CHAPTER ONE

MADDY

I float on a breeze through monsters, witches, celebrities, and a few costumes I don’t recognize. Hundreds of them are on the dance floor, and others are mingling outside the party tent. None of them react to my presence, but they never have any other time I’ve been here. It’s not their fault, though. I’m see-through, and they’re frozen like statues. They will remain that way until I find the one who brought me here.

Once I do, the party will begin. Everyone will have the same conversations and dance with the same partners they have all the other times I’ve visited. But it’s never dull. It’s better than rereading my favorite book.

The breeze carries me beyond the guests, and I spot her at the top of the terrace. She’s alone. It’s been a while since this dream has started here.

With ease, my light body glides up the steps and pauses beside her. She’s dressed as an angel in a flowing white satin gown. Her blonde hair is pulled back so it trickles down to her sheer fabric wings. She’s frowning while staring at the celebration, but even still, she’s beautiful. The rest of her face is hidden behind a silver masquerade mask. All that can be seen is the one thing we have in common: emerald-green eyes.

Hers show she’s strong, independent, and confident. I have no doubt in my mind it’s because she’s loved. I mean, really loved. Like the kind of loved that makes me wish this was my reality and that I, Maddy Page, were loveable. . . .

We’ve never spoken, even though I’ve known her all my life. She’s frozen like the others. But she’s different. She reacts to me. Once I enter her body, her world reanimates and I sink into the background as she takes control. I see everything through her eyes. I feel her emotions. I hear her thoughts. She’s completely in charge, and only when she decides I’ve seen enough does the night end and I return to my life. Her life is so great I often wish it wouldn’t end at all. I ease into her body, falling into my familiar role as the silent observer, and let the Dream Girl take over:

Dusk has settled over the bay, giving the evening a sense of magic—as if dreams really could come true tonight. Everyone is enjoying the party, except one. A man in a tux and devil horns has spent the last two hours weaving through the crowd but conversing with no one. I think he’s searching for someone.

I don’t know why I’m caught up in him. He’s handsome, but so is every other man here. After a few more trips around the floor, he leaves the party area and strolls along the pathway to the valet.

At the sight of my entertainment leaving, I lean on the railing and sigh.

He turns, and solid black eyes meet mine. I can’t find the will to break away, even when the masked stranger strides across the lawn and up the terrace steps to me.

“Good evening,” he says. Deep, soothing tones curl around me. There’s a touch of an accent, Old English–sounding, but it suits him.

“Hello.” Even though it was just one word, I feel as if I’ve gained back some control. I lower my gaze in time to catch a smile forming on his lips. “Are you looking for someone?”

“I was.”

“Did you find the person you were looking for?”

“Perhaps.”

I take a deep breath, and a rich spice, like a burning log over a fire, fills my airways. My body even feels warmer. It’s wonderfully calming.

“Do you always spend every party watching from the shadows?” His black eyes hold mine again. There’s something oddly comforting about their simplicity. It’s as if they’re open windows to his soul.

“Not every party. Just . . . this one.”

“Why?”

I open my mouth to tell him it’s not his business, but the words disappear when I see the intensity in his eyes. He honestly wants to know my response.

For reasons I can’t fathom, I want to tell him not only why I can’t make myself go down to the party I have fantasized about for so long, but every other detail of my life too. Even down to the name of my childhood stuffed rabbit: George.

“What if it’s not as perfect as I dreamed it would be?”

He leans closer, pursing his lips while narrowing his brows. “I do not understand.”

I sigh and resume enviously staring at all the fun taking place nearby. “Ever since I was three, I’ve had this . . . vision of how tonight would go. It’s exactly right, except for one thing.”

“What?” Heat claims me once more as he leans so close, our bodies nearly touch. This time it’s not just from inside me, but it’s also radiating from him. It’s so hot, I feel as if touching him would burn me.

I focus on a couple dressed as Romeo and Juliet. They dance a waltz on the temporary dance floor set up near the boathouse and shoreline. That. I want that.

“Dance with me,” he whispers.

My heart skips a beat, and my cheeks heat. Earlier, he had moved between the crowds of people so easily, as if he knew exactly where their movements would take them before they did. It made me want to watch him dance. But I hadn’t expected I would be his dance partner. My lips twitch as I fight a smile. “Why me?”

“Because dancing with me for one dance is better than wasting the evening up here alone.”

I turn and stare up into his eyes, trying to figure out why he would care. “Who are you?”

“You may call me the Dark Prince.”

Great. I ask for his name, and he tells me his costumed name. “Never heard of him.”

“I would know if you did,” he states matter-of-factly. “So now that I have responded to your query, what answer do you have for mine?”

At some point, I’ll have to go down there. What better way to ensure this night will be unforgettable than by dancing with him? “Okay. You win. I’ll dance with you.”

My heart skips a beat at the joy radiating from him. All I did was say yes. . . .

He extends his arm, and after a deep breath, I accept. A rush of tranquility spreads through me. I know he said only one dance, but now that’s not enough. If I get my way, we’ll be the last to leave the dance floor.

“Shall we?”

I nod, and together we join what will surely be the best night of my life.

We navigate through the dancers to the center of the floor. As his hand touches mine, an intense heat rushes through me, causing us both to gasp. It’s so much more powerful than before. He is fire, and he could easily consume me. I want him to.

“Are you all right?” he asks.

I nod again, and with that, we begin our dance. He moves with such grace, I forget my previous worries, and everyone on my periphery fades into a blur. It’s as if we were the only two people here.

A beam of light hits the horns resting in his sandy-brown hair, and I smile.

“What is it?” he asks.

“Well . . . ” I pause and try to figure out how much I want to say. “Don’t you find it strange that the man now responsible for turning this evening from tragic to utterly perfect is dressed in a costume coordinating mine?” I nod to my angel wings and his devil horns. “I’m not sure if it’s fate or a coincidence.”

He stiffens, and his mouth sets into a harsh line. “There is no such thing as coincidence—simply a series of unwise decisions made by others that led me here tonight and ultimately to you. Fate, however, does exist. But up until recently, your fate was in your own hands.”

“And now?”

“Well, as I am here holding you close, I would say your fate is in my hands.”

“Oh.” My heart beats wildly against my ribs as if it were trying to push its way out. “So . . . what are you going to do with it?”

His hand holding mine tightens, then he sends me twirling across the floor, as far as our outstretched arms will allow. An unexpected, carefree laugh bubbles out of me as I spin back into his waiting arms. For the life of me, I can’t remember the last time I’ve ever laughed like that.

“You have a wonderful laugh.” He bends me low so my wings and hair touch the floor, then leans over me—his intentions written all over his face. He’s reeling me in for a kiss.

I didn’t expect this. I’ve watched couples kiss like this and I wanted to do the same, but can I kiss him? A kiss is much more complicated than dancing. Kisses are the basis for every tragic love story. If I kiss him . . . I’ll be hooked. I can’t allow myself to fall for him, to fall for a nameless mystery.

Before our lips can meet, I turn my head, and his lips press into my cheek instead.

Even still, my body pulses with euphoric bliss.

What have I done?

I peek at him from under my lashes. His eyes beseech mine, and I know he’s disappointed. I am too. He returns me to my feet and starts dancing again.

“I’m sorry, I—” I begin.

“Do not apologize. I got caught up in the moment, though I suspect it would be a common occurrence if I were to spend more time with you.”

Never have I wanted something so much than for his statement to come true. Not just a few more dances. I want to see him again, beyond tonight. But before I can respond, something behind me causes him to stiffen. I turn and follow his gaze.

My happiness fades as a familiar couple dressed as Anthony and Cleopatra move toward us. Our time is up. It’s not fair. Even Cinderella had until midnight with her prince. . . .

I grab his chin and force him to look at me. “Before they get here, I want to say thank you. No matter how many parties I go to or people I dance with, this one will always be my favorite because of you. Thank you for making my dream come true.” I want to say more, but there is no time.

He inhales sharply. “You have—”

“Forgive my interrupting, sir,” Anthony says to my Dark Prince. “But I couldn’t help notice your enchanting companion.”

I turn away, resting my head on his shoulder to allow myself an extra moment to breathe him in and absorb as much of him as possible. There wasn’t anger in Anthony’s voice, as I would have expected. Instead it was something else. It was tense, with just a dash of hope underneath it. It wasn’t for me. Although he had called me “enchanting,” it was merely an excuse to get my Dark Prince’s attention. Anthony didn’t know it was me. So what did he really mean by interrupting us?

With reluctance, I shift my attention to Anthony and Cleopatra to gauge their mood. Anthony’s smile is tight, one I know well. He wears it whenever he’s nervous about a business deal—hoping it will go his way but unsure of the outcome. Cleopatra rubs the four champagne flutes in her hands while watching the guests around us. This isn’t like them. They’re always gracious hosts, so why are they acting so differently?

“I do hope this means you’ve accepted the new terms of our agreement,” Anthony says, continuing to stare at him.

They know each other?

The Dark Prince’s knuckles suddenly graze my cheek. I gasp as the heat overtakes my body again. He closes his eyes and sighs. When his eyes reopen, they lock onto mine. “This gathering is everything you promised, Mr. H. You are a man of your word, as am I. After much deliberation, I agree to your suggested new terms.”

“Excellent,” Anthony says, though the sentiment lacks any emotion. “A toast, then, to the end of our successful partnership.” He takes two glasses from Cleopatra and hands one to my Dark Prince. Reluctantly, he removes his hand from my cheek to accept. I release the breath I didn’t know I was holding and accept a glass from Cleopatra. I’ve had champagne at parties before, but I’ve always snuck the glass from an unoccupied tray. She doesn’t even hesitate handing this to me. Either my secret costume works better than I expected or something else is going on here.

Beneath her shimmering gold mask, her emerald-green eyes meet mine. I’m not sure, but it’s as if they’re filled with sympathy—or regret. She turns away.

The Dark Prince stares poignantly at me. “To possibilities and hope, things I once thought foolish, but now I see they cannot exist without the other.”

Our glasses clink, and I down my glass to avoid Cleopatra. She retrieves our glasses, and Anthony places his arm around her waist. “Come, dear, we must get back to our other guests. Thank you, sir, for all you’ve done for me over the years. Good luck Miss . . . ” He pauses, extending a hand toward me.

“H.,” I respond, copying in their strange greeting style.

Time slows as my father and mother change from distant to angry and frightened as they reexamine my costume and appearance.

“No!” My father and mother gasp and step back in unison. She drops the champagne flutes, and they shatter on the floor. Around us, the party stops as others turn to see the commotion.

“I’m sorry, sir, but this won’t do,” my father protests. “I won’t allow it. Pick anyone else. I invited so many for—”

“We toasted to the new deal. It is set. If you go back on your word, then the next course of action is to honor our original agreement. What say you, Mr. H.?”

My father visibly shakes before me. I’ve never seen him react like this. Especially not in front of so many people. I turn to my mother to see tears welling up in her eyes. My father turns his attention on me, and his brown eyes are misty too. “But she’s my daughter.”

I have no idea what is going on, but I get the feeling it goes beyond he and I dancing together. What has he done, and how does he know my father?

“So I gathered,” the Dark Prince says. “I will be back in a year’s time to collect your decision, whatever it may be.” He bows formally to me. “Miss H., thank you for making the evening one that I too shall never forget.” He rises, turns, and exits the tent into the dark of night.

I rush after him, but there’s nothing. It’s as if he simply vanished.

As loneliness and desperation claim her, I’m pushed out from her body and out of the dream. I wake up in my own bed. Bright sunlight hits my eyes, and I roll over to escape the intrusion. The soft green light of my alarm clock greets me, telling me it is 9:46 a.m.

After two weeks of nightmares, I finally had a good dream—I even slept through my alarm, which I had set early enough to get in a run before . . . school. I glance back at the clock again, confirming that I’d read it right the first time. Not only have I missed my run, but also my first two classes.

“Crud,” I say out loud.