

Charlotte Bennardo & Natalie Zaman

Sirenz



The Devil is in the Retail

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Shar

A Mismatched Pair

God, you're wearing those clunky things again? How stupid, wearing five-inch wedge heels on cracked and frozen New York City sidewalks. What if you break an ankle?

"Great shoes," I said, faking a beauty queen smile at Meg.

"I think I paid five dollars for them. They're from the seventies," she said absentmindedly.

No kidding. You should have left them there.

"Feet cold?" I wiggled my toasty toes in my crystal-studded Ugg boots. *My feet were warm, and they looked good.*

She shrugged.

Poor toesies.

Last spring, when I scored a spot in the coveted Fourth Year Live-In, a program our alternative school offers to twelfth grade students who "show promise, initiative, and vision in their chosen field of study," I was psyched. It's a sweet deal that includes the perk of on-campus housing, just like college—no parents, no curfew, and Manhattan living for nine months! Only top students are offered the opportunity. I knew I had to have a roommate, but I figured, how awful could that be?

Then I got paired with Meg Wiley.

We couldn't be more mismatched—black hair, black clothes, *old* clothes, not to mention voodoo, hoodoo, or whatever else she was into. The Academically Independent High School of New York had saddled me with a vampire out of a

1940s horror movie, and an argumentative one, too. She always had some smart-ass remark about my love of cashmere or my Starbucks addiction. As if she had no habits to complain about.

I looked at her now, clomping along the sidewalk in those outrageous wood-soled Kabuki shoes and completely black ensemble, and shuddered. On my tall and fair-skinned body, that much black would make me look like the walking dead. At least I knew my skinny jeans, ballet flats, and Victoria's Secret PJs were safe; Meg could never squeeze her curvy frame into my pink sweaters even if she wanted to, plus she only wore clothes that made her look like she was in a perpetual state of mourning. I shrugged it off.

The wind blasted us as we turned the corner of Fifth and Broadway. We bent into it, clutching our sleeves and wiping our tearing eyes. It made the holiday lights look blurry. Good thing my mascara was water resistant. Who knew who we'd meet? Lots of celebrities came to these sales. Not that Meg cared; she hated the rich and the "ostentatious."

We'd learned a lot about each other during weeks of petty bickering this fall, but I thought it was time for some sort of truce, since we had to live together for the rest of the year. There was no switching roommates at Live-In; any irreconcilable differences were resolved via removal from the program, and I was not about to let Vampirella stand between me and independence. So, as a peace offering, I called her at home over winter break and invited her out shopping. It was either that or put up with my family for the entire time, which was too depressing to consider. Meg actually agreed—with great reluctance—to come with me to an after-Christmas sample sale. One-of-a-kind creations at undreamed-of prices! Even if she wasn't interested in a designer bag, something might catch her eye.

And anyway, since she'd gotten into the Live-In program, we had to have something in common. I was determined to find out what that was. So I would be the bigger person and make the first move; we'd do a little shopping, get to know each other better, and who knew—by the end of the night we'd be swapping style tips over a couple of hot lattes. Maybe I could get her to lighten up a bit. Literally.

I tugged on Meg's coat sleeve to get her attention. "What time is it?" I asked.

She drew an ancient-looking pocket watch out of her purse. “About ten thirty.”
“We have some time to kill before the sale starts,” I said, my teeth chattering.

As Meg snapped the watch shut, her foot caught on the uneven sidewalk. But she quickly recovered.

See, bad shoes! Maybe you’ll find a decent pair at the sale.

“So let’s do something first, then eat, then go,” Meg suggested casually, as if she didn’t almost kiss the sidewalk. I suppressed a smirk behind my pink pashmina scarf. It would be too cruel to ask how her feet were holding up.

“Wait!” She held up a hand, stopping short in front of a little shop. An orange neon sign cast a strange glow against her face: *TAROT*. “I want a reading.”

“Okay.” I shrugged. If that’s what she wanted to do, I could be magnanimous as long as I was going to be warm and they kept me out of it. Who really believed that stuff anyway?

A silver bell tinkled brightly as we rushed inside. The shop was cozy and redolent with the spicy aroma of cinnamon incense—*the joy of Cinnabons without the temptation*. My stomach grumbled. The walls were lined with bookcases and cluttered with hanging stone and brass sculptures of pentagrams, angelic goddesses, and leafy-faced men. Colorful glass globes and wind chimes dangled from the ceiling, while the center of the store was crammed with displays of pouches, stones in baskets, and other hocus-pocus tchotchkes.

A woman walked out from the back room. “Hi,” she said.

She’d avoided the stereotypical fortune-teller look. No jangly earrings, India-print skirts, or head scarves. I breathed a sigh of relief. She looked like an average New Yorker—great jeans, vintage cream Irish cable knit sweater, and sexy, black-heeled, not-too-high boots. I didn’t think she’d be giving Meg the “you’ll-meet-a-stranger” B.S.

“Hi,” Meg said matter-of-factly. “Can I get a reading?”

“Come on back. I’m Katharine.” *A nice normal name*. I relaxed a little more. No bizarre madame, no Hollyweirdness.

We sat at a round table covered with a celestial-print cloth. Katharine took a deck of cards from a stone box carved with a skull. I looked around. Were there a lot of skulls around here, or was I just ... ? No, there were a lot of skulls.

Katharine caught me staring and grinned. “I love cemetery art.”

Meg nodded. "It's intense."

"Uh, yuh," I said.

"Think of a question as you shuffle the cards," said Katharine, handing them to Meg. "Put them on the table when you feel it's right."

Meg's face lit up, an expression I never liked and one she always wore when talking about weird stuff. She shuffled the cards for several minutes, then gingerly placed them on the table in front of Katharine, who laid them out in a five-pointed star pattern. I dug through my Coach bag and searched for pen and paper to list the outfits I wanted to find, the shoes to go with them, and things I had to do that weekend. I didn't want to listen to this even if I could hear it.

"You're at a turning point. The Wheel of Fortune indicates that a change of events is going to alter your current situation," Katharine murmured. I peeked over as she pointed to the first card and flicked a glance my way. "If you've been having a tough time, say, in a relationship with a friend, things are going to improve."

She lifted the second card and held it up—a picture of a man who appeared distraught at three overturned cups. "In the past, it seems that you didn't get what you wanted or expected."

Meg's eyes widened, and drawn in against my common sense, I scooched over so that I could see better.

Katharine smiled and shook her head. "Look at the picture. There are still two perfectly good cups behind him and he's ignoring them. Your situation has a lot of good in it, but you're just not seeing it. This one," and she pointed to a card that pictured a single man fighting with a staff on a hill, "tells me that you have a challenge coming up. Nothing you can't handle. If you take the higher ground, you'll prevail."

Sooo mystical, I pooh-poohed. *That could be applied to anyone*. I tuned the conversation out and went back to my lists. Finally, Meg stood up to leave.

"Nice meeting you." I thrust my hand into Katharine's, quickly shook it, and tried to hurry Meg along before she asked yet another question, or worse, put me on the spot to get a reading too. As genial as Katharine was, all this psychic stuff was a tad too creepy for me.

"At least she didn't say you'd meet a handsome stranger and fall deeply in

love,” I quipped after Meg paid and we left the store. “I would have thrown up.”

Meg’s forehead creased. I could almost hear the wheels spinning inside her head.

“Don’t worry about anything she said, Meg. I’ll bet every fortune-teller—”

“Katharine isn’t a fortune-teller, Shar. She’s a *psychic*.”

“And you know this for sure just because she told you?”

“I’m in for a big challenge. I—”

“Oh please! Your only challenge is going to be to find something that’s not black!”

“You’re so skeptical!” Meg huffed. “Don’t you believe in anything other than what you see?”

“Right now I’m so hungry the only thing I want to believe is that I’ll find food before I faint. How about pizza?”

Meg brightened. “I know a great place.”

A block or two down the street, she steered us toward a grimy-looking storefront hung with garish holiday garlands that had seen better days. I could barely make out the red, green, and gold through the tarnish. I was about to protest when she dragged me in. It looked roachy; the floors were gritty and it reeked of garlic. But the instant we walked through the door, I was glad she hadn’t given me a chance to say no. Standing at the counter, ordering a slice with extra peppers was ... a god.

At least he looked like it from his profile. A rippling cascade of smooth dark locks tumbled to his shoulders, just brushing the collar of his perfectly distressed leather jacket. What kind of jeans was he wearing? It didn’t matter; they fit his lean but obviously muscular legs. Now if he would only turn around, so I could see all of his face.

“Bad-ass jacket,” Meg murmured under her breath.

“Sweet jeans,” I whispered. We exchanged glances. *Yummo!* But there was only one of him. I didn’t know if Meg was into sharing, but I wasn’t.

Sweet Jeans turned around and I heard Meg catch her breath. His front was even better than his backside. A fringe of hair somewhere between black and dark chocolate dipped above his large, cerulean eyes, which were smudged with a bit of dark liner. He caught me staring and grinned. There was a hint of stubble

on his chin that made the eyeliner so work for him. Normally I wasn't into makeup on guys, even rock stars, but for him I would totally make an exception.

"Hello ladies," he said, looking from me to Meg.

"Hey," Meg breathed. She always knew what to say and how to say it, even if it was a one-line hello. Meanwhile, I couldn't untie the knot from my tongue. Sweet Jeans took his pizza and made his way over to a counter that ran along the window. Both of us watched him as he leaned his studly body over the narrow ledge. The soft glow of Christmas lights reflected in his hair.

I've been a good girl, Santa ...

"What can I getcha?" I barely heard the voice behind the counter. "Girls?"

A shrill whistle made me jump. I turned my attention back to the pizza. A squat older man in a smudgy apron cocked his eye at me knowingly.

"Are you here for pizza, sweetheart," he asked, jerking his head in Sweet Jeans' direction, "or dessert—'cause he ain't on the menu."

"One plain slice and a Diet Coke," I answered primly, trying not to blush.

"And your friend there?" he asked, plopping a cheesy wedge onto a paper plate. I glanced at Meg, who looked like she'd forgotten about being hungry. I nudged her in the ribs. Hard.

"Ow!" She glared at me.

I inclined my head toward the counter.

"Oh. Oh! Uh, a mushroom slice and ... a Diet Coke."

Meg never did diet anything. That was another one of her lectures—that I'd probably already preserved myself for eternity from ingesting all those artificial sugars and additives.

She was definitely distracted.

Pizza Man shook his head and slid a plate and a cup in her direction.

"Follow me," she ordered, quickly grabbing her food.

"Where?" I whispered.

She grinned. "To make a new friend." And she started moving toward the window counter.

"No! Wait!" I whispered as loudly as I could. I needed to run to the bathroom and check my makeup, but I had serious doubts about the restrooms in this place. They were probably unisex and I do *not* use man bathrooms. Too late. Meg had

already positioned herself on one side of Sweet Jeans. I had no choice but to join them, as is.

“How did you manage to get passes to that?” I heard Meg say as I settled myself on the only other empty seat, which was on his other side. Bad-boy sandwich. *Delizioso! Who would get the first bite?*

“I know the manager there,” he answered in a throaty, sexy voice.

God, I hope my mascara hasn't smudged.

He tucked a stray lock behind his ear and turned to me. My face got hot.

“Do you like Elysian Fields?”

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I smiled prettily, nodded, and took a bite of my pizza so I wouldn't have to elaborate.

“They're probably the best new prog band from this area. They *never* do club shows!” Meg purred.

Okay. He was talking about a band.

He turned back to Meg and proceeded to trade notes with her on the nuances of techno. I was beginning to think that I might ask her to burn a CD for me when Sweet Jeans asked, “Hey, you two wanna come? They're only playing tonight. I'm sure I can talk all three of us in.” He turned to me and tilted his head in such a cute way.

I knew what Meg wanted to do. She'd rather go to a club than out shopping. I was considering changing our plans, but we'd never be able to talk at a club, and we had to clear a few things up. And, it was a *designer* sale.

“Sorry,” I said, making a sad face. “We already have a commitment.”

Meg sighed loudly, but before she could protest, Sweet Jeans nodded, saying, “That's cool. Some other time.” He stood to leave. I thought I could see steam coming from Meg's ears.

“Please,” I mouthed. She clenched her teeth and shook her head.

“Catch you later.” He waved and winked at us, then pushed his way out the door, letting in a blast of arctic air.

“Fantastic,” Meg mumbled, taking her first bite of congealed pizza. Served her right for talking too much.

After a dinner in stony silence, we trudged the remaining blocks to the sample sale, arriving just as the doors opened. A crush of people pushed their way

inside.

“If you wanted to go body surfing, we should have gone to that club. I should have gotten his name! Remind me again why I’m here with you?”

“You’ll see,” I assured her, but not with complete enthusiasm. Maybe we should have taken him up on his offer, but we were here now. I started to wonder how far two hundred dollars would go. I’d saved for over a month for this sale.

Once the crowd dispersed, Meg started to wander off, although not before I instructed her to call me if she found something I might like and vice versa. How did anyone shop before cell phones? After a last skeptical glance from her, I took off for the dresses.

An hour later, we caught up. Meg had a pair of over-sized Chanel sunglasses propped on her head and several shoe boxes tucked under her arms. I hadn’t found a little black dress. Or jeans. Or a sweater. Not even a belt. How could I come away from a sample sale with nothing?

“These looked interesting,” she said in a voice that sounded like they didn’t interest her at all. As she dumped the boxes in front of me, a ruby gleam caught my eye and I reached into the pile.

“I love these red patent heels! I’ll take them.” I pulled the lid off the box and caressed the shiny leather. Little gold charms. A sexy instep strap. Gorgeous. *Irresistible.*

She looked at me, shocked.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

I tilted the box upright to check the size. “They’re a ten, you’re a nine. They won’t fit right.”

“I’m a nine and a half.” She paused and stole a glance at the printing on the side. “And they’re Vivienne Westwood.” She put her hands on the box.

I tugged back. “Since when do you care about labels?”

“They’re too quirky for you!” Meg pulled again.

“They’re too conservative for *you*,” I argued, tightening my grip.

“I thought you said my challenge was to find something not black!”

“Since when do you ever listen to me?” I growled, not letting go.

“Katharine was right when she said that things hadn’t turned out as I expected. I saw her look at you when she said that. She was referring to us.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“It’s been so obvious that you don’t want to be stuck with me.” Meg compressed her lips and looked away.

“Look, I know we don’t have that much in common, but—”

“Exactly,” Meg scoffed. “Miss Teen Vogue.”

“Like you’ve never looked at those magazines!” I shot back.

“Oh, yes—such great reading material. Everything I *don’t* want to know about making up, making out, and making prom queen,” she retorted with a sneer.

“That’s so mean! And I did you a favor by bringing you here!” My lip started to tremble. I would *not* cry! Instead, I got mad. How dare she speak to me like that! I gave her my angriest scowl. “Why would you want these shoes? They’re not fifty years old!”

The few people around us stopped to stare. Meg’s face turned a pretty pink, like a storybook piglet.

“And they’re designer, too! *Oooh*,” I rushed on, “if you get them, won’t you somehow be taking food out of the mouths of impoverished Far Eastern children and—”

“Big surprise,” she said, cocking her head and puckering her lips in a sarcastic attitude. “Just like I always thought. Shallow and selfish in the same package.” She shoved the shoes at me, then tore the sunglasses from her head and threw them on the ground. I whirled around to watch her storm out past the stragglers coming in late.

I scooped up the shoes. Someone had to get them at this price; it might as well be me. I nearly tripped over the mountain of boxes Meg left behind. In the center of the pile were the sunglasses she’d been using as a headband. I felt a sting of guilt—or was it that karma thing she was always talking about? Perhaps the last bit, about the starving children, was too much. But then, she did call me Miss Teen Vogue—as if! I’m more a Cosmo type.

I turned the glasses over in my hand. They were five dollars—her usual price limit. Getting them for her might help patch up this latest argument. I bought the shoes and the glasses.

The wind slapped me with a driving force as I bolted out the door. I strode quickly down the block, head down, gloved hands stuffed into my jacket.

Looking up for a second to get my bearings, I spied the subway station with relief—and dread. I hated the subway. Down in its creepy depths, my footsteps echoed ominously. I swiped my metro card and slipped through the turnstile, praying my white down jacket wasn't getting grimy.

At first, the platform looked empty, but then someone stepped out from behind a tiled pillar. My heart jumped into my throat. *Sweet Jeans!* I thought about Meg's five-dollar sunglasses at the bottom of the shopping bag. Did good karma come this cheap?

She probably already caught a train, but maybe I won't have to ride home alone after all. This couldn't have worked out better if I'd planned it. Fate was on my side.

Meg

Oh. My. Gods!

My face still burned, even after several brisk walks around the block. *Shar always acts like SHE got cheated being burdened with ME*, I thought furiously. *For four months I've dealt with her giggling girlfriends, OCD wardrobe, and coordinated bedding. And now this! I get publicly humiliated and miss a chance to see Elysian Fields with, oh, probably the most beautiful guy in the city. Talk about being divinely screwed. Why did I ever agree to go shopping with her? I'm insane, that's why. There's no other plausible explanation.*

I trudged down the subway steps behind a gaggle of clubbers. Half of me hoped she'd be down there, the other half hoped we'd miss each other. If I did see her, I had a few choice things to say.

One by one we passed through the turnstile. As the club kids moved out of my way and toward the back of the station, I saw her. There she was, standing near the platform—talking to *my* Bad-Ass Jacket!

She was deluding herself if she thought he was interested in her. And that sad attempt to act like she knew what we were talking about? Pathetic! At least, that's how it seemed back at the pizzeria. Shoes I could forget, but she'd made a mistake of global proportions by going after the guy. Apocalypse? NOW.

"Thanks for the great evening!" I said, stomping over to her. Bad-Ass Jacket backed up a step, while Shar gaped at me, mortified.

"Meg ..." She trailed off and flicked her eyes at him. I hoped I was embarrassing her.

"I see you had time to buy *my* red shoes," I said, pointing at the shopping bag.

“I can’t believe *you’re* freaking out over a pair of shoes!” she shouted, moving away from me, toward the tracks.

“Get over yourself, Mary Poppins.”

That earned me some applause from the club kids, a snicker from Bad-Ass Jacket, and a nasty glare from Shar. A muffled rumbling came from the tunnel. The train would be here any second.

“You want them so bad, come get them!” Shar taunted, waving the bag and clonking Bad-Ass in the chest with it.

He backed up a step into the yellow zone. “Hey, it’s just a pair of shoes,” he started to say, but without warning I lunged for the bag, latched onto the handles, and pulled.

“Hands off!” Shar tugged.

I lost my balance and tottered backwards toward the tracks. Time seemed to slow as I felt my heart thudding in my chest and my legs starting to give way. The roar of the train grew louder. I turned my head—lights twinkled down the tunnel, growing larger and larger. It was coming up fast.

Death by train! Death by train! I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing myself for the inevitable smack of a subway car.

“Meg!” I heard Shar scream.

I felt my arm being yanked almost from its socket, then my whole body hitting something soft yet solid. Turning my head, I opened my eyes to see a wall of crackly leather and my nose filled with the scent of patchouli and sandalwood. I shrieked and fell sideways into Shar.

The thunder of the train filled the station, and we watched in horror as gorgeous Bad-Ass Jacket slash Sweet Jeans stumbled forward and teetered on the brink, his arms fluttering over the empty blackness.

He tumbled off the platform.

Instantly the train was there, racing through the station. *Didn’t they see him? Wasn’t it going to stop?* The cars screamed by like silver bullets and Katharine’s prediction flooded my mind: *A chain of events is going to alter your current situation.*

The last car shot past, and the rumbling reverberated into a distant hum. Nobody spoke.

I realized then that Shar was holding my arm with both hands. The shopping bag with the shoes in it lay on its side a few feet away, the corner of the box peeking out of the top of the bag. She'd stopped me from going over the edge.

"Oh my God, oh my God," Shar's voice shook, breaking the silence. "He ... fell. He ..."

Unable to stop myself, I peered down at the tracks and gasped, waves of nausea coursing through me. He lay sprawled out over the tracks, a dark pool growing under him—both pieces. He'd been sliced in half more cleanly than a tomato. Now he was Mr. Sweet Jeans *and* Mr. Bad-Ass Jacket.

Up came dinner. I hurled over the platform, missing the body by mere inches. At least I'd spared him that last indignity. Then a crackling noise came up from the rails, along with a smell like pork rinds, and whatever was left in my stomach decided to vacate. Poor guy—this time I didn't miss him.

The club kids ran over to the edge of the yellow line and peered over. One of them screamed, and another stared at us and pointed. *They didn't think we did this on purpose, did they?*

"Don't look," I gagged, grabbing Shar's arm and dragging her back a few steps. "Why was he standing so close to the edge?"

"He's ... dead? Oh my God!" Shar choked, and put a hand over her mouth. "We—"

"Oh man!" one of the clubber girls shrieked. "Like, he was just standing there ..." She trailed off and started sobbing. Then she looked at us with angry, accusatory eyes. "You totally shoved him in there. Poor dude!"

"No!" shouted Shar. "That's not what happened!"

An acne-pocked boy in neon goggles cursed. "You were messing around and you killed this guy! He was trying to break you two apart!" The boy looked over the edge and gasped. "Look at the blood!"

The club kids huddled together and started pulling out cell phones.

"It was an accident," I insisted, but none of them listened to me. I turned to Shar, taking hold of her shoulders. "We didn't mean to hurt anyone. You saved me, I was falling—"

Shar looked at me helplessly. "What are we going to do? They're going to call the police!"

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” My head dropped. Then I lifted it and stared up at the ceiling, blinking back tears. “I would give anything to make this go away. Anything.”

“Me too,” she sobbed. “*Anything!*”

“I believe I can assist you with that.” A silky voice wafted through the murky silence. That’s when I noticed that the station was uncannily quiet, and my heart stuck in my throat when I saw that the club kids were still gaping in horror on the brink of the platform. They were frozen in various poses. No one was moving.

“What’s wrong with them?” Shar whispered, clutching my arms. Even with my winter coat on, her nails hurt.

“They’re perfectly fine,” the voice spoke again.

We turned around to see a tall man standing nonchalantly by the tiled wall. He wasn’t just tall; he was towering tall, well over six-six, and dressed like the guys in the foreign fashion magazines that Shar always kept in our room. Long, elegant fingers hooked the collar of an expensive-looking black coat he held over his shoulder, and his gleaming white shirt was unbuttoned far enough to see a chest of rippling muscles and taut, olive-toned skin. He gazed at us with dark eyes. But where did he come from? He wasn’t here before.

“Wh-what?” I stuttered in disbelief.

“That poor man was simply waiting for a train,” he sighed. “Then you two came along. Now he’s dead.”

“Excuse me?” I didn’t like what he was insinuating. “We are NOT responsible for this!”

He glanced down at the tracks and made a doleful face. “If he could, I think he’d argue that point.”

“It was an accident!” whispered Shar.

“My dear Sharisse and Margaret, this poor soul is dead. You both had a hand in killing him. Do you think that will matter to his family and friends? To the courts?”

“How do you know our names?” My voice, steady until now, trembled slightly. I glanced over at Shar, who stared back, looking as pale as I felt.

“What should we do?” she whimpered.

The man turned to us with a saccharine smile. “That depends. I could call the police and tell them everything, and you can take your chances that they’ll believe it was a tragic accident.”

Impulsively, I grabbed Shar’s hand and squeezed it. “It *was* an accident.”

She nodded vigorously, and I turned back to GQ Man.

“You saw what happened.”

“Indeed I did. But I’m afraid I’ll have to tell the authorities that I saw this man standing by himself. Then Sharisse and you attacked him, pushing him in front of the train just as it was going through the station. You waited until the last possible moment, giving him no time to react. And it sounds like these young people will back me up.”

“That’s not how it happened!” I stamped my foot. As badly as I felt about all this, I wasn’t about to go to prison for it.

“Yes, it looks like the two of you killed him,” he tsk-tsked and flicked his wrist. The club kids vanished. We were alone in the station, shaking like we’d spent the day downing double shots of espresso.

“Now,” he said, casting an all-too-admiring glance at Shar, “let’s attend to business.”

“Who *are* you?” I demanded.

When he smiled, a full set of white, even teeth peeked out. Everything about him was uncannily perfect. His suit was spotless and he looked too polished, like a statue.

“Allow me to introduce myself, ladies. I am—”

“Deranged,” I murmured.

He smiled easily. “Not in the least, Margaret. I am Hades, Lord of the Underworld.”

“You mean like ... the devil?” Shar trembled.

“No,” he corrected her in a voice that sounded like she’d just insulted him. “I am *not* the devil. He’s a pale, corrupt version of me, created by humans. I can assure you that I am very real.”

“The devil’s real!” Shar insisted.

He clucked his tongue. “I suppose I can’t fault you for believing what’s been passed off as truth for thousands of years. But it’s an inspiring piece of fiction,

and it certainly worked for the people who invented it. There's no better way to scare people than to conjure up a devil! Fear is how to control people. It's how I got into my current business endeavor."

Shar and I clutched each other. This reality was very unreal.

"You see," the man continued, now circling around us like a wolf cornering its prey, "I liked the way that whole devil setup worked—a little temptation, some soul trading, and then, eternal servitude. And I thought, I should get into that! It's easy to find desperate people who'll sell their souls to me for fame, wealth, talent, revenge, whatever. Once they've attained a certain level of success, I call in their contract. When I first started out, I would collect them myself, but it was always so melodramatic. They'd plead their case to the other gods and we'd end up in negotiations. Too time consuming! That's when I came up with the idea of delegating, and hence, where you come in." He grimaced at my feet. "Those shoes have got to hurt."

"Everyone's a fashion critic," I snorted. "But seriously, soul selling? Are you joking? Who would sell their soul to you?"

He stopped moving and stroked his chin. "Cleopatra is a wonderful example. A more lusty and ambitious woman never lived. She wanted to preserve Egypt, no matter what the cost. That meant bringing Caesar, then Marc Antony, to heel. Romans!" he spat. "We Greeks brought civilization to the world, and then they come and change our names only to abandon us a few centuries later! They brought chaos and ruin!" He sniffed. "I was only too happy to deliver both those men to her. Of course, once she had what she wanted, her deal was complete, and I called in her contract. A nasty business—I had to transform myself into a serpent to finally get the job done. After that, I vowed never to make an *asp* of myself again!"

"Who else sold their souls?" Shar asked, seriously interested. She didn't really believe him, did she?

"You'd be surprised at the number of people who'd like to make a deal with me. Take a look around—they're not hard to pick out," Hades replied smoothly. "Rock stars and petty actors with no real talent. Multi-billionaires with no common sense and too much greed. How do you think people like that manage to achieve anything?"

“Hades plays Mephistopheles, is that it?” I interrupted boldly. “Look, I don’t know who you are ... or *what* you are, but we—”

Suddenly, a circle of flame danced all around us, and we huddled closer together.

“Please, Margaret, don’t make me resort to parlor tricks. But let’s get back on topic. You killed an innocent man.” He grinned sardonically. “And if I heard you correctly, you both said that you would do anything to make this situation go away. I’m here to oblige you. I’ve never seen such natural talent!”

“Talent for what?” I asked.

“Think about what happened. You met that young man tonight, and you made quite an impression. He was going to take both of you to a music venue, yes? You saw what you wanted and wasted no time in engaging him. And then Sharisse”—he turned a lascivious grin on Shar—“not to be outdone, moved in, and all she had to do was smile. How could he stay away from either of you? He was completely enchanted. You lured him to his doom, and he happily followed!”

“Nooo,” Shar stepped in. “We only talked to him for a couple of minutes over a slice of pizza.”

Hades wagged a finger. “Oh, no no no! You two did much more than that. You were a duet of connivance. The fact that you don’t realize just how beguiling you are makes you even more perfect. I have an offer you can’t refuse.”

“I’m not selling my soul,” Shar declared dramatically, fingering the small gold cross dangling around her neck. “I’d rather die!”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t want your soul. I want your service. You two will be my new Sirens.”

Shar

The Fine Print

“Your *what?*” I asked.

“Greek Mythology, Shar,” whispered Meg. “The Sirens were these bird women who sat on the rocks and sang. Sailors couldn’t resist them, so they crashed their ships and drowned.”

Meg and her occult studies. Who knew they would come in handy? She could converse with psychos.

“Hello? That’s a fairy tale—the stuff they make a TV series out of!” *It’s not real. It’s not!* I refused to believe it, but the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach told me that I was kidding myself. I turned to Hades.

“Fine. Okay, let’s pretend that you’re telling the truth—hypothetically. Why would you need new Sirens? What happened to the originals?”

Hades shook his head sadly.

“Once Odysseus sailed past without succumbing to their call, they threw themselves into the sea and drowned. The same thing happened when Jason and the Argonauts resisted them. They didn’t take rejection very well. So I kept replacing them. I need a steady workforce.” Hades grinned and I felt sick all over again.

“You mean, they *died* ??” I was only seventeen and not liking what I was hearing.

“Every profession has its risks.” He straightened his immaculate Jerry Garcia—signed—tie. “No one’s immortal but us gods.”

“Get to the point,” Meg said. “What would we have to do?”

“Oh it’s easy,” he purred. “You two will bring me a specified individual who executed an agreement with me, which, shall we say, is about to expire. You lure him to an underworld portal which will send him to Tartarus, my kingdom. In exchange, I will undo this terrible tragedy and you’re off the hook. A one-shot deal. Simple, no?”

“Too simple,” said Meg. “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. What happens if we can’t do it?”

Hades looked sideways at us and grinned with a sly smile.

“If you fail, you must reside with me. In the Underworld. For all eternity. And I’ll have another job for you—taking care of my pets.”

“Pets?” I asked. “You have pets?”

“The hell hounds,” he winked. “And they do so love a game of fetch. Especially Cerberus.”

“What do they fetch?” I chewed my bottom lip.

“A stick, a rubber ball. Whatever else amuses them.”

I am so not a dog person. Neither was Meg. At home, we both had cats.

“That’s it? All we have to do is play with your dogs?” I ventured to ask. Greek gods always had some trick up their toga, although Hades wasn’t wearing one now.

“Playing fetch is the fun part. You’ll have to clean up after them, too. They leave quite a mess about the place.”

“Don’t you hate that?” I said. “Once you step in that stuff you can never get the smell out!”

“It is a problem,” he agreed.

Meg stared at me, aghast. “We’re pretty much doomed to either go to prison, wear orange jumpsuits, and be someone’s girlfriend for twenty-five-to-life, or spend eternity on pooper-scooper duty for gigantic hell hounds—and you’re worried about your *shoes*?”

“Oh, don’t worry about the shoes.” Hades lightly ran a finger down my arm. I flinched away. “I have a regulation uniform for those who take care of my babies—right down to the underwear. Tell me, do you care for industrial gray wool?”

I looked from Hades to Meg and back again, the horror dawning.

“Ah, you’re getting the finer points,” she snapped.

“That’s torture,” I breathed.

“Not quite,” said Hades, looking around in distaste. “Please, let’s discuss this in a more civilized place.” He stepped away from the tiled wall and overflowing waste can. The smell of garbage and faint urine suddenly repulsed me, and I checked the bottom of my shoes. Meg rolled her eyes.

“Starbucks?” I asked hopefully.

Meg gave me a *duh* look. “I don’t think we should discuss this in Starbucks, do you? We have to call someone about ...” She jerked her head in the direction of the tracks.

I didn’t want to look. “Let’s go, please!”

Meg shrugged in resignation as she pulled out her cell. “Okay, Hades, lead us to a Starbucks. Shar likes chai tea and I want a—”

“I don’t do Starbucks,” he said haughtily. “And it wasn’t a question. I was merely being polite. Now—” He flicked a wrist and Sweet Jeans was gone. Another flick and we were standing in a tropical garden. Hades was now wearing a very bright white polo shirt that looked custom-made, and cargo shorts. Throwing off my coat, gloves, sweater, scarf, and hat, I wriggled out of my boots to bury my toes in the warm white sand. *Ooh, nice!*

Meg put her cell back in her purse. “Some place you’ve got,” she said, investigating every swaying palm tree and bright flower around her.

It seemed real enough. After a frigid New York night, this *was* heaven.

“Is this ... Paradise?” I breathed. It sure looked like it to me. The air was balmy and breezy and the azure ocean crashed just beyond the lush trees and undergrowth.

“Actually, this belongs to an acquaintance of mine,” he began.

“Apollo?” asked Meg.

“God?” I said.

He gave us both a chiding look. “Hardly. It belongs to Arkady Romanov.”

“The fashion guy? As in ‘House of Romanov’?” I mused, staring out across the waves.

“Does it matter?” Meg put one hand on her hip. “Let’s see, fabulous wealth, personal tropical island, both most likely ill-gotten—sounds like villain material to me.” She pointed an accusing finger at Hades. “Why don’t you take *him*

down to Hell with you?”

“It’s *Tartarus*, not Hell,” said Hades with an annoyed voice. “Don’t people study history anymore?” He snapped his fingers and lawn furniture materialized. Tropical drinks appeared in our hands. I sipped. *Pina Colada! The real thing!* I was about to take another taste when Meg kicked me, ogling my glass.

“Don’t! Haven’t you ever heard of ‘Let’s drink to that’? You’ll be sealing a pact!”

I hastily slammed the drink down, spilling it.

Hades sighed morosely. “I don’t do business that way. You must consent or I face certain ... unpleasantries.” He frowned. “And I dislike unpleasantness, especially for myself.”

I gave Meg a *see, I told you so* glance and picked up my drink, which Hades had thoughtfully refreshed. Reluctantly, she picked up hers, a green concoction, sniffed, then tasted. I saw a small flush of pleasure. She looked away guiltily.

“Now, where were we? Ah, yes, Mr. Romanov. He’s had a long time to enjoy this lovely place. That was his deal, you see. A regular mortal span wasn’t enough for him, so I gave him a few extra years. But now his time’s up. Next year he won’t be spending any holidays on his island—I see him in a less *idyllic* location. You will send him to me.” He twitched an elegant index finger with an obscenely large ruby. “Come, time grows short. The devil is in the details, as you humans say. We need to go over the particulars.” A huge mahogany desk and three luxurious CEO-type leather chairs appeared on the sand. A tightly curled scroll lay on the desk.

He gestured. “Ladies, do have a seat. Let’s wrap this up.”

Gingerly, each of us took a chair and regarded Hades warily as he pushed the scroll toward us.

“Our agreement requires you two to lure Mr. Romanov to one of the many portals to my realm. To help you achieve this task, your natural talents will be enhanced.” He looked from me to Meg and back again before continuing.

“As Margaret has so accurately described, the Sirens called to the sailors, who couldn’t resist them. A word or a look drew their victims to them.” He licked his full lips and gazed at me. “One look from you, Sharisse, is already captivating. From this moment forward, no mortal will be able to look away when you

engage him. And you,” he continued, turning to Meg, “so glib, Margaret. They’ll hear you, and they’ll obey.”

“That’s it?” I asked.

“I doubt it,” Meg replied.

“Clever Margaret!” Hades drummed his fingers on the desk. “There is a time limit. Now let’s see, when do your classes at school resume?” Instantly, a large open leather-bound datebook appeared, then floated down and gently rested on the desk. “You’re a few days into your winter break. This is perfect. You must finish your task before you go back to school.”

“But that’s less than two weeks!” Meg cried.

I had to agree—it didn’t seem like a lot of time to befriend and dispose of a renowned fashion mogul. It might take me that long to build an outfit around the red shoes. And what does a girl wear when sending someone to their doom?

“Why are you complaining? Most schools give a lot less time off than that. Ah, the perks of a private education! But you disappoint me,” he continued. “That should be plenty of time for two clever young ladies like yourselves. When, or might I say *if*, you go back to school, read up on your ancient history. Now, I strongly suggest that you exercise your powers in moderation, and only on Mr. Romanov. They’re quite potent. Oh, and there is a standard nondisclosure clause. You can’t discuss any aspect of our dealings, or your powers, with anyone.”

I shook my head, having a gut feeling that there was still something that he wasn’t telling us. It sounded too easy.

“What happens if we don’t agree to do this?” Meg asked, staring at the scroll.

Hades chortled darkly. “Then this is your future.”

Instantly, the blue sky turned the color of painted gray concrete and the balmy breeze became biting cold. I looked at Meg, who stood across from me. Two thick sets of bars and a stone hallway separated us. She wore a hideous orange jumpsuit and cheap prison slippers. I couldn’t stop myself from laughing out loud.

“What’s your problem?” she demanded.

“You ... you ...” I gasped, covering my mouth with my hand. “You look like a pumpkin!”

“Well, what do you think neon orange does for you?”

I looked down, and then we both started screaming.

A shrill whistle shut us up. There was Hades, pacing the wide hallway that divided my cell from Meg’s.

“Do women still go for that ‘man in uniform’ thing?” he asked, parading around in front of us. Gone were the polo and cargo shorts. He brushed an imaginary fleck off his starched gray uniform, a bright *Death Row Detail* patch happily decorating the sleeve of his shirt.

“Death row?!” I shrieked. “But it was an accident!”

“Well, that’s your opinion,” Hades informed her coolly. “But really, enough of this nonsense, ladies. I’m offering you a way out of this horrible mess you’ve gotten yourselves into. Besides, it’s not a hard job, and there are perks.”

“Like what?” I challenged.

“Oh, limitless cash, an apartment on the Upper West Side, all at your disposal. Seems quite a bargain for you gals, really. All this for one special task. Make your choice—a good deal, or a last meal.”

I snuck a peek at Meg. “Limitless cash!” she whispered.

“The Upper West Side!” I mouthed excitedly. So much for our poker faces for wheeling and dealing. *We were sooo easy.*

“Where do we sign?” we shouted.

“Excellent, ladies! So glad to have you on board!” Hades gestured for us to sit down. We were back on the island and in our own clothes. “Now let’s address the matter of your formal consent.” He unfurled the scroll and pointed to two blank lines at the bottom.

“Do you have a pen?” I asked, searching around.

“Pen?” Hades chuckled softly, and opened a drawer on his side of the desk. He placed a shiny silver stiletto blade in front of us. “Only blood will do.”

We stared at each other. I hated the sight of blood, but this was no time to be squeamish. Stoically I took hold of the dagger and picked it up, and before I could stop myself, I put the tip to my finger, squeezed one eye shut and pressed it in. A few drops fell onto the parchment, sizzling as they landed. Meg gasped and pointed. The blood rolled along the first line, moving faster and faster as if it were being driven by an invisible pen. The leaden feeling in my stomach started

creeping up into my throat as I saw my name form on the line in my all-too-familiar curly handwriting.

My hands shaking, I passed the blade to Meg. With the barest hesitation, she pricked her left thumb, then watched with a spellbound expression as her blood formed the precise letters of her name on the second blank.

“Perfect!” Hades whispered. “Let’s not waste any time, shall we?”

Instantly we were back in the subway station, the club kids huddled in a corner, and Sweet Jeans—alive again!—standing between us. I clutched a shopping bag; it felt incredibly heavy. Looking down, I saw that Meg had hold of it as well. My head jerked up and we stared at each other, wide-eyed. I heard the rumble of the train a short way down the tunnel.

“It’s just a pair of shoes.” Sweet Jeans’ voice echoed in my ear.

Meg laughed nervously, not taking her eyes off me. “You’re right ... and ... red’s not my color anyway.” She let the bag go just as the train pulled into the station.

“My train,” Sweet Jeans said, and turned to go. Rooted to the spot, we waved at him listlessly, and watched as he got on behind the club kids. The car doors closed. He was safe inside. The train lurched away with a squealing grind, and we were alone.

Meg let out a deep breath. “Okay, *that* was bizarre.”

“No,” I shook my head. “This is.” I took hold of her wrist and raised her hand. She didn’t realize that she was holding something: a shiny iPhone with a transparent envelope taped to it. Inside were two credit cards in slim leather cases, and two keys.

“There’s something written here.” Squinting, Meg passed it to me. What I thought was tape was a label. The spidery writing read:

S. Johnson, M. Wiley

Penthouse H2 at 100 West 81st Street.

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