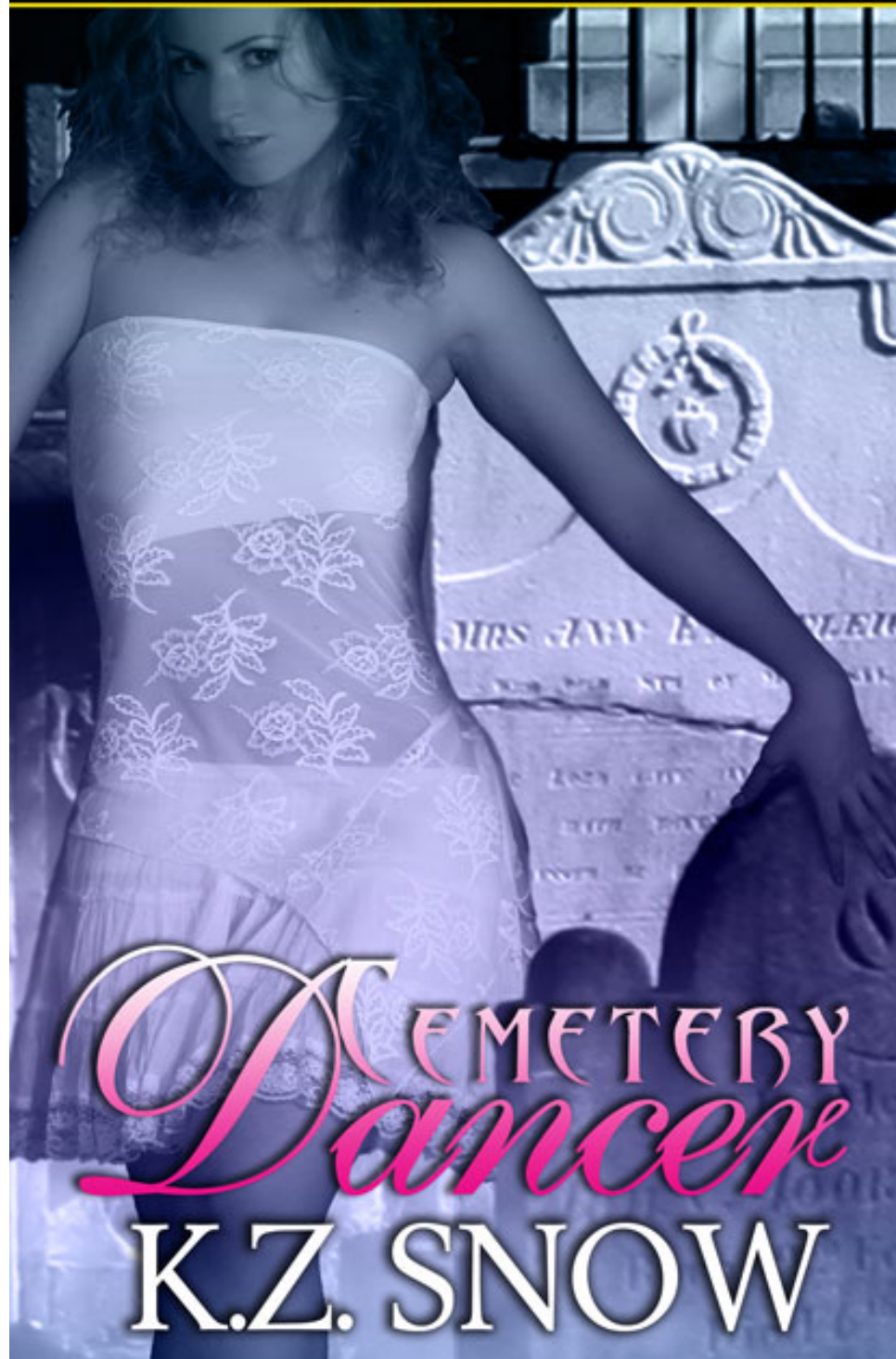


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Cemetery Dancer

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CEMETERY DANCER

K.Z. Snow

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Chapter One

"How do you know it's my husband?" Bitterness suddenly curdled the woman's voice. Without waiting for an answer, she spoke again. "Does he want to fuck you?"

Sophia Alanca, freelance medium, felt her face flush. She also felt a thrilling whisper of fingers along her inner thighs. Struggling to control her breathing, she kept her eyes trained on the candle's flame. High and sharp as a spearhead, it was wavering rapidly at the tip – a signal of tension.

How to answer such a question?

Tell her the truth, Esme instructed. She's craved the truth since she met him but has gotten only lies and excuses. If his loss is not worth mourning, she needs to know.

Esme was, unfailingly, both blunt and wise – an invaluable combination of qualities in a spirit guide. Sophie never questioned Esme's pronouncements.

The medium had been holding her breath as the ghostly fingers crept toward her crotch. Pressing her legs together to shield herself, she exhaled, "Yes," then hazarded a glance at her client.

It was the widow, now, who turned down her eyes. Her lips were tightly seamed. Then, she nodded several times. Sophie could easily interpret the movement. Dolores Rimalgen, her suspicions finally confirmed, had been vindicated.

Mr. Rimalgen, along with his incorporeal fingers, had fled.

With an unnerving combination of ebbing excitement and sympathy, Sophie reached for the perfectly manicured fingers interlaced so firmly on the opposite side of the round table. "He's not worth your grief, you know," she said. "He's still unrepentant."

Mrs. Rimalgen's smile was at once sad and sardonic. "Why am I not surprised?" She stared at the candle flame, which was now so still it seemed painted on the backdrop of darkness.

Closure.

"Roger didn't get women because he was drop-dead handsome," Mrs. Rimalgen went on.

"I believe that's true." Sophie gave her a gently playful smile.

The widow smiled back – but, again, only limply. "But he was very charming and smooth and..."

"Seductive?" Sophie suggested.

"So you picked up on that, too."

"Couldn't help it." Sophie didn't go into detail. She gave the woman's hands a reassuring squeeze, then pulled her own hand back across the table. "Someday, one way or another, he'll pay for his self-indulgence and all the betrayal it spawned. That's a guarantee. At the moment, though, he still doesn't get it."

Mrs. Rimalgen startled Sophie by laughing out loud. "Oh my God, you really *are* psychic!" Letting out a long breath, she ran her thin hands over her face then dropped them to her lap. "I do want to thank you for your honesty. In fact, I can't thank you enough. I've been eaten alive by insecurity and resentment for eleven years. Roger always turned it back on me and tried to paint me as some kind of neurotic shrew." She concluded with a single, dour laugh.

"I think that's called 'adding insult to injury'." Sophie remained still, gazing kindly and patiently at her client. "Is there anyone else you'd like to contact, anything else you'd like to know?"

"Well," Mrs. Rimalgen began to rise, "I do have one more question." She lifted her handbag from the floor. "But it's about you."

Sophie's eyebrows rose. She expected the usual polite probing about her mediumistic development and experiences—her "credentials" so to speak.

"Do you mind?" Mrs. Rimalgen asked.

"No, not at all." Sophie rose, too, preparing to escort her obviously departing client to the door.

"Is it true you used to be a nun?"

Sophie's hesitation wasn't, she hoped, prolonged enough to be noticeable. "Yes," she said, tensing a little.

Together, they walked to the front door.

"So are you, like, one of those virgin mystics?"

Sophie threw back her head and laughed in genuine amusement. "Hardly!"

* * * * *

Sophie knew, even before she entered a Carmelite convent at the age of eighteen, that she was "different". Since her seventh year on earth she'd been glimpsing and hearing people who weren't *of* the earth. Deceased relatives and friends of the family were the first ones to come through. As she matured—harnessing and nurturing and focusing her unique abilities—she found she could contact not only most persons on the Other Side but, occasionally, beings she couldn't even define. She found she had to devise "filtering mechanisms" to keep the uninvited at bay.

Because hers was a deeply devout family, Sophie began to interpret her power in religious terms. It was the only way she could accept it and live with it. She acquired an affinity for female saints. In an awkward way, she tried to model herself after them.

Her body had other ideas.

Sophie was both excited and embarrassed by her physical development. One half of her mind—the one fed by magazines and music, television shows and movies—told her she should enjoy her awakening sexuality. The other half, the one controlled by her parents and the Church, told her that her body should be hidden and ignored.

But she couldn't hide the plump firmness of her breasts or the assertive poke of her nipples or the fullness of her hips. She couldn't hide her lush black hair, her peacock-blue eyes and coquettishly arched eyebrows, her rosy bow-shaped lips. And she definitely could not ignore the throbbing and slickness brought on by the nearness of attractive young men.

Then Sophie began reading about medieval female mystics—women of the eleventh and twelfth centuries who were “far-seers”, somewhat like she herself, *and* were deeply spiritual *and* put a decidedly sexual spin on their spirituality. They seemed to legitimize her longings. So, with the belief that she could fit all aspects of herself into the cloister, she became a nun. Her parents burst with pride.

It was, to say the least, a difficult experience for Sophie. As assiduously as she followed the rules of chastity, poverty and obedience, she could not comfortably settle into the lifestyle. Her fantasies and yearnings seemed to multiply and gather strength...*without* taking on a religiously mystical cast. What was worse, her second sight was not a gift the Church approved of, so she felt forced to keep it to herself.

After ten years, following the deaths of her parents, Sophie made the difficult decision to “leap over the wall”. She left the convent and put up her medium's shingle. Finally, her gift was appreciated, not scorned, and it also provided her with a comfortable living.

The transition into a healthy, happy sex life wasn't as smooth...

* * * * *

“Hey, Cam.” Showered and refreshed, Sophie flopped onto the chintz-upholstered chair in her bedroom as she kept the phone to her ear.

“Feef, what's up? You sound kind of...drained.”

Just hearing her best friend's voice lifted Sophie's spirits. Cammie knew her better than anyone else—except, maybe, Esme—and was wonderfully supportive and nonjudgmental. She also had a great sense of humor—a treasured asset to Sophie.

“I am, a little.”

“Why? Did you just have a session?”

“Yeah, kind of a disturbing one.” Sophie wondered how explicit she should be in talking about it.

Cam immediately resolved that issue. “Come on, let's hear about it. And don't get all evasive with me.”

Sophie sighed. Then it all poured out of her – the meeting with the needful Dolores Rimalgen and the guilty, secret pleasure Sophie had taken in the feel of the wayward husband’s disembodied fingers snaking up her thighs.

Cammie was laughing. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she sputtered, “but isn’t that just like a man? Or *some* men? Ho-doggin’ from the Great Beyond...oh my God.”

Finally, Sophie could chuckle about it, too. “It’s the first time something like that has ever happened to me. Imagine *my* surprise.”

Gradually, Cammie’s laughter chugged to a halt. “Feef, you need to get laid...*bad*. I’ve been telling you that for months. If ever a woman was starved for passion, it’s you. No offense intended, hon.”

“None taken. I know you’re right. Today really, uh...drove the point home.”

“I would think so,” Cam said dryly.

“But I can’t just go out and pick someone up. I couldn’t stand myself if I did that. And I don’t want to go through that blind-date minefield, either.”

“Then I don’t know what to tell you, hon. Maybe you should try asking Esme. I do know this, though – you almost always have to take *some* chances to get what you want. And I’d say, given the state you’re in, you need to start taking some big ones.”

Chapter Two

Sophie lay flat on the pristine sheets of her double bed and stared at the parallel slash-marks of light angling across the invisible ceiling. She knew it was another night when sleep would elude her. Without thinking, she reached for the nightstand drawer and pulled out a silicone-filled dildo that looked remarkably like a large, vein-threaded penis...except it was so shockingly scarlet it would have signaled certain death were it attached to a real man. Closing her eyes, Sophie tried to imagine that real man. He would have delectable lips, a chest like a rock wall and impeccable rhythm. She slid the control button to the *on* position and gradually slipped the dildo into her vagina, which was already moist enough to make a lubricant unnecessary. It did feel good, this solid, vibrating column that filled her. Sophie let her muscles embrace it. Carefully rotating the dildo, she tried to find her G-spot...but it had suddenly become elusive.

She realized she just wasn't in the right mood for a pretend penis. She craved the real thing—a genuine hot, hard cock made of flesh and blood and tissue directed by a real man who was thrusting it, back and forth, without any help from her. Sophie's hand stopped. With dreary resignation, she threw the dildo back into the drawer. Her hand slid beneath the top sheet.

She was sick of her playthings. They'd forever been her only avenues to sexual pleasure, these jewel-colored phalluses with their silly names and smarmy packaging, their ribs and ridges and speed controls. Her three sexual encounters—two pre-convent, one post-convent—didn't even count, they'd been so unsatisfying. Once in a while, as she lifted one of the vibrators from her nightstand, she imagined it had been lopped off some garish statue in a carnival sideshow.

Hardly the stuff of true passion.

Thinking of her profane best friend, Sophie began to giggle. According to her husband, Cam actually talked to her toys. Ignoring their long and ludicrous "given" names, she addressed each one as F.D., which stood for Fake Dick. "Come on, F.D., time to pick up where Daddy left off." Or, "Come on, F.D., time to go exploring." Every time Ethan, Cam's husband, told one of her F.D. stories, Sophie would laugh so hard her stomach would start to cramp.

As her giggles subsided, Sophie expelled a long, hopeless breath and sat up. Her bare nipples tingled with unignorable sensitivity when the top sheet slid over them. She leaned over, letting them brush against her legs. Almost unconsciously, she began running her fingertips along the insides of her parted thighs, mimicking the movements of that salacious spirit aka Roger Rimalgen.

With a disturbing, mingled upsurge of fear and shame and desire, Sophie desperately wished for a return of that touch. She wished the fingers would reach the

apex of her thighs, then one or two of them would skate delicately around and over her clit before sliding into the moist, eager embrace of her vagina. She closed her eyes, imagining...

Before her hands reached her pussy, Sophie felt another, larger pair of hands clamp like vises onto her shoulders and shove her back and down onto the pillows. She felt the sting of—what?—stiff whiskers or ragged fingernails or sharp teeth against her taut nipples. And then a low, low voice wrapped in coarsened breath seemed to whisper against her ear, *Let's see how high I can get them before I fuck you, bella Sophia*. Gasping, she felt her nipples being pinched and twisted.

Sophie screamed. Her arms shot forward but met with no resistance. Again and again they connected with nothing more than molecules of air. Panicked, she wondered how she could push away someone she couldn't feel, something that wasn't there. She began flailing and kicking, then felt a sharp slap to the side of one breast, a second slap to the other. She screamed again, thinking, *Oh dear God, what have I done? What have I brought upon myself?*

Shrilling from nowhere and everywhere, Esme's voice commanded, *Be gone! You are unwelcome here!*

Released in an instant, Sophie rolled onto her side. She pulled her knees up to her chest and, hugging her legs, began to sob. She could still feel Esme's presence, although the spirit guide remained silent.

"I feel like dirt," Sophie whimpered.

Don't let misguided morality influence how you feel about yourself. Sexual creatures are not "dirt" simply because they're sexual creatures.

"But I invited that cur into my bed! I wished him back, just so he would touch me!"

You wished for a man to touch you. And it was a man you got. But if, by "that cur", you mean Roger Rimalgen, it wasn't he who responded to your desire.

Sophie immediately quieted. A chill drizzled through her. "Then who..."

It was a moment before Esme replied. *I don't know. He was concealing his identity from me. But he's willful and magnetic. And quite dangerous. We must ensure this never happens again...to you or any other needful Sensitive.*

"But how?" Sophie whispered.

Again, Esme was uncharacteristically slow in answering. *You need to be made love to with enough regularity to sate your appetite. Your frustration and longing have been building for many years and are inviting unwelcome attention. Until you fully bond with someone—body, mind, heart and soul—physical gratification, at least, will help protect you against these invasions. And we must root out the man who came into your bed and eliminate any further threat he poses. However inadvertently, you have opened a door to him. Now you must close it. He is domineering and not easily discouraged.*

Sophie's mind was spinning. Pulling the covers around herself, she shifted position and sat with her back against the pillows. Each one of Esme's statements was fraught with far more questions than answers.

"Esme, with all due respect, I have no idea how to go about finding a truly satisfying lover. If I knew, I would've done it by now. And I'm at a loss when it comes to 'neutralizing' some rapist from the astral plane!"

Sophie felt a hand tenderly, maternally stroking her hair. It was Esme—she knew it was her beloved Esme. Then she slowly, impulsively turned her face to the bedroom's ceiling. The bands of moonlight admitted by the window blinds rearranged themselves into words.

*Find a man's headstone and dance on his grave.
Be he prince, commoner, monk, or knave;
Be he soldier or hero or coward forlorn,
Shed all your clothing and dance until dawn.*

You must become a Cemetery Dancer, my dear.

After a few more strokes from Esme's caring hand, Sophie's confusion gave way to a deep, untroubled sleep.

* * * * *

The next day, full of May warmth and brilliant sunshine, began uneventfully enough. Sophie had a modest breakfast as she wrote down everything she could remember of her strange and unsettling conversation with Esme—including the verse that glowed on her ceiling. She tried not to give the spirit guide's words too much thought. Sophie knew from experience that Esme would, in her own good time and in her own way, communicate all relevant information.

No sessions were scheduled for today. Sophie set aside two and sometimes three days a week for necessary R&R. Contacting and, especially, channeling folks from the Other Side, not to mention dealing with their living loved ones, was exhausting in every way.

So, Sophie intended to devote this gorgeous day to simple household chores and at least an hour of meditation. Maybe she'd try to meet Cam for lunch or cocktails.

But as she was about to rise from the kitchen table, Sophie's plans quite drastically changed.

A single thought flooded her mind—*Take up the pen*. Swaying slightly, her eyelids drifting shut, Sophie languorously lifted the writing instrument. She turned to a fresh sheet of paper. Then, as usual, she had no choice but to surrender to the mental blankness.

When awareness returned—not consciousness, for she was never *unconscious*—Sophie stared somewhat groggily at the lined yellow paper that lay on the table. Her hand, still loosely holding the pen, was curled on top of it. Within ten seconds or so, she felt lucid enough to read what was written. Moving her hand to one side, she saw scrawl that was nearly illegible.

dance
protec protec tion
angelina

see SPEY spy
ask see spey
WIZARD

What appeared to be a phone number was written beneath the word *angelina*. Sophie assumed it was a woman's name. Hesitantly, she reached for her phone. How in the hell was she going to explain to this person, a perfect stranger, why she was calling?

"Esme," she muttered, punching in the number, "sometimes I think you're on drugs."

A voice was on the line, saying hello. A throaty, female voice with a mild accent.

"Are you... Is this...Angelina?"

"Yes." The word was drawn out. She sounded tentative, curious, maybe a bit on her guard.

"I'm very sorry to bother you," Sophie blurted out, "and I apologize in advance for this being such a peculiar call, but—"

"Dearheart, don't assume I'm bothered and don't assume I'll find the call peculiar." There was a smile in her voice.

In addition to amusement, Sophie sensed warmth. The woman was kind as well as insightful, intelligent. She was also—and this contradiction made no sense to Sophie, although she didn't doubt the truth of it—very, very old...yet not old at all.

"Go ahead," Angelina gently prompted, "tell me why you called."

"I... I was instructed to."

"By whom?"

Despite her lingering reluctance, Sophie forged ahead. She instinctively trusted this person. "My spirit guide. I'm a medium. Oh, I'm sorry, my name is Sophie Alanca. I took up the pen just a short time ago and your name and phone number were on the paper when it was over. Some other words, too. Maybe...maybe you should take a look at it rather than have me try to explain it to you."

Angelina was silent for a moment. It was a thoughtful silence. Then she said, "Maybe I should."

Once Sophie had gotten Angelina's address and thanked her, she all but flew to her car.

Chapter Three

To say the woman who opened the door was regal would be an understatement. Angelina was remarkably tall—around five-ten or -eleven, Sophie estimated—and had flawless, latte-colored skin and voluptuous breasts gravity hadn't coaxed into sagging. She was quite beautiful, too, with a minimum of cosmetic enhancement. In fact, she looked like a Victoria's Secret model.

Afraid she'd been gawking, Sophie smiled self-consciously.

"Hello, Sophie." The simple but cordial greeting immediately put Sophie at ease. "I'm Angelina Funmaker." She extended a hand, the fingers of which were long and tapering and topped by perfectly manicured nails. "Please, do come in."

Their handshake startled Sophie. She almost invariably received impressions when she clasped someone's hand and those impressions almost invariably had to do with the person's mental state. Sometimes she sensed the presence of spirit beings hovering around the individual. But all she got from Angelina's touch were two sets of bewildering contradictions—old/young and masculine/feminine. The woman, who clearly had considerable extrasensory powers, seemed to be shielding herself from Sophie's "sight".

Stepping into the elegant foyer, Sophie assured her, "I won't keep you. Here's the message I received." She pulled the note from her handbag and offered it to the exotic stranger.

Before reading it, Angelina said, "Would you like to sit down? May I get you some coffee or tea?"

"No, thank you." Sophie laughed nervously. "I already feel I'm imposing."

"You're not. But I do believe you'd like to get on with this." She turned her eyes to the paper. Her full, shimmering lips curved into a smile.

"Do you know what it means?"

"Partially." Angelina looked at Sophie. "May I ask the name of your guide?"

"Esme. A female."

Angelina's smile returned. But now there was delight in it. "Yes. A legendary female, in fact. The White Witch of Wessex. A great seer. A great healer." She turned to her left, opened a closet door and pulled an embroidered silk shawl from within. As she tucked the paper into a small pouch cinched around her waist, she said, "You're very fortunate. And gifted, too, I presume."

Dumbly, Sophie shook her head and shrugged. She didn't feel particularly fortunate and had no standard by which to gauge her gifts.

Angelina donned her shawl, then put an arm around Sophie's shoulders. "Well, dearheart, if it's Jackson Spey whom Esme wishes you to see, it's Jackson Spey you shall see."

She had pronounced the man's name as *spy*, which surprised Sophie. It was a Scottish surname, Sophie was almost sure, and should have been pronounced *spay*. Not that it mattered, really, but it was an interesting quirk.

"Come on," Angelina said. "We'll take my car."

Sophie paused. "Who is he? And what about that 'wizard' reference?"

Angelina uttered a short, throaty chuckle. "You'll soon find out."

* * * * *

"Jackson, this is Sophie Alanca. She was directed to you by somebody you've probably heard of."

They were standing in the doorway of a somewhat shabby basement apartment. That was all Sophie could discern at the moment. Because, if Angelina's appearance had bowled her over, the sight of this man left her nearly senseless.

Somewhat taller than his female friend, he had the most stunningly intense face and hypnotic eyes Sophie had ever seen. A dark mustache curved down around an appealing mouth and met with a goatee, the middle of which crept up in a thin line toward his lower lip. His eyes – was it even possible? – were hazel dominated by a rich amber-gold, a color Sophie had never seen in human eyes, and they were strikingly set off by dark lashes and dark brows. His hair must have been somewhat long, for it was tied back.

He looked, Sophie thought dimly, like some diabolically handsome, storybook brigand.

Spey took the paper Angelina held out to him. Inclining his head slightly in greeting, he said, "Nice to meet you, Sophie," then shook her hand.

She sharply drew in her breath. It took all the will Sophie could muster to keep from jerking her hand out of Spey's grasp. A prickling charge had shot up her arm and now sparked throughout her body. Subtly, the man's eyes seemed to glimmer.

Sophie gulped. Who *was* this incredible couple? *Were* they a couple?

Spey scanned the paper. "Looks like automatic writing," he murmured.

His rich voice washed over Sophie like a perfect chord bowed on a fine cello.

"It is," Angelina said.

"Are you a wizard?" Sophie whispered in awe, unable to stop herself.

Spey and Angelina exchanged glances, the meaning of which Sophie could not decipher. The look was underscored by almost imperceptible, private smiles. One thing Sophie *could* read was that they had a unique, unassailable bond.

"First," Spey said, breaking into her thoughts, "why don't you tell me about the origin of this message?" He hadn't yet invited them inside. It was as if he still hadn't determined if Sophie was worthy of his trust...or worth his time.

"It came from my spirit guide, Esme," she said.

Spey's eyebrows rose. He looked at Angelina. "*The Esme? Of Wessex?*"

"I believe so," Angelina told him.

Spey was thoughtfully running his thumb and forefinger over his mustache and beard. "Wow," he whispered.

Angelina inclined toward him. "Jackson, you might do your visitor the courtesy of answering her question."

His eyes flicked back to Sophie. "I'm sorry. I'm just a bit thunderstruck. Uh...yes."

"I beg your pardon?" Sophie asked, confused.

"Yes, I am," Spey repeated.

Angelina clarified. "He is a wizard."

Sophie cleared her throat. She wasn't entirely sure what being a wizard meant but was too ashamed of her ignorance to admit it. Mediumship was her forte; psychic ability was comprehensible to her. Even the Cemetery Dance, as outlandish as it sounded, was something she intuitively understood. It was essentially an extension of what she did—communicate with the spirit realm, which came quite naturally to her.

But ritual magick was something else entirely. It was an age-old, powerful, arcane art. Wizards were not born, like mediums. They were not made, like astrologers. Wizards were born *and* made. They had awe-inspiring natural abilities as well as volumes of learning and years of training, and Sophie felt cowed being in the presence of one.

It sure as hell didn't help that he was killer-gorgeous.

"Is something wrong?" Angelina asked, touching Sophie's arm.

"No. No, I'm fine."

"Why don't you both have a seat," Spey said, oblivious to her wonder. "I'll pour us some tea."

Sophie watched him walk over to the kitchenette while Angelina led her to the couch. "You seem a bit dazed," the tall woman noted as they sat down.

"My God, his hair!" Sophie whispered.

It was in a thick, lustrous braid that fell to the base of his spine. But if Sophie hadn't been staring at his hair, she would've been staring at his body. Long and lean, it was highlighted by a delectable ass that begged to be grabbed, hugged as it was by those tight, faded jeans.

Angelina patted her on the knee. "I'm afraid you need a cold shower, dearheart, but I understand. Jackson is a lot to take in. I've never known anybody to react neutrally to him, even if they're unaware of his status."

Mechanically, Sophie nodded. "A wizard..." She turned to Angelina. "I didn't think they existed anymore."

"Of course they do!" Angelina laughed. "And there's nothing inherently terrifying about them...unless they're up to no good."

Sophie shivered and looked around the living room. She saw hundreds of papers, some loose and some bound and a few beautifully crafted pieces of furniture, a couple of which were shelving units brimming with books—but little else. What she expected to see were wands and pentacles, spangled robes and conical caps, all surrounded by herds of drippy candles.

"Jackson has a ceremonial magick room," Angelina said, "at a separate location. He doesn't conduct any major rituals here."

Sophie gave her a quick, sharp glance. Angelina had read her thoughts! She must try to keep them more veiled.

"By the way," Angelina added, "wizards don't wear those silly dunce caps."

Sophie blushed as Spey approached them with three cups of tea. Now she couldn't help noticing the mound in the front of his jeans. After handing out two of the cups, he sank to the floor and sat cross-legged, facing the women across the cocktail table. Sophie was grateful that at least half of him was hidden. She couldn't seem to control her eyes today.

"So, tell me why Esme sent you here." Spey drank some tea and looked directly into Sophie's face.

Sophie concentrated on answering his question. Because of her sensibilities, it wasn't easy for her to sketch in the background of this visit. She tried describing, without giving away too many of her secrets or going into lurid detail, how the sinister spirit-marauder had appeared in her bedroom and tried to take her. She repeated Esme's statement about closing the door that had been opened to this being.

Spey listened with honed attention, nodding occasionally.

Then Sophie asked him if he'd heard of cemetery dancing.

Again, he and Angelina exchanged one of their pregnant glances.

"It's an ancient pagan practice," Spey said, "Celtic in origin, I believe. Did Esme suggest you do it?"

"Yes."

"I'm not surprised," Angelina said to both of them. "Her ancestors were from Northumbria. Most of the clan did eventually become Christianized but not completely so."

"Let me put these pieces together," Spey said, rubbing his brow, "and see if I've got it right."

"First," Angelina put up a hand to momentarily silence Spey, "I must ask you something, Sophie. And please understand that I'm not doing this to pry. Did you in fact spend the last decade in a cloister?"

Spey shot Angelina, then Sophie, a wide-eyed look.

"Yes." Sophie knew it was in her best interest to be candid.

"Well, that explains a lot, doesn't it?" Angelina said to Spey.

"Sure does," he murmured, then returned to his original point. "Okay, so...Esme knows that to stave off further attacks, you must eliminate the attacker's point of entry – which, in your case, is unfulfilled desire. If successful, the Cemetery Dance will help do this. However, the practice has certain inherent dangers. You could attract one or more of the Nephilim."

Sophie's forehead gathered. "I've heard that name but I can't recall where."

Spey took another drink of tea. "The Book of Enoch, if you've read biblical apocrypha. They were angels sent to earth, eons ago, to instruct humans in the ways of righteousness. Sort of like divine missionaries. But they became corrupted by lusting after mortal women. Now they're considered demonic, since they've pretty much given in to their sexual appetites. So, as I said, the Cemetery Dance *could* attract them. And then there's your attacker, who seems to be –"

"Willful, magnetic and dangerous," Sophie said. "That's how Esme described him. Domineering, not easily discouraged."

"So if you fought against him," Angelina said, "you only sharpened his hunger...and his determination."

"Quite likely," Spey added with obvious concern. He continued to keep his startling eyes fixed on Sophie. "It must be a combination of the Nephilim danger and the continued threat posed by your nighttime visitor that made Esme send you to me. But first, we need to determine who, or what, this individual is. I'm betting he's a hybrid. And an evil one, at that."

"A hybrid?" Sophie asked.

"A deceased mortal who wants the best of both worlds, so to speak. And he knows enough magick to get it. Existence in spirit has distinct advantages, like freedom from the constraints of space and time, freedom from the distractions of daily life, freedom from illness and pain, weakness and aging. *You* know what it's all about."

Sophie nodded. She knew.

"But existence in body has advantages, too. And the pleasures of the flesh are difficult for some people to relinquish."

"I know that, too. From my contact with decedents, I mean."

"Well," Spey said, turning up his hands, "you throw some knowledge of magick into the mix, and a hybrid is born."

"Why can't Esme protect me?" Sophie asked. "If she was such a practiced and accomplished witch, why can't *she* fend off this creature?"

"She can only protect you to a point," Angelina answered. "First of all, she was a witch, not a magickal adept. She doesn't have the knowledge or experience or power to

fend off demons like the Nephilim. And second, she's in spirit now. Fully. Your stalker, however, can move fairly easily between *both* planes, physical and astral."

Disturbed by this revelation, Sophie looked at Spey. Unaccountably, he was smiling.

"But so can I," he said.

Once they were back in Angelina's car, Sophie's thoughts again turned to Jackson Spey. She was imagining how sensuous his hair must look unbraided and unbound. She thought of how it would feel cascading over her naked body – whispering across her breasts, flowing between her legs, a few strands glistening with her wetness – as she gazed into his intense, impassioned eyes. Turning to Angelina she said on a sigh, "You're a lucky woman."

Angelina chuckled. "Yes, as a matter of fact I am. But not for the reason you think."

"You and Jackson aren't lovers?"

"No. It's a common assumption but an incorrect one. We're very old, dear friends. Sometimes I assist him. But that man belongs to no woman." She glanced at Sophie, driving her next point home. "He's an adept, a *magus*. The magick comes first."

"It almost seems a shame. He's breathtaking. In all kinds of ways." Dreamily, Sophie looked out the window and watched the cityscape change as they moved from Spey's humble, working-class neighborhood to Angelina's chichi downtown condo.

"Yes he is," Angelina agreed. "You're not the first woman – or man, for that matter – who's been captivated by him, and you won't be the last. But believe me when I say he is *not* the man who can spare you the Cemetery Dance." She glanced knowingly at her companion. "In fact, you don't want to pair up with *any* practitioner of High Magick. They're a breed apart."

Sophie couldn't deny she'd been hoping Spey could save her through sex, not spells. "I believe you. I just can't help feeling a little regretful." She sighed in resignation. "Well, at least I can fantasize about him."

"Dearheart, I'm afraid not even your *wildest* fantasies could capture what that man is capable of."

Sophie gave her a disgruntled look. "Oh, thanks. Now you're just adding fuel to the fire."

Angelina tilted her head back and laughed. "I'm sorry. I just get a kick out of how he affects people. And I'm still amazed by him myself. A biker and carpenter who happens to be one of the greatest adepts now walking this earth." She tossed Sophie a glance that seemed a bit taunting. "Hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Well, the greatest wonder-worker who ever lived was a vagabond and carpenter." That certainly put a new spin on things for Sophie, who grew pensive as she thought about it. "So I don't find it hard to believe at all."

"Then you *will* be capable of appreciating Jackson's other assets," Angelina said gently, with a pleased smile. "I'm glad."

His "other assets", Sophie knew, were his magickal abilities. She couldn't help but wonder why so grand a wizard would be willing to expend his power on a lowly medium—and one who was a stranger, at that. She turned to Angelina, hoping Jackson's best friend could explain his unaccountable generosity.

"You know, I feel as if I'm imposing on Jackson. This problem of mine could be a big drain on his time and energy. I mean, I just show up out of the blue and lay this ugly situation at his doorstep—"

"You needn't worry about that," Angelina broke in, giving Sophie a reassuring smile. "First of all, Esme sent you and Esme's your spirit guide. Those are reasons enough for Jackson to want to help you. But it's also in keeping with his character and ethics to put his power to good use. If a cause is worthy, he doesn't hesitate to offer his services." Her smile broadened as she patted Sophie's knee. "Believe me, dearheart, I wouldn't have brought you to him if I'd thought this would be a waste of his time."

They rode in contemplative silence for a mile or two. Sophie rested her head against the seat. "Angelina, tell me about Esme. I get the feeling you...know her somehow."

Angelina neither confirmed nor denied this. "I take it she hasn't been too forthcoming about her history."

"No, she hasn't. When I ask, she either retreats or turns my attention to something else."

"That's typical of a spirit guide. They're supposed to be selfless." The car slowed to a crawl as they entered downtown traffic. "Esme lived in body in the ninth century. Her homeland was the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex. It was in a significant period of transition at the time, and this is reflected in Esme's life-path—most important, in her blending of Christian and pagan beliefs and practices. And then there were the Danish invaders. Esme had been a high-spirited and even rebellious young woman until she was raped by a raiding party of five Danes. After that she turned to the Old Ways, primarily, and schooled herself in the occult arts. I suspect she felt if the Church couldn't avenge and protect her, witchcraft would."

Sophie was staring at Angelina throughout this brief narrative, her heart aching. "My God," she breathed. "No wonder she's so intent on saving me from that...monster who came into my bed."

"No wonder," Angelina said in a flat voice.

For the first time since meeting her, Sophie sensed a rent in Angelina's shield. Through it, she glimpsed a reverence for someone Angelina considered a friend and anger on that friend's behalf. But there was more. She herself, it seemed, had experienced a similar violation.

As they pulled into the parking garage beneath Angelina's building, Sophie turned to her. "I have the impression of...a very old wisdom in you, a very old soul."

Softly, Angelina smiled. "We don't need to talk about that now. Concentrate on your own life." She curled a hand over Sophie's arm. "First and foremost, you must be careful. Yes, you have to clear certain hurdles but you must take every precaution. Seek Esme's counsel on the Cemetery Dance. Then train all your senses as well as your memory on any clues to your attacker's identity and immediately inform Jackson of what you've noticed or remembered. He's your primary protector now."

"I will. Thank you, Angelina. Thank you so much."

The mysterious, sweet woman gave Sophie's arm an encouraging squeeze, then leaned over and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "You're welcome. Blessings, Sophie."

Chapter Four

Harrison “Sonny” Brock felt a bit silly as he pulled the night-vision goggles from his large, cushioned carryall. He also felt a bit apprehensive, as he always did when embarking on field research. Scholars, he kept reassuring himself, aren’t always as devoid of superstition as they’d like to believe.

The carryall contained other devices, as well—a DVR, or digital video recorder; a maximum-quality digital camera; an audio recorder with external microphone; several low-noise, high-sensitivity microcassettes; an IC recorder, or digital note-taker; an electromagnetic field detector. Sonny had also brought a flashlight, a notebook and pens.

Pausing and looking around, he once again asked himself, *Why the hell am I doing this?* Fog Cliff Cemetery was peaceful, sunshine-dappled and altogether unremarkable. Headstones—large and small, ostentatious and modest, upright and tilted, new and old—clung tightly to whatever secrets were harbored by the souls they honored. Even though Harrison Brock, M.A., was a graduate student in cultural anthropology and his doctoral dissertation gave him a reason for hauling all this paraphernalia to a boneyard, he felt as if he were chasing phantoms—more figuratively than literally.

Sonny was researching the afterlife beliefs of various cultures and the practices associated with such beliefs. In parts of the western world, thanks largely to technology, ghost hunting had become as popular in the twenty-first century as spiritualism had been in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But what influence, if any, did it have on belief systems? Were its “results” considered evidentiary? Sonny must at least *try* to find out firsthand.

A sunset breeze sighed across the rolling topography of Fog Cliff. It was, by contemporary standards, a fairly small cemetery—about ten acres, Sonny estimated—although its precise boundaries were difficult to determine since they were not delineated by walls or fences. Rocks and occasional boulders studded the thin carpet of spring grass. Trees—mostly oaks, pines and aspens—pressed in on three sides and stood like guardians here and there among the graves.

The most striking feature of this rural resting place, and the one that gave Fog Cliff its name, was a forty-foot rock formation that jutted up from the northwest quadrant of the cemetery, where the oldest graves lay. Ground fog often swirled around the foot of the cliff. Higher fog often swaddled its head. Mist either clung to the cliff’s hard skin or turned into fine, running rivulets that sought out the joints and jaws and eye sockets lying within the surrounding soil. Narrow tunnels snaking through the formation and a few caves sunk into and beneath it sometimes produced strange sounds when the wind was just right.

Some locals still thought of the cliff—and the surrounding cemetery, for that matter—as a possibly enchanted and certainly haunted place. Small wonder. Towering eerily over the surrounding graves, wrapped in its damp gray winding-cloth, giving out its hollow moans, this rocky promontory didn't seem quite like an ordinary outcropping of limestone.

And that was the main reason Sonny Brock had chosen this place for his vigil. Where there's smoke there's sometimes fire, he reasoned. Maybe local stories had some foundation in fact. It might not be paranormal fact, but whatever gave rise to these legends would still dovetail nicely with the rest of his research.

Sonny settled against the broad trunk of a sugar maple after he readied his equipment, made sure his stock of extra batteries was within easy reach and jotted down all relevant environmental conditions such as temperature, wind speed and frequency and any ambient sounds—bird calls were the most noticeable but they would diminish to near nothing after dark. He didn't think he'd be interrupted. Fog Cliff was on a county road and had no resident caretaker. Its only nighttime visitors, aside from wildlife, were occasional groups of partying teens. But, given the cool dampness of this May evening, Sonny thought it unlikely he'd encounter any nocturnal human prowlers.

He inhaled the fresh scent of green growth mingled with the richer aroma of the earth and watched the day's final, filmy light slip away.

* * * * *

Almost dark.

Sophie tried to pick out the easiest path through the tangle of trees and underbrush as she delicately pushed her way through the woods. They weren't terribly dense or deep, thank goodness, and she shouldn't have too much difficulty finding her way out. Her familiarity with this area and the flashlight tucked in her jacket pocket would help her get back to the road once her mission here was accomplished.

No stranger to Fog Cliff Cemetery, Sophie had often walked the half-mile from her small house to this unique and atmospheric burial ground. Sometimes she brought a book to read as she lazed beneath the spreading branches of an old oak. Sometimes she wandered among the graves and read their markers—one way of assuring those who had passed over that they were not forgotten. But always, when visiting Fog Cliff or any cemetery, Sophie heard the same sound—a faint, wordless murmuring that filled the air like the rustle of falling leaves on an autumn day.

She knew it was the spirit voices of those souls who either lingered near their resting places or liked to stop by. Occasionally, one or more would clamor for Sophie's attention. Invariably, she would diplomatically rebuff them. If a medium kept her power turned on and her receiver tuned in all the time, she would be so overwhelmed by a cacophony of voices—not to mention the psycho-emotional tidal wave on which they were borne—she would likely lose her mind.

What would tonight bring? Sophie wondered with a slight shiver. Would the voices be louder, more insistent? Would demands press in on her? Would entities materialize and harass her – especially the ones who disapproved of what she was doing?

Stop a moment.

It was Esme. Sophie stopped before taking another step. She stood just within the woods, at the edge of the cemetery proper. The darkness was complete now and the headstones within her line of vision were brought into relief by only the thinnest silver-plating of moonlight.

First, recall the verse, Esme instructed.

Sophie ran it through her mind.

I hope you have chosen an appropriate decedent to contact.

By “appropriate,” Sophie knew Esme was referring to men who were younger and unmarried when they passed over. Sophie had indeed found one. She knew exactly where he lay.

Dance skyclad, repeating his name over and over. Entice him, seduce him.

Sophie asked what she should do if he didn’t respond.

Try another man, Esme answered, *but only if you suspect he, too, might be appropriate. If it’s too dark to allow for an educated guess by reading the headstones, then leave. Come back in the daylight to look for the next candidate. Return at night to dance once more. Keep in mind that not all will respond. You must be persistent.*

Sophie wondered with some apprehension how the man would appear, if he “appeared” at all. What if she found him loathsome?

How utterly silly of you to be concerned, Esme replied somewhat impatiently. *You’re thinking like the earthbound mortal that you are. Considerations such as age, appearance and degree of vigor are physical issues and, under the circumstances, irrelevant. The men who abide here are in spirit now and their contact with you will reflect that fact. Let your imagination paint your partner in any way you find pleasing.*

“How do I dismiss him?” Sophie asked on a breath. It was another worry that nagged her. She didn’t mind having to be persistent but she didn’t want whomever she summoned to be too persistent.

Recite these banishment words. “Return to that place from whence you came. My dance is done. I lay no blame. Blesséd be.” And then address the man by name.

Then Esme responded to Sophie’s final concern before the dancer could voice it. *Yes, you should be fairly safe. There is always a risk in this but you will be safe if you remain on the grave until you are fulfilled and then dismiss your lover.*

Sophie could feel Esme withdraw. It would be pointless to ask any more questions. This was part of their pattern of communication. Once the spirit guide had conveyed all the information she felt like giving, or felt it necessary to give, she slipped away.

Taking a deep breath, Sophie stepped from the enveloping woods into the open cemetery. She suddenly felt naked and exposed, even though she hadn’t yet removed a

stitch of clothing. As a precaution against detection, she was dressed in dark colors and didn't use her flashlight.

The black hulk of the landscape-dominating rock formation, "the cliff", was immediately visible and yet invisible. Sophie could tell where it heaved up from the ground only because it blocked out everything behind it, and the pale moonlight imparted a dull glaze here and there to the cliff's stony surface. But this was enough to make it an adequate point of reference.

Sophie went directly to a short, weather-worn marker with a rounded top. It was fairly easy to pick out, because it stood between the southeastern wall of the cliff and a stately marble obelisk about seven feet tall. This simple monument marked the unadorned grave of William Woolrich, a Union soldier killed at the battle of Antietam when he was only twenty-three years old.

Kneeling beside the plot, Sophie tentatively touched the rough, pitted face of the stone. Her fingers reverently traced the letters and numbers carved into it.

Wm. Woolrich
b. 21 Feb. 1839
d. 17 Sep. 1862
Sharpsburg

Silently, she addressed the spirit of the young man whose mortal remains lay encased in the dirt beneath her legs.

Forgive me, Will, if I'm disturbing you and you don't want to be disturbed. Don't think you're being discourteous if you choose to ignore me. But, if you're pleased by my presence, don't hesitate to come to me.

Slowly, Sophie removed her jacket. She felt her nipples tighten at the cool air's first caress. "Well, here goes," she breathed, and began unbuttoning her embroidered black shirt.

* * * * *

Sonny jerked into wakefulness and realized he'd dozed off. A residue of anxiety-laced adrenaline still traveled through his bloodstream. Sweat speckled his upper lip. A short, aborted dream quickly surfaced in fuzzy fragments. In the dream, he'd been back in Afghanistan, creeping toward a hillside cave in the dead of night. The rest of his squad wasn't with him...

You're back now, buddy, he told himself. You're back at home and back in school and don't have to enter any more freakin' caves unless you want to. And if you do, there won't be any nasty surprises waiting in them.

After running his hands over his face and stretching his eyelids, Sonny took a couple of restorative breaths. He reached for the EMF detector. Earlier, he'd done

several baseline tests to determine the normal reading for the area. Now, as he stared at the meter, he frowned. He held the device closer to his eyes.

Sure enough, the readings were climbing...and there was no electrical source anywhere in the vicinity.

Sonny's heart began galloping, even though he kept telling himself that ghost hunters used such devices all the time and, no matter how much the numbers jumped, the searchers were rarely rewarded with otherworldly sights or sounds. Still, he thought he should maybe have a look-see. Why else had he sunk so much money into this equipment?

* * * * *

Naked, Sophie gingerly stepped onto William Woolrich's grave. Her reticence quickly melted away. Straddling the plot, legs spread wide, she imagined Will as a handsome, well-built, shy young man—somewhat resembling Jackson Spey—staring up at her moistening pussy, her peaked breasts. Inch by inch she bent over and slowly, with trembling fingers, spread her labia.

"Come to me, Will," she whispered. "Take me. Have your way with me."

Sophie straightened, raised her arms and languidly began turning. Closing her eyes, she swayed and dipped and turned again, excited by the feel of the night air on her bare flesh, the weight and movement of her breasts, the tingling of her nipples. She dropped to her haunches and bent backward until her head nearly touched the ground and began fondling herself.

"I need *you* to touch me, Will. I need *you* to fill me up. I ache for you..."

* * * * *

Sonny donned his night-vision goggles and adjusted them. He was used to the ungainly contraption. He often had to wear a similar set while on patrol near the Afghan-Pakistani border. Lifting the camera from his lap, he carefully swiveled his head, scanning the cemetery.

And then Sonny froze, his breath catching in his throat. He craned his neck. It couldn't be...

But there was no mistaking what he saw, despite the greenish tint and somewhat watery texture of the image—a human figure, an obviously *female* figure, moving like an exotic dancer between the cliff and a tall monument. Spellbound, he stared for a moment, then trained his camcorder on the sight and turned it on. He held up the digital camera and began snapping pictures.

It was difficult for him to concentrate on that simple task. The woman, whether flesh or phantom, was beginning to arouse him. This is crazy, crazy, he thought, then wondered if he might still be asleep. He didn't think so. But maybe his eyes were deceiving him. Maybe this was some kind of mirage.

His cock certainly didn't care. It swelled within the tight grasp of his jeans. Awake, asleep, or hallucinating, Sonny could not control his response to what he saw or thought he saw. Soon, his balls began to ache unmercifully.

The goggles' weird illumination, an icy, alien green, seemed to add an even more erotic cast to the woman's body and movements. Sonny could clearly make out her figure, right down to the tantalizingly erect nipples. Her dark hair fell in soft curls past her shoulders. Each time she shook her breasts—or, worse yet, ran her hands over them, sometimes lifting them in offering—he thought he would lose it.

That's no ghost. Ghosts don't show their plump, bare tits. Ghosts don't feel themselves up. Ghosts don't put intelligent, twenty-six-year-old men on the verge of shooting all over themselves.

Sonny tried to turn his attention away from his stiff dick before it exploded. He focused on finding some explanation for the woman's behavior. Was she a latter-day pagan—Wiccan, maybe—conducting some kind of ritual? Was she psychotic? Was she drunk?

He considered approaching her to find out. But before he could move in her direction, he had to pull his pained, swollen cock from his pants and begin to masturbate. Watching the woman and softly panting, Sonny thought how her ripe ass and breasts would yield to his hands, how he would massage them and make her weak with desire, how her peaked nipples would feel in his mouth...

But before Sonny could get himself off, more extraordinary things began to happen.

* * * * *

Sophie could feel the spirit-man's response to her invitation. It was nothing like making love with a flesh-and-blood human being. At least she didn't think so, although her experience in that area had been both limited and disappointing. William Woolrich, Civil War soldier, approached her hesitantly at first. Sophie initially felt a soft, breathy glide of air along her limbs. It was like a warm, humid breeze but somehow more solid, more purposeful. Then this invisible caress became more substantial and directed.

Sophie rose to her feet again and resumed her seductive dance. It felt as if ripples—solid, gaseous and liquid all at once—were running over her body, tripping across her lips, massaging her breasts and ass, undulating up her thighs. The thrill of it made her legs too weak to support her. Dropping to the ground, she lay on her back as thin, high moans of pleasure crept uncontrollably from her throat. In some places, like over her nipples, the ghostly substance seemed to have tiny, cactus-like pricklers that sent a keen electric charge throughout her body. Sophie arched her back, thrusting herself toward the sensation, and it became even more intense. She let out a quavering wail and began panting as her nipples flamed.

"Now," she gasped, feeling an almost painful tightening deep inside her vagina, her uterus.

The spirit-man needed no further coaxing. The ripples pulsed rhythmically against her clit and then tenderly pulled at it, pulsed against it and pulled at it again. Sophie's hands began clawing at the dirt of Will's grave as her squirming hips dug into it. The strange substance slid into her vagina and seemed to balloon against its walls.

Sophie could hold out no longer. A deep, throbbing orgasm made her neck arch and her toes curl. Paralyzed by it, she was dimly aware of a rush of warm fluid between her legs. As the tide of devastating pleasure ebbed, she half felt and half heard a soft exhalation in her ear. And, somehow, she knew Will had taken his leave of her. The words of banishment would not be necessary. He was a gentleman who had done his duty and was courteous enough to depart without being ordered to.

Sighing, Sophie rolled limply off his grave and lay on her side, the damp grass cool on her flushed cheek. She reached down to touch the wetness on her inner thighs. Of course it wasn't cum. It was G-spot fluid.

"Thank you," she whispered into the night, then chuckled soundlessly in near disbelief.

What an experience! How could she possibly describe it to anybody? And to whom could she even *try* describing it? Cammie, maybe. Sophie's best friend was not only open-minded but quite a skilled Tarot reader. Her parents had been Age of Aquarius hippies. Yet, even Cam might find all of this difficult to swallow. Recalling the sensations that led up to her climax, Sophie began to want more.

But she shouldn't be greedy and demanding. As she shifted position, preparing to sit up, Sophie suddenly felt herself thrown off-balance by a powerful force. She grunted...felt her legs being pried open... *This isn't Will*...and uttered a bewildered, frightened cry.

Chapter Five

The sound was all it took to quash Sonny's arousal. Springing up from the ground, he bounded toward the woman as he pulled the goggles from his head. She was lying at an odd angle, kicking, swatting at the empty air—as if trying to overcome some opposing force. As he pulled up beside her, he fell to his knees. Her frantic eyes turned to him, and another terrified mewl came from her throat.

"*Shhh*. It's all right," he said in an urgent, low voice. Dropping his goggles to the ground, he pulled off his jacket, got the woman to sit upright and draped the jacket over her shoulders. He couldn't help but notice the cool, silky feel of her bare skin but he pushed the observation aside. "You're all right now. Don't be afraid of me. I'm here to help."

Sophie's eyes skittered toward the man's face. He was real—alive and substantial. She could feel the aura of his vitality, not to mention the muscular solidity of his arms. She also sensed he posed no threat. Quaking, she tightened against herself within the cocoon of his jacket.

"Who...who are you? Where did you come from?" she asked in a cracked voice.

Sonny was tempted to chuckle but restricted himself to a smile. "Funny, I was going to ask you the same things...in addition to some others. First, though, I think you'd better get dressed. I'll turn around."

Politely, he did so. Sophie regarded his back for a moment. The night was too dark and she was too shaken and preoccupied to notice much of anything, so she began feeling around for her clothing. As she slipped back into her clothes, Sophie again studied the stranger.

Many loving presences surrounded him but kept at a respectful distance, as if they knew this was not the time to come through. Silently, Sophie thanked them. She concentrated on the man himself. He had broad, square shoulders and an obviously strong back that tapered to a tight waist and narrow hips. Even through his rugby shirt, she could make out the contours of his muscles. His full wavy hair, which straggled past his collar, shone in the dim moonlight.

"You can turn around now," Sophie told him, fastening the last button on her shirt.

Sonny rotated to face the woman. She handed him his jacket. As he took it from her outstretched hand, his previous excitement began sparking again. At least, this time, it was manageable.

She was absolutely lovely. Her lithe, graceful body was perfectly complemented by a delicate oval face, framed now by a tangle of black curls that matched black, arched eyebrows. Her eyes glinted, but the hood of night prevented Sonny from discerning

their color. The woman watched him from beneath slightly lowered lids fringed by thick lashes. She looked at once coquettish and shy.

If she hadn't seemed so terror-stricken, he might have tried seducing her then and there. The sight of her pretty face combined potently with his still-fresh memory of her nude, writhing body with its parted thighs and upthrust breasts. He'd even heard her moans of pleasure as she seemed to reach climax and the sound had nearly driven him to distraction.

Sonny saw no wedding or engagement ring winking from her left hand. The observation made him chide himself, for a number of reasons. First, he knew virtually nothing about the woman. Second, what he did know made her seem more than a little unstable. Third, she was obviously quite vulnerable right now...and well aware of it. She didn't seem to be drunk.

As non-aggressively as possible, he extended his hand. "I'm Harrison Brock. Well, Sonny, to just about everybody. I hope you're all right now."

Sophie hesitated, then shook his hand. It was large, gentle...but she was still too preoccupied to sense anything more. "Where were you?" She didn't feel comfortable telling him her name—not yet, anyway. First, she had to find out just how much he saw and/or heard.

Sonny pointed diagonally behind himself, in the direction of a large maple Sophie knew well. As she began to wither in shame and embarrassment, she tried convincing herself that it was impossible for him to see what she was doing—the darkness was too thick, barely penetrated by the weak moonlight. But he'd nevertheless found her completely naked, and that fact alone must have certainly generated questions about her sanity. Maybe she could tell him she'd come here to have a tryst with her lover. When he'd gotten too rough with her, she'd screamed and he'd fled. That's why Sonny found her alone and trembling.

"Please, don't feel obligated to explain yourself," Sonny said, startling Sophie. Even though he seemed to have intuited her thoughts, the kindness in his soft, low voice put her more at ease. "Nothing you were doing is any of my business. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Looking down, Sophie nodded. "Yes, I'm fine. Now." Her eyes flicked up to his face. He really was handsome—even features, sculpted cheekbones, large and soul-searching eyes. His tousled hair softened the angular masculinity of his face, which bore a hint of five o'clock shadow. He had a mouth that begged to be kissed.

"What made you scream?" Sonny asked solicitously. On impulse, he moved a strand of hair from the woman's left temple. He felt her flinch—but only very slightly, and only for a mere fraction of a second—before she relaxed again.

His question conjured for Sophie the disturbing feeling of being overpowered, bullied...and the disturbing suspicion that she knew full well who or what had tried taking over where Will had left off. She recalled Jackson Spey's warning about the

Nephilim—could it have been one or more of them?—but she recalled even more vividly the male creature who'd invaded the privacy of her bedroom.

"I don't know you well enough to try explaining it to you," Sophie said bluntly. "But the threat was quite real, believe me, and I'm very grateful you intervened."

"Would you trust me more," Sonny said, "if I told you I'm sort of a ghost hunter?"

Sophie hitched up her forehead in surprise. "And that's why you're here tonight?"

"That's it." Sonny didn't go into detail. It was more important at the moment to ease whatever guilt and discomfort the woman might be feeling. She surely hadn't expected to have an audience for her solitary erotic dance—not a human audience, anyway. "All my equipment is back over there." Sonny jerked a thumb over his shoulder, then noticed the goggles lying on the ground where he'd dropped them. "Oh, and here," he said with a nervous chuckle, grabbing them. He immediately put them in his lap and covered them with his hands. Shit, he didn't want the woman to think he was a voyeur.

"Do you come here often?" Sophie asked anxiously.

"No. This is my only time. I read up on this cemetery and what I read intrigued me, so I thought I'd give it a try."

"I'm a medium," Sophie said, emboldened by his confession and relieved he wasn't a regular visitor. She was relieved for other reasons, as well. At least he wasn't some weird midnight mourner or self-styled necromancer. At least he wasn't some pervert who'd followed her here and then watched her from the shadows. And at least he had an appreciation for and understanding of the occult. "My name is Sophie Alanca."

"It's nice to meet you, Sophie." Sonny smiled into her eyes. "The circumstances might be a little unusual, but it's still nice to meet you. You're a true medium?"

Sophie melted. "Yes. And that's more or less responsible for why I'm here. Speaking of which, I should go now."

Damn, what was happening to her? First she had summoned a spirit for the sole, banal purpose of having a supernatural orgasm, and now this very-much-alive man was making her realize how much she missed the sound of a real voice, the touch of real hands and lips, the lick of a real tongue, the thrust of a real cock. And all this in a cemetery!

What kind of slut was she turning into? There was simply no category for her. Sophie was tempted to laugh, this whole evening had been so outrageous.

She had to get out of this place—out of the darkness and away from her rampant desire and its unpredictable consequences. Unsteadily, she began to rise.

"Thank you again, Sonny. Good luck with your research."

Sonny immediately took her hand and helped her up. "Where's your vehicle? I didn't see any others parked on the road."

Sophie brushed at her pants. "I walked here. I live nearby."

"Would you, um...like a ride home?"

Sophie's immediate impulse was to decline his offer, but then she considered the option. If Sonny were inclined to take advantage of her—which she very much doubted, based on her sense of him—he certainly would've done so as soon as he found her, unclothed and alone in this dark and solitary place. But his intentions seemed strictly honorable.

Besides, Sonny Brock intrigued her, and spending some time with him might be the perfect antidote to the evening's wild work.

"Thank you. I'd appreciate that. I am a little wrung out."

"Let me collect my equipment," Sonny said, more breathlessly than he wanted to.

Side by side, they walked to the maple tree. As Sophie leaned against its trunk, Sonny carefully repacked everything he'd brought. She watched him with growing interest.

"It looks like you have all the requisite detection devices," Sophie said, her thoughts gathering at one point.

"Yes...at least I think I do." Sonny glanced up at her. "I'm still new at this."

EMF detector, EVP recorders, cameras... Maybe he got something. Maybe he got something I can use, something Jackson Spey can use. Sophie sank to her haunches and curled the fingers of one hand around Sonny's wrist.

"When we get to my place," she said, "I'll tell you why I was here tonight and what it was that alarmed me. Things happened, Sonny."

He stared at her face. "I told you, you don't have to—"

"No, I want to. I need to. You might've picked up something," Sophie motioned vaguely toward his equipment bag, "that could prove very helpful to me."

Sonny, who'd been kneeling, dropped his butt onto his heels. He pushed the hair back from his face and regarded Sophie, this self-proclaimed medium. Her eyes were both imploring and commanding him. He couldn't help but be intrigued...for all kinds of reasons.

"Okay," he said. "If that's what you want."

Sophie nodded, reaffirming her intention. "If I expect you to take the time and make the effort to share your findings with me, you certainly deserve an explanation for my interest." She slid a glance at the equipment bag. "Were those night-vision goggles I saw you carrying before?"

Sonny felt heat rush into his face. "Uh, yeah. I was, you know, scanning the cemetery for any...anomalous activity." His own words made Sonny wince. How could Sophie *not* realize he'd seen her?

She couldn't not realize it, because she said, on a thread of laughter, "Now you *really* deserve an explanation."

Together, they picked their way through the darkness toward Sonny's car.

Suddenly the wind rose, rattling tree branches like bones and casting a chaotic plaid of darker shadows and lighter shadows on the field of headstones. Shivering, Sonny put

an arm around Sophie's waist. Shivering too, she leaned into him. A column of air swept through the cliff's tunnels and caves—or must have. Because a low, hollow *wooooing* filled the air like an organ-pipe tone...then quavered into a dark sound very much like sinister laughter.

* * * * *

"I'm going to have to run most of this stuff through my computer to enhance it," Sonny said, setting his equipment bag on the floor beside Sophie's couch.

She nodded in understanding. "Would you like some coffee or tea?"

"Yes, thank you, that would be nice. Do you happen to have Earl Grey?" Sonny sat down. Truth be told, he'd like a good, stiff drink, since he felt nervous as hell.

"As a matter of fact, I do." Sophie lingered near the doorway to the kitchen. She was torn between wanting to stare at Sonny—he was even more handsome than he first seemed to be—and not being able to look him in the face. Thinking about what he might have seen at Fog Cliff made her increasingly edgy and self-conscious. "Cream? Sugar?" she asked.

"Both."

Sonny slung an arm over the back of the couch. It was hard to keep his gaze from sliding up and down Sophie's body, to keep from mentally undressing that petite form. She was every bit as pretty as he'd thought but she did look tired. There were dun-colored semicircles beneath her rich blue eyes and her shoulders sagged a bit. She finally eased his struggle by ducking into the kitchen.

Jacking up his right leg and resting his ankle on his knee, Sonny looked around. The one-and-a-half-story house was clean and appealing both outside and in. Sophie had decorated primarily in white, with muted gem-tone touches here and there and an obvious lack of clutter. The objets d'art she did choose to display had a striking, elegant simplicity. She had, he thought, almost a Taoist approach to decor, and it imparted a sense of classiness as well as coziness.

A pair of French doors somewhat off to his left were covered by a pair of shirred curtains. Sonny wondered what lay beyond the doors. Was it the room where she did her readings? And where was her bedroom? Upstairs, probably. How big was her bed?

Sonny quietly cleared his throat and shifted position slightly. His imagination was taking him places he didn't need to go—not now, under these circumstances. But, damn, she did pique his interest, this strange, soft-spoken cemetery dancer, and he definitely wanted to know more about her.

Sophie returned with their tea. She gave Sonny a wan smile, set the cups on the coffee table, then sat at the opposite end of the couch. Silently, he watched her. After taking a sip from the stoneware mug, she rested her elbows on her closely pressed legs and dropped her face into her hands. Rubbing it slowly—once, twice—Sophie sighed and lifted her head.

"I'm not sure where to start," she said, turning to look at Sonny.

"Are you...a witch?" he asked tentatively, trying to give her a springboard.

Sophie startled him by answering, "No, I'm Catholic." She sat back, startling him further by laughing. "I know that seems totally irrelevant, but it actually isn't. You see, I was a nun for ten years."

Stunner number three and by far the biggest one. Sonny nearly choked on his tea. Shakily, he set the mug down and gaped at her. "Now I am *totally* confused."

"I can imagine. But it has a lot to do with why I was at Fog Cliff tonight." Sophie mustered her courage. It was getting easier by the moment, because the longer she was with Sonny, the more she trusted him. He seemed intelligent and respectful. She sensed he'd been admired by many people throughout his life. The spirits who hovered around him bore testimony to that—and their attitude alone was a measure of his character.

"I'm sure you know the three fundamental rules of the cloister," Sophie said, looking into his warm, gray-green eyes.

"Yes. Poverty, chastity, obedience."

"Mm-hmm. I had no problem with the lack of material things. They've never much interested me. And obedience didn't mean subservience. It was more or less a matter of cooperation, courtesy and compassion—humility, if you will. That wasn't a problem, either. But the chastity..."

Sonny was feeling distinctly ill-at-ease. Rather than squirm, he reached for his mug of tea.

"I can see I'm making you uncomfortable," Sophie said with gentle humor.

Sonny lifted his eyebrows and breathed a tense laugh. "Well, you *are* getting into some personal territory, and you *are* an attractive woman...and I don't like myself for thinking what I'm thinking."

Sophie felt a responsive throb in her vagina and an accompanying taint of moisture. She, too, tried to rein in her imagination. Sonny Brock might not want to have anything to do with her after tonight, whether he found her attractive or not. In fact, he might end up making a mad dash for the nearest door.

"I appreciate your honesty," Sophie said. "If you'd rather we didn't go on with this, just say so. I'll understand."

But Sonny wanted to go on. Most definitely. And he wanted to go on well past tonight. "If you need to know what I might have on video and audio, then I guess we don't have much choice but to proceed."

"Okay. Brace yourself." Sophie drank more tea, then folded and tucked her legs beneath her. "I told you I'm a medium. Having those abilities isn't particularly bothersome once you're used to it. But I recently found out how being psychically sensitive *and* sexually deprived can lead to some pretty alarming problems."

Trying to be as delicate and circumspect as possible, Sophie told him about the male entity who'd forced his way into her bed, and about Esme's advice, and about meeting

with Jackson Spey and Angelina. She concluded with, "So that's why I was at Fog Cliff tonight—to call up the spirit of a young man named William Woolrich and have him...pleasure me. Being sexually fulfilled will make me less vulnerable to *unwanted* attention. Unfortunately, that odious spirit-man is stronger than any of us suspected. I seem to have inadvertently enticed him, too. He came to me after Will departed. That's why I screamed. If you hadn't appeared, I hate to think what might have happened."

Dumbfounded, Sonny could only stare at Sophie in disbelief. Maybe one of his initial theories was correct. Maybe the woman was insane with delusion. With one hand, he rubbed the lower half of his face to keep from gawking at her in open-mouthed stupefaction. She really believed she'd seduced a dead man! Sonny's mind strove to come up with some similar practice in other cultures, which would at least ground her behavior more in superstition than in madness. But he just couldn't think clearly.

"So, um...you're saying you successfully summoned this young soldier's spirit, and he did in fact...satisfy you."

"Yes. Don't ask me how, but he did." Then Sophie threw in, with a drollness that matched his, "You should already know that. I suspect you watched and listened to the whole thing."

Sonny's face flamed.

"Well, didn't you?"

"Yeah, okay, guilty as charged. But I didn't set out to watch you. I was looking around the cemetery with those damned goggles, just because it's one of the things you do when you're trying to spot ghosts. But I spotted you instead. How could I *not* watch? I'm a healthy man, for chrissake, and when I see a nude woman dancing in the dark, I'm sure as hell going to take it in. And you don't have to upbraid me for it, because I've already been punished enough by the massive hard-on I had to endure."

Sophie felt three more even sharper throbs, accompanied by a keen tightening of her nipples. Knowing that this sexy and quite solid man had been aroused by her naked body made her want to strip and stand in front of him, daring him to take her. The thought of his rigid cock straining against his jeans was almost more than she could bear.

But his obvious skepticism made Sophie guarded and defensive. She was starting to question the wisdom of sharing her story with a man who excited her but at the same time diminished her with his implied ridicule. It would be sheer folly to cave in to her desire—something she would deeply regret if Sonny used her and then dumped her because he thought she was a lunatic.

"Anyway," Sonny muttered as an afterthought, "can't you find a more...conventional way of easing your frustration?"

Sophie knew it was a logical question but it still exasperated her. "You obviously don't realize, Mr. Brock, that a woman doesn't just waltz from a convent into a pickup bar or singles club. She doesn't even waltz back into the dating scene. And that's

especially true of a woman with standards. I made a couple of hook-up attempts after I left the order, but all they did was confirm how important those standards are. So, until I can develop a relationship grounded in mutual trust and respect, not to mention basic compatibility, I'm just going to have to take care of my needs in 'unconventional' ways."

Well, Sonny thought, she certainly knows her own mind...addled though it might be. He'd been tempted to blurt out, "Hey, so let *me* fuck you. I'll fuck you 'til neither one of us can see straight!" But Sophie's little speech made him realize that would've been absolutely the wrong thing to say. He kept his mouth shut and waited for whatever came next.

"Now that *that's* out of the way," Sophie said briskly, "I'd appreciate it if you kept my personal life out of this, no matter how abnormal it seems to you. I just need to find out if you captured anything—any materializations, any EVPs—with your equipment. To combat the destructive entity, we need to know more about him."

"'We'," Sonny repeated, more dryly than he intended to. "Meaning you, your guide and your shaman."

Sophie rose from the couch and stood ramrod straight as she glowered at Sonny. His sarcasm had been unmistakable. "I can see you were the wrong person to confide in, and this isn't going to get me anywhere. You obviously think I'm out of my mind." She walked around the coffee table to the other end of the couch and lifted Sonny's carryall from the floor. "So you might as well go now." Thrusting the bag at him, she added, "By the way, Jackson Spey is not a 'shaman'."

Sonny turned up his hands and lifted his arms. "I'm sorry. This is all too outlandish. A cultural anthropologist is exposed to many, many bizarre practices but the scenario you've detailed falls way beyond the realm of any western traditions."

Bewildered, Sophie sank to the floor in front of him. "Are you saying you're an anthropologist?"

Sonny scratched his head. "Uh, yeah. I guess I neglected to mention that. I was at Fog Cliff doing research for my doctoral thesis."

"So the ghost hunting?"

"It was valid enough." Sonny smiled. On impulse, he reached out and lightly touched Sophie's cheek with his fingertips. "Honestly, Sophie, I wasn't out there hoping to ogle some unclothed, nubile female." Tempted to carry the touch further, Sonny withdrew his hand. "I wanted to see what tracking down spirits was all about, experience it firsthand. It's a popular pursuit in western culture right now, and it both stems from and has an effect on our beliefs about death and what follows death."

Sophie was at once impressed and dismayed. An educated man, obviously, but also a diehard doubter. He'd very likely not believe what was right in front of his eyes.

"I think, Sonny," she said, "you need to open your mind to things that aren't perceptible through the senses, through *your* senses."

He sighed. "Maybe." Bracing his arms on his legs, he leaned forward. "Sophie, if you'd said you were a Wiccan conducting some specialized sex ritual, I could've bought it. I've sat in on quite a few covens during esbat and sabbat celebrations, which *do* conform to the paradigm of contemporary western paganism, and I've seen some pretty erotic goings-on. But they're *between real, living people*. And the actions have a specific metaphysical purpose. However, this stuff about being fucked by an invisible dead man to keep from being stalked and raped by another invisible dead man and then going to a magician for help..." Shaking his head, Sonny straightened. "That goes way beyond anything I've ever witnessed or studied. You actually believe there's a concrete, physical interaction taking place!"

"Because there is," Sophie whispered. She stood up. Sonny Brock, professional anthropologist and amateur ghost hunter, was clearly a lost cause. Walking over to a small desk tucked into a corner of the room, Sophie tore a sheet of paper from a notepad and scribbled down her phone number and email address. She went back to Sonny and held out the paper to him. "Please, take this. If you do happen to notice anything out of the ordinary when you analyze your results, anything at all, I'd appreciate hearing about it. The significance may be lost on you but it wouldn't necessarily be meaningless to me."

Feeling strangely nibbled by guilt, Sonny took the paper and slid it into his jacket pocket.

"Thank you," Sophie said.

They walked to the door in silence. Just as Sophie was about to reach for the handle, she turned toward Sonny, put her hands on either side of his face and urged his mouth down to hers. She kissed him just long enough to relish the firm-soft heat and mobility of his lips. Dizzied by the feeling, knowing with unerring instinct he could work wonders with his mouth, she nevertheless pulled back. It wasn't her intention to seduce him.

Nearly panting, Sonny tried to catch his breath. He looked drugged. "Why did you do that?" he gasped, raking a hand through his hair. "And why did you stop?"

"I did it out of pure selfishness," Sophie confessed. "And I stopped out of consideration."

Sluggishly, Sonny shook his head. He didn't know what the hell she meant. He just knew he wanted to keep kissing her, stopping only long enough to suck at her breasts and lick the honey dripping from her pussy. His cock wanted out. *Now*.

"I kissed you," Sophie explained, "because I couldn't kiss Will. He gave me one heck of an orgasm but I still crave the feel of flesh connecting with flesh. And I stopped because you think I'm borderline schizophrenic and I resent you for that." She dipped to the right and opened the door. "I'm sorry if you found it disconcerting and I'm sorry if you don't understand but that's why I did it."

She gave this answer as if it were the most reasonable one in the world.

Sonny couldn't seem to move. He stood where he was, gaping at this lovely creature, and wondered for a moment if *he* was the one suffering delusions. This was without a doubt the strangest encounter he'd ever had with a woman.

Finally he said, "I guess I have no choice but to accept that."

Sophie smiled slightly. "Oh, you have a choice. You could either force the issue, which I don't think you'd do because you're a gentleman, or you could say, 'Go to hell, bitch. Even if I got pictures and recordings of *thirteen* ghosts, I'll be damned if I'm going to let you know. I don't want to have anything more to do with your crazy ass.'"

Sonny dropped his head and snickered. "Don't you know nuns aren't supposed to talk that way?"

"I'm not a nun anymore," Sophie said. Her eyes sparkled like sapphires. "After this evening, that should go without saying. Goodnight, Sonny. I won't hold my breath."

Chapter Six

He couldn't stand it. Crazy or not, Sophie Alanca had gotten to him. Sonny thought he'd start bouncing off the walls if he couldn't see her again.

After he got home from her place last night, he'd merely dropped his equipment bag inside the front door, gone straight to his bedroom and flopped onto the bed without bothering to undress. Even though he was exhausted, Sonny kept seeing her bare breasts with their erect nipples, kept feeling her hungry mouth on his. Finally, he had to masturbate just to be able to fall asleep. Groaning in frustration, he yanked down his jeans and clutched his already hard cock. It was all too easy to imagine Sophie's soft lips circling his cock head, her assertive tongue making sensual loops around its base and then snaking down the thick vein on the underside of his shaft. As his hand slid more and more furiously up and down the length of his erection, Sonny could almost feel Sophie sucking and pumping it, sucking and pumping and sucking with such zeal that she seemed intent on turning him inside out.

Maddened by these visions, Sonny growled as he came. He found enough relief to sleep—but he knew it was only temporary. As if to confirm this, Sophie's eyes haunted him even in his dreams.

Haunted...

Today, he had to get to work sifting through his results. After fixing himself a protein shake, Sonny grabbed his carryall and went straight to the second bedroom he used as a study. He carefully lifted out all the devices he'd packed the night before and began hooking them up to his computer and to other enhancement equipment. Given the likelihood there would be no electronic voice phenomena and no visual anomalies—in short, nothing that would give him a reason for contacting Sophie—how could he engineer another meeting with her?

She was attracted to him, that much he could tell, but her wariness seemed to override the attraction. And she was too strong-willed and shrewd to be sweet-talked. Sonny cursed himself for being so outspoken. He should have soft-peddled his incredulity. If she thought he was a kindred spirit, she might—

Sonny dropped his forehead to his hand. "Oh, shit, don't go there," he told himself in disgust. "If all you want is for her to 'give it up', you don't deserve another chance." What was wrong with him? He'd never felt so damned crazed with desire. Maybe he'd be better off *not* concocting a reason to see her. A woman like that could, in all kinds of ways, push him right to the brink.

Sonny looked at the first photo of the sixteen he'd downloaded from his digital camera. A deep furrow carved itself into his forehead. He enlarged and clarified the

image, then moved closer to the monitor, then shoved his chair away from the desk as if what he saw could reach out and grab him.

"My God," he breathed. "Oh my God."

* * * * *

All Sophie could remember about her dreamless sleep was the sound of Esme's voice. At some point, she could've sworn she heard the spirit guide say, *Neither push Harrison away nor grasp at him. Time will alleviate...* But then Esme's voice became muffled, and Sophie couldn't make out the rest of the statement.

It was the first time such a thing had happened, and Sophie was both puzzled by and concerned about the interruption in clarity.

This morning she intended to call Jackson Spey to tell him of her latest tussle with the spirit he called a "hybrid". Because it was Sunday, and possibly the only day he wasn't at his woodworking shop, she was going to wait politely until ten o'clock. But at 8:43am, her phone rang and her plans changed.

The voice on the line was vaguely familiar but Sophie still had trouble placing it. Then, in her mind's eye, she saw a face she recognized.

"Well, you certainly made *my* Saturday evening interesting," Angelina said with tart humor.

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked. She sat at her kitchen table and grabbed a notepad.

"You did the Dance last night, didn't you." It was a statement of fact, not a question.

"Yes," Sophie answered. What was the point of hedging?

"Well, dearheart, I'm clairsentient, not just clairvoyant and clairsaudient. I'm not only able to see and hear things not in my vicinity, I'm also able to feel them. It doesn't happen often—only when I'm preoccupied with somebody's well-being." Angelina sighed. "Apparently, because I met you just yesterday and your situation made such a deep impression on me—was very troubling, in fact—you were fresh and strong in my mind."

Sophie was tempted to giggle. "Oh, God, I'm sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," Angelina said with a smile in her voice. "Anyway, I'm not calling to be nosy—I have no prurient interest in what the Dance produced—but I am concerned about those moments of terror at the end."

Relieved to have a sympathetic listener, Sophie described as best she could the intrusion of the evil entity. She also told Angelina about the propitious appearance of Harrison Brock, anthropologist and ghost hunter.

Angelina was heartened by this. "He's bound to have gotten *something*, as intense as those experiences were. You need to stay in touch with Mr. Brock—maybe even team up with him—and then contact Jackson."

"I *will* contact Jackson," Sophie said. "But, um... I don't think I can do the Dance in front of Sonny."

After taking a moment to digest this, Angelina spoke, treading carefully on her words. "You like this Sonny Brock, don't you. You find him quite appealing. But you're conflicted about it."

Sophie blushed. "Affirmative. On everything. He isn't a believer, not by a long shot. And that translates into him thinking—"

"That you're crazy as a loon."

Sophie responded with a limp chuckle. "You got it."

"Well, dearheart, I suspect that's going to change...and quite soon."

* * * * *

Sonny tried with every ounce of common sense and all the knowledge at his disposal to account for what he was seeing. The digital photos were not just of a nude female figure in a variety of poses. In fact, Sophie's form was always at least partially concealed.

There'd been no fog at Fog Cliff last night. Not a shred. Air and ground temperatures were similar and the humidity level was low. But in every photo, the dim image of Sophie Alanca was swaddled in a swirling white mist. Within it, glowing orbs hovered over different parts of her body. The shape of the wispy, winding cloud and the positions of the orbs were different from one shot to the next. Most intriguing of all, no rippling, diaphanous veils or blurry balls of light showed up anywhere but on and around the dancer. Within the surrounding area, the flat darkness was broken only by the faint, humped forms of headstones.

Sonny checked his handwritten notes. The EMF readings had gone haywire just seconds before he'd started taking these pictures.

Had the mist been simple condensation in the air, it would've been visible elsewhere. Ground fog, Sonny told himself, doesn't just collect around human beings. Had the orbs been flying insects or blowing dust, they too would've shown up elsewhere.

Sitting back in his desk chair, Sonny clicked through the photos again, enlarging each one and examining it, quadrant by quadrant. Same results—a milky cloak studded with fuzzy gold disks—but only on and around the naked woman.

Rolling his chair to the right, Sonny ran the infrared video. His mouth dropped open as his forehead creased. The moving image it presented was different from the still images, and the difference spooked him.

Urgently, Sonny shifted position yet again to play the audio tape. A deep chill settled between his shoulder blades as every follicle on his scalp contracted.

He had to call Sophie and he didn't have to manufacture a reason to do so. He had to call her *now*. Simultaneously grabbing the phone from its base and the piece of notepaper he'd carefully laid beside it, he punched in her number.

She answered immediately and a little breathlessly. Sonny felt a fluttering in his stomach at the sound of her voice. He thought of those happy orbs dancing along her arms and between her legs and clustering like a swarm of bees around her breasts. Then he chided himself. *It isn't the time for that, asshole.*

"Sophie, hi, it's Sonny Brock."

"Oh. Hi. Did you find something?"

"I found a lot of things. Damned if I know what they are, though. Would you like to come over and check it out?"

"You know I would. Just give me your address and some general directions. May I have someone meet me there?"

Sonny paused. He wasn't expecting that. *Shit*, he thought, *I hope she doesn't turn this into some kind of New Age circus.*

"Who?" he asked.

"Someone who needs to be there even more than I do — Jackson Spey."

Sonny did a fast mental shuffle to attach meaning to the name. *Nada*. Then it hit him. "That...warlock or whatever the hell he is?"

"I need him there, Sonny."

He wondered if she might be involved with the guy...or wanted to be. There was an imploring sincerity in her voice he couldn't ignore. "Sophie, it's not that I particularly mind, but I just don't want my apartment becoming a kind of Mecca for a bunch of gung-ho, zoned-out occultists. Know what I mean?"

"We'll try not to take up too much of your time," she said.

Ouch. She was getting snappish now. Sonny realized if he were to have any chance at all with this lady, he'd have to be more flexible. Well, maybe this Spey character would be somewhat entertaining.

"Okay, if you think he has some insights to offer, have him come over." His next thought was wry, and maybe tainted with a hint of jealousy. *Yeah, right. And I might become an Elvis impersonator...*

* * * * *

A night's sleep had made Sophie look radiant. As soon as Sonny opened the door and saw her delicate figure in its faded jeans and faded denim shirt with the top few buttons alluringly undone, her gleaming hair loosely pinned up, he wanted to take her in his arms. Just the memory of last night's kiss made his lips feel drenched in warmth.

"Welcome," he said, smiling softly at her. "Please, come in." He motioned inside. "I've never had a woman over here for something like this. I'm not quite sure how to act."

Sophie walked to the middle of the living room. "Just be your skeptical self, Sonny."

"I might not be so skeptical anymore."

Sophie's fine, dark eyebrows rose.

Sonny couldn't keep his admiring eyes off her. "You're beautiful," he murmured.

The pink deepening in her cheeks, Sophie looked down.

"I'm sure you're used to compliments."

"No, I'm not." She was trying to hold in a smile. "If you keep talking like that, I may have to kiss you again."

"Is that a promise?"

"No, just a possibility." Sophie looked at him both shyly and slyly, her smile not quite so restrained anymore. "I love your place, by the way."

Sonny looked around at the eclectic mix of pictures covering the walls, the odd hodgepodge of artifacts he'd picked up in his travels, the crooked towers of books and magazines teetering everywhere on the worn Tabriz Persian wool rug.

"This mess? You must be kidding."

Sophie laughed. "No, I'm not. It's masculine and unpretentious and it reflects your mind and soul. I could spend hours poking around in here."

"Hmm." Sonny shoved his hands in his pockets to keep from touching her. "You'll probably need dinner first, to boost your stamina."

"Oh? And what will I need afterwards?"

Sonny chuckled and shook his head. "Jesus, Sophie, I didn't know nuns learned how to flirt. And so well." When he glanced at her and saw that coy smile, those ocean-blue eyes, his cock became disturbingly restless. "We'd better go into the study now."

As soon as he turned to lead the way, he puffed out his cheeks and expelled a tense, flustered breath.

"Sonny?"

He stopped and turned.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Oh, let's just say for being in the right place at the right time."

There was some underlying implication, but Sonny didn't have enough free mental space to analyze it. "You don't have to thank me, Sophie. For anything."

He showed her into his office and offered her the chair in front of the computer. After explaining his baseline tests at Fog Cliff, Sonny told her about the electromagnetic

field readings and then brought up the picture file. He'd already done whatever enhancing and clarifying he could, for all his results, so Sophie only had to click through the pictures.

Wide-eyed, she stared at them, the merest hint of a smile on her face. Finally she murmured, "These are textbook images, Sonny – the orbs, the ectoplasm. It doesn't get much better than this for investigators."

"All I know is, I can't come up with a natural explanation. Maybe an expert debunker with more sophisticated equipment could pose some theories, but I can't."

Sophie looked up at him. "That's why such things are classified as paranormal."

Sonny lightly laid a hand on her back. "I guess you're right." He reached past her to start the video player. "This movie isn't as pleasant, though."

As it played, Sophie recoiled. "My God. He appeared just as I would have imagined. Please, turn it off."

"You're not going to like this any better." Moving around her, Sonny readied the EVP recording just as three assertive raps sounded on the front door. "That could be Mr. Spey. Excuse me a minute."

Sonny went back through the living room to admit his next guest as the hair-raising EVP echoed at his back. He grasped the knob and nearly flung the door open.

The man who stood there was as tall as Sonny but about ten or twelve years older and sleek as a panther. The fact that he wore black leather chaps and vest certainly contributed to this quality. His face, diabolically handsome, seemed to carry worlds of experience and his eyes were mesmerizing.

Sophie walked up and stood just behind and to one side of Sonny. His fountain of jealousy began burbling again. Hell, how could she *not* want this guy? How could *he* not want her?

Trying to be a gracious host, Sonny stepped forward to greet him. "You must be –"

The man extended his hand. "Jackson Spey, friendly local shaman."

Sonny shot a startled look at Sophie.

"I didn't say a word," she assured him, looking taken aback herself.

"And you're the anthropologist," Spey said with a smirk as they shook hands, "a man who's fascinated by magickal traditions and who studies them to death under the microscope of intellect...but refuses to give them any credence in terms of causality."

Again, Sonny looked at Sophie. She shook her head and shrugged.

Spey smiled in a good-natured way. "I think, Mr. Brock, you're about to get the biggest wake-up call of your life."

Sonny felt as if the world had tipped on its axis. He blinked at the intense man with the long braid and weird, multicolored eyes. "How...how do you know about me?"

"Well, I *could* say I see all, hear all and know all." Spey wiggled his fingers at Sonny while humming the first bars of *The Twilight Zone* theme song. "But that would be

bullshit. Actually, it was my friend Angelina who picked up the information then passed it along to me.”

“But how did she...” Sonny rubbed his temples. “Never mind,” he muttered. “Shit, I think I chose the wrong major. I wouldn’t have been in that damned cemetery if I’d become a mathematician.”

This elicited robust laughter from Spey. It was laughter born of sympathetic amusement, not mockery, and Sonny thought he just might be able to warm up to this man. But the question still remained how much Sophie had warmed up to him.

“Come on.” Spey placed a hand firmly on Sonny’s back. “Let’s take a magical mystery tour of the real world behind the real world. Show me what you have.”

Together, the three of them went to Sonny’s office.

“What should I run first?” Sonny asked as he sat at his U-shaped desk. Sophie and Spey stood behind him.

Sophie bent toward Sonny’s left ear. “Please skip the stuff with Will,” she whispered.

Sonny turned his head and glanced at Spey, whose eyes had shifted slightly in Sophie’s direction. A barely perceptible smile played at the corners of his mouth. “I only need to see and hear the parts that involve the intruder,” he said.

Seaming her lips and avoiding Spey’s gaze, Sophie stepped back from the desk chair. Sonny swallowed. Hell, he didn’t want Jackson Spey to see Sophie naked any more than she wanted it. The guy was a fucking knockout – worse yet, a knockout with mystique – and if he took *too* much of an interest in her...

Sonny nearly jumped out of his chair when he felt Spey’s fingers curl over his shoulder. “It’s all right,” Jackson said quietly, soothingly. “I’m only here to help. You’re in the driver’s seat, Mr. Brock.”

He’s telling me he has no designs on Sophie, Sonny gratefully realized, and she has none on him. He’s a dispassionate observer, that’s all. And Sonny could’ve sworn he felt something like the warm, bubbling, herbal water of a spa seeping through his body. Immediately, the tension was gone.

He forwarded the video to the spot where Sophie had rolled off Will’s grave. Spey leaned over his shoulder to get a better look. Sophie turned away from the screen and ambled around the study.

With his little finger, Sonny indicated the portions of the scene that he, and Sophie, found most distressing. “See that amorphous black shape? It’s like a cloud of coal dust. Except it’s more...directed.”

“Purposeful,” Spey murmured.

“Yes, that’s how it seems. And here,” Sonny pointed, “look at those tendrils. The shape has pretty much engulfed Sophie, but you can still make out those darker streaks, moving like appendages.”

“And being used like them, too,” Spey noted as Sophie’s legs were forced apart.

Sonny switched off the player and turned his head to look at Spey. "I don't know if my recorder is defective or that's some kind of light-and-shadow anomaly. What do you make of it?"

Jackson straightened, folding his arms over his chest. "That's him. That's our boy."

The certainty with which he made this assertion startled Sonny—and made him question Jackson Spey's objectivity. "So you really think that's some apparition and not—"

"A *kind* of apparition," Spey corrected. "And I don't just think it, I know it."

There seemed to be no arguing the point with him, so Sonny turned his attention to the next item on the agenda. "The EVP is just as strange. But it's possible some sick prankster followed Sophie to the cemetery—"

"Just play the damned thing and let me judge for himself."

"Sor-ry," Sonny murmured. He turned to the computer and began playing the recording.

The low-toned, growly phrases sounded as if they'd been spoken under water. Sentences—if, in fact, complete sentences had been uttered—were broken up, and most of the words were either indistinct or quite possibly not words at all. Some, however, were clearly audible. Even now, after having heard them more than a dozen times, they gave Sonny goose bumps—which was probably why, he realized, he was so desperate to find a natural explanation.

...*Sophia, my spark...*

...*bitch goddess...*

...*RELENT...*

...*I will have you...*

"Shit, that creeps me out," Sonny muttered. He stopped the recording, then ran it back to the beginning. "Is it my imagination," he asked Spey, "or do you detect some sort of accent?"

"There's definitely an accent, although I think he's trying to conceal it."

"What language, do you think?"

Spey dropped his hand from his chin, where he'd been stroking his goatee. "Cajun French, I suspect." He lightly nudged Sonny's upper arm with the back of his hand. "If you don't mind, I'd like to sit there and listen."

"Please do." Sonny rose to let Spey take the desk chair. "Are you ready?"

Spey donned the headphones. "Yes."

Sonny tilted past him and started the player.

Spey narrowed his eyes as he listened. Then he curled his hands over the speakers. "Run it again," he said softly.

Sonny did as he was told.

Spey closed his eyes. "Bingo." He lifted his hands from the speakers and removed the headphones. "Desjardins," he said with perfect French pronunciation. "I'd wager anything on it. That has to be Bruno Desjardins."

Sophie hurried back to the desk. "Who is...who was he?" she asked in a thin voice.

Spey leaned back in the chair, splaying his legs and grasping the edge of the desk. After a thought-filled moment, he glanced at Sophie. "I'm sure you've heard of Gnosticism."

"Of course," she said. Sophie knew that the movement, both religious and philosophical, was part of the early history of Christianity—it appeared in the second century—although it lingered on in one form or another to the present day. The Church, however, branded its doctrines as heresy.

"You may or may not know," Spey went on, "that historical Gnosticism had two extreme branches that were polar opposites."

"The Valentinians, who believed in self-deprivation and practiced extreme asceticism," Sonny said, "and the Ophites of Caprocates, who believed in self-indulgence and practiced extreme licentiousness."

Spey looked at him with mild surprise. "You've studied it."

Sonny shrugged. "A little. My undergraduate minor was comparative religion." He pulled up a chair for Sophie and invited her to sit down. He himself sat in another chair next to hers. "It's a fascinating, complex belief system with a rich history. An enormous variety of sects spun off of it. I think the Mandeans in Iraq are the last in existence."

Spey swiveled the desk chair to face Sonny and Sophie. "That's not quite true. Some cells are still scattered around the world. They just aren't well known."

"So what does this have to do with Desjardins?" Sophie asked, anxious to learn what she could.

Spey began explaining. "The ancestors of Bruno Desjardins were French settlers expelled from eastern Canada in the mid-seventeen hundreds."

"Acadians," Sonny said.

"Yeah, that's what they were called once they settled in Louisiana. Bayou Acadians, to be more exact. But Bruno, who was spawned about a hundred years later, was ashamed of being a lowly Cajun. So he married into a wealthy Creole family. A few years later, his wife died under mysterious circumstances."

"She was poisoned," Sophie whispered, her eyes glazing. Esme had just told her this and now the spirit guide provided glimpses of what had happened. Sophie grimaced as her hand went to her throat. "He poisoned her but became impatient because it was taking too long to kill her. So he hastened the process by strangling her...and he fucked her while he did it, and he laughed."

Silently, the two men watched Sophie. Spey's expression was largely one of curiosity. Sonny, however, looked and felt dazed. Now where did she get *that* from? he

wondered. Did she make it up? Were she and Spey feeding off each other's fabrications?

"Thank you, Esme," Spey said quietly. The line of his gaze was directed just above Sophie's head. "Another mystery solved." He resumed his narrative. "So, after an appropriate period of altogether bogus mourning, Bruno collected his inheritance and took up residence in New Orleans. A short time later, he founded the Ordo Templum Sterquilinium, or OTS, supposedly modeled after the early Gnostic Borborite sect."

Sonny leaned forward. "Weren't they an offshoot of the Ophites? The Borborites, I mean."

"Yes," Spey said. "They were libertines. But the OTS became further and further removed from Gnosticism, in any form, the more obsessed its members became with simply sating their lust."

"Excuse me," Sophie interrupted, "but my Latin is really rusty. Desjardins founded the Order of the Temple of what?"

Spey looked at her quite pointedly. "Muck. Dung. The dung-heap. The shit-pile. Take your pick."

"Wonderful," Sophie said with obvious distaste.

Sonny felt equally revolted. But he still wasn't convinced such a group ever existed, much less their founder had, from beyond the threshold of death, set his jaundiced sights on Sophie. But Sonny knew he must keep asking questions. That was the only way to get to the truth.

"So, what was the Order all about? You said something about its members 'sating their lust'."

"That isn't inclusive enough," Spey answered. "What they were all about can be summed up in another word, though—depravity."

"I don't know if I want to hear any more," Sophie murmured.

Sonny reached beneath the arms of their chairs and curled a hand over hers.

Compassion briefly softened Spey's expression. "I'm afraid you need to. The best defense against one's enemies is knowing them as thoroughly as possible. Desjardins, who in public was a very charming dandy, had some insatiable, private appetites—for bondage and sexual sadism, mostly, with a touch of necrophilia. This secret society he formed drew like-minded people."

Sonny, too, felt a touch of queasiness. He ascribed it to concern for Sophie. Whether true or not, this sordid tale was drawing her in and could adversely affect her life. He quickly started asking more questions. "How did these good ol' boys find their, uh, female participants?"

Spey, as usual, didn't miss a beat. "Some were invited and came willingly. I suspect they were either hardcore masochists or gullible, attention-hungry women misled about the nature of the group's activities. But legend has it that most—prostitutes, probably—

were just grabbed off the street. Young boys, too, so there must have been pedophiles in the group."

"They kidnapped their victims?" Sophie asked.

"So the story goes. And *victims* is the right word. The OTS allegedly engaged in gang rape and brutal orgies. Possibly even ritual sacrifices, once they started dabbling in dark magick. In fact, that's just about the only explanation for how Desjardins got where he is today."

"You mean, that's how he became this 'hybrid'?" Sophie asked in horror. "That's how he defied death?"

"I'm sure it wasn't through the grace of God," Spey said. His expression grew solemn. He moved up to Sophie and braced his hands on the arms of her chair. "I *know* Desjardins is the entity who's tormenting you. It all fits together—the accent, the sadistic behavior, your name and his reference to you as 'my spark'. And there's more." Spey rolled back to the desk.

"Wait," Sophie said. "My name?"

Sonny had a flash of recognition. *Her name—Sophia*. "You're referring to the Nag Hammadi codices discovered in Egypt," he said to Spey, then thought grudgingly, *Shit*, this guy really knows his stuff.

"Yes. It's through that ancient document that we've gleaned most of our knowledge of Gnostic doctrine. The name *Sophia* is from the Greek word for wisdom, and Sophia is certainly the most revered figure in the Gnostic belief system. It holds that the virginal Sophia gave birth to the Creator God. She is the carrier of the divine spark or seed of light from the higher Supreme God, and she's the one who dispenses it to select human beings."

"And the divine spark is like a golden ticket," Sonny elaborated. "Once a person who's lucky enough to contain the spark *realizes* he has it, he can escape the prison of his body at death and be reunited with the Supreme God."

"Correct. In short, I think Desjardins realizes he fucked up. Royally. He perverted the Gnostic ideal, turned to dark magick, then found his sick, twisted ass stuck between the astral and earthly planes for all eternity."

"So in some skewed way," Sophie said, "he thinks *I* can provide him with this 'spark' he missed out on? *I* can free him?"

"That seems to be the case," Spey said, leaning back in his chair. "Things must be getting unpleasant for ol' Bruno in his one-man limbo. Or maybe he's just bored." Spey folded his hands over his stomach. "But the son of a bitch *still* doesn't get it. He's obviously a balls-out psycho and remains at the mercy of his earthly appetites. He seems to think that by possessing you, Sophie, or maybe even destroying you, he'll absorb the divine spark. But he damned well intends to get his jollies in the process."

"Shit," Sonny breathed. It was quite a yarn...and Spey was stretching it for all it was worth. He glanced at Sophie and saw she looked ill. Turning back to Spey, he said, "I hope you realize how hard this is to believe. We don't need to alarm Sophie

unnecessarily." He forked his hands through his hair. "I mean, hell, what reason do you have for being so sure you're right? No disrespect intended, but I don't know anything about you *or* this Desjardins character, so it's hard for me to gauge —"

Spey, his expression impassive, had been staring steadily and directly into Sonny's eyes. Now he broke in and said, in a reasonable way, "Why don't you ask Sophie? And if her answer doesn't satisfy you, the solution to your dilemma is very simple. You just pull out and remove yourself from the whole thing. It isn't your problem. If we have further need of detection equipment, there are plenty of places where we can get it."

Fidgeting a little, worried he might look bad in Sophie's eyes, Sonny turned to her. "I didn't mean to imply I don't believe you or Mr. Spey. And I certainly don't want to abandon you if I can be of any help. I guess I just need further proof of...these assertions."

"Sonny," Sophie laid a hand on his arm, "I understand. Believe me, my head is reeling, too. But I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Esme wouldn't send me to someone whose abilities and credibility were questionable."

"Ah, Esme," Sonny said with a shade of sarcasm, rolling up his eyes.

Sophie's face tightened. "Yes. And if you doubt Esme's existence, then *you* explain to *me* how I even found this man in the first place. I didn't know Jackson Spey from Andrew Jackson until she gave me his name."

Sonny slipped a glance at Spey, who was wearing one of his fractional smiles.

"All true," Spey said.

"And you claim to be a wizard."

"I don't *claim* to be anything. I am what I am."

"A wizard," Sonny repeated.

Spey rocked gently in the desk chair, his hands still folded over his stomach. He didn't say a word. But Sonny could've sworn the man's eyes subtly changed color.

Sonny forged ahead with his interrogation. "So, are you a member of some order — like, say, the Golden Dawn, or some contemporary version thereof? Do you follow a certain tradition or teacher? I know that, historically speaking, practitioners of ritual magic have often belonged to —"

"I'm not a member of anything," Spey broke in. "I don't 'follow' anybody. Don't judge me according to what you know, because your knowledge is limited." He smiled. "I say that with all due respect, of course."

Was he being sarcastic? It was hard to tell. In any case, Sonny was running out of questions. "Well, the term *wizard* seems a little, uh...flamboyant and archaic." He was tempted to make a reference to Harry Potter but held his tongue.

"Esme referred to Jackson as a wizard," Sophie told Sonny. "I found it hard to believe, too. But now..." She hesitated. "Well, we'll see."

Sonny didn't quite know what to make of her pullback. Maybe Sophie was more rational than he'd given her credit for. Maybe she felt that cushioning herself with some

degree of wariness would prevent disillusionment. Although it seemed too much to hope for, maybe she didn't want to put *him* off by too closely allying herself with this charismatic stranger.

All these possibilities put Sonny in the mood to make concessions. "Okay, I can't disprove anything you've said, Mr. Spey. Not at the moment. But at least tell me what, in this day and age, wizards *do*, exactly."

Spey shrugged. "What they've always done."

"How?"

Apparently getting exasperated, Spey sighed. "I'm sorry there's no Cliff's Notes explanation of High Magick. But if you see this gig through, you might get a sampling of how it works and what it can do."

"What about what *you* can do? In this situation, I mean." Sonny wasn't going to let up on him. If Spey planned on becoming Sophie's primary helpmate, Sonny sure as hell planned on dogging him.

The wizard glanced at Sophie, who'd been listening attentively to this exchange. "I can do plenty. I've run into Desjardins before, but only in passing. I believe he's scared of me."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Sonny asked. "What do you mean, you've 'run into him before'?"

The wizard smiled as he stretched his legs, raised his arms and linked his hands behind his head. "I get around."

Speechless, Sonny blinked at him. Then the anthropologist threw up his hands and dropped them back onto the chair arms. "All right. You're obviously a smart man and Sophie obviously has faith in you. So if you think that black blob and that male voice," Sonny motioned vaguely toward the computer, "represent some not-quite-dead Cajun pervert who means her harm, and you believe you can banish him with magic, I'll take you at your word. For now."

"But..."

"I beg your pardon?"

Spey swiveled to face Sonny. "Aren't you leaving out a condition or threat or ultimatum? 'But if you *do* turn out to be a charlatan or nut-case or lecher.'"

"Listen, Mr. Spey —"

"Please, call me Jackson. And I'm none of the above, by the way." He grinned. "Ask Esme."

Sonny braced his elbows on his legs and dropped his face into his hands. He'd run out of things to say. The man was both impressive and magnetic—even, in an odd way, likable—but that was all the more reason for Sophie to need some watching over. If Spey was feeding her a batch of bunk because he had some hidden agenda, Sonny had no choice but to stay the course.

When you cared about someone or something, that's what you did.

"Let's try this again," Sonny muttered into his palms. He raised his head. "Where do we go from here? Is *that* straightforward enough for you?"

Spey grinned. "*Ja. Ich verstehe.*"

"Well?" Sophie asked. "Where *do* we go from here?"

"I think we should take our asses to that cemetery," Spey said, rising from the chair.

"Now?" Sophie still looked shell-shocked.

"Sure, why not? There's enough daylight left. I'd like to sniff around, get a feel for things. Mind if I ask Angelina to join us? Her sensitivity is quite extraordinary." Spey looked to Sonny for his approval.

"Just use the phone on the desk," Sonny said in resignation. *Oh, fuck, what have I gotten myself into?*

Chapter Seven

They made up a small caravan as they traveled from Sonny's apartment to Fog Cliff Cemetery—Sophie in the lead, Sonny behind her in his Jeep, Spey behind him on a Harley. Sophie tried to keep her mind blank. She felt it was important that she not anticipate anything, not let last night's experiences or today's revelations color this visit in any way. The exercise proved a two-edged sword. The more strenuously she kept herself from thinking about William Woolrich and Bruno Desjardins, the more her thoughts gathered around Harrison Brock.

Sophie couldn't seem to help it. Everything about him—looks, behavior, attitudes, even the traits that sometimes maddened her—was becoming endearing. And those loving presences continually hovering around him naturally inspired her trust. What's more, Sophie sensed a change in Sonny's hard-nosed resistance to belief. Now, he seemed to be turning it into a tool to protect her. He seemed intent on not letting anybody, whether ghostly or three-dimensional, take advantage of her. How could any woman not be moved by a man who was determined to defend her?

And Sophie certainly couldn't ignore his physical attributes. That torso-hugging green t-shirt Sonny wore today outlined the most stunning chest she'd ever seen on a male—a perfect bed of hard, sloping muscles, topped by a headboard of broad shoulders. His arms were just as magnificent—twin, bulging biceps sweeping down to sinewy forearms. Damn, how she wanted to feel them around her again, feel the stony, unbreakable embrace that was softened by his warm, smooth skin and the silky flow of dark hair on his arms.

Rolling the car window down even farther, Sophie hoped the fresh air would help dispel her heat. But her imagination wasn't that easily controlled, and her imagination kept turning up her internal thermostat. Sonny's eyes, like two ponds in a forest, shimmered before her. She felt his breath on her neck just as she shoved her hands into his shock of walnut-colored hair. Then his head descended, and Sophie could almost feel Sonny's delectable mouth playing over her breasts, the moist, muscular tip of his tongue flicking at her nipples as she buried her face in the silken tumult of his hair.

"Damn it, *stop*," she muttered to herself. She was becoming more and more strongly attracted to Sonny Brock and he was undoubtedly attracted to her but that didn't mean they were right for each other. Not by a long shot. And Sophie *refused* to let herself become physically involved with any man who was just plain wrong for her. It had happened before, with dismal results.

What was it Esme had told her? *Neither grasp at him nor push him away. Time will alleviate*—Alleviate what? Sophie wondered. Those undelivered words could possibly

have resolved her dilemma. What advice had Esme been trying to impart and why had the message been aborted?

Once the trio of seekers reached Fog Cliff, they parked on the county road and waited for Angelina to arrive. Sonny had his digital camera tucked in his shirt pocket, his audio recorder in his jeans pocket. The three visitors to the cemetery didn't exactly huddle together but they did form a tight circle, as if finding security in closeness. Well, that probably isn't the case with Jackson, Sophie thought. She doubted much of anything ever made him uneasy.

With obvious concern Sonny asked her, "How do you feel about being back here? Does it bother you?"

He had his arms crossed over his chest and looked the picture of masculine strength. The hair on his forearms glistened softly in the sunlight. Sophie forced her eyes not to linger on him. Sonny was becoming too much of a distraction.

"Not particularly. I suppose because it's daytime and I have companions." *One man with physical power and another with metaphysical power—I couldn't be more protected by any other pair of human beings.*

When Angelina drove up, just a few minutes later, Sophie somehow felt emotionally protected, too. Until she glimpsed Sonny's reaction.

As Angelina unfolded herself from the car and sashayed up to them, Sonny gaped at her. Of course, any man would, and Sophie suddenly felt mousy in comparison. Jackson introduced her to Sonny, who smiled nervously and stuttered out as polite a greeting as he could manage.

Hmm. This situation requires some observation, Sophie thought. She knew if Sonny remained too bedazzled for too long, her attraction to him would start to ebb. Sophie was already getting over *her* hots for Jackson. If all it took were longer legs and bigger tits to draw Sonny's interest away from her, he simply wasn't worth her interest.

As Angelina turned to Sophie and gave her a hug, the tall woman whispered, "Not to worry. He *will* get over it. Very quickly."

Sophie exhaled brief laughter and shook her head. "Nothing gets past you, does it?"

Angelina smiled. "Or you, either, when you're tuned in. I just made sure to sharpen my reception as I drove over here. There could be a great deal I need to pick up on."

"Bet you weren't counting on," subtly, Sophie shifted her eyes toward Sonny, "*that*."

Dismissively, Angelina waved a hand. "Ach, it happens all the time. But the joke's on them."

By "them", Sophie knew she meant men. But she didn't understand the "joke" part. Angelina didn't bother explaining and Sophie couldn't read the explanation in her mind. Psychically, the woman only gave up as much as she wanted to. She had remarkable control.

"Shall we drive up the access road?" Sonny asked, referring to the strip of asphalt that wound through the cemetery.

"I'd rather walk through it," Spey and Angelina said almost simultaneously.

"Let's go, then." Sophie hitched up her shoulders, trying to throw off the first pricklings of anxiety.

Sonny immediately stepped over to her and lightly laid a hand on her back. As they all began walking up the sloping drive, his arm slipped around her waist. Sophie looked at him and smiled—in part to show her gratitude, in part to show some bravery.

"I like this," she said.

Sonny lowered his head to hers. "Like what?"

"Having your arm around me. It's reassuring."

"Well, I have two of them, you know. In case you ever want or need both, they're at your disposal."

Sophie felt herself blushing. She hoped the offer wasn't merely a thin veneer of chivalry concealing some unchivalrous motive. She hoped he didn't think she was a nymphomaniac, and he could easily cash in on that fact if he played his cards right.

"Sonny," she said on impulse, looking up at him, "would you mind letting me conduct a session with you?" Oh, shit, that didn't come out right. She sounded like a shady masseuse soliciting a john. "You know what I mean—a mediumistic session. I think you'd make a fascinating read. And I know there are spirit-people around you who'd like to come through."

It was a more or less selfish request and one that made Sophie a little ashamed. A medium's first priority, like a spirit guide's, was to be of service, not ferret out information for personal gain or satisfaction of curiosity. But she just had to know more about this man.

The question stymied Sonny. Sophie could read *that* well enough in his face.

"I guess so," he finally answered, but with reluctance. "When did—?"

He stopped in mid-sentence. In front of them, Spey and Angelina had pulled up short. They were both staring at the cliff. Angelina said something to her companion, he murmured a response, then she turned to face Sonny and Sophie.

"We have to go there," she said, pointing at the outcropping. Her tone was emphatic. "We have to go *into* it."

The trees in the cemetery began to sway slightly, sending up a coarse whisper. Sonny looked around. Sophie began to tremble. Gently, Sonny tightened his hold on her.

Sophie extended her left hand, palm turned toward the graves they were passing. "They know we're here," she said quietly.

Angelina nodded. "Some are agitated by our presence. For different reasons. And that includes beings who don't belong here."

"All the more reason to explore that rock," Spey said.

Unconsciously, Sophie disengaged herself from Sonny's encircling arm and walked ahead of him. Her body moved mechanically but her mind was humming like a hive. Now she had both arms out, slowly sweeping them before her, beside her, behind her, then back again. The vibrations of spirit presences thrummed up her fingers. And the voices! There were so many of them, it was like being at the Tower of Babel. They were like the soft rustling of tissue paper, but insistent. So much to say that should've been said while in body. So many unspoken or never-acted-upon yearnings and regrets, so much hoarded resentment and anger.

"I'm sorry, I can't listen to you now," Sophie said. "I'm here to take care of *my* business. I must, and I can't be diverted from that course."

Many of the voices faded into silence. Those were the spirit-people who in life were considerate, reasonable. Others, sad to say, were used to being rejected or resigned to being ignored. Some, though, clamored on even more stridently. Finally, Sophie had to shut them out.

The cemetery's access road forked before reaching the cliff and branched off around either side of it. Ahead to the right lay William Woolrich's grave. Indecisively, Sophie hesitated. She was about to follow that fork, even though she had mixed feelings about approaching the spot. Wondering what might happen there made her skittish. Still, she harbored a certain fondness for the young man and felt she should acknowledge him.

Jackson Spey made the issue irrelevant. He went straight up the left path with Angelina at his side.

Sonny walked up to Sophie. "You were thinking about stopping at the soldier's plot, weren't you?"

"Yes, but it probably isn't necessary. He knows—" She wasn't sure how to conclude the sentence. *Knows I'm here? I'm thinking about him, haven't forgotten him? I respect him?* Any phrase would have been appropriate, but Sophie was too self-conscious to speak them in front of Sonny. She could tell he wasn't anywhere near understanding.

To get off the subject, Sophie shoved her hands in her jeans pockets and said, "I wonder where Jackson's headed. We'd better hurry up and join them." Without waiting for Sonny, she began walking in Spey's direction.

Sonny jogged up to her. "Hey, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you," he said, catching her hand in his.

"You didn't."

His hand seemed to engulf hers, its warmth seeping into her pores. Before Sophie's mind could start spinning off into another Sonny Brock fantasy, she saw Angelina looking in her direction. She and Sonny picked up their pace.

Spey was circling an old mausoleum at the shadowy northwestern base of the cliff. Sophie had seen it before, of course, but had never wanted to go near it. Because of the surrounding woods, even the setting sun never seemed to touch the graying, moss-

encrusted structure. It was in perpetual shadow, cold and solitary, and it gave her the willies.

Undaunted, Jackson ran his hand over its walls as he passed along one side, then the next, as calmly and analytically as a home inspector.

"What do you think he's trying to detect?" Sophie whispered to Angelina.

"I don't know yet. But I don't like that building." She glanced up and to her right. "I don't much like this rock, either."

"Angelina, would you mind coming over here?" Jackson called out.

"Yes, I would," the tall woman muttered, but she went to Spey anyway.

Sophie turned to Sonny. He, too, was starting to look uneasy. "I think everybody except Jackson is getting creeped out," she noted. "And it's the middle of the day... Why do you keep looking at the cliff?"

Trying to cover his anxiety, Sonny twitched out a smile. He couldn't maintain it. "There are caves in it, aren't there?"

"Yes. Just small ones, as far as I know. They hardly even qualify as caves. They're more like little rooms or spaces in the rock."

"I don't like caves," Sonny murmured.

Silently, Sophie studied him. She definitely wanted to do a reading on this complex man. "Are you claustrophobic?" she asked gently.

"I never used to be."

Strange answer. "There's no reason for you to have to explore the cliff. Jackson and Angelina may want to but you really can't contribute anything. You're not a sensitive."

"But I'm the one with the equipment," Sonny said.

As if to underscore the meaning of this statement, Jackson asked Sonny and Sophie to come over to the mausoleum. Side by side, they walked farther up the asphalt road, which ran past the southwestern wall of the structure and then circled around the front of it. Spey was standing near its northwestern corner.

Angelina was a few feet farther away, a look of revulsion on her face. She'd crossed her arms tightly over her rib cage in a self-protective hug.

"Would you mind taking a few pictures of this hulk?" Jackson asked Sonny. He turned to Sophie. "And would you mind giving the entrances a going-over?"

"Entrances?" she asked. "Plural?"

"Yeah. Haven't you examined this thing before?"

Sophie shook her head. Unconsciously, she had mimicked Angelina's hugging pose. "I've never wanted to come near it."

"Small wonder," Angelina said.

From where she stood, Sophie could only see the entrance facing the road. Its double, Gothic-arch doors were recessed into a compound portal that seemed not just to lead but to pull a visitor in. The doors themselves were cast from bronze, embossed all

over with some elaborate pattern. A pair of Corinthian columns, topped by what appeared to be gargoyles, supported an overhang that ran the length of the front wall and made the entry even darker and more foreboding. Despite these stately touches, the building was rather squat, probably no more than fifteen feet tall, and reminded Sophie of the glowering dwarfs and trolls she'd seen in her childhood picture-books.

She took a few tentative steps toward the entryway. Her eyes swept over it. Centered beneath the peak of the low, pitched roof were some clues to the occupant's identity.

NEWMAN
who became a New Man
3 November 1928
at
Craig-Y-Nos

Sophie moved still closer, but could not bring herself to pass between the columns. "What's that last phrase?" she asked. "And what's that pattern on the doors?" She hadn't addressed the question to anyone in particular, although Spey was likely the only person who had the answers.

She was surprised when Angelina said, "The phrase is Welsh. It means 'Rock of the Night'. It obviously refers to the cliff. And he obviously thinks of this as his birthplace." There was revulsion in her tight voice. "I don't know about the doors. I won't get that close to them."

"The design is made up of demons," Jackson said laconically. "Demons entwined in vines and briars. And those are flames at the base of each door."

Sophie took a step back. She bumped into something and let out a yelp.

"It's only me," Sonny said, putting his arms around Sophie as she turned toward him. He stroked her back. "It's only me."

She sighed against his shirt. His chin grazed the top of her head. For a brief moment, Sophie flattened her hands and cheek against Sonny's chest and let herself be comforted by his strong yet tender embrace. She didn't want to leave it but made herself pull away.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking up into his eyes. "I don't usually get jumpy around dead people."

Sonny chuckled. He lightly ran a hand over her arm. "Well, they're not usually housed in some moldering stone hut with demons on the doors."

Angelina, who had relaxed her stance somewhat, watched them with an enigmatic smile. Jackson still stood off to one side, regarding the structure through narrowed eyes.

Composing herself, Sophie straightened. "So, there's another door?"

Spey approached her. "Yes. Windows, too. Well, *sort of* windows. In the back. Facing the outcropping."

Bewildered, Sophie looked from him to Sonny to Angelina. "But why? There's barely any space between the back of the mausoleum and the cliff wall."

"I know," Spey said. "Come on. Have a look at it." He started walking in that direction, then paused and turned. "So, *would* you mind giving this place a feel?" he asked Sophie.

Sonny began snapping pictures of it.

She hesitated. Jackson wanted her to lay her hands on the weather-dulled granite walls, maybe even on the front and rear doors. The prospect filled Sophie with dread. But what, after all, could happen?

"I could try it," she said, gathering courage.

Spey walked up to her. Then he walked around her, the fingers of his right hand extended toward the ground, as he murmured something in Latin.

"Don't worry, you're safe," he said, facing Sophie once more.

For some reason, she believed him.

Sonny and Angelina joined them. As the four walked slowly to the back of the mausoleum—Sophie beside the building, with Jackson on her right—Sophie reached out and let her fingers trail along the wall. She immediately stiffened. A burning ache crawled up her left arm. Gritting her teeth, she kept walking—slowly, one small step at a time. The dampness of the fallen leaves and pallid grass beneath her feet seemed exaggerated here, seemed to seep up through the soles of her shoes.

The group rounded the southwestern corner of the mausoleum. Stepping ahead of her companions, Sophie peered at the rear wall.

Yes, there *was* a door set into it, a very short, narrow door of unadorned bronze, largely overgrown and concealed by thorny bushes. It had no latch or hinges so could seemingly be opened only from the inside. Flanking it were two equally peculiar windows—even narrower, and crisscrossed with iron grates. While she puzzled over these features, Sophie dimly heard Jackson say something. Then he and Sonny stepped forward and began pulling the branches aside. Without any prompting, Sophie angled herself through the small opening they'd made. She had no intention of peering through those barred slits. But she did lean forward, bending at the waist, to grab the doorway's lintel with her left hand and flatten her right against the bronze plane.

Chapter Eight

A corrugated blackness like a balled-up piece of crepe filled Sophie's mind. Willfully, she forced her way into it, fold after fold and then began to talk in a harsh, hurried voice just slightly above a whisper.

"A man still in body comes here regularly, he makes the doors open and he comes in and lingers and moves about the crypt, opens the crypt. Bothu, Bothu." Sophie's closed eyes squeezed shut more tightly as she winced. "Speaking to, speaking with James Newman, 'No, *New Man*, once the disciple, still the disciple and now the watcher too, one of many'." A rapid-fire series of scenes, like a video on fast forward, shot through Sophie's mind. And then the strange voice again, coming from her own throat. "'Go down, go down, shining Sophia, where he awaits. Go down and you needn't come up again. Ah, what honor and wonders lay in submission. The pain will transport you both!'"

With great effort and a strangled cry, Sophie pulled her hands away from the door as the voice faded. The last statement had come out in a dreadful, ecstatic torrent. She didn't know if her voice had been its vehicle, or if the words had howled silently through her mind, inaudible to her companions.

It didn't matter. *She* had heard them.

Stumbling backward, her knees nearly buckling, Sophie felt a hand grip her shoulder while an arm came around her waist. It was Sonny. She knew immediately it was Sonny. She felt his sheer goodness, his caring. They washed through her like a cleansing draft of pure oxygen dispelling noxious fumes. She felt purged by his touch.

"Are you all right?" Sophie heard him say.

Little by little her mind cleared and her senses became reoriented to the physical world. "Yes," she answered. "Thank you, Sonny."

Composed now, but still feeling a residue of the evil inhabiting that vile building, Sophie walked with her companions to the other side of the road. They all sank to a sunlit strip of grass. Sonny held Sophie's hand and she returned the gentle pressure of his grasp.

"It's a good thing we can't get inside," she said with a wan smile.

"I could easily get us inside," Spey said. "But I wouldn't subject you to it."

Sophie addressed him and Angelina. "Well, could you piece together anything I was babbling about? Did it make sense to you?"

Angelina nodded. "Yes."

"It made a *lot* of sense," Spey confirmed. "But before we get into that, tell us what you saw."

Sophie glanced at Sonny. He looked both concerned and bewildered. She gave him a quick smile, gave his hand a quick squeeze.

"The first image I saw was of a man, a living man, so tall and thin he looked emaciated. He was dressed in black from head to toe, but he wasn't an undertaker or a mourner."

"That was Bothu," Angelina said, glancing at Jackson. "I sensed traces of his presence as soon as I touched the building. Do you remember saying his name?"

Sophie *could* remember but only vaguely. She told them so. "Who is he?" she asked. "A descendant of Newman? A grave robber? I could see him but I couldn't read him."

"He no doubt conjured up some sort of shield for himself." There was unmistakable snideness in Jackson's voice.

Angelina wore the expression of someone who'd just stuck her hand in a potful of maggots. "Or he had one of his contacts do it."

Their comments confused Sophie. "Conjured? You mean he's also a—"

Anticipating her assumption, Jackson finished Sophie's sentence. "An adept? Hardly. Bothu's a gutter-variety necromancer who plagiarizes just enough magick to take care of himself. Angelina and I despise him." Spey looked at his friend, obviously directing his next comment to her. "It only figures he'd be slinking around the foulest entombment site he could find to practice his ugly art."

In response, Angelina gave an exaggerated shiver.

"But," Spey went on, "I doubt he has anything to do with Bruno Desjardins and the Order."

His mention of that subject sparked awareness in Sophie. "But *that* man does," she said, pointing at the mausoleum. She immediately pulled her hand back, as if something might snatch or bite it. "James Baxter Newman. He went to New Orleans specifically to seek out Desjardins, and he became sort of a...a deputy in the Order."

"A disciple," Spey said.

"Yes, exactly! That's how the more devoted members saw themselves. That's what Desjardins called them." Sophie rose up on her haunches. Her clarity of recall was always sharpened by the comments of people who'd been listening to her trance-state utterances. "After a while, Newman came back to Chicago, where he was some sort of businessman—with the railroad, I think—and started a branch of the Order there. His wife left him shortly thereafter. That's why he..." Sophie's eyes flicked up to the dreary building across the road. "...why he lies alone."

"And forgotten," Angelina murmured, "with only a vile necromancer for a companion."

"Yes," Sophie said. "Alone and forgotten. Even though he was born and raised in this very county."

Spey had braced his elbows on his crossed legs. With scintillating eyes he watched Sophie, the forefingers of his interlinked hands pressed against his lips. "And that

explains his familiarity with Fog Cliff Cemetery, not to mention his insistence on being interred here."

"What makes you think he insisted on it?" Sonny asked. He'd been quietly absorbing this exchange because he planned on doing some research of his own—more *conventional* research, that is. But he couldn't keep his mouth shut indefinitely. Questions were inevitable.

"Because it's logical," Jackson answered. "Why else would he be here? He'd made a home and a career for himself in Chicago. So why isn't he buried there? His adored führer lived and died in New Orleans. So why isn't the disciple entombed near the master?" Spey began to rise. "There's a definite reason why Newman had his dead ass brought to this particular cemetery and why his no-tell motel was constructed on that spot."

"And why is that?" Sonny asked, ever more curious.

"Don't you remember what Sophie said in trance? Newman is a Watcher." Standing now, Jackson scoured the cliff with his eyes. "Time to go spelunking."

Angelina, too, got to her feet. Together, she and Spey re-crossed the road.

Sonny helped Sophie up. "Think you can take more of this?" he asked her.

Sophie brushed stray grass off her jeans. "I have to." She gave Sonny a weighty look. "I do believe I'm in greater danger than I originally thought."

Jackson was carefully moving between the rear wall of the mausoleum and the cliff as Angelina followed, her right hand skimming across the surface of the rock. Sophie didn't want to go back there again, so she and Sonny took the longer route. They walked around the front of Newman's resting place and then along its northeastern wall to get to where Jackson and Angelina were headed.

Just as they approached Spey, he announced, "This must be the opening I need to go through. It's the closest one." He was obviously referring to some hole or tunnel in the cliff, behind the mausoleum's small rear door.

Suddenly, a concentrated whirlwind began to buffet Jackson's hair and clothing. Angelina, who stood not more than a foot away from him, was unaffected by it.

"What the hell?" Sonny breathed in wonderment. As he jogged up to Spey, Angelina stepped forward and stayed him with one hand.

"I suggest you don't get any closer."

He was going to reach into the pocket of moving air that encased Spey, try to feel it for himself. But Angelina's words carried a firm warning, and it was enough to make Sonny step back.

"What's going on?" he asked her, his eyes still wide.

Angelina stood beside Sonny and Sophie. Spey, eyelids half lowered, was slowly turning his head this way and that as if listening to something, as if sniffing and searching the air. Strands of hair, pulled loose from his braid, were fluttering across his face.

"Jackson's drawing them," Angelina told her other two companions. "I'm sure he expected it."

"Who's 'them'?" Sonny asked.

"Restless spirits, elementals. All manner of astral beings, good, bad and indifferent."

"If he knew this would happen," Sophie asked, "why didn't he cast a circle around himself?" She knew enough about occult practices to know that magickally endowed circles provided protection. One of her clients was a practicing witch. In fact, Sophie realized, Jackson had thrown a circle around *her* just before she'd placed her hands on the mausoleum.

"I suspect he *wanted* to draw them in," Angelina said. "Temporarily, anyway. That's the best way for him to find out who's who around here, what we're dealing with."

"But isn't it dangerous?" Sophie asked.

"Not for Jackson. A little annoying, maybe, but not dangerous." Angelina turned to Sonny and said, in a matter-of-fact way, "You might want to get out your camera and recorder."

"Oh, shit, yes." Sonny urgently rummaged through both pockets. "Thanks for reminding me."

Angelina smiled. "Any time."

Sonny handed her the recorder and Sophie the microphone. The two instruments had to be placed some distance apart to operate most effectively. He himself started snapping pictures. After a few minutes Spey's arms rose from his sides, elbows bent and palms turned outward. "*Exeunt omnes*," he intoned. Then, with a swift graceful movement, he crisscrossed his arms in front of his chest, palms still outturned.

The strange wind immediately died.

"What did he say?" Sonny whispered to Sophie.

She knew enough basic Latin to answer. "He ordered them all to leave, to exit the stage, essentially."

"And they obeyed?"

Glancing at him, Angelina said, "Spirit-people are fairly tractable. Most of them, anyway. It's the others who can pose problems."

Her tone had shaded toward ominous. Sonny wondered why. So he asked, "What 'others'?"

"We don't need to get into that just yet. Hopefully, we'll never have to."

Jackson, back to his mundane self again, swiped the stray hair from his face and straightened his vest. "Well, this place has quite a cast of characters."

"Was *he* among them?" Sophie asked anxiously.

"Desjardins? Hell, no. He's both too crafty and too cowardly to let his presence be known to me." Spey turned to regard the cliff. "But he's waiting, just beyond the veil."

"And the Nephilim?" Angelina asked.

"I could see them beginning to congregate on the fringes."

Sonny was frowning so hard in bafflement he was starting to get a headache. "The who?"

"It isn't important right now," Sophie told him.

"Are they part of 'the others'?" he asked Angelina.

She nodded. "Indeed they are."

Sonny loudly exhaled as he tucked his instruments back in his pockets. "I wish I knew what was going on. I'm used to doing research with subjects I can touch and see and hear."

"I don't think you want to touch or see or hear *these* subjects," Spey said wryly. "Then again, you may end up having no choice in the matter." Before Sonny could respond, he switched tracks. "Well, let's start poking around this cliff. I want to see if Angelina confirms my theory about it."

"Aren't you worried about Newman, the 'Watcher'?" Sophie asked.

"He won't fuck with me. He already checked me out and beat a hasty retreat. Newman's infinitely weaker than Desjardins."

"But what about the rest of us?"

"You'll all be fine, too. We just have to make sure, Sophie, that you're never alone. And you won't be."

Chapter Nine

Former field lieutenant Harrison Brock, who had volunteered to lead an especially green squad on an especially dicey mission after their sergeant was killed, and who was subsequently decorated for his bravery, could not now bring himself to enter an innocuous hunk of Wisconsin rock.

Biker-wizard Jackson Spey, who'd never been decorated for anything—as far as Sonny knew—slipped into that rock without a second thought.

Sonny felt like shit as he told Sophie, "I can't go in there." His pulse was hammering, his upper lip beaded with sweat.

Her lovely eyes swam with compassion. "You don't have to, Sonny." She touched his arm. "Angelina's going to be with me. And I'm sure we'll be meeting up with Jackson in a minute or two. I would appreciate it, though, if we could borrow your camera."

Sonny pulled it from his pocket. "Know how to use it?"

"Dearheart, it isn't a particle accelerator," Angelina said. She took the camera from him.

The women moved toward the same dark, dank, down-sloping opening Spey had entered. Before she ducked into the hole, Sophie turned and gave Sonny the sweetest smile he'd ever seen.

Truth was, she would have loved having him with her. Sonny's presence made her feel safer than all of Jackson Spey's metaphysical safeguards put together. It was a stupid reaction, she knew—the wizard could tap into power well beyond that of any mortal man—but there was something about Sonny Brock being near her.

Sophie had to concentrate on her movements as the tunnel abruptly narrowed and its height diminished. Sinking to a sit, she scooted along using her heels, which she dug into the ground, and her hands, which she eased along the walls, to propel herself forward. Its surfaces disturbed, the tunnel gave up a rich, damp, organic smell that was almost overpowering. Ahead of her, Sophie could hear the slithering and scraping sounds that marked Angelina's progress.

They were swaddled in utter blackness.

"This is enough to make *anybody* claustrophobic," Sophie said, glad that Sonny didn't have to suffer through the experience.

Angelina didn't answer.

"Don't you think so?"

No answer.

"Angelina, can you hear me?"

The scraping stopped, briefly, but still no answer came.

Sophie tensed. "Angelina?" She raised her voice. "Jackson?"

And then somebody was grabbing her ankles, pulling her forward and down, down and to the left, the slope becoming even more slippery and mucky beneath her, the smell even more fetid. Just as Sophie was about to scream, a cold, hard hand clamped over her nose and mouth. An icy gust of breath pushed against her face. She tried desperately to bite at the suffocating hand but her teeth didn't connect with anything substantial.

Just as Sophie began to lose consciousness, the tunnel blazed with blinding light. Its walls and floors shook. A deep rumbling, like a distant avalanche, sounded all around her. Words, she thought dimly, those are words, as the pressure on her ankles and face suddenly eased.

Sophie's eyes fluttered open. Spey was standing over her, his arms raised, his loose hair floating in slow motion around his head. When Sophie saw this—and saw Angelina, who stood behind him—she realized they were in a space with higher ceilings and a source of light and something very, very weird was happening.

Angelina knelt beside her and stroked her forehead.

"Jackson?" Sophie whispered.

He was the source of light. Jackson Spey was glowing.

The glow faded as Sophie's realization dawned. Then he, too, knelt beside her, his long hair grazing the side of her face.

Sophie heard a raspy click. A spot of flame appeared, then flared and got brighter. Jackson's and Angelina's faces reemerged from the darkness.

"I had enough foresight to bring a lighter and a candle," Angelina said, her voice so kind it instantly warmed Sophie.

She sat up. Jackson had pulled back his hair and was securing it into a ponytail with some kind of binding—a rubber band, maybe.

"What happened?" Sophie asked, still dazed.

"It seems that as soon as you entered the cliff," Angelina said, "your course was intentionally diverted. Jackson came to your rescue."

"But I could hear you, just ahead of me!"

Angelina shook her head. "No. That wasn't me. I don't think it took me but ten seconds to find Jackson in this chamber. Something or someone was leading you away from us."

"I'm sorry, Sophie," Jackson said. "I should have either kept you with me or not let you come in at all."

"But you cast a circle around me. How could it be broken?"

"It was improvised and temporary, meant to protect you when you laid hands on the mausoleum. A circle is like a battery, Sophie. It can be drained of its energy. And the ones that are less well-made are drained that much faster." Jackson glanced at Angelina. "Now I know what Newman's job is. Now I know exactly what being a Watcher means."

Sophie looked back and forth between them. "And?"

Jackson tucked a stray lock of hair behind his ear. "In part, it means watching for intruders. When they enter the cliff, if they do it at the wrong time, they're scared away. Kids, usually. Kids who come here on Halloween or on a dare, kids who come here to drink or smoke pot or make out. It's pretty easy for a weak dick like Newman to send them running."

"But what do you mean, 'if they do it at the wrong time'?"

"The cliff is a vortex, a portal," Angelina said. "Mortals are *persona non grata* when a strong spirit wants to enter our world through it."

"I see," Sophie said. She was quite familiar with such things. "So, this is one of those 'wrong times', and I was an easy mark because I wasn't close enough to you, Jackson, to be protected. Newman singled me out to scare me away."

"Um, that's not it," Spey said. Like a doctor who doesn't want to give his patient bad news and somehow feels responsible for that news, he seemed edgy and hesitant. "The entity that misled you and then handled you wasn't Newman. It was Bruno Desjardins. Newman only alerted him."

Sophie felt short of breath and slightly nauseous. "So the other part of being a Watcher—"

"—is likely the most important part," Jackson said somberly.

"And it entails watching for what?" Sophie's eyes skittered nervously between him and Angelina. "Or whom?" she added on a thin breath. But she already knew the answer.

"For you," Spey said.

* * * * *

The sun was well on its way to setting when Sophie, Jackson and Angelina emerged from the cliff. Sophie was astonished to see how close the cave was to its entrance—no more than ten feet down a slightly, not steeply, inclined corridor in which a stooping adult could easily walk. Where she was being taken by Desjardins, and just how she'd become separated from Angelina, who'd stepped in just ahead of her, she had no idea.

Sophie's next surprise was seeing Sonny leaning against her car. He must have gone to the road while the rest of them were inside the cliff and driven it up here for her. Smiling, she was about to walk over to him when he bounded up to her and lightly grasped her forearms.

"Well, how did it go? Did you find out anything?"

Angelina handed him his camera then excused herself, quietly said something to Jackson and headed for her parked car. Raising a hand in farewell, she told Sophie to take care.

A bit distractedly, Sonny said good-bye to her and turned his attention back to Sophie. "I thought you might be kind of tired, considering what you've been through today, so I—"

Sophie put two silencing fingers to his lips. "What I really need the most is for you to hold me. Just for a while, if you don't mind."

"I can do that." Sonny wrapped his arms around her, laying his cheek against her head. He could almost feel Sophie's exhaustion. It seemed to be sapping her of strength by the second. Tenderly, he kissed her hair and felt her snuggle even closer to him. Lazily, she murmured something against his chest.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, I could fall asleep like this."

Oh, man, Sonny thought, *where do I go with that?*

He was about to make a suggestion—or, at least, was tossing one over in his mind—when Spey walked up and said, "Uh, excuse me. Sophie?"

Reluctantly, she turned away from the refuge that was Sonny. "Yes?"

"We need to decide where to go from here. I have some ideas."

"Let's hear 'em," Sophie said wearily.

Sighing, Spey put his hands on his hips. He briefly hung his head in thought, then faced Sophie again. "Well, there's one surefire solution to this problem but unfortunately I can't tell you what it is."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because telling you what the solution is could compromise its efficacy. You have to come upon it yourself, naturally, without any pressuring or prompting from anybody else and without any pretense on your part. I'm sorry, but that's all I can say on *that* score. At least you know there *is* a fix, and it's a sure thing."

"Thanks a bunch," Sophie said.

"In the meantime, though," Spey went on, "you obviously need to take certain precautions."

"Obviously." Sophie still felt a dull ache in her ankles from the cold grip of those steely hands, could still feel the dampness on her back and butt from being dragged down that muddy slope.

Sonny broke in. "Wait. Did something happen in there?" He pointed at the cliff.

"You could say that," Sophie said on a yawn. God, all she wanted was a warm bath and at least eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. She yawned again. Maybe the bath would have to wait until morning. "So what are your suggestions?" she asked Spey.

"I told you Desjardins is a coward. He confirmed that today. He'll only come after you if and when you're vulnerable. And vulnerable means," Spey lifted his hand and ticked off the situations on his fingers, "a, you're alone when you feel a strong onslaught of desire or b, you're alone on his turf."

"So how on earth am I supposed to eliminate both of those opportunities?" Before she said any more, Sophie became acutely aware of Sonny's attention. Turning to him, she said as diplomatically as possible, "Sonny, thank you so much for being here today. I mean it. But would you mind leaving now? We're getting into some pretty personal and pretty esoteric stuff, and I—"

"Hey, no problem," he said. "Glad I could be of service." He gave Sophie a demure peck on the cheek, then stepped up to Spey and extended his hand. "Jackson, it's been a slice. I hope we have a chance to meet again."

"Oh, I suspect we will," Spey said, shaking his hand.

"Please give Angelina my best. She's a lovely woman."

"Why don't you do it yourself? She's sitting in her car, waiting for me. It's probably parked close to yours. She just needed to get out of the cemetery."

"Oh, uh...okay, I will." Sonny lifted a hand. "Bye." He began walking toward the county road.

"Good-bye, Sonny," Sophie called out. "Thank you."

Without turning, he raised his hand again. "You're welcome."

Spey, who was wearing a wry smile, shook his head.

"What's the matter?" Sophie asked.

"I'm not going to say anything. I sure the fuck would like to, but I can't."

"Does it have to do with Sonny?"

"Let's just get back to our discussion. At least I can speak more frankly now. I hope I don't offend you."

"Don't worry about it. Just tell me what I need to know."

Spey readjusted whatever tie was around his makeshift ponytail. "Okay. Desjardins will come after you when you're alone and horny. But you already know that. Sexual need with no outlet is a Siren-song to him. So you may have to keep doing the Dance until something better comes along."

"Why are you smiling?" Sophie asked.

Sobering his expression, Jackson said, "Sorry. I didn't realize I was."

Sophie sounded a *humph* and crossed her arms. "Anyway, that's what I was getting at before. How can I keep doing the Dance and stay off Desjardins' 'turf'?"

"Easy. Don't touch or enter the cliff—he's most powerful at his portal—and don't go near Newman's little guardhouse. And no matter what cemetery you're in, stay on the plot of the man you're summoning, stay focused on him and *make it clear* he's satisfied you. That was your problem before. You *rolled off* the plot and *didn't announce*

your fulfillment. Either that, or you wanted more. And if you *do* want more, summon the man again until you've had your fill of him. Desjardins won't mess with you if he knows your appetite's been sated."

"Anything else?"

Spey glanced up at the sky, now an expansive, dark-blue velveteen bodice hung with a pale-moon brooch. "If Desjardins gets any more rambunctious, I may need to conduct a rite, maybe even confront him. You might have to participate. We'll see how things go."

It was too much for Sophie to take in, especially with her degree of weariness. "I can't think about that now," she said, reaching behind her and opening her car door. "But I'll stay in touch."

As Sophie got into her car, Spey stepped over to it. "Don't be surprised if he starts blocking Esme, especially when it comes to transmissions he feels might undermine his cause."

Sophie felt a nip of alarm but just wasn't alert enough to examine it. All she could think about now was her bed.

"Thank you, Jackson," she said, and, turning on her headlights, began a slow, relieved crawl out of Fog Cliff Cemetery.

Chapter Ten

Confusion was not a mental state Sonny was comfortable being in. He'd always been a man who knew his own mind and was capable of focusing that mind with considerable precision. So, when he stopped at Angelina's car to say good-bye to her, he dimly realized he was there as much to gain insight and reassurance as to be polite.

The elegant woman seemed to sense this. As soon as he approached the driver's side of the Lexus, she opened the door and gracefully unfolded herself from the car's interior like a supermodel emerging from a limousine.

"I'm sure your head is spinning from being sucked into this whirlpool," she said, standing on the side of the road with Sonny. "These past twenty-four hours must have been quite a departure from your routine." Her sympathetic understanding was sincere—it was obvious from her smile, her tone of voice.

Sonny chuckled softly at the understatement. "I don't know what to make of it. Any of it. Or any of *you*, for that matter. I just know I've seen and heard things I can't interpret or explain."

"I suspect you're inclined to think Sophie is a victim of an overactive imagination, and Jackson and I are either wackos or hucksters. And we're feeding her delusions." Angelina rested against the side of the car and watched Sonny with a knowing smirk.

He was past being embarrassed. "That about sums it up," he said. "At least, that's what I've *been* inclined to think."

"Well, while you're scratching your head, at least *try* to keep an open mind." Angelina's tone became weightier. "It's important that you do."

Sonny tried studying her face, but, in the darkness, all he could make out were her glimmering eyes and the shifting curvature of her glossy lips. He'd been struggling against belief—he fully admitted that—but the combined intelligence and frankness of these three people kept chipping away at his incredulity. Besides, his own senses were supporting the reality of their claims.

He had to do more digging. He *had* to. Because, in this whole strange, new universe of mediums and magicians and supernatural menaces, one fact stood in stark relief—he was enthralled by Sophie Alanca. If Sonny pursued a relationship with her, he must take a stand and make it clear—either *I don't share your beliefs but I accept and respect you for who you are*, or *I know now that your mysterious other-world does exist*. He couldn't waffle around indefinitely between those two positions.

Angelina jarred Sonny out of his reverie by saying, "You're a good man, Sonny Brock. And Sophie is a good woman. For your own sake as well as hers, don't doubt

her. Do whatever you must to erase your doubts. Believe me when I say she is telling the truth."

His attention caught by this declaration, Sonny stared at Angelina. Only a pensive trace of her earlier smile remained. She steadily met his gaze.

Headlights slowly bore down on them from the cemetery's access road. Without exchanging another word, Angelina moved to the door of her car as Sonny walked to the foot of the drive. He wanted to intercept Sophie before she left for home.

She pulled up beside him and returned Angelina's wave. "I thought you'd left," she said curiously.

Sonny leaned toward her open window. "I'm going to follow you home."

"Thanks, but that isn't necessary." Sophie pointed beyond the windshield. "You know I only live—"

"I know you're dog-tired and I know you're rattled by everything that happened today, whatever it was, so I want to make sure you get home safely and there aren't any surprises waiting for you at your house."

Sophie tried to suppress a smile of pleasure. He really *did* care, was maybe even giving some credence to her claims. "What surprises?"

"Damned if I know. Things just seem to happen to you. Unexplainable things. I'll feel better once you're safely tucked into bed."

Sophie wanted to ask, *Are you going to do the tucking?* But that would've been too brazenly suggestive. More to the point, she was simply too wrung out to come on to him. If they ever did get together, she wanted to have a superabundance of energy, not be on the verge of falling asleep. Still, the prospect of those arms around her, that broad, bare chest pressing against her, those lips gliding along her throat...

Cupping a hand around her mouth, Sophie yawned.

Forget it.

"I'll be right behind you," Sonny said.

In a matter of minutes they were pulling into Sophie's floodlit driveway. Sonny hurried out of his Jeep so he could escort her inside. He still wasn't sure why he'd insisted on doing this. Maybe the reason was tied to something Angelina had said.

It wasn't that he was angling for sex—at least he didn't think so. They were both too tired and preoccupied for a spirited, concentrated session of lovemaking, which is how he wanted their first time together to be.

If, that is, there ever was a first time. Sonny wasn't sure of that, either. Since Sophie entered his life, it seemed there were suddenly a lot of things he wasn't sure about.

They walked together in silence to the front door. Sonny expected to have to wait while Sophie fished around in her purse for the key. When she simply turned the knob and went in, he realized she had neither purse *nor* key.

A very strange woman, indeed.

Standing in the living room, Sophie lifted her arms from her sides. "Well, no surprises. See?"

"There could have been. Don't you lock your doors when you leave?" Sonny was still standing in the small entryway, from which the whole living room was visible.

"Usually not," Sophie said lackadaisically. "Only when I know I'll be gone for a long time. This is practically the country."

"Houses outside of urban areas still get broken into, you know."

Sighing, Sophie flopped onto the couch. "Sonny, the only people I'm worried about getting in here aren't stopped by locked doors." Slumping into the cushions, she crisscrossed her arms over her face. "If you're hungry or thirsty, just go into the kitchen and help yourself. I'm going to soak in the tub and then go to bed." She dropped her arms and smiled wanly. "Sorry if I'm being discourteous. I really do appreciate your concern."

She rose and ambled out of the room.

Frozen in indecision, Sonny remained standing where he was. After several seconds he shook his head lightly, turned toward the door, then turned back again. He did have a fairly long drive ahead of him and he *was* thirsty. Deeper within the house, ahead and to the left, he could hear the muffled sound of water filling a bathtub. He headed in the opposite direction, the one Sophie had taken the night before when she'd gone to the kitchen.

Sophie couldn't wait to peel off her dirty clothing. She felt soiled both inside and out. Sprinkling some lavender bath salts into the steaming water, she waited for the tub to get nearly full and then, after turning off the faucet, stepped in and slid down. She wrapped her fingers over the rounded edges and rested her head against the back.

It was a delicious feeling, that warm weightlessness that enveloped her. Sophie closed her eyes and inhaled the lavender-scented steam. Little by little, her mind went mercifully blank.

The old clawfoot tub, porcelain over cast iron, was the most body-friendly structure she'd ever sunk into. Deep, with a slick interior and sloping back, it invited lounging even more than a sumptuous bed. After drifting in pleasant oblivion for a while, Sophie lifted a large, natural sea sponge and bar of handmade soap from the little basket clipped to wall side of the tub and began lazily to lather her body, limbs to trunk. As she was doing so, she just as lazily wondered if Sonny had gone or stayed...

I really should get my ass out of here, Sonny thought, looking around the clean, quiet living room. He was sitting, straight-backed and near the edge of the seat, on a gliding rocker, a near-empty glass of apple juice cradled in his hands. Behind the curtained French doors, a clock ticked faintly.

As he was about to rise, he thought he heard Sophie say, "Sonny?" He paused, cocking his head. Girlish, almost tremulous, the voice didn't even sound like hers.

Sonny got up and set the glass on the coffee table. He took a few tentative steps toward where he thought the bathroom might be and heard her voice again, more distinctly this time. "Sonny, are you there?"

"Yes," he called. "Is everything all right?"

There was a pause before she answered. "Would you mind coming over here, please?"

What's going on? Frowning slightly, he strode toward the bathroom. The door eased open as he approached.

Sophie backed away from it and put her arms behind her, her hands resting on the edge of the sink. Streaked with dripping water and studded with foam, like Venus risen from the sea, she stood before him, naked and expectant.

Sonny's mind hazed. Instinct alone made him pull his t-shirt over his head, unzip his jeans, slide them and his boxer shorts down and off his legs. Sophie immediately stepped up to him and slid her arms around his midsection. He didn't resist. His arms curled around Sophie's back, pressing her water-slicked breasts against his chest, as their mouths came together, unerringly. With unrestrained passion he returned the fervor of her kiss, flexing and gliding his lips against hers, meeting her tongue with sinuous finesse. Sophie felt the marble column of his cock straining against her stomach. As she dug her fingers into the bunching muscles of his back and rubbed her breasts against his sweat-glazed flesh, Sonny half groaned, half growled and lifted her onto the sink.

He dropped to his knees as Sophie willingly spread her legs. Delicately parting her pussy lips with his fingers, he circled her clit with the tip of his tongue. When she began to squirm and dig her nails into his scalp, he lapped and sucked at it—first tenderly, then more aggressively. Sophie's hips thrust toward Sonny's mouth, and he plunged his tongue into her vagina. Her breathless, repetitive moans filled the room. Sonny massaged the outsides of her thighs as she clamped them against his head, and two of his fingers followed the path his tongue had taken inside her.

Frantically, Sophie wriggled off the sink as Sonny caught one breast with his hand and another with his eager mouth. Faint with excitement, Sophie could both hear and feel him breathing like an animal winded from a chase, could hear and feel the coarse spasms of her own breath. She slapped down the toilet seat and pushed Sonny to a sit. His cock was straight and hard as a javelin, waiting for her, waiting to be sheathed within her. Reaching into the cabinet above the toilet, Sophie slid her fingers along the shelf until she found one of the condoms stashed there. Ripping open the packet with trembling hands, she unrolled and smoothed the condom over his shaft. Still throbbing lightly from her last orgasm, feeling more moisture gather to welcome him, she eagerly straddled Sonny's lap and lowered herself with exquisite care onto his rod.

Forcing her breasts together, Sonny sucked at them like a starved man, deep groans balling in his throat. His hips moved subtly up and back as Sophie sat still as she could, rhythmically squeezing the delectable, thick column that filled her, caressing and coaxing it with her vaginal muscles. The slow tease was driving both of them crazy. Sonny clutched her more tightly, suckled more intensely, as Sophie's taut nipples blazed with a concentrated ache of keen pleasure.

Hands scrabbling at the back of her head, Sonny forced Sophie's mouth onto his. Then, as they adored each other's face with their fevered lips, he uttered something in a ground-out, guttural whisper and his hips bucked. Jet after jet of hot cum pumped out of him. She hugged him tightly, relishing his deep, throbbing release even as it ebbed, even as her own unexpected third orgasm rode the tail end of his first.

Gasping for air, Sonny slumped against the toilet tank. Sophie sagged against him. Simultaneously, they both began tittering.

"Isn't it romantic?" he softly sang, and their still-coupled bodies jiggled in unison as their laughter strengthened. "I've never had such a good time on a john."

Still chortling, Sophie rested her head on Sonny's wide shoulder and kissed his neck. "I've never experienced anything like that," she murmured in wonderment. Reaching between Sonny's legs, she eased the condom off his relaxing cock. It was heavy with his thick juice. Almost regretfully, she tossed it in the wastebasket.

Sonny tenderly stroked her narrow back. "I haven't either. You, m'lady, are so gorgeous and desirable, you've almost made me forget I'm sitting on a toilet, nude, in someone else's house."

Sophie lifted her head. Sliding her fingers into his rich, silky hair, she kissed him long and sweetly, then gazed into his eyes. A disturbing thought sprang fully formed into her head. *I could easily fall in love with this man.*

"What are you thinking?" Sonny asked quietly, letting her gaze reach into his eyes. "Dare I ask?"

"No, I don't think you do dare."

Sophie kissed his forehead and rose from his lap. Her legs felt weak. She glanced at the sponge, sitting water-logged in its basket, and thought about swabbing herself clean. Then she thought, *No, Sonny's already cleansed me. He's made me cleaner than I've felt in all my adult life.*

She almost felt as if his ejaculation had anointed her.

"Mind if I take a dip in your tub?" Sonny asked, lightly grabbing hold of Sophie's hand and kissing it.

"No, not at all." Her gaze finally released his handsome face and strayed to the tiled floor. She sputtered into giggles. "But you, uh...you might want to take your socks off, first."

* * * * *

At 2:18 in the morning, Sonny was awakened from a dead slumber by a hand shaking his shoulder. Disoriented at first, he quickly remembered he was in Sophie's house, in Sophie's bed. Her mouth was against his ear but not to deliver a kiss.

"Sonny," she said urgently.

He raised his head, pushed the hair from his eyes. "Hmmm. What?"

"Sonny, he's here. *He's been watching us!*"

Chapter Eleven

The next time Sonny awoke it was again with a start, at 6:11a.m.

"Shit," he whispered, realizing it was Monday morning. "Shit!"

Sophie was still sound asleep. Fondly, with a hefty dose of longing, he gazed at her for a moment. But he couldn't tarry. As stealthily as he could, Sonny scrambled out of bed and searched for his clothes. They were still in the bathroom, where he'd shed them last night.

Padding out of the bedroom, he stubbed his toe on the doorjamb and doubled over, gritting his teeth to stifle a curse. Grasping the balustrade, he hobbled down the stairs and headed to the bathroom, where he peed, gargled, got dressed and combed his hair. Whiskers charcoaled his jawline and upper lip. If he left now, he might be able to make it home for a shave and a change of clothes before his appointment.

Sonny didn't want to wake Sophie—she desperately needed some undisturbed rest—so he stopped at the desk in the living room and scribbled a note.

Sorry to duck out, hon, but I have to meet with my thesis adviser first thing this a.m. and be at work by eleven (the museum—I help out part-time with research for their dioramas). Will call as soon as I get a chance.

After signing it *Socks Brock*, Sonny fleet-footed back to the bathroom and taped the note to the mirror. He was going to grab a tube of lipstick and slap a big XO beneath it, but that sort of mushiness seemed a little premature. Besides, he didn't want to leave Sophie with the chore of scrubbing off those greasy red streaks.

On his drive back into the city, Sonny had plenty of reason to glow and plenty of reason to feel shadowed. Sophie was a lovely, smart, sublimely passionate woman who clearly desired him, and he very much desired her. But Sophie was also a woman caught up in a *Night of the Living Dead* horror story—maybe—and a medium—maybe—with some peculiar associates—definitely. So, where the hell was he going to go with this?

Do research, his inner voice instructed. *Research, research, research.*

Have faith in her, don't doubt her, Angelina countered. *Faith, faith, faith.*

Sonny's body was no help whatsoever. All it kept telling him to do was *fuck, fuck, fuck.*

After stopping at his apartment for a little extra grooming and at Dunkin' Donuts for some fuel, Sonny sped to the campus office of Dr. Felix Merriman, Professor of Anthropology. As usual, the parking situation was hellish, so he barely made his

appointment on time. Sonny's original adviser in the doctoral program had passed away unexpectedly, so Merriman, a fairly new faculty member, was someone Sonny was still getting to know.

Nevertheless, they greeted each other warmly. The new professor was a brilliant, fifty-seven-year-old former hippie with an uncommonly open, inquiring mind and sharply dry sense of humor. Something of an eccentric, he had actively participated in more tribal rites than Sonny could ever hope simply to witness and had the bizarre tattoos and botanically induced flashbacks to prove it.

After pulling up the only other chair in the professor's cluttered office, Sonny babbled about the weekend's developments. He carefully omitted some of the more embarrassing incidents and all of the more personal ones. Merriman, feet propped on his desk, listened so intently Sonny wondered if he might be having one of his zone-outs. His slightly bulging brown eyes were nearly unblinking behind his glasses. Then, to Sonny's relief, the professor furiously began scribbling notes on a yellow legal pad that lay half on his stomach and half on his thighs. He kept writing even after Sonny had stopped talking.

"Let the medium do that reading on you," Felix finally muttered, more to his notepad than to his student, "and see if you can question her spirit guide directly. Go back to that cemetery, too. By all means, go back." He fired off the names of professors in different departments, even at different universities, who might know about Esme, the Cemetery Dance and Bruno Desjardins.

After tossing out a few more suggestions and directives, Merriman looked up over his glasses. "So, you actually met and spent some time with Jackson Spey?"

The question caught Sonny completely off-guard. "You've heard of him?"

"He tries his damndest to keep a low profile, but *I* try *my* damndest to find people like him."

Sonny realized he shouldn't have been surprised. Merriman reputedly had a passion for ritual magic and shamanism, both ancient and contemporary.

Blinking at him, Sonny waited for some follow-up. "And?"

"What do you mean 'and'?" You already know the rest."

"I don't know squat, Felix, except he drives a Harley and is fairly well read."

Merriman rolled his eyes. "He's a fairly well-read fucking *wizard*, my man, and I mean *old school*. But don't think you're going to get any insights into him by reading books. He's never gone near all that clubby, fraternal-order bullshit with its ludicrous ranks and petty infighting and esoteric gibberish. Jackson Spey is a decidedly maverick magus."

Sonny, who'd been attentively sitting forward in his chair, dropped against its back. "Really."

"Yes, really."

"You've actually seen him work?"

Merriman shoved a thumb and forefinger under his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "No, sad to say. He's an almost pathologically private individual. But I have it on good authority he's the genuine article."

"From someone who *has* seen him in action?"

"Yes, doing coven work, which was allegedly impressive enough. I can't *begin* to imagine what he achieves through the rituals of High Magick. I've heard rumors, though..." Wistfully, Merriman's voice trailed off.

Stupefied, Sonny could only shake his head. He was aware of his mouth hanging open and abruptly closed it. "I'll be damned," he murmured.

Felix rolled his pen between his fingers. "You've really stumbled upon something here. Just don't get all tight-assed and academic about it. Keep yourself open." He stopped rolling the pen and gave Sonny a pointed look. "That is *not* synonymous with 'gullible'."

Then Merriman read through Sonny's research notes, they covered a few more bases, and after an hour or so Sonny rose to leave. He was halfway to the elevator when Felix called down the hall. Sonny turned. The professor, his pen behind his ear, was leaning out of the office door.

"Did you say Spey drives a Harley?"

"Yeah. A pristine shovelhead chopper—early Seventies, from what I could tell."

"You're shittin' me."

"Nope."

"You know what Indian Larry said. 'If God rode a bike, He'd be riding a Harley-Davidson chopper.'" Felix looked forlornly at the floor. "Son of a bitch," he muttered. "And I'm still stuck with a goddamned scooter."

* * * * *

Sophie disconnected her phone, as she always did when a session was ready to begin, and indicated to the fit, older man that he sit across from her at the round reading-table. Esme dutifully appeared as soon as Bill Boder, Sophie's only Monday client, let the medium grasp his hands. But there was something wrong. Sophie sensed pressure, tension—as if Esme were simultaneously engaged in some kind of struggle on the astral plane that was dividing her attention and energy. She just didn't seem "all there".

Thank goodness Mr. Boder was neither distraught nor demanding. He simply wanted to ask his grandpa Louie some questions about—of all things—fishing. Grandpa Louie, a crusty old coot, didn't much need Esme as an intermediary, either. He immediately came barreling forward, followed by his wife, Rachel. Neither one needed to be coaxed into communicating.

After a few minutes Sophie fell silent, and Bill asked her if something was wrong.

"They're bickering," she said. "It seems Louie's obsession with fishing always irritated Rachel. She just told him, 'Let it go already!'"

Bill threw his head back and guffawed. "Oh my God, it *is* them!"

Even Sophie started tittering. The exchange was pretty amusing.

"Just try to find out," Bill said, "what happened to that old fly-tying book he had and where exactly he fished on the Big Sandy."

Sophie heard Louie tell his wife, "Zip it for a minute, wouldja? The boy needs some info." Rachel's voice faded. Sophie repeated what she next heard. "Harvey's got it." And, "At the end of Brickdust Road off County E, about three hundred yards to the north."

Then, as his jubilant grandson whooped in glee, old Louie fell to muttering, his voice rising and fading, rising and fading. Sophie caught, "Who is this schmuck?" His querulous voice retreated to the background as Esme's came to the foreground. *He's saying, "I want to talk to Brock. I'm Dr. Curry, and I want to talk to Brock."*

Startled, Sophie tried to refocus on Bill Boder. "Was there anything else?" she asked distractedly.

He slapped his hands on the table and began to rise. "Nope." Then, slowly, his grin shrank into a small, wistful smile and he sat down again. "Are they happy?"

Sophie curled her hand over Bill's. "Yes, very," she said gently. "They were together on earth for sixty-seven years and now they're together again. That's how they wanted it, quibbling and all." Esme began to speak through her. "'The fabric of their lives has been rewoven into a much finer cloth, free of the imperfections of worry and pain and sorrow. Now love and peace are the primary threads. Their old patterns of behavior supply the comfort familiarity can bring and the sparkle of joy contained in fond memories.'"

Bill looked down and nodded, quickly swiping at his eyes. "Thank you," he whispered. He squeezed Sophie's hand and sniffled. "Thank you so much."

As he got up and slipped on his jacket, he said, "You know, I came here kind of on a lark. Ever since Louie passed on a few months ago, I've been grumbling about not knowing what he did with that damned book or where his 'secret spot' was on Big Sandy Creek. Finally my wife got so sick of listening to me she said, 'Oh for God's sake, why don't you consult a psychic or something?'" Bill glanced sheepishly at Sophie. "I really didn't think you'd come up with much of anything, except some vague 'He's with God now and watching over you' crap. But you really helped me in a big way."

"I'm glad I could. I'm glad you're pleased," Sophie said sincerely.

She escorted Bill Boder to the front door. Just before he walked out, he pressed something into her hand. "Keep up the good work," he said. "Now, I've got some serious fishing to do."

The "something" in her hand turned out to be a wad of bills—five hundreds, to be exact. Sophie wanted to call Mr. Boder back and return most of the money, but he'd

already pulled out of the driveway and was heading down the street. When she saw the Hummer he was driving, she realized he could likely well afford the expenditure.

Sophie went to the kitchen to fix herself some lunch. Her mind free of the Boders, she wondered why a spirit-person named Dr. Curry was so intent on speaking to “Brock”. She also thought how much she herself wanted to make contact with him—for a number of very different reasons.

* * * * *

Sonny tried calling Sophie from a public phone as soon as he left Merriman’s office. In his rush to make his appointment this morning, he’d left both her number and his cell phone at his apartment. At least she was in the book, but not even an answering machine picked up his call.

In his little cubicle at the museum, Sonny had access to a computer but not to a telephone. He resigned himself to hunkering down and working on his current project. After he felt he’d made sufficient progress, he began shooting off emails to the various scholars whose names Felix had given him.

Bonnie Lisle, a Celtic folklore specialist, might know something about the Cemetery Dance and the “White Witch of Essex”. Archie Graham, Professor Emeritus of Medieval British Studies, would certainly have a wealth of information about the period in which Esme allegedly lived and may possibly have come upon references to Esme herself. Stanley Huffernan was an expert on American religious and quasi-religious cults and sects, particularly in the nineteenth century, and there were a number of scholars and amateur historians in Louisiana who might have the goods on Bruno Desjardins.

If he really felt ambitious, he could go to the State Historical Society in Madison, only a ninety-minute drive away, to research OTS activity in Wisconsin as well as James Newman’s background. He could go to Chicago to dig up what he could about Newman, who apparently spent most of his life there. He could even visit the historical society in Sophie’s county to see what they had on Fog Cliff Cemetery. It would be fairly easy, Sonny thought, to rearrange his schedule to accommodate these trips, since the distances involved were negligible.

Sonny was hopeful. He found himself wanting to believe.

He also found himself daydreaming about Sophie’s robust passion and wet body and slick, sweet, welcoming pussy. But Sonny fought back these daydreams. Surrounding Sophie’s image with such carnal longings didn’t seem fair to her. He wasn’t doing her justice. Only by erasing all his doubts, Sonny knew, could he be a proper, respectful suitor. And a proper, respectful suitor, albeit a horny one, was what she deserved.

* * * * *

Sophie grew increasingly restless as the day wore on. She knew, based on Sonny's note, that he was going to be very busy, so hearing from him was far from a sure thing. She had to find ways to keep herself occupied.

The house was already clean—she'd seen to that first thing this morning. Cam was at work and, when she got home, would be tending to her family. Sophie hated shopping, so *that* alternative was out. And she was just too antsy to read or sit down with needlework—hobbies she normally enjoyed—and the ground was still too wet for yard and garden work.

Flustered, Sophie flopped down on the couch and stretched out. She draped her arm over her forehead. What was going on here? She'd never before had a problem keeping busy. Why couldn't she just settle down and find something to *do*?

Because, she realized, there were two looming, unresolved issues in her life and, at the moment, she was powerless to bring either one closer to a resolution. They were weighing her down. Sophie remembered feeling the same paralysis when she was agonizing over leaving the convent. But there, at least, she had to follow a certain regimen that prevented her from lapsing into utter stasis. Now that she had control over her own life again, it was all the more crippling when her need to take action was thwarted by situations *beyond* her control.

Two looming, unresolved issues—Bruno Desjardins and Sonny Brock.

"Damn it!" Sophie smacked the couch cushion and sat up.

Faintly, too faintly, she heard Esme trying to tell her something. Sophie stiffened. She closed her eyes and trained all her "other-senses" on the message. It was no use. The words faded in, but just barely, and out again, like a weak and wavering radio signal. That was disturbing enough. But the sound that followed was terrifying.

The sound of weeping.

"Oh my God," Sophie murmured, nearly frantic. "Esme?"

It must be her, could only be her. But she didn't respond.

Her neck and facial muscles tautening, Sophie listened with such concentrated effort she felt a headache gathering. Then the crying, too, dwindled into silence. Sophie loudly exhaled as she opened her eyes and ran a hand up over her forehead. Just as she lunged for the phone on the coffee table to call Jackson Spey, the phone rang, giving her a start.

"Yes?" she gasped.

She heard little more than static. Then, distantly, a male voice pronounced, "I'm afraid not, my dear."

Sophie let out a small squeal and fumbled to hit the disconnect button. That had not been Sonny. She knew it had not been Sonny. It hadn't been any man she knew.

"Okay, okay, relax," she whispered to herself, trying to regroup. Considering what to do next, she stared unseeing at the phone. It rang again and nearly sent her through the ceiling. Trembling, she held the phone to her ear without saying anything.

"I knew the prick would start running interference," Jackson Spey said quite clearly.

Sophie wilted against the back of the couch. "Oh, Jackson, thank God it's you."

"Angelina just phoned me at the shop," he said. "She tried calling you a little while ago but obviously wasn't 'allowed' to speak with you. I suspect the same will happen to Sonny."

"Is it Desjardins?"

"Of course."

"But *you* had no problem getting through."

Spey chuffed. "He can't do a damned thing to me and I'm sure he knows it."

Silently, Sophie sent up a short prayer of thanks for having such an indomitable ally. "Actually, I was about to try contacting you, Jackson. But I forgot you'd be at your woodshop today."

"My home phone is set to ring through to the shop when I'm working," he said. "I doubt Desjardins would have let you get through anyway."

Hopelessly, Sophie put a hand over her eyes. "God, it's like he's trying to cut me off from—"

"All your helpers," Spey concluded. "You bet. But I'm certain his capabilities have limits. In fact, I'm beginning to think it's only telephonic communication over which he has any control—in *this* world, anyway. So don't assume you'll be completely isolated and at his mercy."

At his mercy... The phrase made Sophie think of Esme and why she wanted to contact Spey in the first place. "Jackson, Esme seems to be—"

"I know," he said. "Angelina picked up on it. That's why she tried calling you."

"So...what *is* happening to her?" Sophie's voice was tremulous.

Jackson was silent for a moment. "At the very least, Desjardins is trying to still her. At the most..."

It wasn't like him to be hesitant. Anxiously, Sophie gripped the handset tighter, her palm damp with perspiration. "Go on," she whispered.

Spey sighed. "At the most, he may be trying to fling her into the Shadowlands."

"The what?"

"This would be a rare occurrence," Spey began, "but I've known of it happening. An amoral living person, through the blackest magic, can 'purchase' certain heinous powers that can be used in the afterlife. One of them is the ability to consign a rival or enemy to the Shadowlands. The extent of the ability depends on the dearth of the purchase price. Do you know what I'm getting at?"

Suddenly, Sophie did know. She quivered inside and felt on the brink of nausea. "Desjardins bought this power by sacrificing a human being."

"Most likely," Spey said. "I'm guessing he knew he'd need protection in the astral spheres, given the despicable nature of his earthly life and his subsequent hybrid status."

Sophie closed her eyes but quickly opened them again. She didn't want to invite any gruesome images. "Was it possible for him to up the ante by doing something even more extreme?"

More hesitation from Spey, followed by a quiet affirmative. "He could have sacrificed an infant."

Sophie began to quiver inside, as if all the warmth had drained from her body. "What are the Shadowlands?" she forced out.

She heard a creaking sound. Spey must have either sat down or shifted position. A thought came to her—*This isn't easy on him, either. He's immeasurably scrupulous, ethical, like the best clergy. Evil sickens him.*

"I can only describe the Shadowlands," Jackson said, "based on what little I've learned and seen. I'm still in the body, after all. It's virtually impossible for any mortal to glimpse any aspect of the afterlife firsthand."

Sophie was confused. "I thought you had access to the astral planes. I thought you could confront—"

"I do and I can. But this is a complicated issue," Spey said conclusively. "Bottom line is this. The term 'astral planes' is a very simplistic tag for an incredible, extradimensional and multidimensional cosmic warren of indescribable complexity. The afterlife of human beings is only one cubbyhole in that warren, yet even *it* has a multitude of niches. And, for obvious reasons, the wall before that cubbyhole is an especially difficult one for any mortal to breach."

Finally, it made sense to Sophie. Jackson Spey might be a wizard, but he wasn't God. "So, what *do* you know about the Shadowlands?"

"I know it's a place—although 'place' isn't quite the right word—where no spirit person would elect to be. The only comparable life situation would be an induced partial coma or imprisonment while drugged. It isn't of the light and it isn't of the darkness. It doesn't allow for complete awareness and it doesn't allow for complete oblivion. Will and volition are completely neutralized. There's no peace to speak of and certainly no joy. Just a kind of befogged numbness."

"Why does it exist at all?" Sophie asked. Terror for Esme filled the question. "And why haven't any spirit-people ever mentioned it to me?"

"It exists to accommodate distressed and troubled and cankerous souls," Spey explained, "the souls who have yet to accept their physical deaths or brought too much negativity with them as they passed over. And the reason you've never heard of this place is probably because the spirits with whom you've had contact don't even know it exists. Many criminals and bullies and suicides reside in the Shadowlands, and many souls who simply led embittered lives. Just when, how, or if they pass from that state to a better one is knowledge I'm not privy to."

"But Esme doesn't fall into any of those categories!" Sophie cried. She couldn't bear the thought of her vibrant guide being held in such a place, among such dismal souls. Esme didn't deserve it.

"That doesn't matter," Spey said, "if someone forces her there, someone with the power to do so. But remember, this is all speculation. I won't know exactly what Desjardins is up to until I do more digging. And I've been preparing for it."

"Well, Jackson, I wish you'd ramp up your preparations. This situation is becoming untenable, especially now that Esme could be in danger. I won't tolerate that. It's bad enough I have to put up with this bastard slinking around my bedroom, like he did again last night, but —"

"He was there last night?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"Uh...nothing. I just knew he was around."

"But he did nothing?"

Already, Sophie felt embarrassment overtaking her forthrightness. It was obvious what Spey's next question was going to be.

"Why? I mean, why do you *think* nothing happened? That could be an important clue for us."

Sophie bit at her lip. "I wasn't alone," she murmured.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

"I said, I wasn't alone."

Spey started laughing, delightedly. He kept laughing. Finally, at the tail end of a satisfied *Ahhh*, he said, "Brock, my good man, you came through!"

Chapter Twelve

Sonny was both optimistic and concerned. His inquiries were bound to yield *some* results. But it bothered him that he couldn't get in touch with Sophie. There was only one solution to the problem. He had to drive over to her house. Even if she wasn't home, he could go in and wait for her to *get* home. She never locked the place. And Sonny didn't think she'd be *too* displeased to see him.

Once he got back to his apartment, he checked his email and was thrilled to see that replies to his inquiries were already coming in. The first was from Bonnie Lisle, the folklorist. She wrote:

Found a mention of Esme in a strange little booklet of which only 100 copies were printed, so the author seemingly published it herself. The author is Cassandra Byrd, pseudonym of Helena Fordham, a British witch of the 1930s. The booklet, *Coven Work in Principle and Practice*, is essentially an underground (because of existing British law) do-it-yourself guide. Its composition was probably spurred by a renewed popular interest in witchcraft following the 1921 publication of Murray's *Witch Cult in Western Europe* and the activities of the notorious Aleister Crowley (including his acquaintance with coven members in the New Forest). In her booklet, Ms. Byrd suggests incorporating a "litany of the names of the Great Wise Old Ones" into sabbat meetings and keeping a list of those names in one's grimoire. Esme of Wessex is therein cited.

The Celtic "cemetery dance" about which you ask is, depending on era and geographic region, known by other names, as well. Regardless, its purpose remains unclear. I've read various explanations. It could have been done: a.) to contact deceased kin in order to secure some kind of information or blessing; b.) to make amends for wrongs done in life to the deceased; c.) to celebrate the deceased and/or pay homage; d.) as a clandestine means for unmarried women or restless wives to find sexual gratification, "chastely" and *sans* the threat of pregnancy (although I've never read a description of how, precisely, this particular result was achieved!)

"I know how the result is achieved," Sonny murmured through a smile.

Archie Graham had dashed off a quick but promising response. "Will check some sources and get back to you ASAP."

Then Sonny studied the pictures he and Angelina had taken yesterday at Fog Cliff. Both the email and the photos fueled his determination to see Sophie. He shaved and showered, combed his hair and brushed his teeth, put on clean clothes. He decided to bring both his notebook computer and his camera with him. Just before he walked out the door, Sonny paused. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to bring a few other things. His mother had always told him it was better to be over-prepared than under-prepared. Jogging to the bathroom, Sonny grabbed his comb, toothbrush and deodorant. He detoured to the kitchen for a bag to dump them in. On his way back through the living room, he picked up his audio recorder and some extra batteries.

"Anything else, Ma?" he muttered to the air.

Apparently figuring he was a big boy now, she didn't answer. Of course, no one in his family had a lick of psychic ability, so, considering she and his father were in South Carolina, the lack of a response wasn't surprising.

Whistling happily, Sonny pushed the speed limit all the way to Sophie's house. He had a lot to tell her and a lot to ask. Maybe he'd spend the night and maybe he wouldn't. It was up to Sophie, of course, and it actually didn't much matter. At least he would get to see her. At least things were progressing.

After Sonny pulled into the driveway, he decided to leave his "overnight bag" and laptop in the car. It would've been presumptuous, and look downright silly, for him to be carrying them. So, empty-handed, he jogged up the walk and rang the bell.

Sophie must have seen his headlights, because she opened the door before the chimes' last echo had died. "Hi!" she said. Candlelight flickered at her back. Was she expecting him?

Sonny beamed at her. He was about to return her hello, and add a kiss, when another, far less welcome sight greeted him.

Jackson Spey casually strode up behind Sophie.

Sonny's eyes swept back and forth between them. "What are you doing here?" he asked Spey. "Where's your bike?"

His answer was as casual as his approach had been. "Sophie shouldn't be alone. Not at night, anyway. Until next Saturday, that is. And my bike's in the garage."

"So you're..." Sonny felt as if they'd stuck a knife in his gut. He dimly wondered about the significance of next Saturday but just couldn't think past his shock and hurt. Jackson Spey was going to *stay* with her? All week?

Well, of course. Why else was his damned Harley tucked away in her garage? Why else all that romantic candlelight?

"But why *you*?" Sonny said, his throat dry as an old newspaper.

"Because my presence is a deterrent, that's why. So would —"

Without letting Spey finish, Sonny whispered, "Okay," then turned and blindly groped for the doorknob. He felt Sophie's hands on his shoulders.

"Wait. Where are you going?"

Turning to face her, he stated the obvious. "Home. It seems you're all right. You don't need me here." Then his ballooning jealousy pushed out a snide postscript. "Besides, three's a crowd."

Spey stepped forward. "Oh, for chrissake," he grumbled. "Listen, alpha-dude, before you get your skivvies in a magnus hitch knot, why don't you come in for a while and let us explain some things?"

Automatically, Sonny's hands balled into fists. He kept them at his sides. "Don't talk down to me," he warned in a low, even voice.

"I'm not 'talking down' to you." Almost imperceptibly, Spey glanced at Sonny's hands. "I'd unload those weapons if I were you, Sonny." He wore a slight smile. "I'm not exactly a stranger to, uh...physical negotiation."

"That might've been true at one time. But now you're old enough to know better. And do less."

"Think so?" Jackson's smile grew by several, calm millimeters. "Then bring it on, punk boy."

Like a lightning bolt in reverse, Sonny's arm shot up and forward. Spey firmly, neatly blocked it with his forearm. Then Sonny's fist swiftly turned and connected...with his own face. Sophie yipped and took an unsteady step backward. Sonny reeled a little. Spey's forearm hadn't moved from its blocking position. Only now did he lower it.

Sonny blinked rapidly, more out of surprise than pain. "What the fuck?" He slowly opened his fingers and flexed them. Utterly baffled, he stared at Spey. That had been a solid punch, not the kind of sloppy, glancing biff it would have been if Spey had just shoved Sonny's raised fist toward his face. Besides, Sonny had quick enough reactions to have resisted, and countered, such a stupid move.

And Spey wasn't stupid.

"You're lucky," Jackson said. "It could've been a lot worse." He turned away and sauntered back into the living room. "You have hands like a frickin' ape with brass knuckles. You could've broken your nose or made a mess of your eye..." He sank into the glider. "...if I'd wanted it that way. So, you see?" He turned up his hands, which were resting on the chair arms. "It doesn't matter if I'm thirty-eight or ninety-eight. I can get 'er done, regardless."

"Jackson didn't push your fist, Sonny." Sophie stood in front of him now, her voice barely above a whisper, her eyes scanning his face for injuries. "It moved on its own."

"Are you ready to come in and talk now?" Spey asked. He grinned and slapped his thigh. "Wanna sit on Grandpa's knee?"

Sonny dropped his head and chuckled. "A fucking wizard," he muttered. "When the hell am I gonna learn?" Pushing back his hair, he walked into the living room and stood, hands in pockets, just outside its semicircular seating area. Spey was on his right, in the glider, Sophie in front of him, on the couch. Two glasses of something sat on the coffee table.

Sonny lifted his shoulders and eyebrows. "Well?"

Sophie looked bewildered. "Are you in a hurry?"

"No."

"Then why don't you sit down?" She patted the couch cushion next to her.

Sonny tried formulating a sensible answer.

Spey sat forward. "Sonny, let me spell this out for you. There's nothing 'going on' between Sophie and me."

Her eyes sprang open. She shot Spey a look of pure astonishment.

"I'm here," he went on, "because we couldn't get in touch with *you*. I put my bike in the garage because it's going to storm tonight."

"No it isn't," Sonny said. The forecast, which he'd heard on the way over, called for clear skies through Wednesday.

"Yes, it is." Spey was quite definite. "As I said earlier, Sophie shouldn't be alone at night, at least through next weekend. Now, after we explain what's been happening and what our plans are, you can decide whether or not you want to take my place here."

Sonny looked at Sophie. He put a hand on his chest. "You mean, you wanted *me* to—?"

"Yes, of course," she said with a shy smile. "I owe you a reading anyway. We could try to do it tomorrow evening."

"But...why couldn't you get in touch with me? I've been trying to call you, too, by the way."

"That's part of what's been going on," Sophie answered. "Of the three of you—well, four, including Esme—Jackson's been the only one I've been able to talk to."

Finally, Sonny did go to the couch and sit beside her. "I don't understand."

"You will," Spey said. He grabbed his glass off the table and took a drink. "At least I hope so."

"Hey, I'm...I'm sorry, man," Sonny told him, and meant it.

Spey nodded. "I know. All's forgotten." A congenial smile attested to his sincerity. "I was once your age. Kicked a lot of ass, too."

"I don't doubt it."

"Let me get some more refreshments," Sophie said, rising from the couch. "Jackson, would you mind filling him in?"

Spey filled him in. He told Sonny about Desjardins' latest incursions, how he seemed to be watching Sophie and trying to isolate her from others. He concluded with, "So, next weekend, I'm going to go after him. Or lure him to me. There's a new moon on Saturday. Even waiting *that* long is pushing our luck, but I need time to devise the right work."

"The 'right work'?"

"The most appropriate and effective ritual. Sophie and Angelina may have to participate."

Sonny again felt himself growing suspicious and resistant. A ritual. Sophie being sucked into some kind of weird rite. What the *hell* was Spey up to?

"What kind of ritual?" he asked. "Where?"

Sophie returned with a glass pitcher full of red liquid, ice cubes and fruit slices. When Sonny glanced at her, she murmured, "Sangria." He must have had a questioning look on his face—only it wasn't the nature of the drink he was wondering about. Still waiting for the answers he *did* want, Sonny turned back to Spey.

"It wouldn't do any damned good trying to explain it to you," the wizard said. "You're not familiar enough with magick. Besides, I haven't fine-tuned all the details yet. But it *will* take place at Fog Cliff. That much I've decided."

"You can't be serious. How can you pull off something like that without being seen or heard?"

"Because," Spey said, uncrossing his legs, "no one will be *able* to see or hear us." He reached for his glass, which Sophie had refilled, and took a drink. "You're invited to come along, by the way."

Sonny also grabbed his glass and drank. Just cool it, he told himself, remembering what Felix Merriman told him about being open to these things. And Merriman did assure him Spey was "the genuine article" — whatever that meant.

"So, are you going to stay here every night until then or do you want *me* to come over?" Jackson's eyes glimmered over the rim of his glass, which he'd again lifted to his lips.

Sonny looked at Sophie. She seemed embarrassed. She verified this by saying, "I hate being in this position. I hate putting people out. Jackson, there has to be another way."

He shook his head. "There isn't. Not if you want to keep that prick at bay. Besides, it's not a twenty-four/seven thing. It's just during the hours of darkness."

"I'm staying," Sonny said. "If Sophie needs me, whatever the reason, I'll be here."

"I had a feeling you'd rise to the occasion." With a puckish grin, Spey immediately got up and grabbed his leather jacket from the back of the glider. After slipping it on, he walked over to Sonny and extended his hand. Sonny stood up and shook it.

Then Jackson fished in his pocket. "Oh, I almost forgot. If you or Sophie ever suspects Desjardins is lurking around here, read this aloud. Can either of you speak French?" Spey held out a rolled-up, pale ochre paper.

"I can read French, somewhat, but I'm far from proficient," Sonny answered, taking the paper.

Sophie turned on a nearby floor lamp. "I can pronounce it fairly well but I don't understand much of what I'm saying."

Spey chuckled. "Well, between the two of you, you should be able to get the point across."

Sonny opened the paper. It looked and felt like parchment. Framed by strange, artistically drawn symbols, numbers and Hebrew letters were the words *Laisse-moi tranquille, saligaud!* The writing was calligraphic, complementing the ornate sigils around the border. Everything was done in red and silver ink.

"Leave me alone? Leave me in peace?" Sonny asked Spey.

"Correct. With 'dirty bastard' appended. Sophie should be the one to say it." Jackson addressed her. "Either have your hand over the page or grasp its edges as you give the command. Oh, and keep it under the bed when you're on the bed." He flashed them a smile and strode to the door. "I'll be in touch," he called over his shoulder.

Sonny dropped onto the couch and linked his hands over his head. "I feel like an idiot," he told Sophie. "I'm so sorry about the way I acted at the door. I was actually jealous of him."

The confession drew a smile from Sophie. "I didn't really mind, to tell you the truth." She switched off the floor lamp just as, in the near distance, the garage door went up and Spey's chopper roared to life, only slightly muffled by the intervening walls. Instead of sitting next to Sonny, Sophie climbed onto his lap, facing him, her legs straddling his thighs. As she lowered her hips to his crotch, she slowly pulled her jersey over her head. Beneath it, she wasn't wearing a bra.

Sonny's cock instantaneously hardened. Sophie dipped down, wrapping her arms around Sonny's neck, as she ground her pussy into his lap and pressed her mouth against his. Fervidly, he returned the kiss, his arms sliding over her back and crushing her against him. Sophie purred in excitement and pleasure, clutching his thick hair, rubbing him with her whole body. Control wasn't an option. Sonny began wildly licking and sucking at Sophie's flesh, licking and sucking and nibbling—her face, her neck and then her breasts, which he gathered up in his hands. He wanted to devour them.

As they toppled sideways onto the couch, Sophie grabbed the piece of parchment from the coffee table, just as a precaution. She clutched it in her left hand and pronounced, "*Laisse-moi tranquille, saligaud!*"

"Think it's going to work?" Sonny murmured against her mouth.

Sophie squirmed against him, then rocked her hips against the heightening mound in his jeans. "It better work, or I'm firing Jackson."

Sonny managed a breathless laugh as he ran both hands over Sophie's mass of curls. "Dance for me," he whispered, gazing into her steamy blue eyes. "Just for me."

"Only if you strip first."

"Why?"

The tip of her tongue slid around the rim of Sonny's ear. "Because I want to watch you fill with lust. I want your body to inspire me."

His throat dry, Sonny could only nod. He began peeling off his clothes as Sophie rose from the couch and lit a few more scented candles. Getting his jeans off was something of a challenge. The boxer shorts were too loose to keep his stiff cock flattened against his stomach, so it kept jamming against pockets and waistband. Panting, trying not to touch himself too much, Sonny palmed his erection with one hand while forcing down his pants and shorts with the other. When he was naked, he assumed a semi-reclining position on the couch—one leg stretched out and the other bent, one arm braced on the armrest and the other flung over the back.

"If you think you'd like to join me at some point," Sophie said over her shoulder, "feel free". When she turned around and saw Sonny, she gave him a seductive smile. "Damn it, Mr. Brock, you're making my legs weak."

He returned her smile. "I'd settle for a lap dance."

Sophie began to sway. "We'll see how it goes."

Moving only to the rhythm of her desire, Sophie fluidly moved her hips from side to side and slowly drew her hands over her torso—up, down, across—without touching her breasts. She lifted her arms over her head and swayed more sinuously. She shook her breasts, then lifted them in Sonny's direction, her thumbs petting the tight, high nipples. Sonny's glazed eyes and pumping chest and steel-rod erection, which seemed to twitch with every move she made, got Sophie so wet she could feel her underwear sticking to her pussy.

Sweeping her hands down either side of her rib cage, she began easing off her jeans. Kicking them aside, she turned her back to Sonny and bent over, showing him her ass and pussy. Her tiny, thin bikini panties, she knew, gave him a good view of both, and especially of the spreading moisture on the panties' crotch. With two fingers, Sophie pulled and held the crotch to one side, fully exposing her wet cunt. She slid one finger around her pussy lips before sliding it into her vagina.

"Jesus," Sonny said in a strained voice.

Before Sophie could stand up, Sonny was behind her. His cock slid lengthwise between her ass cheeks as his large hands closed over her hanging breasts and pinched the nipples. His coarse panting mingled with hers, the sound sawing through the room's stillness. Sonny dropped to his knees, forced Sophie's panties down over her thighs, and speared her clit with his tongue. Sophie gasped, flattening her hands on the floor to maintain her balance. His tongue circled and flicked her clit before his lips closed over it, sucking. Just as his tongue darted into her vagina, Sophie quivered...and came. The ripples of pleasure were so prolonged she began collapsing. Sonny's arms twined around her waist before she sank to the floor. Somewhat shakily, they both rose.

Sonny stood behind Sophie, his hands cupping and massaging her sensitive, aching breasts. "I want to dance with you," he said in a hoarse whisper, his warm breath stirring Sophie's hair, "before I fuck you into oblivion."

She leaned back against him, savoring the feel of his hard chest, of the damp hair spread across his taut, pronounced pectoral muscles. Now, dreamily, they swayed

together, Sonny's cock stroking Sophie's back, her ass caressing the springy mound of his pubic hair. She turned within the circle of his arms and faced him. Feverishly their mouths pressed together, lips opening and closing, gliding and flexing, tongues sparring and licking...and all the while they danced, their sweat-slicked bodies grinding and sliding against each other.

Sonny dipped down and curled his arms beneath Sophie's legs. Soon, they were wrapped around his waist. He clutched her ass to hold her in place. As they turned in lazy circles, as Sophie kissed Sonny's neck and dug her nails into his broad shoulders, he gripped her ass more tightly and slid his swollen shaft into her sleek vagina. Sophie clutched his shoulders more firmly and, with the help of Sonny's strong arms, raised and lowered her body to better feel his glorious cock move inside her.

"No, not yet," he gasped, then gently lowered Sophie to the floor. "Bend over for me again."

Sophie did so, her cunt throbbing in anticipation. Sonny grasped her hips and thrust his cock into her with a kind of tender fury, his narrow hips thumping a firm, regular beat against her body. Sophie whimpered with pleasure and tightened her vaginal muscles, squeezing the dense rod that filled her. Groaning, Sonny curled an arm around Sophie's waist and fondled her heavy breasts with his free hand. Immediately his rhythm increased in both speed and strength, his low, heavy balls slapping sensually against Sophie's flesh, his commanding cock making her tremble from the inside out as it repeatedly pushed against her G-spot.

Sonny slid his hand down Sophie's belly. His fingers slipped between her labia and tripped over her clit. Sagging against Sonny's arm, her nipples burning with exquisite arousal, Sophie came again, the orgasm pounding from her cunt and charging through her limbs.

Before it abated and as she wilted across Sonny's forearm, he stiffened briefly. His hips slammed against Sophie's ass. With a series of jerks, he shot his thick, hot cum into her welcoming body, his cock pulsating against the walls of her vagina as his release went on and on...

Together, they crumpled to the carpet, Sonny still curled against Sophie's back.

"I swear," he said, trying to catch his breath, "if you'd gotten me any hotter, I would've combusted. I'm serious."

Smiling, Sophie lovingly stroked the side of his thigh. "You're wonderful," she said, bathed in fulfillment. Smile still in place, she closed her eyes as Sonny's hand nestled between her breasts.

Although the weathermen hadn't predicted it, a distant storm signaled its approach with a hollow rumble of thunder.

Chapter Thirteen

The night passed without incident—except for another round of spontaneous, urgent coupling around three a.m. Sonny awoke, dogged by an erection that could easily have resulted in a wet dream. But as soon as he felt Sophie's warmth beside him, as soon as he smelled the lingering scent of their earlier sex mixed with the fragrance of her perfume, he rolled toward her. Sliding down on the mattress, he drew one of her succulent nipples into his mouth, then the other. He sucked at the soft, bulging sides of her breasts, as well. When Sophie moaned and clutched the back of his head, Sonny lowered his hand to her pussy. He slipped two fingers inside her while he lightly fondled her clit with his thumb. Within a minute she climaxed, her whole body tensing into spasms.

Unsure if she was fully awake, Sonny was about to masturbate while he continued to excite himself with her breasts. But Sophie surprised him. She burrowed beneath the covers, her mouth working his body all the way down to his crotch. Without hesitating she drew his cock into her mouth. Sucking it even harder than he'd sucked at her breasts, her mouth moving along the sides as well as over the top of his shaft, she made him erupt in what seemed like seconds.

After that explosion of mutual lust, they both dropped into a dead slumber.

In the morning, Sonny was again the first to awaken. Sophie lay naked beside him, sprawled half on her side and half on her back. There were no fewer than five hickeys on her exposed breasts. The sight both aroused Sonny and filled him with guilt. Gently pulling the sheet over her, he made himself walk away. He'd have to go easier on her, start restraining himself. But, damn, as soon as they touched each other, they both seemed to lose their minds.

As soon as Sonny glimpsed himself in the bathroom mirror, he started to chuckle. Sophie was guilty, too. He had as many hickeys on his chest and stomach...and wouldn't have been surprised to find a few on his cock.

Freshened up, he went to the kitchen for coffee—Sophie had prepared it and set the timer the night before—then sat on the floor in front of the coffee table. Before they'd gone to bed, he'd retrieved his "overnight bag" and laptop from the Jeep. The computer, all hooked up, was ready for action.

Sonny cracked his knuckles and wiggled his fingers and brought up his email. He breathed a triumphant "Yes!"

Three of the people he'd contacted had sent replies. The first was from Archie Graham, the medievalist Sonny had asked about Esme.

Ref: an obscure codex called the *Religio Paganorum Britannia* (ca. 1100-1150), author unknown but likely a monk. NOTE: *paganorum* does not mean "pagan" as we now use the term but indicates country folk or peasants. One "Esme" appears. In short, described as a *villica* (farmer's wife), *cantatrix* (a female who "sings", or recites incantations), and *venefica* (sorceress or lady poisoner--this latter of which may imply concoction of potions, for the phrase *vis medicatrix* also appears, and it suggests she was credited with healing powers). The subsequent appellation "White Witch" may have derived from author's assertion she worked *in absentia diaboli* or not in the presence of devils. Said to have ridden a forked branch and been able to transform herself into an owl.

Stanley Huffernan, the expert on cults and sects in America, provided considerably more alarming information.

Ugly business, the O.T.S. The most secretive of secret societies, and the most degenerate. Desjardins was an arrogant, dissolute boor from the swamp who "cleaned up well" and could somehow be persuasive when he needed to be.

His Order started out with a creed cobbled together from bits and pieces of Gnostic and (Crowley's) Ordo Templi Orientis beliefs and practices, especially those related to sexual hyperactivity, and some dabbling in alchemy. D. haphazardly borrowed or dreamt up, piecemeal, more quasi-religious/magical stuff as he went along--I'm guessing because he needed ever-increasing justification for his ever more despicable behavior. He allegedly poisoned his wife just prior to establishing the Order; later, rumor attributed the disappearances of boys and prostitutes in and around New Orleans to the O.T.S. A certain gentleman reportedly ran screaming from one meeting because a living human was being disemboweled. Popular belief has it that the police never became involved because two higher ranking members of the force were O.T.S. members!

Within fairly short order, there were rumors of diabolic rites being performed. This is likely true. D. was not only an egotist with no moral compass to speak of, but openly boasted about emulating Faust. He was also obsessed with the notion of immortality, which explains the group's interest in alchemy and the elusive Elixir of Life.

After two or three years some smaller "lodges" were established in other parts of the country--mostly in California and, oddly enough, the Midwest--but the whole Order more or less

fell apart when the master died (the victim of a homicide, it's been said, although this has never been proved).

By the way, inscribed on his black-marble mausoleum are two phrases, one in Latin from Horace, one in French from Racine: *Non omnis moriar* (I shall never die); beneath it, *L'avare Achéron ne lâche point sa proie* (Grasping Acheron never lets go of his prey). Chilling—I've seen it with my own eyes. What should have been written is *mali principii, malus finis*, a bad end to a bad beginning!

Finally, a Louisiana woman named Babette LaRoche, avid amateur historian with a taste for the macabre, told Sonny some of the same things that were in Huffernan's letter...and added a few more. The O.T.S., she said, met in the cellar of Desjardins' *maison*, which was pink and surrounded by a wrought iron fence. Overgrown magnolias blocked most of the ground-floor windows from view. Members and "guests" gained access to the cellar via a hidden stairway behind a secret panel, which could only be opened by pulling a particular book off a shelf. Sonny wondered if she might've lifted that detail from a Gothic novel.

Ms. LaRoche asserted Desjardins *definitely* killed his wife and the O.T.S. *definitely* snatched unwilling victims off the street and Desjardins *definitely* met his own end through murder—first beaten with a shovel and then, injured but still conscious, buried deep enough in horse dung so he'd be assured of suffocating. Sonny voiced an "eeuuuw" of disgust. The local constabulary called the death an accident. But, because of certain pacts Desjardins made with the Devil, many people believe there's a distinct possibility he "isn't quite dead". His house, its cellar filled in and blessed by a priest, was eventually turned into a law office. Desjardins reportedly still haunts the place as well as the cemetery in which he's entombed.

Babette also attached a picture of Desjardins, a formal portrait. Standing stiffly in what looked to be a turn-of-the-century photography studio, his right hand resting on a fluted pedestal, he was a somewhat short man verging on portly. Despite the suit that looked too tight and the ferny, drapery-heavy Victorian background, he had a malevolent aura—an effect he seemed to have tried to heighten.

"Shit," Sonny muttered, "I wish I had a fax of the original." He leaned closer to the screen and studied the image.

Desjardins had dense, dark, bushy eyebrows. He'd obviously made a point of turning up both their inner and outer ends, probably by applying wax. The tiny black eyes, so heavily shrouded, had no depth or sparkle whatsoever. He had a long, sharp nose. A thick mustache and beard effectively concealed the lower half of his face. Sonny thought the beard, which was somewhat unusual for the time, might be an affectation, too—but with a different intended result. Whereas Bruno's eyebrows were "custom designed" to give him a sinister cast, the neatly trimmed beard was meant to look dignified. Clearly, he wanted to inspire fear as well as respect.

"*Saligaud*," Sonny murmured, borrowing the epithet from Jackson Spey's parchment. He threw in one of his own. "*Enculé*. You'll get yours, you sick, cowardly little pants-pisser."

Then he smiled and shook his head. Funny how he could remember the French word for *fucker*. Even funnier that he was threatening a dead guy. Boy, he was really getting in deep.

Sonny turned off the laptop and went to the kitchen to start making breakfast, or at least attempt to. He liked Sophie's kitchen—a bright, spacious room with glass-fronted upper cupboards and subtle decorative touches of pale lemon and pearl gray. The artistically stressed white paint of the cabinets matched that of the small table, which bore a lacy cloth and a small vase of white daisies and yellow daffodils.

With every passing hour, it seemed, Sonny discovered more things that drew him to Sophie. And with every passing hour he felt more and more protective of her, more determined to be there for her in every significant way. He pondered this as he rummaged through the refrigerator, pulled out some orange marmalade, toasted and buttered a couple of English muffins, scrambled some eggs. Still deep in thought as he set the table, Sonny jumped when he felt a pair of willowy arms curl around his waist.

"Good morning, Socks," Sophie said, rubbing her cheek against his back.

Sonny immediately turned. Cupping her face in his hands, he tilted it up and tenderly kissed her. "Good morning, Sunshine."

Pulling back, but not by far, she sniffed the air and regarded the table. "I didn't realize you had a domestic bent. By God, Mr. Brock, with all your talents, a woman might develop some serious feelings for you."

Sonny felt a nerve- and muscle-melting thrill when she spoke those words. Something was definitely happening here—some connection was being made that was reinforced by, yet greatly superseded, their sexual chemistry. Would it last?

"I just want to prove to that woman I'm worth it," he murmured.

Sophie looked straight into his eyes. "You don't have to prove anything to anybody. Because you *are* worth it."

Over breakfast, Sonny told Sophie about his activities of the day before and the emails he'd received, which she read over after they'd cleaned up the kitchen together. She stared fixedly at the image of Bruno Desjardins.

With a slight tremor, she pronounced, "It's all true. What those historians told you about him, it's all true. And there's a lot more they aren't aware of."

Sitting beside her on the floor, Sonny put an arm around her narrow shoulders. She was frightened. But beneath the mild trembling of her body he sensed a rigid determination. Sophie had gathered her will. She would not let this deviant disrupt her life. Sonny silently promised he would do his damndest to ensure that.

Sophie turned to him. "Do you believe now?"

There was neither resentment nor anxious hope in her voice. She wasn't condemning him for his previous skepticism and she wasn't begging for his faith. It was a simple inquiry born of simple curiosity, and Sonny felt all the more attached to Sophie because of her amazing evenhandedness. She'd cut him way more slack than he'd likely deserved.

Sonny's mind filled with a montage of words and images from the past several days. How could he *not* believe—in her and Esme, Jackson and Angelina...and in the mysterious continued existence of the dastardly Desjardins? In fact, he realized, by the end of the week he could very easily believe much more than he ever expected or wanted to.

He looked into Sophie's lovely, large, upturned eyes. "It seems I'm well on my way."

She didn't fling herself at him and give him a bear-hug of relief and gratitude. She simply, in her classy and understated way, nodded.

"Well, we should get on with our day." Sophie got up from the floor and sat on the couch. "I have a couple of appointments, and I'm sure you have things to do, too."

Sonny remained on the floor and raised his hand to her thigh, which he fondly stroked. "Are you going to share all this information with Spey? Oh, that reminds me, I forgot to show you the pictures from the cemetery, the ones we took on Sunday."

Sophie's hand rested on the back on his neck, her fingers toying with his hair. "There's no rush—on either score. I'm sure Jackson already knows everything he needs to know. And the pictures from the cemetery, well, they'll only confirm what *I* already know. But if our schedules allow us to get together this week, that's when we'll go over everything."

Sonny understood the implication. This "investigation" was now at the stage where all research was more for *his* benefit than anyone else's. Admittedly, he still had a lot to learn.

One more question nagged at him. As Sophie was about to rise from the couch, Sonny caught her hand. He just had to get this out in the open.

"Sophie, are you attracted to Jackson Spey?"

"Any healthy woman who looks at him is attracted to him," she said on a light laugh.

"But I'm asking about *you*."

Sophie's expression softened and became more serious. Before answering, she dipped down and kissed Sonny on the forehead, her hand lingering on the side of his face. "At first, yes. But then you entered my life, and now..." She hesitated, smiling in a bemused way, her eyes caressing his face.

"And now?" Sonny prompted.

"It seems you're the only man I can see." Sophie got up, rounded the coffee table and headed back toward the bathroom. She stopped before she entered the hallway.

Turning, she put her hands on her hips and gave Sonny an admonitory glance. "Well, why are you dawdling? Aren't you going to scrub my back in the shower?"

Sonny needed no further inducement. Grinning, he almost knocked over the table as he hurried to get up.

Sophie's earlier words echoed in her mind as she adjusted the spray of water to a soothing temperature—"A woman could develop some serious feelings for you." Sonny stood behind her, his hands resting gently on her hips. Sophie glanced over her shoulder at him. *And I already have*, she thought, smiling into his smoky jade eyes, letting her affectionate gaze wander over his tousled walnut-hued hair and plush, stubble-framed lips. This man moved her in ways, and to an extent, that she'd never expected to be moved by him. She felt physically addicted and emotionally vulnerable.

It was terrifying. She was crazy about this hot hunk of an avowed skeptic and it scared the hell out of her.

Sonny reached around her and slid open the shower curtain. Sophie felt his cock nudge her back. "Ladies first," he said, "and horny men close behind."

Once they'd stepped into the tub they immediately embraced under the spill of water, their lips swiftly meeting and opening.

"I want to wash you," Sophie said, grabbing the bar of soap and sea sponge. "So just stand still."

Sonny slicked the hair back from his face, his biceps thrown into rocky relief by the motion. "But I'm a big boy now."

"I think I've noticed." Sophie cupped his cock in her palm and lightly curled her fingers over the top of it. "And that's precisely why I want to wash you."

He gazed at her for a moment. "All right."

Sophie lathered the sponge. Kneeling on the floor of the tub, she carefully scrubbed Sonny's feet. "You have especially long second toes. That's supposed to be indicative of intelligence." Because she was just at the edge of the water stream, she could glance up at him. "Did you know that?"

"I thought it was indicative of simian ancestry." Sonny leaned over and reached for her. "Sophie, I hate seeing you on your knees like a scrubwoman."

"Stop thinking that way. Now just be quiet and stand up straight." Sophie swirled the sponge up Sonny's left calf, enjoying the rearranging patterns of his leg hair, which glistened softly within the suds. "I'm doing this because—" She aborted the statement. What almost came out of her mouth was too outrageous. *Because I feel like worshipping your body*. "Because I want to," she concluded.

She washed his right calf, then resoaped the sponge and began sliding it around his thighs. His legs, like the rest of him, seemed reinforced with heavy steel bands. His tantalizing, semi-erect cock curved just inches from her face. For the moment, Sophie tried to ignore it.

"You missed a spot," Sonny said in a husky voice.

Sophie smiled. How like a man to expect her to go straight for the meat. "Once I'm finished, m'lord, there will be no 'spot' that's been missed."

She slid behind him, her knees making a dainty squeal on the smooth porcelain, and set down the sponge. Soaping her hands, she used both of them to massage the tight, smooth globes of his ass, then she teasingly slid a finger beneath it toward his balls.

"Uh... I'm wanting to put my hands on something," Sonny said. "Something soft."

Sophie moved around him again and stood up. When Sonny reached for her, she moved his arms back down to his sides. "I said, you're to stand still."

"But there are parts of me I *can't* keep still."

Sophie tried to suppress a smile. Sonny's cock, lusciously thick now, stood straight out from his body. She knew it hadn't finished filling. By the time she was through with him, it would be pointing toward the shower curtain rings.

She washed the rippled plane of his stomach, then stepped behind him once more to scrub his broad back. God, what a magnificent physique he had—all sweeping curves of tough, resistant muscle, shifting with surprising delicacy wherever she touched them. Sophie realized she *was* worshiping his body. But, more important, she was worshiping the man within.

Stepping in front of Sonny once more, she again set aside the sponge and soaped her hands. Her adoring fingers swept over his chest, massaging it more than washing it, her thumbs gliding around and over his beaded nipples. Giving in to her mounting desire, Sophie drew each one between her lips. She heard Sonny's breath roughen. Her hands slid up and around his neck. Finally, she urged his head down to her upturned face.

His kiss was wild, his lips sliding from Sophie's mouth to her cheeks to her eyes and forehead and back to her mouth again. She wilted to the floor of the tub and, urgently soaping her hands, gently washed his weighted balls and turgid cock. It was obvious Sonny was straining for control. Now, it was time to thoroughly cleanse him.

Sophie eased his stiff cock down to her mouth and slid the swollen head between her water-glazed lips. She nipped at it, then applied sporadic pressure with the tip of her tongue. Muffled sounds of exertion came from Sonny's throat—he was obviously struggling to hold on. Still, his hips involuntarily jerked forward.

"I'm sorry," he gasped. "I can't help it."

Sophie opened her throat. Firmly gripping his cock, she took it all the way in, sucking at the silky, ribbed shaft as she slid it in and out of her mouth and across her curling tongue, sucking and stroking until his hot semen jetted into her. She swallowed again and again, not just easily but eagerly. It was as if Sonny's life were merging with her own. Her left hand dropped to her pussy. As Sonny emptied himself within her, Sophie played with her throbbing clit to bring herself to orgasm.

He finally sank down to the floor of the tub, limply draped his arms around Sophie's neck and let his head sag onto her shoulder. "You are so incredible, so beautiful, so Mary Magdalene meets Linda Lovelace..."

Sophie began to giggle. "Now *that's* an image."

Sonny lifted his head. "I'm sorry. Was I being blasphemous?"

"No." Sophie adoringly ran her hands over his streaming face and hair. He looked like some pagan god. "Not in my world it isn't."

"Let me take care of *you* now." Sonny's hands glided down her water-slicked breasts.

"Hey, I'm a big girl." Sophie lifted his hands and kissed each one. "I took care of myself."

Sonny hung his head. "Damn, and I missed it."

Chapter Fourteen

They went their separate ways until nearly eight o'clock that evening. Sophie had two readings – tiring affairs without Esme, who was laying low but, Sophie sensed, not in imminent danger – and Sonny went to his apartment to change clothes. After putting in a productive six hours at the museum, he returned to his apartment to grab more clothes and other things he'd need for his continuing overnights, then worked for a couple of hours on his ever-changing thesis.

His Jeep redolent of Chinese food, Sonny pulled into Sophie's driveway with a happy expectancy he hadn't felt since leaving the Army. It seemed so right, his being here – or their being together – and his sweet contentment was disrupted only by the smallest insinuation of anxiety – *Is this going to last?*

He didn't want to dwell on it. For the time being, at least, they were right where they wanted to be. Sophie confirmed that as soon as Sonny approached the door.

Not only did she meet him there – a sign of her eagerness to see him again – but she did so wearing a silky, peacock-blue robe that clung to her body like some exotic oil. They chattered and giggled like adolescents when they greeted each other. Sonny precariously balanced the bucketsful of nearly cold food as he used his laden arms like flippers to give Sophie a hug. Then she held his face to kiss him. Over dinner and cleanup they discussed the day's events.

Then Sophie, gently grasping Sonny's hand, asked him a question he hadn't been looking forward to hearing. "May I do that reading tonight? Are you up for it?"

"Are *you*?" he countered, suddenly feeling reticent.

She nodded. "I've been wanting to do it since I met you. Esme seems to be in hiding but I still think I can manage."

"Without her?"

"I'm never 'without her'. She's still here, with me, but not in an obvious way."

As they stood together in the kitchen, Sonny kissed Sophie's hand. "All right." At this point, there was very little he *wouldn't* do for her.

For the first time, Sonny got to see what was behind those curtained French doors. It was a pleasing, almost old-fashioned study, with a plant-filled bay window, a handsome old office desk supporting a computer and a lamp with a stained-glass shade, and bookshelves along one wall that stretched nearly the full length and height of the room. A small, round oak table with three chairs sat not quite in the center of the space, a group of graceful, wrought iron candle stands clustered near it.

Sophie lit the candles. Turning to the table, she fired up a cone of incense and placed it in an alabaster censer in the middle. She motioned for Sonny to sit down, then turned off the overhead light.

Sitting across from him, Sophie reached for Sonny's hands. Her fingers curled over them. She gave him a reassuring smile and closed her eyes.

"If there's anyone here who'd like to speak with this man, Harrison Brock, please come forward."

Sonny's eyes roamed the space around Sophie's form, as if something were going to materialize. Nothing did. Silently, smoke curled from the censer and scented the air.

Sophie nodded and began to speak. "He's saying, 'Tell Mr. Brock, Curry is here...without the cigar.'"

Sonny's eyes rounded. "Edmund Curry? My ad—I mean, my former thesis adviser?"

Suddenly, Sophie giggled in delight. "He says, 'No, the Indian spice.'" She giggled again. "He just grumbled, 'Idiot.'"

Sonny blushed. He felt totally discombobulated, so naturally he'd say some stupid things. Suddenly, he smelled the rich pungency of cigar smoke, which he'd never much appreciated. Turning from side to side, Sonny peered into and sniffed the air. The odor, which overpowered the aroma of the incense, was unmistakable. Could the power of suggestion alone produce such a convincing sensory illusion?

Sophie interrupted Sonny's reverie. "He says to tell you, 'Mother allowed me to light one up just to convince you. Lani would kill me if she knew.'" Sophie laughed. "He adds, 'I mean, she'd kill me if I weren't already dead. Although I wouldn't put it past her to try resurrecting me just so she could have another go at it.'"

Sonny responded with a befuddled smile. Lani was Dr. Curry's widow. She was indeed strong-willed and outspoken and had always hated her husband's cigars.

Sophie continued. "He wants to know if you'd like to ask him anything."

Sonny stared at her. Sophie's face was utterly passive, receptive. Sonny tried to speak, but his voice was dry and cracked. Swallowing, he started over. "What have you learned, Doctor Curry? Over there, I mean."

One side of Sophie's mouth curved toward a smile. "He says that's a ridiculously broad question. He says, 'Besides, I'm still too new here to know much of anything. I'm still wallowing in the balm of Gilead.'"

With a start, Sonny straightened. He'd heard the living Edmund Curry utter that phrase before, but he couldn't remember in what context.

Again, Sophie's voice interrupted his thoughts. "He says, 'With the help of this kind lady, we shall talk again in the future. Now, I must tell you some things.'" Sophie's eyelids squeezed more tightly together, as if in concentration. "'Merriman has a...' Spell that, please." Sophie nodded. "Thank you. 'Merriman has a Zorundu fetish. Ask him if you may borrow it. Tell him he will be rewarded for his generosity by meeting Jackson

Spey. Wrap the fetish in red silk and carry it to the cemetery on Saturday. Keep it, respectfully, on your person. Return it soon thereafter, no later than Monday.”

“All right,” Sonny whispered without comprehending. He knew nothing of such a fetish, but he’d go ahead and ask.

“Now he’s saying...” Eyes still closed, Sophie once more tilted her head in an odd way—listening intently, Sonny guessed. Then she commenced to argue with her invisible and inaudible guest. She seemed tempted to smile. “I can’t tell him that, Professor. He won’t believe me.” A pause, and then, “All right. How?” She nodded. “Yes, you may use me.”

Within a few seconds, Sophie jerked to a stiffly upright position. Her head rolled back. Shuddering, as if she were having a seizure, she slowly opened her mouth. She exhaled...a cloud of cigar smoke. Sonny smelled it immediately, watched it wreath around Sophie’s head.

“Brock,” she said in a voice that wasn’t hers, “your dispassionate thoroughness as a scholar is admirable. Now it is time you learn the difference between a mediocre anthropologist and an exceptional one.”

Sonny gaped at Sophie. He’d seen trance states before, and she was surely in one. But he’d never yet heard a voice he’d recognized come out of a medium’s mouth.

Heralded by cigar smoke, that was, without a doubt, the voice of Edmund Curry.

“A mediocre anthropologist,” he said through Sophie, “will occasionally mince up to the edge of the abyss and peer over. What little he sees, he sees through eyes veiled by intellectual reservations and academic preconceptions. An exceptional anthropologist, however, will charge up to the abyss and plunge in. And what *he* sees, he sees with the clearest of eyes—the *third* eye.” Sophie paused, breathing heavily. “It is time to open that crystalline eye, Mr. Brock. I did it in Borneo. Merriman did it in the Amazon basin. You can do it in a humble cemetery not a half-mile from where you sit. Go there before Saturday next. Do the Dance.”

Grasping the edge of the table, Sonny pitched forward. “What! You want *me* to do the Cemetery Dance?”

It appeared Dr. Curry either chose not to respond or was departing. By small degrees, Sophie swayed and began to go limp. Forearms braced on the table, she sagged until her forehead nearly hit the wood top. Just as Sonny was about to get up and go to her aid, she snapped up and backward and grinned at him. Sonny froze in his half stand.

“Lieutenant, we’re here. Peters and Tomlinson and Hartz and even Duncan...even Duncan, that son of a bitch!” The tone became sheepish and apologetic. “Uh...sorry, Sir. I got a little carried away. Lieutenant, we all just wanted to thank you.”

Now it was Sonny who was gasping for air. His coordination impeded by more emotions than he’d ever before harbored at one time, he awkwardly sank back down to his chair. He blinked at Sophie and felt tears gathering in his eyes.

Another voice came forward. "Hey, Brock, you preppie fuck. I know you can't see me, but I'm bowing to you, bro."

Sonny stuttered out, "B-Bulldog?" It was the nickname of Sergeant Willis Duncan, the man whose squad Sonny took over after a landmine blew him, bit by bit, to where he now was. Sonny was half laughing, half sniffing. "Is that really you, you ugly prick?"

"It's your lucky day, preppie. I'm gonna let that one go, 'cuz I ain't got a lot of time. Listen up, Brock—no shit now, this is from my heart—you did me and yourself and the whole goddamned Army proud when you jumped in after I bought it. You coulda sat there, safe and comfy and clean, pushing your goddamned papers, nice and far from the hot spots. But you didn't. You defied all the goddamned conformist brass and took matters under your own balls. And fuck me if they ain't big ones. You deserved every decoration you got, pretty boy, and then some. So I bow to you—it might chafe my ass, but I'm doing it—and I'll bow to you for all eternity. Catch you later, Brock. Some day we'll all have a *big-ass* reunion!"

Sonny was weeping openly. He couldn't stop himself. "Don't thank me," he choked out. "Don't admire me."

The first voice returned, the voice of Travis Peters, a nineteen-year-old PFC who was killed during the same raid that saw Tomlinson and Hartz bite the dust. "Excuse me, Sir," he said through Sophie, "but isn't that up to *us* to decide? You inspired us, Sir. And dicked if we didn't really need it after Sarge checked out. Hell, you even *saved* some of us."

"But...but I couldn't save all of you!" Sonny sobbed. "God damn me, I couldn't...save...all of you." His head fell into his hands. The last thing he heard was Tomlinson saying, "Sir, at the risk of being insubordinate, God *bless* you."

Exhausted, Sophie took several restorative breaths as she came back to herself. All she could think was that she had to get to Sonny. Pushing up from her chair, she walked around the table and twined her arms around him from behind, pressing the side of her face against the side of his.

Before this evening, she'd known none of these things about him. After the four spirit-soldiers had come through, she had an urge to fall at Sonny's feet. He was a more incredible man than she'd suspected, and she felt at once awestruck, undeserving and guilt-ridden. The last thing he needed was to be drawn into her private hell.

Gradually, Sonny's weeping subsided. He raised his head, simultaneously wiping his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Still standing behind him, Sophie stroked his forehead, his hair, his neck. "Stop it. Don't ever apologize for having feelings and showing them. Don't ever be embarrassed by them."

He turned his head. "I was going to come to you after Curry left. I was going to comfort you and get you anything you wanted. What an ordeal that must've been. But then—"

Sophie put her fingertips on his lips. "Shhh. When two people care, they take turns comforting each other. I've done channeling before. I'm fairly used to it. For you, this was a new and wrenching experience." She kissed his damp, salty cheek. "Besides, you've been there for me a *lot*."

Sonny's smile was wan, but the affection in it washed over Sophie like the "balm of Gilead" Dr. Curry had mentioned. She couldn't seem to take her eyes off his face, her hands off his body. "Sonny," she said, "let's go to bed." She just wanted to hold him.

A cloud of worry passed over his face. "I might not be able to —"

"I might not, either. Does it matter?"

Wearily, he rose, his arms coming around her. "Not at all."

Chapter Fifteen

Professor Merriman was just about to lock up his office when Sonny bolted off the elevator and ran up to him.

"Felix, wait!" He nearly came to a skidding halt on the waxed floor. "Some extraordinary things have been happening. I need to talk to you for minute."

Without saying anything, the professor glanced at Sonny over his glasses, turned and opened the door. "Sit down and catch your breath," he said, dropping his briefcase to the floor and his nonexistent ass into the desk chair. "So what's up?"

Sonny ran both hands through his windblown hair. Expelling a puffed-cheek sigh, he leaned forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. "Felix, you may not believe this. *I* hardly believe it. Remember that medium I told you about?"

"She did a reading for you."

"Yup." Sonny's eyes glimmered. "And Edmund fucking *Curry* came through!"

Merriman's eyebrows shot up. "No shit. How can you be sure?"

"She channeled him, Felix. He was talking through her. She *sounded* like him. He mentioned Lani. And, get this, I even saw and smelled cigar smoke — *saw and smelled it!*"

"Whoa. You didn't take any psychotropics, did you?"

"No, hell no," Sonny said. "I was stone sober. There weren't any hallucinations involved. And Sophie — that's the medium's name — doesn't know Edmund Curry from Howdy Doody, doesn't know a damned thing about him or his cigars or Lani or —"

"Uh, hold on," Merriman said, raising a hand. "You realize, don't you, that most mediums who claim to be 'channeling' spirit folk from the Other Side are in fact just tapping into the living person's memories. They have enough psychic ability to pick up on vivid thoughts, mental images. So if, say, Grandpa Herman loved to play the harmonica, and that memory is near the forefront of your mind, the medium will mention Grandpa Herman and his harmonica. But that doesn't mean Gramps is actually communicating from the afterlife."

Sonny began to smile. "Felix, I need to borrow your Zorundu fetish."

The professor seemed to lapse into suspended animation. After a few blinks broke his dumbfounded stare, he sat forward. "How do you know about the fetish?" he asked quietly. "I have it stashed away in my attic. Hell, I haven't even looked at it in God-knows-how-long. *Nobody* knows about it."

"Nobody?" Sonny asked.

More blinks, beneath a furrowed brow. Merriman's eyes slid off to one side as he seemed to troll for recollection. "Shit," he breathed. "I showed it to Ed and Lani before I

even moved here. They were in Chicago one weekend. I had them over for dinner. Shit." His eyes returned to Sonny's face. "So it was Curry who allegedly told you to borrow it?"

Still smiling, Sonny nodded.

"Why the Zorundu fetish?"

Sonny shrugged. "Damned if I know. What's it intended to do?"

"To put it simply," Merriman said, "it's like certain amulets in Western occultism. It's supposed to give a person—a shaman or magician usually, but in theory anybody who's aware of its power—it's supposed to give that person strength and courage when confronting evil supernatural forces."

"You mean give him...immunity?" Sonny asked.

Thinking, Felix scratched his forehead. "No, no, not exactly immunity. Some sort of inevitable encounter is presumed to be taking place. The fetish more or less endows the bearer with an extra measure of will and cleverness. Gives him an edge, so to speak."

Sonny sat upright, resting against the back of the chair. "So Curry must believe in this thing."

"If it was Curry speaking, then yes, I guess he does. Come to think of it, he was pretty damned impressed when he saw it." Merriman gave Sonny a pointed look. "What's important, though, is that *you* give it credence. If, that is, you plan on using it during the kind of confrontation I mentioned." Felix waited for a response but Sonny was too deep in thought. He sat forward. "Well? *Are* you anticipating a tussle with some evil entity?"

"I don't know," Sonny murmured. He was thinking about Jackson Spey's plans for the upcoming weekend. What exactly *was* going to happen? If anybody assumed the role of adversary, it would be the magician—wouldn't it?—and not a bystander.

"You know," Felix said, "I'm not at all comfortable lending out rare artifacts. And this one is *rare*. I don't think it would be terribly wise of me..."

As the professor veered closer to refusal, his justification for it picking up steam, Sonny remembered another of Sophie's utterances. *Tell him he'll be rewarded for his generosity...*

"Felix," Sonny said, interrupting him, "I'm also to tell you that if you do let me borrow the fetish, I'm to return it by next Monday at the latest. And you'll get to meet Jackson Spey."

That pulled him up short. "Did Curry say that, too?"

"Yes."

Merriman slapped his thighs. He was obviously trying not to look excited. "Well then, I'll bring it in for you tomorrow."

Sonny rose and shook his hand. "Thank you. I'll take very good care of it." Before he turned to leave, he had to ask the professor one more thing. "What happened to you in the Amazon basin?"

After another stunned look, Merriman breathed a laugh and shook his head. "Sounds like you got a real earful through that medium," he muttered. "All I can say right now, Sonny, is that it was similar to what Curry went through in Borneo. Have you ever heard about that?"

"No," Sonny said. "Never."

"I'm not surprised." Grabbing his briefcase, Felix got up from the desk chair. "These are some very intense, very personal experiences."

"Maybe I'll soon know what you mean," Sonny said. "Before the week is out, I should be having my own 'very intense, very personal' experience."

The weather was gorgeous—clear, with temperatures in the eighties. Sonny decided he would do the Cemetery Dance tonight.

* * * * *

Jittery as a rabbit, Sonny went straight to Fog Cliff from work. He knew if he stopped at Sophie's first, he'd likely settle in, cold feet and all, and not want to leave the house. But he did call her on his cell and tell her of his plan, primarily so she wouldn't wonder what had happened to him.

She was having lunch downtown with her friend Camilla when he made the call.

"Are you absolutely sure you want to go through with it?" was the first thing Sophie said.

Sonny was sitting in his car at a parking ramp near the museum.

"Yes. I want to know, firsthand, what you experienced. I'm sick of being on the outside looking in, Sophie. Especially after finding out what Merriman and Curry expect of me. I need to—what's that old cliché?—'expand my consciousness'. And this seems like a good place to start."

Sophie repeated the instructions Esme had given her.

"Do you think this will work for a man," Sonny asked, "or is the Cemetery Dance meant only for women?" It was an issue he needed to resolve, since the verse Sophie had recited for him clearly addressed females.

"I don't see why not," she said. "The principle doesn't change, no matter what your gender or preferences might be. I suspect the Dance was originally meant to benefit females only because, for centuries, we were the subservient sex. We were dominated and controlled and used by men while they pretty much got to have their way. Men didn't *need* any secret outlets."

Sonny had to agree. He knew enough about the histories of various cultures to know Sophie was largely correct.

"I hope I don't have to dance until dawn," he said. "I'll never make it."

Sophie laughed. "No. The verse means you have *until* dawn to do this. The Dance has to be done in the darkness, during the nighttime hours."

"Do you have any other suggestions?" Sonny asked, wanting to make sure he'd covered all relevant bases.

Apparently pondering this, Sophie was quiet for a moment. "Just to be on the safe side, steer clear of Newman's 'guardhouse' and that damned cliff. It may not be a necessary precaution where you're concerned but I'd feel better if you kept your distance from them."

Sonny felt a quiver of apprehension in his stomach. "I would, too."

* * * * *

In the sunlight, on a balmy spring day, Fog Cliff was a lovely place full of birdsong. It inspired serenity. Sonny wended his way through the rows of grassy plots, surprised to see how green they'd become after a night of rain and a few days of summer-like weather. An elderly woman and middle-aged man, lured out by the sunshine and the unseasonable warmth, arranged flowers—artificial ones, probably—on a grave that sported a flag. Korean vet, Sonny thought...unaccountably, because the visitors could just as easily have been the younger sister and nephew of a World War II soldier, or the older sister and younger brother of a Vietnam-era grunt. Still, for some reason, Sonny felt sure they were the widow and son of a man who'd served in the Korean "Police Action".

With a pang, he thought of Duncan and Peters, Tomlinson and Hartz—sprawled, or scattered, on a godforsaken, windblown hillside in Afghanistan. *May God bless and keep you*, Sonny thought. *Have a beer on me, guys*.

He turned his attention to the grave markers, most of which rose no higher than his knees. The lance-like leaves of tulips and daffodils, crocuses and grape hyacinths sprouted in front of some of the monuments. Where the sunlight was direct and unimpeded, these spring-flowering bulbs had buds that looked ready to burst into blossom, right before Sonny's eyes. Perennials, too, emerged in cheerful defiance from the sad soil, and each shrub wore a lime-green froth of new leaves, nearly fluorescent in the day's brightness.

Mindful of keeping his distance from the cliff, as Sophie suggested, Sonny restricted his meandering search to the area south of it. He supposed he could have scouted the plots *behind* the cliff—there weren't many, as he recalled, maybe a few dozen or so—but he just didn't like it back there. The northernmost reaches of the cemetery were shadowed both by the surrounding woods and by the towering rock itself. It struck Sonny as a cool, damp, dim area, and therefore just a little too creepy for someone who already felt the tickling of anxiety.

Besides, James Newman's mausoleum hunkered at the edge of that section like the fairy-tale troll under the bridge.

Sonny skirted the tree line at Fog Cliff's eastern edge, knowing he'd have more "cover" there. He didn't want to do his strange dance out in the open, right up the gentle incline from the county road. Beneath the overhanging branches of a box elder,

he spotted the granite headstone of Agnes Loury, age thirty-five. Dropping to a squat to study it, he saw she'd passed away in 1927. Hers was the only name on the stone—no husband, no children. The grave looked untended.

"Hmm. A single woman from the Roaring Twenties," Sonny said to himself. "Maybe *she'd* appreciate me." He thought of old photos and newsreel footage he'd seen of jiggling, flirtatious flappers, dancing the Charleston and drinking bathtub gin.

Then a very distinct thought suddenly formed in his mind. *Don't bother. She was a lesbian.*

Sonny snorted a bemused laugh and shook his head. "Now why do I think that?" But, as was the case with the honored Korean War veteran, he didn't doubt his assumption.

Finally, a little farther out from the cemetery's edge but tucked behind a huge Norway spruce, Sonny found another decedent he thought might be appropriate. Wanda Pamlich, age twenty-two, lay beside her parents' empty plot. Sonny knew it was empty because only their birth dates had been carved into their stone. Those empty spaces after the dashes spelled good news for them. Their daughter's early demise, however, did not. She had died in 1973.

A flower child, Sonny thought, easing down to a sit. He wrapped his arms around his knees. *What did it? Car crash? Drug overdose? Suicide?*

No, multiple organ failure due to anorexia nervosa, his internal voice told him. She inadvertently starved herself to death.

Call her Wendy.

Sonny looked up, looked around. "Esme?" he whispered. At that moment, a single needle from the sweeping branches of the spruce fell past Sonny's cheek, brushing it, and landed on his shoulder. For no discernible reason, he had the urge to smile—and not because he felt foolish.

As he sat placidly beside Wendy's resting place, the sun at his back casting elongated shadows across the cemetery's expansive lawn, Sonny went over everything Sophie told him. He must say and do things to arouse this young woman's dormant desire but he must be sincerely respectful. Sonny had no problem with the latter requirement. His parents and the Army had taken turns drumming respect into him for twenty-six straight years. But standing naked on a grave and trying to seduce a woman he'd never seen, a woman who'd been dead for over twenty years...now *that* was going to be a challenge.

The sun sank closer to the horizon. Silently, Sonny asked Wendy Pamlich about her life. He wanted to show an interest in her. He told her he thought she must've been very pretty and vivacious and only wanted to be more so and that's why food became her enemy. It pained him, he said, that social standards have for several decades been skewing women's self-images and driving them to conform to unrealistic and shallow standards. He once had a girlfriend who weighed close to two hundred pounds, and *she* was the one who dumped *him*.

On and on Sonny went with his one-way conversation, trying to connect with Wendy's spirit. He told her a little more about himself. And then, as darkness overtook the landscape, he slid onto her grave and began mouthing his words, although virtually no sound came from his mouth.

"Wendy, would you please join me here? I'd like to feel you, really *feel* you. I *need* to feel you, Wendy." Sonny pulled his t-shirt over his head, exposing his broad shoulders and chest, his tight, narrow waist. "Please, don't think I'm pressuring you. If you'd rather not be with me, I'll go just go away."

Still seated, Sonny stretched, bowing his shoulders back and forking both hands through his hair. He closed his eyes and inhaled, his chest expanding. The muscles in his arms tensed and hardened.

And he felt something.

A mere breath of a touch, it came from behind him, curling oh-so lightly over his shoulders, down his back, over his ass, up around his rib cage. It lingered, flowing back and forth, on his chest, scraping his nipples. His hands hovered over the spot, as if to make contact with the ethereal fingers that caressed him. Eyes still closed, he whispered, "Hi, Wendy," and began to sway.

Sonny felt his hair being stirred. It wasn't the breeze. This touch went down to his scalp, giving him goose bumps. A soft pulsing, like the repeated push of lips, circled his neck. Breathing heavier, Sonny rose up on his knees, unsnapped his jeans, pulled down the zipper. The tentative, exploratory pressure he'd been feeling on his body became more assertive, finally sliding down to his crotch.

With a sharp intake of breath, Sonny stood up. His jeans slid to the ground, seemingly without his help. Following their descent, the invisible hands that weren't hands slid down his legs. He stepped out of the heap of denim, aware of his rigid cock springing free into the night air, and the hands moved up his legs with tantalizing, agonizing slowness.

Sonny raised his arms over his head and began to move. He didn't know if he was dancing, didn't even think about it, just felt his body take on the fluid grace and strength of a cobra. Foggily, he was aware of the slow gyration of his hips, the sinuous twisting of his torso. His whole writhing body seemed encased in fondling hands.

Then he felt his balls in a delicious grip, his turgid cock being stroked. Simultaneously, a gently throbbing filament snaked delicately up his ass. Sonny knew he was, at any moment, going to lose control. He tried to suppress his groans of pleasure.

With a firm-soft solidity and warmth and moisture that nearly shocked Sonny out of his arousal, a mouth glided over his cock, then a hand, the two sucking and pumping in perfect rhythm. A tongue adroitly flicked over and around his cock head. Sonny breathed out moans. His head lolled back. And then his hips bucked, the cum forcefully jetting out of him into...what? The air, probably. Into the air and onto dear, horny Wanda Pamlich's rectangle of spring grass.

Chapter Sixteen

When Sonny was spent, he weakly doubled over...and nearly cried out in shock. Jerking backward, he almost tumbled over.

"Shhh. It's me."

Sonny peered into the darkness at his feet. There, gazing up at him with a rather smugly satisfied look, was Sophie, kneeling on his crumpled jeans and boxers.

Sonny collapsed onto his knees. "That was *you*?" he asked, sounding more disappointed than he'd meant to.

"Only at the very end," Sophie said. Her hands drifted up and stroked his sweat-streaked face, his hair. "Sonny, wasn't that incredible? I watched it all. I even brought most of your equipment so I could capture it for you."

"You were here the whole time?" he asked, struggling to get back into his clothes. His mind was still hazy, his body drained. "I didn't think—"

"I'm sorry. It wasn't that I meant to mislead you just so I could spy on you and get some cheap thrill. I just thought you'd be self-conscious if you knew I was here." Sophie leaned forward and hugged him. "God, Sonny, it was breathtaking." She pulled back, her eyes gleaming with excitement. "I *saw* her. I actually saw her form, not just orbs and ectoplasm. It wasn't terribly distinct but I could still tell it was a slender young woman with long hair. Blonde, I think." Sophie smiled. "And she was quite obviously getting off on you."

"You're kidding." Sonny turned and looked at the inert, pinkish granite slab with its engraved letters and numbers. Tentatively, with awe, he touched its rough top. As if in response, it glimmered softly in the moonlight.

"No, I swear," Sophie said. "And seeing it...well, it got me so hot I just had to step in and finish you off." She glanced down. "I'm sorry, Wendy."

Sonny turned back to her. Grinning, he reached out and touched Sophie's lips. "I thought that mouth felt a little too substantial."

Sophie's smile gradually faded. Silently, she studied him for a moment. "I can't begin to tell you how much I admire you for doing this. It took a lot of courage and a major suspension of disbelief." An echo of her smile returned. "I'm just glad you enjoyed it."

It embarrassed Sonny to be complimented. He wanted to say, *I did it for you. You're beginning to mean a lot to me, and I did it to erase my doubts and try to understand what you're all about, try to share at least some of your experiences.* But that wouldn't have been entirely truthful. He did it for Sophie, yes, but he also did it for himself. He wanted to transcend his own self-imposed limitations, as both Merriman and Curry had encouraged him to

do. Like those splashy commercials for the Army urged, Sonny wanted to be all that he could be.

Sophie watched him with a strange, pensive expression. She probably understood.

In part to be off the subject, he said, "I hope I'm not a victim of the power of suggestion but I think your Esme might've been with me."

"She was." Sophie's answer was immediate and definite.

"You knew?"

"Of course. I always know when she's around. In fact, I sort of requested she look over you."

"It helped," Sonny said, then murmured an afterthought. "Thank you, Esme." Vacantly, he looked around. *God, what just happened here?* He wondered vaguely if Merriman and Curry had felt as dazed after their "initiations". Then again, maybe this had just been the precursor to his *real* initiation.

Sophie reached for him. Her hands glided down his arms. "This might sound unbelievably selfish of me, but...I'll need some taking care of when we get back to the house. Watching you really turned me on, Sonny." She squirmed slightly. "I feel about ready to slide out of my jeans."

"I should be able to come up with *something*," he assured her through a pleased smile. Sonny immediately had a mental image of his eager mouth descending toward her parted, milky thighs. A bit shakily he rose, extending a hand to help Sophie up. "Let's grab that equipment and—"

Sophie's hand slid from Sonny's and gripped his arm, her nails digging into his skin. "Look," she said softly, pointing to the north. "Was that there before?"

He took a few steps away from Wanda's plot to get a better view of what Sophie was indicating. Still clinging to him, she followed, huddling close against Sonny when he stopped.

A cloud that looked like a glob of curds, gray-green with mold, hung over the top of the cliff. It looked dully lit from within.

Uncertainly, Sonny said, "I don't think so."

"I don't either."

As they continued to stare at the canopy it seemed to creep farther out from the rock, undulating sluggishly like fouled, swampy water.

"It's moving," Sophie whispered.

Sonny put an arm around her shoulders, holding her close to his side.

As if heralding the cloud's approach, a marrow-piercing cold suddenly gripped them. It carried a smell of putrefaction so strong they both grimaced and turned their heads.

"We have to get out of here," Sonny said with a tight throat. He felt Sophie nod against his shoulder but neither of them moved.

Welded to the ground, they watched as the dark, lumpy mass churned slowly toward them, rolling and tumbling over itself, dropping lower, sinking toward the ground. The earth seemed to rumble beneath it—a deep vibration of a sound, more felt than heard. The surrounding trees began to thrash. Then, with sickening thuds, the headstones in advance of the roiling terror began to fall like dominoes.

Sonny finally found volition. “Come on,” he ordered, jerking Sophie into movement. “Hurry!”

Forgetting about the equipment, they dashed haltingly down the low hill on which the cemetery was spread. It was nearly impossible to run fast and be surefooted. Obstacles were everywhere and the darkness was intensifying. Still, Sonny made certain he never let go of Sophie’s hand.

It became more and more difficult for Sophie to concentrate on reaching Sonny’s Jeep, parked on the county road. She heard a low voice form within the wind. It sounded at first like vengeful laughter, rising and falling in waves. Did Sonny hear it too? Desperately, she tried to remember the words written on Spey’s talisman, which she’d foolishly forgotten to bring with her. But she was too frantic, too distracted by whatever horror nipped at their heels and the need to pay attention to what lay immediately ahead of her.

The voice in the wind twined around them. *I...won’t...let...you...have...her!*

Sonny glimpsed a ball of blackness ringed by a red glow just before he felt a blow to his stomach, then a crushing pain. With a startled grunt he doubled over and pitched forward, barely missing a gravestone. Sophie’s hand flew from his grasp. He instinctively wrapped one arm around his gut and used the other to brace himself on the headstone. Gasping for breath, he turned to look for her.

She was six or eight feet away, twisting and turning and clutching her shirt to her chest. Something was *on* her, Sonny realized. It flew in the face of all reason and defied his senses, but he could tell she fought against something that was trying to rip off her clothes and overwhelm her...

...and carry her away. Sonny peered into the darkness as he struggled to stand upright and regain his strength. He hadn’t been mistaken. Occasionally, Sophie rose eerily off the ground. She kicked at the air. Her shirt was wrenched to one side, baring her shoulder. She had her arms crossed protectively over her breasts as her hands clutched the overlying fabric. But that something, Sonny could tell, was trying to pull her arms away.

Doing a hobbling jog, he closed the space between them and growled fiercely, “You have no choice but to let me have her. She has chosen *me*, Desjardins. Not you, *me!*”

“Yes,” Sophie choked out. *“Laisse-moi tranquille, saligaud.”*

“*Tout de suite, bête,*” Sonny ordered. *Right now, beast.*

Sophie fell to the ground like a rag doll flung aside by a petulant child. With a prolonged, muted roar, the suffocating cloud siphoned itself back toward the cliff.

There was a flurry of grinding, grating sounds. The grave markers were being set back in place as the dark mass swept over them. At the wall of the cliff, it disappeared.

The night was clear and silent once more, the air fresh.

Sonny immediately went to Sophie and gathered her up in his arms as he pulled her shirt back over her shoulder. "Are you all right?" he asked urgently, stroking her hair.

"I think so." She pulled back by a few inches to look at him and touch his face. "What about you?"

"I'm more rattled than anything."

"I am, too. I just feel...soiled." Shuddering, Sophie pushed her hair back from her face and tried to compose herself. "We should get your equipment."

"No. Hell, no. I'll pick it up first thing in the morning. What we should do is get out of here."

With one hand Sonny cupped Sophie's forearm and with the other he held her hand. The pain in his gut, Sonny noticed gratefully, had subsided to a dull, crampy ache. Those countless curls he'd done throughout his life had finally paid off.

Once they were standing again, Sophie further straightened her clothes. When she was finished, she looked at Sonny. Dread was written on her face.

"What are we going to do?" she asked in quiet desperation. "He's becoming more and more aggressive. I know we angered him. Maybe that's putting it too mildly. As he withdrew, I could feel his rage, his *fury*. I think we only provoked him. He'll be back."

Sonny nodded. He knew Sophie was referring to Desjardins, obviously, but he didn't know how to respond. If they'd been talking about a real, living man, he would have agreed with her and not given it a second thought. Sonny had dealt with enough members of his gender to know how certain men reacted to certain situations. And, yes, belligerent assholes intent on having things their way only became more belligerent when they were foiled.

But Sophie and he weren't talking about any kind of man Sonny had ever encountered...or even believed could exist. Earlier, trying to save Sophie, he'd simply acted on instinct. Now, his reason felt taxed to the limit. His mind kept rerunning everything that happened this evening but he couldn't seem to process it.

Sophie picked up on this as they hurried the rest of the way down the hill and climbed into Sonny's Jeep.

"You must be having trouble processing all this," she said, giving him a wan smile.

"That's an understatement."

Once the ignition fired, Sonny took a deep, relieved breath and let it out. He tried to return Sophie's smile, but his lips couldn't seem to sustain it. Nothing he was used to doing came naturally to him right now. Even driving the short distance to Sophie's house was a challenge.

She put her hand on his knee. "I'm really sorry," she said humbly, "that you ever got involved in this. And involved with *me*."

For some reason, that simple statement of regret snapped Sonny to his senses. He gave Sophie a quick, sharp look that took in her stress-lined face, her large and rueful eyes.

And he said, quite definitely, "I'm not. I'm not sorry at all."

Chapter Seventeen

Spey's talisman clutched between them, Sophie and Sonny tightly hugged each other as they lay in bed. Soon, exhausted to the center of his being, Sonny dropped into a snoring sleep. Awake, Sophie lay contented in his arms, quietly savoring the soft gleam of waning moonlight on his handsome profile, his smooth cheeks, his shuttered eyes with their feathery dark fringe of lashes. Her feelings for him seemed to be deepening by the minute. With far more affection than desire, she very lightly kissed his smooth, soft lips. He made a faint throaty sound and wiggled a little beneath the blanket. The warmth that enveloped them became infused with his uniquely compelling scent. Sophie drank it in for a moment. After placing a hand over the silky hair that fanned across his chest, just so she could feel his heartbeat throb into her palm, she slipped out of bed.

Going to her library, she sat in an overstuffed chair, legs tucked beneath her and cell phone in her lap. She could still smell a trace of the incense she'd burned that morning during her session with Gertrude Whitehall, who'd wanted to settle an old feud with her sister Violet. It turned out well.

But Sophie's thoughts were centered primarily on Sonny Brock. No matter what it took, she decided, he was not ever again going to be harmed in any way by whatever situations might arise from her unusual gifts. She would do everything in her power to shield him from further fallout.

Sophie checked her watch, then turned her eyes to the phone. It rang at 11:06p.m., just as she'd expected.

"The shit is really starting to hit the fan," Jackson Spey said without waiting for Sophie's hello. "Desjardins is becoming an astral tsunami."

"I know that," Sophie said, "but how did *you* know?"

"Angelina's been getting hinky about it. Then, tonight, some of Bruno's minions were sniffing around me. It looked like the walls of my apartment were coated in mildew. And the reek was overpowering. Did you do something out of the ordinary, by any chance? Something to rile him up?"

Sophie told Jackson about the incident at Fog Cliff Cemetery, what happened after Sonny's Dance.

Spey lectured her. Sophie had been expecting that, too. "Listen, and listen hard," he said sternly. "Fog Cliff was *not* a good place for you to be under those circumstances. It probably wasn't a good place even for Brock to be, considering Desjardins now considers him a rival. Shit, Sophie, what were you thinking? How could you *not* anticipate getting all juiced up watching your hunky new lover dancing naked and being aroused? You didn't have the protection that comes from your own fulfillment,

and you didn't have the protection of the talisman. It became open season on you, Sophie. On you *and* Sonny."

Your lover... So it was obvious to Jackson and, probably, Angelina. Hearing someone else describe Sonny that way seemed somehow to legitimize Sophie's relationship with him. And she'd be drawing upon that legitimacy before the conversation was over.

"You're absolutely right about everything," Sophie said, because there really was no defense she could mount. "I was being impetuous and shortsighted. Believe me, it won't happen again."

"Good. Just keep that talisman at hand whenever you and Sonny are together." Jackson paused, and Sophie could've sworn he was smiling. "Sounds like you and Brock said the right things, though. Sonny's laying claim to you, and you verified that claim. It might've pissed Desjardins off but at least you let him know where you stand, and that got rid of him. For the time being, anyway."

"But what about next time?" Sophie rose and wandered into the kitchen for some juice. Anxiety was making her mouth and throat dry. "And who are these 'minions' you mentioned?"

"It appears Bruno somehow managed to enlist the aid of the Nephilim—remember those demons I mentioned, the former 'angelic messengers' who became corrupted through lust?"

"Oh, God..." Sophie groaned. She opened the fridge and grabbed a bottle of cranberry juice, quickly taking a swallow.

"Yeah, well, that's why I said he's becoming an astral tsunami. With demon hordes at his beck and call, Desjardins poses much more of a threat than he did initially. He must've either struck this deal while he was still alive or learned additional tricks where he is now—which wouldn't surprise me, considering the company he's always liked to keep. I just hate to think about what he promised those debauched little pricks for their allegiance."

The fact that Jackson was disturbed by this new development only increased Sophie's distress. "How can you be sure Desjardins has this...army?" Maybe Spey was mistaken. Distracted, she put the juice back inside the refrigerator but almost missed the shelf.

"All entities have certain 'fingerprints'," Jackson said.

"And you can read them? Accurately?"

"Yes."

"Can you overcome them? The Nephilim, I mean." Sophie wandered back to the library and closed the door behind her.

"Easily. The Nephilim are low-grade demons. And Desjardins himself is riddled with weakness and ineptitude. But, like I said before, I'll need your and Sonny's help. So Saturday is still on."

Sophie had all but forgotten about Sonny's role in whatever was going to happen at Fog Cliff on the night of the new moon. The situation had altered considerably, and she had to speak up. "Jackson, I don't want Sonny there, not after what happened tonight. I don't want the man I love put in harm's w—"

"Whoa, hold on. Brock's not just your bed buddy? You're actually in love with him?"

Hearing the question startled Sophie. She hadn't considered her words before she'd spoken them. But wasn't that how most honest statements were made—without any forethought?

"I guess I am," she affirmed with a small, bewildered laugh.

Sophie's stomach fluttered. So this was a fact of her life now. She loved Sonny Brock. She adored him. It was a realization that filled her with equal measures of joy and trepidation. Yes, he was a kind, smart, honorable and indescribably sexy man...but that didn't mean they were right for each other.

"Sophie, darlin'," Spey effused, "that is some of the best news you could've given me."

Sophie was too stunned by her admission to comprehend the reason for Spey's enthusiasm but not too stunned to pursue her original point. "Good news or not, I still don't want him there, Jackson."

"Ah, but if he loves *you*, Sophie, he'll be there whether you want him to or not. That's a guarantee."

* * * * *

By the time he got to Fog Cliff to retrieve his equipment, Sonny was still wondering why Sophie was so preoccupied that morning. She hadn't seemed inclined to talk about much of anything. She hadn't wanted to make love, either—at least Sonny didn't think so—and that, too, was a little unusual for her. He supposed she was getting apprehensive about the upcoming weekend and the frightening turns the whole situation was taking. There was no other supposition Sonny *could* come up with, so he contented himself with that one.

Feeling a little edgy, he steered his Jeep up the eastern, or right-hand, branch of the cemetery's horseshoe drive. The place, as usual, wasn't quite so off-putting in the daylight, but vestiges of last night's supernatural assault still colored his attitude and made his nerves crawl with tension. Sonny first picked out the Norway spruce beneath which Wendy Pamlich lay, then, using that as a reference point, tried to determine where Sophie may have been stationed. He was debating whether or not to get out of his Jeep and stroll around when he spotted his carryall slouched at the base of a boulder. It was near the tree line, just a bit north of where Sonny had done his "dance".

He parked the Jeep, wishing other people—real, living people—were wandering around the cemetery. But it was likely still too early for visitors. Taking a deep breath,

he got out and walked to the boulder. The cliff loomed at the edge of his vision but Sonny couldn't bring himself to look at it. A few birds twittered around him and skimmed the sky overhead. Just a nice, uneventful cruise through a country boneyard, Sonny told himself with a smile.

But his smile faded as he reached for the carryall. There was something on it. Sonny lifted the satchel and carried it into a patch of sunlight, where he could better see that something.

It wasn't bird doo or pine sap. It wasn't a mud or grass stain. But it was *some* kind of stain—an ugly, sprawling blot of mottled green and black, slightly furry...like mold. Sonny was torn between holding the bag at arm's length and lifting it closer to his eyes to study it. He opted for half of each.

When the carryall was about a foot from his face, Sonny noticed two very disturbing things. First, the same fetid smell that had rolled through Fog Cliff last night was emanating from this blot. Second—and Sonny's face pinched in horror and disgust when as he stared at it—the fine, short cilia atop the stain were *moving*.

"Oh, Jesus," he breathed, hurrying over to the Jeep and tossing the carryall in the back. *What the hell is that all about?*

Rather than follow the drive around the back of the cliff and past Newman's mausoleum, Sonny threw the Jeep in reverse and used his side mirrors to guide him down to the county road.

* * * * *

When Sophie got up, she knew exactly what she wanted to do before showering or having breakfast or waiting for her first client to arrive.

So, following her instincts, she knelt down beside her bed, dropped her head to her hands and prayed.

* * * * *

Sonny drove to campus and headed straight for Merriman's office with an urgency he hadn't felt since becoming involved in Sophie's life. Again, he was facing a busy day—one whose schedule had now changed—so he couldn't afford to dawdle in the department and engage in idle conversation with other grad students and professors. He still had to go to the museum, of course, but he wouldn't be stopping at his apartment to work on his thesis or meeting up with a couple of buddies to hoist a few cold ones.

Merriman's door was open. Grasping the outer frame, Sonny leaned inside. "Hey, Felix. I just came for the—"

Before he could finish the sentence, Sonny spotted the Zorundu fetish as Merriman simultaneously lifted it off his desk. Sonny walked over to him and regarded the ugly

little humanoid figure in the professor's hand. A wire seemed to tighten in his diaphragm.

"It ain't pretty but I'm told it's effective," Felix said drolly. "I'm glad you got here early. This thing's been diverting my attention since I sat down—like it refuses to be ignored."

He reached for a small, rectangular box sitting amid the clutter on his desk. Opening it, he unfolded the tissue paper inside and carefully set the fetish within its protective nest. Replacing the cover, he handed the box to Sonny.

"Take care of it."

Sonny took the box from Merriman. "I will."

Still seated at his desk, hands folded over his stomach, Felix regarded his student. "You look different, Brock. You even sound different. Older, maybe."

Sonny smiled slightly. The statement somehow didn't surprise him. "A lot's been happening. More is going to happen. I suspect I won't entirely be the same when it's over."

Merriman nodded, his eyes narrowing as if probing Sonny. "I suspect you're right." He didn't ask any questions. Like Curry, he'd been through it. "Well, when you're ready to talk about it, I'm here."

"Thank you, Felix." Sonny tucked the fetish in his jacket pocket and left.

He called Sophie on his way to work. Everything was fine, she assured him...and she did sound quite serene, if still a tad preoccupied. Sonny didn't want to alarm her by telling her about the carryall. He had to check into it, first. When he called her again after work, she sounded the same. Her soft voice, though, did tug at his heart.

Sonny wanted to be with her. Nothing, he realized, made him feel better than being with her. But he had one more errand before returning to Sophie's house.

He called Jackson Spey at his woodshop and asked if he could stop by for a while.

"It's rather important," Sonny added.

"Then by all means come on over," Spey said, and gave him directions.

Sonny could have sworn that, after the phone call, he heard an occasional thudding coming from the rear of the Jeep. The back of his neck prickled. At first he tried to tell himself the carryall was shifting due to bumps and turns, or the vehicle itself was making the noises. But it couldn't have been the Jeep—the sounds weren't coming from the undercarriage or anywhere beneath the hood—and they persisted even on smooth, straight stretches of road. A muted thump, followed by another two or three, followed by a manic flurry of pounding, as if something were trying to escape the cargo compartment or get his attention, get him to pull over.

Breathing more rapidly, Sonny gripped the wheel and kept heading for Spey's shop.

It was, he thought as he approached it, an odd place for a wizard to be—and, for that matter, an odd profession for a wizard to have. Spey's woodworking operation was

in an old industrial and warehouse district, known as “the Valley”, roughly in the middle of the city. As Sonny approached the single-story building of corrugated metal, he noticed it must house several other businesses, as well. Looking for an appropriate sign, he had to circle the building a few times before he could deduce which door was Spey’s.

No wonder he had trouble spotting it. There was no garish sign, just a rather modest plaque on the door—a crossed hammer and saw, carved out of wood. The door opened as Sonny was about to knock. The besmirched carryall dangled from his other hand.

“Heard you pull up,” Spey said, lifting a ball cap off his head. His braid uncoiled from beneath it and fell down his back. “Come on in.”

The smell of wood hit Sonny like a sudden, vivid memory, and he immediately knew why. His dad had done woodcrafting, as a hobby, in the garage, and Sonny had spent many childhood hours either watching him or helping out. The smell was as comforting to him as a mug of hot chocolate.

But Spey’s operation was a far cry from his father’s puttering. “Holy shit,” Sonny muttered, trailing behind the shop’s owner. He stopped to take it all in.

Not only did Jackson have an impressive array of tools and equipment, but his completed pieces—and even the incomplete ones—were absolutely stunning. Everywhere he looked there were dovetailed and tongue-in-groove joints, sleekly beveled edges, flawlessly smooth surfaces that gleamed like fine satin. Patiently, Spey watched and waited for him.

Sonny approached what appeared to be a large walnut picture frame. Stupefied, he turned to Spey. “Did you do all this carving yourself?”

“Yup.”

“It must’ve taken days!”

“Weeks,” Spey corrected. “But I love detailed handwork. It brings me the most satisfaction.”

“And money, I’ll bet.”

Spey chuckled. “Oh yeah. That particular piece is going into an old lakefront mansion inhabited by a nouveau riche couple with large egos. The husband just had a portrait done of his wife for their anniversary, and this frame will house it. I’m guessing the whole package set him back close to a hundred grand. He didn’t even blink when I quoted him my price...which, believe me, wasn’t low.”

Sonny shook his head in disbelief as he took one more look around. “Everything you’ve done is a work of art.”

“Thank you.”

Only half facetiously, Sonny asked, “Any magic involved?”

Spey lifted his hands. "Only what comes out of these. I don't believe in taking shortcuts—supernatural or otherwise." He lowered his arms and crossed them over his chest. "Now, what did you want to see me about?"

"This," Sonny said, lifting the pack between them.

Spey gazed at it for a moment, then suggested they go sit down beneath a brighter light. He led Sonny to a corner of the shop that seemed to function as an office space. Once they were both seated, Spey took the carryall and examined it.

"This might sound crazy," Sonny said, "but I think it was moving around in my Jeep." He sounded a flaccid laugh. "By itself, I mean. I picked it up at Fog Cliff this morning. Sophie and I left it there last night. But it didn't start, uh, romping around the back of the vehicle until after I called you."

Spey stroked his mustache with thumb and forefinger as he studied the bag, now lying on a drafting table. Then he nodded and did a half turn to face Sonny.

"What's up with it?" Sonny asked, unable to suppress the revulsion and anxiety in his voice.

"Desjardins and his goons left their mark on it," Spey said, hooking his feet on the crossbars of the stool. "It's his way of both 'tracking' you and frightening you." He glanced at the bag. "That's one of the foulest marks of its kind I've yet seen."

And then, as casually as if he were shooing away a fly, Jackson extended his left hand over the stain. His fingers did a subtle but intricate little dance that didn't last more than two or three seconds. The blot and its odor immediately disappeared. Apparently satisfied, Spey swiped the fingers of his right hand over his left palm.

"Well, that's taken care of," he said.

Sonny leaned forward to get a closer look at the carryall. Sure enough, it was as clean as the day he bought it.

"You'll never get used to it, will you," Spey said with amusement. "By the way, Bruno didn't want you coming over here. That's what all the ruckus was about."

Still flabbergasted, Sonny could only gape at him. "No, I never *will* get used to it," he finally murmured.

"Now tell me what's in your pocket," Spey said.

Sonny didn't know what he meant, and told him so.

"Your right pocket. Let's just say it's...beckoning me."

The fetish! Sonny had forgotten all about it. He reached for the small box and handed it to Spey.

When Jackson opened it, he showed more emotion than Sonny had ever seen him display—in public, anyway. "Shit, man, a Zorundu," he breathed in awe. "Where did you get this?"

"Felix Merriman, my thesis adviser. I was instructed to borrow it by...well, let's just say another anthropology professor told me to borrow it."

"A dead one, right?"

Sonny hesitated, then nodded.

"Shit. This is incredible. I'd like to meet your thesis adviser." Spey looked at him with eerily glimmering eyes, almost as gold as a cat's. "Do you have any idea how powerful this thing is?"

"Not really. I only know what I've been told, and that wasn't much." Sonny leaned toward Spey. "If it's so damned powerful, why didn't *it* do whatever neutralizing thing *you* just did?"

"Because it serves an entirely different purpose. Besides, it hasn't been activated yet, so to speak." Spey seemed tempted to touch it but refrained from doing so.

"Do you know how –?"

"Yes."

"I was told it has to be wrapped –"

"In red silk. Presuming it's to be used on Saturday, that is."

"Yes. I'm supposed to carry it –"

"With you on Saturday. *You* must carry it."

Sonny flopped against the back of the chair, his hands curled over its arms and his legs splayed. He breathed out a laugh. "Why should I bother talking at all?"

Spey gave him an understanding smile. "I'm not reading your mind, Sonny – that's not my area of expertise. I just happen to know about this stuff."

Sonny couldn't help asking, "Is that part of the curriculum at the University of High Magick, Department of Wizardry?" As soon as he said this, he thought it sounded too smart-assy and Spey would be completely justified in taking umbrage.

But Jackson tossed his head back and laughed in a good-natured way. "Yeah, where Harry Potter got a full scholarship." As his laughter subsided, he put the lid back on the box and set it aside. "Actually, any adept needs to know a good deal about talismanic magick – the different uses and properties of amulets, talismans, fetishes, 'mojo bags', those sorts of things. It comes in handy, believe me. I can't always be parading around in full regalia toting a sack of wands and candles and gazing stones."

Sonny found himself truly beginning to admire the man. "You're something else, Jackson."

"So are you, Brock. For a while there, I wasn't sure you'd be able to handle all this shit."

"I don't have much choice," Sonny said. "Sophie's involved, and I...care about her."

Spey barked out a laugh and clapped his hands together – a reaction Sonny found bewildering. But he'd been learning to stop trying to analyze everything.

"Mind if keep this until Saturday?" Spey asked, referring to the fetish.

"Go ahead. Do what you gotta do."

"And you'll be there?"

"Of course," Sonny said without hesitation, then added with another touch of impishness, "I'm the designated keeper of that ugly-ass doll."

Chuckling, Spey handed Sonny his carryall, then got up to escort his guest to the door. "We'll all get together Friday evening to go over whatever information you've gathered, and I'll sort of sketch out what's coming down on Saturday night. And we'd better have our powwow at my place, so be sure to bring all your stuff." At the door, another look of glee danced in Spey's eyes, now a shimmering emerald-green. "Until then, you and Sophie should fuck like there's no tomorrow."

Chapter Eighteen

Nestled between Sonny's right arm and the warm, hard length of his body, Sophie played lightly with his chest hair. She loved how the dark, silky strands clustered modestly between his pectoral muscles; how he was smooth as an infant from there to his navel; how, from his belly button, another thin line of hair descended, as if pointing the way to the impressive treasure between his legs.

Her fingers followed the hair path to its terminus, where Sophie tried to gather both his cock and his balls in her small hand. It wasn't possible—the package was too large and ungainly. It was also slightly moist and sticky from having just been inside her.

"I have to leave soon," Sophie said, resting her hand on the springy puff of his pubic hair.

Sonny kissed the top of her head. "*We* have to leave soon."

Sophie tilted her head up toward his face. "Sonny, how many times do I have to tell you that I *do not want*—"

He shifted position, his left arm coming around Sophie's waist, and silenced her with a kiss. She couldn't help but respond. His lips were so commanding, so supple and expressive...

"That wasn't fair," Sophie murmured.

"Too bad." Sonny pushed himself up to a sit. "How many times do I have to tell *you* that I want to be a part of this? I want to be there for you, Sophie. I'm not staying away."

Thinking, she rolled onto her stomach and braced herself on her elbows. "Sonny, those four men who came through when we had our session...they were your Army buddies, right?"

Sonny stiffened as he was about to get up from the bed. "Yes." His back was toward Sophie. He only turned his head briefly and the answer drifted over his shoulder.

She hesitated, feeling an upsurge of love for him, then asked softly, "What happened?" Sophie already had some idea—flashing images had come to her while she was doing Sonny's reading—but, at this juncture, it seemed important that he talk about it.

Sonny's head dropped. Sophie heard him inhale, exhale. "That freakin' squad seemed cursed. I volunteered to take it over after Bulldog—you know, Sergeant Duncan—was killed by a landmine. The corporal who'd originally been the squad leader was taken down by a sniper just a month earlier."

Sophie gently flattened a hand on the small of his back. "You had to go into a lot of caves, didn't you?"

There was another pause before he answered. "Yes. That's where the enemy liked to, uh, hang out. We never knew what we were walking into. And one night we happened to...walk into a hornets' nest."

Through her contact with him, Sophie was getting another jumbled mosaic of unsettling sounds and sights—maniacal yelling; blinding flashes from discharged weapons splintering the blackness; men scuffling, scrambling, falling; Sonny getting a firm hold on two of them and dragging them outside, then stumbling back inside, alone...stumbling back into the dangerous darkness, where a bullet shrieked past his neck and determined footsteps closed in on him...

Sonny broke their contact and rose from the bed just as a final image swept through Sophie's far-vision. Despite the oncoming rush of the invisible enemy, Sonny's mind was clear enough, his senses sharp enough to lob a grenade with effective accuracy.

Esme's voice rippled through the fading image. *He is a hero. You were meant to find him. And he was meant to find you.*

Sophie gasped and smiled. "Esme," she whispered, "are you all right? Will you be with us tonight?"

But there was no answer.

Disappointed, Sophie bounded down the stairs and headed for the bathroom, where the shower was already running.

* * * * *

As they stood in the living room, waiting for Jackson and Angelina, Sophie noticed the grim determination on Sonny's face. She still wanted to tell him, *You don't have to prove anything to me or to yourself, you've already faced and overcome demons.* But she sensed it would've been pointless to force the issue. It was time to respect Sonny's decision.

"Do you have the fetish?" she asked. Jackson had returned it the night before—wrapped in red silk and tied with wire—when they'd had their get-together. It was "charged" now, he'd said, and "ready to rock 'n' roll".

Sonny patted his jacket pocket to indicate it was there. He didn't seem much inclined to talk, so Sophie kept her questions and conversation to a minimum. From the coffee table, she again picked up the vial of oil Jackson had given her last night and dabbed more on her neck and between her breasts. He hadn't given an explanation of why she should wear it—in fact, hadn't explained too much of anything, but merely told them what they were to do. Sophie couldn't tell if Spey omitted all the details because he didn't want to alarm them or because he didn't think they'd understand. Probably both, she decided.

A distinctive knock sounded at the door—two quick, sharp raps followed by a third. Sonny turned up his sultry green eyes to look at the door, then at Sophie. She went to answer it.

Jackson strode into the house, giving Sophie a start. It wasn't because of his appearance—he was wearing a long, black leather coat—or because of his lack of any greeting. It was because, as he passed Sophie, she felt a distinct...shock wave. He was literally pulsing with energy. Sophie glanced at her arm—the hairs were standing up.

Smiling, Angelina stepped up to Sophie and gave her a hug. "Yes, he's primed," she murmured in Sophie's ear.

Jackson shook Sonny's hand, then turned to face the women. He looked particularly intense this evening, Sophie thought. His eyes were smoldering. In their depths, sparks seemed to be flying off flint. He had an air of absolute concentration and focus. Sophie could even detect the restless shimmering of his aura—something that astounded her, since she'd never bothered to train herself in aura reading. If she was seeing Jackson's, then, it could only mean he was like a volcano ready to erupt.

"So," he said, "you ladies leave together. Take the county road. When you get to Fog Cliff, walk up the right side of the drive. Follow it around the back of the cliff and circle the mausoleum. That way, you'll both get plenty of exposure. The Nephilim and Newman and, finally, Desjardins will have ample opportunity to sniff you out. Sonny and I will take the shortcut through the woods. About the time the bad boys' appetites are good and whetted, we'll be there. I'll enter the cliff first and then you ladies follow. Sonny will stay at the entrance, fetish in pocket. Remember, don't acknowledge us when you see us. Just proceed as if we weren't there."

"And you're sure there's a subterranean cavern," Sophie asked, "deeper and larger than the one we were in last week?"

"Yes," Spey said. "I'll be led there and you'll be led by me. Desjardins won't interfere as long as he knows you're headed where he wants you to go. But he'll have no idea I'm there, too. Once you're in the cavern—and you'll know when you are—do as I instructed last night."

"Wait," Sophie said. "You'll be led? By whom? I was under the impression you'd already discovered this cavern yourself, sometime last week."

"No, hell no. My being there would've risked giving up the game. Besides, there wasn't any need for me to go on a reconnaissance mission."

Sophie was confused. "Then how...who..." She glanced at Angelina, who wore a small, private smile.

"Let's just say I have some powerful allies," Jackson replied. "Ready?"

Finally, the taciturn Sonny spoke up. "Let's do it."

To Sophie, he was unbearably handsome just then. There was iron in his somber expression, a kind of unyielding ferocity and determination, and it made him look like the quintessential Man—mature and virile and courageous. She loved him so much it hurt. Esme's reassurance that they were meant to find each other took much of the edge off Sophie's previous apprehension...but she still wasn't sure if Sonny's feelings matched her own. Unless and until that last remaining doubt was put to rest, Sophie knew she'd continue to feel vulnerable.

She and Angelina struck out on foot down the dark and deserted county road. The athletic shoes they both wore made virtually no sound on the asphalt. Sophie couldn't even see her legs moving. She felt strangely swallowed up by the night.

"I've been in touch with Esme," Angelina said, wrapping her hooded sweatshirt more tightly around her elegant frame.

"Have you?" Sophie almost stopped short and grabbed her companion's arm. She immediately remembered they had a schedule to stick to—timing was everything—so she only faltered a bit and kept walking.

"Yes." Angelina glanced kindly at Sophie. "She's fine. She was granted refuge in a very spiritually refined sphere, a place no evil soul has access to. However, it's so far removed from the earthly plane, and she'd incur such risks attempting to make contact, that it hasn't been practical for her to stay in touch with you."

"But I did hear from her, just this morning," Sophie said. "In fact, she's been looking over Sonny, too. The contact is always brief and then she's gone again but she does manage to get through."

Angelina shook her head in wonder. "That's some lady. I shouldn't be surprised, though. She's devoted to you. And she thinks very highly of Sonny."

The declaration warmed Sophie's heart—something she needed this dreadful evening—but she felt responsible for Esme's perilous situation and wanted fervently to reverse it.

"By the way," Angelina added, "Jackson discovered something further about this power Desjardins has to cast his enemies into the Shadowlands."

Sophie looked up at her. "Oh?" She wasn't sure if she wanted to hear the news or not.

As if in answer to her doubts, Angelina said, "I'm only telling you this because it may strengthen both your insight and your resolve. Bruno didn't get off cheaply and pay the 'quick and easy' way by sacrificing the life of someone who meant nothing to him. That act was nothing more than earnest money, so to speak. The purchase price itself was much larger—and took a big bite out of Desjardins himself. A mortal can't buy such a potent, esoteric ability without sacrificing something of his own."

Now it was Sophie who shivered. *His soul. He bought this power with his very soul. And he's hoping to use me to avoid the consequences of the deal.*

"Yes," Angelina said, reading her thoughts. "He thinks he can absorb from you what he gave up. He thinks you can replace or somehow compensate for his loss. His plight is much more dire than we originally suspected. It isn't just his hybrid status he wants to break free of—"

"It's eternal damnation," Sophie murmured. "Worse than the Shadowlands." She flipped the hood of her sweatshirt over her head. How was that knowledge supposed to strengthen her resolve? If anything, it made her realize the degree of this creature's desperation—and, by extension, *his* resolve.

"Don't you see?" Angelina said, touching Sophie's arm. "Jackson is entirely capable of sealing that creature's fate. Desjardins will never have another chance to prey on anyone, either living or in spirit. He'll have no choice but to wait until his debt is due, and then pay the piper. And that event could be imminent, if Jackson hastens it along."

The delicate trilling of the crickets suddenly stopped.

Angelina's fingers gripped Sophie's arm. "Just keep going," she said in a low voice.

Mechanically putting one foot in front of the other and keeping close to Angelina's side, Sophie was beginning to see some of the gravestones of Fog Cliff's residents emerge indistinctly from the darkness. She knew one thing with absolute certainty. *He's watching us. He's monitoring our movements with curiosity and eager anticipation...as well as a trace of suspicion, because he can't hear us and doesn't know what we're up to. Jackson has performed some magick that allows Desjardins and his cronies to be aware of our approach without being able to eavesdrop on our thoughts or conversation.*

Simultaneously, she and Angelina paused at the foot of the cemetery's paved drive and gazed up the gentle incline that would lead them into the very core of the darkness. The silence was so intense it seemed like something solid. Nature only stood in abeyance, Sophie realized, when great evil was afoot. For the first time that day, she quailed at the thought of proceeding.

"We'll be all right," Angelina said, "if we just keep our wits about us."

"Easier said than done," Sophie murmured.

"Still, we have to do it. We can't dawdle down here on the road or we'll screw everything up. Jackson's work is very dependent on timing." Placing a guiding hand on Sophie's back, Angelina began walking up the drive.

Sophie's eyes scanned the dim graves on either side. No spirits were clamoring for her attention. Even *they* were hiding from whatever monstrous creatures slithered among the stones, keeping pace with the two women whose progress they were following.

She turned to her companion and said in a low voice, "It's like...camping in the northwoods and knowing something is circling your tent in the middle of the night. You can't see it and can barely hear it, but you know it's out there. And you just can bring yourself to confront it."

Angelina's steps remained regular and purposeful. "We're going to have no choice *but* to confront it."

"I'll just feel a lot better when we meet up with Jackson and Sonny." Sophie tensed, then tugged at the hem of Angelina's shirt. "Can you hear that? Can you *feel* that?"

Chill after winding chill snaked through Sophie's body. She could hear — *My God, what is that?* — very faint sniffing sounds all around her, as if she and Angelina were surrounded by a clutch of small but bold animals. What felt like a puff of breath, stinking breath, stirred her hair, then something more substantial grazed her cheek. Sophie swiped both hands across her face.

A low chuckle came from Angelina, who had crossed her arms snugly over her breasts. "We're getting the once-over...and rather brazenly."

"God, Angelina, I don't know if I can take this. My skin is crawling." Sophie, too, hugged herself protectively.

"Jackson anticipated this. In fact, he wanted it to happen. But he's made sure it won't get out of hand." Angelina tossed her head, as if shaking off a pestering insect. Then she added with alarming bluntness, "We're baiting them, dearheart. And it's working."

As they approached the cliff, which loomed ahead like some malformed offspring of the earth and the night, a sudden wind set up a low, eerie moaning that wound throughout the cemetery. But Sophie couldn't feel any caress of breeze on her skin. The sound was continuous, maddening. Just as she was about to cover her ears, she seemed to be propelled forward by an evenly exerted pressure at her back. It wasn't overly forceful but just firm enough to be noticed.

"They're getting impatient," Angelina said.

Sophie tried to train her mind on Sonny. The thought of him was the only thing that could deflect her attention from the fearsome entities that prowled Fog Cliff this dismal evening, determined to deliver Angelina and her into the stained hands of Bruno Desjardins. She had to keep reminding herself not to display her joy and relief at seeing Sonny, not to throw herself into his strong and comforting arms.

"You truly love him, don't you," Angelina said softly.

With no hesitation, Sophie simply answered, "Yes."

Nearing the cliff, she glanced ahead and to the left and saw the marble obelisk that had served as her signpost for William Woolrich's grave. The chill that had been plaguing her immediately subsided. With a wistful smile, Sophie sent him a thought. *Hello, Will. Again, thank you, and may your life be graced with peace and happiness whether you remain in Summerland or return to earth.*

Although she didn't understand it, Sophie was shocked when a reply came distinctly into her mind. *I will be there.*

She had neither the time nor the mental space to ask for clarification. The drive was beginning to curve around the back of the cliff. Soon, they'd be drawing close to Newman's lichen-encrusted death house. And that meant soon, like the coffined bodies scattered around them, they'd be descending into the earth.

As soon as the mausoleum came dimly into view, the chill that had left Sophie gripped her again, even more strongly. Suddenly, she—and certainly Angelina, too—was being pulled rather than pushed forward. Sophie felt like a fish being reeled in. She began to feel queasy. Her eyes tried to penetrate the block of darkness between the back of the mausoleum and the cliff wall. *Where's Sonny...*

"Must we go all the way around the front?" she asked Angelina. They could've simply cut to their left and been behind the structure.

Angelina's breathless answer eliminated that option. "Yes, we have to."

The clammy coldness that enveloped them made Sophie's teeth chatter. She actually hurried forward now, eager to follow whatever tugged at her...because it led to Sonny. Refusing to glance at the mausoleum's demon-covered doors, she and Angelina turned sharply to the left and followed the southwest wall of the building to the north face of the cliff. Sophie steeled herself against any images that might drift her way from Newman's tomb. But she couldn't ward off her memory of the last message she'd gotten there, from the disciple himself. *Go down, go down, shining Sophia, where he awaits. Go down and you needn't come up again. Ah, what honor and wonders lay in submission. The pain will transport you both!*

Stress put Sophie on the verge of tears by the time she and Angelina wrestled through the tangle of bushes that concealed the mausoleum's strange and terrifying rear door. Thorns caught at her arms and legs.

"I can't see anything," Angelina hissed. She sounded both irritated and anxious. "Where *are* they?"

Sophie's heart nearly stopped. "You mean—?"

Angelina broke in, her voice strained. "Jackson and Sonny...they're not here!"

As Sophie's eyes darted, desperate and unseeing, around the tight, thorn-packed space, Angelina's announcement took on horrifying implications. Not far from their feet, where the weird little bronze door would be, something was happening.

Chapter Nineteen

A light, rapid pattering came from the other side of the mausoleum wall. The noise seemed to follow the outline of the small door—up one side, across the top, down the other side—as if a child were tap-tap-tapping the door’s inner edges or a rat were scurrying around it. Then the pattering began to alternate with a sandpapery slithering.

The sounds paralyzed Sophie. Her eyes froze into wide circles. As the noises continued, she let out a feeble mewl and immediately put her hand to her mouth to stifle a louder cry. Then the tapping and scraping stopped—Sophie held her breath—but were soon followed by a faltering squeal. A blade of greenish light made a pale incision on the black ground.

Sophie tried to spin around and flee, but thorns and brambles hooked her sweatshirt, trapping her. She felt something lock around her arm...then, as she was about to scream, a hand came over her mouth.

“Shhh, you’re all right. Just hurry. They’re going in.”

Sonny! With his help, Sophie managed to turn around. She was about to reach for him but, at the last moment, remembered Spey’s injunction—she and Angelina were not to acknowledge the men’s presence. Arms pushed and yanked at branches. A hand grasped Sophie’s. Before she knew it, she was at Angelina’s side again. Before she had time to think, Jackson was ducking into the opening in the cliff. Angelina, bringing up the rear, nudged her inside.

Sophie shot a quick glance over her shoulder. The bronze plane was still rising. The sickly light, taking on substance now, was slowly oozing toward the cliff.

Dear God, Sophie thought frantically, Sonny’s still out there!

“Go on,” Angelina said. *“He’ll be all right. Jackson ‘cloaked’ him. Besides, he has the fetish.”*

As was the case last week when they were here, Sophie and her companions had only to hunch over a bit to follow the down-sloping path to the first chamber. She and Angelina carried Maglite flashlights to help them find their way. Yesterday, during their meeting, Jackson had told them there was a lower, larger cavern—one that could be accessed both by this route and the tighter tunnel down which Sophie had been dragged.

After they crossed the first chamber, the trio made a left turn around a wall of rock and threaded their way between stony, close-pressing walls. For one twelve-foot stretch, they had to turn sideways to squeeze through the passage. Sophie didn’t need to raise the beam of her flashlight to make sure Jackson was still ahead of her, didn’t need to turn around to make sure Angelina was still behind her. She could sense as well

as smell them both. Spey virtually throbbed with energy. Overlying it was the aroma of his leather coat and the rich pungency of whatever oil he'd used to anoint himself. Angelina emitted a strong psychic vibration of a different nature, and it was laced by the distinctive fragrance of her designer perfume.

It was considerably more difficult to determine just how deep they were descending. The path was somewhat winding and uneven, with occasional sharp dips and drop-offs. Just as Sophie began to feel the fist of claustrophobia curl around her, Jackson disappeared from sight.

"There's a ledge," Angelina whispered at her back. "Lower yourself to the ground. You'll be able to feel the edge of it."

Sophie swept her light beam around her feet. She saw the path abruptly terminate. Beyond was a well of darkness. Tentatively, she dropped to a sit, stuck her legs out in front of her and scooted forward until her legs angled downward and the backs of her knees cupped an edge.

"Just jump down. Remember, it's only about four feet high."

Sophie shoved herself off the ledge, stumbled on the pocked floor, regained her balance. Angelina was right behind her. They swung their flashlight beams around the space.

It was an irregular chamber of considerable breadth—perhaps fifteen or twenty feet across—although the ceiling wasn't very high. Jackson was already moving about, making his preparations. Sophie and Angelina, hugging the wall to give him as much space as possible, sidled over to a low outcropping and sat down. They each pulled candles from the front pouches of their sweatshirts and lit them.

Spey lifted a folded piece of fabric from his coat pocket and spread it on the ground. He pulled some sort of dagger, a wand and a small goblet from inside his coat and placed them on the fabric. He lifted a cone of incense from his other coat pocket and, after lighting it, set it too on the cloth. Then he removed his coat, draped it over a larger, flatter rock and arranged his paraphernalia on top of it. He was wearing a red tunic, cut low and cinched at the waist with a chain from which amulets dangled. A small pentacle hung around his neck.

Raptly, Sophie watched him. She thought she glimpsed a tattoo on one side of his chest. "I wish I knew what he was doing," she whispered. The only thing obvious was the makeshift altar.

"You needn't think about it," Angelina whispered back. "Anyway, it's too complicated to get into."

Spey had said essentially the same thing the night before. He hadn't bothered explaining the ritual to her and Sonny. They didn't need to understand it, he'd said, and besides, there was no such thing as a "short course" in High Magick.

When Sonny—scholar that he was—had pressed for an explanation, Jackson relented—but only to a point. "Basically I'll be doing a double invocation/evocation rite. It's a bit unusual, at least under these circumstances. But I'm more than ready."

Later, after they'd left Jackson's apartment, Angelina had elaborated—but only vaguely. "This rite is going to be very touchy, very dangerous, especially outside the confines of a proper ceremonial room. And Jackson's approach to magick is quite...idiosyncratic. Even though he knows all the master teachings inside out, they only serve as a sort of piecemeal foundation for his work. The blueprint for the superstructure is always his own creation. He is a quirky but powerful wizard. Expect the unexpected."

Now, as the "quirky but powerful" Spey followed whatever blueprint was in his mind, Sophie sighed in resignation. She could only wait and then do what she'd been told to do.

As she mentally improvised a prayer for Sonny's protection, something at the edge of her vision caught her attention. Reluctant to turn her eyes from Jackson, who was using his dagger to inscribe a circle and other figures on the dirt floor, she shot a quick glance to her right. What she saw made her clutch at Angelina's arm.

The putrescent, ectoplasmic substance that had been disgorged by Newman's tomb was hovering at the entrance to the cavern. Sophie realized it was the same stuff that had rolled over her and Sonny at the cemetery the other night—only, this time, it had that dun-green glow. And the glow, she knew, was indicative of something exceptionally unpleasant.

"Excitement," she heard Angelina say. "Anticipation of victory."

Sophie glanced at her—Angelina's sour expression matched the tone of her voice—then looked at Jackson to gauge his progress.

He was striding around the circle. Four times he stopped, dropping something to the ground then thrusting his dagger at it and making graceful flourishes with his wand. He spoke in Latin—Sophie thought she heard the names of archangels—but the words were generally too quiet to make out with any certainty. At each of the four points where he'd paused, something, *something* began to take shape in the air.

Figures. Softly glowing, shimmering figures, each composed of two intermingled colors, like a watercolor wash. One was yellow drizzled with purple; the second, blue tintured with orange; the third, red shot through with green; the fourth, a blend of earthy, autumnal hues. They were too indistinct for Sophie to identify them, but each had a vaguely human form and seemed to be "holding" an accompanying object. Jackson returned to his improvised altar. Again speaking in Latin, he seemed to cross himself, forehead to chest, right shoulder to left—not a Catholic sign of the cross, but similar. His arms moved out to his sides, rose above his head...and the most beautiful, effulgent light spilled over him like a heavenly waterfall.

"Come on, we have to take our places," Angelina said as she stood up.

Transfixed, Sophie felt rooted to the spot.

Angelina pulled her to her feet. "Now."

* * * * *

Eyes closed, Sonny sat on the damp ground with his back against the cliff wall, arms resting on his bent legs. He kept his mind blank, tried to regulate his breathing. The fetish in his pocket was growing warmer.

He'd first noticed its warmth when Jackson, Sophie and Angelina entered the cliff and that vile, filmy excretion with its murky phosphorescence crept from the mausoleum's small back door. It was accompanied by the same odor he and Sophie nearly choked on a few nights ago.

But Spey told him, on their way over here tonight, not to react. Sonny was to stay put, remain still, be receptive...whatever *that* meant.

"It's just not in my nature," Sonny told him. "Sophie's going in there. What the fuck am I doing, sitting outside?"

"You're sitting outside for a reason, my man," Spey replied. "Just don't do anything impulsive. If and when you're needed, you'll know. Believe me, you *will know*. That's why you have to empty yourself and become inert. It will keep your *inner* senses sharp and unclouded."

A typically cryptic Jackson Spey answer but Sonny had come to trust him without question.

The ground beneath him began vibrating. Sonny could feel ever-so-faint tremors. He opened his eyes, looked around, saw nothing but the twisted branches of the shrubs and the back wall of Newman's charnel house, its secret door sealed once more.

Sonny closed his eyes. The only sound he heard was the single *hoot* of a nearby owl. He found it comforting somehow.

Still in his jacket pocket, resting against his hip, the fetish shifted delicately and heated by a few more degrees.

* * * * *

Jackson inscribed two triangles on the floor, just beyond the perimeter of the circle, at roughly its ten and two o'clock arcs. As they were instructed, Sophie entered one, Angelina the other. As soon as Sophie stepped within its lines, knowledge flooded through her. She and Angelina were doing something extremely perilous. No human being should ever be within a magickal triangle. But it was here, within these fairly small spaces, that the women were to lure their adversaries. Angelina would try to draw in the Nephilim. Sophie, of course, had only to wait for Desjardins.

Jackson, barely visible within his veil of light, began his invocation in a magisterial voice. "Come unto me and make me, now your servant, like thyself. Make me like no other but thyself, the furnace in which all will bends. Make all spirit and all flesh bend to me. Everything upon and within the earth, everything within the churning water and whirling air and rushing fire. Let mountains shudder before me and storm clouds flee. Place every scourge of God and spell of man within my controlling hands."

At that, Jackson turned his palms up and lowered his head. More softly he intoned several more phrases—whether in Latin or Hebrew or the language of magick, Sophie could not tell. Awestruck, she could only gape at him.

“I am he, I am he,” Jackson murmured...and his very shape and appearance began to change. His clothing dissolved, his back broadened, his hair blew loosely around his shoulders. Then, curling his fingers into his palms as if clutching something within his fists, the wizard turned from the altar, arms raised, and thundered, “*I am He!*”

Within his cocoon of light, he was possessed by a god and so became a god.

Sophie didn’t know from which pantheon the god-form was drawn; it had become nearly impossible to look at or see through the blaze of radiance. But she knew she was no longer looking at the man who was Jackson Spey. She was looking at a wizard transformed.

Angelina, seemingly unfazed by this, unzipped her sweatshirt. Beneath it, she wore a skimpy, gauzy undergarment that barely contained her weighty, clearly visible breasts. Enticingly she shook them, then tossed her head back. “Come on, you little fiends,” she muttered.

Angelina’s guard was down and her focus altered just enough for Sophie to read something about her—and it was a shocking revelation.

That display, and a lot else, is the result of cosmetic enhancement and surgical alteration. She wasn’t born with the genes for it. In fact, she wasn’t born with the right genes to make her either a complete woman or a complete man. My God...she was born a hermaphrodite!

What was it Angelina had said right after Sonny met her for the first time? “The joke’s on them.” Indeed, it was on all the men who slavered over her. And, if all went well, the joke would be on the Nephilim, too.

Wand in left hand and dagger in right, the wizard stalked around the circle, his eyes trained on Angelina. Sophie wrenched her gaze from her startling friend. A sloppy, buzzing sound gradually filled the cavern, like angry bees in bubbling tar, and the stench of rotting flesh rolled through the air. Anxiously, Sophie looked around. The ugly, viscous mass that followed them there had slipped in through the doorway and now circled Angelina. Its movement somehow seemed sly, calculating. Sophie realized it was. Predators were stalking their prey—but not for long. Extending itself like a snail foot, the lumpish glob began to invade the triangle.

Through watering eyes, Sophie saw Angelina wince. Faces emerged from and faded back into the noxious cloud that had all but engulfed the woman. It must be the Nephilim—deformed creatures with black tongues lolling between sharp, yellow teeth. Saliva hung in greenish strings down their long chins.

Just as Sophie was about to yell, “*Do something,*” the wizard stopped before the triangle and pointed his wand. He shouted something in Latin. Angelina scurried into the circle. She was no sooner inside than the wizard swept his dagger over both her point of exit and her point of entry, and again aimed his wand at the triangle. Almost simultaneously, the Nephilim’s burbling and buzzing spiraled into a high-pitched

shriek, and the demon-cluster broke into brittle black cinders that were instantly dispersed from the space they'd just claimed. They bobbed sluggishly in the air for a moment, then rained down on the cavern floor and disappeared into tiny puffs of smoke.

Sophie's heart beat faster. Her turn was next.

* * * * *

The fetish was jittering now. Sonny tried to ignore it. At least the ground no longer moved. Just moments ago it had actually shaken—enough to make Sonny wonder if the New Madras Fault had finally blown—but the quaking wasn't extreme and was over quickly.

Why the hell am I out here? Sonny kept wondering. *Am I just supposed to shoo away kids who come sneaking around with twelve-packs? Is that all Jackson thinks I'm good for?*

Although he was still concerned about Sophie's welfare, he hadn't heard any disturbing sounds come from the cliff—no screams, no rockslides, no preternatural voices. And he hadn't felt compelled to go in.

Thank God, he thought with a nibble of guilt.

The prospect of entering tunnels and caves *still* made his blood run cold. And, this time, he didn't even have a belt full of grenades—just a nasty-looking doll that was probably packed with jumping beans...

* * * * *

The cavern, quiet now, was too cold. Sophie seemed to recall that subterranean spaces were supposed to be a steady fifty-five degrees. Didn't anyone else notice the excessively low temperature?

She still sat in the ten-o'clock-position triangle, legs drawn up to her chest and bottom getting numb. Angelina sat in much the same position in the circle, except she'd rested her forehead on her knees. The wizard stood before his altar, head downturned, hands—holding the wand and dagger—crossed over his chest. Whatever divine light he'd called down still encased him, but it had softened to an almost watery, silken ripple after the Nephilim had been either banished or destroyed.

Sophie dropped her head to her hands and hoped for the hundredth time that Sonny was all right. He should be. Up there it was only dark, after all, and if nothing was happening in this cave, this godforsaken vortex, surely nothing was happening in that usually peaceful cemetery.

The temperature dropped further, and the earth began to rumble.

Chapter Twenty

Sonny's head jerked. He'd nearly dozed off. "Shit!" he barked, then swiped at his jacket pocket and cursed again. That fetish was hotter than hell!

Tensely he stood up and looked around, holding the pocket away from his thigh. Fog Cliff Cemetery lay placidly beneath the stars. Except that in one spot in the sky, there *were* no stars. Frowning, Sonny stared into the atmosphere.

A dense, dark cloud was directly above the cliff. Just as Sonny began to anticipate the first plopping drops of a spring shower—which never came—the cloud began to descend...

* * * * *

The wizard's head snapped up and turned sharply to the right. Curious and shivering, Sophie watched him. Hollow laughter echoed throughout the cavern. A gurgling voice, barely intelligible, melted out of the laughter. "My spark, my star, you have delivered yourself to me!" As if the voice were spewing it, mold began to spread over the cave walls and floors.

Whimpering, Sophie folded herself into a tight fetal curl. She couldn't bring herself to do what Angelina did and seduce this creature. She couldn't invite him to get close to her. Trembling, she looked through a crack in her fingers.

The entire space was infused with a dreary, hideous phosphorescence. Fungal matter continued to whoosh slowly over every surface. And then she felt him.

Icy hands gripped her shoulders, trying to tear off her sweatshirt. Sophie gripped it tighter against her body. Her chin was lifted, her eyes forced open.

"Let me gaze upon your beauty," the voice cooed, "before I devour it."

The wavering, ghostly face of Bruno Desjardins—similar to the photographic image Sophie had seen but coarser, crueler—took shape in front of her like a distillation of evil. Mewling sounds came from her throat but she couldn't seem to speak.

And then the god-wizard was there, speaking in French. His tone was both sneering and commanding. Desjardins looked stunned, then irate. He, too, said something in French.

The wizard dispensed with the courtesy of speaking to the creature in its native tongue. "You can't resist me," he said. "You know you can't. You've seen me before, and you've quailed in my presence."

"Fuck you, *sorcier*," Desjardins shot back. "I've begged, borrowed, stolen and bought power you cannot begin to imagine, much less overcome. So take your cheap whore and depart. *This woman is mine.*"

* * * * *

Sonny felt a drumming inside his head, as if his brain were trying to escape his skull. The fetish, still snapped securely in his pocket, was bouncing off his thigh. He stumbled toward the jagged opening in the cliff and stepped inside.

Black, all black, can't see.

Sonny knew from experience that the perspiration beading on his face and the hammering of his heart were the first signs of an anxiety attack. He began to feel dizzy, then nauseous. Gasping for air, he continued forward. He felt driven.

The passage soon widened into what might have been a larger space. No one, nothing, was there.

Sonny's head began to clear. *Where do I go?* Panicking, he wildly began patting and kicking at the damp walls, trying to find another tunnel entrance. His hands and feet kept connecting with solid rock.

"It's too fucking dark!" he shouted in frustration.

Suddenly, a pale light shivered in one portion of the chamber and slowly took on the details of a figure.

Panting, Sonny stared at it...

...and saw the semi-transparent form of a haggard young man dressed in a Civil War uniform, a Union uniform. He stood at attention beside a floor-to-ceiling slice of rock that jutted out from the surrounding wall like a screen. As Sonny lurched toward it, the pale figure saluted him, then instantly condensed into a glowing gold orb.

"Thank you, private," Sonny gasped. "I'm right behind you."

He angled behind the wedge of rock and found himself in another passageway – one he likely wouldn't have otherwise discovered in that absolute, confounding darkness.

The orb drifted ahead of him.

"I love you, Sophie," he kept whispering like a mantra. "I love you." He bulldozed along, in places nearly jamming his muscular frame immovably between the close walls. But he managed to keep forging ahead, led by William Woolrich. "I'm coming, Sophie. I love you."

* * * * *

Sophie felt herself being lifted off the ground. "Let me go!" she shrieked. "I *despise* you!"

"How you feel matters not," the smug, inhuman voice replied. "It is my destiny to possess you. I have *made* it my destiny."

Although Desjardins was not solid, he was forceful. Immobilized, Sophie felt fetid, viscous slime dripping onto her head, down the sides of her face, into her sweatshirt. She spat to keep it from entering her mouth—if it did, she would start retching.

And then she felt the caress, both soothing and invigorating, of Esme's hand. The spirit guide's caring aura seemed to dilute the toxins with which Desjardins had filled the cavern.

Just as Sophie was about to tell the White Witch, *Go, immediately. It's too dangerous for you here*, Desjardins confirmed her fears.

"Back again, you stupid bitch?" he grated. "Now I shall dispatch you once and for all."

Frantic but powerless, Sophie dimly saw the wizard inscribing arabesque figures in the air. The glow surrounding him pulsed and swirled more strongly, its colors intensifying. She heard more Latin phrases spoken in the wizard's god-voice—solemn, imperious.

"Leave us be, conjurer!" Desjardins roared, dislodging pieces of the surrounding walls. Dirt and rock shards pelted the damp floor.

Was Esme safe? Yes—Sophie heard a tinkle of laughter. The foul mucous began to disappear from her body. As it did so, she floated gently to the ground.

"How like the blind, egotistical sot you are to underestimate me," the wizard calmly said to his adversary.

Sophie could feel the tension of her would-be kidnapper. The small space outlined by the triangle seemed bound by ever-tightening steel bands. She knew her only road to safety lay along the short distance between the triangle and the circle, but she couldn't reach it. Somehow, Desjardins was still holding her captive, and Sophie couldn't move beyond her narrow prison.

Why isn't Jackson freeing me?

The question had no sooner formed in Sophie's mind than Esme answered it. *He's waiting.*

Before Sophie could ask what Spey was waiting for, fire hissed up from the ground, encircling her. She screamed and folded herself into a tighter tuck. The screen of flames, reaching like fangs toward the cavern's ceiling, seemed a prelude to what could only be Desjardins' final, horrifying act.

* * * * *

The guiding orb stopped just as Sonny spotted a glimmering hole of light in the darkness. "Thank you, private. Dismissed," he said...and heard Sophie scream.

Lunging forward, Sonny lost his footing and fell onto his stomach. He scrambled with outstretched arms to gain some purchase, move ahead—anything but lie there. His

fingers curled over a sharp but slippery ledge. Heedless of the revolting stench and unearthly light that came from just beyond this doorway, he pulled and pushed himself toward the ghastly space until, suddenly, he was tumbling into it, headfirst. Something—the fetish, perhaps—caused him to spring upright almost immediately.

The atmosphere was oppressive, like that in some accursed, haunted dungeon. Sonny thought he glimpsed figures in the murky near-distance but they didn't capture his attention. Instead, all thought overridden now by instinct, he dove for the fire...dove *into* the fire.

What happened thereafter happened too quickly and strangely to register in Sonny's mind until sometime later. He felt no heat, although his skin and hair were being scorched. He heard the hellish snarl of some enraged monster, although he saw nothing. And then, as his arms closed around Sophie and her arms closed around him, he was blasted by a volcanic explosion of words.

"Thieving bastard! I will pack your bowels with hot coals and fill your cock with acid and stuff your throat with wasps! For all eternity, pretender—do you understand? You will know nothing but the most hideous tortures for all eternity!" A rush of words came from Sonny's throat. "I love this woman. I love her, you fucking damned, doomed pervert, and we satisfy each other beyond your wildest, sickest dreams. You are *beyond* salvation, you sack of shit. We leave you to your fate."

Protectively wrapping Sophie with his own body, Sonny once again dove through the wall of flame...

...and landed at someone's feet.

For several seconds, Sonny couldn't tell if it was someone or some *thing*. Breathless and wincing, his skin painfully seared, he looked up at the looming, majestic figure haloed with light.

Like a reflection in water, it waveringly altered. Sonny was gazing up at Jackson Spey.

"Thought you'd never get here," he said quietly, then changed back again.

Sonny felt as if his mental circuits were overloaded. He made sure Sophie was still at his side—she was, and saying something to him about staying "inside the circle"—and then he saw Angelina, sitting cross-legged near a slab of rock draped in black, her eyes trained on whatever Spey had become. The wizard himself was now standing with his back to them, apparently staring at or concentrating on something.

Sonny started to shiver. He knew it was caused by the burns. Closing his eyes, he tried to concentrate on controlling the spreading, deepening pain and regulating his breathing. He had to remain alert.

That's when he saw Esme. Sonny knew his eyes were closed, but he saw her nonetheless—a petite woman with flowing, silvery gray hair and eyes the same color. She was floating before him, chanting softly in a language he didn't understand. The air around him seemed charged with a bountiful sweetness and serenity. Sonny felt her approbation. She was proud of him.

Then he felt something else, a decidedly more physical sensation. Starting at his scalp and moving downward, the pain was leaving him. Whatever burns he had suffered to his face and chest, arms and hands, were being healed. In their place, Sonny felt the pleasant flex and tingle of restored skin. Marveling at it, he uttered a breathy, incredulous laugh. Esme smiled at him and departed.

He opened his eyes, reached for Sophie and kissed her.

"You saw her, didn't you?" Sophie asked against his ear.

"Yes."

"Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yes," Sonny said. "A wonderful lady. And a lady full of wonders."

Sophie nodded, then whispered, "Look."

Sonny turned his clearer eyes in the direction she indicated. The triangle of fire that had burned him was gone—in fact, he realized, had diminished and died as soon as he and Sophie were safely inside the circle—but the space it had delineated wasn't empty.

The milky figure of Bruno Desjardins was still within it, head twisting, arms flailing. Skewered by the wizard's stare and trapped inside his small cage, he could do little else.

The wizard strode across the circle and stopped before the flat rock. Face raised and arms extended out from his sides, he spoke in Latin, in a booming voice. Desjardins' partially materialized form issued an inhuman sound—half growl, half shriek—that made Sonny quiver in the pit of his stomach. Grabbing an ornamental dagger from the rock, the wizard once more went to face him.

Desjardins spoke in a flurry of jumbled Cajun French and English—first attempting to bargain, then promising, then imploring. The wizard, making elaborate flourishes with his dagger, responded only with, "Be still, evil one."

The wizard pointed his dagger at the cave wall beyond the triangle, then, with a flip of the wrist, at Desjardins. He held it in that position as he shouted out something in Latin. Desjardins, at the sound of it, writhed with such agonized ferocity he was little more than a spinning, muddy blur within the triangle. Sonny had recognized only one word of the wizard's invocation, *Astaroth*, but it was a chilling one. Astaroth, an archdemon high up in the hierarchy of Hell, was not an entity Sonny wanted to see conjured. Sophie must have heard the name, too—perhaps even understood most of what the wizard uttered—because she slid over to Sonny and cowered against his chest.

A vaporous thread spun out of the cavern's rocky wall and gradually expanded into a sulfurous cloud. There was something within it, a moving black form that throbbed with cunning malevolence. Only the wizard was willing to confront it and he did so without flinching. Angelina hid her face in her hands. Even Sonny partially averted his eyes, but intellectual curiosity caused him to train his peripheral vision on the stinking, yellowish mist.

The wizard said nothing further. He merely stood, straight as a staff, pointing his dagger at the debased creature in the triangle. The cavern was filled with an almost palpable, preternatural quiet. Sonny held his breath, hazarding a bolder look beyond the circle.

Desjardins' spirit was more faded than it had been just a moment ago and was definitely much more still. Very slowly, the wizard began rotating his wrist, angling the tip of the dagger toward the cavern's floor. He was, Sonny realized, indicating a specific spot, quite likely along the triangle's border.

As soon as the movement of the dagger stopped, sound began issuing from the sulfur cloud—a manic, gibbering laughter that was a mockery of innocent delight. A dull yellow tendril snaked toward the triangle as the gibbering crescendoed. Pausing briefly at the perimeter, as if making sure it was safe to cross, the tendril suddenly darted inside and wound around Desjardins as rapidly as a lightning bolt. He let loose a banshee wail that raised the hair on the back of Sonny's neck and caused Sophie to clap her hands over her ears. Caught in his gaseous but unbreakable bindings, the debtor was about to meet—and forever pay off—his diabolical creditor.

Legs spread wide and arms raised high over his head, both hands clutching the dagger's hilt, the wizard pointed its tip at the juncture of cavern wall and floor. He shouted a command. Earth and rock split open with a cracking rumble and a cloud of dust. In the blink of an eye, Bruno Desjardins and the negotiator through whom he'd struck his deal were sucked into the fissure, sulfurous cloak and all. The accommodating earth immediately sealed itself behind them.

The wizard walked counterclockwise around the circle and stopped at his stone altar.

Sonny shot a glance at Angelina, who had lifted her head and sighed heavily.

"Is it over?" he whispered.

"For the most part."

Running a hand over his hair, Sonny wondered what she meant. He looked around. For the first time since entering the circle, he noticed the four semitransparent forms spaced equidistantly around its perimeter. Did Spey conjure them up? The figures were hypnotically ethereal, but they seemed infused with an unassailable strength. Sonny guessed they were supernatural sentries of some kind.

Assuming the wizard shouldn't be disturbed until his work was finished, Sonny turned back to Sophie. His wan smile was full of love.

"Are you all right?" he asked, lowering his head to hers.

"Yes, thanks to you." Sophie's smile mirrored his. "Are *you* all right?"

"Mm-hmm. Thanks to Esme." Sonny touched his jacket pocket. The fetish, completely inert now, was still there. And thanks to this ugly little dude, he thought with weary amusement. He kissed the top of Sophie's head. "But I'll feel even better once we're out of here."

Closing his eyes, Sonny let himself drift toward stupor. Everything that had happened this evening—or all week, for that matter—was far too mind-wrenching to contemplate at the moment. Already it was beginning to seem like a dream.

But it wasn't a dream, Sonny thought. It wasn't. *From now on, I'll see the world differently. This was my initiation...into the world behind the veil...and the mysteries of magick...and the power of pure evil...*

And the power of love...

His head snapped up. Spey was leaning over him, his hand on Sonny's shoulder. "Heads up, hotshot, we can go now."

Sonny felt Sophie stir within the circle of his arms. He blinked a few times, stretching his eyelids to keep them open. The air smelled different, looked and felt different. *Where...*

Bewildered, Sonny turned his head and looked around him, above him. He and Sophie were sitting on the ground outside the cliff, exactly where he'd been stationed before.

As Sophie rose, Sonny turned his wondering eyes to Jackson Spey. The man simply stood there in his black leather coat, hands in pockets, gazing serenely down at him. Angelina stood at his side.

"Come on." Spey extended a hand to help Sonny up. "The walk home should ensure you get a good night's sleep."

"But how..." A little stiffly, Sonny got to his feet. He glanced at Sophie. She, too, seemed disoriented.

"We can talk another time," Spey said softly. He put one hand on Sonny's back, another on Sophie's. "'Between the acting of a dreadful thing and the first motion, all the interim is like a phantasma, or a hideous dream.'"

Both startled and confused, Sonny could only say, "What?"

"Shakespeare," Jackson said, steering them toward the paved road. "Just trying to dazzle you with my erudition."

Epilogue

Glorious spring sunshine flooded the bedroom. It was the first thing Sonny noticed upon opening his eyes. The second was Sophie's lovely face, smiling down at him, and her persuasive fingers tripping lightly along the "happy trail" of hair that led from his navel to his —

"Cock-a-doodle-do," she said liltingly, kissing Sonny's cheek as she toyed with his semi-erection. Then her expression sobered and her hand stilled. "Are we really in love?"

Sonny touched Sophie's face. So he *had* said it. Whether he'd said it to Sophie or to someone else, Sonny couldn't remember. That, too, was part of the "dream". But what mattered was that he *felt* it.

"Yes," he answered with some wonder, "we're in love."

As if he'd just grabbed a key and inserted it into a lock, a door in Sonny's mind opened. Everything that happened yesterday evening stood in clear, stark relief in his memory.

He also realized he'd been Sophie's intended rescuer all along—certainly from the moment Edmund Curry had told him to borrow the Zorundu fetish, possibly from the very moment he'd met her. Jackson Spey's role was to get rid of Bruno Dejardins, but Sonny's role, far more important, was to save Sophie...in more ways than one.

"Is it coming back to you?" Sophie asked.

"Yes." Sonny boosted himself to a sit, letting the images and impressions roll through his mind. He didn't feel shaken and vulnerable. He didn't feel skeptical and untouchable. He simply accepted the experience while letting himself be awed by it.

"It was the same way for me," Sophie said, sitting beside him and taking his hand. "As soon as I woke up and saw you, I thought, 'I've just slept with a hero, and I love him with all my heart.' And then I remembered last night, how you dove through a wall of fire and confronted that vile creature and told him you loved me."

Thoughtful, Sonny nodded. "Yeah, I did." He squeezed Sophie's hand. "And I meant it." He glanced over the edge of the mattress, then at his lover. "Is the talisman still under the bed?"

"No, it's gone. It was there yesterday, but now it's—" Sophie shrugged.

"Unnecessary," Sonny said. "So it was...removed." He chuckled silently and shook his head.

"Now do you believe in magic?"

Sonny looked into her eyes. Despite the playful archness of her tone, Sophie obviously posed the question seriously. How could he answer her? Sonny knew it

would be months, perhaps years, before could come to terms with his infinitely expanded new universe.

"I still don't understand —"

Sophie put three fingers over his lips. "I didn't ask if or what you understand or don't understand. I asked if you believe."

The answer, Sonny suddenly realized, was right there in her eyes. "It brought love into my life. So how could I *not* believe?"

Sophie beamed at him as if he were a student who'd just realized his potential. She held Sonny's face and kissed him, then disappeared beneath the covers.

"Uh, sweetie," Sonny added, feeling her wriggle around on his stomach and thighs, feeling the cushiony press of her breasts and the dance of her lips and tongue on his skin, "one more thing. Can we stay away from that damned cemetery?"

Sophie mumbled a response as her mouth closed softly and surely over his resurrected hard-on.

"I didn't catch that," Sonny chortled, feeling the rapid extension of his cock. His hips arched reflexively. "Never talk with your mouth full." His breath shallowed and gathered speed.

Sophie's head popped out from the tent of blankets but her hand kept a firm hold on her plaything. "I said, we don't need 'that damned cemetery' anymore...wouldn't you agree?"

Sonny managed a weak nod. "I agree."

"But I do think we should celebrate."

"Isn't that what we're doing? Or about to do?"

Still smiling, Sophie slowly nodded.

Sonny narrowed his eyes. "What are you up to? You're starting to look mischievous."

"I think we should include F.D. Maybe turn this into a kind of a retirement party for him."

Scowling, Sonny propped himself up on his elbows. "F.D.? Well, those aren't Jackson Spey's initials, so you can't mean you want a threesome with *him*." Then he muttered an addendum. "Which is a relief."

Sophie retrieved her hand from beneath the covers and scooted over the mattress toward the nightstand. Opening the drawer, she pulled out a gleaming red monstrosity that virtually crawled with thick, simulated veins. Hoisting it in the air, she cried, "Behold, the Crimson Conquistador!"

Sonny widened his eyes. "Is that F.D.?" he whispered in mock awe.

"Well, that's what Camilla would call him. It stands for Fake Dick."

Sonny dropped his head to the pillow. Throwing an arm over his eyes, he began to snicker. The bed shook as his laughter mounted. "Oh...my...God," he sputtered, wiping his eyes. "Yeah, by all means retire him. I can't possibly compete with *that*."

"Oh, I'm not so sure," Sophie said coyly, switching on the dildo and running it over her bare breasts. "I think a contest is in order."

Sonny was no longer laughing. His own very real dick, which had begun to doze off, suddenly paid attention again. "Who gets to go first?" he murmured. The situation did have potential.

Sophie handed him the dildo, then reached back into the nightstand drawer and pulled out some strawberry-flavored, warming lubricant. "Our guest of honor, of course." She reclined on top of the covers and spread her legs.

Sonny's imagination went into overdrive. Moving around Sophie so he faced her, he felt his cock swell as his gaze slid down her creamy thighs to her open, welcoming pussy. He spread lubricant on the vibrating head of the dildo and leaned forward, skimming the head over Sophie's breasts and around her nipples. They responded, raising and tautening. With a moan of pleasure, Sophie closed her eyes and arched her back. Sonny gently but firmly prodded her nipples with the slick, vibrating head, eliciting more moans. Sophie's lips parted to accommodate her excited breathing, and his own respiration soon kept pace with hers.

He pulled the dildo down the middle of her chest and stomach until it was poised at the top of her pussy. Parting the labia with his fingertips, Sonny delicately eased the dildo's head over and around the pink bud of her clit, then around the glistening entrance to her vagina. When Sophie began to groan, he slid the dildo inside her. His own cock swelled and hardened—almost in envy, it seemed—and as Sophie writhed against the motion of the vibrator, Sonny thought, *Damned if I'm going to let this thing make her come*.

Sonny slid out the dildo and tossed it onto the floor. "Adios," he mumbled. He grasped Sophie's hips, urging them onto his thighs. Sitting on his haunches, he plunged his eager cock into her ready body. With a prolonged whimper, she curled forward and wrapped her arms around Sonny's shoulders.

"I love you," he whispered into her ear, and kept repeating it as he dragged his lips down her face and neck, as his hands moved up into the silken tumult of her hair. "God how I love you."

Sophie crushed her body against his. "I love you, too...and declare you the winner."

"Oh yes," Sonny gasped as his life pumped into and merged with Sophie's, "I do believe in magic."

About the Author

K.Z. Snow (formerly writing as Kate Snow) is the daughter of Milwaukee tavernkeepers and learned her first words off a Wurlitzer jukebox. Nine years of higher education, resulting in two and a half English degrees and a stint as a teacher, did not dampen her enthusiasm for beer, Green Bay Packers football, classic R&B, and various forms of political incorrectness.

She's been many things in her life, including a varsity debater, a Catholic, a hippie, a Girl Scout, a junker, a fag hag, a gardener, an editor, a saxophone/bassoon/tambourine player (not all at once), a damned good dancer, and a companion to most species of domesticated animals, including men.

One thing she has never been is a Republican. One thing she will always be is a writer.

She now lives in rural Wisconsin, not far from the birthplace of surrealism, a.k.a. "The Dells." Her imagination and her hips continue to grow unchecked.

K.Z. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.



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