

CHAOS

CYNDI FRIBERG

LoSeld

Praise for the writing of Cyndi Friberg

Dream Warriors 1: Gareth

A wonderful, tantalizing tale with an intriguing paranormal storyline and adorable characters.

-- Tina, *Cupid's Library Reviews*

Fast paced, with a well-matched hero and heroine and a variety of interesting secondary characters both human and inhuman, Gareth will appeal to fans of paranormal and fantasy romance alike.

-- Sondrea Cash, *Romance Reviews Today*

Dream Warriors 2: Ryder

I recommend this book to anyone who enjoys paranormal tales with heroes that are sexier than sin. *Dream Warriors 2: Ryder* is a keeper!

-- Susan White, *Coffee Time Romance*

Dream Warriors 3: Kane

Kane is not a man to look away from, unless the glow blinds you. Dora could not seem to resist and neither could I. This novel was fast paced and exciting.

-- Suni Farrar, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*

Suffice it to say you won't be putting this one down any time soon, because there are some plot twists that you don't see coming making this book a must read. The sex is smokin' so you will definitely need something to cool you down when you get done with this one.

-- Julia, *The Romance Studio*

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This book is rated:



For explicit sexual content and graphic language.

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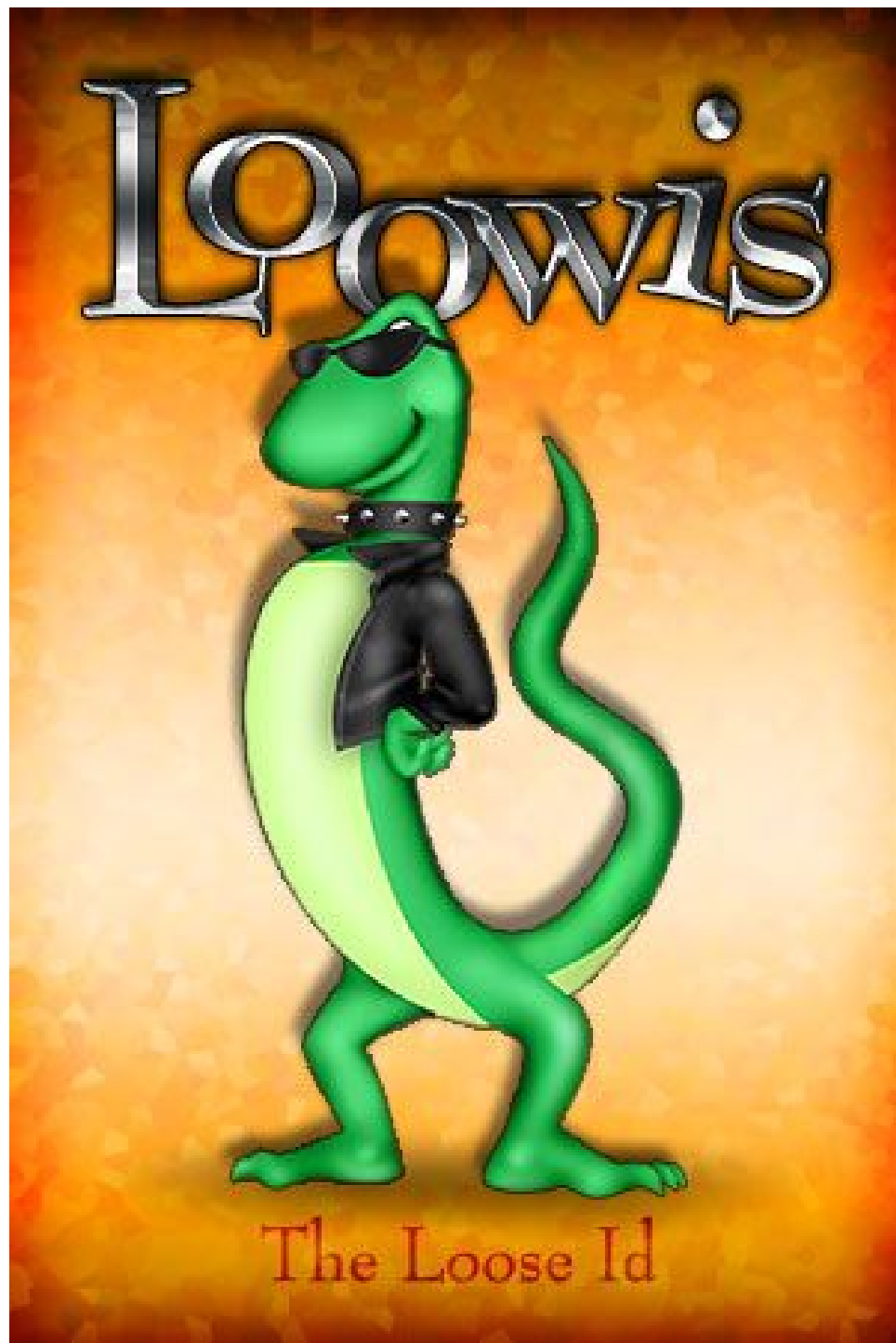
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Prologue

The Underworld

Alexa stared across the lush valley, tears stinging her eyes. Ancient willows lined the far bank of the river, their slender branches streaming in the brisk current. A narrow sliver of sky remained in perpetual twilight, casting an eerie haze over the tranquil scene.

Two hundred years should have eased the ache in Alexa's heart, but her spirit still mourned and her blood boiled every time she returned to the Valley of Oblivion.

A lone figure stood on the river bank, statue still except for the gentle flutter of her long, brown hair. Alexa closed her eyes and remembered her mother's smile, the affection she'd bestowed so generously.

"Welcome to my river." Lethe's familiar voice sent regret spiraling deep into Alexa. She swallowed awkwardly and opened her eyes. Curiosity sparkled in Lethe's bright blue gaze, but her expression remained serene.

Her mother didn't remember her. No matter what Alexa tried nothing made a difference. Whatever she attempted during each visit was forgotten by the next. Lethe was trapped in her own oblivion.

“Come,” she motioned Alexa forward with one slender hand, “sit by my side and I’ll explain the choice awaiting you.”

Alexa had patiently listened to the same explanation each month for two centuries. Seeing her mother’s face, touching her hand made the frustration worthwhile.

“There are two rivers in this valley,” Lethe began. “I guard one and ...” Her eyes grew vacant and she frowned. “A man guards the other, but I can’t recall his name. You must choose the river from which to drink. Mine will soothe you, ease your weary heart. His will lock every memory you’ve ever had into brutal clarity. The choice is yours, so consider carefully before you drink.”

Alexa slipped the leather strap from her shoulder and withdrew one of the two clay jars. Intricately carved with symbols representing her parents, the jars had to be refilled each month with fresh water from their rivers. Like a metaphysical tether, the water provided a tangible link to the realm of her birth. Without the water Alexa wouldn’t be able to exist beyond the Underworld.

“I have yet to make up my mind,” Alexa told her mother. “May I take a small amount of your water, so I can decide at my leisure?”

Lethe’s dark brows scrunched together above her nose. She tilted her head as speculation shaped her expression. After searching Alexa’s face with her penetrating stare, Lethe held out her hand for the jar. “I see no harm in your request, but you must only drink one or the other. Is that perfectly clear?”

“I understand.” Alexa lowered the holder to the ground and opened the bag hanging against her other hip. Lethe knelt beside the river and filled the jar. Alexa’s hands trembled and tension made each breath difficult. So many years, so many failed attempts. *Please, let this be the one to reach her.* Lethe rose and handed Alexa the jar; she slipped it back into its holder and studied her mother’s expressionless face.

“I brought you a gift.” Alexa’s voice hitched with hope and hesitation. She’d tried so many times before. “My mother always said kindness should be rewarded. And you have been kind to me.”

Watching Lethe’s eyes, praying for a miracle, Alexa took a flower wreath from her bag and presented it to her mother. Lethe used to weave them for Alexa when she was still a child. Would the fragrance seem familiar? Would she recognize the pattern of the multicolored blooms?

Lethe smiled and accepted the token, placing it on her head. “How lovely. Who taught you to weave blossoms? This is wonderful.”

Blinking back tears, Alexa turned her face away. Nothing had changed. Lethe didn’t remember.

Alexa needed to touch her, if only for a little while. She wrapped her arms around her, tears escaping the corners of her eyes. “My mother taught me. I miss her very much. Thank you for the water. This means more than you know.” She raised the strap to her shoulder and mustered a smile.

“Remember. You can only drink from one or the other. It is lethal to drink from both.”

That had been her first thought after her mother’s accident. If water from Lethe’s river cast her into oblivion, wouldn’t water from Mnemosyne’s set things right? Hades insisted such was not the case. Mixing the two liquids was toxic. She had to find some other way.

“I’ll remember.” Alexa waved, tore her gaze away from her mother, and slipped into the trees.

Alexa remained within the tree cover, without losing sight of her mother’s river. She followed the winding course until it turned sharply and disappeared into the ground. A short distance farther brought her to the banks of the river Mnemosyne, the river guarded by her father. Illuminated from within, the swiftly flowing water undulated through a stark, barren canyon. She retrieved three green crystals from her pocket and cupped them in her hands.

“Lin bermel, Mnemosyne. Jentar Forell,” she whispered over the crystals, then tossed them into the river.

The current slowed, curving into a sluggish whirlpool that spanned the river’s banks. For an instant, the motion halted, the water stilled. Then the swirling resumed with dizzying velocity. A figure took shape within the vortex, a shadow, a silhouette, and finally a man. The man rose from the river in a sudden burst of light, showering Alexa with droplets of water.

She smiled as her father joined her on the riverbank. Bright red hair flowed to his shoulders. His dark eyes sparkled as he returned her smile. Though he had just emerged from the water his tunic and hair were dry.

“Has it been a month already?” He gave her an affectionate hug.

“Time passes differently in the Realm of Mortals.”

“What occupies your time?”

He was stalling, avoiding the subject never far from his mind. “The expansion is nearly finished. This will double the size of my gallery.”

“You must be excited.” He took the jar from her hand and turned to the river.

“I am. I’ve planned a party to celebrate the expansion. I want to reopen in style.”

“If you’ve arranged it, I have no doubt it will be wonderful.” He crouched and held the mouth of the jar beneath the water. “How is she?”

Alexa smiled. He’d lasted nearly a minute before asking about Lethe, her mother and the love of his life. He passed the jar back to her and she sealed it with a stopper. Slipping his jar into the holder beside the one her mother had filled, Alexa met her father’s troubled gaze.

“She’s the same.” Alexa sighed, the last remnants of her smile fading. “She’s charming, beautiful, and serene. But she doesn’t remember me.”

“She doesn’t remember anything,” Mnemosyne corrected, his gaze filled with anguish.

Alexa understood his pain. Visiting her mother was a bittersweet undertaking. Alexa would never give up hope that some treatment could be found for her mother, but each visit became more frustrating and more heartrending.

“Are you happy in the Realm of Mortals?” Mnemosyne stroked her hair. “Have you found contentment among these humans?”

“Contentment is an elusive goal. I’ve found purpose in my work. That’s more than I had here.”

“But you’re still alone.”

She didn’t argue. Aphrodite hadn’t been kind to either of them. They had both given their hearts without reservation and loneliness had been their reward.

Chapter One

Chicago

Alexa Van Beurren slipped out of her Prada pumps and wiggled her toes. A few talkative stragglers kept her from declaring the grand re-opening a fabulous success and going home. She looked around the spacious art gallery with pride and satisfaction. The expansion had turned out even better than she'd hoped.

After trying her hand at painting and photography, Alexa realized her true calling was recognizing talent in others. She rallied the support of several local artists and opened a small gallery. Upscale elegance had been her focus from the start and the formula had been widely accepted. When the building next to hers became available, her loyal following encouraged her to expand.

Heels tapping against the hardwood floor, Alexa's assistant, Trish, rounded a floor display and approached her. "I'm going to head out." With short, blonde hair and big, blue eyes, Trish appeared rather impish.

Alexa gave her a quick hug. "I'm not far behind. I hope." She looked meaningfully toward the small group congregated near the temporary bar. Harold Prescott, a well-known

art collector, had been eyeing one of her pricier pieces, so Alexa hesitated to break up the lively conversation.

“Mr. Prescott will still be rich in the morning. Tell them to go home.”

With a soft groan, Alexa pushed her feet back into her narrow shoes. Trish was right. It was well past midnight. Her guests had officially overstayed their welcome.

“Jonathan isn’t helping matters, as usual.” Trish indicated Alexa’s boyfriend with a nod, her expression tense and disapproving. Never one to mince words or hide her feelings, Trish had expressed her dislike for Jonathan more times than Alexa cared to count. “Doesn’t he have a rat to train or a bunny to torture?”

Alexa smiled at the dramatic inflection in Trish’s tone. Jonathan’s occupation was one of Trish’s frequent points of contention. How could Alexa saddle herself with a *scientist*? They were artists, for heaven sake.

“He does have to work in the morning and I think I’ll remind him of that fact.” Alexa straightened her skirt and headed across the gallery. Harold and his female companion faced Jonathan and another couple.

“Ms. Van Beurten,” Harold greeted as she approached. “Have you met Mr. Auss?” Harold swept his hand toward the tall, dark-haired man with his back to her.

“I don’t believe I’ve ...”

The man turned, and Alexa’s heart lost its rhythm. *It couldn’t be*. Piercing black eyes stared back at her from a face so brutally handsome it defied description. His hair had been dyed jet black, cut, and styled with casual elegance. Dressed in Armani, and smiling with insidious charm, the Prince of the Underworld looked almost human.

“Mr. Auss” raised her hand to his lips. “It’s an honor to meet you.”

Despite his tamed appearance Alexa recognized that sensual purr. Tingles danced up her arm as heat curled down her spine. *What was he doing here?*

“Li-likewise,” she stammered, dragging her hand out of his light grasp. Those long, strong fingers could do such cruel things. He knew just how to touch her, how to -- *Pull it together, Alexa! You need to find out why he’s here.* She looked at Harold and manufactured a smile. “I hate to be impolite, but I need to lock up.”

“Of course.” Harold glanced around the gallery, his bushy eyebrows scrunching together over his prominent nose. “We’re the last ones here. I apologize. Mr. Auss is such a fascinating fellow; I completely lost track of time. Come along, girls. We must let Ms. Van Beurren go home.”

With the two young women trailing in his wake, Harold headed for the door.

“It was a wonderful party, Ms. Van Beurren.” Chaos looked at Jonathan, menace narrowing his gaze. As possessive as he was passionate, would he unleash his infamous temper on Jonathan? His gaze shifted back to Alexa and the ink-black depths intensified. “May I make an appointment for a private tour? There are several pieces I’d like to discuss with you.”

Alexa reached into her skirt pocket, as much to conceal the trembling of her hand as to retrieve her business card. “Trish would be happy to accommodate you.” His fingertips brushed against hers as he reached for the card. Her heart fluttered.

He inclined his head; his gaze intent on her face. A moment passed in strained silence. She couldn’t still want him, not after all these years, not after all loving him had cost her.

“Good night.” Alexa prompted and he finally turned to go. Her pulse didn’t slow until he disappeared into the darkness beyond the streetlights.

“That ‘fascinating fellow’ gave me the creeps.” Jonathan pulled her into a light embrace. “Charles K. Auss, even his name sounds suspicious. There was no way I was leaving you alone with him.”

She managed a distracted smile, but her mind whirled with speculation, and memories. Chaos’s muscles rippled and his fierce eyes morphed from black to red as he watched her

surrender to passion. His mouth demanded, consumed, while he thrust between her thighs. She pressed her lips together, ignoring the ache building within her. This couldn't be happening. She was over him! She *had* to be over him.

"Are you all right?" Jonathan's well-modulated voice drew her from the past.

"I'm exhausted."

He pressed a quick kiss against her lips and eased away. "I think the West Loop is proving to the world that there is more to Chicago than Clark Street. I suspect this expansion will be quite lucrative."

What did that have to do with her exhaustion? She wanted to collapse into a chair and have her feet rubbed. She wanted to be stripped naked and overwhelmed with sensations no mere mortal could comprehend. No! She wanted her feet rubbed.

"Do you mind if I take off?" he asked. "I have to be at the lab bright and early."

"No. Go ahead. I want to send a quick email before I head home. Bruno will be thrilled that *Downward Spiral* finally sold." There was no way Chaos had actually left. If she didn't confront him now, he'd appear in the parking lot, or worse yet, follow her home.

"Until tomorrow then." Jonathan blew her a kiss. She tried not to cringe. Had he always been such a selfish jerk?

Alexa made her way to her office in the back of the gallery, scanning the shadows for her uninvited guest. Anticipation made her breath hitch. She didn't sense another presence, but her abilities waned with each year she spent in the Realm of Mortals.

Slipping in behind her desk, Alexa sent the email, then slumped in her chair. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples.

"Can I do that for you?"

Bracing herself for Chaos's effect on her senses, Alexa opened her eyes. "What are you doing here?"

He lounged in the open doorway; his arms folded over his chest. Sophisticated evening wear couldn't disguise the width of his shoulders or the bulge of his biceps. Her pulse raced and she kept her breathing even through sheer force of will. It had been so long since his big body covered hers, wrapped around hers.

"If you're this rude to all your customers, you won't stay in business long." Even lightened with amusement his tone was dark and smoky.

"You're not my customer." She picked up her shoes and came out from behind the desk. Refusing to notice how well his tailored slacks accented his lean hips and long, muscular legs, she focused on his face. "You're not welcome here."

"Is that why you sent your watchdog home," he ambled forward, "because you don't want me here?"

She hadn't sent Jonathan home, he'd deserted her. Still, there was no reason to correct his assumption.

The last time she'd seen him his hair flowed past his shoulders, morphing from black to red in a hypnotizing cycle. The short, solid black style only accented the sharp angle of his cheekbones. His eyes had also possessed the otherworldly quality. She found his new, solid black irises nearly as appealing.

"I told you I'd return."

His voice caressed her, triggering unwanted memories. They writhed together, their naked bodies entwined. His mouth moved over hers, his tongue thrusting deeply. Her hands grasped and slid, every bit as eager as his.

"I missed you." He leaned in close, whispering the words and filling her head with his evocative scent. He smelled like rain-washed trees and campfires. Why did Hades's son smell like mountain air?

She couldn't do this. It had taken long, heartbreaking years for her to build a life for herself. She was not going to fall into bed with him simply because he missed her.

“Spare me the drivel.” Clutching her shoes in one hand, she shoved past him and hurried from the office.

“How was the opening? By the time I got here most everyone had already left.”

Her jaw dropped at his audacity. She snapped her mouth shut and turned around. He couldn’t expect her to calmly discuss the gallery’s opening. Not after what he’d done. “I don’t think you’re getting the picture.” Needing an outlet for her seething emotions, she threw one of her shoes at his face. “Stay out of my life!”

Laughing, he batted the pump aside. The second one bounced off his chest. “You want to play?” He arched his brow, dark eyes flashing.

The sensual menace in his tone was all too familiar. She clenched and unclenched her hands. She would *not* give in to him -- again. Her nipples peaked and heat pooled between her thighs, mocking her determination. Damn him. No man should have this sort of appeal.

But Chaos wasn’t a man; he was the Prince of the Underworld. And she was the child of water spirits regardless of how long she’d pretended otherwise.

He stalked toward her, predatory grace evident in every move.

“Stay away from me.” She’d meant it as a directive; it sounded like a plea.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

Her back touched the wall and a violent shiver sped down her spine. He caged her with his body, hands on either side of her shoulders. “You have no reason to trust me. I don’t expect you to. If my kiss no longer affects you, I’ll turn and walk away.”

“It’s not a matter of --”

His mouth stole her words and her thoughts weren’t far behind. Sensation rolled across her nerve endings, a simmering burn. Insistent and firm, his lips pressed over and slid against hers. He angled his head, fitting his mouth more closely to hers. She inhaled his breath and parted her lips, inviting him inside.

He only touched her with his mouth, but her entire body felt his heat, sizzled with awareness, and aching need. It had always been like this with Chaos. How could she resist when every molecule of her being wanted nothing more?

“We need to talk, Alexa.” He whispered the words against her parted lips. “Really talk.”

A certain catch in his voice sent uncertainty curling through her. Talking had never been a priority with them. They touched and their senses exploded. Words were unnecessary, cumbersome.

“Too little, too late.” She tried to push him back. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Then just listen.” He stroked his fingers along the curve of her cheek. She turned her face away. “Recent events have made me reassess my priorities.”

“The quest made you realize you can’t live without me?” She filled her voice with sarcasm.

“Yes.”

Startled by the sincerity in his tone, she looked into his eyes. She’d always longed for more than he was willing to give. Was it possible -- *Don’t be an ass! He’ll say whatever you want to hear as long as you spread your thighs.* She gave herself a firm mental shake.

“Too bad your epiphany came two hundred years too late.”

* * * * *

The next week passed in a blur for Alexa. The response to the grand re-opening was phenomenal. Trish booked appointments and screened inquiries from artists all over the world. If Alexa accepted even a fraction of the proposals, she would be booking exhibitions well into summer.

Thoughts of Chaos kept her tossing in bed each night. By Friday her frustration surpassed her fatigue. How could one word affect her so profoundly? *The quest made you realize you can’t live without me?*

Yes.

His impassioned tone and the dark intensity in his gaze wouldn't leave her mind. She wanted to believe him, needed to believe him, but he'd disappointed her once too often.

Heaving an audible sigh, Alexa pulled open the front door and walked into the gallery. She was supposed to meet Jonathan for lunch. The prospect held no appeal. How could she sit across a table from Jonathan and pretend nothing was wrong? She hadn't been certain of her feelings even before Chaos arrived. Now she couldn't help comparing Jonathan to the demigod. Needless to say, he suffered by contrast.

Friday was off to a rocky start and she'd just arrived.

"You have got to see this!"

Trish's enthusiastic voice intensified the pounding in Alexa's head. Pausing inside the front entrance, she raised her coffee cup and took several sips. It was way too early for Trish's peppiness. Trish hurried across the gallery and took her by the arm.

"The delivery driver was waiting when I got here." Trish led Alexa toward her office at a much quicker pace than she would have chosen. Each step jarred her aching head.

Alexa stood in the open doorway surrounded by the intoxicating fragrance of flowers. Orchids, birds of paradise, irises, roses, and fragile looking blooms Alexa couldn't identify had been arranged into the massive bouquet that now dominated her desk. Her heart fluttered as she approached the desk. Jonathan had never sent her flowers. She set down her coffee cup and retrieved the card proffered on a plastic trident.

"Your hands are shaking." Trisha moved up beside her. "Do you know who sent them?"

"I have a pretty good idea." She opened the small envelope and pulled out the card.

Looks like we're going to be neighbors.

I hope you don't mind.

C. Auss

She tossed the card on her desk and rushed to the windows fronting the gallery. He wouldn't have. Would he? The building across the street had been undergoing some sort of renovation. Was Chaos responsible?

"You know Charles Auss?"

Alexa glanced over her shoulder annoyed by the awe in Trish's tone. "Our paths have been crossing for years." The younger woman stayed a step back, her wide blue eyes filled with hesitation. "We have a sort of love/hate relationship."

"Dump the mad scientist and renew your acquaintance with Charles." Trish brushed her wispy bangs off her forehead. "Make up sex is so much fun!"

Shaking her head, Alexa turned back to the window. "Why is he doing this?"

She didn't realize she'd spoken the words until Trish replied. "If you're finished with him, send him my way. Tall, dark, and dangerous is my favorite flavor."

Trish had no idea!

"I'll be right back." Alexa pushed open the door and blinked into the morning sun. After assuring the traffic had stopped for the light half a block down, she rushed across the street.

Chaos never attempted to disguise his intentions. He'd ruthlessly pursued her until she surrendered her innocence. Why had he changed his strategy? Casual flirtation was definitely not his style.

Masking paper blocked the windows. A building permit was the only exception to the solid field of brown. She tried the door, but hesitated when it pulled open in her grasp. What if Chaos had nothing to do with the renovation?

Then you apologize for intruding and get your butt back to your gallery.

She opened the door and slipped inside. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dim interior. Floor to ceiling bookshelves lined one wall. Scaffolding had been constructed

against another. The front of the shop ascended in a dramatic vault, while the back half displayed a large, open loft.

Footsteps echoed in the empty room, drawing her attention to the shadowed loft. Chaos emerged from the darkness and rested his hands on the railing. He stared at her for a long moment, his gaze filled with longing. Then his sensual lips parted in a mischievous smile.

“Did you like the flowers?”

Chapter Two

Chaos clutched the railing so tightly his knuckles turned white. He had to move slowly, demonstrate how much he'd changed, but damn, she looked good enough to eat! He slowly licked his lips, remembering her soft lips parting in silent invitation and the warm whisper of her breath against his mouth.

"Why are you in Chicago?" Her voice snapped in the empty showroom, her bright blue eyes flashing with suspicion and resentment. She'd loved him once. He was determined to rekindle that affection and forge a lasting bond.

"I'm opening a business. Isn't that obvious?" He kept his tone light and playful, while his heart hammered in his chest.

"And this business just happens to be across the street from mine."

Moving to the stairs, he descended to the main floor. She wore a neat, professional skirt and simple silk blouse. Her long, auburn hair was swept away from her face, confined in a sleek, sophisticated twist. He wanted to take out the pins and spread the thick mass over her shoulders. He needed to unbutton her blouse and cup her bare breasts in his hands.

He couldn't think about her luscious body gripping his or he'd take her right now against the wall, ending any hope he had of convincing her he'd changed. Moving behind an

empty display case to hide the considerable bulge in his pants, he jerked his mind back to the conversation at hand.

“How did your watchdog put it? The West Loop is showing the whole world that there is more to Chicago than Clark Street.”

Her gaze narrowed and her lips compressed into a disapproving line. “You were spying on me.”

“You knew I was there.”

“You’re dancing around the issue. What are you trying to accomplish with all this?”

He shrugged and advanced by degrees, working his way around the display case until nothing stood between them. “I’m sick of the Underworld. Surely you can understand that.”

She stared at him silently, body stiff, expression suspicious.

“What were you doing in my bedchamber on Halloween?” he asked.

He had to touch her. She could slap his hand away; he didn’t care. He couldn’t suppress his need any longer. Holding her gaze with his, he brushed his fingertips across her cheek. Her lips parted and she lowered her eyelashes, shielding her thoughts.

“I ...”

Curving his index finger beneath her chin, he tilted her head until she looked into his eyes. “Have you been spying on me?”

She scowled. “I went to visit my parents and saw two guards carrying an unconscious woman. It seemed odd to me, so I followed them. Imagine my surprise when their destination was your bedchamber. What was I supposed to do, let you --”

“I have never taken a woman against her will.” His tone was sharper than he intended and she jerked away. “Have you ever known anything but pleasure in my embrace?”

“That’s not the point.” She crossed her arms over her breasts, looking everywhere but at him.

“I’m here for you, Alexa. It’s as simple as that. We’ve been parted too long and I --”

“We were never parted,” she cried. “You left me.” Her voice hitched and tears glistened in her eyes.

Chaos reached for her. She pivoted, presenting him with her back. He wouldn’t allow her withdrawal, couldn’t allow her to deny what they both knew. They were meant to be together. With as much gentleness as he could muster, he turned her back around. “Can you look me in the eyes and tell me you feel nothing for me?”

“I feel sorry for you.”

His jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed. Why was she provoking him? If she wanted nothing to do with him all she had to do was stay away. Regardless of her taunt, anticipation lit her gaze. Wrapping his arm around the small of her back, he leaned in close, brushing his lips against hers. She raised her hands to his chest, her fingers clutching his shirt.

“I don’t want you,” she whispered.

“I know.” He fitted his mouth to hers, waiting for her lips to part. A strangled cry escaped her throat, then she opened for him. He stroked her face, letting anticipation build. Her mouth moved against his and her tongue traced his lips.

He eased his tongue into her mouth. She met him with an enthusiastic swirl. His heart renewed its pounding and desire stabbed through his gut. He pressed against her soft body, unable to hide how much he wanted her.

Her fingers sifted through his short hair and she hooked one of her legs over his thigh, rubbing her feminine heat against his thick muscle. He caught her tight bottom and helped her grind, understanding the frenzy in her movements.

All he had to do was move her panties aside, lift her legs to circle his waist, and thrust into her waiting warmth.

Tearing her mouth from his, she lowered her foot to the floor. “I can’t go through this again.”

“Alexa ...”

She pushed him away and ran for the door. Clenching his hands into fists, he forced himself to let her go. She had every right to be wary. He’d disappointed her before, but this time would be different. This time he’d come to stay.

* * * * *

Immersing herself in work got Alexa through the next few days. She refused to think about Chaos or their passionate embrace. Still, she had so many questions. Why was he going through all this if all he wanted was a few days in her bed?

“It’s called All Things Eclectic.”

Alexa looked up from her computer screen and found Trish in the doorway to her office. “What is?”

“The store across the street. They’re hanging the sign even as we speak.” Trish crossed to the chairs arranged before Alexa’s desk and sat. “So give me the scoop on your on-again-off-again friend.”

“I never thought of Cha-- Charles as my friend. Our relationship was always too volatile for such a benign term.” Volatile didn’t begin to describe it. Combustible, volcanic, explosive, were getting a little closer.

“How did you meet him?” Trish crossed her legs, clearly dedicated to learning as much as she could on the subject.

“I was very young when ... My parents know his father.”

Trish grinned. “You were very young when what? He seduced you?”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“You need to talk about it. You’ve spent the past three days at the front windows glaring at his building. Love and hate are flipsides of the same coin.”

“How profound.”

"I don't think you hate him."

Alexa pushed back her chair and stood. "Are you an expert on relationships now?"

"I'm an expert on men." Trish arched her brow, her blue eyes sparkling. "This one gets to you."

"He always has," Alexa admitted with a sigh. "While we're reciting platitudes, try this on for size. Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

"Oh, it's like that." Grabbing her clutch purse out of the top drawer of the desk, Alexa crossed the office and flipped off the lights. Trish laughed and followed her into the gallery. "Where are you going?"

"Jonathan is going to pick me up --"

"He is *so* wrong for you. Why can't you see that?"

"You're the only one who has misgivings about Jonathan." Unless she counted herself. Her encounter with Chaos had amplified her doubts about him. She'd found Jonathan interesting, intellectually simulating, but their tepid attraction couldn't compete with what she felt for Chaos.

"You're prolonging the inevitable."

Jonathan pulled up in front of the building and honked his car's horn. Alexa glanced at Trish in time to see her challenging look. This was one of Jonathan's habits that annoyed them both. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Dump him."

She waved away the comment and headed out the door.

Jonathan leaned across the car and pushed the passenger door open. "I hope we don't hit traffic. Our reservations are for eight."

As Alexa fastened her seatbelt a tingle of awareness drew her attention across the street. Chaos stood outside the entrance to his store, a fierce scowl on his handsome face. Wonderful!

“Isn’t that Charles Auss?” Jonathan asked as he pulled away from the curb.

“Yes. He’s opening some sort of shop.”

“Is that why he came to your opening, to scout out the competition?”

“His store is called All Things Eclectic. I don’t think it’s an art gallery.” A guilty flush crept up her neck and she licked her lips, remembering Chaos’s mouth moving against hers and the instantaneous response of her body. Why was she bothering with this date?

You’ve been together for six months. That warrants a face to face break up.

They arrived at the restaurant a short time later. Jonathan exchanged his keys for a valet ticket, then escorted Alexa inside.

“We’re running a bit behind,” the hostess told them. “Would you mind waiting in the bar?”

Alexa breathed a sigh of relief. They could forgo the awkward meal. Jonathan placed his hand at the small of her back, leading her toward the bar. She halted and nodded toward the door.

“Can we go back outside? It’s really stuffy in here.” His brow creased with suspicion, but he followed her through the door. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to waste anymore of your time.”

“What are you talking about? My time with you is never wasted.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes. Cool and cautious, his gaze moved over her face.

“This isn’t working for me.” She looked into his eyes, gauging his reaction. “I’ve sensed our incompatibility for some time. I probably should have broken this off sooner.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and his expression hardened. “Your attitude toward me changed as soon as you met Charles Auss.”

She heaved a frustrated sigh and looked up and down the sidewalk. His tone was tight and angry. At least he was controlling the volume of his voice. The valets doubtlessly listened, though they kept their gazes averted. A black limousine pulled into the circle drive.

“I won’t lie to you. Charles and I have a history together.”

“A history?” He scoffed. “Doesn’t that sound polite? You’re dumping me so you can screw him. How’s that for truthfulness?”

“I don’t want to see you anymore. That’s all I have to say.”

He slammed her against the front of the restaurant so suddenly her head hit the bricks. His fingers dug into her upper arms. “You can’t toss me out like yesterday’s garbage. We need each other! I will not --”

Instinct drove her knee into his crotch. He released her arms with a strangled groan and staggered back a step.

Chaos shoved him farther down the sidewalk. Jonathan let out a sharp cry. Without saying a word, Chaos held out his hand toward Alexa.

“You’ll pay for this, you stupid bitch,” Jonathan panted, his voice harsh and strained. Bent over and shaking, he cupped his hands over his groin.

Chaos advanced. Alexa grabbed his arm. “He’s not worth your time.”

Fury blazed in his eyes, but Chaos finally turned to face her. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“Let me take you home.” The back door to the limousine stood open; the driver watched them over the top of the car.

“The limousine is yours?”

He nodded and they crossed to the car. “You know I can’t drive.”

“You’ve never bothered with conventional transportation. What’s with the car?” She hesitated, glancing into the interior of the limousine. She didn’t trust Chaos, or more specifically, she didn’t trust herself to be alone with him.

He closed the distance between them. Resting one hand on the car's roof and the other on the open door, he trapped her in between. "I'm offering you a ride." His mouth curved in a sardonic smile. "Where's the harm in that?"

Swallowing hard, she glanced beyond Chaos and found Jonathan glaring at them. She didn't want any more of a scene than they'd already created and cabs took forever on Saturday night. Heaving an exasperated sigh, she climbed into the vehicle. Chaos settled on the seat beside her and gave the driver her address.

"Why did you follow me?" His presence at the restaurant couldn't be a coincidence.

He raised the privacy window before he replied, "I suspected something like this would happen."

Distracted by his proximity, she moved to the adjacent seat. Her head throbbed from its collision with the wall and awareness made her tense and restless. "You thought I'd break up with that jackass or you thought he'd go psycho when I did?"

"I was hoping you'd end the relationship and I knew he wouldn't take it graciously. He has someone following you."

She stared at him, too stunned to speak. Chaos had any number of otherworldly creatures at his disposal. She didn't doubt his information, but what had Jonathan hoped to learn?

"I don't think his interest in you was strictly romantic."

"What else is there? I'm not rich." Glancing away from his expressive eyes, she added, "I'm not important."

He moved to the seat beside her, pulling her into his arms. "I have never regretted anything as much as I regretted leaving you."

She wanted to curl into his embrace nearly as much as she wanted to slap him. "It's not hard to tell someone what they want to hear when you can read their mind."

“I can’t read your mind.” He cradled her against his chest, stroking her face with his fingertips. She remained stiff, her jaw firmly set. “I’ve suppressed my abilities. I’m conserving energy so I can stay with you.”

I’m here for you, Alexa. It’s as simple as that. His statement had haunted her, teased her with possibilities. She’d be a fool to trust him again. It had about destroyed her when he left the last time.

“If you take down your hair, I’ll rub your head.”

Her gaze flew to his. “How do you know my head is pounding if you can’t --”

“I saw your head hit the wall.” He shifted her so she sat more in his lap than on the seat. His fingers felt for the pins securing her upswept hair. “Little by little, you’ll learn that you can trust me.”

Chapter Three

By the time they reached her apartment building the rhythmic slide of Chaos's fingers had eased the throbbing in Alexa's head. The tenderness was out of character for Chaos. He stalked, he prowled, he hunted. He didn't coax or soothe.

"Better?" His warm breath teased her ear.

She nodded, caught between lethargy and uncertainty. He was putting a lot of effort into this if all he wanted was a couple nights of unbridled passion.

"I'll walk you to your door."

She closed her eyes. "If you walk me up, I'll invite you in, and once you're inside ..."

"Would that be so bad?"

"Yes." Opening her eyes, she moved away from him. "You can have any woman you want. Why are you fixated on me?"

"Let me come up and I'll explain everything that's happened in the past few weeks." His earnest expression and sincere tone made her want to believe.

What do you have to lose? Her inner voice turned traitor. She wanted him as badly as he wanted her. All she had to do was keep her heart protected. They could indulge their

mutual attraction until he lost interest -- which she knew he would -- and then she'd move on with her life.

Her apartment was her private domain; a retreat she shared with no one. If this was just sex, they weren't going to taint her sanctuary.

"Not here. Let's go to a hotel."

"No." His expression intensified. The gleam in his eyes turned possessive. "I don't want a one-night stand. I want to be part of your life."

"Sure you do." He always wanted what he couldn't have. It was part of his basic nature. The more she resisted, the more it excited him. Emboldened by her anger, she tugged her blouse out from under the waistband of her skirt. "You're not coming up, so I guess we'll do it right here." She had three buttons unfastened when he grabbed her wrists.

"Stop it. If you're not ready to share your bed with me, we'll wait --"

"I don't want to wait. I've always wanted to be ridden in a limousine." She pulled his hand to her breast and climbed onto his lap, straddling his thighs. "Tell your driver to go get a drink. We're going to be awhile."

His fingers flexed against her breast and a strangled groan escaped his throat. "I know you don't believe me, but this isn't what I want." She pressed her hand over the considerable bulge in the front of his pants and raised her brow in silent challenge. "All right, this isn't *all* I want. I want to feel your breath against my skin as I drift off to sleep and wake with you in my arms."

"Let's start with this and see where it leads us." She covered his mouth with hers, and pushed her fingers into his hair. Tracing the seam of his lips with the tip of her tongue, she ignored the sudden leap in her pulse and the tension gripping her abdomen. Casual, unimportant, she wouldn't allow this to be more.

Wrapping his arms around her, he laid her back across the seat and settled himself between her thighs. His mouth moved against hers as he took control of the kiss. She

unfastened his shirt and he jerked it off, never breaking contact with her mouth. He finished unbuttoning her blouse and unhooked her bra, baring her breasts to his questing fingers.

His hands shook, revealed his urgency. He needed her -- needed her body, she stubbornly clarified. *This is just sex, physical gratification.*

She cupped the back of his head as he bent to her breasts. His hair was still thick and soft, but she missed the long, silky strands sifting through her fingers. He closed his lips around one nipple and suckled with long, firm pulls. Gods how she'd missed him. He stroked one breast and adored the other with his mouth. Tingles zinged along her nerve endings, stirring memories as well as sensations. Forcing the memories into the back of her mind, she focused on the sensations. His fingers caressed her, rolling her nipple, exploring her skin.

"What about your driver?" She panted, arching into his touch.

"He'll figure it out." Chaos pushed her skirt up along her thighs revealing the silk triangle of her panties. "I'll buy you new ones," he growled, and ripped the flimsy garment from her body.

His aggression sent excitement stabbing into her core. She moaned. Her inner muscles pulsed, anticipating the thick slide of his shaft inside her ... wanting him there. She lifted one of her legs to the back of the seat and lowered the other to the floor. Brazenly exposed, she spread before him, waiting, aching.

He paused, his features tense, his body trembling. "You are so incredibly beautiful." His tone caressed her skin with warmth and tenderness. She felt more beautiful in that moment than she had ever felt before.

Damn him! She would not trust her heart to him again. Burying her vulnerability beneath carnal hunger, she cupped her breasts and arched her back, canting her hips. "You're welcome to do more than look."

With his gaze boring into hers, he pushed two fingers into her passage. “Do you want me here, sweet Alexa?” She squeezed her inner muscles and he smiled. “Say it. Tell me you want me inside you.”

“You know I do.” He dragged his fingers out, then drove them deep. Alexa groaned. She wanted this and so much more. She wanted to wrap her legs around his hips and feel the thick penetration of his shaft. She wanted to rake her fingernails down his back and grasp his tight ass as he lost control.

“Say it!”

“I want you inside me.”

He thrust his fingers into her slick core again and again. His gaze never left her face. “Come for me, sweetheart. I want to watch you come.”

He found her clit with his other hand, stroking firmly as his fingers slid in and out. Pleasure gathered, swirling through her abdomen and down her legs. She moaned. He pushed his fingers deep and rubbed her clit.

Tension released in a staggering cascade of tingling pleasure. She cried out sharply. Her foot slipped to the seat as her body shook. He continued to circle her clit, decreasing the pressure as she relaxed. He withdrew his fingers, triggering aftershocks of sensation. She murmured a protest and he kissed her lips.

“I better buy you lots of panties,” he whispered with an unrepentant smile. “Something tells me I’ll owe you more than one pair.”

Stunned and muddled from her powerful orgasm, she didn’t realize what he intended until he pulled her skirt down and fastened her bra. “Chaos ...”

He kissed her again, his touch slow and patient.

“My name is Charles now.”

* * * * *

“Did you enjoy the show?”

Lounging in Jonathan’s favorite chair, Bruno tried in vain to suppress his smile. Immaculate and orderly, Jonathan’s apartment fascinated Bruno. He wanted to disrupt the precisely arranged furniture and dump red wine on the white carpeting. Jonathan worked in a laboratory. Why would he want to come home to this sterile environment?

“I got some fabulous pictures,” Bruno said. “I think you’re lucky she kneed you in the balls before --”

“Lucky?” He stomped across the living room and poured himself a drink. “I can hardly walk. I had no idea Alexa could be such a bitch. And I think your little squeeze toy is to blame.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Trish encouraged Alexa to break it off.” Jonathan held up his hand. “Don’t bother denying it. I heard her running her mouth at the opening.”

Bruno scooted to the edge of the chair. “We’re both concerned that your attraction to Alexa is clouding your objectivity. We brought you in on this because you’re a scientist. If we just needed someone to get close to Alexa, I would have seduced her myself.”

Jonathan snorted and downed the contents of his glass. “The lab results should be back tomorrow. This better be worth the trouble.”

“Every month like clockwork Alexa disappears with those jars. Where does she go? What exactly do those jars contain? The liquid looks like water and has no smell.”

“Didn’t you taste it?” Sarcasm sharpened Jonathan’s tone.

“Without knowing what it is? I don’t think so. Alexa is up to something and we’re determined to find out what it is. Aren’t you intrigued by a good mystery?”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Jonathan closed his eyes. “At the moment the only thing I find intriguing is the inside of my eyelids.”

“Get some sleep.” Bruno stood and headed for the door. “Call me as soon as you have the results.”

Bruno walked out of Jonathan’s house and paused to light a cigarette. Trish waited in a black coupe half a block down the street. She didn’t like Jonathan and refused to pretend otherwise.

“I wish I’d been there when Alexa kneed him in the balls,” she said as he slipped in behind the wheel. “He’s such a pompous ass.”

“Without that pompous ass all we’d have are suspicions. We need him, at least for now.” He started the engine and pulled away from the curb.

“What were you able to learn about Charles?”

Bruno shot her a sidelong glance. “For all intents and purposes, Charles K. Auss doesn’t exist.”

“Charles Chaos? I can’t help thinking that’s an inside joke.” She pursed her lips, tapping her thumb against her knee. “How did he purchase a building if he doesn’t exist?”

“Cash transaction deeded to the art lover across the street.”

“He bought the building outright and put it in Alexa’s name?”

“Basically.” Bruno cracked his window and directed his cigarette smoke away from Trish. “She might not be aware of it. He could be using her as a cover.”

“This is too freaking weird.” Trish shook her head.

“Jonathan will have the lab work back tomorrow. We’ll finally know what those jars contain.” Bruno’s mind spun on ahead, analyzing the potential, imagining possibilities.

“Maybe she’s discovered the Fountain of Youth.”

* * * * *

Alexa opened the gallery the following morning with blurry eyes and a foul disposition. Chaos -- *Charles* had walked her to her door, kissed her on the cheek, and returned to his limousine. He might have changed his strategy, but this was still a game.

After entering the code, which disarmed the security system, Alexa unlocked the back door and flipped on the lights. Trish wasn't scheduled to be in until one, so she had the gallery to herself.

Harold Prescott had ultimately made an offer for the painting he'd admired at the opening. She needed to have it crated and shipped to the address he'd given her. Alexa smiled. It hadn't been *his* home address. One of his female companions was likely getting the painting.

She'd had numerous inquiries into Bruno's work. His first love was photography, but his sculptures were causing quite a stir. Maybe he'd be interested in an exclusive exhibition.

Moving into her office, she checked her phone messages, then turned to the bookcase adjacent to her desk. Small earthen jars sat side by side, one decorated with symbols representing her mother, the other bearing her father's sign. She kept the larger jars, containing the majority of the water, in a locked curio cabinet in her apartment. These supplemental jars kept her from feeling restless and displaced.

After Chaos left her for the second time, the Underworld became unbearable for Alexa. Hades reluctantly agreed to release her to the Realm of Mortals. Unable to accumulate enough power to live beyond the realm of her birth, she returned each month to retrieve fresh water and renew her energy. The water made it possible for her to masquerade as a human. She had to relocate from time to time, but for the most part she was happy.

She turned from the bookcase and moved behind her desk. Why did Chaos have to show up now? The gallery was doing well. Her life had fallen into a comfortable routine.

But you're still alone. Her father's words echoed through her mind, stirring feelings she didn't want to analyze. Instead she picked up the phone and punched in Bruno's number.

“Hello?” A sleep thickened voice came over the line.

“Did I wake you?” She heard a female voice murmur something in the background.

“More or less. What can I do for you, Alexa?”

“Have you decided what you want to be when you grow up?” A long silence followed and she laughed. “Do you want to be a photographer or a sculptor? *Downward Spiral* generated a lot of interest at the opening. Do you have any other pieces available? I’d like to put together an exhibit featuring your sculptures, but if your main focus is photography it’s probably unwise.”

“I honestly believed the price would keep it from selling.”

“We probably could have doubled the price. How many pieces do you have completed?”

“A dozen or so, but only six, maybe seven I’d be willing to show. I can’t believe my sculptures are creating more of a buzz than my pictures.”

“Everyone thinks they’re a photographer. Why don’t I come by your apartment tomorrow afternoon and take a look at what you’ve got.”

He laughed. “Is that a proposition?”

“I don’t mix business with pleasure. Besides, Trish would kick my ass.” She heard him speak in a hushed, urgent tone. “Oh, come on, Bruno. Did you really think I wouldn’t figure it out? Ask Trish if she can come in early. I’ve got some errands to run.”

“She’ll be there in an hour.”

Chapter Four

Chaos separated the sheets of brown paper obscuring his shop's front windows and stared at the entrance to Alexa's gallery. He could ask for a private tour, but she'd pawn him off on her assistant. If he invited her to lunch, she'd turn him down.

He'd been desperate to make love to her the night before. Her aggression had surprised and thrilled him. If hunger had driven her actions instead of stubbornness he wouldn't have hesitated.

The front door to the gallery opened, and Alexa stepped into the late morning sunlight. Red gleamed in her dark hair, accenting her smooth skin. Chaos's heartbeat leapt and his body stirred. Gods, she was beautiful.

She made it to the edge of the sidewalk before she paused. Did she realize he was watching? Could she feel his gaze? He lowered the edge of the paper, minimizing the gap between the sheets. Turning back toward the gallery, she opened the door and stopped again. He chuckled, warmed by her uncertainty. She might pretend indifference, but she still had feelings for him.

Hurrying away from the windows, he looked around for the best place to wait. He didn't want to *look* like he was waiting. He settled for a small round table near the back of

the main floor. Turning the chair around, he straddled the seat and folded his arms across the back. Tension built. This was ridiculous. He released his pent up breath as she opened the door.

She paused, blinking until her eyes adjusted to the decrease in light. He should pounce, press her against the door, and kiss her senseless.

"Where is your construction crew?" She remained near the door, her stance tense, cautious.

"The foreman said something about needing a permit."

"I see." She strolled about the room, taking in the half-completed renovation. "What will this be when they're finished with it?"

"Unique."

She smiled. "All Things Eclectic?"

"Exactly."

"I gather from the shelves there will be books."

"First editions and collector's tomes." He pushed to his feet, not wanting her to get too far away. "I'm importing from all over the world. I want items not found anywhere else."

"When do you expect to open?"

"That depends on how many more permits the contractor needs." He smiled and she licked her lips, slipping her hands into the pockets of her skirt. All of her outfits were similar, conservative, professional, *restrained*. "I --"

"We can't start over as if nothing happened."

"That's not what I want. I'm not the same person I was when I left. I want to introduce you to the man I am now."

"I can't fight what lies between us. I never could, but I won't be used again."

She wouldn't trust his words. Somehow he had to demonstrate how much she meant to him. A deep flush blossomed across her cheeks. She was up to something.

"You said I would learn I could trust you." Desire ignited in her clear, blue eyes. "Are you willing to trust me?"

Intrigued by the unexpected shift in her mood, he approached her cautiously. "What did you have in mind?"

"How long will the workers be gone?"

Her sultry tone played over his senses like warm, teasing fingers. Was she really contemplating making love to him right now? His cock hardened and passion clogged his lungs. This was about control. She needed him to surrender as she had surrendered all those years ago.

"Do we have at least an hour?" Challenge tinged her question.

A stiff nod was all he could manage.

She motioned toward the scaffolding. "Over there."

His gaze narrowed. If she meant to tease him and leave him aching with need ...

"You'll like this game. I promise."

What choice did he have? He could whisk her back to the Underworld and hold her captive until she gave in to their mutual need, but he knew how stubborn she could be. He moved to the corner of the scaffolding and watched her nipples gather beneath her blouse. She was really looking forward to this.

"Put your hands behind your back."

His brow arched at the command. She couldn't be serious. Did his sweet little Alexa want to tie him up? He usually did the restraining, but he'd always enjoyed this sort of play. "If you say so." He angled his arms, crossing his wrists behind him. She pressed her breasts against his chest and wrapped her arms around him. His eyes widened as cold metal closed around his wrists. Now this was unexpected. "Where did you get the handcuffs?"

She ignored his question. "Are your powers really suppressed?"

With a sardonic grin, he tugged against the cuffs. "I'm entirely at your mercy."

Stepping back, she looked into his eyes. Longing, passion, and pain fought for supremacy. "I've had two hundred years to learn to hate you."

He started to tell her he loved her, but she wasn't ready for the words.

"I want to hate you." She untucked his tee shirt, her gaze boring into his. "Why can't I hate you?"

She stroked his chest, bunching his shirt around his armpits. Releasing his belt, she unfastened his jeans and pushed them to his knees. Naked and waiting, he stood before her. His body tensed, his shaft bucked, throbbing painfully.

"Kiss me, Alexa. I want your mouth on mine."

Her lips parted and she leaned in, her hands resting on his shoulders. "I don't think so." She slid down along his body, kneeling in front of him. "I have something else in mind."

She closed her lush, red lips around his aching cock and Chaos groaned. His hands clenched and he widened his stance. Night after night he'd dreamed of this, longed to feel her caressing him in anyway she chose. Her tongue swirled, while her mouth moved farther up on his shaft. She closed her eyes and shifted her head to a more compatible angle. Cupping his balls with one hand, she worked him in and out of her mouth. Deeper, harder, she devoured him. He arched his back, rocking his hips, matching her rhythm. Sweet, so incredibly sweet! Tension gathered in his belly, drawing up his balls. She sucked on the very tip, her clever tongue flicking. His thighs flexed and he pulled against the cuffs.

"Sweetheart." He panted. "Unless you want me to come like this you better ..."

She grasped his butt with both hands and arched her neck. Understanding unfurled within him. She needed him to lose control, to abandon himself completely. She moved faster. He focused on the pleasure of her hot, wet mouth, the gentle squeeze of her fingers.

His shaft sank into her mouth over and over. A deep flush blossomed across her cheeks and her eyes slowly opened.

"I will never ... hurt you again," he vowed and released his seed down her throat.

Sucking and licking, she stayed with him until the last spasm passed, then she slowly drew away. Still on her knees, she stared into his eyes. Her pupils all but eclipsed the vivid blue of her irises. Chaos sank to his knees, releasing his power just enough to allow his arms to pass through the wooden planking. Her gaze never left his face and he released a sigh. He wasn't ready to reveal that the suppression of his power was entirely voluntary.

"Unbutton your blouse. I need to see you." A violent shiver shook her, and Chaos smiled. She might have him bound for the moment, but she was a sub to the marrow of her bones. With trembling fingers, she unbuttoned her blouse, parting the material without removing the garment. "Unhook your bra and come here."

She unhooked her bra and scooted close enough that he could latch on to her breast. Her hands pushed into his hair and her head dropped back on her shoulders. He suckled firmly, moving from one breast to the other and back. Her nipples tightened and flushed, wet from the thorough attention of his mouth.

"Stand up," he whispered against her damp nipple. "I want to taste you. Now!" She reached for the cuffs. "No. I want to do it like this."

Her movements were unsteady as she rose and slipped out of her skirt. She kicked off her shoes and glanced toward the door.

"They're not coming back today. We've got all the time we need."

Emboldened by his assurance she smiled. She shrugged out of her blouse and tossed her bra aside. Her pantyhose and panties completed the untidy stack and she stood before him naked. His gaze moved over her body with leisurely appreciation.

"That didn't take long." She nodded toward his burgeoning erection with a sly smile.

"You've always had that effect on me. Now come here."

She moved closer. “How exactly do you expect me to do this without unhooking the cuffs?”

“Put your foot on the board behind my shoulder and hold on to the pole.” Her breath hissed out in a ragged sigh as she moved into position. “Closer. I can’t reach you.”

She arched her back and canted her hips. He parted her folds with his tongue. They moaned in unison.

“Oh, this is wicked,” she murmured.

He traced her slit, teasing her entrance and circling her clit. She jerked each time he passed his tongue across her clit and groaned when he pushed into her core. “Mmm.” He hummed against her, focusing his attention on her swollen nub.

“Yes, like that.”

Flicking and stroking, he built her desire to a fever pitch. Her fingers tangled in his hair, pressing him closer. He closed his lips around her clit and sucked. She cried out, shaking against him. Her cream coated his tongue, filled his mouth with the taste of her pleasure.

He pressed a kiss against her folds and eased back. “Unlock the cuffs.”

Alexa was shaking so badly she could hardly stand. She’d been determined to master him, to show him she wasn’t the same awestruck girl she’d been when they first met. On his knees, with his hands locked behind him, he’d managed to command her.

Because he knew you needed to be commanded. He’s always known what you need.

As soon as she released the cuffs, he surged to his feet and lifted her against him. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he turned and steadied her against the scaffolding. Positioning himself at her entrance, he hooked her legs over his arms.

“Let go.” His fierce gaze demanded her obedience.

Clutching his shoulders, she released her hold on his waist. This was Chaos, her dark prince, the only man she'd ever loved. He thrust deep with one forceful drive. She cried out, echoes of her orgasm rippling through her.

"Better?" His shoulders bunched and flexed beneath her palms.

She trembled. "I've wanted you inside me for two hundred years."

"I missed you, too." His hands supported her bottom and he moved, filling her in long, steady strokes.

Spread wide, stretched to the point of pain, she clutched his shoulders and arched her back. He took her with demanding intensity. Nothing less would have satisfied. He was wild and aggressive. She reveled in his urgency, sharing the soul deep need that drove each thrust.

He cried out, shuddering violently. The hot spurt of his seed triggered her release. She rested her head against the support pole and accepted each pulsation, each tingling ripple. Pulling her close, he found her mouth with his and kissed her tenderly.

"I love you, Alexa." He whispered the words into her mouth.

"Put me down." She shoved against his chest. "Do you even know what those words mean?"

He closed his eyes, dragging in a long, deep breath. With obvious reluctance, he separated their bodies and set her feet on the floor.

She gathered her clothing, her gaze darting around the room. "Where can I -- put myself back together?"

"The bathroom is in the back corner."

Rushing into the small restroom, Alexa let her emotions unravel. It had always been like this with Chaos. He attracted her like an addictive drug. She should have avoided him. It would have been safer, more logical, not to subject herself to the emotional tempest he unleashed with the brush of his hand. But her desire was every bit as demanding as his. It would have been easier to stop breathing than stay away.

She washed up as best she could and donned her clothing, not bothering to look in the mirror. She was a mess and she knew it. With a deep breath, she opened the door and returned to the main room.

He was fully clothed, calm and collected, as if they hadn't just devoured each other.

"I need some time to process this." She tried to sound composed, even though her heart pounded and her breathing accelerated. "Obviously I still care for you. I need to figure out ... Oh, hell, I don't even know *what* I need to figure out."

"I know I hurt you badly. I want the opportunity to earn back your trust."

"I wasn't the only one you hurt."

"During the quest on Halloween, I was forced to look at my life with brutal honesty. I saw how selfish I'd been, how --"

"I'm not talking about the other women you used and discarded." She paused, staring into his eyes, revealing the full depth of her grief. "Ripples of your destructiveness spanned farther than you know."

He reached for her hand. She twisted away. "Did I ... leave behind a child?"

"No. When I realized you had left for good, I was desperate to escape the pain. My heart ached so badly. I didn't know where to turn."

Dread filled his gaze and he buried his hands in his pockets. "What did you do?"

"I cried until I had no more tears. I cursed your name and vowed to forget you, but you're not easily forgotten." She paused, smoothing her skirt against her legs. "I went to the river that bears my mother's name."

"But you remember me. If you --"

"My mother appeared before I could drink and convinced me to wait. She told me the water was meant for those who had passed into the afterlife. She asked that I give her one day to find out how the water would affect me."

He scrubbed his jaw with one hand, his expression tense and sad. “Did she test the waters herself?”

“Yes. When I returned the following morning, she didn’t know who I was. I stayed with her for years trying to trigger her memory. Water nymphs actually guard the river. Mother is like a robot reciting preprogrammed lines.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He sounded sincere. His expression was filled with regret. She heaved a ragged sigh and turned toward the door. “Explain that to my father.”

Chapter Five

Bruno yawned and stepped aside, hurrying Jonathan into his small apartment. “What are you doing here? Each time we’re seen together it poses a risk. I told you to call me.”

“You’re my cousin, you moron.” Jonathan crossed the front room and sat at the kitchen table. “We were connected before you started wondering about Alexa’s mysterious trips.”

Bruno slammed the door. He’d been called stupid his entire life and even the most indirect reference to his intellect infuriated him. Joining Jonathan in the kitchen, Bruno leaned against the counter. “This *moron* brought you in on the deal and this *moron* can take you out.”

“There’s no time for your surliness. I need a larger sample of both liquids and I need to know the source.”

“Liquids?” He crossed his arms over his chest and consciously relaxed his expression. “Then we were right, it’s not just water?”

“I have never encountered anything like the chemical properties in those samples.” Jonathan paused, his fingers tapping against the tabletop. “I need to bring in a neurologist. Brain chemistry isn’t my area of expertise. If these chemicals do what I think they do -- hell, if they do a fraction of what I think they do, the implications are staggering.”

“What do you think they do?”

“The liquids appear to have opposite properties. One stimulates neurotransmitters, while the other suppresses them. I think the hippocampus is targeted and --”

“Don’t bother flexing your vocabulary. There’s no one here to impress.”

“Memory,” Jonathan snapped. “The liquids affect memory.”

Bruno scrunched up his face. “That sucks. No one will pay money for a memory pill.”

“You’re not thinking, Bruno. What about Alzheimer’s victims, or someone with a traumatic brain injury. The hippocampus -- Don’t scowl at me. That’s the part of your brain most believe generates new memories.”

“You said one stimulates memory and the other suppresses it. What use is a memory suppressant?”

“If it can be controlled it might be more marketable than the memory enhancer. If the victim of a violent crime can take a pill or have a series of injections to permanently rid their brain of the memory, how much do you think they’d be willing to pay? How much do people pay for therapy every year?” He made a frustrated gesture with his hands. “I need someone who knows a lot more about brain chemistry than I do and I need to know the source. Where does Alexa get these liquids?”

“Trish took the samples we gave you from the jars in Alexa’s office. The jars at her apartment are a lot bigger. She has them in a curio cabinet, but I’ll just break through the glass.”

Jonathan shook his head. “Even if you pulled off the burglary without being caught, that’s only a temporary solution. Where does Alexa go each month? Without the *source* our efforts are wasted.”

Bruno paused. “This could get ugly. How dedicated are you to the project?”

“You identify the source and I won’t ask how you got the information.”

* * * * *

Alexa rushed across the street. Chaos called her name twice, but she didn't look back. She needed to think and rational thought was impossible whenever he touched her. Their passionate encounter was proof of that.

"Did you have a nice *conversation* with Mr. Auss?" Trish grinned as Alexa entered the gallery. "You look rather ruffled."

"I don't know what to do." Alexa went to her office and collapsed into her desk chair. "I want him. I'm afraid I still love him, but he is -- not good for me."

"Why do we always fall for the bad ones?" Trish's eyes shone with empathy.

"I never expected him to return. When he left the last time, I was certain he was gone for good."

"Last time?" Trish sat facing Alexa, curiosity lighting her expression. "How long have you known Charles?"

Alexa rested her head against the tall back of the chair and sighed. In the eight months Trish had worked for her, they had grown quite close. "I feel like I've known him forever. He was my first real crush. I was honored when he --"

"Honored? That's an odd choice of words."

She needed to talk, to share her feelings with someone who could be objective about the situation. "Charles is royalty in the land of my birth. It was an honor for him to notice me."

"Where were you born?"

"It's an obscure kingdom. I doubt you've heard of it." She rushed on before Trish could question her further. "He was the first man to treat me like an adult, to appeal to my sensuality."

Trish shook her head. "He seduced you out of your virginity and you felt honored by it. This is one backward kingdom."

"My father was furious. He'd warned me that Chaos only wanted --"

"Chaos?"

Damn. She'd been so immersed in memory, she'd let the name slip. "That's his nickname. It started out as a play on his full name, but it has come to mean more. Turmoil seems to trail in his wake."

"Was your father right, did Chaos only want your body?"

"No, go back to the obscure kingdom." Bruno stepped into the open doorway.

His swarthy skin pulled tight over prominent cheekbones and a broad forehead. Dark, curly hair framed his rugged features. Alexa had never felt uncomfortable with him before, but menace made his dark eyes gleam.

"This is a private conversation." She rolled her chair back and stood. "What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me the exact location of the kingdom of your birth."

Why had he been listening to their conversation? "What difference does it make to you?" He glanced at Trish and a shiver skittered down Alexa's spine. There had been a wealth of communication in that glance.

"Just answer the question."

"Why do you want to know?" He pulled a pistol from the back of his pants and Alexa gasped. "Are you crazy? What is this about?"

"Where do you take the jars? You disappear with them every month like clockwork. Where do you go?"

She glanced at the jars, her tangible link to the Underworld. "They're souvenirs, nothing more. They have no value to anyone but me."

“I’ve got a chemical analysis that indicates otherwise.”

Edging around the desk, Alexa kept her gaze focused on the gun. “A chemical analysis? Courtesy of my ex-boyfriend, no doubt.”

Bruno just smiled.

Had Chaos really suppressed his powers? She called out to him with her mind, augmenting the thought with fear and urgency.

No response.

Shit! She moved between Trish and the desk.

Bruno narrowed his gaze and raised the gun. “Start talking.”

“The water isn’t meant for ... I’ve seen the damage the water can do. Whatever you have planned isn’t going to work.” She lunged toward Bruno knocking him back against the wall. “Go get Chaos!”

Bruno reversed their positions and backhanded her across the face. Pain exploded in her head, momentarily blinding her.

“Don’t try that again. I *will* shoot you.”

Raising her hand to her throbbing cheek, Alexa looked at Trish. Why hadn’t she run?

“What did Jonathan find out? Will the water prolong life?” Trish asked.

Trish was part of it! Alexa’s heart lurched and her stomach knotted. She’d known Trish was sleeping with Bruno, but Trish was her friend. Betrayal tasted like ash in Alexa’s mouth. She was such a trusting fool.

“He said it has to do with memory. One helps you remember, the other makes you forget.”

Trish stood and crossed to the shelves where Alexa kept the jars. “What good is that?”

“None at all if Alexa won’t tell us where she gets the liquid.”

How long had they been spying on her? Why hadn't she sensed the danger? She licked her lips and scrambled for options. Though long lived, Alexa wasn't immortal. A bullet would end her life. Still, a dead person couldn't tell Bruno what he wanted to know.

"You have ten seconds and then I shoot out your knee. It won't kill you, but it will hurt like hell. One, two, three --"

She stomped on his insole, then shoved him backward as hard as she could. He muttered a curse, but didn't fall. Tangling his hand in her hair, he ended her escape and forced her to her knees.

"You want to play rough?" He sneered. "Fine by me. I think a gun is too easy." He handed the weapon to Trish.

Searing pain crawled along Alexa's skull. Tears flooded her eyes. She grabbed his wrist, but pulling on his arm only increased the pressure on her scalp.

"Give me your knife, babe." Bruno held out his hand toward Trish. "I'm going to enjoy this."

"Release her. *Now.*"

The doorway was behind her, but Alexa knew that voice. *Thank the gods!* Relief sent a giddy rush of joy surging through her system. Bruno looked beyond her and his eyes rounded.

"What the ..."

Trish moved forward, both hands steadying the gun. "Don't come any closer." The gun went sailing out of her hand. She staggered back a step, colliding with the desk, before landing against the wall. "What the hell are you?" she asked in a breathless rush.

Chaos entered Alexa's peripheral vision. A subtle gesture sent Bruno flying backward. He smashed against the wall beside Trish.

"I'm Chaos, Prince of the Underworld."

He helped Alexa to her feet. She wrapped her arms around his waist. His hair flowed past his shoulders, shifting between red and black. The otherworldly quality had returned to his eyes. He had never looked more appealing.

"I almost didn't hear you with my power suppressed." He stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. "There are definite disadvantages to masquerading as a human."

"What should we do with them?" Alexa turned toward the humans huddled against the wall. Rubbing her bruised cheek, she glared at Bruno.

"They are anxious to drink from the jars. I say we let them."

Alexa stepped away from him and shook her head. "Not even that asshole deserves my mother's fate."

"Your mother's fate?" Trish echoed. "Who are you?"

"How much did your mother drink?" Chaos ignored Trish's questions.

"I don't know. She remembers nothing."

"So we give them just enough to wipe out the past year."

"And how much is that? I'll not be responsible for another --"

"They were threatening you with a gun!"

Alexa rubbed her temples, her head pounding furiously. "Jonathan is in on this too. He had the water analyzed. There's no telling how many others know."

Chapter Six

Chaos rendered the humans unconscious with a wave of his hand. “That one should forfeit his life.” He motioned toward the male. “He struck you.”

Alexa looped her arms around his neck and moved in close. “It’s nice to have you back.”

“I wish I’d arrived before he hit you.” Framing her face with his hands, he kissed her tenderly. “I thought I heard you cry out, but the call barely reached my mind.”

“I’m glad you decided to investigate.” She kissed his cheek, then her eyes narrowed. “You could have broken out of the cuffs, couldn’t you?”

With a noncommittal smile, he nodded toward the humans. “Let’s lock them in the storeroom. We have to do damage control at the lab.”

“We can’t just barge in and demand Jonathan’s documentation. We need some sort of plan.”

“That sounds like a viable plan to me. If Jonathan resists, I’ll persuade him.”

She crossed the office and opened the jars. “They’re almost empty.” Replacing the stoppers, she shook her head. “I can’t believe I didn’t see this coming.”

“Do you know what made them suspicious in the first place?”

“Not really. Bruno wanted to know where I go every month. I bet he’s the one following me.”

“How does Trish fit into all this? Did you meet Bruno or Trish first?”

“I’ve known Bruno for years. I knew they were involved, but I assumed they met through the gallery. He must have become curious about my monthly trips and had Trish apply for the position when I hired a new assistant.”

“And when those two couldn’t figure out the significance of your trips, they sent Jonathan to seduce you.”

She sighed and shook away the speculation. “None of this matters now. We have to get the water back. It wiped my mother’s memory clean and she is immortal. I can only imagine what it would do to a human.”

“Who have you consulted about your mother’s condition?”

“Hades told us there was nothing that could be done. The water did what it was supposed to do.”

“My father is not a healer.”

“He’s the ruler of the Underworld.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “No one argues with Hades.”

Chaos shrugged. “I do, frequently. Was he told why Lethe drank from the river?”

“My father made damn sure he understood.” She glanced away and moved closer to the mortals. “Father blames you for what happened to Mother and demanded that Hades make amends.”

Guilt set Chaos in motion. He’d known how badly he hurt Alexa, but her mother’s fate sent waves of regret rippling through his being. He picked up Trish and carried her from the office. Alexa followed close behind.

“Making demands of my father is always a bad idea. He responds better to logic and respect.”

She opened the storeroom, her expression skeptical. “That’s been your strategy?”

“No. I know from experience that nothing else works.” He put Trish down and returned for Bruno. “We’re going to have to administer a small amount of the water from your mother’s river. I see no alternative. Apollo should be able to tell us the proper dosage. Did you consult him about your mother?”

“I’m not a goddess. I have no access to Mount Olympus. Hades told us it was hopeless and we had no choice but to accept what he said.” He bent and slung Bruno over his shoulder. Alexa met his gaze. Her lips pressed together; her eyes filled with pain. “If we destroy their evidence, all they have is a wild story. I don’t want to use the water.”

Chaos didn’t care how they defused the situation as long as Alexa was no longer in danger. He dumped Bruno on the floor beside Trish, barely restraining the impulse to kick him in the ribs. Alexa locked the storeroom door and returned to her office for the jars.

She traced her mother’s symbol, which was etched in the surface of one of the jars. Tension banded his chest as they crossed the gallery. Lethe’s condition was his fault. He would do everything in his power to make it right. He wasn’t welcomed on Mount Olympus, but he was tolerated. He’d speak with Apollo once they had this situation under control.

“I’ll drive you to the lab,” she said, “but you’re going to have to restrain your power. You can’t leave the gallery like that.”

“If I suppress my abilities again I won’t be able to release them until we return to the Underworld. These transformations greatly deplete my energy.” She said nothing, so he went on. “It will be easier for me to conceal my presence from those around us. Besides, Jonathan is more likely to talk to you if he believes you’re alone.”

She nodded. “I’ll convince him I want to strike a bargain, maybe offer him a bribe to keep my secret.”

“We need to retrieve the jars from your apartment. There can be nothing tangible left behind.”

Clutching the small jars to her chest, she stared into his eyes. “I have to go back, don’t I? I can’t stay here now.”

“It would be best, at least for a time.” The pain in her eyes tore at his heart. Did she find nothing of value in their years together? He stroked her cheek with the back of his fingers. “We’ll get through this together.”

She nodded again, but a shadow of doubt lingered in her expression.

Chaos mustered his energy and shielded his physical form. One last errand, then they could focus on their future together.

“I can still see you.”

He smiled, hoping to lighten her mood. “I’ve shielded myself from humans. You’re part of my world.”

Alexa paused at the statement. She’d spent so long trying to blend with mortals that it felt odd to think of herself as anything else. “How depleted is your energy?”

“It’s affecting my strength and the speed with which I can manifest my abilities. Don’t worry. I can still protect you from one scrawny scientist.”

“I’m not completely helpless.” *Unless someone is holding a gun to my head.* He didn’t react to the thought, so she rushed on. “It just occurred to me that we can save some time if you teleport us to my apartment and then to the lab. Are you up for it?”

“I’m up for just about anything.” He punctuated the claim with a sexy smile.

How she’d missed their easy banter and his smoldering gaze.

She flipped the sign to indicate the gallery was closed, then moved away from the windows. The gallery wasn’t scheduled to close for another hour, but this couldn’t wait.

“All we need to do is recover the samples,” she reminded him. “The chemical analysis is meaningless if he can’t prove its validity.”

“Are you ready?”

“Probably not, but I want this finished.”

“Wrap your arms around me.”

She moved into his embrace and the gallery dissolved in a blur of color and sound. Her ears rang, her stomach lurched, and her heart pounded. She clutched Chaos, burying her face against his throat. His arms tightened around her, pressing her flush against his chest.

Her apartment solidified around them. Still, Alexa lingered in his arms. His embrace felt so good, so natural. She longed to cuddle close and let the world spin on without them.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded and eased away. His face looked haggard and drawn, his arms trembled. “Are *you* okay?”

“My energy might be more depleted than I realized. Give me a minute to catch my breath.”

Keeping Chaos in her peripheral vision, Alexa unlocking the curio cabinet, she took out the two primary jars. “I’m tempted to dump the water down the drain and smash the jars, but I’m not sure what it would do to me.”

“It’s a wise precaution and you should be fine as long as you’re with me. If the Underworld tries to draw you back, I’ll hold you here.”

“And if I lose my connection?”

“I’ll take you home with me.”

A warm tingle curled through her body, lodging between her thighs. This was no time for lustful thoughts. Jonathan was still on the loose.

“Dump out the water and I’ll destroy the jars.”

Moving to the kitchen sink, she opened the containers that had acted as a tether for two centuries. Indecision made her hands unsteady. This would conclude one chapter of her

life and open another. Chaos wrapped his arms around her waist, pressing his chest against her back. Nuzzling her hair, he teased her ear with his warm breath.

She tipped the jars. The water blended into a single stream as she emptied the contents down the drain.

“They were meant to be together,” he whispered. “We’ll find a way to right the wrong.”

She wanted to believe him. His offer sounded genuine, but why would Hades say it was hopeless if there were possibilities?

Once the jars were empty, Alexa set them on the counter and moved back. Chaos disintegrated the containers so completely there wasn’t any debris. She purged her emotions with a deep breath. This was for her protection; it had to be done.

“The lab is going to be tricky.” Chaos turned toward her and pulled her into his arms. “If you send me a clear enough image, you can wait for me here.”

She chuckled. “I don’t think so. I have a few things I’d like to say to Jonathan.”

“Then I’ll shield both of us until it’s safe for you to appear.”

Taking a minute to study his face, she was relieved to find that his color was better and a bit of the fire had returned to his eyes. “Let’s get this done.” She tightened her hold on his broad back and formed a detailed image of Jonathan’s office. He shifted his hold, pressing her closer as the spinning sensation took her breath away. His hair swirled around them, blocking out the dizzying blur.

Something solid formed beneath her feet. Chaos pushed his hair away from his face, allowing them both to see. Jonathan’s office was empty. Alexa sighed. “He must be in the lab.”

Chaos panted, bracing his hands on his knees. Damn! He was a lot weaker than he was letting on.

“Are there security cameras in the lab?” he asked, his voice thin and strained.

"I'm not sure. It's possible."

"Then I'll remain shielded unless you need me. I can't render him unconscious unless I'm visible, but we don't want to create new evidence while we're destroying the old."

"I think you should wait here." She crossed her arms over her chest. "You really don't look good."

"Not a chance."

The edge of his image blurred indicating he had shielded his presence. Stubborn demigod. Heaving a frustrated sigh, she eased open the door and checked the corridor. It was unlikely anyone would question her. They were already inside the restricted area. With a purposeful stride, Alexa walked down the hallway and around the corner. Chaos stayed one step behind, a soundless, invisible shadow.

Jonathan had taken her on a quick tour of his lab shortly after they met. He had pretended to be interested in her work, so she reciprocated. The door to the lab stood open. Jonathan was alone in the cluttered room. Gazing into a microscope, he didn't notice her. She tapped on the open door drawing his attention.

"Hello, Jonathan." His head snapped up and his eyes rounded. "We need to talk."

"How did you get past security?"

"I told them I wanted to surprise you. Are you surprised?" His gaze darted toward the beakers situated beside the microscope. Silly man. All she had to do was dump the water into the sink behind him. She advanced with careful nonchalance. "Why did you send your thug to threaten me? You should have known I wouldn't respond well to threats."

"You've got it backwards." He remained near the beakers, his posture tense and defensive. "Bruno sent me to you. Bruno set this whole thing in motion."

"You might have been a link in Bruno's chain, but you still used me."

"He doesn't understand the potential of this find." He moved forward, shielding the beakers with his body. "But I understand."

"You don't understand anything." She raised her chin. "The samples belong to me. I want them back."

"Something this significant belongs to all of mankind."

"Really? Your interest in the water is philanthropic?" She scoffed. "You recognize the potential *value* of developing the water, don't pretend otherwise."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Where is the source?"

"Why should I tell you?"

Raising his brow in silent challenge, Jonathan pivoted toward the table. He picked up one beaker and poured a small amount of the water into a test tube. Without pause he added water from the second beaker. The mixture bubbled and hissed. Alexa glanced at Chaos, but returned her gaze to Jonathan before he noticed the slip.

"I've come about as far as I can without extensive testing. For that I need more of each compound." He took a step toward her, the frothing test tube in one hand. "This morning I decided to combine the two and see what happened. Obviously the results are rather volatile."

"I already told you I don't respond well to threats." She kept her gaze locked with his, tracking the test tube in her peripheral vision.

"You're artistic. You treasure beauty. I wonder what this will do to your face?"

Chaos dissolved his shield and wrapped his arm around Jonathan's throat. Turning his head to the side, Jonathan tossed the contents of the test tube over his shoulder and into Chaos's face. He clawed at Chaos's forearm, violently throwing his weight forward. Screaming as the acidic mixture streamed down his face and into his mouth, Chaos rendered Jonathan unconscious before he sank to his knees.

"Oh, gods!" Alexa shoved Jonathan aside and helped Chaos back to his feet. She half led, half dragged him across the lab to the sprayer protruding from the wall. Rinsing his face

with cool water, she tried to neutralize the burn. Blistered furrows formed with terrifying speed. He braced his hands against the tiled wall, his teeth clenched, hands fisted.

“Dump the rest.” He sounded hoarse and slurred. How much had gotten into his mouth?

Terror urging her on, Alexa rushed across the lab and poured the water down the sink. She leapt over Jonathan’s unconscious body and hurried back to Chaos. He’d crumpled into a motionless heap, the fresh water cascading uselessly across his arm.

She knelt beside him, frantically searching for his pulse. “Hades!” She didn’t care who heard her. “Hades, take us home.”

Chapter Seven

Shortly after Hades snatched them back to the Underworld a staggeringly beautiful man rushed into the room. With golden hair and brilliant blue eyes, he provided a dramatic contrast to Hades's dark brutality.

"How much of the mixture did he ingest?" The blond directed the question to Alexa with his eyes.

"Not much," she told him. "The majority of it splashed over his face."

"I can see that." After drizzling a milky liquid into Chaos's mouth, the stranger applied a salve to the burns. Authority and confidence defined his every movement. Hades stood in silence watching the newcomer work.

"Are you Apollo?" She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling self-conscious and helpless.

The blond smiled without looking up. "I should be insulted that you have to ask."

"She was raised in the Underworld." Hades's voice rumbled like distant thunder.

Even those "raised in the Underworld" found Hades intimidating. Nearing seven feet in height, he had shoulders that eclipsed most men. With hair and eyes as black as pitch, many

found his appearance sinister. Alexa, however, saw the wisdom in his gaze and the affection that lit his expression when he gazed at his son.

Apollo splayed his fingers above Chaos's face. His gaze clouded with concentration. "Opposing forces battle within his mind. I've done what I can to neutralize them. The burns will heal. The rest is up to Chaos." He stood and brushed off his knees.

"If he had only ingested water from the river Lethe, would you be able to do more?"

"I told you nothing could be done for your mother." Hades shot to his feet, his fists planted on his lean hips. "How dare you doubt my word?"

"Hades consulted me when your mother first drank from the river. He's telling you the truth. Her memory will return or it won't. There's nothing I can do."

Apollo gathered his supplies and left the bedchamber. Alexa stood. The breadth of the bed separated her from Hades.

"Why would you doubt me?" Though his tone was more congenial, his expression was no less fierce. "Chaos hurt you, not I."

"I meant no disrespect, sir. I just had to hear it for myself."

He was silent for a long time, his gaze assessing her expression. "Have you and Chaos worked out your differences?"

"We were in the process when this crisis arose."

He inclined his head, the gesture surprisingly regal. "I sent one of my assistants aloft to verify that all traces of the Underworld have been destroyed."

"Thank you." She licked her lips and shifted her gaze to Chaos. "I'd like to stay, if that's all right with you."

"He would have it no other way."

Two days passed as Chaos thrashed in violent delirium. Alexa sat on a chair beside the bed swabbing his lips with a damp cloth and dripping water into his mouth as often as he

would allow. Three days of terrifying stillness followed and Alexa began to lose hope. She had seen the destructive power of one of the rivers and Chaos had absorbed water from both.

Apollo returned the sixth day to administer another dose of his potion and clean the burns. Alexa was relieved to see the damage to Chaos's face had nearly healed.

Pausing at the door, Apollo looked over his shoulder. "My sister had an idea. Don't get your hopes up; most of Aphrodite's ideas are fanciful."

"What did she suggest?"

"She said the heart remembers even when the mind forgets." He motioned toward the bed with one broad shoulder. "Does he love you?"

Certainty pervaded her being with warmth and tenderness. "Yes."

"If you love him, go in after him. Fight to bring him back."

Alexa's mind was still reeling when Hades joined her a few minutes later. "Did you hear what he said?"

"Aphrodite is convinced love is the cure for everything."

"But what did he mean go in after him? Is he suggesting I drink the water too?"

"From what I understand Chaos's mind is trapped somewhere between oblivion and memories. That sounds rather like the Dream Realm to me."

"Do you know how to access the Dream Realm?"

A slow, calculative smile parted Hades lips. "I don't, but I know someone who does." He strode from the room with no further explanation.

Alexa wrapped her fingers around Chaos's hand. Hope squeezed her heart with painful intensity. She looked at his salve-smeared face and raised his hand to her lips. He had risked his life for her, now it was her turn to fight for him.

* * * * *

Images swirled in and out of focus. Chaos fought his way through the mist. He was a child, tears streaming down his face, as he stared across the river Styx.

“When you are stronger you can venture beyond.” His father appeared at his side. “But this is your home. You must accept that you’re part of the Underworld.”

“Who is my mother?” His young voice broke with longing and confusion. “Where is she?”

“She wants you to live with me.” Hades reached for his hand, compassion bright in his gaze. Chaos snatched his hand away and ran into the fog.

The mist thickened. He swam. His limbs lengthened and developed with defined muscle and corded sinew.

“Chaos.”

“Chaos, where are you?”

Those voices. He knew those voices. Didn’t he? One male, one female, he was certain he should recognize them.

Waving his hand in front of his face, he tried to clear the mist. Another image formed, dragging him in the opposite direction.

He crouched, hiding behind a leafy shrub. Hades spoke with a tall, dark-haired woman in hushed, urgent tones. Focusing on the woman, Chaos searched his memory. Her noble bearing and haughty expression struck a familiar chord within his mind.

“He deserves to know.” Hades’s voice rose, allowing Chaos to make out his words. “I will not keep your secret any longer.”

“If you tell him, I will --”

“I said nothing about telling him. He is intelligent and inquisitive. He will figure out who gave birth to him.”

Hera. This was his mother.

“Chaos!”

He turned his head toward the deep male voice.

“Follow the sound of my voice.” The tone was insistent, commanding. “You have to come to us.”

Us? That’s right; there had been a female voice too. He swam through the mist, struggling against the swirling current, focused on the voice.

“You’re almost there. I can see you.” The voice was louder, more distinct.

He knew this man, had known him for a very long time. Anger surged through him suddenly and he burst from the fog. A grassy clearing surrounded him, sunlight making him squint. The man stood before him, dressed in a tunic and cross-gartered boots. Hair as dark as his father’s -- as dark as *their* father’s brushed the man’s shoulders.

“You’re my father’s bastard.” Chaos sneered.

“We are both bastards. Do you remember my name?”

Images inundated his mind. Chaos clasped his head between his hands and cried out. Pain accompanied each image. He shook. People he had loved and lost; lives he had destroyed. He screamed, sinking to his knees in the grass.

“Make it stop!” Kane, his name was Kane. “You’re a Dream Warrior. You command this realm. Ease my suffering.”

Kane knelt beside him, placing one hand on Chaos’s shoulder. “What afflicts you was not created in this realm. You must let the past go, accept the present, and focus on the future.”

“I hate you!”

“That’s part of the past. *Think*. What is important to you now?”

An image appeared within his mind, bright blue eyes, silky dark hair, gleaming with subtle fire. “Alexa.”

“I am here.”

Slender arms slipped around him from behind. Her soft, floral scent filled his nose. He turned, drawing her into his embrace. Alexa, his love, his life -- but he'd abandoned her.

“Why are you here?” he asked and her gaze filled with hurt. “No, I want you here, but why would you come? I have treated you so --”

She placed her fingers over his lips stopping his words. “That was in the past. You saved my life in the laboratory.”

“I tried to trap his arms, but I was so damn weak. He could have thrown the water on you.” He shook his head, disgusted by his blunder.

“You were exhausted and you still risked yourself for me.”

He sighed and looked away from her beautiful face. How could he accept her love after all he'd done to her? He ... Mist swirled in, blurring her image, drawing him toward despair.

“Stop it! I love you. You must never doubt my love.”

Her warm hands framed his face, but the mist was so dense he could barely see her. Echoes and memories summoned him to the past.

“Do you love me, Chaos?” Her voice snapped with demand.

“I've always loved you.” Centuries of desire and tenderness unfurled, driving back the mist, solidifying her image. He cupped her cheek and stared into her eyes.

“Then prove it.” She smiled, her gaze shining with devotion. “Look at me. Focus only on me. We'll get through this together.”

“Where did Kane go? You are mine and mine alone!”

She smiled, outlining his lips with her fingers. “He's around here somewhere, but he promised not to peek.”

Kane. A woman had come between him and Kane. Was this another --

“Chaos!” Alexa tugged on his hair, the quick stab of pain clearing his head. “You must fight this. Look at me. See only me.” She lay down in the grass and raised her arms above her head, her gaze gleaming with desire. “Touch me. I want to feel your hands moving across my naked body.”

“There’s a small problem with that.” Wispy tendrils of fog curled around him. He focused on Alexa. “You’re fully clothed.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

She had been naked in his store, but he had been mostly dressed. He longed to slide against her skin on skin. Mist passed before his eyes. He cupped her breast, blinking away the haze. Any thought of the past, however pleasant, intensified the fog. He quickly freed the buttons and parted her blouse. Her bra unhooked in front, but it wasn’t enough.

“I want you naked, really naked, not just accessible.”

“I will if you will,” she teased.

He helped her to her feet and she kicked off her shoes. She slipped off the blouse and tossed it aside. Her bra followed as he unzipped her skirt. He pushed her skirt past her hips, while she went to work on his clothing. In a matter of seconds they faced each other naked, their garments scattered around them like fallen leaves.

Pulling her into his arms, he settled his mouth over hers. She parted her lips and met his tongue with the eager thrust of hers. Warm, soft, passionate, everything about Alexa aroused him. He pushed his fingers into her hair and growled.

“This will never do.” He felt through her thick strands, tossing aside each pin he encountered. “Your hair is so beautiful. Why do you confine it?”

“It looks more professional and I’m not willing to cut it.”

He combed his fingers through the thick strands, then raised one lock to his face. “I love the texture and the scent. I’ll never tire of touching you.”

She chuckled. “You’ve barely begun to touch me.”

Images imposed again, taunting him with other faces, different figures. He pulled Alexa to him, breathing in her scent. "I love you, only you." Her arms wrapped around him, her nails lightly scraping his back. He shivered and the mist rolled away. "Touch me. Don't stop touching me."

Her hands moved over his back, pressing, squeezing. She raised her leg against his hip aligning her sex with his erection. He clasped her knee and rubbed against her, absorbing her heat, craving the firm grip of her inner muscles.

He swept her into his arms and laid her down in the grass. She parted her legs, welcoming him, but he wasn't nearly ready to end their play. Caressing his way from her ankle to her inner thigh, he avoided the moist folds awaiting him and kissed his way down the other side. She squirmed and murmured, her gaze following his teasing progress.

Each gasp and moan sent tingles ricocheting through his body. She had followed him into this torment to fight at his side. Tenderness swelled, desire tightened until he could scarcely breathe.

She loved him.

He moved up along her warm body, pressing his cheek against her breast. She stroked his hair, shifting her legs to accommodate his hips. Cupping her breast in his palm, he listened to her steady heartbeat, content for the moment just to hold her.

"If you fall asleep on me, I might have to hurt you."

With a soft chuckle, he angled his head and looked into her eyes. "I'm just savoring the fact that you're actually here."

She smiled. "Take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere."

He rubbed her nipple with his thumb, thrilled by how quickly it drew into a tight little bud. Propping himself on his forearm, he closed his lips around her other nipple. She splayed her fingers against the back of his head, arching into his kiss.

Easing his knees beneath him, he scooted lower, returning to the juncture of her thighs. He needed to taste her, to surround himself with her scent. He pushed her legs up and back, spreading her thighs wide.

Hovering over the very heart of her, he breathed in her scent and held it within his body. *Mine.*

“Yes, I’m yours. Now stop teasing me.” She panted. “I want your mouth on me.”

He needed no further encouragement. Parting her folds with his tongue, he traced her slit from back to front again and again. He draped her legs over his shoulders, needing his hands free. Her fingers tangled in his hair as he lavished attention on her core. Holding her open with his thumbs, he flicked his tongue across her clit. She jerked and cried out with each firm pass.

“Take me, now. I don’t want to come without you.”

Desire twisted through Chaos. He’d meant to enjoy her pleasure before he joined with her. She arched against his mouth, her thighs quivering.

“Please!”

He surged up along her body without lowering her legs. She cried out as he filled her with his rock-hard length, but the firm, rhythmic spasms assured him she felt only pleasure. Drawing back, he rocked his hips and thrust deep.

“Yes, oh, gods, yes,” she cried.

His mouth found hers. She returned his kiss, undeterred by the taste of her own passion on his tongue. With hard, steady strokes, he claimed her. Their breath mingled, their bodies pulsed in time to their thundering hearts. She caressed him with her hands and her inner muscles, her mouth as demanding as his.

He dragged his mouth from hers, needing to see her face. Lowering the last of his emotional barriers, he revealed the depth of his devotion and the intensity of his love. She trembled beneath him, tears shimmering in her eyes.

She framed his face with her hands as pleasure rippled through her body. He shuddered violently and released his seed deep inside her. Their gazes locked, their bodies entwined, they clung to each sensation with greedy abandon.

Pressing a slow, sweet kiss against her lips, he lowered her legs to circle his waist and raised his face to the bright sunshine.

Epilogue

“Welcome back.” Alexa released her pent up breath as Chaos opened his eyes.

Chaos smiled groggily and looked around his bedchamber. “I was having the most amazing dream.”

“As soon as you’re stronger we’ll explore the topic at length. For now you need to rest.” His eyelids drooped. “Don’t fight it. Your body still has a lot of the toxin to metabolize, but Kane seemed certain the crisis is past.”

The name brought his eyes open wide. “Kane is here?”

A firm tapping drew her attention to the door. “Come in.” She sat on the bed, Chaos’s arm draped across her legs, his head pillowed on one thigh.

Apollo pushed open the door and entered the room followed closely by Kane.

“How are you feeling?” Kane’s dark eyes filled with concern. “You look like shit.”

Chaos chuckled. “I feel slightly better than I look, but only slightly.”

Apollo approached the bed and Chaos glared. “That’s a good sign. He’s ready to protect his mate.”

She stroked Chaos’s hair, smiling as the tension eased from his torso. Now that Chaos was safe, her mind drifted to her mother. “If Kane took my father into the Dream Realm ...”

“Your mother’s condition is different. All memory of her past has been wiped clean. Even I cannot restore it.” He paused for a dazzling smile. “But I managed to better her situation, at least to some degree. She is now able to create new memories.”

Alexa paused, her fingers buried in Chaos’s hair. She didn’t want to seem ungrateful, but she had to know. “If this was within your power, why have you waited all these years before improving her condition?”

“It wasn’t possible when I examined her initially. Just as Chaos’s body is working to rid itself of the poison, your mother’s body has been slowly fighting off the effects of the river. I just helped her along.”

“If I visit her today, she will remember our conversation tomorrow.”

“Exactly.”

Pressing her hand over her racing heart, she broke out in a beaming smile. “Then she can finally begin to rebuild her life. This is wonderful!”

“Don’t expect too much too quickly.”

She scooted off the bed and hugged Apollo. “Thank you.”

He eased her away and kissed her forehead, his hands lingering low on her hips.

“Watch those hands,” Chaos growled.

Apollo ignored his protest and flashed another charismatic smile. “If you get tired of the Underworld --”

“She won’t,” Hades said from the doorway. “She is my son’s mate and you’d do well to remember that fact.”

Apollo laughed, undaunted by Hades’s glower. “She hugged me. I was just informing her of her options.” Apollo winked at Alexa and blinked out of sight before anyone could respond.

“Apollo is a scoundrel. A likable scoundrel, but a scoundrel.” Hades walked into the room, his gaze focused on Chaos. “How are you feeling?”

"I felt much better with Alexa in my bed."

Both Kane and Hades laughed.

Alexa slipped back onto the bed and Chaos pulled her into his arms.

"This is the second time a Dream Warrior saved my son's life," Hades grumbled.

"All I did was lead the way. You owe this one to Alexa."

He inclined his head and faced Alexa. "Name it and it's yours."

She looked into Chaos's eyes and smiled. "I have everything I want right here."

 THE END 

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Cyndi has been a member of Romance Writers of America since 1999 and also belongs to two local chapters of RWA. She is the winner of multiple national contests, including The Molly and The Merritt. In 2003, she was chosen as a finalist in the prestigious Golden Heart, as well as winning the Jasmine with *Rebel Angels 1: Born of the Shadows*. After dabbling in freelance journalism and songwriting, she returned to her true passion: paranormal romance. Visit Cyndi on the Web at www.cyndifriberg.com, or email her at cyndi@cyndifriberg.com.