

Preview

Chapter 6

Do Not Pass Go

A loud burst of laughter escapes Helena in the passenger seat of the exotic Italian sports car. At the easy pace Natalia keeps this time, Helena is able to sit back comfortably, sunk into a loose, relaxed slouch. Natalia drives with quiet precision, her face mostly hidden behind oversized sunglasses and a headband pulled over her ears, blending in with the steady flow of traffic. Helena is unmistakably tipsy, a clear sign of a night out that went more than well.

"It's still a while until sunrise. Would you like to see where I usually spend my days before night falls?"

Helena lets her head fall back against the headrest, closes her eyes, and her thoughts spin from all the alcohol she has consumed. She feels content and happy with this surprise that was more than welcome in her monotonous life. She's gotten a good feeling about Natalia intentions and no longer sees her invitation as anything other than sincere.

"Alright, you can show me where you spend your days, hanging upside down on the ceiling." There's more behind the smile Natalia gives in return to the misplaced remark, while Helena laughs at her own joke and lets her head fall back against the seat once more. They've clearly warmed up to each other, though the warmth from one of them is as cold as the temperature of her own body.

It's pitch dark inside Natalia's Ferrari. The car has stopped moving forward; a low hum fills the air as the circular platform beneath it lifts the vehicle upward, while the shutters of the sleek glass villa above slide open in perfect sync. The minimalistic yet refined interior of this beautiful lake house is illuminated by the moon's last hours of light, streaming through the windows from the cold outside.

Once again, Helena is in awe, this time of the home's breathtaking location and architecture. She opens the car door, steps out, and enters the living room through a glass façade. She watches the night's dew drift across a lake encircled by dense forest. The place is so remote

that the glass walls make no difference. Even with every shutter open, Natalia has complete privacy here.

Helena stands beside an abstract sculpture near the window as the silence breaks when Natalia sets her guest's champagne glass down on the coffee table. With own her glass in hand, she settles sideways on the sectional in the center of the room, drawing her legs up to rest comfortably on the couch. She gazes thoughtfully at Helena standing by the window, then closes her eyes for a moment to quiet her guilt.

"Are you going to stand there all night?"

"It's so beautiful here." Helena turns and takes a seat on the chair beside the coffee table. She feels completely at ease, still savoring the quiet of the night. She leans forward, takes her glass from the table, and raises it toward Natalia, smiling as her arm extends.

"Thanks for tonight. I didn't realize how much I needed it."

Her toast remains unanswered. Instead, she receives a cold-blooded look from Natalia. Helena begins to feel uneasy. Her smile fades into a frown as she hesitantly draws her glass back toward herself, unable to read Natalia's intentions.

"Unfortunately, the night is far from over. Let's see if by the end of it you'll still be willing to raise your glass to me."

A knot tightens in Helena's stomach as she stares at Natalia in disbelief. She falls silent, unable to comprehend the situation she's suddenly found herself in.

"I want to introduce you to someone."

"What?" Helena can hardly believe what she's hearing.

From the shadowed depths of the house, a figure steps into the moonlight, pale, motionless, and unmistakably one of the soulless. Helena flinches, speechless, her breath caught in her throat as she realizes that this elegantly dressed kin of Natalia must have been standing in the dark all along, watching.

It's the inhuman, vain creature, the one who restrained the captain's wife during the mission in Texas with Gabriel and Natalia. He's dressed to perfection once more, a tailored three-piece suit clinging to him like a second skin, every line designed to show his vanity.

"This is Artem. I don't think you've met before. Anyway, he was keen on meeting you."

He doesn't say a word, moves closer to the coffee table, and fixes Helena with a contemptuous stare. Then the sound of murmurs and approaching footsteps fills the room, growing closer with every second. Artem turns his head toward the sound, his mouth opening to reveal sharp fangs as a raspy breath escapes him.

An interior door opens, and the figure that steps through needs no introduction to Helena. It's the same damned creature who, just that morning, had forbidden her to leave her room, the one who stood nose to nose with Christopher, disastrously not here now.

"Good evening, ladies... and gentleman."

With that same self-satisfied smile, he turns his gaze to Helena while keeping a young woman in her early twenties effortlessly pinned in his grasp, her body twisting in vain against his hold. The young blonde woman lets out a panicked scream that seems to shake the entire house. Terror overwhelms her, a consuming fear of death and of the inhuman creatures she's been thrust into without warning.

With all her might, she tries to fight against the creature's iron grip. With one arm wrapped around her waist, he holds her against his side as if her body has no weight. She kicks into the air and pushes at his arm in desperation, but all her effort is in vain.

With a hint of amusement, Natalia's voice cuts through the room.

"And of course you've already met Vitaly, your very own private security. I've heard the two of you have grown quite accustomed to each other over the years."

Helena remains frozen in her chair, fear tightening her chest as she stares at the helpless young woman and the situation that has spiraled out of control. Over the girl's screams, Helena glances at Natalia, who meets her eyes with a smile. And before Helena can recover from the shock or utter a single word, Natalia vanishes from the couch.

The next thing Helena sees are Natalia's nails sinking into the young woman's cheeks. Her screams are cut off instantly, breaking into ragged sobs. The girl hangs folded over Vitaly's arm, helpless, her head lifted by Natalia's hand, forcing her into unblinking eye contact. With a cold, merciless tone, Natalia speaks down to her.

"It's for your own good that we make ourselves heard in here. He'll let go of you, and you're going to behave like a good little girl. Otherwise I'll rip out your vocal cords before you can draw your next breath to scream again."

Natalia lets go of her face and leaves small cuts from her fingernails across the young woman's cheeks. She immediately stops resisting, and Vitaly releases his arm. Free of his grip—but not of her fear—she rises to her feet, trembling and unsure.

Vitaly steps away from her and joins Artem. The two men share a quiet, self-satisfied smile as they take in the scene before them.

The traumatized young woman stands shaking, fighting to hold herself still. Her shoulders are drawn up tight, her arms rigid at her sides, her fists clenched so tightly that the tension forces her wrists to tilt upward. She can't even decide which leg to trust beneath her.

Helena recognizes the same slavish submission she saw earlier tonight, the way the woman lowers her head like something lesser and obeys without a word. Natalia steps aside and lets a darker side of herself surface. She opens her mouth, baring her fangs, a low, threatening rasp spilling toward Helena. Natalia seems to blossom in the power she now holds over the entire situation, as if this moment brings her truest nature to the surface.

"As you can see, she has lost control over her own life. And that control doesn't lie with us. It lies with you."

Helena startles and looks at Natalia in complete confusion. "What? What are you talking about?"

"SSSSSS." From out of nowhere, Natalia's index finger suddenly presses against Helena's lips. "This is the part where you listen very carefully. You will only speak the words that I ask for." Natalia disappears again and returns to her old spot.

No one else enters, and no one shifts places anymore; everyone now stands or sits in a settled ring around the coffee table.

Except for the nervous breaths of the young hostage, an icy silence settles over the room. Helena shifts her gaze from the girl to the poised gentlemen standing beside and just behind her. She then turns her head toward Natalia and finds her eyes still fixed on her, staring straight through her soul.

"Darius often tries to keep me in the dark about his plans. But for one thing, the gentlemen standing beside you have already been called up for a near-certain suicide mission somewhere in uncharted territory deep within the US. And your subtle future husband made it very clear he was on board with Darius's proposal the moment he decided to show off his better side on the rooftop tonight."

Helena immediately knows what Natalia is talking about, and a fresh wave of helplessness washes through her. She has no say in any of it.

"In all my centuries on this planet, I've met your kind before. None of them were as unpolished as you. For all your age, you're still barely out of your cradle. But don't worry, today you're getting a crash course."

The tension in the room is thick enough to cut, and Helena knows there's no point in speaking. Something is coming, and she won't be able to do anything but endure it. Natalia continues without breaking stride, revealing what she intends to do.

"Across countless generations, the genes do nothing but pass silently from one body to the next. Only once in a rare while do they awaken at birth. That is what happened with you, yet

even then, yours seem to require the proper motivation before they will reveal what they are truly capable of."

Helena feels the knot in her stomach pull even tighter as Natalia's unblinking stare holds her in place. She glances around in quick, nervous flicks and sees every misted pair of eyes locked on her. Even the terrified human eyes of the young victim are fixed on her, pleading silently in the desperate hope that Helena might somehow save her.

"Do you see yourself in her?" Natalia smiles at Helena, while the girl standing helpless and alone in the room can't even find a way to hold herself. Cold, isolated, and panicked, she swallows back her sobs, trying to stay as quiet as she can.

"Born and raised in Moscow. From childhood on she kept running away from home to escape an abusive life there. The streets, the institutions, the wrong men that followed, it all became a cycle for her. The only light she ever found in those institutions was ballet, the one place where she could let her trauma slip from her for a moment."

Both the young blonde and Helena stare at Natalia in disbelief, stunned by how much she seems to know about them. The victim then pulls her gaze away from Natalia and looks to Helena instead, fear flickering in her eyes as she searches Helena's face for answers. In Helena's features she sees the same unsettled reaction staring back. And Helena can't help but wonder how Natalia could possibly know all of this, especially when she has never spoken a word about her own childhood.

"People who won't be missed when they vanish. You two happened to be on the same list. The similarities are astounding... But enough talk for now. It's time for answers."

Natalia leans in toward Helena.

"I want you to tell me exactly how this upcoming expedition — if I can even call it that — is supposed to unfold."

Helena feels a heavy pressure climb through her chest. She clutches the armrests and shrinks in on herself, as if the chair could hide her from the room.

"While you sleep, your subconscious stays wide awake. It wanders back and forth through time on its own, without the slightest sense of direction. Why do you think those vivid visions find you in your sleep?"

Helena is shaken by the sense that Natalia understands her in ways she cannot even grasp herself.

"But just like your dreams, only a few ever stay with you."

When Natalia falls silent, the entire villa goes still, save for the faint whimpering of the trembling victim. Helena has no answer, no idea what she should do. She just stares at Natalia, frozen like a deer caught in headlights.

Natalia meets her gaze without wavering. "You can start now, or I'll start hurting her." With a single extended finger and a small turn of her wrist, she gestures subtly toward the abducted young woman.

The blonde begins to shake even harder, and Helena's eyes flick anxiously between Natalia and the victim. Natalia, meanwhile, seems almost inconvenienced, sighing as if the entire scene is beneath her as she rolls her eyes in irritation.

A sharp crack splits the air, followed by a piercing scream. The young woman collapses to the floor, crying out. Helena jolts as Natalia seems to snap back into place on the couch, as if she had never moved at all. Artem and Vitaly both break into a faint smile, their mouths watering at the sight of the defenseless woman on the floor, her ankle reduced to ruin.

Helena understands what she's meant to do. She tightens her grip on the armrests, closes her eyes, and shuts out the world. Her mind begins to race. Like a pinball ricocheting inside her skull, she flies in every direction, fragments of old memories flashing past her at random.

She sees herself as a small, frightened girl wedged between her brothers and sisters while her father, a bottle of hard liquor in his hand, screams at her mother. Boarding schools, institutions, and bitterly cold nights on the streets all flicker past her in rapid flashes, like torn film frames.

Then she reaches the later chapters of her life and sees herself calming Christopher, her hand on his back, saving him and reversing his transformation. How that first, intimate night with him unfolded.

Then Alexey bursts into her mind, her old dance partner, broken and mortally wounded as he's sucked dry before her eyes. How she caught the blurred reflection of Darius holding her down, his blood-stained fangs dragging along her neck.

That Christopher holds Gabriel impaled in the air and then is thrown into a wall himself, swallowed by the falling rubble.

The seven years she spent with Christopher in the mansion. The stomach-aching worry that crept in every time he had to be away from her for nights on end.

But all of this is the past, and it fades as she continues to wander through her mind. In the distance, a thick wall of storm clouds rushes toward her with tremendous speed. Just before it reaches her, she startles and snaps her eyes open. Her senses rush back, reconnecting her to

the world around her. She hears the crying and pleading of the young woman still lying helpless on the floor, and she looks at Natalia.

Natalia sees it instantly in Helena's eyes — the surprise at herself and at the path she's suddenly following. Natalia wants to keep the momentum alive. "Considering the parallels between you, inhabiting her perspective should come naturally."

Natalia vanishes from the couch, and the young woman's scream rips through the villa. She lets out a piercing cry as Natalia steps on her shattered ankle. Helena catches the horrific sight, squeezes her eyes shut, and is immediately swallowed by the storm. The wind, lightning, and thunder swirl around her in blinding, deafening disarray. She has to move through it, staying turned inward, her eyes pressed shut.

Helena is swept into a rush. The storm tears past her, and now she's racing through a mass of clouds in different shades of gray. The speed at which the clouds race around her decreases, and far on the horizon she spots two black specks rushing toward her. As the distance closes, the shapes sharpen into human silhouettes.

As they draw closer, they begin to slow, and the clouds around them split open. And then Helena understands. This isn't the past. This is the future. The disturbance in time tears a hole in the clouds around the silhouettes. A blazing glow ignites at the widening tear, sending bursts of lightning surging through the clouds. The rupture makes the realm around her tremble violently.

The silhouettes slip out of sight, and suddenly she sees the Bering Strait from a bird's-eye view high above, her vision pulled toward the Russian side of the narrow passage of sea dividing the two continents. She concentrates fiercely, drawing the scene closer through the torn opening in the clouds.

On the ice below, the two silhouettes advance toward a helicopter settled on the frozen surface. One of them moves in rapid blurs between the helicopter and the other figure, who limps toward it in weak, staggering steps.

The effort strains Helena to her core, and in a sudden rush her vision snaps back outward. The opening slams shut with a violent crack, sending the clouds whipping away from her. She bursts out of her trance, gasping as she crashes back into the world.

Gasping for air, Helena is hit once more by the young woman's desperate screams. She looks at the girl on the floor, then at Natalia beside her, who has finally lifted her foot from the shattered ankle. Impatient, Natalia arches her brows, making it clear she expects answers now. Through ragged breaths, Helena manages to speak. "Two... two make it back."

Natalia snaps back immediately, her tone sharp. "Who are they!"

Helena stammers, still catching her breath. "I... I don't know... I couldn't see. One was clearly human. The other was not... I could tell, because it was moving like you."

"Is Gabriel among them?"

Artem and Vitaly trade a stung look, offended to realize they are not as essential to Natalia as they had always assumed.

Still catching her breath, Helena slowly shakes her head. "I don't know."

Natalia turns furious. "Well, I suggest you take another look while we're at it." In a split second, her fingers clamp around Helena's chin. She forces her head upward, and Helena finds herself staring into Natalia's misted eyes as a red glow sweeps across them.

In Natalia's other hand hangs the victim, dangling upright by her hair as if she were nothing more than a lifeless prop. The brutal speed of Natalia's movement has left the young woman limp and disoriented. Then, right in front of Helena — her head still forced upward — the girl's neck bursts open as Natalia sinks her teeth into it without mercy.

Blood splatters across Helena's face, and the girl erupts into a violent, seizure-like convulsion. The shock is so great that the present begins to slow... then stops altogether.

Everyone in the house is frozen in place, the world locked in a timeless stillness, blood suspended in midair. Then Helena breaks free from Natalia's hand and drops backward into her chair, her eyes squeezing shut.

Where the storm had been raging around her, she now sees nothing at all and hears a deafening, demonic roar. It's a sound she knows, yet she has never heard it this powerful. Then, just as abruptly, the roar cuts off, the darkness lifts, and she finds herself dropped into a moment far ahead on her own timeline — a spectator inside her own future.

In this new vision, time seems frozen as well. And what she sees hits her straight in the heart. For the first time since she met him, she sees Christopher in his fully mutated form. She feels it instantly; he is there, buried far beneath the surface of this savage creature.

The beast is hunched over a scene of utter devastation. Helena recognizes this place. She was here earlier today. It is the Wolves' Lair, the vampires' cryptic stronghold, now reduced to ruin. And at its center stands the one responsible, the marks of battle written across his body. Helena has no time to dwell on how any of this happened. The mutated beast drags its eyes to the corners before locking them onto her, its entire form shuddering as it tears itself free from the frozen moment and slowly begins to turn toward her.

Helena narrows her eyes, unable to believe he can see her. She's merely a spectator in this moment far ahead on her timeline. She studies the brute as it begins moving toward her with increasing speed. 'Chris?' she whispers, barely more than a breath.

The beast keeps gathering momentum. It opens its jaws and raises its claw beside its body, poised to strike. It surges toward her with increasing speed, and Helena can hardly believe it is *her* the creature wants to attack, or whether it can even see her at all.

Then it breaks free from almost all its restraints, and the fully mutated Christopher slashes his claw toward Helena.

Helena startles, and before the claw can touch her she is hurled out of that distant point in time. She is back in the timeless void where gray-washed clouds tearing past her in reverse. As her panic settles, she feels herself gaining control of the force dragging her through it. She slows the streaming clouds and senses that she has reached a point in time her captor is looking for.

Another opening tears itself open before her, carrying the crackle of electricity and a searing glow, though the vibrations are far softer this time. In the distance she sees a grieving woman kneeling before a memorial stone. But this time she draws the moment toward her, and the woman before the stone becomes unmistakably clear.

At first it feels as though time has frozen in the last moments of the night Helena is witnessing, the same stillness she escaped only moments ago. But when the wind stirs the branches, she understands that this future moment is moving at its ordinary pace. In the faint light before dawn, it is not the world that has stopped. It's Natalia, emptied of the will to live, kneeling before the memorial stone.

Helena reads the inscription. 'Gabriel 1453–1992.'

"Leave."

Natalia speaks flatly, her eyes falling shut as if she has long known Helena would appear in this moment and senses her the instant she does. Helena hears the word, still unable to understand how she can be perceived at all, not when she feels no true presence in the moment she's watching. The opening in time narrows, folding in on itself, and a sudden surge pulls her back into her body with accelerating force.

She sinks into the stillness of the present, where a sweeping arc of blood hangs weightless in the air, erupted from the blonde woman's opened neck. And then, like a long-silent record catching its groove, time begins to move again, granting Helena a fleeting instant to shape her words.

Natalia, her eyes still fixed on Helena, sees that she is suddenly no longer where her hand held her, her body glitching through fractured positions in the chair. Slipping in and out of temporal alignment before finally settling back into full sync with the world around her. Only

when the distortions fade does Natalia see the troubled look in her eyes. And she understands at once: Helena has come back carrying knowledge of what lies ahead.

Helena is too late. The young woman is beyond saving. She hangs violently convulsing by her hair beneath Natalia's hand. Natalia never once looks away from Helena; still fixed on her, she flicks her arm with effortless disdain and sends the girl arcing toward Vitaly and Alexey, all without breaking eye contact.

With unholy disregard, the young woman is taken by the two ravenous creatures. They sink their teeth into her body with greedy urgency, drawing her blood into themselves in deep, devouring pulls.

The sounds of the woman's unmaking slip into the background as Natalia rises, without breaking the cold line of eye contact between them. The blood splattered around Natalia's mouth and jaws spills downward, sliding along her throat and over the fabric of her elegant dress. The wine-red blood against her snow-white skin is as stark as the divide between human and demon she has just unveiled. It is unmistakably clear that Helena holds the answers Natalia wanted. Yet the way Helena carries herself tells her everything—they are the answers she dreaded.

Dawn begins to creep in as Natalia's Italian sports car glides over the empty roads. The V8 idles low, unhurried, yet Helena still feels every flaw in the asphalt reverberate through the rigid frame, each vibration carrying straight into the passenger seat.

Exhausted, she stares out through the windshield in quiet defeat. Whatever her eyes take in never reaches her mind. The world passes her by, but her thoughts remain fixed on one thing. How on earth is she going to tell Christopher not to free Jonathan? The path ahead feels carved toward destruction, internally and externally. She has no idea how it will unfold, only that she has already seen glimpses of where it leads.

The brakes squeal as Natalia brings the car to a slow stop, and Helena suddenly realizes they're now in front of the mansion she shares with Christopher.

"Your thoughts are wandering. Just like mine. It's hard to wrap our minds around a future we can't seem to control."

Helena lets her eyes linger on the large, hypocritical stone guardian angel at the front of the garden, the female statue's hands folded over the hilt of the sword she holds. Then Helena slowly turns her head toward Natalia, confusion and defeat written across her face.

"I know you've seen more than you've chosen to reveal. Which you're entirely free to keep to yourself. I'm already more than grateful you gave me the answers I was looking for."

Helena gives no reply. She turns her head back toward the mansion and reaches for the door handle.

"I hope there's a chance you can forgive me for all of this. The girl was going to die anyway. The only difference is that you saw it happen. Unfortunately, the route to our true selves is nothing but horror."

Helena leans back into her seat and looks at Natalia again in confusion. She wants to blame her for everything that happened. And as deeply as her trust feels shaken, she still understands why Natalia did it.

"So we're all just civil again now? I thought you were the one who was tired of displays of might? But we do whatever it takes to protect the ones we love, right?"

Natalia looks at her with a hollow, expressionless stare. "We were never civil."

Helena had completely misread the dynamics within their circle. "I was under the impression you were with Darius."

Natalia lets out a low chuckle. "You know how these power plays work in order to move up the ranks. But when this dead heart beats, it beats for only one person... just as yours does for him." And she gives a small nod toward the mansion's garden.

Helena turns her head and suddenly sees Christopher standing close to the car. He lets the last trace of moonlight stir what runs through his system. Dark veins spread across his face, and the look in his glowing eyes makes it clear he's not going to be kind to Natalia. His sharpened senses have already picked up the unrest and exhaustion weighing on his loved one.

Helena turns her head back to Natalia, and after everything she has endured tonight, she never expected to glimpse anything resembling a softer side in her.

"Now go, before God's light turns me to dust and He makes me answer for all that I have done."

Helena agrees with Natalia that it's the perfect line to end this traumatic night. She remains silent and steps out of the car. She looks at Christopher, and he knows something is wrong, something that has far more to do with him than with anything that happened tonight...