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Ménage & More

Corinne Davies

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BELIEVING IS TRUSTING

Sequel to Believing is Seeing

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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Ménage and More

BELIEVING IS TRUSTING

Copyright © 2009 by Corinne Davies

E-book ISBN: 1-60601-686-5

First E-book Publication: December 2009

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

DEDICATION

For my girls. You two make me so proud.

For my Honey. Thank you for your continual support, and for continuing to do most of the cooking 😊

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Sequel to Believing is Seeing

CORINNE DAVIES

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Chapter One

Hazel stood in the shadows of a bookcase full of Encyclopedia Britannicas. Dusty old tomes tickled her nose and would have threatened a sneeze if she hadn't been so enthralled with the sight in front of her. From this angle, she could see over the railing and down into the back corner of the library's first floor. She couldn't believe what she saw going on there, in a library of all places!

When a woman bent over to look at a book, a man came up behind her and slid a hand up her skirt. Hazel paused her first instinct to start screaming when the woman acted cautious but not scared. The man pressed himself up against her and rotated his hips suggestively. Hazel couldn't tear her eyes away even if she wanted to. Like a sinful pleasure, she couldn't resist. Not many ventured up here into the shadows, not when the computers were so much more convenient. This moment was a voyeur's dream.

The man's long, curly hair gave an exotic edge to his incredible good looks. While the woman seemed to be unsure at first, she obviously became aroused by his attentions. When he flipped up her skirt and began feasting between the woman's legs, Hazel grabbed the shelf in front of her. She shouldn't watch them, not strangers who thought they shared a private moment, but she couldn't bring herself

to look away from them. She loved watching. A dark secret she hadn't indulged in for years. This kind of opportunity didn't happen every day. If only she had someone in her life that could help relieve the ache throbbing against her clit. She could feel the clip she had attached move as her body swelled against the gentle pressure, increasing the sweet torture. She couldn't remember the last time she felt a hand on her, other than her own.

Hazel's hands fisted as she resisted the urge to slip her fingers into her panties and relieve some of the ache, but she knew to resist now would increase her pleasure later. She watched the couple in silence, mentally encouraging them to further their pleasure. When he stood and moved to cover the young woman, Hazel felt her knees go weak. All too soon it ended, leaving Hazel painfully aroused, her fingers gripping the shelf in front of her.

She wanted one last glimpse of the couple, one more memory she could think about later when she lay alone in her bed. Curiosity driving her, she quickly left and headed toward the checkout. The couple walked hand in hand when a second man joined them. The newcomer leaned down and gave the woman a possessive kiss. Hazel ducked back behind a rack of returns before they saw her watching them.

"Excuse me?"

Hazel jumped slightly, the memory so vivid that for a moment she forgot it happened over a year ago. A petite blonde held up a copy of the *Kama Sutra*.

"Is there anything else like this here?"

She could feel her cheeks heating up and knew that in a moment her neck would be bright red as well. "I'm sorry. Do you mean ancient Indian texts? I have some reference books just over here." She moved out of the shadow of the bookcase she re-shelved research books on and down a narrow aisle past a couple of rows and into an open area. "Is this the book you're interested in?"

The petite woman tilted her head slightly and smiled. “No, I mean books about sex with better pictures. You can’t really tell what they are doing in that one.”

Hazel couldn’t help the grin that curled her lips. This particular book was often waved in front of her face by an angry matron demanding the filth be burned. At least the heat she could still feel burning her cheeks could be blamed on the material under her nose.

“No, but I can give you the card of someone I know. She has a shop over on Central. There are a lot of books in there that you might find more to what you’re looking for.”

“The Sweet Spot? Oh, I’ve meant to get over there. Are you okay? You’re looking a little...overwhelmed?”

“I’m fine, really.” Although, at the moment, she did feel a bit overheated and her head a bit spinny. *Damn*, she hadn’t felt like this since her pregnancy. No chance of that being possible, so she must be getting sick. *Great, she really didn’t have time for this.*

She fished a card out of her pocket and handed it to the small woman. “The address is on the card, and the owner’s name is Matilda. She’ll be able to help you.”

“Thanks for your help, Hazel. My name’s Deedee. You sure you’re okay?”

“Of course.” She brushed her bangs off her forehead. *It got awfully warm in here all of a sudden.* “Wait, how did you know my name?”

Deedee gave her a small wave and a bit of a strange smile.

Are you ready? echoed in Hazel’s thoughts...but in Deedee’s voice.

“I am feeling a bit strange...” Hazel’s vision filled with spots, and the world abruptly tilted, just for her. She expected to land on the floor, but instead a pair of arms wrapped around her.

“Are you all right? Miss? Can you hear me?”

Such a nice voice, Hazel thought to herself. The deep tone made her envision decadent things like melted chocolate, rich and sinful.

She had a crazy thought of how she would love to wrap herself up in that voice and feel it caress her bare skin.

Her eyes fluttered as she tried to open them, but they seemed to be weighted down. A rush of panic danced over her senses, racing her heart, making her shake.

“Okay, calm down. You’re fine.” His voice sounded far away even though her cheek rested against his shoulder. If she could just get her mind to work properly, but she couldn’t hold on to any solid thoughts for long before slipping into blackness.

When she came to, she experienced a feeling of weightlessness. Her body jerked in response, afraid that she had fallen or been dropped.

“Don’t worry. I’m just laying you down,” that incredible voice murmured softly. Now that voice she would love to hear in her bed at night. She managed to open her eyes for a moment, long enough to recognize the water-stained ceiling of the staff room. She must be on the old soft couch in there. Someone gently lifted her head and tucked a pillow under it. She felt her sweater being unzipped, and then fingers caressed the skin just under her jaw.

“Hazel, are you comfortable?”

“Yes, but we can’t have sex here.”

A soft snicker came from someone, but not him. Her eyes popped fully open, and she gazed up at the most beautiful smile she had ever seen. “Oh! Tell me I did not just say that out loud.”

His grin quirked, and humor shone in his eyes. “All right, but I hope you’ll offer a rain check.”

“Oh sweetie, are you all right? You fainted right in the middle of ancient Greece.” Mrs. Roberts’s face came into view just over the man’s left shoulder. “This young man scooped you up before you hit the floor. Very dashing. The older woman fluttered her eyelashes at him and patted his bicep, then giggled. *Giggled?*

“Hazel Cooke, this is Bach Krastos.”

“Bach? Your parents are fans of the classics?” She blinked a couple times trying to get her eyes to focus properly, but everything seemed to stay a touch fuzzy.

“You could say that.” He smiled down at her and ran a couple fingers over her cheek. A few hairs that blocked her vision were brushed away, and she found it easier to focus.

As her vision cleared, she found herself treated to a man with the classical looks to go with his name. Many a woman would kill for lips that looked as soft as his, and for a moment she had an insane urge to stroke them with her fingertips. His hair shone dark mahogany and fell in soft waves around his face. The sunlight coming in from the window behind him emphasized wine-colored highlights. She lifted her hand and fingered a wavy lock, discovering it felt as soft as it looked.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” She whipped her hand away from his head before she followed through with the earlier urge to caress his lips.

“Please, don’t apologize. Have you eaten today, or is there any other reason that might cause you to faint?”

Hazel managed to refrain from snorting. “No.”

That would require sex, something she hadn’t had with another human in longer than she would like to admit. After her son’s birth, her body transformed into this curvy figure that made her self-conscious. She glanced down at herself, relieved to see that, while her oversized sweater lay open, a blanket rested over her torso. When had that happened? She couldn’t think straight like this and started to feel panicky about it. *Control*, she had to get control over herself. She struggled to move, but Bach laid a large hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t be in a big hurry to get up. You’re fine the way you are.”

His fingers rested just at the bottom of her neck, his palm over her collarbone. He felt warm, and she sensed her body reacting. She could envision what would happen if he slid his hand down a bit farther and

cupped her breast. She could feel her nipples tightening in response to that mental picture. Thank God for the invention of padded bras.

“She’s diabetic.” Mrs. Roberts leaned over Bach’s shoulder again. Hazel had forgotten that they weren’t alone.

“Does she control it with insulin or diet?” Bach looked over her and spoke to Mrs. Roberts.

“No needles. I skipped breakfast and forgot to grab a snack.” She didn’t like being talked about instead of to. “I planned on taking an early lunch.”

She felt silly, a grown woman who couldn’t take care of herself. Her morning started out rushed. Gabriel announced, as they walked out the door, that today was “Freaky Hat Day” at school and he didn’t have one. It took another ten minutes to find the perfect accessory, putting them farther behind schedule. Normally, it wouldn’t have been a problem as long as she had a snack. Once at the library, she kept getting distracted by little jobs. She rebooted the returns computer and put in a request for some new audio-books, then went to reshelv some research books and started daydreaming about memories.

“I’m going to go get you some juice from the kitchen.” Mrs. Roberts headed for the door, and Hazel almost called her back. She didn’t want to be left alone with this man, no matter how much her body disagreed.

“Do you need a ride home or, better yet, to a doctor?”

“No, no. I’ll be fine.” On the rare occasion she let her diabetes get the better of her, she always felt completely wiped out afterward. Other than being a bit embarrassed, she felt fine. “I’m sorry to drop on you like that.”

“You surprised me. I’m used to women dropping at my feet, but not before I’ve spoken to them.” That might have been an attempt at humor, but she had heard that kind of arrogance before. Nice to see her beliefs being confirmed, men that looked like him always had the attitude to go with it.

“Lucky me. Please, feel free to go back to your collapsing hordes. I’ll be fine.”

He frowned slightly at her obvious dismissal, not that she cared. When she tried to sit up, he laid a large hand on her shoulder and shook his head.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I can get up.”

“No, you need to rest for a bit more.”

“You a doctor?” She took a quick look at the rest of him, noticing the torn jeans and black leather jacket.

“Premed.”

“Really?” He didn’t look like any doctor she had met.

“What? Geeks can’t look good? Judging a book by its cover? You should know better being surrounded by them.”

“No...I mean your type.”

“Ouch, I’m stereotyped already.”

“I don’t mean it that way...Well, yes, I do. I can explain, or maybe not.” She rubbed her forehead with her palm. If only she could get her thoughts back in order, being prone in front of him distracted her too much. “I can’t think on my back.”

“You’re not supposed to.” His eyes darkened, desire hidden in their depths. She fought the urge to give in to his smoldering look and have a bit of fun. In her younger years, she would have fallen for such a blatant tactic, but thankfully she had grown up. She had one child she cared for the best she could on her own. Thanks to past experiences, she avoided men of his ilk.

“I’d better get up. I have a lot to do.” *Where did Mrs. Roberts and the juice get to?* “Do you know what happened to the woman I spoke to? I hope I didn’t startle her too much.”

“I didn’t see anyone.” Bach frowned slightly as if he really didn’t have a clue who Hazel meant.

“How could you miss her? A tiny blonde holding a copy of the *Kama Sutra*?”

“Sorry, Hazel, there wasn’t anyone that looked like that near you when you fainted.”

“I must have blacked out just before I went down. Thank you again for saving me from an ungraceful landing on the floor.”

“I’m glad I caught you. How about you let me take you to lunch?” He rubbed his thumb against her fingers. She had forgotten that her hand lay in his. A shimmering warmth danced up her arm and straight to her core.

“No, you have done enough already.” She extricated her fingers, pulled her legs up, and twisted slightly, curling into herself. She pulled the blanket higher. “I’ll be fine. I have my lunch here.”

“Why don’t I pick you up after work one day and take you to dinner?”

“Honey, you okay?” Mrs. Roberts came back in. “You need to take the rest of the day off?”

Bach perked up, but Hazel quickly ended that idea. “No, I’m fine. I’ll have my lunch and be okay. Thanks again for your help, Bach. Mrs. Roberts will keep an eye on me, I’m sure.”

“You’ll be seeing me again.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Mrs. Roberts gave her a wide-eyed “What are you, nuts?” look from behind him. Hazel ignored her. She needed to keep her priorities straight. Bach wasn’t wrong in his assumption that she based her opinion of him on his looks. In her experience, men with his looks were too high maintenance.

“Well, I guess we’ll find out who’s right then. Nice to meet you, Mrs. Roberts. Make sure she lies down for a bit longer and eats her lunch. Be sure she checks her blood sugar. She might need a dose of insulin.”

“Hello, I’m right here. I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“I can see that.”

His dry reply had her grinding her molars. She didn't pass out because of her blood sugar. Some doctor he would be. "Take care, Bach. Good luck with medical school."

Bach headed for the door but paused in the doorway and turned to look back at her. "Hazel, I'm going to see you later."

She bit off the denial she wanted to shout at him. By turning the corner before she could respond, he didn't give her the opportunity to argue.

"Oh, to be thirty years younger." Mrs. Roberts sighed. "They did not make men like that when I was your age."

Hazel snorted, hoping to detract from the fact that she, too, had ogled that jean-clad ass as well. "They still don't. All those good looks come with a side effect of being terribly arrogant. The last thing I need in my life is a man who thinks he can boss me around."

She handed Hazel a small bottle of orange juice and put her lunch bag on the table next to her. "You need to think about finding your son a good role model."

"That's the only reason I will ever consider getting involved again. Besides, I don't think that a GQ hunk will fit the bill. I want Gabriel to learn to respect the women in his life, not the skills needed to pick them up. I'm sure when Bach finds out I have a son, it will be the last I see of him."

"So you are going to see him again?" The older lady grinned at Hazel's slip.

"According to him, I will. Although, I have a feeling the next Twinkie in a short skirt will distract him enough to forget about me."

"You should have more faith in yourself, sweetie. You're a wonderful person, a great mom. He would be lucky to be a part of your and Gabriel's life."

"One day, I'll find an average guy who is good to my son and nice to me, and I'll be thankful for what I have."

"So you're planning on settling? What about sparks and chemistry? I could tell this young man had an effect on you. Sex is a

big part of life, and you don't want to settle there. One day Gabriel will move out to start his own life, and then what will you have left?"

Hazel didn't even want to think that far in advance. Her baby would be going into grade two this September. The idea of him going to university seemed so far away. "I'll worry about that day when it arrives. For now I just want what is best for Gabriel."

"Even if it's not what is best for you?"

"Especially if it's not what is best for me. I've messed the poor kid's life up enough already."

"Don't you dare blame yourself for the selfish bastard who chose a life of drug use over you." Mrs. Roberts rushed over and sat down next to her. "You made the adult decision to get out of a dangerous situation."

"Yeah, some adult I am. I'm the one who got pregnant."

"There has only been one immaculate conception, Hazel. You weren't it."

"I'm going to be more careful next time, and Bach isn't going to break my defenses." Feeling better, she sat up and did the zipper back up to her neck, the action making her feel more secure. Keeping herself looking as dowdy as possible kept most men at bay. Those that didn't take the hint, she ignored.

"Oh sweetie, I'm sorry to say this, but I'm rooting for the young man."

* * * *

Hazel spent the rest of the day torn between worrying over if he would show up or if he wouldn't. She shelved books like a madwoman, nervous energy riding her hard. *You have to be firm with Bach if he shows up. You have Gabriel to think of. You can't mess up his life.* Determined not to entertain the idea of going home with Bach, she did indulge in a couple fantasies. That only made her more nervous as the time to go home crept nearer. His hands felt so

incredible against her skin. She could imagine what those long fingers could do to her. Her breasts ached to be held, and that woke up other parts of her body that she did her best to ignore. Only later, in the dark, long after Gabe fell asleep would she give in and play with herself. Her favorite toy waited in her night-table drawer.

Determined to avoid the most gorgeous man she had seen...ever, she ducked out fifteen minutes early. She tried to give Mrs. Roberts an excuse, but the older woman didn't believe her for a moment and didn't hesitate to tell her so. Still, she let her go, with a warning that if she kept avoiding relationships she would end up a cranky old woman.

Hazel felt marginally silly as she hid in the entrance alcove and scanned the staff parking lot. Coast was clear. *Too bad*. Yes, he might be the most gorgeous man ever to cross her path, but she wouldn't allow her hormones to dictate her life choices. Head down, she walked quickly toward her car, keys in hand.

"If I didn't know better, I would get the distinct impression that you tried to avoid me."

Shit. Hazel turned around and found Bach leaning against a large recess in the building's wall. No wonder she didn't see him when she scanned the parking lot.

"I don't know why you would think that, Mr. Krastos. I am merely heading home after a long day."

"Considering I've already had you in my arms, I think it's only fair to let you call me Bach. How are you feeling?" He walked closer to her, and the look of concern on his face almost appeared genuine.

"I'm fine. Perfectly fine." Could he see how hard her heart thumped in her chest? She understood now what it meant in stories when a woman swooned over a man. She would never make fun of it ever again. "Whatever caused my dizziness earlier has gone away, and I'm fine now. Blood sugar normal. Really, you don't need to concern yourself."

"I disagree. I feel responsible for your continued good health."

“I don’t know why. I have a good doctor and am adult enough to know when I need to go see him.”

“Because I caught you. When you go fishing, you can keep what you catch.”

He stepped closer, and she stepped away. “Well, I don’t see a fishing pond for miles around, and as flattering as it is to be compared to a trout, I’m not one. You aren’t going to keep anything that has to do with me.”

“Even if I asked nicely?” Bach looked much more uncertain than he had earlier in the day. It wouldn’t be long now before he gave up.

“I wouldn’t waste your breath.” She tamped down the inner voice that reminded her that he didn’t have to catch her earlier today. He could have let her hit the floor and then stepped over her.

“Take care of yourself, Hazel.” He opened his mouth as if he might say something else, but then closed it. She walked the last steps to her car and got in, giving him a small wave good-bye over her shoulder before driving away.

* * * *

Bacchus, the god of wine and fertility, and the totem for every party animal residing in this country’s many universities, stood in the middle of a library parking lot watching the only woman who had ever told him no, drive away. She didn’t say no to be coy or any other manipulative reason. She really meant *no*.

How long had it been since anyone dared say that to him? This new situation was beyond his normal area of expertise. What exactly should he do now? He could follow her home, but considering how nervous she acted, that would make matters even worse.

She really told him *no* and meant it?

Bacchus knew he sounded desperate when he all but begged that woman for a date, but he didn’t intend on passing up this opportunity. He found this little librarian fascinating. When she collapsed into his

arms, he figured her just another woman looking for attention. It wouldn't be the first time for that tactic to be tried on him. His opinion changed after speaking to her and finding out that she actually had a brain in her head. She had a quick wit, intelligence, and he could almost feel the passion she had locked down inside herself. No mortal would be able to break the walls that she had erected around herself.

Good thing he was a god.

He had the opportunity to study human behaviors, but never understood the fascination with emaciated stick figures for women. Hazel's body curved exactly as a woman's should with hips made to cradle a man's body. Once he unzipped that ugly sweater, he discovered a perfect pair of breasts. Remembering the look of them straining behind the T-shirt she wore under the ugly sweater had his mouth watering. He debated on taking a page from his sons-in-law and visiting her in her sleep, but why bother? He wanted her to know whose arms held her. He wanted it to be his name that she screamed when her pleasure overtook her.

The fact that she had a strong enough personality to be a bit bitchy attracted him more to her, not the other way around. He didn't have any interest in being with a shrew who had nothing good to say about anyone, especially him. Nor did he have any interest in another brainless beauty too drunk or stoned to realize the unique experience she's been chosen for. Being with a woman who, in order to keep her life safe, didn't allow fear to stop her from putting him in his place? That he didn't mind at all. Fighting could be fun as long as they got to make up later.

Chapter Two

A week passed since he laid her down in the library. His memories of her replayed in his mind almost to an obsessive level. The timing sucked, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

So, the other gods wanted him to have another gathering. They had discovered long ago that a Bacchanalia could act as a conduit for those gods strong enough to share their power with the weaker deities. The majority of gods remained inherently selfish, but almost everyone wanted to make sure the Parthenon survived. Until he met his daughter, he didn't agree. He had seriously contemplated helping those behind the real threat to raise the Titans. Someone wanted to wipe the universe clean and start over. At the time, that sounded better than the boredom that had plagued him for centuries.

Now he had a few good reasons not to think that way anymore. His daughter Amy, the first child born to the gods in millennia and happily married to Thanatos and Hypnos. A joining blessed by Aphrodite herself. Recently, Amy gifted him with the title of Grandfather.

Yes, he had several reasons to want to see life continue on. The Bacchanalia drew close, and with the unrest among the gods, this one needed to be particularly powerful. He needed to be personally involved, but fucking some human sacrifice held little appeal to him now. The thought of exchanging such power with a faceless woman left him with a sick feeling in his chest. He wanted Hazel.

He couldn't exactly say what forced this issue, but somewhere inside he knew that he needed her with a power that, up until this

point, he had never experienced. So far, the only word she would say is *no*.

Denied a simple coffee, and he needed to ask her if she would mind being fucked into oblivion in front of dozens of spectators? Even he knew that wasn't something you asked a girl on the first date.

Desperate times called for desperate measures. This morning, he called the formidable Mrs. Roberts, who gave him Hazel's phone number and address as soon as he said his name. Time wasn't on his side, but at least one person stood in his corner.

That is how he found himself standing on a sidewalk, staring up at a small, well-kept house with a plethora of toys littering the front porch. He hadn't considered the possibility of her having a child. The idea made him want to run, as well as pull her close. He had missed almost Amy's entire childhood, meeting her as an adult. Since then, he had often wondered what it would be like to watch a child grow up and to help influence such a thirsty mind.

Bach tore his gaze from the front door and turned to the young boy walking across the lawn in his direction. He couldn't be more than seven years old, with tousled blond hair and a Batman Band-Aid stuck to the side of his calf. The child gripped a large net with a taped up handle in one hand. His other hand held what looked to be a large margarine container with holes jabbed in the top. He stopped a couple feet away and stood there staring at Bach.

"What's in there?"

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers." The child continued to stare at him but seemed to be looking around him, rather than at him.

"Okay, that's a good rule. Strangers can be dangerous."

"Yeah, but you're not. I can tell."

What had Hazel taught her son? They lived in dangerous times, and here a mere child looked at him and decided that he wasn't a danger?

"What's your name?"

"Gabriel. What's yours?"

“Bach Krastos.”

Gabriel dropped the net on the ground moments before he dropped into a sitting position and tried to pry the lid off his container.

“Gabriel, I could be a very evil man who could hurt you. You are putting yourself in a lot of danger. How do you think your mom would feel if you got hurt?”

The boy looked up at him, a strange look crossing his young features before melting back into the innocence of youth. “You sound like a grown-up too. You aren’t the right color to be bad. I know my colors.”

“You can’t judge people by the color of their skin.”

“Not your skin...that’s not right. You have colors all around you. Everybody does. My mom has the prettiest, ’cause she is the prettiest mom in the world.”

“What color do I have?” He suspected he knew what the child spoke about. The last person he met with this ability lived centuries ago.

“Red, but it’s much darker than I normally see. You must be really old.”

“How do you know I’m not a bad person?”

“Bad people have sick colors that are all muddled together. Kinda like when your art page falls into a mud puddle.”

Surprise wasn’t an emotion Bacchus usually experienced, and here he was shocked for the second time in as many days. “You see a person’s aura? Does your mom know?”

Gabriel looked up for a moment with the exasperated look of a kid who is certain that adults aren’t as smart as everyone says. “Yeah, but she doesn’t talk about it much. She can’t see them. She says that makes me even more special.”

“Your mom is right.”

“She usually is.” His face lit up as he pried the top off and looked down into the container. “Look what I caught.”

Bacchus came closer and peered inside. In the middle of a pile of leaves and sticks sat a bright green praying mantis. “That’s cool.”

“Yeah, I’m going to catch him a friend.”

Bacchus could hear Gabriel’s name being called in the house. “Your mom know you’re out here?”

“Yeah, she knows everything. Especially if I’m doing something I’m not supposed to.”

“You’re a clever boy.”

“My mom says I’m intelligent and precocious.”

“Gabriel!” echoed across the backyard.

“Have to go.” Gabriel quickly placed the lid back on his container and grabbed his net before jumping to his feet.

A ruffling of feathers caught Bach’s attention. Looking up, he saw a Kere sitting on the lamppost, staring down at a passing car.

Gabriel’s soft voice spoke behind him. “I see monsters sometimes too.”

He looked back at Gabriel. The boy held his margarine container under his arm, staring up at the post. “They scare me. I don’t want them to hurt my mom.”

“That’s a Kere,” Bach said softly, stepping closer to the young man. “Do you see them often?”

“I see a lot of things my mom doesn’t see.”

“Are they watching you?”

“No, I don’t think they know I see them.”

“Gabriel, it is important that you never catch their attention. Never let them know you are looking at them.”

“Why?”

“Because they are a type of death omen. They can make bad things happen. If you ever see them watching you, get your mom to call me right away.” He wished that he didn’t put the flash of fear he saw in Gabriel’s eyes, but if the Keres made it a habit to visit this area, then he wanted to make sure they didn’t turn their eyes on this family.

“Can you make them go away?”

“No, but I know someone who will scare them off.”

“Really?” The young man’s eyes lit up with this bit of information. “Who?”

Bacchus hesitated, then decided that Gabriel’s belief would only help in the end if it came to it. “I know Thanatos very well. He is the god of death, and the only thing that the Keres fear.”

“Death? Cool. How come they are afraid of him? Don’t they kind of work together?”

“No, they don’t. Keres cause violence and death, but Thanatos doesn’t. He battled with them and won.”

“Cool,” Gabriel breathed and watched the inhuman creature fly after the car.

“Gabriel Michael Cooke! Why didn’t you answer me?”

Both men jumped at Hazel’s tone, speaking at the same time.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“It’s my fault.”

Hazel stood on the porch glaring at Bacchus. “How did you find where I live? Why are you here?” The breeze lifted her hair, brushing it across her face. She tucked some behind her ear. She looked different, wearing a tank top with a small sweater over it. He had his suspicions of what she might actually look like, but he didn’t imagine she would be this exquisite. Blessed with generous breasts, her tight jeans showing off rounded hips and long legs. No oversized baggy clothes for her at home, unlike what she habitually wore to the library. Slip her into a silk toga baring a shoulder and a hint of her breasts, and he might just follow her around on his knees.

“I just stopped by to say hi. See how you are feeling.” His thoughts must have been obvious because she started tugging on the thin sweater as if she could cover her chest more with it. When it occurred to her that wasn’t going to work, she opted to cross her arms over her ample breasts. Didn’t she realize that just drew his attention more?

Sensing her growing discomfort, he went for a distraction. “Gabriel is a very intelligent young man. Good imagination.”

Her gaze softened as she looked at her son. Gabriel gave her what must be his best innocent look. “I know I’m not supposed to talk to strangers, but he’s okay. Good colors, and I didn’t leave the property.”

“I know, and in this rare instance, it’s okay. You still need to have a bath before bed. It’s time to say good-bye.”

Gabriel turned a smile at Bach, and he grinned back. “It was nice to meet you, Mr. Krastos. I hope you come to say hi again. I have more things I can show you.”

“We’ll have to see, young man. Off you go.”

He watched the young man scamper up the stairs and wrap his arms around his mother’s legs. She laughed and hugged him to her before letting go so he could run into the house.

Bach felt a sharp tightening in his chest as he watched them. He had no idea what a child’s hug felt like. He could have known had he taken more of an interest in his own daughter. Despite Amy’s reassurances, he still felt as if he should have known done better by her. He lived a completely self-absorbed existence until meeting Amy. Without her influence, who knows how much time would have passed before he pulled his head out of his own ass.

A soft caress down his cheek brought him back to the present. Hazel’s dark brown eyes looked up at him in concern. “You okay, Bach?”

“Yes, just regrets.” He caught her hand and kept it against his cheek. “I have a daughter. I didn’t know her at this age.”

Hazel blinked, but other than that didn’t give any idea of being surprised. Her continued silence encouraged him to speak more, although he had the feeling that she did that deliberately.

“I didn’t know about her until recently.” He didn’t understand this craving to feel her skin against his. A simple touch and he wanted it to last forever. He let go of her hand after a moment more. “All the years

I missed out of her life, I'm trying to make it up to her now, but sometimes I think it's too late."

"It's never too late, Bach. She can't be all that old, as long as you're there for her now."

Bach wanted to tell her the truth, but he looked past her, to the reflection in the glass storm door. His reflection hadn't changed in over three thousand years. Pressing his lips together, he resisted the urge to tell her the complete truth. Like the fact that his daughter turned twenty-six a couple months ago and recently gave birth to his grandchildren. Also she is married to Thanatos and Hypnos, the gods of death and sleep respectively. *Yeah, that might push the truth envelope a little bit there.*

"I missed a great deal of her life."

"You seem like a good man, Bach. Many don't give a shit."

Hazel gently rubbed the palm of her hand. Nice to know his simple touch could distract her.

"Like Gabriel's father?"

"Gabe's father is a nightmare. It took me a long time to learn that abuse doesn't always mean physical. He had a drug habit. We both did, but I kicked mine. He couldn't fight the monkey on his back, though he tried. When I got pregnant, I hoped he would see it as a perfect reason for him to straighten up, but instead he became possessive and paranoid. He began to obsessively control me, and I didn't want Gabe raised with that kind of role model. I waited until one day when he got too stoned to see straight. I had him sign the papers that relinquished all rights to Gabriel. Once he passed out, I packed whatever I could in a couple bags and got us out of there. It wasn't long after that he got himself arrested for robbery and assault with a deadly weapon. He's been in jail ever since."

Bacchus frowned. "The justice system isn't infallible. What happens when he gets out?"

"He accused me of screwing around on him and denied being Gabe's father. I let him believe it. All he cares about now is where his

next fix is coming from. I couldn't save him, but I will not let my son be exposed to that kind of lifestyle."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Sometimes," she answered honestly, crossing her arms over her chest in a defensive pose.

A breeze shook the leaves in the tree overhead. A chill danced along his spine. Someone dancing on his grave if he remembered his myths correctly.

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her body close to his. The need to comfort her burned in his chest. The need to protect her had him wanting to whisk her off to his home, but even his home wasn't as safe as it used to be. "I will always be there if you need me, Hazel."

"You can't say that."

"Yes, I can. Trust me. If you ever need me, all you need to do is ask, and I will be there. For anything." He wanted desperately to take her inside and make love to her all night. But she needed to ask. She needed to bring him to her. Until then it would be nothing but a hollow act.

"I appreciate the thought, Bach."

He cupped his hands over her cheeks and pressed a chaste kiss against her lips. "Anytime, Hazel. All you need to do is ask. I give you my word."

Electricity shimmered around them, causing the hair to rise on his arms. He couldn't remember the last time he had created such a vow. She wouldn't have any clue what he had done, and for now he didn't care. He deepened the kiss, sealing the vow between them. She tasted like tangerines and cream, sweet and exotic. He wrapped his arms around her and enjoyed the feel of her there. Her curves pressed against him in all the right places, as if she was made just for him. She made a small mewling sound on the back of her throat, and it took everything in him not to lift her ass up, perch it on the porch railing, and press himself deep inside her. Her hands gripped his shirt. He

unconsciously cupped her bottom and pulled her up hard against him. Taking advantage of the contact, he pressed his erection against her core. Even with layers of clothes between them, he could almost believe he felt her heat scorch his length.

The sound of a car coming down the street jerked them both back to the present. She wiggled suggestively against him.

“Unless you want to be naked out here, Hazel, stop it.”

She stilled, and he lowered her legs down his body till they rested on the ground. Her erratic breathing matched his own. Never had a woman aroused him so quickly, so intently that he would have taken her like this, on a front porch for anyone to see. At least with all the climbing vines around them anything that might have happened could have been blocked from the neighbors.

“I had better check on Gabe.”

Bach glanced out at the street. Looking up at the tops of the street lights, he checked for lingering Keres.

“I’m sure he’s fine. I know I came across a little intense at the library, but I’d really like to see you again, Hazel.”

“Just the library?”

That wasn’t a *no*, finally. “How about this Saturday?”

“I can’t promise anything. I’ll ask my girlfriend to watch Gabriel, if she doesn’t already have plans, but I can’t be out late.”

“Whatever time I have with you I will cherish.”

She rolled her eyes and snorted in disbelief. He laughed and kissed her lightly on the lips again. “We’ll see who’s right,” he murmured before walking away from her despite the need to pull her into his arms and bury himself deep inside her.

He glanced back over his shoulder and enjoyed the sight of her leaning back against the front door. At that moment it dawned on him. If she hadn’t trusted him at all, he couldn’t have cemented his promise into a magical vow. It wouldn’t have worked.

“Good night, Hazel.”

“Good night, Bach.”

“Good night, Bach.” A small voice sounded from the window above them. Gabriel’s small form silhouetted against the glass.

“You better not be getting any water on the floor.” Hazel looked up at the porch roof as if she could magically see through it to her son.

The shadow immediately disappeared, making Bach laugh.

“You should phone your daughter tonight and say hi. Don’t let any more years go by.”

Nodding, he blew her a kiss and turned to leave. Knowing she watched, he added a bit more movement to his walk. Right about now, he hoped she felt as frustrated as him.

* * * *

“Hi there, sweetheart. How’s things going?”

“It’s terrible. The twins don’t sleep. I’m so tired I can’t keep up with anything. I have paperwork due for the foster care department, and I look terrible,” the female voice wailed in his ear.

“Honey, it’s okay.” Bach floundered against the sound of his daughter’s tears. Like most men, he had no idea what to do in this case. So he chose the most logical idea to him at the time. Making sure no one could see him, he transported himself to her back garden and came in the back door. Amy sat at the kitchen table, her head buried in her arms, sobbing her heart out, still holding the phone.

“Amaryllis?”

Her head snapped up. “Oh, Daddy!”

He felt his heart swell bigger than the Grinch’s in the cartoon of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Amy had taken to calling him Daddy after they had gotten to know each other better. He had a feeling it irritated the men in her life, but that didn’t bother him any. He should have made them work harder for her.

“Where are those no-good husbands of yours?” he growled, feeling the front of his shirt dampen under the onslaught of her tears.

He planned to beat the hell out of them both when he saw them next. What were they thinking leaving his daughter alone to do it all?

“They had to do their thing, and the kids fell asleep, but I can’t fall asleep now! I’m so tired.”

The energy in the room shimmered and then split a few feet away from them. Hypnos stepped through the gap and into the room. His eyes lit on Amy first and then Bacchus. “What’s wrong, flower?” Concern colored his tone, and he strode forward.

Amy turned and fell into his arms, her sobs quieting. “I don’t know.” Her words sounded muffled against the man’s chest.

“I think she needs a good night’s sleep,” Bach commented quietly, but his remark fell on deaf ears. She had already fallen asleep in her husband’s arms. Nos scooped her up, mouthing, “Just a minute,” to him.

A few minutes later, Nos sat down at the kitchen table, a sleeping child on his shoulder. Thanatos sat opposite, his baby daughter sleeping curled up against his chest. Thanatos had appeared directly in the babies’ room when he arrived and had brought both the babies down with him.

“You two are spoiling those children.”

“Bullshit, how can you spoil a baby?” Than gently patted the baby’s back and pressed a kiss to her head. “We’re more concerned about Amy.”

“She has postpartum depression.” Nos got to his feet and paced the length of the kitchen, a gentle bounce to his step. Bacchus watched his grandson with wonder. He fussed as if he knew his mother felt upset.

“There are pills she can take, but she hates taking them, so she has tried taking herself off them.” Nos continued to pat his son’s back, and the child settled down quickly.

“If you encourage her, will she go back on them? Or I could petition Diana to make it go away?”

“I would do it myself, Chuck,” Than commented, using the nickname that Aphrodite had given him, “but I’m not entirely sure what side Diana is on. We need to solve this civil war because I don’t know who to trust other than you and Nos.”

“We will figure it out. Hephaestus told me that someone wants the Olympians to rise again.”

“Sounds like something Zeus would come out with.”

“Yeah, but he is in no position to do anything about that. Last time I saw him, Deedee had him collared and strapped to a St. Andrew’s Cross, begging for the release she denied him. Aphrodite is not someone I would want as my Dominant. Damn, she had him practically tied in knots.”

His granddaughter started to fuss, and Bacchus began to understand how Amy could get overwhelmed. He held his hands out, and Than passed the baby to him. He knew he would have a goofy grin on his face. Amy teased him enough about how he looked at the babies. They named his granddaughter Flora, in memory of the woman who raised Amy, and Doran meant “gift.” In his not-so-humble opinion, they were shining examples of perfection.

“The Olympians had their time of complete control. As much as I would like to see a golden time again, I prefer being about to have as much time as I want taking care of our family.” Flora’s little rosebud mouth pouted out as she wiggled to get comfortable against chest.

“You’re right.” Nos sat back down now that Doran had drifted back to sleep again. “Do you remember what it was like in those days? Constantly on the go, petitions and prayers being offered in your name. The petty fighting between us all, currying favors and then stabbing each other’s back.” He shook his head. “I have no interest in returning to that.”

“I think there is more of a threat of someone unleashing the Titans than there is of the Parthenon rising to glory again. The world is too different now. The Olympians wouldn’t be able to hold a monopoly on beliefs.” Than returned from the fridge and placed a beer in front

of each of them before taking his own seat. “Let’s focus on the immediate threat. What do you remember of the key?”

“The one that unlocked that corner of Tartaros?” Bacchus tried to remember the exact details. The mythology behind the key might be as old as the universe herself. “Not as much as I would like. There are four elemental parts if I remember correctly. The seed, the tear, the torch, and the feather.”

The bottle paused halfway to Than’s mouth. “The seed wouldn’t happen to be a small golden pomegranate seed?”

“Is that what she gave us?” Nos traded an alarmed look with Than. “Shit. Hera has it now.”

Bacchus fought the urge to vent his frustrations by yelling. Flora must have sensed his agitation because she began to fuss and wiggle against him. He gently cradled her in the crook of his arm and smiled down at her. She looked curiously up at him and grasped the finger he rubbed against her hand.

“Why would you give it back to her?” Feeling calmer, he pressed a kiss to Flora’s forehead, and she blinked owlishly up at him.

“She gave it to us when we bargained for Pasithea’s life. After Amy found us, we freed her from the oath and gave her the seed back.”

Doran wiggled and started to thump Nos’s chest with his tiny fists. Nos got back to his feet and resumed his pacing, gently bouncing the baby in his arms. “I had no idea she would use such a valuable object.”

Than got up and intercepted Nos’s pacing by pressing a kiss to the other man’s mouth. “It wouldn’t have been that valuable to her at the time, and we had no reason to think otherwise.” He leaned down and pressed a kiss on his sleeping son’s fuzzy head.

“True enough. What about the tear?”

“I have it, and I’m keeping it.” Bacchus wished he could remember the rest of the myth involving the Key.

“How do we know Hera is up to something? She is the one who petitioned the gods to save the Greeks on more than one occasion. Can you really see her planning on bringing about the end of the universe as we know it?” Than leaned back against the counter, one arm wrapped around Nos’s waist.

“I hope not. I don’t think she would have enough power on her own. She would have to have accomplices, which could mean a real civil war among the gods.” Flora let go of his finger when she dozed off again. He took a long swallow of his beer. The world and humanity would survive a war among the gods. If someone reassembled the Key and used it, the universe would be destroyed.

“You should cancel your next ritual. If Hera doesn’t have enough power, she won’t get any more. If she has more than we imagined, this could even it out.”

Than shook his head in disagreement. “I think following through with the ritual is the best way to be sure that we all are strong enough to stand against her.”

“The entire point of the ritual is to help balance out everyone’s powers.” Bacchus knew that wasn’t his biggest concern at the moment. “I won’t stop the gathering, but I have a large complication to deal with.”

“Like this woman you met?”

“How did you find out?”

“There are no secrets between our wife and Deedee. Amy told us.”

Bach took another long draw off his beer thinking about the day Hazel collapsed in his arms. He didn’t think anything of it at the time, but now he would gamble Aphrodite stuck her perfect little nose in his life. What possibly went through that blonde head of hers that convinced her to get a human involved in all this, especially now?

He must have been frowning pretty hard because, when he looked up at them, he caught both Than and Nos carrying on a silent conversation between themselves.

“She’s human.” There, that should give them something to think about.

“So’s Amy.” Nos pressed a kiss against Than’s jaw and sat back down at the table.

So much for them understanding the extenuating circumstances. “I hardly know her. How am I going to get her talked into this?”

Than took his seat on Bach’s other side. “What about Orpheus?”

“I haven’t even begun to decide what to do about him.”

“He’ll want to be involved.”

“What’s one more thing to try to get her to agree to?” Aphrodite put him in what felt like an impossible position.

“Why not put that on Orpheus’s shoulders to deal with? You can’t force her into any of this. If she agrees, then that is one thing. Her feeling the slightest bit coerced will cause it all to fail.”

“I know the rules to my own rituals.”

“Then you have your work cut out for you.”

“As you both remember, Orpheus is always an active member in our gatherings. After all this time, he still doesn’t remember the past. All he knows is that I’m to be held responsible for what happened.”

“We have all lost friends and lovers to the Lethe.”

“But, have you been blamed for it?”

Mythology had it right. A group of Bacchus’s followers destroyed Orpheus while in the middle of a drug-induced frenzy, only they didn’t kill him. They threw the world’s paramount musician into the Lethe River, tearing his mind and memories in a thousand different directions, not his physical body. The responsibility for such an incredible loss laid at Bacchus’s feet. Unable to fix the damage done, he included Orpheus in all his rituals. He hoped that being part of such a powerful change in energy would help the musician regain some of his former self.

“It’s worked before when you haven’t been emotionally involved.” Nos passed Doran over to Than.

“This time is different.”

“Because you’ll feel coerced?”

“I already do. This is much more complicated than I ever thought possible.” Bacchus passed Flora over into Nos’s open arms.

“Then you don’t have a choice. You’re going to have to bring her over to dinner.” Nos smiled down at his sleeping daughter.

“What?”

“Let her get to know Amy and us. That we’re normal people and then perhaps it won’t be so hard to believe.”

Bacchus shook his head. This idea could work or go terribly wrong. “We are as normal as the Addams Family.”

“Complete with the strange relatives.” Than grinned across the table at him.

“Leave it with me, and I’ll see what happens.”

“It would mean a lot to Amy. And give her something, other than the babies, to focus on for a bit.”

“Have you thought about bringing in a handmaiden to take care of the kids?” Bacchus wouldn’t say no to anything that would help Amy and her husbands knew it, too.

“Chuck, you haven’t spent enough time with mothers. Amy would freak if anyone suggested we bring someone in here to take care of the kids. We are a family, and that means we take care of each other.”

“Hazel has a son. He looks like he’s about eight. Really bright child and has a gift for seeing auras and Keres.” Their idea had merit, and he wondered how Hazel would react to it all.

“Keres?” Thanatos’s eyes narrowed. “Are they stalking him at all?”

“Not as far as I know. I don’t think they realize that he can see them, and I told him to be very careful.”

“I can try to warn the bitches off, but it might be better for now if they don’t know. Why bring their attention to the little boy if we don’t have to?”

Bacchus knew that Than saw the Keres as his nemeses. He would do anything to protect the world from them.

“Do you think he is a descendent of the gods?”

Nos’s question drew Bacchus back to thinking about Gabriel. “No, I think this is one of those human gifts. The kind that if he didn’t have such an amazing mom, he might have grown up and forgotten what he can do or just stopped believing.”

“You know, if she believes in his abilities, then there is a better chance that she will accept what you are.”

“That’s what I’m counting on.”

Chapter Three

“Would you like something to drink? I have some beer, or soda, or a juice box if you want.” Hazel mentally rolled her eyes. *Stop babbling*. Sheesh, you would think that she had never been alone with a man before. She opened a cupboard and pulled out a couple glasses. Keeping busy seemed to be the only way to avoid how nervous she felt. Despite her promise to herself to keep as much distance between the two of them, she couldn’t help herself. When he called to remind her of their date today, she tried to get out of it saying she could only get a babysitter for a short time. That didn’t dissuade him in the least. She should have told him she didn’t have anyone to watch Gabe at all, instead of sending him to Matilda’s house. Having her son here would be a good excuse to keep some distance between them. Blowing off men in the past didn’t pose much of a challenge. A cold shoulder or bitchy comment, and getting in her pants didn’t seem worth the trouble. For some reason those tactics didn’t work on Bach.

“Do you have any wine?”

“Oh, no, don’t like the stuff myself.” She heard him step closer and sidestepped away from his large form. He radiated an intense heat she could feel pulse against her skin whenever he got close.

“How could you not like wine?”

Hearing the surprised tone of his voice, she glanced up. The look of shock on his face made her smirk. “What? Never met someone who doesn’t like rotten grape juice?”

“No one’s ever admitted it in front of me before.”

He moved a step closer and then grinned down at her when she backed into the counter. No escape and he knew it.

“Why are you running away from me?”

“I’m not running away. I’m finding us something to drink.” She slid to the side, but he predicted the move and grasped the counter on either side of her hips, trapping her.

“Why don’t you like wine?”

She hadn’t anticipated his interest in her preferences. *What made it so important to him?* “Well, I don’t know. It tastes like vinegar, all bitter and sour.”

“So you gave up after one bad experience?”

“They’re all the same.”

“No, every grape has its own personality, quirks that are enhanced by where they are planted, age, and the proficiency of the winemaker. To just give up on everything is denying yourself an entire world of pleasure.”

Were they still talking about wine? She admitted to herself that with him so close she got distracted looking up at the strong line of his jaw. *Danger! Get your head in the conversation before he gets you to admit to something.*

“What does age have to do with it?”

“Older can be better, Hazel.”

“But isn’t there a point that it’s past its prime?” Tilting her head, she tried to verbally parry his comment but doubted she could keep up.

“You need to know when to seize the moment. Timing is part but not all of it.”

He must have taken something she said as a challenge because she suddenly felt like prey to a hunter. Any retort she might have come up with got lost as she watched his eyes darken as he closed in on her. He moved slowly, gaze locked in on her alone. Could he be giving her time to say no? He would retreat for now if she said it, she was sure, but also understood it would only be a temporary maneuver.

He rested his hands on her hip and pressed his lips firmly against her in a brief, chaste kiss. He leaned back far enough for her to focus

on him, and when she gave a quizzical look, he pressed forward. This time he cupped her bottom and lifted her up on to the table and stepped between her legs. All the while, he nipped at her lower lip and pressed kisses along her jaw to her throat. Biting firmly down on the muscle there, he discovered an erogenous area she didn't know existed. Moisture gathered between her legs, and a whimper escaped her throat.

"I love how vocal you are. Don't hold back on my account." He pressed against the apex of her legs, and she gasped, then tried to smother herself by pressing her face against his shoulder.

"Not a chance." He pressed her jaw upward with his thumbs and bit her gently on the chin. "Let it out, sweetheart, 'cause I'm going to make you scream."

"So arrogant."

He chuckled harshly and rocked against her. She dropped her head back, arching her spine, her hair brushing against his hands where they supported her back.

She could feel the entire length of him press against her heated body. A small voice in her head tried to remind her he was the worst type of man to get involved with. Lots of people had spontaneous sex, wild sex, the kind of sex she hadn't had in a very long time. Why couldn't she?

"Stop thinking about it so much." Bach's words brushed against her neck, banishing the voices she heard in her head. He wouldn't be some gentle lover, soft and easy, who talked about making love and handled her like a china doll. This man's hands gripped her hips tight enough, she felt certain she would have marks later. Oh, how she hoped she would have marks to remember him. She would be careful. Just thinking about releasing herself to him sent a crazy jolt through her system.

He bit the tendon joining her neck to her shoulder, and a sinfully deep chuckle vibrated her skin. Her world spun around, and she found

herself lying back on the kitchen table. He stood over her pressing her hands against the flat surface.

“Keep them there, Hazel.”

“But I want to be able to touch you as well.” She almost didn’t recognize her own voice. Had she ever sounded that needy before? Had she ever felt such a deep want before?

“And I’m going to insist you do, but not yet.” He slid his hands up her arms and down her back. “You feel so incredible, I can’t wait to feel your bare skin.”

Then do it already, she wanted to scream, but didn’t. The anticipation was as delicious as she remembered. He stroked her over her clothes, down her back, over her hips, across her ass, and then dipped between. Goose bumps broke out over her skin. She felt too warm, too tight in her clothes. His fingers trailed up her inner thighs, and pressed up against her core, a layer of denim preventing the full extent of her feeling. He groaned and stroked back and forth. She whimpered at the muted sensation.

“You are so wet you’re soaking through your jeans.” He reached around and flicked open the button and shoved his hand down the front of her pants. His long fingers slipped under her panties, arrowing straight to the source. She gasped. As he groaned, his fingers delved into her moisture. She didn’t realize how excited she had become until she felt his fingers touching her directly. The way he easily slipped over her folds sent a violent tremble through her system. She couldn’t remember the last time she experienced an intimate touch that wasn’t caused by her own hand. He stilled. The sudden absence of movement shocked her, and her eyes blinked open. His fingers played between her legs but not with her.

“Sweet eternity. You’re pierced.”

“Oh yeah, well...” Her brief moment of insecurity didn’t last long enough for her to start to worry about his opinion. An animalistic growl cut her off. He lifted up her hips and ripped her pants off. Her cotton panties didn’t have a chance against him, and within a moment

of his discovering it, he stood there looking down at her piercing. Usually her small ring caused a couple of different reactions, from disgust to interest. Never had she seen such hunger on the face of a lover. She felt exposed, bared, and when he looked up at her, she shivered. Getting involved with Bach would somehow irrevocably change her forever.

“Was it your idea?” he said, his voice gruff. No one had ever asked her that.

“I wouldn’t have kept it if I didn’t like it.”

Bach guided her legs so that her feet sat on the table next to her bottom, exposing her entirely to his gaze. She felt vulnerable and nervous, but the heat coming off him felt hot enough to scald. His fingers trailed over the ring, tugging gently on it, sending shockwaves of energy through her. She gripped his wrist in an attempt to pull his hand away. The feelings were too raw, too intense. She never had any idea how quickly she could be addicted to it again.

He shook her off and captured both wrists in his hand. He pinned her hands over her head with ease and looked over her. His hair had slipped forward, shadowing his face, hiding his expression from her. Cranking her excitement up even more, he looked like a dark lover about to ravage her whether she wanted it or not. *Oh God, did she want it.* Laying her head back, she closed her eyes and arched her body up to him.

* * * *

Bacchus couldn’t believe a delicate creature like her spent her days hiding in a library, wearing shapeless clothes like a suit of armor. A hidden inferno of passion, with a pierced hood, she lay there like some human sacrifice just for him. He hadn’t felt such anticipation in centuries.

Keeping her hands pinned above her, he stroked his fingers down her body, teasing and pinching along the way. “You’re incredible.”

He paused to tweak one nipple. Leaning down, he took the other in his mouth and flicked his tongue over it.

“I bet you say that to all the girls you pin to their kitchen tables.”

He chuckled against her breast. “If you can string that many words together, then I need to work harder to distract you.”

He cupped a full breast in his hand. The creamy mound sported a large raspberry nipple begging for his attention. He circled the puckered nub with the tip of his tongue, enjoying the way it tightened even more. Grasping it with his teeth, he drew it into his mouth, flicking the hard nub before letting go with a pop. With feather-light brushes of his fingers, he stroked the wet, silky petals between her legs. He moaned at the feeling and licked his way across the lower edge of her breasts. She gasped and shivered against him.

“Sorry, what did you say?” He delved his fingers deep within her, curling up and rubbing that perfect little spot deep inside, making her body writhe.

“You...I...more.” Her head dropped back, a strangled sigh escaping her lips.

“That’s better.” He lifted his fingers away from her and brought them to his lips. Taking his time, he leisurely licked the cream off them as she watched. Her gaze remained unfocused and glazed, her breathing ragged as he dipped into her wet folds again. He flicked the little ring, rubbing the pad of one finger against the extended clit. She rose up off the table, arching closer to him.

He let go of her wrists and stretched out her arms over her head. “Keep your hands up there.” She grasped the edge of the table over her head. “That’s right, sweetheart.”

He quickly stripped off his pants and stood between her legs. *Thank eternity, the table is the perfect height.* He pressed his ridged cock against her folds, bending over closer, her pressing his length against her mound. He captured her lips hungrily, holding her head still so he could plunder her mouth.

She responded as passionately, making little mewling noises in the back of her throat. Her fingers curled into his hair, holding him captive. She had broken his request to keep her hands over her head, but at the moment he cared more about her instinctive response. Giving in to his own, he arched his hips until the tip of his cock prodded at her entrance. He pressed against her, feeling her give in to his rod, him within her. She trembled in his arms, her hands sliding down to grasp his shoulders.

“You’re so tight, so wet.”

She clawed at his back, but he continued his attack, sliding slowly into her. His cock felt locked in a vise grip. Her muscles clamped down hard on him, to the point of being painful. He took it as slowly as he could, fighting the urge to force himself all the way in. Slow and steady, she stretched to accommodate him. The pressure building inside him felt like a tsunami just waiting to wash over him. Once embedded, he stilled, allowing her to become used to his invasion. She trembled like a leaf beneath him, gripping at his hair, wild, noisy, her nails scoring his upper arms.

“More, goddamn it.” Her hips jerked, and he slid slightly out of her.

“Happily.” He punched back inside, her legs wrapped around his hips, and he moved to a rhythm they both needed. Alternating depth and speed, he penetrated her. Gripping her hips, he lifted her slightly, gaining a scant amount deeper but enough to send a white-hot wave down his spine. His balls drew up close to his body.

He would never get enough of her. She thrashed about on the table, his hands on her hips, anchoring her. Speeding up, he let go of his awareness and let his instincts take over.

“Oh yes, more.”

“You can take me harder than this, can’t you?” He reached under one of her legs and slid it on to his shoulder. Angling her allowed him a touch more depth to his strokes.

“I’m going to...I can’t stop...” Her cries filled the room and urged him closer to his own satisfaction.

“Not without me.” Holding on tight, he rode her as she jerked against him, feeling her body clench rhythmically around him. They rode the wave of ecstasy, crashing down holding on to each other.

“Are you okay?”

Hazel’s entire being drifted on a sea of tranquility, experiencing the peace only a couple really good orgasms can bestow. Slowly, she became aware of her surroundings. Bach had her pinned to the kitchen table, looking down at her with a bemused smile on his face. He’s face came closer and softly brushed a kiss against her lips. Shifting slightly she could feel him hot and still hard and deep inside her.

Reality crashed down over her.

“Oh my God! What did I just do?” She struggled against him, pushing him back off of her.

“We both did it, and up until this moment, I was certain we both enjoyed it.”

“How could I be so stupid? No condom.”

“Hazel.”

“Bach, I can’t have a baby. Not again. I can’t believe I did this. So stupid.” She wriggled under him, trying to get off the table, but he stretched over her, preventing her from moving too far. “Get the hell off me!”

Bach grabbed her by the sides of the head, forcing her to look up at him. “I’m wearing a condom, Hazel. It’s okay. I knew you were distracted. I took care of it.”

“Oh.” She glanced down, needing proof, and felt the tension drain from her. “Thank God.”

“You’re welcome.” He lifted off her and stepped away from her, taking care of the condom. “I know how important this is.”

She counted herself lucky that he wore one without a reminder. “I’m sorry for killing the afterglow for you, but I just can’t take that kind of chance again.”

“It’s okay. I’ll make sure we don’t run out.”

“No, really, Bach. You’re amazing, but we can’t do it again. Even with condoms there is too much of a risk. I hardly...I don’t know you at all.”

She could tell he wasn’t impressed at being given the shove off. Hell, she felt terrible for doing it, but if he hung around, then she knew she would do it again, and again. He made her want to explore cravings she had tried to ignore for seven years.

“So that’s it?”

“Um, well, I guess. Please don’t take this the wrong way, okay?”

“Hazel, how else am I supposed to take it? Thanks for the fuck, now get out?” He pulled up his jeans and tucked his softening cock away. She winced. It did sound like that, and it was kind of what she meant. Better to end this now, before it went any further and she allowed her heart to overrule her head. She couldn’t play around like this, not when she had so much more to worry about.

“I don’t mean it exactly like that, Bach.” She pulled her shirt down to cover her breasts, before scanning the floor to see where her jeans had landed.

“Okay, then. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He jerked his T-shirt over his head and ran his fingers through his hair. Every movement shouted his dislike for the way things had gone.

Not that she blamed him. She felt like a bitch for killing the afterglow like this. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Fine, Hazel. Thanks for the fuck. I’ll get out of your way, again.”

* * * *

For the second time, Bacchus found himself standing outside looking up at a house that held what he wanted. Only she kept

pushing him away, and he didn't like it. He understood a bit more why after hearing about the idiot she used to be married to. A grown man who hadn't matured past the life of a self-centered college student. That trait he could happily say he worked hard to change in himself.

A broadsword hurtled toward his neck. Reacting on instinct, he conjured his own staff in front of his face, deflecting the weapon before it landed. If it hadn't been for the brief flash in the corner of his eye, Hazel would have been his last thought.

"Someone almost got it that time. You're getting soft, vine boy." A large, bald-headed man stepped back, both hands on the hilt, preparing for another swing. "I hope she was worthwhile. You might not get another chance at her."

"Hephaestus, you asshole." Bacchus gripped the staff and shifted into a defensive position, just in time to deflect an incoming strike. Retaliating, he twisted the staff around his body in a defensive move, adjusting his balance as he moved. His eyes narrowed, focusing on the larger man in front of him. An infinitesimal flex, and the weapons clashed again. Vibrations rang up his arms. *Damn*, what the blacksmith lacked in finesse, he made up for in sheer brute strength.

"Such language from someone your age. You would think you would have learned to respect your elders by now." The large man stepped forward and executed a series of blows that had Bacchus staying on the defensive. "Besides, you deserve this. What the hell were you thinking telling the muse that she and I weren't mutually exclusive?"

"Such big words for all that muscle. How else could I get her into my bed?" Bacchus ground out the words between blows. He had completely forgotten about that particular muse. Meeting Hazel caused anyone else to pale in comparison. "Fuck, you've been training with Ares, haven't you?"

"Ha! Ares is a planner, not a trainer. I've been hanging out with some of the Celts. Those bastards know how to fight."

That distracted Bach enough he didn't see the punch coming. His head snapped back with the impact. Seconds later, he flew over Heph's shoulder, landing in a bone-crushing thud on the ground. The tip of a sword pressed against the skin on his neck.

The Olympians were suffering a brutal civil war in their ranks. Years of neglect had sapped most of their powers, and the weaker ones remained jealous of those who still held on. He thought he and Heph stood on the same side. Heph had reasons to want the Olympians destroyed, although Bach never thought that he would take the side of the Titans.

"Now what?" Bacchus asked, looking up at the cold gaze of the man above him.

"I should slit your throat for messing with my weekend, you prick." The sword lifted, and Heph's meaty palm appeared in front of him. They clasped hands, and he was pulled to his feet.

"You had me worried there, Sparky. I thought you had gone to the dark side there for a moment."

"Never. Aphrodite might be a fickle bitch, but I like having her around."

Millennia ago, Heph and Deedee ended their tumultuous relationship. The goddess of love refused to be ignored by anything or anyone. Heph loved his forge as much as his life, and she didn't like his attention straying. Their separation caused vibrations through the pantheon that settled down finally, as did the human world.

Bach slapped away some of the dirt on his jeans before grinning at his friend. "Come on, let's go get a beer. I need a drink right about now."

"She kicked you out?" Hephaestus turned an appreciative gaze to the house behind them. "I do like strong-willed women."

"Don't even think about it. I want as little attention on her as possible."

"That's not going to be easy. You are the first god in a millennium to father a human child. They are all watching you and your offspring

to see if it happens again. I've heard rumblings about this being the beginning of the time of the Olympians again."

Bach rolled his eyes. "I was afraid of that. Dammit, I knew I should have warned Amy away from the twins."

"You think that would have stopped her? I know it wouldn't have stopped them. Look what happened to Zeus."

"To be honest, I don't think Zeus orchestrated that."

Hephaestus leveled a look at Bacchus. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that old man is a blowhard who can't see past the wall of his own ego. Whoever's behind the releasing of the Keres is still out there. The Titans remain asleep, that I am sure of, which means that we have a traitor in our midst."

"One who would thrill at the idea of the Olympians rising again? That doesn't narrow it down any, you know. Our very lives rely on humanity believing in us. We haven't been as strong in centuries as we have lately. That is a great deal of motivation, and something any of us can be guilty of."

"Believe me, I know. I'd be happy being able to live on a farm, make wines, and go from there."

"It is possible, you know. Look at your daughter. She has enough belief to keep two gods happy."

"Amy had a unique upbringing. She had believed all her life that we exist. She just needed to believe in herself." Bacchus couldn't help the swell of pride he felt when he thought of her and his two beautiful grandchildren. The twins had powers of their own, but he kept quiet on that one.

"On that note, I think I'm going to go back and run a few more drills with the Celts. You might need the practice, old man. You're starting to look like Michelangelo's sculpture."

Bacchus snarled slightly over that debacle. "One little insult and the man curses me forever with a chunk of carved marble."

“You seem to piss off a few people, vine boy. There aren’t too many flattering depictions of you. Most of them depict you as being heavily intoxicated.”

“In those days, I did what was expected of me, the same as everyone else.”

Hephaestus hadn’t had the best reputation in those days either. Being joined to the goddess of love while cursed with a massive jealous streak had Heph acting more like a volcano than artist.

“Come on, I’m sure we can find some bare Celt ass to kick.”

“You go ahead. I’ve got some cultivating of my own to do here.” Pressing his first and second fingers together and then his third and forth, he lifted his hand in the three-finger wave. “Live long and prosper, Vulcan.”

Not appreciating the humor at the name the Romans called him, Hephaestus raised a single-finger salute in return before disappearing.

Bach returned to watching the house, trying to figure out what exactly he needed to do. Maybe the boys did have it right. Dinner at his daughter’s house sounded like a good idea. First, he would have to explain how he had a daughter who didn’t look much younger than himself and she had two husbands.

Happily, he decided to wait telling her about that until it was absolutely necessary. First, he needed to find some more information about the threat to everyone. Which meant, he needed to pay a visit to the Fates. He wanted to hear their opinions on the recent attacks. If a war brewed on the horizon, then he had better find out on which side they stood.

With a single thought, he watched the world physically waver in front of him until it looked like he viewed it through a large body of water. The space around him shifted and split, changing into somewhere else. Like ripples on a pond, it settled, and Bacchus stood beneath a shining sun in front of a thatched cottage. A large wild garden surrounded the house. A cobblestone path led up to the front door. The moment his feet touched the stone, the Fates would know

why he visited them. He reached up into a small rift in space and pulled out three bottles of his best vintage, made the year he fathered Amy.

Tucking the bottles in the crook of his arm, he went up to the door and knocked.

“What the hell do you want?” An old voice snarled at him from within.

“Stop that. You are so crabby. You’ll scare him away. Let me answer the door first.” The second voice sounded much younger.

The door opened, and a woman who looked a bit older than Amy stood there. “Bacchus! What a thrilling surprise, and you brought us some of your wine. You rock.”

Bacchus smiled and caught the younger woman’s hand and brought it to his lips. “Always a pleasure, Clotho. I hope you accept my humble gift.”

The woman’s form vibrated and shifted slightly. The fingers he grasped began to lose their youthful appearance. In the blink of an eye, the incarnation of Clotho disappeared, and a matronly woman stood there. Her hair remained the same length, only now silver wisps highlighted the thick mass. “You do not have a humble bone in your body, young man.” The incarnation of Lachesis stepped back, pulling her fingers from his grasp and waved her hand. “Come in. Come in. It has been a long time since you came for a visit.”

She accepted Bacchus’s gifts, and he entered the cottage behind her. The interior of the small cottage stretched out farther than he could see. Threads crisscrossed in every direction, knotting on to other threads, linking back and forth in a large tapestry. Some filaments hung limp and dull, others shone brightly and wove in and out of other threads. A brighter light shone where they crossed. The Fates’ web remained the most beautiful formation ever created, in his opinion. The history of every person who ever lived, and how each of their lives intertwined with others. Many threads linked back to each other when they passed through their reincarnations.

Lachesis placed the three bottles on a table next to a chair that had an intricate piece of stitching on it. She waved her hand, and a gossamer thread floated down in front of him, shining brightly, full of life. He fought the urge to touch it, having been told long ago never to do so.

“It is all right. That is Hazel’s thread. You may touch it.”

Overwhelmed by the honor, Bacchus lightly touched the silken thread. It felt as insubstantial as a spider’s web. But it would never break unless the crone cut it. As soon as his finger touched it, in that moment, he knew that Hazel slept, but her rest remained far from peaceful. *Nice to know she hadn’t been as unaffected by me as she tried to pretend.* A small vibrant knot tied her thread to that of another of dull gray, and from within that knot hung another thread. This one sparkled as if dusted with glitter. *That must be Gabriel’s.* A bit farther down Hazel’s thread sat another small knot, this one almost invisible.

“Will Hazel’s second child be mine?” As soon as the words left his lips, he wished he hadn’t said them. He didn’t want to know, didn’t want to think of another man with his hands on her. The idea of her having another man’s child left him with a sharp pain in his chest.

“May it be a dream you both share.”

Lachesis words were as cryptic as usual, but at the moment exactly what he needed to hear. For the moment, they hadn’t put Hazel’s thread with anyone else’s. Living beings still had free will, but the Fates often played a large part in the success of an individual’s venture. Hazel’s gossamer thread floated away caught on a breeze he couldn’t feel.

“Was Gabriel fathered by one of the gods?”

“A child with an innocent mind can see more than the mortals can comprehend. It is when they cease to believe in themselves that they lose the ability to see. It is the humans’ greatest failing—their inability to realize that children are their greatest asset.”

“We are not without our gifts.” With a grace inherent of a creature of untold knowledge, the woman walked across the floor and sat at a

spinning wheel. She shifted back into the incarnation of Clotho, and a rhythmic stepping sound echoed in the room, as the wheel spun. Out of her own hair she twisted a thin gossamer thread, then lifted it from the spindle. Cradling it protectively in her hands, she moved back to the web and twisted it around a cross section of filaments. As soon as the knot completed, it fused the two threads together. A small thread dusted with glitter remained. Somewhere, a couple would soon discover they were to be parents.

“You’ve known all along what would happen.” Bacchus enjoyed watching the Fates work on the web. Though the amount of raw power being used in front of him was intimidating.

“We knew what could become of the gods of Olympus and what they needed to be willing to do. We will not allow it. We have become attached to the humans that inhabit this world.”

“Mistress, I have no intention of allowing that to happen either.”

Clotho shifted into the incarnation of Atropos, the crone. Deep wrinkles carved her face, and a halo of fluffy white hair drifted around her shoulders as she waved a gnarled finger at him. “We made sure of that.”

Bacchus’s blood ran cold when she turned her black eyes in his direction. For the briefest moment he saw their plan, a plan that spanned decades. “You made sure I fathered Amy.”

“And in turn, she ensnared both Sleep and Death and gifted you all with children.”

“So it wouldn’t have mattered if she believed in any of us?”

“On the contrary, it is her ability to believe that allowed us to manipulate the circumstances as we did. Without that, she would have eluded her destiny. We would not have been able to unravel that particular knot. We would not have been pleased.”

The crone shuffled over to the table where the three bottles of wine sat. A goblet now rested in front of each bottle. Atropos gave him a smile over her shoulder. “You are a smart boy, bringing us each our favorite.”

As she poured herself a glass, Bacchus stepped through the maze of threads that seemed to surround him. “What about Zeus? Is it because of his actions that the Titans might be unleashed?” He knew that the threads were unbreakable, but he respected the Fates enough to be careful not to disturb anything as he navigated his way back to them.

“Zeus has tangled our web enough times. We are not inclined to untangle this knot for him.” She waved her hand, and a large knot drifted down from somewhere above them. It looked like a massive hairball, with strands hanging loose and wrapping around each other. The tangled ball looked dull and sick compared to the other vibrant threads.

“If he wishes to move on and continue his existence, he will have to make the correct decisions. We may be able to cut his thread, but we will have to make sure that it is crossed and knotted until his is a physical manifestation in his mind. Until he too bathes in the Lethe and forgets.”

Not for the first time, Bacchus didn’t understand what they were saying. Often, understanding of what the Fates said came after certain events happened. Hopefully the world wouldn’t have to end before he figured it out.

Chapter Four

Hazel felt like the worst person on the planet. She tried to stay busy at the library but memories of the previous evening crept into her thoughts. Each time she remembered, she wanted to cringe. After having the best sex of her entire life, she freaked out and pretty much kicked him to the curb. No one deserved to be treated like that. Especially since she had no reason, except for her own hang-ups. The man didn't even have his pants completely pulled back up before she did it too. If that didn't nominate her to whore of the year, she didn't know how much worse she could have acted.

She found the paper Bach had given her, in her sweater pocket and as soon as she got Gabe settled down for the night, she dialed his number. As soon as she heard his voice, she started apologizing for her actions. "I'm really, really sorry for the way I acted. I'm horrible, I know."

"Thanks for calling, Hazel."

Well, she did deserve a brush-off after the way she'd acted. Hearing his voice so cold, it made her feel even worse. "I couldn't leave us like that. You didn't do anything wrong. I kinda freaked out."

"Okay."

Obviously he didn't plan to make this easy for her. "How about we see if we can be friends?" She chewed on the side of her thumbnail. She had no proof to prove him anything but a nice guy. Sex with him made anything else she had experienced pale in comparison, but she tried not to think of that at the moment.

"Hazel, I'm not interested in being friends with you. What I want is for you to give us a chance to be more."

“More? Why would you want to? I mean, the sex is great and all...”

He barked a harsh laugh over the line. “Banging you on your kitchen table does not count as great sex, Hazel. Not in my book. We had fun, but I can do a hell of a lot better than that. Maybe we did move a bit quickly. I would like to get to know you more than I do.”

Hazel plopped down into the nearest chair. *He thought he could do better?* “I don’t want you thinking that I’m just using you. Bach, I have a son. He is my world and has to come first in my life. I can’t just rush into anything.”

“Sweetheart, you think too much if you ask me. Why don’t you stop worrying about things before they happen and trust your instincts?”

“Because I get in more trouble that way.” Her heart pounded against her chest, and she tried to hold the phone away from her mouth so he couldn’t hear her erratic breathing. The sound of his voice had the ability to get her flustered.

“You need to work on trusting yourself before I can expect you to trust me. Do me a favor?”

“What’s that?”

“Let me in. I’m on the porch.”

“What! You’re joking.” She got up and headed down the hallway. Brushing back the curtain, she saw him smiling at her, a cell phone held to his ear. She clicked the phone off as he did and opened the door. Bach shouldered through the door with a large paper bag in his hand.

“Why are you here?”

“You really thought I would give up?” He bent and brushed his lips against hers. Shocked, she stood there, no doubt looking like a wide mouth bass. “Where’s Gabriel?”

“Sleeping.” She poked at the paper bag in his arm. “What’s this?”

“I decided to give you a bit of an education tonight.” He walked into the kitchen and placed the bag on the counter. She followed him

in, curious as to what he had brought. As soon as his arms were free, he spun and pulled her hard against him. Cupping her cheeks, he brushed his lips against hers, a soft, teasing caress that had her pressing closer to him. He made her want things she had long before decided weren't going to happen. He smiled against her lips and slid his hands down her arms, wrapping them around her until her cheek rested on his chest.

"We are going to end up in the same position as last time if you keep that up."

"You're right. Sorry. I'm not completely to blame for how we ended up having sex."

"You're completely right about that. The next time we find ourselves in that position, it's not going to be on a kitchen table."

She pushed far enough away that she could look up into his face. He looked like he was about to tear her clothes off any second. That both thrilled and scared her. "Didn't we decide earlier that we will get to know each other better first?"

"We'll get to know each other better. Both in and out of bed."

"Oh, really?"

"Absolutely." He kissed her on the forehead and stepped back out of her arms and over to where he placed the bag on the counter. There were three tall bottles inside, and he placed them on the counter. "Do you have any wine glasses? We'll need at least three."

"Wine?" *He must not have been listening when I said I don't like this stuff.* "I'm not going to like it."

"Have you ever tried a good quality product?"

"I can't afford that."

Bach snorted as he pulled a corkscrew out of his back pocket and started opening up the bottles. "Price doesn't mean shit."

She blinked at his response. At times he seemed so much older than his looks, and then he would say something that contradicted the possibility.

“I decided to teach you what it is that is so wondrous about rotten grapes, as you described it the other day.”

Hazel laughed. “Three bottles? That is a little over the top, don’t you think?” She went and got a couple of stemmed glasses from their place up in the cupboard. In fact, she wasn’t sure she had ever used them.

“No, not really. You recently complained that you thought they were all vinegary. So we are starting with the basics.”

“And that is?”

“Wine should be drunk light to heavy, sweet to dry, so that is how I am going to start your education.” He took the glasses she offered him and rinsed the dust off them.

“Normally, I would do this as a blind tasting, meaning I would put them all in paper bags so you couldn’t see what I had done. For your first time, I want you to see what is going on.”

She couldn’t help but twist his words into another context. “Um, okay, I guess, but you can’t get angry when I don’t like any of it.”

“I hope you will be pleasantly surprised. I picked a couple different wineries and countries that I thought you might enjoy.”

“I’m never going to remember anything after drinking all this.” Hazel lifted one of the other bottles and looked at the label. Other than it being French, she didn’t understand anything else written.

“I wasn’t going to suggest it, but we could and see what you’re in the mood for afterwards?” Bach darted in and brushed a kiss across her lip, and then grinned at her.

She frowned up at him but it didn’t last long. He had an infectious smile and in moments she smiled back.

“We’re going to start with some slightly sweet wines. Muscat is the grape variety, and these are from France, California, and Hungary.”

“Won’t they all taste the same?”

“No, because of the different soils and climates, all of these wines are distinctly different.”

“You know a lot about this kind of thing.”

“You could say it is one of my obsessions.” He pulled the cork from one bottle with practiced ease.

“You have many of those?”

“No, not really, but as time goes by, I find more and more things I am reluctant to let go of once I find them.”

“That sounds like double-talk.”

“Hmm.” He shrugged his shoulders, pouring a bit of wine from each bottle into the glasses “You will have to wait to know me better before you are certain about that.”

“You going to be around long enough for that to happen?”

“I can’t tell the future, Hazel. What I can tell you is that I want you to know me a lot better than you do.”

* * * *

She did very well for her first introduction to quality wine. He enjoyed leading her through the steps to tasting them. Walking her through it was like experiencing a tasting for the first time himself. He enjoyed the way she described what she smelled. She first announced that one smelled like her flower garden in the middle of summer and like the big yellow Asian pears she loved. The next one reminded her of how Gabe’s cheeks smelled after the first time he had a piece of lemon pie. He knew she fully expected to hate the wine when she went to taste it. It wasn’t hard to see the wonder on her face when she discovered that she liked it after all. She breathed new life into something that he had taken for granted for centuries.

How could he ever thank her for that? How could she ever understand what she gave to him?

“I’d like you and Gabe to come to dinner with me tomorrow night.” He knew her first instinct would be to say no, but including her son must have thrown her off, because she looked suspicious.

“What are you not telling me?”

“What makes you say that?”

“You look guilty.”

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “I do not.” He had faced down a lot more intimidating creatures in his lifetime, but she seemed to get past all that.

“I’m the mother of a male. I know that look. You aren’t telling me something. What is so important about this dinner?”

That my daughter is not much younger than you, and she is married to two Greek gods? It would be so much easier to just go ahead and tell her the truth. Then, he would hear the *no* he expected. “I want to take you both to my daughter’s for dinner.”

“Oh, that’s sweet, but why don’t you bring her over here? She shouldn’t have to cook for us.”

“Because she is a new mother, and it would be easier for us to go over there.”

“A mother...how old is she?”

“Old enough to get married last year.”

“Well, at least she doesn’t have to do it alone.”

“No, not at all.” Bach smiled and wondered exactly how he would explain that his daughter wasn’t as young as Hazel obviously thought. “I think the two of you might have more in common than you think. I’ll pick you and Gabe up and take you over there. He won’t be too interested in the babies, but I think there is every video game known to mankind in that house.”

“Well, if you’re sure that she is up to it.”

“She is looking forward to meeting you and Gabe. I promise it won’t be boring.”

“I don’t think anything with you ever would be.”

* * * *

She knew Bach left out an important piece of information when he invited them to dinner. He had waited until they were in the car on the

way over to casually mention his daughter's polyamorous relationship. What else had he neglected to tell her? She still waited for an answer regarding his age. Every time she brought it up, he changed the subject. She read about strange cults where the men married young girls. His daughter couldn't be that old. Poor thing could use a bit of help. Especially since she had a new baby to take care of and an immature husband, who apparently was still addicted to video games. She planned to befriend Bach's daughter and help get her out of the situation, if needed.

Hazel remembered how hard those first few months were, the sleep deprivation, the raging hormones, leaking boobs, all under the stress of trying to keep a roof over your head and food in your stomach. She would do whatever she could to help.

They arrived at the large house where his daughter lived, and a large, dangerous-looking man opened the door. A chill skittered over her skin, and she pulled Gabe closer to her. Bach's arm around her waist stopped her from turning and running with her child.

"Tone it down, Than." Bach hugged her closer to him, and she felt herself relax. Even though she didn't know Bach all that well, he wouldn't have brought them somewhere dangerous.

The man in the doorway smiled sheepishly. "Sorry about that. Come on in."

"Than, this is Hazel and her son, Gabriel." Bach kept a hand at Hazel's lower back as they walked into the house.

Good thing, too, because as soon as Bach's son-in-law smiled, she recognized him. That grin held all sorts of sensual promise with a hint of the coldest danger. The two people who had fooled around in the library last year, he joined them as they left. Oh no...

"Nice to meet you, Than." She tried to sound nonchalant, but even she could hear the forced tone to her voice. She tried to take a deep breath, suddenly feeling overly warm.

Never one to be too shy around those he deemed safe, Gabriel immediately asked about the video games.

“I would love to know what just caused you to blush that deeply.” Bach’s breath tickled the sensitive hair behind her ear as he spoke.

“I have no idea what you are talking about.” She tried to keep the tone of her voice steady and hope the blush faded quickly.

“Liar. I’ll get it out of you later.”

“Wow, you’re both pretty old, huh?” Gabriel stood there looking up at Than, not quite focusing his eyes. She had come to recognize that particular look. It meant that her son was attempting to focus on the colors he saw around people.

“Gabriel! That’s rude.” Than didn’t look but a few years older than her, but like Bach, the look in his eyes made him seem much older.

Than laughed and ruffled the hair on Gabe’s head. “He’s right. I’m older than I look.”

“That’s what Bach says.”

“That’s because Bach is really, really old.”

“Watch it.”

Despite the dark tone in Bach’s warning, Gabriel looked back and forth between the two large men with adoration. Hazel felt a twinge in her chest at proof that her son needed more men in his life. Maybe she could get him into a big brother program?

“Why are you all standing in the hallway?” a young woman asked as she came around the corner, giving each man a strange look.

Hazel recognized Bach’s daughter from that day in the library, and her cheeks heated up again. Hopefully, she could blame this on meeting new people. She already knew what Amy’s other husband would look like.

“Come on in. I’m Amy.” She kissed Bach on the cheek. “Hi, Daddy.”

A strangled groan came from Than. Hazel just caught him rolling his eyes, which made both Amy and Bach grin. Looks like father and daughter shared a sense of humor.

Amy took the bottle from Bach. “Oh, I can’t wait to try this. You always bring the best wine.”

“I should hope so.” Bach gave Hazel a bit of a squeeze on her hip. She blinked and tried to get her thoughts in order. Did Bach have plastic surgery? Amy didn’t look much younger than herself.

“Come in and sit down. Nos is outside charring meat on the barbeque. Hazel, would you like a drink?”

“Absolutely.”

Chapter Five

“You know, you’re taking this much better than I imagined. I wasn’t certain if Bach would tell you about our family or just spring it on you.”

Hazel and Amy sat ensconced in a couple of overstuffed chairs with two large, perfectly blended margaritas. Gabriel played in the other room with Nos’s extensive video game collection, having the time of his life. Amy’s husbands and Bach were outside deciding on the perfect time to turn the meat, which meant she could hear their arguing from where they sat.

“He told me in the car on the way over.”

“You’re kidding me. Didn’t give you much time to get used to the idea.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. I’ve known lots of people with alternative relationships over the years, but two men?” She raised her glass. “All the more power to you. I had a hard enough time with one.”

A look of confusion came over Amy’s face for a moment and then cleared so quickly, Hazel couldn’t be certain she saw it at all.

“Yes, that’s right. Both my guys.” Amy’s smile looked a little too large to be genuine. “Just two big, normal guys. One semi-normal, happy family.”

Hazel adjusted herself in her seat and looked directly at Amy, having gotten the distinct impression that she missed something. “Is there something else I should know?”

“Nope. Not at all.” Amy laughed and took a large swallow out of her glass.

A soft melody chimed throughout the house.

“Oh, that’s the door. I’ll go get it. The boys will never hear it outside.” She placed her glass next to Hazel’s on the table before heading out of the room.

Amy seemed a bit jumpy, but it could be a bit too much tequila in the drink. Her own drinking tolerance plummeted after she had Gabe. Amy had already confided in her that she had expressed enough milk so that she could have a couple drinks before dinner and not have it affect the babies. That started a conversation that compared everything from morning sickness to deliveries, which might be why all the males had moved to the outside and now avoided them. Hazel happily shared her acquired mom knowledge with Amy. Maybe if things didn’t work out with Bach, they could still be friends?

Amy came back a couple minutes later, flopping down in the chair with a sigh.

“So how old is Bach? He won’t tell me.”

“Oh, he’s older than he looks.”

That seemed to be the standard evasive answer around here. “What about you?”

“I’m twenty-six.” Amy smiled as she sipped her drink, and Hazel wondered if the other woman knew what she tried to figure out.

“You and I are close in age. I’m thirty.” *If Bach became a father at eighteen, that would make him forty-four now.*

“You look great for your age.” Amy refilled both their glasses from the pitcher and sat back in the chair. “I’m really glad Bacchus brought you over. I’ve been concerned about him.”

“Bacchus? You’re kidding me. Bach is short for Bacchus? Your grandparents really loved the classics, didn’t they?”

“I think I’m going to have to tell Than to leave the tequila out of my drinks, especially before dinner.” Amy’s giggle from behind her hand sounded decidedly nervous. “I can’t tell you all his secrets.”

“Oh, please. Yes, you can.”

When one of Amy's husbands came in, he caught the two of them in the middle of laughing. Nos, the one who had disappeared under her skirt in the library, bent over the back of Amy's chair, and Hazel quickly looked away. As much as she loved to watch, she preferred the anonymity of strangers. Closing her eyes, she tried to banish that memory in the library forever from her brain.

"I see we had better get some food on the table for you two."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not at all." Nos held on to Amy's hand. "You two relax and enjoy yourself. We'll take care of everything."

Amy kissed the fingers tangled with hers before he left with a parting wink.

"You have the sweetest husbands."

"Yeah, I'm incredibly lucky. Were you married before?"

Hazel shook her head. "Not legally. Gabe's father and I knew each other for a long time. Things started going wrong long before the end, but I didn't notice until after I got pregnant. I think the realization of what being a mother entailed opened my eyes to the situation I was in. My little man is perfectly healthy and I'll never do anything to jeopardize that. He's the most important being in the world to me."

"I know what you mean. I had no idea what kind of grasp children have on your heart until I had my own. Flora and Doran have their fathers wrapped around their tiny little fingers."

Hazel felt a twinge envious of Amy's good fortune. Gabe's father didn't care in the slightest. Her little man never had a chance to look up to another man. His looks in the hallway proved that he had started to look at the men around him as role models. For all her first impressions, she believed Bach, Than and Nos to be a good men. Gabe would be lucky if they took him under their wing.

"My dad's been caught in a rut where he's spent so much time doing what is expected of him. He hasn't allowed himself to enjoy

life. Now, there is a spark in his eye that I've never seen before. A zest for life that I think you and Gabe bring to him."

"I think it's a bit early for that. You know this might not work out."

"If it doesn't, I'd still like to be friends."

"I would like that, too."

"Has he mentioned the party that he is putting together?"

"No, he hasn't."

"Don't take it personally. He mentioned it the last time he came over. Takes a lot of planning to pull one of these off."

"What kind of parties does he have?"

Amy tilted her head as if she chose her words carefully. "They're exclusive, private parties, pretty much the same group of people. All adult and, tell you the truth, a lot of fun. I think it took me a week to stop blushing from the last one. It's an 'everything goes' kind of night."

"Really?" That perked Hazel's interest. The idea of going somewhere like that, she could watch as much as she wanted, and then Bach would be there to help her along.

"Where does he usually have them?"

"Down at the warehouse district. He said something about getting out of them, so this, I think, might be his big blowout. You know, kind of pull out all the stops."

"What kind of things happen?"

"Everything. Role play, costumes, BDSM...if you can think of it, he will have it there for you." Amy's cheeks flushed at an obviously intimate memory.

Hazel practically squirmed in her seat. This sounded incredible, and she already wanted to go. "I wonder if he wants any help? I wouldn't mind helping out."

Amy sat up smiling.

"Hey, Dad." Amy spoke over Hazel's head, so obviously Bach had come into the room behind her. "Hazel said she would love to

help you during your party. Think you have something you need her to do?"

Hazel turned to look behind her. Bach stared at her, his gaze a mixture of need and desperation and perhaps fear?

"Would you be willing to help, Hazel?"

"Of course. I know some good party rental places. I bet we can get you a good price. Do you already have a building in mind?"

"I have all of that covered. There's a couple discreet companies that I always use."

"I'm not sure what I could help you with, then."

"How about we talk about it after dinner?"

* * * *

Hazel flopped back on her bed with thoughts of her evening with Bacchus. The babies woke up just as they finished dinner, and with five adults passing them around and playing with them, they didn't stay awake long. Bach handled the children with such ease he must have spent a lot of time with them.

Thanks to the sports tournament that he played with Bach and Amy's husbands, Gabe fell into an exhausted sleep as soon as they got him in the car. After all that, she never did get a chance to ask Bach about the party Amy mentioned. Becoming a mom hadn't completely changed the person deep inside her. All those yearnings she concentrated on suppressing for the last seven years battled at her subconscious. Hearing all about this wild night had her imagination running overtime and her body tingling.

Too bad she lay in her bed all alone, that being her own fault. She would have loved to let the man do whatever he wanted instead of sending him home. This relationship felt incredible and reckless at the same time. She had known him a very short time and already contemplated having him stay over. What message would Gabe learn

from that? No, it would be too confusing for her son. She couldn't afford to be a plaything, as tempting as it might be.

A cool breeze floated through the window and over her damp skin. Her nipples tightened in response. At least some things she could still do safely. With Bach's face in her mind, she let her fingers dance over her skin, pinching the hardened tips of her breasts. With a bit of imagination she pretended his fingers circled through her curls, slowly parting the velvety folds baring herself to the breeze. Her back arched, liquid dripping between her legs. She brought her feet up and placed them on the bed.

"God, Bach. I wish you were here."

"I told you, only needed to ask."

Hazel sat up with a squeak, pulling her fingers from between her legs. Standing at the end of the bed, he smiled down at her. She tried to scramble back.

He grabbed her under the knees before she could move. "Shh. Close your eyes."

"What are you, crazy? How did you get in here?" She kept her voice low so it wouldn't echo in the dark room. He must have climbed up on the veranda roof and come in through the hall window. Despite scaring the hell out of her, she couldn't deny the excitement at him sneaking in. Her heart fluttered rapidly against her rib cage. Just thinking of him made her damp, but having him standing before her made her throb. To fantasize about a man and then have him appear as if she magically brought him here and catch her playing with herself? Gabe had to inherit his ability from one of his parents. Maybe she had the ability to transport hot men to her bed?

"I promise, Hazel, just a taste. Please. I could smell you all night, and it drove me insane." He pulled her forward until her butt perched on the bed's edge, her knees resting on his jean-clad hips. She looked up into his face. His eyes looked a dark violet, stained with passion.

"I'm not dreaming, right?" This was crazy. She should tell him to go. He snuck into her house.

“I’ll keep you safe.” He breathed the words against her hair. Bending over, he pressed a kiss to her lips, pushing her back against the mattress. She didn’t want him to go anywhere and gripped his shoulders tightly.

His tongue tangled with hers. Nipping at her lower lip, he lifted her, slightly pressing the apex of her legs against the swelling behind his jeans. A deep groan erupted from deep within her sex-starved soul. She must be leaving a damp streak against the denim, but he didn’t seem to care. Grasping her hips, he pulled her tighter against him, rocking their bodies in a circular motion.

Her legs shook and back arched, offering. He slid down and took a nipple between his teeth, biting down hard enough to send pain-pleasure tingles through her entire body.

She cried out and bucked hard in his arms. His lips slid over her skin, leaving stinging bites over her belly and at the top of each leg. Whimpering, she speared her fingers through his hair, the silky strands feeling a bit hard due to whatever he put in it. She pressed downward, and he laughed low and deep against her skin. The vibration alone almost had her coming all over his lips. Only Bach made her want to be reckless, demanding. Mrs. Roberts had one thing right. She could never be satisfied with a man who didn’t care if she stared at the ceiling tiles.

His fingers parted her, and he blew a cool breath against her core. Her hips jerked, and her whimpers became louder as she rocked in his grip. Her thoughts scattered as he teased her. “Bach, please, please.” She panted, clasping at the covers, and then pushed against his unmoving head.

“Please what? What do you want, Hazel? Tell me. Let me hear the words.”

“Lick me. Oh God, something. I can’t stand this teasing.” One finger traced a teasing path between her legs, swirling around her folds, coating her clit with her own moisture. She trembled. Her body wanted to feel his touch, craving his attention.

“You’re so responsive, so wet. Have you been like this all day?”

She nodded, no longer embarrassed by the idea, or if he knew every time he came near her she craved more than just a casual touch.

“I wish I had realized. I would’ve taken care of you before now. Come on, sweetheart.” He lifted her hips and buried his face between her legs. Sucking her clit between his lips he lashed at it, pulling a soul-deep cry out of her, his tongue flickering so fast her toes curled.

He drove two fingers deep within her, and she came hard. He relentlessly continued, not letting go of her as her body tensed up. Her hips jerked against his face, her fingers gripping his hair. He teased and licked her sensitive nub. His fingers curling within her and pumping at an incredible speed. Her next orgasm exploded hotter than the first. Detonating from deep within her, racking her body with shudders, as the intensity ripped through her. She grabbed a pillow and sobbed out her ecstasy. Feeling such relief at being gifted with what she understood she craved.

His fingers continued to stroke a place inside her she didn’t know existed until now. He coaxed her over another peak, until she fell limp against the sheet with delicious aftershocks rippling through her muscles. Her inner walls still fluttered against his fingers as he stroked her, not allowing the passion they shared to diminish. A soft sigh slipped from her, and her lips curled into a smile. She watched through half closed eyes as he wiggled out of his pants and crawled up between her legs. It took almost no effort on his part to stroke her delicate flesh, and entice those lovely tremors to continue. Her nerves jumped when he flicked her piercing with his thumb. She looked up at him and cupped his cheek with her hand.

Bach turned his face and kissed her palm, settled his hips between hers, and pushed into her with one long, hard stroke. She cried out and arched her back. He lifted her legs to his shoulders and cupped her hips, driving into her. Her soft body gripped him in a viselike

grip. Her hands grasped at the sheet beneath her, bunching it between her fingers. Her breasts shook with the force of his thrusts.

She struggled to contain herself, to stay quiet. He watched her bite her swollen lips, fighting against the noise that fought to break free. He wanted to hear every sound, treasured each moan and gasp. He kissed her deeply and hard when she started to come undone, muffling her own cries and his own. Her orgasm triggered a soul-deep one of his own. He collapsed to the side of her, pulling her body close to his. He curled against her side and buried his face into her neck. Inhaling the unique scene all her own, he felt a peace he hadn't known in his entire life. His daily life drifted in and out like the tides. Hazel was his anchor. She made him want to enjoy this exact moment and look forward to the next second with her.

The sensation of fingers running through his hair pulled him out of the haze he floated in. He looked up and found her smiling down at him. Her lips were swollen from his kisses. Her beautiful eye's were half closed and looked dreamy. Strands of silky hair curled at her temples and stuck to her damp skin. She looked like the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. He felt a deep hunger in his soul that wasn't ever going to be sated. She would be his goddess, and he could happily worship at her feet for eternity. Now, how did you convince someone you are a god and you both are meant to be together? Easy. *Yeah, right.*

He dropped his face back to her neck and pretended that the rest of the universe didn't exist.

"Don't go to sleep, Bach" She tugged sharply on his hair. He smacked her hip in retaliation, and she laughed softly. "You can't be here when Gabe gets up."

"I promise. He'll never know." He kept his promise, slipping out of bed just as Apollo edged the sun over the horizon, acquiring a promise from Hazel before he left—that tonight they would continue her wine education. Convincing her to take Gabriel to her friend's house didn't prove difficult. The sands of time continued to flow, and

he needed to tell her more about her part in the Bacchanalia. Then convince her that not only did she have to trust him but believe in him as well.

* * * *

A tinny version of the James Bond song interrupted Bach's exploration of a most delicious neck. Hazel sat up with a gasp and tried to wriggle out of his arms.

"Just ignore it." Bach tried to pull her back into his lap. So far their wine education had gotten as far as the bottles being opened. Riesling grapes lost against the draw of Hazel's skin.

"Can't. That's Matilda. Something might be wrong with Gabe."

Bach let her go, pressing the heel of his hand to the aching erection attempting to rip a hole in the front of his jeans.

Seconds after she answered the phone, he knew something had gone wrong. The color drained from her face, and she reached wildly for something to hold on to. He jumped up and wrapped his arms around her waist. He could hear a woman's voice frantically telling Hazel to come over. She looked up at him, desperation in her eyes that had every alpha part of him jumping up with a battle cry.

"Gabriel's father is there."

For once, Hazel didn't argue with him when he told her to get in his car or during the ride over to her friend's house. She kept a white-knuckle grip on the door and with the other hand grabbed a hold of the seat. His attempt to reassure her abruptly ended when she told him to shut up and drive. At first, he thought that fear had stopped her from speaking, but when she snarled at him, he could hear white-hot wrath fueling her words. She was furious, and incredibly gorgeous. He made a mental note to annoy her enough so that her eyes flashed like that at him. The car hadn't completely stopped when she jumped out and stormed up to the man leaning against a telephone pole near the street.

“What are you doing here?”

“I want to see my son.”

“He’s not your son. He’s mine. You signed off any rights when you denied acceptance. You had your chance to be a father.”

The man looked over her as if she didn’t exist, pinning a look on Bacchus. “So you’re the one playing daddy to my son.”

“No, but I’d be a damn sight better than you.”

The man stood up suddenly and pushed Hazel aside, keeping a grip on her arm. A moment of panic flashed through her eyes before she shuttered them again but not soon enough for him to miss and know that she had experienced this kind of handling before.

“You want to be letting go of her.” He kept his voice deadly calm. Bonehead must have gotten the clue because he let go quickly enough. She staggered back and then stepped in between the two of them. Bach couldn’t decide whether to applaud her bravery or yell at her for getting between them.

He reminded himself that this was her fight. She made it obvious that she didn’t like to feel helpless. Compromising, he stepped closer to her side but let her vent her anger at her ex. If the man lacked enough intelligence to try to grab her again, Bach would break his hand. Then, he would petition the Keres to hunt him down.

“Get out of here, Tim. Right now. You are in violation of parole being within one hundred feet of me. I’ll have you arrested and put back in jail.”

“You try to put me back, little girl, and I’ll show you what I learned in the last twelve months.” He glared down at her, grabbing for the neck of her shirt.

Close enough. Bacchus grabbed the man by the throat and tripped him, sending him over his shoulder and on to the hard ground. The solid thud of his body vibrated up Bach’s arm. “You threaten her again and you won’t have to worry about the legal system. I’ll take care of you myself. I have friends that’ll make you wish you were behind bars.”

The violent man got up and brushed himself off. A smug smile curled his lips as if he had just gotten exactly what he wanted. “This isn’t over, Hazel. You’ll be hearing from my lawyer tomorrow.” He stalked off, and Bacchus fought the urge to throw something sharp into his back.

“What have you done?” Hazel whispered. “He’ll try to take Gabe away from me.”

“I won’t let that happen, Hazel. I promise.”

“I need to check on Gabriel.”

“Don’t worry. He’s sleeping,” a woman’s voice called softly from the house.

Bach looked up and saw a petite woman with large eyes dressed in a flannel nightgown standing on the porch. She would have looked like an innocent, except for the wooden baseball bat in her hands.

“Don’t look at me. I didn’t see a thing.” She glared at the sound of a car screeching away from the curb. “Well, I could use a cuppa. Anyone else interested?”

“Bach, I want you to leave.” Hazel pressed a hand to his chest. “I can’t afford to get involved with any more violent men. This isn’t going to work. I have to keep my priorities straight.”

He grabbed for her wrist and held on. He clenched his teeth, fighting the urge to pull her away from all this and keep her safe. She would no doubt accuse him of keeping her prisoner. He wanted to tell her that he would be back because he couldn’t allow them to end like this. He looked down into her eyes and saw the fear there. Pushing her would make her dig in her heels. Regretting that his actions were the cause didn’t change anything at the moment, so he let her go. “You call me if you need anything.”

Chapter Six

“Girlfriend, I have always trusted your judgment, but right now I think you’re nuts!” Matilda leaned the baseball bat against the side of the door before engaging the deadlock. “Why would you push away that hunk-a-lovin’ out there?”

“Mattie, I can’t have any more violence in my life. Not around Gabe.”

“I can understand that, hun. You’re an amazing mom, and he’s an incredible kid, but it seems like you are hiding behind him lately.”

“How could you say that to me?” Hazel stalked back and forth across the linoleum floor. “I mean, you remember, right? I had to run away. To save us both. I won’t put us in that position again.”

“You’re right, and you did the right thing. You did everything you could to protect the both of you, but you need to have a life, too. Something tells me that big guy could protect you just fine.”

“Bach is just as violent as Tim.”

“You think? Does your wrist hurt? From my viewpoint, it looked more like he tried to protect you but not get in your way.”

Hazel rubbed her wrists absentmindedly. She didn’t need to tell Mattie that she had it right. The wrist Bach grabbed felt fine, but her arm ached where Tim gripped her. Bach had just fought in her defense, and despite his anger, he never hurt her. He left when she asked, even though she knew he didn’t want to. “I don’t know what to think anymore. Bach scares me.”

“Really?” Mattie’s tone turned teasing despite the stressful emotional situation. “Scared like he makes your heart pound and you want to get naked and touch all those muscles of his?”

Hazel turned a faux shocked look at her friend. “No, I don’t want to get naked. I want to get him naked and drizzle chocolate on his abs.”

“Woo-hoo, now that sounds like potential. Wanna make a shopping list? I just got some new stuff in the shop that might interest you.”

“I shouldn’t have made him go away, should I?”

“It’ll keep him on his toes. If he took you seriously, then good riddance.”

“You think he’ll be back?”

“I’d be surprised if he wasn’t standing outside watching the house as we speak.”

“Mattie did Tim threaten you at all?” Hazel agonized over what Tim might have said. He must have been watching her and knew that Gabe was over at Mattie’s house. Why else would he be there and not show up at her place? “If I had known he was around, I never would have put you in this position.”

“Sweetheart, that man isn’t right in the head. Don’t worry about what he said. I’m no dummy. He wouldn’t have gotten a slimy digit on your son.”

* * * *

Bach wasn’t standing guard outside the house. Hazel looked when she carried a sleepy Gabe to Matilda’s car. Didn’t he say he wouldn’t be that easy to get rid of? It might not be right of her to wish he had remained, but she did. Bach made her feel safe. How many times could she push him away before he gave up on her?

She looked out the back window, hoping to see him.

“I hate it when I’m wrong.” Hazel looked to the front seat, when Mattie whispered her comments while looking around. Her friend turned and stared back at her. “I would have bet a month’s rent he would have been out here.”

Hazel shrugged as if it didn't really matter. Her chest felt so tight it felt as if she tried to breathe through soup. She had no right to expect him to keep putting up with her continually pushing him away. No one else did. This time, though, instead of saving her heart, she felt like it had shattered.

The drive home felt so much faster with Gabe asleep in her lap than the fury-filled drive with Bach. It still gave her more time to think than she wanted. Mattie usually chattered more than this, just as well since Hazel didn't feel all that talkative. Matilda drove into her driveway, and as soon as the car came to a complete stop, Hazel's door swung open. A large shadow stepped in front of her. Not until he bent over and leaned did Hazel relax slightly. Bach's features were highlighted by the soft dashboard lights.

"Here, give him to me." Bach scooped Gabe up as if he weighed nothing at all. She couldn't believe the way she felt the tension drain from her body. Bach was here, and a part of her knew that he would keep them safe. "Keys?"

She put her house keys in his open palm.

"Thanks for the drive." Hazel reached forward and held the hand that Matilda offered.

"Don't screw this one up, Hazel. I'd take him off your hands, but he's only interested in you."

Hazel brushed a kiss against her best friend's cheek. "I'll do my best."

By the time she had gotten out of the car, Bach already had taken Gabe inside. The door sat open, waiting for her. Trusting that Bach would do fine, she closed the screen door and went to sit on the swing at the end of the veranda. Not that there should be any nosey neighbors at this time of night, but she preferred privacy.

Not much time had passed when Bach joined her. They sat in silence for a bit, listening to the sounds of the crickets and other nocturnal animals. She didn't know what to say. Frankly, she was

afraid to say anything. If she never started the conversation, would they just sit here peacefully?

An exasperated sigh came from Bach moments before he pulled her across his lap. He cradled her in his arms and kissed her.

This was a sweet kiss, gentle, more of a brushing of lips, and not at all what she wanted. She reached up and ran her fingers through the silky hair at his neck and returned the kiss with all the passion she could. She didn't want him to leave her and tried to infuse her actions with that thought.

He ended the kiss first and eased slightly away from her. "Hazel, you and I need to talk about something."

"Okay. How about we talk in the morning?" She twisted in his lap and straddled him. She could feel the hard length of him pushing up against her. She rocked her hips against him. He grasped her face and gave her a punishing kiss that had them both panting.

"Sweet eternity, stop that. Better yet, keep that thought, and we'll get back to it. I need to talk to you about something, Hazel, and it's important."

"If it's about Tim and what happened tonight..." She would have to call a lawyer tomorrow and see exactly what the law would allow her ex. Bach hit first, but Tim instigated.

"I can protect you and Gabe from that idiot. He's the least of my concerns."

"You can't be with us all the time. I'll call the police tomorrow and make a report. You acted out of self-defense, defending me from him. They have to understand."

"Oh, I'm sure they would have a lot more questions." Bach ran a hand through his hair, mussing up the waves. "There is something you need to know about me. This might not be the best time to bring it up, but I'm starting to think there will never be a good time."

Why is he hiding from the police? She started to move off his lap, but he stopped her. "No, I don't have a record. No, I have never been violent to a woman, ever. Just stay where you are for a moment."

Hazel wasn't certain sitting in his lap was the best way to have what sounded like an important conversation, but for now she wasn't going to argue. It couldn't be that bad. He got the strangest look in his eyes just before he tucked a bit of her hair behind her ear.

"Hazel, I know that Amy told you my real name is Bacchus."

"Yes, she mentioned it. What does that have to do with all this?"

His hands slipped down her sides, his fingers curling around her hips. "Did she mention that my parents are Semele and Zeus?"

"Bach, come on." She tried to push off him, but he tightened his grasp and held her where she sat. "I'm not in the mood for a game tonight."

"I'm not playing a game, Hazel. I really am a god. My sons-in-law are Hypnos and Thanatos."

"Death and Sleep? Right." She pushed at him again. "You know what? I think I'm too tired for this, after all. Role-playing can be fun, but I'm not into it tonight."

"Hazel, I'm not playing here. I am who I say I am."

"Fine." Hazel gave up trying to get away from him. He refused to let her go, and she didn't understand the determination to have her play along. "Prove it."

"It doesn't work that way. If you don't believe me, then no matter what I do, it won't work."

"That's convenient, Bach." She kept the sarcasm from her tone. To have a god swoop down and save her, to be her protector, to be a good role model to Gabe...those were just silly wishes. She wanted to let him take care of her, but that slippery slope she wasn't willing to navigate. If she let him take care of her now, how long before she lost herself again?

"Bach, you're a nice enough guy, and I'll admit what we have going on between us is really intense. Maybe we should just back away and take a breath?"

"Hazel, you are *not* pushing me away again. I have tried to be patient, understanding, but I am not going to suffer for what that

moronic asshole did to you. Isn't that what this is all about? You hide behind your son and push me away so you don't get hurt, but you don't care about how I feel, do you?"

That hit a bit close to the mark for her. "Let go of me, Bach." She shoved hard against his chest, anger riding her hard. He let her go this time, and she moved a few steps away from him.

"This is about you needing a bit of a reality check. You. Are. Not. A. God."

"Gabriel believes me."

That did it. He spoke as if the opinion of a child carried all the proof he needed. Hazel pointed a finger at him, fighting the urge to scream. "Don't you dare bring Gabe into this! You will not use my son as a pawn to manipulate me." She stomped down the veranda, the old wood squeaking with every step.

"Hazel, wait, I handled this all wrong."

She whipped open the door and looked over at him. He had stood up, his head bent as he ran his hands through his hair. He looked so beat down, and angry, but somehow she didn't get the impression it was directed to her.

He took a step towards her, the boards squeaking under his weight. "Please, let me explain. Trust me."

"Get off my property. Go away, now. Don't sneak in again either." She ignored what else he tried to say and quickly moved into the house, shutting him out.

Leaning back against the door, she listened for Bach's footsteps on the stairs. What brought about all the god stuff about anyway? One moment she actually contemplated the possibility of a future with him, but that would require her trusting him with everything. Her chest felt tight and her heartbeat painful. Bach was too dangerous, and part of her knew she would risk almost everything for him. She couldn't trust anyone like that ever again.

After a few minutes, she whipped open the door planning on ordering him from the property or inviting him in and just enjoying

what she had for the moment instead of always being worried about the future.

She faced an empty porch. Stepping out the door, she glanced out into the yard. How did he get past her without her hearing?

* * * *

Hazel had a terrible night's sleep. Erotic dreams of Bach mixed with horrifying dreams of the gods, and then her ex, taking her son away from her. All of them condemned her as a bad mother. By the time the morning arrived, she felt as though she had barely slept. She struggled with the urge to suggest to Gabe that he pick out a DVD and watch it. At least then she could stretch out on the sofa and catch a bit of a nap.

Gabriel played out in the backyard, but when she looked out to check on him, she saw an incredibly large bald-headed man standing next to him. She moved before she made the conscious choice to. Grabbing a large heavy pot on the way by the stove, she burst through the back door. The sight that greeted her stopped her dead in her tracks.

"Do it again!" The sound of Gabe's delighted laughter calmed her slightly.

The man held in his hands a rolling ball of flame, and he threw it up in the air, where it exploded into the form of a robot car and then dissipated into the air.

"Do it again!"

"Gabriel!" His name came out sharper than she meant it to, and he jumped at the sound.

"It's okay, Mommy. He's a friend of Bach's too. He's a good color."

Her son looked up at her with such innocence, she couldn't bear to rip into him for talking to strangers again. *Why can you accept Gabriel's ability, but not what Bach said?* "Gabriel, why don't you go

get yourself a snack? I need to talk to Bach's friend. When I come in, we'll watch a movie together." She had to have a talk with Gabe again. Despite his belief in his own abilities, she couldn't take the chance of his being wrong one day.

"Cool. Nice to meet you, Heph." He shook the larger man's hand like a little grown-up, so mature for such a little boy.

"Nice to meet you too, little man." Heph had a low, gravelly tone to his voice that sounded like rocks grinding together.

Gabe raced past her and into their house

As soon as the door slammed shut, she turned on the large man. "You stay the hell away from my son, or I'll kill you myself."

"Do you have a sister?" He looked her up and down, and she could feel her cheeks heating when he lingered on her middle parts.

"What? No."

"That's a shame. You know, if Bacchus is being too much of an asshole, I'll kick his ass for you."

"No, but thank you for offering." She started to feel silly. Holding her pot up like a weapon seemed futile, so she let it drop. "How did you do the thing with the fire? Is it a trick?"

"Nothing special, just showing off a bit for Gabe."

"Can you do it again?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Simply because Gabe believes I can, and you don't."

"Did you both have a meeting to make this stuff up?" Hazel dropped the pot and sat down on the steps to her back door. "You think you're an ancient Greek god as well?"

"Easy with the word 'ancient.' I take it you didn't believe he is who he says he is?"

"Of course not. Who are you?"

"Heph." When she arched an expectant eyebrow, he amended his answer. "Hephaestus. You could say Bacchus and I grew up in the same neighborhood."

“Little Olympus?”

Heph laughed and sat down next to her. “Bacchus asked me to keep an eye on you two. You must have been mighty pissed at him for him ask me to watch over you.”

“You could say that.” Hazel huffed out a breath and stared out over the lawn. Did she dare, should she actually entertain the idea of believing in this craziness? She couldn’t explain what she saw when she came out here anymore than she could explain her son’s ability. “I’m going to have to apologize to him.”

“I wouldn’t. This is keeping him on his toes, and I haven’t seen him this happy in a millennium. He is used to having everything handed to him on a silver platter. You are making him work for it. He’ll appreciate you more later if you make him earn you now.”

She lifted her hand to block the sun’s glare and took a good look at the man next to her. He was gorgeous as well but in a more rugged way. Being this close to him didn’t affect her anything close to what Bach did standing in the same room.

“I feel silly even contemplating believing this Greek god stuff.”

“Let me ask you something. Many people believe in the one God. Do you think they are silly?”

“No, I guess not.” She turned and looked back over the lawn, watching a couple of butterflies dance around in the air. He had a point. Many people believed they had seen all sorts of apparitions over the centuries.

“What about people who say they have seen ghosts?”

“I guess if you believe in that sort of thing, then it’s possible.” As soon as the words left her mouth, the implications hit her. She glanced up at him, expecting him to be flaunting his superiority. Instead he sat there looking up, eyes closed, as if he enjoyed the feel of the sun on his face. She might have bought it, if not for the grin.

“How do you know so much about relationships?”

“Spent a few centuries married to Aphrodite.” Smiling, he shrugged one shoulder as if that said it all. “Our relationship took a

swirly, but I still remember a lot of what happened between those she worked with.”

“Why are you here?”

“Things are not all manna and lilies in Olympus, and Bach wanted to make sure that you and Gabe hadn’t drawn any unwanted attention.”

“Did you owe him a favor?”

“No, not even close. Vine boy owes me huge, but I have a soft spot for strong women taking care of their family on their own. Your son is a good kid. I’d like to see him grow into the man he has the potential to be.”

“Okay, Heph. We’re sitting down to watch a movie. Do you want to join us?”

Heph pushed up off the step and offered his hand to her. “I’d love to. You sure you don’t have a sister?”

“Sorry, big guy. I’m an only child. I’ve got a best friend, though.”

“Is she as mean as you?”

“I’m not mean.”

“Right. And I’m in the habit of explaining myself.”

Heph looked over her shoulder and let go of her hand. “How about I go in and watch the movie with Gabriel?”

“Why?” Turning around, she saw that Bach had appeared behind them. His arms lay folded over his chest, as he scowled at Heph. Where before she would have had the urge to get Gabe and run away in the opposite direction, she stood there and crossed her arms over her chest. Bach wouldn’t hurt her no matter how pissed off he looked. “What’s with the evil eye?” The back door banged shut behind her, signaling that they were alone.

“I don’t like him touching you.”

“That’s ridiculous. He’s your friend.”

Bach walked closer to her, running his fingers along her cheek as soon as he got close enough. “And I know exactly what he is thinking about when he talks to you.”

“He does not. You’re being jealous.”

“I know. I can’t help it. Not with you.”

He drew her closer, but she kept her arms crossed against her chest, fighting the urge to wrap them around him. “I’m not a possession, Bach. If you think you’re going to control me, then we’re in trouble already.”

“I possess more sense than that. I’m trying to get used to the things you make me feel. They’re all new to me.”

She relaxed her arms and let her hands rest on his hips. A soft breeze blew around them, and she reached up to brush some of the hair out of Bach’s eyes. He had beautiful eyes, and such dark eyelashes, but then a god couldn’t be anything less than perfect. Did she really trust him to tell her the truth?

“You were right, you know. What you said last night. Any man who tries to get near me, I push away. I would hate to see Gabriel get attached to someone and then have them change or disappear.”

“I can’t say I have a problem with you pushing men away from you, as long as I’m not one of them.”

“I’ll do my best.” This time she stepped into his embrace, feeling his arms wrap around her. Her face rested in the crook of his neck. He smelled like dark chocolate and exotic spice. She felt safe, and deep down she knew she could trust him. As scary as that thought was, she wanted to stay in his arms like this forever.

“I brought you something.” He lifted his hand up between them, the back of his fingers brushing her breast lightly. Her nipples tightened, pushing against her tank top, eliciting a quiet chuckle from Bach. She thought of smacking him for such an obvious plot to cop a feel, when his fingers uncurled.

“Wow, it’s so pretty.” A glass pendant surrounded by a filigree gold cage protecting it sat in the middle of his palm. An opalescent liquid trapped inside the small globe rolled like the sea. The gold chain it hung from looked so fragile in Bacchus’s strong fingers. “What’s inside?”

“That is one of Poseidon’s tears. It’s one of the most powerful symbols out there. On the rare occasion that he would shed a tear, it would be washed away by the sea that surrounds him.”

“How did that one end up captured?” Her love of mythology had her wanting to hear the rest of the story.

“Because he shed this one on land, the day my mother died.”

She looked up, about to chastise him for continuing his act. It was one thing to use the name a Bacchus as a joke but another to use it to play with her emotions. What she saw in his eyes stopped her. He really believed in what he told her. This wasn’t a joke to him, a pain reflected there in his eyes that she felt stab at her heart. She had no reason to believe him, no rational one. But the truth hung there between them.

“I want you to have it.”

“No.” She fled back a couple steps. “You can’t. I can’t. It’s too much.”

“You believe me?” The pain in his eyes receded a touch, only to be replaced by that of a hunter stalking his prey.

She wasn’t certain which frightened her more, not believing that he spoke the truth or admitting that she did believe him. “No. This is ridiculous. I don’t know why I am even entertaining the idea.” She ran her hand through her hair and moved away from him a bit more. He matched her steps, not allowing her any more space than a few feet. “Stop it. Let me think.”

“Stop thinking so much, and listen to your heart.”

“That’s the quickest way to get myself into trouble.”

He closed the distance between them between blinks, wrapped his arms around her, trapping her against his chest. “It’s the quickest way to save yourself.”

“If you are what you say you are, let me go.” She shoved against his chest with her hands, trying desperately to ignore the incredible way his muscles felt under her fingers.

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Because I asked you to?”

“I would, but I don’t believe you really want me to do that. Your body isn’t telling me to get away.”

She couldn’t help her body’s reaction to him. His arms wrapped around her, the feeling of her legs between his, being surrounded by him, she felt safe and it was an addictive sensation. “Regardless of that, I have to keep my priorities straight.”

“By denying what you truly want?”

“What I want doesn’t matter. I let myself act in my own interests once and learned the hard way of the consequences. My child is my priority now. I need to do what is best for him.”

Bach rubbed her back with one hand while the other rested on her hip. “The gods could learn a lot from human mothers.”

She gave that comment an inconsequential shrug. “Your lot didn’t have to earn anything. From what I hear, everything is handed to you on gold-encrusted platters.”

“I’m sorry to say that is true, and sometimes I wish it were otherwise. But, earning your trust is an honor I’d prefer to work for.” He held up the necklace. “I want you to wear this.”

The necklace dangled from his fingers. She watched the liquid inside sparkle in the sunshine. “It’s gorgeous. I’d be terrified of breaking it. Besides, shouldn’t that be in a museum or something?”

“I’d rather it be kept safe. Your neck will do just fine.”

“What if it breaks?”

“It won’t. It might look as if it is fragile enough to fall apart at the slightest bit of force, but it’s made from sterner stuff than that.”

Like me? She thought about his silent implication as he lifted his arms from behind her. Instead of running like she had planned, she stood there and let him put the necklace on her. The pendant chilled her skin when it first touched her, but then radiated warmth that washed over her like a wave. For a moment, she could hear the roar of the waves as they crashed against the beach.

Bach stepped closer, and she rested her cheek against his chest. The crashing of waves became the steady beat of his heart. “You okay?” His voice echoed with the sound of waves in her ear.

She blinked. Her cheek rested against his chest, and she wrapped her arms around him as if she used him for an anchor in a buffeting wind. Or simply she needed a snack to get her blood sugar back up? “What did you do to me?”

“Nothing, I swear. I didn’t expect you to feel anything. I wasn’t completely certain that you believed me.”

“So this was a test?”

“No, absolutely not. If I had thought for a moment, I would have warned you of some possible side effects to putting it on you.”

“Anything else you might want to warn me about?”

“Other than don’t be surprised if you develop cravings for sushi?”

She hated sushi. Her horror at that idea must have shown on her face because he amended his teasing too quickly.

“I’m kidding. I promise you’ll be fine.”

“Did Hera really trick Zeus into killing your mother?”

“That story has been told and retold so often that I don’t think anyone knows the truth anymore. Not that it matters, because she wouldn’t be alive now anyway. No matter who killed her.”

“Why didn’t Poseidon do anything to stop it?”

“Because the gods are a self-centered bunch and don’t think of much other than themselves.”

“You don’t have a very good opinion of yourself, do you? Didn’t you tell me you’re a god?”

“Yes, but I’m more evolved. I’m learning, remember?”

“If he cried, then he must have cared.”

“It’s possible, or there might have been a different reason for it. I don’t know the answer to that. The gods are capable of loving deeply, but first we have to realize that we have faults as well, and most don’t like to believe that.”

She wrapped the chain around her fingers and lifted the pendant up higher. “If this is a powerful symbol, like you said, what if someone comes looking for it?”

“They won’t. Even if they did, your neck is the last place they would look for it.” He cupped her cheek with his hand. His skin was soft, and she had this insane urge to rub her cheek against his fingers. “I would never intentionally put you in any danger.”

“Intentionally? Is that more deity doublespeak?”

“Perhaps. Old habits die hard. I would never have given it to you if I thought you might be in danger.”

“Are you coming in to watch a movie with us?” Perhaps later, after she had gotten Gabe tucked in and asleep, she could follow through with what she really wanted to do with him.

“I think we should let Gabe and Heph hang out together. I want to show you something.” He took her hand and led her out onto the grass, past where Heph had earlier played with fireballs. Hazel half questioned the ease with which she accepted everything that Bach said. She knew that most of it defied what she understood as reality, but she didn’t consider herself a stupid person. Already, she had witnessed too many things that defied realistic description.

“I’ve seen my grass before.” She looked around wondering why he chose to bring her out here.

“But did you notice that?” In the corner of her lawn where the sun shone down, a large wooden arbor appeared. It stood as tall as Heph and wide enough that she and Bach could stand beside each other under it. “That’s pretty.”

“Not done yet.” From below the ground four vines grew up either side. Bach moved his fingers in a precise manner, and the vines interwove themselves, creating an almost solid wall around it. Clusters of fat purple grapes started to grow, hanging over the edge of the large leaves.

Hazel’s breath caught in her throat, and she felt her jaw grow slack. She couldn’t help it. Despite watching it happen right in front

of her, her brain scrambled for a logical answer. She took a step closer and then stepped two back. “How did you...never mind.”

Bach took her hand and tugged to towards the arch. “Come on. This is just the door.”

“Door? Door to where?” Her legs felt stiff as she tried to follow him.

“My home.”

Hazel stepped woodenly behind Bach as he tugged her closer to him. He built a door to his home in her backyard? *Holy crap!* “Is this safe?”

“I promise. The only people that can use this door are you and Gabe. To anyone else it’s just a vine-covered arch.”

Through the arch, she could see the corner of a thick hedge that blocked the view of the neighbors behind them. As soon as she stepped under it with Bach, the view shimmered and then washed away, revealing a brightly lit space.

She stepped into a hallway that looked carved from white marble. Large pillars lined up on either side of her for about ten feet, and at the end sat an opaque glass door that looked like it glowed.

Behind her she could still see her backyard. Letting go of Bach’s hand, she stepped back out onto the grass. She felt the warm sun on her face, heard the muted sounds of cars going by out front and a dog barking in the distance. Through the arch, the hedge sat like normal. Worried she had done something wrong, she stepped back, and again the hedge washed away. Now Bach leaned against a white marble pillar, an indulgent grin on his face.

“Sorry. I just...this is amazing.”

“Take your time.” Bach waved at her. “Get used to it.”

“I think I’m okay now. Should I tell Heph where I’ll be?”

“If it will make you more comfortable. I’ll wait.”

She ran up to the house and checked to make sure that Heph continued to watch Gabe. They both were absorbed in the beginning of Gabe’s favorite movie. Apparently, little boys weren’t the only

ones fascinated with the idea of robots that turned into guardians. At the moment, it didn't seem any more far-fetched then the fact that a god would be babysitting her son.

Chapter Seven

Stepping into his home felt like an act of freedom for Bacchus. It freed him from the oppression of disbelief that hung in the air of the human world. Here, surrounded by marble pillars and the opalescence of Olympus, he could use his powers how he wanted. He crawled up onto his bed and flopped back on the downy mattress. It felt good to be home.

Where many believed that the gods were waited on hand and foot by numerous servants, Bacchus no longer welcomed them into his inner sanctum. With his position, those who hung around him stayed drunk or in a frenzy of some sort, sexual or drug-induced. After all these years, that had worn thin. He meant it when he told Heph that he wanted a quiet corner of the world to call his own. Only now, he wanted a particular librarian and her son to join him. He wanted Hazel to pick any of his vineyards, and he would happily move there permanently.

Over time, they might have to move to disallow suspicions when he didn't get any older. But then he could revisit the world with her, discover all the things that he had never really experienced. He would have an eternity to discover them all with her by his side. Gabriel as well, but they would wait until he grew up and then give him the option of eternal life.

Would Hazel want a life that never ended? She might refuse the ambrosia, refuse to stay with him forever. She might decide to stay as a human, and he would have to search for each of her incarnations. He could find her and win her heart over and over. For someone with his lifespan, it gave him a future to look forward to.

On the other side of the proverbial coin, he would be forced to watch her die at the end of each lifespan. It also would be a future with long periods without her. What if she reincarnated in another time? He could go centuries without being with her. That changed his mind. He needed her to be with him, to stay with him forever. The idea of being separated from her left a cold knot in his stomach

Then there was the child he had seen during his visit to the Fates. The memory of that insignificant knot on Hazel's thread burned at him. She would want another child, but the Fates could be fickle. You can't have a world filled with immortals, and they didn't say that the possible child would be his. Could he let her go if he had to? Let her lead a normal life with her children?

As much as he liked to believe that he had grown as a being, in some ways he remained selfish. He couldn't watch her grow large with another man's child.

She couldn't miss what she didn't know, but was withholding the information the right thing to do? The knowledge hung heavy on his thoughts. Now, he almost understood the position of the Fates. Balancing free will with destined outcome had its disadvantages.

A vibration in the energy that surrounded him tickled his senses. Hazel had stepped into his domain. All the gods would know a human had entered their sacred Mount Olympus. Where long ago her presence here would have been a death notice, now she sent a vitality shimmering in the air around them. A strength of belief that would feed the most starved of gods, it would trickle through Olympus like the rich scent of flowers in a tropical breeze. Thankfully it couldn't be traced back here, which saved them any unwanted interruptions. Those currently residing on the Mount would be on the lookout for the source.

Hazel peeked around the door before stepping through it. Her mouth had dropped open again as she gaped at her surroundings. He didn't call out to her, letting her look her fill. This wasn't the first time she'd gifted him with the chance to see his world through fresh

eyes. He took all of this for granted; nothing had changed in here for millennia, except her. The first human to ever set foot in this room, and no other woman ever would again.

He felt a small strain of jealousy pull at him as he watched her look around his room. She hadn't looked over at him once, but she took great interest in the carvings in the walls. He had better stop her before she got any closer to the windows on the other side of the room. If she looked out there, it could be hours before he got her where he wanted her, on his bed and under him.

"You're welcome to change anything. Just let me know." He leaned back on his elbows. One leg stretched out in front of him and the other, he bent.

"My doorway leads to your bedroom?" She crossed her arms and tried to look unamused, but he could see the curiosity shining in her eyes. Her gaze roamed all over, and he was certain she wouldn't miss a detail. She looked at everything from the thick white carpets on the floor, to the rich purple bed covers, and the sheer curtains that hung suspended over his bed. At least now her gaze kept drifting back to him as she looked around, thankfully gaining some distance between her and the windows. He would show her anything and everything he could. Later.

"Unless you have Gabe with you. Then the door will open into the main room." He tracked her movements and fought the urge to leap at her and drag her across the sheets. A feeling of contentment flowed over him. Having her here in his world felt right. It also moved them one step closer to gaining her acceptance to attend the Bacchanalia. There were still some large obstacles he knew needed to be faced, but this one, by far, was the largest. Having her believe in him made him feel like everything was possible. An incredible feat because, until lately, he had never experienced the impossible.

"Is the rest of the house as impressive as what's in here?" Hazel lifted herself up onto the bed and crawled closer to him.

“That would depend on your definition of impressive.” He felt his cock harden under her gaze. Her imitation of a predator stalking prey had him believing that she decided he looked good enough to eat. That idea had his cock twitching against the fabric of his pants. Moving between his legs, she crawled up over him until they were face-to-face. She didn’t touch him at all, and he stayed still, allowing her to dictate the speed of this seduction. Not that he needed to be convinced, he was hers the moment she peeked around the door.

With one hand braced on the bed for support, she cupped him through his pants, pressing down against his erection. “I have a very high standard. The rest of your house may pale by comparison. For example, what I have here is the epitome of impressive.”

Bach exhaled in a rush feeling her fingers caressing him through material, and all the blood in his body made a downward rush. She stroked his length, but the fabric between them muted the feel of her fingers.

“How fast can you get out of these clothes?”

With a moment’s thought, his clothes disappeared, and her warm, soft hand gripped the length of him.

“Now, that’s impressive.” Hazel dipped her head and nuzzled his neck. Her delicate hand stroked the length of him.

He shuddered under her ministrations. Bending both his legs, he trapped her hips between them. This was a very different feeling for him, being completely bared while his woman remained completely dressed.

She pushed against his shoulders, and he dropped back against the pillows. At the same time, he lowered his legs so that she could straddle his hips. She pressed the apex of her legs against his rock-hard erection and he couldn’t stop a strangled groan from escaping his throat.

“You don’t look all that comfortable.”

“I’m fine for the moment.” Her hips shimmied over him, and he gritted his teeth together. With the thought of encouraging her along, he rested his hands on her hips and jerked his pelvis up against her.

“Is it a bit warm in here?” She slipped her fingers under the edge of her T-shirt and lifted it up over her tummy, pausing just as the rounded globes of her breasts came into view. “That’s better.”

Apparently, Hazel enjoyed having him in this position. He watched her play with the hem of her shirt, seeing her luscious breasts peek in and out of view. She wasn’t wearing a bra, so her creamy skin taunted him. After what felt like an eternity, she lifted it over her head and tossed it behind her. He sat up and wrapped his fingers around them, bringing them together so that he could lick and suck on them like a starved man. She moaned and ground herself down on him.

“Sweet eternity, Hazel. You’re killing me with all this teasing.”

“Teasing? I haven’t gotten started with teasing. I could do a striptease that would have you making a mess of yourself before I ever got near you.”

The visual that invoked burned itself into Bach’s mind. He could almost imagine her body swaying to music as she revealed creamy sections of skin one by one. Evil minx would no doubt tell him he couldn’t touch her till the last second.

Before she got that same idea, he gripped her hips and flipped her over onto her back. Pressing down against her, he held her hands stretched out over her head. Both her wrists caught in his hand, she moaned and shivered as he traced a path from her shoulder down her chest, sliding over a perfect breast. He paused to pinch her nipple between his fingers before carrying on. She jerked and arched up against him, looking for a harder touch.

“Stay there, or I’ll find someone to hold you down while I lick every inch of you.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?”

Her response confirmed a couple suspicions. “Would you like that, Hazel? Do you want to be the plaything of the gods?”

She shook her head wildly, keeping her eyes tightly closed. “No, not without you.” So, his little goddess was embarrassed by what turned her on.

“All right, Hazel. I can do that for you.” He kept his hands on her wrists and dropped his face close to her ear. “You want to be taken by two men? Feel a woman’s touch on your body? Do you want to hide in the shadows and watch strangers feed their urges?”

He memorized her every response as he continued to whisper a variety of fantasies and watch her reactions to them. His little goddess played the part of a perfect little repressed librarian, but he would discover her deepest secrets and then make them all come true. Her reactions became increasingly animated, her voice the sweetest sound he ever heard as she grew closer to an orgasm.

He rolled her over onto her stomach, tucking a few pillows beneath her hips. Gripping her tightly, he speared her. Her body clamped down onto him so tightly he could hardly move.

Smack! “Do you want to be my plaything Hazel?”

Smack!

“Yes!”

His hand left a pink print on her bottom. She jerked back against him, meeting him thrust for thrust. He angled his hips and then smacked her on the other side. She clenched the bed sheets and dropped her body down, leaning on her forearms.

“Oh God, more.”

“Yes, that’s right I am.” He punctuated his words with another smack to her luscious bottom. A shiver of increased energy flowed over him at her words. She might not have meant him specifically, but that didn’t change anything. Her belief in him still moved closer to being absolute.

For every smack he gave her, she shuddered and cried out. Not in pain, but the most ardent pleas for more as her luscious bottom heated. Caught up in her reactions, he forgot everything else. His world narrowed down to this exact moment and the feel of her

clenching around him. Her voice echoed off the walls, creating a symphony with his. He increased the tempo, gripping her hips, pulling her back against him, the frantic rhythm driving them to completion.

* * * *

“Are you serious?” Hazel lay on her back staring up at the relief carved into the wall across from them. Layers of grape leaves and clusters of fruit were carved in such minute detail, she thought she could see a small ball of dew sitting on the tip of one of the leaves. Bach lay curled up against her side, his head resting on her shoulder. One arm lay tucked at the small of her back, the other lay across her stomach. His fingers traced invisible designs on her skin.

She ran her fingers through his silky curls, amazed that, no matter what, they were never out of place. He looked perfect, and she must look like a bedraggled mess.

“About what?” His words vibrated against her skin.

“All of it?”

“Absolutely.”

“Even the part when you said that I could change whatever I want. What if I want to paint this room pink?”

Bach’s lazy movements stilled. “I said it, didn’t I? Why, do you want to?”

“No, I’m just testing your limits.”

He growled and bit her lightly on the shoulder. Her body warmed, and she had to wonder if he’d cast a spell over her. There didn’t seem to be anything he did that didn’t turn her on.

She looked down at his bicep, idly tracing the tattoo circling his arm. “Why barbed wire?”

“Would you buy it if I said it seemed like a good idea at the time?” He looked up at her and grinned.

“No, I don’t think so. You did it to pick up chicks, didn’t you?”

That made him laugh out loud and she couldn't help but smile back. "Guilty as charged. I can make it go away if you don't like it."

"No, leave it. I learned to accept people the way they are long ago. If you changed, then you wouldn't be you."

The smile he gave her made her feel like a precious treasure. He looked like he had found the most amazing creature, and she wasn't certain why he looked at her like that.

"Instead of getting rid of it, why don't I change it to something a bit more me?"

"You can change it?"

"Of course. Watch."

She watched in awe as the tattoo stretched and reformed itself. It looked like a cartoon moving under his skin. She didn't realize she was holding her breath, until she tried to speak. It took a deep breath before she could say anything.

"Does that hurt?"

"No, not at all. This is all part of the deity package."

The ink swirled and altered his skin tone until the barbed wire image was gone and now a beautiful grape vine swirled around his arm. Big clusters of dark purple grapes looked as if they were about to fall off the vine, ripe for harvest.

"Wow, that was absolutely amazing."

"Want me to give you a matching one?"

"No. That's okay." He had tattooed himself on a part of her heart, she didn't need a reminder on the outside of her skin as well.

"I promise it won't hurt."

"I'll take your word for it, but I'll pass for now." She ran her fingers over the new ink, still amazed by what he'd done. A part of her thought she should be more freaked out about it, but she decided to worry about being rational later on. He looked like he wanted to talk her into it so she decided it was time for a topic change.

"What are your plans for the event you mentioned at Amy's?"

“I am planning on taking you to my party and trying my best to thoroughly debauch you.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible.”

He trailed his fingers over the tip of her breast and smiled as her nipple tightened into a hard bud. She could feel the reaction stretching out and then centering in on her core.

“I don’t think it will be that hard. You’re a very passionate and responsive person. It’s incredible. This get-together is so crucial for the gods. Your being there will make it truly enjoyable for me.”

“Why is this party so important?”

Bach sighed and lifted himself up off her, resting on one elbow until they faced each other. “There is something that I want to tell you. I know I should have brought it up long before now, but it never felt like the right time.”

“Okay. What is it?” No conversation ended well when it started like that, so Hazel braced herself for the worst. Amy had mentioned that these gatherings were of the no-holds-barred variety. If he told her that he was married or something like that, god or no god, she would kill him.

“It’s used to share power between the gods. Some of us have a stronger basis than others depending on who is favored by the humans.”

“You mean who believes in you?”

“Exactly. It is a precise ritual that must be followed without missing any steps. This time it’s more important than ever. Since this division of the Parthenon, we can’t be certain who will try to use the energy against us. I need to be directly involved. The power has to be stronger than it has ever been.”

“Okay, I’m following you so far.” What he hadn’t told her is what made her nervous.

“It’s also the final ritual to mend the rift between Orpheus and myself.”

“Wasn’t Orpheus killed, or is that myth twisted too?”

“No and yes. He was torn apart by my followers, but not in the physical sense. Orpheus has always had a preference for men. He came across a female group and after refusing them, they pushed him into the Lethe, tearing his mind apart.”

“Oh no.”

“He’s learned the truth over time, created new memories but we are no longer the friends we once were.”

“You mean lovers?”

“That too. As part of my amends to him, I’ve kept him in the center of the ritual in hopes that it might help him recover.”

“I think you’re losing me.”

“Sex is part of the ritual, ideally just as the raised energies are starting to crest. The combined orgasm will cause it to shatter and spread over the gods attending, helping to stabilize those that are fading away.”

“You need to have sex with Orpheus? In front of everyone?”

“I have to allow him to take me, symbolically as well as physically, and yes, in front of everyone. Although by that point, most aren’t paying attention to what I’m doing. This isn’t my first gathering.”

“Okay.” The thought of Bach having sex with someone other than her didn’t sit well with her. She understood how much this ritual meant to him and the other gods. She had to decide how open-minded she could be. What right did she have to pass judgment? She had only known him for a short time.

“Hazel, there’s more. You need to be involved as well.”

“What?” Her pussy clenched at that idea of it. “In front of everyone? Bach, I’m more of a behind-the-scenes kind of girl.”

“Again, it’s all about the Symbolism. A group of women who worshiped me were the ones who destroyed him. Orpheus enjoyed the company of men, and when he refused to join them in their celebrations, they took it as a slight against me.”

“So, he gets a piece of me? Are you kidding?”

“Not exactly.” Bacchus sat up, the buttery soft sheet pooling in his lap. He pushed his fingers through his hair, obviously trying to come up with a way to make this sound better than it did. *Shouldn’t be too hard, it couldn’t get much worse.* “You need to accept him as he is. The women who destroyed him did so because he rebuffed their offers.”

“This sounds like a type of restitution for a case of gay bashing.”

“I guess that could be thought of as the modern equivalent, his memory and talent wiped out because he didn’t want to have sex with a woman.”

“Wow, that’s horrible. I don’t understand why you have accepted the blame if it didn’t have anything to do with you. It’s not like you pushed him in or ordered it to be done.”

“They were my followers. That makes it my responsibility.”

Clearly uncomfortable with the discussion, Bacchus slipped from the bed and walked over to a small table. He was built like...well, a god and nothing like the cold gray marble statues displayed in museums. Bacchus’s bronzed skin radiated heat, and his muscles sensually moved under the skin. He moved like a dancer, all grace and power. If he thought that wandering around naked would end the conversation, he was wrong. It distracted the hell out of her, but they couldn’t ignore this. She wanted to understand everything that happened before she made her decision. “Were they following your orders or teachings?”

“No, of course not, Hazel.” Bacchus carried a large platter over to the bed and set it down on the sheets next to her, then made himself comfortable, stretched out on the other side of her.

“What are you doing?”

He pulled some pillows over and arranged them behind her, propping them up behind her comfortably.

“Feeding you.” He plucked a ripe red cherry and brushed it against her bottom lip.

She waved her hand for him to continue, refusing to open her mouth unless he answered her question.

“All right.” He conceded, so she accepted the fruit. The cherry burst with flavor against her tongue as she chewed. *I could get used to this.*

“Those that follow us are our responsibility. When those women pushed him into the Lethe, it became my responsibility to take care of him, to do what I can, in hope that one day he would regain his abilities.”

“And has he?” A square of what tasted like brie found its way into her mouth. If Bach thought he could stop her questions by keeping her mouth full, he hadn’t learned that much about her yet.

“Orpheus struggles. The music came back to him first, but the magic behind it is gone. His memories and other strengths have appeared and faded over the centuries. I’m hoping that this time might make a difference.”

Hazel placed a hand on the one about to feed her another piece of fruit. “What makes this time so different? Star alignment? Timing?”

“It’s because I actually care about the woman who I’m asking to join us.”

She pushed away the food and stared up into his eyes. “Do you mean that?”

“More than anything.”

“What about Gabe?”

“What about him? He is an extension of you. A gifted child with the human gift of innocence. He knows what I am, what Heph is, and he accepts us as we are.”

She wanted to push, but feared the truth. Just because he cared about them didn’t mean he was theirs for the long run. Bach lifted a goblet to her lips, but she took it from him before sipping the sweet juice it contained. He saw Gabe as an extension of her, but did he realize that her son’s heart wasn’t as guarded as hers?

“Because of how you feel about me, you think it will make a difference?”

“Combined with how you feel about me? Yes, it will make all the difference.”

She wanted to refute what he had arrogantly assumed, except that it was the truth. She did care about him, more than she wanted to admit, afraid to give him that much control over her.

“If I agree to this, you swear nothing will happen to me? Nothing bad, I mean.”

“I swear to you, Hazel, I will keep you safe. I also swear that you will have the opportunity to indulge in any and all of your fantasies.”

Chapter Eight

Hazel stood in front of a huge mirror and stared at herself. Her body was draped from shoulder to ankle in the softest material she had ever felt against her skin. The fabric was the color of delicate eggshells with gold filigree design around the bottom in what looked like stylized grapevines. A group of women had artfully styled her hair in a mass of ringlets and braids that twisted in and out of each other. She looked like a mythical goddess. The body she spent years being so self-conscious of looked incredible. She spun around and had a look from all angles. A slit in the side of the gown stretched from ankle to waist. When she moved, it separated, exposing the long line of her leg. Incredible? Damn, she looked *hot*. A nervous giggle erupted in her throat, and a woman Hazel hadn't seen enter looked at her curiously.

"Is everything all right, Hazel?" a woman asked as she stepped closer. She was short and even more voluptuous than Hazel. She had big blue eyes and blonde hair braided in a style as complex as her own.

"Do I know you?"

"We met once, briefly. Does this help?" The light shimmered around her, and Hazel found herself looking at the woman who she passed out in front of that day in the library.

"Oh my God. It's you? What did you ask me?"

"If you were ready. I knew you would be perfect for Bacchus. I just needed to get you two together."

"Who are you? Cupid?"

The small woman had the most beautiful smile. “No, that’s my son.”

Hazel’s knees buckled, and she found herself sitting in a large chair. “You’re Aphrodite?”

“Yes.” The air shimmered around her, and she resumed her magnificent look. “Don’t act all weird, okay? Usually, this is where people start acting strange. Well, except Amy. She laughed at me and told me I’m terrible at what I do. Imagine that. The goddess of love being terrible at setting people up. Honestly.”

“You know Amy?”

“Very well. She’s my best friend.”

“Oh boy.” Hazel’s world spun slightly, and she dropped her forehead to her knees.

“Take a deep breath.”

“I am,” Hazel muttered against her knees.

A soft hand caressed her neck and Hazel could feel the anxiety gripping her begin to loosen. “Our families came to be because of the beliefs of humans. That is why this gathering is so important.”

“Bach explained it to me. I get the general idea, but it’s still a bit strange.”

“Well, dysfunction comes in all sorts.”

Hazel laughed, a warmth spreading through her limbs. She looked up into Aphrodite’s face. “What are you doing to me?”

“Nothing. You still have free will. I’m just draining away some of your anxiety so you can make an informed decision without being overly influenced by your fears. Are you still feeling nervous?”

“Petrified.” Hazel’s voice sounded a couple octaves higher than normal, betraying her nervousness. This night carried a lot of anticipation and expectations of people she didn’t know existed a month ago. “I don’t know if I can go through with this.”

“Would it help if I promise it will be the most intense, incredible experience of your life?”

Despite her nervousness, she could feel a smile pulling at her cheeks. “No. No, I don’t think so. I mean, I’m not the kind of girl that does this sort of thing, at least not anymore.”

“Why not? There’s nothing illegal or immoral...I guess that would depend on your morals.”

Before Hazel’s eyes, the woman went from looking innocent to looking furious, and she hoped that Bach didn’t walk in the room anytime soon.

“Did Bacchus talk you into this against your will?”

“No, nothing like that.” Knowing that Aphrodite didn’t want her coerced into this night reassured her. Especially since, if she understood correctly, the goddess would benefit as well. “I’m just not sure. I mean, I’m about to do something I can’t remember the last time I did. Even then, the lights were off. Not only are the lights going to be on, but there will be others watching, and I have to keep up to two men.”

“I have complete faith in your ability to keep up to them. I guarantee that Bacchus will be more concerned about you than Orpheus.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Deedee, what the hell are you telling her?”

Hazel lifted her head and looked up at Bach, who stood over them both. He looked every inch of what she would have imagined a god to look like. Struck by the vision, she lost her voice for a moment. Until his mouth crooked up slightly, and the spell broke. She could see past the god to the man. A man who looked like he wanted to make some sort of smart-ass comment.

“Shut up, Bach.”

Ha laughed, and the sound soothed her mood better than Aphrodite’s touch. Not surprising. She wasn’t in love with Aphrodite. *Oh crap! I’ve fallen in love with him?* She dropped her head to her knees again and groaned.

“Don’t let your fears get in the way,” the goddess whispered into her ear before Hazel heard her get up and move away. “I’m going to go join the party. I just know this one is going to be best one ever. I can’t wait.”

Hazel looked up again in time to catch Aphrodite wink at her and give her a little wave before Bach’s chest got in the way.

He crouched down in front of her, looking concerned. “Are you all right? You don’t have to go through with this.”

“And if I don’t, you have to follow through with someone else.”

“No. I’ll ask Orpheus to choose someone else, or I’ll find him someone myself.”

“But it wouldn’t work as well.”

“Not even close, but I’m not willing to risk losing you over it.” He dropped to his knees and cupped her face with his hands and brushed his lips against her. “Hazel, I wish I could be human with you. I don’t want any part of Olympus if it is going to harm what we have.”

“But...”

“No, listen to me. I know that I asked a lot of you and that this must seem way too fast for you. I can understand it, and I wish I could put this off, but I need to know what you want.”

“I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Then you say stop, and we stop. I don’t give a shit what anyone else says, and I swear to you that nothing negative will happen to you.”

“And Orpheus?”

“I can handle him.”

“Do you think I can?”

Bach’s concerned look morphed into a huge smile when he realized what she implied. “Are you kidding? I know he won’t be able to keep up with you. Why do you think I need two of us for this?”

Bach held out his hand, and she slipped hers into it and allowed him to raise her to her feet. “Let’s get the party started.” He handed her a small glass with a golden liquid inside it.

“What’s this?” She took the lightly chilled glass from him and lifted it closer to her nose. It didn’t smell like vinegar. It smelled more like liquid honey and flowers. “Is it wine?”

“Yes. It’s called Samos. Try it.”

She sipped a small amount from the delicate glass. The flavors coated her tongue like a rich caress. It tasted like honey and dried apricots, sweet but not like syrup. “Bach, this is amazing.”

“I told you not all wine is the same. This is a sweet dessert wine from Greece. I thought it would be fitting. It’s from my own vineyards.”

“You have a vineyard?”

“I have several, although I haven’t spent as much time there as I would like.”

“Why not?”

“Let’s just say I had my priorities screwed up.” He took her hand and led her down another pillar-lined hallway, through an archway, and onto a balcony.

There were steps leading down on both sides but he led her forward so she could look around. The ceiling arched well above their heads, and below a large crowd of people danced. The shadows concealed anything else going on. In the center of the room was a large black marble dais. On it sat what looked to be a large daybed or lounge covered in white raw silk sheets.

She gulped down a large swallow of wine, knowing that she would be...right in front of them. The idea sent an icy wave of fear, followed by a heat of volcanic intensity. *Why do I care what they think?*

Bacchus snagged the tips of her fingers in his hand and raised her arm. “You are the most gorgeous woman here.”

“Have you been drinking too much of your own vintage?” Hazel did have to admit that she felt as incredible as she looked. The wine left a rich and decadent flavor in her mouth. Nothing she could

completely identify, but a symphony of flavors. A second glass was pressed into her hand as soon as she finished the first.

“You shouldn’t say things like that too loud. I don’t need a bunch of pissed-off goddesses after me.”

Bach brought her fingers to his lips and kissed the tips of them. “They can be bitchy, but the trick is to not say one particular name. That way they all think it’s someone else.”

She followed him down the stairs and into the crowd. It felt as though everyone stared at her, and her confidence flagged a bit. *What if I make a huge mistake that ruins everything?* It didn’t take long to realize this was no uptight crowd that would freak at the slightest indiscretion.

“Where are we?” This didn’t look like any warehouse rave she had ever attended. The walls were covered in a type of shimmering material that looked like black velvet but undulated on its own according to the music playing. Candelabras hung suspended around the room, filled with candles that didn’t drip wax or even look to be melting.

“This is part of my house. If you look out the front doors, you’ll see we’re in the warehouse district. Similar to the doorway in your backyard. Only yours is permanent, and this one is only for tonight.” He held her hand and showed her around the room. “There are still quite a few people to come. I thought you might feel better if you had a chance to see everything before it gets crowded.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled down at her and pressed his lips to the backs of her fingers. Moving her hand over his heart, his covering hers, he leaned down and kissed her. A sweet, innocent kiss to those around them, but for her, she felt as though he branded her. His lips felt hot against hers, burning, but instead of pulling away, she wanted to be closer.

“Aw, that is so sweet. See, I told you I was right.”

Bacchus moved slightly away and winked down at her. Feeling dizzy and a tad overwhelmed, Hazel leaned against him until she could get her thoughts in order without looking at who spoke.

“Right about what, Amy?” His voice drifted over her head. When Hazel turned around, she saw Amy standing there grinning at them both. Her curls were caught up in a coronet of flowers and ribbons. She wore a toga-style dress that stopped just short of her bottom, with golden sandals that laced up her legs.

“That you two are perfect together, of course.” Amy hugged them both. “I’d love to chat, but I have to go.”

“Is everything okay?” Hazel glanced around. “Where are Than and Nos?”

“I’m hiding from them. Gotta keep moving, or they’ll catch up. So, if you see them, don’t tell them where you saw me, okay?”

“I promise.” Hazel returned Amy’s hug. Amy bussed Bach’s cheek with a kiss, then took off, dodging in between people before getting swallowed up by the crowd.

“How long do you think Amy can hide?”

“Not very long.” Bach motioned to the left. “They’ve spotted her already.”

Hazel looked in the direction that Bach pointed and saw Amy’s husbands. Both intent on their target, they ignored anyone trying to talk to them as they moved in the same direction Amy headed. “I hope they don’t catch her too soon. Anticipation shouldn’t be underrated.”

“I couldn’t agree more myself.” Bach tugged her hand lightly and drew her toward the edge of the room. “Come on. Let’s see what you can find around here.”

Continuing their easy stroll, she saw that around the room were alcoves of varying sizes and visibility, some already occupied by those enjoying themselves. As they walked, Bacchus introduced her to everyone he stopped and spoke with.

She tried to pay attention, but the darkened corners called to her. Eliciting a hunger deep inside her, a tingling warmth spread over her skin. She wanted to see more. She wanted to see her hunger reflected in their expressions.

“You can feel it, can’t you? Their energy?” His voice felt like a silken caress against her neck.

“Yes. If it feels like the air is dancing a salsa over my skin?”

“It will soon be under your skin, driving you crazy.”

That sounded a bit disconcerting. “What if I can’t control it?”

“Why would you want to?” His hand roamed over her shoulder, caressing the edge of her toga. He slipped his finger under the edge of the fabric to the peak of her breast and teased her nipple. .

They slipped into the shadows, keeping to the edges, unseen. A woman sat on a table, her legs spread, her hand gripping the hair of the woman between her legs. A man behind her drove deep and steady. The woman on the table opened her eyes and looked directly at Hazel, offering her a beguiling smile as she held out her hand as an invitation to join them.

Hazel felt the energy roll over her skin, filling the tiny pores, sparking like an electrical current. She took a step forward, but a strong hand on her arm drew her back.

“Not yet. Feel it grow and fill you up inside.”

Hazel turned and looked up into Bach’s eyes. His pupils had dilated, almost completely swallowing the bright blue. He cupped her cheek and dipped his head, giving her a hard, passion-filled kiss. She could feel the energy draining out of her and into him. Her head cleared a bit, but her body still hungered. “Why?”

“To make it last. You are the one who can bridge this for us. There is a bond from you to me to Orpheus.”

“When is he going to join us?” She could hear the nervousness in her own voice.

Bach took the glass from her fingers and placed it on a small table that appeared beside him.

“Not until you’re ready.” That came from behind her.

She turned and looked up higher into the musician’s eyes. She expected him to be gorgeous. What she didn’t expect is that she would recognize him. His dark brown hair was cut close to his head, dark soulful eyes edged with long black eyelashes, high cheekbones, and a goatee. His band had just broken into the music charts. They played an incredible mix of string instruments and percussions, but no lyrics. The sounds they created were primal and haunting. The first time she heard them, she ran out to get their CD. “Aren’t you...?”

“Shhh, don’t tell anyone.” His intense gaze traveled over her, taking in every nuance of her. She could hear music surrounding her, and feel a beat echoing in her chest, reminiscent of the music he played. Orpheus’s eyes widened slightly. “How can you feel that?”

“I told you she’s special.” Bach’s hands rested on her hips. “Let’s go dance.”

Hazel couldn’t remember the last time she had danced in public. The only dancing she’s done lately was in the shower with the radio playing. “I don’t know if I know how anymore.” A small nervous laugh escaped her.

“There aren’t any rules here, Hazel.” Orpheus lifted her hand and pressed his lips to her inner wrist. The soft hair on his chin tickled her sensitive skin. Holding on to her hand, he towed her back out into the crowd.

She turned, worried about Bach’s reaction to this interruption, but he looked at her bottom as she walked. She mentally smiled remembering the day she and Mrs. Roberts had ogled his bottom. *Turn about is fair play.* She rocked her hips a bit more with her steps. He moved up directly behind her and nipped her on the shoulder.

Not many took notice of them as they slid through the crowd. Orpheus remained in the lead, holding Hazel’s hand, Bach walking in tandem with her keeping his body as close to hers as possible. Unconcerned about the eyes on her and what they thought, she met a

couple of gazes who greeted her with welcoming smiles, and some that contained such heat that she felt it press against her.

She felt as if she walked through an oven in which the heat slowly increased, making her skin prickle. Small beads of moisture appeared on her upper lip, and bits of hair stuck to the back of her neck. Bach pressed forward and ran his tongue around the shell of her ear. Suddenly, the oppressive heat drained away as if a cool breeze drifted over her skin and refreshed her. Orpheus's steps faltered, and she could almost see a shiver dance down his back.

"What just happened?"

The music vibrated around them, but both gods heard her question. Bacchus wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back against him. The thin fabric did nothing to prevent her feeling every hard inch of him. "This is what tonight is, sweet Hazel. The energy around here fills you up, and just when you think you might explode, I take a little off the top and pass it on to Orpheus."

"I don't get it. Is it a kind of magic?"

Bacchus didn't answer. Instead Orpheus stepped closer to her. Sandwiched between two aroused men, she almost forgot what she asked. He pressed his lips against her forehead, then her cheeks, and finally her lips. "You know when you listen to music it can make you feel intense emotion, or how it's possible to have a physical reaction to a work of art?"

"Yes, but what has that got to do with anything?"

"The gods don't have that ability. It's a human gift. They can't create that kind of energy within themselves, but can absorb it from a human who cares for them. He, in turn, can pass it on to those around him."

She looked over her shoulder, where Bacchus's chin rested on her shoulder. He leaned closer and pressed a kiss to her lips. "Don't say it. I'm not using you. You have the control here, remember?"

Hazel felt bad since that thought did immediately enter her head. "That's why you need a human to be involved in your ritual."

“Yes, but today is different.”

“Because we care about each other.” She remembered what Bacchus had told her earlier.

“If you don’t have any more questions?” Orpheus smiled and pressed a finger up against Hazel’s chin. She allowed him better access to her neck, and he took complete advantage, brushing his lips against the soft skin covering her collarbone. Her heart pounded against her ribs. His hands stroked lightly along her bare arms, lifting them to wrap around his neck. She stroked the short hair at the back of his neck. He caressed the skin on her arms. His fingers slid down to her shoulders, then along her sides, coming to rest over Bach’s hands on her hips. *Is it cheating when a man kissed you while your lover holds on tight?*

Bacchus chuckled against her shoulder. “You are thinking too much, sweetheart. The night is young, and we have lots of time to play.”

Orpheus nipped at her lower lip and then looked over her shoulder. She turned and saw him stroke a finger down Bach’s cheek, his gaze heated. “Yes, we do.”

A small sign of affection, but it relieved her that they were truly interested in each other as well. Bach told her that long ago he and Orpheus were lovers, but she wasn’t certain until now.

“So, who’s leading here?” Hazel looked between the two men.

Bacchus laughed and nodded to Orpheus, who answered her. “For now, you. Later....you will be too distracted by us to notice anything at all.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself.”

“If there is one thing I am not concerned about tonight, it’s that.” Orpheus pulled her closer to him and slid his hands brazenly over her behind, stroking it as he nibbled her neck. It took a moment for her to realize that Bach stood close enough to her to receive the benefit from Orpheus’s movements. He continued to kiss her neck, and she could feel his ragged breathing against her skin.

Orpheus stepped back slightly and brushed a kiss against her lips before turning her in Bach's arms. She expected him to step up behind her, but he drifted back away, swallowed up by the crowd.

"Where's he going?"

"He'll be back. Orpheus has his needs as well, and raising the energy as high as possible in here will benefit him as well."

The music swelled at that moment, a low heartbeat that she could feel echoing in her chest, similar to what she felt earlier, when Orpheus first came close to her. "That's him?"

Bach nodded, pulling her closer to him. She could feel the heat of his body through the thin silk of her wrap. His muscles bunched when he moved, pressing his impressive erection against her lower tummy. He gripped her lower back, and she could feel the material bunch beneath her fingers. Knowing that she created such a passionate force within him filled her with confidence.

The musical cadence grew, as if her beating heart controlled the music's tempo. Her body slid against Bach. A fine sweat broke out across the back of her neck. Around them everyone swayed to the same beat. The melody changed, there were no words, but she could feel the energy built. The intense tempo pulsed a little stronger with each song. The sound of a single instrument raised above the others, primal, electrical. A vibration, almost like a roar, echoed through the crowd.

Hazel felt free. When it got too intense, she felt the cooling sensation of Bacchus drawing it off her. Each time it happened, the music would reflect it, growing more and more primal and sexual. Closing her eyes, she gave herself up to the music that surrounded them and let it lead. She swayed and Bach moved with her. Lifting her arms, she moved them in the melodic breeze. She could feel her hair whipping around her as if she was caught in a tornado-like wind, but when she opened her eyes, she realized there wasn't a physical wind. She could feel the energy in the room as it whipped through them all and grew wild, free, increasing in intensity as did the people

around her. Many had already shed their clothes and enjoyed the feeling it aroused in them.

Bach's lips traced the edge of her toga, his teeth pulling back the material until he revealed her breast. A small voice in her head shrieked in the horror of being bared in public, but she slammed a door on it. Not being ashamed of herself had a power of its own. Bach didn't reveal her body in order to mock her or have others laugh at her. He couldn't wait to have her, and that kind of power carried an intoxication of its own. She moved against him, catlike in the way she rubbed her body along his. A low growl rumbled from him, and she felt a tremble to his hands. The music pounded around them, encouraging her to push his limits and her own.

Sliding her hand down his shoulder, she scored his bare chest with her nails. He looked up at her and bared his teeth as if she was prey about to be eaten. Slowly, she wet her lower lip with the tip of her tongue, and the look in his eyes intensified. The anticipation made her heart skip a beat, and then quicken.

Pure heat flowed through her, filling her to bursting, only to drain away. She wanted to hold on to it, wanted to feel herself stretched to the point of combustion. She wanted more. She slid her hand from his chest, and he tracked the movement. She danced her fingers along his arm to where it met her body, then along her own curved waist, up to her ribs. Teasingly, she caressed the silky skin under her own breast. He lunged forward, but she pushed against his chest, stopping him from reaching her. Two large hands rested on her shoulders, and she looked up into Orpheus's dark eyes.

"Offer it to him, Hazel." His voice sounded deeper than Bach's with a husky edge of a man who didn't speak often.

She smiled and cupped her breast, a sacrifice to the god gripping her hips. Seeing his head dip to her chest, bending her back, she watched as he claimed one dark nipple. He held it with his teeth. She could feel his tongue lashing the tip. He wrapped his hand around her other breast and pinched the extended nipple through the fabric.

Robbed of breath, she pushed her back against Orpheus's chest. Dropping her arms, she caressed his steely thighs as she watched Bach mark her. He sucked at the sensitive skin, then bit down, leaving a dark red mark in his wake. Bach gripped her hips tighter and pulled her against him.

Orpheus took her wrists and pulled her arms above her head, leading her hands behind his neck. That created a natural arch to her body pressing against Bach's mouth. He cried out against her skin and pulled the other edge away so both breasts were bared for him. He nipped and caressed her skin. The small bites sent flashes of awareness to her core.

"Lace your fingers. Don't move them." Orpheus held her hands there for a moment, then let go to indulge in his own explorations. She would have bruises on her hips the next day, but didn't care at this point.

She grabbed the silky hair and tugged him closer to her face, indulging in a kiss she had fantasized about. His kiss didn't affect her the way Bach's did. He didn't touch her soul, but that didn't make it any less hot at this point.

"You are exquisite." Orpheus ran his hands over her hips, caressing her curves before cupping her ass. His fingers played against her skin as if she was his personal instrument. Bach nipped her breasts. Orpheus nipped at the sensitive muscle that joined her neck and shoulder while his hands supported her back.

Shivers ran rampant through her body, feeling like an icy heat spreading its wings throughout her nervous system. Her eyes drifted shut as a languorous shudder slipped along her spine.

"Open them." Bach had moved up and cupped her jaw. His eyes were darker than normal, hungry. "I want you to know who it is that is touching you. They can't have you. You're mine. This ends here."

She could feel Orpheus's hands on her hips, his erection pressing against her back. He had stopped moving, his stillness a warning.

“Don’t let him control you, Hazel. He needs you. We all do. He is reflecting a primal side that we all hide. Remind him why he’s here.”

She didn’t quite understand what Bach needed her to do. Her body hummed with sexual energy wanting to spill out, but instead it grew to an almost painful level. Somewhere deep in her psyche the answer came forth.

“You don’t own me, Bacchus. I’m here of my own free will, and I will be the one to tell you when it’s over.”

“Good girl,” Orpheus murmured and encouraged her to start dancing again by leading with his own body.

Bach’s nose flared, and he snarled slightly as he stared into her eyes. “You are mine.”

“And I will be again tomorrow. But tonight, we are theirs.”

Bacchus pulled her forward out of Orpheus’s arms and kissed her. It was an anger-filled kiss, but she could feel the desperation behind it. This entire situation had slipped away from her. She had no idea how to deal with a god who acted more and more primal as the minutes passed.

She stroked his face and tried to soften her kisses and lure him back, but he snarled and gripped her harder. She tore her lips away and looked up at Orpheus in confusion.

The musician nodded and reached around her and gripped Bacchus by his hair, sharply pulling his head back. She tried to move away from between them, but both men stopped her. Orpheus tilted his head and delivered a brutal kiss against Bacchus’s lips.

Watching two men try to dominate the kiss increased the energy around them, and she couldn’t help the moan that escaped her lips. This had to be the most erotic battle she had ever witnessed. Standing between them and watching them fight for dominance left her gasping for breath.

Orpheus broke off the kiss and tugged hard on Bach’s hair again. “Are you willing to fulfill the ritual tonight? Will you share what we give you?”

He must have loosened his grip because Bach looked down at her, his gaze much more focused than it was a moment ago. “Yes. You will allow this woman to be the instrument you play, to share what we all give? To forgive the past?”

“Yes.” Orpheus kissed him again and then gently pressed his lips against Hazel’s.

Finally, the sensation of Bach drawing off some of the intensity from her allowed her to take a deep breath. It didn’t diminish how aroused she felt. Now, she felt every detailed sensation instead of being lost in them.

“We have a frenzy to ignite.” Orpheus smiled down at her and then drifted away to be swallowed up by the people around them.

“He’ll be back,” Bach whispered in her ear. “You and I have a job to do as well. We need to spread the love.”

He drew out the word love and made her laugh. Around them others echoed her.

“What happened there?” Her gaze drifted around curiously but came back to the source of pleasure that beat within her.

“By the end, we will all be linked by the energy we create. We have a great start, but it gets better. Trust me?”

Trust me? She nodded and he gifted with the most beautiful smile.

“Hazel, my heart is yours. Close your eyes and feel.”

She followed his direction and it someone threw a switch on her senses. Instead of relying on what she saw, now she could feel what happened around them. Bach guided her and they moved with the crowd. Everyone who touched her filled her with such intense emotions. She felt all that they did, the loneliness, the longing, the anger, all coursing through until she wanted to scream and pull out her hair. As the intensity began to crest, Bach would remind her of his presence. His touch pulled her back, acting as her anchor in this sea of emotions. He held her steady, moving her through the crowds, dancing to music she no longer heard. Bach lifted her up, and the crowd carried her, bobbing along in a sea of hands. They caressed and

tickled and touched. She laughed and cried, not sure if the emotions were hers or something she picked up from those around her.

The music rose and crashed against them. The melodic tempos of earlier had evolved into a primal crescendo of pulses mimicking her heartbeat. Everyone spiraled into a frenzy and she with them. Faces blurred around her. She wanted. A hunger had built inside her. It needed to be fed.

Laughter?

She opened her eyes and turned towards the sound. A group of people writhed on enormous cushions that had appeared on the floor. She could feel herself bombarded by the energy they released. She wanted it all, wanted to lose herself in them. A large hand wrapped around her waist, stopping her descent into the pile. "Not yet."

She clawed at the arm that lifted her into the air. The energy swirling around the room felt hot against her senses. Her body ached, her pussy dripped, aching to be filled. Her clothes felt too tight, too hot.

She heard the fabric torn from her chest, just before her breasts were worshiped by two faceless people. Fingers caressed, pinched, slipped beneath...*No!* Relief was pulled away by unseen hands, denying her what she desperately needed.

This time, she twisted in her captor's embrace. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she rubbed herself against him, cursing the material that deprived her of the contact she truly needed. Instead, she gripped his hair and tugged his face forward. Kissing him hard, she slipped her tongue within his warm mouth, tasting the wine he must have drunk earlier. She feasted on his taste, nipping at his lips, rocking as he walked.

"Give it to me," she demanded, and the god smiled down at her.

"I plan on it." He dropped to his knees and pushed the gown out of his way, pressing his lips against her nether lips. He feasted with teasing flicks of his tongue and long strokes that covered her entirely. Still the desire grew, and she screamed in frustration. Her body

hummed with unsated desire to the point of it being painful. Another covered her, pressing his body tight against her, but not gaining the access she so desperately needed. The hunger grew until she reached out and vented her frustration, scratching, drawing blood from those who couldn't satisfy her. The bodies moved, and she gained her footing. Stalking the room, she grasped anyone at random, sharing passionate kisses.

Watching those around her gaining their satisfaction wound her up tighter. Her thoughts dissolved into a primitive state, the search for the one who could save her. Who could satisfy her? Over and over she tasted and teased, searching on, led by an unseen hand.

The crowd parted, and she found herself standing in front of a platform. Pushed gently toward it, she followed the wordless advice. As she stepped up, a creature appeared on the other side. Dark, hungry eyes narrowed, just before he lunged at her with a roar. She stood there welcoming the savagery of his emotions.

His progress was diverted when a body came out of nowhere and tackled him, the momentum sending them both careening off to the side. The sounds of punches and tumbling sent more emotions crashing into her. Hunger, anger, desire, want, jealousy, and possession all echoed around and through her. She crumpled against the onslaught, unable to handle any more. More screams vibrated around her. The sound echoed the agony she felt being unable to release what built within. Another wave of intense wave of emotion roared through her and she dropped to her knees shaking. Strong hands slipped under her limbs and lifted her up into the air.

She writhed in gentle arms. "Mine" echoed around her. Now she fought the hands herself, wanting the contact she instinctively knew this man could give her. Another set of hands grabbed her wrists. "No!" She screamed and fought against the restraint. They forcibly lifted her onto a table, and pressed her hands down on either side of her head. Bach's face appeared over top of her.

"Yes, damn you! Do it."

“Say my name! Who do you belong to? Who do you follow?”

“Bacchus!” Deep within her something clicked, flooding her with relief.

He moved down and bit the side of her breast hard. She retaliated and latched on to the nipple above her and bit down on the hard muscle before caressing the bruised skin with her tongue. A bite on her inner thigh distracted her. She darted a look down and saw Orpheus’s face between her legs, a primal mask of crazed desire. She jerked her pelvis at him, but he glared at her, denying her.

“Mine.” Bacchus grasped the remains of her toga and tore it from her body. He spread her arms out wider and hopped up on the table, bracketing her shoulders with his legs. His cock hung hard and pointed straight at her.

Saliva pooled in her mouth, and she opened wide to accept him. He let go of her arms, and she gripped his hips, taking all of him deep in her throat.

Orpheus spread her legs and licked her clit to ass. She screamed through the mouthful of cock at the experience. Her body shook hard with the need to explode. Finally, they gave her what she needed.

Orpheus played her body like an instrument.

Bacchus shuttled in and out of her throat. She sucked him deep, running her tongue over the ridges. Her fingers played with the heavy sac that bounced against her chin, stroking in the lightly furred skin, at the same time. She arched her pelvis against Orpheus’ tongue, a wordless plea for relief.

* * * *

Feeling her lips around him, Bacchus regained a small amount of control, knowing this woman could give him what he needed. Still his body ached for more than her soft lips on his cock. He withdrew from her mouth and gripped her hair, pressing his lips against hers in a kiss so gentle in contrast to the aggressive emotions that pounded in his

head. Her body shook with tension, the energy vibrating from within her. He wanted to drain more off her, to ease her, but no longer could. The time had come to cement all they had created and worked toward.

With a single thought, the table beneath them changed shape, morphing into a shape that would aid their actions. She didn't notice, but Orpheus did. As Bacchus moved lower on Hazel's body, Orpheus moved behind him.

Despite the inferno that threatened to dissolve his mind, he kissed her once more. "Open your eyes, Hazel, mine."

Her gaze almost sent him over the edge, full of hunger and desperation, but behind all that she trusted him to bring her to the other side of this madness.

In a singular, long, powerful thrust, he slammed deep inside of her, tipping a screech of pleasure from her throat. He rocked against her and then withdrew, only to slam inside her again. Her body clenched around him, shaking them both.

Feeling Orpheus behind him, he stilled even as his body demanded movement. Hazel shifted her hips beneath him Orpheus reached between his legs and caressed his balls. The erotic sensations bombarded him, enhancing his needs, making him want to beg.

"Keep your hands on her hips, Bacchus." He could see one of Orpheus's elegant hands trail up the creamy skin of Hazel's thighs, reaching the apex of her legs where his cock was buried deep inside her. Those talented fingers stroked her clit, flicking and tugging the small hoop. She jerked and cried out, driving him so close to the edge. He wanted to pound into her and release the tension that had him to the breaking point.

"Orpheus, now," he growled through clenched teeth. The blunt pressure of the other man's cock pressed against his ass. Orpheus scattered sharp little bites across his shoulders. Relaxing, he welcomed the intrusion, feeling his body giving under the assault. White-hot fire stretched him as a thick cock invaded him. Orpheus pushed his generous cock past Bach's tight opening. He welcomed the

burn, feeling himself being pushed harder against Hazel, who bucked up against him.

For this part of the ritual, a final apology to the musician for the wrong done to him, Bacchus allowed his friend to top him. Orpheus orchestrated their movements. When Bacchus drove deep into Hazel, Orpheus would allow his cock to almost slip out of his bottom. Withdrawing from Hazel would drive Orpheus's cock deeper into his ass again. His bottom stretched to the point of pain even as his cock was gripped in impossible tightness. The beauty of opposites, the hunger of them all, that's what drove them.

He saw the tears slipping down Hazel's cheeks as the energy and music within the three of them grew to a crescendo of passion and power. Shattered, the three of them plunged over the boundary and released everything that had built up inside of them. A white-hot rush of energy washed out over the writhing crowd, infiltrating those caught in the frenzy of the Bacchanalia. The explosion of passion and energy echoed back into them from the crowd. He collapsed against Hazel's chest, and Orpheus over his back. The table continued to morph into the shape they needed, supporting each of them as needed.

They stirred after a while. No longer restrained, he could feel Hazel's fingers running slowly through his hair. He could see her arm lifted over him, assuming she echoed the movement on Orpheus's head.

His friend stirred and leaned down, brushing a kiss to Hazel's lips. "Thank you for your understanding, Hazel."

"Anytime, Orpheus." Her husky voice must be thanks to her being so vocal, but he recognized the mischievous grin on her lips. His librarian enjoyed the experience.

"Leaving so soon?" Bacchus asked when Orpheus lifted off him and he adjusted his position and curled around Hazel's sated form.

"I think I'll leave you two for now, before I become addicted." Orpheus leaned down, bracing himself with a hand on either side of him and Hazel. Bacchus accepted the tender press of his lips. A kiss

given with a promise of forgiveness. “Thanks to you as well for sharing this with me.”

“Did it help any?” A part of Bacchus hoped that being a direct part of this ritual might undo the wrong that happened so long ago.

“My memory of anything before pulling myself out of the Lethe is still lost, but the anger I carried has been burned away. I think I can start over now.”

Hazel reached up and cupped Orpheus’s cheek. “You’re not alone, you know. There are people that care about you.” She gave him a sleepy smile and snuggled her cheek against Bach’s arm, tucking her arms between their chests.

“Take care of her, my friend.”

“Forever. You call me if you need me.”

Orpheus nodded and then slipped away in the quiet shadows that surrounded them. Bacchus moved Hazel to his bed with the slightest of thoughts. The ritual was finished, but the Bacchanalia would carry on for a while. For now, he wanted to lie with her in his arms and sort out what he felt.

He remembered once, long ago he thought himself in love. What he felt then paled in comparison to the emotion that crashed against his heart. “Nothing is going to separate us,” he whispered against her cheek and then laid his head down and allowed himself to drift off, content in his belief that nothing would go wrong.

Chapter Nine

Gabriel opened his eyes, confused about where he slept, until he saw the large panther on the end of the bed. That helped him remember that this was a sleepover. Aunt Tilly always put the big cat at the end of his bed to help protect him. He looked around the dark room, his heart frantically beating in his chest. His legs felt frozen, and he thought he might pee in the bed, he felt so scared. Big boys didn't pee in the bed, and they didn't go and crawl into bed with their aunties when they were scared.

Heph wouldn't do that. Gabe crossed his arms over his chest and frowned like Bach's friend. Heph wouldn't be afraid. Heph could be scarier than the dark and scarier than bad dreams. Gabe would be scared of him too, except that he had good colors around him.

He still felt frightened, so he tried to make a meaner face, a face that would scare Heph, a face that would strike fear in the shadows. Yeah, he felt like this one would scare anything. He could almost see the boogie man shaking in his boots. Shadows didn't scare him. Puny shadows didn't scare the little man.

Sitting quietly in bed, he could just hear the soft ticking of the big clock downstairs. Something didn't feel right, kinda like spiders running up and down his neck. Maybe Auntie Tilly woke up scared too? Maybe he should go crawl into bed with her and scare away the shadows with his scary look? He could protect his auntie. That's what good guys did. He slipped from the bed and tried to pull the big stuffed panther with him. A scratching at the window caught his attention, and Gabriel looked up.

Large dirty yellow eyes over a hooked beak smeared with red stared at him through the glass. A Kere.

Gabe peed in his pajamas.

* * * *

“Mmmooooomyyy! Bbbaaaccchhh...”

Matilda ran across the room when Gabe’s terror-filled screams woke her up. Glass shattered in the other room and then nothing but silence.

Entering the spare room, she felt the night air on her face. The smell of fear and rotten flesh hung in the air. Splintered glass lay strewn across the bedroom floor, a large hole where the window used to be. The stuffed panther lay on its side under the window.

The glass cut her feet as she ran to the window, looking out into the night.

No Gabe.

Glass rammed into her knees when she looked under the bed.

No Gabe.

She pulled the sheets off the bed and then ripped open the closet door. She could hear screaming, realizing a moment later that they were her own.

Oh God!

Chapter Ten

Bach had never felt such a feeling of helplessness and rage burn through his body as he had at this moment. That fucking bitch dared to touch his family. She might be planning the end of the universe, but he planned to destroy her first. They were recovering from the ritual when Gabriel's terror-filled cry filled his head. She might not have heard it, but Hazel knew in that moment that something had happened to her son. He had transported them directly here, clothed, only to discover Matilda screaming Gabe's name as she pulled at a pile of bed covers in the closet.

Now, Hazel's friend lay curled in a fetal position on the couch, sobbing. Hazel paced the floor, chewing on her nails. Her face looked drawn with dark shadows rimming her eyes. A hollow, horror-filled look that he had only ever seen in the faces of those suffering the worst atrocities painted her features. They convinced Matilda that they were waiting for the police and waited for her to fall asleep. As long as Matilda stayed awake, her disbelief in the gods would only cripple their chances. Finally her sobbing quieted as she drifted off into an exhausted sleep.

He couldn't do anything yet. Not until he heard from the person responsible for taking Gabe. If it turned out that Hera ordered this? What could he do then? Could the bitch queen be responsible for hurting a child? It hadn't stopped her before when she tried to destroy Zeus's bastard children. She wasn't at the ritual, a vital mistake he would exploit. While he felt weaker than when it started, their allies would be stronger. There were many more gods and goddesses who wanted the human race to continue on. Even more who had dived into

the Lethe because they couldn't handle the memories. It turned them into immortals like Orpheus, who would rebuild their life slowly.

"Bacchus, do something, please. I'm begging you, talk to them. I want my baby back."

"I know. I will I swear it to you. I will get Gabe back, but for now, we have to wait."

"I can't. Oh God, I can't. Bach, he's my child. I can't stand the thought of him being hurt. If he's hurt, I want them fucking destroyed. I want them dead. Unleash the fucking Titans. I want to watch them all destroyed!"

Bach held her and let her rant. He felt the same way. She and Gabe belonged with him. He couldn't wait any longer.

"Stay with Mattie."

"No!"

"Goddamn it, Hazel. Just listen to me. You are mortal. I'm not. You cannot come with me, or you will die."

"If it means my son will survive, I don't care about me." Her eyes were wild, her skin deathly pale. She had just withstood a ritual that had him drained, and still she stood when she should have collapsed in exhaustion. The gods had no idea of the true strength that lay within a human spirit. For all of eternity they had underestimated them, but he would do that no longer. There was no way he could allow her to put herself in that kind of danger.

"You make one mistake in there and your son is as good as dead, or worse, tortured. You want that?" He felt like a demon for putting that look of horror in her eyes, but she had to understand that this wasn't something she could fix. He would do it. The energy in the room shimmered slightly, a tell-tale sign that they were about to have a visitor. Hermes stepped into the room, and Bacchus grabbed him by the throat. "Where is he?"

The arrogant prick stood there and waited for Bach to let go, forcing him to do so before he spoke. "I don't know where he is. I just

deliver the words. I know not from whence they came, having traveled through time and space to.”

“Get to the fucking point. Where’s my son?”

Bacchus caught Hazel just as she lunged herself at the sniveling little prick. Wrapping his arms around her torso, he resisted the urge to let Hazel have a go at him. She reminded him of a TV show he watched once about an overprotective female bear willing to tear apart anything that got near her cub. Too bad that would only drive the messenger away and they needed as much information as they could get.

“Let me the fuck go, Bach.” Hazel wiggled wildly in his grasp, fighting his embrace. He tightened his hold on her until she had a problem taking a deep breath.

“Don’t shoot the messenger, sweetheart. Wait till he tells us what he has to first. Spit it out, Hermes.”

“You are to relinquish Poseidon’s tear in exchange for the boy.”

He squeezed Hazel tight against him, preventing her from saying anything, giving her a warning squeeze. “I don’t have it. That trinket went missing in the sands of time.”

“I have been ordered to tell you that you have thirty seconds to produce the tear, or the boy will be torn limb from limb. While his mother watches.”

Bacchus let go of Hazel’s arms, and she immediately ripped the chain from her throat, and held it out at arm’s length towards Hermes. The pendant sparkled as it swung, the tear looking like liquid silver in the dim light.

Bacchus reached out and grasped Hermes’s wrist, stopping the god from collecting the necklace. “Bring the boy here, now.”

Hermes vanished.

“What have you done?” Hazel turned on him and beat at his chest. “Why are you playing with my son’s life?”

Bacchus wrapped his arms around her, pulling her shaking body closer to his. She sobbed against his chest, her hands gripping his

shirt. “I would never play with his life. I want to make sure that Hermes follows through. You know the stories. I know the gods firsthand. Do you trust me?”

She nodded against his tear-dampened shirt. She leaned back slightly and brought her hand up between them. The necklace lay in the center of her palm. It was a painful reminder of when he gave her the necklace, arrogantly thinking at the time that it would be safest around her neck.

“By doing this we are giving someone the chance to destroy everything. Bach, I know what the philosophers say, but I think my son is more important than the rest of the world.” Her voice wavered, and he hated the terrorized resonance in it.

“So do I, Hazel. We’ll stop them before they can destroy anything.”

Another shimmer, and Hermes appeared again. This time he held Gabriel in his grasp. The obviously frightened boy launched himself out of Hermes’s grasp just as Hazel reached for him. With mother and son united, Bach moved in front of them. He tossed the pendant to the messenger.

“You did the right thing. The Titans will purge the world of...”

“Hermes, get the fuck out of here before I push you in the Lethe myself.” Relief flashed in the messenger’s gaze before he vanished. If Bacchus hadn’t been glaring at him, he never would have seen it. Hermes had made his own alliances. If the messenger regretted his decisions, then that was his problem.

Bacchus dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around Hazel and Gabe. His heart pounded against his chest at the idea of anything happening to either of them. Could he live with that? Did he have any right to ask them to be part of his life, in which they would be helpless against those who wanted to hurt him?

“Gabe? Oh my God, Gabe! You’re okay?” Matilda had woken up and threw herself at Gabe, kissing his cheeks as she hugged him. “Oh, Gabe, I’m so sorry I didn’t protect you.”

Gabe stood stiff in her embrace. “You let them take me. My mother trusted you, and you let them get me. You told them how to get me, didn’t you?”

Bacchus watched the color drain from Matilda’s face. “No, never.”

Hazel looked wildly from Matilda to Bach. Gabriel threw himself into his mother’s arms. “I don’t want to ever stay with her again.”

“Gabe, you don’t mean that. Your Aunt Tilly loves you as much as I do. She would never put you in danger.”

“She hates me. She does bad things to me when you are gone. She’s bad, bad, bad.”

Gabriel had already proven his ability to see past a person’s appearance to his true intentions. Bacchus stepped closer to Matilda, who stared openmouthed at the young boy. “How do you know?”

“I can tell. It’s in her eyes.” Gabe didn’t turn around, his voice muffled by his mother’s shoulder, but Bach heard him. “She gave me to them, Mommy. They said that you were going to be distracted, and that they could get me.”

“That’s enough.” Bacchus ripped Gabe from Hazel’s grasp and tossed him across the room.

“Stop!”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Bacchus ignored the women as they screamed at him. Hazel beat at his chest, and Matilda jumped on his back.

Gabe peeked up over the coffee table and smirked, then started to wail. “Ow, my arm. Mommy, he hurt me!”

Hazel turned to run to her son, but Bacchus grabbed her arm. Using her own momentum, he sent her careening into the sofa. Matilda brooked a little more trouble, flipping her over his shoulder and pinching the sensitive nerve in her neck. Rendering her unconscious and dead weight, he tossed her on the sofa and spun to grab Hazel’s arm again. “That’s not Gabriel.”

“What? Get away from my son!”

“Mommy, please. Stop him.”

“Hazel, don’t make me knock you out as well.” Matilda’s unconscious state allowed him to use his abilities at will. Blocking Hazel from running past him, he prevented the boy from leaving the room.

“Mommy, please. No, Mommy, stop him.”

Bacchus reached out, and a deadly-looking metallic staff appeared in his hand. About four feet long, with hundreds of intricate symbols carved into its staff, a sharp point on one end.

“Bach, please, don’t do this.” She pounded against the invisible wall that separated them. Tears streaming down her face, she dropped to her knees begging, “Oh God, no. Please, Bach. No, don’t.”

“Mommmyyyy, help me!” The boy scrambled back, trying to get away from Bacchus.

Bacchus tripped the boy and pressed the pointed end against the boy’s chest. “You are going to die a slow and painful death for every single one of her tears, Eris.”

Gabe stilled. His cries silenced in a moment. “Damn, how did you figure it out? I had her convinced, and she’s the mother.”

Fury beat against Bacchus. He could hear Hazel retching behind him and longed to go to her and comfort her. “Where is Gabriel, Eris? You have one chance to answer me.”

“Or what? You are going to beat me in a drinking game? Poke me with your stick? Fat chance, party boy.”

Bacchus had enough of being blown off as nothing but a drunk, but right now his focus had to be on finding Hazel’s son. “You’re going to tell me, or I’ll give you to Thanatos.”

“Pfft. That pussy-whipped pansy. Think I’m afraid of him?”

“Yes.” A chill ran over Bach’s spine announcing his son-in-law’s arrival. There was no need to turn around and verify what he already knew. Gabe’s physique shimmered and disappeared, leaving a twisted creature behind. Eris might be about the same size as Gabe, but he had shriveled, sallow skin and bulging eyes. The imposter cowered

behind the coffee table as the room filled with the unmistakable scent of sulphur and rotten eggs.

"It's not my fault. They told me to pretend to be the boy. How was I to know he would figure it out so fast?" The creature skittered across the floor. Its talons ticking against the hard wood.

Bacchus reached down and grabbed the creature by its scrawny neck before she got too far. "Where's Gabriel?"

"He's being held in a cell. They need him innocent to use the key." Eris's hands fluttered against his grip, and he came within a breath of snapping the creature's neck. If it wasn't for the fact that he didn't want Hazel to see him lose control, he would have done so.

"Who sent you?"

"I can't tell you. Hermes passed the message to me. Ask him."

"Oh, I plan on it."

"I'll take this from here." Than appeared at Bacchus's shoulder. "So you like to terrorize little boys and their mothers, Eris?" The little creature's screech cut off when Thanatos grabbed her, and they vanished.

Bacchus turned, concerned for Hazel. She slumped on the floor, eyes wide with terror he could feel in his soul. Trembling against his hands, he scooped her up and turned to sit down on the sofa, keeping her in his lap.

"Where's Gabe?"

"I swear to you, we will find him." He glanced over at Matilda, and she disappeared.

"Where'd she go?"

"I put her in bed. She doesn't believe, so I couldn't use any power in front of her. I needed her unconscious in order to get past Eris's disguise."

"Bach, find Gabe right now. I can't stand the thought of him being alone. Oh, what if they are hurting him?" Hazel squeezed her eyes closed, but gripped his hands.

“We are going to find him right now.” Bacchus pressed kisses against her face. He wished he could take all the fear away from her. He wanted to make it all better, and if anything had happened to Gabe, he would crawl on his knees to any god he had to. He would do anything for Hazel and her son.

“You can stay with Matilda.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Hazel, I warned you already that could be more dangerous. If I have to worry about you and Gabe...”

“We will figure it out. Bach, I can’t just sit here and wait. I will lose my mind.” She gripped her own head, making a low keening sound in her throat that he felt in his chest. She was on the verge of a breakdown. He knew the concern he felt would be nothing in comparison to what she suffered.

He brought this horror to them. If only he had left her alone, or talked her into attending the ritual with him and then ended it. He should have altered her memories and made her forget about him. As much as he hated the idea, he could have prevented the soul-aching pain she experienced.

“All right. I’ll take you with me.” Right now he couldn’t deny her anything, even putting her own life in danger to save the child. What she wanted, he would do. When they had Gabe back safe at home, he would have their memories altered and get the hell out of her life.

“What about Matilda?”

“She can stay with Amy, or I’ll get Heph to watch over her. We can change her memories. She will never remember what happened.”

“You can’t take away someone’s memories, Bach. It’s not right.”

“Hazel, I have to. Do you want her hunted as well? Do you want her to live with the memory of Gabriel accusing her of hurting him?”

Hazel’s every thought reflected across her face. She didn’t like it but wouldn’t have her friend burdened with the memories of what had happened. “All right. But only tonight’s memories.”

Amy and Nos arrived shortly after Bach gained Hazel's agreement to his plan. His grandchildren were being kept safe by Deedee. Aphrodite would destroy anyone who tried to harm those children. Bacchus hated lying to Hazel, but he would have to wipe Matilda's recollections of him as well. That meant he would be erasing a larger chunk of her memories.

Amy sat on the sofa with Hazel and comforted her. Amy had the most uncanny ability to help people calm down and see situations in perspective. A throwback to the goddess's soul she had or just another incredible human ability? Who knew?

By the time Nos had Matilda's memories of the evening altered, Hazel had dressed and stood ready to go. While she got ready, Bach phoned Mrs. Roberts and explained that Gabe had gone missing, leaving out all references to the gods. The older woman sounded so distraught and insisted that Hazel take all the time she needed and not to give the library another thought. He promised to keep her updated on everything they found out. Amy and Nos promised to stay for a little while in case someone appeared with Gabe.

"How are you feeling, Hazel? Light-headed? Do you need to eat anything?"

"Let's just get going."

"No, stop for a moment. You won't be any good to Gabe if you don't take care of yourself. It wouldn't be in their best interest to hurt him. Take a moment and think about what you need to do first."

"All right. After everything that has happened, I should eat something. I'll take it with me and eat on the way." Hazel rushed around the kitchen throwing a couple of snacks into her bag, then pulled that over her head so it crossed her chest. "Okay, I'm good to go. I have snacks and some of Gabe's favorites in case he's hungry."

Chapter Eleven

Gabe sat in the middle of a stone floor, shaking and scared. He didn't know where he was. He didn't hurt anywhere which surprised him because he'd been sure the Keres would tear him apart. His head felt a bit fuzzy, and he couldn't think really clearly. Could this all be a bad dream? He knew how to control things in his dreams, only in this one he couldn't change what he wanted like any other time.

He pinched his arm hard. "Ow!" So much for it being a dream. Now what? He could feel himself getting really cold again, and scared. Heph had said that the worst thing you can do is panic when you're scared. So he would try to act brave like Heph and find his own way out.

He sat on the floor of a room made out of stone, which was kinda cool. A tiny bit of light shone in the room, but he couldn't figure out where it came from. There weren't any doors or a seam that might lead to a hidden door. He read that in a mystery once, about a hidden door hidden in a dungeon that allowed a knight to escape.

Gabe didn't feel much like a knight right now. He wanted his mom. Bach would be okay, and so would Heph, but Mom would be the best.

She would scare them all away if she started screaming at them. He worried about his Aunt Tilly. What if they had her in a stone room too? Aunt Tilly didn't like closed spaces. She didn't even like going in the basement. She would be scared to death in this room, almost as scared as he would be if the Keres returned. He didn't remember much of how he got here. He remembered screaming—like a girl,

which was really embarrassing. Hopefully no one heard—and then he appeared on the floor in this room.

A soft breeze that swirled around him, could someone be coming? He scuttled back against the corner, under a stone ledge that could have been a kind of seat. He pulled his legs up close to his body and wrapped his arms around them. Looking over his knees, he tried to make himself as tiny as possible. He could smell his damp PJ's sitting like this. *Gross*. Maybe, if he made himself small enough, they wouldn't see him. Between one blink and another, a woman appeared. Even with the lowered lights he could see the colors that surrounded her. Bad colors, sick-looking with black blotches over them, and she had to be really old like Bach and Heph.

"Hello, little one."

Gabe tried to push himself back farther into the corner. "Go away." At least that made her stop. She stared at him, and he felt a pounding in his head. He wanted his mom, and clean jammies, and his panther.

"Mommy sent me to come and get you. Come on, I will take you to her."

She wiggled her fingers at him, but Gabe didn't move. She didn't say the password. If his mom had sent her, then she would know to say the word.

"If you don't hurry, she's going to get hurt. What if your mommy dies because you didn't come with me? Do you want her to die? It is going to hurt her. She will scream it will hurt so badly. Why are you afraid? She told me to come and get you."

Gabe shook. His tummy cramped. Did bad people tell the truth? What if his mom needed him? *No*. She would have said the password to this woman. That's how bad people tricked you. His mommy said, "*They will tell you lies so you would think it's an emergency. Anyone I send to you will tell you the password.*" He shook his head again.

"Listen, you little gnat, get over here, or I will make you watch your precious mommy get her guts ripped out."

The temperature dropped in the room. He could see his breath. He buried his face into his arms, only allowing himself to see just over the edge. He didn't want her to see him crying.

"Come here, *now!*" the woman screamed, stamping her foot. The little bit of color he could see swirling around her got swallowed by what looked like black sludge. "Why can't I hear your thoughts! Why? Why? Why?"

Gabe didn't know why, but she wouldn't come any closer to him. For some reason, he had to come to her, and that was not going to happen. She screamed and stamped, and Gabe suddenly thought she looked silly and not so scary after all. A small giggle erupted from behind his hands.

She froze and turned towards him. "Don't you dare laugh at me, or I'll kill you." Her hair puffed up like she had just ridden a rollercoaster ten times backwards. He had never been so scared. To his horror, another giggle escaped, and she reeled away from him.

"Stop it!" She jumped around and batted at her ears with her hands. Her dress flipped around her, and her hair got in her eyes and her mouth as she screamed. Her shrieks sounded like the seagulls at the boardwalk, like when they fought over the fries he threw at a couple of them. That made him laugh harder.

"Lalalalalalalalalala..." The lady covered her ears and ran in a circle, until she ran into the wall.

That was so funny, Gabe rolled over onto his side, holding his tummy, his giggles echoing off the walls.

She screamed one more time and then vanished.

He could make them go away by laughing at them? He didn't feel as scared now. Crawling around on his hands and knees, he continued to look for a way out.

* * * *

Bacchus stormed through the liquid caverns of Poseidon's domain. Hazel tucked her hand safely in his. As long as he held on to her, then she would be safe. If he let go, the ocean would enclose around her and crush her.

This trip turned into a complete waste of precious time. The waterlogged god didn't help, more concerned with his underwater world than that of the Earth walkers. "To think he regained a large influx of power thanks to you humans and your cartoons. He'd still be sitting at the bottom of the ocean floor talking with bloody dolphins if it weren't for you."

"I can't blame him. They were interesting. And the dolphins promised to help if they heard anything."

"Stupid fish." He kicked a couple large shells out of the way and crushed a smaller one under his boot.

"Mammals."

He couldn't help but smile at her soft correction. Every moment that passed without her son he knew was complete torture for her. Concern stabbed at his heart like a dull knife, and what he felt could only be a fraction of what she endured.

"I can't think what to do next. Without going to Hades, which I will leave for a last resort. There is a high cost to his help." If Hades took one look at both of them, he would demand Hazel's soul in payment for saving Gabriel's. That's how he worked.

"What about the smaller deities? Who could Eris have worked for?"

"Usually Ares, but that guy is buried in the Pentagon right now, causing havoc with the States."

"There is a god in our government? How the hell does that happen?"

"I don't know if it is a physical manifestation or if he's influencing those in power. He's trying to get his fingers in every war possible. Ares is a planner and warmonger, not the warrior he's been made out to be."

“So he wouldn’t want the humans to disappear?” Hazel stumbled slightly, and Bach paused, waiting until she caught her breath. “What about Zeus?”

“Not Ares. Not Zeus.”

“What about Hera?” She gave his hand a squeeze, letting him know she could continue.

“That bitch? What about her? Honey, you don’t want to get anywhere near her. She is jealous and nasty, with a few thousand years’ worth of baggage saved up.”

“Okay, who would want to protect children?”

Bacchus stopped dead in his tracks, the answer coming to him. He pulled her into his arms and pressed a kiss against the seams of her lips. “How does it feel to be smarter than a god?”

“Pretty much the same way I feel every day?”

“We are going to see Demeter. Her daughter is Persephone.”

“And she’s married to Hades. Do you think Gabe is dead?” Hazel’s eyes filled with pain and terror.

“No, but if anyone would have heard anything, then it would be them. Those two have tabs on everything. If they haven’t already heard what is going on, then it won’t take them long to find out.”

He pulled Hazel close and stepped them from Poseidon’s underwater kingdom to the perfection of a flower-dotted countryside in Mount Olympus. She waved slightly in his arms when they arrived. “You okay?”

“I’ll be fine, although I’m not certain I’ll ever get used to that.” Her fingers twisted with his. “Where are we?”

“Demeter’s home.”

“Why Demeter? Isn’t she more like Mother Earth? If anyone had a reason to be pissed at the human race, I could see it being her.”

Bach paused for a moment. A wave of doubt washed over him. No, it couldn’t be.

“Are you okay, Bach? You look sick.” Hazel brushed a motherly hand over his forehead.

"I'm fine. Don't worry." He caught her hand and pressed a kiss to the palm. "We're not here to see Demeter. With any luck, Persephone will be here."

"It's summer, so she should be if the mythology is right."

"Sweetheart, it's always summer or winter somewhere in the world. Persephone walks both worlds as she pleases." While Hazel processed that bit of information, they stepped up the long staircase to Demeter's home. The goddess still enjoyed the excesses of their youth. Where many had homes in the human world, she chose to continue the traditions of old.

Hazel had brought up a very good point. One deity who had a reason to truly hate the humans and what they had become would be Demeter. The hearth goddess obviously preferred the old ways, and thanks to the humans, her life force had become poisoned by technology. They needed to be careful what they said in here.

Persephone, on the other hand, couldn't be more different than her mother. She and Hades had upgraded their home in the underworld a couple times. According to her husband, every time Kora, as Hades called her, picked up an interior design magazine, their home underwent a reno.

They hadn't yet made it to the immense arched entrance to her home when Demeter stepped out, looking as if she had just come from a shopping spree on Rodeo Drive. He frowned, but quickly schooled his features into something more neutral. This earth mother didn't look anything like she used to.

"Demeter, you look beautiful as always."

She nodded at Bacchus but glared at Hazel, who had stepped just behind his shoulder. "What is she doing here? The Mount is not for *her* kind."

"I'm showing her around." Bacchus gave Hazel's hand a soft squeeze and sidestepped so that he stood between the goddess and his human. "As a thank-you for assisting in the ritual."

“That did turn out well, but I suggest you take her back to where she came from. Immediately.”

“We won’t be here long,” he said as Demeter brushed past and strode away from them. “Okay...I think it’s safe to put her on the other side of the list.”

Hazel looked up at him. The pain in her eyes struck him directly in the chest. “Why didn’t you ask her about Gabe?”

“Because I didn’t want to raise her suspicions or let her know we were here to see her daughter. She can’t be trusted yet. I don’t want to risk anything, and I know time is not on our side.”

They found Persephone flipping through *Home and Garden* magazines while lounging on a hammock swaying gently in the sunshine. She glanced over and gave them both a large smile. Her fluffy blonde hair shone almost white in the sun, small flowers stuck into the curls. She looked like a cross between a Playboy Bunny and a hippy. Seeing her next to her husband made their differences even more apparent.

“Hey, Chuck.”

Bach groaned, and debated on strangling Aphrodite for coming up with that nickname.

“You two lit up the place earlier. I’m surprised that you’re both up and about.”

Bach heard the snuffle and knew Hazel felt guilty over not being there for her son. She would blame herself. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer to him. “We need your help.”

“Oh my goodness, what’s wrong?” Persephone gracefully exited the swing and rushed over to press a soft cloth into Hazel’s hands.

Hazel thanked her, and then between the both of them, they explained what had happened. He added what little details they had, which wasn’t much.

“Oh, that’s just terrible.” Persephone looked to be close to tears herself. “I don’t know what I could do to help, though.”

"I thought that Gabe might be held in the underworld somewhere. Hades might know, but I can't ask him."

Persephone looked at Hazel and then back at him. "I understand what you're saying." She gripped Hazel's hands with her own. "Let me assure you that if your little boy is there, he is safe. The demons that inhabit that realm can't hurt anything pure or innocent. Unless your son willingly follows them somewhere. If he's frightened, then I doubt that might happen."

"I have to come with you."

"Absolutely not!" Bach gripped Hazel's shoulders and turned her toward him. "You are not going anywhere near that place."

"Bach, he won't go with anyone but me."

"You can't go, or Hades will insist you trade places."

"Then I'll trade places. Bach, this is my son. I can't stand by when I could do something to help."

He wrapped his arms around her tightly and kissed the top of her head, then whispered against her hair. "I know this is hard, but I can't lose you both. As much as you need to keep Gabe safe, I need to know you aren't in any danger either."

"Hazel, you can't come. Bach is right. I can come and go from Hades's domain as much as I want. If your son is there, Hades might know something about it. I swear on the Styx, if he's there, I'll bring your son to you."

Hazel turned in Bach's embrace to speak directly to her. He kept his arms around her stomach, her back against his chest, with the hope that she would be able to draw some strength from him.

"You will have to tell him that I said if he doesn't come with you, I'll feed him to the closet monster." She felt stiff as a board in his arms.

"Why would you do that?"

"I think it's a code, Persephone." It amazed him that Hazel would trust the goddess, but then they didn't have much choice at the moment.

Hazel nodded in agreement. “The monster’s name is Bubbles. That’s the important part to remember.”

“All right. I’ll be back.” Persephone skipped a few steps from them before fading away.

Hazel turned back in his arms and wrapped hers around his chest. He rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head. “This is the hardest part.”

Chapter Twelve

Gabe sat curled up in a corner of the stone room, his arms wrapped around his bent legs and his chin resting on his knees. His PJ's had dried, so they didn't smell as bad. After that lady got all weird and ran into the wall before she vanished, no one had come in. He searched everywhere but couldn't find a door or a secret passage or anything. A little while ago, a tray of food had appeared in front of him. It was filled with apples, grapes, cheese, and some kind of bread. Next to the plate sat a glass of something that looked like juice. His tummy growled, and he wanted to eat it all as fast as he could, but remembered when his mom read *Alice in Wonderland* to him. Everything Alice ate changed her. He didn't want to be changed into anything but himself so he figured he better not eat anything.

Tears trickled down his cheeks. He wanted his mom so bad. His tummy hurt and he wanted her to cook hotdogs for him. Why wasn't she here? She would do whatever she could to find him, but he would like to be found now.

A movement next to him startled him enough to send him scurrying over to the other side of the room, afraid of what might come in. A lady appeared, but she didn't look anything like the one before. She glanced around the room before finding him hiding in the corner.

"You are here. Thank the gods. I feared I wouldn't find you. You're Gabriel, right?" She spoke quietly and rushed over to him.

As soon as she got close to him, he jumped to his feet and ran to where she had appeared, hoping to find a doorway. Hitting the stone walls hurt, but he needed to get out of here.

“No, no, stop, stop. You’re going to hurt yourself. I can take you to see your mom and Bacchus.” She tried to grab his hands, but he dodged her and ran under her arm.

The last woman wouldn’t come near him, but this one could grab him. That scared him so much. What if she took him somewhere he couldn’t be found? He didn’t want to cry anymore, but he couldn’t help it. He wanted his mom.

“Why do you keep running? Oh, I almost forgot. Oh, little one, I’m so sorry. Hazel said that if you don’t come with me, she is going to feed you to Bubbles, the closet monster.”

“You do know my mom!” Gabe ran to the lady and jumped into her arms and started crying. “Please get me out of here.”

* * * *

Hazel paced the perimeter of Bach’s living room. She had no sense of time. Since Persephone had left, her world had narrowed down to an eternity of circling the room. Her imagination filled her in on what might be happening to her son, images that got worse and worse with every circle. Bach had tried to get her to sit down, but she couldn’t. She ate because she had to, but it tasted like nothing. She couldn’t sit, couldn’t bring herself to stand still. For a moment she thought to call her parents but then decided she didn’t want to worry them, yet. How was she going to explain all this to them? She paced round and round the room, her steps matching her thoughts.

“Stop.” She walked into Bach’s chest just as he spoke. “You need to sit down. Even just for a minute, before you collapse.”

“I can’t. I can’t stop thinking about what might be happening to him. You have to take me there.” Her voice cracked, and she couldn’t stop the tears that coursed down her cheeks. “Please, Bach.”

“If I believed for the briefest of seconds that it would help, I would carry you there myself.” He held her for a moment, but she couldn’t stand not moving.

It wasn't his fault, even if she wanted to scream at him, hit him, tell him to stay away from her forever. Instead of giving in, she pulled out of his embrace and went back to pacing the floor.

"Mom!"

Gabe's voice was like a ray of sunshine cutting through the horror she endured. She spun around just in time to catch his little body as he launched himself at her. His legs wrapped around her waist, his arms around her neck. He shook and cried in her arms. She buried her face into his neck and smelled her little man.

"Oh, baby. Oh my God, I felt sick without you." She dropped to the floor and cradled her son in her arms, rocking them both as they cried, and peppered his face and hair with kisses. "I've never been so scared in my entire life."

"Me too, but I'm okay. I didn't get hurt. I got scared but not hurt. Persephone said I had to make sure to tell you that lots because you were so upset."

Hazel managed to look up at the woman standing nearby. "Thank you so much. You've given me my life back."

"I'm glad I could help. I'm sorry it took so long, but at first I didn't think I'd find him there. If I hadn't heard a couple of demons talking about how horrible a child's laughter is, I would have left without him."

Bach reached around her and ruffled Gabe's hair. "Good thinking, little man."

"Oh, Bach. I didn't know that would work. I've never been that scared in my whole life, but I couldn't stop laughing. It was really weird."

Hazel wiped at her eyes with her shirt sleeve. "Don't worry about it, sweetheart." She hadn't realized that Bach had sat down next to her, rubbing her back as she rocked.

"I'm going to get going." Persephone waved at Bach when he moved to stand. "Don't get up. There are a few things going on in

Hades's domain that he doesn't know about. Believe me, he is not going to be a happy camper when he finds this out."

"Thank you again for everything." Hazel nudged Gabe, but her son had fallen asleep in her arms.

"I'm more than happy to have helped. I hope the next time we meet, Hazel, it will be under better circumstances." She gave them a wave and disappeared in a shimmer.

Hazel yawned and looked up at Bach. "I'm ready to go home."

"I'm going to take you there." Bach looked brokenhearted. His eyes were sadder than she had ever seen them.

"Are you all right?"

"You'll be safe now. I promise."

Chapter Thirteen

“Mom, why hasn’t Bach come to see us?” Gabe had spent the last five minutes playing with his mashed potatoes instead of eating them. She knew he wanted to ask her something and expected it would be about Bach. Expecting this hadn’t prepared her with a perfect answer.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“Oh, honey, no. No, not at all.” She wanted to smack Bach for making her son feel this way, especially since she felt the same. “I think he worried that staying with us would put us in danger. He wants us to be safe.”

“I’d feel safer if he stayed here.”

So would she, nothing felt right with her since he brought them home the night Persephone found Gabriel. Thankfully, her ex was no longer a threat. This morning she had gotten a call from the sheriff’s office. They recovered Tim’s body from a crack house last night. The official cause of death was listed as overdose, but she had to wonder if there was some divine influence involved. Apparently, he had tried to file for full custody of Gabe. Not that he had a chance of winning. Part of her felt sorry for his death and that he never would have a chance to pull himself out of the black hole of addiction. It could have so easily been her, if not for her son.

“What if the Keres come back?” Nightmares of monsters had plagued Gabriel’s sleep for the last week, waking him up in the night. He didn’t like any windows open at night and insisted on hanging blankets over the bedroom windows. She let him sleep with her in order to help him feel a bit more secure.

She resumed her schedule at the library and because of summer vacation, Mrs. Roberts had happily accommodated Gabe's need to stay close to his mother. Thankfully, there was a day camp program running and he could stay there while she worked. She still went to check up on him at least every hour, the fear of his disappearing again still fresh in her heart.

"Honey, they won't come back. Bach promised you that, remember?"

Gabe shrugged as he continued to push at the food on his plate. "I guess."

"You haven't seen any around the house, right? Have you seen anything else?"

"No. I said I would tell you if I did." He pushed his plate away. "I'm not hungry. Can I be finished?"

"Sure, honey." She didn't have much of an appetite lately either. Eating felt like another chore that had to be done. Move one foot in front of the other, breathe in, breathe out. She didn't want Gabe to learn any bad habits. Starting tomorrow, she would eat properly and pretend that her heart remained in one piece. It would be just the two of them, like before. She would set the example. A broken heart won't kill you, even if it feels like it will.

In the morning, she would tear down the arbor Bach had created. She didn't know if it still worked. The idea of stepping under it and having the hallway not appear made a sharp pain echo in her chest. She'd caught herself standing in front of it a couple times this week, debating on whether to try it or not. Part of her understood the reasoning behind why he stayed away from them. She could appreciate the chivalry up to a point, but she missed him so very much.

A solid knock sounded at the front door, and Gabe went charging for it before she could stop him. She reached the door just as her son swung it open, Bach's name dying on his lips.

Than stood in the doorway. "Hi there, Gabriel."

“Hi, Mr. T.” The disappointment that she could hear in her son’s voice tightened the vise around her heart.

“Hello, Than.” She kept her voice bright, but the compassionate look in the man’s eyes proved she didn’t fool anyone. His partner came up the stairs behind him. “Hello, Nos.”

“Hi, Hazel. Can we talk to you about something?”

She held the door open and allowed them both to enter. “Where’s Amy?”

“She’s at home.”

A fission of fear danced along her spine, and she stepped back a few paces. “So, this isn’t a social call?”

“Not exactly, but please don’t be scared.” Than waited till Nos was inside and then shut the door behind them. “We need to discuss something with you.”

“All right, come into the kitchen then.” She peeked into the living room as they passed the entrance. “Gabe, why don’t you go and play a game?”

“Mr. N, do you want to come too?” The pleading look in her son’s eyes twisted the vise in her chest tighter.

“I need to talk to your mom about some grown-up stuff right now, Gabriel. How about I meet you in here for a game in a little while?”

“Oh, okay.” Perked up by the idea, Gabe headed into the living room. She and the two men continued on into the kitchen.

She sat down at the kitchen table. Than stood, leaning against the counter. Nos sat across from her. “Hazel, we want you to consider letting us alter your memories.”

“What?” She looked up at Than, who stood there shaking his head. They were kidding, right?

“Again, the art of subtlety escapes you, Nos.” Than walked over and sat down next to her.

“Sorry, Hazel. I couldn’t think of a better way to bring it up.” Nos reached over and covered one of her clenched hands with his warmer one.

“It’s okay. I prefer the direct approach.” Hot tears stung her eyes, making her blink. “Did Bach send you?” Did he want her to forget about him so he could move on to someone else?

“No. We know you must be in a lot of pain right now. Gabriel as well. We want to help.”

“How do you know what I’m feeling right now?” She pushed herself out of the chair and went to the counter where Than had stood a moment before. Something about standing when they were both sitting made her more comfortable. It allowed her the illusion of being in control.

“Hazel, at one time we went through what you are right now. We know how much it hurts.” Than rested a hand over Nos’s. “We can make it go away.”

She would be lying if she didn’t say it was tempting, but to lose the pain, she would lose her memories of Bach. Losing the memories of her son’s disappearance would be fine by her, but what were the dangers? She wasn’t willing to place her son in any kind of danger.

Another knock at the front door distracted her from that dangerous line of thought. “Hazel!” Amy’s voice echoed down the hallway, followed by a muttered curse from one of her husbands.

“How did she find out?” Nos got to his feet.

“One guess.” Than stood up behind him. “Deedee?”

“Hi, Gabriel sweetie.” Amy’s voice got closer, and she came into the kitchen with her arm around Gabe. “I can’t believe the two of you would do this without telling me.”

“Amy, we know what they are going through.”

“I know you do, but that doesn’t make it right.”

“They are just memories.”

“They are *her* memories. Right, Hazel? Is that what you want? To never remember anything about Bach? About what you mean to each other?”

“Mom?” Gabe moved over to her and grabbed her hand, obviously confused by everything going on. “What’re they talking about?”

Hazel wanted the pain to stop and the aching in her chest to ease. She didn’t want her son to feel abandoned, but she didn’t want to forget anything. Some memories were precious, like the way Bach made her feel like the most desirable woman in the world. The way he cared for her, talking her into trying things she had convinced herself she hated. Or the night she shared him with Orpheus...

“No, you can’t have them.” She gave her son a soft push toward the back door, trusting Amy’s husbands not to force the issue. “Gabriel, run. You know where to go.”

She stepped between them and her son, just as Amy moved up next to her. “You go near her, and I’ll never speak to either of you again,” she snapped at her husbands.

Chapter Fourteen

Bacchus sat on the bank of the Lethe, watching the black river flow by. If Gabe saw this, he'd try to float something on it or ask if he could go swimming. The latter, he happened to be considering at the moment. He'd never had any concept how much it would hurt to give Hazel up. Good thing, or he never would have. This constant burning in his chest was almost unbearable. The constant ache to hold her in his arms, and feel her sweet breath on his neck, the lack of these sensations made him feel like a man suffering from starvation. He rubbed the heel of his hand against his chest. It felt like there should be an enormous hole there. He felt hollow, as if someone had come along and ripped his chest open. Surrounded by his family and followers, and he had never felt so alone. It drove him from his own home and to the edge of his sanity.

Gabe's absence added to the constant ache he felt. The little man had survived an experience that would have terrified a grown man. He had used his brain, stayed calm, and remembered to wait to hear the password before blindly going with Persephone.

Hazel and Gabe would be in danger if he went back to them. The Mount continued to descend into civil war that would change them all forever. The oracles had disappeared, which prevented his finding out any information about the torch and the feather. The gods watched each other with suspicion. Hermes had gone into hiding, that smarmy shit was dead god walking if Bach ever saw him again.

With all that going on, his thoughts remained solely with Hazel and her son, nothing else mattered to him.

He could have watched her, watched Gabe, and made sure they were fine, but he didn't trust himself to stay away. Surviving without them would be one of the most painful things he had ever done. Frankly, he didn't want to do it.

It would be easy to do a shoulder roll right off the edge and allow the Lethe to take him under. It wouldn't take long, as soon as the water closed over his head, it would be over. His memories of Hazel and Gabe erased in the icy depth. How many times had he looked down at the gods who wandered the earth with pity or disgust? He realized now what an arrogant bastard those thoughts made him. Now, he understood what drove a god to do this.

Pushing up off the velvety grass, he got to his feet. Did one shed his clothes before swimming in the Lethe? He didn't want to come to downstream completely naked. So, this would take a bit more planning than he had thought. He would need clothes and a way to tell himself where to retrieve them. He could leave himself a note and leave out anything regarding recent events. Perhaps he should leave a reference to Hazel? He could tell himself that she is a friend and to look in on her occasionally.

Bacchus looked once again into the depths of the river, watching the rainbows of color chase each other like ribbons in the wind. Two steps, three at the most, and it would all be over. Who was he kidding? His feet remained rooted to the riverbank. He couldn't do it, couldn't take the coward's way out.

He would survive, and his memories of Hazel and Gabe would stay with him. Diving into the Lethe would erase his memories, but he believed the feeling of loss would remain, driving him to find what he had lost. The two of them were everything to him. A smile pulled at his lips. He could imagine Clotho spinning his thread with Hazel's, creating a thread stronger together than apart.

One step back, then another, he backed away from the river and turned to run to the one woman he would never forget. Bacchus ran

across the plush grasses that lined the banks of the Lethe and, with a small push of his powers, straight across Hazel's back lawn.

A chorus of raised voices echoed over the back lawn.

"No, you can't have them. Gabe, run. You know where to go." Hearing the urgency in Hazel's voice sent a jolt of fear through his heart.

"You go near her, and I'll never speak to either of you again." That voice belonged to Amy, and the tone said she was pissed at her husbands.

Gabriel burst out the back door and ran for the vine-covered arbor.

Bach ran to intercept him.

The boy must have sensed the movement because he looked over his shoulder, a smile breaking out over his face when he saw who chased him. "You came back."

Bach scooped the boy up and gave him a tight squeeze. "I came for you and your mom. Is that okay?"

"Totally!" His small arms wrapped around his neck and held on tight. "I missed you, Bach."

"I missed you too, little man."

"I think you need to go up to the house. Mom and Amy are yelling at Than and Nos. I know I'm not in trouble, but I think they are."

"I'll fix everything. Were you headed to my home?"

"Yup, Mom said it would be a safe place, but she told me I couldn't visit you unless you invited me. I wanted to see you, but I didn't want you to get mad if I came over without asking first."

"Gabriel, you are welcome anytime. Just make sure your mom knows first. It's a kind of magic. As soon as you go under the arbor, you'll see a door at the end of a hallway. Go on in. It leads to the living room. Nos told me which games were your favorites. You'll find them on the coffee table."

"Awesome!"

He let go of Gabe, and the boy promptly ran under the arbor and disappeared. Bach ran for the house. Bursting through the back door

caused four sets of eyes to turn his way, but he only cared about one pair.

“Bach, you are the biggest asshole in the universe!” Not quite the greeting he’d expected or hoped for, but since she still recognized him, he’d take it.

“There a reason you’re here, Dad?” Amy stepped to Hazel’s side in a show of support.

He owed his daughter a great deal for fighting for her friend. As soon as he got close, Amy stepped in his way, Hazel glaring at him from over her shoulder.

“Yes, I’m here for the most wonderful woman ever created.” He pressed a kiss to Amy’s forehead and reached around her to Hazel, who wouldn’t budge.

“I guess that’s our cue.” Nos wore the biggest shit-eating grin he could. “You couldn’t have cut that any closer. I almost ran out of excuses not to do it.”

“What!” Hazel turned and glared at Amy’s husbands.

Than held up his hands. “We had no intention of doing it. We just wanted to give Chuck some time to think. Since it proved difficult for him to figure out, I thought I would give you a push in the right direction.”

Amy tapped Hazel’s shoulder. “I’ll admit to being in on it, too. I’m sorry.”

Hazel hugged Amy. “Thanks for standing by me.”

“What are friends for?” Amy let go and walked back to stand between her two husbands. The air around them shimmered, and the three of them disappeared, leaving Bach and Hazel alone.

“I am so angry with you!” She tried to shake off the hand he had on her upper arm. “What were you thinking?”

“Too much, apparently. Hazel, are you going to come with me?”

“No.”

He hadn’t expected a different answer. “All right then.” Dipping his shoulder, he tossed Hazel over it and strode out of the house. She

smacked him against the back and tried to get him to put her down. Had she truly meant it, he would have, but her arguments lacked conviction. He marched across her lawn and into the arbor, pausing to flick all the lights off in her house with a thought.

“You can’t do this, Bach.”

“I just did, Hazel.”

Not stopping until he had her in his home, he threw her onto the bed before following her down. He rolled her onto her back, cradling her head with his arm.

She reached up and traced the edges of his face, running her fingers through his hair. Didn’t she realize that he wanted her for eternity?

“Hazel, I’m a selfish man. If you are here to stay, I’ll never let you go. You could have another child if you leave. A normal family. I can’t promise you that or a perfectly safe life.”

“Bach, there is no such thing as a perfectly safe life, here or in the human world. All I know is that being away from you was the most painful thing I have ever experienced. You pushed us away.”

“I did it for your own good.”

“That’s a dumb reason. You made the choice for me, for Gabe, without ever asking us. He’s just as upset in his own way.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. Will the two of you ever forgive me?”

“It might take decades.”

“That’s okay. I’ll wait.” Bach pressed his lips against hers, licking along the seam. “Oh, come on, sweetheart. Let me in.” He nibbled the corners of her mouth that had drawn up into a smile.

She shook her head.

“I guess I’ll have to find something else to wrap my mouth around.” Slipping his arm from under her neck, he kissed his way along her jaw and down the tendon on the side of her neck. She tasted sweet, like ambrosia. He trailed his tongue along the V-edge of her shirt. Moving his leg to the other side, he straddled her hips, trapping her beneath him.

Her hands found their way into his hair, clenching, pulling the strands. He chuckled against her skin and slid his hands along her arms, pulling her fingers free and moving them to under her own head. "Get comfortable. I might be a while."

"That sounds promising." She stroked his face, dragging a nail down his jaw.

He moved her hand back with the other under her neck. "Behave. Keep them there, or I'll tie you down."

"Is that supposed to be a warning?" A mischievous twinkle glinted in her eyes. After all the fear and horror that he had seen there before, her ability to bounce back amazed him.

"Woman, you are mine for all of eternity. I'll never give you up for anyone."

"Good but does that mean there is no more sharing?"

Images of her sandwiched between him and Orpheus threatened to have him coming before he ever had a chance to get near her. "Oh, I don't think we should be too hasty in swearing that off. Perhaps we should have a couple more people join us before we decide that it's not for us."

"That might be a good idea." He ran his hand over her chest in a possessive manner and cupped her breast. She sighed and arched her back, pressing the firm globe against his hand. Her nipple pebbled beneath his palm. Reaching under her, he ripped the small bit of stitching that kept the cups together. Her bra pulled back out of the way, and he wrapped his mouth around the tip of a breast, tonguing her nipple.

"Oh, Bach." Her body bowed, her hips pressing up against his. He rotated his hips, adding a bit of friction against her. Bracing himself with one hand, he cupped her other breast and bit down on her nipple.

She grabbed handfuls of his hair and pulled him up toward her face, stopping when they were eye to eye. "I love you more than anything. Don't for one moment think that we are going to do this and

you are going to push me away again. It's. Not. Going. To. Happen. Capiche?"

"Hazel, this is for eternity. I swear by the Styx, I will never let you go."

"And I swear by your Styx that you are stuck with me forever. I love you more than I ever thought possible. I trust you to take care of me and Gabe."

Her admission humbled him. Knowing she trusted him with their lives, that gift he would cherish for eternity.

Epilogue

“Zeus failed destroying that little human. Yet another nail in our collective coffin.”

A woman sat behind an elegant desk, dressed in an Armani business suit with an artfully high pair of Jimmy Choos on. Her legs crossed. A cigarette dangled from her fingertips. She didn’t have any fear of cancer or any of those pathetic human diseases.

“Now, there is another in our midst. This one thinks she has the right to be in Olympus. I don’t care what Bacchus has done. This cannot and will not be tolerated.”

Those disgusting creatures had wreaked havoc on their own soil, not giving a damn how their selfish, chemically dependent existence damaged it. She tried to teach them a lesson, creating weather patterns that would confuse them and bring awareness of the damage they inflicted on the world around them. They reacted by giving her creations silly names and attempting to figure out ways to predict them and adapt. It had gotten to the point that she didn’t care anymore but still held the human race in contempt. Pathetic little creatures who held the power of their existence.

Belief in the old ways grew and mystical creatures were reaching the point of coming out of the woodwork. Once they came out of hiding then the Parthenon would rise again. The gods in all their ultimate wisdom and power would take their place, at the top of the food chain.

How did all major changes in history happen? With a whisper, with a small show of power? *No*. Change happened with a mighty show of strength. The humans respected creatures more important

than them. They would be reminded that they were nothing but cannon fodder and never allowed to understand their true powers.

She would unleash the Titans. Many of her kind had swum the depths of the Lethe. Most of them became too unstable to handle the loss of their own powers due to the human lack of belief. That meant that there weren't many who could or would stand up to the elements in their truest forms. There would be many human deaths. Not that she cared. There would be Olympic deaths, an unfortunate result, but necessary to bring the change she wanted.

Zeus would be the Titans' primary target.

She might even serve him up on a silver platter. The others would turn to her for guidance, to her for safety, and she would take control, and that would be the last time their kind came close to winking out of existence.

She remembered the day so long ago when she stood by, helpless, and let those she felt responsible for die. *Never again.* She would take care of herself and not rely on anyone else to do it.

A small pomegranate seed sat in her palm, such a small thing to herald such destruction. Reaching over to the desk, she lifted a velvet box. Inside, a chain with Poseidon's tear nestled on a pocket of velvet. She bristled at the thought that this had lain around a human's neck, as if that sniveling insect had the right to wear it. Carefully, she balanced Hera's gold seed on the pendant. The two began to glow, and then the seed sank past the gilt cage and into the tear itself. The streaks of red and silver swirled around the small seed. As soon as she got her hands on the feather and torch, then she would have her revenge. The world would cower at her feet, Zeus would beg for forgiveness, and she would be queen. This time the humans would know their place and never get delusions of being higher than their station. They would beg, cower, and sacrifice whatever she and her family demanded.

The world would be as it should.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Corinne Davies reads anything she can get her hands on, from the side of a cereal box to a historical book on the Riflemen during the Napoleonic wars. By day, she is a full-time wife, mother, and works in the wine industry. At night, she avoids such mundane tasks as housework and laundry by creating her own worlds where mythology comes to life—worlds in which you are just as likely to be living next door to an ancient deity as finding a mystic treasure in the attic.

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