

M.W. Muse

Goddess
Legacy

What do you do
when the legacy
you seek isn't
the one you are
destined to have

Goddess Series Book One



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Godness Legacy

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Cover art by JTLW Design © February 2013

Penning Princess Publishing

Maumelle, AR 72113

www.penningprincess.com

ISBN: 978-0-9882130-1-2

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Dedication

To JT Lacy for all the hard work you did (and still do) behind the scenes to ensure this new endeavor became a reality. Branching out on my own is very scary and exciting, but I wouldn't have been able to take this leap without your love and support. To fellow author Parker Kincade for, among so many things, being my writing rock. I honestly don't know how I published books before you came into my life. You are truly awesome. To my assistant, Carla Gallway, for taking on all those tedious tasks, so I can focus more on my craft. To my editor, Brianna Robertson, for your meticulous eye and no-nonsense approach on whipping a manuscript into shape. Each time we work together, I learn something new.

And to all my fans who followed me over to this new facet of my writing career and giving M.W. Muse the same love and support you have on my works in other genres.

This book is for you.

Chapter One

“*Surprise!*”

Legacy jumped and nearly dropped the new shoes her friend Calli had just bought at the mall. She'd been dragged there after school with dubious taunts of makeup and bling-bling, but had spent the majority of the time feeding Calli's shoe fetish. And now they were at Legacy's house, in the doorway, staring at a living room full of her friends and some people who worked with her guardian Lissa. Great. A surprise birthday party. Legacy should've known she couldn't sneak by the not-so-big one-seven with just a nod from her non-traditional family and a night with her BFF.

Especially when she'd told Lissa she didn't want a birthday party. But she'd learned long ago that Lissa did whatever she wanted anyway. She'd been Legacy's guardian since the night her parents had died when she was just a baby, and the woman had always been there for her, even on silly celebrator days like this one. Lissa and her mom, Dora, had been friends when Legacy was a baby, so she usually told her stories to help her feel close to her mom on occasions like this. Legacy feared today would be no different. Only now she'd be donning a party hat for trips down memory lane.

Legacy smiled as she turned to Calli. “You must be in on this. I can't believe it.” She was shocked her friend had kept the secret, not one of Calli's strong suits.

Calli Rhodes was her best friend, and had been for many years. She was one of those girls that came from money and lots of it. Being the fashionista she was, she regularly wore the latest fashions and rarely wore the same outfit the same way twice. Even though Calli came from money and would probably never work a day in her life, she never seemed to let that go to her head. Of course she usually made comments about other people's clothing, but that was really the extent of her snobbery.

“Guilty.” She fluttered her eyelashes with false innocence.

Legacy hugged her and then turned around to gaze at the room, which had been decorated perfectly. There were streamers draped across the ceiling, balloons gathered in bunches and disbursed throughout the room. A large, personalized sign hung on the far wall that read *Happy Seventeenth Birthday Legacy Kore!* Everyone was grinning. Some already had plates full of finger foods while others had plastic cups with red punch. It was definitely a party in full swing.

Lissa had one table set up with a several gifts, a different table with all kinds of snacks, and another table in the middle of the room with two birthday cakes. One was obviously a homemade chocolate cake, probably the one Lissa had mentioned making this morning as a ruse to throw Legacy off any party trail. The other cake looked like no ordinary cake. In fact, it didn't look like a cake at all. If it weren't for the icing, it would have just looked like a centerpiece as it was made into a shape of a beautifully wrapped present with a billowing bow atop it.

Wow. Legacy felt tears form in the corners of her eyes as she fully took in the grand scene. Lissa had gone through a lot of trouble. Just for her. The woman in question stepped over and threw her arms around Legacy, hugging her tightly.

“Happy birthday, Legacy.”

Olive squealed next to her. “Are you surprised?”

Olive Borne was Lissa's other ward. But unlike Legacy, Lissa had adopted her. There had been talk about Olive's mother putting her up for adoption before she was born, but no specifics were ev-

discussed. As far as the family was concerned, Lissa was Olive's mother, though Lissa had been very open about the fact Olive was adopted. Olive was a couple of years younger than Legacy, and the three of them made up their happy home.

"Totally," Legacy said, smiling at Olive while blinking in an effort to keep the tears from falling to her cheeks.

Truth was, she'd been very surprised. Lissa usually made her feel special on important occasions but she had never done anything like this before. Legacy had always thought that she didn't like surprises, but she had to admit to herself this felt pretty nice.

"How long have you been planning this?" she was finally able to ask Lissa, knowing her voice wouldn't crack.

"A few weeks. Calli called me. It was her idea. Olive and I wanted to do something special, but Calli didn't think you'd willingly agree to a party, so she figured a surprise party would be just what you needed."

Legacy glanced over at Calli. "You plotted this," she accused teasingly, and several people in the room laughed.

"I didn't plot. I just planned," she said angelically.

"So the trip to the mall. The shoes. The makeup." *The speech about how I should make a pass at Adin*, Legacy added in her head. "That was all just a setup?"

With a wink and a nod, Legacy had gotten her answer.

She turned toward the few people who were standing the closest and thanked them for coming. Several of the other people in the room got more snacks and talked amongst themselves in small groups. She started to feel a little more relaxed as the previously undivided attention she'd held turned to a more suitable level of interest and she continued to scan the room as small talk commenced.

And then whipped her head around to double-check what she thought she'd just seen.

Legacy gasped at the confirmation and then coughed to cover it as she quickly turned away, barely remembering her manners to excuse herself from the recently started conversation. But it was hard because she couldn't pretend she hadn't just seen who was here. At her house. Celebrating her birthday.

Adin Sheppard.

Gods, ever since she was little, she'd had it bad for the guy, and the fact that his grandma lived next door caused a few mini heart attacks for Legacy over the years—the only thing hotter than Adin was Adin *shirtless* doing yard work for his sweet grandma. Yum.

Legacy had wondered when she'd get to see him again since today wasn't only her birthday but the last day of school...and Adin had been a senior who graduated a couple of weeks ago. He returned today with the rest of the graduating class for the annual parade and float completion between the leaving senior classmen and the rising seniors. She'd put on her favorite outfit—a green dress with just the right accessories. Her official eye color was blue, but her eyes tended to change colors from blue to green depending on what she was wearing. *Hopefully*, her eyes had cooperated and had gotten on board with the color scheme when she'd seen Adin.

And see him she did. But she hadn't been the only girl in school eager to ogle one last time. Ellen and Kate had been fawning all over him and his new Camaro like they didn't already have boyfriends. Yeah, it had bothered her in a way she didn't want to analyze. It wasn't like he and Legacy had even

been an item. He was just outgoing and charming in such a way that it seemed like second nature to him, making her insides melt every time he gave her any attention. Not to mention the fact that he was unbelievably gorgeous. Not that looks mattered to her, *much*. But the way he looked should be considered a sin. He was tall with dark blonde hair and piercing blue eyes. He didn't even look like a senior because none of the other seniors looked anything like him. It was as if he'd stepped out of her personal fairytale.

Thankfully, Calli had mentioned to the crowd this morning that it had been Legacy's birthday and Adin had overheard. Even though it had just happened, the events would forever be burned into her brain...

"It's Legacy's birthday." Calli looked over at Legacy. "It's a day for celebration."

"It sure is," she heard, coming from behind her in an unmistakable masculine voice. "Happy birthday, Legacy."

She turned around to look at the guy who'd just wished her a happy birthday, but she already knew who had said it. She could hone into that voice from several feet away and still go weak in the knees.

"Thanks, Adin." She smiled as their eyes met, hoping she didn't look like a star-struck idiot. "Nice car."

"Thanks. My parents promised me a new car when I graduated, but since I decided to go to college close by, they used the extra money to surprise me with something nicer. You know, now there's no room and board to worry about." He swayed onto his toes. "So...do you have any plans for your birthday?"

"Um, not really. I mean, Calli and I are going shopping after school, and Lissa is baking me a cake for tonight."

"Well, you look stunning," he said as he took in her green dress. "That color really brings out the color of your eyes. They're so beautiful."

"Thank you." Don't think anything of it. He's nice to everyone, she reminded herself. "Er, you look nice today, too."

"You look nice every day, but thank you."

"Legacy," Calli interrupted. "We need to get ready for the parade."

"Oh, okay." Thank heavens she didn't have time to process what Adin just said and make more out of it than what it truly was.

Adin smiled at her and took a step closer. Her heart tried to break free from her chest, and she felt blood rushing to her face.

"I hope you have a wonderful birthday, Legacy," Adin whispered to her in such a sincere manner that it made her feel like they were the only two people in the parking lot. He stroked her arm as he stepped even closer in a move that she was sure to end in an embrace.

She was silently screaming in anticipation. Sure, Adin had hugged her before, but she never got used to it.

He held her tightly for a brief couple of seconds, and, somehow, she managed to move her numb arms from her sides to around his back before he stepped away.

"Good luck on your float," Legacy said to Adin to try to distract herself from the wonderful smile

of his skin. "You'll need it. Ours is really cool."

"You too." He laughed and winked at her as she turned and walked...

Oh yeah, she'd never forget that brief conversation or the way he'd made her feel. And now Prince Charming was standing in her living room.

Since everyone seemed to be comfortable mingling with each other, Legacy figured she wouldn't be missed or gawked at if she tried to have a private discussion. She walked toward Calli who was still talking to one of the other guests, but she excused herself and walked over when she saw Legacy with a frown.

"What is it?" she asked with concern in her voice. "You look constipated or something."

"Did you, er, invite everyone here?" Legacy asked, ignoring the constipation comment.

"I invited some of our friends from school, but Lissa talked to the people in your neighborhood and at her office and invited them. Why?"

"Oh, I'm just surprised to see some of these people."

Calli started to turn around to scan the room. Legacy grabbed her arm. "Don't."

"Huh? What's with you?"

She knew Adin's grandmother lived next door, so he probably found out about the party through her. Legacy didn't want her friend to make it obvious they were talking about him. Even though she apparently hadn't figured that out yet herself.

"Act natural. Look around the room *casually*. I'll meet you at the buffet table." Legacy couldn't even say his name out loud to explain.

"Er, okay...um, are you going to explain this to me when we get over there?"

"Uh-huh, just act natural."

Legacy left her side and walked over to the closest group of people that were engaged in their own conversation. She joined in—they were talking about an upcoming storm. At least it wasn't a topic she had to be fully involved in, so she could participate lightly in the conversation while watching Calli take in the room.

Then Calli looked in Adin's direction. Luckily, he wasn't looking at her because she looked utterly shocked. She composed herself quickly and made her way to the buffet table. Legacy politely excused herself and walked over to the table, grabbing a plate for snacks as she walked to the end where Calli stood.

"I take it you didn't invite him?" Legacy asked as she grabbed a pair of tongs to get some food.

"No."

"I figured that much when I saw you look at him."

"Are you okay?" she asked in a timid whisper.

"Yeah, just shocked. His grandma probably told him about the party since you said Lissa invited the neighbors." How he found out about the party was quickly taking a backseat to another issue though. "Did you see who was standing next to him?"

"Yep. Ellen and Kate." Ellen Battles and Kate Travis were best friends who attached themselves to whomever they felt was popular at any given moment. Considering this was a small school and they really didn't have cliques, Ellen and Kate tried their best to form them. Legacy liked them just fine

but didn't trust either of them. They were both the type of girl who would stab you in the back to go ahead—Ellen more so than Kate. Since Calli was obviously the richest girl in school, they tended to gravitate toward her. Legacy was just an unfortunate aspect of that vanity they had to endure, but she pretended she was oblivious just the same.

“Uh-huh.”

“Don't worry about them. Just be happy he's here.” Calli put her hand on her hip and smirked. “You know, there's nothing wrong with liking someone, Legacy. I've liked lots of guys.”

“Yeah, but you usually date the guys you like.”

Calli chuckled. “True, girl. But maybe now you can make a move on Adin like I suggested earlier.”

Legacy felt herself blanching as she shook her head frantically.

Calli sighed. “Okay. Take it easy. I won't press it anymore tonight. But don't worry about Ellen or Kate either. They both have boyfriends.”

“Like that matters...”

“I know you don't like either of them, but really, I don't think they mean any harm.”

“They are fully capable of causing any amount of harm they want.”

“True. But they don't know you like Adin. He's the best looking guy in school, or at least he was before he graduated. They're probably just enjoying the eye candy.”

“You know they have to be wondering what *he* is doing at *my* party.”

“Which is something else you don't need to worry about. Jeez, you could stroke out from the stress. I'll go figure out what's been said and make sure they understand his grandma is your neighbor.”

“If you bring it up, it'll look like I'm hiding something from them.”

“No, it won't. I'll be really casual about it.” Calli grabbed her arm. “C'mon, we need to keep walking around so it doesn't seem like I'm hogging your attention. People will think it's rude if you don't personally thank everyone for coming tonight.”

“I know. Just give me a sec.” She took a deep breath and then nodded.

Calli threw on a quick smile to remind her she was supposed to be sporting a happy face, and then they disbanded. Legacy approached the closest group to chat. This conversation started out better as it wasn't about the weather, but then it turned to her, and she had to put on her game face. These were people Lissa worked with. Legacy usually saw them a few times a year, every year, at picnics, holiday parties, and other office functions that family members were invited to. They asked her about school plans for the summer, and the types of classes she was taking next school year. They commented on how much she'd grown since the last time they all saw her, and she was the gracious hostess, answering all their questions attentively and blushing at the comments about her growth spurt.

When Lissa and Olive walked over to Calli and they both walked over to the cake, Legacy turned to face them.

“It's time for Legacy to blow out her candles,” Lissa announced as the crowd quieted down.

Legacy quickly popped the last of the chocolate covered strawberries she'd retrieved from the buffet table into her mouth and made her way over to them.

Calli took pictures of her behind the two cakes while Lissa lit the seventeen candles on the chocolate cake. She smiled as she scanned the room, locking eyes with several of the guests. She saw Ellen's forced smile and Kate's more natural one.

She saved Adin's face for last because she knew when she saw him looking at her, it would be difficult to keep her composure. When she allowed herself to look at him, he looked incredible. His hair slightly disheveled. As she glanced from his hair to his face, his piercing blue eyes locked on hers. She couldn't go any further. He could have been nude for all she knew. His face lit up like they were long lost friends seeing each other for the first time in too many years. Her heart pounded in her chest, and she forced herself to keep breathing regularly. She tried to feign a little shock, pretending this was the first time she saw him and really feigning for the benefit of Ellen and Kate since she didn't know what they were thinking about Adin being here. She then returned his smile. Even though she knew she needed to speak to everyone here, she definitely knew now that she would have to go talk to him as soon as she could.

Luckily, Lissa finished with the candles and turned to her, getting her attention. She was able to unlock her gaze with Adin to watch Lissa as she started the crowd with the birthday song.

She laughed appreciatively, and once they were finished singing—some shouting—the rendition she bowed her head and held her hair back while she extinguished the candles with her shaky breath. Flashes blinded her while she rose back to a full standing position, and she kept cheesing while the cameras finished clicking in her direction.

Lissa quickly removed the hot candles and started cutting the cake. She handed Legacy the first piece, and she took it with her away from the table. Calli grabbed a piece and came over to the wall she was leaning against while the rest of the crowd lined up to get their pieces.

“What did you find out from Ellen and Kate?” Legacy asked through her teeth while she kept her smile on her face.

Calli turned her back to the crowd so that she could face her and speak without anyone seeing her expression.

“Nothing we didn't already expect. He told them he found out from his grandma.”

“Do they suspect anything else?”

“I don't think so.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“Yes. He thanked me for taking the initiative on the surprise party and said I did a wonderful job.”

“Did he compliment you? *Personally*, I mean?” She didn't know why, but she just had to know.

“Um...I don't think so. Well, he did say he liked my dress.”

“Okay.” She was only slightly appeased that Adin hadn't compliment her friend like he had before earlier, but she was really happy Ellen and Kate seemed as if they weren't expecting anything out of the ordinary, even after seeing Adin here tonight.

“I know you don't want to hear this now, but maybe...it'll give you a little courage.”

“Ugh. What?” She looked away, irritated.

“You assumed Adin's grandma invited him, and he apparently confirmed that assumption to Ellen and Kate.”

“And?” She knew those things, so she couldn’t see Calli’s point.

“And...I don’t see his grandma here.”

Her eyes shot back to Calli. “What?”

“I looked around the room, and I do admit there are some people I don’t recognize from Lissa’s office, but as much as I’ve been over here, I know I’ve seen his grandma a few times. Unless she’s grown about twenty years *younger*, she’s not here. It looks like Adin heard about the party...and came here alone.”

“I don’t want to hear your theories as to why he would do that.”

“Fine. But you know you have to speak to him before he leaves. You’ve already spoken to ju about everyone else.”

“I haven’t talked to Ellen or Kate yet,” she defended herself.

“Because they’ve been talking to Adin. I’ll get them away from him, so you can have a moment alone.”

“No! I mean, you don’t have to do that.”

“Legacy, you *have* to talk to him. Besides, I know you want to talk.”

“I do,” she confessed, looking back down again.

“Don’t worry about it. Just keep telling yourself he’s just a friend, and that’s all he’ll ever be. Calli couldn’t help but smirk at her own sarcasm as she spoke.

“Fine. But I want to talk to Ellen and Kate first.”

Calli nodded as she stepped away from her to help Lissa and Olive with the cake.

Legacy walked over to Ellen and Kate while she played with the icing on her piece. “Hey, girls! Thanks for coming tonight. I really appreciate it.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t have missed this for the world,” Kate said with a genuine smile on her face.

“Yeah, Calli asked us if we would come,” Ellen responded, a little less enthused.

“Where’s Thad and Seth?” she asked, trying to keep the conversation flowing.

Thad was Ellen’s boyfriend. He was a typical jock. He was a better athlete than any other guy at school, but he was still a jerk.

Seth was Kate’s boyfriend. He was more likable. He was also an athlete, but was nicer to people than Thad was. He and Seth were pretty close, so she guessed it made sense they would date two girls who were already best friends.

“They’re out destroying the senior float with Alex and Laos, and I don’t even understand why those two are there. They can’t stand each other,” Ellen said in a bored manner.

“Some of the juniors didn’t like the fact that they lost, so they’re taking out their frustration on the senior float,” Kate said, slightly embarrassed.

“Well, we’re the seniors now. I guess they can get rid of that monstrosity if they want to,” she teased, keeping the conversation light.

Ellen perked up and nodded. “I see Adin Sheppard made it to your party.”

Uh-oh. “Yeah, his grandma lives next door.”

“That’s what we heard,” Kate said, slashing her gaze to Ellen, trying to defuse her friend’s intention.

“Hey, gurlies. What are you talking about?” Calli interrupted, coming to Legacy’s rescue.

“Oh, nothing. Just school. They told me about the juniors demolishing the senior float,” she added with a wicked laugh, hoping to divert Ellen from a conversation she knew she’d rather have.

“I heard about that,” Calli responded, giggling and then turning to Ellen and Kate. “Hey, why don’t you come over here and look at this cake. Cake Bake did a fabulous job on the fondant bow.”

Calli easily got their attention away from her. Ellen was all about Calli, and Kate hung on every word Ellen said, so it wasn’t as difficult as she thought it would’ve been to drag away Ellen and Kate from the side of the room that Adin stayed in.

She glanced in Adin’s direction. He was by himself against a wall finishing his piece of cake. She took a deep breath, psyching herself up as she walked toward him, but then she saw he had on a different shirt from this morning. He had been wearing a fitted blue, button-down shirt with the top few buttons unfastened. Gods, he’d looked so hot as he casually leaned against his new dark blue Camaro. Blue car, blue shirt, blue eyes, against a clear blue sky. He’d blended in perfectly with this beautiful day.

But this shirt wasn’t blue. She hadn’t noticed before because when their eyes locked, she hadn’t been able to look away from his gaze. No, this one was green—a beautiful emerald green that matched her green dress. They were matching! *It must be a coincidence.* She tried to keep herself from shaking as she neared. It was already too late to keep her hands from sweating, assuming she could even keep that from happening anyway.

His eyes flashed up and locked onto her once again. She forcefully kept her composure and smiled at him.

“Happy birthday.” He smiled as he took his free hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulder in a sideways hug.

“Thanks.” She stepped back out of his embrace.

He took her empty plate with his and set them aside. “You have a little icing on your lip,” he said as he gently took his index finger and wiped it away.

She couldn’t breathe. He was touching her lips, and his skin smelled so good. And then to her utter disbelief, he took that same index finger and put it in his mouth to taste the icing. She laughed nervously, glanced away from him, and then looked back into his eyes.

“Have you had a nice day today?” he asked as he stepped closer and took not one, but both her hands into his, holding them at their sides.

“Er, yes. Calli and I did some shopping after school.” She didn’t know what to say. The hugs she could try to get used to, but him touching her lips and holding her hands—these were a first in all the years of their friendship.

“How about the party? Are you enjoying yourself?” he asked, his head cocked to the side, eyes opened wide.

“Absolutely. This was a wonderful surprise.” Maybe she was feeling brave. Maybe she just knew she needed to thank him for coming. Either way, she knew she was going to have to keep her composure as she continued. “I’m really happy that you came tonight. That, too, was a wonderful surprise.”

“I wouldn’t want to be any other place,” he said, smiling and gazing into her eyes. “You look so radiant. ~~Everyone has been commenting on how beautiful you are. You should see yourself. You’re positively glowing.~~”

“Oh, it’s just my party face.” She shrugged, trying to lighten the conversation. “I’m actually horrified at all this attention. If I let my real emotions show, everyone will think I’m some ungrateful brat.” She laughed.

“I doubt that.” He gave a half-smile.

She continued to stare at him, not knowing what to say. He was still holding her hands. His hands felt so strong, even though he was holding hers gingerly.

“Did your grandma not come tonight?” There, that was a good question.

“No, tonight’s her bunko night. I’ll probably have to pick her up. It was her night to bring the wine, and she got an early start.” Adin chuckled.

So she hadn’t shown up because she had other plans. Not because Adin had told her to stay away so he could come to Legacy’s party and seduce her with his charm. And it would be so easy for him, what with his sincere personality, piercing eyes, delectable scent, strong arms...*Stop it!*

“Um...that sounds like fun.” Great, now she sounded like a babbling idiot.

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never played.”

“Does she play often?” Why were they still talking about his grandma?

“Yeah, once a week.” He nodded as he answered.

“That’s good. I mean, it’s nice that she has a hobby.” Oh for the love of...

He took in a deep breath and exhaled sharply. She assumed he wanted to steer this conversation back away from his grandma just about as much as she did.

“Can I ask you a question?”

He could do whatever he wanted. “Sure.”

“Well, it seems like whenever I give you a compliment, you don’t seem to believe me. I was wondering why that is?”

“What?” Her hands started trembling.

“Do I make you uncomfortable?” he asked with sincere confusion.

“No, of course not.” *Get yourself together!* “Um, I think I’m not used to getting compliments from anyone. It’s not you.”

“It’s just that I say things sometimes without thinking them through, and I’ve noticed that. um...usually happens when I’m around you.”

“Oh.” Huh? What was he trying to say?

“Legacy, it’s time to open your presents,” she heard Calli say as she walked toward them.

Adin kept hold of her hands as Calli approached. She looked over at Legacy, and she glanced at Adin. Then she peered at Legacy’s hands in Adin’s hands and stared back at her.

“Um, whenever you’re ready,” she modified.

“I’m ready,” Legacy said in a slow, flat tone.

Adin slipped his hands away from hers while she was still looking at Calli. She faced Adin, and he was watching at Calli with a pleasant expression on his face.

So this was it. Her moment with Adin Sheppard was about to be over, and she wasn't sure when she'd see him again. "In case I don't get to see you before you leave," Legacy started to say, and he flashed his eyes back over to her, "thanks again for coming tonight."

He had a strange look on his face. Almost sad, but he was smiling and nodding at her. He then abruptly put his arms around her waist, and she put her arms around his neck for what she assumed was a goodbye hug. He held her tightly like this morning, but for several seconds longer. He turned his head so that his face was buried in her hair. If she wasn't in complete and total shock at how close he was, feeling his breath on her, she probably would've been squealing internally.

"Happy birthday," he whispered to her one more time.

She couldn't help herself—she stroked the back of his neck at the bottom of his hairline with her slick palm as they pulled away from each other.

"Thanks," she whispered back to him.

She walked off in a daze at Calli's side, sat at the table with a frozen smile on her face, and opened her gifts in a fog of surrealism. After the first couple of gifts, she was able to focus better, and she remembered to thank everyone individually. She got a lot of cash and gift cards. Lissa's coworkers had chipped in and gotten her an iPad mini, so she couldn't wait to download her Kindle and Nook apps. Lissa had gotten her a beautiful silk red dress. It had brought Legacy to tears because she knew it was much more than Lissa could afford, but she couldn't wait to find an occasion to wear it. Adin had given her a watch that had a sun with crystals that reflected the sun's rays during the daytime and a moon with those crystals turning to stars during the nighttime. She had never seen anything like it. She tried not to act too shocked at his gift, but she wasn't sure if she fooled anybody. The funniest surprise gift was from Calli because Legacy hadn't seen it coming. The trip to the mall this afternoon hadn't been a distraction after all. The red shoes were for Legacy, not Calli. Her BE knew what Lissa had gotten her and figured she'd use that as a reason to buy her expensive shoes and Calli and her accessories.

After Legacy finished unwrapping her presents, everyone said their goodbyes and left. Adin had sneaked out shortly after she'd opened his gift. Calli stayed to help clean up the remnants of the party, so she'd been the last to leave. Once the house was empty, Legacy kicked off her shoes and plopped onto the couch. Lissa sat down beside her, but when Legacy looked at her, she frowned. Lissa seemed somber, which didn't jive after throwing a party. She was being eerily quiet.

"What's wrong?" Legacy asked as she sat up.

"I have something to tell you, and I can't figure out the right way to do it."

"Why don't you just come out and say it? I'm sure whatever it is it'll be okay."

"It's about your mother."

What? Was Lissa about to tell her another story about her mom? If so, she surely didn't sound as if she were about to regurgitate one of those trivial, generic ones. She sounded like she had something meaningful to say.

Lissa sighed, and an ominous feeling crept up Legacy's spine. "Your mom didn't die when you were a baby." Legacy gaped at her, and Lissa cupped her hand. "She had to leave. She left you in my care because she was worried about your safety."

“So she’s still alive?” Legacy barely breathed. Could this really be true?

“It’s not that simple. Your mom was a powerful woman. There were people who tried to hurt her. She knew she couldn’t keep you safe with her, so she trusted me to look after you.”

“I’m not following.” She could feel the tears forming in her eyes.

“It’s time you learned the truth. What I’m about to tell you will change your life forever.”

Chapter Two

Legacy sat there reeling, waiting for Lissa to explain.

“What do you know about Greek Mythology?”

“Um, not much. Why? What does that have to do with my mother?”

“According to the myths, Gaia is the goddess of earth, the great mother of all. All gods and goddesses were born of her. One such goddess is Demeter, the goddess of harvest and the circle of life and death. She gave birth to a daughter named Persephone.” Lissa looked at her pointedly. “But some refer to her as Kore.”

Legacy gasped. “That’s my last name.”

“That’s because *you* are Kore. Well, one version of her anyway.”

“What?” Legacy screeched.

“Greek Mythology is not the story of legends. There are actual gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus to this day. Some go way back to the beginning of time, others are newly created. But gods don’t always descend the way people normally do, giving birth to children who then give birth to their own children and so on in a vertical fashion. They also descend horizontally. The original gods and goddesses created by Gaia continue to create offspring. They’re just not always offspring in the sense that you think they are. What I mean is they can also create a likeness of themselves with other gods.

Legacy was too confused and too shocked to say anything. It was hard enough keeping up with what Lissa was trying to tell her, much less grasp the point of this conversation.

“The path to ascension for a new god begins on the first day of the seventh year of birth and culminates on his or her eighteenth birthday.”

Did the air suddenly leave the room? That had to be why Legacy couldn’t breathe. She shook her head, refusing to wrap said head around this information.

Lissa nodded. “Yes. Sweetie, your mom, Dora, is a goddess. Whether she descended after several generations that originated from Demeter or if Demeter created Dora directly from herself, doesn’t matter. Either way, you are her offspring with the legacy to one day be a goddess.”

Legacy busted out laughing. “OMG, you really had me going there for a minute.” She stood up and she continued to laugh. “Not cool that you brought up my dead mother, but I’ll give you props for creativity. Goddess? Right.” She chuckled as she walked into the kitchen to grab a soda.

Lissa followed her. “I know this is a lot to take in. Your mom didn’t want me to tell you yet, but I felt it was for the best.”

Legacy slammed the refrigerator door shut. “Stop talking like my mother isn’t dead.”

Lissa pursed her lips. “You can get mad at me all you want. It’s not like I can tell you much more anyway. I’m on a need to know basis, and apparently, I don’t need to know all the specifics. It’ll be up to you to learn what you can about your change.”

“My change?” Legacy asked mockingly. “Like what? Am I going to grow wings now? Is that it?”

“You’re thinking of angels.”

Legacy scoffed as she opened her can of soda. She wasn't going to listen to this crap anymore.

“When you're ready to talk, you know where to find me. I can't promise I can answer all your questions. I have no idea if you were created for a reason to accomplish some goal or if Dora just wanted a daughter and then realized you'd be safer away from her until you ascended. But I'm here to help you in any way I can. The sooner you accept what is happening to you, the safer we'll all be.”

Safer? Whatever. Legacy stormed up to her room and slammed the door. Happy freakin' birthday to her.

* * * * *

With a faint image of a dream still lingering, Legacy suddenly awoke to the sound of thunder. Her head was foggy, but she managed to sit up and stare out her window. She saw nothing. In the seconds that passed, the rest of her body adjusted to the sound of the thunder and rain in what seemed to be a start to a gloomy day. She tried to think back to the dream she'd just had, but just as she stared out her window and saw nothing, she saw nothing of the lingering images left in her head.

She glanced over at her clock out of habit and slowly slid out of the bed. After slipping on her house shoes, she carefully walked over to the window to watch the rain pouring from the clouds. As she stepped up to the window, a flash of lightning illuminated the dark morning sky, and a crash of thunder erupted in an ominous sound. She stared a few seconds longer in awe. For those living in this part of the country, storms were a common occurrence, but their power never ceased to amaze her. Storms never bothered her like they did some people. Maybe she just enjoyed the distraction that storms provided. Distractions from the mundane processes of regular life. This one was definitely a distraction now. She wasn't studying the swirls of the clouds, the angle of the rain, or the distance between the sounds of thunder. She was really mulling over the events that transpired yesterday. The storm just gave her something to focus on externally.

She could have stayed at this window and continued to stare all day. Staring at the storm development was easier than understanding what Lissa told her last night. At least the storm made sense.

As she stood still staring out the window, questions flew in her mind at the same speed lightning flashed across the sky. Too many questions and not a single answer. She didn't even know how to begin to comprehend all the questions she had about her mom. Or whether to believe anything Lissa had told her. If her mom was really alive, why had she left for Legacy's protection? And if Legacy suspended reality for like a second, what *changes* had Lissa been talking about?

She sighed and turned away from the window. She didn't have time to dwell on this. She had to get dressed and go back to the mall because she'd totally forgotten about filling out job applications while she was there yesterday. Fantasies could wait. She got dressed and headed downstairs. Reality was more important right now.

When she neared the kitchen, she smelled blueberry pancakes. Her favorite.

“Why are you cooking breakfast? We have a ton of leftovers,” Legacy asked Lissa as she pulled out a chair and sat at the table.

“I wanted to use these blueberries before they spoiled.”

She looked at her in disbelief.

“Fine. I wanted to do something nice for you. I didn't know what kind of mood you'd be in when

you got up this morning, so I figured I'd take the initiative to try to overtake any negative feelings."

"And you think blueberry pancakes would do the job?"

"I put the blueberries in the shape of happy faces," Lissa said with a timid laugh while handing Legacy a plateful. "I'm really sorry about last night. I think I probably shouldn't have said anything."

"Why?" Was she going to confess it was all a big joke?

"Because now you'll be worried about it."

"Worried? What do you mean by that?"

"I meant wondering, not worried," Lissa said as she put her plate on the table and sat down.

"Of course I'll be wondering about it. How could I not? You told me my mother is alive, that she's a goddess, and that I'm going to turn into one too."

"You're not *turning* into one. You're changing. It's different. And you must learn to accept this because your life is at stake. *Other* lives are at stake."

"So you're really going to stick with this story? You know, they make pills you can take for craziness."

"Legacy, you being upset and confused isn't going to change the truth. You have a year to go ready. That's not a lot of time."

"And what exactly is the truth here? That my mother is a goddess, and I'll be *changing* into one by my eighteenth birthday? Is that it? Or is a ghost going to come guide me to the mother ship where legions of trolls will dance in my honor?" Lissa opened her mouth, but Legacy stood and raised her hand. "Save it. I don't have time to deal with this nonsense right now."

Legacy stormed out of the kitchen, grabbed her purse, and left the house, slamming the door behind her. Lissa had some nerve. Legacy was so furious she was shaking. She could barely put on her seatbelt or get the key in the ignition. When she managed to get the car started, she tore out of the driveway and headed straight to Calli's house. She knew she had to get started on her job hunt, but she was in no condition to tout her assets and abilities to a hiring manager. She needed to talk to someone, and Calli would get a kick out of this.

Legacy's mind reeled as she drove to her best friend's house. When she got into the ritzy neighborhood, she couldn't help but be a little distracted by all the opulence. It never seemed to get any easier seeing how the other half lived. To say that Calli's house was big would be a huge understatement. She lived in the most lavish neighborhood around, which had been developed by her real estate guru parents. She'd said they had picked this land because they were inspired by the beautiful pond at the back of the property. Even though the land wasn't developed at that end, the area that *was* developed had lot sizes of at least five acres. The road into her neighborhood was lined with Bradford pear trees in the median and manicured shrubs along the sides. All the houses—or rather estates—had gated entrances. There weren't many kids in this posh community, but of them, Calli was the only one who attended Oak Grove, a public school in the Pulaski County system. Her parents attended the same schools, and they obviously turned out well. Legacy was sure they also believed that attending public schools would help keep Calli grounded in reality. But her black American Express Card helped her realize what reality she belonged to.

Legacy entered the code at the gate and parked in the circle drive out front. Calli opened the door as she jogged up the big stairs.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

“I just felt like visiting before I start begging people for a summer job.”

“Did you have fun last night?” Calli asked, ignoring her comment. “I thought it was a great turnout. Everyone commented on how beautiful you were, and it seems like you really raked in the goodies!” Legacy didn’t miss the glance to her wrist as they made their way inside the house and into Calli’s bedroom.

“Yeah, the party was great. I did have a wonderful time.”

“Adin seemed really happy to see you.”

“It was nice seeing him there last night.”

“Wow.” Calli stared at her with obvious shock on her face.

“What?”

“I didn’t expect you to respond so easily to me bringing up Adin. I figured I’d have to talk some sense into you about how serious his attraction is to you.”

She grimaced and looked away. “It *was* really weird having him there last night,” she admitted.

“But you’re not going to deny that something is going on...I mean, on his side too.”

“You know nothing is going on.”

“After last night, it’s pretty obvious he has feelings for you.”

“I think you might be right.”

“I can’t believe you’re not denying this!” Calli sat down on the edge of her bed, and Legacy followed. She sat quietly for a moment and looked down at her hands as she spoke.

“It’s not like it matters now. He’s out of high school. Going to college.”

“Like that matters! Girl, there’s nothing sexier than a hot college guy for a boyfriend,” she said with a giggle.

“The only thing sexier than a hot college guy as a boyfriend is if that hot college guy were Adin.” She looked back at Calli with a crooked smile.

“At least you’ve accepted the fact you two like each other more than just friends.”

“I said I think you might be right about that, not that I believed it completely.” She looked at Calli more seriously.

“I saw him holding your hands. I’ve *never* seen him do that with anyone, not even those anorexic skanks he brought to all those dances. How are you able to have a coherent conversation about him after last night? I figured you’d be screaming at the top of your lungs all morning while I tried fruitlessly to calm you down.”

It was true, Adin had come to all the school dances with beautiful girls that looked as if they belonged in his league, and he never brought the same girl twice. He obviously had a stash of ladies on the side ripe for his picking. And Calli was just as aware of these facts as she was. But talking about Adin cooled her frustrations with Lissa and her silly story about goddesses and myths.

Legacy smiled. “Okay, so it was totally squeal-worthy.”

“So what did he say? I want all the deets!”

“He told me I was radiant,” she said as her grin got bigger.

“Aw, that was very nice.”

“And, um, he asked me if he made me uncomfortable.”

“What?” Calli’s eyes grew wider in sudden disbelief.

“Yeah, he said something about complimenting me and mentioned that he sometimes says things to me without thinking.” She fidgeted and strained to maintain eye contact with her friend.

“So when he compliments you, he’s speaking without thinking first?”

“I think so, but I don’t think he was just talking about the words he said. I think he also meant his actions.”

“Why do you think that?”

She knew she had to be honest with her. “Because after you interrupted, he pulled me into a hug and *whispered* in my ear.”

“No way!”

“Uh-huh. And right after I walked over to him, he told me I had some icing on my lip, and er, he wiped it off with his finger and then put that finger in his mouth.”

“He touched your lips?” Calli screeched as she jumped up off her bed.

“Yes.”

“So he touched your lips, hugged you twice, held your hands the entire time, and whispered in your ear? Did I miss anything?”

“Nope, I think that’s pretty much it.”

“So why are you so calm? He’s apparently into you. And I know that’s what you’ve always wanted.”

“Well, besides the fact that he’s still just a friend,” Calli started to interrupt, but Legacy put her hand up to stop her. “Something else happened last night to trump that.”

“What could possibly have happened that would’ve topped that?”

There was no easy way to buffer this. “Lissa told me some crazy story about my mom being alive.”

Calli stared at her in total astonishment. “I’m sorry, what?” she said as she sat on the bed again.

Legacy told her everything, right down to the changes and the goddess crap. Gods, she found ridiculous even talking about this.

“Seriously, I’m not sure if I should get her some mental help or scream at her for using my mom this way.”

“Hmm, okay, hear me out here. I wonder if there’s some truth to your mom being alive, and Lissa is covering it up with the silly story so you won’t be totally shocked when you see her again. Maybe your mom is in some kind of Witness Protection Program or something if she left you for your protection. That happens.”

“In the movies.” Legacy rolled her eyes.

“Well, I think we should try to figure this out. There has to be a valid reason Lissa told you that story. Maybe she needs you to read between the lines or something.”

“I wouldn’t know where to begin. Besides, I really need to find a job before the summer comes an end,” Legacy said sarcastically.

“I might actually be able to help you with that. This morning, I heard her mom talking to the neighbor. She owns that new alternative medicine shop on Main Street, and she has a son our age. Calli wagged her eyebrows before continuing. “Anyway, she said something about hiring seasonal help to get the store up and running. Apparently, she’s opening a bunch of other stores across the state, so she’s going to be out of town a lot.”

“I know where it is. That would be perfect, actually.”

“Let me grab my purse, and I’ll go with you. It couldn’t hurt to drop my mom’s name in the conversation. Maybe she’d hire you as a favor to her new neighbors.” Calli shrugged as they both got up. Once Calli grabbed her purse, they took her BMW to the store. Even though the storm had subsided, the rain was relentless. Legacy looked out into the rain while Calli drove, and she thought about some clever responses to possible questions the owner might ask her.

“I see the only gift you’re wearing today is the watch Adin gave you,” Calli mentioned, distracting her from her previous train of thought.

“Mm-hmm. I need a special occasion to wear the red dress that Lissa gave me and the red shoes that you gave me,” she said, trying to make light of the fact that she was wearing Adin’s beautiful gift.

“Can I see it? I didn’t really get a good look at it last night. I assumed you didn’t want me calling too much attention to it.”

“I’m glad you showed some restraint,” Legacy said, laughing. She took off the watch and handed it to Calli.

“Wow. This is really something. I’ve never seen anything like it before. It’s very pretty,” she said, handing it back to Legacy.

The rain eased as they pulled into the parking lot of the store. They hurried inside and went straight to the cashier working the front register.

“I’m Calli Rhodes,” Calli began. “Is Ms. Gorgos in? My friend Legacy would like to fill out an application.”

“She’s in the office. Go down aisle two and you’ll run right into the door.”

“Thanks,” Calli said, and then she turned to her. “Let’s go.”

They walked down the aisle, and her palms started sweating. She tried to maintain some level of composure, but was having extreme difficulty. She’d never had a job before. Well, not one that didn’t include babysitting, chores, or yard work.

Calli knocked on the door to the office while she stood patiently by her side.

“Come in.” She heard a quiet voice respond.

They walked into the office, and Ms. Gorgos stood up from behind a desk covered with papers. She was strikingly beautiful, except for the 80s style perm she was sporting. But even her unruly curls couldn’t distract from her other features.

“May she help you?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m Calli Rhodes. You met my mom, Beth, this morning.”

“Yes, of course. Your mother was very gracious and inviting. I’m Petra Gorgos. It’s a pleasure to

meet you.”

“I heard you tell her you’ll be hiring seasonal help, and my friend Legacy is currently looking for a summer job.” Calli nodded her head in her direction, and she smiled at Ms. Gorgos.

“Well, Legacy, do you have any experience?”

Ugh. “No, ma’am, but I’m a quick learner.”

“That’s good. You’ll need to be. How soon can you start?”

A shock ran through her body as she realized she was giving her the job. “She can start whenever you need me.”

“How about Monday? Can you be here at nine o’clock?”

“Sure.”

Ms. Gorgos rummaged around her desk and found a stack of papers. “Take this paperwork and fill it out. You can bring it back with you on Monday.”

“Okay. Thanks, Ms. Gorgos, I really appreciate this opportunity,” she said graciously as she shook her hand.

They left her office and started for the front door when a guy caught them both by surprise.

He was tall with dark hair and green eyes. He looked to be about their age, but Legacy knew she had never seen him before. Judging from Calli’s reaction, it was apparent she’d never seen him before either. He was strikingly handsome and built like an athlete. She’d only seen one guy better looking than him in this town, but this guy could definitely hold his own. Calli and she stood, both dazed while he carried what looked to be heavy boxes with ease into the front door of the store.

He glanced over at them. Legacy knew she was still staring, and Calli’s mouth was still open in shock. He cocked his head to the side and flashed a quick, beautiful smile as he put the boxes on the counter.

“Yale,” he said to the girl at the counter, “can you tell my mom I’m bringing in the supplies she ordered?”

“Okay,” she said eagerly, gazing at him. Apparently, Yale enjoyed the view too.

He glanced back over at them and started walking in their direction. She collected herself, but Calli hadn’t found her composure yet.

“Hi. I’m River Rysaor,” he said, waiting for a response from either one of them.

Calli must have checked out because she wasn’t quick to engage him. She usually had no difficulty with conversation, regardless of how absurdly handsome the guy was.

“Hi, River. I’m Legacy, Legacy Kore. This is my friend, Calli Rhodes.”

The way River looked at her while she spoke actually gave her butterflies in her stomach. Reflexive reaction, she guessed.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Legacy. You too, Calli,” he said as he stuck his hand out toward each of them for a quick handshake. She shook his with ease. Calli had a little more difficulty feigning nonchalance.

“What can I do for you?” he continued as he glanced back and forth from each of them.

Calli giggled a short laugh that she quickly suppressed.

“Er, nothing, thanks. Ms. Gorgos just gave me a job,” she offered to get the attention off Calli while her friend pulled herself together.

“Really? That’s great. We need a lot of help around here.” He smiled, locking his eyes with her once again before glancing back at Calli.

“So, will you be working here, too?” he asked her.

“No. I came here for moral support,” Calli was finally able to comment.

“That’s too bad,” he said, and he actually sounded like he meant that.

“Don’t worry. You’ll still see me around. Legacy’s my best friend, and apparently, you and I are now neighbors.” Calli had finally slipped back into her regular, flirtatious personality.

“Well, that’s nice to know. Maybe I’ll come borrow a cup of sugar sometime,” he said, responding to her coy demeanor.

“You can come borrow anything you want.” Calli flashed a sly smile at him.

Okay, now Legacy was beginning to feel uncomfortable for a different reason.

River just laughed at her response and turned back to the counter to pick up the boxes.

“It was a pleasure to meet you both,” he said, but his eyes—though they lingered on Legacy’s a little longer—seemed almost confused.

Calli smiled and shot her eyebrows up and back down. Legacy’s smile was somewhat more casual as they turned to leave, assuming the chilly breeze she just felt was the air kicking on.

Once they were in the car, they weren’t even out of the parking lot before Calli started. “Oh my. Have you ever seen anything more beautiful than that?”

“Yes,” Legacy said matter-of-factly.

“Well, Adin certainly is hot, but River is fire!”

“River is definitely a looker, and he seems really nice too. At least, I hope he is if I’m going to be working with him.”

“Maybe I should get a summer job too!” Calli was still too excited.

“Nobody will believe that *you* need a summer job. If you get a job up here, everyone will know why you did it,” she tried to rationalize with her.

“True. I don’t want to come off too obvious.”

“I think it’s a little late to worry about not looking like you’re interested,” she teased.

“At least he knows he has an option,” she responded.

“Calli, he might have a girlfriend.”

“I’m not worried about that. I have a girl on the inside.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, not liking the look in her eyes.

“You’re going to find out everything about him.” And Legacy knew there’d be no getting out of that.

“Only because you’re my best friend and you *did* just help me get a job.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

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