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KINGDOM OF THE CURSED

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author

KERRI MANISCALCO

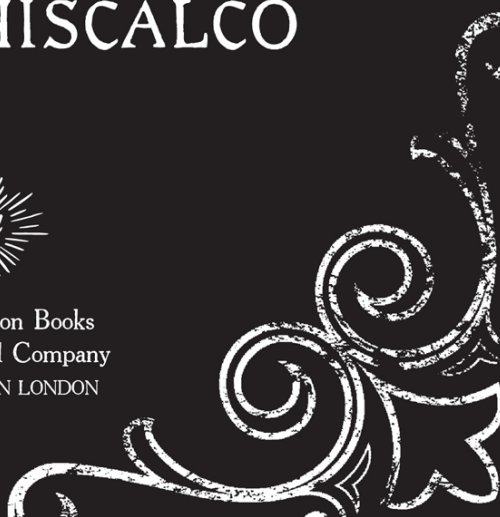


KINGDOM OF THE CURSED

KERRI MANISCALCO



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For you, dear reader. Always.

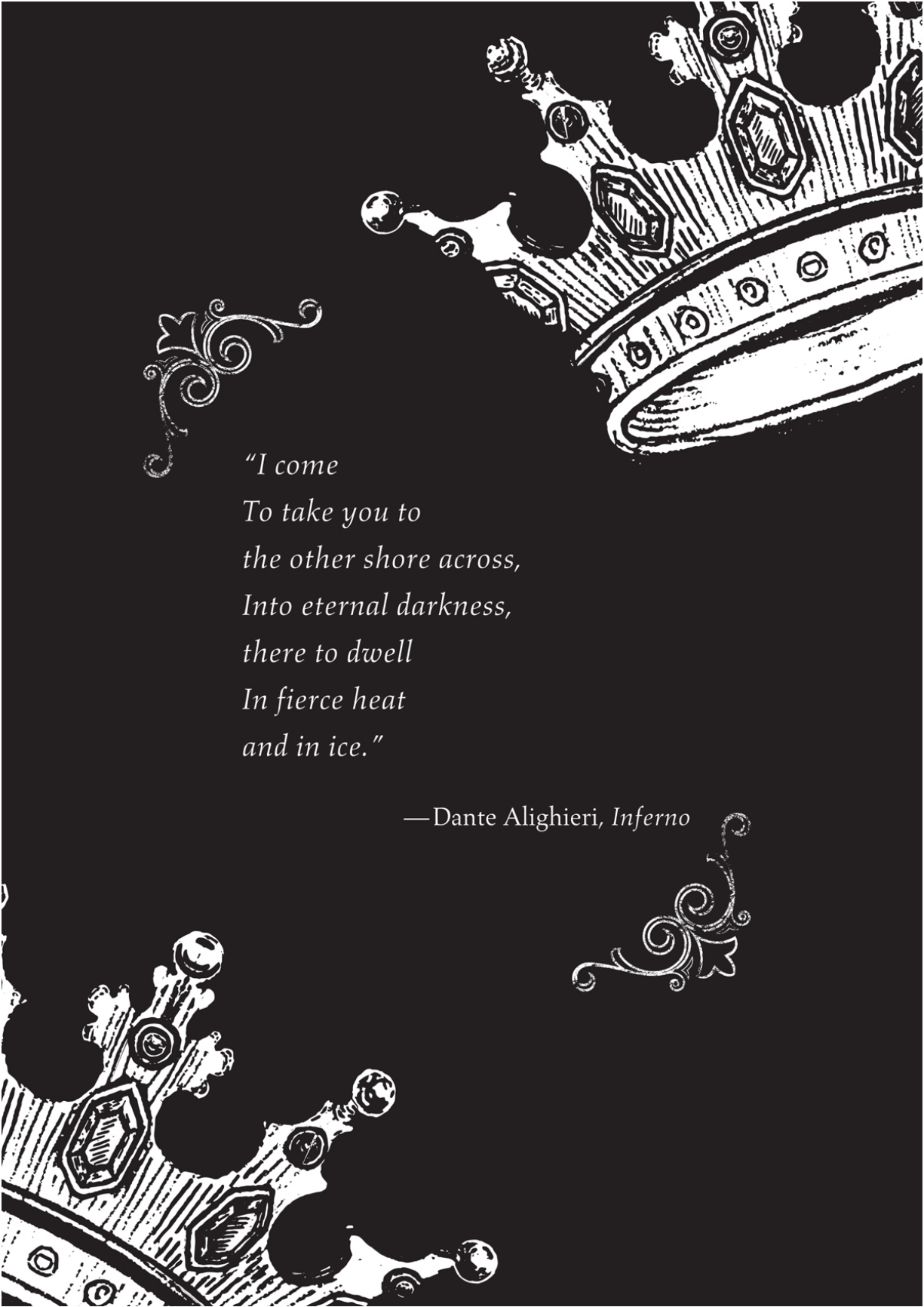
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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY



*"I come
To take you to
the other shore across,
Into eternal darkness,
there to dwell
In fierce heat
and in ice."*

—Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*



*"I come
To take you to
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Into eternal darkness,
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—Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

On an unusually chilly summer eve, amidst a howling storm, twins arrived. It was not the start of an enchanted fairy tale, however. Those who'd been watching, waiting, recognized it for the omen it was. One would forfeit her mortal life, the other would sell her soul. Coven elders argued the hows and whys, but all agreed on one fact: the twins marked the start of dark days. Now, as one turned to fury and eyed the devil's throne, and the other lay heartless, surrounded by death, others whispered of a new prophecy—one that damned both witches and demons alike.

—Notes from the secret di Carlo grimoire



SOMETIME BEFORE

Once upon a cursed dawn, a king strode through his castle, his footsteps thundering down the corridor, sending even the shadows skittering away to avoid notice. He was in a foul mood and it was growing darker the closer he got to *her*. He sensed her vengeance long before he'd entered this wing of the castle. It swarmed like an angry mob outside the entrance to his throne room, but he paid it little mind. The witch was a plague upon this land.

One he'd eradicate at once.

Silver-tipped wings of white flame burst from between his shoulder blades as he flung open the double doors. They crashed against the wall, nearly splitting the wood in half, but the intruder didn't glance up from her indolent position sprawled across the

throne. *His* throne.

Refusing to look in his direction, she caressed her leg the way an attentive lover might try with an eager partner. Her gown split up the side, revealing smooth skin from her ankle to her hip. She drew lazy circles on her calf, arching back as her fingers drifted higher. His presence did nothing to dissuade her from running her hands up, along her outer thighs.

"Get out."

The witch's attention flicked to his. "Talking with you hasn't worked. Nor logic and reasoning. Now I have a rather tempting new offer for you." Over the thin material of her gown, she slowly skimmed the peaks of her breasts, her gaze growing heavy as she boldly stared at him. "Take off your pants."

He crossed his arms, his expression forbidding. Not even his maker could bend him to his whims. And she was far from his maker.

"Get out," he repeated. "Leave before I *force* you."

"*Try*." In one inhumanly graceful movement, she swung herself into a standing position, her long silver dress gleaming like a sword carving through the heavens. Gone was any further attempt at seduction. "Touch me, and I will destroy all you hold dear. Your majesty."

Her tone had turned mocking, as if he wasn't worthy of the title or respect.

He laughed then, the sound as menacing as the dagger now pressed against her slender throat. She wasn't the only one blessed with immortal speed.

"You seem to be mistaken," he all but growled. "There is nothing I hold dear. I want you out of this realm before nightfall. If you're not gone by then, I'll set my hellhounds loose. When they're finished, whatever's left will be tossed in the Lake of Fire."

He waited to scent her fear. Instead, she jerked forward and slashed her throat across the blade in one brutal motion. Blood spilled over her shimmering gown, splattered across the smooth marble floor, dirtied his cuffs. Jaw clenched, he wiped down the dagger.

Unfazed by her new vicious necklace, she stepped away from

him, her smile more wicked than the worst of his brothers. The wound stitched itself together.

"Are you certain about that? There isn't *anything* you yearn for?" When he didn't respond, her annoyance flared. "Maybe the rumors are true, after all. You have no heart in that armored chest of yours." She circled him, her skirts smearing a trail of blood across the once pristine floor. "Perhaps we should carve you open, take a look."

She eyed the unusual silver and white wings of flame at his back, her grin turning feral. The wings were his favorite weapons and he welcomed the fierce, white-hot heat that made his enemies flinch away in terror or fall to their knees, weeping tears of blood.

With one quick snap of her fingers, they turned the color of ash, then disappeared.

Panic seized him as he tried—and failed—to summon them.

"Here is a trick as nasty as the devil himself."

Her voice was both young and old as she spoke her spell into existence. He swore. Of course. That was why she'd spilled blood; it was an offering to one of her ruthless goddesses.

"From this day forward, a curse will sweep through this land. You will forget all but your hate. Love, kindness, every good thing in your world will cease. One day that will change. When you know true happiness, I vow to take whatever you love, too."

He'd barely heard a word the dark-haired witch said, as he strained to summon his wings to no avail. Whatever she'd done with them, his beloved weapons were well and truly missing.

His vision had nearly gone red with bloodlust, but he reined in his temper through sheer force of will. The witch would be of no use to him dead now, especially if he ever hoped to regain what was stolen.

She clicked her tongue once, as if disappointed he didn't release his inner monster to fight back, and started to turn away. He didn't bother charging after her. When he spoke, his voice was as dark and quiet as the night. "You're wrong."

She paused, tossing a glance over a delicate shoulder. "Oh?"

"The devil may be nasty, but he doesn't perform tricks." His smile was temptation incarnate. "He bargains."

For the first time the witch seemed uncertain. She'd thought herself to be the most cunning, lethal one. She'd forgotten whose throne room she stood in and how he'd clawed himself onto that cursed and wretched thing. He would take immense pleasure in reminding her.

This was the kingdom of the Wicked, and *he* ruled them all.

"Care to strike a deal?"



ONE

Hell was not what I expected.

Ignoring the traitorous Prince of Wrath at my side, I took a quiet, shuddering breath as smoke wafted around from the demon magic he'd used to transport us here. To the Seven Circles.

In the brief moments it took us to travel from the cave in Palermo to this realm, I'd concocted various visions of our arrival, each one more terrible than the last. In every nightmare, I'd pictured a cascade of fire and brimstone raining down. Flames burning hot enough to scorch my soul or melt the flesh right off my bones. Instead, I fought a sudden shiver.

Through the lingering smoke and mist I could just make out walls hewn from a strange, opaque gemstone that shot up farther than I

could see. They were either deep blue or black, as if the darkest part of the sea had swelled up to an impossible height and had frozen in place.

Chills raced down my spine. I resisted the urge to breathe warmth into my hands or turn to Wrath for comfort. He was not my friend, and he certainly wasn't my protector. He was exactly what his brother Envy had claimed: the worst of the seven demon princes.

A monster among beasts.

I could never allow myself to forget what he was. One of the Wicked. The immortal beings who stole souls for the devil, and the selfish midnight creatures my grandmother warned my twin and me to hide from our whole lives. Now I willingly promised to wed their king, the Prince of Pride, to end a curse. Or so I'd led them to believe.

The metal corset my future husband had given me earlier tonight turned unbearably cold in the frigid air. Layers of my dark, glittering skirts were too light to provide any true protection or warmth, and my slippers were little more than scraps of black silk with thin leather soles.

Ice sluiced through my veins. I couldn't help but think this was yet another wicked scheme designed by my enemy to unsettle me.

Puffs of breath floated like ghosts in front of my face. Haunting, ethereal. Disturbing. Goddess above. I was really *in* Hell. If the demon princes didn't get to me first, Nonna Maria was certainly going to kill me. Especially when my grandmother discovered I'd signed my soul away to Pride. *Blood and bones*. The devil.

An image of the scroll that bound me to House Pride flashed through my mind. I couldn't believe I'd signed the contract in blood. Despite my earlier confidence in my plot to infiltrate this world and avenge my sister's murder, I felt completely unprepared now that I was standing here.

Wherever "here" was, exactly. It didn't appear as if we'd made it inside any of the seven royal demon Houses. I don't know why I thought Wrath would make this journey easy on me.

"Are we waiting for my betrothed to arrive?"

Silence.

I shifted uncomfortably.

Smoke still drifted close enough to obscure my full view, and with my demonic escort refusing to speak, my mind started to taunt me with a wide array of inventive fears. For all I knew, Pride was standing before us, waiting to claim his bride in the flesh.

I listened hard, straining to hear any sound of an approach through the smoke. Of anything. There was nothing aside from the frantic pitter-patter of my heart.

No screams of the eternally tortured and cursed. Absolute, unnerving silence surrounded us. It felt heavy—as if all hope had been abandoned a millennium ago and all that remained was the crushing quiet of despair. It would be so easy to give up, to lie down and let the darkness in. This realm was winter in all its harsh, unforgiving glory.

And we hadn't even passed through the gates yet...

Panic seized me. I wanted to be back in my city—with its sea-kissed air and summery people—so badly, my chest ached. But I'd made my choice, and I'd see it through, no matter what. Vittoria's true murderer was still out there. And I'd walk through the gates of Hell a thousand times over to find him. My location changed, but my ultimate goal did not.

I took a deep breath, my emotions settling with the action.

The smoke finally dissipated, revealing my first unobstructed glimpse of the underworld.

We were alone in a cave, similar to the one we'd left high above the sea in Palermo, the very place I'd set up my bone circle and first summoned Wrath nearly two months before, but also so different my stomach lurched at the alien landscape.

From somewhere above us a few silvery pools of moonlight trickled in. It wasn't much but offered enough illumination to see the desolate, rock-scattered ground glistening with frost.

Several meters away a towering gate stood tall and menacing, not unlike the silent prince standing beside me. Columns—carved from obsidian and depicting people being tortured and murdered in brutal fashions—bracketed two doors made entirely of skulls. Human. Animal. Demon. Some horned, others fanged. All disturbing.

My focus landed on what I assumed was the handle: an elk skull with an enormous set of frost-coated antlers.

Wrath, the mighty demon of war and betrayer of my soul, shifted. A tiny spark of annoyance had me glancing his way. His penetrating gaze was already trained on me. That same cold look on his face. I wanted to claw out his heart and stomp on it to get some *hint* of an emotion. Anything would be better than the icy indifference he now wore so well.

He'd turned on me the second it suited his needs. He was a selfish creature. Just like Nonna had warned. And I'd been a fool to believe otherwise.

We stared at each other for an extended beat.

Here, in the shadows of the underworld, his dark gold eyes glinted like the ruby-tipped crown on his head. My pulse ticked faster the longer our gazes remained locked in battle. His hold on me tightened slightly, and it was only then that I realized I was clasping his hand in a white-knuckled grip. I dropped it and stepped away.

If he was annoyed or amused or even furious, I wouldn't know. His expression still hadn't changed; he was as remote as he'd been when he offered that contract with Pride a few minutes ago. If that's the way he wanted things to be between us now, fine. I didn't need or want him. In fact, I'd say he could go straight to Hell, but we'd both accomplished that.

He watched as I reined in my thoughts. I forced myself into a frozen calm I was far from feeling. Knowing how well he could sense emotions, it was probably futile. I looked him over.

Doing my best to emulate the demon prince, I mustered up my haughtiest tone. "The infamous gates of Hell, I presume."

He arched a dark brow as if asking if *that* was the best I could come up with.

Anger replaced lingering fear. At least he was still good for something. "Is the devil too high and mighty to meet his future queen here? Or is he afraid of a dank cave?"

Wrath's answering smile was all sharp edges and wicked delight. "This isn't a cave. It's a void outside the Seven Circles."

He placed a hand on the small of my back and guided me

forward. I was so shocked by the pleasant feel of him, the tender intimacy of his action, I didn't step away. Pebbles skittered beneath our feet but didn't make a sound. Aside from our voices, the lack of noise was jarring enough that I almost lost my balance. Wrath steadied me before letting go.

"It's the place stars fear to enter," he whispered near my ear, his warm breath a severe contrast against the frosty air. I shuddered. "But *never* the devil. Darkness is seduced by him. As is fear."

He ran bare knuckles down my spine, enticing more goose bumps to rise. My breath hitched. I spun around and knocked his hand away.

"Take me to see Pride. I'm tired of your company."

The ground rumbled below us. "Your pride didn't appear in that bone circle the night you spilled blood and summoned me. It was your wrath. Your fury."

"That may be true, *your highness*, but the scroll I signed said 'House Pride,' didn't it?"

I stepped closer, heart thrashing as I crowded his space. The heat of his body radiated around me like sunshine, warm and enticing. It reminded me of home. The new ache in my chest was acute, consuming. I sharpened my tongue like a blade and aimed straight for his icy heart, hoping to penetrate the wall he'd so expertly erected between us. Wrong or not, I wanted to hurt him the way his deception had gutted me.

"Therefore, I chose the devil, not you. How does that feel? Knowing I'd prefer to bed a monster for eternity rather than subject myself to *you* again, Prince Wrath."

His attention dropped to my lips and lingered. A seductive gleam entered his eyes as I returned the favor. He might not admit it, but he wanted to kiss me. My mouth curved into a vicious grin; finally, he'd lost that cold indifference. Too bad for him I was now forbidden.

He stared a moment longer, then said with lethal quiet, "You choose the devil?"

"Yes."

We stood near enough to share breath now. I refused to back

away. And he did, too.

"If that's what you wish, speak it to this realm. As a matter of fact"—he yanked his dagger out from inside his suit jacket—"if you're so certain about the devil, swear a blood oath. If pride truly is your sin of choice, I imagine you won't say no."

Challenge burned in his gaze as he handed the blade to me, hilt-first. I snatched his House dagger and pressed the sharp metal to my fingertip. Wrath crossed his arms and gave me a flat look. He didn't think I'd go through with it. Maybe it *was* my cursed pride, but it also felt a little like my temper was raging as I pricked my finger and handed the serpent blade back. I'd already signed Pride's contract; there was no reason to hesitate now. What was done was done.

"I, Emilia Maria di Carlo, freely choose the devil."

A single drop of blood splattered to the ground, sealing the vow. I flicked my attention to Wrath. Something ignited in the depths of his eyes, but he turned away before I could read what it was. He shoved the dagger into his jacket and started making his way toward the gates, leaving me alone at the edge of nothingness.

I thought about running, but there was nowhere to go.

I glanced around once more and hurried after the demon, falling into step beside him. I wrapped my arms around myself, trying desperately to stop the increasing shivers, which only succeeded in making me shudder more. Wrath had taken his warmth with him, and now the metal corset top bit into my skin with renewed vigor. If we stayed out here much longer, I'd freeze to death. I conjured memories of warmth, peace.

I'd only ever felt this cold once—in northern Italy—and I'd been young and thrilled by the snow then. I'd thought it was romantic; now I saw the truth: it was beautifully dangerous.

Much like my current traveling companion.

My teeth chattered like tiny hammers, the only noise in the void. "How can we hear each other?"

"Because I will it."

Arrogant beast. I released a quivering huff. It was meant to come across as exasperated, but I feared it only gave away how cold I

was. A heavy velvet cloak appeared from thin air, draping itself around my shoulders. I don't know where Wrath magicked it from and didn't care.

I pulled it tighter, grateful for its warmth. I opened my mouth to thank the demon but stopped myself with a swift internal shake. Wrath hadn't acted out of kindness or even chivalry. I imagined he did it largely to make sure I didn't die this close to accomplishing his mission.

If I recalled correctly, delivery of my soul to Pride granted him freedom from the underworld. Something he once said he prized above all else.

How exceptionally marvelous for him. His stay was over just as mine was beginning. And all he had to do was betray me to secure his heart's greatest desire.

I supposed I understood that well enough.

Wrath continued toward the gate and didn't look in my direction again. He pressed a hand to the column closest to us and whispered a word in a foreign tongue, too low for me to hear. Gold light pulsed from his palm and flowed into the black gemstone.

A moment later, the gates slowly creaked open. I couldn't see what lay beyond and my mind promptly crafted all sorts of terrible things. The demon prince offered no formal invitation; he prowled toward the opening he'd made without bothering to see if I followed.

I took a deep breath and steeled my nerves. No matter what was waiting for us, I'd do what I must to achieve my goals. I nestled into my cloak and started forward.

Wrath paused on the threshold to the underworld and finally deigned to look at me again. His expression was harsher than his tone, which halted me in my tracks.

"A word of caution."

"We're about to enter Hell," I said sardonically. "The caution speech may be a little late."

He was not amused. "In the Seven Circles there are three rules to abide by. First, don't ever reveal your true fears."

I hadn't planned to. "Why?"

"This world will turn itself inside out to torture you." I opened my

mouth, but he held up a hand. "Second, control your desires or they will taunt you with illusions easily confused with reality. You had a taste of what that's like when you met Lust. Each of your desires will be magnified tenfold here, particularly when we enter the Sin Corridor."

"The Sin Corridor." I didn't pose it as a question, but Wrath answered anyway.

"New subjects of the realm are tested to see which royal House their dominant sin aligns best with. You will experience a certain... prodding... of emotions as you pass through it."

"I signed my soul to Pride. Why do I need to see where I'm best suited?"

"Live long enough to find that answer out yourself."

I swallowed my rising discomfort. Nonna always cautioned that bad news came in threes, which meant the worst was yet to come. "The third rule is..."

His attention slid to the finger I'd pricked. "Be cautious when making blood bargains with a prince of Hell. And under no circumstances should you ever make one involving the devil. What's his is his. Only a fool would fight or challenge him."

I ground my teeth together. The true games of deception had clearly begun. His warning vaguely reminded me of a note from our family grimoire, and I wondered how we'd come to hold that knowledge. I tucked those thoughts away, focusing instead on my growing anger.

He was no doubt stoking my emotions with his namesake power. Which enraged me all the more. "Signing my soul away wasn't quite good enough. So you resorted to trickery. At least you're consistent."

"Someday you'll see it as a favor."

Unlikely. I curled my injured hand into a fist. Wrath met my gaze again, and a smile tugged at the corners of his sensuous mouth. He undoubtedly sensed my growing fury.

One day, soon enough, I would make him pay for this.

I gave him a dazzling smile, letting myself imagine how good it would feel when I finally destroyed him. His expression shuttered and he inclined his head—as if reading my every thought and

emotion and silently vowed to do the same. In this hatred we were united.

Holding his intense stare, I nodded back, thankful for his treachery. It was the last time I'd fall for his lies. With any luck, though, it would be the start of him and his wicked brothers falling for mine. I'd need to play my role well, or I'd end up dead like the other witch brides.

I brushed past him and strode through the gates of Hell as if I owned them. "Take me to my new home. I'm ready to greet my dear husband."