Chapter 21

I had expected Hades to stop me. I was calling his bluff and he actually didn't want me to leave. I thought I would see his eyes widen with realization when I actually climbed into the car and opened the garage door. He didn't. He watched me with certainty while Ethel stared in shock, her eyes practically begging me to stay.

I put the SUV in reverse and pulled out of the garage. Then I was racing down the driveway towards the massive, haunted gate. I jammed a button on the random remote clipped to the sunvisor, hoping it would be the right one. I had never bothered to watch Hades do it when we le together.

Mercifully, the gates groaned with protest, but opened. I waited until there was a gap big enough for the ancient Nissan then floored it. It gave out a roar, the vehicle not meant for this kind of speed. I didn't care. I needed to be gone before he changed his mind.

I didn't recall much about my drive home. I remembered being so confused and so incoherent, reeling from the murder. I hadn't been able to process what had happened. But I could recall how straight and boring the drive was. The only notable thing about the whole drive had been a small village and once I was through that it was hours on a straight and quiet highway. Surely, I would pass something I knew like an unusual tree that I remembered or a certain sign. Then, I would be home.

And through the whole drive I kept thinking about my mother running out of the house and wrapping her arms around me. Tabitha would squeal with delight and hug me to spend extra time with her to make up for everything I had missed. Even my dad would be excited to see me in his quiet, subtle way.

Sure, I would have some explaining to do, but that was only natural. They would want to know what had happened and I would provide any details that I could. But I would tell them that he had let me go, that this wasn't some crazy escape attempt. He wouldn't come looking for me. Everything would go back to normal. And normal was all I needed right now.

I couldn't stop the smile from exploding onto my face as I pulled into the driveway of the home. My home. My old car was right where I had le it and my mother was on her knees, tending to a shrub on the front lawn just like I imagined. This fantasy bubble into my day dream, the one where we gathered together, planting everything from poppies to cosmos.

"Mom," I sang, barely giving myself enough time to undo the seatbelt and shut o the car before I was running to her.

She did not hear me at first, then turned, glaring against the sun when she looked at me. Slowly, like she couldn't believe it, she got to her feet.

"Charlotte?"

I raced towards her, ready to throw my arms around her despite the dirt that covered her gardening gloves.

I only pulled up short as she stepped back, her eyes wide and scanning the vehicle behind me. It took me a moment but I realized that she was looking for Ivan I felt a fraction of my joy deflate, but I understood her worry and I would be a fool to think that she wasn't right to be a little anxious.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed. "We told you to stay away."

The words stung. This was her first time seeing me in weeks. Hades could've disappeared into the wilderness. She would've had no idea. I hadn't written a letter or called to confirm that I was okay. I tried to remember that they were caring about the whole pack, not just themselves, like good betas. Inevitably, I would have to answer some questions.

"It's fine, he's not here," I assured.

"Where is he? Does he know you're here?" she asked.

And at her words, a couple walking down the street turned towards us. The man quickly pulled the woman towards him. his eyes frantic. It seemed that news still travelled fast around here. They were already associating me with that monster.

"Let's talk inside," I murmured, wanting to be out of the public eye.

My mother remained tense, but bobbed her head in a short nod. We moved into my childhood home together.

Tabitha saw me right away. At first she smiled, the same brilliant grin that she had always worn so proudly. But, with each step I took towards her, it faded away. She, like my mother, stepped back as soon as she was within hugging distance.

"Tabitha?" I whispered.

"Mom and dad said you aren't supposed to come back. They said bad things would happen if you ever came back," she confessed.

"Nothing bad is going to happen if we just hug," I promised, opening my arms for her.

She still didn't come to me.

"Charlotte," my father boomed from behind me.

I could tell from his voice that he wasn't happy to see me, but I still faced him with a smile. Maybe if they all saw how at ease I was they would relax. They didn't know the situation like I did so they would have to trust me, right?

My e ort was met with a glare.

"What are you doing here?" my father demanded. His thick arms were folded across his chest and his dark bags under his eyes, looking like he had been carrying the pack for some time.

"I wanted to come see you all," I whispered. I felt like I shouldn't have to explain myself like this, but to my own family.

"We told you to stay away. Where is that creature? Does he know you're here? How did you escape?"

"What do you mean? I didn't escape. I'm not his prisoner." The words le my lips, but a part of me wondered. I hadn't really been aware of the fact that Ethel buying everything for me I thought I wouldn't be able to leave without a chaperone.

"So you just stole his car and decided to come here?" my father seethed.

"I didn't steal it. He wanted to spend a couple days apart-"

"And so you sought refuge here?" my mother shrieked.

"You selfish girl!" my father snapped. "Do you realize what you could have done?"

"He's not like that," I whimpered.

"Not like that?" my father repeated in disbelief. "He slaughtered a young man. Didn't you care for Caleb at all? How could you disrespect his death like this? Maybe Hades is going to come looking for you again, and this time he won't stop e or one kill."

"Didn't ask him to come here!" I cried. With Caleb's death now hanging over my head the tears poured down my cheeks with little warning. "What he did to Caleb was not my fault."

"You didn't have to ask. You're his mate. He came for you. He would go to the ends of the earth to find you and drag you back to his lair," my dad hissed. "You didn't know that. Why, that was not your fault. But you know it now and you put your whole pack at risk for something so pitiful."

"I just wanted to see you! I miss you. I haven't seen anyone other than him in days. I hide in my room all day. I barely eat, I can't sleep. It's lonely and I'm sobbed.

That seemed to so on my parents. Seeing real tears come from their daughter, knowing that kind of situation I was in and how hard this had been on me. Something in them was finally giving and the yelling stopped.

"We know that this is hard," my mother murmured. I felt her hand cud around my arm. I melted into her, still blinded by tears. She stroked my hair like any good mother would've, but then she continued on, "But you have to think of the pack. We already lost someone so important because he was here. We can't risk judgain. The pack would never forgive you."

I jerked away from my mother as if she had scalded me. And I stared at both of my parents in disbelief. This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be true. They were putting the pack before their own daughter. I had driven all this way, risked so much, and they could've even a or to let me stay for supper and a movie, they couldn't even hold me while I cried?

Tabitha just watched on, looking like she wanted to come to me. but she remained behind my parents, the people who had always protected her. The same people who had protected me were now throwing me to the wolves.

I wiped a hand under my eyes, clearing away as many tears as I could.

"I'll be leaving in a couple minutes," I stated, sounding robotic to my own ears.

I should've le then, spared myself some hurt, but I just wanted to see if there was anything my mom that I could take with me. I just wanted something that would spark joy, anything that would make the world seem brighter and remind me of who I was.

I pushed open my bedroom door and ran over greeted with the smell of fresh paint. All of my well used furniture was gone. the pictures of me and Caleb that I had spent on the wall had vanished. Anything that had been comforting or familiar to me was replaced with a white desk and a brand new shelving unit that was already covered with books.

My mother had always said that the minute I moved out she would convert my bedroom into a recipe room. It would be her new sanctuary, a place where she could find nice meals without having to listen to my dad's snoring.

Turns out that being forlorn to the god of death was the same thing as moving out. She had ripped away my safe place for her own uses.

I slammed the bedroom door shut and stormed back down to the entry way, too furious to cry.

So it was all for the good of the pack was it?

With my parents now out of the picture and Caleb dead who was going to take care of me? It seemed that they didn't care, so long as they didn't have to lose another member.

I didn't say good bye to my parents. I shoved passed them though and wrapped my arms around Tabitha in a fierce hug before they could protest. They knew full well what they were doing, but she was just as lost and as scared as I was. She didn't understand why I had to leave any more than I understood why I had been taken away.

"I love you," I whispered into her hair. "You are going to do great things and if you ever need me I'll find a way to get to you, promise."

"Charlotte," my father warned.

I just squeezed her tighter, hoping that my mind would hold on to the memory of how she felt in my arms and the smell of that awful shampoo I hated. Who knew when I would see her next. She could be a beautiful woman by then and I could be old and showing wrinkles. I placed a kiss on the top of her hair before I straightened up.

"I think you should go," my mother urged, trying to be gentler, but the desperation was clear in her voice.

"Don't worry, there is no other reason for me to stay," I mumbled, straightening up.

"Be safe," my mother called a er me as I walked towards the door. "We love you." It felt like it was spoken as an ar thought.

"You love the rest of them more," I accused.

"It's our duty, Charlotte," my father interjected.

I said nothing, just pulled open the door. The last time I had le I was accompanied by the man that had ruined my life. Now, I was leaving on my own accord, all too aware that no one was willing to risk anything for me anymore.

I climbed in the SUV and started it, feeling numb.

And I didn't start to feel something until almost two hours later, when I realized where I was driving. I was heading towards that little village just o the highway. And from there I would go to the massive metal gates, if the quarter tank of gas would get me that far.

I didn't have a choice. It had all been so sudden that I le the house without my wallet. I had been foolish enough to think that my parents would fix everything, that they would accept me back into their lives with open arms, even for just one night. Now, I had no money, no ID, and no where to go. I didn't even have enough gas to make it into the next city. Ka friends, no family. Just a borrowed SUV and too many feelings.

I was furious when I pulled into the driveway. My hands were clenched into fists so tightly and for so long it felt unnatural to uncurl them to open the door. But I flung it open with a vengeance, ready to take out my fury on anyone.

No one was in the entry, but I followed the noise to the kitchen. My wrath needed a victim.

And the happy, lightheaded scarlet-haired one did nothing to make me feel better. If anything, it made my stomach turn even more sour.

"What are you doing?" Ethel gasped, pushing Hades away when he licked batter o his finger. I guess the leaving was cause for celebration in this house.

But it was Hades who caught the movement first, Hades who lost his smile when he saw the standing in his kitchen, red faced and rage filled.

"Che?" he whispered.

Ethel whirled around and gasped at the sight of me.

"You was." I sputered. "You fucking with. My own family wasn't take me back because they think that you're going to come and murder them all. Is this what you wanted?! You wanted to ruin me?"

My words were directed at Hades, but he just stood there, his finger still half covered in batter. I couldn't read his expression. It was Ethel who swooped in first, throwing down her whisk and darting towards him with open arms.

"You poor thing. No one deserves that," she whispered.

And when her arms wrapped around me, doing what my mother should've, the rage fell away. I fell apart. My legs trembled with weakness and my head slumped against her shoulder. Her light blue sweater was covered in tears in a matter of seconds, but she just held me and spoke so fly, trying to get the tears to stop flowing.

I feared they never would.

——Question of that Day——

What is your favorite alcoholic drink

I personally love sidecars and rum and cokes!