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THE
PENITENT

THE SACRIFICE: BOOK TWO

NATASHA KNIGHT

USA Today Bestselling Authors

A. ZAVARELLI

THE PENITENT

THE SACRIFICE DUET

BOOK 2

A. ZAVARELLI

NATASHA KNIGHT

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

The Penitent is Book 2 of The Sacrifice Duet and should only be read after you've read Book 1, *The Tithing*.

You can find [The Tithing](#) by clicking here!

AZRAEL

To see the printed photographs, to hold them in my hands and look at them, is somehow worse than I imagined. No. That's not right. I couldn't imagine something as sick as this.

“Who the hell is this asshole?” I ask for the hundredth time. The 8x10 of Willow swimming naked is in my fist, my eyes glued to the butchery—again, that fucking word in my life—that has obscured her face. The rage in the carving—of the carver—is glaring. The photograph has almost been mutilated, with repeated lines etched into her forehead. The glossy paper has been worn, destroyed where he stained her beautiful face with the Disciples hallmark, the cross, their signature forever defiling their victims.

I don't know why I assumed they carved that cross into the women after death. The sheer quantity of blood in the photos of their victims is evidence that they had been sliced into the skin while they were still alive. My mind cruelly manifests the image of Willow being held down, her face, her tears, her pain as the sharp point of the blade is dragged across her forehead.

I slam my fist down on the table. “Who the fuck is he?”

Larissa glances at the closed door, then to Emmanuel. “I shouldn't really be showing you these,” she starts, but my brother puts up a hand to let her know he'll handle it.

“Give us a few minutes, Larissa. Let me talk to my brother,” Emmanuel says.

“I can get into serious trouble.”

“I know. And we appreciate this very much. You know that. It’ll be fine. I promise.”

Although reluctant, Larissa picks up her phone and walks out of the room. We’ve met her at the back of a restaurant usually reserved for small dinner parties rather than her office at the police station because she’s right. She shouldn’t be showing us these.

“A man’s been writing her letters. Threatening her for a while. It’s the same person or people, I’m sure.” Guilt gnaws at me, my gut tight with it... and with the knowledge that she’s locked up in my house.

“She’s safe for now. Let’s figure out who the car is registered to,” Emmanuel says.

“I want the photographs. All of them,” I say.

“Brother, this is an open investigation. They’re not going to hand those over.”

I grit my jaw. He’s right, I know. I glance at the other photos laid out before him. They’re of Raven Wildblood. She doesn’t wear the carving on her forehead. The man who did this has Willow in his sights. She is his obsession and based on the timeline of the photographs, Willow being as young as sixteen in some, he’s been stalking her for a while.

“We need to contact the Wildbloods. Make sure they know.”

Emmanuel nods tightly just as the door opens and Larissa re-enters. She hands over a folded piece of paper. “Here,” she

says, and Emmanuel takes it. “It’s the registration of the vehicle, but I’m not sure that’s going to get you very far. The owner is a seventy-year-old man from Portsmouth, New England. It’s probably stolen.”

“Are there prints? DNA from the dog bite?”

“We’re testing any samples we can get but these guys are meticulous. They’ve never left so much as a hair at any of the crime scenes. And this woman is the only survivor we’ve come across.”

“Can she tell us anything?” I ask.

“She’s in shock. I hope to talk to her later today, but as far as what we know for sure, there were three of them and they kept the lower half of their faces covered. The one new detail we learned from the victim that the witness can corroborate is that they were wearing cassocks. But that’s all we have. Priests, though...”

“They’re not priests. Or if they are, they worship a warped god,” I say, thinking of Shemhazai’s statue standing proud in the churchyard, of Salomé’s blind devotion to the demon-angel.

I open my mouth to speak, but my cell phone rings. I glance at the clock. It’s almost three in the morning. I reach into my pocket to draw the phone out and see the call is coming from home. My heart drops to my stomach as I swipe to answer.

“Hello?” I practically bark because no one calls at three in the morning with good news.

“Azrael. She’s gone. Rébecca is gone!” Salomé shrieks.

My heart, back in its place in my chest, pounds against my ribs. “What do you mean, gone?” God. No. Please do not let

her—

“She’s disappeared along with your wife. That witch kidnapped her!”

“What?”

Emmanuel takes the phone and puts it on speaker. “What’s going on?”

“I’m telling you. They’re not here. Rébecca and the harlot are gone!”

Without another word, I stalk out of that room, the photo of Willow with the carving in her forehead still in my hand. They can keep the rest. That one is mine. I’m going to make the asshole who desecrated it eat it before I fucking kill him.

Emmanuel is on my heels as we make our way back to the car. I drive this time.

How can Willow be gone? Her door was locked—unless one of the staff forgot to lock it after bringing her dinner. And Bec, how would she get Bec out of the house? She was too weak.

Emmanuel is on his phone. I’m not sure who he’s dialing, but whoever it is isn’t responding. The roads are deserted as I peel out of the parking lot and speed to Eden’s Crossing. Given the late hour, we arrive in record time. I can see from the end of the street that the gates stand open. I’m sure we closed them after we left. They’re automated and programmed to react to a sensor on our vehicles, requiring a manual code to get them to open or close otherwise.

I’m turning onto the driveway when the headlights of my car shine over a vehicle where there shouldn’t be one.

“Stop!” Emmanuel calls out. He’s seen it too.

My brakes screech. He pushes his door open and is out the instant the vehicle stops moving.

I follow him, glancing up at the dark house. Bec's hospital room is not visible from here. The only light that's on upstairs is Grandmother's, but that's not unusual. My own bedroom and Willow's room are dark.

"This is Raven's car," Emmanuel says, his voice too quiet when we reach the purple Volkswagen Beetle.

He opens the driver's side door. I hear a sound coming from the back seat where the door stands slightly ajar. Sure enough, when I pull it open, familiar green eyes greet me from inside a carrier. Fiona, Willow's cat, meows, pushing her paws against the door. I open it to lift her out. Expecting her to scratch, I hold her at arm's length, but she just mewls.

"What the..." Emmanuel starts from the driveway and when I turn, I find him picking up one of Bec's protein drinks, which is spilling out of a tote I recognize. I'd seen it among Willow's things. There's a latex glove on the ground alongside it.

I tuck Fiona under my arm and pick up the tote. It's heavy, and when I glance inside, I am reminded how just when you think things can't get worse, they do.

Oh, how they fucking do.

Because there in the tote is the heavy, ancient tome from the library. The Book of Tithes. I keep it locked away because I don't ever want Willow or even Bec to come across it. Inside it is a history of the Wildblood and Delacroix catastrophe, from the detailed account of Elizabeth Wildblood's hanging and through the years right up to the day I signed my name on the dotted line. The contract binds me, as the Penitent, to make

a sacrifice of the Wildblood witch and pay the Tithe owed, to feed the ever-hungry Shemhazai so that he would protect our family against Elizabeth Wildblood's curse. At least until it all begins anew when the next Penitent and Sacrifice are born, the cycle seemingly on repeat.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter.

“Brother?”

I look up at Emmanuel—and at what he's holding: a cross and two beads linked by silver rings. A rosary, or what is left of it, because it's broken.

And it's smeared with blood.

WILLOW

Raven glances at me from across the van, fear flickering through her eyes as the man at the wheel turns us down a dusty road. Tires crunch over gravel, eating up the distance between us and the lights of civilization. I don't know where we are or where we're going, but with every second that passes, I know we're inching closer to our doom.

My mind is in overdrive, bouncing from one scenario to the next, searching for solutions where there aren't any to be found. Logically, I know that. We're outnumbered. The driver is a man I don't recognize, while Caleb is in the passenger seat, and behind us are two additional men in a separate truck. They're The Disciples, men born from a religion modeled after the early Puritans—or so they claim.

I've had time to learn about them since my first entanglement with Caleb Church, but their beliefs aren't the kind you can learn from a textbook. They change the rules to suit themselves, deciding the fates of anyone who encounters them as if they are the very god they claim to worship.

During his previous attack on me, Caleb told me he was a prophet. He believes—as do the rest of The Disciples—that they have all been chosen for a higher purpose. According to them, they're holding VIP tickets to the kingdom of heaven. In

the meantime, they've convinced themselves they're here doing God's work, ridding society of the damned.

It's what they plan to do to us.

My stomach lurches as the van hits a pothole in the road, sending all of us careening into the hard metal walls. It's a utility van, stripped bare of comfort, and we're all sitting ducks in the back. Bec moans from beside me, and guilt wraps its insidious claws around me as I look at her.

She's here because of me.

Raven bumps my bound feet with hers, drawing my attention to her face. She doesn't have to speak. We've always been able to communicate this way, and I can hear her perfectly without words.

Calm down. It's going to be okay.

She's still clinging to that hope, but she knows as well as I do how this will end. She was with me in the aftermath of Caleb's brutality. She watched as my physical wounds healed, but the mental scars never did. All my sisters saw the way I changed—the way I shut down, closed off my emotions, and became a different person. One who smiled when she was supposed to. One who laughed when it seemed appropriate. It wasn't real.

I don't know when the last time anything was... except for maybe when I was with Azrael.

That thought feels like another punch to the gut, and a wave of grief washes over me as I consider that he tricked me too. Before him, I'd been living on autopilot for so long, coasting along perfectly fine as a one-dimensional caricature of my former self. But then he brought me into his home, life,

and bed... and made me feel things. Things I swore I'd never feel.

A well of pain opens inside me as the first tear falls down my cheek. I can't wipe it away because our hands are bound, which only makes it more humiliating when Raven notices it. I've always wanted her to believe I was made of stronger stuff, but as it turns out, my titanium heart isn't quite as impenetrable as I'd hoped.

"Willow," she whispers, her voice fracturing as she tries to comfort me in the only way she can.

"Shut up," Caleb growls from the passenger seat, his head whipping in our direction.

"Maybe we should stop and baptize her now." The driver leers at me in the rearview mirror.

"What did I fucking tell you?" Caleb snarls.

The driver tenses, his knuckles turning white against the steering wheel. "We're supposed to share. That's our right—"

His words halt abruptly when Caleb reaches across the vehicle and presses a pistol to the driver's head. "Stop the van."

The man swallows audibly, his jaw tight as he stares straight ahead. "I was wrong. We need to keep going. There's too much heat on us."

"Stop the fucking van," Caleb repeats.

"But we ain't supposed to—"

Caleb pistol whips the driver, sending the van skidding off the road and into the ditch with a violent jolt. Raven and I scream as we slam against the metal walls, and Bec manages a whimper when we come to a jarring stop.

“Now look what you did,” the driver grunts. “Frederik was right. You weren’t ready to leave prison—”

Caleb launches across the front seat, slamming his pistol into the driver’s face again. There’s a sickening crunch, followed by another, as he starts to pummel him over and over.

Blood spatters across the windshield, and rage bleeds into Caleb’s voice as he makes his violent declaration. “She. Belongs. To. Me.”

Frantically, I wiggle my wrists, trying to loosen my binds while Raven does the same. Bec watches, her eyes wide, and I know she doesn’t have the strength. If, by some miracle, we can get ours undone, I don’t know what we’ll do next. I just know we have to try.

“What’s going on in here?” The passenger door opens, and another voice filters in from outside. It’s one of the men from the vehicle behind us. “Holy shit, Caleb. Frederik isn’t going to be happy about this.”

“Fuck off,” Caleb spits. “Leave us be.”

There’s a pause, then the door shuts, followed by the sound of the truck leaving. I manage to loosen the knot around my wrists, but not enough to slip free. When I glance around, I notice a small piece of the metal panel behind me is bent. I don’t know how sharp it is, but it’s all I’ve got right now, so I back myself up against it and start to rub the rope up and down, sawing through it with painstaking slowness.

I can feel it fraying, starting to give, and hope alights within me. But then Caleb stops his assault on the driver, and when I glance up, I realize it’s because he’s dead. He beat him to death right there in the seat the same way he nearly took my

life before. Without any care, he opens the door and shoves the limp body outside, the thud solid and final.

I work manically, sawing the rope harder and faster until Caleb turns his brutal gaze on me.

“No!” Raven screams as he pushes between the seats, coming for me. “I’ll kill you, motherfucker!”

She tries to stop him by flailing her body into his path, and he kicks her across the van so viciously her head bounces off the metal, and she goes limp.

“Raven!” I bellow. “Raven, please!”

“Enough!” Caleb snarls, reaching down to grab me by the hair. “I’ve waited too long for this.”

Pain shoots through my scalp as he drags me to the back of the van, flinging open one of the doors before he tosses me into the dirt. The breath flees my lungs in a sharp gust from the impact, and gravel bites into my skin.

I’m still wheezing when he climbs on top of me, squeezing my face so forcefully I can feel my bones starting to give.

“You were supposed to be mine!” he thunders. “I could have saved you. I could have redeemed you. But now you’ve been a whore with another man. There’s only one way to absolve you of that sin.”

“Caleb, please,” I beg stupidly, knowing that I can’t appeal to his humanity because it doesn’t exist. “It doesn’t have to be this way.”

His eyes flare, and a bead of sweat drips from his brow. When it splashes against me, I have to hide my revulsion.

“We can run away together,” I choke out. “Just the two of us. Leave everyone else behind. We can start over.”

Caleb stares at me blankly, then a caustic laugh bursts from his lips. “Do you think I’m fucking stupid? You laid with another man. There’s no coming back from that, Willow.”

“I’m sorry.” I force the words out. “I made a mistake—”

He strikes me across the face without warning, shocking me into silence. “Keep your mouth shut. I don’t want to hear another lying word from your devil-worshipping lips.”

He leans back, searching around the pocket of his strange black robe that looks like a priest’s, before he produces a small vial I recognize all too well. *Holy water.*

“Unclean whore,” he mutters, twisting the lid off. “Think you can trick me with your poisonous fruit.”

He rolls up his sleeves, and I nearly gag as a sickening stench wafts through the air. It isn’t until he dumps some of the water onto his arm that I realize what it is. He’s injured. The flesh on his arm has been torn, and it’s infected.

As I consider that, I peek up at him again, noting the way he’s sweating. He just killed a man, but it’s obvious the exertion did a number on his already weakened state. It gives me hope, at least for a moment.

That is, until he draws a blade from a sheath beneath his robe.

“You should know you were the inspiration for this.” He splashes some of the holy water onto my forehead. “When you carved me up the way you did, you left a permanent claim on me. And you know what I think?”

I don’t answer him, instead trying to focus on wiggling my wrists free from the frayed rope beneath me while hoping he doesn’t notice.

“I think you wanted me to carry you with me.” He drags the tip of his knife down my cheek, pausing to stroke my lips with the flat edge. “So now, I leave a little piece of me on every woman who reminds me of you.”

I swallow as bile rises up my throat. He’s trying to tell me, in some twisted way, that I’m responsible for the women he’s been murdering.

“No,” I whisper.

“Yes.” He smiles cruelly.

“Fuck you.” I buck against him. “You’re disgusting. I fucking hate you!”

“There’s the girl I remember.” He laughs. “I knew you were still in there somewhere, baby.”

I scream, the sound reverberating off the trees around me, and I hope it carries. I hope it carries all the way back to New Orleans.

Caleb slashes my cheek, quick and sharp, the bite of pain stopping me cold as I suck in a breath. Blood drips from the wound, snaking its way down my throat, the warmth quickly cooling against my skin as if to remind me how fragile I am. How quickly my life can slip away.

I think of Raven and Bec in the van, and I know I have to be smart about this. I have to find a way to play Caleb’s game and survive until they are safe. I’ve escaped him once, and even as I lie helpless beneath him, I want to believe I can do it again.

“Are you ready, little lamb?” He leans down, the rancid stench of his infection burning my nostrils. “I’m going to brand myself on you the way you branded yourself on me.”

A rogue tear slips from my eye as he presses the blade into my forehead and drags it down, fileting my skin apart. Agony twists in my gut as I grit my teeth, trying not to react to the sickening pleasure in his eyes. His hand twitches as he pulls back, only to press it to a different spot, slashing the second line of the cross into my forehead.

Blood runs down my face, burning my eyes and coating my lips. I blink repeatedly, trying to dispel it before I give up and squeeze my eyelids shut.

“That’s it.” Caleb’s voice strains as he wipes some of the blood away. “That’s how I pictured this moment.”

I hear his zipper coming down, and terror streaks through me. On instinct, my arms jerk behind me, and when they do, I feel the last of the rope splitting apart, freeing me. But when I open my eyes again, prepared to fight, the sight above me makes me freeze.

Caleb is sucking the blood from his fingers on one hand while he fumbles around in his pants with the other. He looks like he’s trying to jerk himself off.

I wait in shocked silence, wondering what’s happening. I expected him to force himself on me the same way he tried to do last time. But is it possible he won’t because he knows I’m no longer a virgin?

He mutters a curse as I’m considering it, glaring down at me.

“Worthless whore,” he growls. “That’s what you are.”

He shoves my dress over my hips, exposing my thong to him. I brace myself, searching for weak spots. He took my self-defense ring, learning his lesson from last time, so all I have are my hands, which he doesn’t yet know are free. Even

in his current state, he's stronger than me, so I have to think this through. But even as I try to recall what I learned in my defense classes, his irritation grows, and I can't understand what he's doing. Not until he finally yanks up his robe and grunts his frustration as he tugs on his limp dick. There's something wrong with him, and he can't get it up.

Relief swells inside of me as Elizabeth's voice returns.

I'm with you, Willow. Always with you.

It's all I hear before the sound of tires crunching over gravel snatches his attention. I turn my head in that direction, noting the headlights coming our way, and a renewed sense of alarm compounds inside me. It's the same truck that left us here, with the man Caleb was arguing with.

"Fuckkkk!" he roars. "Sonsofbitches."

He stuffs his cock back into his pants and moves to stand, and panic drives me to act. I know this is the only shot I'm going to get. The van is still running, and it might not even make it out of the ditch, but whoever's in that vehicle is coming back for us. If I don't try, I'll never forgive myself.

While Caleb is distracted, I scoot back, reaching for the rope around my feet as I sit up. The truck comes to a stop, lights blinding us as two men hop down from the cab.

"Caleb." The voice is one I don't recognize, but it sounds like an older man.

"Frederik," Caleb responds, tension lingering in his tone.

"You disobeyed my orders."

Caleb shifts, giving me more of his back, and I use the opportunity to work faster, yanking the knot free before I unravel the rope around my feet.

“I don’t take orders from you,” he tells the man. “I take my orders from God.”

A moment of silence passes before the other man speaks again. “You’ve brought us nothing but trouble since your release. You’re being too reckless. The damned will come for us and toss us all in cells to rot. Is that what you want?”

I don’t wait for Caleb’s response. The moment the rope is free, I’m up on my feet, darting for the van. I make it to the door, nearly tripping over the driver’s body, before I hear Caleb’s muttered curse as he chases after me. But when I grab the door handle, my fingers slip on the blood there.

I’m still scrambling for purchase, frustration making me scream when I feel his presence behind me.

“What did I tell you?” He grabs me by the hair again. “Fucking heathen.”

It’s the last thing I hear before he slams my head into the door, knocking me out cold.

AZRAEL

Salomé doesn't come rushing out to us. In fact, she's not in the house at all. Emmanuel calls down from Bec's room, confirming she's gone, and there's no need to search mine. I know Willow is, too. And Raven.

Rage spreads through me as, with that tome in my hands, I slam through the French doors and hurry to where I know my grandmother will be. Sure enough, at the foot of Shemhazai's broken altar, Salomé is on her knees with her head bowed. She's spread something out on the stone altar, familiar red strands like thread.

Except they're not thread.

Her eyes are closed, and her lips move in prayer.

"What did you do?" My voice is a roar in the night.

Even she, with her supposed superhuman hearing, must be startled by my sudden appearance because her head snaps back to look at me, her hands coming to the altar as she raises herself up.

My gaze falls to the red wisps blowing in the breeze, and my vision blurs black at its edges.

"What did you do!" I reach for her, and if it weren't for Emmanuel appearing at my side and grabbing me, I think I

might strangle her here and now.

Salomé sees the book in my hand but meets my eyes defiantly. “I told you I would not let you waste this second chance, did I not?”

“Who took them?” Emmanuel asks. “When?”

I tug free of my brother’s grip and reach to gather the hairs before they blow away, a sick sense of déjà vu as I push the handful of long strands into my pocket.

Elizabeth Wildblood’s hair. A piece of her scalp. The sticky wetness of blood.

I close my eyes, forcing the sensation away. There’s no skin. No blood. It’s just a lock of hair.

“I made the offering. As you should have done, Azrael. Perhaps if you had, your sister would be safe!”

“Willow is mine. Mine!” Emmanuel grabs me again as I lunge for her.

Salomé’s eyes narrow, her lip curves maliciously upward. “*Was* yours, Azrael. Was. Now she’s fair game.”

“Game!” I spit the word, fury making it impossible to say more.

My brother takes me by the shoulders and turns me to face him, makes me look away from the old woman who kneels once more before the altar. He shakes me hard and opens his mouth to speak, but his phone rings in his pocket. He keeps one hand locked around my arm as he reaches in to glance at the screen, then, confused, swipes to answer.

“Yes?” Whoever is calling must not speak because he asks again, louder this time. “Who is this?”

“It’s Cordelia. Cordelia Wildblood,” I hear her say as Emmanuel pulls the phone slightly from his ear.

His jaw tenses and his grip on my arm drops.

“Is Raven with you?” she asks timidly.

“No. But her car’s here.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line.

I take the phone from his hand. “We’re on our way. Get your parents up if they’re not already.”

Without another glance to the still-muttering Salomé, my brother and I hurry back through the house and to the front door. I drop the book on a side table in the hallway. I should throw it into a fire.

Outside, we climb back into my car and race to the Wildblood home.

Every light in the house is on, and probably for the first time in history, at least since the Wildbloods have lived in this house, the door is thrown open for us. We’re greeted not only by the parents, Barrett and Clara, but also an older woman, Willow’s grandmother, Celeste, and her sisters, Winter, Aurora and Cordelia.

Barrett steps onto the porch. At six-foot-two, he’s in no way short. He has a solid build but still, we must look like trees next to him. When Clara steps out, he stops her moving too close to us. He glances past me to Emmanuel and his eyes narrow.

“You’ve broken the rules.”

“It’s not the time, Barrett,” Clara says. “We need to find her.”

“You can’t touch another one. You cannot—”

“Barrett,” Celeste says, stepping outside. She’s younger than Salomé and so much more vibrant. Her graying hair still carries wisps of red, and her pale, aging skin is still lustrous. “Clara is right. Now is not the time,” she says to him, and Clara puts her arm around her husband, both of them looking tired, exhausted. Celeste turns her gaze to me. “Willow?”

My chest tightens, my mouth is a thin line. I shake my head once. It’s enough of an answer.

She clutches the amulet around her throat, then turns toward the house. Everyone clears the way for her. We follow her into the living room, passing those photographs I remember from the last time I was here, my gaze catching on the one of Raven and Willow. Raven laughing. Willow trying to.

“Winter, make tea please,” Celeste says.

Winter nods and rushes away.

Celeste settles on the floral print armchair, while Clara and Barrett sit on the couch. The sisters stand with arms folded, expressions moving between disbelief, hate, and concern. A weighted silence settles before Winter comes in carrying a tray with a pot of tea and teetering cups stacked on top of one another.

I’m going to need something a hell of a lot stronger than tea.

As if reading my mind, Celeste points to a sideboard, and the youngest sister, Cordelia, adds a little whiskey into each glass before helping her sister pour from the teapot and passing the cups out. When they get to Emmanuel, who is standing, he holds up his hand to stop her pouring the tea.

“I’ll take it straight.”

“This is not the time for a tea party, Celeste,” Barrett says. “If we serve the Delacroixes anything, it should be—”

Celeste holds her hand out to quiet him before he finishes. She keeps her eyes on me. “They will help us.”

“These Disciples. Who the hell are they?” I hear myself ask, the dainty cup and saucer awkward in my hand. I swallow the too-hot tea, needing the whiskey to calm me down, and place the set on a nearby side table.

“More importantly, *where* are they?” Emmanuel asks.

“Mom,” Clara says, turning toward her mother. She shakes her head once in a signal to the older woman.

“Caleb Church has been stalking her forever!” Cordelia blurts out. “He—”

“Hush, child,” Celeste says, her tone firm but kind.

“Caleb Church is a Disciple,” I say. Although it’s not a question, Celeste nods to me.

My brother steps out into the hallway, and a moment later, I hear him talking. He must have called Larissa.

“He’s in prison,” Barrett says. “It can’t be him.”

“These Disciples have been active in the area,” I say. The Wildblood parents exchange a look. I have a feeling they suspected as much given the local murders of supposed witches even if the hallmark of a Disciple murder, the cross carved into the forehead, hasn’t been released to the public. “You need to tell me what you know because they not only took my wife and Raven, but they took my sister, too, and she is very sick.”

“Is that why you’re here? Because they took one of yours?” Barrett asks, standing. “I should have guessed as much.”

“They took my wife as well as my sister,” I say. It takes all I have to remain seated.

Barrett studies me for a long minute. “We have our own private investigators,” he says.

“Dad,” Aurora says, her voice pleading. “Those investigators can’t help if the Disciples got to them.”

I shift my gaze to Celeste, who watches me. She’ll be the one to make the final decision.

Emmanuel re-enters the room and all eyes turn to him. “Caleb Church was paroled early. And the officer assigned to him reported him missing two days ago.”

“What?” Barrett snaps. “Why weren’t we told?” He looks around, helpless, and I find in that moment that I feel for the man.

“Barrett,” Clara says, reaching out for him. He sits beside his wife, clasping her hand in both of his and whispering reassurances to her he doesn’t believe himself.

“Go get the files,” Celeste says to Aurora. “Bring them all here.”

“Who is he?” I ask Celeste.

“Caleb Church has wanted Willow for himself for a very long time—since before she was even a woman.”

“Mom. It’s not our story to tell,” Clara says, which is worrying.

Barrett squeezes her hands. “What do you know about the Disciples?” he asks us.

“They’re vigilante witch hunters who’ve been operating since Elizabeth Wildblood’s lifetime, at least. They’re responsible for dozens of murders, most recently the two women who were killed here,” I say.

Husband and wife exchange a look.

“We suspected they were responsible,” Celeste says. “You’re certain?”

“They left their signature. Another woman was attacked in the last twenty-four hours. She got lucky. A neighbor was walking her dog and interrupted the killers. Three men wearing cassocks.”

Celeste’s lips curl downward. “Evil men hiding behind religion. It’s disgusting.”

Aurora returns with the folders and hands them to Celeste. She stands behind the older woman, and all the sisters watch us as Celeste opens the folders and flips through the pages to find what she’s looking for.

“They marked your door,” Emmanuel says. “You should have contacted us.”

Barrett stands and Clara with him. “*You* should not have gone near my daughter.”

I stand, too, and put a hand on my brother’s arm. “We need to find them now. The rest can wait.”

Emmanuel breaking the rules could cause a problem. The contract between our families is clear.

Barrett turns to me. “And you.” He looks me over. “You were supposed to keep her safe. I thought maybe this time... I

thought at least you'd keep her safe and maybe, just maybe—" His voice breaks, and I watch a grown man cry.

"I'm... sorry," I say, a feeling of impotence overwhelming me. It's a pathetic apology that, if I were him, I would not accept.

He snorts.

Celeste gets to her feet holding a folder out to me, and for the first time, I see her age. It's what she's reading in these pages that does it, that must so upset her.

I take the folder from her, sit down to open it, and I understand. They've been tracking murders not only in New Orleans, but all over the country and the photos included offer more detail than necessary.

"We've never been able to track them down, but there is a rumor of a compound. This man," she points to a name that is familiar. "Alfred Noyes. He was their leader for a time. He's old now, though, in his seventies I believe."

"Noyes?" I turn to Emmanuel.

"The car they found. It was registered to a Noyes from somewhere in New England," he says.

"Portsmouth," Celeste fills in.

"Get Larissa on the phone," I tell my brother. "We need to find any properties he owns in New Orleans or near here. That's where they'll be." Emmanuel nods, already placing the call. I turn back to Celeste. "What's Church's obsession with Willow?"

She sits back down, and one of the sisters hands her her tea. She drinks a sip, then another. "He targeted her when she was too young to know better. It was my fault, really. I should

have been more forthcoming about the dangers, but I didn't want to scare the girls. They were still so young."

"No, Mom, it's not your fault. How can any of this be your fault?" Clara says.

"How young?" I ask, feeling my muscles tighten. I want to stand, to move around, but I force myself to stay seated. I don't want to loom over them, already feeling like a giant in this room.

"They took your sister too?" Cordelia asks before Celeste can answer.

I look at Cordelia. She's got to be around Bec's age, maybe younger, but my sister is a frail thing next to this girl.

I nod once, not wanting to go into the how, but, of course, that seems to be Barrett's cue.

"How? How did they get to them *in your house*? It's a fortress, isn't it?" He's on his feet again and again, his wife is trying to hold him back. "Or is that only to keep my daughter in?"

I get up too, walk right up to the man. "Listen here," I start, but before I can say more, Aurora is beside me.

"They won't hurt your sister," she says, tugging at my arm, clearly wanting to defuse the situation.

I turn to her. She's an inch taller than Willow, and her hair is a little shorter. I remember the night of the Choosing ceremony and feel shame at how I'd come into this house to inspect the sisters, to look for the mark of the crescent moon on their bodies.

She steps backward, maybe surprised herself that she is touching me. "I mean, if that's what you're afraid of. She's not

a witch.”

“I don’t want these Disciples to hurt any of them,” I say. I push my hand into my pocket and am reminded of the violence the Tithe calls for—as if I need reminding.

Willow’s hair had been scattered on the altar. Did Salomé cut it off her? Or did she trade it for that book? Did she make Willow hand over a lock of her own hair? And after she got it, did she leave Willow’s door unlocked?

No. She wouldn’t have done that. She doesn’t want Willow free. She wants her dead.

Emmanuel walks in, but before I turn to him, I catch Celeste’s gaze intent on me. Those blue eyes are so much like Willow’s, as if she can see everything—as if she can see right through me.

“The old man has a grandson in the area,” Emmanuel says, reentering the room as he tucks his phone into his pocket. “Frederik Noyes.”

“Frederik? The Prophet?” Clara asks.

I turn to catch her glancing at Celeste. They know this man. And Clara is afraid of him.

“Who is he?” I ask.

“He’s the leader of the Disciples,” Celeste says. “Calls himself the Prophet. More like the Butcher. He’s a descendent of one of the ministers who was present during the original trials in Salem long before they hanged Elizabeth.”

“I have two addresses,” Emmanuel says.

“Give them to me,” Barrett says.

Emmanuel looks to me before he reads them aloud.

“They have to be at Hill’s End. The other address has been taken over by the homeless,” Barrett says.

“How do you know?” Emmanuel asks.

“My investigators learned of the existence of that one half a year ago. I keep tabs on it.”

“You’re sure?”

Barrett nods. “Let’s go.” He steps toward the hall, but I grab his arm to stop him.

“My brother and I will go. You’ll stay here.”

“Like hell I will.”

“You’re going to leave your family unprotected? They’ve already walked right up to your front door. What’s to stop them coming in? Besides, Emmanuel and I will be faster alone.”

Barrett opens his mouth but before he can speak, Celeste does. “They’re right,” she says. “They’ll be faster without you.” I wonder how much she knows about our family. More than I would probably like.

I turn to go but Barrett stops me. “Bring my daughters back. Bring them back or—”

“I plan to,” I say, not giving him a chance to finish.

WILLOW

“**W**illow.”

I groan, trying to open my eyes, but they are too heavy. My entire body feels weighed down, and it isn't until I hear the panic in Raven's voice as she repeats my name that I remember why.

It all comes back in jarring fragments. *Caleb. The Disciples. The van.*

“Willow, please wake up.” Raven sobs. “I need to know you're okay.”

The agony in her voice forces everything into focus, but I'm still sluggish, and my brain is having a hard time catching up. It takes me several attempts before my eyelids open, only to be stung by the light inside the room.

“Willow.” Raven breathes a sigh of relief. “Oh, my god. Are you okay?”

I force a nod, my tongue sticking to the roof of my mouth from being so dry. It makes me wonder how long I've been out. As I heave myself upright to take in my surroundings, I realize all three of us are in what appears to be a small, spartan cabin. There aren't many furnishings apart from a threadbare sofa, a rickety old bed frame, a sunken mattress, and a

kitchenette with a hot plate and a few plastic dishes that have seen better days.

My first thought is that if we're in a cabin, we must not be close to anything else. Caleb brought us to this place, whatever it is, because it's secluded.

"How are you feeling?" Raven asks. "You were out for a long time. I was getting worried."

I part my dry lips, forcing words from my raw throat. "I think I'm okay. Are you both alright?"

My eyes move over her and Bec, taking in the bindings on their wrists and ankles. I have them too, and mine are so tight this time that they're cutting off my circulation. We're all on the floor, our backs propped against the wall. Raven has a few bruises that are starting to darken on her face, but Bec appears to be okay, apart from the terror in her eyes.

"I'm okay," Raven assures me.

"Me too," Bec answers softly.

"I'm sorry." I nearly choke on the words. "This is all my fault."

"Stop it." Raven sits up straighter, steeling herself. "You couldn't control this any more than I could."

"My brothers will come for us," Bec says. "They have to."

I nod but can't meet her gaze. Truthfully, I don't have that same hope. I don't know how they'd even find us in time. If they did, the only comfort I can take is that at least Raven and Bec would be okay. But no matter what, I'm a dead woman walking. I don't know what's worse: the thought of Caleb bleeding the life from me or having to look into Azrael's eyes as he does it.

Shaking off those thoughts, I peer around the room again, looking for something to help us.

“Do you know where we are?” I ask the girls.

“We’re in some kind of compound near a bayou,” Raven answers. “There’s a bunch of little cabins just like this one and then one big building. A church or something, probably.”

I don’t have to guess what’s in that building. The Disciples like to baptize their victims for some bizarre reason that only makes sense to them, considering that they murder them afterward. If it isn’t a baptism we’ll be subjected to, it’s an exorcism. Either way, it’s not going to end well.

“Where did he go?” I ask. “How long have they been gone?”

“The older man, Frederik, came in with Caleb and made sure we were secure,” Raven explains. “Then they went outside, and we could hear them arguing. They said something about having a meeting. But there’s still a man out front. He’s been opening the door periodically to check on us.”

I nod as she leaves the rest unsaid. They’re having a meeting to decide our fates. A moment of silence passes as I scan the room, searching for something to cut the ropes with, but there doesn’t appear to be much.

“I already looked,” Raven tells me. “They removed anything sharp before they left us here.”

“Well, we can’t give up. Let’s try backing up against each other. Bec can guide us.”

Raven shifts, and we scoot around until we’re back to back. The only problem is my bindings are so tight that my fingers are numb, and I don’t have enough dexterity to guide my movements.

“You’ll have to go first,” I tell Raven. “And then I can do yours.”

Bec leans forward to help, and it seems she has regained some strength since we left the house. Her complexion isn’t as pale, and her body is not as weak. It’s a relief, but I can’t dwell on it for too long because none of that matters if we can’t get out of here.

“It’s that piece,” Bec guides Raven verbally. “The one between your thumbs.”

“I’m too far away,” Raven grumbles, scooting back even further.

As she does, boots echo off the stairs outside, and we all freeze. There isn’t time to hide what we’re doing because the door crashes open a second before Caleb’s frame fills the space.

The first thing I notice is that he’s got a split lip, but that isn’t all. There’s fresh blood on his hands, and he looks boiling mad.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he snarls.

I open my mouth, trying to conjure up an answer, but he obviously doesn’t care to hear one. He reaches me in three long strides, snatching me by my hair and forcing me upright.

“Caleb.” His name leaves my lips on a desperate plea.

“You’ve been nothing but trouble for me.” He lets go of my hair and grabs me by the arm. “And now you’re going to make up for it.”

He drags me over to the bed, shoves me on top of it, then returns to where Raven and Bec are sitting.

“What are you doing?” Raven thrashes in his grasp as he pulls her up.

“Shut up, bitch. Or I’ll start cutting pieces off of you right now.”

“Leave her alone!” I scream, trying and failing to get to her. I only manage to fall, smashing my knees, then my face against the floor.

He hauls Raven into the bathroom, followed by Bec, and all I can do is watch helplessly. The door rattles when he slams it behind him, his eyes focusing on my face as he returns for me.

“It’s time to give me what I’m due, Little Lamb.” He yanks me up from the floor, forcing me onto the bed again. “And I won’t stop taking until I’ve had my fill, whether it’s from you or your friends in there.”

Terror streaks through me as he climbs on top of me, the weight of his body pinning me down as he tugs off his robe and unzips his pants. His thighs pin me to the bed as he shifts higher, yanking out his cock and shoving it into my face.

“Suck.” He forces my head down, locking me in place with his fist in my hair.

I stare back at the limp member in his palm, horrified by the sight of it. It’s marked by red, angry slashes that can only be scars. It looks like it was put through a meat grinder and pieced back together by a surgeon from a horror film. It’s... *mutilated*.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” he growls. “Suck it, whore. Suck it like the heathen you are.”

The overwhelming stench of the infected wound on his arm invades my nostrils, and combined with the sight before

me, it churns my stomach so violently that I can't help but retch.

"Oh god." I gag again, trying to turn my head, but he doesn't let me.

It's too late to stop, and I couldn't if I tried. Vomit spews from my lips, all over his dick, and panic washes over me when I realize what I've done.

"You motherfucking cunt," he roars, belting me across the face so hard my head whips to the side, teeth gnashing together as the taste of blood fills my mouth.

Before I can brace for the next blow, he hits me again, this time with a closed fist. Stars burst behind my eyelids, vision swimming as I try desperately to cling to consciousness.

"This is because of you." He flops his dick in my face again. "You don't like the sight of it? You did this to me! You sent me to that hellhole!"

I couldn't speak if I wanted to, but Caleb isn't waiting for a response when he wraps his fingers around my throat and squeezes. My lungs burn as I instinctively try to move my hands, but they're trapped behind me, held captive as he chokes me.

My vision dims, and I can hear Raven screaming from the bathroom, begging for him to stop. Praying to Mother Goddess as she tries to bind him from harming me. But it's no use. I think this is it. This is how I'm going to die.

Don't give up.

Elizabeth's voice is a whisper in my ear, a chill on my skin. It's the same thing she'd told me when Caleb had tried to drown me. I channeled her then. I don't know how, but I did. I'd never felt more powerful than when I slashed his face with

my ring and watched him stumble back, blood pouring from the wound.

I can feel that same energy building in me now, but I'm not sure I'm strong enough. I'm not sure I can survive him twice.

Blackness creeps further into my vision, and I know this is it. I have to decide whether to fight or die.

Don't give up.

Another bite of cold air skitters over me, followed by a surge of something I can't explain—something not of this world. It gives me the strength I need, and I use it to thrust my head up directly into the bridge of Caleb's nose.

A crack resounds through the room, followed by his curse and then blood. So much fucking blood. His hands fall away, allowing me to drag in a breath as he brings his fingers up to touch his face, trying to stem the bleeding.

“That's how you want to play, Willow?” His voice takes on an edge of darkness I've never heard, something so bone-chilling that I wonder if I just made the worst mistake I ever could. I may have saved my life, but I know it will cost me. Caleb confirms that when he balls his hand into a fist and slams it into my face.

“I'm going to make you wish you were dead.”

It's the last thing he says before he beats me within an inch of my life.

AZRAEL

The sun breaks over the horizon as we near the compound, clouds bloated with rain closing in. I can't help but think how much this looks like the morning Elizabeth Wildblood was hanged—at least, the way it plays out in the dream.

I wonder sometimes if my mind doesn't conjure the scene based on the detailed description left by Isaiah in the Book of Tithes. I've read it so many times that I can't tell if the book came first or if it was the dream that drove me to read it, to learn if it was true.

Alfred Noyes's compound lies a little over an hour out of New Orleans. It is gated by a rickety chain link fence, which is surprising. I expected more reinforcement. But there is enough wasteland around it that the buildings themselves wouldn't be seen by passersby. This place hums with an energy so dark, so evil, it serves as a repellent. Everything here is dead, even the earth.

A glance at my brother as I drive through the open gates tells me he feels it too.

I slow the vehicle as the tops of buildings come into view and count the scattered cars, some of which are broken down

heaps. It's the vans with their blacked-out windows that give me pause, though, and I park the car a little ways from them.

Emmanuel and I emerge from the Jaguar and take it in. We have no weapons, only our hands. If they're armed, we may have a problem, but the place seems quiet, almost deserted. Could we be wrong about it?

As I pass the first van, I set my hand on the hood of the engine and feel its warmth.

No. We're not wrong. Someone is here. Is it Caleb Church, though? And did he bring Willow, Bec and Raven?

A bell rings somewhere in the distance. Emmanuel and I both stop, duck between the two vans, and watch as a door opens on one of the farther buildings. The sound of an organ spills out, and a procession of men exit. The first of them carries a cross, while the second swings a censer of incense, and I pick up the familiar scent of Sunday Mass. But there's nothing holy taking place here. Three more men follow, these three carrying long lengths of rope, all wearing cassocks tied at the waist with simple leather cords. All are barefoot with heavy rosaries hanging from their necks as if they were brothers of a monastery.

We watch as they make their way to a half-dead oak. It's huge, and as the sun rises higher, it casts an eerie shadow over the gathering.

But it's not the tree itself that's eerie. It's what the men stop to do, what they seem to be preparing for. Three ascend the raised platform and, using the ladder, sling the ropes they're carrying—one each—over three branches. They tighten the knots, checking the strength of the nooses, as the other brothers begin chanting a prayer. The man bearing the cross sets it in its place near the platform.

Once they're satisfied with the ropes, one sets the ladder out of sight behind the wide trunk of the tree while the other two place stools beneath each noose.

"This is fucked up," Emmanuel says as one of the brothers who had stood watching looks around at the others uncertainly. From here I can guess him to be in his early twenties, possibly younger. He says something to the one closest to him, who shakes his head to quiet him as a door opens and a man steps out of one of the cabins. Two men follow him out. They're so tall that they have to duck their heads, but clearly the shorter one is in charge because they flank him, waiting as another huge man steps out. This one is gripping Raven with one hand, Bec with the other.

Emmanuel sucks in a breath and I slap a hand over his arm to stop him stalking to them.

"We need to wait until we see Willow," I say.

Raven and Bec struggle against him, with Raven putting up a stronger fight, as he leads them toward a second cabin and throws them inside as if tossing bags of garbage. He then closes the door and stands guard.

The door to the cabin they came out of is closed and left unguarded as the three approach the gathering.

"We need to get them," Emmanuel says.

"Wait." Where the fuck is Willow?

My gaze follows the man flanked by the others, the one giving the orders. Is this Frederik? He is disheveled, his cassock soiled, filthy from the look of it and his hair needs to be washed and brushed. His steps are hurried, almost manic, as he wipes his dirty hands on his cassock.

"Caleb," one of the brothers says as he approaches him.

My eyes narrow. This is not Frederik. It's Caleb Church.

"What?" Caleb barks, the two flanking Caleb clearly some sort of personal guard.

"We still have to perform the baptism. And you said we'd all have our time before the hanging."

"Do you see anyone swinging?" Caleb asks with a sweeping gesture.

"Frederik said—"

"Frederik said," Caleb mimics. "Frederik isn't in charge anymore, is he?" he barks at the man before shoving him backward and climbing onto the platform. I notice that Caleb and the guards are the only ones wearing shoes. "Tonight we will hang three of Satan's spawn—"

"One is not a witch. We are sworn to protect the innocent!" someone interrupts.

Caleb's eyes narrow on him. "She was in the company of witches. She is as guilty in God's eyes."

"In your eyes!" the same man yells.

Caleb grins, then leaps off the platform. I notice he keeps one arm close to his side, that hand fisted. I wonder if he's the one the dog attacked. As he stalks toward the man who spoke up, the others clear away. The outspoken man backs up as Caleb approaches. Caleb is maybe six feet tall. He's built moderately. The others all look to be younger than him. More capable than him.

"That's right. In my eyes. Thank you for clarifying that, Brother Amos. It's the same thing, isn't it? I decide who hangs."

“If we kill even one innocent, our souls are damned. You know what the Prophet says. Scripture is clear—”

“I am both Prophet and scripture,” he says more calmly, and as he says it, he licks his thumb and draws the sign of the cross on Amos’s forehead. “I thought I made that clear, young Brother.” Caleb raises his hand to beckon the two who were flanking him to approach. “Take Brother Amos into the church. Remind him of his role as an initiate.”

“No!” Brother Amos cries out as the two guards close in on him, each about twice Amos’s size as they take an arm each and lead him away.

“The meek shall inherit the earth and penance shall make you meek,” Caleb calls out casually as he ascends the stage once more.

The four remaining men exchange glances as they watch Amos being dragged away.

“Anyone else need reminding who decides what?” Caleb asks with an unhinged grin, glaring at each man in turn.

They all quietly shake their heads as organ music begins to play loudly. Caleb takes a moment to glance at the church and, closing his eyes, smiles momentarily before addressing the men again.

“Brother Paul, go have your turn. You may have your pick of the two.”

My stomach tightens.

Two.

Brother Paul walks eagerly toward the cabin where they’d just taken Raven and Bec. Without another word between us, Emmanuel and I stalk in separate directions, Emmanuel

toward the cabin following fucking Brother Paul and me toward the platform, my vision blurred but for one man.

Caleb's expression when he sees me is disbelief at first. His eyebrows rise high on his head, and he stops talking mid-word. The brothers turn to follow his gaze, that music blaring some dark tune appropriate for the evil taking place here.

“Where is my wife?” I roar.

It's not until I am almost to the platform that two of the brothers jump to act, attacking me. They only manage to slow me down long enough to shove them away.

Caleb is the one I want.

“Where is she? Where is Willow?”

As the two scramble to their feet, the other two attack, and Caleb screams to his soldiers, but they don't seem to hear him over the organ music. The two new attackers put up a better fight as the first two join them, making me shift my attention from Caleb to handle them.

I pound my fists into their faces, sending them to the ground. One grabs my ankle as my fist connects with another's jaw, and I'm taken off balance. I drop to the ground, bringing one brother with me while another picks up a stick and begins to beat it on my back. He's clearly not an experienced fighter, but he is fucking irritating.

I get to my feet, wrestle the stick from him and smash it across his face with an inhuman battle cry. Blood splatters me, and he goes down hard. Another one is on his knees, getting up, and I smash his head next before being pulled down again. This time when I'm down, I drop the stick. I take the two remaining brothers by their oversized rosaries and twist their lengths around my fists, strangling them the way they would

have strangled Willow, Raven, and Bec with their ropes and nooses. But when I see Caleb running in my periphery, I drop the rosaries, unsure if the men who stopped their fight moments ago are dead or alive. Uncaring.

I get to my feet, but as I do, the church door opens. It takes the two soldiers, who are surprised at the scene they're seeing, a moment to rush me, to attack, with their fighting skills better than the four combined.

All the while, I hear the sound of running, of an engine starting.

Of Caleb getting away.

"Azrael," I hear in the distance, but it barely registers because Caleb's escape enrages me.

I let out a roar as I fist a hand in each man's too-long hair, grip tight, and slam them together so hard, I hear the sound of skulls smashing, feel the reverberations of bone splintering as I do it again and again and again.

"Azrael!"

I'm bloody, my arms covered in it and the coppery taste of it is in my mouth. I let them drop and watch the dust of Caleb's long-gone van settle.

"Azrael!"

I turn. It's Bec. She's slumped on a tree stump halfway between me and the cabin.

"Bec!" I rush to her, gather her in my arms, hug her hard, her too-thin arms so tight around my neck I feel her desperation. Her terror. "Did they hurt you? Did they fucking hurt you?" I draw back to look at her but don't see any bruises and the blood streaking her face, it's from my own hands. The

blood of those men. In fact, her eyes look brighter than they have in a long while, but I don't have time to dwell.

“Willow,” she says, pointing to the cabin they came out of.

I lift Bec up to carry her to it. I don't think there are other brothers on the property, or they'd have heard the commotion and come, but I don't want to take a chance, not with my baby sister.

A man hurtles out of the cabin they'd taken Bec and Raven to, and Emmanuel is behind him, on him, as he makes a pathetic attempt at escape. I don't stop moving as Emmanuel pummels the man and Raven rushes out to him. She stops when she sees me, but I'm at the first cabin now, and I set Bec down. Bec hurries to open the door, and I rush inside. It's dark in here. The only light is what's coming in from between the slats of wood that board up the window and what's seeping in around me from the open door.

“Willow?” Bec asks through tears as my eyes adjust to take in the decrepit room, the rotting smell, and the broken bed.

The broken body on top of it.

“Willow. Jesus. Willow.” I rush to her. I hear Raven and Emmanuel enter, Emmanuel holding Raven back as I touch Willow's bloody, beaten face, her eyes swollen shut, her face so bruised and bloody it's almost unrecognizable. I push the hair that's stuck to the blood on her forehead away, my heart pounding against my chest, and my stomach sick as I take in the cross carved there. “No. No!”

How could I have let this happen? Her father was right. I was supposed to protect her, keep her safe. I promised her I would.

“Open your eyes, Willow,” I demand, and it takes all I have not to shake her in an attempt to force her to wake up. I keep pushing hair from her face. “Willow? Willow, wake up.” I smell vomit and blood, so much fucking blood, as I tear her already-ripped shirt all the way open.

She still doesn’t move when I lay my ear against her heart, taking her small hands in one of mine as I hear the faintest of heartbeats.

Another sound comes, something from inside my chest like the wailing of some beast. I gather her up, lifting her gently, carefully, cradling her head against my chest, and kissing the top of it as I run my hands over her body to feel for breaks and look for more damage.

“Willow?” Raven must finally pull free of my brother because she comes to Willow’s other side. “Honey, wake up.” She’s crying, sobbing, as she takes in her sister. “Please just wake up one more time. One more time.”

“He just kept hitting her and hitting her,” Bec says as Emmanuel hugs her to him. “We couldn’t... He locked us in the other room. We couldn’t help...”

“Shh. Ambulance is on its way,” Emmanuel says soberly as I run my hands through the sticky, bloody mess of Willow’s matted hair.

“Fiona is fine,” I tell Willow so she knows. “She’s home. She’s safe. Now open your eyes. Open your eyes for me, sweetheart, and I will take you home to see her.”

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

Raven sobs, kissing Willow’s hand.

I put my fingers over the pulse at her neck. It's so faint. Am I imagining it?

"I'm so sorry. I should never have left you unprotected," I whisper to her. "Please just wake up. I will take better care of you. I promise."

The sound of a chopper approaching almost has me looking away. A few moments later, there's a rush of footsteps running toward the cabin, but I just keep holding my wife, hugging her too small, too fragile, too broken body to me.

Strange hands try to pry me away, but I just hug her tighter, careful not to hurt her any more than she's been hurt. I'm afraid to let her go, to let them take her from me.

I hear myself muttering promises, making one-sided agreements if she will just wake up. If she'll just open her eyes for me because I need to see them. I need to see her beautiful eyes even if they look at me with hate.

"Azrael," Bec says, her little hand on my shoulder urging me to look at her. Behind her are paramedics, and outside, through the door, I can see the chopper waiting to airlift her to the nearest Society hospital. "They need to look at Willow. Get her into the helicopter."

"I'll carry her," I say, voice as hoarse as if I've swallowed a bucket of sand.

"Sir, we have a stretcher."

"I said I'll carry her," I snap, standing, keeping Willow close. I won't let them take her from me.

"Here, come on," Bec says, leading the way out of the cabin I vow to burn to ash.

"He beat her so hard," I hear Raven say.

“Sir, please,” a paramedic says.

“Azrael. You’re not helping her,” Emmanuel tells me firmly.

I only spare a glance at him, at the paramedics, and the stretcher. I look at my Willow and something inside my chest breaks the way her body has been broken. Do they hear that breaking? Does she?

“I’m sorry,” I tell her as I lay her on the stretcher and hold her hand. The paramedics tuck blankets around her, securing her to it before wheeling her to the waiting helicopter. I don’t wait to be given permission to go with her. I just get on. Raven does the same and shoves one of my hands away to take one of Willows as we fly to the hospital. I keep making my promises to her, to anyone who is listening, that if she opens her eyes—if she wakes up—I’ll end this. I’ll end it all. I’ll find a way.

Someone must hear me, or maybe it’s my own mind conjuring the sensation of her small hand squeezing mine. Maybe it’s my own desperation making me think I feel it, but I don’t care. It’s all I have.

Because if she dies, what will be the point of it all?

If she dies, how will I live?

When I took her on the night of the Tithing, the cruel truth of what that meant was an abstract, far-away idea. It was nowhere near a reality to me. Sacrificing her the way I am meant to, taking her life with my own hands... Did I ever believe I could do it once I saw her? Held her?

The thought of it drove my brother to suicide.

Those men outside, I may have killed them. Probably most of them at least. I’m glad for it. I’d do it over again, and Caleb Church will die at my hands. But Willow?

I will take what consequence comes to me, but I will not allow her to be hurt any more than she has been. I swear it. I swear it on my own life. I will find an end to this.

WILLOW

The steady rhythm of noises around me tethers me to my surroundings. Squeaking shoes. Wheeling carts. Machines beeping. Keyboards clacking. These are the sounds of a hospital—an anchor to safety.

A reminder that I'm not in hell anymore.

At least... temporarily.

The thought elicits a stray tear from my eyes, and I squeeze them shut, trying desperately to barricade my emotions behind a wall of numbness. But those emotions pile up every hour, and I know it's only a matter of time before the dam breaks.

I don't know how long I've been here. Well over a week, at least. Nurses and doctors come and go, and the hushed voices of my family linger in the hall. Concern edges its way into their questions with each new day that passes.

They want to know why I've refused to speak to any of them. Why I can answer my doctor's questions behind a veil of privacy but not theirs. They want reassurances that I'm okay, but I can't give them that.

Physically, I may be healing, but I'm not sure I'll ever be okay again. This isn't the end. This isn't even the worst thing

I'll have to face. My death still lingers on the horizon, a death that will surely come at my husband's hands. I don't think there could be anything worse than that.

Part of me wishes I had died in that compound, that Azrael and Emmanuel had only rescued Bec and Raven instead, and I have to wonder why he didn't just let me die there.

But then, the answers come to me in an uncomfortable acknowledgment of the truth. He couldn't let me die there because it has to be him. He has to perform a ritualistic murder of his wife to satiate a demon angel who doesn't exist.

It's this thought that keeps me from meeting his gaze every time he sits beside me. He's been a constant at my bedside since I first woke. When I saw his face, the two halves of my heart were at war. One wanted to take shelter in his strength, his protection... believing every false promise he ever made. But the other part, the one that's guarded my emotions for so long, insisted that he can't be trusted. The Book of Tithes has proven as much. His name on the contract, signing my inevitable death, has confirmed it.

So, here we sit at an impasse. Both of us are silent. He's long since given up on trying to speak to me, but it doesn't stop him from trying in other ways. I've felt every touch of his hand. Every brush of his fingers and even his lips as he kisses my forehead when he thinks I'm asleep.

Those small things have brought me to the brink of insanity because I know, as much as I may want to, I can't take solace in them. I can't believe in them.

But it doesn't change the way I feel, the way I simultaneously yearn for and dread those comforts.

It would be easier if he hated me. It would be easier if I could hate him. But I can't, and I don't. So, all I can do is what I know best. Close myself off, hold my breath, and cry whenever he leaves the room, if only for a minute.

I fall back into a restless sleep, visions of Caleb haunting my dreams. I know he hasn't been caught because I've heard the whispers from everyone around me. I want to ask more about the situation for my own peace of mind, but that would require speaking, and that feels too vulnerable right now. So I sleep. And I rest. And I stare at the ceiling as more days pass until, eventually, Dr. Charles tells me I can go home tomorrow morning.

Home.

He doesn't know how loaded that word is, but Azrael doesn't miss the way I cringe at the idea. Tension seeps into his spine as his gold eyes move over me, uncertainty lingering at the edges. He doesn't know what to do with me or how to fix this. That makes two of us.

"There's just one more thing," the doctor says, the pitch of his voice capturing my attention.

We both look at him, waiting for whatever it is, and he shifts uncomfortably. "Mr. Delacroix, perhaps your wife would like some privacy for this conversation."

Azrael's eyes flare as they flick over the doctor in disbelief. "Is this not a Society hospital?"

"Well, yes, of course, it is, sir," Dr. Charles answers.

"And therefore, you know your place, as well as mine."

Another silence follows before the doctor nods tersely. "Of course, sir. I meant no offense."

“Then get on it with it,” Azrael snaps. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Dr. Charles glances at me, his eyes softening in what I can only describe as pity. “Mrs. Delacroix... err, Wildblood.” He pauses, a flush creeping up his neck as he realizes his blunder. Azrael and I have both given him conflicting statements about what my last name is to be.

“Mrs. Delacroix is fine,” Azrael remarks coolly.

Instead of arguing, I focus on the doctor as he continues.

“When you first arrived, we performed standard tests, as is protocol. Since you’d been through such a traumatic event, we decided it was best to wait to deliver the news. But now that you’re free to go, you’ll need to schedule follow-up care with a primary doctor and an obstetrician.”

My brows pinch together in confusion as Azrael’s spine straightens. “What does that mean?” he asks.

“It means... congratulations are in order,” Dr. Charles replies, sounding anything but congratulatory. “It looks like you’ll be having a baby.”

“A baby?” The word leaves Azrael’s lips in a faint, shocked whisper. “But how? She’s on birth control.”

Dr. Charles gives a noncommittal shrug. “These things do sometimes happen. Given the circumstances, I would say it’s a miracle.”

Azrael glances at me, and terror grips us both. I recognize it in his eyes because it’s the same thing I feel as I glance down, wondering how this is even possible.

That word, and all the consequences that come with it, tumbles through my brain like a wrecking ball.

Baby.

I'm having a baby.

As I'm trying to wrap my mind around that, the doctor explains that the baby is okay, and they estimate I'm around two and a half months along. He starts rattling off some other information about the scan, a heartbeat, vitamins, and follow-up care, but as I press my hand to my stomach, two things happen simultaneously.

A jolt of recognition moves through me, and suddenly, I feel her.

I can feel her inside of me, a new energy with a powerful sense of connection between us, as if she's trying to communicate her presence. That she's been here, waiting for me to recognize her existence. A wave of emotion steals my breath as I process my feelings. Awe. Joy. Then... *fear*.

Fear that she will grow up without me. Fear that she may not even be born, given the cruel hand of fate that's been dealt.

When I look at Azrael, I can tell he sees the question in my eyes.

Will he kill us both?

"Willow." He chokes on my name but doesn't give me his assurances.

"I want to go home," I croak, using my voice for the first time in front of Azrael.

He stares at me in shock, but that emotion is swiftly carried away by another. "You are going home," he says carefully. "With me."

"No." I shake my head, tears leaking from my eyes. "I want to go back to my home. With my family."

His throat works, eyes piercing mine with something I can't quite identify—nor do I care to. I know he won't let me go. Maybe it's foolish even to ask, but everything is catching up to me all at once, and that dam of emotion is about to burst.

“If you don't let me go, I'll leave at the first chance I get,” I tell him. “I'll run from you and never look back.”

He doesn't respond, and the doctor looks like he has no idea how to handle this situation. We're in a Society hospital. Things are not in my favor here, and they never will be. Azrael has all the power in this dynamic.

“Willow,” he begins, but fails to find the words he's searching for.

“Let me go,” I plead, pain lancing through my voice. “Let us both go.”

“I can't do that.” He leans down, brushing my tears away before he tries to kiss me.

For one second, I allow myself to feel that warmth and his false comfort. I let myself believe the lie before I pull back and shake my head, emotion stealing all rational thought.

“Then kill me now!” I scream at him. “Don't take us home and draw it out. Stop torturing me, and get it over with! I refuse to let you raise this baby. I won't let my child grow up in that house.”

That's the crux of it. I don't even realize it until the words are out of my mouth. But if I have to choose between sentencing my child to death with me or sentencing her to a lifetime of hell under Salomé's supervision, I would rather end it all now.

Azrael stares at me in disbelief, words still failing him, and it only makes me angrier.

“Nan,” I call out. “I need you!”

My grandmother appears in the doorway a moment later, followed by my entire family as they filter into the room. The doctor uses the opportunity to make a quick escape, muttering something about returning tomorrow with discharge papers.

“What’s going on?” my father demands, his eyes cutting over Azrael sharply.

“Willow?” My mother rushes to me, clutching at my hands. “Are you okay?”

“I want to talk to Nanna,” I tell them. “Please. I just need to talk to her alone.”

They all wear matching expressions of concern, but my grandmother puts them at ease as she pushes her way through the crowd and waves them away. “Everyone out.” Her voice leaves little room to argue, but it doesn’t stop them from lingering momentarily before they reluctantly filter back into the hall.

Everyone except for Azrael.

“Him too.” My voice trembles as I refuse to meet his gaze.

“You heard her,” Nan tells him. “Out, Azrael.”

I can feel his attention on me. He wants to argue. I’m convinced he will. When he heeds my grandmother’s order, it surprises both of us.

The door shuts with a click of finality, and I promptly burst into another fit of tears while my grandmother holds me, trying her best to soothe me. She rubs my back, letting me cry it out, giving me time to purge myself of the feelings I’ve been holding back. And finally, after a long stretch of silence, I’m able to gather my thoughts.

“My dear, sweet girl,” Nan says. “Tell me what troubles you so.”

“I need your help.” I swipe at my eyes, trying and failing to look like I’m in a rational state of mind.

“Okay, what is it?” she asks.

“I need you to make me a sleeping potion,” I whisper. “One that will put me to sleep forever.”

“Willow.” Terror streaks through her eyes as she shakes her head frantically. “No. I can’t do that—”

“I’m pregnant, Nan.”

My words halt her protest, and she falls into shocked stillness as she processes the weight of that reality.

“It’s a girl,” I whimper, clutching my stomach. “I can feel her. I don’t know how. I can’t explain it. But I just know. I feel her.”

She nods in understanding, smoothing my hair back into place. “I know you can.”

“I can’t let them take her,” I tell her, panic making my voice too high. “I can’t let her grow up without me in that house with Salomé. Please, Nanna, you have to help me.”

She holds me tight as I break down again, hating myself for even making such a request. I know how it sounds. It makes me feel even worse. But I don’t know what else to do.

“You know they’ll never let her come live with my family. This is the only thing that makes sense. I have to run... or I have to die.”

“Shh.” Nan rocks me in her arms. “It’s okay, Willow. It’s okay.”

“It isn’t,” I choke out. “You don’t understand. She’s evil. That’s why I took Bec. She’s doing something to her. I know she is.”

Nan leans back, quietly considering my words with a frown. For a long while, she doesn’t speak, but something strange flickers in her eyes as they fall on me again.

“And what about Azrael?”

“What about him?” I sniffle.

“Is he evil?” she asks softly. “How does he treat you?”

I look away, too ashamed to admit my feelings for him, and despite everything, I can’t find it in me to hate him like I should.

“He’s not evil,” I murmur. “He’s just a liar.”

“He hasn’t wanted to leave your side,” she observes. “He seemed very worried about you when he realized you’d been taken.”

“What does it matter?” I meet her gaze. “He’s going through the motions and doing what he thinks he’s supposed to, but we both know how this will end.”

“Do we?” she questions.

I don’t understand what she’s getting at, but it’s not what I want to hear.

“Yes,” I grit out. “Please don’t try to give me false hope, Nan. I don’t want it. I have to face reality.”

“You were on birth control, weren’t you?” she asks.

“Of course I was,” I tell her. “You know that.”

She squeezes my hand in hers as something strange alights in her eyes. “Then this happened for a reason.”

“What reason could there be?” I argue. “Other than to torture me even more. I can’t live like this. I can’t return to that house and carry this child, knowing I won’t be here to protect her.”

She doesn’t answer me, and it only escalates my panic.

“I can’t,” I tell her. “I can’t do it.”

“Willow.” She presses her hand to my face, forcing me to focus on her. “You can and you will. This is fated. It did not happen by accident. This child is meant to be born. You and Azrael are the first Wildblood-Delacroix match to create life together. It means something.”

“What could it mean?” I shake my head in disbelief. “It means nothing if I can’t protect her.”

“I give you my word that I will,” she answers with unwavering conviction in her tone.

“How?”

“Do you trust me?” she asks.

“Always.”

“Then trust me when I say if tragedy should ever befall you, I will take the child away and get her to a safe place. I will do it at any cost.”

Her words bring me the relief I need to breathe again, and exhaustion settles over me like a heavy blanket. I want nothing more than to close my eyes and go to sleep, but Nan isn’t finished yet.

“You have to do something for me, though, Willow.”

“What?” I blink at her, conflicted by what I find in her eyes.

“You have to promise me you won’t let hope die,” she implores. “Promise not to let fear rule you, and open your eyes to what’s before you. Judge Azrael by his actions, and not words that have been previously spoken.”

I don’t know what she means by it or why it matters at this point. But I can see her softening to him, and I’m not sure I like it.

“I thought you were supposed to be team Willow,” I remind her.

She gives me a mischievous smile that lightens the mood considerably. “Oh, believe me, I am and always will be. That’s precisely why I’m asking this of you, my sweet girl. There are things you don’t yet know. Things I will tell you when I feel the time is right. But for now, I’d like you to go home with your husband, and do as I’ve asked. Trust that your fate isn’t written in stone and that, perhaps, you have a chance to rewrite it altogether.”

AZRAEL

On Celeste's order, I walk out of Willow's hospital room, wondering why I'm doing as I'm told as the door soundlessly closes behind me. I'm left standing in the hallway with a gaggle of Wildbloods staring me down.

A woman carrying a baby steps off the elevator and snags my attention. She heads toward the nurses' station. I watch as the lot of them get up to aww and ahh over the thing, hugging the woman who apparently is the daughter of one of the nurses.

"What the hell's going on, Azrael?" Willow's father asks, forcing me to turn back to the Wildbloods.

The baby cries. I look at it. The mother is handing her off to one of the other women. It's so small, the thing. I'm pretty sure it's mostly blankets.

"Azrael." Barrett barks my name.

I turn to him again.

"What did you do to her? Why is she so upset?" he badgers but it's all surreal, nothing quite making sense.

Willow is pregnant? No. That's not really possible. It's... She can't be having a baby. My baby.

“For Christ’s sake!” Barrett throws his hands into the air.

The doctor steps out of another room, sees me and hurries away but I stalk after him. With a hand on his shoulder I stop him. He turns uneasily to face me.

“Yes, Mr. Delacroix?”

“How...” I shake my head. “Are you sure?”

He glances behind me at the family I guess, then up at me. “I’m sure. I’ll get you some brochures—”

“Brochures?” What the fuck does he think I’m going to do with brochures?

He clears his throat. Someone touches my arm, and when I turn to see who it is, he slips away.

Raven stares up at me, jaw set, eyebrows high. “What’s going on?”

My gaze falls to the bruise on her jaw. She has several on her arms, and her wrists and ankles are raw from rope burn. Bec got lucky. She has a few dark spots on her arms and the rope cut into her skin too, but they must not have seen her as as much of a threat as Raven or Willow.

“Azrael. What the fuck is going on?” she asks again.

The baby cries once more. I glance at it, push my hand through my hair, then look at the wedding band on my finger.

Pregnant. Willow is pregnant.

Raven cocks her head, her gaze moving over my shoulder, then back to me, her eyes narrowing. “Oh my goddess.”

We’re having a baby. Willow is pregnant with my baby.

A sensation I’m unfamiliar with blooms at my core and sends a rush of energy through me.

Raven lets out a “huh.” She shakes her head, then turns to her family. “Willow’s pregnant.”

Five sets of eyes stare at me, some widening, one narrowing. The sisters are at first surprised, then excited. Clara’s mouth hangs open, but her lips, too, twitch. She tilts her head as her gaze falls on me, a look of something like satisfaction followed by sympathy on her face.

Barrett, though—there’s no smile there.

“She’s what?” he asks in a low, menacing voice. He steps toward me, ignoring his wife when she tries to hold him back. Raven moves away, a wide grin on her face as her father comes to stand an inch from me. “What did you do? What the hell did you do?”

“She’s my wife,” I say stupidly.

One of the sisters snorts. It sets the other two off and they try to contain their laughter, which only makes it worse. Raven just keeps on staring at me with a look on her face a lot like Celeste’s. Like she can see right into my brain.

I clear my throat, then stand up taller as the elevator doors open and Emmanuel steps off along with Bec. It’s my turn to watch Raven now as her gaze is instantly drawn to him. I remember how he beat the man who would have raped her if we hadn’t gotten there in time. He beat him to an unrecognizable pulp.

Everyone straightens up. Barrett’s glare is divided between me and my brother, who comes to stand beside me. Bec, looking better than she’s looked in a long while even with the healing bruises, gives me a quick peck on the cheek then walks past me to hug Raven and the other sisters. They ask her

how she's feeling as they take her hands, and once their chatter is over, they all turn to face me.

“What's going on?” Bec asks innocently.

Raven, with a grin on her face that shows how immensely she's enjoying my discomfort, turns to me. “Azrael? Do you want to share your happy news?”

I give her a warning look. Her mother clears her throat and we both turn to see her shake her head. Emmanuel's brows draw together in confusion. I'll tell him about the pregnancy later.

Willow's hospital room door opens, and Celeste steps out. Before it closes, I catch a glimpse of Willow but when my eyes meet hers, she quickly turns away.

“Excuse me,” I say, slipping back inside without answering.

The door closes behind me, and the atmosphere changes entirely. Willow is sitting up, the blankets tucked around her. She seems a little calmer after her talk with her grandmother. At least she doesn't scream at me to get out, but when I try for a smile, she turns away. A tear escapes from her eye that she's quick to wipe away before folding her arms across her chest.

I clear my throat, then move around the bed to sit in the chair I've been sitting in since we got here almost two weeks ago.

“Willow.”

She keeps her gaze just beyond me, her eyes wells of water, a never-ending supply of them.

The bruises on her face are healing, and much of the swelling has gone down. When I brush her hair away from her

forehead, she winces, and I pull back, standing. She quickly pushes the hair down over the stitches there. She's trying to hide the cross.

For a moment, all tenderness is replaced by rage—rage at Caleb Church, at what he did to her. What else has he done that I don't know about? What else is she keeping bottled up inside her?

She notices the shift in me, her eyes widening as her gaze moves from my clenched jaw to my fisted hands. I force myself to breathe, to relax. I don't want to frighten her any more than she already has been and probably still is. She knows Caleb is still out there.

But there's more to it than that. Caleb is an external threat. She has seen the Book of Tithes. It's what sent her running away from me.

"You're safe now," I say, my voice strange, the words awkward.

She looks up at me, her eyebrows coming together. She shakes her head on an exhale. "How am I safe?"

"He won't come near you again. I won't allow it."

"Because you'll keep me locked up in that house?"

"What? No." I shake my head. "I'm going to find him and I'm going to kill him."

She studies me and I wonder what I look like. Most of my bruising has healed, the few hits the brothers got in barely causing any damage to me at all. Her, though... what one man did to her, I'm afraid has caused much more harm than what I can see with my eyes.

"What about you?" she asks.

What about me? It's a fair question after she read the detailed account of what all the Delacroix men have done to their Wildblood women.

I sigh, then sit down. I take her hand, and when she tries to pull it away, I don't let her. I remember how she squeezed mine on the helicopter. I didn't imagine it. She was telling me she heard me. She was comforted by me. I have to hold on to that. I have to believe it.

"What you read in that book, I wouldn't do to you, Willow."

Shadowed blue eyes settle on me. "You signed your name. I saw it."

"Before. That was before." She turns away. "No. Look at me." Keeping her hand in one of mine, I touch her cheek. "Look at me, Willow." She does, and I can see she's biting the inside of her cheek and those tears are going to spill over any second. I wish she'd let them go. "I came for you. I came the instant I heard. Those men, I made them pay. And I'd do it all over again. I'd beat the life out of them all over again for touching you. For hurting you. Do you understand?"

A few tears fall and she sucks her lower lip between her teeth.

I brush my thumb over a cut on her cheek that required stitches. "That book is what I was meant to do before I ever knew you. But I made you a promise. One you forgot or threw away—"

"That book, Azrael—"

"One you forgot or threw away," I repeat more firmly. "My words did not carry the weight I thought they did with you."

"That's not—"

“But I meant what I said. I will not let harm come to you, and I will do you no harm.” I let my hand drift from her cheek to her still-flat belly. “I will let no harm come to either of you. I swear it. Do you hear me? Do you understand?”

Her answer is that breaking of the dam as tears flood her face. It’s something, right?

“I thought I lost you,” I say. “When I saw you lying in that cabin, I thought I was too late.” Does she hear the truth in my words? Does she feel the pain in them? “And I vowed to find a way out for you if only you’d live. And now, I have more reason than ever.” I splay my hand over the span of her belly. She looks down at it but doesn’t touch it, doesn’t lay her hand over mine. I want her to, though. Badly. But I know it will take more than words to convince her. “Tomorrow, I will bring you home. Tomorrow, I will begin to prove myself to you.”

“What about Salomé? When she finds out I’m pregnant—”

A soft knock on the door interrupts us, saving her from continuing. Saving me from having to answer. We both know how Salomé will take the news.

I stand as Bec enters, with Willow’s family behind her. I catch a glimpse of Emmanuel and Raven talking quietly. I see the moment she tells him the news. His eyebrows rise high on his forehead and his eyes meet mine, his mouth hanging open, just before the door quietly closes.

“Willow,” Bec says, coming inside.

Willow musters a smile as Bec hugs her gently.

I need to tell Bec, but I need time to work out how to handle Salomé. Her influence over Bec is too great, and I’m afraid that if Bec knows, she may not be able to keep it a secret from our grandmother.

EMMANUEL AND RAVEN ENTER NOT A MINUTE LATER, AND I study the two of them. Between us, we killed seven men that day. Seven men in the span of ten, fifteen minutes.

Frederik was dead inside the church. From the looks of it, they'd drowned him in holy water.

Amos almost died. He's in a coma two floors up. He's not a Society member, but I want to be sure I'm the first to talk to him if or when he wakes. He might have information for me about Caleb's whereabouts. I don't care that he was protesting Bec's execution. He's as crazy and as guilty as the rest, as far as I'm concerned. But I'll need any information I can get. Caleb Church may have vanished, but his fixation on Willow, his conviction to do her harm—hell, to murder her—is as strong as ever. Of that, I have no doubt. It's only a matter of time until he strikes again.

“You and I need to talk soon,” Barrett says.

I nod. He's right. But now is not the time.

As the family collects, I kiss the top of Willow's head and excuse myself. I need to have a conversation with Salomé before I bring Willow home. It's time to have my reckoning with her.

I don't think she meant to let Willow out of the house, although I don't know how the Disciples managed to open the gate. According to the security system, nothing was tampered with. Salomé letting Willow go makes no sense because the woman follows that Book of Tithes like it's her fucking bible. That offering of hair to Shemhazai had been a good faith gesture that what he is owed will be paid.

Owed.

No. I shake my head bitterly at my choice of words. It's what he demands. He is owed nothing.

Salomé has made herself scarce, though. My grandmother has feigned illness and kept to her room.

Tonight, the house is dimly lit when I enter. This place is dark on the brightest of days. I make a mental note to look into widening the original window frames to let in more light. Willow would like that, I think. And paint, maybe. Yes. Paint to cast the shadows out.

Mom had wanted to do that too, but Dad had been hesitant. I think it was his fear, him holding on to the things he had been told all his life, too afraid to risk Shemhazai's wrath.

"Where is Salomé?" I ask one of the staff, who is preparing a dinner tray.

"She's upstairs in her room, sir. She wasn't feeling well."

"Has the doctor been called?" I ask, seeing the simple bowl of broth and a glass of water on the tray. That's nothing for my grandmother.

"Not since earlier this week." I've been spending all my time at the hospital apart from coming home to shower and change. Given my anger at my grandmother, I've been happy to avoid her, but now I wonder if she's truly ill.

"I'll take the tray up," I tell the woman who nods and hands it over.

I carry it upstairs and knock at my grandmother's door before opening it. I have a feeling that if I say it's me, she'll send me away, so I don't announce myself. Seeing the near-panicked surprise on her face when I enter tells me I'm right.

“Grandmother,” I say as I enter and close the door behind me.

She’s sitting on the edge of the bed in her long white nightgown. She is quick to open the nightstand drawer and push the bottles of whatever medications the doctor has given her in.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, trying but failing to get a glimpse of even one of the labels before she closes the drawer.

“As if you care,” she says, sitting back against the headboard and pointing to where I can set the tray. She folds her arms across her chest and looks away like a petulant child.

“What’s going on?” I ask, gesturing to the drawer.

“Nothing. The usual. Getting older.” She studies me. “Go on then. You have something to say.”

It’s strange seeing her in her nightgown. She never leaves the room unless she’s fully dressed, her hair combed back and contained in a tight bun at her nape. She looks almost vulnerable like this, in the long white gown, her hair loose with the wiry curls combed out. It’s still thick and long, well past her shoulders.

When I meet her eyes, though, that usual hardness is there.

“I’m bringing Willow home tomorrow.”

Nothing. Not a blink. Not a breath. Not even a down turning of her lips.

I don’t mention the pregnancy.

“Well, that’s as it should be. We will carry on as if this little episode never took place. The offering has been made. Shemhazai has obviously forgiven you, and now that she knows the truth, well, it will make things easier.”

I sit on the edge of her bed. “Why did you give her the book? How did you get into my desk drawer to get it? I keep it locked.”

“There are no secrets from me, Azrael. I thought you knew that.”

I study her, take in her unapologetic expression. “Why? Why let her see that? You had to know it would only terrify her.”

“Isn’t it better to know what you’re facing? To know the truth that your time is limited?” Her words make me pause. “Perhaps it will make her more compliant.”

“Compliant? You want her to offer her neck to the blade?”

“Well, that will never be. The Wildbloods would never willingly sacrifice themselves, would they? They’re too selfish.”

“Do you hear yourself?”

She raises her eyebrows like I’m the crazy one.

I stand. “There will be no sacrifice, Grandmother. I’m tearing the statue down.”

Her expression morphs into one of shock, of horror. It takes her a long moment to recover. “Then you’ve as good as signed your sister’s death warrant.”

“As long as you believe this bullshit, you will credit countless natural events to it, to this curse, to a piece of rock.”

“Blasphemy!”

“Logic. This Tithing began how many centuries ago? Back when people believed witches to be real. When they murdered them on the testimony of children. We’ve come so far beyond

that. My parents died in a terrible accident. Abacus died out of the terror of what he'd be made to do—to act out scripture forced on him from your lips drove him to suicide.”

“Oh! It's my fault he hanged himself? Or did I tie the noose around his neck, too?”

“That's not what I meant.”

“No? Well, then maybe you shouldn't have said it.”

“Enough! I've had enough! I'm bringing Willow home. You will give her the respect she's due—”

Snort.

“You will give her the respect she is due as my wife!”

“Is that what she wants? To come back here? To lay with you? If you won't go through with the Tithing, then what's the point of bringing her here? Return her to her family. Return her...” She stops, narrows her eyes, and tilts her head. One corner of her mouth curves upward and for a moment, I wonder if she knows. If she's guessed about the baby. “Oh, Azrael.” She laughs. “Oh, my dear, stupid boy.” That laughter continues, a strange sound from her. It's a wicked, unnatural thing. “Don't tell me that witch has spread her legs and trapped you between her thighs.” She gets out of the bed, seeming stronger than ever as she stalks toward me. “She is just a woman. Any woman's cunt will do.”

“She is my wife. You will not speak—”

“If you think yourself in love with her, let me tell you that is impossible. You are a man.” She looks me over, the disgust in her eyes evident. “Men often mistake fucking for loving. I know. It's how we manipulate you, how we control you. And even the strongest stumble at times.”

“Grandmother, you’re wrong.”

“You, my darling grandson, are made in my image. You are exactly like me.”

“You’re wrong.”

“And I can tell you one thing for sure. You and I are incapable of such a base, common emotion. No, my dear Azrael. You keep on fucking that whore to your heart’s content. Use her as you like. Bring her home, by all means. This is where the Sacrifice belongs. Her blood, after all, must be spilled on Delacroix soil. The violence you committed against those men, the Disciples, that is who you are. That is what you are capable of. That is why Shemhazai has chosen you. *You*. Not Abacus. Not Emmanuel. Not your father. You.” She gets close enough that I smell her sickly breath when she next speaks. “Do not make the mistake of thinking yourself capable of love. You are not so weak. You are his soldier. His Penitent. You belong to Shemhazai. And the Wildblood witch, when the time of his choosing comes, will die at your hands. Mark my words, Azrael.”

WILLOW

I wake with a jolt, terror gripping me by the throat as my lungs seize. Sweat beads along my brow, my hair sticking to my forehead, and I blink rapidly, trying to discern my surroundings. It's so dark I can't see, and the memory of Caleb's rotting flesh is alive and real in my mind.

For a moment, I wonder if I'm back there, beneath him. Helpless to save myself, my sister, or Bec.

The feeling of a hand on my arm startles me, and I scream, trying desperately to escape as I fight him off. But it's Azrael's voice that fills the space between us.

"Willow, it's me."

My lungs expand, drawing in a full breath as he flips on the bedside lamp and turns to face me.

"Come here," he murmurs, dragging me into the sanctuary of his body as he wraps his arms around me.

I make one half-hearted effort to shrug him off before I close my eyes and start to cry again. I'm so sick of crying, but I can't seem to stop. Every night for a week, it's been like this. As much as I want to blame it on the pregnancy, I'm worried that this time, my mind has well and truly broken.

“It’s okay,” Azrael whispers, his lips brushing against my temple. “You’re safe here. I’ve got you.”

I know he wants to believe that, and a part of me still wants to believe it too. But I know better than to let my guard down. As long as I’m in this house with Salomé’s influence and Caleb Church is out there, I’ll never be safe.

Seconds tick by, becoming minutes, and my heartbeat slows as Azrael’s warmth penetrates my back. He’s so much larger than me that I can’t help but feel fragile in his arms. I despise myself for allowing this kind of intimacy, but it’s easy to get caught up in these comforts, even if they’re being doled out by the one person I want to hate.

His palm settles over my belly, and it sends goosebumps skittering over my skin. I can’t tell what he’s thinking, but his touch feels almost... *reverent*. Or maybe that’s just what the vulnerable part of me wants to believe.

At some point, I’ll need to bring up the matter Nan and I discussed. When something inevitably happens to me, and possibly him, I want my family to raise this child far away from Salomé. But now isn’t the time.

“What did you do with the shakes that were in my bag?” I ask.

Azrael stiffens behind me, as I suspected he would when I brought this up. I’ve been waiting for the right time to address it since I’ve been home, but days have passed, and there hasn’t been one. I know it will lead to an argument, but that doesn’t mean we can avoid the topic.

“You mean Bec’s shakes?” he replies.

“Yes. They were in my bag.”

There's a momentary pause before he answers. "They were disposed of. Why?"

I draw in a breath and pull free from his arms, needing some distance for what I'm about to say. "I wanted the hospital to test them."

Anger flashes in his eyes, and he tries to temper it, but it doesn't work. I can see the denial written in his features. The hard set of his jaw, the pulsing vein in his neck. He doesn't want to believe that Salomé could ever hurt Bec, and part of me gets that. She's the woman who raised them. She's the only parental figure he has left in a life marked by tragedy. But I fear that loyalty has blinded him to her true nature.

"She was getting better," I tell him. "At the compound, when we were taken. Don't you find that strange?"

He stares at me, the same unyielding expression on his face.

"She could barely walk when we left the house," I continue. "And then she's abducted, held hostage, and put under an enormous amount of stress, only to improve."

"It happens," Azrael answers dismissively. "You don't know her illness like I do. She has good days and bad days."

"You don't know her illness at all," I argue. "You've let Salomé take the helm of that ship. She doesn't even have a proper diagnosis. How can you be sure of anything when you —"

"Enough!" Azrael growls, dragging a hand through his hair as he rises from the bed.

I half expect him to disappear to the bowels of the house, returning to his dark wing as he usually does. I think maybe

that would be better because I don't know how to get through to him.

"We aren't having this conversation right now," he says. "You need to rest."

I tear my eyes away from him and shake my head. "It will suit you just fine if we never have it. But you can't ignore it forever, Azrael. I know you want to believe your grandmother would never hurt her, and maybe I'm dead wrong. Maybe it's all a misunderstanding on my part. But if there's even a sliver of a chance that I'm right, you will never forgive yourself if something happens to her and you didn't do everything you could."

He doesn't answer me, and I don't expect him to. I leave those words hanging between us as I roll back over and cuddle Fiona, falling back into a restless sleep.

I STARE AT MY REFLECTION IN THE MIRROR, FINGERS MOVING over the healing scars on my forehead as the bath runs behind me.

I haven't wanted to look, and I've avoided it as much as possible. But there's no denying the existence of Caleb's mark etched into my skin. A rogue tear slips down my cheek, and I dash it away quickly, steeling my spine.

It's nothing a little makeup can't fix. That's what I'm telling myself when the bathroom door creaks open, and Azrael's body dominates the frame.

He meets my gaze in the mirror's reflection, his darkening when he notices the expression on my face. I believed him

when he said he would murder Caleb Church, and maybe it makes me twisted to want that, but I do. I just don't want it to happen because he thinks it will prove something about our relationship. It feels like these threads that entangle us together are twisting and gnarling, and we'll never get them undone. But the truth is, he's already spilled blood for me.

Or was it for Bec? I guess I'll never truly know, and taking him at his word isn't an option. Not now, and maybe not ever again.

"It will heal," he tells me as he approaches from behind.

"Maybe." I shrug. "Or maybe I'll need to get another tattoo. Perhaps you should have put yours there to begin with."

Azrael ignores my sarcastic remark as he turns me to face him, tilting my chin to meet his gaze. "I don't need to tattoo your forehead. Everyone already knows you belong to me."

Heat rushes through my veins at the possession of those words, a familiar hunger sparking inside of me. He wants me, but he's not forcing it. He's been gentle with me since my return, but I can sense his desire to claim me again. Every time he looks at me, I can see the way he wants to imprint himself on my body and soul. The longer I stand here, beneath his gaze, the more this energy intensifies between us.

I do want him, and that's the worst part of it.

I want him to take it all away. My pain. The memories. The brokenness inside of me. I want him to make me feel good again. But I'd sooner die than admit it right now.

"Your bath is ready," he tells me in a gravelly voice.

I force my eyes in the direction of the tub, noting how high the water is. Before I can move, Azrael is already turning it

off. When he turns to look at me again, I can see the question in his eyes. *Will I send him away?*

Every day, he has come in here since my return, trying to help me; every day, I have demanded to be left on my own. Logic tells me I should do the same right now. But instead, I find myself pushing boundaries as I disrobe before him, letting him gaze at my naked body as I walk to the tub.

His eyes drift down to my breasts and over my torso before they harden when he notices the still-healing bruises.

Wordlessly, he holds out his hand and helps me into the tub, watching me settle in before he sits on the edge, reaching for the soap.

“I will kill him, Willow,” he reassures me.

I look up at him, only to wish I hadn't when I see the determination in his eyes. He wants to avenge me, and I'm not sure why that feels so... satisfying.

“I know,” I croak.

He watches me as he squeezes soap into his hands, waiting for me to issue my rejection of his assistance. But try as I might, the words don't come as he begins to lather my shoulders, working his way down my arms and then, eventually, back up to my breasts.

The first brush of his fingers over my nipples has me shuddering, and I close my eyes on instinct, realizing how much I've missed his touch. Azrael pauses, waiting for me to signal my approval, and my nipples tighten in anticipation. Maybe it's the hormones or just stupidity, but either way, I can't help myself.

“Azrael,” I whisper his name.

He doesn't make me say anything else. There will be no begging today. He gives me what I need, stroking my nipple with one soapy hand while the other drifts down between my thighs.

I keep my eyes closed and give myself over to the sensations as he strokes me between my legs. I bite my lip as tension builds inside me, the pressure and stress of the last few days drifting to oblivion.

I'm close, so freaking close, to falling apart... then I feel him shifting before he adjusts me, leaning my body forward. I open my eyes to see water sloshing over the sides of the tub as he slides in behind me, fully clothed.

"Azrael." Nerves grip my voice as he wraps an arm around me from behind.

"You're safe," he murmurs against my ear. "Lean back, Willow. Let me feel you."

My heart races, breath stalling in my chest as that familiar panicky feeling takes over me. It isn't the water. It's the feeling of being out of control in the water. The memory of gasping, lungs burning, trying to claw my way out as Caleb held me under.

I don't know if I can do it.

But then Azrael guides me back, his fingers returning to where I need them. He strokes me as he kisses his way along my neck, breathing me in. "We'll make new memories," he tells me. "Relax for me, Little Witch. Let me give you what you need."

Slowly, I allow my body to melt against him. As I do, I get swept away by the feeling of him, of his warmth pressed

against me, his scent wrapped around me. I give into it completely, and Azrael growls his approval against my skin.

“God, I’ve missed watching you this way. Do you know how fucking beautiful you are?”

I release a breath, shaking my head as if to tell him I don’t need his words. But I do. Right now, I do.

“You’re mine,” he tells me, his free hand spanning my stomach. “Do you feel it?”

I’ve never felt more owned than when I hear those words spoken against my neck. It’s his acknowledgment that he’s claimed me in a way nobody else ever will.

“Come for me,” he encourages. “Show me just how much you belong to me.”

His words send me over the edge, and I free-fall into one of the most intense orgasms he’s ever given me. Spasms rack my body as the room around me disappears behind a veil of darkness. All I have left are my distorted senses, the feel of Azrael’s lips on my skin, and his body wrapped around mine.

It feels so right... but horribly wrong at the same time. I shouldn’t trust him. I shouldn’t be giving myself to him this way. It’s only going to make things harder.

When I open my eyes and turn to meet his, I can feel him reeling me back in. But we can’t return to the way things were before. I can’t pretend to be ignorant of what I’ve seen. No matter what he says, I can’t accept that he’ll forsake a centuries-old tradition.

“Azrael,” I choke out his name.

Tension draws his brows together as he strokes my face. “What is it?”

“I want to visit my family today,” I blurt. “Alone.”

WILLOW

Unsurprisingly, Azrael does not agree to my request to let me visit my family at home by myself. After an argument over the fact that they can visit me at the house any time they'd like, along with him pointing out that they have done so since my return, we found ourselves in a war of wills. He insisted that he's not letting me out of his sight while Caleb is still free and drove me over himself.

This is how we ended up sitting in my parent's dining room with Bec while my sisters serve us afternoon tea. They've really gone all out this time, and I can't help but smile as Bec's eyes widen with every new tray that appears on the table. There have been finger sandwiches, pastries, macarons, and cakes galore. Bec has sampled them all while Cordelia chatters her ear off, the two of them seemingly becoming fast friends.

The real amusement, though, is when Cordelia disappears briefly, charging up the stairs, only to return with another of her t-shirt creations, this one for Bec. When she offers her the rhinestone-studded shirt, Azrael's brows shoot up in concern when he sees what Cordelia has written on the front.

"The moon made me do it?" He reads it aloud, half under his breath, and Aurora snorts loudly at his expression. That's

about the time he notices her shirt, which proudly displays a slogan about hexing the patriarchy.

“I picked it just for your appearance today.” She bats her eyelashes sweetly.

“Aurora,” Raven chides her half-heartedly. “You’re supposed to wait until the guests leave before you talk shit.”

“Oh, whoops.” Aurora plays along. “I should probably take that potion I’ve been brewing off the stove, too, then.”

Azrael’s eyes dart to the kitchen in concern, and Winter seizes the opportunity to get in on the joke by grabbing the sage and smudging around him obnoxiously.

“Whew, that’s better. It was starting to feel a little dreary in here.”

The entire Wildblood house erupts in laughter at Azrael’s expense as he stares at my sisters like they’re insane. Bec laughs too, and I watch the scene play out with reluctant amusement. I know my sisters are trying to lighten the mood and make me feel better, and it’s all in good fun. Truthfully, I think they have all come to like Azrael, despite their initial opinions of him.

“I think they’re fucking with you,” I tell Azrael. “Welcome to the family.”

The moment the last words leave my lips, I find myself regretting them. Because I’m forgetting why I came here in the first place. When I see him relax beside me, his lip tipping up at the corner, I think it would be easy to let myself fall into this trap with him. I could think that we could actually have this, that he could sit here beside me with my family, not as my enemy or my captor, but as my loving husband.

He seems to feel it too, this possibility, and something shifts in the air around us as the room falls silent.

“Will you excuse me for a moment?” I clear my throat as I rise from my seat.

Azrael reaches out as if to halt me, his eyes filled with concern.

“I’ll just be upstairs,” I tell him. “It won’t take long.”

He doesn’t want to let me go alone, and I wonder if he can sense my plans. If he can feel me erecting a wall between us, trying to salvage what I have left of myself before it’s too late.

“Do you need company?” Raven calls after me as I head for the stairs.

“No.” I force a smile. “I’m okay, thanks.”

They watch me go, and I’m grateful once I’m out of sight, so I can tear off the mask of indifference I’ve been wearing all day.

I trudge up to the familiar room overflowing with books, greenery, apothecary cabinets, and everything required to do magic. When I step inside, it looks the same as it’s always been. Well-loved and well-lived in. But it feels different today, and I can’t tell if it’s the room that’s changed since I last visited or me.

With a deep breath to steel myself, I glance behind me to make sure I’m alone and then head for Celeste’s altar. Beneath it, in an ancient trunk, I find exactly what I’m looking for. The book of spells has been passed down from generation to generation of Wildblood women. It’s a book we are yet to inherit or dabble with until Celeste deems that we are ready.

She wouldn't like that I'm going behind her back like this, but I don't see any other choice. She asked me not to abandon hope, but she couldn't possibly understand what it is she's asking of me.

Dust particles filter into the air as I crack open the weathered binding, flipping through the pages until I find what I'm after.

Spell to Dissolve Love and Guard Yourself Energetically

My eyes catch on that four-letter word, and I swallow involuntarily. Love seems... like a strong sentiment, particularly when I don't know how to convey my feelings toward Azrael. All I know is I want them to stop. I want to stop feeling altogether so I never have to know the pain I fear he will bring me.

Cast this spell with caution, and only if you are certain you are ready to permanently sever this connection. Once done, it cannot be undone.

I read the inscription scribbled at the top, wondering if it was Nan or another of my ancestors who wrote the warning. And for a moment, I question myself all over again. Is this the right thing? Do I want Azrael to sever all emotional ties with me if they really do exist?

I close my eyes, thinking of the outcome I can't stop playing on repeat in my mind. Him carrying my limp corpse to that altar, offering me up to the demon angel like I'm nothing. Like I never was. Whatever his feelings for me may be, they won't change the outcome. Salomé will ensure that even if it's the last thing she does. And if I'm doomed to die at either of their hands, I can't allow myself to feel more for him than I already do.

Tears prick my eyes as I read through the spell quickly, and before I lose my courage, I start gathering the things I need from around the room.

I light a white candle and then some Palo Santo, smudging the room and clearing away residual energy. I need a clean slate for this spell. *I need it to work.*

With trembling fingers, I scribble Azrael's full name onto a piece of paper and then hold it above the flame, preparing myself to speak the words into existence. The letting go of whatever it is we may have. The severance, a final blade through the threads of whatever it truly is that has bound us together.

Don't.

As I dip the paper nearer to the flame, the word comes to me, sharp and filled with warning. I halt abruptly, fingers clenching, lips parting as I listen for Elizabeth.

Don't do it, Willow.

Her voice is clear, clearer than it's ever been.

"Why?" I whisper.

He is the chosen one.

She repeats the same thing she told me on our wedding day. But the passage of time hasn't made it any clearer for me.

"I don't know what that means," I grit out. "Tell me what it means."

"It means you can't do this," Nan says from behind me.

I wheel around, equally shocked and humiliated to be caught in the act. But her face is absent of the reprimand I

expected to find; rather, there is only understanding and empathy in her expression.

“Yes, I can,” I argue, but my voice wavers even as I say it.

“If you could, then you would have.” Nan nods to the paper in my hand, and when I follow her gaze, I’m confused to see I’ve crumpled it into a little ball in my fist as if to protect it.

“I don’t want this,” I tell her.

“You mean you don’t want to get hurt,” she answers softly.

When I can’t find the words to dispute her observation, she comes closer, her attention drifting to the open spell page. There’s no denying it confirms what she just said.

“Does he love you, Willow?”

Her words catch me off guard, and I don’t know how to answer other than to tell her what I’ve been telling myself.

“No.”

“But he came for you,” she points out. “He rescued you.”

“Because it has to be him.” I turn away in frustration. “He has to be the one to do it.”

“And what if he doesn’t?”

“Nanna, you have to help me.” I turn back to her, desperation clawing at my insides. “I know if anyone can find a way to break this curse, it’s you.”

She offers me a knowing smile as she comes closer, brushing my hair back the way she always did when I was a child. “No, Willow. It’s never been me who held that power. But have you ever stopped to consider that maybe you do?”

I stare at her in confusion, tired of all these riddles. “How?”

“A Delacroix has never fallen in love with a Wildblood before,” she observes. “They have wanted. They have claimed. But they have never loved until you.”

“He doesn’t love me,” I repeat.

“A pregnancy has never happened between a match either,” she says. “You’re the first.”

“It was an accident,” I murmur.

“Was it?” She raises a brow. “Or is it part of something bigger?”

Exhaustion settles over me as I shake my head in defeat. “Nan, I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want you to remember who you are,” she tells me. “The same sweet, beautiful, loving girl I’ve always known. The one with the soft and tender heart. The one who I always knew was special. You have something in you, Willow. Something that others recognize they lack in themselves. Your heart is pure, and you have so many gifts you haven’t even come to understand yet. But the greatest gift you have is that of your capacity to love.”

“What does any of that matter if we are doomed because of Elizabeth’s curse?”

“Are you?” she questions.

I sigh, realizing I’m getting nowhere with her. She’s talking in circles, and I don’t have the mental energy to participate.

“Okay, Nan.” I close the spell book and return it to her trunk before putting away the rest of the things I gathered.

She watches with a strange twinkle in her eye. I wonder if she's been drinking too much psychedelic tea again as I head for the door.

"I better get back down there before they send a search party."

"You know, Willow," she muses. "I often think that Elizabeth had quite a sense of humor."

"What do you mean?" I glance back at her in question.

"I mean, if you think about her curse." She smiles. "What could be worse for the Delacroix family than to have one of their own fall for a Wildblood?"

AZRAEL

I stand beside my brother staring at the altar of Shemhazai.

“Holy fuck,” he mutters, shaking his head.

Where the slab of stone had split into two during the lightning storm, it now lays in three pieces.

“Think Gran’s seen it?” he asks.

“I doubt it.” I haven’t talked to Salomé since the other night. She’s been keeping to herself in her room, and I’ve avoided her as much as possible. But no matter how hard I try, I can’t forget her words. I can’t lessen their impact.

“If she had, I’m sure she’d be out here praying for our salvation,” Emmanuel says. He crouches down, tries to move the heavy stone, shakes his head.

“No doubt. It must have been weakened by the initial break,” I say, wanting to make sense out of it. I look up at the demon-angel’s face, his expression as malevolent as ever.

Emmanuel straightens up, dusts off his hands. “Mhm.” He glances up at the thing, then at me.

“I’m taking it down anyway,” I say, trying to go for casual. Failing.

Emmanuel studies me for an unending minute. “You’re not going to do it.”

I turn to face him.

“The curse. The sacrifice. You’re not going through with it.”

I don’t respond but my silence is answer enough. I can’t do it. He must know that. He must have figured it out when we went after the Disciples to get all three of them back. If he thought the urgency was for Bec, well, I think anyone who saw me hold Willow in that cabin would know that it wasn’t only Bec I went to save. To bring home.

Strange that it took Salomé’s mocking, hateful words to make me look at myself. To make me see.

Men often mistake fucking for love.

I push my hand through my hair. “Let’s go,” I say to my brother, turning away from him and heading down the path back to the house.

Emmanuel stops me. “Azrael.” He waits until I’m facing him to continue. “Bec...” he trails off.

“Bec isn’t sick because of this curse. Because of Shemhazai. We both know that. Mom and Dad, freak accident. Abacus, well, she fucking drove him mad. What she believes is madness. I can’t do it, Emmanuel. I won’t. And if you have a problem with that, then you have a problem with me.”

Men often mistake fucking for love.

Salomé is wrong. Maybe it was love from day one, from the instant I saw the mark upon Willow’s breast and knew she was to be mine. Maybe it had already begun that night, my stumbling down this unfamiliar path. My trying to do what I

have always been told I would have to do to ensure my family remains safe, healthy and prosperous.

Hell, I don't know when it began. I don't care. The truth is that I've fallen in love with a Wildblood witch. My Wildblood witch. The one chosen by fate to be sacrificed to Shemhazai at my hands is the very one I am in love with, a woman I can no more hurt than I could my sister, my brother. Even my grandmother.

He smiles a sad smile, nods. "I have no problem with you, brother."

I nod, too, unable to speak given the weight of our words.

"It has to end somewhere," he adds.

We walk the rest of the way in heavy silence. When we near the house, I look up to see the light on in my bedroom. I search for Willow but don't see her. Just before I turn away, something moves in the corner of the window, coming out from the shadows of the drapes. Familiar green eyes meet mine. Fiona.

"She's got a crush on you, I think," Emmanuel says with a chuckle.

"Nah. She hates me," I say, knowing she's probably been watching us from her hiding place and wanted me to know it. "I have a suspicion she scares Benedict."

"Hell, I know she does. Wasn't he supposed to be this ferocious breed of guard dog?" Emmanuel asks. "He'll tear a human being limb from limb but Fiona? She just has to give him side eye and he'll tuck tail."

Just before we enter the house from the doors leading to the living room, movement from the pool house catches my eye. We both stop to watch our sister swim a lap all the way

across, take a momentary breath, then swim the lap back. Willow is sitting along the edge dangling her feet in, a T-shirt on over her bathing suit. She's cheering Bec on but from the look on her face, I see it's forced.

She's been despondent since we've been home and although she'll let me hold her after the nightmares that don't seem to give her a fucking break, she's keeping me at arm's length. I get it. I know what she saw in that book: what she knows my ancestors have done to hers, what she believes I will do to her. A few words aren't going to reassure her of my intentions where they concern her. She needs to learn to trust me again.

"Bec's looking so much better," Emmanuel says. "Maybe that night, maybe it was the last of it."

"I hope so," I say, although Willow's words haunt me. I haven't told Emmanuel that she wanted to have Bec's shakes tested. Does Willow truly believe Salomé is harming her? My grandmother may be many things, but she wouldn't poison her own granddaughter.

Since we've gotten home, doctors have wanted to step back and start Bec with a clean slate. They're testing one thing at a time, monitoring, and so far, she's doing better and better.

Bec climbs out of the pool, a wide smile on her face, and Willow hands her a towel so she can tie an oversized robe around herself.

"You know it's a matter of time before Gran learns about the pregnancy, right? She's neither stupid nor blind."

Although Willow isn't showing yet, she will be soon. He's right.

“One thing at a time, brother.” I’m meeting with Ezra Moore, an investigator Judge Montgomery, one of the Sovereign Sons of the Society, recommended when I reached out for help to find Caleb Church. As much as the Wildbloods have shared, I need someone unafraid to break a few rules to get me what I need. I’ll use my connections within IVI to get it.

“You sure you don’t want me to come with you?” he asks, knowing where I’m going. I shake my head as I watch Bec and Willow walk out of the pool house, Bec chattering as Willow smiles. She looks exhausted, but I’m not surprised. I don’t know the last time she slept through the night.

“Keep an eye on them. Don’t let Salomé corner Willow, okay?”

He studies me. “What do you expect her to do when she finds out?”

“I have no idea, Brother. That’s the problem.”

I DRIVE TO EZRA MOORE’S OFFICE, WHICH IS HOUSED ON THE same property as his house. I don’t know much about the man except that he’s trustworthy and has resources at his disposal that others may not—and he’s discreet.

I park my car and step out of my vehicle. The house itself is dark, with everyone most likely in bed. I walk along the path to the entrance of the office where the door has been left slightly ajar. I push it open and enter.

Ezra looks up from his desk, takes my measure, then stands to extend his hand. “Mr. Delacroix, it’s a pleasure to

meet you in person.”

I take his hand and shake it. “Azrael, please. Thank you for meeting me at such a late hour.”

He simply nods, not wasting time but gesturing to me to sit down as he resumes his seat behind his desk. Over the last week, I’ve been able to look over the files the Wildblood investigators have collected on the Disciples and as much as they’ve been willing to share about Caleb Church, which hasn’t been much.

Like Willow, they don’t trust me. Again, understandable, but I will do whatever I need to do to protect my wife and our unborn child. If that means going around the Wildbloods, so be it.

“I’ll start with Alfred Noyes, even though he was a small player when we first spoke.”

My eyebrows crease together as he turns his computer screen around and types on his keyboard. An older man of decent height and build fills the screen. He’s in military fatigues, and what is left of his hair is gray. His face is deeply lined, but in his eyes is a determination that’s rare. If I had to describe the man in one word, it would be fierce.

“Mr. Noyes retired from the military some years ago and had been funding and running the Disciples for the last forty years until his grandson, Frederik, took over as the Prophet a few years ago. Frederik had the full support of his grandfather, and the two were close from what I gathered.”

I nod, waiting. Not liking where this is going.

“He is a very powerful man, and since his grandson’s murder, has taken on the active role of Prophet once more.”

“So he’s back to running these witch hunters?”

“Yes.”

“What does he have to do with my wife?”

“Nothing. He has nothing to do with the Wildbloods at all apart from the historic fact that they descend from a woman who was executed for witchcraft dating back hundreds of years.”

“His ancestors were at the original witch trials in Salem as I understood it.”

“Correct.”

“What about Caleb Church?”

“After the... incident at Noyes’s compound, Caleb disappeared as far as we knew. Alfred Noyes put out a call to bring Caleb to him. He wanted him alive.”

“Did he? And did he succeed in locating him?”

“Well, here’s the thing. When Caleb learned what Noyes had done, he took a risk, a dangerous one. Outright bold if you ask me.”

He clicks a couple of keys on his keyboard again, and a photo populates the screen. This one has me leaning forward to look closely at the image of Caleb Church standing at an open door. He’s had his hair cut since I saw him, and although he’s wearing a cassock, it looks new or at least laundered. He’s shaved his face and looks fed and rested, not so crazed.

On the other side of the door is Alfred Noyes. The two are shaking hands.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Frederik and Caleb had an ongoing feud. They’d worked together before Caleb was incarcerated and Frederik and

Alfred both thought Caleb was bringing too much attention to the Disciples. His arrest and prosecution were evidence of that.”

He pushes a folder toward me. I look at it but don’t pick it up. I think I know what’s inside.

“Willow was a minor during the incident that landed Church in prison. All records have been sealed and will remain so.”

I drag my gaze from the folder to him.

“Caleb’s bold move,” I say, because as much as I want to know and understand the past Caleb Church shares with my wife, I want it to come from her. I want her to tell me.

“Alfred assumed it was Caleb who killed his grandson, hence the call to bring him in. But Caleb didn’t wait to be dragged to the man. He showed up at his front door knowing how heavily guarded Noyes is, how the Disciples will do his bidding no questions asked. He showed up to plead his case.”

“Plead what case?” But as I ask the question, I understand. I understand what the manipulative bastard did. It’s the only thing he could have done. “He pinned Frederik’s murder on me.”

Ezra nods. “You need to be careful, Azrael. The Disciples are dangerous, no matter what you think of them.”

“Oh, I know that.”

“And you have a target on your back.”

“Any news on Caleb Church’s whereabouts?” I ask, ignoring his last comment.

“No, but I’ll keep searching. I will advise one thing. The man in the hospital, do you have him guarded?”

I nod.

“He’s the only one who can tell Noyes the truth about what happened. I assume Caleb will not want him to wake up.”

I stand, consider the folder. I almost don’t take it, but then I do. I pull it toward me and tuck it under my arm.

“Thank you, Ezra.” I extend my hand and we shake.

“I’ll keep working. Caleb Church will turn up. He’s obsessed with your wife. He will risk his own life to get to her. I want to be very clear on that.”

I study the man. He’s earnest. “I am very clear, thank you.”

“I’ll be in touch as soon as I can.”

With that I walk toward the door but stop and turn back. “One more question. Church wasn’t close to parole. Do you know why he was released early?”

He shakes his head. “No, but I can look into it.”

“Do.”

I walk out of his office, set that envelope on the seat beside me and drive home, noting every set of headlights behind me, more aware of my surroundings than usual.

The lock at the gates of the house has been upgraded and I decide to call in more security both here and also at the Wildblood house. I pull the Jaguar through the gates and park in front of the entrance. It’s late, and all the lights are out. I head up the stairs toward my bedroom, quietly opening Bec’s door on my way to check on her. I’m surprised when I find her at her window rather than in bed.

“Bec?”

She turns to me, startled. She puts her hand to her chest. “You scared me.”

“What is it?” I ask, crossing the room to look out the window. Her bedroom also overlooks the backyard but from hers, she can see a part of the pool house. Although the light in the pool house is out, she can see inside it from the lights in the garden.

“Willow,” she says, pointing. “She’s been out there a while, and I’m worried about her.”

I peer around to see the distant figure of Willow floating on her back in the calm water and for a moment, my mind conjures up the photograph in the backseat of that car. Willow with the carving in her forehead. I blink to dispel it, but it’s happened, hasn’t it? He managed to get to her. To carve that cross into her forehead.

“Azrael? You okay?” Bec asks.

I shake my head, force the thoughts away, glad to catch a glimpse of Emmanuel on a chair in the pool house. “Did something happen? Did she say anything?” Because she won’t talk to me, not really.

“I don’t know. She just feels off to me. Sad. I mean, it makes sense. I think she’s trying to act normal, but she’s scared. Like really scared. What happened to her, that man, what he did to her, Azrael, it was terrifying. That kind of violence... I’ve never...” Her eyes tear up and I pull her in for a hug.

“You’re safe now. You’re all safe now. I’ll go down there. I’ll talk to her. Make her talk to me.”

She pulls back to look up at me. “I think that’s a good idea.”

“Come on. Get back in bed.”

I walk her over, noticing one of those shakes on the nightstand. As she climbs in, I pick it up. It’s open, the cap lying beside it, but still full.

“You drinking these again?”

“Grandmother says I need to to keep up my strength.” She makes a show of holding her nose with one hand and reaches to take it from me.

“Leave it,” I say. “You’re doing well. Keep doing what you’re doing for now, okay?”

If she finds it strange, she doesn’t comment but nods. “Are you going to flush it?” she asks me as I get up to leave. “She always checks that I drank it all.”

“Yeah, I’m going to flush it.”

“Even Benedict won’t drink those. They’re awful.”

I pause at that, because Benedict will eat or drink pretty much anything.

“Goodnight, Az.”

“Night, Bec.”

I walk out and take the shake to the library, sniffing it. It smells like vanilla. I twist the lid back on, unlock the drawer of my desk and place the bottle inside then text Ezra to ask him if he knows of a lab where I can have something tested discreetly. He responds that he’ll send details in the morning.

Satisfied, I walk down to the pool. The shake can wait. Seeing Willow can’t. I need her to talk to me. That’s happening tonight, whatever it takes.

WILLOW

“Don’t you have anything better to do with your time?” I call over my shoulder as Emmanuel traipses through the yard behind me.

He’s been lurking since Azrael left earlier, and I suspect he’s been assigned guard duty.

“Who says I didn’t have the same itch for a late-night swim?” He shrugs.

I stop and turn to glare at him. “You aren’t wearing a suit. And even if you were, I’m not swimming with you.”

“Who says I need one?” He arches a brow at me.

“Good point,” I muse. “Maybe we should both get naked. I’m sure your brother would love that.”

Emmanuel snorts, seemingly amused by the idea of riling up Azrael. So, I decide to change tack.

“I’m sure Raven would love to hear about your shrinkage problems in the pool too. She seems to be under the impression that you’re rather large, but I could easily dispel that notion—”

“She said that?” he asks, his curiosity getting the best of him.

I can't help but smirk at how easily he took that bait. "Of course not," I tell him. "Do you think she gives you a second thought when she already has so many admirers vying for her attention?"

That idea makes his jaw rigid, and it pleases me far more than it should. Maybe it's petulant of me, but I want him to drop his strange fascination with my sister.

"She never mentioned a boyfriend," he says.

"Well, she wouldn't." I resume my journey toward the pool house, listening as he plods along behind me. "She doesn't have a boyfriend."

"No?" Emmanuel questions.

"Nope." I reach the door and open it. "She has a bunch of them. Why settle for one guy when you can have ten?"

A low growl emanates from Emmanuel's chest. "Are you always so antagonistic?"

I disrobe and kick off my flip-flops before meeting his gaze. "When it comes to my sister, yes. You can't have her. So stay away."

"If she has no interest, then my presence around her shouldn't be a problem," he retorts.

"It's in the contract," I grit out. "The Delacroix obsession with the Wildblood women is insatiable, I know. But the rules are clear. You only get one sacrifice from my family, and I'm it. Your brother chose me, and that's that. Whether you like it or not, Raven can't be acquired for any purpose that may suit you. She is free to live her life with whomever she chooses. Any man but one with your last name."

Emmanuel seems wholly unfazed by my rant as he shrugs dismissively, and I don't like it. I can tell he cares about the rules of that contract as much as I care about their demon-angel. But regardless, he has to know it can't happen. It's something else I'll have to bring up with Azrael, but for now, it looks like I'm stuck with my babysitter.

"You can go," I tell him. "I don't need a guard to swim."

"Tell that to my brother," he answers wryly. "He seems to be under the impression that you do."

I walk to the edge of the pool and sigh. "Is it to keep me inside the gates or Caleb out of them?"

There's a moment of silence before Emmanuel answers, and when I look at him, he can't hide the flash of anger in his eyes. The mention of Caleb seems to have brought up something for him, and I don't know if it's because of Bec or something else—something like the fact that those men took Raven too. If Azrael and Emmanuel hadn't arrived when they did, I don't know what might have happened to her.

"It's not a prison," Emmanuel says quietly. "That isn't Azrael's intention. He wants you safe."

"Yes." I sit down on the ledge and stare at the water. "He needs to keep me safe until it's time to sacrifice me to the slab of stone you worship. Makes total sense."

Emmanuel takes a seat beside me, and when I meet his gaze, all the humor and mischief have fled. "He's not going to hurt you, Willow."

Something tightens in my chest when I hear the certainty in his voice. I want to believe it as much as he seems to. I can't find it in me to answer, but Emmanuel doesn't seem to expect it. We sit together in silence for a while before he speaks

again, his voice even lower, almost as if he knows he shouldn't say it.

“He's different with you.”

I peek over at him, but his gaze remains on the water, unmoving.

“You brought him back to life,” he murmurs. “After Abacus, I didn't know if we'd ever see that part of Azrael again. A piece of him died when our brother did, but you... you've changed him.”

Those words hang heavy between us, and I try to swallow, but my throat is clogged with emotion. I can feel the pain in Emmanuel when he speaks of Abacus, and I think I've always recognized that pain in Azrael too. Their losses have been great, and despite what that tome says about them, this very real emotion reminds me they aren't monsters from a storybook. At their core, they are as mortal as any man can be.

“He's changed me too.” The words leave my lips on a broken whisper before I heave myself off the ledge and into the pool.

Water sloshes around me as I sink to the bottom and push off to resurface again. When I do, I'm glad to see Emmanuel has taken a seat near the window, phone in hand as he goes back to ignoring me.

For a minute, I can almost forget he's there as I float on my back and stare up at the moon. It's beautiful tonight, and I didn't realize until now how much I've missed moon bathing at night. But regardless of my earlier protests, I'm secretly grateful for Emmanuel's presence so I can swim in peace without worrying about every little noise outside.

I glide around the pool, propelling myself along with my arms and legs until I've burned off some of the restless energy I've been harboring. Then I just stay there, floating like driftwood in the water, the buoyancy calming my nerves like nothing else can. It's strange how I feel so at peace with an element that brought me so much terror.

But it didn't happen overnight. It took a lot of work to keep coming back to the water, rebuilding my associations with it after Caleb. And now that I have, I never want to lose it.

The moment I hear a splash, though, it immediately sends me into that same flight or freeze response. When I lift my head from the water, I'm surprised to find Azrael staring back at me. I didn't even hear him come in, and when I glance at the bench, Emmanuel is gone.

"What are you doing?" My eyes rove over Azrael's near-naked body. He stripped down to his briefs, leaving his clothes stacked beside the pool.

"Joining my wife," he answers.

"Azrael—" My protest is cut short as he pulls me closer, pivoting our bodies until my legs are wrapped around his waist while he holds me up with his arms.

"How is this?" His eyes move over mine in question.

He isn't just asking if I'm comfortable. He's giving me time to process this fear that always lives inside of me. The fear of being out of control in the water. He wants me to trust him, to understand that he has no intention of taking that control from me right now. Logically, I know this. But my body still needs time to adjust. He gives me that without forcing me to acknowledge his question.

After a couple of minutes, my heartbeat slows, and I settle into the feeling of me wrapped around his body. We're weightless together. Or maybe it's just me. Maybe it's the way he makes me feel, like if I let him, he could harbor me forever in his arms.

"Good?" Azrael's lips brush against mine, and heat sparks in my belly.

It feels like it's been so long since he kissed me. The last time had been before Caleb took me. He hasn't tried while my face has been healing. He hasn't pushed for anything, but I can feel how hard he is for me now.

"Good," I croak.

He groans as he deepens the kiss, and I part my lips for him. I don't even know if it's a conscious choice anymore. I just know that as complicated as my feelings are for Azrael, this part is simple. It's the simplest thing in the world to admit that I want him.

His palms slide over the back of my thighs, dragging me closer as I reach up, and my fingers find their way into his hair. He rumbles his approval as the chaotic energy between us returns with a vengeance.

"Azrael," I choke out his name as I grind against him.

"I know," he growls. "Fuck, I need to be inside of you. Tell me you want it too."

I can't give voice to the words inside my head. Because telling him that he's already inside of me in ways he doesn't fully realize feels too vulnerable. So, I show him instead.

My hand drifts between us, fingers grazing the hard length of his erection through the wet material of his briefs. He closes his eyes, shuddering, and I want to play that visual on repeat

for the rest of my life. To see this powerful man come undone for me. To be the one to bring him to his knees.

I want it, and how much I want it scares me.

When I slip my hand beneath the band of his briefs to stroke his cock, he's gone for me completely. I can't look away when he opens his eyes, and they collide with mine. We get lost in each other, hands groping, water sloshing around us, our hearts beating a staccato rhythm together as he presses his chest to mine.

He gets the strings of my bikini undone and presses my back against the side of the pool, using it for leverage as he lifts my hips.

"Tell me." He kisses my neck as he thrusts against me, the heat of his cock so close but still too far away. He's being so unfair.

I groan out my frustration, tipping my head back to give him access to the most sensitive part of my body. He drags his teeth along the skin, torturing me slowly as he waits for me to give in.

"Please," I choke out.

"Please, what?" he asks.

"Are you really going to make me say it?" I ask.

He pauses to look at me, heat flashing in his eyes. "I need to hear you say it, Willow."

There's so much emotion in his words that I'm struggling to identify the reason behind it. I don't know if it's because of what happened or the undeniable ocean between us these last weeks.

But whatever it is, I can see he's not asking to push me out of my comfort zone. He needs to know I want this with him. Maybe it's stupid to let the barrier I've erected around myself crumble in the face of that, but it does. At least for the moment.

"I want you," I whisper.

He kisses me then, a brutal kiss, swallowing my gasps and stealing the very breath from my lungs. I hold onto him for dear life, and in the next moment, he thrusts inside me, sending a wave of shock and pleasure through my body.

"Okay?" he asks again, gentling his movements as he rolls his hips.

"Yes." I nod frantically. "More."

He thrusts into me again, only giving me half of himself, and when I meet his eyes, understanding dawns. He's trying to be gentle because of the baby.

"It's okay." I wiggle against him.

He doesn't look as certain as I am, and that realization does something to me. He doesn't want to hurt us. Which can only mean... *he wants this baby to live.*

"Azrael?" I look up at him in question.

"I don't know how to do this," he admits. "I have no idea."

I offer him the only reassurance I can. "It's okay. Trust me to tell you if it's too much."

He gives me a stiff nod, deepening his thrusts, and slowly, we fall back into a familiar rhythm.

Only, something is different this time. It's more intense. I can't tell if he feels it too, not until he makes me come and

approaches the point of no return himself.

“Fuck, I’ve missed being inside of you,” he murmurs. “You feel so perfect wrapped around me.”

I whimper as he drives deeper, my fingers clutching his massive shoulders, his hips splitting mine apart. He loses himself to it, and I watch in awe as he starts to unravel. He praises every inch of my body, telling me how good I feel as he tries to draw it out and make it last forever. But as good as it feels, I don’t want it to last. I want to watch him come because, truthfully, I’ve missed this too.

I’ve missed it so much that I didn’t even realize how much until now.

Azrael tips his head back, lips parting, eyelids fluttering as he loses the battle. His cock pulses inside me, warmth spilling into me, chest heaving as his heartbeat rises to a crescendo.

For a few long moments, we stay there, tangled up in each other. My body feels boneless, and I don’t want to move. I want to stay right here with him inside of me while we ignore the world that seems to be burning around us.

But when a shiver moves over me, the chill of the evening air finally getting to me, Azrael doesn’t miss it.

“Come on, Little Witch.” He carries me up the pool steps, pausing to grab my robe and draping it over my body. “Let’s get you back inside.”

He carries me, still wrapped around him, all the way back to the house. And before we slip through the door, I swear I see the curtain moving in Salomé’s room. I wonder if she was watching us and for how long. The thought sickens me, but it doesn’t surprise me. I don’t doubt she spies on us far more than I’d care to admit.

Azrael takes me inside the house, straight to the bathroom, where he draws a bath to warm me up. Unsurprisingly, he slips in behind me again, wrapping his arms around me as he settles me against his chest. My eyes are heavy with exhaustion, and I feel like I could fall asleep right there, but Azrael has other plans.

“Willow.” He strokes my cheek, turning my face toward his.

“Hmm?” I blink up at him.

“I want you to tell me about Caleb.”

I stiffen in his arms, and his brows furrow as he waits for a response. I knew this moment would come, but half of me expected he would just use his connections in The Society to get the answers he wanted.

“You mean you don’t already know?” I ask, trying for a neutral tone.

He considers me for a moment, tension creeping into his features. “I have a file,” he admits. “But I don’t want to read about it in a file. I want to hear it from you.”

I curl my knees into my chest, quietly giving it some thought as his fingers glide over my arms. He’s being gentle again, and I don’t know if that’s better or worse. I’m so used to stuffing down these memories, trying to forget they ever happened. Staying numb is how I’ve survived, but Azrael makes me feel with even the slightest touch, and I know that isn’t an option this time.

I can’t recite the story as if I’m talking about someone else’s life. As reluctant as I am to tell him the truth, I know he’ll learn it regardless. I would rather it came from me, and I

can begrudgingly admit that he respected me enough to ask before he went digging through that file himself.

“I don’t know where to start,” I confess.

“Start at the beginning,” he suggests. “How did you even meet him?”

There’s a note of tension in his voice, and I can tell he’s trying to temper his feelings for Caleb Church, but it isn’t necessary. I already know how he feels about him, and there’s comfort in that. Because if I meant nothing to him, he wouldn’t care what history I had with Caleb or anyone else.

“When I was in high school, my sisters and I used to visit this bookshop in the Garden District,” I explain. “We’d spend the afternoons reading, each of us finding a comfortable chair and getting lost in whatever book we were fascinated with at the time. One day, I was there alone because I had to pick up a book I’d ordered. I was so eager to start reading I didn’t want to wait. I wasn’t paying attention to anyone around me, and when I went to sit down, I bumped into Caleb. Or, more accurately, I suppose he bumped into me.”

Azrael’s fingers come to a halt on my arm, and I glance back at him momentarily, long enough for him to realize his mistake. He pulls me closer, resuming the soothing rhythm that’s keeping me grounded.

“At the time, I thought it was all one big coincidence,” I tell him. “How stupid that was.”

“He knew who you were?” Azrael asks.

“Yes. He knew who my whole family was. The Disciples had assigned him to watch us and gather information because they considered our existence a threat to their religion, apparently. I had no idea he’d been observing me for a while

already. It wasn't until the police found journal entries of his stalking that I realized the full extent of it."

"You couldn't have known," Azrael assures me. "They have a long history of this. They've learned how to stay under the radar."

I shouldn't be surprised that Azrael knows so much about The Disciples, but in a way, I'm glad for it. At least that part, I won't have to explain.

"I knew I would be married to a Delacroix," I tell him. "But I was young and naive and thought I deserved to be a little rebellious. So, when he asked me to stay and have a coffee with him, I did. He seemed... charming and funny, and he was always interested in what I had to say. Before I knew it, I wasn't thinking about the consequences anymore. One date turned into two, and then I was sneaking out to meet him every week. It was fun, mostly the thrill of it, I think. I just wanted to break the rules in my own little way while I had the chance. I never intended for it to go anywhere or for anything serious to happen between us. I was only sixteen."

Azrael is quiet behind me, and I can't look at his face because I'm not sure what I'll find, but I can feel his breathing has slowed. He's anxious to hear the rest.

"This went on for a while. A month, maybe two. I'm not really sure. I told him I couldn't have a boyfriend, and he kept insisting it was okay. But then he started to get handsier. He kissed me a few times—"

Azrael stiffens, and I swallow.

"Go on," he says gruffly.

"And he'd insist on holding my hand all the time when we were in public like he wanted to stake a claim on me. At that

point, I was already getting a little annoyed with him. He was becoming more demanding of my time and attention and trying to call and text me constantly when we weren't together. My family started asking questions about who I was talking to, and I hated keeping secrets from them. I was already thinking about ending it, and I think he sensed that."

I pause to take a breath, shifting to get comfortable, and Azrael waits as I gather the courage to go on.

"I tried to tell him we needed to take a break," I continue, recalling how I felt that night, the dread in my gut as I worked up the nerve to tell him. "I thought it was best to do it in person. But when Caleb picked me up, he told me he wanted to take me somewhere special. I figured it was just another date. So, when he pulled up in front of a church, I was completely blindsided."

"In New Orleans?" Azrael asks.

"Yes." I swallow. "It looked harmless enough on the outside, I guess. But you know how I feel about that stuff."

"I do," he answers quietly, rubbing circles into my back.

"I had a gut feeling right away," I admit. "But I ignored it. I went in anyway, even though everything inside me was screaming not to."

I fall quiet for a moment, squeezing my eyes shut as a shiver racks my body.

"What happened inside?" Azrael asks.

"He took me to the room where they do the baptisms," I explain. "There was a little pool with stairs. At first, I stupidly thought he wanted to swim or something, though it was way too small for that. But he led me over to the water, and I could tell as soon as he turned to face me, something had changed.

His eyes were darker, and his voice was completely different. It was like he had ripped off a mask, and too late, I realized he'd been putting on an act the entire time.”

Azrael draws me closer, adjusting my body so that I'm settled onto his lap, head resting against his shoulder. He can see my face now, but the thought isn't as terrifying as I thought it might be. I'm lost to the memory, eyes glazed as I stare at the wall, forcing the words out.

“He said he wanted to baptize me,” I croak. “It totally freaked me out, and I told him I wanted to leave. But the minute I turned around, he yanked me back. The violence of it startled me, and at first, I wondered if I was making it seem worse than it was in my head. I'd never known him to be cruel, and I just couldn't make sense of it. But he showed me who he really was then. He told me I needed to be purified. That I was a sinner. A devil-worshipper. He kept saying it over and over, and I tried to fight him off, but he started manhandling me and tearing at my clothes. He was trying to get me naked.”

A tear slips from my eye, followed by another, and I feel Azrael wiping them away, but he doesn't interrupt me as I rush to get the rest out.

“I bit his arm, and that really pissed him off. That was when he first hit me. It stunned me, and I just froze for a minute. But it didn't stop there. He started beating me at that point, and I think he was getting off on the violence just as much as he was getting off on the thought of forcing himself on me. When I finally got my limbs to cooperate again, it was already too late. He had my skirt ripped off, and he was unbuckling his belt as he dunked my head into the water. I

don't think, at that point, he even cared if I was dead or alive. He planned to fuck me either way."

"Jesus," Azrael growls.

"I was terrified, and I don't know how long I was under, but I knew I would die. My lungs burned, everything hurt, and I was starting to give up. And then I heard Elizabeth's voice. She was telling me to fight. To channel her. I didn't think I could. I didn't even know how. But then I felt something... like a sudden surge of adrenaline, and I remembered my ring.

"Maybe it was her telling me to use it. I don't know. But I just know I stopped fighting at that point, and Caleb loosened his grip, and that's when I surprised him. I thrust my head back into his face, and I think I broke his nose. He let me go long enough for me to draw air and fight back. I managed to pull myself up and slash at his face. I wasn't expecting the ring to do that much damage, but it fileted his skin wide open, and it went right through his eye.

"There was blood everywhere, dripping onto me, into the pool. He stumbled back, clutching his face, and I just ran. I don't know how I even made it out. He'd beaten me so badly I could only go one block before I collapsed. Someone on the street called the police, and that was it. That's the last thing I remember before I woke up in the hospital."

There's a long moment of silence after those final words are spoken. Azrael doesn't let me go, but we're both quiet as we process everything I just told him. Even though I know it's foolish, part of me fears he may blame me in some capacity, that he'll be angry that I ever indulged Caleb's advances in the first place. But he lays those fears to rest when he turns my face to his, forcing me to meet his gaze.

“I’m sorry, Willow,” he chokes out. “That never should have happened to you.”

I force a nod, which is all I can manage in my current state.

“He will pay,” Azrael promises darkly. “He will never touch you again. I’ll make sure of that.”

AZRAEL

Willow falls asleep the instant I lay her down in our bed. I climb in beside her and pull her to me. Her body is soft and yielding, and when I wake at first light, she hasn't moved. Her eyes are still closed and her hand rests on my bicep the same as when she fell asleep. It's the first time she's slept through the night since that bastard took her.

My muscles tense at the thought of Caleb Church. Willow must feel the shift because her brow furrows and she mutters a sound as she curls in on herself a little.

"Shh," I tell her, brushing my lips over her cheek before I slip out of the bed and tuck her beneath the covers. I don't let my gaze linger on the mark on her forehead.

Fiona, who was at the foot of the bed, takes my place. Before I turn to leave, she gives me a look of what I might say is approval if I didn't know better. I grab clothes out of the closet and walk down the hall into an empty guest room to shower so as not to wake Willow.

The house is quiet, as usual, as I pad down the hall. Salomé's light is on, and I remember that protein shake that's locked in my desk drawer. It was the only place I could think to put it even though I realize Salomé can access it. She had no qualms about taking the Book of Tithes. I don't know if she

has a second key or if she picked the lock to get it. I don't even know how she knew where it was to begin with. She clearly didn't care that I'd know what she'd done. Her need to hurt Willow, to do what she believes Shemhazai wants her to do, is greater than anything else.

Salomé is dangerous to Willow. As far as she is concerned, Willow is the Sacrifice. Period. The end. And she is determined that the Tithe be paid, the sacrifice made.

The only thing I can think of that will keep Willow safe from her, at least for now, is that as far as history goes, the Penitent must be the one to spill her blood. If Salomé obeys tradition and history, as she has done to the letter thus far, then she cannot hurt Willow. It has to be me to do it.

But her words haunt me as I walk into the library and toward my desk.

Was yours, Azrael. Was. Now she's fair game.

I shake my head, unsure what to make of that. I glance up at the stained-glass window that depicts both Penitent and Sacrifice, but I don't linger there. There's no point. Instead, I look to the glass case set on a pedestal nearby. It's where the dagger Abacus used to cut out his birthmark used to be displayed so fucking proudly. I wonder if Salomé is hoping to somehow replace it. There are other antiques, artifacts historically important to our family, but I'm not interested in those. There, beside the empty place where the dagger stood, is the Book of Tithes, back in its prominent position from where I'd taken it down after Abacus's suicide, once I became the Penitent. I assume it was Salomé who put the book back there after I confronted her. I lift the heavy tome and sit down at my desk. There's something I want to see.

Last night, after Willow had fallen asleep and before I had, I noticed something. Just as Shemhazai's altar had split from two to three sometime after we learned about Willow's pregnancy, I noticed that the crack in the carving above the bed had lengthened and deepened to a point that for the first time ever, I could see the white of the ceiling behind it.

Shemhazai's altar splitting in that storm, the thunder that accompanied the angry bolt of lightning almost felt like a scream. His scream of rage. There is a malevolent energy in that churchyard. I've always sensed it, and Benedict won't set his paws over the border of the path.

But inside my bedroom, the room that has always belonged to the Penitent, I've never felt that same energy. I've never felt *him* there.

And it has me thinking.

Settling behind my desk, I open the Book of Tithes. I can just imagine Willow's face as she read through it. Her thoughts. Her horror.

I turn the pages yellowed by age. They're fragile. It wouldn't take much to tear them out, crush them in my hands. Turn the past to dust. Would it change our future if I did? Because as much as I abhor Salomé's archaic, blind belief, her devotion and commitment to follow through with this sacrifice to protect us from Elizabeth Wildblood's curse, there is one thing that I cannot explain.

The Wildblood women are sacrificed at our hands. Their deaths, mostly, are made to look accidental. But with each Tithe paid, the Penitent who shed the blood of the chosen Wildblood woman dies within a year. Those deaths always occur on Delacroix soil. Those deaths are accidental, in some regard, or can be deemed so. But how many Penitents have

drowned in the lake I grew up swimming in? How many have been struck by lightning on these grounds that seem to defy the odds of attracting electricity? How many are buried beneath powerful, young trees felled by almost unnatural storms?

I don't ask the question out of fear. I've said it before, and I will say it again. I would give my life freely if it would save my family, and that now includes Willow. But this is something I cannot explain. It's something I cannot disregard. Like the pages of this ancient tome, even if I could turn them to dust, I know their destruction will not change our future.

But the crack in the carving, maybe that is not Shemhazai's rage, his warning. Even the splitting of his altar, if I shift my perspective... maybe it's something else entirely.

I open the tome to the page I want. That of Solange Wildblood and her Penitent, Louis Delacroix. Their story dates back to 1822, and it's theirs that has always stood out to me. I've never understood why until now. Until this morning.

Louis wrote their story in the first person calling his Sacrifice *my Solange*. The Penitents before him had noted facts, logging the atrocities they committed. The only emotion on the page, if any was shown, was an eagerness that turns my stomach. Perhaps that is one of the reasons their story has stayed with me. It was just different.

Solange's birthday was on the day of the Tithing. She had turned twenty-two and she and her two older sisters had stood in their white gowns and received the Delacroix brothers, Louis and Charles, twins like Abacus and I, born minutes apart.

Opposite Abacus and I, Louis and Charles were not close. In fact, from how I read it, Charles hated Louis.

I turn the page that marks the year and names of both Penitent and Sacrifice and begin to read.

I shift uneasily, leaning forward so as not to come into contact with the back of the seat. Charles is at my side as we ride to the Wildblood house. My grandfather and father saw us off and will await our return at home. Just days ago, we buried Manon, our sister. And that on the heels of our mother's burial weeks earlier.

The Tithe is a heavy weight upon my shoulders, but I understand my duty now. Both Father and Grandfather have shown me what happens when we shirk our responsibility.

"Sit back, brother," Charles says in his mocking voice, pushing me backward. "Relax."

I wince as my flayed skin comes into contact with the seat and hate myself for crying out.

Charles grins, his eyes dark, their wickedness making the deep amber flat and ugly.

"You'll see your lovely Solange in just a little while. We'll bring her to her new home together, you and I."

"She is mine. I am the Penitent."

"Of course," Charles says, his expression one of pure innocence, a thing he is not.

Once we arrive at the Wildblood house, we are ushered inside only a few candles barely lighting our way. The mirrors we pass in the hall are covered with black shrouds and Horace Wildblood, Solange's father, stands at the door where the Tithing will take place, one arm in a sling, leaning on his better leg, his face swollen with the bruises Charles put there when we had to drag him and Solange back home. He had

tried to hide her away, out of reach. He did not understand that it is an impossibility.

Does he know, though, that the beating he took was nothing compared to what my family has endured? What Solange has yet to endure.

I meet his eyes, this man who once, before he knew my name, welcomed me into his home.

It is why I write this account. As warning to the Penitents who will follow. You see, I know Solange Wildblood. Once I knew what I was required to do, what Shemhazai demanded as the Tithing time drew nearer, I thought it would be easier. And when Isaiah began to appear in my nightmares to watch with me the execution of Elizabeth Wildblood, I believed if I knew the evil of the Wildblood witch, maybe I could go through with it. Maybe I could make a Sacrifice of her.

Shemhazai punished not me, but my mother and sister for my misstep.

The lashing I endured was nothing compared to the price they paid.

“Come, brother,” Charles says as the door is opened, and I meet Solange’s wide blue eyes. “Let us claim your bride.”

She was made to watch her father’s beating. Charles made sure of that. The night of the Tithing, though, was the first time she looked upon me in fear.

The ceremony itself lasted longer than necessary. A part of the punishment for attempting to run. Charles stripped each of the sisters bare. He humiliated them knowing all along it was Solange who bore the mark. Solange who would be the next Sacrifice.

That night, I took her to my bed as my bride. Before that, we had lain in sin. Shemhazai had known. It was an error on my part to think he would not. Shemhazai knows all things.

It was that very night as Solange clung to me, weeping, that I saw it. The fine almost unnoticeable crack in the great wooden carving above my bed. I did not understand what it meant. I'm not sure I do now. But it is no matter to us.

In the first week of her residence in our home, Solange remained strong as she endured the rituals decreed by this Book of Tithes. Her hair was shorn. It was my own hand to do it as she knelt naked at the angel's feet and wept, my hand that left her head bloody and bald while my family watched.

Me who offered her hair to him, a promise of more to come.

She did not hate me. It may have been easier if she had. She forgave me that night. And I hated myself more for it.

The next morning came the first of daily whippings that would leave her back raw until the very end. This was the morning I learned that it was better that she receive her punishments at my hand for if I refused, Grandfather would hand Charles the whip and call him Penitent.

It took one time for me to learn.

One time of hearing her screams.

One time of watching the wickedness upon his face as he brought the lash down again and again and again, flaying my poor Solange.

One time of watching him degrade her with his seed upon her broken, bloody body to know I needed to take up the whip the following morning and every morning after that.

In the nights that followed, in the weeks that Solange lived with me and slept at my side, taking comfort from me by night when she endured only pain at my hands by day, that I watched that hairline split of the carving lengthen, deepen. And on our final night together, when I tried to spare her from the fate that was coming, that would come for her at the moment the sun broke the horizon, I confessed my love for my Solange. And in our pitiable state, she did the same. And over our heads, I swear, I swear it upon the god who has forsaken us, I heard the splintering of wood, and I knew, I knew in my heart that Shemhazai somehow grew weaker for our love.

But I did not hope for a better outcome for my Solange.

I only asked that once I had spilled her blood, that they would spill mine. And by the time the morning of the Sacrifice came, she was ready. She begged me for it. By then, she needed to be carried to the foot of the statue. By then, she was too broken in body and spirit to walk.

And when I looked into her eyes and saw the forgiveness in them, I despised myself for my weakness. I slit her throat, angering my family with the mercy I showed her in death that she had not been shown in life knowing all along I'd be punished for it. I knew and did not care. I would endure like she did. And I would die at their hands, for there was nothing to live for. I would not see my family prosper. My father would take a new wife. My brother would marry. It is all they spoke of, well, apart from the humiliations and horrors they would have me wreak upon my innocent bride.

As I write this, my final entry, I know tonight I will have release. I will see my Solange again. I won't blame her if she refuses me in the next life. But it is the one thing that I live for. A strange thing to live for, death.

I close the book and take a deep breath in. I've read this passage multiple times. Louis is the only Penitent before me who has fallen in love with the Sacrifice, who has struggled with what he is required to do. Although if I think about it, there must have been others. Others too afraid to write the truth on these pages.

Abacus killed himself rather than do what is required of the Penitent. I couldn't bring myself to even take a lock of hair from Willow. There had to have been others who struggled. Not Isaiah, certainly, not most of the Penitents who wrote with zeal about the punishments the Sacrifice endured at their hands.

My phone buzzes with a text, distracting me. I check the time. It's eight o'clock. The text is Ezra responding to my message from last night with an address and a name. The lab is about an hour's ride from here, and while I'm sure the local hospital could test it, I want discretion.

I unlock my desk drawer, take out Bec's shake, and put the book inside. Salomé may have a key, but I'm not going to put this book of murders in a place of reverence among the other antiquities of the Delacroix family.

Locking the drawer, I take my keys and that drink and slip out of the house. I make a few calls as I head toward the lab, arranging more security for Amos, more guards to be stationed at our gates and on our grounds, and, finally, guards at the Wildblood house.

My visit to the lab is a quick one. A technician greets me at the door, mentioning Ezra had already reached out to him. There's a part of me that, as I hand the shake over, wonders what the hell I'm doing, but I do it anyway. He tells me he'll have results for me within a week.

On my way out of the lot, my phone rings and I see it's Willow's father, Barrett. I answer.

"I told you I will hire my own guards to keep my family safe." He still doesn't want to accept my help.

"There's a development. I'm on my way to your house. I'll see you then."

I disconnect the call, not waiting on him to tell me not to come, and drive on. Half an hour later, I pull up to the Wildblood house and find Barrett talking to two men on the porch. I also see two others are at the far end of the garden and another two in a car parked down the street.

"There you are," Barrett says as I climb the stairs.

"Mr. Delacroix," Jordan, the head of the security team says. "Good to see you, sir." He then continues to tell me where they've stationed the men.

"Thank you, Jordan. Under no circumstances are they to leave unless I give the order. Only me. Understood?"

"This is not your house," Barrett reminds me.

I see the heads of the sisters peering down from the top of the stairs. "Can we talk privately?" I don't want to scare the girls, and I don't want this getting back to Willow just yet.

His expression goes from annoyed to worried. "Is Willow all right?"

"She is. Perhaps Celeste can join us," I say.

"Fine. This way," Barrett says, gesturing for me to enter and leading the way to his office. He calls for Celeste, who appears in a few minutes. She doesn't seem surprised to see me.

The sisters don't pretend to hide, and I'm sure at least one of them is on the phone to Willow before that door is even closed. I can bring Willow by later if she wants. I didn't want her to see that I'd taken the shake from Bec. I don't know why.

No, I do. I want her to be wrong, but if she's right—

“How is my granddaughter, Azrael?” Celeste asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I clear my throat, grateful. “She slept soundly last night for the first time since she's been home.”

She considers me, smiles and nods. “I'm glad to hear that. Tell her Solana has been asking for more stock, will you?”

“Solana?”

“She makes some products for a shop in town. She'll know.”

“Can we talk about the additional security? What's going on?” Barrett asks.

“I met with a private investigator last night—”

“I told you we have our own.”

“Caleb Church has somehow convinced Alfred Noyes that I murdered his grandson.”

“Well, maybe you did,” Barrett says.

“Hush, Barrett,” Celeste tells him.

“Oh, no doubt I would have, but unfortunately, he was already dead when I got to the compound. The reason I'm here, though, is Caleb has somehow convinced Noyes that he is his loyal Disciple, and he's got the old man's backing. Which means more Disciples are on their way here if they're not here already. The security is to keep your family safe.

They should stay on the property until Caleb Church is no longer a threat. Do you understand?”

“You want me to put my family under house arrest?”

“Call it what you want—”

He slams his fist down on his desk. “Do I need to remind you that we are not on the same side, Azrael?” I take a breath in, look him straight in the eye and let him continue. “You’ve taken one of my daughters for some ridiculous, senseless thing.”

“Do I need to remind you that you lined them up—”

“I know. Believe me, I know, but if I hadn’t, if Willow hadn’t been courageous enough to refuse to run, what more would you have taken? I know the bloody history of our families as well as you do, Azrael. You think this is easy for me?”

“Do you think this is easy for me?”

He snorts.

Celeste clears her throat and speaks quietly. “Willow is the first Wildblood to become pregnant by a Delacroix.”

We both turn to her.

“Have you ever considered that Elizabeth Wildblood’s curse hurts her own descendants as much as it does her enemies? Do you think she’d have wanted that?” Celeste asks calmly.

“What are you saying, Celeste?” Barrett asks.

“I’m saying there’s a way out for both of our families. There must be. Perhaps this child is that way.”

I look at her, confused. I understand what she's saying. But Elizabeth's curse isn't what's hurting her descendants. It's us.

Before I can open my mouth to voice my thoughts, though, she continues. "Azrael, what does she say exactly?"

"What?"

"You dream it, don't you? Don't all the Penitents dream with Isaiah?"

"How the hell—"

"What does she say? What are her exact words before she dies?"

WILLOW

“**W**hat are they doing?” I squint into the phone screen as Raven shuffles around, and the light in the hallway dims.

“Shh,” she hisses. “I can’t hear.”

“None of us can hear,” Aurora grumbles. “Cordelia, put your ear beneath the door.”

“Why do I have to?” Cordelia argues.

“Because you’re the youngest,” Winter proclaims haughtily.

“You always use that as an excuse—”

Cordelia’s protest is cut short when the door to Dad’s office swings open, and Azrael peers out at the Wildblood brood with an arched brow. All four of my sisters squeak in surprise before Winter throws them under the bus.

“I told you not to eavesdrop.”

“Yes, I’m sure you were completely innocent in this little scheme,” my father responds dryly.

“Look, Dad, it’s Willow.” Raven holds up the phone so he can see me.

I give him a shameful little wave. “Hi, Daddy.”

“Hello.” His face softens as he looks me over. “How are you today, Willow?”

“I’m good.” I give him the same answer I do every day when I talk to my family.

“Well, all right then. I was just getting ready to send your husband back home to you.”

He says *husband* like the word leaves a bad taste in his mouth, and I can’t help but smile. But when Raven pans the screen back to Azrael, he doesn’t seem to share my father’s hostility.

“What are you doing there?” I ask.

I can practically feel my sisters waiting with bated breath for his response, but before he can offer one, Nanna butts in.

“Willow, I’m sending Azrael home with some ginger tea for you in case you get any morning sickness.”

“Thanks,” I tell her, aware she’s purposefully changing the subject. “But I haven’t had any sickness yet.”

“Well, you never know.” She shrugs. “By the way, we require your presence this Saturday for a coven meeting. I’m sure your husband won’t mind dropping you off for a while.”

Azrael seems perplexed by the idea, and for a moment, I think he might ask what she’s talking about, but then he just shakes his head.

“I can bring her by, but I won’t be dropping her off. I’ll stay with her.”

Nan gives him a smug grin, as if she’s proven a point.

“No boys allowed,” Cordelia tells him. “Sorry!”

“Oh, hush you.” Nan waves her off. “Now, let Azrael say goodbye. I’m sure he’s anxious to return to his wife.”

Azrael shifts, and his eyes meet mine. Nan really isn’t pulling any punches putting him on the spot like that. I don’t know what he’ll say, and my stomach flips as I wait for him to answer.

“I’ll be home soon,” he tells me, his voice tender.

I offer him a tentative smile, and for a moment, it seems as if we both forget he’s surrounded by my entire family. Neither one of us can look away from the other, at least not until my father clears his throat.

“Off you go, then.”

“Dad!” I scold him, but Azrael takes it in stride.

“Yes, indeed. I’ll see myself out.”

Raven turns the phone back to her face, and I feel a strange pang of disappointment. I don’t know why Azrael went to see my father or why he didn’t take me with him. But after last night, it’s apparent that I can’t keep shutting him out. Nor do I want to.

When I woke up this morning without him by my side, I felt that loss just as I feel the distance between us now. I don’t know how to explain it other than that I miss his presence when he isn’t beside me.

“That was bizarre,” Raven harrumphs. “What do you think they were talking about?”

“I have no idea,” I admit. “Maybe Caleb.”

“Well, there are Society guards all over the property,” Raven informs me. “So that would be my guess too. Dad nearly had a coronary this morning over it.”

“Azrael arranged for them?” I ask, my heart warming at the thought.

“He must have.” Raven shrugs. “Who else would have done it?”

“Well, I think that’s for the best,” I tell her. “Until we know where he is, nobody is safe.”

“Agreed.”

A beat passes, and I know the housekeeper will be in soon to deliver my breakfast, so I need to get ready for the day. But I’m curious about what Nan is planning.

“What has Nan got up her sleeve for the coven meeting?” I ask.

Raven snorts. “Who knows? She’s probably going to make pot brownies and get all philosophical again.”

“Probably.” I laugh.

“Although I have been seeing lots of baby stuff appear. So if I had to venture a guess, it might be related to that.”

I press a hand to my belly, feeling that same strange energy I did when I first learned of the pregnancy. It’s surreal to think I’m carrying a tiny human. The child that Azrael and I made together.

“Are you nervous?” Raven asks, interrupting my thoughts.

“I am,” I admit. “I’m very nervous. But I’m also... strangely happy. I always wanted to be a mother. I just didn’t think it would happen.”

She looks relieved, at least until I add the next part, the thing I can’t get out of my head.

“I just don’t know how long I’ll get to spend with her.”

“Don’t talk like that, Willow,” Raven pleads. “We don’t know, okay? We don’t know how everything will go.”

I nod, emotion clogging my throat. I know she’s right, and I’m trying to keep an open mind and heart like Nan said. It’s easier said than done, considering I also know the history between our two families. It’s something I can’t bring myself to tell Raven about.

“I should go take a shower,” I tell her.

“Okay. Talk to you tomorrow?”

I smile at that, knowing Raven will probably call me again tonight. She can’t go a full day without talking to me several times.

“Sounds like a deal.”

We disconnect the call, and I give Fiona a scratch between her ears before I yawn and shuffle to the bathroom. I’m still tired, but I slept better last night than I have in weeks.

I take a short shower and put on my robe with the intent to go pick out some clothes from my room. But when I open the bathroom door, I feel an immediate shift in the air, and I’m greeted by the sight of Salomé sitting on one of the chairs near the window, my breakfast tray resting beside her on the table.

“I took the liberty of bringing it in for you,” she tells me.

“You really shouldn’t have,” I mutter. “I won’t touch any of it now.”

She studies me, her face devoid of any human emotion. Not for the first time, I wonder how she could be of any relation to Azrael. How he and his siblings could grow up under her cold and undoubtedly callous parenting style and

turn out the way they did is mind-boggling because they are nothing like her.

“If I wanted to poison you, I would have done it long ago,” Salomé responds. “I’ve had every opportunity.”

“I suppose that’s true. You’ve proven yourself to have plenty of opportunities. And perhaps plenty of practice, too.”

“Explain yourself, witch.” She narrows her gaze. “What exactly are you accusing me of?”

“I think you know,” I answer. “You speak of gods and angels, and yet it’s you who has been moving the chess pieces around the board.”

She doesn’t respond, but she doesn’t have to. The truth is written in her emotionless eyes.

“Do you harbor love for any of your grandchildren?” I ask. “Or are they all pawns to be manipulated and pushed around to suit your selfish desires?”

She balls her fists at her sides. “What do you know of love, whore? Do you think I don’t see how you’re trying to manipulate Azrael? The way you lure him between your legs as if that will save you somehow. You are foolish if you think that means anything. He can have any woman he chooses. He’s probably out with one right now, if I had to venture a guess. There’s nothing special about you.”

“Spoken like a pious woman,” I scoff. “What is it you’re so afraid of, Salomé? Do you really feel that threatened by me?”

“The Tithe will be paid!” she snarls, rising to her full height to point her finger at me. “This is the natural order, and you will not change it. Wake up, and stop believing in fairytales. Everything Azrael does is for his family. He killed

those Disciples because they took his sister, not you. He signed the contract himself, and he carries the mark of Shemhazai. Only a foolish little girl would believe she could be worthy of a man of his greatness. You have had one purpose since you entered this house, and that purpose will be fulfilled when your blood is spilled on our soil, at Shemhazai's feet, by the husband who will sacrifice you without a second thought."

I stare at her, taking note of the mounting frustration in her voice. If it were as simple as she says, she wouldn't need to tell me so, and I don't know who she's trying to convince more: me, or herself. But one thing becomes apparent as she clutches at the chair beside her, and the color in her face drains away as if something is sucking the very life from her. Suddenly, I'm wondering how I didn't see it before.

She's lost weight. The shadows on her face are more pronounced, and her eyes are glassy. She looks... sickly.

As I consider it, all the pieces begin to fall into place. Her desperation to have this done. Her insane belief that Shemhazai can save her family. That in spilling my blood, it will somehow benefit her.

"It was you, wasn't it?" I ask, my voice barely audible.

"What?" she hisses, her knuckles whitening from the energy she's expending to keep herself upright.

"You left the gate open that night. That wasn't an accident or a lucky coincidence. You knew something would happen. Were you already aware of the Disciples?"

She doesn't deny it. She doesn't even try to.

"Did you know I would take Rébecca too?"

Her lip twitches, but again she doesn't answer.

“Of course you did,” I murmur, more to myself than to her. “Because either way, you thought you’d win. If something happened to Bec, and I was saved, you’d expect Azrael to blame me. And if we both died, then she was just collateral damage.”

“That’s a cute story.” She offers me a condescending smile. “You have quite an imagination, but I’m sure you must know nobody would ever believe that. I am a loving grandmother, after all. One who gave up everything to come here and raise my orphaned grandchildren. Where would they be without me?”

“You’re deranged,” I tell her. “Do you even realize that? Just like your ancestors before you who took pleasure in murdering the Wildblood sacrifices. You are no godly woman. You’re the epitome of evil itself.”

Salomé smiles, a strangely terrifying peace settling over her features. “Well, how fortunate I see exactly what you are too. And soon, you’ll be nothing more than a burnt corpse, rotting in the ground where you belong. So, brace yourself, witch. The Tithe will be paid.”

AZRAEL

What does she say? What are her exact words before she dies?

I don't know if I ever hear what Elizabeth says. I see her lips move. I hear mutterings, maybe? I'm not even sure of that. All I know for certain is that Isaiah is gone by then. I'm standing alone on Proctor's Ledge, and she is cursing me.

I turn onto our street, and through the slowly opening gates, I see the Society guards standing at attention. Two walk toward my vehicle suspiciously until they see it's me and wave me through.

This is one of the benefits of being a Sovereign Son. When I need something, it's a phone call away. I may have to deal with the likes of Councilor Hildebrand, but I can handle men like him.

I check my phone for messages as I climb out of the Jaguar, anxious to hear from the lab. It's too soon, but there is a text from Emmanuel telling me he and Bec are out for the day and their itinerary. As if reading my mind, he sends a second message to say he's taken two guards with them and that I shouldn't have a fit. He knows me well.

I send him a text telling them to have fun.

One of the staff comes to take the keys of the car.

“Leave it. I’ll be using it again in a few minutes,” I tell him and head up the stairs to the front door where, before I’m even fully inside, Salomé starts.

“Your brother has taken your sister on an outing!”

“Good morning, Grandmother,” I say, tucking the car keys into my pocket and glancing over her shoulder up the stairs.

“Did you hear what I said, Azrael?”

I take in her appearance. She looks more like herself with her usual long black dress, her hair pulled tightly back. I wonder if it gives her a headache and realize, not for the first time, that I haven’t had a migraine in more than a week.

“Are you feeling better?” I ask her.

She seems taken aback by that. “Why do you ask?”

“Just because the last time I saw you, you weren’t well. You look better.”

“I’m fine. Thank you. But your sister is not strong enough to leave this house and with those predators on the loose.”

“Those predators? You mean Caleb Church?” She wouldn’t know about the Disciples, about Caleb’s meeting with Noyes and the fact that he has the backing of the Disciples.

“Yes. He’s still out there and she’s a target now that she’s associated with your witch. And she’s sick, Azrael. She needs to rest. To get stronger.”

“He’s taken her on an outing to the zoo. I didn’t realize Bec had never been to a zoo. Did you?”

Again, she looks confused. “A zoo? To see some animals?”

“Followed by lunch and a movie then dinner.”

“Do you think that’s appropriate?”

“I think it’s perfectly appropriate. Bec is feeling better, Grandmother. She needs to be out and doing things, normal things. She’s almost sixteen and, apart from doctor visits, she has spent more than a year in the house, much of it in her room.”

“Because she’s sick.”

When I hear a door open and close and footsteps upstairs, I glance over Salomé’s shoulder and smile to see Willow. She smiles back but waits there as I shift my gaze back to Salomé who has noticed my expression with displeasure.

“Excuse me, Grandmother. I’m taking my wife out. You’ll be on your own for dinner tonight.”

She purses her lips.

I don’t wait for a reply but head up to Willow, wrapping a hand around her hip and brushing my lips over hers. It’s so natural, yet so new. She sets her hands on my shoulders and her eyes are still closed when I draw back.

“Morning,” I say.

She blinks, licks her lips like maybe she was expecting more, and I find I like that. “I have a bone to pick with you,” she says, trying to sound angry.

“Well, it’ll have to wait. We need to pack an overnight bag. I’m taking you out.”

I take her hand and lead her back to the bedroom.

“Out where?” she asks as I take a duffel out of my closet and set it on the bed.

I notice the still-full breakfast tray. “You didn’t eat?” I go to her, touch her cheek, then her belly. “Do you feel well? Morning sickness? Your grandmother’s tea, it’s in the car. I forgot—”

She laughs. “I’m fine, Azrael. No morning sickness yet. Salomé brought that in this morning, and I don’t want to take a chance she’ll poison me.”

“She wouldn’t, Willow.” As I say it, a nagging sliver of doubt creases my brow.

“She doesn’t know yet, does she?” Willow asks.

I shake my head, the lightness of the morning quickly vanishing. “We’re not worrying about that today. We need a break from everything. Come on, get what you need to spend the night away. Just essentials.”

“That’s spontaneous of you. Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.” I choose a suit for myself.

“Do I need a fancy dress?” she asks as she returns with a small bag of toiletries.

“Nope. I’ll take care of that.”

Fiona comes around the corner and wraps herself around Willow’s legs. She crouches down to pet the cat.

“If we’ll be gone overnight, I’ll need to bring her.”

“I’ll have someone drop her off with your family. We can pick her up on our way back. I’ll get her carrier.”

“You’re being really weird,” she says when I return with the carrier. I hear the strain in her voice as I try to coax the cat

in. The asshole, of course, isn't having it.

"I just want to get out of here, Willow. I think we both could use the change."

"Okay," she says, managing to get the cat settled without trouble.

I roll my eyes, take both carrier and duffel and walk Willow out, glad to see Salomé is nowhere to be found as we exit the house. We settle into my car after handing the cat off to one of the guards and instructing them to deliver her to the Wildblood home.

"I'd better text Raven that I'm fine. She'll think something happened to me when she sees a stranger dropping Fiona off."

I glance at Willow, the comment strange, but don't say anything. That's what today is about, I remind myself. A little time for us together, to build on the trust that allowed her to share her story about Caleb last night.

"Where should I tell her we'll be?" she asks, giving me her sweetest smile.

"Nice try," I say, squeezing her knee before shifting gears and pulling out of the gates. Two men follow discreetly. Willow must see me looking in the rearview mirror and glances over her shoulder.

"Is that for Caleb?"

I nod but don't tell her what I learned from Ezra. I don't want to worry her any more than she already is.

"Thanks for taking care of my family, too. That means a lot to me."

I look at her. "I told you once that I'd protect you and I failed. Willow, I realize what you saw in that book... well, I

understand you wouldn't trust me, but I am telling you the truth. Nothing is going to happen to you or your family. Not at those idiots' hands. And certainly not at my own."

She searches my eyes. "For the baby?"

"What kind of question is that? For both of you."

"I want..." she trails off, her eyes darkening as she bites her lip.

I wait for her to continue, but she doesn't. Instead, she keeps her gaze out of her window so I can't see her face until we arrive at the small, boutique hotel in the Warehouse District of New Orleans.

"What's this?" she asks as we pull up to the valet stand.

I smile at her. "Part of the surprise." I climb out, grab the duffel and walk to her side of the car to open the door for her. Handing the keys to the valet, I take her hand and we walk inside.

She looks around at the small, but beautifully appointed lobby as I check in. It is a lovely space, vibrantly colorful yet elegantly done, the furniture custom made, the carpets lush, every detail carefully selected for its beauty. Willow peers into the bright blue and white dining room, and the look on her face tells me I was right to bring her here.

"This way, Mr. Delacroix," a man says, taking the heavy key—the tassel a nice touch—and leading us toward an old-fashioned elevator.

We follow and ride up in silence, whatever Willow has on her mind darkening her mood. The attendant shows us to our room, and I slip him a generous tip. "Oh, one more thing," I say just before he leaves. "Breakfast. Can you have some of everything sent up?"

“Everything?”

I glance at Willow who is looking out the window and nod to the man. “Wait, no meat. She’s a vegetarian.”

“Yes, sir. Everything without meat. But... That’s still a lot of food.”

“Perfect. Thanks.”

He looks like he wants to say more but I close the door and turn to my wife. She takes a deep breath in and pastes a smile on her face.

“I’ve never been in one of the rooms. It’s even more beautiful than I imagined.”

“I thought you might like it.” I take her hands and lead her to sit on the edge of the bed. “What were you going to say in the car?”

She looks away, her eyes growing shiny with tears.

“Willow, you need to—”

“I want you to promise me something,” she blurts out. I wait, watching her with concern. “If something happens to me, this baby... you’ll make sure this baby isn’t raised by Salomé.”

“What?”

“You’ll make sure my family raises her.”

“Is that what... Jesus, is this what you’ve been thinking about?”

She shrugs a shoulder, wipes away a tear. “I just need to know she’ll be okay.”

“Willow—”

“Promise me, Azrael.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you. I told you that,” I say more harshly than I intend.

“If it does. I just need to be sure—”

“You listen to me, Willow Delacroix—”

“Wildblood. I didn’t take your name.”

“We’re changing that, too. Now you listen to me, Willow Delacroix,” I say, taking her face in my hands and making her look at me when she tries to turn away. “Nothing is going to happen to you or to this baby. Nothing. Caleb Church and those idiot Disciples will be dealt with. The curse, Shemhazai, Salomé, it’s over. It’s fucking over. I won’t hurt you. And I won’t let anyone else hurt you either. It’s over.”

“Az—”

“I love you,” I say, shifting my hand to cup the back of her head and pull her to me. “I fucking love you and the thought of hurting you, of you being hurt, it makes me sick. It makes me fucking sick. Do you hear me?”

She looks up at me, and I feel the sting of salt in my own eyes when I see hers spill over. She reaches up to touch my face, fingers tentative and uncertain.

“Tell me you heard me. Because that day in the cabin when you wouldn’t open your eyes, when you wouldn’t wake up... All I know is that to see you like that, see you so hurt, it almost killed me. I love you, Willow. And I will take care of you better than I have been. I promise you that, sweetheart. I promise you.”

She bursts into tears, and I pull her to me as she wraps her arms around my neck, sobs wracking her body. I hold her. I

hold her so tight because this is her release. This is all that anxiety, all that fear, years of it exacerbated by this goddamned curse, by Caleb fucking Church; this is her release, and I hold her because I will take all her pain, all her fear away. I will take all the sadness away. What I saw on the night of the Tithing, all that color, all that vibrancy and life and joy within that house, I will give that back to her, and I will bring it into our home.

“Shh, sweetheart,” I whisper into her ear as she quiets, as her tears subside and her body yields softly to me. “Shh.” I lift her in my arms and pull the blankets back to lay her down. She cups my face and looks at me, the blue of her eyes made brighter by the tears. She kisses my mouth and watches as I slip off her shoes, undo the buttons of her dress and take that off too before stripping off panties and bra and standing back to look at her for a long minute, seeing how much fuller her breasts have grown, imagining my baby inside her. Our baby.

“Azrael,” she says, voice husky as she reaches for me.

I strip off my shirt, buttons popping in my rush. Willow smiles and reaches for my belt, and in a few moments, I’m naked and lying on top of her, kissing her mouth as she wraps her legs around me. I cup her face, my gaze holding hers as I slowly, ever so slowly, push into her.

When her nails dig into my shoulders, I pause. “Willow?”

She looks up at me, eyelids half-closed, and bites her lower lip. “It’s good.” She tightens the wrap of her legs around my back. “More.”

I pull her closer, weaving a hand into her hair to keep her looking at me, to watch her eyes as I move inside her.

“I love you,” I say, wanting her to hear it again. “I love you, my Little Witch.”

“I love you, Azrael,” she says, a tear spilling out of the corner of one eye and sliding down over her temple. “I love you, too.”

I make love to my wife that morning. We both need it, this slow, deep love making. This closeness. It’s when we’re lying, spent, side-by-side, me staring up at the ceiling, Willow with her cheek on my chest, that I remember what she said earlier. I look down at her, all that red hair splayed over my chest and arm, covering the dark face of Shemhazai inked into my skin.

“Willow?”

She looks up at me. “Hm?”

“You said her.”

“What?”

“The baby. You said her.”

She smiles, her face still blotchy from tears, the delicate skin around her eyes pink, and still she looks like the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

“She’s a girl. I know.”

“How?”

“I just do.” She shrugs a shoulder just as there’s a knock on the door announcing room service. She sits up, energized. “Oh, just in time. I’m starving!” She jumps out of the bed and pulls my shirt on, buttoning one of the few remaining buttons on her way to the door.

“Willow, wait!” My heart leaps as I jump out of the bed, grabbing her arm to pull her away from the door. She’s startled

as I pick my pants up off the floor and pull them on, buttoning the button before pushing her behind me and opening the door.

“Your breakfast, sir,” one of the IVI guards says.

I look at him, then behind him at the two attendants with rolling trays full of covered dishes.

“Thanks,” I say with an exhale, letting them push their carts in. I reach for my wallet as I take in their faces, wondering if they’re Disciples.

“If you can sign this, please,” the first man says, glancing nervously at the guards in dark suits, earpieces in place. The second man takes the lids off all the dishes.

I sign and tip them generously, usher them out, thank the IVI guard and close the door.

Willow is standing watching me, rubbing her arm. “Are you going to throw me out of the way any time I go to open a door now?”

“Shit. I’m sorry. I just panicked.” I go to her, look at her arm.

“It’s fine. I’m okay. I’m starving, actually,” she says, turning to the food just as her stomach growls loudly. She sits down at one of the chairs they pulled up to the rolling trays and serves herself French toast, pancakes, eggs, and fruit. She begins to eat with so much gusto that all I can do is watch. Stuffing a forkful of French toast into her mouth, she notices me looking at her. “Are you eating?” she asks around the mouthful.

“I’m afraid you’ll bite my fingers if I reach for anything.” I sit in the chair across from hers and continue to watch her.

“Nah. Vegetarian,” she jokes.

I smile.

“You know when we were little, Nan would bring us here on special occasions. We’d have afternoon tea and pretend to be proper young ladies.” I pour myself a cup of juice as she devours more food. “I wonder if they still have their special chocolate torte on the menu.”

“I’ll order it for you,” I say, getting up to look for the phone.

“No, it’s fine.”

“It’ll just take—”

“Azrael, it’s fine.” She comes up behind me, takes the phone from my hand and sets it back down. “Seriously, look at all this food.” She points to the not-so-small buffet.

“You have a point.”

“Besides,” she tilts her head as I wipe powdered sugar off the tip of her nose, “I should maybe pace myself.” She stands on tiptoe to kiss me deeply on the mouth, her lips sticky sweet, her tongue tasting like cinnamon. “Work off some of the calories,” she says, drawing me back toward the bed and pushing me to sit on it.

She strips off her shirt and lets me look at her again. I wrap my hands around her hips and tug her closer, flick my tongue over one nipple, then the other.

“You know, I think I am hungry,” I say, tugging her onto the bed, dragging my belt out of the loops of my pants to bind her wrists to the headboard.

“Oh?” she asks, raising her head to watch me.

“I thought I saw whipped cream.” I get up to search and smile wide once I find the bowl of homemade whipped cream

and carry it back to her.

“That’s hardly a complete breakfast,” she says, then squeals when I drop the first spoonful onto one nipple, a second onto the other. I bend my head to lick it off.

“Vanilla. My favorite.”

“Azrael—”

I spoon a trail of whipped cream down over her belly, finishing with a dollop on her clit.

“I hope you didn’t want any because I’m going to eat every last bite,” I say, as I settle myself between her legs and feast.

WILLOW

Warmth flutters over my cheek, the sensation stirring me from sleep.

“Have I worn you out?” Azrael grazes my ear with his lips.

I groan in response, snuggling deeper into the sanctuary of his body, my eyes too heavy to open willingly.

Soft laughter emanates from his chest, and I realize how much I like that sound. I don't think I've ever heard him so relaxed, and I think he needed to be away from Salomé's suffocating presence as much as I did. It isn't just Salomé, though. It's all of it. Bec's illness. That fucking demon statue. The memories of his parents and brother that undoubtedly linger on the property.

The Delacroix estate is beautiful but haunted by sadness, and for a moment, I consider that we could bring life back to the place. If Salomé weren't there, and it was just our little family along with Bec and Emmanuel, we could make it the home it was always meant to be.

“What are you thinking about?” Azrael's hand spans across my belly, something he's been doing a lot recently. I wonder if he even realizes it or notices how it settles me to feel him that way.

When I imagine what it must look like from the outside, I can see him as the warrior descendant of angels determined to protect his beloved and child at any cost.

Perhaps that can only ever be a fantasy, and Salomé was right. I need to let go of fairy tales. But when I open my eyes to take him in, it only makes me want it more.

He's waiting for me to answer, and I almost consider telling him the truth, that I'm thinking I wish he could find a way to banish Salomé from our lives. I want to put all of that behind us and live happily for however long we may have left together. But in my heart, I know this isn't a decision to be made lightly. He confessed his feelings for me, and I believe them. But his loyalties are still divided, and it isn't something I can force him to do. He has to come to the conclusion of what's best for our family of his own volition.

"I'm thinking about food," I tell him as my stomach rumbles. "What time is it?"

He chuckles and leans over to kiss me, his gloriously naked body half exposed by the bedsheet like a piece of art. I think I could lay here with him all day, but I suspect he has other plans.

"It's late afternoon," he tells me. "You slept hard."

"You can thank yourself for that." I yawn. "You spent all morning inside me. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to knock me up."

A devilish glint flashes in his eyes as he brands my belly with the heat of his palm. "I hate to break it to you, Little Witch, but I already did."

I gasp, feigning surprise. "I knew you were trouble. What will the townsfolk say when they hear that such a respectable

man impregnated one of those unsavory Wildblood women?”

He presses his hardening cock against my hip. “If I had to guess, I’d say they’d be jealous.”

I turn to face him, heat melting through my core as my eyes roam over him. He truly is a work of art. Broad shoulders, strong arms, a tapered waist with abs I’ve considered licking more than once. He has the body of a god and the face of one too, and I’m finding it increasingly difficult to look away. The more time I spend with him, the more I become entangled in him, and I think I was a fool to consider that I ever had any other choice.

“Maybe you should have put a statue of your likeness in the garden in place of your demon angel,” I murmur as I stroke his chiseled jaw. “That I might get on board with worshipping.”

Amusement flickers in his gaze as he watches my fingers trail down the length of his body, but before I can wrap them around his cock, he captures them.

“Only if I can have one of yours beside mine.”

“It can be arranged.” I resort to rubbing against him since he has my hand trapped.

“Needy?” His voice dips, taking on that growly quality that implodes my ovaries every damn time.

“Yes,” I whine.

“Good.” He grabs my head, holding me in place while he kisses me until I’m breathless. Then he leaves me lying there in a stupor when he releases me. “You can think about that while we’re out today because when we get back tonight, I’m going to fuck you into a coma.”

His words send sparks through my nerve endings, and I stare up at him in protest as he rises from the bed, his rigid cock on display.

“Or you could just do that now,” I suggest.

“I had no idea my wife was so greedy.” He smirks. “I should impregnate you more often.”

There’s something seriously wrong with me because that only manages to make me even more desperate. I don’t know if he’s right that it’s the pregnancy hormones or if I’ve just become an insatiable little beast, but either way, I don’t care.

“Good idea,” I say. “Let’s start now.”

“I think I recall you mentioning you needed to be fed,” he muses.

“Who needs food?” I shrug. “It can wait.”

He leans down, pulls me upright, and tips my face toward his. “You can have your fill of me tonight. But for now, I need you well cared for so you can keep up with me.”

The sentiment is oddly sweet, and my stomach rumbles again on cue, cementing the deal.

“Fine,” I relent. “This kid of yours is proving to be pretty demanding.”

He offers me a lazy smile. “You say this as if it’s a surprise. Just wait until you have three of my little monsters running amok.”

His words slip out unbidden as if he’s considered the very thought, and it produces equal amounts of hope and dread within me. When he looks at me again, I can see that he knows it too.

“Come, Little Witch. Let me wash you.”

WHEN AZRAEL SAID HE'D WASH ME, HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN that it was inevitable. I came alive for him with every reverent brush of his fingers, and soon, I won the battle. He fucked me up against the shower wall until I truly was on the verge of passing out. I didn't think it was humanly possible to have so many orgasms in one day, but he was proving not only that it was possible but that he could still leave me wanting more.

However, he had other plans he was determined to see through. So, I dragged my boneless body along beside him out to the street, where a valet already had his car waiting for us.

It was impossible to miss the guards that followed behind us as we drove, but their presence didn't seem to ease the tension creeping into Azrael's features.

“Is all of that for Caleb?” I ask.

His fingers grip the steering wheel harder, and he shakes his head. “Not just Caleb.”

“The Disciples?” I venture a guess. “There aren't that many of them here. I think you and Emmanuel probably annihilated at least half of them.”

He glances at me across the car, and I don't like the expression that darkens his face. “They have more in other cities.”

“They've never bothered to get involved before,” I say. “Even during the trial, they didn't harass me or my family. It was only the locals who delivered Caleb's messages while he

was in prison. I don't see why they would risk their necks now."

Azrael doesn't answer, and I know it's because he's hiding something.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Willow, let's discuss this later—"

"No."

He tosses me a reproving glance. "Nothing good can come of talking about him today."

"I don't care." I glare at him. "I'm your wife, and if you want me to trust you, then you need to be honest with me. This has been my life for six years, long before you ever came into it. I don't need you to handle me with kid gloves. I know how dangerous Caleb is. But if there's something else you aren't telling me—"

"It isn't just Caleb," he interrupts. "It's Alfred Noyes. Caleb has won back his favor. He convinced the Disciples that I was the one who killed Frederick, and I have sources who tell me they've been gathering."

I lean back against my seat, allowing his words to sink in, and a fresh wave of terror grips me as I consider that it isn't just me they want. They want Azrael too. I wasn't expecting such a visceral reaction to that, but the thought of losing him, of anything happening to him, terrifies me.

"This is why I didn't want to tell you." He reaches across the seat to take my hand in his. "I'll protect you, Willow. You don't need to worry about that. Caleb will never touch you again. I meant that the first time I said it."

I nod, unable to bring myself to tell him that wasn't what caught me by the throat. I don't know how or when exactly. I just know that at some point, Azrael became a part of me—a part that I can't imagine living without now.

The rest of the drive is quiet, and I'm grateful when he parks. I feel like I need to walk off some of this restless energy. But when he gets out and opens my door for me, I realize where we are when I see the shop across the street. It's Zen Apothecary.

I look up at him in question, and he squeezes my body close to his side. "I thought I should see what you've been peddling here."

The dryness in his tone makes me smile, and some of the tension from earlier ebbs away.

"But first, food."

He takes me into the shop down the street, where we order one regular coffee, one decaf, and a mountain of beignets to share. By the time we eat, I'm more animal than human when I bite into the warm, chewy dough.

"Oh my god." I groan. "I don't remember food ever tasting this good before."

Azrael watches me, amused, but it doesn't stop him from scanning the shop every few moments, taking in our surroundings.

The IVI guards who followed us here are stationed outside on the street, and I try to pretend they aren't there as we polish off the plate of pastries and get on with our day.

When we enter the apothecary shop, Solana, the owner, greets me with a happy smile, but her expression is swiftly followed by widening eyes as she takes in the man beside me.

Like most humans of average size, she has to crane her neck to meet his gaze at close range, and I wonder if that's how I look when I'm speaking to him. He's well over a foot taller than me, and it's only now that we're out in public together that I realize how strange it must seem. It probably looks like my giant of a husband took out his Tinkerbell wife for the day.

"Um, hi," Solana stumbles over her words. "Willow, can I just... borrow you for a moment?"

She's already got me by the arm, trying to lead me away, but Azrael is reluctant to let me go. It's only when I look up at him that I think he even realizes he has such a tight grip on me.

"It's okay," I assure him. "I'll be where you can see me."

He still doesn't seem pleased with the idea, but he releases me. Solana promptly hauls me off into the corner, watching him over my shoulder before she leans in and lowers her voice.

"Blink twice if you've been kidnapped."

"Solana." My words nearly die in my throat as I laugh. "It's okay. That's my husband."

"Husband?" she blurts, all discretion thrown out the window. "You got married and didn't tell me?"

As she says it, her gaze drifts over my face, pausing to linger on the scars on my forehead.

"Willow?" she croaks out. "What's going on? You're scaring me."

"Everything is okay," I assure her, wishing I'd put on more makeup to cover it up. "I have a lot to tell you, but not right now. We just came by so Azrael could see the shop."

We both glance at him then, and I can't help but smile when I see him sniffing a bottle, his nose wrinkling at the contents inside. It's a sampler of Solana's herbal tinctures.

"So, this inhumanly sized man isn't kidnapping you," she says, her voice relieved. "Okay, well... in that case, where did you get him, and are there more where he came from?"

"Solana." I burst into a fit of laughter as Azrael glances up, clearly hearing what she just said. "I thought you were seeing some mystery man you still haven't told me about."

"Pfft." Solana waves off the suggestion, but I see the tension in her eyes even as she says it. She likes to joke about never letting any man lock her down, but I suspect there's more behind this mystery man than she's willing to admit.

"Well, Azrael does have a brother," I confess.

"Unfortunately, he seems to be infatuated with your sister," Azrael interjects.

"Dammit," Solana mutters. "I should have known. Men always fall for the Wildblood women."

"Well, it doesn't matter because it's not going to happen," I say determinedly. But when I look back at Azrael, he doesn't share my confidence.

"Try telling that to Emmanuel."

"Oh, no, that's all wrong for you." Solana leaves my side when he picks up a bar of soap to sniff it. "Try this one."

I join them, watching as Solana proceeds to give Azrael an in-depth tour of the shop and all of its contents. He takes a particular interest in the things I made, of which Solana reminds me she needs a restock. By the time she's finished,

he's seen every piece of jewelry, essential oil blend, and candle that Solana has procured from me.

Solana picks out a few things for him, some soap, one of my oil blends, and a crystal, which really raises his brows. And finally, after a brief argument about whether she will take his money or not, he tosses a hundred-dollar bill onto the counter and tells her to keep the change.

Before we can say our goodbyes, the bells above the door jingle as Madame Dubois, the shop's in-house fortune teller, steps inside. Azrael stiffens at the interruption, and they meet each other's gaze, something strange crackling in the air as Madame Dubois takes him in.

"Madame Dubois," Solana greets her. "This is Willow's —"

Madame Dubois holds up her hand, effectively silencing Solana before she disappears behind the private curtain of her little booth, only to return a moment later with a deck of tarot cards. Her gaze remains on Azrael as she shuffles, watching him with a strange fascination. Discomfort radiates from his body as he tightens his grip on my waist, waiting for whatever Madame Dubois is about to reveal.

It isn't the first time she's acted strangely. The woman is known for it. But it is the first time I've seen her so fixated on something.

We all watch as she draws a solitary card, her mouth tightening as tension creeps into her features. Her gaze snaps up to us as, without a word, she returns the card to the deck and goes back to her booth.

"What the hell is she doing?" Azrael grumbles under his breath.

That question is answered when Madame Dubois returns with something in her fist, an almost glazed expression on her face as she walks right up to Azrael and reaches for his hand.

He stiffens but doesn't pull away as she drops a piece of raw obsidian into his palm and closes his fingers over it.

"Keep it with you," she tells him under her breath. "Always."

She doesn't give him the opportunity to answer, probably sensing he doesn't know what to say. But she does look at me, offering me a sympathetic glance that also sets my nerves on high alert.

"Congratulations, my dear."

With that, she disappears into her booth and shuts the curtain, leaving us all dumbfounded.

"Well, that was odd," Solana says, trying to dissolve the tension.

"That's an understatement," Azrael mutters. "I think we should get going."

"I'll bring you some new stock soon," I tell Solana. "We can chat more then."

She nods and pulls me in for a hug, whispering in my ear. "I like him."

Her approval makes me smile, and I'm glad I never told her about the history between the Delacroix's and my family. I doubt she'd feel the same if she knew all the hell we've been through so far just to get to this point.

"Thank you for the stuff," I tell her. "I'll see you soon, okay?"

With one last goodbye, Azrael ushers me out onto the street again, where a guard takes the bag from his hands and offers to store it in the car while we continue on.

“Where are we going now?” I ask.

Azrael leads me down the sidewalk, his arm secure around my waist as he scans the crowd. “Shopping.”

I look up at him in confusion. “Shopping for what?”

His eyes drift to my belly, warmth returning to his features. “Baby things.”

AZRAEL

Willow seems more at ease than before as we walk into Esmerelda's, a boutique shop for baby and children's clothing and custom pieces of furniture. The IVI guards stand outside. They look conspicuous, but that's the point. If Caleb or any of those Disciples are out here, I want them to know Willow won't be so easy to get to.

"Who was that woman at the shop?" I ask, wondering about the strange French woman who'd behaved so oddly.

"Oh, that's Madam Dubois. Don't worry about her. She's a little eccentric."

"A little?" I drop the rock she gave me into my pocket and put the whole strange experience out of my mind.

"Welcome," an elderly saleswoman says, looking up from where she's folding clothing for newborns at the counter. She smiles warmly before she glances discreetly at Willow's belly then at me. "You two will make beautiful babies," she says, which has Willow blushing and me feeling a little awkward. "No need to be shy." She winks. "First time shopping for baby?"

"We're looking for a present," I say defensively, feeling weirdly confronted by her question. Not wanting anyone else

to know about the baby just yet.

“Are you?” she asks, one eyebrow raised. She knows I’m lying. “Well, I have a large selection for newborns right there.” She gestures to the far wall while resuming folding the smallest onesie I have ever seen. I try to remember if Bec was that small when she was born. I’m sure I wasn’t.

Willow walks to where the woman points, and I follow her.

“You know, pink looks lovely on little girls with red hair,” she says, that knowing smile still playing on her lips.

“Oh, these are so pretty,” Willow says, touching the folded items. “So soft.”

She holds up a dress that seems made for a doll and smiles while I watch her as she caresses everything almost reverently, her eyes growing damp as she finds a small stuffed rabbit with huge pink ears that must have the fluffiest coat I’ve ever seen.

“Do you think it’s too soon to buy something?” she asks me, suddenly looking worried.

“There’s only one left. We’d better take it just to be sure.”

She nods, hugs the little rabbit, and moves to another rack. She picks up a few onesies then sighs, putting them back.

“Maybe one or two of those, too,” I say.

Soon, we’ve gathered a collection of items, and the saleswoman comes to take them from us to set them on the counter.

“The cribs are made to order, so you’ll definitely want to choose one soon. It can take up to six months. They’re made by hand locally, you see.”

“Oh, are they?” Willow asks, peering around her. “We’d better have a quick look.”

I nod and follow Willow. When the bell over the door dings, I tense and turn to watch a couple enter. The woman is heavily pregnant and smiling happily. The man she’s with looks suspiciously around the shop, his gaze resting on Willow longer than I like. I step in front of her, blocking her from his view, just as the saleswoman greets them, setting a large shopping bag on the counter.

“Mr. and Mrs. Anderson, your order is ready.”

“Azrael?” Willow says as the man walks up to the counter and takes out his wallet to pay.

I look down at Willow, who glances between them and me.

“Azrael?” she asks again, eyebrows raised. “Everything okay?” She squeezes my hand, which I realize is fisted. I force myself to relax and nod, trying to remember we’re having a normal day. Doing normal things. Having fun.

“Fine.” I try for a smile. “What did you find?” I follow her into the backroom where we spend another hour looking at a few things and end up leaving the shop with two bags of clothes, two books detailing the stages of pregnancy, and a mobile with various animals for the baby’s room as well as several stuffed toys.

From the baby shop, I take Willow down the street to another boutique, this one for her, not the baby. It’s a Society-owned shop and they’re expecting us when we walk in.

Willow turns a circle in the small but well-stocked boutique, where a dozen dresses in mostly black or red—or some combination of the two—have been laid out for her to try on and choose from. Shoes have been matched with each,

and when Willow looks back to me, her smile is wide and her eyebrows high.

“I called ahead,” I say, taking a seat on the large leather sofa and accepting the whiskey one of the two attendants hands me as the other one locks the door and draws the curtains closed.

“That was sneaky of you.” Willow narrows her gaze, but that smile is still there as she walks to the closest dress, my personal favorite, and glances at the price tag. “Wow.”

“Try it on,” I tell her. “Try them all on. We’ll take all that you want.”

“Why?” she asks as she looks a few over and points to the ones she wants to try on.

“A husband can spoil his wife, can’t he?” I check my watch. “We have dinner reservations in an hour. Once you choose the dress you want to wear, these ladies will help you with hair and makeup.” I sit back, cross my ankle over the opposite knee.

“You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you?”

I wink at her and sip my drink.

The saleswoman carries the dresses Willow chose along with all their accessories and, after a half-hour long fashion show where I decide my wife would look amazing even in rags, she settles on my favorite, a wine-red velvet gown that hugs her curves and drapes low down her back. Her hair is styled up, and her makeup consists of black-winged eyeliner and lipstick to match the dress. She doesn’t need more. She’s glowing.

I swallow the last of my drink and stand as a necklace is draped over her neck to hang down her bare back. I walk

around her and brush my knuckles over the curve of her spine.

“You look so fucking beautiful,” I say, unable to take my eyes off her.

“Thank you,” she says. “I like it. Very much. In fact, I like this day very much.” Even in four-inch heels, she still has to stand on tiptoe to wrap her arms around my neck and kiss me.

“Ready?”

She nods and turns to the women who helped her. “Thank you.”

They smile and one tucks a short lock of Willow’s hair behind her ear. I don’t let myself think about why it’s shorter than the rest as the other woman unlocks the door and we step out.

“Where to?” Willow asks as I open the car door for her.

“Our reservation is at George.”

Her eyebrows rise again. “How long have you had this planned? That place is impossible to get into.”

I grin. “Not for me.” She rolls her eyes as I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her to me, my gaze dipping to the swell of her breasts. “Although I admit I am not sure I’m going to be okay with every single man in the place ogling you.”

“Well,” she starts, drawing back a little, her tone teasing. “We could just go back to the hotel and order room service. You can peel the dress off me while we wait.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

“Why not?” she asks, sliding one hand between us and making me groan.

“I’m not sure that’s proper behavior for a proper young lady.”

“Maybe you should spank me.”

I tug her to me, hard now as I inhale the subtle scent of her signature perfume and squeeze her ass. “Maybe I will.” I’m about to kiss her when my cell phone rings. I’d ignore it except that it’s Bec’s ringtone, and something tells me I should answer.

I draw back, Willow clearly disappointed as I pull the phone out of my pocket.

“Bec?”

“Azrael,” she starts, crying.

“Bec, what’s the matter?” I bark, the heat running through my veins just moments ago ice now.

“It’s Grandmother.” Her voice trembles and it sounds like she drops the phone, but then my brother comes on the line.

“Azrael. Gran’s in the hospital.”

“What?” I ask, looking at Willow who is staring at me.

“We found her when we got home. She was unresponsive.”

“How? Where the hell was everyone?” We have a full-time staff.

“She must have dismissed them for the night. We found her at the bottom of the stairs.”

“Is she awake?”

“No.”

“Shit. We’re on our way.”

“What’s happened? Is Bec okay?” Willow asks urgently.

“She’s fine. It’s Salomé. She’s at the hospital.”

“What?”

“I need to get there.” I signal to one of the guards. “I’ll have them take you home.”

She shakes her head. “No. I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I’m coming with you, Azrael,” she states firmly.

“Fine.” She gets into the car, and I let the guards know about the change of plans. Guilt gnaws at me as we ride in weighty silence toward the hospital.

“It’s not your fault, you know that, right?” Willow asks as we pull into the lot.

I don’t answer. I knew she wasn’t feeling well the last few nights. I should have been more patient with her, shouldn’t have left her alone.

“Azrael,” Willow says once I kill the engine. I turn to her. She touches my face. “It’s not your fault. You do know that, right?”

“Let’s go in,” I say. I tell the guards to wait for us in the lobby, and Willow hurries to keep up with me. As soon as I enter, a woman from the reception desk comes to greet us and takes us up to my grandmother’s room where Emmanuel and Bec are waiting. Bec is crying, and Emmanuel’s forehead is creased with worry.

“How is she?” I ask as Willow takes Bec into her arms and hugs her.

Before Emmanuel can answer, the door opens and a doctor steps out. We all turn to him.

“Your grandmother is awake,” the doctor says, and relief washes through me. But he’s quick to put up a hand, and from the look on his face, there’s bad news to come. “She isn’t well. And she still refuses treatment.”

“Treatment?” I ask, glancing at my brother.

The doctor looks at me then at Emmanuel. He clears his throat, clearly surprised we don’t know what he’s talking about. “You’re Azrael?”

I nod. “What treatment?”

“She’s asking to see you.”

“Doctor,” I start, and he glances at the chart.

“You should go in, Azrael,” he says. “Talk to her. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He walks away, and I meet Willow’s eyes over Bec’s head. She’s cautious, her expression guarded.

I take a deep breath in and walk into my grandmother’s hospital room.

“How was your date?” Salomé asks before the door has even fully closed behind me. She looks smaller, somehow diminished in the hospital bed, wearing the blue gown with an IV dripping something into her veins.

“Grandmother. I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Are you?”

“Of course I am. Don’t be ridiculous.”

She snorts.

“What treatment is the doctor talking about?”

She pushes herself up to a seat, and I see the effort it takes. I hurry to adjust the pillow.

“Don’t pretend to care about me, Azrael. Not when this is your doing.”

I draw in a tight breath and tell myself to calm down. The woman collapsed while all alone in that house. She must feel like we’ve all abandoned her.

“Grandmother, what treatment?”

She looks up at me, folds the arm without the IV over her stomach and I see the jutting of bone at her wrist, the blue lines of veins over spotted, old skin.

“Rébecca isn’t the only one he is punishing.”

I sigh, pull up a chair. “Not this again.”

“Yes, this again. You’ve read the Book of Tithes. You know our history. Your parents, Abacus, your sister, and now me.”

“What treatment was the doctor talking about?” I ask firmly. “What were all those pills you were very quick to hide?”

“Cancer,” she announces stubbornly. “Terminal as far as the doctor is concerned.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Your brother will be next if you don’t act, Azrael. I am an old woman, and I know you won’t care much when I’m gone, but your brother and sister? What will it take for you to understand you must make the sacrifice? It’s the only way to save us.”

“Jesus Christ.” I’m up on my feet, pushing my hands into my hair. “Is that why you’ve refused any treatment? Because you believe that making the sacrifice will cure you? Is that it?”

“It’s not some fanciful belief. I know it. And if you won’t do it, there is another way. Because I’ve read that book too!”

“What?”

She’s saved from answering when the door opens and Emmanuel, Bec, and Willow enter. It’s Willow my grandmother’s gaze falls on, those watery eyes hardening. Her hate somehow gives her strength, making her sit up taller, making her look almost not sick.

She sweeps her gaze over Willow, and the malevolence I feel from the stone statue of Shemhazai is matched. Doubled. Willow must feel it too; I see it, and I step between them, placing myself in front of my wife, my baby, hearing her exhale of breath when I do. Feeling the light, trembling touch of her fingers on the center of my back.

Salomé’s eyes meet mine.

I know I’ve just drawn a line in the sand. If I hadn’t already definitively chosen, if there was any doubt in anyone’s mind, I’ve just erased it. Because I’ve taken a side.

And Salomé knows it.

AZRAEL

The doctor and several nurses follow my family into the room. I take the opportunity to usher my wife out, needing to be away myself.

Willow shudders once we're in the hallway and I hug her to me.

"You okay?" I ask.

She clutches her stomach. "I'm going to be sick."

I nod, peer down the hall and hurry her toward the bathroom at the end of the corridor. I don't care that it's the ladies' room, but enter with her, and we just make it into a stall before Willow vomits. I hold onto her, drawing that shorter strand of hair that keeps falling out of the updo back, remembering again why it's shorter. Remembering it was Salomé who took it from her in exchange for the book—Salomé who made an offering of it to Shemhazai, a promise of more to come.

I rub Willow's back, crouching down beside her. Someone enters the restrooms just as she retches again. Whoever it is must hurry back out.

"It's okay, sweetheart. It's okay. It's normal," I say, not sure if it's normal or not.

When the last wave passes, Willow reaches to flush the toilet, leaning back into me as she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Sweat dots her forehead, and her hands are shaking.

“Come on. Let’s get you some water.” I help her to stand, keeping my arm around hers. “We’ll get you checked out while we’re here, make sure everything is okay,” I say, wanting to distract her and keep the panic at bay, because I know she felt what I felt in Salomé’s hospital room. I have no doubt.

At the sink, she gargles cold water and splashes her face. I feel helpless as I watch her, rubbing her back, thinking of this day we’ve had, how it began. How it’s turned out.

“Azrael,” she says, finally turning the water off and taking a deep breath in, her eyes red, eyeliner smudged, looking more like the morning after a night out. “She left the gate open. It was her. I know it.”

“Willow—”

“I’m scared, Azrael.”

“Shh,” I say, wondering about the gate. Could it have been Salomé? Would she have done that knowing she was risking Bec’s life too, just for her being in the house? “Come, let’s get you looked over. Come, sweetheart. Shh.”

I keep her tucked into my side as we walk to the nurse’s station, and I ask for a doctor to examine Willow. They send us to a different floor, and Willow seems relieved that it’s a female doctor to greet us. Once they’re settled in an examining room, I step outside to give them privacy while I process what Willow said. I push a hand into my hair and drop into a seat in the waiting area when my phone rings. It’s Emmanuel.

“Hey,” I say.

“She wants to go home. She’s insisting.”

“Of course she is.”

“I’m waiting to talk to the doctor. Where are you?”

“Willow’s getting checked out while we’re here.”

“Why? Is she okay?” How do I answer that? But I don’t have to answer because Emmanuel speaks again. “The doctor’s here. I’ll call you back. Go take care of your wife.”

We disconnect, and I get up, pace the length of the corridor while I try to work out what to do. When I am almost at the door to the examining room Willow is in, I see a kid with a large bouquet of white lilies at the nurse’s station, and I think I hear Willow’s name. I walk over as the nurse tells the kid to leave the delivery and she’ll make sure Willow gets it.

“Just a minute,” I say, stopping him from leaving.

“Mr. Delacroix. They’re for your wife. I’m not sure how someone would know she was here—”

I take the card from the flowers, keeping hold of the kid, and pull the note out of the envelope. My heart pounds against my chest when I read it.

You look like a whore is scribbled in angry red and beneath it, a capital letter A. I know what it is. The Scarlet Letter. Adulteress.

“Goodness, this is odd,” the nurse says.

I look up to find her unwrapping the paper around the bouquet and there, from the bottom of it, drops a heavy, familiar rosary. One similar to what was hanging on Shemhazai’s wrist. One similar to the fragment I’d found on

the driveway the day the Disciples kidnapped Willow, Raven, and Bec.

I turn to the kid, slam him against the wall. “Who the hell are you?”

“What?” Terrified, he puts his arms up to block me.

“Where did you come from?”

“Sir! Mr. Delacroix!” The nurse pulls at my arm.

“This guy. He gave me twenty bucks to carry it up.”

“Yeah? Where is he? Where the fuck is Caleb?” I bark.

“I don’t know any Caleb. I don’t know... He gave me twenty bucks. I swear, man. I swear!”

Two men pull me off the kid, and I look at him—at his mop of curly hair, his hoodie and shorts, his sandals. He doesn’t look like a Disciple. He looks like a scared kid.

I scrub my face, then pull free of the men holding me back. I pick up those flowers and throw them against the wall at the back of the station, that rosary crashing along with the lilies, then I stalk back into the examining room, determined not to leave Willow alone again. Not for a second. Because they’re here. They can get to us. It was foolish of me to ever think otherwise.

WILLOW

Azrael is on edge during the drive home, and I don't have it in me to offer him false assurances. I know he saw the look on Salomé's face, along with her determination to see me dead.

As I stare out the window, the thought crosses my mind that perhaps I should stay with my family until the situation with Salomé is resolved, but it doesn't feel right. I refuse to run from an insane old woman or allow her to drive more wedges between Azrael and me than she already has.

"When Salomé came to our room, I asked her if she left the gate open," I tell Azrael, my voice muted beneath the sound of rain pelting the windshield.

We couldn't finish this conversation earlier, but now it's more important than ever that he knows. I feel him glancing at me as he drives, but I can't look at him. I just need to get this out, and what he does with the information is up to him.

"She didn't deny it."

Silence swallows up the space between us, and I know he's lost in his thoughts, but it doesn't deter me from going on.

"She didn't deny that she knew I'd take Bec with me either."

Again, Azrael doesn't respond.

"She said it was a cute story, but who would believe me? She told me I've deluded myself into thinking you care and that you were probably with another woman as we spoke."

"Willow." Azrael reaches over to take my hand in his.

"She said the Tithe will be paid, and soon I'll be nothing more than a burned corpse rotting in the ground."

I feel him flinch, his grip on me tightening. I hold my breath, waiting for his response. I don't know what he'll say. Honestly, I don't know what I expect him to do. Salomé is an old woman. A sick old woman, at that. While I harbor no pity for her, I know this isn't easy for Azrael. As twisted as their bond may be, she's the only parental figure he's had in his life for a very long time.

"It isn't safe for me around her," I tell him.

"I know," he chokes out, pain lancing his voice.

"Maybe I should stay with my family for a while—"

"No." His declaration holds a weight of finality.

"Azrael—"

"There's a cottage on the property," he says. "I'll keep her there under guard, with a nurse to take care of her. In the meantime, you, too, will have your own guard inside the house when I'm not around."

Relief swells in my chest, but it's short-lived because I suspect it doesn't matter where Salomé is. She isn't going to give up this idea easily. Regardless, I know this is the best possible solution right now, short of forcing Salomé into an asylum.

“Thank you,” I murmur, squeezing Azrael’s hand. “I know this isn’t easy for you.”

“You’re my wife.” He casts me a look that says everything I need to know. “And it’s time to put an end to this insanity. I regret that I ever considered it. That I ever thought...”

He doesn’t finish, and I’m glad for it. Neither of us needs a reminder of what his intentions were in the beginning.

“We have bigger things to worry about now,” I tell him. “I just need to know that our baby will be safe.”

“On my life, she will be,” he tells me. “You both will.”

We pull up to the entrance of the house, and I know Azrael is thinking about what I said earlier as the gates open for us. He’s considering how I could have escaped that night. The wheels are turning in his mind, and I want to ask him if he’s given any more thought to what I said about Bec’s illness, but we are both too exhausted to address that subject tonight.

We pull through, and Azrael stops in front of the house, handing the keys off to a guard as another retrieves our shopping bags from the car.

He helps me up to the room and into my nightgown before he settles me in bed.

“I’ll have the housekeeper bring you some soup and a cup of your Nan’s tea,” he says.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to meet Emmanuel.” His eyes darken. “They’ll be returning soon. I’ll help Salomé get settled into the cottage, and a guard will be at your door until I return.”

I nod, wishing he could stay but understanding that he has to do this.

“I’ll send someone to pick up Fiona tomorrow,” he adds. “In the meantime, do you want me to send Bec up for a visit?”

“I’d like that,” I agree, for both our sakes. I’m sure he doesn’t want Bec to see what’s about to go down with Salomé.

He brushes my hair back with his fingers, his face softening as he gazes at me. “I had big plans for you tonight, but they’ll have to wait.”

“I’ll take a rain check.” I offer him a tentative smile.

“Tomorrow, we’ll move your things in here,” he says. “Then we can start preparing the nursery in the adjacent room.”

His suggestion spreads warmth through my chest, and I nod my agreement. “I’d like that very much.”

“Get some rest.” He kisses me gently, lingering for a long moment as if he, too, is having trouble leaving. It makes me feel better knowing I’m not the only one affected by this madness.

“I’ll be here when you get back.”

WILLOW

Bec appears not too long after Azrael's departure, joining me for a late dinner in the room. The housekeeper brings a light meal for me to settle my stomach and a plate that looks better suited for a nursing home for Bec. Another one of Salomé's directives, I'm sure.

She picks at the food while we sit in companionable silence, but I can't help noticing the worry in her eyes. She doesn't know what's going on yet, and I'm not sure how she'll feel about it once she finds out Salomé has been exiled to a cottage.

"Here." I set my spoon down, leaning over to the nightstand drawer. "If there's one thing you should know about me, Bec, it's that I always have chocolate in case of an emergency."

She laughs as I retrieve the box of fine European chocolates my sisters gifted me during their last visit. I've been slowly working my way through them, but there are still plenty of options left.

Bec's eyes widen when I remove the lid, offering it to her.

"Are you sure?" she asks.

"Please." I nod. "Otherwise, I'll eat them all myself."

She takes the box and carefully makes her first selection, hesitating before she eats it like she knows she's breaking a rule. But the moment she begins to chew, I can see all fear has been abandoned.

“Good, right?”

She nods emphatically. “Oh, my goddess. So good.”

I can't help smiling at the phrase she undoubtedly picked up from one of my sisters. She's been spending a lot of time with them, and I'm glad. I don't think she has many friends since she doesn't attend school or activities outside the house. That's something I'm hoping we can change once things settle down here.

“How have you been feeling?” I ask tentatively.

She shrugs, her gaze dipping to the chocolates. “Okay, I think. Today was a good day. And I feel better when I get to visit your family. I really like it there.”

“Then we'll have to do it more often,” I suggest.

“I'd like that.”

She polishes off a few more chocolates, and I finish my soup and tea, feeling much better. I'm too restless to sleep, and I know Bec is too, so I make another suggestion.

“Do you want to help me make some jewelry?”

She perks up. “Really?”

“Yes. I need a new batch for the shop in the city. Maybe we can make some oil blends, too, if we have time.”

“I'd love that,” Bec says.

“Okay, well, you go on in and get out the jewelry box, will you? You can start looking at some stones and crystals for

ideas. I'll join you in just a minute."

Bec nods and heads through the adjoining door while I pop into the bathroom to slip on my robe. It's still raining outside, and there seems to be a chill in the air tonight, though I can't tell if it's from the storm or what's happening downstairs. It's been silent, although I did hear a car pull up earlier. I suspect Azrael went outside to join them, and that's why we haven't heard anything. I'm anxious for Azrael's return, but I have a feeling I may not see him until the late hours.

Once I have my slippers on, I head back through the adjacent door to join Bec, only to stop when I see her staring down at a baby book in her hands.

Shit.

I completely spaced out that the shopping bags were in here.

"Bec."

She startles when she hears her name, nearly dropping the book in a panic. "I'm sorry. I wasn't snooping. I mean, I wasn't trying to or anything. I just saw the bags, and I thought maybe you got some new clothes, and I wanted to see—"

"It's okay," I assure her with a shaky smile.

She hurries to put the book back into the bag it came from before she wraps her arms around herself, looking everywhere but at me.

"I'm really sorry," she blurts again. "Should I go?"

"Of course not," I tell her. "Sit down, please. I need your help with this jewelry."

She seems to relax a little as she does, but the silence between us can't be ignored. I know she wants to ask, so I

decide to confront the situation head-on.

“I guess you’ve figured out our little secret,” I say, trying for casual, although secretly, I’m terrified. Not because I don’t trust Bec, but the more people who know, the higher the chances are of Salomé finding out.

Bec releases a breath, and when she looks up at me, I’m relieved to see the excitement in her eyes. “Is it really true? I’m going to be an aunt?”

“Yes.” I nod. “You are.”

“I knew it,” she murmurs. “This is so awesome.”

Her happiness is contagious, and I don’t want to ruin it, but it has to be said.

“It is,” I tell her. “But can you do me a favor and keep this between us for now? Your brothers know, but we think it’s best Salomé doesn’t find out just yet.”

Bec’s smile dims as she considers it, but she nods. “Okay. I won’t tell.”

Relieved to put that behind us, I sit beside her and start rifling through my jewelry box. Bec chooses a few crystals and gemstones that she likes, and we get to work. I teach her how to wrap different pieces, and after a couple of hours, we have some bracelets, pendants, and even a few rings.

I can tell Bec is having fun, but the late hour is starting to wear on both of us. When she yawns, I decide to call it a night.

“Maybe we can work on some candles and oils this week,” I tell her.

“Okay.” She sets the jewelry on the altar. “Can you show me how to make a vanilla-scented oil too? Like the one you have?”

“Of course.” I consider it, pondering a few ideas she might like for scents. “We’ll make a day of it.”

“Thank you, Willow.” Bec rises to her feet, stifling another yawn. “This was fun.”

I’M STIRRED FROM SLEEP WHEN THE WEIGHT OF THE BED DIPS beside me, and I feel Azrael’s warmth as he wraps an arm around my waist, tugging me closer. His head rests above mine, his body a fortress surrounding me, and it feels so right that it would be easy to drift back into oblivion. But instead, I open my eyes, noting I forgot to shut the curtains as moonlight spills through the window, casting a glow over the bed.

It isn’t until I turn in his arms to face him that Azrael realizes I’m awake, and he reaches up to touch my face.

“What is it?” he asks, concern tightening his features. “Another nightmare?”

“No.” I smile softly. “I just wanted to do this.”

I press my lips against his, and he relaxes into the kiss, his fingers fisting the material of my nightgown. The subject of Salomé hangs heavy in the air, but I don’t want to talk about it right now, and instinctively, I know that isn’t what he needs either.

“I love you,” I murmur against him, repeating the words without a second thought. It feels so natural to say them, and I don’t know when it happened or how he broke down my barriers, but somehow he did.

“I love you too,” he groans as I shove him back and climb on top of him, yanking up my nightgown. “God, you’re

fucking beautiful,” he grits out as I grind against him. “My perfect little moon goddess.”

His fingers trace over the mark above my breast as if he can’t help himself. It’s the piece of destiny that brought us together, the imprint I was given at birth, the supernatural decree stamped into my skin that I was always meant to be his. I wonder again about the other Wildblood women before me. Did any of them ever fall for their husbands? Did they feel even a fraction of what I do right now as I gaze down at mine?

That question drifts away as I fumble to pull down Azrael’s briefs and put him back inside me, where he belongs.

“I need you,” I pant.

“I know,” he growls, helping me by yanking his cock free and hoisting my body straight onto it.

I stifle a sigh of relief as he slides into me from below, and my palms come to rest on his chest, using the strength of his body as I begin to move against him. We come together as we always do, but something about this time feels more frantic.

It’s the thought lurking in my mind, and undoubtedly his own, that question of how much time we have. *Can Elizabeth’s curse truly ever be broken?*

Tears sting my eyes, but I don’t let them fall. I squeeze them shut, willing them away, then I kiss Azrael again and again until we both fall to pieces. He comes with a sigh of agony, his fingers clutching my hips as I collapse onto his chest.

We’re both breathless, neither of us willing to move as his palm settles over my back, stroking me there. And I realize he’s made good on his promise, whether he meant to or not. Because I’m so exhausted, I can barely keep my eyes open.

But still, the question lingers in my mind, and I can't stop myself from asking.

“Why do you think it was us?”

“What?” He peers up at me.

“Why do you think we were the first pairing to fall in love?”

His hand pauses, and the strain in his eyes grabs my attention as I lift my head to examine him.

“Azrael?”

“We weren't the first,” he says reluctantly.

“What do you mean?”

“There was a record in the book,” he explains. “You probably didn't see it. But there was another pairing long ago. Solange Wildblood and Louis Delacroix. They fell in love too.”

Something tightens in my chest, and I know I probably shouldn't ask, but I have to.

“What happened to them?”

“Louis sacrificed her, as was expected of him. But he did so with the request that he would die too, so they could be together in the afterlife.”

A shiver crawls over my skin, and any hope I may have held dispels in an instant.

“How could he do that if he really loved her?”

Azrael's eyes darken. “It was his family. They insisted upon it.”

He doesn't have to point out the parallels here. They're painfully obvious. As I consider it, I think about what Nan said about Elizabeth having a sense of humor. Nothing could be worse for the Delacroix's than to fall for their enemies. Is that what she wanted all along? One man to fall for a Wildblood and break the curse?

But no, that can't be. If it were that simple, it would be broken already. Because no matter what anyone else may say, I know in my heart without a shadow of a doubt that Azrael does love me. Any lingering questions I had about that have been laid to rest over the last week. But does it change anything?

He senses my worries and smooths his fingers over the crease between my brows before cupping my chin.

“It will be okay, Willow.”

I can see he wants to believe that, but the truth is, he can't hide the edge in his voice. The same fear exists in him too.

Neither one of us really knows if it will be okay. We don't know what will become of us.

AZRAEL

I can't fucking sleep.

Salomé has been settled in a cottage on the property in the staff quarters. Ironically, it's the room she'd prepared for Willow before her arrival here. Contrary to her accusations, I didn't take any pleasure in locking my grandmother out of the house. I hated every moment of it. But I have no choice.

With a deep sigh, I sit up. Willow is sleeping soundly. I'm sure between the pregnancy and everything else that's going on, she's exhausted, and I can't expose her to any more stress.

When I brush the hair back from her forehead to kiss her, I'm reminded again of the brutality she is in danger of. The cross Church carved into her skin is healing, but it will leave its mark. Even if it's faint, she will see it every time she looks in the mirror. And me, well... it is the glaring mark of my failure staring me in the face. She is the obsession of one man's hate, and that man has an entire cult to do his bidding. I saw the nooses they'd prepared at Noyes's compound. These people aren't playing games.

Defiant, I touch my lips to her forehead, whispering a silent vow of protection, my own life for hers, before I climb out of the bed. Salomé made a mistake when she accused me of being like herself, of being unable to love. What I feel for

this woman—what I thought I felt and how it's blossomed in just the time since I acknowledged it, said the words aloud—it's almost unreal, incomprehensible. My heart swells when I look at her. But the instant I feel that buoyancy, it's as though a lead blanket is thrown over me because I know how perilous the reality of our lives is right now.

We have enemies both inside our home and outside of it.

The thought enrages me.

The thought of Salomé and her hate of Willow, her idiotic belief that sacrificing her will somehow save her own life. At least I understand Salomé's selfish motivation even if it disgusts me.

The thought of Caleb Church and the Disciples being so close to us that they knew—they fucking knew—where Willow was. Even with the presence of the Society guards in a Society hospital, with me at her side, they thought to taunt her, to threaten her. Caleb Church is unhinged and those “brothers” will follow his command no matter the danger to themselves.

I pull on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. I remain barefoot and, before heading to the door, I take Isaiah's ring out of the nightstand drawer and hold it in the palm of my hand.

Willow stirs, as if sensing its dark energy. I drop it into my pocket, more determined than ever, more furious than ever, and make up my mind. I stalk out of our bedroom and down the hall, a glance at the open door of my grandmother's empty, dark bedroom only solidifying my determination as I hurry down the stairs. I walk out through the kitchen door and find Benedict tethered to the post Salomé had put in just for him. His chain is short, barely allowing him to lay his head down. I've allowed her to rule over this household with her iron fist for far too long.

“I’m sorry, boy,” I tell him, releasing him from the chain and taking his collar off altogether. I’d forgotten to check on him and the staff must have just done what they’ve always been told to do, but that’s over. “Go upstairs. Keep Bec and Willow safe,” I tell him, not sure he understands as I pet him, and he nuzzles me. When I straighten, he goes into the house and heads up the stairs.

The rain that’s been falling most of the night is now a drizzle. I walk outside, straight to the shed, which houses various tools. The old wooden door creaks open and I pull on the small chain of the bare lightbulb overhead. I look around. I rarely come in here. We have gardeners who maintain the grounds. I walk through until I find the shelf with various saws and hammers and take the heaviest sledgehammer I can find, switching out the light and closing the door behind me as I walk barefoot through the forest to the churchyard, to that statue.

On my way I see the lights on at the cottage that now houses Salomé. A hospital bed has been set up, and she will have round the clock medical care as well as round the clock security. I didn’t bother to sugarcoat why. It’s not exactly to keep her safe. It’s to keep her in.

Willow’s words come back to mind, how Salomé didn’t deny having left the gate open to let the Disciples in. There’s a part of me that wants to believe she didn’t deny it just to fuck with Willow but there’s another part of me that knows better. It’s why I took Bec’s shake to the lab to have it tested. She may be my grandmother, but I don’t trust her. I don’t think I ever really have. But to poison Bec? To kill Willow? I can’t wrap my brain around it, and maybe that’s selfish. Maybe I don’t want to believe she, a woman from whom I am

descended, whose blood I share, is capable of such horrific, deviant acts.

I shove the thoughts aside and continue to my destination. I stretch my neck, rub out the tight knot of muscle. When I arrive at the small churchyard, I walk straight to Shemhazai's statue and look up at the giant figure of the demon. No angel here. I meet his eyes. The artist who created him was a gifted man. I wish he hadn't been quite so talented because those eyes bore into me, challenging me, taunting me, always furious with me.

I disappoint him, I have no doubt. But I am not here to please this beast.

I set the hammer down on the ground, resting its handle against my leg, and reach into my pocket to retrieve the ring. The usual wave of nausea is absent as I flick the tiny latch and open it to find the still-red wisps of hair inside.

Elizabeth's? It is from Isaiah's time, and the man was obsessed with both her life and her death.

"I denounce you," I tell Shemhazai. If only it were so easy. "I denounce you and all you stand for. And I set my family free of you."

Thunder rumbles in the distance. It's like I'm in a fucking movie and the director has just given the cue. I don't care, though. I don't care about any of that bullshit right now.

Instead, I dig into the small cavity of the ring to scrape out all those wisps of hair so fine they're almost like touching air. I let the wind take them, carrying them away from him. Away from me. From all of us. Does Elizabeth, from her place beyond this earth, see it? Does she feel it? Does she hear the words I whisper, setting her free?

Once the depression is empty and it is just a ring, I drop it onto the broken altar. Rain picks up when I lift the sledgehammer.

Now to the business of why I truly came here. In the distance beyond Shemhazai, the sky flashes brightly, charged by lightning.

“I’m done,” I tell him, raising the hammer over my head. “You’re done.” I bring it down hard, aiming for the demon’s knees. The blow vibrates through me but only particles of dust break away from the statue. I haul the hammer up again. “I’m stronger than you.” I smash it against his knees again. “I’m not cold, unfeeling rock like you.” I strike again, the sound of the hammer crashing against stone as if timed with the next strike of lightning, the roar of thunder as the storm approaches. I keep bringing the hammer down again and again and again, until his knees have crumbled to hollows, his shins shapeless, the middle part of his sword gone now.

I don’t know how long I work, how long I beat at the statue. I damn the giant slab of stone as rain pelts my face, electricity charging around me, thunder drowning out the curses I scream at the demon.

But no matter what, no matter how long I work and the force with which I smash the hammer against it, he keeps on standing, broken but tall, and his face, his eyes, keep on staring. So, I climb up on the rubble I’ve brought down onto his altar that is stained with the blood of the innocent. He is so fucking huge that I balance precariously as I haul the hammer over my head and smash at his face. His eyes. His evil.

I am so focused and so angry, the storm so loud that I don’t realize I’m no longer alone. When I feel the tugging at my waist, the frantic pulling on my arm, I am startled to look

down and find Willow there, her face one of utter panic, her hair matted down her back and sticking to her face as rain comes down in sheets.

“Azrael!” She screams over the roar of the storm.

My muscles burn with the effort I’ve exerted, the hammer a heavy weight above my head. I look up at the statue’s face to tell him off. I’ve obliterated one eye, and a part of his head is caved in.

“Azrael, come down from there. Azrael!”

I hold the hammer at my side and look down at her lovely face once more, then back to his hateful one.

“You won’t touch her. She is not for you,” I tell him as Willow’s hands curl into the waistband of my jeans, and I drop the hammer and climb down.

“Azrael, we need to get inside.” She glances up at the statue, her forehead creased with worry, that cross carved so viciously into her sweet, lovely face.

I jump down from my place and wrap my arms around her, lifting her, carrying her away, shielding her from him. I meant what I said. He will not touch her. She is not for him. She is for me.

Broken skin I did not feel on my way to the destruction of the demon and his altar now burns the bottoms of my feet as I tread over sharp stones and sticks. I don’t go to the main part of the house though. Instead, I carry her to the dark wing, through the door I use to get in and out when I don’t want anyone to know where I am.

She clings to me, her hands on either side of my face caressing me, whispering words I can’t make out, just like Elizabeth’s lips moving in that dream.

Only when we get into the piano room do I set her down, kissing her as I back her onto the pink velvet couch Mom loved, where I sometimes let myself drift off, weary after the music from all the emotions that inevitably surface and exhaust me.

“Benedict wouldn’t stop whining,” she tells me between kisses as she pulls my shirt over my head, and I strip her of the slip she’s wearing. “You’re so cold,” she says once we’re naked, her hands flat on my face, my shoulders, my chest.

I don’t feel cold. I feel vibrant. Alive. Energized.

I draw back to look at her in the shadows of the room, then kiss her again, unable to get close enough.

“You’re mine. Not his,” I tell her, hearing how I sound as I push into her.

She gasps and I lay my weight on her to hear her moan as I penetrate fully, deeply, her passage warm and welcoming, my cock so fucking hard it hurts.

“Willow,” I kiss her lips again, bite them as she greedily takes my lower lip between her teeth.

Drawing out, I stand up, lift her so she wraps her legs around me, cupping her ass as I press her back to the wall. She cries out with each thrust, and when I pull out once more and spin her around, I wrap one hand around her front, spanning her belly, my fingers coming to her clit. Bending my knees because she’s so much smaller than me, I thrust into her and fuck her from behind as she moans, hands clinging to the back of the sofa as I lean over her. She flips her hair off one shoulder and looks back at me, and I kiss her cheek, the corner of her mouth. When I see her eyes grow glassy and feel her walls begin to throb, I close my teeth over the curve of her

neck and listen to her call my name as her body releases, and I throb inside her, claiming what is mine, only mine... what will only ever be mine.

Afterward, both of us spent, we fall asleep on the narrow velvet couch, Willow wrapped in my arms, our legs entwined, clinging to each other. I have the dream again. I'm standing on Proctor's Ledge, the breaking of the sky so much like it was tonight, behind Shemhazai as I smashed away the likeness of him. Isaiah is there and gone, no longer laughing but insignificant, a small presence, a small man.

Elizabeth, though... she'll still hang, and I must watch, must bear witness in the chaos of this terrible morning that determined our fates centuries before we were even born. When I push my hand into my pocket, I feel soft hair, warm, wet blood. A cross is carved into Elizabeth's forehead now to match Willow's. The curse is upon her lips.

Whispers.

Mutterings.

Her damnation of my family, and ultimately, of her own.

It's then I understand it. I understand the crack in the carving over the bed, the splitting of Shemhazai's altar, the failure of Louis and Solange.

I understand it all.

As my eyelids fly open and I see Willow's own eyes staring at me, I wrap my hand around the back of her head and grip that silky hair I love so much as I finally grasp the impossibility of it. Of us. Of this curse. Of the final Sacrifice that must be made to break it once and for all.

"Azrael?" She's crying. She senses it. She knows that every other pairing ended in tragedy but I can't allow her to

know that she's right. That we are hopeless. "Azrael?" she says on a sob.

Because to end this, there must be a final Sacrifice. A life given to save the other. Testament of a love powerful enough to end centuries of madness.

It is Elizabeth's decree.

The Sacrifice will be made. Blood will be shed.

But it won't be Willow's.

It will be my own.

WILLOW

The next few days pass in a fog. Azrael and I get on with our lives, going through the motions of normal human existence. Ignoring the elephant in the room seems to be our chosen path, but it's impossible to miss the tension crackling in the air.

Everywhere I turn, there's a Society guard watching over me. If Azrael isn't with me, the guards are. At first, it was just one, but with each new day, they seem to multiply.

A directive from Azrael, no doubt.

He's been distracted, locked inside his head, but he always comes back to me at night. The moment we're alone in the sanctuary of our bedroom, he's on me. We spend every night lost in each other, doing what comes naturally to us. He makes love to me like every day might be our last. I know that's what I'm afraid of, but I can't bring myself to admit it because speaking the words out loud gives them credence. It makes it real, this idea that the curse is too powerful, that it may never be broken... that even if he's chosen not to sacrifice me, it doesn't mean our story won't end in tragedy.

Looking at him this morning, I can see it in his eyes. Beneath his determination to protect me, fear still lingers. We haven't spoken of Salomé or Caleb. I don't know if he's even

had any updates on The Disciples, and truthfully, I don't have the energy to ask right now. Between spending hours every night with Azrael wearing me out and this pregnancy, I think we're both exhausted.

"What do you think?" Azrael asks.

We stand side by side, observing the adjacent room that used to house my things. Now, my belongings are in the bedroom I share with Azrael, while this space is slowly starting to look more like a nursery. There are small touches of pink from the items we chose together. Blankets, stuffed toys, a framed piece of art yet to be hung. The baby's clothes are folded on a table, waiting for a place to store them. We ordered furniture and a crib—all a shade of cream for a new beginning. But those things will take time to arrive.

"I think the walls need to be redecorated," I say, forcing the words past the knot in my throat. "I want to do something soft in pink and cream."

"I'll hire a contractor," Azrael agrees. "We can have it done this week."

Despite the tension in my gut, I can't help smiling at him. Everything with him is just that simple. I ask, and he supplies. There's never any argument about that. If I want something, he makes it happen without question. And I know if he gets the chance—if we get the chance to see this child grow—he'll be a good father.

"I was thinking about names." I turn to face him, subconsciously touching the wedding ring on my finger.

Azrael arches a brow, and I'm not sure if he realizes where I'm going with this. It's impossible to miss the frisson of tension in his jaw. We've had an argument from the beginning

of our marriage over my last name, and I don't think he wants to rehash it.

"I know it's still early," I say. "And I could probably look through a hundred baby name books and change my mind, but I feel strongly about this."

"Okay." He shifts. "What is it?"

"I realize our families have a complicated history," I tell him. "But if it weren't for that history, we would never have found each other."

His eyes soften a fraction as he reaches down to touch my face. "I want to believe I would have always found you somehow, Willow. You were meant to be mine."

My heart quickens as I place my hand over his. "I know."

A beat passes, and it would be easy to get lost in each other right now. But I want to finish our conversation before I forget. Azrael seems to sense this, and although I'm sure he's wary about where this conversation might be headed, he urges me to continue.

"You were talking about names?"

"Yes." I offer him a tentative smile. "I was thinking about a way to honor our families and begin anew. An olive branch, of sorts. So, I came up with a combination of your mother's name, along with the woman who ultimately brought us together. What do you think of Amélie Elizabeth Delacroix?"

The softness in his eyes transforms to warmth as he grazes my chin with his fingers. "That's... perfect." His voice dips as he repeats the name reverently. "Amélie Elizabeth. I love it."

"So, it's settled then?" I ask hopefully.

“Settled.” He nods. “I was expecting another fight about the last name.”

“I know,” I admit. “But I’ve been giving that some thought too.”

His eyes move between mine, the gold more intense than I’ve ever seen it as he waits for me to explain.

“If we’re determined to break this curse, the first step should be putting the past behind us, right?”

He pulls me closer, the heat of his body pressing against mine. “What are you proposing?”

“In my heart, I will always be proud of my Wildblood heritage,” I say. “But I think, more than anything, I’m proud to be your wife. And I want all three of us to be united in this way. You, me, and Amélie should all have the Delacroix name.”

He stares down at me, his eyes darkening with heated possession.

“Christ, Willow,” he growls. “You have no idea how much I like that.”

“I think I have an idea,” I muse, feeling his erection prodding against my belly. “But if you take me to bed again, I’ll never make it to the coven meeting.”

“Right,” he murmurs distractedly as he gropes my ass. “That’s supposed to happen.”

“It is happening,” I correct him. “You can hold me hostage all night, but my family will send out a search party if I don’t show up.”

“So let them come,” he says. “We can have it here.”

“You’ll say anything to get me back in bed.”

He blinks as I pull away to look up at him. “I fail to see the problem with that.”

“Of course you wouldn’t.” I laugh.

“Fine,” he grumbles. “Let’s get you to your witch convention.”

“Coven meeting,” I reiterate. “Which is really just an excuse for Nan to get high and spend time with us.”

Azrael follows me into the room, shaking his head. “Of course it is.”

“You love her. You just can’t admit it yet. You’re part of the family now.”

“Yes,” he agrees dryly. “Your father is rather fond of me. Shall I start calling him Dad?”

“Well, can you blame him?” I shrug. “You took his favorite daughter.”

I head into the closet and slip on a pair of Doc Martens with the burgundy dress that Azrael hasn’t been able to stop eyeing since I put it on this morning. It’s knee-length, with a low neckline and lace-up bodice, and it may as well be see-through the way he’s been staring at it.

I just told him we would be late if we didn’t leave, but as I return to the room to see his heated gaze coasting over me, I can’t help myself.

“There was just one more thing I wanted to address.” I walk over to join him.

“Hmm?”

His eyes are on the swells of my breasts, and I know he's barely listening, but I have a feeling what I'm about to say will capture his attention.

"I have a belated wedding gift for you." I smirk as I sink to my knees before him and reach for his hand, bringing it to my lips.

"I like you like this." He strokes my face tenderly.

"I like it too." I breathe the words against his skin. "Dominus et Deus."

His eyes flash, fingers tangling in my hair as I lean forward and press a kiss to the erection beneath his trousers.

"Now, I give you my submission, my love."

BY THE TIME AZRAEL FINISHES IN MY MOUTH AND TAKES CARE of me, we're an hour late. It doesn't win him any favors with my father. As soon as we walk in the door, he properly chastises my husband with a single look. I swear, if I didn't know any better, I'd think my father knew exactly what made us late. Heat blooms across my cheeks, which doesn't help the situation.

"Are you sure you want to stay?" I lean up to whisper near Azrael's ear. "You can still run."

He chuckles, shaking his head. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good." Nan comes to join us, ushering us both toward the living room. "Now, if you two can keep your hands off each other for five minutes, we have a meeting to get to."

“I’ll see you when we’re done?” I squeeze Azrael’s hand, and his lip tips up at the corner.

“Actually, I think I’ll be joining you.”

“What?” I look at Nan, who also has a mischievous smile on her face.

“You’ll see.” Nan gestures us both along behind her. “I don’t have all day, Willow. Come on now.”

I have no idea what they’re up to, but it all becomes clear the moment we walk into the living room, and my sisters scream out ‘surprise,’ nearly giving me a heart attack.

“Holy crap.” My eyes widen as I take in what must be a hundred pink and white balloons around the room, along with a stack of presents piled high on one table.

Adjacent to that, there are endless tiers of pastries and finger sandwiches, along with a tea bar.

“What is all this?” I blurt.

“A baby shower,” Mom answers. “We know it’s early, but —”

“We couldn’t wait!” Cordelia interjects.

I glance at my little sister, only just realizing Bec is there beside her—and when I look at Azrael, it’s evident he was in on all of this.

“How did you get Bec here without me knowing?” I ask.

“You’re easily distracted.” He smirks.

“Okay, gross.” Aurora makes a fake gagging sound. “Keep the PDA to a minimum, please.”

“Do you keep the PDA to a minimum when you’re shoving your tongue down your boyfriend’s throat?” I ask her.

She blanches, casting me a glare before offering Mom a sweet, innocent smile.

“What boyfriend?” Mom demands. “You’re not allowed to date yet.”

“Willow, I’m taking back my gift!” Aurora growls. “You just broke the code of sisterhood.”

“I’m pregnant.” I smile back at her. “Don’t fuck with me.”

“Willow!” Mom chides. “There are children present.”

“Like you haven’t dropped the f-bomb many times, Clara.” Nan rolls her eyes. “Now, are we going to stand here and argue all day, or are we going to celebrate?”

After some low rumblings, the Wildblood clan agrees we’re here to celebrate. Then Azrael and I are quickly ushered to a loveseat, where we’re treated like a King and Queen all afternoon.

After eating entirely too many sweets, I nearly fall into a food coma and have difficulty focusing as I unwrap all the presents. Azrael doesn’t pitch in, seemingly content to watch me do all the work, much like I did this afternoon on my knees. When I mutter as much beneath my breath, he grazes the back of my neck with his fingers and leans in to whisper in my ear.

“What happened to your willful submission, Little Witch?”

“It comes and goes,” I grumble. “I ate too much, and now I’m cranky.”

He laughs, and all my sisters take notice, the room falling quiet like they just witnessed a once-in-a-lifetime event. But it’s my Nan who seems to be smiling too broadly, like some evil master plan she made is finally falling into place.

The afternoon wears on, and we receive everything we could ever need for a baby and then some. At some point, when my pregnancy fatigue becomes too much, Azrael pulls me onto his lap, and I have a little cat nap against his chest while my family engages him in conversation, keeping him busy as he strokes my back.

Raven rouses me an hour later, forcing me to participate in all manner of ridiculous games. But, really, it isn't so bad. We all laugh until we're blue in the face when Azrael is forced to let me feed him baby food while I'm blindfolded, and I end up smearing it all over his face.

"Whoops." I offer him a sweet smile when the blindfold is removed.

"You don't look all that sorry," he observes wryly.

"No, but I'm sure I will be later."

His expression tells me he already has some ideas about that, but our conversation is interrupted by Aurora, who's apparently still prickled over our earlier bickering.

"Willow, have you even considered that you'll be giving birth to Gigantor's baby? You better take this stuff seriously. That kid's probably going to come out a twenty-pounder."

"Shut it, Aurora." I glare at her, horrified by the prospect.

Azrael sees the panic in my eyes when I look at him, and he does the worst thing he could do.

He laughs.

"She's not going to be that big," he assures me.

"Have you seen the size of you?" I whisper-hiss.

"She'll be perfect," Nan tells us. "No need to worry."

Her reassurances do nothing for me, and as we pack up all the gifts and prepare to say our goodbyes for the afternoon, something occurs to me. It isn't until my Nanna hugs me that I get a chance to ask.

“Did you do all this so we had a chance to experience it before something happens to us?”

“Of course not,” Nan chides me. “Willow, you looked so happy today. You were glowing. That's all I wanted.”

I nod, forcing a smile, even though I'm still wondering if this is all just for show. Will we even have the chance to see this baby born?

“I love you,” Nan whispers. “We all do. And we are so happy your husband loves you as much as you deserve.”

“Thanks, Nan.” I hold back my tears as I hug her tight. “For everything.”

After twenty minutes of goodbyes, we finally make it out the front door with Bec in tow. She's been quiet all afternoon, not as relaxed as she usually is with my family, and I've been wondering why. It isn't until we're in the car that I'm considering how to bring it up. But to my surprise, Azrael beats me to it, proving that he's been taking a more active role in his sister's life.

“What's wrong, Bec?”

She blinks up at him, her face slightly panicked as she pulls her sweater over her wrist, but not before I notice a fresh bruise there.

“Bec?” I ask. “What is it?”

“I'm sorry,” she blurts, her eyes filling with tears. “Grandmother knows about the baby.”

AZRAEL

I stare straight ahead at the road but drive on autopilot. Every muscle is tensed, my knuckles white on the steering wheel. Willow stares at the road too, but now and then I see her turn to me and even in my periphery, the shadow of that cross healing and hidden by makeup seems to shine bright, as if I need reminding our future isn't clear. As if I didn't already know.

And now, this, Salomé knowing about the pregnancy. The bruise I glimpsed on Bec's wrist. This on top of the Disciples coming for her, for us all. And ultimately, the curse, the sacrifice that will be made after it all, it's enough. It's fucking enough already.

When we get to the house, I park. Two cars with IVI guards follow, parking their vehicles behind mine. The four men shadow us as I carry a few of the things Willow wanted to bring home with her up the stairs, Willow and Bec behind me.

My cell phone buzzes in my pocket, and I set the bags down, reach in to take it out, meaning to silence it because I need to talk to Bec, but seeing it's the lab. I stop just outside our door and glance at Willow and Bec.

"I'll go with Bec," Willow says after seeing my expression.

I nod and once they're gone, I answer the call. The technician says hello, reminding me who he is.

"Yes, I know. What did you find?" I ask more curtly than I intend, not sure about anything anymore.

But when he tells me, it still takes me a good minute to process.

"The sodium level was very high. I've checked it against..." he continues talking, but I don't hear any more. Well, no more than one word. "Tamper."

He's still talking when I cut him off. "What would the long-term effect of something like this be if a child were to drink these regularly?"

"Regularly?" He sounds surprised but clears his throat. "Well, they'd cause serious stomach pain, and to ingest this much sodium regularly would be detrimental to their health, their growth. Even deadly depending on the dosage."

My body goes rigid and my heart stops beating, the blood in my veins running cold.

"Are you sure?" I ask, my voice unrecognizable.

"I can test more samples, but I'm sure. It's why it took me longer than I liked to get back to you. I didn't want mistakes, not on something like this."

"How could doctors have missed this?"

"Easily. You see—"

I tune him out. It doesn't matter. The damage is done. "Thank you," I say and disconnect the call.

Willow was right. All this time, for more than a year, Bec's been complaining about her stomach hurting. She hasn't been

getting better, but worse, and not a single doctor, not one specialist, the best of the fucking best, has been able to find a reason.

Salomé was poisoning her. And all while I stood by and did nothing. All under my own roof. Under my nose.

“Bec,” I call out, heading toward her bedroom. I reach it in just a few steps.

“It’s okay,” Willow says to her in a comforting tone, and I hear how I must sound.

I walk into Bec’s bedroom, where I see it as if for the first time. I see the stilted transition from girl to woman in the posters on the walls, the dollhouse in the corner. It’s as if time stopped in the middle of it all.

This poisoning of my baby sister was happening all this time, and I failed to see it. I failed yet again.

“Fuck!”

I walk to the windows and throw them all open. I feel like I’m suffocating. Bec shivers at the cool air. I take several deep breaths before closing the windows and turning to face Willow and my sister, reminding myself to stay calm.

“Those drinks,” I say, sounding hoarse because all this fucking emotion is choking me.

Both Willow and Bec look at me confused.

“Were they open when she gave them to you?”

“Grandmother?”

“Who else?” She flinches at my tone, and I stop myself. “I’m sorry, Bec. I didn’t mean to snap at you. It’s not you—”

“Why?” Bec asks. “Why are you asking?”

But Willow understands. The confusion in her eyes turns to concern. Not pity. Not victory. There are no victors in this. There is only loss. Only hurt. Only damage to my baby sister.

“She’d open the bottles and give them to me to swallow my vitamins with,” Bec says.

“How long was it going on?”

“I don’t know. A long time. I feel better without them, Azrael. I don’t want to drink them anymore. Please. I promise to eat—”

“Are there more?”

It takes her a moment to answer. She’s surprised I cut her off. I normally don’t. “I don’t know. She keeps them in her room.”

“You will not drink those anymore. You hear me?” I ask, going to her and, without thinking, I take her shoulders and give her a shake.

“Azrael,” Willow says, and I realize what I’m doing.

“Shit. I’m sorry, Bec. I’m sorry. Just don’t drink those anymore, okay? Just...” I pull her in for a tight hug, wondering just how close I came to losing her. My innocent little sister. My defenseless little sister. If Willow hadn’t said something, I’d never have thought to test those shakes. Never. “I’m so sorry.”

I release Bec and Willow takes her hand. I look at my sister. She looks so much better these days, her coloring warmer, those shadows beneath her eyes fading. Her hair even appears shinier and her eyes, although pink from silent tears, are brighter, more vibrant. I can see our mother in her. She’ll be as beautiful as Amélie, although I don’t think she’ll be much taller than Willow. The poisoning has taken its toll.

“Tell us what happened with Salomé,” I say.

Willow gives me a look that tells me I’ve done something wrong, and she turns to my sister, smiling her warm smile.

“It’s okay. It’s not your fault. We know that, don’t we, Azrael?”

“Christ. Of course.” I take my sister’s hand and push the sleeve of her sweater up. There, I see what she was quick to try and hide. Purplish bruises on her wrist like someone grabbed her hard. “Are there more?”

She bites her lip and when she turns her face as she begins to cry, I see the camouflage of makeup on her cheekbone. I touch her cheek, brush my thumb over the spot. I’m trying to be gentle, to not scare her, but it’s hard. It’s very fucking hard.

“Any more?” I ask tightly.

“She didn’t mean it,” Bec starts, tears streaming down her face. She is still sweet, still forgiving, and it makes this that much harder because Salomé did mean it, and worse.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Willow says, pulling her in for a hug.

“She just... she said someone told her about the painting at the house and,” she’s interrupted by a sob. “And when I went to see her, take her some flowers she likes, she was being nice and then she asked about it and...”

“It’s okay,” Willow tells her, rubbing her back.

“And what?” I want to know every fucking detail.

Bec glances over her shoulder at me. “Don’t hurt her,” she says, and in her eyes I see the memory of what I did years ago when I came home to find my little sister lying in her bed, unable to move from the caning she’d taken. I’d been young myself. Not the man I am now. I’d been uncertain. And, if I’m

being honest, I'd been afraid. Afraid of the force that was my grandmother. But, still, instinct had taken over even then and I remember how close I'd come to doing damage to Salomé. Real damage.

It's that which Bec remembers now. It's what has me seeing fear in her eyes. She knows what I am capable of.

"And what. Tell me exactly how it happened." My voice is lower, darker than usual.

Bec pulls away from Willow and faces me, although she's still holding Willow's hand. "I wouldn't tell her, and I got up to leave. I didn't think she was even strong enough to get out of her bed, but she grabbed me and spat at me." Her voice breaks on that last part as if she's still shocked, ashamed herself when it's Salomé who should be ashamed.

My hands clench and Willow lays one of hers around my fist.

"She slapped me and said after all she's done for me, I betrayed her for the... for the..." She looks at Willow and shakes her head. I can guess what words Salomé would have used.

"It's okay. It's okay," Willow tries to reassure her.

"She called me a traitor and said we deserve everything we have coming."

I don't wait to hear more. My vision blackens around the edges and I turn stiffly to go.

"Azrael!" Bec cries out.

I stop but I can't look at her, not right now, because I want to kill Salomé. I want to wrap my hands around her neck and

squeeze the life out of her and she will see that in my eyes.
“What?”

“Don’t hurt her. She’s just scared. That’s all. She’s just scared.”

“She’s a selfish, hateful old woman. Willow, stay with Bec.”

I stalk out of the room and slam the door behind me. I don’t know how I get down the stairs or out the door. Unseeing, I stalk through the grounds, Bec’s words urging me on as I follow the path toward the cottages.

Once I’m at the door to Salomé’s room, I don’t bother to knock. The guard nods his acknowledgement, but I barely see it as I push it open so hard, it slams against the wall and the wood reverberates.

A nurse gasps, spins to face me, the metal tray with its vial and syringe she’s holding crashing to the floor with a loud clang. The vial shatters, the syringe rolls under the hospital bed. The fucking empty hospital bed.

“Where is she?” I bark, looking around the small space as if there were anywhere to hide. Before the woman can answer, I bang my fist on the bathroom door three times. “Salomé! Get out here!”

“Sir?” The guard has entered the room.

“She wanted to get some air. The other nurse took her out,” the nurse says.

“I told you she does not leave!” The nurse cringes away, shaking.

“I’m new. I didn’t...”

I spin to the guard. “You were given simple fucking instructions.”

“Sir, she insisted on fresh air.”

“How hard is it to keep an old woman in her bed?” I shout, then I hear myself. Hear what I said. How I said it. I see Bec’s face again, her fear. She remembers well what happened the last time. How I grabbed Salomé and that goddamned cane and threatened to break it on her back. She remembers the bruise on her grandmother’s wrist, the single fucking bruise that Salomé proudly showed off like a badge of fucking honor when she left my sister bedbound for a week. If it hadn’t been for Emmanuel, I’d have killed her. I’m sure of it. Maybe I should have.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize—” the guard starts.

“Where did they go?” But as soon as I ask the question, I know the answer. There’s only one place she would go. So, I stalk out of that room and, heart pounding, blood rushing, I go to the churchyard.

Sure enough, I find her there, kneeling at the foot of the icon. Her broken god.

“Leave us,” she says to the nurse standing by with the wheelchair, which couldn’t have been easy to wrangle over the path.

I wonder if she was expecting me.

“Go!” I bark at the woman who hurries off.

Once she’s gone, I stand watching my grandmother. She’s collecting pieces of the statue. I’m not sure what she intends to do with them. Her hair is tied into a long ponytail at the nape of her neck and she’s wearing one of her dresses, not a hospital

gown. But when she turns her head to look at me, I see the toll the cancer has taken on her. She's diminished.

How did I not see it for so long? How did I not see the strange, sickly, consumptive-like sheen of her eyes? The hollows beneath them, the wasting away of this once formidable woman.

"I hear congratulations are in order," she says in that tone I hate so fucking much. She turns back to the task of gathering pieces of the statue.

"What did I tell you about raising a hand to Rébecca?" I ask, reminding myself what she did, what she has been doing, to a defenseless little girl. Sick or not, she is not to be underestimated.

She doesn't answer for a long moment but brushes dirt away from one of the blocks of stone. It's the bastard demon's eye.

"It's a rock, Salomé. Nothing to be revered. Worshipped. Nothing to nearly murder your own granddaughter for."

At that, her back stiffens, and she slowly stands. I see the walking stick at her side then and try to remember if I've ever seen her use it before. I think it used to be our grandfather's but I can't be sure. I do see the Delacroix insignia with the broken crescent moon stamped into the polished brass handle. I'm so fucking sick of it.

"I know what you did," I tell her.

She faces me, studying me before answering. "Do you?" she challenges. "I only did what I had to do in order for *you* to act."

She isn't sorry. She isn't remotely sorry.

I step toward her. She doesn't back away, and although she may not stand as tall as she used to, the look in her eyes reminds me she is no weak thing, sick or not. This is a woman determined. Obsessed.

And I understand something.

“No, Salomé. You did it for you. You did it because no matter how cruel, no matter who it costs, you will do anything to cling to your petty little existence. Well, it's over. You're finished.”

She takes her time to process this, to think of her retort. She's unapologetic. Unhurried and calm as ever. “I told your wife a little while ago that I, too, had been foolish once. I, too, had to learn the hard way.”

I am surprised by this turn in conversation, but Salomé continues.

“Did you know that my brother, Tobias, also bore Shemhazai's mark on his back?”

“Tobias? What the hell does Tobias have to do with any of this?”

I know he lived in this house before my parents came but I don't know much about him. Apart from the fact that he let it go to ruin. Based on snippets of overheard conversation from my parents, I suspect he was an alcoholic, but hell, this family will do that to you.

“But when it came to the Wildbloods, well, he simply refused,” she continues as if I haven't spoken at all.

He was a Penitent? Tobias?

“We've paid for my brother's weakness,” she continues. “For your father's in marrying that who—”

“She was my mother, and you will respect her in death even when you could not in life.”

“When he married so young,” she continues with a mocking curve of her lips. “He too bore Shemhazai’s mark.”

“They’re fucking birthmarks. They don’t mean anything. Get that through your thick skull!” I try to keep my hands at my sides but am finding it increasingly difficult.

“They are the symbol of Shemhazai’s strength. After he was stripped of his wings, he did not cower. He did not go quietly. He made himself a god.”

“Do you hear yourself?”

“The only flaw in judgment on Shemhazai’s part was to choose Tobias as Penitent and not me. If it were me, I’d have done what he required. I’d have made the whore pay the Tithe.”

“You’ve lost your mind, Salomé.”

“My foolishness, my part in this, it came with my brother. I was young then. Easily dismissed. Did you know that I was born in this house?”

“You were born in France,” I remind her.

She shakes her head. “No. I was banished to France. When I tried to do what Tobias refused. He chose to save the Wildblood woman over his own family. He released her from her obligation and banished me to France, cutting me off financially and keeping me under lock and key in that house. You didn’t know that, did you?”

No, I didn’t. I don’t bother saying it though. It hardly matters anyway.

“But he died. Drank himself into an early grave, and good riddance.”

“You are a sick old woman, you know that?”

“I thought with your father, Shemhazai heard my prayers, and I was being given a second chance. But he, too, refused. And, as our law dictates, the inheritance is never divided. It is only bequeathed to the eldest male and again, I was banished. Well, your father and mother banished themselves, I suppose. They left me in France and cut off all ties with me. But we see how far Shemhazai’s sword reaches, don’t we? He will have his sacrifice. And you, Azrael, you were strong. Not like the others. You were my hope. Even if you needed a little motivation.”

She means Bec.

“Abacus. Did you have anything to do with his death?”

She raises her eyebrows. “He didn’t need help. That boy was weak. In fact, all of the Delacroix men have grown weak. You should take an example of Isaiah.”

“I think not.” I step toward her, finished with her nonsense. “Let me tell you what is happening now, *Grandmother*.” To call her that leaves a bitter taste on my tongue, and I swear it will be the last time I say it.

She clutches that piece of the stone and looks up at me, her eyes as cold, and as dead as Shemhazai’s.

“You will no longer be allowed near my family and that includes Willow and my unborn child.” Distaste makes her face harder. Uglier. “Because I choose her too. I choose the Wildbloods over you.”

“Do you think I’m surprised?” She grins a malicious grin.

“You will be taken to a facility far away from us to live out your final days. I will not deny you medical care in your last weeks of life, but that’s where it ends. You will die alone.”

That grin grows wider, all her yellowing teeth showing. “Send me away, if you like. I don’t need to be here. I know the rules. Her blood needs to be spilled here, on Delacroix soil. It’s simple enough. Once she’s gone, you’ll follow and then, once he finishes you, I will return to my rightful place.”

Without conscious thought, my arm shoots out to close around her throat. She drops that rock and grasps my forearm with both of her hands, her eyes huge, veins bursting as I strangle her. She makes a sound, her lips moving into a wicked smile and a flash of memory cuts in, Elizabeth on Proctor’s Ledge. Elizabeth with the rope around her neck. Isaiah gleeful to watch her execution.

I realize what I’m doing. I realize I’m no better than him if I can murder this old woman.

I release her with a roar, and she stumbles backward, falling on the rubble that was once her beloved Shemhazai’s altar. And she laughs. She laughs the laugh of the insane as two guards come around the corner and stop dead when they see us.

The phone in my pocket rings. I ignore it.

“Take her to her cottage. If any one of you lets her out of there, I will personally kill you all. You hear me?”

They look at each other and it takes one a beat to answer. “Yes, sir!”

I glance back to Salomé. “It’s over!” I tell her before I turn to walk toward the house.

“Oh, it’s far from, Azrael!” she calls out. Her cackling laughter follows me all the way back to the house until I slam the door closed behind me and shut her out, and even then, her words echo overlaid by Elizabeth’s mutterings, and I know she’s right. It’s not over. Far from it.

Even with her out of the house, away from Bec and my family, even with one threat gone, this is far from over.

WILLOW

“Hey.” I touch Azrael’s shoulder, startling him from his thoughts. “Are you coming to bed? It’s getting late.”

He nods but doesn’t retreat from the threshold to Salomé’s former room. While I stayed with Bec and tried my best to keep her calm, Azrael was busy clearing out the old woman’s things. Most notably, the cases of nutritional shakes she was feeding Bec are now drained, the containers piled into three black garbage bags.

“I want it all gone tonight,” he says. “I just want her fucking gone.”

“I know.” I settle my hand over his arm, giving him a gentle squeeze. “But it’s been a long day. It can wait for the morning.”

He still hesitates to leave, but eventually, he returns to the bedroom with me. I start my nightly routine of changing into my nightgown and brushing my teeth, but I can tell Azrael is too unsettled to sleep. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so wrecked, and I hate it. I hate that I can’t take away this pain and betrayal for him. But I also know this is something he will have to process on his own.

“I love you.” I press my fingertips to his face. “You know that, right?”

“I do.” His voice softens.

“What can I do to make it better?”

Before he can answer me, his phone rings, interrupting us. It’s late, and I don’t know who would call at this hour, but something twists in my gut as Azrael picks up.

“Emmanuel—”

His greeting is cut short by whatever Emmanuel says, and just as Azrael glances at me with concern in his eyes, a crack of thunder reverberates over the house.

My gaze drifts to the window, and it’s impossible not to notice the storm clouds rolling in at an unnatural pace. They weren’t there moments ago.

“I’m leaving now,” Azrael tells Emmanuel.

The moment he says it, another loud boom shakes the house, followed by a flash of lightning illuminating the yard.

“Azrael.” I reach out, grabbing him as he hangs up. “What’s going on?”

He stares at me for a moment too long, and that twisting feeling in my gut turns into full-on fear.

“Azrael?”

“I’ll tell you when I return.”

“Azrael, no.”

Thunder echoes outside, closer and more turbulent, as rain pelts the windows so loud it sounds as if they might shatter.

“I don’t want to worry you,” he says.

“But you are. You can’t go out in this storm.”

He sighs, checking the time on his phone. “I have to go, Willow. I’ll explain everything when I return—”

His assurances are muted by the violence of the storm raging outside the walls of the house, and even Azrael seems to sense something is off as he glances out the window. It came out of nowhere, and it hasn’t escaped my attention how these storms have increased in frequency and intensity.

“Please, Azrael.” I cling to him, begging.

“I love you.” He pulls me close, kissing me on the forehead. “Everything will be okay. I have twenty guards on the property.”

“I’m not worried about that,” I argue. “I’m worried about you.”

He doesn’t offer me his reassurances as he gently peels me off him. “Keep an eye on Bec, will you?” he asks as he heads for the door. “I’ll have guards outside both your rooms.”

“Azrael.” My plea is barely audible.

He forces a smile that feels like a tragedy in the making, and this isn’t how I want to remember him. I need him here with me, and I don’t know how to make him understand these feelings inside of me. How can I explain that my intuition is screaming that something terrible is about to happen?

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” he promises. “Try to get some rest, okay?”

I move toward him as if my body is weighted down, suffocating beneath the intensity of my feelings. But I’m not fast enough. He goes before I can stop him, and when I

wander down the hall, I'm stopped from following further when an IVI guard steps into my path.

“Mrs. Delacroix, your husband asked that you stay on the second level until his return.”

Tears prick my eyes, and I shake my head, calling out for him. But the only response is the sound of thunder and the rumbling of the still-blackening sky.

“Azrael!” I scream.

He doesn't answer.

AZRAEL

“**D**o you ever fucking answer your phone?” Emmanuel barks in my ear as I climb into the Jaguar and, tires screeching, drive off the property.

“Tell me what the fuck is happening! How did she just disappear?” I’d set my phone aside for a while and when I answered just now, Emmanuel told me in a rush of words that Raven was gone.

“I don’t fucking know. They’ve taken her. Plucked her right out of the backyard.”

“How? There are guards—”

“I’m telling you she’s gone, Azrael!”

“I’m on my way. We’ll find her.” I drop the phone into the empty seat beside me and drive like Satan himself is chasing me to the Wildblood house. How the hell did they get to her? Guards are stationed throughout the property. Unless Barrett sent them away, but he wouldn’t do that.

The storm that seemed to come from nowhere sends sheets of rain down sideways and I can barely see through the windshield until I drive out of Eden’s Crossing. As I near the Wildblood house, though, it seems less furious. Although

heavy, rain and wind aren't tearing up New Orleans like they are Eden's Crossing.

The house is aglow, every light on inside and out. I park at the curb and stalk in through the open gate, noting the two men standing guard, wondering how the fuck anyone got to anyone in here. But the property is large, and maybe the perimeter is not as secure as we were told. We didn't check it ourselves.

Cordelia and Celeste walk out the front door as I rush up the stairs. Cordelia is holding her grandmother's hand, and this is the first time I see worry on Celeste's face.

"They're out back. Searching," Cordelia says, her voice almost too quiet over the beating of rain on the shingles. Although she's not crying, I can see she has been.

"Get inside. Both of you," I say and run back down the stairs and into the backyard. Barrett's expression is pained as he trudges back to the house. He's drenched, and when he sees me, he hurries his step. I meet him half-way. "What happened?"

He pushes a hand into his wet hair. I see the streak of gray and I swear he's aged a decade since Willow's baby shower.

"I don't know how. I don't understand." He shakes his head, squinting through the rain as he tells me, "She went to the shed to get some things. There are guards throughout the property." He looks up at me. "You said they'd be safe. You swore."

His voice breaks and a sick feeling settles in my gut as tears spill from his eyes.

"Where's my brother?" I ask, lightning igniting the sky. No thunder though. We're too far from it. Some part of me makes

a note of the fact that that lightning is still coming from the direction of Eden's Crossing.

Barrett shakes his head, then points behind him toward the pool and shed in the back.

I turn to the guards closest to me. "You, take him inside," I tell them.

He doesn't put up a fight, and I see the toll this has taken on him. All of it—the Tithing, the years leading up to it always on the backs of our minds, his more so than mine, perhaps, knowing he would lose a daughter. Raising her knowing all along that he would lose her.

"Where are the other guards?" I ask the other IVI man.

"Two down at the shed. Ten out looking with your brother, two at the front door and six inside the house. One of their men is down."

"Where?"

"Behind the shed."

"Go inside. If anyone tries to enter—"

He nods and is gone before I need to finish. They won't hesitate to use deadly force, especially if two of their own are down.

I scrape my hand over my face and stalk past the pool toward the shed with its open door clanging back and forth, swinging in the wind and bouncing off something that won't allow it to close. I realize what that something is when I get near enough and light shines on the black pant leg, the polished shoe of one of the IVI soldiers.

I walk inside, take in the scene. Two men lie dead on the ground, their throats slit. They're covered in blood that stains

the wooden floor. On the floor beside them is a woman's shoe—Raven's most likely.

But I don't see the Disciple's body.

I walk out of the shed and back into the heavy rain. "Emmanuel!" I call out and follow the beam of flashlights into the dense copse of trees.

"Here!" Emmanuel calls back and, in a few minutes, I see him. He and the guard are crouched around a body on the ground. The Disciple. I recognize him from his black robe and the oversized rosary.

Emmanuel straightens, then turns to me with a puzzled expression. "I don't get it," he says. He's holding onto a torn piece of red silk.

"Tell me what you know."

He drags his gaze from the fallen man to me. "I was with her just fifteen minutes before they took her. I told her to stay inside, but they don't fucking listen, do they?" He pushes his hand through his hair. My brother, too, looks like he has aged. "But this guy shot dead out here makes no sense."

I look at the Disciple who was killed by a bullet to the back of the head.

"Why isn't he at the shed with the guards? He couldn't have walked here with a bullet to the back of the head." When they told me one of the Disciples was down, I'd assumed he was killed during a struggle.

"It wasn't our bullet. The men who were killed, their weapons were in their holsters," the IVI guard says.

I look at Emmanuel. "They killed their own? Why?"

Emmanuel shakes his head. “And with a gun that wasn’t silenced. They weren’t trying to be discreet. Not when they killed him. With the Society guards, they used knives.”

He shifts his gaze to the torn piece of silk.

“Where did they get in and out?”

“Back of the property. The fence was cut. This was stuck to it.”

I take it, see the darker smear of red. I know it’s blood.

“Let’s get inside. I can’t think with this rain.”

Emmanuel shakes his head. He doesn’t move. “Why kill their own?”

Lightning splits the sky and again, I note the absence of thunder again. Something isn’t right. Not here at this house. And not with that storm.

“It’s not moving,” I say, realizing it.

“What?” He looks up.

“The storm, it’s suspended. Over Eden’s Crossing.”

That sick feeling of earlier worsens. Emmanuel’s phone rings. He reaches absently into his pocket and silences it, but it rings again just moments later.

“For fuck’s sake,” he says, swiping at the screen. “What?” he barks into the phone.

I watch the sky split in two by a lightning bolt so powerful the earth quakes beneath my feet.

“Raven? Is that you?” Emmanuel says more quietly, looking at me, his face white, eyes blazing. “Where are you?”

And I know. I understand.

As if on cue, my phone rings.

“Stay there. Don’t fucking move! I’m coming!” Emmanuel yells just as I answer my phone, seeing those I missed from Willow.

“Willow?” I call out, my heart dropping to my stomach. But there’s a clatter, and Emmanuel is staring at me.

“It was a decoy,” he says when our eyes meet.

I hear him say and, without any thought, any word, I bolt out of the yard, hurtling myself into my car and racing back home. Because this is a trap. Raven being taken, the soldiers with their throats slit, their own man killed with a bullet to the back of the head, a bullet the guards would have heard, would have come to investigate, it was a trap set for me. For me to leave Willow unprotected. For me to leave Willow for Caleb.

WILLOW

“**W**illow?” Bec’s frightened voice startles me from my thoughts.

I peek at the door, my eyes adjusting to her silhouette in the darkness.

“Bec.” I sit up. “What is it?”

She takes a step inside. “Did you hear that?”

“The storm?” I ask, listening as the unrelenting rain continues to pelt the windows.

“No.” She shakes her head. “It sounded like something else. A gun, maybe. I don’t know.”

I rise from the bed, glancing out the window into the yard. I can’t see anything out of place, and I didn’t hear anything other than the thunder.

“Are you sure it wasn’t just the storm?”

Bec shakes her head emphatically. “I thought maybe it was Azrael.”

“What do you mean?”

“In the dark wing,” she says softly. “I was in the library when I heard it.”

Tension seeps into every fiber of my muscles as I consider that. “How did you get to the library? Did the guard let you pass?”

“The guards aren’t up here,” she answers. “I heard them say something on their radios, and then they left.”

Alarm bells ring inside my head as I glance at the door.

“Bec, do you know any good hiding places up here?”

“There’s a hidden closet in one of the guest rooms.” She nods. “We used to play in there when we were kids.”

“Okay, good.” I reach over and scoop up Fiona. “I want you two to go there. Now, please. And stay quiet. As quiet as you can.”

“What about you?” she asks.

“I’m going to call Azrael and check downstairs.” I swallow, knowing all too well that if something called the guards away, it’s more than likely something sinister. The only way to protect Bec is to separate.

“Don’t come out unless it’s Azrael, Emmanuel, or me calling for you,” I instruct her. “Can you do that?”

She nods reluctantly, and I follow her to the door. We walk down the hall together before she stops to slip inside the room she mentioned, taking Fiona with her.

For a moment, I question if I’m doing the right thing, but I know this is the only thing that makes sense. If it’s the Disciples out there, they will leave Bec alone as long as I’m not with her. I have to find somewhere else to hide while I call Azrael, and I have to do it fast.

With a trembling hand, I dial his number as I reach the banister, pausing to peek over the edge. The house is quiet,

nothing seemingly out of place, and I wonder if I'm just being paranoid. But that feeling I had when the storm arrived only grows stronger by the moment, and I can't ignore that.

My call to Azrael goes to voicemail, and I hang up and dial him again as I tiptoe down the stairs. I've made this journey many times in the dark, but it feels downright creepy tonight. As my foot finally reaches the last step, the sound of Benedict barking outside sends a wave of terror through me. Azrael wouldn't have left him out there, and he was in the house when we went upstairs.

Azrael's voicemail picks up again, and I dial him back just as I turn the corner to head for the library, only to slam into something hard.

The phone clatters to the floor just as I hear Azrael's voice calling out for me in a panic.

Then the unforgettable stench of rotting flesh permeates the air around me as a hand shoots out and latches around my throat, followed by a voice I'll never forget.

"Miss me, baby?" Caleb breathes the words into my face. "Because I've missed you."

A whimper escapes me as my nails dig into his arm, trying to wrench myself free.

"Enough." Salomé's voice booms from behind me. "It's time to make the sacrifice."

I jerk against Caleb's hold, turning my head to see her wheelchair next to another man. I recognize him as the leader of The Disciples. His photo was in the evidence submitted for Caleb's trial.

"It's time, Caleb," Alfred announces. "Let's finish this."

“I told you I wasn’t done with her yet,” Caleb snarls. “I want more than to bleed her dry. I demand my pound of flesh, as should you.”

“There isn’t time,” Alfred growls. “We had a deal. The witch will die, and she will die now.”

Tension lingers between the two men as they face off, and Salomé’s gaze slithers over me with a sick satisfaction. She thinks she’s won now, and as I consider it, I wonder if it’s true. Azrael isn’t here. The guards are likely dead. They must have brought a small army of Disciples to accomplish such a feat. What are the chances that I will walk away this time?

“Take her to Shemhazai!” Salomé orders, her voice rising to a crescendo to match the ferocity of the storm outside. “Now!”

Dread wraps its insidious claws around me as Caleb lifts his free arm, cocking a gun. “Do I look like I take orders from a decrepit old woman?”

“Caleb,” Alfred grits out. “This wasn’t what we discussed. We don’t have time—”

Caleb momentarily releases his grip on me as he steps toward the other man, challenging his authority.

“You know what I think?” Caleb asks menacingly. “I think I’m done taking orders from you too.”

I take a step back, and Salomé sets her eyes upon me, her lips parting in protest as she begins to roll toward me. At that point, I don’t think. I turn and set off into a sprint, heading for the library. Caleb’s muttered curse follows, as do footsteps behind me.

I fling myself through the door frame, hope alighting in me when I notice the bookcase to the dark wing is already open.

But as I pass through, I nearly stumble over a fallen guard, slipping on his blood.

My stomach clenches in protest, the urge to retch strong as I right myself and try not to think about it.

“Get her!” Salomé shrieks. “Now!”

My feet slap against the concrete, echoing down the corridor as I run. I run as fast as my legs can carry me, the blood on my soles turning sticky. My lungs burn, and my heart races, but I don’t look back. I keep going, the thought of our baby—of Azrael and the family we swore to protect—driving me on.

When I reach the door I escaped through once before, my heart nearly stalls when I find it open. I’m so close I can taste it. If I can make it outside, I can find a place to hide. That’s what I keep telling myself. That’s the thought propelling me forward. But that thought dies abruptly when someone snatches me by the hair, yanking me back.

“It must be done, Caleb.” Alfred’s voice vibrates against my back as he presses a knife to my throat.

“Release her,” Caleb snarls.

“Caleb—”

Alfred’s words are pierced by the sound of a gunshot, followed by warmth splattering across my face. It isn’t until I feel Alfred’s grip falling away, only to be replaced by Caleb’s, that reality sinks in.

He just killed him. He shot him right behind me, covering me in his blood.

“Caleb!” I thrust my head back, making contact with his shoulder.

“Enough!” He drags me out the door into the rain. “I’m going to take what you owe me if it’s the last thing I do.”

“Then it will be the last thing you do.” Salomé’s shrill voice penetrates the darkness.

Caleb’s body stiffens behind me as Salomé presses a gun to his head. She’s out of her chair, not looking nearly the frail old woman she was in the hospital.

“Take her to Shemhazai,” she orders. “The time has come to pay the Tithe.”

AZRAEL

Blinding rain pelts my car as if it, too, would keep me away. The car spins out twice, and when I get to the house I wonder if I'm wrong when I need to slam the brakes so I don't crash straight into the slow-opening gates.

But the sick feeling only deepens as I take in the dark house, not a single light on. It's late though; maybe they're asleep. Just asleep. Or the power is out. It could be with this storm.

I haven't even climbed the stairs to the front door before I know I'm wrong. There, lying on the ground with his throat slit much like the two soldiers at the Wildblood house, is the man I'd rushed past earlier when I'd set out after Emmanuel's frantic call. They'd known he'd call me if they took her. If they took Raven.

I push the front door open. It's not latched, never mind locked. I enter and look into the house. It's dark, and it looks to be empty. I hurry to the stairs but there, before I take the first one, I see Willow's phone where she must have dropped it.

"Willow!" I cry out, unable not to. Benedict's barks are frenzied. He's not inside. He should be inside.

Rather than going upstairs, I rush down the hall, and when I see the library door is open, I shift direction. Is Willow hiding in the dark wing? Did she make it there?

“Willow?” I ask, entering the library and rushing to the hidden door that will lead to the dark wing. In the darkness, I almost fall over a man on the ground. It’s a Society guard.

My heart pounding, I rush down the corridor, the draft stronger than usual meaning the exit door is open.

“Willow!” I call out, but hear nothing. When I get to the exit, I find it open as expected and I can see the shadow of another man down. I expect to see a Society guard but am stunned to find Alfred Noyes there on the ground instead with a pool of blood around him and a large, ancient looking dagger on the floor beside him.

I leap over his body and rush outside, where I hear Benedict’s frantic barking. From here, I can see him leaping against his chain but before I get to him, lightning flashes, illuminating the bodies of two more men. A Society guard and James, one of my drivers and the man who normally handles Benedict. I drop to my knees to check for a pulse, but it’s too late for him. If I don’t hurry, it’s going to be too late for Willow, too.

If it isn’t already.

No. I can’t think that. I can’t.

Benedict turns toward me, growling fiercely until he sees it’s me. He barks his warning, and when I release him, he takes off at breakneck speed with me at his heels. He leaps down the stairs that lead into the garden, and the lights of the house blink momentarily on then off again three times in quick

succession. In that light, my gaze catches on something. Something that shouldn't be there.

I stop running, shocked when I turn fully to see Salomé there. But she's all wrong. I find my feet moving, carrying me toward her prone, unmoving body. Her feet are at the top of the stairs with her head on the bottom stair. The skirt of her dress is up over her thighs, leaving her exposed. Her neck is bent at an unnatural angle, her head cracked open. In her hand she's still holding a pistol, and in death, her eyes are open, red from where blood vessels burst when I nearly strangled her. And as wicked as ever.

I kneel beside her and touch her cold neck, unsure why I'm feeling for a pulse. She's dead. It's obvious. Her skin is cool to the touch, her hair soaked with blood and rain. Without looking away from her face, I tug the skirt of her dress over her legs to cover her and lay my hand over her eyes to close the lids. I stand just as I hear a scream.

Willow's scream.

Willow's piercing scream followed by a gunshot.

AZRAEL

I run so hard my muscles burn by the time I arrive at the scene—and what a scene it is. It’s surreal, like something out of a fucking nightmare. My worst fucking nightmare.

Benedict is on the ground whimpering a few feet from Shemhazai’s broken altar. Blood colors the fur of his hind leg a dark red.

Seven brothers in cassocks and rosaries stand in a semi-circle chanting what sounds like some demonic prayer.

Willow is stripped naked, her torn nightie in a heap of soft pink in the dirt. It doesn’t belong here, that color. That pretty, vibrant shade.

She doesn’t belong here.

And what I see, how she’s positioned, *fuck*, it takes me to that morning on Proctor’s Ledge. It’s the nightmare, but this is no dream because she’s bound with a thick rope around her neck, strung up around Shemhazai’s own neck. Her hands aren’t tied at least, and she has them wrapped around the noose, but she won’t be able to hold on too long, not once the rubble beneath the tips of her toes, which barely make purchase as it is, slips away.

Thunder roars and lightning strikes almost in unison to Caleb, not yet seeing me, drapes a rosary over her head and stands back.

Willow's eyes are wide on him.

"Caleb," she chokes out, as he brandishes a dagger that looks a hell of a lot like the one Abacus used to cut out the birthmarks on his shoulder blades. But that's not possible. That's at the bottom of the lake.

"The old bitch was holding on to this just for you," he says, eyeing it. "It's better than the one Alfred would have used. Less sharp. It'll last longer that way."

He moves toward her, licks the edge of the blade and smears the flat of it between her breasts, leaving a streak of blood there.

It takes all I have not to rush him, but if I move now, he could kill her. Just push that knife right into her stomach and end her life. Willow squeezes her eyes shut, but I realize it's not her bleeding. He must have cut his own tongue. The bastard is sick.

"Caleb. Please. Don't."

"I like hearing you beg, witch. And maybe once upon a time, I'd have saved you. I tried. You can't say I didn't try. But you chose your fate, and it's too late for you. It's time for you to repent. One pound of flesh at a time."

WILLOW

Caleb drags the knife down to my belly, and a flash of lightning in the sky illuminates the malice in his eyes.

“You spread your legs for him,” he snarls. “And now I’m going to cut his spawn out of you.”

Strength, Elizabeth’s voice whispers in my ear. *Remember who you are, Willow.*

My fingers wrap around the blade, and I close my eyes for a moment, channeling her the same as I did once before. An angry, howling wind whips around us as the heavens open up, and another barrage of rain falls, more violent than the last.

“I am a Wildblood.” My voice begins as a whisper, growing stronger with every syllable. “A descendent of Elizabeth Wildblood. A witch you cannot kill.”

Caleb’s mocking laughter grates at my nerves, but I return my focus to the power rising within me. It’s a force of nature no mortal man can rival. I recognize the energy as Elizabeth’s, and there’s no question she is here for her reckoning.

Thunder explodes across the sky, rumbling all around us. As the ground shakes beneath him and he nearly stumbles, a frisson of fear radiates through Caleb as his eyes dart around suspiciously.

“What are you doing?” he growls.

I meet his gaze, and whatever he sees in mine provokes a terror in him like I’ve never witnessed.

“Where is your deity to save you now?” The question spews from my lips in a voice I barely recognize as my own.

Caleb tries to wrench the blade from my grip, and when he can’t, he seems to recognize that his strength is no match for Elizabeth’s. Blood drips from my palm as I squeeze, the blade severing my flesh but not my will.

A silent struggle ensues as rain pelts my skin, and I balance precariously on the crumbling foundation of Salomé’s demon angel.

“She’s possessed!” Caleb screams. “Come help me. Now.”

The other men rush to join him, and at their periphery, I sense a different energy approaching. The energy that can only be the man I love.

“Willow!” he screams for me.

I keep my attention forward, trained on the enemies before me as they descend.

“Stay back!” My voice reverberates off the forest trees, echoing all around us as the ground again shakes from another thunderous boom.

It’s then that I see him, that I fully meet Azrael’s gaze, and I have never seen such fear. The idea that he might lose me terrifies him, but I feel nothing but a strange sense of calmness as I reassure him.

“Stay back,” I issue the decree once more.

He freezes momentarily, trying to understand, but something in him recognizes Elizabeth in me. And it all comes full circle at that moment.

The dreams, she whispers.

He recognizes her from the dreams, and without knowing how, I understand. I have clarity that this moment has always been fated, that he would recognize her within me. This exact moment in history has already been written, and we are little more than observers watching as it unfolds.

Azrael charges at the men and begins tossing them aside like ragdolls as he tries to get to me. His strength is unyielding, rivaled only by my own at the moment. He is as he was intended to be. A fallen angel. A man not truly of this world. My dark protector and my light all the same.

Caleb recognizes this, and his acknowledgment has him releasing the blade. It seems to unfold in slow motion, and I'm captive to the noose around my neck as he takes a step away and raises his gun. He takes aim at my husband. My life. My very breath.

Azrael doesn't back down. He meets Caleb without fear, harnessing his fury as he prepares to sacrifice his life for mine.

"Azrael, no!" I call out, escalating panic making my foot slip from the foundation.

A gunshot rings out as I teeter over the edge, trying and failing to keep my balance. My first instinct is to reach for the rope, but the knife falls from my grip as I do. My body drops, jerking as I latch onto the rope above, leaving me dangling beside the statue. The rough fibers dig into my neck, choking me, and terror grabs me by the throat as I attempt to alleviate the pressure. Just as I'm making some progress, I catch a

glimpse of Azrael collapsing to his knees, blood seeping through his shirt, and a silent scream unleashes from my lips. An unholy curse. The same words Elizabeth once repeated on Proctor's Ledge, but this time in reverse.

An almighty crack thunders above us, followed by another flash of lightning, and in a split second, something explodes beside me. It isn't until I'm on the ground, staring at the demon angel's head split in half, that I realize what's happened.

He's been cast down.

My vision wavers as I scramble for purchase, fingers digging into the earth as I try to summon the energy to look up. To find Azrael.

The Penitent has sacrificed himself in your stead, Elizabeth whispers. *You are free now, Willow. You are free.*

Tears blur my eyes, and I shake my head frantically, trying desperately to reach him as I crawl through the mud.

"No, no, no, no." The words come from my lips unbidden, fear like I've never known coursing through my veins.

Every ounce of energy I harnessed from Elizabeth has fled, and now only an aching heaviness remains.

"Azrael," I call out. "Azrael!"

I crawl through the scattered bodies, the men in cassocks strewn about with red fractal patterns split down their faces. Those patterns can only mean one thing. They've been struck down by lightning.

A fresh wave of terror moves through me as I consider the path of the ground current. I survived unscathed, but what about Azrael? *He was right beside them.*

“Azrael,” I call out again. “Azrael, please—”

I halt when I see Caleb lying there, eyes closed, eerily still. For a second, one split second, I think he is dead. But the pulse in his neck still beats and his lungs still draw breath.

Though unconscious, he’s not gone.

Goosebumps break out along my skin as I consider ending him, here and now, once and for all. But I can’t. I have to get to my husband.

“Azrael.” My voice is hoarse when I finally reach him, and I’m so weak I can do no more than collapse against his chest.

A sob rips from my throat when I settle my palm over the crimson staining his shirt.

“Please,” I beg. “You can’t leave me. You can’t do this. We have so much life left to live.”

“Who said I was going anywhere, Little Witch?” he croaks, startling me from my agony.

My eyes snap up to his, and he forces a smile as he watches me in awe.

“Did you think you’d be rid of me so easily?”

“Azrael,” I cry out, clinging to his body as he grunts. “I thought... I thought...”

“I know.” His voice fractures. “I know what you thought. But I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

I kiss him, tears streaking down my face as relief pulses through me. I want to relish this moment so badly, but I know if his words are to have any meaning, we need to get him to a hospital.

“Azrael!” Emmanuel calls out, his silhouette sprinting through the yard at a fast clip, Raven following behind him.

“He’s over here,” I tell them. “Please, come quick. We need an ambulance.”

“No.” Azrael’s voice gathers strength as he forces himself upright against my protests. “Emmanuel, call the vet for Benedict, and get more guards here.”

“But you’re bleeding,” I argue.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” Azrael tells us. “Caleb was a poor shot.”

“Benedict,” Emmanuel calls out for the dog, and a moment later, he limps over to us. His paw is wounded, but he wags his tail when he sees Azrael.

“That’s a good boy.” Azrael pets him, and Benedict licks his face.

“Is he okay?” I ask, checking him over.

“His paw is injured, but I think he’ll be alright,” Azrael assures me. “We need to get you to a doctor too.” His eyes darken as he takes in the blood on my hand. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I’m fine. I just need you to be okay.”

“I am,” he promises, something strange flickering in his gaze. “Thanks to you.”

Emmanuel seems to sense what his brother isn’t saying as he and Raven take in the scene around us. “What happened to these guys?”

“Lightning,” Azrael murmurs.

Emmanuel studies them in disbelief. “And you were both spared?”

Neither of us answers as we stare at each other, the silent truth lingering between us. As much as I’d like to take credit, I don’t harness that kind of magic. This was all Elizabeth, and we both know it.

“Azrael.” I cling to him as he rises, taking me with him. “Do you think this means...”

I can’t say the words, too afraid it might not be real.

He glances up at the clearing sky, the storm seemingly vanished, and he looks so different at that moment. It’s as if a thousand-pound weight has been lifted from his shoulders.

“Yes, Little Witch.” He leans down and kisses my forehead. “The curse has been broken. We are finally free.”

I smile up at him, teary-eyed, before something occurs to me.

“Almost,” I tell him.

He pulls back to look at me, worry in his eyes. “What do you mean.”

With a sigh, I glance at Caleb. “There is still one matter we have to deal with.”

AZRAEL

It's been three weeks since the Disciples attacked. Willow and Bec have stayed at the Wildblood house during that time while the house was deep cleaned. Emmanuel and I also took this time to clear out Salomé's room, burning most of her belongings but holding on to what I guess was a sort of diary of hers. I am not sure if I'll ever read it, but I set it aside for now.

The wooden carving over my bed had split in two the day Shemhazai's statue fell. It lay in solid pieces on my bed.

Throughout the house, we took down the Delacroix insignias that contained the crescent moon being split in two. The one over the front door is the only one that stayed since it was the original before Isaiah added his mark. I gathered all the things that have to do with the Tithing, and have set The Book of Tithes itself aside. I want to destroy it, but I owe it to the Wildbloods to have the chance to see it, to learn the true fates of their ancestors. They may choose not to read it, but it is up to them.

I'd thought the dagger Abacus had used to cut out his birthmarks lay at the bottom of the lake. I was wrong, however. Salomé had had it all along. I wonder if, in my distraction that day, I'd just assumed it was unreachable. Or,

hell, maybe it was Shemhazai all along. That's what she'd have said, at least.

The stained-glass window in the library is the only thing I kept as is. If I look at it the way Bec does, it feels different, like the angel is standing over his fallen beloved. I can almost make myself see it as that angel watching over her in sleep. That may be fanciful, but I like it. If Willow wants it taken down, then I'll take it down, but for now, it stays.

The authorities cleared away the bodies, Larissa handling every aspect of that. Salomé's ashes sit by the door of the kitchen, outside where she used to keep Benedict. I picked them up this afternoon because I didn't want to leave the stain of her where she could infect other lives but I won't have her in the house again.

All in all, between our house and the Wildblood home, nine Disciples and twenty-two Society guards were killed, most on our property and most with Salomé's help.

Ezra finally got back to me with the information he'd been verifying as far as Caleb Church's early release from prison. Alfred Noyes had received a transfer of funds from Salomé Delacroix's bank account. With those funds, he had made a significant donation to the re-election campaign of the judge who helped secure Caleb's early release with the parole board. I wonder how long Salomé had known the details of Caleb's attack on Willow. She'd been in touch with Noyes for the last few months, offering her assistance in their witch hunt in exchange for Caleb's help in the matter of Willow.

Ironically, the judge who had presided over the case and had sealed her files and sentenced Caleb was the very same judge who helped to secure his early release. He has since been dealt with and, just before his untimely death, he

generously donated all of that money to the families of the victims of the Disciples, benevolent soul that he was.

The news channels fell on this story like pigs in slop, outing the Disciples of a radical and violent cult led by the deceased Alfred Noyes. Noyes was the mastermind of the attacks, they reported, but his own Disciples turned on him in the eleventh hour.

The location of the events are being kept secret. I don't want photos of either of our homes circulating on the internet for years to come. The names of the victims are also being kept secret. Being a Sovereign Son does have its privileges, although I will be in Hildebrand's debt. I don't much like the idea but it was worth it to protect the privacy of both Wildblood and Delacroix families, and to keep Caleb's name out of the news story.

As far as anyone is concerned, Alfred Noyes was the insane man responsible for the attacks. His Disciples have also been linked to the majority of the murders of women over the years, that carved cross condemning the killers. As far as the public is concerned, Caleb Church has simply vanished, erased from this earth as if he never existed at all.

And very soon, that will be true.

I park the car at the IVI compound and turn to Willow. It's the middle of the night and the courtyard is deserted, the buildings mostly dark except for one light that remains on in the Tribunal building.

"Are you sure you want to be a part of this?" I ask Willow. "I will take care of it."

She is determined though, my fierce Little Witch. "I want to see him one more time." Caleb Church almost killed her

three times now. He hurt her family. He hurt a lot of families. I understand her wanting this. And Willow is strong. I always knew she was, but at Shemhazai's altar, I witnessed the full breadth of her strength, Elizabeth's enduring determination an undercurrent of that power.

It was the strangest thing during that final flash of lighting that killed the Disciples. I was looking at Willow with the noose around her neck and, for brief moments, it was as though she *was* Elizabeth. Not the Elizabeth gasping for her last breaths on Proctor's Ledge, but the Elizabeth Wildblood fully in her power. She was the witch Elizabeth that Isaiah should have been afraid of.

"All right then." I climb out of the car and go around to Willow's side to take her arm. From the trunk of the car I take the small, leather bound parcel.

We walk hand in hand toward the Tribunal building to where the same man who showed us in on our wedding day waits for us. Looking like it's normal for him to be here at three in the morning, he's dressed impeccably in a dark suit. He nods to me in greeting before opening the door and gesturing for us to enter. His counterpart waits inside and this time, rather than leading us up to Councilor Hildebrand's office, we are taken to a darker corridor and down a set of curving stone stairs half as wide as those leading up. They're lit only by torches blazing with hot fire and as we descend the interminable staircase, I keep Willow close.

No one speaks, and the sound of three pairs of shoes hurrying along ancient stones echoes eerily.

Does Caleb hear us, I wonder? Does he hear his reckoning coming for him?

The Tribunal building houses not only the offices of the Councilors, who are the judges of the Society's judicial system, and the courtroom itself, but below ground are several cells. Caleb won't be spending too much time down here, though. Only those sentenced after the most heinous of crimes take up residence here, some as they await execution. There aren't many of those, the last being a low-ranking member of the Society who had been responsible for the murders of several Sovereign Sons.

Lesser sentences are also carried out here. The Society's protections are many, and their punishments equal those protections. Although archaic in nature, most members of IVI are good, upstanding citizens both inside and outside the walls of the Society, and never even know what goes on within the confines of the Tribunal.

We reach a door and the man guiding us holds up his hand for us to wait. I glance at Willow, whose eyes are wide as she takes it all in. It's my first time down here, too, but it's not very different from what I expected.

The man knocks once on the door before opening it, and I hear Hildebrand's voice as he bids us enter. I gesture for Willow to walk in ahead of me, keeping my hand on her back at all times so she feels me beside her.

"Azrael," Hildebrand says, walking around the desk set in this cave-like room. There is electricity, I notice, so I guess they use the flaming torches for dramatic effect. It fits.

"Councilor." I shake his hand. "Thank you for meeting us at such a late hour."

"These matters are best dealt with in late hours, are they not?" he asks with a dark smile. He's no stranger to the ways of the Tribunal. He has presided as one of three Councilors for

nearly all of his adult life. “Although it is unusual for a woman to be present,” he says with a glance at Willow. “With all due respect,” he adds.

“My wife has a history with Caleb Church, and she’s chosen to bear witness. I will not deny her that.” I don’t give him the opportunity to do so either.

“Of course. This way,” he says, opening the door and stepping out into the same corridor we just came down. Willow and I follow. “Everything has been arranged as you requested. He’s been looked after so he’s fully healed, care you were generous to provide, Azrael.”

“For selfish reasons, I assure you. I want him fully present for what is coming.”

He smiles, nods. “Oh, I am sorry to hear about the passing of your grandmother,” he says when we stop before an unlit corridor within which I hear rustling.

“I’m not,” I say curtly.

He studies me for a beat before picking up one of the torches and entering that dark hall. He knows it well, I can see from the ease with which he walks. I wonder if he’s aware he’s humming a jolly tune as he lights several torches and we finally come to a wider opening at the back of which is a wall of bars. It looks medieval.

“I apologize for the stench,” the Councilor says.

Willow is breathing through her mouth. I smell it, but don’t care.

The Councilor lights each of the torches as Willow and I wait. I take note of the marble baptismal font standing in the center of the space outside of the cell. It must have been a hell of a job to get it down here.

This is the arrangement I asked for. The one thing I need. I walk toward the font and unwrap the parcel I am carrying. In my periphery, I see him. Caleb Church. He stands from where he was seated in the corner and walks toward the bars to watch as I take out the dagger I found beside Alfred Noyes's body and set it along the edge. I'm fairly certain it's the one they used to etch their mark into their victims before murdering them.

Caleb Church will die the way he lived.

Councilor Hildebrand only glances at Caleb before making his way back toward us after having lit all the torches. He hands me an ancient looking key on a heavy iron ring.

"I'll say good night then. Should you need anything, my man will be waiting within earshot. Rest assured he is discreet."

"Thank you, Councilor," I say, turning my full attention to Caleb.

Councilor Hildebrand's footsteps recede and disappear. I hear the vague echo of him climbing the stairs we just took down.

I walk toward the cell, which truly is how I imagine a medieval cell would have been. There's straw in one corner, which I assume is meant to be used as a bed, a bucket—the cause of the stench—and a plate of stale bread and a cup of water.

Caleb is dressed in a pair of ancient and filthy looking pants made out of what appears to be burlap. They're too short on him and come up to his shins. His feet are bare, and I imagine the yellowed, fraying oversized shirt he's wearing was

once white. He has a few visible bruises but nothing close to what he deserves.

“You,” Caleb says to Willow. “You’re dead!”

When he was brought here, he was still unconscious. I imagine his last sight of Willow was when she was swinging before the strike of lightning that smashed Shemhazai’s statue to pieces.

Willow walks right up to the bars. “Sadly for you, no, I’m not. I’m alive and well and will walk out of here tonight to see another day tomorrow. You won’t be so lucky.”

Caleb stupidly shoots his arms through the bars to grab her, but I step in front of her.

“You won’t touch her,” I tell him. “You’ll deal with me tonight.”

He looks up at me, and I momentarily see fear in his eyes. I’m a lot bigger than him, and he’s on his own. He doesn’t have his Disciples to mindlessly do his bidding.

“She’s a witch and a whore, and you... You are the devil’s spawn!”

I snort and turn to Willow, gesturing for her to back away. She does, walking toward the baptismal font and picking up the dagger. I unlock the cell door and gesture for Caleb to step out.

He looks at me, at Willow, then at the mouth of the corridor.

“Feel free to try and run, but if you touch my wife, I’ll make your final night a very, very long one for you.”

He swallows, eyes up the exit again. He knows he’s not getting out of here, though.

“Come out, Caleb Church. Fight like a man with a man rather than hiding behind others to beat and murder women.”

He steps outside of his cell and I gesture to the font.

“I had this brought here just for you. You like to baptize the women before you kill them, isn’t that right?”

“I am God’s Prophet. I do his work.”

“Is rape his work?” Willow asks. “Is mutilation? Murder?”

He stalks toward her, his rage no less diminished in the time he’s spent here. I intercept him, take him by the hair on the back of his head, and march him toward the baptismal font. Without ceremony, I dunk his head in and hold it under while he thrashes. I pull him up after a few moments.

“It’s not holy water. I didn’t want you to spontaneously combust.” I push his head under again and his scream, swallowed by the water, turns to bubbles. His hands come to the edge of the font to pull himself up. He doesn’t get up, though, until I allow it. “By the way, Brother Amos succumbed to his wounds. That’s another life on your hands.”

I dunk again, then straighten him, water splashing my shirt.

“You’ll burn in hell for what you’re doing!” he spits as he tries to suck in air.

“Willow,” I say, holding my hand out to her. “The dagger.”

Willow comes to my side, but she doesn’t hand me the dagger. I take his arms and hold them at his back when she steps up close to Caleb, and I watch as she stares him down. He struggles against me, but he’s not going to get free.

“You hurt my family,” she says. “You hurt countless innocent women. You hurt me. Now I’m going to hurt you in

our name.”

“Willow,” I start, because I don’t want his blood on her hands. I won’t allow it.

“It is my due, Azrael.”

She is right. Hell, she’s due more than this. I shift his wrists to one hand and, knowing what she’ll do, I grip his hair and tug his head backward with the other.

Willow’s eyes meet mine over Caleb’s head. I nod and hold him still as she dips the tip of the blade into the water and slowly, and with great care, carves not a cross but a crescent moon into his forehead. Caleb, the coward, screams. He screams so loud the sound echoes after he stops.

“This is for all of those women and girls you hurt, you piece of shit. This is for all the families you destroyed.”

Willow’s knuckles are white around the hilt of the dagger and I see the emotion in her damp eyes. I see what it’s costing her because at her core, she is not violent. She is loving, caring. She is the opposite of him. So, I draw Caleb away and close my hand over hers to lower it, hugging her to me as she weeps for herself, and for all the others.

As her tears subside, she draws away and nods and I give my attention once more fully to Caleb Church. This time, when I dunk his head beneath the water, I don’t let him up. Not when he stops struggling. Not when the bubbles vanish and the water stills. Not when piss runs down his leg and pools at his feet. I don’t let him up until his body is limp and boneless.

And once it’s over, I drop him to the ground, the dagger with him, and I take my wife home.

I take my wife home to heal. For us to begin anew.

WILLOW

“**M**orning.” Azrael’s lips brush against mine as I begin to stir from sleep.

My eyes are heavy, the lids unwilling to open even as his kiss pulls me from a peaceful slumber. I groan in protest, clinging to him the way I always do in bed.

“Are you ever going to get up?” he murmurs.

“You only have yourself to blame for this,” I remind him.

This pregnancy fatigue has been no joke. Between that and the emotional purge and processing everything that’s happened since our union, I’ve been napping more than I’ve been awake.

Azrael has been nothing but supportive, always checking in to see if there’s anything else he can do to make me comfortable. He makes sure I’m fed, gives me massages every night, and treats me like a queen. He also treats me like his favorite toy when the situation warrants it.

While his wound healed, he built up so much restless energy he’s been inventing new ways to purge it at every opportunity. We’ve christened many areas around the property, bringing new life to the place, as he likes to say. But now that my belly is rounding out, my days of running through the forest are over, and he’s finding different methods to take care

of me. Specifically, waking me up every day with a reverent mouth and tongue.

I'm not complaining.

"I can't say that I'm sorry." Azrael kisses his way down between my breasts, pausing to appreciate them before he palms my belly. "You're beautiful like this."

He tells me as much every day, never failing to be awed by the fact that he's claimed me this way. Before long, we will have a child together.

Slowly, I force my eyes to open, squinting against the sun's bright light. When I set my gaze upon his, warmth blossoms in my belly. I didn't think it was possible to love him any more than I already did, but that love continues growing every day, and without any obstacles between us, the bond that tethers us has become unbreakable. This I know in my heart and soul. Together, we broke the curse. Together, we have created life, and our legacy won't be one of tragedy but hope.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" I arch a brow at him.

A lazy smile curves his lips as amusement dances in his eyes. "If I start that now, we'll never leave the room. I have something I want to show you."

I groan again, being extra dramatic. "But it's so comfy here."

"Trust me. It will be worth it." He leans over me, his chest brushing against my nipples as he gives me a quick kiss then retreats.

"You did that on purpose." I sit up resentfully.

Azrael laughs and shrugs, not even trying to deny it. He never does. The man has no shame. I watch him walk to the

bathroom, the muscular globes of his bare ass on full display. He no longer bothers to sleep with clothes on since he knows I will just peel them off.

As I follow him to the bathroom, I feel like one of Pavlov's dogs. He's already started the shower, and he's waiting for me with a smirk.

"What?" I ask him sweetly as I lift my nightgown and toss it aside. "Do you think you've won?"

His eyes don't leave my breasts, which is answer enough. Within two minutes of me joining him beneath the hot spray and stroking his cock, he's got me pressed against the shower wall, giving me exactly what I need.

By the time he finishes inside me, he's made me come twice, and I can't hide my smug smile as I start to wash him.

"I always win."

"Or I always let you think that," he muses.

I shrug because, regardless, I win either way.

Going about my business, I wash him like I do every day. When my fingers brush over the healing scar above his collarbone, I get lost in a familiar sea of emotions. Every time I see it, I'm reminded of how close I came to losing him, and with that comes a fresh wave of anger. I know it will take time, and at some point, there will come a day when Caleb's marks on us will have faded so much he will never taint our memories again. But for now, we live with them, taking solace in the fact that he can never harm us or anyone else again.

"Hey." Azrael tips my chin up. "It's okay. I'm here."

"I know." I smile at him through watery eyes.

A beat passes, and as he's learned to do well, Azrael senses exactly what else is plaguing my mind.

"You know she's going to be okay, too, right?" he asks.

Raven. He's talking about Raven.

"I hope so."

I let the words settle between us, but the truth is, I don't know. None of us know what really happened to her the day the Disciples took her. She hasn't wanted to talk about it, and we haven't pushed her, allowing her to process it in her own time. But I recognize the haunted darkness in her eyes. She's closed herself off, shutting all of us out, including Emmanuel.

She's numb, dissociated, and I don't know how else to help her. I never thought I'd see the day when I'd give Emmanuel my blessing to chase after my sister, but after watching him pace the halls night after night, concern for her gnawing away at his sanity, it's become evident that he truly cares about her well-being. The fact that she's shutting him out right now has left him in agony too.

"We can go see her this afternoon," Azrael suggests.

"I'd like that." I nod.

We step out of the shower, and I can tell without checking the clock that it must be past ten. The cacophony of power tools and contractors has come to life on the opposite side of the house, the same as it does every day—another surprise Azrael is working on.

As tempting as it's been to peek, I haven't ventured into the dark wing yet. I want to see it as he intends it to be when the work there is finished.

He towels me off, and we slip on our robes, stopping short when we enter the bedroom again. Near the foot of the bed, Benedict is sprawled out on his cushy dog couch, Fiona curled up beside him with a smug little smile.

Azrael snorts. “So much for being enemies.”

“She’s being nice while he recuperates,” I tell him.

“Yes, that’s what she’s known for,” he replies dryly. “Being nice.”

“Says the man she sleeps beside every night.”

He pretends not to hear that, mumbling something about me getting dressed before we head to the closet and select our clothes for the day. I’m officially at the stage where I require comfortable outfits, which means I usually wear loose dresses or leggings and t-shirts.

Once I’m satisfied with my selection, Azrael leads me down the hall, pausing by Bec’s room. She’s playing music and video chatting with my sisters, something she’s been doing every day.

In the aftermath of Salomé’s death, Bec grieved the loss. Regardless of how terrible the woman was, she was still her grandmother, and I know she has mixed emotions about everything. But now, we’ve watched her as she’s started to blossom and come into her own, figuring out who she is under Azrael’s protective watch.

Both he and Emmanuel want her to have the life she deserves, and they are navigating the situation as best they can, trying to give her more freedom while also keeping her safe.

“I’m sure she’d love to visit with my family, too,” I tell him.

“I have a feeling we’ll be returning with a few more Wildbloods tonight,” he says wryly.

I wrinkle my nose at him. “You love it. We fill the house with joy.”

He laughs, taking my hand in his. “That you do.”

Once we’re downstairs, he leads me out past the gardens, but my footsteps falter when I see where he’s directing us. The statue of Shemhazai has been removed from the churchyard, but the memories that lurk there are still fresh in my mind.

“What is that?” I ask, staring at the white sheets draped over two large objects. They’re exactly where Shemhazai’s statue used to be.

“It’s what I wanted to show you.” He squeezes my hand in his before he wraps his arm around me, holding me close. “It’s a good thing, I think.”

It takes a moment for my feet to cooperate and move in that direction, tension still straining my muscles. I haven’t been back here since we both almost died. But I trust Azrael, and I know whatever it is he plans to show me can only be good. He wouldn’t bring me here otherwise.

“Here.” He stops when we’re a few feet away, rubbing my shoulders before he releases me. “Stay right here.”

Even though my stomach is in knots, I smile at his retreating back, watching as he pulls both sheets off at the same time. His large body obscures the view until he steps aside to return to me. It’s then that I see the white marble statues that have been erected in Shemhazai’s place. Their features are soft and unmistakably familiar. On the left is Azrael’s likeness, handsome and strong, just as he is now. From his back, two large wings emerge as he bends to caress

the face of the other statue of a woman with long, flowing hair adorned with delicate roses. She's beautiful, and I can do nothing but stare as I take in every detail of her, knowing that this is how Azrael sees me—that I am exactly this likeness in his eyes.

“What do you think?” he asks softly.

In answer, a sob wrenches from my chest before I can stop it, and I start blubbering unintelligibly as he pulls me into his arms. He comforts me, even though he doesn't know what he's comforting me for until I get myself under control. It's a common occurrence at this stage of my pregnancy.

“I love them,” I sniffle, finally getting the words out.

Azrael breathes a sigh of relief. “Thank God. I thought...”

His words drift off, but he doesn't have to finish his sentence for me to understand.

“They're beautiful,” I tell him. “It's our legacy. Many years from now, when our grandchildren come to this place, instead of thinking about tragedy and death, they will remember our love. The love that broke the curse.”

“An enduring love.” Azrael brings his lips to mine. “Unrivaled by any other.”

Just as he says it, the breeze picks up, and something drifts between us, grazing Azrael's shoulder before it flutters to the ground. He pulls away, his brows pinching together as he stoops to retrieve the fluffy white feather to examine it.

As he does, the energy in the air shifts, and I feel it. The presence of someone passed. Someone who wants him to know he's at peace.

“Abacus,” I murmur as goosebumps break out along my skin.

Azrael’s eyes snap to mine, and the hope I see there warms my heart. “You think so?”

I smile, leaning up on my toes to kiss him once more. “I know so.”

EPILOGUE

AZRAEL

Amélie Elizabeth Wildblood Delacroix comes into the world as lovely and headstrong as her mother, and on her own terms—three weeks early. She is a ball of fire with the softest crown of flaming red hair and bright golden eyes. I find myself completely and utterly under the spell of both mother and daughter alike.

Willow gave birth to our little girl two months ago today. She was born in our house, and the occasion is another marking of time, one that is significant for the change it brings. For the joy it brings. Up until the day of Amélie's birth, I realize that the anniversaries I've noted have been sad occasions and losses. Those losses will be remembered, and the lives of those we lost will be celebrated. But this—Amélie—her arrival is a line of demarcation from a past of shadows to a present and future of light and life.

I still remember what I felt the first time I walked into the Wildblood house on the night of the Tithing. How vibrant it was, how colorful. How happy and full of life and love.

I kiss my sleeping wife's forehead and climb out of our bed. From inside the nightstand drawer, I take out a sheet of paper, unfold it and set it on my pillow for her to find when

she wakes, then I walk into my daughter's room just as the sun begins to rise on the horizon.

A carousel of animals make their rounds in a light show across the pastel colored ceiling and walls. I smile, because I didn't stub that vibrance out. Instead, we brought it here, into our home. Willow and I—our impossible love—broke an ancient curse and opened the door to joy. This house, which only ever knew darkness, suffering, and loss is now a home of light and possibility and happiness.

Our love was, and is, greater than any curse, any demon-angel.

Benedict and Fiona raise their heads momentarily but close their eyes and go back to sleep once they see it's me. The two of them have been inseparable since Benedict was hurt, although I'm pretty sure the power dynamic leans heavily in Fiona's favor. I swear that cat has some witchy power in her. The two of them are as protective of Amélie as Willow and I are.

Amélie, expecting me, coos in her crib. My chest swells at the sight of her little hands reaching up into the air, and when I see her sweet face, a smile brightening it the instant I come into view, I think how the love I feel for her has somehow grown overnight. Every day since her birth, I've thought I cannot love any more than I do now. It's not possible because my heart will burst if I do. Yet, every morning, I am in awe.

"Good morning," I whisper, leaning down to collect the warm little bundle of her.

Amélie and I have a date. Each morning just as the sun rises, I come into her room, where she wakes to greet me as if she cannot believe her luck at seeing me. It's overwhelming to see the love in her eyes, as if I am her entire world. She has the

same with Willow and Bec and Emmanuel and all of the Wildbloods.

She can make anyone feel like they are the center of the universe.

I hug her to me, inhaling her sleepy scent deeply as she nuzzles my neck. I sit down on the hideous but most comfortable rocking chair ever and watch her excitement when she sees her bottle. One of the staff warms the milk and leaves it right here for me to feed my baby each morning. She reaches tiny little arms out for it and greedily takes the nipple into her mouth, immediately soothed as she draws deeply of the warm milk.

This is our moment. Only ours. Willow's body is working hard to produce the milk, and after watching her give birth, I have no doubt the woman is superhuman. I don't need as much sleep as she does and don't mind getting up to do the nighttime feedings but this, the sun rising outside the windows as Amélie's tiny fingers curl around two of mine, her eyes, so like mine, locked on me, there's nothing like it.

She drinks the bottle more quickly than humanly possible. She's always ravenous in the mornings and in the beginning, when I didn't think to have the bottle of milk warmed and ready, she'd wake the house to let everyone know it. Willow found my cluelessness amusing as hell, and I'm still not sure my wife and our tiny little witch aren't in cahoots.

But I learn fast.

Once she's finished with her bottle, I burp and change her. I bundle her up, as is our routine, and we quietly slip out of her bedroom, down the stairs, through the house and out into the garden. The morning is warm, and it will be a clear day. Amélie watches all the birds with curiosity as I step onto the

path. We usually walk for a little while until she starts dozing, then I head back and lay her in her crib to sleep the morning away.

As usual, I walk her toward the chapel as the rising sun brightens our path. During the renovations, we also cleared some of the forest to allow more sunlight to penetrate the darkness. It's been incredible to watch the transformation both inside and outside the house.

Amélie blinks up at me when I come to a stop at the place Shemhazai once stood, darkening it like he did our lives. He is long gone, his evil with him. Now, when I come to stand before the statues that have taken his place, I only feel possibility. A future. Light.

"I think you will grow up to be as beautiful as your mother," I tell Amélie as she gazes up at the statue of Willow as if she recognizes her mother's face. I'm not sure that's possible for someone so young, but my daughter is no normal infant.

Her gaze shifts from the statue of Willow to the one of me and she reaches out to touch my cheek and again, I think she understands what she's looking at.

"May you inherit all the gifts of your ancestors and none of the darkness," I tell her, taking in the wings so protectively shielding Willow. I say this to my daughter every morning, making it so.

Amélie was born with both the crescent moon on her chest and the marks of the angel's wings on her back. I wonder if the next generation will have either or both but when she begins to wriggle in my arms and reach out over my shoulder, I don't have time to ponder the thought because I see who she's reaching for.

“Is this where you bring her every morning?” Willow asks, taking our baby in her arms and cuddling her.

I watch them, mother and daughter together. Amélie plants a wet kiss on her cheek and burps up a little milk.

“Nice,” Willow says, wiping it away from Amélie’s chin and her own face as her daughter gives her a wide, gummy smile.

“You should sleep in. You need your rest,” I tell Willow as I tug her robe higher over her shoulders.

“I’m fine. I’m great actually.” She reaches up to plant a kiss on my lips. “What did you say to her?” she asks. “I heard you whisper something.”

“Oh.” I feel a little embarrassed and glance away. “I told her that she will grow up to be as beautiful as her mother.”

“That’s all?”

“Were you eavesdropping?”

“Azrael, tell me.”

I glance away from her. “Nothing. Just wishing her to inherit only the best of us.” I only look at her after saying the words quickly.

Willow studies me for a long minute as Amélie coos. She smiles warmly. “You don’t have to worry. Look at your daughter, Azrael.” I do, smiling as she struggles against the closing of her eyelids. “She would banish any darkness that dared try to touch her. She’s as stubborn as you, after all.”

At that, I shift my gaze to Willow to find her grinning mischievously.

“Stubborn as me? You mean stubborn as a Wildblood. One Wildblood in particular,” I say, setting a hand at Willow’s back to lead the way back toward the house. “Look at that hair. It’s scientifically not possible.”

“Science has nothing on witchcraft,” Willow tells me with a wink as we reach the stairs. She climbs two and stops to face me. She’s almost at chin level now.

“Like I said, stubborn,” I repeat and take her into my arms, careful not to disturb the now sleeping Amélie as I kiss her, believing her entirely that our daughter would banish any darkness that dared try to touch her. She is the product of an impossible love, and that can only breed strength.

Willow stands back and looks up at me. Keeping hold of Amélie in one hand, she reaches into the pocket of her robe with the other and takes out that sheet of paper I’d left for her. She raises her eyebrows.

I smile and take it from her. Opening it, I look at the sketch the tattoo artist made after much trial and error, but I think it’s perfect. It’s a willow tree, standing tall and strong and beautiful. Through its branches shines the golden light of a crescent moon.

“It’s about time I overwrite Shemhazai’s image on my skin, don’t you think?” I ask her. The tattoo is too large to remove, but this is a better alternative anyway. Good winning over evil. Love over hate. Willow’s eyes grow damp. “Don’t you like it?” I ask, suddenly worried.

She climbs up on tiptoe. “I do. I love it. And I love you so very much. Do you know that?”

I hold her to me, that swelling in my chest somehow impossibly more.

“Come, Little Witch. Let’s get this little one to her crib and go back to bed ourselves.”

“I’m not sleepy anymore.”

“Who said anything about sleep?”

WHAT TO READ NEXT

SAMPLE FROM REQUIEM OF THE SOUL

***Requiem of the Soul* is the first book set in the world of *The Society*. You can read a sample of Ivy and Santiago's story [here!](#)**

Ivy

The lace of my dress scratches my skin. I shiver. It's cold, a wet cold as soft mist turns to rain. Rain on your wedding day is good luck, right? Isn't that what they say?

Candles protected inside glass lanterns line the stairs leading up to the double front doors. I stare up at them, remembering the last time I stood here. It's been a while.

The doors are opened. Organ music and incense pour out.

I close my eyes, listening to the sound, and take a deep breath. The scent and sound combined are dizzying.

No, it's not those things that have me swaying on my feet. It's what's coming. What's waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

My brother wraps his hand around my arm. He mutters a curse as he rights me.

I grip my bouquet of blood-red roses. If I'm not careful, I'll crush them. They're striking. Beautiful. Like my dress. He has impeccable taste, my fiancé, and he likes things a certain way. He has rules. And he's used to getting exactly what he wants.

I'm slow as we ascend the stairs toward the entrance. It irritates my brother, I know, but everything irritates him. The toe of his shoe catches my long veil, tugging my head backward momentarily. A few steps more and we stand inside the vestibule, the organ louder, the incense stronger, combining with the smell of melting wax.

The doors close behind us, that final divide between what was and what will be. My past and my present. The voice inside my head urging me to run grows louder, but I don't run. It's no use.

Our guests rise to their feet, gazes blank as they turn back to look at me, their sacrificial bride. I don't see their faces, though. They're just shapes in my periphery. I only have eyes for one man. The stranger before the altar. The stranger in whose bed I'll sleep tonight.

I feel numb. Like it's not real. Like it's not me.

The room sways, and my brother's grip tightens. I'll have a bruise tomorrow. We take one step then another. I clutch my bouquet like it's my lifeline. My nails break the skin of my palms, the blood slippery, wet, the pain keeping me from giving in to the vertigo.

A thousand candles bathe the cathedral in a soft glow, the music more fitting for a Requiem Mass than a wedding march. I guess he chose that too. It goes with the dress at least. My fiancé's doing. I understand why.

My eyes lock on him. He's half-turned toward us, watching us.

My brother walks me past our guests. I only recognize one or two. All men. Only men. A dozen of them. My own mother is absent. I glance at my brother, see a dark smear of dirt or blood on his collar. I hadn't noticed it before, and I want to ask what it is but don't. His jaw is set, eyes hard. It should have been my father walking me down the aisle, but he can't do that.

Sadness washes over me, but I don't have time for it. Not here. Not now. Because we're almost there.

I look down at the polished marble floor cold against my bare feet, and I take my final steps to the altar where every sound is amplified in this strange dream that is somehow my reality.

My brother turns me to face him. He lifts the veil, then leans down to brush his cold cheek against mine. My eyes lock on my fiancé over his shoulder. His face is still in shadows, but he's watching us. Watching me. I see the glint of hazel eyes.

Santiago De La Rosa.

The man who has chosen me for his wife.

The man to whom I will belong.

My brother straightens. With a tug, he offers my hand to Santiago.

I swallow hard, my heart pounding against my chest, and when Santiago takes my wrist, the flowers slip from my grasp to scatter at our feet, blood-red against the stark, cold marble.

I barely notice because I am riveted.

Because that's when the candles flicker, sending light and shadows dancing across his face, and I get my first real glimpse of him. My breath catches in my throat, the gasp drowned out by the organ, by the sound of the priest telling the witnesses to be seated, and the creaking of the ancient pews as the ceremony begins.

One-click [Requiem of the Soul](#) here!

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To Have and To Hold

With This Ring

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Stolen: Dante's Vow

The Society Trilogy

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Dark Legacy Trilogy

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Unholy Union Duet

Unholy Union

Unholy Intent

Collateral Damage Duet

Collateral: an Arranged Marriage Mafia Romance

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Sergio: a Dark Mafia Romance

The Benedetti Brothers Box Set (Contains Salvatore, Dominic and Sergio).

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The Amado Brothers

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Taming Emma

Taming Megan

Taming Naia

Reclaiming Sophie

The Firefighter's Girl

Dangerous Defiance

Her Rogue Knight

Taught To Kneel

Tamed: the Roark Brothers Trilogy

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Natasha Knight is the *USA Today* Bestselling author of Romantic Suspense and Dark Romance Novels. She has sold over a million books and is translated into six languages. She currently lives in The Netherlands with her husband and two daughters and when she's not writing, she's walking in the woods listening to a book, sitting in a corner reading or off exploring the world as often as she can get away.

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ABOUT A. ZAVARELLI

A. Zavarelli is a USA Today and Amazon bestselling author of dark and contemporary romance.

When she's not putting her characters through hell, she can usually be found watching bizarre and twisted documentaries in the name of research.

She currently lives in the Northwest with her lumberjack and an entire brood of fur babies.

Want to stay up to date on Ashleigh and Natasha's releases? Sign up for our newsletters [here](#).

