

The Medusa Deception (Preview)

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Chapter 1

MANDY CAME-TO ON her back. Sheer vertical walls of sandstone towered around her, cylindrical, about twelve feet across. Moonlight seeped into the rim of the circular opening above, revealing the pinprick of stars in a veil of darkness.

The air was cool and musky. She shifted to look around. The sandy floor conformed beneath her. Turning to her side, grit chafed her bare flesh. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the dim. There was movement all around her, like rolling waves in a rocky stream. She froze.

Snakes.

A mass of writhing serpents surrounded her. Moonlight danced off their jet-black scales. Their amber yellow eyes penetrated the gloom. Forked tongues flicked the air. Smelling. Tasting. All around her a moving blackness — a snake pit.

Mandy tensed. The snakes circled, but kept their distance. Her heart thudded in her chest.

A large snake slid out of the fray. It paused, its calm manner in stark contrast to the frenzy behind. Its forked tongue, black as night, incessantly probed the air. Its beady yellow eyes unwaveringly stared.

Mandy took a ragged breath and tried to calm her nerves. Shutting out the turbulent mass, she focused on just the one. It waited, not coiled to strike, but stretched out, vulnerable. Slowly, she extended her hand along the surface of the sand, palm up, fingers outstretched.

The snake approached, flicking its tongue, grazing her fingertips. It slithered forward until its head rested on her palm.

What does it want? It seemed so sad and forlorn.

Breaking eye contact, it lifted its head to gaze at the moon.

Mandy looked up, then back at the snake. She furrowed her brows. “You want out?”

The snake left her palm and agitated in front of her.

She rose to her feet and assessed the wall. Too far to jump to the rim, and even if she could, then what would she do? Scanning the floor, she looked for something to stand on.

The snakes parted, revealing an area of higher ground.

On her hands and knees, she pushed armloads of sand toward the wall. The snakes watched. Then using their powerful bodies, they joined in. Mandy paused to watch the snakes work — a harmonious and graceful ballet.

Once the floor had a good incline to it, she tried again. Standing at the apex, she reached for the rim. Her fingertips curled over the edge; her chest pressed lightly against the coarse sandstone. Looking back to the floor, she spotted the large snake coiled at her feet.

“OK then, climb.” Mandy nodded toward the sky.

Slowly and deliberately it climbed her bare flesh, over her foot and up her calf, stroking the back of her knee. Goosebumps rippled over her skin. On it coiled, squeezing, pulsating up her thigh. Over her hip and abdomen it caressed.

Mandy’s skin flushed. Not knowing the path it would take, the anticipation of touch, was overwhelmingly intense. Every nerve, every follicle it brushed, heightened the tension. Her breathing became shallow and rapid; she closed her eyes. She had to do this. She had to trust.

Between her breasts it squeezed, using them for purchase as it reached across her chest for her shoulder where it draped, gathering for the final ascent up her arms to the ledge.

The remaining snakes anxiously waited, slithering, tongues flicking, freedom so close they could taste it.

At the rim, the large snake coiled and hung its head back into the pit. As if receiving permission, the other snakes approached and began their gradual scaling of the human tower, careful under its watchful eye not to overburden her.

Standing, arms aloft, clinging to the ledge above, she was a pillar of snakes, a tornado of undulating flesh. Touched more now than ever before, the sensation wild, invigorating, and empowering. She drew in a deep breath, luxuriating in the embrace of the silky soft cocoon.

Before long, the weight upon her frame subsided. Mandy looked down. The pit was nearly empty. A few of the snakes slithered away. Following them with her gaze, she could hardly believe why.

The rescued snakes had devised a way for her to escape. Hanging half-way down into the pit was a succession of loops, circles of snakes, biting their own tails. As the next slithered down, it joined the last link and clamped on with strong jaws, keeping clear of its deadly venomous fangs. Link by link, the chain extended, anchored firmly around the stone lip above. Once it was low enough, the few remaining snakes in the pit climbed the ladder.

Mandy approached. *Would it support her weight?* At 135 pounds, she was lean and fit on her five foot eight frame. There was only one way to find out. She placed her bare foot into the first loop, grasped a rung and cautiously transferred her weight. It held. As she climbed, the ladder below diminished with every step.

At the top, she scrambled over the rim onto the hard packed ground and leaned against the sandstone base. Set in an arid desert landscape, well back of a palatial complex, the pit seemed out of place. Clearly man-made for some reason. It sat in the back yard like a kiddie pool waiting for guests.

The last of the snakes poured out after her. She watched the exodus as they slithered gracefully into the moonlight, all except the one.

Mandy caressed its chin. "Go. Be free," she whispered.

The snake flicked its tongue at her fingertips one final time, as though imprinting her scent, before departing into the night.

* * *

MANDY BURKHARDT LAY in bed, eyes wide open. Shards of early morning light cut through open Venetian blinds, leaving a lined pattern on the opposite wall of the disheveled bedroom. The white plastic blinds, yellowed and brittle with age, were heavy with dust. A trail of yesterday's clothes disappeared into the other room.

Mandy didn't normally wake before the alarm, but today was different. She felt different. She didn't have to be at work until 9 a.m., but decided to get up anyway. She was famished.

She could barely move. Mummified by tangled and sodden sheets, she struggled to break free. Tiny granules of grit scratched her bare skin as she squirmed out of the twisted heap.

She ran her hands over the sheets. *What the hell? Where'd that come from? Did somebody dump a handful of sand in my bed?* The last thing she remembered was bailing from work early the day before. She'd been lightheaded and dizzy but somehow had made it home. *Maybe I stumbled and fell in the dirt?*

Standing on the low-pile industrial beige carpet, she enjoyed a good, long stretch, releasing

the night's kinks in the golden warmth of the sun, before realizing she was posing naked in front of the open blinds. *Good going, Mandy*, she chastised herself, *give the neighbors a free show, why don't you?*

She turned, grabbed her housecoat from the folding chair and padded barefoot to the small kitchenette. Not known for her culinary talents, she made a peanut butter and honey sandwich, and washed it down with orange juice.

On her way to the shower, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and stopped cold. She turned side to side, taking stock of the smudges and grime on her skin. Her hair looked like a day at the beach.

"Don't you look nice," she scoffed.

She felt good though — strong, rejuvenated and alive. Not like yesterday. The vertigo and nausea had been intense. Vaguely, she remembered shedding her clothes and collapsing into bed before blacking out. *Lucky I even made it home*, she thought, shaking her head.

After shampooing twice and deep conditioning, her long black hair was finally restored to its normal gleam. She wrapped herself in a towel and stood at the mirror. She applied a thin line of black eyeliner and added a couple of swipes of mascara to her already thick black lashes. It was an old habit, highlighting her eyes, drawing attention away from her too angular cheekbones. Eventually she'd matured into them and had eased off on the eyeliner. At twenty-two, she was a little old for the goth look.

Not bothering to blow it dry, she brushed her damp hair and gathered it at the nape of her neck, securing it into a snag-free elastic.

Not exactly the girl next door, she had olive-toned skin and opaline hazel eyes with pupils ringed in amber — like a solar eclipse. Not like her parents either. Their fair complexions and blue-green eyes made her wonder. *Maybe the postman was a dark, handsome stranger...*

Huh, not likely. She huffed. She couldn't picture her mom making such a bold move. Ever.

Hanging her towel to dry, she went to her closet and stood there, eyeing the depressing selection of earth tones, from basic black to blend-in beige. Near the back, she found a white, sleeveless cotton shirt - the boldest thing in her wardrobe - and a pair of gray slacks bought from a nearby consignment shop. On her salary, buying second hand wasn't so much a choice as a necessity. Besides, you could get much nicer things, if you weren't picky that somebody else had worn it first.

With yesterday's clothes still on the floor, she set off for work with a spring in her step.

She drew in a deep breath. It was a glorious day, the morning air was still, as if time itself stretched from a night of slumber. Little shops and businesses were starting to open. A florist shuttled a cart of fresh flowers to the sidewalk. Cafes bustled with people seeking their morning coffee, the streets awash in the glow of the early morning sun.

At the end of the block, the quaint little pet store swung open its door as she approached, as if extending her a personal invitation. Mandy sauntered inside on a whim. She had time.

The smell of kibble, hay and pets filled the air. Puppies yipped at the morning's commotion; mews and chirps added to the joyful racket. She walked straight through — past the fuzzy lop eared bunnies, the skittish little hamsters and gerbils — all the way to the glass cages at the back.

She was fascinated with snakes, drawn to them. As eager as she was to see them, the feeling appeared mutual. Mandy crouched in front of a baby python; it turned its head to look. *Was that normal?*

"Hey little fella. You lonely in there?"

The snake stared.

Seeing the snake brought back memories of her childhood trips to the zoo. She couldn't wait to get in to see the snakes. Was it her overactive imagination, or did they pay special attention to her back then too?

The snake approached, never taking its tiny little eyes off of her.

"Aren't you cute?" Mandy watched it squirm and wriggle.

Zoned out at its hypnotic display, her mind drifted back to senior year. It seemed so long ago, that traumatic little incident that set her life on a different course. So out of character, so unfair — forever changing her relationship with her mom.

The snake looked away, jolting Mandy back to the present.

"I'd better get to work." She rose to her feet, smoothing the creases out of her pant legs. "This lavish lifestyle doesn't pay for itself." She smirked, hurrying out of the store.

* * *

THE OCCULT BOOKSTORE was located in Bridgeport, a central, high-traffic, low rent area of Chicago, a melting pot of culture and ethnicity, crammed chock full of business, residential and commercial property between two busy expressways and a rail yard. The building it occupied was unremarkable from the other freestanding businesses on the block, except for it being the only single story. Tan colored brick ran waist high along the entire front topped with plate glass, Occult Books tastefully stenciled in white paint on the central pane.

Mandy arrived at the bookstore as usual, on time, unlocking and opening the glass front door, greeted by a melodic jingle. Stepping into the store was like stepping back in time, right down to the antique bell over the door.

She proceeded to unlock and stow the security grates inside the windows. The owner, Seth Whittington, was serious about security, and in this area of town, who could blame him.

Having the grates on the inside was all about image. Sure, the glass outside could easily be broken, but the treasures inside would still be protected. It was more welcoming that way. The only bars visible during regular hours were integrated into the glass front door, a necessary evil.

Occult Books had done well right from the start, attracting a decent amount of walk-in traffic and a steady stream of Internet orders. Subjects including mythology, history, mystical, occult, astrology, alchemy, witchcraft and paganism, filled a literary niche not available at larger chain stores. The store experienced a surge in business fueled by the popularity of the Harry Potter and Twilight series, which had awakened the imagination of the masses. Despite his impatience at the frivolous pursuits of Twihards and wizard wannabes, Seth was an astute businessman and stocked all the mainstream offerings sought out by this burgeoning market segment.

Employed at the store now for nearly five years, Mandy still hadn't tired of it. It was almost as much a part of her as it was for Seth.

She flipped the cardboard sign on the window from Closed to Open and headed up the center aisle toward the kitchenette, passing through the impressive collection of books, scrolls and folios carefully bound in leather and stacked neatly on the timeworn shelves polished to a dull shine.

Mandy inhaled deeply the smell of antique wood, furniture wax and old books. *Smelled like history.*

She hung her coat, started the coffee and returned to the front counter to power up the computer. Today she'd work on the accounting. Seth had come to rely on her over the years. She practically ran the store herself, even processing her own payroll. Twice a month she had to

bother him to sign her paycheck. It was a bit odd, like asking for permission to be paid.

It wouldn't be so bad if he were still the boss she'd come to know. But these days, he spent nearly all of his time in the basement working on whatever it was he did down there. She knew enough not to ask.

Arriving a half-hour later through the back entrance, Seth poked his head around the back door to check that she'd made it in. Eyeing her with his usual mild interest, he said, "I'll be in my office." And with that, he disappeared into the basement.

"Good morning to you, too," she muttered under her breath. "And yes, I'm feeling much better, thanks for asking Mr. Whittington."

She rolled her eyes and returned to the payroll, printing two paychecks, one for her and one for Cathy Jones — a casual part-time worker Seth employed from time to time. The front door jingled open.

Mandy looked up and smiled. "Good morning, Mr. Carruthers."

"Good morning, Mandy. How are you today?"

"I'm fine, thank you. And you?"

"Very well, thanks."

"Your order is right here, packaged and ready." She leaned under the counter and retrieved it. "Would you like to inspect it first?"

"No, that's not necessary. I trust it's in great shape as always," he said, practically beaming.

"It's a very fine edition. I think you'll be very pleased."

After the sale was processed, the store was quiet once again. Mandy felt dizzy; her stomach twisted in a knot. She was going to be sick.

"Not again." She moaned.

Rushing to lock the front door, she put up the "Back in 15 minutes" sign and scurried to the bathroom. Even in a time of duress, she'd never leave the store open and unattended.

Locking the bathroom door behind her, she knelt before the toilet and retched; her skin flushed with prickly heat. The room spun, skewing like a carnival fun house. Her vision narrowed as blackness invaded her peripheral vision. She fought to keep her eyes open, focusing on anything she could. The black and white checkered floor tiles didn't help. Gripping the toilet seat, she tried to anchor the room, lessen the sickening spinning sensation, keep her bearings, but the darkness took over.

Chapter 2

SHE HEARD THE commotion before opening her eyes. A fetid smell of livestock and nervous sweat permeated the air. Crouched on her hands and knees, a hard, uneven surface dug into her kneecaps. She was in some kind of cage, approximately a four-foot cube. Slim lengths of bamboo were lashed together with Jute rope, encrusted with chicken and other animal waste she'd rather not think about.

The cage, stacked atop others, was draped with a burlap sheet covering the top and most of the sides. Amid clucking and bleating, she heard a growl and dared not look too closely into the cage below. Crawling forward, careful not to upset her precarious perch, she inched her head to the front for a better view. The scene appeared artificial, like an old sepia photograph of the pioneer days — the crowd in shades of beige, the sky gray, the dunes beyond a muted gold.

Beyond the horde of people was a woman in a black tattered dress, with long, matted black hair, bare feet and deep green eyes. Bedraggled and dirty, her arms were bound to a large

wooden stake set firmly in the sand behind her.

She seemed absurdly calm, radiating confidence, power and strength. Her piercing stare at the crowd incensed them, causing more ruckus and unease. The villagers exuded a palpable energy of hatred and fear. Bravado shouts toward the bound and helpless woman accompanied the rattle and clank of stones in their hands, more in sacks and piles at their feet.

Mandy blinked in disbelief.

A loud shout accompanied the hurling of the first stone.

It struck the woman's forehead. Her head recoiled, diverting her gaze to the livestock pens where Mandy crouched. Their eyes met. A rivulet of blood trickled down her cheek; her eyes widened. A barely discernible smile crossed her lips. Averting her eyes to the sky, she breathed, "She lives!"

The woman began to struggle; the crowd jeered. A barrage of stones flew impacting her flesh from every angle. Mandy tried to yell at them to stop, but her voice caught in her throat. She could hardly breathe. No one would hear her anyway, over the din.

A stone smashed into the woman's temple. Her head lolled to the side and drooped forward.

Mandy couldn't stand it. With all her might, she inhaled deeply and screamed, "Stop!" The sound was deafening, like a sonic blast.

People froze, stunned. In the reprieve, the woman at the stake regained consciousness, garnered her strength, and twisted free of her bindings with ease, as if she could've done so all along. A communal gasp arose from the crowd at her unexpected freedom. Raising her arms, she spun around and around, uttering a deep, primal incantation.

The sand swirled, became a torrent, then a blinding twister. In the mass confusion, those who could, fled. Those left behind were stranded in their tracks, blinded by the sudden onslaught of sand, garments held over their faces in order to breathe.

Mandy sheltered her face with both hands, stealing glimpses through the slits between her fingers, her eyes stinging from needles of sand. The swirl concentrated and drew in, obliterating the woman from sight. With a flash of light and thunderous crack, she was gone.

As fast as it began, it was over — with nothing left behind except an empty stake in the center of swirled sand. The last vestiges of the angry mob hunkered in sandy heaps. Silenced.

On her knees in the cage, Mandy's gut clenched. She hugged her chest, rocking, her fingernails digging painfully into her arms.

* * *

MANDY CAME-TO ON the cold black and white linoleum tile, her face inches away from the base of the toilet centered in a ring of grayish, fuzzy mold. She wrinkled her nose. Gingerly, she pried herself off the floor and got to her knees.

I must have passed out again. She steadied herself. The dream flashed in her mind, so vivid and real. *I must be coming down with something.* She got her shaky legs beneath her and stood up. A cold shiver ran up her arms. Absently, she rubbed them.

"Ouch!" Mandy winced at the bloody fingernail impressions on her upper arms.

Damn, that seemed real...

The toilet was empty but she flushed it anyway then shuffled over to the sink. Rinsing her mouth out, she sipped some water and washed her face and arms.

She looked in the mirror. Dark circles hung under her eyes. She pushed loose strands of hair behind her ears and leaned over the sink. Opening her mouth wide, she inspected her throat for signs of inflammation. Seemed normal. Still, something was off. Passing out on the bathroom

floor could hardly be considered normal.

Pulling free the elastic, she ran her fingers through her hair and refastened a ponytail at the nape of her neck, then dabbed away the smudges of eyeliner from under her eyes. Wondering if anyone had noticed her absence, she headed back out into the store.

Seth was nowhere to be found and no one was waiting to come in. She unlocked the door and checked the time on her cellphone. She'd been out for nearly an hour. She put on a sweater and headed to the kitchenette for a cup of coffee. *It was going to be a long day.*

* * *

MANDY ARRIVED AT work as usual the next morning and hesitated. The security grates were pulled back and the door was unlocked. Seth stood behind his open briefcase at the front counter. He hadn't opened the store in a very long time.

Impeccably dressed, he wore dark slacks, gray shirt and polished black shoes. Slim, average height, late fifties, his dark brown hair grew silver at the sideburns, giving him a distinguished look. Intense brown eyes glinted behind stylish, dark framed glasses, set in a clean-shaven face more often stern than pleased.

Seth was a stickler for his appearance, dressing for business whether he had meetings or not and insisted she do so as well even though most of the walk-ins wore tattered jeans and ripped T-shirts. "This is a serious business," he would say. Mandy figured he was a bit too serious for his own good, borderline obsessive, but it was his store.

"Mandy, glad to see you are well. I'll be in Athens at a conference for a week. I'm entrusting the store to you. Are you up to it?"

"Sure." *Typical Seth.* Yesterday he barely acknowledged her existence after her illness; today he was personable, practically giddy on the Seth emotional scale. He'd probably been planning the trip for weeks. It was always the same. With an air of self-importance, he'd wait until the last minute to let anyone else know about it.

"Good. I'll leave Gary's number here if you run into any problems. If you need to contact me, send an email. Cathy will be in from time to time to run errands. Use her as your backup if you need anyone to cover for you."

Seth's instructions were conveyed with more excitement in his voice than she'd heard in a long time.

"Now, I have a plane to catch." He placed some papers into his silver briefcase and snapped the lid shut. As he slid the briefcase off the counter, something shiny fell and landed on the anti-fatigue mat on the floor. Like a mouse, it skittered out of sight under the front desk. At precisely the same moment a customer came in.

At the jingling of the bell, Seth looked over to the door. "Welcome to Occult Books, Mandy here will be happy to assist you." Briefcase in hand, he turned, grabbed his overcoat and nearly pranced out the back door.

Mandy's gaze lingered on the back door. She huffed in annoyance and shook her head. *Yeah, and thanks for the heads-up.* She was starting to feel underappreciated and ignored. Still, a part of her couldn't help being pleased. It'd be a nice break from his gruff demeanor and random spot-checks. Maybe he'd even loosen up a little, get a little color on those cadaver-like cheeks. Being in the basement as much as he was couldn't be healthy for the body or the mind.

She frowned; a growing unease sent a prickling sensation creeping up the back of her neck. She turned. Her heart skipped a beat as she spotted the handsome young man at the door. His tousled light brown hair had a cowlick at the front. Loose strands curled onto his forehead, like a

friendly sheepdog, framing his kind blue eyes. He smiled.

“Oh, I’m sorry. My mind wandered off for a moment. How may I help you?”

“Hi, Mandy, is it? I’m Ryan. I’m researching Greek mythology and its influence on modern day occultism for my thesis. Would you happen to have any literature along those lines?”

“Sure, we have a section that should interest you. Please follow me.” Mandy wondered if he’d waited for her to turn around out of politeness or amusement. His smile indicated both. Either way, it was a bit embarrassing.

Stopping at an aisle near the middle of the store, Mandy cleared her throat. “Many of these are limited edition and quite expensive. Please handle them carefully.”

Ryan studied the selection. “Is there a place where I could take a look through a few of these? I promise to be very careful.”

Seth didn’t appreciate customers coming in and reading his literature. This is a bookstore not a library, he’d say, but he was heading out of town and really, what harm was there? These weren’t cheap books and Ryan seemed respectable enough; neatly dressed in tan slacks, light jacket, and denim blue, button-up shirt that brought out the color of his eyes. Besides, she was still a little miffed.

“Um, sure.” She waited while he selected three books then led him to the back where a table and four chairs were set up. “If you don’t mind, there’s some cotton gloves in that box to protect the pages.”

“Sure, no problem. I really appreciate this.”

It was a rare treat to have a good looking, polite, college guy in the store, not the typical demographic. Besides, with her recent blackouts, it was kind of nice not being alone. She smiled and headed back to the front desk, leaving him to his research.

Mandy settled in to process the on-line orders when she remembered the shiny object under the desk. She bent over to retrieve it and the door jingled open. She repositioned the floor mat before standing.

Cathy bounced into the store, wearing a form fitting T-shirt and faded blue jeans. She had sparkling blue eyes, beachy brown hair in a short pixie cut and a body that was annoyingly cheerleader. Still, Mandy liked her. She had a bubbly personality with plenty of spunk on her short frame with none of the better-than-you, cheerleader attitude.

“Hey Cath, I didn’t know you were coming in today,” Mandy said.

Cathy made a little extra cash by putting her kid in day care and running a private errand service. Seth brought her in for odd jobs around the store like cleaning, deliveries, kitchen stocking and supply pickup. The dress code didn’t apply to her.

“Yeah I didn’t either until last night. Seth emailed and asked me to come check in on you. He seemed concerned after you left sick the other day. How are you feeling?”

“I had a dizzy spell. I feel good now though.”

“That’s good. You certainly don’t look sick. In fact, you look kind of radiant. Anything you’d like to share?” Cathy raised an eyebrow.

“Um... no.” Mandy gave her a quizzical look and tilted her head. “Chalk it up to getting a good night’s sleep, I guess.”

“Yeah, sure.” Cathy winked. “Anyway, Seth gave me some stuff to do. Lucky me, I get to clean the kitchen and bathroom. I’ll only need a couple of hours, then I’m outta here.”

“Lucky you. By the way, I noticed some mold around the toilet the other day.”

“Gee thanks.” Cathy grimaced and headed toward the kitchen.

A couple of minutes later, Cathy popped back to the front. “Hey, who’s the hottie in the

back?”

“A college student, doing some research. Lucky for him Seth’s out of town.”

“Lucky for you he’s easy on the eyes.”

“Don’t you have some mold to clean or something?”

“Hmph!” Cathy said, returning to her chores.

* * *

A FEW HOURS later, Cathy reemerged looking like she’d put some serious effort into her cleaning duties. Strands of hair stood on end and her cheeks were flushed. She arrived at the front counter the same time as Ryan.

He had his jacket on. “Hey Mandy, would you mind terribly if I left those books out? I’d like to come back after lunch to pick up where I left off.”

“You have a date?” Cathy asked.

“Uh, yeah,” Ryan said.

Cathy frowned.

“With my mom,” he added.

“Oh, how nice,” Cathy cooed.

Mandy interrupted the embarrassing exchange. “Sure Ryan, you’re welcome to come back after lunch. We’re open until five.”

“Thanks Mandy, see you later. Nice meeting you, um...”

“Cathy.” Cathy reached out to shake his hand. When he left the store, she turned to Mandy. “I think he likes you.” She raised her eyebrows a couple of times.

Mandy rolled her eyes. “Real subtle, thanks. Are you done?”

“Hmph! That’s gratitude. I was just checking for you. You two stay out of trouble now.” She wagged her finger and left the store.

Mandy shook her head and huffed. *What a pot stirrer.*

Once they were gone, Mandy took the opportunity to temporarily close up. She flipped the “Back in 15 minutes” sign, locked up and popped out for a quick bite, taking full advantage of her newfound freedom.

* * *

RYAN RETURNED AN hour later.

Mandy looked up. “Have a nice lunch with your mom?”

“Yeah, it’s a gorgeous day out there for lunch on the patio. Probably not many more of those left before snow flies. Thanks again for allowing me to continue.”

“Sure, no problem. I added a couple of books to the table back there that you might find useful.”

“That’s really nice of you, thanks.” He shrugged out of his windbreaker jacket as he strode to the back.

With the Internet orders completed and sent out, Mandy spent the afternoon straightening books on shelves and helping the rare customer that wandered in. Walk-ins were just starting to pick up as the weather cooled and people got back to business after their summer vacations.

Tired of being on her feet, she selected a book and sat on the high stool behind the counter. Seth didn’t mind her using free time to read as long as the work was done and she was discreet. She held the book on her lap, about to flip open the cover when she remembered the shiny object

under the desk.

Peering under the desk on her hands and knees, she spotted the object and brought it out. It was a key, about five inches in length. Heavy for its size, it was a paradox of design: an incongruous blend of old and new. The hilt, designed in antique brass, was long and slender, ending in a relief style pentagram. The shiny, silver blade resembled multiple city skylines. Had the doorbell not jingled at the exact moment the key landed on the rubber mat, Seth would have noticed it drop for sure.

She wasn't really sure why she hadn't said anything when she'd seen it fall. A part of her thought it was maybe just a pen. There was so much going on with Seth's annoying last-minute departure and the customer at the door, it didn't occur to her that it was important. But a part of her knew.

Mandy stood, transfixed, twisting the key in her fingers. *What was down in that forbidden basement that Seth was so protective of?* The more time he spent down there, the more he changed and not for the better. She was more than a little worried.

"That's an interesting key." Ryan approached and leaned on the desk.

She fumbled the key and stuffed it in her pocket like a child caught doing something forbidden. "Geesh, you scared me! Don't ever sneak up on me like that. I could've had a heart attack." She put a hand to her chest to keep her heart from pounding free of her ribcage.

"I'm sorry." He smiled wryly. "I didn't think I was sneaking. You were really focused on that key. Mind if I have a peek at it? It did appear to be rather unusual."

"No! I mean, um..." Still reeling from shock, she realized how juvenile she sounded. *What was the harm? It was just a key.*

"OK." She retrieved it and held it out on the palm of her hand.

He gently lifted it from her hand, lingering a bit longer than perhaps he needed to. The warmth of his hand sent a tingle up her arm.

"Fascinating." Ryan studied the key with great interest. "I can see why you were so rapt. I've never seen anything quite like it. What's it for?"

"It's my boss's. I'd better put it back." Mandy held out her hand.

He relinquished the key to her palm.

"Was there something else I can help you with?" she asked.

"I well, uh, was just wondering if you were free after work. Um, it doesn't have to be tonight, I'm sure you're busy." Ryan cleared his throat and tried again. "I would very much like to take you out for a drink sometime, or coffee, whatever you prefer. To, uh, thank you for your help and kindness."

She felt her cheeks warm. She opened her mouth to speak, but didn't know what to say.

The awkward silence stretched on until he let her off the hook, "I'm sorry for being so forward. I don't mean to pressure you. After all, we just met. I'll get back to my reading. Um, you know where to find me."

Mandy stood behind the front desk, trying to find her voice. *Did he just ask me out? I think he just asked me out! What should I do? Is he my type? Mandy rolled her eyes. Like I even have a type. He seems nice and kinda cute. Scratch that, very cute. Smart too, obviously.* She was tired of her self-imposed isolation. It was time to break out of her shell. Maybe if she really tried, she could enter the world a little, rather than existing on the edge.

She glanced at her hand and realized she was squeezing the life out of the key. Unfurling her fingers, she saw its imprint in her palm. *Stressed a little?* She chided herself, embarrassed she'd frozen up when asked out for a drink.

Steeling herself, she decided to get to know the young man at the back of the store a bit better before agreeing to a date. Placing the key back in her pocket, she walked around the front desk, took a deep breath, and turned toward the back, wondering what she'd say.

Before she took two steps, the doorbell pealed behind her and the door swung open. She jumped; a tingling cold prickle washed over her scalp.

Chapter 3

SETH PLANNED THE connection tight. Wasting time in airports was a pet peeve, but membership in the Ambassador's club eased the pain — priority boarding, expedited passage through customs and security, and shuttles on standby. No, there was no need to dawdle at the airport.

The two hour flight from Chicago O'Hare to JFK International in New York had been right on time, leaving just enough time for a brisk stroll to the next departure gate with a brief stop to pick up a paper and a pack of spearmint gum along the way.

"This is a pre-boarding announcement for Flight 253 to Athens. All first class and business class passengers are invited to the gate. Please have your passports and boarding cards ready."

Seth approached and stood in the short line. The flight to Athens was nine and a half hours. The first class ticket cost a mint but was worth it for the luxury and space it provided, especially on long treks like this one. Besides, he could well afford it.

An attractive flight attendant instantly appeared as he settled into his plush leather sleeping recliner. "May I hang up your coat, sir?" she inquired.

"Yes thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll be right back with champagne and orange juice," she said.

"Hot towel?" asked the next attendant holding a shiny silver tray of rolled up, steaming towels.

"Please."

With gleaming silver tongs she shook out a towel and passed it to him, before moving on to the next first class passenger.

"Ahh," Seth murmured. "The only way to fly."

The trip to Athens had been on his mind for months. This year's Gathering was highly anticipated. Every five years an especially elaborate affair was organized and this was it — apparently the organizers had outdone themselves.

Seth looked forward to connecting with the greater Brotherhood. Chapters from around the world would unite. Bound by their common purpose, their kinship and comradeship was affirming.

At cruising altitude, he pulled out his silver briefcase from under the seat and reviewed some paperwork, endeavoring to squeeze in some business on the side, in between his chock-full itinerary. A visit to his regular brokers was in order and he wanted to track down a couple of new leads. Always on the prowl, Seth had his fingers on the pulse of the mythical, magical and mysterious. His vigilance earned him a strong reputation in the world of Occult literature.

It was more than an occupation, it was a calling. His thirst for answers could never be slaked. The mysteries of the universe haunted him, especially lately. It was as though something had changed, or was changing. He could feel it.

And Athens, the city of the gods, was there any place on earth where he felt as connected and whole? Walking the very ground where gods once walked, breathing the same air, it was... divine.

* * *

MANDY SPUN AROUND to face the door. “Geesh Gary!” Mandy put a hand to her chest, her heart pounding. “You scared me half to death!”

Gary Whittington stepped into the store. Behind him, the sun sat low in the sky as afternoon melted away into evening.

“Hey, Mandy, I didn’t mean to startle ya. Seth asked me to drop in from time to time, make sure the store hasn’t burned down or anything.” Gary chuckled, clearly amused by her reaction.

Gary was Seth’s idiotic younger brother. According to Seth, they’d shared equally in their parents’ estate, but Gary had burned through his share in record time, gambling, drinking and generally making a nuisance of himself. Seth put up with it, but loathed his brother’s irresponsible lifestyle and apparent lack of couth. The two couldn’t be more different.

Gary’s appearance was unkempt, his posture sloppy. His normally coiffed brown hair hung in strings over his forehead. His glassy brown eyes were too close together, like a rat’s, and he smelled of old tavern. Somewhere along the path to intoxication, he’d adopted a drawl, which further accentuated his lack of refinement.

“Well, as you may see Gary, the store clearly has not burned to the ground so I guess I’m managing just fine.” Mandy put her hands on her hips.

“No need to get your knickers in a twist, darlin’. I’m just ribbin’ ya. I know my old bro can be a bit intense.”

Mandy glared at him.

“Now how’d you like if I let you close up early, an’ we go out on the town. Looks like you could use a night out.”

In Seth’s absence, Gary sometimes went all “hot shot”, pretending to have authority over the shop and everything in it. Clearly, Gary had a few to drink and was bolder than ever with his crude advances.

“No thanks, Gary. You know Seth would never approve.”

“And neither would I, you big oaf,” she added under her breath. Not only was Gary old enough to be her father, *ew*, he was far from what anyone would call a ladies man — more like repellent.

“Well, Seth doesn’t need to know, does he?” Gary cooed, crossing a line she didn’t think he’d cross with her dropping Seth’s name. Usually that was enough.

“I said no, Gary.” Mandy’s voice rose. “And I mean it.”

“Whatcha gonna do, put a spell on me? You musta already done that, cause I’m feeling bewitched.” Gary winked, advancing another step.

She took a step back matching every step Gary took forward.

“The lady clearly said NO, so back off!” Ryan appeared behind her.

“Whoa. I didn’t know you already had a man tucked away in here. I guess you ’n me is gonna have to be another time,” he slurred.

“Get out.” Mandy pointed her finger toward the door. “And don’t think Seth isn’t going to hear about this: hassling me, disrupting his business. You’ll get what’s coming to you, Gary.”

Gary gave them both a sneer and retreated like a dog with his tail between his legs.

Ryan followed him to the door, locked it, and flipped the “Open” sign to “Closed”. “What a jerk. I think you should keep the door locked, in case he comes back.”

Mandy stared at the floor, trying to maintain her composure.

“You OK?” Ryan asked, breaking her out of her thoughts.

“Yeah, just a little shaky.” She drew in a long slow breath and exhaled. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

After an awkward silence, Ryan asked. “Do you need a hug?”

She eyed him suspiciously. It was hardly the time. She wasn’t accustomed to outward displays of affection. Hell; she wasn’t accustomed to affection at all, shunning every opportunity to develop a deep relationship. Her parents hadn’t exactly been role models in that department. But he was probably just being kind, trying to comfort her. Maybe hugging a stranger was no big deal in his world.

He opened his arms, inviting her in. “I promise I won’t bite.”

She held her ground, eyebrows knitted together. Little did he know she’d been more worried about what she would’ve done to Gary, rather than the other way around.

He lowered his arms and shrugged. “Sorry. Here I am making you uncomfortable again.”

“No, I...” Mandy paused. Ryan had a way about him that pulled her out of her comfort zone, which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. She was trying to become more normal, whatever *that* was. She looked over at him — determined to make an effort.

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged his arms open again.

She tentatively stepped forward, stopping short of Ryan’s torso. He leaned forward and brought his arms around her back, enveloping her with warmth.

Mandy leaned in, yielding to the gentle pressure of his arms on her back. The magnetism of his body drew her in. She shifted another half step forward. Her arms reciprocated, wrapping around his back, her cheek lowered to his shoulder.

Mandy inhaled a long, deep breath. He smelled good — clean, woodsy and manly. *Mmm, nice. They seemed to fit.*

Ryan was a couple of inches taller than she was with a firm, not overly broad chest, athletic, like a runner, sturdy and lean. She felt warm, safe and something else... Somewhere along the way the hug had changed from friendly to friendlier. She lifted her cheek, released her arms, and stepped back.

Ryan released her and looked at her with smoky, heavy lidded, deep blue eyes.

She felt her cheeks flush and averted her gaze. “Um, thanks.”

“Sure. Anytime.” Ryan cleared his throat and straightened, regaining his cordial manner. “So, would you like to join me in the back for some exciting research on Greek mythology and its impact on modern day occultism?”

“Sure.”

Ryan raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“It so happens I have a keen interest. I’d be happy to assist a fellow occult researcher,” she said, relieved at the distraction.

“Well.” Ryan smiled. “Right this way then.”

* * *

MANDY STARED AT the open page in front of her: the beheading of Medusa, with Perseus carrying the recently severed head over the desert in ancient Greece. From each drop of blood that hit the sand an asp sprang forth. An accompanying color image lay next to the text, an artistic rendition of black asps.

Her mind flashed back to a memory, or a dream. Snakes. Black asps? The resemblance to the picture was uncanny.

Bit by bit she remembered the dream. She’d been surrounded by snakes in a pit; they wanted out. The walls were too high. She mounded the sandy floor to create an incline. They helped.

From its apex, she clung to the rim above. Standing there, she supported a tornado of writhing snakes, scaling her naked flesh to freedom in the silvery light of the moon.

A shiver rippled over her flesh. She broke free of the memory. Ryan had been talking, but she hadn't heard. "Sorry, um, what did you say?"

"Are you OK?" he asked.

"Sure... I just left the mother ship for a bit, but I'm back." She blinked her dry eyes and shook off the vision.

Ryan furrowed his brows. "Your eyes looked almost... luminescent."

"The lighting in here is pretty harsh." Mandy reached into her pocket for a tissue. Her hand bumped into the forgotten key. She laid it on the table in front of them.

Ryan stared at it. "What do you suppose it's for?"

"I have a pretty good idea it unlocks the basement. My boss spends countless hours in his office but I've never been down there; I'm not allowed. He holds the occasional meeting down there too. It's kinda weird actually."

"How so?"

"Well, one night when I was walking in this area, I saw a bunch of men in trenchcoats and dark glasses head up the alley toward the back entrance of the store. They all looked so similar, like they were in disguise."

"You didn't mention it to your boss?"

"Are you kidding? My boss is kind of a Jekyll-and-Hyde. I never know how he'll react to anything. He's obsessively private about the basement, so why would I ask him about clandestine meetings in the night?"

"Ever been curious?"

"Yeah, slightly! I wonder if he's involved in some kind of Wiccan or Satanic cult or something — not a topic you'd casually bring up to your boss, or anyone else for that matter. Of course, it could just be a book club or some kind of special interest group."

"But this," she held up the key, "is driving me mad. Inquiring minds want to know."

"I could go with you," Ryan offered. "If you want company, that is." His lopsided smile was quirky and disarming.

"Earlier today when it fell to the floor, an instinct prevented me from saying anything about it. When I discovered it was a key, I had this feeling, like I needed to go down there. And then you scared me half to death." Mandy narrowed her eyes at Ryan to reprimand him.

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"I'm dying to see what's down there, but also terrified. If we do this, you have to promise that whatever we find, we keep it secret. We tell no one. Are you sure you're in?"

"Hell yes I'm in. I've always been fascinated by the occult. And I promise, whatever we see, I'll keep it a secret. I swear."

Mandy considered his words and looked him in the eye. Bit by bit, he was earning her trust. Besides, she wasn't sure if she had the guts to go alone.

"Alright then, let's go. Keep the gloves on."

Chapter 4

"I'LL FINISH LOCKING up." Mandy moved to the front of the store. "It needs to look as it should this time of night, in case Gary or anyone else comes by."

She pulled the security gate across the plate glass windows and secured it to the reinforced

frame around the door. After repeating the same procedure on the other side, she double-checked the deadbolt. It was secure.

“Let’s take our coats and stuff to the kitchen. We can exit out the back door later.”

Ryan grabbed his coat while Mandy put on her sweater, got her purse and snagged an extra pair of cotton gloves. She led him to the back hallway, flipped off the store lights and closed the wooden door behind her.

They entered the small windowless kitchenette lit by two bare bulbs. A old white fridge buzzed in protest on the same dingy black and white vinyl tile as in the bathroom. The faint smell of Lysol wafted out to greet them.

Mandy placed her purse on the chipped Formica table and pointed to the coat rack in the corner. “You can put your coat over there, unless you want to wear it.”

When Ryan hung his coat, she grinned sheepishly, pulling her gloves on over sweaty palms. She couldn’t believe she was taking a guy down into Seth’s basement.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Ready.”

Back in the hallway, they were faced with three doors. The wood door to the right led back to the store, the steel door on the left exited to the alley. At the far end of the hallway, a plain metal door — the door to the basement — beckoned ominously. Above the doorknob sat a barrel shaped lock, patterned with a relief pentagram, matching the pattern on the key.

“I see how you made the connection, key-to-lock,” Ryan quipped.

“Yeah, not rocket science,” she replied with a smile.

She steadied her gloved hand as she neared the lock with the key. It slid deep into the opening. She twisted it counter-clockwise, holding her breath. The key turned a full hundred and eighty degrees before stopping. A buzzing erupted from the door.

Mandy recoiled, pulling back her hand. “Oh no! We’ve set off an alarm!”

“Try the knob.”

She grasped the knob and twisted. Half expecting a pit viper or booby trap to spring out, she pulled the door open a hair’s breadth and peered in. The buzzing stopped.

“It wasn’t an alarm. The door’s electronically sealed.”

“Oh, thank God!” Mandy exhaled.

She removed the key and put it back in her pocket. With another deep breath and a heave, she fully opened the heavy, spring-loaded door. Light from the hallway crept onto the landing, dimly illuminating the stairs descending into the basement.

An LED light on an electric panel cast a faint reddish glow. Stepping in, she found a switch and flipped it. The area flooded with light, but looked no less ominous.

Holding the door ajar, Ryan inspected the landing. He pointed to a red button on the wall next to the door. “I think we’ll need to push that button to get out.”

Mandy frowned. “It’s pretty heavy security for a basement office. This place is like Fort Knox. We should probably test getting out. I can go wait in the hallway with the key, or do you want to?”

“That’s OK, you go. If I’m not out in thirty seconds, open it up.”

She nodded.

The door made a solid thud as it closed. Barely a second passed before the buzzing started and Ryan pushed it open.

“So far so good.” She stepped back onto the landing. “At least we know we can get out of here.”

“Do you want me to go first?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Mandy clung to the sturdy wood hand railing on the way down. The walls and railing were painted a plain off-white. The stairs, steeper than expected, were covered with a gray rubber carpet runner. As they descended, the walls seemed to close in and become claustrophobic.

On the bottom landing, they exchanged a quick look in front of another substantial metal door. Ryan took a breath, and slowly pulled it open.

“You have GOT to be kidding me.” Mandy gasped, hesitating, before stepping inside.