

“What’s wrong, baby?” Kyros asked as he smiled.

Gretchen’s eyes grew wide.

Kyros could sense her fear. It was sweet on his lips—sinfully delectable. He chuckled.

And then she was running into the woods. Kyros was impressed with how fast she could move. Despite her short legs, she flew over the ground. He tore after her. His legs felt awkward, cumbersome. But because of his long stride, he was able to keep her in his sights.

She scrambled up and over logs, under low branches, and slogged through muddy puddles. He nearly caught up to her as she tripped and fell over a thick vine. But she was immediately on her feet again. He remembered how difficult she found climbing the stairs at the lighthouse. She sure seemed to have energy now.

He wondered for a fleeting moment why he was chasing her in the first place. Pain exploded behind his eyes as he stumbled into a tree. Why was he being plagued by headaches? He’d never had so much as a twinge of a headache in the entire 116 years of his life, but now they seemed to afflict him at every turn.

The hurt subsided, and he pushed himself away from the tree. Getting back to the task at hand, he scented the air. Gretchen’s sweet perfume was like a beacon showing which direction she was headed. Kyros took off running. His legs felt more natural, more a part of him with each step. Soon, he could hear something. It was faint at first, but then became clearer. Stumbling footsteps, gasps of air—breathing in and out, in and out...

“Gretchen, you don’t need to run from me,” he said. “I would never hurt you. I love you.” At the expression of love, it happened again. Pain, like he’d never felt before, slammed into his head. He staggered and pressed his hands against his temples. It felt like someone had opened his

skull and put an angry viperfish inside. It seemed to be trying to bite its way out with its long, razor teeth. He roared, the sound echoing across the treetops.

Understanding dawned on him. Someone had taken over his mind. Who could have done this? This was a power born of the gods. But what god would have even an errant thought for a human, much less want to harm one. A demigod? A mermaid? No, mermaids were extinct, all except for Sara, and Sara certainly wouldn't have done this.

His hand shook as it inched closer to the knife in his belt. A vision of plunging it into Gretchen's body accompanied a significant lessening of the pain. If he killed her, it would stop. He was certain of that. His flesh leapt at that thought, eager to complete the deed, but his mind fought it. Like a tsunami, pain once again slammed into him. He finally touched the knife, his fingers tapping the handle as his hand shook. Making one last effort, he made a grab for it. If he had to, he'd thrust it into his own skull. That would surely stop the torture.

"Kyros?" Gretchen's faint voice shook.

He looked toward her, and there she was—trembling, her legs looking as if they would give out at any moment. Why did she come back for him? She should have kept running. Snarling, he hurled himself up and leapt at her. He grabbed her by the throat and slammed her to the ground.

The pain was gone. He nearly shouted with joy.

A whistling sound turned his attention to the task. Gretchen looked up at him, tears springing from her eyes. Her terrified face shone pale in the moonlight, her full lips staining blue. This woman was beautiful, witty, and kind-hearted... and Kyros had never in his life wanted to kill anyone as much as he wanted to kill her.