

Chapter One: ASH

An air raid siren wails in the distance, alerting Black City citizens to lock their doors and turn out the lights. They don't want to be out in the dark alone. They might meet something dangerous. Something like me.

I head under the canal bridge and wait for the girl, taking a packet of Sentry-regulation smokes from my back pocket and sparking up. The nicotine courses through my veins, making them throb with adrenaline; the sensation is almost like a pulse . . . almost.

Footsteps approach the bridge, and a short girl with straggly black hair appears from the shadows, dressed in men's work boots, tight black trousers and a tailcoat made from a patchwork of clashing fabrics. Her hazel eyes gaze up into mine. She's brave. Not many cherry-poppers have the courage to look me in the eyes. She hands me an old playing card with two hearts on it, one red, one black. It's my calling card. It seemed an appropriate choice; that's what I'm selling her after all, an illusion of love. I slip it into the pocket of my dark green military jacket.

"You're late," I say. "Last thing I need is to be caught out here after curfew by a Tracker. They're just begging for a reason to throw me in jail."

"Sorry, they've put up extra checkpoints, stopping everyone. There's tanks everywhere!" she babbles. "I guess they can't be too careful with the Sentry Emissary back in the city, what with the boundary negotiations with the Legion and—"

"You paid Beetle?" I interrupt.

The girl nods.

"Terms and conditions," I say. "No refunds. You don't enjoy it, you puke, you freak—not my problem, okay?"

She nods again.

"You pregnant?" She blushes furiously. "I'll take that as a no. It may cause drowsiness, so don't drive or operate any heavy machinery." She smiles at this, and I grin. They always like that. "And no repeats for at least two weeks, all right? I mean it."

"That all?"

"No kissing. Strictly business, okay?"

She seems a little disappointed by this, but I don't like to mix business with pleasure. She shyly unbuttons the collar of her coat, revealing her slim, pale neck. Hunger grips my stomach at the sight.

"What do I do?" she asks.

"Lean back," I say.

She obeys like a good girl. I place a hand against the wall and slip my other hand between her thighs, gently easing her legs apart. Touching her doesn't turn me on, but I groan like it does, knowing she'll enjoy that. They all do, even the guys—it's why they come to me instead of the Haze dens. I slide my body between her thighs so we're face-to-face. Her shallow breaths are warm against my cool skin.

"Relax, okay? It's more enjoyable if you relax."

"My heart's pounding a mile a minute." She gives a nervous laugh.

"Can't say I know how that feels," I admit.

She tentatively presses a hand against my chest, and her eyes widen. "So it's true, then? You don't have a heart?"

"I have a heart," I growl, shoving her hard against the wall. It just doesn't beat.

A small tear snakes down her cheek, her thin lips trembling.

"Sshhh, it's okay, sweetheart. I didn't mean to frighten you." I gently wipe her tear away. "Forgive me?"

She nods, then tilts her head to one side, exposing the smooth whiteness of her neck. The poison sacs behind my fangs swell with venom.

Focus, Ash. Don't blow your load.

I lean toward her, pressing my lips against the soft flesh on her neck, just below her ear. Her pulse flutters under my lips, and I nearly lose it. I begin to nibble on the flesh, tickling the tiny hairs on her neck with my tongue, making them wet with my saliva.

"Do it," she whispers.

So much for foreplay. I sink my fangs into her jugular. Hot blood spills over my tongue, making my taste buds burst with its sticky sweetness. Man, I love the newbies; they always taste the best. She sighs as my venom enters her bloodstream. I wait for the Haze to take effect before I start to drink from her. That's the bonus of Haze; my clients get high from me, and I get high from them by drinking their drugged blood. It's win-win.

A sour, bitter flavor suddenly floods my mouth, and I gag, leaping back.

"What the—" I spit up blood.

The girl stares at me with glazed eyes, blood trickling down the two puncture wounds in her neck.

"Everything's sparkling," she says dreamily. "Didn't Beetle tell you I don't take clients on meds?"

She lurches toward me, and I grab her before she falls into the water.

"I love you," she slurs, trying to kiss me.

I shove her, hard. She falls back against the wall and slides to the floor. Her eyes roll back into her head, and she begins to spasm, white foam bubbling out the corners of her mouth.

"No, no, no! Wake up." I kneel down and shake her, panic rushing through me.

The girl jerks, her boots leaving black scuff marks on the cobblestones. Fragg! This is why I don't take clients on meds. You can never tell how they're going to react to the Haze. I shrug off my jacket and place it under her head.

A Sentry tank rolls over the bridge, and I shut my eyes and wait for it to pass. Even though the war is officially over, I still get chills at that sound. Wherever they went, Death followed. I had a few close scrapes during the war. During those days, the fact that I was a legal citizen and half human didn't mean much to them. If you weren't 100 percent human, you were the enemy. Every day was a fight for survival. Not much has improved since then; I'm still the enemy in most people's eyes. All they can see is the Darkling in me. The tank turns down Bleak Street toward the Sentry Emissary's headquarters.

The girl groans. It's too dangerous here; I have to go. I could just leave her . . . No, that's not an option, but I can't take her to the hospital. I'd get in so much trouble.

Beetle!

I peer down the canal. A yellow barge is moored about one hundred feet away. The lights are off. Where is he? He's meant to be my wingman; that's why I came to the bridge in the first place. Can this get any wor—

An explosion of pain bursts inside my chest, and I clutch a hand over my lifeless heart. I sense someone behind me and turn.

A girl stands by the entranceway, lit by the headlamps of a passing truck. In the fleeting light, I catch a glimpse of cornflower-blue eyes flicking between me and the Hazer writhing on the ground.

Her gaze finally fixes on me.

I fall back, struck down, as the pain in my chest blooms again. Shivers run through my body, rushing toward a single point in my chest. There's a spark of electricity and then:

A flutter.