

Excerpt from
The Fury Bride

by Nicola R. White

For three long years after her husband died protecting their daughter from a man bent on exploiting her ability to see into the future, Nora Katsaros was on the run. And now that she's finally found a place to call home, she's not about to let anyone stand in the way of raising her daughter in peace. Not even Charon, the womanizing, drop-dead-gorgeous former god who works at the restaurant she owns.

Unfortunately for Nora, Charon's love-'em-and-leave-'em lifestyle brings trouble to her doorstep when a jealous husband shows up at the restaurant looking for a fight. When the man threatens Nora's safety, Charon reacts with violence and soon finds himself under arrest. At the same time, the confrontation causes Nora to manifest the powers of an ancient Greek Fury.

Struggling to adapt to her new life as a goddess of vengeance, Nora is desperate to find a way to make the assault charges against Charon disappear before bad publicity destroys her livelihood and the authorities look too closely at his past. When a friend suggests a way to deprive the prosecution of its key witness and keep the case from going to trial, Nora is forced to consider the unthinkable...a marriage of convenience—to the accused!

Chapter 1

I blew a strand of hair away from my face as I headed back to the kitchen, arms and feet aching from the delivery of appetizers and plated entrees to table after table of hungry diners. The impatient four-top seated at the front of the house had me hopping like the Easter Bunny on crack, and the pieces of hair escaping my French braid were an outward symbol of the adrenaline that pumped through my body. It was mid-November on Cape Cod, but the weather was unseasonably warm, and tourists and locals alike filled Spyder's Bar & Grill, the restaurant I ran with my business partner and friend, Tara Walker.

As I tucked my hair back in place, I reflected on the fact that my long tresses weren't as practical as a shorter 'mom' style would have been, but my hair was my one concession to vanity. I didn't wear makeup, and I kept slim by running a business and chasing two kids around instead of dieting.

Besides, Cash had always loved my hair long.

A dull ache rose in my chest at the thought of my dead husband, accompanied by a traitorous flash of gratitude that the pain was only an echo of the agony I'd suffered three years ago, when he died.

I pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen and stuck my head into the hot, noisy, behind-the-scenes bustle of the dinner rush.

"Back in five!" I called out to Tara on my way to the back door of the restaurant. The smelly garbage dumpster standing guard outside wasn't the most glamorous of break-time companions, but I desperately needed a breath of air if I was going to survive that four-top without saying something I'd regret later. They'd already made more demands than I could shake a stick at, and I was starting to feel meaner than a nest full of rattlesnakes.

My business partner nodded without looking up from the tray of dishes she was loading into our industrial dishwasher. Both of us helped out when our staff was shorthanded, but as a Greek Fury, Tara's quick reflexes and ability to heal minor cuts and burns in a heartbeat made her especially well-suited for work in the kitchen.

I smiled to myself. If I was the Easter Bunny on crack, Tara was the Swedish Chef on amphetamines. Not that I knew much about illicit drugs. While Tara and her fellow Furies, Alex Hughes and Rachel Underwood, spent their nights fighting crime, I was the boring sidekick of our group. My only claim to mythological fame was that my daughter, Ruby, and foster son, Nicky, were oracles who foretold the future.

Outside, I leaned against rough, red brick and stared up at the night sky. Goose bumps rose on my arms, but after the warmth of the dining room and the even hotter air of the kitchen, I welcomed the chill. There were days when I was desperately homesick for my native Texas—like when we were in the middle of a Massachusetts snowstorm—but I loved the crisp bite in the air that signaled a New England autumn.

“Oh, Cash, I wish you could see our little girl,” I murmured at the stars overhead. “She looks more like you every day. Today, she—”

“Do you often speak to your dead husband as if he can hear you?” A deep, male voice rumbled beside me.

I yelped and pressed a hand to my wildly beating heart. “Charon! Damn it, don't sneak up on me like that.” I looked up—way up—to meet his gaze.

“I thought you would hear the door.” The statement was as close to an apology as I could expect. Before cooking at Spyder's, Charon's role as ferryman on the River Styx hadn't required much in the way of etiquette.

“Do you need me in the kitchen?” I asked, ready to push off the wall and rush inside.

Charon shook his head. “No. I am also taking my break.”

I nodded and let my muscles relax. Charon often timed his breaks to coincide with mine. I figured it was because he craved something constant after millennia spent watching a steady, ever-changing parade of souls go by. And there was the added benefit that, unlike most women he encountered, I didn’t ask anything of him. Not conversation, friendship...or anything else.

More than six feet tall and built as solidly as the brick wall I leaned against, there was no denying Charon was easy on the eyes. With black hair and a set of piercing baby blues, his good looks got him laid whenever he had the urge—which was often. Charon spent more nights in the beds of his conquests than he did in the cot he kept in an unused storage room at Spyder’s.

Not that he’d made a move on me in the months since Alex and I had visited Hades and Charon had bargained with Venus, the goddess of love, for a way out of the underworld.

I glanced sideways again. Hell, he barely spoke to me most of the time. Charon had been created to suffer on behalf of the Olympian gods as a *pharmakos*—a scapegoat—and he hated most everyone, even the women with whom he had his no-strings-attached rendezvous. He just hated me a little less.

“Do you often speak to your dead husband?” Charon asked again.

“That’s personal.”

“But he cannot hear you,” he persisted. “As I told you on the banks of the Styx, I ferried him across the river myself.”

I sighed. Of all the nights for him to get talkative, he had to choose the night my nerves were frayed to a fine thread. “I know he can’t hear me.”

“Then why do you do it?”

“It’s a mortal thing.” I shrugged. “It makes me feel closer to him. Helps me remember him.” I studied his face. “What’s with all the questions?”

“I am attempting to understand human emotions.” His unnaturally blue eyes flashed—literally. “They often make little sense.”

Uh-oh. That flare of light in his eyes never meant anything good.

“What did you do?” I demanded, already reaching for the door. “Did you get into another fight with Ramiro?”

Charon was naturally gifted in the culinary arts, a fact our head chef did not always appreciate. Especially when Charon told Ramiro how to do his job.

He shook his head slowly. “I did not get into an argument with Ramiro.”

“Thank God for small mercies,” I muttered.

Charon flattened a massive palm against the door to keep me from opening it. “However, there is a man in the dining room who may be inclined to cause a scene. I had a liaison with his wife.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You don’t say.”

He frowned. “The reason for the man’s outrage is unclear in light of his wife’s statement to me that they are no longer intimate.”

“That doesn’t make it OK to sleep with a married woman!” I tugged at the door, but I couldn’t budge it. “Now let me inside so I can deal with this mess.” After spending hours elbows-deep in dishes, Tara wasn’t anywhere near presentable enough to show her face at the front of the house, so it would have to be me. “It’s probably too much to hope for that I can comp the guy a free meal and get him to leave quietly,” I said to myself, “but maybe—”

“I hoped you could enlighten me as to the husband’s motivation,” Charon said. “As I stated, my efforts to understand mortals have not been fruitful.”

I threw up my hands. “I don’t know! Maybe the wife lied. Maybe she wanted to make her husband jealous. But who cares? Do you have any idea how much

business we'll lose if this guy pitches a fit in front of a full house?" Since taking over Spyder's the year before, Tara and I had recently begun to turn a profit, but margins were tight.

Charon frowned. "I have been confronted by jealous spouses before, but I did not expect any of them to seek me out at the restaurant. This man's behavior is cowardly. I will get rid of him."

"You will not *get rid* of anyone!" I ordered. "You'll get your philanderin' ass back in the kitchen and let me sort this out." Frustration made the Texas in my voice stronger than usual.

Then the full meaning of Charon's words sank in and I let out a moan of dismay. "Are you telling me this has happened before? Outside the restaurant?" God only knew how much harm he was doing to our reputation in the community—not to mention the physical damage he could inflict. "Please tell me you haven't been in any actual fist fights since you came to Hawthorne."

Charon was no longer immortal, but he was still far bigger and way stronger than most mortals. As my daddy would have said, a punch from him would be like getting hit with a pile driver.

"I did not intend to cause trouble for you." He frowned. "I...apologize." He stepped back so I could open the door.

I took a deep breath as I reached for the handle. Charon *never* apologized. This was going to be bad.

Very bad.

When I rushed back into the dining room to assess the situation, my gaze was drawn to a red-faced man who stood next to the hostess's station with his feet planted wide and his hands on his hips. He wasn't quite as huge as Charon, but he was barrel-chested and his arms were as big around as my thighs. The look on his face would have made a hornet seem cuddly.

Tamara, the hostess on duty, was pale and nervous as he loomed next to her.

“I’m sure Ms. Katsaros will be right out to speak with you, sir,” she stammered. “Like I said, she only stepped out for a minute, but I left word with the kitchen staff that you wanted to speak with—”

“I don’t want to speak with any Ms. Katsos,” he barked at the poor young woman, butchering my last name in the process. “My fight is with some guy who works here named Sharon. That girly name will suit him fine after I cut off his—”

I stepped between the enraged man and my frightened hostess before he could harangue her any further.

“Good evening, I’m Nora Katsaros, one of the owners of Spyder’s Bar & Grill.” I introduced myself with a wide, disarming smile. At least, I hoped it was disarming. “I understand you have a personal matter you’d like to discuss with a member of our staff. Unfortunately—”

“You’re damn right I do,” he cut me off. “When I get my hands on him—”

“*However,*” I interrupted right back, still smiling, “as I’m sure you can understand, we don’t allow employees to have visitors on the premises during business hours.”

It was a bold-faced lie—just the week before, I’d let one of the wait staff take an unexpected hour off to visit with her grandma when the woman had stopped by—but I would say whatever it took to get this man off the premises and out of my hair.

He jabbed a finger at me. “You tell that son of a bitch to come out here and face me, or I’ll go to the kitchen and find him.” He raised his voice even louder. “And when I do, I’ll shove his apron down his throat!”

He took a step toward me and heads turned in our direction. Conversation in the restaurant ebbed as people began to whisper about the disturbance.

I gritted my teeth. It was time for the gloves to come off. “Sir, I understand that you’re upset, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave. I can’t allow you to threaten my employees.” I paused for effect and tried to look more imposing. “I’m sure you don’t want me to call the police.”

He laughed in my face. “Go ahead, honey, call ‘em. And while you’re at it, call an ambulance for that motherfucker in the kitchen, too.” He brushed past me and strode through the dining room toward the kitchen.

Hell’s bells. “Tamara, call 9-1-1,” I ordered over my shoulder as I hustled after him. By now, none of the diners seated in the restaurant were even pretending not to stare. From the corner of my eye, I saw that a few of them had camera phones out and were recording the confrontation.

Great. Just what we needed.

I caught up to the man outside the kitchen and ran in front of him to block the door. At least now we were around a corner and out of sight of the dining room.

“Sir, why don’t you take a minute to calm down before you go in there and do something you’ll regret later?” I said. “The police have been called, but if you’ll step into my office and wait for them to arrive, I know we can clear up this...misunderstanding without any further trouble.”

If he walked into the kitchen loaded for bear, he definitely *would* regret it. No matter how big or angry he was, there was no way he’d come out on top against Charon and a Fury.

But rather than listen to what I had to say, the man simply advanced on me, jaw set with determination. Any more brave words I might have said died unspoken as I took a quick step sideways. The man was a juggernaut, committed to his course and unconcerned with what I might or might not *allow*. As I tried to avoid being mowed down, my feet somehow tangled with each other and I lost my balance. I

flailed my arms and staggered a few steps, but couldn't stop myself from tipping over backward.

Time slowed down as I fell, then sped up again when I realized there was no way to avoid smashing into a wall. I had a split second to anticipate the impact before my temple connected with gyprock and a sickening wave of nausea engulfed me. As I crumpled to the floor, a trickle of warm liquid run down the side of my face. I blinked up at the ceiling, then my gaze fell on a smear of blood staining the wallpaper Tara and I had lovingly picked out.

When the wave of pain in my head receded into a fierce, steady ache, my first thought was of Ruby and Nicky. I groaned. I had to get up, make sure I was OK. I couldn't be hurt too badly to look after them. Nicky's social worker was scheduled for a visit later in the week and I needed to show her I could provide a good home, even though I was a single parent who worked full time.

The thought of the kids lit a spark of fierce protectiveness inside me and kindled a fire in my belly. Only a few seconds had passed since I'd hit the wall and the urge to throw up was still strong, but I swallowed convulsively and rolled to my hands and knees, then surged to my feet. My vision went dark and I swayed in place, but I blinked rapidly to clear my head. Background noises faded away as my focus arrowed straight toward the man who'd threatened my livelihood, my safety, and the quiet existence I'd built for my children.

My world narrowed to thoughts of revenge. The man reached out to open the kitchen door and I opened my mouth to shriek at him in wordless anger.

But before I could make a sound, someone pushed back from the other side of the door. It flew open, knocking the man backward, and Charon appeared in the doorway, shoulders almost as wide as the frame.

His gaze flickered from the blood on my face to the man who'd fallen at his feet. "You hurt a woman who did you no harm." His eyes flashed coldly. "I have little tolerance for those who take out their anger on the innocent."

Like the gods had taken out their emotions on him for thousands of years.

The other man clambered to his feet, not cowed by Charon's size or scary attitude. "I didn't touch her. She tripped." He pointed at Charon. "You bastard—you think you can get away with screwing my wife?"

Charon smiled thinly. "There is nothing to *get away with*. I took nothing that wasn't freely given." Then he grabbed the man's arm and twisted it up behind his back before shoving him face first against the wall, next to the smear of my blood. "Let this serve as a warning. Do not come here again."

The other man let out a yell of pain as Charon forced his arm higher up his back. Something in his shoulder tore with an audible pop.

He screamed. "Ah! Jesus! You broke my arm," he panted.

"Your arm is not broken," Charon corrected him. "It is more likely that your shoulder is dislocated, and perhaps you have a torn ligament." He paused thoughtfully. "You may require surgery to repair the damage."

"Let him go!" I said sharply as I heard sirens in the parking lot. A moment ago, every cell in my body had urged me to attack the man myself, but now my anger drained away as the consequences of what had happened sank in.

The police had arrived. And whether they pressed charges against Charon would depend on whose version of events they believed—mine or the injured man's. Tamara had seen him enter the restaurant and demand to speak to Charon, but being angry wasn't a crime, and I was the only witness to what had happened in the hallway outside the kitchen. Aside from all that, the man had a few extra points in his favor. People always felt sympathy for a jilted spouse, and though he'd made threats, he hadn't actually hurt anyone—I had tripped over my own feet.

Then there was the fact that his injury appeared to be far more serious than mine—not a great argument that Charon had used reasonable force to subdue the man.

I reached up gingerly to touch the cut on my head. But when I ran my fingers over my hairline, I found only smooth, unbroken skin. Then I realized how clearly I could hear the murmured conversations and scrape of silverware from the dining room, and how strongly scented the foods in the kitchen were. *What the hell?* My eyes widened as I took a mental inventory of my senses and realized they were all heightened. Was it adrenaline? Shock?

Or something else?

My gaze flew to Tara, who now stood in the kitchen doorway. What I was experiencing was eerily similar to a process she had described to me a year ago.

She grimaced as she met my gaze. “I’m sorry, Nora,” she said. “By the time I realized you needed help, Charon was blocking the whole damn doorway and I couldn’t get out there.”

“I...hit my head,” I said weakly. “But now...” I trailed off.

“Yeah, about that... You and I have a lot more in common now than either of us ever expected.”

I stared at her. She couldn’t mean...

Could she?

By now, the man Charon had assaulted was yelling something about calling his lawyer, but I ignored him as I listened to someone else. Someone I’d never heard before.

Someone inside my head.

Hell’s bells. My legs trembled with shock.

I sagged weakly against the wall as the Greek Fury who’d appeared in my mind introduced herself.