

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

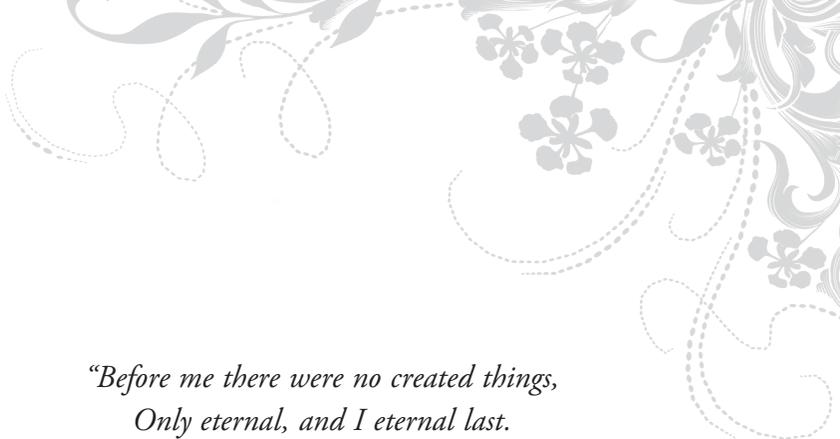
MEG CABOT

UNDERWORLD

*Escape from the realm of the dead is impossible*



An *ABANDON* novel



*“Before me there were no created things,  
Only eternal, and I eternal last.  
All hope abandon, ye who enter in!”*

DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Inferno*, Canto III

Pierce keeps having the most terrible nightmares.” My mom used to say this to all the doctors we saw right after the accident. “She talks in her sleep — sorry, sweetheart, but you do — about a boy following her. Sometimes she even wakes up crying. It doesn’t seem normal. I’ve never had dreams that vivid.”

*That’s because the worst thing that’s ever happened to you, Mom, I’d wanted to tell her, is your divorce from Dad. You never died, got resuscitated, then had a boy follow you back from the realm of the dead.*

Only I couldn’t say this to my mother. Nothing good ever seemed to happen to anyone who found out about my problems, which had more or less caused my parents’ divorce, even if Mom didn’t know it.

“Often while we’re sleeping, our mind is busy working out solutions to problems about which we’ve felt stressed while we were awake, though our dreams might seem completely unrelated to what’s really bothering us,” the doctors explained, one by one. “In Pierce’s case, of course she isn’t *actually* being followed by anyone in real life.” This showed how much the doctors knew. “That’s just how whatever is causing her anxiety manifests itself in her subconscious . . . the way some of us will dream that we’re late for a class, for instance. It’s perfectly healthy, and a sign that Pierce’s subconscious is functioning normally.”

You know what I’d like? To dream that I’m late for a class.

Instead, I’m always dreaming that someone is trying to kill me, or someone I care about. That’s because people *are* trying to kill me, as well as the people I care about, in real life . . . so often, as a matter of fact, that there are times I can’t tell when it’s really happening, and when I’m only dreaming about it.

Like now, for instance. For a dream, this one felt pretty realistic.

I was clinging to the wooden railing of an old-fashioned sailing ship. High winds whipped my dark hair, causing loose tendrils to stick wetly to my face and neck. They tugged at the long white skirt of the silk ball gown in which I’d somehow become dressed, tangling it around my legs, making it hard for me to keep my footing on the rain and salt spray-slickened surface of the deck.

The sky above me was black as night . . . except when lightning sliced through the thick dark clouds, revealing the frighteningly whitecapped ocean waves crashing against the ship’s hull below me, churned by a violent storm.

My heart pounded as I held the railing, but not with fear for my own safety. I knew I could turn around and go below, where it was warm and dry. Only I didn't want to. Because every time another bolt of lightning illuminated the sky, I saw *him* in the water, being cast about like a piece of driftwood. With every surge of the rough waves, he was pulled farther and farther out to sea, away from the boat.

Away from me.

"John," I cried. My voice was hoarse with emotion, and from overuse. It seemed as if I'd been screaming his name for hours, but no one would come to our aid. It was just us, and the storm, and the seething sea.

"Swim," I begged him. "Just *swim* to me."

For a moment it seemed as if he was going to make it. He was close enough to the side of the ship that I could see the single-minded determination in those gray eyes, mingled with the fear each of us was trying not to show the other. His strong, muscular arms rose from the ink-black water as he tried desperately to make his way back to the side of the ship.

For every stroke he took forward, however, the angry waves pushed him another two strokes back.

I looked around frantically for a rope, something, anything, to throw to him, but there was none. So instead I leaned out as far as I could, reaching down to him with one hand while gripping the railing with the other.

"I can pull you up," I assured him. "Just take my hand."

He shook his head, his dark hair slick with rain and seawater.

“I don’t want to take you with me.” His voice was as deep and rough as the ocean. “I’d rather die than let you die.”

*I’d rather die than let you die.*

This made no sense. John Hayden *was* Death. He couldn’t die. And every single one of his previous actions had indicated that he most certainly *did* want to take me with him, to the Underworld, over which he ruled. Why else had I spent so much time running from him?

Persephone, the girl in the myth the ancient Greeks used to explain the seasons, hadn’t run fast enough from Hades, the Greek god of death, so he was able to chase her down in his chariot when he came across her hanging out with some nymphs in a field one day, and take her to the Underworld to be his queen.

Persephone was lucky. Her mother happened to be Demeter, the goddess of the harvest. Demeter went on strike, refusing to allow anything on earth to grow until her daughter was released. What fun is it being a god or goddess if all the humans are too busy starving to death to worship you? Hades was forced to let Persephone go, and after the longest winter imaginable, spring-time finally blossomed across the land.

In reality, spring doesn’t come because of some girl being released from the Underworld. It comes because of the earth moving into the astronomical vernal equinox.

But I get it. People have always been desperate for stories that explain why bad things happen to good people, myths with happy endings to give them hope. They don’t want to know that when we die, what lies beyond may not be all harps and halos. No one wants to listen to someone like me, who comes back from the dead

and says, “Hey, guess what? All that stuff they’ve been telling us is a load of bull.” It’s more comforting to trust the storytellers, to believe that fairy tales really do come true.

Still, when John said that thing in my dream about how he’d rather die than let me die, even though I knew that could never be, I realized something: *I* wanted to believe in the fairy tales, too. My subconscious — just like all the doctors had tried to reassure my mother — had worked out the resolution to a problem that had been bothering me for a long time. What I really wanted was to run *towards* John, not away from him.

Only now that I’d finally realized it, he was about to drown.

No wonder my heart gave a lurch like it was my own life I was watching disappear right in front of me.

“Take my hand,” I begged him.

I sounded like someone possessed. I *was* possessed, with the fear of watching the sea swallow him up before my eyes. It figured that the minute I’d finally admitted to myself how much I loved him, I was about to lose him. Maybe this was my karmic punishment for having taken so long to figure it out.

A wave lifted him, as if in answer to my prayers, and suddenly, miraculously, he was so close, our fingers touched.

The look in his eyes turned into something like hope. I leaned out even farther to grasp his wrist, feeling his hand lock around mine. I smiled, overwhelmed with love and joy, daring to believe he was safe, and the ending to my own story might be a happy one after all.

Then from out of nowhere came another one of those powerful swells . . .

. . . and I saw the hope in his eyes die.

*“Don’t let go!”* I shouted, knowing in my heart that this was exactly what he would do. Even as I said the words, I felt his fingers loosen from around my wrist. He was releasing me on purpose, not wanting to pull me down into the cold waves with him. . . .

A second later he was ripped away from me by a wave so big, it tossed him like a toy. I screamed his name, clinging to the wooden rail, my tears indistinguishable from the rain pelting my face, a hole as big as the sea seeming to split open inside me. Only when lightning streaked the sky did I see him again, a tiny, shadowy figure crested atop a swell a dozen yards away. He raised an arm as if to say good-bye.

Then the water closed over him. I was alone in the storm, and he was gone forever.