

Kiss of Tragedy



Stephanie
Van Orman

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Stephanie Van Orman

Edited by Alison Quist

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For Rose

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Chapter One

First Sight

“Do you believe in vampires?”

Elise sat on the end of the bed painting her fingernails. She shook her head like she was bored and answered drolly, “You have got to be kidding me. Who actually believes in something like that?”

Juliet hadn’t been expecting Elise to be very enthusiastic, but her tone was much less than that. “I guess nobody does.” Disappointed, Juliet got up and headed back to her own dorm room.

“Wait!” Elise shouted after her. “Why are you asking? Is some sicko trying to take advantage of you by saying he’s a vampire or something?”

Juliet stopped at the door and thought for a second. Something interesting had happened that afternoon—not what Elise thought—but something. Juliet had been gearing herself up to share the story, but now she was uncertain. She didn’t want to be ridiculed. For her, it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance and if she told Elise, who obviously would not understand the uniqueness of it, the experience would lose its sparkle. It wasn’t like they knew each other very well. It was their first year in university and Elise’s room was next door to Juliet’s in their dormitory, Lister Hall. It was nice that they got along well enough to support each other through the hectic month of September, especially living in dorms, but once they had settled into their respective grooves, Juliet wasn’t sure if they were very compatible after all. Elise was on the volleyball team, while Juliet was trying to find a *different* kind of group to join.

“Come on,” Elise urged. “Did you meet somebody?”

Juliet frowned. She didn’t want to tell Elise anymore, but she had to tell someone. The story was a like a hundred dollar bill burning a hole in her pocket. She had to spend it. She sat back down on the bed. “Well, I went down to the Student Group office after class to see if there was an interesting group I could join.”

“Huh,” Elise said, perking up a little. “Did you find anything?”

“Sort of,” Juliet said, chewing on her cheek. “There are a lot more student groups here than I thought there were. So, I was sitting in the Student Group’s office perusing the list.”

“And?” Elise asked impatiently. “What does this have to do with vampires?”

“And this guy came in.”

Elise screwed the lid back on her nail polish. "As I thought. There's always a guy."

"Fine. Yes, there is *always* a guy," Juliet said, sorry that she had even begun to confide in Elise. She had been absolutely right, the fun of telling the story was lost and she hadn't even got to the good part. "Yep, that's right," Juliet continued, getting up and heading back to the door. "I saw a guy in the Student Group office that was so hot I was totally reminded of Louis in *Interview with the Vampire*. End of story. Thanks for listening."

"Hey!" Elise called after Juliet, who closed the door behind her.

Once safely back in her own room, Juliet locked the door and sat down at her desk. Sometimes no one understood her. No one except her precious laptop.

She pulled it out of her school bag and set it up on her desk. She opened her email and went straight to her blog.

Juliet loved her blog. It was called 'Moonlight Reflections' and it was a wonderful place where she could talk about her life without fear of misunderstanding. Her screen name was 01Pearl_Moon. The black screen loaded showing her stunning banner which was a picture of the moon and stark white text on a pitch black background.

Her last post had been about her fascination with tarot cards. She scrolled to the bottom to see if anyone had commented. She still got comments from her high school friends, but they didn't visit often since, apparently, they all had thrilling lives outside of their own laptops. However, Juliet wasn't bothered too much by their inconsistency. Recently she'd begun getting comments from someone new, someone refreshing.

She didn't know their real name. He or she called themselves ReadyEyes808 and while none of her friends commented on her blog, this person had.

"I have never had my fortune told, but to hear you describe it, it sounds like I'm missing out. I made a blog. Come visit me sometime." Then the web address was keyed in below.

Juliet had every intention to go visit the blog, but first she had to write down her experience with the vampire she'd met that afternoon. She clicked to enter her account and pulled up the window.

"Today I saw a vampire. Don't get me wrong, he didn't introduce himself to me as a vamp, but you should have seen the absolute beauty of this man. I was sitting on the couch in the Student Groups' office trying to find an occult group to join at my school when this guy came in. His hair was perfectly black and straight. It was just long enough to fall into his eyes, which were also perfect by the way. Everything about his face was fascinating; the way his nose tilted up, the way the muscles in his jaw flexed when he talked, the way he searched for what he was looking for. Now, I

haven't said what made him look like a vampire, but his skin was so pale it looked like he had powdered it. Even his lips were white. If only his eyes were green like Louis de Pointe du Lac, but instead they were brown like blackness had warmed.

"I wanted to talk to him, but I couldn't rally up enough composure to close my gaping mouth. So, I was staring at him with my tongue hanging out when he turned and looked directly at me. My mouth snapped shut. I wanted to look away, but his gaze was so compelling, almost like he knew what I was thinking (that I was seeing a real vampire for the first time), and it amused him. I think his expression might have been a smile. Then he finished talking to the Student Groups director and headed out, but you will not believe what he did before he left. He winked at me!

"Do you think he thought I was crazy?"

Juliet stopped typing and read over her post. Yeah, that had done justice to her feelings. Not like talking to Elise. *Bah!*

She posted it and went to check out ReadyEyes808's new blog. When the page came up, it was not black like hers, but the layout for the screen was white and all the text displayed was a deep blood red. The banner was a pair of red anime-like eyes. The design of it was stylish. Juliet could have chosen it for herself. But somehow that red struck her as darker than her black. She shook her head. It was just a color.

Before she read the first post, she looked at the 'About Me' section. It read: "It fills my mind and caresses my body. It kills my spirit and makes me move... so I move... And it makes me prove what I am and where I lie each time I die." Juliet's heart beat kicked up a few notches. She scrolled down the page madly, searching for more information about this person. With a few clicks, she found the bio information he had listed. It said that he was a man in his early twenties.

"Thank goodness," she exhaled as she moved back to the first page to read his blog.

"Today I saw a goddess. I was at work—bored as usual. She was hanging out at the university after hours. My guess is that she was waiting for her loser boyfriend. Who would keep a woman like that waiting? But maybe 'woman' is too strong a word for her, since she barely looked eighteen. She smelled like the ocean surf and flower petals blowing in the wind. She was utterly bewitching. I'm probably dreaming, but I can't get her out of my mind.

"If I introduced myself to her, do you think she'd be interested in me? Nah, I didn't think so either. Even if she is single, I'm too devilish for a girl like that."

Juliet smiled and scrolled to the bottom. She was going to comment, but when she got there she was surprised at how many people had already commented. There were comments from at least seven girls, all gushing at the sweetness of this guy.

Juliet wasn't sure if she wanted to comment after all, but he was one of the few people who consistently visited her blog, so she opened the window to send her comment. "You met a goddess today? Well, I met a vampire. Watch, those two will hook up and you and I will stay single. LOL! Thanks for visiting my blog."

Over the next couple of days, Juliet went back to the Student Group office several times. She asked the director if he remembered who he spoke to after her the first time she came in. Unfortunately, he had no idea.

"I talk to a lot of people, so sorry, I can't remember," he explained.

Juliet decided not to bother going back there since she had already found a student group to join. It was called the Occult's Addict and they met every Friday night at midnight, always at a different location. They had an office and Juliet went there after class one afternoon to find out where their next meeting would be held.

The door to their office was decorated in black paper with papier-mâché skulls attached to it. Lucky for Juliet, someone was home. The door was wide open and inside, a couple of people were talking.

She knocked and said, "Hi. Is this the Occult's Addict club room?"

There was a young man and a young woman in the room. Both the boy and the girl had white-blond hair that struck Juliet as almost unnatural, but at the same time she couldn't spot even a millimeter of root to indicate it was bleached. The blond went right to their scalps. The girl had blue eyes surrounded by black lashes, the boy had red eyes surrounded by white lashes, and both their eyebrows were white. Maybe it was natural after all. The boy stood up to greet her.

"Hello. How can I help you?" he asked lightly.

"I am interested in this club," Juliet explained.

"Well, come in," he said, making room for her to enter. "Have a seat," he indicated a bucket chair covered in an orange and black tiger print. "I'm Rylan and this is my twin sister, Taylor. She's the treasurer and I'm the secretary."

"Who's the president?" Juliet asked.

"Another set of twins. Well, one is the president and the other one is the vice president. Their names are Fiona and Halona. You don't have a twin, do you?"

"That's not a prerequisite, is it?"

"No," Taylor said, "But it is more fun that way. Interesting backgrounds make for interesting research."

"What kind of research?" Juliet asked.

"Well, what sort of things are you interested in, or rather, what activities would you be interested in participating in?" Taylor continued.

"Tarot cards," Juliet said.

Rylan laughed, "Tarot cards and horoscopes, eh? You're a first year, aren't you? Please tell me you don't have a teen girl magazine in your bag."

"I don't!" Juliet hotly defended. "I'm interested in other things, too."

"Like what?"

"Vampires, crop circles, demons, psychics... you know. Those sorts of things," she stuttered.

Rylan rolled his eyes, "Vampires, eh?" He seemed to be looking at something on the back of the club room door. Juliet couldn't see it from where she was sitting. "Yeah, we've got a few people we're investigating on campus, who we think could be vamps."

"I saw a guy yesterday that I thought might be one."

"Is this him?" Rylan asked as he turned his back to the door and kicked it shut.

As the door closed, the poster on the back came into view. It was a black and white picture of the guy she had seen in the Student Group office. He wasn't looking at the camera. It was a shot that accentuated his jaw and the vein that ran down his neck. There, in plain sight, were three perfect sets of bite marks.

"Has this photo been meddled with?" Juliet asked, getting up and touching the photograph with her fingertips.

"No," Taylor said.

"Is he part of this club?" Juliet continued, very excited.

"No. We house freaks, but not his kind."

"You wouldn't want a vampire to join you?" Juliet asked. She didn't understand.

"If he wanted to join, we'd be thrilled to have him, but," Rylan paused. "He wouldn't want to. None of the people we've tried to recruit have ever wanted to join. They like their secrets and more than anything else, they like to pretend like there is nothing wrong with them."

"Anyway," Taylor interrupted. "We're having our next meeting tomorrow night at midnight at the observatory. It'll be a nearly full moon and we're going to memorize the names of the craters and learn what the different phases mean when predicting the future. Do you want to come?"

Juliet's eyes almost bugged out of her head. "Of course I want to come," she blurted.

"Great," Taylor said, pulling out a membership application form. "Have this filled out when you come and don't forget the registration fee. We have to pay to rent

some of the venues we have our meetings at, as well as this club room, so your fifty dollar fee is very important to our survival as a club. Please don't forget it."

"Thanks," Juliet said as she took the paper.

"We'll look forward to seeing you," Rylan said, opening the door for Juliet.

"Wait!" she exclaimed. "Aren't you going to tell me who this guy is?"

Taylor shrugged. "He's one of our pet projects. We really wouldn't appreciate you running to him and telling him that we've been watching him. He probably wouldn't like it and if he reported us, we would get in trouble with University security, if not the police, for stalking him."

"I wasn't going to tell him, or anyone else. If you're investigating paranormal activities, doesn't that involve studying people most of the time?"

Rylan smiled. "You've got it exactly right, Juliet. Do show up tomorrow and we'll make you an official member. Besides, you're interested in fortune telling, right? Tomorrow should be right up your alley."

"Are you sure you can't at least tell me his name?" she begged. "I've been completely obsessed with him since I first saw him."

Taylor frowned and shook her hair. "His name is Seth Halkias."

Juliet grabbed the door and swung it so that she could see his picture again. "Seth, huh?" she said out loud, thinking of how completely captivating he looked. "Hey, can I write on this poster?" she suddenly asked. Her time spent in art class made her want to write and draw on anything that sparked her imagination.

"Go nuts," Rylan said as he threw her a set of markers. "He's probably just an ordinary guy who has a girlfriend with a vampire fetish."

"I hate how you always assume that everything is commonplace and boring," Taylor remarked.

Juliet couldn't take her eyes off the picture of Seth. She opened the set of markers and fumbled around until she found what she wanted—the red. She uncapped the felt pen with her teeth and began coloring on the paper.

"Think she's in love with him?" Rylan whispered behind Juliet's back.

"If she's not, it probably won't be long before she is," Taylor murmured.

Juliet didn't care what they were saying. She finished up and stepped away from her handiwork. She hadn't done much. She'd only colored his iris red, but in her mind, it was a vast improvement.

Taylor walked up behind Juliet and put her arm on Juliet's shoulder. "It looks better that way. Red eyes look the best, right Rylan? I think Fiona and Halona are going to love it."

Juliet pushed Taylor off and put the lid back on the marker. "If you ever decide that you don't want this picture anymore, I'll buy it." She turned over the bottom corner and wrote her email address with the black marker.

"How much?" Taylor asked.

Juliet looked at it. She wanted it in her dorm room so badly her mouth was watering. "A hundred," Juliet said.

"S-O-L-D!" Rylan and Taylor said together as they playfully slapped her on the back in unison.

She should have tried to bargain more before she said that grandiose amount. Since they took the picture, they could obviously make another copy if they wanted to.

"I'll even gift wrap it for you, so bring the money and you can pick it up tomorrow night," Taylor said, smiling.

"Now, you had better show up tomorrow!"

Juliet said goodbye to the twins and headed out of the clubroom and toward the elevators. She pressed the button and ruffled her hair. Life had just gotten unexpectedly interesting.

Chapter Two

Hang the Moon

Juliet arrived at the observatory a few minutes before midnight. It was early October. The weather was chilly, even though the first snow had not yet fallen. She had brought her winter coat as well as her toque to help fight the frigid wind. She didn't know how long she would be able to sit outside since the observatory was not an enclosed space, but simply a gigantic telescope on top of one of the science buildings. However, the top floor had a comfortable heated room that led out onto the roof, so everyone was meeting there before staring in wonder at the moon.

"Welcome!" Taylor called out in a tone that was almost friendly when Juliet came through the doors. "Glad you found the place okay."

"Yeah," Juliet said, shaking hands with Taylor.

"I don't think I caught your name yesterday," she said.

"I'm Juliet."

"This is Fiona and Halona," Taylor said pointing to two exquisitely beautiful blonde women. They looked like fourth years, or maybe even grad students, and almost exactly identical. They had taken to tinting their hair different colors in order to help people differentiate between the two of them. Fiona had tinted her hair silver, while Halona had tinted hers gold.

"Nice to meet you," Juliet said politely.

"You know Rylan," Taylor continued, introducing the people standing around the room.

Rylan was crouched in the corner with his laptop stretched across his lap. The bright screen illuminated his face as he examined something closely. He had quite a bit of equipment with him and a long tube of rolled up paper, undoubtedly her poster of Seth. Her fingers itched to open it.

"This is Blanche, Ceries and Tawnee," Taylor said, introducing Juliet to three more women. They were standing in a circle behind Fiona clasping hands and praying.

"Are they nuns?" Juliet couldn't help asking.

"Not exactly," Taylor said swiftly. "They are not triplets, just in case you were wondering. Tawnee is still in high school, but since not all of our membership has to be made up of university students, she is welcome to attend. Ceries is a first year like you and Blanche has been a member for a few years. You probably won't believe this, but they actually make up a small coven of white witches."

Juliet's eyes rose. "Really? Are they looking for members?"

Taylor shook her head. "No. Witches do things in threes. They wouldn't dream of taking you on unless you brought a couple more with you. You would have to help them have six members or nine or twelve. But, you're not a witch, are you?"

"No," Juliet said.

"Then you don't qualify. They only want real witches, the kind with real magic and if you don't have it, then you don't have it. It's as simple as that."

"So if they're witches, what are Fiona and Halona?"

Taylor waved to Fiona. "Talk to the president. She can answer for herself."

Fiona appeared and dismissed Taylor. Then she smiled and explained, "Halona and I are the true Gemini. We're not two souls trapped in the same body. We're one soul in two bodies. Our bond is such that we can feel each others' thoughts and wishes."

"What about Rylan and Taylor?" Juliet asked, eager to learn as much as she could.

"That's interesting," Fiona said, inviting Juliet over to sit down at a small table by one of the windows and drawing the conversation back to herself. "Normally, when I tell someone something about Halona and myself, they think we're crazy."

"I don't think you're crazy," Juliet said.

"No, I guess not. You are really into this stuff, aren't you?"

Juliet nodded eagerly.

"Taylor and Rylan are conjoined twins," Fiona said seriously, and then she waited for Juliet's response.

Something in Juliet's brain clicked and she immediately started up, "Are you sure? Aren't conjoined twins always the same gender because they are identical twins who haven't quite separated?"

"Very good," Fiona praised, although it appeared that she was only slightly impressed. "They say that they were joined at the hip, and I've seen their scars from when they were surgically separated, so I don't think they are lying. They say that one of them is cross dressing, so they might be two boys or two girls." Fiona glanced over to them. "I've been watching the two of them for years and I can't decide which gender they could both be. Sometimes Taylor's voice is so husky that I think that it couldn't possibly belong to a girl and other times Rylan's cheek is so smooth that I think that he couldn't possibly be a man. What do you think?"

Juliet glanced at the two of them. Taylor was sitting beside Rylan looking at something he was reading on his laptop. Taylor wasn't very curvy, but Juliet didn't feel like criticizing her for that since she wasn't very curvy herself. Juliet studied Rylan. When Juliet met them yesterday she had taken it for granted that Rylan was a man and Taylor was a woman. It was quite the mystery.

"I don't know," Juliet said to Fiona sheepishly. "I wish I could tell the difference."

"So do I," Fiona said. "I have a reason for explaining all this. You see, the Occult's Addict is not a club that Halona and I formed. Back in the day, Halona and I had to prove we had a psychic connection in order to gain membership."

"Really? How did they test you?"

"They took us into separate rooms and asked us random questions. We gave the same answer for ninety five percent of their questions. So, we were invited to join. Blanche, Cerie and Tawnee are witches and I've explained about Taylor and Rylan and Halona and I. The thing is, right now you only have trial membership. You only get full membership if you are or can do something unusual."

"Like what?"

"Once we had a girl who could bend spoons with her mind."

"I can't do that," Juliet said weakly.

"Let me see," Fiona said, thinking. "I heard you say you're not a witch. Psychic?"

Juliet shook her head.

"Rylan said that you like tarot cards. Do you tell an accurate fortune? Having a fortune teller could be cool."

Juliet shrugged her shoulders. "I could give it a try."

"Wait," Fiona said, raising her finger as though she had just thought of something brilliant. "What about vampire hunting?"

Juliet's eyes opened wide in shock. "Do you mean killing vampires?"

Fiona laughed. "I mean nothing of the sort. I just thought you might have a good time in our club if you researched some of our campus vamps. I might be able to get you full member status for something like that. If you're good at it."

Juliet thought about it for a second. She wasn't sure how to respond. She wasn't sure if she wanted to give updates to her club on how she was doing pursuing her crush.

Fiona noticed her indecision and said, "Well, you can think about that later. Did you bring your application with you?"

Juliet reached into her bag and brought out the papers.

Taylor sat down next to them while Fiona read through Juliet's application. Her eyes squinted several times as though she were surprised at Juliet's answers. Well, Juliet was surprised at some of their questions. They asked the usual questions like: Name? Date? How did you hear about us? What faculty are you in? But then they asked other questions and some of them Juliet didn't exactly want to answer. For one thing, they wanted a detailed account of where Juliet had lived her entire life. She'd been born in Toronto, but her parents moved to a small town called Clearwater and she couldn't remember living anywhere else. It was boring and she didn't like to talk about it. They also wanted to know what her ethnic background

was, which she didn't know. Her last name was Hudson, but her parents never talked about where their family had originally emigrated from.

"So Juliet," Taylor said, leaning across the table. "I brought you that lovely poster of Seth. Did you bring the money?"

"Yes," Juliet said, opening her wallet and parting with five very smooth twenty dollar bills that came straight from the ATM. She was going to regret spending it, but she said she would buy it, so she was on the hook.

"Here you go, darling," Taylor said, handing Juliet the poster. "Unroll it to make sure I haven't cheated you."

Juliet scooted the rubber bands off both ends and pulled it wide. She gasped. He was even more beautiful than she remembered. "Thank you Taylor. This is gorgeous."

Fiona smiled pleasantly and said, "Oh, and I think Rylan has something else for you, Juliet. That is, if you're interested in pictures of Seth."

"There are more!" Juliet exclaimed as she accidentally let go of one of the poster edges. It swiftly rolled back up.

"Yeah," Taylor said, a conspiring smile on her lips. "He even brought his mini printer. I think he's selling pics of him for five bucks a pop."

"Too expensive!" Juliet balked.

"Well, maybe he'll be willing to give you a deal if you're going to be a repeat customer. But, I think they're worth five dollars apiece."

"Go have a look," Fiona encouraged. "We've got a few minutes. Our little coven is still chanting for luck. Everyone has midterms next week."

Juliet replaced the rubber bands on the poster and joined Rylan on the floor.

"Hi Juliet," he said, offering her a piece of carpet. "I feel like a prick doing this, but our club needs my fundraising efforts. Anyway, these are the other pictures I took that day. These ones happen to be in color. Pity, it doesn't show. He's very monochrome."

Rylan made a slideshow of his pictures of Seth on his laptop screen and made them change every twenty seconds, but twenty seconds was not enough for Juliet. After a while, she decided that taking the pictures had to have been a combined effort. Yes, Seth was good looking, but Juliet doubted that he would have looked quite that good if Rylan hadn't worked hard searching for the perfect shot.

Suddenly, Halona returned to the foyer. Juliet had been so involved in her conversations that she hadn't even realized that she was gone. "Sorry it took so long, kittens, but we're finally ready to go."

Rylan shut his laptop and reached for his toque. "This should be fun for *you*," the tone he used was derogatory. Exactly like he could think of a hundred better things for him to be doing with his time, but he had to spend it here.

Juliet frowned at him. "Don't you like looking at the moon?"

His eyes flashed. "Until you've loved the moon, you've loved no one."

"Wow... deep," Juliet said callously, like she was getting him back for making fun of her.

Rylan swallowed hard and opened the glass door for Juliet to follow the others onto the roof. They all gathered around the telescope while Halona took the reins and led the lecture.

The sky was quite clear, though the light pollution from the city drowned out most of the stars. A few planets were visible. Juliet could see Venus, but she wasn't sure which one was Mars. The moon was bright too. Most of the face was showing, though it wasn't a full moon. The shadows of the craters fascinated Juliet. She couldn't wait until it was her turn to look through the telescope.

"Tonight we've got a waning gibbous moon," Halona said, explaining the shape. "Next week at this time, it'll be a waning crescent moon. Too bad our meetings are only on Friday nights, or we all would have been able to watch Blanche, Cerise and Tawnee dance naked under the full moon on Thursday."

"Har-har," Blanche said, far from amused.

"Okay, so when you look at the man in the moon, what are the names of the seas?"

Rylan answered without thinking, "The right eye is the Sea of Clouds. The left eye is made up of two seas; the Sea of Tranquility and the Sea of Serenity. The nose is called Central Bay and the mouth is called the Sea of Rains."

Fiona didn't look surprised, but Juliet was. "Way to go, Rylan. You really *do* love the moon."

He shrugged his shoulders like he didn't care for Juliet's praise when something caught their attention. Someone on the ground was shouting, or blowing a whistle, or perhaps both. Juliet went to the edge of the building to have a look at what was going on.

Down below, a man was chasing another across the grass. The man being chased was running awkwardly. Juliet watched as the graceful man pursuing him ran effortlessly and much faster. Within moments, he had overtaken the other. He forced him onto his stomach and pinned his wrists to his back. The man pinned to the dying grass yelled and screamed, but Juliet couldn't understand what he was saying across the distance.

"That's your boyfriend," Rylan said, as he joined Juliet.

"That's Seth?"

“Yep.”

“But why was he chasing that guy?” Juliet wanted to know.

“Oh, I don’t know. There could be loads of reasons. Seth’s always doing that sort of thing. He’s the director of Safewalk here on campus.”

“Safewalk? You mean that you call him when you want someone to walk you across campus when it’s late? How weird! He can’t be a vampire! A vampire would never take that kind of job.”

Rylan smiled knowingly. “Are you sure? I thought about it a lot too when I first spotted him and suspected he might be a vamp. But after a while, it seemed like the perfect cover. While it’s still controversial exactly why vampires prefer night, it’s still a given that they do. Safewalk doesn’t operate during the day. And it gives him an excellent reputation, because he’s doing something charitable. And he gets to see crazies like that guy down there all the time, so maybe he has a blood supply, though I’ve never caught him doing anything truly suspicious.”

“But Safewalk is so goody-two-shoes!” Juliet whined. “It’s not something a cool vampire would do at all.”

“Maybe not,” Rylan said peevishly. “But it does allow him an excuse to escort vulnerable female university students across campus. He might not have anything more complicated than that on his mind. Who’s to say? Maybe you should ask him.”

“Maybe I will,” Juliet said, still looking over the ledge at Seth, as he helped the officer from Campus Security lift the guy he’d just chased back on his feet. She looked at her watch. It was twelve thirty. She looked down at the scene and measured how long it would take him to finish up at campus security and head back to the Safewalk office to wait for another call. She squinted and watched them leave. Then she made up her mind. She’d call for a Safewalk in an hour—at one thirty. But until then, why not have a good time?

She tried to listen to Halona’s speech, but it was challenging. Afterwards the three little witches had brought white hot chocolate which they shared with everyone. Juliet had never seen such dainty little mugs as the ones they served their hot chocolate in. It was delicious. They even had the sense to squirt a little whipped cream on the top of each mug.

Juliet went out to the roof several times and looked through the telescope. She had wanted to learn the names of all the craters and seas, but the atmosphere distorted her vision of the moon. She couldn’t see anything through the telescope clearly, and felt bored with her dream of moon gazing. Instead, she settled for looking at the city lights.

Rylan came and stood beside her. He might have been hitting on her, but Juliet couldn’t get the idea out of her head that he might be a girl and so she couldn’t stop

looking for clues that would lead her to the truth of his identity. She was far more interested in unraveling the mystery, but if he was hitting on her, he was going about it the wrong way. He was still trying to sell her pictures of Seth. Before one thirty she bought a small stack that he printed on his mini printer, but none of them were as good as her poster.

A few minutes before one thirty, Juliet said she was done for the night and that she was going to head back to the dorms.

"Right," Fiona said, suddenly standing up and commanding the attention of the other club members. "Juliet said she's done for tonight, so I'll announce the next meeting. The next meeting will be in the Forestry's greenhouse. Blanch is going to teach us about the medicinal properties of some of the plants there. Interesting, eh? Don't forget, Juliet. We'll meet at midnight next Friday. Don't miss it."

"I won't," Juliet said as she excused herself.

"Here, I'll walk you back," Rylan said, probably using his best gentleman voice.

"No need," Juliet said with a wink. "I'm going to call Safewalk."

Rylan clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. "I knew that I shouldn't have told you that."

"Oh come on! It's not so lame as all that."

"It's way lamer, since an hour ago you didn't think what he was doing was sexy," Rylan said blankly. "Well, whatever. I'll see you next week." He turned around and went back to the others.

Juliet put the photographs he'd printed in her bag before she realized the hypocrisy of his statement. She wasn't going to let him get away with it. She went back toward Rylan and said, "Hey, why are you giving me a hard time? You knew I was interested in him, you even sold me pictures of him, so why are you acting like it's pathetic that I want to meet him?"

"That's not what's pathetic," he said, scratching his ear.

"Then what?" Juliet demanded.

"Hey, just go," he said in a slightly different tone of voice. "There's no reason why you can't call him. Go ahead. I'm sure you'll have a great time."

Juliet didn't know what he was talking about, but she'd had enough, so she turned around and headed toward the elevator. She was pretty sure there was a red Safewalk phone on the main level.

Chapter Three

A Little Fire

After Juliet called the Safewalk office, she stood in the foyer and waited for her escort. She wasn't surprised when Seth showed up, but she was surprised by the girl he had with him. *Why couldn't he have come on his own?* she wondered angrily.

"Hi. Are you Juliet?" Seth asked in deep, mellow tones, and then he gave her a heart-stopping smile. He almost had a dimple in his left cheek.

She managed to smile back, nod, and collect her backpack from off the floor.

The girl who was with him looked bored. She wore a Safewalk hoodie and she buried her hands in her pockets. Juliet despised the moments she had to spend evaluating Seth's partner, because those were precious seconds that should have been spent adoring him, but she suspected that the girl might be a form of competition since she and Seth obviously knew each other. The girl had dark eyes and the most attractive splatter of freckles across her nose, but she did not smile or speak. Juliet rejected the idea that hoodie-girl had a significant relationship with Seth and turned her attention completely toward him.

"I'm Seth," he said, "and this is Nixie. Where are we taking you?"

"Lister," Juliet answered cheerfully.

"Wonderful," he said, and there was something in his voice that made it sound like it was exceptionally wonderful. It was quite a walk from the science buildings to Lister Hall. Was he really excited to be taking her all that way? It seemed too good to be true.

As they started walking, the wind picked up. Seth and Juliet walked side-by-side on the pavement while Nixie fell slightly behind them. It was getting cold and Juliet's breath froze in the air.

She shivered and said out loud, "Wow, it's cold. I wish I brought my gloves."

"Seth," Nixie called from behind. "Since it's so cold, why don't you link arms with Juliet? Maybe you could even hold her hand in your pocket as we walk. It's a really long way to the dorms."

Juliet felt distinctly uncomfortable, since Nixie was clearly making fun of her, but all the same she couldn't resist seeing how Seth reacted.

His head was turned and he looked back at Nixie, like he thought her suggestion was amusing rather than alarming.

"Let's hurry," he said, quickening his pace.

Juliet skipped a little to catch up with Seth, but when she turned around, she saw that Nixie had slowed her step in response to Seth's request. Soon they were out of earshot, but Seth slowed down to give Nixie a chance to catch up.

"We don't always get along, Nixie and I, but it's Safewalk rules that all teams have to be made up of guy/girl partnerships. It's because girls like you are afraid to walk with two guys. If a guy and a girl go with them then everyone's supposed to be more comfortable."

"What about the guys you walk? Are they more comfortable?"

"Ah, they don't call. Actually, most of the time when I've escorted guys, it's because they need help carrying their library books... either that or they got hammered at the Powerplant," he laughed as he mentioned one of the campus bars.

"Are you serious?"

"Always," he said, giving her another flirtatious smile.

Nixie caught up and passed them. "Come on," she snorted. "I want to get back to the office and get a cocoa. Let's move."

Seth smiled and obeyed.

That was the end of Seth's dialogue and in truth Juliet was glad. She found his presence slightly overpowering and in the back of her mind there was a little voice that warned her that if she chatted him up too much he would ask about the rolled up paper she carried just to make conversation. Her fear of being discovered as a pathetic groupie was enough to keep her tongue tied. She would try to talk to him again without the poster.

They dropped her off in the lobby of the dorms and headed out again with little more than a wave. It looked like Seth would have taken her all the way to her room, but Nixie's phone was buzzing which meant they had another job.

Juliet forced herself to turn around and walk with confidence up the stairs. She wanted to look a little cool, so she didn't watch him leave.

Once she was back in her room, she was too wound up to sleep. Instead, she took off her winter gear and pinned up her poster. She decided the only safe place was on one of the sliding doors on her closet. That way, she could at least hide it if someone she didn't want to see it happened to be in her room. That was wishful thinking. Seth probably had a girlfriend. Actually, he probably had a collection of girlfriends. She didn't have a chance with him. He definitely wouldn't be visiting her dorm room, so there was nothing to worry about.

After that, she put on her pajamas and got into bed, but she had no intention of sleeping, so she hooked up her laptop. Once she had it open, she went directly to her blog and wrote all about her first night with the Occult's Addict. She wasn't sure if

she wanted to talk about calling Safewalk to have her vampire walk her home. In the end, she wrote it out, but refrained from posting it on the internet.

She checked her email, wrote a few of her friends back home and then surfed the web.

It was a while before she made her way to ReadyEyes808's blog, but when she finally did, she discovered she was very interested in what he had to say. The title was 'Step into the Confessional.'

He started out, "Forgive me for I have sinned. I'm always sinning, but tonight I found myself standing at the threshold of temptation. A few posts ago, I mentioned that I saw a goddess. Tonight, I met her. You should have seen her eyes. Before tonight's fateful meeting, I thought she radiated goodness, but now that I've seen her more closely, I see that I was mistaken. It was innocence. Once I carefully examined her, it was clear she doesn't have a boyfriend. She has never had a boyfriend. Like a child, she has never been consumed by the flavors of desire, jealousy, or fear; never felt hate, isolation, or obsession. She has never once left herself out to spoil.

"For someone like me, the stainless virgin is far more devastating than if she had been good—like my first impression.

"If she had been good, I would have been able to play my true role. I wouldn't have had to hide any of myself from her. Women who are truly good are havens for men like me. When I throw myself on the mercy of a good woman it is a precious experience, because a woman like that knows exactly how to comfort me. I'll spend an entire night from midnight to six telling a good woman what I am and she patiently listens and offers comfort at all the correct moments. It would be a perfect situation, except a woman like that always wants to reform me. An innocent girl somehow isn't tipped off that there's something unfathomably wrong just by looking at me. The innocence inspires me to hide what I really am. Why? Because she's not the mind reader a good woman is. I can get away with anything.

"I throw lies into conversation seamlessly and act like everything is fine. I'm normal. She accepts me, because she doesn't know she should be afraid. She doesn't have the experience to be warned by the smaller signals. It would be heaven to meet a woman who desires me for who I really am, and for me to have the confidence to be exactly that. To move like I naturally do, speak the way I do, look the way I do. That's all a dream to me, because everything I do is a lie. I have to hide my eyes which reveal my unnaturalness. Unless I make a conscious effort to the contrary, my eyes look tragic—hopeless. Why? Because I am completely without hope. But tonight, around this innocent girl, my charade was worse than even I am liable to be. Even my best friend noticed and commented that I was acting like I was on the prowl.

"And why shouldn't I be on the prowl? I'm young. I would like a girlfriend. I'm alone and it makes me restless.

"Because it is impossible for love to exist for me. Love is lifeless. Only heartbreak and ruin could follow my relationship with that girl if it should grow. In my mind, I can see what she would turn into if we got together. I'm not a fortune teller, but I can see it as easily as if the future has already become the past.

"She's sitting in my armchair at six o'clock in the morning. She hasn't slept all night because I wouldn't let her and she's smoking a cigarette. There are purple lines under her eyes. I can feel her exhaustion, but I don't feel sorry for her, because she didn't escape when she had the chance. Her wrist looks pathetically slender as she moves her hand to and from her mouth. She's lost twenty or thirty pounds since I first saw her. The scent of apple blossoms is gone and what was once pure has turned a hideous gray. If she hadn't gotten involved with me, who knows what bright future she would have, but once she falls under my shadow, she's a little more than a corpse.

"Since that's my guess for our future, I won't pursue her, no matter how much I'm drawn to her. She's like a beautiful blank piece of paper I have no business writing on. I have nothing to offer. Not friendship or love or devotion...

"There's no love in this world and practically no life... not for me. This place becomes more and more of a wasteland in my eyes each day. And the worst part is there is no end. I can't let up. I deserve it. And there is no way she deserves to be stripped of everything about her that was gentle and decent.

"I'll never meet that girl again."

As Juliet read his post, her heart was filled with such a deep sorrow she almost cried. She couldn't believe anyone felt that desperate, that anyone despaired that much. She uploaded her comment as soon as possible. She had to be gentle and encouraging. She couldn't allow anyone to feel that depressed. It was against her very nature.

"Dear ReadyEyes808," she wrote and as she typed she tried to envision a human being at the end of that name, even though it was an alias.

"I wish desperately that I was there beside you tonight. I wish that I could soothe you and comfort you. The voice you use in your writing makes me feel desolate. I wish I could shelter you from your self-loathing and show you a brighter way. I don't know you very well, but I have felt your friendship across the circuits and wires of the internet. I only know you as the one who comes to comment on my blog. You have visited more consistently than any of my old friends from high school. And even though it probably hasn't meant much to you, it has been one of the high points of my day. I wouldn't even mind meeting you in real life. I'm sure we would make

excellent friends. Goodnight, my sweet. Don't forget, there are always people who care what happens to you."

She signed her alias and wished that there was more that she could do.

Juliet woke up the next morning with her laptop stuck between her bed and the wall. She had barely managed to close it before she drifted off to sleep. She must have kicked it off the bed during the night. Now, she was pulling it out and apologizing to it like it was a person.

"I'm sorry, Lappy," she mumbled. "I'll always set you on the floor nicely before I zonk out from now on. I promise."

Then she turned to see Seth's glorious face and the three perfect bite marks down the side of his neck. "Good morning to you, too, Seth. Thanks for watching over me last night. Today has to be good because you were the last person I saw last night and the first thing I saw when I woke up," she said with a playful shrug of her shoulders.

After that, Juliet went down to the cafeteria and had a bowl of Frosted Flakes in a cup. She didn't even realize that she was alone until she happened to see Elise having breakfast with some people at a different table. She didn't even have the sense to feel awkward when Elise's eyes met hers. Instead, she merely gulped down the rest of her breakfast and went back to her room.

It was Saturday, so she had a few errands to run. They weren't much, but she needed to get a load of laundry done in the laundromat and then she needed to visit a supermarket. Her dorm room was pathetically empty of all snacks. Then she had a paper to write. Her day was so booked she didn't even think her life as devoid of friends as she hauled a bag of dirty clothes to the elevator.

"Besides," she reassured herself. "I am part of the Occult's Addict and the rest... doesn't really matter." She had great plans to call for another Safewalk after the meeting next Friday. The thought of that was enough to carry her through her day.

Juliet read one of her textbooks while her laundry flopped around in the machines. She had been lucky to get a machine and happy that she only had one load to do.

Needless to say, it was a while before she checked her email. She scrolled through the university notices until she found one message marked differently. It was from ReadyEyes808.

"01Pearl_Moon," it started out. "I suppose the number one at the beginning of your name must mean that you are the only pearl moon. Sorry, I'm cheesy early in

the morning, but your comment on my blog really meant something to me. You sound like one of those 'good girls' I talked about in my entry. I know it's probably way out there, but you said you wouldn't mind meeting me. I know meeting people online is scary, but I'll tell you what. If you're ever at the University of Alberta, please let me know and I'll tell you how to find me. I wouldn't mind meeting you either."

Then he signed it, "ReadyEyes808."

"Whoa!" Juliet gasped.

Chapter Four

Fountain of Good Fortune

Juliet stared at her laptop screen. Yes, it said what she thought it did. ReadyEyes808 went to her school. She could meet him if she wanted to. He had given away his personal information without the slightest worry, but the idea of meeting him in person was a little daunting for her.

She realized what she had said to ReadyEyes was fairly irresponsible. She spouted off that line about wanting to meet him while thinking she wouldn't actually have to. Normally, when she chatted with people on the internet, they were from the other side of the world and a meeting would have been impossible.

What was she going to do?

She abruptly closed her laptop and went for a walk. At first, she was simply wandering, but eventually she found herself looping her way down to the Student Group office and heading toward the Occult's Addict club room. It was only a coincidence that she happened to pass Safewalk on the way. Who was she kidding? It was four o'clock in the afternoon. There was no way Seth would be walking anyone until after dark, so no matter how sneaky she tried to be about it, there was no possibility of 'accidentally' running into him.

In actuality, she didn't think the club room would be open either. That's why she was surprised when she turned the corner and saw the door wide open.

She tiptoed up.

When she peeked around the corner, she saw Rylan, with his back to the door, leaning over the office computer looking at some pictures of crop circles.

Juliet smiled. That was one of the topics she said she was interested in. Was it possible that he was investigating it for her? Maybe. Maybe not. Whichever, the idea, no matter how unlikely, put Juliet in a good mood.

"Hiya!" she greeted pleasantly as she paused in the door frame.

Rylan wasn't even surprised. "You have the stalking ability of a groundhog," he said lazily without even turning around. "But you're welcome to come in."

Juliet found herself a place to sit in the cluttered office. "I had a good time last night at the observatory."

"Really?" Rylan drawled, closing the open windows on his desktop and turning his attention toward Juliet.

"Was looking at the moon really that boring for you?" she asked.

He smiled and brushed his white bangs off his forehead. "Of course not. It's just that Taylor and I have been in this club since our first year. The only new members we've got in all that time have been the witches and although they can do some pretty amazing tricks, they're white witches, and that's the boring part."

"You prefer black magic?" Juliet asked coyly.

"I would prefer something interesting. Like you for instance." As he said those last four words his eyes zeroed in on Juliet's.

His intensity made Juliet jump. "I'm not anything special," she said, blushing slightly and sweeping away his comment like he hadn't made it. He was probably just joking anyway.

"We'll see," he said, taking a starship paperweight off the desk and balancing it on the back his fingers.

Just at that moment, Juliet got an idea. What if she asked Rylan about her problem with ReadyEyes?

"Hey Rylan," she started. "Have you ever met someone you know on the internet in person?"

He arched one eyebrow curiously and then laughed. "No, but that's not to say that I wouldn't. It would depend."

"Depend on what?"

"Depend on how I felt about them and what kind of connection we had. If it was a girl, I wouldn't hesitate. I'd want to meet her immediately—no questions asked. If it was a guy... I don't know why I would want to meet him, unless he was claiming to be a werewolf or something, and if that was the case, I'd invite the whole Occult's Addict to meet him, too."

"Ah, but I'm a girl."

"So, you're meeting a guy?"

Juliet nodded.

"Romantic? Ugh! Please tell me that you didn't meet him in a singles chat room. If you did, I'll have you banned from the club on charges of being insipid."

"No," Juliet countered, quick to dispel his fears. "I met him through my blog. He's a regular visitor."

"You have a blog?" Rylan asked inquisitively.

She smiled. "Yeah."

"Can I have the address, so I can be a regular visitor, too?" he asked, opening his browser and waiting for her to tell him the address.

She told him and he quickly typed it in.

"Ah," he said when the page finished loading. "This is adorable, and for your last entry you wrote about our meeting last night. That's really good of you, but I see you

haven't written anything about Seth. Considering the level of your obsession, I half expected that you would have already uploaded the pictures I sold you last night. Instead, you haven't mentioned his name, but you've put my name in three times. I'm honored."

"I didn't want to talk about Seth online," she mumbled, wondering why in the hell she had given Rylan permission to look at her entry. When he asked her if he could look at it, she'd forgotten that she'd written anything at all about him and was only thinking about what his thoughts might be on the formatting. It hadn't even occurred to her that he would actually read the stupid thing.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered blankly, clearly playing dumb. After meeting Seth last night while carrying her poster of him, she felt the remorse of a hopeful groupie. He was not going to fall in love with a girl who adored him by putting a poster of him on her wall, especially because he didn't even know he was being photographed. That settled it. No more buying pictures of Seth from Rylan. No more ridiculous behavior. At least, that was what she told herself.

"Well? Wasn't Seth as good up close up as he is on paper?" Rylan asked, rousing her from her thoughts.

She had to act like she didn't care. She shrugged her shoulders and asked him if he liked her layout.

"It's beaut," he said, before he clicked on her comment bar and saw a comment posted by ReadyEyes.

It was one Juliet hadn't even seen yet, because she had been so caught up in his email she hadn't bothered to check to see if he had commented on her blog.

It read, "Your student group sounds fascinating. I wish I had the time to participate in something like that. It really fits the image I have of you. Make sure you write a detailed post about your next meeting. I would be really interested in hearing what crazy stuff you get up to."

"Is it this guy, ReadyEyes808?" Rylan asked.

"Yep."

"He sounds like a wanker. I wouldn't bother meeting him if I were you."

Then, to Juliet's horror, Rylan clicked on his name and was directed to his blog. There was his post *Step into the Confessional*. Juliet wanted to close the window to stop Rylan from reading it, but she dared not wrestle the mouse out of his hand. Besides, if he loaded it once, he would be able to read it anytime he wanted, even if she stopped him from reading it in front of her. She paced around the room, smothering her urge to stop him. Maybe he'd change his mind about ReadyEyes

being a wanker, but Rylan probably thought that everyone except himself was nothing.

When he was finished reading he turned to Juliet and said, "I've changed my mind."

"Really?" she asked, totally shocked.

"Yes. I think you should invite this guy to come to the meeting on Friday. Do you think he'll be able to come?"

"Yeah, probably. He told me he has classes here."

"Really? Then you should definitely invite him. Like I said, it would be interesting to get some new blood in here and he sounds warped. He'd probably make a good boyfriend for Taylor, so make sure to invite him."

"Wait, are you sure?"

"Yeah. Besides, we'll watch your back and make sure nothing bad happens."

"Okay," Juliet nodded. She was a little bewildered, but what Rylan said made sense. Inviting ReadyEyes to the club activity was a perfect way for her to meet him for the first time.

"So, it's almost five." Rylan said. "Want to go out to supper with me?"

"A date?" Juliet asked, perking up a little bit.

"Not a date. Remember that Taylor and I are still playing our little game?"

"Oh right. No one knows whether the two of you are both female or both male."

"Yeah, and I don't want to blow my cover. Taylor's still having a lot of fun laughing at everyone for not being able to figure out the truth."

Juliet frowned. "Well, if you're not a guy, then you've fooled me. Sometimes it even feels like you're flirting with me."

"I am flirting with you, but it's up to you whether you want to flirt back... knowing what you know," he said, meeting her eyes again in the most serious way.

In just one second, Juliet made her brain think of him as a woman instead of a man and it made her feel dizzy. "If you're a girl, then you've got the whole 'guy' act down perfectly."

"And if I'm a guy?"

"Then you shouldn't play with my feelings for your amusement. Be honest about who you are," she said, getting up and leaving the club room.

"Hey, what about dinner?" Rylan called after her.

"Some other time," she said over her shoulder.

He got up and went to the door to talk to her. "Wait. What are you going to do instead?"

"I think I'll see if I can instant message ReadyEyes. I'll invite him to our meeting this Friday."

"I'd rather you ate with me and put ReadyEyes on hold. Do you really like him that much?"

Juliet took a deep breath before she answered him. "Listen, I know that it really shouldn't matter if you're a girl or a guy in order for us to be friends, but I'm having a hard time reacting to you. I don't want to put any pressure on you to reveal your true identity to me, but I'm..."

"Straight," he answered for her, looking bored.

"Yeah."

"Well, why did you have such a hard time saying it? It's obvious, especially after the way you were chasing Seth last night."

"Sorry," Juliet flushed. "That's a little embarrassing the next day. I'm just..."

Rylan waited patiently for her to finish.

"I just would feel a lot more comfortable if I knew whether or not you are what you seem to be."

"Well, work hard. Maybe you'll be the first one to figure it out," he said smoothly before he grabbed his coat and switched off the clubroom lights. "See you later, Juliet."

Juliet walked to the elevator with him and playfully smacked his shoulder with the flat of her hand. "Hey, don't be in such a hurry to say 'goodbye.' We still have to take the elevator together."

Rylan stepped into the elevator with a sigh and pressed the button to take them down. "Isn't the fun almost too much?" he said sarcastically.

Even though Juliet said she was going to try to get ReadyEyes online, it took a lot of nerve to log into her account to invite him to chat with her. She agonized over it for most of the evening before she finally did it. In the end, the only reason she was able to press the 'finish' button was because she kept telling herself, "He won't be online. He won't be online. Even if his status says he is, he's probably away from his keyboard."

However, he wasn't AFK, and he accepted her invitation.

"Hi," Juliet typed hesitantly.

"Hi," he replied immediately.

"This is going to take forever," Juliet moaned. Then she got down to business typing to ReadyEyes what she had on her mind. "I was really intrigued when I got your email saying that you attend the UofA. I go there, too."

It was a second before his answer came through. "Really? Do you still want to meet me?"

Juliet was a little reluctant to answer, but Rylan had said the whole Occult's Addict would stand behind her. "Yes," she typed. "My club is meeting this Friday in the Forestry's greenhouse at midnight. Would you like to come?"

"I have to work," was his response. "But give me a little time, and I might be able to find a replacement."

"It's okay. If you can't make it to this meeting, you could come to the next one. My club is called the Occult's Addict." She posted the link to their web page. "You can look at the schedule on their site. I just joined, so I'm not listed as one of the members, but I'm very interested in it, so I can pretty much promise I'll be at their meetings from now on."

"I'll be there. I already found someone to take my place."

Juliet gawked. "That fast?" she typed.

"Yeah. I'm at work right now, so it was easy."

"Should you really be playing around on the internet when you're at work?"

"You make it sound so irresponsible," he responded. "But it's not. A couple of other guys are playing on the Playstation."

"What kind of job do you have?"

"A very respectable one, I assure you."

"It sure sounds like it." She added a wink made out of a semicolon and a right bracket.

"Well, do you want to tell me your name, or do you want to leave it a secret until the last second?"

"Isn't that more fun?"

"Then how will I know you?" he typed.

"Let me think..."

"...I'm waiting..."

"Okay, I'll be wearing a green sweater."

"I'll see you then, but right now I've got to go. Got a call."

Juliet's mood went a little flat as his icon turned red. Juliet stayed online until she went to bed, but ReadyEyes didn't sign in again. It was too bad, she thought, she wanted to get to know him better before they met.

After turning off the lights, she stretched out in bed and thought about Seth, Rylan and ReadyEyes. If things went well at the meeting on Friday, she'd get to meet ReadyEyes without much trouble, he'd leave before she did, Rylan wouldn't cause any trouble and she'd get to call Seth for a walk at the end of the night.

Juliet didn't see ReadyEyes online again before their meeting. He didn't email her, he didn't comment on her blog, and he didn't make any new posts on his own, which Juliet thought was amazing considering how many girls posted on his blog to express their sympathy regarding his wretched state. Most of them sounded a lot like her. Was he planning to meet all of them? *Yuck!* She was starting to doubt the sanity of promising to meet him. If Rylan hadn't offered her the safety of numbers, she would have backed out by now.

Even though ReadyEyes didn't write anything in his blog, that didn't stop Juliet from writing in hers. She wrote several entries. She posted a paper she wrote for one of her classes, posted one of her poems (inspired by the poster of Seth on her closet door, though she wouldn't have wanted to admit it), and one where she ranted about the increasing anxiety she felt with midterms coming up.

Since she'd given Rylan her blog address, he became a regular visitor. Though he didn't admit his name, his alias was Force_of_Destruction. At least, Juliet didn't think it could be anyone else. For the post that housed her paper, he said what he expected her grade to be (he was only off by two percent when she got her paper back on Friday morning). For the poetry, he pointed out a spelling error and commented on how innocent she was.

His exact words were, "Poor child, still wishing to be a vampire's victim. If only I had fangs to turn your throat to ribbons, then I'd have your heart, and the rest wouldn't matter to you."

Juliet was a little annoyed by his remark. It was true that she was fascinated by the dark majesty of a vampire, especially by the romance and mystery of that kind of relationship provided, but she didn't often reflect upon the price that had to be paid. In short, she had never considered being murdered by a vampire, and when she did think of it, the idea seemed ridiculous. Instead, his cynicism only diminished her pleasure dreaming of a dark lover. It felt like Rylan had seen through her visions and wanted to point out the obvious evils she ignored with the power of her idealism. She hated him for bringing it up when she what she wanted wasn't a fantasy. Seth was unattainable, but what was so wrong with dreaming about him?

Monster, she thought angrily before she typed her reply. "With that sense of humor, even if you had the sharpest canines in the world, my throat would still be out of your reach."

She didn't believe that Rylan could melt her heart after he had offended her, but when she complained about the course load and how much work she had to do, he was awfully sympathetic.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he had written politely. "I know what you're going through. We all go through it at this time of year. If you tell me what courses you're taking, I might be able to help you. I think I wrote an essay like yours for a philosophy class I took. Please come by the clubroom and I'll give you all the help you could possibly want. And if things still go wrong, I'll cram you full of junk food and then I'll let you admire my photo album (there's something there I know you'll be interested in)."

Then he signed it, "Your loving pal, 4ofD."

Juliet wouldn't normally have been touched, but she didn't have anyone to turn to when it came to school work. His offer meant something because she knew he wasn't bluffing. He really would help her. Besides, when was the last time anyone had paid that much attention to her? She couldn't even remember.

Juliet slipped her green sweater over her head. It was an old sweater, but it was the one she promised ReadyEyes she would wear that night. As a matter of fact, it was her secret weapon. She looked fantastic in green because of her eyes, and the soft pond-water green of that sweater made it the most accenting piece of clothing she owned. It was short through the body with extremely long sleeves and a charming boat neck, but that wasn't the most charming thing about it. It was fuzzy. When she paired it with a long bodied white tank top, the straps showed at the neck and the body of it covered her stomach, which was good, considering how cold it was.

After putting on her jeans and enough black mascara to make her eyelashes catch any man's attention, she felt like she was ready to go. At ten to midnight she left her dorm room and headed toward the Forestry's greenhouse. Once she was half-way there she realized that she should have called for Safewalk to escort her, but it was already too late.

"Next time," she promised herself as she hurried, but she still felt stupid for not thinking of it sooner.

The Forestry's greenhouse was an extension of the main building and it was actually closer to her dormitory than the science building. It only took her a few minutes to walk there.

Juliet approached the doors, peering speculatively through the glass.

"Wow," she whispered appreciatively. "I didn't know there was a place this beautiful on campus."

Through the glass windows, she saw the interior of the greenhouse. There were cement walkways, glistening fountains, steady pools of water, exotic trees with

foreign crimson blossoms. As she opened the doors and entered, she heard the chirping of birds. The members of the Occult's Addict were already assembled in the center, and the witches were setting up dragonfly-shaped patio lights around the center of the room.

"This place is amazing," Juliet breathed, as she stood in the middle of their arrangement.

"Yeah, it is. Haven't you been here before? It's one of the sights on campus. And look, there are fish in the fountains," Taylor said.

Juliet saw the white and orange koi racing through the water.

"They're just here during the cold season. They'll be in the outside fountains this summer."

"Hey," Juliet said, looking around. "Where's Rylan?"

"Oh, he's somewhere. He's probably pouting. He's been in the foulest mood today. Something's bugging him. But what about you?" Taylor asked, suddenly changing the topic. "I hear you invited a guy you met on the internet to the meeting? It's good of you to incorporate your date with our club. We can always use more members, you know." Heady excitement was lighting up Taylor's eyes.

"Yeah, he should be here any second. Which reminds me," Juliet said as she took off her coat. "I told him I'd be wearing a green sweater."

"So, you don't know what he looks like?"

"No. Is that bad?"

Taylor answered, but Juliet didn't hear her because just then, the most astonishing thing happened. Seth Halkias, the director of Safewalk, the object of Juliet's wildest and most passionate dreams, walked through the door.

Juliet's heart felt like it took a plunge in the fountain behind her—the fountain of good fortune—and she didn't even have to throw in a quarter.

Chapter Five

Wildest Dreams

There he was. Seth Halkias stood in the doorway surveying the membership of the Occult's Addict. His near-black hair was falling into his eyes and brushing his white cheek. Juliet could not believe her good luck as she stood, hypnotized by him. She could hardly focus, but she wanted to remember everything: the brown khaki pants, the layers of gray and green T-shirts, the red rose in his hand. *He was holding a red rose? Who was that for?*

Juliet nearly screamed as his sherry colored eyes settled on her and focused on her green sweater. Then he walked up to her with steady, even strides and extended the rose to her.

Then, it clicked. Was it possible that Seth Halkias was ReadyEyes808?

"Hi," he said easily. "Thanks for agreeing to meet me, though we've met before. Your name's Juliet, right?"

Juliet took the rose and touched its petals with her fingertips. She gulped nervously before responding. "Thank you. Yes, I'm Juliet. I remember you walked me home last week. You're Seth, the director of Safewalk. So, that explains why you're allowed to instant message and play video games when you're at work."

"Basically." Seth laughed. "See? I told you. It's very respectable."

"Very."

He put his hands in his pockets, completely ignoring everyone else in the room, even though they were all staring at him. Then a half-smile played upon his lips in self-ridicule. "Yeah, if I'd known Pearl Moon was going to be you, I would not have got you a red rose."

"Why not?" she asked, slightly affronted.

He smiled weakly before locking eyes with her and saying unabashedly, "I would have gotten you a bouquet of white lilies. Red isn't really for you."

"Aren't lilies for funerals?" Fiona said, interrupting their exchange and making her presence known.

Seth turned his head slightly toward her, "Depends on your culture, doesn't it? For some of us, they symbolize youth and beauty." His voice was smooth and completely unruffled by Fiona's challenge.

"You know about that sort of thing?" Fiona gushed, changing her tune. "You really belong with us tonight. We're discussing plants and their medicinal properties. Please join us."

"That was the plan all along," he said, putting his hand in the small of Juliet's back and guiding her toward the knot of members in the center of the greenhouse.

Everyone sat together on the floor in a circle on straw mats that the three witches had brought. The witches provided the food. The menu, though small, was delicious. They served mango and pomegranate on large green leaves. When the mango slices reached Seth, Rylan perked up. Juliet knew he was watching carefully to see if Seth would eat the fruit. He wanted to see if he was really a vampire.

Seth declined saying, "Sorry, I gag on mango." But he willingly accepted the pomegranate which was served scored and still attached to the rind. He broke off and ate the kernels expertly. Juliet had never seen anyone eat anything so beautifully. There was one moment when a drop of red juice dripped down the side of his chin.

Juliet stared.

"Is there something on my face?" Seth asked, smiling broadly. So broadly in fact that the corners of his mouth spread like a curtain to unveil two very sharp-looking canines.

"Blood," Juliet mumbled, completely mesmerized by the red on the powder-white of his flesh.

"What did you say?" Seth asked, leaning forward.

Juliet pulled herself together and said, "You've got a little juice on your chin."

"Really? How crass!" He pulled a handkerchief from one of his cargo pockets and wiped his face.

But Juliet couldn't get the vision of his fangs and the red dribble, like blood, out of her mind. Her rational self told her that he probably wasn't a vampire, especially since he ate fruit with enjoyment, but for the romantic appeal of that picture, he might as well have been.

The group talked about the different plants in the greenhouse, but Juliet couldn't focus on their conversation. She saw only Seth. When she wasn't looking at him, she felt his eyes on her, but she had to push that idea out of her head. There was no way he could be interested in her. He was clearly completely out of her league.

By the end of the meeting, Fiona was working hard to recruit him. She explained how Blanche, Cerise and Tawnee were witches and then she told him about her and Halona's psychic powers. He didn't look at all surprised or doubtful of the truth of her words, but when she explained about Taylor and Rylan being conjoined twins, he gave a disgusted sigh.

"They're lying," he said scornfully.

"Beg your pardon," Taylor said, popping her head around Tawnee's back. "What did you just say?"

"You're lying," he said without apology, looking directly into her eyes.

Fiona was a little confused at his hostility and shifted her position to back-up Taylor and Rylan. "They have the scars from when they were separated. Do you want to see them? You're probably just thinking that conjoined twins have to be the same gender. I should warn you, one of them is cross-dressing. It's a game they like to play."

Seth didn't look one iota impressed or deterred. "No. They are lying. Taylor is a woman and that," he said, pointing to Rylan, "Is male."

"Prove it," Halona challenged.

Seth gave her a funny look like he couldn't believe what she was requesting.

"Without stripping them," she amended after an awkward moment passed.

"Explain why you think they're lying."

Seth took a deep breath and began. "I admit that both Taylor and Rylan each have a sort of androgynous quality to them. Rylan doesn't have facial hair and Taylor isn't curvy, however there's a lot about them to prove they're not faking their genders." He lifted his hands and started counting his reasons on his fingers. "If they were conjoined twins they would need to be identical. They're not. I know a lot of identical twins don't look exactly alike even though they're supposed to, but Taylor and Rylan have too many differences in their features. Rylan's mouth is wider; his earlobes are detached while hers are attached. Most obvious of all, they have different eye colors."

"He's wearing contacts," Halona countered.

"No, he isn't," Seth contradicted. "His eyes are red. Ask him to take out his contacts."

Everyone's attention switched to Rylan. He was stretched out on one of the mats, flipping through a book of photographs.

A muscle around his mouth twitched while everyone waited for his response. "Since it doesn't constitute dropping my pants, I'll do it once he's finished. I want to hear the rest."

Seth shrugged his shoulders and said, "You want me to go on? The rest might be too embarrassing."

"Yes," Rylan said confidently. "Finish."

"Fine," Seth said, continuing. "Taylor can't be pretending to be a girl. She has to be a real one. She turned bright pink when I came in."

"What does *that* prove?" Taylor squeaked, blushing furiously.

"A guy pretending to be a girl would never be able to turn that color. At least, his cheeks wouldn't. If you were a guy your ears would have turned pink while your

face would have stayed white as a sheet. Like Rylan here, who had a reaction to my entrance, but not like yours.”

“Are you saying I’m attracted to you?” Taylor flared.

“Are you saying you’re not?”

She bit her lip. “Yeah.”

“I realize I’m teasing you publicly and you don’t like it, but your sweet brother did ask me to continue. So, with that said, what about me is unattractive—besides the way I’m speaking right now?”

Taylor’s head drooped. “Nothing, I guess.”

“Thanks,” Seth said nicely.

“And what was Rylan’s reaction to your entrance?” Fiona asked, making sure she was still part of the conversation.

“He took one look at me and turned his back. He doesn’t like me. It’s just my hypothesis, but he seems to think I’m up to something.”

“Are you?” Fiona questioned, her eyebrows in the air.

“Not really. I came here to meet my favorite blogger and have a look at her student group. That’s about it.”

“Are you going to join our club?” Tawnee asked shyly, flicking her long blonde hair with her fingers.

The entire group perked up at Tawnee’s question and the challenge for Rylan to take out his contact lenses was completely forgotten.

Seth smiled at her and shook his head. “I can’t. I’m the director of Safewalk. I can’t join a club that meets every Friday night at midnight. I have work to do. I skipped out tonight and that’s fine, but I can’t miss work all the time.”

“Ah, that’s too bad,” Tawnee moaned, real disappointment flashing through her eyes.

“And I really should be ducking out now. I have to stop by the office. Juliet?” he asked turning toward her. “Can I walk you back to your dorms now, or were you planning on staying here longer?”

“No. Please walk me. We haven’t had much time to talk.”

“That’s true,” Seth agreed as he got to his feet. Then he spoke specifically to Fiona, “Thanks so much for letting me visit and thanks for the pomegranate. It was delicious.”

“Our pleasure,” Fiona said.

Juliet picked up her jacket and followed Seth.

“Juliet!” Rylan suddenly interrupted. “Are you really going to leave now? I was going to show you my photo album. Remember?”

Juliet shifted her eyes around the room as if she was looking for a way out, or at the very least, a polite way to refuse Rylan, but no plausible excuse came to mind.

After she had stalled about ten seconds, Rylan gave a disgusted sigh. "Never mind," he said briskly. "If you get bored and decide you're interested in my pictures, come by the clubroom this week." Then he turned away from her.

Juliet felt awkward holding her coat and staring at Rylan's contorted shoulder-blades, when Seth abruptly took her coat from her and helped her put it on. He helped her with each arm and then he rested his hands briefly on her shoulders before he pulled away. Juliet felt her heart race as Seth stole her attention from Rylan. She was breathless. She had never had a man help her with her coat before. Not only that, but she could hardly remember the last time a guy had done anything to treat her like a lady.

"Good night," Seth said softly to the crowd before he pushed the glass door open. "After you," he whispered into Juliet's ear.

She stepped through the door, but his warm breath close to her ear was doing irrational things to her system. With his breath down the back of her neck she was getting so hot that she wanted to take her coat off, but she didn't dare remove it when he had put it on her so carefully.

Then they were alone in the dark hallway, with only the sound of their footfalls on the tile floor.

"It's kind of cold out. Do you mind if we stop by my locker to pick up my coat before we go outside?" he asked, suddenly sounding casual.

"It's no trouble," she said, her breath uneven. She held her red rose and blankly touched the thorns protruding from the stem. Even though it was difficult for her, she managed to say, "Is this really you? Are you really the type to meet a girl on the internet, bring her a beautiful flower and help her with the door like a gentleman? Your post online made it sound like you were a bad guy who took advantage of women and hated himself because he couldn't help it."

Seth grimaced and shook his head cynically. "I'm sorry. I expected tonight to go much differently. I expected you to be a different sort of person."

"Really? Who did you expect?"

He paused before he answered her. He seemed to be thinking very carefully. "Would it be all right if I told you the truth?"

Juliet's mouth went completely dry, but she nodded and gave him an encouraging smile. "You can tell me anything."

"It's just that if I explain it to you... I don't know how you'll react. You might not believe me."

"Do I look like the sort of person who would have a hard time accepting something unconventional? You've just met my friends."

Seth smiled like he was thinking something ironic. "What I want to confess isn't really in the same class as your friends' secrets. It's a little more unrealistic."

"And you think those guys are realistic?" Juliet smiled. She was trying to predict what he was going to say. It seemed too outrageous for him to come right out and admit to being a vampire, but after being with those crazy people who thought they were witches, one soul separated by two bodies, and conjoined twins to boot, then maybe it wasn't that strange. Would he tell her his secret? But what about the pomegranate? Wasn't he a blood drinker?

"This is different," he said after a moment. "You might think it is an act I use with every woman I meet."

"You'll have to take a chance," she said, flirting.

"All right, here goes," he said, sucking his breath in and making his chest puff out. "Last Friday night," he began, "I posted my blog about meeting my goddess, the post you responded to. It was about you. I have seen you around campus several times and I've always been... drawn to you, but I..."

Juliet frowned deeply. "So, you think a relationship between the two of us would end in heartbreak and ruin?"

"Yeah. I was coming here tonight because I thought Pearl Moon would be the kind of woman I could complain to about my problems and she would take my attention away from what I really wanted... you."

"You're saying, you wrote about me on your blog after you walked me home last week?" Juliet asked, skeptical. She had been expecting something much different.

"Sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," she mumbled, trying to remember what he had written about his goddess. She had been so mesmerized by her vampire that she hadn't given ReadyEyes' posts much thought until this second. "So, I look innocent?" she continued, once she remembered his exact impression.

"Extremely."

"A blank sheet of paper that you have no business writing on," she said, trying to quote his post.

"You read that carefully, huh?"

"I'm sure every girl who reads your blog reads it carefully."

"Well," he said, touching her waist briefly and drawing her eyes to his eyes. "I need to amend what I said then. I don't think you're a blank piece of paper, but maybe more like a spring after a long winter—a new beginning that hasn't been

trampled on or spoiled. A piece of paper sounds pitifully plain and you are far too lovely for that.”

“You sound like you’ve thought about this a lot,” she commented dryly. He was right, she wasn’t convinced it wasn’t a line he fed every girl he met.

“Maybe,” he said running his fingers through his hair and leaving his hands behind his head as he walked.

Something triggered in Juliet’s brain just then and she suddenly understood. “This isn’t a line you tell every girl, is it?”

“No.”

“You’re saying all this because you are trying to scare me away, aren’t you?”

“Is it working?” he asked hopefully, dropping his hands and giving her the most charming smile.

“I did not *expect* a romance out of you,” she said forcefully, getting his attention. “I said on the internet that I wanted to be friends. I don’t believe your story about me being your goddess. It’s not true. You’re just using it as an excuse so you can pardon your way out of a romantic relationship you don’t want because I’m not the sort of woman you expected. You’re not attracted to me, and in reality I’m so far beneath you that you don’t even want to play around with me. Well, don’t worry about it. Just walk me home and get on with your life the way you were going to.” She stomped down the hallway three steps before she blurted, “I hate these awkward moments when a guy I’m not even dating dumps me. Especially after getting me a rose and saying those nice things to me in the greenhouse. Where do you get off?” By this point, Juliet was staring straight ahead and she was getting more and more angry, angry enough to tell off a conceited jerk—no matter how handsome he was. “You know what? You don’t have to bother walking me back to my dorm. I can manage quite well on my own. See ya!” Juliet dropped the rose on the tiling, turned around and started walking the way they had come.

“Where are you going?” Seth asked, scooping up the rose and hurrying after her. “Aren’t the dorms this way?”

“Yeah, but I’m going back to Rylan. He won’t mind walking me back, and when he spends time with me, he doesn’t try to fill my head with crap.”

Seth caught her by the elbow. “Rylan? Don’t do that. Something is wrong with that guy. Didn’t you hear me say that he has red eyes—naturally? Pink eyes occur rarely, but not blood red.”

Juliet rolled her own eyes and tried to pull her arm away. “Yeah, well, he never took his contacts out, so you didn’t prove that little theory.”

“It’s not a theory. Something is wrong with that guy.”

Juliet stopped resisting. “And you’re perfect?”

Seth held onto her arm and gave her a serious look.

She faltered. "Okay, fine. What's wrong with him?"

"He's... not what he seems to be."

"So, he *is* a chick?"

"No, no, no," Seth said, shaking his head. "I can't explain it."

"Well, could you please explain to me why you couldn't be civil enough to simply take me to my room without making sure that I knew there was no possibility I could be your girlfriend? Because I've got news for you. I already knew that. Probably every girl who looks at you simultaneously knows she's not good enough for you."

"No! *You* are the one who is too good for *me*!" he said, desperately seeking her eyes.

"Whoa," Juliet laughed, squirming in his grasp. "Did that lame excuse actually come out of your mouth? I think *everyone* knows what that line really means, so you might need to learn a new one for letting the girls down easy. That one doesn't work. Sorry."

He looked at the ceiling and seemed to be frantically searching for a solution. "I can't convince you?"

"No, but don't let that bother you. Since your object is to get away from me as quickly as possible, you shouldn't have any problem letting go of my arm and going to your office, or wherever the heck you were planning to go once you had dropped me off. I get the hint, so let go already."

He took a deep breath. "I can't. I can't leave you to go back to Rylan. You would be better off with me."

"Well, what if I don't want you? What if you've offended me so badly that I never want to hear from you again? Ever think of that?"

"Wait!" Seth said. His face lit up slightly. He looked like he had just discovered the answer he had been searching for. "You said in your post that you fell in love with a vampire. Was it him?"

What?

Now Juliet was the one who was stuck since she had written those posts about Seth and not Rylan. She took a deep breath to prepare herself for what she had to say. "No," she said, her voice sounded like she was under water.

"But you are attracted to dark things?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" he asked, and when she didn't answer he went on. "You know if you keep walking down that road, you'll end up dark too."

"How is that any of your business?"

"You are Spring and you want to make yourself Autumn? Why?"

Juliet fought his arm harder and when her voice came out, it was much louder than she expected. She was panicking. "Couldn't you tell from my posts?" she practically yelled. "You look at me and you see Spring. I look at myself, and I see that something is missing."

"Missing?" Seth yelled back. "What could be missing from the purest of beginnings?"

"Experience... Pain... Love... Joy... The white moon's body against the black velvet of a midnight sky? An ageless passion that would fill the void of loneliness I want to escape from? That's why I am interested in the dark side of life. I want a love that's agonizing in its sweetness, untamable, eternal," Juliet belted out. Now she was saying things she had never put into words and expressing opinions she didn't know she had. "I want a love that will not turn its back on me or change its mind about me. I want a love as strong as blood and just as hot."

"Is that what your love for your vampire is really about?"

"Huh?"

"Who is that guy? You said you first saw him at school. Have you had the courage to introduce yourself to him when you like him so much, or are you choosing to live with unrequited love?"

"I met him," she claimed hotly.

"And?"

"He turned out to be a jerk," she accused without thinking. "It was really disappointing. He wasn't dark at all. I wish I could find a guy who would treat me properly. I want to be seen as a real woman with needs instead of an adorable kid who has to be sheltered, but what does that have to do with you?"

Seth suddenly planted both feet right in front of her and put his face close to hers. His scent went straight through Juliet's head like he had put a gun to her forehead and pulled the trigger. She couldn't think straight with his heady cologne infecting her senses. He was too close to her. What was he doing? He no longer looked like a pearly statue crafted to look like a vampire. Now he appeared a demon from her dreams whose shadow covered everything. It was the flicker of violence in his eyes. It was the wetness of his bottom lip and the way he towered over her. Even though she wasn't cornered, she couldn't possibly escape.

"Choose me," Seth said, finally sounding sincere.

"What?" she muttered, quite out of breath.

"If that's how you feel, then I want you. If you're just going to run out and let some monster like Rylan ruin you, then I want you."

"Be real," she said, closing her eyes and trying to brush past him.

"I *am* being real," he said, clasping her elbow.

Her shoulders fell. "Are you saying you want to be my boyfriend?"

"Sure. If that's how you want to classify the love you want, then sure, I'll be your boyfriend. I'll be whatever you want."

"Weren't you going to ruin me?"

"Better me than anybody else," he said persuasively.

"What if I don't want you?" she asked, a small part of herself barring Seth from convincing her. Her mind was unraveling, but she still had one idea to hold onto.

"What if I don't want anyone, except a vampire?"

He faced her. "It's true that I'm not a vampire, but I kiss like one."

He warned her, so she should have been ready, but absolutely nothing could have prepared her for his lips. The fragrance from before, the spicy blend of leather and Paris, was gone and instead the taste of his saliva and the smell of his aftershave were like copper. Darkness enveloped her. It was as if her lips and nose had been lowered into a puddle of blood rather than been captured by the man she dreamed of. Her mind was flashing with images.

There was an image of the man she loved and his body was bleeding and dying at her feet. Falling to her knees, she was embracing him—encompassing him with the greatest love she had ever felt. His face was hidden from her, but it didn't matter. She knew him by sense if not by sight. She was bending over him and kissing him for the last time as she had kissed him thousands of times. This was to be the last kiss and her heart was overflowing with the intensity of the moment. Her mouth felt full with blood and she was choking, like someone choking on tears. She swallowed and with each swallow she was safeguarding and sealing each one of their sacred memories.

Then she was kissing Seth. He was the one from her vision, the one she crushed to her chest and ached to be near. Nothing made sense except that she loved him and she wanted him. She tangled her fingers in his hair and drew him even closer, but the smell of blood was strong and she began feeling faint.

She slipped from his arms and half fell to the floor. Seth cradled her and lowered her gently until she sat upright on the tile flooring.

"What happened?" she asked, putting her fingers to her face. It felt like there was blood dripping from the tip of her nose and dribbling down her chin.

"I kissed you," he explained.

Juliet pulled her hand away, expecting to see her fingers stained with red, but they weren't. They were white. In fact, her face wasn't even wet.

"I...?" Juliet began.

"Kissed me back," he finished for her. "You're a phenomenal kisser, Juliet. I think I even saw stars. And I thought you were going to resist me. Now you'll never be able to get rid of me."

"I don't want to get rid of you," she mumbled, still confused about what happened. She had been positive that she tasted blood in her mouth. She felt around with her tongue, but she couldn't feel any cuts. She even put her fingers directly into her mouth and touched her gums and cheeks, but there was only saliva.

"What are you doing?" Seth asked, laughing at her.

"I tasted blood in that kiss. Are you bleeding?"

He examined her with amusement. "No."

"Then...?"

"Just think of me as your vampire, if that's the only kind of man you'll take," he said as he put his arms around her and lifted her onto her feet. "I'll take you back to your room now, but I want to see you tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that."

Chapter Six

Vampire Kiss

The next day was Saturday and Juliet found herself in the Occult's Addict office. She wasn't sure who she was expecting to find there. The room was empty except for Rylan. At first, she was disappointed to see him because of the awkward way she had let him down the night before, but he was friendly and talkative like Seth hadn't unveiled Rylan's mystery with so little ceremony. She didn't mean to, but since Rylan was being so nice, she ended up telling him what happened with Seth the night before.

"So, you think he's a vampire, even though he said he wasn't?" Rylan drawled as he flipped a plastic multicolored slinky between his palms. His silky, white hair curled away from his ears and his eyes glimmered crimson.

Juliet thought about what Seth had said about Rylan. Was it true that his eyes were naturally red? She didn't dare ask him.

"To be honest," Rylan went on, "I really didn't envision you to be the type to kiss-and-tell."

"Well, you're the one who suggested that I investigate campus vampires, and he seemed to be your prime suspect. I thought you might want to hear how it went."

"Was it me who suggested that? Are you sure it wasn't one of the girls? Maybe Fiona or my sister?"

Juliet furrowed her brow, recalling her discussion with the president. "Yeah, I guess it was Fiona. Sorry for boring you. I thought you were interested in that sort of thing." Juliet stood up from her chair but Rylan put up a hand to stop her from leaving.

"But," he said nodding. "If he says he's not a vampire, then he's probably isn't. The simplest explanation is usually the correct one."

She shook her head. "I'm not convinced. After that kiss, there must be something wrong with him."

"So, you're planning on dating him in order to uncover his ghastly secret? To think that you didn't try to date me to uncover the truth about my ghastly secret—how disappointing!"

Juliet sat down again and hooked her toes behind the wheels of the chair to keep herself from spinning. She couldn't focus on Rylan when he talked to her like that.

"Does that mean you're acknowledging Seth's theory about you and Taylor?"

"Yes. Well, I was planning on coming clean this Friday night whether Taylor liked it or not. It's infuriating for the girl I like to be unsure of my intentions because of a joke, so I was going to call it off. It was rather unfortunate that he beat me to the punch, but I brought my photo album to show everyone pictures from when Taylor and I were children in order to clear up any confusion."

"Really? Do you still have them in the office? Can I see them?"

"No. I'd prefer the farce was over as quickly as possible now. So, there's no point in going over the little scene I had in mind. It's too bad that I couldn't pull the lid off the scandal the way I wanted. It was going to be cool."

"Is Taylor okay?" Juliet asked. She was a little worried that Taylor's feelings had been hurt by the way Seth spoke to her at the meeting in the greenhouse.

"She's fine."

"I should go see her. Does she live in dorms?"

Rylan didn't answer her question. "Why do you have to go see her? It's not like she's sick, or like she failed a course she was counting on or anything. She's fine. If you go, you'll be making a big deal out of nothing. She wouldn't like to be pitied like that, especially from someone who was making out with Seth in the hall five minutes after he embarrassed her."

Juliet frowned. "You make it sound really indecent, but guess what? It was nice."

"Do I have to hear this?" Rylan snarled as he tipped his stool backward so he was leaning against the wall. "Juliet, we're just starting to be friends. Do you really want to begin our friendship by giving me a play-by-play of your love life?"

She rolled her eyes angrily. "Whatever. I didn't tell you anything. I mention one PG rated experience and you're completely blowing it out of proportion. See if I ever tell you anything again," she said, sticking her tongue out at him and stepping out of the room.

"You're really dense," he called after her as she waited for the elevator.

Juliet could tell what game he was playing. He wanted her to come back and apologize, but she wasn't in the mood. She already felt stupid because in her mind mentioning Seth's kiss had been more of a search for knowledge than a kiss-and-tell. She hadn't meant to rub it in Rylan's face that she'd been kissed by Seth. She wasn't as dense as Rylan thought. She was ignoring his feelings for her. It was obvious. He liked her. That was why he was coming clean about the fact that he was a guy. He didn't want to be rejected again like the time he asked her to dinner and she refused because she wasn't positive he was a man. The thing was, once she knew, she still didn't care. He didn't seem like such a bad guy, but she wasn't interested in spite of his flirtatious comments, and she didn't feel like anything could change her mind.

There was also one other thing. It was the most curious feeling, but she felt like Seth was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, whereas Rylan was hers for the asking, whenever she wanted. It was totally arrogant for her to assume that Rylan would always be there if she wanted him.

She couldn't go back to the club room to talk it out with Rylan when she had already made her choice. She chose Seth. He made her feel alive with delight. Since she felt that way, she could only hurt Rylan and so she couldn't go back.

She waited for the elevator.

As the elevator chimed and opened, a familiar smiling face met hers.

"Seth!" Juliet beamed. "What are you doing here?"

He casually brushed his hair out of his eyes. "Well, I was in the neighborhood and I thought I'd stop by your clubroom to see if I could entice you into having lunch with me. Are you busy?"

"No. I'm totally free!"

Just then, the door to the clubroom slammed shut. Naturally, Rylan was upset and if that was how he had to vent his feelings, then so be it.

"Don't mind him," Juliet said quickly. "He's always grouchy. Where should we go?"

Seth grinned. "I've got the perfect place."

He took her to a pub on the top floor of one of the buildings. Once inside and seated, the view of campus was amazing. Juliet sat next to the window and looked down on the quad. It was only half-way through October, but the trees were already bare. The vibrant red and yellow colors were more of a memory than they should have been.

Juliet pointed to a spot on the lawn. "Hey, that was where I saw you take down that guy."

Seth raised one eyebrow artistically. "You saw that?"

"Yeah. It was the night I was up on the Science Building with my club observing the moon. What did he do anyway?"

"Nothing," Seth shrugged.

"Not allowed to talk about it?"

"No, I am. I was already interviewed by the paper about it. It's boring."

Just then, the server approached their table. "Can I get you anything to drink?" she asked Juliet with a professional, practiced smile.

"Um," Juliet said opening the menu. "I don't know. What's good?"

Juliet had asked Seth, but it was the waitress who answered. "We're a fully licensed bar, so we can make you anything."

"Water?"

"We don't make that, but I can bring you a glass," she said before she turned to Seth. She gave him an odd look before she said, "I know what you want, but I still think it's weird."

"Yeah, I've heard the lecture before," Seth said dryly. It sounded like he was a regular there.

"Are you ready to order or do you need a few minutes?"

Juliet was scanning the menu frantically. "The beef dip," Juliet ordered, looking at Seth for approval.

"I don't know if it's good. I've never had it," he explained.

"It's good," the waitress confirmed. "But, you might not have much of an appetite after you see what he's eating."

"Thanks," Seth said to her as she disappeared into the kitchen. "She's got a smart mouth, but that's part of the fun of coming here."

"What did you order?" Juliet asked impishly.

"You really are hung-up on the whole vampire thing, aren't you? What? Won't you like me if I order a hamburger and fries?"

She scowled. "It's not like that."

"Isn't it?"

She turned her head away and looked out the window instead of meeting his eyes. She didn't feel like being ridiculed for her dreams of vampires, especially not by the real live man whose photo she had pinned to her closet door as her perfect idea of the beautiful undead.

After a minute or so passed, Seth said, "Sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I just think our relationship will be smoother if I'm free to eat what I like when we're together rather than trying to maintain a facade. I want to spend all my time with you, so I'd like to be able to eat normally."

Juliet took a deep breath. "I wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary after you ate that pomegranate last night. It was just that the waitress made it sound like your order was unusual."

"It is," Seth agreed. "I have a very sensitive palate. It took me forever to get the chef here to make me special orders, but he charges me an arm and a leg, so we each get what we want."

"So, you're a picky eater?"

"Fanatical. Don't ever try to cook anything for me, because I guarantee I won't like it."

"What do you like?"

"Almost nothing. I like how my brother prepares food, so I always make a special effort to go home if he's cooking."

"You have a brother?"

"Yeah. I live in his building."

"In his 'building?' Don't you mean his house?"

Seth smirked. "No. He owns an apartment building."

"Is it close to campus?"

"Pretty close," he said, looking at the ceiling.

"What about your parents? Do they live with you, too?"

"No."

"Do you have any other siblings?"

"No."

At this rate, Juliet was going to have to start talking about herself, which was the last thing she wanted to do. Why wouldn't he say anything more than one word answers?

By this time, their food arrived. Juliet was surprised when she saw Seth's meal because it was merely a plate of sliced raw fish, served with a glass what almost looked like red wine, except the color wasn't as rich.

"Bon appetit," the waitress said as she set down their food and disappeared.

"Doesn't sushi usually come with rice and seaweed?" Juliet questioned, looking at his plate contemplatively.

"Usually, except this isn't sushi," he said as he cracked apart his chopsticks. "It's sashimi, a Japanese delicacy. Like I said, it took me a while to get the chef to prepare it the way I like it, but it was well worth the wait. He does a pretty good job."

Juliet wasn't revolted by his meal, but she was surprised when he took his glass and poured half its contents onto the fish. It streamed scarlet on the dead, white flesh.

He laughed at her. "Trust me, it's good. Do you want to try it?"

She nodded, though she was positive it wouldn't become her favorite. He picked one up and deposited it carefully into her open mouth. The flavor was not what she had expected. She had expected red wine, but instead it was some kind of cordial that completely drowned out the flavor of the fish.

"What is that?" she asked when her mouth was empty.

"Cod."

"No. What's in the glass?"

"Are you sure you want to know?" he asked wickedly. "It's nothing to worry about. It wouldn't get you drunk no matter how much you drank of it. It's grenadine."

"Pomegranate juice?"

"Basically."

"I didn't think anyone drank that straight. Isn't it supposed to be an ingredient for other drinks?"

"Probably."

Juliet peered at him curiously before she dunked her sandwich in the beef broth.

"What about you?" he asked. "What about your family, your friends, your life?"

She shook her head slowly. "I..." she started, but then she stopped and looked at his face.

He was even more attractive in the sunlight. His eyes had a slight upward slant to them that made them look like they hid millions of secrets. Before she knew it, she was daydreaming about him and his past and his thoughts. There was something about him, something compelling, drawing her in and making her want to throw her own past away. As she sat with him, she wanted to reinvent herself, just so that she could be the type of woman he wanted. Was that what he had envisioned about her? That she would change and become a wreck just because of his love? Maybe she didn't have to lose hope in herself. Maybe she could invent a new self. She pictured herself driving him wild with desire. Perhaps she could become a woman with long legs, excellent taste in books, and a smile worth dying for. He would want to be with her all the time even just to play with her hair.

Juliet licked her lips and said, "I want to apologize for asking you all those questions about your brother and your life. It was rude of me since I don't want to reciprocate. There's nothing in my past life that I want to talk about with you. Can't we just pretend that I didn't exist before you started reading my blog?"

Seth's chop sticks were half-way to his mouth when she had started speaking, but with her words, he put them down and regarded her seriously. "That's perfectly fine with me if that's the way you want it."

Juliet breathed a sigh of relief.

"But I'm surprised," he said as he took a bite. He finished chewing before he went on, "I thought you'd want to hash over every detail of your life... and mine."

She smiled secretively, "I don't want to scare you."

Seth laughed. "How could you scare me? Besides, it feels unnatural somehow to have such a finicky, polite conversation with you."

"Why?"

"Because I'm already tired of this whole 'lunch' scenario. I know couples should go on dates to see how compatible they are, but I just want to take you out of here and find out what your lips taste like... over and over again. Can we finish up here and go back to your dorm room?"

Juliet's heart jumped and skipped and then took a nosedive. What about the poster on her closet door?

"Couldn't we go somewhere else? Like your place?" she stuttered.

"I can't wait that long," he said, his eyes burning with intensity. "In a second, it's going to be your side of the table."

"In public?" she gasped.

"Just once," he said, getting up from his side of the table and coming around to hers. He pulled her chair out and turned it slightly so that she faced him. Then he knelt on the floor in front of her. Juliet's cheeks burned heady scarlet. People were looking at them. He looked like he was proposing marriage in a campus bar, but Seth wasn't looking at them. His eyes were only for her as he pulled her closer to him and claimed her lips.

She felt his lips on hers before she entered into the dream-like state she had during their first kiss. Seth wasn't there. There was no man in her vision at all. She was sitting alone in a chair in a stone room. She could see the sun setting through the windows to the west and the yellow-gold light across the walls. On the stand beside her sat a goblet—a goblet filled with blood. Turning away from it, she knew it wasn't for her even though she had tasted it many times. It was her blood.

But then, was she the same person? She was and she wasn't. She had never been a little girl or a teenager. Her adolescent self had been shed like snake skin revealing a woman. She couldn't see herself, not even her hands, but she felt a difference in her the very essence of herself.

Spring had gone from her, and with it so many treasures of youth. Summer was gone too, only her autumn remained. And autumn was glorious, shaded with deep markings of orange and blue. Her breath felt crisp in her throat. All at once she knew what she wanted to be—autumn.

Suddenly, she came to the realization of where she actually was—in the campus pub. Seth wasn't kissing her, but to Juliet's horror, he was lying flat on the floor beside their table.

"What are you doing? Get up!" she hissed at him as quietly as she could, even though everyone was glaring at them.

Seth smirked. He put his hands behind his head and said evenly, "It would have been less embarrassing if you hadn't thrown me off."

"What?" she gasped.

"What? Don't you remember?"

She scratched her temple, to hide her feelings of unrest. "No. Not at all."

Seth picked himself off the floor. Standing straight up, he said, "Do you want to go now?"

"Yes," she whispered, half covering her face.

Seth reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He put the necessary bills on the table, put his arm around her and ushered her toward the door. "We won't come back here for a while."

"Thank you," she mumbled.

Once they were alone inside the elevator, Juliet felt free to talk to him. "I'm sorry. I black out or something when you kiss me. It's mortifying, but I don't think I can keep it a secret if..."

"Kiss me again," he breathed, gently pushing her into the corner. "If you pass out, I'll take you back to your dorm."

"No, Seth!" she said, putting her hand between their faces. "I want to talk for a minute."

"Talk? When there's pleasure like this to be had?" His lips found the side of her neck.

She pushed him off and met his eyes sternly. "Why do you have this effect on me?"

Seth backed away from her and leaned against the wall. He folded his arms across his chest and looked vexed. "And why, little girl, do you have this effect on me?"

"What effect?"

"I want you more than I've ever wanted anyone. I feel like if I can't have you in my arms, they'll break. Don't turn me down."

The elevator doors opened and Juliet pushed past him. "I need to think... and I need answers. I'll see you later."

He rushed after her and grabbed her elbow. "Don't go."

The sound of his voice made Juliet's bones melt. She was on the verge of giving in when she glanced up and saw his face. She thought she had imagined his sharp teeth. No, she hadn't. He was almost panting, and his two canines had extended so far they were resting on his bottom lip.

"We can't talk right now," she claimed, forcing herself to be assertive. "Your blood lust is too strong for you to handle."

Seth's eyes stared back at her in horror and his mouth hung partly open. His fingers relaxed and his arm fell to his side. Juliet stared at him with deliberation. Finally, he tucked his fang-like teeth behind his bottom lip. He turned around and walked away.

As Juliet watched his retreating form, she let out a cleansing breath and told herself she was safe.

Seth turned around and said just four words to her, "I'm not a vampire." He even managed to say the words like he believed them, but the thing was, Juliet wasn't sure she could believe.

Chapter Seven

Finding Her Out

Juliet went back to her dorm room in a stir of confusion. No matter what Seth said, those protruding teeth could not be ignored. Was he a vampire? He insisted he wasn't, but if that was true, why did he back off so abruptly when she accused him of suffering from blood lust?

She sat down at her desk and was about to open her laptop, when she caught sight of her own reflection in the mirror beside her desk. The mirror itself was tinted slightly pink and the frame was a shiny metal to match. She scrutinized her reflection with mild annoyance. To her, she resembled a child who wasn't even trying to look like an adult. Was she really the kind of woman Seth wanted to bite? He had suggested more than once that they head back to her dorm room. If she hadn't panicked and sent him away, he would have come over. She looked around at the mess on the floor. Her poster wasn't the only reason she didn't want him in her room.

Juliet stretched her limbs and started tidying up. She changed the sheets and made the bed and got a load of laundry ready to go. Then she emptied her entire closet and went through every piece of junk she had thrown in there in the past month and a half. She looked at her clothes, knickknacks, plushies, pictures and everything else she owned. Soon, she was sitting in the middle of a donut made of girlish trinkets; fuzzy picture frames, colorful hair accessories, t-shirts with gaudy mascots on them. This was why she was a baby-pink spring and not a dark-cranberry autumn.

From the look of things, there was a part of her that hadn't grown up yet. What was the rush? There hadn't been a reason to hurry the process, until she met Seth.

Dissatisfaction flooded her as she recalled her last vision when Seth kissed her. She pressed her fingers to her lips as she remembered. It had been a vision of womanhood she hadn't known existed. A woman who accepted reality, who didn't run from it. She had filled the cup with her own blood and felt contentment inside her. The sacrifice was within boundaries she was willing to accept. Those boundaries were widespread. Juliet had never felt that way in her life. Her mother, the only example of womanhood in her life, certainly hadn't been like that. If Juliet had been in pain, her mother had encouraged her to forget about it, like ignorance was bliss. What if that was wrong? What if knowledge was bliss?

Juliet sat and tried to imagine what kinds of clothes the woman in her mind wore. Black certainly, but what else? Rich browns, orange, gold, and only white in touches. What style? Juliet thought of long fitted skirts, lovely textured sweaters, and the highest of high-heeled boots. Hardly anything in her closet fit the image of what she wanted to become.

She looked at her wardrobe strewn across the floor and, before she knew it, she had changed her mind about doing laundry. There was no point in washing clothes or bedding she was going to throw away.

Before she gathered everything up in garbage bags, she decided to check her bank account. She didn't know how much it would cost to outfit herself the way she wanted, but she couldn't risk meeting Seth again while wearing a black t-shirt with a smiley face on it, which was unfortunately what she had worn that day.

Her bank balance wasn't great, but there was a little leeway in her budget. She decided to make the most of it.

She was about to close her laptop when it occurred to her to check her email and blog. No new messages from Seth. However, she had his email address now.

"Hey Seth," she typed. "Sorry about today. I would like to try again if you're still up for it." She wrote these words hesitantly. She had never had a relationship with a guy who couldn't keep his hands off her. His feelings couldn't have cooled since lunch, or could they? She continued typing. "I have something I need to take care of. I'll get in touch with you when I'm ready to see you. Until then, please don't pressure me. It will be worth the wait. Love, Juliet."

Juliet pressed the 'send' button and went back to her cleaning. Finishing, she left her throwaways in garbage bags by the door. Then she took a shower.

When she was finished, she came back to her room and found a pair of pants and a shirt that she felt comfortable wearing, considering her new image. It was a pair of black polyester trousers and a cream-colored turtleneck sweater. She only put on mascara and eyeliner because she had put the rest of her makeup in one of the bags she planned to throw away. She decided she wasn't going to wear glitter on her face anymore, and when she realized how much of it she owned, she was appalled. Exactly how much money did all that make-up represent?

Juliet checked her email before she left to go shopping. She was amazed. There was a message from Seth.

"Hi Jules," he started. "If you're sitting in your dorm room sharpening wooden stakes, please remember that a normal person would die if you jabbed one through their heart. As for the rest, do whatever you need to do. Call for a walk when you're ready. I'll be waiting, Seth."

Juliet thought of writing him back, but decided against it. She didn't have anything to say to him, at least, not until she became the woman who was good enough for him to bite.

Closing her laptop, she left to catch a bus.

Juliet's shopping excursion started at a strip of boutiques on Whyte Avenue. They looked so cute from the bus window, but after popping into a few of them, she realized that she was going to go bankrupt if she tried to fill her entire wardrobe there. But she kept on walking and looking at price tags until she found herself at a second-hand clothing store. Because of her own feelings about used clothing, she had never spent much time pawing through a thrift store. But now, she felt like her squeamishness was childish. Maybe something with a little history was just what she needed.

After sorting through a few racks, she found a few skirts and sweaters she didn't think were that bad. This particular thrift store had an abundance of evening gowns and so Juliet took a quick look through them. Surprisingly, she spotted three dresses that were all worth trying on. Two of them were black and the last one was burgundy with deeply colored raspberries embroidered across the hem and neckline.

She didn't even have to look in the mirror when she tried the first black dress. It was obviously a no-go. The next black one turned out to be a shirt/skirt combination and not a dress at all. It was more expensive than the other two put together. It was floor-length and the top was like a corset with capped sleeves attached to it.

Juliet groaned. She clearly had to buy it once she saw herself in the full-body mirror on the back of the dressing room door.

"I was going to buy that," one of the sales girls told her, "but it didn't fit."

"The skirt is dragging on the floor," Juliet pointed out.

"No problem," the girl continued. "Wear a pair of heels and you're golden. You won't even have to hem it. It's an amazing find. Next week, everyone will be looking for Halloween costumes."

"I'll buy it," Juliet blurted.

"Of course you will," the girl replied, tossing a pointed witch hat on Juliet's head, before strolling back toward the sales counter.

Juliet tried on the rest of her cart and sorted through the items she wanted. She hadn't been impressed with the tops she's seen, so she thought she would take the

bus to the mall after she finished. Plus, she wanted new accessories, shoes and perfume.

When she was at the counter, the sales girl ran the witch's hat through with her other purchases. Juliet hadn't planned to buy it, but she probably needed a Halloween costume.

By the time she left the thrift store, she was happy because nothing suited her purposes as much as the dress she'd bought.

Juliet caught the bus and went to the closest mall to campus. She had been there the week she had moved into the dorms. It was part of the 'sight-seeing' tour her parents took her on while they were still in town.

Juliet hopped around from shop to shop. She got a collection of stretchy black and brown tops, a pair of tweed trousers, a knit scarf and mittens to match, new stockings, new sheets, and a few other home decoration purchases.

The only thing that caused Juliet considerable financial pain was when she went to buy shoes. She wanted to buy at least three pairs. She needed boots, she needed heels and she needed something that wouldn't break her ankles. All together, the ones she bought were so expensive they hurt her feelings.

Once she was done, she went on her impossible search to find a perfume that smelled like pomegranates.

The woman at the department store said, "There's Euphoria by Calvin Klein."

Juliet looked at the price and almost choked. She was clearly in the wrong store. Her budget was almost completely gone after the shoes, and she still wanted to buy some make-up, but she asked to smell it anyway. It was so familiar.

"Can I smell the men's cologne, please?"

"Certainly," the lady said with a smile. She sprayed some on a card and handed it to Juliet.

One breath of that scent and Juliet was forced to respond, "I'd like to get it, but unfortunately, that's the cologne my boyfriend wears."

"He has excellent taste," she smiled.

"Of course he does," Juliet agreed dryly before she exited the store.

In the end she forgot about the perfume. She got make-up instead: the whitest shade of foundation she had ever been able to find, an eye shadow that had black, gray, and raspberry together, and new lipstick.

After all that she was completely out of cash. She didn't even have enough money left to buy herself a pop from a vending machine. She had to get back to Lister so she could get a drink and bill it to her meal card.

When she got back to her dorm, she left her bags in her room and went straight to the cafeteria. She sat down to her Hawaiian pizza and Minute Maid and said, "That

was a job well done.” Then she ate and spent the rest of her evening going through her garbage bags again. She picked out the bedding she was going to pitch, and spent the rest of the evening in the laundromat thinking of how far she had come in only one day.

The next Friday night, Juliet put on her coat and bemoaned that she hadn’t bought a new one. She wanted to go back to the thrift store to see if she could find something passable, but she was out of cash. In the end, she layered two sweaters and put on her scarf and gold mittens. It wasn’t the darkest part of winter yet, so she decided she probably wouldn’t freeze to death.

Juliet left to go to the Occult’s Addict meeting. Same day, same time—Friday night at midnight. They met in one of the campus libraries and sat at a long table beside the reference material.

At the meeting, Rylan was his usual moody self as he gave a lecture on crop circles. He stood at the end of the table and showed a variety of different designs on a wall of the library with a projector. He talked about locations where they’ve been seen, highlighted one that looked like Hello Kitty, and a number of reasons why people rather than aliens may have done them throughout the decades.

He wrapped up his lecture, saying, “In the summer, I think we should make one of our own. I read about how amateurs can do it if they use a garden roller or wooden planks to flatten the wheat. Are you girls feeling buff? I hear it takes a lot of muscle,” he said with a wry smile.

“We’re always buff,” Fiona waved, showing off her bicep.

“I know. I know. Then we’ll leave it to Juliet to call the newspapers and stuff to let them know that there’s a new crop circle. She’s the only one of us that doesn’t come off like a crackpot. They’ll definitely believe her.”

Juliet frowned. She hadn’t liked the way he worded his lecture. It was almost like he had prepared the entire thing to make her look ridiculous for her interest in them. She was almost trembling from the humiliation.

“You really don’t think aliens made them?” she asked, using up every ounce of her concentration to speak rationally rather than to cross the room and slap his face. She couldn’t believe he was such a poor loser.

He stopped his reading and looked up. “I’m critical of everything. Haven’t you figured that out by now?”

"But, everything you've said makes it sound like you wouldn't even consider the evidence that it could be the work of something that's not human. Aren't you supposed to give a presentation that looks at the subject from every angle?"

He didn't answer her, but the expression on his face seemed to say, "The simplest answer is usually the correct one."

Taylor stepped in and spoke up for him. "Rylan's specialty is conspiracy theories. He likes to present them and explain how they're right. He's even suggested a couple on the internet that are quite popular. So, don't mind him. He doesn't even believe in the moon landing."

"So," Juliet said, turning to him. "What's something unusual that you *do* believe in?"

Rylan frowned deeply. Taylor was about to answer for him when he put his hand up to stop her. "I believe in the afterlife."

Juliet didn't know what she expected him to say, but that certainly wasn't it. In her mind, there was absolutely no doubt that there was a spiritual existence after death. She was hoping he believed in something more outrageous. His answer was so tame, she was certain he was still making fun of her. She gulped in utter aggravation, and started gathering her things together.

"What? You're leaving?" Rylan asked.

"Yeah. I'm leaving."

He left his perch at the head of the table and came over to Juliet's seat. "What's the problem? Why are you angry? You said you were interested in crop circles and so I researched them for you. I was trying to be nice to you, so why does that make me the bad guy?"

"Trying to be nice'?" she gawked, putting her arm through the sleeve of her first sweater. "I wanted to hear a lecture that was trying to prove that crop circles were really done by aliens. Isn't that more interesting? I didn't say I was going to believe it. I wanted to hear the argument. And you.." she said, throwing her other sweater over her shoulders, "don't want anyone to believe in anything that you don't believe in yourself."

Rylan stared at her with hard red eyes. "I guess that's true," he said slowly.

Juliet glared at him and grabbed her bag.

"Wait. You haven't even eaten and the witches brought something really good tonight," he urged quietly.

"I'm not hungry."

"You're being a baby."

Juliet fumed, "And saying that is going to make me stay?" She turned away from him and shouted to Fiona, "What's the meeting next week?"

Fiona got up from her chair and closed the distance between them so she wasn't also shouting across the library. She didn't actually say that Juliet's manners were bad, but the tone she used when she spoke said it for her. "It's the Halloween party. Rylan and Taylor are sharing their story of how they got their scars. You know, the ones that helped convince us that they were really conjoined twins."

Juliet nodded.

"Will you come?" Rylan asked soberly.

She hesitated. "I'll think about it." Then she stepped away from him.

"Look," he said, grabbing her elbow. "I wasn't trying to piss you off. I presented the information in a way that was the most natural for me. You didn't like it and I'm sorry, but don't stay away from the meeting next week just because I didn't present the information the way you wanted."

She ground her teeth. She wasn't leaving because they had differing views. It was because he was being petty about her and Seth and he called her a baby! But she could hardly accuse him of that in front of everyone, so she took a deep breath and listened to what he had to say.

He continued, "I'll be on my best behavior. I promise. You don't know how hard it was to convince Fiona to give me the meeting. She was planning on a séance. Please come," he pleaded.

Juliet wanted to blow him off, but there was a desperate quality to his voice she found impossible to ignore.

"I'll come," she agreed. "Are we dressing up?"

"I don't know. I don't think the witches ever look normal and Taylor has been talking about dying her hair gray. I don't know. Wear whatever you want." He paused for a moment, as though he was considering Juliet's current outfit. "You look lovely."

Juliet smiled and pulled her arm out of his reach. "Thanks. See? That's a nice thing to say. You should work on saying stuff like that to girls instead of trying to prove that you're smarter than they are. See you later." She left them and headed toward the exit.

She noticed a red Safewalk phone at the front of the building. She picked up the receiver and called for a walk back to her dormitory. For a second, it didn't sound like Seth was going to be the one coming, but when the operator took her name she heard Seth in the background insisting on taking the walk even though it wasn't his turn.

Juliet blushed deeply as she replaced the receiver. He hadn't cooled. Thank goodness!

A few minutes later she saw Seth and Nixie coming across the lawn. Juliet's breath caught in her throat as she recognized his dark head and striking features. Somehow, even though she had his picture up in her room, seeing him in person always dazzled her. It was the simple things about him that were amazing; the angles of his legs as he walked, the way he held his head, and perhaps the greatest thing about him—a kind of mystery in his eyes. Like there was so much more to him than he showed. There had to be mountains of thoughts and emotions behind his eyes he'd never shared with anyone. For a glimpse of what he hid, how high was the price?

"Hi," Nixie said in a lazy tone as she cranked the door open. "Let's get a move on."

Seth smiled at Juliet and put out his arm so they could walk with their arms linked.

"Is this professional?" Juliet asked as she fell into step with him.

"And if it isn't?"

Juliet smiled, but couldn't meet his eyes for a moment. She was dizzy with the pleasure of walking side-by-side with him.

This time Nixie headed out first and let Seth and Juliet linger behind her. She even had the courtesy not to turn around to check on them. She just walked on steadily, trusting Seth to not let her get too far ahead of them.

When Juliet felt comfortable, she turned to have a look at Seth. Apparently, his winter coat had just come out of storage because it wasn't the same as before. This one was khaki gray with a fur collar. His dark hair curled into the edges of it by his ears and lit up Juliet's imagination. That was how she always felt around Seth—on fire.

He licked his lips. "I'm glad you called. I've been watching for you around campus. Before we met officially, I used to see you everywhere, but not anymore. Where have you been?"

"I've been around," she answered, trying to sound casual. "I just needed to get my ducks in a row. So, I sorted some things out. Do I seem any different to you?"

"Different?" He sighed, "I haven't even begun to discover you. We need more time together. When can I see you next? I need to learn everything."

Juliet's fingers curled into fists to stop herself from trembling. For a moment, she couldn't even answer, and when she looked up, they were already standing outside the dorms. Seth held the door open for her.

Nixie leaned against the handrail and warned, "Just like we agreed, you can walk her to her room, but don't take more than ten minutes. I won't wait longer than that and it would look really bad if I went back alone."

"I won't leave you hanging," Seth said as he put his arm around Juliet's waist and headed up the stairs with her. Once they passed through the double doors at the top of the stairway, Seth leaned toward Juliet and whispered in her ear, "So, what ducks have you been organizing? Don't tell me you're still trying to figure out a way to prove I'm a vampire?"

"Not everything is about you. It's me that I've been thinking about. I've been giving myself a teensy bit of a makeover, so I've been spending some time at the mall."

"A makeover? Is that all? You had me really worried."

"Well, it was nothing. I just needed a little time to take care of myself and work my identity out."

"By shopping?" he exclaimed.

"Well, it might seem frivolous to you, but just wait. You'll be grateful. I got a killer dress. Do you want to see it?"

"Maybe later," he said languidly, his breath still lingering around her ear. "Didn't you hear Nixie? I have to be back downstairs in less than ten minutes? But, you still didn't answer my question. Do you still think I'm a vampire?"

Juliet breathed deeply. "I know you keep saying you're not, but those fangs of yours speak differently."

Seth chuckled.

"All the same, I'm unconvinced. You're too perfect to be human."

His smile faded and for a moment he looked thoughtful. He bent down and whispered, "I have to tell you something." Suddenly, his arms came around her and he slammed her firmly against the wall. Looking directly into her eyes with his tiger-colored ones he said, "Listen carefully." He held her gaze in order to give weight to his words before he continued. "Please give up your vampire fixation. I think there's one prowling around campus, and I don't want you to get hurt, so promise me you won't go looking for it. If you need to go somewhere after dark, call for a Safewalk."

Juliet stared at him with intrigued eyes. "And what if I want to meet the vampire?" She wasn't sure if she meant what she said. The only thing she knew was that she wanted to hear Seth's response to her rebellion.

"Mercy! Don't go looking for it!" he hissed emphatically, his eyes full of fury. "You wouldn't be able to handle it regardless of your interest in the occult. It doesn't follow the rules you're familiar with. It would murder you."

"There haven't been any murders on campus lately," Juliet said defiantly.

"Yeah, no murders," Seth agreed. The way he said it suggested he was the reason why no one had been killed.

"All right," Juliet said weakly. "I'll stay indoors, but on one condition."

“Name it.”

“You’ll come back tonight after you’re finished with work and tell me about vampires—the real ones.”

“Done. See you later.” He let her go and headed down the hall to the stairs.

Juliet leaned against the wall and let out a satisfied sigh. She was finally going to learn the truth about vampires and, hopefully, Seth’s exact connection with them. She crossed her fingers for luck, that nothing would stop him from returning, before getting out her keys and unlocking her door.

It was going to be a night she would never forget.

Chapter Eight

Prince of Curses

Seth's printed face disappeared in front of Juliet's eyes as she slid her closet door open. The poster slid neatly between the two doors, remaining hidden behind the blank door. No one would be the wiser, especially not Seth, who she was expecting at any second.

She wanted to do something special since this was his first night visiting her room. She thought of changing into something prettier, but that seemed like going overboard. Then she considered ordering food, but he had warned her not to try to cook for him, he hated everything. So, she carefully selected some music to play and got a couple of chocolate bars out of the vending machine. Surely he liked chocolate.

It was three-thirty when Seth's gentle tap on the door roused her. She hadn't been sleeping. Juliet shut her laptop and turned on some music before going to the door.

"It's me," she heard Seth whisper.

Opening the door, she invited him in. "Welcome."

Looking around the room, Juliet felt confident and she was no longer embarrassed to have him in her room. There was nothing there to be ashamed of. The bed was spread with a white duvet without a cover on it. Her pillowcases and the rug in front of her bed were still purple, but now appeared tasteful because they weren't augmented by stuffed animals. The only picture that was left on the wall was a monstrous poster of a red moon with a white feather in front of it.

"I'm glad you're still awake," Seth said as he entered the room. "That's lucky. I thought you would have passed out by now. What time is it?"

Juliet took his coat and discarded it in a corner. "Three-thirty. Is last call at the bars really not until three in the morning?"

"No. It's at two. I apologize, but I had a little fight with Nixie. She didn't want me to come here and settling her down took some time. We normally close up shop at three. Plus, she was a little afraid to go home alone."

"Do you normally walk her home?" Juliet asked, remarkably without the slightest hint of jealousy.

Seth nodded. "Yeah."

"So, tonight you let her go home alone?"

"Don't look so horrified. Like I would do that. I called her father and asked him to come get her."

Juliet smiled. "Then she's taken care of."

"Yes," Seth said, rolling his eyes. "Taken care of."

"What do you mean by that?"

Seth shrugged. "It's nothing. She's just not particularly fond of her dad, even though he's the type that will come to pick her up at three-thirty in the morning without complaint."

"She's lucky to have such a cool-headed father. My parents would come get me, but I'd get an earful. I guess since she's working at Safewalk and not out clubbing he wouldn't be mad. So, he's normal, right?"

"I don't know."

"What? Wouldn't your parents come get you in that situation?" Juliet pressed.

He sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall. "No. I didn't grow up with the crayon drawing of a mom and a dad and a house and a dog." His voice trailed off and he began examining the room more carefully.

Juliet sat down on the bed and waited for him to elaborate. She knew he didn't want to talk about his past, but if he volunteered anything she wouldn't discourage him.

Finally, he turned his eyes toward hers and said, "I like your room. It's pleasant. And what are we listening to? It's mellow." Then he stretched out his legs and changed the topic. "Well, I have to keep my end of the bargain if I expect you to keep your promise to stay out of trouble. Vampires," he said in a melodramatic tone and then suddenly stopped.

Juliet arched an eyebrow. "I really don't need all this bravado."

He laughed, "All right. I couldn't help myself. After all, a little dramatic flair never hurt anyone, right? Anyway, there are lots of cursed humans in this world. Vampires are one of the lowest, partly because of how common they are, so it's not completely unlikely that you might run into one."

"You said they followed different rules. Care to explain?"

"Sunlight doesn't hurt them, but they would never be seen in the light of day."

"Why?"

"They're dead. Their flesh is as cold as the fish you watched me eat. They are not beautiful or sexy. They are foul, loathsome creatures that feed off human blood to keep themselves animated. If they stop, they will fall off that precipice of life and death and that'll be the end. That's their curse."

"But they're fast, right? And strong?"

"No. They are ordinary people that are dead. Their limbs hang on by mere threads. They move in the darkest parts of night so their victims don't notice that they are off-balance, that they're not normal."

Juliet felt a chill come over her. Somewhere in her mind, she had been prepared for him to tell her about vampires like her interest in them was ridiculous. That was what Rylan had done earlier with the crop circles, but Seth did not sound like he was joking. The way he spoke was serious. Either he meant what he said or he was the most talented liar she'd ever met.

He continued. "The most beautiful thing about them is their voices. They sound lovely—beguiling."

"You saw one on campus?"

"From a distance. He was at the bar a couple nights ago. I don't think he knew me, but those monsters have incredible noses for danger. He bugged out, and I've sensed him around a time or two since then, but he won't come into the dorms. There are too many lights that never turn off. You have nothing to worry about here."

"What was he like?"

"Mostly bald, with a few braids in the back," Seth said reflectively. "His eyes were lifeless, almost like he had no soul. But he has one. I know he does. It may be mutilated with age and spilled blood, but it's there."

Juliet waited for him to finish, but he stared at her computer desk with his jaw clenched. When it seemed like he wasn't going to go on, she got up the courage to ask her next question. "What were his fangs like?"

"Blunt. Vampires don't have fangs. They have teeth just like yours. Like I said, they're human beings. The only special thing about them is the curse that keeps them animated even though they're dead. They don't even have the power to turn someone else into a vampire. All they do is murder."

"And what do you have to do with it?"

Seth snorted. "Honestly, nothing. If he recognized me, he would run, and if I got my hands on him, I would kill him."

Juliet suddenly made a sickening connection as she compared the way he spoke of a vampire's flesh and the fish he ate at the pub. She swallowed a hard lump in her throat. "You don't eat vampires, do you?"

He raised his eyebrows like he was considering her question and then he smiled; his lips spread enough for Juliet to see his razor sharp canines. His expression was a snarl. "I don't think so," he said heartlessly. "However, the idea isn't without its charm. In fact, it makes my mouth water." He swallowed.

The chill that had begun spreading across Juliet's body curled its way down her legs and arms. She was breaking out in goosebumps. She told herself she was merely cold and cuddled a purple pillow in her arms.

"What are you?" she whispered.

He licked his bottom lip and grinned. "I'm not like them."

"Are you a vampire hunter then, since you want to kill them?"

"You misunderstand me. I don't want to kill them especially. Let me see if I can come up with a good comparison. Hmm... I got one. If a mosquito landed on your arm, what would be your reaction?"

"I would kill it," she said slowly, trying to understand his logic.

"Yet, even though you would kill it if it landed on you, you aren't a mosquito hunter. See?"

"I think so."

"They're just disgusting. That's all."

Juliet took a deep breath. "So, why do you have fangs?"

Seth chuckled and for a moment, Juliet thought he looked smug. "Ah, but that wasn't part of our bargain. I promised that I would tell you about vampires, not that I would tell you about myself. Besides, I thought we covered all that. You don't want to tell me about yourself, so you acted like it was all right if I didn't either. Remember?"

Juliet recalled their conversation in the pub. "I guess so," she mumbled.

"Regardless," she continued, her enthusiasm picking up. "I still want to unravel your mysteries."

He nodded. "I feel that way about you, too. You have your secrets. As a matter of fact, I think I have revealed a lot more about myself than you have. Sly little devil, aren't you? Tricking me!"

"I'm not trying to be sly. I know it's probably more fun if I play a little hard to get, but I want the playing field between us to be fair, so you can ask me any question you want and I'll answer it."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Seth asked, surprised. "I always feel more comfortable in a relationship when I'm at a disadvantage. It makes me feel like a gentleman... if such a thing were possible."

"No. I'm fine with it. Ask me anything you want."

Seth rested his chin on his knuckles and peered at her face as he formulated the perfect question. His focus moved contemplatively from the gravity of her eyes down her throat and down the length of her arm. He seemed to be lost in the labyrinth of his own mind and, even though she was the subject of his reverie, she had no idea what he was formulating, not to mention how uncomfortable she felt with him looking her over so carefully. It wasn't like there was anything much to see. Even though she felt like she had seen the door to womanhood, she knew she still hadn't crossed the threshold, so there wasn't anything there for him to explore. He was right about her. She really was a blank sheet of paper.

She sighed.

Seth's eyes met hers as though he suddenly remembered what it was he was supposed to be doing. "There's only one question. I wanted to come up with a different one, but there is only one question I would ever want to ask you. Why are you so innocent?"

Heat flooded Juliet's face and she threw her hands in the air. "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't see how I could be so much more innocent than your average eighteen-year-old."

"I see," Seth said calmly. "I asked my question in an overbearing way. Let me rephrase. Have you ever been tempted to do something that you know is wrong and done it anyway?"

She ran a hand through her hair and ruffled it. "You're here, aren't you?"

He laughed. "I know I'm wrong for you, but I don't mean that. I mean before we met. Have you ever been so tempted to do something that was wrong that you couldn't resist? Didn't resist?"

"Like told a lie or stolen something?"

"Sure."

"There was never any room for that sort of thing before. In the life I lived before I came to university there was no reason to lie and no reason to steal. You don't know my parents. It was the hardest thing in the world for them to let me come here and live in dorms. I never even went on a sleepover before this. That's a story and a half."

"Ah, that's the story you're trying not to tell?"

She shrugged and shifted so she was face down on the bed. "Overprotective would be a gentle way of putting it."

"Then I guess that's it. Mommy and Daddy kept you locked up at home?"

Juliet groaned.

"And now you're away from them at university. What would they say if they could see you now?"

"They would take one look at you and Rylan and feel sure I had gone straight to the devil." She laughed.

"Wait. You're still hanging out with Rylan?" Seth asked abruptly.

"Yeah. You picked me up from my Occult's Addict meeting tonight. Didn't you realize? Friday night after midnight at the library? What else would I have been doing?"

Seth gawked. "You should really give that up."

"Why?"

"I already said. That guy, Rylan, is not normal."

"What do you mean? Surely he's not the vampire."

Seth moved from his position on the floor and knelt beside her bed. He smoothed her hair and looked into her eyes gently as he spoke. "No, that guy isn't a vamp. It's been bothering me. I wish I knew what he was, but I have no idea. I even talked to my brother about him and he's at a loss, too. Granted, whatever he is might not be a big deal, but it might be a huge deal. He could be more dangerous than a vamp."

"What could be worse?" Juliet scoffed. "Besides how bad could a vamp be if I'm with you? You've already compared them to bloodsucking insects. Let me see, if they're like mosquitoes to you, how dangerous must you be?"

Seth ignored her question and said thoughtfully, "Actually, there may be a way to guarantee that vampire will stay away from you. I should have thought of it sooner."

"What?"

"If you have my scent all over you, he may simply mistake you for me and take off. You know?"

Juliet took a deep breath. Seth smelled just like the card at the department store. "I can't smell like Euphoria for Men. All the girls will be staring at me in the hall wondering why they got such a hot-man vibe when I walked by. I'd get hit on by the girls, I promise."

"Euphoria," Seth repeated, looking skeptical. "What are you talking about? I don't wear cologne."

Juliet rolled her eyes. "Fine. Aftershave?"

Seth jerked his head back and put some distance between them. "Why are we having this conversation? It's bizarre. I was trying to steer the conversation to one of those delicious moments where I could kiss you and all you do is start asking me irrelevant questions about my personal hygiene?" He got to his feet and headed for the door. "It's late. Since I'm not staying over, I should really get going."

"Hey," Juliet gawked, staring after him and jumping to her feet. "I didn't mean to chase you away, but you do smell exactly like Euphoria. It's a scent based on pomegranates."

He suddenly turned around and leaned against the door. He folded his arms across his chest and let his coat dangle from one hand. "So you were researching me at the mall," he said with satisfaction.

"Not exactly," Juliet deflected. "No. I was just looking for a scent that was based on pomegranates and when I asked for one, they showed me Euphoria, but after I smelled it, I couldn't buy it. It already smelled like you."

Seth dropped his coat on the floor. "And why would you go looking for a perfume that smelled like pomegranates?"

"Well," Juliet fumbled. "It's the only thing I know you like."

"Really? After what you said last Saturday, it sounded like you were afraid I would bite you and drink your blood." He began taking slow steady steps toward her, forcing her back.

Juliet stuttered, "You keep saying you're not a vampire, and what you've said tonight makes it sound like you're nothing like them, so..."

"So?" he encouraged when she faltered.

Hot sweat was breaking out on Juliet's back. He was advancing on her like a one man army. His sherry colored eyes had been eclipsed by the eyes of the man who wrote about how he would ruin the woman he loved. His stare was so intense she could hardly meet his eyes. She had to look away.

His fingers curled around her chin and he brought her face up to meet his. "So?" he said again.

"So, why shouldn't I smell like something you like? You're my boyfriend," she choked.

When she gathered enough courage to look at him again, he seemed unreal. The slant of his eyes was menacing and a sinister fire seemed to be glowing behind his irises. Whatever he was thinking, his mind had gone to a place Juliet had never been before. As he said, she was innocent.

"Are you my girlfriend?" he whispered, not taking his eyes off hers.

"We decided that last week," she stuttered.

"I remember, but... this is an awkward situation, Juliet. Really awkward. There's this delightful little catch in our relationship that constantly contradicts itself. Would you like to know what it is?"

She simply stared.

He licked his lips. As his mouth opened, his fangs extended until they were resting on his pale bottom lip. Juliet stared spellbound at his mouth. She had never seen anything so mesmerizing in her entire life. Her mind registered no thought of danger. The only thing she knew was that she didn't want this moment to end. Whatever he was, he was the most fascinating creature that had ever existed.

His voice was deep and smooth as he said, "You want a relationship with a vampire, but you don't want to get bitten. You want to lose your innocence, but in actual fact, you don't want to sin." Juliet tried to interrupt, but Seth stopped her words with his. "Then there's me, and I'm the exact opposite. I want a relationship with you, an innocent girl, but I don't want to pollute you, even though it's unavoidable if you stay with me. I want to stop sinning, but I can't. Like I said, I'm not like those vampires. It's true they're cursed, but not like me. I'm the prince of curses."

Juliet opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out.

"Hold still," Seth said, turning her around so her back was against his chest. The heat from him swept through her body like a hurricane. His lips were by her ear and his hot breath trickled down her neck. "Do you trust me?"

"To do what?" she mumbled. She couldn't focus on what he was saying since his hand had slid around her waist.

"Protect you," he said softly, his tongue smacking lightly on his teeth.

"I trust you," she mouthed, but she made no sound.

"Then you have to stay conscious to the end. You need to smell exactly like me if you're going to be safe."

Even with everything Seth had said, Juliet still expected him to move in on her throat. She told herself he was going to bite her, even though he said he wasn't a vampire. Her mind was foggy and everything in her room felt strange, even the lighting was off-color and grotesque.

Don't be afraid, she told herself gently, as though she was rocking a screaming child. There's nothing to be afraid of. This is what you wanted, so relax and let it happen.

Seth shifted his position and to her amazement, he began kissing along her spine. She could feel his fangs, but the sharp points didn't scratch her. His free hand caressed the side of her face and then moved down to her wrist. He lifted her wrist and crushed it between his palm and his mouth.

Juliet gasped.

No pain came. She opened her eyes to look, and she could see what he was doing. He was kissing her. He hadn't broken skin.

He moved so that one of his arms was under her knees and the other supported her back. With one fluid motion, he lifted her in his arms and placed her gently on the bed.

"What are you doing?"

"Finishing up. I just have four more points to hit and then we'll be done. You don't mind, do you?"

At the foot of the bed, he lifted her ankle and unrolled her sock so her heel was bare. Juliet nearly squealed as he moved from one ankle to the other.

"Don't be so jumpy," he reproved as he bent to kiss each dent again. Then he reached and curled his fingers around her yet unkissed wrist. "Two more to go," he said before he placed a kiss on her palm. Raising his eyes he looked into her face. "Are you ready for the last one? I'm impressed you haven't blacked out."

Juliet swallowed and pursed her lips.

Seth moved her palm so that it was resting over his heart. "Do you feel that? Do you feel my heart racing?"

"You're not dead," she responded quietly.

"No," he said, moving his hand so that it cradled her head.

"But you're not a normal human?"

"Would you be interested in me if I were?" he asked cynically before lowering his head and kissing her lips.

Juliet closed her eyes and sincerely tried to focus, but it was no use. It was like there was a switch inside her that he activated when their lips met and her brain left the place where she rested in Seth's arms. She saw darkness. Slowly shapes came, and then she was somewhere else, like in a dream.

She was running through a dark hallway with high, vaulted ceilings over her. She ran past rows of stone pillars that reached to the heavens. Blue light trickled in through breaks in the ceiling like stars. Holding her shoes, the soles of her feet slapped on the stone tile. She gripped the hem of her dress and pushed her hair out of her face.

Then she became aware that a dark abyss was growing behind her as if it was chasing her down the corridor. She had to escape from it. No matter how swiftly her feet flew or how much closer she came to the gigantic double doors at the end of the hallway, the darkness didn't stop. It was just as desperate to reach her as she was to leave it. She had to break free. She could feel cold, like metal chains sliding against her bare arms like snakes. It didn't matter the form of what pursued her. Turning back was unthinkable. Even one false thought would plunge her into the deepest realms of darkness, but her spirit was strong and she surged through the doors like they were liquid.

The light broke in one massive wave against her body and heat finally returned to her. The dark that pursued her recoiled into the fortress and the doors slammed shut with a heart-stopping echo.

Juliet caught her breath and, tossing her shoes to the ground, she threw back her head to bask in the sunlight. The glorious white sphere hung in the sky like the purest and brightest gemstone. Clouds grew in gathering puffs like cotton. She fell back on the grass and pushed her long wet hair out of her face. She was laughing. Something amazing had just happened and the triumph of it left her glowing and victorious.

Then, from the corner of her eye, she saw something incredible. There was a white horse standing on the grass that possessed sprawling wings and feathers. It was like Pegasus. When it saw her, it snorted and lifted its wings. Leaning against its body was a young man with black hair and sherry eyes.

Seth.

Though Juliet could not see herself, she could easily see him. He was wearing a burgundy vest with elaborate stitching, a white, collared shirt and black trousers. His expression made her heart skip a beat. He looked ultimately satisfied.

He offered her his hand.

He circled his arms around her. Lifting her sent her back to her dorm room where she was lying on the bed.

She opened her eyes and looked at Seth.

"That was great," he said softly. "It looks like you survived one kiss. Let's see if you can make it through two."

Juliet put her arms around his neck and drew his head toward hers. She wanted to see what else his kiss had in store for her. She felt his lips part and the heat of his breath and then everything disappeared.

Seth got up from the bed and found his coat on the floor. It turned out that Juliet hadn't been able to make it through a second kiss and she lay completely unconscious on the bed.

"Poor girl," he muttered to himself before he put on his coat.

He looked briefly around the room to see if there was something to cover her with since she had fallen asleep on top of her blankets. He bent down and looked under the bed and then briefly in the chest at the end of her bed. There was nothing, so he turned to the closet. There wasn't a spare blanket on the open side. There were only clothes, so he pulled the door shut, revealing another door, the one with a poster on it.

He stared at his own face.

He unconsciously put a hand to his mouth. There he was, a black and white image, except his eyes were colored red.

"Where in the world did she get this?" he said aloud as he touched the place on the poster that showed the three sets of bite marks down his neck. His other hand immediately touched the scars on his own throat.

For a moment, he considered ripping it down and taking it with him, but he immediately discarded the idea. If she liked him so much that she had a picture of him then wasn't that lucky? Then another idea came to him. He remembered her post about being in love with a vampire. It was him from the start. After all, there was a myth about three bites from a vampire turning you into one.

He found a blanket in the closet behind the door that had his picture and was careful to leave the doors the way he found them. Unfolding the blanket, he spread it

out over Juliet. Hopefully, it would keep her warm until morning. Locking the door behind him, he found himself in the dormitory hall and then on the empty street outside. It was almost five, but the sky was still black as pitch. He could walk home before the buses started, so he took to his feet and marched along the pavement.

He needed some water.

Chapter Nine

Fishing for Trouble

The foggy morning light drifted through Juliet's curtains and brought her into a state of consciousness. She batted her eyelashes and brought the room into focus. Her room was empty because there was no long-limbed gentleman asleep at her desk or dark-haired rogue in bed with her.

Seth was gone.

Juliet sighed.

She couldn't remember a thing after their second kiss and that had been somewhere between four and five in the morning. Had he left right after that? From what she could tell, he hadn't done a thing to her, but merely covered her with a blanket and walked out. Well, there was something else she wanted to check. She felt the contours of her throat, but the skin was unbroken.

She flopped back down on her bed.

What should she do now? After their conversation the night before, Juliet was left to choose what to believe: either that Seth was an ordinary guy who was pretending to be some dark, demonic thing just to please her, or that he actually was some dark, demonic thing.

When Juliet thought of the first theory, Rylan's red eyes popped into her head. She could guess how he would answer her dilemma. "I'm an everyday guy and I'm wearing red contacts. Remember? The simplest solution is usually the correct one. And Seth? Yeah, he's a normal guy, too. Don't be so dumb that you believe the ridiculous stories he tells you."

Since when had Rylan become the voice in her head? Was he supposed to be the devil or the angel sitting on her shoulder?

Juliet considered the second theory, that Seth was really something dark—cursed. There were three pieces of evidence that supported this theory: the three bite marks in a neat line down the vein in his throat, his fangs, and the fact that he said himself that he scared off vampires because he was scarier than they were.

If she'd had enough of these games, she needed to crack down on what Seth really was. Reminding herself that it was completely okay if he was an ordinary guy, she picked up her cell phone and gave the Occult's Addict president a call.

"Hello," Fiona answered her phone briskly.

"Hi Fiona, this is Juliet."

"Hey, how's it going? Lucky you called after ten, if you'd called ten minutes earlier, I wouldn't have answered. What can I do for you this morning?"

"I was just wondering what information our club has gathered on Seth. Could you share it with me?"

Fiona yawned. "Sure, babe, but I think you're in a much better position to share information with us, since you're so close to him and everything."

Juliet hesitated. "I already told Rylan a bunch of stuff. Didn't he pass it on?"

"That little puke," Fiona fumed. "No, he didn't. Stop telling him things. He's been so despicably jealous since that night you left the greenhouse with Seth. I can hardly stand to be around him anymore. Just come to Halo or me when you have something interesting to spill. It'll be more fun to tell us anyway."

Juliet suddenly remembered her conversation with Elise from down the hall about Seth. That girl didn't want to hear about it, but these people did. Juliet's heart sang.

"You bet," she said cheerfully, and she explained how she had blacked out when he kissed her.

"You are so lucky," Fiona said when she was finished. "Seth's piping hot, but it's not just his face. The man looks totally tortured while somehow managing to look sophisticated and... I don't know... he seems like he's got a layer of impatience simmering under the surface." She sighed. "I hope you have a good time with him. I wish I'd studied him a little more closely myself, because I had no idea he had such a honey-dappled way of talking, or such a razor-sharp wit."

"Yeah, he's a little vicious, huh?"

"Gorgeous, but vicious," she agreed. "It's a good thing Rylan didn't try to spar with him. There would have been bloodshed."

Juliet smiled. At least someone understood her fascination. "So, what do you know about him?" she asked.

"We weren't that far into our investigation when you showed up, and I just thought you'd take it over. So, I have his address and Rylan's pictures of him and that's all."

"His address? That's more than I have. I haven't been over to his place yet."

"All right, here it is."

Juliet wrote it down. "Wow, I'm glad you had it so handy," Juliet commented. "Do you usually keep this kind of information so handy?"

"Ah," Fiona said, sounding nonchalant. "No. I have a folder next to my bed and that's where I keep all my occult stuff. I gotta go, but please tell me how it goes. If he sucks your blood, I want to be the first to know. Later."

With that, Fiona hung up. Juliet didn't even get a chance to say goodbye before the line went dead.

"That was a little weird," Juliet muttered as she dropped her phone on her duvet. It wasn't that Fiona's friendliness was completely unexpected, but Juliet found her end of the conversation awkward. She expected to have to wait for Fiona to give her Seth's address. Why in the world did she have it at her fingertips?

Juliet shrugged. She should just be happy with the result, which meant she could spend her entire Saturday hunting Seth down and figuring him out.

She looked at his address more carefully. His apartment complex wasn't in her part of the city; rather, it was across the river in an area she had never been. However, the numbers made it seem like it wasn't that far away. Too far to walk, she decided as she shoved herself to her feet. She needed to take her time getting ready, just in case she 'accidentally' ran into the object of her pursuit.

Juliet sat in the front of a city bus, watching the scenery closely. She had never crossed the river before. The water was blue as the wan sunlight flickered across its stirring surface. The poplars and willows had long lost their leaves and only the spruce and pine kept their green needles. The sky was overcast and the wind bore down on the pedestrians. In a moment, she would be one of them.

As the bus climbed the valley road, she kept her eyes fixed on the street signs. She knew her stop was coming as they approached the top of the ravine. She pushed the button and the bus came to an immediate and bumpy halt.

She smiled apologetically to the bus driver as she stepped out the front doors. "Thanks," she muttered.

Once on the sidewalk, she examined the piece of paper with Seth's address scrawled across it. His place was over three blocks and then two more blocks into the river valley. Luckily, she didn't think she would freeze to death before she found it.

She walked leisurely, looking at the houses and apartment buildings, wondering idly what Seth's building would be like. Some of the designs were very old, absolutely nothing like what she was used to back in her hometown. They were fascinating to her.

After she had covered a little over a block of her journey, she became aware that someone was walking behind her. At first, she wasn't alarmed. There were lots of people out on the streets. Weren't there? Juliet's eyes flickered around the streets, searching. It was just a person walking. There was nothing to be suspicious of. But

when she finally made her turn to enter the deeper parts of the valley, she realized that it was a man and he had caught up to her so that she was only three steps ahead of him. She hadn't even heard his footfalls behind her.

She jumped. It felt like he was practically breathing down her neck.

"Sorry," he said deftly, his voice deep and slightly echoing through the cold. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Juliet stared at him. It was unintentional, but she couldn't help it. Besides Seth, she had never seen anyone who appeared so utterly unreal. His hair was the color of salt, and his eyes were the color of lilacs; however, it wasn't just the coloring that made the person in front of her seem amazing. It was something else, something much more complicated that Juliet couldn't exactly analyze.

He stepped in front of her with a flirty smile and strode ahead of her with a silence and a speed in his long legs that seemed to wake Juliet up, like his very existence had flung her from her world into an extraordinary one. She forced herself to walk faster just to keep up with him. She had to unravel the mystery before he disappeared.

Suddenly, he stopped in front of a small cluster of outdoor mailboxes and Juliet had to proceed ahead of him. It was no use. She had no excuse to loiter because she was standing outside Seth's building.

It was a completely ordinary building. It was built of brick. There were no balconies, making it look ancient. Juliet wondered which one of the windows belonged to Seth.

Bravely, she walked up to the buzzer panel. She had planned to find out his apartment number from the chart. There had to be a list of names like there was at every other building, but when she looked at the list of occupants, she saw that it was completely blank. There was only one button that had anything written beside it. It said 'manager' on it, but there was nothing else.

Juliet sighed.

"Can I help you with something?" a deep voice said.

Juliet spun around to see the fascinating stranger standing in front of her. His keys were between his fingers. He probably lived there.

She smiled sheepishly and said, "My boyfriend lives here, so I was just looking for his apartment. That's all."

"Oh really?" the stranger said, clearly amused. "Who's your boyfriend? I'm the manager here, so I know everyone."

"Seth Halkias," she answered, unable to meet the stranger's gaze and dropping her eyes to the pavement. She was even blushing with glee at being able to call Seth

her boyfriend. She already knew that if this guy was the manager, then he had to be Seth's older brother.

"Ah, Seth," the man said speculatively, his tongue rooting around in his cheek. "Yeah. Did he invite you here?"

Juliet flushed even deeper. "Not exactly."

"Didn't think so," he said, his voice gaining a satisfied quality to it. "I've sent him out on a little errand. You can come in and wait for him if you'd like." Then he extended his hand. "I'm Chas."

Juliet shook hands with him. His hand felt warm and welcoming, and all the unease she had felt evaporated.

Chas took her handshake as assent and after putting his key in the lock, opened the door for her. The inside was everything Juliet had expected. Buildings built in that style usually opened into a staircase; one flight going up and the other flight going down with a door capping each hallway of suites.

"Come on," Chas said, heading up the stairs.

She nodded and followed after him.

When he got to the top floor, he took out his keys again and unlocked the door that Juliet assumed led into the hallway. When he opened the door, there was no hall, instead, the entire floor had been gutted and made into a single private apartment. It led into an overly large, but extremely tidy living space. A stainless steel kitchen separated the living area from the dining area. As Juliet proceeded further into the apartment she saw that the whole back wall by the dining room table was glass, overlooking the river valley. The view was incredible. Her mind couldn't even calculate the value of the place.

"This is Seth's place?" Juliet gawked.

"No," Chas said pleasantly, tossing his coat on the back of a leather armchair and dropping himself into it. "This is my place. That is Seth's room," he said, pointing his chin toward one of the doors. "What exactly did Seth tell you about his living arrangements?"

Juliet gulped. She was being quizzed. "He didn't say much. He said his brother owned an apartment building and he lived there."

Chas nodded. "Yeah, that's how he talks. So," he said stretching his legs out and putting his hands behind his head. "What should we do now?"

Juliet's skin turned cold.

"How about a tour?" she said, trying to keep her voice steady. She couldn't let him know she was shaken.

"A tour?" he mocked. "You don't want a tour of this place, little girl who says she's Seth's girlfriend."

"I am his girlfriend. I am. Didn't he mention me?"

"Well, what's your name, little un-introduced girl?"

"Juliet."

"He didn't mention you," Chas said negatively. "But don't let that bother you. I have no problem inviting strangers up to my private rooms for a little fun." He scrutinized her with careful eyes, all the while cold sweat pooled at the base of Juliet's neck. "Seth didn't say anything about you, but my daughter did. There are two things you should know about Seth and I should tell them to you before he gets back," he got up from the chair and stepped toward her. Standing too close to her he said directly, "If you're looking for a fairytale ending, you will never get it with him. If you back off now, it will hurt less." He paused for a moment and took a deep breath. "The other thing you should realize is that if you're here for fan service (and I sincerely hope you know what I mean when I say that) you won't do well getting it from Seth. He's... sort of hopeless in that department and extremely inconsistent. You'd be better off with me."

Juliet had no idea what he meant when he said 'fan service,' but made a note of it and decided to ask Seth about it when he got back.

"Thanks," Juliet said peacefully. "I'll remember your warning."

She was about to ask him who his daughter was, but just as she opened her mouth to ask, the apartment buzzer rang and Chas excused himself to pick up the phone.

Juliet pretended not to listen to his conversation by turning her back to him, when actually she was listening carefully.

Chas' deep voice was practically a whisper, but Juliet still caught most of it. "Right now?" he asked. "I have a guest. No, not that kind of guest. Hmm... how could I refuse such an invitation? All right. I'll get rid of her. I'll buzz you up in two minutes. Don't move."

He put down the receiver and came over to where Juliet was admiring the painting over the mantelpiece.

"What do you think of it?" he asked serenely, as though he had all the time in the world and wasn't looking for an excuse to toss her out on her ear.

Juliet, suddenly in no rush to leave, took her time letting her eyes explore the canvas.

The painting was a portrait of an extremely beautiful woman. Juliet had never seen a face like hers before. She had waves of blonde/black hair (if such a thing were possible) that fell around her face like the mane of a lion. Her eyes seemed colorless, or rather the exact shade of her skin, and held the pitiless quality of a woman who cared for no one but herself. Her lips were like plums and the dark lilies

painted around her made her seem utterly exotic. One of her hands curled up by her cheek, making her look slightly thoughtful. No, not exactly thoughtful, it was more like the wheels that turned in her head always came to a devious and terrible conclusion. Yet, even having observed all that, the woman was, without reservation, the most exquisitely gorgeous creature Juliet had ever seen.

"The artist had quite the imagination," she remarked.

"I'm afraid that if you had seen the original, you would find this pathetic scratching lacking. I painted it. I love beautiful women, but no one is ever as beautiful as Raidne, and every time I see her she's even more so."

"You painted this?" Juliet asked, searching the corner of the canvas to find a date written. The markings said it was painted in nineteen seventy-four. She had no clue how old Chas was. Maybe he was in his early thirties, but if he was, then he would have been a child when it was painted. But for him to have been a teenager when it was painted meant he was at least fifteen years older than she had suspected. "How old are you?"

"Old enough to be your father," he said grimly before moving away from the picture.

"Wait! If this was a real person, where is she? Was she your wife?"

"Oh no," Chas said slowly. "She could never be anyone's wife. Look carefully at her eyes, child. What kind of person do you think has eyes like those?"

Juliet looked thoughtfully and the only answer she came up with was particularly bleak. "A murderer," she answered quietly.

"It's even more cruel than I will explain. Now, come along with me. You wanted a tour and I'm suddenly inclined to give you one."

"Thank you," she said as she followed him, forgetting the painting behind her. Maybe a tour was his way of showing her to the door.

Chas led her to one of the doors. "This," he said as he put his hand to the door knob, "is Seth's room."

The door swung open noiselessly. The curtains were drawn and the room was flooded in darkness, except for the sunlight that poured in through the door Chas was holding open. Juliet couldn't see anything except a patch of tiled flooring.

Chas motioned for her to enter.

She hesitated.

"During the renovation, I had a lot of opportunities for improvement. For example, this room," he said, by way of making conversation, "is completely soundproof. No one can hear what happens in this room, and no one inside can hear what happens out here."

"Does Seth listen to loud music?" Juliet asked, feeling the wall for the light switch. She couldn't find it. The wall felt empty.

"It's up here," Chas said, placing his fingers over hers and guiding them along the wall till they reached the switch. It was about level with Chas' neck, which made it higher than Juliet's head. She moved to turn it on, but his grip tightened and her fingers were locked in his. Struggling, she tried to free herself, but she couldn't get away.

"Let go," she hissed, glaring at him.

"I have this problem," he said gently. "I have someone coming I *have to* see." The way he said 'have to' made him sound like a man dying of thirst on the Sahara, desperate and weak. "It has nothing to do with you, but it's too late for you to leave. I'm very sorry, but I have no choice except to lock you in here until either Seth comes to rescue you, or my guest leaves."

"You wouldn't," Juliet gasped.

"I *have to*," he said, and then he pushed her into the room and slammed the door shut.

Juliet landed on her palms and knees. She heard Chas secure the lock before she was able to get up off the floor. Rushing to the door, she tried the doorknob, but it was completely immovable. She banged on the door with her fist, but nothing happened. The room was soundproof. No one would hear her. There wasn't any point in fighting. Besides, she got to see Seth's bedroom. Wasn't that what she wanted?

She reached for the light switch, but when the room filled with scattered light, Juliet was more puzzled than she had been before. Seth's room was not normal.

Chapter Ten

Den of Darkness

When Juliet imagined Seth's room, she pictured an overhead light to turn on. Instead, a disco ball, hanging from the center of the high ceiling, began to spin and fragments of light began dancing across the walls.

What was this place?

Juliet could not believe what she saw. There were no windows and there were no other electric lights to turn on, only the disco ball offering its meager light. Yet, it didn't seem meager to her eyes. It seemed magical. There were tiny mirrors in the shape of stars secured to the ceiling, and when the tiny streams of light reflected on them, Juliet suddenly felt like she had entered an artificial heaven. This was where Seth lived.

It was strange. Stranger than any place she had ever been before, and yet so like a dream she wished she'd had the imagination to bring to life.

There was a circular tub in one corner of the room. It was full of water. Against one wall, there was a small gilded table with a bowl of pomegranates on it and a myriad of candles. Some of them were burnt very low.

There was a wardrobe and Juliet reluctantly opened it, expecting to find only clothes, but it wasn't full of Seth's jeans. Instead, there was nothing in it but towels.

Juliet smiled. She should have guessed, but then again, she'd never had a hot tub in her room, and apparently Seth used his all the time.

There was no coffin. Instead there was a big bed in a beautiful metal frame. She liked the bedposts and the intricate ironwork. The mattress was covered in black covers and pillows. Juliet realized that that was what allowed the ornate bed frame to be in a man's room, it was completely under-dressed.

The other corner of the room was occupied by a small desk. There was a laptop and when Juliet jiggled the mouse the monitor flickered on. No password was needed and so she had immediate access to his files. There was an open window on the desktop. It didn't look like much until she expanded the view. It was a poem.

Juliet sat down on his swiveling office stool and began to read. There was no title. Without preface, Seth plunged her into a world she didn't know existed.

Midnight waves wake my senses - Confused

The water burns me to my eyes - Suffused

The dreams haunt my mind - Disintegration

I can't battle my dreams - Formulation

The First Dream

I'm young while she's beautiful - Bemused
Untouchable and irrevocably touched - Defused
The pool of blood I laid in at road's end - Surprised
Death's white fingers like love - Realized

The Second Dream

I'm angry while she's patient - Placate
Provoked by her lover to knife's point - Aggravate
Brown eyes triggered bloody red - Amused
Lose my body in the violent fray - Refused

The Third Dream

Like an injured monster lost in water - Rescue
Like a broken man waiting by the window - Withdrew
Still feigning while dreaming - Conventionalize
The morn will be bright after the hardest night - Cruel Lies

Juliet felt bewildered as she read the words. They triggered a storm of conflicting thoughts that came down on her so suddenly she couldn't organize them.

Seth dreamed.

She would have passed his dreams off as therapeutic poetry to ease his heavy burdens, except the third line in the second verse struck an unusual chord with her. It read, 'The pool of blood I laid in at road's end.' Juliet had had that dream, too. The first time he kissed her, she remembered having a vision of his body on the cusp of death. She drank his blood, like salt water in a storm, but hot like his skin had been, and immeasurably precious like the silver lining of dark clouds. It had been her first dream, also. Did they dream of the same things at the same time? He never mentioned anything before.

Her mind swam. What had her second dream been about? She had been waiting in a room with a goblet of her own blood on a table beside her. Rereading Seth's second dream, she tried to decipher whether they lined up.

She couldn't tell. He described the woman as patient. Maybe it coincided.

Her third dream had been the night before. She remembered being chased through the hallway full of shadows, but for her there had been light at the end and Seth waiting for her. There had been a happy ending. Why was there a happy ending for her and not for Seth?

She frowned.

How much longer was Chas going to keep her locked up? When would Seth come home?

For the first time, Juliet wondered what he would say when he found her in his room. There was no question about it. She was going to be in very deep trouble. Well, she would only make it worse if she meddled around with his computer needlessly, so she returned the window to its original size and slid away from his desk.

She got up and at first, she didn't know what to do with herself. She stretched and threw herself across his bed. She opened her eyes when her head hit the pillow and she saw what Seth saw on his ceiling before he slept. No wonder there was no canopy on his bed. Why would you want to block the twinkling stars?

So, she thought as she turned on her side and pulled the pillow close, this is where Seth does his dreaming.

Juliet didn't dream when she slept. It was one of those things that nagged at her conscience. Shouldn't she? Everyone she knew dreamed, but she merely blacked out and woke up several hours later. Her experiences with Seth had been her first chances to dream. Now that she thought about her visions, she felt like, somehow, they made her more like other people. Maybe, just maybe, she wasn't a broken person. She closed her eyes and pretended she was whole. Too soon, she found herself scratching her knee and then her ear in irritation. Her mind never accepted these attitude adjustments no matter how many times she tried them. Her parents never encouraged her to look back. They wanted to keep her in the present. They wanted to keep her safe. Yet, she was always left to question what happened to make her this way.

Just then, there was a rattling at the door and the whole room brightened at Seth's entrance. At first, the sunlight from the living room was so bright that she couldn't see what he was doing, but when she squinted, she caught the end of it. He had pulled a key from the lock and threw it into the living room.

Then Juliet heard a sort of muffled scream outside the room. It was a woman's voice.

Seth closed the door and then Juliet realized what he had done. He had locked the two of them inside without giving them a way to get out.

"What's going on out there?" Juliet choked, suddenly gripped in terror. There had been no noise before, so she hadn't worried about what Chas was doing out there. She was so stupid. She didn't even worry about why it was soundproof.

Seth didn't answer and it was so dark she couldn't see the expression on his face. Instead, he dropped his backpack on the floor and began taking off his shirt.

"What are you doing?" she asked. Her voice had been half strangled before, so perhaps he hadn't heard her.

He didn't acknowledge her as he whipped his shirt over his head and threw it on top of his computer stool. Then he began undoing his belt and pants.

"Seth, wait! Can't you see I'm in here?" she cried as she averted her eyes.

"Quiet down," he mumbled. "You're going to give me a headache. Besides, I'm not getting naked. Good grief." Then she heard the slight tremor of water.

She turned and saw Seth had gotten in the tub and completely submerged himself in the water. Juliet stared. He was under for an awfully long time. Eventually, he came out of the water and shook his hair like he didn't care what got wet.

"So, Juliet," he said, finally paying attention to her. "I'm a little confused. What are you doing here?" He leaned over and began lighting the candles by the tub.

"You act like you're not happy to see me," she pouted.

The candlelight made the droplets of water on his white cheek glisten and reflected the fire in his eyes. "I'm starving," he said simply. Then he took a pomegranate out of the bowl and began peeling it.

Juliet climbed off the bed and approached the tub. She was a little apprehensive at first, but Seth said he wasn't going to get naked and sure enough, when she perched herself on the lip of the tub, she saw he was still wearing a pair of dark colored briefs.

"What was that screaming outside?" she asked slowly.

Seth didn't even pause as he answered smoothly. "My brother is cooking. I think he accidentally cut himself."

"That didn't sound like him. It sounded like a woman."

Seth laughed and popped a few of the red kernels in his mouth. "I can't help it if that's what he sounds like."

"Then why are we locked in here if all he's doing is cooking?" she demanded.

"*We* are not locked in here, little girl. *You* are locked in here," he corrected as he tossed a bit of the peel over the edge of the tub. "What are you doing here, anyway? Isn't coming here advanced magic, even for you?"

"What are you talking about?"

He shook his head wearily. "You're not afraid of me, are you? Afraid of what I could do to you?"

"Not really," she said slowly.

"Well, you should be," he answered, his head hanging at an angle. "You've caught me at a very bad time. I'm starving."

Juliet shivered. "But you said that you weren't a vampire. You were worried the vampire would hurt me. You would *never* hurt me."

He put a hand to his forehead and said bitterly, "Wouldn't I?"

"You're not a vampire," she repeated.

Seth threw his head back and stared at the beautiful ceiling. His voice sounded like truck tires on gravel when he said his next words, "That doesn't mean I don't drink blood."

Juliet pursed her lips together to stop herself from yelping. She sat very still on the edge of the tub and didn't speak. Was he telling the truth?

"The problem is that Chas is cooking right now, and I have to wait for him to finish." He dropped the uneaten pomegranate by the side of the tub and continued, "These won't satisfy me when I'm like this. You shouldn't have come. This room, it isn't for you. If I could stay away from you, I would. I would leave you in the lurch so fast if I could find the one I'm really meant for. Why do I even bother masquerading as a human? It's pointless. If I could, I would throw you out on the street right now with the stiffest warning you've ever had. You should stay away from me."

"What about last night?" she whispered.

"What about it?"

"Don't you love me? Even if it's just a little bit?" she asked, putting her thumb and index finger an inch apart.

He squinted like thinking was painful for him. Then he swallowed. "I don't know if I would call what I feel for you love. Sometimes it feels like you're just a gorgeous distraction trying to keep me from my real goal."

"What's your real goal?"

He sighed. "To break my curse. When I met you, I realized on sight I should have nothing to do with you and I tried to keep you out of my life, but then you said if I left you would go back to Rylan. My hands were tied. That felt like the worst thing I had ever heard. You going back to *him*? I couldn't stand it. I still can't stand it, because that's the truth, isn't it? If I leave, you'll end up with him. You won't quit your Occult's Addict thing, will you?"

"No," she said gravely.

"And that's why I'm here. You can't go to him to be trampled and put down. You have to be free. I don't understand it. It seems the weirdest thing in the world that being with me would be the thing to set you free."

"I don't like the way this conversation is going. Are you trying to escalate our relationship by biting me, or are you trying to offend me so badly that I'll break up with you?" she asked, her voice caustic.

"Do you want me to bite you?" he asked quizzically.

She blushed and deferred answering, "I want you to feel strongly about me. I want you to feel as passionate about me as I feel about you. You mentioned that you were meant for someone else earlier. Far be it for me to keep you from your destiny, but I don't want to be your second choice. If that's how it is, then I don't want you to touch me."

"Even though just one of my kisses sends you into such ecstasy that you can't keep conscious?"

"You're an egomaniac in disguise, aren't you? And yeah, even though."

A few moments passed and neither of them said anything.

Finally, Seth found his voice and asked, "Would you go to Rylan if I left?"

"It's this feeling I have," she said, sounding wistful. "I just know he will be there for me no matter what happens."

"What a curious feeling! But the way you tell it, that dependability does not sound accompanied by love." He sat very still and seemed to be thinking it over. "No," he said at last. "I can't give you to him."

Juliet leaned toward Seth and looked him in the eye. "Do you love me? Do you think there's a way for you to give up on the one you're meant for and just be satisfied with me?"

Seth's lips curled as though he were in pain. "I wish I could."

She got up from the tub. "Then I won't stay. I've read too many books and seen too many dramas for that kind of a line to work on me. I won't be led on by half promises. If there's someone else or some other type of girl you feel you must pursue, then I will politely bow out. I promise not to go to Rylan right away, or at least, not out of loneliness. So, that should satisfy you. You need not fear that I'll do something stupid because you were unkind to me. There. Is that all you need so you can do whatever you want with a clean conscience?"

He glared at her. "So, you can just put your feelings for me aside?"

"I didn't say I wouldn't be lonely. I didn't say I wouldn't be desperate. I said that I wouldn't do anything stupid because you rejected me. That's all. That doesn't change how much I want you in my life. I want you so bad. You have no idea how much I'm dying to unlock the secrets of your world. For starters, why am I locked in here?" she almost yelled, rattling the doorknob. "Are you and your brother cannibals? Is Chas killing some innocent girl out there and I have to be locked in here so that I can't be a witness? Why did you walk in here, immediately strip and

get in the tub? Why was it filled with water to start with? Shouldn't you leave it drained? There are so many questions I can hardly count. Who is Chas' daughter and why does she know me? Why do you have a picture of that woman, Raidne, in your living room? The woman Chas told me was a murderer? I want to know everything."

"You're putting yourself in a precarious position even being here, Juliet. But I can answer a few of those questions. First, neither my brother nor I are killers. Do you believe me?"

She nodded, feeling brave and dying to hear every last word that dripped from his superb lips. She was even proud of herself for bullying a few answers out of him.

"The scream from before was probably nothing more than one of Chas' lovers. Some of them are quite vocal. Don't let it bother you."

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"I didn't like to freak you out. You seem so pure. Who knew you were imagining that he was hacking some girl to bits on the counter top? That's the reason the rooms are sound proof. He doesn't want to traumatize the more innocent members of his household and in an offbeat way that includes me." At this point, Seth actually laughed and with his laughter, the mood in the room lightened considerably. He got out of the tub, took a towel out of the wardrobe and started drying himself, starting with his face. "I think the only other question I don't mind answering is about Chas' daughter. Yes, you know her. It's Nixie. Bet you never would have guessed that she's my niece."

"No," Juliet started, aghast.

"Well, she is. She's been my friend for many years."

"And you won't answer my questions about the tub?"

"That's because they are ridiculous. Everyone has baths," he said simply, as he motioned for Juliet to turn around. "Go ahead. I need to put dry clothes on."

"I'm done," he said after a decent interval.

Juliet turned. He was sitting on the edge of his bed, putting on a pair of black socks. He was wearing what looked like a dark turtleneck sweater and a pair of dark slacks. Exact colors couldn't be defined in the hollow of his room.

"Oh," she said, suddenly remembering Chas' warning. "What's fan service?"

Seth started. "Where did you hear that?"

"Chas. He said that if I wanted to have a happy future, then I had to leave you alone. Then he said something about how you weren't very good at fan service. What was he talking about?"

Seth shook his head in disgust. "I'm not answering that."

"Really? That's too bad. Maybe I could ask Chas instead. I'm sure he wouldn't mind explaining."

"I'm sure he would. The fact that he said 'fan service' instead of speaking bluntly means that he doesn't want to talk about it if you don't already understand it."

Juliet fumed. She loved this situation and hated it. Here she was, locked in a room with the object of her desire and yet he was taking the teasing too far. She hated being left out of a joke because he thought her to be too 'innocent'. No one wanted to traumatize her by telling her the truth, and it happened to her all the time.

"So, basically," he drawled, leaning back on the bed. "You're considering dumping me because of the person I'm waiting for?"

"It sounds like a waste of time if you're just going to leave me for her."

"My whole life is a waste of time."

"Yeah," she said quietly. "I read your poem. You sound very bleak."

"What poem?" he asked, sitting up and leaning his elbow on his knee.

"The one you had open on your computer. The one you wrote about your three dreams."

"Dreams," Seth repeated, looking beyond her like he was in a trance.

"Will you tell me more about them?" she asked, moving to sit beside him. Maybe she still had a chance to win him over if she was patient and understanding.

"You shouldn't have snooped," he said, still staring at the same place on the wall. "And you shouldn't be sitting this close to me. I'm hungry."

Juliet's skin turned cold. "Would you really bite me?"

He turned his face away from her and plugged his nose.

"I don't believe you'd actually bite me," she said, not entirely sure if that was what she believed or not.

"Don't provoke me. I was lying about only you being locked in here. I can't get out either. We have to wait for Chas to open the door."

"What else have you been lying about?"

One of his eyebrows twitched. "I can't stand this. Please, go sit over there, or better still, take off your clothes and get in the tub."

"What?" Juliet exclaimed.

"You don't understand," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "With you in *my* room, I can smell you so much better than anywhere else. There are no distractions. When I'm in your room, I can pretend that what I smell is your fabric softener. When we're out in public, I smell everything but you. The tub is still full of water and my scent. Either get in, or... I really will bite you."

Juliet stared, completely unsure how she should react. Was he simply trying to get her to take her clothes off?

"This isn't a joke. I wish it were. Get in. You'll be much safer."

"No," she whispered.

"You're a stupid girl, Juliet," Seth cursed. Then he clenched his teeth and before she knew it she was slammed directly into the middle of his bed with her head on the pillows. His knee was between her legs and his hands balled into fists on either side of her head. "You should listen to me when I warn you, but if this is how it has to be, then so be it."

He bent his head down and kissed Juliet on the lips. She was nervous, but she pushed her tongue between Seth's lips and tried to search his mouth for his fangs. Maybe she had imagined his long, sharp teeth. She had to confirm it one more time. But she felt little more than the wetness of his mouth before she disappeared into one of her visions.

There was a warm, wet wind blowing across her face and the sweaty breadth of her chest. She was kneeling on the stones of a tower balcony. It looked out onto the sea and the starry night sky. Her hands and lips were drenched in blood and red, swollen tears streamed from her eyes freely. Dizzy, her mind was spinning and her senses whirling as though she couldn't understand what had just happened.

Seth lay dead in front of her, his blood splashed and staining the dark stones of the balcony. He was practically hacked to bits in front of her. He was missing fingers and one of his eyes had been gouged out. There was an arrow through his shoulder and two knives protruding from his abdomen.

He had fought desperately to protect her, his twin double-edged swords lay still and wet with blood beside him, but the violence was over. It was quiet and Juliet could hear the faint chirping of birds.

Her lip trembled and the anger that stormed in her system could not be contained. That bastard! Nothing could stop her now. No one could take Seth away from her. Damn him! Damn everyone!

She wrenched one of the knives from Seth's stomach free and more blood gushed in the process. Bending down, she kissed the bloody gash.

"I love you so much," she whined, her voice broken. "You can't die like this. I'll give you a different ending."

With that, she took the knife and put it to her own throat, slitting it with such violence that she managed to drag the blade all the way to the other side.

The last thing Juliet heard was a howl. A man was screaming himself hoarse. What had she done to herself?

Juliet couldn't stand it, even though her consciousness was returning to Seth's bed, the vicious pain uncoiling in her stomach was something she couldn't handle. It was something she had never been able to handle.

She kissed Seth harder and accepted oblivion with pleasure.

Seth waited until he was positive Juliet was out cold. Then he pulled away from her and started unbuttoning her shirt.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, realizing she couldn't hear him. "I didn't want to do this. Why didn't you just do what I told you?"

It was an ordinary white shirt, with buttons up the front and short sleeves. Seth picked her up slightly to take it off the rest of the way. The action was horrible for him, almost torture. Luckily, she was wearing a white spaghetti-strap tank top underneath, so he didn't even feel like her modesty was being challenged. She was definitely a good girl.

Seth sighed. Even though she was well dressed, he had to hurry, before he lost his mind.

He moved to her feet and quickly removed her shoes and socks. It was a good lead-up for the rest of what he would have to do. He took a preparing breath and continued. His fingers trembled slightly as he unzipped her pants.

Now he was cursing at her. Why couldn't she have just done what he told her to do without complaint? Putting him in such an awkward position, was it really to be tolerated?

Soon, he was carrying her over to the tub. The water was warm. It wouldn't wake her up. He set her down in the water, soaking the sleeves of his shirt in the process. He rested her head on a rolled up towel and let her sink to the bottom.

Then he went to his dresser and pulled out one of the many bottles of grenadine from his stash. He took the bottle, unscrewed the top, and emptied it into the tub.

He could still smell her.

He frowned and opened bottle number two. That, he also poured into the tub.

He could still smell her.

Opening bottle number three, he took a swig of the red liquid. It eased him more than he imagined it could. Downing the entire bottle, he finally felt satiated enough to change his dripping shirt.

Pretending Juliet wasn't there, he opened another bottle and curled into a ball on the bed. It had been a long time since he'd gone on a binge like this. Usually Chas took better care of him.

Not long after, the door cracked open.

"Seth," came Chas' gentle voice.

"I'm here," Seth said, rushing to the door. "Juliet's asleep."

"In your tub?" Chas shook his head sadly. "That bad, eh? I'm sorry."

"Don't you dare pity me."

"Who said anything about pitying *you*? I feel sorry for *her*. When will you learn and set yourself up like I have?"

"Nixie would never forgive me."

"Whatever. You don't have to repeat my mistakes, but there may not be any other option." He handed Seth a blood bag through the crack. "The donor is gone now, so you don't have to stay in here."

Seth unplugged the stopper and began to drink ravenously. It was cold, but Seth didn't give a damn. At least it wasn't congealed.

"You could say 'thank you,'" Chas said humorlessly.

Seth forced the liquid down his throat. "More than that. I'd die without you. You know that."

"Still, I don't get what the difference is. Why is it so much better for you if it's my donor's blood rather than this girl's? They both consent."

Seth didn't answer. He just drank. He didn't like to explain the difference to Chas. How could Chas understand? Seth felt that if he lived in a soundproof room and drank the blood that Chas provided in neat little packages, he could pretend that the blood was no different than the grenadine. It didn't come from a real person, not from a living, breathing girl like Juliet. It was irresponsible, but Seth didn't care. He was content to live in an imaginary world his brother provided, until he found the destiny he knew was waiting for him.

When Juliet finally woke up, she was disoriented and groggy. It took a moment for her to remember she was in Seth's hot tub. The door was open and Chas was sitting in a chair watching her.

She screamed because she hadn't expected him. When she got her breath back she asked more sensibly, "What's happening?"

"You passed out and Seth thought you could use a bath."

Juliet lifted her fingers out of the water. It looked funny, sort of pink. "What's in the water?"

Chas stood up and looked at it. His violet eyes seemed eerie in the candlelight. He rubbed the back of his neck casually. "Huh? I don't know. Seth," he yelled into the living room. "What's in the water?"

Seth came in, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. "I put a couple bath bombs in to give it a good scent. Doesn't it smell nice?"

"You *own* bath bombs?" Juliet asked disbelievingly. "Aren't you a guy?"

"I'm a bath enthusiast. Don't judge me." Then he laughed, and a charming smile lit up his face. "Dinner is ready. Sorry. Chas and I already ate. Oh, and I think I spoiled your undergarments. I didn't realize the bath bomb would stain them red." He bonked himself on the head with his knuckles. "That wasn't very considerate, but I've found some of my underwear that I think should fit you. Here's my only white wife-beater and a pair of my briefs. Do you think they'll work until you get home?" he asked, and then he regarded her with the sweetest, most serene expression she had ever seen anyone wear.

She just stared at him through the half-light. Was he the tortured soul she had seen before she passed out?

Suddenly, she knew what must have happened. He said that he didn't want to drink her blood, so she should get in the tub, she didn't listen to him, so he kissed her, forcing her to fall unconscious, and then he put her in the tub himself. She clenched her teeth. She hadn't been certain before, but now she was positive he wasn't a blood drinker. He was just making it up for her amusement. Well, fine. She was perfectly okay with that.

Standing up in the tub, she shook the water off her and pretended that she didn't care if Seth or Chas saw her in her wet underwear.

Chas handed her a towel and she wrapped herself in it.

"I'm sure your clothes will be fine. What's for dinner?" she asked comfortably. She was never going to be afraid of coming here again. It was all bravado and silliness from the start. She bet Seth even told Chas to treat her like that just in case she ever showed up.

"Sushi," Seth said with a smile.

Chas smiled roguishly and left the room.

But Seth continued talking, "Here are your clothes, so go ahead and get changed. Do you want to go to a movie tonight? After dinner, we could go see something."

"Aren't we on the verge of breaking up?" she asked, getting a little irritated. "We still haven't resolved the main issue here. Are you waiting for someone new, or will I do?"

Seth leaned against the door, his handsome face looking wan and pale. "I already warned you I would ruin you, and yet you still wanted to proceed. I tell you I have plans for myself and you want to stop? They're the same thing."

"Not to me," Juliet wailed, leaning over to dry her legs. "If I end up a mess, I at least want to have you for myself."

"And you won't take an answer like, 'You have me right now, so why do you need more?'"

"No," she said sternly.

He frowned deeply. "Then I guess we really are breaking up."
"Take me home."

Chapter Eleven

Wounded, Unto Death

That night, Juliet didn't eat dinner at Chas'. She really did make Seth take her home, but before that, she put on his underwear. It was soft and smelled slightly musty, like him. It might have been petty of her, but he really wasn't getting them back later.

Seth borrowed Chas' car to drive her back across the river. Chas' car was a long, black Jaguar. Juliet couldn't figure out why she had seen him walking when he had a car like that parked in the tiny garage out back. Seth opened the door for her, but he didn't do it like he was a gentleman. He did it like it was all part of the obligation of being with a girl. Juliet had the feeling that he would have done the same for Nixie, or anyone.

Once they were alone in the car she tried asking him about the tub again. "Why did you put me in the tub when I was unconscious?"

She heard him huff slightly in the darkness and then he said, "You got in the tub yourself. Don't you remember? I turned on the jets. We were taking a bath together."

"The show's over Seth. It's okay if you tell the truth," she said quietly.

For a second Seth didn't say anything. Then he said softly, "I couldn't stand the way you smelled when I was so hungry. I put you in there so I wouldn't be tempted to bite you. I thought that was already understood."

For the first time since Juliet met him, she was really fed up with what he pretended to be in order to please her.

"Today has been awful timing all around," he went on. "I wanted more time to think after what happened last night, and then you showed up today before I'd sorted myself out. I spoke hastily when I talked about *someone else*. She's been on my mind lately. It's kind of like an arranged marriage with someone who may or may not show up. The possibility of that woman has always been there, like a shadow hanging over my entire life. I don't usually like to talk about it, but when I'm starving, I can't think about anything else. You walked in at the wrong time. I would never have spoken about it with you otherwise."

"So, if this woman shows up, you really would leave me in the lurch no matter how much you liked me?" she asked, getting agitated again.

"Juliet, I don't actually believe she'll come. It's just something I worry about like a spasm that comes with hunger pains. It could be your job to drive out those feelings of apprehension and calm me down."

"If it's a job, I should be getting paid," she commented mockingly.

Seth scoffed his reply, "Wouldn't you need to be calmed down if your mother promised you to someone? And the arrangement wasn't a normal relationship that could be understood. It's not a marriage."

Juliet paused and they pulled in the u-shaped driveway of the dormitory parking lot. "Okay, so why didn't you say something about this when we started seeing each other?"

"It wasn't important. It isn't now."

"I think it is," she rushed, "when you'd suddenly drop me like a rock, without telling me anything beforehand. I don't want to be second-place."

"It wouldn't be like that, drama queen. You're over-reacting," he accused.

Juliet's hand went to the car door. She opened it slightly so that the interior light came on. "Whatever Seth! Forgive me if I seem demanding, but I'd like it if my boyfriend didn't harbor persistent thoughts about other girls."

"Hope you find him," Seth said bitingly.

"And... one who doesn't resort to lies that don't make sense!" she yelled, getting out of the car and slamming the door. She didn't look back and stormed up the front walk.

Seth vaulted out of his side of the car and shouted, "That's what you like about me!"

Juliet spun around and glared at him.

He smiled roguishly and got back into the car.

Even with all those theatrics, Juliet didn't want to give Seth up. Actually, she wanted him more than ever, but she couldn't allow herself to be a pushover. Just because he was beautiful, that didn't mean that she had to be his lap dog until whomever he really wanted showed up. That would be the worst ending she could imagine for herself. She'd have to see if she could change his mind. He said he saw her all over campus, well then, let him see her all over campus. She would dress up cute, look unattainable, and she wouldn't let her desire for him near the surface. As a matter of fact, if he wanted to come back, she'd make him beg.

On Monday, Juliet dressed carefully and walked tall. She curled her hair and wore lipstick and smiled at everyone, making sure she made the best use of her 'innocence.' That way everyone got pleasure from looking at her. A guy even gave her his phone number in the food court during lunch, but Juliet was certain Seth hadn't seen that.

By Tuesday evening, her spirits had dwindled a little. She expected him to have broken down and called, but he hadn't. The previous Saturday, she believed that getting him back wouldn't be that hard and she didn't have a spine if she let him walk all over her. But, in those two days, she hadn't seen him once.

She saw him on Wednesday. He was sitting in the fish bowl of one of the student lounges. He saw her. He even gave her a crooked smile, so she made her way over to his table. Unfortunately, she had to pass by several crowds to reach him. By the time she made it there he had already gone. He caught her eye by the exit. His expression was weak, perhaps slightly downcast and then he disappeared.

Juliet sat down in his empty seat feeling slightly rejected. Maybe he had a class to go to or some other totally acceptable reason why he had to leave without even saying hello to her.

On Thursday, he outright snubbed her twice. He was in the elevator to the pub they had been to on their date. It was almost full, but she thought she could scrunch in and stand next to Seth, if not to eat lunch with him once they reached the top. But he gave her his place in the elevator and let it go up without him. Juliet went to the pub to have lunch anyway, hoping that he would show up and join her, but he never came.

The second time, she headed directly to the Safewalk office to talk to him, but as soon as she got there he went into his personal office with a student and shut the door. She was positive he'd seen her. In the end, Juliet waited forty-five minutes, but he didn't come out. Nixie asked her if she wanted Seth to call her, but Juliet shook her head. She was being stupid. He didn't want to try again with her and what was worse, she had chased him when she planned to make him beg. She was pathetic.

She went back to her dorm room and felt utterly defeated for the rest of the night. Ten o'clock found her watching the end of a Japanese drama with a massive box of tissue, and a small collection of wrappers from the junk food she'd binged on. She was coming unglued. Then she let herself cry. The poster of Seth tortured her. He seemed to say, "You let me go."

The worst part was that Juliet was alone nursing her heartbreak. Her laptop was not sufficient company. She thought of calling her parents, but she knew if she called them when she was like this, they would immediately come see her and that was the last thing she wanted. She just needed to pick up and move on, but it was hard when there was no one except herself to lick her wounds.

When the Friday night of the Occult's Addict meeting rolled around, Juliet prepared herself for what should have been an electric night. It was the meeting before Halloween, so she could dress up. She bathed in apple blossom nectar scented bubble bath and did herself up to the nines. She dressed up in her long black

dress and wore her knee-high black boots. She tied a red ribbon around her neck like a choker with a bow in the back and long tails hanging to her waist. She tied another red ribbon around her bare wrist and another one around her witch's hat. She let the tails hang long. Inspecting herself in the mirror, she was hugely satisfied by her appearance. Thank goodness for ribbon, inexpensive and glorious. It gave her a sense of being dressed up, and she needed the confidence badly.

A whole week had passed. Even though Seth was brushing her off, she still hadn't shaken her feelings for him. She didn't feel burned just because he was good-looking, did she? It wasn't because he was mysterious, was it? There had to be more than that, since she felt so mournful. However, it wasn't the end of their relationship. She was going to try to win him back when she called for an escort to the party.

Once she was ready to head over to the meeting, she went to the lobby of her dormitory and called for a Safewalk. She had promised Seth that she would always call for a Safewalk at night if he would tell her about vampires. She was sort of putting her belief in vampires on hold for the time being. It didn't matter anyway. A promise was a promise, and an excellent way of seeing if he still wanted to see her. He was probably working that night.

But when the Safewalk couple arrived, they were two people Juliet had never seen before.

Pushing her disappointment aside, she smiled at the two students and directed them toward the meditation room. Normally, it was a quiet room that allowed only for absolute stillness, but since the Occult's Addict had rented the room, they would be able to speak, rearrange the furniture, and basically do whatever they wanted, except light candles.

When Juliet got there, she saw that Taylor and Rylan had worked very hard to make the room extra elaborate for the hallowed event. The couches and end tables were covered in black linen. In the center of the room, they had set up a small reflection pool that had eerie turquoise lights shining from underneath the water.

The witches and the two sets of twins had all arrived before her. The women looked like fluttering butterflies as they flitted and fluttered between the buffet table and the couches. Apparently, they had all thought to dress similarly and their ruffles and satin made Juliet feel like she'd joined the most sophisticated club on campus.

As Juliet entered, her arm was immediately taken by Rylan. He looked incredible in a black tuxedo, but his eyes weren't their usual red. Instead, she found herself looking into golden brown eyes. She was shocked. Brown must be his real eye color. Good grief! He looked gorgeous to her.

"I'm glad you came," he said pleasantly as he led her into the room and propelled her toward the buffet table. "I know it is Halloween and I should be trying to scare you, but I'm going to talk about something very personal tonight—almost sacred—and I couldn't bear to turn this into some cheesy event with fake skulls. You know?"

Juliet nodded as he filled a goblet full of sparkling cider for her.

He handed her the goblet, and their fingers touched briefly. She smiled and colored. Then suddenly, she was very aware of what Seth had said to her before. That if he left, she would end up with Rylan. She hadn't believed that such a thing was possible. Wasn't Rylan kind of detestable? But, somehow, she didn't see him that way that night. He had started out being overly considerate of her and she was feeling so downtrodden that she wanted to confide in him. In another moment she *was* confiding in him.

"Seth and I broke up," she said quietly, taking a sip of her bubbly.

"I know," he said, looking at her plainly. He was definitely not gloating.

"How?"

"Not until a minute ago, when you came in. I thought I would be pleased if I heard that it hadn't worked out, but when I saw your face, I couldn't even feel one second of delight over your injury. Sorry."

"Don't apologize. I'm the one who should apologize to you for the way he embarrassed you that night. I don't think he likes you very much."

"That's all right. His kind never does."

Juliet puzzled over that comment. What did he mean by that? However, she was soon distracted by Rylan rooting around in his pocket.

"I have a present for you," he said casually.

"What is it?" she asked.

He was wearing white gloves and he took one of her hands in his and placed something small in her palm.

It was a coin.

"It's for you to toss into the pool. I want you to make a wish, except that isn't an ordinary pool and that isn't an ordinary coin. The witches aren't the only ones who can work magic. Make a wish."

"What kind of wish?" she asked as he ushered her to the pool.

"Any kind of wish will do. You could wish that I wasn't such a jerk, or you could wish that you didn't feel bad about Seth, or..." he said with a grand gesture, "You could wish that you were a magical creature and could get full membership in our club instantly."

Juliet took the coin in her fingers. It was a dime, the smallest coin. What should she wish for? Rylan stood beside her patiently while she considered. She wanted to

wish that Seth would come back to her properly, but it felt wrong to make such a wish with Rylan's generosity. Finally, she came up with one.

She closed her eyes and kissed the coin. *I wish, she thought, I could be an autumn instead of a spring.*

Juliet tossed the coin into the water and opened her eyes to watch it slide back and forth before finally resting on the bottom.

"Thank you," she said to Rylan. "I feel relieved."

He nodded and took her over to a seat on one of the covered couches. Then he went to the front and began to lead the lecture.

"Welcome to our Hallows' Eve celebration," he said in a grand voice, like he was used to making public addresses. "Tonight, as all of you know, Taylor and I are going to share our experience, how we got our scars. The theme of the evening is 'Near Death Experiences'."

Juliet's throat tightened.

"Come on, dear sister," Rylan said, reaching for Taylor, who immediately rushed to the front.

Juliet had not seen Rylan and Taylor within such a close proximity of each other since the first time she went to the Occult's Addict's office. They had seemed close then, but Juliet didn't realize how close they actually were until that moment. Taylor and Rylan kissed each others' cheeks. Juliet squinted. That was something she saw in movies, but nothing she had ever seen in real life before. Was it possible for siblings to feel that strongly about each other? Then another idea hit her. Could Rylan really be a bad guy if Taylor was so fond of him? She remembered the time she wanted to apologize to Taylor for Seth's bad behavior and Rylan wouldn't let her. Maybe Rylan knew Taylor well enough to protect her, even from small things.

Juliet took another drink and exhaled in exasperation. Why had Seth been so right about her? Why did she suddenly feel like going to Rylan for friendship when a friendship with him could only lead to a love affair? She hated herself. Didn't she care about Seth? Didn't she want to fight hard to get him back? She looked down at her finery. Seth hadn't walked her that evening. Her dress had been for nothing. Now she didn't believe he would come back, not after he had snubbed her so many times.

Taylor started speaking. "When Rylan and I were fifteen, we went to an amusement park for our birthday. We went with a bunch of our friends and made a day of it. We rode the roller coaster, hung upside down on the pendulum, got nauseated on the zipper, played carnival games, and made ourselves sick on junk food. We rode everything, except there was one ride called the Spiral Bubble that wasn't working that day. We watched them test it over and over again. Rylan

wanted to ride it so badly. We watched the trial runs and he kept saying, 'It's fine. It works. Why won't they let us ride it?' Well, any of you who really know my brother know that he's basically a genius who understands everything, including mechanics. So, later that night, we did something really stupid."

Her narrative so far had been unbroken and presented with grace and even a little flair, but at this part of the story, she had to pause to prepare herself for what she would say.

"We sneaked into the park after hours to see if we could get the ride operational ourselves. There weren't digital locks or all-night security guards. The surveillance cameras were few and scattered. Rylan had already mapped out where all of them were that afternoon and they were easy to avoid, so even after everything was over, they didn't have any footage of us getting in. It was easy, really easy—too easy. Rylan brought his friend Tom and he helped us hike over the fence without any trouble. It was harder to open both the control booth and turn the ride on. Once they did, Rylan ran a few unmanned trial runs. Then he showed Tom how to operate it and he went first—by himself. Nothing went wrong, so he let Tom and I ride it. Heck, we must have ridden it twenty times before something did go wrong. The ride was made so that two people got into a pod and sat back to back, and then it went around in a spiral going upwards before falling straight down. There were parts of the individual cockpits that looked like bubbles, but I have to stress that most of it was open to the air and there was only one bar keeping you in place. Afterwards, they said that the ride's restraints broke at exactly the wrong time—at the worst possible moment. Rylan and I were riding while Tom operated it and the restraints came loose at the very top of the ride, right before it turned to go down again. We came off at an angle with one wheel hanging onto the rail and at first we just hung upside down for a few seconds. The hinge broke and we slid back down the spiral. We scraped our hips on the rails and then our sides when our bubble hit the pavement. Not just our sides, but our elbows and arms, too. If we had only fallen, no one's life would have been threatened, except the bubble crashed into a nearby trailer."

Rylan put his hand on her shoulder to support her. She hadn't exactly started crying, but tears were forming in her eyes.

She took his hand, kissed it like she was grateful just to touch him, and continued, "Tom called for the ambulance. I suffered the most tortured hours of my life as we waited for the ambulance and then waited for the doctor's opinion. I cried out to him over and over while Tom tried to pry me from my chair," she mumbled. "And I was very hurt. They were scraping bits of gravel out from under my skin all that

night. Rylan was in a coma. I suffered like that for weeks..." her voice broke off in a sorrowful strain.

"That's enough," Rylan said gently. "I'll take over from there."

He led her over to Halona, who took Taylor in her arms and let her rest her head on her lap and put her feet up on the empty part of the couch.

Juliet stared. She had never had friends who were that close.

Rylan went back to the front, so that the turquoise pool cast colored light onto his face. When he spoke, he sounded infinitely eloquent, "I have never been afraid of dying, because the idea of dying never entered my head. I have always taken it for granted that I would live forever. Juliet asked me last week what I believe in. I told her I believe in the afterlife, because I have seen it. I know that what I saw back then was not the imagination of my mind or a dream I had while I was unconscious. The place I saw was a black palace, a place just beyond the blackness of your dreams, if you could only strain yourself to see it. Lucky for me, it wasn't my soul's final resting place. However, during my time in the black palace, it's true, you do see a reflection of your whole life and I learned things about myself that I had never guessed. I saw myself through my mother's eyes, through Taylor's eyes, through the doctor's eyes. I was an idiot. I was smart enough to get the Spiral Bubble working, but not smart enough to realize that I shouldn't ride it. I saw Taylor and what I had done to her—her horrible scrapes. My sweet twin sister! My body meant nothing compared to hers."

He turned his back to the girls and got himself a drink from the punch bowl. Everyone waited patiently. He was more emotional than usual. Juliet saw it was awkward for him because what he was about to recount was an experience he would have rejected, had he not gone through it himself.

He came back and went on, "I met someone in the black palace. It was a man with long, shining hair and red eyes. I would have died. I should have died, but he returned me to my family. I'll go back some day and he'll be waiting for me."

That marked the end of Rylan's story. He didn't seem inclined to say more, though Juliet suspected there was more to the story that he wasn't willing to share.

"Does anyone else have a near-death experience?" he asked, inquiring of the whole group.

Juliet put up her hand before she realized what she was doing. She never told anyone her story. It was none of their business, but she had also never met a person who had a similar experience. She wanted to talk about it with Rylan and she wanted to be close with these people. If she didn't confide in them, how could she ever be close to them?

She got up and took Rylan's place at the front of the room looking out at the beautiful women strewn across the couches. Rylan sat down and waited for her to start.

She fumbled with her fingers and tried to find the right words. She wanted to be as graceful as Rylan and as beautiful as Taylor. Taking off her witch's hat, she began, "You may not believe me, but... I don't have any memories before I was thirteen. There was an accident. Well, not exactly." She paused, searching for her voice and a way for her to make her story ring true. "My memories begin when I woke up in the psych ward of the hospital. I was on suicide watch. I couldn't remember a thing, but one thing was for sure, I no longer had any wish to harm myself. They showed me the note I had written to my mother. I wrote that she didn't love me enough to save me, and that no one did. I said that my life was unbearable. I wanted escape and there was only one way." She paused and consciously disassociated herself from the person she was talking about, so she shed no tears. "I had thrown myself off a train bridge into an overflowing river. I was carried over a kilometer downstream before some campers saw me and rescued me. No one knew how I survived. To this day, it is still a mystery. I was lucky those campers knew CPR." She tried to laugh, but it didn't ease her nerves. "It turns out that I have no memories like Rylan. I didn't see a palace or talk to anyone who seemed benevolent. I just woke up like a baby and looked into my parents' eyes like they were strangers. That was when my life began. Several of my extended family members thought I was joking when I said that my memory was gone. Maybe I was being bullied. Whatever happened to make me want to kill myself has been kept a secret from me. I never got the chance to ask anyone in my school class because my parents moved us to a small town a little over a month later. I spent most of that month in the hospital."

Juliet looked up and surveyed the room. The beautiful witches were listening very carefully. Tawnee had a hand to her mouth in distress. Taylor was sitting up and leaning forward to catch every one of Juliet's words, like it was very important that she didn't miss any of it.

Juliet wasn't going to look at Rylan, but her head turned subconsciously towards him. He was smiling. She did a double-take. He looked satisfied, like the last piece of a puzzle had just fallen into place. Confused, she forgot about continuing her speech and just stared at him.

"Sorry," he said, raising his eyebrows and touching a hand to his chest. "I was just thinking about how long I've waited to meet someone who knows what it's like to die. It was obviously painful for you and I shouldn't be this happy. I apologize. Continue."

"You're always such a clod, Rylan," Taylor said from the other side of the room. "Treat her experience with the same respect she treated yours. She's only sharing this because of you. Be sympathetic."

"I was trying," he said before his face went blank and he motioned for Juliet to go on.

Juliet was ruffled by the interruption and it took her a second to find her place in the story. "Whatever lesson I was trying to teach my mother by trying to kill myself, she learned it, and I was hardly ever alone after that incident. Being here at university has been my first time to enjoy the quiet peace that comes from just sitting alone. It took a lot to convince her to let me live here in the dorms, but I would have gone crazy if I'd stayed with my parents another minute. Unless you've lived it, there's no way you can understand how they watched me for any sign of self-hate. I was on suicide watch for five years, not three weeks. Of all the things I want to learn, what made me hate myself is not one of them."

There, Juliet had said all she could stand to. She went back to her seat, and Rylan took her hands in his. As he looked at her, his lovely brown eyes suddenly swelled with compassion.

"I really do know something of how you must have felt. I feel privileged to know you. We will have to have a conversation someday, about how I was treated by my family after I got out of the hospital. I think we probably had similar experiences."

He pulled her head close and let her rest it on his shoulder. She felt the comfort of someone who has suffered through the same thing. Her eyelids fell shut and she simply enjoyed the warmth of his arm. Finally, someone was there for her.

"I knew it was you," he said gently.

Chapter Twelve

Brown Night, Red Morning

Later that same night, Seth lay on the couch in Chas' living room and pretended to fall asleep. He stared at the ceiling and stretched his arms over his head. He felt like crap. He'd called in sick for work that night and sent Nixie to take his place. He felt like a loser when he weaseled out on his responsibilities.

But he couldn't go out tonight, not when he knew that it was the evening of the Occult's Addict's weekly meeting. Juliet might call for a Safewalk and he couldn't be there when she did. He couldn't look at her.

Lately, he saw her everywhere. He hated giving her the slip, but approaching her felt wrong. She had broken up with him. He had to give her the space she asked for. However, even though that mentality was correct, doing it was practically breaking him in half. She was always walking down the hall or crossing the lawn at the exact same time he was. Trying to avoid her was turning into a game of cat and mouse. She couldn't be trying to hunt him down. *She* dumped *him*. Well, whatever her goals, she was making a mess out of him. She always looked lovely, too. How was he supposed to leave her alone?

Just then, Chas appeared in the living room carrying the cordless phone. "Raidne's on the phone for you."

Seth flopped onto the floor and glowered at his brother. "I don't want to talk to her."

"He says he doesn't want to talk to you... Okay, I'll tell him" Chas said into the receiver. Then he said to Seth, "She says if you won't talk to her, she'll dislocate both your shoulders the next time she sees you."

"So what?" Seth spat, his face in the carpet. "She's already planning on breaking both my knees, my third and fourth ribs and my left wrist."

Chas listened intently to Raidne as she spoke. Then he announced cheerfully, "She says she'll forget all her previous threats if you talk to her."

Seth jumped up. "Give me the phone! Raidne," he said snatching the receiver from Chas.

The female voice that sounded through the speaker was like butter, perfectly pitched and perfectly smooth. "I promised nothing of the sort," she said pleasantly, "but now I won't dislocate your shoulders. That should make you happy. However, I'm displeased with your familiar greeting. Call me by my title."

"But..." Seth stuttered, giving Chas a dirty look.

His brother shrugged his shoulders and left the room like he didn't care how their quarrel ended.

"Chas doesn't have to call you that," Seth defended.

"When you're as old as Chas, you can call me by my first name. Until then, I expect you to do as you are told. Let me hear it."

"Mother," he said, relenting. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

"Chas told me you had a girl in your room last week. You didn't bite her. Why not? You're too old to take Chas' hand-outs. Where's your pride?"

Seth breathed deeply and offered the only excuse he had in the wings, except his voice was small and strained, "What about what you told me when I was little?"

She hesitated. "Are you talking about those bites marks on your neck?"

"Yeah," he said softly.

"All right, I see your problem," she said, yielding slightly. "But let me ask you one question. How are you going to live if you don't build up a clientele like Chas? Isn't that the bottom line? You vomit after eating raw fish, don't you? You get ill smelling Nixie's meals. You're making Chas work twice as hard and for what? You're a grown man. Frankly, I'm beginning to be ashamed of you. You weren't like this when you were a boy."

"I hate myself when I think of the things I did then," Seth said softly.

"That's why this is a curse. You think this is supposed to be fun? You think we are allowed to live like normal people? Seth, I've had enough of this. You have to get at least one donor for yourself by the end of the year, or I'll order Chas to cut you off entirely, and I'll come and take you home with me. Would you like that? Do you want to be a murderer instead of just a monster? Sing for your supper like your brother, or kill for your supper like your mother. Do you understand me?"

Seth swallowed. He couldn't bear to answer.

"Do you understand me?" she repeated in an icy tone.

"I understand," he whispered.

"I hate it when you act weak, Seth. You're supposed to be the strongest of all of us. You're supposed to be the one to save us."

"You're such a hypocrite," he bit. "How am I supposed to be an acceptable offering for her if I've already tainted my fangs on another?"

"It's not going to bother her. Don't kid yourself. She has soiled her hands in ways you can't imagine."

He snorted.

"I'll be up in January to check on you."

Seth hesitated. "How should I start?"

"Obviously, with that girl who was in your room last week."

Seth was going to regret what he planned to say next, but he had to say it. Leaving it out of his argument wouldn't help him. "What if I care about her? What if I care too much to think of her as my next meal?"

Raidne sniffed. "Are you sure she's not our girl?"

Seth tightened his grip on the receiver. He had never thought of that. What if Juliet was the one he was waiting for?

After Juliet shared her story at the Occult's Addict meeting, everyone talked freely of the strange things that had happened to them in their lives, involving death and not involving death. Mostly, they were stories that everyone knew except for Juliet. These people had been friends for a long time, but they were willing to welcome her into their circle. She heard many things that made her smile even though she felt dead inside.

She didn't know why, but being dressed in her black dress, the one she hoped Seth would admire her in, made her feel doubly depressed, even without the reminder of what an incomplete person she was. She felt cold and empty. If only she could find some way to fill herself up.

Toward the end of the evening, Rylan sat alone with her on one of the couches. "Earlier, I gave you that coin. Will you tell me what you wished for?"

"Doesn't that spoil the wish's chance for coming true?" she asked.

He shook his head. "On the contrary, you have to tell me your wish if you want it to come true."

"So, you're the one who really grants the wishes, like Santa Claus?"

Rylan laughed. "I am nothing like Santa Claus, but I would grant one of your wishes if you wanted me to. Tell me. What did you wish for? Seth?"

"No," she said, sighing. "He doesn't really want me."

Rylan was silent for a moment. Then he lifted the tails of the crimson ribbon attached to her wrist and laced them between his fingers. "At a time like this, I always say the wrong thing. I can't seem to help it, and I have to take extra care if I'm going to win you over this time."

"What would you normally say?" she asked slyly.

He groaned. "I know this is a trap you're holding open for me. I'm not going to fall in."

"You love saying the wrong thing. How will you resist the temptation?" she asked dreamily.

"By changing the subject, of course. I'll ask you for a favor," he said, smiling slightly.

"A favor? Like what?"

"Can I walk you back to your dorm tonight? Don't call for a Safewalk. Let me take you."

Seth had already sent other people to walk with her once, so what would stop him from doing it again? She would rather have Rylan's warm arm to lean on than no one, so she smiled and nodded her consent.

"I don't know why you're suddenly so patient with me," she said. "Aren't I a brat?"

"The worst kind, but... I can't keep my eyes off you. So, I'll put up with your crap."

Then, without warning, Rylan leaned toward her and kissed the corner of her mouth.

Juliet didn't black out, but she jumped a little and stared at him.

"Did I do something wrong?" he asked. His eyes looked genuinely concerned. "I didn't mean..."

Juliet couldn't listen to him. She was staring at his face. He looked so gentle and worried about her. In the mirror of his eyes, she looked far more hurt than she had admitted. She was overwhelmed by loneliness and depression. Until that moment, she hadn't realized how much she wanted someone to touch her, someone to admire her, and in truth, someone to *want* her. She told everyone she enjoyed being by herself, just like she told herself, but the truth was she hadn't been allowed to have a boyfriend before university, thanks to her parents. Now that she was away from home and technically an adult, she just wanted someone's hands on her. She felt deserted by Seth. So much so that she just wanted someone to want her. She didn't know if it even mattered who, and here was Rylan, suddenly completely at her beck-and-call. She wasn't experienced enough to know that these things did not mix well.

"Kiss me again," she said, hunger and excitement glowing in her face.

Rylan narrowed his brown eyes and examined her expression. Then he leaned in and said, "Should I? I know that this isn't a good time for the two of us to get together. You're too vulnerable for words, and unfortunately for you, I'm not really the type to back off because of timing. I'll take you as far as you want to go, but I don't want you to have regrets."

"I won't have any," Juliet said, throwing her unrequited love for Seth carelessly out the window and focusing on Rylan's safe, soft brown eyes instead.

"That's all well and good, but I still have to warn you. If you want to do this sort of thing with me tonight, you can't blow me off in the morning. It doesn't work like that with me. I won't be your one night stand. You're a good girl and you wouldn't do that to me, right?"

"No, I wouldn't," she said, remembering that she *was* a good girl. Everyone always told her that. It must be true, if they all said it, so it was all right to promise she wouldn't use him.

"And you're still fine with that?" he asked, searching her eyes.

"Yeah," she mouthed. She was sick of their talk already. She didn't want to hear his warning. She just wanted to be kissed. She wanted to be kissed for hours without fear of fainting. Her mind began reeling at the possibility of what she could do with Rylan that had never been possible with Seth.

She nodded again.

"Then? My place or yours?" he asked smoothly.

"Mine's closer."

"Excellent."

Rylan took her hand and led her to the door.

Juliet and Rylan walked with their arms around each other to Juliet's dormitory. The air was cold and their breath spread like steam into the frigid, late-autumn air.

Neither of them said anything. The silence between them was comfortable and easy. She felt excited about what would happen once they were alone, but for the time being, she was comforted. Finally, she felt desired and wanted, like she had something to offer.

When they entered her dorm room, Rylan's fingers eased around Juliet's shoulders and he helped her take off her coat. He found a hanger in the closet and hung it up along with his coat. He sat her down on her computer chair and lifting her ankles, unzipped her boots. He put them on the mat by the door so that the few remaining snowflakes wouldn't melt into the carpet.

By the time he was untying his own shoes, Juliet was horribly exasperated. "I'm dying here," she said.

"I know," he whispered, "but this has never happened to me before, so I have to take it slow and enjoy it."

"You've never been invited into a girl's dorm room before?"

He smiled, but said nothing.

Finally, he stood in front of her and undid his bow tie and the first three buttons down his shirt. "I have my theories about how this is going to work. Let me know if it gets too scary for you."

Juliet stared at him. What was he talking about?

He knelt in front of her and looked into her eyes like he was preparing to do something amazing and then, he did.

Rylan's kiss wasn't like Seth's. His breath wasn't as hot and his mouth had a much different flavor. Kissing Seth was like swallowing blood, while kissing Rylan was like kissing ice. His fingers and lips were still cold from being outside. Those icy fingers were in her hair and resting on her waist.

"Don't pass out," he whispered after a few seconds. "Hang onto me."

She put her arms around his shoulders and scooted herself off the chair and into his lap. Maybe she could warm him up. Parting her lips, she accepted Rylan's kiss. She really wanted it. She really wanted to feel loved, to feel accepted by someone, to feel whole. Her life had been emptiness, endless wondering of what kind of tragic soul she had begun as, and when Rylan held her, she felt like she was getting closer to understanding herself.

Then it happened.

She didn't understand. Weren't her visions something that only happened when she kissed Seth? Blackness consumed her.

Juliet sat up in a large, beautiful bed. The covers were silky black, just like the entire room around her. It wasn't like the black of Seth's room. Seth's room was just in shadow. In the new room, the walls were made of onyx, the ceiling of vaulted black marble, and the intricately carved bed frame of heavy ebony.

Then a man entered the room. She couldn't see his face or hear his voice though he was talking to her. The only thing she could see was his torso, half-naked. He exposed the whitest, most beautifully chiseled body she had ever imagined, like a Grecian statue.

Juliet didn't like the way he was talking to her and she felt her mouth tighten into a hateful line. Soon, they were arguing and she was yelling and cursing. She was throwing pillows at him while he laughed, so she hurled a glass vase at him and dared him to laugh again.

She hated this man more than anything. She hated everything about him: his looks, his voice, his thoughts, but more than anything, she hated the power he had over her.

He caught the vase in an open palm, the flowers and water fell behind him and splashed on the floor. He bounced the vase in his palm, pondering. Then abruptly, he deliberately smashed it on the floor. It broke into thousands of shining shards that reflected like stars on the black marble flooring. Then he did something strange. He trod over the broken glass, barefoot. The sound of his flesh on the glass grated her nerves until she thought she could feel his pain in the soles of her own feet. How could he do that to himself? He bent and retrieved one of the fallen flowers. It was a

white flower with six pointed petals and a little cup in the center almost like a daffodil.

Then she heard his voice, deep and slightly echoing through the large chamber. "Do you know what this flower is, my love?" he asked languidly. "It's a white narcissus. Do you know what it symbolizes?"

She did know, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of obeying him, so she stayed silent.

"It symbolizes selfishness," he answered his own question and offered her the flower.

She knocked his hand away.

His mouth curved into a half smile, the upward curve, half intrigue, the downward curve, half hate. Then he violently pushed her back onto the bed. As he lowered himself on top of her the blackness consumed her again.

Seth paced his bedroom for hours that night. He had to find the answer to Raidne's question. He didn't think it was ridiculous, and indeed, he wondered why he hadn't thought of it himself.

His mind was not whole and his memories were blotchy. He put his fingers to the first set of bite marks on his neck. His memories of the first time he was with her were fuzzy at best.

The second time he met her she had long, curling red hair. For some reason, he always thought that was the way she would always look, but when Raidne asked him so bluntly, his mind took a turn. Why did she have to have red hair? Why couldn't she look like anything, or anyone? Why couldn't she look like Juliet?

When Seth thought that, his heart began pounding. He was overly excited. He needed to calm down.

He looked at his clock. It was four o'clock. He couldn't call Juliet now. He'd have to wait until morning. But the minutes took an eternity to pass and his heart beat faster than the clock ticked.

In the morning, Juliet woke up with a man's arm draped over her shoulder. Her hands immediately checked her body to see what had been done to her while she was unconscious. Like Seth, Rylan had left her in her clothing. Except that Rylan was there the morning after when Seth had left her without explanation.

Her blankets were wrapped around both of them. Waking up with a man in her bed should have been the craziest thing that had ever happened to her, but she felt nothing. No regret. Not sorry she had jumped into something strange with Rylan. Not sorry she had not kept her promise to Seth. The only thing she did feel was grateful Rylan had not left. His body was warm in bed with her.

"Thanks," she mumbled, moved almost to tears, but she didn't know if he could hear her.

She thought he was asleep, but he answered, mumbling, "It was nothing. I wanted to stay. But it feels so early. Go back to sleep."

She rolled over and kissed a pattern down the side of his face.

Rylan smiled and, keeping his eyes closed, said, "I've died and gone to Heaven."

He moved to kiss her, but she evaded him. "I don't want to pass out again," she explained.

"Did you dream?" he asked, still keeping his eyes closed.

"Yeah, I did."

"What vision did you see?"

She paused before answering. More than any of her other visions, the last one really confused her. "I don't know. There was a man. He was controlling and..."

Suddenly, Juliet's cell phone chimed.

"Ignore it," Rylan advised, intertwining their fingers.

"No. I've got to get it. If I don't, and it's my mom, she'll worry."

Rylan let her go. "Well, we wouldn't want that."

Juliet picked up the phone on the fourth ring without checking the caller. "Hi, this is Juliet," she said cheerfully, trying to pretend she hadn't just been half asleep.

"It's me," a melancholy male voice said. Juliet's heart skipped a beat. It could only be Seth. "I need to see you," he said.

Juliet gaped and turned her back to Rylan. "What?"

"I changed my mind. I want to see you. I'll tell you everything you want to know about me, so please come back."

"I... I..." she stuttered, not knowing how to answer. She hadn't even done anything much and now Seth was literally begging. Regret she promised she wouldn't feel stung her heart. If she'd only waited eight more hours. "I..."

"I know I acted badly. I'll stop being a jackass. Please, just give me one more chance," he pleaded.

"I don't know," she said, glancing at Rylan.

He was standing at the foot of the bed, and the golden brown of his eyes was gone. His eyes were now the color of the most recently shed blood—almost shining.

Rylan took the phone from the stunned Juliet and began speaking, "So sorry, Seth. I'm here. She'll have to call you back. You shouldn't call so early in the morning. It's rude." He handed the disconnected phone back to Juliet and got back into bed.

Chapter Thirteen

Siren in the Library

Rylan pulled the covers over himself. "Are you coming?" he asked, looking at Juliet expectantly, his red irises flashing wickedly.

Juliet swallowed.

She couldn't complain that Rylan had just hung up on Seth. Rylan had warned her that this would happen. She couldn't pretend like there was nothing between them. He offered her his company and since she wanted a romance, she couldn't go back on her promise now. That was the trade-off. She ignored her hesitation and got into bed with him.

"Good girl," he said, taking her hand and kissing her palm. He wrapped the blanket around her and held her close.

"Rylan, what happened to your eyes? Why are you wearing your red contacts first thing in the morning?"

He opened his eyes wide, so she could see them more closely. "I was wearing my brown contacts last night. I took them out last night after I put you to bed. They were part of my 'costume'."

Juliet inspected his eyes and sure enough, he was not wearing contact lenses of any kind. It was just like Seth said. His eyes were naturally red.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, they were brown before my accident. When I woke up in the hospital, they had turned red."

"I've never heard of anything like that before. Do you know why it happened?"

"Yes," he said lingeringly, almost smiling.

"Well, why didn't you talk about it last night? Everyone would have been really interested."

He chuckled. "You're right. They would have loved to hear about it, but some things are better left private, you know?"

"So, you won't tell me now?"

"I guess that depends. Did Seth tell you what he is? Did he confess to being a vampire?"

"No. He keeps saying he isn't one," she admitted.

"Interesting... and he let you go. He's a slow one, isn't he? I've met him before. Did he tell you that?"

"No," Juliet said, becoming increasingly impressed.

"Huh... Maybe he doesn't remember. It was a really funny thing. I knew him immediately on sight, but I didn't know you," Rylan said, pretending to bite her wrist.

Juliet squirmed, moving her arm out of his grasp. "Wait. Wait. What do you mean? You've met Seth and me before?"

He nodded. "One glance at that miserable son of a bitch and I feel the hair on the back of my neck rising."

Juliet gawked. She had no idea Rylan disliked Seth to that extent. "Have you and I met before? Did you know me before I was thirteen?" she questioned eagerly.

He shook his head slightly. "It's complicated. Ask me something more specific."

She sighed in exasperation. "Did we meet before I came to the Occult's Addict office?" she asked, searching for the proper way to question him. Sometimes the way Rylan operated was simply infuriating.

"Yes," he said definitely.

"At school?"

"No."

"I have no idea where I've been. Where did we meet?"

"At your place."

"Would my parents remember you if I called them?"

"I've never met your parents," he answered quizzically. "They wouldn't know me."

"Did I invite you over?"

"No. We'd never met before," he said, laughing. He was clearly playing with her.

She shook her head. He was making it as difficult as possible on purpose. "What about Seth?" she asked, taking a deep breath and preparing herself for the useless answers he would give her or the horrible things he would say. "Were you really investigating him as a vampire if you already knew him?"

"Well, I definitely knew him and I wanted to investigate him. I took pictures and he looked like a vamp with those three bite marks down his neck."

"Do you think he's a vampire?"

"No. I told you before, I think he has a girlfriend with a vampire fetish. I still think that. Maybe he's through with her, since he's been hanging around you, but no, I don't think he's a vampire."

Juliet stayed silent and snuggled into Rylan's arms and tried to think. She remembered her dream where she drank Seth's blood. That dream, though dark and twisted, did not inspire the same feelings that arose in her when Rylan kissed her. When Seth kissed her, she felt love, agonizing love, but love just the same. When Rylan kissed her, she felt like she had been thrown into a nightmare. It was strange. Logically, Rylan was a better match for her. He was reliable and gentle. Despite

Seth's sex appeal and the pull she felt towards him, she felt like she would be a fool to head back to him. Wasn't that the classic mistake all women made?

She refused to feel guilty about not keeping her promise to Seth. Rylan's clumsy, but well meant, attentions were better than Seth's reckless ways, weren't they? After all, Rylan stayed the night and held her like she was a treasure. No, she wouldn't feel guilty. She would forget Seth and enjoy a gentler romance with Rylan.

"Is it okay if we go slow in our relationship? You aren't going to ask me to jump into bed with you, are you?" she asked quietly.

"Darling, you are already in bed with me," he countered pleasantly.

She huffed, annoyed at his joking.

"I know what you mean," he said, pulling her head close and kissing her temple. "I don't want to mess things up with you, so we can go as slow as you want. Just try to be considerate and don't take too long."

"What's your idea of too long?" she asked, getting anxious.

He opened his eyes suddenly and looked at the ceiling. "Huh. I feel like I've already waited forever and you know what? I think I would be willing to go on waiting, as long as you really wanted it."

Juliet flushed. "Why do you care about me so much? Didn't we just meet last month?"

"But we didn't. I have known you for a very long time. This time you're so different, which must be why I didn't recognize you at first. I'm just glad I figured it out before it was too late."

"I wish you wouldn't talk so cryptically," she complained.

"I'll make a deal with you," he offered, completely changing the subject.

"What kind of a deal?" she asked skeptically.

He whispered in her ear, "I'll tell you something interesting if you'll give me back that poster of Seth."

"What! You made me *pay* a hundred dollars for it! I'm not *giving* it back!"

"I'll give you a full refund," Rylan offered tantalizingly.

Juliet thought about that. She could certainly use the money she'd blown on that poster. She had almost nothing left after her shopping spree. And besides, if she still wanted pictures of Seth, she had a whole collection of four by sixes that Rylan had sold her. It didn't take her a minute to decide that it wasn't worth the effort to try to hold onto it.

"Okay," she said to Rylan. "It's a deal."

Rylan smiled at her, and then took a look at his watch. "I should probably shove off soon. But, don't fret. I'll tell you what I'm going to do before I do it so you don't

get scared. I'll tell you something interesting and then I'll kiss you. Please don't pass out again."

Juliet nodded. She could go along with this. He said he'd be a gentleman and she trusted that. Plus, he didn't ask her to stay away from Seth and Seth was always asking her to stay away from Rylan. He had to be a nicer guy.

Rylan's eyes shone slightly as he peered carefully into hers. "My eyes are red because I made a deal with *that* guy."

"Who..."

Juliet's words were cut off as Rylan's lips came down on hers. She tried to focus. She tried to stay in the present where she and Rylan were kissing, but her mind would not stay and she was whipped away to another time and place with the feeling of cold air freezing her skin. The darkness was thick and humid and she opened her eyes and tried to figure out where she was.

She was in a circular room. It was dark except for one beam of light that broke through the ceiling and lit up a tree in front of her. The floor of the room was a shallow reflection pool, so veins of white light were mirrored on the ceiling like lines between constellations. Holding herself, she wished it wasn't cold or dark. She didn't like darkness, and she knew that even the light that came from the ceiling wasn't direct light. It was sunlight filtered through water and glass. It offered no heat.

She felt like she was in prison. She didn't know how long she had been there, or how long it would be before someone rescued her. She could hear animals growling and scratching, sometimes far away and sometimes in the room next to her. Their claws rang as they sharpened them on rocks. From time to time she could hear a whip cracking and a subsequent yelp. Fear gripped her. The beasts felt so near that they might break through and tear her to pieces. Breathing hard, she tried to keep her panic in check.

An icy feeling was winding its way through her insides, a feeling of such strong desolation that if suicide were possible, she would have taken her life. She couldn't even wound herself. The only things in the room were the ankle-deep water and the tree. The tree that grew perfectly, its branches sprawling upward like it wouldn't have to stop if it came to the ceiling.

There was a tapping at a door and then a man entered the room. She couldn't see his face, but she could see his body and hear his words.

"Are you hungry? I know you've refused food for days. Starvation isn't pretty, especially for someone as precious as you."

He was wearing a white robe, beautiful, like moonlight dancing on ripples of water at midnight. He approached her and seeing her cold and wet state, removed

his robe and slid it over her shoulders. Slowly, he knelt down in the icy water and tightened the fabric around her huddled form.

"Won't you take something to eat?" he offered, sliding a piece of food into her palm. "I can't eat it for you."

She was about to take a bite when his scarlet eyes flickered in the darkness. His face was still shrouded in a mask of shadow. Without trust, she could not eat.

Opening her palm, she let it splash into the water and float away.

His eyes grew cruel and suddenly pain shot through her head like her skull would break. He had hit her—hard. Grasping her cheek she forced herself back to reality.

Rylan was kissing her tenderly, but her mouth was full of blood.

Juliet sat at her writing desk and tried to focus on her work. She had to finish a paper by Monday, but her brain was a complete muddle and her head hurt.

She was at the point where she could no longer pass off her visions as merely dreams. There had to be a meaning to them.

The thing was, Rylan hadn't slapped her, but she couldn't ignore the bruise forming on her left cheek and the cuts in her mouth. The side of her face was red and swollen. The cover stick and foundation she applied hadn't hidden much. Juliet didn't even have the kind of hair that could be artfully draped over a bruised cheek. Sunglasses were useless as well, as they didn't cover her jawbone.

Rylan didn't know what had happened either. He had brought her some ice and stayed with her as long as he could. He worked on the weekends and he said he couldn't call in sick.

"I'd stay with you," he said with real regret in his voice, "but there's no replacement for me. Shit, Juliet. I have no clue what just happened."

He had gone. Morning had ended. The early afternoon had arrived. She was trying to write her paper and failing at it. She needed to get out of her dorm room, so she gathered up her laptop and headed for one of the campus libraries. When she was surrounded by hard-working people, she found that their energy sometimes rubbed off on her.

She entered the atrium of the library and there, sitting at the very first table, was Seth. He was sitting by himself, stretched out, and balancing a triangular ruler on the end of his pen.

At first, she didn't know what to do. Should she turn around and find another library on campus? Should she purposefully sit at another table and ignore him? Should she sit down and make nice like they were friends? What should she do?

She didn't get the chance to make that decision before he lifted his eyes and looked her in the face. Without saying anything, he kicked the chair opposite him and motioned for her to take a seat. Despite her previous choice to cut Seth out of her life, his invitation tempted her sorely. Giving in, she told herself Seth wasn't offering her anything more than a seat, even if she was Rylan's girlfriend now.

Juliet cautiously slid into the chair.

"Relax," Seth said easily when he saw her taut nerves.

"You're not mad?" she asked, hesitating slightly.

"Why would I be mad?" he asked, gentleness in his sherry brown eyes.

She tapped her toe nervously on the table leg. "You know... because of the way Rylan answered my phone this morning."

"Yeah," Seth said, grabbing a book and leaning back on two chair legs. "Didn't expect that. So, are you here to study, or were you looking for me?"

"Both... I guess."

"What did you want to say? I'm listening."

"About Rylan..." she started.

"Don't worry about it," he said, cutting her off. "You said that you weren't going to run away with him out of desperation and I trust that you didn't. You were just out late because of your meeting, and you're worried I won't understand that nothing happened between you two. He wanted to tell me off and he got his chance. That's all."

Juliet stared at his response with giant eyes. Was that really what he believed? Was Seth the type of guy to avoid the worst possible conclusion and to think the best of her, even when it wasn't true? His attitude instantly softened her toward him.

"Why didn't you walk me last night when I called for a Safewalk?" she abruptly demanded. She was getting antsy and feeling a little guilty.

"I didn't work last night." He paused before he said, "If you wanted to see me then why didn't you call me? We could have had a date or something."

"We already broke up."

"Oh... that," Seth said, looking away from her and flipping a page in his book. "Well, I am not too concerned about that. I still want to see you. I thought I made that clear this morning." When his eyes rose to meet hers, they were filled with danger and passion, and then abruptly the heat fizzled. Instead, he was examining her bruised face. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing. Just an accident involving my vision," she said, implying that her eyesight was to blame. "It's nothing to worry about."

"Did you walk into a pole or something?"

"No," she said, looking at him coldly and tapping her toe.

"Then why are you hiding what happened? Did Rylan hit you?"

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"Then what happened?" he persisted.

"Aw, Seth, leave me alone. I had a weird dream and I somehow got hurt during it."

Seth gawked at her in disgust. "What do you occult people do for your meetings? They weren't making you practice astral projection or some other stupid thing, were they?"

"No. It's nothing. I just have weird dreams when I faint. That's all."

"You faint a lot," he said quietly. "What kind of dreams do you have? Did you have them when I kissed you?"

Juliet put a hand to her forehead and said coolly, "I tried to talk to you about this last week and you blew me off."

"I don't remember."

"Well, I do. It's not like they're important," she added spitefully.

"Not to contradict you, but I think they might be." He took a deep breath and looked at her levelly with his beautiful, sorrowful eyes. "I am going to tell you what I am."

"Why now, when it hardly matters?"

He sucked his breath in. "No. I think now is the time when it matters the most. I'm sorry I acted like an ass. I can only explain that I got scared."

"Scared?" Juliet asked, peering into his eyes.

"I was so hungry that day and you were in my room. I wasn't sure if I could hold back, but I couldn't leave. I was trapped, too"

Her heart skipped a beat, but she couldn't let Seth see that he was making her weak. She continued in a hard voice, "So, you're saying you're not a vampire, but you were tempted to drink my blood?"

Seth put his finger in the corner of his mouth and pulled it wide so that Juliet could see his sharp canine. He let go and said, "I'm a blood drinker."

"U-huh," she said slowly.

"I don't expect you to believe me without proof. I've arranged for some."

"Which is?"

"You can contact your friend Fiona. She's one of Chas' clients. He drains her blood regularly. I've checked the records and her signature is all over them. She knows exactly what he is. Me too for that matter. I can show you the records if you'd like."

Juliet thought about Fiona and how quickly she had been able to give her Seth's address. She sighed. "There's no need to go that far," she said weakly.

"You believe me?" he asked curiously.

"Let's hear the rest of your story," she urged.

Seth tapped his pen on his open textbook. "I'm a siren."

"A siren?" she repeated.

"Do you know what that is?"

"Isn't it a woman who sings and bewitches sailors making them crash their ships on the rocks?"

"Sort of. I'm not a full siren, only half. I don't know who my father was. He's undoubtedly dead. My siren mother says she'll tell me who my father was when I turn sixty, so I have a long way to go." He paused, "Sirens are flesh eaters. My mother and her sister used to be nymphs, but they were cursed by the goddess Demeter to eat the flesh of men. You saw my mother's picture in Chas' living room. Who knows how many men she's seduced with her glorious voice, only to murder them and lick their bones clean with her leopard-like tongue. If you think my fangs are brutal, you should see hers. She is a predator through and through."

Juliet listened to him carefully. She rested her unhurt cheek against the palm of her hand. "She's lucky she didn't get worse. Spineless wretch!" she suddenly spat.

Seth's eyes went wide. "What did you just say?"

"I don't know," she said, clueless. "I just kind of zoned out. I seriously apologize. I don't know what came over me."

"Huh," Seth said, his tongue stuck in his cheek. "Anyway, I'm not a cannibal... exactly. I drink blood, but I'm not a vampire. I'm a half siren and there aren't many of us in the entire world. I don't know how many children my mother's sister has had, but Chas and I are the only sons of Raidne at this moment. A vampire is a common thing compared to us."

"And Nixie is a quarter siren?"

"Yes, and she's not like Chas and me. She's just a carnivore. She doesn't drink blood, but she could probably eat an entire cow by herself and she has like eighteen boyfriends on rotation. I like to think that if she really disciplined herself, she might be able to confine herself to one love interest. However, she likes the attention way too much. You see, the curse isn't just to make us miserable by giving us revolting eating habits, it's to ensure that we never find happiness with the person we love. Every man my mother has ever loved, she has murdered. Two generations down, Nixie's just hyper and restless with only one guy. She has a really short attention span, but she doesn't *have* to cheat. Chas and I *have* to cheat."

"What do you mean?" Juliet asked suspiciously.

"I can't drink a man's blood. It has to be a woman's, and on a regular basis. One woman's blood would not be enough to satisfy me. I need to drink about five hundred milliliters a week. Most women can only safely lose five hundred milliliters once every eight weeks. So, if I drank your blood behind that bookshelf over there,"

he said, motioning to a deserted part of the library. "I'd be good for about a week, but you wouldn't be good for another eight weeks. I need a donor list of at least eight women to stay fed. I'd be better off with more, but I drink grenadine straight to try to help with the cravings."

"Why can you drink that?"

"Can we talk about that some other time? It's a complicated detail and I'm trying to teach you the basics."

Juliet apologized and asked him to continue.

"The point is," Seth said, leaning in so that he could speak quieter. "This part makes me feel ill, but I have to tell you everything. I have been drinking the blood that Chas drains from his donors, women like Fiona. Nixie acts like his little assistant and drains half their donation for me before he takes them off to pay them."

"How does Chas pay his donors? Is he a whore then?" Juliet asked, feeling a little queasy.

"I don't know everything he does, but I don't think so. We're sirens. We sing. You'll understand if you hear one of us. Think about it. The origin of our vocal cords is the stuff legends are made of. Men used to throw themselves into the sea when they couldn't swim to get closer to a siren's voice. You think a vampire would be tempting with their smooth pale skin and razor sharp fangs? Trust me, a vampire's got nothing on me."

"Then why have I never heard you sing?" she asked, cocking her head to the side.

"I've been taught never to sing unless I'm in a soundproof room. It's very dangerous because it attracts too much attention. Even Nixie is forbidden. She sounds like an angel."

"What do you sound like?" she asked wistfully.

"A demon," he said wickedly. He paused before continuing. "The problem is that I haven't gotten any donors for myself yet," he confessed with a shameful glance downward. "My mother called last night and she's going to make Chas cut me off by the end of the year if I don't a donor of my own."

"Your siren mother called you?" Juliet chuckled.

"I appreciate it sounds ridiculous, but there is nothing ridiculous about what would happen to me if she came and took me home, or if I stayed here with no blood supply. I'm inviting you to be the first woman I bite in earnest. What do you say?"

Juliet thought twice about what he said. "I'm not sure I understand what exactly you are proposing. Is this a romantic overture or a business arrangement?"

"Either one. Whichever you're more interested in."

For Juliet, that had to be worst answer he could have given. Suddenly, she wanted to shatter his perfect idea of her. "You know, I don't think it could be romantic. You know, the exact same thing happened with Rylan."

"Huh?"

"I had Rylan over in my dorm room late at night, he kissed me, I passed out and when I woke up the next morning, he was still there," she said triumphantly. Then she waited for Seth's response, hoping he'd be crushed.

"Don't you think that's kind of creepy?" he replied, completely unruffled.

"It is much better than taking off without even writing a note. Like what you did last week? Yeah, you're so much less creepy than Rylan. Why didn't I see it before?" she said acidly.

Seth looked at her blankly. "You were upset about that?"

"Yeah. If I'm going to have anything to do with you in the future, I'm going to need to know why you left that night."

He flicked a piece of hair out of his face and said rationally, "I would like to point out that you didn't wake up bruised after your night with me."

"It didn't happen then and it wasn't Rylan's fault. I want to hear your excuse."

He dropped his smug expression. "I'm a siren, a water creature like me can't stay on dry land forever. I needed to go home and have a bath in my own tub with my own salts. I'm sorry. I had no idea it bothered you, but I had just been dry for too many hours by the time I made it to your room that night. A shower there simply wouldn't have done the trick for me, so I *had* to go home."

"What would have happened if you'd stayed?" she persisted.

"Apparently, I wouldn't have lost my girlfriend to a red-eyed freak show. Or do you mean to me? If I had stayed until you woke up, let's say you woke up at ten in the morning, I would have been about five hours past my expiry. I wouldn't have died, but I would have been dehydrated and I might have been a little unhinged at that point."

"What does that mean?"

"I would have been wild, desperate in my need to get to water. I might have done something crazy and thrown myself in the river on my way home. Who knows? I've been taught never to let things get that bad."

When Seth said the words 'thrown myself in the river' something in Juliet snapped. She had thrown herself in the river once long ago when she wanted to kill herself. Her mind was doing cartwheels. She had survived when no one thought it was possible. Did she make it to shore because some small part of her was like him, a siren?

"Just now, you said you didn't know if your mother's sister had any children or grandchildren. Could you find out for me if she did?"

Seth glanced at Juliet and asked, "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing," she lied. What she was actually thinking was too incredible to be considered. After all, he said that by the time the curse got to the second generation, it was hardly a curse at all. What if she was more than two generations removed from Raidne's sister? Maybe that was the reason Seth was attracted to her—they were both sirens.

Seth flipped his book shut and said, "Well, Juliet, you haven't gone, so did you decide to let me bite you even though you're with Rylan now?"

Juliet stared at him, but didn't say a word. She couldn't speak when his voice sounded like polished brass. The long and short of it was that she had spent last Friday night with Rylan and they had become a couple, but the look on Seth's face spoke plainly. He didn't care. Something in the bottom of her stomach pitched. She didn't know how she felt. She didn't know what to do at all, but maybe there was a way to find out.

"I need to talk to Fiona before I decide," she said. "I want to hear what she has to say about Chas and his blood drinking."

Seth collected his books and deposited them in his backpack. "You do that. I'll see you later." Shouldering his bag, he rose to leave, but then he suddenly turned back. "Fiona will tell you, it's a pretty good deal."

"It depends, are you going to bite me or are you going to prick me with a needle?" she asked flirtatiously.

He grabbed the back of her chair, and leaned over her. His eyes sparkled with danger. "I'd recommend the fangs. They hurt more, but it's a much more satisfying experience. If I bite you, I do it after the performance. If you want the needle, you get it before we get started. That is what Chas does. You can choose, but I still want you to be the first girl I bite, so I'll wait until you are ready. I wish I had the luxury of waiting forever, but I only have to the end of December. That gives you roughly two months," he said as he moved away and gave her some space. "See you later and take care of those bruises."

Then he was gone.

Juliet sat there fanning herself with her palm. How could she have forgotten how seductive Seth was?

It was a full five minutes before she gathered her senses enough to open her laptop and try to work. When the screen lit up, there was an instant message from Rylan blinking in her toolbar.

His existence had completely slipped her mind.

Chapter Fourteen

The Immortal One

Rylan showed up at Juliet's dorm room after he was done work that Sunday night.

"Hi, my girlfriend," he said as the door opened. Immediately, he wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her. However, he didn't let it last long enough for her to black out and pulled away just when she was starting to feel lightheaded.

"You're good," Juliet said as she flopped onto her computer chair. "No weird visions. Nothing."

"Well," he said as he shrugged out of his coat. "I don't mind if it's only a peck. I'm just happy I can kiss you whenever I want and if I can make you a little breathless than that's all the better." He dropped a second kiss on her cheek.

"Thanks," Juliet said, trying to focus on his attentions.

Even though she was doing double duty seeing Rylan and Seth in alternation, she wasn't going to let it bother her. For the time being, she was Rylan's girlfriend and *technically* she hadn't done anything wrong seeing Seth. Who was she kidding? She was the *worst*! However, she didn't know how to weasel her way out. Seth wasn't such a good choice for a boyfriend and Rylan was, even though her feelings didn't exactly line up that way. So, until she made up her mind or something happened to choose for her, she would continue this way. Besides, Rylan didn't suspect a thing and Seth knew that she was with Rylan now. He just didn't care. He still wanted to bite her.

"What are you doing for dinner tonight?" Rylan suddenly asked.

"I'm going over to Fiona and Halona's in about an hour," Juliet said as she consulted the clock on her bedside table.

"Am I invited, too?"

"Huh? I don't know. I phoned Fiona because I wanted to ask her something and she invited me over for dinner."

Rylan shook his head and rooted around in his back pockets until he found his cell phone. "You know, you've really got to get it into your head that we're a couple now, so you shouldn't make plans without me." He programmed Fiona's number into his phone. Once it connected, he started talking to her, "Hi, I hear Juliet's coming over for supper tonight. Mind if I tag along? ... What? ... You've got to be kidding me? Girls only? Did you invite Taylor? ... That's not *all* the girls then... What about the witches? Did you invite them, too? ... No huh? ... All right, I get it. I'll bring her over, okay? Yeah... See ya." Rylan shut off his phone and buried it in his back pocket.

"Sorry," Juliet said, cringing.

Rylan rolled his eyes and put his arms around her. "It's okay. She treated me to a mini lecture about being possessive and giving you space to do your own thing. Possessive? I don't even know the meaning of that word."

Chills began inching their way up Juliet's spine. "What do you mean?"

"I'm always being told that I'm too possessive or protective or something with Taylor. I'm not her dad, so she doesn't have to check in with me every thirty seconds, but I worry about her. She's my dear little sister and I don't want anything bad to happen to her."

"Does she mind?" Juliet asked curiously. She knew what it was like to have someone constantly checking up on her and she had had her fill of that in the past.

"No," Rylan said. "She's never said a word about it. It's mostly Fiona I hear it from, or... maybe Fiona is the only one I'll listen to. I think if anyone besides her or Halona even hinted that they thought something was strange in our relationship, I'd just tell them to shut it. I don't expect other people to understand. They aren't twins. But I listen to Fiona, because she's got a twin, too."

"Fiona thinks your relationship with Taylor is a little too close?" Juliet asked, thinking about how Fiona told her that she and Halona were one soul separated by two different bodies. Those two were extremely intimate and if they thought Rylan and Taylor were too close then Juliet was inclined to think something was off. Weren't they particularly understanding toward twins?

Rylan scratched the back of his neck. "We're not. It's hard to explain. I just don't want to miss out on her life."

"Because of the time that you almost died?"

"Yeah," Rylan said, blinking slightly. "I knew you'd understand perfectly. Only someone who'd almost died could know exactly how scary it is to almost miss out on life."

He grasped Juliet tighter in his arms, but she didn't feel right. What he thought about her wasn't true. He was holding her so warmly, like she was really special, but it was all wrong. She didn't know what life she was missing out on. In truth, the life she had been living before she tried to kill herself was over. The life she lived now didn't have anything to do with who she had once been. She wasn't comforted and instead she felt like she and Rylan didn't share a common bond after all.

He pulled away slightly and looked into her eyes. "You're probably the first person who has understood. Thank you, Juliet. You're a goddess."

"No, I'm not," she said a little breathlessly.

"Yes, you are." And as he said those words his eyes seemed to turn to liquid. They glistened.

When Juliet studied Rylan's face, she realized something about him she hadn't considered before. He loved her. For him, their windswept little romance, that was started by a mere impulse of hers, was serious—far more serious than she had guessed. He thought she was beautiful. He didn't need to say it. She knew he thought so just by looking at him. He believed that obtaining her was an impossible feat and he was triumphing at his success. No wonder he hadn't left the morning after, simply lying beside her was pure pleasure to him. Saying she was a goddess was no exaggeration, he believed it. Even standing in her plain, boring dorm room, he was getting excited. He was completely smitten and Juliet had no idea why. She hadn't done anything to earn it. She wasn't even sure if she wanted it.

"Oh," Rylan said, seeming to remember something. "I have a present for you, or rather, a return."

"What?"

He pulled out his wallet and pulled out five twenty dollar bills. "I'm returning your money, so can I get the vampire out of your room?"

Juliet took the money between two fingers. "Knock yourself out."

"With pleasure," he said, heading over to her closet. Carefully, he tugged the white tack off the doors and rolled up the poster.

"What are you going to do with it now?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll find Seth and give it to him. He probably has a girl somewhere who would enjoy it."

Juliet shuddered at the idea. "Why don't you just throw it away?"

"Actually, I was thinking of asking him if I could enter it into a photography contest."

Her stomach turned. "Don't do that either. Let's just throw it away."

"That would be a waste. Like you noticed, that guy isn't normal. Do you still think he's a vampire?" Rylan joked.

"No," Juliet said, poking a rumple in the carpet with her toe. "I don't."

Rylan looked thoughtful. "You were so sure earlier. What changed your mind?"

"He's just a normal guy with an ex-girlfriend with a vampire fetish," she said bleakly.

"I'm confused. Did you meet her or something? Why are you suddenly on my side when you were fighting me so fiercely before?"

She couldn't tell Rylan that Seth had told her what he really was. Actually, she had no idea how to answer him, so she kept silent and put her shoes on.

"No, really," Rylan persisted. "What made you change your mind?"

"Didn't you tell Fiona that you were going to drive me over? It's about time we were on our way. Thank you so much for returning my money. I don't know how I would have lived for the rest of the semester if you hadn't."

"Are you having money trouble?"

"I wouldn't be if I hadn't fallen for Seth," she said, thinking of how much money she'd spent since she met him.

"Wait. That bastard didn't take money from you, did he?"

"No. It's not like that."

"What is it like, then?"

He wasn't going to stop asking until she told him the truth. So, she did. She reminded him of the poster's cost as well as the other photos she'd bought. Then she told him about how her entire wardrobe needed a makeover as well as her room. If she hadn't done all that, she would still have money.

"So, as you can see, it's all my fault. So, don't blame Seth, kay? He didn't actually tell me I wasn't good enough for him. He didn't even hint it. I just don't like being told that I'm innocent."

"He said you were 'innocent'?" Rylan asked, his face a perfect puzzle.

"Repeatedly."

"But you're through with him now, aren't you?"

"He knows we're together," she said, evasively. From what Seth said, he didn't care two straws if she was with Rylan or not. If Seth couldn't possibly be faithful to one woman, he had no business expecting fidelity in return. But, she hadn't decided that she was going to betray Rylan by letting Seth bite her—yet.

"It's all fine then," he said, visibly relaxing. "Are you ready?"

"Yep."

Rylan drove Juliet across the river to Fiona and Halona's place. She was a little surprised when they got there because he pulled up in front of what looked like a run-down art gallery.

She gave Rylan an apprehensive glance. There were downtown parking meters on her side of the door. "Is this really their house?"

"I'll walk you in," he said as he opened her door for her.

"You didn't have to do that," she said, a little embarrassed.

"Don't worry about it. That's not all I would do for you," he said easily, taking her hand in his as he pressed the buzzer beside an isolated door.

While they waited, Juliet looked at the art displayed in the lighted front window. The tastefulness of the pieces was in heavy contrast to the peeling white paint of the exterior of the shop and neighboring abandoned pawn shops.

"Do they really live here?" Juliet asked hesitantly.

"And you thought your friends from the Occult's Addict were normal? You, my dear, live in the most sensible accommodations of all of us. The witches live in a castle on the waterfront that was built when the hot commodity in this part of the world was beaver pelts. You should see it sometime. It's beautifully maintained and the gardens are really well cared for. The ivy is amazing."

"Where do you live?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"What does that mean?"

He chuckled. "It means I live in a hotel."

"Isn't that... *expensive*?"

"Extremely. You didn't notice the quality of my car, or the quality of my clothes and gadgets?"

"No," Juliet said, a little aghast. She pulled away from him and tried to look at his clothes more carefully.

"I'm wearing Armani to my socks. My car is an E46 BMW M3."

Juliet turned to look at it more carefully. It was silver. That was about all she could see about it. She had no idea what E46 meant.

"It's a BMW," he reiterated with great patience. "But that particular one had to be imported."

"Crap Rylan! How rich are you?"

"Disgustingly."

"So why were you and Taylor so ecstatic about selling me a poster for a hundred bucks when it would be easy for you to cover the cost of all our club meetings yourselves?"

"Good question. Taylor doesn't like to do it that way. She never pays for anything for another person just because she's rich. She has had a really hard time with hangers-on in the past. Anyone who might be with us because of our money is absolute trash to her. So, we don't pay for much, but we did pay for our Halloween party."

He turned and rang the buzzer again.

"So, what's your weekend part-time job? I'm very curious now."

"It's more like an obligation. My father is a very successful stock broker and if I don't spend at least two days a week working with him, he gets very foul. So I have

to make the sacrifice no matter where I spend the night." His arms came around her and she found her back pressed into his chest.

For the briefest of moments, Juliet saw the reflection of Rylan and herself in the glass door. His eyes were closed and he was curling his head in toward her like she was the greatest of treasures. It would have been picturesque, if only her eyes hadn't looked so frightened.

They were interrupted when Fiona flung open the door. "Oh, I'm glad you're still here. We had a little emergency with the food, but the crisis has been averted. Don't just stand there. Come in."

Rylan kissed Juliet on the head and stroked her back with his free hand. "I'll take you home when you're ready. Just give me a call, okay?"

"Okay," Juliet said weakly.

Then he let her go and Fiona pulled her into the studio. "Thanks Ry. We'll see you later. Thanks for being so understanding. Bye-bye."

Then she slammed the door shut.

Turning to face Juliet, she said, "Halona and I are so glad *you* called *us*. We've wanted to talk to you since Friday. That was quite the change of heart you had."

"W-What?" Juliet stuttered.

Fiona grabbed her upper arm and pulled her through the canvas-lined, paint-splattered studio to a decaying staircase. Marching her up, Juliet hardly got a chance to look at anything, but she soon found herself in the homiest room she had ever been in.

The twin's kitchen was painted yellow with blue flowers adorning every spare spot. Their table was done up like the pages of a home decorating magazine with blue and white china. The napkins were folded perfectly and there was even a vase with real blue roses.

Halona stood at the stove, stirring something passionately. "You've caught us on a pasta night."

"Thanks for inviting me," Juliet said as she sat down in the chair Fiona pulled out for her.

"Get the salad out," Halona commanded as Fiona fiddled around the kitchen, arranging the last details.

Soon they were all sitting at the table with fresh greens on their plates. Juliet had one bite of the salad and thought she was in heaven. She had been eating cafeteria food for too long already and it was only early November.

"Okay," Fiona said, taking her water glass in hand and looking directly at Juliet. "Time we got down to business. Neither of us think you should date Rylan."

"Why?"

"I thought he was a girl," Halona said directly. "All those years he and Taylor played that game and I thought he was a girl."

"I was never sure," Fiona admitted. Juliet remembered her saying something like that the first night she came to the club meeting.

"And that wasn't just what I wanted to believe. There were hints that convinced me," Halona continued. "He wasn't interested in girls, and he took such downright ravishing photographs of Seth. He was never remotely moved, no matter how many times he saw us all in our underwear or bathing suits. Nothing. And he has devoted entirely too much time to Taylor. Before, I thought they were simply two sisters who were never going to have men in their lives, but now... I don't know what to think."

Juliet twitched. "You make it sound like he's bi and has an incestuous relationship going on with his sister," she said coldly.

"No. No. That's not what she meant," Fiona said, rushing to the rescue. "She was merely pointing to the signs that made her think Rylan was a girl. For starters, I would like to say that I didn't think the way Rylan photographed Seth was the least bit sexual. Honestly, I think he hates Seth, and I think he hated him long before they met at that club meeting. Not for one second do I think Rylan likes guys. Halona's just annoyed that he was so good at playing the part. She doesn't like being fooled. In her defense, there's nothing wrong with desiring honesty in your close friends."

"Hmph," Halona said, crossing her arms.

"As for his relationship with Taylor, it's a little weird. He keeps very close tabs on her, but she also keeps very close tabs on him. He only agreed to go along with her mad story because she begged him to. She didn't want him to find a girlfriend at university and forget all about her. And he did a very good job keeping his bargain with her. Not once did he hint that he was a guy until Seth outright accused him."

Juliet took a deep breath and asked, "So, why don't you want me to date him?"

"Isn't it obvious?" They chimed, "Because of Seth."

Juliet winced. "Actually, it's kind of because of Seth that I wanted to talk to you tonight."

"Why?"

She looked at Fiona. "I was under the impression that you know his older brother, Chas, and I wanted to know what you could tell me about him and his blood drinking."

Fiona practically slid out of her seat. "As long as Chas doesn't murder me, I'll never give him up."

"Like he could kill you," Halona snorted.

Fiona shook her head like she was shaking off Halona's comment. "I'll have to wait for Chas, but one day, he'll definitely be mine. You see, he has a woman who lives on the third floor of his building. They have a child together."

"Right. Nixie."

"Yeah. Anyway, it's been over between the two of them for ages, but she won't let Chas go, so Nixie has a deal with him. As long as he doesn't break his promise with her mother, she'll live with him. But something's got to crack soon, and you better believe that I'll be there when it does."

"You're a home wrecker?" Juliet asked in disbelief.

"It's not much of a home when he lives on an entirely different floor, now is it? And I'm not a home wrecker. That woman can't live forever and I can, so it's not such a big deal."

"What are you talking about?" Juliet sputtered.

Fiona stared at her with wide eyes. "Didn't I tell you we were the Gemini?"

"Yes, but what does that mean?"

"Welcome to the world of myths and legends," Halona said with a wicked smirk. "It means that even though we're twins, we have different fathers. Her father was an immortal being, while my father was an average man, who gave me the ability to die."

"You make it sound like I rub it in your face," Fiona said, looking pitiful.

"You don't. Actually, you don't even make it sound good when your greatest ambition is to become the only woman Chas ever bites. Living forever just to be the food for that cursed bastard. You can have your immortality."

"You don't like Chas?" Juliet asked, wondering what Halona could possibly see amiss in him. He looked good to her.

Halona slumped in her chair like Juliet had let all the air out of her tires. "I've never met him, so I guess it's not fair for me to talk like that. I'm just jealous that she has someone she wants. I've never met a guy worth the gunpowder to blow him to hell. And I don't want to meet Chas. What if I fell for him, too? What kind of a disaster would that be?" She took a deep breath and then said potently, "But I'm not jealous about her immortality. I never want her to suffer and an immortal body is nearly impervious to pain. Maybe that's why I don't understand Rylan and Taylor. My Fiona is always safe. No one could ever hurt her. But Rylan and Taylor are both human, so maybe that's why they're so fearful for the others' safety."

Juliet sat quietly for a moment and thought about what Halona said before she finally spoke. "Seth doesn't think Rylan is human. Actually, he's not sure what he is."

Fiona twitched. "Seth said that? He must be right. I don't think he would say something like that without good reason. Sirens have certain abilities. Maybe he can tell something just by looking at Rylan. Who knows?"

"What sort of powers do you think Seth has, Fiona?"

"I don't know. The only thing I know for sure is that the power of a siren's song is not to be taken lightly. It's potent all by itself. Have you heard Chas or Seth sing?"

"No."

"It's really wonderful—perfect pitch, perfect control... absolutely perfect. But, what's really special is the bite. That's how I learned that I was immortal. Chas drank my blood and I had a vision of my true father and Halona's. It's exactly the way the old legend of the Gemini goes. Chas knew it, too. He pulled away from me and did the most amazing thing."

"What?" Juliet asked, on the edge of anticipation.

Fiona put a hand to her throat and the next words that came out of her mouth seemed guarded, yet sincere. "He knelt down in front of me and told me I was the daughter of a demigod. Then he showed me that the wounds he put in my throat were already healed. It was really a beautiful experience. He's cursed, so to touch me is a blessing for him. He never refuses me when I want to see him. He can't."

Juliet cleared her throat. "Seth invited me... or rather he asked... if he could bite me."

Fiona's eyes widened. "You should do it!"

"Why? Aren't I with Rylan now? Crap, I'm so confused."

"It's not cheating. It's like giving blood. Actually, it can be entirely like giving blood if you want. When I go, they pump out two hundred and fifty milliliters for Seth to drink. Of course Chas has to bite my wrist to break my skin, because the needles don't work well on me. He sings for me and afterwards, he drains the last two hundred and fifty with a really good bite on the throat. It's completely satisfying after his song. The whole thing is really special and who knows, you might be able to find out something new about yourself."

"Actually, I already had visions from when Seth kissed me," Juliet admitted with a frog in her throat.

"Really?" the twins blurted, staring at her with gigantic eyes.

"Yes."

"What have you seen? You have to tell us."

"Well, it wasn't exactly how you described your vision. I didn't learn anything new about myself like that. I had four of them. In the first one, I saw Seth bleeding and dying on the floor in front of me and I began drinking his blood."

Fiona and Halona's mouths fell slack as they stared at Juliet in horror.

"That's not what I expected," Fiona said, breaking eye-contact with Juliet.

"Tell us more," Halona persisted. "What else did you see?"

Suddenly, Juliet knew she had come to the right place to talk about these things. They weren't just some weird coincidence and these girls were on the same vein as Seth. These were the perfect people to confide in. "Seth hasn't bitten me. This happens when he kisses me. Does Chas kiss you, Fiona?"

"Yes, he has many times. Except he never does anything more than that and I think it's just to warm himself up for the bite. But after that first vision, I never saw anything again. It's extremely weird that you had multiple visions and from only a kiss. What did you see the second time?"

"I was sitting in a room and I had this strange feeling that I was an older version of myself. There was a goblet full of my blood beside me."

"Could be a vision of the future," Halona suggested.

Fiona nodded in agreement.

Juliet cleared her throat and remembered the third dream. "Next I was in a dark castle and I was being chased by a monster. I was running and when I finally broke out of the gates, Seth was waiting for me with a winged horse beside him."

"Are you sure?" Halona asked suddenly. "There actually aren't that many winged horses in this world. If there was really one there than he would have had to borrow one from one of their owners. Seth's cursed so that doesn't seem likely. Wouldn't you agree?"

Juliet was surprised. "Really? How many are there?"

Halona shrugged. "I can only think of two, but there might be more."

"Tell us about the last vision," Fiona encouraged.

Juliet mastered her nerves and forced her voice not to shake as she confronted her fear. "This one was a lot more detailed than the others. I was standing on the balcony of a castle and Seth was dead in front of me. Sorry," she said with a voice that trembled. "If you've never actually seen a person hacked to bits, then you wouldn't understand how scary this was. Sorry, I can't even tell you how messed up his body was. But I pulled one of the knives out of his chest and..."

"And what?"

Juliet nearly choked on the words. "Slit my own throat."

"Maybe Seth's not the right guy for you," Fiona said slowly as she leaned back in her chair. "Since you both end up dying in your visions."

"I'll get the pasta."

Halona prepared the rest of the meal. After dishing up for all of them she sat down again.

"We've got to lighten up the mood in here," she said, flicking her hair away from her face.

But Juliet wasn't finished dropping her bombs. "I have visions when Rylan kisses me, too."

Fiona and Halona stared in complete disbelief. "What did you see then?"

"You know, I have to point out that even though I had scary dreams when Seth kissed me, during the dream, I was filled with the most amazing feeling of love toward him. It's my judgment that pushes me away from him and not my feelings. That's what I think anyway."

"Sirens do that to people," Halona said, patting Juliet's hand sympathetically. "Just look at this girl here. She's a total mess and all because of one those silver-tongued devils."

"Shut up," Fiona mumbled through a mouthful of pasta.

"Oh, you know I'm just jealous," Halona said in the most condescending voice imaginable.

Juliet laughed. The two of them were really fun. She was really happy to be with them. What had she done without them since she started university?

"Anyway," she said, dropping her wide smile. "When Rylan kisses me, I don't see the same things."

"Do you have visions of Rylan? Because it could be you who has visions whenever anyone kisses you rather than any special power either of those guys has," Halona suggested.

Juliet had never thought of that. "Huh? No. I don't have visions of Rylan. I see a man, but I don't think it's him."

"What's he like?"

"It's more of a personality than a face. I guess he has a body, but I haven't seen his face. In my visions, he's almost like a Grecian statue that is missing limbs. His body is like that, too—white and polished. Real men don't look like that."

"But some of them look pretty dang good," Fiona interrupted.

Halona gave her a dirty look. "She's talking now, okay?"

Both of them waited patiently for Juliet to continue.

"He's mean to me," Juliet said, thinking carefully. "And he's mean to himself as well." She told them about her two dreams. As she finished, she mused, "I think he stepped all over the glass because I wanted him to."

"And then once he gave you what you wanted, he thought it was okay to take what he wanted, so he raped you?" Halona said coldly.

"My dream ended before that happened," Juliet said, defending whoever it was.

"Come on, Juliet," Fiona intervened. "You can't pretend that this is a good guy. Whether he raped you or not, in the very next dream, he hit you. You can't ignore that."

"I don't think you should date either of these guys," Halona said seriously. "They both sound like trouble. Unless, you're the girl who has visions no matter who kisses you. So, have you ever kissed anyone else besides Seth and Ry?"

Juliet shook her head.

"Parents watched you like hawks? Never got the chance?" Halona asked calmly. "Well, I think we should put my theory to the test. I know a guy who would be up for an experiment of this sort." She reached around and grabbed her cordless phone from off the kitchen counter.

"The man-whore?" Fiona laughed.

"You read my mind. I love this guy, Juliet. You're going to like him, too."

"But I thought you never met a guy who was worth the gunpowder to blow him to hell?"

Halona nodded while she dialed. "Yeah. He's mostly the guy who proves the theory. He's totally worthless, but cute and extremely fun. Seriously, he makes shopping for light bulbs feel like a day at an amusement park." She put the phone to her ear and continued talking to Juliet, "But he's got no sense of modesty, sobriety, or fidelity. He's sort of indecent all around, but he can spin off a love poem at a moment's notice that makes Byron look like an amateur." Then she got up from the table to speak to the man in question in another room.

Fiona leaned across the table to whisper. "She's hopelessly in love, but it's sort of pointless. Don't worry though, he is an excellent person to try this with."

"Try what with?" Juliet squeaked.

"What do you think?" Fiona huffed. "Kissing."

Juliet leaned back. "I'm not going to do that. Do you know how angry that would make Rylan?"

Fiona rolled her eyes. "Weren't you just talking about slipping behind his back to let Seth bite you? Which is still something I think you should do. If Seth starts biting women himself for his food then he won't be able to stay faithful to you. If you're not immortal then you don't have enough blood inside you to satisfy him. He needs at least eight clients if they all come regularly and give their maximum allowance. So, it doesn't matter if he's just a little thing you have on the side. That's all you could ever be to him."

Juliet felt deflated. "But he doesn't actually have to bite them, does he?"

"Chas lets people choose, so most people choose the needle the first time they meet him because he's very open about it. His fangs hurt more than the needle."

However, no one ever chooses the needle again. The only reason anyone has it is because he insists that he needs some blood in a bottle as well. No one wants to do both, but everyone does it, because missing out on Chas' bite would be a huge letdown after listening to him sing."

"Is it really such a big deal?"

"Yes. It's a huge deal. And you know what? I am charmed at the idea of Seth getting his own clientele, because that would mean that Chas wouldn't have to take on any additional clients. Right now he has eighteen, besides his wife-like-person. Not only that, but something amazing might happen when Seth bites you. You could learn how all those fragments of vision fit together to form a whole. I'll even come with you. Chas can bite me anytime because I'm immortal, so I don't have to wait for the eight week mark."

Juliet thought about that for a minute. It was a lot to take in. She had been putting whether she believed it or not on hold, but things were starting to get a little too confusing if she didn't believe it. At least the twins had offered her a little guidance and an idea on how to proceed. Now she just needed to figure out what she wanted.

"Is Chas immortal?" Juliet asked suddenly, thinking of Seth.

Fiona shook her head. "But that doesn't mean he can't live forever. The sirens who were originally cursed are still alive and still beautiful from what I understand. I expect that Chas and Seth will be just as long lived, but if someone were to attack them violently, then I don't think they would survive. Neither would their mothers. I heal instantly. They would die. The problem with half-sirens is that they aren't as vicious as their cursed mothers. To say Raidne is brutal would be an understatement. She's cruel to degrees that you and I simply wouldn't understand. I don't think she'd have the tiniest problem killing her sons, which is probably why they are the only two living right now. They can't be the only children she's ever had. So, Seth and Chas are not evil, and even though both of them would love to drain a woman dry because of their hunger, both of them will stop before she's in danger, because they aren't murderers. Their one wish is to save their bloodline from the curse."

"How do they do that?"

Fiona puffed a lock of hair out of her eyes. "I have no idea."

Just then, Halona stalked back into the room. "He's busy, so he can't come over right now. He had a prior engagement, or some such crap. But, I still want to try this out. He says he'll meet us at the campus bar this Friday, so you'd better be there, Juliet."

"What about the Occult's Addict meeting?"

"Canceled," both girls said immediately and in unison.

“Huh?”

“I’m the president and I can do what I want,” Fiona said, sticking her tongue out.

“But...”

“Listen, Juliet,” Halona said seriously. “I’m the voice of reason. I always make more sense than she does. You can trust me to tell you when things are amiss and I’m telling you, it’s not often we get the chance to party with Mr. Costa. The witches will be happy. It’ll be a rollicking good time.”

Juliet swallowed. She hadn’t been to the campus bar before, let alone to party with an unknown guy who was supposed to kiss her as part of some experiment.

“I’d better call Rylan,” she said, trying to catch her breath.

Chapter Fifteen

Not the Red Cross

The lofty ceiling of the cafeteria in the science building arched over Juliet's head. The snow had stopped and instead they were visited by dreary rain. It splattered on the glass like tiny pinpricks. This would probably be the last rainfall of the year.

She didn't have classes for two hours, so she was waiting for Rylan to meet her for lunch. It was already Wednesday and she hadn't seen much of him that week. He had sent her a few text messages apologizing that he didn't visit or call. Apparently, he had a lot of work to do. Juliet didn't mind. She needed time to think.

So far, her love affair with Rylan hadn't been much of anything. She felt like that was the way a relationship should be, calm and steady, instead of suffering from a heart attack every time she thought about him. Rylan was safe, comfortable, and fathoms-deep in love with her, but he wasn't a hundred percent perfect. There was still the man she dreamed of when Rylan kissed her, and he frightened her. Sure, she could avoid the faceless man by only receiving the briefest of kisses from Rylan, but what would happen when their relationship needed to move to the next level? That was where Juliet hit a wall. If there wasn't a way for her to end the visions, then there wasn't a way for them to be together. That was a fact.

Juliet put her cheek in her palm and strummed the table with her fingertips when she saw Rylan come in the side door. In the crowd of brown and black-haired heads, he looked like an angel. His hair was so light he made blondes look like brunettes. In such a crowded place, no one should have noticed him who wasn't watching for him specifically, but Juliet saw heads turn. He didn't notice. He was looking for her. The way he moved through the crowd was completely mellow. Yet Seth, and now Fiona and Halona, were convinced he wasn't human.

Juliet put a welcoming smile on her face as she watched him, but he continued to miss her as he circled his way around the room.

A sudden glint of sunlight broke through the clouds and through the glass ceiling. It lit up Rylan's face and his eyes shone bright red. For a split second it looked like they were bleeding.

She jumped in her chair and Rylan finally noticed her.

He walked over immediately and took a seat. "Hello Juliet. You look gorgeous." He bent and kissed her cheek, then her ear, and then her neck. "Thanks for waiting for me. It's been a hard week."

She gazed at him curiously and asked slyly, "What have you been doing? I find it hard to believe that you need to study. You predicted my mark on that one paper so accurately. Aren't you super smart?"

His head cocked to the side strangely. "I don't like to draw attention to that."

"So, what have you been doing?" Juliet asked logically.

"Taylor needs my tutoring. I promised I'd help her get good marks. Wait. You're not mad, are you?"

"No. I saw at the party how important your relationship with her is. I'm cool with it."

He leaned back in his chair. "Okay then. Thanks."

"Oh, did Fiona tell you? The meeting for this week has been canceled."

Rylan snorted. "Yeah, she told me."

"Well, we were going to meet at the campus bar, but then Paulo decided that he wanted to go to some private lounge downtown, so we're going there instead. Are you coming along or am I going solo?"

He groaned, his face painfully contorted. "Do you have to go? Can't you just come over to my hotel that night? We could watch a movie and over room service and... and..."

"And?"

"And," he said, putting his hands over Juliet's while looking in her eyes. "And I could keep you away from the biggest lounge lizard this town has ever seen."

Juliet laughed. She gripped Rylan's hands and leaned forward. "Not a chance. I want to meet this guy. From Halona's description, I would be missing out big time if I stayed away. You've met him, right?"

"A couple times a really long time ago. I saw him across a bar once last year and that was all I needed. If I'm like the moon, then he's the sun; he drowns me out."

"I still plan to go. After neglecting me this whole week, you can't be mad if I make my own plans when it comes to the weekend."

"I guess not," Rylan said at last. "Okay, I'll come. Even if it's only to pick you up and make sure you get back to the dorms safely. I wouldn't want you to have to take a bus back to campus and then have to call for a Safewalk, now would I?"

"Do you really want to keep me away from Seth? You know, I wouldn't stay away from you when he asked me to."

"Really?" Rylan said, looking honestly moved.

"Really. So don't you be as dumb as him and get all fidgety if I happen to say hello to him, kay? It wouldn't be cool."

Rylan reached across the table and placed the shortest of kisses on her mouth. "I adore you. You go ahead and be as cool as you want to be."

Juliet looked into Rylan's face with regret. He was asking her what she wanted to eat, but she could hardly focus. If she couldn't get control of her feelings and focus them one way or another, everyone was going to get hurt, and it would be all her fault.

The next day, Fiona invited Juliet for lunch at the campus pub. Juliet was surprised because Fiona had not sought her out like this before, but since dinner on Sunday, Fiona had phoned Juliet twice just to ask if she'd seen Seth. She was disappointed when Juliet admitted that she hadn't seen him, nor hair, nor text, nor email from him.

Juliet gazed outside at the grim expanse of gray buildings that made up the campus in November. But no matter how overcast it was, Fiona wore gold hoop earrings and the rose of her cheeks made her look like a spring sunrise.

"Are you all set for tomorrow?" she asked Juliet with a grin. "Do you have a dress to wear to the lounge? It's a pretty quiet place, but you'll regret it if you don't wear the right thing."

"I've got it covered. I bought a couple new dresses this fall."

"Good. Then there won't be any last minute costume struggles." Fiona stopped and looked at Juliet expectantly. "Actually, there's one more thing I wanted to mention to you."

"Which is?"

"Chas called me last night. He has a bit of a problem. One of his clients quit. I told him before that if he ever had a vacancy I'd fill it, so he's asking me to come in just this one extra time. Do you want to come too?"

Juliet shrunk in her chair. "Oh, I don't know how I feel about that."

"I told you. The fact that you're with Rylan doesn't matter. We can do the whole thing with a needle and a tube if you want."

"Do they really drink blood?"

Fiona nodded. "You bet they do."

Juliet fumbled with her napkin. "Can I watch Seth drink it?"

"I'm sure that could be arranged. Does that mean you'll come?"

Juliet rubbed the inside of her left elbow with her thumb. She guessed that was where they were going to draw the blood from. "I guess a pinprick is a small price to pay to get some answers. But I'm not *cheating* on Rylan. I want my deal to be with Chas instead of Seth."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I want to hear Chas sing and I want to watch Seth drink my blood," Juliet said, gaining confidence.

"Okay. Great. I'll call Chas and let him know what you want. I'm sure he won't mind. He's very liberal as long as what's requested of him doesn't infringe upon his treaty with Nixie, and this won't. I'll come by and pick you up at about two tomorrow afternoon. You don't have class, do you?"

"I have a study group," Juliet admitted.

"Skip it."

On Friday, Juliet stood waiting in front of Chas' apartment building. It was cold out, but from the smile on Fiona's face, it was clear that she didn't feel a thing. She was bouncing on the balls of her feet, clutching the edges of her fluffy orange scarf like she was fifteen again and ringing the doorbell of her crush.

"Excited much?" Juliet asked.

"Well, you know. I haven't seen him in a while. I'm a bit of a strain on his home life."

"Why?"

"Because, I'm the solution to all his problems," Fiona said with a wink. "If I could be his girlfriend, he wouldn't need any other donors. He could be faithful to only one woman—me! Right now, he's not allowed to treat me too much differently than any of his other donors or Nixie would spazz. He really loves his daughter. It would be heartwarming if she didn't despise him."

"Yeah, I sort of got that impression from Seth," Juliet admitted.

"Don't get the wrong idea, I sympathize with her. I don't know how I'd react to having a father like Chas. The father Halona and I grew up with isn't my dad or hers. He's our step-dad. He married our mother when we were four, so I actually remember a little about life before he entered the scene. The point is, he's a middle-aged father figure who isn't remotely attractive in a sexual kind of way. I love him, but if he was stuck in time and didn't age at the same rate as my mother... Not to mention the way Nixie's friends drool over Chas like he's eye-candy when they visit. She's so annoyed by him, she lives with her mother and sees him only occasionally."

"That sounds very lonely for Chas."

"Well, after you hear him sing, you're going to forget about everything I just said. It's hard to imagine that someone so talented could have trouble with his daughter."

The buzzer sounded and Fiona tugged on the door. They went into the foyer.

"Let's just wait here until they come down," Fiona suggested.

Looking up the staircase, Juliet saw Seth and Chas descending the stairs. Seth was dressed in an extremely fitted black T-shirt with long sleeves and dark blue jeans that were partially torn. His hair spiked up a little in the front and Juliet's breath caught in her throat. Why did he always have to look so damn perfect? True, he wasn't wearing Armani, but with Seth, it really didn't matter what he wore.

Chas was wearing a white lab coat, a white collared shirt underneath, and a pair of light gray trousers. Chas looked great in white. It matched his hair and made him look like a doctor who was about to sprout angel wings.

Suddenly, Juliet felt lucky just to be there.

"Hi Fiona," Chas said pleasantly, as he took her gloved hand. "And thank you for coming, Juliet. Unfortunately, Nixie isn't here today. She usually takes care of the medical side of our exchange, so you'll have to deal with me instead, but don't worry. I'm talented with needles. You won't feel a thing."

Seth ground his teeth and grumbled.

"Come along," he said, taking them up the stairs to the first floor.

He led them into what really looked like the entrance to the theater. There was a coat rack on one side and a bar on the other. Then there was a set of large double doors on the other side, which she supposed led into the theater. Were any of the floors in the building ordinary?

Chas took Fiona's coat while Seth helped Juliet with hers.

"What's the matter, Seth? You don't look happy," Juliet said quietly while he hefted her coat off her shoulders.

"Oh, I'm fine," he said caustically.

Juliet gave him a puzzled look before Chas opened the double doors and took them into a theater.

"Okay. First, we need to get Juliet on the machine," Chas said as he opened another door leading away from the seating.

Inside this room, there was a reclining chair with blue vinyl covering it and a stand housing a collection of medical supplies next to it.

"Are you right handed?" Chas asked, indicating for Juliet to sit down.

"Yeah," Juliet said, getting on the chair.

"Then, do you want me to puncture your left arm?"

Juliet nodded.

Chas went to the sink and washed his hands and then put on a pair of latex gloves. He sat on a stool in front of Juliet's chair and gave her a stress ball. Then he strapped her arm to the arm rest and got out a plastic bag and put it on a white machine.

"What's that for?" she asked, pointing to the machine.

"Oh, it's nothing. It just sloshes the blood back and forth and stops it from clotting. Okay, I'm just about ready," he said as he meddled with a couple of plastic tubes.

"You've never given blood before. Am I right?"

"Yeah."

"Are you nervous?" he asked, looking tenderly into her eyes.

"A little," she admitted.

"Are you cold?"

"U-huh," she mumbled.

"Please get her a blanket, Seth," he instructed calmly. Then he swiveled slightly on his stool and continued, "I would have let you leave your coat on, except that I need your arm bare. Sorry."

Seth brought her a purple knit blanket and gently covered her. She thanked him while Chas swabbed her inner arm.

"Okay. Are you ready?" Chas asked.

Juliet nodded.

"Wait," Chas exclaimed. "I forgot the permission forms. That's why Nixie usually does this. I can't keep my mind on waivers when I'm about to sing. Seth, can you get them?"

Seth brought Juliet a paper on a clipboard.

"What am I agreeing to?" she asked, scanning the page.

"You're just agreeing to allow Chas to draw your blood and he promises to use entirely new sterilized equipment and to follow all accepted medical practices. It's simple."

Juliet signed her name and had a curious feeling like she was signing a deal with the devil. Yet even though she felt a little spiral of fear curl itself around her spinal cord, she didn't want to leave. She wanted to see where this road ended.

"Now that that's done, we can get started. You should look away while I do this," Chas advised, needle in hand.

Juliet turned to look at Seth, while Chas inserted the needle.

"All finished," Chas announced as he finished taping her arm.

He was right, she didn't feel a thing.

Then he stood up and took off his gloves. "Now, you'll need to move your arm a little from time to time, so gently squeeze the stress ball and roll it around with your fingers."

"Okay."

"Good job, Juliet. You didn't even lose your color," Fiona praised as she stood beside Seth.

Juliet looked at her arm and saw the tube fill with blood and empty into the bag that was now rocking back and forth.

Chas sat in a chair on the other side of the room and picked up a magazine, but as soon as he was no longer busy, Fiona was eyeing him. She gave Juliet a wink and took the seat next to him.

Once she was gone, Seth leaned forward and said quietly, "So, that's why you're here? Because Fiona asked you to come?"

"No. But having her come with me certainly helped give me the courage. Except, she thinks I'm making a mistake not letting you bite me the first time."

"Maybe she's not as wretched as I thought she was," Seth said dryly.

"Now why would you have a problem with Fiona?" Juliet wanted to know.

"It's nothing... much," Seth shrugged.

Juliet guessed that it probably had something to do with Nixie, but decided not to say anything. It wasn't her problem.

"So, this whole apartment building is built just to house your special needs?" Juliet asked, by way of changing the subject.

"Well, yeah. The basement has a pool. The first floor is the theater. The second and third floors are apartments and the fourth floor is Chas' private apartment."

"So, there are apartments in this place?" Juliet asked, a little surprised.

"Well, this building isn't exactly brand new, but the pool was added fifteen years ago. That was the most recent renovation. I'm sure you noticed that the theater isn't in the best condition. It was last done in the late seventies, before I was born, but Chas didn't exactly have the same needs back then. He had a different set-up."

"What was it like back then?"

"Well, his donors used to live here in their own private apartments and he'd put on a performance for an hour or so every night for all of them."

"There sure are a lot of seats," Juliet commented, thinking the place housed at least fifty people. "How many suites are there?"

"Only about twenty, but they didn't like to sit beside each other, so he had to build the theater so they wouldn't have to rub elbows. I understand that he had quite a bit of trouble with rivalry between his girls before Melanie got pregnant with Nixie. It was all over after that. He tossed out everyone and the rooms have pretty much been empty since then."

"How did he survive after they all left? Didn't he still need blood?" Juliet wondered.

"Well, he knew his little setup couldn't last forever and he learned to satiate his thirst by drinking grenadine and eating pomegranates. It wasn't the end of the world and eventually he got the system he has now. And he got Nixie."

Juliet nodded slowly.

"Keep moving your fingers," Seth instructed.

"I'm wiggling them!" she retorted. "Hey, I was wondering. Can you take me down to the pool sometime? I'd really like to go for a swim there if it isn't against the rules." She wanted to feel how the water would feel to her skin since it was intended for sirens. She wondered if she was one, too.

"What are you talking about? You're a donor now, which pretty much means we'll let you walk all over us the day you give blood. Especially since this is your first time and your blood is for me. Giving me my first donation means a lot. You've given me a 'get out of jail free card' with my mother. Sure, you can take a dip in the pool if you want to."

"If you're so happy I'm doing this, why are you acting so sour?"

"I'm not acting sour!"

"You are."

He rolled his eyes and huffed gloomily. "Sue me. I'm disappointed that you asked especially for Chas to sing to you this afternoon and not me. Would you mind telling me why you decided something like that?"

"Well," she said, wetting her bottom lip. "I thought it would be better for my relationship with Rylan to do it that way, because you implied that even listening to a siren singing would be considered cheating. I just decided to treat the whole thing like a massage. See, if Rylan went to his old girlfriend for a massage, I'd feel like he was cheating, but if he went to someone he didn't know to get one, I wouldn't mind."

Seth stared at her with his mouth slightly open. "Okay, weird girl," he said finally. "I guess if you want to look at it that way."

"But, I'm not really here to listen to anything. I really want to watch you drink my blood. That's what I'm here for."

"Well, we could unhook it from the bag and I could drink directly from the tube like it's a straw."

"Don't joke," Chas interjected, coming up behind Seth and having a look at Juliet. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Juliet said, purposefully flexing her fingers around the stress ball.

"Good. Don't let what he said worry you. We'll keep our end of the contract and drain your blood professionally. It looks like you're about half done, so just hang in there."

"You know, I think you'd make a really good doctor," Juliet said suddenly to Chas. His manner was so gentle and soothing, he could make anyone feel confident in him.

Chas' lips almost turned white when Juliet said that. "No. I wouldn't, and neither would Seth. It would be too much of a temptation to resist." Then he turned and walked back to Fiona.

Juliet gawked after him open-mouthed.

"He doesn't mean what you think he means," Seth said as soon as Chas' back was turned. "Neither of us would be tempted to bite anyone. We're the same as you. Even if you were starving, you would still have the willpower to resist food even if it was right in front of you, right?"

"I think so."

"He means that he would be tempted to sing to ease someone's pain with song. The only problem is that we're so loud, everyone in the hospital would hear and nothing would get done." Seth exhaled heavily and then he said, "I wanted to ask you something about Rylan."

"You can ask, but I might not answer you."

"Right," Seth said without worry. "I just wondered if he'd asked you to marry him or anything like that."

"I'm eighteen! Who would want to marry an eighteen-year-old?"

"I would," Seth sighed, "if the eighteen-year-old was you."

"What about the woman who is supposed to show up somewhere in your future?" Juliet asked breathlessly.

"Hmm... I have given a lot of thought to what I'm going to do about her. I'll deal with her when she shows up, but don't let her bother you. I won't be unfaithful."

"And what about your blood drinking, cheating ways? You need at least eight regular donors to survive, don't you?"

"With you, I'm hope I won't need any," he said quietly.

Then it hit her. Juliet put a hand to her mouth. She was shivering. It was clear that Seth thought she was immortal like Fiona.

Chapter Sixteen

Strumming Heartstrings

Seth brought Juliet another blanket when he noticed she was shivering. "Sorry," he said calmly. "It's cold in here. You should probably come back tomorrow if you want to go swimming. Actually, come next week. It takes the human body four or five days to replace the amount of blood we're taking, so you'll feel strong again by then."

Juliet put her free hand to her mouth and bit the side of her index finger. She wasn't shivering because she was cold. She was shivering because of what he'd just said. Did he really think she was immortal? Juliet didn't have any birth secrets. She had no memories from before she tried to kill herself, but she did have fifteen scrapbooks her mother had made of their family before she lost her memory. There were tons of pictures of her with her parents. She even looked like them. There was no way her parents were not her parents.

Just then, Chas checked the bag at her side. "You're done. Let's get you unhooked. Good job, Juliet. For a first time donor, you were very brave. Some girls squeal a lot about the pain."

"It was fine," Juliet said as Chas tugged the tape off her arm.

Within seconds, she was free from the machine with a piece of gauze taped over her puncture wound. Chas handed Seth the tube and Seth sucked the tiny remnant of red liquid out of it like he was a child licking the cake batter spoon.

"Okay," Chas said, "let's go to the bar. We have to keep the second half of our deal."

Seth helped Juliet up from the chair with one hand and took the plastic bag of blood from Chas with the other.

"Congratulations Seth! I'll see that your left wrist doesn't get broken," Chas said kindly.

"Why would his wrist break?" Fiona asked.

"Family joke," Chas said to Fiona, but his eyes stayed on Seth and they looked serious.

Juliet felt a little light headed as they went back through the theater to the bar. She leaned into Seth and let him lead her to a bar stool. Then Seth went behind the bar while Chas and Fiona took seats beside Juliet. From under the counter, Seth brought out two shot glasses and clunked them down. He unplugged the plastic bag and filled both shots. He slid one towards Chas and said, "For your consideration."

"Thank you," Chas said, picking it up.

"Wait," Fiona said, grabbing Chas' arm. "What are you doing?"

"I'm tasting it. Don't worry, honey, it won't spoil my appetite."

When Juliet saw Fiona's distress, she grumbled and then gathered her courage to say what was on her mind. "Seth and Chas want to find out if I'm immortal. If I'm right, Chas has never shared your blood with Seth. When he drains a little off the top, he's putting it away for a rainy day. Seth probably has no idea what immortal blood tastes like."

Fiona looked slightly horrified. "Is that true?"

Chas raised his eyebrows and clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. "Yeah, that's how it is. You're not angry, are you?"

Fiona stared at him blankly for a moment. At last, she finally stuttered, "I... I think I am. You've been lying to me all this time about needing blood for your brother. And what about the emergency? If you've been saving it then you don't need to drink my blood today."

Chas put the shot glass back on the bar untasted and said unflinchingly, "I did not lie about today. It just wasn't *my* emergency. I'm sure you can put two and two together, Fiona. If Juliet came today and continues to come then there's no need for me to replace the donor who quit. You want me to have fewer donors, don't you?"

Fiona squirmed on her feet.

"It's okay, Fiona," Juliet heard herself saying. "You don't have to give him your blood if you don't want to."

"I'll think about it," she said, averting her eyes and turning slightly on the bar stool.

It was then that Juliet noticed Seth. His hand was on his forehead, and she noticed a thin line of perspiration. He was still holding his glass, waiting, sweating and silently losing his mind over the small amount of warm blood under his nose.

Chas seemed to notice, too, and he gave Seth a nod to continue. Chas would know how he was suffering.

"Bottom's up," Seth said tightly, just before he drained his glass.

Chas drank his at the same time, and the two brothers slammed their glasses down on the bar. Their eyes locked as though trying to gauge what the other thought.

"You go first," Chas said at last.

Seth started pouring another glass. "I've never tasted such young blood, but this blood doesn't exactly have the tang of innocence some of the blood you bring me has."

"No," Chas said, sniffing the inside of his cup.

Juliet was beginning to feel a little uncomfortable and yet strangely valuable. It was almost like having your fortune told, having two sirens taste your blood in order to figure out your personality and perhaps, your destiny.

Chas licked out the inside of his shot and then turned to Juliet. "Not to burst your bubble, but this isn't immortal blood. Not only does it not taste right, but Fiona's blood changes color after about fifteen minutes. It turns golden and looks more like honey than blood."

Seth took another swig and after he swished it around in his mouth he said, "This blood is tainted. I need a different glass." He fumbled around under the bar until he pulled out a large brandy glass. It was big enough to double as a fish bowl. He poured the rest of Juliet's blood into it, squishing the corners carefully so that it emptied completely, and began swirling the glass back and forth.

"Don't forget the rubber spatula. You don't want to miss a drop," Chas advised dryly.

"Wait a second, Seth," Juliet protested. "What do you mean my blood is tainted? I don't have any diseases or anything."

"He means," Chas said carefully, "that your blood is sinful."

"Violent sins," Seth clarified, after swallowing another mouthful. "Self mutilation, I think."

"How can you tell that?" Juliet gasped, rising automatically from her chair and gaping at him.

"I can tell a lot more about your blood than that. Just give me a minute," he said, sniffing the red liquid again.

"Like what? That I'm a descendant of Medusa?"

"Har har," Seth said, drinking heavily.

"No," Chas said rationally. "I think that's a legitimate question. Obviously, there are not only humans in this world, so if you did have a little mythical blood in you, Seth would be able to taste it."

"One hundred percent human," Seth said when his mouth was free again.

"I thought so, too," Chas said, giving Juliet a curious gaze.

Juliet felt her whole body fall in disappointment when she heard their words. She had counted on her theory being correct. She lowered herself back onto the stool.

"Yet tragic," Seth said appreciatively. "Oh, so tragic. Like a sorrowful love song that was sung only once, like a tender young woman executed unjustly, or like moonlight on the water eaten by a storm. That's what you taste like. There's so little defiance in your blood. It's a wonder you've made it this far. You have been crushed and manipulated," Seth whispered, like he was seeing something beyond the room

they were sitting in. "That's where the self-mutilation comes into play. It's ironic that the only way you can stand up for yourself is by holding yourself hostage."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Juliet rasped, feeling as though she was being rushed at by wild bulls. Was he telling the truth about her missing years? But she continued on like there was no possibility that he had hit the mark. "I've never once hurt myself."

"You've done far worse than that," he whispered. "It's no good, Juliet. You can't have your innocence back, and now that I've tasted this, there is no way I'll let you pretend that you have it. The mask has to come off and you have to become who you really are. You won't forgive me if I don't strip you of the little lie you feed yourself to keep yourself safe."

"What are you talking about? What do you know about me before I was thirteen?"

Fiona gasped. "You mean, he doesn't know what you did?"

"No," Juliet said, keeping her eyes on Seth. "The only time I have ever spoken of it was at the Halloween party."

Chas suddenly grabbed Juliet's upper arm and forced her to look at him. His voice was hoarse as he roughly questioned, "What did you do?"

When Chas opened his mouth to speak, Juliet saw his fangs. There was blood pooling in red lines around his teeth. His breath smelt nauseating, hot and coppery. Juliet stifled her gagging reflex and covered her mouth and nose.

"Relax," Seth said quietly, before Chas lost his temper. "Let her go. Everything's fine."

"Is it?" Chas asked, loosening his grip on Juliet's arm.

"Yes," Seth said, right before he lifted his brandy glass unreasonably high and drained the rest of her blood. Then he did as Chas said and got out a green rubber spatula to clean every drop of blood out of the glasses. "Thank you, Juliet, for coming today and being such a good sport."

Juliet smiled weakly at him. She didn't know what to say.

Seth suddenly perked up like he just remembered something. "I'm being a bad host. You need to eat something sweet, Juliet. I forgot because I was so excited. What would you like? Normally, we have every decadent desert imaginable. Let's see," he said, ducking to root around under the bar. "But let's get you started on a couple cookies." He brought up several packages and let Juliet choose one.

She took a coconut cream and started munching away. She didn't realize she had been feeling weak until she put a cookie in her mouth. Now her body sensed how much she needed the sugar, and she started chewing faster.

"Right now," Seth said. "We have cheesecake, chocolate cake, carrot cake, cinnamon buns with cream cheese icing, and apple crisp. Which one do you want?"

“Carrot cake,” Juliet answered immediately and Seth brought out a piece on a tiny plate with a glass dome covering it.

He uncovered it and handed her a delicate silver fork. “Sorry that it’s from a bakery, but we don’t cook anything here.”

“That’s okay,” Juliet said, sinking the fork into the cake. “It looks pretty fancy.”

“Only the best for our donors,” Chas said calmly to Juliet. He seemed to have settled down since his outburst. Then he turned to ask Fiona, “Which would you like for an ‘after’ snack?”

“The cheesecake... But wait! I haven’t agreed to let you bite me,” she said, realizing her blunder.

“It’s okay. Have a piece anyway,” he said. “I really appreciate you taking the time to accompany Juliet and helping us make her feel safe. Seth will be floating on a cloud for a week. I promised Juliet a show so you can sit in on it if you’d like. If you still don’t want me to bite you afterwards, then you can go back into the office and rip up the waivers you already signed. Whatever you decide, we still love you today.”

“Yes, thank you,” Seth said sincerely, looking into Fiona’s face.

Fiona seemed reluctant.

“I’ve got a good idea, brother,” Seth said, before Fiona could terminate their standing agreement. “I think you need an opening act. You can’t just walk up and start singing without a little fanfare first, right?”

“What did you have in mind?” Chas asked. Then he smiled slightly with his lips pressed together firmly.

“I could open for you.”

“An excellent idea,” Chas said, getting up and putting his hand on the small of Fiona’s back. “Then there’s no reason not to get started right away. Juliet, just bring that food into the theater with you.”

They all headed in, and Seth carried a small platter of cookies and apple juice with him. Chas led them to the front row and Seth set up a little tray for Juliet’s food to rest on. When she was comfortably seated, Seth jumped up on the stage and started tinkering with the electronic equipment.

Chas sat next to Juliet and brought Fiona down to take the chair next to him. “Behind that curtain are my instruments. Seth likes to sing to electronic tracks because then he can have a full accompaniment, so he programs them himself. He’s modern, while my performance will be more classical. I like the strings, so I play the harp, violin and guitar. Which would you like me to play?”

Juliet's sip of apple juice went all wrong and she was wheezing and hissing while Chas patted her on the back. When she had finally caught her breath, she wiped her mouth with a napkin and said, "Please let Fiona choose."

"But it's *you* I'm trying to please," Chas said evenly. "It really means a lot to us that you took the leap to come here. Let me cater to you."

Juliet glanced over Chas' shoulder to see Fiona's face. She was biting the flesh of her thumb and looking openly restless in her chair. Juliet couldn't make her miserable by accepting any more of Chas' attention. It was obviously making her uncomfortable.

"Actually, I don't really care if I'm sung to or not. If I were to be rewarded somehow for doing this, then I think you've already given me what I was searching for. I wanted to know if I was really an ordinary human and you've told me. Thank you. I don't need all this."

Seth had stopped what he was doing and was now standing at the edge of the stage paying close attention.

"How will we get you to come back in eight weeks if you don't accept payment from us?" Chas asked smoothly, his violet eyes narrowing slightly.

Juliet scratched her previously punctured arm nervously and averted her eyes. It was a moment before she had the nerve to say, "I hadn't exactly planned to come a second time."

"Would you rather be paid money for your blood?" Chas continued. "Our song is generally considered more valuable than money, but we cater to the needs of our donors. Do you need money?"

"Isn't that normally around twenty bucks if you go to a clinic?"

"All donations are volunteered. Not even clinics pay for blood anymore. I wasn't talking about twenty dollars. Are you in some kind of trouble? Do you need money to clear up some debt or do you have an unexpected expense?"

"No. I've just been a little on the poorer side lately. It's nothing serious."

"She can't have money problems," Fiona said dryly. "Her boyfriend is moneybags Rylan. He would take care of anything she needed."

Chas shot Seth a worried glance. In return, Seth nodded slowly.

"Let's forget about all that," Seth said. "Listen, Juliet. Give me a chance. I'll sing something and then you can see how you feel. Clearly, I want you to come back in eight weeks. So, let me convince you with my song."

"Wait!" Juliet said, arching her back and sitting up in her chair. "Didn't people do suicidal things when they heard a siren's song?"

"Well, yes," Seth said, trying to keep his mirth in check. "Don't be afraid. It won't make you want to jump out of Fiona's car on the way home. It will only make you

want to stay glued to your chair until I'm finished, okay? It's not scary. And it isn't some strange form of mind control. It's just beautiful. Okay? Can I get started?"

Juliet looked around nervously.

"There's nothing to worry about," Fiona said. "It's fine. I promise." She clearly wanted to hear their concert.

Juliet settled back into her chair and nodded to Seth.

"And hey," Seth said as he fiddled with a few more knobs on the mixing board. "If you're unimpressed, I can always have you over next week for swimming."

"Can't I have that anyway?"

Seth flipped a switch and the lights went out. In the soft darkness she heard his voice like it was dancing in an unfelt wind. "I'll give you anything you want."

Then a little white light started flickering on the ceiling and against the curtains. Something appeared over the center of the stage. It was like a spotlight, but the light was not constant. Instead, bits flashed and flipped on and off. It was almost like Seth was being rained on by blue light.

And the music began.

The smoothly balanced sounds of percussion and electronic instruments were nothing compared to the power and scope of his voice. Juliet sat up in her chair and saw Seth like she had never seen him before, like she had never understood one thing about him until that moment, and he was not the man she thought he was.

*In the calm of the night
I stand on the shore
The universe is cracked
And the stars shine into my core*

*There is nothing left for me to do
All I can do is wait for you
And the waves pound out my distress
Knocking out all my unrest
Making me lie in sleep
As I wait for the promised guest*

The music changed as the tempo increased and the room exploded in millions of tiny fragments of light.

*In the ache of your morning
The wind comes fast enough to break me*

*It's white enough to see through me
To puncture holes in me*

*There is nothing left for me to say
I can't fight to keep you away
And the branches that beat me,
Writing on all my skin,
Your speeches sting
Making me lie in death
As I wait for your lost breath*

Seth closed his eyes often as he sang and when he opened them he gazed directly into Juliet's awestruck eyes. Juliet felt like she had missed an entire facet of him before. She hadn't seen this much beauty. It wasn't his face or body anymore, but something inside his soul that spoke of deep reservoirs of intense feeling. How had she missed that much of him?

Juliet's throat tightened. Her breath became shallow and the only thing she could feel was the sound of Seth's voice breaking down her barriers. Why had she tried to keep him out?

The beat slowed down again for the verse and the light fell only on Seth once again.

*In the waking of my mind
I feel the frost coming
And wonder when your leaves fall
And how I can catch them*

The melody rose again with great emotion as the light flooded the room again in what looked like silver rain. Juliet stood up. He said she would be pinned to her chair, but she had to get up. She couldn't stop herself from dancing. Her arms were over her head and she let her eyelids fall as she swung her hips to the rhythm.

*There is nothing left for me to do
All I can do is wait for you
The only soul that can save me
Biting me through to the bone
Making me lie in blood
As I wait for the oncoming flood*

His voice sounded closer now as she felt his hand caress the side of her face, the side that still had the lightest of bruises, grazing her skin. Juliet felt rapture. She clung to his hand and kissed his fingers.

The beat slowed and he sang the next lines softly into her ear.

*And wonder when your leaves fall
How I can catch them*

Juliet stood perfectly still, holding carefully onto Seth's arm to stop herself from falling to the floor.

The music faded out and Seth whispered the last words carefully into her ear.

How can I catch you?

Then the music stopped entirely and the lights came back on. Juliet felt like she had just woken from a trance. She shook her head feeling a little bewildered.

Seth's free hand stroked her back. "Perhaps I could continue the set and Fiona and Chas could shove off for a few hours?"

Juliet nodded her head vigorously.

"No!" Fiona interrupted, getting to her feet. "What have you done to her, Seth?" she asked, sounding waspish.

"Nothing," he denied, staring back at her.

"Like hell! She's like a zombie!"

"I didn't do anything to her!" he shouted back.

"Whatever! We have to go," Fiona forcefully unwound Juliet's hands finger by finger from around Seth and forcefully pulled her loose.

Juliet wanted to resist Fiona, but she was too disoriented to realize exactly what was going on. She realized only two things as she was hustled out of the theater and into the coat room. One was that Seth did not struggle against Fiona to keep her. The second was that she desperately did not want to be separated from him, but she was too weak to fight the strong arms that maneuvered her swiftly away. She stood dazed as Fiona helped her put on her coat.

Chas followed after them and spoke hasty words to Fiona to appease her temper while Seth stayed in the theater. Juliet wasn't sure, but it sounded like something was crashing to the floor. Was Seth ripping the place apart? But Juliet couldn't move: not to talk, not to fight back, and not to rush back to Seth's side.

Fiona pushed her out the front door. The cold air on Juliet's face woke her up a little, enough for her to take a deep breath and stare hopelessly into the sky. She was bewildered and not strong enough to run back. The feeling could not have been described before this moment, but it felt like she loved Seth so completely that just the feeling alone would kill her.

Fiona muscled her into the passenger seat of her car and put on her seat belt when Juliet couldn't do it for herself.

"I'm so sorry," the blonde girl said earnestly. "I didn't know it would affect you like that. It was never like that for me... only a really good concert with a really beautiful man performing—nothing like that. I'm so sorry, Juliet."

Juliet didn't respond. Actually, she couldn't even focus on Fiona's face and instead just stared straight ahead of her like she saw angels.

Fiona shut the car door briskly and when she got into her seat on the other side, she said, "Listen, I'll take you to my place and I'll call Rylan. I'll tell him that you're coming to the club tonight with Halo and me and he can meet us all there. I'll get you in one of my dresses and doll you up like a siren and... uh... sorry. I didn't mean to say that. Anyway, I'll fix this, honey. I'll fix this."

Juliet sat slumped in the car like a broken doll as Fiona pulled away from Chas' building. Her eyes still wouldn't focus, so what she saw out of the corner of her eye may or may not have happened. Just at the last moment, she thought she saw Seth burst out of the building and try to stop them. But, she was so confused that she might have imagined it.

Chapter Seventeen

The Burning Rose

Juliet was still slightly dazed three hours later as she sat in Fiona and Halona's apartment. She wasn't spacing out anymore, but she couldn't pay attention to what they were saying. Halona showed Juliet three pairs of shoes, but Juliet little more than glanced at them before she turned again to the window. The traffic on the street below was more interesting to Juliet than ten centimeter heels.

Finally, Fiona slammed a monster-sized text book on the coffee table in front of Juliet so that the bang sounded like a shotgun.

Juliet jumped.

"So, what exactly did Seth do that was so amazing?" Fiona asked crossly.

Juliet let her head fall back and rolled her eyes. "Nothing, I guess."

Fiona picked up the text book and prepared to chuck it at Juliet.

Halona grabbed it from Fiona. "Are you crazy? You can't kill her! Calm down! We can go about this in an easy, peaceful manner."

"I already asked her peacefully!" Fiona retorted angrily.

Juliet watched them struggle over the weapon with her head still tilted back. Halona was right. She was the more rational of the two.

It wasn't that Juliet thought the twins wouldn't understand. Certainly Halona would understand. Yet she couldn't find the voice to say, 'I hoped there was something special about me, too. I was hoping that was the reason Seth liked me.' Since she was human, she was in a worse place with Seth than Fiona was with Chas. At least Fiona had a reasonable belief that if she treaded water long enough then a future with Chas was possible. Juliet didn't even have that. She saw now what Seth saw when he said that any relationship between the two of them would end in ruin. He was talking about Nixie's mother, Melanie. Juliet didn't need to meet her to realize that she was a shell of a woman who simply didn't know how to exist without Chas. That was why Nixie had to protect her so fiercely.

If Juliet gave into her love for Seth, she'd become a broken shell as well and, eventually, Seth's desire for her would die, just as Chas' desire had died for Melanie.

The thing that stung like hellfire was that Seth knew this. He had always known this. Yet, he had pursued their relationship, trying to keep it unsoiled by her blood. Now she'd discovered how impossible it was for her to resist him and she had nothing to offer him that would sustain him... one hundred percent human.

She wondered if Seth was disappointed. He'd clearly had hopes, but he seemed at ease with her humanity. She thought about what he said about taking away her innocence. What had he meant by that? She knew what he meant. He meant that she wasn't worth more than a donor to him and he had to let her know as quickly as possible. After he figured that out, he was determined to give her a good show, but that didn't mean that he had any special feelings for her, only that he wanted to be good to someone who donated blood for him. He told her that they do practically anything for women the day they donate.

Juliet glanced at Fiona and Halona still struggling and arguing.

She leaned forward and picked up a pair of slim, black high heels. She had to make an effort at behaving properly or she would never get them off her back. She curled her fingers around the heel, thinking.

What was she going to do? She had been forcing herself to act numb, but now the numbness was falling away. She felt like she couldn't go back to Seth, no matter how much she wanted him, and she wanted him badly. It wouldn't do any good. They had no future, because she wasn't the mystical creature he thought she was. She didn't want to hear that she wasn't right for him.

She was in the midst of contemplating life without love when she suddenly remembered she had a boyfriend. She had forgotten all about him. She still had Rylan. That thought seemed to snap her into awareness. That was right. She still had to get dressed, go to the club, and meet Rylan.

With that, she nodded her head once and got to her feet. "Fiona, show me the dresses again. I'm going to pick one."

The lounge was called Hugo's and it was deep within the forest of skyscrapers in a part of the city Juliet had never been before. The hostess who ushered them in was one of the most beautiful and well made-up women Juliet had ever seen. Actually, all the waiters, waitresses and the bartender were knock-outs. The seats were dark brown leather and the walls were tan and looked like they were made of suede. Unique track lights lit up each table and illuminated the most exquisite liquor glasses.

Juliet steadied herself. Normally, she would have felt uncomfortable in such a place, but not that night—not after Seth's voice, his breath, his eyes, and the song he sang that still played on repeat in her head.

Her outfit helped, too. She wore a black mermaid gown with a high neckline and deep cut sleeves. There were swirls embroidered on it with sparkling mulberry thread. Her impossibly high heels were the icing on the cake.

Halona went to great lengths with her own appearance as well. Obviously, she was excited to see Paulo.

Juliet scanned the room looking for Rylan when they sat down at their table, but she didn't see him anywhere. She leaned over to Fiona and asked her when he said he'd be there.

"Don't worry," she soothed. "He'll probably be here in two minutes. He doesn't like to wait at tables all by himself. Such a child, don't you think?"

The waiter approached and took their drink order.

"Is Paulo here tonight?" Halona asked, after they had given their orders.

"He is," the man answered cordially. "Actually, he'll be performing one of his poems in just a few moments."

"Excellent," Halona said with obvious pleasure. "I love his poetry."

Just then, the low lights went even lower and a faint spotlight appeared at the front of the lounge. In the faint purple light there was a man sitting on a bar stool. His one boot was crooked between the legs of his seat and the other supported him on the floor. He had a small glass of liquor in his hand and a small microphone pinned to his immaculate shirt. He had loose, black hair that curled around his face and fell just past his shoulders like he was just waking up from a night of passion. On his face were rectangular glasses that rested on the tip of his nose, but didn't mask the melancholy expression on his swarthy features.

Juliet stared.

She was supposed to kiss *that* man at the end of the night! Halona had chosen a man with an aura of sexuality so potent it was sickening to be her partner in their experiment? Juliet was completely aghast. She would have been better off to lay a kiss on a stranger she found on the street than allow the ensuing insanity to continue.

As the waiter placed her drink in front of her, she nearly stood up and kissed him on the spot, just so she wouldn't have to kiss the rakish man sitting nonchalantly on the stage. But the waiter backed away and Paulo began to speak.

"This is called 'The Woman I Cannot Have'."

It was high-class bar, but Juliet was positive she heard some guy snort at the next table.

Paulo appeared not to notice and continued, "It's also entitled, 'The Burning Rose'." Then he began reciting the poem:

*The fairytale of my love began with you
With that single rose spell of forever love
With charms and keys of enchantment
Like a white witch, you trapped me*

*And when you fall, you fall like a blossom in sea spray
And my heart falls when you keep me at bay
And my soul fills with lifeblood when I hear you say,
"Only when the rose burns"*

*The fairytale of my love grew for you
With arms and lips I sought to prove
With words and breaths of worship
Like a fallen angel, you undo me*

*The fairytale of my love goes on for you
With aching body and broken arms
With apology and borrowed sympathy
Like the blue rose, you forget*

*And when you fall, you fall like a blossom in sea spray
And my heart falls when you keep me at bay
And my soul fills with lifeblood as I forever say,
"This rose still burns... for you"*

Afterward Paulo swigged his drink, climbed off his stool and stepped off the platform. Everyone clapped, though Juliet got the feeling that some of them were not quite as genuine as others in their appreciation.

She thought his recitation was really brilliant. The way his voice flowed and the way he acted truly mournful was overwhelming. She forgot all about the experiment and focused on his acting, his energy, and his charisma. It was exactly what she'd come to the city to experience. Professional performances like that couldn't be found in her hometown. Halona was right; it had been worth it.

Paulo sauntered over to their table and took a seat between Fiona and Halona. "Good evening, my beautifuls," he said as he lightly caressed and kissed each of them on the cheek.

"That was a slightly different performance than usual, wasn't it Paulo?" Halona said provokingly. "Normally, you narrate one of your seduction stories like you're Homer recounting *The Odyssey*, don't you?"

"Ah, well," he said, leaning toward her and carefully slipping her arm around his shoulders, like he had to have her arms around him. "I could scarcely do that with you coming tonight. Whenever we meet, I'm always afraid it will be the last time. And now you're trying to pawn me off onto one of your friends. Will we never be together?"

Halona pursed her lips and Juliet couldn't decide if Halona was going to kiss him or kick him in the shin.

Paulo smiled roguishly and continued, "Besides, you haven't said what you thought of the poem. I composed it tonight, just for you. I expect an appraisal."

Halona opened her mouth and let it hang ajar for a few seconds while she looked at the ceiling, trying to figure out her response.

Paulo moved in to kiss her while her attention was diverted, but she put out one finger to stop him at the last second.

"You cast me in an unusual role, since it's not me that rejects you."

"What? You always reject me!"

"No, you continue to reinvent yourself into different versions of the same cheater. If you became a truly decent character, then you'd stop refusing yourself access into my life," she said sternly.

"So, you'll never be mine?"

"If you say so," Halona said deliberately.

"Yet you want me to fool around with your friend?"

Juliet colored uncomfortably.

"I never said I wanted you to fool around with her. I said I wanted you to kiss her. It's an experiment and I need a man for the job who isn't blown off his feet by one tiny kiss. That's you, isn't it? We came all this way."

Paulo turned away from Halona and glanced across the table at Juliet.

She was beet-red and sweating like she'd just run five miles. Why did he have to look at her so appraisingly? It was rude.

"All right," he said, getting up from his chair and rounding the table to Juliet's side. "Let's not do this in the lounge. If the waiters see me kissing a woman for longer than one second, the gossip they'll conjure will ruin my life. Let's go someplace quiet."

Juliet steadied her nerves and took his offered hand. She didn't want to do it one bit, but she wanted to find out the answer to the question Halona had posed. Was she the one who cause the visions or was it Seth and Rylan? After what happened

that afternoon, she was inclined to believe it was Seth and Rylan, but she needed more proof.

Paulo curled her hand around his arm and led her toward the back doors.

"What are *you* doing here?" he asked somberly as soon as they were out of earshot of Fiona and Halona.

"I... uh..." she stammered.

His whole tone and demeanor changed as he continued speaking, "What kind of a joke is this? I know you've always been disappointed that you didn't have the same exciting stories the rest of us have, but this is too much. I'm sorry, but I don't feel enough pity for you to play along."

Juliet was confused. "Play along? I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about. This wasn't even my idea... And why are you talking to me like you know me?"

He rolled his eyes and opened the door to the back corridors. The hallway was lit with flickering fluorescent lights, but Paulo still looked beautiful under them.

Letting go of her, he crossed his arms and said coldly, "A line like that isn't going to work on me."

"Listen," Juliet said, feeling crushed by his insolence. "I don't know how you know me. Have we met before?"

He took a deep breath and said, "I really have nothing against you, nor do I like the way you've been treated in the past. What happened to you was a catastrophe that I mourned. You know that. But I can't put myself on the losing side of this foolishness. The very idea makes my stomach turn. Please don't pursue it."

He moved to leave, but Juliet grabbed his arm and said forcefully, "Do you know me? Am I somehow connected with you? I don't remember anything before I was thirteen. Please tell me if you know something!"

Paulo's jaw tightened. "Don't try to pretend you're innocent. I saw that *thing*. I've seen him all over town. Each time I lay eyes on him, the violence I feel toward him can't even be described, but I can't go after him—he outranks me. It's infuriating!"

Who was Paulo talking about? Juliet tried to connect the pieces together. The only *thing* she could think of was Seth, and the only *thing* Seth had mentioned who didn't want to meet him was the vampire. But Paulo couldn't be the vampire. His flesh wasn't crumbling.

"And you," Paulo went on. "Do you even realize how much blood would be spilled if I committed the abomination of placing one finger on you? I won't play into your sick little game for some demented practical joke that you're twisted enough to find amusement in."

Juliet tried to protest again saying that she had no idea what he was talking about.

"Enough," he said just before he jerked his arm free from Juliet's grasp and opened the door that led back into the lounge. He held the door open for her and she had the courage and grace to step through it without crying.

"Let me explain things to the twins," he whispered as they crossed the room.

Back at their table, Juliet slid into her seat without comment. She felt irrevocably dismayed and downright exhausted. How many more confusing twists would she encounter before she found the truth? She was exhausted from the effort of keeping her head above water.

"How did the kiss go?" Halona asked Paulo when he took her drink and had an unoffered sip.

"We didn't get that far. She fainted in my arms before the fateful moment and I almost had to carry her back here," he said cheerfully, like nothing unpleasant had just happened.

Juliet knew Fiona and Halona were staring at her. They were waiting for her to comment, but she couldn't bear to look at them. She was so embarrassed and confused that she wanted to cry. She kept the tears away by folding her napkin and breathing steadily.

It felt like the horrible deadlock with the twins staring at her would last forever, but Paulo shifted the attention away from her by asking Fiona about her love life. It was a hot topic, and soon the three of them were laughing and talking and Juliet might as well have not been there.

It was then that her eyes wandered to the exit.

Rylan was sitting at the bar. She couldn't have missed his shining hair anywhere. Juliet fumbled in her purse to find money to pay for her untouched drink, placed it on the table, got up and made her way over to the bar. The seat next to Rylan was empty and she hopped up onto it.

Rylan smiled when he saw her. "Hello," he said casually. "Having fun with the whore?"

"Not really," she admitted gravely. "I'm really glad you came."

"Do you want to go? I could take you back to your dorm or we could go to my hotel, or wherever you want."

"Yeah. Thanks. I really don't want to hang out here anymore."

"No problem. Just go tell them you're leaving with me."

Juliet squinted at him. "I don't want to go back there. Couldn't you go tell them for me?"

Rylan shook his head wearily and pulled out his cell phone.

"Are you seriously going to text them instead of simply walking across the room?" she gawked.

“Seriously,” he affirmed. “I told you. Me and that guy don’t mix. I’ll text Fiona. She’ll at least pick up her phone when she’s around that guy.”

As Rylan keyed in his text message, something finally occurred to Juliet. Maybe the guy Paulo mentioned wasn’t Seth. Otherwise, why would Rylan refuse to merely walk to the table to deliver a simple message? Seth had said that he didn’t think Rylan was human... so what was he? Who was Paulo and why did Rylan outrank him?

Chapter Eighteen

Siren's Song

Juliet and Rylan stepped onto the street. Above the city lights, Juliet could see the full moon. That was right. It had been about a month since the Occult's Addict had gone moon-gazing at the campus observatory. Juliet got an idea.

"Hey Rylan, can we go back to the university? Do you think we could go to the observatory again and have a look at the moon?"

"No," Rylan laughed, his tone slightly mocking. "It's probably all locked up and it's way too late to get permission."

"Oh," Juliet mumbled, disappointed.

"Besides, I'm worried about you. It's freezing and you're not properly dressed. What a thin jacket! My car is parked a few blocks away. You'll be an icicle if we don't hurry."

Juliet held onto his arm tightly as they rushed down the street. The shoes she had borrowed from Halona didn't exactly have the best grip and the sidewalks were icy.

"I should buy you a fur coat to keep you warm. You never dress properly," Rylan reproved.

Their footsteps sounded lightly on the pavement and the street lamp above them flickered. The wind curled around Juliet's face and she put her bare hand to her cheek to warm it. It was quiet as they approached the entrance of an alleyway, but in the eerie silence she heard a lilting voice in the alley from behind a dumpster.

"Hello pretty," it said.

Rylan froze. Juliet clutched his arm and tried to make him move along, but he paused at the mouth of the alley. He craned his head to see who had spoken to them.

"Let's go. I'm really cold," Juliet urged.

"No, I want to see who that was," Rylan said as he pried her fingers from his arm. "Just wait here, while I go have a look."

Juliet crossed her arms and tried not to think about the way her frozen earrings kept swinging against her naked neck. She should have brought a scarf.

Rylan walked back to the alley and peered inside. "Huh," he said, "I thought someone was there."

"So there's no one there. Can we just go?"

"One sec," he said as he stepped into the darkness of the alley.

Juliet took a deep breath for patience. What was he doing? Besides it being late, there was also no one else walking on this particular street. Everywhere she looked

there were nothing but closed banks and black-windowed corporate offices. The only bar on the street had probably been Hugo's. Seconds were passing and Rylan still hadn't come back. Juliet started tapping her toe. In two minutes, she was going to whip out her cell phone and call for a taxi.

Suddenly, long arms wound around her from behind and pulled her backwards. She would have slipped, but she was lifted clean off the ground. One large hand gripped her wrists, squashing them together, and their other hand covered her mouth. When she breathed, her nostrils were filled with the most putrid stench she had ever experienced. The same lilting voice whispered, "Hello Pretty," into her ear.

Then the monster began to do the most impossible thing. It began to run, while holding her. Juliet struggled, but the smell was too much for her and she was weak from giving blood that day. She just didn't have the same fight in her she normally had.

Before she knew it, she was thrown inside a garbage bin. Her head struck painfully against the side of the crate as she slid off a slippery black trash bag onto the empty bottom.

"Ouch!" she screamed.

"Shut up!" the monster rasped as it jumped in on top of her. Once again, its hand clamped over her mouth to keep her from calling out.

Shadow covered its face, she could only see the moon hanging over its shoulder. She focused on the white, shining sphere to steady herself because she couldn't move and that disgusting smell was still assaulting her senses. Even her eyes were watering.

"I know you. You're the girl with that siren's scent all over you," the thing said as it bent down and sniffed Juliet's throat. "You've had your blood drained recently. But, your lover was good to you—no bite marks." The thing laughed softly as it licked the side of her neck. "He left enough for me."

Juliet heard its lips smack as it enjoyed the moment before it made good on its threat to bite her. Juliet screamed through her nose, trying to make any noise she could before the monster attacked.

"Juliet!" she heard Rylan shout.

She wasn't sure if he heard her. His voice didn't sound alarmed. She tried screaming again, but the thing muffled her voice by plugging her nose and smothering her.

"Juliet!" Rylan tried again. He seemed to be standing right beside the garbage bin. Juliet suffered a tortured second where she agonized over whether or not he was going to find her.

BANG!

The metal container shuddered. Rylan must have kicked it. Juliet's ears rang painfully at the sound. The thing's fingers loosened enough for Juliet to get breath to try to scream again.

Rylan hefted himself up on the lip of the dumpster to have a look inside and as he did so, his head eclipsed the moon. His white-blond hair lit by the moonlight looked like a halo, and in the shadow of his face shone two sparkling red eyes.

The monster turned and regarded him. "Bloody hell," it whispered. Then it turned to Juliet and shook her. "What the hell is wrong with you? You hang out with sirens during the day and then at night, you're with *him*? Are you insane?"

Rylan grabbed the thing by its dirty collar and dragged it out of the bin with two hands and a heavy struggle.

"Let go!" the thing hollered as it tumbled over the side.

Once it was out, Juliet got to her feet.

"Stay in there," Rylan instructed darkly, as he headed into the darkest part of the alley with the thing in tow.

"I wasn't going to kill her," the thing whined as Rylan forced it along.

"Oh?" Rylan asked, sounding doubtful, but in complete control.

"No way. She just looked so delicious wearing those high heels. You're with her, so you must understand the attraction."

"You're saying the wrong thing," Rylan informed it callously.

"Uh... I mean... I didn't know who you were. I would never have touched a woman who was with you—never."

"Still wrong."

"I screwed up!" the thing finally screamed.

"Fucked up," Rylan corrected coarsely. "My guess is that you still have no idea who you're dealing with and who exactly you have pissed off. If you weren't such a pathetic little gimp, you'd realize that an apology isn't going to do anything. How dare you put your filthy fingers on her! Come here, you little bastard," Rylan said as he jolted the thing around the corner.

"I didn't *know*!" Juliet heard the thing yelp desperately.

Screams and curses echoed down the alley and Juliet was only left to assume that Rylan was beating the living daylights out of the thing. It was a vampire. Juliet was certain of that now. It was exactly what Seth described—loathsome.

She was so relieved Rylan had come to her rescue that she hadn't noticed exactly how badly she had hurt her head. Now that the danger was gone, she gingerly fingered under her hair where a bump was growing. She was also missing a shoe. She guessed she lost it somewhere in the vampire's mad dash. She stood with one

foot on tip-toe in the dumpster waiting for Rylan to return. Shivering, she wished he would come back and take her home.

When he finally reappeared, he ran lightly down the alley with an air of weightlessness that seemed entirely inappropriate considering the circumstances. His hair reflected the moonlight and his eyes still appeared as two pinpricks of red in the dark shadow of the alley. His coat was open and his throat bare.

"Juliet," he called, with genuine concern. "Are you okay? That freak didn't hurt you, did he?"

"He hurt my head," Juliet said, trying to control her disorientation. Things were getting stranger and her head was throbbing. "Why is your coat open, Rylan?" she asked weakly.

He shook his head wearily and smiled broadly. Looking down at his chest, he said, "I was suddenly too hot to leave it done up. Don't fret it. Here, let me help you out."

Rylan put his arms around her and helped her out of the bin.

"Do y-your coat up. You're freezing," she chattered.

"Nah, I feel fine. Let's go find your shoe."

"Yeah. Especially since it's Halona's shoe."

Rylan let her walk a few steps and then he swept her up in his arms. "I can't let you walk like that, now can I? You'll get frostbite on your foot."

They walked like that for a few steps before Juliet asked, "That was a vampire, wasn't it?"

"Seth told you about real vampires, didn't he? That's why you changed your mind about him being one, right?"

"Yeah," she agreed quietly.

"Did he tell you what I am?" he asked calmly, his voice sounding lower than usual.

"No. I don't think he knows."

"I'm sure he does."

After several seconds, Juliet said, "Your eyes glow red, Rylan. Because of the deal you made with that guy in the afterlife? What did it do to you? Are you human, like me?"

"Don't worry about it," he said, kissing the side of her head. "I'm human."

"Then why are your eyes red? It's unnatural."

Rylan didn't answer her, but instead, slid her out of his arms and set her one foot on the ground beside her fallen shoe. She balanced by holding onto his shoulder while he bent down and helped her slide her foot into the delicate high heel.

"Let's go back to your place," he said evenly.

"What about you? Don't you need to clean up? I mean, shouldn't we go to your hotel?"

"I don't need anything special to clean up. I don't need anything except you," he said gently as he took her hand and led her back down the street toward his car. His coat flapped open in the wind and snowflakes fell against his white shirt. His shirt was slick with sweat and molded to his body perfectly. It would have been a beautiful sight, except the whiteness and his contoured torso reminded her of something, of someone.

As they drove, Juliet turned the heat up full blast. She put her ice-cold fingers over the heater. Rylan didn't seem to notice the cold. He was drumming his fingers against the steering wheel to the melody of nothing. The radio wasn't even playing.

"I've never seen you like this before," Juliet said, trying to sound dreamy, like she liked him, like she liked the moment.

"Well, you're going to think I'm a sadist, but killing that vamp was a really good time," he said, his white teeth flashing.

Juliet nearly choked. She had thought that he merely beat it up. She had no idea that he'd murdered it. "How could you do that?" she asked brokenly.

"Easily," he laughed. "You shouldn't feel sorry for a disgusting creature like that. No matter what he said, he was going to kill you. I mean, I knew he was lurking around, but I never imagined he would be so stupid as to come after *you*. Besides, the death of a cursed creature like that is so cleansing. I've done the world a favor."

Juliet swallowed her fear and asked the question that was on her mind. "How did you do it?"

"Vamps are practically falling apart as it is. It's not hard for a mere human like me to take one out. I took off my coat. He thought I couldn't control him when I let him go. I didn't even get my shirt sleeves rolled up before he charged me. So, I slammed the heel of my hand through his ribs and tore out his heart. Well, it's not quite that simple, but you know, the less gory version for you."

"Thanks," she said, holding her stomach. "Then why aren't you covered in blood?"

"It's not like it sprayed," Rylan laughed. Then he went on to explain, "Their blood doesn't pulse through their bodies like ours. It's old blood, brown and half mucus. I took his heart and crammed it through a manhole. I can still feel the slime of his blood in the cracks of my hands. I'm gonna have to clean off my steering wheel and have my coat dry cleaned and probably fifteen other things because of what I've done tonight, but what the hell?"

Juliet forced herself to calm down. Seth said that he would have killed the vampire if he'd encountered it, and Seth made it sound like he would have done something more disgusting, like he would have eaten it.

"You never thought Seth was a vampire, did you?" she asked.

Rylan hesitated for a moment before he answered. A little of the excitement had come out of his voice. "No, I didn't."

"Well, then why were you investigating him?" she asked, just as Rylan pulled into the visitor parking outside her dormitory.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Doesn't really matter now, but I was hoping he'd lead me to you."

He got out of the car to open Juliet's door for her. She got to it before he did and stood outside the car, taking an inventory of her borrowed dress in the blaring white lights of the parking lot. It needed cleaning, too.

Rylan went to the community bathroom to wash the remnants of blood smeared all the way up to his elbow. When Juliet saw the vampire's blood, she understood why Rylan had nothing to fear, walking around in public with splatters of brown up his arm. It looked like mud or paint, and the smell was rancid, not like fresh blood.

When Juliet stepped into her room, she was alone, if only for the moment. She shook off Halona's heels and as she bent to pick one up, her head swam. She realized she'd have to check the damage to Halona's finery the next day, because that night she was going to be lucky to get herself out of her dress without Rylan's help. Determined to do it herself, she put her fingers to the zipper. She got it down as far as her shoulder blades before it was out of her reach. Taking a deep breath, she reasoned that she should just wait for Rylan to get back. He would take perfect care of her. Hadn't he proved it? Juliet's face twisted in discomfort that had nothing to do with her pounding head.

Why couldn't she let herself fall in love with Rylan? But there was something inside her that revolted at the concept. She couldn't do it. She squirmed and bent herself in half until she got the zipper down. Relieved, she tossed the dress aside. Next, she removed her pantyhose that was hopelessly run up one leg and threw them into the wastebasket.

She needed sweats. She needed warm, comfortable, unglamorous sweatpants. In her drawer, there were still a few items from before her wardrobe purge and she was glad of it. She put on neon blue track pants, a plain gray long-sleeved shirt, a

short-sleeved t-shirt over top that had a gigantic blue star in sequins across the chest and green and blue striped slippers.

Then she hopped into bed, just as Rylan's knock came.

"Hi," he said pleasantly, as he entered the room and kicked the door shut behind him. "I think I came up with a plan for getting rid of your visions when we kiss," he said as he bolted the door.

Juliet pulled the covers over herself. "What?"

"I think we should have sex," he said, pulling a condom out of his pants' pocket.

Juliet swallowed her shock and motioned for him to come to the bed. "Give me your hand," she ordered. He did as he was told and she put his fingers to the swelling bump on the side of her head. "I'm not really in the mood, but besides that, I don't want to. I've never had... you know... sex before and I want it to be really special."

"I just saved you from a vampire. What could make it more special than that?" he reasoned, unreasonably.

"Well, I could be healthy and unhurt," she offered.

"I'll get you some Tylenol. No big deal."

"No," Juliet said interrupting him. "I have only known you for a month. Don't be so impatient."

"I'm not impatient," he denied.

"Then, don't push this. I need to learn so much more about you before I know if our relationship can be like that." Juliet took a sudden leap she hadn't planned to take and said truthfully, "And I'm deeply sorry, but I need to sort out my feelings for Seth."

Rylan's face went from charismatic with a dash of recklessness to furious and nothing but reckless in less than a second. "I thought that was over."

"You're great, Rylan. Everything you have done and said has been pretty much perfect since that night I brought you home. It's true, you're wonderful. You saved me from real danger tonight. You're hot and you look amazing with your shirt undone a bit. There's something about you that's fascinating and mysterious and I can hardly take my eyes off you. So, there's not a thing wrong with you—you're perfect. I'm just not sure that we're right for each other. And I don't want to hurt you."

"Are you saying you want to break up?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"No. What I'm saying is that, I'm fragile—you knew I was fragile—and I want to go very, very, very, very slowly. I don't want to break up. I want us to spend more time together, but I'm not ready yet, no matter what fantastic thing happened tonight."

Juliet put her arms around him and brought him into an embrace. She wanted to reassure him and let him know that he could still have her heart, but he had to wait until she was comfortable. His arms tightened around her, and they held each other. His body was chilled and so she grabbed one of her blankets and pulled it over his shoulders. When she leaned forward to see if the blanket covered his whole back, she saw something dark and metal sticking out of the back of his pants.

"What's that?" she asked, reaching for it.

"Nothing!" Rylan refuted and jumped to his feet.

"No, really," Juliet said, getting out of bed and chasing him. "It looked like you had a gun in your pants."

"It's my wallet," he retorted.

Juliet gawked. "You carry your wallet in the waistband of your briefs? Yuh-huh. Besides, I saw the handle. Why do you have a gun? That's really freaky. Why would you bring a gun with you to my dorm room? During a date? At the same time you're asking me for sex? Oh... Rylan..." she moaned, her brain turning in circles she had never imagined her brain could turn in. "Were you going to rape me?" she whispered, her hand on her chest.

"No!" Rylan said, pulling the gun from his pants and flipping it open to show the empty chambers to her. "It's not loaded or anything. I just have it in case of an emergency."

"What kind of emergency?" she wailed. "Get out!"

"Wait! You don't understand."

"Get out NOW! I'll call security," she said, picking up her phone.

He snatched it out of her hand. "I can't go until you listen to me. I have it for a reason, but it's not that bad of a reason. This is just a game."

"Give me BACK my PHONE!" she shouted, reaching for it.

"It's just a game we play. You run and I try to catch you."

"It's a game? What the bloody hell are you talking about? Get OUT!"

Rylan didn't respond, instead he moved from his position and turned to peer out the window. Juliet stopped, too. She heard music. Not ordinary music. She heard something special, like angels singing. She and Rylan chased to the window and flung it open together.

Standing on the snow-covered lawn, was Seth. He was wearing a black trench coat and a dark red scarf. There he was, singing in public. Other dormitory windows were sliding open, but no matter how much noise there was from shocked students, Seth's voice floated above them.

There were so many roads I had to travel

*So many demons I had to fight
To find my way back to your arms
And the destiny we carve together*

I sing for you

Juliet turned without saying a word and dashed out of the room and down the hall to the staircase. She jumped down the steps, two and three at a time. It must have been a moment before Rylan realized what was happening, because Juliet had already made it down two flights before she heard him barreling after her at the top of the stairs.

"Don't go out there!" he yelled down to her.

*And as the day turns into night
What we've done turns my blood
But I want to be with you
No matter how many times my heart stops*

I sing for you

Juliet didn't stop. The only thing she needed to know was that Seth was there. He had come and there was no way his song wasn't for her. She had to get to him. She had to get away from Rylan and his gun. Security might not be helpful, the police would take too long, but Seth, she could trust him completely. She had been wrong all along. Seth was the one who she was safe with, not Rylan. Seth would protect her.

She didn't wait to catch her breath and pushed herself through the double doors into the lobby.

*So welcome into my arms
I'll accept the pain of loving you
If you'll accept the way I breathe
And the way I die for you*

I sing for you

Out the front doors and into the snow, she ran. Rylan was right behind her and caught her elbow at the exact moment the first snowflake fell on her flushed cheek.

"Seth!" she hollered.

Seth spotted her and sprinted toward her.

Rylan pulled out his gun and put it to Juliet's temple. He covered her mouth with his free hand and yelled, "Stay away from us!"

Seth obeyed and stopped dead in his tracks.

Juliet struggled hard. She bit Rylan's fingers and when he pulled away in pain she cried out, "It's not loaded. Help me!"

Seth needed no further encouragement and rushed to them. Grabbing Rylan's free hand, he twisted it painfully and wrenched it away from Juliet. She broke away from the two of them and stood a safe distance behind Seth.

"Still human, eh?" Seth said coldly as Rylan's serious expression changed to one of someone suffering an unfamiliar sting.

"Still trying to be me?" he retorted mockingly.

"We'll see about that," Seth said biting, winding up and striking him across the cheek.

Rylan fell to the snow.

Seth turned on his heel and grabbed Juliet's hand.

As Seth approached Juliet, the fright in her eyes was something he never thought he would see in her, the one he had been waiting for. He hadn't expected her to be afraid, or fragile, or anything like a normal girl. Her hair wasn't red or curly, but it didn't matter what she looked like anymore. It didn't matter to him. Drinking her blood had been the final straw. He was past caring if he broke the rules or not. That was why he came to sing at her dormitory. It was strictly against the rules designed to protect the sirens and already there were swarms of girls spilling from the windows and doors.

He asked Juliet gently, "Did he do anything to you?"

"No," Juliet said, looking over his shoulder to see Rylan turn over in the snow.

Seth sighed in relief, but they were running out of time. Rylan was recovering quickly and Seth didn't want to fight him again. Fighting was meaningless, but he would have to if he didn't get a move on. They were almost to the car. He'd have to do it now.

Seth cradled Juliet's face in his hands and looked into her green eyes. They were shining like two emerald fireflies floating in the night. Like Rylan's mysterious red eyes, Juliet's were green, lit from within by the power of her soul. She was close to remembering everything—he could feel it. She was becoming more like Rylan every second and as ironic as it was, Seth had to make her completely like him.

"The mask has to come off. Forgive me," he begged breathlessly, right before he sunk his teeth into the side of her throat.

Juliet's eyes opened wide like she had just been jolted with electricity. Thoughts were surging through her head in wild spasms. What was Seth doing? Hadn't he drank her blood that afternoon? It hurt. It hurt. It HURT! IT HURT! She wanted to scream, but her voice was lost. Nevertheless, in her ears, the scream rang anyway. Someone was screaming for her. Who was it? And why was this happening to her? Her eyes watered badly and tears spilled over her cheeks in rivers.

"Seth," she gurgled, the sound barely making its way through her lips.

He clenched down harder and she felt her veins pulse to the point of bursting.

Her heartbeat seemed to slow and she wondered for a second if this was how she would die, at the blood lust of a siren. But then it felt like her heart resonated his unspoken passion. It quickened, gaining pace and energy.

And then, just like every time that Seth kissed her, she separated from herself and a part of her fell away. The world wasn't turning black, as it had so many other times, but a shining, blinding white. She was disappearing with it, wherever it went. She would escape the moment and discover what the vision held in store for her.

Juliet fell limp in Seth's arms. He held her briefly as he shuffled her toward his car and rested her gently in the back seat. He stood up and involuntarily flinched.

BANG!

A piece of Seth's hair went flying.

Rylan had shot at him, but somehow Seth had dodged it.

Seth didn't miss a beat as he leaped into the driver's seat. He didn't look to see the expression on Rylan's face, or give him a chance to re-aim. He just got in the car and started the engine.

As he screeched out of the parking lot, he saw Rylan make for his own car. In seconds, this was going to turn into a strenuous car chase.

Slamming the stick into third gear, Seth looked in the rear view mirror at Juliet's limp body. "Mental note: I can dodge bullets," he laughed, before he said viciously, "Now, let's see if we can lose that bastard husband of yours."

Chapter Nineteen

Virgo

It was only a memory, but it grew. One memory became many. It was only a collection of moments that had already happened. It was a set of memories that began with the sun warming her back as she rested on a plush settee on the top terrace of her turreted tower. Moving herself into a sitting position, she stretched her arms over her head and took the deep breath of a girl who always slept like an angel. Her eyes took in the landscape surrounding her—so everyday to her, yet so magnificent.

She sat at the top of her very own palace, a detachment of the main building, but hers nonetheless. Much of the tower was skeletal, in that walls were not needed. White stone columns held floor after floor aloft to give her the grandest view of the landscape. Height was what she desired, not walls. She needed neither privacy nor warmth, though the lowest levels of the tower provided comforts such as baths, beds, shaded places and pleasures to welcome her mother and siblings who visited her often.

It was her own palace, but she was not alone there. She had servants who surrounded her and cared for her every whim.

Yet, with her every desire delicately answered, there was something missing from her perfection.

She had no lover.

The concept failed to trouble her. Time meant nothing. She could wait for perfection. She could wait for the god she loved to love her in return. When she reflected on his golden boy charm she felt weak, like a mortal woman, who could fall in love in a way a goddess shouldn't be able to. But there was no rush.

Standing on the tower, her body felt hot and as she stared out at the resplendent view that was Olympus. There was a hunt of some kind going on in the mountains. An unwanted ancient creature had somehow ferreted onto holy ground, so everyone rushed to the chase. Except her. She was not interested in killing. At the moment, all she wanted was a swim. Her bathtub would have sufficed, but the long pool that lay between her tower and the great temple of Zeus was completely empty.

Her expression brightened as she considered having the pool entirely to herself. The prospect pleased her, so she rose and stepped off the edge of the sixth floor as a human might jump the last steps of a staircase. She landed lightly on the grass and skipped across the footbridge to the pool.

Dressed in casual silks, she slipped into the water fully dressed. It wasn't as though modesty was a particular virtue of her kind, so her vulnerable state didn't even occur to her. Instead, she thought of the perfectly cool water and the way her skirts and top billowed around her body like mermaid fins. She lay back in the water and watched the white clouds turn gold in the afternoon sun.

She believed she was alone. She believed it did not matter if anyone should walk by. She was home, where she was free to be naked or clothed, where she was free to grow up as quickly or as slowly as she wished. She believed that her mother and father would protect her if anything should seek to harm her, but what could harm her? She was a goddess.

But she did not think about these things. She never thought about them. They were there, but they were as obvious as the ground beneath her feet and she questioned them less.

In that moment of happy repose, a voice sounded from behind one of the stone pillars. "You have a beautiful body," he said languidly. His voice was low and occasionally made a clicking noise like he moved his tongue too much or smacked his lips when he spoke.

The girl stood and the water fell away from her form. She knew her clothes offered little modesty when they were soaking wet and clinging, so she covered her chest with her arms. No one she knew on the mountain would speak to her like that. Who was it?

He stood, leaning against the pillar. He was dressed in hunting apparel like he was someone who had strayed away from the hunt. He wore a black and silver breastplate and guards on his forearms and shins. But his clothes were ordinary, for her. It was his face and his aura that startled her. His hair was white and weaved into a long single braid that hung to his chest. His eyes were scarlet and sharp as arrows as he appraised her body to the smallest detail.

"I don't know you," she said stiffly.

"I don't know you either," he said, as he stripped his sword and placed it calmly at the edge of the water.

As a goddess, she knew no fear. She was merely curious as he approached her, entering the water without taking off one piece of armor.

He stood in front of her, traveling the depths of her eyes with his, and reaching a conclusion she could only guess at. "Is this how you greet visitors to Mount Olympus? You should do something to let me know you wish me no harm."

She turned out her right hand, all the while keeping her left arm to her bosom. She didn't understand what he meant about her harming him. Even without a formal

introduction, he was clearly a god. In her mind, it was impossible for them to hurt each other.

He took her hand gently and bent to kiss it. At least, that was what she expected him to do. Instead, he licked her skin from knuckles to wrist.

She jerked her hand back. "You have no right to touch me like that," she said fiercely as she took a step back in the water.

"Of course I do," he said, looking through her, like she was something trivial that amused him temporarily. "I can touch you any way I please. Is that your home?" he asked, pointing his chin toward her tower.

"Yes," she said, still puzzled.

"Take me there. I'd like to see where you live. If I like your palace, maybe I'll take you to see mine."

She had never been to any place other than these buildings, this land, these hills. She had no idea where it was he was talking about. There was no other place, except Gaia, and though she had never been there, she had seen visions of it. She did not want to go there. It was dull and ugly.

"No," she said serenely.

He looked at her blankly, like he was intrigued by her answer rather than defeated. "Are you what I think you are? I've never seen anything like you before. How clean," he said stepping toward her again and brushing the side of her cheek with the back of his fingers. "I want you."

"I want to dry off," she said simply as she stepped away from him and pointed herself towards her tower.

"Don't leave," he said, grabbing her clothes instead of her body.

He held tightly, and whirled her around back to him, but she lost her balance and fell into the water. There was a tear—her neckline. A piece of coral colored silk hung from his unmoving fingers as she recovered herself enough to hold her head above the water.

"Hades! What are you doing?" someone shouted from the top of the north stairs.

The young goddess smiled in thankfulness. It was Apollo, her half-brother. His thick, curling hair surrounded his perfect brown face, but his normally friendly eyes narrowed angrily. He rushed down the steps and removed his vermilion cloak. He splashed into the water unconcernedly, approaching the two figures. As he handed his cloak to his sister, he gave her a small smile, saying quietly, "You are more precious than the rest of us. Cover yourself."

She took his cloak and did as he commanded.

“Go,” he said, and again she did as she was bid. She trusted Apollo implicitly, possibly because she saw more of him than her father, or possibly because he cared more for her than her father.

She went back to her tower without turning around to see what transpired between Apollo and Hades. She had never heard that name before, Hades.

She went into her home and prepared herself for her mother’s evening visit. Once she was dry, she pinned up her shining scarlet curls with emerald clips, and covered her body in soft green satin. She opened the doors to her palace and stepped onto the small terrace to wait for her mother’s arrival. The sun had set and the moonlight shone down on the rippling pool. There, in the sparkle of reflection, stood the god she had met, Hades. His eyes met hers unwaveringly. He had to be thinking about her, but what exactly he thought was more of a mystery than it should have been. She did not feel uncomfortable as she waited and allowed his gaze, but rather suspicious that there was more to life here than she understood. Her ignorance made her more uncomfortable than his lustful stare.

“Who is he?” she asked her mother when she arrived and they had closed the doors behind them.

“Hades,” Demeter said grimly as she sat down. “The monster that entered our kingdom was thought to be from his realm, but after the thing was caught, it was clear that this was not so. He is innocent as always. Perfect gods never lapse.”

“Is he a good god then?”

“He has been with Zeus since the beginning. Long ago, when Zeus defeated the titans, Hades was with him, as well as Poseidon. Zeus rules the Heavens, Poseidon the Sea, and Hades the Underworld. He is perfect in his position—flawless beyond flawless. But there is something unnerving about him, isn’t there? Did you feel it? A coldness that other gods don’t have?”

“No. Though he did not seem as warm as Apollo.”

“No one is as warm as Apollo,” she laughed in a motherly tone. “You compare The Sun God to The God of the Underworld?”

“No one is as bright as Apollo?”

“No one,” she affirmed. “It’s funny you should mention him. Tonight, The God of the Underworld asked Zeus if he could have you for his wife.”

“What did he say?”

“He deferred to me and I refused for you. He is fine enough in his place, but I cannot give him my baby daughter. You are too young to be his wife and he is too dark to be your husband. You would not be happy in the Underworld. There is no light and no life. His home is filled with death and the sorrow of endings and partings. Your heart would break if you were forced to live there. I cannot send you

to a place that would hurt you so. You need sunlight and a full life of love and passion. I fear you would find none of those things with him. I could not consent. Never fear though, Hades does not have a temper even if he does live on the very edge of Hell. I'm sure he won't seek vengeance and he'll soon school himself to forget about you."

"Do you really think so?" she asked cautiously.

"Of course. Demeter has decreed it," her mother said.

The young goddess nodded because she felt she was expected to show some gratitude, but she did not understand what she ought to be grateful for. From what she'd seen, she did not know whether this god, Hades, would make a good husband or not. She did not feel one way or the other about him.

The next day, she sat on the sixth floor of her tower with two servants, two nymphs called Raidne and Teles. She lay on the settee while they combed and braided tiny braids into her hair.

Raidne was like the spirit of a birch tree as her hair fell in blonde and black tresses. Her eyes were the color of her skin. Teles was like Raidne, but like a Mountain Ash. She had brown and blonde hair, but her eyes were ebony black. The two of them were patient and willing servants.

"What are you going to do today, Lady Persephone?" Raidne asked her mistress in soft tones.

Persephone pointed to a hill in the distance. "I want to go there to pick flowers. My tower has been bare of blossoms for days now because of all the hunting. The mountains haven't been safe, but they've let up now, so we should go."

"Aren't you afraid of running into some horrible beast?" Teles asked shyly wrapping herself in her arms and shivering slightly.

"No," she answered. "If we did come across something frightening, wouldn't the two of you help me escape?"

"Of course," Raidne said boldly. "There's nothing to worry you if we come along. You'll be perfectly safe. Besides," she continued, picking a comb through Persephone's hair, "nothing could ever hurt you. You're a goddess."

"Of course," Persephone echoed blandly. She had never been hurt in her life.

"Of course," Teles said cheerfully, adding to it, so that the two of them giggled playfully at the joke.

Persephone rose and went down to the fifth floor to find clothes for the day. Teles and Raidne showed her different silks while she yawned and daydreamed, looking out the window.

She wondered if she would see Apollo that day. He was usually away, but whenever he came home he had the most wonderful stories to share about his adventures. Everyone said he was the most beautiful god on Olympus. His golden light brought worshipers from Gaia, to Olympus, to the ends of the earth. In contrast, Hades was white, yet even in the whiteness, he was dark. He seemed different, like his power came from a different source than that of Apollo and the other gods. It perplexed her.

Idly, she wondered if she would ever see Hades again. He had gone away and she had not seen him since that moment their eyes met across the pool. Where had he fled to? Had he really given up on her?

Persephone chose a white silk gown and white slippers that laced up her shins. The dress fastened over one shoulder while the other shoulder remained bare. She used a pair of sapphire clips to hold the fabric in place; one on the shoulder and one on her back to give the dress some shape by pulling the silk tight around her waist. Then the nymphs finished her hair and they left the tower together.

On the hillside, the three of them picked great handfuls of blossoms and laughed happily at the brightness of the day, at the fun of being free and the melody of birds that rang from the trees.

"If you had a husband, lady, what kind would you like?" Raidne asked Persephone as she handed the goddess a peach.

Persephone sat on the soft blades of grass and spun the peach around in her hand until it slipped from her fingers and rolled away. "Well," she said, thinking of these things for the first time. "I realize my choices are few. There aren't many gods who could be my husband."

"Would you like Apollo?"

"Perhaps in time. As for human men, I don't really care for them, but one might do for a time if I should get lonely. If that were the case, then the choices are almost endless." She paused to consider. "I'd like dark hair, almost black. Maybe brown eyes to match. Beyond that, I really don't know what I want. Perhaps I'd like kindness, because I don't like anger."

"None of them are the same, and all of them are a bit like animals," said the dark-eyed nymph.

Persephone picked a large blue flower with a head so large she needed two hands to hold it properly. "I don't know much. It feels like I've lived in this quiet world forever and the sun... how I adore the sun! I feel like it doesn't matter if I have lovers

or husbands or children or anything as long as I have that sun shining down on me. But, is there any place where it doesn't shine?"

She breathed blissfully and lowered herself onto her back. The earth beneath her felt perfect. She closed her eyes and focused on it, but then she started to feel something strange in the ground—a rumble. It started out as little more than a quiver, but soon the dirt was jolting in heavy thrusts. Persephone sat up and tried to rise to her feet, but she was thrown onto her knees.

"What's going on?" she shrieked, completely unprepared for anything so unexpected. Separate from the quaking hillside, her whole body trembled in fear.

The nymphs didn't answer her but clung to trees and screamed louder than she did.

Then the ground before her began to split and the earth ripped open spewing red volcanic spray. The flaming liquid rolled down the hill as the hole grew and gaped. She was going to fall in if she didn't move. Paralyzed by fear, she could hardly move an inch, but she forced herself backward. Then, just as suddenly as it started, the earth stopped shaking and Persephone put a hand to her breast.

It was over.

Seconds passed and a gash in the earth remained large and flowing with lava, like a bloody wound in a man's chest. The nymphs ran toward Persephone and threw their arms around her seeking comfort from her even though they were her servants. She put one arm over each of their shoulders to show that she realized they were upset, but said nothing. She did not know how to respond. They said they would help her run away if something terrifying happened, but instead they had protected themselves without worry for her.

Beneath their feet, the ground began to rumble again, but this time it was pulsing and rhythmic, like the pounding of horses' hooves. The pounding became louder and louder until the gleaming pool of molten earth suddenly erupted. Shattered rocks and lava flew in all directions, and up out of the earth burst two massive horses pulling a chariot.

There in the rain of flames and rocks, stood Hades. His face and arms were streaked with ash and sweat. His white hair hung free below his armored shoulders. On his face was the expression of a man who utterly refused to be denied. In the chaos of stamping horses and shrieking nymphs, he saw nothing but Persephone.

She stared back at him in amazement. What had he gone through to break through to Olympus that way? She marveled at him as she clung to Raidne and Teles.

His eyes were a curious mixture of heartlessness and determination as he stared at her. "Come with me," he commanded, proffering his soot-stained hand.

"No," she whispered, a tremble rocking her body.

His eyes did not move from his goal as he tied the reins around the corner of the chariot, and stepped down. Reaching into the chariot, he produced a long riding whip and approached the three women.

"Nymphs, get away from her now," he said chillingly.

There was no need for further threatening. Hades, merely standing there with a whip was enough to send the two fleeing the scene like leaves blown in an autumn wind.

Persephone calmed her nerves and sat still. "What are you doing?" she asked. "My mother told me she declined your request."

"I don't care what Demeter declined. Everything on her tongue tells of her contempt for my existence and her ignorance of what I stand for. In protecting you, the goddess of fertility, her understanding of my purpose is left so carefully blank. Either she doesn't understand our joint function, or she intentionally ignores the necessary balance of the universe for her own selfish purposes. You are a symbol of birth, and yet you have been kept away from the bed chambers where you would learn your purpose. Demeter commands your realm in your stead in order to keep you a virgin. She is determined to stop you from learning of me and my ways. No more! They will hide you from me no longer. We were meant to be together as lovers, and you will learn what death is." He bent and offered her his hand again. "Take my hand or I will drag you into Hell by your hair."

Persephone shivered. She couldn't do it.

When she didn't obey, he did as he threatened and took her ringlets in his stained fingers and jerked her to her feet. She cried out. She had never felt pain before. He looked in her distorted face and slipped his arms around her, so he carried her with her knees over one arm and her back in the other.

"I'm such a beggar," he said sardonically. "I can't even carry through on my promise to force you cruelly. Understand that if you continue to disobey me, I will not stay a beggar."

He dropped her into the chariot and taking up the reins, lashed the horses and drove them back down into the earth. Persephone was jostled back and forth in the chariot. Her hair and clothes were soiled in the ash and heat as they journeyed back down through the rock and fire that had been so inconspicuous under the carpet of Mount Olympus a moment ago.

In his getaway, Seth could only spare a glance in his rearview mirror to make sure Juliet was okay. Rylan was directly on his tail, striking the back of Seth's car with horrific grinding noises at every opportunity. Seth weaved in and out of traffic at break-neck speeds trying to lose Rylan in his BMW. Seth thought a guy like Rylan would treasure the front end of an expensive car like that. It clearly meant nothing compared to the woman Seth was stealing from him.

Seth changed lanes and took a quick right.

Eventually, the long tunnel ended and Persephone and Hades came to a great cavern. The horses landed on a small outlet beside the underground river Styx. Persephone looked around, but she couldn't see much. It was dark, and she could sense strange animals clinging to the rocks of the ceiling. Their screeching sounded in her ears and she felt afraid.

Hades stepped down from the chariot and without saying a word hauled her out by her wrist. Now she looked like him, smeared in ash and sweat, her curls unwinding, and her throat and nasal cavities burnt dry.

A boat was waiting in the black water with a strange, huddled figure piloting it. Hades made no introduction but threw her on the floor of the boat face down and took a seat at the stern. It was a large curling seat with comfortable cushions large enough to seat the two of them. The cloaked creature pushed away from the riverbank and they began floating downstream. The horses huffed and snorted, but Hades didn't even look back at them.

"Do you want to sit beside me, wife?" Hades asked as he looked down at her.

After their feverish plunge into the earth, the moist cavern was cool and refreshing. She was unable to oppose him before, but now, she felt she had the power. After all, her mother had rejected his proposal. "A husband of mine would never treat me as you have done," she said.

"Oh? If you feel I have mistreated you, then you have Demeter to thank for that. I tried to do things her way and was thwarted. Now we do things my way. I'll repeat myself. Do you want to sit beside me, wife?"

"I'm not your wife," she whispered.

He narrowed his eyes curiously. "Painful. You are painful. Get up. Take your clothes off. I want to see what you look like without that seductive silk." He looked at her expectantly. "Undress."

"No," she cried.

"Charon won't look at you. He knows who his master is... unlike you." Then he hesitated a moment, before he said, "Now that I think of it, you haven't paid him."

"What?" Persephone gasped. She didn't know what he meant. Why would she have to pay for anything? She wasn't a mortal making a deal with a god.

"You need to give him a coin for the journey," Hades persisted, propping one of his legs up on the upholstery. "Give him that sapphire clip on your shoulder. Then he'll get his tax, I'll get my view, and you won't get thrown head-first into the river Styx."

She reached behind her and removed her back clip and slid it into Charon's outstretched hand without turning to look at him. Her dress billowed and lost its shape, but stayed on.

Hades shook his head darkly. "Your romantic appetite leaves something to be desired. You won't even let me make our marriage even slightly enjoyable for you, will you? The story would be told best if you could say, 'He was so hungry for me he couldn't even wait until we reached his bedchamber, he ravished me in the boat.'"

Persephone felt her stomach roll. "That isn't a story I would tell."

"Considering your frame of mind, your story will be much less alluring for the audience," he said insolently.

The boat rocked on, steering its way through the ripples of water. Occasional lights traveled along the shore. Not fireflies, or flames, or stars, not even the reflection of tiny shimmering rocks. Instead, the way was lit by dead souls, lost and wandering. And the goddess, Persephone, was strangely worse off than the dead, in the boat of Charon with the Lord of the Underworld dying of lust.

There were two entrances to Hades' buried castle in the Underworld. One opened to the river Styx and the other opened to the road that led all the way to Mount Olympus. A human soul would always arrive by the riverboat, past the three-headed dog, Cerberus, and into the great hall. Persephone had entered the Underworld the way dead souls do.

The great hall was a circular room with vaulted ceilings and many, many doors lining the walls. From the oversized throne, souls were judged. The doors lining the walls did not lead further into the palace. Each door led to eternal consequences. Some souls went through a door where they would find relaxation after a hard life, some would review their life, some suffer, some exalt.

As Hades and Persephone approached the throne, Hades sat her down on it. The back of her head flattened the plush black velvet with a thud.

"Unlike your position on Olympus, you will have to work here. You'll find it exhilarating, I'm sure," Hades said lazily. "I have a gift for you. It's a crown for you to wear as you sit on your throne." He put out his hand and immediately something circular shimmered into position. She had never seen a god conjure something before and she looked at him, stunned.

The crown was a circlet that was very strange to her. On Olympus, her crown had been laurel leaves of carved gold. What Hades showed her was a crown made of black feathers.

Hades set it on her head with reverence and took her hand. Lifting her from the throne, he said, "For us, there is only one way out of this room." He took her to the middle of the circle and opened a trap door in the floor. A winding staircase led downward.

At the bottom of the stairs was a parlor lit by a soft blue light that reflected on the ceiling by intermittent pools of water.

"This is where I greet any god who comes to visit. They don't come often, but a good show is put on for them when they do come. Most everything in this room will burn without diminishing: the chairs, the sculptures, the steel plants, the walls. Some of them like to feel like they're visiting Hell, so I put on a show for them. The rest of the rooms aren't like this."

The next room was almost completely taken over by an enormous bath. It had bridges across the water and pedestals with statues of winged gargoyles. Hades led her straight across to the next room.

It was a library, but it was more than three times the size of hers at home. There were more metal plants and tiny trees, but these ones had real fruit dangling from them. Beside them were basins on pedestals that resembled her birdbaths, but were filled with a dark, sticky liquid.

"It's chocolate. Have you ever tasted it?" Hades asked.

"No."

"You'll love it. Dead humans bring the best recipes with them. No ambrosia down here."

Persephone was beginning to be mildly disturbed by his palace. It was like hers, so exactly like hers that she wondered if he made it that way especially for her. She was also worried about what was coming next. She was eyeing the two doors in front of her.

"You know what's behind that door, don't you?" he whispered inching up behind her and stroking the side of her arm. "They're both bedrooms. That one is for whores and that one is for wives. You choose."

"I don't want to see either one."

“But I want to see you. I want to see all of you.” His lips curled and Persephone knew it was the end.

Seth jerked his head to see what was going on in the backseat. Juliet was convulsing, shaking and twitching so violently that she had fallen half-way onto the floor.

“Hang in there,” he shouted, completely helpless to do more than place his hand on her shoulder for a moment before he needed it back on the gear shift. “Damn it,” he cursed, turning the wrong way down a one-way road packed with traffic. He needed to shake Rylan. His car wasn’t as fast and he needed to take the chance. But Rylan had no fear and his blue-white headlights followed Seth down the one-way street like he would pursue Seth to hell if he had to.

Persephone numbly felt the cold silk on her naked back. She heard the faint sound of crunching in the background. She kept her eyes shut tight and tried not to think of anything. She didn’t know if she had been slammed through the door intended for whores or the bedroom intended for wives. She only knew that her back had broken through one of them and she had been sprawled against cold sheets with the coldest god of all on top of her.

Grabbing a sheet that had been kicked aside, she covered herself, but felt no warmth.

She had tried to fight, but the more she fought, the more pleasure he found in it. He had loved every second she squirmed, scratched, kicked and shrieked. Now she lay exhausted and broken as her pearl-like tears streaked down her temples and welled in her ears.

“Open your mouth,” he said, almost sounding kind. “I don’t mean to be cruel to you, not after that. I just needed to make it clear to you that this is how we were meant to be together. Open your mouth,” he said again and Persephone, tired and sick at heart, did as she was told.

He had been peeling a pomegranate and inside her mouth he slid six kernels. She bit down on them and the juice flooded her mouth. Hades bent, sealing her lips with a kiss and, though she was unaware of it, that was their wedding.

Chapter Twenty

Burnt Offerings Become Ashes

The next day, Hades gave Persephone a dress to wear. He said he was taking her back to Olympus to announce their wedding, and she obviously couldn't wear the dress that had been burnt down to mere rags after their adventure. The new one was a scarlet dress with a boat neckline that fastened over the shoulders with ruby clips. The dress had two long slits up both sides and intricate lattice work down to her knee. "The color of the dawn," he had said, but to her it was the color of sunset.

Her life was over.

She knew it was over when he led her to the bath. The water was hot as she stepped in. Hades disrobed and got in with her. Both of them had smudges of soot all over them and Hades splashed his face energetically while Persephone shied away from him. She watched him, fearing what he had planned for their bath together. Instead of bothering her, he conjured a bottle of soap out of thin air and made it magically pour into his hands as if someone was there, but no one was. Even Zeus had his thunderbolts made for him by a lesser god. For Hades, conjuring appeared to be something he could do with very little effort.

With a flick of his hand the bottle glided across to her where it floated poised to pour soap into her outstretched palms. Except she didn't lift her hands to accept it. She couldn't. She didn't have the will to take care of herself. She turned away from him and stared at the water because she didn't care if he killed her for bad behavior now. If only she *could* die.

She had been violated and woken to discover another hideous truth. She did not need to consent to a wedding ceremony. All that was needed was for her to eat a piece of food from the underworld. That was all. After swallowing those six tiny kernels of pomegranate, she was doomed to spend six months out of every year in the Underworld with him.

"Why didn't you make me eat twelve?" she whispered, sliding away from him in the water.

He sighed. "I would not limit your power by forcing you to live here always. You are life and even though you are now married to death, you still need time to do your appointed duties on Olympus. I doubt your mother will withhold your responsibilities any longer. Since you are mine, you will be responsible, strong, and completely uncompromising. Besides, I don't want to deprive your father, my brother, Zeus, of your company. There are still some things to settle. I believe he will

be pleased with this arrangement." He paused, untying his straight, white tresses and letting them float in the water. Then he said to her, "Why don't you clean yourself? There are black streaks in your hair still."

"I don't want to. I don't care what I look like."

"I care," he said, grabbing her chin and forcing her to look at him.

His red eyes pierced through her and she shivered with a bone-chilling fear that he was going to do something dreadful to her again.

"You hurt me," she mumbled and tried to turn away.

"Hurt me back," he challenged. "Make me cry the way I made you cry last night."

"I would rather die."

He smirked. "Too bad that isn't an option."

She didn't have the energy to glare at him, but instead slipped from his fingers by dunking herself in the water. She stayed under for minutes, but she couldn't drown. She had played that way when she was a child, but it didn't matter how long she stayed underwater, she always emerged as if she hadn't missed a breath.

When she came up, Hades took her in his arms and washed her hair and skin like she wasn't his wife, but his pet. It made her uncomfortable to be so close to him, but he seemed intent on getting her ready for their journey. He hurried them out of the basin and moved them along in what he saw as the routine of preparing to go to Olympus.

"You must look unfathomably beautiful," he said. "But you must also look changed. You must look strong and womanly. You must return home like you have conquered a beast."

"I haven't conquered you," she choked, as he arranged her hair. He curled it and pinned it because she had no idea how to do it herself, and she had to appear perfect to the gods on Olympus. "No one will believe it. No one will believe any of this," she ground through her set teeth, indicating everything around her, including his styling her hair.

He stabbed a pin through a high bun he had knotted off. "They must. Together we now control the life and death of each person on Gaia. That is more than either Zeus or Poseidon can boast. We must display the will to control it fairly. Are you ready?"

She looked into his face and her expression read, 'Only if you say I am.'

"You need paint," he said after his appraisal. Out of the air he summoned two tiny jars. He painted charcoal around her eyes and made her lips blood-red. "After today, this paint will be famous," he said dryly as he moved away to prepare himself for their departure. "After all, I made it just for you."

It was then that she realized that his clothes were in the other bedroom. She sat in the bed chamber for whores. This was where he brought silks for her. This was

where he left the paint he had just applied to her face on the table. This was where he had raped her. Even though a marriage had been forced on her and she was technically his wife, this was where she belonged. Until she entered his bedroom of her own free will, she would live in this second-rate room. It basically amounted to forever, because that was something she could *never* do.

Persephone searched the room silently for a mirror. She wanted to see what she looked like. Finally, she found one. It was a hand mirror with a long gilded handle. When she looked at her face, she was astonished by the transformation. Before this, she had shiny, bouncy curls that glistened in the sunlight. Her nose had been dusted in freckles. Her lips had been the color of coral and her eyes were the green of new leaves uncurling in the sun.

Now she was an entirely different creature, Goddess of the Underworld; she believed it. Her freckles were gone and the brightness of her complexion was completely diminished to the bone-white of a storm-worn sand dollar. Her hair hung in loose curls, much different from the tight ringlets she usually wore. The pin she thought he was sticking in her hair wasn't a pin at all. It was a peacock feather that had been mostly trimmed except for the eye, which stuck out alone from her knot. With the paint around her eyes, they appeared the green of deep forests to the point where they almost appeared black. All together, the virginal look was completely gone from her and in its place was that of a seductress. That was what he meant by a woman who had tamed him. Only someone even more terrifying than Hades could battle him hard enough to win against him, and it wasn't her. The paint and dress were a magic trick he was performing for the gods and goddesses back on Olympus.

It was all a lie.

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" Seth hollered. His darling goddess was sobbing like a lost child in the backseat and Seth hated himself for bringing this upon her. He had no choice. He couldn't stop it. He turned left and got back on the right side of the road. The front of Rylan's car smashed into his tail, but Seth didn't stop. He smoothly corrected his steering and went on.

Hades and Persephone returned to Olympus, but when they arrived at the gates, they were greeted by two unusual sights. The first was the obvious gathering of an

army. Apollo was checking his soldiers' weapons and banging shields with other gods. So far, no one noticed Persephone and Hades standing placidly at the gate. Hades insisted they stand unconcerned and appear as though it did not matter that an army was being raised.

"It is too late now," he said under his breath.

Suddenly, all the soldiers parted for Demeter, she was waving her arms and denouncing the nymphs with authority. Raidne and Teles were strewn helplessly in the clearing. They yelped painfully as Demeter grasped both of them by their hair and forced them into kneeling positions.

"Let it be known," she called out loudly to the assembly. "For their crime against my daughter, these two nymphs are cursed forevermore. They will never know the joy of true lasting love. Instead, they will feast on the flesh of the men that crash against the shore believing that they have heard angels singing. These two are not angels, but henceforth shall be known as sirens!"

Even as Demeter spoke, the two nymphs began changing. Their teeth became sharp and ferocious, their fingernails grew into claws, and their eyes completely lost the soft, loving look they had once possessed.

As Persephone looked down on her two servants who had betrayed her, her mind began to whirr. Because they had not protected her, she had been hurt—hurt badly. Her chest throbbed. What her mother had done was not enough. They had not even tried to help her escape, but cared only for their own security. In the end, they believed she would care for them.

Persephone felt for Hades' hand. She knew he still clutched his chariot whip. Grasping the end of it between her fingers, he relinquished it. Holding a whip was a new experience for her, but she was a goddess with powers of ability no one suspected. She was not the daughter of the god of lightning for nothing, and for once she was angry enough to display it. Against these treacherous hags, she could at least have the satisfaction.

She marched into the clearing with her red dress billowing behind her and her red hair flying away from her face.

The soldiers saw her and moved aside immediately.

Persephone didn't even look at them. She knew what they were thinking. They had no idea who she was. But her mother—she knew. Persephone couldn't meet her mother's eyes, but she could look at Raidne and Teles and her glare was sharper than a dagger.

She unwound the whip and let it fall to the ground in a lump of snaky coils.

The sirens finally recognized their mistress and prostrated themselves on the ground before her and begged, "Lady, forgive us. We were frightened."

Persephone breathed hard, her chest heaving. "Shut your mouths. You don't know fear. You don't know pain. I've just become acquainted with both of them and I've come to introduce them to you!" She cracked the whip perfectly and the soldiers fanned out in waves to avoid it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hades. His arms were folded across his breastplate. His eyes were flames and she could feel his heart pounding in feverish anticipation. This was exactly what he wanted from her first appearance on Olympus, and more.

But whatever his reaction, Persephone didn't care. Raidne and Teles had betrayed her in an unforgivable way. They should have helped her run, even if it had been impossible to save her.

She cracked the whip so hard against the cobblestones that dust flew. On Mount Olympus, dust actually flew. Someone whistled at the impossibility of it. This was a place of perfect peace, but now the most precious and sensitive goddess of them all was about to draw fresh blood.

Then she let in on them.

Raidne and Teles ran screaming as Persephone's whip came down on both their backs in one stroke. Over and over she whipped them, cutting and breaking their skin. They ran, trying to push through the gates, but not before the whip twisted around Raidne's throat. Persephone yanked Raidne toward her and slapped her across the face twice. She thought of strangling the siren, but when she saw Teles hesitate at the gate, waiting for her sister, she decided against it. Maybe they had learned something, even though they couldn't make up for what they'd done. Demeter had cursed them. That was enough. She hit Raidne again for spite and felt a twinge in her hand. Then she flung the whip free from the siren's neck.

"Get out of here!" she shouted. Then she spat on Raidne's face.

Persephone didn't wait for them to leave. Instead, she turned on her heel and tossed Hades' whip over her shoulder. She walked through the wind and dust. The shimmer of her red dress floated through the haze like the eye of a cosmic storm. She walked tall and straight, past countless soldiers and turned only to find her father. She hesitated for no one, not even Apollo, though he looked like a man who had just seen Hell. Not her mother, who trailed after her weakly. Not Hades, who sauntered behind her like he was exhibiting a rare piece of art he, himself, had created.

Zeus stood by his throne at the far end of his temple. Inside the stone structure, along the long corridor lined with many gods, not just those who were planning to invade the Underworld to retrieve her, but everyone. She walked past them all, keeping her eyes only on her father.

He did not descend the stairs to greet her, but instead watched her as she proceeded toward him. Perhaps he too did not know her. Then she realized that he was not looking at her at all, but at her husband shadowing behind her.

"Hades," he greeted stiffly.

"Zeus, your daughter and I have come to tell you of our marriage," her husband said lightly.

"You wanted her this badly?" Zeus asked in a low voice. He did not say anything about her abduction or of the army that surrounded them.

"Father," Persephone said, interrupting them. She wouldn't be left out of decisions or discussions any longer. "I have eaten the food of the Underworld and shall be required to spend six months of every year there. I beg your forgiveness for my waywardness."

"You have grown too quickly," he observed.

"Kidnap and rape will do that," she said.

The look on her father's face was strange. "Come here, both of you," he said, beckoning them into his private chamber.

Hades put his hand on Persephone's back as they entered.

She had been in this room many times. She had lounged on the cushions when she was a child. It seemed a different place now. It felt as though the familiarity was lost to her.

Hades closed the door himself to give them privacy.

Persephone did not know what kind of reaction her father would have to this news, and she waited with her hands clenched into fists. Would he be able to free her? She prayed there was a way as she watched him glare at Hades.

Finally he spoke, and his words were not at all what she had expected. "To hell with you," he muttered, looking sharply at Hades. "Brother, this is foul trickery. In the counsel you said that you wanted to make Persephone your bride, but what you have done far exceeds the desires you expressed to Demeter. Why couldn't you have worked to convince her of your deep love for her daughter rather than hauling her off by her hair and forcing us to prepare for war? Apollo was ready to raze the Underworld for her sake."

Hades snorted. "And I should care what Apollo does? That brat wouldn't know power if it took his head off."

"*He's my son!*" Zeus raged.

"*She's your daughter!*" Hades countered. "Mine now. And I didn't say I loved her."

Zeus stopped and looked at Hades like he didn't believe what he was hearing. "You..." he breathed, but didn't continue.

Persephone broke the silence. "Father, please help me. Please reverse the contract. I did not partake of the fruit knowing that it would force me to live in the Underworld."

Zeus shook his head. "I can't undo what was done. I can give you a potion that will make you able to eat the food of the underworld freely now, but it won't shorten your time there. I apologize, it's the only gift I can give you, daughter." He placed his hand on Persephone's head and peered into her eyes, adding weight to his meaning.

She nodded piteously. She should have known. Hades would not have made a plan to ensnare her that Zeus could undo. He had a perfect knowledge of what Zeus could and could not do. He knew there was no saving her.

Zeus walked to the door. Putting his hand on the latch, he turned and said to Hades, "This was a black thing to do."

Then he was gone and Persephone was left alone with her husband and her future. She didn't cry, though she wanted to. There was no need to make a fool of herself. There would be plenty of time, plenty of dark nights where she could cry as much as she wanted to.

Hades arranged everything so quickly it was truly frightening. Persephone took on all the responsibilities of the Goddess of Fertility and learned that every creature she allowed to be born on earth would die. Giving life had been spontaneous and ingenious before Hades. Now she was face-to-face with what happened after creation. She spent six months on Olympus planting the seeds of greatness and the other six months sorting the refuse of lives exhausted, picking through the tragedy.

And he, Hades, was in her face, in her bed, touching her, running his oily black fingers across her supple skin that was made for loving, not for what he did. It was eternal violation. Not just her, but everything she made, everything she created.

The cycle of life had existed before Hades had hauled her off by her hair. Of course he had been curious about her. Her mother had been training her for her responsibilities, and he knew the difference between Demeter's work and Persephone's. She was the one giving life. It was like she had been sending him messages unknowingly with every single person she made. She made a little girl who was like a butterfly. The little girl lived on earth and grew, but life was hard for her, because little girls cannot live like butterflies, and by the time that little girl's soul arrived at the throne room of the Underworld, she had become something quite different. The God judging her had wondered who had made her so fragile that life

had wrecked her so completely. And Persephone learned not to make little girls who were like butterflies.

The Goddess of the Harvest, Demeter, grieved. Her grief was palpable, so palpable that every single person who lived on the soil of Gaia felt it. Before Hades and Persephone wed, every day had been warm. The weather was continually pleasant. Afterwards, Demeter, the Goddess of the Harvest, arranged the world differently. The seasons appeared. In spring, Persephone arrived home on Olympus and everything on earth suddenly grew, babies were born, buds sprouted, the world was reborn. In summer, the joy continued, but when autumn came, Persephone would have to return to the Underworld. By that time of the year, Demeter was at her busiest with the harvest that she could let Persephone go without a qualm, because she didn't have the time to spare. By winter, all the work was finished. There was nothing left to do but mourn and the world fell into a coldness and darkness that resembled death. After all, it didn't matter what Persephone was doing in the Underworld, whatever Persephone made, it died there.

Persephone didn't know the depths of her mother's suffering on her behalf, because Demeter tried her best to keep her sorrow to herself. But some of her feelings were too close to the surface to be concealed. She believed that she had truly been the one to destroy her daughter's happiness. She had been the one to give her Raidne and Teles as servants. She had been the one who chose to raise her child in perfect innocence. And worst of all, she had been the one who refused Hades without questioning him. She could have compromised and won Persephone a better home or a better husband. She would have done it, too, if she hadn't wanted to keep her child all to herself. Her pretty child, who she loved endlessly, now draped in red silk shouting commands like a blood-soaked necromancer. Demeter hid her face to hide the pain.

Back in the black rooms of the Underworld, Persephone stayed in the room intended for whores. Days and nights felt almost the same. It didn't matter if the sun was in the sky or the moon, because she couldn't feel the warmth either way. She found other rooms besides the ones Hades had initially shown her. He had many strange beasts besides the horses and Cerberus.

There were practically no servants. There was Charon, but he wasn't exactly Hades' servant. His purpose was to ferry the dead. The god didn't care if the ferryman did his job and ferryman didn't care if the god did his. Charon was paid for his work by the dead by one coin that was put in their mouths when they were buried. A soul who had no money to pay him would wander a hundred years before they found the way. In any case, Hades did not need servants. His animals were

immortal beings that did not need grooming or feeding. As an expert conjurer, Hades required no one to wait on him as other gods did.

The work of the dead was demanding, but there was no rush to complete it. Hades would lie across the throne with a knee hooked over the armrest. With his eyes closed, he would decide on the fate of a thousand souls in an hour. Demeter had not exaggerated when she said that Hades was perfect in his role. Even his rebellious wife could not deny his talent. When she took over, she would agonize over one soul for hours and in the end decide to send them to the resting room to wait for further judgment. Hours later, Hades would empty the resting room. If he found her indecision frustrating, he never mentioned it. It didn't matter how many hours he spent or she spent, there was always more to be done, more souls waiting.

As for her nights with him, they fought. They threw things, broke things. She raged, he beat her, she screamed until she was limp. Against her better judgment, she would look for signs that he was falling in love with her, but his treatment of her never altered. He didn't mind her slow work, but he wanted her to be strong willed like he was. He wanted her to have the strength of will to make mistakes and take responsibility for them. Sometimes, she didn't put souls in the waiting room. Sometimes, she put them in the wrong room. When she reneged a soul's eternal assignment and tried to take back her judgment, he hurt her. It happened frequently. She could never be happy with him. It was impossible.

When she returned to Olympus, Hades dropped her off at the gate. She wore a black, backless dress and her arms were stained onyx from all the dirty souls she had touched. Hades took her hand and kissed it before he rode off. Looking around, she saw at once that she didn't fit in anymore. The gods and demigods glared at her. Her mother was the only one who didn't follow her with their eyes like she was a traitor.

Apollo's reaction to her changed self was the most heartbreaking. He cried in the open, falling to his knees. He tore at his hair and covered his head in ashes because of the passion of his grief.

"Persephone is lost," he cried as she stood still as a statue before him.

She turned to her mother and said, "There's work to do."

Each time she completed the cycle to Olympus, to the Underworld, she became different. Sometimes she was apathetic. Sometimes she let herself say exactly how she felt, but life with Hades was not something she could grow to love. He was not a person she could grow to love. He showed her no mercy and she began to long for death. She wanted out of her body. Her body belonged to him. She wanted out.

It was hundreds of years before she found a way. She was in the throne room judging spirits when the spirit of a young woman approached her. She was holding a

bag of gold in her arms that was almost overflowing. A person did not need that much gold to bribe Charon, so Persephone questioned her about it.

"It's for my family. Every one of them was murdered by sirens. I couldn't find their bodies, but I wanted to free them from the prison of being wandering spirits, so I brought money for them," the girl said.

"Were you expecting to die?" Persephone asked, thinking the girl must mean Raidne and Teles, though she didn't keep a tally on everyone who was cursed on Olympus.

"Yes. I took my own life," the ghost explained. "I couldn't stand to live any more. I was so frightened. I was the last one alive. The sirens murdered and ate my family. I didn't want to wait for them to come to kill me too, so I..."

"How did you kill yourself?"

"I drowned, Lady."

"Ah! So your body is complete and unharmed in the water somewhere?"

"Yes, but I don't want another chance at life. I only want to be with my family again. Please help me find them."

Persephone nodded. "I *might* be able to help you, but you have to give me a few things in return. And," she continued, holding up one finger, "you are going to have to understand that my help won't be immediate. I can reunite your family, but not instantly."

"What do you want?" the ghost asked desperately.

"I need your permission to borrow your body, and I need you to tell me your mortal name."

"What do you need my body for?" she shivered.

"That's not your concern," Persephone said stiffly. "Do you want my help or not?"

"Stella. You can use my body."

"And I need you to give me that bag of gold coins. I will give the coins to your family when I find them."

Persephone's plan was almost perfect. If she borrowed Stella's body, Raidne and Teles would probably be the first to find her and she would need their help. When she possessed Stella's body, she wouldn't remember anything. If she knew who she was, pretending to be someone else would be pointless. The sirens owed her any and all help she might require. The one flaw was that now she needed a place to hide Stella's spirit. If she put her soul in the resting room, Hades would certainly find her and if he didn't interrogate her, he would send her off to her final resting place and then Persephone wouldn't be able to find her in the end. Finally, she got an idea. She'd put Stella in one of her empty perfume bottles to rest.

"Come with me," she said, opening the trap door and bringing the dead soul into the living space of the palace.

She took Stella all the way to the whore's bedroom and took the bag of gold from her.

"Thank you for your kindness," Stella said, before Persephone sealed her in the glass bottle.

"Think nothing of it," Persephone whispered as she went to lie down on the bed. Her head fell on the pillow as she went over the steps of her plan once more.

Astral projection was simple in theory. All a person needed to do was separate their spirit from their body. Humans could do it. The necromancers who worshiped Hades did it all the time. She'd seen it done countless times. She'd do it this time.

Breathe slowly. Breathe evenly. Envision flying. She did everything the necromancers did, but she did them in seconds rather than hours and, even though she'd never done it before, her spirit flew from her body as though she was a bird in flight.

Her body lay beneath her. For many years she had detested looking at herself because of the changes wrought in her appearance. As she saw her body without her spirit, she realized that it was her spirit that was hurt and not her body at all. Her body was the body of a goddess which could not be marred by time or abuse or fatigue, but her spirit was the spirit of a woman that longed for love and happiness. This being the case, she ached as she scooped up the bag of coins and drifted to the door.

She disappeared around the corner and thought of the many years this idea had eluded her. She should have realized ages ago that it was her body that committed the sin by eating the pomegranate and not her spirit. Hades could not trap her spirit and as long as her body remained in the Underworld, she could go anywhere she wanted.

But there remained one final obstacle. There was still Charon, the river master, who needed to ferry her down the Styx. Persephone had the fare with her, but she did not know if he would take her. It was impossible to trick him into believing she was someone else. She was never as exposed as she was when she passed through the halls of the Underworld without her flesh.

When she reached the portal, Charon had just arrived with a collection of new souls. He turned his blank face toward her and she approached to pay him the required coin. "Where is your master?" he questioned dully.

"Asleep. Please take me," she asked simply. It was impossible to rouse much emotion. An emotional appeal wouldn't have meant anything to the ferryman.

"Get in," he said, taking the gold from her.

She sat down and he pushed away from the shore. They had never spoken. She did not know if he had feelings or if he pitied her. He never said. The water ran smoothly and the twinkle of lost souls along the cavern walls lit their way.

"Lady," he said in a low voice once the dock was out of sight. "You know this is only temporary."

"I know." Moments passed as they pushed against the current, going the unnatural way in more ways than one. "If he asks you what happened. Please tell him that I left a message for him with you. Tell him that I'll stay with him all year round."

Seth swung his head around to check on Juliet for the millionth time. She had stopped fighting. She no longer shook or cried, but stayed perfectly still as if she was dead. Seth spared two fingers from the wheel and placed them on her throat to check her pulse. He hoped he wasn't imagining that it felt strong.

His mind was breaking apart in pieces. Keeping focussed on the mad car chase as well as watching over Juliet as she went through this ordeal was almost too much. He had to find a way to lose Rylan. He was persistent! Seth had a full tank of gas when their chase started, and he found himself wishing passionately that Rylan's tank didn't. Seth didn't know how he was going to outrun Rylan if he didn't run out of gas.

Chapter Twenty One

The First Dream

She was wet—so cold. There was water up her nose and in her mouth. There was something round and hard on her tongue. Spitting it out and blowing her nose into her palm, she tried to clear her nasal passages. Finally, she took her first breath. It stung. Opening her eyes, she saw that she was washed up on a beach and there was a gold coin nestled in the sand in front of her. That must have been what was in her mouth. There was a brown cloth sack beside her, too, but she took no notice of it. She felt something on her face. Was someone there? No. The sun was rising. Whatever her circumstances, there was the sun. Its light and warmth reached her face and caressed her cheek like the warm breath of a mother.

“Oh, Heaven!” she cried to the skies raising her arms in the air. “Oh, Heaven! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!” She put her hands in the sand and pushed herself onto her feet. She tried to take a step, but her dress weighed too much. It was made of wool, and sopping wet, it was too heavy to carry. It was so cold and uncomfortable that she immediately stripped except for the lightest petticoat. Once free, her shoulders and arms were bare and the sun bore down on her so warmly she felt like dancing.

She chased down the beach without a care for whom or what might see her. She jumped and skipped like a prisoner free from jail. She hollered and cried and drank in the landscape like she had never seen one before. The mountains rose and the forest hummed. There were no houses except for a plain gray stone tower set slightly away from the beach, but when she studied it, she recognized it as her home. Her body seemed to remember it was where she belonged.

Home! She was home!

Troublesome details like her name, what she had been doing in the water, what was in the bag, and the rest of her past didn’t concern her. All that mattered was the feeling of freedom that coursed through her body.

She ran to the tower and looked in every room. She found hers and took off her undergarments. As she looked through her wardrobe, she saw that all her clothes were alike. White dresses with dark woolen over-frocks. She grabbed one and put it on. As she dressed herself, she felt her wet hair dripping through her clothes. She grabbed a sheet and twisted it around her black hair to wring as much water from it as possible. Then she combed through the tangles with a seashell comb she found on

the chest at the end of the bed. Swiftly, like she had done it every day of her life, she braided it into two long plaits and twisted them into a bun on the base of her neck.

With that done, she went downstairs to find something to eat. She felt like she hadn't eaten in ages. She was ravenously hungry. In the kitchen there was bread and fruit, which she ate happily. She drank the entire contents of the clay water pitcher on the cutting board. The kitchen had ground wheat, dried fruit, and bundles of dried herbs hanging from the ceiling. Prowling around, she looked for meat. She wanted meat for supper. Then she realized that it must be in the smoke house.

"How silly!" she exclaimed, still buoyant from her feeling of freedom.

A path ran from the tower to where a tiny wooden building sat in the middle of two tall bunches of grass. Halfway down the path the girl stopped and stood still in shock. Trails of blood soaked the yellow grass of the path and ran under the smokehouse door. The young woman tried to steady herself. It was a fresh kill and one of the men had taken it in the smoke house to butcher. That was what she told herself as she approached. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Putting her hand to the knot in the wooden door, she swung it open. She gasped in horror and let the door fall shut. Turning on her heel, she ran as fast as she could back toward the tower.

Inside the smoke house there were two women hunched over the remains of a human body, a man. The girl couldn't identify him, but he was in pieces with his bare bones protruding and his internal organs exposed and bloody. The women themselves were terrifying as they pulled his flesh off his bones with their fangs. They had sharp vicious eyes and growled like panthers.

She had to get away. They were cannibals. They would eat her, too.

"Sethos! Stop her!" a woman shrieked.

The girl made it to the door of her tower and slammed it shut behind her. She pulled down the bar that secured it, but she wasn't sure that it would be enough to save her, so she pushed a chair from the next room over it. She believed for a moment that she was safe, but then she saw a dark head slip past outside the window.

Her eyes flew around the room in a panic. She could see three windows, but there was no way of securing all of them.

She sprinted up to her bedroom and shut the door. There was no lock on the door, so the girl pushed over her wardrobe. Then she began piling everything in the room on top of the wardrobe until it looked like a junk pile.

The girl braced herself against the wardrobe and sat very still. She was so afraid she had sweat running down her temples in rivers. At least the window was well

above ground and she wouldn't have to worry about one of the cannibals getting through it.

But then that dark head popped up over the window sill.

The girl closed her eyes and screamed till she was hoarse, but nothing happened. No one grabbed her and bit her arm or forced her through the open window. She screamed again, but still no one touched her.

"Open your eyes," a surprisingly calm voice said.

"I don't want to," she cried, shaking her head and screaming again.

"I'm not going to eat you," the voice said, trying again.

"I don't believe you."

"Open your eyes, woman!"

Her eyes snapped open.

That dark head was still at the window. He hadn't even entered the room. His arms were crossed on the window sill. He seemed weightless and he looked amused. He was ugly, or at least he seemed ugly. As she stared at him, she wondered if he truly was ugly. What was ugly about him? His eyes? Yes, his eyes were definitely hideous. They didn't look like a human's eyes at all—more like an animal's—and the rest of his face was definitely flawed. His nose was too pointed, his hair was too wild, and his cheeks were too thin.

But then he smiled a quirky, thoughtful smile and said, "You're not the girl from before, are you?"

"What?"

"The girl that was here before," he continued, "she didn't act like this. She didn't run screaming into an enclosed space where she knew she would be easily caught. See?" he said and flapped large, white wings, so the girl could see he had flown up to her window. A single feather slipped in through the window and landed at her feet. The girl stared at it, transfixed, as the monster went on in a casual tone. "She would have stayed on the ground floor, because that would have provided the fastest escape. Actually, I thought you were just coming in here to get a weapon, but what you've done makes no sense. She was smart enough to get away. You look the same as her, but you're not her, are you?"

"I don't know," the girl whispered. "I don't remember."

"Your eyes are different. Hers weren't green. They were brown. I tasted her blood once," the monster said as he folded his wings against his back and slipped into the room. "It was amazing. She tasted like sunshine and bonfire dances." He put a single finger to his lips and said, "Don't tell anyone, but I helped her escape from here. I made sure she had enough money to take her anywhere, so she could hide from my

flesh-eating relatives. She was supposed to be long gone from here and yet... here you are."

"Leave me alone," she begged, almost crying in terror.

"No. I want to see something." He lowered himself until he was almost on top of her and put one hand on her head and the other on her shoulder. He turned her head so he could see her throat. "You have my mark. I bit you. So, if you are the same girl, why don't you remember anything? And why have your eyes changed color?"

At that moment, a woman appeared at the window. She also flew through the air and entered the room like a giant bird. This woman was closer to the girl's idea of beauty. Her hair curled in black and blonde waves. Her colorless eyes stared down at the girl crouched on the floor like she was an insect. Then she squinted. "Sethos, is this the same girl?"

Apparently, that was his name, Sethos. He smiled and said, "Something is wrong here. She's got my bite marks, but she's different."

"Her eyes," the woman said reflectively. "My mind travels back to a different time when I saw them. It's the color. I never thought of green as the color of wrath until a green-eyed goddess tore off strips of my skin with a whip intended for animals. Who are you?"

The girl thought hard. "Stella," she stuttered. "My name is Stella."

"What a lie!" the woman laughed pitilessly. "I am Raidne. Does my name mean anything to you?"

Unbidden, the words spewed from Stella's lips, "It makes me want to tear another strip off you, you filthy witch!"

The woman's face went from cool confidence to absolute fear instantly. "It's you!" she fell to the floor, bowing and pressing her forehead into the wood. Then she beckoned for Sethos to do the same, which he immediately did. Their wings folded and disappeared into their backs as they knelt.

The girl didn't know what to do. "What's happening?" she asked. After her outburst she had completely reverted back to trembling in front of winged cannibals.

"You are the Lady Persephone, daughter of Mighty Zeus and Gentle Demeter, Goddess of Fertility, Goddess of the Underworld, and wife of the Dark Lord Hades, God of the Underworld, son of Chronos, brother to Zeus the God of Heaven..."

"Stop!" she interrupted. "My name is Stella."

Raidne ignored her and went on groveling. "We'll clean up this tower and make it habitable for my lady, or we'll take you off the island and to the mainland. We'll do anything you wish."

"I thought this was the mainland. I saw mountains in the distance."

"No. This is the southern part of the island. You can see the mountains from here, but this land isn't connected to them. The mainland is a long way off. It's not possible to swim. A person must be taken by boat and even then it is a long journey. Do you wish to go there?"

"What is here on the island?"

"This tower and our cave are the only livable places. The rest is a wilderness inhabited by wild animals. The people who tried to settle here brought sheep. They may be dead, we don't know," Raidne paused, and caught her breath. When she spoke again it was a dead entreaty, "My lady, Teles and I regret what we did to you every moment of our lives. Please give us some way to make amends. We will do anything to correct our grave misconduct. I beg of you, is there anyway to break the curse your beloved goddess mother put on us?"

Stella had no idea what Raidne was talking about. She didn't believe she was this goddess, Persephone. She wasn't a goddess, but if she played along with them, they wouldn't hurt her. They would even take her off the island if she wanted.

"I want to live here for a time," Stella said after a moment. "I would go directly to the mainland as you say, but my memory is muddled, so I shall live here until I remember enough to live competently. Are all the people here dead?"

"All of them, except me, my sister, and my son," Raidne muttered hopelessly.

Stella's eyes traveled over to Sethos, Raidne's son. His body was awfully rigid. His shoulder blades protruded so far that his back looked like a bull's. His arms and legs were well muscled, and he said that he had helped a girl, possibly her, escape. There was definitely something good about him even if he was ugly. She wanted to know why she suddenly felt peculiar when she looked at him.

"Is this man your son?" Stella asked Raidne.

"Yes. He's my son," she said, raising her head. "Do you want him?"

"For a servant," Stella said, wondering if her request sounded plausible.

"He's yours."

Expecting some reaction, Stella turned to Sethos, but his face bore no evidence that he was unhappy with this change of events. In fact, she thought she heard him say under his breath, "Bonfire dances."

Chapter Twenty Two

The First Dream - Part Two

First, Stella made the sirens put her wardrobe back up and tidy the rest of her bedroom. Then she sent them out to clean the smoke house and to remove any other

corpses that might be in the vicinity. They were to remove all traces of blood and trim the grass around the smokehouse. Stella didn't want to see human blood smeared anywhere near her home or stumble upon any other nasty surprises. After that much was done, she sent Raidne and her sister Teles back to their cave. Something about them was detestable, but she, for some reason, didn't feel that way about Sethos. It wasn't that she liked him, but she could tolerate him and she needed his help if she was going to live comfortably.

Once they were alone, they were able to speak freely. "You see," he said. "Stella and her family did not build this tower. They simply moved in. This tower was built one hundred and thirteen years ago by one of my mother's old lovers. He couldn't live in her cave with her because he was a human, so he chose to build this tower. It wasn't easy, considering it is built entirely of stone and there isn't exactly a place to cut stone on this island. He had every block brought in by boat and had his slaves put it together piece by piece."

"That sounds romantic," Stella said as she stepped out onto the southern balcony and looked out to sea.

Sethos swallowed something in his mouth. "Hmm... Slaves are still people and I don't really like murder."

"Are you saying your mother and her sister killed them?"

He nodded gravely.

"Aren't you a murderer, like them?" she asked quietly, feeling a constriction in her throat.

"Not really. But if I'm to survive, I'll have to go home to my mother regularly."

"Why?"

"I don't subsist on the same food you do, so I'll need to go home to eat from time to time. I'll spend all the rest of the time caring for your needs."

"You don't mind?" she asked.

He looked at her carefully, his brown eyes flashing wickedly. What was he thinking? Then he continued his story. "My mother says that her lover built this tower because it was his dream to spend his evenings trying to guess if my mother would fly in to visit him from the south or from the north. He wanted it to be a surprise and he loved watching her fly."

"Was he your father?"

"No, but of all the stories my mother has told of her life, I like the one about this tower the best. I've always looked at it and thought that something good would come of it."

"That's strange."

"So, I can have this room?" he asked.

"It's yours. Now go chop firewood and I'll find blankets for your bed."

"Don't do that!" he exclaimed, rushing to her side. "Don't take care of me. I'll take care of you. Until my body breaks, I'll take care of you," he said, and suddenly, his eyes didn't look quite so hideous to her. In fact, he looked gentle. "I'm a siren, so I'm not fragile," he said, bending down and kissing her hand.

Stella allowed it, because she didn't know what else to do. A shiver ran through her. She didn't know why his respect moved her, but it touched her to her core.

Sethos was chopping firewood, and Stella was watching him through the window. He sang as he worked and everything that came out of his mouth sounded like the sky had merged with the sea and somehow produced glorious music. Stella would never have imagined such harmony could exist in one voice. Actually, his speaking voice was lovely too, deep and full of feeling. When he sang, he sang of powerful emotions: of long lost loves, bitter regrets, loneliness, betrayal, passion, and about every aspect of their physical world. As he chopped the wood, he was singing about the stars, and how they danced at night.

Stella finally decided to take him a pitcher of water, just so she could sit closer. He looked thirsty from the hard work he did every day, but this was the first time she'd taken pity on him. It was probably his voice that softened her up.

Taking the water with her, she sat on the wood pile and waited for him to finish his song. "What's it called?" she asked when he was finished.

Suddenly he looked shy and he cast his eyes downward. "Well, it's called Stella. Didn't you know that Stella means stars?"

"No. Um," she faltered. "I'm sorry. The old me, did you love her?" Stella was not convinced she was Persephone. She was Stella and she had lost her memory. However, she had already decided that she had to fool the sirens and pretend to be the goddess. Otherwise, they'd kill her.

"No," he said without hesitation. "I did not love her. She was just so lovely and young that it seemed a pity for her to be eaten by my mother. I wanted to save her, but not because I was in love with her. She wasn't like you. She was earthy and round and she had a laugh that was... not beautiful. You haven't laughed like her once."

"Yet, you bit her," Stella reminded him. "And after having tasted her blood you refrained from eating her and yet you did not love her?"

"Yes, I bit her. I don't know if I told you, but I don't eat flesh. I drink blood, but I've never been so starved that I bled a person dry. There's so little to eat here that I

couldn't afford not to. I'm a creature of appetite, even if it disgusts me. And I can't escape being an accessory to murder, but I haven't tried to drink your blood yet, so I think I'm becoming stronger. There was a time when I couldn't smell humans without salivating. I'm really improving. What's that?" he said, noticing her pitcher of water for the first time.

"It's for you," she said, bringing it for him.

"Thanks," he said, taking it in his hands and dumping it over his head.

Droplets splashed her dress so she stepped back. "You weren't supposed to pour it on your head," she said crossly, brushing off the wet parts of her dress.

"Wasn't I?"

"You were supposed to *drink* it."

"Oh. I'm sorry," he said, before he shook his hair out. "I don't drink water, but that was very refreshing and I thank you," he said, putting the pitcher next to the wood pile. "I'll fill it with fresh water before I come in. It's about time to start hauling water anyway, but I'll finish this first." Then he picked up his ax.

"You don't have to work this hard for me. I'll help you haul the water this time."

"Don't," he said, his eyes becoming serious.

She knew he would respond like that, like when she offered to find him blankets. In fact, it seemed like he didn't want her to do any work at all. She couldn't stand by and do nothing while he slaved away for her comfort and she loved his reaction when she offered to share the work. He always looked hurt and took a defensive stance. She wanted to take the ax from him and chop the wood herself. That would make him really angry and she wanted to see that. So, she tried.

"Well, you go haul water then, and I'll finish chopping the wood," she said, reaching for the ax handle.

"Have you gone crazy?" he asked, stepping back from her and holding the ax away from her.

"No. Give it to me."

He dropped the handle and put his arms around her. He was soaking wet, but the warmth of his body came through. "I refuse. I'm not taking care of you because you asked, or because my mother would have gutted me if I hadn't accepted with pleasure. I'm doing this because I want to. I have never been so happy in my life."

Stella was breathless. She should be angry. But she couldn't find the words to be wroth with him, or even to move away from him.

"I'll tell you what," he said when she didn't answer. "Tonight, I'll do something nice for you. Instead of going back to the cave when it gets dark like I normally do, I'll stay here and we'll have a party."

"A party? I've never been to a party. What'll we do?"

"I'll light a fire, we'll dance and sing. I'll bring you flowers and something pretty to wear."

"That sounds like you're adding work for yourself, because then you'll have to chop more wood to replace what we'll burn."

"That's why it's something nice for you and you'll have fun. I'll sing the song I wrote for you."

"What song is that?"

"The one you walked in on me singing, just now."

Sethos had worked intently since their conversation at the wood pile. He chopped all the wood, hauled water, watered the sheep, brought a fish for her out of the smoke house and then disappeared down to the cave for a few hours.

At nightfall, he came to the tower, dressed more impressively than she had ever seen him. Normally, he wore the simplest of woolen trousers. With no shirt, he could easily let his wings unfurl whenever necessity demanded it. When she first saw him running around with his chest bare, she thought he looked like a rather tame beast, but lately her feelings had softened and she thought he looked practical. When he brought her dress, he wore real clothes that covered his back and chest and shoulders and buttoned up the front. She couldn't believe it when she saw him wearing boots.

"Where did you get the clothes?" she gasped.

"Oh, nowhere. Ships crash here and we salvage their cargo. I've brought this for you." He handed her a trailing garment of white spun silk. "I washed it and tried to make it smell nice. Sometimes these things get a little wet and then they're ruined."

Stella put her nose in the fabric. It smelt like windflowers. "Don't trouble yourself, Sethos. It's fine, quite fragrant. You'll wait while I change?"

"I'll wait," he said, looking sufficiently humble and a little red around the ears.

When Stella emerged from the tower, Sethos was still waiting outside the front door.

Down on the beach, the stars were shining and the moon was the slimmest crescent Stella had ever seen against the navy sky. Sethos had placed stones around the bonfire and set up sticks for cooking. He wasn't planning on eating himself, but he took great care that everything was perfect for her. There were drums, which he pounded on and showed Stella how to do the same. She banged on them in time with him until her palms were sore.

"Now, we dance," he said, getting up and putting his hands around her waist. He brought her to her feet, and stepped away from her. Excitement danced in his eyes and it infected her until she could only follow his lead. "Let's clap. One, two, pause, one, two, three. One, two, pause, one, two, three. Got the rhythm? Then we stomp our feet to the beat. One, two, pause, one, two, three. Put your arms in the air. Now clap and stomp."

She did it.

Sethos clapped his hands to the side of his face and stomped with her. Then he put his arms around her waist and lifted her into the air on the last beat. She was so shocked, she almost knocked him far enough off balance to pitch her straight into the sand.

"Sorry," he said, stumbling to recover himself.

"No," she laughed. "That's great. Why didn't you tell me that was what you were going to do? It's fun. Let's try it again."

"You want to try it again? Don't tell me you're actually having a good time?"

"I am. Now come on, I want to do some more."

"Good," he said, extremely pleased.

He threw her up into the air again and again. She squealed and laughed like a little girl. He should have told her that he was tired by this point, but he kept right on tossing her and teaching her new ways to jump. He showed her how to spin and how to clap hands in time with him.

As they moved, she became more at home with him until she felt herself becoming increasingly attracted to him. He was noticeably gentle when he touched her and profoundly careful, like she was beloved. She felt his love for her in every move, in every word, and before long, she wanted to return it.

By the end of the night, she was sitting between his legs with her back against his chest while he fed her smoked fish and olives. She was so tired that just resting with him was pure pleasure. He didn't seem to tire like she did, so he prepared the food and brought her water to drink. The fire crackled. Her eyelids felt heavy and her body felt deliciously limp.

Then he sang to her and the sound of it filled her soul like heaven was falling down on her.

"Do you know what's amazing about you?" Stella said quietly when he finished. "I never would have imagined that you could be so... adorable. I mean, when I first saw you, I thought you were an animal, and now... I think you're breathtaking."

"You're the kind of human I like the most," he said sweetly. "You don't have any thoughts to hurt anyone, do you? You would never hurt me, even though my mother and sister have done you a great wrong. You're kind and you don't take your anger

out on me. Before my mother left, she told me that I had to bear it when you beat me. I had to stand it even if you should want to murder me, but I knew I was safe. Thoughts like those don't enter the temple of your mind. Most people would kill rather than be killed. You're not like that, are you?"

"No." Stella shuddered, resting her head against his beating heart. She wondered what else he thought about her.

"I wish I could compliment your beauty, your face and your soft curves, but I don't see them. They belong to that other girl. Where is her soul now, I wonder?" Stella shifted, and he said quickly, "I'm not worrying about her. The only one I see is you and the green light that shines from your eyes. Your eyes give your divinity away."

"Let's not talk anymore about that," she said, hoping to shift the mood.

He put a piece of fish in her mouth and she kissed his fingers before he could move away. He craned his neck around to look at her face. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

"Do what?" she feigned, letting one of her hands rest lazily on his thigh.

He cleared his throat. "My mother and her sister say that you have a husband, and that he's a god. Are you sure you want to turn me into that kind of slave?"

Stella clenched her jaw in aggravation. She didn't know what to say. In the space of one evening, she had changed her mind about eventually traveling to the mainland. It held no charm for her anymore. She didn't want to leave Sethos and try to make her way in the world without him. It wasn't because she was afraid. It was because she wanted to live in the world that he lived in. There was so much she desired. She wanted to fall asleep in the wreath of his arms and never wake up. She wanted to crawl under his skin and feel what he felt. She wanted to sprout wings and fly into the night with him. At the very least, she wanted him to take her as his bride.

Now he was talking to her about the ridiculous idea that she was married to the God of the Underworld. Over the past few days, she had become more and more convinced that the sirens had mistaken her for someone else. She'd never been in love or married. She would know something like that about herself, wouldn't she?

Finally, she said. "I don't really remember him, so would it be all right if we just pretended he didn't exist?"

"Are you asking me to become your lover?" he asked, his voice unreadable. She couldn't tell if he was pleased by the prospect or angered by it.

"I guess I'm not asking for anything," she said, getting up and picking her way along the beach, back toward the tower.

"Wait," he said, chasing after her.

Stella didn't turn around. The mood had left her and she just wanted to be alone so she could sleep. She didn't know if he followed her all the way back to the tower, because she never turned around.

When Stella woke up the next morning, Sethos was lying on the stone floor at the foot of her bed. "What are you doing?" she asked, rushing to him and trying to raise him up.

"I'm sorry," he said dazedly. "Last night, I didn't mean to anger you. I just wanted things to be clear between us. If you want me to seduce you, I'll certainly do it, but I don't want to presume to do that sort of thing with a goddess."

Stella put a hand to her forehead and tried to realize what she was dealing with. Their relationship would be plagued by his subjugation forever if she didn't force him to accept equal terms. She embraced her courage and took the leap. "I-I'm not a goddess," she said, taking his hand and putting it over her heart. "I'm just an ordinary person. Don't you feel my heart?"

Sethos twitched and pulled his hand away. "Fragile," he said breathlessly.

"So, why don't you just love me for what I am? I don't need a servant as much as a partner. I like living under your protection, so just stay and if you can give me a little of your heart, give it."

"I'm supposed to romance you?" he asked dubiously.

Stella sighed. How could she stand his pigheadedness? He was terribly slow. She got up from the floor and left the room. She couldn't bear the sight of him when he was so useless.

Hours later, when she saw him, he was hauling water, back in his plain trousers and bare chest. He looked thin. She wished she could cook for him. As it was, she made flat bread for herself in the stone oven in the kitchen, but she couldn't share it with him. He didn't eat food, only blood.

As the hours and days grew into weeks, Sethos and Stella talked more than they did at first. He brought her flowers from all over the island and decorated her rooms with them. Sometimes he took her out to the most exotic places they could reach: roaring waterfalls, sparkling caves, awesome heights that boasted incredible views. He also had a very careful mind for her stomach and gathered fruit for her.

They talked about everything. She talked about the void in her mind where her memories were and how the emptiness haunted her. He talked about the horrors of his life with his mother and aunt. He was half human and he was revolted by the

way they lived, but they must go on. It was their curse. He asked her once if she knew how to break it, but she shook her head sorrowfully. She had no idea.

They danced on the beach most nights, and sometimes he extended his wings and let the wind catch them. He soared into the air like a shooting star and flew as smoothly as a swallow.

And their love took shape. Slowly at first, it was almost imperceptible. Like the moon rising each night a little different than the night before. It was almost full.

"Don't go to bed yet. Let's talk more," he said, and they shared ideas until she fell asleep beside him on the shore. He covered her with a blanket and kept the fire going all night.

The moon hung on the edge of the curvature.

"Put your head in my lap and I'll feed you, like that first night."

And the moon rose to its full height when his voice swelled and said, "I want to taste you."

This was something Stella could feel coming. Sometimes he looked unbearably starved. She'd tried to give him real food, human food, but he wretched whatever he ate. He didn't try to keep it a secret from her. He said he'd tried it before, but he could never keep anything down but blood. She'd thought about it, letting him bite her and drink her blood, but she didn't know what it would do to her. She couldn't spill her blood endlessly for him and live, could she?

"No," Stella said, pulling her wrist away from him and feeling the unbroken skin. "No. If you bite me, you'll kill me eventually, won't you?"

"I don't know," he said quietly, averting his eyes because of his shame in mentioning the unmentionable. "I've never tried to keep a human alive to harvest their blood. My mother and aunt always eat anyone I drain." He paused and wind blew through the tower. "Forgive me. I can't stop this feeling from growing. It's in my nature and I can't break from it. Perhaps you should go to the mainland where you'll be safe from me."

"No!" Stella shrieked, grabbing his arm. "I can't go to the mainland. Don't send me."

"But, treasure," he said, touching her cheek tenderly with the back of his fingers. "You don't understand. My mother keeps me well nourished, but no matter how much I drink from her ankle, I don't stop wanting to drink from you. It'll only grow worse and worse until I end up going mad and taking what I have no right to take." He suddenly stood up. "You're going to have to let me go."

Time wore on like the wind and the waves. Sethos' eyes became shadows, hollow and vacant. He tried to act the same for her, but it was impossible. He went twice as often to the cave to visit his mother, but he grew thinner and thinner until he was compelled to wear a shirt to hide his jutting bones.

Stella tried to ignore his starvation. She ignored everything. The way he took to sleeping on the beach instead of on the floor above her. He couldn't stand to be in the same building with her while she slept. He didn't trust himself.

Stella pushed it away and pushed it away until finally, her footsteps found their way to the path that led to the seashore. The sand was cold on her bare feet and she didn't disturb one blade of grass as she moved. There was a dying fire on the beach. Sethos sat in front of it with his legs crossed. His drums sat beside him as well as a stack of mats and blankets. From where she stood, it looked like he was playing on his flute, but she heard no music. It wasn't until she was right behind him that she saw what he was doing, and she screamed.

Turning around, his lips and chin were red with blood. His broken wrist fell to his side as he saw her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, as twin tears trickled down his face. "I've tried so hard to be strong."

"And this is what happens to you when I refuse you?"

"No. This is what happened when your mother cursed mine. I'm sorry that I'm made this way, made this poorly, forced down this low, but I am. If I were what nature intended for me, I would be half nymph and even then I would be too low for your notice."

Stella didn't answer. She felt sick and sorry and stabbed right to her heart.

"Let's go back to the tower," he offered. "I'll sleep in my own bed like I'm supposed to."

They walked together. In the past they had held hands many times as they walked, but this time, they couldn't. Sethos wouldn't. His control was slipping and his grip faltering, but he put Stella to bed. The cuts on his wrist obvious and gruesome as he wrapped her covers around her like she was still his treasure. He slipped up the stairs to the top floor.

The next day, he didn't come out of his room. She left him undisturbed until nightfall. Then she'd had enough. She opened the door at the top of the tower and stepped into his room. The ocean breeze blew cool through one balcony and out the other. Stella felt her own heartbeat. Each throb felt like it would pound her ribcage to dust. She couldn't bear the pain.

Sethos was spreading his white angel wings and standing at the balcony facing north. The sun had set and the sky was filled with gold and rust. His brown hand stroked the stone door frame.

"I love you," he said, turning for one moment to look at her.

"Don't go," she commanded. "I don't want you to go."

"Your eyes are shining, treasure. They are so green," he replied peaceably.

Stella rushed to him. "Don't leave. I love you!" She threw herself on his back and put her arms around his shoulders. His wings smelled like the wind and the perfume of the universe. With her cheek on his back, she could feel the fury of his heart and the heat of his skin.

"Don't kill me," she whispered. "If you have to bite me, do it, but don't kill me."

He whipped around and gripped her face between his hands. Looking desperately into her eyes, he said, "Are you sure you mean that?"

"No, I'm not sure, but I don't want to lose you," she stuttered.

Anguish filled his eyes, and his expression became tortured. "How can I devour any part of you when that is your answer?"

"I trust you," she whispered, holding his slender wrists. "Don't kill me, and let me be your love."

"You will always be my love," he said as he buried his head in the crook of her neck. "You will always be my love." He bit down.

Stella put her arms around him and clutched his wings. She closed her eyes and imagined he was kissing her. He was kissing her warmly, like he had kissed her thousands of times before.

Then her mind seemed to change course and she couldn't steer it back to the present. Bitter feelings flooded her mind and burned her nerves. She was a lonely creature, not the girl held lovingly by Sethos, but a great woman who was despised and rejected by those she once loved and trusted. She was always invited, yet shut out from the intimacies of the society she used to enjoy. It was because she was a sacrifice on a bed of black silk.

Her history as the Goddess Persephone hit her like a thunderbolt. Her life as Stella had just been a dream, an escape. Nothing could save her from the emptiness that gaped in front of her like a chasm. There was no end, no death and no freedom.

She opened her eyes and saw Sethos, a single tear streaking the side of his cheek. He had known what she was and loved her anyway. Not because he was fascinated by what she represented and not because he was excited by the idea of being the plaything of a formidable goddess, but because of her soul under everything else. He didn't know of the constant revulsion that followed her when she visited Olympus. He didn't care that she had been abused and broken by a cruel, unwanted husband.

What she had become was a woman who was not the innocent child that Apollo wept over. Now her desires were clear. She wanted life to have the chance to spring up, rather than being constantly cut down.

"I love you," Persephone said, looking straight into Sethos' eyes. "I love you and I want to go on being in love with you."

He wrapped her up in his arms and wings, crushing her gently. "Thanks be to the gods."

The day ended with the two of them sprawled across his bed as she told him the truth about herself. She hadn't been wrong about him and his feelings for her. Nothing she could say would ruin the sweetness of his feelings. He was a cursed creature of sin and therefore he couldn't judge her with distaste. Both of them were wrecked by powers beyond their control, but when they were together, they felt whole.

They belonged together.

Chapter Twenty Three

The First Dream - Part Three

Persephone stared out at the sea from the top of Stella's tower. It was nothing like her tower on Mount Olympus. She faced south and the sun beat down on her skin. Her skin never used to feel burnt when it was hot out. She used to love heat and in her current skin, it felt like she was going to fry to a crisp. She backed away and waited in the shade.

Stella's body was both a nuisance and a comfort to Persephone once her memories were restored. It was a nuisance because it was mortal and tired easily and was frail as blown glass. It was a comfort only because it allowed her to be with Sethos.

Mortality was a hard bargain, especially the eating part. Food had only been for pleasure when she had been a goddess. Now she hated the sweat it formed on Sethos' brow as he labored to keep her well-fed. She couldn't stop him from doing it. He fished, he hauled water, he picked fruit, and he dried plants. Didn't he realize he was wasting her life? The more time he spent fussing over her diet, the less time she got to spend with him. Now that she recognized the precariousness of her position, she knew that she may not even get to spend the remainder of Stella's lifespan with him.

Hades would find her. Her disguise wasn't good enough to fool the God of the Underworld forever. His specialty was in sorting souls and he knew the texture and taste of hers very well. Even if she had hidden hers in rotting human flesh, he would find her. She had to make the most of the time they had.

Because she had lived as Hades' wife, she could not enjoy the comfort Sethos offered her as her lover. The truth was, life with Hades had left her too sexually abused to want to take that step. She loved Sethos, but she was afraid to let him touch her. What if sex with Sethos was just as painful and horrible as it had been with Hades? They kissed, and she never wished it was more.

And when they kissed, her mind filled with visions as glorious and intense as heaven. She had visions of flying with him. She saw them swimming. He embraced her like she was sacred. He knelt before her as he did the first time. She breathed the fragrance of the sea on his skin. It was enough for her.

She felt happy, like she used to long ago.

Even though her immortal coil had been shuffled off in favor of a disposable one, even though she had suffered the abuse of a god who would never tire of tormenting her, she had escaped for one glorious moment into the arms of an enemy.

She stretched her limbs on Sethos' bed and waited for him to join her. He was away, visiting his mother. When would he be back? Before the sun dipped behind the mountain range? Before the room grew dark orange? Before her pulse beat ten times? Or five times? Now? Would he arrive this very second?

Just then, she heard the sound of feet alighting upon the north balcony. Persephone leapt from the bed when a figure entered the room that was not who she was expecting.

White hair blew in strands against his pale face and parted to show scarlet eyes.

Persephone stared. Hades had found her. How? She knew at once. It was her memory. As soon as it returned to her, he had been able to track her.

"Wife," he said darkly. "You're breaking your contract with me."

"I was tired of staining my arms black doing your dirty work," she said. Stella's voice sounded weak and counterfeit when placed next to the God of the Underworld's rich tones.

"You break my heart," he said, approaching her in full battle armor. He carried his helmet in his arms and the length of his snow-white hair fell against his black breastplate.

"You broke my spirit," she retorted.

"Apparently not, if you have the impudence to run away," he said as he examined her current form. "You're not beautiful like that."

"I don't care," she mouthed, tears coming to her eyes. Now that he had found her, she didn't know what was to be done. What was he going to do? If he was to rape her in her current form, it would be better to jump off the tower before he could touch her. At least then she could go back to being Persephone and her goddess body could take his abuse.

"But you're a virgin again," he murmured. "How interesting! Do you—the Goddess of Fertility—really want to live like that? A virgin? Untouched?"

"Don't come near me!" she hissed, inched her way to the second balcony.

"I won't if you don't want me to. I know how delicate you are in that state. I want to talk to you. All these years we've been together, did my feelings for you never get through to you?"

"Your feelings? The only feelings of yours I saw were hate and revenge. I know you wanted me to be hungry for power. I know you wanted our partnership to be the greatest alliance in history, but I never lived up to your ambition. You hate me," she said, grabbing the door frame of the balcony to steady herself.

"You think I hate you?" he asked quietly.

"What else could you feel? You don't treat me like your wife. You don't even treat me like a goddess. You use me. You use me any way that suits you, and I'm not half strong enough to counter you."

"So, I've driven you to this? I've driven you to seek comfort out of my realm in a body that dies every moment you live in it?"

The sun fell behind the top of the mountain. She prayed Sethos would not return to the tower with the setting of the sun.

"I have not been cruel to you," he said fiercely, the anger of a god thundering in his voice. "I originally sought your hand through the proper channels, but your meddling mother condemned our union. What else was I to do? I didn't want anyone else but you."

"You stole me away from my home and robbed me of my innocence in the most spiteful way. How can you say you haven't been cruel to me?"

He exhaled heavily and yellow vapor escaped between his lips. "I still maintain that there was no other way to achieve you. If I had waited to consummate our marriage, Apollo would have brought war. Then everything would have been in vain. The way I acted could not have been avoided."

"And what about since then?" she wept, falling to the floor with her back to the wall. "What do you say to justify your unkindness since then?"

"I have been kind to you," he breathed, his breath becoming orange. "I admit I have been frustrated with you. Why can't you forgive me for those first crimes I was forced to commit? I have tried in so many ways to entice you to open your heart to me, but you are unmoved."

She didn't answer. She couldn't. His attempts at tenderness tasted the same as his first crimes.

"You don't want to forgive me," he said as though he comprehended it for the first time and the knowledge deflated him. His breath turned white. "You *want* to leave me."

Her tears came like a waterfall as she fell on her face at his feet. "Yes. Please, my lord, let me go."

"I can't," came his stiff reply.

"I know you can't let me go forever, but can you let me live here until this body dies? It would be the first tenderness I asked of you since the moment you dropped those seeds between my lips. I beg you!" Her fingers rested on his sandals. It was the first time she had voluntarily touched him since their marriage.

His shoulders fell. "What would you do with your time here?"

At that exact moment, Sethos landed on the north balcony.

The room turned dark orange.

Hades turned and saw the half-siren.

Through Persephone's tears she saw Sethos' wings retract. He didn't speak, but dropped to his knees to mimic her. She didn't need to tell him who her visitor was. It could only be one person.

Hades kicked Persephone's fingers loose. "If this is what you plan to do," he said, indicating Sethos and drawing his sword. "Then why haven't you done it already?" He used the flat of it to raise Sethos' chin.

"My lord?" Sethos asked vacantly. It was clear that he had no idea what they were talking about before he entered.

"Silence!" He turned to her. "Persephone, answer me."

"You misjudge me. I am not the same as those red-blooded gods on Olympus who find pleasure in making conquests of mortals. I would die as I am now—a virgin."

"I believe you," he said resting the point of his blade above Sethos' heart. They both knew he would see through her lies, so she told none. "So, what do you want with this... siren?"

"He has been providing me with food," she answered, stretching the truth as far as she dared. "You know who he is?"

"Of course I do. He owes you a debt larger than he is paying. Though I don't want you to use him as your plaything, you must do something else to him to show your anger and resentment toward his mother." Hades removed his sword and used his free hand to help Persephone to her feet.

"Such as? Isn't it enough that he labor for me all my life?"

"It would be, except that I know your wrath toward his mother. Does she still live or have you stopped her heart?"

"She lives. I was not kind enough to kill her."

"And you think I'm resentful toward you? Your scorn is immortal," he said, his breath becoming black like the walls of the Underworld. He placed the handle of his sword in her wet palms. "I'll make you a bargain. If you cut him, I'll allow you to live here all the days of your natural life."

Persephone didn't dare to ask what would happen if she didn't. She flexed her fingers around the handle and looked at Sethos. He kept his head down and knelt as though he expected her to sever his head. She knew what this moment meant to him. He would allow her to cut him without even letting her see his eyes for fear that his expression would give her reason to pause. He wanted her to cut him with confidence, like his life meant nothing to her. That was the only way they could stay together.

She smacked her lips. They were cracked. "I won't sever anything," she said. "I would hate to see a mutilated man serving me for the rest of my life. It would be too pathetic."

"So be it," Hades agreed, crossing his arms and waiting for her strike.

She judged the shoulder to be the best place to pierce him and straightway dealt the strike. Sethos did not move or cry out. He took it bravely and as she drew out the point, he braced himself as though he expected another stab.

"Are you satisfied?" she asked, wiping the blood on the hem of her dress.

Hades didn't answer, but seemed to be thinking of something carefully. He took the sword from her and sheathed it. "I am not satisfied, but you have fulfilled your half of the bargain. I will let you live here as long as you like in that body." Then he went to the balcony door. "We will meet again," he said before he disappeared in a cloud of black fog.

Persephone watched as his form disappeared into the ether. When she was convinced that no part of him lingered, she ran to Sethos' side.

"Thank you," she muttered. "I tried not to do it deep. Will you survive?"

"More than that," he said, his eyes filling with humor.

"You were so strong," she commended.

"I thought you were the one that was strong. I know how afraid you are of him. You were valiant."

She retrieved a length clean cloth and tied his wound. "Will it take long to heal?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said as the fabric absorbed his blood. "I'm already better. I have been given permission by your husband to live by your side for the rest of your life. I'm in heaven. This is heaven." He leaned forward and kissed her lips.

She kissed him back and to her surprise and wonder, he lifted her off the floor with his bad arm and carried her to his bed.

Night's darkness spread across the land. The last remaining sparkles of the sun's rays had dimmed and the stars began to shine like coins flung in a pool. Sethos lay in her arms despite her meeting with her unwanted husband.

Sethos' kisses tasted like hot rain and his mouth worshiped hers in the true fashion of lovemaking, the one she wasn't familiar with.

What time passed between their kiss and the arrival of an arrow that pierced the headboard over Sethos' head, Persephone knew not. She didn't know what attacked them. Exerting great effort, she roused herself from the bed and rushed to the balcony. Swarming the tower flew the army of the Underworld. She knew them as her eyes scanned the horizon. She knew parts of them: their howls and the sounds of their discontented scratching, but she had never seen them in full array like this.

The archers flew on black wings with arrows pulled at the ready. When Persephone filled the doorway, they stayed their hands, but only temporarily. One corrected his aim. An arrow flew past her ear and struck the bed where Sethos had been only a moment before.

"They're here for you," Persephone yelled. "You have to hide!"

"No," he said, displaying even more courage than when she had spilled his blood. His expression was fathomless. "I'll fight them."

"You'll die," she yelled, spreading her arms wide to stop the army from shooting.

"Then I'll die, but I will not do you the same wrong my mother did." Sethos pulled twin swords from under his mattress and spread out his wings to battle his foe across the skies while Persephone stood, clenching her dress and fearing the outcome. He flew fearlessly into the night and began to cut down the line of archers. Ribbons of his blood streamed across the sky as he took damage.

Then Persephone saw him. At the end of the line of archers, flying dogs, and ancient warlords, she saw him—Hades. He rode on Cerberus' back and watched the battle from the top of a hill. She could see the glint of his hard red eyes even from that distance.

Hades had seen their secret extended kisses. That was why he retreated temporarily, to spy on them. She had broken no promise. Adultery was not one of her sins. Forbidden love on the other hand was definitely the chief of her wrongdoings and he was punishing her for it.

Now she understood. Hades was willing to let her live on the island for as long as she wished. There was no expiry date to the bargain, just so long as she didn't live with any man, she was free. It didn't matter to Hades if she dallied with Sethos sexually or only harbored feelings for him, one was just as objectionable as the other.

What if she agreed to go back to the Underworld with him now? Would he forgive her and save Sethos' life?

That was what he was waiting for. That was what the demon was doing watching the battle with such an easy spirit. His forces could have easily overpowered one half-siren. He was waiting for Persephone's will to crack. He was waiting for her to fall at his feet and beg him to call his soldiers off.

Persephone was paralyzed.

From across the valley, Hades gave her a look. She knew that look. It said, "Make up your mind, or I'll make it up for you."

Her brain worked furiously. She couldn't see how begging Hades to stop would make him stop the attack. Even if she gave him what he wanted, he would kill Sethos

anyway and see that his soul was sealed in the ninth circle of Hell. Was there even one thing she could do to save him?

Time was up and she hadn't answered Hades.

Hades was finished waiting. He put his hand up in the air to call off his goons and they all fled from Sethos like scattering spiders.

Sethos held his position in the air, his swords lowered in his clenched fists. His shoulders and arms were badly cut. Blood fell in red strings across his bare chest and in stark contrast on his white wings. He'd taken gashes everywhere. Worst of all was his eye. One of his eyes had been gouged out.

Persephone's lips quivered in terror and her breath became ragged as she looked upon him.

Hades pulled his bow from his shoulder and notched an arrow. There was no way he would miss.

"Sethos!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "Come here!"

He shook his head and spread his wings as if he was going to charge Hades.

"Seth, come to me!" she tried again.

Hades arrow flew true and struck Sethos in the heart.

Persephone screamed.

Hades lowered his commanding arm and his army descended upon Sethos. New arrows struck home, fangs found his throat, his wings rent from his back, and knives pierced his flesh, until Hades called them off. Their last order was to drop his mutilated corpse on the balcony in front of Persephone.

A muscle in her chin twitched. For a moment she dared not look down. There was a warm wet wind blowing across her face and down the sweaty expanse of her chest. She lowered herself to her knees on the stone balcony and kept her eyes to the sky. She looked out onto the sea and the starry night sky. Reaching out, she touched her love and felt the hot wetness of his lifeblood. Closing her eyes, she felt his body with her hands until she found his mouth. Kissing him, she tasted the blood he had choked on. Now her hands and lips were drenched in blood and swollen tears streamed down her cheeks freely.

Opening her eyes, she forced herself to take responsibility for what had just happened. What had Sethos hoped for? Was he hoping to undo his mother's curse? She was dizzy and it didn't matter what he had wanted. He had died because of her. He had died *for* her.

His blood pooled and stained the dark stones of the balcony. His body was practically hacked to bits. He was missing fingers and there was Hades' arrow was stuck through his chest and two knives protruded from his abdomen.

Seeing him thus defaced, her lip trembled and the anger that boiled in her system could not be contained. Those bastards! Damn them! Damn everyone! She knew what to do. She was not the Goddess of the Underworld for nothing. She had come to this world for freedom, not to be stomped down in this fashion. No matter how Hades ended her escapade, she wouldn't let him remain conqueror. She would not surrender. The battle would go on, and she knew who her first victim would be.

She wrenched one of the knives from Seth's stomach free. Bending down, she kissed the bloody gash.

"I love you so much," she whined, her voice broken. "You can't die like this. I'll give you a different ending."

With that, she took the knife and put it to her own throat, slitting it with such violence that she managed to cut herself ear to ear.

The last thing Persephone heard before she entered the Underworld was a howl. Hades had not expected her to do that and now he was so angry he was screaming himself hoarse.

Persephone arrived in the Underworld within the blink of an eye and woke up where she had left her immortal body, in bed. Her body yearned for her spirit to return and called out to her each second they were separated.

She hadn't a moment to lose. Swinging her feet to the floor, she reached for the bottle on her dressing table, the one that housed Stella's soul. The bottoms of her slippers resounded on the marble as she charged through Hades' palace to the entrance.

She had to find Sethos' soul. He would be wandering and she had to beat Hades to him. If she was too slow he would send Sethos to the tenth level of Tartarus for sure.

Rushing to the mouth of the Styx, she leaped into Charon's waiting boat and ordered him to cast off.

"Money," he said, pushing out his hand.

"What do you need money for, you stupid ghoul?" she shouted. "You spend eternity here running up and down the river as a slave. Why do you need money?"

"I just do," he said turning his head away and extending his open palm to her again.

"Why?" she questioned, ripping the slippers from her feet. "The way you always demand payment is starting to make me feel like I should keep a coin under my tongue, and I'm the blasted Goddess of the Underworld!"

"It would be a wise idea," he said as he picked several gem stones off the toes of the slippers.

"Get moving! I have no time to banter and barter with you. I have to find a soul before Hades does."

Charon seemed not to have heard her as he pocketed the rest of the jewels. He tossed the slippers back at her and took the oar with an experienced hand. "If you tell me the soul's name, I'll find it for you, but I won't give you a ride back unless you pay me again."

"Done," she said, knowing full well that she didn't have anything else of value on her person. "Sethos."

"Arrow to the heart," he said, pointing to the far shore. "I'll take you there." And for once, Charon seemed to be putting some effort into his job. He moved the oar like Persephone had never seen. The water parted in huge waves behind them and the sparkling lost souls on the banks were sprayed with gray water.

High up on the banks, the lost souls gathered together in huge groups. How was she going to find Sethos in this mess?

"He was murdered by Hades himself, so his soul will take on a red tinge. You're on your own. I cannot leave the boat. You can safely wade in the water, goddess. It's not death to you." Then he took a deep breath as though their journey had tired him. "Get out."

"Thank you," she said, jumping out of the boat into the slippery water. She steadied herself with one hand on the lip of the boat, but she still managed to lose one of her slippers straight off.

Then Charon laughed. It was a deep laugh rather like a chuckle and it was the first sign of a personality she had ever witnessed in the ferryman. "Hades would never imagine that you would do this. To him, it's raw sewage. He won't come here or find you. I recommend you leave that bottle somewhere along the way. If you keep it with you, he'll take it from you."

"You know your master well," she commented, letting go of the boat and preparing to go on her own.

"I know how he feels for you well."

"Do you think I'm ungrateful?" she asked haughtily.

"I wouldn't help you if I thought that." Then he cast away from the shore and left Persephone to search for the red specter among thousands of blue ones.

She was a goddess. Finding Sethos shouldn't have taken any time at all. She should have just looked at the clusters of soul lights and seen the red one, but she didn't. She measured the time. It had been one hour since she began, one whole hour. That was when her frustration peaked.

Uncorking the bottle, she spoke to Stella, "All right, Stella. I'm looking for your family now. You have to help me find them, but you can't come out of the bottle. If you do, your soul will naturally begin wandering."

"How do I help you look, if I can't get out of the bottle?" Stella whined.

"Tell me their names and I'll attach a spell that will turn their spirit bodies golden." It was the same spell Charon had done when he dropped her off. She only needed to see it once to replicate it.

Stella told her their names and Persephone replaced the cork. It wasn't that she was particularly interested in finding Stella's family, but she did make a promise she had to keep. Stella gave her eleven names. Maybe she'd have more success looking for twelve people than one.

She was right. She found three members of Stella's family within minutes. Behind a rock, she found two more huddled together. Why was it so hard to find Sethos? She found gold colored souls each way she turned, but the scarlet one she sought was nowhere.

Finally, when she had gathered up all eleven of Stella's family members, she turned to rest on the bank. Her feet hung in the water and her mind was filled with desolate thoughts. Maybe Hades had guessed her plan and sealed Sethos' soul immediately after his death. She plopped the glass bottle beside her and raked her fingers through her hair in frustration. It didn't matter what moves she made, Hades was always ahead of her.

Persephone twitched. Something was crawling in her ear. She brushed it away. It came back. She slapped it away. Did insects live in this cave?

It buzzed in a third time and she caught it in her hand. It was her red light, Sethos.

"Thank heaven I found you," she cried.

"You didn't find me," his sorrowful voice murmured. "I have been following you."

"Have you?"

"I've been on your back almost the whole time. You wouldn't turn around. Thank you for searching for me so carefully."

"How did you know it was me? I look so different now."

"I'd love you in any shape you took, and your eyes are always green. Persephone," he asked in a low voice. "What's going to happen to me now? Hades will certainly send me to hell."

"I won't let him send you to Tartarus. I have a plan. You are going to be born again. I'm going to take you back to your mother."

Persephone eased Sethos' soul in the bottle with Stella and started down the road to Gaia, where she would alight in front of the cave where Raidne and Teles lived. She needed to have a talk with them about how to break their curse and how to set her free.

In all the time that Persephone lived on the island, she never once went to the cave where the sirens lived. It was none of her business. They disgusted her.

Now that she was there, she was startled by the looks of things. They lived in a cave that had been hollowed out of the side of a cliff and even though it was always flooded at high tide, it was an incredibly beautiful place when it was drained. Inside, the water from the sea ran in a river that rose and fell with the tide. Some rooms were available during low tide and others were too high to be flooded during high tide. There were bridges that crossed the water and torches that lit the rooms decked in treasures scavenged from wrecked vessels. The cave walls glittered with coins and gemstones.

Persephone made her way through the rooms and corridors, holding her bottle in one hand while she pinched her nose with the other. It smelt rank. No one else would have noticed anything other than the smells of sea salt and the mess that always came with the ocean, but she smelled nothing but the servants who betrayed her.

The sirens were in the furthest chamber from the entrance, it was the only room that had a door on it.

Persephone grabbed the iron ring used for a door handle and swung the door open without knocking.

Raidne and Teles saw her enter and nearly fainted for shame. Well, they should have felt desperately filthy being caught feasting on Stella and Sethos' dead bodies by Persephone herself.

Persephone turned her head in revolt while the sirens prostrated themselves before her, shrieking apologies.

"It doesn't matter," she said after she'd heard sufficient whimpering. "You are cursed and wretched, so you are compelled to behave without conscience or manners. It's not as if you killed us. Raidne, answer me something. How many children have you birthed all these years?"

"Three," she answered. "Sethos was the first boy."

"Do you like raising children?" Persephone asked coldly.

"I would like it better if I were not a siren," she replied miserably, her jagged teeth looked sharper than ever.

"Well, I have a task for you. Fetch me a bottle."

Raidne ran and got one immediately.

The goddess took it in her hands. She didn't want this interview to last any longer than it had to. The sight of Stella and Sethos' mangled corpses made her feel infinitely sickened and saddened at the same time.

She set the two bottles on the table and uncorked the one with Sethos' soul in it. She grasped the red flicker that was his spirit and trapped it in Raidne's bottle before it could be pulled back to the Underworld.

"Listen to me. I hate you both, but I will tell you how to break your curse."

"How?" they begged, pressing their foreheads against the stone floor.

"First, Raidne, you must give birth to this child again. Each time you birth him, you must mark the number of times on his throat."

"I'll have to do it more than once?" Raidne asked timidly.

Persephone snapped. "You'll do it as many times as it takes for you to get the combination right. He must be an adequate tool for me to use. If you fail, he'll die. He'll die over and over again until you get it right. Prepare yourselves. You sent me through hell—you won't break the curse until you walk the path I have trod and doubled back again."

Chapter Twenty Four

The Second Dream

Seth navigated through the city with Rylan hard on his tail for over an hour. Chas' Jaguar was severely dented after numerous hits from Rylan's perpetual rear-ending. Seth didn't care. He knew Chas wouldn't care. All their possessions were disposable. Nothing mattered if he was going to save Persephone.

Persephone lay in the backseat in Juliet's body. Sometimes she trembled. Sometimes she muttered phrases like, "Go chop wood," or "Staining my arms." She was remembering everything, because he bit her, and she was getting so much more than the thirteen years of Juliet's life that she didn't know about.

He had to lose Rylan. Checking his rearview mirror, he saw Rylan's headlights. In an all-or-nothing effort, risking his and Juliet's safety, Seth spun the wheel to take them the wrong way down an on-ramp. Before reaching the oncoming traffic below, he hit the gas and sped across the median with a clatter to merge gently into traffic on the right side of the road.

Seth sped through a red light and into a residential neighborhood, leaving Rylan far behind and out of sight.

Seth exhaled a heavy sigh of relief. That was it.

He put his car in reverse and headed back downtown. He needed a place to go where Rylan wouldn't find them. He headed for a hotel with underground parking.

He shuddered. He had to get them out of the car.

Seth nervously left Juliet still unconscious in the backseat to check into the hotel. After getting their room key, he parked underground and carried Juliet, limp, to the elevator, avoiding the hotel staff and any confrontations.

Once in the room, he placed her on the bed and looked at her face. She shook her head restlessly for a while. He stroked the side of her face in an attempt to get her to calm down. She grabbed his fingers and kissed them.

His face fell.

All his life he had been told that he was the consort of the Goddess Persephone. It was a fact his mother had told him since he was born. He felt it was true because he had vague memories of his first life. He thought he remembered a bonfire and dancing, but he couldn't be sure. Raidne filled him in on the details. Apparently, his previous incarnations had told her everything. Seth thought this strange. He certainly didn't think of his mother as a confidant in his current life.

Seth remembered his second life better. The second time he was born, Persephone came to meet him as herself, in all her glory with tangles of red hair blowing in the breeze.

Those memories were dearer to him. He remembered the passage of events with some clarity, but it felt like a dream and not like his real experiences.

The truth was, in this third life of his, he didn't believe he would fall in love with Persephone, no matter what his mother told him. Raidne said that he would love her on sight. Perhaps he would have believed her if his mother, the prophetess, was not a blood-soaked siren who lived on a diet of dead human flesh. How could Raidne understand anything as divine as his love?

Seth had certainly been attracted to women before he met Juliet, but he always knew that his feelings were predominantly fueled by his desire to feed off them. Thus, he was disgusted with himself and clung to Nixie for friendship. All that changed when he saw Juliet, because he felt powerless in the face of his feelings—absolutely powerless. She was beautiful, but not as much as other women he's seen. He couldn't figure out why he wanted to be near her so badly. If he stayed with her, he would turn her into a shell.

It was clear now. It was because Persephone's soul was in that young girl's body that his heart ached for her. It was because his spirit recognized hers and all his past emotional wounds were unbound. It turned out that they were still fresh. A new body hadn't healed him.

Slowly, he allowed himself to remember that second life and for the first time, accept it as his.

Seth had been raised on the rocks and cliffs of an isolated island. He knew sunshine, ocean waves crashing, sunrises, sunsets, wind, fog and, of course, murder. He was the only child with Raidne and Teles. If he wanted to eat, he had to drink the victim's blood before Raidne and Teles spilled it. That meant he was the first on the scene of a shipwreck while the sirens sang from their perches above to lure in the sailors to their island. He was thin, brown, scarred and hungry all the time.

Raidne told him stories of a woman who he would meet when he was a man, who he would have to kiss instead of bite, caress instead of choke, and love instead of devour. He didn't understand. What was kissing? What was love? He didn't know anything except the cycle of luring ships to the shore, wrecking them, and killing everyone aboard.

Once, when he was fifteen, he told his mother that he wouldn't go with Persephone when she called for him.

Raidne had responded with fury. "If you won't go with her, you're of no value to anyone and I'll kill you now." She had knocked him against the wall and moved to bite him.

He knew she did not jest when she threatened to murder him. He had hidden his face from enough gore to know she should be taken at her word. "I'll go!" he screamed before she broke his flesh.

He was told to go to a certain mountain the year he was twenty-one. There, he would be carried on the back of a fey horse to the place where he would meet Persephone. His mother had dressed him carefully in the best clothes she had stolen from dead men. He mounted the unworldly stallion and stared sullenly at his mother.

"Spread your wings out when you see her. She loved to fly with you."

Seth had frowned and told the horse they could go. He was too nervous to be reasoned with. This was what he was born for, to be toyed with by a goddess. He felt sick. During all the times his mother spoke to him of his purpose, she had never said anything about what Persephone looked like except that she had green eyes. Green was the color of life, but what could she know about life? She was the Goddess of the Underworld.

When he was a child, he had built up an idea of what she would be like and even when he became a man, the image did not dissipate. He was frightened of her. In his mind, her hair was oily black and stringy, running down to her knees. Her face was long and pasty. Spiders and mice lived in her clothing. Her skin would be greasy and he would have to touch her. The thought made him gag.

The stallion lifted Seth into the air, flying a direction Seth didn't know it was possible to fly with no wings. The island beneath them disappeared and there was only the ocean currents and the horizon to be seen. On their journey, they flew through clouds higher than any Seth had ever flown through, and when the clouds parted, Seth saw a river beneath them. It was black with tiny lights like blue fireflies dotting the surface. The river flowed the wrong way, up the mountain and into a gaping cave of shadows. It was the river Styx. They must be close to their destination.

The stallion didn't agree and it flew on, out of the darkness and into color. The color was gold. They were flying in a straight line, toward a different mountain, a higher mountain than the land of the dead. In the distance, shining gold and green, was Mount Olympus. Seth faltered. He wasn't worthy of going there, but again the stallion had his own route mapped out, and suddenly began his spiraling descent.

They had not flown all the way to Olympus, but instead landed on the far side of the Underworld, where water ran upward.

Seth looked around, confused. The side of the mountain he had originally seen was dark and sick with death. It had been a facade. The other side of the mountain was green with grass and lined with well-kept trees. There was a road in front of him, not a human road, but a road that looked like it was made of just the yellow part of a rainbow. It led to Olympus, and the other end of the road led to the doors of Hades' palace.

Seth dismounted and unfurled his wings to await Persephone.

He told himself the arrangement could only last six months at the most. Then she would return to the Underworld and he would be free, for at least six months. He hoped she tired of him quickly.

But then the doors of Hades' palace were flung open and a young woman burst forth from them. Monsters chased her and when they could not reach her, they curled their shadowy claws around the doors, pulling them shut with a thunderous slam. The young lady threw her shoes up in the air and fell back on the grass, laughing up at the clouds. Her red hair curled and fell in gorgeous waves around her face.

Seth was speechless.

This was the Goddess of the Underworld? No, this was the Goddess of Fertility.

He was a siren so he sung almost always, just for the beauty of it, but he had never heard anything as beautiful as the song his heart sang as he gazed upon her. She was smiling and the delight on her face made him feel unworthy. Why should he have this pleasure? It was forbidden love.

He spread his wings as proudly as he could and walked with grace to offer the Goddess Persephone a hand in rising.

She took it and flew into his arms. Seth couldn't find his voice. She was so different than what he imagined. She was short. Her head tucked in right under his shoulder, and the perfume of her hair was intoxicating. He was losing his senses.

She kissed him and prompted, "We need to go. I've got a place ready." She mounted the stallion and put him up behind her. Telling him to tuck in his wings, they raced across the skyline.

Seth didn't know how long they traveled. It was a blur of happiness as he held onto her waist and nestled his face in her hair. Finally, they alighted outside a cave not unlike his old home. The cave had a huge circular entrance. Inside there were no tunnels leading deeper into the earth. Instead, there was only a pool of black water protected by the walls and ceiling of the cave. He could hear the waves of the sea crashing nearby.

"What are we doing here?" he asked.

"I made this place especially for you, for when you came to see me," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm sure you'll be able to make the journey," she said sweetly. Then she pushed him into the water.

Seth surfaced, unsure how to take this playful side to her nature. He hadn't wanted to be drenched when he was dressed so well. Sirens were not water creatures even though they lived by water. They were creatures of the air.

She was laughing as she jumped in after him. "Take a deep breath," she said grabbing his shoulders and dunking him.

Under the water, she took his hand and together they swam through the coral and rocks. Seth ran out of air more than once, but Persephone kissed him and blew new air in his mouth. He tried to hold onto her to extend the kiss, but she hurried him on. He held her hand as they made their way deeper and deeper into the water. When they came to the end of their journey, there was almost no light. They had to swim under a huge rock and then up to get to an entryway. They emerged in a room that was bare, except for a landing with two large carved doors.

When they stood on the landing, Persephone rung the water from her dress and pulled open the doors. "Give me a moment," she said, closing them behind her.

Seth stood dripping on the tile, feeling rather foolish. Nothing was turning out how he expected. He wasn't supposed to love her, yet every moment they were separated was agony.

One minute later she opened the door to let him in, except she looked completely different. Her hair was dry and she was dressed, having discarded the white dress she wore before. This time she wore a gown of orange flame with long tight sleeves and a square neckline. There was amber shining in her hair and she brought a brown tapestry robe that she hung on his shoulders.

"I love you," he said suddenly, surprised at the sound of his own voice.

Her expression was forlorn. "Come inside," she invited, drawing him through the doors.

Inside was a magnificent palace, clearly fit for a goddess. The floor glistened with mother-of-pearl triangle tiles and the walls were carved out of black rock, jagged and sharp. Even though the palace was deep within the sea, the rooms they entered were not cold. Actually, it was somewhat like home for Seth, except there had never been blood spilled here. He liked it.

Persephone led him to a bedroom decorated in tan, like the sand of the sea. She told him to get cleaned up. There were plenty of clothes for him in the wardrobe.

So, he took care in dressing. He wanted to please her.

When he returned from the bed chamber, the blinds were drawn and Persephone was looking out into the ocean. There was a bale of turtles swimming by. She was pacing. Her shoes clacked on the tiles.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"All is not well. I'm not feeling easy," she admitted.

"Why?"

She sighed. "You're going to die."

"You don't know that," he contradicted softly.

"No, you are," she said. Her beautiful lips quivered. "We must make the most out of this time and not waste it."

She touched his shoulder and looked at him as gravely as if he were already dead. He didn't understand it. Did she have second sight? Well, he wouldn't die!

"Well, what am I to do?" he asked.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, extending her wrist. "You can have a drink if you want to."

Actually, he was not hungry. His mother had seen to it that he was well fed before he left home.

He evaded the question and asked, "Aren't I to be your lover?"

She winced. "I'm sorry. I don't want to form that bond since our love is hopeless. I'll live with the pain of remembering just your arms around me for who knows how long without relief. Let's not make memories too intense for me to live with after you are gone."

"Why do you keep saying I'm going to die?" he asked, his voice rising. "I'm not. I'm young. I'm healthy and sirens never die. My mother has already lived over a thousand years. Why do you keep saying this?"

"Because it's true, but I must see your strength. Bite me!" she insisted, extending her arm and pulling up her beautiful sleeve.

He recoiled. He did not want to break her flesh if it was not necessary.

"Bite me! I want to see how much power she gave you."

"I don't want to bite you. You're too precious. I want to kiss you."

Persephone pushed her sleeve down. "You don't understand our situation right now. Sit down with me and I will explain something."

He sat down and she took his hand in hers. She began by touching his skin lightly then she kissed his palm. "I know you're brave. I know you would die for me. You already have. You don't have to prove it. I would prefer it if you didn't."

Now she was talking sense.

"There's no way we can be successful this time," she continued. "We will have to wait for you to be reborn a third time."

Seth didn't understand why she was so hopeless. What would be different the next time? He was frustrated and he didn't understand. He had been told he was her lover, but now he felt like he was being rejected when it was his birthright. And he wanted her so badly his body hurt.

"Be patient," she said softly as she pulled his head into her lap and stroked his hair. "We'll succeed next time."

He didn't believe her.

Perhaps he wouldn't have died if he had taken her warning seriously, but at the time he couldn't stand the limbo in which his life hung while he lived in Persephone's palace. He forgot completely of the struggles he endured while living with the sirens, and instead his life with Persephone felt unbearable.

He was not allowed to sleep in Persephone's bed chamber. She said that gods and goddesses who committed adultery tended to be caught in the act and she did not want anyone to see them, least of all Hades, who she suspected would appear at any moment.

Seth was not her equal.

She treated him like he was a butterfly in a bottle. He would die, so she had to enjoy his beauty while she could. His fragility was proven when he tried to bite her for the first time. His fangs were like daggers and though he evaded biting his own tongue and cheeks with them, a human was nearly cut to ribbons when he applied them. He knew this, so he bit into her softly. He expected to break her flesh. It didn't. When he put all his effort into it, he could draw a tiny portion, but she would quickly heal.

She told him that was the difference between them. She said that if he were immortal, he would have been able to break her skin and make the blood flow, but none of the sirens were truly immortal. They were merely spared from death.

After that, she drew her blood for him, using her own blunt teeth to break the skin.

His ego stung. He thought he was a ferocious beast—a cursed prince—but when he stood up next to Persephone, he was nothing.

He asked her how she planned to break the sirens' curse and her own marriage contract, but she hushed him.

"If anyone heard of our plan, it would be stopped. I don't dare tell you... since you're going to die."

Seth raked at his hair in fury. He hated his life. He hated the mystery. He was a key player, yet he didn't know his role. Well, maybe he did. He was the pawn, the slave, and not one thing in his life was turning out in a way he could stomach.

Persephone was expected on Olympus during her six months out of the Underworld, so she often went to the heavens without Seth, and stayed there for days on end.

"Have you seen Hades on Olympus when you've been there?" Seth asked anxiously when she came back.

"Yes."

"What does he say?"

"Nothing. It's maddening. He knows your soul went missing because it never came to judgment, but I believe he suspects that Zeus has it. My father has been pulling strings for me, but not the ones he thinks."

"What? I didn't know your father still cared for you."

"He does. Zeus gave me two gifts. The first one was that it wouldn't matter how much food I ate in the Underworld, it would no longer condemn me. Secondly, he gave me a favor."

"Did you ask him to release you from your obligation to Hades?"

"He can't do that. Even though Zeus rules the Heavens, he cannot command anything in the Underworld, including me. Hades powers are not like Zeus'. Father would shrink if Hades rose against him. You see, all that lives must die and death is eternal... sometimes."

"So, what has Zeus done for you?" Seth asked hesitantly.

"He added another layer to your mother's curse."

"What?" Seth almost screeched. Wasn't his family already as low as they could get?

"Don't agitate yourself," Persephone said leaning back on her dais unconcernedly.

Seth didn't understand. How could she be so beautiful and holy and so cruel at the same time?

"He stopped Hades from murdering them all."

"What?" Seth breathed, lowering himself in front of her.

"He tried after you died, but for once his movements were slower than mine. I had already arranged it. You see, your darling mother is a part of my plan. I could not allow Hades to kill her when she still has a role to play. For all intents and purposes, she is the one who will have to break your curse. Your part is merely the crowning

glory of her accomplishment. However, she failed this time and you will die as a consequence of it."

"I don't understand."

When Persephone answered, she was not vexed or impatient. Her voice was like the mist on the mountains, full and poignant. "Zeus put a seal of temporary immortality on Raidne and Teles. It will be removed when I bid him, but it's false and provides no comfort or help in this situation. They still suffer like the damned. As they should."

Seth knew how they suffered better than anyone. Their curse was heavy. He could not think of it without pain, even when he was removed from the situation.

Seth could have lived there with Persephone forever, but he did not make it to the end of the first cycle.

There was a masquerade ball to be held on Olympus. It was a going-away celebration for Persephone, and Seth desperately wanted to go. When he asked her if could escort her, since he would be in disguise, she refused saying it was too risky.

Seth wouldn't listen.

He wanted to dance with her. He wanted to hold her close. As they lived, she would hardly let him touch her and soon she would disappear back into the Underworld for six months. The idea wasn't as appealing as it had once been, especially since she had decreed that he wouldn't be able to live alone in her palace during the cold season. She was going to send him home.

"You can't live here," she said. "Without me, your source of food is gone. I don't want you to die of starvation or drive yourself mad with hunger, so it's best to set you free."

"If I stayed here, I'm sure I would be able to hunt for food."

She stroked his cheek lovingly. He knew she loved his confidence, but she also feared it. It would kill him. "No," she said, shaking her head. "Considering the way you are now, I don't think you could survive the trip to the surface. You would have to have an air supply and you would have to swim up slowly to relieve the pressure on your body."

"I could manage that," he said, getting behind her and massaging her shoulders.

"Even if you made it, you would arrive in the darkest wasteland of the sea. Seth, there is nothing nearby, no human settlements. The only thing remotely close is a cloud trail that leads to Olympus and trust me, there's nothing edible along that path."

"What if we stored your blood?"

"That wouldn't work either. My whole body has to go back to the Underworld. If some of it was left undigested in your stomach, you would have to follow me. You have to go home."

Seth didn't see any point in arguing with her. Though it did beg the question, why had she built a secret hideaway for the two of them that he couldn't live in all year round?

Then there was the matter of the masquerade ball, a matter in which he couldn't accept her decision.

The day of the ball, he stood by her dressing table, admiring her and feeling bitterly dejected that he couldn't go with her.

Watching her apply gold powder to her face, he asked, "How are you going to get to the surface without all that washing off in the ocean? Is that another skill of yours as a goddess?"

"Every palace has more than one door. This one has two."

"Two?" he asked in astonishment.

"One leads to Olympus, and one leads to the ocean floor."

"Why is that such a difficult entrance? Is it to stop Hades from reaching you here?"

"No. Hades could come here whenever he wanted to, but out of some twisted respect for my feelings, he never has. You see, even though I'm expected to spend six months of the year on Olympus; it's awkward, socially. Hades himself doesn't choose to spend his time there although he is a joint ruler over Gaia with Zeus and Poseidon. It's uncomfortable for him. As his wife, we share many of the same powers, duties, and social discomfort. I don't want to be there more than I have to be. Living here is my way of being close to Olympus without having to be too close. Actually, a portion of this palace is my old tower on Olympus. I felt unwelcome there, so now one of the paths between the mountains leads here."

"Can I see the old tower?" Seth asked eagerly.

"No. I use it solely as a reception hall when gods and goddesses come to call on me. It's rare, but it makes them feel nostalgic to see my old rooms. I've outgrown them. I like these rooms better. They give me hope."

"But, I want to see—"

"No!" she snapped. "That part of my life is not for you."

Then she dipped her fingers in a second jar and ran them through her hair. The red of her hair was covered entirely with brilliant gold.

"Why are you dressing entirely in gold?" Seth asked, his voice was soft and cautious. He didn't want to anger her further.

"Well, I have this ongoing joke with Apollo, the Sun God. I try to outshine him."

"Do you succeed?" Seth whispered in her ear.

"I haven't yet. It doesn't matter how he dresses, he's always the brightest thing in the room."

She tied her hair up in a scarf so ringlets fell around her face. The scarf she tied almost like a cone and other ringlets trickled out the end. It was beautiful. She was beautiful. Her whole body shone like the sun except for her green eyes. He wondered what she would do to disguise that part of her, because surely everyone knew Persephone for her piercing green eyes that were more radiant than emeralds. Finally, she took a long piece of wide gold lace and turned it back on itself until it was no longer transparent. Then she pinned it across her eyes like a blindfold and tucked the edges under her scarf.

"How will you see?" Seth wondered.

"I'm a goddess. This body is very aware of who touches it. That sense of mine is stronger than sight. Actually, this gives me an advantage because then I can concentrate better. And sometimes it's better if I don't know whether I've beaten Apollo or not. It's a hopeless cause. The Goddess of the Underworld cannot outshine the Sun God, but I can't stop doing it, even though it is slightly ridiculous. He's my only friend besides my mother, who still recognizes me as my old self."

Seth was irritated. It annoyed him that someone so distanced from her, like Apollo, could walk the halls of his lady's tower while he—her lover—was expelled. "Will you dance much tonight?" he asked lightly.

"I don't know, but whatever it's like, it won't be anything like the sound of your drum on the beach with the stars overhead. Goodnight," she said as she swept through the door and down the hallway.

Seth thought of following her up to the tower. He thought he had already explored her palace in its entirety. He didn't even know what passage he should take if he wanted to find the way. Instead, he refused to follow after her and followed his own plan instead.

He ran to his room and got ready.

"I'm going to die," Seth wheezed as he lay wet and deranged on the lip of the cave where Persephone had first pushed him into the water.

What he just went through was definitely hell. Now he felt like he partly understood what she was saying when she worried constantly for his physical

person. It was lucky that he was finished swimming for the day. The exertion would turn him into worms' meat.

He dried himself with a cloth from the parcel he had managed to bring with him. Then he rushed to find the cloud trail Persephone spoke of. Hopefully, it would lead him to the ball. Hopefully, he could slip in unnoticed with the gods and goddesses of Olympus. Hopefully, he could dance just one melody with Persephone.

Finally, he reached the gates of Olympus. They were wide open. Inside, gods and goddesses were mingling while heavenly music played. He had never seen so many colors. One goddess by the doorway wore the clothes of the night sky. Another wore the hue of the setting sun. Two women danced by holding hands. They wore nothing but ivy threads and moss.

Seth pulled his black mask over his eyes and attempted to blend in.

He didn't see Persephone anywhere. She should have been easy to find, since she was dressed like the sun, but he couldn't find her.

He saw Apollo, or at least someone who he thought was Apollo. He was clad entirely in gold like Persephone and was surrounded by five women, all vying for his attention.

Seth, himself, wore clothes that had the appearance of black waves that splashed at night. They were the finest things Persephone had given him. He left his white wings unfurled and stepped around the outskirts of the crowd, because he didn't want to be noticed. He could blend in. Many of the guests had wings.

Looking around, he couldn't identify many of the gods until he saw one god. He knew *him*. He was wearing long, dark trousers. He left his chest bare and had black tattoos all over his body. There were two circular symbols tattooed on both sides of his chest. There were black bands tattooed on his biceps with long curling symbols traveling up his shoulders and down to his elbows. His throat and back were tattooed also. Then his hands and arms, they were black to the elbow. His mask was created out of twisted metal with sharp thorns holding it slightly off his face. It looked like it should have cut him, but somehow, it didn't. It only framed his blood-red eyes and made them look triply as menacing as Seth's memory of Hades.

Everyone moved aside for him when he walked. His white hair flew over his shoulders as he parted the crowd, obviously making his way towards someone.

That was when Seth saw Persephone. In her dressing room, she had shone brilliantly. Now, she looked like her blazing fire had been reduced to embers.

Hades took her in his arms and led her onto the dance floor. She was blindfolded, but she clearly knew his touch because of her reaction. At first, she recoiled, but then she submitted.

Hades wasn't looking at her. He was looking across the dance floor at Seth. Then he started drawing on Persephone's shoulder with his ink-black index finger.

Seth couldn't see her face, but she saw her tremble and, from the rise and fall of her shoulders, her discomfort was palpable. Everyone in the room should have felt it, but no one made a move to protect her from her own husband.

Hades didn't stop at her shoulders. Soon she had his black fingerprints all over her dress and down her back.

If someone didn't do something soon...

Seth saw Persephone's mouth move. He strained his ears and heard her say, "Please stop, I think Demeter is watching us. I don't want to make her any angrier."

"Demeter hasn't come down yet," Hades breathed, his black breath smoking around her ear and staining her neck.

She turned her back to him and insisted, "Someone is watching us."

But Hades pinned her arms behind her back and while looking straight at Seth, he kissed her shoulder. His eyes were gloating.

Seth couldn't stand it. His nails scraped at his temples as he breathed and tried to gain control over himself. There was nothing he could do. He wasn't a god, or a demon, or anything. He was an insect. He didn't even have a weapon. He had nothing.

Then Hades did the most intolerable thing of all. He put his fingers on the strap of Persephone's dress and brushed it so it was on the edge of her shoulder. If it fell, her entire dress would come down in front of all these people.

Against his better judgment, Seth acted.

"Leave her alone!" he yelled.

Upon hearing his voice, Persephone tore the lace from her eyes and saw Seth and Hades standing ten paces away from each other. The gods and goddesses of Olympus went quiet as all eyes turned toward the twisted love triangle.

Persephone's face was tortured.

"So, it is you," Hades said pitilessly. He extended his hand and conjured a silver knife out of thin air. "It was so good of you to show yourself. What objection to my behavior could you possibly have?"

"You're hurting her. Can't you see she doesn't like it?"

Hades bounced the handle of the knife in his palm several times before he answered. "You misunderstand. This show was only for you, to draw you out. Do

you really think that I can't do whatever I want to her, whenever I want? She's been mine for over a thousand years. There's no need for a public display."

Persephone looked pitiful. Her dress and makeup were ruined and there was a tear coursing down each of her cheeks.

Seth knew what she was thinking. He was going to die. He smirked. He had to make this good. "You've only got one blade. It will take more than that to kill me."

"No, it won't," Hades said, expertly slinging the knife without ado and slashing Seth through the heart. "I won't share her with you."

Seth fell flat on his back with his wings unfurled around him. He expected Persephone to fall on his chest and weep for him, but in his last seconds, she was running from the place with all due speed.

He chuckled bitterly as he heard her pounding footfalls that matched the last beats of his heart.

Chapter Twenty Five

Waking up to the Third Dream

Sitting in the hotel room, Seth didn't know what to make of his second life. All he knew was that he hadn't wanted to meet Persephone in his third life. If he met her, he would doubtless fall on the same path of destruction that he walked in his first and second lives. He didn't want to live it again a third time.

Plus, there was so much he didn't understand. For instance, why had she decided to take a mortal body this time? Was it just to escape Hades for a longer period of time? Why did she do it? What was going to be different about this time?

He didn't know anything about her. Persephone was right in front of him, yet he felt like he didn't know her.

From what he knew, each time he met her, her finest qualities were whatever he wanted at that moment. When he was Sethos and she was Stella, she was carefree, untainted by bloody memory and the exact opposite of what he had known while living with the sirens. When he met her the second time, she was hurt, everything he wanted to protect. When he met her this time, he had been a fool for her innocence in the form of Juliet.

He had thought Juliet was a new person that he loved for the first time, but he had been wrong. She was Persephone again.

Seth scratched his fang on his bottom lip and looked at the unconscious girl on the bed. Her soul was Persephone's, but the body belonged to Juliet. He had drank her blood, so he knew *things* about Juliet. He didn't know everything, but the taste of her blood unlocked her anger, her despair, her suffering, and with them the reason why she had committed suicide.

When Juliet was nine, her mother began leaving her to be watched by her best friend's son. They lived next door. He was twelve. When the abuse started, Juliet didn't have the courage to tell her parents. It went on for months before she finally got the idea that if he hurt her face, her parents would ask her about it. Then she would have the courage to say that he hurt her, and she wouldn't have to take off her underpants to show what he'd actually done. So, that was what she started doing. She told him that if he touched her, she would slam her face into the wall until it bruised and then she'd blame it on him.

It worked for a while, until he figured out a way to explain it away, legitimately.

When her mother confronted her about the bruises and that the boy wasn't to blame, Juliet was twelve. This strange deadlock between the two children had been

escalating for three years without intervention from their parents. She didn't know how to defend herself. He was outwardly perfect. His list of academic and athletic achievements was as long as his arm. Her attempts at even hinting toward his grave misconduct were swept under the carpet in the face of his latest victory.

Juliet's mother had grown so confident in him, her neglect toward Juliet had no boundaries. One time when she was introducing him to someone, her voice was so proud and she was so busy talking about him like he was her star that she forgot to mention her daughter.

As he grew better at everything, Juliet grew worse. She slowly stopped caring about everything. It didn't matter if she was pretty. What was being pretty worth if it didn't protect her from the abuse? Her grades in school weren't important. She wasn't as smart as him on her best day, so no one paid attention to her grades until they were floundering. Skipping school gave her time away from everything, and time to sleep.

Her mother made him tutor her and then he was being paid to abuse her. Before this, her mother used to listen to Juliet's complaints about him. They were watered down, and it was obvious that she didn't believe her, but at least she listened. Eventually, she stopped. He was perfect.

Once the little monster realized that he could get away with anything and he would still be a star, he started bringing his friends by to 'play' with her.

And that was the last straw. Juliet couldn't stand that kind of life, and she had nowhere to turn. Her lifelines had been pulled away one by one. After the bridge incident, her memories stopped, as Persephone took over.

There were two crucial details Persephone was not told when she woke up in Juliet's body. The first one was that when Juliet threw herself off the bridge, she had tied her ankles together and then tied them to a bucket full of rocks. The second was that Juliet wasn't really a virgin, even though memoryless Persephone assumed she was.

Seth hated calling her sinful when he drank her blood, but self-mutilation and suicide were crimes of the highest order. No matter what you've suffered, not even the warped God of the Underworld looks kindly on those sins. That was because it spat in the face of the Goddess of Fertility. Seth smiled wanly. How ironic.

He felt so much pity. It was actually Juliet's memories of abuse and abandonment that moved him to rescue Persephone from Rylan that night. After all, Persephone and Juliet weren't that different. Both of them had once been blissfully innocent and had their innocence bitterly snatched away right under their mothers' noses. And in the end, both of them resided in the Underworld.

He couldn't do a thing for Juliet. Her story was already over, but he could save Persephone and he was going to.

He sat in the chair and closed his eyes. Doubtless, when he awoke, he would meet a very different girl. He wondered if he would love her as much as he loved Juliet when she had no memory.

Persephone blinked her eyes slowly. At first all she saw were white sheets. Then brown carpet. Wait, she wasn't her room. Where was she?

Opening her eyes fully, she saw she was in a bedroom. Seth was sleeping in an extremely uncomfortable position in an armchair. She didn't even have to get out of bed to find the answer to this question. There was a menu on the bedside table. So, they were in a hotel.

That was right. Seth bit her neck and she fainted, causing her to remember all the pieces of her previous lives.

She stared at Seth on the other side of the room. Now all those things he said about the woman he was destined for made sense. His family had told him about her and their relationship, but from what he said, it didn't sound like he was very happy about it. She felt wounded. She knew he didn't remember his past lives well. It had been a consequence of the huge gaps of time between his births.

Didn't he love her anymore?

Persephone sighed. Maybe he didn't. Maybe he was just trying to end the curse.

She reached for the menu. She knew that she needed to put something warm and soft in her stomach. Her head felt heavy and her body felt weak.

Picking up the phone, she ordered room service. She tried to whisper, but it was impossible while talking to the kitchen. "Can I order a clam chowder in a bread bowl please, with a bottle of water and I know this isn't on the menu, but would it be possible for you to bring up an unopened bottle of grenadine?"

Seth stirred and blinked to see her awake.

"Sorry," she said immediately, when she replaced the handset. "I didn't mean to disturb you, but I really need to eat."

"Of course you do," Seth said, noting the late hour.

He rubbed his eyes and leaning back, he looked into her face like he was expecting to see something different. "How are you feeling?"

"I lost a little too much blood," she said quietly. "Thanks for saving me from Rylan. Your timing was perfect."

"Rylan?" he asked skeptically.

"Hades," she corrected. "I guess you're wondering if I got all my memories back." Seth leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. "Did you?"

"Yes," she said confidently.

"And what do you think of our situation, Persephone?" he asked, even more interested.

She looked at him strangely. "You can go on calling me Juliet, since that's what's most familiar to you. I don't mind. Besides, calling me my true name sounds strange."

"All right, Juliet. Do you think you could answer a couple questions for me?"

She winced. She had hoped for a glorious reunion with Seth since their last separation, but it felt like their last meeting was too long ago to reawaken the precious feeling they once shared.

"Ask away," she said dully.

"Why did you leave me to bleed to death when Hades murdered me last time?"

She leaned back on her elbows and looked at the ceiling.

"It broke my heart that you didn't hold me in my last seconds. Where did you go?" he asked and it was clear from his tone that he was having a difficult time controlling himself.

"I should have," she said, her voice low. "But, I was worried. Hades didn't know that I scoured the mouth of the river Styx for your soul. I was terrified that he would find out, so I had to find you before he did. That was all I was trying to do when I left you on Olympus."

"You fished my soul out of the river Styx?" Seth blurted. "Aren't there practically a million souls waiting there to be ferried over?"

"Yes. It wasn't easy, either time I had to do it. You don't remember, do you?"

"No. Not at all. I don't remember anything that happened in between my lives."

"Then," she asked, pulling the blankets up to her chin, "you forgive me?"

Seth got up and began pacing the room. He didn't answer her, but instead persisted in asking his second question, "So, why did you decide to be a mortal this time? Why not just stay as immortal Persephone all the time?"

"Oh. That? Well, there were a few reasons for it. For one thing, Hades has a really hard time finding me when I drink the waters of Liliu and forget my life as Persephone. That was why it took him so long to find me when I was Stella. I thought my overall plan would have a better chance at success if he wasn't watching me every second the way he does when I'm Persephone." She paused. "Also, I knew

your memory would be bad. Things didn't go well between us when I paired you with myself as a goddess. I wanted to have a similar amount of life experience as you, so we would match. But it's too late for that now."

"Do you wish I'd bitten you and returned your memory sooner?" Seth asked softly.

"No. Your timing was perfect. You don't realize it, but the last two pieces of my plan have fallen into place in the last week. There's only one more thing I need to confirm and then we'll be ready to end this... forever."

Seth looked unconvinced. "You know, I've never heard what your plan entails or why it was doomed to failure last time."

"We'll go through it, piece by piece. But first, I need to eat, so let's wait until I have a full stomach before we talk about that. I need you to do something for me that you probably won't like."

The room service arrived and Juliet sat in bed and sipped her soup while Seth held his nose on the other side of the room. He had turned on the TV and was flipping through channels.

She thought about Seth. It seemed like he believed she was a different person. His manner had changed entirely. It was hard to believe he had repeatedly kissed her until she fainted. He thought that the girl, Juliet, was gone and only a cruel goddess that had abandoned him remained. He didn't realize that it was her. Everything was always her. It was just that she had lived so many different lives that she was whatever she felt like being. Every woman was a little capricious, she was just more so. This was something she had already learned, until a man accepted the changeability of a woman, he could not really be in love with her.

She pushed the grenadine toward him. "I ordered this for you."

He looked at her over his shoulder. "I don't need it. My innards are full of your blood. I'm very satisfied."

She let it slide and finished her food.

When she was done, she began looking around. There had to be something in the room she could cut him with, but what? She should have asked room service to bring her a steak knife. She looked in the bedside table, but all she found were company pens. Wandering into the bathroom, she found complimentary shampoo and clean water glasses with paper cups on top to keep the dust out.

She grabbed one of them and smashed it against the floor.

Seth came running. "What happened?"

She crouched on the tiles and picked out the largest shard with her fingers.

"Seth," she said, her voice deadpan. "I want you to cut yourself."

"What?" he asked as he took a step back. He was clearly horrified, but she couldn't back off. She needed to show him the answer to the final question.

She picked up the unbroken glass and took the paper top off it. Then she hopped over the shattered glass and advanced toward him. "I'm serious. Cut yourself and collect the blood in this cup."

"I don't want to," he said, his eyes wide with horror.

"You drained my blood without my permission earlier. At least return the favor. Besides, Raidne has done so much. At least show her the courtesy of sporting her accomplishment."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said as he removed his coat and rolled up his sleeve. He took the broken piece of glass from her and after a couple deep breaths, moved to cut the fleshy part of his palm. He grunted. "It won't work," he said after three tries. "It's not sharp enough."

He had passed the first test.

"Then bite yourself!" she hissed. Excitement was brewing inside her.

"Blood thirsty, aren't you? What did you discover about yourself when you were asleep?" he asked, barely containing his anger.

"The truth. Bite your wrist."

He bit down and broke the skin. Disgusted with himself, he licked his own blood off his lips and spat it on the floor, and then let the blood drip red into the glass.

"How much do you need?"

"As much as you can give until it clots."

He grimaced, but said nothing.

Soon the bottom of the glass was completely covered. "That's enough," she said, taking it from him and getting back into the bed. Pulling the covers over herself, she sat with the glass between her fingers studying it as though it were a petri dish.

Seth went into the bathroom and got a face cloth which he wrapped around his wrist.

When he came back, she gave him a sly smile from the bed. "I bet you're wondering what I'm doing with this."

"I did wonder if you were possessed," he said drolly.

"Silly. Of course I am." She raised the glass so she could look at the blood through the bottom of the cup. "I've just been thinking about you and I want to show you that you are finally everything Raidne promised me."

"You mean everything you extorted out of her?"

"You know, you wouldn't say that if you had a clear memory. You're forgetting how much Hades makes me suffer. As the Goddess of Fertility, I send souls, innocent and clean, into the world knowing full well they will return to me in the form of rapists, murderers, thieves, liars, and victims to a million other vices. I want all children to be conceived beautifully and cared for carefully and instead... Do you know how often I am disappointed? My pains are those of a nursing mother and a mortician at the same time. It's been that way for so long that I can hardly remember the time that I used to laugh while wrapping new spirits bound for this world. Now I want to weep at both ends of the cycle."

"Too bad you don't have to eat those souls for dinner. Maybe then you'd understand how Raidne feels," Seth said cruelly, turning off the television with an angry flick and discarding the remote control on the bed.

Juliet took a deep breath. "You're only ticked off because you're forgetting the most important thing. Raidne and Teles had a choice and they made it. They could have fought off Hades, or called for help, or come down to the Underworld with me, refusing to leave their mistress. They are reaping the consequences of their choice. I never had a choice. Now there is only one thing I want and if I can get it, everything will unravel and begin again."

"What's that?" he asked, his voice becoming more reasonable.

"A choice. I want to choose my fate. I want to choose my role in heaven. I want to choose my mate."

"And you've chosen me?"

She didn't know how to answer this question. Back when he was Sethos, her feelings for him were so powerful, she slit her throat for him. The second time, she had loved him, but they were not equal. She decided to take on a mortal body to be the same as him. Now it felt like it hadn't worked. He didn't love her. He merely saw her as a means to an end.

Well, she could think of him that way, too.

"I don't know," she said. "After our curses are broken, then we can talk about us and what we are together. Right now, let's just focus on getting ourselves set straight."

A moment passed as her words sunk into Seth. That seemed more acceptable to him than anything else she'd said. "So, what do you need from me?"

"First, you could answer some questions for me."

"I don't think I know anything you don't," he scoffed.

"Well, you might. For instance, why you have a hot tub in your bedroom?"

"I already told you, sirens live in water."

"Do they?"

"Of course they do. You've been to the cave we've lived in for centuries, so you know."

"And that's why sirens have wings instead of fins?"

Seth cocked his head and looked at her strangely.

She didn't wait for him to answer and went on. "And that's why Chas waited until after you were born to have that pool built in his home? Because he seemed to live just fine without it for fifty years before you came along."

Seth stared at her from across the room, totally speechless.

"How long can you hold your breath under water, Seth?" she persisted. "An hour? Eight hours? Ten?"

"It gets boring to time it. I've never run out of breath," he said slowly.

"You see," she said, looking at his blood instead of his face, "the sirens from my past were not creatures of the water. It was a matter of convenience to live in the cave. Back then, sailors didn't come home for plenty of reasons and investigating their deaths was often too complex for their families or friends to manage. Doing things that way, Raidne and Teles avoided angry mobs."

Seth stared.

"They didn't need water to survive, but you say you do. Actually, I don't think you *need* it, but you certainly like it." She waited for Seth to answer, but he was staring at the blood in her cup intently. "You know why, right?"

"Are you saying that my father was a water creature and not a human like Chas' father was?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. You know, Raidne failed to procure the right kind of father for you the second time you were born. I was livid with her for taking chances with you. She needed to find you an immortal father if you were going to survive, because even after the first time you died, it was clear that was the only solution. Hades would just kill you over and over again if she didn't get you quality paternity. I knew immediately she failed the second time because if you were immortal, you should have been able to make the dive through the water to my palace without a problem. That was very disappointing. But this time," Persephone said holding up the cup of blood which had turned from scarlet to gold, "you're not going to die."

Seth looked aghast. "So, who is my real father?"

"If I'm not mistaken, you are the son of Poseidon. His wife is a nymph so I thought he might be a little more sympathetic to our cause. It seems Raidne finally convinced him."

Across the room, Seth looked as though he had been beaten with a baseball bat. That was how shocked he was. When he finally found his voice, he said, "Why have I been drinking blood all this time if I was immortal?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "Your hunger has nothing to do with your body's needs. It has everything to do with your curse. And besides, all this had to be a secret, even from you. Have you ever even been cut before tonight? I know, your mother, though cruel, never draws your blood, does she?"

Seth shook his head.

She waited for him to speak, but he had lowered himself to the bed and now he looked like he was going to throw up.

"I know this must be a shock to you, but there's more."

"What else could there be?" he whispered.

"Your role in this. Do you want to hear it?"

He bowed his head slightly and she took it as a yes.

"Do you remember the first thing we talked about when I brought you to my underwater palace?"

"How I wasn't allowed to touch you?"

She turned her face away from him. She couldn't talk to him if he was going to act like this.

"Sorry," he apologized. "No, I don't remember. Please go on."

With his repentance, she continued. "I asked you to bite me hard enough to draw blood, and you couldn't do it. Do you remember now?"

He nodded.

"I wanted to see if you could break my skin with your fangs."

"And I couldn't do it. So?"

"I ate six pomegranate kernels the first night I was in the Underworld. The juice and skin are gone now and the only parts that remain are the seeds. Their curse binds me to Hades and the Underworld. They are located in different places in my body and I need you to cut them out, with your fangs."

"But," Seth sputtered, "I'm not a scalpel. There will be a huge mess."

Persephone looked at him with blank eyes. She had no pity for herself in this regard and she could not understand his hesitation. Didn't he know how long she'd been waiting for this? "That's a sacrifice I'm willing to make. There is no other way. There aren't many weapons capable of cutting a goddess. None in this world. This may seem strange, but this way is the most convenient. I do not want to take one of Zeus' thunderbolts to my chest."

"Are they in your stomach or where?" Seth stuttered.

She scratched her head. "I don't know where they are, but I have a plan for finding out. I have someone I need to visit tomorrow."

Chapter Twenty Six

When the Sun looks on Death

"So, what happened after Rylan and I left last night?"

Juliet was on the phone with Fiona. She called her just before the hotel's checkout time to ask her a few questions. Seth was on the other side of the room giving off a gloomy aura. He couldn't help it and she knew why. He couldn't believe that she could just slide back into being Juliet without skipping a beat after everything she'd absorbed in the past twelve hours. Why wasn't she like the goddess he remembered? It was obvious, if not to him. She was Juliet, the woman who matched with him, and the Goddess Persephone at the same time. She could gab on the phone like she was eighteen.

Fiona was blowing air into the receiver. "I had too much to drink and ended up calling Chas. Ugh. It was brutal, Juliet. He wouldn't even talk to me."

"Oh no! Did he say anything at all?"

"He said he was having a family emergency and that he would call me when it was over. Do you think I should believe him?"

"Actually, I do," she said after a moment of reflection.

"Why? It was obviously a crappy excuse he came up with on the spot just to get rid of me... Or maybe his family emergency had something to do with his wife. Maybe she had food poisoning or something."

"I don't think it was that."

"Oh really? What do you think it was?" Fiona asked testily.

"Well, I saw Seth last night," Juliet said soothingly. "I think it was his emergency and I know it was real."

"What happened?" Fiona's voice sounded hopeful.

Juliet looked to Seth for guidance and he mouthed, "Wrecked the car."

She went with that and said, "I guess Seth wrecked the Jag last night."

Fiona gasped. "You're kidding!"

"Not even a little bit."

"Wait! Let me get this straight. You left Hugo's with Rylan and then somehow you ended up seeing Seth?"

"Yeah."

"How did that happen?"

"It was really romantic. You might even hear something about it on campus on Monday. Rylan and I were in my dorm room hanging out when suddenly Seth started serenading me on the front lawn."

"Wow. There must have been a ruckus. Was any blood spilled?"

Juliet laughed like it was a joke, but said under her breath, "Only mine." Then she said out loud, "Listen, we can talk about that later. I called because I was wondering if you could help me with something. I need to find that guy we met last night, Paulo. Do you have his number?"

"Aw hell. Don't you have enough trouble with your love life without getting the man-whore involved?"

Juliet sighed. "It's not that, Fiona. I just need to ask him something. I don't have to have his phone number either. An address or a place of business would do just fine. I really need to get in touch with him this afternoon."

"Juliet, I simply can't divulge that kind of information without a thorough explanation as to why. He would kill me if you started stalking him."

"I'm not interested in Paulo romantically," she said smoothly. "It's because I had a memory of him. I think I met him sometime before I was thirteen and I want to ask him if he knew me. It's nothing gross. Okay?"

When she said that, Fiona's tongue loosened up. "He works as director of operations at the Black Jack Art Gallery on a hundred and third avenue. I think he's even there today, if you wanted to pop by around lunch. Oh wait. Halona says she has a date with him if you want to go with her."

"No. That's okay," Juliet said quickly. "I want to talk to him on my own, so I'll meet him before that."

Fiona took a deep breath. "Hey, Juliet, after you see Paulo, do you think you and I could hang out? I want to ask you about some things."

Juliet smiled. This was leading up the exact alley she needed after she spoke to Paulo. "You know, we didn't have a club meeting last night. Would it be possible to round up the witches and Halona and have a little impromptu meeting tonight? I could host it."

"You don't want to invite Rylan or Taylor?" Fiona asked, noticing she had left those two out.

"No," Juliet said, her voice tight. "And it would be better if they didn't know it was happening either."

"Did you two break up?"

"If only we could actually break up. That would be wonderful. He's kind of an impossible guy to get rid of."

"We told you not to date him."

Juliet rolled her eyes. "You're right. If I had listened to you, I never would have had any trouble with him. So, do you want to do the meeting or what?"

"I don't have plans and it's an off-night anyway, so Rylan and Taylor won't expect us to have one. So, at midnight like usual?"

"No, I want us to meet an hour before sunset instead, and we could have it at Chas and Seth's. They have a pool, so we could meet there."

"Is that okay with him?" Fiona asked suspiciously.

"I'm sure it's fine with him," Juliet replied confidently.

"What are you planning on doing?"

"Astral projection."

"Huh?"

"They're here," Seth interrupted as he opened the door to let Nixie and Chas into the hotel room.

"I've got to go. Please bring everyone and show up at about four-thirty, okay? I'll supply the refreshments. And even if no one else comes, *you* have to come, Fiona. Okay?"

Then she hung up.

Since Juliet was still in her pajamas and Chas' Jag was practically lying in ruins, Seth decided to bring in reinforcements. After all, his whole family was cursed, so all of them might as well be part of the cure.

Juliet hadn't given Seth any details about who she was going to visit that morning. He'd heard the name Paulo, but she knew from the expression on his face that the name didn't mean anything to him. If he knew what Paulo was like, then she wouldn't have escaped the wrath of his expression. The less Seth knew about him the better. That was why she was going to see him, Paulo had to come to the Occult's Addict meeting.

Nixie gave Juliet a bag of her clothes. Looking at the girl's figure, Juliet didn't know how they would fit.

She took the bag Nixie offered and slid into the bathroom while Seth and Chas discussed the fate of the bashed Jaguar.

As Juliet peeled her pajamas off, she remembered how she had felt the night before when she put them on. It was during her date with Rylan. Now she knew that he was really her husband, Hades, her mind was full of questions.

Was the way he acted in Rylan's body a real facet of his personality? He had been a complete odd-ball since they first met in the Occult's Addict office. Above all, why was he pretending to be a cross-dresser? Fiona and Halona said it was because Taylor asked him to, but was that really reason enough? He was a cold-hearted

monster who had made her life miserable for time out of mind and now he was playing mind games with his fake twin sister?

Separate from that, there were parts of his performance that made her do a double take. He said that he liked her before he figured out that she was Persephone. She would certainly give him points for loving her when he didn't know who she was, right?

Wrong. Whatever right he had done was tarnished by the fact that the despicable dirtbag had brought a gun to her dorm room. Now she knew why he had it. It was so he could remove her from her body and send her back to the Underworld at any time. He was a human when he was in Rylan's body and he couldn't use his necromancy to remove her soul from her body, so he had to carry a human solution, a gun. The monster had said he had the gun because the two of them were playing a game. She smirked. He thought she was playing a game.

She yanked Nixie's black sweater over her head and stuffed her legs into a crisp pair of jeans.

"Where are the shoes?" Juliet called through the door.

"Oh crap!" Nixie said, rushing to the door. "Sorry. I forgot the shoes."

Exasperated, Juliet opened the door. For a second, she didn't know how to deal with the mistake. If it was Raidne or Teles or Chas or Seth, it would have been easy. She would have stepped out and ordered them to get her some shoes and they would have done it, but it was Nixie.

Juliet kept her face expressionless.

"Sorry," Nixie repeated faintly.

Returning to the bathroom, Juliet retrieved her fluffy slippers and put them back on.

"I didn't mean to forget them," Nixie breathed.

"Why don't you go downstairs and see how Chas is doing with the car?" Seth suggested before Nixie started to cry. She tiptoed out the door before Juliet had re-emerged from the bathroom.

"Are you angry with her? She's suffered from this mess, too."

Juliet sighed. "Seth, the women in your family infuriate me, but I didn't punish her and now I have to run my errand with Cookie Monster feet."

"Wear my boots," he suggested.

"They won't fit," she said rejecting his suggestion and turning away.

"Even so, they'll be less conspicuous than Cookie Monster feet," he said as he returned her to her chair.

"And what will you wear?" she questioned as he knelt at her feet and removed the slippers.

"I'll wear these," he suggested cheerfully as he untied his laces.

She looked at him and felt his action warm her heart. The feeling uncurled like a ball of fur in her chest until she could feel what kind of animal it was, and just like that, the animal was love. It was the love they had always had for each other. It hadn't died and it hadn't changed.

She bent forward as he secured the oversized boots on her feet. She would have kissed him if she hadn't seen the clock over the bed. It was past checkout time, and she had to hurry if she was going to meet up with Paulo before Halona.

Juliet got up and put on the jacket Nixie had brought for her. Then she said stuffily, "If Nixie wants to help, then please send her to my dorm room to pick up my stuff. I'm not going back there."

"Are you planning on staying with us?" Seth asked pleasantly.

"Yeah. Is that okay with you?"

Seth nodded.

"I'll sleep in one of the old rooms Chas has made up for his donors if they happened to lose consciousness."

Seth did a double take. "How do you know about those?"

"This life was not the first time I have been there. I remember the layout from after the pool's construction. I came just before you did to make sure that it was a suitable place for you. You know, before I took this body."

Seth looked stunned.

"You should get ready," Juliet said steadily. "What we're going to do tonight will test you to your very limits. You have never tasted immortal blood. Remember to keep yourself under control, because this is going to be worse than anything else you've suffered."

She stepped up to him and put her hand on his black head. His hair was soft. She wanted to put her arms around him and tell him how she loved him and how she had missed him, but she kept her tongue still. It was better if she waited. After tonight, there would be no uncertainty left in him.

Then his hand touched her waist.

Juliet was noticeably moved, but her watchful eyes glanced at the clock again. She didn't have time if she was going to meet with Paulo.

"Seth," she mumbled. "Can you give me some money?"

"Money?" he twitched.

"Yeah. After I see Paulo, I want to take a cab back to your place. Is that okay?"

He instantly pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and gave her a couple bills. "I hope that will be enough." He had given her everything.

She was about to kiss his forehead when she realized how that would make him feel. "Thank you," she said as she pocketed the money. "I don't have any money."

"So you said." He looked at the floor. "Don't you need to go?"

"Yeah," she said as she moved away from him. Then with one last painful look at him from the doorway, she left. She *had* to.

The Black Jack Art Gallery was only five blocks from the hotel, so Juliet walked there in Seth's boots. The gallery had a large foyer that connected to a gift shop and then to a corridor that led to the displays. Juliet walked up to the glass ticket box and asked the woman inside if she could see Paulo.

"Do you have an appointment?" the woman asked drolly.

"I don't."

"Well, you'll have to make one. If you want to telephone his assistant, the number is—"

"I'm sorry," Juliet interrupted. "I'm his sister. He'll want to see me."

"His sister?" the woman chirped. "Sorry, that line isn't going to work on me. I've known Paulo for years and I know that he's an only child."

"I'm his half-sister. Intercom him and tell him that his sister Juliet is here to see him. I'm positive he'll let me right in."

The woman looked doubtfully before she dialed the number. "Denise, there's a young woman at the front desk to see Paulo. She says she's his sister, Juliet. Yes, I'll wait."

A minute passed before Denise got back on the line to give the verdict.

"He's coming out," the woman finally said.

"Thanks. Can I go in?"

She nodded, but Juliet didn't get two steps before Paulo appeared. His face was set in hard lines as he approached her. He was studying his phone and hardly glanced at her. "What are you doing here?"

She smiled wanly. "I have to apologize for last night. I wasn't myself."

"If that's all you came for, it's fine. It's not like I was fooled by your little game," he said, as he finished with his phone and stuffed it in his pocket. "I actually have a lunch date and a bit of work to finish before she gets here, so if you don't mind, can we do this some other time?"

"Paulo," she said, taking a deep breath and blowing a bit of her hair off her forehead. "Please don't cut me off. I didn't come here just to apologize. I have

another reason. Could you give me a minute? I'm sure Halona won't mind if you're two minutes late."

"Fine," he said blankly. "Two minutes."

"In your office?" she suggested.

He rolled his eyes and began leading her toward the back. "You know, it's not like you haven't had two thousand plus years to ask me anything that has been on your mind. Why do you need to talk to me right now when I'm so busy?"

"You're exactly right. The thing is, I have a favor I want to ask you, but I didn't like to bring it up until the situation became paramount."

He opened the door to his office and held it open with his hand on the door over his head. "Get in."

She went in and presumptuously sat down in the chair behind his desk.

"Make yourself at home," he said drolly as he shut his door and leaned against it. "Now do you want to tell me what this is all about?"

"I need a favor from the great Sun God, Apollo."

He raised an eyebrow. "Of course you do. It's good to know that you recognize me now. How could a goddess be fooled by my disguise?" he said, not changing his swarthy looks one iota.

"Except this isn't my body," Juliet admitted.

"Whatever. Necromancy is weird—making corpses ninety-nine percent alive. As if I wouldn't know a dead person when I saw one or recognize my sister using her own soul as the elixir of life. What do you want?"

"I want you to go to the Underworld and have a look at my body."

He snorted. "What for? You're a goddess, so you don't exactly need medical attention."

"That's where you're wrong. I finally figured out how to break Hades' contract with me. I need you to examine my body and find the locations of the pomegranate seeds I swallowed. I think I've been able to spot two by myself, but I can't find the other four."

Paulo shook his head irately. "You know, even if I can find them, it's not like I can remove them. My medicinal skills are for humans, not for auto-regenerating goddesses."

"You're not going to be the one to cut me open."

"What? Are you going to do it yourself? How are you going to manage that?"

"No. I've been preparing someone to do it for me. That's the other half of this favor. I want you to escort him to the Underworld."

Paulo looked extremely uncomfortable. "Don't get ahead of yourself. I haven't agreed to do anything for you and even though I've allowed our conversation to go this far, it has gone far enough. I'm not going to help you leave your husband."

"Why not?" she snapped. "Didn't you fall to your knees and weep when I was stolen from Olympus?"

He wagged his head. "What happened to you back then was despicable, obviously. The thing is, I think it's too late to set it straight. And why would you want to? Hades has been completely faithful to you for thousands of years. What other god has been so faithful to his wife?"

"Stop talking," she spat. "You just don't want Hades on your doorstep because even though he couldn't kill you, he would make you pay dearly for moving against him. Didn't you say the other night that he outranks you? The thing you're not getting here is that I'm not asking you, I'm ordering you."

"What could you do to me that would give you the power to give me orders?" he gawked.

"It's not what I would do to you. It's what I would do to your latest lady love. It's Halona these days, isn't it? Judging from your *poem*," Juliet sneered.

His face went pale. "You wouldn't."

"Don't think that I wouldn't. I have lived in the Underworld for millennia. I don't even think of death as an ending anymore."

"I thought she was your friend!"

"What of it? I thought you were my friend. Besides, she won't suffer, unlike me. If you don't help me, I will be cut to ribbons as my surgeon searches for the seeds. Even with your help, what I will suffer will be incredible. Even gods and goddesses have nervous systems."

Paulo stroked his chin and looked thoughtful.

"I know you're worried about Hades coming for you afterwards," Juliet supplied in a tolerant tone. "I can't promise you that he won't, but he might not."

"Why not?"

She sighed. "I just don't think he's very vengeful in temperament. When he finds out, I think he'll come after me, not you."

"And you would really kill Halona if I don't do what you ask?" he questioned like something sour was resting on his tongue.

"I don't want to. I like Halona, but since you won't help me voluntarily, I need to use what leverage I have. Even I think it's petty, but what am I supposed to do? I wasn't able to defend myself back then and my soul screams for freedom. I want to have the choice, Apollo. I'm sure you understand that. You never married, because the choice has always been yours."

A strange silence filled the room as the two of them contemplated the situation angrily.

"I was supposed to marry you," he finally said.

Juliet stared.

"That's what Demeter had in mind when she refused Hades."

After a moment of reflection, she said quietly, "I didn't know you wanted to marry me."

"I didn't particularly. I only thought of you as a sister, even though it's quite common for siblings to marry on Olympus. Demeter has always been fond of that kind of union since she is Zeus' sister. Our marriage was on the table at counsel the night Hades asked for you. Demeter asked me if I wanted to marry you and I said no. That was when Hades interrupted and made his intentions known." Paulo sat down on the corner of the desk and looked into Juliet's face tenderly. "It wasn't that I didn't care for you. It was just the feeling I had for you was *philia* instead of *eros*. You were an infant, just like all those sweet spirits you sent here." He paused. "When I saw him ask for you, I thought two things. I thought that he would make you a better husband than I would because he was passionate about you while I was empty. Still, I didn't want him to have you because I thought his darkness would spoil you. I felt it so strongly I was willing to go to war over it, but now that the darkness has already done its work, I don't know that you should be freed. The balance the two of you keep over the souls of this world is perfect. Why not just embrace your joint role with him?"

It was Paulo's second attempt at getting her to forget her plan. Juliet knew it marked the end of their conversation. "Stop it. I get what you're saying and I don't care. I won't change my mind. I want freedom and choice."

"Hasn't one part of you grown to love him during all the time that you've lived with him?" Paulo entreated.

She looked up into his brown eyes and said coldly, "How dare you be so hypocritical? You would throw me back into his arms where I have been abused for thousands of years, when you're terrified to meet him by yourself for one hour. You know what? Forget Halona. When my seeds are removed and I'm free, I'm coming after you."

He laughed. "What are you going to do, little Goddess of Fertility?" he asked mockingly. "You can't even cut your own skin."

She narrowed her eyes hatefully. "I can. I have. And I can hurt you even if I can't go to battle with you. Well, maybe from today onwards you'll get every single one-night stand you have pregnant."

Paulo looked horrified, he had looked less upset when she threatened to kill Halona. He was willing to bet that had been an empty threat, but the idea of a child after every dalliance he had with a human woman seemed more in line with what the Persephone he knew could and would do.

Moments passed and he still didn't answer her.

"Are you going to help me or not?" she sighed. "Zeus has lent his one favor to me for this cause. All of my effort for centuries has been for this end. If you don't help me, I will do it anyway. I'm only asking you to ease my burden and if there's something I can do to protect you from the wrath of Hades, or any other favor, I will do it."

"I hate this," Paulo said dispassionately.

"I know, but please," she said, losing her Goddess of the Underworld demeanor and looking like a child again just because she willed it. "You couldn't save me back then like you wanted to. Could you please do just this little bit to save me now?"

He wilted. "I hate this. If the balance of the universe gets thrown off, I won't be to blame for it."

Juliet smiled roguishly. That was exactly what she wanted to hear.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Water on the Altar

The taxi ride back to Chas' apartment building was fleeting to Juliet, and it wasn't because she was anxious to get on to the next phase of her plan. Actually, it was the exact opposite. She wanted to stop and take stock of the situation. Nothing had happened for years and now everything was happening all at once.

The taxi pulled in front of Chas' building just in time for Juliet to see a police cruiser move away from the curb. In the backseat, she could see a white head.

The police had taken Chas away.

Juliet paid the taxi driver and met Seth at the front door of the building.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"They want to talk to him about the car chase I had with Rylan last night. Except they don't know I was driving. It was Chas' car, so they didn't even ask. They just assumed it was him and now he's taking the blame."

Juliet silently applauded Chas. If Seth got dragged off by the cops and got stuck in questioning, he might not be able to make it back by nightfall. That would be no good since tonight was her only sure-fire chance to get started. If they didn't strike before Hades, she might not get a chance to strike at all.

"Why do you look so tortured?" Seth grumbled. "It's not like Chas can't handle himself."

"Of course he can. I'm not bothered at all. It's you. You look cheated. Did you really want to take responsibility that badly?"

"That guy does everything for me," he said quietly as he stared down the road.

"As he should. Especially now. Stop worrying."

Seth nodded.

"Great. Since that's taken care of, I'll just pop upstairs and have a word with Nixie."

"What for?" he exclaimed, unintentionally glancing at the blue slippers on his feet.

"I'm promoting her," Juliet said breezily.

"To what?"

"My personal assistant."

"Is everything ready?" Juliet asked Nixie as she stormed down the stairs and through the doors to the pool level.

"Yeah, but it's not very fancy," Nixie admitted as she scampered around behind Juliet.

Juliet didn't believe her for a second. Whenever people said things were modest, they always lied. On the pool deck, there was a feast set out on an elongated table. There were four different kinds of appetizers, two fruit plates, a tray of cream puffs, three bottles of wine and bread with artichoke dip. "This looks perfect," Juliet said as she observed the table of refreshments Nixie and Melanie had set out. "Except lose the wine. I don't want anyone drinking tonight."

"What should I get instead?" Nixie asked, picking up the bottles.

"Apple juice and steal anything presentable from the theater level," she instructed. Something was different in the quarter siren. The change had to be due to Chas. He must have said something to her before he left with the cops, which suited Juliet perfectly.

"By the way," Juliet said, changing the subject. "How did it go at my dorm room? Did you pick up my clothes?"

"Yeah," Nixie said. "They're waiting for you in Seth's room."

Juliet narrowed her eyes. "I told him that I'd take one of the unused rooms on the third floor. Didn't he tell you?"

Nixie looked sheepish. "Yeah, but Chas said that one of those rooms couldn't possibly be made ready by tonight. They're dusty. Seth said you would prefer to sleep in his bed."

A knot caught in Juliet's throat. Then she swallowed and made herself calm down. He probably didn't mean anything by it. She'd wake up in the morning and he'd be sleeping comfortably enough in his tub. That was, if he didn't find somewhere else to sleep.

"That's fine," Juliet said to Nixie like it didn't matter. "You didn't do everything on your own, did you? Thank your mother for me."

"I will," Nixie said as she finished gathered up the wine bottles and headed for the doors.

"Hey Nixie," Juliet said, making the girl turn. "Don't go too far away. I need you to attend the meeting tonight."

"Me?"

"Absolutely," Juliet said somewhat brightly. Then she crouched on the pool deck and removed her shoes.

"Do you need a bathing suit? I think I may have an extra one," Nixie offered.

"That's nice of you, but I won't be getting wet. I just wanted to dip my feet in the water."

Nixie nodded like she understood and left the room.

The pool was exactly like Juliet remembered, a perfect circle. The bottom was painted blue with black symbols. From the surface the circles and stars looked about as enticing as octopuses and fish painted at the bottom of a kiddie pool. But Juliet knew how important they were. This room had two functions. The first one was to give Seth a place to connect with his aquatic roots and the second was to create a direct path to the river Styx.

At four-thirty, the three witches and Fiona arrived.

"Welcome," Juliet's voice echoed across the water. She stood on the diving board and looked at them. "I'm glad you all came."

Fiona was laughing. "So, this is the legendary pool room? Weird. Oh yeah. Halona and Paulo are two steps behind us."

Fiona touched the water with her fingers. "Huh? There's no chlorine. Hey girls, come have a look at this."

The three witches recoiled. "This is a dark place," Tawnee said as she moved to grab the door handle.

"I thought you said astral projection," Cerise interrupted. "You didn't say anything about necromancy."

"What?" Fiona exclaimed.

"Look at the bottom of the pool," Blanche, the oldest, commanded. "This is a place used to summon the dead. Don't think because we're white witches that we don't know what those symbols mean."

"I had no intention of fooling you," Juliet said, walking backward until she stepped off the diving board onto the deck. Then she approached them. "I have something important to tell all of you. If you don't want to meet in here, we can go into the theater and I will tell you my story."

"We already heard your story," Cerise said scornfully.

"No. You have only heard five years worth. There is much more." Juliet locked eyes with Blanche. She was the one would make the decision for the rest of them.

"Okay," Blanche said finally. "But if we don't like what we hear, we're leaving."

"You'll like it," Juliet nodded as she led them out and took them barefoot to the theater.

Once in the theater, she sat Blanche, Cerise, Tawnee, and Fiona on the front row and then sat on the edge of the stage. Then Seth and Nixie came in and took their places by Juliet. She introduced them to Nixie since none of them knew her.

“So, what are we doing tonight?” Fiona bubbled. She didn’t have any apprehension about black magic. The stormy-faced witches had no effect on her mood.

“I want to wait for Paulo and Halona,” Juliet responded. “Hey, why don’t you call Halona and find out why it’s taking them so long?”

Just then, the outside buzzer sounded and Nixie went to let them in.

“Paulo, Halona, sit over there,” Juliet instructed.

Once they sat down, she started.

“Okay, we’re ready,” the goddess said, uncrossing her legs. Changing her position she let one of her legs dangle off the stage and brought her other knee up to rest her chin on. “I’m not really sure where to start,” she began as she let her eyes sweep across the people she had brought together. She paused when she reached Seth. His face was set in serious lines. Juliet looked away. She had to. She couldn’t let his discomfort ruin her concentration. So she bucked the sensation and began muttering, “I’m aware that every beginning for my story is too much for all of you to take, so you’ll have to forgive me for my abruptness. This is a story about past lives. It’s a good thing that I know that none of you have a problem accepting that possibility. Bless open-minded people.” She sighed. “A long time ago I was a virgin, but I was stolen from my home, abandoned by my servants and forced into a marriage with a man I thought of as nothing less than a monster. It wasn’t just for one life on earth either. It has been a marriage meant to last forever. I have stolen this life—Juliet’s life—in order to finally have my chance to escape. Juliet didn’t want to live anymore. I possessed her body when she killed herself in the river and assumed her identity.”

The room went deathly silent.

“What are you saying?” Fiona asked quietly.

“I’m saying that Juliet succeeded in killing herself that day. Her soul is in a bottle on my dressing table in the Underworld.”

“Are you saying that you’re the Goddess Persephone?” Halona perked up, leaning forward on her tightly crossed legs.

Juliet was shocked at her perception. Actually, she hadn’t wanted to unload her story like that, but it seemed the fastest way to hold the witches’ attention.

Seth whistled.

“Is she right?” Fiona asked, leaning forward to look at her sister.

"Yes," Juliet said, rubbing her palm with her tips of her fingers. "I am the Goddess Persephone. Because my body is bound to the Underworld, the only way I can escape is by becoming a body thief."

"I don't believe this!" Blanche said, getting up from her seat.

"It's true," Paulo said, getting up to look the oldest witch in the eye. "I don't know why my sister brought all of you here tonight, but if she asked you, she must have a role for you to play. But I digress. After thousands of years of playing out scenes where mortals do not believe in the existence of the gods, I have become bored. Please allow me to end this nonsense and use my body as your sign that she's not lying."

Blanche's eyes were as wide as serving platters as she watched him transform.

Paulo put his hands to his hair and the brown was shaken off to reveal his perfect golden curls. He touched his face and whatever was swarthy about his skin before was removed and his countenance shone like the sun. Comparatively, his clothes looked like dry rags. They had seemed so smooth and new when he first came in. When he opened his eyes and looked at the guests, they were the color of polished brass. His glory was beyond brilliant.

"Apollo!" Cerise gasped.

Juliet looked at the girls to see if they believed after seeing his display, but when she saw Halona's face, there was no surprise—only praise. She had seen this before. Fiona's mouth hung open. It looked like Halona had been able to keep one secret from her sister.

"Are we clear?" he asked the assembly.

The women nodded.

Then in the blink of an eye, he returned to the way he was before. "Continue, sister."

Juliet nodded thankfully.

Then she told them the whole story.

Juliet recounted the tale to the end. When she got to the part about how she fell in love with Sethos, she spared no detail in explaining her love for him. After all, wasn't he listening, too? She wanted him to know how much she cherished him and how her memory of their shared feelings hadn't diminished on her side.

She ended by saying, "When I was with Sethos, I felt whole. I felt the warmest form of sacrifice as he labored for my sake from sunrise until he pulled the blankets

over me at night. I was protected, calm, and beloved. I have never felt the happiness that I felt with him elsewhere. Now I want to save him.”

The room was quiet. No one wanted to interrupt after that. Paulo was getting restless, bored by their astonishment. Juliet paused in her story, she wanted to see Seth’s reaction, but couldn’t look at him. If he wasn’t moved, she didn’t want to see his face after her confession.

“What about Juliet’s soul? It’s in a bottle on your dressing table?” the youngest witch asked after the moment lapsed.

The goddess nodded. Then she told them of Juliet’s sexual abuse and her hurt and mutilated spirit when she arrived in the Underworld. She had been ferried directly to judgment because she had a two dollar coin in the pocket of her cut-offs when she jumped off the bridge.

After that, the twins and the witches were especially interested in hearing about Rylan being Hades and the car chase Seth had had with him while trying to escape with Persephone.

“Do you think Hades didn’t lose his memory when he took Rylan’s body?” Tawnee asked speculatively.

Juliet answered, “It’s hard to tell. When you drink the water of Liliu, you’re supposed to forget everything, but some things are so ingrained in your soul that you can’t forget them. For instance, I wasn’t able to forget that I loved Seth and I wasn’t able to forget my goal.” She paused and prepared to drop her bomb. “I need a few people to help me. That was why I joined an occult club. I was trying to find people here on Gaia to help me fill the last of my requirements.”

“What do you need us to do?” Fiona asked, barely sitting on her chair.

“We need to start by opening the door to the river Styx. As I already explained, I need Apollo and Seth to go to the Underworld to have a look at my body and remove the seeds. Witches, please do not be alarmed by the magic that we will be drawing on. I’ll be calling on the Goddess Persephone, which is me, so there won’t be any strange repercussions. I’ll just be creating a link with myself.”

“It sounds fine,” Blanche said. Even if she was a white witch, she wasn’t unreasonable.

Juliet nodded. “In order to open the door, I need you three witches and Halona to go into that back room and allow Nixie to draw five hundred milliliters of your blood.”

“Why?”

“We need to pour blood on the altar. I can’t go into the siren’s storehouse for blood. It only works if it’s fresh. Don’t look at me like that. You think I made up necromancy?”

"I'll do it," Halona volunteered immediately. She stood up and yanked up her sleeve. "Fiona has told me about this plenty of times. It's not a big deal. It's exactly like donating blood. All you girls get up."

Juliet felt a jab of conscience. She had threatened to murder this loyal girl not six whole hours ago. Her eyes unconsciously flicked over Paulo. He knew what she was thinking, and he smiled at her gloatingly.

Nixie got up and led Halona back toward the room where Juliet had given blood the day before.

Juliet pushed away her feelings and focused on the task at hand. "Will you help?" she asked, looking directly at Blanche.

"Sure," she said, taking off her coat and following Halona.

"What about me?" Fiona interjected. Her voice sounded hurt. "Why don't you want my blood, too? I'm immortal. You could get more than enough from me."

Juliet shook her head and jumped down off the stage. "Your blood won't work at all. It's got to be a human sacrifice."

"But I want to help, too."

"And you will," Juliet said soothingly. "Your role is one of the most important. You see, when I said that we were going to practice astral projection, I meant that you and I are going to. When the others finish giving their blood there will be nothing else that they need to do, though I am going to invite them to watch." She hesitated before continuing. "You know, I feel like I'm dropping nothing but bombs today."

"It's okay. Go ahead and spill it."

She took a deep breath. "I need you to be the marker in Juliet's body. If my spirit leaves her body, it will die. If your spirit leaves your body, you will live. It will be the same for you as it is for me. My body lies in the Underworld without my soul in it and it lives."

Fiona's bangs fell over her eyes and covered her expression.

Juliet couldn't tell if it was going well or not. "It would only be for tonight," she reassured, but Fiona's face didn't move. "I'm sorry, but my spirit needs to be in my body while the surgery is taking place, or it won't work. Do you think you can do it?"

Fiona suddenly jolted up. "I can do this!" she practically screamed. "In all the time I've been in this club, I've never got to do anything a tenth this exciting. So, how does it work? Tell me and we'll get started."

"Thank goodness," Juliet cried and threw her arms around Fiona. "I was afraid you were going to say no."

Fiona put her arms around her and said, "It's not such a big deal. After all, I don't know who my dad is. We could be sisters."

Juliet smiled politely. Fiona's father was a demigod and there were so many of those, it would be hard to figure out which one without Chas' insight. The truth was her blood wasn't almighty or royal. If it had been, Chas would not have had the strength to bite her hard enough to draw blood. However, Juliet didn't want to call attention to it, so she just smiled.

After that Juliet went back to the pool deck. She had some work to do there while the girls were donating their blood. She needed to trace runes around the edge of the pool. If she had been in her own body, she would have simply used her black, soul-stained fingers to write the runes. Since she was mortal, she had to use a black eyeliner pencil that she kept in her backpack. She smirked. Maybe it was more fun when she had to be inventive with her tools.

So she got to work. The circles and stars for the inner track of the magic circle were already painted on the bottom edge of the pool. Now she had to draw the outer track. Basically, it was her name in Greek characters over and over again. Gauging the distance around the pool, she guessed she had to write it six times, so she divided the edge of the pool into six sections beginning in front of the diving board. Then she began writing. The outer track could be used to draw power from other deities from the Underworld besides herself, but she only needed her own power tonight.

"What are you using to write with?" Seth asked, suddenly leaning against the doors.

"An eyeliner pencil. What? Not professional enough for you?"

"I guess it doesn't matter as long as you get the job done." He came up and inspected her work. "It seems to be working well."

"Thanks," she said, getting up and looking at her writing. "This is taking me forever. Are they almost done downstairs?"

Seth nodded. "Tawnee is the last one."

"Good. Hey, I have a question."

"What's that?"

"Do you have any more money?"

"If you're worried about how Paulo and I are going to pay the ferryman, I've already got it all worked out. Raidne has been saving Greek and Roman currency for thousands of years. You better believe she's already sent half her treasure trove to us for this very purpose. I could pay Charon enough to make him a king."

"Wonderful. Except I think he likes toonies. He said something about how he thought the gold and silver coins were precious when Juliet gave him one."

"You're kidding."

"No. He said they were different. Heaven knows what he does with all of them or why he needs them. So Seth," she said pausing to regard him seriously. "Are you ready?"

He sucked in his breath and cast his eyes downward. "I don't know how to prepare myself. I'm not hungry because I had so much to drink yesterday, so I haven't been able to work up an appetite. Is there something I need to do?"

"You just have to have a clear head. My mind is clear, but I can understand if yours is clouded."

"I want to," he interrupted, looking in her eyes. "I remember more every minute and what you said this evening was... eye opening. That first time we met in the tower, I don't remember it and that tower fell into the sea before I was born the second time."

"Hades toppled it after I slit my throat," Juliet said with a sigh. "That was why Raidne and Teles were devouring our corpses in the cave instead of where they lay at the top of the tower."

"So, it was like that?" Seth said sadly.

She suddenly grabbed both his shoulders and forced him to look at her. Studying his brown eyes she said with conviction, "This doesn't have to go on. This can end tonight. If you're single-minded, if you listen to me and work quickly, we could finish this tonight. I could walk out a free woman, leaving my obligations behind and start a new life."

"And we'd be together?" he asked quietly.

She smiled uncertainly. "I love you, but I can see you're floundering. I don't blame you. The way I am right now... what's lovable about it? Nothing much. It's just that," she continued, "We don't have time. If we're going to win, I have to fight. I have to be uncompromising and slightly reckless."

"We're not important right now?" he said, indicating the two of them together.

"If you're saying that, I don't think you appreciate how rare this opportunity is. Do you realize how hard-won your lineage was? Even beyond that, there are other components that have only now been brought into place. And it's not like our relationship won't reach a new level tonight. For the first time ever, you are going to drink immortal blood that you have cut for yourself."

He seemed mildly uncomfortable. She knew he had never liked himself as a blood drinker.

She slid her hand around his waist and put her head on his shoulder. "It's all right. I trust you completely. You won't lose control. And the experience will be so much more rewarding than you realize, beyond tasting my blood. So far, you've only seen two sides of me. Tonight you're going to see more, and if things happen the way I foresee, the changes in me will change you."

"How will I change?" he asked as he tried to look at her.

She kept her face away from him. "You will grow up to meet me. The road we travel tonight will be a painful one, but even if it hurts, you have to walk it with me until the end. What happens after that will be completely new, for both of us."

The moment hung silent and stretching before the door thwacked open to announce the entrance of the witches and the Gemini.

Halona and the witches sat in deck chairs and ate in order to raise their blood sugar levels while Nixie delivered four plastic bags of blood to Juliet. She looked at the girls sitting in the pool chairs sipping apple juice out of cocktail glasses and taking tiny bites of biscuits. They were fine. She didn't need to worry about them, even though she secretly had.

Juliet was marginally regretful as she popped open the top of the first bag of blood. "Thank you," she said to the girls. "I know this was a big sacrifice that you made specifically for me. Thank you for wanting to save me."

They nodded, and Blanche even smiled at her.

Then Juliet got to work. She started by squirting the blood in a slender line all the way around the edge of the pool on her name. One bag of blood covered two of her written names, so she used three to encircle the whole thing. Then she had one left. She stepped out onto the diving board and emptied the last bag into the water.

The lights flickered.

Juliet started saying the words to the spell.

Then the lights flicked off and only the lights that illuminated the pool from underwater stayed on.

"What's happening?" Tawnee whispered.

Juliet chanted.

Mist rose off the water and filled the room with gray fog. Then tiny blue lights appeared. Juliet knew those lights. They were the lost spirits that wandered the edges of the river Styx. Then the ferry appeared. At first it was gray like whispers of ghost breath, and then the tiny lantern hanging from the bow of the boat came into focus. When Charon came into view, someone gasped. Charon took no notice and maneuvered his craft so that the side was level with the diving board, where Juliet stood.

He looked at her and said, "My Lady, you never cease to amaze me. Asking me to come all this way to collect you? You should have just slit your throat like the last time. It would have been quicker."

Juliet smiled wanly. Even though he acted like this, she had grown to like the old ferryman, but she'd never stopped wondering why he chose to spend eternity in his role.

"This ride isn't for me," she said, retreating back off the diving board and making room for Seth and Paulo to step on.

She watched them make their way down the diving board. Seth went first, stepping onto the boat with an odd clatter, making the boat jostle in the water. He gave one of his coins to Charon and then took a seat in the back of the vessel and spread out his arms like he was master. Juliet's clenched her jaw with emotion. It was exactly the way Hades had sat nearly two thousand years before when he had kidnapped her. She felt a surge of hope. They were going to be able to do this. Seth would unmake her contract. She knew it.

At the end of the diving board, Paulo stood and shed his mortal disguise to reveal himself as Apollo before he stepped into the boat. He gave Charon another one of Seth's coins, but did not take a spot by Seth's side. The space on that seat was only enough room for one, so Apollo sat on the floor of the boat and leaned his back against the side.

Juliet strode to the end of the diving board to have one last word with Charon before they left. "I'm going to leave this gate open, so you can return these men to this entrance when they've completed their task."

"Aren't you coming, too, my lady?" Charon inquired.

"Not by this path. I'll meet you at the mouth of the river. Travel safely."

"You know I don't promise my customers anything, especially not their safety," the ferryman of the dead rasped before he pushed away from the side of the pool and steered the boat into the mist.

After they disappeared into the haze, the room did not change. It was still black and foggy with the only light coming from under the water's surface.

"Fiona," Juliet said, stepping on the pool deck. "Get comfortable. It's your turn now."

"So, what do I do?" she asked as she put her cocktail glass on a table next to her.

"Lie down and imagine your spirit is flying," Juliet said as she lay down on the deck next to her.

Even though it did not seem possible, the little goddess was about to live the most horrifying night of her life. It might even make what Hades had done to her seem tame.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Golden Lifeblood

Blue lights.

The cave that led to the Underworld curled around the travelers. Surrounding them were thousands of glowing orbs hanging in the air, the lost spirits of the dead.

Blue lights.

Seth felt strange as he looked at them. He had spent most of his existence as one of those lights. Like Stella and Juliet, he too had been in a bottle on a dressing table, though not Persephone's, Raidne's. Persephone couldn't keep him for two reasons. The first one was that Raidne needed to have his soul handy should an opportunity arise that could give him the immortal body they sought. The second was that if Hades found Persephone hording something like his rival's soul, Seth would never get out of Tartarus.

Blue lights.

As the ferry floated by, Seth felt a deep kind of expectation rise up in his heart. In this life, he had never felt like he had something to look forward to, but if he could break the curse tonight, then life held unlimited possibilities. He could live the way he wanted to, and whatever road he decided to travel, he would never again become one of the tiny blue lights that wandered the banks of the river Styx.

When they reached the mouth of the river, Persephone was there waiting for them. She was like his dream, but a thousand times more vivid. It was her eyes that struck him the hardest. She had green eyes when she was in Juliet's body, but when her natural red eyelashes framed those green eyes, the impact almost undid him. Still, somehow, she was different from what he remembered. The line of her mouth was harder and she was dressed differently. Forget the silks. With the changing of the times, so was there a change in her wardrobe. Now she was wearing blue jeans and a black halter top that crossed her chest and tied in two different places on her back. The top left her stomach exposed and around her hip bones were the same type of symbols that he had seen on Hades.

She tied her curly red hair into a ponytail and then put out her hand to help him onto the stone-carved dock. Her hand was warm. He was just getting used to it when she let go of him and turned to Apollo to help him.

"Are we going to do this here?" Apollo asked, "Or do you have some other place in mind?"

"We need to go to one of the bedrooms. Once this is finished, I won't want to be moved. I can heal best if I'm lying down." Her lips were deep red as she spoke. Seth couldn't take his eyes off her.

As she led them through the palace, he kept thinking, This is the woman I fell in love with? This is the woman I wanted to protect so badly that I gave up my life not once, but twice? I believe it.

Also, he noticed that she was right. A different side of her personality was coming out. In the pool room she had seemed competent, controlling and exacting. Now she was leading them through the mansion of the Underworld like a nervous detective in an action movie. She peeked around corners. She perked her ears like she was waiting to hear the sound of a door at any moment. She went ahead from time to time and then beckoned for them to follow her.

Then it hit him. She was really afraid of being caught by Hades, even if she was a goddess.

Finally, it seemed like they were at the end of the line. There were two doors in front of them.

"This one leads to the bedroom for whores and this one leads to the bedroom for wives. What do you think?" she asked, turning to Apollo. "Which bedroom should we use? I've never been in the bedroom for wives. If Hades comes home, he probably won't look for me there."

"You mean to tell me he's treated you like a consort all this time?" Apollo grimaced. "Even so, if you're planning on leaving him then the insult of performing your surgery in that room would be devastating. Besides, that's the only place in his palace that he has not shared with you. I think it would be better if you let him keep one thing to himself. It would give him a little dignity."

Persephone favored him with the foulest expression in her artillery.

It was then that Seth realized that Persephone did not have Apollo's approval. After his speech to the Occult's Addict, Seth had assumed that she did.

If Apollo didn't approve then Seth felt like the 'other man' and he hated that. He always ignored that part of their problem because it disgusted him. It wasn't as if she had decided to marry Hades or given him a promise of love. She had never given Hades her heart.

He pushed ahead of them and entered the room meant for whores.

It was black. The only light in the room came from her dressing table, a tiny blue light in a bottle. Then Persephone entered and the room seemed to come alive. Potted plants swayed like there was a breeze, candles spontaneously lit, water began flowing down one wall, the bed curtains parted, and the edge of the sheet curled down.

Seth stared. Then he cleared his throat as if to let everything in the room understand what he was saying. "This is where your contract was made. This is where we will break it."

Persephone seemed incredibly heartened by his words. She cast her green eyes on him with such approval that it nearly stopped his heart. Even though he knew he was just a tool, her praise made him feel valuable.

"Lie down on the bed," Apollo said.

She gave Seth one last look before she smoothed her blankets back into position and stretched out on top of them.

"All right," Apollo said, sitting next to her on the bed. "Where do you think your seeds are?"

"My abdomen," she said, touching a spot above her navel and then moving her fingers as she pointed to a spot below. "I think there's one here, and one down here."

Apollo brushed her hands away and placed his own against her stomach and pressed down firmly. "I owe you an apology. I thought you were dressed like that because you were planning a seduction."

"You're hilarious," she said icily.

He looked into her eyes earnestly, more earnestly than Seth thought possible under the circumstances, and said, "I'm sorry."

She said nothing more and after a moment of his pressing and feeling her abdomen and sides, he said, "You're right. There are only two there. One is lodged in your large intestines and the other just outside your stomach wall. I'll start searching for the others now. Close your eyes."

Seth should have felt uncomfortable with Apollo touching Persephone, but there was nothing romantic in the way he touched her. He started with her head and placed his fingers on her temples. Rubbing gently, he didn't look at her. Instead, he looked blankly at the ceiling or the headboard behind her. He was focusing on his fingers.

His hands worked their way into her flaming hair and behind her head. "I found one," he said. "It's lodged between your spinal cord and your skull."

Persephone winced.

That one would be undoubtedly difficult to remove.

After that, Apollo spent a long time examining her throat. He seemed to think it was logical for another seed to be there, but after a good five minutes, he moved on to her shoulders and down her arms. He held both her arms at the same time and examined different muscle groups to see if he could feel a difference in them. He paused when he came to her wrists. "There is a seed stuck in each of your wrists. They're deep. That accounts for five. There's only one left." Apollo's eyelids flickered

as he scanned her. "There's only one place for the last one," he said, placing a hand over her heart. "It's here."

Persephone slapped his hand away. "Sorry," she repented immediately. "I just didn't want to hear that last one. It will take me to the brink of death to have that one removed."

"He is the God of the Underworld. He wouldn't make this easy." Apollo sighed and then got off the bed. "Did you catch all of that, Seth?"

"Yeah," Seth mumbled, wondering how he was going to get up the appetite to do this.

"Do you want me to supervise?" Apollo asked, looking at Persephone's bare stomach.

"You think I should start there?" Seth exclaimed in disbelief. He had absently been thinking of starting with her wrists.

"They are actually in the least vital place on an immortal. Besides, she hasn't eaten in five years, so there won't be any other food in her system. It's completely clean. If I were doing this, that's where I'd start."

Seth looked to Persephone for guidance.

She nodded.

Seth mentally buckled himself up. He didn't want to appear weak in front of either Persephone or Apollo, so he clenched his jaw on teeth that wanted to chatter and made fists of his fingers that wanted to tremble. He walked around to the other side of the bed and climbed up next to Persephone.

I am just a tool. I am just a tool, he chanted in his head to calm himself, but he wasn't calming down. His canines were growing long inside his mouth. One look at Persephone lying there waiting for him to bite her and his body reacted accordingly. He wasn't supposed to be like this. He had already had all the blood he needed. The idea of biting her shouldn't even tempt him, but it did, desperately.

Just then Apollo drew the bed curtain closed. "I'll leave you two alone," he said. His voice sounded remarkably like a physician's.

"Are you all right?" Persephone asked Seth, propping herself up on her elbows.

"This just feels so wrong," he whispered.

"It's not. If you refuse, you're saying that you and your family should be cursed because you're still too afraid to stand up for me. Did you think undoing the wrong that was done was going to be easy?"

"And what about you? It will hurt."

She sighed and slipped gently onto her back. "I'll love you as you rip me to shreds. You'll feel it."

Seth ran a hand over her unbroken skin lingeringly. It seemed the ultimate shame to cut her.

"Time is short. Please, don't hesitate."

He moved his hand over her stomach and paused over the area where one of the seeds was. Then he closed his eyes and sticking out one canine more than the other, he scratched. Nothing happened.

"You're going to have to bite harder than that," Persephone whispered, her fingers reaching for his free hand.

He held her hand and bit down without remorse, getting his second fang involved, which was what she wanted.

Persephone's blood tasted nothing like Juliet's. In order to find out about Juliet's past, Seth had to swish her blood around against his pallet like he was a human tasting wine. The message contained in human blood was subtle. It could even be ignored if he drank quickly enough.

This was different.

Persephone's blood screamed her message, even though he tried not to taste it and definitely not to deliberately drink it. Her injustice burned his tongue. The taste of her blood gave him a full view of how she had lived as the wife of the God of the Underworld.

Seth closed his eyes and could see Persephone as clear as daylight as Hades slammed her against a wall. Hades thought it was a game. Raping her was a game. Seth felt her pain. The next moment he heard the mocking laughter of the white-haired god. Through Persephone's ears, the sound was too cruel to be tolerated.

Then he saw Hades sitting next to her on the settee, trying to feed her pomegranate kernels. She couldn't stand the taste. She spat them on the floor. Hades red eyes narrowed. He raged at her ingratitude and spat on her.

Seth bit down harder. He had to find the seed. He had to make these memories stop.

In summer on Olympus, Persephone was forced to partake of Artemis' pity and condescension, the Goddess of the Hunt. Persephone couldn't endure to listen to such talk from a woman who had kept the virginity that had been stolen from her. To add insult to injury, Artemis was Apollo's twin. His adoration for his twin had never ebbed, not the way his love for Persephone had withered.

In the Underworld, Persephone was treated like Hades' doll as she was forced to try on all the different clothes he had prepared for her as gifts. She grew numb to the sight of her own naked body. The modesty she had once cherished was destroyed.

Seth pulled his razor teeth from the wound he'd made. Then with his fingers, he reached into the incision and pulled the long, hard seed free.

Persephone's face was dead-white as he removed it.

"I got it," Seth proclaimed with blood dribbling down his chin.

Persephone sighed and let her head rest on the pillows.

"Excellent," Apollo said, sticking his arm between the bed curtains and holding out a small glass bottle for Seth to put the seed into. Then with the other hand, he tossed a white cloth on the bed. "Wrap her wound," he instructed before his fingers disappeared.

"Thank you, Seth," Persephone whispered as he put pressure on the gash, "but please don't stop there. I fear we don't have much time and I want as many out as possible."

"How's the pain?" he asked, not moving to obey her.

"I can bear it," she murmured with her eyes closed. "It's like Apollo said. These will be the easiest to remove, for both of us."

He cradled her head in his palm, and in so doing touched the burial place of one of the seeds. "I'll take care of you."

"Then take care of me now and get the next one out," she mumbled. Her eyelids peeking open to reveal two eyes like shining fireflies.

He nodded and found the next place.

Seth wanted to move confidently, but after he felt those few shards of her memories, he wasn't sure if he wanted to know more about her suffering.

Swallowing his concerns, Seth bit down again.

This time he felt loneliness, long stretches of loneliness. First, Persephone was lonely on Olympus. Demeter was the only one there for Persephone, and she loved her, but Demeter was also the Goddess of Harvest. Thus, she was not always there to hold her daughter's head in her soft lap. For just one second, he got a taste of the love Demeter had for Persephone. She was a mother who loved her child despite all the rumors and disapproval that followed her.

Persephone was considered a repugnant child on Olympus because she could not let go of her mother's skirt. How could a grown woman continue to want her mother's love and attention even after she was married? And she was a goddess at that! Persephone knew what they said about her. Demeter ignored them and acted like her daughter didn't have filthy arms. Persephone could not let go of her mother. There was no one else.

The disapproval extended. She was the wretched wife of Hades who would have had a grand family with beautiful daughters and powerful sons, yet Persephone denied him. She wasn't even of any use to him in bed. Pathetic! In this case, the public ridicule came from Hera herself.

The last thought was a snapshot of Zeus himself giving her a disgusted look. It was because she'd gone missing from Olympus for a season and left her work to her mother. That was unpardonable. But Persephone didn't care, not even when she was reprimanded by the God of Heaven.

Then, he saw himself. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth and his eyes lit up with mirth. Seth felt Persephone's pleasure as she ran like a mad woman in Stella's body. She brushed her wind torn hair out of her eyes and looked over her shoulder at him, chasing her.

Seth jolted away from her. He had forgotten what he was supposed to be doing. Immediately, he plunged his fingers into her wound and searched for the seed.

He was surprised. He had not expected to see himself in her memories or see his own face with such a happy expression. He couldn't believe he had ever been that happy. His past felt like nothing but curses, curses, curses! How could he have been that happy? It didn't seem real.

He pulled the seed loose and dropped it into the bottle Apollo held out for him.

"Wrap her up," Apollo hissed, shoving his head through the curtains. "I hear footsteps."

Seth ignored the blood on his face and worked rapidly to bandage her wounds.

"He's coming!" Apollo prompted, helping him tie off the makeshift bandage.

"You have to go," the wounded goddess said, holding her stomach. "There's a back door to this room that leads to the river. It's behind my mirror. The password is 'breakable'. Hades doesn't know I know it," Persephone mumbled, pushing Seth and Apollo away. "I'll face him myself, so go!"

"No," Seth said, grabbing her hand. "You have to come with us."

"I can't," she whispered. "You have to leave me here and go back with Charon."

Seth felt helpless. Why couldn't he protect her? What wrath would she have to face from Hades? He couldn't leave her alone to face Hades.

"I'm used to it," she said as though she could read his mind. "He's here."

Apollo pulled Seth off the bed by his shoulders, just as Hades stormed through the bedroom doors. He had abandoned Rylan's body and the man who stood in front of them was nothing less than the actual God of the Underworld. His eyes were red as spilled blood and the vapor that surrounded him was the color of ashes, until he saw the three of them, then it suddenly turned inky black. "What is this?" he asked. His voice smooth though it was clear he was enraged.

"Get out of here you two," Persephone cried before she said spitefully, "I want to show my husband something."

It was then that Hades noticed her bandages. His eyes became flames. "What have you done?" He extended his hand and out of oblivion retrieved a scythe with a blade

as long as the span of a man's arms. "Apollo, I'll sever your head for what you've done, and as for that boy you brought down here, he'll forever rest in hell. This is the last time I will stand for this ridiculousness."

Seth stepped between Apollo and Hades. He tried to speak, but Hades immediately struck him across the chest with the edge of his scythe ripping a huge gash open from shoulder to hip. Seth couldn't even scream. His blood splattered across Hades' face.

As he fell backwards, golden arms caught him.

Seth's head swam with the pain. The feeling, he knew it. It was very much like a dagger through the heart or an arrow to his core, except somehow different. Those times, he had felt his strength desert him as his soul prepared to take flight. This time was different. The pain was exquisite, yet palatable. He could swallow the pain.

Seth pushed himself onto his feet as Hades' eyes widened like two red moons hovering on the horizon. He could not believe what he was seeing.

"Golden blood? Immortal?" Hades spat as he examined Seth's metallic blood dripping between his fingers. "How? Who?"

Apollo seized Seth from behind and as he pulled him backwards, everything became a blur.

"What are you doing?" Seth choked.

"You think you can fight him just because you're immortal? Fool," Apollo muttered between set teeth.

Then somehow Seth was lying on the bottom of the ferry. Apollo rifled through his clothes until he found the money to pay the river master and soon the boat rocked with the current to the beat of a lullaby.

"You should have left me there," Seth said grudgingly as his golden blood pooled under him. "She shouldn't have to face that monster alone."

Apollo sat in the seat at the back of the boat and put his chin in his palm. "Idiot! He can still slap you in Tartarus. He can still fight you until you lose your head. Dying was a blessing before. If he gets his hands on you, he could arrange for you to be tortured until the end of time. This immortal coil of yours is not a blessing. It's a curse."

Seth couldn't talk for several moments. He hadn't thought of it that way before, but it had to be true. When he could finally speak, he asked Apollo, "Then why did she do this to me?"

"Because this is the *only* way. But even now, as she lies in bed with gnashes in her belly, she's protecting you. It's her love. Besides, you have undone two of her months. Now she only has to spend four months a year with that devil. Tonight has

been a great success. Enjoy it. In one night you have done what she couldn't do for herself in sixteen hundred years."

"But... what will Hades do to her?" Seth asked, afraid of the answer. His cut was already on the mend. The flow of blood had stopped.

"Who knows? Who knows what he has already done to her to make her like this?" Then Apollo dropped something beside Seth's head. It was the bottle with the pomegranate seeds and smudges of Persephone's blood smeared inside the glass. "You keep that. My part in this is over. From now on, no matter what happens, no matter what she suffers tonight, it's up to you to cut the remaining four seeds from her body. Just don't swallow them in your haste to get them out or you'll be in a similar mess."

Seth picked up the bottle and clutched it to his heart. What was that devil doing to his treasure?

Chapter Twenty Nine

His Other Half

The scythe in Hades' hands bounced recklessly as he paced the room. Persephone watched him carefully and waited for the moment that he would turn it on her. She had to stall him a little longer. She had to keep him there until she was sure that Seth and Apollo had gotten away. Once they were on the riverboat, they might have a chance to get Seth somewhere safe so he could heal, but where was safe for Seth now that Hades was a God again?

Persephone clutched her stomach and tried not to think about it.

Finally, Hades let the scythe evaporate in his hands. Then he approached Persephone on the bed and ordered, "Uncover your gut."

She tried to do as she was told.

He tore her makeshift bandages off in his impatience and examined her wound with his nose practically touching her skin. Then he scoffed as he backed away, "You never once asked me to free you, and now you're doing it in the most painful way possible. Why?"

"It's the only way," she muttered, covering her wounds with the leftover shreds of bandage. "You would never have let me go. Pretend to deny it."

Hades narrowed his eyes hatefully. "I won't. I just want to understand why you have never once come to me with any of your desires. Why? Why is it always someone else? Why do you always take your problems to someone else? Your mother or Apollo or... Sethos? Why can't you ever tell me what's wrong? Why can't you give me the chance to make you happy? You never even talk to me!"

"How could I talk to you?" she whispered. "Nothing about this arrangement was discussed with me. I don't care that my mother didn't give her blessing to our union. You didn't ask *me*. When you broke through the mountain, you could have *asked* me to come with you. You could have asked me to be your bride."

"You wouldn't have accepted."

"And you wonder why I didn't ask you to let me go. We have always been at odds, you and me. Why even bother discussing it?"

He hid his face by turning it into a shadow.

"I can't go to you with anything because you defile my very existence—the creation of innocence—and imprison me in the place where everything I cherish is desecrated. You wanted to control the balance of power, but I can't play both sides. If I don't reject you with all my heart I will not be the Goddess of Fertility. And no

matter what you want, you can't play both sides either. You can't stop trying to break me down, decompose me. The longer I stay with you the hotter my rebellion becomes. I will do anything to depart this place and never return."

He turned his face to the light. His eyes burned her like splattering lava. "And my love for you is meaningless?"

"Rape is hate. It has nothing to do with love," she said evenly, not allowing herself to feel scorched.

His shoulders fell and his expression became sorrowful. "And I can never prove that my love for you is real?"

"Never," she said unrelentingly.

"Why not?"

"Because you only regard me as a way to lighten your load. Just as many people are born into the world as die. That means that the number of souls requiring your attention here is the exact number of souls I send down to Gaia. Who helps you with the work of judging them? Me. Who helps me with the work of preparing them? Not you. My mother lends a hand whenever I am gone from Olympus, but she has her own work to do and a great deal is left for me. Besides, there is no real rush to judging souls like there is in preparing infants. There's no heated romance that gets overplayed or people praying for conception. Here, timing is unimportant. When I do my work on Olympus, timing is everything and because I'm only there for six months of the year, I'm forced to do double duty, except for now when I'm playing truant." She paused from her tirade and glanced at a timepiece on the wall. Now she was positive that enough time had lapsed for Apollo to remove Seth.

Hades absorbed what she said with his jaw clenched and his chest heaving.

She didn't care. She let her eyes flutter closed. "Hades, the damage is already done and the pain is overwhelming. I'm done talking."

"You think I'll let you off this easily?" he demanded, grabbing her by the elbow and jolting her into a sitting position. He forced her green eyes to stare into his red ones and continued, "You have never mentioned any of these grievances before."

"We've already discussed this. There was no point. You wouldn't have wanted to help me. It's against your nature, just like me living as a Goddess of the Underworld is against mine. Go ahead. Tell me you would have helped me."

"I can't help with conceiving souls. It's against my nature," he conceded through clenched teeth, "but I would have liked to understand your perspective."

She narrowed her eyes and said, "Which is something you haven't sought since the beginning."

Then he shook her wildly and the violence of it tore open her healing wound afresh. "When are you going to forgive me for that?" he bellowed. "When will I have your forgiveness for that one time?"

"It hasn't been just once," she choked, fighting against the pain in her gut. "If I kept marks on a wall like a prisoner counting the days in jail, how many would there be? I ask you: how many would there be?"

Hades was stunned. It was clear he didn't know.

Persephone didn't either, but there had been enough times to warrant her rage.

He let go of her and turned back into the room while she wept and used the bedclothes to soak up her blood.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked callously.

"You shouldn't shake an injured woman like that."

"And what? Am I supposed to nurse you better? I should slice you in half for the wound you've put in my heart."

Persephone returned his heartless stare with hers and coldly said, "Knock yourself out." Then she grabbed a coin off her dressing table and shoved it in her mouth, placing it under her tongue.

She let her spirit take flight and let her body fall limp. Flying, she made her way up to the mouth of the river, her soul moving so fast that she was almost out of the palace when she heard Hades' scream. He hadn't expected her to do that. He'd probably abandoned Rylan's body for good, since he lacked a convenient, immortal place holder.

She just had to get Charon to take her back down the river to the pool where her friends were waiting for her. She spat the coin into her hand.

Excellent. She was still one move ahead of Hades. Juliet's body was probably enjoying something indescribably fattening that was one hundred percent against Fiona's diet.

Juliet opened her eyes. She was propped up on a wooden deck chair by the side of the pool. The gray fog still filled the air and the ferry to the Underworld still swayed in the pool. Apparently, Charon had stayed to watch her gain consciousness in Juliet's body before leaving. She saw the edge of his lip twitch into a half smile as he lifted his pole and shoved off from the edge of the pool.

Her body felt strange. Even though it was her immortal body that had been cut, her soul had to be present for the surgery to be effective. She knew this. There shouldn't have been any difference when she took Juliet's body, but it didn't feel

right. Her body was uncut and should have felt perfectly healthy, but she didn't feel the perfect fit she had before. There was an unearthly trembling in her stomach. Her spirit knew she was wounded. Even though the pain was gone, the knowledge was still there.

Putting her feet on the floor, she checked on Fiona. Her eyelids were flickering violently as Halona held her head in her lap.

"Is she going to make it back?" the twin asked nervously.

"Don't worry," Juliet said in an authoritative tone. "It's a matter of practice. Once she's done this a time or two, she'll be able to take instant possession. The most important thing is not to panic. Be soothing. Relax and give her more time. If she keeps having trouble, I'll guide her soul back myself, but it shouldn't come to that. Your psychic connection should be enough."

Halona nodded.

Juliet knew Fiona understood what she had to do, so it was fine to leave them alone.

The next thing Juliet needed to do was to check on Seth. He was splayed out on the deck by the edge of the water. His cut was worse than she thought when she saw Hades strike him down, and his golden blood had made a mess of him. There was nothing she could do for him at this point. There was no medication or treatment for the immortal. They simply had to experience the pain until they healed on their own. Except her, who played the coward by leaving her body to endure it alone, not just the pain, but whatever Hades saw fit to do with her body after her consciousness was gone.

What could she do for Seth? After everything he had done, she was in such awe of him that she wanted to bow down in front of him.

On the deck beside him, Nixie attempted to smother his wounds with towels while he pushed her away. "I'm not bleeding anymore," he growled. "And I don't want you to touch me."

"But..." Nixie pleaded.

"Persephone," he hollered, looking directly into her eyes like he saw her soul. "Close the gate to the river. Now!"

Juliet didn't hesitate, even though she had reason to be ashamed. She should have thought to do that herself. Closing the gate would make it harder for Hades to pursue them. She snatched the towel from Nixie. Dropping to her hands and knees, she scrubbed the blood and her name off one portion of the circle. When the witches saw what she was doing, they grabbed towels and worked with her until it was all rubbed off.

The fog in the room dissipated until the lights hanging from the ceiling shone clearly. Soon everything was as it had been before Juliet had opened the gate.

"All done?" Seth questioned weakly. It had been too much effort for him to yell.

"All done," she replied softly.

"Excellent," he muttered and then he rolled into the water with a splash.

"What happened?" Nixie asked quietly, clutching a second towel stained with gold blood.

Juliet looked around the room. It seemed to be the question on everyone's mind. She guessed Seth and Apollo didn't have time to tell them before she got there, and now she had to answer their questions. That was the last thing she wanted to do. Every fiber of her being wanted to dive into the pool after Seth. She had to hold him and tell him of her gratitude for everything he had done, but he had drifted all the way to the bottom of the pool. It was deep. Could she even reach him before her air ran out? This was one of those moments when she felt the sting of duty. Even if the Occult's Addict didn't realize it, their actions that night made them her worshipers and she couldn't turn her back on those who followed her.

"Come here. I'll tell you," she invited kindly while she stifled her instinct to bury herself in the pool.

Juliet took a perch on a deck chair. Just as she sat down, Fiona stirred.

"Wow," she breathed. "That was one wild ride."

"Did you like that?" Juliet asked, still maintaining her facade of control.

"Yeah," she said, before she fell back into Halona's arms.

"Good, because I'm going to need you to do it again."

Blanche groaned. "You weren't able to get all the seeds?"

"No, but we got two. Hades discarded Rylan's body and came to the Underworld and caught us. Tomorrow, if some of you want to visit Taylor, it will be very interesting to find out if Rylan is dead or if Hades was able to use a marker like I did."

"Couldn't he give Rylan his body back?" Tawnee asked.

Juliet was a little taken-aback. "I suppose it's not impossible. The God of the Underworld has powers I have not seen. He and I have never let each other entirely into our own worlds."

A hush fell over the room, but was quickly brightened by Paulo who was scavenging around the refreshment table cursing that there was no liquor and wearing his favorite swarthy disguise. "You made me do all that work and you're not even going to buy me a drink?" he scorned.

The party continued as everyone listened to Juliet explain what happened in the Underworld, but Seth stayed under water for the rest of the gathering. After

everyone's curiosity was satisfied, all the guests went home and Nixie went up to bed, Juliet sat on the diving board and watched Seth's dark figure at the bottom of the pool. He didn't swim, but drifted on his back with one hand over his torso and the other extended. His eyes stayed closed, or at least Juliet thought they did. It was difficult to tell through the movement on the water's surface. She leaned forward until she was on her stomach and touched the water with her fingertips, pretending she was touching him. She had done a lot of that in the last thousand years. It calmed her.

Eventually, her body tired. She rose and went up to the fourth floor. She couldn't stay up all night to watch over him. Nothing could kill him and Juliet's body had been through too much to withstand the fatigue any longer.

In Seth's room, there were boxes and plastic bags of her things. Nixie had brought them over. Ignoring her clothes, she pulled a black dress shirt from Seth's dresser and did up the buttons. The cuffs fell over her hands, so she undid them. Then she slid into his bed and realized something surprising. Seth had never slept in it. She knew he slept in his tub, so the bed wasn't where he did his dreaming. He left no mark on his bed. It was nothing more than a piece of furniture.

Taking to her feet, she went to his hot tub and slid into the salty water. She didn't know if she'd be able to sleep there, but she'd certainly try.

"You fill me with unease."

Juliet roused herself. She had not lit any of the candles in the room, but when her eyes fluttered open, she saw that all of them were lit and glowing. Seth stood fully dressed and soaking wet on the bathmat in front of her. His shirt was unbuttoned and his wound was exposed.

He needed his tub.

"I'll get out," she said, moving out of his way.

"No," he said as he peeled his shirt off and then stepped barefoot into the water with her. "I want you close to me," he explained as he lowered himself beside her. It was a large tub and there was more than enough room for two. He sat beside her and put his arm behind her head to cushion it from the edge of the tub while he rested his on the wall. "But perhaps you shouldn't sleep here. When you find yourself drifting off, please retire to the bed. I made it up especially for you."

"You could have left it the way it was. After you made it, it didn't even feel like it was yours."

"It isn't mine. It's yours. It wasn't put in this room for my comfort. It was put there for you. I have no need for a bed."

"Ah, but you didn't think I would ever show up."

He paused. "Back then, I hoped you wouldn't."

When he didn't continue, she urged him on. "And how do you feel about me after tonight?"

"I wish I could be more to you, like your lover or your husband, but tonight I see how much you need me in the position I'm in. I never imagined that your need was so desperate. Even if things get worse, even if Hades breaks in through the wall this minute, I'll stand by you. You deserve loyalty from at least one person. It'll be me."

A muscle tugged at Juliet's bottom lip. The feeling that overwhelmed her was the breathless longing of what she wanted more than anything else in the world—Seth's heart—Seth's real heart. She wanted to give him her heart. Did he feel her heart when he tasted her blood? She asked him.

"I can't drink your goddess blood," he refuted without skipping a beat. "It hurts my mouth. The impressions I get when I bite you burn. Ripping you apart is torture. I want to put you back together, make you whole and let you grow."

Her eyes were getting hot and her mouth dry. She couldn't speak. She could only fend off her tears and give all her attention to the words coming out of his mouth.

"And I want to see what else you have in store for me. I want to know the rest of the story."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know."

"I want to *feel* the rest of the story," he said turning her so he could look into her eyes and see the emotion there. "Your words are only half a story and I want all of it, so we must continue it until I remove every last speck of Hades from you."

The next day was Sunday.

Part way through the night, Seth had insisted she go sleep in the bed because he wanted to rest more completely, which he could do better if he were submerged. So, she got out and covered herself in a white dress shirt. She slept easily, but she awoke when Seth got dressed and left his room to talk to Chas after he got home from the police station.

Phones had been ringing and buzzers buzzing off and on for hours. Juliet huddled in Seth's bed and pretended to sleep, but how could she sleep with all that racket?

Finally, she came out of the bedroom like a zombie and fell onto the couch.

"What do you want for breakfast?" Seth asked pleasantly, sitting next to her.

She rubbed the gunk from her eyes. "Seth, should you really be worrying about me like this? Aren't you hurt? Why are you out of your tub?"

"I'm fine," he said. He lifted his shirt and showed her his skin. Though the mark from shoulder to hip was still there, the skin was completely knit back together.

"Is it still painful?" she asked, feeling her fluttering stomach and wondering how her own body was faring in the Underworld.

"Not so much. I'm lucky he didn't break my ribs. You shouldn't worry about me. Besides, I was only going to place your breakfast order with Nixie who is actually about to go shopping."

"Okay," she said, skeptically examining his straight posture. If he were truly suffering, he would have stayed in his tub. "Then I'd like a bagel with cream cheese, please."

"Done," he said getting up.

"What's with all the noise out here? Who keeps calling?"

"Chas and I will explain. A lot happened since last night."

Seth disappeared around the corner and called his brother. Two minutes later, Chas emerged from his bedroom sipping a goblet of blood like it was perfectly aged wine.

"Good morning," he said when he saw her. "Wonderful taste you have in bodies to have selected a girl with such beautiful legs."

"They didn't look like this when she was thirteen," Juliet muttered. "So, what happened when the cops dragged you off?"

"Well, they had taken down my license plate number during Seth's car chase with Rylan and came to issue me several tickets. Actually, if my driving record was not perfect I would have lost my drivers' license last night, thanks to Seth." Chas paused and gave his brother an affectionate glance. "I love that I was the one who taught you how to drive."

Seth shook his head wearily.

"So, they didn't find out that you weren't really the one behind the wheel?" Juliet sighed in relief.

"No. Apparently, after rampaging all over the city searching for you two, Rylan ran out of gas and passed out in the driver's seat. The police arrested him early yesterday morning, but it took them ages to figure out what happened since Rylan has no memory of Friday night."

"What?"

"Actually, he has no memory of the past five years. His last memory was during an accident he had at an amusement park when he was fifteen. They said he went into a coma."

Juliet scanned the room as she thought. "So, that means that Hades has given Rylan his body back. I wonder if Rylan was dead when Hades took possession of his body. It's possible that he wasn't and so Hades was contractually bound to return his body to him at some point."

Chas and Seth exchanged glances. Their knowledge was incomplete, so whatever she said was law.

The white-haired siren continued, "They brought me in to see if I had any information about Rylan. Specifically, they wanted to see my car because Rylan had obviously been ramming something with the front end of his. So, I had to take them to the garage where my car is being repaired, explain why I didn't call the cops when he was chasing me, give a bogus explanation, and act like I was the one there the whole time."

"What did you say?" Juliet wondered.

"I said that he was obsessed with my daughter Nixie and I was just doing what any good father would do when their child is being attacked by a maniac. That way, I have explained why there was a girl in the backseat of my car. You weren't involved in the story I fed the cops. Since Rylan can't verify what happened, they bought my story. Besides, Rylan's gun was still in his car and someone had called the cops about the shot fired at your dormitory. So, he's locked down in the hospital now being assessed by doctors trying to piece together exactly what happened to him."

"Have you seen him?"

"They took me to the hospital and asked him if he knew me. Of course, he said he had no idea who I was."

"Hmm, and how's Taylor? Seth, do you know?"

"She's been calling non-stop since sunup. Right now she's camping on our front lawn with Halona, who is trying to calm her down."

"Why didn't you wake me sooner?" Juliet fumed. "Let her come up. I want to talk to her."

Seth looked dubious. "She's hysterical. Are you sure you want to see her?"

"Positive."

As they waited for the girls to come up, Juliet asked Chas if there was anything else he needed to tell her.

"Nothing," he muttered. "I'm just glad you've finally come to clear up this whole mess."

"And I am thankful to you for taking the fall yesterday and so convincingly, too. You're a hero."

He smirked. "Not like Seth. He told me what he had to do to you last night. I don't know how he stood it. I would have lost my nerve before the first cut was made."

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

"I'm not," he said with honest eyes. "I have carried this curse for almost seven decades and I was only allowed to be born for the sake of raising Seth in the real world. Otherwise my mother wouldn't have had me. I lived with her and my aunt until I was sixteen. After all these years the taste of blood sickens me to the point of gagging sometimes, but I must go on because nothing else will fill my stomach and make me live on. And I must live on. How could I face you on the other side if I gave up early?"

Juliet didn't answer. She knew how she would act if she was the one to judge his soul and he had not fulfilled the role of safeguarding Seth. Refusing to mention what they both knew to be true, she patted Chas on the back and whispered, "You have done uncommonly well. I thank you."

He smiled at her and even though he was sixty-five, he looked incredibly young.

Then a knock came at the door to announce the arrival of Taylor and Halona. Chas kept his back to the door and Seth waited for Juliet to nod before he opened it to let the girls in.

Seth was not exaggerating when he said that Taylor was hysterical. Her eyes were red from crying and her cheeks were blotchy.

"You," she said accusingly, pointing at Juliet.

"Me?" Juliet said back, lounging on the couch. She could tell at a glance, it was time for a high-handed attitude. If she acted even remotely weak, Taylor would walk all over her, not let her get a word in edgewise, and basically dominate the conversation until she got fed up with Juliet's helplessness and stormed out. Juliet knew how valuable Taylor was and she wanted to use her. She was going to fill in the blanks in Taylor's mind and turn her from a senseless maniac into a humble servant. After all, she had been Hades' twin for five years—his other half.

So, Juliet sprawled on the couch with her beautiful legs parted slightly, so that everyone could see she was wearing Seth's underwear. Her fingers twisted knots into her hair like she hadn't a care in the world, waiting for the storm to begin.

"What did you do to my brother?" Taylor began. Her blue eyes were horribly bloodshot and her mouth made hideous shapes as she spoke. "He never even looked at a girl until you came on the scene and now he's ruined!"

"What do you mean he's ruined? I heard that he lost memory, but it happened so recently. Give it time. With a loving sister like you to guide him, he'll probably remember everything quickly."

"Loving sister?" Taylor spat.

"Yes, of course. I remember the incredibly moving speech you gave about him at the Halloween party. Surely, you can help him through this difficult time like you did when he came out of his coma."

Taylor's lip trembled violently and she broke into fresh tears. "You don't understand."

"Certainly, I do. He spoke so warmly of you. Did you know that he neglected me just after we started dating in order to tutor you? What a sweet brother! Even if he finally looked at a woman, he always took care of your needs ahead of his own."

"And now that he's had this accident, you plan on deserting him?" she asked, her eyelids like slits.

Juliet matched Taylor's narrowed eyes and said, "You don't actually believe that story about him chasing Chas for Nixie's sake, do you?"

Taylor almost spat. "Of course not. He was chasing you."

"And why do you think I was running away from him? You must know your darling brother wasn't exactly what he seemed."

"What do you know about him?"

"Everything," Juliet said, like the depths of his soul were a lightweight matter.

"What could you possibly know about him? You've known him for what, a month?"

"Well, maybe I don't know everything. I don't know where he keeps his knife collection. He has all kinds of weapons, but I have no idea where he stores them. I'm beginning to think that he actually conjures them out of thin air when he needs them."

"What are you talking about? He only likes guns."

Juliet smirked. "But he hasn't spent enough time at the shooting range to score a point off Seth when it counts."

"Damn! I hoped it was you he was shooting at," Taylor said scornfully.

"And why are you so angry with me on this subject? It's true. He had a gun in his pants when he came over to my dorm room to rape me. I ran. Seth came to my rescue. He shot at Seth—missed—and chased us until he wrecked his car and got himself arrested. How am I at fault here?"

"He did not want to rape you. How dare you accuse him," Taylor whispered darkly.

"What does it matter what *I* say?" Juliet continued lightly. "We broke up that night. I haven't gone to the cops and the story they've been fed can only help Rylan in the long run. No one is angry, except you and I can't fathom why. You've got your brother back and hopefully no long term damage has been done. And if he doesn't remember the past five years, that's a shame, but it is not my fault."

"Not your fault? If you hadn't insisted he come out with you that night, he would have been with me and none of this would have happened."

"I didn't tie his hands," Juliet retorted. "Besides, why are you fighting the truth about him? I'm sure you know something about it. You just don't want to say."

"Say what?"

"That when he woke up from the coma five years ago, he was not your brother."

Taylor's mouth gaped.

Since she was utterly stunned, Juliet went on. "I bet I know what happened. Rylan, before he woke up from his coma, was a jerk. I bet he bullied you so furiously that when he was an inch from death in that hospital room you actually wished that he would die."

Taylor stepped back. With a twist of her mouth she said, "I don't have to listen to this."

Juliet got up off the couch and stalked toward Taylor like a predator. "And I bet when he woke up he was completely different. He was kind to you, like a twin brother should be—except better. He watched out for you like you were the only thing in the world that mattered and even went so far as to discard his friends that were mean to you. He helped you study and held your hand through the difficulties of adolescence until you couldn't think of entering university or even living your life without him."

Taylor backed up until she was against the wall, but still Juliet pursued her.

"Then," she continued. "You asked him to pretend to be your conjoined twin so that he wouldn't date. He was popular with girls before. They liked him for his dangerous looks and dry wit. What would happen to you if he found someone he liked? You'd be alone. Do you know why?"

Taylor closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Because," Juliet said smugly. "You would never find another man as good for you as your own brother."

The girl covered her ears with her hands and screamed, but Juliet didn't let her go on. She cupped Taylor's mouth with her palm and dragged her hand away from her right ear.

Then she whispered, "Except he wasn't your brother. He was a body thief who knew more about the universe and myths and legends than anyone you could have ever dreamed of." She took her hand away and stepped back from Taylor. "He would have been perfect for you if he hadn't take your brother's body."

Taylor looked like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Yet from the expression on her face, Juliet knew that everything said rang true.

Juliet continued, "You should be grateful he has moved on. In a different body the two of you might be able to be together... were he not my husband."

Taylor looked like she would snap in half.

"I'm a body thief, too." Juliet gave her a wicked smile. "Despite everything I just said, if you want him, I'll help you get him."

Taylor's expression was incredibly satisfying.

Chapter Thirty

Kiss my Wrists

The next Friday night, the meeting of the Occult's Addict was staged in the theater of Chas' building. Juliet was the one to suggest it. Chas agreed to sing a set for them at the beginning of the night. Juliet asked him to do it specifically because she needed a favor from Fiona and she wanted to give her something she prized as payment. The only thing Fiona wanted was Chas, and lucky for Juliet, he was something she could give.

Seth and Nixie volunteered to sing as well. Nixie got permission to sing two songs ahead of Chas, but Seth was excluded.

"I need you to do other work. I want you focused."

"What? I'm a siren. I can sing perfectly with no practice and come off as brilliant as an angel. Why wouldn't I be allowed?"

Juliet amended her statement. "Because you're mine and not for open display. Didn't you know, I'm whoring Chas off in exchange for Fiona's astral projection."

He smiled and backed off. "If you put it that way. Why is Nixie singing?"

"The others are curious about her."

In actuality, Juliet didn't want to do the next operation that night. Seth had healed completely, so she guessed she had as well, probably faster than he had. Yet even though she hadn't felt much of the pain her body felt because she was absent, she still felt nervous. Their first move had gone well, but Hades had the week they used to heal to come up with a strategy of his own. She told herself she wasn't making a mistake, trying for more seeds so quickly.

Fiona and the others arrived at midnight like usual. Halona's job was to help guide Fiona's soul back to her body when the night was over. The witches didn't really have a role to play, but Juliet was happy to have them anyway. They were especially eager to hear Chas and Nixie sing.

Paulo didn't come. He said he wasn't involved in Juliet's problem anymore and he meant it.

Taylor came, too. Actually, she had spent all her free time that whole week at Chas'. She went to school, went to the hospital to check on Rylan, and then stayed at Chas' as long as Juliet would allow, only going home to sleep. She did it because she believed there were only two places Hades might appear. One was back in Rylan's

body and the second was by Juliet's side. So, she occupied a place on the couch without really moving, without really breathing. She was waiting.

When everyone was assembled in the theater, Juliet started the meeting. After the high of last week's rigmarole, this gathering seemed anticlimactic. Juliet had Seth and Paulo do her first surgery in the Underworld because it was the one place she was certain Hades would not be. Since he had abandoned Rylan's body, Hades could be anywhere, so no place was safe. At this meeting, she planned to leave Juliet's body in the care of Fiona, and reclaim her divine body in the Underworld. If she could escape and meet Seth at the theater, she would have her second operation there. If not, she could at least check up on the condition of her body. All of which meant, the party would be less thrilling. The only interesting part would be the singing.

Nixie had gained energy and enthusiasm for entertaining since the previous week and had gone to great lengths to prepare the food. She was a carnivore, so there were chicken wings, beef jerky, bacon and shrimp kabobs. Juliet chuckled when she saw the setup. Clearly Nixie had never spent much time with women and didn't understand that her choices were peculiar.

It didn't matter.

Juliet started the meeting by asking how Rylan was doing.

"Well," Taylor began, "he's forgotten how to drive, all his usernames and passwords, his pin numbers, and his signature. He also has no idea about his taxable income for last year, what classes he was taking in university and every last thing our father taught him about the stock market. He spent the last two days in the hospital sneaking into his neighbor's room so he could play *Final Fantasy*."

"Do you think Hades has been back to see him?"

"No. I asked him privately about his encounters with Hades. He said Hades promised him he would go to heaven when he died if he let him borrow his body for an undetermined length of time." Taylor sighed. "I had no idea my brother was so concerned about going to hell. Besides, now that he knows there's no eternal punishment waiting for him, he's a thousand times more despicable than when he was fifteen."

"Sorry about that," Juliet said, trying to sound sorry.

"Don't say that," Taylor snapped. "I got to have five glorious years without him and in his place the best br-br-person I have ever known."

Juliet didn't like Taylor's way of talking. Not because she stumbled on the word brother not once, but twice, but because she thought Hades was a good person. Little blonde Taylor had only seen one tiny part of him, but Juliet decided to let it slide under the circumstances. Taylor hadn't been told all the gory details of Hades'

behavior and Juliet wanted to keep it that way. After all, Taylor would make a better tool if she thought the best of the God of the Underworld.

"All the same," Juliet said. "I'll try my best to give you what you want. At the very least, one last time to talk with him. I can't promise more. He has a mind of his own."

Taylor nodded, but crossed her arms and dug her chin into her chest. She was unalterably moody, so Juliet moved on.

She approached Fiona and said, "Are you ready? I thought you might be willing to switch bodies before Nixie sings."

"I'm ready," Fiona said. She was clearly enjoying being the only necessary person there besides Seth.

He got up from his chair and gave Juliet some money. She sat down in a theater seat next to Fiona and put two coins under her tongue. One for the trip down, and the other was for the trip back up.

She kept her eyes open as she waited for Fiona's spirit to leave her body. The last time it took her only a few minutes after she had listened carefully to Juliet's instructions. This time she said that she didn't need the lecture and that she could do it on her own. Juliet didn't doubt this. If Fiona said she could do it than she probably could.

"She's done," Halona informed them.

With that, Persephone let her spirit loose from Juliet's body.

In the Underworld, Persephone was surprised to see her immortal body lying peacefully on her bed. The bed had been remade and she had been changed out of her clothes into a V-necked shirt, stretch pants and a soft green wrap sweater. There were even slippers on her feet. Hades must have done this. He had even wrapped her wounds properly though he hadn't added a healing balm.

Persephone frowned. This had to be a trap.

Before entering her body, she went from room to room, searching for Hades. Was he there? Was he waiting for her to come back?

After peeking around, she saw signs that he hadn't been there in some time. The fountains were turned off—something he never allowed when he was home. When she went into the circular court for judging souls, she saw that he had done quite a few on his arrival, but it was clear from the souls in queue that he hadn't been there in days. The last thing she wanted to check was the temperature of the bath. If the water was warm, he was coming back. If it was tepid, he wasn't. It was unfortunate that Persephone couldn't tell without a body.

So, she got into hers. She sat up in the bed. She wasn't healed yet. Seth's fangs were more dangerous than Hades' scythe.

Aside from feeling the pain from her unhealed wounds, nothing catastrophic happened. Hades didn't appear suddenly from behind a secret door. None of his minions materialized to take her into custody. There wasn't even a note for her.

Maybe he didn't think she would come back to claim her body so soon. In that case, it was smart of her not to wait, even though the pain in her abdomen was enough to make a grown man cry.

She pushed herself to her limits and forced herself to walk back through the palace to the river.

When she got to the bathroom, she knelt down and checked the water. It was cool.

Hades wasn't coming back, not for a while.

Back at Chas', Persephone arrived after Nixie and Chas had finished singing. Everyone had been waiting around for an hour. Actually, they would normally have gone home, but all of them wanted to see Persephone in her own body, so they stayed.

When Chas brought her in, there was a reverent hush and respectful eyes. It was the awe she was entitled to and had experienced so little of.

She would have liked to let them look at her longer, but she feared being discovered again, so she asked Seth to take her into the room where their donors gave their blood.

When Fiona asked to come too, Seth refused her. "I'd rather you didn't. What's about to happen is a little personal," he explained.

Once they were alone, he asked her about the condition of her body.

"I hurt dreadfully, but I think this was the best time to act. Hades did not expect it."

Seth nodded. "Where do you want me to start?"

"My wrists. Those won't be as difficult to remove as the one in my neck or the one in my heart, so please start there."

The blood poured into Seth's mouth as he broke the skin on her left wrist. His consciousness was flooded with memories from his past life.

He was standing behind a waterfall and the spray was in his eyes. He reached to rub them to try to clear his vision, but suddenly soft warm fingers covered his eyes from behind.

“Don’t tease me,” he yelled over the roar of the rushing water. Those were his words, but he secretly wanted her to tease him—desperately. “I have to get back.”

“To do what? Chop firewood? I’d rather you didn’t. Just spend all your time with me.”

He took her hands off his eyes and turned around to face her. It was Stella. Her face was so familiar, he felt his heart spring up at the sight of her. What was he supposed to do? But he was not there with her. It was only a memory. He cupped her face in his hand and said into her ear, “Don’t let go.” Wrapping her hands around his middle, he threw them both over the edge.

Her arms held him tightly.

And the world turned into water.

That was enough.

He sucked the seed out of the wound and spat it on the floor.

It was enough.

The blood from her right wrist tasted bitter and the quality of it was far out of the range of taste that Seth was accustomed to.

Persephone was lounging on a blue sofa in her underwater palace. He recognized the place immediately. She was reading a delicately bound book as the soft ripples from the water window reflected on her skin.

“Do you know what this is?” she asked as he approached.

He didn’t answer, because he didn’t even know how to read the words written on the cover. No one had ever taught him.

“It’s my book of dreams. I write down the visions I see when I’m asleep. I wonder if they mean anything.”

“What are they about?” he asked curiously.

“They’re about you, darling. Come. Sit next to me. I’ll read them out loud,” she said making room for him behind her.

He tucked himself in and rested her head against his chest as she started telling him about her beautiful dreams. His soul filled with unspeakable delight at the elegance of each one. He longed to kiss her. He longed to be with her forever.

Seth stopped.

He was losing his objectivity in the comfort of their past. He needed to stop. He needed to realize that the past was just broken promises. He needed to be here for now.

He spat the fourth seed on the floor.

Persephone felt a sense of elation as Seth wrapped her wrist. It was like she was staring down at the game she had started playing with Hades hundreds of years ago, and for the first time, she saw her tactics working. Erasing the first two months from her contract was unpredicted. Then, amazingly enough, they'd exceeded that. Now, with only two more seeds to go, she felt her courage rise and grow. She didn't let her mind contemplate the difficulty with which the last seeds would be removed.

"Seth," she said smiling through her heightened suffering. "This is nothing short of a miracle."

Seth kept his lips pursed. His mouth was dripping gold blood. He wiped it with a white handkerchief and then asked shyly, "Now that we're at the end, do you want me to do the one in your heart or the one in your neck?"

"My neck," she replied. "Leave the one in my heart until last."

"Are you cold?" Seth asked, reaching for a blanket.

"Yes. I'm cold," she breathed, her eyes fixed on the light blue cabinets across the room, if only to have something to focus on other than her pain. It was rather like when she had woken up in the hospital bed after she took possession of Juliet's body. Somehow the atmosphere was the same.

Seth covered her with the blanket and then he got her a glass of water. He put a straw in it and held it to her mouth so she could drink.

"I feel like a baby," she said when he took it away from her lips.

"Really?" he said softly. "Well, you *look* like a car wreck, but a lovely one."

"Thanks. You didn't exactly look like a rose garden when you had my blood smeared all over your face."

"What are you talking about? Women really go for the whole vampire look, or didn't you know?"

She chuckled lightly in her throat at the joke he made at her. "Yeah, I guess I did know that."

Seth laughed too and then bent to pick up the seeds he had spat on the floor.

During all the time that they had been working, the door had been kept closed, but just as Seth finished collecting the seeds, it swung open.

"Don't come in," Seth yelled, but whoever was on the other side had no concern for Seth's words.

The door opened all the way and Hades entered. He didn't look much like the God of the Underworld since he was dressed casually. He was wearing a black sweater with white shoulders and a white stripe across the bottom. Under his blue jeans he wore heavy-soled black boots. His white braid hung over his shoulder and his lips twisted into a frown as he approached them. It was his red eyes that gave him away.

Seth tried to stand in his way to protect Persephone from him, but Hades threw him out of his way with only a wave of his hand.

Persephone reclined in the hospital chair and stared at him with determined eyes. The pain in her wrists compounded with the aching in her stomach, and left her drained of all energy. She didn't have a voice to say anything more than, "Hades, don't."

He didn't listen to her and placed two fingers on her forehead. It felt like a band of silk spread itself across her forehead when he touched her. He moved his fingers down her face and body in a straight line to touch her abdomen. When his fingers lifted off, the ribbon became a net that spread across her whole face. As he placed his fingertips on her stomach, a new net sprouted and spread there. Then he touched her right shoulder and then her left. Persephone twitched. Her awareness was heightened as she felt, not saw, what was happening. Bands as delicate as spiders' webs were tangling and tightening around her entire body. Not just her arms or her legs. These were not the kind of bands to keep her body still. They had another purpose as individual nets seemed to be growing and capturing each part of her body. There was a net around her tongue, others spread around the bones in her legs, one around her heart and others around each of the organs in her ribcage. As they permeated her body, she felt like every last bit of her was being caught individually and squeezed.

She screamed and just as she screamed the pain caused by the netting stopped.

Hades stepped back and regarded her reluctantly.

Persephone felt like crying. She didn't even know he could do that. It was a different kind of magic than she had ever seen him use before. What had he done? She tried to push her soul out of her body, but couldn't. Astral projection had always been easy for her, but now she felt as trapped in her body as if she were human. That was what he had done. He sealed her soul in her body, so she couldn't go back to being Juliet. That road had been cut off.

"You're too late!" Seth shouted to Hades as he pulled himself to his feet. "We already removed another two seeds."

He didn't know what Hades had done.

Hades regarded Seth as an insect. "Do you think I care about that? She's still bound to the Underworld with the last two seeds. My letting her go to Olympus for half the year was a courtesy of mine." He turned and looked at Persephone with bitter, cold eyes. "And it's one that will not be extended again. It looks like they'll have to find a new Goddess of Fertility, because when I'm through, you will no longer be available. You can concentrate on being the Goddess of the Underworld, my wife," he said, looking her in the face. "Oh, and you should know, Zeus owes someone else a favor."

She gasped.

He stepped one step closer to her, so that the edges of her fingers beyond her bloodied wrist brushed his knee. "You said that you couldn't operate both sides of the circle of life. If all that's stopping us from being together is your position on Olympus, then I'll see you are removed from it. I don't care about the power of controlling all sides of life. I never did. It was only a pretense I used to explain why I wanted you. It was all a lie. I only ever wanted you. So, if you give up being the Goddess of Fertility, can you be mine?"

Persephone couldn't answer. Her head hung in defeat.

Now she understood. He hadn't been in the Underworld because he was outside Chas' building waiting for this very moment. He knew she wouldn't attempt the next operation in the Underworld for fear he would appear and disrupt them. So, he stayed where Seth was and made it look like he had retreated, when in actuality, he was waiting on the battlefield. He had even waited until she was wounded, so he could carry her home without a fight and keep her in the Underworld as his captive forever.

Persephone couldn't think anymore. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't even protest as Hades' arms came around her and he carried her like a princess out of the room.

He passed through the theater on his way. Out of the corner of her eye, Persephone saw Taylor. She was running up to them and the expression on her face was unfathomable. If Persephone had to describe it she would have used the word shaken, except she knew Taylor's feelings ran far deeper than that.

She came up behind them. "Hades, I want to talk to you."

He stopped abruptly, turned around and looked down at her.

Taylor's head hung low as she scratched her upper arm on one side nervously. It seemed like he was giving her a chance to say whatever she wanted. "I-I wish..." Taylor stuttered.

"I don't know you," he said blankly and pushed through the doors in front of him.

The desolation Persephone felt was overwhelming. Who was she kidding? Of course Taylor hadn't meant anything to him.

The game was over.

He had won.

Chapter Thirty One

Spirits for her Spirit

It had been six weeks since Persephone had been dragged down to the Underworld and Fiona still inhabited Juliet's body. They were in the darker half of December. Fiona hadn't been able to go to her classes in somebody else's skin, so she had to withdraw from all her classes for 'medical' reasons. She had spent all six weeks hanging around Chas' apartment watching TV and eating.

Seth didn't know what to do. At first, he had promised Fiona that no matter what Hades said, Persephone would find a way out of the Underworld and return to collect Juliet's body. After six weeks, he was starting to think he had been wrong. After all, Persephone had been Hades' prisoner for thousands of years. Seth had no evidence that she would return, and what about Fiona? It was wrong to leave Fiona in Juliet's body indefinitely. Exams were already over and the new semester was starting in two weeks. If Persephone didn't come back during that time, Fiona would either have to miss another semester or leave Juliet's body and let her die.

Fiona didn't want to talk about it. She seemed to be in a position where thinking was painful. From what Seth could tell, she had at least two things on her mind. The first one was Chas. At the beginning of those six weeks she had clearly been infatuated with him, but now she seemed to be having second thoughts. When Seth looked at the situation, he saw that Fiona was a perfect mate for a siren. It was because of the blood. Chas could drink as much as he needed from her anytime he wanted and she would never go dry. However, her view of Chas had been horribly skewed. She was only with him when he sang or when played doctor with her. In those settings, he appeared almost flawless as a lover, but what about the rest of the time? Now she saw him in his natural environment she was finding out about the real him, the man apart from the bloodsucker.

Chas was a father. Seth wasn't sure if that made him lose his appeal, but it definitely seemed to change the way Fiona looked at him, especially since he and Nixie met and talked at least once a day to discuss life. Fiona was usually present for these interviews since it wasn't like father and daughter hid to talk. In any case, Seth wondered how much Fiona knew about Chas and Nixie before this. She must have known something. Chas wasn't completely close-tongued about his life.

Professionally, Chas was an artist like Fiona. That was something they shared. He had one room on the top floor dedicated to his painting. Except his skill was light-years beyond Fiona's, and he wouldn't let her watch him. It spoiled his

concentration and ruined both his quality and his quantity. He sent her out to the living room to get her out of his way and refused to let her use his art supplies.

She asked Seth to take her home to her studio so she could pick up a few sculptures she wanted to show Chas.

He looked at them with mild interest before asking her, "What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to critique them," she said.

At this point, Chas asked her what she intended to accomplish with each piece in great detail. When she answered, he explained at least ten things she could stand to improve on. No matter how kind he spoke, it was obvious he considered her a complete amateur, even though she'd already sold dozens of sculptures.

Fiona was hurt and asked Seth to take the sculptures back.

"I'm sorry. He's just like that because he's old," Seth explained as he helped Fiona get in the rental car. "He was in his forties when Nixie was born. I know he doesn't look like it, but sometimes he's really a grouchy old man."

Fiona hid her face and tried not to let her feelings come to the surface.

Seth wanted to comfort her. "It's part of the curse. We can never be with someone who's right for us. His contemporaries have been dying steadily for the past ten years, and there's this hopeless generation gap between him and anyone much younger."

"No kidding," she said humorlessly.

"But you know," Seth said. "If this experience hasn't completely soured you, I still think you would make the best partner for him."

"Explain."

"Sure, you don't see eye-to-eye now, but if you still want him in a couple of decades, he'll probably have reached another level of aging where he's less strict. You can try him out then."

"You mean that I should go live my life normally and then look him up after I've grown up a bit?"

"Exactly. Personally, I think you should spend your time with Halona. Chas doesn't have the same lifespan as your sister. He'll probably still be kicking around looking like a celebrity long after she's gone, and who knows? Maybe you'll find someone more suited to you in the meantime."

Fiona looked at Seth with Juliet's green eyes and smiled.

Seth started the engine and moved the car away from the curb.

The second issue that was driving Fiona mad was one Seth had a deep interest in. She was in Juliet's body. Nobody knew it, but Persephone contacted Juliet's parents when she realized who she really was. She told them that she was withdrawing from

university, moving in with some friends, getting a job, and figuring out what she wanted to do with her life. Also, to make things worse, she told them that she wasn't coming home for Christmas break.

Juliet's mother called and Fiona was forced to answer the phone. "Hi mom," she started, but ended up having to turn the phone over to Seth when the crying became too much for her.

Seth explained to her mother in his silky I'm-a-siren-so-my-voice-is-like-cream-and-sugar tone that Juliet had stopped living in dorms to save some money, but that he had no knowledge of her withdrawing from her classes. He was all patience and honey as he offered to talk some sense into Juliet.

After that, 'Juliet' refused to talk on the phone and Seth fielded the calls. He told her parents over and over again that she was safe and he would call when he had some news. But this had been going on for five and a half weeks and now Juliet's enraged parents were no longer listening to Seth. They were coming to pick up their daughter in two days.

Seth didn't know what to do. How much longer would they have to continue this charade? He and Fiona spoke of it constantly. He hadn't known Fiona much before this, but her stamina was nothing short of commendable.

"If I went back to my own body, do you have any idea what you would do with Juliet's dead body?" Fiona asked, being practical.

"Call my mother. She's good at disposing of dead bodies."

Fiona made a disgusted face.

"I don't want to go that route," Seth said defensively. "I want Persephone to come back."

"Can that goddess even use this body anymore? Hades did something weird to her when he took her away. What if I went with Juliet's parents pretended to be her for a few months in order to let them have a little more time with her, then I leave her body in the middle of the night, she dies and they can give her a proper burial?"

Seth hoped Chas could see Fiona's value. He had never heard a woman talk about a proper burial before and he liked it. "Do you think you can be brave that long?" he asked, concerned.

She rolled her eyes. "Of course I have to be that way. We can't let your cannibal mom dispose of her body, if I have to leave it. With no body, Juliet will be a forever missing person case, with you and Chas as the main suspects. If I go with her parents and I act weird, then I act weird. Then after Juliet dies, they'll say she was acting really weird toward the end. That's okay." Fiona sighed. "I don't have a better idea."

Seth frowned. "I wish there was something I could do to thank you for everything you've done, everything you will do."

"Think nothing of it. I love all this. I'm finally part of the legends I dreamed of."

Seth patted her on the shoulder and left her on the sofa to retire for the night.

Alone, he stood in front of his tub and undid the buttons of his shirt. A different kind of loneliness enveloped him. He was used to being cursed, to being alone and hungry. He fondly recalled how much he had wanted to draw Juliet's blood back in the beginning when he pulled her close and kissed her. It was strange, he had just finished talking to the Juliet he fell for, and he had felt nothing. Fiona gave her body a whole different light than Persephone had and Persephone was the one who made him come alive.

No matter what, he would find a way to help her. There had to be a way.

The next night there was a buzz at the apartment door. Seth answered it, hoping it wasn't Juliet's parents a day early.

"It's me," said a voice as hard as iron, over the intercom.

Seth's body froze. He knew that voice. It was Hades. For a second Seth didn't know what to do. Should he let him in? Then he remembered that no one had let him in before when he came to take Persephone, so the fact that the God of the Underworld was ringing at all was a courtesy on his part.

"Come up to the fourth floor," Seth said before pressing the buzzer.

"Is it all right to let him in?" Fiona asked nervously.

Before Seth could answer, Chas came running out to the living room. He had heard the voice, too. "What is *he* doing here?"

Seth shook his head to say he didn't know and opened the door.

When Hades came in the door, he looked different. He was dressed in a loosely knit blue sweater that had holes in the cuffs and at the shoulder seams. His jeans were scuffed up as well as his boots. So, this was what he looked like when he dressed down. He was carrying what looked to be an ancient doctor's bag.

"Come in," Chas said when Hades filled the doorway.

He didn't answer but instead entered the living room and after sparing a glance at the portrait of Raidne, stood with his back to it. This placed him in front of the coffee table and directly opposite Fiona, who was perched on the couch. Then he opened his bag and removed two bottles of equal size. One had a little blue light in it and the second was filled with a clear pink liquid.

"This," he said, indicating the blue bottle, "is Juliet Hudson's soul. And this," he said, picking up the second bottle, "is the waters of Liliun. The fact is, the river Styx has two mouths. One leads to the Underworld and the second leads to a small

fountain that produces this elixir. Persephone drinks of this whenever she steals a body. This is what causes her to lose her memory.”

Seth nearly bolted for the door, but then he remembered Persephone. He had to stay strong. He stepped forward and said, “You can’t force us to drink that.”

“Fool,” Hades said pitilessly. “It’s not for you.” He bent down and squatted until he was eye-level with Fiona. “Fiona,” he said calmly, looking into Juliet’s eyes.

“Yes,” she squirmed.

“Come now, you remember me from when I was Rylan. We’re not strangers.”

“No, we’re not, but—”

“But nothing,” he interrupted. “Listen to me. You cannot leave that body until a soul comes to fill it or it will die. Persephone is not coming back.”

Seth clenched his knuckles and asked in an icy tone, “Why not?”

“I have sealed her soul in her real body. Her body-thieving days are over.” Then he turned back to Fiona and continued. “I’m here to give you a chance to go back to your body without guilt or regret. I already said that I’ve brought Juliet’s soul with me. I’ll put her soul back in her body and I’ll give her the waters of Liliu to drink so that she will remember nothing. Will you leave her body quietly?”

Fiona fidgeted under his gaze. She didn’t know what to do.

“It was Juliet’s body to begin with,” Hades reminded her. “You aren’t wronging Persephone. Whether she could come back or not is irrelevant. Right now she’s still recovering from her last surgery and cannot rise from her bed.”

Fiona still hesitated.

“Do you want to stay in that body all your life? Or let her die?”

“Okay!” Fiona blurted. “I don’t want to do it without Persephone’s approval, but when you put it that way, I guess I have no choice. Tell me what to do.”

“Just go back to your body and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Fiona had tears in her eyes. “Hades, if it’s true that she can’t come back to this body, then why are you doing this? Shouldn’t you just leave this for us to sort out on our own?”

He sighed slightly and a strand of white hair fell across his cheek. “It’s only natural that a dutiful husband would want to set his wife’s affairs aright. Don’t you think?”

Seth wanted to cuff him across that smug face of his, but held back.

It was good that he did too, because Fiona knew what questions to ask and what tone to put them in. “All right. I’ll accept that, but what about Taylor? She loved you all these years. I have been Taylor’s good friend much longer than Persephone’s and my loyalty is not divided. In the end, it’s with Taylor. I want her to be happy. I’d at least like to take her a message from you before I go back.”

"What should I say in this message?" Hades asked.

"You should explain why you won't discard Persephone, who doesn't feel one thousandth of the devotion to you Taylor does, for her."

"Why?"

"Don't you want to give her closure? If you don't tell her, a part of her will stay on pause while the rest of her life continues playing. At least set her free before you move on."

"Hmm," Hades said reflectively. "There's no message, but I will consider the problem."

"Wait," Fiona said anxiously, as Hades prepared to uncork one of the bottles. "That's it? Can't you give me something to tell her?"

His shoulders drooped. "Are you forgetting? I am a married man. All I can send her are my best wishes for her health and happiness."

Fiona looked like she was about to cry.

"Stop that," Hades commanded, somewhat gently. "If you blubber like that, I won't be able to leave. Don't cry. Go back to your body. It's still on the pool deck?"

She nodded, wiping at her tears.

"All right. Then I won't see you again before I go. Goodbye, Fiona. I'll be good to Halona when she comes to me." He stroked her cheek and put his fingers over her eyes to close them.

Juliet's body lost all strength and she fell as though dead on the black leather couch. Hades wasted no time. He uncorked the two bottles and poured the waters of Liliu into the bottle with Juliet's soul in it. Placing his thumb over the bottle-top he shook it. When it was mixed to his satisfaction, he pulled Juliet into a sitting position and poured the whole concoction down her throat.

"Good girl," Hades breathed, holding her carefully.

Seth thought the transition would be difficult. He expected her to sputter and cough, but her body seemed to know what she was drinking and gave Hades her full cooperation.

When Juliet opened her eyes, she was a different woman all together than any of the ones he had encountered before. She looked up at Hades with baby-green eyes and said, "Thank you," before she flopped down on the couch, fast asleep.

He patted her on the head before getting up and putting his bottles back in his bag.

"H-Hades," Seth stuttered. "Where is the boy who abused this girl?" Seth wondered out loud.

"He hasn't come to see me yet, but you never know; he could already be dead and wandering the river. That's punishment enough for some of them." With that, Hades closed his bag and left.

Seth followed him out and watched the white head go around and around the spiral of stairs until he finally disappeared out the front door. Afterwards, Seth went back in the apartment and slumped down on the couch thinking about Hades. There was something going on in Seth's mind that was on the verge of connecting.

Just then, Chas appeared carrying his car keys and his coat. "I'm going to take Fiona home." He paused in front of the couch. "Seth, I might not understand everything that just happened, but that little scene actually made Hades seem like less of a monster than how he's usually portrayed."

"Yeah. It's weird. So, why did he kidnap Persephone and rape her in the first place?"

"I don't get any of it," Chas shrugged and then he went down the stairs to get Fiona.

Seth rubbed his eyes. In many ways, what Hades did for Juliet was the answer to Seth's prayers. Juliet's parents were coming the next day and they were probably better equipped to understand if she was delivered up to them with a memory wipe than other parents. After all, they'd dealt with that problem before. Not to mention, giving Fiona her freedom and life back. It was all very godlike of Hades.

But what about Persephone? Seth didn't bat an eyelash. Even if what Hades said about sealing her soul was true, she would find a way out. Regardless, Seth couldn't stand by and do nothing. But what could he do? It wasn't like he was Hades with a medical bag to come around and make everything right...

Seth got up. It was the idea of a medical bag that started him up. He had left something in Chas' doctor bag that might tip the scales—the seeds that he had bitten out of Persephone.

Seth raced down to the theater and grabbed the black bag. He met Chas and Fiona on the back landing just as they were about to leave.

Fiona was so white and rigid she looked like a mannequin, except for her enormous shiny eyes. "Is Juliet all right?" she asked shakily.

"I think so," Seth said smoothly. "Chas, mind if I take Fiona home? I have an errand to run after that can't wait. Could you go back upstairs and watch over Juliet? Please?"

Chas rolled his eyes. Then he took a step closer to Seth and hissed in his ear, "Is it really that important? I wanted to have a few minutes to talk to Fiona. She's cross with me and I want to smooth it over."

"You'll have to wait. I need to take these seeds to Taylor."

Chas stepped back. "Are you going to give them to her?"

"She might want to eat them."

"Bloody Hell! Are you serious? She's a human. You might kill her!"

Fiona leaned back on the door. She was so weak she almost fell on the floor. "Why are you two talking about killing me? My body already feels like it has come back from the dead. Leaving it for one night was child's play compared to six weeks. I think I've had enough of this roller coaster ride, so can I go home already?"

"We're not talking about killing you," Seth explained. "I was going to give the seeds I bit out of Persephone to Taylor. They might be her only key to the Underworld."

"If you want to go to the Underworld, why not just open the gate like Juliet did that first night? I'm sure you guys know lots of women who can give you fresh blood if you need it."

Seth frowned. "That wouldn't do any good."

"Why not?"

"What's to stop Hades from treating her the same way he did when he saw her here? And you heard the way he talked about Taylor just a few minutes ago. He's the God of the Underworld. You can't get something for nothing from that guy. If she shows up on the ferry with Charon, he'll just send her back. If she's not willing to make a sacrifice for him, he won't be moved. Yeah, eating the seeds might kill her, but if she's not willing to go that far, he'll never listen to her."

Chas sighed grouchyly while Fiona steadied herself against a wall, and Seth waited for either one of them to tell him he was wrong.

Finally Fiona said, "Well, fine then. But take me with you. I want to see what Taylor decides."

"What? I thought you wanted off this roller coaster ride," Chas reminded her.

"I'm not planning on interfering. I just want to watch. Come on, Seth. Let's go."

They were just about to go when Chas caught hold of Fiona and held her for a moment. Fiona looked like a dead woman in his arms. "Can I come see you after?"

"Tonight?"

"Tonight."

"Are you sure that wouldn't interfere with your arrangement with Nixie? You've never come to my place before." Fiona's lips were parched, but her eyes were watery.

Seth wanted to leave them alone, but they were blocking the door, so he had to stay and watch Fiona's conflict and discomfort.

"Melanie has decided to leave me. Her sister just got a divorce and they want to buy a house together. I'm going to give her the money and our marriage will be dissolved."

"How long have you known?" Fiona cried.

"Since last week, but how could I tell you when you were in Juliet's body?"

"Are you saying that you were so distant and aloof because of that?"

Chas flinched. "Please consider how I would feel romancing you in her body. I'm old. I'm good at waiting."

"Then, yes. Come see me. Come see me tonight."

"Thank you." He kissed her and Seth pretended not to show his impatience. He didn't want to interrupt, but he was crawling out of his skin. Timing might be important.

Lucky for him, breaking their curse was as important to Chas as it was to him and Chas hurried Fiona out the door with promises that he would be there soon. He gave Seth his car keys and went back upstairs without waiting for them to drive away.

"Did you know about any of that?" Fiona asked once they were in the car.

"No, but it doesn't exactly surprise me. I can hardly even remember the last time I saw Melanie upstairs."

"Are you happy for me?" she asked wearily.

"I'll be happy for you if this thing with Taylor works. Then maybe your lover won't need to drink your blood. Fancy that!"

He started the car and they got on their way.

Taylor had taken over living in Rylan's suite in the hotel. Seth and Fiona waited in the lobby while the receptionist at the front desk phoned Taylor. It turned out she was home. Seth could hear her yelling at someone in the background.

In a few minutes, they were in Rylan's fabulous suite near the top of the hotel. It had gorgeous furniture, carpet, beautifully lacquered tables, and the most fabulous view of the river valley. It was even more magnificent than the one at the top of Chas' building because this building was twenty stories higher.

"Press the reset button," Taylor called loudly behind her as she let them in. "Sorry," she said, coming back into the room. "He's in the bedroom playing Playstation. It's like babysitting a teenager!" she exclaimed noisily.

"You mean, that's Rylan back there?" Fiona chuckled.

"You really don't need to laugh," Taylor chided. "This is so abnormal and sucky at the same time. He keeps telling me now old I look. I mean, I'm only twenty."

"You look thirty," a familiar voice rang from around the corner. In another second, Rylan was standing in the doorway.

"Holy crap!" Fiona exclaimed when she saw him. "Sorry," she said when she realized Rylan was glaring at her with his brown eyes. "I'm a friend of yours. We've been friends for years, but I've..." Her voice petered out.

When Hades was Rylan, he was cynical, respectable, and polished. Standing in the hotel room he was wearing a shirt with a giant green pixelated mushroom on the front. It wasn't just that. His posture was nonexistent and he was wearing a baseball cap backwards.

"What are you, twelve?" Fiona couldn't resist asking.

He stared at her with his brown eyes and asked in cold tones. "*We* were friends?"

"Yes," Fiona admitted.

"And what? Are you her boyfriend?" Rylan suddenly asked Seth.

"No. My name is Seth and this is Fiona."

"Then are you my girlfriend or one of my ex-girlfriends?" Rylan asked Fiona.

"No," she said with obvious gratitude. "We were all part of the same club. Do you remember the Occult's Addict? I'm the president. Could we possibly get you to speak at a club meeting about your experiences? I'm sure it would be quite remarkable to wake up and not remember the past five years."

He looked utterly bored and didn't answer.

"Well," Seth said, clearing his throat. "Taylor, I actually came to talk to you. I have something important to give you." He picked up the doctor's bag and put it on the coffee table. "*He* came to visit us tonight." Seth knew she would know who he meant. Then Seth turned to Rylan and said, "Isn't there a video game somewhere that's missing you?"

"It hasn't been working."

"That's a shame. Should we go up to the restaurant to talk privately then?" Seth asked.

"If you hang on a couple of minutes, our parents are coming to get him. They're taking him to Calgary to see a neurologist. I think it's a waste of time. He should be in high school, but mom and dad are too embarrassed to send him back. He doesn't even understand the names of the courses he's been taking in university."

"I don't want to go back to high school. I've already graduated, so why should I retake the classes?"

Taylor groaned. "Because you'll flunk out of university. By the way, have you finished packing yet?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You haven't even started, have you? Well, go right now. Mom and Dad should be here soon."

He didn't move.

Taylor flicked her long bangs out of her face and turned to Seth and Fiona. "It's been like this for weeks. Welcome to my hell."

"Funny you should say that," Seth said humorlessly.

Just then the phone rang. Taylor gave Seth an apologetic glance and answered it. "Yes," she said into the receiver before hanging up and yelling at her brother. "Our parents are downstairs waiting for you. They are not coming up. They want you to go down, so you'd better go get your crap together."

Rylan lazily got off the chair he was resting in, only to flick Taylor's ear as he sauntered by, obviously in absolutely no hurry.

Taylor turned back to Seth. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"I'll wait until he leaves, if it's all the same."

Fiona told Taylor about Chas and what he had just said to her about Melanie as they waited. Taylor was very happy for Fiona, but even in expressing her pleasure, it was obvious that a tiny part of her held back. Seth noticed it, but didn't comment. In fact, he was surprised when she mentioned it herself.

"I'm sorry, Fio. I just always thought you and I were in the same boat, even though I never talked about it. We were both loving men we couldn't have. I thought the problems we had were pretty equal. I mean, Chas is cursed with blood lust and married. How much more doomed could a love affair be? I thought I had you tied, but now everything is working out for you. I'm pretty envious."

Seth's eyes practically bored a hole through the paint and drywall as he waited for Rylan to come out of the bedroom, but the teenager-at-heart was taking his sweet time.

"He doesn't mind making people wait?" Seth abruptly asked.

"Are you kidding? He loves making people wait. He may even be lingering by the door hoping that you'll lose patience and talk to me about your top secret adult thing."

"I won't. I'll wait," Seth said noisily enough for Rylan to hear him.

A minute and a half later, Rylan appeared in the doorway carting his expensive luggage. "Spoil sport," he huffed as he left the suite.

After they were sure he was gone, Seth opened the bag and pulled out the pomegranate seeds. "I bit these out of Persephone. They guarantee a four month vacation in the Underworld every year of your life."

"Unless they kill you," Fiona warned.

Taylor looked breathless. In her moment of wonder, she leaned forward and took the tiny glass bottle from Seth. "Will these make him choose me?"

"I don't know. What I do know is that he's a god and gods like sacrifice. I don't know if there is anything else you can do that will make him turn his head. And Fiona is quite right. They could kill you."

"What would *you* do?" she asked Fiona pleadingly.

Fiona fell back in her seat as though deflated. "What haven't I done already? I've let the man I love drink my blood repeatedly. I've left my body and spent six weeks in someone else's skin. I'm reckless and crazy. Don't make a decision like this based on anything I've done."

"What about *you*?" she asked Seth as though he was her last lifeline.

He filled his lungs and explained gently, "I'm the same as Fiona. I have had my wings ripped off, fingers severed, and my left eye gouged out. I've had my heart pierced twice and even died twice. Lately, I was cut with a scythe from here to here," he said pointing to his shoulder and hip. "There is nothing I wouldn't do to get the woman I love. Although I do feel dispicable instructing an innocent girl to commit suicide to help my cause." He let the time tick on for a moment before declaring, "I don't want any part of your decision. I'm leaving right now. I just want to give you the choice. Don't do anything for me. And don't do it unless you're willing to do anything—say anything—endure anything—to be with Him. Goodbye Taylor." Seth closed the doctor's bag and got up. "Come on, Fiona. I'll take you home."

Taylor got up and showed them to the door. She hugged Fiona before they left and Seth heard her whisper, "Give some of this hug to your sister. I might not see her again."

Chapter Thirty Two

The Second Way to Skin a Cat

Her wrists itched.

Scratch. Scratch.

The back of her neck itched.

Scratch. Scratch.

Her bandages itched. Everything itched.

Persephone wanted out, but there was no way. There were two ways out of the Underworld. One was by way of Charon and the river. Anything that Persephone might have used for payment was gone. All her jewelry had been removed. In the old days, her clothes were covered in adornments, sometimes with jewels sewn in. Her wardrobe was shockingly bare. All the ornaments in the other rooms of the palace had been nailed down or taken away. There was nothing Persephone could do. Without payment, Charon wouldn't take her anywhere. The other exit was above the judgment room. Normally the army of the Underworld dwelt in those upper chambers, where they could easily be dispatched should the need arise. As a goddess, she could get past them. She had done it before when she went to meet Seth during his second life. The problem was that Hades had moved Cerberus. Normally, he guarded a certain stretch of the river Styx, but he was moved to the upper chambers to prevent her from escaping.

"You can't get out that way," Hades had said. "His teeth would tear you to ribbons."

The scabs on her stomach itched.

Scratch. Scratch.

Persephone dressed in loose clothes which mostly consisted of stretchy maxi skirts and hoodies. Considering her condition, she would have preferred her traditional Grecian robes, but alas, all of them had been confiscated since they needed pins and brooches to keep them in place. Since she was still healing, anything that wasn't tight around her stomach was fine.

Time spread out endlessly in front of her. How could she fill it? That was the eternal question. Sometimes she spent the hours judging the dead.

The first one was a liar.

The next one was a thief and a liar.

The one after that was a murderer, a thief, and a liar.

It went on. And there was never any end.

It was December. Maybe. Or was it January?

Sometimes she spent the time by counting each vertebra in her spinal cord. Other times she measured her ribs individually.

She wanted a book to read, but books written by humans were too low for Hades and books written by Apollo were censored. The Underworld only had two books. One was a guidebook for Necromancy that was sometimes given to humans on loan, and the second was a copy of a three part diary written by Hades' father, Cronus. He was also Persephone's grandfather. Awkwardly enough, he didn't have anything interesting to say. Hades kept it as a memory. After all, Hades was a man who had helped overthrow his own father. Having done that, couldn't he tell aged chains when he saw them?

Sometimes she sat on a branch in the tree room beyond her bedroom and blew soapy bubbles into the dead space.

Even though Hades swore up and down that he loved Persephone and wanted to be with her, in the time that followed, he was rarely home. She didn't know where he went or what he did.

Her only companion during this time was Juliet, still plugged up in her bottle. Persephone would uncork the top and talk to her little lost soul. One of the nothing days, she realized that the bottle was gone—completely gone off her dresser without a note or an explanation. Persephone wasn't sure she wanted to hear the explanation. It was yet another way Hades was cruel to her. He took Juliet's soul for judgment when Persephone had no one else.

When the loneliness was at its worst, all her wounds seemed to ache more.

She started writing letters, but she knew that her letters couldn't go to just anyone. Hades had a long list of people she wasn't permitted to write. It wasn't that he sat her down and spelled it out for her. There was no need to do any of that. He wouldn't kick up a fuss if she wrote to any of the gods on Olympus, except Apollo. Hades was letting his interference with the seeds go, since his actions had not impacted anything, but that didn't mean he wanted her writing him. Humans? Persephone knew he did not want her contacting them. She could catch up with them in the judgment room after they died.

Persephone picked up a scroll and pulled a pot of ink toward her. She would write Raidne. Her wrist felt better, so she penned three swift paragraphs informing her of the situation, how she was trapped in the Underworld with Cerberus keeping her captive while Hades was gone. When she was finished, she rolled up the paper and sealed it with a white wax seal. Then she took the quill she used to write the letter and tore it down the middle, making what looked like two enormous white eyelashes. Then using a simple spell, she attached them to the scroll and made the

broken feather act as two wings to carry the paper to its recipient. Persephone regarded the flying paper wistfully. It had actually been Hades who taught her how to do that.

She spent the following hours judging souls in the throne room. Really, there wasn't much else to do. Judging souls was almost like watching TV. Everyone came and presented their case. Everyone had their own story.

Persephone was very surprised when she got a letter from Raidne within hours of having sent hers. She had not expected a reply for days, or even weeks.

Persephone stopped the judgment to read the letter. It said:

Dearest Goddess of the Underworld (the honorifics went on for three more lines, but Persephone skipped them),

My sister and I are extraordinarily sympathetic to your situation. As your faithful servants, we very much want to assist you, but as you are well aware, we are capable of very little. I'm afraid the task of loosening your bonds has been left squarely in your hands. Please forgive me for my upcoming suggestion, but my sister and I can devise no other strategy at this juncture that doesn't cause unspeakable harm to come upon Sethos. We fear sending him to the Underworld again would result in eternal violence in Tartarus. Thus, we have only one idea remaining. You have the keys to freeing yourself now if you are willing to pay the price. You finally know where your seeds are. If Cerberus can cut you, than why not let him cut you? What's the difference between Sethos' fangs and his?

Persephone did not read the rest. She wondered how long the sirens had known the solution and not had the opportunity to present it to her? The paper fell to the floor.

"Nothing," she answered. "Nothing!" she exclaimed. "The dog would just have to bite me in the right place."

Persephone stood up and left the throne without even finishing the judgment of the soul she had put on hold. Without hesitating, without thinking about her wounded body, she took to her feet and headed straight toward the door that led into the upper chamber.

She opened the door and found Cerberus guarding the way. Though he was not asleep, he was lying down when she entered, but raised himself on his paws when she opened the door.

Cerberus had black fur with red stripes. His faces were flat. His body was like a tiger's, except larger. If he had had only one head, it would have been so large that Persephone would have been able to stick her whole head inside its mouth. As it

was, each of the heads was slightly smaller than a lion's. Cerberus did not have the power to speak. Communicating with him was easy though. He might have had three heads, but it seemed to Persephone that they all generally thought the same way. Right then, all of them looked at her with the same expression in their reddish-brown eyes. She never thought of it before, but that was why she thought Seth was like an animal when they first met. It was because Seth had the exact same eye color as Cerberus—full of sympathy and sorrow. The six eyes seemed to say, "Don't do this. Go back. Please."

Persephone eyed him carefully. She wanted to measure his jaws to see if it was possible for Cerberus to do Seth's job before she lost consciousness. After a minute of looking, she was satisfied. The only problem was that baiting him into doing it would be almost impossible—unless she hurt him.

Lifting the latch, she stepped back through the door.

Another day.

Blowing bubbles in the tree, Persephone was alone until Hades joined her. He had just returned to the Underworld. Persephone didn't know where he had been. In all the time she'd lived with him, he did not usually take vacations, or business trips, or make friendly calls on other gods. He lived in the Underworld almost exclusively. She was curious, but at the same time, she didn't want to act like where he went mattered to her one little bit. She didn't even ask him what he did with Juliet's bottle. It was just that she wondered if his trips were a key to unfolding his new weakness. What required his attention outside of the Underworld?

Persephone had already made all her plans. She was determined, and for her, there was no turning back. The first phase of her plan involved her sitting in the tree when Hades came home from one of his trips. Her plan would work much better if he was there to see it.

Now it happened as he strolled in the tree room. From what he was wearing, she couldn't tell if he'd just come from Olympus or from Earth. He wore a black silk shirt that had a V-neckline created by the fabric being folded and tied at his waist. His pants were ordinary black. Maybe they were made of silk, too. His hair was in its usual braid and a few loose strands fell across his cheek.

It was amazing how attractive he could look and how much his obvious beauty made her hate him all the more. If he had been ugly maybe she could have scrounged up a morsel of pity for him, but how could she pity someone so elegant?

He could have anyone he wanted. Why did he need to maintain his twisted infatuation with her?

She dipped her wand and blew another soapy round of bubbles.

"You're so morbid," he said jokingly as he came toward her.

"What else can I do, my love?" she mocked. "No dusty books. No shiny technology. I used to love my laptop so much. It was a wonderful tool for creation."

"Exactly. You don't need to create anything down here." He popped one of her bubbles with the middle knuckle of his right hand.

She snarled, "Is soap outlawed now? Is my need to make things totally unnecessary here?"

"It is. We have everything we need."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe you're right. We have everything we need. I'm so glad you're finally seeing my perspective on the whole children issue. I thought you were never going to see it my way."

Hades stepped forward. "That's different."

"Are you sure?" she asked saucily, blowing another round of bubbles. "I would have thought you would have known better than to have offspring after what happened between you, your brothers and your father. Children eventually overthrow their parents. This way, you and I can be Lord and Lady of the Underworld forever. Isn't that what you want?"

Hades drew his eyebrows together and regarded her seriously. "I doubt any child of ours would want the task of judging the dead."

"It's such hard work, isn't it?" she said, setting her bubble mixture in a fork in the tree branches.

Persephone had previously selected which branch of the tree she wanted. She grabbed it and swung from it. It was a thin branch and not nearly strong enough to hold her weight. It cracked at the base and Persephone fell two meters into the shallow water. She landed on her feet and held the branch in her hands.

Hades gave her a dirty look. "Why did you break it? That tree isn't going to grow anymore branches. It was brought here when it was still alive and I have extended its life. Now it's scarred."

"Like me," she said evenly.

"Why did you break it?" he repeated. "Was it just for your own amusement?"

"Did you ask this living tree if it was willing to come down to the Underworld? Did you ask it if it wanted to stop growing?"

Hades turned away in disgust and then he turned right back again and huffed, "Is this more of the same fight? I should have asked for your permission to bring you down here. I shouldn't ask you to play both sides of the circle of life. I'm taking care

of all that. This is where the story ends, with you with me. Don't you understand? I'm not letting you go back. I don't care about my past crimes. I'll go on with or without your permission. I'll go on even if everyone condemns me."

Persephone turned away from him like she hadn't heard anything he said. She touched the trunk of the tree and looked up at the translucent ceiling through the branches. "I sympathize with this tree a great deal. Neither of us is free to be what is in our nature."

"I am unmoved," he said.

She looked at him again and her green eyes flashed. "You think you are more powerful than me. You think that stopping something in its most perfect state is love. I don't know if you ever learned to understand the splendor of life, of growth, of change. When I went over your comments when you were playing Rylan, you said that you didn't want to miss Taylor's life, and yet here you are. She's not dead. Her life is still going on and you are missing it."

Hades growled. He did not like hearing this.

Yet, Persephone went on. "You say I am stripped of my powers as Goddess of Fertility. Fine. Even if my only title is Goddess of the Underworld, I will show you my passion for life."

Hades blinked. Then he shook his head slightly and asked, "What could you do?"

"I'll show you," she said, walking past him into the bedroom for whores.

She wasn't sure if he followed her or not. Whether he watched the whole show or not, the result would be the same.

She stomped all the way up to the room where Cerberus guarded the door. He went into sentinel position when she entered, as he had before. The branch in her hand was more like a switch than a branch. It was long (giving her range) and bendable (giving her the ability to work it like a whip). She was good with a whip.

"Cerberus," she said, knowing he would understand every word she said. "I want you to bite me. I want you to bite the back of my neck right here," she instructed, pointing. "I want you to bite me to the point that you almost sever my spinal cord. Do you understand?"

He whimpered. Hades wasn't there yet, so he didn't have to show thoughtless obedience to his master yet.

"If you don't, I will head for the door and get away. What will happen to you then?"

Each of Cerberus' heads looked miserable in its own fashion, but this was Persephone's last chance. It would be brutal beyond description, but there were two things she could gain from it. If Cerberus was successful, she would only have one more seed to remove. What if she really did get past the dog? What if she got the

seed out? After this act of defiance, she hoped Hades would be bound to the Underworld and be forced to play her prison warden. It was only right to make things fair. He shouldn't be able to leave when she could not.

Cerberus was pawing the ground indecisively. He wasn't going to open wide and bite her, even if her neck was exposed so conveniently, even if she asked him.

Persephone took two steps toward the door.

Cerberus put a foot out to stop her.

"Get out of the way!" she shouted.

He wouldn't and he wouldn't bite her either.

She knew this was how it was going to be. If she didn't bring a weapon he would simply block the door and no matter how she moved, she had no hope of outmaneuvering him.

She whipped him across his middle face. "Out of the way!"

With his head down, he recovered from the shock. His eyes were angry when he brought his head up.

She took another step.

He leaped in front of her and she whipped him across his three heads at once. He growled.

Hades appeared and stood by the door. Leaning against the wall, he commented, "This is ridiculous. Even if you work at this for a hundred years, he'll never let you through."

She ignored him and lashed Cerberus across his middle face again. All three heads felt the pain and they all started growling.

Persephone was getting excited. The dog was reacting the way she wanted.

From that point on in their fight, Persephone did not get one step closer to the door at the end of the hall. Hades was watching and Cerberus had to treat her the way his master had requested.

He made swipes at her while she scored nicks off him as every turn. With her switch, he was hard to miss and with such a light weapon, it was hard for him to disarm her. He was starting to get drained as she evaded minor wounds. She offered him her throat at every turn. As she damaged one of his six eyes, she knew the end was coming soon. He would be too enraged with her to maintain his loyalty.

Then two things happened at the same time. Cerberus' left head reached its limit and another person entered the room. Persephone turned to see who it was and Cerberus took advantage of her distraction and bit into her. Persephone saw blonde hair before she was lifted by her neck and shook away from the scene.

Persephone felt all of it in such an analytical way it was almost as if someone else experienced it. Teeth—six times as large as Seth's incisors—buried themselves in

her neck. The back teeth were the closest to the seed. Through the pain, she pushed her hand against the floor and forced herself to move so the flesh would tear.

Then his jaws went limp and she fell in a heap on the floor.

Hades was shouting something, but Persephone couldn't understand it. She disassociated herself from the horrible trauma that her body just suffered and with one twitching hand she compelled her fingers to search the wound for the seed. She was convulsing slightly, and spitting blood, but she had to find it. Finally, she found the exact spot Apollo had pointed out. It had to be there, but it wasn't.

Had she made this incredible sacrifice for nothing? Had Apollo been wrong?

Cerberus ambled over and the same head that bit her licked her face. "Thank you for trying," she mouthed when something caught her eye. Stuck in the gums of Cerberus' top teeth was a long seed.

That was it.

Persephone reached up and pulled it loose. "Good boy," she mouthed. Clutching the seed, she allowed herself to fall unconscious right there and then. It didn't matter what Hades was yelling or who was standing beside him. She was in ecstasy. One more seed was free.

Voices. There were voices in her head. There were voices just outside the door, voices beside her bed, voices down the hall, and in the room next door. What were they saying? She couldn't hear their words. She couldn't feel their intent. Were they angry? Were they laughing? They seemed neither joyous nor contemptuous.

Love. There was love. It was sinking through the walls and vibrating in the air—desperate love. Refusal and more love, like rose petals falling from the sky or feathers hanging in the air. Was she dreaming?

But whatever it was and whatever it meant, it had nothing to do with her. She couldn't untangle it. She was too tired to listen to what the voices said. She was too tired to feel gratified by her victory. This time there was only pain.

She drifted in and out of sleep as the throbbing sensation in her injuries came and went like the drifting tide. The extensive nerve damage in her neck was probably the only thing saving her from unendurable agony.

When her fingers found her throat, she could feel how her body was sewing itself back together. The gift of immortality was incredible. Too weak to move she could only lie there and let the tears stream.

She thought there was nothing more Hades would do to hurt her. She thought she had broken all those barriers. Who was she kidding? He was an expert. She knew it,

because she lay on a bed and the only bed she had ever occupied in the Underworld was the one for whores, yet he had a woman in the room next door. In the room for wives—he had brought a woman. She could hear them talking and then she couldn't hear anything.

Chapter Thirty Three

The Last Pomegranate Seed

Time passed and Persephone slipped between the Underworld and the dream world. Pain and oblivion came in turns, but when she finally woke from her slumber she felt different. The pain had subsided and she felt the slight tingle of refreshment as an appetizing spice warmed the air around her.

“Who’s there?” she asked wearily before opening her eyes.

“It’s always me,” Hades answered somewhat dully.

Persephone wasn’t angry when she heard him. It was mildly comforting that he had not left her to suffer entirely alone.

Then she opened her eyes and was startled at what she saw. She had always believed that the bedroom for whores was the grandest room in Hades’ palace. She was mistaken. She could only be in one room now, the bedroom meant for wives. The walls were white marble with gold and gray veins running along the surface. The floor was carpeted in scarlet and the molding throughout was solid gold. The bed she had awoken in was made up in white silk with elegant pomegranate blossoms and gold leaves embroidered on the cover. The bed and all of the other furniture in the room was formed out of pure gold. The walls had three enormous paintings reaching up to the vaulted ceiling. The one to the left was of Hades. He looked the way he had for hundreds of years. The one to the right was of her before she came to be his wife and the Goddess of the Underworld. Finally, the one in the center, across from the bed, was of the two of them together on the day he took her home to Olympus. It was the day she wore the red dress.

Persephone didn’t know how to respond to this majesty. It was grander than any she had been in on Olympus. Not only that, but it seemed she had rested in this room the entire time. There was evidence: bandages in the wastebasket. He must have been talking to someone in a different room.

She scratched the back of her neck and felt her progress. She was almost healed, but it itched terribly.

Hades stood next to a trolley littered with desserts. They were warm and if Persephone focused she could smell each one individually: chocolate, baked apples, cold lime pie, and everywhere the intense scent of vanilla bean. They smelled heavenly. Hades selected a piece of pumpkin pie and sat down in a gilded chair next to the bed. He shifted his chair close to her and sliced off the tip of the pie wedge with his fork. Then he bent and offered to feed her.

Persephone recoiled. This temptation was too much for her. Even if she was immortal, she did not like going without food. She was ravenous when she woke up after her five year fast, but did not eat because she knew that Seth was going to bite out part of her stomach that night. She hadn't eaten and the tantalizing aroma of the pie was driving a part of her mad.

"Oh, Hades," she nearly wept, her voice croaking. "I can't eat that."

"Why not?" he asked gently. If he was provoked by her refusal, he kept it completely hidden.

"I don't trust you. You said you had a promise to collect on from Zeus. Maybe you used it to remove my title as Goddess of Fertility, or maybe you used it to remove my immunity against the food of the Underworld. I can't eat anything you offer me."

He set the pie on the bedside table and leaned forward to look in her face. "There's nothing wrong with it. It's a peace offering, but it's fine if you don't want to accept it. It's practically a tradition for you to refuse everything I offer you." He paused and then said, "I have wanted to talk to you and you've been asleep for months. It has given me a lot of time to put things in order."

"What are you organizing?" she whispered.

"Love," he replied. His red eyes were so dark, they almost looked black. "We never talk, so I'm going to use this moment when you're so weak to talk to you about my love. When I first saw you soaking wet in the pool on Olympus, I can only *try* to describe my feelings. You were radiant. The world of the dead is dreary, as I'm sure you've noticed, and I thought that if only I could bring you here, you would magically light it up. Maybe then, I wouldn't mind being the Lord of the Underworld."

Persephone shivered.

"Naturally, you didn't like it here. I exhausted myself, trying to make it pleasant for you. I brought you everything I thought a woman could want and fitted this room up hoping I could excite you by leaving a mystery for your discovery. This room is your unopened present." He sighed. "You were never going to open it. You were never interested in my presents."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"There's no use apologizing now." He took a deep breath and leaned away from her. "In truth, once you got here, you were so demented with depression that all the magic was drained from you. I was the one who did that to you. You were never impressed with any of my brands of lovemaking, no matter how many I tried. Food? You refuse it," he said, indicating the mouth-watering pie. "Clothes? You always looked tortured. Space? You took too much and abused it. When you went away, you never missed me. Sex? You always called it rape. I'm left with no way to win you."

Persephone's breath came in tortured gasps. He made his crimes sound light and her ingratitude sound immeasurable. She couldn't stand much more of his speech, but she had no choice but to let him talk. Her brain was too muddled after her injuries to even try battling with him. She was not even strong enough to raise her voice, let alone think of some cutting way to respond to him.

"I'm a patient man," he said, looking into her face and noting the rising tension. "Living with the dead teaches patience. The man who wanted to kill his rival didn't get the satisfaction, but three generations down—blood is spilled in his name to his satisfaction. The man who doesn't get the woman he wants—his son gets her daughter. I believed that if I waited long enough, I could get what I wanted, too."

"How many hundred years have you have been waiting?" she asked, her voice a hideous rasp.

"Over twenty six, and even now, I feel like it hasn't been that long. I could go on waiting... except that I won't."

Persephone sat paralyzed and wide-eyed. What had he just said?

"In the midst of your fight, in the moment when Cerberus got you. Did you see her?" Hades asked, peering into her eyes.

"I didn't know who she was."

"It was Taylor. She said that Seth gave her your four pomegranate seeds. She ate all of them and came here."

Persephone gasped.

"I am overcome," Hades whispered. "You never excited me like that."

She nodded. Never in her whole life had she wanted to arouse anything in him, other than his compassion. "Did you really love her, when you played the part of her brother?"

"Indeed, I did. It was different being part of a normal family, with a mother and father who cared about me. Taylor was a revelation about love and forgiveness all by herself. Rylan was horrible, but I knew that when I decided to make that deal with him. He did all sorts of terrible things to her and she forgave me for them because I was kind to her. Unlike you, she liked my brand of kindness."

"Go on."

He rolled his eyes dismissively. "She was my sister in that world. Mortals are forbidden from having romantic relationships with their siblings. In that body, there was nothing for it. I have excellent restraint. In fact, I did not think of her that way. To hear from her own mouth that she cared for me—that intensely—was new. And to see her come to me at that moment... my feelings are inexplicable. There you were, trying so desperately to get away from me that you were practically willing to

behead yourself, and there she was, sacrificing one third of her life just to be with me. I don't think I've ever had anyone love me that much."

Persephone's heart fell in her chest until it lay motionless on the bottom of her inner self. "You shouldn't have raped me."

"It was never rape, Persephone," he said calmly. "The way you looked at me across that starlit pool the night before I took you, I believed you wanted me too. I thought you felt the way I did. I thought you would love my grand display with lava and rock. Letting you say no with your mouth when your heart wanted to say yes. I thought I was giving you everything you wanted, but couldn't have asked for."

"I was just looking at you. It didn't mean anything," Persephone rasped.

His jaw was rigid. "It meant something to me. I thought that was what we were doing all these years. We play a game. You play the virgin and I play the pillaging warrior."

"How could you misinterpret me so completely?"

He looked down, vaguely ashamed. "I think it's because the idea of that game made me feel like all this," he said, indicating his underground palace, "had a romance to it that couldn't be found anywhere else. That was why I let you go home to Olympus every year. So, you could be the virgin all over again and come down to me again, where I ravished you in the dark, reliving that beautiful memory all over again."

"I never felt that way," she insisted.

"That's why I'm going to let you go." He stretched out his hand and conjured a long knife. He took hold of the silver handle and looked at it in his palm.

Persephone stared at it with great eyes and literally trembled as the fear of the pain overtook her. Her mouth went completely dry and she thought she would vomit if she swallowed, except her stomach was empty. She closed her eyes and prayed for strength.

"More than anything, I don't want to do this," Hades continued. "I wasn't going to do this."

"What made you change your mind?" she stammered.

"I am never going to make you happy. My doubts were confirmed that night when you were Juliet and I was Rylan. I killed the vampire and we were in your dorm room. I couldn't think why you wouldn't want me to make love to you. It was the perfect night for it. At least, it should have been. If it had been possible for me to win you—you would have fallen for me that night. Since you didn't, I knew I was not pursuing the right course. My doubts were cemented the night you baited Cerberus and Taylor arrived. What kind of mad woman baits Cerberus to rip her head from her shoulders? He hasn't stopped crying."

“Oh?”

“I’m sorry. Even now, the very memory of you stretching your neck out for him to bite fills me with horror. I shouldn’t have driven you that hard. It was also the night that I realized that you were never going to make me happy. The conflict between us will never end unless I end it peacefully now. Death is the way to repair any injury and the time has come for our love affair to end that way also.”

“I’m grateful,” Persephone said, her eyes overflowing with tears. “Thank you.”

“I thought we were meant for each other,” he said as he maneuvered next to her on the bed. “I’m sorry that winning your heart became a game. Please remember, I thought that you liked it, too. I thought that if I got you to accept me in Rylan’s skin that would show that it had been me you wanted all along. I was a fool.” He brushed her neckline aside so the flesh above her breasts was visible. “You never wanted me.”

Persephone quaked from head to foot in terror.

“Don’t you want this?” Hades asked in a low tone.

She nodded, but could hardly bring herself to speak. “I’m scared. It’ll hurt.”

Hades covered her eyes with his palm like he was closing the eyes of a corpse. Then she felt his breath in her ear. “Don’t be afraid. This will be different. This incision won’t rip your flesh the way you let Cerberus tear you. Seth’s scratches will seem crude. I know every cell of your being. And I know the exact position of the seed in your heart.” He placed his hand on her chest and between his fingers; he pierced the knife through her ribcage.

The sensation took her breath away. She couldn’t move or breathe or bear the pain. It was too much. It was too strange. Hades was muttering something and the knife’s point inside her seemed to grow arms as it spindled around the tightest part in her chest.

Then suddenly, he pulled it loose and the pain in her heart abruptly ended.

Hades held the knife, the top split like needle-nose pliers. The seed rested in its grip. He dropped the seed into a bottle on the bedside table, containing the seed Cerberus had freed.

Hades pulled a handkerchief out of his front pocket and covered Persephone’s wound with it. “You won’t need more than that,” he said calmly as he wiped the blood from the tool he had been using. Then he got up from the bed and, extending his hand, he let the knife disappear back into thin air.

“Hades,” she rasped with tears spilling down her cheeks. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it. I got you into this mess to begin with, so I fetched you out. That’s all.” He stood at the end of the bed and held onto the bedpost and looked at her wistfully. “Now I must tell you of the consequences of what we’ve just done.”

Persephone felt like dying. As if she hadn't been through enough. Now he was going to tell her how she screwed up the whole order of the cosmos and how all Heaven was going to come down on her head.

She groaned.

"I paid a visit to Demeter. After all, she is the one who governs the seasons on Earth. She is the Goddess of the Harvest. I asked her if it would be within her control to keep things the way they are if I let you go. After all, they only have winter and summer on Gaia because she longs for her daughter."

Persephone's eyes were wide in expectation.

"Of course, she willingly gave her consent."

Persephone exhaled in relief.

"I also spoke to her about the sirens. I don't want to see any of those creatures again, so I told Demeter of their involvement in freeing you. She was impressed and grateful, so she decided to show her appreciation. Their curse is lifted."

Persephone sneezed. "How long ago was that?"

"It was done a few weeks after I returned Juliet's soul to her body. I'm not sure the exact time."

She gasped. "You did that, too?"

"After a solid drink from the waters of Liliun, I think she'll be able to live a fine life there. Don't you agree?"

Persephone clutched at the handkerchief on her chest and moaned, "This is too much goodness, Hades. I'm confused. If you had the capacity to be this good all along then why are you only showing it now?"

"It wasn't you," he said quietly.

"What?"

"It wasn't you who opened my heart and showed me how to love. It wasn't you. It was Taylor."

"Taylor?"

He nodded.

Persephone couldn't stop weeping. "Is there anything I can give you in return?"

"Yes," he said, returning to her side of the bed.

She waited for him to tell her with her eyes wide as chasms.

"Kiss me—once."

She nodded through her tears. With her heart as light and full as a hot air balloon, she bent her head to kiss Hades, and for the first time, she felt something like love.

Chapter Thirty Four

The Way of All Things

Persephone sat in front of the dressing table in the bedroom for wives in the Underworld. Her neck was finally healed. Hades had been with her for the past month nursing her and his help aided her recovery like lightning. It was late April and the two of them were preparing for her last journey down the river Styx.

Looking in the mirror, Persephone saw herself maybe for the first time in centuries. She wasn't sure if she even looked that way a month ago. Her red hair had lightened so much it could only be described as strawberry blonde. It was so long that even with her curls, it reached her waist. They bounced as she walked. Her skin was changed, too. Now it glowed like health, like strength. Although these changes were amazing, it was her eyes that made the real change in her appearance. No longer emeralds, her eyes were light like peridot.

Sitting at the dressing table, she had been trying to tone down her appearance so she looked less like a goddess, but it was a lost cause. She couldn't hide her natural brilliance no matter how much powder she put on her face.

She smiled and spooned a dollop of cream from her pumpkin pie into her mouth.

Then she saw Hades behind her. He looked different, too. His hair was still white. His eyes were still red. But he'd stopped blowing smoke and, instead of moving like a deathly vapor, he walked like a man who had been freed from some terrible burden and now had something to live for. Persephone liked this side of him, but like he said, she wasn't the one who created this version of him. So, even though she could appreciate a portion of him, she wasn't the one who was going to enjoy the fullness of him. That was for Taylor.

"Are you ready?" he asked. Since they were going to Earth, he was wearing casual clothes.

She smiled at him in the mirror. "I'm going to finish eating this first."

"Be my guest," he said, taking a seat on the edge of the bed and waiting as she ate.

"So, what do you plan to do after you've escorted me back to Gaia?" she asked shyly. She knew his affairs were no longer her business, but she wanted to ask in a friendly sort of way.

"If you must know, I plan to pay a visit to Taylor. I've missed her since she went back to the surface. It's been three weeks. I want to see how she's doing with that idiot brother of hers. I hope he's being good to her. If he's not, I'll steal her away."

Persephone smiled. "Try not to be too arrogant about it."

Hades snorted.

"And if Rylan is too much of a pain, you can always kill him off, even if you can't send him to Tartarus."

"True," Hades said roguishly, he could never think badly of death. "But, even if he is a pain in the ass, his parents still love him. I think that even if he were to break their hearts a thousand times, it would be less painful than the way I would break their hearts killing him once. I'll just let him screw up."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't discount natural consequences, my dear."

Persephone put down her plate and they got up to leave. She was in a different kind of mood as they walked through the house. She walked through the baths with her pants on.

"Aren't you worried about getting wet?"

"Nah," she said. "I want to give this place a proper goodbye, so I won't miss it."

Hades shook his head like he thought she was crazy, but laughed out loud when she dipped her fingers in the chocolate fountain.

She licked them with gusto. "Is it true that you still have a promise from Zeus to collect on?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to ask for?"

"Immortality."

Persephone smiled sadly as she shook the two remaining pomegranate seeds in a bottle in her bag. "Then Taylor won't need these."

"I'm sure she'd like to have them anyway," Hades said reassuringly. "It would make her feel better to have your blessing."

"Are you sure you'll let me talk to her? You wouldn't even let me see her during the time she stayed with us. If you do let me talk to her, I'll have to let her know the wonders she worked the God of the Underworld. It wouldn't be right if I kept you after the transformation she performed on you."

"No. It wouldn't." Hades was serious.

After he said that, Persephone had no desire to bask in the Underworld. She wanted to remove all traces of herself so Taylor could move in happily, without guilt.

Just before they stepped out onto the dock, Persephone heard a whimper from the shadows. She turned and saw six red eyes peering out from the darkness.

"Come here," she whispered and Cerberus came into full view.

His middle face had healed since their fight, but he was missing a tiny line of fur in two places across his forehead. He licked her hand with his middle face, but the head that bit her kept his eyes down.

Persephone got on her knees and stroked his head. "I'm sorry."

He whimpered. He seemed to say that he was the one who should be sorry.

Hades rolled his eyes and sneered, "How could you be a bad dog? You followed your master's orders since you didn't let her leave. Then you followed your mistress's orders by biting her." Then he added more gently, "You are a perfect dog."

Persephone nodded. Then she kissed each of his furry heads and said goodbye.

At the mouth of the river, Charon was waiting for them in his boat. Persephone stood on the dock and pulled out her money. "You know, Charon," she said. "Since this is my very last ride, I was wondering if you could ask you a question."

He looked at her with bored eyes. "You might as well."

She held her coin poised in her hand. "What do you need the money for?"

He sighed. "I'll only tell you after you give me your fare."

Persephone dropped the coins in his open palm and got on board. Hades followed her and for the first time, they sat together in the seat at the back.

Charon kept his face pointed toward the bow. "My daughter was stolen by a fire demon over three thousand years ago. He's been holding her at a ridiculous ransom. For ages, I wasn't able to pay it. Then I started this and it has taken me what has felt like a hundred lifetimes to earn enough to get her back." Then he turned around and looked back at Persephone. "The money you just gave me is the last of the money I need."

Persephone gasped. She jumped up to hug him, but Hades held her firmly in her seat.

"Thank you, milord, for holding her down. I don't like being touched."

Hades smiled. "Don't mention it. What do you plan on doing now that you've earned it all?"

"I imagine I'll keep doing this. Over the years there have been a great many things I have wanted to buy and haven't wanted to spare the money. Everything has been for her. So, I'll stay here and do this, probably forever."

Persephone struggled free and turned to Hades. "And you knew this all along? Why didn't you give him the money?"

"I gave him a job," Hades rebutted. "And frankly, he needed more money than a god could give. The amount the demon wanted was an amount intended never to be paid. He wasn't trying to be greedy. He was trying to get Charon to give up on his daughter, but if the demon won't make good on his deal now, I'll crush him."

Persephone nodded. "All right. I accept that."

"As you should."

At the end of the ride, Persephone got out onto the shore. She had one or two more things she wanted to say to Charon, but he had already turned away without a wave or a backward glance.

Persephone sighed and she and Hades headed toward the university.

The quad was basically empty as it was the end of the semester. Exams were over and there were only a few random students waiting around to receive their grades.

"Taylor's in the Occult's Addict club room," Persephone announced as she scanned the area. "Do you mind if I go there with you? I'd like to give her my small present."

Hades stretched out his hand to say that she should go first and they started walking.

"Do you think you'll still use your palace under the sea or are you planning to move it back to Olympus?"

Persephone smiled. "I don't know. I have to go back to Olympus to do my work, but it's such a chore. Olympians are so boring and everywhere I go I see Aphrodite and the very sight of her makes my blood boil."

"Still mad about Adonis?" Hades asked lazily.

She pursed her lips together angrily. "Yeah, I am. He lived with us for so long. We were his guardians. I was practically his mother and his name was even sealed in the book of necromancy. Then *she* had to insist on joint-guardianship and then she seduced him. That whore!"

"No one's arguing that Aphrodite will sleep with anyone and wants to sleep with everyone," Hades commented drolly. "Still, I don't know what there is to get worked up about. I never liked him."

"That's because his time in the Underworld disrupted our time to quarrel," she said dismissively.

"Perhaps," he chuckled.

They got in the elevator and it took them up to the student group offices.

"Wait out here. I'll go in first," Persephone said as she tapped on the door.

"Come in," Taylor called, but her voice sounded strained.

When Persephone went in, she saw Taylor turn white as a sheet, she was that surprised to see her. "What?" Persephone asked playfully. "You didn't expect to see me?"

"No," Taylor answered, turning her chair to look at Persephone in amazement. "I didn't expect to see you ever again. I thought Hades forbid it."

Persephone smiled. "He's allowing this. Actually, he's just outside the door. But this probably won't be the last time you see me. Immortal people have a way of bumping into each other repeatedly."

Taylor stared like she had just achieved her life's ambition, Christmas, her birthday, and her wedding day all in one sentence. Persephone had never seen such joy on a person's face. The expression only lasted a moment though before her whole face wrinkled up and she began to cry.

"Don't cry, honey," Persephone said, putting her arm around Taylor's shoulder. "It's all right. Everything is all right. Being immortal is wonderful, and besides, I brought a present for you—two presents actually."

Taylor grabbed a tissue out of the box on the desk and blew her nose. "What?"

"This," Persephone pulled the little bottle containing the remaining pomegranate seeds out of her bag and gave it to Taylor. "These are two of my presents. You know what these are, I presume."

"Of course," Taylor nodded.

"They still work, if you want them."

"Thank you," Taylor sobbed, taking the bottle.

Persephone suddenly hugged Taylor. "I have to tell you one last thing. It's you! You did the last thing that needed to be done for all of us to be saved. Gods love sacrifice and Hades was moved to his knees by what you did. God bless you! What am I saying? I'll bless you. What can I give you? Name it. It's yours."

"I can't take credit for eating those seeds. It was Seth who gave them to me. It was him who taught me not to be afraid. Even if I died—he made me feel like there was nothing to be afraid of. And now I have everything I ever wanted. So, you don't need to give me anything."

"All right. But still! I owe you a debt of gratitude that I can never repay. Thank you. With all my heart—thank you." Persephone squeezed her one last time, and then she pulled away. "I have to go. Hades is waiting and I don't want to make him wait any longer. He's changed so much and been so kind to me. It's better if I don't monopolize his favorite girl. Goodbye."

Persephone smiled and waved from the door and then went out. She closed the door between them.

"I guess this is goodbye to you, too," she said, looking into Hades' red eyes.

"Yeah," he said, pulling her into a hug.

They didn't hug for longer than a second before both of them pulled away simultaneously.

"I'll see you around, somewhere," he said breezily, like their goodbye didn't mean much.

"Yeah." She smiled. "I'll always remember our last kiss."

"You're too generous," he said sardonically. "Now get out of here."

He pushed her into the elevator and waved as the doors closed between them. At that last moment, when she knew that Hades was out of her life completely, her emotions were mixed and her energy drained. Their story really was a tragic one. Why couldn't things have been different? Her eyes were filling with sweltering tears. She brushed them away. Because he had let her go, she could forgive him and move on. She pulled herself together and pressed the down button.

Persephone took the elevator all the way down to the Safewalk office. She knew Seth was there wrapping up some loose ends.

Inside, Nixie was sitting on one of the sofas. Her appearance had changed since her curse was lifted. Now she looked like she was one-quarter nymph and it was a sight to behold. A siren was a dark creature with dead-white skin and sorrowful eyes, but a nymph was full of play and mischief. To her credit, she was holding court to literally eight young men and Nixie was soaking up every bit of the attention like it was her birthright.

However, Nixie's attractiveness didn't stop all eight heads from practically swiveling off their shoulders when Persephone entered the room. Luckily, Nixie wasn't jealous and she jumped right up to greet her goddess.

"Seth's in there. He's training the new Safewalk director, but the hottie is off at lunch right now, so Seth's all alone."

"Thanks Nixie," Persephone said as she stepped past all of them to stand in the door frame of Seth's office.

His head was bent over his computer.

"I keep having this dream," she said lazily.

Seth's head jolted up.

Persephone smiled. He looked different, too. The paleness of his skin was long gone and he had the most gorgeous golden tan. Nixie may have eight suitors, but Persephone wondered how Seth had managed to make it to his office that morning without causing a ruckus. It was probably worse than when he sang outside her dormitory.

"Can I tell you about it?" she asked with a gleam in her eye.

"Tell me everything," Seth said, getting up from his chair. A glorious smile was spreading wide on his lips.

She kicked the door shut and said, "I'm lying on a beach and the sun is just setting. The stars are appearing. There's a bonfire beside me and a coarse woolen blanket

under me. I've been eating peach slices and I've danced so hard my breath is fast. That's why I'm lying on the blanket, to catch my breath." Persephone leaned over his desk and looked in his face. "Then I realize that a dark stranger is watching me and as I open my eyes I realize that I've let him sneak up on me. He's standing over me, and I have this overwhelming desire to kiss him until I'm breathless. Do you think I need to see a doctor?"

"Definitely not," Seth said, closing the distance between them and tenderly claiming her lips with his. He moved around the desk in one motion and slipping his hands around her waist he lifted her up on the desk. "You're not sick. You're finally seeing things my way."

Seth's kiss was warm and as he deepened it, Persephone realized that she wasn't going to faint. She wasn't going to disappear into a dream world that would remind her of the reality from which she was trying to escape. For the first time she found herself living in a moment that was good. There was no more waiting for a happily-ever-after. It had arrived. She was no longer pretending she was free to love who she wanted. Now she was perfectly free.

And Seth's kiss was better than the one in her memory. He no longer wanted her blood. He didn't want anyone's blood. He was just as free as she was and it was magnificent.

She pulled away and looked into his sherry-brown eyes. "So, when can we get out of here?"

"Soon. I just need to finish training my replacement."

Just then the door came crashing open and a striking blond young man came stumbling in. Persephone's blood ran cold as she slipped off the desk onto her feet.

"Please don't come in like that," Seth said to the intruder. "Darling, this is Brian Parker," he said gallantly.

"Brian, huh?" Persephone said icily as she inspected his long hair and curious expression. Seth didn't know who he was, but no amount of magic could conceal his true identity from Persephone. He was Adonis. "Fun alias. I thought you were dead. When I get through with you, you'll wish you were dead!" Then, for the very first time, Persephone conjured a whip out of thin air.

Brian's face turned pale as he recognized her. "I'm interrupting," he said, putting his hands up in surrender. "I should never have barged in. I'll go." In a flash, he was out of sight.

Persephone was about to chase after him, but Seth grabbed the whip out of her poised fingers. "Now this may be a lot to ask, but you're going to have to stop being the Goddess of the Underworld and start being the goddess of something a little less aggressive."

"Of what?" she asked angrily as she reached for her weapon.

Seth held her at arm's length. "Life."

Persephone felt herself deflate.

Seth put his arm around her and rubbed the small of her back. "So, just let that guy go—whoever he is. We'll run away together to the beach and I'll make your dream come true."

Persephone pouted. "So, what do you want to do with the whip? I don't know how to put it back."

Seth smiled. "We'll keep it. I might find it useful the next time some arrogant brat decides to fall in love with you. I'm not a god so I can do what I like."

Persephone rolled her eyes. "Being a goddess never stopped me from doing what I wanted."

"That's what I like to hear," Seth murmured into her ear. "Let's go. If that guy is an acquaintance of yours, he can probably handle this job without any more instruction. And we've got to get moving. I don't know if you noticed, but we're not anywhere near a beach."

The End

Dearest Reader,

After all this time we've spent together, me writing for you, you reading what I wrote, I have a secret to tell you. Lean in, so you can hear me whisper.

I'm an independent novelist.

I know. How could I admit to such a thing? How could I admit to being without the resources of a publishing company? How could I admit to designing my own cover? Hiring my own editor? There's no acknowledgments page because the only person I need to acknowledge is my editor and she is getting paid more than I am. It's super embarrassing!

Now that you know I did not receive a royalty advance and no one is paying for my advertising, could you do me a little favor? Pretty please. If you enjoyed my book, could you put a post on your social media saying you liked the book and get the word out? If you have a blog, you could write about my book on your blog. You could post a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or anywhere. You could follow my blog (<https://stephanievanorman.blogspot.com>) or on Facebook (svoauthor). That way you would know when I come out with a new book. If you liked reading this book, you might like my other books. Not that I want to jab them down your throat or anything, but ya know... if you were looking for something more to read.

Dearest Reader, thank you for reading this novel and for reading this letter. If my story got your heart racing, or made you read all night, or even if it made you feel less lonely, I'd love to write more for you. Watch for my next book!

Love is all around the world,
Stephanie Van Orman



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