

THE MEET (Kai's POV from his first meeting with Sophie in *My Ex From Hell*)

There's no way this chick was worth it.

I stomped my feet to get the blood circulating. Get some feeling. I'd been sneaking around the perimeter of this school in the middle of nowhere for hours now, searching for any reason why it was warded the hell up.

It was probably nothing. It was *usually* nothing. I rubbed my neck, irritated by the prickly sensation along the back of it. The sensation that had all but had me jumping out of my skin when I'd arrived and met that girl in the nearby town.

Britney? Bobbi? Whatever. All I wanted was to wring any info to explain the ward that she had out of her. No matter how vague. I smiled, appreciating the memory of her hotness. Then shrugged. They were all hot. So what?

I stuffed my hands into the armpits of my leather jacket. Maybe she wasn't coming. I could go home. Get some sleep. A wry grin crossed my face. Gods, what was happening when the prospect of using my charm on a good looking chick did nothing for me?

But there it was. The prospect of her failure to make our meet just filled me with relief.

I tightened my jaw at the sound of a faint rustle. Great. She'd showed. I moved out of the shadows. Might as well have our little chat and get this over with.

"Hey there, handsome..."

My shoulders lifted up into the vicinity of my ears. With a winning opening line like that, there was no hope of her being other than a brainless flirt. Best to cut my losses. Send her back inside and check out the ward from another angle tomorrow.

"The name is Kai," I corrected, moving in closer. *If I told you I was Kyrillos, Son of Hades and Prince of the Underworld, you'd probably freak.*

She stood there, silently staring.

O-kay. "Wasn't sure you were going to come."

“Of course I was, silly.” She was either going for the breathy sexy approach—and failing—or she had a cold. *Wonderful. Lame or diseased.*

“Enjoying the moonlight?” she asked.

Was she for real? I strode closer again, until I stood feet from her, with only the low fence separating us.

More staring. Was she totally daft? I sighed. Time to amp this up a bit and see what I could get out of her. I shot her my best cocky grin. Guaranteed to warm even the most jaded female. “You gonna come out and play, sweetheart?”

It worked. *Of course.* She swung her leg over the fence—what a shocker she was in yoga gear instead of actual clothing—and jumped down onto my side.

“Better?”

I had to give her props for the cocky eyebrow raise she shot back at me.

Very minimal props.

I shrugged and knocked an annoying lock of hair from my eyes. “It’s a start.” Time to get comfortable. I glanced around for a way to get up close and personal without freaking her out. She may have been dumb enough to land herself outside in the middle of the night with a stranger but it didn’t mean that I had to frighten her.

Yet. I stifled a laugh as I found a patch of dry ground and folded myself onto it. I patted the seat beside me. “It’s dry.”

She didn’t need to be asked twice. Although she just sat there as if waiting for me to take the lead.

Obviously this was going to require a bit of hand holding. Figuratively speaking. I didn’t particularly want to touch her. She didn’t seem like the sharpest tool in the shed. She’d seemed a bit more with it when we’d first met. “So. What’s your story?” I gave her my most entreaty look.

Hopefully, it would help her spill all kinds of useful things about herself. And more importantly, this warded up school she went to.

She waved a hand. “You know. Mom and Dad from rival families, forbidden affair, love child produced. Parents disappeared, leaving me rich beyond my wildest dreams but alone, and I continue to hope they’ll come back so I can know love.” She batted big blinking eyes at me.

And that’s when it hit me. This girl wasn’t stupid. She was out here messing with me. It was so audacious of her, so unlike the reactions I got anymore, that I started laughing. “I wouldn’t have thought you were this funny.”

“Why not?” She sounded mad. Practically bristled at my words.

Hmm. Given that reaction, she *wasn’t* messing with me. Just a nut case, then? “Chill. Just thought your type would care more about looks than humor.”

“My type?” Her voice was syrup sweet but the effect was kind of ruined by the glower she threw my way.

“The kind of hot chick who wants to grow up and land some rich guy.” Calling it like I see it. I shifted, hoping she’d get the hint and move over a bit so I could get up and get out of there.

“You’ve had a wide sampling, have you?,” she asked. “Gotten to know all us chicks intimately enough to know our hopes and dreams?”

I flinched. She looked like she wanted to rip into me. *Okay. Enough of you.* I smirked. That usually got under their skin. “Yeah. I’ve been intimate.”

If looks could kill, she’d have incinerated me. “Wow. Well, I’m underwhelmed. And cold now. So I’m going back in. Have a nice life. Hope you don’t die naked in a closet after your sugar mama’s husband shows up and shoots you. Because we all know your type.” She stood up, heading for the fence as if to dismiss me.

Except now I was pissed. She wasn’t going anywhere until I got some answers about what her deal was. I grabbed her arm. “Sweetheart, you have no idea of my type.”

I could tell from the wary look in her eyes and the sudden tension in her body that I'd spoken with more menace than I'd intended. But she held her ground.

"Let go," she said. Her voice was steady.

Who was this girl? I couldn't figure her out. Despite myself, I was intrigued. I raised my hands and took a step back. Showing she had nothing to fear from me. Physically.

I will figure you out. I stared at her, really stared, trying to understand what was going on. Why she wasn't responding in any typical fashion. And what if anything, she had to do with this ward? She was an enigma and right now, I didn't think that was a good thing.

She shifted and something about the way the moonlight caught her red hair was wrong. It should have shimmered but instead it just looked ... plastic? I reached out and tugged her wig off. Her actual, boring brown, sweaty hair fell limply out. "Nice look." And again, who the hell was she? Because she sure wasn't the girl I'd made plans with.

My skin prickled on high alert. Alarm bells rang in my head. Which was laughable since there was nothing some human female could do to hurt a god.

She bent over to grab her hat that had fallen to the ground, switching mid-snatch to save a sock falling out of her chest.

My sarcastic laugh should have made it clear that what I now thought of her.

She looked completely unphased, yanking the other sock from her bra as if she didn't care. "You're a dick. Let's cut our losses and hope to never see each other again."

Back at ya, sister. "You know, girls don't usually mouth off to me."

"Yeah, yeah. They fall all over themselves trying to impress you."

I couldn't help it. I grinned. Her sass was refreshing. "Pretty much. They do."

Maybe it was her mouthiness. Or maybe that in the moonlight, there was something sort of cute about her. Might as well salvage this before I blow this joint. I pulled her to me and kissed her.

At the first touch of her lips, a jolt careened through my body. My hands tightened possessively on her as the mother of all chemistry connections blew my head off.

It's you ...

I jerked away. What the hell? My mouth went slack. I was in a daze. "Who—"

She grabbed me, kissing me.

I kissed her back like a drowning man having been thrown a lifeline. My arm snaked around her in a steely band. All I could feel was soft female that I knew and didn't know and yet on every single cellular level, my body was screaming was mine.

She spasmed, shrieked, and doubled over, wrenching away from me.

At the sudden loss of contact, my chest filled with sorrow. Then flooded with a hot, tight anger. I grabbed onto her shoulders, steadying her. "Who are you?" *You know.*

No! The answer was impossible. Laughable. There was no way this was Persephone and yet, I'd have staked my life on it.

Somebody was screwing with me. They were going to be very sorry.

"Sophie ..." She shuddered again, her pain evident.

I couldn't afford pity for whoever this pawn was. I shook her. "Talk to me."

She smacked me. "Zeus," she whispered.

I went cold.

She fell to the ground and lay her head on her knees, curling up into a ball.

I stared dumbly at her, my rampant emotions keeping me stuck. How could it be Persephone? But how else could this human have known to speak Zeus' name? I wanted to rage and cry and laugh and shout. All I could do was mutter "no" over and over again, the thoughts in my brain tumbling at a million miles a second.

She let out this pitiful whimper. Like a kitten. Then she started to shiver.

I swore. Whatever was going on? I couldn't just leave her like this. Especially if she was ...

No. I shoved any hope down deep inside me. At least, I think it was hope. It might have been murder. I shrugged out of my leather jacket and bundled her up in it.

She took a deep breath and then opened her eyes, staring directly into mine.

I kept my gaze steady, but I'm pretty sure my expression was pure shock.

She touched her hair and the fact that she could do something so trivial, so normal when my entire world was blowing apart, killed any nice guy urges in me. "Was this all a big game to you?"

"More of a joke, but—"

"And I was the punchline?" I kicked out blindly, the edges of my vision red. My foot smacked against something hard. Probably the fence. I didn't care. I was a second away from blasting everything in sight.

"Look Kai, I'm sorry you got caught up in this."

Caught up in? Either I was losing my mind thinking this nothing female was the dead love of my life or Persephone had played a hell of a joke on me for the past sixteen years. I laughed bitterly.

"But the joke was supposed to be on Bethany," she said.

She wasn't making sense. I just wanted the truth. "Stop lying to me." I could feel my eyes go black. I curled my fingers into my palms so I wouldn't start firing and accidentally kill her before I got any answers. Much as I wanted to at this moment.

She shrank from me, watching me warily as she spoke. "I'm not lying! What's wrong?"

My heart was racing. My chest felt so tight, I wondered if I could crack a rib from tension. "I want the truth. You owe me that much."

"Truth: I'm Sophie Bloom. I go to Hope Park. Bethany? She's a giant cow, so I pretended to be her so you wouldn't ever want to see her again. I didn't mean to upset you."

Given how carefully I watched her, no way a human could get a lie past me now. "You're sure of this?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't lie about something that exciting."

I let out a breath as my shoulders relaxed and sank back onto the ground. Whatever had happened, she didn't know what it was either. Which still meant I had to figure out who was behind whatever had just occurred. Probably the same person who had warded up this school? Time to ditch her and solve this little mystery. "Sorry. For a second I thought... hoped... Doesn't matter. Halloween weirdness."

Why was I still talking? Apologizing? To her? For what?

That kiss. How do you explain how you felt about her? I fought the tug in my gut, the urge to take her in my arms as I attempted to drown out the voices in my head. Specifically, my father's, laughing at my situation.

By the time I got myself under control, I'd missed part of what she'd said.

".. been a night to remember. Or not."

A crow cawed off in the distance.

She shrugged. "I need to make curfew so..."

I pushed to my feet. "Of course." I held my hand out to her. She let me pull her up before returning my jacket.

I shoved my arms into the sleeves. This was obviously so long, farewell. I shifted slightly to stay that much closer to her, breathe her in for one more second. Store up the sensation of being back with Persephone once more.

Even if it was a lie.

"Goodbye, Sophie Bloom." I resisted the urge to crush her to me, pressing my lips to hers for the most chaste of kisses.

"Goodbye," she began, then clutched at her head in agony.

I tensed. My messed up urges towards this girl had me now wanting to kill whoever had involved her in this sick joke.

I reached out my hand to ... steady her? I don't know. Because she turned her gaze up to mine, open-mouthed in pure shock. "Kai?" My name was spoken with absolute certainty.

At that word, I felt my blood begin to fizz. It took me a second to realize the feeling.

Joy.

My face lit up. "Finally."

Then she was in my arms, her lips on mine, finally, finally back with me, my body wanting more, needing her, dying, where had she been, was she going to leave me again? It was the best kiss of my very long, jaded life.

Until someone jerked me from her, delivered a sharp right hook and made me eat dirt.

THE LOVE (Kai's POV when he declares his love to Sophie in *My Date From Hell*)

If kissing her with everything I had wasn't going to snap the damn memory spell, then I'd have to go with Plan B.

Talking.

I hated talking.

But Sophie looked destitute. I could only imagine every "he doesn't love me" thought bouncing through her brain right now, compounding her disappointment that despite Pierce's certainty, our kiss hadn't retrieved Persephone's memories.

I glanced at Festos. "Is there somewhere Sophie and I can talk? Privately?"

"Through there." He gestured off to one of the doors leading off his open concept living room.

I rose, keeping Soph's hand firmly in mine, and led her into Festos' bedroom, shutting the door for privacy. With that bunch, the chances they were eavesdropping was high.

The hipster vibe extended to Festos' bedroom. I sat her down on the edge of the bed with its bright splashy comforter cover, then rested a hip against one the dresser. The way she watched me, rigid with tension, I could tell she was wound tight.

Not half as tight as I was. I really didn't want to have this chat. Relive that particular part of my past. "What did I tell you when you found me cuffed?"

Surprise flashed across her face. "That Hades had poisoned himself as a test of your loyalty, and that you chose me."

A bolt of phantom pain jarred through my body. My father certainly knew how to show his displeasure. I threw her a bitter smile. "Hades would halt the torture every once in a while to make me a proposition."

I zoned out, lost in the memory, of what had happened when I'd recently gone after my father, seeking revenge. Talk about backfire.

"If you're waiting for me to beg," I croaked out the words through cracked lips. "You'll be waiting a very long time."

The straps suspending me from the ceiling had rubbed my wrists raw. Too bad they hadn't gone numb. Hades had made sure of that. I just kept experiencing the agony, to the point that the feel of air across my skin burned like fiery hot blades consuming me.

Hades frowned. "Look at you. My son, reduced to ... this." His distaste was palpable. "So deluded as to try and seek revenge against the Lord of the Underworld? Did you really think me so weak?"

I mustered up all my energy to give a simple shrug, knowing the gesture would infuriate him. "Did you really think I wouldn't try? I am nothing if not a creature of your making, father."

He flicked his gaze to one of his minions. The Pyrosim floated closer, then stretched out a flaming tentacle to pour fire into my body, jerking me rigid. I could smell my flesh charring as swirls of burning orange and blue licked across my body.

It stopped. My head flopped forward. My chest heaved.

He ran a gentle hand over my head. "There is another way."

I blinked back to my surroundings, trying hard to shake off that particular father-son bonding moment and explained to Sophie what he'd offered. "All would be forgiven, he'd even bequeath me the Underworld, if I went back and killed you."

"You said 'no,' right? Turned him down. Chose me so I could help you defeat him. Team Sophie, yay?"

She still didn't get it, even knowing that the reason I'd gone after Hades was to seek vengeance for him having framed her in a test of my loyalty. I crossed the room towards her, a fond smile on my face. My hand twitched, wanting to touch her. Feel the warmth of her skin as I smoothed away all her worries. Soon enough. I had to get through this without getting ... distracted.

I sat down next to her and unable to help myself, tucked one of her dark brown ringlets back behind her ear. "Goddess, I didn't choose you to help me defeat my father." My body tightened, leaning in to her of its own volition, her scent luring me in like the most deadly siren song.

I'd given up trying to resist.

She threw me a wavering smile. Still didn't get it.

Gods, I was messing this up. I ran my fingers through my hair. "Goddesses are easy. Sure, they're vain and temperamental, but I know how to handle them. But you. You were this prickly, mouthy, human girl. And I couldn't figure you out and I couldn't get you to fall in line and you just kept getting under my skin." I willed her to understand what I was saying so I wouldn't have to actually say the words.

She didn't.

"You don't remember us. I do." I frowned. "At first, it was just confusing because I kept seeing glimpses of Persephone in this stranger. But then, it all started to get tangled up. I felt like I was betraying Persephone." Because how could my feelings for Sophie so quickly have totally eclipsed those of the love of my life?

“I get it.” Her voice was flat as she stared at the floor. “You loved her so much. Her loss devastated you.”

Missing the point. “Sophie,” I began.

She cut me off. “You’re not betraying her, you know.”

Huh? That’s what she thought? I stared at her, dumbfounded.

Her words were rushed. “Having to fall in love with me. It’s just battle strategy. It doesn’t lessen what you felt for her.”

I grinned. Well, inside. If she was this upset ... I threw her my most weighty look. “You’re not listening, stubborn girl. Everything got tangled up because I started to have feelings for *you*.”

“Feelings?”

Damn. She was going to make me spell it out. I looked away. “You scared me. Because what I felt for Persephone was nothing compared to what I thought I might feel for you.”

I hated this. Every fibre of my being was screaming for me to shut up. To keep talking was to risk myself. But how could I stay silent? Sophie had barreled her way into my life and forced me to feel things I hadn’t wanted to feel again. But now that I did? I’d do whatever it took to hold on to it. “I didn’t want to be at someone’s mercy again,” I explained. “Couldn’t deal with the idea of loving someone and losing them again. So I used the ritual as a convenient excuse.”

Did she understand? My cheeks felt hot. I was behaving like a pathetic girl. My stomach roiled.

Her silence was agonizing.

“Go on,” she finally squeaked.

I stroked her cheek with my knuckles, pretty impressed with my restraint when all I wanted to do pull her into my arms. “Goddesses aren’t half as challenging as humans. You drive me nuts and I still can’t stay away from you.”

I grasped her face in my hands. Moment of truth. There'd be no going back after this. I stared into her eyes, so anxious, so beautiful, and knew that all I wanted was to move forward.

With her. "Saya-ga *po*, Sophie. I love you."

Her face lit up with pure radiance.

But there was no answering sentiment. Really? I tapped her on the shoulder. To jog her memory about common courtesy in this situation. "Anything you care to say to me?"

She had the audacity to grin at me. "Nope. I'm good."

She loved me. And she *would* say it back. I could be very persuasive. But before I had the chance to work my wiles on her, her face went somber.

My stomach plummeted. "What's wrong?"

She averted her eyes. Pale, she twisted her fingers so hard, I worried she might break one. "I feel really disgusted by my behavior. Never once considering what this must have been like for you." She glanced at me.

Shock and hope warred inside me. I never thought she'd say that. No one had ever considered what things had ever been like for me before. Well, if they had, they sure as hell hadn't admitted it. "You *were* always willing to think the worst of me."

She nodded. "I know. But it's not like you bothered to clarify."

She was going to wrench a finger off. I caught her hand in mine, forcing her to stop. "It's not like you asked."

She sighed. "Right. I'm not very good at considering other people."

I stared at her in blatant disbelief. "What are you talking about? You do it with Hannah and Theo all the time. And your classmates." She was the most crazily caring person I knew.

She laughed, ruefully. "Yeah, well, they don't scare me like you do. And with them, there's no one to measure up against."

I squeezed her hands. "You don't need to measure yourself against her." Sophie was a goddess. And it was time she started believing a bit more in herself. We'd work on that.

"I do though. No," she held up one hand. "Hear me out. I've never been anyone extraordinary. Just hanging around waiting for the day my life would start. Then I discovered that I was actually a goddess with powers and a destiny. As much as being awoken helped me realize how great Sophie was, because *I've* been the one actively dealing with all this, and doing a pretty good job, I think ..."

I nodded, because it was true.

"Well, on a capability level, my confidence zoomed off the charts. But on an emotional level? Demeter arranged for stars to shine in the sky when she lost Persephone. You defied Hades for her when she was held captive. I didn't really inspire anything."

No, my gorgeous girl, you inspired far too much. That was the problem. But all I said was, "I'm sorry I was a douche." I nudged her knee in apology.

She patted my leg. "It's okay. You had your reasons. I'm not saying all this to fish for compliments or even whine. I just want to be honest. I felt so inadequate next to her in a lot of ways. And I'm working on it. Because I think I'm great."

"I do, too," I said in a low voice.

"But I'm laying myself bare here. From now on? No more games. From either of us. I'll be honest with you and you be honest with me. No matter how hard it is, or what we're feeling. Because this thing between us? It's not just between us, no matter how much we wish it was. It's Romeo and Juliet squared by infinity with the specter of the ex thrown in for good measure. And we can't let all that bring us down."

She threaded her fingers through mine and took a deep breath, her words tumbling out. "All this to say, I think I'm worth it and you're worth it. And most of all, *we're* worth it."

Ah. Now we're getting somewhere. I leaned forward, unaware until this second how much I wanted to hear her speak those words. "Then say it. Don't be scared. I love you."

My heart raced. In gleeful amazement that I could once again say those words to someone.

She opened her mouth.

My body practically vibrated in anticipation of hearing her tell me she loved me. But before she could speak, her entire being convulsed.

Moment over.