



caution.

BLACKWOOD
AFTER DARK

CHRISTINA C JONES

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BLACKWOOD AFTER DARK
BOOK TWO

CHRISTINA C JONES

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One



Endorphins.

That was *supposed* to be the point of this.

After a whole damn day of clients working my nerves, I'd come home and shoved my tired limbs into my cutest stretchy outfit, aching feet into overpriced, ugly shoes, and ignored my headache to blast something raunchy and bass heavy in my ears.

You should go for a run; you could use the endorphins.

I couldn't even blame anyone else. I'd made the suggestion to myself, for myself, so it was all *my* fault I was out here in the dark.

No endorphins were happening.

Maybe I was too tired.

Too stressed?

Or maybe... the paved trail through the heavily wooded Blackwood Hills was too creepy, even though it was well-lit, with posts every few feet.

I... couldn't relax.

I'd run this trail a million times—in rain and fog and blazing sun, but *always* in the daytime. Then, I appreciated the

serenity of it, out there with nothing but the sounds of nature and the occasional encounter with a neighbor—in the community sense—out at the same time.

It was dead quiet now.

A little fact I only noticed because I'd found it necessary to pull my earbuds out; I didn't need anything muffling what was happening around me.

The silence was unsettling, to the point that I rubbed my ears, even tapped the sides of my head, wondering if *I* was the problem.

Nope.

No birds, no bugs, just the roar of my own heartbeat, the shuffle of my rubber soles on the pristine asphalt path.

My pace slowed as I approached the bridge. My path was taking me under it, running right along the creek that fed into Lake Black. I always sprinted to hurry and get past this part. It was kinda creepy even in full light.

I stopped short as my eyes caught movement. Before I could process what I was or wasn't seeing, the nearest street lamp flickered, then went dark.

"*Nope*," I said aloud, then turned my ass right around, taking off at full speed.

"*Excuse me*," I heard from behind me, something about the voice hitting me with the same feeling of ice water down my back.

It was *so* close behind me.

Too close.

“Ahh!” I screamed, staggering to a stop as my path was suddenly blocked.

A tall figure in a black hoodie and black sweats was right in the middle of where I needed to go to get back to the safety of my home.

My feet wouldn't move.

“Did nobody ever teach you it was rude to not speak?” he asked, tipping his head up. As I tried to peer into the dark opening of the hoodie, struggling to make out a face, it struck me that *all* the street lamps were out.

The only light was the moon, barely filtering through the heavy canopy of leaves.

My hands went to my pocket, easily fitting around the pepper gel I kept on me for moments exactly like this.

“I was taught not to talk to strangers, actually,” I said. “I'd appreciate it if you moved aside so I can go on about my business.”

“What's your name?” he asked, stepping a bit closer.

Now, I could see a bit of his face—pale, parchment-colored skin, red-rimmed eyes. He was perfectly still, not huffing and puffing like I was after my attempt to get away from him.

“Sharon,” I lied, giving him my designated name from back in my clubbing days with my friends.

“Okay Sharon, I'm Daveed. And just like that... we're not strangers anymore.”

I forced a smile to my face. “Right. Well... next time I see you out here, I'll make sure to speak, okay?”

I am never stepping foot on this trail again.

“Why can’t you talk right now?” he pushed, taking yet another step closer.

The proximity pulled my stomach into immediate knots.

I shook my head. “I just... I need to finish up my run, get home, get some sleep, go to work. You know the grind.” I wrenched out a laugh, trying not to show just how uncomfortable I was. “It was nice to meet you though,” I said, stepping to the side, and further down the path, keeping a wide berth between us.

Did I *want* to turn my back on this man?

Of course not.

But I needed to get away from him.

“How about I walk you home?” he offered in a tone that didn’t really give the vibe of his suggestion being *optional*. “It’s not the safest thing for a woman like you to be out alone at night.”

“Never know what you might run into, huh?” A new voice broke through the unsettling stillness of the night from behind me.

I whipped my head around to find the newcomer standing a few feet away, in running gear himself, with a large dog seated beside him.

A *very* large dog.

It looked at me, bored, then at Daveed, a low growl rumbling from deep in its chest as it fixed on him.

“Are you okay?” the man asked and I started to nod, but then... didn’t.

Couldn't.

“He’s scaring me,” I admitted, but not because I *wanted* to. I just... couldn’t overcome the compulsion to tell that truth.

He looked to Daveed. “You hear that? You’re scaring her.”

Daveed’s face twisted into a snarl. “What the fuck does it have to do with you?”

“Everything,” the man said, then stepped into a patch of moonlight, further illuminating him. Vaguely, he seemed familiar, but just the fact that I could fully see his face was comforting enough.

Daveed’s reaction to him was a welcome extra.

He must’ve recognized him too because he instantly shrank back and the inexplicable chill I’d been feeling was suddenly gone. The street lamps suddenly illuminated the path again as Daveed took several long steps away from me.

“My bad, I swear,” he stammered, hands up. “I didn’t know—”

“But you *should’ve* known, shouldn’t you?” the second man asked. “You’re out of bounds.”

“I wasn’t thinking—”

“Clearly. Find something safe to do.”

“Yes, Mr. Black. I’m sorry.”

“Just get the fuck outta here.”

He wasted no time.

He took off running, at a speed that seemed... *impossible*.

But it wasn’t the most pressing thing at the moment.

“Ambrosia... you should get home.”

I turned back to where Mr. Black was standing. His dog was no longer seated, but poised right beside him, staring in the direction where Daveed had disappeared.

“How do you know my name?” I asked, taking a step back from *him* now, even as a smile spread across his face.

A beautiful smile.

Adorning a strikingly handsome face.

“Wow. I’m a little offended.”

“*Should* I know you?” I asked, my mind blanking on who he could possibly be.

“Yes.”

In spite of his “offended” claim, the smile remained on his face as he approached me.

“Running out here alone at night isn’t a safe choice. Please don’t do it again.”

My eyebrow lifted. “You’re out here.”

“I’m not alone,” he said. “And... I’m not afraid of the things most people are afraid of in the dark.”

“*You* are what most people are afraid of in the dark.”

I... didn’t mean to say that.

And had no idea where it came from.

But, it made Mr. Black’s eyes go a little dark, his friendly smile shifting into a smirk as he nodded. “So you *do* know who I am.”

That sent a fresh chill down my spine.

“Run along,” he said. “You won’t be bothered again.”

My body started moving before my brain could really process it. But as soon as I *was* in control... I just ran faster, confused and creeped out by the last... however long that had been.

I ran and ran, keeping my head on a swivel to make sure I wasn't being followed, all the way up until I was safe in the locked confines of my home.

I went straight to my kitchen, seeking a long drink of water to rehydrate and also calm myself down. While I was standing there, my gaze drifted to the window, to my view up the hill.

At the ultra-modern house that sat at the top.

As I stared, two tiny figures moved in the distance, illuminated by the moon.

One on two legs.

One on four.

Oh, shit.

That Mr. Black.

Two



I grew up surrounded by flowers.

Roses, to be specific.

My mother practically interred us in them, although I could vividly remember the smell of them making me violently ill as a child, the touch of them leaving rashes on my skin.

It didn't matter.

She would soothe me though—comfort me while I cried, give me oatmeal baths to calm the red raised welts, keep the windows and doors open to let in a breeze of fresh air. Eventually, I developed some sort of immunity to them. Her DIY version of immersion therapy, I guess.

From immunity, I grew accustomed to them.

Unbothered by their presence.

After she died... I found comfort in them.

And from that comfort, love.

I immersed *myself* in them now.

In my chosen trade as a florist, I utilized them whenever I could, even though they weren't the most exotic flower. They

were versatile though. Some were finicky to grow, so I was able to get a good challenge.

Especially with developing hybrids. I had ample land I'd purchased on my own, with the insurance money my mother had left me. I hadn't been able to have my greenhouse built yet, but I *had* planted a whole damn field of roses, using seeds I'd developed myself.

Roses my mysterious neighbors had deemed a nuisance and had removed.

I was *still* salty about it.

But, I had access to another greenhouse, a property the Blacks had no control over. It was there that I created a little niche of my own, to support my tiny—but successful—business.

For my current order, I was packing up all the different varieties I needed from what I'd processed at the shop in the city. A hundred stems each of roses, dahlias, peonies, hydrangea, orchids, and lilies. I had ten different table arrangements to make, each interspersed with greenery to create the final looks.

Could I have waited for help to get all these boxes out to my SUV?

Sure.

This was definitely work that could wait until morning.

But, since sleep had been so elusive—I wanted to blame that weird ass encounter from the trail a few nights ago, but honestly, even before that—I figured it was better to fill my time with something productive, instead of scrolling social media and bingeing TV.

I could do the arrangements *while* I binged TV.

These boxes were fucking heavy though.

So much so that I wasn't trying to carry too much at once or bother loading them on a cart to get them outside instead. A cart may have saved me some steps, but certainly not any back usage. I'd rather pick them up once and just head straight out, knowing I'd have to unload them again at home.

So that was what I'd been doing, one by one in the back parking lot of *Something Blue*, the event planning collective space I shared with a few other small businesses. One of them was a commercial kitchen ran by Celeste, one of my best friends in the world.

She'd been a bit hard to get ahold of lately, even harder to hang out with now that she'd started focusing on evening events, which threw our schedules off. I made a mental note to get in touch with her ass by whatever means necessary though. I needed to talk to her, especially since she was quite deeply enmeshed with a Mr. Black of her own.

I let out a sigh of relief as I picked up the last box of flowers, a box of my proudest accomplishment, red and white striped roses I charged a pretty penny for since they weren't something I'd been able to consistently replicate.

I took the box under my arm precariously so I could fish my keys from my pocket and lock the rear door before I headed out to my vehicle, since I wouldn't be going back inside. While my back was turned to the lot though, the strangest feeling crept up on me.

Again.

Familiar, like what I'd experienced the other night.

My head whipped around, scanning my surroundings for a potential threat. When I didn't see anything in the well-lit lot, I shook my head.

“Please, Brosia,” I scolded myself. “Get a fucking grip.”

I finished locking up and started moving toward my car, reminding myself I'd already decided I'd imagined a *lot* of what occurred that night.

I was exhausted, sleep deprived, and watched a lot of creepy shit.

Of course my imagination was wild.

I was almost at my vehicle when movement in my periphery pulled my attention.

From more than one direction.

Shit.

An immediate sense of dread washed over me as I put my back to the rear doors of my SUV, eliminating one possible angle I'd have to defend myself from. I let the crate of flowers drop, not caring about the mess as the wood splintered on impact with the concrete.

I needed my hands free—keys threaded through my fingers on one hand, my pepper gel back in the other. As my flowers spilled across the ground, my would-be assailants all drew back like they were weapons, as if *they* weren't the aggressors.

Because what the hell else could four motherfuckers be up to, sneaking up on a woman alone, shrouded in the dark?

“They can't touch you.” A familiar voice sounded from the dark, the sudden intrusion making them recoil again. I

immediately recognized the voice as Mr. Black from a few nights before, standing by the exit to the building.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, confused, but not particularly... afraid.

Not of the others at least.

A strange feeling, like my fear had just been suddenly pulled from me.

“And... why are you here?” I continued, looking around from one shadowy figure to the next.

“You really don’t know?” he asked and I shook my head.

“No! What the hell is going on?”

“They’re vampires, love,” he said, pushing off the wall where he’d been leaning to saunter toward me.

As he did, my potential attackers shakily stepped into better view, lowering the hoods from their heads in jerky movements, just another unsettling addition to this whole experience.

Seeing their faces was another.

Strangely pale, melanated, but... not? Their skin was like the color had been specifically drained from them, except for... around the edges?

Fucking weird.

And those red-rimmed eyes, just like the *Daveed* guy.

These people though... their eyes were wide and scared, facial muscles clenched like they were struggling.

I look back at Mr. Black. Cassius. That was his name, I somehow knew.

Or not *somehow*.

Because he was my neighbor.

The neighbor that protested my roses.

The look on his face as he finished walking up to me made something click.

He was the reason I wasn't scared.

Not because of some insane idea that he was protecting me.

More like... he was literally *feeding* on my fear.

"Not feeding," he said, looming over me. "Siphoning. Would you rather be scared?" he asked and my immediate response was to nod.

Naively.

The manufactured calm lifted for me all at once and a poignant sense of horror settled over me.

Vampires.

He'd said fucking *vampires*.

And I could clearly see the fangs gnashing from my likely adversaries as they struggled against some invisible force. Their voices invaded my head. No, not their voices, their... *desire*.

To consume.

To drain.

To rip me apart.

A scream bubbled up in my throat, but before I could push it out, Cassius was on me. Hand at my throat, mouth to my ear.

"Don't scream."

I didn't.

Couldn't.

I could only watch, transfixed by horror as he ambled around the group, pressing a finger to the chest of each one. Or at least, that was all he *appeared* to be doing.

Somehow though, one by one, they dropped to the ground, dissolving into piles of ash, getting picked up and blown about in the night breeze.

“This isn't real,” I told myself aloud, shaking my head. “*This isn't real.* I am not getting enough sleep and that fucking melatonin is giving me nightmares.”

“You're not getting sleep because this is not when you are *meant* to sleep.”

Suddenly, Cassius was right next to me again.

“What?” I questioned, but he didn't respond to that. Instead, he posed a question of his own.

“Was there something confusing about it, when I warned you about being out by yourself at night?” he asked.

“*What?*”

Apparently, that was the only word in my brain—not unreasonable, considering the circumstances.

And still, he ignored me.

“It's too soon for this. But we can't have your blood getting just anywhere.”

“*What?*” I asked, yet again, despite the fact that I hadn't even gotten an answer to the first one. “This is too much,” I declared. “You need to get the hell away from me. You need to *stay* the hell away from me,” I demanded.

“Unfortunately that’s not a request I’m going to be able to oblige,” he said. “I need you to come with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I said, already moving in an attempt to get away.

I didn’t get far.

His hand gripped my arm, not nearly tight enough for the level of resistance I felt.

Something more than his hand was holding me, but it wasn’t something I could feasibly explain to anyone.

Not even myself.

He met my gaze, and a sudden, overwhelming drowsiness swept through me.

The last thing I remembered before my eyes closed was his declaration of, “*I’m afraid I have to insist.*”

Three



I awoke with a start, head pounding, ears ringing, wondering *what the hell just happened?*

My last clear memory was of being surrounded by ... *something...* in the back parking lot of *Something Blue*.

Now, I was in the dark in some unknown room, shackled to the bed.

No.

Not shackled.

Just... heavy.

Inexplicable heaviness in my limbs weighed me down, but I fought against it to force myself to sit up. Once I'd managed to get upright, it came with a feeling that my head was spinning. I blinked wildly, trying to shake it off, eyes struggling for any familiarity with my surroundings in the dark.

There was none.

Instead, my attention landed heavily on my legs and feet, willing the mobility back into them. After what felt like so many minutes dragging by, I found it, managing to swing my feet off the bed and plant them on the floor.

Breathless, I cast my gaze around again.

Where the fuck am I?

I could still barely see in the dark, but I didn't need to be certain. I definitely wasn't in my own home, in my own bed. Just barely, I could make out the outline of what I guessed was a window. I willed my legs into motion, making it there to pull back what felt like weighted curtains.

It *was* a window.

And it was quite high up, giving me a night-obscured view of what appeared to be foliage, trees for as far as I could see.

No sign of a road that led to... wherever the hell this was.

But... there were voices.

I could hear *voices*, coming from...somewhere.

I had no idea if that was a good thing or bad.

I certainly was in no shape for confrontation of any type, especially with my surroundings unknown. Still, I wasn't about to just sit here and wait for whatever or whoever might eventually come for me.

So I decided.

I was leaving this room.

I would not get caught.

Couldn't get caught.

In the new visibility provided by the moonlight streaming through the window, I deduced I'd been separated from anything I could claim as mine. Most notably my cell phone, which would have been my first choice for getting help or figuring out my location.

The checking of my pockets made me realize the clothes I was wearing were *not* the ones I'd worn to work.

These are not my clothes.

These are not my clothes.

I wasn't sore anywhere, didn't feel any indication that I'd been handled violently in any matter, but that didn't make the revelation any less disconcerting. I'd dressed comfortably in leggings and a T-shirt for work, but was not currently wearing either item.

Why?

Now, I was in black jeans, a black tee, black bra and underwear that were also not mine.

I've got to get the fuck out of here.

No hesitation, just a resolve to not to get caught, I made my way to the door, steeling myself to find it locked.

It wasn't.

The knob turned easily—too easily?—and the door opened without even the slightest creek from the hinges.

I don't have on shoes.

Shit.

No shoes would make it harder to traverse the natural terrain of those trees, but on the flip side, I didn't have to worry about my feet making noise as I slinked out of the room, following the sound of voices down the hall.

Why would you follow, Brosia?! You need to go away from the voices, away from whoever brought you here!

That would have been the sensible thing for sure.

But something still drove me toward the sound of the voices. Maybe the overwhelming need to understand what the hell was going on.

Whatever it was... I listened.

I couldn't help it. I let those voices lure me to a room just off the stairs that represented my freedom. The door was closed, but there was a glow of light underneath, a beacon in the dark hall.

As quietly as I could, I walked right up to it, put my ear to it, and waited.

"You know this is... unorthodox, right?" were the first words I could make out as my brain keyed into the conversation on the other side of the door. *"Supposed to be at least another year, maybe two."*

"You bonded your mate way earlier than you swore you ever would."

My heart crashed against the front of my chest.

That voice.

That was Cassius Black.

"That's not the gotcha you might think it is. I was weak."

Cassius countered whoever he was speaking to. *"I'm not looking for a gotcha. I'm trying to make it make sense. I'm trying to talk myself into it."*

"Why?" the other person, maybe Elias, asked. *"You know what was written, and you know what must be done. Besides that, the woman is gorgeous."*

"Those are not my only considerations," Cassius countered.

“Or... are you just bothered that they have to be your only considerations?”

There was a moment of quiet before Cassius answered.
“And her looks actually aren't a consideration. If anything... they're a perk.”

“Indeed. Fate has smiled on you, little brother.”

“Oh, is that what this is?” Cassius asked.

“It's a better way of looking at it than any other.”

“True enough. But the bottom line is, I understand my duty, second-born son, blah blah blah.”

“Correct. She has first blood, which we cannot allow to be spilled carelessly. We have a standard to maintain.”

She?

She who?

She as in me?!

“And you said her humanity is currently overshadowing her vampire nature?” Elias asked.

“As far as I can tell.”

“You need to have your eyes open for when it happens,” Elias warned. *“And in the meantime, what would happen if you tried to turn her?”*

“Who knows? The lore is minimal about it.”

“Well... a vampire is already a vampire, so there's no turning to be done there. We know plenty about what happens when a vampire bites another, it just hurts like a bitch. And we know the lore about turning humans. We can make it painless.”

“But is she human, is the question.”

Okay they couldn't be talking about me, because I was definitely human.

“We can't be certain about what nature has decided.”

“Which is more than enough reason for us to be on the leading edge. Our family always has been, why should that change now?”

“Because we can't be certain. What's the worst case scenario?”

“She dies.”

“Then we bring her back, with the benefit of a controlled environment. If we let her loose and the commoners get ahold of her...”

“We can't have that.”

“So what's the conclusion?”

“I think, given the circumstances, turning her might be the only way to protect her.”

“Agreed. I'll go grab her.”

Her as in me?

I don't fucking think so.

I couldn't be entirely sure of what I'd just heard, but I knew I wanted no parts of whatever this shit was. I turned from the door, ready to sprint down the stairs a few feet away.

Except... I made the mistake of blinking.

And when I opened my eyes, Cassius was in front of me.

“How the hell did you get out of that room?” he bellowed. Confusing, since the damn door hadn't even been locked, and

I staggered backward, stricken with fear over the aggression in his voice.

And the sight of long silver fangs protruding from his mouth.

What the fuck...

I'd seen grills before, seen people's elaborate Halloween accessories.

But this wasn't that.

"Hey, listen," I said, pleading with my hands. "I didn't hear anything," I lied. "And I haven't seen anything. I don't know what the hell is going on, I don't know anything. You can just—"

"None of that is necessary," he interrupted. "You're not going anywhere. Especially not now that you've woken up and gotten yourself out of a locked room."

"It wasn't locked," I insisted. "And more importantly... was I... *not* supposed to wake up?"

"Of course," he replied. "Both in the sense that you're referring to *and* another much deeper interpretation of the term. Why don't you tell me what you know?"

"I told you. I don't know anything. Why don't you tell me what *you* know?" I countered. "You're the one who kidnapped me and brought me here."

"For your own good," he explained. "Because you were too... because you don't understand the gravity of the situation we've found ourselves in."

"What situation?" I asked "And who the hell is *we*?"

"Me and you. Our people."

“Black people?” I asked and he chuckled a bit.

“A little more specific than that. But I’m guessing... you’re still in the dark about most of this.”

“Most of *what?*” I shrugged. “This whole situation is flat out *weird* and it honestly seems like it’s getting *weirder* by the minute. I need some explanations and I need them *now*.”

He smiled.

And *Father God help*, it was so sexy.

Even with the fangs.

“Fine. Where should we start?”

Four



I can see my house from here.

I'd never in my life felt as outright *dumb* as I did now, realizing that for all my *I have no idea where I am* musing, it turned out that I was—basically—down the street from my house. I wasn't *technically* a resident of the ultra-exclusive Blackwood Hills neighborhood like my captor, but the only thing separating my property from his was a thicket of trees and a couple acres of fields.

Ample space for him to not have a problem with my damn roses, but that was here nor there for the moment.

Right now, my focus was on my lack of awareness and how *clearly* dangerous that was.

“Your obliviousness to your whereabouts was by design. No need to beat yourself up.”

Shit.

I managed, somehow, to not have a reaction to Cassius suddenly being in the room with me. I didn't want to continue giving him the satisfaction of catching me off guard.

Instead of acknowledging him, I kept my gaze trained out the window of yet another room they'd stuck me in. The door was *definitely* locked on this one.

“You’re not going to ask how I knew what you were thinking?”

He was standing beside me now, joining me in my observation of my own home.

There was a *very* convenient growth pattern in the trees, allowing an unobstructed view.

“Why should I ask new questions when I haven’t gotten any answers to the first ones?” I countered, glancing up as he turned to look at me, instead of outside. “Clearly you’ve decided to do what you want anyway. So, making me sit in here and wait... is this part of the torture or whatever you’re planning?”

“Torture?” He smirked and I hated the way it lit up parts of my body that should be decidedly turned *off* by this whole ordeal. “This is for your own good, love.”

“And I’m supposed to just... take your word for it?” I scoffed, looking away from him, where it was safer. “Forgive me if I’m not seeing it.”

“Clearly there’s a lot you don’t see, but rest assured. You’re no damsel in distress, Ambrosia.”

I moved away from the window, heading across the room to... anywhere that wasn’t close to him.

He followed.

“*Stay away from me,*” I demanded, with full understanding that I held *zero* authority for such a thing.

The amused grin Cassius pinned in my direction as he stopped in his tracks a few feet away underscored that fact.

Mocking me.

“Not mocking, admiring,” he said in a tone that sounded like correction.

Even though I hadn’t actually said anything.

“Fine,” I snapped. “Tell me, how are you in my head?” I crossed my arms. “Did you drug me? And I want the *truth*,” I insisted. “None of this *vampire bullshit*.”

“I’m afraid that what you refer to as *vampire bullshit* is the very truth you’re seeking.”

“Nonsense.”

“Do you think you can make that the truth by saying it?”

“Couldn’t I ask you the same?”

He nodded. “You could, but... are you honestly not even a *little* convinced by the fangs?”

And... there they were again.

Extending right in front of me, impossible to write off as simple jewelry.

“I thought vampires were like... vulnerable to silver?”

“Lesser ones, yes.”

“There’s a hierarchy?”

He scoffed. “There’s *always* a hierarchy.”

“And you’re at the top?”

“My family is, yes.”

“And where am I in this hierarchy?”

“Right up at the top with me.”

“That’s ludicrous,” I scoffed. “I’m nobody to you.”

“*That’s* ludicrous,” he countered, moving from where he’d been standing for most of the conversation, closing the distance. “You’re everything to me.”

My head cocked to the side; eyes narrowed. “We don’t know each other.”

“You are sorely mistaken if you think that matters.”

Anger flared up in me, so sudden and severe I had to grit my teeth to bite back the kind of reflexive vitriol I couldn’t afford to spew right now.

Not when I was being held captive by a man— monster?— who seemed to think this was some sort of fate.

This could get even more dangerous for me than it already was.

Fast.

I shook my head, turning away from him again while I gathered my thoughts before speaking. “I thought you were going to give me some answers,” I said, glancing back. “When you caught me listening to the conversation with your brother. You asked where I wanted to start, then shoved me in here to make me wait while you did... God knows what. And I’m still just as in the dark now as I was then.”

“You’re not, actually,” he insisted. “You just... don’t see it yet. But I do. I’m watching you unfold as we speak.”

I huffed. “You keep saying cryptic shit like that, and I’m trying to get you to understand, that doesn’t mean anything to me. Why can’t you just *explain?*”

“Because it’s better if you unlock it on your own.”

“Unlock *what?*!” I demanded.

“*Yourself*,” he answered. “The very essence of *who you are*. You already know the truth, Ambrosia. You know who you are. *What* you are. You just don’t want to accept it.”

“This is insanity.”

“*This* is prophesied.”

I laughed.

Because what the fuck else *could* I do?

“Do me a favor?” I asked. “Whatever the hell you’ve been smoking, snorting, huffing, et cetera? Can I get a hit of it before you... dismember me or whatever it is you’re planning?”

He... was not amused.

He actually seemed a bit... *sad*?

“Let’s go,” he suddenly declared, already turning for the door.

“Hold up. I’m not going anywhere with you,” I claimed, even though my body moved like I was on marionette strings connected directly to his hands.

“I thought you wanted answers?”

“I do, but—”

“But nothing,” he said, fixing me with a glare. “The longer you remain in the dark, the more dangerous this world is for you, and the more likely I am to get fucked over, which I refuse to accept. So... it’s time to force the issue.”

“Meaning what?!”

“Meaning *let’s go*.”

Once again, my limbs were out of my control. I was just... moving. It was a dizzying feeling, but my feet were steady, movements sure as I followed him from the room, down the hall, down the stairs, to the car.

We drove right past my house.

It was off the main street, on a long driveway of its own, but I watched it out the window until it was far behind us, longing for the comfort of those familiar surroundings.

And thinking about the shotgun under my bed.

If I'd had that with me, instead of fucking pepper gel, none of this would be going on.

"I would've taken you either way. I'd just be a lot less pretty." Cassius chuckled from the driver's seat of the car. "And a lot more pissed off."

"Could you stay out of my damn head?" I asked, without saying it aloud.

"I could, yes. But I need to know what you're thinking for now."

His answer came in the same unspoken manner.

So I thought about grabbing the steering wheel.

Yanking it hard, flipping the car.

I thought about him being impaled on a stray piece of rebar from... anywhere.

"Again, that wouldn't do anything but piss me off." This time, he spoke aloud. "It would take a lot more than that to kill me or either of my brothers."

"Like a silver bullet?"

“Lesser vampires and our Lycan cousins, sure. Us though? It would hurt like a bitch, but heal fast. So if you shoot... you better be faster.”

“Thanks for the heads up. I’ll keep it in mind.”

He chuckled. “You know... you’re very angry at me, to have needed me to save your life.”

“I didn’t ask you for anything.”

“You didn’t have to. I understand my history and my duty, unlike you.”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh, you absolutely will,” he said, attention firmly focused on me instead of the road. “In due time, Ambrosia, you will *beg me* to do exactly that.”

“You are *sorely* mistaking me for a very different type of bitch.”

He smirked. “We’ll see.”

I didn’t realize the car had stopped until he opened his door and climbed out. He opened the door on my side before I could even think about doing it for myself.

I’d expected he was taking me to some dungeon somewhere to do whatever he’d been planning since he’d snatched me from work.

Instead... we were in a parking lot.

A *busy* parking lot.

There was a big, flashing neon sign on the building that read “BB’s”.

No other explanation for what it was.

The music coming from inside was loud; and so was the smoke. People came and went from the building to the cars, blasting different music, dancing, arguing, screaming on the phone.

A crowd.

A perfect opportunity to get away.

If I'd wanted to do that.

But I didn't, not at all.

In fact... I'd never felt more comfortable, even though I'd never seen or heard of this place.

I looked to Cassius, seeking... anything.

He grinned.

“Welcome to your awakening.”

Five



In my younger years, I was a party girl.

Not as a teenager; my mother made sure of that.

She fretted over me so much, needed every little detail of where I was, who I would be with, even what perfumes and oils I was wearing.

It was too much, actually.

But the fear in her would be so potent that I would, often, simply conform to what she wanted for me, which was mostly just a safe, controlled environment.

After she died though—on my twenty-first birthday, to be exact—I got *pissed*.

All that worrying about me and *she* was the one to get brutally attacked?

What the fuck was *that*?

The *incorrect* lesson I took from it was that none of my caution mattered. If someone decided to leave me bludgeoned and bloody in a dark alley, that was just what it would be.

So I was reckless.

Wild.

Stupid.

I was, as the kids say now, *outside*.

But I'd still never heard of BB's.

A damn shame.

It was a sea of beautiful melanin, wall to wall, hazy with sweet smoke, loud with chatter and music, crowded with dancing bodies. Hot enough that I already felt like I might start sweating, but enough of a breeze coming off the oversized fans hanging from the ceiling to keep it comfortable.

I *loved* it.

Most of my anxiety, and annoyance, about the unknown melted away, replaced with the comforting feeling of... refuge?

A glance around at everyone else let me know that my current clothes—the black shirt, jeans, and boots I hadn't remembered putting on—were a much better fit for the surroundings than my work clothes had been.

Which made me wonder if this had always been the plan?

Cassius released his hold on me as soon as we crossed the building's threshold, allowing me to walk ahead. I glanced around, looking for him now, but couldn't see him.

I could... *feel him* though.

My eyes narrowed as I surveyed the crowd once more, trying to spot him among a sea of barely illuminated faces, my view constantly changing as they moved.

Most of them.

It took a moment to notice it, but some of them... *weren't* moving, actually.

They were perfectly still, and staring.

At... me.

There were those familiar eyes again.

Red-rimmed, set into pale faces.

No one else seemed to notice them, but once *I* did, they were all I could see.

They were locked onto me like I was some sort of satellite; they couldn't escape my gravitational pull. Internally, I sought the connection I'd felt a moment ago with Cassius.

I... couldn't find it.

What was it he'd said to me before we walked in here?

Welcome to your awakening?

What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

Had he left me here to fend for myself?

Should I run?

Shit.

If I ran, tried to escape from here, that would just put me back outside in the dark, and I *still* didn't know where I was. I'd rather take my chances inside among the crowd, where at least I had the advantage of—

“Excuse me...”

I reflexively startled over the sound of a voice to my left and immediately backed away.

“Shit, my bad, beautiful, didn't mean to cause any alarm,” the owner of the voice added, practically yelling to be heard over the pounding music.

“I'm not here alone,” I informed, trying to get ahead of whatever pickup line he might be about to throw my way. He

was handsome, sure, smooth pecan skin, fresh haircut, all the usual stuff, but it was a really, *really* bad time.

The worst, as a matter of fact.

“It’s not uncommon to walk in on one arm,” he replied, sidling closer to me. “And leave on another. So what would it take?”

“Excuse me?”

“What would it take,” he repeated. “For *me* to be the one to give you what you came for?”

I frowned. “You don’t know me; how would you know why I’m here?”

He smirked, then leaned in to speak against my ear. “There’s only *one* reason humans come here.”

Humans.

I processed that choice of word at the same time I felt the brush of something sharp against my neck. Pushing away from him, I caught the glowing red of his irises, the beautifully polished white of spiked fangs protruding past his bottom lip.

Neither had been there the moment before.

“*Ahhh!*” I screamed, glancing helplessly around me for assistance as the man—*monster*—stalked toward me.

“Don’t be scared *now*,” he insisted. “This is what you wanted.”

“Stay the *fuck* away from me!”

“I don’t think I will,” he growled, suddenly right up on me again, his hands gripping my arms with viselike strength as he hauled my body to his. “You human women come in here with lust in your blood and the whisper of a supernatural fantasy in

your mind, praying for a release from your first-world boredom. And then, when you are presented with what you are looking for... you *cowe*r.” He grinned down at me, eyes glowing, fangs getting longer, all sending a ripple of terror through me that only tightened my already racing heart. “You will be disgusted by this weakness once I’m done with you.”

“I said *get the fuck away from me!*”

The words burst from me in an explosion of... *power*.

That was the only way I could describe it.

My hands were still locked at my sides where he’d pinned them, but *he* had jolted backward, landing several feet away.

Suddenly, no one was moving.

The crowd was dead silent, music stopped, all eyes on me.

All except his.

His were lifeless and black, pointed uselessly at the ceiling.

“No,” I muttered, shaking my head as I took a step back. “I didn’t... this wasn’t... I didn’t *do* anything to him,” I insisted, answering questions the crowd hadn’t actually asked as they formed a circle around me.

I could feel it though.

The confusion, the curiosity, the caution in their eyes as they silently communicated with each other.

And then... there was the anger.

The fear.

The... bloodlust.

So sudden and heavy, paired with a rush of smells—the smoke, the sweat, the stench of copper—and *sounds*.

What the fuck is that?

Just... a chaotic din of chatter, coming at me from all sides, all discordant.

Until it wasn't.

As I focused, the static faded, and it was clear.

One harmonious message.

Get her.

Absolutely not.

Before anyone else could move, I did, shoving my way through the crowd, forcing myself out of searching grips and grasps. Too late, I realized I wasn't heading for an exit; I was going deeper into the club.

But I was committed now.

I scrambled down a dark hallway, searching for some unlocked door.

When I found one, I dashed through it, not caring what was on the other side.

I got it latched and locked behind me just in time. I'd barely stepped away before the knocking and pounding began, paired with the heavy rumble of someone clearly trying to kick it in.

I backed away, chest on the verge of caving in with every attempt to catch my breath, to calm myself.

I didn't even want to think about what might happen if they got through that door.

When they got through that door.

My consideration wasn't the determining factor here, reality would be. And with a whole crowd of people trying to get through that door, the outcome was clear.

I got close enough to the door again to flip the light switch beside it, intending to search the room for something, *anything* I could use to fight.

It was a supply room.

With a door that led outside.

My heart leapt with hope as I launched myself at that door, unlocking it to step boldly into the night.

I still had no idea where I was, but being in the open *had* to be better than the confines of that bar.

At least, I thought so, just before I poised myself to take off running.

Before I realized I wasn't alone outside.

"Hi, Sharon."

Sharon?

Oh, shit.

In front of me, Daveed smiled, showing off a mouth full of sharp, jagged teeth.

He was several feet back, but not alone.

He was accompanied by more of those cloaked figures in black.

Many more.

And they were all coming at me.

Much faster than should've been possible, just like that night on the trail.

I couldn't move that fast. Hell, I'd barely had a moment to think and they were already just inches away from me, all red-rimmed eyes and pale beige skin and sharp teeth and black claws.

“No!” I shrieked, throwing up my hands to shield myself from impending attack. I closed my eyes, braced for the inevitable—the ripping of my flesh, the pain, the blood...

... death.

None of that came.

I peeled my eyes open to find myself alone in the alley, mounds of dark clothes the only evidence that anyone—anything—else had been there.

I rushed back inside and closed the door.

Locked it.

Took in the sound of the crowd on the other side still trying to get in.

What the fuck is happening?

Across the room, the distinct splintering of wood caught my attention.

The door being demolished out of the framing.

It was only a matter of time, then that crowd would be on me, doing... whatever it was they sought to do.

“Cassius,” I called out with my mind. “*Why did you bring me here?*”

“To get you the answers you sought.”

I blinked.

How did he get in here?

“I only have more questions and still no answers,” I snapped, propping my hands at my waist. “And now, what? I’m about to die here?”

“No you’re not.” He chuckled. “Don’t be dramatic.”

“Dramatic?” I scoffed. “Do you hear that?” I asked, pointing to where there were now hands pulling at the drywall separating this room from the hall. “They want my head.”

“All they know is one of their own was injured. They don’t know what you are.”

“The one I injured, *he* said I was human.”

“He is mistaken.”

“So what am I, then? Are you telling me... I’m a vampire too?”

My mind went back to the conversation I’d overheard, between him and Elias. Me being a vampire didn’t make sense. That was something I’d be aware of... right?

If I was a vampire, why would they talk about *turning me*?

“You’re neither, and also... both,” Cassius said, breaking into my thoughts with an answer, albeit, an insane one. “You can’t be compared to the lesser vampires, which is why they don’t know what you are.”

“But you do?”

He nodded. “Because I am descended from *First* vampires... original ones. I can smell it on you, as can the vermin who came for you out in the alley.”

“Are they not lesser vampires?”

“They are beneath them,” he said. “Leeches obsessed with, and addicted to, blood.”

“Aren’t all vampires addicted to blood? It’s kinda the definition.”

Cassius chuckled a bit. “I guess you could say that, but... not exactly, no. Not like them. But, that is for another time. We have more pressing matters right now.”

“What do you think could be more important to me than getting my questions answered?”

“Getting the crowd to leave you alone?”

Oh shit.

Somehow, I’d tuned that out in favor of focusing on the conversation.

“How am I supposed to do that?” I asked, as the door finally came crashing down, and people—no, *vampires*—came pouring in.

“You tell them so.” He shrugged.

“Why would they listen to me? They’re more likely to listen to *you*, you’re the one with the power.”

“Yes, I could call them off. But what fun would that be?” He smirked. “It has to be you.”

How?

“Just say it.”

Shit.

“I... uh... Lea...*Leave me alone*,” I stammered, to no avail.

They all just kept creeping toward me as I backed toward the wall.

“You’ve gotta *mean it*,” Cassius said, shaking his head and looking clearly amused at my plight as he stepped aside.

It was too late.

They were already upon me, grabbing my limbs, pulling me in all directions.

Fear and something else coiled in me, as tears sprang to my eyes.

“*Leave me alone!*” I screamed and the room went still in the wake of another wave of... *power*.

But only for a moment.

Then they let me go.

And... just turned and left.

I planted my back against the wall behind me, clutching my chest as I watched everyone back out of the room.

The music started again.

The chatter started again.

I turned to where Cassius was standing, looking rather pleased with himself.

“What was that? *What am I?*” I asked.

Cassius smiled, fangs glittering. “You asked me if you were human or vampire already, love. And I answered the question.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “You said I was neither and both, so what does that *mean?*”

“Was that not clear enough for you?” he asked, gesturing first to the alley, then the destroyed door.

When I didn't answer, he met my gaze, eyes glowing silver.

“Ambrosia... you are something so much more.”

Six



The drive home was... quiet.

Cassius wasn't saying anything, which allowed me to get lost in my own ruminations, trying to make sense of...

Anything.

A vampire?

Seriously?

Aside from that being purely imaginative fiction—which was no *small* thing to put aside—wouldn't I *know* something like that?

Wouldn't I remember being bitten?

But if you're only half, maybe not?

And what did *half* even mean?

Was the process incomplete?

Or did it simply only affect half of me?

So was it about DNA?

Was only one side of me susceptible to vampire... infection?

Or... was I born like this?

So my *mother* was the one who'd been a vampire? Or had she been bitten?

She couldn't be a vampire. She died, and vampires were immortal, right?

Except for super specific circumstances.

Their specific weaknesses.

Like sunlight, and garlic, and wood stakes, and... what were the other stereotypes?

Silver.

But... Cassius had silver fangs.

So maybe the fiction didn't line up with reality.

Assuming any of this was actually reality, and not some insane fever dream.

But it had to be that, right?

This is wild.

And Cassius still wasn't *actually* answering questions, though I had so many I could feel it eating away at me. Every answer just seemed to set more uncertainty into bloom.

The roses.

A sudden recollection hit me.

The way those creatures—he'd called them leeches—had shrank away from those roses I dropped and the explanation Cassius gave...

They couldn't come near me because of the roses.

The Blacks wouldn't let me plant a field of them anywhere near.

And then...

Damn.

Memories swept through me in a flood. Years and years of my mother surrounding us with roses, the way my little body had reacted to them as a child, the efforts she'd taken to build my immunity to them.

It wasn't just because she loved the flowers so much.

She was protecting me.

But from what?

My... *kin*?

"A human woman should never have been able to birth a vampire child, especially not one with *First* blood," Cassius spoke, as if he could hear the thoughts swirling in my mind.

Which... he probably could.

"What are you saying?" I asked. "That there was something special about my mother?"

As I watched, he nodded. "She was likely not purely human herself."

"Okay what does that mean?"

"That she likely had some level of mystic being in her blood."

I raised an eyebrow. "Mystic being?"

"An eonian, a Lycan, a witch, a siren—not another vampire, though."

"A *what*?" I huffed. "You know what? I can't deal with this. You just made that up, didn't you? And where are you even taking me?"

“Home,” he answered. “It’s been a busy night; you need to decompress.”

“You’re right, I do. And I can do that just fine in my own place, in my own bed.”

“Not until we get some kind of protection at your house.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What, like security guards?”

“Like enchantments. Runes. *Real* protection.”

“Enchantments? You mean spells? Hello no,” I replied, shaking my head. “I may not have been to church in a while, but I don’t do the witchcraft thing. The spooky shit isn’t for me.”

“It’s nothing like what you’re thinking,” he said, laughing, but it was not funny to me.

Not when, in light of everything else, I was remembering my mother’s aversion to anything even adjacent to “magic” as I was growing up. She saw it everywhere and reacted in a way that, back then, seemed so unnecessary and extreme to me.

But... Maybe she wasn’t tripping as much as I thought.

“I can’t have you at your place unprotected,” he spoke, maybe in response to the concern on my face. “What I’m getting at is way more profound, older than anything your mom would’ve had a problem with. Not unless she was a witch herself. Which I don’t think is the case.”

“So...what do you think she was then?” I asked.

“Most likely she was eonian.”

“*I don’t know what that means,*” I huffed and he was quick to explain.

“They’re called eternal too. Immortals,” he said.
“Sometimes they have certain powers, sometimes they don’t. But they live long and age slow. They’re not invulnerable unless they can achieve it with their powers.”

“That they may or may not have.”

“Right. They’re unique in that... they can blend in. They aren’t beholden to the phases of the moon, or bloodthirst, any of that. They’re the most likely to want to be to themselves, not garner any attention. There’s a lot of power and potential in their blood, which could be dangerous for them, and others, if they don’t know what they are or how to channel it. It would explain a lot about why those leeches are so attracted to you.”

“How would I find out?”

“We’d have to study your blood most likely. But there are people we can ask. I know a few around here we can talk to, who have settled in Blackwood.”

“So these...*mystic beings* as you call them... They’re just walking around the city, living among the rest of us, and nobody knows?”

“Well, *we* know,” Cassius said, grinning. “Would you rather us be off on some compound all on our own or something?”

“Wouldn’t that be safer?”

“Safer for who?”

“The people that *aren’t* mystic beings,” I answered. “The people who have no idea any of this is going on.”

“Inherently? No.” He shook his head. “Our cares are not the same as humans, our worries, desires... honestly couldn’t

be further apart. We occupy the same space, but we operate on totally different planes.”

“How can you say that when I’ve been nearly attacked three times?”

Cassius looked at me with a raised eyebrow and I raised an eyebrow back at him until he shook his head again.

“Ambrosia, you’re not one of *them*. You’re one of *us*.”

Oh.

Shit.

Maybe my head was still not wrapping around that.

“Like I said... it’s been a long day. A hot bath, a glass of wine... I can help you process.”

I sucked my teeth. “Why do I need *you* to help me process? What’s your role in this? How am I connected to you? How do I know *you’re* not just as dangerous as the vampires you’re referring to as leeches? You could be planning to just bleed me dry and dump my body in a field somewhere too.”

“Honestly, yes. I could. But I’m not.”

“How do I know that? Why should I trust anything you say, especially after you kidnapped me and put me in an incredibly dangerous situation, only to just sit back and watch. So that I could supposedly *wake up*.”

“For your own good.”

“Oh *please*,” I huffed. “I don’t even know you. What gives you the right to make decisions about what’s for my good or not?”

“As your bonded mate, I’ll be deciding many things for you.”

“As my *what?!?*” I exclaimed.

“We’ll discuss this later.”

“We’ll discuss it *now*, the fuck?!” I shouted. “Bonded mates? Have you lost your mind?”

“I am very much in possession of it, but thank you for your concern.”

I scoffed. “Oh, I gotta disagree. If you think you are going to... what, brainwash me?”

“I won’t have to brainwash you,” he said. The words laying heavy on me as he met my gaze. “In due time, you will freely give yourself. Beg, even,” he murmured, his voice drenched with a sinister... *lust?*

I shook off the feeling that incited in me.

“Here you go again,” I said, leaning instead into annoyance.

It was safer.

“Yes.” He nodded. “And you should get accustomed, since from now and for the rest of eternity—”

“Do *not* finish that sentence!” I demanded, then noticed the car wasn’t moving anymore.

We were now parked outside his house.

“No.” I shook my head. “Take me to *my* home. I am not going anywhere with you to drink your mind-control wine or whatever else you’re trying to get me to do.”

“Again, not possible. Not yet,” he said. “I’m the last person who would do you any harm, Ambrosia. You have to

trust that.”

“I actually don’t, but thanks.”

Without waiting for him to respond, I pushed my car door, lowkey surprised when it opened, letting me know I wasn’t locked in.

I quickly recovered from that surprise though, climbing out of the car to start walking back down the driveway.

“Where are you going?” Cassius called after me.

“Home.”

“You’re *already* home,” he said, in front of me now.

“Stop doing this shit!” I yelled, pushing at him to no avail.

He didn’t move.

“Why should I amend my behavior for you?” he asked, turning as I continued past him. “Who are you to me?”

I stopped, turning to glare at him. “I thought I was your *bonded mate* or something.”

“Oh.” He chuckled. “So you want the privileges of that, but not any of the duties?”

“Not being snuck up on, not being subjected to you disappearing and reappearing, popping around like a fucking magician is a *privilege*? That’s wild.”

“It’s not that wild.” Cassius chuckled. “My point is, you don’t get to ask things of me while denying the very title that gives you the power to do so.”

“So if I accept you as my *mate*, you’ll do what I say?”

“In certain respects, no, it’s not that simple. In others, yes.”

I sighed. “Will getting *straight answers* to my questions be one of the things that you do? Meaning, none of the cryptic bullshit.”

“Of course,” he answered. “I’ll tell, and even show, you everything you want to know. As far as possible, at least.”

“You keep hedging.”

“I’m not hedging, I’m trying to be transparent.”

“Okay then clarify what you mean.”

“It just means I don’t know everything. I’m not a memory keeper.”

“A memory keep—you know what?” I said. “I want you to write all this shit down. With a glossary of terms or something. All the knowledge of these *mystic beings* or whatever the fuck. I need to know.”

“So are you saying yes?” he asked. “You’re agreeing to our bond?”

I smirked, already knowing exactly how *bonded* I planned to get to this motherfucker, but I needed those answers.

“Yes.” I nodded. “I agree to be your bonded mate.”

His fangs were in my neck before the words had fully left my mouth.

Seven



I should have thought about it a lot more.

I realized that *very* shortly after my declaration, right around the moment the sharp points pierced my skin.

Rash decisions had rarely yielded a positive result for me before, so I wasn't sure why I expected one now.

Except, the feeling of things in my neck wasn't exactly a negative. Not *purely* negative, rather. There was pain, terror, discomfort, all of that, all of the expected things. But then, under the surface and rising fast, the deeper those silver fangs sank, it was... profoundly... pleasurable?

Agonizing, but also blissful, bordering on the absurd.

This is absurd.

My lips parted, mouth in an open gape as I gasped, for... words?

Air?

Maybe both.

I wasn't sure.

But I was certainly beside myself with pleasure and another sensation I couldn't quite pinpoint as I grabbed

Cassius by the shirt, using the solid pillar of his body to keep myself upright.

My knees buckled as I pressed against him, giving in.

Was I giving in?

I couldn't tell if he was giving or taking, couldn't find the mental clarity to focus on anything long enough to decipher what was happening. It was too much and not enough, and the duality of it was... dizzying.

Frightening.

I could feel my smallest, deepest parts, my cells and molecules, the things that made me... splitting apart then knitting themselves back together, making me into something that was still me, but... different.

It was excruciating.

And delectable.

Awareness flooded me—not *new* burdens on my senses, just deeper ones.

The wild apples growing in groves around the property were more pungent, the roar of their rustling leaves almost deafening, the glare of the moon blinding.

I could taste the remnants of peppermint on my tongue from gum I'd chewed hours ago.

But it was *touch* that was most potent.

The feeling of Cassius's hands on me, gripping my arms to keep me still. The heat from him searing through the lightweight fabric of my shirt, invitingly hot and drawing me closer.

It was crushing.

And his fangs... I was attuned to them now, him simultaneously drinking and feeding me.

I wanted him deeper.

Wanted more of him.

Wanted to give him more.

Wanted him to fully consume me, right here in the crisp chill of night, under the light of the moon.

“Told you.”

His fangs were still in my neck, but his voice was in my head, using my unhinged and uncurtailed desire as a taunt against me now that I was contradicting what I’d insisted upon just moments before.

And I couldn’t even fire back, couldn’t deny it. I was too drunk on whatever this feeling was he was infusing into me.

Pain?

Pleasure?

I wasn’t actually sure as he finally retracted his fangs from my neck. I stumbled backward, away from him, fingers clamping down on the two puncture wounds that quickly became nonexistent right under my fingertips.

I pulled my hand away, looking at it expecting crime photo levels of blood.

There was none.

“It would be ludicrous to spill your blood without reason, Ambrosia.”

“So... you... healed me?” I asked, my thoughts running a million miles a minute.

“You healed yourself, love. It’s one of many perks.”

Huh?

How could that be, when I hadn’t even thought about it?

“It’s reflexive,” Cassius said out loud. “You don’t *have* to think about it. Your body knows exactly what to do.”

“Okay but *how?*” I insisted. “And since when?”

The question was fresh off my lips when my knees buckled again, a sudden wave of exhaustion sweeping through me. I put my hands out, attempting to mitigate a fall to the ground that never happened.

Cassius had already swept me off my feet and into his arms.

“Since your awakening, which has clearly taken a lot out of you. Which isn’t surprising.”

Before I could reply to that, we were already inside, already upstairs in a room I hadn’t seen on my previous “tour” of the house.

“Where are we?” I asked, taking in the obvious luxury of my surroundings. He’d put me down on a soft leather bench at the end of a bed covered in plush linens to walk away, into what was presumably a bathroom.

I heard the water come on.

“My—*our*—bedroom,” he answered, correcting himself as he came to stand at the doorway. “Not what you expected?”

“Not at all.”

When one thought of a vampire’s bedroom, soft surfaces, clean lines, warm wood accents and lush green plants weren’t exactly what came to mind.

Not to mention, the lack of a coffin.

“Seriously, Ambrosia?” Cassius chuckled and my gaze snapped back to him.

“Can you get out of my head?!” I asked, embarrassed. “Or do I no longer have the luxury of private thoughts?”

He raised an eyebrow, studying me for a moment. “Of course you can have private thoughts. You just have to stop projecting them at me.”

“What?”

“I’m not in your head, love. You’re in *mine*.”

Those words took my breath, because... *what?*

No way could that be true.

Right?

“You’re still adjusting,” Cassius spoke up, in this soothing tone that instantly calmed the anxiety creeping up my spine. “And you’re tired. With rest, you’ll have more control.”

He didn’t wait on me to reply.

I blinked, and he was in front of me, undressing me.

As if he weren’t a stranger.

He’s not a stranger.

“I’m not a stranger.”

That time, the assurance was in my head.

And it was in his touch.

The way he ever-so-gently stripped me down to bare skin and carried me into the bathroom to a massive claw-foot tub. Filled with... *red*.

Not blood, I quickly, relievedly realized.

There was hibiscus floating in the water, which would explain the color.

He didn't say anything, just slipped me into the water, way deeper than it looked from the surface. The steamy, floral-scented bath embraced me as I fully submerged, penetrating my skin and washing away any tension.

When I surfaced, hot rivulets of water ran down my face, momentarily blinding me. Still, I was somehow... grounded. I felt behind me, finding a molded seat in the side of the tub and planting myself there, then using my palms to clear the water from my eyes.

I was alone.

Surprisingly.

... Disappointingly.

I spotted products—botanical soaps and shampoos—nearby, so I busied myself with those, letting the herbal properties seep into me and wash away the day. Warm, oversized towels were in arms reach as well, and when I was done with those, a robe.

Everything perfectly laid out.

Too convenient, honestly.

“Or are you just paranoid?”

Immediately, the intrusion of Cassius in my head annoyed me, despite his claim that I was actually *projecting* my thoughts. My gaze snapped to where he stood in the doorway, watching me sit at the vanity. As I kept our eye contact, he started moving closer, but I held up a hand.

“*Stop*,” I insisted, drawing on the same... *whatever*... I’d used to command those people at the bar. I was angry with him, but unsure *why*.

Instead of *stopping*, he simply smirked at me, closing the distance.

“You don’t have that privilege anymore,” he explained. “Or, more accurately, our bond precludes me from your powers of uh... suggestion.”

I huffed, breaking our gaze to revisit my hair in the mirror. “Is that why you were so anxious to bond with me? So I couldn’t defend myself against you?”

His eyes narrowed. “Again with the paranoia. What makes you think you’re under attack?”

“We can start with the fact that I still haven’t been given any of the answers I was promised in exchange for this so-called bond.”

“So-called?”

Amusement played at his lips as he came to stand behind me, planting his hands on my shoulders. Without permission or warning, my body sank into him immediately.

“There is nothing *so-called* about it,” he said, then moved to take a seat beside me. He met my gaze in the mirror. “Many, many years ago, there was an eonian who decided to play in ancient magic from many, many years before him. He had fallen in love with a mortal human and wanted her to join him in eternal life. He couldn’t find a spell for that, so he dabbled in many, frankensteining them together. After many, many failed attempts... he was successful.”

I frowned. “How would he know?”

“I don’t know, actually,” Cassius admitted. “I’m telling you the lore. But I imagine the truth of it is... disturbing. And bloody. And required lots of patience, and a long time.”

“Right.” I nodded. “But... continue.”

“Yes. He was successful. So he spread the news to all his eonian friends, so they could keep the loves of their lives as well. Only... there was something a little different—dangerous—about these humans they’d enchanted.”

“They wanted to suck blood?”

Cassius chuckled. “Yeah. This disgusted and scared the eonians, so they gathered them all up, locked them in a stone enclosure they’d imbued with runes. And then they used more magic, to create a fire, the hottest fire to ever burn and water couldn’t put it out.”

“They wanted to destroy what they’d created.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “And they did. They destroyed their creation, buried the ashes, and moved on. They didn’t expect the ashes to meld with the natural magic of the earth, the water, the moon, the metals and minerals in the ground... and give birth.”

Riveted, I asked, “To you?”

“No, not to me.” He laughed. “But to my ancestors.”

“Did they hate the eonians?”

“For a time, yes,” he confirmed. “But that’s ancient history now. Though, there are still factions that carry the grudge.”

“Understandably. But what does any of it have to do with me?”

“Well, those first vampires... they knew things. Way in advance. Things that would happen and things for us to follow.”

“So like...prophecies?”

“Divinations.”

“And there’s one about me?”

“*Us*,” he corrected. “The second son, of the second son, of the second son, will find his bond with a mate born of the undead and the eternal.”

I blinked. “Meaning... me.”

“Yes.” Cassius nodded.

“And you’re... special? Or your brothers have their love lives foretold as well?”

“I’m special *and* my brothers have been written in the book. Things have to happen in order.”

My eyes went wide. “So... Celeste...”

“Celeste is mortal, but her connection with Elias was not simply by chance.”

“So they’re... soulmates?” I shook my head. “Wait, no, vampires don’t have souls.”

“According to who?” Cassius challenged. “Some movie? Fairytales?”

I thought about it, then nodded. “Point taken. So I’m... *born of the undead and the eternal*. Your books tell you anything about how it happened?”

“No,” he answered. “I wish I could give you *those* answers.”

“I understand why you can’t,” I told him, with a wry smile. “You *can* tell me this though, why now? Elias and Celeste have been together for months... Hey, did he turn her into a fucking vampire? Is that why I can’t catch her during the day anymore? Sorry, that’s a tangent. But I still want to know. As well as why it was so urgent to give me this awakening *now*.”

Cassius laughed. “Yes... your friend is a vampire now. And she’s been very careful in the company she’s been keeping because she didn’t want to hurt any of her friends. She’ll be relieved to be back in community with you.”

“After I curse her out.”

“If you must.” He nodded. “And to answer the other question... I’m not sure what’s happening, but your presence has been attracting unwanted attention. I was content to watch, and wait, let your awakening happen naturally. But the leeches started going after you, so I had to intervene. To keep you safe.”

I sighed. “I guess I should thank you?”

“No, it’s my honor to protect you, Ambrosia. And I understand the position it puts you in, being thrust into all this.” He stood, squeezing my shoulder. “Which is why it’s time for me to leave you to your thoughts for the night.”

He didn’t give me a chance to argue.

By the time I could consider it, he was already gone.

And I only had one primary thought hogging all the space in my mind.

What.

The.

Fuck?

Eight



Where are you?

The response—the brush of his conscience against mine—was immediate and... staggering.

Shit.

I pushed away, breaking the connection.

It felt... foreign and familiar at the same time, to be reaching out to him on purpose, versus what had previously felt like him helming an invasion into my thoughts.

But, I'd been out of the bath for what felt like the longest time, doing exactly what he'd said, thinking.

Thinking that something felt off.

Hey, you're half ancient mystical being and half vampire, and it was written by the first vampires to ever exist that you and I were going to be bonded forever, but you need some time to think about it.

Nigga, what?

No.

It was... a blow off.

Just the excuse he was giving to get me momentarily off his back while he moved onto something else.

Maybe something more important.

Envy flared in my chest at the possibility.

What was more important than me, his bonded mate?

Nothing.

I swallowed my nervousness, swallowed any uncertainty. The new sense of ownership, the entitlement that came with this title he'd bestowed on me... it wouldn't let me back down.

"*Where are you?*" I projected the question out of me again, with his face in my mind.

Was that the proper protocol?

I had no idea.

But I knew my outgoing calls were going through because of what he'd said earlier, his insinuation that I just needed to focus.

Well I was rested now, the bath had been restorative, and cleansing.

I felt energized now, freshly charged.

Ready to take on anything.

As soon as I found my... husband?

Was that how I should refer to him now, in my head or otherwise?

I wasn't sure.

Whatever the case was, again, the union of his psyche with mine was instantaneous and I could feel him, feel his emotion.

He was pleased that I'd sought him out.

“I’m here,” he answered. *“Speaking with Elias, downstairs.”*

“Must have been a pretty important conversation for you to leave without consummating our bond.”

Why on earth would I reply like that, so boldly?

I couldn’t answer that.

But I didn’t regret it.

Especially when I felt his response to my words, a different pleasure than before, a deep surge of lust that brought beads of sweat to my forehead.

“In due time.”

A moment later, something new shifted. My eyes were closed up in my room, but I was seeing something totally different from my surroundings.

He’d pulled me into his head.

I was seeing his brother now—Elias, who I’d met and even spoken to before, largely because of Celeste. Even outside of her connection to him, I knew *of* him.

Everybody knew *of* the Blacks.

A trio of fine, mysterious, single brothers was the kind of thing that got around town.

As I watched, both brothers’ attention was pulled in the same direction, at a new addition to the room.

Their other brother, the youngest.

Parris.

He came in loud, silver fangs flashing as he spoke to someone on his phone. I could feel the flare of annoyance

from both Cassius *and* Elias, but Parris was either oblivious to it or simply didn't care.

After a moment, he got off the phone, looking back and forth between his brothers.

“Aiight. As much of a blast as it always is with you viggas, can we make this quick? I have other things I need to be tending to.”

Elias raised an eyebrow at him. “You were summoned nearly an hour ago.”

“And here I am.” He shrugged, dropping to a seat in a plush upholstered chair near the fire. “I was wrapping up a job.”

“I find that hard to believe, considering the smell of pussy on you,” Cassius countered.

Parris smirked. “I never said what kind of job.” He winked at Cassius, then looked back and forth between his brothers again. “Seriously, what's going on?”

“What do you know about leeches attaching themselves to Ambrosia's scent?” Elias asked, getting straight to the point. “Cassius has bonded with her, to ensure her protection.”

“So another part of the prophecy has been fulfilled,” Parris grinned, clapping. “Good job, Cash. Ambrosia is fine as fuck. About damn time you claimed her.”

“No,” Elias said. “Actually it's not. It was supposed to be another few years before this happened. This is too soon. Our hands have been forced and you know how I feel about that. Everything in order.”

Parris shrugged. “Exactly, *in order*. What difference does the timeline make?”

My own curiosity piqued. I wanted to know the same. But from the somewhat flustered look on Elias's face, I wasn't sure he would give an answer.

Or... that he even *had* an answer.

"These things shouldn't be trifled with," was what he said and Cassius chuckled.

"Meaning... it's simply outside of what you wanted or planned?" he guessed and Parris nodded.

"That's exactly what it is. That's how I knew it wouldn't be a big deal for me to speed this thing up some."

Instant confusion swept through the room.

"Speed this up?" Cassius repeated, staring his brother down.

"Yeah." Parris shrugged. "I needed y'all to handle your shit so I could handle mine."

Cassius met eyes with Elias.

"Is he saying what I think he's saying?"

"Handle our shit meaning... fulfill our prophecies?" Elias asked, seeking clarification before his barely-tempered anger boiled over.

Parris smirked. "Why do y'all seem so surprised? Patience has *never* been a virtue of mine. And El, this is your fault. You bagged your woman early too, remember? And this shit wasn't even on my mind until you did that. *You* woke this up."

Cassius sighed.

I could feel it.

Parris was right.

“Something definitely shifted after you bonded with Celeste,” Cassius admitted as he looked to Elias. “I was already conscious of all this, because that’s just... what I do. But once *you* were bonded, it was different. There was this... *hunger*.”

“See?” Parris spoke up. “And I’m not about to be the only one out here starving. I’m ready to stake my claim too.”

Elias shook his head. “So you’re really saying that you... what *did* you do?” he asked.

“It seemed like Cash needed some incentive to get his girl. So I gave him some.”

“*Say more*,” Cassius insisted, as a deep, burning rage started building in intensity from somewhere inside him.

Parris—oblivious or indifferent—grinned. “Fear, baby. The best damn motivator, even if it’s a little... tertiary.”

“*Parris*,” Elias warned.

“Damn, where is your imagination?” He chuckled. “It’s not that complicated. I gave the girl a little scare, which got her *and* Cash moving. What’s the big deal?”

“You... put them onto her scent,” Cassius murmured, dangerously low. “You... you put her in danger... so that you could... so...”

I was back in my room.

Out of nowhere.

There was a surge, a *massive* surge, of fiery wrath, then I was kicked off my connection with Cassius. At least, out of his head.

The air was still thick with anger and just... *noise*.

Chaos and static and a hum of aggression crackling in the atmosphere, weighing heavy from all sides.

I'd never felt anything like it before.

And then... it was over.

And Cassius was in the room with me.

Panting, out of breath, fangs extended, fists clenched, looking like he wanted to destroy something.

“What the hell just happened?” I asked, standing from where I'd been seated at the vanity. I still wasn't dressed from the bath, in just the robe I'd found waiting, but nothing else.

Cassius pushed out a deep sigh, like he was trying to collect himself, but it still came out as a growl when he answered, “My little brother happened.”

“Okay.” I nodded, backing into the vanity as he stalked up to me. “Is there anything I can do? Anything you need... from me?”

His hand went to the back of my head, fisting the hair at the base of my neck to drag my face to his. No, to tip my head to the side, exposing my neck. His other hand went between my legs.

His fangs sank into me at the same time his fingers did— deep and unrelenting, sending me careening toward a wild sort of pleasure.

Consuming.

“*Cassius,*” I gasped, chest heaving as he... did whatever he was doing to me.

Fangs and fingers.

One pulling from me, one pushing into me, a dual rhythm that made me feel like I was being turned inside out.

And just plain turned out.

It was so... *immediate*.

And... insufficient.

His fingers were good, his fangs were better, but I needed more somehow, and he knew it before I could say it. Before the *please* could form on my lips, he had me perched on the vanity, he was out of his boxers, and his dick was lodged damn near in my stomach.

Filling me, stretching me.

Killing me.

I was certain of it.

God, it was too much.

Too fast.

Too much, too fast.

He was killing me.

And it was impossible that there was any better way to go than this, than with his fangs in my neck.

No, his tongue in my mouth.

No, his tongue on my neck.

His mouth on me.

His dick in me.

His fingers gripping my thighs.

No, playing with my clit.

No, *in me* too.

Fuck.

Too much.

Too fast.

Too deep.

Too big.

Too *good*.

Too much.

The overload on my senses, this lustful attack, was going to rip me apart.

And I was going to love every second of it, I was sure.

This was what my body was meant for, *he* was who I was made for.

There was no deeper purpose for me than this, no higher emotion, no greater experience than his fangs scraping the curve of my breast as his head dipped, silver skimming my areolas, my nipples.

Him pulling my nipple into his mouth, sucking.

Biting me there too.

There was pain, the best kind of pain, and then no pain.

Just pleasure, pleasure, pleasure, turning me inside out, then just plain turning me out.

Even when he pulled away, when he wasn't touching me anymore, it was still there, coursing and churning through me in tandem with the blood in my veins as he dropped to kneel in front of me.

He spread my legs open wide, baring my pussy to him as he trailed his tongue, his fangs, up one of my inner thighs then

the other, before planting his nose in my pussy for a deep inhale.

And then there were his fangs again.

Ahhhhh shit.

Pain, then no pain.

All pleasure.

Pleasure, pleasure, pleasure.

I recognized the ridiculousness of it and didn't care.

I dug my fingers into the soft coils of his hair and pressed him in further, deeper, back arching as he brought his tongue and fingers into the mix, licking and finger-fucking me into an orgasm that had me screaming myself hoarse.

I was drenched in sweat and pleasure by the time he straightened, lining his dick up to bury in me again. He poked the thick, heavy head right at my opening, but no further, meeting my gaze.

Saying nothing.

His eyes locked with mine as he fisted his dick, rubbing it against my clit—good, but not enough.

I was... *hungry*.

Ready.

Willing.

“What’s the magic word?” he asked, smirking. Even though I knew it was a concession, nothing could’ve kept me from giving him exactly what he was asking for.

“Please.”

Nine



Roses smelled *awful*.

So much that it caught me off guard, making me stagger backward as I stepped into my greenhouse.

Now that I was finally back in the “real world”, I’d remembered I had clients waiting on me, flower arrangements to make. The arrangements I’d planned to make the night that... *everything* happened.

Everything changed.

Including my perception of time, apparently, because I would’ve sworn I’d been laid up fucking my new vampire husband for at least a week, but somehow... it was just a day.

Not even a day.

Just a night, full of *so much*.

Too much.

And yet, I had to push through.

Even though the roses smelled *horrible* now.

A laugh in the distance made my head pop up from what I was doing. I listened for a moment, then practically sprinted in that direction, using the service hallway to get to my destination.

Celeste's commercial kitchen.

“So you suck blood now, bitch?!” I whisper-yelled, sneaking up once I'd confirmed no one was in earshot.

Shaking her head as she looked up, she grinned. “I hear I could accuse you of the same damn thing, friend. Welcome to the fold.”

My eyes went wide. “*Welcome to the fold?* That is an insane statement. This whole thing is insane. Did you know this? When you catered that thing at his house? I mean, you had to know, right?”

“Bitch?” She laughed. “I would absolutely *not* have gone to that house, are you loco?”

“No, I'm not. I'm half vampire, half... *eonian* is what they keep calling it. Or maybe full vampire now? I don't know. Do you know?”

“I don't, I'm sorry.” She chuckled. “I'm still learning too. But... shoutout to us, I guess?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but like... what about Riv?” I asked, referring to our other homegirl, a supplier who worked at *Something Blue* with us. “You already abandoned us once you became *Mrs. Black*. Now I'm doing the same thing?”

“Riv was always busy anyway, running all over the world collecting her weird sex toys.”

“She was not collecting sex toys.” I cackled. “Don't do her like that.”

“She definitely showed me an ancient dildo collection she found some... where.”

Celeste must've noticed it at the same time I did, the subtle shift in energy that came along with the presence of one of the

Blacks. We looked toward the entryway at the same time, seconds before the doorframe filled with a tall, handsome, wide-shouldered man dressed in all black.

Parris.

“Sup Celeste,” he greeted and she gave him a nod before he turned to me. “Brosia, I need to talk to you.”

“Me?” I asked, surprised.

I was shocked to see him there at all, actually.

After that night—*last night, Brosia*—when it came out that he’d basically orchestrated me being scared into my power, I had the impression he’d been *persona non grata*.

But again... it had only been a short amount of time, in spite of my skewed perception.

Cassius had been *so* angry though.

And he’d taken that white-hot rage out on me. Not violently, just... passionately.

“Yes.” He smirked, offering me his arm.

Charming.

He was just as handsome, hell maybe *more*, than his brothers, with palpable youthful troublemaker energy. I halfway didn’t even trust being that close to him, which he must have picked up on.

“Come on, you’re family now, sis,” he insisted and I... accepted his arm.

“I am?” I asked, eyebrow raised. “Was I not family when you were trying to get me... what, attacked? Bitten?”

Parris sucked his teeth. “Man, don’t let Eli and Cash rile you up, nothing was going to happen to you. Didn’t he tell you

what you are?”

“Eonian?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed, leading me back to my workshop. “You’re more powerful than probably all of us, since you’ve got it from both sides. But that’s not what I’m here to talk about.”

“Okay, what *are* you here to talk about then?”

He grunted as we stopped at the door. “I fucked up.” He shrugged. “My brothers said I gotta get right with you.”

I frowned. “Get right with... *me*? What does that even mean?”

“Apologizing. I have to apologize,” he said, taking it upon himself to open my door and step into my shop, immediately looking around with disgust. “It smells like shit in here.”

“You can go,” I told him, rolling my eyes. “I didn’t ask you here. Isn’t there a thing about vampires not being able to enter places without an invite or something anyway, or is that a myth?”

“Not a myth.” He chuckled. “But, it only applies to homes, and only to humans.”

“Oh. Well... still. Like I said. I didn’t ask you to come here.”

“You didn’t. I told you; I have to apologize.”

I crossed my arms.

Waited.

And waited some more.

“Well?” I asked, when he still didn’t say anything. “Are you going to actually *do* it?”

He groaned. “Shit, you’re really going to make me do this shit? Like it didn’t work out perfectly fine?”

“What if it hadn’t though,” I countered. “You put me in danger, for... what exactly?”

“So I can get my girl too.”

Right.

He’d mentioned that in the overheard conversation with Cassius and his brothers, but still...

“Seriously? I don’t get that vibe from you.”

He frowned. “What vibe?”

“Looking for an eternal mate,” I answered.

He chuckled. “Oh, yeah, definitely not. I’m looking for the perfect *anatomy*, I’ll say, which happens to be connected to the perfect mate.”

“So it’s about pussy to you? Not the prophecy?”

“You said it, not me.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I’m sorry for... doing everybody a favor. We good?”

Again, I raised an eyebrow. “Sure, Parris.”

“Excellent. Bye.”

I blinked and he was gone, just as fast as he’d arrived.

I blinked again and Cassius was there.

“Did he apologize?” he asked, immediately pacing around, a little more frantic than warranted. “He put up a block before he came in, so I didn’t know if—”

“Wow, he really gets under your skin, huh?” I laughed, moving to put a hand on his arm. “Yes, he apologized... kinda.

It was very uneventful. Did you think he would hurt me or something?”

“Of course not. The boy is wild, but not... like *that*,” Cassius admitted. “I just don’t appreciate being blocked off from you and he knows better,” he fumed.

“Wow,” I mused. “Who would’ve thought that even freaking *vampires* would have the same family dynamics as the rest of us mere mortals. He did that shit to get under your skin because he’s the baby. Clearly.”

Cassius raised an eyebrow at me. “*Us mere mortals*? How quickly you’ve forgotten...”

“I... well... I guess you’re... damn.” I laughed. “I’m not part of that *us* anymore.”

“No, but you’re part of *us*,” he reminded me. “And trust me... there’s nothing bigger.”



“SHE KEEPS IT AT HER APARTMENT, YOU’RE DEADASS?” I asked Celeste as we climbed out of the car in the parking lot of Riv’s rowhouse. We’d just been driving past, on our way up into the Blackwood Hills for dinner with the Blacks, when we spotted her car at the property, a perfect little sub-community of cute colorful connected homes, perfect for people who were always coming and going like she was.

“Yupppp,” Celeste confirmed. “She’s gonna show you.”

“Fine,” I agreed, following her up to Riv’s door.

Riv’s slightly cracked door.

Weird.

Celeste met my gaze, likely sharing my thoughts.

Something was wrong.

We just didn't know *what* quite yet.

We pushed through the door, stepping in and looking around for any signs that it had been broken into or something. Her car was there in the parking lot, so we could assume she was home... and hopefully whole.

The sound of rattling and rustling from another room—Riv's bedroom—drew us in that direction. We both had our hands on our pepper spray just in case, since *that* door was cracked too.

We pushed it open, not knowing what we were going to find.

We found... Riv.

“What's going on?” I asked, causing her to jump, startled at the sound of our voices.

“What are you guys doing here?” she asked, pausing with a hand full of, well... some weird looking shit from a trunk she'd clearly just pulled from the closet.

“We were coming to see the antique dildo collection, but you're clearly occupied,” Celeste said. “What are you doing?”

“I'm looking for something.”

“Well duh,” I said, looking around the trashed bedroom. “What though?”

“A necklace,” she said. “I *know* I had it.”

“Did you know your front door was open?” I asked. “Is the necklace like, an emergency?”

“It’s fine,” she quickly brushed that off. “I’ve gotta find this.”

“Okay, well... just tell us what it looks like?”

“It’s a black stone, on a cobalt chain. Really old. *Really* old. It’ll be in a little black velvet box.”

I nodded. “Okay... black on black on black.”

For obvious reasons that took my attention to a certain family.

Which reminded me of something from my conversation with Parris.

“Celeste...” I spoke up. “You know that thing about not being able to enter a home without an invitation. You know... ’cause of our condition?”

Celester looked up from where she had already started helping look for the necklace to nod at me. “Uh... Yeah. Why are you bringing that up... right now?”

I met her gaze. She was pleading with me not to mention the obvious to Riv, but...

“Because,” I said, shifting my attention to Riv, who was just standing there.

Eyes wide.

“She did not invite us in.”

THE END.

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About the Author

Christina C. Jones is a best-selling romance novelist and digital media creator. A timeless storyteller, she is lauded by readers for her ability to seamlessly weave the complexities of modern life into captivating tales of Black characters in nearly every romance subgenre. In addition to her full-time writing career, she co-founded Girl, Have You Read – a popular digital platform that amplifies Black romance authors and their stories. Christina has a passion for making beautiful things, and be found crafting, cooking, and designing and building a (literal) home with her husband in her spare time.