
CHAPTER FOUR

"Nothing else wounds so deeply and irreparably. Nothing else robs us of hope so much as being unloved by one we love." –**Clive Barker**

Charlotte woke up with sweat beading on her brow and her red shirt clinging to the moisture of her skin. The room felt like she had stepped into a sauna. Tossing off the tangled, sweat-soaked bed covers, she rolled out of bed, muttering at how Kevin must have turned up the heat again. Pressing her feet to the soft fibers of the rug, she rubbed her eyes as they adjusted to the darkness. Standing up, she shuffled over to the thermostat, which was one of the new digital ones, and tapped on the down button. A soft green light glowed on the display, and she frowned at what she read. According to the indicator screen, the temperature was left at sixty-eight degrees she had set it to, but the room itself was a sweltering one-hundred and ten, and climbing.

"Impossible." She muttered to herself.

Shaking her head, she walked over to the sliding glass door, hoping to nudge it open a crack and let the crisp night air into the

room. Pushing one of the red and gold curtains to the side, she froze, and the air caught in her lungs. She wanted to turn and run, but she couldn't move. Something held her in place as her lungs continued to sting without fresh breath. Outside—despite it being a moonless night—the courtyard overlooking the ocean appeared to be surreally bright. Squinting, Charlotte rubbed her eyes and stared out at the swirling clouds of fog beyond the glass. She tried to come up with a reasonable explanation for what she saw, but no matter how much she tried to rationalize it, the area outside was not as she remembered.

Releasing the stale air from her lungs, she took in a deep breath and continued to observe the spectacle on the other side. The world beyond had lost its luster, appearing to be almost as gray as an old-time movie. A dusty cobblestone street flanked by iron lanterns replaced the garden path of intricately placed slabs of concrete and lush green lawns she remembered. Inside their houses, behind crazed glass, flames of candles flickered and danced about the walkway. Stone houses puffing clouds of smoke upwards to the blackened sky had replaced the maze of shrubbery and rhododendrons from earlier in the day. Watching a horse-drawn carriage roll by a short distance away, Charlotte thought she spotted movement out of the corner of her eye, lingering on her porch. Leaning forward, she attempted to steal a glance at the figure beyond the door when an all too familiar voice called her name from the hallway, causing her blood to run cold in her veins.

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"No..." she whispered, "it can't be."

Frowning, Charlotte grabbed her pink robe off the nearby chair and slipped it on. Inching closer to the door, she pressed her ear to the polished wood, and listened closely while holding her breath. Once again, she heard the voice from her past calling her name, and she swallowed the rock forming in her throat. It was impossible. There was no way he'd be there, she knew that, but she could not help it. Before she knew it, she was removing the chain from the door and pulling it open a crack. A blast of hot air singed her cheeks, and she strained her eyes to see past a plume of smoke filtering into the room. The hall on the other side was almost a perfect back—the seashell scones on the wall appeared to have vanished—the only source of light was a faint carmine glow coming from the end of the tunnel to her left.

Fearing there might be a fire, she grabbed a key from the pocket in the door and slipped it into her robe. Stepping through the crack, she coughed as smoke enveloped her on all sides, and she shut the door tightly behind her to keep it out of the room. Turning towards the direction of the glow, she got paralyzed in her spot by the man standing before her. Flooded by long-forgotten memories, she felt the tears pricking the corners of her eyes as he took a step closer to her. He was older now, but still as handsome as he was back then with his messy black hair and only a small bit of stubble on his square jaw. She would have recognized him anywhere, even if she hadn't seen his picture on the back of one of

his books. It was Zack, her Zack, and the sight of him made her knees wobble.

Zack Campbell was her high school sweetheart, and in her mind, the one that got away. She could recall every detail of their first meeting as if it happened yesterday. It was her Freshmen year at the Silver Oak High School. She was a shy, awkward nerd with glasses who preferred the company of books over people. Zack was a Junior and the captain of their school's football team. She first laid eyes on him one crisp October morning during study hall at the library. He came in wearing his red and white varsity jacket, tossing his ball in the air. Charlotte was the only one there, and he approached her, asking if she would help him find a book which she gladly did. As he thanked her and left, she thought that would be the end of their encounter, but he came in the next day asking her for help with his homework.

That was how all of this started, with a few tutoring sessions which quickly blossomed into romance over the course of a few weeks. By Halloween, the two of them had officially become a couple, and Charlotte became the envy of the entire school. Not that she blamed everyone for being jealous, even she did not understand what he saw in her over a peppy cheerleader with the perfect legs. But Zack, who was her first boyfriend, had quickly become her everything. For him, she took down her walls, let him into her private world, and gave herself to him in ways she could never imagine. Looking at him now, every cell of her body

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suddenly recalled the memory of their first time together. Her skin crawled with the sensation of his touch, and her lips remembered his fiery breath as they consummated their feeling for one another.

Back then, she thought there was a future for the two of them, planned out a life they would have together. Little did she know her world would come crashing down around her when he dumped her a week after his graduation. He was going off to UCLA in the fall on a football scholarship, and he didn't think it was fair to have her in a long-distance relationship, especially since she had always talked about becoming a surgeon. With an aching heart, Charlotte recalled how he told her they were on a different path now, but if it was meant to be, the road would bring them back together. That was the end of it, at least for him—but for her it was only the beginning—she learned she was pregnant with Kevin a few days later.

Glancing up at his steel-gray eyes, Charlotte recalled the stew of emotions that flooded her as the two red lines appeared on that darn stick. She remembered bawling her eyes out as she told her mother—a single parent herself since her father died while she was still a baby—and how her mother was willing to support her no matter what she decided to do. At first, she considered putting the baby up for adoption. After all, everyone around her had convinced her that Zack should not know he was a father. But as she held her son at the hospital and stole a glance at his face, she knew she could never be apart from him. He looked too much like his dad.

For years, she thought the only memory left of Zack was the one found in their son. She let him go that day, convincing herself their path would never cross. And yet, here he was, standing before her with pleading eyes, or at least some version of him, one which was not entirely human. The Zack before her, while retaining the image of the man she once loved, was nothing like him. Her knees buckled beneath her, and she fell against the wall, clutching her chest as his once gray eyes turned to a glowing shade of deep ruby red. Clouds of shadowy smoke poured out from his body and he reached out a hand to her, tilting his head.

"Cherry, is that you?"

"Yes..." Charlotte choked down her sadness as the hot tears streamed down her face, "it's me."

"Please," Zack's voice was distorted and distant, "help me?"

"What's wrong, Zack? What do you want me to do?"

"Save me... please...."

"How?" Charlotte pushed herself off the wall to get closer to him. "Tell me what you want me to do."

"Save me, Cherry. Please, help me. You are the only one who can."

He said nothing more, he just continued to stand with his hand stretched out towards her, and she felt herself getting pulled closer to him until she was melting into his body. She missed him so much, she wanted to hold him again and comfort him in his hour of need. Embracing him in her arms, his body stiffen at her

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touch and the muscles ripple beneath his cotton shirt. She buried her face in his chest sobbing and noticed he had a strange smell of sulfur to him. He reached around to hold her, but as he wrapped his arms around her back, a blood-curdling squeal rang through the hallway.

Charlotte felt the temperature suddenly drop and glanced up to Zack, evaporating in her arms until there was nothing left. She was left standing, holding on to the smoke seeping through her fingers, and for the first time, she noticed that she could see her breath in front of her. The scones which had reappeared on the cream damask walls flickered faintly around her, and the room slowly spun and whirled like something in a fun house mirror. Feeling queasy as her head floated with the room, she leaned a hand on the wall and swallowed down the sour taste of bile lingering in her throat. At the end of the hall, she could hear shallow grunts and groans, and she squinted to try to see in that direction, not expecting to be greeted by a grisly sight.

On the far end, a black cloth-clad torso wiggled towards her at an alarming rate. Its legs did not seem to work, as it walked—if you could call it that—with one arm in front of the other as it pulled itself along the paisley rug. The thing was slowly closing the distance between them as its human arms picked up pace with every stroke. A human torso, that was not entirely human, carried on its shoulder the scar-painted face of a white pig. Its snout twisted as it let out groans, and Charlotte could see that its eyes

were vacant socket; dark and lifeless, still oozing blood across the pink skin.

Clutching her chest, her heart raced faster as the air slowly drain out from her lungs and caused her head to spin even more. She wanted to scream, but nothing came out except the sound of the wind escaping her throat. The horrible creature was almost upon her as it ran on its arms to eat away the space that separated her from it. Turning around, Charlotte urged her legs to move as she attempted to run for the door of her room, but every step she took felt like she was walking in Jell-O. She aimlessly jabbed the key into its slot, jiggling the lock and praying it would open. The smell of carrion crept into her nostrils, and she could feel the creature's hot breath as she pleaded with the lock, and with God to be spared from what it had in store for her.

Finally, as if by the grace of God upon hearing her prayer, the door handle turned, and Charlotte flung herself into the safety of the room. Slamming the door behind her, she wheezed and pressed her back to the wood. Closing her eyes, she took a few deep breaths and thanked God for letting her live. With trembling hands, she turned to slide the door chain into position with the grunts resonating continuously from the other side. She attempted to tell herself she was going crazy, and convinced herself to peek through the peephole to prove it. Pressing her eye against the small hole, she could see nothing but a dimly lit hall, until a bloody eye socket popped up from the ground to meet her gaze. Letting out a

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yelp, Charlotte fell to the floor and scrambled back towards her bed.

Pulling herself up to the soft mattress, she sat with the covers pressed up against her and continued to pant. Hours seemed to pass by with the creature sniffing at the bottom of her door until it let out a shriek and moved away. She could hear it dragging itself along the floor as the sound of its grunts slowly grew distant and muffled. Charlotte waited until she heard nothing but the hum of the radiator and laid her head down on the pillow with the comforter still pressed to her face. Telling herself it was only a dream, she closed her eyes and urged herself to return to sleep, so she could wake back up in her world and forget about the horrible nightmare which just transpired.