

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author

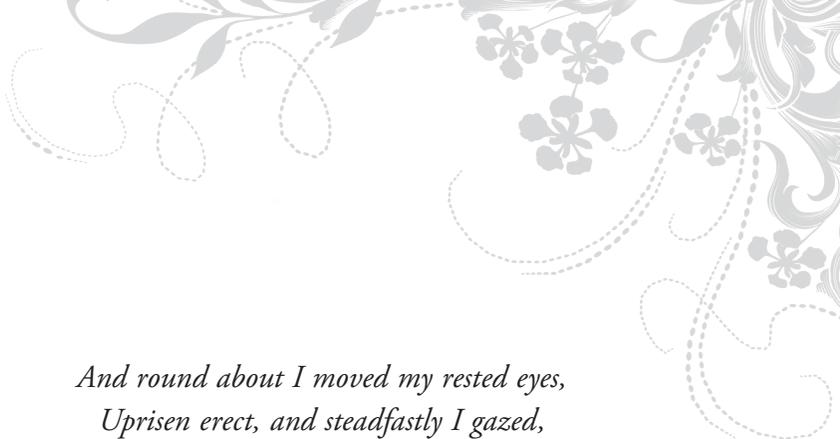
MEG CABOT

UNDERWORLD

Escape from the realm of the dead is impossible



An *ABANDON* novel



*And round about I moved my rested eyes,
Uprisen erect, and steadfastly I gazed,
To recognise the place wherein I was.*
DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Inferno*, Canto IV

My pulse still pounding from the dream, I opened my eyes. My hair was stuck damply to my face and neck, my fingers so tightly clenched into fists that it hurt when I tried to straighten them.

Wait. It *had* been a dream, right?

If so, then why, when I licked my lips, did I taste salt water? And why did that slant of light filtering through my bedroom curtains look so unfamiliar?

Because they weren't my bedroom curtains, I realized. The curtains in my bedroom weren't long and white and ghostly. They didn't hang from ornately carved stone arches. There wasn't a stone arch to be found in the house my mom had bought in a gated community in Isla Huesos, where we'd just moved from Connecticut, thanks to my parents' divorce being finalized and

my expulsion from the Westport Academy for Girls for decidedly unladylike behavior.

Nor would Mom's decorator have chosen medieval-looking tapestries picturing satyrs chasing half-clad nymphs around as a design motif.

That's what lined the wall opposite the stone arches, though, as well as sconces lit by actual flames. . . .

No way would Mom have okayed those (total fire hazard), *or* the enormous four-poster canopy bed in which I lay.

It wasn't until a deep, masculine voice said my name — in a voice so loud, I startled — that I realized I wasn't in the bed alone.

"Pierce."

The boy from my dream wasn't dead at the bottom of the ocean. He was in the bed next to me. Not only was he in the bed next to me, but he was holding me in his arms. The reason my name had sounded so loud was because my head was resting against his chest.

Which was shirtless.

Mom would *definitely* not have okayed this.

Suddenly, it all came rushing back. Underworld. I was in the *Underworld*.

And this time, I wasn't dead.

I gasped and sat up. Instantly, his strong arms released me.

"It's all right," John said, sitting up as well. His tone was gentle. So were his hands, going to my shoulders to soothe me. As gentle as if I were the bird I'd once watched him bring back to life.

Except that I knew the enormous power behind those callused fingers. I'd seen them stop hearts as easily as they'd started one.

“Pierce, you were having a nightmare,” he said.

Nightmare? It took me a second to make the connection — the nightmare from which I’d just woken, about him drowning. He didn’t mean the one that was unfolding right now before my disbelieving eyes as I looked down at our legs, entwined on top of the exquisitely embroidered white comforter.

Because while I wasn’t wearing anything I’d have chosen for myself — I was dressed in the same kind of long flowing white gown as the nymphs in the tapestries — at least I was fully clothed.

I couldn’t say the same for him. He had on jeans — though they were so formfitting, he might as well have been naked. The black denim molded itself to him like a second skin.

Nightmare . . . or quite excellent dream? I guess it depends on how you looked at it. His shirt was many feet away, tossed carelessly across the low white divan by the fireplace.

His bare chest and shoulders were surprisingly tan for someone who’d spent most of the past two hundred years trapped below the surface of the earth, allowed out only for short periods of time in order to commit felonies, such as kidnapping girls (admittedly, he’d done this to protect me from being murdered, but it was still illegal). His skin was the same gold as a lion’s coat, just as warm and smooth . . .

. . . a fact to which I could attest only too well, as I’d apparently slept with my face pressed against it all night long.

I’d also been weeping against it, if there was any truth to his next statement.

“You were crying,” he said, smoothing some of my dark hair from my forehead. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

“Not really,” I said, feeling mortified as I remembered all those times my mother had mentioned my crying in my sleep. I lifted a wrist to wipe my cheeks. He was right. They were wet.

Crying in my sleep in front of him. *About* him. Great.

I knew I had bigger things to worry about — so big, I didn’t know how I was ever even going to begin to deal with them — but I had never spent the night with a boy before. Then again, I’d never been in love with any boy but him.

I’d been wrong about his skin. When I looked more closely, I realized it wasn’t entirely gold. There were fine, pale lines crisscrossing it here and there. What *were* those lines? A closer inspection was going to be necessary.

“You know you don’t have to worry about her anymore, don’t you, Pierce?” he asked, his dark brows lowered with concern. “I know it will take awhile to sink in, but you really are safe here with me. It was just a dream.”

I wished I could share his confidence. I knew from experience that though dreams don’t leave scars — at least not ones that anyone can see — they sometimes leave an ache that can prove every bit as painful.

And now that I’d gotten a better look at them, I could see that’s what the pale white lines were that occasionally crisscrossed the otherwise golden skin of his body: scars from long-healed wounds.

I bit my lip. I knew who’d inflicted those wounds, and why. It was one of those worries that felt too big for me to deal with right then. Remembering the monster from which he’d saved me — more frightening than any ocean swell — by sweeping me from

the cafeteria of my new school in Isla Huesos and bringing me to his world, I realized I was probably going to have post-traumatic stress for life. How does someone deal with finding out that her own grandmother hates her so much that she's tried to kill her . . . *twice*?

Apparently, she dreams about her boyfriend drowning right in front of her, then gets a little distracted from that dream when she wakes to find him tantalizingly shirtless on top of the bed beside her.

"But other people got hurt besides me," I said, as much to remind myself of this fact as him. "Do you really think bringing me here is going to make them just . . . *stop*?"

Because the rest of my worries were about precisely this.

"I don't know," he admitted, dipping his head to press his mouth to the back of my neck. I felt an immediate *zing* all along my veins, like his lips were carbonated or something. "This is the first time I've ever been in love with a girl who the Furies were trying to kill. But I do know there's nothing you can do to stop them. This is exactly where you belong. Where you've *always* belonged. And where I hope you'll consider staying . . . this time."

This time. Right.

"Well," I said. *Love*. He *loved* me. Hearing that word fall so casually from his lips might help a little with the post-traumatic stress. "This is certainly better than world history, which is where I'd be sitting if I were back in Isla Huesos right now." If school hadn't been canceled due to the giant hurricane bearing down on the island, anyway.

“History was a subject in which I was particularly good in school,” he assured me, his mouth sliding down my throat, towards the gold links of the necklace he’d given me.

“I don’t doubt it,” I said.

“I can tutor you,” he said, continuing to press kisses to my throat, “so you don’t fall behind.”

“Wow, thanks,” I said. “That’s such a relief.”

He laughed. I wasn’t sure, but it might have been the first time I’d ever heard him do so. It was a good laugh, throaty and rich.

The only problem — well, not the *only* problem, because there were *many* problems, I was quickly realizing, with our situation — was that he was wrong. Not about world history, obviously. I was certain he’d be good at anything he tried. I meant about the Furies.

I was never going to believe there wasn’t a way to stop the evil spirits — angered by where they’d been sent after passing through the Underworld, and who’d managed to return there — determined to seek vengeance on John . . . as if where they’d ended up was *his* fault, and not their own.

But when John’s merest touch sent my blood fizzing as if I’d just downed a six-pack of soda, it was hard to concentrate, particularly on forming an argument with him about the Furies, or whether or not it was true the Underworld was “exactly” where I belonged.

If that were true, that meant other things had to be true, as well . . . like that my grandmother was possessed by one of those Furies, and that she really had wanted to kill me for the sole purpose of causing John pain.

This was no foundation on which to build a lasting relationship. It wasn't as if my parents were going to like him much, either, if they ever got the chance to meet him. I wasn't sure my dad would consider *any* guy good enough for me, but a death deity who'd kidnapped me from my school cafeteria — even to protect me from Grandma — was never going to be high on his list.

And what about what Richard Smith, the sexton of the Isla Huesos Cemetery, had said to me that rainy day in his office about why John might have given me the necklace Hades had forged for Persephone?

Clearly there had to have been some kind of mistake. Persephone had been the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, and the goddess of springtime. I'd been kicked out of one of the most exclusive girls' schools on the East Coast for assault, my GPA was marginal at best, and I was probably the only seventeen-year-old girl in the entire state of Florida who'd yet to pass her driver's license exam. How did any of that qualify me for the position of Queen of the Underworld?

Persephone and I did have something in common, however. Our boyfriends had the same job . . .

. . . a reality that was impossible to ignore when the deep, sad sound of a marina horn cut through the stillness of the morning air. I recognized it immediately from my last visit to his home, and knew all too well what it signified.

"They're waiting for me down at the beach," John said with a groan, dropping his head to the indentation between my neck and shoulder.

These words chilled me far more than any nightmare ever could. *They*, I knew, were the souls of the dead, who gathered by the shore of a massive underground lake just on the other side of the walled courtyard beyond the stone arches, to wait for the boats that would ferry them to their final destination. . . .

John was the person who decided which boat they would board. The horn I'd heard signaled that a boat was arriving to pick up the latest batch of passengers.

I shivered, feeling suddenly cold. A dankness seemed to cling to every of inch of my body, despite the fire in the hearth and the warm tenderness of his touch. He must have noticed, since he reached for my hand and pressed it against his naked heart.

"Pierce," he said, as if I'd wounded him somehow. "Don't look like that."

"I didn't mean to." I felt foolish. But I couldn't help remembering my last visit to his world, when I'd been one of those souls, waiting on that beach to be sorted. "It's not your fault. It's just . . . that *horn*."

He kissed the palm of my hand. "I'm sorry," he said. All the laughter was gone, both from his eyes and his voice. "Sorry for all of this — sorry for your nightmares, sorry for what your mother must be going through, not knowing where you are, and sorry most of all for the times when I . . . well, when I didn't behave around you as I ought to have. You weren't far from wrong last night when you called me . . . what was it? Oh, right. A wild thing." The entreaty in his eyes was difficult to resist. "But you know I only ever acted that way when you were putting yourself in danger . . . or when you were acting as if you didn't care about me."

With the hand that wasn't holding mine, he reached up to trace the links of the gold necklace I wore around my neck.

"For so long, I thought you hated me," he went on, his eyes hooded by his long, dark lashes. They were completely wasted on a boy. "If I had known that you never stopped wearing this after I gave it to you, I might have been a little less . . . agitated."

I felt myself blush, and not only because his wandering fingers had strayed dangerously close to the neckline of my gown, seeming to search for my own heart.

"Well, I think you've figured out by now that I never hated you," I said, steering his hand firmly to the less intimate territory of my waist. "And I know you didn't mean to be so wild then, John. I'm not sure about now. . . ."

My primness brought a smile back to his lips. With his heavily muscled frame, those scars, and that long dark hair that had a tendency to fall into those absurdly light eyes, I was certain few girls would have called him handsome, much less cute.

I was equally certain, however, there wasn't a single girl my age who'd have been able to resist him. There was something so ruthlessly masculine about him that it was impossible not to feel a kind of magnetic attraction.

Especially when he smiled. Smiling, he went from the brooding juvenile delinquent the girls back at Isla Huesos High School might have whispered about, to the misunderstood hottie they'd definitely have slipped their number if he'd asked for it . . . and maybe more.

I couldn't help feeling as if in escaping with him to the Underworld to avoid being killed, I'd gotten myself into a whole different level of trouble.

“Pierce, I know how many questions you must have,” he said. “And I swear I’ll answer them all — the ones I can, anyway — as soon as I get back. But for now, just know that I mean to — I’m *going* to — make this place feel like home to you, if you’ll give me the chance.”

Home? The *Underworld*? A gigantic underground cavern where the sun never shines, wracked by perpetual damp, to which dead people show up every five minutes?

I raised my eyebrows. “Okay. But first, maybe we should talk about —”

Boundaries. That’s what I meant to say. But he distracted me again.

“I know you never liked school,” he went on, the corners of his mouth still irresistibly turned up, “or you wouldn’t have gotten yourself thrown out of your last one. I know, I know . . . that was mostly my fault.” He grinned down at me. I don’t know what he was finding so amusing. He certainly hadn’t been laughing about what had happened with my study hall teacher at the time. “But anyway, there’s no school here. You’ll like that. But there’s still plenty here with which to entertain yourself while I’m working. I can get you all the books you need to graduate from high school, since I know that’s what you said you wanted. In the meantime, there are all *my* books. . . .”

I’d seen his books. Almost all of them had been written before his birth, which had been more than a century and a half before mine. Many of them were books of love poems. He’d tried to read to me from one of them the night before, in order to cheer me up.

It hadn't worked.

I thought it more polite to say "Thank you, John," than "Do you have any books that aren't about love? And young couples expressing that love? Because I do not need encouragement in that direction right now."

"And you have this whole castle to explore," he said, an eager light in his eyes. "The gardens are beautiful. . . ."

I glanced skeptically at the billowing white curtains. I'd already seen the gardens outside them. Deathly black lilies and poisonous-looking mushrooms *were* beautiful, in their own way, especially to people like my mother, an environmental biologist who had a fondness for exotic plants and trees.

But I'd always preferred ordinary flowers, like daisies — the kind that grew wild, not cultivated in a garden. What chance did a poor, wild daisy have against a sophisticated black lily?

The night before, when I'd still been determined to escape and had tried to climb the garden walls, I'd seen that John's castle was on a little island, surrounded by water. There were no boats to cross it. Even if I could find one, the only place to go was the next island. That was the one where he worked, though. And there was no way to get from there to where I wanted to go, back to the land of the living.

"But you should know I've told my men that if they do see you anywhere you're not supposed to be, they're to bring you straight to me." Had he read my thoughts? He must have noticed the owlish look I gave him, since he added, his voice growing hard, "Pierce, it's for your own good. There are dangers here that you —"

“You told me there’s no one here who can hurt me,” I interrupted. “You said I’m safe here.”

“You’re *safer*, because I can protect you,” John said. “But you have a heartbeat, and you’re in the land of the dead —”

“*You* have a heartbeat,” I pointed out. I’d felt it beating, as strong and steady as my own, beneath my hand. He certainly seemed fit for someone who was supposed to have died so many years earlier, not to mention so violently in my dream.

“Yes,” he said. “But that’s different. I’m . . . Mr. Smith already told you what I am.”

I thought it strange that he didn’t want to say the words *death deity* out loud. It wasn’t like I hadn’t noticed he had gifts that were unlike a normal nineteen-year-old boy’s.

Then again, I was having communication difficulties of my own, so maybe we were even. I decided to drop it.

“So Furies can find me here, too?” I asked instead.

“They can,” he admitted, sounding more like himself again. “But it will be much harder for them to attack you in a fortified castle in the Underworld than in your high-school cafeteria. Still, even with me around, *and* a necklace that warns when Furies are coming,” he added, tugging on the chain I wore around my neck so that the large round diamond at the end of it slipped from the bodice of my gown, then tumbled into his palm, “that doesn’t mean you’re invincible, Pierce, whatever you might like to think.”

I sucked in my breath defensively. “But Mr. Smith said —”

“Mr. Smith is a fine cemetery sexton,” he said, holding the diamond up so that it caught the light filtering in from outside

the stone arches. Whenever John was around, the stone glowed a deep silver gray, the same color as his eyes, but when people like my grandmother, who definitely did not have my best intentions at heart, were present, it turned a warning shade of black. “And I’ll admit he’s been better at his job than any of his predecessors. But if he’s got you under the impression that just because this necklace was forged by Hades to warn Persephone when Furies were present, it also has the power to defeat them, you’re wrong. Nothing can defeat them. *Nothing*. Believe me, I’ve tried everything.”

His scars were testament enough to that.

Imagining what he must have endured — and remembering what he had gone through in my dream — caused tears to gather under my eyelashes. One of them escaped and began to trickle down my cheek before I could wipe it away without him noticing.

“Pierce,” he said, looking alarmed. Nothing seemed to discomfit him more than the sight of my tears. “Don’t *cry*.”

“I’m not,” I lied. “I’ve seen what the Furies have done to you, and it’s so unfair. There’s got to be a way to stop them. There’s *got* to be. And in the meantime, can’t I at least go back to warn my mom about what’s going on? Even if it’s only for five minutes —”

His expression darkened. “Pierce,” he said. “We talked about this. Your mother is in no danger. But *you* are. It’s too risky right now.”

“I know, but I’ve never been away from her for this long without her knowing where I am. She’s got to be freaking out. And what about my cousin Alex? You know he lives with my

grandmother, and now that Uncle Chris is in jail, Alex will be with my grandmother *all alone* —”

“*No*, Pierce,” John said, so sharply I jumped.

Thunder crashed, seemingly directly overhead. Technically, where we were — hundreds of miles beneath the earth’s crust — there shouldn’t have been any meteorological phenomena. But it was one of John’s many special gifts that, when he felt something very deeply, he could make thunder — and lightning — appear . . . with his mind.

I blinked at him. He might have liked to believe otherwise, but it was clear the wild part of him was far from tamed. And as much as John might have wanted to pretend that this place was my home, it wasn’t.

The palace was a prison. He was the warden . . . even if he was a warden who was only holding me captive for the best of reasons, to keep me safe from my own relatives.

“You don’t need to shake the place down,” I said reprovingly. “A simple *no* will suffice.”

He looked a little sheepish. When he spoke again, it was in a much gentler tone.

“I’m sorry. Force of habit.” He gave me another one of his heart-stopping smiles, then extended his palms. “I know something that will make you feel better.”

If I hadn’t been looking down at that exact moment, I wouldn’t have believed my eyes. I’d have thought he’d made a sleight of hand, pulled it from his sleeve like a magician.

He wasn’t wearing any sleeves, though, and he was no magician. He’d almost killed two men in my presence using nothing

but his fingertips. He traveled back and forth between two dimensions, his world and mine, far more easily than other people commuted to and from work, because he didn't need to use public transportation, or even a car. He just blinked, and *poof*. It was done.

"There," he said. "What do you think?"