

Chapter 1

On the Road

Cather bolted upright with a gasp, jerking from sleep so suddenly that it almost hurt. Momentarily disoriented, she stared around the cabin of her tiny Bug, her heart pounding, trying to remember where she was, why she was there, and how she'd gotten there. Also, and maybe most importantly, she wondered why she wasn't driving even though the car was moving.

Then, her gaze fell on Hermes where he sat in the driver's seat, one hand on the wheel and the other on his lap. His gray seat belt stretched tight across the darker charcoal sweater covering his lean, muscled chest, and he was watching her with those deep, silver eyes.

She relaxed.

"Are you all right?" he asked. His familiar voice was filled with concern above the low hum of the Bug's engine.

"Yeah." Running a hand through her hair, which was mussed from sleep on one side and dampened with drool, she scooted up in her seat until her back was straight. "I was just dreaming about you giving me my memories back, that's all."

"So you don't remember anything yet?" he asked, turning back to the front.

"No, not yet. How long is it supposed to take?"

"Honestly? I'm not sure," he replied, tapping the steering wheel with one long, pale finger. "I've stolen many people's memories over the years, to keep them from knowing about me, or the other gods and goddesses, or the curse. But I have never given them back."

"So how do you know that it worked?" she asked, her brow furrowing in confusion.

Keeping one eye on the road in front of them, he turned the other back to her and fixed her with a look. “Because I felt it. Didn’t you?”

She bit her lip, remembering the feeling of invisible warmth that had started at her temples and spread throughout her entire head. Crossing her arms, she slouched against the armrest. “Yeah, I did. I guess that means we just have to wait, huh?”

“Well, you don’t have to look so put out about it,” Hermes teased, shooting her a dazzling, white-toothed grin before turning back to the wheel again.

The glowing clock on the dashboard read 5:30 p.m., which meant that she’d been asleep for most of the day. Normally, that would have meant a headache, or at the very least, a groggy lethargy. However, either because of the intensity of her dream or the surge of adrenaline that shot through her veins every time she looked at the Book Keeper and Messenger of the gods sitting next to her, she felt neither.

Outside the vehicle, it was still raining a steady, relentless pitter-patter that had been falling since they’d left Hawkinsville earlier that morning. The small, clear blue drops splattered against the windshield like iridescent alien bugs, filling her vision so that Cather could only see the yellow line a few feet in front of the car.

The wipers swished back and forth, back and forth, first smearing them then erasing them as quickly as they appeared. Their muffled *whoosh-thud* seemed to beat in time with her heart.

“Sorry.” She blushed, straightening up again. “I guess I’m just impatient, that’s all. I mean, it’s not like I really want to remember getting hurt so bad that I almost died, but...I think I need to, you know? I need to remember everything, especially the part about you saving me.”

“Why that part especially?” he asked, giving his turn signal to go around a particularly slow station wagon that was driving in the middle lane.

“Because I think that it’s part of the reason why I love you,” she replied.

He glanced at her again in surprise as he switched the blinker back off.

“Why would you say that?”

“Well, it was the first time I saw you,” she shrugged, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“Yes, so it was.”

“Was it the first time you saw me?” she asked, blinking over at him.

He bit his lip, as if he didn't want to upset her any more than necessary. Cather understood why. She'd had so much put on her in the last few hours that all she wanted was to curl up under the covers of her bed, pull her pillow over her head, and hide out with a flashlight, a good book, and a box of cookies for the next twenty-four hours. For Hermes, who had spent every waking moment since the day he'd pulled her out of the ocean trying to keep her safe, the desire to protect her from anything else right now must have been overwhelming.

But she wanted the truth. Otherwise she wouldn't have asked him to help her find it, wouldn't be here with him right now. So when he finally he shook his head, silver hair glinting in the headlight beams of the car behind them, she was relieved. "No."

"No?"

"No," he repeated. "I've been watching you your whole life, Cather, since the day you were born. I saw your first steps, heard your first laugh and your first word: duck." His lips turned up at the corners, not quite a smile but not a smirk either.

When he wore that expression, she thought, rather than his usual serious one, his face looked softer, less angular. It also made the hook in his nose, a souvenir left over from where her great-grandmother Joan Louise had punched him and the broken bone hadn't quite healed properly, more pronounced. For the first time, she wondered why he hadn't used his divine abilities to heal it. Perhaps because he wanted it as a reminder of the pain he had caused her? That sounded like something he would do.

"I watched your dad die, saw your mom grieve while you grew up faster than you had to...and I hated it for you. Through it all, I despised the pain that the curse had caused you in a way that I never did for any of the other members of your family. But I didn't realize that I loved you until the summer of 2011."

"I remember that summer. My mom and I went to the beach, like we always did. I had a green bikini that year, and I got sick from eating too many oysters."

"Yeah, that was kind of gross." Hermes laughed with her. "But all I could think while you were leaning over the toilet was that I wished I could be there in your mom's place."

"You wanted to get splattered with gray puke?" she asked, arching her eyebrows at him.

“No, although I wouldn’t have minded so much, I think. I mean I wanted to be the one who was there for you the way that she was. I wanted to hold your hair out of your face and give you cold rags to put on your forehead and tap water to drink in small sips. I wanted to lie with you after you were done, until you fell asleep, and then hold you all through the night to make sure that you were really better.” He shrugged his shoulders, a small, almost incredulous smirk on his lips. “That was when I knew for sure that I would do anything for you. And I would’ve gone to you then, the next day, when you were well again, only I couldn’t.”

“Why not?” she asked, drawing her eyebrows together. She could feel the tiny wrinkle they made in the center of her forehead at the top of her nose.

“Because Zeus forbade all the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus from consorting with mortals eons ago, after Prometheus, the last of the Titans, betrayed our race by giving the gift of fire to the earliest humans. The power of that element changed those who accepted it into demi-gods, a race of half-human deities with fantastical abilities and appearances, the strength of immortality, and the lifespan of a regular mortal. For centuries, Zeus tried to destroy them, with fires and asteroids, floods and earthquakes, volcanoes, even wars. But their powers proved too strong, too resilient, for even the King of the gods to overcome.

“So instead, he banished them to a new realm, which he created as a mirror to this one, and built a barrier between them to keep any of the demi-races from ever returning. After that, he made the decree that gods and goddesses were to stay on Mount Olympus, and mortals were to stay on Earth. I, as Book Keeper and Messenger of the gods, and Hades, ruler of the Underworld, were the only exceptions. Anyone else who broke that law without Zeus’s permission would feel intense pain in their feet with every step they took on solid ground. Not to mention they would be subject to punishment by death, so naturally, no one did. Even I was careful to keep my contact with humans at a minimum...until that day when you fell.”

“And you saved me,” she whispered, her awe at his tale morphing into horror. “Did Zeus—?”

“Find out?” he finished for her. “No, at least not at first. I returned home after saving you and wiping your memory to protect the both of us. For the next three years, I continued to serve him as I always had. But when your eighteenth birthday drew near, I knew that the time had come to tell you the truth about your

family's star-crossed curse. So, I left Olympus and came to Hawkinsville, where I sought you out. The rest is, as they say, history."

He shot her a playful grin, and she frowned, crossing her arms over her chest.

"So you did hit my Bug on purpose that day!"

"Um...yeah," he admitted, and she shoved him, hard enough that he felt it but not hard enough to move the wheel since the road was wet.

"Hey!" he protested, chuckling despite her furious expression. "At least I paid to have it fixed, right?"

"Yeah, but you couldn't have thought of a better way for us to meet?"

"It was improvisational," he replied, faking a haughty tone. Then he glanced at her. "Plus you didn't come across as the easiest person to get close to, so I went with what I had."

She scrunched her nose up at him, sticking out her tongue. But what little annoyance she'd felt at this new tidbit of knowledge was already gone. "Whatever. I can't believe you were such a stalker."

"Hey, if it weren't for this stalker, you wouldn't be alive right now," he pointed out, and she sobered.

"I know. Sorry."

"No, it's fine," he reassured her. Reaching over, he took her hand, lacing his warm, graceful fingers through hers, and she gave him a grateful glance.

"Thanks. So...the whole intense pain in your feet thing. Now that you're not here under Zeus's orders anymore, can you feel it?"

"With every step," he replied. Only the low undertone in his voice let her know how bad it really hurt, and she tightened her fingers around his.

"And the punishment by death? I guess that's real too, huh?"

"Extremely real."

"Should we be worried about being hit by a lightning bolt anytime soon?" she asked, glancing out her window at the stormy sky above.

Hermes shook his head. "No. Judging by the weather, Zeus has known about my betrayal since the day I arrived in town. I think if he was going to smite us, he would've done so by now. He's not famous for controlling his temper."

"Yeah, I can see that," Cather replied, watching as a giant, jagged bolt of lightning split the sky. It was followed seconds later by a thunder boom so loud it seemed to rattle the car.

“Indeed.” Hermes winked at her out of the corner of his eye. Seeing a blue and white sign advertising several restaurants ahead, he gave his blinker and got off at the next exit. Turning off the freeway, he pulled into the parking lot of a twenty-four-hour breakfast joint and cut the engine. “Come on. Let’s go get something to eat.”

“Sounds good to me,” Cather agreed, unbuckling and following him as he got out of the vehicle. “I’m starving.”

Chapter 2

Brinner

Hand in hand, they walked into the restaurant. The cooler, air-conditioned atmosphere, so much larger than that of the cramped space inside the Bug, hit them in the faces like a solid wakeup call.

Only two booths were occupied, both by men wearing grease-stained clothing. If Cather had to guess, she would have said they were the drivers of the two large rigs outside. An older, haggard-looking waitress greeted them in bland tones from the hostess stand.

“Hi there, welcome to Donnie’s House of Breakfast, where pancakes and eggs are our specialty. How many will be in your party tonight?”

“Just two,” Hermes replied.

Nodding, she grabbed two menus from the shelf below her and led them across the restaurant to a booth on the other side.

Without having to ask one another, Cather and Hermes slid into the same seat, close enough that their knees were touching. After setting the menus down on the table in front of them, the woman left without another word.

They had a few minutes to look at the menu before a waitress, much younger and perkier than the hostess, came up and asked if she could take their orders. Or at least, that was what it sounded like she said. She was smacking loudly on a piece of bright pink gum that was nearly the same color as her short, spiky hair, obscuring her words and making it difficult to understand her.

She reminded Cather of Patsy, one of the girls in her best friend Abi’s band, *Devilish Delilahs*. That, in turn, made her think about Abi, who she hadn’t even had the time to say goodbye to before leaving home with Hermes.

As far as best friend rules went, this was a huge no-no, and one that Abi would be sure to ream her out for if it wasn't remedied ASAP. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her cell phone and brought up the familiar picture of the burgundy haired hippie on the screen.

Hermes noticed. "What are you doing?"

"Calling Abi to let her know that I won't be in school for a while and that I'm okay. Is that all right?" Cather arched her eyebrows at him, belatedly realizing that secrecy might be the best route to go on this one. Her finger paused above the green call button. "I don't want her to get hurt or anything."

"No, for Zeus to hurt a mortal simply because they're associated with you would mean breaking his own law, and he's nothing if not prideful. It should be okay. Just keep the specific details to a minimum."

"Okay." Without giving him time to change his mind, Cather dialed the number and raised the rectangular, gold-bedazzled device to her ear. Abigail Brickwood picked up on the third ring.

"Cath! Hey, girlfriend, I was wondering if you were going to call me! We didn't really get a chance to dish about Hermes showing up at your party last night, and I've been waiting to hear from you for hours. You have to tell me everything that he said while you guys were out on the dance floor so I can relay it to Whitney and Rachel before Monday!"

"Um..." Cather hesitated, not quite sure what to say. Beside her, Hermes arched his eyebrows in question, and putting her hand over the mouthpiece she whispered, "She wants to talk about you."

"So tell her." He shrugged. "Just leave out the part about me being, you know, a god."

"Right," she drawled. As if it was that simple.

Uncovering the mouthpiece, she pressed the phone back to her ear in time to hear Abi speak again. "Cather, are you still there? Hello!"

"Sorry, I'm here. I just...lost you for a second. This place has bad reception."

"What place? Where are you?" Abi asked, sounding confused, and Cather looked around, hemming and hawing.

"Um...I'm at...I'm at Donnie's."

"Oh, you mean the all night breakfast place in Byron?"

"No, actually we're right outside Atlanta, in Locust Grove," she admitted.

“What? Why are you there? And what do you mean, *we*? Wait, are you with Hermes?”

“Yeah, I’m with Hermes.”

“Like on a date with Hermes?” the hippie pushed in her usual persistent, enthusiastic way. Cather glanced at Hermes again before replying.

“Yeah, I guess so. Listen, Abi.” She leaned forward, putting her elbows on the table and muffling her voice as much as she could while still remaining audible. “I’m going to be out of town for a while, okay? If it’s not too much to ask, I need you to cover for me on the squad and get my school work together so that I can make it all up when I get back.”

“What? What do you mean you’re going to be out of town for a while? I thought you were on a date!”

“I am on a date. It’s just...” Cather paused, trying to think of the best way to put it so her friend would understand. “It’s kind of an extended date. Hermes is...taking me to see my family.”

“Your family,” Abi repeated. “As in, like, your aunt and cousins and all?”

“Yeah, exactly.” She seized onto the excuse with both hands. Lying had never been her strong suit, and Abi had the uncanny ability to know when she was being untruthful. She would have to hope that the fact that she was here and the hippy was back in Hawkinsville would be enough to convince her this time. “He wanted to meet them, and my mom said it was okay, so we went ahead and left this morning.”

“You couldn’t have waited for a better time? Like say, fall break?” Abi asked, sounding so put out that Cather felt a twinge of guilt for lying to her.

“No,” she replied, knowing she sounded lame but unable to help it. “We had to go now because...because they’re all going up state, to, uh, New York City, for Thanksgiving, and Christmas too this year. If we’d waited, we wouldn’t have had another chance to see them until the summertime.”

“And your mom didn’t go with you?”

Miles away or not, Abi was starting to sound like she didn’t believe her, which only made Cather lie all the harder.

“No, she has to work. You know that.”

“So she let you go off on a road trip to Atlanta with some guy you just met? That’s...that’s...well, its plum ridiculous is what it is! You and I both know that your mom is nowhere *near* that trusting when it comes to boys, and for that matter,

neither are you, no matter how big of a crush you have on this one!” Abi’s voice turned coaxing. “What’s really going on? It’s okay. I’m your best friend. You can tell me. I promise. Are you in some kind of trouble? Because if so you know I’ll come get you—”

“No, Abi, I’m fine,” Cather cut her off, making her voice as firm as she could without sounding rude. “We’re just going to visit my family, that’s all, okay? I wouldn’t lie to you about this, or anything else.”

“Fine.” Abi sighed, giving in. She still sounded like she didn’t quite believe her. But they’d been best friends long enough that Cather knew she knew not to push. “What should I tell the squad?”

“Just tell them what I told you, all right? That I’m out of town visiting family and I’ll be back as soon as I can. It’ll be fine. You know the routines, and you’re the co-captain, so you can totally fill in until I get back.”

“Whatever. Just...just be safe, all right?” said Abi, taking on a tone of worry that was as out of place as the pack of lies growing between them. To Cather, they felt like something solid and heavy in the pit of her stomach, as if she had already eaten and gotten too full. It wasn’t a good feeling.

“I will, Abi, I promise.”

“Okay. Talk to you later, then?”

“Yeah, talk to you later.” Ending the call, Cather stuck her phone back in her pocket with a sigh.

Hermes watched her, his eyes like slate beneath the diner’s fluorescents. “I take it that didn’t go too well.”

“No.” Cather ran her hand through her hair in frustration. “She doesn’t believe me. As a matter of fact, she’s probably on the phone with my mom right now trying to confirm my story. Ugh.” She sat back against the red pleather booth with a sigh. “I hated having to lie to her. We’ve always told each other the truth, always, even back in sixth grade when she liked Danny Zeekman and I didn’t because he would pick his boogers and put them in my hair.”

“I remember,” Hermes whispered.

“Right.” She glanced at him, giving a short, wry laugh. “Because you were watching.”

“Yes.” He studied her face, as if he was trying to gauge if she was angry with him. He must have decided that she was, because a moment later, he apologized. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I get why I had to do it. Besides, it’s not like she would have believed me anyway. I mean, come on.” She shot him a mischievous smile. “My boyfriend’s really a Greek god who’s helping me break a star-crossed curse that’s plagued the women in my family for centuries? That’s kind of a hard pill to swallow.”

“Boyfriend?” Hermes repeated softly, looking deep into her eyes.

She arched her eyebrows at him. Her heart skipped a beat at the thought that she might have misinterpreted his feelings for her. “Well, aren’t you?”

“I am,” he replied, and she sagged in relief then sat up straight again as he added, “At least for now.”

“Right, because I have to marry this descendant of Pyramus, whoever he is, in order to break my family’s curse.”

“Yeah.”

She swallowed hard, attempting to clear her throat so that it didn’t sound like she was talking over a frog. “I won’t love him, you know. I might have to marry him, but it doesn’t mean I’ll love him. So we can still be together. There is such a thing as divorce now-a-days, you know, and even though I was raised to believe that marriage is a sacred, spiritual bond that shouldn’t be entered into lightly...even though marrying someone for the sake of breaking a curse I can’t tell anyone about then leaving them to be with you might get me excommunicated, or at least shunned...I think our circumstances are what my mom would call extenuating, and...I would risk a lot more than having to do Sunday bible study on my own for you.”

“I understand that you feel that way now, and hearing you say it means more to me than you could guess.” Hermes leaned forward, his hair falling into his face. “However, signing a few pieces of paper at a courthouse is not going to be enough to break the curse. Thisbe and Pyramus were soul mates, which means that to have the same kind of connection with Pyramus’s descendant, you will need to marry him on a spiritual level, not just a physical one. For you with your Catholic faith, that means being wed in a Catholic church by a priest. I also know that you have two pieces of Thisbe’s soul inside of you along with your own, and that they will be drawn to Pyramus’s descendant because of the blood that runs through his veins. You won’t be able to keep from loving him.”

“I think you’re wrong,” she replied, knowing in her heart that he had to be. It didn’t matter who performed the marriage between her and Pyramus’s descendant

or where the ceremony was held. There was no way she could ever love anyone else as much as he loved him. Lacing her fingers through his again, she squeezed. “But we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, okay?”

“Okay,” he replied. But he sounded so sad, looked so forlorn when he said it that her heart broke a little bit at the sight, and she wanted to hug him, to kiss him, to touch his face and reassure him of her feelings.

Only she didn’t get to, because the waitress chose that moment to bring their food.

“Here you go. Two stacks of cinnamon pancakes with eggs, hash browns, and bacon. Enjoy!” Setting the plates on the table in front of them, she sashayed back to the kitchen.

Briefly Cather thought about picking up the conversation again, but it was too late. The moment was broken. Maybe there would be another time to talk about it later, but not right now.

Besides, she really was starving, she realized, as the smells of cream cheese icing, cinnamon sauce, and buttermilk pancakes smothered in maple syrup reached her nose, making her stomach growl. So letting go of Hermes’s hand, she picked up her fork and ate in silence as he did the same beside her.

Chapter 3

Fiddlesticks and Feathers

Cather was stuffed when they left the restaurant an hour later. Along with her regular sides of eggs, bacon, and hash browns, she had eaten two helpings of the cinnamon pancakes, plus drank an extra-large glass of water. It was a lot of food, even for her.

However, since she didn't know if they were going to stop again to eat, or if they were going to drive straight on through until they reached Massachusetts, she'd wanted to be prepared. Hunger was one thing she did not deal well with.

Now, however, she was regretting it as she jogged through the rain behind Hermes to where he'd parked the car. Her stomach jostled uncomfortably with every step.

"Did you get enough to eat?" he asked as they reached the doors and put her key in the lock.

"Yeah, I'm good," she groaned, rubbing her belly. At least it didn't look as swollen as it felt. "I probably won't eat again for a week."

"Great. Then except for bathroom breaks we should be able to make it there without any more stops."

Turning the key, he opened the driver's side door as she agreed.

"Sounds like a plan."

Leaning inside, Hermes pushed the button below the window, unlocking her door. Pulling the handle back, Cather started to get in. Then she paused.

Through the rain, she could just make out the silhouette of a large gray owl sitting on top of the metal railing that lined the walkway leading up to the diner's double glass doors. Its silver eyes watched her through the downpour, their depths

wide and unblinking. She fought the urge to shiver, feeling suddenly as cold as if the rain hitting her head had turned to snow.

“Huh.” She frowned, still staring at the owl. It looked, she realized, exactly like the one she’d seen outside the library that day when Hermes had first told her his name. And the one she’d seen that night at the playground, right after she found out who he was. Not that she thought this one was the same owl or anything, but still... “That’s weird.”

“What’s weird?” Hermes asked, straightening from where he’d been cranking the engine to look at her overtop of the small, round vehicle.

“That.” She pointed. “I mean, don’t birds normally take shelter in weather like this because they can’t fly with their wings wet? Plus, it’s still daylight out. I always thought owls were nocturnal.”

His forehead furrowing in confusion, Hermes turned to see what she was talking about. When his gaze landed on the owl, he jumped so high that Cather looked up, worried that Zeus had decided to throw down a lightning bolt after all. When he spun back to face her, his eyes were blazing. “Get in, now!”

“Why?” she asked, sliding into the seat and slamming the door shut behind her. Buckling her seat belt, she looked over at him as he threw the Bug in drive. “What’s wrong?”

“That’s Athena.” Flooring the accelerator, Hermes steered them out of the parking lot, narrowly missing a large blue truck that was coming in. The driver beeped at them as they merged into traffic.

Normally, the fact that Hermes had almost side-swiped another vehicle in her car would have set her off, especially considering that she’d just gotten it fixed after he totaled it two weeks ago. Now, though, Cather could only stare at the god in surprise. “You mean, as in the goddess of Wisdom and Battle strategy, Athena?”

“Yep, that’s the one.” Hermes glanced in the rear view mirror and cursed under his breath. When Cather looked to see what had bothered him, she saw the gray-feathered owl flying above the cars behind them. “She looked different the last time I saw her, of course, but she was in her human form then, and she always did like to use her wings to get around faster. I would bet my last drachma that she’s been ordered to follow us.”

“Deities can change forms?” Cather’s brain swirled as she processed this information and stared at the god next to her, trying to picture him as an animal.

Did he have antlers, a tail? “Can you? And what makes you think that?” she asked as he changed lanes, putting a green truck between them.

Flapping her wings, the owl picked up speed, flying faster than an ordinary bird would have been able to.

“No, only Athena has that ability. The weirdest thing about me is my wings, and you already know about them. As for why I think she’s been ordered to follow us, it’s simple really,” he replied, changing lanes again. “If she hadn’t been ordered to follow us, then she wouldn’t be here, and we would already be dead.”

They were behind a large chicken truck now, with three vehicles between them and Athena. Cather pinched her nose, closing the vents as the smell of dirty chicken feathers wafted into the Bug. The owl’s eyes narrowed, their silver depths glinting.

With a screech that they could hear through the glass and aluminum siding, she dove. Her claws raked across the top of the red vehicle in a warning blow that made Cather wince. Then pulling up again, she narrowly avoided hitting the large green ramp sign as they drove back onto the interstate.

“Hey!” Cather rolled down her window and leaned out, shouting after the owl. “This is a new paint job!”

“Seriously?” Hermes exclaimed, glancing over at her as he steered them around a pair of motorcycles. “That’s what you’re worried about right now, your car? Because trust me, nothing you say to her is going to matter. The woman doesn’t know the meaning of the word boundaries! I should know. She’s my big sister.”

“What?” Cather exclaimed, worry over her vehicle forgotten as she looked over at him. “The goddess of Wisdom and Battle Strategy is your sister? But that would mean...!”

“That Zeus is my father? Hera is my mother, and Ares, Artemis, Apollo, Hephaestus, and Dionysus are my siblings? I know! I’ll explain it all to you when we have a little more time!”

One of the motorcycles hit the brakes, causing him to swerve and nearly hit a van at the last minute. Cather shrieked as her lap belt tightened, jerking her back against her seat. One hand wrapped around the handle above the passenger side window for support, she looked over at him, wide-eyed. This time he ignored her as he evened them out and kept going.

The speedometer needle was touching ninety.

“Well, whether she’s your sister or not, I don’t care how she feels about boundaries!” she protested, clutching the handle so hard her knuckles turned white. “I just don’t want to have a wreck and die!”

“Relax.” Grim-faced, Hermes reached across the bench seat and pulled her to him. Her seat belt stretched to its full capacity across her stomach, making her regret the big meal she had eaten even more. “I’ll never let you die.”

Her heart double thumping at the weight behind his promise, she glanced over her shoulder out the rear windshield. The owl glared back.

Her face was so close to the glass that Cather could see the tiny black dots of her pupils among all the silver and she shrieked in surprise.

At the sound of her cry, Hermes looked over his shoulder. His mouth hardened into a long, thin line. “Hold on.”

Swerving left, he steered them into one of downtown Atlanta’s early tunnels. They made it, barely, though the driver’s side mirror broke off as they scraped the wall. A shower of orange sparks danced outside Hermes’s window.

“Ah! My car!” Cather screamed, burying her face in his shoulder as the vehicle jostled back and forth. She felt his arms move as he turned the wheel back to the right, straightening the car, and she lifted her head just in time to watch as they avoided being flattened by an oncoming gas truck. Hoping that this had been enough to lose Athena, Cather looked out the rear again.

“Unbelievable! She’s still behind us!” she exclaimed, watching as the gray owl swooped through the open mouth of the tunnel. Water dripped from her wings onto the roofs of the vehicles around them, and Cather didn’t know whether to be terrified or impressed at how fast and how well she was keeping up. She settled for both.

“I know. Don’t worry.” Hermes glanced in the rearview mirror, his eyes darting back and forth between the oncoming bird and the semi they’d just passed. “I can lose her.”

Without warning, he slammed on the brakes. Her seat belt gave, enough that Cather slipped forward, before locking in place. Only Hermes’s arms around her waist kept her from smashing her head into the dashboard, and she leaned into him, grateful for his overprotectiveness.

The owl flew to a rapid halt in response, her wings flapping wildly as she tried to correct, to turn around and get back on their tail. Seizing the opportunity, Hermes put the car in reverse.

Looking over his shoulder, he drove backward, weaving in and out of cars that honked in protest. Some of the driver's screamed obscenities out their windows, but either Hermes did not hear them or he was too busy trying to catch up to the semi to pay them any mind. Although why he was trying to catch the truck, she didn't know.

Cather clutched his shirt in a death grip, so tight that her fingernails dug into his skin beneath the fabric. She was beyond scared now. She was panicked, and the cars and trucks and vans flying past the windows in a blur were only making it worse.

Up ahead, Athena had corrected herself and turned around, so that she was speeding after them again. Cather could hear the whistle of air as it flew past her wings through the open window, which he hadn't taken the time to roll up. She could hear the sound of her beak *clicking*, saw her claws open wide, and she glanced at the boy beside her with a shout. "Hermes!"

"I know!"

Slamming on the brakes again, causing a tan station wagon to go around them with a blast of its horn, he threw them back into drive. Then, no sooner had they pulled up next to the eighteen-wheeler, he floored it, sending them shooting straight into the truck's path.

"Hermes!"

"Trust me!"

"Ah!" Cather screamed, squeezed her eyes shut. The squeal of metal filled the air, along with the loud blast of the truck's horn, and she braced herself for the impact she knew was coming. Only it never came.

Instead, Hermes jerked the wheel, hard enough to push her into a sitting position, and spun the Bug around in a circle like something out of an action movie. Flooring it again, he sped back out of the tunnel as Athena flew right into the path of the semi. Opening her eyes, Cather watched in the rear view mirror as the owl's eyes widened and she tried to fly backward, to correct the mistake she must have realized that she'd made.

Crash!

Her feathered body hit the large windshield hard, shattering it in spider-webbed cracks of glass that filled the air like broken stars.

The truck swerved, first one way, then another, and for a second Cather thought that the driver would get it back under control. But his vision must have

been obscured, because one of his tires hit the embankment. The momentum of the impact carried the truck onto the guardrail with a screech of metal on metal.

The semi teetered for a minute, threatening to tip over. Then with another loud smash it hit the ground on all eighteen wheels again and rocked to a standstill, smoke pouring out of its metal tail pipe.

The moment a gap in traffic appeared, Hermes jerked the Bug around again, pulling a U-turn in the middle of the road. Flooring the gas pedal once more, he raced back through the tunnel and out the other side.

Too much in shock to do anything but try to remember how to breathe—inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale—Cather trembled beside him, one hand still wrapped around his shirt. Glancing in the rearview mirror again, she searched for any signs that Athena had survived the wreck and was coming after them. When she didn't see her, she turned to the god beside her, taking in his rigid posture and the too-pale color of his knuckles where he gripped the steering wheel. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, or rather, I will be as soon as we put some distance between us and Athena."

"Distance?" Cather repeated, not sure she'd heard him correctly. "As in, we're going to flee the scene of a wreck we caused? Hermes, we can't do that! It's illegal, not to mention that truck driver could be hurt! We have to go back!"

"And say what? Sorry, Officer, I was trying to ditch my immortal sister, who was following us to stop us from breaking a centuries old curse cast on my girlfriend by my father?" He gave her a look that said get real. "They would never believe me, and even if I lied and said I swerved to avoid hitting a bird, I could still get locked up if the driver decides to press charges. Then you would be at Athena's mercy, and we would be no closer to breaking your family's curse than we were when we left Hawkinsville. Besides," he added, as the unmistakable wail of sirens filled the air. "It sounds like the police are already on their way. There's nothing we could do for the truck driver that they can't."

Cather glanced in the rearview mirror once more. Several cars had pulled over on the side of the road beside the wrecked semi. As she watched, their drivers climbed out, craning their necks to get a better view of the accident. In the distance, she could see the red and blue flashes of police cruiser lights as the authorities headed for the scene, and she slumped back against her seat with a sigh. "Fine. I guess you're right. But can you at least slow down a little? If you're trying not to get arrested then speeding probably isn't the best idea."

The speedometer inched back to eighty, then seventy, as Hermes reached across the seat and gave her hand a squeeze. "I think I can manage that."

Cather squeezed his hand back before turning to look out the window, where the sky was a mess of angry-looking storm clouds, as the highway sloped upward, carrying them over a hill toward the Atlanta skyscrapers.