



PROLOGUE

The words *soul mate* send chills down my spine. The average person might find comfort in the idea of having someone who shares every aspect of their life, but I know better.

I belong to an ancient race of humans descended from the Greek gods and goddesses—the Hellenicus. My ancestors are also closely tied to the origin of the soul mate. I have seen the torment caused by the existence of soul mates, and so, I dread the day when I'll be reunited with mine.

Of course, not all of my people feel the same way. We have been taught to take pride in our history, to be gracious about our ability to reconnect with our soul mates. As Hellenicus, we learn from a young age where we come from and where we sit in the hierarchy of our community. Reciting our history in my sleep was nothing; that was how much it had been drilled into me over the years.

Centuries ago, before the Golden Age, there were the three parents—the Sun, the Earth, and the Moon, and each of them had offspring. The Sun produced the men, the Earth produced the women, and the Moon produced the androgynes. The original human form was a hideous sight to behold, having one head with two faces, four arms, four legs, and two sets of genitalia. These humans rolled, hand over hand and foot over foot, by manner of cartwheels at double

speed. These original humans had been created to be strong and fast and free and powerful, and they roamed the earth with a great deal more freedom and power than humans have now.

The power eventually went to their heads. They thought that they could stop giving offerings to the gods and goddesses and be gods in their own right. They decided they deserved a place on Mount Olympus alongside the gods; a rebellion broke out and humans scaled the mountain to attack. Obviously, it wasn't a good idea and it led to an inevitable defeat. The Hellenicists commemorate this battle as the Day of Prideful Folly.

Because of the humans' audacity, the gods, with their limitless power, pondered how to punish them. Zeus could burn them to dust with his lightning bolts, just as he'd done to the giants. Poseidon could drown the fools with an enormous wave. Or Hades could lock the creatures in the depths of Tartarus for eternity.

But the gods loved a little drama for their own amusement, and they also loved to be worshipped. Zeus realized that humans weren't the real threat—it was their oversized egos that needed adjustment. He stripped them of their arrogance by splitting them into two with his lightning bolts, making them half as fast and half as strong. Not only would it put them in their place, but it would also double the number of those giving tribute to the gods. Problem solved, right?

Well, no. The halved creatures ran around frantically, looking for their other halves, seeking them out, embracing them, and trying to be one again. The creatures who had been double women naturally sought out women. Those who had been double men sought out men. And the androgynes sought out members of the opposite gender. But, unable to rejoin, they lived in utter misery and began to starve to death in their sorrow.

Mindful of his need for worshippers, Zeus instructed Apollo to create a means for the creatures to reunite, if only briefly. Apollo did

so by turning the genitals toward the belly side of the body. According to the legend, when the two halves finally found each other, they would have an unspoken understanding. They would lay with each other in unity and know no greater joy, and when each of them was reincarnated after they died, they would be reunited in their next lives.

To complicate things further, the gods and goddesses mingled with the newly divided humans, fornicating with them and producing demigods. These demigods would then have children of their own, and so on, until clans were built. These clans became known as the Hellenicus—my ancestors.

Over the generations, the Hellenicus spread out around the globe. We were taught to take pride in our history, and so, despite the diaspora, we have always held on to our traditions. But one thing has kept us divided: the three castes. Pure Royals, Royals, and Regulars.

Pure Royals retained the top shelf of our hierarchy because they were the descendants of the Big Three: the Lord of the Sky, Zeus; the Lord of the Sea, Poseidon; and the Lord of the Underworld, Hades. It was easy to tell who belonged to the Pure Royals by looking at their eyes. Pure Royals who had blue eyes were from the Christoulakis family, Zeus's descendants. Green eyes belonged to the Ambrosia family, Poseidon's descendants. And finally, those with dark brown, nearly black eyes, were from the now-extinct Stavros family, Hades's descendants.

Slightly below the Pure Royals were the Royals, the descendants of the remaining Olympian gods and goddesses. Unlike the Pure Royals, who maintained their original ancient Greek family name, the Royals' family names were influenced by the culture and language of their geographical locations. For example, Hera's descendants were originally known as the Themistoklis family, but

in Australia, it was Tavoularis, and in Bulgaria, it became something entirely different: Petrova. I didn't even bother trying to remember all their names, though. Most Royals would jump at the chance to let you know their royal lineage, anyway. Besides, it was also obvious who was a Royal from the size of their wallet.

Then there was the lowest caste, slightly above your standard-issue humans. That was where I fit in: the Regulars. Look it up in the dictionary and it was precisely what I was supposed to be: average, common, uniform, consistent, and fixed. No overflowing bank accounts, no exotic vacations, no sports cars, or big houses. There was a god for everything under the sun, but of course, us Regulars didn't share a lineage with the fancy, powerful ones. We came from the many gods and goddesses who didn't have a seat on Mount Olympus. They were the gods and goddesses of regular things, like the god of sleep, Hypnos, and the god of the west wind, Zephyros. It was next to impossible to keep track of a Regular's lineage—there were too many minor gods and too many of us.

Other than being the descendants of the gods and goddesses, the Hellenicus had one other thing in common: to honor our demigod lineage, Apollo wanted to set us apart from normal humans—or, as we called them, the Nescient—and awarded us an extraordinary ability to help us find our soul mates. Our gift allowed us to read our other half's mind, something the Nescient couldn't do. That way, even though we were continuously reincarnated, we would always be able to find each other.

Every year, the Court—a heavily guarded compound located in Denali, Alaska—held a revered event known as the Gathering. It was a chance for all the Hellenicus from around the world to come together in the hopes of being reunited with their soul mates. In our eighteenth year, during our first Gathering, our clairsaudient gift was awakened through a sacred ritual known as the Awakening Ceremony.

Then we would wait for the moment when we met our other half. A single touch could ignite what we called a click—a phenomenon that allowed us to hear our soul mate's thoughts. It was how we knew we had found the one.

I would be eighteen soon. Tomorrow I would officially go to the Court for the first time. And find out if my life would change forever.



CHAPTER ONE

“Remember to set your alarm, Avery,” my mother shouted from downstairs. Despite Katherine Montgomery’s small stature, she had a loud, stern voice. I was in the middle of brushing my teeth, so I couldn’t respond to her right away. “Avery! Did you hear what I just said?”

“Yes, Mom!” I opened the bathroom door so she could hear me clearly. “I got it. I’m brushing my teeth.”

“Tomorrow is a big day. You need to be prepared in case you meet your soul mate.”

Soul mate.

I shuddered. That word alone ignited the same reaction I got from watching a horror movie alone in my bedroom at midnight. I could always turn off the movie, but there was no escaping my fate.

I was seventeen now, but I would turn eighteen on December 22. I would be attending my first Gathering to awaken my clairaudient ability. Thinking about the long procession, the formality, and the fact that I had to dress up for the occasion was exhausting. After all, there was no guarantee that your soul mate would be at the Gathering in your first year—or even your fifth or sixth. Or even

at all. Sometimes a Hellenicus died still waiting to meet their soul mate. My mom came upstairs and we met in the hallway.

“Hurry up and get to sleep. Eye bags aren’t attractive.”

“Mom, relax. Maybe I won’t meet mine this year,” I said.

“But maybe you will,” she said. “I met your dad during my first Gathering. Not everyone’s so lucky to meet their soul mate at their first Gathering, but we’re the descendants of—”

“Tyche, the goddess of luck,” I said, having been reminded at least a dozen times a day. Everyone knew that it was impossible for Regulars to trace their lineage, so it drove me crazy that she insisted we were the descendants of Tyche. I had just about the worst luck in the world, which convinced me that my mom had no idea what she was talking about.

“Exactly. We’re descendants of the goddess of luck! You should know better that—”

What if she was right? What if I did meet my soul mate this year? My body instinctively shivered at the thought.

The other Hellenicus would be surprised if they knew how repulsed I was at the prospect of reuniting with my soul mate. Most claimed that having a soul mate was romantic and that we should be grateful for Apollo’s gift of the click. But for me, having a soul mate was more like being subject to an arranged marriage that I could never run away from, even if I wanted to. Once I was Awakened, it would be possible for me to have a click that would cause my soul mate’s mind to be instantly linked to mine. I would always be able to hear my soul mate’s thoughts, and they would always be able to hear mine. If that wasn’t a total breach of privacy, I didn’t know what was. And the idea of being tied to someone I possibly didn’t even know existed until the day we were revealed to be soul mates was the icing on the cake.

Honestly, I’d prefer to be a Nescient. At least they could ignore the whole soul-mate situation if they wanted to. Of course, this was

all merely wishful thinking. As a Hellenicus I was destined to be reunited with my soul mate in the most invasive way possible.

“—girls pray to Aphrodite, wishing to be reunited with their soul mate as soon as possible. You should be praying too. Let me see if I can get—”

“Mom.” I stopped her before she signed me up for some obscure Greek ritual that I didn’t even know about. “It’s late. Didn’t you say you wanted me to get to sleep early?”

“Yes,” she said. “Go back to your room and have a good rest.”

I quickly headed to my bedroom before my mom had a change of heart. It was rare for us not to bicker, and I knew that I should cherish this moment. As I lay down on my bed and stared at the ceiling, I thought about how impossible it was to escape my destiny. It was so disheartening.

The Fates shaped each of our lives. They were the three weaving goddesses—Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos—who were in charge of assigning mortals to their destinies. From birth to death to how and when we would meet our other half, and even whether we would meet them in this lifetime—everything was in the hands of these three goddesses. If even the Great Zeus, king of the gods, could not overrule their decree, how did I stand a chance?

I reached for the shoe box hidden underneath my bed. This was my liberation. Since the day I had decided that I wanted none of this soul-mate business, I had been saving up every penny I had. There was a faded photo buried underneath the crumpled money stuffed inside the box. It was of a pale girl with insufferable auburn frizz for hair and dark-brown eyes that were too big for her small oval face. Next to her was an olive-skinned guy with dark hair. They were both smiling, wind blowing the hair from their faces, sunlight shining on their foreheads. Me and Bryan. Tears prickled the corners of my eyes, and I took a deep breath.

He was supposed to be here with me. We were supposed to escape together.

I wiped my tears away with my sleeves. I wished I could go a day, or even an hour, without thinking about him or being reminded of him, but it was impossible when everything and everywhere evoked something about him—even this room. He used to sit on the floor with me, and we'd spend hours talking about our dreams and what we wanted to do in life.

The Davises had moved next door ten years ago; they were Regulars too. While my house was always quiet, practically a ghost house, Bryan's had been the other way around. Every morning his mom turned on the radio and tuned into a country music channel while doing housework (I disliked country music because I'd heard more than my share of it). Despite going to the same school, Bryan and I never shared anything but awkward hellos for the first five years we lived next to each other.

But then his father kicked him out of the house. Six months ago, Bryan's mother had a terrible accident while hiking. She lost her footing and slid down the edge of the hill, hitting her head against a rock on the way down. She ended up in a coma. Instead of being there for his wife, Bryan's dad cozied up to a co-worker. Bryan found out about his dad's secret affair one day after coming home early from visiting his mom at the hospital.

With country music-free mornings, I had been getting used to sleeping in, but that morning, slapping, clacking, and crashing sounds jolted me awake. Bryan had confronted his dad bright and early, causing havoc before the birds had even started chirping. Everyone on our street heard the details of their argument, crystal clear. Disturbed by the noise, I ran to my window and caught sight of Bryan dashing out the front door, carrying nothing but his backpack. His usual slick, jet-black hair was disheveled, and his face was

red with anger. Catching his breath, he brushed away a bead of sweat trickling down his forehead and looked back at his house before walking away. I watched him until I could no longer see any glimpse of his grey backpack and white sneakers.

My day went on much like it had begun, with my parents arguing. Most of their fight took place inside their heads, but every now and then my dad would shout, "Holy Zeus," and my mom would slam cupboards and doors. It wasn't enough to clue me in on the cause of their disagreement, but it was enough to make me want to lock myself in my room with my head hidden underneath my pillow. After I'd listened to them for the majority of the day, Mom called me downstairs to demand I go buy the sour cream that she'd forgotten at the grocery store. Something told me that they weren't arguing about the forgotten sour cream, but I was happy to have an excuse to get out of the house for some fresh air.

To avoid having to spend more time at home, I took the long route home after shopping and passed the playground. Bryan was sitting on the swing, his backpack flopped on the ground by his feet. He was staring at the ground, deep in thought, a frown wrinkled across his forehead and a yellowish bruise on his tear-stained cheek. It must have been tough to find out about your parent's infidelity and then, to top it all off, be kicked out for confronting them about it.

I must have said something out loud because suddenly Bryan lifted his face and our gazes met. The way he looked at me, with eyes the deepest shade of the richest earth, made me feel exposed. Neither of us knew what to say after what had happened earlier that day. *So, hey, I also happen to think your dad is an asshole. Kudos on standing up to him for your mom*, was definitely not a good conversation starter. Instead I squeaked out a lame, "Hi."

"Hey." He greeted me. "I'm sorry you had to hear all that. It probably ruined your morning and anyone else's who heard my fight

with”—he paused as he appeared to have a battle in his head over what he should call his father, finally settling on—“Daniel.”

“It’s fine. I hope things get better, though,” I said.

“I doubt it will. I mean, I’m here ready to sleep on the swing.”

“I’d take the slide if I were you. At least you could lay on your back.”

“Good idea.” He smiled. His bottom teeth were slightly crooked but very white. “Maybe I’ll do that.”

I lifted my left wrist to check the time on my rectangle-shaped watch. If I stayed for another minute, my parents, particularly my dad, would call the SWAT team to look for me. He was *that* protective and paranoid. “Look, I have to get back. My parents will worry, so I’ll see you around?”

“See you around, neighbor.”

I felt guilty leaving him there, and I couldn’t stop thinking about him for the rest of the evening.

For several nights in a row, once the sun had set, I would find something I needed to buy at the mini-mart—excuses to go out and meet Bryan. I’d bring him food and we’d talk about being Hellenicus and rant about all the Royal pain in the asses at school. One week went by and his dad had still not allowed him back home, so I offered to let him stay at my house. In secret, he’d climb in and out of my room using the tree outside my window. He’d sneak in late at night and leave early in the morning before my parents, or any of our prying neighbors, woke up.

We quickly became inseparable, partners in crime, each as silly as the other, and we did everything together. It was hard to describe the connection we had because I didn’t fully understand it myself. It was as if we had always been friends even though it had only been a few weeks. He made me feel comfortable. I was myself around him, and he never judged me. Bryan was the only person I knew who

understood what it was like to have a turbulent family life. I trusted him with everything.

Our friendship continued even after his mom finally awoke from her coma, returned home, and brought him home. Bryan would still sneak into my room when the rest of the neighborhood was asleep, and we'd talk for hours. He vented about what was going on at home, his parents' divorce, and how his mother cried herself to sleep every night, haunted by the fact that she was able to hear his father's thoughts about the other woman. Bryan cried as he poured his heart out. Together, we agreed that neither of us would ever experience the click—the invasion of privacy was too much. We had seen how it could all go wrong. If only his parents' minds were not linked, perhaps his mother could have moved on.

Then one night, while sitting on our favorite swing in the nearby park during one of our usual conversations, he told me he had feelings for me. I was stunned. I'd come to think of him as a brother. I couldn't say the one thing he wished to hear: that I felt the same way about him. The heart-wrenching look on his face, as if his whole world had crashed and burned, was one I would never forget—no matter how hard I tried.

The next day he texted me from our Hellenic school's library, saying he needed to tell me something urgently. I told him to come over, dreading the awkward conversation that would ensue. As I waited for him to arrive, an uneasy feeling grew in my stomach. Something, maybe intuition, informed me that something terrible was about to happen. Still, I waited and waited.

He never showed up. Bryan died in a car accident. That was over a year ago now, but I still missed him every second of every day. I also couldn't help feeling like it was my fault; if he hadn't been on his way to see me, he would still be alive today. We would be working on our escape plan together—counting our combined savings and

deciding whether New York was too expensive for our budget. We had already agreed that a big city was our only option if we wanted to avoid being found by our parents. We could live peacefully among the Nescient, blissfully click-free.

I couldn't bear to look at the photo any longer so I put it back inside the shoe box, closed the lid, and pushed the box to the dark corner underneath the bed. I hated the idea of someone reading every passing thought I had inside my mind. I couldn't go through what Bryan's mom had. As cliché as it sounded, I wanted a normal life—free from all the sacred rituals and important celebrations. The fact that I'd also be free from all the Royals who always looked at me as if I was below them—as if I was *less* than them—was a generous bonus.

Without Bryan, though, I couldn't escape on my own. The thought of being on the road alone terrified me, and I hadn't saved up enough, anyway. It seemed like I was stuck going to Court after all.

My parents were busy preparing for my first Gathering. My mom insisted it'd help to take my mind off of Bryan's death if I immersed myself in the rituals. While everyone with royal blood in their veins received an invitation, Regulars had to travel all the way to Court a year early to sign up and get their photographs taken in order to participate. My dad had made me go to Court with him so I could sign up. Getting my photo taken as I stood against the wall next to a water dispenser had been embarrassing enough—the photo looked like a mug shot—but the worst part of the whole ordeal was that I had to wait for hours outside the gate at the security office while my dad was inside finishing the necessary paperwork. Those who were not of royal blood and had not been to their first Gathering couldn't enter the Court, which was why we had to have our parents come with us.

I'd spent the first hour alone. Then *he* was there with his hazel eyes and raven hair, exchanging some heated words with the guard at the security gate. He was undoubtedly the most handsome person I'd ever seen. His whole demeanor changed from frustrated to intrigued when he noticed me gawking, and he strolled confidently over.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"Some bullshit about me not being able to get back into the Court grounds after leaving. I was only outside for a minute! I needed a little walk to get some air. But apparently I need to wait for verification to get back in." He glared at the guard before softening his expression again. "But it looks like I'm in good company now. I'm Carlo."

"Avery," I said, my face flushing.

We had only used only our first names. I didn't know his family name, and he didn't know mine. We didn't know each other's Hellenicus status, and for the first time, it felt normal and refreshing to be Avery—*not* Avery Montgomery, the mere Regular.

I lost track of time as we sat outside the gate of the security office, chatting for hours. Carlo reminded me of Bryan in so many ways. He had a way of speaking to me, just as Bryan had, that made me feel safe, and the conversation flowed naturally between us. In the short time we spent together that day, we learned so much about each other.

"When you finally become a pilot, where will you fly your plane first?" Carlo asked.

"I don't think I can choose where to go. I'll have to go wherever they tell me to," I said.

"Maybe. But it's your dream, right?" Carlo grinned. "Maybe you could work for the Court? I heard they recently bought another jet. They will let you go for your first trip."

There was no way I could handle having snobby Royals as my passengers. Since Carlo could be a Royal and might be offended by this sentiment, I didn't say this out loud.

Perhaps my true feelings showed on my face, because after a short while, Carlo said, “Probably not a good idea.” It was almost as if he had read my mind. He leaned forward and whispered in a conspiratorial tone, “There are a lot of vexing people around here—some might even call them assholes.” I couldn’t help laughing, and his eyes lit up, knowing he was the source of my amusement. “Anyway, it’s your dream, Avery—you can be and do whatever you want. You just have to have enough courage and willpower to pursue it.”

“What about you? What do you want to be?”

“I want to be a teacher.”

“What kind of teacher? Math? Biology? High school or college?”

“High school teacher, and yes, you guessed right, I want to teach math. I love math, and I want to break the perception that it’s a boring or tough subject.”

“Good luck with that. With the math mark on my report card, I won’t be changing my mind about that subject any time soon.”

“I’ll take that as a challenge,” he said. “Are you nervous about this whole thing? You’re preparing for your first Gathering, right?”

“Yeah.” It took a while for me to find my voice again, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. If Bryan were still here, I wouldn’t be going through any of this. My heart ached as the memories of Bryan came flooding back to me. I looked up, trying to keep my tears from spilling. A soft, warm hand cupped mine.

“You lost someone you love.”

It was more of a statement than a question, but I answered it nonetheless as I shook my head. “I lost someone who loved me. I didn’t have time to figure out my own feelings. But I think I lost my chance at happiness.”

“Do you think this person was the *one*?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged helplessly. “We aren’t supposed to know until we have a click, are we not?”

“Yes. We have to have a click to know for sure.” A look of disappointment flashed across his face. “This year will be my fourth Gathering, but I still haven’t met my other half. We just have to trust the Fates, I guess.”

The Fates. The mention of them got me frustrated in an instant.

“Don’t you get tired of waiting? You’ve wasted four years waiting for your soul mate.” He looked like he was about to interject in protest, but decided to simply clamp his mouth shut and listen. “What if you don’t meet your soul mate again this year? What if next year you don’t either? And the year after that?”

It was only when he squeezed his hand that I realized he was still holding mine. “Avery, I understand what you mean, and these four years haven’t exactly been filled with patience either,” Carlo said, shaking his head lightly. “Maybe for you it’s a waste of time, but for some people, for me anyway, it’s not. After all, we’re not waiting for a pizza delivery; we’re waiting for our literal other half, the other half of our soul. Whoever it might be, they will make it worth all the years I’ve spent waiting.”

“You can just as easily meet a nice person and have a shot at happiness.”

“Maybe,” Carlo said. “But they wouldn’t be my other half. Besides, what if one day I have a click? I would end up hurting two people, not just one.”

“You’re just going to wait?”

“Of course.”

“What if your soul mate never comes? What if you waste your whole life waiting for someone who never shows up?”

“Then I shall meet my soul mate in my next life.”

He noticed the disbelieving look on my face, “Look, I’m not trying to change your opinion—I believe each of us can have our

own—but don't feel sorry for me by thinking that I'm wasting my time because I don't think of it that way."

We were quiet for a moment before he cleared his throat. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"I'm just curious. You know if you don't go through with your first Gathering you could live as a Nescient, and your gift will never be awakened, right?" I nodded. "Then why are you signing up for your first Gathering if you think that this is a waste of time?"

"Because I have no choice," I answered matter of factly.

"That's where you're wrong, Avery." Carlo's kindness danced in those hazel eyes. "You always have a choice."



My dad showed up moments later, but not before Carlo and I had exchanged phone numbers. After a few days, he texted, telling me he hadn't met his other half. Even though I *still* wasn't entirely sold on this soul-mates business, I couldn't help feeling relieved that he hadn't met his. With Carlo, I felt a spark of hope. I met him exactly when I needed to, and he offered me a new solution to my fears. There was this small, yet unwavering thought growing inside my head that maybe, if my soul mate turned out to be someone I knew—and actually liked—then maybe clicking with them wouldn't be as horrible as I had thought.

Maybe the reason why I was still here instead of on a bus heading to New York or Seattle, anywhere but Denali, was because I had feelings for Carlo. Unlike me, he was one of the Hellenicus who thought that having a soul mate was a gift. And his trust in the process planted doubts in my mind that I couldn't shake off. As if knowing that I was thinking about him, my phone buzzed. Carlo. I

quickly unlocked my phone and pulled up his text. It started with his usual greeting,

Buonasera, cara mia.

That night, I decided that I wanted, more than anything, to know if Carlo was my soul mate or not. If by my birthday we did not have a click, at least I wouldn't have to live the rest of my life haunted by what-ifs.

It was risky to have hope because hope led to expectation, which could also lead to disappointment. I'd heard about it often, how a Hellenicus went to their first Gathering certain that their significant other was their other half only to be heartbroken when they discovered their beloved was meant for someone else. And there was no guarantee that things would work out—look at Bryan's parents; look at mine fighting all the time. I was also aware that if I went to the Gathering and my soul mate turned out to be somebody other than Carlo, my whole plan was ruined. But if I didn't click with anyone, then I still had my savings. I could escape before next year's Gathering, and my original plan to live in hiding among the Nescient would remain intact.

After spending most of the night mulling the pros and cons over in my mind, I woke up to the sun peeking through the slits in my blinds, my alarm ringing, and my mom's voice shouting through my bedroom door telling me to get up. I had chosen to stay. I would go to my first Gathering. When it came to Carlo, I simply had to know.



CHAPTER TWO

It was barely eight o'clock in the morning and I'd already lost my temper.

"Mom, I've told you, I'm done packing!" I hissed through gritted teeth. My mom slid the zipper around the suitcase, then dumped the contents onto my bed—every piece of clothing that I had spent hours ironing and putting neatly inside. "Why. Did. You. Do. That?"

Ignoring me, my mom tossed aside all of the old T-shirts I loved so much. She pulled out dresses and some faux-fur coats from the plastic bag she'd had with her when she had barged into my room and packed them in place of my choices.

"I'm not going to wear *those*."

"You will," she said as she turned on her heels and rummaged through my wardrobe. "You won't have a choice when these are the only clothes you have with you."

"If *I* am the one who has to wear them, don't you think that *I* should be the one deciding what *I* wear?"

"Nope."

This was too much. We had already fought during breakfast an hour ago, and I really did not want to have another argument now.

I left, paying no mind to her yelling as I raced downstairs, took my coat off its hanger, and dashed out the front door.

My mom and I had never had a stable relationship, and without anything in common, it was even harder to build one. We were doomed to clash. Our personalities were too different: I was fire and she was water. If I was lucky, I could use my fire to evaporate her water. But if she held her ground, she would put out my fire with her water. It entirely depended on who was more stubborn at that moment. We could never reach an agreement because neither one of us was willing to compromise—maybe that was the *one* thing we had in common. We didn't even agree on small things, like what we should have for dinner or who would take a bath first. Most of the time my dad had to come between us with a solution that we'd both accept.

Taking a left turn at the junction, I headed to Bryan's swing and sat there for a few minutes before pulling out my phone to call my best friend, Kristen Ambrosia. Although Bryan had been my partner in crime, Kris was the one person I shared all my bottled-up feelings with. We had been best friends since her first day at my Hellenic school. She had walked toward me—the fat girl with ginger hair and freckles all over her nose—stopped by my desk, and asked to sit with me. She ignored everyone else who had tried to befriend her simply because she was a Pure Royal, and chose me, a Regular.

Other than glorifying soul mates, the Hellenicus were obsessed with status and how to promote themselves. I never understood it; it wasn't like you could elevate your caste based on who you hung around with. Still, Royals tended to be even more status hungry than us Regulars, who had accepted our place. Besides our love for mystery novels and detective TV series, Kris and I had bonded over our shared dislike of the Hellenicus caste system and how it made some people so shallow.

After trying to phone her several times and having all my calls go straight to voice mail, I slid my phone into the front pocket of my jeans and decided to go to her house, which was only a few blocks away, in a fancy gated community.

The house looked like a cutout from an architecture magazine, looming proudly behind creaky iron gates and flanked by rows of skeletal trees swaying gently in the December wind. At its threshold stood a delicate marble fountain. On summer days the soft gurgling of the clear water resonated melodically in the surrounding silence, but now that it was winter the water had frozen, and all that could be heard were my footsteps crunching on the snow of the front walkway.

Cloaked in blankets of white snow and days of little sunshine, winter was a long season in Alaska. Although it only took fifteen minutes to get to the Ambrosias', my feet were numb thanks to my stupid choice of footwear. I should have worn extra socks.

I was about to ring the bell at the grand entrance to the Ambrosia house when someone turned the lock. I hoped it was Leopold, the gardener's handsome son, who might answer the door again. Last time I hadn't been prepared and had parsley from my salad stuck between my teeth. Leopold had awkwardly pointed it out. Zeus, it was embarrassing. But I had learned my lesson and ran my tongue along the front of my teeth to make sure nothing was stuck in there. When the door swung open, I had my most dazzling smile on . . . only to have it dissolve immediately.

The gods loved to torture me—always throwing obstacles in my way. This time it was in the form of a six-foot-tall guy with tousled brown hair and mesmerizing green eyes who was looking down at me from his lofty height. Vladimir Ambrosia, Kris's older brother. I tried to stand up a little taller, stretching my five-foot-two frame and refusing to show deference to a Pure Royal, despite having spent my whole life being trained to.

The last time we had been in the same place was two years ago during Hermaea—a festival with an athletic contest held in honor of Hermes. Vladimir had come to support Kris, who played tennis. I had been cheering on my best friend, minding my own business, and doing my best to ignore him. But before the match was over, we had managed to bicker. As usual, he had started it.

I still don't understand why people who know nothing about tennis feel the need to shout out during the game as if they know what they are talking about. It just makes them look stupid.

Excuse me?! His passive-aggressive comment was directed at me. I'm only here to support my best friend, who also happens to be your sister. Got a problem with that?

Yes, if you're going to shout "That's cheating" like you did a minute ago when you know nothing about the rules.

My finger shot toward Kris's opponent. But what she did was cheating!

It actually wasn't. And I'm simply pointing out how embarrassing it is for Kristen to have to listen to you shouting ridiculous accusations without any legitimate basis.

After the game, I asked Kris and she agreed with me that her opponent hadn't been playing fair. Vlad was unnecessarily being an ass.

That wasn't the first time he had acted like a smart-ass either. He always provoked me like that. He started with something condescending that triggered my anger and then would somehow manage to make me look like a brat for arguing without knowing when to stop.

I hated him so much.

Holding my stance, I looked up. Way up to his thin lips, straight nose, and green eyes that reminded me so much of damp moss after the autumn rain. Had he always been this handsome? He was better looking than I'd remembered. It irked me to realize that I didn't find his face repulsive.