

# PERSEPHONE'S ORCHARD

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### **PERSEPHONE'S ORCHARD**

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# PERSEPHONE'S ORCHARD

## PROLOGUE

**T**HE FIRST GUNSHOT SENT ADRIAN Watts' dog, Kiri, crashing to the ground with a yelp. Ten meters ahead, in the darkness under a tree, she twitched and then lay still.

The smart thing to do would be to switch realms right away, without her. But he would never leave her.

He sprinted forward and threw himself on the grass, gathering her in his arms. He looked around the park, but the night hid his attacker. All he caught was a shadow and fast footsteps: someone taking cover behind the next tree.

As Adrian was about to dive into the spirit world with Kiri, the second shot came. The bullet tore through his back and out his front. It felt like his midsection had exploded.

Gasping and rolling onto his back, he laid his hand over his belly. The ragged wound stretched as wide as his palm. Blood soaked his T-shirt and jacket. The attacker walked over, both hands on the gun. Adrian could just make him out against the stars: medium height, muscular build. A strange shape around the eyes, and a glassy glint, suggested night vision goggles.

"If you're mugging me," Adrian said hoarsely, "I only have twenty dollars on me."

"I'm not."

"You know who I am, then?"

"Shut up."

"I see." Adrian gagged on the familiar metallic taste of blood,

and cleared his throat. "What if I'd been some ordinary bloke, walking his dog in the park?"

"Then you'd be dead."

Adrian touched the wound on his stomach, where the edges were already itching and trying to pull together. "Yeah. Guess I would be."

"You will be, next time." He sounded American, or at least that was Adrian's best guess. The gun remained pointed at him, and Adrian had to wonder just how well he'd recover if a shot shattered his skull across the ground. Was this the kind of gun that could do that? He could barely see it in the dark, and even if he could, he wouldn't have any idea. His life hadn't involved such training so far, and he rather wished it would never have to.

Adrian pulled Kiri closer, curling his arm around her, gathering his strength. She didn't move. From the feel of the blood on her neck, the shot had hit her in the head, but Adrian didn't panic yet.

"Listen to me," said his assailant. "You and your friends go back to your other dimension or whatever you call it, and stay there. Show up among humans again and you're dead. Understood?"

"We *are* human." Not important at the moment really, but Adrian's offended pride couldn't let the slur stand.

"Shut up. Go away, never come back, never make any more like yourselves, or you're all dead."

"Sorry. I don't make promises to people who shoot dogs." Adrian's strength and focus recovered just enough to let him reach for the other realm. He slipped into it, bringing Kiri with him.

His attacker vanished. The city lights winked out, giving way to a sky full of stars. The grass turned into moist dirt scattered with leaves. The park's landscaping disappeared; a patchy forest of tall trees now stood around Adrian and Kiri. Some kind of monkeys or apes whooped and chattered in the branches.

Adrian rolled onto his side, wincing. Kiri twitched again and whimpered. Her breathing grew steadier.

"It's all right, girl. Just rest a bit." He stroked her ears. "We

weren't going to die without getting to meet Sophie, were we? No. We wouldn't do that. We'll be okay." He lay looking at the stars, his pain receding with each breath.

## CHAPTER ONE

**D**ON'T START CRYING, SOPHIE DARROW repeated to herself as she stared into the small, empty closet in her new dorm room. True, her parents and little brother had just driven away, heading back to Washington, leaving her here at Oregon State University for her first term of college. And yes, her boyfriend was beginning college in a different city and her best friend in an even farther city. So, indeed, Sophie was all alone now, alone to a degree she'd never experienced before; and she knew nobody here, and missed her family and friends so much it felt like a fresh wound in her chest. And meanwhile, of course, panic was rapidly overtaking her at the idea of facing life as a university student.

But surely the other freshmen in the dorm suffered the same problems, and *they* didn't sound like they were about to cry. They laughed and chatted out in the hall, just past her open door, unfolding their life stories to each other with glee as if this was the best vacation they'd ever taken.

What was wrong with her?

Sophie drew a deep breath, blinked three or four times, and knelt to unpack her shoes into the closet.

All she had to do was get her stuff moved in properly, make this little room feel like home. Then her spirits would recover.

As if this could ever be home, her lonely mind lamented. Home was the drafty farmhouse in Carnation, Washington, out on the highway, the family produce stand set up at the roadside. Home was her room on the second floor, a tattered and colorful

oval rug on the uneven hardwood planks, her bed with extra comforters piled up against the chilly nights. Home was Liam, her little brother making a clattering racket on his skateboard in the cracked driveway. Home was sleepovers with Tabitha—now far away in Seattle—or, lately, cozy movie nights with Jacob. Home was Mom and Dad and the dogs, and not having to procure her own food and share a room with a girl she'd never met.

Kneeling on the floor, pulling the packing tape off a box of clothes, Sophie stopped and closed her eyes. *Don't start crying.*

At that point her father's words came back to her. *Don't start crying. Start doing.*

He said it whenever she threw a frustration fit about homework, or a fight with Liam, or someone bullying Tabitha or herself. "Do something to fix it, and if you can't, then do something else to make your life better. Tell you what, crying isn't going to fix it."

Sophie took another deep breath, in and out, and wiped her eyes. Line up the shoes. There. Already did something. Now, perhaps, to take a picture of how ridiculously tiny her closet was, and send it to Tabitha, who probably had a more glamorous dorm room, since she was at an arts college.

But as Sophie got out her phone, someone wandered into her room, babbling in a foreign language on a cell phone.

Sophie rose to her feet to stare at him, regarding him as both an intruder and a welcome distraction.

He lowered the phone beneath his chin long enough to tell her, in heavily accented words, "I am sorry. This phone, it is like crap. I get signal only here."

Then he was shouting into the phone again and gesticulating at his invisible acquaintance.

"No problem," Sophie said, though he couldn't have noticed, what with his tirade.

Her homesickness subsided a bit as she looked upon this new perspective. She couldn't imagine studying in an entirely different country, where they didn't even speak your native language. Poor guy.

She sat on her still-bare mattress, between a box of books and



a stack of clothes on hangers, and studied him. His dark brown hair was thick and curly, fluffing out around his head to near-Afro levels. Sophie could do that to her hair if she wished—she had genuine African heritage on her dad's side. But this boy looked more Mediterranean. Maybe that was Italian he was speaking?

Sophie reached back to scratch her neck, and found her hair was escaping from its clip, tendrils sticking to her skin. The September weather here in Corvallis, Oregon, was turning out hotter and more humid than the university brochures had advertised, and the dorms lacked air conditioning. After carrying all those boxes up two flights of stairs, Sophie was sweaty and sticky.

The boy's tan skin gleamed at the temples with sweat too, as did the triangle of sparsely-haired chest above his shirt. He was tall and fit, with a perfect complexion, and possessed a certain beauty with that symmetrical face and thick hair. And a foreign accent was usually a plus. But those clothes—*oh, honey*, she thought, adopting her best friend Tabitha's favorite condescending phrase.

His shirt was striped purple and orange, and a white drawstring zigzagged up its V-neck. His red jeans clung like tights to his body. Golden leather sandals rounded out the ensemble. Seriously, golden, as if he had spray-painted them. Even Sophie didn't own any footwear so sparkly.

When the boy swung away from her, still arguing in Croatian or Russian or whatever it was, Sophie surreptitiously snapped a photo of him with her own cell. Setting the phone on her lap, she added a message for Tabitha.

*Room just got invaded by this guy, shouting on cell in foreign language. Welcome to college.*

She sent the text to Tabitha, up in Seattle, and thumbed through her other messages for a minute.

Her little brother Liam had just texted her, presumably from the car, *Mom is txting some1, wtf?*, which sent her stomach into an uneasy dip. She had her suspicions about their mom's leisure activities lately, and whom she might be texting.

Meanwhile, Sophie's boyfriend Jacob had told her: *I miss you :(* at which she sighed sadly.

A text bounced in from Tabitha, in response to the photo: *Hi, the Eurotrash club called. They want their clothes back.*

Sophie grinned, but felt bad for making fun of the nice clueless visitor. Just then, the guy told the other speaker something that sounded like “Okay” and some kind of goodbye, and switched off his phone. She set hers down too.

He pushed aside her box of books and sat with a sigh beside her, resting his head in both hands. He smelled like a thrift store, as if he had just today purchased that outfit at one.

Sophie waited for an explanation, and, getting none, asked, “So, what language was that?”

“Eh?” He lifted his face. “Oh, yes. Greek. I am Greek. You have heard of Arkadia?”

“Uh...”

“Yes, is in Peloponnisos, in Greece.”

“Okay.”

“I am from there. Yes.”

“How are things at home?”

Another big sigh. He cast a look of desolation at her window. The late afternoon sun lit up his pale green eyes. “Is difficult,” he said. “My family and friends, there is problems always, between them. And my cousin, he wants me to find a girl for him.”

“He wants you to find him a girl?”

“He looks for someone, a certain girl. Is my job now, somehow.”

“Um. Yeah, that’s difficult.” Sophie decided she wasn’t even going to ask.

He stuck out his hand. “I am Nikolaos. Hello.”

She shook hands with him. “Sophie.”

“Ah! Sophia. Is good name. Greek. Wisdom.”

“Yep. That’s right.”

“You know. Of course. You are how old? Eighteen?”

“Yes.”

“Ah, I as well. So you are freshman here too?”

She nodded. “Just moved in.” Her gaze trailed along all the things she still had to unpack, and the tiny half of the room in

which she had to fit them. Her roommate Melissa, a short, mousy, pale Oregon girl with brown corduroy shorts and white sneakers, had stuck around for about two minutes when Sophie and her entourage had arrived. Then Melissa had backed out of the room, flashing her student ID and claiming it was time to go use it to get dinner, and vanished. Apparently dinner took a while, as that was two hours ago. Sophie was alone.

Her mood sagged downward again as she recalled just how alone she was.

"So I am confused," Nikolaos said. "You can help me perhaps?" Sophie lifted her head. "How?"

"You know where bookshop is? For the textbooks?"

"Yeah, I went there earlier. You go down the main street outside, and—"

"The street here?" He pointed in the wrong direction.

"No, right down there, by the parking lot."

"I go across a street?"

"Actually, you just go *down* the street, and..."

He crinkled up his eyes, looking hopelessly lost. "It is not far? You can show me, yes?"

Sophie gave up. Getting out of the dorm room would be a relief anyway. "I can show you. Sure."

He beamed and jumped up from the bed with her. "Thank you. It is good. You are very helping."

Stuffing her cell phone in the pocket of her denim shorts, Sophie led Nikolaos into the dorm hallway and locked her door. She turned and headed for the stairwell. Nikolaos followed, bobbing beside her, grinning too widely at everyone who passed.

They trotted down the stairs and emerged into the breezeway between Sophie's dorm and the next. Warm air rolled over them, smelling of dry grass and a thousand burgers being cooked.

"I see you moving in with your family before," Nikolaos said. "There was tall boy with hat. He is your boyfriend?"

Jacob had bravely worn his new yellow and green University of Oregon cap onto the Oregon State University campus, earning him jeers from a car full of OSU football fans.

“Yes. He’s going to U of O, down in Eugene.” Forty miles away. Not so far, perhaps. But until now, she had always lived in the same town with him, and with everyone else she knew.

“He does not know how lucky boy he is.” As they entered the shade of a huge redwood arching its branches over the sidewalk, Nikolaos threw his arm around Sophie’s shoulders. “I make him jealous, yes?”

*Uh-oh*, she thought. She faked a laugh. “Probably shouldn’t.” She tried to push his arm off, but it wouldn’t budge. The boy was stronger than he looked.

While she tried to decide the nicest way to say *Hands off, dude*, Nikolaos swung to face her, snaring her in both arms. “Hold on tight.”

Her face went hot in protest. She tried to twist away, still failing. “I’m serious, I—” At that second the ground heaved beneath her. Losing her balance, she tumbled into the tall grass, in Nikolaos’ arms.

An earthquake? No, it had only been one jolt, no rolling or rumbling. And tall grass? Where had that come from? They’d been walking along the dorm sidewalk, next to short hedges and cropped lawn and a few giant redwoods—all of which were now gone.

As she debated whether to worry about that later and stick her thumbs in his eyes now, Nikolaos pinned her to the lumpy ground, grinning. “That was easy. We must teach you to be less trusting.”

His awkward Greek accent had nearly vanished, only a trace of it remaining. He now spoke a fluent and rather British English.

He’d been faking! Bastard. The self-defense moves they’d taught her in high school gym class came sweeping back to her on a wave of fury. She slammed her knee up between his legs, and shoved both hands at his face.

He grunted, and rolled off her, clambering to his feet. “Ow. Careful.” She had definitely made contact—her knee and fists throbbed from it—but he didn’t appear to be in any pain.

*Whatever. Time to escape.* She flipped onto her front and scram-

bled to get her feet beneath her, but found herself being lifted by Nikolaos, who caught her around the ribs and set her upright as if she were light as paper.

When she got a look around, she froze. Golden fields rippled in the late afternoon sun. Trees dotted the hills. The buildings and people were all gone. The normal campus sounds—music, laughter, cars—had vanished with them. Leaves rustled, birds twittered, and the wind whispered; that was all.

Panic washed through her. Had he slipped her a drug of some kind? How? No, she'd surely been knocked out just now, and this was a dream, or a coma. But it felt so *real*.

"Who are you?" Her voice shook; she couldn't control it. "Where is everyone?"

He still held her by the arm, casually but firmly. "You don't believe my name is Nikolaos? It's perfectly true, I promise."

She swallowed, gaze darting around the wild terrain, her mind scrambling to recall all the details leading up to this. "And you're Greek. Sure."

"I *am* Greek. Honestly, I'm insulted you doubt me."

Sophie shot him another look, and now noticed the mature shrewdness in his green eyes. "I guess you're not eighteen, either."

"All right, you've got me there."

She looked around again, seeking any sign of the campus. Nothing. Just nature, and a lot of it. Something that sounded like the trumpet of an elephant echoed from far off.

Nikolaos let go of her for a moment to tap something on his cell phone. She seized her chance and bolted across the meadow. Her feet hit unsteady lumps and dips of ground, but she made decent speed. Thank goodness she was wearing her jogging sneakers rather than impractical sandals.

"Bad idea," called Nikolaos from behind her.

She slowed to reach into her pocket for her cell, thinking now might be a good time to try 911. But the phone wasn't there. *Crap*. She suspected she'd dropped it in the meadow, and good luck finding it in this tall grass if she had. Forget it. Escaping was more important. She put on a burst of speed.

As she reached a large oak tree, a growl brought her skidding to a halt. From the grass a lion emerged, staring at her with amber eyes. It was a *huge* lion, as tall as Sophie even when down on its four giant paws, its shoulder muscles piled high behind its short ears. Its fur was browner than any lion's she had seen in a zoo, and its mane was shorter.

She'd been scared already, but now pure primal terror chilled her from head to feet.

Though she might indeed have just stepped through some kind of magic wardrobe, this was not Aslan she was dealing with. From the predatory gaze and the saliva dripping from those fangs (which looked at least six inches long), she was sure this animal regarded her as lunch.

*Oh, please, let this be a dream or a coma, she prayed. Otherwise I'm about to die.*

Were you supposed to climb a tree when faced with a lion, or run in a zigzag pattern, or punch it in the face, or what? She couldn't recall.

Then a young man and a medium-sized dog darted in between her and the lion. The guy had curly black hair, tamer than Nikolaos', and wore all black: untucked long-sleeved shirt, jeans, and boots with laces. She couldn't see his face yet; he was staring down the lion, as was his dog. The dog's hackles bristled beneath its golden fur.

"Off you go, mate," the guy told the lion.

As if to back him up, his dog growled, and barked.

The threat worked. The lion hissed, turned tail, and bounded away into the grass.

Sophie's knees shook as her adrenaline subsided, leaving her weak.

The young man turned around to look at her. "You okay?"

He was rather lovely. Probably a couple of years older than Sophie, with olive skin, shapely mouth, and large dark eyes with black lashes and brows.

She parted her lips, found she was too upset to answer, and merely nodded.

"Please don't run," he added. "We're not going to hurt you. But the lions won't give you that guarantee. It's not safe out here."

Sophie detected a different accent in the slant of his words, Australian perhaps. She answered with another nod, more guarded this time.

Footsteps rustled up behind her, and she spun about.

But it was only Nikolaos. "Told you running off was a bad idea. But now you've met...Wat-son." He separated the syllables playfully, as if this wasn't the guy's real name.

Watson glared at Nikolaos. "Why are you dressed like that? What is *wrong* with you? Did you need to wear the most conspicuous clothes on the planet?"

"It worked, obviously," Nikolaos said. "So, I shall leave you two dears alone." He sauntered to Watson, and slipped something into his palm while murmuring a few words in a foreign language, maybe Greek again.

Watson nodded and tucked the item into his jeans pocket. His dog, meanwhile, sat and gazed calmly at each human in turn. It looked like a golden retriever crossbred with something darker, perhaps some kind of shepherd dog. It also looked gentle, not the type of animal who would rip out her throat upon command. She tried to take comfort in the gaze of the friendly dog.

The two men finished their discussion, and Nikolaos turned and executed a bow in Sophie's direction. "Sophia, it has been a pleasure. I hope we meet again soon."

She didn't dignify that with a response, only a cold gaze. *Yeah, hope we meet again. Thanks for kidnapping me, you lying jerkwad.*

Nikolaos, catching the glare, laughed, then waved and strolled away into the wilderness.

Sophie turned her wary attention to Watson, or whatever his name was. He was already studying her, but when their eyes met, he looked down and cleared his throat. "All right. Let's talk."

## CHAPTER TWO

ADRIAN'S STOMACH CHURNED. HE HATED having to approach Sophie this way, loathed it. He dared another look at her. Streaks of dirt marked her slim white T-shirt from her tussle on the ground with Nikolaos. Her hair was shorter than last time Adrian had seen her, cut to just below her ears and partially pinned back. Bits of dry grass stuck to her dark brown curls. She hugged her small, curvy body as if trying to protect herself from him. Her hazel eyes watched him, sharp with distrust. Her full lips looked pale, and her light brown complexion had gone ashen.

She still looked thoroughly beautiful to him.

And, of course, she had no idea who he was. Yet.

"Am I in a coma?" she asked. "Or dead, or dreaming?"

"No. You're awake."

"Then where the hell are we? And what's with the lions?" Her voice was unsteady.

He'd asked similar questions when he first got dragged into this realm. Using stronger language, in fact. "It's kind of like another dimension," he said. He tried to sound gentle and reasonable so he wouldn't scare her further, though he suspected it wouldn't work. "It's the same geography as the living world—see, same mountain over there, same river over there—so in a sense we're still in Oregon. But only animals live here, species that evolved without humans around. There's no civilization, because humans don't live here."

"Except you. What are you?" Her eyes narrowed.



"People like Niko and me, we have certain abilities. We can switch back and forth between the realms. The animals here avoid us."

Sophie glanced at Kiri, sitting at attention beside him. "They avoid your dog too?"

"Yeah, her too." Adrian reached down to stroke Kiri's head, then straightened up again. "I had Nikolaos fetch you because I wanted to meet you."

"Why?"

Ah, there it was. The perfectly logical question he didn't dare answer in full. He swallowed. "You're important to me. I wanted you to see this place."

"Why would I be important to you? We've never met."

"Well. We have and we haven't."

"When? When have I met you?" She sounded tense and panicky.

He couldn't answer that either yet; and in fact, any partially true answer could make it sound like he was a common stalker. In all the time he'd spent planning how to meet her and talk to her, he hadn't realized how hard it would be to speak calmly when she stood in his presence, staring at him in alarm and suspicion.

He folded his arms as his stomach tensed again in nervousness. "Never mind. I'm sorry to have done it this way, but you wouldn't have believed us if we approached you and told you we've got this other realm, and invited you nicely to come see it. Would you?"

Sophie hugged herself tighter, looking out at the field. "Of course not."

"And in order to switch you from one world to the other, one of us has to be holding onto you, so Niko had to grab you like that."

"And getting me here was so important why?"

He hesitated. "You have to promise you won't tell anyone. I say that for your own protection. Niko and I can hide out here and no one'll find us. But if *you* try to convince people about this place, well, most of your time will be spent in a psychiatrist's office, which I doubt is what you want."

"Then I'm not crazy? Good. I was wondering." Clearly she was attempting sarcasm, but the tremor in her voice betrayed her fear.

"Also," he continued, "there are a few people who do know about me, and about this realm, and they're not fond of us. They're quite dangerous in fact. You do not want to be on their radar. So just promise you won't tell anyone."

"Okay. I promise." She sounded as guarded and uneasy as ever, but he was unlikely to get a more trusting pledge for now.

So Adrian drew in his breath and delivered the true but incomplete explanation: "This world is where souls go. People's souls, when they die. There's a place we can go to see them, though it's a long way from here."

Sophie stared at him several long moments without speaking. Then, evidently deciding he was mental, she spread her hands in front of her and said, "Look, if it's money you're after, my family doesn't have much. My parents run a fruit stand, we grow a little produce, but—"

"No. I know. We're not after money."

"Then...what?" The quiver was back in her voice. Probably she thought he was going to rape her or sell her into slavery.

"I'm not here to hurt you," he repeated. "I only want to talk to you. And you can't get back to the regular world by yourself, so please listen and don't run away. I'm not lying and I'm not crazy, all right? Can't you admit that this is...supernatural? That something very unusual is going on here?"

She pressed her lips together, glancing around. "Unless you or your buddy drugged me or knocked me out."

Adrian sighed, and squinted across at the mountain—Mary's Peak, they called it in the living world. "All right." He took his own smartphone from his back pocket. The other pocket held Sophie's phone, which Niko had swiped. "I asked about you, in the—the place where the souls go. Here's what I found. Watch this, then I'll take you home, I promise." He selected the video and held the phone out to her, his heart pounding.

Sophie took the phone, frowning, and tapped the screen to begin the video. Immediately she inhaled a quick breath.

"Hi, Sophie Sodapop," said her grandfather, who'd been dead over a year. Adrian kept his distance rather than watching at her shoulder, but having filmed it himself and previewed it, he knew how it looked. Sophie's grandpa smiled benevolently, but, like all the souls, glowed greenish and appeared translucent. Behind him milled other souls in the fields. The black of the cave's interior surrounded them all.

Adrian felt uneasy bringing photos or videos of the Underworld out of its borders, even into the rest of the spirit realm, but he had to convince her.

"This fellow here tells me it's September of 2012," her grandfather continued on the video, "and you're about to start college. Sounds like you chose OSU. Honey, I'm so proud."

Sophie choked back a sob, and splayed her fingers over her mouth. She kept her gaze riveted to the video. Adrian bowed his head, closing his eyes for a moment. Why was he doing this to her? Why couldn't he leave her alone? Well, he knew why. But couldn't he have found a gentler way?

"I miss you and Liam and your dad and mom," her grandfather went on, "but it's not so bad here. There's all kinds of interesting folks to talk to. I even found some old friends. Now, this boy says he can bring you here to see me, if you're willing. Sophie, I'd sure love that. I wouldn't be able to touch you, but it'd be a real treat to talk to you again. I hope you'll come. In the meantime, I love you so much, honey, and you take care of yourself."

The video ended.

Tears ran down her face. She handed the phone back to Adrian, holding her arm out to the side and not looking at him.

He took the phone, and handed her a clean cotton handkerchief from his front pocket.

She accepted it, and blew her nose.

"I'm sorry," Adrian said, then found himself talking rapidly, saying things he hadn't entirely planned to say: "When I was a kid, my mum died. Suddenly. In a routine surgery, one of those complications that isn't supposed to happen but sometimes does. And when I first went to the...that place, and found her soul, I..."

was really shaken." *Was crying too hard to talk* would sound maudlin, he decided, although it was true. "Everyone feels that way. I mean, the few living people who've been there, and talked to their loved ones. It's normal. But you do get used to it after a while."

Sophie wiped her eyes. "I don't know how you did the video. Or why." Her voice sounded shakier than ever now. "But I want to go home."

His heart sank, but he had expected as much. He nodded. "Then come over here."

He walked past a few trees and over into another meadow, Kiri trotting beside him. Sophie followed at a distance of a couple of steps. Adrian stopped by a stake with fluorescent orange flagging tied to its top.

"Here's the spot we picked as safe to reappear. Safer than, like, the middle of the street or something."

Eyes reddened, Sophie glanced at the stake. She moved her hand to her back pocket, and exhaled a sigh. "Right, I lost my phone. Great."

"Oh. Here." Adrian pulled the purple-cased smartphone from his pocket and offered it to her. "Niko picked your pocket. Didn't want you causing a panic by dialing 911."

She grabbed it, then gazed in abstraction at its screen. "I probably ought to. But I don't know what I'd say."

"Really, don't. Please. It'll only complicate things for you."

Sophie lowered her arm without dialing anyone.

He hesitated. "Listen. The souls, your grandfather, this whole realm...it barely scratches the surface of the things I want to show you."

She met his gaze, her face tense and disturbed. "How do I know it's real?"

"How could I have faked it? That's what I want you to think about for a few days."

"Then what? What happens after a few days?"

"I'll ask you again if you want to come with me."

Her eyebrows darted closer together. "You're going to kidnap me again?"

Adrian tried a smile. "No, I'll ask you if you *want* to be kidnapped again."

Sophie looked away, declining to answer. After a moment, she glanced at the crumpled handkerchief and held it out to him. "Yours."

"Nah, keep it. Maybe it'll convince you this was real. So will this." From the breast pocket of his shirt he took a bit of white linen, and unfolded it. A violet with red petals lay within, partially wilted. He'd picked it several hours ago, in the Underworld. He handed the flower to her.

She took it and studied it, looking pensive. Maybe she'd realize you couldn't easily find a violet with red petals and a stem so pale green it was nearly white. Only in the Underworld, in fact.

"All right, then." Adrian stepped closer to her.

She recoiled a few quick steps.

"I have to be holding onto you," he repeated. "In order to take you back."

"Oh. Fine." She kept her eyes averted, but held still.

Adrian settled his hands on her waist.

The low evening sun sparkled in her eyes as she gazed past him. The wind blew the scent of her hair to him, feminine and earthy. He would have gladly laid his face in it and breathed it for hours. As indeed he used to.

He drew her up against him, feeling their bodies touch at knees and hips and chest. "Ready?" he asked. "May want to hold on."

Her lips flattened. She settled her hands on his shoulders, one hand still clutching the phone.

"Here goes." He tightened his hold on her, and the tip of his nose brushed her forehead. He reached for the living world.

The ground shoved upward beneath their feet, and flattened out into smooth concrete. Swaying in the moment of tipped balance, Adrian found himself leaning against a wall. Steadying Sophie, who had also stumbled, he stood upright, then let go of her.

She gasped, turning in circles and looking at everything: the neon signs in restaurant windows, the sheets of paper stuck to a bulletin board in the breezeway where they stood, the tamed ivy

crawling out of a stone planter near their feet. The sounds of cars and distant conversations and music thrummed around them. Moving aside, she peeked out of the concrete enclosure, and the bewilderment cleared from her face.

"Your dorm's right across there." Adrian pointed toward the grassy square with an X of sidewalks traversing it.

"Yeah. I recognize it, thanks." Back to the sarcasm, evidently.

"I'll talk to you in a few days."

"Don't count on it." She started walking away.

"Sophie."

She paused to hear him, but didn't turn all the way around.

"I'm truly sorry for doing it this way. I know it's hard to believe, but hurting you, or even scaring you, is the last thing I want to do." He gave a soft laugh, as a stream of poignant memories whispered past in his mind. "We seem meant to cause trouble for each other, you and I."

She frowned at him, looking as if she honestly wanted to understand. "Will you still be watching me?" she asked, the words carrying a quiver of fright. "Are you going to come after me again?"

"Not unless you want me to."

She didn't care for the evasion in the words—he could tell by her lingering frown.

Laughter and voices danced closer; other students were approaching. Adrian inhaled a cautious breath. "I should go."

"Wait. What *was* all that? And why me?"

"If you really want to know, come with me next time. Good-bye, Sophie."

She stepped toward him in protest, but he slipped back into the spirit realm, and she vanished along with the rest of the city. The concrete gave way to meadow dirt under his boots. Tall grass brushed against his knees.

He sank into the field, stretching out on his back. Kiri yipped in delight and ran over to lick his face, then flopped down next to him. Adrian drank in the sight of the sky. Puffballs of cloud edged

with gold reflected the setting sun, and on the horizon stood a bank of curdled gray thunderheads.

"But will she come again?" he asked Kiri. "Or did I scare her off?"

Kiri yawned, and delivered an indeterminate grumble.

"Yeah," Adrian said. "We'll see." He filled his lungs with the sweet meadow air, and closed his eyes. "Oh, but it was so good to see her."