

HALO

CHAPTER TWO CON'T

Dominic remained in his room the rest of the day, reading his books, probably studying how to use a hammer, I thought with a smirk. At three o'clock the chef arrived to make dinner, and I went downstairs to sit at the kitchen counter to watch him work.

Victor was thin, in his thirties, quick in his movements. He had a visa from France, and often talked about how much better it was there than here.

"I see you are doing nothing with yourself again," he said as he turned to open the fridge.

I didn't bother to defend myself, though the truth was that I wished I had more going on.

He prepared dinner quickly, with no hint that it gave him any pleasure until he had finished, and a small gleam of satisfaction lit his sharp, dark eyes when he tasted the sole. "Perfect," he said with confidence. He plated one of the filets with the roasted potatoes and asparagus, then pushed it toward me. "See?"

The zesty tang of lemon and the flaky fish melted on my tongue. "It's wonderful."

"Yes, it is," he said with self-assured pride. "All right, mon ami, I'm off. I'll see you Saturday, not tomorrow. Remind your father I'm off tomorrow, will you?"

I texted Dominic that dinner was ready. Victor said one more good-bye and then he was out the door. I heard him exchange greetings with my father in the sunroom, my dad's familiar low, quiet voice pleasant in contrast with Victor's self-assured, more clipped tones.

Dad came in, leaving his umbrella in the sunroom and stepping into the kitchen. Tall and distinguished looking, he had light eyes and dark hair that had only just started graying. Everything about him was precise yet elegant, from the cut of his suit to the way he moved. In his younger days he'd been on his college track team, taking them to national competitions. Even now he was athletic, choosing long distance runs, though he didn't compete. Sailing kept him tan and running made him lean. No one would ever guess that behind his smile he was struggling.

"Smells fantastic," he said, glancing over at the plates.

Dominic came in the kitchen and Dad clapped him on the shoulder, looking a moment too long into Dominic's face. I realized there were shadows under my brother's eyes.

"How are things?" Dad asked, looking at both of us.

"Boring," I answered first. Except for Alton, I thought to myself.

"Not much to do before school, I guess," Dad said.

"It's okay," I said, pushing my food around on my plate.

"And you, Dominic?"

I pictured the nails in the closet door. Dominic eyed me for a moment before he answered. "Not much going on. Got some books at an antique bookstore."

Dad raised his eyebrows. "What kind?"

“History,” Dominic said.

“I didn’t know you liked history.” Dad said.

“The house kind of got me interested in it.”

“So you were paying attention to the real estate agent when we went through?”

“To the interesting parts.”

Dad laughed out loud. “She was very dramatic.”

The colorful real estate agent with her too-black hair, bright red lipstick and strong perfume and the stories about the previous owners had been entertaining. The original builders had owned a railroad and passed the house on through the generations until recently, when it had been sold to her father.

“Mind if I read them after you? Sounds intriguing.” Dad said.

“Sure,” Dominic said, though it was a flat assurance, without enthusiasm.

I resisted to urge to smack him. Dad was trying and Dominic was mentally somewhere else. He wasn’t the center of the universe. Dad was being patient with the short answers and the apathy but perhaps it had something to do with all the brooding. I realized that Dad cared enough to try to break through and maybe I could help by sharing what I knew.

Standing in the kitchen after Dominic had left, I pretended to wipe the counters, scrubbing some non-existent spot of dirt as I gathered my courage. “Dominic nailed his closet door shut today.”

Dad put down the dishtowel he’d dried his hands on, folding it with slow deliberate motions. “He *nailed* it shut?” he repeated.

“Yeah.”

“Did he say why?”

“No.”

“Has he done anything else like that?”

“Like...hammering things?” I asked, feeling stupid.

“Well, like anything else that might be strange.”

“No, just that. Well, and reading books. He only does that for school, not for fun, so that’s a little odd.”

Dad laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners, which, rather than accentuating his age, gave him warmth. “He’s never been one to read for fun, that’s true.”

“Don’t tell him I said anything,” I warned.

“Trust the old guy,” he said, kissing my forehead as he walked past her to the stairs.

I hid in the kitchen for a moment, then I crept up the stairs to crouch around the corner. I wanted to hear what Dad would say, and more importantly, how he would say it.

Dad knocked at Dominic’s door.

I heard the door open. “Hey, Dad. What’s up?” Dominic said.

“Just wanted to check in. I’m going to be working more hours than usual, I’m afraid. You okay hanging out with Nina all day?”

There was a long silence, and I wondered why Dad had asked about me, my face growing hot. I wasn’t on Dominic’s radar.

“Actually, I’m not with her much. I’ve been kind of distracted. Sorry.”

So Dominic was aware that he’d kept mostly to himself, which surprised me.

“Distracted by what?” Dad asked.

Another long pause and I held my breath, curious.

“Nothing. Just enjoying the time off.”

“I know it’s hard, moving to a new place.”

“It’s really not,” Dominic disagreed. “The move is no big deal. Hillcrest is a great school, maybe better than St. Catherine’s. It’s going to get me where I need to go.”

Dominic obviously didn’t regret the move. Whatever was bothering him had nothing to do with that.

“I’ll keep a closer eye on Nina, I promise.” Dominic continued. “She usually just texts her friends and swims in the afternoon. Maybe we’ll go out do stuff together. We’ve got a month left until school.”

“I’m sure she’d like that. And you can talk with me, anytime.”

“I know, Dad. It’s all good.” Dominic sounded almost impatient.

I dared to creep around the corner of the stairs. I saw Dad embrace Dominic, giving him a hearty thump on the back. Then he said, “What happened to your closet?”

I couldn’t see Dominic’s face as he answered, though I could hear his voice lower. “The door is broken.”

“There are better ways to fix that. I’ll have someone come by this week.”

“No, that’s okay. It’s fine. I’d rather not have anyone in my room.”

Dad sighed. “Well, that’s not the right way to do it.”

“I know, I’m sorry. I can take the nails out and we can replace the door sometime.”

“No more home repairs.”

“Okay.”

Dominic watched Dad walk away, then his gaze turned in my direction, his eyes boring into me. I cringed, but there was nowhere to hide. He shook his head at me and closed his door without a word. Did he suspect that I had told Dad about the closet door? I thought he'd been pretty smooth. I shrank away to my bedroom, picking up my phone, scrolling away my worries, trying not to feel like an idiot.

Despite his promise to spend more time with me, Dominic left early the next morning, the roar of his motorcycle waking me from an unpleasant dream. He hadn't even bothered to say he was leaving. I don't know why I thought his conversation with Dad last night would change anything.

I rolled out of bed and slipped out of my room, down the hallway, listening as I went. Dad seemed to have left as well, so I was alone in the house. It was the perfect opportunity to go into Dominic's room, even though it would be considered a serious breach of trust. I didn't care.

I pushed his door open, peering inside. His bed was neatly made, and there was no sign of the crumpled box he had brought home yesterday. I went to his nightstand and examined the titles of the books he'd purchased. The subject matter wasn't quite history.

A Compendium of Demons, The Age of Witches, The Seventh Circle and *An Encyclopedia of Darkness* were among the titles.

A chill rushed through me as I pulled one of the books from the stack, my fingers touching the spine as if it might burn.

A Compendium of Demons. Pages of old drawings on slick new paper and a cheap, cringy cover by an author whose credentials included nothing more than years of

interest in demons, or demonology, to make it sound academic. The author also had expertise in UFO's. Complete junk.

The next book, *Exorcism Guide* was more interesting, and more credible, if only slightly. The author stated that he had not used his real name, and that though his knowledge came from real experience he couldn't share any names or places, just the events. Even if he was delusional, he sounded very earnest about his stories, as if he truly believed them.

The oldest book was bound in black leather, the pages yellowed. The title stamped on the spine read *The Seventh Circle*. I couldn't find an author. It detailed the names of demons, their mentions in sacred texts and historic appearances. The research was extensive, but none of it was real. It was like making up the names of dragons and then writing a book about all the imaginary scaly beasts as if they existed.

I shoved the book back on the shelf, suddenly angry. Dominic never used to believe in that stuff.

The closet door stared back at me. A chill rushed over me, a faint shift in the air that made my skin crawl. I walked over to it, mesmerized by the nails, by what might be behind the door. A few feet away my body refused to move any closer, as if I were being pushed away.

Suddenly wanting to get out of the house altogether, not just his room with his strange books and his nailed closet, I dressed quickly, leaving my bed unmade and my clothes on the floor.

The weather was unexpectedly cool for August, the oppressive humidity swept away by the storm, the sky bright. I decided to explore the town on her bike, if only to

prove I did more than sit around texting or swimming.

The town was a mix of beautifully restored historic homes and aggressive tourist shops all trying to make the most of the summer vacationers. The candy-colored houses on the shore, festivals and sun-soaked beaches drew a lot of people and I wondered which ones were visitors and who were the locals. I guess I would find out in the fall.

I biked to the quieter residential streets and coasted down them in the clear morning air, wheeling lazily, in no particular hurry, until I came to a cemetery. The iron fence boxed out the town, aided by tall, ancient trees that watched over the headstones. A patchwork quilt of graveyard plots in bright green grass had tombstones clustered in varied groups, some of them obviously very old, some of them with Christian crosses and others with the star of David.

My bike's wheels crunched on the gravel path. The last time I'd been in a cemetery had been at my mother's funeral. A cool breeze touched my cheek as I walked past the graves. It felt odd to walk among other people's loved ones, knowing that my own mother's grave was over a thousand miles away, on a hill that overlooked a lake. It didn't make sense but being away from that hill made my mom seem farther away. I had pictures of her but the grave was a place I could touch and I'd given that up when we moved.

I rolled my bike back out to the sidewalk and swung my leg over the seat, eyeing a cafe across the street with outdoor tables and umbrellas. The bike's front tire rolled down over the curb before I was ready to launch and the bike teetered for a moment while I tried to get my balance. A jolt of adrenaline warned me that I was about to go down, so I jerked at the steering wheel to regain my balance, but it was no use. I let the

bike fall as I stumbled a few steps into the street and the traffic. I felt a hard shove against my chest, as if a hand had punched me and I took a step back. At that moment a car hurtled by, so close my t-shirt rippled as it passed. The bike made a creaking sound as the car sped over it.

Terror ran like electricity through my body, the revelation that I'd almost been hit traveled through my brain and the adrenaline slammed through my veins. I scrambled away from the road, dragging the bike to the curb, tripping and falling to the sidewalk. Shaking, I sat there trying to regain my bearings.

A shaft of light blinded me and I looked up to see Alton. The sunlight shone around him, making him even more ethereal than usual.

“Are you all right?” he asked, concern in his eyes.

“Yes.” My mouth was saying words but my mind was still occupied with the idea that I'd almost been smeared by a car. Also, what was he doing here?

I stood and tried to put my feet back on the pedals, but my legs were shaking and one foot slipped off. “That car almost hit me,” I babbled, feeling stupid for stating the obvious but still too shaken to have any other social graces.

“Yeah, I saw that. Maybe you should just walk for a while.” His voice was kind.

“Maybe,” I conceded, getting off the bike, my whole body trembling.

“Come on, I'll walk with you back to your house,” he said.

In my weak hands the bike felt like an awkward animal that wanted to leap off in several different directions as I pushed it forward.

“I believe it's my turn,” he said casually, pulling a cigarette out of his pocket.

“Your turn?” I asked, still in a daze, attempting to straighten the handlebars. What

was he talking about?

“To ask you a question,” he said, playing with the cigarette without lighting it.

“Oh, right. Go ahead.” I wasn’t in the mood for a game, but I was glad he wanted to walk with me.

“Why were you at the cemetery?” he asked.

I blinked, forcing myself to focus. “How did you know I was here?”

“That’s not how this works. You give me an answer and then a question, and then I answer, remember?”

“I was there because...I was just riding around I guess.”

“Your turn,” he said.

“Why were you at the cemetery?”

“To see you fall off your bike.”

I laughed, some of my nerves melting away. “Funny, but you have to answer or else why would we play?”

He looked away, a small smile on his lips. “Technically, I did. How about this one—I like to walk around the town, and I especially like that cafe across the street.”

“You walk around by yourself?” I asked. He must have friends he hung out with, or maybe even a girlfriend. He was certainly too good-looking to be single.

“It’s my turn.”

“Right.” I agreed.

“You feeling better?” he asked.

My legs weren’t shaking so much anymore and the terror had faded. “Yes, I am. You wasted your question,” I said ruthlessly. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

He lit his cigarette and put the lighter back in his pocket, taking his time to answer. "I used to."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, chagrined, realizing that it might be a sore subject.

"Nothing to be sorry for."

"So it was a good thing. You broke up with her."

"No."

Maybe it was better to just stay away from this topic. "Um, I think it's your turn."

"Why do you care if I have a girlfriend?"

My face went hot and I wished that I hadn't asked that question because now he would think I was crushing on him.

"Your answer?" he asked, pinning me with his unrelenting, cool gaze when I dared to look at him.

"Oh, I don't care...I mean, it doesn't matter. If you have a girlfriend then it's none of my business, of course. I was just asking." Stammering like an idiot wasn't making this less awkward, so I went on the offensive. "You could ask me the same thing, you know."

"Well, I would but I can't because it's your turn again," he said, a smile touching his lips, as if he were laughing at me.

"Why haven't you talked to me before? I've been here all summer."

He shrugged. "I was busy doing my job. I noticed you swimming around in the pool during a thunderstorm like a Tesla coil waiting to be electrocuted so I offered you an alternative idea. Namely, to live."

"That is *such* an exaggeration. Lightning strikes are very rare."

“You are actually arguing that swimming during a storm isn’t dangerous—that is remarkable.”

“So you noticed me.”

“That is technically a question, and it’s my turn again. Favorite subjects in school?” he asked.

“English. Not math, sometimes science if there’s a possibility the lab might explode. And that’s a boring question. Is the landscaping a summer job or is it what you do?”

“Landscaping isn’t in my future. It’s not what I plan to do, anyway.” He played with the cigarette, turning it in his fingers.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

“I want to do something where I can help people. Like counseling, maybe.”

“I want to help people too but I don’t know if I could handle knowing everyone’s stuff. It could be hard.”

“Not if you know you are helping them get better, then it’s positive.”

“It would still be kind of depressing,” I said, glancing at him sideways. It was so hard not to like him. He genuinely seemed to care about people, although if I were being honest, what I really liked was that he seemed to care about me.

“My turn. Mustard or ketchup on your hot dog?” he asked.

“Mustard, because my dad says ketchup on hot dogs is an abomination.”

“That’s a strong opinion on mustard.”

“He knows what he likes. He always knows...everything. He’s an orthopedic surgeon so he’d pretty smart. What about your dad? Your family, I mean.”

“My mom and dad divorced. My mom worked hard to provide for us and I wished I could help her more.”

“You don’t live with her?”

“No,” he said. “I’m on my own.”

“You’re really young to have your own place.”

“Yeah, I am. That’s three questions in a row. Did you tell anyone where you went this morning?”

Taken aback, I shook my head. “No, but I don’t have to. I can at least go for a bike ride, you know.”

“I’m not talking about your ability to ride a bike across town without falling into the street, although that is questionable after today—I’m talking about basic safety.”

I was conflicted about his advice. On one hand, he seemed to care if I were hit by a car but on the other hand I wanted him to be impressed by my independence. I didn’t want him to think I was a little kid.

“Do *you* tell anyone where you go all day?” I asked.

“Don’t all smart people do that?”

“So I’m not smart if I don’t text my every move to my brother—who doesn’t even care what I do, by the way. He doesn’t even know I’m in the same house.”

“I’m not so sure about that, he’s your brother.”

My resentment rushed to the surface, boiling hot. Dominic had ignored me since we moved here and then when he promised to act like I was on the planet he’d bailed out and left this morning. “Well, I’m sure. I know it for a fact. He does not care. At. All. He’s a cold, self-centered, completely unaware idiot. The whole world revolves around him.

He doesn't even know I exist."

Alton stopped walking to turn around and face me. I realized we were in front of my house, but I was too angry to do anything but stare at him defiantly, daring him to prove me wrong.

The look in his eyes was suspiciously like pity and I felt a lump well up in my throat, my anger dissolving into humiliated tears. The truth was that it hurt. It hurt that my older brother, who I'd worshipped since the day I was born, didn't seem to notice I was here, or even worse, thought I was a nuisance.

Before Alton could say anything, Dominic's motorcycle roared into the driveway. From behind his visor I could see my brother's eyes widen for a moment, as if he were surprised, before he turned his head away.

The roar of the engine cut out, the clank of the kickstand loud in the sudden quiet as Dominic got off his motorcycle. He pulled the helmet off, his damp hair clinging to his forehead. "Nina!" he called out to me, his tone sharp.

What was he mad about? I swallowed my tears and scowled at him, turning to Alton, but Alton was staring back at Dominic, his face expectant, and wary. Did they know each other?

"Nina!" Dominic called again, tossing his helmet on the seat and walking toward me and Alton. "Come here." The tone of his voice sounded like a parent warning a child who was standing too close to a stranger at a playground.

"What is wrong with you?" I asked.

Dominic's eyes weren't on me as he walked toward us, they were on Alton. "Get away from my sister."

Alton toyed with his unlit cigarette for a moment. "I didn't mean to scare you," he said quietly.

I started to answer, but Dominic cut in.

"I'm not scared," he said, his voice contemptuous as he pushed me behind him.

"But I know what you are."

"No, you don't. You don't know anything. About me or yourself," Alton replied.

The two of them faced off with each other as if I weren't there. What was happening?

"I know that you're dead," Dominic said.

"What?" I blurted.

Alton's response to this bizarre comment was to bend his head and light his cigarette, taking a thoughtful drag. "Yes, I am."

I'd always known there was something unreal about Alton, but I couldn't quite figure out what it was. The only way Alton could be dead would be if...

"Are—you a vampire?" I asked, grasping Dominic's t-shirt and cowering behind him.

Dominic glanced down at me with a pained expression. "He's a ghost, dimwit."

I let go of his shirt, pushing him away. "That's stupid."

"And a vampire isn't?" Dominic asked, his voice rising with a note of disbelief.

I blushed, looking over at Alton.

He met my eyes apologetically. "It's true."

My brain reeled, trying to fit the pieces together, going over the past two days. In a flash of clarity I realized he'd never touched me, not even once. Had that been because

he couldn't? How did Dominic know Alton was a ghost?

"I said leave," Dominic said.

Alton didn't respond right away, finishing his cigarette. I supposed the cigarette wasn't real, though I could smell the smoke. "I can help you," Alton said.

"What makes you think I need your help?" Dominic asked.

"That fine bit of carpentry on your closet door."

Dominic went pale.

I wondered how Alton knew about that, but he was a ghost, so maybe he'd been hanging out at our house all the time. I didn't like the thought.

"How can you help?" Dominic asked.

"Just ask for me."

"Ask for you?" Dominic repeated.

"Out loud. I'll hear." Alton cast one more apologetic look at me before turning his back and fading away. He disappeared into thin air, as if I had just been imagining him.

I'd been talking to a *ghost*. For two days.

Dominic tugged at my arm. "Come on, Nina. Let's go inside."

I wheeled my bike up the driveway in a daze. Dominic didn't seem the least bit fazed.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"How did you not know? He doesn't look like a person at all."

"What— does he look like?"

"He looks as if he tried to beam down from the Enterprise but didn't quite make it."

That wasn't how Alton appeared to me but then again, I'd never seen a ghost before. "Have you seen others?"

"I don't think so. I just knew what he was."

"Is he a bad ghost?" I asked.

Dominic frowned. "No, but he's a ghost, so he doesn't belong here. He should go to the light or whatever."

Oddly I wasn't afraid of Alton but I was beginning feel a growing sense of betrayal. Alton had known all along, and hadn't said anything. Even more distressing was that he had never been interested in me at all, he'd wanted Dominic. Shoving the embarrassment and confusion away, I asked, "Why do you need help with your closet door? I thought you nailed it shut."

He took the bike from my hands and rolled it a few feet. "Your rim is bent, that's why it keeps going in different directions. What happened to your bike?"

"I fell into the street and a car ran over the wheel. But I'm okay."

"You fell into the street?"

"Yes. But I'm okay, as I said already. What are you hiding about your closet?"

He picked up the bike with one hand, the bent wheel spinning as he lifted it.

"Bubblegum, if I wanted you to know I'd tell you."

For a moment he was the protective older brother I remembered, but I persisted.

"Why are you reading books about the occult and demons?"

Anger flashed across his face. "I told you not to go in my room."

"Are you in a cult or some online group of satanic losers?"

"Yes. I get a free robe and they're going to make me head satanic loser if I pay

them \$29.99.”

Fury exploded in my head, red hot anger that flared and then burned out and I no longer cared what he wanted. I turned on my heel and ran to the house, sprinting like I’d been training all summer. If he wouldn’t tell me what was in his closet then I would find out for myself.

His footsteps pounded behind me but I had a head start, and I was fast. I ran across the driveway, flung open the door to the sunroom, and through the kitchen.

“Nina!” He skidded through the kitchen and out into the foyer.

I hit the stairs, flying up two steps at a time, my heart pounding. I was tired of being shut out. Shoving against the bedroom door I stumbled into his room and dove at his closet.

A strong hand closed over my hand as I touched the doorknob. Dominic stared down at me, panting from the chase. He pushed me away from the closet so hard I fell to the floor.

I got back on my feet to try again, then stopped. The doorknob on the closet rattled, from the inside, by itself.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose and I recognized a familiar chill.

Something was in there.

Dominic grabbed the back of my shirt, dragging me across the floor and pushing me out into the hallway. He was still out of breath, panting, but he wasn’t angry. He was afraid.