

Creatura



A Novel by N e l y C a b

Creatura

Nely Cab



AuthorHouse™
1663 Liberty Drive
Bloomington, IN 47403
www.authorhouse.com
Phone: 1-800-839-8640

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For my baby sister, Krystle,
who believed in me from the first written words.

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick,
but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.”

-Proverbs 13:12

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Prologue

Journal Entry 1, 1:01 A.M.

My name is Isis Martin. I'm seventeen years old, and I suffer from a sleeping disorder. A dark figure stalks my dreams, making me dread sleep.

I'm a senior at Los Fresnos High School, where I take advanced placement courses for college credit—dual enrollment. It's difficult to function on one or two hours of sleep a night.

Today I've got another session with Dr. Jameson. He's my best friend's dad and the only psychiatrist in town. He suggested I start a journal to release my stress and maybe one day I'd be able to sleep again. He says my recurring dream is only a reflection of my anxiety to sleep, but there's something that tells me he's wrong.

Journal Entry 2, 12:14 A.M.

Why do you plague me like this... haunting my dreams and taking over my thoughts? I do nothing to evoke you, and yet, you come to me every night. You keep me under your watchful eye. Do you find pleasure in my fear? I haven't led a normal life in three months.

What are you?

Tonight, in my dream, I was lying in that field of flowers without a worry in the world. I could actually smell the poppies. As I turned to see the scarlet sunset there you were—yet again. Why do I fear you if you're nothing but a winged black silhouette in the distance, taunting my nerves?

Three sleepless months I've had to live with you in my subconscious. The psychiatric sessions do nothing for me and now they want to drug me. I refused, of course. I'm seventeen for goodness sake! I don't want to be dosed for the rest of my life.

My mother focuses on the dark circles under my eyes when she speaks to me; she's worried. What can I do if the problem is in my head and not elsewhere? I despise you.

Journal Entry 3, 5:45 A.M.

You walked toward me tonight. I was petrified. You growled at me and paced back and forth in the fields like a savage beast. All I can see is your dark shadow and the glistening of your eyes.

I cursed you for half my sleepless night and wished I had taken the doctor's prescription. He says I have to make myself believe you are nothing and nothing you will become. It's so easy for him to say that. The panic I feel in my sleep is all too real. I know I'm at fault for feeding it. How can anyone live like this... awake through the night?

* * *

Chapter 1

I had always been able to control my dreams. I don't know how, I just could. I would take myself to beautiful far off places. I could relax by a pond or lay surrounded by buttercup shaped flowers.

My favorite was the poppy field. The golden sun was always warm and perfect on the crimson horizon. I felt at one with nature. That ended the day a stalker took over my dreams.

Nowadays, I hardly sleep.

Today I didn't have the energy to doll myself up so much. I lined my green eyes with black eye liner, followed by black mascara. My long light brown hair was ironed and ready to go.

It was hot and muggy this March morning as I made my way to school by foot. I started walking to school shortly after the dreams started, so I could be alert—coffee in hand, Green Day's *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* blaring on my iPod.

As I crossed the intersection of the main street, I was tempted to stop for a refill of coffee at the gasoline station, but decided against it. My five-foot frame could only hold so much caffeine before my leg started shaking frantically.

Los Fresnos, Texas is your typical small town with a scant population of roughly 5000 inhabitants. It's the type of town where everyone knows everyone. It's located at the southernmost tip of Texas, bordering Mexico. The weather is humid, hot and sunny practically all year round. I wasn't a fan of either the heat or the humidity, but I had forcefully grown accustomed to it, having lived here my whole life.

The town is peaceful, reserved and only a few miles from several small surrounding cities—that's where the town's people do their shopping. All in all, it's a pretty monotonous place. It's a safe little town to walk around in, even at night.

My best friend, Andy, waits for me at our usual table in the cafeteria with her boyfriend, Bill. I don't have one of those anymore.

My memory recalled a three-year high school relationship with the guy I thought was destined to be my husband. His name was Gabriel Betancourt. Gabriel was now a freshman at Florida State University. He graduated early from high school, having been in an advanced program, and left immediately after his prerequisites were met. With an academic scholarship, he jumped right into the spring semester. I was so proud of him.

Gabriel's older brother, also in college, had a place of his own in Florida. It was not a surprise that he would consider leaving right after high school.

"Isis," he had said to me before he left, "I'll be back every chance I get, I promise. You won't even miss me. We'll talk on the phone every day—we'll chat, we'll text. It'll be like I never left!"

I was completely and moronically blinded by what lay ahead.

I remember looking into his brown eyes, believing every word he said.

"Whatever!" I said to myself, remembering the day of his departure.

I felt the tears start to slowly emit from my eyes and onto my round cheeks, but I quickly wiped them away. I wondered exactly how important I had really been to him. I was dumped via text

message, mind you. What a cruel way to have broken up with me. The insomnia had already started.

He hadn't visited once after leaving to Florida State. He had made excuses to evade conversations with me. I had attributed his distancing to his heavy load of classes.

I was dumbfounded. I examined every detail of the last three years wondering the reasons behind this sudden change. I guess things happened for a reason, as my mother always told me.

My mother had warned me not to get too serious and persuaded me to continue having friends. Gabriel consumed all my time and my friends slowly started to dissipate from my life at one point.

"You need time for girly things," she had said, "and friends will always be there when boyfriends aren't."

Mom was knowledgeable in this area. My Dad had cheated on her so many times, that I don't know how she had the strength to endure the humility in this town. Everyone knew about his little adventures, but no one commented—at least, not to her face.

The day of their separation was hard for both of us. She told me that she was filing for divorce. I was twelve.

"My heart is done breaking", she had told me, "it's time to begin renovation on it."

She never mentioned my father's infidelity, but I always knew and I'm sure she knew that I did. I believe she hung in there for my sake. She believed strongly in family unity and fought to keep hers together. I was grateful that she sacrificed so many years of a failed marriage to let me have a somewhat normal family environment.

I was glad I listened to her now. I had at least one shoulder to cry on. Her name was Andrea "Andy" Jameson. She had been my very best friend since we were five. That's when I saved her from the frog that little Billy Nesbit had put down the back of her shirt in kindergarten. I stuck the frog in Billy's mouth to teach him a lesson, and I was suspended for a day. I would trade a lost day of school for a best friend like that anytime. We were practically inseparable, until Gabriel came along. Ironically, little Billy Nesbit was now Andy's boyfriend. He prefers to be called "Bill" now.

"Sup, guys?" I tried to sound awake and full of energy.

"How'd you sleep?" Andy asked, pulling a tube of makeup concealer out of her cosmetics bag.

"Close to three hours, I estimate," I answered, setting my book bag on the table and taking a seat, awaiting Andy to begin her daily ritual with me.

"Sleepy?" she asked.

"Mhh hmm," I moaned.

Andy took a cosmetics sponge and dabbed the makeup on it. She started covering the dark parts around my eyes that I had neglected this morning.

Bill shook his head from side to side and sighed. "Just take the pills, Isis. You look a little more like crap each passing day."

"Nice," I scoffed as Andy continued to dab, "You use that same poetic charm on Andy?"

"He's right, you know," Andy agreed as she twisted the cap back on the concealer tube.

"I'm considering it," I sighed. "I'm so exhausted of being..." I paused to think of the right word, "*exhausted*." I took a deep breath and lay my chin on my arm over the table.

"So is it fear of sleep or insomnia?" Bill inquired for the third time this month.

"It makes no difference if the end result is sleepless nights," Andy answered before I could. "My dad says you only have to try the pills for a few days to see how you react to them."

“Your dad’s been talking to you about me?” I wondered.

“Of course not! You know how he feels about doctor and patient confidentiality.” Andy bit the right side of her bottom lip and peered at the floor. “I kinda overheard him on the phone with your mom.” She bit her nail for a second. “Well, okay, I might have been eavesdropping, but with just cause. I’m worried about you.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“Can we please start off the day with another topic for a change?” Bill complained. “We’re young. We’re supposed to be talking about music or movies, not illnesses. This isn’t a normal topic of conversation to be having when you’re a teenager.”

“She’s gotta talk about it. I don’t want her to go deeper into depression,” Andy snapped at Bill.

“I’m NOT depressed!” I countered in an offended tone. “Did your dad say *that too*?” I frowned.

Andy paused briefly before she answered.

“No,” she said in almost a whisper.

“Stop trying to diagnose me. You’re not a doctor, okay?” I sounded upset. “I’m just tired.”

There was an awkward silence amongst the three of us for several minutes. The lull was broken by a loud shrill of laughter coming from the cheerleaders’ table.

“What the hell is Jean Murphy so happy about today?” My tone was harsh.

“Well,” Andy started, “you used to laugh too, remember?” She turned to view Jean, the captain of the cheerleading squad.

“Her voice just gets under your skin. Make her stop,” I grinded my teeth and held my head with both hands leaning over the table.

Bill stood from the table and grabbed his notebook.

“Nope, she’s not depressed,” he said addressing Andy but referring to me. “She’s aging prematurely and at a rapid rate. She’s a grumpy old woman. That’s what she is.”

Bill managed to make me smile. Andy giggled and smacked him a kiss on the cheek.

“Let’s get to class before the student stampede starts,” Andy urged me.

School dragged on as usual. Lunch was dull and after a long day of assignments, classes finally ended.

After school Bill and Andy drove me to Dr. Jameson’s office where I would meet my mother. Before walking into the office, I watched them drive down Ocean Boulevard, the town’s main street. Bill’s red ’67 Ford Mustang revved. He was so proud of his car.

My mother, Claire, was already seated in the waiting room. She worked half a block away at the county courthouse as an administrative assistant to the judge.

Claire was thirty-five years old. She had put herself through night school after the divorce and obtained an associated degree as a paralegal. Shortly after the divorce, my dad passed away of a sudden heart attack. He was thirty-one years old at the time.

My mom was hot. She had beautiful brown hair, huge copper brown eyes and a body to kill for. I didn’t understand why in the world she was single. She was jovial and fun to be with. She always told me Mr. Right hadn’t shown up on her doorstep yet.

“Hey, mom,” I greeted her.

“Hi hon. How’re ya holding up today?”

“I’m okay,” I lied.

The doctor’s assistant called me in to Dr. Jameson’s office before my mother had a chance to bombard me with a list of questions about symptoms of depression. She’d been making mental notes

from the T.V. commercials she watched and I'm almost positive I saw her Googling several times. Suddenly everyone I trusted wanted to play doctor.

Dr. Jameson was seated behind his desk when I walked into the consult room. He was the only one allowed to bombard me with depression questions as far as I was concerned.

"Am I asymptomatic of depression, Dr. Jameson?"

"Isis, I can't diagnose you with depression or any other illness other than insomnia. The only thing I can suggest is to take the medication I prescribed so you can sleep. It's obvious that the fear of this recurring dream has the upper hand in your case.

"You need to let the dream play out. I'm certain that you'll see that there is, in fact, nothing to fear and, therefore, ease the anxiety."

I told the doctor I had started writing the journal he suggested, hoping he'd veer away from the medication issue. Unfortunately, I was not victorious. He insisted on having me take the medication he prescribed *that night*.

After twenty minutes or so of trying to sway me, I politely refused. This resulted in his calling my mother into his office after he was done with me.

As we walked to the car I noticed my mother's brow line was deeply creased. She was either very upset, very deep in thought, or both.

"You're taking that pill tonight, Isis," she sternly advised me as soon as we were in the car.

"Absolutely not, mother," I said trying to keep my calm.

"I'm not asking you. I'm telling you, Isis," her voice sounded threatening. She put the key in the ignition but did not turn it.

"Don't you think I deserve a little compassion? I work all day, I feed you, I do your laundry, I do all the house chores and I haven't had a sound night's sleep in two months because I keep getting up to check on you. I need to rest too, Isis. We don't have the luxury of having a man in our lives to care for us. We have to take care of each other."

My mother's eyes started to redden. Claire was a strong woman—not prone to tears very often, but, recently, she had become more emotional for some reason. I felt so guilty.

"Mom, c'mon don't cry," I reached over to her.

"I'm concerned, Isis. You don't sleep, you hardly eat... are you on drugs? Tell me what it is and I promise I won't get mad. I promise," she sniffled.

"Mom, I am not on drugs and I'm not doing this to you on purpose." I had been so preoccupied with myself that I didn't bother to think of her and what she was going through. I took in a deep breath and exhaled before uttering the words: "I'll take the pill, mom. I'll take it tonight, okay?"

I glanced at the clock; it was nearing ten. My mother reached across the kitchen table, handing me a glass of water and the infamous sleeping pill. I sighed, setting the pill on the table and stared at it.

Truthfully, I was scared to take the pill. I was afraid of not being able to wake from my slumber, afraid of having to see that hideous grey figure.

"You promised me," Claire set her hand on her waist.

I glanced at my mother and grimly smiled.

"I know," I said taking the little white pill in one hand and the glass of water in the other.

"It tastes disgusting." I gagged as the pill started dissolving on my tongue. I quickly took a drink and flushed it down.

“You’re such a baby,” Claire mumbled, walking out of the kitchen.

I found my mother lying next to me at 3:30 A.M. as I woke from that lucid nightmare once more. I must have slept at least five hours. Though physically I felt a little better, emotionally, I was a mess.

The medication was still at large inside my body. I felt drowsy but had enough energy to fight it. I wouldn’t let myself dream horribly, twice in one night.

Claire felt me creep out of bed and followed me downstairs to the living room.

“Go back to bed, Mom,” I whispered.

She shook her head, slurred something inaudible and fell asleep on the couch. I watched her sleep for a few minutes thinking about how long she had tolerated all those sleepless nights.

I didn’t tell her I wasn’t able to sleep until a month passed, for fear that she might do just this-stay up with me. And to think she’d have to work tomorrow while I could slack off at school.

My mom didn’t want me to work while I was still in high school. She said it was okay to be sheltered when you were a kid, and that I would appreciate having been able to enjoy my youth when I was older.

Mom began to work at the age of fourteen as a waitress at the only sit down restaurant that existed in town at that time. I don’t know if that was legal back then. Not that she was that old. She had me at the tender age of eighteen, having married my dad fresh out of high school.

Mom and Dad had been high school sweethearts, and she had gotten pregnant two months before their high school graduation. I guess, unconsciously she always worried that I would end up with her same fate, but she needn’t fret over that anymore.

I grabbed a quilt from the coat closet and softly placed it over my poor, tired mother.

As it was still fresh in my mind, I started jotting my dream down in my journal on the kitchen table.

Journal Entry 4, 4:03 A.M.

The sleeping aid did its job. I fell asleep within half an hour of taking it. I wish it hadn’t worked at all.

I saw you with a little more detail this time. You’re a muscular human etch with a darkness about you. My heart raced as I watched you in the distance walking toward me, snarling. I slept a full five hours before you ran toward me menacingly and I woke in a cold sweat.

The doctor wasn’t right about letting my dream play out. I’m more afraid than I had been in our previous encounters.

I fear you, but I won’t live like this anymore. I’m going to confront you tonight. Tear me apart if you want, but you will haunt me no more!

* * *

Writing down my thoughts didn’t take very long, and I still had two hours to go before I started getting ready for school. Time goes by slowly when there’s nothing good on T.V., there’s no one to talk to, or nothing to do. Waiting for the sun’s rays must be a virtue.

Claire opened my bedroom door as I curled the ends of my hair with my flat iron. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, and she looked rested and beautiful in her pantsuit.

“Hun, I left you some pancakes on the table. Call Dr. Jameson to tell him how you felt after taking

the pill. Keep the caffeine intake to a minimum today and please, *please* remember to lock the front door—you've been so absent minded lately." She said it all in one breath.

"Will do," I said, twisting the flat iron on the last strand of hair that needed curling.

Claire walked over to me and kissed my head, "Thanks for taking the medication, baby. You have no idea how relieved I am." She took one last look at me before she closed the door and smiled.

"I'm off to work!" I heard her yelling down the hall.

"Kay!" I hollered back.

I was happy my mother got a good night's rest. I could see how much less worried she was.

Today, I paid more attention to the dark circles under my eyes. They didn't change much overnight, but I applied more concealer than usual to keep Andy from worrying about me as well.

My cell phone rang while I was dabbing the last of the concealer under my left eye.

"So, you need a ride today, or are you still sleep walking to school?" Andy teased.

"Ha," I smiled, "I'm walking."

"You didn't sleep?!" She expressed disbelief.

"Yeah, I did, around five hours or so."

"What'd you dream?"

"Same thing, only..." I paused, "with a little more detail to THE BEAST." I dramatized the last two words.

"Tell me about it at school?"

"Sure. Let me finish getting ready so I can start sleep walking there."

"Bill just got here. Sure you don't want a ride?" She insisted.

"I need the walk, but thanks," I said, glossing my lips.

"Suit yourself. See you in a bit." Andy hung up.

At school, I told Andy and Bill how that thing in my dream leapt and ran toward me violently growling. This was the first time I told them a detailed account of my dream.

"Do you think it might be something, you know, having to do with demons or evil spirits?" Bill was curious.

"Bill," I closed my eyes and shook my head, "I did not need to hear that. I already pray like a religious fanatic. You're only adding to my nightmares."

Andy widened her eyes, "Geez, Isis! Why didn't you ever tell us how scared you really are? Does my dad know about this?"

"Of course," I rolled my eyes.

During the course of the morning I couldn't seem to get Bill's words out of my head: "demons or evil spirits". I felt drowsy and unable to direct much attention to my morning classes. I was not looking forward to taking that pill tonight. Having heard those words spoken only made me dread the night more. Nonetheless, I would have to take it, and I would confront this creature.

At lunch I took some time to call Dr. Jameson to tell him the outcome of the medication. He wasn't too pleased that I had only slept five hours. He suggested I take the pill earlier and double the dose. I wasn't happy about that at all, but I had to bear it for my mother's sake.

During the day, my nerves stirred by the passing hour, knowing that around eight o'clock I'd have to be in bed and ready to face-off terror.

At exactly eight o'clock Claire had a glass of milk and two pills waiting for me at the kitchen table. I took them without reproach.

Claire walked me to my room and sat on my bed as the medication slowly made its way through my blood stream.

"You don't have to sleep with me, you know? I'll be okay." I patted my mother on the hand.

My head felt fuzzy, and my body started relaxing. This part of the sleeping process I did not mind. It had been a long time since I felt at ease while falling asleep. Maybe tonight would be different from the rest; maybe, just maybe, tonight I would dream something pleasant. I should be so lucky.

I lay in a field surrounded by a bed of yellow flowers. This was the poppy field I dreamt of every night.

A sensual breeze of sandalwood accompanied a delicate floral wave of aroma. I inhaled the sweetness in the air. Poppy petals caressed my skin imitating the finest of silks ever woven. As I turned to admire the lavender and rose colored sky that so brilliantly contrasted with the field of gold, I saw him—his dark penumbra in the distance. I knew he'd be waiting to renew my torment, but this dream would have a twist. I promised myself I'd confront him and this would be the end to my misery.

My body lifted and began to walk toward him. I wanted to stop when I saw him set his feet astride and ready to spring, but my subconscious was tired and angry and wanted these nightmares to end; I maintained my fast pace. I would not be intimidated by a figment of my own psyche.

As this thing saw me approach, it let out an echoing growl which I felt bounce off my chest. I kept walking. It charged toward me at an unbelievable pace. I shut my eyes and continued to walk. My heart raced with fear and I started the Father's Prayer. Unable to remember the words, I stopped and kept my eyes shut.

I could hear its steps no more. I was sure it was gone.

Slowly, I began to open my eyes. Mortified, I gasped and froze. The blood drained from my face as I found it immediately before me, glaring coldly into my eyes. His snarls resonated like rolling thunder through the field. My body trembled.

I couldn't so much as blink. Its contour became a blur to me. Finally, it took a few steps back, allowing my eyes to regain focus.

It was a tall, sculpted young male. His hair was as black as a raven. His skin was golden and his eyes were a rare indigo blue color. His wings spanned across six feet to each side. He wore nothing but a white, gold lined loin skirt.

My mouth dropped. I was unable to utter a word, but he, on the other hand, was quick to query.

"Why do you keep coming here?" He asked with a scornful stare.

Still in shock from what I had previously thought was a monstrosity I could not speak. He was, somehow, angelic—perfectly crafted and beautiful all over.

"In the name of who do you come to me?" He persisted with his questioning.

I slowly composed myself. "This is *my* dream. You can't question me. I do the talking here. I've seen what you really are and your growls and snarls cause me laughter. I'm not afraid of you. You're just a fictional character in my overactive imagination."

I watched him take a seat on a rock. He set his hand over his mouth in silence as if in thought.

“How did you find your way here? Why don’t you stay in your world? This is my domain, and you have no business here.”

“Who are you to kick me out of my own dreams?” I scoffed.

At this, he laughed much amused.

“I’m your dream weaver, my dear. Something you are ignorant of in your reality.”

“No... you are only a figment of my imagination, and I am not afraid of you.” I crossed my arms waiting for his response.

“You’re a sprightly little thing, aren’t you—full of charisma?” He stood, took a few steps in my direction, and growled viciously at me.

I silently whimpered.

“You lie when you say you do not fear me. You fear me plenty, my dear.” He sneered.

“What is there to fear if you aren’t real?” I countered with a shaky voice.

“Oh, on the contrary, I am plenty real, and I can prove it.” He threatened in a low deep voice.

I analyzed his golden face in silence. I reminded myself this was only a dream before I could start crying.

“Prove it then,” I challenged.

I heard a low growl forming in his chest. He swiftly stood from where he was seated. He set his face an inch away from mine, then bared his teeth as his top lip quivered. I started praying like my life depended on it. He suddenly softened his glare, took a step back and vanished leaving behind a cloud of golden shimmer.

I was alone in the field. I had done it; he was gone. I sat down with a wide smile of satisfaction across my face. The field was mine again to dream in.

For the first time in months, I woke to the sound of my phone alarm. Claire had fallen asleep beside me. The loud noise of the missile alarm scared her half to death. She sprung off my bed and landed on her hands and knees on the floor. I burst into laughter unable to help her up.

“Turn that stupid thing off!” She was enraged.

I tried as hard as I could to help her up after I turned the phone off but ended up rolling on the floor cackling. I could tell Claire wanted to laugh.

“Oh my God!” I chortled. “Too funny!”

“Shut up and get dressed,” she said slamming the door to my room. I could hear her giggling in the hallway.

I arrived at school smiling and a little drowsy from the medication. Bill noticed my mood immediately. My glossy eyes must have tipped him off.

“Are you high, or did you get some sleep?” He joked.

“Both,” I laughed. “I slept the whole night!”

Andy smiled and handed me an oatmeal cookie. “You look so much better.”

“Yeah,” I yawned, “but I’m so sleepy.”

“So, tell me about your dream.” Andy took a bite of her cookie.

“I confronted him, Andy! And get this: he wasn’t a monster at all. He was just a guy with wings and gold skin... and who growled a lot.” I chuckled.

“A golden boy with wings?” Bill rolled his eyes, joining the conversation.”

“Wow! Maybe he was an angel?” Andy seemed curious.

“Trust me he was no angel. He growled at me right in my face. I was scared witless.”

I took a sip of Andy’s milk. “He’s gone though. He disappeared, hopefully forever. I told him I wasn’t afraid of him and poof, he was gone.”

“At a girl!” Andy gave me a one-armed hug. “Call my dad to tell him the news later.”

“Mhh hmm,” I nodded putting the last piece of the cookie in my mouth.

It was hard to stay awake during all my morning classes. During lunch I updated Dr. Jameson on my condition. I told him I was way too sleepy and he said it might not cease until my body grew accustomed to the medication.

“Wait a minute, Dr. Jameson. Just how long am I going to be on this stuff?”

“We’ll try two more weeks and see if that’s enough for you to get your rhythm of sleep back in sync.”

“Two weeks? What if I can fall asleep without the pills?”

“Two weeks, Isis. No exceptions.”

During study hall, which is when I get almost all my work for the next day done, I could not hold my head up any longer. I was so sleepy that I rested my cheek on my arm and was consumed straight away into dreamland.

Quicker than usual, I found myself in my dream and in the meadow. I twisted my neck in the direction of the sunset to see if that snarling boy was there. No sign of him today.

“Ha!” I smiled to myself. I had indeed outdone my subconscious. No more annoyances from what’s his face. I was finally free!

I felt a hand touch my shoulder. I gasped and fell back. Golden boy scared the crap out of me.

“If you’re going to keep coming here we, might as well make a truce. Although, you are not supposed to be here, you know? You have no idea of the quandary that may beset the both of us if you are discovered here.”

“You’re not even real. Why bother?” I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t tempt fate, dear girl. You don’t know what I am capable of.” His frigid stare was fixed on me.

“You can’t intimidate me,” I said nonchalantly. “I know you’re not real.”

He took my hand and placed it on his chest. I could feel his heart beat and his hand was warm.

“Is that real enough for you?”

“It’s a vivid dream; anything is possible.”

“You’re stubborn.”

“I don’t take criticism from people that don’t exist.”

He firmly took my arm and looked my face over.

“I...” he started in a harsh tone then released my arm. “I’d like to know your name.”

“What?” I was incredulous. “You harassed me for three months and now you want to be my ‘buddy’? You’re out of your mind.”

“My sincere apologies and it wasn’t three months I watched you for, it’s been almost a year. I don’t understand why you keep coming back even after I tried to lure you away.

“Would you believe you’re the only human to ever enter Somnium? The gods would have your head

and mine as well if they knew you were here.”

My face was void of emotion as I listened to him. I was seriously starting to doubt my sanity. Just last night this creature almost bit my head off and today he was trying to befriend me. I wondered if that was a side effect of the medication? I'd have to check into that as soon as I woke up.

“Stubborn girl?” He called for my attention.

“That's not my name.”

“Tell me your name then.”

“Tell me yours first.”

“That's childish of you.”

I hated being called immature.

“I'm not childish.”

“Then why not just tell me your name... Isis, is it not?”

I gasped. “How did you know that?”

“I know a multitude of things. Everything you dream is right here.” He tapped his temple with his index finger.

“Listen, dream boy, you're part of my subconscious, and my subconscious knows everything about me. Of course you're going to know my name. How gullible do you think I am?” I turned around and began to walk away.

“Wait.” He placed his hand on my shoulder and stopped me. “A proper introduction is in order.”

“An introduction? You growled at me and now you want to introduce yourself properly?!”

He smugly smiled, taking several steps toward me.

“My name is David.” He extended his hand and took mine then pressed his lips to it. “It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Isis.”

“Isis... Isis,” I heard Andy's voice echoing as David shimmered himself into nothing.

“He's not real,” I mumbled as I woke up.

“No, he isn't. Now, let's get to class before they count our tardy.” Andy pulled me out of the desk.

“Huh?” I was groggy.

“Get your butt out of that chair, Isis. We're gonna be late!” Andy urged me.

In a dash I grabbed my books and stuffed them in my bag and we headed to the final class of the day.

As we took our tardy slips from the teacher, I noticed a glittery gold substance on the back of my right hand.

“Andy,” I whispered seated in the desk behind hers. “What is this?” I pointed to my hand.

“Looks like gold eye shadow.”

“In the shape of lips?” My voice was a note higher.

“It's probably lip gloss from when you were asleep last period.”

“Andy, I'm not wearing lip gloss.” I spoke in my normal voice.

“Girls!” Mrs. Vincent interrupted our private chat. “Do you mind if I continue with the lecture?”

“Sorry!” Andy apologized to our teacher.

Was this his kiss? No, it couldn't be. He wasn't real. Maybe I did have lip-gloss on this afternoon and didn't remember. I rubbed the gold smudge to feel the consistency. It definitely wasn't lip-gloss. The substance was like loose silk powder.

I rummaged through my bag and pulled out my powder compact and looked in the mirror. I wasn't

wearing gold eye shadow. I rubbed the lip contour shape completely off my hand. The dust left gold sparkles all over my hands.

I didn't tell Andy about the fact that I thought that gold dust could have somehow come from that last dream. I'd be crazy to tell her I was paranoid about golden boy's existence. I'd be crazy to think he actually existed period. Pure coincidence is what I would write it off as.

When eight o'clock rolled around I told my mom I wanted to see if I could go to sleep without the aid of the pills. She didn't go for it. I explained that I had dozed off at school, but she said I was due for a lot of sleep. I wasn't upset. All of a sudden it didn't matter. I needed to know if what was happening was paranoia. I *wanted* to go to sleep.

I closed my eyes and cleared my mind of everything. When I opened them I was sitting next to a stream in the land that David had called by name Somnium. I was sure I was asleep and very much in control of my dream.

"Back again, eh?" A voice coming from behind me made my body jerk.

"I wish you would stop showing up like that." My heart pounded heavily as I spoke to David.

"As I wish you would." His left brow lifted.

I ignored his comment and swayed my hand through the cool stream water. After a moment of silence, David took a seat next to me.

"May I ask you a question?" Suddenly he was humble.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Whatever."

"How is it that you come here every single time you sleep?"

"I don't know. I just think about it when I'm dosing off and then I'm here or wherever I want to be."

"I see." He looked me over from head to toe.

"What?" I was annoyed by his stare.

"You're petite. That's lovely in a girl."

A compliment? What was this guy up to now?

"Yes, I'm only five feet tall," I said, not knowing what to answer.

"You have alluring eyes and lush eyelashes. Very exquisite." He nodded.

"Are you...," I cleared my throat, "flirting with me?"

David chuckled. "I'm merely pointing out your good traits. You're quite beautiful when you're not being ill-mannered."

"Oh." I pressed my lips together. I did not take compliments very well. I felt awkward and never knew how to respond.

"So," I decided to break the silence, "why is your skin gold?"

"I would rather not speak of that, as I am not allowed. You never know what may be listening." He smiled.

"Well, that wasn't a weird answer at all," I said sarcastically. "I suppose I can't ask you about that either?"

"No." He shook his head.

I started growing nervous when he continued to gaze at me. I turned my head and tried to act normal. I stared into his sparkling eyes feeling a shiver of frightened anxiety. I could smell the magical perfume that arose from him. It was that scent of sandalwood. It had a mysterious soothing effect on me, and my anxiety immediately melted away.

“Your cologne smells nice,” I pointed out.

“Right,” he laughed, “It’s not cologne.”

“What is it then?” I said sniffing the air.

“Me,” he answered.

I laughed thinking he was teasing me, but he wasn’t.

“Why don’t you believe I’m real?” He asked, somewhat disturbed.

“Because you’re not.”

“I’ll prove it, my precious.” His lips curled.

“I dare you.” I challenged him.

“Do you, now?” He chuckled. “You’re sure?”

“Positive,” I said without hesitation.

“I warn you, I am quite the competitor.”

“We’ll see who wins…” I smirked.

With this contest my dreams would finally be free of him. I was absolutely certain that my subconscious was the one playing tricks on me.

“Then I bid you good morrow.” David tipped his head and disappeared into a glitter dust.

Morning came and I was off to school again. It was Friday, and today was the Spring Carnival pep-rally.

Spring Festival in Los Fresnos was a yearly event used as a fundraiser for the senior prom. I guess I should be excited since it was my prom also. Unfortunately, there were no Casanovas I knew of that were lined up to ask me and if there were, I wasn’t aware.

So, today I met Andy in the Gym. Bill was a football player, so he was off doing his football pep-rally thing getting the crowd motivated. I was there to cheer for my friend. I wasn’t exactly looking forward to the prom when I knew I might not even have a date and going solo was not in my plans. I had to leave the rally early to discuss universities with my guidance counselor, Ms. Albright. I picked up my book bag and headed off to the office. The sign in sheet at the front office had no other people on it, so I was happy I wouldn’t have to wait very long.

Another student walked into the office and started filling out forms. From the back, he had a better build than the football players.

“How do you pronounce your last name?” the clerk asked him.

“It’s like chaos but with a long ‘I’—Chios,” the boy replied.

“The counselor will see you in a few minutes. Take a seat, Mr. Chios.” The secretary pointed to the chairs where I was seated. I looked away so he wouldn’t know I had been listening in on his business. I quickly pulled out my cell phone and started fiddling with it.

I managed to catch a glimpse of the Chios boy through the corner of my right eye as he sat one chair away from me. He was definitely not from around here. He was impressively handsome: fair skinned, deep blue eyes and black hair. He looked like a model straight off the runway. He was obviously a new kid.

“Isis, Ms. Albright is ready to see you, dear. Go on in,” the clerk said scratching me off the list.

I bent over to pick my bag off the floor and turned my head a little to peer at the gorgeous boy. Embarrassed that he was too looking at me, I quickly turned away. I stood up and tripped over my own foot. I could feel his stare at the back of my neck. Could I be anymore pathetic?

“Are you okay?” He smiled.

“Fine,” I answered, red-faced.

I walked into the counselor’s office where I found Ms. Albright taking sips of her coffee and munching on a protein bar behind an altar of files. Her bright red curly hair sprung from her head without direction.

“Hi, Isis. What brings you by today?” she said, reaching for her desk phone and holding her index finger up to signal me to hold.

“Yes, I have his schedule right here. I’ll be a few minutes. Thank you, Gladys.” Ms. Albright turned her attention to me.

“You told me I should come by today to talk about my choices for universities,” I reminded her.

“Oh, yes,” she said, handing me a packet. “Here are some applications for different colleges you might want to consider. Fill them out and drop them off at the front office for me, and I’ll get back to you.”

She grabbed a mirror and red lipstick from her purse and began to apply it just as the first school bell rang.

“I have a meeting with some parents in five minutes, Isis. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to review the list of colleges with you.” She blotted her lips.

“That’s okay,” I said getting out of the chair.

“Wait, there’s something I need your help with.” She reached for her phone again. “Gladys, can you send in the new boy? Thanks.” She hung up the phone and veered to the door. She walked into the hallway and motioned me to follow.

“Isis is going to show you around today,” she said, patting the new gorgeous boy on the arm. “He’s a new student,” she explained.

Ms. Albright handed the new guy his schedule and welcomed him to the school. Without hesitating to hear a response from either of us, she called in the married couple that was waiting to speak to her.

He would be the day’s gossip for the school—especially looking like he did. I have to admit, I was nervous to look him in the eye or even talk to him, let alone have a full conversation with him. This was different behavior for me. Boys—let alone *one* boy—never had intimidated me.

Gladys, the clerk, wrote us out passes to class so we wouldn’t be counted tardy.

I felt like such an idiot gawking at him and turning away. I didn’t know how to initiate the conversation. What was wrong with me?

“After you.” He opened the front office door for me.

I decided to commence our excursion through the school at the cafeteria, which was right across from the office.

“That’s the cafeteria.” As if he couldn’t see that by himself? He must’ve thought I was a complete moron. He nodded and kept his eyes on me.

“That’s the gym over there.” I pointed.

The new guy stared at me continually as we walked. I could feel myself start to fidget and get a little flushed.

I started down the hallway passing the library and pointing it out. He kept silent through the grand tour.

“Um... I guess, I should show you where your first period class is and you can probably get someone in there to guide you to your second period.” I readjusted the bag on my shoulder.

“You haven’t even asked me what my name is,” he finally spoke.

“Oh. Sorry.” My face grew bright red. I didn’t have the guts to ask him now that he had put me on the spot.

We continued walking down the hallway. Right before we turned the corner he stopped walking.

“I see you’re the shy type.” He tried to analyze me.

“Not at all.” I threw my hair back over my ear.

He started advancing toward me and pinned me against the white hallway wall. My heart started to race.

“Well, aren’t you going to ask me what my name is?” he pressed.

“Don’t... don’t try anything. I can scream.” I could feel my throat drying up. “The security guards will come right away if you pull anything.”

His laugh echoed against the hallway walls.

“I just want you to know my name.”

I took a side step, but he was quick to follow.

“I’m going to *tell you* my name, since you’re too shy to ask.”

My heartbeat was at my neck, while my mind sounded off all the things I should do: “I should yell. I should punch him in the gut.”

I was frozen like a deer in front of headlights.

“It’s David...” He slowly leaned in toward my face, “. . . and I’m real.” I suddenly recognized that voice. I opened my mouth in an effort to scream at the top of my lungs. He pressed his hand over my mouth muffling my poor attempt at crying out for help.

“I win,” he grinned.

My entire body trembled frantically as I felt the blood plummet from my head and down to my feet. I was no longer breathing. I started to feel a cold numbness. Everything turned black. My legs caved in taking my consciousness with them.

Chapter 2

The school nurse was holding a thermometer in my mouth when I came to.

“Don’t you dare sit up, young lady.” Her left arm rested over my chest.

“Oh, thank God, it was only a dream,” I thought to myself.

“I tried to get hold of your mother at the courthouse, but she was busy. I left her a message telling her you weren’t feeling well. She should be calling back soon.” She held the thermometer up to the light. “No temperature. Did you have breakfast this morning?”

I nodded, “Yes”.

“If you’re not eating, I’ll have you in here every single day during lunch to observe you,” the nurse threatened.

“That’s not necessary.” A male voice came from the doorway. “I will keep an eye on her for you.”

I sprung up and sat on the gurney bed immediately. I could feel the blood draining from my face again as I saw him standing there. He was a hallucination. I had gone insane!

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” the nurse responded to David’s comment.

“You see him too?” I sat agape.

“Did she hit her head?” The nurse started to examine my scalp.

“I don’t believe so,” David answered.

I started to mildly hyperventilate. My eyes and mouth were wide open. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. It hadn’t been a dream, and I wasn’t hallucinating. Insanity, however, I was not yet ruling out.

The nurse leaned in close to my ear. “Close your mouth dear. Try to play hard to get.”

I jumped off the gurney and reached for my bag with my eyes fixed on David. There had to be some explanation for this. Was I still dreaming?

“I have to go home,” I told the nurse.

“You’ll have to sign yourself out at the office,” the nurse advised me, handing me an excuse.

My hands were trembling as I reached for the piece of paper. The nurse took note of that and offered to call my mother again.

“No, I’ll be okay,” I said.

“I will accompany her. She will be fine with me,” David offered.

I would most certainly *not* be okay with him escorting me. I was absolutely, positively freaking out. But what was I supposed to say to the nurse? How was it possible that this boy that had manifested in my dreams was now in the physical world? Who could I tell that would believe me? I couldn’t tell Dr. Jameson, Andy, or my mother. They would have me in a straight jacket before I could have a chance to run.

Maybe I was experiencing a state of mania. Maybe nothing happened in the hallway. It could have all played out in my mind. I had read about schizophrenia in those pamphlets in the waiting room at Dr. Jameson’s office. My brain might be playing this out by itself and making me believe it was real.

David took my bag and let me lead the way into the hall. Once the door closed behind him, I turned and gawked at him again.

He took me by the arm and cornered me between the soda machine and the wall. He towered over

me at about six feet tall.

“You are to tell no one. Do you understand?” His face was hard and serious.

He took several steps back and let me through. My ears started to get hot, and I started breaking out in hives all over my chest and arms.

“What’s wrong with you?” He wrinkled his brow examining the red patches on my skin.

Tears started flowing from my eyes.

“Are you going to abduct me or something? Kill me?” I cried silently.

“What, in heaven’s name, are you saying?” David pulled me to the side of the vending machine again. “Why would I commit such an atrocity?”

I dropped to the floor weeping. David dropped my bag on the floor and knelt beside me.

“Isis, forgive me if I’ve frightened you. I did not think you to react this way. You were the one that said...” He lowered his voice. “Isis, you were the one that said you were positive you wanted me to prove I was real. I merely took your word.”

“This can’t be happening. You’re *not* real. You can’t be.” I shook my head.

We heard footsteps approaching in the hallway. David wiped my tears and helped me to my feet. I hung my book bag over my shoulder. The streams of salt water continued to flow freely from my eyes and over my cheeks.

“There’s a female approaching,” David warned. “Stop crying.”

“I can’t,” I whimpered.

The footsteps got louder as the woman approached. I wanted to cry out for help, but the knot in my throat wouldn’t let me. I was sure David was some sort of psycho.

“Isis, stop,” he pressured. “She’ll question you.”

His telling me to stop only made me cry louder. He looked over his shoulder and turned around to view me once again. Then, with an expression of desperation, he took my face in his hands. My tears stopped streaming and I ceased breathing. I thought he was about to snap my neck. Instead, he pressed his lips against mine in a soft swaying motion.

My breathing returned, and I became aware of subtle sandalwood essence. My body was completely relaxed. My head was numb. I felt like I was anesthetized. It was a sensation I could only compare to that of morphine.

“Get to class kids,” Principal Miller’s voice ordered as she passed us by.

David caught me as my legs gave out from under me.

“Careful,” he smiled, “I’m lethal.”

“What did you do to me?” I asked half conscious and unable to sustain my own weight.

“Forgive me.” David drew his arm around me, clutching me at the waist. “I had to do something to tranquilize you. The effect will cease in a few minutes, but I must speak to you privately. You don’t understand what consequences may arise if someone should gain knowledge of my existence.”

“Where are you taking me?” I slurred. “You’re going to th... th... thlaughter me?” My tongue would not cooperate. It felt like it had been dosed with Novocain.

“No... I am not allowed.” His chuckle made the two dimples on either side of his face visible.

David grabbed the bag off my shoulder and hung it on his arm. He lifted me and walked down the hallway with my semi-conscious body. At the corner of the front office, where we were not visible to the office staff, he set me on my feet. He aided me in walking—more so, dragging me—to the window and knocked on the glass to get the clerk’s attention.

“She will be going home per nurse’s orders.” He handed the receptionist the nurse’s excuse.

David signed my name on the student sign-out log. Then, he walked me around the corner where he lifted me again. I wanted to protest and run and kick and scream, but whatever he had done to me was more potent than my body’s reflexes.

With my eyes partially open, I tried to struggle with him. I wasn’t about to go down without a fight.

“Stop it or I’ll put you to sleep,” he threatened in a low voice.

Down the first row of cars, in the student parking lot, he set me down next to a black, shiny vehicle. David opened the car door and seated me. He buckled my safety belt and shut the door. I tried to undo the seatbelt, but it was no use, I was trapped. My neck felt like gelatin, barely managing to hold my head up.

“You must be sober before I can speak to you,” David said, turning the key in the ignition.

“I’m going to call the police.” My speech was less slurred as I pulled my cell phone from my pocket.

“Oh, no, my dear. You will do no such thing.” He snatched the phone from my hand. “You will listen to what I have to say, and then you will tell me how you came to be in Terra Somnium.”

I mumbled a few rude words calling him names, thinking he would not hear.

“That language does not fancy your lips, my lovely. I would have thought you more proper.” His face showed disappointment, which in turn made me feel embarrassed for my foul mouth.

I would have offered an apology, but I was scared and angry that I was taken against my will. I stopped speaking to him while he drove.

The numbness was beginning to subside. I regained stamina in my body little by little. My tongue now felt normal enough to talk.

“Where are you taking me?” I tried to open the door.

“The doors are locked,” David sighed. “You’ve not yet given me an opportunity to explain that I mean you no harm.”

“What?! You’re literally kidnapping me and you want me to listen to the reasoning behind it?”

“Yes,” David smiled completely undisturbed by my reaction.

I crossed my arms over my chest and shook my head. “You’re psychotic.”

I turned away from him and looked over the luxurious red interior of the car. I reached over to touch the silver word embossed on the dashboard in front of me: “Maserati”.

“Did you steal the car too?” The accusation fled my mouth in a sarcastic tone.

“I am no thief,” he sounded offended. “Gifts and offerings from kings and queens established my financial platform. I have collected and reinvested my capital for centuries. I do not require, much less, condone theft.”

He handed me a bottle of water from under his seat. “And, let this be perfectly clear: I am not kidnapping you, nor will I attempt to hurt you in anyway. I simply wish to converse with you.”

He placed the bottle of water on my lap seeing as I would not take it from his hand.

“Where are we going?” I uncapped the bottle.

“Here.” He pointed to the navigation system.

David was headed to South Padre Island, a beach and tourist hotspot for spring breakers and the like. “The Island”, as we locals called it, was about half an hour away from Los Fresnos. I had about twenty minutes to either conjure up an escape plan or convince myself that I was under no danger.

“I do believe you should call your mother to advise her that you have left school grounds. You have

three missed calls from her.” He held up my cell phone so I could see the display screen and handed it to me. “She’s concerned about you. I trust you will not breathe a word of what has just happened?”

“And what makes you think I won’t?”

“I am trusting you,” he said, reaching for my hand. “And I beg you, trust me in return.”

I glanced at his hand on mine as he spoke. I looked at him from head to toe. The black shirt he wore brought out his ocean blue eyes and paired so well with his black hair. His jaw curved perfectly over his neck. In my opinion, he was an architectural and anatomical marvel. It could have been his looks or the fact that I grew so curious about him that made me decide to do what I did next.

I dialed my mother’s cell number but she didn’t answer. I left her a voice mail:

“Mom, I know you’re probably worried, but I’m fine. I don’t know what the nurse told you, but there’s no need to check up on me, okay? The nurse gave me a ride home. I’m swinging by the library to work on a project. See you this afternoon. Love you.”

“I thank you.” David smiled when I ended the call.

Nearing the bridge that connects the mainland to The Island, I sensed David glancing at me. My stomach started to ache from the nervousness I felt. I didn’t know what he was thinking, but I knew that I might end up in a shallow, unmarked grave at The Island as my final resting place.

Upon crossing the bridge, and once on South Padre Island, David pulled in to a fast food drive-thru and ordered an orange juice and bottled water.

“Drink this,” he said handing me the juice. “Your blood sugar must be low from the commotion.”

“Thanks,” I said taking the juice.

Upon observing how considerate he was being, I remembered the rude words I had called him earlier. Remorse started to overcome me as he pulled into a parking space near the beach.

“I’m sorry I offended you earlier,” I said analyzing his face for a reaction.

“Under the circumstances, I suppose I should have expected it. I just never thought to hear those words spoken by you.” He paused to shut the car engine off. “Thank you for the apology.”

David was starting to seem more of the gentleman type than the psychotic killer type to me. My nerves eased a little, but my guard was still up. He was, after all, the reason I didn’t sleep for three months.

“Isis, I would like to share with you who I am, where I come from and why I came to be here. But if I do this, you must swear by that which you cherish the most that you will not repeat any of the content we discuss today to anyone.”

He lowered the car windows, which I discovered were ridiculously dark after seeing the sky peak through the crack and waited for my response.

“I swear,” I said lifting my hand, as if under oath.

I turned my body toward him, crossed my legs and arms, and rested my back against the car door. I figured, if I wasn’t going anywhere, I might as well get comfortable.

“I’m listening,” I prompted him to begin his account.

“My history is long lived. I am descent of a divine lineage of immortals long forgotten by mortal man. We are many, yet few compared to mankind. Our history and names have been misconstrued throughout the centuries. I am one of those immortals.

“Your people referred to us as ‘gods’”. He briefly sought a reaction from me, but, instead of questioning him, I let him continue.

“Deities were once worshiped by every culture in ancient times—even before the age of the Greek and Roman Empires, before the age of the Neanderthal, and from the very moment in which mortal man was birthed on Earth.

“We lived in harmony with each other—the mortals and deities—, that is, until the age of the Roman conquest.

“Two problems arose during that time period: First, a small number of deities became egotistical with their power.

“You should be aware that most humans are easily consumed in the mere presence of a deity.

“A fair number of unscrupulous deities utilized humans for their own pleasures. They conceived half-human, half-godlike creatures, which, more times than less, resulted in abominations. They were evil and uncompassionate beings—savage beasts. The *Creatura*, as they were called, caused humans to despise gods.

“T’was this time when humankind rebelled, claiming the gods had cursed them when all they ever did was offer them praise. They saw that abhorrences were being born of these relationships that were strictly prohibited by Deus, the Creator; this created verbal feuds between deities and men.

“Secondly, man began to accept other faiths, opening the door to religious warfare.

“A war ignited among men, gods and *Creatura*. The *Creatura* were slain. Man, however, was spared by the mercy of Deus demanding deities to retreat after he saw the tragic bloodshed.

“The Oracles, those with the gift of foresight, saw that man and deity would destroy themselves if this continued. There was only one option that could be deemed rational; the gods were instructed by Deus to become oblivious to man—all, except for He who was the Creator.

“It was not for hunger of worship or conceit from which He placed this law in order; but because, you see, man cannot exist without faith. Faith cannot exist without man, for it is faith that keeps the soul aflame... even His.

“As time progressed, some deities were forgotten and others became fictional characters—their purpose, names and adventures were continually altered by man through generations. So it came to be, that deities became myths and legends for the children of men to tell.

“There have never been any humans in the lands of gods—none, except for you. You are the reason why I am here now.

“The land you enter in your dreams rests under my rule. I shape and inhabit these dreams. I give divine messages and divine nightmares to some. But it is not always my doing. The structuring of these dreams is mostly the subconscious that acts on its own. I am just a silent contributor. My existence makes it possible for the unconscious state to be redelivered to the conscious body.”

David’s explanation went far and beyond anything I was ever taught scholastically and religiously. I didn’t quite believe him, but after the whole inebriated kiss ordeal, I was willing to give him a chance... for about ten seconds! I shook the analytical Isis back into my head.

“That goes against every one of my beliefs in life and religion. How can you be a god? That’s impossible for me to absorb. You do realize how irrational and deranged that story sounds, right? Just how gullible do you think I am, anyway?”

“Isis, I will *never* lie to you. The truth has been hidden from your kind for thousands, upon thousands, of years. Some of us lead incognito lives amongst humans. Doctrinal Law prohibits Deities to have any type of intimacy, kill, or transport any human to our worlds. This is why I cannot comprehend how it was that you found *Somnium*.”

“Right,” I nodded. “Does the Tooth Fairy visit you there, as well?”

“Be serious.” His lips formed a straight line.

“Isis, ponder this: If I am not who I claim to be, how else do you explain my being here when, but a night ago, I was the one that told you I would prove that I was real?”

“I don’t know. I have no explanation for that,” I sighed and bit my thumbnail.

“Then, I believe, the score is two to one, in my favor. Is it not? Accept that I have rendered you sufficient evidence to prove my existence.”

“But, if you were so curious about me, why did you torment me every night for months?”

“I was trying to make you flee and never return. I was concerned for your safety.”

“My safety?” I was confused. “But it was a dream. You just said so.”

“That was no dream. That was Terra Somnium, and there are not only gods that exist in those other realms, Isis. There is a balance of good and bad, right and wrong just like on Earth. Deities are very protective of their lands and of humans, as absurd as it may sound. I was afraid someone or something would see you and condemn you to one of the dark realms.”

“Condemn me for what? I did nothing wrong.”

“Your simple presence there condemns the both of us. You are not to go there again if you value your existence here on Earth. Do you understand?”

I nodded accordingly.

David tapped on the steering wheel with his index finger. “I need to understand you. There is something about you that is quite different from other humans. While I am here, I would like to observe you, just as I observed you for that year.”

“I only saw you for three months.”

“Just because you did not see me does not mean I that I was not there.” His mouth formed a smile. “I actually was very reluctant to try to frighten you away.”

“Why?” My eyes narrowed.

He reached over and touched my cheek with the back of his hand.

“Because Isis...,” he smiled, “. . . just because.”

I pulled back and hit the back of my head on the window.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, in a defensive tone.

“I’m sorry. You just look so very, very... innocent,” he sighed. He opened the driver’s side door and circled the car to open my door.

“Take a walk with me?” He extended his hand to help me out of the car.

I hesitated for a moment before I took his hand. The beach wasn’t empty. There were quite a few people walking on the shore so I was sure he wasn’t about to murder me right then and there. I took his hand and he pulled me out of the car.

David walked beside me to the sand dunes where he stopped. “Is this area adequate, or should we walk further into the beach area?”

“Further in,” I immediately answered. I wasn’t taking any chances. I needed to be in the public eye, in case I had to cry out for help. My last attempt hadn’t been very successful, however.

“Ask me anything you would like to know, and I will try to do my best to answer. I know you must be curious about me as well,” he said picking up a sand dollar.

“You mentioned you were *immortal* . . . so, does that mean you don’t age or die?”

“No, we do not die, but we do age. Age depends on how fast one reaches maturity on many levels.

It may take millennia. Mind you, the aging process does not vary much from deity to deity. It is quite the same as the human stages of growth, only deferred.”

“And just how old are you?” I wondered.

“In human years, I would be age eighteen.”

“That’s not what I asked. How old are you, really?”

David scratched the side of his mouth and smirked.

“Does it matter?”

“If you want me to trust you, answer my questions.”

I found a clear spot next to an elderly couple sitting on beach chairs under a colorful umbrella. I started to lower myself to sit but David shook his head in disapproval. I sighed and continued walking, with sand sifting between my toes. I stopped to take off my sandals. David mimicked me and removed his shoes also. He reached out and took my shoes in his free hand to carry them for me.

“Well?” I probed.

“Well what?” he acted dumb and avoided the question.

“What’s your real age?” I asked once again.

“You won’t believe me.” He raised his shoulders.

“Answer the question or I will scream ‘bloody murder’ for all these people to hear,” I grew impatient.

He pursed his lips before he answered. “Two millennia... well, essentially, closer to three.”

I abruptly halted.

“Millennia?” I gasped.

“Mhh hmm,” David murmured with his chin tucked into his chest.

“Okay, then...” I was wide-eyed and kept quiet for a few minutes. I kicked some seashells into the water as I walked.

“Do you have a family?” I reinitiated the questioning.

“Yes I do. I have a mother and a father and two brothers. My mother knows of you and emphasized her interest in meeting you.” He smiled as if pleased by something I was not aware of.

“Really? You told your mother about me? Was she impressed?” I joked.

David chuckled as he nodded. “Yes, she was extremely impressed; plus, I had to tell her. She started growing curious of my whereabouts after the first month, when I would disappear at the same time every day. I could not keep the secret from her.”

“Why did you watch me without attempting to communicate?”

“I was curious. I wanted to know if you were a deity I had never met before or something else. Then, I noticed you were just interested in walking through the fields and talking to yourself. I didn’t see any harm in that, but then I mentioned you to my mother.

“She was taken aback when I told her I thought you might be human. She advised me for months to drive you away by any means necessary, warning me of the ill consequences. If any other deity found that you were being permitted by myself to roam Terra Somnium, I would be set to trial. Luckily, no one discovered you there.”

“So these laws are very strict?” I was unsure of why he was here with me if it wasn’t allowed.

“Ridiculously strict.” He pointed to a solemn spot on the sand. “Would you like to take a rest?”

I bobbed my head and turned my course to the place he indicated. I crossed my legs on the sand and looked at the ocean’s constant sway.

“But, if these rules are so strict, why are you telling me all of this? Why are you here with me now?”

“You’re captivating. I suppose I could regard you as a personal project. I need your cooperation to find out how you found your way to Somnium. I also want to be assured that you will not return.”

“So, in essence, I’m your lab rat?” I huffed.

“I did not mean it in that sense,” David chuckled.

“Why is it so important that you find out how I go there anyway? I’m sure anyone can do it. I’m not special.”

“Isis, there is no possible way that any human could just stumble upon it, much less return as often as they like. It is humanly impossible.”

“Apparently, it is.” I lifted my eyebrow. “Besides, I’ve already told you all I had to do was think about it. Isn’t that explanation enough?”

“No, not for me. I thrive on knowledge. Aside from the teachings of other gods, I studied under some of the most brilliant minds in history, I’ll have you know: Galen, Galileo, Socrates, Newton, Darwin, Einstein and Freud, to name a few of the ones you may know. Their theories were very interesting and quite exact, actually.”

“Wait, that means you’ve attended school on Earth.”

“Yes, it does, and I have been privately tutored as well. Contrary to what you may think, we are not born knowing everything. An education is a privilege your kind sometimes takes for granted.”

“You attend school on a voluntary basis? Why?” I was shocked.

“Well, I find it astonishing to see how much man has evolved in his education over so many centuries. You would not believe the ridiculous theories they taught children in the past.” He chuckled as he reminisced about his previous experiences.

“You sure do sound like my grandfather. A word of advice, if you plan on attending school, you’re gonna have to tone it down about three millennia and not act your age. How in the world do you plan on getting away with that anyway? You hardly use contractions.”

“For your information, I speak in English, not in idiot idioms. But I can lower myself to the elementary level again. Worry not over me.” He twitched his nose in a flirtatious manner.

I rolled my eyes at his conceitedness.

“What about your laws? Aren’t you banned from socializing with humans?”

“As long as we are undetected, we may live among you.”

“You’ve revealed yourself to me. Isn’t that breaking the law?”

“Not when it was you who found me—loophole.” He priggishly grinned.

“Says who?”

“Says the Doctrinal Law. My father is a council member, therefore, I have access to ancient scriptures. I studied volumes of literature on the subjects of conviction and perjury time and again and not once does it mention this situation.

“Being as the council does reserve a place for my father, I would assume they would be lenient with me. That’s the only reason I decided to take you up on your ‘invitation’. However, I did take precautionary measures. The only person that knows I’ve come here for you is my mother.”

“Hmm...” My forehead wrinkled. “. . . and if they aren’t lenient on you, what happens then?”

“I would probably be prohibited from any visitation to this or any other world—quarantined to my own land—or, . . .” His lips formed a straight line. “. . . worst case scenario, incarcerated, beheaded,

guttled and incinerated.”

“I thought you were immortal?”

“Immortal until Deus decides you are no longer. It is He who bequeaths the final judgment.”

He held the back of his hand to his mouth muffling his laughter as he heard me gasp.

“Worry, not,” he said, “I do not believe things will reach that extent.”

“You laugh?!” I was flabbergasted. “Your life is at stake!”

“I have nothing to fear. I have done nothing wrong.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Besides, as I said, there is no one else that is aware of this situation.”

His eyes sparkled brightly as he gazed at me and I at him. How could this perfect boy be so old? And why was he looking at me that way? My eyes could not resist his looks. They were intoxicating.

“What are you thinking?” He interrupted my wide-open gape.

“Oh, n-n-nothing,” I said. “It’s just that you’re looking at me like...”

“Like what?” he asked, very interested in what I was about to say.

“Forget about it. I think we should leave.” I quickly changed the subject. “My mother will probably drop by the city library to check up on me during her lunch hour.”

“Yes,” he said, wiping his neck. “It is quite warm here, isn’t it?”

“Wow, you used a contraction. I’m thoroughly impressed.” I raised my brows.

“I strive to please,” he grinned.

“So am I still captive?” I asked, placing my fist under my chin.

“You never were. You were under the effects of my personal anesthetic. It made things simpler for both of us.”

“I’m going to let you in on a little something you might not have learned under all your genius teachers: when you take someone against their will, that counts as abduction.” My mouth pulled down at one corner.

“At no instance do I recall you voicing the words ‘I don’t want to go’, so technically...”

I was annoyed that he beat my defense, because, to be honest, I didn’t remember if I had or hadn’t complained when he was carrying me off to his car. Everything that happened after that kiss was a blur.

“Do you always win debates?” I said in a bothered voice.

“Yes.” His smirk was cocky.

I rolled my eyes and stood up. “I need to get to the library before my mother does, and since you say you didn’t kidnap me, I’d appreciate a ride.”

“As you wish,” he said, rising to his feet.

In the car, I couldn’t help but to stare. His clothes were obviously expensive. I started biting my nail as I admired him. His lips pressed together and I could see him restraining a smile but the dimples on his cheeks gave him away. He swiveled his head and looked out the window to hide the curl on his lip.

I knew exactly what he was thinking—that I was checking him out. I quickly turned my head away as I realized I was blushing.

“You look a little flushed,” he expressed in a pompous tone. I couldn’t believe he called me on it.

“Do you need me to pull over?”

What a pretentious ass! He knew exactly why I was red in the face. I was from embarrassment. I

clenched my jaw trying to keep my composure.

“I’m fine,” I said coldly staring at the visor in front of me.

As we cruised by the only intersection in Los Fresnos, I kept an eye out for Claire’s car in the courthouse parking area. Luckily, it was still there, which meant my mother hadn’t gone looking for me—yet.

David pulled up to the city library and turned the engine off. I tried to open the door to get out but it was locked.

“Uh, I thought you said I wasn’t a captive?”

I sighed, seeing as he didn’t move to unlock the car.

“May I join you?” he asked in a calm voice.

“Do I have a choice?” I spewed sarcasm in my tone.

“Yes, you do. I would just like you to know that today I would very much like to serve as your chaperone.” He ran his finger along the edge of the dashboard as he spoke.

“I don’t need a chaperone,” I said, trying to open the door again.

“Please, *allow me*,” he said, opening his door.

He pulled the passenger door open and helped me out of the vehicle.

“Thanks,” I said as we reached the library door. “I guess I’ll see you at school tomorrow?”

“You could try being a bit more hospitable. I’m new in town and I don’t have any friends, remember?” He leaned on the library wall, I imagine, expecting me to invite him in.

His use of contractions was getting better.

“That might have worked out better for you if you hadn’t dragged me off fearing for my life,” I stated loudly.

“Shhh...” he hushed me with a wrinkled brow. “Say you forgive me and I will take my leave. I promise I will pester you no more... for about the next hour... or for as long it is that you will be in this library.”

“You’re not kidding. You’re not going to leave me alone are you?”

“No. I am truly sorry, but I need to know I have gained your trust and that you have gained mine before I can let you be.”

I understood that I would probably feel the same way if I told someone a secret that could cause my demise. He was doubtful that I would not speak of this to anyone else.

“You think I’m going to say something to someone about you? Believe me, I’m not. I don’t want to be locked away in a white padded room.” I opened the door to the library, but he pulled my arm away letting it slam shut.

“Give me your word,” he demanded, looking past me.

“Isis?” My mother’s voice startled me.

“Mom... hi.” I made a face at David and then turned to view her. “What are you doing here?”

“I should be asking you that. I thought you fainted at school?”

“I didn’t faint. I just felt dizzy, is all. The nurse exaggerated.”

David tapped my shoulder prompting an introduction. Claire gave me a confused look when she noticed I wasn’t alone.

“Mom, this is David. He’s new in town.”

David took two steps forward and took my mother’s hand. “A pleasure, Mrs. Martin.”

“A pleasure as well, David, and welcome to our small town.” My mom gave me a huge smile as she shook his hand. “Are you attending high school?” My mother started the question game.

“Yes, ma’am, I enrolled today, as a matter of fact, but will not attend classes until Monday. There was a scheduling conflict, so I was sent home.” David was a good liar. He had promised he would never lie to me, but I wondered if he had. He was very convincing.

I casually turned my head to sniff him. The scent of sandalwood was alive on his skin.

“What is your last name, dear?” My mother continued questioning David.

“Chios.” David smiled charmingly.

“Ah, Chios... yes. Your family bought out the Ebony Estate, am I right?” Leave it to Claire to be nosy about documentation that goes through the county office. I wondered what the Ebony Estate was as they conversed.

“Yes, that’s correct,” David nodded. “We moved here from Greece.”

“Greece? That’s very interesting. You don’t have a Greek accent.”

“We’ve lived in various places around the globe—one accent doesn’t seem to stick,” he laughed.

“Oh,” my mother’s mouth arced as she raised her brows. “That’s very, very interesting. What did you say your father did for a living?” She wrinkled her brow.

“Mom!” I interrupted. “Aren’t you going to eat anything for lunch?”

“Yes, hon, my lunch is at the office. She raised her arm with her car keys in hand and pointed east toward the county courthouse. “What about you two?”

“Actually, I was asking Isis if she wanted to have lunch just as you arrived. Would that be alright with you, Mrs. Martin?” David asked Claire for approval.

“I have no problem if Isis wants to go grab a bite.” She elbowed me as if David wouldn’t notice. “I have to get back to the office anyway. I’ll see you kids later.”

David laid on his godly charm before my mother left telling her how it was a pleasure to have met her and that he hoped to see her again. My mother tried to recommence her questioning.

“How in the world did your parents get the owners to sell the estate? They swore they would never part with it if their life depended on it.”

“My mother has savvy negotiation skills,” David responded.

Claire opened her mouth again to ask another question, but I cut her off reminding her she only had an hour for lunch. She announced her parting one more time and walked to her car. She made a sharp “U” turn as she drove off in her little Toyota Echo.

My stomach was starting to speak to me in strange gurgling tongues. It was definitely lunchtime.

David reached for his mobile and dialed. He placed the phone on speaker, and I heard a female voice answer. He spoke in another language, which sounded to me like Latin, but I could’ve been mistaken. I didn’t understand one word of what he said. He pulled the phone the slightest bit away from his mouth.

“My mother would like to extend an invitation to have lunch with us at our home. We would be honored to have you as our guest. What shall I tell her?”

David was putting me on the spot. He knew that with his mother on the phone he had a better chance of getting me to go with him. He had already told me he wasn’t letting me out of his sight, but this would have to end sometime. The only way to ease his fear of me leaking any information about him would be to show him that I was trustworthy. I took the invitation-if I was *his* personal project, then he would be mine.

We didn't even set foot in the library. David immediately headed for the Maserati and opened the passenger door for me. I had to admit that he was chivalrous. There aren't a lot of those guys around anymore.

Nearing the freeway, on Highway 100, he slowed the speed and turned onto a wooded path.

"Wait a minute! Stop the car!" I panicked. "This is a nature preserve. Why are we going in?" I imagined a guy in a hockey mask with a chainsaw, holding up one of my bloody limbs.

David tittered at my expression. "I live here."

"You live *here*?" I was astounded. "The Ebony Preserve is the Ebony Estate?"

David nodded and set the car in motion again. As the path curved, I saw a grand brick house with white pillars along the front. A few yards from the front door there lay a medium sized lake surrounded by wild flowers and trees.

"Is that a peacock?!" I sounded like a five year-old at the zoo for the first time.

"They are my mother's pets," David nonchalantly answered.

He parked the car under an ebony tree on the driveway. I started getting butterflies in my stomach as he stared at me with a wide grin. I was always nervous about meeting parents.

"Ready?" he asked, killing the engine.

"Yeah." I pretended not to be bothered by my nerves.

For some reason the passenger door would not open from the inside and that was getting to me.

"Just a moment, I'll get that for you," David said as he exited.

I took a deep breath and set one foot on the cement. David offered his hand to aid me out of the car. I slowly rose from my seat and looked around.

"It's beautiful," I gasped.

"Yes, I do have good taste, don't I?" He half grinned.

"Whatever," I mumbled.

David suggested we take a small tour of the front "yard", as he modestly called it. We started walking toward the lake to view the ducks and a few swans swimming about. The sun pounded hard on my head today and I had to squint to observe the rest of the estate. Nature always gave me a sense of wellbeing. I loved it.

"Can I ask you a question and be honest about your answer?" David asked.

"Sure." I held my hair up in ponytail with my hand and fanned myself with the other.

"Do you find me attractive?" he queried.

It was an awkward question, and I felt ashamed to answer because the answer was so obvious. I wasn't blind for goodness sake!

"Are all gods as conceited as you?"

"Only the good ones." He winked.

I didn't answer the question because I was embarrassed to admit that he was drop dead gorgeous. What was wrong with him anyway—asking this question? His self-esteem obviously was not suffering any.

"You're not going to give me an answer are you?"

I rolled my eyes and pursed my lips.

"Let us go inside to meet my mother then," he said with a disappointed look on his face.

We walked up to the southern style home and walked through the door.

"Mother?" David called out.

We stood in the foyer awaiting an answer. David set his car keys on a wall table.

“Where are you?” A female voice came from another room.

“The anteroom, mother.” David said taking me by the hand and walking into a large living room.

A petite, slender woman appeared in the living area. Her hair was black as night and held back in a ponytail. Beautiful glossy winding curls fell down her back and to her waist. She wore a knee length chic white dress. A golden rope chain belt intertwined three times around her waist and hips over the dress. She turned to acknowledge us with a smile. Her skin was as smooth as a porcelain doll’s. Two silver and black curls fell slightly over the right side of her face. Her eyes were lined with lush black lashes, projecting her piercing blue eyes—just like David’s eyes. Her beauty was—to no other description—that of a goddess.

“Be a gentleman and introduce us, David.” She asked of him.

“Isis, this is my mother, Nyx,” David said.

“Hello, my dear.” Nyx leaned in to kiss both my cheeks. “I am very pleased to finally meet you.”

“Thank you. It’s a pleasure to meet you too.” I started shaking my leg nervously.

“Why, you are absolutely beautiful,” she said looking at David.

“Isn’t she, mother? She would surely be the envy of any goddess.” Excitement rang through David’s voice.

“Yes,” Nyx said observing me. “Yes, indeed she would be.”

Something seemed to be off in Nyx’s voice. She seemed to be in a trance.

“Stop scanning her, please, Mother,” David urged in a bothered voice.

“Scanning?” I asked confused.

“My mother is empathic. She makes it a point to know what you feel physically and emotionally. It is her way of getting to know you,” David explained.

“There’s something peculiar that I…” Nyx suddenly gasped. She took several seconds to compose herself and forcefully smiled.

“What is it?” David asked.

“Nothing. She just needs to eat better… and sleep more.”

“You’re lying.” David gave his mother a stone look. “Tell me what you have found.” He raised his voice.

Nyx started to speak in Latin in an abrasive tone. Her facial expression was bitter as though she was reprimanding him. David was silent and nodded repeatedly as she spoke.

“Forgive me, Mother. I meant no disrespect.” David took his mother’s hand and kissed it.

“What’s wrong with me?” My eyes narrowed and I glanced back and forth between Nyx and David.

“It is nothing, dear.” Nyx smiled. “Please, do not fret over it.”

Chapter 3

I felt awkward after that brief mother-son altercation. I needed to know what it was that Nyx had said. I would have to wait till I was out of Nyx's presence to question David.

"Would you like a beverage before we eat, Isis?" Nyx offered.

"Yes, please." My stomach chose that moment to rumble as loudly as it could. I felt my cheeks turn a bright crimson.

"I think we should eat instead," David announced.

"That sounds like a good idea." Nyx giggled, motioning me with her hand to follow.

We entered a formal dining area where a huge table was displayed in the middle of the room. The table was neatly set with white porcelain plates that were placed over gold metal charger plates. There were three place settings—all with an array of utensils that I had no idea when to use. Along the center of the table there lay an impressive and appetizing buffet of fruits, vegetables, breads and meats. The setting felt too formal for a casual lunch. I wasn't used to this kind of stuff. I glanced at my blouse and jeans feeling under dressed for the occasion.

David pulled out my chair and did the same for his mother. Nyx sat at the head of the table, while David took his place across the way from me.

"Help yourself, Isis," Nyx said serving herself a small portion of greens.

The food tasted unlike anything I had ever savored before. The flavors literally left me speechless. I sat in silence devouring the glorious buffet.

Meanwhile, David periodically glanced at me. All the while, Nyx's face reflected worry as she subtly observed David's actions.

"Is it Latin that you were speaking earlier?" I finally broke the silence.

Nyx dabbed her mouth with a white linen napkin. "Yes, it was. You have a good ear for languages."

David winked at me and smiled.

"David," Nyx called his attention in a coarse voice. "Comport yourself."

"Relax, mother. It's innocent coquetry." David reached for his glass of water.

Nyx sighed and pressed her lips together. "You know what can happen. Be wary of the laws."

"What can happen?" I spoke out of turn.

"Didn't David tell you? Gods can be irresistible to humans. Falling prey to his charm is not a good idea."

"Yes, we did speak of that earlier., but, well, he's not really my type." I was quick to defend myself. Though, I think I might have been lying just a little.

David gave me a resentful look and put his fork down.

Nyx's face lit up. "I am very pleased to hear that. I was perturbed for a moment. David knows exactly what I mean. I trust he has given you a detailed account of our history?"

"He has highlighted the main points," I nodded.

Nyx's chin rested on her interlocked fingers as she poised her elbows on the table.

"Tell me about your parents, dear. What is it they do?"

"I only have a mother. My dad passed away almost five years ago."

"Oh." She was surprised. "I raise my heart to his risen soul." She slightly raised her hand, upright,

as she spoke. "I am very sorry to hear that. You and your mother must have taken it very hard."

I bobbed my head. "They had just gotten a divorce when he had a sudden heart attack. We both took it hard."

"And your mother?" She tilted her head as if gaining interest in my life. "Tell me a little about her."

"My mom's name is Claire. She works at the county courthouse as a secretary for the judge, here in town. She's never remarried... and that's about it."

"You have no other family, besides your mother?" David inquired.

"I have a grandmother, Eva. She's my dad's mom. She lives at a retirement community about an hour away. Aside from my mom and me, she doesn't have any other family."

"A very small family you have," Nyx noted.

"Small indeed," David agreed.

After lunch, we retreated to one of the living areas. I didn't understand why one house had to have so many living rooms. We engaged in a conversation about the town's spring festival. Nyx's stare grew blank on several occasions, as it had when she had scanned me earlier.

"What is it that you keep scanning for, Mother?" David finally asked the question I so eagerly wanted to.

"I am not scanning." Nyx's lie was obvious as she was startled when David addressed her in the middle of one of her trances.

"To another with that story," David tittered. "I know my own mother too well."

Nyx dismissed David's comment and continued in casual conversation with me. She asked about my grades in school and the classes I was taking. She commended me for taking college courses.

The ringing of the doorbell, to which David attended, interrupted our conversation.

"I will be signing documentation for your vehicle," he addressed his mother, coming back into the room for an instant. "Please excuse me." He turned his sight on me. "I'll be returning shortly."

"You know Isis... David asked me to come with him so that we could seem like a normal family in the eyes of society. He said he was puzzled by your ability to travel to Terra Somnium. I joined him in that curiosity; however, I think this curiosity of his has developed into a grave state of medical idiotism."

I tried to suppress my mirth, but failed. "How do you mean?"

Nyx found no humor in what I thought was a jest. "I have reason to believe he is, to a degree, infatuated. I cannot be certain about this... but, child, you will have to be the strong one if this is truth. I am not one to judge with whom my sons are romantically involved, but in this case, I have no other choice. I fear for the welfare of my son as I fear for yours."

My smile turned flat after her discourse.

"It's not like that," I argued. "First of all, I need to focus on my grades right now. I've applied for several scholarships and grants and I can't afford to lose concentration on my grade point average. I don't have time for a relationship. Besides, after all that you and David have explained to me, I doubt that can or will ever happen."

Nyx took my hand in hers and smiled. "Yet, in history, it has happened. I know you find him attractive, dear. I am no fool." She stood up and took a few steps to view herself on a wall mirror. "Tell me... how did David pursue you today?"

“Pursue is hardly the word. He technically kidnapped me from school. I was petrified. He used his anesthetic or whatever it is he does to carry me off, literally.”

“He did what?! How did he...” Nyx turned to me with a creased brow line. David walking into the living room interrupted Nyx’s interrogation.

“Your car is parked outside. Would you like to inspect it?” He asked Nyx, seating himself next to me on the couch.

“No. Not at the moment. We have company, remember? It would be rude of us to divert ourselves in that matter.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” I said adjusting my earring.

David took a lock of my hair and placed it behind my ear. Nyx glared at David with tightened lips, lifting her brow. Noting her disposition, I winced away from David at once. David gave me a sour look and leaned back on the couch.

“David,” Nyx said in a calm voice. “I do believe we need to speak later this evening. I have much to discuss with you.”

“Regarding?” David inquired.

“I will reserve that till tonight.”

In the car, on our way to my house, I lost no time in questioning David about the small dispute between him and his mother earlier.

“I don’t want to be nosey, but it does concern me so I think I’m allowed to know: What was it that your mother said about me when she spoke in Latin?”

“She said you held her attention during the process of reading you. Then she scolded me for speaking to her in that tone. It was disrespectful for me to do that, and especially in your presence. Please excuse my behavior. I don’t usually comport myself in such a manner.” His eyes were fixed on the road and he seemed disturbed.

“Did I say something to upset you?” I wondered.

“No,” he voiced. “I am simply not looking forward to my mother’s lecture this evening.”

“How do you know it’s a lecture?”

“As I said before, I know my own mother all too well.”

We pulled up to my house and found my mother’s little Toyota parked in the driveway. I found that odd since it was still about an hour before her usual quitting time. I tried opening the door to the car again, forgetting the darned thing would not open.

“You need to get this door fixed,” I nagged.

“It’s not broken, my lovely,” David grinned.

“Then why won’t it open?”

“Child locks to keep the princess from opening the door herself.” He gave me a crooked smile.

“Oh,” I blushed.

I was reminded of Nyx’s warning. I bit the corner of my lip and took a deep breath, looking at the ceiling.

“Could you please open the door for me?”

“Am I wearing down your nerves already?”

I cleared my throat. “Do I have to answer that?” I joked.

He wrinkled his nose for an instant. "I honestly don't care to know the answer."

Claire appeared at the front door. I imagine she was wondering what a car was doing parked in front of the house. I knew she wouldn't be able to see who was inside with the dark tint on the windows. David swung open the driver's side door and waved to my mom as he made his way around to my side of the car.

"Hey, mom," I greeted her.

"Hi, honey. Hi, David." Claire gave me a thumbs-up and a wide smile when David gave her his back to fetch my book bag from the rear seat of the Maserati. He then walked me to the porch where my mom was poised and ready to start her query.

"Hello again, Mrs. Martin." David tipped his head.

"David, would you like to come inside?" she said, holding the front door open.

"I thank you, but I can't. Perhaps some other day," he said, handing me my bag.

I was relieved David didn't want to stay. I didn't want Claire getting any juicy details about the new family in town to share at the office. That could be dangerous for them.

My mom excused herself and went inside. I knew she'd be listening in by the door. I signaled to David with a few tilts of my head that she was eavesdropping behind the door. He smiled and ran his fingers through his black hair.

"Thank you for joining my mother and me for lunch. I truly enjoyed the pleasure of your company. I hope to see you at school on Monday." He leaned in to kiss both my cheeks.

"Or sooner," he whispered in my ear.

"Yeah." I ignored the remark and his glorious, subtle scent and followed his lead. "I'll see you Monday."

I turned the doorknob and heard my mother run for it. When I opened the door, she was on the couch pretending to read a magazine.

"It's upside down, Mom," I rolled my eyes.

Claire straightened her back and threw the magazine on the coffee table. "So you had lunch with the family, huh? What's the estate like? Did they treat you well? Do they have a butler and governess? Oh my gosh, I bet they have one of those heated, indoor pools!"

"Mom, please! They're normal people." Well, kinda normal except for that whole being deities thing and their special powers. I wondered if David had extrasensory hearing, or if Nyx could perceive what I did and said like a psychic. I'd have to be careful of what came out of my mouth until I found out.

"C'mon, Isis. You can't tell me the car alone didn't impress you? I know what an Italian sports car costs... a lot of money." Claire raised her brows expecting an answer to her questions.

"They're totally normal. They don't have any of the things you listed, mom." I started walking to the kitchen. Claire followed.

"Why are you home so early, anyway?" I opened the refrigerator out of habit, even though I wasn't hungry.

"Because I took the afternoon off." Claire sounded suspicious.

I peered at her from behind the refrigerator door. "You took the afternoon off for no apparent reason? That's not like you."

"Well..." she started making her way to the kitchen doorway as if evading me, "I have an

appointment this evening.”

“An appointment? Where?”

“At a restaurant.”

“What type of appointment does one have at a restaurant?”

“Well, I guess it’s more of a social gathering—for two.” She bit her thumbnail, in the same manner I did.

“Mom, are you trying to tell me you have a... a date?” My voice squeaked.

“Yes,” she said running up the stairs, laughing like a kid.

“Don’t run away from me! Who is this date? I want details, Claire Martin!” I screamed running after her.

Claire had never dated. She always found excuses for not wanting to accept an invitation—too short, too tall, too this, too that.

I ran to the top of the stairs and found her giggling on her bed clenching a pillow.

“What is wrong with you? Why are you acting all... adolescent-like?” Her girlish disposition made me giggle along with her.

“It’s embarrassing! I can’t believe I’m going on a date and talking to my daughter about it. I’m old, for Pete’s sake!” Claire buried her face in the pillow.

“You’re not old. Thirty is the new twenty, Mom.” I tried to pry the pillow from her hands. “Who’s your date?” I kept struggling with her.

She mumbled something into the pillow that sounded like “Gopher Annuals”.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying. Take that pillow off your face and tell me! I’m dying to know!” I resorted to whining since speaking loudly didn’t work. “Mother!”

She pulled the pillow off her face. “I hate the whiney voice, Isis. You know I hate it.” She paused for a second and closed her eyes. “Okay, I’m ready to spill my guts.”

I threw the pillow to the other side of the room before she had a chance to hide her head in it again. “Tell me!” I demanded.

“It’s Christopher.” She waited for my reaction.

“No?!” I couldn’t believe it. “Judge Daniels? You’re lying to me, Mother!” I threw my hands up in the air. “I can’t believe it!”

Judge Daniels was a bachelor known for not dating women in town because of his position—at least, that’s what my mother had told me when I tried to push her to ask *him* out. She didn’t want to risk her employment.

“Did he ask you out, or did you ask him?”

“He asked me, of course. I would never have the guts to do something like that.” My mom jumped off the bed and opened her closet.

“What am I supposed to wear? How should I wear my hair?” She jumped on the bed and rustled around with the sheets. “Where’s that article?” She pulled a magazine, bookmarked with sticky notes.

“Cosmo, Mom? Really?” I looked at her agape. “You’ve never read Cosmo in your life.”

“I needed some ‘Tips for Dating in this Day and Age,’” she said holding the magazine cover up and pointing to the title of the article.

“Just how long have you been planning this young lady?” I pulled a typical Claire question on her.

“Well, he asked me on Monday, but I didn’t give him an answer till Wednesday. We’re keeping it very hush, hush at the office.”

She smacked her forehead with the rolled up magazine. “What the heck am I supposed to talk to him about that doesn’t concern work?”

“You’re supposed to get to know him out of the work environment. Even I know that. You can’t be this nervous about a date. It’s the most normal thing.”

“Says a seventeen year-old that picked up the new guy at the library—easy for you to say!” She laughed, throwing the magazine at me.

“I did not pick him up,” I said putting my hands on my waist. “And we’re talking about you, not about me.”

“So what should I wear?” Claire said, hopping up and down like a kid.

I walked over to her closet and laid out several outfits for her to choose from. She wasn’t too crazy about the sexy tops I chose. I waited in my room while she showered. Next we prepped her hair and makeup. By the time I was done with her, my mom looked like the hottie, hidden within the hottie, that she was.

The doorbell rang.

“I got it!” I yelled running down the stairs. I swung the door open and welcomed Judge Daniels into our house. The Judge, as everyone called him, was a tall, handsome forty-something year old man. He had a strong build and wore a cowboy hat and boots—very common for southern Texas. According to my mother he was in good shape for his age.

We waited for my mother to make her grand entrance down the staircase. It didn’t take but maybe three minutes for Claire to appear at the foot of the stairwell. She should have made him wait more.

The Judge’s eyes widened when he saw the transformation my mother had gone through. I was proud of my work and excited for my mother.

“Have a good time kids,” I teased as they walked out the door.

I locked the door and turned the T.V. on to see if anything interesting would catch my eye. It was past dinner time and my mom had left me some money for pizza. I retrieved my phone from my pant pocket and noticed an incoming call. It was Andy. My phone had been on silent mode all this time. I usually kept it like that at school, otherwise, I’d get in trouble. I hadn’t remembered to turn the ringer on.

“I assumed you went home sick, so I asked the nurse and she told me you fainted. Why haven’t you answered your phone? I’ve been worried about you all day.” Andy sounded very upset.

“I didn’t faint. I was just dizzy. I’m sorry I didn’t answer my phone, I didn’t know the ringer was off.”

“My dad wants to talk to you... hang on.” She transferred the phone to Dr. Jameson.

“Isis, are you feeling okay?”

“Fine, Doctor. I felt a little dizzy this morning, but I’m okay now.”

“Listen, I want you to suspend the medication for these next couple of days and see how you feel without it okay? The dizziness might be a side-effect of the medication and I don’t want it to affect you in that way—especially not at school.”

“Okay, Doctor Jameson,” I said gleefully.

“Call me if you experience insomnia or more dizziness. Here’s Andrea again. Take care.”

“Isis?” Andy was back on the phone.

“Yeah, I’m here.” I said looking at the magnets on the fridge searching for the pizza place’s phone

number.

“So you’re okay then?” Andy wanted to be reassured.

“Fantabulous,” I replied.

“Okay. That’s all I wanted to know. I’ll text you later. We’re about to eat dinner.”

“Okay,” I said ending the call.

I turned my phone’s ringer on and started dialing the number to the pizza place. Before I was done dialing, another incoming call interrupted me. I didn’t recognize the number but I decided to answer anyway.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Miss me yet?” A male voice was on the other end.

“Who is this?” I ran to the front door to make sure it was locked and peeked out the window.

“Have you forgotten me already?” He laughed.

“David.” I recognized the voice and sighed. “How did you get my phone number?”

“While you were busy calling me obscenities in the car this morning, I dialed my own number from your phone.”

“Hmph!” I smiled while trying to sound bothered. “I apologized for that already.”

“Right. I was wondering if I can I ask a favor of you?”

“Is it illegal?”

“I’m being serious.”

“What is it?”

“Do not tell my mother what method I used to sedate you if she asks.”

“I’m assuming you just had that discussion she mentioned earlier?” I was more than sure I was right.

“Yes. It did not go over too well, and I certainly did not tell her about that... incident.”

“Can I ask why she got so upset?”

“I divulged some things that she did not want to hear.”

“Oh,” I said not wanting to pry more. “I’m sorry you argued with your mom.”

“No worries.” His voice was serene. “Well, I won’t keep you any longer, and thank you for the favor.”

I opened my mouth to stop him from hanging up, but then realized what I was about to do. What if Nyx was right about what she said and David did have a little crush on me? I’d be flattered, but that would be it because nothing else could ever come of it.

“Okay,” I said remembering his venomous kiss.

“Goodnight, my lovely.”

“Night,” I said, a little saddened the conversation was so brief.

I finally got around to ordering my dinner. I decided not to wait up for Claire, fearing the insomnia would set in again, but I did stay up a bit late. There was nothing to be afraid of now. I was happy I wouldn’t have to take the pills.

I noticed my journal lying on my desk, beside my laptop. I read the entries I had previously written and decided my journal should continue; maybe one day I’d write a book.

Journal Entry 5, 9:59 P.M.

Reality is not as it seems. You are real—skin, bone, tissue and blood. In but one brief day I've succumbed to your wit and charm only because of the virtues you were born with. I won't fall deeper into this fascination, for it would be taunting an ill fate.

Tonight, I won't dream of you because I know what is right and the difference between life and death. Good night, dream boy. May you give me pleasant dreams.

* * *

The sun's rays snuck in through my blinds. I slept quite well without the pills. I was tired from having such a long Friday. I guess experiencing anxiety, fear, nervousness and excitement all in one day had really taken a toll on me. I didn't even remember dreaming.

I took a quick shower, but remained in my pajamas. I checked the time on my mobile and found it was really early to be up on a Saturday morning.

I crept into my mother's room where she was still fast asleep. "No sense in waking her," I thought. My stomach urged me to feed it, so I silently closed the door to Claire's room and fetched my laptop from my room. I made my way to the kitchen and whipped up some pancakes—my favorite.

I sat down at the kitchen table with my laptop and my pancakes, and I wondered if Andy was awake already. She was an early bird, so I decided to text her.

I Googled "Maserati" and "The Ebony Estate" while I waited for Andy's text. Andy ended up responding an hour later asking if I wanted to hang out in the afternoon. I had nothing planned so I took her up on it.

Claire walked straight to the coffeemaker as I replied to Andy's text.

"Morning. How'd you sleep?" She asked in a hoarse voice.

"Great," I said with a sly grin formed across my lip. I pushed out one of the chairs from under the table with my foot.

"Have a seat, my dear Claire. Let's talk about men." I smiled and moved my eyebrows up and down continuously.

"Stop it." She let out a giggle. "I had a nice time."

"Really?" I leaned closer to her side of the table. "Did he kiss you?" I puckered my lips and made kissing noises.

"Stop teasing me, or I won't tell you anything else." Claire was moody before her coffee. She wasn't alive until she'd taken a few sips. I loved taking advantage of that.

"So are you going out again?" I probed, as she would have done.

"Maybe." She sounded like she was holding back on me. "Mind changing the subject? It's too early for interrogations."

"Fine," I sighed.

Claire sipped her coffee while I read the news on several Internet sites. My mind started wandering as I scrolled through the articles.

I felt an itch to find out more about the Chios family. I thought about calling David, but remembered Nyx's discussion with me. I didn't want to be the reason for a dispute between Nyx and her son, much less have her dislike me. I didn't want Nyx to have any reason to doubt what I had stated—being a liar wasn't one of the characteristics I wanted to be known for, but I'd be doing an awful lot of it from now on.

I whispered the word "infatuation" several times as I thought about the conversation Nyx and I had,

regarding David. I hid the smile that formed on my face from my mother. It was all probably in Nyx's head. I mean, what could he possibly see in me? Deities were perfectly beautiful, from what I had already witnessed. I was just a girl. I shook the idea out of my head and thought it was silly of me to even think it could be possible for David to be infatuated with me. David was intelligent enough to know that it was a dead end street.

Later that morning, Claire headed off to get a manicure and pedicure in the neighboring city of Brownsville. She had asked me to come along because she wanted to buy some new blouses for work and wanted my help. Of course, I teased her about wanting to look good for The Judge. I really did want to go with her, but I declined, letting her know I had plans with Andy.

"Help a mother out!" She said waving two fingers in the air.

I laughed hysterically at her silliness.

"Sorry, Mom. Plans have been made," I giggled.

Around twelvish, Andy called me to ask if it was okay if we hung out at my house instead of hers. We had a few slices of left over pizza and secluded ourselves in my room.

"I gotta tell you something," I said biting my lips trying not to grin.

"Uh oh," Andy said getting comfortable on the bed. "This must be good."

"I met a guy." I couldn't restrain the broad smile from forming. "But I don't like him or anything. He's just... um... I don't know." I shrugged one shoulder.

"When did this happen?" Andy's face showed confusion.

"Yesterday." I forgot I was supposed to be sick, as far as she was concerned.

"Where?"

I hadn't thought that part through before I opened my big mouth. I hated lying to my best friend but I couldn't tell her the truth.

"At the city library. I went there after I came home from school."

"What were you doing at the library if you were feeling dizzy? We don't even have any projects due."

Nothing got past Andy. How was I going to get myself out of this one?

"The dizziness had passed already. I was fine. I wanted to check out a book, you know, to have something to do for the rest of the day."

"Oh," Andy sounded satisfied with my explanation. "So who's this guy?"

"He's new in town; a senior at our school. His family bought The Ebony Estate."

"WHAT?!" Andy jumped off the bed.

"Calm down. He's very down to earth." Not.

"Is he cute?"

"He's quite... uh... handsome," I said nodding slowly with one brow raised.

"Oooo, someone has a crush," Andy giggled, pointing at me.

"I do not," I said defensively.

"Then why bring up the subject of the new, ridiculously gorgeous, rich guy in town? Hmm?"

I rolled my eyes. "He doesn't have any friends. I thought he could hang out with us until he made some."

"We're doing social work now?"

"It's called being hospitable." I used David's word.

“Whatever.” Andy raised her hands. “He’d just better not be a total douche.”

“That’s not nice, Andy,” I gave her a slight scornful look. “He’s really nice.”

“Fine,” Andy shrugged.

Andy left later in the afternoon leaving me with nothing to do. I kept myself entertained by listening to music on my iPod. That grew old after about half an hour. My mother was still not back from her shopping excursion, so I popped a DVD disc into my computer and nestled myself into bed. Half way into the movie, I heard the front door slam. I paused the video and jumped out of bed.

“What’d you get?” I said helping Claire with some of her bags.

“Just a few things: blouses, skirts... office clothes.”

“Can I see?” I said laying the shopping bags on her bed. I didn’t wait for her to answer. I started pulling clothes out from the bags and displaying them on the bed.

“*What is this?*” I was shocked. “Mom, Grandma Eva has sexier clothes than this. I’m never letting you go shopping on your own again.”

Claire had bought herself the most conservative clothing I had ever seen. She was going to look like a nun; dark colors, no contours—most of it had to go back, if I had my say in it.

“What do you mean return it, Isis? I got good deals on this stuff. It suits me just fine.”

“Well, to each their own,” I said wrinkling my nose. “By the way, long polyester skirts went out of style a few decades ago. Didn’t Cosmo teach you anything?”

“I’ll return the skirt, but I’m keeping the rest of the stuff.”

“Whatever. I’m not the one dating my boss.”

Claire gave me a rude stare.

“Fine. I’ll return it all, but you’re coming with me,” she threatened.

We gathered all the clothes and drove to the mall. We spent the late afternoon and part of the evening shopping for tasteful clothes my mom could wear. Why she didn’t have any fashion sense was beyond me. After shopping, we took in a movie and dinner at a sit down restaurant near the shopping center.

At home, we watched T.V. for about an hour. Claire fell asleep on the sofa as usual. I woke her so that she would find her way to her bed. I settled in my own bed with my journal, but couldn’t think of anything to write.

I wondered why David hadn’t called being as he had said he wouldn’t let me out of his sight. Maybe the argument with his mother had made him change his mind about studying me. Whatever the case, I was sure I’d see him on Monday at school.

I decided I should stop thinking about him before it became a habit. I put my thoughts to rest and fell sleep.

The sound of my phone ringing made me sit up on my bed. I reached for it and answered in a voice that closely resembled Elmer Fudd’s.

“Hello?” I hoarsely mumbled.

“Good morning, my lovely.” David’s voice made me smile.

“Morning,” I said, struggling to open my eyes.

“Would you like to have breakfast with me?”

“Sure. What time?” I lay back down and pulled the covers over my head.

“Now,” he said. “I’m on your front porch.”

The doorbell rang, and I heard my mother walking down the stairs to answer. "Coming!" she cried out. I could hear her over the phone too. He wasn't lying about being at the door.

"I'm not ready," I said, stumbling out of bed and into the bathroom to wash my face. My hair was in knots and there were pillow lines on my cheek.

"I can wait," he said and hung up.

I heard my mother talking to him downstairs.

"Isis!" She called from the bottom of the stairs. "David is here to see you."

"Be right down!" I yelled from my doorway.

I rushed into the closet and threw on some jeans and a shirt. I stuck the toothbrush in my mouth and pulled my hair back in a ponytail.

I flung the toothbrush onto my nightstand and tried to stretch out the pillow creases from my face. I doubt that it worked.

David was seated on the sofa with my mother with a glass of water in his hand.

"Hi," I said trying to hide the creases on my cheek with my fist.

"Good morning," David said looking at me rather unusually. "Did I wake you?"

"No... no... nope. I was already awake," I lied.

"I think there's something wrong with your shirt, honey." My mother held her hand over her mouth.

I looked down to inspect it. I had put it on inside out and backwards. The tag was sticking out from the front of my neck. David didn't laugh but I knew he was dying inside. I could see his eyes tear up from holding the laughter in. My face of course was flushed.

"I'm going to go get ready. I'll be down in fifteen minutes, okay?"

I raced up the stairs and flew into the shower. I slicked my hair back in a ponytail and applied my makeup as fast as I could. I decided I didn't look too shabby to have gotten ready in such a short amount of time.

"Ready," I said, joining my mother and David in the living room. I wondered how much and how long Claire had interrogated him. Probably the full fifteen to twenty minutes it took me to get ready.

"Would you like to join us for breakfast?" David asked my mom.

"No thank you, David. I've already had breakfast," she said, opening the door for us.

David opened the car door for me then took his seat behind the wheel.

"My mother has extended an invitation for tea this afternoon. Would you care to attend?"

"I'd love to." The corners of my mouth raised in a content fashion.

We had breakfast at a coffee shop in town. My mom used to work there when I was a kid as a waitress. The owner, Mr. Rodriguez, always requested a dessert on the house for me, and he always made it a point to asked me about Claire. He had been a great boss to my mother when putting herself through night school.

"Who's your new friend?" Mr. Rodriguez queried, noticing the unfamiliar face.

"This is David Chios. He and his family just moved into town," I said, setting my napkin next to my plate. "David, Mr. Rodriguez used to be my mom's boss."

"A pleasure, sir." David extended his hand.

"You folks the ones that bought the preserve?" Apparently, the rumor had already spread.

"Yes, sir. We closed on the property just a few days ago."

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Mr. Rodriguez threw a dishtowel over his shoulder. “Them folk swore they’d never sell out,” he paused, to tug on his chin. “Well, I best get back to the kitchen. You kids enjoy!”

“Thanks, Mr. Rodriguez,” I said waving with my fork.

“You articulate Spanish very well,” David complimented me.

“Yes, I should hope so,” I said laughing.

“I don’t find the humor. Am I missing something?” He was puzzled.

“David, I speak Spanish. I’m Hispanic. In case you haven’t noticed eighty-five percent of the population here is Hispanic.”

He looked around the restaurant and nodded.

“I pay no thought to things such as race, color, creed or social standing. Everyone is equal. Do you really think Deus intended this ridiculous segregation of mankind?” he voiced his bothered opinion.

“I didn’t mean anything by it.” I was surprised by his reaction and thought he was reading too much into it.

“It saddens me to hear you categorize and degrade yourselves into groups, as if you were the base level in the food chain. You are not animals, yet you separate yourselves in the same manner.”

“You’re right,” I agreed, remembering an article I had read about an atrocious murder committed by a group of racist teenagers. “We segregate ourselves all the time, and it sometimes causes terrible outcomes. I’ll try not to do it anymore.”

David smiled and ran his finger along my hand. “That would be lovely.”

After breakfast, David dropped me off at home. Teatime was at three o’clock sharp, and he promised to be back for me by half past two. He said Nyx was expecting me and that I must have impressed her in order for her to invite me for tea. I wondered what delicacy she would prepare for the afternoon.

Claire was doing laundry when I got home. I joined her in tidying up the house, before I told her I was invited for tea at the Chios’ house. Nearing the time David was supposed to pick me up, I freshened up and changed into my favorite spring dress. For this occasion, I wouldn’t be under dressed.

“His mother must be quite a lady,” Claire said, folding towels. “He seems like a very respectful young boy; good manners are taught at home.” She handed me a pile of clothes to put away. “I like him.”

“He’s okay,” I said modestly.

“Are you kidding? He’s more than okay, isn’t he?” She nudged me.

“Stop trying to trick me into saying I like him, because I don’t.”

“You are so much in denial, it’s not even funny... it’s hilarious,” Claire laughed.

“Whatever, Mother.” I rolled my eyes.

“Listen,” she said holding up her index finger.

I heard a car engine’s low rumble. I peeked through the blinds in the living room. I saw David’s black Maserati in the driveway. He stepped out of the vehicle dressed in a white, long-sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled up and jeans.

David rang the door at precisely 2:30 P.M.

“That’s what you call punctual,” I said to my mother holding up my phone so she could note the time. “See you later, Mom.”

“Not too late, honey. It’s a school night.”

“I know,” I said letting myself out.

“Hi.” My mouth formed a crooked grin as I looked into David’s eyes.

David kissed both my cheeks. “You look exquisite.”

“Thanks,” I said shyly.

We didn’t exchange many words on the way to his house. He gave me a quick synopsis of his afternoon and I told him I had done some chores.

As we turned the curve to the forested path on the estate, David’s face dropped. I noticed another vehicle in the driveway beside Nyx’s new Ferrari. A black Land Rover was parked next to Nyx’s car.

“I can’t believe they would do this!” David slammed the steering wheel bending it in from the right side.

I gasped at his sudden violent outburst.

“My apologies. I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, trying to straighten the steering wheel with his bare hands.

“What’s wrong?” I asked wide-eyed as I watched him mold the thick alloy of the steering wheel.

His upper lip quivered as he spoke with clenched teeth, “I’m being placed under surveillance.”

Chapter 4

David placed his head on the steering wheel and breathed deeply. I would swear I heard him growl.

“Hey...” I reached over and touched his shoulder. “Calm down okay? It can’t be that bad.”

“Isis...” he placed his hand over mine, “I...” His face was full of angst.

“You what?” I wondered.

He shook his head unwilling to answer.

“What do you mean by ‘being put under surveillance’?”

For an instant, I saw anger on his face. His mouth formed a straight line as he tried to regain his composure.

“Forgive me, but I can’t explain this to you. It’s a personal family matter.” He peered at the estate for a few seconds then turned to view me.

“It seems my twin brothers will be joining us for tea.” He kissed my hand and let it slide gently out of his. “We’d best not keep them waiting.”

I wished he wouldn’t have done that. Nyx was right about their charm. I didn’t have the nerve to tell him he shouldn’t do those types of things anymore—even if he thought it was innocent flirting. The truth is, I liked it. I liked it a little too much, and that worried me.

We exited the car and approached the patio. David sighed deeply, before opening the wooden front door.

“After you.” He gracefully swayed his hand.

He closed the door behind us and led me to the backyard where Nyx and her sons were sitting under a white pavilion surrounded by palm trees and vivid green plants. A peacock displayed its elegant feathers by a fountain. The sight of it was picturesque and breathtaking.

As we walked to the pavilion, Nyx met us half way and kissed either side of my face as usual. The brothers stood from their chairs and waited for us to join them.

“It’s a pleasure, Isis. My name is Eryx. We’ve heard many wonderful things about you. “The brunette with green eyes took me by the shoulders and did the double-kiss, meet and greet they were accustomed to.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” I reciprocated.

The other brother took a few steps toward me and inspected me from head to toe. I felt like a strange creature as he scrutinized me.

“So this is she... the young enchantress?” The blonde, green-eyed boy asked in a cocky tone.

“Galen!” Nyx frowned. “You *will* mind the Golden Rule.”

Galen didn’t acknowledge his mother’s warning. “I can see why any man would fall to their knees before her. You were right, Mother; she does wear the skin of a goddess.” He took my hand and lightly touched his lips to my knuckles. “Enchanted to meet you. I am Galen.”

David glared at Galen with a tight jaw. “Have you not yet learned to keep your inadequate ad-libs to yourself, brother?”

“Ah, little brother!” Galen put an arm around David. “And how are you doing these days?” A distasteful and sarcastic tone accompanied his words.

David pushed away his brother's arm while he glowered at his mother. Nyx looked away from David, taking no importance in David's fit.

"Let us take our tea in the dining room, shall we?" Nyx proposed. "I've prepared some tea biscuits and pastries. I'm sure you'll enjoy them, Isis."

We started walking to the house. It was a short distance across the back lawn. I took a few glances at the twin brothers who looked nothing alike. Their only common trait was that they looked like adolescent gladiators with that muscular physique: huge biceps, wide neck, narrow waist and broad shoulders.

"I did some research on your house," I started a conversation with Nyx to break the brothers' tension. "I found out it was built in 1937 by some early settlers."

"Yes it was. What else did you learn?" Nyx was curious.

"There wasn't much information on it. The house and preserve sit on eighty-two acres of land," I said, entering the dining room. "There's an abundance of birds and butterflies on the preserve that only..." I trailed off.

My jaw dropped as I saw the immense trays of pastries, cookies and, tea sandwiches she had laid out. It was way too much food for five people.

"Well, that also sums the extent of my knowledge on the property," Nyx smiled. "The mystery of its history only adds to the fascination, is what I think."

"Are you expecting more company?" I gawked at the silver platters of bountiful goodies.

"Oh, no, dear. It will just be us today." She poured tea into a cup and handed it to me.

David showed me to my seat and took his place beside me. Eryx aided his mother with her chair and waited for Galen to select his place first.

Galen took the seat directly in front of David and stared at the both of us with his arms crossed over his chest. He shook his head as if in disagreement with the sitting arrangement. He reached for a teapot and topped his plate with cucumber sandwiches. Eryx did the same.

"Tell us about this school we will be attending, Dahveed," Galen's perfect teeth were slightly visible under his sly grin.

"You are not enrolling in preparatory and, please, do not call me Dahveed," David muttered.

Galen lifted a side of his upper lip. "We *will* enroll and Dahveed is your given name... so grin and bare it, my brother."

David pointed his index finger directly at Galen. "You have no right to interfere in..." David stopped in mid sentence, when Nyx intervened.

"That is quite enough from the both of you," Nyx snapped. "Out of respect for our guest, hold your tongues, or I shall hold them for you."

David and Galen held sour faces. David didn't eat any of the food on his plate. It seemed this family had underlying problems I wasn't aware of. I felt uneasy being the third wheel, so to speak. Eryx smiled at me, attempting to ease my discomfort, and took a sip of his tea. Nyx's face, however, reflected worry.

"Pay them no attention, Isis. You'll get used to it sooner or later," Eryx said, reaching across to his mother and kissing her hand. "The food is decadent, Mother. You amaze me with your culinary skills every time."

"Thank you." Nyx forced a smile, still upset over the other two brothers' quarrelling.

I nibbled on a cookie and remained silent as I observed Galen watching David and me. He was

starting to get on my nerves. What was his problem? No wonder David had gotten so upset in the car. I could imagine how Galen must make David's life miserable. With a brother like that, who the heck needed enemies?

As my peripheral vision allowed, I noticed the twins' plates quickly empty. They piled their plates twice more in the time I took to eat three canapés. Then, they dug into the pastries. I had never seen anyone eat so swiftly, and yet, with so much grace. Their indulgence did not end there. They consumed at least a dozen cookies each. I tried not to stare, but it was hard to ignore how the food continually disappeared from their trays. The twins were the epitome of gluttony.

David handed me a slice of bread with some cheese and pink stuff on it. "Try this."

"It's very good." I nodded. "What is it?"

"Paté and aged gouda cheese. Would you like some more?"

"No thank you." I raised my hand. "I'm full." Surprisingly, goose liver didn't taste terrible.

"My mother made everything you see here." Eryx sounded proud.

"It's true," David added. "She is a master of the culinary arts."

I patted my lip with my napkin. "Everything was delicious, Mrs. Chios. Thank you so much for inviting me."

"I prefer that you call me Nyx, dear."

"Nyx," I approved, with a nod.

A marvelous view of the lake was visible from the large bay windows in the study. Nyx, David, and I admired the antique furniture in the room while Galen and Eryx spoke silently by the fireplace. Galen stood cross-armed listening intently to Eryx. He nodded in accord as Eryx spoke.

"Isis," Eryx called my name. "Would you say Galen and I would pass as eighteen year-olds?"

I observed them both before I answered. "I suppose you would. How old are you two?"

"We are a year and several months older than David," Galen answered in place of Eryx.

"That would make you around nineteen?" I wasn't sure.

"More or less." Nyx crossed her leg sitting in an antique white and gold armchair.

"I beg to differ." David pursed his lips. "They are closer to twenty and too old for preparatory."

"David," Nyx began, "Your brothers are here to join us as a family. Can we please learn to live in peace? It would mean so much to your father and me."

David rotated his neck to glimpse back and forth between the twins. "Gemini, I trust you will keep clear of my business?" David's question sounded more like a threat than a petition.

I knew Gemini meant "twins" because we had studied mythology in school and my zodiac sign happened to be Gemini also. I assumed David must have been addressing the both of them.

The twins glanced at each other and at their mother without response.

"Mother?" David pressed Nyx over the twins' reluctance to answer.

Nyx nodded her head. "Please stop jumping to conclusions. They will not involve themselves in your... dealings. I trust that you have the sense to maintain yourself free of difficulties?"

"Of course." The corners of David's mouth rose in a satisfied gesture.

"Ugh!" Galen threw his hands up and scoffed, but said nothing more—that was a first.

From what I could gather, Galen and Eryx would not be monitoring David's every move. What I didn't understand was what everyone was so upset over? I drew one conclusion, and that was that David had told his mother something very delicate for them to be so concerned.

After that discussion, Galen and David settled down. They joked and acted like normal siblings without the tension that had filled the room minutes earlier. Galen was excited about attending high school. He claimed it had been far too long since they were able to enter “the social pattern of adolescence”.

“Our high school campus is probably tiny in comparison to your former school in Greece. Don’t expect any of the extravagances you’re most likely used to.” I tried to make them aware of the simplicity of our fine town.

Galen laughed, “We’ve not matriculated in any school since the early 1800’s.”

“But what about your transcripts? You need them to enroll in school.”

“Ah,” Eryx grinned. “Dear girl, everyone has a price, and money—thank the gods—is a bad habit to break for some. All our documentation is in rightful order.”

“What made you think they came from Greece?” David poised his elbow on the fireplace mantel.

“Your conversation with my mother. You said you had just moved here from Greece. I assumed that meant all of you.”

Nyx explained, “We do travel to Greece often, inclusive we have a house, but we aren’t permanently installed there.” She adjusted the gold hairpiece in her lustrous black hair. “We live in Caelum.”

“Where is Caelum?” I asked.

“Caelum is the realm of eternal life—land of the gods. It is otherwise known as the heavens by your kind. We are not subject to live there all the time but do make it a point to return for gatherings of the Plenum or other affairs.”

“The Plenum?” I was lost.

“The plenum is the legislative group made up of the council and other deities. The deities that do not serve on the council are the audience and petitioners on behalf of the people. Thus we are all considered the Plenum.”

“So it’s a democracy?” I was surprised to learn.

“Yes, much like a democracy.” Nyx ran her hand down my ponytail. “My dear girl, I don’t understand what you’re still doing in preparatory school.”

It was a quarter past six when David and I arrived at my house. The porch light was already on. I knew Claire would be preparing dinner. Having eaten only three hours earlier, I wasn’t hungry. I hoped Claire didn’t mind me skipping dinner tonight.

“I had a really good time.” I observed David’s thick black eyelashes. They made the indigo blue color of his iris more prominent.

“Aside from the drama with my family, you still enjoyed yourself?”

“It was... interesting, but nice.” I bobbed my head.

The itch to know more about his family was still there.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything.” He silenced the roar of the engine.

“Well, I was wondering,” I started, “you know how you and your mother have these... these... gifts?” I found no other way that best described their abilities.

“Right?” David waited for me to go on.

“Are your brothers also gifted?”

“I was wondering when you were going to ask me about them.” The corners of his mouth pulled up. I could tell he liked that I took interest in his family.

“Where to begin?” He lay his head back on the seat. “My brothers are unique. They co-exist, and, when I say ‘co-exist’, I mean one cannot live without the other—literally. To be quite frank, they are inseparable. They are the best of friends. They were great warriors at one time. Even in their early teen years they showed prowess and valiancy in battle. They were born with the gifts of healing and inherited a fair amount of my mother’s empathy.”

“Were you a warrior too?” I could imagine him on a horse, but not with a weapon.

“Yes, I too had to join in battle at certain intervals in my life. But those times are gone and, thankfully, I do not have to do so anymore.”

“So you *killed* people?” I was shocked.

“That’s what war is about isn’t it? I’m not proud of it, Isis. The uprisings were inevitable and so was my summoning to defend our creed. War is never easy, but one must stand along the sides of his brothers to protect each other’s lives. Those were very trying times.”

“I understand,” I said staring at my feet. I couldn’t believe what I had just heard him admit to. I just couldn’t imagine him slaying anyone. He, who was a proper young man—a gentleman, a deity, and yet still just a boy.

“What about your dad? You don’t mention him much.” I noted.

“My father is,” he hesitated, “. . . a well respected individual both here on Earth and Caelum. He is accredited with being the first engineer. Invention and technology are his magnum opus. He is the one responsible for gifting the caveman with the first wheel, if you can believe that.”

I laughed along with David not knowing if he was serious. At this point, I believed everything he said.

“Wait a minute,” I suddenly had a thought. “Just how old is your father?”

“Ancient. We’ve lost count, actually. He’s as old as time itself, but not as old as Deus.”

He noticed my mouth drop open, in disbelief. With a curved lip, he continued.

“On another note, my father is also an entrepreneur, a warrior, and a politician. He is of the first generation of deities, the Primitus.”

David gazed out the passenger’s side window to view the front door of my house. He must have been worried that Claire was aware that we had not yet stepped out of the vehicle.

“Isis, do you remember how I told you I was going to tell you why I was here?”

“Yes and you did: To figure me out.” I straightened out my dress skirt. “And I’ve kept my end of the bargain; I haven’t returned to Somnium.”

“Right.” He bit his lip. “There is one other thing that drove me here besides that,” he said, scrutinizing me. “The reason for the bickering between my mother and brothers and me.”

“To be honest, I’ve been questioning the disputes silently, as a matter of fact.”

“Yes, well, I am going to have to hold that reason back from you for now because I fear it may affect your judgment of me. Rest assured it’s nothing of which I am ashamed. I would just rather keep it to myself.” His eyes shifted to the house again.

“That only makes me think that you haven’t been completely honest with me, like you promised. If you don’t plan on telling me, why bring it up? It makes me doubt you.”

“My intention was not to place distrust in your hands, but to have you clutch the sincerity that I have

to committed. I have told you once and I will repeat it: I will never lie to you. I want you to know me for who I am and not what I am. I want to brush away any ill thoughts and bias opinions you may have. I want a fresh start for our friendship, as if we had met by mere casualty on the street and not under these circumstances. With this being said, do you believe it is possible that we may initiate a new beginning?"

I stared at him for a long time. Why did he have to be such a complicated person? Mysteries and me did not mesh well; I was an eager beaver. I needed to *know* things, not figure them out like a labyrinth.

The last drop of sunlight was almost gone as David patiently listened for my delayed response.

"Okay," I said, unsure of what his point to starting off from fresh would be.

"It's improper for us to be inside the car this long outside of your house. Let me walk you to your door." David grabbed the key from the ignition and circled the car. He took my hand and held it all the way to the porch.

I just didn't understand this boy at all. Why was he holding my hand when he had placed such crucial emphasis on their laws? The worst part of the matter is that I let him.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then?" I gazed at our hands still joined.

"You shall," he said, closing the gap between us.

"Wait!" I stopped him before his lips touched mine, my hand flat against his chest. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Plotting a new beginning." His nose touched the tip of mine.

"David," I shook my head, pulling my face away from his, "I don't think this is a good idea."

He stepped back and grazed his lips on my wrist. "Thank you for a lovely afternoon." His face reflected a hint of dismay as he momentarily fixed his eyes on the floor and sighed.

My dress swayed softly in the breeze as I gawked at him, wondering what could be if we weren't from different worlds.

David gave me his back and began to walk. He turned for a moment and blew a kiss in the air. "Good night, my lovely." His brawny silhouette continued its stride. He slid into his car and drove away slowly.

I staggered into the kitchen and sighed a little too loud—loud enough for my mother to hear. One corner of Claire's lip rose as she diced some tomatoes.

"I'll bet anything that sigh is worth one thought." She slid the tomatoes off the cutting board and into a skillet. "And I bet I know that thought's name."

I smiled.

As usual, she was right. But I'd never admit to it. I leaned against the kitchen counter and watched her chopping away.

"Need some help?" I offered.

"Fix us some salad, would ya, hun?"

"Uh, Mom... I'm not hungry at all." I patted my stomach. "Nyx prepared this ginormous spread of pastries, canapés and some other stuff. It was deee-licious." I closed my eyes and waved my head as if I were savoring something magnificent.

"Better than my cooking?" I noted jealousy in her tone.

"Uh..." I hesitated, "not better, just different." I didn't want to hurt her feelings. Honestly, my mom's cooking was good, but Nyx's surpassed greatness.

“Hmm,” she didn’t sound convinced.

I selected some vegetables from the fridge and started making a salad for Claire. My mind wandered off to David and his brothers as I carefully sliced and diced. They’d be enrolling tomorrow. Boy, were the girls at school in for a treat.

“By the way, Dr. Jameson called. Wanted to know how you were. I forgot to mention to him you were having daydreams about some good looking kid you picked up at the library.” Even though she was joking, her face remained serious.

I laughed. “Would you stop with that already? I know you’re struggling to hold back the questions. What do you want to know?”

“Is his mother younger or older than me?”

“About the same.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Yes.”

“What about his father?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t met him yet.”

“Why not?”

“He’s never there.”

“Well, where is he?”

“Mom, I don’t know. I don’t ask David such personal questions.” Actually I did, but I wasn’t about to dig myself into a hole with her non-ending interrogations. Plus, I didn’t know how to answer that last question. I couldn’t exactly tell her about Caelum. Making up lies wasn’t one of my biggest talents.

Monday, I woke up half an hour earlier than usual. I looked out my window to find a vagrant dog sniffing through trashcans. The sun wasn’t out yet, but the street lamps provided enough illumination for me to see the stillness of the waking day ahead.

Today, for obvious reasons I chose to deny, I felt like dolling myself up. I selected a fitted black top and blue jeans that would be accessorized by a pair of wedge heels and bronze colored jewelry. I felt the bronze accessories might have made the outfit a little too dressy for school, but decided to wear them anyway.

I sprayed on my favorite perfume and spread on the scented body lotion. I loved walking by and having people notice my scent—nice and clean smelling, like jasmine and gardenia.

I looked myself over once more in the mirror behind my door. I looked pretty good, if I did say so myself. With my book bag over my shoulder and my phone in my hand I left my room with a conceited grin. A girl’s got to be vain.

Coffee was already brewed, courtesy of my mother who had left about ten minutes earlier. I grabbed a pastry bar from the pantry and waited for it to pop out of the toaster. It was take-along breakfast today.

Before walking out the door, I got a text from Andy:

“Walking?”

“Yup.” I answered.

I had walked three houses down from mine when his black sports car pulled up along the curb. He rolled the window down on the passenger side.

“May I drive you to school today?” David’s sly smile made me nervous. He looked like he was planning something sinister.

“Can I say no?” I pouted and wrinkled my nose jokingly.

“I would prefer you said ‘yes’,” he insisted.

I tugged on the door handle. Big surprise—it was locked. He stepped out of the vehicle to open the passenger door. He positioned his body directly in front of me, coming extremely close. I moved my body back until he had me pinned to the car.

“Are you frightened of me now?” His lips were centimeters away from mine.

“Yes,” I confessed like an idiot, holding my breath.

David sniggered. He lightly kissed my cheeks and reached for my waist. He moved me aside and opened the car door. My face burned in a scarlet hue.

I stepped in the Maserati. As soon as he had shut the door I reached for the visor mirror to inspect my face. Sure enough, I was as red as an apple. I swayed my hand back and forth quickly, fanning my face to bring down the heat that radiated from it. David stepped in the car within seconds.

“That was uncalled for,” I reproached. “Your mother would disapprove.”

His grin grew wide, never glancing at me. “My mother isn’t here, is she?”

“You really shouldn’t play around like that, David. It’s not nice.” I scowled at him.

“Why would you think I was playing?”

“Because of your laws, your family... your life?” I counted with my fingers as I gave him each of the three reasons.

He turned to view me. I could see he was lacking a debate for the first time.

“Well?” I insisted.

He sighed, “I would rather we change the topic of conversation, if you don’t mind.”

I crossed my arms, grimacing as we passed the main intersection on Ocean Boulevard and Arroyo Street. I was worried.

What had brought about this sudden change in him? Nyx had probably told him I thought he was exceptionally handsome. Who wouldn’t think that? He wasn’t oblivious to the fact that I was nervous around him, and he was using it to his advantage. Surely he couldn’t be serious about pursuing me. Or could he?

The school parking lot was half empty. David picked a parking space one car away from Bill’s red mustang. His brothers’ Land Rover was parked in the front aisle right across from the walkway into the school.

“Wait.” I grabbed David’s arm before he stepped out of the car.

“If anyone asks, I met you at the library.”

“Right.” He turned to get out of the car again.

“Wait.” I stopped him for a second time.

“Where am I supposed to tell my friends you’re from?”

“Why don’t you leave the talking to me?” He winked and stepped out of the vehicle.

Low whispers and stares from the kids sitting on the brick benches followed David and me as we walked up to the school entrance. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the girls agape as David strode by. Too bad I didn’t have any tissues on me to hand them so they could wipe off their drool.

David’s posture grew tense as we walked down the hallway. He must have been nervous to start school, I assumed. We turned the corner within visibility of the cafeteria where I saw Andy and Bill

waiting for me. We waved at each other.

“Hey, Isis!” Simon, one of the football players, greeted me as we passed each other in the hall.

“Hi, Simon. See ya later.” I waved.

David grasped my hand and stopped walking. I tried to let myself loose, but his grip was far too tight.

“David, you’re hurting me,” I pleaded. He loosened his grip but did not release his hold.

“Who... was... that?” His jaw was tight and his eyes were infuriated.

“He’s a guy in my class. Let me go.” I was partially whining.

“Do you fancy him?” His mouth was a flat line.

“That’s none of your business,” I said, trying to pry his fingers from my hand. He took hold of that hand too. Giving up on the custody battle for my limbs, I looked up at him questionably. Why was he acting this way?

“David?” Eryx’s voice startled me.

David’s nose flared as he set one of my hands free.

“Hello, brother,” David acted as if nothing were happening. “Have you gotten your matriculating process in order?”

“Yes,” Eryx nodded. “Galen is awaiting a schedule as we speak.”

I saw Andy and Bill observing us from a distance. Bill stood up and tugged on Andy’s hand to follow.

“My friends are coming.” I warned Eryx and David. “Eighty-six the formal talk and act like teenagers... *if you can.*”

I smiled at Andy as she approached. Eryx, Andy and Bill did a double take at David’s and my hand joined together. David seemed pleased with the attention that we were receiving from all the onlookers.

“Hi,” Andy said, wrapping her arm on to Bill’s arm.

“Hi,” I said trying to slide my hand out of David’s. “Guys, this is David and his brother, Eryx; and that guy coming out of the office...” I used my free hand to point, “That’s their other brother, Galen.”

Bill and Andy turned to view Galen strutting toward us. I elbowed David while they were distracted in an attempt to dislodge my hand, but the blow didn’t seem to phase him.

“Hi,” David beat Eryx in the exchange of words with Andy and Bill.

“Hello,” Eryx followed David’s lead.

Galen stood next to Eryx with one arm folded and the other over it, holding his hand over his mouth. His eyes followed a triangular pattern as he glanced from David, to me, to our hands.

“Galen,” Eryx put his hand on Galen’s shoulder, “these are Andy and Bill. They’re friends of Isis.”

“Bill?” Galen stretched his arm. Bill took Galen’s hand and did some boyish handshake. “Sup, Galen?” Bill put his arm around Andy. “This is my girl, Andy.” You could almost hear the emphasis on “my girl” when Bill said it. In male code, Bill made it known that Andy was off the market. He must’ve felt threatened by Chios boys’ appearance.

“A pleasure, Andy.” Galen took the hint and didn’t even bother to raise his hand.

“Hi!” Andy said enthusiastically. “Why don’t we all go sit at our table?” she suggested, pulling on Bill’s arm.

We let Bill and Andy lead the way to the table following far enough behind that we were not within their hearing range.

“Let me go,” I spoke through my teeth.

“Why?” David asked offended. “You had no opposition yesterday. What makes today any different?”

“You have issues.” My tone was scornful.

Galen cackled behind us, “Is this part of your ploy, little brother?”

“Mind your tongue,” David snapped at Galen. David glanced at our hands and reluctantly released mine.

“Forgive me for acting this way, Isis. You have no idea just how difficult and different this is for me.” David tried to apologize.

“I don’t really care,” I said in an angry whisper.

“Isis, please...” David’s voice rose.

“Shh...” Eryx signaled David to lower his voice with his finger over his lips as we were nearing Andy and Bill.

The cheerleaders’ table gawked at the boys at once, seeing them walking with perfect poise down the table aisles. I sat next to Andy at a rectangular table. David sat between the twins on the other side of the table—horizontally from me. His face was sour.

Andy and Bill quickly queried the brothers. Eryx did most of the talking because Galen seemed too intrigued by the exchange of stares between David and me.

I knew Andy was dying to know what the deal was between David and me. She kept hitting me with her foot under the table every time she noticed David and I scowling at each other.

During the conversation, Eryx told Andy and Bill that they had been living abroad in Greece for the last two years and had been tutored privately. He said they were excited when their father announced they’d be moving to the U.S. because it had been a very long time since they had last visited or been enrolled in a public school.

“But why not live in a big city? Why Los Fresnos? The town is practically invisible, it’s so small.” Andy questioned the brothers, offering me a piece of her pre-packaged Danish. I raised my hand, declining the piece as I listened to them speak.

“We prefer the quiet and tranquility,” Galen answered. “Something there is an abundance of here.” He was being sarcastic, but Andy and Bill didn’t notice.

David’s face finally took on another appearance: ashamed and repentant. He seemed to be in deep thought for a while, staring blankly at me. He lifted himself from the seat. I knew he’d be coming over to my side. I immediately stood up and pulled Andy out of her seat.

“We’ll be right back. Ladies’ room.” I excused us from the boys.

Andy paced quickly away from the table. We were half way to the restrooms when she asked, “What is the deal with you and the new kid? You guys are together already? You just met him like two days ago!”

“We’re not together,” I corrected her assumption, opening the door to the lavatory. “He’s just a friend.”

“A friend who holds your hand and looks into your eyes the way he does?” She raised her brow and put her hands on her hips. “Yeah, right.”

“Andy, it’s nothing. Really. We just hung out a little over the weekend and that was it. Innocent, friendly socializing.” I fixed my hair in the bathroom mirror as we spoke.

“Sunday morning we had breakfast in town and then his mom invited me over for tea in the afternoon.”

“You met his parents for tea?” Andy gawked at me.

“Only his mother. His dad is out of town or something.” I shrugged casually.

“Isis, he introduced you to his mother. Girl, you are either—and don’t take this the wrong way—but you are either blind or stupid. This guy is into you. And if you don’t mind me saying it—don’t tell Bill I said this—the guy is hot. What are you waiting for?”

“He’s not really my type.” I was careful not to bite my tongue for fear of massive hemorrhaging.

“Are you wearing your contacts today? What do you mean he’s not your type? Those three boys are every girl’s type. Have you *seen* them?” Andy waved her arms around as she spoke. “Don’t tell Bill I said that either,” she warned with a raised finger and a hand on her hip.

“Let’s head back,” I sighed. “It’s almost time to get to class anyway.”

Upon leaving the ladies’ room, I spied Jean Murphy talking to Galen. Marie Shannon, the co-captain of the cheerleading squad accompanied her. Galen looked annoyed. He rustled with his hair and crossed his arms with an uninterested expression. I couldn’t blame him. Jean’s high-pitched voice was an acquired taste. Eryx and Bill were deep in conversation ignoring the cheerleaders while David looked over his shoulder at us on the edge of his seat. He was waiting for me.

“So, Greece, huh?” Jean giggled in a deafening pitch as we reached the boys. Her long, perfect legs bouncing a little as she spoke.

“Yes.” I heard Galen’s teeth grind. “May I ask you a question, Jean?”

“Anything.” Jean smiled with her bright pearly teeth, twirling her black bouncy hair. Poor Jean. She had no idea her flirting was in vain.

“I was wondering, would you please be so kind as to leave us now?” He swayed his hand in the air motioning to her table. The Chios family was very direct, I found.

Jean wrinkled her nose and turned her attention to Eryx. “Eric, what languages do you speak?”

“The name is Eryx. E, R, Y, X.” He spelled it out for her.

“I was gonna ask you about that,” Bill addressed Eryx, interrupting Jean’s attempt to flirt with deities that were off limits.

“Yes, it’s unique, isn’t it?” Eryx disregarded Jean’s question.

“Eryx?” Jean sounded annoyed that she was being ignored.

“Yes, please excuse me Jean. I speak Greek, Italian, French, Spanish, Latin and a few other dialects.” Eryx answered.

Galen poked Eryx on the shoulder three times. “Brother, if you feed the cats, they’ll keep coming back. Please. I beg you. Stop.”

Bill and Andy broke out in laughter. I bit my bottom lip to keep from smiling at Galen’s rude, yet humorous remark. Jean and Marie took half a turn and walked away.

David maintained his stare on me blocking out the boys’ ongoing conversation. He rose from his seat and walked over to me.

“May I speak to you privately?” His eyes pleaded.

I glared at him, keeping silent. I hoped he was smart enough to interpret my silence as a “no”.

“Please.” He insisted.

“Fine.” I said flatly. I knew he wouldn’t desist if I didn’t have words with him.

I moved several seats down to the end of the table. Andy widened her eyes and twisted her neck in the opposite direction from us, pretending she wasn’t paying attention.

David spoke in a whisper. “Isis, I am not one to act out with such posture. Please accept my sincere apology, as I have nothing else to offer.”

“Apology accepted,” I said standing up. “Is that all?”

“No.” He removed a strand of hair away from my face. “I have to confess something.”

I winced away from his touch and crossed my arms.

“Just, tell me what you have to tell me.”

David took a deep breath. “Isis, I am envious of every male that sets his sight on you, and if I could, I would tear out their eyes.”

Chapter 5

David didn't look like he was kidding. I glanced over my shoulder to see if the others were observing us. I knew he was capable of not only tearing eyes out, but tearing limbs, as well. Nyx had been right about David. This was a flare of uncontained jealousy.

"Envious?" I refused to believe it as I sat down.

"Irrepressibly." He asserted with a creased brow.

I studied his perfectly, flawless face. His stare lingered on me awaiting a response. I was speechless with shock. There was a part of me that felt flattered and pleased to know that he was indeed smitten. But there was also the rational part of me that knew better than to give him or myself false hope for something that could never be.

"I think you're confused." My eyes were fixed on the table as I spoke.

David lifted my chin with the tip of his fingers. "No." He gazed at me from under his black lashes.

"Hey, David..." Bill cried out from the other end of the table. "What's your first class?"

David sighed, bothered by the sudden interruption. He pulled out a folded piece of paper from his back pant pocket and surveyed it.

"English Literature, A.P." He answered loudly over the rest of the voices in the cafeteria.

"Why are there only four classes on here?" He asked, puzzled.

"That's the way our school system works. Four classes, one semester, and then another four classes the second semester." I explained. "What classes do you have?"

He handed me his schedule to look over. His first and last periods were the same as mine.

"We've got two classes together—first and fourth," I breathed deep, knowing I would have to find a way to keep my distance from him.

I saw a pleased arc form on his lips.

"You have all advanced placement courses like me. You should've taken a study hall. You'll be up to your neck in homework and projects with these." I handed the paper back to him.

"I doubt that," he voiced arrogantly, folding the sheet neatly and tucking it into his pocket. "Now, as I was saying..."

"Oh, David, c'mon." I broke his attempt to reinitiate the topic. "We've just met me. We hardly know each other. Whatever you're thinking can't exist. It's unthinkable."

"And if there were a way? Would you have me then?" He searched my face for an answer.

"But there isn't, and I'm not interested, so you might as well forget any hypothetical angles."

"I see." He bit his lip and lightly hit the table with his fist several times as if in an attempt to control his emotions. His face grew glum, shortly after.

I felt horrible, being so cold with him, but the fact of the matter remained, and I couldn't set us both up for heartbreak. What could not be just would not be, and that was the end of it. There was no point in stringing him along when Nyx had specifically touched base with me on that subject. I would have to be the strong one, as she had put it.

"We'd better get to class." I stood up, unable to look at him directly.

David shrugged with indifference; upset over my words, I was sure. His lips were in a straight line, his stare burning through me.

I turned to signal Andy that I was headed off to first period. She grabbed our things, pecked Bill on the lips, and joined David and me.

“May I?” David said, offering to take our tote bags.

“Absolutely.” Andy smiled.

David took the lead in walking out of the cafeteria area. I wondered just how deeply I had wounded him.

Andy subtly rotated her head, speaking silently. “He’s no Gabriel, I’ll tell you that.”

“Who’s Gabriel?” I was caught off-guard by Andy’s comment.

“Gabriel Betancourt... your ex-boyfriend?” Andy giggled. “The one you’re obviously over...” She nudged me.

“Oh. Right,” I murmured. I wasn’t entirely over Gabriel. I still sometimes wished he hadn’t graduated and moved away. I missed him. Especially when I saw Andy and Bill together. Gabriel and three others from our group graduated mid-year, reducing our group from seven to three after Christmas vacation; Patrick, Krystle, Sheila—they were all gone. That made it harder for me to assimilate. Still, I had Andy and Bill—great friends.

I rested the side of my head over my hand watching David and Mrs. Lopez, our English Lit. Teacher, discuss where he should sit. Andy, who was sitting to my left, was courteous enough to point out the desk behind mine was empty—as if I needed to feel more uncomfortable around David already.

“Gee, thanks,” I said sarcastically.

“No prob,” She said without detecting my irony.

David’s mouth arched pleasantly as he took his seat behind mine. He leaned his desk forward.

“I’ll not tire until I’ve claimed your heart,” he whispered into my hair. “And that is both a promise and a threat.” I could feel his warm breath against my cheek as he spoke.

I tilted my head slightly so that I would be audible to him. “I told you, I’m not interested.”

“Trust me... you are.” He grazed my cheek with his pale lips and repositioned his desk.

Flushed and with a creased brow, I turned and leered at him.

“Ehem,” Andy cleared her throat to warn us Mrs. Lopez was watching.

I flipped my notebook open and started scribbling to divert the teacher’s attention. I didn’t want to get in trouble in front of my whole class for public display of affection. I crossed my fingers hoping she didn’t notice. I was relieved when a couple of minutes went by and she didn’t call our names. I let out a sigh of relief and started taking real notes as soon as I could concentrate on the class again.

After the lecture, Jean Murphy and two other cheerleaders swooned over David’s presence. Jean initiated a conversation with David that led to purposeful crossing of her gorgeous long legs and deafening giggles. She asked Andy, of all people, for a pencil and reached over in front of David to take it from Andy’s hand—highly unnecessary, might I add.

Jean’s charm bracelet got caught in my hair as she retrieved the pencil, pulling about twenty hairs out of my scalp. She didn’t even bother apologizing. David helped her untangle it. My curls were ruined and part of my hair was in knots.

Jean was putty in David’s hands by this point. And me, well, lets just say I was upset, to put it modestly.

Andy and David took turns untangling the knots in my hair. I pulled it back in a ponytail concealing

the untamable parts. I gave Jean the stink-eye the rest of the period as she continued to pester David.

I stomped out of class infuriated.

“You look lovely,” David tried to lessen my aggravation.

“It doesn’t look bad at all,” Andy agreed with him.

Jean ran up to David in the hallway. She weaved her arm on his and slipped him a small folded piece of paper. I didn’t bother waiting for him.

“Walk me to class?” I heard Jean squealing as I walked away.

Andy tried to keep pace with me. “Geez, Isis, it’s not the end of the world that she ruined your hair. I promise it looks good. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“I know that.” I was still mad.

“Calm down.” She put her arm around me. “Don’t let it ruin your day. You look beautiful.”

I heard someone calling my name from a distance. I stopped and twisted my neck to see who it was. It was David, hurrying to catch up to Andy and me. I turned and continued my steadfast pace—Andy struggling to keep up with me.

“Are you mad at him?” Andy questioned my unwillingness to wait for David.

“No,” I sounded defensive. “Why would I be mad at him?”

“Because of Jean.”

I came to a halt and lifted my index finger. “Wait a minute...” I started, “Are you implying that I’m jealous?”

“You’re sure acting like it.” Andy placed her hand on her hip.

“Ugh,” I huffed, rolling my eyes. “Whatever.”

David finally made his way through the crowd and to us. His dimples resonated the satisfaction his face wore. I guessed I’d be happy too if I was a guy and the captain of the cheerleading team gave me her phone number. What else could be on that piece of paper?

“Where’s your next class?” Andy asked David.

“Across the hall from mine,” I answered before David did.

Bill met Andy by one of the staircases, as usual, to escort her to her class. David and I walked together to second period. My irritation had simmered down, but quickly flourished when I saw Jean at the doorway to David’s classroom. Many unfavorable words came to mind as I scornfully eyed Jean. I meddled with my ponytail, making sure the part that resembled a bird’s nest was covered.

David walked me to my classroom door. The lab tables were already full; a sign that the tardy bell would ring shortly. Simon, my lab partner, had his book opened and ready for the class to begin.

“May I accompany you during lunch?” David asked, following me into class. “Otherwise, I’ll be obligated to join your friend, Jean—Deus have pity on me.” His eyes rolled back into his lids.

I walked to my table and set my tote down. David grimaced as he saw who I was partnered with.

“Sure,” I smiled at his disapproval.

“See you after class, then.” He took me by surprise raising my hand to kiss it. I hated these feelings he awakened in me. I gazed at him as he held on to my pinky.

A loud thud made me come back to reality. I pulled my hand away from David. I looked behind me to see what had caused the loud noise.

“Sorry,” Simon sneered at David, picking his book up from the floor.

David raised the corner of his upper lip, giving Simon a scornful look. Simon pulled my lab stool

out from under the table just as the tardy bell rang, and patted the seat as an indication for me to sit. David's jaw clenched.

"You're late," I remarked.

"I'm new. I have an excuse." David glared at Simon again. "Excuse me." He winked at me and rushed out the room as Mr. Ybarra, my Physiology teacher, entered the class.

Simon raised his brows once and tightened his lips. "So, the new guy's already on the prowl, huh?"

I shrugged, evading the subject and searched my sack for my book.

"I heard you were dating," Simon continued. "Not him, but in general."

"Nope." I flipped through my spiral notebook, avoiding eye contact. I knew what he had in mind already.

"Hmm..." Simon sighed. "Uh... I was wondering..." He tapped his pencil nervously on his book, "... if you'd like to go out sometime? Not on a date or anything—as friends."

"As friends"? Yeah right. Simon had asked me out right after he learned Gabriel and I had broken up. I wasn't buying into the whole friends bit he was trying to sell.

"Um... I'll have to get back to you on that. I'm not really going out a lot these days. Got several projects to work on." I tried to let him down easy.

"Oh, ok." Simon bobbed his head. "Well, think about it."

"Sure." I pressured myself to smile.

Mr. Ybarra started the class with a lecture based on an article on human stem cell research. I sat silently listening to the rest of the class contribute to the subject. Their voices slowly falling into the background as my mind wandered to David and his tenaciousness toward me. I visualized him with his wings spanned, in his golden skin as I had met him in my dreams—Terrified then, confused now.

After class, in the hallway, David and Jean seemed to be hitting it off quite well. Not that I minded... *much*. Jean was very touchy, feely with David and I didn't have the stomach to watch. My appetite diminished thanks to her. I went in to the restroom to take a look at the disaster that was my hair. Andy was right; it didn't look that bad. I readjusted it a bit and it turned out looking fine. I dabbed on a little lip shine and slowly made my way to the cafeteria.

Our newly assembled group was present at our table by the time I arrived. There were a few other people there as well—all girls, Jean included. An extra lunch plate was set beside David. I wondered if it belonged to one of the twins or maybe Jean.

Andy discreetly pointed to the plate. "Yours," she mouthed motioning with her eyes that David was responsible for bringing it to the table. I started walking toward David, a little enthused that he had thought of fetching my lunch for me.

Two steps away from the table, David arched his lips in my direction. Just then, Jean slid the plate away from beside David's and took her seat in the place that was designated for me. David's lips protruded in displeasure at Jean's action. I breathed deeply and took a seat next to Andy across the table instead. David looked at me with sulky eyes, to which I replied by raising my shoulders casually. I didn't want Jean to notice the slightest bit of agitation on my side. That would only give her pleasure.

"Excuse me." David lifted both trays of food and left Jean sitting by her poor, lonesome self. He transferred himself over to my side of the table and lay the plate in front of me.

"Hungry?" David asked.

“A little.” I smirked, watching Jean out of the corner of my eye having a hissy.

Of course David’s movement didn’t go unnoticed by Galen who was watching him like a hawk. Galen’s laugh bellowed over the crowd’s chatter. He lifted his hand to the side of his mouth delivering the occurrence to Bill. Bill glanced over at Jean, whose desperate attempt to appear unaffected was weak. Bill joined Galen in his mirth. Jean pranced over to Eryx brushing aside the boys’ laughter.

I turned my attention away from the table and back to David whose hand I felt on mine.

“Are you still sore with me?” His fingers locked with mine.

“No.” I began to remove my hand from under his. He, being quicker than I, held his clutch.

“Seriously?” He wanted reassurance.

“Seriously.” I gave him a fake smile.

David released my hand with an eased look. He glanced at our food trays and wrinkled his nose.

“Are we being punished for something?” He bantered.

“It’s not that bad,” I tittered.

“Farm animals would not eat this.” David took the apple from the tray and pushed the Salisbury steak aside.

It took courage, but I sliced off a piece of the meat and put it in my mouth. It was disgusting. I gagged. That must’ve been attractive to watch. Hurryingly, I took my napkin and spit out the piece of steak in it.

“I believe I made my point?” David teased, offering me his apple.

“I usually take a salad,” I confessed.

David was late to Government and Economics—the last class of the day. He was seated next to Eryx on the other side of the room from where he glanced at me periodically. He caught me stealing glances of him on several occasions also. He might have been off limits, but, like I said before, I wasn’t blind.

He tore off a piece of the paper on which he was taking notes and wrote something. He then pressed his lips against it and folded the note in half. He handed it to the kid next to him to pass along until I received it.

My name was written on the outer part of the half folded note. I opened the paper making sure the teacher was not watching me. A pair of gold lip imprints slowly disintegrated into a glittery powder sliding onto my desk leaving but a hint of sparkles on the paper. The note read:

“A kiss, such as this,
would look divine on thy lips.”

An overwhelming surge of enthusiasm ran through my body. My ears and cheeks felt warm with the rush of blood that circulated through them. I timidly lowered my head and pressed my lips together trying to suppress a smile. I peeked at David through a strand of my bangs. His mouth rose at the corner in a satisfied, buoyant manner.

I tucked the paper between the pages of my spiral notebook and contemplated the powdered golden shimmer on my desktop. I ran my finger through it in a circular motion, testing the consistency between my thumb and forefinger. Silky.

I was tempted to smell it, but knew David—and probably Eryx—would be accounting for my interaction with the substance. I pressed my wrist on the golden powder when they were preoccupied taking down the day’s homework assignment. I ran my fingers through my bangs and sniffed at my wrist in the process. It smelled like David—woody and spicy; appealing to my senses.

Trying to speak over the sound of the last school bell, the teacher reminded us to cast our votes for the nominees of the Miss Spring Pageant.

“Pfft,” I hissed. I wouldn’t be casting a vote for any nominees. I knew well that the active student body would take care of it for me. The two runners-up were already so apparent. It would be Jean Murphy, the famous captain of the cheerleading squad and Sandy Gonzalez, the student body president. Not that I had anything against Sandy. I actually really liked her. I just wasn’t into the whole “miss popularity” contest thing. And Jean, well, I’d rather not comment.

Eryx and David walked on either side of me in the hallway after class. I must have looked even tinier than I already was between those two.

“Might I offer to take you home?” David asked nearing the end of the hall where Galen stood against the wall cross-armed with an expression of indifference on his face.

“I usually take a ride from Andy and Bill,” I said, observing Eryx’s reaction. He seemed unconcerned with David’s request to me.

“Would you consider making an exception?” David posed.

Eryx, attempting to give us some privacy, gave David two firm pats on the back and whisked past us in Galen’s direction.

“I... um...” I shook my head.

“Please?” David insisted.

“Sorry.” I forced myself to look up at him apologetically. “They’re probably waiting for me. I have to go.”

David paused and took me by the arm, prompting me to stop. When Galen saw this, he took a few steps in our direction, but Eryx intercepted Galen’s motion by placing a hand on his shoulder. David and I watched as the twins walked through the busy hallway and past the school office toward the exit. Galen looked over his shoulder, giving David a look of disapproval.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I paused, “you can let go now.”

David set my arm free. “I see no harm in driving you home.”

“Don’t take it so personally. I’m just used to riding with my friends. That’s all.”

“As you are used to walking to school? And yet you accepted the drive this morning.” He surprised me with his rebuttal.

Well, that excuse wasn’t going to work on him, was it? It would all be so much easier if he were a normal guy. Then, I wouldn’t have to act like this and pretend I was heartless. This wasn’t me.

He looked down at me, waiting for a response. I sighed and turned my eyes in the direction of the front office, in hopes that Andy would be there, waiting for me. No such luck.

However, I did see Jean eyeing David and waiting impatiently for him to walk by. She was so obvious. I reconsidered his offer as I watched her, thinking that a ride home wasn’t that big of a deal.

“Isis?” David’s fingertips turned my chin to view him.

“Okay,” I voiced impulsively. “I’ll ride home with you... *for today.*” I specified holding up my index finger.

David smiled.

We commenced our walk through the crowd and neared the area where Jean was socializing with some other kids. As Jean was about to approach David, I felt his arm wrap around my waist. Jean scowled at me and enunciated something under her breath. I sneered back at her.

I took David's hand and removed it from my waist. He showed no sign of opposition.

"We're not on those terms," I pointed out. "I'd appreciate it if you kept your distance."

"Would you argue my petition should I ask you to ride with me everyday?" He insistently held the previous subject.

"Yes," I said flatly.

"Why?" He sounded upset.

"Because."

"That's an ambiguous answer. You really should refrain from being childish and immature. The two aren't suitable companions for you."

I hated being called that. Dramatic, maybe. I stopped at the doorway, my brows pulling down toward my nose.

"Enjoy your ride home alone," I huffed, pushing the glass door open with full force. I peddled toward the parking lot with David calling my name behind me. He caught up to me rather quickly and blocked my way.

"What is it? What did I say?" He was unaware of my pet peeve.

"I am NOT childish." My nose flared. I could feel my face boiling in anger.

"It will never happen again," David apologized. "Please reconsider your words."

Trying to settle my agitated state, I saw Bill, Galen, Andy, and Eryx huddled at the hood of David's car. I started walking, but David just stood there.

"Well c'mon," I said to David, with a bit of an attitude. "I've gotta go tell them I'm riding home with you today."

"Yes, General." He lifted his hand and saluted me.

I then realized how rude and overbearing I had sounded. I didn't want that impression of me stuck in his head. I quickly tried to push away that girl and bring in the nice Isis—the one I liked.

"Stop trying to make me laugh. I'm mad at you." I tried not to grin as we crossed the parking lot and met the new group.

"My brothah!" Bill smacked a high five at David. "Suhweet ride."

"Yes. She's a monster." David said proudly running his finger along side of the car. "Drives like silk."

"And where is that car you've been raving about?" Eryx asked Bill.

"Oh no," Andy rolled her eyes. "Please don't get him started."

Bill pointed to his red '67 Mustang. "Right there." He walked with a spring in his step. We followed.

"Refurbished engine. New paint. Original interior. Original wheels." His hand motioned to each individual asset as he listed them. "Roars like a lion, rides like a stallion." Bill opened the car door letting Galen in to inspect it.

"I am *impressed*." Galen admired the car's interior. "She's in mint condition." He stepped out of the Mustang. "You've good taste."

"Exceptionally," Eryx added with his arms crossed.

“I hope that doesn’t apply only to cars.” Andy wrapped herself around Bill.

“We don’t doubt that.” I nudged Andy. “Do we?” I asked the brothers. No one answered. I could almost hear crickets in the background. “*Hello?*” I emphasized.

“With due respect,” Eryx looked at Bill, “your taste in girls is better than your taste in cars.”

“Thanks, man.” Bill pulled Andy closer to him, grinning at Eryx’s compliment. “She’s a real doll.”

While the boys were busy building up their egos, glorifying each other’s cars, I told Andy I’d be taking a ride home with David today. She gave me a huge smile and said, “Not your type, eh?”

“Hmph,” I grumbled and rolled my eyes.

Later, after much ado over the twins’ Land Rover, everyone said their good-byes for the day and stepped into their respective vehicles. I waved to Andy and Bill as David pulled out of the parking lot and joined the line of cars waiting to exit the school. Cars honking and stereos screaming was a usual custom for kids on their way out of the school grounds.

We were both quiet on the way to my house. David dabbled with the stereo while I looked out the window watching the kids walking home in the belligerent sun.

I admired the sky as we waited in line; it was clean. Not one cloud was visible in that heavenly blue canvas today.

This was a hotter spring than usual for south Texas weather. I could just imagine the temperatures during summer. It would surely go over the one hundred degree mark on the thermometer. It would be blistering hot. On the positive side, great beach weather.

“Have you given thought to what I asked?” David said, turning the corner on my street.

“Given thought to what?” I couldn’t recall the question.

He grimaced. “Will you allow me to drive you to and fro preparatory?”

“Oh, that.” My head twisted toward my house as we drove past it. “Hey, um, that was my house we just passed?” I pointed back to it.

“Yes, I realize that, but you still haven’t answered my question.” He pursed his lips.

“Why are you being so persistent? Am I not making myself clear enough?”

“I’m certainly not as tenacious as you, my love.”

“Oh, I beg to differ,” I argued.

“I beg you differ not.” He tapped my nose with his finger.

I swatted his hand out of my face. “Are you always this incorrigible?”

“Yes,” He snidely smirked. He turned the block and drove down another street. “Well?” He insisted on an answer.

I was reluctant to answer—not because I didn’t want him driving me to and from school. The idea of seeing him every morning at my doorstep made my stomach flutter. It was the idea of not seeing him at all, if things turned against him that I was afraid of.

I didn’t want to tell him that every time I saw him I felt a rush and that’s why I couldn’t accept a ride from him. Those words might only provoke him to pursue me more intensely. And I couldn’t tell him about the conversation I had with Nyx regarding his interest in me. That was something between Nyx and me. Yet, I had to find a way to convince him that his feelings were irrational and something he would just have to suppress.

I wanted to tell him that I too was vulnerable. I was a mere human with weaknesses and flaws, but not ignorant of the consequences that these mortal imperfections could in which result. Why couldn’t he understand?

David drove the car to the front of a vacant lot where he parked.

“Listen,” I began. “I can’t...” I stopped to think about my words, unsure of how to begin. “I won’t let you be led on by...”

“Isis, stop.” He raised his hand. “Spare me a sermon. I have my mother and brothers for that. I am not an imbecile. I know what I am doing and I only ask that you give me the benefit of the doubt.”

“David...” I sighed and twisted my head from side to side. “Your mother anticipated something like this would happen with you. She was very concerned.”

I had no other choice, but to tell him. It was for the better.

“Exactly what did she tell you?” He creased his eyes. He started the car engine and set it in motion, but David didn’t steer the car to my house. Instead, he turned onto Ocean Boulevard and sped through town.

“Why aren’t you taking me home?” I asked as we drove past my mother’s place of work. Her car was parked in the rear, but still visible from the street. She’d be home in less than an hour.

“We are paying a visit to my mother. There are issues that must be cleared, and I will not allow anyone to intrude in my affairs any longer. I have made this subject very transparent to her.” He looked at the road ahead as he spoke.

Leave it to me to cause a family discord. Great. Now Nyx was going to think less of me for being a blabbermouth and telling David. My hands started to sweat.

“I really don’t think that’s a good idea, David. How long is this going to take?” Aside from facing Nyx, I was also worried I wouldn’t be home by the time my mom arrived.

One thing Claire was strict about was my being home by dinner, which was around an hour and a half after she finished her day at the courthouse. I hadn’t helped out with dinner or housework in two months; she let it pass because of the insomnia. But it was time to resume my responsibilities and start up with my usual routine of chores. I had counted on today being the first day to do this, but David had just changed my plans.

David kept his eye on the road. “Not long.”

I sent Claire a text message letting her know I’d be at David’s house, but that I would be home in time for dinner. I always let her know where I was if I wasn’t going straight home afterschool. She had this horrible habit of thinking the worst had happened to me if I didn’t. Usually I was with Andy or at the library doing a group project with other classmates. She replied with a wink emoticon: ;).

Nyx’s white Ferrari and the twin’s truck were parked in front of the house when we got there. The southern style antique house somehow reminded me of Scarlet O’hara and Rhett Butler from *Gone with the Wind* with its tall white pillars and vintage charm. I tried to remember a quote from the movie to forget that I was about to enter into an uncomfortable situation, but David was hauling me out of the car before I could recall one.

“Hey, what’s the hurry?!” I complained, as he briskly walked me under the front porch gripping me firmly by the hand.

“Impatience is a trait of mine,” David stated.

Inside, I could hear music streaming down from the second floor. Nyx was in the den reading on a white chaise. Her soft black curls fell over the side of her shoulder, her lips slightly protruded as she read to herself. She looked like a work Michaelangelo, the artist, would have skillfully molded and kept for himself.

“Afternoon, Mother.” David led the way in to the open den. He kissed her on either side of the

face.

Nyx rose to her feet. "Isis!" her huge blue eyes widened. She rushed to greet me. "I am so pleased you have come to visit." Her lips arched in a sincere smile.

"Hi," I said softly. "It's very nice to see you too." I was ashamed to be there. I had defied her confidence.

She turned to view David. "And you... a typical male. Why did you not tell me she would be visiting?" She playfully slapped his arm. "I would have prepared for afternoon tea."

"'Tis not a social visit, Mother," David answered.

"But a guest in my home is a rarity. It serves me well to be in good company and with a woman, such as myself. Why, you have no idea what labor it is to live under a roof with bickering boys."

The sound of footsteps descending from the staircase drew our eyes in the direction of the foyer where the stairwell began.

"Hello, hello," Galen said entering the room with Eryx a few steps behind.

"Hello, Isis." Eryx took a seat on the couch. "Have you news of your ability to transport yourself from realm to realm?"

"No, sorry." I pressed my lips together. "And I don't really understand why I'm here right now."

"Mmm," Galen pursed his lips. "Treating you as his private rag doll, is he? Dragging you around in every which direction? Tisk, tisk, my brother. And here I thought you were more a man of gentle attributes."

David, a man? I giggled inaudibly. He was a teenager. The rag doll metaphor, however, fit the bill perfectly at the moment.

"What is it that you would like me to tell her?" Nyx spoke as David was about to defend himself from Galen's allegation.

I found it amazing that she already knew what David wanted from her without so much as breathing a word or dropping a hint.

"A private matter between Isis, you and me." David made it clear to Eryx and Galen that he would like them to leave. Instead, they readjusted their position and got comfortable.

Seeing as how they had no intention of leaving us, David closed his eyes and exhaled loudly. He had no choice but to continue with the discussion.

"I would like you to enlighten Isis about my free will and how you will not intervene in my personal interests or decisions, and you know well what I speak of. Now proceed." David took a reprimanding tone with his mother. It somewhat upset me.

Nyx set a hand on her hip, arching her brow. Her penetrating stare on David was indicative of the rage she felt.

"Don't talk to her like that," I objected. "She's your mother. Respect her."

"It's okay, dear. I'll deal with him later," she sounded intimidating. "You and I shall speak in private, Isis." She took my hand and led me up the stairs to her bedroom where she locked the door.

"Sit, my dear." She patted the bed. "I shall tell you of my son's 'interest' as he has proclaimed it to be."

"Okay," I said ambiguously.

"First, I must ask: do you feel for David, as he does for you?" She was as blunt as her sons.

My face immediately flared in awkwardness.

"I..." My mouth fell open not knowing how to react.

“You don’t have to answer, dear.” Nyx was quick to note my reaction. “But, I *can* sense in you that you are aware of his feelings.

“These boys you see downstairs have no preconceived notion of what it is to be enamored. They have only experienced temporary and mute infatuations with human girls here and there, but never to a degree that I would become ill at ease, for they know their limitations. It is not to say that they have not had relationships of the sort with their own kind, but that is a different circumstance—one that does not come to light in this conversation.

“In my experience, I have found that these male deities are far too spoiled—David is not excluded. They think they can always attain their aspirations with a snap of two fingers. They all grow quite the ego. I’m actually quite grateful that you haven’t given in to David’s charm.

“He needs to learn to fight a battle without weapons. The struggle will teach him to value and respect you. That is a lesson that must be learned on one’s own.”

She took several steps toward the window and gazed at the bright blue sky for a moment.

“Isis, I have sensed within you something, but what it is, I am not certain,” she said softly in almost a whisper.

Nyx quickly turned to look at me. “Forgive my imprudence. I was thinking aloud. I shouldn’t have pried opened your curiosity.

My pulse accelerated and I blocked out the rest of her words.

“Anyway, I suppose I need to let my sons take responsibility for their actions. That is why I hold no opposition for David’s determination to pursue his desire of winning you over. You are free to decide whether or not you shall have him as a suitor. I will not judge you either way.”

In somewhat of a daze, I stood from the bed and walked to her.

“What did you sense in me?”

“Patience, my dear girl. In good time, you and I shall both know.” She stroked my hair and smiled.

“Oh, and Isis, the words we have exchanged in this room, behind this closed door shall remain here. You’ve seen the way my sons react under the most trivial of circumstances. I could use without the dramatics.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I promised, and this time, I was sure to keep my big mouth shut.

Chapter 6

After having a glass of strawberry lemonade, David took me home.

“How did your chat with my mother go?” He was curious.

“It went well.” I lifted my shoulders and let them drop quickly.

“Did she tell you I was free to make my own decisions and she held no opposition to them?”

“Yes, she did mention that.”

David smiled. “She has taken a liking to you. I am very pleased.”

Claire’s car was parked in the driveway when we reached my house. David walked me to the door where I could bet anything my mom was peeking through the peephole. She probably wanted the scoop on what was happening between David and me and knew I was more reserved than she when it came to these things.

Though she was my mother and we were the best of friends, it annoyed me a bit that she got overly excited about every little detail of my life, but I also understood her young life had been transformed into that of an adult overnight when she had me.

She once told me she was living vicariously through my experiences, because she wanted to feel young again. I had to keep reminding her that she wasn’t old.

“You look disturbed.” David noted the expression on my face. I was thinking about the last part of the conversation I had with Nyx.

“Not really.” I took my tote from him. “I forgot I have to help my mom with dinner.”

“Then I shall leave you to your chores.” He locked his fingers with mine and gently pursed his lips against the back of my hand. I didn’t pull it away this time. He smiled and then went on his way.

On purpose, I turned the doorknob quickly and flung it open hoping to find Claire running away. However, I think I might have opened it too quick and instead of the door swinging right open it bounced back and I heard a loud thump followed by an “Ouch!”

“Mom?!” I raised my hand over my mouth opening the door carefully this time.

My mom was holding her head sitting on the floor.

“Jesus Christ, Isis! What the hell is wrong with you?! Are you trying to kill me?”

I gasped and knelt next to her examining her head. There was a bump forming. “I’m so sorry, Mom. I didn’t think you’d still be behind the door.”

I felt so bad. “Should I drive you to the hospital?” I asked worried.

“No.” My mother groaned. “I’m fine. Just get me some ice.”

I helped her up and sat her at the kitchen table. “You need to stop spying on me.” My mouth tugged to one side. I took a sandwich bag and filled it with ice and handed it to her.

“I wasn’t spying... I was *observing*,” she said closing her eyes as she placed the homemade icepack above her right eye.

“Gimme a break. I’m not twelve, Mom. I know the difference.”

I walked over to the fridge and started pulling out ingredients for dinner, which she hadn’t yet started then walked over to her again.

“How do you feel?” I said, lifting the icepack off her brow to inspect it.

“Like I was hit on the head with a door,” Claire said, touching her brow. “It feels a little swollen.”

“Mom...” I bit my lip. “I think you should look in the mirror. But I have to warn you... you look a little like the elephant man,” I grimaced.

“What?” She raced to the mirror in the living room. I stayed in the kitchen afraid to see her reaction. I bit my thumbnail as I waited.

“OH... MY... GOD!” Claire’s voice pierced the house.

“Crap.” I cringed.

“I can’t go to work looking like this!” Claire pointed at the huge bump on her head and I ran to the phone.

Dr. Jameson was nice enough to make a house call. I didn’t know whom else to call, and he was, after all, a doctor. It was the least I could do even though Claire refused medical attention—she was so stubborn.

Thankfully, Claire didn’t have a concussion, but the bump distorted the proportion of her head. Dr. Jameson prescribed an anti-inflammatory and told her to keep it on ice.

Neither of us was in the mood to cook after that scare. We ended up ordering pizza and spaghetti. I sent Claire upstairs to take a load off. I washed the dishes and tidied up a bit before I went upstairs to finish the homework I wasn’t able to finish in study hall.

Journal Entry 6, 10:43 P.M.

Your sight on me and mine on yours is no longer forbidden. But to what extent, I was not told. I am confused and afraid and curious about you, about me, about us. Confused for the change of heart, afraid for falling and curious for what is to come.

* * *

I was very relieved when, in the morning, Claire’s bump was down to a minimal size, but still noticeable. My mom decided to go to work even though she was complaining about how she looked like she was growing a horn. I helped her cover the bruising with make-up, and we managed to hide the bump with her hair.

As I locked the front door with my back to the street, I heard a car coming to a halt in front of my house. I had only one guess of who that could be. My mouth couldn’t resist but to curl up. I kept my back turned, trying to get rid of my silly southern girly grin. I heard footsteps coming up the walkway. I rotated my body—my grin under control.

David walked up the porch steps to me and kissed my cheeks in his usual manner. One of his hands was behind his back. “Good morning, my lovely.” He handed me a single long-stemmed red rose. There was a note attached to it with a silky satin bow.

My silly grin was back. I giggled a bit and thanked him. I was acting like my mother on the day she told me she had a date with The Judge.

I opened the note and read it to myself.

“My Lovely,

Your guise is unparalleled,

Your touch entices my thirst,
Your presence thaws my soul,
My torso threatens to burst.

Awaiting your requited love,
Forevermore I shall remain.
Never exhausting of time,
But enduring its tribunal pain.

Ceaselessly Yours,
David Chios”

My jaw dropped. “Did you write this?” I was wide-eyed.

“I did.” He looked pleased with my reaction. “Is it to your liking?”

“David, I... I love it,” I whispered, rereading the words on the paper.

I was silent. I felt awkward not knowing how to react or what else to say. Any other girl would have fallen into his arms and melted. Too bad I wasn't any other girl.

I wished I were less of an emotional coward with him. I wished, just for a mere second, I were a little more like Jean when it came to David—confident and unyielding. I still didn't understand how one person could intimidate me so much.

“Shall we?” David snapped me out of my silent rambling. I nodded and started walking.

“Thank you for accepting a ride from me this morning. I doubted you would be willing since you were so set on your answer yesterday.” He reached for the car door.

“How am I supposed to refuse after a stunt like this?” I smiled holding up the rose to inhale its perfume. “You're cheating.” I accused him quietly and lowered my head to avoid him seeing the stupid prune face I was making in an attempt to refrain my nervous giggle.

“All's fair in love and war'.” I could hear the vain grin on his lip as he recited the idiom.

I held my sight on the ground entering the car, trying my hardest not to let him see how enthused I was over the gift. I wasn't about to give in so lightly even though my stomach was in a knot and flutters of nervous spasms raced through me. My eyes deceived me now and then stealing glances of him and wondering of what other romantic gestures he was capable. Some would call it corny... incredibly corny. I would agree, holding on to my silly southern girlie smile. I was a lost cause for corny.

“Girl, he is in love with you.” Andy's golden eyes flickered back and forth between the parchment paper and me.

Through one of the bathroom mirrors, I watched her read the poem over again like I had done as I covered my hands in scented sanitizer—I hated public restrooms.

“I'm jealous,” she sighed. “I want Bill to write me poetry too.” She pouted and handed me the note back. “Does he tutor boyfriends in need of romantic inspiration?”

“I wouldn't doubt it,” I said, sticking the note in my pocket. “That's probably his hobby.”

Andy and I giggled as we exited the lavatory.

When we returned to the cafeteria the first bell rang. That indicated that class would be starting in seven minutes. I was surprised Jean wasn't prancing around Eryx or David. As a matter of fact, she wasn't anywhere in sight.

"What were you guys doing in there?" Bill sounded perturbed. "We've been waiting for you forever."

"William," David hung his arm over Bill's shoulder, "A man always waits patiently for his ladylove."

"Are you for real?" Bill's eyes narrowed. "What black and white movie did you pop out of?"

David laughed.

Andy and Bill strolled off to the side to say their good-byes before they headed off in different directions.

"So much for trying to educate a boy," Eryx said under his breath to Galen as they passed by me.

"I wouldn't have waited," Galen muttered.

"Yes, but, then again, you're no gentleman, brother," Eryx laughed.

Galen pushed his brother in a playful manner as they walked into the crowded hall.

Andy, David and I walked to first period together, elbowing our way through.

When we got to class, Andy reached in to my tote and set the rose on my desk. I didn't understand why she had pulled it out. I had been very careful in making sure it wouldn't get crushed. It wasn't until I saw Jean tighten her brows when Andy said in a really loud voice, "David, that rose you gave Isis is beautiful," that I understood Andy's reason for putting the flower on display.

"And yet it somehow manages to pale in her presence," David added.

"I read the poem you wrote her," Andy blurted out.

"Andrea." I frowned. I didn't want David to think I was divulging personal information. Besides that, Andy's comment embarrassed me because now David knew I gave it enough importance to share it, and Andy had just shared it with the entire senior class.

"Really?" David was surprised. "What did you think of it?"

"It's sweet. Passionate. Appealing to the senses." Andy sounded serious, like a true critic. "Have you thought of majoring in literature? You'd make an excellent writer."

"Perhaps." David and I exchanged a quick smirk, knowing full well his scholastic level was beyond a simple degree in literature.

Shortly after, class began and Mrs. Lopez, our teacher, started the day's lecture. When the teacher had handed out our assignments, toward the end of class, David started to whisper through my hair. The sweet scent of his breath made me tense.

"I shall tell you a truth... your lips taste of sweet ripened berries. I should be so forward as to take them in degust. And if it cannot be so, then I shall kneel until that day in purgatory."

"Degust?" I asked. David didn't answer. He tittered and sat back in his desk. I assumed he wanted me to find out what it meant for myself. I pulled out my cell phone and hid it under the desk—thank goodness for technology.

I searched on a free dictionary site for the word. The definition read, "to savor". I peered at him over my shoulder, wondering how he could be so confident. What was it that drove this boy to be so self-assured and poignant?

David walked me to second period being as how his class was right across the hall. He leered at Simon, my lab partner, from the door. David took me by surprise when he leaned in to kiss my cheek

as I reached under the table for the lab stool.

“What’s up with you and that new guy anyway?” Simon watched David leaving the room with contempt on his face.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing or none of my business?”

“Both.” I placed my hand on my chin over the table and pretended he wasn’t talking to me.

“So you’re going out with him?”

I swerved my eyes in Simon’s direction with my head following. “Could we drop this already?”

“It’s just a question, Isis.”

“Well, for future reference, I do not share my personal life with just anyone.”

“So that’s a ‘yes’?”

“Simon...” I tipped my head to the side as I said his name.

“Gimme a little hope, Isis. I’ve been waiting to ask you out since freshman year.”

“That’s... flattering.” I sounded unconcerned.

“So will you go out with me?” He stood his ground.

“Sorry, Simon. I told you, I’m not dating.”

“C’mon, Isis.” He reached for my hand. I moved it quickly to my lap before he had a chance to grip it.

“This conversation is over. Now if you don’t mind, physiology requires my undivided attention.”

“You’re not even going to consider it?” Simon was insulted.

“Shhh...” the teacher hushed him.

Minutes into the lecture I caught Simon eyeing the rose in my bag. I had forgotten about that. No wonder he was trying so hard to get me to go on a date. He probably figured David was a step ahead of him and couldn’t think of another way to gain ground. I felt kind of bad for him.

“Isis, will you consider it?” Whispering, he persisted even with the warning he had received earlier.

Leaning toward Simon, I covered my face with my hand and arm and spoke softly. “I don’t want to hurt your feelings or lie to you, Simon. Just leave it alone for now, okay?”

Simon tossed his pencil on the table with a swift twitch of the wrist. He didn’t say anything else to me for the remainder of the period. Feeling the tension between us, I watched the clock slowly ticking. I was stuck with him as a lab partner till the end of the year—awkward. We would both be uncomfortable for the next three months. I would be unintentionally hurting him—I was already feeling remorse. How to remedy the situation, I did not know.

Finally, class came to an end. David was waiting by my classroom accompanied by Marie Shannon and Jean on either side of him. I paused for a brief moment to examine the cheerleaders’ flirting with David.

They seemed to have it down to an art. The way they found ways to touch his arms or giggle and bat their eyelashes made me feel defective in some way. A small quiver of rage ran through my spine as I saw the long-legged girl’s—Jean’s—fingers running up and down David’s arm. I couldn’t compete with that. I ducked my way out of the room with a group of students, evading them.

“Pardon me, ladies.” I heard David excuse himself. My attempt to subtly flow with the current of kids had failed. I slowed my pace to let him catch up to me—there was no point in being rude.

“Hey,” I said as he joined me.

“Hello, precious.” He tipped his head once. “How was your class?”

“It was okay.” I didn’t feel it necessary to inform him of the discussion I had with Simon. I already had a feeling they were less than amiable toward each other. Why add more wood to the fire?

“And yours?” I asked out of courtesy, trying not to visualize Jean during class interacting with him in the same manner she had in the hall way. The thought made my stomach churn.

“Quite uninteresting.” His dimples creased in as he smiled.

“What subject is it you have?”

“Calculus.”

“That explains the uninteresting part of it.”

David chuckled. “Well, there were some interesting parts to the time spent in class.”

“For example?”

“Your friend, Jean is very—how shall I say this? Friendly.”

The comment made my teeth grind together. I could feel my mouth pulling down at the corners. David noticed my composure. His lips held one of his classic sly smiles, content with my reaction, no less. I quickly reestablished myself and pushed out a false smile in return. I’d be damned if he was going to play this type of game with me.

Our lunch table was full by the time we reached the cafeteria. There was no doubt that the twins were making a real impression. Two jocks and three girls had joined the group at our table. Andy had saved a place for me, but there wasn’t enough room for David.

“Sorry,” Andy shrugged apologetically at David. “They were here before we were.”

“Well...” my mouth pulled to the side, unhappy that *our* table was being taken over. “I guess we can take a booth.”

“You guys go ahead.” Andy put both arms over Bill’s shoulders. “I’m staying with Billy goat.”

David let out a short snort. “Billy goat?”

“He loves it. Don’t you Billy goat?” Andy crushed Bill’s arms and pressed her cheek against his.

“Yeah, sure.” Bill rolled his eyes. “Love it.”

David insisted I stay at the booth and didn’t let me accompany him to get my lunch. He stood restlessly in line keeping his sight on me. I’d swear his gaze was hypnotic. He puckered his lips and blew a kiss in my direction. I looked away from him, pretending not to take notice. I bit down hard on my bottom lip to suppress the giggles bubbling inside me. I scrolled through my phone messages trying to look preoccupied.

My mother had sent me a text message reminding me of the appointment with Dr. Jameson I had scheduled for today. He’d be glad to know I was doing much better since David wasn’t part of my horrific dreams anymore. I could sleep without the use of the prescription medication—that had come in handy after all. I’d have to thank him for being so persistent with Claire. She would’ve taken longer to convince me of taking the pills otherwise.

A salad was placed on the table before me along with a small carton of milk.

“Thanks,” I smiled.

“You’re quite welcome,” He smiled back.

David took his place next to me instead of across the table where I thought he’d be more comfortable.

I held a smooth profile even though I was bursting at the seam because I could see Jean was watching with a flustered face. Man, that felt good! It was silly to be envious of her when I knew this

thing with David was an impasse for anyone that wasn't of his same *species*—for lack of a better description.

“Will I be allowed to drive you this afternoon?” David picked at his salad.

“Oh, about that... I have a doctor's appointment. I'm riding with Bill and Andy.”

David's eyes narrowed. “Are you ill?”

“No.” I was hesitant to tell him I was seeing a psychiatrist. I didn't want him to think I was a nut job. I wasn't far from it at one point, though; the day he told me who he was in the hallway was very close.

“What is the cause of your appointment then?”

“Nothing important.” I hoped he stopped asking.

“I'm puzzled. Why must you see a doctor then?”

“Ugh,” I sighed knowing he would not stop until he had his answer. “I used to have trouble sleeping. I consult a psychiatrist. It's Andy's dad.”

David grimaced. “This insomnia was because of me, was it not?” He put two and two together.

I nodded.

“I am deeply apologetic for causing you that type of trauma. If I would have it to do over again, believe me when I say, I would never do this to you. But please remember, I was obligated to find a means to keep you out. I had no alternative.”

“Why didn't you do something about it the first time you found me there?”

“Isis, have you ever looked at yourself?” He intently looked into my eyes.

I kept silent, listening for the rest of his explanation.

“You're gorgeous. Fit for the god of gods. You are unending beauty to the tips of your fingers.”

The hair on my arms rose as he gave his interpretation of me.

“You're exaggerating.” I shook my head.

He looked at me like I was crazy, nodding his head—gazing.

“What?” I said softly.

His hand carefully swept the hair out of my eyes and to the back of my earlobe. He cupped my face and closed the gap between us nestling his nose next to mine. I felt my heart in my throat, beating at full speed.

“No.” I restrained him, raising my right arm against his chest.

David moved slightly back, staring deep into my eyes. “You'll be the death of me. I swear it.”

The remainder of our lunch hour was quiet. For some reason, I thought about Gabriel. I felt guilty for thinking of him while I was sitting next to David. But I realized he—Gabriel—was still buried somewhere inside of me. I felt like I was cheating on him, although we were through months ago. It was strange to suddenly have Gabriel in my thoughts when David was a perfect distraction to everything around me. So perfect in fact, that I wished I had let him kiss me after all. I could kick myself. I was such a prude.

I reminisced of the day he pressed his lips against mine outside of the nurse's quarters—his act taking me completely by surprise. His caring for me was already so apparent, and of it I was fearful. Then I came back to reality.

I knew there would be nothing beyond a kiss that would hold us together. I decided I couldn't be with him and I knew why. I would rather keep him as a friend than have the fear of losing him forever, engraved deep in my conscious. How depressing.

Maybe, I should've agreed to go out with Simon to assert myself that Gabriel was over and done with and that my fate was not pointing toward David. But I'd be using Simon for closure, which wasn't fair to Simon and probably not a good idea, anyway. I didn't want to give Simon motive to think I wanted anything other than friendship.

The last class of the day rolled in slowly. As the teacher spoke, David sat quietly observing me from the other side of the room, his hand in a fist under his chin. His leg shook intermittently, as if desperate for the lesson to end.

Eryx sat cross-armed staring dismally at the notes on the chalkboard while everyone else, except for David and him, copied the lesson onto their notebooks. I wondered if their knowledge of American government and economics was so great that they could sit back and still pass the course. If they could, what was the point of being enrolled in school? Then I remembered the reason behind their sudden appearance in Los Fresnos. Me.

I didn't see the necessity in their attending school, however. David had told me it was to observe me, but it had been as his mother had advised me all along—to pursue me. As I got to know them better, I found David and his brothers were very set in their ways. David wouldn't have only settled for being in the same town as I was. Now that I noted that detail about David, it wasn't surprising that he would have enrolled in the same school as me, and the twins along with him.

Eryx dropped his head back and sighed in relief when the final bell rang. He strode out of the room without waiting for David.

I started getting my stuff together, throwing it in my bag. David walked over to me and squatted, placing his chin over his crossed arms on the desktop.

“Allow me to accompany you to the medic,” he stated rather than asked, in a serene tone. “I promise I won't behave.” He pulled the semi-wilted rose he had given me that morning out of my tote and set it on the desk.

My lips curved in a half smile. His greater attributes were chivalry, cunning, wit and humor. He killed me with all of them. I sighed deeply before turning various shades of crimson when I realized the way I was looking at him—agape. I closed my mouth and looked away from his blue-eyed gaze.

“I'm meeting my mother there,” I told him. “I don't need an entire audience present.”

His nose wrinkled briefly and then he smiled. He helped me with my bag and we walked together to the parking lot.

Midway through the parking area, Galen walked toward us and spoke something in Latin. Galen's tone sounded concerned. David's façade became ominous as we approached the group.

“What's wrong?” I asked David, but he remained silent, his jaw tight.

We joined the rest of our entourage, and it was then that I realized why Galen had stepped out from the circle to speak to David. Gabriel was there.

My eyes widened when I saw Gabriel. He looked different—pale and thin. His eyes were bloodshot and there were dark circles under them. His clothes were loose and wrinkled. His hair uncut and untamed. For a minute I thought he might be sick. A sudden flurry of nerves ran through my arms. I hadn't spoken to him in months and remaining friends wasn't in my plans. I'd have never gotten over him if we maintained contact.

Tension was in the group when we joined them. Andy looked worried along with Bill. David's face hardened even more so when he saw Gabriel's arm on Bill's shoulder. Galen and Eryx looked as if they were ready to spring at David at any given moment.

“Hey, sweetness.” Gabriel took a step toward me. David pulled me back instinctively.

“Hey,” I said sourly. I felt my eyes dampen. Suddenly, I was full of rage—mad as hell to have this idiot in front of me. He had the insolence to end our relationship by typing it out rather than speaking. Coward!

“David, can you drive me today?” My voice was partially broken.

“My pleasure.” David’s smile beamed.

“Wait, Isis,” Gabriel requested. “Can we talk?”

“No,” I said rotating my body and heading to David’s car.

Gabriel hurried to meet my pace. I turned to face him with angry eyes. Behind Gabriel, I saw Eryx and Bill talking to David who was green-faced. Galen held David by the arm, constricting his movement forward.

“Go!” Andy mouthed to me from the sidelines of the conversation the brothers and Bill were having.

“I don’t have anything to talk to you about.” My voice was hoarse with fury. I was on the verge of tears. I wanted to tear his heart out. I wanted him to feel the same pain I had felt the day he sent me that message, bringing the relationship to its end without explanation.

“Isis, I just want to say... I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t know what I was doing. I miss you and I want you back. We can work this out. Long distance relationships happen all the time.” Gabriel reached for my face.

I moved away from him. “You hurt me,” I paused, “You could’ve called me to breakup, you know? I didn’t know cowardice was a part of your personality.” With that I turned and started walking again.

“Isis... Isis!” Gabriel called after me. I didn’t respond. I walked to the door of the car and glanced at David, but Gabriel placed himself in front of me obstructing my view before I could signal David to unlock the car doors with the car remote.

“Listen to me, sweetness. I’m sorry from the bottom of my heart. I’ll make it up to you. I’m in town for a week and a half for spring break. I’ll do anything it takes for you to take me back.”

“Too late. I don’t want anything to do with you. I’m late for something; I gotta go.” I waved to David, signaling I was ready to leave.

“Is he the reason you’re being like this with me?” Gabriel frowned.

I gave him a scornful look and sighed, waiting for David to arrive at the car.

David reached for the door handle and partially opened the car door. Gabriel shoved it closed.

“I’m not done speaking with her.” Gabriel’s brow pulled down as he spoke to David. “Can I have a few more minutes, please?” He spoke through his teeth.

“She has a prior engagement. Maybe on another occasion.” David opened the door. Eryx, Galen, and Bill raced to the scene. I stepped into the car and shut the door. The conversation was still audible even through the enclosed vehicle.

“What the hell is your problem, man?” Gabriel reproached, shoving David by the shoulder.

David’s nostrils flared. I could see he was withholding himself from a more serious confrontation. Eryx and Galen stood side by side with David.

“Take it easy,” Bill recommended. “It’s three against you, Gabe. Don’t be a dumb ass.”

I tried to open the car door, but the child lock was on. I jumped over to the driver’s side and stepped out. I walked angrily to the other side of the car.

“Hey!” I said in a loud voice. Galen stood between David and Bill as I spoke. “Leave, Gabriel.

I'm done talking with you."

"Go back inside the car, Isis," David ordered me.

"No," I objected.

Bill and Andy pulled Gabriel away from the car trying to talk him down. Gabriel pulled his arms from their clasp in a violent manner and climbed into his own car. The tires screeched as he pulled out of the parking lot. A gust of grey smoke and the smell of burnt rubber traveled slowly in the humid breeze.

I couldn't believe how immature Gabriel was. I was embarrassed the Chios boys knew that he had been my boyfriend after exhibiting that behavior.

Gabriel was not the violent type. The guy in that parking lot was nothing like the Gabriel I knew. There was something that just wasn't right about him. From his looks to the way he carried himself, Gabriel was different—a whole other person.

David's face was hard. His brothers insisted on David driving the Land Rover home and they the Maserati.

"That was so unlike Gabriel." Andy ignored the Chios' conversation. "Did you see how bad he looked?"

"Yeah." I bit my nail listening to Bill try to convince David to follow his brothers' advice.

I couldn't believe they were giving Gabriel so much importance. Then again, he did almost start a fight with dream boy over me.

"Avoid yourself conflict, bro. This town is too small. It'll be a miracle if you don't bump into him on the way home," Bill debated his point.

For Bill to be giving advice like that, he must have sensed something was brewing in Gabriel's head.

"Why are you guys so adamant about this?" I interrupted the boys' convo. "He's gone. There's no point in taking it to such extremes as to switch cars and hide from him."

"Isis," Bill started, "he was talking a lot of crap before you got here. It was crazy talk, like he was high and mighty... saying he would beat the living daylights out of anyone who touched you... saying you were his and that he didn't give a flying this or that about who he'd be up against."

Bill looked at his feet, shaking his head. "His hands were shaky; his eyes blood shot. I'd swear he was high or something. That wasn't the guy I knew three months ago."

"William is right to be concerned," Eryx agreed. "We don't want any problems."

"I'll ride with Bill," I said glancing at the time on my phone. "I really have to get going."

"No," David opposed my suggestion. "I'll drive you."

"David, be reasonable." Eryx argued. "He will be persistent with her. Avoid the catalyst of any future confrontations."

David sighed scathingly. "Right, then."

"We'll speak of this at a more convenient time, Isis." Eryx gave me a stare that let me know he could not discuss the matter in further detail with Bill and Andy present.

"We'll be in the car," Andy said, observing the twins reluctance to speak to me with them there.

Once Andy and Bill were in the Mustang, Galen took the lead in speaking.

"The reason we are taking such measures is because we must abide by the laws; we are restricted from physically harming any mortal, and that is something that can easily be achieved in a state of anger. We would be verboten from your world for many centuries. That is something I am not willing

to sacrifice.”

“Oh,” I said in a low voice, remembering a previous conversation where David had mentioned this. “Well, I doubt he’ll come looking for David. I’ll put a stop to his little fits.”

“You’re overconfident.” Galen raised his brow. “That toddler just had a severe tantrum. Do you really think he will cease?”

I understood Galen’s point. My neck tensed to think David wouldn’t return if a fight broke between Gabriel and him. This is exactly why I was keeping myself from falling for David. I was afraid the day would come when he’d disappear from my life completely. I was afraid of being pain stricken. I wouldn’t be able to bear it.

The brothers exchanged car keys and decided on an alternate route home. I thought they were over dramatizing the situation, but they felt it was necessary.

I announced I was leaving when my phone rang for a second time and the display indicated it was Claire. I was late.

The twins slid into the Maserati and revved the engine waiting for their brother to enter the Land Rover. David ignored the signal and walked me to Bill’s car.

“Do not call him,” David urged me. “Do not deal with him at all.”

On the way to Dr. Jameson’s office, Bill was quiet listening to Andy relating the words said by Gabriel in their full syntax—colorful language and all. It was strange for Gabriel to swear like that in front of Andy. He was completely changed.

The doctor’s appointment went well. I was told I no longer needed Dr. Jameson’s services, but that I was more than welcome to continue with sessions once a month if I felt it necessary. I told the doctor I didn’t expect anything to change, and I would only be wasting his time.

Dr. Jameson brought Claire into the consult room and explained that I was being released from his care. Claire let out a sigh of relief and hugged me. Her eyes sparkled, retaining the moisture forming in them. I was glad the whole shrink ordeal was over.

It must’ve been an hour past sundown when the doorbell rang. My mother answered it and called me downstairs. Immediately, I imagined David standing in the middle of my living room. I was mistaken.

Gabriel paced outside, beneath the porch light. His pale skin looked a light hue of grey even with the yellow glow of the bulb.

“Can we talk?” He rubbed his face downward anxiously. He looked sickly thin and the red blood vessels in his eyes made him look sinister.

“What about?” My arms overlapped each other while shifting my weight to one leg.

“Isis, I messed up. I’m sorry. I want you back.” He extended his arm to touch my face. His hand was trembling.

I removed his hand from my cheek and took a step back. “That’s not gonna happen.” I bit my lip and peered at the porch floor. “Do me a favor... don’t come looking for me again, okay?” I took a half turn, stepped into the house and shut the door behind me. I waited near the door listening for his footsteps to descend the porch stairs. I could hear him pacing back and forth on the wooden floor. He knocked on the door with three loud thumps.

I looked back at Claire leaning on the kitchen doorway with one hand on her waist. I was expecting her to offer to open.

Her lips were a straight line. “Don’t look at me,” she said throwing the dishtowel she had in her

left hand over her shoulder. “That’s *your* problem.”

Upset, I opened the door and stepped out onto the porch.

“What?!” I scoffed.

“I know you’re mad at me. I know you don’t want me anymore, but give me an opportunity to win you back.” He fidgeted as he spoke. “I can make it better, babe. I can.”

I watched him rubbing both hands nervously. His shoulder rose to his cheek every so often in a twitch like movement. He could hardly maintain still. My heart started feeling heavy, worried about him. But I wasn’t going to give him an opportunity to hurt me a second time.

He waited for my response.

I recalled that sleepless night he was responsible for months ago. That morning, I had stumbled to the bathroom and washed my face. As I looked in the mirror, I saw that my eyes had swollen from what seemed like an ongoing eight-hour trail of tears throughout the night. I looked as though I had aged dramatically. My light brown hair looked ash gray and my olive green eyes were bloodshot and in pain. I was pale and lifeless and my already petite five-foot body felt like it was a mere five inches tall. I had felt like a grieving widow.

“I’m done with you.” I said after a long moment.

“Isis, no.” His voice cracked. “Baby, where there was fire, ashes will remain.” His brown eyes dampened.

“No, Gabriel. I’m over you. Don’t make this harder for either of us.”

“You can’t tell me you don’t feel anything for me anymore. I know you, Isis. I know you still care about me.”

Maybe he was right. Maybe what I was feeling was repressed anger I should have experienced when I had no one or nothing to direct it on when the break-up occurred. He had been my friend before he had been my boyfriend. That had to count for something.

I observed the dark circles under his eyes and his loose fitting clothes. I wanted to know if he was sick, but I was hesitant to let him know that I held any type of concern for him. I had to think about David and I couldn’t make the mistake of admitting that, even though I was angry with Gabriel, his appearance pained me.

I had known Gabriel since early elementary and we had remained friends through out the years until high school, when we became an item.

Forgetting someone you were friends in your childhood and then having been romantically involved was not easy. My mind was going in circles trying to figure out what my next move should be.

Suddenly, Gabriel strode quickly toward me and grabbed my waist, roughly pushing his lips on mine. I struggled to get loose, but he was stronger than me. I reached up and grabbed him by the ear and dug my nails into it.

“Dammit, Isis!” His hand lay flat against his ear.

“Leave!” I demanded gritting my teeth. “Idiot!”

I stomped into the house and slammed the door.

“Isis...” I could hear him on the other side of the door pleading. “Open the door, I know you’re still there.”

I didn’t answer. I heard him mumbling to himself and knock lightly on the door. He stood silent for a while and rang the doorbell.

“Crap,” He sounded irritated.

He remained on the veranda for a few more minutes pacing. Finally, I heard him walk off the porch and onto the cement walkway. I peeked through the window blinds, making sure it was his car driving away and not another.

I was blazing in fury. I could only imagine the look on my face as I walked up the staircase. My mother was at the top of the stairs waiting for me.

“You don’t look too happy.” Claire noted.

“He’s a moron.” I felt a ball in my throat.

“What happened?”

“He’s a moron.” I repeated.

“I got that part the first time.”

I broke down and started to cry.

“Oh no, honey. Don’t. He’s not worthy of your tears.” Claire embraced me.

“I’m just mad, Mom. Why did he come back? I was doing fine without him,” I sniffled.

My mother stayed quiet listening to me vent.

“He’s different, Mom. I hate to admit it, but I’m worried about him. He looks... sick. And he kissed me, and I scratched the crap out of his ear and he showed up at school too.” I kept going. “He wanted to start a fight with David and he won’t take no for an answer.” I wept softly now. “What should I do?”

My mother was probably as shocked as I was that I was being so open with her, but I couldn’t hold in what I was feeling anymore. I had to tell her exactly what was happening in my life. I needed her as both a friend and a mother and she was one of the best friends and only mother I had.

“How do you feel about Gabriel?” Claire was curious.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I hate him and... and I want to know why he’s so changed now.”

“Ah,” Claire nodded. “You’re confused.”

I looked at her in despair. She was right. I hated this feeling. I hated knowing I still cared for Gabriel—even if it was just a little—and yet I detested him for hurting me so deeply. I disliked the person he had become and that made it hard for my mind to understand why it was I felt such concern for him.

My mind was made up, however. I would not give him another opportunity.

After dinner and another short rage of fury, I climbed into bed and pulled the covers over my chest. I had trouble settling into a comfortable position. The thought of Gabriel roaming around in Los Fresnos was unnerving. I needed to go somewhere comforting in my mind.

I struggled to keep my mind off the poppy field and thought about what the next day would hold for me. I tried to wrestle with my weariness, afraid I might unconsciously drift to the poppy field—a place off limits to me now. I slowly fell into a deep sleep.

My dreams took me to the beach where David and I had been the day he materialized in this world.

I walked along the shore sensing the wet sand beneath my soles. The waves swayed in a steady motion against the horizon.

“This is different,” I heard a voice behind me.

I recognized his scent at once. My eyes raced to find his silhouette. I met his gaze several feet from me. His golden body stood gloriously with his soft wings gallantly extended.

“Hi.” I greeted him with a smile.

“Hello, my lovely.” He smiled also.

David took my hand and sat me beside him on the sand. I slipped my hand away from his soft grip and placed it on my lap. He expressed a disgruntled groan at my action. I pretended not to hear his note of opposition.

“I’m sorry if I’m trespassing.” I was worried I had somehow crossed over into Somnium.

“You’ve not broken any rules,” David assured me. “I have come to you tonight.”

“You can do that?”

“Of course,” his lip lifted at the corner. “I’ve come to show you something.”

“What?” I curled my knees and wrapped my arms around them.

“Look.” He pointed to the sunset.

The scarlet and lavender sky turned dark. We were sitting on nothing and surrounded by nothing. I searched for David’s arm in the emptiness.

An image of a young woman lit up the canvas.

“Hello, my precious baby... hello, my little princess,” the young girl whispered lovingly.

I recognized the voice and the face. It was a young Claire.

I gasped and held my hand over my mouth.

“Do you recognize this young lady?” David whispered in my ear.

“My mother,” I nodded. “She’s beautiful!”

David pressed his lips gently against my cheek. I was too overtaken by the images to protest his advance.

“This is what you dreamt of as a child.” He maintained a low whisper.

The images continued to play like a widescreen movie. I heard a baby’s cry, while my mother’s soothing voice sang a lullaby. My father’s image blew kisses in my direction. There were pictures of bright toys and trinkets that came and went. Again appeared my father. His green eyes were glazy and tired as he made silly faces. I saw my grandmother, Eva, holding her arms out and smiling.

Then the faces in the images slightly matured. There was an image of my first bicycle and then my father’s smiling face as his voice explained how to ride it:

“Keep your balance, angel. That’s it... you’ve got it!” his voice said, followed by a child’s unfiltered laughter—it was mine.

The scene that followed gave the impression of flying through clouds surrounded by flying monkeys. It was a scene from the *Wizard of Oz*. I was terrified of the flying monkeys as a child, but now the monkeys weren’t scary at all.

I cried and laughed at different intervals during the exhibit of past dreams. I was unable to control the overwhelming rollercoaster of emotions that enveloped me.

The illustrations ended in darkness with my father’s voice saying, “I love you, angel.”

The sky took on its crimson appearance once again. Streams of tears rolled from my eyes. I reached over to David and embraced him fiercely. I cried uncontrollably, clinging onto him for several minutes. David gently removed my arms from my stern embrace when I finally managed to calm my sobbing. He fearfully scrutinized my face.

“I’ve made you unhappy,” he noted in a grim expression.

“No,” I opposed his theory. “I’m very, very happy.”

I sniffled and laughed as he helped wipe the tears from my eyes.

“My dad,” I began, “I’ve wanted to see him for a long time. I never really got a chance to let out all my pain.”

“Isis, I’m so sorry. I had no idea; otherwise, I would have never…” he trailed off at a loss for words.

“Forgive my imprudence. I never meant to cause you any grief,” David’s face was agonizing.

“No, David,” I objected again. “You’ve made me very happy. You’ve given me back memories of my father. Thank you… really”.

Having observed my smile for several seconds, the tension in his body eased.

“I’m truly sorry.” He wiped the remainder of the tears from my face.

We stared at the waves dancing rhythmically to and from the shore. His eyes wondered toward me. I asked myself what could possibly be holding his interest so long as he gazed at me in that way.

A turquoise butterfly fluttered in front of us out of nowhere. David held out one hand as if calling to it. The butterfly grounded itself on his index finger. David held it out for me to study.

“Beautiful,” I softly remarked.

“It’s time to go,” David warned.

“Already?” I sounded glum.

“I’ll meet you in reality, my lovely.”

He gradually disappeared, leaving only a trace of golden glimmer in the blackness.

Chapter 7

I woke with a smile on my face. I jumped to my feet and headed for the bathroom. I curled the ends of my long hair with the flat iron and pulled my favorite black shirt over my head. Jeans and wedge heeled shoes were the day's choice of attire for me. With my black eyeliner and mascara perfectly in place, I still had time to scribble in my journal.

Journal entry 7, 7:01 A.M.

And so it is with a deeper emotion for you that I awoke from my slumber this morning. I have seen through my very eyes the gifts that you have been born with. These are a mystery to my intelligence, a beckoning to my heart. And yet I cannot and will not interpret them as anything more than a silent infatuation.

* * *

"Have some breakfast before you leave," Claire said, pouring herself a cup of coffee. "I'm running late today. Hope the boss doesn't mind," she giggled.

I hadn't heard her mention The Judge in a while.

"How's that coming along?" I asked, intrigued by her lightheartedness.

"Nicely," she said, wincing as she took a sip of the hot beverage. "See ya this afternoon."

My mother was at the door on her way out when the doorbell rang. She opened the door with her always-humble smile.

"Well, good morning!" She sounded cheerful.

She turned back to wink at me and motioned me over.

"Good morning, Mrs. Martin," I heard David's voice coming from the door.

My eyes popped wide and I moved quickly to my feet. I walked over to the door where David stood wearing a light blue collared shirt and dark jeans. The blue tone stressed his black hair and already brilliant blue eyes. James Dean had nothing on him.

"See you later kids. Have a good day," my mother said, kissing my cheek as she left.

"A good day to you, as well," David responded to her goodbye holding my gaze.

I stepped onto the porch and closed the door behind me.

"Good morning." I smiled and bit my lip feeling a sudden queasiness.

"It truly is," he said kissing both my cheeks in greeting.

He held out a small white box wound with a delicate gold organza ribbon. I looked at him questionably.

"You really shouldn't be buying me gifts."

"I didn't buy it." He motioned me to take the box.

I took the small white box and debated on whether to open it or not.

"Open it," he requested.

I took an end of the fine organza ribbon and pulled lightly. The bow came undone easily. I opened the box slowly.

In the interior of the white box, lay the turquoise butterfly from my dream. It stood calmly; gently swaying its velvet wings. A small square piece of parchment paper with my name rested beneath it. The butterfly fluttered away into the morning breeze, disappearing into the shrubs. I took the paper from the box. I glanced at David as I carefully unfolded it. The note read:

My heart's beat thy sight stole,
Taking mine unruly soul.
My pulse at rates of abrupt speed;
I proclaimed love before my creed.
Blooming flowers hold no compare
To thy blissful beauty, oh so rare.
Give me agony or give me death,
I'll take thy heart as eternal breath.

Ceaselessly Yours,
David Chios”

My face was frozen in astonishment by his expressively written words. I raised my head to view him. He awaited my gaze to meet his.

“Ceaselessly yours,” he repeated the closing of his poem.

“Incredible,” I muttered. It was the only word that I could think of as his eyes pierced mine.

“Thank you... it's incredible,” I tried to correct myself.

His lips curled into a pleased arc.

“May I drive you to school?”

“Yes, you may.” I sounded like a first grade schoolteacher.

I returned to the house to retrieve my book bag and placed the white box in it. I locked the door behind me and joined David on the walkway.

Today David drove his own car. I slid into the passenger side and he carefully closed the door for me. My cheeks were starting to hurt from the tremendous smile my mouth was emitting.

“Has Gabriel attempted to contact you?” David asked after turning the ignition.

My mouth went flat.

“Yeah.” I nodded. So much for the happy morning I was having. “He came by last night. I closed the door on him... twice.”

“Oh,” David sighed, discontentment on his lip. “Hmm. Galen was right about him. He is perseverant.”

“I made it clear that I didn't want to see him anymore,” I assured him.

“I'm not convinced that will constrain him. Galen sensed a high toxicity level in him. You should try to avoid him at all cost.”

“Toxicity?” I paused. “Like drugs?” My worry for Gabriel escalated. Surely, he wasn't stupid enough to fall into drugs.

“We're not sure. Galen is the more empathic of the twins, but not as sensitive as my mother. All he perceived was a high dosage of some sort of toxin in his blood. Galen could not assess the nature of it. It might be medicinal as opposed to recreational drug use, for all we know.”

“Is that why your brothers were so uneasy yesterday?”

“Yes. Under the effects of such a high dose of medication or narcotics, a person is likely to behave irrationally... or belligerent. That’s why Galen approached me yesterday before we joined the group.”

“So it was a warning he was giving you,” I assessed.

David nodded.

“Isis,” David said taking my hand, “please be cautious.”

“I will.”

Our consort was present at the cafeteria table. Andy looked at me with eager eyes, cuing me that she had something to deliberate.

“Morning, David.” Andy smiled. She wasted no time in taking me by the arm and pulling me aside.

“You’re not going to believe this,” she began. “Bill and I bumped into Gabriel last night at the gasoline station. Aside from being drunk, he was paranoid and all jittery. He was rambling on about you. He tried to convince Bill to get you to talk to him. He said he had gone to your house and you had brushed him off. Is that true?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Go on.”

“Well, he creeps me out. He said that his friends were waiting for him in the car and that he had to go.”

“What’s so creepy about that?”

“There was *no one* in his car.”

“What?” I creased my brow.

“Weird, right?” Her eyes widened. “But there’s more... before he left Bill told me to wait for him in the car—he got a little worried. So, I go to the car and five minutes later, Bill’s all nervous, and he wanted me to call you. So, I did, but I kept getting your voice mail. It was too late to call your house phone. I didn’t want to wake your mom or get you in trouble.”

I took my cell phone out of my book bag. “It’s dead. I forgot to charge it. Sorry.”

“Yeah, I figured. I tried calling you at your house phone this morning too. There was no answer. I guessed you’d already left.” She pressed her lips tight. “That’s not all.”

“Well, get to the point already,” I said anxiously.

Andy’s face was serious for a minute. She glanced at Bill and back at me. “He told Bill he was packing.”

“Oh, thank God! He’ll leave me alone now that he’s going back to Florida.” I was relieved. The Chios siblings would be too.

Andy looked at me with a blank expression. “No stupid.” She twisted her mouth. “He’s packing *a gun*.”

The blood in my head sank down to my feet. What the heck was Gabriel thinking? Where did he get a gun? And most importantly, what did he want it for? My head was spinning in every which direction.

“What?!” I shuddered. “I don’t believe it. He’s not the type,” I refused the idea. “No, no, no, Andy. I think Bill misunderstood.”

“He didn’t, Isis. Gabriel showed it to him.” She paused to momentarily glance at Bill who had been observing us the whole time. “You gotta tell your guy.” Andy whispered as Eryx walked by with

Marie on his arm.

“He’s not my guy.” I corrected. “But you’re right.” I sat in an empty chair next to me, waiting for the dizzy spell to end. “Do you think Gabriel will come looking for me again?”

“Girl, I don’t know, but you have to be careful. Gabriel sounds like a lunatic. I think Bill’s right about him being on drugs.”

“I just can’t digest that, Andy. He looked down on people that were into that stuff. Remember?” I sighed heavily letting my head fall back.

“Tell David and tell him now, Isis,” Andy ordered.

I placed my hand in a fist over mouth.

“Okay.” My voice was muffled.

I was nervous. I couldn’t believe what Andy had just divulged. What was wrong with Gabriel? I needed to know if he was really on drugs or suffering from some psychotic episode.

Andy pulled me up out of the chair and bent her finger back and forth at Bill, motioning to join her. I walked directly to the one person that could give me insight on what could be happening to Gabriel.

“Hey, Galen, can I speak to you?” My voice sounded a little shaky.

I could feel the surface of my eyes start to glisten. David stood from his seat immediately aware that something was wrong with me.

“This is a private matter. Go away,” Galen told Jean whom I did not notice had been talking to David. I wasn’t concerned with her at that moment.

“Whatever.” Jean shrugged and sat in David’s chair across from Galen.

“Jean, he’s serious.” David’s face was hard. “Please, leave us.”

Jean’s face turned bright red as she slowly stood from the table. She looked at me with hostility and then turned to view David with resentment.

“See you in homeroom.” David tried to ease Jean’s mood.

Jean gave us her back and walked to her group’s table.

“You have my attention.” Galen offered me a seat next to him.

“What is it exactly that you saw or scanned or whatever it is you call it, in Gabriel?” My worry made my voice unstable. I felt a knot in my throat ready to burst into a scream.

“Did you not discuss this with David?”

“We did,” David said as he placed his hand on my shoulder.

“I need more details.” I said trying to stop from trembling.

“What is it you want to know?” Galen arched one of his brows.

“Everything you sensed in him. Everything,” I reiterated.

“You’re shaking,” David noted.

“Why are you so agitated?” Galen added to David’s comment.

“There’s something wrong with Gabriel. He’s acting strangely. I’m worried he’ll get himself into trouble.”

I heard David hiss as I showed my concern for Gabriel.

Galen folded his arms. “Usually a person is less tense after they ease their mind and your pulse rate is still in an up heave. Is there something more you’d like to share with us?”

“Tell me what you sensed in him first,” I insisted.

Galen placed his hand under his chin. “Extreme levels of exposure to either a very strong prescription medication or a mixture of narcotics mixed with alcohol. I cannot tell you how long or

how much was in his system, but I would assume it was recent and high inebriation. Other than that, I could not sense more than his physical tension as you and David approached, but I believe all of us felt that.”

“Oh my God.” I whispered, running my hand through my hair. “I just can’t believe it.”

“Now, what have you to tell us?” Galen reminded me of the piece that I was still hopeful wasn’t true.

“He has a...” I couldn’t even say the word without shaking. “. . . a gun.”

Galen threw his head back and laughed as if I had made some comical statement.

“I don’t see the humor in it, Galen.” David put his arm around me, trying to ease my distress.

“Why fret over the little things? You know well that the boy is no match for us. What’s he going to do with his toy—play cowboys and Indians?” He placed the back of his hand on his forehead. “Oh, the horror.” He remarked sarcastically.

I sneered at him.

“Clearly she’s upset and you with your cynicism.” David’s tone grew scornful. “What if he tries to use the weapon and discovers we are impenetrable? What then? Eh, brother?”

“Pish posh.” Galen swayed his hand, disregarding David’s argument. “I am a warrior. He is a pubescent junkie. Enough said.”

“Exactly.” David squatted beside me. “His actions are impulsive. We have no idea what he might be scheming. What if he decides to confront me in public?”

“Play dead.” Galen rolled his eyes.

David’s lips formed a straight line. “Is there no limit to your imbecility?”

“I am not the one that decided to play footsy with her.” Galen pointed to himself then shifted his index finger quickly from left to right. “If there is any imbecile present, that would be you.”

With an indignant face, Galen abruptly stood up. “Fix your own damned problem,” Galen said and walked away.”

“You would have had him on your side had you not stepped on his tenders.” Eryx’s voice flowed over my head. He was standing behind us. “You know how he hates being called less than perfect.”

“How much did you hear?” David asked.

“Cowboys and Indians.” Eryx recalled the conversation.

“That pretty much sums it up.” I sighed, resting my forehead on my hand over the table. “I guess you guys are going back to... *wherever*.”

“No,” a deep voice bellowed from David.

“Do you have a better idea?” Eryx asked David, with one side of his mouth pulling down.

“All we have to do is evade him until he has gone.” David gave his solution.

“Easier said than done.” Eryx sat next to me. “Do you believe he will continue to harass you?” Eryx’s expression was calm.

“By what Andy told me, I would have to say yes. He’s even asked Bill to convince me to speak to him.”

“Dahveed, you know what you must do.” Eryx peered at David.

“I will not leave her unattended while that buffoon is here. He poses more threat to her than he does to me. Out of the question.”

“Very well then. I cannot make your decisions for you. You can count me out of your plans. You have obviously not thought this through.”

“Why?” David demanded a reason.

“You fail to note that the only reason she might be in any danger would be your presence. You are the one that ignited the fury in that boy, not her.”

David lowered his head and viewed the floor. He was quiet for a few minutes thinking the situation through. “I’m sorry, Isis. I won’t be able to drive you until I have found a way to settle this.”

“There is no settling it,” I said. “He’ll be gone in a week and a half, then things can go back to normal.”

“A lot can happen in that amount of time. I would advise you to keep your distance from him.” Eryx stood from the table. “Think about it, brother. It is a risk you are taking by staying.”

“I understand that, Eryx. I just...” David shook his head from side to side. “I cannot leave her unattended. I beg you to understand me.”

“We can continue this conversation in the evening in the presence of our mother. She will be interested to hear of this occurrence. Good day, Isis.” Eryx walked into the crowded hall.

The bell had rung and I had not taken notice. I quickly picked up my bag and started walking with David by my side.

“I won’t leave, no matter what my mother advises,” David repeated his decision as we squeezed through the crowded hall.

“I can take care of myself, David. Gabriel would be incapable of doing anything to me. He was my friend before he was my boyfriend. He’s a good person. He’s just fallen into a deep hole he can’t get himself out of.”

“Are you sympathizing?” David scoffed, expressing disbelief.

“Yes.” I admitted. “I might be mad at the idiot, but I’m not heartless.”

“Wait.” David stopped me in the middle of the hallway.

“What are you doing? We’ll be late.”

“I don’t care. I have to ask you something.” He pulled me back as I tried to walk again.

“You might not care, but I can’t afford another tardy.”

Again, David stopped me from taking another step.

“Do you still love him?”

“We can discuss this later.” I shook my head unwilling to start this now.

“Yes or no?” David probed. “‘Tis a simple answer you have to give.”

“I can’t answer that right now.”

“That tells me enough.” His lips tightened and his mouth pulled down at the corners.

“You’re misinterpreting. I didn’t say ‘yes’.”

David gazed at me despairingly and sighed.

The truth was I really didn’t know what I was feeling. I knew I felt sorry for Gabriel. I knew that if I were in his position, he wouldn’t hesitate to try to help me. Did I love him? Maybe a little, maybe just as a friend, maybe not at all. I didn’t know. What I did know was that I felt an overwhelming need to talk to him, but I knew I shouldn’t put myself in that position.

The bell was ringing just as we walked into class. Andy was craning her head over the rest of the seated pupils, scanning the doorway.

“How’d it go?” She asked quickly before I had a chance to sit down.

“She’ll be going home with you this afternoon,” David answered in my place, walking a step behind me. “Gabriel is more likely to be calmer if I’m not around Isis. I don’t want to risk her getting

hurt on my count.”

“I told you he’s not like that. He won’t hurt me.” I dropped my tote next to my desk and let myself fall on the desk chair.

Andy chewed on her pen. “That was before. We don’t know what he’s capable of now.” She set the pen down and whispered. “He had that thing on him yesterday when he was picking the fight with David, Isis. What if he had used it then? Gabriel used to break up fights, not start them.”

I remained silent, evaluating the situation. None of us spoke for the duration of class.

Galen wasn’t present at our table during lunch. I figured he must have still been upset with David for calling him an imbecile. Eryx must have been with him because he wasn’t there either.

David joined the lunch line to retrieve our salads while I stayed with Andy and Bill. From the distance, I saw Jean cut in line behind David.

“Sickening,” I murmured in disgust.

“Looks like someone’s got a fan.” Andy said, taking her sack lunch out of her school bag.

“I’d say it looks more like someone’s jealous,” Bill sniggered.

“Shut up.” I smiled. “He wishes.”

“Pfft,” Bill huffed. “My dear girl, you are in denial.”

Andy laughed, bobbing her head. “You are.”

“Et tú, Brute?” I stared at Andy, my mouth pulling at one side.

“Hey, I call ’em like I see ’em.” She shrugged. “You really should just give in.”

“I’m not ready for that, yet. Not after...” I trailed off.

“Oh, no!” Andy’s arms flew up. “Do not tell me you’re thinking about going back to Gabriel?”

“No.” I frowned.

David was a couple of tables away carrying a salad in each hand with Jean prancing by his side.

“Moving along...” I prompted Andy to change the subject.

“Ugh.” Jean’s eyes fell back into her sockets looking past our table.

Galen and Eryx were back. Jean turned her body 180 degrees and walked priggishly to join her friends.

David handed me a salad and a bottle of water.

“What’s the topic of the hour?” Galen stood at the head of the table with his arms crossed.

“David is,” Bill announced.

“Seems he’s a popular subject these days.” Galen peered at me in a way that made me feel responsible for all that was happening. I probably was in his eyes. He didn’t look too happy.

David hesitated to sit down. “*What* about me?” His face was puzzled.

“Nothing,” I responded before anyone. “Bill’s being a nuisance.”

Bill put his plastic fork down. “Don’t lie. Just tell him how jealous you are of Jean.”

Andy’s eyes widened. She slapped Bill on the arm. I let my mouth drop and wrinkled my nose. I couldn’t believe Bill.

David smiled. “Very nice. Thank you for that piece of information. I’ll take it as a compliment.”

I covered my face and breathed deeply hoping they wouldn’t see me blush. I was going to kill Bill on the way home this afternoon.

“On another note,” Andy addressed Bill, “Isis is riding home with us today.”

“Because of Gabe?” Bill posed.

“Pretty much.” She nodded.

Bill stood up suddenly, patting his pocket then reaching in and pulling out his phone. He held the device up to me so I could see the caller’s name.

“Speak of the devil,” Bill remarked. It was Gabriel calling. “Should I answer?” Bill asked.

“I don’t want to talk to him.” My eyes warned Bill.

“He’ll just keep calling you if you don’t answer.” Andy pressed the green button on Bill’s phone.

Bill held the phone up to his ear. “Hey, Gabe. What’s up?” His mouth pressed into a straight line. “No, she’s not around. Andy and her went... er... somewhere together.” He paused. I could hear an indistinct conversation on the other end of the line. “Yeah, I’ll tell her you want her to give you a call, man.” Bill paused for a long while again. He sighed and gave me a grieving look as he nodded. “Okay, Gabriel, I have to go. I’ll talk to you later, man.” Bill snapped the phone shut and slid it back into his pocket.

“What was that about? All I heard was babbling on the other end,” Andy said.

“He was slurring.” Bill looked at the table with unease. “He was rambling on about you,” he told me. “He’s my friend and all, Isis, but maybe you should look into getting a restraining order.”

“Touché.” Eryx agreed.

“That is a grand idea,” David pushed his salad plate away. “However, I’ve already looked into it. Restraining orders vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. In order to obtain one in this state, you must have been threatened or provide proof that the person you are placing under restraint has caused material, property or physical damage. He has done no such thing to Isis.”

“That’s preposterous,” Galen finally spoke. “He’s carrying a weapon that is probably not under his name nor does he have a permit for; that should be enough for the authorities to see the impending danger.”

“Yes, you’re right. The legal age to obtain a concealed handgun license in Texas is twenty-one, unless the person is actively in the military, in which case the legal age is eighteen,” David explained.

“So what should we do?” Andy tapped her soda bottle. “Do we call the cops on him?”

“I believe that decision is up to Isis to make, not us.” Eryx examined my face.

“No.” I placed my thumb and middle finger on my temples. “I can’t do that to him. He’ll have a record. He’s just starting off college for goodness sake.”

“And your safety?” David reminded me. “Does it not count for anything?”

I looked at Andy expecting her to back me up.

“I’m with them on this one.” She nervously popped her fingers.

“Reexamine the situation,” Eryx advised. “You’ve heard everyone else’s thoughts on the matter—consider our view.”

Fourth period was stressful. The back of my neck ached with tension from thinking about the problem with Gabriel. I couldn’t deny that he was noticeably under the influence of some sort of drug or drugs. That scared me. He was a smart guy. He was a jock and a good person. He was a leader, not a follower. What had he become? Another statistic.

Maybe, in my head, I had made him out to be this grand person when I was with him, when in fact he wasn’t that much different from any other person I’d met. That didn’t mean he was a bad person, though. It just meant I might have given him more credit than was due because of our relationship.

Maybe I had changed too—matured in some way—and that’s why I saw him with such different

eyes.

“Isis Martin,” Mrs. Vicent called out my name.

“Yes?” The thumping of my heart accelerated, afraid I must’ve missed something she was going to ask about.

“The counselor needs to see you.” Mrs. Vincent looked at me through her bifocals. “You’re excused from the last fifteen minutes of class.”

“Thank you,” I said clutching my tote.

I rose to my feet and glanced at David and Eryx. Eryx’s head was hanging to one side, asleep. David half smiled and winked at me.

The counselor reviewed my applications for universities with me in a brief ten minutes time. She suggested I take some entrance exams that would be offered in the next couple of months. I was thankful she called me in. Otherwise, I might have put off seeing her till the end of the school year, which might have been too late.

The red Mustang was in full fury when I arrived at the parking lot to meet Bill and Andy. David was waiting for me by the car’s door.

“I’m sorry I won’t be able to drive you to and from school for the next week or so.” His hand lightly ran along my chin.

“It’s no big deal,” I said with a nervous shiver. “Sometimes, I walk home from school.”

“Then, I bid you adieu,” David sighed.

“And adieu to you too.”

His lips touched the skin on my cheeks. He opened the door and turned to wave to Andy and Bill. He then veered toward his car where Eryx was waiting patiently leaning against the passenger side door.

Eryx waved at us. When I saw the black car’s taillights turn the curve, I dropped my head back to breathe again. I didn’t realize I had been holding my breath.

Once at home, I remembered I had forgotten to kill Bill for that little number he pulled at the cafeteria. I made a mental note to kill him tomorrow.

Before I ran upstairs to plug my phone into its charger, I stopped at the fridge to see if there was anything good to munch on while I worked on a two-page report for government and economics due on Friday. I figured I might as well get it out of the way while I had nothing else to work on.

The fridge was half empty. I took a sliced apple and the jar of peanut butter to my room. I finished my paper in about forty-five minutes. It was an overview of the last month’s work—no references needed. Piece of cake.

The bell chime sound coming from my phone indicated I had an incoming text message. I took the phone from its charger on my nightstand and scrolled through sixteen missed calls, eight voice mails and twenty-something texts, all from Gabriel. It was enough to make me think something was very wrong with him. The voice mails and texts basically said the same thing. He wanted me to call him to talk about us. The last text I received said he’d be dropping by later if it was okay with me.

“NO!” I replied.

My phone rang immediately after I pressed *send*. I crossed my fingers, hoping the display on my phone showed someone else’s name and number on it. Of course it was he. I let the phone go to voicemail. It rang again and again until it finally got on my nerves and I answered.

“What?” I tried to sound as rude as I could.

“Doll, why you givin’ me the cold shoulder?” He said with a bit of difficulty. His voice was slurred, just as Bill had described. “I just wanna talk.”

“Are you drunk?” I asked.

“Drunk? No, no. I don’t... I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Are you *on* something, Gabriel? Is there something you have to tell me?” My female instinct started setting in. I started feeling like he was helpless without me. He sounded awful.

“Yes, I do have to tell you something. I have these new friends, Isis. They say things to me that make total sense. Things about you and me. Things about the world. I think you should meet them. They’re so cool. They want us to be together, and I know how to do that now.”

I started to freak out. “Gabriel, you’re not well. Tell me where you are and I’ll call your parents to come get you, okay?”

“Nope. Nope. I’m perfect, baby. Thank you for caring about me so much. I know you love me, Isis. I love you too.”

“Gabriel, tell me where you are.” My hand started to shake.

“My friends are here, so I have to go now. Can you hear them? They’re so loud and crazy. Oh, they say ‘hi’. They say they’ve been watching you. Anyway, I’ll call you later, babe.”

He hung up.

I held the phone in my hand, looking at it. I hadn’t heard anyone in the background as Gabriel spoke. Now I realized why Bill wanted me to issue a restraining order against him. Gabriel sounded legitimately insane.

I sat on my bed, still staring at the phone, and I wondered if I should call him back. I tried several times, but I chickened out and hung up before the line rang. My shoulders felt tense and stiff. I had to fix this somehow. I had to help Gabriel. I had known him all my life—his family too. Should I have called his parents? Surely, they had already noticed the onset of his new personality. Why weren’t they doing anything about it?

The sound of door slamming came from downstairs, making me aware that Claire was home. My first instinct was to tell her about Gabriel, but then she too might take everyone else’s side to have him apprehended. Having her work for a judge, I was sure they’d find some way to prosecute Gabriel—something I didn’t want. Keeping the matter to myself was probably the best option right now, unless I wanted to see Gabe behind bars.

Claire stood at the entrance to my room. “Hey, kiddo.” Her expression was unreadable. She wasn’t her usual chipper self.

“Hey, Mom. How’s your head?”

“A lot better,” she nodded.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, sliding my phone closed and setting it aside.

“Nothing. Just tired from work,” she sighed. “It was a long day.”

“You want me to fix dinner tonight?” I offered, jumping off my bed.

“I’d appreciate it.” She vaguely smiled.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I reached over to touch the small bump on her forehead. She flinched in pain. “Sorry,” I grimaced.

“I’m going to go take a long bath. I really need it.” She removed her earrings and slipped off her shoes. “You can hold off on dinner for a while. I’m really not that hungry.”

Something was bothering my mother. She only took long baths or showers when she was thinking very seriously about something. Claire took lots of those when my dad passed away. I knew she wasn't going to tell me what she was concerned about. Whatever the reason, she didn't want to share it with me. I respected her privacy as much as she respected mine, but it worried me when she acted this way, too.

Claire was unusually quiet during dinner. She didn't cross-examine me about my day. It felt strange to me that we sat silently eating when usually she was telling me about some funny thing that happened at the office or how irritating it was to deal with difficult people. As strong as I felt the urge to ask what was going on with her, I let her be. She would tell me what was dancing around in her mind as soon as she was ready.

It was a few minutes past eleven o'clock when my phone rang. I wasn't asleep yet, but a bout of nerves ran through my spine thinking it might be Gabriel talking nonsense again. Relieved to see the caller I.D. on my phone's screen, I answered.

"Hi." I spoke in a low voice and crept to my door to close it. I didn't want to interrupt Claire's sleep.

"*Hola, Preciosa.*" That was the first time I had ever heard David speak in Spanish. His voice sounded crisp and deeper. "Did I wake you?"

"No." I'm sure he noticed the smile in my voice because I heard him briefly chuckle.

"Can you open your window?"

I hesitated, wondering what this was about. "Okay," I said without questioning.

David was sitting on the porch rooftop right outside my window holding a guitar. His fingers were positioned on the strings and he began to strum the instrument lightly.

"What are you doing?" I tittered.

"Shh..." He hushed me and continued to play a slow, soft melody.

His lips curled as he started to sing in almost a whisper in sync with the music:

*"Amore, sei il mio amore,
Amore, il mio amore sei tuo . . ."*

The notes were precise and his voice was angelic. He continued to play slowly and perfectly for me. I didn't know Italian so I had no idea what he was saying, but it was romantic and dealt with love. I was smiling from ear to ear. I shook in excitement. I was filled with utter exasperation and emotions beyond my control. Had he been any closer to my window I would have hurled myself at him. I had never been serenaded, nor did I know of anyone of my friends that had. I was starry eyed and enveloped in the moment.

When the song ended, I heard soft clapping behind me. Claire had woken up and was standing at the door with tears her eyes and a huge smile. I had inherited every bone of the romanticism in her.

"You have to turn the light on in response," she sniffed as she quietly closed the door and left us alone.

Slowly, in the dark, I made my way to the wall and flipped the light switch on. Then I turned to the window where the brightness found David setting his guitar down. I sat on the windowsill grinning in delight.

“Thank you,” I smiled. “That was the most...” I was at a loss for words.

“You’re welcome.”

The shadow of his lashes fell over his cheekbones. His dark hair glistened in a blue-silver hue with the moonlight above.

“How did you get up here?” I wondered.

He laughed, “I flew.”

“Seriously...” I twisted my mouth.

“Isis,” He chuckled again. “I can fly. I can’t show you now, but you know what I am referring to.”

“No, I don’t,” I was confused.

“Wings.” He briefly showed me a light shimmer in the shadow of two silhouettes of wings spanned a small distance from his body. “They are kept discrete.”

“Invisible, you mean,” I corrected him.

“Right,” his dimples creased as he smiled.

He stood on the roof and took several steps toward the window and knelt. “I must go now. I came only to bid you good night.”

He lightly balanced my chin on his fingertips and leaned forward. He swayed his lips ardently yet gently against mine. One of his arms rested on my back while the other held my face to his. The gentle motion of his mouth on mine continued for several seconds.

Breathing heavily, I lightly pushed him away. I couldn’t do this. This wasn’t right. His laws forbade it.

“David, no.” My head fell to my chest, embarrassed to look at him.

He was still and silent for what seemed like an eternity until I was brave enough to look him in the eye.

“I’ll count the very seconds until I see you again.” His voice was soft.

“Good night,” I said, retreating into my room.

“Good night, my lovely,” he responded, disappearing into the shadows.

I pulled down on the window trying to shut it but it was stuck. I pushed down with all my strength shutting it with a sharp thud that made the glass move. A bit harder and I might have shattered it. Claire knocked on my door a minute after the loud crash. I opened the door and let her in.

“I’m okay. I had trouble with the window,” I quickly admitted.

“That was romantic.” She hugged me for a moment.

Claire walked toward the window and flipped the locks closed. “I’ve never been serenaded. You’re a lucky girl.” She pulled the curtains and sat on my bed. She gave me a look that made me uncomfortable.

“You know, honey, you’re almost eighteen years old, and I don’t have to remind you of the responsibilities that are associated with young adulthood.”

I threw a pillow over my head. “Not the ‘talk’ again, Mom!”

“It’s not a sex talk, Isis. It’s a reality-knocking-on-the-door talk. You know you have to be careful, right? You’d tell me if something... if you would need certain... *things*, before you did anything drastic, wouldn’t you?”

“Mom,” I whined. “This is embarrassing. I’m not asking you for birth control because I don’t have the need for it.” I let the pillow fall on the wooden floor. “Please go back to bed, Mom. I’m begging you. I really don’t want to have this conversation.”

Claire laughed. "Fine. Just keep it in mind."

My mother was terrified of me having the same fate as her—pregnant at seventeen, mother at eighteen. She missed out on a lot of things: Prom, dating, college with her friends. I had told her time and again that I wasn't active in that way and she always told me that most of the time we never expected it, it just happened. I shied away from talking to her about it because it just felt icky to talk about "it" with her. I didn't even talk about "it" with Andy, and she was my best bud.

Andy texted me, bright and early, asking if I wanted a ride. The forecast for the day was cloudy and cool thanks to the northern winds, which had blown in sometime in the wee hours of the morning. I decided to enjoy the climate change before it was over and told Andy I'd walk.

The playlist on my iPod was at the highest deafening volume possible. I enjoyed my favorite tunes as I walked putting Gabriel, Claire, and David in that hiding place in the back of my mind where I would store them until I felt the need to worry about them again.

The breeze got colder as I walked past a small family owned store several blocks north of the gasoline station. I loved cold fronts when they were just setting in. The air was just cold enough to give you a chill, but not so cold as to give you frostbite. Of course, being in south Texas, frostbite was an exaggeration—the climate didn't allow for snowfall.

At the entrance to the school, I found David sitting on a red brick bench made from the same bricks as the exterior of the school building. He was waiting for me with a smooth expression.

"Morning," I said, looking away for a second as I wiped the girlish grin from my face. I was remembering last night's all too perfect kiss.

"Good morning." His face held on to his smooth façade.

He opened the glass doors for me and gripped my hand to follow him to a semi-empty area across from the glass doors and windows. He pushed me gently against the wall and cradled his nose next to mine.

"I crave your lips." His breath was sweet. "Give me but one taste and I shall ask no more."

"No, David." I turned my face slightly. His hand pushed it back to the position in which he had originally placed it. "Why do you insist on this?"

"Why else would I crave your lips if I didn't already know the sweet nectar that they possess?"

"No," I said shutting my eyes to keep from staring into his hypnotic blue gaze. "It's forbidden."

"It is as forbidden as is the illicit fruit of Hades and, yet, even he has eaten from it."

"Excuse me." A familiar voice interrupted.

David stepped back from me and turned slightly, staring wide-eyed and with a clenched jaw at the person behind him. I slowly peeled myself off the white hallway wall.

I took a side step to see whom the voice belonged to: Gabriel.

Oh no, I thought to myself. I could see them hauling Gabriel away in the back of a police car already.

"I need to speak to Isis... *alone*." Gabriel stressed the privacy he intended.

David's face expressed concern and anger.

"It's okay," I said to David. "I'll be alright."

David turned and walked to the glass windows across the way observing Gabriel's every move.

"You got a watch dog now?" Gabriel teased.

"What's on your mind?" I ignored his comment.

“You are, doll,” he smirked. “I came to see you.”

“What the hell were you on yesterday? You scared me half to death. I was ready to call an ambulance.”

“You love me, don’t you?” Gabriel was being asinine.

“No, actually I don’t,” I sounded harsh and aggravated.

“Yes, you do,” he grinned.

Gabriel grabbed my face with both hands and kissed me against my will. I gripped his hair and started pulling on it in an attempt to pull him off me. After about a minute, finally, he pulled away.

“That hurt,” He smiled.

“You’re an ass.” I grunted, wiping my mouth.

I glanced in David’s direction. He gave me a spiteful glare and hit the paned glass window. He strode angrily toward the exit, then heaved the school door shut with such force that the glass slowly began to crack in a diagonal wave.

I pushed Gabriel aside and ran for the door, but the force that David had bore on it was so great that it wouldn’t open.

I saw David’s car race by.

“Dammit!” I hit the door with the palm of my hand. The crack on the glass raced a few inches further down.

I knew exactly what that kiss must have looked like to David.

Chapter 8

I turned to glare at Gabriel in disgust. He walked toward me with a smile of victory on his face. I was enraged that he would do that to me after I was honestly worried about him.

Suddenly, there was an awful bitter taste on my lips. Like the taste of those pills I had taken twice before, but worse.

“Are you high?” I examined Gabriel’s red bloodshot eyes. His grayish skin turned rouge with nervousness.

Gabriel turned his sight away from me.

“No.” He rubbed his eyes and retrieved a bottle of eye drops from his pant pocket. He turned to the wall to apply the drops in each eye.

“Forget you... liar,” I said, looking out the glass doors in hopes of seeing David’s car back in the parking lot.

I gave my back to Gabriel and walked toward the front office where I was sure he wouldn’t follow.

“Wait!” Gabriel cried out.

“Leave or I’ll get the office to call the campus police,” I threatened him.

“Isis, c’mon, babe.” He raised his hands in a pleading motion.

“I’m not kidding.” I walked to the office.

Gabriel tried to open the exit doors. They were stuck. He pushed and pulled until one of them—the one that wasn’t cracked—gave. I watched him walk to his car and sit there. It looked like he was talking to himself, but it was such a long distance from the entryway that I couldn’t be sure.

Letting my mind ease enough from the anger I felt toward Gabriel to simmer, I decided to phone David. He didn’t answer. Of course he wouldn’t answer. I wouldn’t have answered me either. He thought I had just made out with my ex-boyfriend right in front of him after he had openly expressed what he felt for me. I would have been humiliated and furious.

“Shoot.” I clicked to end the call. “Now what?”

My feet dragged me to the cafeteria where everyone was accounted for except for David and me. I sat next to Andy silently recalling what had just happened, my blood boiling again. I threw my phone on the table and grimaced.

“Hey, hey.” Andy greeted me. “Where’s your Romeo?” She craned her head around searching for David.

“He left.” My teeth were clenched.

“You had a fight?” She was surprised.

“Worse. Gabriel showed up...” I gave her a synopsis of what had happened in the hallway with Gabriel and how David had raced out of the school.

“I can think of a few adjectives he’s used to describe me by now,” I told Andy, regarding David. “He probably thinks I’m the most horrible person on the face of the Earth. What should I do?”

“Call him.” Andy pushed my phone in my direction.

“I did. He won’t answer.” The corners of my mouth pulled down. “I can’t believe Gabriel is such an idiot.” Streaming tears of rage fell from my eyes.

“I felt sorry for him too,” I admitted. “I was worried about him, especially after last night’s phone

call.”

“Did he sound, you know... crazy?” Andrea narrowed her eyes, biting her lip.

“To the extreme,” I acknowledged, taking a napkin from Eryx who had most likely been questioning why David wasn’t present.

“Thanks, Eryx.” I wiped my eyes.

“And my brother?” Eryx asked.

I sighed. “He left... upset. Gabriel showed up and something happened that set him off.”

“I see.” He retrieved his mobile from his pocket. Eryx held the phone to his ear and waited. “No answer.” He relayed. “What was it that happened?”

Embarrassed, I looked down at the table as I spoke. “Gabriel kissed me.”

“Jealous fool,” Eryx shook his head, turning his eyes up toward the ceiling. “He’ll be back.” He sounded sure. “I doubt he can stay away for long.”

Eryx’s comment brought me a faint smile. He knew his brother better than I did. That had to count for something.

The teacher’s ongoing literature lecture lasted longer than usual today. Andy entertained herself with a mystery novel she had hidden behind her textbook. I kept my eyes on the door, hopeful that David would walk in at any moment, and knowing that he would be upset. The door never opened.

Placing myself in his position, I would have reacted the same way. Here was the poor guy spilling his guts out about his feelings and another comes and steals the kiss for which he so eagerly begged. I felt guilt although I knew I wasn’t at fault for the incident.

Gabriel had severe problems. Avoiding him would be my best recourse, but if he kept showing up unannounced it would be hard to stick to my game plan. I wondered what sort of drugs drove a person to behave this way. The thought of him with a gun in hand gave me nervous shivers. He wouldn’t be dumb enough to bring it on school grounds if what he had in mind was confronting David at some point in time. Or would he?

On another note, I started wondering about Claire and her affairs. Why was she taking long meditative baths? Something big must have been going on with her, but what? She would put up a wall against her problems to protect me from emotional stress, but what she didn’t realize was that I stressed all the same with or without knowing the reason to her silence. Stubborn as she was, she wasn’t going to tell me even if I drilled her for an answer. She’d deny anything was wrong even if someone held Gabriel’s handgun to her head.

Moving back to David, I was tempted to send him a text message explaining the situation. That would have been too impersonal. I needed to speak to him directly. There was this feeling that was eating away at my core that I couldn’t explain. My stomach felt like it was churning and my chest felt anguish. I wanted to tell David that what he saw was not as it seemed. I needed to tell him I was sorry for causing him pain although it wasn’t my fault. Then again, I did feel at fault because I allowed Gabriel to speak to me. I had already agreed that I would have no dealings with him and yet I deliberately did so.

During lunch, Andy tried to make conversation but I wasn’t in the mood to talk.

“Try calling him again.” She finally desisted from trying to make me talk about trivial things.

“What’s the use? He’s not going to answer.” My fingers ran over the keys on the phone.

“Ask one of his brothers then.” Andy tried to help. “I’m sure they won’t mind.”

“No. I’ll just try again tonight.” I set my cell phone down beside my untouched salad.

I wondered if David would show up for his afternoon classes. Turns out he didn't. I walked home alone—against Andy's imploring—in the nice cool breeze, clearing my mind of everything and everyone during my stroll.

The red Toyota was parked in the driveway when I got home from what seemed like the longest day in the history of my school life. Claire was listening to classical music lying on the couch with cucumber slices over her eyes. That meant only one thing—she had been crying.

"Mom?" I sat beside her on the couch. "What's wrong?"

She removed the cucumber slices off her eyes. "Nothing, hon. I'm just relaxing for a while."

"Why are you home from work early? Do you have a date?"

"No, I don't. I have an eternity's worth of accumulated vacation time; I decided to take half a day today and the whole day tomorrow."

Her eyes were glossy and not that puffy. A sign she had indeed been sobbing. I decided to confront her.

"Why is it that you always want me to tell you my problems and you never tell me yours? I'm not a pigtailed little girl anymore. I know when there's something bothering you."

Claire gave me a crooked smile. "There is nothing wrong with me. I just need a little anti-stress time from work."

"Things going okay with you and The Judge?" I tried to pry open whatever she was keeping inside.

"More than okay. He's a very nice man."

"That's it? He's just nice?" I narrowed my eyes.

Mom shook her head. "He's got some other good traits, I suppose."

"That doesn't sound like a promising future. You're supposed to be giddy about it like you always are." I pursed my lips.

"Well, today I feel tired of being myself. I just want a little quiet."

I popped my lips, blowing her a kiss. "That's my cue. I'll leave you alone." I placed her slices of cucumber on her eyes again. "I'm cooking dinner tonight. Don't worry about it, okay?"

"Thanks, baby," she smiled.

From my room, I dialed David's number again. The phone went directly to voicemail. I thought he might have blocked my number. Was he that upset?

Rummaging through my school bag, I found the white box with the poem inside. I took the other pieces of paper he had written on and placed them inside the box too. They were my treasures now... mine to keep forever, even if David never came back. At least I had that to hold on to.

Why did things have to be so complicated between us? Why couldn't he just be human and normal without the pressure of those rules of his? Stupid laws.

"Fettuccini Alfredo, madam." I swayed the plate back and forth in front of Claire.

"Yummy." She lifted her eyebrows. She sounded livelier than she had this afternoon.

"Salute!" I raised my can of diet soda to hers.

Claire giggled.

"You know," she started, "I heard nominations for Miss Spring are up and running. Why don't you campaign?"

"Pfft." I rolled my eyes. "Yeah right, Mom."

"Why not?" She twisted her fork in the pasta.

“I’m not pageant material. Besides, I wouldn’t be caught dead waving on a hay bale with petroleum jelly all over my teeth.”

“Oh, c’mon Isis. It’s not even a pageant. You’d make a beautiful Miss Spring.” She paused. “I was Miss Spring when I was sixteen and so was Grandma Eva. It’s a family thing.”

“First of all, it’s called The Miss Spring Pageant, so don’t try to sell me on that one. Secondly, *no*.”

“You should be more involved in school events like I was. It’s something that you’ll love looking back on when you get old like me.”

“I’m too tied up with dual-enrollment to do anything else. You know how hard I’ve worked to keep my GPA. Not to mention that school is almost over. There’s nothing I can join in now. Soon I’ll be off to college and out in the real world where beauty pageants and popularity contests aren’t going to pay my bills.”

Claire gave me a strange look. “How old are you again?”

“Old enough to take into consideration what *you* had to go through. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me, Mom, and one day, it’ll be my turn to take care of you. I want to be ready for when that day comes. I want you to be proud of me, like I am of you.”

My mom’s eyes reddened. She had been on emotional overload these past few days. Maybe it was her monthly gift giving her a ring. She remained quiet for a long time before she spoke again, asking about my day—something that was a safe zone for her, but not for me.

I closed my eyes trying to forget the day’s events. “It was really, really boring.” I contained my fury as I spoke, reminded of Gabriel and his stupid romance tactics.

Dinner ended with me volunteering to do the dishes. Meanwhile, Claire announced she’d be taking a long shower as opposed to a long bath. There was nothing I could do to better her emotional state. It was her internal battle, and I had to sit it out. I felt the impotence of being young.

I sat at the wooden kitchen table watching the digits on the microwave clock change. I thought about asking my mother for the car to pay an unannounced visit to the Ebony Estate, but it was close to ten o’clock, and I knew she’d say no since it was a school night.

I dialed David’s number while climbing the stairs. Once again his phone took me directly to the voice messaging system. He was avoiding me. His cellular was either turned off, or he was purposely ignoring my calls. I gave up for the night and went to bed.

My phone rang at around two in the morning. I patted around the nightstand with my eyes closed.

“Hello?” I answered groggily.

“Hi,” Gabriel replied.

Irritated, I smacked my lips and hung up. I turned to my side and the phone rang again.

“What?” I answered.

“I need to talk to you.” Gabriel’s tone was broken.

“Forget it.” I hung up again.

Again my phone sounded off.

“Ugh!” I growled. I turned the phone to vibrate and watched it tremble on the nightstand continuously as the calls kept coming—the humming sound was easy to ignore.

I don’t think it took me that long to fall back asleep. I was almost to the dream state when Claire shook my arm to awaken me. The cordless phone was in one hand and the other hand on her hip.

“It’s Gabriel.” Her eyes were furious. “I told him you were asleep, but he keeps calling. If I wouldn’t know him any better I’d say he was drunk.”

With a little fear due to Claire's irritated face, I took the phone from her hand.

"Tell him I said this better be the last time he calls at this hour," Claire snarled as she left the room.

I glared at the phone in my hand then heard the door to Claire's room slam shut. She was furious.

"Why the hell are you calling my house this late?" I was boiling in anger.

"Isis, I need to talk to you. I miss you. I can't be without you anymore." Gabriel sounded inebriated.

"How many times do I have to tell you that I don't want to be with you anymore? Haven't I made myself clear enough?"

"You're just upset that I messed up what we had going. It was a good thing, baby... hang on." I heard the phone speaker being covered. His words were indistinct and muffled. I couldn't hear anyone answering him.

"I have to go." He quickly changed the way he was talking to me. He sounded sober now.

"Who were you talking to?"

"My friends. I have to go. I'll call you later."

"N..." The line cut off before I could finish.

I exhaled, grinding my teeth together. I searched for the off switch on the cordless phone and threw it to my feet. Then, I remembered the kitchen phone was still on. I quietly tiptoed down the staircase and into the kitchen and unplugged the phone outlet.

I hoped to wake up before Claire in the morning or she would ring my neck for turning off both phones. We never turned off the phones in my house. It was one of my mother's rules. Her main concern was that Grandma Eva would have an emergency and we'd have no way of knowing. I understood Claire's point of view, but what were the chances that tonight would be the night that Grands needed us?

My subconscious didn't let me sleep too well. I was worried that someone would call from the retirement community where Eva lived. I checked the cordless phone's caller ID screen over and over. No calls. Not even from Gabe—thank my lucky stars.

After switching the phones back on, I started my daily beautification routine. I wondered if David would be at school today, or if he'd show up at my front door this morning being that I had been so persistent in calling him.

Should I call him again? I thought to myself.

"What the hey," I said out loud, dialing his number. No answer. My chest felt a sharp pain. The kind of pain someone would associate with rejection. I pushed the pain away and finished fixing myself up.

I spent twenty minutes pacing on my porch waiting to see the black car drive up my street. I should've sat down because he never showed. The day was humid, breezy and cloudy. No sunshine glistened on the water droplets left from the previous night's light showers.

I power walked to school, afraid of being late for class; all the way thinking that maybe, just maybe he'd be there so I could clear this whole mess up.

"Please, oh please, be there," I talked to myself on the way.

Out of breath, I let myself fall on the desk. Andy had already texted me several times warning me that I was going to be late. I wasn't.

The desk behind me was empty. David wasn't in class. My eyes were glued to the door... waiting.

The bell rang, and David did not enter the room. I kept my sight on the door for several minutes after the tardy bell rang but still nothing.

Second period, I peeked inside his calculus class, but he wasn't there. I decided to attempt to call him one more time, before I walked into my own class. This would be the last time I'd call. He probably thought I was a stalker by now. Not that he had been any different with me. I dropped my head in defeat and resignation as the line rang several times, then the voicemail kicked in. I ended the call and entered my class.

From the edge of the steps that led down to the cafeteria area, I saw that our table was empty. Only Andy and Bill were sitting there with their sack lunches before them.

I thought it odd that none of the three brothers had shown up to school. What if they had all left? I started to panic.

"The twins didn't show either?" I asked Andy.

"Nope," Bill answered with a full mouth.

"Bill and Galen have second period together. Galen was absent today," Andy explained. "I haven't seen Eryx either."

"Hmm," I exhaled.

"I brought an extra sandwich for you." Andy tossed me a paper bag.

"Thanks." I raised a corner of my mouth. I had no appetite.

My thoughts were with David the whole day. I decided that I would ask my mother for the car this afternoon after school to go to the estate. I had to find him.

Bill was nice enough to drop me off at the county courthouse after school was out. Judge Daniels greeted me with a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Hi, Isis. What brings you by?" The Judge asked, rather surprised.

"Is my mom in?" I inquired.

The Judge looked confused. "Uh... she took the day off."

"Oh, yeah!" I felt foolish. "I totally forgot." I walked backwards toward the door, excusing myself.

Where was my mind? I was definitely not thinking clearly. Now I had to walk home in this humid weather. To top it off, it was drizzling. I was going to smell like a wet dog when I got home.

I contemplated the idea of calling my mother to pick me up, but I didn't want to bother her today. She really needed some alone time and I didn't have an alibi for going to David's house just now. I didn't want to tell her I was looking for him because it would get much too complicated for me to build lie after lie. I sucked at lying. I would most likely tell her I was going to Andy's house. That wouldn't entice her to further questioning. Though, I felt sort of guilty for having to lie about where I was going. I had never had to do that before with Claire. But this was different; it involved so many things I just couldn't explain to her. She'd probably have a patrol car surveilling our neighborhood in a snap of two fingers. I could hear my mother now, going on and on about crimes of passion. No way I'd be telling her any of this.

The Toyota was out of sight. There went my plan. I wondered what time my mom would be home from where ever it was she had gone to distract herself. She rarely went anywhere alone. I didn't want her to hurry home on my count, so I didn't call her. I wanted her to come back as the normal Claire with the perky smile and the contagious chipper personality. I hated being in the dark about what it was she was holding inside.

Why weren't there any taxis in this bloody town or any other form of public transportation? It was

nearing sundown and I still hadn't heard from Claire. Wherever she was, she must have been in dire need of that time to herself.

I climbed out my bedroom window and sat on the porch roof with my legs curled up against me. I watched as the last of the sun's rays became just a thin line over the horizon. The night fell over me as I sat there and waited—alone and in despair.

I ignored a dozen calls from Gabriel as I sat there in the darkness. How ironic that I was doing to Gabriel, what David was doing to me. Maybe life was teaching me a lesson. Grandma Eva always told me that “what goes around comes around”. This was precisely one of those situations.

A pair of headlights slowly came to a stop in the driveway. I watched as my mother retrieved a few bags from the back seat of the car and walked to the front door.

“Isis?!” she hollered.

“Coming!” I yelled climbing over the window ledge. I noted the time and found it was past ten o'clock. I had been sitting out there for hours doing nothing but wondering where Claire was and what David thought of me.

Mom brought Chinese carry out for dinner even though it was pretty late. I ate some noodles and soup and struck up conversation since Claire wasn't talkative.

“So what'd you do today?” I maneuvered the chopsticks between my fingers. I wasn't very good at eating with them.

“I went to visit Nana and the granddads...” she said quietly. “. . . and Dad”.

Claire had been to the cemetery. “Oh,” I said placing my chopsticks down and picking up a fork.

“Is that all?” Certainly there must have been more she had done till this late hour.

“I went to see Grandma Eva. She sends kisses and hugs.” She took a sip of her iced tea. “Then I went to have a late lunch with Lucila and Bethany. They send their regards, as well.”

Lucila and Bethany were my mom's best friends. They hardly ever had a chance to get together because they both lived about forty minutes away. Lucila was single and worked long hours and Bethany was recently married and had no children. I was glad she had the day to catch up with them. What worried me was the visit to the cemetery. That was not typical of my mother.

“Did you have fun with the girls?” I tried to sound unconcerned with the fact that she had probably gone to the cemetery to vent. I was right here—alive and kicking. Why couldn't she tell *me* what she was so distressed about?

“I did have fun,” she smiled. “Those two are a real hoot. I've missed them.”

“Did Grands have anything new to talk about?”

“Same 'ol, same 'ol... ailments and gossip about the neighbors,” she laughed. “That Eva...” She shook her head, still smiling.

“Hey, Mom,” I started, “you don't have to pretend you're okay. Tell me what's going on with you?”

Claire breathed deeply and twisted a strand of my hair between her fingers. “I will, but when the time is right. Not tonight, hon.”

I pouted like a reprimanded child.

“Don't give me that face, young lady.” She wrapped her arm around me. “I promise to tell you, just not today, but soon, honey. I promise.”

“Kay,” I sighed.

I waited for Claire to retire to her room and unplugged the kitchen phone from its jack, then I went to her room. While she was taking a bath, I retrieved the cordless phone from the receiver and took it

to my room. I flipped the ringer switch to the “off” position. I didn’t want a repeat of last night’s events with Gabriel taking place tonight. My phone was set to vibrate, as well.

I had another plan in mind since I couldn’t visit the estate. I would go to Somnium tonight in my sleep and search for David there. I knew David had made me promise never to return, but I needed to see him and that was the only other place besides his home I could think of looking. I prayed that I wouldn’t be discovered by any of the things he said existed there.

I turned the lamp table off. I was nervous about going back to Somnium. What was I supposed to tell David? How was I supposed to explain that I didn’t love Gabriel in that way anymore? I shoved the covers off me, turned the light on and started to write.

Journal Entry 8, 11:53 P.M.

You’ve left me. I’ve succumbed to the feeling of destitution without you. I recall the look on your face as you left, and I suffer along with you. I never meant to cause you pain. I never meant to make you break. I have but one wish for you and me, but it is unreachable and unthinkable.

Untamable, as you are, you would agree to it in an instant, but what is the price? Death or eternal abandonment—that is what my mind foresees. I don’t dare be the catalyst to either, but what if?

What if in some other world, in some other time, in some other reality it could be so? What if it can be so?

I cannot be certain that I can hold my chest in silence for much longer, for it implores me to scream three words at you and only for you.

Yes, it is those three words that you seek, that seek me out too.

I beg you to abnegate me because, I don’t have the strength to renounce you.

* * *

I was scared. I had just confessed something to myself that could not happen. I couldn’t go to Somnium now. I would wait until morning and ask my mother for the car. I would visit David and I would tell him... what? Nothing. I would apologize, and that would be it. I would ask him to come back to school and hope he had no conditions to do so.

I turned off the light and slipped back into bed. I drifted to sleep nervous about the next day’s plans.

Tired from the previous night, I slept in and woke up after Claire. I could hear the television on downstairs and cringed, knowing I was getting a scolding for unplugging the phone jack.

I slowly descended the stairs. Maybe she hadn’t seen the phone jack out of its place.

“How many times have I told you about the phones?” Claire sat watching T.V. with a bowl of cereal held up to her chin. Her tone was reprimanding. “Don’t do it again,” she said peering over her shoulder.

“Okay,” I said veering toward the kitchen.

I was surprised I had gotten off that easy. The first and only other time I had done it was when I was in middle school and not allowed to have a mobile phone. She really gave it to me that time. She even grounded me for two days, and I had to forcefully tell all my friends my phone curfew was eight o’clock. And if I didn’t, she would tell them for me.

I waited to see if Claire was in a bad mood. I didn’t want to ask for the car and have her say no. I planned on making a visit to the Chios’ house after noon.

I did several loads of laundry and cleaned my room before I got up the courage to ask for the car. It wasn't that I was scared of Claire being upset, it was that I wasn't sure what I was going to say to David when I saw him. I had so many mixed emotions that I couldn't harness. My brain and my heart were divided. They each contemplated a different reasoning.

"Where are you going, and who are you going with?" Claire asked, scrubbing the walls of the oven with her yellow rubber gloves on.

"Over to Andy's. We don't know what to do just yet, but I'll let you know if we go into the city."

"Be careful," she said with a warning tone.

"Thanks, Mom." I smiled and nervously shuddered at the same time.

"Oh wait!" she said, moving the hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand. "I have a thing to go to this afternoon, but I don't need the car. One of the girls from work is picking me up so, I'll probably leave before you do. If you call me and I don't answer, leave me a message or text me."

"Okay," I said whisking up the stairs to wash my hair.

Mom left around two thirty. I kept making up excuses to not leave for another hour until the anxiety was so much that I just rushed out the door without thinking about it. I circled the block a few times, and then finally decided I was doing this. I practiced what I was going to say as I purposely drove five miles below the speed limit.

I stopped the car when I reached the entrance to the green path and saw a half hidden sign that said "The Ebony Preserve". My stomach swirled round and round. I was extremely nervous.

I turned the gear to reverse and decided I couldn't do it. Then I retracted and shifted back into drive. My foot wouldn't lift off the brake pedal, so I shifted to the park gear and waited to calm myself down.

I slowly exhaled and inhaled.

"I can do this," I told myself. "What's the big deal?"

I shifted to drive and slowly drove along the paved curve. I reached an open space where the path ended and the driveway began. David's car was parked under an Ebony tree. My hands started to sweat. I didn't know what would happen when I saw him. I felt like it had been weeks since I last saw his beautiful smile and flawless face.

The twins' truck, Nyx's car, and two other cars I didn't recognize were in the driveway. I hesitated in getting out of the car and knocking. I didn't want to inconvenience them, seeing as they had visitors.

I sat in the car contemplating the idea of knocking anyway. I either had to knock and get it over with or leave because the sun was baring down on me so hard inside that car with the windows rolled up that I was capable of getting heat stroke. I looked at myself in the visor mirror. I looked flushed, either from the heat or the nerves. It might have been a combination of the two.

"It's now or never," I told myself

I stepped out of the car and rang the doorbell. Nyx answered the door in a beautiful red flowing dress. She looked so radiant that I literally gasped when I saw her.

"Hello, my dear girl!" She kissed my cheeks. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you. How are you?" I timidly asked. I knew she had company and I was interrupting.

"I was wondering when your next visit would be," she smiled.

"Well, I'm sorry I showed up unannounced. I'm actually looking for David." I tried not to gawk as I spoke. Her beautiful porcelain skin stood out so vibrantly against the scarlet of the dress she wore. It

was inevitable to stare.

“David and his brothers had to leave town for a few days to set some matters in order, but they should be back by tomorrow or Monday, if all goes well.”

“Oh,” I said glumly. “I saw his car outside, and I thought he’d be here.”

“Will you excuse me for just a minute while I fetch something?” She said, already leaving the anteroom.

I could hear chatter coming from deeper in the house. Several people were talking and laughing.

It wasn’t long before I heard the sound of descending footsteps. Nyx walked down the staircase with something in her hand. She held it out to me. It was a piece of papyrus paper.

“David has asked me to deliver this on his behalf.” Her eyes glistened. “You must promise to guard it with your life.”

“Yes, of course,” I nodded, noting her seriousness.

I took the paper and unraveled it. Within it, there lay a golden six-point star. It seemed to subtly glow in the palm of my hand. The note held another of David’s poems:

“A tearing thrusts this vacant heart
Brutal agony does prevail.
Incessantly battling for Victory’s love,
Its resolute intents to no avail...
But this singular army will not retreat,
It is obligated by penance-
Ravenous for Her emotional defeat.”

It was clear by his own word that David was not letting go of me. A burst of happiness filled me, and I could see that Nyx was using her empathic skills to scrutinize me.

“He *is* requited.” The words barely escaped her lips as she spoke. “Thank you, My Lord.” Nyx clenched my hands, closing her eyes.

Nyx wiped a tear from her delicate skin and pulled off a leather string from her wrist.

“Here.” She took the star and made a simple necklace with the string. She placed the necklace in my hand.

“You must guard it. Carry it with you at all times. Promise me this, Isis.”

“I promise.” I held on to the paper and the charm.

Nyx looked at herself in the foyer mirror and wiped carefully under her eyes, wiping the black makeup smudges away.

“I am having a small tea party, dear. I’d love for you to join us.”

“I really shouldn’t. I feel like I’m imposing already.” I reached for the door.

“Please, stay.” Nyx took a hold of my hand. “It would mean the world to me if you did. I don’t know anyone in that other room. Grace me with your company for at least a few minutes.”

“Sure,” I nodded. “I’ll stay.”

We walked into a room I had never been in before. The room was lined with windows that overlooked the beautiful white pavilion and tropical landscaping. Three women sat on a beautiful, voluminous white wicker chairs. My mother was one of them.

“Oh, snap,” I mumbled through my teeth.

“Isis?” Claire narrowed her eyes, puzzled. “What are you doing here?”

Nyx’s eyes widened.

“I’m... err... invited for tea.” I looked at Nyx hoping she’d go along with my story.

“Oh,” Claire lifted her eyebrow. “Where’s Andrea?”

“She couldn’t make it.” My answer sounded more like a question.

Claire frowned. “Didn’t I tell you to call me if you left town?”

“Technically, we’re still in town, Mom.”

Nyx interrupted, “Isis, dear, I forget how you take your tea?”

“Cream and sugar please,” I smiled at my mother.

“Do you remember Elsa and Mary from the office?” Claire asked.

“Yes,” I nodded. “How are you?”

Small talk was the afternoon’s highlight. I got snaps from the ladies for being on top of my game at school. I was very proud of myself, to be honest.

“Isis, would you help me with the canapés?” Nyx called for me from the kitchen.

“Excuse me,” I said walking away from the enclosed patio.

“I’m so very sorry that I got you in trouble,” Nyx apologized in the kitchen. “I knew your mother’s name was Claire, I just did not think to put two and two together.”

“It’s okay. She’ll get over it.” I took a platter of the finger foods in each hand.

“Nyx, is David out of cell phone range?” I asked before leaving the kitchen.

“Why do you ask?” She said placing down her trays.

“He doesn’t answer his phone. I was just curious, that’s all.”

“I do not believe he has his phone with him.”

“Oh,” I crushed my lips together and smiled. “I thought something else.”

“I know,” she smiled. “Well let’s get this soirée going.”

“Wait.” I grabbed a napkin and asked Nyx for a pen. She found one for me in a credenza in the den. I wrote down my home phone number and a short note—nothing like his poems. I kept it simple: “please call me”. I left Nyx my cell phone number, just in case, also.

After saying goodbye to Nyx for the eighth consecutive time, my mother finally boarded the car.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming here?” My mother immediately questioned me.

“I didn’t know. I got a call after you left.” I lied through my horrible rotten teeth. I stayed quiet for a while afraid Claire would notice the guilt in my voice.

“How’d you meet Nyx?” I asked as we approached a red light. Claire was driving.

“She came by the court to ask about the deed to her house. My co-worker slipped her a Plasticware catalog and asked if she’d be interested in having a demo party. Nyx mentioned she was new to the area and had no one to invite. We got to talking and she ended up inviting us to tea.”

“You knew who she was,” I laughed. “You wanted a first-hand account of the estate and the family didn’t you?”

“I was being neighborly,” she replied with a sly smile.

I saw her eyebrow lift—I knew the questioning was about to begin.

“So, David, huh?” She glanced over at me with a smirk.

“What about him?” I acted unconcerned.

“I thought you didn’t like him?”

“I never said that.” My voice developed a defensive tone.

“So you *do* like him?” She pressed.

“Mom, I barely know him.”

“That doesn’t matter. The first time I laid eyes on your father, I was head over heels in love.” She sighed deeply.

“Love at first sight? How original.” I rolled my eyes in disbelief.

“Absolutely. When you know, you know.” My mother smiled as her eyes gazed blindly over the steering wheel. I could tell she was thinking about my father—might he rest in peace.

Claire left on her date with the Judge roughly around eight. I stayed up and watched television for a while in my room. Sometime between reruns of *I Love Lucy* and *The Honeymooners*, I fell asleep.

I observed the sun’s rays breaking through the window, announcing another day’s beginning, as my eyes meekly opened. A faint ringing had woken me. I clumsily reached for my phone.

“Hello,” I said in a raspy voice.

“Good morning.” The voice on the other end was ideal.

I sprung my body to a sitting position.

“David?” I asked surprised.

“Yes.” I heard a smile in his speech.

“Where’ve you been? I’ve been going crazy trying to find you.”

“Have you?” David sounded baffled.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “Um... I wanted to apologize for that incident.”

“It’s not your fault.” David countered my apology. “I overreacted. Besides, I shouldn’t have pressed you so much after you had clearly expressed your feelings. I’m the one that should apologize.”

“No, David... I shouldn’t have spoken to Gabriel. It was inconsiderate of me.” I continued my apology.

“Stop, Isis,” David implored me. “Had you not spoken to him, he might have started a brawl. Something we both know is simmering in that little brain of his.”

I relaxed my back against the bed’s headboard.

“Does that mean I’m forgiven?” I persisted with the issue.

David laughed softly. “Tenacious, aren’t you?”

“I guess, I am,” I answered.

Again, he chuckled faintly.

“So, I was wondering...” he paused, “do you think your mother would allow you to come out with me for the day?”

I squinted my eyes to focus on the time on my wall clock. It was only a few minutes past seven.

“I don’t think she’d mind,” I assured him.

“May I pick you up in an hour for breakfast?”

I jumped out of bed and skidded into the bathroom.

“Okay,” I said trying to sound cool while reaching for the shower knob.

“See you then,” his voice was soft.

“Bye.” I hung up and jumped into the shower.

Chapter 9

UNREQUITED

DAVID CHIOS

Enraged, I raced to my car and drove past the security guard at the school entrance. I was cloaked with disillusionment.

What did she think I was—a mere plaything for her own sadistic pleasure? I cursed the day I laid eyes on her enchanting round face. Surely, she must think I was her own private jester, entertaining her raw humor.

And I so stupid to think she would have me as her own. I loathed her with a passion, yet my heart yearned for her a million times more. Her wicked emerald stare bewitched me every time, and I held no cure to her curse. She was the most incomprehensible human I had ever met. I did not understand her quick to change moods, or why she stared at me in such a way that made me think she held feelings for me.

A fool she must see me as and, rightly, I must be to digest her apathy for me. She gives me no sign of affection. A dying leper would be more likely to receive, at the very least pity, from her than I any type of concern. And, yet with all her coldness, she thrives through my veins like wildfire.

Her soft pink lips, her sweet breath... oh, how my soul beckons hers.

But if there were a way—a way to gain her frail poisonous heart—I would not hesitate. I care nothing for those imposed rules of the council.

Mother had warned me against growing aggravated for her affection, but this was impossible to avoid. I needed recourse—some means to sway her emotions—but what? The only thing my right mind could clearly see was her face—that which should belong to me along with the rest of her.

Many times, my friend, Eros, had recounted stories of lovers in his daily routine of archery. At the time, I was ignorant of the meaning of the word “love” and far more ignorant of the words he spoke in reference to humans: “Their prayers seek me out asking to pierce my arrows upon the hearts of their unrequited halves because it is so great—their love—that they fall physically ill.”

“Ridiculous!” I judged their request. But now, I was the one to be ridiculed by my own wits for being so boorish. I had become a hypocrite to my own views.

As I thought deeper about it, I knew that this would be a task only for one individual to handle. I would waste no more time. Eros would be my recourse.

I parked the car under an Ebony tree and ran inside the house.

“Mother?!” I cried out.

My mother appeared at the staircase.

“What’s wrong?” She sounded concerned. My tone must have been desperate.

“I must take leave of this place for a few days, but I need you to do something for me while I am away.”

“Where are you off to?” Her eyes reflected her angst as she tried to scan my emotions.

“Mother, please do not question me. I need your help.”

I turned away from her. I took a deep breath, and then pierced my own torso with my forefinger and thumb. The pain was unbearable. I dropped to my knees in excruciation. My mother cried out my name and attempted to stop me. I pushed her away and continued with what I had to do.

My fingers searched for the sacred object buried deep in my chest. I tried not to breathe as I took the life within me and extracted it. It was a small, luminous six-pointed star. I held it out to my mother to take.

“Make sure she receives it.” I let the Star Crest fall in her hand.

“David, no!” My mother protested with desperation. “You don’t know what you’re doing!”

I slowly rose to my feet, unable to stand erect from the steady and sharp pain that enveloped me.

“Yes, I do,” I gasped as the wound began the scarring process.

“Now, please, Mother, I beg you to deliver this in my name. I ask you to think of my feelings for her. She is my only desire. You can feel the physical and emotional pain writhing within me. I beg you, I beg you, and I beg you.” I held my chest attempting to lessen the pain as I spoke.

She looked at the vibrant gold star in her hand and wept. “I will honor your wishes.”

“There is one more thing,” I said. “Wait here.”

I climbed the stairs as fast as the pain would allow me to move. I prepared the article to be delivered and threw my mobile phone on the bed. I didn’t need distractions.

I wrote a few phrases on papyrus paper and rolled it. I descended the staircase and handed the note to my mother.

“What shall I say if she comes soliciting you?” My mother asked.

“Tell her I have left no word, but that which you hold in your hand.”

“Are you certain of yourself, my son?” She asked examining the ancient emblem with consternation lingering on her face.

“Yes, mother.” I took her face and kissed her head. “I’ll return in two days time.”

“Ite cum Deo.” Her voice was broken as she gave me the ancient blessing in Latin, “Go with God”.

“Thank you, Mother. Thank you.” I hugged her. “And Mother... tell her not what it signifies.”

With those last words I left the estate in search of Eros. In pain, as I was, I spread my wings and headed to the airport. I had not eaten or slept in days, therefore, I already felt famished and weak, aside from the pain of the lesion. I could not fly over the Atlantic in these conditions. I boarded a plane in a nearby city. The flight would be long, but well worth the wait. I slept the majority of the way arriving in the crisp and chill early morn at Eros’ primary city of residence.

Eros possessed the power to tamper with the heart. He was not one to slew me. I was certain he would aid me once he saw the heartache on my semblance. Another plus: Eros was a sucker for love.

Eros lived in Paris. Very cliché, I know, but it was his city of choice so I would start my search for him there. I hoped luck and my mother’s blessing would be with me as he was a hard individual to find. His love for travel would make the search especially effortful for me.

I arrived at the Café de Flore, one of Eros’ favorite spots. Fragrant European coffees and the scent of freshly baked pastries filled the crisp morn’s breeze. I surveyed every person in the restaurant walking through the table isles. Eros was not to be found at the café this morning. I took a seat at an empty table and ordered a double espresso and waited patiently to see if he would appear. Almost two hours I waited, and I never did see him arrive.

I pondered upon the places where Eros would most likely roam. I knew him well enough to know these sites, and so I set pace to an antique bookstore named Shakespeare and Company, a short

distance from the café.

As I walked among the rues of Paris, I wished one day I would be able to show Isis the City of Love. I came to the street where the bookstore was located. I prayed to Deus that I might find Eros.

The shop doors were opened wide with books stacked on tables on the sidewalks. I stepped in to the smell of vintage paper coming from the antiquities. A numerous collection of works were scattered upon tables and arranged on shelves. I examined the literary hunters, which were but a handful.

Next to one of the book tables by a window there stood a blonde, tall young gentleman in a grey trench coat and spectacles. I recognized him instantly; it was Eros rummaging through a book pile. Deus had heard my cry.

I approached him discretely, as if I too were searching for literature. I purposefully leaned across his way to spy his face.

“Bonjour,” I bid him good day.

He raised his head to view me.

“Alas! My brother!” Eros was surprised to see me. He shook my hand as he embraced me with a one armed hug.

“How are you my friend?” he asked in a thick French accent. “Have you come to visit as you did last time... for pleasure?”

I shook my head. “No, dear friend.” I hesitated to divulge the purpose of my visit. “Actually, I’ve come across a circumstance that requires your assistance.”

I paused and retracted, “But where are my manners? How have you been? Do tell me of your whereabouts and adventures?”

Eros paid no interest to my queries regarding his life, but was intrigued by the reason I was there.

“A favor you say?” He set the book in his hand down and quickly led me out of the store.

“Tell me what I can help you with. You know I am at your disposition.” He sounded sincere.

“I would rather discuss this in a more private place, if you don’t mind.”

“I see.” Eros understood that it was a matter of absolute secrecy for the both of us. “Let us retire to my current residence then, shall we?”

“That would be perfect,” I grinned, content with his willingness to aid me.

Eros flagged down a cab on the sidewalk. “La Reserve. Place du Trocadero.” Eros furnished the driver our destination as we turned a corner.

During the cab ride, we spoke of my family. He was surprised to learn we had moved to a small town instead of a fast paced city.

“Paris is where you should be. The women here die for our kind,” he laughed. “I jest, of course. I should be so ignorant as to put myself in that position.”

I forcefully smiled and avoided the topic of conversation. I could not let him know yet the circumstance behind my visit until he knew the entirety of the story. He would be more inclined to help me if he understood the degree to which I was now emotionally engrossed.

We walked through the lobby of the hotel as a familiar classical number by Chopin pleasantly played in the background. We took the elevator to the penthouse. Upon entering his elegant and contemporary suite, Eros removed his coat and offered me a drink. I took a seat on a sizeable white leather couch and watched him walk to the bar.

I modestly declined the drink and waited for him to prompt me to tell him the reason behind my appearance.

“I will assume this concerns a female,” he smiled and raised his brow.

“You assume correctly.” I straightened my back.

“Is it someone I know?”

“No.” I hesitated, avoiding his eyes. “She’s not of our kind.”

“What?!” Eros dropped his glass of wine. “Please don’t tell me this concerns a mortal?”

“Let me explain.” I said taking him by the shoulder.

His face was hard with opposition. He took a seat on a chair and anticipated my rebuttal. I deliberated on how I should approach his empathy.

“I love her.” My voice was filled with torment as I recalled my sacrifice. I saw Eros’s eyes widen in disbelief of what my lips had confessed to him.

“I thought this was a case of lust!” He scoffed. “You? In love?” His laughter pierced the room.

I remained silent as he embraced an attack of merriment. My face was hard as stone as I watched him with disgusted irritation.

“Shall I return when it is no longer humorous?” I asked scornfully.

“No, no.” Eros held his stomach trying to subdue the pain of laughter.

“I do not appreciate the mockery of your guffaw,” I warned him.

Eros collected himself.

“Forgive me, friend. It has just come as a shock from you, of all people—and in love with a human girl, to say the least.” His voice still held amusement in it.

“May we speak in a civilized manner now?” Impatience was digging at my core.

Eros sighed and closed his eyes. “I can’t help you. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, you can, Eros. You must. You have no idea what it’s like to need someone like you need the flow of your own blood.” My voice was agonizing even to my own ears.

“David, you will never be able to procreate from this relationship. It is against the law,” He paused, “My answer is firm. I cannot help you.”

Eros pressed his temples as if attempting to release the pressure of my petition.

“Eros... I have done something that has proven my love for her. But I suppose it is too much to ask of you, *brother*. I shall take leave.”

“No! Wait!” Eros interjected me.

“Forgive me, but hear my thoughts on the matter. To be in love with a human... that is impossible. You know the prohibitions of such acts. The law is impenetrable.”

He walked to the bar again to serve himself another glass of wine.

“You mentioned you had done something to prove your love. What exactly have you done, Romeo?” Eros took a sip from his wine glass and gawked at me.

“Must you really have to ask that question?” I sighed.

“I need an answer if you want my help.”

“I gifted her something of mine.”

Eros dropped his drink for a second time. He held his fist clenched to his mouth.

“Please, brother, do not tell me you have done the unthinkable?”

I stared at the hardwood floor and nodded. “It is done.”

“For the love of Deus! You’ve gone insane! It’s suicide!”

He took his hand to the rim of his nose mumbling inaudibly with his eyes closed.

A knock came at the door.

“Don’t move,” he warned with his index finger. “Stay. Right. There.”

Eros turned the doorknob and cracked the door open enough to show his face to whomever was on the other side. He exchanged a few words in almost a whisper. He fully opened the door and stepped aside giving me an expression of worry.

In walked my brothers Galen and Eryx. Galen wore a smug grin on his lip while Eryx’s expression was uneasy.

“And just what do you think you are scheming here, brother?” Galen grinned helping himself to the wine Eros had left displayed on the bar.

“I’m not.” I replied.

“Come, come,” Galen began, “we know of your affection for the mortal girl that travels to Somnium.”

Galen glanced at Eros as he awaited an explanation from me.

“That’s not possible.” Eros objected Galen’s statement.

“It’s not supposed to be possible, but it is, in fact, true,” I said, reacting to Eros’s skepticism.

“Did you think you’d get away with it, hmm?” Galen swayed the wine glass.

Eryx took a seat on one of the elegant contemporary chairs.

“Mother has sent us to retrieve you, David. She was afraid you would unwisely conspire a plan to encourage the human girl’s sentiments for you,” Eryx informed me.

“Be quick to judge when you are in my shoes. I need no lecturing. I’m quite aware of what I can and cannot do and I have done nothing.” I walked to the balcony door.

“He has not mentioned any of this to me,” Eros lied on my behalf, and also to save his own hide.

“Besides, David is fully aware that the girl must love him on her own. My power is limited to only lust when it involves human and deity relationships. The feeling would wear off in a matter of hours. In most cases, the girl would detest him afterwards. I’m sure he would not surrender his love for her to such a thing,” Eros continued to vindicate me.

Eros tried to lead Galen and Eryx into thinking that he was not aware of the situation, but if my mother had told them of the Star Crest then certainly they must have assumed I would end up here.

“Then why are you running at the first sign of defeat?” Galen asked with a mischievous stare reminding me of the happenings of the previous day.

I turned to face all three of them now standing side by side. I could think of nothing to say that would sway them from including Eros in the affair.

“I don’t need to be pestered with unnecessary questions. This was a mere social visit to a close friend.” My face was red with fury. “If you must know, I was on my way out.” I stomped past my brothers. “And don’t bother following me. I’ll be taking the long way home—by plane, as I came.”

I shook Eros’ hand. “A pleasure to see you again, dear friend. Thank you for your hospitality.”

Walking me toward the door, Eros’ face still expressed distress for himself. The council did not just frown upon cases like these. There were consequences that could lead to decades of penalty.

“Many blessings to you and yours.” Eros sounded nervous as he bid me farewell.

Eryx and Galen followed close behind me, as if they were my keepers. I swayed my hand to signal a cab and left without saying another word to them. I was furious that my mother had sent them to seek me out, yet I understood her concern. I knew the repercussions of my actions, and this was not to be

taken lightly. My mother knew I was headstrong and had reason to fear for me.

On the flight back to the States, I had time for self-reflection. I realized what I had almost accomplished, had it not been for the wisdom of Eros' decision. If my brothers had not made their presence at Eros' suite, he would have surely condoned my decision, as he was easy prey for ailing lovers.

And what of my irrationality? Was I so preoccupied with my egotism that I was willing to *obligate* her to love me? Only a tyrant would obligate anyone to such a degenerate form of affection. I would rather die soulless, than take her love by force. I could not, would not, do that to my lovely Isis.

I had let the face of desperation lead me. I well knew that it would not last if it were not meant to be so. Yet, I had grown irrational enough to attempt it. What was I thinking?

I would have to wait to see if Isis ever requited what I felt for her. For now, my best friend and enemy would be time. I would have to woo her just as any other man would.

I departed the plane and walked out of the airport. There were yet some hours left before the break of sunrise. I found a secluded area behind two parcel trucks and expelled my wings. I ascended swiftly, penetrating the cloudless sky.

My wings unconsciously took me to her home. I observed her from the window as she slept peacefully on her side. I fought the urge to enter her dreams—I was not ready to speak to her. I recoiled myself, fearful she might discover me and initiated flight to my own domicile.

As I walked in, my mother and brothers seemed to be impatiently awaiting my arrival in the den. "How noble of you to grace us with your presence, brother," Galen greeted me with his pretentiousness.

Eryx motioned me to take seat with them.

"Are you not done ridiculing me?" My harshness took them by shock. My brothers viewed my mother in question of my unruly conduct.

"David, they hold only concern for you. They simply wish to ask your motive behind your actions." My mother safeguarded my brothers.

"What actions do you speak of?" My voice was less abrasive with my mother out of respect.

"You've presented her with the Star Crest—you know well what she speaks of. Why would you do such a thing? You've slit your own wrists." Galen's face was intense.

"Until you experience this burden for yourself, you have no reason to judge my actions. I have nothing more to add." I sighed deeply and took my leave toward the flight of stairs.

"David, I do not wish to meddle in your affairs," My mother bellowed behind me.

I returned to the room aghast. "Then why send them searching for me, Mother?"

"As a precaution, David. This emotion seems to have incapacitated your intellect. Did you think I would not perceive what you premeditated? I had to find my way to the Oracles to acquire your location before you caused your own demise. And if that wasn't enough, I had to return to Caelum to calm your father. He is not pleased, my son."

My mother took my hand in hers. "You must be patient, David. The first consequence of love is pain—whether it is the fascinating jovial pain of love or the excruciating pain of a torn and tormented heart; it is pain, nonetheless."

I observed my brothers' serene faces. Their composure offered me no reason to doubt their concern for my wellbeing.

"This is for you." My mother handed me a folded napkin.

"What is this?" I asked puzzled.

"A note from her," she replied with a delicate grin on her lip.

I knew my mother's grin was indicative of her support for my decision in pursuing Isis. She was a mother and woman without equal.

"Thank you, mother." I smiled brilliantly and kissed her temple.

"Do make it a point to check your mobile. You have a multitude of missed calls," she grinned.

"From whom?" I was curious.

"See for yourself. I am no nosey Nelly," she tittered, turning her back to me and walking into the kitchen.

I followed.

"You must be famished from the flight. Shall I prepare something for you?"

"Thank you, but no. If the calls are from a certain young lady, then I have other plans for breakfast."

Chapter 10

I heard the doorbell ring and raced for the stairs.

“Mom, I’m leaving now!” I hollered from the bottom of the steps.

“Have fun,” she smiled leaning over the second floor railing still in pajamas.

I swung the door open hastily and analyzed David’s remarkable face, as if it were the first time I had ever seen him. He looked too perfect to be standing at my front door.

“Good morning, again.” He leaned to kiss both my cheeks.

“Morning.” I tried not to sound too eager.

David extended his arm revealing a pink rose with a small envelope attached to it. I sheepishly grinned and bit my bottom lip. I loved his romantic gestures—even if they might have seemed corny to anyone else.

“Thank you. It’s beautiful; I love flowers,” I said as I inhaled the rose’s perfume.

“Yes, I know. Would you please read the note?” he politely request.

I opened the envelope and unfolded the note. I read aloud.

“Beseech me;
I require no contest
Embrace me;
I shall not wince away
Proclaim me;
I will forever stay”

His eyes were poised on me as I inclined my head to view him.

“It’s amazing, David—they all are. Thank you.” I reached to him and hugged him. His body was stiff. His arms did not return my embrace.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, stepping away from him.

“No, not at all,” he assured me. “Shall we go?”

I nodded my head. “Y-yeah,” I answered.

I silently questioned his unresponsiveness as he opened the car door for me. Things were different. Why was he being this way with me now, when just a few days ago he had been treating me like... like I belonged to him? He had not called me “my lovely” once during our conversation. He had not signed his poem “Ceaselessly Yours”. Was this his attempt to let me go?

I spied David as he drove. His sight never left the road. He never once turned to gaze upon me as he had constantly done since the first time we met. Was he still upset? It would make no sense to present a girl with a rose and a poem if you were upset with them. He did not speak to me as he drove.

In a neighboring city, we arrived at a pancake house. We were seated without delay at a booth. I took it upon myself to break the silence.

“Where were you these past few days?” I studied his face as I spoke.

“Resolving some issues.” The response was short and withdrawn.

During breakfast, we exchanged half-hearted smiles twice. I involuntarily began to stab my pancakes in a semi-violent fashion, as our silence perturbed me. I purposely elongated the time it took to finish my breakfast, hoping that he would speak.

David picked at his food, hardly eating. His eyes were focused on his plate. He observed my dish and asked for the check once he noticed I was on my last bite.

We walked across the parking lot and boarded the car without saying a word. Silence prevailed on the return trip to town as well.

The car turned onto the wooded path that led to his house. I could not endure the silence and uncomfortable tension any longer.

“Pull over,” I demanded.

He set the gear on “Park” and turned off the engine.

“Did I do something I shouldn’t have?” I implored.

David shook his head from side to side and reached for the ignition. I grasped his hand before he could turn the key.

“Are you still angry with me?” I pressed.

“Of course not,” he replied as he viewed my hand holding his.

“Why are you different with me then?” I kept my hand on his, testing to see if he would slide it away from mine.

“I’m not different, Isis. I’m exactly the same.” He briefly glanced at me and turned his sight to the steering wheel.

“No, you’re not,” I pointed out. “You’re distant.”

His brow frowned in thought. He pressed his lips tightly and turned to view me.

“I’m only intending to do as you asked. I will no longer press for... .” he paused momentarily, “we can be friends. I do not wish to plague you.”

I removed my grasp from his hand and crossed my arms over my chest.

“I *don’t* want to be your friend.” My voice was unintentionally cruel.

His mouth faintly dropped open and his face grew angry. He had misinterpreted my comment.

“You’re the most unsound person I’ve ever met! I simply don’t understand you.” His jaw clenched tightly around his neck.

“Did you just call me crazy?” My voice was menacing as I knelt on the seat with my hands on my waist. My posture was defensively inclined toward him.

“Legitimately.” His upper lip curled up as he spoke through his teeth. His eyes focused on the dashboard. His hands clenched the steering wheel with such strength that it took the shape of his grip.

“David, look at me,” I ordered him in a harsh tone.

He turned his enraged glare to me. I took his face in my hands and fastened his lips with mine. I felt his arm wrap my waist, pulling me to him. He clasped me tightly. His hand ran up my spine and to the back of my head. His spicy scent was stronger now. I withdrew from him and gasped for air fearing I might collapse. I had forgotten how his kisses inebriated me.

David positioned his nose on my cheekbone.

“Why are you toying with me?” His breath was unstable. “You’re driving me mad.” A spark of anger penetrated his voice, yet he maintained his hold on me.

I cupped his cheek with my hand and stared deeply into his blue eyes.

“I would never do that to you.”

I gasped as he tightened his embrace around me.

“I’m afraid I’ll never have the opportunity to hold you like this again.” His voice was soft and vulnerable.

“You don’t have to let me go... *ever*.”

David shook his head in denial.

“My mind refuses your words, yet my vacant chest welcomes them,” he argued, his face buried in my neck.

I lifted his head and looked intently into his eyes.

“Let your heart be the victor,” I persuaded.

“No... I’ll be torn to infinite shreds if you draw back on your word.”

“How can I gain your trust?” I sought a means to sway him.

“You don’t understand how fiercely my heart craves yours.” His voice was tortured.

“Tell me.”

“It’s selfish.” He lowered his head in shame.

“Tell me,” I stressed.

“I won’t. It’s inane.”

“*Tell me*.” My voice was stern and demanding as I held his face between my hands. His eyes became vicious with fervor. His jaw clenched.

“I want you wholly, incessantly and exclusively for me,” he confessed.

I tightened my embrace around him.

“Then we are both egocentric,” I requited.

David’s face eased. His fingers ran from my face, to my jaw, to my collar. He took my lips eagerly and relentlessly, caressing them with his.

David drove us to the lakeside. We strolled around the lake’s edge, admiring the swans and newly bloomed wildflowers. Concerned that we would be seen from the house, he pulled me into the tree shadows sporadically to hold me and kiss me. His arms felt like a refuge for my reborn soul.

“I have questions for you,” I forewarned him.

“I wondered at what point you would begin to ask more,” he smiled.

“That would be now,” I informed him as we settled under the shadows on the pasture. He rested his shoulders against a tree base, drawing my back against his chest. His arms held me firmly.

“Ask away,” he prompted me. His head was nestled on my shoulder.

“Why did you leave this charm for me?” I raised my wrist for him to inspect.

“Oh dear,” he sighed. “I was hoping you would leave the difficult ones for the end.”

“A difficult girl asks difficult questions,” I joked.

“Right,” He laughed softly.

“Well...” he began, “there’s a long story behind the Star Crest. Would you like to hear it?”

I arched my neck back to view him. “If it gets me answers, then, yes.”

He kissed my forehead and began his story:

“In the center of darkness there existed an immense and extraordinary light. Light grew tired of the

darkness and created the sun, stars, and planets—the universe.

“Light realized that it had a soul, but it had no vessel to carry it in. So, it created a vessel to suit its needs. The vessel was comprised of elements that were necessary for its existence. It had limbs to travel and touch with; a mouth to savor the taste of life and to speak its thoughts; eyes to take in the glory of the universe; ears to listen with and cancel out the silence; and a heart to maintain the vessel alive. Light decided it needed a name, so it chose the name ‘Deus’—the Creator. The vessel that Deus created for himself required care. He required food, drink, and shelter. He set out to construct a place where He could dine and slumber; He created Terra—the Earth.

“One day, Deus walked upon Terra admiring the beauty of His creation, but there was no one to share in His experience. He took of His body two triangles of skin and placed them on a cloud to produce a companion. The triangles took the shape of a star. He remained in the clouds until His companion was complete.

“A female was born of the star. She was the most beautiful creature He had ever made. He thought of her as his own, being that she was made of His flesh. The woman was displeased with Deus’ assumption that she would want to be His because He was her creator. She argued with Deus telling Him she had the right to mold her own life, and left the clouds to roam Terra on her own.

“Deus became aware of an emotion that he had never before encountered—sadness. He began to grow ill. The light that radiated inside the vessel he called ‘body’ began to dim.

“The woman observed that the silver clouds where Deus lived were no longer bright. She traveled to the clouds to question Deus, but He was too weak to answer; He was dying.

“The woman, remembering that she was made of His flesh, searched her body for the star made of His skin. She found the star in her heart; it had turned to gold and radiated a fragment of the light that once belonged to Deus. She took the star from her heart and embedded it into Deus’ chest. The light flourished within Deus, returning life to Him.

“When Deus saw He was no longer ill, he removed the star from His chest. Upon turning his gaze to the woman, He realized that her skin had become wrinkled and her hair had grown white. He quickly pierced her chest with the star and placed it in her heart. Slowly, she began to revert to her original state. Deus realized that the star was her essence and that she could not live without it. After seeing her sacrifice for Him, He immediately fell in love with her.

“The woman realized that Deus had fallen ill because of the sadness He had felt in her absence. This moved her so much that she too fell in love with Deus.

“Feeling the overwhelming love in her heart, she began to cry tears of gold. The tears transformed into children marked with a gold star in the center of their chest—exactly like the one the woman contained in her heart.

“Deus and the woman realized these children were conceived of their sole love for each other and nothing more. The woman was overjoyed with her new children; She promised Deus she would stay with Him for all eternity.”

“Wow... that was a beautiful story,” I said, rotating my body to view him.

“It is, isn’t it? But I think it is more of a biography than a story,” he assessed.

“So, God has a wife?” I was astounded.

“Not the God you believe in, but Deus does,” he explained. “He is but one God with many faces, and, yet, only one.”

“I see,” I nodded.

“And this star...” I paused to view the charm, “it’s significant of both your origin and your creed?”

“Yes, that’s correct, but, at the moment, I believe it to be more symbolic of my love...” his finger tapped my nose “for you.”

“Like a promise ring?” I compared the two.

“No, much, much better,” he smirked, lifting one eyebrow.

“Oh right. I forgot I was dealing with perfection,” I taunted him.

David chuckled silently. “There’s no such thing as perfection, silly girl.”

“What was her name?” I reverted back to the subject.

“Her name *is* Starr,” he said, acknowledging her existence.

“Pretty name,” I remarked.

“That’s why this,” he took my wrist removing the charm, “is called the Star Crest.”

He placed the string with the star around my neck. I spun myself around, and I lifted my hair so that he could fasten it.

I started to think about the story he had told me regarding relationships between humans and deities. I wondered, if that rule was still in effect, why we were together now?

“David?”

“Yes, love.”

A wide smile formed across my face in reaction to his answer. I momentarily forgot what I was going to ask.

“You were saying?” David encouraged my question.

“Will you be in trouble for breaking the ‘no human slash deity relationship rule?’”

“Don’t concern yourself with that. I have the matter under control,” he said.

I observed as he gently pressed on the star that lay on my chest. He raised my chin with the tips of his fingers.

“I love you,” he said and pressed his lips tenderly over mine.

Nyx appeared on the porch as we approached the front door.

“Hello, Isis.” She kissed my cheeks. “I’ve prepared lunch.”

I was happy to hear her utter those words. I was starved. David and I had been out by the lake all morning. It was past noon now.

“Thanks, Nyx. You’re very hospitable,” I praised her.

In the dining room, Nyx had once again gone out of her way to prepare an extraordinary variation of foods. The twins were already seated at the dining table.

“What be the verdict?” Galen asked David. His face was serious.

“The verdict?” I asked confused.

“He senses my enthusiasm,” David explained. “Can I have a moment of privacy at least for this?” He smiled.

“The verdict is good then,” Galen raised his glass. “Here, here. To love everlasting.”

I blushed. What was this? It sounded like a wedding toast.

“Leave them alone.” Nyx poured iced tea into my glass. “You of a people should be so fortunate. What with your raw humor and narcissism, I would wager that you will be a bachelor your entire given life.”

Nyx made her way to the other side of the table with the glass pitcher.

“And yet you always compare me to Father. He is too narcissistic then,” Galen smirked.

Nyx tapped Galen’s head with her knuckles. “Be respectful.”

Eryx, David, and I laughed at Nyx’s attempt to settle her son.

During the course of the meal, David held my hand under the table. He, every so often, reached out to settle a strand of hair behind my ear and away from my face. Galen’s expression was at ill ease with David’s attentiveness toward me.

“Maybe, we should find human girlfriends,” Galen proposed to Eryx.

“You will do no such thing. I expect you both to keep rules in place,” Nyx said in a distressed tone.

“Well, some rules can be bent, Mother.” Eryx eyed David.

“No, Eryx. That is a much different matter than you think.” Nyx’s frustration was beginning to grow.

After lunch, David and I took a walk on one of the nature trails that had been part of the park’s hiking route. He collected flowers for me along the way.

“Please, forgive Galen’s insolence. He’s always been one to speak his mind. He means no disrespect; I assure you.” David said.

“It’s okay. It doesn’t bother me,” I remarked. There was another person on my mind at the moment—Eryx.

“What did Eryx mean when he said you were bending the rules?” I asked David.

David stopped his pace in the middle of the trail. His lips slightly pouted.

“It means that as long as there is... how shall I put this?” His brow frowned as he thought. “As long as there is no physical union between us, we are allowed to be together,” he explained.

I looked at him wide-eyed.

“Do you understand what I speak of?” he inquired, detecting the silence of uncertainty.

“Are you talking about... um...” I trailed off, and looked to the ground too embarrassed to say it.

“Yes,” he nodded, taking a step in my direction.

He placed his hand under my jaw and lifted it. I felt warmth blooming in my ears and cheeks. David smiled as he saw the rosiness take over my face.

“Why does this make you uncomfortable?” he asked, puzzled.

“I never really talk about that subject with anyone.”

“I see,” David quietly uttered. “We will not discuss this any further,” he said, noting my reluctance with the subject.

We continued to walk quietly along the vegetated path. I started to grow curious of what would happen with David and me if our relationship took a more mature course. What if we decided to get married? Maybe I was jumping the gun by thinking so far ahead, but my brain persisted on the thought. I had always thought I would have a family of my own. I’m sure my mother would be overzealous at the mere thought of grandchildren. What about David’s unchanging appearance? I didn’t know exactly how slowly he aged. It could be a century before he looked at least twenty, for all I knew.

“What are you thinking?” David interrupted my quiet reflections.

“About us,” I answered.

“What about us?” He asked pulling me toward him.

I premeditated my response, aware that it may be presumptuous to mention the word “marriage”. I was only seventeen; I had no intention of getting married anytime soon.

“Well...” I began, “let’s suppose, and this is purely hypothetical, that sometime in the future—like

years from now—our relationship advanced to something more serious. How would that work?”

“Are you saying you want to marry me?” He lightly chuckled.

“It’s purely hypothetical; I know it’s premature to bring up the subject. I just... I don’t know how that would work.”

“Ah,” David nodded understanding my concern. “You will have everything that marriage entails... everything.”

Did that include a family? If it did, his statement contradicted the law he had explained earlier. My instinct told me there was something I was not aware of.

“You’re keeping something from me.” My eyes were fixed on him.

David took my hand and brushed his lips against it.

“It’s nothing,” he smiled, taking my waist in one arm.

“I’m not convinced,” I pouted.

I forcefully loosened myself from his embrace and took a few steps to the forest’s edge.

“I detest when you do that,” David’s voice sounded hurt.

I glanced at him over my shoulder and saw his wounded face. Remorse took me over immediately. I briskly returned to him and wrapped his arms around me. I pulled down at his collar bringing his upper body to me and pecked his lips.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t realize that upset you so much.”

David smiled halfheartedly and placed his chin on my head. He did not speak. He must have been upset. I deliberated on whether to break the silence, but reconsidered. I had nothing relevant to say.

After several minutes, David took my hand and led me to a fallen tree where he seated me. He knelt before me and took both my hands in his.

“How would you feel about growing old with me?” His question caused my eyes to pop.

Was he asking me to marry him? My question had probably led him to believe that’s what I wanted, but I was in no way psychologically prepared for marriage. My mom always told me I was mature for my age, but I don’t think marriage fell under her perception of my maturity. I hadn’t even graduated from high school, yet. I wanted to attend college. I had plans—lots of plans!

“Isis?” David expected my response as I sat agape.

“But, I’m not ready for marriage,” I blurted.

David’s body trembled in amusement.

“It is not a marriage proposal,” he clarified.

“Then, what are you asking me?” I was confused.

“What if there was a way?” His voice was serious now.

“A way for you to age?” I wanted to be sure I understood the question.

“Yes.” His voice was hopeful. “What if I could age alongside you? What if, when you are ready, I could give you the commitment you were inquiring about a moment ago? Would it make you happy?”

“Undeniably,” I declared.

David’s face gleamed. He lifted my entire body to him, draping me with his arms and pressing his lips against mine. I was dizzy and weightless in his arms. It wasn’t until I sensed the sun beating fiercely on my face and lowered my head that I realized why I felt that way; we were hovering above the forest and gradually ascending in spirals through the air.

I gasped and hid my face in David’s chest as I held onto him for dear life. My eyes were tightly shut and my stomach was in knots. For a second, I thought I would lose the meal I had eaten earlier.

“Don’t be frightened, my lovely,” David tried to soothe me.

What David didn’t know was that I wasn’t frightened—I was terrified.

One of David’s arms released its embrace from my waist and lifted my head by the chin. I wanted to plead with him to continue holding me with both arms, but my teeth ground together, incapacitating my speech. My eyes remained firmly shut.

“Open your eyes,” he instructed.

I shook my head opposing his request. Suddenly, I perceived his light, seductive aroma as I inhaled. A sense of tranquility consumed me. The panic was swept away.

“Isis, open your eyes,” David insisted.

Being no longer afraid, my eyes gradually began to open. The majestic blue sky surrounded us. The ebony trees lying below seemed to be nothing more than a blanket of moss. David’s wings moved in a slow, graceful wave.

“Am I dreaming?” I asked, unable to make sense of reality.

“No,” he said gently gliding us through the breeze.

His wings carried us above the reserve and over the puddle-like lake. He circled the antique house, which I could now clearly see was located in the center of the wooded area. Slowly, we descended to the ebonies. David delicately grounded his feet on the rugged grass. His arms lowered me to the fallen tree base on which I had been seating previously. I gazed at his silhouette, which still exposed his angelic white wings.

“Can I touch them? Your wings, I mean?” I asked.

David positioned himself next to me and rotated his body giving me his back. I examined his wings briefly, and then slowly ran my fingers through his luxurious feathers with both my hands. Their texture was exceptionally soft and velvety—unlike anything I had ever touched. David observed me over his shoulder. I stroked my face against one of his wings. I inhaled their sweet perfume. The scent was warm and inviting.

David’s wings disappeared with a vaguely noticeable shimmer as he shifted his frame to view me.

“Will you be at ease tomorrow when your friends see you with me?” David was curious.

“I don’t care what anyone thinks. I just care that you’ll be with me.” My words placed a content curve on his lips.

Nyx had served tea in one of the living rooms. A large display of pastries was set upon the coffee table. Eryx and Galen were preoccupied with the sweets and didn’t even notice us come in. Nyx offered David and me a cup of tea.

“What time do you have to be home?” David asked.

“My curfew is nine o’clock on school nights, but since I’ve been out all day, I think I should probably be home earlier. My mother must be wondering about me.”

“Right,” David agreed.

Shortly after having tea, David drove me home.

“I’ll be by tomorrow morning to drive you to school,” he reminded me.

“What about that issue with Gabriel and us?” I reminded him of the matter.

“I will deal with him if the worse should occur,” he sounded confident.

“Will I see you in my dreams tonight?” I wondered.

“I don’t want you to see me while you sleep,” he said kissing my hand.

“Why not?” I sounded offended.

“I want you to miss me. I cherished the way you gazed at me this morning after not having seen me for several days.” He inclined to kiss my temple.

“You noticed that?” I was obviously not a very good actress.

“I did,” he stated.

David walked me to the front door. He lightly brushed his lips on either side of my face.

“My heart will not beat again until my sight rests upon your emerald eyes,” he whispered into my ear.

Impulsively, I pulled his face to mine, clutching him by the collar as I kissed him. He pulled away with a titter. I felt my face redden as he gazed at me.

“Good night, my lovely,” he said as he strolled along the walkway.

I watched his car drive off until it was no longer visible and then entered the house.

Claire got home within minutes of my walking in the door. I was still sighing over the ideal day I had spent with David.

Claire grabbed my face with one hand and squeezed it. “What’s that goofy smile all about?” she said, turning my face from side to side playfully.

I was so glad she was back to her normal self—at least that’s what I hoped. I pulled myself away from her grip and kept smiling.

“Hello? Earth to Isis...” She waved her hand in front of my eyes.

“Stop.” I raised my brows trying to keep my smile contained. “I’m not telling you anything.”

Claire stuck her tongue out at me. “Well, neither am I.”

“Act your age,” I laughed. I was sure my mom was fine now. She wouldn’t be acting silly if she weren’t.

Of course, three seconds later she started telling me about her afternoon out with The Judge. They had taken in a movie and gone out for ice cream afterwards. She was my happy Claire again.

It was still early for dinner, so I hung out in my room listening to my favorite Italian artist, Tiziano Ferro. It seemed like a perfect selection for the way I was feeling. He was an awesome artist... no idea what he was singing, though.

I daydreamed about the night when David sang to me. I wished I understood Italian so I knew what it was he was saying through song.

Then I remembered the problem with Gabriel. There I went ruining my perfect day. I had to think about how to get it through Gabe’s thick skull that I didn’t want him around me anymore. Maybe I should rethink telling my mother about Gabriel and his gun. I shook the thought out of my head. I didn’t want Gabriel in prison, much less overprotection from Claire. She tended to be a bit overly dramatic with these things. I guess it was the small town girl in her that made her that way.

Journal Entry 9, 6:00 P.M.

Emotion has overthrown the reign of reason. I am now the humble servant of that which should have a more passionate name. This emotion, which you have ignited in me, holds no comparison to any I’ve felt before. I am a prisoner, a servant, and a slave of this that I call by no name, for it is a

deeper state than that. Do not attempt to release me, for I will cling to you with all the threads of devotion in me.

* * *

Monday morning, Andy elbowed Bill as David and I walked to our table hand in hand. Andy started clapping when she saw that we were “together” now. Bill joined her.

They were such morons sometimes.

Galen tightened his lips. I knew he was the only one in David’s family that was uneasy about our relationship. Nyx and Eryx didn’t seem to mind at all. I think I would have reacted the same way as Galen if I were in his shoes. My brother’s safety would mean the world to me, but then again so would his happiness.

David received several warnings during first period for tilting his desk forward and putting his arms around me. He was told to keep his hands to himself for the remainder of the period.

Second period must’ve really hit the ego mark for David. He paraded me on his arm for Simon to see. He seemed to enjoy that quite a lot.

Lunch was blissful. David and I sat at a booth by ourselves since our table was overcrowded again.

“Why is your mother not against us seeing each other? It was like she was relieved when I went looking for you.” I was curious to know if he knew something that I didn’t,

“My mother believes that because you have found a way to travel to Somnium without knowledge of its existence, you were destined to find me. “You see, fate plays a critical part in life’s journey to reach your undeniable destiny.” David began.

“Wait, wait... fate and destiny?” I interrupted. “I’m not grasping the whole genius-deity theory of life,” I said.

“No, love, it’s not a theory; it’s the way things are,” he started his explanation again. “Fate is the series of events in your life that brings you to your destiny. It’s like, a mathematical equation: one plus one equals two, and will always equal two because it is a true statement, right? Well, imagine that the number ones are fate and the answer—which is always equal to two—is destiny. It doesn’t matter how many ones you add to the equation, the answer is always the undeniable truth. Does that make sense to you?”

“Now it sort of does,” I smiled.

David tilted his face to mine.

“You’re my undeniable truth—my destiny,” he murmured, reaching for my lips.

“Ehem,” Principal Miller cleared her throat. “None of that on campus kids.”

David wrinkled his nose. “Yes, ma’am,” he acknowledged the principal’s request.

“Thank you,” Ms. Miller said and strode away.

David reached for my hand and kissed it.

“I was thinking that I would like to invite your mother to dinner sometime this week,” David revealed.

“Why would you want to do that?” I creased my brow.

“I simply thought it would be a nice gesture.”

“I’ll let her know.” I could already hear the big commotion Claire would make over this.

“I would like to extend the invitation personally. It is the proper way, after all.”

“Sure,” I smiled. “That would be nice.”

Out of fear that Gabriel might have called, I refused to check my phone until after school when I was in a safe haven—at home. I ignored that worry and sent it to the back of my mind where it wasn't immediately perturbing. I wasn't going to ruin this day.

I had trouble convincing David to come inside the house when he dropped me off. I insisted that my mother had the utmost trust in me. He insisted it wasn't proper for him to be in my house without Claire's consent. He won the argument—as customary, it was.

After several attempts to say good-bye, he literally pulled me out of the car and walked me to the porch. I didn't want him to go, but I knew he wouldn't stay and let Claire find him there. He claimed again it wasn't “proper”.

David promised to return later that evening to speak to Claire about the dinner invitation. I thought that was quite gentlemanly of him.

“Mom, I have to tell you something,” I told her as soon as she set her purse down.

Claire's eyes widened, “Oh my God, you're pregnant.” Her hand automatically covered her mouth. I thought she was playing around for a moment, but then I saw the panic in her face. I forgot how those words scared her witless.

“No!” I said in an offended tone. “We talked about that already.” I dropped myself on the sofa with a frown.

“I'm sorry, honey. I know I overreact with those words but that's the way I told... nevermind, nevermind,” She shook her head. “What do you have to tell me?”

“David's coming over later.” I turned the T.V. off and walked to the stairs. “I'll be in my room.”

“Isis, don't be angry, honey. I'm sorry.”

“You need to trust me, Mother.” I was a little hurt that she would think that when I had never given her reason to doubt me.

“Just this afternoon I was telling David how much you trusted me. Was I wrong to tell him that?” I stood at the foot of the stairs as I spoke.

“No, honey. You have to understand that I'm just a drama queen when it comes to my only baby. I can't help it, Isis. You know this is me...this is your mother. One day you'll understand what it's like to want the best for your children. I'm terrified that you're a teenager with raging hormones, because I already lived through that.”

“I know, Mom. You've told me this before... a *dozen* times. I'm just asking for a little credit. Have faith in me.”

Claire's lips formed a straight line. “I don't doubt you, Isis. You're a good girl.”

“Thanks.” I gave her a crooked smile. “I'll be in my room.”

Claire was making a ruckus, moving pots and pans around in the kitchen, getting dinner started. She didn't hear the doorbell. I pranced down the stairs and opened the door.

“Hi,” I said motioning him to come in.

David smiled and walked in the house.

“I'll go get my mother.” I walked backwards a few steps and then turned to veer toward the kitchen.

“Mom, David’s here.”

“Okay. Is he staying for dinner?” She was chopping broccoli on a wooden cutting board.

“I don’t know.” I hesitated to tell her he wanted to speak to her for fear she might overreact once again. “Can you come to the living room?”

Claire stopped her chopping and looked at me like I had said something wrong. She rinsed her hands and wiped them dry on her apron. I could tell she was this close from voicing some other tragic event she had thought up in her wild imagination.

“Good evening, Mrs. Martin,” David greeted her in the same manner he greeted me—with a kiss on each cheek.

“Evening, David. How’s your mother doing?”

“Fine, thank you. And yourself?”

“I’m well.” Claire glanced at me probably wondering what this was about. “Would you like to stay for dinner?”

“I thank you, but no. I am actually here to extend a dinner invitation to you and Isis for sometime later in the week, when it is more convenient for you.”

“Oh,” Claire was surprised. “I’d love to. How about tomorrow night?”

“Perfect.” David’s dimples creased as he smiled.

“It’s a date,” Claire smiled. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to finish up in the kitchen.”

“Are you sure you won’t stay for dinner?” I asked. “She makes the best broccoli quiche.”

“Tempting, but I do apologize. I’ve already eaten.”

“Hang out with me for a little while?”

“Yes, of course. But, only until your dinner is ready.”

Claire didn’t take very long to put the quiche in the oven. She joined us in the living room asking David about the places he had lived.

“I would love for Isis to see all those places one day.” David squeezed my hand briefly. “The cultures are so different.”

“I can imagine,” Claire nodded.

The timer on the stove beeped several times. Claire excused herself and went into the kitchen.

“Time for me to take my leave.” David noted the time on his watch. “I think I’ve overstayed my visit.”

“It’s not that late,” I set him at ease.

“Yes, I realize that, but Galen is having trouble digesting our relationship and his comments make my mother tense. I should have called to let her know I would be staying for longer than expected.”

“What comments?” I frowned.

“About Gabriel and this.” He pointed to the Star Crest hanging from my neck.

“I’m concerned also,” I admitted.

“As am I, but that won’t keep me from you.”

David stood from the couch and walked to the door. I closed the front door behind me. He lightly pecked my lips and left.

Chapter 11

Claire set the broccoli quiche and wild rice on the table. She plopped down on a chair with her oven mitt and apron still on. Carefully, she cut two triangles off the quiche and served them on our plates.

“It’s nice of your new playmate to invite us to dinner.” Her beautiful smile gleamed.

I nodded as I took a taste of the piping hot food. It was delicious. I wondered if it would be up to Chios’ standards. I wouldn’t shy away from showing off my own cooking skills for David, if given the opportunity. I had my mother to thank for that.

“Are you ever going to tell me what’s going on between you two?” Claire said taking off the mitt and placing it next to her dish.

“Nope,” I smiled. “Not until you tell me what was going on with you last week.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “That again,” she sounded bothered.

“No deal?” I asked smugly.

“No deal.” Claire pursed her lips.

I was washing the last of the dishes when the phone in my pocket started vibrating. It was Krystle, one of my best friends that had left for college earlier in the school year.

Krystle was attending the University of Texas in San Antonio along with Patrick. Word was that Patrick and her were an item now. It had been ages since we had talked. We had texted back and forth but only scarcely since she left. She had graduated high school with so many college credit hours that she was considered a sophomore in college already. That’s a smart girl for you.

“It’s so much work,” Krystle complained. “Research papers and projects and presentations... I’m so happy I’ll be coming home for spring break this weekend.”

“That’s awesome! We can hang out with Andy and the rest of the guys.” I was excited to see my friend after three months of being apart. “So what do you want to do when you get here?”

“Sheila told me the Spring Festival is going on this weekend.”

“Man, I miss her... She lives here and I never see her because she’s so busy all the time.” I leaned against the kitchen sink, staring at the floor.

“I know,” Krystle sounded glum. “I hardly talk to her anymore either and we don’t even have time to text. She’s super busy with work and school and all. I don’t know how she does it. I can barely handle my full load of classes.”

“You’re scaring me. I don’t know if I want to go to college anymore,” I kidded.

“Shut up. You know you’re going,” she giggled. “So have you given thought to where you’ll be attending?”

“Still debating.” I sighed. “The tuitions are ridiculous.”

“Tell me about it. If it weren’t for Financial Aid and student loans, I’d be illiterate right now.”

“Too dramatic,” I laughed.

“I know. It’s the stress. So, I’ll see you when I get there?”

“Absolutely.”

“Talk to ya later. Bye.” Her voice turned into two different tones on the “bye” part.

“Bye.” I hung up.

The sky was bluer, clearer and more beautiful this morning. Had there not been the humidity factor, the climate would have been perfect.

David was wearing a black polo type shirt with a white shirt underneath. He looked like a model for the designer clothes he was wearing.

“Ready, gorgeous?” He asked as we drove onto the school campus.

“Ugh,” I sighed. “How many more days till spring break?”

“Not long.” David kissed my hand. “What are we planning for spring break?”

“We?” I smiled. “That sounds nice.”

“Do you think your mother would let you travel?”

“Not unless the apocalypse was nearing.” The edge of my mouth pulled to one side.

“Then I shall find a way to keep us entertained here.”

David’s arm was wrapped around my waist as we walked into the school doors. He held me like I was a fragile glass vase. His embrace was soft, careful and firm. I was in heaven, until the smell of the breakfast pizza hit my nostrils. Yuck!

“What is that horrendous odor?” David pinched his nose.

“Let’s sit on the patio tables today,” I said, leading him out of the exit next to the theatre arts center.

“Thank goodness for clean, pure air.” He breathed deeply.

As we took our seats, the rest of our entourage came through the glass doors to join us. Eryx and Galen sat at a corner table with two other guys, while Bill and Andrea sat with David and me. There were no other students out on the patio besides us.

I let Andy and Bill know that Krystle would be in town for Spring Break and about our plans to meet up at the Spring Carnival. David was quiet while Andy and Bill exchanged ideas of what to do while Krystle and Patrick were in town. I realized David was probably quiet because he had meant it when he said he would find a way to entertain us during Spring Break.

“David, you’re really gonna like Patrick, Krystle, and Sheila.” Andy said excitedly. “They’re such good people.”

“I don’t think Sheila is going to make it to the carnival. She probably has to work,” Bill noted. “Maybe we can meet up with her on one of the days we go to the beach.”

“Well, we had kind of made plans for the week already,” I told Bill while I glanced at David.

“Nothing is set in stone.” David placed his arm around me. “I wouldn’t mind meeting your friends.”

“Woo hoo!” Andy raised her fists in the air with alternating up and down movements. “Spring Break at the beach!”

The day went fast. First period, David managed to keep his hands to himself.

I had a presentation that I had to wing in Physiology—second period—without Simon. Simon took it upon himself to change his seating arrangement. The teacher must have not minded because he didn’t ask him to return to his original lab table.

Lunch was a blast talking about how great Spring Break would be. Even Galen and Eryx took interest in the idea of a little recreation and relaxation at The Island.

After school, the excitement of the week to come was still alive in Andy and Bill. I could tell they

too were looking forward to hanging with the old group. We all said goodbye and boarded our respective vehicles.

“Come,” David moved his index finger back and forth.

I shifted my weight to the driver’s side of the car. David pressed his pale soft lips over mine in a tender, swaying motion. My mind fogged momentarily.

“Four hours I’ve been waiting to finish that,” David sighed, “but well worth the wait,” he grinned giving me one final quick peck.

“Touché,” I corresponded.

I asked David to drive us to my house so that we could talk. My mother had a meeting and wouldn’t be home until past six o’clock, so our dinner plans would be later than expected.

David was reluctant to enter the house claiming Claire would disapprove of his visit without her presence. I explained that she trusted me and reiterated it time and again as he gave me the same excuse. Finally, I swayed him.

I threw my book bag on the recliner and sat on the sofa.

He was uneasy even about sitting down.

“I must not stay long. Though my brothers and mother say they do not wish to meddle in my affairs, they still hold concern for me.” David sat at the edge of the sofa.

“Because of Gabriel, isn’t it?” I lowered my head knowing I was to blame.

David nodded.

“They are afraid Gabriel will confront me any given day. The only reason they matriculated in school was to maintain a watchful eye on me. My family is wary of my judgments at the present. They believe that I’m liable to act impulsively and unintentionally reveal myself.”

“What? Why would they think that?”

“Because I have recently given them reason to doubt me.” He frowned, irritated by his own words.

“What did you do?” I refused to believe David could do any harm.

David grimaced and turned away from me for an instant.

“Isis, love is irrational. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, more so than anyone, I would say.”

David took my hand and placed it on his face.

“This is difficult to say. In my desperation, I asked someone to break a rule that may have cost him and me a great deal of problems.” He examined my face and continued. “I asked a deity to... distort your emotions so that you would love me.” David stopped to analyze me again.

I felt rage erupt from within my core. My eyes flooded with the torment of betrayal that his statement had produced. As he tried to speak again, I sprung to my feet and fiercely struck his face with the palm of my hand. Though, I doubt I physically hurt him, his face reflected pain.

“How could you do that to me?!” I screamed over streaming tears. “You made me believe that I loved you?!”

David draped his arms over me constricting my movement. I tried to force myself from his restraint, but his strength was much greater than mine. He didn’t even look like he was making an effort to keep me confined.

“No, Isis, that’s not true,” he tried to quiet me.

“You’re a liar... a hypocrite... a charlatan!” I accused him through my gritted teeth. “Let me go! Get out of my house!”

“Isis, I didn’t follow through; I didn’t do it. Listen to me, please. Your emotions are of self-will. You love me on your own.” His words pleaded for my comprehension.

I stopped struggling and listened to him.

“I swear on my life, I did not go through with it. I’ll swear on anything you want, I’ll do your bidding, but believe me, please... please,” David’s face was consumed by terror as he pled with me.

I considered his plea in silence. My anger was still evident. David released me from his grasp. He dropped before me on one knee and took my waist between his hands.

“I implore you,” he stressed each syllable.

I never imagined I would see the day a god would kneel before me, begging me to have faith in his words; it was just so wrong. I couldn’t bear to see him this way: kneeling and in torture over my verdict. I questioned my emotions—did I really care for him? Did I trust him enough to accept his claim and forgive him? I relied on instinct rather than reason. My decision was made.

“I believe you,” I said to him.

A heavy gust of air fled David’s lungs. He sprang forward, hugging me. I extended my hands and placed them on either side of his face.

A tingling sensation swept over the tips of my right hand. I raised it from David’s face to view it.

“My fingers...” I uttered as I brought my hand closer to my eyes.

My nails and fingertips were a purplish black hue. The color and tingling sensation were steadily traveling up in the direction of my knuckles.

“No!” David gasped with his eyelids wide open in panic.

Vigorously, he lifted me and ran out the door. He soared into the air at an astonishing rate. I had no time to react. The tremendous pressure of the wind made my body ache and burned against my skin. Abruptly, David’s body jerked as he landed. I heard his feet pounding on the ground below. My head swirled uncontrollably. Everything around me was a smear. I was going to be sick.

“I have to throw up,” I moaned.

“Try to hold it, love, please!” David insisted, as he ran with me in his arms.

I shut my eyes to block out the spinning, but the nausea persisted.

“I can’t feel my hand,” I managed to mumble.

My hand was cold and limp. The pins and needles sensation had now reached my wrist.

I heard David’s steps echoing. We were indoors somewhere, but I didn’t want to open my eyes. My stomach was still in knots.

“Mother! Gemini!” David’s eager cries bounced off the walls.

He lay me down on something soft. I heard footsteps approaching hastily in our direction. Someone took my right arm as if examining it.

“I have to throw up,” I warned again.

“Calm her,” I recognized Nyx’s voice.

I felt a light pleasurable breeze on my face as I inhaled. My head was light, but the dizziness was gone. My stomach began to settle. My body relaxed, and I slowly opened my eyes.

David was kneeling by my head. Nyx sat next to me, while the twins stood behind her. I examined my hand. It looked like it was beginning to decompose from the fingers. The dark purple color was a third of the way up my lower arm. The tip of my pinky fell off. I should have been frantic, but I was completely unruffled. My train of thought was obscured. I didn’t realize what I was witnessing.

“You must forgive her,” Nyx said to David.

“I do, I forgive her,” David assured her.

“No, David. You must truly feel it,” she advised him.

“Mother, I should be the one asking her for forgiveness,” David’s voice was disturbed.

“She struck you. Forgive her... NOW,” Nyx commanded in aggravation.

“I forgive you, Isis,” David said stroking my head.

I studied my arm. The blackness was at the base of my elbow. The tingling did not subside. It looked like something was boiling under my skin, slowly moving upward. The muscle tissue was exposed in my hand. I could see bone and veins all turning black. The rancid smell of putrid meat made me gag.

I looked up at everyone’s face. Galen and Eryx’s eyes were focused on my arm in despair. Nyx was crying, but trying to hold her composure.

“It’s not working,” David urged Nyx.

“You don’t have much time, David. If the corrosion reaches her chest, she’s going to die,” Nyx’s voice was broken.

“I’m going to die?” I mumbled, looking at each of their faces. No one answered.

I always thought I would be afraid of dying. I carried that fear with me since I was twelve, after looking inside that coffin. But now that it was my turn, I was ready. This was the destiny that was written for me.

“I can’t do it, Mother. I have nothing to forgive her for,” David’s hopeless tone acknowledged my question.

If I was going to die, I needed to tell David I loved him. I owed him that much after all the emotional stress he had endured. I don’t know why I hadn’t told him before.

I glanced at my arm. The decomposition was at my elbow and the tingling had crept up near my shoulder. I didn’t have time to waste.

“David,” I called for his attention.

His desolate eyes rested on mine.

“I love you, David. I’m sorry for not telling you, but I’ve loved you since the first time I saw you. I’m sorry I hurt you when all you ever did was love me. I need you to forgive me before...” I reached out for David with my left hand, “before it’s over.”

I could feel the tingling a few inches past my shoulder. Nyx pulled my blouse at the neckline exposing my collarbone and part of my shoulder.

“Forgive me, David. I love you,” I waited for his requite. I needed to hear that he loved me one last time.

“I do; I forgive you, Isis,” David uttered restraining his tears. “Forgive me for doing this to you.”

“Tell me you love me,” I requested.

“With all of my heart,” David whispered stroking my forehead.

I could no longer feel my arm, my shoulder and part of my chest. And then I felt it—a tearing of rigorous pain in the middle of my chest. I writhed in anguish, screaming at the top of my lungs. My whole body jerked and then there was darkness. The end was here.

Silence.

“It goes in retrocede!” Eryx cried, pointing to my arm.

David raised my body to a sitting position.

“Gemini, flush her,” David ordered.

Eryx and Galen set one of their hands on my shoulders and joined their free hands, palm to palm.

Their lower arms formed an “A” between them.

A strange suctioning tugged the inside of my arm and hand, making my fingers twitch inward.

A black stream tunneled under the twins’ skin. The flow traveled from the hand with which they grasped my shoulders, then over their chests and to their raised arms. A deep plum colored ball formed between their palms.

Meanwhile, my arm regained feeling. The decomposition gradually was resurfaced by skin. At some point, my pinky was restored, and my senses started to recuperate.

The twins removed their hands from my shoulders. They lowered their arms and held the melon-sized sphere out to Nyx and David.

The ball was formed of coiled maggot-like creatures. Their little repugnant bodies squirmed over one another in a spiral motion.

David blew a gust of breath over the circular mass. The creatures ceased their movement immediately.

Nyx took the sphere and compressed it between her hands, then separated her lips. Low rattling hisses accompanied a black and pink serpentine tongue that slithered out of her mouth and wrapped the sphere. Her tongue rolled in a back and forth pace dissolving the ball of larva with a dense clear fluid. My weak stomach could not tolerate the sight or repulsive smell. I squirmed and turned away, gagging.

As I listened to the hissing die down, the shock of what had just happened sunk in. I realized I had been a hairline away from dying. I didn’t know if I was more disturbed by the near death experience or the family’s extraordinary exhibit. I allowed my upper body to fall back on the couch.

“Isis?” David sounded alarmed.

“I need a minute,” I said impassively, staring blankly past David and fainted.

Nyx was positioned at my side. She rubbed my arm soothingly as I came to.

“Well, you’re certainly a feisty little thing, aren’t you?” Galen grinned sitting across the way from David and me in the living room.

I couldn’t argue because I knew that was true about me.

“David must have done something very wrong,” Eryx added.

“He didn’t do anything,” I defended David.

“Well, if that is the way you express your love to him, I’d hate to see you express your scorn,” Galen laughed.

“We can leave this subject for another time,” David addressed the twins.

Nyx raised a cup of tea to my lips.

“I can sense you’re feeling better,” she said, setting the tea on the coffee table.

I observed her mouth as she spoke trying to catch a glimpse of her tongue. It looked normal enough now.

“You gave us all a very good scare,” she paused, taking my right hand to inspect it. “If Gemini hadn’t flushed the parasites from within you, this hand would have remained black and deformed; it’s a life penance. Thank goodness David pardoned you when he did.”

“Thank you for...,” I swept all of their faces.

“You would have done the same. I’m sure,” Eryx replied. “But David is the one who deserves the thanks; after all, he is the one that saved you by acting with haste.”

“I am also the one that unintentionally sentenced her,” David creased his brow.

“But I slapped you,” I took the blame.

“Let there be no fault,” Nyx settled the subject.

In the frenzy of things, we had left David’s car parked on the curb in front of my house. Eryx offered to drive us back before my mother got home, but David insisted flying was much faster—driving back was my first choice. I thanked Nyx and the twins again for whatever it was they had done to spare my life.

“You should consider anger management,” Galen teased me as David and I stepped out the front door.

The flight home was easier on my stomach than the previous. I didn’t require any of David’s “assistance” to survive it.

“What if someone sees us up here?” I realized there was still daylight as we neared my house. Thankfully, my mom’s car wasn’t there yet.

“We’re not visible,” he was quick to answer.

“Not visible... like, invisible?”

“Camouflaged, actually,” he said, setting me down in my living room, “by the sky.”

“Oh,” I responded, not really sure how that was possible. Of course, by now, I realized everything was possible.

As David and I took a seat on the couch, we heard a beep coming from the inside of my book bag. I walked over to the recliner and reached inside the bag for my cell phone. The alert alarm indicated I had missed events: nine missed calls, nine voice mails, seven text messages—all from Gabriel. I dropped the phone back into the bag ignoring the missed events.

My head swerved in David’s direction. He was gazing at me in that way that made me feel like I was his Hope Diamond. I took a spot on the couch next to him.

“Today was the single worst day of my entire existence.” David held his head between his hands. “I had never felt more helpless or afraid than I did in those eternal minutes. If I would have lost you . . .,” he shook his head refusing the notion. “I would have ripped out my own heart.”

“I don’t want us to think about that anymore. It’s over now and all that matters is that we’re still together,” I said leaning my head on his arm.

“But I have to think about it, Isis. I’m the one that caused it,” he frowned. “Don’t you see what might have happened that afternoon if Gabriel would have struck me before all those people?”

The anxiety I had seen in David and his brothers that afternoon was now so apparent to me. They knew what could have taken place if Gabriel had decided to take a swing at David and accomplished it. There would have been no way to save him. Everyone around us would have witnessed the

hideous parasitic larva devour him whole. The memory of the horrific flesh eating pests made my skin crawl. I shuddered as visions of my decomposed arm ran through my head as if I were reliving it once again.

I just realized it,” I said reflecting on the idea that I would have to find a way to end Gabriel’s aggressiveness toward David.

“What you must think of me now,” David’s face was stiff, “I am nothing short of a monster or a freak to you.”

“No,” I objected, “I don’t think any of that.” My hand cupped David’s face. “I love you.” The words came easily now.

David’s arms drew me close to him.

“You have no idea how I’ve longed for those three words to bloom from your lips,” he stated.

Our faces met in a flowing kiss. David’s hands lightly applied pressure to my waist setting my back on the couch. The warmth of his breath traveled along my neck. One of his hands found its way to the back of my knee.

The sudden stirring of a car’s engine in the driveway signaled my mother’s arrival.

“My mom’s home,” I warned trying to sit up.

David jumped off the couch and looked at me wide eyed. I saw the color dissipate from his face.

“Hi kids, sorry I’m so late,” Claire said, not noticing anything different. “The meeting went on and on,” She explained, letting the bun in her hair loose. “Let me freshen up and I’ll be right down so we can leave.”

Claire climbed the stairs and left us. David walked over to me and placed his arms around me.

“I would have been embarrassed to have been caught in such a compromising situation. Promise me you won’t ever kiss me like that again.” He tittered.

At the restaurant, about half way through the meal, my mother posed questions about David’s father. David told her that his father was a shoe sales man.

Claire’s mouth dropped.

“You don’t believe me,” he laughed. “My father—Alezzander—owns shoe manufacturing companies in Greece and Italy where my family has lived on and off through the years. Most of my father’s time is spent traveling abroad for business affairs.”

Claire was impressed. I could see her face light up more as David continued to tell her about all the countries he had been to. She was even more impressed when David told her how many languages he spoke—seven, including English and Spanish.

Then David did something that neither my mother nor I expected:

“Mrs. Martin,” he started, “I would like to ask your permission to court your daughter. Now, I realize that you may think my asking might be all too premature as Isis and I have only known each other for but a short period; however, I assure you that my intentions are good and sincere.”

As I choked on my lemonade, after listening to the first sentence of David’s speech, I wanted to protest. If the year had been 1823, I would have conformed to the time’s practices. However, being that Women’s Rights had been in effect for a while now, I would not have this. Plus, I was almost eighteen; I didn’t require my mother’s permission to have a boyfriend.

Mom softly chuckled at David’s charming speech.

“Yes, you may court my daughter, David,” she smiled, “That is just the sweetest thing I’ve ever

heard. I'll have to praise Nyx on what a good job she's done teaching you all this properness."

"Well, actually, it's out of respect for both the girl to be courted and her parents. It's a very old custom," David explained.

Seeing how pleased they both were with the dialogue and then appreciating the reason behind his petition, I reconsidered my objection. After all, it was ideally sweet of him to consider my mother.

I was shocked when, after David left us, my mother did not bombard me with questions. Apparently, David had done a good job of settling all her doubts with the whole "permission to court your daughter" thing.

I got ready for bed and remembered about all the missed events on my phone. There was no putting it off—I was going to have to deal with it now.

The voice mails all said the same thing: "Isis, I need to talk to you. Please answer your phone." The text messages were basically the same also with the exception of two: "Who was that guy you were with?" and "Don't I mean anything to you?"

I held the phone in my hand knowing I had to get it over with as soon as possible, but lacked a full proof plan to stop Gabriel from pursuing me.

If I told him David was my boyfriend, Gabriel would be tempted to pick a fight with David. Since Gabriel had seen David and I in what seemed like an intimate moment, I couldn't lie and say we were only friends. I'd have to figure it out as I went along.

I dialed Gabriel's phone number crossing my fingers and hoping he wouldn't answer, but as my luck would have it, he answered. Loud music was blaring in the background accompanied by shrills and laughter.

"Gabriel?" I said after several seconds of the line being open.

"I knew you'd call me," he yelled over the noise. "Can I come over?"

"Are you kidding me? No!" I scoffed.

"Can I come over tomorrow?"

"NO! I don't want to see you. The only reason I returned your call is to tell you that I want you to stop calling and texting me. It's over. I don't know how to make that any clearer. I've practically spelt it out for you."

"Isis..." The music sounded softer now, like he had moved away from the party. "I'm not happy. I feel like everyone's abandoned me, including you. Sometimes, I just want to..."

There was a long pause.

"You want to what?" My chest felt congested and heavy. I started feeling compassion for him. For three years he had been my best friend. I couldn't leave him alone at his lowest. It just didn't feel right to me.

"Never mind. I'll talk to you later. I can't hear you. They're yelling your name," he raised his voice.

I separated the phone from my ear and looked at it. I couldn't hear anyone besides him screaming on the line. "Who's yelling?" I asked confused.

"Bye, Isis."

"Wait! Who's..." I stopped talking when I heard the dial tone.

I felt bad for Gabriel. I knew what it was like to feel alone and have no one understand you. I went through that when my dad died. I couldn't talk to Claire because she was devastated and none of my

friends understood what it was like to lose a parent. My dad took a large part of my heart with him. These were different circumstances, however, and I sincerely hoped Gabriel sought out the help he needed as far as the drug abuse was concerned.

Journal Entry 11, 10:17 P.M.

There I lay, deteriorating by the fault of my own hand. My ill will to listen with virtue placed me in that tomb.

The irony of life is to realize that you live only to die. Life is a gift that only the ones that have come to face the direst of situations may understand. Whether you live with honor, glory, or disgrace, Death will come without warning. She arrives at the hour that best suits her—wearing no cloak, carrying no weapon. She steals the breath and interrupts the beating of the pulse without prejudice.

Today, I am alive, by the grace of God and the gods themselves, for they had within their reach the power to negate her.

* * *

The rest of the week was utterly amazing. Gabriel stopped calling, and David and I couldn't be happier.

"Tomorrow is Saturday," David smiled. "You must be eager to see your friends."

"Yes, I'm really excited," I smiled as we walked through the hallway on our way to the cafeteria. "I hope you like them."

"I am positive that I will," he grinned. "I have something to ask of you. It concerns next week."

"What is it?" I stopped in the middle of the hallway to listen.

"My father will be visiting and I'd like you to meet him. He will be in town only for a pair of days. Do you think you can spare Monday afternoon to make his acquaintance?"

"Of course," I smiled.

I felt like our relationship was reaching another level of seriousness. It didn't feel wrong or rushed. I felt like everything was happening at the right time. My worry about the dilemma with the Doctrinal Laws was still alive, however. I was afraid that his father would have a problem accepting our relationship.

"Does your father approve of us?" I bit my lip hoping to hear a positive response.

"That's something I wanted to mention." David folded his arms over my shoulders from behind me and started walking. "He's not aware that we are involved."

"What?" I gasped and turned to view him. "He's going to kill you."

"He shall do no such thing. I have my family's support. He will listen to reason," He promised.

"Okay," I said with a note of distress.

School let out early for the Spring Festival Parade where the Miss Spring contenders would be parading before the actual pageant and carnival took place. None of us would be attending the parade.

Andy, Bill, David, and I decided to go to the movies, while the twins bailed on Bill and went home. They weren't moviegoers, I supposed.

I noticed David more relieved when his brothers weren't around. I believe it was because Galen—though he had lowered his guard—was still a bit uneasy over the fact that David and I were dating. I didn't like being babysat either.

We watched a corny teen romance movie with which I fell so much in love. Andy thought it was great too. Bill fell asleep during the film. David said it lacked poetic intelligence and passion, but that overall it was okay.

After the movie we ate a light snack at the food court. While we were seated, Bill called Patrick to make plans for the next day. Andy stole the phone away from Bill to speak to Krystle. Andy wanted the “4-1-1” on Krystle and Patrick.

“It’s official then? You’re together?” Andy spoke into the phone. “I knew you liked him! Poor guy you tortured him for almost three years!” Andy laughed.

Bill sighed and gave Andy an impatient look.

“I gotta go, Krystle. Bill is giving me ‘the look’. See you tomorrow.” She handed Bill his phone.

“Geez, woman!” Bill said putting his phone in his pocket. “You’re eating up my minutes with your gossip.”

“Whatever, stingy,” Andy rolled her eyes.

The Toyota was parked in the driveway when David and I reached my house. I invited him in but he said he had some things to do before he was free for the weekend. It was always related to Somnium, so I didn’t bother to ask.

I had asked once how he accomplished to do that and be here at the same time. He compared it to multitasking. He said it was like running several programs at the same time. I would probably never understand that.

Claire was seated in the living room staring blankly at the television.

“Hi, Mom,” I said hugging her and kissing her cheek. “How’d your day go?”

“Fine.” Her face was deep in thought.

“You okay?” I tensed up. I hoped she didn’t go into autopilot again. I hated seeing her depressed.

She reached over, taking the T.V. remote and turning the television off. “Sit down.” She patted the sofa.

“I went to visit my doctor today.”

“Are you sick?” I had a sudden rush of panic.

“No, I’m in tip top shape, but we did have a talk.” She pressed her lips.

“About what?”

“You.”

“But I’m not sick,” I said puzzled.

My mom reached for her purse and pulled out a case that looked like a cosmetic compact. She opened it. Inside was a circle of pink little balls with numbers on them.

“Mother, are those what I think they are?” I maintained my calm.

Claire nodded. “I asked her for some pills for you to consider taking, Isis.”

“What?” I mumbled between my teeth. “I can’t believe you did that! We’ve talked about this, Mom. Why do you insist on this topic?” I stood from the couch and kicked the recliner. “For the love of Pete!”

“I said consider it. I’m not obligating you to take them. I just want you to be ready when that time comes, honey. Please don’t think I don’t trust you. I’m trying to protect you. I know how personal a topic this is to be discussing with your mother. I had to live through it with mine. I’m every bit as uncomfortable as you are.”

She walked over to me and handed me the compact.

“Keep it. Use it if and when you’re ready and I will never ask you if you do or don’t take them.”

She searched through her purse and pulled out a business card.

“You can make an appointment if you need some more. I won’t bother you with this subject anymore. I’ve done all a mother can do and I’ve been as nosey as I can, and I’m sorry about that.”

Claire walked up the stairs and left me holding the birth control pills in one hand and a doctor’s business card in the other. I didn’t know if I should be angry or embarrassed. Maybe both.

I slowly climbed the stairs and entered my room. I shut the door and opened the compact to view the round pastel colored pills. I snapped them shut and shoved the case to the back of my underwear drawer along with the business card.

I wondered why Claire never tried to convince me to take those kinds of pills before, when I was with Gabriel. Maybe she thought I was too young then. Maybe she saw the way I looked at David as opposed to Gabriel. I had noticed it in myself. I was completely head over heels in love with David. I felt like my existence depended on him.

The night had a bit of a chill to it. I was so excited to see Krystle and Patrick at the Spring Festival carnival tonight. Andy, Krystle, Sheila and I shrieked when we saw each other at the gate. Sheila had been able to come along after all.

I introduced David to Sheila, Krystle and Patrick. Patrick was shocked that I had a boyfriend already. I could see it in his face.

“Where can *I* get one of those?” Sheila asked nudging me.

Krystle acted cool about it and asked me quietly if David had any brothers then giggled.

“As a matter of fact...” I said loud enough for Patrick to hear.

Krystle slapped my arm and laughed. “Shush!” She commanded.

“I call shot gun on that,” Sheila raised her hand. “Sorry, Krystle.”

We had the best time on the rides. The Ferris wheel was my favorite. I got to ride with David—alone.

“We’re supposed to make-out on this ride,” I said in a serious tone.

David chuckled loudly. “We are?”

“Yes, all the cool kids are doing it.” I maintained my seriousness.

“Peer pressuring me, are you?”

I nodded. “Is it working?”

“Yes,” He said holding me against him tightly. He gently took my lips in his. His breath was warm and steady. His sandalwood scent radiated from within him. His sweet lips made me forget where I was.

“You’re a bad influence.” He pecked my lips twice more.

We were almost toward the end of the ride when David gave me the Hope Diamond gaze.

“Will you be mine forever?” The words escaped my lips.

“And evermore.” He replied kissing my forehead.

I spent Sunday helping my mother with the housework, then took a long shower. David picked me up in the afternoon to accompany Nyx and him on a shopping excursion to an outlet mall in a nearby

city.

That woman could shop. I thought I liked retail therapy, but she took the cake. I was so tired of walking in the heat, that I finally sat on a bench and asked David if he thought Nyx would be much longer.

“We’ll have to drag her out by the hair,” he replied.

“Oh my gosh,” I said letting my head fall back. “I can’t take this anymore. I need air conditioning, a shower, and a diet soda.”

“I’ll let her know we’re leaving with or without her.” David wrinkled his nose briefly. I loved when he did that.

We ate dinner at a chain restaurant right outside the outlet mall. I must have drunk a half a gallon of water. I was parched.

As soon as I got home I hit the shower. I wondered if David ever smelled bad. He always smelled so good to me.

I had a headache from being out in the sun all afternoon, and my feet were killing me. I massaged my feet and took a couple of pain pills to lessen the pain. I kicked the covers to the floor, popped in my earphones and scrolled through my iPod playlists. Classical genre was the proper choice for the evening.

I recalled that tomorrow would be the day I met David’s father. I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach—maybe just nerves.

I listened intently to each piano note played in Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata*. Slowly, my eyes started closing in sync with the melody. The music carried me into a deep sleep.

Chapter 12

My yellow spring dress was completely wrinkled, and the other two dresses I contemplated wearing were at the cleaners. David, being punctual as he was, would arrive in approximately five minutes and I still hadn't chosen an outfit to meet his father. Not that I needed to look extraordinary, but making a lasting good first impression wouldn't hurt, considering the news he was about to receive. To recap, his son was in a relationship with a human and Alezzander was deeply involved with dealings of their council. The council would not be happy if they found out.

I was starting to sweat just thinking about how David's father would react. What if he didn't accept our relationship? I'd be devastated if he asked David to remove himself from my life.

Glancing at the time on my phone, there were only three minutes left till David would ring the doorbell. I looked over the outfits I thought were half decent and threw them on my bed. David was going to have to wait.

I decided to play the simple girl and threw on a pair of jeans and a blouse. I accessorized with the first pair of earrings I found and slipped on a pair of my most fashionable wedge heels. I was ready to meet Mr. Chios, the shoe salesman slash deity. I wondered if he'd check out my shoes.

When I glanced at the time, it was exactly four o'clock; the doorbell rang. I was faster than I imagined.

David looked distressed when I answered the door. We both were.

"Do we have to tell him?" I said, looking out the window as we drove past the last of the houses in town.

"It is the responsible thing to do. He is my father and I respect him. I have gained his respect by being honest with him through the years." He brushed my arm with his hand. "Besides, it's no secret that I love you."

The house door swung open as David reached for the knob revealing Eryx on the other side. His expression was as uneasy as I was feeling. David seemed to be determined to get this over with. His face was hard and serious.

"Has he arrived?" David asked Eryx.

"Indeed, he has, and in good humor, might I add. Let us see how long that lasts."

David's mouth tightened. "And, Mother?"

"She is with him. He has inquired about you, but we have not surfaced the subject as you have requested." Eryx led the way out of the anteroom and into the formal living room. "I will let them know you have arrived."

I sighed.

"Are you nervous?" David's hand squeezed mine.

"Very," I admitted. "He's going to kill the both of us."

David half grinned, nervously. "I doubt that he will."

We sat quietly in the living room, where only a few days ago I had almost lost my life. My stomach started to churn as the images flashed through my head. I breathed deeply settling myself.

I felt restless waiting for the head of the Chios family to join us in the room. The silence made the time seem eternal.

Several sets of footsteps descended the staircase. David and I glanced at each other. I noticed David's hand lightly tremble as he held mine.

Alezzander was a tall blonde man. He was handsome and of athletic stature. He was a strong presence as he walked into the room—authoritarian and intimidating. I now understood he was not a man to be reckoned with; hence, the reason why David and Eryx seemed unsettled.

“Father...” David walked to greet him. They shook hands and patted each other on the back.

“Dahveed, you have brought a guest?” Alezzander's voice was deep with a strong accent. Latin, I presumed.

David took me by the hand and presented me to his father. “Father, this is Isis Martin.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you, sir.” I extended my hand.

Alezzander extended his hand, but instead of reaching for my hand he took the Star Crest that hung over my chest and ripped the cord from my neck with one quick tug. His nostrils flared and his brow creased. He was infuriated.

“What is the meaning of this?” Alezzander's voice was deeper than his normal tone.

“I have gifted her, Father,” David said calmly.

“It is not as it seems, my husband.” Nyx took Alezzander by the arm noting his fury. “She's not as she appears. Look deeper, much deeper.”

Alezzander's stare penetrated me. I felt chills as his eyes met mine. He threw the star at David's feet. David gave him an angry look as he bent to lift the Star Crest from the ground.

Without warning, Alezzander lifted one arm and grabbed my throat. I gasped and fought to release his hands. “Of whom were you born?” He asked in a thunderous voice.

“Release her!” David tried to pry his father's grip from my neck. “She'll suffocate at your hand!”

My eyes were wide and mouth agape. My hand pulled on his arm, trying to remove his hold from my neck the slightest bit so that I could inhale.

“Father release her! She is fragile.” Galen's voice held concern for me.

“Alezzander!” Nyx cried out. “Stop!”

Alezzander released his clutch. I fell on the floor gasping and wheezing, my eyes watering. I didn't understand Alezzander's reaction or the significance of the charm. I wanted to run out of there, but I couldn't catch my breath.

“Tell me who this thing belongs to,” Alezzander pointed to me.

“I know only her mother, but she is human. Her father is a mystery,” Nyx spoke, pulling Alezzander away from me by the arms.

David and Eryx helped me up, off the floor, and then sat me on the couch.

“Apologize, Father. You have no right to treat her this way.” David's brow was creased and his breath was heavy.

Alezzander took a step toward David. “You should be apologizing to me. Do you not know there is no remedy to the consequences you have brought onto yourself or your family? I held you on a pedestal and you repay my efforts to educate you, to raise you, to lead you in the right direction with this?”

“The rest of our family holds no opposition,” David replied, holding me to his chest.

Alezzander pushed David away from me and grabbed me by the face. “Who are your parents?” He demanded an answer.

I squirmed. His grip was too tight on my face.

“Leave her!” David slapped his father’s hand away.

Alezzander’s chest emitted a low growl.

Nyx sat next to me and hugged me in a protective manner. “Answer him, dear.”

“My mother is Claire Martin and my father was Hector Martin,” I wept. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“You know full well, you half breed. Did you think you would go unnoticed? I spare you now only because this fool,” he pointed to David, “has given you his life. But we can easily change that. Can’t we Dahveed?” Alezzander raised his brow, giving David a burning glare.

Nyx stood between Alezzander and me. “They don’t know. She is not aware of anything. She shows no sign of it.”

Alezzander brushed Nyx’s face with the back of his hand. “Why have you kept this to yourself, my wife. Do you not know the penalty for conspiring?”

“I do, my husband... but it is our son we are speaking of.” Nyx winced away from Alezzander’s hand. She was upset.

“What do you speak of?” David’s face was filled with anger and indignity. He held me closer to him as his father approached me for a third time.

“Keep your hands off her,” David warned him with a sneer.

“Have you taken her as your pet... this bastard mutt?” Alezzander derisively spoke.

“I will not allow you to speak of her this way!” David stood from the couch and raised his voice to his father. His hands were at his sides formed into fists.

Alezzander peered into David’s eyes. “Your Creatura has no father. She is a bastard little beast that I shall put to sleep like a dog, after you have retaken what is yours.”

“What?” David gasped. “She is not Creatura. You are mistaken.”

“She *is* Creatura, David.” Nyx asserted. “But she will not be harmed or I shall go down with her.”

“Are you compromising yourself on this... this filthy animal’s behalf?” Alezzander posed.

David looked at me with astonishment and disbelief.

I was a what? I was agape as I stared back at David.

“I am.” Nyx crossed her arms. “She is different. She is not like the others. She is as normal as any human on this planet.”

“Isis?” David questioned me.

I shook my head. “I don’t know what they’re talking about.”

“That explains the dimensional travel.” Galen placed his hand on David’s shoulder as they both peered at me.

Alezzander firmly took hold of David’s arm. “Take back what is yours, Dahveed. I will not sit and watch as you transform into whatever this excrement of hell is.”

David looked at his father’s arm on his arm. His lip quivered in fury.

“I will not take it from her, and I would appreciate it if you stopped addressing her in such an offensive manner. I do not want to disrespect you, Father.”

“I’m not asking. I am commanding you to do so. Then, I shall deal with her, myself.” Alezzander’s eyes met mine.

“No, Father.” David said firmly.

“I’m ordering you!” Alezzander’s voice was deep and aggressive.

“No!” David inclined himself slightly toward his father’s face.

Alezzander raised his hand, ready to strike David.

“Alezzander!” Nyx called for his attention before he could strike David.

I stood from the sofa and hugged David, trying to move him out of the way. The twins stood between Alezzander and us.

“She’s given me her love.” David tried to reason with him.

“The mange is what she’s given you,” Alezzander sneered.

“There is no need for that, Father.” Eryx spoke in a calm tone. “He is intransigent. You forget we are not children anymore. We are able to make our own decisions... or mistakes without your permission.”

“This is a case of Doctrinal matter, not personal affection. I will not stand for this. And this *girl* has no business being alive. When I find her father I will make sure he feels the wrath of the laws.”

Alezzander pointed to David, “and as for you... you have no place in this family anymore.”

Nyx shook her head. Her brow line creased deeply. “Your actions have spoken for you today, Alezzander. You are no longer the man I married. You have become nothing less than a brute, unable to reason and unconcerned for your own. You are the one that has no place in this family. The door is open—leave.”

“You don’t mean that.” Alezzander’s eyes widened.

“Leave, I said.” Nyx’s tone was stern. “I shall not have any of my children deprived of their happiness. You have been cruel and a savage to this poor child.” She motioned to me. “That is not our way, Alezzander.”

Alezzander turned his back on all of us. He placed his hand over his mouth in thought and breathed heavily. He walked out of the room and ascended the stairs. We heard a door slam shut.

Everyone was silent.

“Why does he want me to give you back the Star Crest? Tell me the truth.” I looked at David intently. “The truth,” I reiterated, staring intently at him.

All eyes were on David and me as David touched my face. I pushed his hand away. “Tell me,” I demanded.

“Do you remember the story I told you of Deus and Starr?” David asked.

“What does that have to do with...” My jaw dropped in mid-sentence as I remembered the story, then his question to me about growing old together. “What did you do?!”

“I will become as you are. The Star Crest is no longer within me. We will both be *Creatura*.”

“I... why did you do that?!” I cried. “I don’t even know what I am.”

“I don’t care.” David cupped my face. “I only care to be with you for as long as this life will allow.”

“You aren’t immortal anymore?” I whimpered. “You gave your life for me?”

David was silent. I looked to the others for an answer, but no one was willing to speak.

“Answer me,” I urged.

“I don’t know what I will become because I don’t know how your genetics will be affected. I have renounced the life I had. My transformation will be slow.”

“How am I *Creatura* if both my parents were human?” I questioned him.

“No, dear,” Nyx shook her head. “I’m afraid the man you knew as your father was not your biological father.”

“That can’t be!” I widened my eyes.

“Your mother is human.” Nyx rubbed her hands nervously. “It’s the only possible explanation, Isis. There is no other way that you can be Creatura.”

Galen began to pace behind his mother. Eryx was cross-armed, sitting on the arm of the sofa.

“Your mother has never mentioned any of this to you?” David asked.

“Never.” I felt betrayed.

How could Claire keep something like this from me? I felt like I had lost my identity. I didn’t know my real father, and I didn’t even know what species I was.

We heard heavy footsteps descending from the stairwell. I cringed. I was terrified of that man—Alezzander. He was unsympathetic and a savage as Nyx had called him. I held rage for him and his words toward me.

“I want to go home.” I looked at David with pleading eyes.

“Yes,” David agreed.

Alezzander strode into the living room with a stone look. He walked in my direction. I gripped David’s arm. David embraced me protectively. Nyx gasped and held Alezzander by the arm, pulling him away from us.

“Forgive me,” Alezzander glanced between David and me. “I have realized that you are not at fault for the actions of your parents. I am ashamed of my behavior and beg you to understand that the situation is not easy to approbate.

“I cannot live without my family, child. If accepting you is the way to keep them, then I shall receive you as you are, but with one condition: you must tell me who your father is. I shall need to deal with him personally, for he is the one that has shattered the principles of the Doctrine.”

“I don’t know who he is,” I spoke without viewing him. “Are you going to kill him?”

“That is not up to me to decide. The council must make judgment of that and then pass their votes to Deus who has the final say.”

I stared at him. “Please don’t do that. Please don’t turn him over to your council.”

“Why would you plead on behalf of a father that has abandoned you?” Alezzander’s heavysset brow rose. “Do you think he would do the same for you?”

I looked down at the floor. Alezzander had a point, but he was my father even if I did not know him.

“He’ my father. It doesn’t matter what he would do for me. What matters is what I feel is right.”

“I don’t want my family compromised. Conspiring is a death sentence as far as this matter is concerned. You are not supposed to exist. Do you understand that?”

I nodded.

“I can protect you,” Alezzander asserted. “But I cannot protect your father. He must come forth and face the council. His act is unpardonable.”

“Surely there is something in the books that provides partial sanctuary for her father?” David inquired.

“I’m afraid not,” Alezzander said. “He will be tried and penalized with the harshest of verdicts.”

“No one but us knows this,” I interjected. “No one else has to find out.”

Alezzander’s mouth formed a straight tight line as he considered my statement. “I shall deny my knowledge of anything. I will deny knowing you if that is what it takes to save my own flesh and blood. That is the best I can do for you. It is in your hands.”

“Thank you, Father.” David tightened his embrace on me. “I will do my best to maintain the

situation mute. If for some reason the council be advised of this, I will serve as advocate for her father.”

“Words cannot describe my opposition to this, Dahveed. However, you are a grown man and responsible for your own deeds.” Alezzander took a seat on the couch next to me. “And you, girl, you are undetectable even to a Primitus, as myself. I had to strain to find the most minimal sign of difference in you. I pray that my son will be too, or you both may be in grave danger.”

“I forget what a Primitus is?” I looked to David for an explanation.

“The prime lineage of deities are called Primitus. They are the first generation of gods,” David explained.

“Are you the son of Deus and Starr?” I asked curiously.

“We are all sons of Deus.” Alezzander curved his lips.

“By blood, are you the son of Deus?” I reworded my question.

“By blood,” he answered, “we are all the sons of Deus.”

The room was silent for a few minutes. Nyx glared at Alezzander, still upset over the earlier happenings. I was upset too, but I needed answers to so many things.

“What am I?” I asked Nyx.

“Different.” Nyx answered. “You have the ability to control your subconscious. I can sense a long life within you, but I cannot know if you are immortal. I see you fragile, yet fierce. I will not know what you are until your coming of age.”

“When will that be?” David queried.

“I don’t know that either.” Nyx looked at me with a blank stare, reading me, I presumed.

She walked over to Alezzander, stared at him for a few seconds, and then brutally slapped him.

“You deserve more than that. She’s terrified of you and I am ashamed.” Nyx walked off into the kitchen with tears in her eyes.

Alezzander followed.

We all stared at each other in awe. I heard arguing coming from the kitchen in Latin.

“I think I should leave now,” I told David. “I’ve had enough for today.”

“I think it better to stay. Take rest in my room until you have calmed down and your head is clear, before you go home and interrogate your mother. You must be inconspicuous in your approach to asking for information about your biological father. You must not mention how you discovered the truth.”

“I don’t want to be in the same house as your father,” I confessed.

“Come here.” David kissed my forehead. “I will never let anyone hurt you again. I will not hold my self back if there is a next time.

“I’m sorry for my father’s behavior. He is not a savage, I assure you. He is just concerned for our wellbeing. He thought you were an abomination. I’m sorry, my lovely. I truly am.”

“He treated me like an animal,” I cried. “He’s a horrible person.”

“He seems that way now, but believe me, he is good at heart.”

My eyes filled with tears of rage and impotence, as I realized my mother had kept this secret from me my entire life. And to top it off this horrible man was David’s father. I loathed him already, and I had barely met him.

“I want to go home,” I continued to weep.

“Isis,” Galen called my name. “I think you should take David’s advice and settle your emotions

before leaving. You don't want to cause panic in your mother."

"Okay," I accepted Galen's reasoning.

"I'll take you to my room. You will not be disturbed there." David held me under his arm and led me up the stairs.

We sat on his bed. His arm was tight around my waist, his other hand wiping tears from under my eyes. "Would you like a beverage?"

"No." I hugged him. "I want to know who I am."

"You're exactly the same person you were before any of this was revealed." He kissed my eyes. "You've not changed."

"Everything has changed for me." I sobbed into his chest. "Who's my father? Why did my mother keep this from me?"

I suddenly had a thought. I sniffed and gazed at David. "Do you think he did the same thing you did with the Star Crest?"

"No, precious. That is not the case. You would have been born fully human."

"What am I, David?" I held my hands over my eyes. "Am I turning into something hideous?"

"No. The ones that were abominations were born as such. You do not resemble them in the slightest."

"Why would she keep this from me?" I hit the bed with my fist. "She made my father believe I was his daughter... or maybe he knew and kept it from me too. How am I supposed to live with the uncertainty of what I am?" My mouth trembled.

"I realize you're overwhelmed. I'm as much taken aback as you are, but I will be there for you. I will be the shoulder for you to cry on—your sanctuary."

I held on to him with all my strength and began to sob again. My face was nestled into his neck. I could smell his sweet aroma. The sandalwood scent soothed me. It was him I wanted to be with at a time like this and no one else.

"Why didn't you tell me what the Star Crest meant when you gave it to me?" I questioned him still breathing in his scent.

"You would have not permitted it. I was a desperate fool, in love." He kissed my head. "There was no other way."

"Do you think my mother knows about me?" I sniffled.

"No, and do not mention this to her. It only compromises her and all of us more."

I placed my hand on the back of his head, running my fingers through his dark hair. He closed the gap between us and took my lips in his—swaying, biting, caressing them.

"I adore you," he whispered.

Nyx knocked on the door to David's room. "Am I interrupting?"

"No, Mother. Come in." David smiled shyly.

I wondered how long she'd been standing there before she decided to knock.

"Isis, Alezzander would like to speak to you and David alone."

"Is he going to strangle me again?" I reproached.

"Please forgive him for that. He thought you were something else. He had no idea that you were so normal." She walked into the room. "He'd like to make his apology sincere. Will you have him?"

David stared at me, awaiting my response. I was reluctant to accept, but, for the sake of my beautiful David, I would do it.

“Yes,” I agreed.

Alezzander was already at the doorway when I gave my answer. He walked to the bed and knelt on one knee. Nyx walked out of the room.

“I have inflicted you with physical and emotional pain. I am truly apologetic for the words I have used to disrespect you. I was hasty in my actions, and I cannot begin to convey my deepest regret for it,” Alezzander began his apology.

“I beg you to understand that I was blinded by the surprise of your... genus. I am sworn to defend my creed and you are a living miracle, child. I don't know how it is you have been living undetected for so many years.

“In short, please take my sincerest apologies. I kneel before you as the most significant form of symbolism for repentance. I have knelt before no one under these circumstances.”

I wanted punch his teeth out. I was still upset over the fact that he called me a bastard mutt and choked me. I glanced at David, thinking about what I was about to say, but I went ahead anyway.

“You call yourself a father and a god,” I shook my head opposing the thought. “You don't deserve either title. You have no respect for your family or for those you're supposed to empathize with... such as me. If the only reason you're doing this is to please Nyx, then you keep your false apology. I don't need it.”

David's eyes widened as he gazed at me. He didn't expect a reprisal to escape my mouth.

Alezzander lowered his head. “I realize where your spite is coming from, dear girl. I implore you to reconsider. I shan't rise from here until you have accepted my apology.”

“He is not feigning, Isis. Hypocrisy is not a trait of his.” David took my hand.

“He owes you an apology, too,” I said to David, holding my ground.

“And I shall give them all my apologies, for I have caused them mental anguish, as well,” Alezzander promised. “But you are the one I am beholden to.”

Alezzander kept his knee to the floor. His back was straight like a Templar waiting to be knighted. He waited for my response.

David tightened his hold on my hand. “You don't have to accept if it is not in your will. He will have to live with the remorse.”

“It's not in my nature to hold grudges. It makes for an ugly personality,” I sighed.

David smiled warily. “What are you saying?”

“I forgive you,” I said to Alezzander. “And I apologize for my words also. It's bad manners to speak to your elders in such a fashion. I was taught better than that. Do you take my apology?”

“Yes.” Alezzander's face was serious. “May I stand now?”

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Out of respect,” David answered for his father. “He may not rise until you approve.”

“Please, stand up.” I felt ashamed of being ignorant of their customs. I was suddenly aware of the magnitude of humiliation the kneeling before me was to them. It took guts for Alezzander to do this before his son and wife. I was at a loss for words.

After Alezzander formally apologized to his family, he began to indulge in Nyx's culinary masterpieces and questioned me. He was looking for small details regarding my abilities to travel to Somnium. He was curious about the level of intellect I had and complimented me on my looks.

“Do you take after your mother?” He asked in small talk.

“No, I look nothing like her.” I drank from a soothing tea Nyx had prepared me.

“She’s quite beautiful, your mother,” Nyx noted, “but you’re right; she and you bear no resemblance.”

Nearing midnight, David drove me home. I was sure Claire would be fast asleep. She had to work the next day.

David pecked my lips under the porch light.

“Don’t leave,” I pleaded with him. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“My lovely, these are not visiting hours. I’m surprised your mother didn’t call to reprimand you on being so late.”

“She knew I’d be with you and your parents. She had no reason to call. Besides, she didn’t give me a curfew tonight.”

David tilted his head and gazed at me. “How soon are you planning to confront her on the issue?”

“Tomorrow,” I sounded unsure, “I think. I don’t know how to do it.”

“It doesn’t have to be that soon. You can wait until the time is right. Repose and it will come to you.” David held me in his warm brawny arms.

“I need to know,” I mumbled. “Would you be able to live with the mystery?” I gazed at him.

“No, I suppose not.” He peeled my arms off him. “Isis, I have to go. It’s past midnight already. Do you think it appropriate for us be out here at this late hour?”

I twisted my mouth. “Party pooper.”

“That I am,” he grinned. “Time for little girls to go to bed.”

I wrinkled my nose and took the house key out of one of my pant pocket. I turned the knob and opened the door.

“Night,” I said.

“Wait.” David pulled me back into the patio. He took me by the waist and pinned me against the wall and kissed me. “Good night, love.”

I lay awake for several hours thinking of how it was that I had never once noticed how different I looked from Claire. I probably looked like my father—whoever he was. What if I was adopted? What if Claire wasn’t my mother? I had so many questions.

When I woke up Claire was gone. It was nearing noon. She left me some money on the kitchen counter under an empty can of diet soda. That was her subtle attempt to tell me to buy some.

I grabbed a pastry bar from the cupboard and headed upstairs again. I walked into her room and stared at the nightstand where I knew she kept all her important papers and photographs. Could it be that somewhere in there would be a hint of who my father was?

I looked through all the legal documents with my name on them and hers. I found my birth certificate where I was registered as the daughter of Hector Martin and Claire Ann Martin. Everything looked legitimately correct.

Old photographs of my father, Hector, and me—of when I was born—were tucked in an envelope along with our—Claire’s and mine—hospital bracelets. I didn’t look like Hector either. I always thought I had inherited his green eyes. I was wrong.

I found some old photos of my mother during her pregnancy. Obviously, my theory about being adopted was wrong. But was Hector aware that I wasn’t his daughter? He had been a wonderful father to me in spite of his imperfections.

Nothing out of the ordinary turned up in the nightstand.

I remembered a box my mother kept at the far corner of her closet. That box held some documents along with pictures, too. I ran down the stairs for the stepladder and brought it up.

I fetched the box and placed it on the floor. I opened it and started pulling out papers: house insurance documents, old receipts, Claire's Associates degree. I read each document thoroughly, looking for a name or a clue that would help me decipher my existence.

Just as I was about to put everything back in the box, I noticed a yellow legal sized envelope taped to the bottom of the box. I opened it and reached in. Inside there was a letter addressed to my mother with one single sentence typed out: *For your troubles*. It wasn't signed. I put my hand in the folder again and found an envelope postmarked in a language I couldn't understand, but the date was clear enough to make out. It was about a month after my father had passed.

"Isis." My mother startled me. "What are you doing?"

"What's this?" I ignored her question, holding up both the envelope and letter.

"Where did you get that?" Claire acted like she didn't know.

"From where you had it hidden." I sounded slightly upset. "Why was it hidden?"

Claire sighed and closed her eyes. "It's nothing. Put it away." She walked out of the room in a hurry.

"Mother, wait!" I walked after her. "Tell me what this is."

"Isis, it's nothing." She frowned. "What are you doing digging in my stuff for?"

"Am I adopted?" I bluntly asked.

My mother's eyes widened. "Have you been talking to Eva?"

"Yes," I lied. "She told me some things." I hoped I was saying the right words to make her talk.

"What did she tell you?" Claire's face was surprised.

"Everything," I lied again. "She told me not to tell you."

"Oh my God," Claire sighed and walked back into her room.

"Honey, I was going to tell you, but I just didn't know how. I was so scared you'd hate me for keeping it from you. I'm so sorry you had to find out this way."

"Tell me what happened." I saw that I was getting somewhere with my lying. I folded my arms and sat on the bed waiting for an explanation.

"Okay," Claire said nodding. "Where to start?" She put her hand on her forehead as she paced.

"I was seventeen," she started. "I had broken up with your father—with Hector—a week earlier. My parents and I went on a fishing trip that afternoon to a nearby park. I was debating on whether or not to go back to him. I had caught him talking to one of his friends about wanting to date this girl at school that everyone knew was a *sure thing*, in boys' terms.

"I walked away from the fishing area and decided to go on a short walk by myself. It was a desolate, long trail—wild green plants growing everywhere. Just beautiful.

"I sang to myself and picked a few wild flowers. I thought I was alone. Then, I saw him sitting under a mesquite tree.

"He was so handsome. We started to talk. He asked my name, but being that I was hypnotized by his looks, I didn't bother to ask for his. He was about twenty years old and a devastatingly beautiful creature. When he spoke, I heard every syllable that came out of his mouth. When he looked at me, he stole my breath.

"He kissed me and I was a lost cause in his arms. I've never felt that way about anyone since then.

"About three weeks later I started feeling sick. I thought I was coming down with the flu, but the

symptoms persisted for days. My mother grew worried and took me to the doctor. They drew blood for some lab work.” She stopped.

“And then?” I prompted her to keep talking.

“I was pregnant, Isis.” She paused, looking at the floor. “Pregnant with that boy’s child, whose name or identity I didn’t know. I was a virgin. I had never been with Hector.

“My parents automatically assumed you were Hector’s,” she sighed and wiped a tear falling from her eye.

“Hector was so upset when I told him. He said he’d kill him if he ever found him. Your father loved me dearly. I told him my parents assumed the baby was his. He said he’d take full responsibility, and we were married two months later.

“Eva was the only person who knew the truth. She accepted me and you.”

Over streaming tears, holding up the letter I asked, “So, what is this?”

“I received that letter with a check of a sizeable amount after your father passed away. I used it to pay off the mortgage and some bills that I knew I couldn’t handle on my own. I used the rest for my school and what little was left over, I put in the bank for a rainy day.

“There was no return address... only the check and those words typewritten on the paper. I tried to find out the origin of the postmark but came up blank. I thought it was him that sent it, and that’s why I kept it.”

Claire wiped her tears from her face. “Do you hate me?” She sniffled.

I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t believe my biological father’s identity was a mystery even to my mother. The way she described him was exactly as I felt about David. There was no doubt about it. My father was a deity.

“I don’t hate you, Mom.” I hugged her. “In an ironic way, I understand you.”

“I have to call Eva to tell her.” Claire reached for the phone.

“Mom, no.” I set the phone down. “I didn’t talk to Grands at all. I lied.”

“But why did you ask me if you were adopted?” Claire was confused.

“Because I found it odd that I don’t look at all like you or dad,” I lied, yet again. “Then I found this letter, and I thought you might have kept it for some important reason.”

“You tricked me?” My mother gasped with a devastated look on her face. “I can’t believe you, Isis!”

“You were going to tell me someday... weren’t you?” I creased my brow. “I should be the angry one here.”

Claire nodded. “I know, but you lied to me to make me tell you something very crucial about both our lives, Isis. How do you think I feel?”

“Deceived, like I do,” my tone was hard.

Claire lowered her face into her hands and wept. “I’m sorry.”

I stood from the bed and picked up the box from the floor and put it back in its place in the closet.

“I’ll be in my room,” I said and closed the door behind me.

Chapter 13

Journal Entry 12, 1:33 P.M.

My state of mind is blurred by the constant of uncertainty. I don't know who or what I am or what I will become.

The only certainty in my life right now is that I am not my father's daughter, and yet I am.

He who gave me life is an unknown—a ghost in my mother's past. I am a product of two distinct breeds. I am *Creatura*.

* * *

I called David to tell him I needed to talk to him. He said he would drop by my house within an hour.

Claire knocked on my door interrupting my conversation with him.

"I'll see you when you get here. I have to go," I said softly.

"See you soon, love."

I clicked the phone to end the call.

"Come in, Mom," I spoke in a normal tone. There was no sense in being upset with her when she was the only mother I would ever have.

"I have this for you," Claire said holding something in her hand.

She handed me an envelope addressed to "Miss Isis Martin". There was no return address.

"I opened it," she admitted. "I wasn't being nosey. I was being protective of my daughter."

I slid out the letter it held. It was typewritten, like the one addressed to her.

Dearest Isis,

I know it is in great distaste to try to communicate with you through this means after so many years. I am truly repentant of my absence from your life. I have thought of contacting you many times but felt I was in no position to make myself known to you, as your mother chose a good man to take my place.

Although I am reluctant to reveal my identity to you at the present, I would like you to know that you never escaped my thoughts.

My remorse and cowardice to leave your mother under those circumstances has eaten at my core always. I am sorry if this letter has caused you any pain. I only wish to make you aware that you have a father.

Without further ado, I bid you good tidings.

Best Regards

"How long have you had this?" I held the paper in my hands, staring at it.

"A week or so."

"Is this the reason behind your recent melt down?"

Claire nodded, "You know it is."

"You could've just told me then. I would have preferred you to come clean about it."

Claire stared at the wall. “I knew it would be hard on you. I didn’t know how to go about it. I was scared of how you’d react. It’s not easy for me either.”

“Are there any more—letters, I mean?” I folded the paper and placed it back in the envelope.

“No.” Claire stared off into space. “I wish there were.” She turned and faced the door. “I don’t know what else to say. I feel like I’ve failed you as a mother.”

I walked briskly to her. “Mom, you’re the best mother I could ever wish for. You haven’t failed me in any way—ever.” I hugged her.

Claire’s eyes dampened. “Isis, my parents didn’t know about this. Your father, Hector, didn’t want me to tell them. The only one that knew was Eva and she promised she’d take it to the grave with her. She’s kept her promise. She’s never treated you like you weren’t her own blood.”

Claire stepped back into my room and sat on the edge of the bed.

“You have no idea how difficult it was for me to face her after Hector told her you weren’t his.” She shook her head. “I was against it, but he insisted on telling her when his father threw him out into the street, penniless and with only the shirt on his back.”

“You had never told me that about Grandpa.”

“I didn’t want you to have a bad impression of him. He was a good man. He was just very old fashioned—set in his ways.”

I sat next to her on the bed.

Claire placed her arm around me and sighed. “It wasn’t until you were born that your grandfather came around... you charmed him silly.” She half grinned.

“Is there anything else I should know?”

“If there were, I wouldn’t hesitate to tell you now—I swear.” She crossed her heart like when I was a little girl.

“If you remember anything else about him—my biological father—do you promise to tell me?”

Clair nodded, “Mmm hmm.”

David arrived right as Claire was backing out of the driveway. She waved to him as she drove off.

“Hey, handsome,” I said sheepishly at the door.

David pecked me on the cheek. “Hello, my lovely. I was impatiently awaiting your call. Were you able to gather any information regarding your biological father?”

“A little. He’s as much a mystery to my mother as he is to me.”

“A mystery to your mother? How is that possible?” David had a confused look on his face.

I relayed the story to him that my mother had told me. He wasn’t nearly as astounded as I was when I told him Claire didn’t know his name.

“He would have used an alias if she had asked,” David assured me. “There is no question about that.”

“I received a letter from him,” I revealed.

“What?!” David’s eyes widened, in disbelief. “I thought you said his identity was unrevealed?”

“He didn’t sign it and there’s no return address.”

“May I see it?”

“There’s actually two,” I said walking toward the stairs. “C’mon.” I moved my hand back and forth, motioning him to follow me to my room.

“No.” He raised his brow. “Bring them down, please.”

“David...” I pulled my mouth to the side and set one hand on my waist.

“No,” he repeated sternly. “Out of respect for your mother, please, bring them down.”

“Fine.” I sighed. I didn’t know what the big deal was. It wasn’t like I was going to jump his bones or anything.

I scrambled through the cardboard box in my mother’s room and retrieved Claire’s letter then ran into my room and took the envelope addressed to me from my bed. I ran down the stairs and handed David my mother’s letter first.

David studied the postmarks on the envelope. “Morocco.” David tapped the stamp with the back of his finger. “May I?” His hand was already in the envelope.

“Yeah,” I nodded.

“This is it?” He made a disgruntled face.

“Yes. My mother said that one came with a check.”

“Did she keep a copy?”

“I doubt it.” I shrugged. “This is the one I wanted you to see.” I handed David the more recent of the two letters. “It came about a week ago, but my mother kept it from me... until today.”

David looked over the stamp. “Turkey.” He creased his brow.

“Read the letter,” I advised him.

David unfolded the paper and skimmed over the letter. I saw his eyes study the context of the paper twice more. “He was very vague. There are no clues.” He examined the back of the paper as well.

“I know,” I said disappointedly.

David scrutinized me. “You expected me to find something, didn’t you?”

“I was hoping.” My mouth pulled to one side.

David reached for me and embraced me. He kissed my head, then my nose. “You want to find your father.” David voiced the thought that had been dancing in my head.

I shrugged. “Maybe. I dunno. It would be weird.”

“There is nothing strange about wanting to know who your father is. I would say it’s the most normal reaction you could have. I know *I* would want to know.”

“I had a father.” I saw Hector’s face in my mind. “No one could ever take his place.”

“I understand your view point, but it is crucial that we find your biological father. We need to know his genetic makeup so that we can have an idea of your mutant gene characteristics.”

I made a sour face. “You make it sound like I’m some sort of alien.”

“I’m sorry; please, take no offense.” David brushed a strand of hair away from my eyes. “Scientifically, there is no other way to verbalize your DNA composition. You must remember that this involves me also. I don’t know what it is we will become.”

“David, I can’t imagine you as something other than what you are.” I sighed and looked away from him. “I think that you should take back the Star Crest until you see what I truly am. For all I know, I could become some hideous monster. I don’t want you to live out your life in regret.”

“I have told you that those creatures were born as such.” He lightly applied pressure to the golden star figure on my chest. “This is yours to keep.”

David began to unbutton his shirt.

With widened eyes, I took two steps back using the couch as a barricade. “What are you doing?” My heart started to race.

David stopped at the fourth button down giving me an amused stare. “What, may I ask, do you *think*

I am doing?”

I just looked at him, feeling my heart in my throat.

David muffled his laugh.

“I am truly sorry to disappoint you, but I am not that type of boy.” He tittered. “I only want to show you something.”

“Why didn’t you say that before you started ripping your clothes off?” I overdramatized the situation.

“Isis, I’m fully clothed,” he laughed. “Are you frightened of me?”

“No,” I blushed. “Of me.”

David slightly opened his mouth. “I see. I was not expecting that answer.”

We looked at one another in awkwardness. I wondered what he thought of me. I hoped he didn’t think I was some hussy.

“What is it that you have to show me?” I asked.

David opened his shirt revealing the mid section of his chest. There was a diagonal thick wound with a small hollow in the middle of it.

“The scaring process has begun.” He ran his finger along the red line.

“What does that mean?”

“I can no longer return the Star Crest into my torso. The cavity it was contained in has sealed.”

I walked to him and placed my hand over the lesion. “You mean it’s irreversible? You sacrificed your life?”

“It had to be this way. Had I not presented you with the Crest, we could never be as we are now— together.”

“How were you so sure of what you were doing? What if... what if I’m just a novelty to you?”

“Love is the emotion of complete awareness of another’s life. I knew nothing could change how I felt for you.” He took my hand and lightly touched his lips to it. “And to answer your question, you are and will forever be a novelty to me.”

I smiled. David truly made me happy. My heart fluttered as I listened to him. I had no doubt in my mind that he was the one—irresistible, irreplaceable and incomparable.

I locked my fingers with his. “You know you’re perfect, right?”

“Hardly,” he grinned. “Sorry to disappoint you again.”

I briefly glanced at his half open shirt then up at his face. I placed my hand on the scar and ran my fingers up his neck. I pulled his head down to mine. My lips glided over his fervently.

David took my hand from behind his head and squeezed it. He pulled away from me. His eyes were wide. He shook his head from side to side. He knew I was looking for more than a simple kiss.

David turned away from me. “We should consult my father regarding the letters,” he said, buttoning his shirt.

What was wrong with me? I was shocked by my own behavior. I never acted this way before. That wasn’t me. I blushed as David looked at me. I stared at the floor in shame.

“Did I offend you by restricting your advance?” David asked quietly. He had misinterpreted my reaction.

“No,” I mumbled. “I’m embarrassed... I can’t believe myself.”

David bit his bottom lip trying not to show his proud smile. He nestled me against his chest. “If it’s any consolation, I find you just as appealing, love.”

I embraced him tightly and buried my face in his shirt to hide the crimson color I could feel radiating from my neck, face and ears.

“I have to go get dressed. I’ll be down in a few minutes. I really hope your father finds a clue on one of those letters,” I said.

“Take your time, my lovely.” He softened his embrace and looked at me with those dreamy blue eyes of his.

I took to the stairs and up to my room. I reached into my drawer for a white tank shirt and pulled it out. A round pink compact flew out of the drawer when I pulled the tank out and fell on the floor next to my feet. It was the birth control pills my mother had given me.

I bent over and opened the compact. Should I have listened to my mother and taken the things? I sat on my bed staring at them in silence.

“This is stupid,” I said to myself. I clicked the compact shut and shoved the pink circle back into the drawer, where I would forget about them again. I wasn’t ready for that. I was still embarrassed from almost pouncing on David. Why would I even think about taking those pills?

I opened the drawer once again and pulled out the compact. Claire had been right about this sort of thing being unexpected. But we—David and I—had to abide by the rules. Nothing would happen between us that would require me to begin taking the contraceptive pills.

I pushed the pills way to the back of the drawer this time and closed it. I almost reached for the drawer again, but remembered David was waiting for me downstairs. It was dumb to even consider looking at the flat compact again. I started my dolling up process.

The shift from adolescence to young adulthood brought on so many responsibilities and choices. In two months I’d be turning eighteen and of legal age. I’d be considered an adult even though the number was still suggestive of adolescence with its ending in “teen”. I felt older than that somehow.

I suppose the experiences I had with my mom and dad had made me mature a little faster. And now... the experiences I had lived with David and his family had opened my eyes to a whole new world. It was a reality that one would write about in a fictional book to hide the truth from human kind. It was my world now—my reality.

Alezzander’s face grew uneasy as I walked into the living room. I wondered if it would always be this way, this awkward.

“Afternoon, Isis,” his thunderous voice bounced off the living room walls. He set his coffee cup on the table and stood to greet me in their usual manner. I didn’t expect him to kiss my cheeks, but he did.

“I am truly surprised to see you here.” Alezzander offered me a seat. “I am very unsettled about my reaction toward you yesterday. Believe me when I say, that is not the man I am. I am ashamed and disgusted by my behavior.”

“You don’t have to apologize again. I realize you were only looking after the safety of your family.”

“Thank you. It sets my conscious at ease to know this.”

“Father,” David said as Alezzander took a seat across from me, “Isis has some news regarding her biological father she’d like to share.”

“Do speak, dear girl. What have you to say?” Alezzander scooted to the edge of his seat.

Nyx and Gemini joined us in the living room shortly after my account started. I delivered the entire story of my mother’s rendezvous with the man that was my biological father. Then I showed them both letters.

“It’s anonymous,” Nyx stated, as she finished reading the letter. She turned to view Alezzander. “Why would he send a letter stating he is the child’s father and keep his identity unrevealed? I would assume he would present himself to her fully so that she is aware that he is sincere in his attempt to contact her.”

“I, too, would do the same being in his shoes,” Eryx said, taking the letter from Nyx. “Surely he must be concerned that the Council will discover the Creatur...” He paused, glanced at me and corrected himself, “. . . that the council will somehow discover Isis’ existence as well as his violation of the laws.”

“But why would he try to contact me now? He had a perfect opportunity when my father, Hector, passed on. He could have enclosed a note or something along with the first letter addressed to my mother.” I tried to query them for answers I knew they wouldn’t know.

“He knows you are Creatura.” Alezzander placed his hand on my shoulder. “He may have an idea that the age of your maturity will arrive soon and with it your transmutation.”

I lowered my head and shuddered. What was I? Uncertainty and fright had the best of me. And to make matters worse, David was going to become whatever thing I would turn into.

“I don’t want to be a monster.” I looked at David with pleading eyes. “I don’t want to be another species. I just want us to be normal.”

David pulled me close to him.

Nyx brushed my hair with her fingers. “The transformation will be internal, my dear.” She reassured me. “Keep calm. I will be monitoring your progression.”

“Mother, and if something should arise? A malformation?” David grew concerned.

My head quickly swiveled to view Nyx.

“We will deal.” Galen placed an arm over his twin’s shoulder. “We will deal,” he reaffirmed.

Eryx bobbed his head in approval of his brother’s words. “We are here for you, my brother... and Isis.”

Alezzander tugged at his chin. “I had not contemplated the percentage of an undesirable trait until now. The percentage—calculating by my previous experiences with Creatura—is variable.”

David’s brow creased. “What would the probabilities be?”

“Seeing as she is in human form, I would estimate between thirty-three and sixty-five percent.”

“Sixty-five percent?!” I gasped. “What types of internal malformations are we talking about?”

“I can only give you examples,” Alezzander explained. “The traits could vary from personality changes, such as, impairment of your better judgment or inflicting physical harm with but a glance or a touch.”

“Impairment of my judgment? Like going insane?” I tried to understand what he meant.

“Or...” Galen began, “a cold-blooded murderer. A homicidal genius. A psychotic killer...”

“I think you’ve made your point,” David interrupted Galen with a scornful look. “Thank you for causing her more distress than necessary.”

“She should be aware,” Galen argued. “She must be able to point out changes in moods or thoughts in case we fail to notice them.”

“He’s right,” I sighed. “I just don’t understand how you can fix a lunatic.”

Eryx explained the process. “We are able to control the chemical imbalances that cause the thought or desire to kill. The process must be done at the beginning before the brain has completely converted the personality of the subject into a savage murderer.”

“It doesn’t mean this will happen to us.” David turned my head to view him directly. “We are just discussing the possible outcomes. Nothing is definite. For all we know, we may remain as you are now.”

“Oh that Deus might hear you, my son.” Alezzander shut his eyes and clenched his fist. “May He keep you as you are—free of defects such as those we are discussing.”

I turned to Nyx. “Can you sense any changes in us yet?” I was of course referring to David and myself.

“Give me your hands.” She reached for me. “I don’t want to skip over any minute changes in your emotional or physical state.”

Nyx closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her head slightly tilted back. She remained in this position for a couple of minutes. I eagerly awaited her prognosis.

“Has your temper changed? Have you become more aggressive?” Nyx asked.

“Not that I’ve noticed.”

“There’s no indication of change. You’re perfectly fine.”

I sighed in relief. “That means David is fine also, right?”

“He shows no sign of transformation other than the closing of the lesion in his torso, but that is normal.”

“When will he begin to lose his abilities?” I wondered.

Everyone in the Chios family exchanged glances. I had touched a subject of concern.

“The changes in me will be slow,” David reminded me. “They may not be in congruence with yours. The interesting thing is that there should already be some noticeable pattern of metamorphosis.”

“Such as?” I asked for further details.

“For example, lapses in my strength and in the inability to fly. We don’t understand why there isn’t an absence of these.”

They were as clueless of the changes that would come for David and me as I was. It was the blind leading the blind.

“I have to find him,” I stated. “I have to find my real father.”

“*We* have to find him,” Alezzander corrected me.

I needed air. Dealing with this was giving me a headache and an anxiety attack. David suggested a stroll along the nature trail.

The day was cloudy and humid. There was a fine mist coming down. As much as I hated to smell like moisture, I knew the tranquility of the forest would calm me.

We took refuge under a tree branch from the drizzle that started falling overhead. David reassured me that we would not turn into freaks of nature.

“My brothers will keep their promise of aiding us if worse should come to worse; my mother will stand by to see it done correctly.”

His embrace reassured me, but didn’t make the worry disappear.

“Is there any remote possibility that I might turn into what you are and not the other way around?” I held on to the last shred of hope left in me.

“My lovely, please, let this go for today. Consider another topic for your own sanity.”

Obviously, the answer was not what I would want to hear. I bobbed my head in agreement, though

the thought would remain embedded in my mind as the day dragged along.

I felt the vibration of my phone on my hip pocket and reached for it. It was Andy calling. She would most probably want to hang out later, but I wasn't in the mood.

"Are you home?" she asked in a panic just as I hit the answer key on the phone.

"No, I'm at David's. What's up?"

"I was on my way to your house with Bill to pick you up. Stay where you are until I call you back," she sounded concerned.

"What? Why?" I was confused.

"It's Gabriel. He pulled us over on Henderson Road and asked where you were. We assumed you were at your house, but we told him we didn't know. He was angry and he had the gun in his hand. He pointed it at Bill and me and demanded that we tell him where you were.

"Bill tried to calm him down, but he said he knew you were with *him*. We guessed he was talking about David. He said he was gonna find you and deal with you two. He kept talking to someone behind him, but there was no one there. He was acting like he was nuts again.

"Isis, I'm still shaking. We have to call the police," Andy sniffed. "I just saw your mom's car at the courthouse. I'm so glad you guys aren't home."

I felt my body start to shake.

"Isis?" David noticed my reaction.

"Gabriel..." I said with widened eyes. "He's looking for us... for you and me. He threatened Bill and Andy with a gun."

David took the phone from my hand.

"Hello?" he said into the handset and paused for a few seconds. "Andy, are you or Bill hurt?" He paused again. "I can't understand what you're saying over your crying, my dear. Calm down. We will resolve this."

I clenched my hands together and started to pace.

"Andrea, may I please speak to Bill? I don't understand what you're saying." David held one hand on his forehead as he spoke.

David instructed Bill to meet at the estate. We walked briskly toward the house and advised the family of the threat that Gabriel posed and that Andy and Bill were on their way.

"Call the authorities," Alezzander requested when I was finished with the details of the phone call.

"Not yet, Father," Eryx opposed. "It must be William and Andrea that must give a statement to the police."

"But will they want to press charged against the boy?" Galen wondered. "After all, he is their friend, is he not?"

"Not anymore. Not after that," I assured Galen. "Andy definitely wants to contact the police."

"She's very upset," David remarked.

As if I didn't have enough to deal with on my plate, now the Gabriel problem was back. I was on the verge of a meltdown. A seventeen year-old shouldn't have to deal with so much stress in life. I wasn't emotionally ready to handle so much at once. I was just coming into the realization that my life would never be the same and now this?

We quietly waited for the doorbell to ring. Everyone was getting anxious.

David walked to the front door and opened it. I stood with him on the porch biting my nails waiting for Bill's car to drive up.

“Dammit!” I hit my thigh with my fist. “Where are they?!” I was getting worried that Gabriel might have stopped them, or even worse, followed them. They had more than enough time to reach the estate already.

“There.” David pointed to the red car making its way up the driveway.

“Oh, thank God,” I sighed in relief.

“I was beginning to worry, myself.” David’s mouth pulled to one side.

We walked to meet Andy and Bill in the driveway. Bill opened the door and stepped out of the car. He looked like he was in shock—pale in the face and nervous.

Andy remained in the car with her head lowered. I ran to the passenger door, opened it and hugged Andy as hard as I could. She was shaking and in tears.

“He... put... the gun... on Bill’s head.” Andy spoke in pauses as she gasped for air. “I thought he was going to pull the trigger,” she sniffed clinging on to me. “I shouted at him to stop, and then he pointed the gun at me.”

She pulled away from me and wiped her tears. “I’m so scared for all of us.” She started gasping again.

Bill and David were behind me listening.

“What took you so long to get here? I was about to go looking for you.” I heard David ask Bill.

“Sorry about that, man. She was hysterical. I had to pull over,” Bill explained.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less.” David’s hand touched my shoulder.

I pulled Andy out of the car. “C’mon, girlie. We’re going to be okay.” I tried to soothe her.

“Why didn’t you go straight to the police?” David asked Bill as Bill embraced Andy. She softly sobbed on Bill’s shoulder.

“Would you have gone to the police first or tried to warn your friends in a situation like this?”

“I see your point,” David accepted Bill’s view.

Alezzander and Nyx appeared on the porch.

“Bring them in,” Alezzander suggested in his deep voice. “Let their nerves settle.”

We walked into the den where Eryx was quietly speaking on the phone. Galen stood cross-armed, watching his brother against the fireplace. Eryx ended his call as he saw us approach.

“Dearest, fetch them something soothing,” Alezzander addressed Nyx.

“What can I offer you to drink?” Nyx asked Bill and Andy.

“Nothing for me, ma’am... thank you,” Bill replied.

Andy was having trouble controlling her weeping. She couldn’t respond to Nyx’s offer.

“I’ll bring you a special tea... to soothe your nerves, my dear. Is that fine?” Nyx spoke softly to Andy.

Andy nodded, “Yes, thank you.”

Galen handed Andy a box of tissues. “I think she needs something stronger; vodka, perhaps?”

I didn’t think joking was appropriate at the moment, but it made Andy giggle a little.

“David, aid me in the kitchen, please.” Nyx walked through the den doors.

“Join me.” David pulled me away from Andy.

“I’ll be right back,” I excused myself from Andy and Bill.

We walked into the kitchen. Nyx was placing a teapot on the burner.

“Can I help?” I asked.

“I need to show you something,” David said. “Mother, do make enough for two cups. They both

need this.”

“What are you giving them?” I was curious.

“Your friends are in shock. Bill hides it well to keep Andy from becoming frantic again. I can sense their adrenaline levels are still high.” Nyx pulled a spoon from a drawer. “Once the water boils, David will add a small amount of tranquilizer to each.”

“How will you do that?” I looked at David in amazement.

“Watch,” He said holding his thumb and index finger over the spoon Nyx had in her hand.

David rubbed his fingers together letting a gold shimmering dust fall on the spoon.

“Don’t over do it.” Nyx warned. “That’s enough for both. Fetch me another spoon, would you, dear?” She said looking at me.

I pulled another spoon and handed it to her. Nyx divided the small amount of gold shimmer between both spoons.

The teapot started hissing.

“The water now, David,” she instructed.

“Of course,” David replied.

“They’re going to see the gold dust in the water and probably taste it too,” I pointed out.

“Not at all,” Nyx smiled. “This *is* the tea. It is sweet and the water will turn a golden yellow... like chamomile. It’s quite good. They will enjoy it and it will help their anxiety.”

“You’ve enjoyed it as well, my love,” David revealed.

“When?”

“When you had that lover’s quarrel and you slapped him, which, in my opinion was a well deserved slap, now that I think about it,” Nyx teased.

“I don’t remember.” I creased my brow.

“After you came to. I offered you tea. Do you remember now?” Nyx stirred the gold dust into the hot water. The scent was pleasant. I suddenly remember it tasted like a very sweet pomegranate.

“I distinctly recognize the aroma.” I shuddered as I remembered that terrible day.

“It’s the reason you were able to maintain your calm.” David took the teacups from Nyx’s hands and placed them on a tray.

“You doped me up?” I was appalled.

“My dear, we do not dope anyone. We heal them,” Nyx said in a disgruntled tone.

“Right. Sorry,” I retreated.

Nyx took the tray from the counter and walked out of the kitchen. I had obviously offended her.

“Is she mad?” I asked David.

“She’s fine. You women have tender points we men do not and never will understand.”

David took my hand and led me to the den. Bill and Andy were drinking the tea. Bill was relaying the incident in his own words to the family. Andy seemed calmer. I was glad to see that.

“I took the liberty of calling the police,” Eryx told us. “They say you must file a report with your parents at the police station, because you are both minors and you left the scene of the incident.”

“He’s after David and Isis. Shouldn’t they file a report also?” Bill questioned Eryx.

“Yes, David and Isis are to accompany you, since they are Gabriel’s main targets.”

My mother was going to have a cosmic fit. She was a feisty lady with an attitude when it concerned her only daughter. I felt sorry for the police officers that would have to deal with her.

“Can I have some of that tea?” I asked Andy. I suddenly felt very nervous.

“No!” The entire Chios clan said in unison.

“Ehem,” Nyx cleared her throat. “I’ll prepare you one if you’d like, dear.”

I glanced at Andy and Bill who had confused expressions on their faces.

“Uh... no... that’s ok. I don’t want to trouble you. I’m fine.”

“It’s okay. You can have a sip of mine,” Andy offered.

“No. You need it more than I do,” I countered. “I’m okay... really.”

After Bill and Andy had finished their tea, Nyx and Alezzander accompanied us to the police station. We—Bill, Andy, David, Nyx, Alezzander, and I—crunched into Gemini’s Land Rover. I noticed Bill and Andy were both yawning frequently.

“Are you guys tired?” I asked.

“No, why?” Bill responded.

“You both are yawning,” I pointed out.

David squeezed my hand and gave me a stare. “It’s the body’s way of releasing tension after a traumatic episode.”

It was probably a lie because Andy’s brow lifted far up questioning his theory.

“Oh,” I said, and left the subject for dead.

We rode quietly down Highway 100, through Los Fresnos and to the precinct.

“My dad is going to freak.” Bill held his head between his hands. “And your mom is going to have you home schooled,” he told me.

“She’s going to want to go looking for Gabriel at his house,” Andy said as we opened the heavy glass door to the small station.

“The lioness on the prowl. Ugh!” I grunted. “Gabriel’s parents will probably end up filing a restraining order against her instead of the other way around.”

Alezzander spoke to a woman clerk at the window. Shortly after, a police officer escorted us in through another door and to his desk.

“I’m Officer Ramirez. What can I do ya for, sir?” He spoke to Alezzander.

Alezzander explained the situation. Our parents were called to the police station on the spot. Officer Ramirez would not relay any information as to why we were there, for fear of causing panic in our parents.

Once our parents arrived and introduced themselves properly to Alezzander and Nyx, Bill and Andy started giving their account of the incident as the officer took notes.

Our parents were up in arms to say the least. They were shocked and mortified at the thought of Gabriel running around with that gun. The officer had to keep telling them to hold it down, because the conversation would become unintelligible over so many people wanting to speak at once.

“What are you doing about this, Tomas? I need to know my daughter is going to sleep safely tonight. I’ll find him myself if I have to.” Claire leaned into Officer Ramirez’s face.

“Told ya.” I elbowed David. “She’s going to get locked up before Gabriel does.”

“I heard that,” Claire snapped at me. “This is a serious matter, Isis.” Claire didn’t bother to turn away from the police officer.

“So what the hell are you doing about it?” Claire asked Officer Ramirez again.

“Calm down, Claire.” Another official entered the room. “I can hear you through the damn doors.”

“I’ll shut up when I see that kid behind bars, John.” My mother and I knew this official. It was Krystle’s dad.

The officer rolled his eyes and walked toward Alezzander and Nyx.

“Hello folks. I’m Constable Mendiola. I’ll be assisting Officer Ramirez in the case.” He held out his hand to the couple then tipped his hat at Dr. Jameson and his wife and Mr. and Mrs. Nesbit—Bill’s parents.

“What do we got, Ramirez?” the constable asked.

“Threat with a handgun, possibly stolen,” Ramirez quickly summarized.

“I’ll draw up a search warrant. Do we know where the kid lives?” Constable Mendiola set his hat on the desk.

“Yeah,” Bill answered the official, “we know where he lives.”

“You know the kid?” the constable asked Bill in a surprised tone.

“Yeah. He’s Isis’ ex-boyfriend, Gabriel Betancourt.”

“Hmm...” Constable Mendiola muttered. “Jealous ex-boyfriend, huh?” He eyed David and me holding hands.

“Pretty much sounds like it,” Ramirez agreed.

The crowd of parents assembled in the parking lot, discussing the matter while waiting for four police units that were called in and assigned to each of us as surveillance for the night.

My mother had a lot to do with the night patrol being set in place. She argued with Ramirez and Mendiola until they were blue in the face. They had to call in detectives from the neighboring city of Brownsville, since there were only three police officers in the town of Los Fresnos on call and two off duty. The wait was about half an hour long. We were escorted to our homes by the patrol units. It was pretty silly to have a police officer escort the Chios family, being as they needed protection from no one.

I could hardly sleep that night. My mom kept peeking out my bedroom window and tried to convince me to go to work with her in the morning. She didn’t want to let me out of her sight.

“I don’t want to spend the day listening to judgments or old ladies with coffee breath asking me about this. No way, Mom. I’m staying here. Besides, I’ll be fine with that detective outside watching the house.”

“Then I’m not going in to work,” she stated with a frown. “I’m not leaving you alone and that is final.”

“I can spend the day at David’s or Andy’s place. I won’t be alone there.”

I didn’t want my mother’s paranoia to rub off on me. I was already scared. I felt my only safe harbor was David, but I couldn’t tell Claire that. She wouldn’t understand, and I couldn’t tell her the reason behind my feelings. They were like real life super heroes to me.

“You are taking all of this too lightly, little girl.” She started tapping my head with her finger. “Do you understand that someone with a gun is out to do God knows what to you?”

The tapping was annoying to me. I hated when she did that. I pushed her hand away.

“Jesus, Mother... Stop it! I’m not an idiot. I know perfectly well the severity of the situation. Don’t you think I feel as helpless as you do? I’m just trying to keep myself together. I suggest you do the same.”

“And how can I when I know he’s out there somewhere? Isis, if something ever happened to you...” She pursed her lips and turned her head from side to side. “I don’t know what I would do, honey.”

“Let’s just go to sleep, okay? We’re fine for now,” I tried to convince her.

“No,” she shook her head. “What if that detective falls asleep?”

“Then can you please let *me* sleep?” Not that I was going to fall asleep with all this pressure on me, but if it would get her to stop the ongoing hysteria, then it was worth lying.

She turned off the lamp on the night table and sat on the windowpane staring down at the street. I shut my eyes so that the conversation would not start over again.

Occasionally, I would hear her tiptoe around the room pacing. At some point, while pretending to be asleep and thinking about how I was to blame for this whole ordeal, I fell asleep.

Chapter 14

It must've been around seven in the morning when I heard heavy knocking on the front door. Claire was asleep next to me. I jumped over her and down the stairs to get the door.

Through the peephole, I could see Krystle's dad in his uniform and cowboy hat. I opened the door right away.

"Morning." Constable Mendiola tipped his hat. "Your mother home?"

"Yes, sir. Come in... just a minute, let me get her."

I closed the door behind him and ran up the stairs. Claire jumped when she felt me tapping her on the arm.

"What's wrong?" she asked wide-eyed.

"Krystle's dad is down stairs. He wants to speak with you."

"Be right down," she said stumbling to the bathroom.

Downstairs, I offered the constable some coffee, while Claire made her way down to join us. The constable took a seat at the kitchen table waiting for the coffee to brew.

"Were you able to find Gabriel's house easily?" I asked trying to get ahead on the information he had come to give my mother.

"Just fine," he said.

"Was he home?" I probed, as I grabbed two cups from the cupboard.

"Let's wait till your mother joins us, whataya say?"

"Sure," I sounded disappointed.

The constable and I made small talk while we waited.

We turned our heads to the stairs as we heard Claire's footsteps coming down.

"Morning, John. Sorry for the wait. I didn't sleep a wink last night," Claire said, making her way to the coffee pot.

"Can't say I'm surprised. If I was in your shoes, I'd be lookin' out for my kid too."

"So what happened yesterday evening after we left the station?" Claire sipped her black coffee.

"We were able to search the house... question the parents; kid was gone though. They say he took some of his stuff and drove off without a word. We found traces of some drugs in his room, but no weapons. Kid must o' made a run for it, is my guess."

"You guess?" Claire said sarcastically.

"Would ya let me finish?" He pressed his lips together.

"Sorry," Claire apologized. "Go on."

"Seems the parents have been having a whole lot o' trouble with the boy. He was suspended for the semester from school. Lost his scholarship."

"That's not typical of him," I interrupted.

"Neither is pulling a gun on your friends, but drugs make you do stupid things." Claire raised her brows.

"Thing is..." Mendiola continued, "we got a call about an abandoned car 'round four this morning—off one of the farm roads right outside o' town. Ran a check on the vehicle plates and turned out the owner was the boy's father. Boy's clothes were in the car, the door wide open, but no sign of the kid."

“So he’s out there with a gun looking for *my* daughter?!” Claire said in a high-pitched voice, spilling some coffee as she waved her hands in the air.

“We tracked him through the sugar cane fields with K-9’s but came up with nothing. The tracks just disappeared.”

“How could they have disappeared?” I asked. “He must’ve covered them.”

“Now we can’t be sure of that.” The constable sat back and wiped his mustache with a napkin. “The family filed a missing person’s report early this morning when they were notified that the car was abandoned.”

“So now what happens? I mean, he couldn’t have disappeared into thin air. He must be somewhere. Look harder,” Claire demanded.

“We have turned every stone and pebble in this town and the surrounding areas. He’s gone, I reckon. I can almost guarantee it.” Mendiola said.

“I’m not buying it.” Claire crossed her arms. “No way he’s just disappeared.”

“Anything coulda happened to him at those hours of the night. The engine was still warm, when we got there. He couldn’t have gone far.” The constable stood from his chair. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go relieve the detectives of their duties.”

“That’s it?” Claire placed her hands on her hips. “You’re leaving her out like a tasty meal, John. You can’t tell that officer to leave.”

“Police units will be patrolling your house every fifteen minutes for the next twenty-four hours. If this kid doesn’t turn up by then, then he’s officially missing and the cops are off your case.”

“But John!” Claire protested.

Constable Mendiola held his hand up. “I know, Claire, but I have to go by the book. Ya understand?”

Claire sighed in discontent. “I can’t believe you can’t do this personal favor for me, Mendiola. You know it’s just the two of us and no man in the house.”

“Now hold off just a second; don’t try to pity talk me into it. I haven’t told Krystle about the incident for that same reason.” He turned his back to us and started walking toward the door. “If it makes you feel any better, I’ll be taking over patrols in the area after tomorrow. Isis bein’ my main concern.”

“Well, thank you, Constable,” Claire smiled like she had gotten away with something.

“Don’t thank me. I’m doin’ it as a favor to m’self. I wouldn’t hear the end of it from you if I didn’t do this.”

The constable put his hat on and opened the door. “Take care now.” He waved and closed the door behind him.

Claire refused to go into work. I wasn’t allowed to peek through the windows or set foot outside the house. The more paranoid Claire became, the jumpier she made me feel.

“Would you stop being so paranoid?” I said to my mom peeking out the blinds just as a police car drove by.

“For the last time, get away from the window, Isis. What if he’s waiting to get a glimpse of you from across the street?”

“You make him sound like he’s a professional killer. You’re being ridiculous, Mom. I’m going upstairs,” I said, already half way up the stairs.

“No peeking out the windows!” she yelled out after me.

I called David to let him know the news about Gabriel, but an officer had already beaten me to it.

“I don’t want you leaving your house today.” He sounded authoritative over the loudspeaker on my phone. “My brothers have been out sweeping the area where Gabriel’s abandoned vehicle was discovered. They didn’t find any sign of him. They’ve also been circling the town from above all night. I told them to keep surveillance on Bill’s, Andy’s and your residences.”

“Thanks for that. I’m sorry I didn’t call last night. My mother wouldn’t give me any privacy.” I lay on my bed holding the phone a few inches from my mouth.

“I didn’t have that problem, but I thought it inopportune to call you under the circumstances.”

“I knew you’d say some sensible thing,” I smiled. “Anyhow, I don’t know when I’ll be able to see you. I’m on lockdown for a few days. I don’t know if my mom will allow you to come here though. I’ll have to check with her before.”

“I think that she will not approve, being that I am the reason for this dilemma. She would feel that you are at greater risk being with me at this time.”

“You’re not the reason; I am. But you might be right about her feeling more stressed with you and me together. Her paranoia is suffocating me.”

“She’s your mother. Let her suffocate you all she wants during this situation. Her instinct is to shield you. It helps her in feeling more at ease and in control.”

I made a face at the phone. Why was he always so prudent about things?

“Sure,” I said watching Claire observing me from my bedroom door. “So what are you doing for the rest of the day?” I continued the conversation.

Claire walked across the room to the window and sat on the windowsill.

“Thinking of you,” David replied.

Claire giggled as she heard him over the loudspeaker.

“Yeah, me too.” I smiled.

Seeing as my mother wasn’t going to leave me alone, I had to end the phone call with David. My corny moments with him were private and special for me.

“I like that boy.” Claire looked out the window in thought. “He reminds me of...”

“Of who?”

“It’s silly,” she smiled and shook her head, “but the way he carries himself and speaks, he reminds me of your biological father—so eloquent and debonair. I guess we have very good taste in men.” She winked.

“The best,” I laughed.

Over the next few days I wasn’t allowed to leave my house. We got word from Officer Ramirez that Gabriel was officially missing. His family set up flyers all over town and the neighboring areas. I felt like something horrible had happened to him. Although he had threatened Andy and Bill, my worry for him didn’t die. I silently prayed for his safe return to his family.

On Friday, Claire finally returned to work. I had the house to myself but was advised to call her if I even thought about opening the front door.

I was bored and was in desperate need of some company. My spring break had been ruined and I couldn’t see Krystle, Patrick, or Sheila because their parents held concerned for their safety. They didn’t want them hanging out with me for the time being.

I thought about calling David, but that would only make me miss him more. He didn’t want to visit

me until my mother was over the scare we had.

This was like Romeo and Juliet must've felt having to be apart. My chest was heavy and pained from the emotion. I loved him. And not just a normal kind of human love, but a love that hurt and made me joyous and weak and strong all at the same time... and to think that he would be only mine someday, and I would be his. But before we could be together, I wondered if we would have to suffer like Romeo and Juliet—minus the dying, of course. I wasn't the suicidal type.

That afternoon my mom called to tell me that she had spoken to Constable Mendiola and found out that Gabriel was still missing. I secretly tried calling his cell phone, but it went directly to voicemail. I felt so bad for his family and for him. I wondered what could have happened to him. Would the police turn up with his body in a plastic bag somewhere? The thought made me shudder. Maybe I should have helped him when I knew he was under the influence instead of shoving him away. I was surely the reason this had happened to him. I should have been more of a friend than an ex-girlfriend.

Clearly the guy was screaming out for help in every attempt he made to reach out to me. I should have contacted his parents when this was all happening. I should have told my mother. I should have tried to talk to him in a civilized manner instead of brushing him off.

Everything that was happening was my fault—I could see that now. I was to blame for the trauma Gabriel caused Andy and Bill and for the jealousy that burned in Gabriel that caused him to point a gun at my friends. I was to blame for his disappearance. He would have never run away if he hadn't been looking for me.

I was also responsible for everything that was going on with David and his family. They were putting their lives on the line for me.

I really needed some divine intervention.

It was a long and dull weekend. Sunday night my mother finally allowed me to have David over for dinner, which I cooked. I was very proud of my lasagna and salad. David seemed to enjoy it as well. My mother cautioned David about ten times about driving to and from school and being careful. She suggested that I be dropped off at her office after school, but I didn't approve.

"I'll be fine, mom. Gabriel is still missing remember? If it makes you feel any better, I'll go home with David while you get out of work, but I'm not going to sit in your office."

"David's family doesn't have the obligation of babysitting you for me. I don't feel comfortable giving Nyx that type of responsibility, knowing full well she's already concerned about her own son. I don't want to double that pressure." Claire cleared her plate from the table.

"It wouldn't be a burden, Mrs. Martin. On the contrary, I think it would serve to relieve you and my mother a bit. She's done nothing but ask about Isis and you since the incident," David tried to convince her otherwise. "I think it's a grand idea."

"Hmm..." Claire's mouth creased to one side. "Do you think I could speak to your mother on the phone?"

"Of course," David said. He pulled the phone from his pant pocket and dialed.

David and I listened to the one-sided conversation as we finished our dinner, Nyx convinced my mom that it would be better to have me stay at their house for a couple of hours after school, rather than being alone at our house. I had to hand it to Nyx; she really knew how to pitch a sale.

Claire excused herself and went upstairs while David and I cleaned up the kitchen. As soon as I heard my mother's bedroom door close, I flung myself into David's arms.

“I missed you,” I said taking in the sandalwood scent on his shirt.

His lips tenderly brushed against my forehead. “I agonized over you.”

I smiled.

“I thought of you constantly,” he said holding my chin up to look at him.

“Me too.”

“I wrote something for you, but I would prefer you read it before you go to bed tonight.”

He handed me a paper, twice folded.

“What is it?” I asked putting the paper in my back pocket.

“My thoughts.”

David left shortly after. His scent lingered on my green blouse. I laid it on my pillow hoping the aroma would penetrate it. I took a quick shower before going to bed, eager to read whatever he had written.

I jumped on the bed with the parchment paper in my hand and opened it.

My Dearest Love,

As I sit here writing, I wish nothing more than to have you with me. The days have gone slowly without your tender gaze upon mine. I am weak without you and do not know how I can survive in this state.

The scent of your hair, the touch of your lip, the rose of your cheek all lay engraved in my touch, my sight, my scent, my mind and my heart. I am committed to you with all that I am, and I am nothing without you.

Tonight I lay awake recounting our lover’s meets and I agonize over the insignificant distance between us. Yet, it so pains me to have you this short distance away. Might I be a fool to feel this way? And if a fool I am, then it is for you; for you would make any man a king’s fool, my queen.

I pray thee sleep well, with dreams of your one true love and may he be me, for the love of my eternal life is the one that breathes life into my soul and that is you and only you.

I bid thee sweet dreams and sweet kisses on thy cheek and thy lip and thine eyes, that I should be so fortunate to keep them on mine lip every night.

Ceaselessly Yours,

David Chios

This was the very first love letter I had ever received, and how perfect it was. I had to show this to someone. I ran over to my mother’s door and knocked.

“Mom, you awake?” I said in a loud whisper just in case she was asleep.

“Come in,” she yelled behind the closed door.

Claire was in her pink bathrobe with a towel wrapped around her head. She was painting her toenails on the bed.

“What’s up, honey?” she asked.

“David wrote me a letter. I want you to read it. It’s beautiful!” I said excitedly.

“Give it here.” She stretched her arm and snatched it away from me.

She started reading the letter in a low tone trying to imitate David's accent. After the first line she read in her normal voice.

"This is poetic," she said. "How did he come up with this on his own?"

"He's a freakin' genius, that's how." I grabbed the letter put it on my chest and fell back on the bed. "He loves me." I smiled from ear to ear.

"Yes, that's evident."

I turned and lay on my stomach with my hand under my chin and the letter in my other hand. "He loves me," I repeated to her.

"I heard you the first time," she laughed.

"I know, I just wanted to assert myself," I giggled. "Do you think David would make a good husband?" I asked without thinking to whom I had posed the question.

"Wait a minute, young lady. I am not having this conversation. You're only seventeen. Switch that gear off and turn it to your studies. I'll have none of that until you've finished college," she frowned.

"It's a rhetorical question, Mom."

"No it's not. I see the way you're all googly eyed with that boy. Do you think I didn't go through the same experience when I was a teenager?"

"It was just a question," I said in a hurt tone. "I'm not planning on getting married any time soon."

Claire was in thought for a minute. "I didn't mean to sound like I was reprimanding you. You caught me off guard. You know how much it means to me for you to graduate from college." She took her towel off and smiled at me. "I think he would make a perfect husband, Isis. That's why I freaked out, okay?"

"Really?" I sat up on the bed.

"Yes. He's brilliant, gorgeous, sincere and respectful. What else could you ask for?"

I smiled. "He is isn't he?" I held my hands together and batted my eyelashes playfully.

"You're such a clown! Go to bed," she demanded.

"Night." I jumped off the bed and kissed her on the cheek. "Love you, Mom."

"Love you, too, kiddo."

Another northern front had blown in on Monday morning. The sky was dreary, announcing more rain. The wind was cool and pleasant. I didn't care for the rain, but the temperature was wonderful.

Claire left for work earlier than usual, being as she had missed three days of work the prior week. I lingered on the porch with my cup of coffee, waiting for it to be near the time David would pick me up for school.

I went back into the house and washed the coffee cup and then ran up the stairs to brush my teeth for a second time. Coffee breath wasn't very becoming, I thought.

The letter David had expressively written was fresh in my mind. I could never be as skillful with words as he was. I probably read the letter ten times before going to sleep the night before.

The doorbell rang while I was testing my breath on my hand. I grabbed my things and ran down the stairs. I was so happy to see David at the door.

"Good morning, love." He greeted me with a kiss on the lips today.

"Wait," I said pulling him down toward me again. "I'm not done."

I kissed his forehead, his eyes, his nose and finally his lips.

"You're no fool," I made reference to the letter.

“But I am... a fool for you. You could ask me for death, and I would be at your mercy.”

“Don’t even play around with that,” I frowned.

David chuckled. “It’s my foolish heart that speaks. I am only the marionette.”

“Sorry, I’m not into wooden boys, Pinocchio.”

“Such a shame.” He rolled his eyes back and shook his head. “And here I thought a kiss from my princess would make me a real boy.”

I laughed at his quick-witted humor. “Let’s see if it’s true.”

“Gladly,” He said squeezing the air out of me.

“David,” I gasped. “You’re crushing me.”

“I’m sorry,” he tittered. “I forgot how fragile you are. Are you alright?”

“I think I have a few broken ribs, but other than that, I’m peachy.”

“Enough of this, my lovely. Let us be on our way.”

Things looked like they were back to normal for the next couple of days. Word had somehow gotten out about the incident between Gabriel and my friends. I guess nothing is a secret in such a small town.

Andy and Bill seemed to be slowly getting over the scare.

The police had no clue as to what happened to Gabriel. I was still blaming myself for not taking him more seriously, when he showed Bill the gun that first time. I could have talked to him. I could have avoided all of this mess.

My mother, after speaking to officers, said everyone, including Gabriel’s parents, had the notion that he was gone. Officer Ramirez said there was no trace of him, and the likelihood of him being found was minimal.

Ramirez told my mother Gabriel’s disappearance was a mystery, and his parents were told that there would be a search in the sugar cane field only once more for his remains. They believed he might have taken his own life. I was devastated when my mother told me the news.

“How can they be so sure?” I asked Claire.

“They say he fit the profile of a manic depressive, and they weren’t ruling out suicide.”

“That doesn’t mean he’s actually d-dead.” I had trouble with the last word.

“It’s terrifying for his parents, Isis. They’ve gone looking for him on their own. I couldn’t imagine going through something like that. I feel horrible for them.” Claire scrubbed a pan on that Tuesday night after dinner.

I stood there behind her, cold and unconvinced. “I just can’t believe it, Mom. I’m in shock.”

“So was I, honey. I knew that boy since he was in elementary school with you.” She wiped her hands on her apron. “I just don’t understand how he got himself involved with drugs and guns and God knows what else. He was such a sweet kid.”

“He was,” I agreed with a blank stare and a knot in my throat.

That night, I tossed and turned thinking of my ex-boyfriend and former friend. I wanted so much to know what had happened to him. Was he really gone? Was he just a lifeless body lying somewhere in a field or a ditch? I shuddered every time I thought of it. I didn’t want to imagine him that way, but the thought kept haunting me through the night.

The northern winds were really blowing on Wednesday morning. It was a significant change from the previous week with the humidity. It was crazy weather season in south Texas.

Claire had left early to work again. She was trying to catch up with files at the office, from the days she had been absent.

David picked me up right on time. He looked dazzling in his black jeans and black long sleeved shirt. His blue eyes were piercing. He was just perfect.

After our morning hellos, we were off to school. David asked me to remain in the car when we reached the school parking lot.

“My father has gone to Italy on business. He has asked me to inform him of any changes you might have been feeling lately because there have been no changes in me,” he explained.

“I don’t feel any different. I’m not even sure I’m changing at all.”

“I told him that.” He seemed to pout slightly. “If the metamorphosis doesn’t occur soon, I’m going to have a fit of anxiety. I can’t take this any longer. I want you to be mine forever.”

“I thought I already was.” I was unsettled.

David sighed, “Isis... love... if this change doesn’t occur for us, we cannot be together.”

“But you said... your family said...” I sounded upset.

“Yes, we did say the changes would occur. That is what is supposed to happen in the case of any normal human. The deity should change into a mortal, but in our case... well, it’s hard to foretell.”

“I won’t leave you. I don’t care if we don’t change,” I warned him.

“I would never let you leave me,” he looked intently at me.

We sat there silently looking at each other. We had just agreed to live against the rules. What would the future hold for a half-bred human and an immortal deity?

Gemini came looking for us at the student parking lot. When they saw we were fine, they went back inside the school building.

“I love you, David,” I finally broke the silence. “We need to find a way to be together if this change doesn’t happen. I won’t lose you to anything.”

David grabbed a hold of my hand. “I want you to promise me one thing.”

I nodded.

“Promise me you will never love anyone more than you love me.”

“Are you saying good-bye?” My heart began to hurt.

“No. I’m securing my treasure.”

“I promise,” I said, crossing my heart.

“I promise you that we *will* be together.”

From his pocket David pulled out a gold ring and placed it on my finger on my right hand. The ring was simple with a small white stone—a diamond.

My heart started pounding at an unbelievable rate. I stopped breathing all together. I knew he wasn’t proposing, but with this ring, I knew he was promising to do so one day. I was speechless.

We were late to first period. Andy was on the edge of her seat when we walked in.

“Where were you?” She whispered. “Why didn’t you answer your phone? I thought something happened to you guys,” Andy sounded upset.

“Sorry,” I said wiggling the fingers on my right hand. “We were busy.”

“You’re engaged?!” She said in a very loud voice that made the entire class turn around.

“Shhhh!” the teacher hushed us.

“No, we are not engaged,” David said, hugging me from the desk behind mine. “I should be so fortunate.”

“You still should have answered your phones. Don’t pull that number on me again, you hear?” Angrily, she opened her notebook and started scribbling notes.

I could understand why Andy would have been so upset. She didn’t know about what the police had told my mother about Gabriel yet. I hadn’t mentioned it to anyone, because I really hoped they found Gabriel alive. I would have to tell them to calm them down. I even kept it from David. I would have to tell them today.

During lunch I gathered the group at a corner table, secluded from the twins’ groupies. It was hard to keep those kids away for more than five minutes, so I made it fast.

“The police told my mother that Gabriel might have committed suicide.” I got straight to the point.

I heard a gasp coming from Bill. “What?”

“That’s their hypothesis.” My throat started feeling like it was being constricted. “They’re supposed to be looking for him one last time today.”

The group looked at me expecting more details.

“I don’t know what to think. I just wanted to let you guys know what’s going on with the case so that your parents are informed and less worried for you.” I felt David’s hand on mine. “That’s all I had to tell you,” I added, before the twins had some of their fans yelling out for them from across the nearest table to us.

Galen raised his hand to the group motioning them to hold on.

“How sure are the police that this is true?” Eryx asked.

“I don’t know. What I do know is that his family has been searching for him and they’ve come up empty handed also.”

I heard Andy whimpering. Her head was on Bill’s shoulder.

“He was capable of it in his condition... of suicide, I mean.” Bill considered Gabriel’s recent behavior. “There must’ve been something that the cops are going by to have come up with that theory.”

“I’ll ask my mom this afternoon,” I told them as two guys approached Galen and Eryx to socialize.

Lunch was pretty gloomy after my announcement. Andy wasn’t in a talking mood. I was sure she was still mad over the fact that neither David nor I answered our phones that morning; that, and she was scared.

The news hit Bill pretty hard too. He wasn’t much into chatting either.

We all had mixed emotions over Gabriel. He was an ex-friend, but it didn’t mean he deserved the fate the police said he might have had.

“You’re worried about Gabriel,” David assessed.

I felt like I was cheating on him somehow.

“Yes,” I said in a soft voice. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing? I’m not judging you. I realize he was important to you at one time in your life. I would probably react the same way.”

React the same way? Over who?

“Oh,” my jaw clenched. “I didn’t know you had ex-girlfriends.”

“Only a few,” He admitted.

“I see.” My brow automatically creased.

“Are you jealous?” he smirked.

“No.” I gave him a scornful look.

“Oh my Lord!” He covered his mouth. “You *are*! I feel grand.”

I rolled my eyes at him.

He pecked my cheek and laughed. “I love you, precious.”

That afternoon seemed strange for me. I felt something in my stomach telling me that there was some event about to occur. I was nervous.

After school, Andy had gotten over the unanswered phone calls. She complimented me on the promise ring and seemed more at ease than she had during lunch.

David and I were about to head for the car when I got the phone call from my mother:

“Isis, there’ve been some developments on Gabriel’s case,” she told me.

“What is it?” I stopped in the middle of the crossway at the parking lot. David led me to the other side by the arm.

“There was a body found around one of the fields where Gabriel’s car was discovered. They don’t know if it’s him, but the physique looks like it’s a match. The body is... oh gosh...” She sighed. “The body is unidentifiable. They think the coyotes got to it.”

“Oh my God!” I placed my hand over my mouth.

“I know, honey... I know,” she said. “I have to let you go, but could you please advise your friends so they can tell their parents.”

“Mom, how will they identify him then?”

“They’re going to do an autopsy and DNA samples will be gathered. It’ll be a couple of days before the results are in. Till then, let’s pray for that poor family.”

“Thanks for calling to let me know, Mom. I’ll see you later.” I clicked on my phone to end the call. I was in shock again.

“What happened?” David asked.

“They found a body in the fields near where Gabriel disappeared. The body is unrecognizable, but they think it’s him. They won’t know for sure until DNA results are in.”

Andy rushed to see why I was clinging on to David. She had been watching me on the phone call.

“What now?” she asked as if she expected more bad news.

I explained about the body being found in the field.

Bill broke down in tears before Andy. She was in awe, like it hadn’t sunk in fully.

I sniffled a little bit, trying to keep in all my emotions. I couldn’t digest the information Claire had given me. I felt sick to my stomach.

Chapter 15

“Are you going to eat something?” Claire asked as I sat staring at my food.

“I’m not very hungry.” I tapped the fork on my plate. “I think I’m going to call it a night.”

“Isis, I know this is hard for you. I had to watch that poor woman—his mother—give a statement to the local newspaper. She’s completely distraught. Mr. Betancourt wouldn’t give a statement. He’s angered that they’ve made this into a media affair. I would be too, but Mrs. Betancourt has hope that she’ll find her son alive even with the high possibilities that the body they found today was his.”

“I feel sick,” I said holding my stomach. “I don’t want to hear anymore.”

“Sorry, honey. I won’t say another word.” My mother stood up and hugged me. “It’s nerves. I know how you feel.”

“Mom... do you think I’m the reason this all happened to Gabriel?”

My mother’s eyes creased. “No. Why would I think that? That boy had problems.

“We each make our own choices, and he just happened to make the wrong ones. Don’t blame yourself for someone else’s poor judgment.”

“Right,” I said unconvinced. “Anyway, I’m going upstairs. I’m not in much of a mood for anything.”

I climbed out the window and onto the porch roof where I could view the starless night. The full moon seemed dull somehow. I felt like the night was in mourning along with me. I shivered as I felt the dead cold around me.

A knot formed in my throat. I couldn’t resist calling the one person that would make me feel better.

“Princess,” he sounded happy when he answered his phone.

“Hi,” I said in a broken voice. Tears had already started flowing from my eyes.

“Are you crying?” David asked softly.

“A little. It’s nothing.” I wiped the tears on my jeans.

“What is it?” he wondered.

“I don’t want to talk about it. I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Alright. What shall we talk about then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you like to hear about Greece?”

“That sounds nice.”

“Very well, then... In Greece, my family owns a house atop a hill. It is in the city of Athens. It’s beautiful there. The house oversees the city and the ocean is near. There are architectural marvels and small villages in the surrounding areas. There are also a multitude of museums that I would like you to visit one day soon. I would be your personal tour guide, of course.”

“That sounds wonderful, but my mother would never allow me to go.” I shivered as a cool breeze of air swept along my back.

“You will never know unless you ask,” he whispered.

“Why are you whispering?” I asked.

“Because I’m wary of frightening you.”

“How would you frighten me?” I said noticing a shadow moving beside me.

I shrieked, dropped the phone, jumped back and almost fell off the side of the roof. David caught

my arm and pulled me back to the window ledge.

“Shh,” he hushed me. “It’s only me.”

My body was trembling. “Don’t do that anymore,” I sounded upset.

“My apologies,” he said wrapping me in a small throw blanket that I knew belonged in his room. I had seen it the day Alezzander had called me a dog and rung my neck like a chicken. What a fun day that was.

“I knew you would be out here. I only wanted to comfort you.” He hugged me.

“Thank you for coming.” I snuggled closer to him. He was warm and his scent traveled through all my senses. I could almost taste the sandalwood, it was so strong. I had only now noticed that when David’s temperature rose, so did the concentration of his fragrance.

“How did you get here so fast?” I was surprised.

“How do you think?” he tittered. “Well, what do you think about a trip to Greece?” He returned to the subject.

“So out of the question. My mother would freak. Besides, I don’t have the money for a trip like that.”

“I would cover your costs.” He wasn’t jesting. He was sincerely asking me to take a trip with him to Europe. That was one of my dreams.

I pulled my head back to view him. “David...” I sighed and shook my head.

“Why not?”

“I can’t have you pay for that; it involves too much money.”

“You’ll be my wife someday. I should take responsibility of your financial needs.”

“Whoa!” I pulled myself away from him. “You gave me a *promise* ring. It’s not an engagement ring, remember? It doesn’t mean you have to take responsibility for my anything.”

“And if it is my will?” He lifted his brow.

“Well I suggest you put your will away, because my mother would never have it and neither will I. I want to enjoy being your girlfriend for a while.”

“You can enjoy being my girlfriend in Greece for the summer.”

“David, I want to go, but my mother would never allow me to fly to Europe with my boyfriend fresh out of high school. How much does that cost anyway?”

“That is not a deciding factor in this discussion. We’re both mature young adults with good judgment. I am not naïve and neither are you. We know what we do. You’ll be eighteen by then and capable of making your own decisions. I see no problem.”

I sighed, “Don’t you get it? There is a problem and her name is Claire. You saw how aggressive she was with the officers at the police station. Imagine if I were to ask her to let me go on a trip that my boyfriend was financing?” I pecked him on the cheek. “It’s not happening, dream boy... sorry.”

“We’ll have to see about that. I always get what I want.”

I rolled my eyes. He obviously wasn’t getting the point.

“Moving on...” I prompted him to change the topic.

“You know, a promise ring in my culture entitles me to look after your wellbeing and your material needs. My parents would be disgraced if they found you did not allow me to do so.”

“What?” My eyes narrowed. “Are you making this up?”

“Yes,” he smirked. “I want to take care of you.”

“David! Don’t do that to me! I get overly anxious with these things, okay?”

“How will you deal the day I ask you to marry me?”

“That’s different.”

“How so?”

“A little girl dreams of her prince charming all of her life... about the white wedding dress... the flowers. I want all of it.” I looked away from him. “I just don’t want it right now.”

“Oh.” David’s jaw hardened. “I thought we were on the same page. I thought you wanted to be with me forever.”

I held his hands. “I do. I love you... but you have to understand that I also have other priorities. I want to go to college. I want to make my mother proud. I want to experience life. Now that I don’t know if I’ll get to do those things, I want them more than ever.”

David sighed. “And how long do you think it will be before you’re ready to take this a step further?”

I bowed my head and looked at him from under my lashes. “David, I’m only seventeen. I don’t know.”

“I see.” He bobbed his head. “I suppose I am being overzealous and quite selfish. I forget that you’re so new and inexperienced.”

“I don’t know if I should take that as a compliment or an insult.”

“Innocence is a beautiful rarity.” He caressed my head. “I would never change that about you.”

“Thanks.” I lay my head against his chest. “I wouldn’t change anything about you either.”

His stay was short by my definition. David made me go inside my room before he left. I asked him to leave his blanket, infused with his scent since he insisted on leaving before being discovered by my mother. He didn’t understand why I wanted his blanket. When I told him it was to have his scent on me, his ego rose through the roof. It made me happy to see his wide beautiful smile. I felt like it meekly made up for the earlier conversation where I had crushed his excited state of emotion.

Journal Entry 13, 10:32 P.M.

It’s as if he has been swallowed whole by the soil his foot walked upon. The sugarcane fields whisper their secret as the wind sifts through each stem.

What happened to Gabriel Betancourt?

I know nothing of his whereabouts, but I pray that God might hear my plea.

I pray for all that is life and for all that is His will. I pray, and plea and beg that I might remain as I am said to be—in His own image.

* * *

It was Thursday morning, and I was off to school with prince charming, where I was surprised to see posters of Gabriel along the white hall walls. As if I needed more reason to feel utterly disgusted with myself for not being there for him. Now I had his eyes staring at me all over school. Creepy.

David brought up the subject of Greece again in a group discussion at our table. Galen couldn’t care less, but Eryx shook his head and rolled his eyes at the idea. He was obviously against it.

“Europe would be the ultimate summer vacation before college,” Andy sounded excited. “I would so kill for that experience.”

“Yeah, but there’s the matter of money involved.” I pursed my lip and raised my left eyebrow.

“There’s only the matter of requesting permission. The cost is irrelevant,” David pursed his

argument.

“It is too relevant,” Andy retorted. “That’s like thousands of dollars, isn’t it? I don’t think her mother is in any position to spend that much money.”

“No, she’s not,” I agreed.

“The trip would be at my expense,” David explained.

“Well in that case…” Andy raised her shoulders. “I say start begging Claire for permission as of now.”

“I wouldn’t be too confident about that going over too well with Mrs. Martin,” Bill said before he took a sip of his milk.

“Thank you,” I said raising a hand in the air. “There you have the voice of reason.”

“Touché,” Eryx agreed.

“Three against two. Subject closed,” I said leaving out Galen who was busy attending to two flirty girls at either side of him.

“I doubt this is the end of it,” David laughed mockingly.

“Whatever,” I mumbled.

When I got home that afternoon, Claire was in the laundry room sorting some clothes.

“Hey,” she said throwing a shirt into a pile of dark clothes. “How’s the royal family?”

“Hi,” I hugged her. “Nyx sends her regards. Alezzander is out of town on business.”

“Give her my best tomorrow, would ya? Tell her we need to get together for some coffee or something. I’d love to visit with her again.”

“Sure.” I started helping her sort through the dirty laundry. “Have you heard anything about Gabriel?”

“Nope,” She said examining my face. “How are you feeling about this whole thing? You haven’t really opened up about it.”

“Horrible. I feel like it’s my fault.”

Claire stopped what she was doing and looked at me. “Now how in the world is this your fault?”

“Mom… I… I haven’t told you everything.”

Claire placed her hand on her waist. “Well spit it out,” she sounded angry already.

I lowered my head, knowing all too well she was about to go ballistic with what I was about to expose.

“Gabriel had already been harassing me. He picked a fight with David and then showed Bill the gun before this all happened. I tried to tell him I wasn’t interested in him anymore. He was acting weird—crazy, even. I brushed him off and ignored him.”

I heard my mom take a deep breath. I was a little too intimidated to look at the raging lioness.

“I cannot believe you kept something this serious from me,” she said in a calm voice, with her hand on her temple. “Look at me,” she demanded. “You are to never, ever keep anything like this from me again. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Mom, I knew him since forever. I never thought he’d go postal on us.”

Claire’s eyes were burning through me. “Isis, I thought you were more responsible than this. Haven’t you any common sense?”

“I do, Mom. I just didn’t want you to overreact.”

Claire threw a few more articles of clothing on some piles. “You’re grounded, Isis. How’s that for overreacting?”

“Mother!” I protested.

“I don’t want to hear it. Go to your room,” she was furious.

“I don’t understand your reasoning. Why am I grounded?” I tried to talk her out of it.

“I said go to your room... NOW,” she raised her voice at me.

“You’re grounding me for being honest?” I defended myself.

“Don’t even try debating with me, young lady. Keeping this from me is by far the stupidest thing you’ve ever done. How do you expect me not to overreact?” She threw some whites into the washer.

“Your life was on the line, Isis. Do you understand that?” She slammed the lid to the washer.

“I’m sorry, Mom. Geez. I’m fine. Look at me. I’m in one piece.”

“Well, Bill and Andy might not have been so lucky, Isis. Have you thought about that?” She made her point very clear to me.

Suddenly it dawned on me that I never took that into account. Gabriel could have killed someone in his demented state. I had to admit I had used poor judgment. It was unpardonable.

I could feel the muscles in my neck starting to burn from the tension.

“I screwed up,” I admitted. “How long am I grounded for?”

“For the rest of your natural born life.” Claire walked out of the laundry room fuming.

I walked after her.

“Mom, wait.”

“What?” Claire let out an annoyed sigh.

“I’m sorry.”

“That just isn’t good enough right now.” She gave me her back and walked up the stairs. “You have no consideration for me as your mother. Go to your room.”

My mother was disappointed in me. I knew that. It was one of the worst feelings I had ever experienced. How could I have been so stupid? How could I have thought I could control someone that was obviously emotionally unstable? I was so wrong to do so.

“I’m grounded,” I told Andy over the phone. “I haven’t been grounded since I was like twelve.”

“Why?” she loudly snapped her gum.

“I told my mom that I already knew Gabriel was carrying a gun since before he threatened you guys.”

“I told my parents after the police report was filed. They weren’t too happy either, but they didn’t ground me. I guess they thought having a gun pointed at me was punishment enough.”

“Well, my mother made me see things from a whole new perspective. You guys could have been seriously hurt.”

“Gee, why didn’t I think of that?” Andy was being sarcastic.

“I’m sincerely sorry I didn’t listen to you, Andy. We should have gone to the police immediately.”

“Well, we all learn from our mistakes. We’re young. What do you expect?” She tried to make me feel better.

“That doesn’t excuse me. I should have known better than to keep it a secret from all of our parents. I’m an idiot, and I almost got you killed because of it.”

“Don’t put the blame all on yourself. We have brains too and we chose not to say anything. We’re all a bunch of idiots.”

“Well, thanks for making me feel better. I have to go start dinner and score points with my mom to see if I can have my freedom back someday.”

“Later.” Andy giggled.

“See ya tomorrow.” I said, ending the call.

While I split the chicken breasts for my special apology dinner, I heard steps descending the stairs. Claire sat at the table tapping her fingers.

“You’re not grounded for the rest of your life anymore,” she started the conversation.

“Thanks.” I said smiling to myself. “How long is it for?”

“You’re too old to be grounded. What would I gain from it?”

“You’re the parent. You know what’s best. I’m not arguing the punishment.” I cracked an egg into a glass bowl and began to beat it.

Claire sighed. “What good would it do you? You’re a young adult. Deal with the aftermath of your poor decisions. That’s what’s going to discipline you when you’re on your own—trial and error. You might as well start learning now.”

There was nothing I hated more than having my mother teach me a lesson by making me feel even more conscious of my errors. I couldn’t complain, however; her parenting skills worked like magic on me through my teenybopper phase.

“Ah... the old psychological and emotional torture route. Thanks. I love that about you, Mom. Adding to the guilt always works on me.”

“I know,” she said modestly. “Remind me to reward myself with something cute next time we’re out shopping.”

The Chicken Parmesan was quite good. Claire noticed my promise ring during dinner. She didn’t make a big fuss about it, because she was still upset with me, but I knew she wanted to know when and how David had presented it to me. The questioning would probably come after the storm that was brewing inside my mother.

I tidied up the kitchen and finished the laundry for Claire. She retired early, and most of the laundry was mine, so I felt it was only fair for me to finish up.

I took a long shower and wrapped myself in David’s blanket once I was in bed. I held the throw to my nose and inhaled. The fragrance was delicious. I wished it was his arms around me instead of the blanket, but for now this would have to do.

The buzzing sound of my phone’s vibrate setting prompted me to reach for it. I had a text message from David asking if I was still awake.

“Only for you,” I replied.

His call came through a minute later.

“Hi,” I answered.

“Hello, my lovely. How was your evening?”

“Dreadful,” I began. “I’ve been psychologically tampered with.”

“Oh?” He asked.

I proceeded to tell him how I had come forth with the truth about the whole Gabriel dilemma to Claire and how she had not taken it lightly.

“I would expect nothing less. She is in her right.” He took Claire’s side.

“Why do you always say that?” I was annoyed. “Can’t you take my side for once?”

“Should I?”

“No, I’m on her side too,” I tittered.

“What plans have you for the weekend?” he asked.

“Nothing at the moment. My agenda is completely blank.”

“I’d like to invite you to dinner tomorrow night. Do you think your mother will mind after that discussion you two had?”

“I think she’ll just lay a guilt trip on me again. No biggie. How should I dress?”

“Semi-formal.”

“Ooh la la.” I smiled. “We’re going on a real date.”

“That we are, my love. Are you as thrilled as I am?”

“Absolutely.” A grin extended across my face.

“I have to confess something to you,” he sounded serious.

“What’s that?”

“I miss you every second we are apart.”

“I adore you,” I whispered.

“And I you. Good night, my lovely. May all your dreams be sweet ones.”

“If only you were in them, they would be.”

“Oh, be still my beating heart. I offer no contest to your words. You are she that I hold sacred to my life, my one and only true love.”

I decided to test my own intelligence and began a game of wits with speech. I hoped William Shakespeare had taught him well.

“I have no words to surpass yours, but in my chest lay the same truths you speak of.” I began the game.

“Love me always?” he asked of me.

“And forevermore,” I replied.

“Adore me more?”

“By the passing hour, I do.”

David laughed as he saw I was challenging him and continued the game of words.

“Good night. Sweet kisses on thy lip. Excuse my absence; my prudence holds me captive, or I would be there now.”

“Come then. Be my vigil lover and you’ll have many.”

I heard David gasp in surprise.

“Isis, do not speak to me that way. It makes me think you are serious.”

“And if I am?” I asked.

David held silence.

“Are you there?” I asked wondering why he wouldn’t speak.

“Do not speak of such things. Your lips are both venom and nectar combined.”

“I’m sorry. I was caught in the moment.” I wasn’t really sorry at all.

“Alas, let me bid thee good night, my love, before I forego my impulse.” David continued the game.

“Don’t say good night, say good day to me instead.”

“Isis, please, my dear, stop. If your plan is to incite this love I feel for you, then you are victorious.

Do not lead me any further.”

“And if I beg?”

“My blood boils for you. Stop this, at once. I know you are not playing.”

“Good night then.” My disappointment was unsubtle.

“Good night, my love.”

A chill of excitement ran up my back as I waited on the porch to see his car drive up to my house. I couldn't wait to see his agonizingly beautiful face today.

I ran to the car as soon as I saw it pull up to the driveway. He flung his door open and embraced me without a word. My back was flat against the car and I could feel his ribcage expand as he breathed while he kissed me. His hands ran through my hair and down my back. I wanted to remain this way forever.

“Let's not go to school today,” I said kissing his neck.

“Isis, please, refrain from such words. You weaken my sense of reasoning.” He kissed my face. “Do you know how catastrophic that can be?”

“I'm very aware.”

“Then stop. I beg you, precious. Do not put those thoughts into words for I am not without emotion.”

“I'll stop,” I nodded.

He looked deep into my eyes and brushed the back of his hand against my cheek. “Dear, dear, girl... I'm lost without you and lost with you as well. A lost cause is what I am.”

I smiled and hugged him before he peeled me away—literally—then we set off to school.

David parked close to the campus today. He stared at me after he turned off the engine, pulled me quickly toward him and kissed me in the same feverish manner he had when he arrived at my house. I let my hands wander over his chest. I loved this boy with all my heart. I wanted him for me and only me.

“We're going to be late again.” He gently took my hands and placed them on my lap. “We should go inside.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Definitely.”

David held me tightly as we entered the school. Our group was already assembled at one of the long rectangular tables in cafeteria.

Andy was feeding Bill a piece of apple. The twins socialized with some people whose faces looked familiar, but whom I did not know personally.

We sat at the far edge of the table with Andy and Bill where it was less crowded. David offered to buy me something for breakfast. I had only had an orange juice this morning, but I wasn't very hungry.

I probably should have had something to eat since Fridays were test days and seemed to carry on forever. My stomach would be rumbling by mid-morning.

I remembered that today was also the day the DNA results for the body they found in the fields would be released. While observing the group in their normal routine at school, I wondered if anyone remembered that today was the day we would find out if our former friend was gone forever. I could only imagine what his family was going through. I cringed as I wondered what time I would get the call from Claire.

I must have had an awkward expression on my face, because David asked me what was the matter.

“Nothing.” I smiled crookedly not wanting to ruin the day that had started off so perfect.

We walked to first period, where we were presented with blank sheets of paper at the door. Grunts and moans came from the students receiving the sheets. We all knew it would be an essay question test.

David sat behind me in his usual spot and Andy beside me. We awaited the test instructions eager to get it over with.

I took my time answering the two questions provided by the teacher. I needed to ace this exam to keep my grade point average up. I had been so preoccupied with life—meaning David—that my class average had slightly dropped. The scholarships I had applied for would be at stake if I didn’t get at the very least an “A” minus overall.

Our teacher, while awaiting the rest of the students to finish their exams, kept the class quiet. I was bored.

I lay my head on my arm and started thinking of how wonderful that trip to Greece would be if I accepted. Would my mother let me go? Just the night before she was talking about how I needed to learn things on my own. I wondered if this qualified as a learning experience.

David touched me lightly on the shoulder so that I would turn to face him. He puckered his lips blowing a kiss at me and winked.

I giggled silently and mouthed “thank you”. He smiled and blew me another kiss.

“Everyone is watching you,” I whispered.

“Jealous bastards,” he grinned.

I couldn’t help but laugh at him.

“No talking,” the teacher warned us. And that was the end of first period.

David was very expressive today. Between classes, he held me so tight that it impaired my breathing.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I gasped.

“Not if I have a say in it,” he jested and squeezed me tighter.

“David, you’re suffocating me again.”

“Oh,” He released his clutch and laughed. “I didn’t realize how much pressure I was placing on you.”

“Plenty,” I said rubbing my ribs.

He walked me to my class, gave me a peck on the cheek and two on the mouth and ran toward his own classroom across the hallway. The bell rang just as he stepped inside.

During lunch Eryx sat with us. Galen wasn’t with our group today. He wasn’t anywhere in sight.

“Where’s Galen?” I asked Eryx.

“Lunch detention,” Eryx sniggered.

“What’s he in for?” Bill asked biting his sandwich.

“Making the substitute believe he was a student teacher finishing up university and hitting on her in front of the entire class.” Eryx threw a piece of ham from the sandwich he was eating down on his foam plate. “She fell for it too. She was putty in his hands. He’s evil, that boy.”

No one mentioned a word about the Gabriel ordeal. I figured everyone just wanted to go on with his or her life and forget it happened. This afternoon Claire would have news for me, and we would all have to remember.

The final test of the day came with a headache for me. After the exam I sat and played with my

phone until I was almost asleep. David stared at me from across the room the whole time with eyes of a prisoner begging for mercy.

Fourth period was almost over when I got a text. I looked over at David certain it was from him. His phone was in his hands.

“Please help me,” the message read. It came from Gabriel’s phone.

Chapter 16

My pulse raced.

“Where are you?” I replied.

“Student parking,” the last message read.

I jumped from the seat and grabbed my bag. I looked over my shoulder at David who gave me a questionable look.

“I need to be excused,” I told Ms. Vincent and ran out of the room.

My heart was beating in my ears. I felt nervous and eager to see Gabriel alive. I ran down the halls as fast as I could until I reached the exit.

Gabriel was standing in the middle of the parking lot, drenched by the rains that had come with the northern winds. His clothes were ragged and he looked even thinner and paler than before. I thought he’d drop on the ground as I ran toward him.

“Gabriel!” I screamed hoarsely.

He ran toward me smiling. I eased my pace when I saw him pull something from his back. It was the gun.

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned to run from him. It seemed like it was all in slow motion. My legs didn’t carry me more than a few feet when I felt a violent pull on my hair. He covered my mouth before I could scream and dragged me to a truck.

He threw me in the truck, locked the doors and started cussing at me profusely. I screamed at the top of my lungs for him to stop.

He called me a whore and a back stabbing bitch and gave me a heavy blow on the side of my head with the gun. I fell back and he violently beat me in the face until I was knocked half senseless.

My vision blurred. He continued calling me names and ripped open my blouse.

I tried fighting him off, but it was no use. His weight was too much for my frame.

“No.” I could barely whisper.

I saw him reach for his belt.

“Stop... please.” I cried. “Gabriel, stop. Please, stop!” I pled with him.

He forced open my jeans.

The last of the adrenaline in my body forced out a scream.

“No!” I cried. “No! Please, don’t!”

Suddenly, I heard the loud crashing of glass and Gabriel flew back and out the driver’s side window.

Something warm and thick trailed down my face.

“Don’t do it, brother!” I heard Galen scream. “He’s not worth dying.”

“David, think of *her*. Think of Isis,” Eryx said loudly. “Let him go.”

“He doesn’t deserve to live,” David growled. “I’ll tear off his limbs with my teeth.”

“David,” Galen called his name. “Isis is injured. Tend to her!”

I heard a thud and gasping coming from Gabriel.

“Hold him down!” David commanded.

I saw David’s blurry silhouette open the door to the truck.

“Isis...” he gasped. “What has he done to you?” I could hear rage in his voice.

David took his shirt off, wiped my face and covered me with it. I realized the warm trickle over my face was blood when I saw the stained shirt laid on me. He carried me out of the truck.

“Get an ambulance over here!” Principal Miller screamed into her radio.

I felt David trotting with me from the truck. I could see Galen holding Gabriel down and Eryx in front of David ready to stop him from attacking Gabriel.

A crowd had gathered in the parking lot. Gabriel was screaming at the top of his lungs in a language I couldn't recognize, squirming under Galen's constraint.

“Where do you think you're taking her? She's on school grounds. I'm responsible for her until her parents arrive.” Principal Miller followed behind David and me.

“I assume full responsibility,” David said without turning to view her. He carried me to the Land Rover and placed me in the back seat. Eryx slid into the driver's seat and revved the engine.

“Isis, don't close your eyes, my love.” David pleaded with me. “Don't close them.”

His hands were slippery as he wiped the blood from my eyes. They must have been covered in blood too.

“It hurts,” I whispered.

David snarled loudly followed by a whimper and tears. “Shh...” He rocked me. “Be still, precious. We're almost there.”

I could feel the speed at which the truck was turning corners. My head was throbbing.

I took one last look at David's watery eyes before I closed my own.

“Open your eyes, my lovely. Open your eyes.” I could feel David's hand lightly shaking my face.

When I regained consciousness, I felt them place me on a hard surface with a white bright light over me. My eyes were barely open. I could see blurry images of people applying pressure to the side of my head, nose and lip. I didn't recognize any of them.

A woman opened my eyelids and shined a bright light into my eyes. “She's awake,” she announced.

“Keep her awake,” one male voice said, “and get me a head scan after she's cleaned up.”

“How many fingers do you see?” The woman asked holding her hand before me.

“It's blurry,” I whispered. It hurt when I moved my mouth.

I was taken to a white room and put into a tube. My vision was still obscured. I didn't know what was happening. There was a loud humming noise coming from the machine.

“Be completely still, please,” I heard a male voice say.

How could I move if my head felt like it was about to explode?

“If you feel nauseas or dizzy, let me know,” the same voice said, “I'll stop the machine if you do.”

The loud humming of the machine didn't last long. Or maybe it was the fact that I felt like I was coming to and from consciousness that I don't remember.

I was taken out of that room and carried off into the hallways and into a room with a lot of medical equipment in it.

My eyes were heavy, and I wanted to ask for some painkillers, but the nurse was arguing with someone at the doorway. I heard her telling them they could not come in.

My eyes felt heavy and tired. The pain on the side of my head was unbearable.

“Sweetie, stay awake,” the nurse said. “I have to ask you some questions.” She injected a substance into the I.V. going through my arm.

“Do you know your name?” she asked.

“Isis.” I replied trying not to move my mouth.

“Do you know what happened to you, Isis? Do you know why you’re here?” She continued questioning me.

“Yes.” I answered.

The door to the room opened. Claire rushed in and stopped when she saw me. She placed her hand over her mouth and gasped. The tears immediately started flowing from her eyes. She took several more steps and wiped her face.

“Isis, do you know who this is?” The nurse asked.

“My mother,” I answered, as I started to cry.

Claire started crying as she looked at me.

“Mom,” I reached for her hand.

Claire’s face reflected agony. She was pale from the shock of seeing me like this. I must have looked gruesome.

“I want a mirror,” I said.

The nurse looked at my mother and my mother at the nurse.

“You don’t need a mirror right now, Isis. You’ve suffered several concussions. You’ll be kept under close observation until further instruction from the doctors.” The nurse spoke softly. “Your mother is here to keep you awake. Be a good girl and stay awake, okay?”

“Kay,” I tried to nod but I felt throbbing pain. I reached for my head, but my mother quickly grabbed my hand and set it down.

“Don’t touch,” Claire warned me in a broken voice.

“My nose hurts too,” I said.

“I know,” Claire wept. “Honey, you’re going to have to stay here for a few days. The police will be coming in to take a report from you.”

“Mom, don’t cry.” I rubbed her hand.

“Isis...” she gasped as she cried. “That son of a... Gabriel was taken away by the police. He’s not well. They say he’ll be taken to a psychiatric ward.”

“Where’s David?” I wondered.

“He’s outside. They won’t let him in. He was arguing with them earlier. You’re in the Intensive Care Unit. Only immediate family is allowed.”

“I want to see him,” I whispered to her, squeezing her hand.

“Yes, but he’s not allowed in here,” my mother whispered too.

“Please?” I asked.

“There’s only one person allowed in here at a time and it must be family. I’d have to leave and lie about who he is, and I don’t want to leave you.”

Claire stared at me, trying to hold back the tears. Gabriel must have really done a number on me for her to be this distraught.

When they finally told Claire I could go to sleep and rest, I told her to go eat something. She wiped her tears and touched my cheek ever so gently with her fingers before she left for the cafeteria.

I started to close my eyes when I heard the door open. David had somehow gotten past the nurse’s station and stood at the doorway gawking at me.

“It’s bad?” I asked.

“Oh, Isis...” His look worried me.

David walked to the bed and laid his head on my chest. “I was so afraid.”

“I’m fine.” I ran my hand through his silky black hair.

He wiped his eyes before he barely touched my lips with his. “You’re not fine. You should see yourself. I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” David called out.

A police officer walked into the room. His badge read “Cortez”.

“Officer.” David extended his hand.

“Morning,” Officer Cortez said shaking David’s hand. “I’m here to take a report of the incident from the victim. Is she up for it?”

“Yes.” I slightly nodded.

The officer posed a series of questions, and I had to recount the incident. It was as if I were reliving it again. David’s lip quivered, enraged as he heard my account.

My mother came into the room shortly after I was done giving my testimony. The officer was on his way out as Claire was coming in.

“Do they know you’re in here?” she whispered to David.

David shook his head, “No”.

“Mrs. Martin, you’ve been here all night. Go home and rest. I’ll stay here with her.” David tried to persuade her to take leave.

“No,” Claire answered. “The one that needs to go home is you. You’ve been in that waiting room all night. Go home to your mother, young man. She must be worried sick.”

“I’m not leaving.” David stared at me as he spoke to my mother.

“Well, suit yourself,” She said rubbing some ice on my lip.

A couple of days went by, and I was released from the hospital with stitches on the side of my head. There was purple and red bruising around my eyes and over most of my face. The swelling on my lip had gone down, but my nose was broken and the headache was persistent.

I wasn’t allowed back to school for a week. When I returned, stares and low mumbling greeted me. David took a leave of absence for the same amount of time for “emotional distress”. He and his family visited me everyday. Claire took some days off work again until Nyx offered to watch me for the rest of the week at my house.

My face was a wreck. Make up only made it look worse. I had some markings on my arms where I had struggled with Gabriel to free myself, so I wore long sleeves until they became less noticeable.

David didn’t have to persuade Claire this time; my mother insisted I stay with David and his family afterschool. Alezzander visited me the week I resumed my classes.

“There’s something we have to tell you about your friend, Gabriel.” He paced around the Den.

Just when I thought things were going better, more bad news arrived.

“The language you heard him speak on the day of the incident was not his own. Am I correct?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I agreed with this statement.

“Isis, Nyx went to visit him at the psychiatric hospital where he was admitted. He claims to have been hearing voices. The doctors have stated he was in a manic state and hallucinating. They think he is schizophrenic, but my wife has uncovered a truth.” He looked at me for a reaction.

“He has been interrupted by the Turpis.” Alezzander revealed.

“I don’t understand?” I told him.

“The Turpis are unseen demonic creatures. They are shrewd and evil and they do not take prisoners, child. They were using him to get to you.”

“What?!” David stood up from his seat. “Father, why was I not told of this before?”

“I am telling you now.” Alezzander motioned for David to sit.

“Why are they after me?” I asked.

“We have reason to believe that you have been discovered. You seem to possess some key element that draws them to you. We need to find out what it is they seek,” Alezzander explained. “You need to find your father.”

“That’s impossible. I don’t know who he is, much less where he is,” I told him.

“We will have to find a way. The Turpis will not rest until you cease to live. We cannot allow that can we?” He pointed at the Star Crest on my chest.

“But how?” David questioned his father.

“The letters he will send should serve as grounds for finding him. I’m sure you will receive more. Until then you must not keep your distance from us. We are the only protection you have against those creatures.”

“I want to drop the charges.” I told David as he drove me home.

I was upset over the fact that Gabriel had been a victim of those things just as I was.

“No.” David clenched his jaw. “You will do no such thing. He could come after you again.”

“He’s a victim, David.”

“I don’t care. He’s not well and he might never be. Those monsters don’t just leave a person. They haunt them... writhe within and around them until they aren’t aware of their own names. They’re like a disease that makes people lose their sanity.”

“Are you talking about possession?”

“It may very well be the case.”

“You have to help him, then. You and your family have to help him,” I begged. “It’s not his fault he did this to me.”

“No,” David said sternly. “Over my dead decrepitated body.”

It hurt to frown at him, but I did. I didn’t talk for the rest of the trip home.

I sat on my bed looking at my bruises in the mirror. A strand of hair I purposely clipped there covered the stitches on the side of my head. I could see some prickly hair growing back on the bald spot around the wound.

The dark circles under my eyes were now a yellowish hue. I tapped the bridge of my nose. The swelling had gone down some, but it still hurt a little when I breathed.

I took the herbal remedy—a cream—that Nyx had prepared for me and rubbed it on the bruises as she had suggested.

During the weeks to come I thought a lot about Gabriel in that psych hospital. While he was in there incarcerated, I was being made paranoid by the Chios family and Claire.

Nyx and Claire would spend a lot of time together now. Friendly gatherings were now held at

either my house or the Ebony Estate with at least two of the Chios members always present. David left me only at night, but I knew he sat atop the porch roof watching me. He would never admit to it.

It took a month, but the swelling on my face finally went down, and the bruising was completely gone. I didn't need surgery to readjust the bridge on my nose thanks to the healing techniques of the twins.

I was suspicious of everyone and perturbed by my own paranoia. Not even prom was fun.

Nothing weird happened for a long time, that is, until the end of May.

I arrived at my house with David the day before my birthday and four days before our graduation.

My mother was waiting for us on the porch.

"I don't want to be rude, but can I talk to you in private, hon?" Claire asked.

"Sure," I said following her to the kitchen.

"This came for you today." She handed me a sealed envelope.

"It's from *him*." I looked at the stamp that read "Athens".

Claire nodded. "Yes."

I carefully ripped open the side of the envelope. I slid out the letter that was inside and unfolded it.

The letter contained a cashier's check for \$25,000.

I proceeded to read the letter

Dearest Daughter,

I hope that you are well and happy to be graduating and coming to the age of adulthood. I send my warmest congratulations on both.

Enclosed you will find a check that you are at liberty to spend as you wish. I am not trying to buy your acceptance, but rather deliver to you what I have not been able to give you in my absence.

I have made arrangements for monthly deposits in your name at the bank located on the north corner of the intersection in your town. Your account will always be funded, as I will provide for you while you are enrolled in university.

I have not yet decided when I should present myself to you personally. I hope that you understand that I am fearful of both you and your mother's rejection.

I bid thee good tidings.

Best Regards,
S. Leumas

"This arrived today?" I asked her.

"Yes," She said clasping her hands. "What is it?"

"I think it's a birthday and graduation present."

"What?" Claire was unaware of the check.

I held both papers out to her.

"Read it," I told her.

"Oh, em, gee!" She said jumping up and down. "He wants to see you! He wants to see *me!*"

"What's wrong with you?"

"He's the love of my life, Isis." She whispered.

"What about The Judge?"

"We're not exclusive," She said smelling the paper. "It's his scent. Mmmh!" She closed her eyes.

David walked into the kitchen. "Are you okay?"

Claire hid the letter behind her back. "Fine, thanks."

"Just checking," David said walking into the living room again.

Claire turned to me and smiled. "You can buy a car for college."

Then the light bulb in my head clicked. If this letter was postmarked in Athens, it meant my father was there now. David and I could leave right after graduation—that was only a few days away. I would go on a manhunt. But would my mother go for it?

"Actually," I started, "David invited me to Greece. They have a house there but I know that you..."

"Go." She didn't even let me finish.

"Huh?!" I was dumbfounded.

"Go, Isis. That's always been a dream of mine for you and you're all grown up. You'll always be my little girl, but you're not that little anymore. I trust you. So go. You have the money."

"You're not kidding?" I was agape.

"Go!" She waved the check in my face.

"David!" I screamed from the kitchen jumping up and down with my mom. "We're going to Greece

for the summer!”

May 30th was my birthday. I had a quaint reunion with the Chios family, all of my best friends, and mother at a restaurant that evening.

I was excited to think that in a few days I would be standing on the other side of the world on international grounds.

With shopping for clothes to take on the trip and making arrangements for graduation and college, it seemed like there just wasn't enough time.

I also had to think about my supposed transformation. I had to find my father and soon. I needed to know why David and I weren't changing into anything different and he might be the one that held the answer to that.

The night of graduation David surprised me with flowers and a set of new luggage. I was so excited I couldn't sleep. I found David sitting outside my window in the A.M. hours before sunrise.

“Hi,” I said peeking out the window.

“Hello, my lovely.” He smiled. “You caught me this time.”

“Come inside,” I asked him.

He stared at me, thinking about it.

“Just this once... please?” I asked again.

He stood from the side of the window and crossed into my room. He wrapped me in his arms as he caressed his lips on mine. I let his hands wander down my spine and to my hip.

“Can you believe we'll be together for two months as of tomorrow? I don't have to share you with anyone.” He bit my lip.

“I'm so excited,” I said to him.

We watched the sun come up from my window. The sky looked absolutely beautiful with its scarlet, gold and blue hues.

Today was the start of a new me. I was a young woman betrothed to the man of my dreams.

Epilogue

At the departure gate, I said good-bye to my mother who was more excited than I was to be going on this trip. I wished she had accepted the offer to come along. She said it was the start of my adult life and that she could not interfere.

I took my seat by the window. David sat next to me with a mile wide smile on his face.

“If I could, I’d kidnap you again,” he joked.

“I’d let you,” I smiled.

The seatbelt sign came on before the pilot started his welcome announcement. I looked at David and held his hand tightly. We were on a journey to find the man who was my father.

I took out my journal while David slept. I turned it to the interior front cover and wrote.

I am both more than human and less than human. I am, by some miraculous act, still alive. This is the story of my first love, the story of my former life, and the story of my new birth . . . as Creatura.

* * *

David was still fast asleep. I looked in my compact mirror to fix my makeup. The pupils of my green eyes had grown thin and long, like that of a serpent. I looked at a passenger that was seated across the aisle from us and hissed, before I attacked.

Only the Beginning

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