

## Chapter 1

I stared at the man in the dark pin-striped suit as he walked slowly towards my office desk. He opened his mouth slightly to smile at me. I could not help but notice the way his incisors seemed to come to a point beneath his red lips.

I swallowed hard, gripping the edges of my desk, peeking from behind my glass/plastic hybrid computer display. I came to the immediate conclusion that this man was not human.

The tall man looked at me curiously, a corner of his upper lip curled, his head slightly tilted, his pale blue eyes seeming to bore a hole into me, digging down deep as if he could see my soul.

I thought that he looked familiar. I closed my eyes for just a brief second (fearing to close them for longer), attempting to recall where I had previously seen his face. I envisioned him in my mind's eye, imagining him as he appeared before me now. Then recognition came to me - my imagination began to draw him upon a stage. He was standing behind a microphone, gripping its silver stand as if it were a lover, singing lines of poetry to an audience of adoring and screaming fans.

*Of course*, I thought, as I re-opened my eyes and noticed that he was already standing just in front of my desk, now looking down at me. His name did not come to me, but I knew him as the lead singer of a relatively well-known local band called Killer City. Hell, I had even seen them play once, right after the city had re-opened the Hi-Tone (and then had later closed it again).

He continued to look at me, his head tilted slightly, lips curling subtly into a smile. He was waiting for me to begin some sort of fawning, as men like him were often accustomed to.

When he spoke, his voice was as lyrical in speech as it was in song, "Ms. Grosjean, I presume?" His accent was British, which, for some reason, caught me off guard.

I hugged myself with my arms as an ice-cold shiver crawled across my shoulders and down into my limbs. I couldn't tell if it was the falling temperature outside or just my nerves causing this reaction.

The man, though, merely tugged at the edges of the expensive leather driving gloves he was wearing. A flash of silver caught my eye - he was wearing a large skull ring on his middle finger.

He motioned to a worn leather chair that sat in front of my desk, "May I?" he asked.

I nodded, fearful but also fascinated. My fascination, though, did not come from the fact that he was a rock star - a real local celebrity. Nor was it due to the fact that he was such a striking figure in his suit and tie. What I found interesting was what I had determined earlier - that he was not human. But that begged the question - what then was he?

"I was hoping that you could help me," he stated. He leaned forward and placed one gloved hand on the wooden surface of the desk.

It took everything within my willpower not to pull away from him, because his nearness began to frighten me. It was more than the fact that he wasn't human; it was that there was something completely "off" about him. Inside my head, I could practically hear something whispering "*wrong*." I attempted to come to terms with what I was sensing.

"You are the Oracle, I take it?" he asked, his voice lilting at the end of the sentence. The hand that he had rested against my desk reached out and brushed against a book that lay there - a slightly dusty copy of Charles Dickens' "A Tale of Two Cities."

The book had been a gift from Aleisha. My irrational fear did not wish for this strange man to

touch it. I fought back the urge to smack his hand away and ask that he leave. But I also needed to hear what he had to say because, as he had already stated, I was the Oracle.

This was my job. I was the Oracle. I hadn't asked to become this - it was just something I had to deal with.

My name is Alex Grosjean and I am a private detective. But more than that, I am the Oracle of Delphi. Although technically, as I live in Olympic City, I am more the Oracle of there, but official godly titles are what they are.

I obtained the "gift" of sight that led me to become the Oracle after a bitchy goddess named Mnemosyne played a nasty practical joke upon me. After I was notified of what I had become, I assumed that it would mean that all sorts of weird gods, goddesses and even monsters were probably going to show up at my door. And now, I found myself wondering which one this guy was. My inner sight was already yelling monster, so I was going with that. I did not find the thought very comforting.

But first thing was first, I needed to know who (or what) I was dealing with for sure. So I finally spoke and asked my first question, "Who are you?" Yes, I had already recognized him, but a name alone did not even begin to answer that question.

The man with the short curly brownish-blond hair and entrancing pale blue eyes smiled again. His pale face seemed to glow underneath the fluorescent lighting. "My name is Christian Renaud," he announced and motioned towards himself with a flourishing gesture. He was the sort of man who was often very proud of himself.

"Let me rephrase that," I interrupted, willing myself the courage to just get through this little meeting. "*What* are you? Exactly?"

His smile broadened as he seemed to think over the best way to answer my inquiry. After about a minute, he spoke again. "I am become death. The destroyer of worlds," he stated, adding another over the top gesture with his hands.

I glared at him. I was in no mood to continue this discussion if all he was going to give me were quotes from other people. I shook my head and touched the drawer where I knew my .38 pistol was carefully stashed away. The truth of it was - I was growing more scared by the minute.

He must have sensed this because he seemed to visibly relax and leaned back in the seat. "I bring death," he stated and shrugged, as if that were answer enough.

"Death?" I asked, believing every word he was saying.

He crossed one leg over the other and began to explain. Behind his eyes, I sensed a sadness I had not noticed before. But that sadness was lying under something more malevolent. "I bring death," he stated. "I touch people and they die. I am immortal, but I am also death. And I have Lamia to blame."

I had no idea what he was talking about, although the word Lamia rang a bell. I knew that she fell into one of the following categories: gods, goddesses or monsters. And that sucked because those were things I really did my best to avoid.

I was still completely lost, though, as to why Christian was here and why he had said he needed me. I was pretty sure this went beyond my pay grade.

Christian shifted in his chair as if studying me, seeing if any comprehension was starting to impress itself upon me.

I said the first thing that popped into my head, "You're a fucking zombie?" Maybe that was rude, but I did not care - I usually didn't. But from what he had told me so far, that's all I had to

go on. It's not like there was a handbook or anything on how to handle this sort of discussion.

Christian shook his head, "No... I suppose I should start from the beginning. You should know the entire story. I am Vrykolakas. Do you know that word?"

I shook my head. I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Some might call me a vampire," he stated and smiled wider this time, showing off those pointed teeth I had noticed earlier.

I slid back a few inches on the wheels of my office chair. What he had just said made me think of all of those movies about blood suckers and devourers of men. I was fucking scared. I was beginning to convince myself that he had come here just to eat me.

Fuck. I didn't even believe in vampires. But up until last year, I also had not believed in gods, and I'd learned about them the hard way. So believing him wasn't really that difficult. If that was the case, though, I might be screwed. I kept my hand on the drawer where I knew my .38 Smith & Wesson Special was, just in case. Knowing it was there made me feel slightly safer, even if I had no idea if shooting him would have any sort of effect. Hell, I didn't even know if I could type in the password to open the locked drawer fast enough to draw on him. But I certainly would try if it came down to that.

I didn't realize that my free hand had begun to rub my neck as if expecting him to lunge for it at any given moment.

He laughed, making the sort of sound you would expect to hear if you lived in a mental asylum. There was nothing human in that noise, nothing close to anything friendly or non-threatening at all. Holy fuck, I was going to die.

But then his face changed and he suddenly seemed mild, even meek.

I knew it was a trick - some sort of vampire deceit - but I still relaxed, in spite of wanting to run for my life just seconds earlier.

"No, not like that," Christian explained, lowering his voice as if he were speaking to a child. He opened his mouth and pulled out his extra-long incisors, showing nothing more underneath than a normal set of teeth. He held out his palm to me, where the pointed teeth now resided. "These things? They're just for show. I'm playing around with a new image."

His dichotomy was making my brain explode inside my head. At one moment, he was almost sweet and innocent. In another, he was the most horrifying thing I'd ever seen. And I was having trouble coming to terms with both of those visuals inside my mind. This man, this vrykolakas, was something I had never come across before.

I was sincerely hoping that this meeting did not signal what a future as the Oracle might entail.

"Perhaps I can show you," he told me and stood up, walking around the side of my desk to where I sat. He began to approach me slowly, his gloved hands held out.

I jumped up from my chair, forgetting myself. "Just back off, buddy... just back the fuck off..."

I debated screaming for help, calling down one of the gods (if that were even possible) to come get this crazy and scary monster away from me and out of my office. But something in the way he was looking at me told me that although he could not be completely trusted, this time he did not intend to do me harm.

I backed up to the large picture window behind my desk. I found its cold surface soothing. Outside it had begun to snow, but I had not yet noticed.

Christian stood just in front of me and reached up to touch my chin, forcing it up so that my eyes were level with his.

I fell into the blue sea that awaited me there. My breathing began to calm and my body relaxed. The familiar room around me shifted and began to change...