

Prologue

On Monday morning, school was canceled. Power still hadn't been restored to certain parts of the island, and several streets in the center of town were impassable due to damage done by the storm.

Yeah, right, Zach thought, as he walked out his front door. It was the "storm" that demolished half the town, not the freaky new family that can outrun cars.

He jogged for a few blocks, just to put some distance between himself and his dad. He couldn't bear to stay at home and listen to his father complain about the team missing football practice when all he was really complaining about was spending another day separated from his three star athletes—the amazing Delos boys.

Zach went down to India Street to look at the ruined Atheneum steps along with dozens of other gawkers. Everyone was saying that an electrical wire had shorted out in the middle of the street the night before and that it had gotten so hot it melted the pavement. Zach saw the hole in the ground and he saw the downed power wires, but he knew the wires hadn't caused all that damage.

Just like he knew the exit sign over the door by the girls' locker room hadn't burned a huge patch of grass *fifteen feet* away from it.

Why was everyone so stupid? Were they so blinded by the Delos kids that they were willing to overlook the fact that the marble steps of the library couldn't possibly have been cracked by the frigging wind? Didn't anyone else see there was something more going on? It was so obvious to Zach. He'd tried to warn Helen, but she was too wrapped up in Lucas to see straight. Zach knew she was like them somehow, but he'd tried,

anyway. She was like the whole island was about them, just like his dad was, too.

Blinded.

Zach was walking through town, glowering at all the fools milling around, ooh-ing and aah-ing over the melted asphalt, when Matt saw him and waved him over.

“Check it out,” Matt said when Zach joined him by the edge of the police tape.

“They’re saying it must have been the main line to the island that did that. Pretty incredible, huh?”

“Wow. A hole. How incredible,” Zach said sarcastically.

“You don’t think it’s interesting?” Matt asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I just don’t think a downed power wire did all that.”

“What else could it’ve been?” Matt asked in his usual, analytical way, gesturing to the scene of destruction in front of them.

Zach smiled cautiously. Matt was smarter than most people gave him credit for. He was handsome, he wore all the right clothes, he captained the all-state golf team, and he was from an old and respected family. On top of that, he knew how to play it cool around people who mattered and talk about interesting things, like sports. In fact, Zach always suspected that Matt could have been one of the most popular kids in school if he wanted, but for some reason, Matt had given up his spot on the popular team and chosen to be the Geek King instead. It had to have something to do with Helen.

Zach still hadn’t figured out why Helen chose to hang out with geeks herself, considering she was more beautiful than any movie star or supermodel he had ever seen. Her decision to be the wallflower was another part of her mystery, and her attraction. She

was the kind of woman that men *did* things for. Things like sacrifice their social standing, or steal for, or even fight for . . .

“I wasn’t here,” Zach replied, finally answering Matt’s question. “But it looks to me like somebody did this on purpose. Like they thought they could get away with it.”

“You think someone . . . What? Smashed the library, ripped down a ten-thousand-volt power line with their bare hands, and then melted a four-foot hole in the street . . . as a prank?” Matt asked evenly. He narrowed his eyes and gave Zach a small, closed-lipped smile.

“I don’t know,” Zach finally answered. Then a thought occurred to him. “But maybe you do. You’ve been hanging out with Ariadne a lot lately.”

“Yeah, and?” Matt said calmly. “I don’t see your point.”

Did Matt know? Had the Delos kids told him what was going on while they left Zach out of it? Zach studied Matt for a moment and decided he was probably just sticking up for the Delos family like everyone else did whenever Zach mentioned how odd they were.

“Who says I have to have a point? I’m just saying that I’ve never seen a downed power line do that before. Have you?”

“So the police, Water and Power, all the people that are trained to deal with natural disasters, they’re wrong and you’re right?”

The way Matt put it made Zach feel a little silly. He couldn’t come right out and say that a family of supermen was trying to take over his island. That would sound crazy. Feigning disinterest, Zach looked out across the street to the demolished steps of the Atheneum and shrugged.

That's when he noticed someone, someone special, like Helen—like those frigging Delos kids. Only this guy was different. There was something inhuman about him. When this guy moved he sort of looked like an insect.

“Whatever. I don't really care what happened,” Zach said, acting like he was bored. “Have fun staring down that hole.”

He walked away, not wanting to waste any more time on someone so obviously on the Deloses' side. He wanted to see where that freak was going, and maybe figure out what they were all hiding from him.

He followed the stranger down to the docks, and spotted a beautiful yacht. It was something right out of a storybook. Tall masts, teak deck, fiberglass hull, and red sails. Zach walked toward it with his mouth open. The yacht was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, except for one face. . . . Her face.

Zach felt someone tap him on the back of his shoulder and, as he turned around, the world went dark.

Chapter One

Red blood bloomed from underneath Helen's torn fingernails, pooled in the crescents of her cuticles, and trailed down her knuckles in little rivers. Despite the pain, she gripped the ledge more tightly with her left hand so she could try to slide her right hand forward. There was grit and blood under her fingers, making her slip, and her hands were cramping so badly that the center of her palm was starting to spasm. She reached with her right, but didn't have the strength to pull herself any farther forward.

Helen slid back with a gasp until she was dangling from her rigid fingertips. Six stories beneath her kicking feet was a dead flowerbed, littered with moldy bricks and slates that had slid off the roof of the dilapidated mansion and broken into bits. She didn't have to look down to know that the same would happen to her if she lost her grasp on the crumbling window ledge. She tried again to swing a leg up and catch it on the windowsill, but the more she kicked the less secure her grip became.

A sob escaped from between her bitten lips. She had been hanging from this ledge since she descended into the Underworld that night. It felt to her like hours, maybe days had passed, and her endurance was flagging. Helen cried out in frustration. She had to get off this ledge and go find the Furies. She was the Descender—this was her task. Find the Furies in the Underworld, defeat them somehow, and free the Scions from the Furies' influence. She was supposed to be ending the cycle of vengeance that compelled Scions to kill each other off, but instead here she was, hanging from a ledge.

She didn't want to fall, but she knew that she would get no closer to finding the Furies if she went on clinging here for an eternity. And in the Underworld, every night lasted

forever. She knew she needed to end this night and start the next anew, in some other, hopefully more productive, infinity. If she couldn't pull herself up, that left only one option.

The fingers of Helen's left hand began twitching and her grip gave way. She tried to tell herself not to fight it, that it would be better to fall because at least it would be over. But still she clung to the ledge with every bit of strength remaining in her right hand. Helen was too afraid to let herself go. She bit down on her bloody lip in concentration, but the fingers of her right hand slid across the grit and finally came away from the edge. She couldn't hold on.

When she hit the ground she heard her left leg snap.

Helen slapped a hand over her mouth to keep the scream from erupting across her quiet Nantucket bedroom. She could taste the flinty grit of the Underworld on her cramped fingers. In the pewter-blue light of predawn, she listened intently to the sound of her father getting ready for the day down the hall. Thankfully, he didn't seem to hear anything out of the ordinary, and he went downstairs to start cooking breakfast as if nothing were wrong.

Lying in bed, trembling with the pain of her broken leg and her pulled muscles, Helen waited for her body to heal itself. Tears slid down either side of her face, leaving hot tracks across her chilled skin. It was icy cold in her bedroom.

Helen knew she had to eat to heal properly, but she couldn't go downstairs with a broken leg. She told herself to stay calm and wait. In time, her body would be strong enough to move, then stand, and then walk. She would lie and say she'd overslept. She'd

hide her sore leg from her father as best as she could, smiling and making small talk as they ate. Then, with a little food in her, she would heal the rest of the way.

She would feel better soon, she told herself, crying as quietly as she could. She just had to hold on.

Someone was waving a hand in Helen's face.

"What?" she asked, startled. She turned to look at Matt, who was signaling her back to earth.

"I'm sorry, Lennie, but I still don't get it. What's a Rogue Scion?" he asked, his brow wrinkled with worry.

"I'm a Rogue," she answered a bit too loudly. She'd faded for a second there, and still hadn't caught up to the conversation.

Helen straightened her slumped shoulders and looked around at the rest of the room to find that everyone was staring at her. Everyone except Lucas. He was studying his hands in his lap, his mouth tight.

Helen, Lucas, Ariadne, and Jason were sitting around the Delos kitchen table after school, trying to catch Matt and Claire up on all things demigod. Matt and Claire were Helen's best mortal friends, and they were both incredibly smart, but some things about Helen and her past were too complicated to be taken for granted. After everything they'd gone through, Matt and Claire deserved answers. They'd put their lives on the line to help Helen and the rest of the Delos family seven days ago.

Seven days, Helen thought, counting on her fingers to make sure. All that time in the Underworld makes it feel like seven weeks. Maybe it has been seven weeks for me.

“It sounds confusing, but it’s not,” Ariadne said when she realized that Helen wasn’t going to continue. “There are Four Houses, and all Four Houses owe each other a blood debt from the Trojan War. That’s why the Furies make us want to kill someone from another House. Vengeance.”

“A billion years ago someone from the House of Atreus killed someone from the House of Thebes and *you* are expected to pay that blood debt?” Matt asked dubiously.

“Pretty much, except it was a lot more than just one death. We’re talking about the Trojan War, here. *A lot* of people died, both demigod Scions and full mortals like you,” Ariadne said with an apologetic grimace.

“I *know* a lot of people died, but how does this blood-for-blood thing get you anywhere?” Matt persisted. “It never ends. It’s insane.”

Lucas laughed mirthlessly and lifted his eyes from his lap to meet Matt’s. “You’re right. The Furies drive us mad, Matt,” he said quietly, patiently. “They haunt us until we break.”

Helen remembered that tone. She thought of it as Lucas’s professor voice. She could listen to it all day, except she knew she shouldn’t want to.

“They make us want to kill each other in order to fulfill some twisted sort of justice,” Lucas continued in his measured tone. “They kill one person from our House, we kill one from theirs in retaliation, and on and on it goes for three and half thousand years. And if a Scion kills someone from his own House, he becomes an Outcast.”

“Like Hector,” Matt said tentatively. Even saying the name of their brother and cousin set off the Furies’ curse, angering the Delos clan. “He killed your cousin Creon because Creon killed your aunt Pandora, and now you all feel an irresistible urge to kill

him, even though you still love him. I'm sorry. I'm still not seeing how that's even remotely like justice."

Helen looked around and saw Ariadne, Jason, and Lucas gritting their teeth. Jason was the first to calm himself.

"That's why what Helen is doing is so important," he replied. "She's in the Underworld to defeat the Furies, and stop all this senseless killing."

Matt gave up reluctantly. It was hard for him to accept the Furies, but he could see that no one at the table was any happier about their existence than he was. Claire still seemed like she needed to clarify a few things.

"Okay. That's an Outcast. But *Rogues* like Lennie are Scions who have parents from two different Houses, but only one House can *claim* them, right? So they still owe a blood debt to the other House," Claire spoke carefully, like she knew what she was saying was difficult for Helen to hear but she had to say it, anyway. "You were claimed by your mother, Daphne. Or by her House, rather."

"The House of Atreus," Helen said dully, remembering how her long-lost mother had returned to ruin her life nine days ago with some very unwelcome news.

"But your real father—not Jerry—even though, Lennie, I have to say, Jerry will always be your real dad to me," Claire amended passionately before getting back on track. "Your biological father, who you never knew and who died before you were born . . ."

"Was from the House of Thebes." For a moment Helen met Lucas's eyes, then quickly looked away. "Ajax Delos."

"Our uncle," Jason said, including Ariadne and Lucas in his glance.

“Right,” Claire said uncomfortably. She looked between Helen and Lucas who refused to meet her eyes. “And since you were both claimed by enemy Houses you two wanted each other dead at first. Until you . . .” she trailed off.

“Before Helen and I paid our blood debts to each other’s Houses by nearly dying for each other,” Lucas finished in a leaden tone, daring anyone to comment on the bond he and Helen shared.

Helen wanted to dig a hole straight down through the tiled floor of the Delos kitchen and disappear. She could feel the weight of everyone’s unasked questions.

They were all wondering: How far did Helen and Lucas go with each other before they found out they were first cousins? Was it just a little kissing, or did it get “scarred for life” serious?

And: Do they still *want to* with each other, even though they know they’re cousins?

And: I wonder if they still do it sometimes. It wouldn’t be hard for them because they can both fly. Maybe they sneak off every night and . . .

“Helen? We need to get back to work,” Cassandra said with bossy edge in her voice. She stood in the kitchen doorway with a fist planted on her slim, boyish hip.

As Helen stood up from the table, Lucas caught her eyes and gave her the tiniest of smiles, encouraging her. Smiling back ever so slightly, Helen followed Cassandra down to the Delos library feeling calmer, more self-assured. Cassandra shut the door, and the two girls continued their search for some bit of knowledge that might help Helen in her quest.

Helen turned the corner and saw that the way was blocked by a rainbow of rust. A skyscraper had been bent across the street as if a giant hand had pressed it down like a stalk of corn.

Helen wiped the itchy sweat off her brow and tried to find the safest route over the cracked concrete and twisted iron. It would be hard to climb over, but most of the buildings in this abandoned city were crumbling into dust as the desert around it encroached. There was no point going another way. One obstruction or another blocked all the streets, and besides, Helen didn't know which way she was supposed to go in the first place. The only thing she could do was to keep moving forward.

Scrambling over a jagged lattice, surrounded by the tangy smell of decaying metal, Helen heard a deep, mournful groaning. A bolt shook loose from its joint, and a girder above her broke free in a shower of rust and sand. Instinctively, Helen held her hands up and tried to deflect it, but down here in the Underworld, her arms didn't have Scion strength. She slammed painfully on her back, stretched out over the crisscrossing bars beneath her. The heavy girder lay across her stomach, pinning her down across her middle.

Helen tried to wiggle out from underneath it, but she couldn't move her legs without excruciating pain radiating out from her hips. Something was certainly broken—her hip, her back, maybe both.

Helen squinted and tried to shade her eyes with a hand, swallowing around her thirst. She was exposed, trapped, like a turtle turned over onto its back. The blank sky held no cloud to provide even a moment of relief.

Just blinding light and relentless heat . . .

Helen wandered out of Miss Bee's social studies class, stifling a yawn. Her head felt stuffed up and hot, like a Thanksgiving turkey on slow roast. It was nearly the end of the school day, but that was no comfort. Helen looked down at her feet and thought about what awaited her. Every night she descended into the Underworld and encountered yet another horrendous landscape. She had no idea why she'd end up in some places a few times, and other places only once, but she thought it had something to do with her mood. The worse the mood she was in when she went to sleep, the worse her experience in the Underworld.

Still focused on her shuffling feet, Helen felt warm fingers brush against hers in the hustle of the hallway. Glancing up, she saw Lucas's jewel-blue eyes seeking hers. She pulled in a breath, a quick inward sigh of surprise, and locked eyes with him.

Lucas's gaze was soft and playful, and the corners of his mouth tilted up in a secret smile. Still moving in opposite directions, they turned their heads to maintain eye contact as they walked on, their identical smiles growing with each passing moment. With a teasing flick of her hair, Helen abruptly faced forward and ended the stare, a grin plastered on her face.

One look from Lucas and she felt stronger. Alive again. She could hear him chuckling to himself as he walked on, almost smug, like he knew exactly how much he affected her. She chuckled, too, shaking her head at herself. Then she saw Jason.

Walking a few paces behind Lucas with Claire at his side, Jason had watched the whole exchange. His mouth was a worried line, and his eyes were sad. He shook his head at Helen in disapproval and she looked down, blushing furiously.

They were cousins, Helen knew that. Flirting was wrong. But it made her feel *better* when nothing else could. Was she supposed to go through all of this without even the comfort of Lucas's smile? Helen went to her last class and sat behind her desk, fighting back tears as she unpacked her notebook.

Long splinters enveloped Helen, forcing her to remain completely still or risk impaling herself on one of them. She was trapped inside the trunk of a tree that sat alone in the middle of a dry, dead scrubland. If she breathed too deeply, the long splinters pricked her. Her arms were twisted behind her and her legs folded up uncomfortably underneath her, tilting her torso forward. One long splinter was lined up directly with her right eye. If her head moved forward while she struggled to break free—if she even let it sag a little with fatigue—her eye would be stabbed out.

“What do you expect me to do?” she whimpered to no one. Helen knew she was completely alone.

“What am I supposed to do?” she suddenly screamed, her chest and back stinging with a dozen little puncture wounds.

Screaming didn't help, but getting angry did. It helped steel her enough to accept the inevitable. She'd put herself here, even if it was unintentional, and she knew how to get herself out. Pain usually triggered her release from the Underworld. As long as she didn't die, Helen was pretty sure she would leave the Underworld and wake up in her bed. She'd be injured and in pain, but at least she'd be out.

She stared at the long splinter in front of her eye, knowing what the situation demanded she do, but not sure she was capable of doing it. As the anger fueling her

seeped away, desperate tears welled up and spilled down her cheeks. She heard her own constricted, choked-off sobs pressing close to her in the claustrophobic prison of the tree trunk. Minutes passed, and Helen's arms and legs began to cry out, twisted as they were into unnatural shapes.

Time would not change the situation. Tears would not change the situation. She had one choice, and she knew she could either make it now or hours of suffering from now. Helen was a Scion, and as such a target for the Fates. She'd never had any choice but one. With that thought, the anger returned.

In one sure movement, she jerked her head forward.

Lucas couldn't take his eyes off Helen. Even from across the kitchen he could see that the translucent skin across her high cheekbones was so pale it was stained blue by the lacy veins running below the surface. He could have sworn that when she first came over to study with Cassandra at the Delos house that morning, her forearms were covered in fading bruises.

She had a spooked, hunted look to her now. She looked more frightened than she had a few weeks ago when they all thought that Tantalus and the fanatical Hundred Cousins were after her. Cassandra had recently foreseen that the Hundred were focusing nearly all their energy into finding Hector and Daphne, and that Helen had nothing to fear. But if it wasn't the Hundred frightening Helen, then it had to be something in the Underworld.

Lucas wondered if she was being chased, maybe even tortured down there.

The thought tore him up inside, like there was a wild animal climbing up the inside of his rib cage, gnawing on his bones as it went. He had to grit his teeth together to stop the

growl that was trying to grind out of him. He was so *angry* all the time now, and his anger worried him. But worse than the anger was how worried he was about Helen.

Watching her jump at the slightest sound or tense into herself with wide, staring eyes, pushed him almost to the point of panic. Lucas felt a physical need to protect Helen. It was like a whole body tic that made him want to throw himself between her and harm. But he couldn't help her with this. He couldn't get into the Underworld without dying.

Lucas was still working on that problem. There weren't that many individuals who could physically go down into the Underworld like Helen could and survive—just a handful in the entire history of Greek mythology. But he wasn't going to stop trying. Lucas had always been good at solving problems—good at solving “unsolvable” puzzles in particular. Which was probably why seeing Helen like this hurt him in such a nagging, hateful way.

He couldn't solve this for her. She was on her own down there, and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Son. Why don't you sit next to me?” Castor suggested, startling Lucas out of his thoughts. His father motioned to the chair on his right as they all sat down at the table for Sunday supper.

“That's Cassandra's seat,” Lucas replied with a sharp shake of his head, but really what Lucas was thinking was that it was *Hector's*. Lucas couldn't bear to take a seat that never should have been vacated. Instead, he took his place on his father's left at the end of the community bench.

“Yeah, Dad,” Cassandra joked as she took the seat that she had automatically inherited when Hector became an Outcast for killing Tantalus’s only son, Creon. “Are you trying to demote me or something?”

“Wouldn’t you know it if I was? What kind of an oracle are you, anyway?” Castor teased, poking Cassandra in the belly until she shrieked.

Lucas could see that his father was seizing this rare opportunity to play with Cassandra, because those opportunities were nearly over. As the Oracle, Lucas’s little sister was pulling away from her family, from all of humanity. Soon, she would drift away from all people and become the cold instrument of the Fates, no matter how much she was loved by those closest to her.

Castor usually took any chance he could to joke around with his daughter, but Lucas could tell that this time he was only partly focused on taunting Cassandra. His mind was elsewhere. For some reason Lucas couldn’t immediately see, Castor really didn’t want Lucas to sit in his usual seat.

He understood a moment later when Helen sat down next to him, in the place that had, through time and use, become *her* spot at the table. As she stepped over the bench and slid down next to him, Lucas watched his father’s brow furrow.

Lucas shook off his father’s disapproval and let himself enjoy the feel of Helen next to him. Even though she was obviously hurt by whatever was happening to her in the Underworld, her presence filled Lucas with strength. The shape of her, the softness of her arm as it brushed against his while they passed plates around the table, the clear, bright tone of her voice as she joined in the conversation—everything about Helen reached inside of him and soothed the wild animal in his rib cage.

He wished he could do the same for her. Throughout dinner, Lucas wondered what was happening to Helen in the Underworld, but he knew he would have to wait until they were alone to ask. She would lie to the family, but she couldn't lie to him.

"Hey," he called out later, stopping Helen in the dim corridor between the powder room and his father's study. She tensed momentarily and then turned toward him, her features softening.

"Hey," she breathed, moving closer to him.

"Bad night?"

She nodded, angling herself even closer until he could smell the almond-scented soap she had just used to wash her hands. Lucas knew she probably wasn't aware of how they always moved toward each other, but he was.

"Tell me about it."

"It's just hard," she said shrugging, trying to dodge his questions.

"Describe it."

"There was this boulder." She stopped speaking, rubbed her wrists, and shook her head with a pinched expression. "I can't. I don't want to think about it anymore than I have to. I'm sorry, Lucas. I don't mean to make you angry," she said, responding to his huff of frustration.

He stared at her for a moment, wondering how she could be so wrong about how she made him feel. He tried to stay calm while he asked her the next question, but still, it came out rougher than he would have liked.

"Is someone hurting you down there?"

“There’s no one down there but me,” she replied. By the way she said it, Lucas knew that her solitude was even worse somehow than torture.

“You’ve been injured.” He reached out across the few feet separating them and briefly ran a finger across her wrist, tracing the shape of the fading bruises he had seen there.

Her face was closed. “I don’t have my powers in the Underworld. But I heal when I wake up.”

“Talk to me,” he coaxed. “You know you can tell me anything.”

“I know I can, but if I do, I’ll pay for it later,” she groaned, but with a touch of humor. Lucas pressed on, sensing her lightening mood, and wanting so much to see her smile once more.

“What? Just tell me!” he said with a grin. “How painful could it be to talk to me about it?”

Her laughter died and she looked up at him, her mouth parting slightly, just enough so Lucas could see the glassy inner rim of her lower lip. He remembered the feel of it when he kissed her and tensed—stopping himself before he dipped his head down to feel it again.

“Excruciating,” she whispered.

“Helen! How long does it take to use the powder—” Cassandra cut off abruptly when she saw Lucas’s back moving away down the hall, and Helen blushing furiously as she darted toward the library.

Helen hurried through the room with the peeling petunia wallpaper, avoiding the rotted floorboards by the soggy, mold-infested couch. It seemed to glare at her as she ran past. She'd already come this way a dozen times, maybe more. Instead of taking the door on the right or the door on the left, both of which she knew led nowhere, she decided she had nothing to lose and went into the closet.

A mossy wool overcoat loomed in the corner. There was dandruff on the collar and it smelled like a sick old man. It crowded her, like it was trying to shoo her out of its lair. Helen ignored the cantankerous coat and searched until she found another door, hidden in one of the side panels of the closet. The opening was only tall enough to permit a small child to pass through. She knelt down, suddenly crept out by the wool coat that seemed to watch her bend over, like it was trying to peek down her shirt, and hurried through the dollhouse-sized door.

The next room was a dusty boudoir, caked with centuries of heavy perfume, yellow stains, and disappointment. But at least there was a window. Helen hurried to it, hoping to jump out and free herself from this terrible trap. She pushed the lurid peach taffeta curtains aside with something approaching hope.

The window was bricked up. She hit the bricks with her fists, just jabs at first, but with increasing anger until her knuckles were raw. Everything was rotted and crumbling in this labyrinth of rooms—everything except the exits. Those were as solid as Fort Knox.

Helen had been trapped for what felt to her like days. She'd become so desperate she'd even closed her eyes and tried to fall asleep, hoping to wake up in her bed. It didn't work. Helen still hadn't figured out how to control her entrances and exits from the Underworld without half killing herself. She was frightened that she was actually going

to die this time, and didn't want to think about what she would have to do to herself to get out.

White spots crowded her vision, and several times now she had almost passed out with thirst and fatigue. She hadn't had any water in so long that even the sluggish goo that spattered reluctantly out of the taps in this hell-house was starting to look appealing.

The strange thing was that Helen was more frightened in this part of the Underworld than she had ever been, even though she wasn't in any imminent danger. She wasn't hanging from a ledge, or trapped in the trunk of a tree, or chained by the wrists to a boulder that was dragging her down a hill and toward a cliff.

She was just in a house, an endless house with no exits.

These visits to the parts of the Underworld where she was in no immediate danger lasted the longest and ended up being the hardest in the long run. Thirst, hunger, and the crushing loneliness she suffered—these were the worst kind of punishment. Hell didn't need lakes of fire to torment. Time and solitude were enough.

Helen sat down under the bricked-up window, thinking about having to spend the rest of her life in a House where she wasn't welcome.

It started pouring rain right in the middle of football practice, and then everything went sideways. All the guys started throwing each other around, sliding in the mud, really tearing up the turf. Coach Brant finally gave up and sent everyone home. Lucas watched Coach as they all packed it in, and could tell he wasn't really into the practice to begin with. His son, Zach, had quit the team the day before. From what everyone said, Coach

hadn't taken it well, and Lucas wondered how bad the fight had gotten. Zach hadn't been in school that day.

Lucas sympathized with Zach. He knew what it was like to have a father who was disappointed in you.

"Luke! Let's go! I'm freezing," Jason hollered. He was already stripping off his gear on his way to the locker room, and Lucas ran to catch up.

They rushed to get home, both of them hungry and wet, and walked right into the kitchen. Helen and Claire were in there with Lucas's mom. The girls' track uniforms were soaked through, and they hovered expectantly by Noel with excited looks on their faces while they dabbed at themselves with towels. At first, all Lucas could see was Helen. Her hair was tangled and her long, bare legs glistened with rain.

Then he heard a whispering in his ear, and a flare of hate flashed through him. His mother was on the phone. The voice on the other end was Hector's.

"No, Lucas. Don't," Helen said in a quavering voice. "Noel, hang up!"

Lucas and Jason rushed toward the source of the Outcast's voice, compelled by the Furies. Helen stepped in front of Noel. All she did was hold out her hands in a "stop" gesture, and the cousins ran into her hands like they were running into a solid wall. They were thrown back onto the floor, gasping for air. Helen didn't budge an inch.

"I'm so sorry!" Helen said, crouching over them with an anxious look on her face. "But I couldn't let you tackle Noel."

"Don't apologize," Lucas groaned, rubbing his chest. He had no idea Helen was *that* strong, but he couldn't have been happier that she was. His mother had a shocked look on her face, but both she and Claire were fine. That was all that mattered.

“Uuuuhh,” Jason added, agreeing with Lucas. Claire crouched down next to him and patted him sympathetically while he rolled around, trying to get his breath back.

“I wasn’t expecting you boys home so soon,” Noel stammered. “Hector usually calls when he knows you’ll be at practice. . . .”

“It’s not your fault, Mom,” Lucas said, cutting her off. He hauled Jason to his feet. “You okay, bro?”

“No,” Jason replied honestly. He took a few more breaths and finally stood all the way up, the blow to his chest no longer the thing hurting him. “I *hate* this.”

The cousins shared a pained look. They both missed Hector and couldn’t stand what the Furies did to them. Jason suddenly turned and walked out the door, out into the rain.

“Jason, wait,” Claire called, hurrying to follow him.

“I didn’t think you’d be home this early,” Noel repeated, more to herself than anyone else, like she couldn’t let it go. Lucas went to his mother and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be fine,” he told her in a choked voice.

He had to get out of there. Still wrestling with the knot in his throat, he went upstairs to change. Halfway down the hall to his room and half out of his clothes, he heard Helen’s voice behind him.

“I used to think you were a good liar,” she said softly. “But not even I bought it when you said ‘it’ll be fine.’”

Lucas dropped his sodden shirt on the floor and turned back to Helen, too wrung out to resist. He pulled her to him and let his face rest against her neck. She fitted herself

against him, taking his weight as his big shoulders curved over and around her, and held him until he was calm enough to speak.

“A part of me wants to go find him. Hunt him down,” he confided, not able to tell this to anyone but Helen. “Every night I dream about how I tried to kill him with my bare hands on the steps of the library. I can see myself hitting him over and over, and I wake up thinking maybe this time I *have* killed him. And I feel relieved. . . .”

“Shh-shh.” Helen ran her hand across his wet hair, smoothing it down and gripping his neck, his shoulders, the bunched muscles of his back—tucking him closer to her. “I’ll fix it,” she vowed. “I swear to you, Lucas, I’ll find the Furies and stop them.”

Lucas pulled back so he could look at Helen, shaking his head. “No, I didn’t mean to put more pressure on you. It kills me that this is all on you.”

“I know.”

That was it. No blame, no “pity me.” Just acceptance. Lucas stared at her, running his fingers over her perfect face.

He loved her eyes. They were always changing, and Lucas liked to catalogue all their different colors in his mind. When she laughed, her eyes were pale amber, like honey sitting in a glass jar on a sunny window. When he kissed her, they darkened until they were the rich color of mahogany leather, but with strips of red and gold thread shot through. Right now they were turning dark—inviting him to lower his lips to hers.

“Lucas!” his father barked. Helen and Lucas sprang apart and turned to see Castor at the top of the stairs, his face white and his body stiff. “Put a shirt on and come to my study. Helen, go home.”

“Dad, she didn’t . . .”

“Now!” Castor yelled. Lucas couldn’t remember ever seeing his father this angry.

Helen fled. She squeezed past Castor with her head bowed and ran out of the house before Noel could ask what had happened.

“Sit.”

“It was my fault. She was worried about me,” Lucas began, his stance defiant.

“I don’t care,” Castor said, his eyes burning into Lucas’s. “I don’t care how innocently it started. It ended with you half naked, your arms around her, and the two of you just steps away from your bed.”

“I wasn’t going to—” Lucas couldn’t even finish that lie. He *was* going to kiss her, and he knew if he kissed her he would have kept going until either Helen or a cataclysm stopped him. The truth was, it didn’t really bother Lucas anymore that some uncle he never met was Helen’s father. He loved her, and that wasn’t going to change no matter how wrong everyone said it was.

“Let me explain something to you.”

“We’re cousins. I know,” Lucas interrupted. “Don’t you think I realize that she’s as closely related to me as Ariadne? It doesn’t *feel* like that.”

“Don’t lie to yourself,” Castor said darkly. “Scions have been plagued with incest since Oedipus. And there have been others in this House who have fallen in love with their first cousins, like you and Helen did.”

“What happened to them?” Lucas asked cautiously. He could already tell that he wasn’t going to like his father’s answer.

“The outcome is always the same.” Castor stared intensely at Lucas. “Just like Oedipus’s daughter, Electra, the children born to related Scions always suffer our greatest curse. Insanity.”

Lucas sat down while his mind raced, trying to find a way around this impasse. “We—we don’t have to have children.”

There was no warning, no notice that Lucas had pushed too far. Without a sound, his father rushed him like a bull. Lucas jumped back up to his feet, but didn’t know what to do next. He was twice as strong as his father, but his hands stayed passively at his sides while Castor grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed him back until he was pinned against the wall. Castor glared into his son’s eyes, and for a moment Lucas believed his father hated him.

“How can you be so selfish?” Castor growled, his voice seething with disgust. “There aren’t enough Scions *left* for either one of you to just decide you don’t want to have kids. We’re talking about our *species*, Lucas!” As if to drive home his point, Castor slammed Lucas into the wall so hard it began to crumble behind him. “The Four Houses must survive and stay separate to maintain the Truce and keep the gods imprisoned on Olympus, or every mortal on this planet will suffer!”

“I know that!” Lucas yelled. Plaster from the shattered wall rained down on them, filling the air with dust as Lucas struggled under his father’s grip. “But there are other Scions to do that! What does it matter if Helen and I don’t have children?”

“Because Helen and her mother are the last of their line! Helen must produce an Heir to preserve the House of Atreus and keep the Houses separate—not just for this generation—but for the ones yet to come!”

Castor was shouting. He seemed blind to the white dust and breaking masonry. It was as if everything his father had ever believed was tumbling down on top of Lucas's head, smothering him.

"The Truce has lasted for thousands of years, and it must last for thousands more or the Olympians will turn the mortals and the Scions into playthings again—starting wars and raping women and casting horrendous curses as it amuses them," Castor continued relentlessly. "You think a few hundred of us are enough to preserve our race and keep the Truce, but that's not enough to outlast the gods. We must endure, and to do that every single one of us must procreate."

"What do you want from us?" Lucas suddenly shouted back, shoving his father off of him and rising up out of the bowed and breaking wall. "I'll do what I have to for my House, and so will she. We'll have kids with other people if that's what it takes— we'll find a way to deal with it! But don't ask me to stay away from Helen because I can't. We can handle with anything but that."

They glared at each other, both of them panting with emotion and covered in white dust grown pasty with sweat.

"It's so easy for you to decide what Helen can and can't handle, is it? Have you looked at her lately?" Castor asked harshly, releasing his son with a disgusted look on his face. "She's suffering, Lucas."

"I know that! Don't you think I'd do *anything* to help her?"

"Anything? Then stay away from her."

It was like all the anger had rushed out of Castor in a flash. Instead of yelling, he was now pleading.

“Have you considered that what she’s trying to do in the Underworld could not only bring peace between the Houses, but also bring Hector back to this family? We’ve lost so much. Ajax, Aileen, Pandora.” Castor’s voice broke when he said his little sister’s name. Her death was still too fresh for both of them. “Helen is facing something none of us can imagine, and she needs every ounce of strength she has to make it through. For all our sakes.”

“But I can help her,” Lucas pleaded back, needing his father on his side. “I can’t follow her down into the Underworld, but I can listen to her and support her.”

“You think you’re helping, but you’re killing her,” Castor said shaking his head sadly. “You may have made peace with how you feel for her, but she can’t cope with her feelings for you. You’re her cousin, and the guilt is tearing her apart. Why are you the only one who can’t see that? There are a thousand reasons you need to stay away, but if none of them matter to you, at the very least stay away from Helen because it’s the best thing for *her*.”

Lucas wanted to argue, but he couldn’t. He remembered how Helen had told him that she would “pay for it later” if she talked with him about the Underworld. His father was right. The closer the two of them got, the more he hurt Helen. Of all the arguments his father had made, this one cut Lucas the deepest. He shuffled to the couch and sat down again so his father wouldn’t see his legs shake.

“What should I do?” Lucas was completely lost. “It’s like water running downhill. She just flows toward me. And I can’t push her away.”

“Then build a dam.” Castor sighed and sat down across from Lucas, rubbing plaster from his face with his hands. He looked smaller. Like he had just lost the fight, even

though he'd won, taking everything from Lucas. "You have to be the one to stop this. No confiding in each other, no flirting at school, and no quiet talks in dark hallways. You have to make her hate you, son."

Helen and Cassandra were working in the library, trying to find something—anything—that could help Helen in the Underworld. It was a frustrating afternoon. The more the two girls read, the more they were convinced that half the stuff about Hades was written by medieval scribes on serious drugs.

"Ever see any talking-skeletal-death-horses in Hades?" Cassandra asked skeptically.

"Nope. No talking skeletons. Horses included," Helen responded, rubbing her eyes.

"I think we can put this one on the 'he was definitely high' pile." Cassandra put the scroll down and stared at Helen for a few moments. "How are you feeling?"

Helen shrugged and shook her head, unwilling to talk about it. Since Castor had caught her and Lucas outside his bedroom, she'd been tiptoeing around the Delos house when she had to come over to study, and stuck inside the hell-house each night.

Usually in the Underworld, Helen could count on at least one or two nights a week where she was walking down an endless beach that never led to an ocean. The endless beach was annoying because she knew she wasn't getting anywhere, but compared to being trapped inside the hell-house it was like a holiday. She didn't know how much longer she could take it, and she couldn't talk about it with anyone. How could she possibly explain the perverted wool coat and lurid peach curtains without sounding ridiculous?

“I think I should go home and eat something,” Helen said, trying not to think about the night that awaited her.

“But it’s Sunday. You’re eating here, right?”

“Um. I don’t think your dad wants me hanging out here anymore.” *I don’t think Lucas does, either*, she thought. He hadn’t looked at her since the day Castor had caught them with their arms around each other, even though Helen had tried several times to smile at him in the hallway at school. He’d just walked by like she wasn’t there.

“That’s nonsense,” Cassandra answered firmly. “You are a part of this family. And if you don’t come to dinner, my mom will be offended.”

She walked around the table and took Helen’s hand, leading her out of the study. Helen was so surprised by Cassandra’s uncharacteristically warm gesture that she followed quietly.

It was later than the girls had thought, and dinner was starting. Jason, Ariadne, Pallas, Noel, Castor, and Lucas were already seated. Cassandra took her customary place next to her father, and the only spot left was on the bench, between Ariadne and Lucas.

As Helen stepped over the bench, she accidentally jostled Lucas, running her arm down the length of his as she sat down.

Lucas stiffened and tried to pull away from her.

“Sorry,” Helen stammered, trying to shrug her arm away from his, but there was no room to move over on the crowded bench. She felt him bristle, and she reached under the table and squeezed his hand as if to ask “what’s wrong?”

He snatched his hand out of hers. The look he gave her was so full of hatred it froze the blood in her veins. The room went silent and the chitchat died. All eyes turned to Helen and Lucas.

Without warning, Lucas threw the bench back, knocking Helen, Ariadne, and Jason onto the floor. Lucas stood over Helen, glaring down on her. His face was contorted with rage.

Even when they were possessed by the Furies, and Helen and Lucas had fought bitterly, she had never been afraid him. But now his eyes looked black and strange—like he wasn't even *in there* anymore. Helen knew it wasn't just a trick of the light. A shadow had blossomed inside of Lucas and snuffed out the light of his bright blue eyes.

“We don't hold hands. You don't talk to me. You don't even LOOK at me, do you understand?” he continued mercilessly. His voice rose from a grating whisper to a hoarse shout as Helen scrambled away from him in shock.

“Lucas, enough!” Noel's horrified voice was tinged with dismay. She didn't recognize her son any more than Helen did.

“We're not friends,” Lucas growled, ignoring his mother and continuing to move threateningly toward Helen. She pushed her shaking body away from him with her heels, her sneakers making pathetic squeaking noises as she scuffed them against the tile, looking for purchase.

“Luke, what the hell?” Jason shouted, but Lucas ignored him, too.

“We don't hang out, or joke around, or share things with each other anymore. And if you EVER think you have the RIGHT to sit next to me again . . .”

Lucas reached down to grab Helen, but his father gripped his upper arms from behind—stopping him from hurting her. Then Helen saw Lucas do something she'd never once dreamed he'd do.

He spun around and hit his father. The blow was so heavy it sent Castor flying halfway across the kitchen and into the cabinet of glasses and mugs over the sink.

Noel screamed, covering her face as shards of broken dishes went flying in every direction. She was the only full mortal in a room of fighting Scions, and in serious danger of getting hurt.

Ariadne ran to Noel and used her body to protect her, while Jason and Pallas jumped on Lucas and tried to wrestle him down.

Knowing her presence would only enrage Lucas more, Helen scrambled up onto her knees, slipping across a bit of broken crockery as she stumbled to the door, and jumped into the sky.

As she flew home, she tried to listen for the sound of her own body in the high, thin air. Bodies are noisy. Take them into soundless spaces like the Underworld or the atmosphere and you can hear all kind of huffs and thumps and gurgles. But Helen's body was as silent as a grave. She couldn't even hear her own heart beating. After what she had just been through, it should have been thundering away, but all she felt was an intolerable pressure, like a giant knee was grinding into her chest.

Perhaps it wasn't beating because it had broken clean through and stopped.

“Is this what you wanted?” Lucas shouted at his father while he fought to break free. “Do you think she hates me now?”

“Just let him go!” Castor yelled to Pallas and Jason.

They paused, but didn’t let go right away. First they looked over at Castor, to make sure *he* was sure. Castor stood and nodded his head once before passing judgment.

“Get out, Lucas. Get out of this house and don’t come back until you can control your strength around your mother.”

Lucas went still. His head turned in time to see Ariadne brush a drop of blood from Noel’s face, her glowing hands healing the cut instantly.

An old memory, formed of images before he had words, came back to Lucas in a rush. Even as a toddler he’d been stronger than his mother, and once during a tantrum he’d pushed against her face while she was tenderly trying to kiss him quiet. He’d made her lip bleed.

Lucas remembered the hurt sound she’d made—a sound that still filled him with shame. He’d regretted that moment his entire life and since then he hadn’t once touched his mother any harder than he would touch a rose petal. But now she was bleeding again. Because of him.

Lucas pulled his arms away from his uncle and cousin, threw the back door open, and hurled himself into the dark night sky. He didn’t care where the winds took him.

Chapter Two

Helen took tiny, gasping breaths. This was the fifth night in a row she'd descended into this same spot in the Underworld, and she knew that the less she moved, the slower she sank into the quicksand. Even breathing too deeply edged her farther into the pit.

She was prolonging the torture, but she just couldn't bear the thought of drowning in filth again. Quicksand isn't clean. It's stuffed with the dead and decaying bodies of all its former victims. Helen could feel the moldering remains of all kinds of creatures bumping up against her as she was slowly dragged down. Last night her hand had skimmed across a face—a human face—somewhere under the tainted sand.

A pocket of gas bubbled to the surface, sending up a plume of stench. Helen vomited, unable to control herself. When she eventually drowned, the putrid dirt would rush into her nose, her eyes, and fill her mouth. Even though Helen was only up to her waist, she knew it was coming. She began to cry. She couldn't take it anymore.

“What else can I do?” she screamed, and sank lower.

She knew thrashing didn't work, but maybe this one time she would reach the dry reeds on the side of the pool and be able to grab them before the heavy muck swallowed her. She waded forward, but for every inch of progress she paid with an inch of depth. When she was up to her chest she had to stop moving. The weight of the quicksand was pressing the air out her, like a great weight settling on her chest—like a giant knee was pressing down on her.

“I get it, okay?” she cried. “I put myself here by being upset when I fall asleep. But how am I supposed to change the way I feel?”

The quicksand was up to her neck. Helen tilted her head back and thrust up her chin, trying to will herself higher.

“I can’t do this alone anymore,” she said to the blank sky. “I need someone to help me.”

“Helen!” a deep, unfamiliar voice called out.

It was the first time Helen had heard another voice in the Underworld, and at first she assumed she was hallucinating. Her face was still tilted up, and she couldn’t move it to look or she’d be sucked under.

“Reach toward me, if you can,” the young man said in a strained voice, like he was struggling at the edge of the pit to get to her. “Come on, *try*, damn it! Give me your hand!”

At that moment her ears filled, and she could no longer hear what he shouted at her. All she could see was a flash of gold—a bright glimmer that pierced through the dull, defeated light of the Underworld like the lifesaving beacon of a lighthouse. She caught the barest glimpse of an angular chin and a full, sculpted mouth at the very edge of her vision. Then, under the surface of the quicksand, Helen felt a warm, strong hand take hers and pull.

Helen woke up in her bed and pitched forward, frantically scraping the muck out of her ears. Her body was still racing with adrenaline, but she forced herself to stay very still and listen.

She heard Jerry make a cawing sound downstairs in the kitchen—a high-pitched “WHOOOP-WHOOOP” siren noise that was more suited to the middle of a crowded dance floor than it was Helen’s snug Nantucket home. Jerry was *singing*. Well, sort of.

A burst of relieved laughter jumped out of Helen. She was safe at home, and this time she hadn’t broken anything, stabbed herself, or drowned in a festering bog. Someone had saved her.

Or was it all in her head?

She thought about the deep voice and the warm hand that had pulled her from the pit. Healers like Jason and Ariadne could go down around the edge of the Underworld in spirit, but no one except Helen could physically get down into the Underworld with his or her body still attached to the soul. It was supposed to be impossible. And Helen had been in Tartarus—the lowest of the low. Even farther down in the Underworld than Hades itself. Not even the strongest Healers had ever come close to it. Was she so desperate for help that she had hallucinated?

Confused about whether or not she had imagined the whole thing, Helen sat in her sodden bed for a few moments and listened to her father mangle Prince’s “Kiss” while he made breakfast.

Jerry was getting half the lyrics all wrong—which meant he was in a great mood. Things between him and Kate were going very well: so well that Helen hadn’t seen much of her father the past three weeks. Even their timeworn system of trading weeks cooking for each other was all thrown out of whack, but that was okay with Helen. She wanted her father to be happy.

Jerry repeated the line “you don’t have to be beautiful” four times in row, probably because he couldn’t remember any of the other words. Helen smiled and shook her head, thanking her lucky stars she had a father like Jerry to wake up to, even if he was a terrible singer. She had no idea why he could never get the words to songs right, but she suspected it had something to do with being a parent. Nobody’s parents were supposed to sing Prince well. It would be disturbing if they did.

Throwing back her covers, Helen launched into cleaning mode. Two weeks ago, Claire had taken Helen to the mainland to get the special plastic sheets that moms use if they have a kid who wets the bed, making a thousand cracks about the Princess and the “Pee” along the way. Helen didn’t mind. The sheets were uncomfortable and super embarrassing to buy, but a necessity since every night she came back from the Underworld either bleeding or covered in yuck.

She stood up and started stripping her bed as fast as she could. In the laundry room, she took off her muddy boxer shorts and threw out her ripped T-shirt, putting everything that could be salvaged into the wash. She took a quick shower, and then retraced her path with a rag to clean up the dirty footprints she had tracked across the floor.

A few days ago she had considered using her superfast Scion speed to get through this new and annoying morning cleaning ritual, but she decided that it would probably scare her dad to death if he ever caught her doing it. Instead, Helen had to either get up at the crack of dawn or run around frantically at normal human speed to cover her tracks, like she was doing that morning. Out of time, Helen wiggled into some jeans before she had completely dried off while trying to pull a sweater over her damp hair. It was so cold in her room that the tips of her ears were beginning to go numb.

“Lennie! Your breakfast is getting cold!” Jerry shouted up the stairs.

“Oh, for crying out . . . Crap!” Helen cursed as she stumbled over her book bag. Her sweater wasn’t all the way on yet, and it was still covering her face and pinning her arms over her head.

After a moment of flailing around like a muppet, Helen regained her footing and paused to laugh at herself, wondering how a demigod could be such a damn klutz. She assumed it had to have something to do with the fact that she was so tired. Helen righted her clothing, grabbed her school things, and ran down the stairs before her dad could start singing “Kiss” again.

Jerry had gone hog wild on breakfast. There were eggs, bacon, sausage, oatmeal with nuts and dried cherries, and of course, pumpkin pancakes. Pumpkin pancakes were a favorite of Jerry and Helen’s, but around Halloween, which was only about a week and a half away, anything with pumpkin in it was on the menu. It was sort of a competition between the two of them. It started with roasted pumpkin seeds and went all the way to soups and gnocchi. Whoever found a way to sneak pumpkin into a dish without getting caught was the winner.

The whole pumpkin thing had started when Helen was a little girl. One October she’d complained to her dad that pumpkins only got used as decoration, and although she loved jack-o’-lanterns, it was still a big waste of food. Jerry had agreed, and the two of them resolved to start eating pumpkins instead of just carving them up and then throwing them out.

Unfortunately, they found that pumpkins on their own are so bland they're practically inedible. If they hadn't gotten creative with the cooking, they would have given up on their Save the Pumpkins crusade after the first year.

There were a lot of nauseating creations, of which the pumpkin popsicles were by far the worst, but the pancakes stood out as the biggest success. They instantly became as large a part of the Hamilton family tradition in late October as turkey was on Thanksgiving. Helen noticed that Jerry had even made fresh whipped cream to put on top, and that made her feel so guilty she could barely look at him. He was worried about her.

"Finally! What were you doing up there? Quilting?" Jerry joked, trying to make light of his worry, as he looked her up and down.

For a moment, his eyes widened with fear and his lips pressed together in a harsh line, then he turned back to the stove and started serving. Jerry wasn't a nag, but Helen had gotten skinny over the past three weeks—really scary skinny—and this humongous breakfast was his way of trying to remedy that without having to go into a big, boring lecture. Helen loved the way her dad handled stuff. He didn't pester her the way other parents would if they saw their daughter turn into a scarecrow, but he still cared enough to try to do something about it.

Helen tried to smile bravely at her dad, took a plate, and started stuffing the food down her throat. Everything tasted like sawdust, but she pushed the calories in, anyway. The last thing Helen wanted was to make her dad anxious about her health, although to be honest, even she was starting to feel a bit worried.

She healed quickly from any overt injury she sustained in the Underworld, but every day she felt weaker. Still, she had no choice—she had to keep going until she found the Furies, no matter how ill the Underworld was making her. She'd made a promise. Even if Lucas hated her now, she would fulfill it.

“You have to *chew* bacon, Lennie,” her dad said sarcastically. “It doesn't just dissolve in your mouth.”

“Is that how it works?” Realizing she had been sitting there stock-still, she forced herself to act normal and crack a joke. “Now he tells me.”

While her dad chuckled, she wrenched her thoughts away from Lucas and considered all the homework she hadn't done. She hadn't even finished reading the *Odyssey* yet, not because she didn't want to read it, but because she hadn't had time.

It seemed like everything on Helen's to-do list needed to be done yesterday. On top of that, her favorite teacher, Hergie, kept trying to pressure her into joining the AP classes. Like she needed to expand her reading list.

Claire cruised up the driveway in the new hybrid car her parents had bought her and yelled, “Honk-honk!” out the window rather than actually honking the horn. As Jerry tried, and failed, not to hover, Helen stuffed the remaining pancake down her throat, nearly choked, and ran out the door with her shoelaces still untied.

She hurried down the steps, taking a glance back at the widow's walk on her roof, but she knew it would be empty.

Lucas had made it painfully clear to Helen that he would not sit on her widow's walk again. She didn't know why she bothered to look up there, except that she couldn't seem to stop herself.

“Button your coat, it’s cold out,” Claire admonished as soon as Helen got in the car. “Lennie? You’re a frigging mess,” she continued as she put the car in gear.

“Ah . . . good morning?” Helen said with wide eyes. Claire had been Helen’s best friend since birth, and was therefore entitled to yell at Helen whenever she felt like it. But did she have to start so early? Helen opened her mouth to explain, but Claire would not be deterred.

“Your clothes are falling off your body, your nails are bitten down to nothing, and your lips are chapped,” Claire ranted, plowing right through Helen’s weak protests as she tore out of the driveway. “And the bags under your eyes are so god-awful it looks like someone punched you in the face! Are you even *attempting* to take care of yourself?”

“Yes, I’m trying,” Helen sputtered, still trying to button up the front of her coat, which had suddenly become harder to figure out than Chinese algebra. She gave up on the buttons and faced Claire, throwing up her hands in frustration. “I’m eating *up here*, but there’s no food in the Underworld and I can’t seem to stuff enough down when I’m in the real world to compensate. Trust me, I’m trying. My dad just fed me enough breakfast to choke a linebacker.”

“Well, you could at least put on some blush or something. You’re white as a sheet.”

“I know I look awful. But I’ve got other things on my mind. This whole descending thing isn’t exactly easy, you know.”

“Then don’t descend every night!” Claire exclaimed like it was obvious. “Take a break when you need it! Obviously, you’re not going to solve this in a few weeks!”

“You think I should treat the Furies like a part-time job?” Helen yelled back, finally finding her voice.

“Yes!” Claire shouted back, and since she was naturally better at shouting than just about anybody, Helen shrank back into her seat, cowed by her itty-bitty friend. “Three weeks I’ve put up with this and I’ve had enough! You’re never going to find the Furies if you’re so tired you can’t even see your own big, stupid feet!”

After a slight pause, Helen burst out laughing. Claire tried to keep a straight face, but eventually she gave up and laughed her amazing laugh as they pulled into the parking lot at school.

“No one would think any less of you if you decided to limit your trips down there to once or twice a week, you know,” Claire said gently as they got out of the car and started toward the front door of the school. “I can’t believe you can force yourself to go down there at all. I don’t think I could do it.” Claire shuddered, remembering her own recent brush with death when Matt hit Lucas with his car. Claire had almost died in the accident, and her soul had traveled down to the dry lands—the outskirts of the Underworld. The memories of that place still frightened her, weeks later.

“You would if you had to, Gig. But it doesn’t work like that, anyway. It’s not something I decide to do.” Helen threw an arm over Claire’s shoulders to pull her out of her disturbing recollections of the thirst and loneliness of the dry lands. “I just go to sleep and end up there. I don’t know how to control it yet.”

“Why doesn’t Cassandra know? She’s so smart and she’s been doing a lot of research,” Claire said archly. Helen shook her head, wondering if she really wanted to get in the middle of the feud between Claire and Cassandra.

“Don’t blame Cassandra,” she said carefully. “There isn’t exactly a manual for descending. At least Cassandra and I haven’t found one in that pile of ancient Greek and Latin the Delos family calls archives. She’s doing her best.”

“Then that settles it,” Claire said, crossing her arms and narrowing her eyes with conviction.

“Settles what?” Helen asked in a worried tone as she turned the dial on her locker.

“Obviously you and Cassandra can’t do this alone. You need help. Whether Cassandra wants me to or not, I’m helping.” Claire shrugged as if the matter was settled, which it most certainly was not.

Cassandra insisted the archives were for Oracles, priestesses, and priests of Apollo *only*, despite the fact that there hadn’t been any real priests or priestesses of Apollo in about three and a half thousand years. Matt, Claire, Jason, and Ariadne had offered to help Cassandra a bunch of times, but she wouldn’t accept because that would go against tradition, and for a Scion, going against tradition was nothing to sneeze at.

The Fates had a thing against Scions in general, but Scions who broke tradition usually found themselves on the Fate’s extra-special hate list. Plus, most of those archives were hexed against the uninitiated. The only reason Cassandra let Helen in the library at all was because no one could think of a hex that could harm her. Helen was protected by the cestus. In the real world she was impervious to practically everything. But Claire most certainly was not.

Helen followed her stubborn friend down the hallway, feeling her shoulders slump more with every step. She hated the thought of going against Cassandra, but when Claire set her mind to something there was no point in arguing with her. Helen just hoped that

whatever Claire was planning didn't get her permanently cursed with boils or lice or something equally horrid. Claire could get seriously hurt.

The bell rang just as Helen and Claire scooted into homeroom. Mr. Hergesheimer, or "Hergie" as he was called behind his back, gave them one of his most disapproving glares. It was almost like he could smell the trouble brewing inside Claire's head. Hergie assigned both of them two words of the day for the next morning as preemptive punishment for whatever it was they were so obviously up to. From that moment on, Helen's day got progressively worse.

Helen had never been the most attentive student, and now that she was spending her nights slogging through the Underworld, she had even less interest in school. She was scolded in every class, but at least one of her peers was doing even worse than she was.

As their physics teacher tore into Zach for not writing up his lab, Helen wondered what had happened. Zach had always been one of those guys who looked awake and alert no matter what time it was. Usually, he was a bit too alert, sticking his nose where it didn't belong. Helen had never seen Zach looking so washed out and disconnected. She tried to catch his eye and smile at him in solidarity, but he turned away.

Helen sat staring at his blank face until it finally sank into her sleep-deprived brain that about a week ago she had heard someone say that Zach had quit the football team. Zach's dad, Mr. Brant, was the football coach, and Helen knew that he pushed Zach to be perfect in everything he did. There was no way Mr. Brant would allow his son to quit without a fight. Helen wondered what had happened between them. Whatever it was, it couldn't have been good. Zach looked horrible.

When the bell rang at the end of class Helen tried to touch Zach's arm and ask him if he was okay, but he acted like she wasn't even there and walked out of the room. There was a time in their lives when Helen and Zach had been friends—he used to share his animal crackers with her on the playground—but now he wouldn't even look at her.

Helen had just resolved to ask Claire about Zach and his mysterious condition at track when she caught a glimpse of Lucas from afar. Everything else dissolved like a chalk drawing in the rain.

He was holding a door open over someone's head, politely making a bridge so that a smaller underclassman could walk beneath his arm. He glanced back down the hallway at nothing in particular and spotted her. His eyes narrowed in anger.

Helen froze. It felt like someone was kneeling on her chest again. *That's not Lucas*, she thought, unable to breathe or move.

As Lucas disappeared in the throngs of rushing students, Helen made her way down to the locker room to change for track, her mind wiped clean, like the sky after a thunderstorm.

When Claire showed up, Helen immediately started asking her questions. She'd stumbled across this trick a few weeks back when she realized that if she peppered her best friend with questions, Claire wouldn't have time to ask how she herself was doing. This time, Claire really did need to talk. Jason was having a really bad day and Claire was worried about him.

Jason and Claire weren't officially dating, but ever since Jason had healed her they were obviously more than just friends. They had become very close very quickly, and now she was Jason's closest confidante.

“Are you going over to his house after track?” Helen asked quietly.

“Yeah, I don’t want to leave him alone right now. Especially since Lucas is still MIA.”

“What do you mean?” Helen asked, alarmed. “He hasn’t been home at all since . . .”
Since he told me to go to hell, hit his father, endangered his mother, and got thrown out of his house? Helen finished in her mind.

Claire seemed to know exactly what Helen was thinking, and she squeezed Helen’s hand in support as she explained.

“No, he’s been home a few times since then. He apologized to his parents and they forgave him, of course. But he’s never around anymore. No one knows where he’s been going or what he’s been doing, and honestly? Everyone’s too afraid of him to ask. He’s changed, Lennie. He doesn’t talk to anyone, except maybe Cassandra. He vanishes right after school, and sometimes he doesn’t come home until one or two o’clock in the morning, if he comes home at all. His parents are letting him go because, well, without Hector around, no one can really *stop* him. Jason is worried,” Claire said before glancing sideways at Helen. “You haven’t seen him lately, have you?”

“Today. But only for a second, way down the hall,” Helen said, ending the line of questions before Claire could ask her how she felt. “Look, I gotta pick up the pace. Are you okay, or do you want to talk some more?”

“You go ahead,” Claire said with a troubled frown.

Helen gave Claire a little smile to let her know she was okay, even though she kind of wasn’t, and then sped up to finish her run in a time that Coach Tar would think showed initiative.

Lucas saw Helen at the end of the hallway, and forced his face into an angry shape, willing her to hate him or fear him—whatever it took to get her the hell away from him. For her own good.

But Lucas didn't see hate or fear in her eyes. She didn't turn away from him like she was supposed to. She just looked lost.

It felt like chewing glass, but Lucas forced himself to turn his back on her and continue down the hallway.

All he had intended was to push Helen away.

But then things got out of hand: striking his father; his mother, bleeding; the blind rage he felt. Lucas knew what anger felt like. He and Hector had been fighting tooth and nail since they were big enough to stand. But this was like nothing he had experienced before. He'd woken something up inside of himself, something that he'd had no idea existed in him.

The genie was out of the bottle and it wouldn't fit back in.

Finishing her run long before Claire, Helen decided that she wanted to walk to work so she could think. She sent Claire a text explaining that she didn't need a ride to the News Store that afternoon and stifled the suspicion that Claire would probably be pleased with Helen's decision to go it alone.

They had never avoided each other before, but things had changed. Their lives were pulling them in different directions, and Helen was beginning to wonder if their friendship would ever be the same again. The thought made her want to cry.

The temperature started to plummet as Helen walked up Surfside Road toward the center of town. Her jacket was unbuttoned and the straps from the book bag over one shoulder and the gym bag over the other pulled the two sides of her jacket apart so she couldn't close the front properly. With an exasperated cluck of her tongue, Helen unslung her bags. As she bent over to put them down on the ground, she experienced a strange vertigo. It seemed for a moment that the sidewalk didn't quite match up to the street, like there was something terribly wrong with her depth perception.

Straightening up with a gasp, Helen put an arm out to the side in case she fell over, waiting for the rush of blood to her head to end. The vertigo was gone in a moment but an even more disturbing sensation replaced it. Helen felt like she was being watched, like someone was standing right in front of her, staring directly into her eyes.

She took a step back and reached out, but touched nothing but thin air. Glancing around nervously, Helen spun on her heel, grabbed her bags, and jogged into the town center. Cassandra had foreseen that Helen was safe from attack for the next few days at least, but she'd never promised that Helen would be left in peace. Helen knew someone from the Hundred Cousins was most likely watching her, she just hadn't expected to feel so paranoid about it. Suddenly, Helen imagined that she could feel someone's breath on her neck. The thought made her bolt into the News Store like she was being chased.

"What is it?" Kate asked. She looked behind Helen for whatever had spooked her. "Is someone following you?"

"It's nothing," Helen replied with a phony smile. "The cold gave me the shivers."

Kate gave Helen a skeptical look, but Helen ducked around her and deposited her things behind the register before Kate could get into it.

“Did you eat after track?” Kate asked.

“Go to the back and make yourself a sandwich,” she ordered when Helen didn’t respond right away.

“I’m not really hungry,” Helen began, but Kate cut her off angrily.

“Is that your final answer? Think carefully,” Kate warned as she planted a flour-dusted fist on her curvy hip.

Helen shut her mouth and went into the back. She felt like Kate and Jerry were both blaming her for getting so thin. But she couldn’t explain what was really going on to either of them.

Helen smeared some peanut butter on a hunk of bread and drizzled honey over it before she took a giant, angry bite. She chewed mechanically, hardly noticing the sticky ball of bread and nutty-sweet paste sealing up her mouth. She felt like she was choking on something most of the time, anyway—like there was a wad of words lodged permanently in the back of her throat. What was a little peanut butter compared to that?

She gulped down a glass of milk and shuffled back out front, still feeling like she was being blamed for something that wasn’t her fault. She avoided Kate for the rest of the night to punish her.

After an uncomfortable few hours walking on eggshells at the News Store, Helen lied and said that Claire was picking her up. Outside in the dark, sure that no one could see her, Helen jumped up into the night sky and flew toward home. She soared high, pushing herself to go up to where the rarified air tugged at her eardrums and dug at her lungs.

She had promised Lucas once that she wouldn’t leave the island without more training in transoceanic travel, and technically, she’d kept that promise. She was still over

Nantucket, just very *high* over it. Helen reached up and up until she could see the bright web of night-lights that connected the whole continent underneath her. She flew until her eyes watered and the tears froze on her cheek.

She stretched out and let her body float until her mind emptied. This must be what it was like to swim unafraid in the ocean, but Helen preferred to swim in an ocean of stars. She floated until the cold and the loneliness became intolerable, and then she drifted back down to earth.

Helen landed in her yard and ran in the front door, hoping her dad wouldn't notice that there hadn't been a car in the driveway to drop her off, but Jerry wasn't in the kitchen. She poked her head into her dad's room just to make sure, but he wasn't there, either. Helen reminded herself that it was Friday night. He and Kate probably had plans. Since she and Kate hadn't spoken for most of the evening, Helen hadn't thought to ask if Jerry would be spending the night at Kate's place or not. Now she regretted holding a grudge. The house was too empty, and the silence seemed to press painfully on her ears.

Helen washed her face, brushed her teeth, and went to bed. She kept her eyes open for as long as she could, willing herself to stay awake despite the fact that she was so tired she was near tears.

If she fell asleep, she knew she would descend into the Underworld and plunge herself into a loneliness that was even more complete than the loneliness she felt in the real world. But the longer she lay in bed, the closer her thoughts drifted toward Lucas. Helen rubbed her hands over her face and tried to push the stinging tears back into her eyes. The unbearable weight began to settle on her chest again.

She couldn't allow herself to wallow, or in a few moments she'd be wallowing in the filth of the pit. Then a thought crossed her mind.

Maybe this time she wouldn't be alone in the Underworld.

She knew that her savior was probably a mirage, but Helen was desperate. Even talking to a mirage was preferable to wandering through hell alone.

As she focused her thoughts on the deep voice she'd heard, Helen allowed herself to fall asleep. She pictured the flash of gold, the beautiful mouth, and the sound of him saying her name as he held out his hand for her to take. . . .

Helen was on a prairie-like plain with lots of dead grass and undulating hills. She'd been to this part of the Underworld before, but something had changed. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but everything felt a little bit different. For one thing, there was noise. Helen couldn't remember ever hearing any sound in the Underworld that she hadn't made herself—not even the sound of wind on the grass.

Somehow, the Underworld felt *real*, and not just part of a terrible nightmare. Helen had experienced this before, if only briefly, when she was miraculously pulled from the pit. As jarring as this new perspective on the Underworld was, it was also a relief at the same time. Hades seemed less hellish for some reason. Looking around now, Helen was reminded of that moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy saw in color for the first time.

She squinted into the distance and saw dancing flashes of gold, coupled with the sound of shrieks, grunts, and clangs. There was a fight going on, and it sounded like a

brutal one. At least Helen could be certain of one thing. The guy with the warm hands wasn't a mirage.

She ran as fast as she could toward the commotion.

When she crested a small rise she saw a big guy with an overgrown mop of loose chestnut curls using a long dagger to hack away at the tattered vulture-bat thing that was flapping around his head. As Helen ran closer, she heard the harpy snarl and cuss, trying to rip at the young man with her talons. Even though he was fighting for his life, Helen couldn't stop herself from noticing that he really needed a haircut.

"Haircut" got the upper hand for a moment, and Helen saw him grin in a half-surprised, half-self-congratulatory way. Then, as he realized that he was still losing, Helen watched the grin quickly turn into a self-deprecating grimace. Even though he was battling away, he seemed to maintain a good sense of humor.

"Hey!" Helen shouted as she neared the struggling pair.

Haircut and the harpy paused awkwardly in the middle of the fight, each of them still clutching the other's throat. Half of Haircut's mouth lifted up in a surprised smile.

"Helen," he managed to croak out, as if he always had a pair of talons wrapped around his neck. Helen was so taken aback by his nonchalance she almost laughed. Then everything changed again.

The world started to slow down and thicken around her, and Helen knew that meant that in the regular world her body was waking up. A part of her brain was beginning to register an annoying bleating noise coming from a universe away, and she knew that she would never make it to Haircut before waking. Helen looked around frantically, then bent down and picked up a rock at her feet, straightened up, and chucked it at the monster . . .

. . . and the rock from the Underworld went right through her bedroom window, breaking it into about a hundred pieces.