



DARCIA HELLE

ELI'S COMING

CHASING THE NIGHT

BOOK I

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Chasing The Night – Book 1

Chapter 1

The allure of the night is its ability to pull you into its depths, to keep you hidden in its crevices. The darkness wraps around you. Nothing reaches you there.

And you reach nothing.

Have you ever wanted to melt into the darkness? Dissolve into the shadows?

You can lose yourself in the black emptiness. But while you may lose yourself, the night always knows where you are.

Eli Hayes stood alone in the darkness. The night sky was clear, lit by the stars and a perfect quarter moon. Shadows fell across the ground, casting a thick and almost tangible black film. He was aware of the tension in his shoulders and the ache in his jaw. Closing his eyes, he breathed in slow and deep. He stayed that way, quietly meditating, until the pain melted away.

When he opened his eyes again, the shadows followed the path of the gravestones. He squatted in front of a square chunk of marble. He read the name and date slowly, committing it to memory as if he'd later be quizzed on the information. As if it wasn't already etched in his mind, a permanent fixture there.

He reached out. The stone felt cold against his fingertips. He traced the letters. Deep grooves in cold rock. All that was left at the end of existence.

Fortunately for Eli, not all his nights were spent with the dead. The slow rhythm of Amanda's breathing relaxed him. He stroked her hair, enjoying the way the thick strands tickled his skin. He hated to wake her. Hated that she would leave. But that was not his choice to make.

He glanced at the bedside clock. 11:52 p.m. Amanda would soon be gone, and he'd be left alone with the silence of the night. Once that would have been a comfort. But now...

He kissed her cheek, whispered that she needed to wake up, and pulled his thoughts out of the black shadows.

Amanda stirred. She cracked her eyes open and sighed. "What time is it?"

"Almost midnight."

"You're kidding!"

"I wish I was."

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, Amanda said, "You wore me out. I could have slept all night."

"That's okay. I like watching you sleep."

"Please don't tell me I was drooling or snoring or anything like that."

Eli chuckled. "No, you were perfectly angelic."

"I can just imagine."

Amanda propped up on her elbows. The dark smudges beneath her eyes made him smile, though he couldn't quite say why. Maybe because the ruined makeup and tousled hair gave him a sense that she belonged here, belonged with him.

"I never got the chance to tell you," Amanda said, "since we got a bit distracted. I love your loft."

"And I love having you in it."

Eli was still stunned at having her here in his bed. He'd thought he could maintain the distance with her. He normally brought women to hotels, which kept it all from getting too personal. More importantly, the anonymity of hotels protected his privacy. Still, here he was. Here they were. Together. In his bed.

He knew Amanda must have a hundred questions running through her mind. So much between them remained unsaid. He couldn't have missed her expression when he'd invited her here, despite her attempt to keep the shock and eagerness from showing. He didn't need to be an empath to know what she was feeling. The questions danced behind her beautiful green eyes, but she'd chosen not to give them voice. He wondered if she'd sensed that asking would have meant the end.

Now she stared off toward the dwindling candle, her expression troubled. Perhaps letting her this close had been a mistake after all.

But, no. She wasn't upset about him. Her stress came from another place.

"You're lost in thought," he said. "What's on your mind?"

Amanda flopped back against the pillow. "I hate having to tiptoe around my father like this. It's ridiculous. I'm thirty-two years old."

"I know."

"I have a right to stay out all night with a man, if I choose."

"Yes, you do."

"Of course, that would mean telling him about you. And then he'd want to

meet you.”

“From what you’ve told me about him, we already know he would dislike me.”

“He can’t envision me as an adult woman who enjoys sex and can make my own decisions,” Amanda said. “He wouldn’t dislike you, exactly. He’d hate what you stand for; that, in his mind, you’re using me for sex. His natural distrust would be further complicated by your differences. The two of you are like night and day.”

“Those preconceptions will be difficult to dissuade.”

“He’s at least a century behind the times. My divorce didn’t help. Now he thinks I need protecting from the evil in the world.”

“That’s not such a bad thing for a father to feel.”

“It can be nice, in moderation. The funny thing is, he loved my ex, probably even more than I did. So his judgment isn’t all that sound.”

“Maybe he feels guilty about that, and the guilt drives him to be overprotective now.”

“I suppose.” Amanda glanced at the clock and groaned. “I should go. I have the early-morning shift with my mom.” She sighed. “I wish I could just lie here in your arms all night.”

Eli traced his finger from Amanda’s lips to her bellybutton. “I’d like that.”

She playfully pushed him back and rolled on top of him. “Would you really?”

Hunger burned inside him. His body betrayed his need. “Do you even have to ask?”

“A little verbal acknowledgement would be nice now and then.”

“Stay.”

She lightly nipped his bottom lip, and said, “I can probably get away with another hour.”

Somewhere deep inside, he shuddered. *Forever. I need you to stay forever.* Those words weren’t spoken. Not even the emotion surfaced. His voice remained controlled, heavy only with sexual desire. “I’ll take what I can get.”

Eli woke at dawn, despite the fact that today was Sunday and he had nowhere to be. He could sleep burrowed in his closet, wearing a padded blindfold, and he’d still awaken the instant the sun crested. An ingrained habit he couldn’t shake.

Amanda’s perfume lingered on the sheets. He closed his eyes and

breathed in the scent.

She'd called him mysterious. He supposed that was the word women used when a man kept secrets. Until they married him. Then they called him deceitful.

Or so he assumed.

He'd never even come close to marriage.

He pushed himself out of bed and stepped into the bathroom. As he brushed his teeth, he considered his predicament. *Mysterious*. The word made him feel like a fraud. Of all the things he was, mysterious ranked low on the list.

"What now?" he asked himself. His reflection had no answer.