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Death's Courtship

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Jory Strong

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Death

The Death card is part of the major arcana, the twenty-two non-suited cards in a tarot deck that represent the hero's journey from a naïve simpleton, The Fool (card 0), to a state of being

fully-integrated and actualized as represented by The World (card 21). Regardless of whether or not you believe in the cards when it comes to divination or meditation, they're interesting to reflect on simply because each card in the hero's journey of the major arcana contains themes we all encounter on our life path.

Card thirteen, Death, for instance, can strike fear into the heart of anyone seeing it appear in a tarot reading. But it rarely represents true, physical death. It is, instead, a card most often representing profound transformation, a leaving behind of something significant, separating, or confronting one's deepest fears—all things we encounter and that impact our lives and shape us for better or worse.

Chapter One

"You're wearing that?"

Thespecter that was Death looked down at the flowing white suit, the white shirt with its silky blue tie—all of which offset the darker tones of his skin and the midnight black of his hair superbly even if he did say so himself—though of course he didn't.

Fashion was wasted on his brother. Was wasted on all five of them really. "Does it look as though I'm wearing it?"

But of course, his brothers couldn't simply step aside and allow him to make his exit in peace. After all, how often did Death go on holiday?

Not that anyone would notice it. His brothers had been chomping at the bit, tugging on the reins for ages, each one of them thinking they could spice up the role of Grim Reaper, could put a new spin on it, a new twist, do it better than he could.

Well, here was their chance and more power to them.

"It looks like a pimp suit," the youngest of them said from his indolent position in the doorway.

"Reminds me of Mr. Clean," the twin who'd escaped being youngest by only a few minutes said.

"Mr. Clean. You mean the one in the commercial?" This from the brother who had started the conversational assault on Death's clothing to begin with—the one who was calling himself Azrael at the moment, having fared no better when it came to being named by their mother than Death himself had.

Why none of his brothers could settle on a name for more than a year or so was beyond him. He'd done it, after all.

Death sighed. No wonder he was in need of a vacation. And really, he couldn't have asked for a more perfect time to take one.

No global wars. No widespread plague, though the bird-flu on the horizon was a bit worrisome. Not that he could do anything about it anyway.

His role was rather well-defined and it didn't include heading off trouble. He was a gatherer, a herder, a door opener, an occasional hunter. It was all quite tedious most the time. But he was born to the task and there was no "escape through death" for Death.

"Step aside, the business of managing death isn't all fun and games, as you'll find out for yourselves soon enough."

Still a small fissure of worry opened inside of Death as the dark sea of his brothers parted, allowing him to exit into the courtyard containing the family vehicles. A pimp suit? A costume from a television commercial? Death shuddered and concentrated. The elegant suit became a thing of the past, replaced by black jeans and a shirt in the same blue as the tie had been.

From inside the house came shouts of laughter and Death's humiliation was complete. They'd no doubt placed wagers on whether or not he'd change his clothing.

Well the last laugh would be his. His immediate future held no misguided souls, no disenfranchised spirits, no death. In fact, no Death. Unless he chose otherwise or his brothers made a mess of things, he could take whatever name he desired and be whatever he wanted to be. He was on vacation.

Death created an identity for himself. Atticus Denali. Not that he didn't already have a name, he had a slew of them, all affixed to him by others, including a particularly atrocious one given to him by his mother. It was one of the reasons he'd taken refuge in Death. It was simple. Elegant. A name and a title. A clear definition of his role and his duties.

But a man on vacation was entitled to leave all that behind, especially when it wasn't a working holiday but a true escape from the mantle of responsibility. Death chose Denali because he'd trekked in the Alaskan national park by that name and thoroughly enjoyed the cold snow of Mt. McKinley. He chose Atticus because unlike his brothers who thought culture was found in an Xbox, Death was a reader and Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* was a favorite.

The name, of course, was the easy part. The destination far, far trickier.

Oh, there were places he could go. Mount Olympus for instance. Valhalla. But those ancient haunts were all about wine, women and song, and Death was hardly the life of the party. No, despite the human world being essentially one trouble spot after another for Death, he thought that's where he'd find the most enjoyment. And beyond that, he didn't intend to let the energy he'd expended on preparation go to waste.

It'd been particularly tedious gaining permission from the Oracle of Amun to become fully human for the span of his week-long vacation. Really! One would think that after centuries on the job he could be trusted not to run amuck like some new god who'd only just received the proverbial breath of life that came from human belief.

No. The human world it was. For some reason—not that he'd tried very hard to examine it—he couldn't seem to shake the notion that's where he needed to go for his vacation.

Death frowned as he mulled over the collection of vehicles. An elusive worry skittered along the boundaries of his psyche, a thought just out of reach.

He shook it off and decided on the vintage Aston Martin DB5, its early fame a result of the James Bond movies that were so popular in their day. With a slight nod of his head, Death slipped behind the steering wheel. It was the perfect automobile for Atticus Denali.

Decision made, he now faced the moment of truth. Where to go?

It was the last choice, the last bit of power he could wield until it was time to return home and take the mantle of Grim Reaper from his brothers, the now-acting Brothers Grim.

A laugh escaped at the pun. But Death knew that even if his brothers had been present, they would have rolled their eyes and discounted his sense of humor.

Oh, they thought him lacking. Dull. A stick in the mud.

He'd come to think of himself as a stone under a constant drip of responsibility. And from that analogy was born the desire for a holiday.

Where to go?

Big cities held a wealth of entertainment opportunities. But they were teeming with bodies—literally. He'd often marveled at how desperately the dead clung to their overcrowded environments. One would think they'd be happy to let go and move on. They frequently weren't.

The last time he'd been required to gather up a bunch of farmers and herd them in the direction of the ghostways was during the plague. And even then, it wasn't a battle to get them moving along as it so often was with the city dwellers. A quick flash of the scythe and the farmers were on their way. They understood the cycle of life and death. They saw it around them every day. They accepted it as

necessary, unlike city dwellers who seemed to think death was an option, something to be scheduled and rescheduled in one of those multi-tasking cellular phones they were so enamored with.

What would Atticus Denali choose? Death asked himself, trying to get into the new persona, his vacation identity.

And the answer surprised him. Land wherever he landed and wing it! Leave the destination up to chance.

The elusive worry returned, skittering along Death's spine, momentarily reminding him of the nervous ghost stallion that had been retired when the idea of the four horsemen became passé. Just as well, really, the horse added an unpredictable element to the business of seeing souls on their way. Death shook the oddly unsettling sensation off as pre-holiday jitters.

Leave the destination up to chance? he mused.

Well, why not?

* * * * *

"Got a live one on the phone, Bryn! But you're going to need to put a hustle on if you want to collect. Double your fee if you go right now!"

BrynDePalo sighed, knowing it would be wishful thinking to assume the caller on the other end hadn't heard the comment. But before she could reach the phone, much less wrest it away from this week's temporary assistant, Sheri was reading back an address and saying, "She's on her way. Cash due when services are performed. We don't bill." And then the receiver was slammed into its cradle with the energy of a victorious NBA player dunking the ball.

"Hot damn! This is better than telemarketing," Sheri said and Bryn resolved to have yet another conversation with Marietta. To date she'd had five of them but she refused to lose her optimism. One of these days she'd be able to convince the woman who ran a temporary agency to stop sending "help" as a way of showing how grateful she was Bryn had managed to send the ghost of her abusive ex-husband packing.

It was all in a day's work for Bryn, and though she often bartered her services for things she needed—the small office space with living quarters in a run-down, nearly abandoned office park being one of them—Marietta had paid Bryn in cash and as far as Bryn was concerned, the matter was settled. Unfortunately, Marietta didn't feel the same way.

Sighing again, Bryn picked up the piece of paper with the potential client's information written in large, bold, purple script. She didn't bother reminding Sheri that her duties did not include answering the phone. Today was Friday and Monday would see a new assistant on her doorstep.

"You need backup?" Sheri asked.

Bryn rubbed her neck. The truth of the matter was she doubted she'd be going anywhere once she called the potential client back. "I'll be fine." She looked at her watch and felt a bubble of relief. "Hey, it's close enough to quitting time. Why don't you go ahead and get a jump on the traffic."

Sheri surged from her chair with a jangle of bracelets. "You're the best!" She opened the bottom desk drawer and pulled out a purple and green purse large enough to carry a medium-sized dog in. "Oh, by the way, lover boy called ten times. He finally broke down and asked for you on the last one. I told him you were seeing someone else and he needed to get a life."

Bryn groaned. "Sheri—"

A laugh interrupted the half-hearted reprimand. Sheri shook her head and sent her multiple earrings swinging. "Don't thank me, Bryn. It was no biggie. See you on Monday, maybe, unless Marietta thinks my services are needed more urgently elsewhere. Have a good one!" And within seconds she was gone in a cloud of perfume.

Bryn reclaimed her desk chair and made the call. Busy. She waited a few minutes and repeated it. Busy.

Her stomach tightened with worry. Money was short and she couldn't afford to get a reputation for not showing up. A small laugh escaped. As though being called a "ghost exorcist" wasn't a bad enough label.

Still, the small article in one of the freebee newspapers had generated some real business. It had also led to a lot of prank phone calls and several that were downright creepy. Those had made her wish she did have backup, maybe a tall, dark and handsome guy who could also serve as her boyfriend.

Right. Boyfriends were harder to come by than clients and often carried more baggage than the ghosts she sent packing.

"Lover boy," as Sheri called MarkBildner, was the perfect example.

Bryn wanted someone who could accept her as she was, could accept what she did for a living. Mark had, but only because of his fixation with his mother's ghost. And despite the daily calls and the weekly delivery of flowers, she wouldn't go out with him again. She'd made that clear enough times that her conscience didn't bother her when she screened her calls and dropped the flowers he sent off at a local nursing home.

She sighed, reminded herself it wasn't as though she *never* got asked out, she did. She just hadn't met *the right* man and she didn't see any point in pretending to be something she wasn't or denying what she was.

Been there, done that, Bryn thought and a familiar knot of pain formed in her chest along with images of her parents—conservative, church-going people who'd been content not to have children but were given an unexpected "gift" late in life—a gift that had, by their own admission, turned into their worst nightmare.

Bryn tried the phone number again. It was still busy.

She pulled a map program up on the computer and typed in the address. It was far enough away she needed to get moving if she were going to make it there in a reasonable amount of time, but not so far it would be a huge waste of effort if she reached someone on her cell phone and ended up turning around part-way there.

Regardless of what her mother and father had accused her of in the chilly conversation that sealed their estrangement and finally allowed her to move to the west coast with no regrets, Bryn had no interest in "feeding the paranoia of mentally sick individuals" or "stealing from the misguided and lost".

Either there was a ghost that needed to be sent on its way or there wasn't. She wasn't a shrink or a counselor. She wasn't a witch or a con-artist.

She was just someone who wanted to use her strange, sometimes scary talent to make a difference. Because as terrifying and heartbreaking as dealing with disenfranchised spirits could be, the thing that gave Bryn nightmares was the image of herself as a ghost, as a person trapped in a bleak eternity by regrets.

"I've got to stop thinking about them," she muttered, recognizing the downward spiral that was always triggered by thoughts of her parents.

Bryn got in her car and drove, singing along with the radio in order to keep her mind cleared of worries and unhappy memories.

She tried the phone number one last time as she turned onto the street where her prospective client lived. Still busy, but this time she flipped the cell closed and tossed it onto the passenger seat.

"Well, ready or not, here I come," she said, relieved that the neighborhood looked respectable. The houses were old, most of them single-story, the stucco painted in peach, blue, green or white. The yards sporting browned patches of grass and a couple of trees, most with an overabundance of fruit scattered and rotting at the base—the major downside to fruit trees planted for shade.

Bryn checked the address and the name attached to it, Claudette Haddon, then found the house. It

was on the far corner, the paint a little more faded than the rest, the yard a little worse for the summer heat, the curb in front of it blocked by cars.

She slowed her car to a crawl, winced at the sound of loud music blaring from the side yard of the house next to Claudette's. There was a moment of blissful silence, followed immediately by band members arguing, then more noise, the changes agreed upon not improving the song.

Bryn rounded the corner and did a u-turn, came back to park across from the house. She grimaced as she climbed out of the car and got the full effect of the music. *Must be a determined ghost to stick around and listen to this. Or a trapped one.*

An elderly woman wearing an old-fashioned cooking apron opened the door before Bryn could knock. The expression on her face was so grateful Bryn braced herself, knowing how easily and quickly the expression could give way to disappointment or anger.

"You came," Mrs. Haddon said, tears forming at the corner of her eyes, her hands reaching for Bryn's hand and clasping it between warm, boney fingers that shook slightly though her grip was strong enough to pull Bryn into the house.

Relief surged through Bryn as she felt the faint tendrils of a phantom breeze marking the presence of a ghost.

"Do you need part of the payment up front?" Mrs. Haddon asked. "I don't have all of it. I'm afraid I don't drive anymore. My son usually takes me but the bank is nearby."

Bryn cringed and shook her head. Dealing with the financial aspects of what she did was the worst part of it, made even more horrible by Sheri's earlier "help".

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Haddon, my assistant isn't supposed to answer the phone. Can we sit down somewhere and talk about the haunting first? Then I can give you a better estimate of the fee."

Mrs. Haddon shuddered. "Let's go to the kitchen."

Bryn followed her there, taking note of the dinner preparations on the counter. A salad. Meat marinating in something. A towel-covered bowl that probably held rising dough. Pots, pans, a rolling pin, a heavy cutting board with a knife and a pyramid of cheese cubes. It seemed like a lot of food for one person.

Mrs. Haddon's gaze darted to the clock. She wiped her hands down her apron several times before clutching the material in her fist. "Will this take long?"

Bryn felt the first stirrings of misgiving. "I can come back another time if you want."

Mrs. Haddon's face grew panicked. "No. No. Please. Can we start? I've got candles and a Bible. And some holy water. I wasn't sure what else you might need."

"Mainly I need information. Spirits stay for a reason. A lot of the time just finding out why they're present resolves the situation."

Mrs. Haddon's hands clenched and unclenched on the material of the apron. "I don't know why I'm the only one who can hear them. They come every night at dusk." Her gaze darted to the clock again. "My son's afraid I'm going crazy. Billy. Bill. He doesn't like to be called Billy now that he's an adult. He's afraid I'm going to get hurt here, too. That's why he sold my house in Virginia and brought me here, because I fell. But there weren't any ghosts in that house."

Tears gathered at the corner of her eyes. "If I can't get them to stop I'm afraid he'll put me in a home. A woman at the seniorcenter gave me an article about you. Can you really make them go away? It's worth every penny I have if you can just make it stop."

"Mrs. Haddon, I—"

"You're not going to get your hands on any of my mother's money," an angry male voice said from the doorway and Bryn looked up to see Billy, the hulking epitome of a schoolyard bully plus about thirty years and fifty extra pounds, stepping into the room.

“I—”

“Get out of my house and don’t come back!” he yelled, face red, the stains on his shirt suddenly looking like the end result of a brawl.

“Billy, Please! Just listen to what she has to say. Give her—”

“No!” He lunged at the counter, going for the knife on the chopping block.

It was a scene straight out of a Stephen King novel and for a split second Bryn was frozen in place. But when his hand actually *touched* the knife’s handle she was out of her chair and out of the room, his footsteps thundering after her.

Get to the car! It was her only thought as she fumbled with the front door and nearly plowed through the screened-door in front of it.

There was a curse behind her, the frantic call of Billy’s mother. But Bryn didn’t stop. She didn’t turn around to look.

Get to the car! Maybe, maybe get lucky enough to actually get in the car.

She dashed into the street, surrounded by screaming, tortured music and envisioning the homicidal Billy behind her.

Bryn never saw the car that ran into her.

Or rather, that she ran into.

One minute the street was empty, the next she was sprawled on the ground and a gorgeous, dark-haired man was leaning over her, cradling her cheek in his palm, his gray eyes with their dark endless centers reminding her of fog-shrouded ghostways .

Chapter Two

Atticus knew the moment he touched the woman that she was the one meant to be his wife. She was the reason he’d suddenly decided on a holiday after centuries of going without one, the reason he’d chosen to vacation among the humans. She was the reason for the elusive worry, the unsettling sensation he’d written off as pre-holiday jitters at the thought of turning over the day-to-day business of Death to his brothers.

The woman who’d careened into his car and left a sizable dent was meant to be his. He could take her now, cast off the shell of flesh he’d lobbied so hard to gain. He could harvest her soul then take her home with him.

He could do it. But *he wouldn’t* .

No. He didn’t intend to make the same mistakes as his father.

It would be a challenge, and time was limited. At the end of his seven-day holiday he’d lose his corporeal form and until he claimed her as his bride, consummated their marriage physically in order to permanently link their souls, it would be risky. If she died without him nearby to take her home... If she got on a ghostway where he couldn’t follow...

Atticus shivered. For a moment the chill of Death threatened to return to the core of his being and spread outward until she was ice-cold, her heart stopped. The worry about losing her nearly weakened his resolve to give her time, to court her as she deserved to be courted. He’d been lonely for centuries, longed for a companion. To gamble on his future happiness...

He squared his shoulders and saw the vintage Aston Martin out of the corner of his eye. He reminded himself that it was the car of James Bond *and* Atticus Denali.

“Oh god,” the woman whispered, the husky sound of her voice drawing Atticus’ attention to her lips

and scattering his thoughts.

He nearly blurted out the first thing that came to mind, almost told her that in his early days he had often been called a god but these days he was more typically considered an angel and in some cultures had been sainted—though in all honesty he found the mantle of *Santa Muerte* somewhat disconcerting. Not that it mattered between *them* of course. He was proud to say he was not only a part of history but a student of it and fully intended to have a marriage based on equality. No, he wouldn't make a mess of things as Hades had done with Persephone. He wouldn't alienate her as his father had succeeded in doing initially with his mother.

Atticus opened his mouth to offer the assurances bubbling furiously inside him. He was saved from making a complete fool of himself when he managed to look away from her lips and see that her focus was on the dent in the car. Her "oh god" was a response to it and not to *him*.

She slowly got to her feet, her dismay and anxiety obvious. He had the urge to take her in his arms, to hold her, to smooth away the distress as easily as the dent could be made to disappear from the car. But before he could utter a word, a large man burst from a nearby house, shaking off an elderly woman who'd apparently been clinging to him.

"I told you to get out of here," the man yelled, charging toward them.

Atticus stepped forward, shielding his wife-to-be. Sheer amazement struck him when the human arrived fist first and the force of it sent Atticus to the ground.

He was on his feet in an instant, returning the favor, thinking that only a person with a death wish would assault Death himself. But of course, as Atticus felt the uniquely satisfying sensation of flesh connecting with flesh, saw the man stagger backward with the force of the blow, *his blow*, he was reminded that, in fact, Death was on vacation.

He followed the first punch with a second, driving the man toward the house even as he dodged a beefy fist. Adrenaline surged through Atticus. It was followed by understanding, a clarity regarding combat he hadn't gained until this moment though he'd been to a million fight scenes to collect the losers and send them on their way.

Exhilarating! There was no other word to describe what he was feeling. The excitement of not only testing his mettle, *mano-e-mano*, but to be doing so in the service of his lady—it was absolutely astounding!

Atticus grunted, doubling over when his opponent plowed a fist into his gut. The pain of the blow chased more intellectual thoughts away.

He responded with an uppercut that sent the human sprawling, momentarily dazed as blood poured from his lip. Before Atticus could do more, the elderly woman was kneeling, crying, dabbing at the blood with the corner of her apron as she pleaded with the man whose name was apparently Billy, saying over and over again, "Please don't send me away, Billy."

The tears and desperate pain in the woman's voice were like the stab of a knife through Atticus' heart. The scene was too close to ones he'd witnessed before, especially in the old days, during times of plague and civil war, though the words were different. *Please don't leave me. Please don't die.*

He turned away. His breath caught in his throat when his eyes met the concerned ones of the woman who would soon be his wife. A shiver went through him when she reached for him, her hand brushing dirt and dried grass from his shirt. "Thank you," she said. "I—"

"It was my pleasure." He captured her hand. His cock filled, and the sensation of a throbbing erection pressed against his boxers was so novel he wanted to freeze the moment in time and savor it. He wanted to forever capture in his mind the first rush of blood to an organ that now seemed to pulse in time to the beat in his heart. Because while there might be life after death, there was no possibility of life *from* Death—at least not until a bride was found and claimed—the curse of impotence a penalty for some long ago ancestor's unrestrained and unfortunate predilection for sacrificed virgins.

Atticus closed his eyes. He mentally divested himself of clothing and tried to imagine what the tightness of his jeans was telling him, to confirm what he'd always hoped was true about himself—that fully aroused he was in fact well-endowed, even when compared to gods like Apollo and Backlum Chaam and Eueucoyotl. But of course there was no way of knowing for sure until he was in a private place with his intended.

He opened his eyes and kissed her palm, rejoiced when he felt her shiver and witnessed the subtle blush stealing into her face. "I am Atticus Denali," he murmured, unable to resist the impulse to kiss her again, this time in a butterfly caress against the pulse at her wrist.

"I'm Bryn DePalo," she said. "Thanks. I know I said it before." Her free hand went to his silk shirt and anxiety returned to her face. "I can pay to have this cleaned." She worried her bottom lip and he wanted to take it between his teeth, to suck it into his mouth. "It'll take me a while to pay for the dent in your car. I don't think it's covered by my insurance and I can't afford to have them raise the rates anyway."

The huskiness in her voice sent another throbbing rush from Atticus's heart to his penis. Every chivalrous impulse inside of him demanded he tell her not to worry about the dent. The car would be returned to its pristine state as soon as it was once again in the family compound—the only price to be paid that of enduring some comments from his brothers regarding his skill behind the wheel.

It was a price Atticus was more than willing to pay. A price that paled in comparison to the importance of gaining a wife.

"I believe we can reach an accord," Atticus began, somewhat unsure of how to proceed and surprisingly grateful when he didn't have to because the elderly female joined them, his opponent lagging behind her and holding a tissue to his lip.

"Please come back inside," the woman said, addressing Bryn.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Bryn said, hesitant to point out that Bill was glowering and as far as she was concerned, the evening was already a disaster. She doubted *any* ghost intervention Mrs. Haddon could possibly need would cover the costs already incurred.

Bryn glanced again at the dent she'd put in the Aston Martin when she ran into it. She felt queasy just looking at it. It wasn't a huge dent, not compared to some of the ones that had actually come with her car when she bought it. But on an Aston Martin—a vintage James Bond car if she could believe what her eyes were telling her... It wasn't a car to take to just anyone and have him pound out the dents then do a quickie paint job.

"Please," Mrs. Haddon said. "Please. Any minute now they'll start."

"The ghosts?" Bryn said, drawn to the woman's pain, wishing they'd had a chance to discuss the details earlier, inside, in private—then again, what was the point? Bryn wasn't going to hide who she was though it took a supreme act of courage to glance at Atticus. And then it took a second, longer glance to confirm what the first had revealed.

He was smiling, practically grinning—but not with mirth or disbelief. The look in his eyes, the eagerness that seemed to be radiating from him, was excitement, anticipation. Happiness.

Bryn's eyebrows drew together and for the first time she wondered exactly how he'd come to be in this neighborhood and in front of this house in particular. Did he also have a talent for ghosts? Had Mrs. Haddon called both of them? Had she meant to hire them both or was she so desperate she'd decided to hedge her bets in case one of them didn't show up?

"You're interested in hauntings?" Bryn asked Atticus, twinges of nervousness spiraling through her chest as she waited for his answer.

"Very much so."

Bryn shivered at his answer. His words resonated with an almost otherworldly truth, a deeper meaning that inexplicably frightened and thrilled her at the same time.

Her gaze locked to his. Once again she saw gray eyes that reminded her of foggy shrouded ghostways—at least until they warmed, heated, stirred something deep inside her so it uncoiled and slid through her cunt, making it flutter and causing her labia to flush and swell, her clit to stand erect.

She broke the contact, aware of the blush staining her face and neck as she forced her attention to Billy first—who continued to glower, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, his body stiff though he kept his lips pressed tightly together—and then to his mother, whose hopeful look was a painful contrast to the tremors making her hand shake as she reached out and touched Bryn's forearm. "Please. Please come back inside. Billy's sorry for his behavior. He's a good son. He—"

"I understand," Bryn said, covering the elderly woman's hand with her own. "He doesn't want you to be taken advantage of. We can go back inside and you can tell me about the ghosts." She looked at the Aston Martin still in the street, at the dent that still needed to be dealt with, and added, "If it's all right, I'd like for Atticus to join us."

When Mrs. Hammond nodded, Atticus made quick work of parking the car and rejoining them. He could barely contain the emotions cascading through him. And if The Fates had been present, he might well have kissed them in his gratitude and giddiness over gaining a bride already *in the business* so to speak.

Not that The Fates had anything to do with him finding Bryn, of course. He had only a nodding acquaintance with them—thankfully. They were a capricious lot, one that any being was well advised to steer clear of.

Atticus grinned like a fool as he followed the others into the house and into the kitchen. He knew he should pull his lips back into their usual somber position. But with the rigid length of his penis making every step a sensory experience and his soon-to-be-wife's presence, he couldn't.

It took a supreme effort to keep from rubbing his hands together in anticipation of watching his future wife at work. He felt the ghostly energy against his skin. It swirled, built, was tied to some long ago event and triggered by the approaching dusk. Even in his current incarnation he could know the details of it with a mere thought. But he wanted to be surprised. He wanted to witness for himself Bryn's touch when it came to sending spirits on their way.

He glanced at his vanquished opponent and took great satisfaction in not only seeing the split and swollen lip but in witnessing the gathering fear in Billy's eyes as the ghost energy grew and somewhere on another plane, a hound began baying, followed by a second, a third, a fourth, more, until it was a pack of animals on a hunt.

Well, that's what he gets for not believing his mother in the first place, Atticus thought, guessing his presence was a catalyst for Billy being able to experience the haunting his mother had been privy too.

"Do you need the Bible and the holy water?" their elderly hostess whispered, her grip white-knuckled on her son's arm, her question directed at Bryn.

Atticus disguised his spontaneous laugh as a cough. He glanced at Bryn and his chest filled with pride and warmth at the negative shake of her head, at her serious features and obvious concentration.

The pack arrived in ghostly form, black-and-tan hounds of medium size chasing through the house, the baying so loud it was nearly ear-splitting. Atticus fully expected a huntsman to appear and collect the beasts, but by the time the pack had circled through the kitchen for a third time, he wondered if they were lost and searching for a way home.

Intriguing! He could hardly wait to see how his bride-to-be would solve the problem. After all, how did one reason with hounds, especially when the hunt was taking place on another plane?

The grin Atticus had managed to subdue started to reform, then just as quickly changed to a severe frown. He had only enough time to think, *Surely not*, before a horse and rider emerged from the hallway. Not just any rider but a bad marriage between Zorro and a Highwayman. The end result being a caped, masked, tone-deaf individual blowing a trumpet and wearing a tri-cornered hat while sitting astride the skittish black stallion Death himself had retired to the stables!

His youngest brother sat astride the beast, doing a particularly atrocious manifestation of Suriel the Trumpeter, also known as Sauriel the Releaser. It was almost too much to bear, even for a man on vacation. But there was nothing Atticus could do other than to allow the farce to continue.

To interfere would require him to return to his own realm. And so he gritted his teeth as the would-be Suriel charged around the house, ostensibly gathering the hounds, but in fact adding his energy to theirs so all of them became more solid in form—so solid, in fact, that one hound lunged for a pyramid of cheese on the counter, scattering the cubes as it dug its snout into a bowl of marinating meat and began lapping and gnawing without success.

Another hound knocked a bowl to the floor, shattering it so bits of glass mixed with the rising dough. The remaining pack members snapped and growled as they started to fight over food they couldn't eat.

Atticus grimaced but couldn't fault them for their behavior. Centuries of being without food could do that to man or beast. And if he was completely honest with himself, his own arrival *might* have changed the normal course of the hounds' hunt, though in all likelihood it was the arrival of his brother that had done it.

The stallion pranced, tail lashing out and knocking silverware and plates off the table, the clatter of which caused the horse to spook and wheel into the dogs, stepping on several of them and making them yip, but also gaining their attention.

That's all it took apparently. As one the pack gathered around the horse, baying once again in the excited sound of a hunt about to begin.

In a gesture of triumph, Atticus' youngest brother took off his hat and nearly unseated himself in the process of taking a bow. His eyes danced with victory as his gaze met Atticus'—only to fill with stunned disbelief an instant later when he noted the raging erection still pressed against the front of Atticus' jeans.

A quick glance at Bryn and Suriel the Trumpeter lifted the ill-used instrument, blasting out an off-key version *Boots and Saddles*. And then the black stallion wheeled and bolted, the hounds forging ahead and at its heels, all of them disappearing without a backward glance, though when the last of them was gone, a card fluttered downward from the height of the rider.

Atticus wanted to believe he'd seen the first and the last of his five brothers. That the youngest would pass on the news a courtship was in progress and they'd all leave him to his holiday and his taking of a wife.

He wanted to believe—oh yes he did. But he didn't.

Ambulance chasers. Vultures. A wealth of images came to mind before he resolutely pushed them out of his thoughts in favor of concentrating on the matter at hand.

He had a bride to woo. He had a cock that would soon take on a life of its own if he didn't get down to the business of putting it to good use.

Atticus took a step forward, intending to pick up the calling card his brother left in his wake but Bryn reached it first. Her face reflected a range of emotions, all of them captured and stored in Atticus' memory to be taken out and examined, savored at another time—especially the last one, the one directed at him. It was a mix of curiosity and heat, anticipation and shy trepidation, longing and hesitation.

Bryn forced her attention away from the man who was commanding far too much of it. In all likelihood the hounds had somehow been separated from the huntsman. There was no doubt a fascinating story given the extremely odd horseman, but she'd seen the foggy edges of a ghostway and knew it was safe to say, "I think the hounds are gone for good now, Mrs. Haddon."

The elderly woman nodded. She was still clutching gratefully at her son's arm and Bryn took a great deal of satisfaction in seeing Billy pale and swaying slightly as a result of what he'd seen. It wasn't charitable, but given the Stephen King moment she'd experienced when he went for the knife, she didn't feel guilty adding silently, *Take that, you bully.*

Still she didn't intend to hang around long enough for him to talk himself into a scenario where she

was a mistress of special effects and had somehow orchestrated the show with the intention of fleecing his mother for every penny she had. *Been there, done that.* “I’ll be leaving now,” Bryn said, edging toward Atticus and the doorway.

“What do I owe you?” Mrs. Haddon asked, her voice shaky.

Bryn took in the trashed kitchen and didn’t have the heart to ask for money, especially when she wasn’t sure she’d actually done anything. “Just this,” she said, holding up what the huntsman had left behind. It was a tarot card. Number thirteen. *Death*.

Chapter Three

Is there no end to their lack of respect for the sanctity of Death? Atticus thought as he looked at the card in Bryn’s hand. Oh, he recognized it, of course. It was from his extensive and priceless collection of tarot cards.

In retrospect, he probably should have hunted Merlin down and asked the sorcerer for a no-trespassing spell. At a bare minimum, he should have affixed a skull and crossbones to the doorway leading to his side of the house—though on second thought, that’d probably *draw* the heathens rather than repel them. No matter, the expression on Bryn’s face as she studied the card made the trauma of seeing his possession tossed carelessly from horseback worth enduring.

They retreated from the house, leaving Billy and his mother to the task of cleaning up the mess.

Bryn’s heart sank when she saw the dent in the Aston Martin. It was still there, still as big as she remembered it. *Nice to know I pack a punch*, she thought, trying to cheer herself up.

She glanced down at the card. It looked old, hand-painted even. Maybe she could sell it on eBay. “About the car—”

“Please, have dinner with me. This is my first day of vacation and I’m new to your town. We can discuss the dent over dinner if you wish, though I’d much rather talk about what just happened in your client’s house.”

Bryn ran her thumb along the edge of the tarot card. She wanted to eat dinner with him, wanted to prolong the contact. There was something about him... not that she had to look very hard to get a good start on a list.

He was GQ gorgeous and had jumped to defend her, hadn’t hesitated even though she’d just dented his car. He seemed genuinely fascinated by the encounter with the ghost hounds. *And* it would be great to have someone to talk things over with.

In a lifetime of seeing ghosts, she’d never had any of them become almost touchable. She’d never had a spiritual manifestation leave physical evidence behind as they entered the ghostway. Sure, some of them had thrown things in a poltergeist’s rage, but *none* of them had left anything—especially a calling card for Death.

She glanced at the gaily-colored Death card. The dark hooded figure at its center gave her a chill, though the reds and yellows, blues and greens of what appeared to be swirling dancers made her want to smile.

Maybe she should be terrified, but it was hard to be scared when she was fascinated by what she’d seen. And other than a slight worry about the hounds becoming solid enough to knock her over and the horse real enough to accidentally trample her, she hadn’t for a moment feared for her life.

She pressed her thumb against the edge of the tarot card and glanced at Atticus, going with her instinct. “I don’t know this area very well, but I noticed a pizza place a couple of blocks over when I left the main drag.”

“Perfect. You lead and I’ll follow.”

His smile could raise the dead. It curled her toes and sent nervous jitters somersaulting in her chest.

It’s not a date, Bryn reminded herself as she got into her car, her spirits plummeting as she took in the patched upholstery and cracked, sun-bleached vinyl. “Well, one look at what I’m driving and he’ll know I’m not lying about needing time to cover the cost of fixing the dent.”

The Aston Martin’s engine purred to life against the curb. Bryn laughed softly. The car fit the man. She could definitely see him starring in a James Bond movie. And though she’d never been a fan of boxing, it had stirred some primitive part of her when Atticus had come to her rescue and pounded Billy with his fists.

Bryn’s cunt spasmed and her nipples tightened. “It’s not a date,” she reminded herself—out loud this time. But arousal slid from her slit and her cunt lips grew flushed as she remembered the soft touch of his lips on her palm and wrist, the erection she’d seen pressing against the front of his jeans.

She turned on the radio in an effort to distract herself and found Big and Rich singing about being caught up in the moment—a chance encounter and throwing caution to the winds as a result of an overwhelming physical attraction. Bryn grinned and started singing along with the radio, picturing herself and Atticus in the unfolding story images of the song.

The pizza place was easy to find. And whether by accident or design, Atticus took the spot to the right so she didn’t have to see the dent when she got out of her car. It was a relief even if out of sight wasn’t out of mind.

He took a minute to pull out a clean shirt, the open suitcase on the passenger seat serving as a testament to his vacationer status for the brief instant Bryn could take her eyes off his bare chest and the sight of his tanned fingers slowly buttoning the shirt. She wished it *were* a date or, better yet, that he was dinner. It was far too easy to imagine exploring him with her mouth.

“Is a vegetarian pizza okay with you?” Bryn asked when they got inside and it was their turn to order.

“I’d prefer it.”

His smile and his answer made her heart flutter. The nervous excitement usually reserved for first dates had her shoving suddenly damp palms into her pockets when he insisted on paying for dinner.

They claimed a booth far enough from the video games so they could hold a conversation. Bryn licked her lips nervously and nearly whimpered when his eyes darkened and his face went taut.

Atticus didn’t seem to be making any attempt to hide his interest in her. A sick feeling bloomed in the pit of her stomach and fed on her nervousness.

He was gorgeous, rich if the Aston Martin was any indication. What if he thought she’d pay for the dent with sex?

Bryn glanced down at the scarred wooden table where any number of initials enclosed in hearts proclaimed teenage love. “About the dent—”

“If you take me on as your apprentice and give me a place to stay, even a couch in your office, then I’ll take care of it with my vacation funds and the car will be returned to its owner without a mark on it,” Atticus said, skirting the truth but trying not to lie to his future wife in his need of an excuse to remain a constant in her life.

She looked up from her study of the table to meet his eyes. “The car isn’t yours?”

“No.” It was another uncomfortably close brush with falsehood. But the car was a family asset and he couldn’t very well tell her it was a manifestation made real by the power granted to those responsible for overseeing and managing Death.

He refrained from embellishing further, said, “I have a professional interest in death and what I saw today... I’d like to learn more about your work. It’s well worth using my vacation funds to pay for an apprenticeship, so to speak.”

Bryn's eyes widened and her lips parted just enough to make it a struggle for Atticus not to lean across the table and cover her mouth with his, slip his tongue in to tangle with hers. He ached to touch her, to experience everything that came with finding a bride.

"You're a mortician?" she guessed, her voice holding the same surprise he read in her face.

Atticus smiled. The worst was over. "I see the dead on their way."

Bryn blinked. "When I think undertaker...I don't think of someone who looks like he stepped out of an advertisement selling men's cologne."

His cock pulsed at the comment. The way she'd looked at him when he was changing his shirt had given him cause to think she was attracted, but...

His heart warmed and expanded in his chest at the subtle blush slowly coloring Bryn's cheeks. Atticus couldn't resist reaching over and taking her hands in his. "And when I think *Ghostbusters* I don't think of someone as beautiful as you."

Her eyes sparkled when she laughed and he thought he could fall right into them and live happily ever after.

"I loved that movie when it came out," she said. "But I'm not a ghost buster. I'm not a ghost exorcist either, though I've been called one. Mainly I'm just someone with a strange gift who is trying to do something with it that's useful and helpful."

"Like today," Atticus said, rubbing his thumbs over her knuckles. "The old woman was afraid of the hounds."

"Not afraid of them, but afraid Billy would send her to a nursing home because he thought her mind was going and he didn't want her to get hurt while he was gone during the day."

"And now, thanks to you, Billy has seen for himself that his mother is perfectly sane."

"I'm not sure it was just me. I've never had anything like that happen before."

Bryn's fingers gave his a little squeeze and Atticus closed his eyes briefly at the sensation it evoked. It felt like a hot wire ran from where they touched straight to his cock.

"I think maybe your being there is what made the difference," she said. "Another few minutes and those hounds and the horseman would have been solid enough to touch. And then there's the card. It's very real, and it looks old. If I sold it—"

"No. Please don't. Keep it. Let me worry about the dent. Let me spend time with you."

Bryn found it impossible to refuse and the reason had very little to do with the state of her checking account. The sincerity in his voice, the way he was looking at her—desire mixed with earnestness—had any thought of resistance melting away before it could form.

They'd only just met, but she felt a deep connection to him, a profound need to get to know him better, to see where this would lead. She trusted her instinct when it came to being safe with him.

"My phone doesn't exactly ring off the hook," she warned.

His smile made her breath catch. "Then we'll have more time to get to know one another better."

She bit down on her bottom lip, not sure getting to know each other was better in the long run. "When you're not on vacation, where are you?"

"I share a home with my five brothers."

"A funeral home?" It was the first thing out of her mouth and Bryn felt the heat rise to her cheeks at how stupid it sounded.

Amusement danced in Atticus's eyes. "No, though we're all in the same line of work and at times it feels as though death would be a welcome refuge."

His answer startled a laugh out of her, an immediate understanding. "I guess in your business you have to develop a dark sense of humor in order to cope."

Atticus nodded, unable to speak for the lump in his throat. She was perfect for him, absolutely perfect. Intelligent. Generous of spirit. Accepting. Honest with her thoughts and emotions. Beautiful. Alluring. Just looking at her made him ache to hold her, bare flesh against bare flesh, to slide his penis into her sheath, join with her intimately and make her his wife.

"Do you know anything about tarot cards?" she asked, placing the card on the table between them.

He picked it up, studied it for a moment to ensure it'd come to no harm from being in his brother's possession, even temporarily. "I've always been fascinated by the artwork, but I'm not a student of using them for divination though I do know something of their meaning. Contrary to popular belief, this card doesn't necessarily represent physical death. It can, but it can also signify a major transformation, a facing of one's greatest fears, a major change in one's life, leaving one path to embark on another." Atticus grimaced. "Or in the case of our exceedingly odd looking horseman, who I believe was doing a rendition of Suriel the Trumpeter, it could simply be a greeting card, a hello from one person in the business to another."

Bryn's eyes reflected surprise and Atticus cursed himself for what he'd said. But there was no way to head off her question.

"You're saying the horseman was a manifestation of Death and not just a strangely dressed huntsman."

Atticus shrugged. "My clientele has always been human," he said, working his way carefully through the minefield of conversation. "But perhaps a little something extra is needed when dealing with lost pets and seeing them reunited with their owners or sent on their way."

Bryn slowly nodded her head. "You could be right. This is the first time I've ever been asked to deal with ghost animals."

Atticus breathed a quiet sigh of relief and jumped up quickly when the loudspeaker announced their pizza was ready. He retrieved it from the counter then took charge of the conversation, diverting it to a discussion of movies and books, and his favorite subject, Bryn.

He was completely enamored and extremely anxious to escape with her to a private environment by the time the meal was over. What a stroke of luck that her office and her living quarters were in the same place.

When she disappeared into the ladies' room, Atticus couldn't resist stepping into the men's room. Curiosity dictated the restroom stop instead of necessity.

It's a work of art, Atticus thought as he stared at his erection. It was just as he'd suspected with the first rush of blood upon finding his wife-to-be. In a fully engorged state he could stand with the best of them. Apollo, Backlum Chaam, Eueucoyotl and any number of other gods, none of them was more generously endowed than he was.

A laugh escaped as he remembered his brothers' conversation assault on his clothing and their smug, cocky assurance they could do things better than him. If they could only see him now—

"You're going to need a suit for that thing," the brother currently going by the name Sammael said, making Atticus groan when his hand clenched involuntarily on his cock and sent a spasm of exquisite sensation through it.

Sammael leaned against the wall. "It's definitely a great boner. But if you're going to get any use out of it you need condoms. Remember AIDS? You should. It still keeps us busy in some parts of the world. I doubt your beautiful but very human wife-to-be is going to let you through the door, so to speak, without protection."

"Go away and stay away."

"Just trying to help."

"I'm on vacation. Go away."

A bathroom stall door started to open. Atticus gritted his teeth even as embarrassed heat rose to his

cheeks while he hastily tucked himself into his jeans.

An old man shuffled out of the stall. He glanced around—not seeing or hearing Sammael of course—then proceeded to the sink.

“Used to talk to mine too. Still do on occasion,” the old man said, making Sammael snicker. “Never told it to go away, though, not even when I was young and stupid. You took that Cialis as a recreational drug, huh? Got more bang for your buck than you counted on. Well, beats the hell out of whatever they’re selling on the streets these days. ‘Course the ads say to go on down to the emergency room or some such thing if you’re still good to go after about four hours. Four hours. Imagine that. I’ve been a Viagra man, myself. But I think I’ll try that Cialis.” He tossed the paper towel into the trash and shuffled out of the bathroom.

Sammael’s snickers turned into howling laughter as he faded away, leaving Atticus to wonder what other humiliation awaited as a result of his brothers’ interference. Still, as he washed his hands, a small cavity of worry managed to open up inside him. He was disease free. Always had been, always would be. But did he dare risk following Bryn home and having her call a halt to a passionate encounter because he wasn’t prepared?

He nearly doubled over in pain just thinking about it. Already the ache to get his cock inside her and come was nearly unbearable.

It was a physical need as well as an emotional one. He couldn’t risk losing her. And while he would have preferred to ask her to marry him, it wasn’t strictly necessary, nor was gaining an affirmative answer. The reality of it rested in the consummation.

Atticus left the restroom knowing he’d have to leave her long enough to acquire the necessary protection. He dared to take her hand as they walked toward the front door. It felt right in his, delicate yet strong, warm. A perfect fit.

They parted company a few minutes later. And though he had her phone numbers, her address along with directions on how to get there, panic nearly overwhelmed Atticus as he watched her drive away. A thousand scenarios played out in his mind where she was taken from him, lost to the ghostways before he could claim her as his bride and ensure that even in death, they would never be parted.

He stopped at the first grocery store he came to. It was a huge affair, crowded with people of all ages. A display of flowers caught his attention almost immediately and despite his hurry to get to Bryn he detoured to examine the bouquets.

The red roses drew his eye. *Too soon?* he wondered. *Too much?*

Or maybe carnations. They were safe.

An arrangement of stargazer lilies had him reaching only to hesitate once again. His shoulders slumped. What did he know of romance? Of courting? Oh, he was well acquainted with Romeo and Juliet-type tragedies, and the horrible, modern twist of love and obsession turned deadly with couples sheared from their bodies by murder-suicide combinations. But what did he know about making a woman smile with pleasure over a gift?

He started to turn away from the display of flowers, nearly defeated by the abundance of choice, but then his spine stiffened, his shoulders went back. Love made for a better man, one who was willing to step into the unknown, to risk his heart and his pride.

Atticus studied the assortment of flowers once again, this time not thinking about himself, but Bryn. What arrangement would suit her? Which arrangement would she like?

He spotted it immediately. A mixed bouquet of tulips. Yellows and reds, pinks and starburst orange. It was perfect.

A store employee appeared and liberated the flowers from their protective environment. “These are beautiful,” she said as she handed them to Atticus. “You’re going to make someone very happy.”

He smiled then laughed softly when he realized how often his lips had curved upward since meeting

Bryn. It felt almost natural now, as if he'd always worn a smile.

With great confidence Atticus left the flower display and strode to the aisle containing condoms, only to once again be assaulted with unimaginable choice. It made him long for the days of sheep intestines, though the thought of actually putting such a thing on his cock caused him to shudder.

Ribbed. Lubricated. Thin. Extra strength. Non-lubricated. Extra long. Ultra large. Studded. Colored. Flavored ! They all vied for his attention and he imagined a lesser man would have shriveled in his pants. But braced with his success in the flower department and the urgency with which his penis was transmitting its desire to get suited up and get on with the business of claiming a wife, Atticus didn't shrink under the visual onslaught of condoms.

"Flowers, nice touch," a voice said.

It belonged to his youngest brother, recently of Suriel the Trumpeter fame. But Atticus had learned his lesson. This time he said nothing.

A hand reached over, a finger tapped a condom package. "Grape. You wear that and she'll think you're a lollipop. Lucky bastard."

It was too much. Atticus muttered, "Go away."

His brother snickered, no doubt having been regaled with tales of Atticus' humiliation in the restroom. Atticus did his best to ignore it, something he was well-practiced at given how often the five made sport of him.

"Nice work with the hounds, wouldn't you say?" his brother asked. "And the horse enjoyed going out for a ride."

Atticus opened his mouth, prepared to issue a scathing lecture about the "borrowed" tarot card and the privacy required when a man was courting his future wife, but a pimple-faced teen sidled up next to him, his cheeks flaming as he studied the condoms. A quick glance down, unintentional no doubt, and the teen's chest seemed to cave in at the sight of the ridge pressing against the front of Atticus' jeans.

"Poor guy. You've just buried his self-esteem," Atticus' brother said. Then added, "Don't forget the chocolates to go with the flowers," before fading out.

Afraid to linger and risk another encounter with one of his brothers, Atticus decided to stick with basics. He plucked a package of extra large condoms from the display rack, hesitated over whether he needed more than a single pack, then decided against it. Why invite prolonged suffering? Wearing even one condom was one too many.

A shiver of desire went through him. Arousal escaped from the tip of his penis as he imagined what it would be like, sliding into Bryn's sheath with nothing separating them.

He found himself on the candy aisle without conscious thought, but detoured to the ice cream. Finally an easy decision!

Atticus grabbed a carton of Ben & Jerry's Cherry Garcia, named appropriately enough after Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead fame. Then he was on his way to Bryn.

Chapter Four

Bryn looked around her living quarters. It was basically one large room attached to the office space visible through the open door. Originally it'd been a suite of offices but as the business park had floundered, losing one tenant after another to modern architecture and more popular areas of town, Sid, the owner and landlord, had torn down walls to form apartment-office combinations. Bryn wasn't sure the conversions were completely legal, but she didn't fault him. The place was half vacant and some income was better than no income.

She studied the poster art on the walls above the crowded bookcases then moved on to the comfortable couch and chairs, their worn fabric hidden by gaily covered hand-made quilts she'd snagged at various thrift shops. She tried to see it through Atticus' eyes and hoped he'd find it the refuge she did.

Her heart rate picked up when her attention shifted to the bed. Her cheeks heated along with the rest of her body. The sheets were changed in preparation for the night. She'd known even before they left the pizza place that she was going to sleep with him.

There were probably a lot of reasons she shouldn't, why it'd be better to wait, but she didn't bother to dredge them up. A lifetime of seeing ghosts, most of them lingering in abject misery or seething rage, had made her determined to live with no regrets.

Bryn moved over to her CD player and sorted through the disks. It was country for the most part. She nibbled on her bottom lip and wondered what Atticus enjoyed listening to. Country music was filled with stories, a lot of them sad ones, but even those spoke about the importance of finding happiness in life. She settled on Jessi Alexander and put *Honeysuckle Sweet* into the player, pressed the play button as a knock sounded at the office door.

Atticus. Bryn rubbed damp palms against the clean shorts she'd snagged after a hasty shower. She resisted the urge to check herself in the mirror, to make sure the green of the shirt she'd put on really did enhance her eyes.

This is not a date, she tried to tell herself, but her racing heart knew she lied and the bouquet of flowers Atticus presented her with at the door proved it right. "Thank you," she managed, her heart hammering a furious *I told you so* in her chest.

She led him through the office and into her living area. He followed her to the kitchen separated from the rest of the room by a long counter, his heat and masculine scent swamping her as she retrieved an antique crystal vase she'd found at a yard sale and put the tulips in it.

"They're beautiful," she said, turning from the arrangement and into Atticus' arms. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to touch her mouth to his, to whisper *thank you* against full masculine lips before sliding her tongue against his.

Lust exploded between them. Fierce and hot, like a summer storm, like a sudden swirling of raw power and primitive forces.

Bryn's hands went to his chest and felt the wild beat of his heart through her palms. She moaned when his fingers tangled in her hair, holding her in place with a delicate balance of strength and gentleness.

His tongue plundered her mouth hungrily. His moans joined hers, making her nipples tighten to painful buds.

The hard ridge of his erection ground against her pelvis and she wrapped her leg around him so she could press her clit against his hardened cock.

Their lips parted, but only for an instant. The need to breathe came in a far second to the need for intimate contact.

She slid her hands upward, wrapped her arms around his neck and cried out when her nipples rubbed and pressed against the solid muscles of his chest. A whimper escaped as lust built to an inferno and she lost the will to do anything but cling to him.

Atticus shuddered as wave after wave of incredible sensation cascaded through him. He knew what the great poets said about love and lust, but even they had not captured it completely.

He burned. He ached. Conscious thought deserted him in Bryn's arms.

She tasted of springtime and happiness, of primal mystery and divine desire, of heated nights and playful afternoons.

It transcended anything he'd ever known, anything he'd ever believed true about finding his soul mate.

His hands left her hair to sweep down her back, to settle on her hips briefly before sliding up her

sides to touch the swell of her breasts.

The hard points of her nipples were driving him crazy, sending pulse after pulse of white-hot need to his cock as she pressed them against his chest.

“Bryn,” he whispered when they parted for air. He dared to rub his thumbs over the tight nubs, was tormented with the need to kiss down to them and suckle.

Her whimper emboldened him. His hands cupped her breasts, gently weighed them. He moaned when her pelvis rocked and her mound pressed against his erection.

“Let me see you,” he said, a shockingly primitive part of him wanting her to disrobe for him, to show him that her hunger matched his own.

Bryn’s lips parted slightly and he couldn’t fight the urge to take them again. From the first touch of his mouth to hers he’d given himself over to instinct. There’d been no time to worry, to wonder if his inexperience in such matters would surface. There’d been no awkwardness, no hesitation.

Their lips met, clung in a perfect joining. His tongue twined with hers. His breath mingled with hers as though they’d always been one being forced to live in separate bodies.

Lust and happiness blended, whipped through him like comet trails across his soul.

He forgot about his request, his desire for her to strip. Her body trembled against his. The soft, urgent whimpers told him she craved the feel of skin against skin as much as he did.

His fingers found the buttons of her shirt, the front clasp of her bra, made short work of opening them, parting them. He groaned, shivered as his palms glided over her full breasts and hardened nipples. Her moans filled him with satisfaction and confidence, caused his cock to throb and leak arousal.

“Bryn,” he said, lifting her onto the counter then immediately taking her nipple into his mouth. He kissed, laved, bit, suckled as his fingers found the nipple’s twin.

“That feels so good,” Bryn said, her back arching, her fingers spearing through his hair, holding him to her.

His mouth was incredible. It felt as though his lips were pulling wave after wave of heated need from her cunt up to her breasts. He made her feel things no other man had ever come close to making her feel.

Tenderness, surprise, desire—they flashed through her quicksilver fast with each interaction. He was gorgeous and yet there were glimpses of uncertainty, vulnerability. It was an irresistible combination, made more so by the hot, liquid hunger his touch evoked.

“You’re beautiful,” Atticus murmured, nuzzling, claiming the nipple that hadn’t yet known the exquisite feel of his mouth.

Her fingers tightened in his hair but she made no protest when his hands glided down her hips and around to the opening of her shorts. *I should have worn a skirt*, she thought, suddenly anxious for him to trail kisses downward, to bury his face between her thighs.

She was wet, swollen, flushed, her clit rigid against the thin fabric of her panties. A moan escaped when the top button of her shorts gave, when the zipper parted.

“Please,” she whispered, bracing her hands on the counter, lifting so he could tug the shorts down and off. He left her panties on, closed the distance between them again so the material of his pants touched her inner thighs and the hard line of his cock pressed against her clit.

His fingers brushed against her ankles in an erotic caress. The straps of her sandals slid down, then off.

“Atticus,” she said, pulling him from her breast, her cunt spasming when he held her nipple in his mouth, relinquishing it with a pop at the point where pleasure and pain merged perfectly.

She’d meant to guide his mouth to hers. But when he stepped back and dipped his head, kissed down her belly, his wet, hot tongue exploring her navel before his lips parted around her clit, Bryn was lost.

Her hands went behind her, gripped the back edge of the counter as her hips lifted, as she pressed her cloth-covered mound against his mouth. "Yes," she said, the word a ragged whisper, a desperate plea.

He tortured her through the thin material of her panties. His breath, his moans, the teasing touch of his mouth to her inner thighs as his tongue claimed every drop of escaped arousal had her crying out, clutching the counter as her hips bucked and her channels spasmed repeatedly.

The eroticism of his slow kisses, the sight of him between her thighs, eyes closed, lashes dark against his cheeks, his face taut with desire though he remained unhurried, sent molten hunger pounding through her veins, pooling in her cunt lips, her clit, her nipples.

"Please, Atticus, don't make me wait any longer," she said. "It's safe. I haven't been with anyone in a long time. Put your mouth on me."

Atticus wanted to linger. The taste of her rivaled the ambrosia of the gods who called Mount Olympus home. Her arousal intoxicated him, was more potent than any wine made to honor Bacchus.

Her skin was like heated silk. And her whispered pleas... They were a siren song he would never attempt to resist.

With a groan he stripped the panties from Bryn's body. He had the primitive urge to stuff them in his pocket as a token, a perfumed reminder of the first touch, the first taste of the woman who would soon be his wife.

The sight of Bryn's cunt mesmerized him. She was slick, flushed, open, her labia like the petals of a flower coated with sweet nectar.

Words tumbled through his thoughts, became tangled on their way to his tongue, making it impossible for him to speak, to tell her what she was to him. He pressed his mouth to her cunt lips, licked and sucked in a carnal kiss of greeting, in a promise they would always be together.

Raw pleasure coursed through his veins. He gripped his erection through the fabric of his pants, afraid he'd come as his tongue trailed through the silky moisture of her slit, pierced her as he wanted to do with his cock.

Her moans and whimpers, the jerk of her hips as he fucked her with his tongue fed an endless spiral of fierce joy and desire. Her wet core was beyond any fantasy.

He tasted, lapped, moved to her clit, his breathing becoming rough and fast, his balls tightening in warning. She jerked, panted as he licked her, sucked her, ran his tongue over the exposed tip of her swollen woman's knob until she came with a shuddering cry.

Satisfaction raged through Atticus afterward as he held Bryn, her face buried against his shoulder, her naked body pressed to his clothed one. His cock throbbed with the need to explore the same wet, welcoming folds his mouth and tongue now knew, but for the moment he was content to hold her, to savor a closeness he'd never experienced before.

"I'll make it a habit to bring you flowers daily," he said, palming her breast, caressing her nipple.

Bryn's heart turned over in her chest. She tried not to read a promise in his words though she thought she heard one.

She realized their conversation over pizza had been sidetracked and she didn't know what city he called home, didn't know how far away he lived, whether he was restless, ready to move or had hopes of expanding the family business. But she didn't want to spoil the moment, to worry about the future when the present was here now and could be enjoyed thoroughly.

Feeling bold, satisfied, incredibly feminine, she touched her lips to his and tasted herself on him, murmured, "I appreciate the...flowers."

"It was my pleasure," he said, making her smile even as his tongue slid into her mouth for a slow, heated kiss and his arms pulled her bare cunt against his denim-covered erection.

When they parted for breath, Atticus lifted her from the counter, his laugh joining hers as she

wrapped her arms and legs around him and let him carry her to the bed. He couldn't bring himself to let go of her as he placed her on the mattress and lowered himself on top of her.

"You're overdressed," she teased and he didn't resist when she pushed him over and onto his back, following so she straddled him.

He wanted to hurry her as she unbuttoned his shirt, pushed the cloth aside to explore his flesh. Lust jerked through him when she found his nipples, teased them first with her fingers and then with the liquid heat of her mouth.

"Bryn," he moaned. It was a plea, a protest. He didn't know how much longer he could last.

She smiled against his skin and it filled his chest with such pleasure, such satisfaction and happiness he wanted to whisper words of destined love and promises for the future. But he retained enough of his sanity to know it would be a mistake.

His cock thickened further. "No!" he said, gasping as her hands found him through the material of his pants.

She stilled. Her mouth left his chest and he wanted to cry out another protest.

"I'm not going to last," Atticus said.

"You don't have to last. Not after what happened in the kitchen."

"Bryn..." He groaned when her hand left the front of his jeans to glide upward and settle on his chest.

"I think you're the reason I'm naked. The least I can do is return the favor," she said, helping him out of his shirt before crawling backward to dispense with shoes and socks.

Atticus fisted the bedspread as her fingers returned to the top button of his jeans. His stomach quivered and he gasped when she leaned down to press a wet kiss to his abdomen. His breath caught in his throat when her tongue darted out to explore his navel. This time it was him whispering *please*, arching his hips off the bed, begging for the feel of skin against skin.

She took his boxers with the jeans, stripped them from his body and left him naked, proud and vulnerable at the same time.

He grabbed her hands when she would have touched him, measured his length and width, weighed him with her fingers. "If you touch me I'll come. I want to be inside you the first time."

"I'd like that too. Do you have—"

"In my back pocket. I hoped... It seemed..." He shut up as she retrieved the discarded pants and pulled a condom from the pocket.

His cock pulsed. In protest. In anticipation.

Atticus was beyond any ability to differentiate.

Arousal escaped and beaded on the tip of his penis. And though he hated the idea of having a barrier between them, he found it wildly erotic to watch as she tore the package open.

He grabbed the base of his cock with one hand while the knuckles of the other turned white in their death grip on the bed clothing. He willed himself to hang on, to not disgrace himself by coming when she touched him.

"Hurry," he urged, the word little more than a hoarse pant.

A spike of white-hot lust shot through him as her fingers brushed against the sides of his penis. Her face was as flushed as his, her lips parted in concentration and aroused need as she slowly worked the condom downward to cover his engorged cock.

He wondered if extra-large was large enough—he wasn't human, after all. Never had been. But then it was done and her hand was covering his, guiding him to her opening.

He'd thought to take her another way. But the sight of her above him, full breasts and taut features, her hot woman's flesh swallowing his cock, taking him deep inside her an inch at a time...

Atticus had no strength to muster a protest, no will to do so. His hips arched off the bed as he drove himself the rest of the way in. "Kiss me," he said, needing to share the breath of life with her in the moment she became his wife.

Bryn moaned against his lips. Hercunt clenched on his hard cock as their tongues found each other.

She didn't know what had come over her. But being with Atticus had somehow destroyed her inhibitions and the self-conscious worry that came with initial intimacy.

Everything felt so right with him. He just seemed...perfect. Made for her.

For long moments she lost herself in his kiss, was content to twine her tongue with his as the muscles of her sheath rippled and spasmed and clung to his engorged penis. He was huge, long and thick, a throbbing presence that filled more than her channel.

With a moan she lifted off him, let him escape until only the very tip of him was inside her. But she couldn't bear to lose contact completely.

His fingers took possession of her nipples, squeezed in silent punishment, in carnal command. She lowered herself on him, slowly at first, then faster as his hands moved to her hips and he took control, holding her, guiding her, his back arching as his thrusts took him deeper, harder until they were both panting, moaning, jerking in release.

La Petite Mort. The little death.

Atticus understood why the French had named the sweet moment of orgasm such a thing and he approved. If only all death could be so wonderfully sublime. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, then formed completely when Bryn brushed her mouth against his and said, "You're looking very satisfied with yourself."

"Umm," he murmured, tangling his fingers in her silky hair and relishing the feel of her breasts against his chest as she lay on top of him. "That's because I am."

He grinned when he felt his cock start to stiffen where it was still lodged inside her. His lips captured hers, sucking and teasing as one hand stroked down her spine. He knew he should be grateful things had gone so smoothly, but as the kiss deepened and heat built between them, he craved more, wanted there to be no barriers between them the next time they made love. He ached to slide his cock into her, to feel her slick, heated core against his unprotected penis.

"Bryn..." Words eluded him. The sudden sound of the doorbell broke and scattered the sentences that had formed in his thoughts as a tangled knot.

She tensed but didn't roll off him until the bell sounded again, more insistently this time. It was followed by a man's voice yelling, "Bryn, it's me. Mark."

Chapter Five

Jealously assaulted Atticus, a mugger's attack he hadn't expected. Primitive instinct shouted, *No!* and had him ready to jump out of bed and stride to the front door. Now that he'd claimed Bryn as a wife he could end his vacation with a thought. One touch and Bryn's suitor would be on his way—permanently. Or—

Bryn distracted him with a kiss, reminded him without knowing she'd done it that she still thought him human. "I'll be right back," she said, starting to pull away from him.

"Who is he?" Atticus asked, grabbing her hands.

Her wrinkled nose and deep sigh went a long way toward calming the unexpected churn of emotions assaulting him. "Someone who thought I'd be the perfect wife for him since I can see his dead mother. I'll

tell you about it after I've told him to leave."

Atticus released her hands—reluctantly.

"Coming," Bryn yelled, her sense of humor kicking in with the realization she probably would have been doing just that with Atticus if Mark hadn't interrupted.

Since her dresser was closer than the pile of discarded clothing on the kitchen floor, she pulled on a pair of shorts and thin sweatshirt before slipping into the office. She left the doorway to her living quarters open, partly because it made her a little nervous having Mark show up unexpectedly and partly because she didn't want Atticus to wonder if she'd told him the truth about Mark.

For the second time in one night she was greeted with a bouquet of flowers. Only this one brought her a mix of sadness and exasperation instead of happiness.

Bryn crossed her arms over her chest not only to minimize the impact of not wearing a bra but to make it clear she wasn't going to take the offered flowers. "Mark, what are you doing here?"

"I thought we could talk."

"We've already talked. I told you I won't go out with you again. I've asked you to stop sending flowers and calling."

"I brought you a box of chocolates, too," he said, completely ignoring what she said and lifting his arm away from his side to reveal the white and gold box.

She shook her head. "Please leave, Mark." For the first time she wondered if she should threaten to contact a lawyer. But what would she say? *Mark sends me flowers every Sunday even though I've asked him not to. He calls, or at least I think some of the hang-ups are him but I can't prove it. And when I do answer, if he's on the line, he's always polite.*

"Please stop this, Mark. There's someone out there for you but it's not me." She felt a twinge of guilt as she added, "Last week's temp met her fiancé on eHarmony.com. They have an amazing way of determining compatibility. I bet—"

"Is that where you met him?" Mark's face appeared strained as he looked past her.

Bryn turned slightly. She couldn't see Atticus through the doorway separating the work and living quarters, but the Aston Martin parked in front of the building was probably enough of a clue that she wasn't alone. Even during the workweek the spaces in front of her office usually held only her car and sometimes one belonging to the temp Marietta sent over.

It bothered Bryn to do it, but it suddenly bothered her more that he'd shown up *now* when for months he'd seemed content with no "in-person" contact. "You need to leave, Mark. You need to stop calling and sending flowers. I'm serious. I know you don't consider yourself a stalker but it's starting to feel that way to me. I'm not going to go out with you again—ever. And if you don't stop, then you're going to force me to ask for a restraining order."

It was hard, especially when his eyes grew moist and she saw the abject loneliness in them, but she closed the door quietly and firmly, hoping the gesture was harsh enough to get the message across though she felt guilty for doing it. She hated deliberately hurting someone even when she knew they brought it on themselves.

With a sigh she closed her eyes and rested her forehead on the cool wood. A long minute passed, and then a second. She tensed, expecting to hear him knock or ring the bell again.

Receding footsteps finally sounded, followed by the blissful start of an engine and then a car driving away. Bryn startled when Atticus' hands settled on her shoulders. She moaned softly when he kneaded the knotted muscles he found there.

"Sorry you had to be here for that," she said.

His lips pressed soft kisses to her neck. "I'm not. If he shows up again, I'll deal with him."

Her heart did a swan dive in her chest, leaping in joy only to sink into uncertainty when she reminded

herself to take this one day at a time. Atticus was probably talking about the immediate future, as in, if Mark turned up again while he was still on vacation and staying with her.

She turned and wrapped her arms around his waist, hoped her emotions didn't show on her face. Her parent's conditional love had left its mark on her, making her needy and yet cautious at the same time. Physical intimacy was always tricky for her. It opened emotional doors she usually kept guarded.

It was too easy to make more of it than there really was. And yet...something about Atticus made her willing to risk the pain that would come if what seemed so perfect turned out to be nothing more than a vacation fling for him.

He'd put his jeans on but his chest remained bare. Bryn pressed a kiss to the hard muscle above a tiny male nipple. "Where were we?" she asked, wanting to recapture their earlier closeness.

Atticus rubbed his cheek against her hair and tightened his arms around her in a possessive hug. He didn't like to see her in distress. He liked it even less that another man had come calling on her with flowers and chocolate.

"I brought ice cream," he found himself saying, remembering as he did so that the Cherry Garcia was on the counter where it'd been forgotten as soon as she kissed him. "It's probably soft."

His cock, on the other hand, was hard and got harder when she licked over his nipple and rubbed against his erection. He felt her smile against his chest and his heart melted.

"Some things are better soft," she said. "Ice cream is one of them."

Atticus didn't have the strength to release her completely. It should have felt foolish to hold hands with her as they traveled the short distance to the kitchen, but it didn't. Even when she pointed at a cabinet and said, "Spoons in the top drawer. There's an ice cream scoop in the one below," he found it difficult to let her go. Thoughts of tugging her back over to the bed were held at bay only by the desire to learn more about Mark and to find a way to avoid wearing a condom again.

Reluctantly Atticus freed Bryn so she could retrieve bowls and open the carton of ice cream. "Tell me about him," he said.

As if on cue the phone rang in both the office and the kitchen. Bryn said, "Let the machine pick it up."

A moment later there was a click, followed by Mark's voice. "I left the flowers and the candy for you. I know you and Mom didn't hit it off, but it'll get better. You can't really blame her, she thought... Well, it's all my fault, not telling her about you before I brought you home. If you'll give her another chance... We can make this work, Bryn."

There was a long silence, then finally a dial tone.

Atticus moved to Bryn's side. "You were about to say?"

She took the scoop from him and began filling the bowls. "I met Mark when I went out on a call. Later I figured out he'd set the whole thing up to check me out, but at the time he was introduced as 'a friend from the office interested in ghosts.' There wasn't a ghost, but the woman who'd asked me to come out insisted on fixing dinner for me since I don't charge if there's no ghost to deal with. Mark stayed."

Bryn pushed a bowl along the counter until it was in front of Atticus then took a spoon from his hand. "When it comes to people who don't spend most of their time writing software and troubleshooting computer programs, Mark's kind of shy and awkward. I found it...endearing, non-threatening. We went out." She sighed, stirring and mashing her ice cream until it was smooth and formless except for the tiny squares of chocolate. "I liked him. That's what makes this harder."

"What happened?" Atticus managed, finding it disconcerting to wrestle with the primitive, caveman-like emotions her admission stirred in him. He'd always considered himself a rational man, a just being, a person who brought order to chaos and dignity to the job. But when it came to Bryn—he was a mass of conflicting needs and desires.

“He took me home to meet his mother.”

“Who’s dead.”

“Very much so. But not gone. She thought I’d come to send her away and she *does not* want to go. Even worse, Mark doesn’t want her to go. She threw a fit. He acted like a complete mama’s boy.” Bryn shrugged. “Let’s just say it wasn’t pretty. And once you’ve seen someone in that light, there’s no going back. I liked him. He was sensitive and smart and easy to be with. I’m not saying we would have ended up together long-term. But...I liked him. Now I feel sorry for him and at the same time I’m mad at him for not being stronger...for wasting his life and not being who I thought he was when I was going out with him.”

Troubled eyes lifted to meet Atticus’. “Does that make sense at all?”

Atticus set his empty bowl down then took hers and placed it on the counter as well. “It makes perfect sense,” he said, pulling her into his arms and nuzzling her neck, inhaling her scent and kissing the soft skin he had access to.

Words joined, forming sentences only to break apart and realign as he tried to find the right way to express his feelings. Finally he said, “I don’t like seeing you suffer, but I can’t stop myself from being glad you’re with me and not him.”

His hand slid up her back, over to cup her breast through the soft fabric of her thin sweatshirt. His mouth sought hers, claimed it in a chocolate-cherry kiss.

“In case you’re wondering, I never slept with him,” she whispered when they parted, his lips a breath away from hers.

The warm press of her palms over his hardened nipples was exquisite torture. “I want you again,” Atticus murmured.

“I want you again too.”

“Bed?” He swung her up in his arms and smiled when she laughed. Now that they’d consummated their union, the only ghostway to open for her was the one leading to his home. He could imagine cozy evenings by the fire, the two of them leisurely making love on *his* side of the house.

The chaos to be found on the other side of the house damped his smile somewhat. He glanced around suspiciously, though in his current human state he was at a disadvantage and wouldn’t know he was in the presence of one of his brothers unless they wanted him to.

Plague take them! If he found out any of them were voyeurs on his wedding night he’d banish them to Hades. He’d assign them the unpleasant task of auditing those souls trapped on the banks of the river Styx and seeing which ones could be released.

Let them commune with Phlegyas the ferryman and Cerberus the three-headed dog instead of their Xboxes for a change! he thought, ire building until he resolutely pushed thoughts of his brothers from his mind.

Thoughts of Bryn’s suitor were not so easy to dismiss.

He placed Bryn on the bed but resisted the urge to immediately strip them both of clothing and cover her body with his. “Be...right...back,” he said between kisses.

It required a supreme effort of will to leave her. His cock protested with each step he took.

It couldn’t be helped. Curiosity, male instinct, primal need—any one or all of them carried him to the front door and had him opening it, assuring himself Mark was gone.

The flowers and box of chocolate were like a red flag to a bull. Muscles rippled. Nostrils flared.

“We can take care of him for you,” a male voice said. Knuckles popped and cracked. “You’re family and nobody messes with family.”

Atticus turned his head slightly to see the brother born after Sammael leaning against the wall, cloaked in darkness. It was shades of *The Godfather* or, given Azrael’s lack of appreciation for the classics, an

interpretation of *The Sopranos* .

“What are you doing here?” Atticus managed through clenched jaws.

“Keeping an eye on things. So what’d you think of the whole Suriel the Trumpeter routine? Cool, huh? We collaborated on it.”

Atticus opened his mouth with the intention of telling his brother to go away but stopped himself in time. Obviously this was a situation requiring the application of some psychology. For all their boisterous assertions that they could attend to the business of Death better than he could, apparently, his brothers needed reassurance and perhaps a bit of guidance.

“It worked,” Atticus said. “Practical, efficient... lucky, messy.”

He paused, intending to ease into a stern warning about the sanctity of his private quarters and the value of his tarot cards—only before he could do it Bryn was at his side asking, “Who are you talking to?”

Atticus sighed as Azrael gave an appreciative whistle before fading away. “Myself.”

He wanted to protest when she bent down and picked up the offering of flowers and candies. In actuality he wanted to rip the offending items out of her hands and dispose of them in the nearest trashcan.

“Are you okay?” Bryn asked, retreating into the office.

“Yes.”

He felt better when she set the box of candy and vase of flowers on her desk then took his hand and led him back into her living quarters.

Atticus swooped her up into his arms. “I wanted to make sure he was gone. I don’t like him hanging around you.”

Bryn’s smile traveled all the way down to his toes.

“Mark’s lonely and maybe he’s a little fixated since there aren’t too many women out there who can actually *see* his mother, but I don’t think he means me any harm.” Bryn’s mouth sought his and Atticus’ cock pulsed in reaction. “Thanks for caring enough to worry about me.”

This time Atticus set Bryn on her feet instead of on the bed. His hands found the hem of her sweatshirt and burrowed underneath the soft material until they reached her breasts.

Hardened nipples greeted him. A whimper passed from her mouth to his, traveled down tongues rubbing and twining in carnal bliss.

Enthralled. Drugged. Ensnared. When he was holding Bryn, touching her, kissing her, he understood the heady downfall that led to the ruination of many a male, mortal and immortal alike.

A groan escaped when she opened his jeans and took his cock in hand. He shivered as she pushed his pants lower so one hand could fondle his heavy sac while the other explored the rigid length of his erection.

“Bryn,” he said, a plea, a command.

Her low moan of sexual excitement had him deepening the kiss, taking her nipples between his fingers.

His heart beat in his penis, throbbed against Bryn’s palm. Arousal leaked to bead on his cock head. Hips jerked when her thumb found the wet evidence of his desire and turned it into an erotic wash.

“Bryn...” Plea and command had gone to hopeless need, a willingness to beg.

He shivered, nearly mindless with the desire to feel her slick wet heat, to plunge into her depths with nothing separating them. He’d die if she made him wear a condom again.

A groan of protest escaped when she abandoned his cock and balls. Lust built when her hands went no further than his pants, this time pushing them lower so gravity did its work and pulled them to his feet.

Atticus kicked them to the side, heart thundering as her mouth trailed kisses down his neck, over his nipples, along the center line of his chest to his abdomen, halted inches above where his penis strained to reach her lips.

Her hands recaptured his penis and sac. Bryn's earlier words tumbled through his mind. "Don't make me wait any longer," he said. "It's safe. I haven't been with anyone except you. Put your mouth on me, Bryn. Please."

Shock stilled Bryn. Uncertainty.

"Never?" she asked, loving the smooth velvet-over-steel feel of him, the wild throb of his heartbeat and the hungry, desperate expression on his face. Was he saying what she thought he was? That he was a virgin?

"Never," he said, the heat coloring his cheeks in sync with the honesty she read in his eyes.

She ran her thumb over his cock head, fondled the heavy sac. He was so gorgeous, so wonderful to be with, such a natural when it came to lovemaking that she found it almost impossible to believe he'd never been with another woman, and yet she did.

Why would he lie? It would have been enough if he'd just told her he was safe, the same as she'd told him.

That thought of being his first—for everything—was intoxicating, devastating to any barrier she hoped to erect around her heart. Questions bombarded her, but they had to wait for later, for after.

Bryn touched her lips to his satin smooth shaft, reveled in the way he bucked, panted, speared his fingers through her hair and held her to him as if he was afraid of abandonment. He'd washed while she was talking to Mark on the doorstep and she found the smell of her soap on Atticus deeply satisfying.

It was primitive. Something she'd never expect in herself, but then again, she hardly recognized herself at all when she was with him.

She kissed along the length of his shaft, teased him with the feel of her tongue, her teeth. Gave him sucking bites that turned the sound of her name into a litany no man had ever spoken so passionately.

Each of his pleas, each of his gasps fed her confidence, filled her with a feminine power that was exhilarating, pushed her to give more, to take more. She nuzzled his testicles, took what she could into her mouth, fed on Atticus' pleasure.

He was hers. As much as she tried to shy away from the thought, to deny it, to live only in the moment, it returned again and again, tore down her reservations and insecurities, turned her into a woman who was unafraid to give and take everything.

One of his hands joined hers and she found it wildly erotic to see his fingers locked around his cock. His other hand tugged at her hair, urged her away from the velvet pouch and upward, over his knuckles, along his shaft, until finally her lips were on the soft, mushroom-shaped head of his penis.

"Put me in your mouth, Bryn, please." His voice was tortured, strained, his belly and chest covered with a thin sheen of sweat.

She looked up at his face and it was like looking at the face of an ancient Greek god. He was beautiful, elegantly masculine, peerless in his appeal.

Bryn took him into her mouth, sucked him hard, deep, let him fuck through her tight lips. His moans and gasps increased her hunger, her need to give him pleasure.

She would willingly have swallowed him down, let him come and reveled in his loss of control. But he surprised her at the last minute by pulling from her mouth. He thrilled her with his whispered pleading to let him enter her channel without any barrier between them.

"Yes," she said, only barely managing to shed her clothing before she was on her back with Atticus above her.

His expression was tender, fierce, desperate, and yet rather than plunge into her in a single stoke, he

lodged the tip of his penis at her entrance and stilled, a look of tortured ecstasy on his face.

“Bryn.” It was almost a prayer as slowly he pushed into her, stretched her, filled her.

She shuddered under him, felt so intimately connected to him that she wanted to close her eyes to escape the vulnerability of it, but she couldn’t. Instead she speared her fingers in his hair and guided his mouth to hers, captured his lips as his cock forged deeper, not stopping until every inch of him was inside her.

Bryn wrapped her legs around his waist. “I can’t believe you’ve never done this before me,” she whispered, knowing that whatever happened between them in the future, she’d never forget the incredible joy of being his first lover.

His smile nearly took her breath away.

“I’ve waited forever for the right woman. As you might imagine, my line of work attracts a very ghoulish type of female.”

Bryn laughed despite the fact the most gorgeous man she’d ever met was lying on top of her with his cock buried to the hilt in her channel. “If you ever call me ghoulish it might just be the last thing you ever do. And you already know the chances of hanging around as a ghost to haunt me are next to zero.”

Atticus grinned, amazed he could manage such a wide range of emotions while experiencing unparalleled physical bliss. It was sweet torture to remain still, and yet he knew as soon as he moved he would become mindless with the need to keep moving.

He brushed his mouth against Bryn’s, shivered when her hands left his hair and trailed over his neck and back. He already craved her touch, thrived on the soft sounds of her gasps and moans.

“The only name I’ll ever call you *ismine*,” he said, deepening the kiss, his hips thrusting, breaking the barrier of his self-restraint.

Raw pleasure and liquid heat swamped him. Heart, soul, mind—all migrated to his cock as he plunged in and out of Bryn’s tight channel.

His breath came rough and fast. His moans matched the rhythm of her gasps as she clung to him, welcomed him, fed his hunger for more with her need and lust.

Possessiveness gripped him as did tenderness. She was his! Just as completely as he was hers.

Bryn’s fingers curled, her nails scratched down his back, freeing something primitive inside him. He lay more heavily on her, wanted to sink through her skin and become a part of her.

His world was reduced to her lips, her tongue, her wet, silky core. Insane pleasure gripped him when she cried out in release and her sheath clamped down on his cock, hurtling him over the edge as wave after wave of hot semen rushed through his shaft to fill her with his seed.

Chapter Six

The knocking was loud, enthusiastic, and showed no signs of going away. It *wasnot* the way Bryn wanted to start Saturday morning, but when she heard last week’s temporary assistant yell “It’s Sheri!” Bryn knew she’d have to leave the heavenly warmth of Atticus’ arms.

“I’ll be back,” she said, her heart doing a little dance when Atticus’ arms tightened on her with a mumbled protest before letting her go.

Bryn slid from the bed, dressed quickly, and closed the door between her living quarters and the office before letting Sheri in.

“I was pretty sure you were here,” Sheri said by way of greeting. Her eyebrows lifted. “Cool car. Who is he?” Her gaze shifted to the flowers and box of chocolate. “Oh, wow. No wonder lover boy just

squealed away like the hounds of hell were after him. Did he know you had company? Is that why he threw in the chocolates this time?" She shook her head. "Guy needs to get a clue. I mean the flowers look like what my granny used to put on the graves she visited at Easter time. No originality. It's the same arrangement he gave you last Sunday, right? The one you took to the old folk's home on Monday."

Bryn held up her hand to halt Sheri's conversation. She'd tackle the subject of why Sheri was knocking on her door on Saturday morning in a second, but first, "Are you sure you saw Mark here?"

"Mark? Oh, yeah. Lover boy. I guess I knew that was his name."

Bryn closed her eyes briefly. She was starting to feel like she had a hangover though the only thing she'd gotten drunk on in recent memory was the best sex she'd ever experienced, with Atticus, and he certainly hadn't left her with a headache.

"Are you sure you saw Mark?" Bryn repeated, not really wanting to revisit the last exchange she'd had with him.

Sheri stopped chewing on her bubble gum long enough to blow a huge bubble, then pop it. "Not a hundred percent positive," she finally said. "But it's not like this is Grand Central Station. I mean, this place is Deadsville." She laughed at her own joke then bit her bottom lip. "Sorry. You know what I meant. This business park isn't exactly a hotbed of activity. The few businesses still here don't get much action even during the week and the places with live-ins are on the other side and at the far end. So a car leaving in a hurry from a few doors over..." Her gaze strayed to the flowers and chocolates. "He here last night?"

"He stopped by," Bryn admitted just as Atticus opened the door into the office.

He had trousers on and nothing else. For a long moment she couldn't tear her eyes away from him. All she wanted to do was strip and press her body to his. The idea of opening his pants and sliding them over his hips, then kneeling in front of him and exploring his cock with her mouth again held Bryn in its grip.

He was rock hard, his erection a very notable presence against the fabric of his trousers. Heat flashed between them and Bryn's scunt spasmed painfully. Morning-soft nipples tightened to hard points.

Only the sound of Sheri popping a bubble reminded Bryn she and Atticus weren't alone. She made the introductions and, *not* wanting to linger on the subject of Mark Bildner, she looked at Sheri and said, "Did you forget something? Is that why you're here?"

Sheri's hands settled on the huge bag she carried, clutching it to her hip as a hint of nervousness surfaced. "Look, I know you don't owe me anything. I mean, I've only worked a week for you so it's not like we've got the team thing going. But Marietta said I could come back next week if you didn't call and say you and her are even. See, that's the thing. She's really grateful you sent her ex packing. And she thinks if she keeps sending us, eventually one of us is going to click and you won't tell her to stop. So if you don't call, it'll be a done deal." Sheri's fingers tightened on her bag. "I could really use the work. Not to put pressure on you or anything, and I'm not talking about forever." Her gaze strayed to Atticus. "Right now I'm not exactly rolling in the money. The secretary-receptionist gig is my weekday, daytime thing, but only until something happens with the band." She swallowed her gum. "That's why I'm here, for your help."

"What kind of help?" Bryn asked, moved by the vulnerability she saw in Sheri's face.

"With a ghost." Sheri's hands left her purse to wave in the air. "I need you to do your thing, work your magic like Marietta talks about. See, I'm managing this band. My boyfriend's the drummer. And things have been hot, I mean, with the band, not just my boyfriend. Only now, just when we're starting to get noticed, our lead singer and way-talented songwriter, Stoner...um Eric, well, he's losing his edge. He's..."

Sheri shrugged. "He's says he can't sleep because the ghost won't stop singing stuff that went out in the seventies. He can't fu—have sex with his groupies because the ghost, um, hangs out in the same room and masturbates while he's doing it. He can't get totally high because he's afraid of going on a bad

trip, and he can't compose new songs because the ghost won't shut up. I mean, this is really, really bad. My boyfriend would kill me for saying it, but Stoner's kind of the *major* talent in the band. Will you help? Maybe take an IOU against when we make it big time?"

"Even if there's a ghost, I may not be able to do anything about it today."

"That's cool. I understand, totally." Sheri bit down on her bottom lip. "Look, it's possible... Well, just knowing there is a ghost would be a big relief to all of us. Right? I mean, the band can work around that, but if Stone—Eric has lost it totally, that's a major problem."

They left a few minutes later, Bryn and Atticus following Sheri's scooter in the Aston Martin. "For Sheri's sake, I hope there's a ghost," Atticus said. "How often do you go out only to find it's a loose shutter or an overactive imagination?"

"Not often. By the time someone's willing to risk being cheated out of their money or being embarrassed, they're desperate, which means there's usually a ghost haunting them or their home."

Atticus nodded and took her hand. He placed it on his thigh and covered it with his own. It felt good to have her at his side, so comfortable that he was content to drive in silence, to breathe flower-scented air and take in the brief tableaux of human life on either side of them.

Mothers herded their children to cars. Men mowed lawns. Rollerbladers traveled down the sidewalks. Little girls jumped rope and played with dolls on porch steps. Boys kicked soccer balls and threw baseballs.

It was all so fragile, their lives, here and gone, the individual lost to time, to the sheer crush of a swelling humanity where only a few of them rose to be revered or remembered after they died. He glanced at Bryn, wondered for the first time who would be left behind to grieve when he took her, what would be left undone, unresolved, what regrets would linger for eternity, her role as his wife preventing her from stepping onto the ghostways where a different destiny might give her a chance to make amends, to finish the things important to her soul's completion.

He laced his fingers with hers. She said, "I'm glad you're here with me."

"Me, too."

They followed Sheri's scooter into a neighborhood much like the one they'd met in. It was a mix of well-tended lawns with well-cared-for homes and sun-scorched yards in front of patched, faded adobe houses.

Soccer games played in the street halted just long enough for them to pass then resumed with a mix of English and Spanish shouts. Dogs barked, some on chains, some running along fences, others from behind window screens.

Sheri signaled a turn and guided the scooter to a stop next to an old, much-dented Kharmann Ghia up on blocks in the driveway. Atticus parked behind the disabled car and got out of the Aston Martin, quickly surveying the scene though he knew better than to breathe a sigh of relief at not seeing any of his brothers.

There was strong ghost presence inside the house. He could feel it. Curiosity made him turn to Bryn and ask, "Anything?"

Bryn rubbed suddenly damp palms on her jeans. "Oh yeah," she said, wondering just what was waiting inside the house. Usually she felt a phantom breeze, a small telltale marker of a ghost presence. At the moment it felt like she was standing on the beach with a storm blowing in, winds howling.

"So there's definitely a ghost?" Sheri asked.

"Yes," Bryn said. "Does your friend know anything about who lived in this house? Who might have died here?"

"It's a rental. Stoner said he'd make some calls, in case you agreed to come over." Her voice didn't sound optimistic.

Bryn glanced at Atticus and for a moment she was lost in the ghostway gray of his eyes. *Having him*

with me is what makes the difference. It was the same thought she'd had earlier, the one she'd voiced over pizza. Yet now she knew it with a certainty she couldn't explain. "Ready?"

"Where you go, I go."

He took her hand as they stepped onto the cracked walkway leading to the front stoop. Sheri fell in behind them, popping the gum in her mouth more rapidly the closer they got to the door.

"Do you hear that?" Bryn asked as howling winds gave way to a screaming, otherworldly guitar.

"Yes, unfortunately," Atticus said.

The door opened and a bare-chested man staggered out, baggy shorts a blinding swirl of color against a surfer tan, his hands covering his ears. Through the doorway Bryn saw a ghostly rocker lost in the ecstasy of sound, his knees on the ground, his back arched so his head was inches above the floor, the guitar across his chest parallel to it.

His eyes opened and widened, as if he was surprised by his increased audience, as if he knew why they were here. The music grew more frantic, more urgent. The distinctive scent of a smoked joint settled like a cloud around Bryn as Stoner slammed the door behind him, the sound a drumbeat in the last chord of music before silence reigned.

"Dude! You came. You saw. You heard," Stoner said, his focus on Atticus.

Sheri stepped forward so she was next to Bryn. She waved her hand in front of Stoner's face. "Reality check here. Who did I say I worked for this week? Who did I say I was going to ask for help?"

Stoner blinked. Once. Twice. "Oh, right. Yeah. Got it. A cool chick." His eyes found Bryn's. "Babe! Thanks for coming around. I'm short on cash but I can show you a good time." His gaze moved down, settled on her breasts for an appreciative moment before moving on, his double blink an indication he'd registered that her hand in Atticus' meant they were a couple.

With an exasperated sigh Sheri once again waved her fingers in front of Stoner's face. "Did you make those calls? Did you find out anything?"

"Oh yeah. Yeah." Stoner used his thumb to point toward the closed door. "Dude just found out his band was going on tour, opening act. Had some friends over and partied to celebrate only he overdosed in the living room and everybody was too wasted to notice for a couple of days."

"Does that help?" Sheri asked Bryn. "Do you know how to get rid of him?"

Bryn nodded. "The ghost needs to be convinced that a better, bigger gig is waiting at the end of a ghostway."

"Oh man," Sheri breathed. "This is so mind-blowing."

"We might as well go inside," Bryn said, hoping the music wouldn't start up again.

It was a useless thought. As soon as the door swung open they were held in place by noise so loud it shook the house, loosened small chunks of drywall from the ceiling and showered them down between the doorway and where the singer screamed into a microphone.

Bryn pulled her hand away from Atticus' so she could cover her ears. Sheri and Stoner did the same.

With each chord of music the ghost appeared to grow more solid. When the last note sounded he grabbed the guitar's neck and proceeded to use the instrument as a club, smashing it against a low stage and speakers that hadn't been there moments before, metal strings squealing as wood shattered.

"Dude," Stoner said. "It's shades of The Who. But nobody trashes the stage anymore."

In a blink of an eye the damage was undone and the guitarist was reaching for the same instrument he'd just destroyed, slipping the strap over his shoulder. As his fingers settled on the frets, Bryn opened her mouth, but before she could try to reason with him the heavy engine noise of a bus overridden by Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven* blared from behind her.

"No way," Stoner said.

“Yeah, way,” Sheri said, both of them turning a split second before Bryn.

Amazement left Bryn gaping as she watched the ghost bus pass through the Aston Martin and come to a stop in the middle of the front yard. Its windows were tinted black to match the color of the body.

“The Coachman,” Atticus muttered and Bryn’s attention moved to the lettering on the side of the bus—white, finger bone segments spelled out *Charon*.

A door opened on the bus. Stairs slid out and were immediately covered by a blood-red carpet. Atticus groaned as the next-to-the-youngest of his brothers stepped out wearing a cowboy hat and dressed in a black rhinestone-studded suit.

Sheri said, “He looks totally country, Bryn. Is that Johnny Cash?”

“Bummer, man,” Stoner said. “I was expecting Zeppelin.”

An icy presence in the doorway had them stepping back and off the stoop, parting as the ghost inside was drawn to the spectacle outside. One look at what was waiting for him and he stepped out into the sunlight, strummed his fingers over the guitar strings and yelled, “Are you ready to rock ‘n roll? Are you ready to party?”

Without a backward glance he crossed the distance and scrambled into the darkened tour bus as *Stairway to Heaven* became *The Rain Song*. The man in black took his hat off in a sweeping gesture so much like Suriel the Trumpeter’s parting move that Bryn wasn’t surprised at all when a tarot card fluttered to the ground.

She stepped forward and retrieved it, once again finding herself in possession of the Death card.

“Parting is such sweet sorrow but we’ll meet again,” a voice similar to Atticus’ said. But when she glanced up, the coachman’s back was to her, the red carpet and stairs dissolving as the door closed and the bus drove away, disappearing within seconds.

“Awesome, dude. I mean, dudette. Totally awesome,” Stoner said. “You guys want to come in for some fresh tunes and abrewski?”

“I think we’ll pass,” Bryn said. “We’ve got to grab some breakfast.” She risked a glance and a raised eyebrow at Atticus.

“Bryn and I need to be on our way,” he said.

“That’s cool. No problem.” Stoner stepped back inside the house and, after a quick goodbye to Sheri, Bryn and Atticus were driving away.

“This one is different,” Bryn said, studying the Death tarot card. “It looks newer. No that’s not right. It’s old, but maybe not as old as the last one. The design seems more modern and the colors are almost psychedelic.” She snickered. “I can almost imagine Woodstock in the sixties and a woman wearing no bra or panties doing a reading between bong hits and bouts of free love.”

Atticus laughed. Not that he didn’t intend a stern lecture regarding trespass and the unauthorized use of his possessions when he saw one of his brothers next, but it was hard to be mad when Bryn seemed to take such delight in the calling cards they were using.

Her eyebrows drew together in puzzlement. “I just wish I knew what was going on, especially with the cards. Yesterday I said I thought your being there is what made the difference, now I’m sure of it.”

“Not just me. It’s the two of us together. Nothing like this has happened to you before in dealing with ghosts, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I can say the same and I’ve certainly seen my share of the dead.”

Bryn sighed and looked down at the card. “Do you think this is a message?”

“I suspect it’s a little something to amuse Death.”

Surprise lifted Bryn’s face and Atticus wanted to kick himself.

“You make it sound like Death is an actual entity.”

“A hazard of the trade.” He took her hand and brought it to his lips. “I never underestimate the power of belief.”

Bryn blinked, her thoughts rearranging themselves, her reality shifting. She didn’t know for sure where the ghostways led, but she’d always suspected a person’s belief system played a part in what happened to them after they died.

Was it such a stretch that people might also create a personal vision of Death? She’d felt certain Atticus’ presence was responsible for the strange ghost encounters, so wasn’t it equally possible his belief was strong enough to give form to some supernatural power that might have been there all along, opening the ghostways but invisible to her?

Still, Bryn shivered when she thought about the manifestation’s words as he turned to leave and how closely his voice resembled Atticus’. *Parting is such sweet sorrow but we’ll meet again.* Death might be inevitable but she really didn’t want to think about dying, especially now, when she felt more alive than ever before.

Bryn slipped the Death card into her purse. “You called him The Coachman.”

“Charon the Coachman,” Atticus clarified.

Bryn nodded, remembering the name on the side of the tour bus.

Atticus said, “Charon originated with the Greeks. He was seen as a stern old man who piloted souls across the Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, on a ferry. In later years he drove a sleek black coach pulled by black horses and came into the human world to retrieve souls. As you can see, he’s upgraded. One can only wonder if the manifestation as Suriel the Trumpeter made him leery of pulling the horses from their pasture in this modern era.”

Bryn snorted, then gave in and laughed, enjoying the expression on his face, as well as his wit. She loved his humor. In fact she loved everything about Atticus so far.

When she could finally contain her amusement, she asked, “How in the world do you know about Charon the Coachman and Suriel the Trumpeter?”

“You might say it’s been handy in my line of work to know all the metaphors for Death.”

She turned in her seat in order to study his face. “You have a hard job. I don’t think I could do it.”

He shrugged. “I was born into the work. It’s all I’ve ever known.”

Bryn rested her hand on his thigh, just inches away from where his erection strained the front of his trousers. “You want to know what I think?” she asked, unable to hide her smile when he took her hand and moved it to his cock.

“Yes.” It was a groan forced into the shape of a word.

“I think you’ve spent far too much time around death. What you need is a day outside, surrounded by nature and spent underneath a blue sky.” She glanced at the car clock. “Technically we slept through breakfast. Let’s skip it and have a picnic lunch. There’s a place just outside of town I’d like to share with you. It’s an old estate with a hiking trail that leads to this wonderful spot where you see the ocean. We can eat, and...”

She rubbed her thumb along the ridge of his erection. Thrilled at the way his hips jerked and a moaned yes escaped.

Chapter Seven

The place Bryn described during their quick stop to gather lunch and a blanket was everything she’d said it would be and then some. Atticus thought as an ocean breeze brought the call of seabirds and the

sound of the surf to the bluff where they lay, stomachs full, sun warm on their skins. Contrary to Bryn's assumption, he spent quite a bit of time surrounded by nature and underneath the blue sky, often with a good book in hand.

It thrilled him to learn that a love of the great outdoors was yet another thing they shared in common, and as he lay on his side, looking down at her, it was almost possible to forget that his brothers might be lurking unseen like voyeurs at a peep show. *Almost* being the word that momentarily kept his hand on her side rather than peeling her clothing off so he could make love to her.

He was hard, his erection ever present, his penis thoroughly aroused and demanding relief. It appeared to be his natural state when he was with Bryn or thinking about her.

Atticus glanced up and around, his expression apparently haunted since Bryn laughed and said, "We're alone. As far as I know I'm the only local who has a key to the gate except for the lawyer. He'll call me when the lawsuits over who inherits are decided and the place is sold. Until then I'm free to come here. The house has always been a big draw for local kids. Even without Caroline's ghost, the place practically screams *haunted* but I've never seen any kids hanging around during the day. They save their dares for the night and these days they scare themselves since Caroline isn't here."

"You liked her," Atticus said, thinking about the silent film star Bryn had told him about and the antique framed photograph of a strikingly beautiful woman Bryn kept on one of her bookcases.

"Yes. I think the estate lawyer had mixed feelings about hiring me to get her to leave. He'd grown up listening to stories about her from his grandfather and father. She was terrified of being forgotten, lost to a history no one cared about anymore. When I showed her the websites on the Internet dedicated to silent films and their stars, she wept."

Atticus nodded. "It's hard for some people to let go of their fame or to accept just how fleeting it truly is."

"I think it was also hard for her to leave this estate," Bryn said. "If I won the lottery, a miracle since I don't play very often, I'd buy this place. I love it here. The gardens are overgrown and wild but somehow it seems perfect. The new owners will bulldoze over it in favor of landscaping. For sure they'll raze the old house. That's the California way for anyone with enough money to purchase prime real estate like this piece."

Atticus wanted to tell her he'd gift her with the estate as a wedding present. It was easy to imagine her joy and surprise, her pleasure. But this wasn't his world to linger in.

A hint of anxiety touched him. He had only six days left until his vacation was over and his mortal body surrendered. The thought of her hating him, turning away from him when he took her home with him was unbearable and yet the thought of leaving her behind, of waiting for her to die in order for them to be reunited was equally unthinkable.

"Do you have family?" he asked, wondering again who would grieve for her.

Bryn hesitated before saying, "No."

He wanted to probe, to find out if there were things left unsaid, a reconciliation she'd regret if it was left undone, but the sentences didn't form easily. Emotion had never played a role in his work. He was not the judge of good or evil, right or wrong. Neither was he priest or confidant. He was completely impartial, his role defined as gatherer, herder, door opener, and occasional hunter.

"How old were you when you first realized you could see ghosts?" he asked.

"I was in third grade when I really understood. Always before I'd felt something, and sometimes there'd be a quick movement at the corner of my eye or a place in the room where the light seemed strange, but in third grade my teacher was killed in a car wreck. She came to her funeral and wept. Then as we were filing out of the church I looked back and saw a ghostway open. She stepped into it and disappeared. I thought maybe she was going to the cemetery." Bryn laughed softly. "Then when I didn't see her there, I thought she must have gone to heaven, shades of *Star Trek* with a voice-over saying, '

Beam me up, Scotty'."

"Did you tell anyone what you saw?"

She tensed in his arms and he was afraid she wouldn't answer. Finally she said, "My parents."

"It didn't go over well?"

"No. It was blasphemy to them. They don't believe there's an afterlife until Judgment Day arrives." Bryn reached up and ran her forefinger down his nose before tracing his lips. "Your turn. Tell me about your brothers."

The question jolted him, had him glancing around before he could stop himself. Her laughter sent heat to his cheeks and pulled his lips into a wry smile. Atticus looked down and met her eyes. "They're a bit of a trial. I keep expecting them to appear out of nowhere."

"You're close? You must be, to live and work together."

"They think me dull, a stick-in-the-mud," he found himself blurting out.

Bryn's fingers made short work of the buttons on his shirt. His cock pulsed and his hips jerked when her fingertips brushed over his hardened nipple.

"Dull? A stick-in-the-mud? I don't think so," she teased, her smile filling his heart with such joy, such contentment that he knew he'd move heaven and earth to ensure she'd always look at him with affection.

"Bryn." It was a pledge masquerading as a plea. His hand covered hers. An erotic shiver slid through his belly and penis, pulled his testicles tight to his body. Desire divided into two equally powerful needs and held him motionless, savoring the exquisite electric current each stroke over his nipple produced, even as his cock demanded its share of her attention.

Atticus leaned down and captured her mouth with his. Her name was a silent litany, the sound of his heartbeat, the throb in his penis.

When the kiss ended he sat and shrugged out of his shirt, panted as Bryn did the same, making a provocative show of slowly undoing her blouse and slipping out of it.

Hunger drove him to lean over and nuzzle her breasts before she could remove her bra, to suckle her nipples through the thin, ultra-feminine garment until she was writhing, pleading with him to let her take it off.

He lifted his face. Recaptured the beaded nipple as soon as it was bared.

More. All. The need to taste her, to be inside her, finally gave him the strength to leave her breast.

He shed the rest of his clothing. Was glad her shorts and panties disappeared as quickly.

Lips. Breasts. He paid homage again with his mouth and tongue. But when he would have positioned her on her back so he could trail kisses down to her soft, swollen folds, she said, "I have something I want to try. Something that'll be even better for both of us."

Atticus let her push him to the blanket. Near mindless pleasure engulfed him as soon as he knew what she intended.

Lips. Nipples. Abdomens. Similar but different. Masculine versus feminine as she knelt above him and kissed downward.

He bucked when her mouth reached his cock. He clutched at her hips and held her in place so he could run his tongue through her wet slit and over the exposed head of her clitoris.

Sensation bombarded him. Orgasm threatened with each touch of her tongue, each pull of her lips on his penis.

He lapped, thrust, sucked at her wet woman's flesh until she shuddered in release first, her ecstasy staving off his own. Primitive male instinct took hold of him in the wildness of the setting. He forced himself away from Bryn's feminine cleft and positioned her on her hands and knees.

She parted her thighs instantly, lowered onto her elbows, sending a bolt of lust through Atticus. He

palmed the satin globes of her buttocks, was completely mesmerized by her cunt, its lips parted, inviting, begging for him to mount her and thrust his cock inside her.

He yielded with a groan, filled her slick, welcoming channel in a single hard thrust. The pleasure forced his eyes closed. "I'll never get enough of this," he said, unable to stay still for more than a second.

Her moans matched his. Her sheath clung, fisted, tried to hold him even as it made him fight to reclaim every inch he abandoned.

What breath he had came in ragged, rough pants as he fought toward ecstasy just as desperately as he tried to delay it. But when she orgasmed again, crying his name, he came in a hot rush of seed that left him shaking and weak, almost afraid he'd pass out as he let his weight carry them both to the blanket.

Bryn smiled in utter contentment. She liked having Atticus curled around her back, his hand cupping her breast, his cock still lodged inside her.

"I think your brothers would be hard-pressed to call you dull right now." She wiggled a tiny bit to emphasize where his penis was. "And as for being a stick in the mud..."

Atticus's groan widened her smile. His mouth on her neck made her sigh appreciatively.

"Are you close to them?" she asked, remembering her earlier question and hoping he had something she'd always wished for, a brother or sister to care about and who cared about her in return.

"I'd already taken the reins of the family business from my father's hands when my mother arrived at the notion I might be lonely and set about to provide me with siblings. To be honest, it probably wouldn't have occurred to her at all if she wasn't visiting the temple of Aphrodite at the time. In fact, I suspect the birth of my brothers had more to do with Aphrodite's reputation for inciting lust than anything else. But it wasn't my place to protest, and who would have guessed Mother wasn't going to stop with just Sammael? Beyond that, my father seemed quite happy with the situation, for reasons I understand completely now."

Bryn laughed. The idea of being driven to lust in the temple of an ancient Greek goddess was a bit mind boggling, but given Atticus' intelligence and familiarity with the metaphors of Death, it wasn't completely shocking. "I gather your parents are intrigued and fascinated by history."

He chuckled. "Ancient history is as real and relevant to them as modern history."

"And your brothers?"

He snorted. "They believe anything important enough to know can be found in an Xbox."

"Definitely a generation gap there."

"Several lifetimes at least."

"Did you see them much when they were growing up?"

"As soon as my brothers were old enough to start learning the trade my parents sent them to me."

"You raised them?"

"It was more like trying to herd wild cattle and keep them together and going in a straight line."

Bryn smiled, hearing the affection in his voice as well as the exasperation his memories caused. "I'll bet you did a wonderful job raising them," she said, heart tripping in her chest as the image of him holding their black-haired son sent hope shivering through her.

"They think I'm hopelessly old-fashioned and without imagination. For ages they've been chomping at the bit, anxious to show me they can do things better than I can."

"That's the highest compliment they can give you, you know, their being anxious to show you what they can do. It's about wanting your approval, not about proving you're hopelessly old-fashioned and without imagination. I would have loved a brother or sister, especially one who could see ghosts."

"You were lonely as a child?"

She hated thinking about her childhood and the parents who were often mistaken for her grandparents by the time she started attending school, their age only exacerbating the gap between her

and them, making her feel outcast in a home where silence reigned, commotion wasn't tolerated and the wickedness of the world was kept strictly at bay. "Very," she said.

His mouth returned to her neck. "Now that we've found each other, you won't know loneliness again," he said, his kisses and words chasing the chill of the past away.

He groaned when she rolled to her back, forcing his penis from her channel. But she wanted to look into his eyes, to see his face and memorize every expression, every beautiful feature. Against his mouth she said, "Your brothers are lucky to have you."

"And I'm lucky to have you."

One kiss led to a second, a third, a fourth, until the number was lost in a haze of intimacy and the intimacy led to renewed passion and cries of release, followed by lazy contentment. They cuddled, napped and forgot about the rest of the world until finally it was time to dress and return to the car.

Bryn's contentment lasted until they got back to the Aston Martin. When she saw the piece of paper held against the windshield by the wiper blade on the passenger side, her first thought was the estate had sold and having seen her car here, the new owners or the lawyer were letting her know she could no longer come and go freely.

Disappointment crowded in only to be replaced by anger, embarrassment, uneasiness when she read the note. *How could you let him take you like an animal? You deserve better.*

The strokes were dark and bold, slashed across the whiteness of the paper and vibrating with anger and pain. There was no signature but she didn't need one to know Mark must have followed them here and left the message after watching them have sex.

Bryn started to fold the paper. She hated the way her hands shook and her heart thundered in her chest.

Atticus took the note from her before she could put it away. She shivered as warm summer air seemed to turn into an arctic chill around them.

His face tightened. His eyes darkened to the gray of a deadly storm. "I will deal with him."

"Atticus, no. I can—"

He stopped her with the press of his lips to hers, his kiss gentle despite his tense muscles and the anger she felt seething in him. When he lifted his mouth she tried again to say she'd see about getting a restraining order, only to be stopped with a second kiss.

Bryn gave in. She let his kisses take the edge off her worry.

"No violence if it can be avoided," she finally managed when the need for breath forced their mouths apart.

His eyes were slate gray, clear and beautiful, coldly determined. "I believe I've proven myself capable in a fight. We met under those circumstances, if you'll recall, though I believe this situation can be dealt with in another manner."

She relaxed enough to tease him. "Dull? A stick-in-the-mud? Obviously your brothers don't see the same man I do."

The ice in his eyes melted. He laughed and rubbed his nose against hers. Heat rose between them in a heartbeat, renewed need along with it. "Let's go back to my place," she said.

"Let's."

* * * * *

The blinking answering machine caught Bryn's attention as soon as she stepped into her office. She walked to the desk and hit the play button. It was Sheri.

"Bryn, mega thanks again for this morning. I'm indebted. The whole band is. And guess what?

When Stoner told everybody what happened, the lead guitarist said he knew someone who could use your services. Since I know how you operate I called and made the pitch. I told Temperance your rates and it's a go. I wasn't sure when you could do it—I mean, Atticus is completely hot. I don't blame you for taking some time off so I didn't try to pump up the fee for speedy service. But please, please, please let me go with you. I mean, I'm in awe. I already left a message begging Marietta to let me work for you next week. And if you'll let me go with you to Temperance's place, it'll be off the books, totally, no payment expected."

Sheri rattled off a series of cell numbers. Bryn managed to write the last one down.

"You've got an admirer," Atticus said, sliding his arms around her waist and pulling her back to his front.

Bryn grinned when she felt his erection. The man was definitely making up for lost time.

She wriggled so her buttocks rubbed his hard cock. Joy rose like bubbles in champagne when his hips jerked and he moaned her name. Then it was her turn to shiver and whimper as his hands slipped underneath her blouse and bra to cover and torment her nipples.

"Do we call her back?" Atticus murmured between kisses to Bryn's neck.

"We should," Bryn said, her voice breathy. "Even though she'd understand if I don't. You are *completely hot* after all."

Atticus' laugh deepened Bryn's happiness. With a final kiss to her neck, his hands left her breasts to settle on her belly.

Bryn wasn't sure that was any better. Her clit was standing at attention, her cunt lips slick and parted. It was all too easy to imagine his hand sliding beneath the waistband of her shorts and panties and cupping her mound, capturing her clit against his palm as his fingers pushed into her channel.

A shudder went through her as her cunt spasmed and arousal wet her panties. Against her back she could feel the rapid beat of Atticus' heart and his shallow breathing.

Business first, she told herself. But the promise of pleasure called more loudly, more insistently.

It was completely wanton, completely irresponsible.

She'd never be able to sit at her desk again without remembering.

Still, she didn't protest when his fingers deftly opened her shorts. A sound that couldn't be mistaken as anything but encouragement escaped when his hands slid the garment over her hips along with her panties and both dropped to the floor.

"Bend over. Hands on the desk," he ordered, the command making liquid heat pool in her labia.

"So you're a fan of police shows?" she said, images of bondage crowding in as she obeyed him, a moan accompanying her shiver when he parted her blouse and bra.

"I'm your fan," Atticus said, cupping her breasts, playing with nipples left sensitive by his earlier suckling. "Now spread your legs."

His trousers were smooth against her bare buttocks as she pressed backward, rubbed against his cloth-covered erection in order to entice him to come out and play.

Atticus laughed, a husky masculine sound that made Bryn smile despite how desperately she wanted him to pierce her with his cock.

"Yes," she moaned when his hands left her breasts to stroke over her stomach.

He gathered arousal from her wet, swollen cunt lips then found her clit, tormented her with silky touches as he held her stiffened knob prisoner between two fingers.

"Please," she said, hips jerking each time he ran his forefinger over the tiny head.

She shuddered when his hands left, widened her stance when she heard the sound of his zipper sliding downward. And then he was where she wanted him to be, where she *needed* him to be, his cock thrusting in and out in a hard quick fuck that left her completely sated and sprawled across the top of her

desk.

"I'm never going to be able to sit at my desk without remembering this," she said, voicing her earlier thought.

Atticus chuckled. "I hope not."

Somehow Bryn found the energy to stand. "I'll just stagger in and grab a shower while you bask in your glory." She kissed him to let him know she was teasing. "I'd invite you to come with me but I have a pretty good idea of where that would lead. As soon as I'm done I'll call Sheri back and find out more about our next ghost appointment." She kissed him again for good measure then scooped her panties and shorts off the floor before going into her living quarters.

Atticus watched Bryn until she was out of sight. It was probably just as well she hadn't invited him to shower with her. One minute more of seeing her walk, naked from the waist down except for sandals, and he'd be hard again. Reluctantly he put his cock away.

"So what'd you think?" his brother asked.

Atticus prided himself on his reaction to Sammael's sudden appearance. It was limited to a small twitch. He refused to consider that his brother was inquiring about anything other than the latest manifestation of Death.

He remembered his earlier decision to apply psychology rather than rant or try to convince his brothers to leave him alone as he worked toward revealing who he really was to his new wife. And as it so happened, given his current lack of power and his desire to keep Bryn's worry over Mark at bay, he needed their assistance.

Atticus contemplated how best to point out the problems with respect to Charon the Coachman, namely that not only had Bryn, Stoner and Sheri seen the manifestation of the doorway opened by Death, but anyone who happened to be driving by or looking out their window had seen it as well. And then there was still the matter of the Death tarot cards taken from his private rooms, though he privately acknowledged that was a losing battle.

"Quite effective," Atticus finally said, going for simplicity, "though a little more discretion might be in order."

Sammael nodded, his mien serious, his mouth remaining straight though Atticus wasn't fooled. Amusement, oh he read it in his brother's eyes. *Discretion* was the mark of someone dull, someone—

Well, let them think him dull. The weight of that word no longer had the power to wear him down to nothing like water on stone.

When he'd become Atticus Denali he'd shed the labels affixed to him by others. He'd freed himself from the rigid role imposed by the name and title he'd previously called himself by.

He was a different man now, a changed man. One Bryn found interesting, attractive, enjoyable to be with.

Atticus ignored the amusement lurking in Sammael's eyes. He pulled the note left on the windshield from his pocket and handed it to his brother.

Sammael's eyebrows rose and a speculative glint replaced the amused one. His eyes strayed briefly to the front of Atticus' trousers.

Justice prevails, Atticus thought. *Imagine the sex and weep.*

"This is the guy who brought the flowers and candy?" Sammael asked.

"The same. I need to know where he lives." Atticus tilted his head to indicate the shower being turned off.

"You want us to take care of him for you? Put the fear of Death into him?"

"No. I'll see to the matter myself." Memories of his successful fisticuffs with Billy made Atticus add, "But the rest of you may accompany me if you wish."

"I'm out of the shower if you want to grab one," Bryn called from the next room.

"I'll be back when I have the information," Sammael said before fading from sight.

Atticus joined Bryn in the living quarters. She was standing in front of her closet, wearing only a towel.

"You're giving me ideas," he said, pulling her back to his front and placing kisses along her shoulder.

"As if you need me to give you any ideas."

One last kiss against her delicate skin and he forced himself to release her. "I'll be right back. If you're not dressed don't expect me to behave."

Her laughter followed him into the bathroom. A hurried shower and he stepped back into her living quarters to find her cooking.

"I haven't called Sheri yet. I thought I'd fix us something to eat just in case the potential client wants us to come over right away. Does fried vegetables served in pita bread with teriyaki sauce sound okay to you?"

"Sounds delicious."

Atticus moved to where his suitcase was open on a chair and quickly dressed. As he buttoned his shirt the books on the nightstand caught his attention.

The first one made him smile as a now-familiar warmth spread through his chest. Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* was a particular favorite. The other books had him stepping closer, the images on their covers and the titles leaving little doubt as to what was inside them.

Erotic romance. Atticus thumbed through a well-read story. Bondage. Anal sex. Other scenes reminiscent of what he and Bryn had already done together. His cock filled.

"Food's ready," she called.

He put the book down, hungry now for more than fried vegetables served in pita bread.

As soon as they ate Bryn returned Sheri's call. She couldn't suppress the smile when she learned Temperance owned a vintage clothing store. Not only was it the perfect location for a ghost, but having met Sheri and Stoner, she'd expect a friend of their lead guitarist to be equally non-conformist.

"She's at the shop," Sheri said, "and she's psyched for this. I talked to her a few minutes ago. She called *me* to see if I'd talked to you yet."

"Atticus and I can head there right now," Bryn said.

"Great! And it's cool if I show up, right?"

"We'll meet you there."

"I'm out of here."

Bryn laughed and hung up the phone.

Chapter Eight

Temperance wore a sleek ankle-length white dress, gloves to her elbows and a five-strand pearl choker that made Bryn think Roaring Twenties. What was even more astonishing was how well Temperance pulled it off, given she probably got carded anytime she tried to buy alcohol.

"I really appreciate this," Temperance said. "Sheri said it'd help if you knew who died here. I'll tell you what I can then if you need more, we can call Gramps. He owns the building but right now he's on a poker cruise. He's not very good about checking for messages when he's playing, so hopefully we won't need him."

"The book guy is the one who died. After that happened Gramps hasn't been able to keep a tenant here for more than a couple of months. That's why he finally agreed to let me have the place for one dollar a month plus utilities."

Temperance twined two gloved fingers together. "Gramps and I have always been tight."

"Tell me about 'the book guy'," Bryn said.

"He was old. Think Albert Einstein, only off the deep end, and a lot smaller. I only ever came here once with Gramps when the book guy was a tenant. But I remember the shop was filled, totally packed with musty books I couldn't imagine anyone would want. I still think it's totally unreal someone would kill him over them. That's what happened. A robbery gone bad is what the police told Gramps."

"Did the police charge anyone with his murder?" Bryn asked.

Temperance's eyebrows drew together. "Is it important?"

"It could be. Some ghosts linger because of a thirst for vengeance or justice. Showing them a newspaper clipping about their killer being arrested, convicted or dying is sometimes all it takes to get them to leave."

"Way cool!" Sheri said. "That's like a trick of the ghost busting trade, right?"

Atticus chuckled at Bryn's side. She glanced at him and they exchanged a smile. "Do you feel it?" she asked.

"Yes," Atticus said. Not only could he feel the ghost presence, but it was growing stronger by the moment.

"What does the ghost do?" Bryn asked Temperance. "How does he manifest?"

"Watch," Temperance said. She left her spot near the cash register and began winding her way through racks of clothing.

Atticus was a bit chagrined to see copies of some of his most comfortable suits labeled vintage. Cast off as out-of-style garments.

Nothing happened until Temperance drew near a back wall covered in sun-faded and water-stained paneling. Her hair began lifting and fluttering away from her face. Clothing flapped, gently at first, then more violently as the circular racks the items were hanging from rocked.

The transparent figure of a man formed, wispy gray with hints of color. Similar in appearance to Albert Einstein, Atticus thought, but really nothing at all like the great man, even on that day in 1955 when he finally succumbed to illness.

"Is this good enough?" Temperance called, fear edging into her voice.

"Yes," Bryn said.

Temperance hurried back to the front of the store. The clothing and racks became motionless. The bookman faded but retained enough of an outline to remain visible.

"Whoa," Sheri said. "Totally radical and dangerous." A pick bubble emerged from her mouth and popped as if to emphasize the point.

"I assume it gets worse if you don't get out of that space," Bryn said.

"Way worse." Temperance took Bryn's hand between her gloved ones. "Please say you can help. It wasn't this bad with the other tenants. It wasn't this bad for me either until a week ago. Before then I could hardly see him even though I knew the place was haunted."

"What happened a week ago?" Bryn asked.

"This lady came into the store. I could tell she wasn't interested in the clothes. I mean, *hello*, she walked right by the stuff that would be perfect for her. Then whenever she caught me looking she'd pull out whatever was on the rack closest to her. As soon as she got near the back wall, this started. And it's only gotten worse. If it doesn't stop Gramps is going to shut this place down. He said he might even raze the building. He's scared of losing everything in a lawsuit."

Atticus' curiosity was stirred. "It only happens near that one section of paneled wall?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where the bookman was when he died?"

Temperance pointed at the corner across from where she'd set up her cash register. "He had a little cubicle there so he could do whatever he did but be close to the front door."

"Has your grandfather done any remodeling since the bookman was a tenant?" Bryn asked and pride filled Atticus that she'd made the same mental leap as he had.

"Nope. Gramps likes to say, 'What you see is what you get.'"

"Totally cool," Sheri said. "You think the ghost is protecting hidden treasure, don't you?"

Atticus' assessment of Sheri rose. "I believe it's quite possible," he said. "Though given the former tenant's occupation, it seems likely the treasure is a rare and valuable book."

His eyes met Bryn's and his heart rate doubled at the warm regard he saw in them. Her smile dazzled him and made him want to pick her up and carry her back to bed.

"Do you think the woman who came to my shop is the one who murdered the bookman?" Temperance asked. "Maybe she panicked and ran before getting what she'd come for, or else she couldn't find it and only just now got up the nerve to come back."

"Sounds possible," Bryn said. "How was the bookman killed?"

"Some kind of an explosion." Temperance's lips pursed and her eyebrows drew together. "I just remembered something. Right after it happened I heard Grams say she didn't believe it was murder. She thought maybe he'd accidentally blown himself up. He was an arsonist."

"An arsonist?" Atticus and Bryn said at the same time with equal measures of doubt.

Sheri said, "Someone that likes to start fires?"

"No, that's not the right word," Temperance said. "How about anarchist? No. Archaist? Alchemist! That's what Grams called him. He was like one of those guys from the Middle Ages who was looking for a way to turn metal into gold. Only Gramps called him something else. Rastafarian. Rosicrucian! That's it! Only not the Christian kind, but the kind that's like a secret society studying mysterious Egyptian texts."

Sheri hopped up and down. "Maybe he has treasure hidden after all, something stolen from some pharaoh's tomb." She clutched Bryn's arm and continued to jump around. "How do we get rid of the bookman's ghost?"

The question rang in the air like a death knell, bringing with it a hot desert wind and the smell of frankincense. The bookman's form began solidifying as clothing whipped on the racks. He screamed and his arms came up to shield his face.

Bryn's hand found Atticus' though she didn't utter a peep when a mummy stepped through a side wall, tattered, dirty strips of cloth hanging from outstretched arms.

Sheri's shrieks joined the bookman's, as did Temperance's. The ghost's frantic attempt to escape seemed limited to a corner of the back wall, as if he was indeed tethered to a treasure worth lingering in order to guard.

"Do you have a name for this manifestation?" Bryn asked, "Besides *A Scary Mummy*?"

Atticus chuckled as he studied what was in all likelihood the middle of his five brothers. "I believe this is Seker, an Egyptian god."

It was a stretch, and Atticus couldn't be absolutely certain his brother was familiar with ancient Egyptian culture. It was quite possible the mummy came from a comic book or horror film. But he could hardly tell Bryn that.

Atticus breathed a sigh of relief when Sheri and Temperance stopped their shrieking and the desert wind serving as *atmosphere* for his brother's show drowned out the worst of the bookman's screams and pleading.

Behind the ghost the woodpaneling appeared to melt and blacken until it resembled a carved sarcophagus left standing.

"No! No!" the bookseller said as the mummy reached for him.

Atticuswaited with baited breath when the cloth-shrouded figure of his brother paused, stood like an actor waiting to deliver his final lines.

Desert winds died down. A deep, from-the-grave voice, intoned, "Leave. Leave now! I command you. The information you seek awaits."

The mummy stepped forward, the bookman stepped backward. Their movements repeated until both of them disappeared into the black pit of the tomb.

"Totally awesome," Sheri said.

Temperance hugged herself, rubbing white-gloved hands over goose-pimpled flesh. "Freaky."

But the show was not yet done.

Black ash fell in fine dust as the sarcophagus disintegrated leaving brick wall and a carved-out hiding place exposed.

"Oh my god," Sheri squealed, rushing forward with Temperance.

Atticusmet Bryn's eyes. "Shall we?"

Her laugh made him smile.

"Might as well," she said, "though I'll admit, I'm still blown away by what I just saw."

The requisite Death tarot card lay on top of a leather-bound book. Atticus picked the card up with a sigh. It belonged in his collection, of course.

Sheri lifted the book and Temperance gave a little squeal when a handful of gold buttons were revealed.

"Whoa!" Sheri said. "Is it real?"

Temperance collected the buttons and looked at Atticus. "What do you think?"

He took one from her hand. "Feels real. An appraiser could give you an idea of carat and value."

Sheri opened the book. "Cool. Check out the strange symbols."

"It looks like a diary," Bryn said. "Maybe a record of the bookman's experiments and observations."

"Oh wow," Temperance said. "Maybe these buttons started out as ordinary metal buttons and he figured out a way to turn them into gold."

Bryn shook her head. "That is definitely not my line of work."

Temperance glanced up. "You're awesome. What do I owe you? I know Sheri told me your rates over the phone but you've done a lot more than just get rid of the ghost. If I can sell this gold and maybe the book too...I mean, I don't want to blow myself up or anything and if there are others like the woman who came to the shop..." She sighed and looked around her at the vintage clothing. "I could expand, go to estate sales and buy even better stock, maybe open a second store in a year...or even chip in so the band can go on tour."

Sheri let out a whoop of joy.

Bryn reached over to run her finger along the edge of the Death card in Atticus' hand. "This is payment enough. You don't owe me anything. But honestly, I think Atticus deserves the credit for what happened here today with the ghost."

His heart threatened to swell past the ability of his chest to contain it with her acknowledgment and the sense of togetherness that swamped him. He leaned in and brushed a kiss against her lips. "If we hadn't met this wouldn't have happened to either of us. Of that I am one hundred percent sure."

"Ready to go?" Bryn asked, her eyes promising an intimacy his cock responded to immediately.

Atticus thought briefly of his brother's parting words. Though they'd been directed at the bookman's retreating ghost, he suspected the message, *The information you seek awaits*, was meant for him.

"Yes," he said. Dealing with Bryn's unwanted suitor could wait.

They said goodbye and left the shop. As they approached the car, movement at the corner of his eye made Atticus turn his head. A flash of dirty white disappeared around the corner of a building. *Surely not*. His brother wouldn't dare to hang out on the streets as Seker while waiting to deliver Mark's address.

Still, misgiving filled Atticus as a second thought came on the heels of the first. What if they followed him back to Bryn's place?

They'd respected his privacy when it came to the marital bed—so far—he thought. But an excuse to pop in regarding a matter he himself had asked their assistance with... Atticus shuddered. It might test the limits of their restraint too much.

Sheri came barreling out of the shop. "Hold on. Can we, like, do coffee together first? Just for a few minutes? Please? There's a place right around the corner."

Atticus seized on the opportunity. He squeezed Bryn's hand. "Something just occurred to me. Have coffee with her while I run a quick errand, all right?" He followed up with a kiss. "We can meet back at the car."

"Okay," Bryn said, curious about his sudden errand though she wouldn't put it past him to be thinking of some romantic gesture he'd like perform. She turned toward Sheri. "Lead on."

The coffee shop was empty of customers except for two rollerbladers and a man hunched intently over his laptop. "My treat," Sheri said after Bryn ordered a mocha.

They took their drinks to a window table. Bryn was content to sit and appreciate the hit of chocolate.

The mummy hadn't scared her, not really. But as a staple of horror images, it'd made her heart race and given her an adrenaline rush. And the voice... A cold shiver slid down her spine. It wasn't *really* like Atticus' and yet it had reminded her of Charon the Coachman's voice and his voice *had* sounded like Atticus.

Maybe it wasn't so much the voice, but the fact that both Seker and Charon had spoken. The thought made her feel better.

Bryn wondered again if Atticus' beliefs were giving rise to the manifestations of Death, then smiled when it occurred to her that maybe he was right in insisting it was the two of them that did it. What if her ability to *see* ghosts combined with his belief in a death entity were the reason everything was so different, including how little she had to do to get ghosts to move on.

Still, it didn't explain the tarot cards. Atticus thought it was spectral amusement or a greeting from "one person in the business to another". But why now? And who were they meant for? Her? Him? Both of them?

She smiled as an idea came to her. She couldn't believe she hadn't thought of it earlier. Then again, between the sex and the ghosts, she *had* been pretty busy. It'd be interesting to see what Ava made of the cards. She didn't "do" tarot cards, as she often had to point out to people who wandered into her tiny occult store looking for a reading, but she was a true psychic.

Bryn forced her mind away from thoughts of Death and the cards. She focused her attention on Sheri who was nervously spinning her coffee cup between her hands. "What's up?"

Sheri's spine stiffened and her chin lifted. "Look, I know I let you down back there with all the screaming. Next to Freddie Kruger and Jason, that mummy was *so has been*. He just kind of caught me by surprise. I mean, I was expecting the ghost. But after the black coach and Led Zeppelin tunes at Stoner's...

"What I'm saying is I hope you won't write me off as a total loser because I kind of lost it when the

mummy first showed up. If you'll just give me another chance I know we could make a great team. I grew up in this town. There are a lot of ghosts here. Not that I ever paid attention before, but I think I could reel in some more clients for you if you'll let me keep working for you. I swear I—"

Bryn held up her hand to halt the flow of words. She was touched by Sheri's heartfelt plea. "You did great back there, Sheri. I'll call Marietta and tell her I'd like for you to come back next week."

Sheri's *Yes!* was accompanied by upraised fists and wildly jangling bracelets. "You won't be sorry, Bryn. I swear."

Bryn laughed. Sheri's enthusiasm made her feel lighthearted despite the fact she couldn't afford an assistant. Except for the tarot cards, she hadn't gotten paid anything for her last three ghost calls, though in all fairness Bryn knew she couldn't claim any credit for sending those ghosts on their way.

For the time being she'd just have to accept Marietta's gratitude when it came to Sheri's salary. But if Sheri really could scare up some clients...

"Uh oh," Sheri said. "Red alert. Here comes lover boy."

Bryn stiffened and turned in her seat in time to see Mark push through the coffee shop door. Anger and embarrassment heated her face.

But instead of coming over to the table he went to the counter and ordered a drink. His back remained to them until his coffee was in hand. When he turned he appeared to do a double take, as though he hadn't known she and Sheri were in the shop.

Some of the tension left Bryn. Uncertainty wormed its way in though she wasn't positive he hadn't followed her, just as he'd apparently done when she took Atticus to Caroline's estate. Bryn looked down at her cup and hoped he'd just go away.

He didn't.

"Can we talk, Bryn? Alone?"

She glanced up to find him standing next to their table, face remorseful. Part of her wanted to bring up the note, to express the hurt and anger she felt, but she knew it wouldn't make her feel better and a small fear argued that she should *not* escalate things with him. "No, Mark. I said everything I had to say to you last night."

Had it only been last night? She'd been caught in a whirlwind since running from a knife-wielding Billy Haddon and colliding with Atticus' James Bond car.

Mark's hand clenched into a fist at his side. "He's not right for you, Bryn. He'll never appreciate you the way I will. I—"

"Mark—"

"Please, Bryn. Mom and I had a long talk today. She wants you to come to dinner."

Bryn's hand tightened on her coffee cup in growing frustration and anger. "Mark, I know you don't want to hear this, but you need to let your mother go. And if she won't move on then *you* need to."

"You can't mean that."

"I do mean it. Your mother had her life. Now you deserve yours. Let her go."

"I can't," he said and left the shop.

"Whoa," Sheri said. "That was intense."

Bryn grimaced and offered the same apology she'd given Atticus. "I'm sorry you had to witness that."

"Hey, no problem. So am I reading it right? Lover boy's mother is a ghost?"

"Yes."

Sheri pulled a pink square of gum from her pocket and unwrapped it. "Radical. I think I've got a feel for this ghost business. You know yesterday when he called, remember how I said I'd told him get a

life? I must have been picking up on something, getting a vibe over the phone.”

* * * * *

Atticussurveyed the buildings around him. He’d walked several blocks, expecting one of his brothers to make an appearance, but to no avail. Perhaps he’d been mistaken and the mummy’s message hadn’t been meant for him after all.

Just as well. The idea of spending the evening and night in bed with Bryn held far more appeal than dealing with her unwanted suitor.

He turned, intent on retracing his steps and returning to the car. Thoughts of his brothers were quickly replaced by erotic fantasies.

Not that he needed inspiration, of course, or help when it came to determining what Bryn might enjoy, but if he could manage it, he’d skim a few more scenes in the books on her nightstand.

A chuckle escaped. His pace increased,lightheartedness put a spring in his step.

Atticuswould have walked past the nondescript building without giving it a single glance if a delivery truck driver hadn’t stepped away from the back of his vehicle and collided with him, scattering packages on the sidewalk. ImpulsivelyAtticus picked up the box closest to him. Delighted surprise made him laugh when he saw the label.*Mabel’sErotics , Toys for Adult Fun and Games.*

A discreet sign next to the front door confirmed that he was indeed standing in front of Mabel’sErotics .Atticus followed the deliveryman inside.

“May I help you?” a woman who could easily be someone’s great-grandmother asked after she signed for the packages and the deliveryman left.

Much to his chagrinAtticus found himselfcoloring under her steady gaze. “I’m sorry, I thought... Given the sign...”

Her cackle spared him from complete humiliation.

“Don’t get much walk-in traffic,” she said, stepping away from the desk. “Most of our business is over the Internet but we do have a showroom. Follow me.”

He followed, docile as a sheep.

The showroom was small in comparison to the storage and packaging area they walked through in order to get to it. But the shelves and tables were indeed packed with*toys for adult fun and games* as well as DVDs and books—all existing to serve*La Petite Mort* .

“I’ll leave you to look around,” the woman said. She pointed toward a small desk bare of anything except a telephone and pad of paper. “I don’t have any shopping baskets. Put your items over there. Should be plenty of room. I’ve got a few orders I want to pack up before calling it a night and closing. So try to be quick.”

Atticusbreathed a small sigh of relief when she left the room. Certainly he*could* have studied the display of sex toys and sexual aids under the scrutiny of someone’s elderly grandmother, but he preferred privacy as he examined the items and imagined which ones Bryn and he might find fun.

It took sheer willpower not to reach for the front of his jeans. He was hard almost to the point of hurting and it got worse when he thought about what he’d read in Bryn’s erotic romance books.

Bondage. Anal sex. He’d start there since his time was limited.

Lubricant. That was easy enough and he remembered seeing it in the grocery store as well. He selected two different types before moving to the display of restraints.

The choice fed his imagination. Arousal seeped from the tip of his penis as he studied the various items. There were cuffs, tethers, all in varying lengths and materials, some designed specifically for*power sex* and*position mastering* .

Stick to the basics, Atticus thought, selecting soft wrist and ankle restraints.

Items in hand he turned to find Sammael leaning against a display of cock-shaped vibrators. “Married life isn’t all it’s cracked up to be I take it. I’ve always worried about that. It’s a shame given the curse we live under. And the sex life? It already needs spicing up?”

“I am not going to discuss my private affairs with you.”

“Affairs?” Sammael gasped in mock horror, staggered backward a few steps before making a slicing motion with his hand at the front of his jeans. “Do I need to remind you that if you use it on anyone but your wife, you lose it?”

Approaching footsteps spared Atticus from prolonged interaction with his brother. “You have the address for Bryn’s suitor?”

Sammael provided it.

“At midnight I’ll meet you there,” Atticus said. The thought of his brothers lingering around Bryn’s building as they waited for him to emerge was enough to give him nightmares.

“Midnight it is.” Sammael glanced at the items in Atticus’s hands and snickered before fading away.

Chapter Nine

Bryn laughed softly when she saw the brown box underneath Atticus’ arm. She’d guessed correctly about his sudden errand. What a romantic he was!

He gave her a kiss before unlocking the car and opening her door. “Have you been waiting long?”

“No, just a few minutes.” She glanced at the box, but it was solid brown, without a clue to its contents. “What have you been up to?” Her eyes strayed to the front of his jeans. She knew her smile didn’t hide her appreciation for what she saw there.

His chuckle drew her attention back to his face. “Let’s get back to your apartment and I’ll show you.”

Bryn slid into the car and buckled her seatbelt. Atticus closed the door and hurried around to the driver’s side.

Anticipation made the atmosphere inside the car electric. Need pebbled Bryn’s nipples and sent arousal escaping from her slit. She wondered if they’d make it into her living quarters before they fucked again. Memories of gripping her desk as he’d pounded into her before leaving to see Temperance had her cunt spasming and her heart throbbing between her legs.

The Aston Martin zipped through town. Red lights yielded to green seconds before they reached them, as if the sex gods needed an offering and planned to feast on the lust between Atticus and her.

Bryn felt like a teenager who’d just discovered sex and would do anything to get more of it. Her breath escaped in a small pant when Atticus stopped the car in front of her office door.

She had only an instant to register the vase of red roses left by the front door, to feel dismay when Atticus’ expression told her he had nothing to do with their appearance.

“Leave them,” he growled and she didn’t argue.

Somehow she managed to get the door open, to pass through to the living quarters. “This is insane,” she said against his mouth as they tore at each other’s clothing.

The brown box ended up on the coffee table, Bryn’s curiosity about its contents fleeing as skin touched skin, as tongues twined and tangled. She sighed in pleasure when soft sofa cushions greeted her back and Atticus covered her front like an erotic blanket.

"I've never felt this way about any other man," she said when he lifted his mouth.

"Good."

He slid downward to her breasts. A moan escaped as he sucked and laved her nipples. Bryn's fingers tangled in his hair, held him to her.

White-hot need defined Atticus. It spiked through him in sharp pulses, originated from where his lips suckled at Bryn's breast and speared his heart on its way to his cock.

Her scent was heady, a drug so powerful any man would be drawn to it. Her gasps and moans, nature's primordial call to mate.

Atticus kissed his way back to her mouth, wanted to swallow her cries as his cock found her wet entrance and pushed inside. Tremors racked him at the exquisite feel of heated, slick woman surrounding his penis, welcoming it in a tight fist of need.

He could make love to her for centuries and never take the ecstasy of having his body joined to hers for granted. It was indescribable bliss, nearly unbearable pleasure.

"Bryn," he said in between hungry, soul-gathering kisses. Words waxed eloquently in his thoughts, sonnets of love, tributes to marriage and the joy to be found in intimacy, but there was no breath to allow their escape, no way to tell her what she was to him without revealing who he was.

"I love it when you're inside me," she whispered against his lips, making control impossible, making his hips thrust once, twice—and then there was no retreat from motion, no stilling to savor a slow joining.

Thoughts vanished, intentions along with them. Flesh slapped against flesh, the feel of Bryn's wet core around his cock and her mouth against his becoming his sole reality, all that was important in his life.

His buttocks flexed as he worked to get deeper. Her cries became more insistent, her hips rising as her fingernails raked his shoulders and her tongue twined with his in a savage mating.

Harder. Faster. He imagined himself a centaur, half man, half stallion as he pounded into Bryn until her channel clenched and rippled against his shaft and his testicles gave up his seed, forcing it through his penis in a lava-hot rush of release.

Atticus lay on top of her, trembling in the aftermath, his heart thundering so hard he could easily envision it stopping, casting his essence from the mortal flesh he was wearing.

"So what's in the box?" she asked when their breathing had steadied, her question sending a fresh surge of blood rushing to his penis.

Atticus took her hands in his and held them against the armrest of the couch. He fought the urge to move, to thrust.

She was soft underneath him, sated, and yet he knew her passion would rise for him. "I've waited forever for you," he said, taking her lips in an effort to keep from taking her cunt.

"Atty," she whispered, the tenderness in her voice as she gave him a private name swelling his heart.

He slid to the side. Transferred her wrists to one hand so the other could cup her breasts, tease the nipples that made liquid hunger pool inside him so it was nearly impossible to think past the need to suckle.

He stroked her smooth belly. Brushed his fingers through downy dark curls and over her clit.

Her thighs remained splayed, inviting as his hand moved lower, trailing through slick arousal and his own seed on the way to her back entrance.

Contented satiation gave way to eyelashes lifting, face heating in a mix of curiosity and nervousness as his fingertips glanced over the forbidden rosette.

"Have you ever let a man have you this way?" he asked, knowing instinctively that she hadn't, feeling a primal thrill at her whispered, "No."

His finger lightly traced the tight pucker of her anus and his cock hardened with the thought of being the first, and last, to ever take her there. Bondage games would have to wait, he decided, freeing her

wrists and leaving her long enough to retrieve the lubricant from the box.

Bryn shivered as Atticus squeezed lubricant onto his fingers. His face was so darkly masculine, so full of primal desire that she doubted she could deny him anything he wanted sexually.

His cocked jutted upward. Velvet skin over steel. Potent masculinity on display.

She'd joked about him making up for lost time, she would have thought it physically impossible for a man to become aroused so often, but when their eyes met, when desire pulsed between them in a shared wild heartbeat, she knew it was the two of them together that caused him to harden over and over again, not his being a virgin before her.

A flush stained her cheeks when Atticus' fingertips returned to her anus. Her buttocks clenched instinctively.

"We don't have to do this," he murmured.

"I want to," she said, forcing herself to relax, remembering the first time she'd read about anal sex in one of her erotic romance books and how curious she'd been.

Additional heat flooded her cheeks when she thought about the toys she'd bought, the ones nestled in the bottom of her panty drawer. Blood rushed to her labia, swelling her cunt lips until they were plump and parted as she imagined having her ass filled with the plug she'd purchased, so that he would have to fight to get into her channel.

Arousal slid down to help coat her back entrance. Her hips jerked when Atticus rubbed his thumb in tiny circles over the exposed head of her clit, his fingertips massaging the tight pucker of her ass with silky wet strokes.

"I'm ready," she whispered after he'd stretched her with his fingers.

He delayed only long enough to squeeze additional lubricant onto his cock and then he was above her, arms rigid, face strained. As he slowly worked himself in she brought his face down to hers, initiated the kiss this time, lost herself in the darkly erotic act of being taken anally.

Bryn swallowed his groans, reveled in the way he trembled above her, his strokes short, his body quivering with the intensity of his pleasure. She tightened on him, took him to the edge of orgasm only to have him change the angle of their bodies so he rubbed against her clit with each stroke, made her come before he gave in to his own need for release.

They showered together afterward. Lingered underneath the warm spray of water. Lips repeatedly touching. Soapy hands following wet curves, exploring the difference between masculine and feminine until teasing gave way to need, to a slow fuck against heated tiles.

Bryn barely had the energy to pull on a tank top and sweats once they'd emerged from the shower and dried off. "I vote for polishing off the rest of the Cherry Garcia, then crashing on the couch and watching TV."

"Perfect," he said, his smile and his presence filling her with a contentment she'd only dreamed about.

They didn't bother with bowls, just grabbed spoons and cuddled together on the couch, her in possession of the ice cream carton, him in possession of the remote control. She groaned each time he settled on a history program. He grumbled when she liked the looks of a crime show. They finally agreed on *Planet Earth*, finishing the ice cream and watching one episode after another until sleep claimed Bryn.

Atticus crept from Bryn's apartment. In the moonlight the roses left in a vase beside her door were the color of old blood, sinister in appearance even to a man who'd once called himself Death.

A white card rustled in the breeze like a truce flag though Atticus read it as an offer of challenge. He leaned over, uncaring that petals fell to the concrete when he pulled the note from the stem it was attached to.

I can't give up on us.

We can make this work, Bryn.

I know we can.

Yours forever, Mark.

"I think not," Atticus muttered, picking up the offending vase and carrying it with him to the Aston Martin. It was time to take off the velvet gloves.

His resolve strengthened with each mile he drove. His aggravation increased as he thought about being forced away from his bride in order to deal with a man who should already have gotten the message she wasn't available.

By the time Atticus parked in front of the address, the thought of a down and dirty fight appealed to him. If he'd been a centaur making love to Bryn, now he felt like The Cretan Bull presented to Minos by Poseidon, a normally mild being until anger unleashed its destructive powers.

Atticus left the car and was immediately surrounded by the sea of his brothers. They'd dressed alike for the occasion, black leather jackets over white t-shirts. It was shades of *West Side Story* though he imagined it could have been much worse. *Grease* came to mind.

Sammael correctly read his thoughts. "Sorry. We didn't have time to work up a song and dance routine for the occasion. Your ghost hunting with the new wife has kept us hopping, creatively speaking."

"The mummy was a bit much," Atticus said, unable to work up any true aggravation.

It'd be pointless anyway. His brothers seemed determined to show him they could see to the business of Death better than he could.

That's the highest compliment they can give you, you know.

Bryn's earlier words whispered through his mind, derailing his usual internal dialog about his brothers. *Could she be right?* he wondered, looking at the faces around him.

There was laughter lurking in their eyes, a shared response to his predictable comment about their manifestation of Seker no doubt, and yet they were all here, watching him, waiting for him to act, perhaps thinking about their own futures and what might be necessary when it came to claiming a bride.

A sense of pride filled him. He hadn't done too badly with them.

"Time to get on with it," he said, standing a little straighter as he turned his attention to the matter of Bryn's suitor.

"Bad news," Sammael said. "He's not home. There's no one in the house." His smile held wicked amusement. "Except for the mother."

"The mother you say?"

Sammael nodded. "Built like a linebacker. Put a Raiders uniform on her and she'd be a great fantasy football pick."

Well, wasn't the mother the root of this problem anyway? Atticus thought. No mother, no reason for Bryn's suitor not to look elsewhere for a wife. It might be a harsh solution considering the apparent dependency, and perhaps if Mark hadn't spied on he and Bryn while they were making love then left the note for her on the windshield, Atticus might have been content to simply discuss the matter with Mark's mother and have her rein in her son, but given everything that had happened...

"I believe it's time to have a chat with her," Atticus said, "and convince her to be on her way."

Trapped in human form it'd be a tad more difficult. Generally his mere presence as Death was enough for a lingering soul to open a ghostway with the desire to get away from *him*. And if that didn't work, a touch of the scythe would do the trick.

Still, Atticus felt up to the task. He headed toward the house, his brothers with him.

The front door presented the first challenge. Atticus frowned when he found it locked. He wasn't accustomed to finding obstacles in his path when it came to entering a home. He wasn't a vampire, after

all, he didn't need an invitation to cross the threshold.

Perseverance. Persistence. Rising to the challenge and refusing to accept defeat. They were important lessons to reinforce for his brothers.

He searched for a hidden key beneath flowerpots and underneath rocks. When he didn't find one he left the front porch and walked around the house. The back and garage doors were locked as well, as were the first floor windows.

Curtains fluttered against an upstairs window, the sound beckoning like a signal. Atticus sighed. An extension ladder left conveniently against the side of the house would have been a welcome sight, the tree close enough to offer a way in was not.

Perseverance. Persistence. Rising to the challenge and refusing to accept defeat, he intoned, pulling himself up onto the first branch and trying to remember the last time he'd climbed a tree.

Midway up, he frowned, unable to remember *ever* climbing a tree. He had, hadn't he? He must have.

And yet he couldn't recall such a moment of spontaneous fun during his childhood. But then, from the time he *could* remember, he'd been with their father.

Hah! His brothers complained that he was old-fashioned, lacking in imagination... Well they hadn't experienced their father in his working years. They hadn't witnessed the terrifying visages he'd manifested. The goddess Kali with her necklace of fifty-one heads had nothing on their father in his glory days.

Annihilation. Ruthless destruction. Their father had been a force of nature rather than a shepherd of souls.

Atticus shuddered and pushed the memories away. He edged his way higher into the tree, then sideways along a branch.

Mortal death was beyond him, but the sway and give, the perilous dipping as wood yielded underneath his weight, the sheer drop to the ground beneath him gave Atticus a moment of fear. Images of Bryn crowded in, turning his grip white with the realization he didn't want to experience an accident that might cast him from the physical into the spectral. Adrenaline spiked through him, a jolt of energy and excitement that made everything around him seem more vibrant.

He'd often wondered at the enjoyment humans found in roller coaster rides and bungee jumping, in daredevil antics no sane man would attempt. Now he suspected he knew the answer.

The rush could be quite addictive. And as he pushed through the screen and levered himself through the upstairs window, he understood how exhilarating risk rewarded by victory could be.

Neat as a pin came to mind as Atticus surveyed the bedroom. He himself enjoyed order in his personal quarters and insisted on tidiness around the house, but comfort didn't go by the wayside in favor of military precision.

Not a speck of dust dared land on the polished wood of the desk or the Ouija board positioned an equal distance from each corner. The bed was wrinkle-free, its sheets and blankets stretched tight and tucked, giving the impression a coin would indeed bounce if dropped on the mattress. Computer reference books filled a bookcase, their spines lined up perfectly.

Down the hall he would find the ghost, not yet aware its sanctuary had been breached. Its energy was calm as it held to the schedule of mortality and slept.

No time like the present, Atticus thought, ready to get the whole business behind him so he could return to Bryn.

He left the bedroom, the sound of his footsteps muffled by carpet but still loud enough to alert the sleeping ghost. A woman with cropped salt-and-pepper hair and jowls that would do a bulldog proud barreled out of the bedroom in a gust of wind.

An olive green bathrobe morphed into Army fatigues as she kept coming toward Atticus, passing

through him with such fury that had he been fully mortal, the instinct to flee would have overwhelmed him.

Like a bull charging a cape she turned at the end of the hall and rushed toward him again, this time yelling, "Get out of my house!"

Picture frames pulled from the wall, her anger enough to make them weapons. Atticus ducked as they spun toward him like demon-possessed Frisbees.

"It's time to move on," he intoned, having little hope she'd listen to him and even less that he'd be able to reason with her before her energy level diminished.

"That woman sent you to get rid of me!" the ghost yelled. "It's not good enough she's taken my son from me, she wants my house, too!"

Atticus grunted when the woman crashed through him with enough force to put him on his back. Jagged pieces of glass from the trashed picture frames swirled upward in a deadly funnel of twisting, moving air as he got to his feet.

Next to him Sammael took form, this time wearing a football jersey. His presence generated a wind that forced the glassy threat backward, toward the end of the hall and the stairway.

"No!" the ghost screamed, understanding immediately the nature of Atticus' ally.

The rest of their brothers arrived, their appearance sending the ghost shrieking down the stairs in retreat, yelling, ironically enough, that she wouldn't be taken alive.

"Shall we?" Sammael asked.

Because of Bryn, Atticus heard a deeper question than the two words conveyed on the surface. He heard the desire to be treated as an equal, to be viewed as capable, the need to do something on behalf of a brother who'd served as a father.

"Go to it," Atticus said. "This is a matter best left to the five of you. I'll endeavor to stay out of your way though I insist on staying for the show."

"All right!" the youngest of his brothers shouted, bringing a smile to Atticus' heart.

"Okay, team," Sammael said, drawing the other four—also in football jerseys—into a huddle. "We go in fast. We go in hard. Got it?"

"Got it!"

Hands went to the middle of their huddle, one on top of another.

"One. Two. Three. Let's do it!" they shouted together before charging down the hall with Atticus behind them.

While they'd lingered upstairs, the ghost had used emotion-fueled energy to turn the kitchen table and chairs into a barricade. Sharp knives and assorted silverware greeted his brothers, moving through them to clatter against linoleum floor and hallway walls. They forged ahead, leaving Atticus in the doorway ducking kitchen appliances and dishware.

"No!" the woman screamed in frustration as five jersey-clad men plowed into her barricade, scattering furniture and landing on top of her in a tackle. There were masculine curses and grunts. The youngest rolled to his back, clutching his genitals. The middle of the five reared up, blood streaming from his nose.

At Sammael's command an opening appeared at the base of the nearest wall, a gray, swirling doorway to whatever lay beyond.

More grunts and curses ensued as inch by inch they wrestled the determined woman toward the ghostway, finally getting her across the threshold, finishing it.

Approval filled Atticus as his brothers got to their feet. Jerseys ripped, lips and noses bleeding, he hadn't done so badly with them after all.

Chapter Ten

Bryn stirred, slowly woke with the sense of being alone. “Atty?” she called, knowing even as she did it that he was gone.

She sat up on the couch, eyes searching the room, the clock on her nightstand telling her it was after midnight. Confusion had her leaning against the back of the couch, replaying the events since they’d gotten home for a clue as to where he might have gone.

The roses.

She was on her feet in an instant and hurrying through her apartment and office to the front door. The flowers were gone.

Bryn shivered as she remembered Atticus’ expression at the estate, when he’d promised to deal with Mark, then earlier tonight when they’d gotten back to find the roses. She glanced at the phone and worried her bottom lip, wondered if she should go over to Mark’s house.

But what if she was wrong and he saw her there? It’d only serve as encouragement.

She thought about Sheri. Maybe she’d be willing to do a drive-by.

Bryn returned to her desk and opened the drawer where she’d put Sheri’s contact information. She glanced down at the numbers and reached for the phone, only to realize she didn’t know Mark’s address.

She knew the street and she’d recognize the house, but she didn’t know the number. So how would Atticus ?

Mark wasn’t in the phone book. In fact, his number was unlisted—his mother’s choice and one he hadn’t changed since she’d passed away.

Bryn thought back to the conversation she’d had with Atticus the night Mark showed up with flowers and chocolates. She hadn’t mentioned Mark’s workplace, which given the time was probably where he was at the moment anyway.

Relief poured into Bryn with the realization she was worried over nothing. She opened the laptop on her desk because she knew there was no way she’d be able to go to sleep until Atticus returned.

“You’ve got it bad,” she muttered, but hearing the truth spoken out loud didn’t diminish how she felt about him, didn’t make her regret feeling it.

On a whim she did an Internet search on Death’s manifestations. She had to tweak her search, to follow several related links, but finally she came to a site about the personification of death.

Seker was listed, as were Charon the Coachman and Suriel the Trumpeter, also known as Sauriel the Releaser. But it was another name that caught Bryn’s eye. Samael, the first of Atticus’ five brothers.

Bryn didn’t know whether to laugh or be horrified. Undoubtedly Atticus’ parents were unconventional and interesting, but to give their son a name which represented the Angel of Death and was translated *poison of God* ...

“They won’t be naming any of my children,” Bryn muttered, opening the door to a fantasy she knew she should stop but couldn’t, not for long moments as the movie of a future with Atticus played out in her mind, complete with little black-haired sons racing around their doting father.

“This is bad,” Bryn said, finally pulling out of the daydream. “I only just met him.” But how likely was it that she’d be able to share her work with another man the same way she could with him?

She turned her attention to the meaning of the Death tarot and was relieved to find almost every site said the same thing, namely that it rarely represented actual physical death. It could, especially when it

was used in a reading involving someone elderly or gravely ill, but it more often stood for endings, transitions.

Makes sense, she thought, and it's especially fitting when applied to spirits entering the ghostways.

Bryn remembered her earlier idea, to go by Ava's shop with the cards. Having a psychic she trusted handle them would make her feel more comfortable, especially if they were going to keep appearing after each manifestation of Death.

The sound of a car's engine had Bryn turning off the computer and going to the window. She smiled at the sight of the Aston Martin, hesitated for only a second before deciding to greet Atticus outside.

"You're okay?" she said.

Elegant masculine eyebrows lifted, male ego answering silently, *Was there any doubt?*

She wrapped her arms around his waist in a hug, noticed for the first time the plastic grocery bag holding the distinctive shape of a carton of ice cream. "I was afraid you'd gone after Mark."

"Mark is fortunate I didn't encounter him."

Bryn sighed. Tomorrow...no, later today she was going to have to do something about Mark. She shivered. She wasn't really afraid of him, but it was hard not to be a little worried thanks to sensational news stories about men who'd escalated to physical violence and murder once the authorities had become involved and a restraining order put into place.

Atticus' hand stroked her spine. "Don't worry," he murmured as if reading her mind. "I think your suitor will soon discover his fixation on you is unnecessary."

Warm masculine lips covered Bryn's. A wonderfully talented tongue teased its way into her mouth, turned her thoughts away from his curiously worded reassurance.

Bryn pressed more tightly against him and wasn't surprised to find him hard. His hands cupped her buttocks, held her steady as he ground the thick ridge of his erection into her.

"Your door key was on the counter," he murmured against her lips. "Forgive me for borrowing it without asking?"

"Convince me I should."

His husky laugh sent heat cascading through her. "With pleasure."

For long moments they kissed, clung together as though they'd been parted for months. "Let's go inside," Atticus finally said, one of his hands leaving her buttocks and pushing under her tank top to claim her breast.

A spike of need shot to her clit when his palm pressed against her nipple. A moan escaped. "That sounds like a good idea."

They detoured past the refrigerator in order to put the ice cream in the freezer, then past the coffee table where Atticus picked up the brown box, making Bryn realize it must have held more than the lubricant he'd pulled out of it earlier.

Atticus placed the box on the nightstand before taking her in his arms. "I can't imagine my life without you in it."

"I feel the same way about you," Bryn said, knowing it should be too soon to feel that way, but feeling it anyway. She'd always accepted the possibility of soul mates, of couples destined to be together, in one life as well as in the next, but she'd never truly believed it would happen for her.

Her hands went to the front of his shirt, unbuttoned it. His went to the hem of her tank top, pulled it upward and off, both of them needing the touch of skin against skin.

"You're beautiful, Bryn, as beautiful as any woman who ever graced the temples on Mt. Olympus or the halls of Valhalla."

His eyes went from her face to her breasts to her waist, lingered, made her feel beautiful, desirable.

She pushed his shirt off his shoulders and down so it fell to the floor. "You're like an ancient god brought to life," she whispered, "so perfectly formed that I'm afraid you're a manifestation that's going to disappear into thin air the same way as Suriel and Charon and Seker did."

"Never without you," he said, pulling her against him so her breasts pressed to his chest and they both moaned at the pleasure to be found just holding each other.

He captured her lips again, teased her with the thrust and retreat of his tongue until her hands slid down his muscled back and around to open his jeans then free his cock. Satin smoothness over hardened desire, he shuddered at her touch, made her feel lightheaded with feminine power as she stroked his thick shaft.

Arousal beaded on the tip of his penis. He bucked when she found it with her thumb, spread it over the mushroom-shaped head. He groaned when she explored the tiny opening, coaxed more arousal from it.

"Bryn," he panted, hands going to her sweatpants, pushing them down along with her panties so he could slip his fingers between her thighs, run them through her slit.

She moaned, wanted to lie on the bed and feel him inside her but didn't want to part long enough to do it. She pushed at his jeans, thought to free the rest of him so she could fondle the heavy sac between his thighs.

Atticus had more willpower than she. With a grunt he stepped back and hastily shed his shoes and the rest of his clothing while she stepped out of her fallen sweats and panties.

Bryn lay down on the bed, her pose wanton, inviting, thighs spread and hands cupping her breasts. She'd never felt so confident, so alluring, so sexual with any other man, but the look on his face, the way his cock seemed to pulse in hungry appreciation made her daring, spontaneous, free of inhibitions.

He joined her, took an offered nipple between his lips and suckled as his fingers returned to her slit. She was wet, needy, unashamedly anxious to have his cock push into her channel.

Her hips lifted. She was reduced to whimpering when he began fucking her with his fingers, his palm glancing over the tiny head of her clit with each thrust. So close, she was so close.

"Come for me," Atticus said, leaving one nipple to capture the other, the feel of his teeth giving bite to the command as the touch between her thighs became more demanding.

Her hands went to his shoulders, his hair, held him to her breast as her hips thrust upward and her channel clenched desperately on his fingers. It felt so good, too good.

With a cry she let herself go, let the heated tide of ecstasy swamp her, take her strength until she felt boneless, utterly relaxed against the sheets. "Your turn," she murmured as Atticus slid upward so his face was only inches away from hers, his hard cock pressed against her hip as his thigh crossed hers, trapping her against the mattress.

"I have a confession to make," he said, the glint in his eyes hinting it was a confession she just might enjoy hearing.

"Tell me."

His gaze flickered to the nightstand and back. "I skimmed through your romance books. I acted on what I found there." Atticus lowered his mouth to hers. "What happened on the couch earlier was part one. Part two has to do with bondage. Am I wrong in thinking you'd like to try it?"

Electric surprise rippled through Bryn, a curiosity that made her shiver involuntarily with erotic fear. Somehow she managed to ask, "Is that what's in the box? Restraints?"

"Yes." He dipped his head to nibble on her lips. "But we can save them for another time if you prefer. I love being with you. Anything we do together satisfies me."

"Anything?" Bryn asked, a wicked idea forming.

He didn't hesitate. "Anything."

She stroked his nipple, thrilled at the way his cock pulsed against her hip. "You first."

His eyes widened, filled with dark hunger and carnal heat. "You want to tie me to the bed?"

"You didn't get to that scene in the book?" she teased, not sure there was in fact such a scene in the erotic romance books on her nightstand.

"My time was limited."

She took his nipple between her fingers and applied just the right amount of pressure to make his face grow taut and his eyes close. "I think we can probably figure it out as we go. What do you think?"

His cock pressed more firmly against her, the tip touched her side in a wet kiss.

"Yes."

Bryn used her grip on his nipple to push him onto his back. Then she straddled him as she'd done the first time, when he gave her his virginity.

The thought flooded her channel with arousal, as did the sight of him, a bronzed Greek god in her bed, soon to be totally at her mercy. She'd fantasized about bondage, about trusting a lover enough to give him complete control. She hadn't made it as far as imagining the reverse, but she felt sure she could improvise.

Bryn reached for the box on the nightstand and took out the restraints. They were soft, strong.

Atticus raised his arms without being commanded. She secured the tethers to the bedposts first then leaned down, offered him her breast as she fitted the restraints around his wrists.

Bryn moaned as he took advantage of what she offered. He laved and bit and suckled, made her clench and unclench as pleasure was pulled upward through her nipples until it took considerable willpower to leave him long enough to tether his ankles.

It was wildly erotic, more so than she would have imagined, to have him spread-eagled on the bed awaiting her attention. His cock bobbed and strained when her gaze settled on it, seemed to grow even fuller. He didn't tug at the bonds, didn't seem to be afraid at all of being helpless.

Trust. Intellectually she knew that was what bondage games were all about. Now she understood it viscerally. And looking at Atticus, she knew she trusted him enough to give him the same control—next time.

She placed her hands on his thighs, loved the way his hips bucked and a moan escaped. "You're gorgeous, Atty," she said gliding her palms upward, over his muscles, until her fingers framed his thick penis and full sac.

"Bryn," he said, hips lifting, voice hoarse.

She leaned over, intent on nuzzling his balls, kissing up his shaft.

He started struggling then, fighting the tethers.

"I won't last if you do that, Bryn. Put me inside you. Let me come there."

His need and panic were so darkly erotic that they halted her a breath away from taking him with her mouth. For a split second she was a stranger to herself. The desire to explore the limits of feminine sexual power, to disregard his pleas and command his release rode her, made her pant and struggle to keep from closing the distance between them, from using her lips and tongue on him.

She'd never thought of herself as a dominant lover or even an assertive one, then again, she'd never been as uninhibited, as spontaneous, as intimate with anyone else. Even tied to the bed, Atticus managed to free her of all restraint, to empower her.

Bryn kissed his abdomen instead of his straining penis, moved upward, wanting to reward them both with the feel of masculine and feminine perfectly aligned, sensually entwined in an ancient dance of thrust and retreat.

"I trust you more than I've ever trusted any other man," she told him, gliding her wet, parted slit up and down along his cock. "You make me glad to be alive."

She lowered her head, pressed her mouth to his, their tongues finding each other immediately, twisting and twining, increasing the pleasure, the need.

"Next time," she whispered, her breathing as fast as his, her body quivering just as his was. "Next time you can tie me."

"Put me inside you," he begged, hips lifting, cock rubbing against her clit.

Bryn took him in hand, thrilled at the way his eyes closed and his face went taut. She guided him to her entrance, swallowed his length in her needy feminine core.

As she moved up and down on his thick shaft, she tormented him with images, told him about the vibrator in her panty drawer, the anal plug that would make her sheath smaller, make him have to fight to get inside her. She told him the things she'd let him do with her when they played with her toys as well his, her words driving them to a fevered frenzy until finally they both cried out in release.

While she still had the energy she freed him from the restraints, but she left them in place for next time. Then somehow they stumbled to the shower, made it back to the bed and settled underneath the covers before giving in to the need for sleep.

The phone rang and Bryn let the answering machine pick it up. She tensed when she heard the sigh, braced herself for Mark's voice but instead an elderly woman said, "This is EsterMaigny . I need your services. Please call me at your earliest convenience."

Ester was leaving her phone number as Bryn reached for the phone in the kitchen. "This is Bryn."

"I know today is Sunday," Ester said. "I'm sorry for bothering you. You probably take the day off. I'd like to schedule an appointment. Is that possible?"

"You have a ghost?"

"It's not something I want to discuss over the phone. I'm happy to pay whatever you charge for a house call whether you're able to assist me or not."

Bryn glanced atAtticus . He nodded, understanding her silent question. "I can visit with you today," she said.

"That's wonderful! I'll fix some coffee. Do you like sugar cookies?"

"Yes."

"When can you visit?"

"I can leave in a few minutes. *We* can leave. I'd like to bring my...partner,Atticus . Is that all right with you?"

"Certainly, bring your young man."

Bryn smiled at that and got directions.

* * * * *

Ester lived well out of town on ranch land that hadn't yet been claimed by urban sprawl. She greeted them at the door, her face wrinkled from age, her body frail and bent under the weight of the years it carried.

"You look very familiar," Ester said, peering intently atAtticus ' face. "Have we met before?"

"No, I don't believe so."

She continued to look at him for long moments before turning and inviting them into the dark coolness of aparlor .

It was like stepping into the past. Antique furniture graced the room as it had probably done since the time of Ester's parents, maybe even her grandparents. Delicately painted bone china coffee cups sat on matching saucers, the coffee table further protected by handcrafted doilies.

As promised there was a plate of sugar cookies waiting. Ester excused herself long enough to retrieve a coffee pot from the kitchen, her footsteps measured on her return, her hand shaking.

Atticus rose from his seat before Bryn could, closed the distance and took the pot from the elderly woman. A knot formed in Bryn's throat at his kindness and what she sensed in this room from a long ago era.

There were no ghosts here, only lingering memories. Moments of victory and despair, pride and pain, sacrifice and redemption, now faded into a nearly forgotten past.

Ester took her seat on the other side of the coffee table and Atticus reclaimed his on the couch next to Bryn. "May I?" he asked, indicating the coffee pot.

"Yes, please," Ester said, her attention never wavering from his face as he poured their coffee.

When he set the pot down, she said, "I know where I've seen you. You were there when my Aunt May passed away and at the hospice when my sister Zeda was taken from us. You were dressed in a dark suit."

Her hand shook slightly as she lifted her cup. "No, that can't be right. I was only eight when May had her accident and died. You wouldn't have been born then. Maybe I'm confusing you with your grandfather. But your voice sounds so familiar. Both times I've heard it, the word were the same. *It's time*. Just the two words, *It's time*."

Chapter Eleven

Goose bumps rose on Bryn's arms. She remembered another voice that sounded like Atticus'—Charon the Coachman, Death card tumbling to the ground in offering as he bowed and said, "Parting is such sweet sorrow, but we'll meet again."

Her focus shifted to Atticus' face and she saw again the gray of the ghostways in his eyes. She shivered, her thoughts skittering like leaves caught in wind, not wanting to follow a mental path and find the truth at its end.

Bryn was grateful when Ester directed their attention to the stack of photo albums on the coffee table. "I thought those might help you in your work," Ester said, putting her coffee cup down and opening the first one, her face softening with memories.

Compassion kept Bryn from admitting she didn't feel the presence of a ghost. She stirred cream and sugar into her coffee as Ester revisited the past, fingers lightly stroking over long-dead faces. Stories of childhood exploits and adult hardship unfolded, along with those of men sent to war never to return, of babies born and children raised, farms abandoned for city life, happy moments and sad ones, all lovingly told as album pages were turned.

"I'm the last," Ester said, closing the final album. "Six sisters and five brothers. I've outlived them all. We weren't a prolific bunch. It probably came from there being so many of us and so little money when we were growing up. Only a couple of my brothers and half of my sisters had children. Some of them moved away. Some of them divorced and I didn't know their children well, never met their grandchildren. There was only one great-grandchild who had an interest in history, in family, but he's in Arlington cemetery now, brought home from Iraq and buried there." She met Bryn's eyes. "Do you feel any of them here?"

"No," Bryn said, her throat tight.

Ester nodded as if expecting the answer. "Do you have time to walk out back with me?"

"Yes," Bryn said, glancing at Atticus, tears threatening to erupt at the compassion she saw in his face.

They left the parlor, matching their steps to Ester's. The hallway was lined with pictures, the carpeted floor worn. Modern appliances graced the kitchen. Sunlight poured in through picture windows.

The backyard was defined by rosebushes and shrubs, a scented square with a rope swing strung from an old oak tree. Beyond it was pastureland and to the side, a small well-tended family cemetery.

"I've got a yardman that comes every week," Ester said as Atticus opened the gate in the white picket fence separating backyard from graveyard. "When I was able, I tended it myself." She led them to a wooden bench positioned underneath an arbor draped in jasmine.

Old headstones and statues rose above summer-brown grass. Butterflies danced from flower to flower. Hummingbirds descended then hustled away.

"When I was a child a ghost lived here. Most of the time Zeda and I were the only ones who could see him. He'd move through the cemetery pale as moonlight, more a shimmer than anything else. We always wondered what he was looking for."

Ester laughed. "March 12. That's the only day any of the others could see him, but only the children. We figured it must have been the day something horrible happened to him, something that haunted him in life. On that day my brothers dared each other to go into the graveyard and touch the ghost light." She turned toward Bryn. "I haven't seen him in a long time. Not since I got married and left home for my first teaching job in Santa Maria. Is he still here?"

There was a hopefulness in her voice that spoke of loneliness, of wanting to find something of the past still alive in the present. The cemetery felt calm to Bryn, as though any souls who might once have lingered had ultimately found closure and peace and moved on.

"No," Bryn said.

Ester's face saddened. "I'd hoped... You must think me a crazy old lady. I imagine most people want you to chase away their ghosts not invite them to make themselves known, to come up to the house for conversation."

Bryn took Ester's hand in hers. It was frail and bony, the skin paper-thin. "I understand," she said around the lump in her throat, glancing up to find Atticus watching her. His eyes were dark, troubled. She wondered what he was thinking but abandoned the question when Ester gasped, her eyes widening, her hand tightening on Bryn's in a nearly painful grasp.

Bryn's heart stuttered in her chest when she turned her head and saw the dark-suited man silhouetted in a doorway made of thin air and swirling, phantom clouds. His face was in shadow though the sun was alone in a blue sky, its light bathing the cemetery.

The man stepped from the doorway and it was Bryn's turn to gasp. Atticus. And yet as the man moved closer, his face looked younger, his body leaner and his hair longer.

She forced her eyes away from him and back to Atticus. He was leaning forward on the benched seat, so still he looked like a statue.

He's surprised, too, Bryn told herself, *just as surprised as I am*. But even as she tried to convince herself, fear slid through her.

Dread filled Bryn when the apparition stopped in front of them. Elegant death, he was the dark-suited man Ester had mistaken Atticus for.

"It's time. Are you ready, Ester?" he asked, his voice deep, echoing like a well, the black suit melting into flowing white robes as golden-veined wings unfurled behind his back.

Sunlight caught and spun around him. The sight was so beautiful Bryn had to look away, fight to contain the tears burning in her throat.

"I'm ready," Ester said, her voice steady though her fingers tightened on Bryn's, as trembling, she lifted her other arm, reached for Death.

He took her outstretched hand in his and Ester shuddered, gasped one last time and then her fingers went slack in Bryn's grip as her soul left the shell of flesh behind.

The angelic manifestation walked Ester to the swirling gray of the ghostway door, and without a backward glance she stepped through it.

Emotions swamped Bryn in the hushed silence of the gravestone-decorated landscape. Grief, shock, fear.

Tears wet her cheeks as she released Ester's hand and stood, turned toward Atticus seeking comfort, seeking reassurance, telling herself that Death's manifestation had taken his form because his face and voice had been familiar to Ester, his likeness present when she'd lost her aunt and sister.

But what about Suriel the Trumpeter and Seker? Why did they sound like Atticus as well?

Atticus rose from the bench too, concern in a gaze that held a deeper knowledge, a more profound understanding of death. The worry in his gray ghostway eyes made Bryn shiver, made it hard to override the silently whispered questions she didn't want to face.

He gently repositioned Ester so she lay on the bench. His fingertips closed her eyelids so she looked as if she slept peacefully.

Bryn's throat tightened. His gestures unnerved her even as she reminded herself that he ran a funeral home, had more experience with the reality of physical death than she did.

There was wariness in his expression when he stepped toward her, as if he expected her to turn away from him, to run now that she saw him as something other than a lover and companion.

She resisted only for the breath of a heartbeat when he put his arms around her and pulled her to him. Then a sob escaped. Shock gave way to guilt and she pressed against him, wondered if her presence, her being there with him had summoned Death.

She'd always believed in the rightness of using her talent to help spirits move on to whatever awaited. There'd been satisfaction in doing it well, in helping both ghost and haunted human alike. But it had never been *soreal* as it was with him.

Fear shuddered through her. "Do you think this is our fault?" she managed. "Do you think we brought Death with us?"

Atticus' hand stroked her spine in a soothing gesture. "No. It was her time, Bryn. It was just her time."

Bryn forced herself to look up into the ghostway-colored eyes. "How can you be sure?"

"Because I am. Because I know."

He sounded so confident, so certain that some of the worry and guilt faded, but not all of it. "There's something about us being together that calls to Death. What if this happens again?"

Atticus' arms tightened around her. "Would it have been better for Ester to pass from this world unattended? Alone? Would you rather she'd seen one of the more terrifying faces of Death?"

"No," Bryn whispered, her heart racing, fear skittering along her nerve endings because underneath *his* questions she heard his acknowledgement that what happened today *would* happen again if the two of them were together.

"I need to go inside and call someone," she said. "The police I guess. Will you stay here with her?"

A kiss brushed across Bryn's forehead. "Yes."

She retraced their earlier steps, the hushed silence giving way to birdsong, life continuing, accepting death as part of the natural cycle. The tears wouldn't stop, their source a faucet of emotions she couldn't turn off.

Her purse was on the couch in the parlor where she'd left it. A shudder went through her when she spotted the tarot card, a somber reminder that while it more often stood for endings, transitions, it could also represent physical death.

It was on top of the stack of photo albums, an unwanted confirmation of what she'd feared. Her presence and Atticus' were responsible for the manifestation and it would happen again.

She put the card in her purse and called the police before returning to Atticus. As they waited she showed him the card.

A muscle twitched in his cheek. He tensed before glancing up. When he didn't say anything Bryn put the card away and walked to where the ghostway had opened, a waiting burial spot in a row that contained six women and five men, Ester's brothers and sisters.

Tears started flowing down Bryn's cheeks again and Atticus was instantly there, his arms around her. She tried to distract herself with conversation, remembered the brief research she'd done at the computer while she was waiting for him to come back from his middle-of-the-night trip for ice cream. "Was that Sammael?" she asked, thinking of the Angel of Death his brother had been named for.

"No, that was Azrael. He was born after Sammael."

As soon as the words were spoken she felt Atticus go completely still. His heart raced against her chest but there was no rise and fall of breath.

Bryn lifted her face and met his eyes. Questions tumbled through her mind. Fear and disbelief, impossible conclusions. For a shimmering second she believed *he* was Death and had come for her, but then thoughts of what they'd done together made her push the idea away.

The police arrived, sparing Bryn from her imagination, from the wild thoughts that left her uneasy.

And eventually the two of them were free to leave.

Silence reigned in the car. It accompanied them through the office space and into the living quarters.

Atticus was tense, wondering what she was thinking. The glances he gave her, the lines etched on his face told her as much.

"Would you like some ice cream?" he asked, walking into the kitchen and retrieving the carton from the freezer, his effort to get things back on familiar footing so obvious it made her heart ache.

Bryn wanted to put him at ease, to tell him nothing had changed between them, but she couldn't. If he hadn't stiffened against her, if his heart hadn't raced after so casually knowing the difference between two angels of death, Azrael and Sammael, she might have been able to remain in denial, to accept he was like her, someone with a special talent.

She wanted to ask *what* he was, *who* he was, but she was afraid. Afraid of his answer, afraid everything that had happened between them was a lie, a strange dark fantasy.

Without conscious thought she walked over to the book-littered desk in her living quarters, her true work area despite the desk in her office. The breath froze in her chest when she looked down at the tarot cards she'd placed there. Instead of the three that had been there after adding the one left behind by Seker, now there were four. Five if she counted the one in her purse.

Her hands shook as she gathered them up. It took all her courage to pick up the new one, the one appearing in her home, in a place where there was no reason for the ghostway to open unless it was for her.

Endings. Transitions. Rarely does the thirteenth card represent actual physical death, she told herself as she slipped them into her purse.

But it can, her inner voice said. *It can represent physical death.* She knew that only too well now.

Bryn turned and found Atticus watching her, the carton of Cherry Garcia in one hand, a spoon in the other. Even in the jumble of frightening thoughts urging her to run she still thought he was gorgeous, still thought she was halfway in love with him.

Her gaze skittered to the bed, where the tethers she'd bound him with hung decadently over the sides of the mattress. The sight of them anchored her, reminded her of the pleasure given and received, steadied her heartbeat and calmed her.

She was over-emotional, imagining things, she told herself. Seeing an angel of death would do that to anyone. Witnessing death would do that to anyone.

A shudder went through Bryn, leaving her feeling weak. She forced herself to close the distance between them, to put her hand on his arm.

It was warm, human, his scent masculine, his expression so caring she nearly started crying again. "I'm going to go see my friend Ava."

She wanted to tell him she was having a tough time dealing with Ester's death, with the idea that there would be more like it. She wanted to tell him it was making her question her sanity, her judgment, that she hoped having Ava handle the cards would help her regain her emotional balance. Instead Bryn tightened her fingers on Atticus' arm in a gesture that begged him to give her time and space, that reassured her he was solid, real.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," she said, her failure to invite him to go with her adding weight to the air around them.

Pain ripped through Atticus' heart. Fear. Regret. Death had built a wall between them and he didn't know how to tear it down.

He braced himself for rejection as he reached for her and pulled her into his arms. The urge to strip her out of her clothing, to make love to her and reaffirm life shocked him with its intensity, nearly overwhelmed him.

"Bryn," he whispered, holding her, rubbing his cheek against the soft silk of her hair. She was teetering on the verge of recognizing who and what he was. But her rational mind anchored her ability to deny what deep inside she *knew*.

He should *say* something, *do* something to prepare her for what was to come and yet words and actions eluded him as they stood near the precipice of their future together.

He was Death but he was also Atticus Denali. She was his wife, the one chosen to walk at his side and not merely pass through his shadow.

Perhaps he should have parted the shroud separating him from the knowledge that was his birthright. He could have seen that Ester's mortal life was at its end, had wondered briefly if her time was near when her mind painted his face into the memory of her aunt and sister's passing.

No doubt she'd felt their impending death, dressed it as a dark-suited stranger, a child's vision of an undertaker at her aunt's bedside, the image revisited in later years at her sister's death. Her ability to see the ghost in her family's private cemetery testified to her sensitivity.

But even now he couldn't regret his choice not to *know* or interfere. Death was a brief moment, a step between a life lived and what came next. And yet he wouldn't have had Ester take that step unattended, her fear heightened because she was alone.

"Bryn," he whispered again, smoothing his hand down her spine, wanting her to melt against him as she always had before. "Do you believe in soul mates?" he asked, the question emerging from the tangle of his thoughts and emotions.

A shiver went through her, the subtle struggle of the subconscious to be heard. "Yes," she said, the word barely audible.

He cupped her cheek, used his touch to coax her into looking up at his face. *It's too soon*, he thought, and yet it was also too late. They were already bound together as man and wife. Only the Oracle of Amun could sever that bond and set Bryn's soul free.

"You're my soul mate," Atticus whispered, "the only woman for me. Accept me for who I am just as you want me to accept who you are."

He lowered his mouth to hers. Pain ripped a hole in his heart when she tensed. Pleasure healed the wound when she finally softened in his arms, her lips yielding, parting, her tongue greeting his, tentatively at first, then with more confidence.

Love coursed through him, tender and fierce, all consuming. It made him feel possessive, protective, transcended the physical need to couple with her even as it ratcheted up the desire to do so.

He said with his kiss what he couldn't yet put in words, what she wasn't ready to hear. He told her of his love, his desire, gave her his promise to honor and cherish, to care for her.

Only a hint of wariness remained in her eyes when the kiss ended. Hope fluttered through his chest at the reprieve though a tight knot of worry formed in his stomach. Time was running out. When his vacation ended there would be no shielding Bryn from the truth.

"I'll be back after I visit my friend," she said.

Atticus brushed his thumb over her lips. "I'll be here."

He let her go, watched from the doorway as she drove away, and felt utterly alone when he returned to her living quarters. Quiet descended on him, making him agitated rather than peaceful.

He paced, paused to look at her books, to study the poster art on her walls, to handle the knickknacks she'd collected. They were all Bryn but it was only because of her that they held meaning for him.

Desolation threatened to swamp him. Surrounded by her things, by the memories they'd made over the last days, her absence now, with things unresolved between them was intolerable, nearly unbearable.

He couldn't lose her. Every road she might take led back to him. That kept him sane. But as Atticus paced and waited, the weight of the human experience settled more heavily on him and his admiration for them grew. That they could risk emotional devastation by loving deeply and without regret in the face of life's tenuous nature took courage, an amazing amount of courage.

Chapter Twelve

Bryn placed the five Death cards on the counter. She was relieved when Ava's sole reaction was lifted eyebrows before looking down to study them.

"I'd say old, as in, very valuable collector-old," Ava said.

"I thought so too," Bryn said, biting her bottom lip to keep from saying more since Ava wouldn't appreciate any additional information, anything that might influence the reading.

Even though the cards weren't in any particular order, Ava picked up the one left by Suriel the Trumpeter first, then unerringly picked up the one left by Charon the Coachman next.

Goose bumps crawled along Bryn's arms when Ava selected the card left by Seker third, followed by the one left at Ester's house, and finally the one waiting when she got home.

She crossed her arms, tried to draw some comfort in the fact that Ava hadn't run screaming from the room, didn't seem particularly alarmed by what she sensed in the cards.

In reverse order Ava picked them up again, this time with her eyes closed. When she reached the first one she said, "There's a lot of energy in these cards. They are old, extremely old, not just high quality reproductions. They've passed through a lot of hands though most of them were a long time ago. They've been playing cards and divination cards. And despite the fact they all say Death on them, I'm not sensing any implied threat. They seem more like those visiting cards aristocrats liked to use in the seventeenth century."

Ava touched each one of them again. "Recently they've been handled by six different men. But *all* of them belong to *one* of the men, someone extremely close to you, not just physically close but emotionally, a soul mate, a—" Ava opened her eyes, a question in them, a hint of hurt feelings. "Did you sneak off to Vegas and get married? Do these belong to your husband?"

Bryn's obvious shock answered the question and caused Ava's eyebrows to draw together. She closed her eyes again, concentrated on the cards as Bryn's head filled for an instant with white noise.

Even after a lifetime of dealing with ghosts, Bryn didn't want to believe, still found it nearly impossible to believe, to accept. For long moments she clung, wrapped herself in denial. But in the end she couldn't hide from a truth her subconscious had already arrived at.

Five cards. Five brothers.

Do you believe in soul mates? he'd asked before she left.

Yes, but— She'd always thought her soul mate would be human.

You are my soul mate, the only woman for me. Accept me for who I am just as you want me to accept who you are.

Her heart raced in her chest, pounded and thundered as she tried to process lightning-fast thoughts, as her world turned on an axis that jarred with the reality she had always known— And yet her reality was different than most people's. What made her think it was the only one when it came to the supernatural?

She'd never met a man who felt so right for her, so perfect—until Atticus. When she was with him she felt completely free to be herself.

I have a professional interest in death, he'd said and she'd immediately labeled him a mortician.

He'd told her repeatedly it was the two of them *together* that were responsible for the manifestations of Death—for the greetings from his brothers, he'd meant, though she'd come to believe it was her ability to see ghosts combined with his belief in a death entity that were the reason everything was so different.

"So what gives?" Ava asked, opening her eyes and spearing Bryn with a look, interrupting the wild flow of thoughts going through Bryn's mind.

Bryn scooped the cards up and returned them to her purse. "I think I need to find that out myself," she said, skirting the counter and hugging Ava before exiting the store.

She could run. But what was the use in that? Especially if he wasn't what he appeared to be, human, if he was what she'd come to believe he might be.

There was a calmness that came with accepting. The image of Ester reaching for Azrael's hand flashed through Bryn's mind but she pushed it away, not ready to go there yet. Not ready to think about the deeper issues of what it might mean to be Atticus' soul mate, his wife, as Ava believed.

Lost in the fog of her thoughts Bryn didn't register Mark's presence until she was in her car driving—and suddenly he was there, in her rearview mirror, in her backseat, a gun in his hand.

Terror held Bryn in its grip, froze her foot to the gas pedal and her eyes to the mirror for a horror-filled second. She saw her death in his gaze and had it confirmed when he said, "I don't have anything left to lose, Bryn. You shouldn't have sent her away, especially when she didn't want to go."

Ice filled Bryn's chest as she drove, staying on course to her apartment, to Atticus. "What are you talking about Mark?"

"Don't lie to me!" he screamed, face contorting into anguished rage, the barrel of the gun jamming into the back of her seat hard enough for her to feel it, to know it was just as deadly there as pressed against her temple.

She didn't dare slam on the brakes and wreck the car. She couldn't risk that the gun was loaded, the safety off, his finger on the trigger.

A sick feeling crept into Bryn. Realization dawned as she neared her office and thought of the unexpected tarot card she'd found there and what it must represent, of Atticus' unexpected absence and early morning return with a carton of Cherry Garcia ice cream.

"No!" Mark shouted from the back seat, jarring Bryn from her thoughts. "Drive to my house. You're going to bring her back or we're going to join her."

The destruction in the kitchen made Bryn gasp in shock. It was shades of the bookman's fury, only

the fight he'd put up was nothing compared to Mark's mother.

Furniture lay overturned and broken. Silverware and cooking utensils were embedded in the wall around the kitchen door and in the hallway. Shattered glass and plates littered the floor, turning it into a minefield and leaving the counter bare except for a Ouija board.

"You didn't know?" Mark asked, his voice sounding like a lost child, giving her hope that she would survive this encounter.

"I didn't know. When did this happen?"

"Last night. I came home from work this morning and she was gone."

Mark's hand tightened on Bryn's wrist. His grief translated into a jolt of pain up her arm.

"If you want to bring her back we'll need special candles for the séance," Bryn said, keeping her voice calm, soothing, confident, the desire to stay alive making the lie come easily and without remorse.

"What kind of candles?" he asked, his grip on her arm loosening.

She'd had time in the car to think about it, to plan. She prayed she wasn't putting Ava in danger but she didn't think Mark would strike out at a stranger.

"The only place you can get them is from the occult shop on Boulay Street."

Suspicion tightened his face. "You were just there."

She nodded, not surprised to learn he'd followed her there before breaking into her car and waiting. "I wanted to consult with Ava about some tarot cards," Bryn said, giving him a truth in order to strengthen the lie. "She's got a witch friend who makes candles for her to sell in the shop. The ones we need for the séance are special, they help open the ghostway so a spirit can be called through it. They're really expensive, Mark, and they have to be destroyed afterward but if you want to do this—"

"I do."

"Then we need the candles for the séance."

* * * * *

Atticus knew fear when his brothers appeared in front of him, their faces remaining somber as they took in the restraints still attached to the bed, the erotic romance book in his hands. His first thought was of Bryn, that something had happened to her.

"What is it?" he asked, rising, tossing the book to the bed.

"We were called to the Oracle of Amun," Sammael said.

The tension drained from Atticus with a suddenness that left him weak. Given their recent antics, he wasn't surprised. "What did the Oracle say?"

His brothers exchanged worried glances. "She forbade us interfering or coming to you until Bryn's life was in the hands of another."

The fear returned in a rush. "Where's Bryn?"

"With her suitor."

"Where?"

Sammael shook his head. "We're not allowed to say." His hand reached out to grip Atticus' arm. "We would though, and suffer the penalty for it if it were in your best interest or your wife's. But it's not."

Atticus covered his brother's hand with his, saw the pain and worry in Sammael's eyes, the frustration at being used as a pawn in the Oracle's game. He acknowledged it with a nod.

"I'll find her on my own then," Atticus said, adrenaline pulsing through him, his destination crystallized by the time he got to the Aston Martin.

There was only one place a man obsessed with his mother's ghost would go, and that was home.

* * * * *

Bryn tried not to let terror overwhelm her as Mark used duct tape to secure her to a chair, which he then secured to the pantry doorknobs. She hadn't expected him to trust her when he went for the candles but she'd hoped he'd lock her in a bathroom or closet.

Stay calm, she told herself. It's a good plan. Ava will know I'm in trouble as soon as he asks for the "special" candles.

They'd had more than one conversation about the ghostways, the impossibility of bringing back spirits who'd entered them. And though Ava didn't generally "read" people, she'd pick up the vibes around Mark and find a way of getting his address. Bryn had to believe that.

"I'm sorry, Bryn," Mark said as he tore a dishcloth and used it to gag her.

His voice had lost its desperate edge and that helped calm her, made it easier to bear his touch without flinching, to meet his eyes with compassion and understanding in hers.

She could freak out later. After. But now she needed to continue restoring his trust.

Trust. A shiver went through Bryn as the image of Atticus tied to her bed rose in her mind. It surprised her that she could think about it now, and yet there'd been such beauty in his face, his straining body, in what had happened between them. Even with what she suspected, she knew she'd let Atticus tether her to the bed. In the face of *this* death she realized she trusted him, believed absolutely in the sincerity of his claim that they were soul mates.

If—no, *when* she got away from Mark then she would confront Atticus with her suspicions, face her fears of the unknown head-on. She felt the rightness of being with him even if she didn't understand what it meant for the two of them.

* * * * *

In the daylight Atticus saw the military precision of the yard. Shrubs trimmed to rigid conformity. Grass clipped short like a military haircut.

The absence of a car in the driveway sent fear skittering along his nerve endings and roiling through his stomach. He'd gambled Bryn would be here. He couldn't allow himself to think he'd lost.

He kicked the door and the wood yielded under the force he applied, adrenaline and resolve giving him superhuman strength. Upstairs was the war zone he remembered. He took only enough time to check behind every door before crashing down the stairs.

"Bryn!" he said, emotion pummeling him when he found her in the kitchen.

Uncaring of the debris, he knelt before her, ripped the gag from her mouth and covered her lips with his own. She greeted him with passion, sobbed into his mouth in relief and fear.

"How did you know?" she asked, pulling at her bonds.

He cupped her face, wiped away her tears with his thumbs and couldn't lie to her now that she was safe. "My brothers," he said, relief sliding through him when she didn't seem puzzled or surprised.

Reluctantly his hands left her face. He struggled for a moment with the duct tape before saying, "I need something to cut this with."

Atticus left her only long enough to retrieve a knife. He sliced through the tape tethering her to the pantry doors and pulled the chair forward so he could get to her hands and ankles.

"Hurry," she said, and it was as if that single word conjured Mark from thin air.

Suddenly he was in the doorway, gun raised, his shouted "No! I need her with me!" punctuated with the pulling of the trigger, the sharp bark of a fired weapon.

No! screamed through Atticus, his reaction human, too slow to prevent the bullet from slamming into

Bryn's chest, too slow to take the bullet himself and prevent her death.

Grief, horror, shock. They ripped through Atticus, pierced his heart as the bullet had pierced Bryn's chest.

He looked up in time to see Mark turning the gun on himself, to see his brothers shimmering into view, and then time was frozen, as with a flick of Sammael's fingers a tiny golden hourglass tumbled to its side on his palm.

Atticus' spirit parted from human flesh, a severing like that wrought by the scythe though no ghostway opened. He took form, spectral self and physical self standing side by side, twins caught in a frozen tableau.

His first thought was Bryn. She wasn't dead, not yet. Her soul hung by a sliver, waiting only for a few more heartbeats, a few more breaths before being freed.

Neither was her assailant dead. The gun was pointed at the ceiling, caught in mid-arc on its way to Mark's temple, his finger still on the trigger.

"We couldn't interfere before now," Sammael said, his voice holding regret, apology. He closed the distance between them, pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to Atticus.

Death stood in stark simplicity on the front, dark robed with a scythe in hand, surrounded by the gray of the ghostways. The back of the card held the Oracle of Amun's symbol.

"You have a choice," Sammael said. He took a deep breath. "You can claim Bryn now by unfreezing time, allowing this to play out without the additional burden of having been directly responsible for her death as you would have been at the end of your vacation. Or you may remain here with your bride, fully mortal, subject to the same trials and tribulations as they endure, the same frailties brought on by the aging of their bodies, the same pain of loss and loneliness if she dies before you do."

Atticus glanced down at the card in his hand. Death. It was simple. Elegant. A name and a title he'd once taken refuge in. But now, because of Bryn, he was so much more. Through her he'd experienced humanity in a way that was deeper, more personal than what he'd found between the pages of any book.

I trust you more than I've ever trusted any other man, she'd told him as she'd hovered above him while he lay tethered to the bed. *You make me glad to be alive*.

"And him?" Atticus asked, indicating Mark.

"By the Oracle's decree, to change what happens to your bride is to change what happens to her suitor," Sammael said, a hint of amusement lightening his somber eyes. "But I believe you can rely on us to put the fear of Death in him, to scare him straight, so to speak."

Atticus looked around him at his brothers and felt a swell of love for them. In the span of his brief vacation, his relationship with them had shifted, changed. He no longer saw himself as excluded from their circle by the weight of responsibility, by differences in age and perspective. The potential for companionship, for a friendship found in being equals shone bright on the horizon, and yet to reach for that star, to return to his own world meant Bryn's mortal life would end.

Bryn. He tucked the oracle's card into his shirt pocket, finding the choice easy. In the end, he would know mortal death personally, but for now the card would hold a different meaning.

"I'll remain here," Atticus said.

With a sudden flare, sunlight streamed into the kitchen and gathered, became an old woman clothed in folds of gold, though Atticus knew the image was an illusion. The Oracle of Amun could appear in an infinite number of forms.

The Oracle lifted her hand and pointed. A ray of sunlight struck Bryn, burned through just enough of the past so that her blouse was no longer saturated with blood, her chest no longer pierced by a bullet.

Then the Oracle turned her attention to Bryn's suitor, bathed him in a shaft of light so he was no longer frozen into position, though time remained stopped for him. She picked up the small hourglass in Sammael's hand and with a negligible wave sent him, as well as the other four, to Mark's side.

"I'll be monitoring the five of you," she admonished. "This is the last bit of interference in your brother's life I'll tolerate. An occasional visit is acceptable, but there'll be no flashy manifestations in front of witnesses."

She turned to Atticus. "You courted your wife when all of your predecessors have simply taken their brides, and now you have given up your own world for hers. Such acts shouldn't go unacknowledged or unrewarded. What would you have?"

The answer came to Atticus in an instant, along with memories of covering Bryn's body with his as an ocean breeze scented the air and brought the call of seabirds. "There's an estate that once belonged to a silent film star named Caroline. That's what I'd have to start my life with Bryn."

"So be it. Take her there and wake her with a kiss."

Then with a flick of her thumb, the Oracle righted the golden hourglass and time resumed.

* * * * *

Bryn woke to the feel of masculine lips against hers and lost herself in the pleasure of Atticus.

His heat warmed her. His body was solid, deliciously heavy, his erection a hard presence at the juncture of her thighs.

Thoughts tried to crowd in, fears and memories, but the rub of his tongue against hers, the press of his cock against her clit kept them at bay.

She needed him, wanted him.

It seemed so natural to cant her hips, to welcome him inside her. Passion flared between them, hot, insistent, and yet his movements were slow, his touch so tender it brought tears to her eyes.

Bryn cried in the aftermath of orgasm, clung to him as her mind cleared only to fill with the fog of confusion.

She recognized her surroundings. Felt alive though her memories insisted she must be dead.

It hadn't been a dream. She knew that with unshakable certainty.

The visit with Ava. Mark with his gun and his willingness to kill her and then himself.

"Why are we here?" Bryn asked, her heart racing with uncertainty rather than desire.

His smile made her sheath clench and her toes curl. "Because this is our new home."

"I don't understand," she said, her confusion deepening.

Atticus reached for his shirt, retrieved a card from its pocket. Death, stark and unadorned graced it, making her shiver despite the heat of his body.

He kissed her deeply, settled more of his weight on her. "You have nothing to fear, Bryn. This was never your card. It was meant for me."

"But you're—"

He stopped her with the touch of his lips to hers.

"Only a man now, Bryn. The one who will love you in life and then afterward, in death."

Questions crowded in, but they faded in importance against the vulnerability Bryn saw in his face. She brushed her thumb against his lips. "I have it on good authority that we're already married. A woman *does* like to be asked, even if she believes the man is her soul mate."

Joy flashed in his eyes. He leaned down so his mouth was only inches above hers. "Consent to being my wife?"

"I do."

About the Author

Jory has been writing since childhood and has never outgrown being a daydreamer. When she's not hunched over her computer, lost in the muse and conjuring up new heroes and heroines, she can usually be found reading, riding her horses, or hiking with her dogs.

Jory welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

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