



JOSH
LANYON

The Hell You Say

Adrien English
MYSTERIES

Loose Id

THE HELL YOU SAY

(An Adrien English Mystery)

Josh Lanyon

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Published by
Loose Id LLC
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924
Carson City NV 89701-1215
www.loose-id.com

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ISBN 978-1-59632-582-1

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Judith David
Cover Artist: Croco Designs

There is nothing new under the sun but there are lots of old things we don't know.

-- Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*

Acknowledgements

To Nick (the other one), who keeps me on the straight and narrow. Well, on the narrow, anyway.

Sincere thanks also to B.W.B. and Drewey Wayne Gunn.

And finally, special thanks to the readers who kept pushing and pleading for a new Adrien English novel. This one's for you.

Chapter One

The voice on the phone rasped, “Bones of anger, bones of dust, full of fury, revenge is just. I scatter these bones, these bones of rage, enemy mine, I bring you pain. Torment, fire, death the toll, with this hex I curse your soul. So mote it be.”

I handed the receiver to Angus, who was facing out the “We Recommend” stand by the counter. “It’s for you.”

He took the receiver and put his ear against it as though expecting an electric shock. He listened, then, hand shaking, he replaced the receiver and stared at me. Behind the blue lenses of the John Lennon specs his eyes were terrified. He licked his pale lips.

“Look, Angus,” I said. “Why don’t you talk to Jake? He’s a cop. Maybe he can help.”

“He’s a homicide detective,” Angus muttered. “Plus he doesn’t like me.”

True on both counts, but I tried anyway.

“He doesn’t *dislike* you, really. Besides, you’ve got to talk to someone. This is harassment.”

“Harassment?” His voice shot up a notch. “I wish it was harassment! They’re going to kill me.”

A customer lurking in the Dell Mapbacks coughed. I realized we were not alone in the bookstore.

I gestured to Angus. He followed me back to the storeroom that served as my office. So far we’d had a grand total of three customers browsing the shelves on this gloomy November day. I half shut the door to the office, turned to Angus.

“Okay, what the hell is going on?” I sort of knew what the hell was going on, so I added, “Exactly.”

I thought my tone was pretty calm, but he put his hands out as though to ward me off. "I can't talk about it," he gabbled. "I mean, if I talk about it, if I reveal the secrets of the --" He swallowed The Word. "They'll kill me."

"I thought they were already trying to kill you?"

"I mean physically kill me."

"Uh-huh," I said. I sounded like Jake.

Angus caught the skeptical note in my voice. "Adrien, you don't understand. You've never -- they know where I live. They know where I work. They know where Wanda lives. They know where Wanda works. They --"

"Why don't you leave town for a while?" I interrupted. "It's nearly Christmas. Why don't you...take a vacation?"

"It's November."

"It's after Thanksgiving."

Angus had worked at Cloak and Dagger Books for the past year, but I knew little about him beyond the fact that he was finishing up an undisclosed undergrad program at UCLA which seemed to entail an awful lot of courses in folklore, mythology, and the occult. He was twenty-something, lived alone, and was a decent, if irregular employee. Lisa, my mother, insisted that he was on drugs. Jake, my sometimes lover, was convinced that he was a nutcase, but I tended to believe he was just...young. I studied him as he stood there in his baggy black clothes, like an émigré from the dark side. He was shaking his head in a hopeless kind of way, as though I still didn't get it.

"Yeah," I said, warming to the idea. "Why don't you take Wanda and split for a week or two? Let this all blow over." I dug through the desk drawer for my checkbook.

Not that I believe throwing money at a problem solves the problem -- unless the problem is lack of money. And not that I ordinarily recommend trying to run away from your problems, but this particular problem rang a few bells for me. Or so I thought at the time.

Angus stood silent while I wrote out the draft. I tore it off. When I handed it to him, he stared at it. He didn't say a word. Then, as I watched, a tear slid down his face and dropped on the check. He gave a great shuddering sigh, started to speak.

I cut him off. "Listen, kiddo, do us both a favor. Crank calls from the crypt are bad for business." I headed for the door.

* * * * *

"You did what?" said Jake.

I had been about ten minutes late meeting him at the car dealership on East Colorado Boulevard. My ten-year-old Bronco was on its last legs, and Jake seemed to believe that I was incapable of making an informed buying decision unless he was my informant.

“Gave him eight hundred bucks. Told him to take Wanda Witch away for the holidays.” I gazed at the rows of sleek sports cars and rugged-looking SUVs gleaming in the tequila sunset. Palm trees rustled overhead. Tinny Christmas carols issued from the loudspeakers in not-so-subliminal messaging.

I watched Jake’s blond and buff reflection materialize behind me in the windshield. “Eight hundred bucks? You have eight hundred bucks to throw around?”

I shrugged. “I’ll write it off as his Christmas bonus.”

“Uh-huh.” I felt him study my face. “Well, Mr. Trump, is there any point in our going inside?”

“Did you never hear of the great American tradition of financing?”

He snorted. I met his tawny gaze. “How the hell is running away supposed to solve anything?” he asked, and for a second, I thought we were talking about something else entirely.

“I wasn’t looking for a long-term solution.” Before Jake could answer, I added, “I doubt if I need one. They’re kids. They have the attention span of...what is it? One minute for each year of life. We’re looking at twenty minutes of terror. Tops.”

Jake’s lips twitched, but he said, “These kids are all part of a witch’s coven based out of Westwood?”

I stroked the hood of a silver Subaru Forester. “New meaning to the words ‘Teen Spirit,’ huh?” I studied the sticker price on the window. “From what I’ve picked up, they all took part in a class on demonology or witchcraft about a year ago. I guess somebody inhaled too much incense during the lab.”

“They went off and started a coven?”

“I’m guessing. It’s not like Angus has been forthcoming on the subject. Revealing Count Chocula’s secrets carries a stiff penalty.”

Red and green Christmas lights strung across the lot flashed on. They reminded me of glowing chili peppers, but maybe I was subconsciously influenced by the Mexican restaurant across the street. I remembered I hadn’t stopped for lunch. My stomach growled. I wondered if Jake could take time for dinner.

If I whined about being hungry, he’d make time. He was appalled by my eating habits, being one of these fitness fanatics who believes the rule about three balanced meals a day is engraved on a stone tablet. We hadn’t seen much of each other lately. I was willing to risk another lecture on the benefits of complex carbs.

“You shop around, you compare prices, you get the vehicle right for you,” he observed, watching me linger over the Forester.

“Sure.”

“You don’t need another gas guzzler. How about a coupe? How about pre-owned?”

“Used?”

At my tone, a muscle tugged at the corner of his mouth. Reluctantly I moved down the aisle of cars to a blue two-door. Tinted windows, power sun roof, Bose speakers. The price was right, too. *Climate controlled*. What did that mean? Air conditioning?

Jake said suddenly, grimly, “Believe it or not, this kind of shit can get way out of hand. Hollywood PD turned up a Jane Doe in the Hollywood Hills about a month ago. Word is she was the victim of a ritual killing.”

“You mean, like, devil worshippers?”

I was mostly kidding, but Jake said thoughtfully, “I kind of wish you hadn’t sent the kid out of town. I’d have liked to talk to him.”

“You can’t think Angus is involved in that,” I protested. “He’s a bit odd, granted, but he’s a decent kid.”

“You have no idea what he is, Adrien.” Jake, a ten-year veteran of LAPD, used that cop tone when I exhibited signs of civilian naïveté. “You’ve employed him for a few months, that’s all. You hired him through a temp agency. You think they ran a serious security check?”

“You think it’s necessary for working in a mystery bookstore?”

He wasn’t listening. “There’s this whole satanic underground we’ve been hearing about since the ’80s. There might not be evidence of an organized movement like certain religious groups claim, but we’ve seen plenty of injuries and deaths resulting from people taking this stuff seriously. And plenty of people turning up in psych wards. It’s ugly and violent, but a lot of kids are attracted to it.”

“So hopefully this scares the hell out of Angus, and he gets it out of his system.” I tried to picture myself behind the wheel of the coupe, gave it up, headed back to the silver Forester.

* * * * *

When I finished signing the loan docs, Jake and I went across the street to grab dinner at the cantina. I had traded in the Bronco, and since the dealership was going to install a stereo system in the new vehicle, I needed a ride back to my place. Jake let himself be coerced.

While we waited for our meal, I watched him put away two baskets of tortilla strips. He munched steadily, as though he were being paid by the chip, gaze fastened on a wall planter bristling with plastic bougainvillea.

“Everything okay?”

Still crunching, he paused mid-reach for his *Dos Equis*. "Sure. Why?"

"I don't know. You seem preoccupied."

"Nope." He swallowed a mouthful of beer, eyes on mine. "Everything's cool."

Our relationship was not an easy one. Jake was deeply closeted. He claimed it was because he was a cop -- that the job was tough enough without having to go to war with the guys who were supposed to be on your side -- but I'd come to believe that it was more complicated. Jake despised himself for being sexually attracted to men. Though he had been a good friend to me and was a physically satisfying lover -- when he was around -- there was a certain tension between us that I sometimes feared could never completely be resolved.

Which was a damn shame, because I cared for him. A lot.

When we'd first met, he'd been active in the S/M scene. I thought -- hoped -- maybe he was less active in the clubs these days.

What I did know for sure was that he was dating a woman, a female cop named Kate Keegan. He'd been seeing her longer than he'd known me; I didn't think it was just a cover relationship. But he didn't discuss it much with me.

"So I hear Chan's writing a book."

A few months earlier Jake's partner, Detective Paul Chan, had joined Partners in Crime, the weekly writing group I hosted at the bookstore.

"Yeah, a police procedural."

"Is it any good?"

"Uh, well..."

Jake laughed, shoved the basket of chips my way.

* * * * *

The next day, Friday, I had to prepare for a book signing with bestselling author Gabriel Savant. Savant wrote the Sam Haynes occult detective series, sort of an update on the old Jules de Grandin and John Thunstone pulps. I'm not a big fan of horror, but I had skimmed Savant's latest in an effort to facilitate discussion should the question-and-answer session peter out too fast. Not that I expected a problem. After an initially lackluster career in the '80s, Savant had reinvented himself and his work and was now a media darling. Hustling around in anticipation of a significant turnout that evening, I wished ungenerously that I had delayed rescuing Angus till after the weekend.

I was arranging the front display of Savant's latest, *The Rosicrucian Codex*, wondering if I had enough bottles of four-dollar champagne, when I received another call from the dark side.

"Smitten, battered, beaten, torn. I prick at thee as if a thorn --"

"Speaking of pricks," I interrupted, "You're wasting your time. Angus doesn't work here anymore."

"Wh --?" He -- the voice was male -- caught himself. There was a pause, then a click as the receiver slammed down.

I tried *69, but the number was blocked. Not a surprise, I guess. I knew, of course, that it wouldn't end there.

Sure enough, later that afternoon I got another caller requesting "Gus." This time the voice was feminine, dulcet-toned. In all the time Angus has worked for me, I've only known one female to call him, and that was his girl friend, Wanda. Wanda is not dulcet-toned. She sounds like she was weaned on unfiltered Marlboros.

"Sorry," I said in answer to the query. "He's not here."

"Oh, gosh," she fretted. "I've *got* to talk to Gus. It's, like, an emergency."

"Like an emergency, but not?"

"What?"

"Forget it." I said, "Look, he's gone. For real. Spread the word."

A pause. Then she faltered, "I'm not sure...?"

I decided to try a different approach. "Can I get your name? Maybe he'll phone me once he gets settled. You're a friend of Angus's?"

She laughed a tinkling laugh, a party-girl laugh. "Well, ye-*aah*! Of course! And I've *got* to talk to him. He wants to talk to me, believe me."

"Oh, I *do*," I said with equal sincerity. "But he's gone. Skipped. I'd like to help, but...hey, why don't you leave your name and number, and if he gets in touch with me, I'll let him know you called."

Another hesitation. Then she said coolly, "Sure. Tell him Sarah Good called. He knows the number."

666?

She replaced the phone gently. I followed suit. I caught a glimpse of my rueful expression in the mirror across from the counter. *Sarah Good*. One of the first of the Salem witches to be hanged. Cute.

Well, on the bright side, at least the kids were getting some history at school.

* * * * *

By six-thirty, it was standing room only in the store. I realized I had seriously miscalculated both the champagne and how much help I would need. I'd never seen so many teenagers in black lipstick -- boys and girls -- or chainmail jewelry on middle-aged men who didn't ride Harleys.

Not that it wasn't great to see people reading. Especially people who looked as though a book would be their last choice of entertainment. I just hoped the evening wouldn't end with broken furniture or the building struck by a lightning bolt.

Running next door, I bribed the girls closing the travel agency to lend a hand with the crowd control.

By seven-fifteen, our illustrious author was officially late, and the natives were getting restless. There was a line of women waiting to use the washroom and a nasty argument about the origins of the swastika brewing near the "cozy corner." A local reporter tried to interview me about my involvement in a murder case the previous year. I resisted the impulse to finish off the last of the drugstore champagne and hide in the stockroom.

At seven-thirty, there was commotion at the front door. Several people, clearly part of an entourage, entered the store. Three leggy ladies dressed more like succubae than minions of a reputable publishing house entered. A plump, bespectacled man drew me aside and introduced himself as Bob Friedlander, Gabe's handler.

Handler? Nice work if you could get it, I guess.

I didn't catch most of what Friedlander said, because the next instant, the Prince of Sales had appeared. Gabriel Savant stood over six feet tall and was built like a male model -- in fact, he looked like the male half of the illustration on a historical romance: unruly raven hair falling over his tanned forehead, piercing blue eyes, flashing white smile. Were there rhinestones in his teeth? Certainly something shone in his right earlobe. He wore leather jeans and a black cape. Amazingly, nobody laughed.

"But this is charming," Gabriel assured me, as Friedlander navigated his star in my direction. "Of course, it's not Vroman's, but it's nice."

"Ambiance," Friedlander said quickly. "Wonderful ambiance."

"We try," I said.

"Of course you do," Gabriel encouraged. He glanced at his handler. "Bobby, what is there to drink? I'm parched."

Friedlander cleared his throat uneasily. Along with that musky aftershave of Gabe's wafted a mix of mouthwash and bourbon. Mostly bourbon.

"There's brand-X champagne making the rounds," I said.

You'd have thought I'd offered milk to a vampire. Gabe blanched. Swallowing hard, he said, "Oh, God, let's get this over with." He strode over to the antique desk I had set up. Enthusiastic applause from the waiting audience echoed off the dark beams.

"This book tour has been grueling," Friedlander told me by way of apology. "Twenty cities in thirty days...radio interviews at four in the morning, cable talk shows, book club luncheons; often we're doing three bookstores a day. Gabe is exhausted."

"I bet you both are."

He laughed. Behind the glasses, his mild eyes were unexpectedly alert. "A little. I understand you write also."

"A little." Not enough, thank God, that anyone wanted to send me out on the road.

"You're too modest. I've read *Murder Will Out*. Very witty."

Either this guy did his homework like nobody I'd ever met before, or he was gay. My books don't attract many mainstream readers.

"But you need a hook," he said. "A platform."

"You don't think a gay Shakespearean actor amateur sleuth is enough of a hook?"

"No. No way. Look at Gabe. He wasted years producing beautifully written, critically acclaimed literary fiction that no one wanted to read, and then what happens? He comes up with Sam Haynes, the occult detective. The rest is history."

History, occult, and romance all spelled out in purple prose, I thought as Savant read aloud from his latest masterpiece. He kind of reminded me of a hunky Vincent Price, but the audience loved it. They stayed silent as the proverbial grave while he read. Not a whisper, not a snicker. When he finished reading, he took questions. Lots of questions. His fans wanted to know everything from Where He Got His Ideas (at which he turned up his elegant nose, beckoning for the next question) to Was He Seeing Anyone.

"I'm seeing *everyone*," Savant drawled and tapped his forehead, either to indicate the Third Eye or that his busy social life was giving him a headache.

Maybe the bubbly helped, but the fans drank it right up.

Friedlander listened and ate pizza rolls like they were going out of style. Every so often, as when Savant graciously referred to me as "Andrew," he would smile nervously in my direction.

And then a customer asked what Savant was working on now. Apparently this was the question he'd been waiting for. He rose to his feet, shaking back the cape.

"As you know, I've made a fortune telling stories about the occult and its practitioners, but my current project is not a mere work of fiction. During my research, I've uncovered evidence of a real-life, secret cult, a sinister organization which has preyed upon the young and naïve for the past two decades. A cult right here *in this very city*. In my next book, I plan to expose that cult and its leaders to the world."

Bob Friedlander dropped his paper plate. Pizza rolls scattered across the hardwood floor. I stooped to help retrieve them and saw out of the corner of my eye that Bob was shaking. I glanced up. His round face was white, perspiring; he looked terrified.

I turned. Gabriel Savant beamed at his audience, most of whom were smiling and chattering, delighted to learn that another of those pesky cults was soon to be history -- and a best-selling book. At the back of the room, however, stood a small group of young women. They were dressed in black, lots of leather and lace, makeup and hair inspired by Halloween. Elvira: the Early Years. They appeared to be hissing at Savant.

* * * * *

"I love this house," Lisa sighed. "I've been so happy here."

The first Saturday of each month I had brunch with my mother, at the ancestral ruins in Porter Ranch in the North San Fernando Valley.

The brunch tradition began when I left Stanford and broke it to her that I would not be returning to the nest. It shouldn't have come as a shock -- or even as bad news -- but as she had chosen not to remarry after my father's death (despite a legion of eligible suitors), I was all Lisa had in the world. As she rarely failed to remind me.

"It's a beautiful house," I agreed.

The house smelled of pine trees and cinnamon and apples. It felt warm and Christmassy. In some ways it still felt like home. I'd taken my first steps in the marble foyer (an initial attempt to make a break for it). I'd learned to drive in the quiet surrounding streets. I'd experienced my first fumbling sexual encounter in the upstairs bedroom beneath the fake open beams and poster of a boyishly grinning Robert Redford in *The Natural*.

"Although it really is too large for one," she said, as though she had suddenly noticed those additional sixteen rooms.

"Maybe you should think about moving," I said heartlessly.

I had underestimated her as usual. "If I were to...move...do you think the house would suit you and Jake?" she inquired innocently.

I inhaled my white-chocolate pear tartlet and spent the next moments wondering if the last thing I saw would be the mental picture of me and Jake picking china at Neiman Marcus.

"Darling," Lisa gently protested when I could breathe again. "You shouldn't talk with your mouth full."

"You're not serious about Jake and me moving in here," I said.

"Why not? You seem awfully fond of him, and he's...he's..." I could see her searching for something nice to say about Jake. "He's a very efficient sort of person."

The "why nots" were so many that I was speechless. The worst part of it all was that for one split second I seriously considered it.

Seeing my moment of weakness, she moved in for the kill.

"It's wonderful that you're feeling so well these days, Adrien, but it doesn't do to push yourself too hard."

"I'm not."

She shook her head as though it were all no use. "The economy is *so* dreadful right now, especially for small businesses." As though Lisa had the foggiest idea about the challenges of running a small business. "And when you talk about needing to expand, I

simply can't help worrying about the stress and strain of an additional mortgage on you, darling. Whereas this house is paid for free and clear."

Like a fool, I said, "Even so, there's no way I could begin to afford the upkeep."

Her violet eyes widened at my naïveté. "You're going to be *very* wealthy one of these days, darling," she chided. "I know I could *prevail* upon Mr. Gracen to arrange something with your trust fund."

"Don't start that again." Funny how that money was absolutely untouchable when it was for something I wanted that Lisa didn't approve of, but right there at my fingertips if I'd give in to whatever she wanted for me.

"If your poor father had realized that you would end up sacrificing your health struggling to make ends meet --"

"Lisa, where is this going?" I broke in. "Are you thinking of selling the house? Is that what this is about?"

I was amazed to see her turn pink.

"Um, sort of," she said. An un-Lisa-like comment.

When she didn't continue, I prodded, "And?"

"Actually, I'm thinking of getting married."

Chapter Two

In the silence that followed her words, I heard one of the Christmas ornaments fall through the branches of the ten-foot noble fir taking up a quarter of the dining room.

“Come again?”

“I’m thinking of remarrying.” Prettily blushing.

“Anyone I know?”

“Councilman Dauten.”

My fork clanged against the brass charger plate.

“Councilman? Is that what you call him? Doesn’t he have a first name?”

“You sound rather waspish, Adrien,” my mother observed. “Do you not like the idea?”

“Of Councilman Dauten? I’m not sure. Have I met this one?”

Lisa’s eyes narrowed. She said carefully and clearly, “Do you have a problem with the idea of my remarrying?”

Did I? I wasn’t sure. Whatever I felt -- and it was sort of a brakes squealing, glass smashing, horns blaring reaction -- it wasn’t logical. Whereas Lisa marrying was perfectly logical. She was still young, considering the fact that she was my mum, and beautiful, considering the fact that she was my mum.

“No, of course not,” I said. We both listened to my tone of voice. I said with more energy, “No, I mean, if you’re happy. It’s...it’s kind of sudden, isn’t it?”

“It is!” she chirped, like that made it all the more wonderful.

* * * * *

I woke to a giant shadow looming over me. I started up, half asleep.

"Easy, easy. It's me," Jake said, sliding between the sheets. His hands and feet were like ice as he pulled me into his arms.

I subsided, heart thudding hard. "I thought you couldn't make it tonight?"

"Yeah, well." He was silent.

The far wall was patterned in snowflake shadows thrown by the street lamps through the lace window coverings. I heard flecks against the glass panes.

"Is it raining?" I half-lifted my head from the pillow of his chest.

"Just started." He stroked his cold hand down my back, and as I shivered, gave my ass an absent squeeze. "They found another one."

Not fully awake, it took a while for his words to register. "Another what one?"

"Another DB."

Cop-speak for dead body. Since Jake worked homicide, I knew that it had to be more than just another body. I finally remembered our conversation of a few days earlier. "You mean, like a ritual killing?"

He nodded. "Maybe. This one was older. Maybe a year old. Badly decayed. But there were markings on the tree he was buried beneath."

"Markings?"

"Symbols. We've got people working on them." He stroked my back again, fingers idly tracing the links of bone and cartilage. "It's not like I haven't seen weird shit. Decapitated goats, disemboweled cats. Once I saw a cow's tongue nailed to a tree."

"Those wacky Baptists."

Jake snorted. "You're a funny guy."

"Funny boy is the way I remember it."

I felt rather than saw him smile at the memory of our recent vacation in the land that time forgot, the northern Mother Lode country.

"They estimate there's like fifty thousand Santeria devotees in LA County. But this is...different." He was quiet. I hated to imagine what he was remembering. "Adrien, do you honestly not know where Angus went?"

I rolled on one elbow, tried to read his face in the gloom. "You've got to be kidding me. *Angus?*"

"I'd just like to talk to him."

"Jake, no damn way was he involved in anything like this. I know him that well."

"I'm not saying he's involved. But if he's on the fringe of that scene, maybe he's heard something." He asked neutrally, "Did you send him up to the ranch?"

"No!" In fact, it hadn't occurred to me to send Angus to Pine Shadow, the ranch I had inherited from my grandmother many years before. I wondered why I'd missed such a simple solution.

At last I said, "I don't know where he is. I gave him the money and told him to leave town."

"Could you take a guess?"

I shook my head. The rain drummed down harder now. We listened to it for a while. He tugged me back down. I rested my cheek against his chest, listening to the thump of his heart.

I said, "If he calls, what do you want me to tell him?"

"Whatever you think will get him back here to talk to me."

We lay like that for a time. I started to relax back into drowsiness, lulled by Jake's lazy caresses.

"How tired are you?" he asked, breaking the silence.

I chuckled.

The weight and warmth of our bodies moving in the tangled sheets. The pleasant friction of rough jaws, and hairy legs and arms, and lightly furred chests brushing against each other. The softness of mouths and eyelashes and silky hair...

He guided me onto my belly, and I spread my legs, shivering as Jake spread the warm gel in the cleft between my buttocks. He worked the tip of his finger, pressing against that first instinctive resistance, always careful, always taking his time, although it wasn't necessary these days which I seemed to spend primed and ready for his cock's penetration.

I sighed, pushing back, and his finger slipped inside the dark heat of my body. I murmured approval. "More, Jake."

He eased the second finger in, teased a little, and I caught my breath.

"Good?"

"You know it is." I drew my knees under me, raising my ass in invitation. Please, Jake..."

Instead I got a slow, tantalizing third finger working me with maddening, delicious deliberation. I groaned. "Will you just *do* it?"

"Do what?"

"Fuck me."

He murmured, breath against my bare back, "Not sure I caught that."

"Jake," I pleaded, humping against his hand. "Fuck me. Please."

Ah, the magic word.

We shifted around, bed springs squeaking, I got on my hands and knees, and he knelt behind me, his hand stroking the curve of my ass, lingering. The head of his cock whispered the password, and my well-massaged ring of sphincter muscle gave him entrance. Arms braced stiff, his cock buried deep in my body, I rocked back against Jake's hips. He shoved

back against me. We quickly slipped into our rhythm. The fingers of one hand bit into my hip, holding me in place as he thrust hard. His other hand wrapped around my cock, pumping up and down, occasionally losing the pace. I shifted weight onto one hand, moved my free hand to join Jake's, working myself.

We knew each other well by now, knew what we liked -- and when we liked it. It was comfortable, and it was familiar, and it still shook me to the bones when I least expected it.

Like now.

Blood throbbed in my temples, pounded through my veins, so that I could barely hear the harsh, fast sound of our breaths, the hard slap of flesh on flesh, the music of the mattress. Jake's hot breath gusted between my shoulder blades, sending little chills of sensation down my spine. And all the while that pleasurable scrape and slide, smooth exit and stiff entry, over and over and over.

I dug my fingers into the bedding, relinquishing control, letting him take me further and faster.

"Oh, *baby...*" he gritted between his teeth, and I felt a grin breaking across my tense face, even while I clenched, focused as that slow wash of liquid heat flooded my groin.

My whole body seized, clenched like the fist wrapped around my cock, the electric intensity of orgasm holding me in place while relief bordering on bliss shuddered through nerves and muscles and bones. I creamed over our joined fingers, his hand slipping a little in the sticky wetness. Jake went rigid, groaned like he was mortally wounded, and I could feel that wet warmth pulsing into me, a man's cum flooding my ass.

I collapsed in a limp sprawl, Jake's body covering my own. Wet beneath me, wet seeping out of my hole. Held hot and wet in Jake's powerful arms and never wanting to move again while pleasure echoed through me.

"I couldn't stop thinking about this all day." His voice was rough on the admission. "Feels so fucking *good* with you."

I nodded, managed, "It is good." In fact, sometimes it surprised me how good it was with Jake, given his various hang-ups and extracurricular interests.

He kissed the back of my neck, and I felt my heart turn over. The sex was great, but it was those moments of quiet tenderness...

"Lisa is thinking of remarrying," I said later, when we had both had time to catch our breath.

He made a noncommittal noise and turned his head on the pillow to face me.

"It's kind of weird, that's all," I said in answer to the question he hadn't asked. "She's had plenty of opportunity. Probably should have done it years ago, but she always made such a thing about never loving anyone but my father."

"Do you know the guy?"

I shook my head. "Councilman Dauten. I've heard the name, but I've never met him."

"You want me to run a background check?" He sounded amused.

"Forget it," I said, smothering a yawn. "It's Chinatown, Jake."

"Nah, it's only Pasadena. You'll be fine, baby."

* * * * *

Angus wasn't exactly a blabby guy. Maybe that's why I remembered the infrequent bits of information he let drop. I recalled him saying that he was a teaching assistant for a Professor Snowden.

I made a few phone calls, learned without too much trouble that on Monday morning Dr. G. Snowden was supposed to be at Bunche Hall giving a lecture on the occult in popular film and fiction.

UCLA is like a small village, with its own police department, fire marshal, radio and TV station, restaurants, shops. It even has a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Campus Resource Center. I don't know if they were offering this back in *The Day*. My father graduated from Stanford University, so Lisa's expectation was that I would grace the halls of the old alma mater. That suited me fine, as I was attracted by the university's proximity to San Francisco and the gay community.

But because I'd had friends at UCLA, and because I'd attended various cultural events there, I was reasonably familiar with the campus. I knew that Bunche Hall was located close to the Sculpture Garden, which was about five acres of grass and trees and studded by the works of Matisse and Rodin, among others. It was especially beautiful in the spring when the jacaranda trees were in bloom.

They were not in bloom that gray autumn day. Bare trees and stark sculptures provided a suitable backdrop for Bunche Hall, which had to be one of the ugliest buildings on campus. It looked like a concrete slab of Wasa bread.

I found #1209B without a problem. Slipping inside the dark classroom, I took a seat in the back row. It was one of the few empty seats in a room that looked like it seated about two hundred, indicating Professor Snowden was either popular or an easy pass. At the moment, he was showing a videotaped *Yu-Gi-Oh* cartoon on a pull-down screen at the front of the class.

Every so often Professor Snowden's tall silhouette loomed menacingly on the screen in front of Yugi and the gang, as he skewered the notion that occult elements in the popular kid's cartoon were dangerous. He had an attractive speaking voice with a hint of a British accent.

"The Religious Reich takes the view that despite overt themes of friendship, loyalty, and courage, Satan is using *Yu-Gi-Oh*, *Pokemon*, and *Harry Potter* to prime innocent minds

for occult suggestion and demonic influence. The idea being that if your brats are going to be brainwashed, it should be by Pat Robertson.”

The class rumbled into laughter.

On the video, a girl cartoon figure said, “It’s a symbol of our friendship. So when Yugi’s dueling, no matter how tough it gets, he’ll know that he’s not alone!”

Snowden drawled, “Not that Yugi is ever alone, as he’s possessed by the spirit of Yami Yugi, the ancient Egyptian pharaoh.”

More laughter. Nothing like a captive audience.

There was a smattering of discussion before Snowden turned off the video. Someone in the back row hit the lights.

The lecture concluded, students rose, talking, gathering books and papers, shuffling off to the next dog and pony show.

Snowden stood at the front surrounded by a flock of the faithful, mostly female, vying for the final crumbs of his attention. I made my way down the aisle watching him dispatch them with smooth ease.

He was medium height, lean, with long, loose silvery hair and a haughty world-weary face. He reminded me vaguely of Alan Rickman’s Professor Snape, except that he wore Levi’s and Birkenstocks and a T-shirt that read, *I’m not Satan, I’m merely one of his highly placed minions*.

When he smiled, which seemed to be rarely, it transformed his face, and I had a hint of what the attraction was. I stayed on the outside of the circle until the last little bird, a chickadee with a black mohawk, pink heart-shaped glasses, and an upside-down crucifix necklace departed with a final curious look at me.

The professor was ejecting the video tape from the VCR as I approached. He looked up, his eyes brilliantly green in the artificial light. Contacts, I thought. Nobody’s eyes were that color.

“I enjoyed your lecture,” I said. “Is it your opinion, then, that the media don’t have any particular influence over the young and suggestible?”

“That would be an indefensible position,” Snowden replied in that lazy public-school accent. He tilted his head. “You arrived toward the end of my lecture. I prefer observers to ask permission before they sit in.”

“Do you take a lot of heat over your curriculum?”

“This is UCLA,” he said. “I’m expected to be controversial. And you are --?”

“Curious.”

He arched a querying eyebrow.

I introduced myself, explained my relationship to Angus. I said all the usual stuff about hoping I wasn’t catching him at a bad time and could I have a moment.

He was very brown and very muscular, like polished teak -- but he exuded energy, a virility that was anything but wooden. "So you're Adrien English," he murmured. "Well, well." He looked me up and down with a certain appraising glint that you generally don't get from straight guys. "Angus has spoken of you."

I didn't doubt it, since I'd had to read Angus the riot act on more than one occasion when he'd blamed Snowden and the demands of academia for not getting his job done. No stretch to think he'd used me and the bookstore in reverse circumstances.

"Have you seen Angus lately?"

He looked...guarded. Or maybe I was reading into a natural reservation about what concern of mine it was. He said finally, "He missed class Friday and again today. No word of explanation."

"There may be extenuating circumstances," I said. "Were you aware that he was being harassed by former classmates?"

Once again Snowden raised the most supercilious eyebrow this side of the royal family. "I was not," he said finally.

"Apparently Angus and some other kids took a course with you called 'Practical Magic.' Witchcraft in modern society. Anyway, the enterprising little tykes went off and started their very own coven -- but I imagine you already know that."

"Ridiculous," he said sharply.

"What is ridiculous?"

"Why, the idea that a student -- my students -- would attempt to put into practice --" He stopped.

I shrugged. He smelled a bit like pipe tobacco, which I like, and Masculine, which I wear myself on occasion. I found it just the least bit distracting.

"You think these...classmates are harassing Angus? Exactly what do you mean by *harassing*?"

"Curses -- I don't mean cussing, I mean threats -- I've heard a few of the phone calls. Alexander Graham Bell would not be happy."

The green eyes narrowed. I had to admit that expression was not quite as enjoyable as the way he'd originally looked at me.

When I failed to be razed to cinders, he asked, "What is it you think you can do about this?"

"Well, I can start by talking to you. If you have any influence over the little shits, perhaps you can warn them off. Maybe they don't get that making threatening phone calls violates both state and federal law."

"And if I don't...if I am unable to influence them?"

"Then I'll talk to them."

He spluttered. "Talk to *whom*? What makes you think I know who these...these juvenile delinquents are?"

I'd figured this was likely a waste of time. If Angus trusted Snowden, or believed Snowden could help him, he would have gone to him himself. But I was working at a disadvantage. Snowden was the single lead I had. I said, "If you didn't know, I think you probably would have said so up front."

His eyes flickered, acknowledging the truth of this. He either knew or strongly suspected who these assholes were. "How are you qualified to deal with this sort of thing? What makes you imagine you won't make it worse by butting in?"

"It's my experience this kind of thing thrives on secrecy. When you drag it into the light, when you make it public, it tends to shrivel up and blow away."

"Had a lot of experience with cults, have you?" he asked sardonically.

I said evenly, "We've all had experience with bullies. You can dress this in black and teach it to quote bad poetry, but it's still the same animal."

His turned off the television set. Back to me, he said quietly, "I have no proof, but I have my suspicions. Will you allow me to deal with this in my own way?"

"If you truly will deal with it."

He glanced over his shoulder, his smile askew. "Word of honor."

He offered a well-shaped, strong hand.

We shook on it. His grip was warm, just the right amount of pressure. I wondered how far I should trust to the honor of one of Satan's highly placed minions.

* * * * *

Bob Friedlander was waiting for me at Cloak and Dagger.

"We wanted to stop by and thank you for Friday night."

We, White Man? Maybe he meant the publishing house; there was sure no sign of Gabriel Savant.

"The pleasure was ours," I said. "We had a great turnout. One of the best ever." Angus was the fan. He had pushed for that signing -- and he had been right. It had been a success. The shame was that Angus hadn't been around to enjoy it.

"I hope you sold a lot of books?"

"We did very well."

Friedlander appeared to be perusing the bookshelves behind the desk where Gabriel had signed books.

Curiously, I inquired, "Was that announcement at the end for real? Is there a cult exposé in the works?"

He spared me a harassed look. "No. I can't imagine what Gabe was thinking." He stood on tiptoe to examine the shelf above his head.

"So there is no book planned?"

"Absolutely not. It was a publicity stunt. A dumb stunt." He removed a couple of books from the shelf.

"What did you lose?" I asked.

His head jerked my way. "Huh? Nothing. Well, actually...yes. You didn't happen to find a...a disk, did you?"

"What kind of a disk?" I was thinking favorite CD.

Friedlander looked flustered. "A floppy. It has research notes on it."

"You think you lost it here?"

"I didn't lose it," he said irritably. "Gabe thinks he lost it. He'd had a lot to drink Friday night, in case you didn't notice."

And he was walking around with a floppy disk stuck in his skin-tight leather jeans? "I'm pretty sure I would have noticed a loose disk by now," I said. "I can keep an eye out for it."

This must be some valuable disk if Savant was afraid to go anywhere without it -- in which case, how had he managed to lose track of it?

Reluctantly Friedlander turned back to me. "That would be great," he said without enthusiasm.

"This research," I said, "would it have anything to do with the book Savant isn't writing?"

The glasses glinted blindly. "There is no book."

"But maybe there should be?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. You have no idea what you're talking about."

"And Savant apparently had no idea what he was talking about, so that makes it unanimous. All the same, this isn't idle curiosity. I've heard rumors of a group here in LA."

Friedlander stared at me. "My advice to you," he said. "The next time you hear rumors? Cover your ears."

Chapter Three

Toward the end of Saturday's brunch, Lisa wrangled a promise from me to meet "our new family" for dinner Monday night. When I questioned the urgency, she had blushed, said that she and the councilman were considering a winter wedding.

"You mean... *this* winter?"

She nodded eagerly. "If we can pull it off."

Having spent years watching Lisa organize all kinds of last-minute emergency fund-raisers and charity functions, I figured she could have marshaled a full-scale military campaign in less time. I had no doubt the "golden, mellow wedding bells would be ringing through the night, ringing out in all delight," or whatever the hell it was Poe said in "The Bells."

"How extended is our new family?" I'd inquired cautiously.

"Bill has three lovely daughters." She gave a long, sentimental sigh. "I never had a daughter, and now I'll have three."

"You don't even like girls."

She looked indignant. "Of course I like girls!"

"You sure never liked any girl I brought home."

"None of those girls was right for you, Adrien."

She had a point there.

I figured the least I could do was keep the English end up -- in a manner of speaking. I closed the shop as soon as I reasonably could, showered, shaved, and hauled the charcoal gray Hugo Boss suit out of the back of my closet. The last time I'd worn it had been to Robert Hersey's funeral. My mood wasn't a lot more cheerful that evening.

I brightened a bit driving the Forester. Nothing like a new toy. I did a kind of *Car and Driver* interior monologue -- *smooth ride with decent acceleration...light but responsive steering* -- as I pulled onto the freeway. Thoughts of battling the forces of evil temporarily took a back seat.

We were meeting at Pacific Dining Car on West 6th Street in Los Angeles. Starting out as a railway dining car parked on a rented lot in downtown Los Angeles, the legendary family-owned restaurant has been around since 1921. This was the place where the city's bigwigs, politicians, lawyers, and businessmen broke bread and cut their deals. It was pricey, but unpretentious. The food (and wine list) was excellent. I thought it was a good sign that we were dining there rather than at another overpriced, trendy eatery.

Our party had already been seated by the time I arrived, but Lisa came to meet me as I made my way across the dining room. She looked radiant in something blue and beaded. Her eyes were shining, her cheeks were flushed; she didn't look a day over forty.

"Oh, darling, you look *so* handsome," she whispered before hauling me off to meet the Gang of Four.

Dauten rose from the head of the table to meet me. I've got to admit he was not at all what I expected.

"Adrien." He gave me a curt nod, though his handshake was hearty. He was big, bigger than Jake even, though soft around the middle. Big and bald. His eyes were a shrewd Dutch-Boy blue in his darkly tanned face. He would never have been good-looking, and I didn't get the impression he wasted a lot of time being charming. But he had a definite air of authority. The aura of power. It would have been hard to find anyone more unlike my slim and sophisticated father.

"Sir." I tried to apply the right amount of pressure returning his handshake. Did these people know I was gay? Was that going to be a problem? Not that I gave a damn what they thought, but if Lisa had her heart set on this, I sure as hell didn't want to be the deal breaker.

"Call me Bill."

Thank God, because I was never going to call this guy *Pop*.

"And here are the girls," fluted Lisa, sounding nervous.

There seemed to be a mob of them. Lisa was right; they were lovely. I was briefly enveloped in a butterfly swarm of scented breasts and long legs and silky hair as the girls maneuvered around each other, hugging and bussing cheeks with me, smiling meaningfully at each other, and changing their seats for some unfathomable reason.

Once we were all seated, I realized there were only three of them. The eldest, Lauren, looked about my age. She wore a wedding ring, though there was no sign of a husband. The youngest, Emma, was twelve.

Their drinks arrived. My order for a double was taken by a sympathetic-looking waiter. Everyone proceeded to talk at once.

"Adrien writes murder mysteries as well as owning a bookstore," Lisa was explaining to Dauten. I wondered if she'd waited till five minutes before dinner to break the news that she had a grown son. "They're terribly clever and terribly malicious, which is *so* surprising, because he was always the most *gentle* little boy."

"Her accent is too adorable," Lauren said of my English-born mum, mercifully breaking my concentration. "I just love to hear her talk."

"Oh, me too," I said. "Especially right now."

On my right, the kid, Emma, giggled. I grinned at her.

Lauren and the middle girl (what the hell was her name?) were tall, willowy blondes, good-looking in an All-American, Ralph Lauren advert way. The kid was thin and lanky with glossy black hair and rosy cheeks. She had inherited the family blue eyes, which were striking with her dark hair. She looked a lot like Lisa. She could have passed for her daughter -- or my sister.

"We *adore* Lisa," the middle one (Nancy? Natasha?) reassured me. "She's so good for Daddy. He *worships* her."

I saw Dauten patting Lisa's hand with his giant paw as she chattered away. He wore a gold signet on his pinky finger. The backs of his hands were covered in black hair. I reached gratefully for the double Chivas Regal the waiter appeared with and knocked half of it back in one gulp.

"Was the traffic awful?" Lauren asked sympathetically.

"We'll *all* have to come to your bookstore," the Middle One told me. "I *love* mysteries! That's all I read. We'll tell *everybody*. We'll get all our friends to go. You know, I always wanted to work in a bookstore."

The kid, Emma, who had been eyeing me steadily, said all at once, "You look like someone. I know who. You look like the actor in that movie. *Red River*."

"John Wayne?"

She giggled. Yeah, she was a cutie.

The Middle One, Natalie -- *Natalie* -- said proudly, "Emma likes *black-and-white* movies," as though the small fry had just received her Mensa card in the mail.

"What movies do you like?" I asked Emma.

I never heard her response, because Lauren leaned across the table, whispering like the Girl from U.N.C.L.E. on duty, "So, what do you think about this plan for a New Year's Eve wedding, Adrien?"

"Uh..."

"It doesn't give us *nearly* enough time," Natalie put in, equally covert ops. "We've got to *stall* them."

“We’ve still got to get ready for Christmas,” Lauren told me. “Oh, by the way, you’re having Christmas with us this year, did Lisa tell you?”

“I’m going to be a junior bridesmaid,” Emma piped next to me.

“You’re going to give the bride away,” Natalie told me.

I signaled for another drink.

* * * * *

We said our good-byes in the restaurant parking lot, Lisa and the other girls piling into Dauten’s Jag as the rain began to patter down. The Jag sped past, a blur of waving hands and smiling faces. I pulled off my tie, tossed it on the passenger seat.

The misty rain got heavier as I turned onto the 110 freeway. I popped a CD in the new player: Patty Griffin’s *1000 Kisses*. The melancholy opening notes filled the silent car in time with the swish of the windshield wipers.

Of course, the perfect finishing touch would have been getting pulled over for a DUI, so I was very careful driving home. Careful and depressed. I think it was hearing all the details of the forthcoming Christmas extravaganza that sent my emotions into a tailspin.

I like Christmas. Not as much as I liked it when I was a kid, but I do enjoy it. Yeah, I know it’s become cheapened and tawdry and commercialized, but that doesn’t change the reason for the season. And, of course, it’s absolutely the best time of year for Cloak and Dagger Books.

The problem I have with Christmas is the problem most single people have with Christmas, which is that, if you’re single, it is absolutely the loneliest time of year.

It would have been a lot lonelier if I hadn’t had Lisa and a handful of good friends. And this year I had Jake. Sort of.

Naturally I wanted to spend Christmas with Jake, but I realized that was unlikely. He would spend it with his family, who after forty years apparently had no clue that James Patrick Riordan had a yen for men. Despite the fact that he spent a couple of nights a week under my roof and in my bed, there was no way that Jake was going to set them straight (as it were).

Nor was he likely to spend Christmas on my turf. He wasn’t thrilled about the fact that my mother and Chan, his partner on the force, knew we had a relationship. Add four more strangers to the mix, and I’d probably never see him again.

Jake had vacation time coming -- he always had vacation time coming, because he was a workaholic -- and for a while I had toyed with the idea of trying to persuade him to take a trip for the holidays. I thought that on neutral ground, someplace where no one knew either of us, he might relax again, and we might regain the closeness we had shared the previous spring. But I had never got around to asking him -- mostly because I was fairly sure he’d say no.

There were a few forlorn Christmas lights as I drove down Colorado Boulevard. The lamppost holly wreaths had a windblown, ghost-town look. I turned off onto the quiet side street, driving past mostly dark shops and closed businesses.

I lived over the bookstore. The building had originally been a small hotel built back in the '30s. I'd bought the place not long after I'd inherited a chunk of change from my paternal grandmother. I'd graduated from Stanford with a degree in literature and a vague idea that running a bookstore would be a good day job for a writer. A decade later it turned out that writing wasn't a bad hobby for a guy who ran a bookstore.

Old Town was a happening place at night, but not in my neighborhood. Around here it emptied out about eight o'clock. Generally I liked the privacy. Tonight it felt lonely.

I wondered if Jake might have left a message on the answering machine, but I knew that was unlikely. I wouldn't see him tonight, not two nights in a row. The CD started over. I listened to the sweet sorrowful chords of "Rain," reached over to turn off the player.

Turning into the alley behind the store, my headlights slid across the brick wall of the back of the building. I caught a gleam, like eyes shining in the gloom. I had a confused glimpse of something uncomfortably like heels disappearing out of the spotlight of my headlights. I jammed on the brakes.

Had I imagined it?

I waited, engine idling, exhaust red in the Forester's taillights, windshield wipers squeaking against the glass.

No movement in the shadows.

A cat, I thought.

A really tall cat.

A really tall cat wearing sneakers.

I took my foot off the brake, rolled quietly into my parking space. After a moment's hesitation, I turned off the ignition.

A gust of wind sent a milk carton skittering along the asphalt. It was the only sound in the alley, the only movement.

I got out of the SUV and went inside.

* * * * *

Things looked brighter in the morning, but that was due to sunshine slicing through the leaden cloud cover, not any emotional epiphany on my part.

I had requested that the temp agency open another can of sales associates. They sent me Mrs. Tum. Mrs. T was a diminutive and elderly lady with practically no English, which provided insight into how the agency perceived my business.

Mrs. Tum also appeared to be rather excitable in nature, as I discovered when she tried to explain to me about the graffiti on the front step.

Finally, when I was still *no comprende*-ing, Mrs. T grabbed my arm with her doll-sized hands and hauled me outside, where I had an up close and personal view of what appeared to be a pentagram drawn in blood on my threshold.

Chapter Four

“Still think it’s harmless fun?” Jake inquired, after I had finished filing my complaint with the uniformed patrolman who answered my call.

“Refresh my memory. When did I ever say I didn’t take this crap seriously?”

“Quiet,” he muttered, as the officer returned after a brief conference with his compadre.

“It’s not blood,” Officer Hinojosa informed me. “The color is a good match, but it’s paint.”

Not blood was good. Very good. I let out the breath I seemed to have been holding for the last hour.

“Not blood? Just...custom color, huh? Well, is it okay if I wash the evidence away? It’s liable to wreck the Christmas vibe.” I had already used my digital camera to take several photos of the artwork. Not that I had high hopes that they were going to be bringing anyone to trial in the near future.

Hinojosa shook his head regretfully. “It’s enamel. Quick drying. I don’t think you can wash it. I think you have to paint over it.”

“Nah, it’ll come off with paint solvent,” the other uniform said, joining us.

“Not if it’s dried.”

“Yeah, it’ll come off if you put some elbow grease into it.”

“No. But you might be able to cover it with that concrete resurfacing paint.”

“You could try that Goof Off stuff.”

It was like *Home Improvement* with guns. Jake gave it up after a minute or two and stepped inside the shop. I waited it out. Eventually they called a draw, told me to have a nice day, got back in their patrol car, and drove away.

I located Jake cornered by Mrs. T at the coffeemaker.

I wasn't exactly sure why or how Jake had appeared on the scene of what, after all, was merely a vandalism complaint, but I had been glad to see him. Mrs. T did not seem similarly reassured. Her doll arms were flailing around like the button on her remote control was stuck. I made out one word in ten of that rapid-fire exchange.

"What language is that?" Jake inquired, sotto voce, as I joined them.

"I thought it was Spanish, but I'm beginning to think she's speaking in tongues."

"It's not Spanish."

I nodded earnestly, smiled at Mrs. T like I've seen legions of immigrant workers do to Lisa when they don't have a clue what she's requesting of them.

She shook her head at my obvious stupidity and stalked away. Jake took off his sunglasses, picked up my camera. He studied the photos in the monitor.

"What did you plan on doing with these?"

I knew I was going to have to come clean sooner or later, so I said, "I'm not sure. I thought I might show them to Angus's professor at UCLA."

His gaze narrowed on me like he was lining me in the crosshairs.

"What professor is that?"

"Van Helsing," I said at random, hesitating (not sure why) to give up Snowden to the long arm of the law. "Didn't I mention --?"

He was not amused. "I don't recall the name of the professor being mentioned. I wasn't aware you knew the guy's name. Are you telling me you've talked to him?"

"Briefly."

"Why would you do that? Why wouldn't you just give me his name and let me deal with it? Seeing that it's what I'm paid to do."

He had a point, so I responded a little irritably. "I don't know, Jake. Speaking from personal experience, it's not exactly a joy ride when the police show up at your place of employment asking questions. I didn't know that it was warranted."

"Warranted?" His face tightened. "That's not for you to decide. You're not a cop. I told you I wanted to talk to Angus, that I thought there was a chance he might be able to provide a lead on these killings. You didn't think I'd be interested in knowing the name of the professor who started all this shit?"

"All what shit? You also said you realized that there probably wasn't a connection between your case and this."

"That girl they dug up in the Hollywood Hills? Her name was Karen Holtzer. She was a student at UCLA."

"Yeah? She have any life or interests beyond being a student at UCLA?"

It occurred to me that what was really biting him was the fact that he hadn't considered tracking back to the original class Angus had attended or the professor who had taught it -- and I had.

But I didn't want to fight with Jake; I saw little enough of him as it was. I said, "Look..." and filled him in on exactly what had been said -- and to whom.

When I'd finished Jake stared at me like he'd never seen the species before. "What the hell are you doing butting in on this?" he asked. "You're not the punk's father. Or do you have something going with him too?"

I admit that took me off guard. My stomach dropped a floor or two. I blinked at him, at a loss for words. I had a sudden vision of myself lying in his arms, soaked and sticky with his cum. Did he honest to God think --?

He glared back at me, but then his gaze swerved. He grimaced. "Forget it." He sighed. "Adrien, you're trying to help the kid, but for all you know you made it worse, and now you've set yourself up as a target too."

"You don't know that. Snowden may not have talked to anybody yet. This could be the natural progression."

He was silent. Too silent. When he could apparently trust himself to speak, he said crisply, "I'm going to tell you nicely. Stay out of it." He slid his sunglasses back on. I had twin reflections of myself looking pissed. "Understood?"

"Got it," I bit out.

It didn't go a long way to cooling me down when he reached over and gave my hair a quick, casual ruffle before turning to go.

* * * * *

The shop was called Dragonwyck. As fate would have it, it occupied the building which had once housed Café Noir. The pink stucco walls were painted with ivy and thorns and magic symbols. In the glass-front box that used to display the menu was a listing of the classes offered for the winter session: *Magickal Tools* taught by Rhiannon. *Dreams and Divination* taught by Cassandra. *Finding and Communicating with Spirit Guides* taught by Ariel.

I stepped inside and was greeted by soft sitar music and the scent of incense. The place was brightly lit, clean, and well organized, which I didn't expect. If Claude's spirit was still hanging around, I couldn't tell. Neatly labeled shelves were packed with books, gems, minerals, crystals, candles, candles, more candles, goblets, chalices, incense, oils, and bumper stickers.

GODDESS ON THE LOOSE

MY OTHER CAR IS A BROOM

WITCHES PARKING (ALL OTHERS WILL BE TOAD)

A plump, middle-aged woman stood at the counter dressed in purple tie-dyed gauze. She had a kind, freshly-scrubbed face -- nothing like the babes on *Charmed*.

"Blessed be," she greeted me.

"Hi," I said.

"Can I help you find something? Herbal tea? A Renaissance Fair costume?" She twinkled at me. "A love potion?"

Herbal tea is one thing, but did I look like the kind of guy in the market for a Renaissance Fair costume?

"Information."

She tipped down her gold-wire specs, peered at me.

I showed her a couple of the photos I had enlarged on my computer and printed out.

She stared for a long time, frowning. Then she said, "This is an inverted pentagram. It symbolizes the Morning Star -- Venus -- and Satan. That's not what we're about. We're Wicca. We have nothing to do with Satan."

That sounded familiar. I'd done reading on the subject years ago. Nothing attracts adolescents like the promise of supernatural powers. If ever a kid had felt the need to overcompensate, it was me.

"In fact, we don't recognize a supreme evil deity like Lucifer or Satan, whatever you want to call Him," she added. "We worship the God and the Goddess, the harmony of male and female. We honor Mother Earth and hold all of nature sacred. This..." She looked at the photo. "This is entirely different. This is...evil."

"It's annoying, anyway."

She shook her head, insisting, "It's evil."

"What does the symbol in the center of the pentagram represent?"

She hesitated. "Ariel," she said softly, gazing past me.

For a second, I thought she meant that the symbol represented Ariel. The only Ariel I knew was the spirit who served Prospero in *The Tempest*, and I didn't believe that was even a real supernatural entity. There was motion behind me. Another Wiccan appeared, this one, tall, bony, freckled, clad in flowing green tie-dye. Apparently she'd been lurking amongst the dried lemongrass and sassafras.

They reminded me of the fairies in *Sleeping Beauty*. I was tempted to ask where Merryweather was.

Ariel wafted past me. She examined the photograph her soul sister held out. She blanched.

"The *Ars Goetia*?" the first one inquired.

Ariel nodded. She looked at me. "This symbol is a seal. A personal signature representing a demon. A high-ranking demon."

I certainly didn't want any low-ranked demons loitering about the place. "So...what does that mean? I've been cursed?"

They both made these quick, almost imperceptible hand gestures. Were they averting the Evil Eye or giving me a witchy high five?

"This is your home?" Ariel inquired gravely.

What did I have to lose by telling the truth?

"I own the property," I compromised.

"Not good," Ariel said to the other one. "Cassandra?"

Cassandra shook her head.

"This is out of our realm," she told me apologetically. "The Howling Art is not one of ours."

"That makes three of us."

Ariel said tentatively, "We could...refer you to someone."

"Okay." A specialist. I knew how that worked.

The Wiccans looked at each other, seemed to exchange info via the Psychic Network. Cassandra disappeared into the back room, which had formerly served as the kitchen at Café Noir.

She reappeared a moment later and handed me a business card. I glanced at it. There was a phone number in silver script. That was it.

"An' it harm none, do what ye will," said Ariel.

"Words to live by," I agreed.

* * * * *

I left a message for Professor Snowden with the history department secretary. I didn't want to jump to any conclusions. Maybe he hadn't had a chance to talk to the Wild Bunch yet. Maybe he had no intention of talking to them. Or maybe I had miscalculated, and talking to them had made them more aggressive.

In any case, further sleuthing on my part had to wait until I'd solved the case of getting coverage at the store.

Mrs. T did not seem any happier with the streaky results of my efforts to clean the front stoop than she had been with the original pentagram. She kept looking at me and shaking her head sadly as though she could already foresee my unfortunate end. But what settled the matter was the fact that every time a customer neared the cash register, she came haring after me, frantically flapping her tiny hands over her tiny head in the universally recognized gesture for *The sky is falling!*

We waved good-bye to each other at the end of the day. I called the agency asking for a replacement. While I microwaved a frozen dinner, I thumbed through the *Los Angeles Times*.

MISSING TEENAGER MAY HAVE BEEN VICTIM OF CULT

Investigators digging in Eaton Canyon Park late Saturday night unearthed what they believe are the remains of a teenager who disappeared two years ago.

The badly decomposed body of a young white male was discovered in a shallow grave beneath a tree carved with symbols believed to have occult significance. Similar symbols were found on the victim's body. A source close to the investigation confirmed that the heart of the victim had been removed.

Detective James Riordan of the Pasadena Police Department refused to speculate on a possible link between this death and the discovery of a woman's similarly mutilated body in the Hollywood Hills last month.

As yet, police have no suspects in the brutal slaying.

Suddenly I wasn't so hungry.

Chapter Five

"I heard what happened," Paul Chan said as I finished setting up the chairs for Tuesday night's Partners in Crime writing group. Chan was Jake's longtime sidekick in Homicide. "Just when you think you've seen it all."

"You've likely seen a lot of it," I replied absently, stepping back to gauge my handiwork.

"I'm starting to think these murdering freaks are everywhere."

I glanced at him, his words finally registering. "Probably not," I said.

I had managed to sneak in a few minutes of Internet research before setting up for the group: According to the FBI, if satanic sacrifices and cult murders were as prevalent as some claimed, the nation would be littered with thousands and thousands of dead animals and humans. Slaughter on that scale could hardly be kept secret.

"Truth is stranger than fiction. You ought to know that," Chan said. He added, "You hear they're talking about putting together a task force for this killing in Eaton Canyon?"

Chan was a middle-aged, deceptively avuncular-looking Asian-American. I never quite knew what he made of my relationship with Jake. Clearly he understood we had a kind of relationship, but he carefully steered clear of acknowledging that it was anything but a casual friendship -- which, for all I knew, was how Jake had presented it.

"A task force?"

"Oh, yeah. Jake could be a part of that. It could be a powerful opportunity." He gave me a vague smile which might have indicated sympathy for the fact that devil worshippers were after me, or because he was aware that I was on Jake's shit list.

If they were putting together a task force, it must mean that the symbols on the tree and the victim were definitely occult in nature and that there was a link between the girl found in the Hollywood Hills and the body found in Eaton Canyon. I guess that explained

how Jake had turned up on my doorstep this morning. He had feelers out for anything remotely occult-oriented.

I didn't believe my little problem had to do with a murder -- let alone two murders. I mean, LA is full of nutjobs. That doesn't mean they're all acquainted or attend the same church, anymore than I personally know every bookseller or mystery writer.

The others began arriving at that point, so there was no further chance for discussion. The group now numbered eight members. Of the eight, about four were serious about writing (read: willing to "compromise their art"), and of the four, three showed what I considered real promise. This opinion was based on years of bookselling, not my own unexpected and slight literary success -- although ironically it was my "cred" as a published writer (however inexperienced), and not as a bookseller, that was valued by my partners in crime.

They were a nice group, though, supportive of each other's efforts, cheering on the triumphs and commiserating over the rejections. Tonight our married writing team, Jean and Ted Finch, were reading from their magnum dopus *Murder, He Mimed*.

I poured a cup of coffee, snagged a couple of oatmeal cookies to make up for dumping my frozen dinner down the garbage disposal. The cookies were nice and crunchy, which effectively drowned out Jean's reading. I turned the pages when the others did, my thoughts on whether -- should the situation deteriorate further -- I could track Angus through his girlfriend, Wanda. I didn't think it would be necessary. Even if he was on the periphery of this stuff, it didn't necessarily mean he'd know anything useful beyond rumor and conjecture. Jake's instincts were usually good, but his view of humanity was jaded.

I'd assumed Wanda had left town with Angus, but maybe not. I tried to remember if he'd listed anyone as an emergency contact, I thought he might have put her down. As far as I knew, Wanda lived at home with her parents, so maybe there was a lead there.

I realized Jean had stopped reading. The group was ready for discussion. The Finches have been working on this monsterpiece for the past two years. The latest revision had to do with turning a relatively minor character, Avery Oxford, into the protagonist. I had a lot of problems with Avery, not so much because he was a gay stereotype, but because I feared he was based on me. True, he was a Hollywood gossip columnist, but he was thirty-three, five-eleven, slender, had black hair, blue eyes, and a friend on the police force named Jack O'Reilly -- and he kept showing up in my clothes. In the scene I'd just read, he was wearing "a favorite pair of faded Levi's and a black lambswool sweater over a crisp, white T-shirt" -- pretty much what I'd worn to last week's meeting.

I said, trying to be tactful, "I could be wrong, but I don't think turning Avery into the protag is a good idea, Jean. I think you should stick to the original plan. Kill him off in chapter seven. Or even sooner."

"I don't know," Max mused. "He's an amusing twerp." Max was a rugged forty, with yellow shaggy hair and yellow shaggy beard. Attractive, I guess, if you don't mind a guy who

sees deodorant and razors as a threat to his masculinity. He was aggressively heterosexual and made a point of dating every unattached woman who joined the group. Since his regular pillow pal was Grania Joyce, another of our partners in crime, it made for an interesting dynamic.

Ted turned to Jean, whose face had fallen at my words. She faltered, “We’ve already rewritten those first nine chapters to reflect the new character dynamic.”

“I don’t think he’s a strong enough character.”

“You could go with the cop,” Chan suggested. “O’Reilly’s a strong character.”

“If you don’t mind the testosterone overload,” Grania sneered. Grania was tall and rangy, with an unruly mane of sorrel hair: your basic warrior princess model.

“I got no problem with it,” said Chan.

Their gazes locked. They did this dueling lightsaber thing, which I hastened to interrupt. “But you see, that makes more sense,” I said quickly. “It’s more believable that a cop would get involved in solving these murders. I mean, you’re talking about writing a series. How believable is it that this Hollywood gossip columnist is going to keep stumbling on all these murders?”

“That’s the problem with the amateur sleuth in general,” Grania pointed out. Grania, naturally, wrote about a kick-ass female PI. “It’s totally artificial.”

Chan said reasonably, “I don’t know. A lot of kinky shit goes down in Hollyweird. A gossip columnist could get sucked into that.”

“Hey, you’re writing about a gay Shakespearean actor solving mysteries,” Max pointed out to me. “You sold the series to some lunatic fringe publishing house.”

Ted said, “How believable is it that a bookseller and mystery author would get involved solving mysteries? But you’ve been involved twice in murder cases, Adrien.” Jean nodded eagerly. “You’re like a real-life amateur sleuth. So it does happen. Truth is stranger than fiction.”

“Let them write what they want to write,” Max said irritably. “What do you care?”

“I don’t think that Avery’s...likeable.”

Jean looked like she was going to cry, like I’d insulted her precious prune of a newborn. “You don’t *like* Avery?”

Ted glared at me.

The entire circle stared at me.

“Not a terribly constructive comment, Adrien,” Grania observed.

* * * * *

When the group at last broke up, I cleared the chairs and crumbs, made sure the side and front doors were secured, and climbed the stairs to my flat.

I poured myself a drink and tried to think of an entertaining way to fill the rest of the evening. I don't think of myself as a loner, but it's a fact that my friends generally do the calling. And I've never been able to get into the whole club scene. I don't like crowds. I like reading.

I'd carried a stack of books upstairs. I lazily skimmed a copy of Rick Copp's *The Actor's Guide to Murder*. I noticed a lot of these gay amateur sleuths have cop boyfriends. And I noticed that none of these cops seem particularly closeted. I also noticed that they all seemed amazingly agreeable about sharing privileged information with their non-cop boyfriends. It was a shame Jake didn't read these books.

I was getting into a scene in which Copp's protagon was once again being scolded by his (yikes!) hazel-eyed, brawny cop boyfriend for sticking his nose into a criminal investigation, when I noticed the answering machine blinking. I pressed the button, listened to a stiff Professor Snowden telling me I could call him at a certain number. I picked up, dialed the number he'd left.

He answered on the fourth ring, sounding as preoccupied as if I'd caught him correcting final exams.

"Hi, it's Adrien English."

There was a pause. "Oh. Er...hello." Pause.

I opened my mouth to say hello again -- it seemed to be one of those conversations -- but Snowden said carefully, "I've been unable to get in touch with the person I thought might know about our mutual friend's difficulty."

The guy sounded like he worked for the CIA. Or Charles Dickens. I said, "Well, not to pressure you, but some joker painted a pentagram on my front step last night. The folks at Dragonwyck seemed to think this was not good."

Silence stretched on the other end.

"Perhaps we should meet," he said finally.

I had no problem with that, provided it was in a public place in broad daylight, not Eaton Canyon at midnight. "Sure," I said. "When and where?"

* * * * *

Wednesday morning brought fitful sunshine and Lester Naess. Lester was about my age, very heavy and a talker. He smelled of cigarettes and astringent. By midmorning I'd heard about his first divorce, his second wife, and his kidney operation. On the bright side, he wasn't afraid to deal with the customers. The fear was all on the side of John Q. Public.

Before lunch, Lester had updated me on his gallstones, his second divorce, and his current girlfriend. Immediately following lunch, he had what he described as "a nicotine fit." When he recovered, I slipped out for a Starbucks and a quick nervous breakdown. I phoned Guy Snowden to tell him I'd have to reschedule our meeting.

“Has something happened?” he asked warily. Possibly it was my tone.

I assured him all was cool, although I couldn’t help wondering: If God works in mysterious ways, why shouldn’t the Devil seek temporary employment in a mystery bookstore?

After lunch Lester told me about his angina, his IRS audit, his first heart attack, and his girlfriend’s lousy teenagers. I decided that another day of Lester, and I’d also be having chest pains.

I called the agency once more.

* * * * *

Jake dropped by that evening with Chinese takeout and the *Alien vs. Predator* DVD. I had closed shop on the ponderous heels of Lester and was trying to drape miniature Christmas lights along the ceiling. I had the McGarrigle sisters’ Christmas CD playing in the storeroom, so maybe that’s why I didn’t hear him using his key in the side door.

A floorboard squeaked, I glanced down, and for once, there really *was* a shadowy figure coming at me.

“Jesus!” I yelped, nearly overbalancing the ladder.

“Christ!” finished Jake, who also jumped, but managed to make it look more like someone leaping into battle mode and less like someone about to rocket through the roof.

These tender greetings out of the way, he ordered me down from the ladder, took my place at the dark beams. I carried the takeout upstairs, emptied out the soggy containers, put the food into pans to heat later, and briefly studied the DVD cover.

“My money’s on the aliens,” I called, starting back down the staircase.

“Nah,” Jake returned, seriously. “No way. All the aliens have is acid blood. The predators have body armor and invisibility.”

Ah, yes. I saw why Jake was voting for the predators. Nothing like invisibility when you need it.

He had already managed to string the lights all along the back partition of the shop. I dug fake pine garland out of the dusty cardboard boxes and draped it artistically over the faux fireplace.

We worked for long, companionable minutes. No mention of his case load, no mention of my straying off the reservation. The music filled in the silence.

“Rufus Wainwright?” he inquired when the song “What Are You Doing New Year’s Eve” whispered through the canyon of bookshelves.

“Yeah.”

He grunted disapprovingly.

“Hey, you think you’d want to go to this wedding?” I asked casually. “I could use the moral support.”

He didn’t speak for a moment. I couldn’t see his profile; the upper half of his body was in shadow.

I qualified hastily, “I mean, as a regular guest. As a friend of Lisa’s.” Meaning not as my personal guest, meaning his cover would not be compromised.

“Uh, sure,” he said vaguely. “I could do that.” He glanced back at me. “How does this look?”

“Great.”

He tossed me the extension cord. “Try plugging that in.”

I found the wall socket behind the tall mahogany counter which had once served as the hotel’s front desk. I guided the prongs into the wall socket and felt a weird rippling jolt wash through my body. The cord dropped out of my hand, though I don’t think I consciously moved my fingers.

“Shit! It shocked me.” I sat back on my heels, heart pounding way too fast, thinking, *shit, shit, shit. Not good...*

“Are you okay?” Jake jumped from the ladder, came around the counter, squatting down, face tense.

I waited for my heart to start skipping and stuttering. It continued to gallop away, trying to outrun the threat.

“Okay, baby?”

I took an experimental breath, nodded.

He rested a callused hand against my cheek, tilting my face so that our eyes met.

“Sure?”

“I think so.” From his expression, he was thinking what I was, that any minute the electrical shock would send my own funky heartbeat out of sync.

“Why don’t you sit back?”

I lowered myself the rest of the way and leaned gingerly against the base of the desk. I took another careful breath. My heart began to slow. I decided that I was okay, just startled. My hand still tingled. I flexed it.

“You’re lucky you dropped the cord. That doesn’t always happen.”

I nodded. Lucky I dropped the cord. Not so lucky I got shocked. I thought of that pentagram on my front step.

Jake eyed me like there was a defect in the manufacturing. I gave him a lopsided grin.

“Take it easy.”

I nodded. “Sorry. I sort of scared myself.”

"No shit." He frowned. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. It wasn't anything I did. Nothing anybody did. The wiring's old, that's all."

His mouth twitched.

I clarified, "The building's. Not mine."

That night the fucking felt like making love. So slow and so sweet. We spent a long time stroking, petting, kissing. Hands threading hair, bringing faces closer, the taste of lips and tongues, gentle bites and soft breaths and languid sips. The friendly bump of noses, the flickering of eye lashes, the slow, quiet exchange of breaths. A little cocoon of sensual delight -- and maybe something more.

But at last we began to thrust against each other, pleasure knotting into hunger and passion and the need that always felt close to anxiety. I wrapped my arms around his broad, muscular back, arching against him, feeling the hard probe of his dick against my belly. No questions here, the answers being self-evident.

Jake muttered against my ear, "My God, I..."

"Me too."

I scooted back, smiling despite my tiredness, knees splayed, fingertips grazing the flat hard planes of his chest, reaching for him again.

Instead he pushed me back without roughness into the pillows. "Nah. Just relax."

Nah? "But..."

"Just...shut up..." He leaned over me, found my mouth, kissing away the sting of that. "And...relax." His lips trailed softly down my naked flesh, pressing tiny melting kisses on my chin, my throat, collar bone, breast bone, belly, the sensitive joining of groin and inner thigh. I shivered. He'd never...was he going to...?

"Very pretty, Adrien," he whispered. "Every inch of you." And he kissed the head of my cock, which, embarrassingly, seemed to be reaching up for that very thing.

I laughed shakily, the laugh dying in the back of my throat as his wet, hot mouth closed around me. My hands fluttered to my sides, half protest -- though what the hell was there to protest in this? -- half supplication, clenching in the duvet.

Jake's tongue traced the slit, tasting. I caught a ragged breath, amazed, afraid to say a word that might break whatever magic spell this was. His lips tightened around my shaft, and I stopped myself from bucking up. I felt him smile, felt his fingers cup my balls and squeeze.

I did arch then, gasping, "Jake!"

"Right here. What'd you need?"

Oh, I didn't want him *talking*. Couldn't bear to be teased. Couldn't bear for that febrile slide down my dick to stop.

I moaned and was promptly enveloped in that slick, sucking heat. That sweet pulse of pleasure as his mouth dragged on my length, drawing me in deeper. The pressure of his tongue on the sensitive underside of the head of my cock. He took me all the way in, sucking hard, and my hands moved to his shoulders, squeezing, urging.

But Jake took his time, like we had all night, gentle and relentless, and in the end the intensity of feeling was so powerful it brought tears to my eyes. Coming was an exquisite shock of release, with me pushing up hard into the grip of lips and mouth, pumping out what felt like my life's blood in hard, long strokes.

I rested my forearm over my face so he wouldn't know, but Jake drew me into his arms, found my mouth. He tasted like me and like himself.

All I wanted to do was sleep, but I forced myself to mumble the words, "What about you, Jake?"

"I'm good. Go to sleep," he said, settling us more comfortably. He rested his face in the curve of my neck and lay very still.

Chapter Six

Morning had broken -- apparently over Gabriel Savant's aching head.

Unshaven, eyes red-rimmed, he wore expensive, wrinkled trousers and silk shirt. He looked, in my opinion, more like the victim in a horror novel than the dapper celebrity who penned them.

"I was hoping that you might have found that disk." His smile looked like it hurt.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I told Friedlander that I don't think you could have left it here. I've looked a couple of times."

Hollow-eyed, he continued to smile twitchily at me. "It's very important that I find it. Bobby is very upset."

"I don't know what to tell you. If you want to look around --?"

He took out a pack of clove cigarettes and lit one. His hand shook. "There are things you don't understand."

Well, yeah, starting with the popularity of reality TV and moving on down to adult men who wear Capri pants.

I said, "I gather it was research for a project you're working on?"

His eyes seemed to start from his head. "Why would you say that?"

Paranoia: it's not just for dinner anymore. "I'm guessing," I said kindly.

He continued to stare at me, then relaxed a fraction. Nodding, he blew a stream of smoke out his nostrils. "Bobby and I meet people. In the course of our work."

"Sure." I had to wonder about his relationship with Friedlander. I'd had the impression that Friedlander was sent as an author escort from the publisher, but that seemed to be incorrect. Was Friedlander maybe Savant's assistant? I considered that diamond stud winking away in Savant's shell-like right ear, but I didn't get the feeling Savant was gay or even bi.

He continued, "We take notes. You never know what will be useful. We have a book due every nine months, see?"

"That's got to be tough." Surely the hundreds of thousands that he earned in royalties was some compensation.

"We don't use it all, naturally. Some of our research material is fairly...sensitive."

Were they blackmailing people? What was the deal here? I must have looked perplexed, because he said, "If you help me, I will help you."

"You'll help me with what?" Was he offering to work in the store? I wasn't sure if I was that desperate yet.

His eyes did this shift from side to side. He whispered. "I know about your...problem...with..." His voice died out, and his lips formed soundless words, "Blade Sable."

Blade Sable? Was this somebody I should know? Kind of sounded like a gay super hero. "Blade Sable?" I repeated, wondering if I'd heard him correctly.

Gabriel eyed me in disbelief, then said, "Think about it, Aiden."

"Adrien."

"Whatever. You wouldn't want to deal with this on your own. These people are very dangerous. Even without the Powers of Darkness."

* * * * *

By midmorning, when no one turned up from the agency, I phoned and was informed that they *had* sent someone. The slightly exasperated implication was that the employee was here somewhere -- or perhaps that I had carelessly lost the employee and now wanted *another* one. The woman at the agency did not actually remind me that employees did not grow on trees, but I felt like she wanted to.

Luckily, it was a slow morning. I decided that it wouldn't matter if I closed for an hour or two to meet the professor. I was entitled to lunch. Maybe a long lunch. What was the use of being the boss if you couldn't take a long lunch once in a while?

As previously arranged, we met at Campanile on South La Brea Avenue. Recognizable by its distinctive bell tower, the building housing Campanile restaurant and La Brea Bakery was built by Charlie Chaplin back in 1929. Before the building was completed, Chaplin lost it in a divorce settlement. His loss is our gain.

The professor was seated in the green-walled garden area, with its towering glass ceiling and red-tiled floor. He was reading and sipping a glass of wine. He wore jeans and a velvet doublet over a white shirt. His long, silvery hair gleamed like sterling against the claret-colored velvet. He was a striking presence, oblivious to his surroundings.

Even without the powers of Darkness. Well, there are powers, and there are *powers*.

I rested a hand on the chair across from him. "Professor Snowden?"

He must have been watching my approach from under his lashes, because he looked up out of his book, and without missing a beat, drawled, "Call me Guy." He set the book aside and offered his hand. We shook. His gaze held mine a few seconds longer than politeness required.

Interesting.

I sat down across from him. "Guy, then. Thanks for meeting me."

Guy moved his book aside. He had beautiful hands, tanned, graceful, but with long-fingered strength. I could still feel the imprint of his palm against mine.

The waitress appeared. I ordered a glass of the Clos du Bois merlot. When she was out of earshot, Guy said, "I have good news. I don't think you'll be...pestered any further."

"Really?"

"I've spoken to the students involved -- former students, actually. It was mostly a...misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding? That's it?"

The remarkable green eyes met mine. "Er...yes."

Maybe he was happy to let it go at that, but I wanted a little more reassurance that it was truly over.

The waitress returned with my wine. She was one of those pert waifs, flirting reflexively with us while we ordered our lunches. Guy went for the mesclun salad with marinated ricotta, pine nuts, and crostini currants. I opted for a sandwich with smoked meat, provolone, and tangy cherry peppers.

"So what caused this misunderstanding?" I inquired, returning to our original topic of conversation. "Did anyone explain it to you?"

"Yes. And I'm satisfied that it is over." His gaze found mine again, and he smiled wryly. "I know the kids involved. They got a little carried away, that's all. You can tell Angus it's safe to come home."

"Just in time for finals," I said. "Unfortunately, I don't know where he is."

His eyes never wavered. "You don't?"

"Nope."

After that we chatted idly, politely, until our meal arrived. I thought that, although this was not really a social occasion, certainly nothing remotely resembling a date, it was pleasant to be sharing a nice meal with an attractive man -- in public. And he was very attractive. Cultured, urbane, witty -- exuding an easy, unconscious sexuality. Polar opposite from Jake. I wondered what Jake would make of him.

"What happens when Angus does come back?" I inquired eventually.

"Is he coming back?"

I thought of Mrs. Tum and Lester Naess. "I hope so," I said.

Glass stem between his fingers, Snowden gently circled the base of the glass on the linen-covered table, warming the wine. "You see, the others believe that Angus is a warlock."

"Isn't everybody?" That wasn't exactly what I meant. "I mean, aren't they all part of a coven?"

He answered me indirectly. "Warlock is the term for an oath breaker. For one who has lied or broken a pledge of silence."

"I thought it was a male witch."

"Partly. It would be a witch who practices the Black Arts. A witch who worships Satan. Most modern witches are Wicca, and Wiccans don't, you know."

"So this group or coven is Wicca? Then I don't understand why an inverted pentagram was painted on my doorstep."

His brows drew together. "Inverted? Are you sure?"

I removed one of the photos from my day planner, pushed it across to Snowden. He stared at it for a long moment.

"Are you sure you talked to the right people?" I inquired, watching his expression.

His eyes veered to mine. "Certainly," he said, but he sounded less than certain.

"What's the *Ars Goetia*?" I asked.

"Where the devil --?"

I kid you not. "Where the devil," like you'd expect to hear from Colonel Mustard in The Study. I murmured, "No pun intended?"

He stared at me, but I didn't think he saw me. At last he said, "It's the first section of an anonymously-written seventeenth-century grimoire known as *The Lesser Key of Solomon*. Do you know what a grimoire is?"

"Book of Shadows, right?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You surprise me."

"I had a lot of time to read as a kid." Not that you would find a copy of the Book of Shadows in your school library -- unless you're attending Hogwarts.

"Then you're probably aware that the Book of Shadows is a kind of witches' Bible, only rather more than that. It's a personal record of rituals and spells and lore, each one unique."

"But isn't there a definitive Book of Shadows?"

He grimaced at this ignorance. "No. Different traditions have reclaimed and reedited the most famous source materials into their own grimoires. There are illustrious historical grimoires: *The Black Pullet*, *The Greater Key of Solomon*, *The Lesser Key of Solomon*."

"So what is *Ars Goetia*?"

“Essentially it’s the name, rank, and serial number of seventy-two demons King Solomon is said to have conjured and then imprisoned in a bronze vessel fastened with magic seals.”

“And this symbol?” I pointed to the line drawing that Ariel had told me was the signature of a high-ranking demon.

He shook his head. “It’s a sigil. A sign or seal in magic.” He glanced at me and said, “It’s a symbol designed for a specific magical use.”

“This sigil is the name of a demon, isn’t it?”

Reluctantly, he admitted, “That also.”

“And the point of this sigil would be to invoke or conjure this particular demon, right?”

“Correct. The idea would be to summon the demon to do the work of the conjurer.”

“Which of the seventy-two demons is this? Out of curiosity.”

“I have no idea.”

I must have looked skeptical. He said, “Off the top of my head? Don’t be ridiculous.” He sounded unexpectedly haughty. “I’m no expert in this particular arena. If you want to understand the role of modern witchcraft in primitive societies or the devolution of Goddess worship into modern religion, I’m your man. Traditional witchcraft...Satanism...is not my scene.”

“But you could find out?”

“What do you care which demon it is?”

That earned curious glances from our fellow diners. Guy lowered his voice, said, “You need to stay well clear of this.”

“That old black magic gotcha?”

“You may laugh, but the point is not whether you believe in this. The point is that whoever left this on your door believes in it. This is one who wishes you great harm -- merely because you got in his -- or her --”

“Or their?” I suggested.

“Or *their* way.”

“I thought you said it was all settled?”

“It is. If you let it lie.”

“What about Angus?”

He didn’t seem to have an answer.

“Dessert?” the waitress asked brightly, materializing beside our table.

I resisted the impulse to ask for devil’s food cake.

* * * * *

Chan was waiting by the front door when I got back to the bookstore. He appeared to have been there a while. He looked tired and frazzled; there was a mound of cigarette butts at his feet.

"Hey," I greeted him, sliding back the ornate security gate. "What's up?"

"Adrien --" There was something in his face.

I put my hand out to steady myself on the gate. I'd as soon as not remember the sound I made.

Chan said, sounding kind of frantic, "He's okay, Adrien. Jake's okay. That's why I'm here. In case it makes the news. He didn't want you to hear it that way."

I turned to stare at him across a great crumbling distance, hanging on to the gate like it was my spar in a swell.

"He's fine. I swear to God. Maybe a little concussion."

"What happened?"

"We were chasing a suspect, and he got hit by a car. Jake, I mean. The suspect got away."

"Where is he?"

"The suspect?"

"*Jake.*"

"Oh. Huntington Hospital." He added as I started back toward my car, "But he doesn't want you driving down there. Adrien" -- he trotted after me -- "he doesn't want you there."

Chapter Seven

I hate hospitals. I hate the antiseptic smell, the artificial light. I hate those crisp, professional smiles that tell you they've seen a million like you come and go, and your little, life-threatening illness isn't nearly as important as you imagine.

It took a while to locate Jake's room up on one of the skyscraper floors. I prowled around the sterile halls until I found the right room -- the room with the uniformed cop in the doorway.

The cop looked like a younger version of Jake. Probably one of his brothers, most likely the one fresh out of the Academy. He wasn't watching me, he was staring into the room, grinning, and as I walked by, I was able to snatch a snapshot glimpse of Jake. He sat bolstered by pillows in bed, his face bruised, his head bandaged. He was laughing. The room seemed full of people. There was an older man in a navy cardigan standing with his arm around a woman with a young face and gray hair. A young woman with red hair sat beside the raised bed holding Jake's hand. She was sort of laughing and sort of crying.

The cop who looked like a younger version of Jake glanced my way. The uncomfortably familiar hazel eyes met mine. I kept walking.

I walked all the way down the hall, stopped by the drinking fountain. It felt like the longest walk of my life. I bent over the fountain and drank ice-cold metallic water. I pressed the button again, splashed my face. My hand was shaking.

Satisfied? I asked myself. *Feel better now?*

* * * * *

The body dug up in the park turned out to be a missing teenager named Tony Zellig. He had been nineteen, a freshman at UCLA. He had disappeared a year ago, in October. Classmates described him as quiet and a bit of a loner who worked hard and took his studies

seriously. There was a photo of Zellig, a nice ordinary-looking kid. Not the kind of kid who gets himself carved into pieces during occult rituals.

I spent a couple of hours working on the computer, seeing what I could come up with on Blade Sable. I found plenty of info on blades and sable, but nothing on any organization called Blade Sable.

I'd have to dig deeper. I noted the titles of a number of occult "classics" that kept popping up on various recommended reading lists. I decided to skip those not written in the past century. At the top of my TBR list was Anton LaVey's *The Satanic Bible*. LaVey was the founder and high priest of the Church of Satan. He was credited with creating the official religion of Satanism. A guy named Peter H. Gilmore had been appointed High Priest following LaVey's death, but he wasn't much for the written word. The reigning expert in the field seemed to be an Oliver Garibaldi.

Unlike the flamboyant Anton LaVey or the other occult showmen, Garibaldi kept a low profile. I tried surfing for biographical information, but no joy. I figured he had to be in his sixties, given the copyright info on his bibliography

So I looked for what I could find on Guy Snowden -- and was surprised when all kinds of info sprang up. He had a Web site, for chrissake. I had to admit he photographed well. I studied a moody and dramatic photo of him and then read the bio. He had been born in Seattle. *Wasn't that a well-known haven for Satanists?* He had traveled extensively, spending several years in Great Britain.

So the English accent was fake. I suppose it said something about his character, but I wasn't sure what. A love of theatrics?

He was a Rhodes Scholar, accumulating a nice batch of impressive-sounding academic accolades. He had published a slew of articles with titles like "The Feminist Witch," "The Politics of Twentieth-century Witchcraft," and "Witch Hunt: An American Tradition." And he had written two weighty-looking tomes: *Modern Magick* and *The Craft in Conflict*.

Both were out of print. Instead, I ordered a copy of the *Cop's Guide to Occult Investigations*, telling myself I could always give it to Jake for Christmas. (I mean, how much fishing tackle does any guy truly need -- especially a guy who never takes vacations?)

Back to prowling the Internet, I found mention of Snowden in a couple of gossipy student blogs. For what it was worth, a male student, "Spelwerx," felt he was an arrogant ass. "Devil-Dog" had been taking him every semester apparently since time began and could be listed under the Fan column. Over several months of blogs, "Destiny's Child" weighed the pros and cons of "bearing his precious seed" (I couldn't help flashing on a *Rosemary's Baby* moment) and frequently speculated on his age (I bet he was in his forties, myself).

All very readable, if not germane. I finally powered down the computer, went through the shop, turning off the Christmas lights twinkling gently in the gloom.

Upstairs, I caught the last minutes of *Pirates of the Caribbean* on TV, which cheered me a little. There's nothing like rolling seas, buried treasure, and handsome pirates as an

antidote to whatever ails ye. In my expert opinion -- a fortune in video rentals should carry weight -- *Pirates* was the finest swashbuckler of the last two decades.

I read in bed for awhile, treating myself to award-winning Anthony Bidulka's amusing *Tapas on the Ramblas*, but found my thoughts wandering to Gabriel Savant and his missing disk. I wondered again about his relationship with Bob Friedlander. There was something there, but I was pretty sure it wasn't a romantic partnership. Not that you can always tell. I've had gay friends who felt I acted too straight, and straight friends who've told me they knew I was gay the minute they met me.

I'd asked Jake once if, in his admittedly warped opinion, there was anything particularly gay in my appearance or demeanor.

He'd replied, "You're...too graceful."

Too graceful? What did that mean?

"Physically, intellectually, or spiritually?"

"All of the above," he'd said wryly.

I'd considered this. "It's probably the *tai chi*," I'd answered seriously. He'd laughed.

"It's probably the ballet lessons."

Jake had never recovered from learning that Lisa enrolled me in ballet from age seven to nine. It made sense; Lisa had been a ballerina with the Royal Ballet before she met my father.

But Jake was always trying to find an explanation for my homosexuality: my father's death when I was a small child, being raised without a strong male role model, being raised by Lisa -- hell, *knowing* Lisa. The one theory he never wanted to consider was that I might have been born with a genetic predisposition.

I usually didn't bother debating him, because I knew he was smart enough to realize that none of the above explained *him*.

* * * * *

The phone rang about ten-thirty. I almost didn't pick it up, then on the third ring, fumbled it off the hook.

It sounded like a TV was playing in the background, then Jake's voice was in my ear, quiet and intimate as though he were lying next to me. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

It took me a second to get control of my voice. Then I said, "Me? I'm not the one who got nailed jaywalking. How are *you* feeling?"

"Fine. I should be out of here tomorrow. Just bumps and bruises. Next time I'll look both ways."

Me too, I thought. Inexplicably there was something about the size of a baseball lodged in my throat, making it impossible to speak.

Into my silence, he said awkwardly, "I hope Chan didn't -- I told him to try not to scare the shit out of you."

"He was...uh...very diplomatic." Again I couldn't seem to think of what to say to him.

It was Jake's turn to fall silent. Then he said with a curious gentleness, "Are you okay, Adrien? You don't sound okay."

My heart started thudding in a kind of fight or flight reaction. "I'm fine," I said tersely. "Still half asleep maybe."

He didn't answer for a moment. I heard the TV blasting away in the background. "Right. Well, I'll let you go. They're trying to close the switchboard down anyway. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Sure," I said and hung up.

* * * * *

Once again nobody showed from the temp agency. I tried not to take it personally. The agency offered to send back Lester Naess, who had apparently been kind enough to give me a thumbs-up.

Ungrateful bastard that I was, I declined.

What would I do if Angus didn't return? I hated to think. Even without the holiday rush and the longer hours, I couldn't handle it all myself. Besides, my editor at Lunatic Fringe Publishing was tactfully hinting that I had a manuscript due in a couple of weeks. Why had I been so hasty in sending Angus away?

Not that Angus was the perfect employee, but I was used to him, he was used to me. Better the devil you know, as the saying goes. Today especially, I felt I needed the company as much as the help.

A regular client brought in a bag of paperbacks, and I found a couple of Gabe Savant's early efforts. Back when he wrote pulp fiction, he had gone by the nom de plume of G.O. Savage. I glanced through a dog-eared copy of *So Lovely, So Dead*. Pretty much what you would expect. I recalled Bob Friedlander talking about how Savant's career had gone nowhere while he was writing deathless prose for the entertainment and edification of literary critics, but this was your standard-issue formula fiction. Maybe Friedlander had never read Savant's early stuff.

Not that it mattered. I re-priced the books to reflect Savant's current popularity and shelved them.

There were no new developments in the Eaton Canyon murder, but that didn't keep the local newspaper from rehashing and speculating on past events. There was an earnest interview with a prominent psychiatrist who explained why the young are often attracted to

magic and the occult, for those readers so lacking in imagination they couldn't see the obvious for themselves.

"The idea of being able to empower yourself through magic is appealing to the insecure adolescent," quoth the shrink.

Appealing to all kinds of people, I thought.

There was an interview with a local religious figure. His angle was that interest and examination of the occult lured the young away from Jesus and the path of righteousness.

"These organizations make a point of accepting behavior considered sinful in the Judeo-Christian tradition. For example, homosexuality is condoned by Wicca."

I wondered what the other examples were. It seemed likely to me that the people who condemned Wicca and the study of the occult for religious reasons might be as likely to condemn the study and practice of Islam or Buddhism or Catholicism or Mormonism on the same basis.

I gathered from Guy that the same bias existed in occult circles: Wicca versus Traditional Witchcraft, for example. Which started me thinking. If this coven of ex-students was upset with Angus for practicing the Black Arts, then why had they turned around and decorated my entrance with the most instantly recognizable symbol of Satanic worship? What kind of a warning was that?

Maybe it wasn't a warning. Maybe it was a welcome home sign in anticipation of Angus's return.

Maybe it was a welcome home sign in anticipation of someone else's return. Someone or *something*?

I thought about the card the Dragonwyck ladies had given me. Was it worth calling the mysterious number? According to Guy, my troubles were over. Well, my problems on the spiritual plane.

There was still the problem of finding good help in the material world.

* * * * *

"Did you talk to Jake about the house?" Lisa asked, when she guilted me into meeting her for lunch later that afternoon at Café Santorini.

"Not really." Not at all, as a matter of fact. Certain things could be taken for granted in this world.

"The pool would be awfully good for you, darling. You always loved swimming. The doctors --"

"I know!" I said sharply. She looked hurt. I softened my tone, "Lisa, I don't think it's practical. It's too far from the shop, to start with." I glanced over my shoulder. I had that funny feeling you get when you're being watched. No one seemed to be paying us any

attention. I turned back to Lisa. Her eyes were burning Siamese cat blue, which occurred whenever the bookstore came up as a stumbling block to one of her plans.

"At least think about it," she urged.

Shoving more pita-wrapped grilled chicken and hummus into my mouth to prevent myself from saying what was on my mind, I stared down from the brick rooftop balcony.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her bowed head as she drew invisible circles in the linen tablecloth with one perfect fingernail lacquered in the palest possible pink.

Uh-oh, I thought, watching her. *What now?*

"Adrien," she mused aloud, "it's important that you and Bill get to know each other. It's important to me that you like each other. I want us to be a real family."

I gulped the lump of pita and chicken. "Okay."

"I was thinking that perhaps if you two were to spend time together -- alone --"

Oh, God. What was she thinking? A baseball game? Or worse: a fishing trip for the guys? A safari?

"Lisa, I like him. Really. And I can't take any more time. I mean, with Angus gone --" And battling the forces of darkness and all.

"It would only be dinner. Bill suggested it himself."

"But I already like him," I pleaded. "I like them all."

She blinked her lashes as though she felt the tears welling -- though I didn't see a cloud in the sky. "No one can be to me what your father was, Adrien. Stephen was...well, he was the great love of my life. That kind of love happens once. But Bill is a good man. What we have together is special."

"Lisa..."

"He's certainly not going to replace *you*. You'll always be --"

"Okay! Where am I supposed to meet him for dinner?"

The sun appeared in all its dimpled glory. She said nostalgically, "You look so like your father sometimes, Adrien. He used to get that same expression."

"And yet, funnily enough," I said, "twere not the apoplexy what done him in."

* * * * *

I spent a jolly evening surfing the 'Net and was once again taken aback to discover how many Web sites were devoted to Satanism, witchcraft, Wicca -- you name it. There were sites for chaos magic, Voodoo, vampires, guided meditation, and candle magick. What is the deal with candles? There were occult personals, online spell purchases (through PayPal, no less), and even organizations for gay pagans, gay witches, and gay Wiccans.

Several links led me to Yahoo Groups. Again I found groups based on region (Boston-Occult), school of thought (angelsoccultforum), age (teenwitches), gender (goddessonly). There were groups dedicated to the black arts, to sex magic, to alchemy, to hermeticism. There were groups for specific covens and for solitary witches. But there was no entity anywhere called Blade Sable.

Holy moly, what kind of menacing cult couldn't afford its own Web site?

On impulse, I joined a "community" called Dark Realm, with 983 members. The brief web intro indicated that this was a group for those who wished to peruse the dark side of the moon -- and maybe exchange spells, lore, and phone numbers.

I filled out a quickie questionnaire, naturally lying about almost everything, and twenty minutes later, Frank Hardy, age twenty-one, interest sex magick (Yahoo ID blackster21), had been officially welcomed into the Dark Realm.

The Blackster didn't waste any time on social niceties. Right away he posted, asking whether any of the dark denizens had ever heard of a group called Blade Sable.

No response. I hit refresh a couple of times, but zilch.

Well, it was getting late on a Friday night. Time for all bad little witches to be out raising Cain. I turned off the computer.

* * * * *

The employment agency wasn't open on weekends, had I the heart to ring them. I rushed through the morning and early afternoon, taking advantage of a lull around three o'clock to microwave a bowl of Top Ramen soup and scan the weekend edition of the *Times*.

The front page news froze me, spoon dangling foot-long noodles about an inch from my mouth. Bestselling author Gabriel Savant was missing. I speed-read the article. Savant had not been seen since Friday morning, when he had left his hotel without mentioning to anyone where he was going. When he had not returned in time for a book club luncheon, his assistant Robert Friedlander had begun calling around. Whatever that meant.

When Savant had still not turned up for the evening's scheduled book signing, Friedlander had filed a missing person's report. Apparently when the person missing was a celebrity, the usual waiting period was waived.

I re-read the article. Unless I was mistaken, it sounded very much as though Savant had walked out of my bookshop and disappeared into thin air.

Chapter Eight

“I was wondering...” a voice inquired diffidently into the ether. “Are you hiring?”

I jerked my head out of the paper. A small, brown-haired woman stood on the other side of the counter. She was young, and she looked clean -- that was my main impression. She looked quiet. Beyond that, she was about as nondescript as a woman could be and still remain visible to the human eye.

I was afraid to move, afraid to speak too loudly in case I scared her off. I asked carefully, “When could you start?”

Possibly that came across as too needy. Her brown eyes widened.

“Don’t you want me to fill out an application?”

“Absolutely. When can you start?”

I smiled, but apparently it was not a reassuring effort. She said warily, “Tomorrow, I guess.”

“Full-time? Part-time?”

“Whatever I can get, I guess.”

Did she guess about everything? Were there no certainties in her young life?

“What’s your name?”

“Velvet. Velvet White.”

See, this is why people should have to be licensed to have kids. Imagine going through years of homeroom as White, Velvet.

“Hang on, Velvet,” I told her. “I’ll find an application.”

I hustled to find the forms in the storeroom archives before Velvet had time to make an escape. Still doubtful, she filled the application out at one of the library tables in the back,

while I went into the office to let LAPD know that I might have been the last person to see Gabriel Savant before he vanished.

* * * * *

Velvet showed up on time Sunday morning. We spent the day going over basics. She seemed to be an intelligent life form -- at least she followed directions, and that seemed as good a place as any to start.

When she showed for work on Monday, I began to think I had a live one. She was quiet, even quieter than Angus, and she seemed to watch me when she thought I wasn't noticing. I figured she'd relax as soon as she realized that her first impression was wrong, that I was actually quite the model of mental stability -- barring recent lapses.

I hadn't heard from Jake since Thursday night. Monday night was one of our usual get-togethers, but I had agreed to meet Lisa's councilman for dinner. I left word on Jake's cell phone, but still hadn't heard from him when time came to close shop.

So when the downstairs phone rang, I doubled back to pick it up, though I was already running late.

A pause followed my greeting. Then, "We're watching you," whispered the voice on the other end.

"Yeah? Did you see what I did with my keys?"

Silence. Then dial tone.

These younger demons. So easily discouraged.

Not discouraged enough, though, I had to admit half an hour later as I negotiated my way into the river of cars flooding the I-210. I got my cell phone out and dialed Guy Snowden's number.

No answer.

Was the man ever home? I left a message, flipped shut the cell, and returned my attention to insinuating my way into the fast lane.

The good news was that they apparently only had the shop number. The bad news was that, regardless of what Guy believed, the minions of evil were still way too interested in my corner of the cosmos.

Why?

I merged onto the C-118, considering this objectively.

* * * * *

Down in the valley, the valley so low, lights glittered in the blackness like jewels in a pirate's chest. The Odyssey offers a spectacular view of the San Fernando Valley at night if you can get a table by a window. The councilman could and did.

"Glad you could make it, Adrien," he said gruffly, giving me another of those industrial-sized handshakes. His eyes bored into me under the shaggy eyebrows.

I batted something inane back, and we settled into our game.

Over drinks we discussed cars, gas prices, traffic, California's economy, and scotch versus whiskey. Or maybe it was whiskey versus scotch. Bill was drinking Johnny Walker Black Label, which apparently wasn't up to scratch. I stuck to Chivas Regal, and apparently that was also for the tourists. He promised me the life-altering experience of a "wee dram" of Laphroaig at Christmas. I declared myself ready and willing, and wondered if there was any chance in hell of avoiding a full-scale family Christmas with "the troops," as Bill referred to his harem.

Classical music and the murmur of voices from other tables filled the silences, which fortunately weren't many.

We ordered, both opting for seafood, for which the Odyssey is justly famous. Over our meals, Bill filled me in on what a city councilman actually does. I wasn't sure I was getting my tax money's worth.

The soft lights, sweet music, and gallons of alcohol began to have their effect. Bill's keen eye grew less keen, his voice went deep and resonant with emotion.

"When Eleanor, my first wife, died, I believed that I would never remarry, never find anyone who could begin to fill that void. I've known and admired Lisa -- your mother -- for many years, but I never dreamed..."

I nodded -- not so much in encouragement as indicating that he need say no more.

He went on to tell me that obviously no one would have to tell me how beautiful and delightful and charming and intelligent and warm and wonderful Lisa was, and I agreed and kept agreeing, but he seemed to be on a roll. He assured me that Lisa would never have to want for aught. But since she didn't now, I only managed a few polite sounds. He said he realized that he didn't need to ask my permission to marry my mother, but that it meant a lot to both of them if I would give my blessing.

He seemed perfectly sincere. I figured that he might be a throwback, but he certainly did have nice old-fashioned manners.

"If this is what Lisa wants," I said by way of blessing.

He nodded. We had more drinks and finished our dinner. See, that wasn't so bad, I reassured myself, as Bill appropriated the bill.

But I was kidding myself if I thought the male bonding was over for the night. Bill offered port and a Cuban cigar by the fire pit out on the patio.

I accepted the port and declined the cigar.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was forgetting. You have a heart condition, I understand."

"Very mild."

He nodded politely -- Lisa had likely convinced him I would never see forty.

Thanks to a freak bout with rheumatic fever when I was sixteen, the valves of my heart were damaged. As long as I didn't do anything too stupid, it wasn't usually a problem, although maybe it gave me a different perspective from most guys my age. Getting involved in a couple of murder investigations had reinforced my conviction that life was short and happiness pretty damn fragile.

Bill and I drank in silence that was not exactly companionable, but not unfriendly. The scent of cigar mingled with the fire and the hint of sage from the surrounding hills.

Dauten tapped cigar ashes over the railing, said gruffly, with the air of a bull who knows damn well it's in a china shop, "I know that you live a...uh...an alternative lifestyle, Adrien. I don't want you to feel that any of us would judge...would feel... We want you to be comfortable, and of course, any friend of yours would naturally be welcome in our home at any time."

I went cold. Had Lisa told him about Jake? Had she named names? Was there any likelihood that Dauten would bump into Jake in the normal course of either of their jobs?

"Thank you," I got out.

"You're one of the family now."

Talk about cults. "I...yes."

He held his brandy snifter out, we clinked glasses ever so carefully.

* * * * *

Velvet departed for an early break on Tuesday, *Lord of the Rings* lunchbox in hand -- what *is* it with girls and that elf, by the way?

Not long after she'd left, two young females sauntered in. Although there is really no typical bookstore customer, this pair looked like they would be more at home in a mall in Hades.

One was tall and blonde. She looked familiar. In fact, she looked a lot like one of my new sisters tricked out for Halloween -- though I assumed she would have mentioned if we were destined to share ceremonial turkey in the near future. She wore leather jeans and a black lace T-shirt, through which I saw her scarlet bra. A silver pentagram gleamed on a chain around her neck (so much for secret signs). The feathery tips of her hair were tinted black. Her lipstick, eye makeup, and fingernails were all painted a macabre and sooty shade more suited to a charnel house than a house of fashion.

Her mohawked companion was small, buff. She was dressed in a floor-length black leather coat that dwarfed her. Pink-tinted heart-shaped glasses and silver-frosted lipstick completed the ensemble.

Are you a good witch or a bad witch? Again, I had the impression that I knew her from somewhere, but I couldn't quite place her. In any case, it was the blonde who held the floor.

"We're looking for Gus," she announced, propping one hand on one skinny hip and tossing her two-toned hair over her shoulder in what was obviously one of her top ten poses.

"He's not here."

Her heavy-lidded eyes fastened on me. "Well, like, when will he be back?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

Her lip curled. "Bullshit. You must know."

I raised my brows. "Why must I?"

"He works for you."

Here was the born dupe of a yet-to-be-promoted micromanager.

"He's on his own time now."

"Are you saying you, like, fired him?"

I grinned. I don't know why, but that belligerent mix of Valley Girl and Wicked Witch struck me as sort of funny.

"I'm not saying anything, kiddo, other than that he's not here, and I have no idea when he's coming back." She opened her mouth, but I added, "I'm thinking that if Angus wanted you to know where he was, he'd have left word with you."

She glared ferociously with those Alice Cooper eyes. I studied her. We seemed to have reached an impasse.

"I want to know where Gus is!" She was louder now. Maybe she thought we didn't speak the same language.

"I can't help you."

Her skinny chest rose and fell. "Can't or *won't*?"

This kind of stunt was not good for business. I was lucky a customer hadn't strolled in yet. I said, to conciliate, "Can't, if it makes you feel better."

"I'll tell you what will make me feel better!"

I waited politely while she trembled with rage. Belatedly, I wondered whether she was on something. Her eyes did look stoned. My gaze slid to her faithful companion who stood there wordlessly waiting for...whatever. Behind the pink heart-shaped specs, her eyes met mine, slid away.

Snowden's class, I thought abruptly. That's where I've seen you.

I still didn't think I had a problem. I mean, I was confident I could take Wicked, if it came down to that. I wasn't quite sure about the stocky brunette. I was fairly sure that two healthy, adult-sized, and aggressive femmes would be a handful, even for a guy who didn't have a tricky heart. But I honestly didn't think this was going anywhere I couldn't handle.

The blonde jerked her head to her trusty sidekick. The dark-haired girl turned toward the front door, moving to shut it.

Now *that*, I admit, caught me off guard. I remembered Jake saying once that half the people who wound up victims simply took too long to assess potential danger or ignored their own instincts.

As the leather munchkin flipped the “Open” sign over to “Closed,” I started considering my options.

The blonde turned back to me. “Did you, like, want to change your mind?” she drawled.

“Like, what about?” Now she had me doing it.

I figured if I reached for the phone I would wind up in a wrestling match with her, and I wanted to avoid that. It wasn’t solely fear of being beaten up by girls; it was the thought that they could scream rape or God knows what, and they might be believed. Being gay wouldn’t necessarily protect me. There are lunatics out there who believe that a gay man is capable of anything. Even lusting after college co-eds.

She made this minute sound of impatience and fury and shoved the stack of paperbacks on the counter to the floor.

The situation was fast morphing from farce to felony.

I could always run upstairs, lock myself in my flat, and call the cops. Or I could grab the antique poker from in front of the fake fireplace and start whaling away with it, but... I don’t know. Maybe it wasn’t rational, but I had a real reluctance to start crunching skulls and breaking bones. Nor was I about to leave the shop to their mercy.

She advanced on me. “Listen, queer bait, we want an answer!”

Queer bait?

I contemplated shoving the nearest bookshelf over on her, but that was liable to kill her. I ducked back, putting the counter between us.

“Why don’t you ask your Ouija board?”

As Jake has frequently pointed out, I have a tendency to shoot my mouth off at the wrong time. She tried to jump across the counter top to scratch me. I backed out of range of her ink-tipped claws.

“For fuck’s sake!” observed the brunette.

So now I knew the name of their mysterious deity.

Sabrina the Teenage Bitch wriggled forward on the polished mahogany and spilled none too gracefully over the other side with sales receipts and assorted invoices. I slipped around the end of the counter, keeping one eye on the lady with the mohawk.

Sabrina rose, shook her blonde mane out of her face. “I can make you *so* sorry,” she whispered. My nostrils twitched as I got a whiff of cinnamon gum and overpowering perfume. *Obsession? Shalimar? Brimstone?*

"Likewise," I said evenly. "And what a waste of both of our time, since I don't have the information you need."

"Kinsey," exclaimed the second one, nodding at the window facing the street. To my astonishment I saw Jake striding along the sidewalk clearly making straight for Cloak and Dagger Books.

The cavalry when I least expected it. I said, "Kinsey, don't look now, but there's a house with your name on it."

Kinsey and the Poison Dwarf gaped, taken aback by what they seemed to believe were my psychic powers -- or maybe they really thought a house was blowing their way.

Jake looked like the house had hit him first. There was a discreet square of white over his brow. One side of his face looked bruised. He was casually dressed, jeans and a leather jacket, so he wasn't working.

"This isn't over," Kinsey warned me, backing away. Her foot slid on a sheaf of papers, and she reached out to steady herself.

"Snap out of it," I told her. "The guy's a cop. And a friend. D'you --"

But they freaked at the word "cop." The dark-haired girl fumbled the front door open, and they went hurtling through it, nearly knocking down Jake, who had paused at the sight of the closed door.

As the glass door settled into place, I heard his muffled curse, one arm cradling what were apparently sore ribs. Instinctively, he turned to go after them. From my vantage point I saw him check. He turned back, shoved open the door, and leaned inside the doorway. I waved my arm to signal that I was okay -- and to go after them -- but it took him a moment to pinpoint me in the relative gloom of the shop's interior.

Then he was gone.

Through the front window, I watched him sprint down the busy sidewalk in pursuit. One arm was clamped to his side as though to brace himself. He didn't know what he was pursuing; it was the same reflex that makes a dog chase a car down the street.

I knelt, gathered the fallen papers and books. My heart was kicking hard with a rush of adrenaline and tension. I was irritated that my hands weren't quite steady. I still wasn't convinced the whole incident wasn't mostly ridiculous.

Jake was back in under five minutes. "So...did they see your prices? What was that about?" Despite the wisecrack, his face was glazed with sweat, and beneath the tan, pale. He moved like he hurt.

"I take it they got away?"

He glared at me, still breathing hard.

"They came in asking for Angus. They didn't believe me when I said I didn't know where he was."

"Maybe you weren't convincing."

"Jake," I said hotly. "I don't know where he is."

He let that go. "So what happened? They threatened you? What?"

"Yeah. Sort of." I felt like an idiot. I couldn't picture Jake letting a pair of girls chase him around a room. "They got here a couple of minutes ahead of you. Nothing actually happened."

Jake scowled. "The goddamn door was shut, Adrien, with a closed sign on it. Something sure as shit was going down in here. I know guilt when I see it. Those two were guilty as hell. Did you get a name? Did you recognize either of them?"

"One of them, the blonde, was named 'Kinsey.' I recognized the dark-haired girl from Guy Snowden's class last Monday."

All business, he sat on the fat arm of one of the faded, comfy chairs, and took out a notebook to jot down my information. By the time we finished, his color was better. He had caught his breath again.

Flipping the notebook shut, he straightened and came over to the counter where I stood.

"I think I'll have another word with Professor Snowden," he said. I didn't like his smile. I wondered what the first word had been and decided I'd be happier not knowing.

"So what are you doing here?" I asked. "How are you feeling?"

Our public greetings were always awkward. Occasionally, he'd actually kiss me hello, if we were well and truly on our own, but generally any physical display of affection had to wait till we were behind closed -- and locked and bolted -- doors. Today, in particular there seemed to be a force field around him.

I didn't care; I was happy that he was alive and in one piece. And that he'd come to see me so soon after getting released from the hospital. So, I settled with gripping his arm as it rested on the counter, giving him a friendly shake. "Nice to see you."

A weird expression crossed his features. His hazel gaze met mine, swerved away.

"Kate's pregnant," he said.

"Oh?" For a second I actually couldn't think who Kate was. Then it registered. *Kate*. The red-haired woman in the hospital. Kate Keegan. The woman he slept with when he wasn't sleeping with me.

"Kind of a surprise," I said neutrally. He seemed shaken, but not upset. Had it been planned? Was he glad? Was she trying to manipulate him? Trap him?

"Yeah." He smiled, a goofy smile.

So he was happy about it.

"She's keeping it -- the baby -- then?"

He nodded. His eyes met mine. Fell away. "Yeah. That much we're agreed on."

“What do you not agree on?”

He wasn't looking at me. He said carefully, “We've talked about getting married, but this would kind of escalate things.”

I blinked. “Sure.”

“We're both in a pretty good position financially and with our careers.” He glanced my way. “But it's not like we planned for it. It would mean a lot of...adjustments.”

“Right.”

He took a deep breath, then let it out. “Anyway, I thought I'd better tell you.” He looked at his watch and said with relief, “I'm late. I'll talk to you later.”

“Okay.”

He grabbed me around the neck in a quick bear hug and banged his cheek against mine. Or that was his intention. In fact, he knocked both our heads together kind of hard, which felt symbolic. He grunted, and I grunted. He let loose and was gone. I watched him go through the little birdies circling my head.

Chapter Nine

After Partners in Crime broke for the evening, I went upstairs and discovered that Guy Snowden had left another of those cautious, noncommittal messages on my machine. I figured if he was still noncommittal, Jake must not have got hold of him. I tried calling him back, got his machine again, and left a less cautious message of my own.

Still no word from the Dark Realm regarding Blade Sable. My online query lay right where I had left it. Discussion did not exactly scintillate. Spells were exchanged, political opinions were exchanged, a video was recommended: *Cursed* with Christina Ricci. This triggered an unexpectedly heated debate of the flick's cinematic merits and Ricci's physical ones. I sighed. Signed out.

An evening of surfing the 'Net for information on local Satanic organizations did little for my nerves, although I thought I had a better understanding of what Satanism was.

As with Christianity, there appeared to be several different religious belief systems and practices in Satanism. Traditional Satanists worshiped the deity Satan, aka the Christian Devil. But the majority of Satanists seemed to view Satanism as an abstract philosophy with Satan functioning as a symbol for pre-Christian life concepts.

Of course, according to the Religious Right, anyone who wasn't practicing conservative Christianity was a Satanist.

The ugly stuff, the stuff that got the media attention, seemed to fall into the category of Satanic dabbling. A mix of everything from Wicca to psychotropic werewolves with, as far as I could tell, no connection to religious Satanism, this junk seemed to attract the young (pissy adolescents in particular) and the mentally ill.

I was reading up on the more horrific manifestations of this mystical acting out, when the phone rang next to my elbow, and I almost went through the roof.

By the time I had regained composure enough to pick up the receiver, I hoped it might be Jake, but nope, the hoarse whisper on the other end belonged to Angus.

“Adrien...?”

“Angus, speak up,” I said crisply. Hours of reading about the Sign of the Beast, ritual torture, crazed killers, and equally crazed Christian fundamentalists made me less patient than usual. “Where are you?”

“I don’t think I should tell you,” Angus mumbled. “It might not be safe.”

Swell. Was he anticipating my being captured and tortured for the information?

I heard a sound like a garbage disposal running in the background, which I deduced was Wanda, offering Angus guidance. “Adrien, I think I made a big mistake,” he said.

That made two of us. “What mistake?” I asked.

“I think I left stuff at my place that might help them track us.”

“Angus, who is ‘them’? Wait -- forget I asked. You’ve got to call Jake right away.”

“I’m not talking to *him*,” Angus said in perfectly normal and perfectly hostile tones. “He doesn’t give a rat’s ass what happens to me.”

“Listen to me carefully,” I said. “They dug up a body in Eaton Canyon a couple of days ago. A kid named Tony Zellig. Jake’s part of the investigation. He wants to talk to you.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with it,” he said desperately. My heart sank. *Not*: “I don’t know anything about any body!” *Not*: “Who’s Tony Zellig?”

“Adrien, please listen. If they find that letter, they’ll be able to hunt us down. Adrien...*are you there?*”

“I’m here.” I rested my forehead on my hand, tried to think. “What letter?”

“The letter from my Grampy. I left it right there on the coffee table. If they find it, they’ll make the connection...”

His *Grampy*? How desperate a character could a kid be who called his grandfather “Grampy”?

“Do they know where you live? Maybe they’ve already found it.”

I didn’t actually believe that. I had trouble with the idea of this vast conspiracy of evil, but I felt the panic vibrate all the way down the line. He covered the mouthpiece and held a quick, ragged discussion with Wanda.

“If they --” His voice cracked. He tried again. “If they’ve found out, we need to know.”

The minute hand of the clock on my desk clicked onto the six. Eleven-thirty. I listened to Angus breathing noisily on the other end. He sounded like he was about to cry.

“How do I get in?” I asked at last.

“There’s a key in the dragon planter on the back porch.”

“Terrific,” I said briefly. “No one will ever think of looking there.”

“Are you going to do it?”

“What exactly am I doing? Retrieving a letter that has the location of your secret hideout?”

His voice wavered. “Why are you mad at me?”

“Because you knew --” My voice shook. I cleared my throat and said, “Because you knew about the body in Eaton Canyon. Because you’re involved in a goddamned murder -- and I helped you --”

He slammed the phone down.

I pressed Call Return. The number flashed on the screen. Up north somewhere, judging by the area code. I scribbled the number. Then I called Jake’s cell. It was busy. I pressed pound to leave a message.

“It’s me.” I explained briefly, recited Angus’s phone number. “He asked me to pick something up for him at his place. It’s eleven-thirty now. I should be over there by twelve, if you want to have a look around without a warrant.” I pulled the address out of my Rolodex, read it over the phone, and hung up.

* * * * *

The house was at the end of a cul-de-sac. One of those rectangular, L-shaped, ranch-style fixer-uppers that no one had bothered to fix up. It looked blue in the moonlight. The peeling shutters were blood-colored -- possibly brown in the light of day. The attached garage sagged wearily on its posts. Apparently Angus wasn’t a big fan of HGTV.

For laughs, I walked to the front and tried the door. It was locked. I decided that was a good sign. I went around to the side gate. It was also locked, fastened by a padlock on the other side of the tall wooden gate.

I weighed alternatives while keeping an eye on the neighbor’s house. The windows next door were dark, so either no one was home, or everyone was in bed. I didn’t fancy getting snagged for burglary by a Citizen’s Watch zealot. I suspected Angus might not stay around long enough to back my story.

It was a reasonably sturdy gate. I decided it could likely take my weight. I grabbed the top board and swung myself up. I balanced briefly, the fence groaning in alarm. I jumped, landing in tall grass and weeds.

That had been easier than expected. I went around the corner of the house. The patio was a cement slab with a metal canopy. There was a selection of withered plants in pots of various sizes. I didn’t need to use my flashlight thanks to the dramatic full moon, and the fact that the dragon planter had been painted in Day-Glo paint. Red eyes glowed eerily from the shadows. I poked around in the dirt and dead twigs, found the key, and opened the sliding glass door.

I stepped inside. The place stank of cigarettes, marijuana, garbage...

“Hello?”

The sound of my voice was startling in the emptiness of that house. I’d never been anywhere that felt so cold, so devoid of life.

I turned on the nearest lamp.

The room looked shockingly ordinary. No horned goat image painted on the walls, no altar festooned with black candles.

The shag carpet looked like Rice-A-Roni, and there was an assortment of furniture ready for the Goodwill, although, come to think of it, that was probably where Angus had purchased it. The coffee table was littered with music magazines and bills. There were several books on astrology, including a copy of *The Devil’s Disciple* by Garibaldi.

There was also a copy of *The Satanic Bible*. I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise at the sight of the ominous scarlet pentagram on that stark black cover.

After a moment I shook off my inertia, telling myself not to be an ass. I quickly shuffled through the papers scattered across the coffee table. No letters. I glanced around the room.

Not a single picture on the wall. Now *that* truly was weird.

I made tracks for the kitchen. It was disorderly, but not dirty, despite the persistent reek of garbage. A phone book lay open on the table. I glanced at the yellow pages: locksmiths. Was that significant?

Next to the fake oak cabinets was a bulletin board with photos of Angus and Wanda -- Wanda in a giant sombrero, her face smeared in whipped cream. Birthday party, California style. There were a couple of postcards, a schedule of classes that neither of them was attending. That was about it.

All the while I searched, the quiet chill of the place gnawed at me. I began to feel like I was being watched. Every time the house creaked -- and sometimes when it didn’t -- I snapped to attention, staring about myself uneasily.

If I hadn’t already told Jake I would be there, I’d have walked out a dozen times. As it was, I’d been inside about eight minutes when I decided I’d had it. I would wait for Jake out front in the Forester. For that matter, I didn’t even know if Jake had got my message. He likely hadn’t. He hadn’t called me back. He was probably home in bed, sound asleep, right now. Which is where I would have been if I had any sense at all.

As I crossed the living room, heading for the glass door, it occurred to me that the sour sick smell that hung over the place like a pall was stronger from the hall that led to the bedrooms.

I stood rooted in the intersection of rooms, my mouth dry with dread.

Thank you and good night, I thought. At the same instant, I realized that I couldn’t walk away. Never mind the ethics of the situation, I’d touched the front door knob, the

sliding glass door, the lamp -- and those were the articles I knew for sure would retain fingerprints. The articles I remembered touching.

I could be wrong, I reassured myself. I was often wrong. More and more often, it seemed lately.

But I knew I wasn't wrong. Not this time. Not about this.

I turned down the hallway. It felt like when you're trying to run in nightmare. Despite the adrenaline overdrive, my footsteps dragged as I paced the length of the hall. I poked my head around the doorframe.

Moonlight poured from the back window onto the thing sprawled on the bed. White, limp, and streaked with dark: a body.

"No," I said. "No. No fucking way." My voice sounded shocked and loud. Way too loud. Too loud for the room, too loud in my head. I clamped down on it.

Dimly, I made out the giant circle scrawled on the wall above the headboard. Circle with a five-point star, and in the center, a terrible symbol -- the calling card of a high-ranking demon.

Chapter Ten

I retreated a step, then a few more, walking backward because -- crazily -- I was afraid to turn my back on the body in the bedroom. I reached the living room without falling over anything. I stood there, white noise filling the space usually needed for thinking.

The glass door slid open behind me. I spun around, blood thundering in my ears. I don't do surprises well.

Jake slipped inside, got one look at my face, and was across the floor in two strides. His hands closed on my arms. He said close to my ear, "Don't pass out."

"I won't." I thought I said it aloud, but maybe I was just thinking it. My face seemed to be pressed into his shoulder. I breathed him in. He smelled like the night and like deodorant soap; he smelled alive.

After a few moments he gave me a shake. "Adrien? Come on, baby. Pull yourself together." He gave me another joggle, this one less patient. "Is it Angus?"

I shook my head.

He put me away from him, moving past. I heard the bedroom light click on. Light spilled down the hallway. I tottered the last steps to the couch, dropped into the sagging cushions, practiced taking long, calm breaths.

While You Were Out, with special guest Charles Manson.

After a couple of minutes, Jake dropped into the chair across from me. I glanced at his face. Nice to know I wasn't the only one sick with horror.

"I think it might be the girl from the bookstore," he said.

"Velvet?" I was aghast.

Jake looked confused. "The one you called Kinsey. The blonde."

Kinsey. Right. Where did I get Velvet from? That was a weird jump.

“Who’s Velvet?”

I shook my head.

He was silent. Then he said abruptly, “Did you see the symbols over the bed?”

“Not clearly.”

“Could you handle another look?”

I stared at him.

He explained, “I think they match the carvings in the tree where we found the Zellig kid. I think, but I’m not sure, that they match the stuff painted on your doorstep. Would you be able to tell?”

Why did he have to know right that minute? Why the fuck couldn’t he wait till he looked at the photos himself?

I gave him a long, unfriendly look, forced myself to get up. I walked back to the bedroom.

How had I not instantly recognized that smell for what it was? I swallowed hard.

Jake followed. As feeble as it sounds, the fact that he stood at my shoulder did bolster me. I kept my gaze focused on the wall, not looking at what lay beneath, but Jesus Christ, the thing was written in blood -- *her blood*.

I reached for the door frame, and he startled me by catching my wrist.

“Try not to touch anything.”

That didn’t register. The fact that he gripped my arm hard enough to leave his own fingerprints didn’t register.

“I think it’s the same.” The voice didn’t sound like mine.

He let me go. I turned, found my way back to the couch. I put my face briefly in my hands, trying to scrub away the picture in my brain. I’ve seen bad things, but that was the worst, by far.

Jake came and stood over me.

“He set you up. You do realize that?”

I lifted my head. Blinked at him. “Huh?”

“Your pet nutcase. Angus.”

“You think Angus killed her?”

“If he didn’t, he sure as hell knows who did. He didn’t accidentally pick tonight to send you over here.”

I tried to remember the details of my conversation with Angus. “He was terrified.”

“That fits.”

Did it? Maybe it did. Angus knew about the Eaton Canyon murder. I didn't want to believe he had been involved in that, but it was hard to explain his knowing, yet not being incriminated. Why wouldn't he have gone to the cops? What excuse was there?

It was over anyway. He had Angus's phone number. In a matter of hours, Angus would be arrested for murder. At the least, he would be brought back and questioned. Maybe that was just as well, because this had to end.

I became aware that a long silence had fallen between Jake and me. I glanced at him.

"Have you called it in?"

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"I don't know what to do about you."

"Say again?"

His expression was bleak. "How do we explain your presence here?"

I shrugged tiredly. "Angus asked me to swing by and pick up his mail." I wondered if Angus would be willing to back that story once he was officially under suspicion for murder. "And I called you because I knew --"

I got it at last. *How* did I know of Jake's interest in the case? *How* did I happen to have his cell phone number? And why had Jake come sneaking over here at my offer of an unofficial peek into Angus's home? The answers to these and other obvious questions inferred a personal and intimate acquaintanceship between me and Jake.

He said slowly, as though he were thinking aloud, "It's reasonable that you could have called me. I could have come to the bookstore following up a lead."

"What lead?"

"Okay, scratch that. You called me when the kid disappeared. We met during the Slasher investigation, and when this happened you gave me a call. You were concerned about the kid, and I gave you my cell phone number and told you to call me if you heard from him."

It was fascinating, in a painful and weird way, to watch him try to rationalize away any reason for a personal link between us. To cover the fact that he had been friends -- and occasionally more -- with a gay man.

"Then what?" I asked with a strange detachment. "You came over here and found the...her?"

"Why not?"

"What about my fingerprints?"

"What did you touch?"

I told him. He shook his head dismissingly. "It's hard to lift latent prints from rough surfaces like terra cotta and unfinished wood. Even getting them off a curved surface like a door knob is tricky."

"They can do it with chemical processing."

"Yeah." I spotted the tinker-toy wheels turning. "But I don't want to risk destroying the perp's prints. Anyway, your fingerprints aren't on file, and there's no reason for you to be printed now."

He spoke confidently, working it out as he went along. Contemplating him from what seemed like miles away, I felt kind of hollow.

"Is it worth the risk? We'll have a shitload of trouble trying to explain why we lied, if your story doesn't hold up."

His eyes flicked to mine. "Or even seriously interviewed," he said as though I hadn't spoken. "There's a good chance I'll catch the case. I'm part of the occult-killing task force."

Oh, good. Promotion ops for Jake.

I planted my hands on my thighs, pushed myself to my feet. "Sounds like you've got it all worked out," I said politely. "Is there any reason for me to hang around?"

He shook his head. I'm not sure my words actually registered.

"Can I leave by the front, or do I need to climb over the back wall?"

"Hang on." Pulling a hanky out of his pocket, he went to the front door and gingerly opened it, touching the knob as little as possible. Opening the screen door, he stepped out, studied the street, and then turned back to me. "It's clear."

"I gripped the front knob."

Without a word, he wiped the door handle. So much for not destroying evidence.

My eyes met his for an instant before I turned to slip past him.

He grabbed my shoulder. "You're wrong," he said roughly. "I wouldn't compromise an investigation to protect myself. Not even to protect you."

I couldn't help a bitter laugh. "This isn't for me."

"Jesus, Adrien. *Neither* of us needs this complication right now. We both know you didn't do her, that it went down just as you said. What the fuck would be gained by going through the formality of questioning you? Why would I want to waste department time and resources checking your story out? Christ, do you *want* your picture in the papers again?"

I sure didn't, but it troubled me that he was destroying possible evidence. The harder he tried to convince me that this was all in the interests of the investigation, the more I knew it was to protect himself.

He must have read my thoughts. Abruptly, he let me go. "Think what you want," he said curtly.

I stepped out, the screen door springing shut behind me with a little bang.

* * * * *

Angus had left three frantic messages on my machine. I listened to them, stomach curdling with irrational guilt, then I erased them. I wondered how long it would be before the cops audited the phone records of wherever he was staying and came to interview me.

But then, we weren't trying to hide the fact that I had called Jake, we were concealing how well I knew him.

I poured myself a snifter of brandy. Actually, it was more like a soup bowl. I downed it in a couple of gulps, then refilled my glass.

I was going to have to lie for Jake, and I wasn't sure I would be able to. I wasn't sure I wanted to. Through the warm haze of the brandy, I listened to that whisper of rebellion, then turned down the volume.

Guy Snowden had also left a message: crisp and to the point.

"I had a visit from LAPD today. I'd like to meet with you again. I'd like to introduce you to a friend of mine."

When I finished the brandy -- and I do mean *all* the brandy -- I gave Guy a call. Predictably, his answering machine picked up.

I hesitated, wondering if he was awake, maybe listening in the darkness for one particular voice.

I quietly replaced the receiver in its cradle.

Chapter Eleven

Over a bowl of oatmeal and a bottle of aspirin, I watched Angus and Wanda being arrested.

The morning news brimmed with murder. Footage of Angus and Wanda being escorted out of a cabin in Lake Tahoe was replayed on every channel. Unreal. Angus and Wanda, handcuffed, trying to hide their faces, were escorted by burly sheriffs through a mob of cameras.

What would happen to them? I assumed Wanda's family would come to her rescue, but I had never heard Angus mention any family besides this NorCal "Grampy." He couldn't afford legal defense. He'd wind up with some court-appointed public defender.

I changed the channel and watched Angus being guided into a patrol car once again. It was surreal. Eyes shining, the blonde reporter blabbed on with pseudo gravity to the folks at home. You'd have thought they had nabbed the Zodiac Killer.

I turned off the TV, dumped my dish in the sink. Belatedly, it occurred to me that Angus knew the truth about my relationship with Jake. How long before that came out in questioning? The minute he found out that Jake was the cop who'd discovered the body, he'd put two and two together. He'd spill. Or did Jake have a plan for keeping Angus quiet?

I considered Jake's theory that Angus had tried to set me up the night before. It didn't make sense. Set me up for what? It wasn't like the cops had been waiting for me to stumble onto the crime scene. If anyone was being set up, wasn't it most likely Angus? The body had been found in his house.

I was sketchy on the details of how he had angered his former playmates, but there was no doubt he had ticked off some unpleasant people. Then he'd compounded his offense by skipping out. Was it too much of a leap to suppose that, when they'd been unable to retrieve him through the power of negative thinking, they had decided to use the police?

Or to approach from another angle: Angus's defection had posed a kind of threat to them. They had neutralized him by framing him for murder.

Granted, committing murder was quite an escalation from harassment and vandalism, but if these were the same people who had killed Tony Zellig and Karen Holtzer, then murder wasn't anything new.

Why this girl, though? Kinsey had clearly been one of "them."

Okay, qualify that. She had been one of the group looking for Angus. Did that mean she was part of Angus's...what was it called? Coven? According to Guy Snowden, Angus had belonged to a harmless Wicca group. I'd met Wiccans, and they didn't seem like the same species as Kinsey and the Poison Dwarf. Angus had been frightened of his former friends; the scariest thing about the gang at Dragonwyck was their addiction to wheatgrass.

The symbols left at the shop and the grave sites of Tony Zellig and Karen Holtzer had been inverted pentagrams -- black magic. The Wiccans had been disturbed by them. So what did that mean?

Might there be two different factions? Was there some kind of woo-woo turf war going on? It was hard to picture Angus -- the Angus I knew -- as a major player in a diabolical chess game. He could be a pawn, though.

Thinking about it made my brain hurt. Or maybe that was the hangover. I decided to let it go and get downstairs.

* * * * *

I hadn't been downstairs for ten minutes when Lisa phoned.

"Oh, Adrien, they've arrested That Boy!" She always referred to Angus as "That Boy." "They say he killed a girl. That he may be a serial killer!"

"That's bull-- ridiculous," I said. "I think he's been framed." First time I'd actually put the thought into words, but I realized I did believe this. I sure as hell did not believe that Angus was a serial killer, and I hadn't noticed *any* of the symptoms.

"Oh, *darling!*" A blend of sympathy and dismay. Mostly dismay.

Cradling the phone between my cheek and shoulder, I glanced over at Velvet. She was busy addressing the shop's Christmas cards. We'd spent an embarrassing amount of time yesterday trying to print labels. In the end we'd decided it would be faster to do it by hand.

I lowered my voice. "Lisa, would it be possible to talk to Mr. Gracen? Could something be worked out with my trust fund?"

"Have you decided about the house, then?"

"Huh? No. I was thinking of Angus. There's no way he can afford decent legal defense."

"Adrien, you must be joking." Her tone was sharp. "Were it possible to lay your hands on that money, helping that boy would *never* be an acceptable reason."

"Is the money mine or not?"

"The money is in trust for you. The reason it is in trust is to prevent this very kind of thing."

"Oh, right. Thirty-two years ago my grandmother miraculously foresaw that one day I might need cash to help a friend --"

"He's not a friend, Adrien. He's someone who works for you. Someone whom I have always said was *most* unsavory."

"My God, you should hear yourself."

"What does Jake say?"

"*Jake?* What the hell does Jake have to do with it?" The mention of Jake made me madder than anything so far.

"Don't swear at me, Adrien. Jake is a police officer. He has experience in these matters. And he's your...oh, what *is* it called? Your partner."

"Jake has nothing to do with anything. Angus is my responsibility."

"Your *responsibility?* How is that boy your *anything?*"

"He works for me. I don't think he has anyone else."

She answered tartly, "Rather a feudal attitude, don't you think, from someone who thinks *I'm* a snob?"

"Will you help me or not?"

"I will help you by doing whatever is in my power to prevent you from accessing that money. That money is your future. You have no idea when you may need that -- that cushion."

Right. Because -- fingers crossed -- my health might give out at any moment, thereby fulfilling Lisa's dire predictions for the past sixteen years.

"All I needed to know," I said crisply and hung up.

After which, I stared in disbelief at the receiver sitting there in its cradle. I'd never hung up on Lisa in my life. I don't think I even interrupted her very often. Jeeeesus. I waited for the phone to ring.

Waited.

Slowly I expelled a long breath. I glanced over at Velvet. She looked away hastily.

* * * * *

Late morning, the Misses Dauten showed up en masse. It was like someone had decided to film a shampoo ad in my shop: The door flew open, and suddenly the place was full of shiny bouncy hair, bright eyes, bright smiles, bright voices. All that was missing was the kicky soundtrack.

"We have to talk to you about the engagement party," said Nancy -- no, Natasha. Natasha?

"What engagement party?"

They laughed merrily at that -- all of them, including the kid -- although I didn't get what was so funny.

"No, but seriously," I said. "Isn't that kind of thing for first weddings and...well, younger couples?"

"Now you sound like Daddy," chided Lauren, which shut me up. She spread a selection of embossed cream and white cards on the counter like a Vegas dealer fanning the deck. "What do you think?"

I stared at the elegant assortment of invites. "But...I was under the impression that we had to...stall. That you couldn't pull off a wedding so close to the holidays."

Lauren nodded as though this was a good point from one who didn't have all the facts. "You have to look at this from Lisa's point of view," she said kindly.

Well, yeah. When did one *not*? Did they honestly think they had to explain the center of the universe to Galileo?

They continued to stare at me expectantly. I realized I was expected to cast a vote for stationery.

I pointed at a crisp white card with crisp black writing. Lauren's fawn-colored eyebrows drew together infinitesimally. Natasha bit her lip. Emma -- initial test results continuing to prove promising -- had wandered off to explore.

"Whatever you think is fine," I declared.

They looked relieved.

"So here's the plan," said Lauren. She proceeded to outline the festivities for a small intimate gathering of one hundred and eighty of the prospective bride and groom's nearest and dearest.

"How many people are invited to the wedding?" I asked faintly.

Lauren shrugged dismissingly. "Three hundred or so, I believe."

I blinked.

They burst out laughing at my expression. "I'm *teasing*," said Lauren. "The wedding is going to be very small. Private. Family and close friends."

"But *very* elegant," vouchsafed Natasha.

I was still trying to assimilate that as they detailed the engagement party plans which included the Mondrian SkyBar, ice sculptures, scented candles, champagne cocktails, and 1940s Big Band music. So bizarre. I still had the images of the night before buzzing in the back of my brain like flies, and they were talking party favors.

I think I had blanked to the Indian Head test pattern when I heard a voice pipe, “Sooooo, what do you think?”

“Wow,” I said.

They laughed delightedly. Were they always like this, bubbly as champagne, talking all at once, finishing each other’s sentences, laughing at each other’s jokes in a kind of silvery harmony? Could they maybe be on some kind of medication?

The shop bells jangled, the door opened. In walked Jake and a lanky scarecrow of a man who had to be another plainclothes cop. They stopped short at what might have appeared to be an in-progress fashion shoot. The scarecrow brightened, scoping out my sisters-to-be.

Jake looked as tired as I felt. His eyes found mine. “Hello again, Mr. English,” he said formally. “Detective Rossini and I were hoping you would answer a few questions in connection with the Angus Gordon case.”

The Dauten Gang never moved a muscle, but you could feel the shock wave bouncing off the safety shield of their poise. They didn’t so much as exchange glances, yet I knew they were communicating telepathically, à la *Village of the Damned*.

“If it’s not too inconvenient,” Rossini said. He appeared to be talking to Lauren’s breasts.

“Sure,” I said. Not in front of the womenfolk, though. I turned to Lauren. “Sorry about this. Maybe we can finalize details later.”

She didn’t respond.

Emma appeared at my elbow with a tattered copy of *The Mystery of Lilac Inn*. “How much is this?”

“Five dollars,” I said automatically. “But for you, ten.”

She giggled, happily oblivious to the electricity snapping in the air.

I took the book, handed it across the counter to Velvet, who watched us like a favorite TV show. She looked blank. “Put it in a bag for her,” I muttered.

“Oh. Sure. Right.” She took the book belatedly.

I glanced over my shoulder. Lauren seemed to be trying the telepathy with me. I wasn’t getting the message. Jake’s message, on the other hand, was coming through loud and clear; I didn’t have to meet his eyes.

“We’re done here, right?” I said to Lauren, resorting to old-fashioned speech.

“Are we?” Natasha said ominously. Was she concerned about the police presence, or did she suspect me of trying to skip out on my share of picking hors d’oeuvres?

“Is everything all right, officers?” Lauren inquired evenly.

I wondered what Lisa had told them that led them to conclude that I might need protecting from the fuzz.

"Everything's fine," I said quickly. "I'll call you. But really, whatever you guys -- girls -- ladies --"

They laughed, though their laughter was no longer so silvery sweet. Rossini and Jake stared in fascination.

"I'm fine with whatever you work out."

"What about the book?" inquired Emma, gazing seriously up at me with those big blue eyes.

"It's a gift," I said. "A before-Christmas gift."

"Adrien," Lauren said quietly, "do we need to call Daddy?"

"Caaa --" I sounded like Michael Palin in *A Fish Called Wanda*. "No. Seriously." Naturally I couldn't say aloud, *And don't tell my mother!* But I telepathed for all my life was worth.

They looked unconvinced. I couldn't look at the cops. Then Natasha exclaimed, "*Christmas!* We haven't talked about Christmas yet!"

"Oh, my *gosh!*" Lauren responded without missing a beat.

Ad lib or did they rehearse this stuff?

"We'll talk," I assured them. They were making protesting noises as I grabbed the book bag from Velvet, pushed it into Emma's hands. I gestured for the coppers to follow me.

They followed, unspeaking, footsteps heavy on the wooden floor. I led them into the backroom, shut the office door firmly.

"What did you need?" It came out abruptly. I was angry with Jake, angry to find myself in this position -- and I was apprehensive.

"I'm sure you're aware that we've arrested Angus Gordon?" Rossini said.

I nodded. Glanced at Jake, then looked away. Easier if I didn't look at him. If I pretended he wasn't there at all.

Abruptly, I remembered the first time I'd met him. Even less happy circumstances than these. We'd sat in this same crowded office with him asking questions about a murder. Today the other cop -- Rossini -- did most of the talking. I answered mechanically. They showed me photos of Kinsey. She was a year or two younger and a lot cleaner in the photographs.

I admitted I had seen her before, that she had come into the store asking for Angus. I admitted I had given Angus money when he had expressed fear over harassment from fellow students.

Rossini was inclined to follow this line of questioning. He began to ask about my relationship with Angus.

"Safe to say, Gordon was more than an employee?"

I opened my mouth, but Jake cut in. "We've already established Mr. English's role."

This breach of etiquette naturally irritated the other detective. He tapped his pencil on the edge of the desk as though trying to recover his train of thought.

"For the record, Mr. English, what were you doing last night from the hours of, say, six p.m. to ten p.m.?"

Ten p.m. So she hadn't been dead for long when I walked in. I wondered if she had been killed at the house. Looking back from a safe distance, I thought that -- considering those terrible wounds -- there hadn't been as much blood as you'd expect at the crime scene. Which isn't to say that it hadn't been plenty gory...

Once again I was standing in that dark hallway staring at the broken bloody corpse lying in the tumbled bed clothes.

I wondered what would have happened if I'd walked into the house forty-five minutes earlier.

I swallowed hard. "I closed the store around five-thirty. I ate dinner here --"

"What'd you have for dinner?" Rossini interrupted genially.

"Uh...a kind of Lean Cuisine thing." That was the truth; it was the question itself that gave me pause.

He didn't speak, so I went on. "I host a weekly writing group on Tuesday nights. They met from seven to nine. After that I did paperwork, and at some point Angus called."

"At what point? What time exactly?"

"Eleven-ish. Eleven-thirty at the latest."

No comment. He could verify the time, and certainly would, if he was any kind of cop at all. It didn't matter; this was all basically true. "I went to bed after leaving the message with Detective Riordan."

I thought it was a pretty tight alibi -- assuming I actually needed one. Maybe it was remotely possible that I could have hunted Kinsey down and murdered her in the hour after Partners in Crime dispersed -- or killed her before everyone arrived and then calmly discussed sentence structure for a couple of hours before carting her corpse over to Angus's -- but I was betting on Rossini's commonsense. (Although the guy did wear red socks with blue trousers.)

Where my story fell apart was after the time of the murder. Hopefully no church ladies selling raffle tickets or Girl Scouts peddling cookies had turned up banging on my door after I split for Angus's. Hopefully, the police had no interest in my actions after the hours of six and ten.

Rossini made a note.

"The message you left was regarding this phone call from Gordon?"

Jake's silence was like a fourth person in the room, a formidable presence.

"Right." It took willpower not to look toward Jake. Why would Rossini ask that?

“Why again did you think Detective Riordan should investigate Gordon’s house?”

He was a smart cop. He had good instincts. He knew something was fishy with my story, but the fact that Jake, in essence, vouched for me, made it awkward.

“I guess the...fear factor,” I said. “Angus sounded terrified. He sounded in fear of his life. Besides, Detective Riordan had told me to get in touch with him if he -- Angus -- called.”

I cast a look at Jake, wondering if it had occurred to him yet that Angus was unlikely to back our strangers-in-the-night scenario.

His eyes met mine, sheared off. His lips were tight, all feeling held in check.

“You had no idea why Gordon was terrified?”

We had already been over this, so I wasn’t sure why Rossini was angling around again.

I said, “I thought I had a pretty good idea. I was wrong. I thought he was being harassed, bullied by other kids. I assumed it was student hazing, something like that. I had no idea that it might tie into this...thing in the papers.”

This multiple homicide thing in the papers, that is.

“You thought he was the victim of hazing? But he was a grad student. He was working as a teaching assistant. How likely is it that someone like that would be targeted that way?”

Rossini must not have gone to college. “It happens,” I said.

“Oh, for Chrissake, Rossini,” Jake said, bored. “English acted like a good citizen. Why are you giving him a hard time? Look, we’ve got places to go and perps to talk to.”

This was so far out of line that Rossini almost couldn’t swallow his anger. He stopped writing. He didn’t tap his pencil, he didn’t move a muscle. I was guessing that he was the senior officer in this investigation. He could probably have Jake removed from the case if he chose.

I said, “I admit I didn’t think it through. I just threw money at the problem.”

Rossini snorted as though this were a common mistake that led to countless cult murders.

He asked me a few clipped questions about my encounter with Kinsey, which I instinctively downplayed. Rossini resumed jotting his notes.

There was a lull in the questioning. I said, without thinking, “Do you think any of this has to do with Gabriel Savant’s disappearance?”

They scrutinized me.

Rossini said, “Gabriel who?”

“The mystery writer who disappeared a couple of days ago,” Jake supplied without inflection.

“Why would there be a connection?”

I had already explained all this over the phone to the cops handling Savant's missing person case. They hadn't been impressed with my story, and I had to admit, hearing myself now, it did sound like I might be the kind of guy who wore aluminum foil hats in the privacy of my own home.

"He writes about the occult. When he did a signing here last Friday night, he announced that his next book would be an exposé of a local cult."

I saw the first glimmer of humor on Rossini's morose puss.

"And you think the secret cult snatched this Gabriel dude?"

"I don't think anything." Well, that wasn't exactly true. "He thought it. I mean, he seemed fearful that something like that might happen."

"He expressed to you a fear that he might be kidnapped?"

"Sort of. Nothing that concrete. He said stuff that --" I caught Jake's chilly eye and stumbled. "He mentioned a group called Blade Sable."

"Say what? Black Sable? Sounds like a cartoon character," Rossini commented. Adding, "I think we'll leave your mystery writer to the boys in Missing Persons."

My face must have made my thoughts clear. He said affably, "You have to understand, Mr. English. Cults are like big business. What we're looking at here is more of a mom-and-pop operation."

There was a quaint analogy. Murder, Inc.

"You're not exploring the possibility that these murders are cult-related?"

"We're taking a look at a couple of scenarios. But you've got to remember that there are more movies about cults than there are genuine real live cults. You can't hide a whole cult," Rossini explained. "Nowadays you can't really hide anything," he finished, and glanced briefly at Jake.

Something in that quick look, in the mildness of his tone, made me uneasy.

He asked more routine questions, while Jake preserved impassive silence, then finally slapped shut his notebook, stood, and thanked me curtly for my time.

I moved to the door. Jake followed Rossini out without a backward glance.

I didn't think much about Jake. I didn't even worry much about whether I had managed to convince Rossini that I was a harmless goof. My attention zeroed in on the sight of Velvet hurrying up the aisle toward the front desk.

The self-conscious line of her back, the guilty haste with which she moved, gave me the distinct impression she had been hovering outside the office.

Had she been listening through the door?

Chapter Twelve

“So they’ve arrested Angus,” Guy remarked at last.

I nodded, selected another home-baked chip from the sandwich basket.

We had agreed to meet for a late lunch at the Corner Bakery Café in Westwood. Guy had an hour and a half before he had to head back to UCLA for his evening course on the “History of Terror: Mystics, Heretics, and Witches in the Western Tradition.”

We’d ordered at the counter, found an empty table in the corner, wasted about ten minutes in awkward small talk before Guy got down to it. I didn’t particularly mind. The café smelled of warm baking bread, and the muted Christmas carols playing in the background were sort of soothing. I was dead tired and glad for a moment’s respite.

I asked, “Did you know Kinsey Perone? The girl Angus is accused of murdering?”

“Know her? No.” Avoiding my gaze, he said, “She could have taken a class or attended a lecture series. Her picture looked familiar, but then, they all look alike after a while.”

I described Kinsey’s accomplice right down to her pink heart-shaped glasses. “She was in that lecture you gave on the occult in popular film and fiction.”

Reluctantly, Guy said, “It sounds like Betty Sansone.”

Betty? What kind of evil henchgirl is named *Betty*?

“Why?” Guy questioned, his gaze finally direct on mine.

I told him why. Sort of. I told him that Kinsey and Betty had paid me a visit the day before. I left out how I spent my evening.

“That doesn’t sound like Betty. She’s smart and focused. I wish I had more like her.”

I let it go. “Guy, would you have a list of the students who were in the Practical Magic class you taught a year or so ago?”

"No," he said crisply. "As I explained to that cop investigating Tony Zellig's death, roll books are turned in at the end of the semester. I've got enough to do keeping my current class load straight without hanging on to out-of-date seating charts and test scores."

If by "that cop" he meant Jake, I had news for him. Nothing stopped Jake. He'd go straight to the college administration to get what he needed.

I could be stubborn too, but I didn't have Jake's resources.

"Well, when you said you had talked to the kids who you believed were involved in harassing Angus, who did you talk to?"

He shifted in his chair, an unconsciously evasive movement. "I spoke to one former student. He denied any involvement, and I believe him. I gave his name to that asshole cop, but I'm not comfortable sharing it with you. I feel that would be a breach of ethics."

By which, I deduced, the student was someone with whom Guy had remained friendly. I sipped my cappuccino, wondering if Jake had talked to this former student, and what the result had been. It was a sure bet that he wouldn't rely on Guy's endorsement.

A group of students sat at a table close to us. I lowered my voice. "Have you ever heard of a group called Blade Sable?"

"Blade what?"

"Sable."

"No. What is it?"

"I don't know. A secret cult?" I was smiling, and he laughed.

The laugh seemed genuine. Maybe Blade Sable really was a figment of Gabe Savant's vivid imagination.

"You realize that Christianity was once a secret cult," he remarked.

We ate in silence for a few moments, then Guy said, "I don't believe that Angus is capable of...that."

"Of murder? I think everyone is capable, given the right set of circumstances."

"Of killing, yes. Of murder, no." Those jade green eyes studied me. "I don't believe you, for example, are capable of murder."

"You haven't seen me when someone's check bounces or customers put books on the wrong shelves."

His lean brown cheek creased in a smile. "Terrifying to behold, no doubt. But in fact, I wasn't thinking of murder. I was thinking about this whole situation. Angus is a follower. It's not in character for him to strike out on his own."

No pun intended? I said, "I agree. Granted, my ego is involved. It's hard for me to believe that I could have employed a serial killer for a year and never noticed any of the symptoms."

He forked a pile of greens neatly into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

"Maybe Wanda's the mastermind?" I suggested, joking.

Guy made an expression of distaste. "Wanda's sole interests are getting high and getting laid. I can't picture her wasting valuable stoner hours on murder."

I selected another chip, then tossed it back in the basket. I didn't know Wanda well, but I thought his assessment accurate. She seemed to be strong-willed, but all her will was concentrated on partying. I expected serial killers to have more of a work ethic.

Guy pushed his plate aside and folded his arms on the table. "The police are satisfied that they've got the right person: one madman and his girlfriend involved in the occult, picking and choosing their victims at random. They're not going to keep digging."

"That's my guess."

He sighed. "But you're not satisfied. You honestly believe there's an evil organization out there, don't you?"

"I don't know how organized they are -- if they're anything like Angus."

He made an exasperated sound.

I said, still keeping my voice low, "Look, the cult thing is probably a figment of a writer's imagination. But we both agree that we don't believe Angus committed this murder, which means someone else did. Someone vandalized my shop. Someone killed these other two UCLA students. And your Betty Sansone may be Student of the Month, but she was pretty damn close to committing assault yesterday. So maybe it's not a cult. Maybe it's a clique. Call it what you want. Call it a social club, but at least consider the possibility that there is one -- and likely more -- person out there with homicidal tendencies and an interest in the occult."

"The police may have arrested the wrong person, but to leap to the conclusion that there's an entire cult out there --" He shook his head.

"Forget about the cult," I said impatiently, ignoring the interest this elicited at the table next to us. "Say it is one person. Are you genuinely okay with knowing that this psycho is still out there? You're talking about someone who can carve another human into pieces -- and use her blood for writing deranged messages to the great beyond."

Guy gave me an odd look. "You seem to know a lot about it."

Had the papers not carried the part about the pentagram being written in the victim's blood? I couldn't remember. I reached for my cappuccino, took a long drink. I set the cup down deliberately and said, "Who's this guy you said I should meet?"

He didn't answer, instead drawing out a pipe. Then he seemed to recollect his surroundings, putting it away again. He said at last, "Have you ever heard of Oliver Garibaldi?"

"*The Oliver Garibaldi?* I ordered a copy of *The Devil's Disciple* this morning."

His eyebrows rose. "Did you?"

I nodded. "He's pretty much acknowledged as one of the foremost living experts in the occult, right?"

"Right. In particular, he's an expert on Satanism." He studied me thoughtfully. "He lives part of the year in France and part of the year in California. In Los Angeles, in fact."

"That's convenient."

He grimaced. "Please don't place any sinister significance in the fact that Oliver lives in a county of over ten million people."

"I won't. It is convenient, though."

"Nothing happens on the occult scene that Oliver is not aware of. He'd be able to find out if there's any truth to this theory of yours about a secret cult -- or whether these killings are the work of one freak on acid. He's helped the police once or twice in the past."

I wondered if the police would be consulting him any time soon, and whether that might let me in for another chat with Detective Rossini. I decided that the police were content with Angus in the role of Public Enemy No. 1 and wouldn't bother contacting Garibaldi.

"When can I meet him?"

"I don't know. I haven't discussed it with him yet. He's out of town till the weekend."

"I'd like to meet him."

He looked faintly irritated.

"That was the idea, right?"

He leaned forward, said quietly, "You do realize what you're asking of me, yes? You do realize that if this -- these murders culminated out of my course of study, I will be held ultimately responsible. I'll be ruined."

"I thought they expected you to be controversial at UCLA?"

"I believe the Board of Regents draws the line at sacrificial murder."

"I can't do this on my own."

He said resentfully, "I know. And that would be better for you. And better for me."

"Not better for Angus."

"*Fuck*. Does it occur to you that you could be wrong? We could both be wrong? Perhaps Angus did snap. Perhaps he did kill those people. And if he didn't, well, we have to assume the police aren't complete idiots. This is what we pay them for, isn't it?"

"Guy --"

He made a brusque gesture, an I-Don't-Want-To-Hear-It gesture.

"I think you underestimate yourself, Guy," I said. "I think if you didn't intend to help me, you wouldn't have shown today."

The green eyes met mine. "I showed up today because I believe if you continue to ask these questions you will put yourself in danger," he said crisply. "I wanted to make sure you realize what you're getting yourself into."

"Fair enough."

A jazz rendition of "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen" filled the not-so-merry silence between us.

He gave a peculiar laugh. "And...perhaps I wanted to see you again."

I met his eyes, and my heart did one of those freaky triple beats -- probably the caffeine-laden cappuccino.

"*Oh.*"

I had sussed he was gay. I had even kind of thought there was maybe a spark of electricity there. You can tell, although I'm not sure *how* it is that you can tell; it's to do with the release of pheromones or the dilation of the pupils or...well, you can tell, that's all. Still, I wondered. You date a cop for nine months. A little skepticism is bound to rub off.

"You intrigue me," he added dryly.

"Uh, thanks."

I intrigued him? You don't hear a lot of that in my line of work. I admit that I was flattered -- though still unconvinced. Which didn't mean that I didn't find him attractive. I did. He was an odd mix. That hard, lithe body; his sensual, rather cynical face...the pipe, the books, the fact that he wasn't afraid to be seen with me. Yeah, maybe I recognized that spark of electricity because it wasn't one-sided.

His smile held a hint of self-mockery, "I take it from your guarded response that you're seeing someone?"

I hesitated. "Yes."

He caught the hesitation. "Well," he said lightly. "Should the situation change -- that is, assuming you don't get yourself killed --"

"That would certainly be a change," I agreed.

* * * * *

I watched Guy zip off down Westwood Boulevard in his shiny red Miata, while I sat in my car listening to my voice mail. Jake had left a message on my cell phone.

I studied the familiar number with a strange lack of feeling, hit Play Message. Short and not particularly sweet. "I'll call you later."

Maybe yes, maybe no. Maybe, baby.

I turned the key in the ignition. As I pulled out, I noticed a red Corolla, the same color as Guy's Miata, pulled behind after me.

The radio buzzed with the latest update on Angus -- which didn't appear to be anything. There was no news about missing author Gabriel Savant -- by which I mean he wasn't so much as mentioned. That seemed atypical.

On impulse, I made tracks over to the Biltmore Hotel where Bob Friedlander was staying.

The Biltmore is pretty much of a historical landmark. Built back in the '20s, it's provided room and board for kings, presidents, and celebrities for decades, but what I find most intriguing about it is that this is the last place the Black Dahlia was seen alive before strolling off into the night and the annals of unsolved mystery. They actually serve a cocktail called the Black Dahlia in the Gallery Bar.

I noticed the red Corolla that had been following me since Westwood had finally dropped off. Not that I had actually thought it was following me, I mean, too funny if Satan's minions are tailing people in devil red vehicles. I parked one block from the hotel at Pershing Square -- not the greatest part of town -- walking past the temporary skating rink where skaters glided and spun -- and fell -- to Christmas music and then worked my way through the usual television and film crews stationed outside the Biltmore.

I remembered from an earlier conversation with Friedlander that he and Savant were staying in the Music Suite. I scrutinized my Day Planner and was pleased to note that I had actually jotted the room number down along with various notes for the signing.

I stepped into an elevator crowded with a high-spirited group of ladies making their way back to their rooms following the Holiday Afternoon Tea. Judging from the winks and smirks I got, they had dosed themselves liberally with eggnog.

I found the room without trouble, knocked several times before the door opened a crack. Bob Friedlander's bloodshot eye peered out.

"Yes?"

"Hi, Bob. It's Adrien English. Gabe signed at my store last Friday night."

"Right, right." He curved his lips, but it wasn't exactly a smile. "What can I do for you?"

"I stopped by to see if there was any word."

"No. No word."

"I'm sorry. Can I help in any way?"

He stared at me strangely for a long moment, then he backed, allowing me into the room.

I stepped inside. The room was dimly lit, but I made out creamy walls and dark, elegant furniture. A bowl of orchids sat on a low table covered with papers and books and maps. There was a decorative fireplace and a grand piano. The white French shutters were closed. It was hot and stuffy. Gloomy classical music played from another room in the suite.

As Bob stepped back from the door, he withdrew his hand from the sagging pocket of his oversized bathrobe. I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise. It wasn't that Bob was happy to see me. Sure as hell, that was a gun in his bathrobe pocket.

I dragged my gaze away from the disquieting bulge in Bob's dressing gown and noticed that there was a laptop set on the desk. Next to it a printer shot out crisp, typed pages. A pristine printed stack sat to the side.

"Do you want a drink?"

"Sure."

There was a bottle of Jack Daniels next to a silver ice bucket. Bob poured two drinks, drank half of one down, then topped it again. I've had nights like that -- though not many afternoons -- and I sympathized.

I took the glass he handed me. "Do the police have any leads?"

"The police? The *police*?" He laughed wildly, threw himself into the chair across from me.

See, this is why it's always a good idea to call before dropping in on people -- it's so awkward when you catch them in the manic phase.

"The police are investigating, right?" I said cautiously. "Don't they have any theories on what happened?"

He leaned forward, said bleakly, "Do you think it doesn't reach to the police department?"

Beyond the distant roar of downtown traffic, I heard the theme from the *Twilight Zone* playing. Or maybe the *Mephisto Waltz*.

"Do I think what doesn't reach to the police department?"

He glared at me. Apparently he was afraid to say The Word. "Like you really don't know," he said bitterly, at last.

"I really don't know."

"Then I'm sorry for you." He took another gulp from his glass. "Because you're probably next."

I lowered my glass. "Why would I be next?"

"Why not? They targeted you, didn't they? The Sign of the Demon?"

"How do you know about that?"

He didn't answer. I guess good news traveled fast in Bob's circle.

I tried to inspect him without being too obvious about it. He didn't look well: his face puffy, eyes red-rimmed, lips chapped. He needed a shave. In fact, he needed a bath.

I asked, "Did the disk ever show up?"

He shook his head. "They have it. They have Gabe. But they don't have me. And they're not going to get me. They may get *you*, but they're not getting me."

I sighed, wishing he'd stop with the *they're gonna get you* riff. "You shared all this with the police?"

"The police think this is all a publicity stunt."

"Why would they think that?"

He glared at me. "That's the question, isn't it? Oh, I explained it, as much as I know. But I don't know much, do I? No. Because Gabe had to keep it all to himself; this was his project, his baby, so I don't know anything. There isn't any reason for them to come after me. Unless Gabe lied to save his own skin."

I ignored most of that. "But why would the police think that this is a publicity stunt?"

"Because *someone*" -- he leaned so far forward that he nearly tipped out of his chair -- "some anonymous person called the cops and told them that Gabe had a habit of taking...stress breaks."

Stress breaks? Did that mean a drinking binge or booking time at a private hospital?

"He does?"

He gave me another of those red-rimmed glares.

"So...the police think that Gabe disappeared voluntarily?"

He jerked a nod. "So they say," he said thickly, at last.

"Is that a possibility?"

He said dully, "No. Not this time."

But other times. That did kind of change matters, at least from the police perspective.

"How long do these stress breaks usually last?"

He got up as though he couldn't bear to sit still any longer. The metal object in his drooping bathrobe pocket knocked loudly against the end table, and I flinched. I hoped the thing didn't go off while I was in the room.

Refreshing his drink, he answered, "A few days. A week once. But that time was different. He got married that time."

I counted backward. Gabe had been gone six days so far.

"So he's married?"

Bob made a wet sound between a snort and a raspberry -- not very attractive. "No. It lasted eight months."

"Might he have met someone? Or is there already someone in his life? Girlfriend, maybe?"

"Several. He's the proverbial chick magnet."

Okay, so he wasn't gay. And he and Bob were definitely not involved. If anything, Bob was jealous of Gabe's success with women.

"Does he have any kids?"

“God, no.” He looked at me like I’d suggested something truly aberrant.

“Does he have any enemies?”

He gaped at me. “What are you suggesting?”

“Nothing. You seem sure that he didn’t take off on his own volition. Maybe he was...kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped!”

“Well, he’s fairly wealthy, I assume?”

A funny look crossed Bob’s face. He slowly put the glass to his mouth and drank, his eyes unfocused.

“His publisher would pay to get him back, I’m guessing.”

“He wasn’t kidnapped!”

“No? No ransom note? No demands?”

I didn’t think for a moment that Gabe had been kidnapped. If he had been, law enforcement would have been all over the case. I wanted to hear what Bob had to say on the subject.

“These people don’t want ransom!”

“You said the night of the signing that Gabe was under a lot of pressure. If he did take off on his own, where would he go? Would he go home?”

“New England in the winter?” He gave a short laugh. “Not likely. He prefers the sunnier climes.” He laughed unsteadily and raised his glass again. “Some like it hot, that’s what they say, right?”

“Did he change his will after he was divorced?”

“No. Yes.” He slopped his drink. “I don’t remember.” He stared at me. “What kind of a question is that? In fact, why are you asking all these questions?”

I said apologetically, “I guess it’s the mystery writer in me.”

He continued to stare at me in glassy-eyed offense.

I decided to push my luck. “You and Gabe must be pretty close after all these years?”

“Yeah, we’re close. We’re like brothers.” He held up two intertwined fingers, which is not actually how I think of brothers. “We’ve been together since...for...you know? And I do *not* like your insinuations.”

The interview was going down the drain fast. I needed to make it quick, before the last of Bob’s coherency dissolved like the ice in the booze. I said, placating, “I’m not insinuating anything, Bob. I just wonder if there was another explanation for Gabe’s disappearance.”

“I’ve told you what happened to him. I told the police. No one wants to believe me.” He shuffled back to his chair, sat down, letting his head fall back against the cushions.

“How did you find out someone painted an inverted pentagram on my doorstep?”

"Gabe saw it. He saw that you had tried to wash it out, but he knew from the shape." Eyes closed, he drew a circle in the air, then wiggled his finger in an air-doodle.

Now that was interesting. That meant that Savant hadn't disappeared straight after leaving my shop. He had hooked up with Bob at least one final time. Yet, if I had understood the newspaper account correctly, according to Bob, he hadn't seen or spoken to Gabe after he had gone out that morning.

I didn't say anything, sipped my drink.

Bob went very still. "Oh, I see," he whispered. He opened his eyes.

"What do you see?" He seemed to have focused on a point over my left shoulder. I glanced uneasily over my shoulder, half-expecting to see an ectoplasmic manifestation.

"I think you better leave," he said, sitting up, reaching for the phone. "Before I call hotel security."

"Uh...okay." I preferred hotel security to being shot, and I was relieved that he hadn't remembered that option.

I put my glass down. I let myself out while Bob still struggled to get out of his chair.

On the elevator ride down, I kept thinking over what he'd said. *Gabe had to keep it all to himself, this was his project, his baby...* But weren't they all?

I stepped out of the elevator in the lobby in time to see Betty Sansone and a Harry Potter look-alike, both garbed in those long, black, leather duster-style coats, stepping into another one. Young guns from the fifth dimension.

Straightaway, I tried to crowd back on the elevator, but was too late. The doors shut. I moved to the next one and punched the button, waiting impatiently. Passing guests gave me reproving glances.

At last the elevator opened. I stepped in, pressed the button for Bob Friedlander's floor. Before the doors shut, an elderly couple boarded. The man was bowed beneath the weight of shopping bags stuffed with white and silver wrapped Christmas presents. The woman carried an apricot toy poodle. Which is to say, it was a live poodle, but one of those pocket-sized, yappy ones. It wasn't yapping at the moment, but its lip had caught on its tiny incisor in a sneer, as though it knew what I was thinking.

"Six," the elderly man rapped out.

"Sorry?"

"Six," he said impatiently. "Six. Six. Six."

I pressed the button for the sixth floor.

We started our slow ascent, the three of them surveying me in open curiosity. I realized I was tapping my hand against the wall and stopped.

"Aren't you Lisa English's son?" the woman said.

Oh, God.

“No.”

I glanced at them, then away. I guess it's true about married people starting to look alike after a while. Or maybe they were brother and sister. They were both deeply tanned and correspondingly creased, and they had sparse hair dyed that awful fake red-blond color that certain seniors go for. They reminded me of shrunken heads -- but with all the limbs still attached.

The woman whipped out a blue rhinestone -- I assume they were rhinestones -- lorgnette from her Louis Vuitton bag. She viewed me closely. Smiled. “You are! He is, isn't he, Ralph?”

“Feh,” said the old guy. I hoped that's what he said.

“She's such a lovely person!”

“Mmm-hmm.” I couldn't help it. I pressed the button again, leaned into it, as though this would speed the elevator.

“She's the true force behind the success of our annual Paws and Claws Ball.”

Lisa had always been an active supporter of the SPCA, despite the fact that I was never allowed to have a dog or a cat as a kid (she was a staunch advocate of tropical fish, as I recall).

“Her fundraising efforts on behalf of the Opera Guild are nothing short of miraculous. And now she's getting married, I understand. Isn't that lovely?”

“Lovely.”

“So romantic.”

“You bet.”

“December weddings are so special.”

She smiled fondly into the watery eyes of the poodle. It licked its chops.

The elevator lurched to a stop on the sixth floor. The doors slid languidly open.

“Do tell your dear mother hello!”

“Will do.”

She continued to smile at me as they shuffled off. I hit the Close Doors button. Hard.

The elevator shot up the last floors. The doors opened onto a silent and empty hallway. No sign of the extras from *The Matrix*. I strode down to Friedlander's suite. I heard the phone ringing from inside.

He answered on the first knock. His glasses were askew, his hair sticking up in un-groomed tufts. He straightened the specs, examined me in disbelief.

“*You!* What do you want?”

“I thought you should be aware that there are two kids who might be involved in Gabe's disappearance in the hotel. They were headed upstairs.” I wasn't sure myself what threat Sansone and company posed. I figured they'd probably like to get into Gabe's room, although they could hardly search the place if Bob was present.

He goggled at me. “Are you insane? *Kids?* You think this is about juvenile delinquents? Mind your own business, or I *will* call the police.” He slammed shut the heavy door.

Chapter Thirteen

When I got back to the store, Velvet had already closed and gone home. I checked to make sure she'd battened down the hatches, but it looked secure. The day's receipts and cash drop were in the top drawer of my desk.

My cell phone was ringing. I glanced at the number display. Jake. I smiled sourly. Kind of late, in my opinion, to worry about his calls being traced.

I pressed the button.

"Can you talk?" he asked brusquely.

"What did you need?" I was equally curt.

There was a pause. He said mildly, "You want to fill me in on the Savant situation?"

It was hard to believe that I hadn't found time in a week to tell him about Savant and his weird behavior. I had planned to, but it had never seemed quite the right moment. Or maybe I just hadn't been in a rush to get my ass chewed for tracking mud through Jake's murder investigation.

Not that I had ever intended to wander into Jake's case. I had wanted to find out who had vandalized my store and sent Angus running for cover. But that wasn't going to cut any ice. From the start, Jake had believed that these events were connected -- irritatingly enough, he appeared to have been right.

So I told him then about the missing disk, the warning about Blade Sable, all of it. I filled him in on Bob Friedlander's erratic behavior this afternoon. I figured Friedlander might make good on his threat to turn me into the cops. It might defuse the situation if I came clean first.

He listened without comment until I wound to a stop.

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

"When did I have a chance?"

Silence.

"Did you find the disk?"

"No. I did look. Maybe not as carefully as I should have."

Another silence.

"The cult thing is far-fetched."

"You're the one who first came up with the cult theory. Remember?"

Crackling noises.

He said finally, "You're sure the girl you saw in the hotel was the same one who came into the store with the murder vic?"

"Yes."

"Assuming you're not mistaken, she could have been there visiting a guest. Or maybe she works there. She could be staying there herself."

Satan would have to give these kids a mighty generous allowance to afford rooms at the Biltmore, but I kept my mouth shut.

"And you think Friedlander is lying about the last time he saw this missing literary genius?"

I answered indirectly. "I don't know what Savant's net worth is. He seems like a guy who might have trouble hanging onto money. I think it would be helpful to find out who inherits his literary estate."

"You mean the rights to his books?"

"That's part of it."

"You think they're queers?"

"Uh, no," I bit out. "I don't. But I think something's queer. Friedlander suggested that the police might be involved. He seems genuinely frightened, but he's also hiding something."

"Gee, hard to believe," Jake drawled.

"Yeah, I can't imagine why anyone wouldn't trust a cop."

The silence lasted so long I thought he might have lost signal. The physical one. Clearly he'd lost the other long ago.

I said into the crackling void, "I'm sure they weren't lovers, but their relationship was more than a publisher's representative and a favored client."

"Look, I've got to go."

I said, trying to sound indifferent, "Later."

I waited for the click that didn't come. "Is there anything else you haven't told me?" he asked through another surge of static.

I laughed.

“Yeah. Whatever,” said Jake and rang off.

* * * * *

Lisa had also called. I discovered her message on the answering machine when I went upstairs to get a beer.

“I realize that you’re under a great deal of strain, Adrien, but your behavior today was extremely hurtful. I hope you will try to see this from my perspective. Your welfare is my first and foremost concern in life.”

I sighed and erased the message. I wasn’t sure why I had lost my temper with her. It’s not like Lisa had wavered one centimeter from her fondly held position that I was a semi-invalid child (with slightly embarrassing sexual inclinations) who needed to be protected from his own self-destructive impulses. Getting mad at her was like getting mad at the Great Wall of China for not welcoming the Mongol hordes.

I wasn’t sure it *was* such a great idea to help Angus pay for his legal defense. I felt like I should be doing *something*. I guess my fear was that a portion of this was my fault. Would it have made a difference if I hadn’t given Angus money and sent him out of town? In fact, wasn’t that one of the Eleven Satanic Rules of the Earth? *Do not give opinions or advice unless you are asked*. Not only had I opened my trap, I had put my money where my mouth was.

I spent the next hour zoned out in front of the television set watching the first half of *Captain Blood*. The last time I’d seen it had been with Jake in a funky theater up north in the Mother Lode country. Seemed like a lifetime ago.

I tried to make sense of the last forty-eight hours.

Never mind the last forty-eight hours, how about my entire life? I remember reading once that one of the officers of the Titanic survived three shipwrecks. Even taking into account his profession, that seemed excessive. Apparently, once that cosmic target was pinned to your back, the arrows kept flying. In my case the arrows seemed to be involvement in murder cases.

I guess if I didn’t enjoy the puzzle aspects of crime, I wouldn’t have opened a mystery bookstore, but there’s a serious difference between an intellectual puzzle and having people you know arrested for murder -- or killed.

Obviously there were healthier ways I could spend my time -- I wasn’t thinking so much about the potential physical danger as the fact that I was so busy running around sticking my nose in other people’s business that I hadn’t made a bank drop or bought groceries for over a week. I was dangerously low on Lean Cuisines -- and totally out of Tab.

Sipping my beer, eyes getting heavier, I watched the black-and-white images on the screen “celebrating in pirate fashion,” when it dawned on me that in a little over a week I

would be celebrating Christmas with four strangers for whom I hadn't bought Christmas presents.

I swore. Sat up. So much for my plans for an early night.

I went downstairs, turning on the lights to the ground level. The shelves threw oblong shadows in the dim lights. The skull paperweight on the counter grinned hollow-eyed at me.

On impulse, I went over to the shelves near where Gabe Savant had sat the night of his signing. I lifted the books in sections, sat down, flipped through them. Nothing. No sign of any disk.

I got on my hands and knees to inspect under the writing table where he had sat. Nothing. Well, nothing of interest. I made a mental note to ask Velvet to vacuum more thoroughly.

I had trouble with the whole lost disk bit. Accepting that there had been a disk, why would Savant have carried it around with him? And if he had been nuts enough to carry it around, how could he have lost track of it? Wasn't the most likely scenario that he had mislaid it before he ever got to Cloak and Dagger?

He had been late arriving that night, I remembered. And he had arrived with a posse. How well had he known the women with him? Were they friends, acquaintances, or just chicks he'd picked up along the way? Would Bob know? Would Bob tell me if he knew? Would Bob shoot me for asking?

About then I remembered that I had come downstairs for a non-crime-related purpose.

I picked myself off the carpet, stretched, reflected that another thing I had been neglecting was my tai chi. I wandered into the stock room, where I sat stiffly at the desk, signed onto the computer.

I don't have a problem with shopping. I don't have a problem with malls at Christmas. But shopping in the malls at Christmas -- yes, that I do have a problem with. I shop online.

I surfed the 'Net for a while, trying to come up with ideas. When you're a guy, you get extra credit for any sign of thoughtfulness, and I've earned a lot of mileage out of chocolates, flowers, and gift certificates. But buying for one's new supplementary family members seemed to require more effort. I reconnoitered for a moment, then recalled one of those universal truths about chicks of a certain age: anything vaguely reminiscent of Audrey Hepburn is going to be a hit.

I browsed a few pages further, then settled on a retro designer silk scarf for Natasha and a cloisonné compact mirror for Lauren. Emma was easy: five 1946 blue board editions of Nancy Drew novels. And for Dauten, a silver whisky flask. True, he didn't strike me as a whisky flask kind of guy, but after months of living with Lisa, he might discover the comfort of always having a drink close at hand.

I pressed *yes* for gift wrap, *yes* for second-day shipping, and sat back feeling self-congratulatory.

Smothering a jaw-cracking yawn, I clicked to open my e-mail. Nothing particularly interesting. I yawned again, reviewed blackster21's e-mail.

What do you know? Along with the usual offers of home loans, university degrees, and penis enlargement, was an e-mail with the cryptic header: *Your Question*.

I studied it warily. No sign of an attachment. It had been sent by darkwing@something.net.

I clicked. Immediately my entire screen went red.

"Shit!"

I hit alt+control+delete and jumped about a foot as someone right next to me screamed. Heart hammering, I absorbed the fact that the scream came from my computer. As I stared, the screen filled with an ominous Grim Reaper figure. Scythe in one skeleton hand, hourglass in the other, it drifted slowly toward me, the hooded skull filling the monitor screen. Then it disappeared. Ghostly shrieks of laughter vibrated my modem. My entire screen went black. The computer turned off.

* * * * *

I was brushing my teeth when I heard Jake's key in the lock.

Like I hadn't enough excitement for one night. I scowled at my reflection. Foaming at the mouth. How appropriate.

Then the front door slammed. It was like one of those goofy campfire tales: *I'm on the first step...*

I bent over the sink, rinsed my mouth, and spat. I wiped my face on the towel draped around my shoulders.

He was pouring himself a brandy from the liquor cabinet. He had discarded his jacket, but he was still wearing his shoulder holster.

"Hey," I said, leaning against the door frame leading into the bedroom.

"Hey." He knocked back the brandy. Bared his teeth. He set the glass down, advancing on me.

I held my ground. Studied him quizzically. I wasn't sure what he had in mind, his expression was kind of grim for romance. He reached me, his fingers digging into my shoulders.

Pain is not my scene. I tried to slip out from under his grip. He pushed me back toward the bed. I lost my balance, exclaiming, "*Jeez*, Jake --!"

He went low for a tackle, hoisting me over his shoulder in a fireman's carry, surprising a laugh out of me.

"D'you mind, asshole?" I protested, upside down.

No reply. We got to the bed in about three steps, and he flung me down. The pillows bounced, the mattress springs squeaked in maidenly alarm. Jake's hand went to his belt buckle.

"Whoa. You mind disarming first, cowpoke?" I sat up, reached for the fastening on his shoulder holster.

His eyes met mine. There was something unfamiliar there. I felt a prickle across my scalp.

He yanked off his trousers and shorts, and pounced, pushing me back into the pillows. His mouth covered mine hungrily. Toothpaste and brandy. I gave up on the holster, preparing to give as good as I got.

What I got was a fast, fierce, mindless fuck: sweaty, bruising, and a little weird. I don't mean that in a bad way -- I enjoy sex for sex's sake as much as the next guy -- but I can't say that it was exactly *Chicken Soup for the Gay Man's Soul*, either.

We wrestled around some, Jake not hurting me, but not holding back either. He flipped me over without much of a tussle, pinned me, pushed my legs apart and up, and then shoved two slick fingers inside me. I jerked with surprise more than pain. He worked my prostate with ruthless efficiency, taking my breath away, even if I'd wanted to protest, which I didn't particularly. I grunted in helpless, mindless response, and he withdrew his hand and crammed his cock in my ass.

I rammed him, giving into the aggression and hunger -- his and mine -- and he shoved back. We pushed each other, each time a little harder and a little further. It could have been play, or it could have been the prelude to a brawl. He pounded into me, and I drove right back at him.

The hardest part was the silence. Not just the lack of words, because Jake communicated a lot of the time simply through touch. But tonight the touch felt distant, almost impersonal. He brought me swiftly and adeptly to orgasm, and that I did resent a little -- as much as you can resent that kind of teeth-rattling sensation -- and then he yelled and came himself, in fierce surges of ropy semen.

When it was over, Jake sprawled on his back, staring blankly at the ceiling.

I studied his profile. I knew it so well: that unyielding jaw, the hard sensual line of his mouth, the faint laugh lines spreading out from his eyes -- not that he laughed a lot.

How's Kate? I wondered. How's that pregnancy thing going? Does she have any idea what you do on Monday and Wednesday nights?

When is this going to end?

Filled with sudden, overwhelming lassitude, I closed my eyes.

Next I knew, the bed springs were pinging again. I opened my eyes. Jake sat on the edge of the bed, his back to me, head in his hands.

The white bandages taping his ribs were stark against his skin. The last hours couldn't have done him much good, but I didn't think his pain was physical.

I waited for him to get up and walk out, but the next moment the light snapped out. He flopped back.

Within a minute, his snores were gently ruffling my hair.

Chapter Fourteen

"You feel okay?" Showered and dressed, Jake stood at the stove, turning bacon with a spatula when I walked into the kitchen the next morning.

I shrugged the rest of the way into my shirt. "Fine. Why?" He'd set a clean mug out for me on the counter, and I poured coffee from the machine.

I glanced his way. He turned down the gas on the stove. He looked more relaxed than he had the night before -- maybe it was the absence of firearms.

"You were restless last night. Tossing and turning. Talking in your sleep."

I sat down with my coffee. "I hope I didn't spill my girlish secrets."

"Your girlish secrets are safe with me."

That kind of line works better with a smile, but Jake was not amused by references to my feminine side. He set a plate of scrambled eggs in front of me. "Eat. You'll feel better."

"I feel fine," I said, irritably this time.

Jake had this Nero Wolfe-ian attitude about food. He thought a growling stomach signaled serious illness. In less than a year, I'd had more lectures from him on the importance of breakfast than I had from Lisa during my entire childhood.

He piled his own plate from the pan on the stove, sat across from me, leaning on his elbows the better to intimidate his food.

We ate to the homely sounds of the dishwasher running and coffee machine percolating.

I was deep in thought when Jake's voice yanked me back to awareness.

"So what's on your mind? You're usually chirping and chattering around here in the morning."

"Well, thank you," I said. "I appreciate the flattering comparison to Tweety Bird." I forked in a mouthful of fluffy, scrambled eggs. He was a good cook, and I did appreciate the fact that he fixed me breakfast and did my dirty dishes -- and saved my skin on occasion.

I said, "To start with, I think your new partner Rossini smells a rat."

"Let me worry about Rossini."

"Happy to."

"What else?"

"Oh, so we're talking about this now?"

"We're talking about whatever is freaking you out."

"Freaking me out?" I murmured politely.

"You know what I mean."

Well, actually...no.

But in the interests of keeping it civil, I said, "Okay. What does Angus say?"

"I didn't interrogate Angus -- and we're not discussing the case except as it directly affects you."

"What does Angus say?" I repeated.

Grudgingly, he replied, "He says he didn't do it."

"Do you believe him?"

"We're investigating his story."

"No, I mean do *you* personally believe him?"

"Don't be naïve. My personal feelings have nothing to do with it."

"Come off it, Jake. You're always talking about a cop's instinct. You know Angus. What does your gut tell you?"

"Nobody ever really knows anybody," Jake said.

"You'd be the expert on that," I said shortly. "I still think you can know people well enough to tell whether they're homicidal maniacs."

"Tell that to the neighbors of the serial killer of your choice."

"Does he have an alibi?"

"We're checking into it."

"Did he --"

Jake cut across. "Let's cut to the chase. He hasn't said anything about any cult or coven. In fact, he clammed up at the suggestion."

"What does that tell you?"

"That he decided not to waste his breath and our time."

I nodded. Speared a bit of bacon.

"I suppose it's occurred to you that he's not likely to back our story of casual acquaintances?"

He didn't respond.

"Okay, answer me this. If she was killed between six and ten o'clock, how would Angus have got back to Lake Tahoe in time to call me at eleven-thirty?"

Jake took a long, deliberate drink of coffee, set down his cup without haste. "Have you ever known me not to do my job?"

I flashed onto the memory of him wiping the doorknob at Angus's rental. Did that count?

"Well...not exactly."

"Then chill. Have a little faith in the system. If he's innocent, it'll come out. If he isn't innocent, he deserves to fry."

"He deserves to *fry*? Welcome to the Age of Enlightenment. Happily, we gas them here in the Golden State, remember?"

Jake shook his head, not bothering to reply to this old argument between us.

I said, "How much of a fair trial is he going to get with the cops already convinced he's the man and a public defender straight out of law school?"

Jake raised his brows. "For your information, he doesn't have a public defender. Martin Grosser has officially taken his case."

"Martin Grosser, the major league media lawyer?"

"You got it."

"Pro bono?"

"I guess. I wouldn't know." Jake added grimly, "I'm on the *other* team."

I chewed this over. After a time I noticed Jake watching me with that sardonic expression.

I pointed out, "You were the one with the theory that Angus was on the fringe of something bigger. A coven would have thirteen members. Maybe that doesn't qualify as an actual cult, but --"

"The unofficial view is that Angus and his girlfriend acted on their own in the killings of Kinsey Perone, Tony Zellig, and Karen Holtzer."

Like Daniel and Manuela Ruda, a husband-wife team in Germany who stabbed their best friend sixty-six times, then drank his blood -- claiming the Devil made them do it. But even the Rudas appeared to have connections to underground occult groups in Britain.

"Does that mean you have a different take on it?"

He rose, dumped his dishes into the sink, ran water. A well-trained and completely house-broken male: *La Cage aux Folles* meets *Leave It to Beaver*.

He turned and faced me. "Look, I'm not discussing the case with you. You're a witness, remember? A hostile witness at that."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he stopped me with a quick, rough kiss that tasted of coffee and bacon.

"Stay out of trouble," he said.

A moment later, I heard the front door slam.

"Someone doesn't like you, Adrien," Ted Finch muttered, tapping away at my computer keyboard.

Like the majority of writers I knew, published and unpublished, Ted has a day job. He works as a computer programmer and freelance web designer. I pay him a nominal fee to maintain the Cloak and Dagger Web site -- and to bail me out of disasters like the present one.

"How bad is it?"

He chuckled. "Not that bad, just mean. Very mean." He swiveled in the chair. "It's a freeware prank program. It automatically launched when you opened the e-mail. Do you know who sent it?"

I shook my head.

Ted made tscking sounds. "You should never open e-mail from an unknown address."

I didn't bother to reply. Half the e-mail I got was from customers whose e-mail addresses I didn't recognize.

"So we saw on the news that Angus was arrested for that coed's murder." He shook his head. "I bet you saw that coming."

"Not at all."

"You're kidding. Jean and I were saying this morning that you're probably the one who tipped the police off."

"Why would you say that?" I can't say I was thrilled at the notion of me as the local stool pigeon.

"It was in the papers. Your friend, that cop. He was the one who found the body, right? Someone called and tipped him off. We thought it must be you." He turned back to my computer, began clicking away again, fingers flying over the keyboard.

"Oh, man, I bet you laid an egg when you saw your screen go black!"

What was with the bird references today?

Grinning in geek delight, Ted added, "Of course, we always knew there was something wrong with that kid."

I said dryly, "Did you?"

"The Barbies are back," Velvet announced, poking her head in the office.

I glanced up. "Who?"

"Your friends from yesterday. The fluffragettes."

I muttered something un-familial under my breath and went out.

Lauren, carrying a Gap Kids shopping bag, greeted me. "Natalie and I were in the area, so we thought we'd nail down the details on the party -- if you've got a free minute."

Natalie? I thought the middle sib was named Natasha. I tried to remember if I had addressed her as Natasha. I glanced at her, and she was beaming at me in that eerily affectionate way.

Didn't these women have jobs? Didn't they have other interests besides this bloody wedding?

Velvet approached, phone in hand. "Did you want to make a holiday donation to the American Family Association?"

The AFA? The people who define a family as one man, one woman, and two-point-three properly baptized biological offspring -- no exceptions?

"I think not," I said.

Velvet moved off to convey my regrets. I watched the Dautens sizing her up with what seemed to be professional interest and felt unexpectedly protective of her brown ordinariness in the face of their air-brushed perfection.

The blue eyes swiveled back my way.

"Maybe we could run out and grab a cup of coffee?" Natalie suggested.

"Great idea!" Lauren chimed in -- as though they hadn't run through their lines on the way over. "There's a Starbucks a few doors down."

"I really can't..." My voice trailed in the face of their dismay.

"No prob," said Velvet, from behind the counter. "I've got it."

I gave her an ungrateful look.

"Great!" said Lauren.

The three of us marched out, passing Ted's red Corolla parked on the street. Memory of the red Corolla from the day before niggled at me. The next instant the feeling was gone, Lauren and Natalie nattering happily -- about what, I have no idea.

We reached Starbucks, I took their orders for coffee-laced whipped cream, and got into line while Lauren sat and pulled out her Palm Pilot.

"Christmas Night in Harlem" was playing on the loudspeaker as I carried our drinks back to the circle of chairs, picking my way through their scattered shopping bags.

"This is *so* perfect!" Natalie announced, taking her nonfat mocha Frappuccino with a shot of sugar-free mint and extra whipped cream. "Thank you!"

Coffee-by-the-numbers. Myself, I prefer to patronize the independents, but with one on every corner, Starbucks lays a mean caffeine ambush.

“So...what are Lisa’s favorite songs from the ’40s?” asked Lauren, fixing me with those china doll-blue eyes, one finger poised to type.

Did she have favorite songs from the ’40s? She was born in the ’40s. Did toddlers have favorite tunes?

“I don’t know.”

They looked nonplussed. “Well, what songs were special to her parents?” Lauren prodded helpfully.

This was awkward. Lisa never spoke of her family. I had no idea if she even had family living. I knew my maternal grandparents were dead, but that was all I knew. The few times I had pushed for information, Lisa had been deliberately vague -- even for her. I had grown up accepting that this was simply the way it was, but I could see it would seem a little weird to outsiders.

“I think she’ll be happy with...uh...the classics.”

“English classics or American classics?”

For Chrissake.

“Both.”

Incredibly, they looked satisfied with that. Lauren keyed into the Palm Pilot.

“I can’t see how you’re going to put all this together in...”

“Ten days,” said Brigadier General Lauren crisply.

“Right.”

“It’s not easy,” Natalie confided, adding reassuringly, “But the hard part’s done.”

I’d take her word for it. Lauren watched me keenly. “So you’re okay with this?”

I opened my mouth, but uncharacteristically, I failed to think of what to say. They waited politely.

“Er...yeah, why not?”

Good question. Why not? I mean, I had spent most of my life trying to evade Lisa’s overprotective clutches. This marriage was bound to give me breathing space.

“It’ll mean a lot to Lisa,” I said, trying not to sound as stiff as one of my unknown British relatives.

They uttered cooing sounds and made fluttery motions like they were about to enfold me in a group hug. Since this wasn’t physically possible given the seating arrangements, they had to settle for smiling at me and reaching over to pat my arm and knee.

“I’m so glad we were able to talk,” Lauren said. She put the Palm Pilot away.

Apparently the emergency board meeting was over.

“Are you and Lisa *still* quarreling?” Natalie said sympathetically, as I held the glass door for them on our way out.

“Quarreling?” What had Lisa told these people -- these strangers? “Of course not.”

“Lisa didn’t say that,” Lauren said quickly with a quelling glance at her sister. “She only said you were not very happy with her.”

They gave me twin looks of commiseration that still conveyed that I was *so* in the wrong.

“She said you hate to be fussed over,” Natalie said. “But of course she can’t help it, can she? That’s what mothers *do*.”

What in God’s name were they talking about?

Lauren looked serious. “It must have been such a shock that boy being arrested. Did you have any idea he was capable of that?”

That Boy. Well, at least now I knew what they were talking about and where they got their news bulletins.

“No.”

“It goes to show,” Natalie said.

We hugged on the sidewalk, then they departed for more shopping. I hot-footed it back to the shop.

I stepped inside. Glanced around. A customer browsed the Gothic section. He smiled. I smiled back. I didn’t see Velvet at the counter. I glanced down the aisle, spotted another customer busily scanning the ending of a book.

I went to the office. Ted had packed and left. Velvet stood at my desk going through the drawers.

I halted in the doorway.

She had all my stuff out on the desk top. She was holding the plastic vial of my digoxin capsules, frowning at it.

“What are you doing?” I asked from behind her. She started.

Cheeks flaming, she stuttered, “I was tidying in here. I found these. They looked like you might need them.”

Tidying up *inside* the desk? “Thanks,” I said, holding my hand out for the vial. I kept an extra bottle in the desk in case I forgot the morning dose, although I didn’t plan on explaining that to her. “You don’t need to worry about my stuff.”

“I don’t mind,” she said eagerly.

Was she truly that dense?

“Yeah, well, I’d prefer if you stayed out of here.”

She flinched as though I’d slapped her.

“Fine,” she said stiffly. She brushed past me into the shop.

I opened the desk drawers, swept everything in haphazardly. Then I locked the desk.

It seemed far-fetched to suspect her of being an agent in the Deviltry Network, but then again, she hadn't come through the temp service -- and I hadn't verified her references yet.

I could practically hear Jake now.

I closed the office door, pulled her application out of the file cabinet, and spent the next half hour calling her previous employers.

The two dress boutiques she had worked for would have hired her back in an instant.

She hadn't worked long at the veterinary clinic, and they didn't remember her well, but as the director remarked, that might be a positive.

She checked out.

Chapter Fifteen

If it bleeds, it leads. By late afternoon I had declined an interview with one local news station and three local papers.

What were they hoping to hear? How I'd always known from the way Angus mixed Elizabeth Peters and Ellis Peters that one day he'd run amuck? That his bad habit of sticking price tags smack center in the face of book covers would lead him to ruin?

I ate lunch in the stockroom, catching up on paperwork and listening to the radio. Jake was correct. Angus's court-appointed lawyer had been immediately replaced by Martin Grosser. Grosser, a high-profile defense attorney, worked as a commentator for Court TV, and pretty much reserved his services for the high and mighty. He did not typically work pro bono, but there was no way Angus could afford his fees. Not that I got how it was in Grosser's interests to represent the latest pretender to Charlie Manson's throne.

Angus had a bail hearing set for the following day. Personally, I thought he was probably safer in jail, judging by the tenor of most of the news stories. There was a lot of crap about Satanism on the air and the signs parents should watch for in their own children -- starting with an interest in heavy metal or New Age rock music and shimmy shimmy ko-ko bopping right on down the line to drug use and burglary.

There was a startling amount of misinformation out there.

Not that the basic tenets of Satanism weren't startling all on their own. There were a few commonsense rules like not complaining about stuff you didn't need to subject yourself to, but there were more troubling recommendations, like *When walking in open territory, bother no one. If one bothers you, ask him to stop. If he does not stop, destroy him.*

Say again? Was that symbolic destruction, or magical destruction, or a practical application like slicing and dicing classmates?

"Did you know he was a devil worshipper?" Velvet inquired, after we had hung up on our fourth journalist that day.

No need to ask to whom she referred. "No," I said shortly. Naturally she would be curious about her forerunner, but I didn't want to discuss Angus like he was past tense -- jailed and the key thrown away.

"Did he ever talk about...stuff?"

"No." That seemed a bit curt, so I added, "He wasn't a gabby guy."

"Did he work for you a long time?"

"Not quite a year." And his predecessor had been murdered. I was going to have to take another look at the benefits package I offered my employees.

"I used to know a girl involved in that stuff."

"Good friend?"

"No," she murmured. "It's hard to get close to people like that."

"Why do you think that is?"

She laughed. I'd never heard her laugh before. It came out unexpectedly shrill. "I don't know! They don't want to be close to other people. They don't need them."

"It's a lonely way to live."

"Being alone is not the same as lonely."

"That's true." I handed her the list of reserved and requested books that had arrived with that day's shipment. "What finally happened to your friend?"

She shrugged inside her navy cardigan. "Nothing. I lost track of her. Do you think What's-his-name is guilty?"

"No."

She smiled. She had small, white teeth -- like milk teeth. "But you never know, do you?"

"No," I said, eyeing her plump back as she turned away with the list. "You never do."

* * * * *

Friday morning I had a call from Bob Friedlander.

"I need to see you right away. Can you drop by the hotel?" He sounded sober and a lot more reasonable than the last time we'd spoken. Still I was wary.

"Maybe this afternoon. We're busy this morning."

"It's important that we talk. It's about Gabe."

"Shouldn't you call the police?"

He said hastily, "It's not like *that*. I just thought you'd be interested. Why don't you come for lunch?"

I glanced at Velvet and the line at the counter. "I can't do lunch. I can try for later. Maybe around three or so."

"Okay, that will work. I'll see you then." He put the phone down with a clatter.

An instant later the phone rang again. I picked up.

"What are you doing tomorrow?" Guy inquired in that lazy semi-English accent. I heard the smile in his voice. And there was an answering smile in my own.

"Working."

"Would you like to drive out to Oliver Garibaldi's house in Pacific Palisades? Maybe stop for lunch?"

As far as I recalled there was no actual rule against mixing meals with sleuthing in the *Boy's Official Guide to Detection*.

"Sure."

"Be sure to bring that photo of the sigil left on your doorstep. Oliver is interested in seeing it."

"Will do."

"I'll pick you up around ten tomorrow."

I cast a guilty look at poor Velvet, innocently ringing purchases at the register. The sleuthing was becoming an obsession. Not only was it cutting into all my free time, I was actually putting it before my livelihood.

I was pretty sure that it didn't boil down to wanting to see Guy again.

I replied, "It's a da-- deal." Then I couldn't help asking, "By the way, has Betty Sansone shown for class?"

"Certainly."

"Didn't the police interview her?"

"I have no idea."

"Was she there on Wednesday?"

"You sound surprised. Why shouldn't she have been?"

Always eager to practice my diplomatic skills, I said, "I figured she might have been worn out from murdering her pal the night before."

Dead silence.

Finally Guy said briefly, "Well, she's an excellent student. I imagine she doesn't cut class regardless of how little sleep she gets."

"The fast track for success."

"I appreciate that you prefer to believe that my classes are full of psychopaths and devil worshippers."

How had we got off onto this? How many times had I heard Jake state that it was crucial an investigator kept his own feelings and beliefs to himself when dealing with potential witnesses? Knowing this, I still said, "I think the subject matter may attract certain people for the wrong reasons."

"I see," he said dryly. "Knowledge should be reserved for the chosen few?"

"I didn't say that, but you can't be unaware that on occasion this stuff has influenced more than a few unbalanced kids."

"Here's the part where you bring up Joseph Fiorella and his mates." Guy sounded bored.

"Why, were you their teacher?" I shot back.

Fourteen-year-old Joseph Fiorella and two of his friends had murdered -- and then had sex with -- a fifteen-year-old girl with whom Fiorella was obsessed. They had claimed they were inspired by the heavy metal band Slayer and that they had to make a virgin sacrifice to Satan in order to get their own band on the road to success.

After an affronted pause, Guy said in more normal tones, "As you're no doubt aware, in the Fiorella case the blame is being placed on the band and their nihilistic message. Which is not to say that in other circumstances an instructor or a local church mightn't as easily be made the scapegoat by a grieving family."

"Look, for obvious reasons I don't want to see the First Amendment undermined. This is a different issue."

"Is it? Well, it should be no surprise to hear that the cops agree with you. I've had a couple of interviews with that son of a bitch who was investigating Zellig's death --"

"His murder," I interrupted.

"What?"

"Tony Zellig was murdered. He didn't just die in a car accident or from natural causes. Someone butchered him and buried him in a park."

"Yes, someone that the cops believe I inspired and possibly influenced, whether deliberately or not."

And the Zellig kid's fate had been the same as Karen Holtzer's -- and who knew how many others. But I didn't say that. I felt my popularity index dropping fast as it was. Oddly enough, I regretted that.

"But regardless of what you or the police or the school administration think," Guy continued in that chilly voice, "I believe that the examination of the occult is valuable for many reasons, including the fact that it encourages kids to challenge their dearly held knee-jerk assumptions about the world they live in. Knowledge is power."

"Yeah, but does everyone need to know how to build an atom bomb?"

"Perhaps if everyone knew how, no one would make them any longer."

"Or maybe we'd blow ourselves into oblivion." This was stupid. I was arguing with Guy the way you argue with potential -- scratch that. I reminded myself that I was not trying to get to know Guy; he was a source of information. He was a lead. It did not matter what he thought or I thought. I said, trying to mollify, "It's not that I disagree with you, I just think there's a certain responsibility that goes with sharing this information."

"I agree -- which is why I'm taking you to see Oliver." He added curtly, "I hope I don't regret it."

I hoped not too. I was very much afraid that Guy had at least one friend who did not deal well with betrayal -- whether real or imagined.

* * * * *

It was getting close to four o'clock by the time I made it over to the Biltmore, negotiating crowded streets decked with gnarly fake holly boughs and giant silver bells. Even the pawn-and thrift-store windows in the surrounding streets sparkled with colored Christmas lights. Skid Row putting on its holiday finery.

While Bob did not exactly look rested, he looked like he had paused long enough to bathe and ingest something solid. He was dressed, and other than a nervous tic beneath one eye, seemed pretty normal.

"How about a drink?" he suggested as I sat in the chair I'd occupied the last time.

"Not for me, thanks. I've got a lot of paperwork to catch up on tonight."

"Right, me too." He gave me an uncertain smile. "I have to apologize for Wednesday. I realize I said a lot of crazy things. I'm not used to drinking like that. It was the stress."

"Sure, I understand."

"When I remember what I said..." He laughed, a ghostly echo of a funhouse laugh. "It's embarrassing."

"There's no reason to be embarrassed. Like you said, you were stressed about Gabe."

"Yes," he said eagerly. "I'm sure I alarmed you, too, with my...my wilder accusations, which is why I wanted you to know that it's okay. Everything is okay. Gabe is fine."

"He is?"

He nodded, smiling, the tic beneath his eye beating away. "I got a postcard from him this morning."

"You're kidding."

Maybe that wasn't the right response. His smile slipped. "No. Here, I'll show you." He rose, went to the desk and picked up a postcard, which he handed me.

I opened my mouth to mention the possibility of fingerprints, but it seemed pointless now. I took the postcard gingerly and studied it. Malibu Beach at sunset, sure enough. I glanced at the back. The postmark was Malibu, dated yesterday. I considered the

handwriting. I'd seen enough of Gabe Savant's writing the night of the signing to recognize what superficially looked like his bold, erratic hand.

Sorry, Bobby. I need some me time. You'll see me when you see me. G.

"Is this his handwriting?" I asked Bob.

"Of course!" There it was again, that high-pitched, slightly unsteady laugh. "Of course, it's his. This is exactly like Gabe." He got up, as though he couldn't handle sitting still one minute longer and slopped himself a drink from the bottle on the table.

"Are you okay?"

He swung on me, nearly spilling his drink. "Of course, I'm okay! Everything is fine now. I wanted you to know so that you wouldn't keep" -- he swallowed -- "worrying. I mean, it's awkward, of course, to cancel the book tour now. But there was only the Pacific Northwest left anyway. I mean, they'll get over it. The main thing is that Gabe is A-okay."

"That's great news," I agreed courteously. "So you don't actually know where he's staying?"

"I don't need to know." He tossed his drink back. "So, I want to thank you for all your help."

"I didn't actually do anything."

"Well, for your concern, then." His smile was plastered back in place -- plastered being the key word.

"Will you be leaving soon?" I inquired.

"Leaving?"

"You don't live here, do you? You're not local?"

"I -- no, I live in New York. And yes, I will be leaving. Shortly. I have to wrap up a few loose ends, then I'll be flying home. This weekend, in fact."

I rose, offered a hand. "Good luck, Bob. I'm glad it all worked out."

He stared at me, his expression calculating. "Thank you. And you'll..."

He didn't finish the thought. I said curiously, "I'll...what?"

He shook his head, said brightly, "Take care of yourself!"

"I'll do that," I said.

Chapter Sixteen

If Gabriel Savant was sitting on a beach in Malibu sipping mai tais and enjoying some me time, I was an NHL first-round draft pick. I wasn't sure why Bob Friedlander felt like he had to convince me his meal ticket was safe and sound, but I wasn't buying the postcards from the edge act.

What I didn't understand was why Bob pretended to.

I was still turning this over in my mind when I stopped at Vons on the way home to pick up a few essentials, including a couple of steaks on the off-chance that Jake might drop by one evening. The tabloid headlines at the checkout counter reflected the public's perennial fascination with space alien babies, miracle pets, and celebrity indiscretions. By next week, Angus and Wanda would be hitting the stands.

Unless Savant's body had turned up by then.

If he wasn't dead, I didn't get Bob's distress. Unless Savant was being held for ransom. I'd seen enough crime films to know that kidnappers always wanted their targets to hide what was going on from the police, but I wasn't the police. I wasn't involved at all. Okay, maybe I'd shown a little curiosity, but it's not like I was investing any time or effort in Bob's problem. I had enough problems of my own.

Bob was still scared, I thought, going into the dry cleaner's, but there had been another emotion in play that afternoon. What was it? Suspicion? Yeah, maybe. I tried to remember my first impression of Friedlander the night of the signing. Quiet and mild-mannered. But what else? I thought back. Friedlander had struck me as smart, aware, and apologetic. Clearly he was under no illusions where Savant was concerned. He was used to cleaning up Savant's messes, used to apologizing for him. Maybe tired of it?

I picked up my dry cleaning and headed for the local carwash, running this over in my mind.

He was frightened, he was wary, and he was...guilty?

* * * * *

I expected to find everything closed by the time I got back to Cloak and Dagger Books, but when I walked in the side door I found the lights on and an extremely uptight Velvet waiting with a couple of guys. Judging by their suits and ties, I thought they might be plainclothes cops.

"They said they needed to talk to you," Velvet said defensively, in answer to my surprise. "Can I *go*?"

"Yeah, you can go," I said, and go she did, banging out through the back.

The foremost guy, a tanned fifty-something with a gray buzz cut and a Batman tie, introduced himself as Luke Best, one of the legal investigators working for Angus's defense team.

I set the grocery bags on the wooden counter. We shook hands. My mind was going a million miles a minute, but I tried not to let any of my alarm show on my face.

I didn't catch his partner's name, but he was a bit younger, lankier, with a superb haircut and no superhero fixation.

"We want to verify some facts about Angus's employment," Best said with a smile I didn't trust. "This is a nice place you have here."

"Thanks," I said. "What did you want to ask?"

"Are we keeping you from putting your groceries away?"

"They'll keep." The personal items Jake left lying around wouldn't fill a shoebox. But I didn't want to take a chance. I didn't want these two upstairs.

Best and his partner exchanged glances. Then Best proceeded to ask the basics: how long had Angus worked for me, how much did I pay him, what kind of employee was he, did we socialize, blah, blah, blah.

I was starting to relax when he said, still friendly and easy, "Angus says you paid him quite a bit of money to disappear."

I blinked. "You can spin that a couple of ways," I said. "The truth is, he was scared, and I thought it would be better for him to get away for a couple of weeks. He couldn't afford to go on his own, so I gave him the money."

"This is when the whole Devil-worship issue arose?"

"Angus had been getting threatening phone calls for a week or so. He'd mentioned having problems with former friends. He didn't go into a lot of details, and I admit I didn't pay close attention. I didn't take it seriously at first, but he got more and more...rattled."

Either Best had already heard this, or he wasn't interested in back story. "A 'Christmas bonus,' you told him, although you had never given him a Christmas bonus before."

"He didn't work for me last Christmas."

"You never gave him any kind of bonus."

I didn't bother to answer that.

"Eight hundred dollars is a nice chunk of change. You're that successful?"

I wasn't *un*successful, but I ordinarily wouldn't have doled out that kind of cash. Not that I was the cheapskate Jake had on occasion suggested, but I didn't throw money around. I'd never given Angus any kind of raise after I'd made him a permanent employee, so I'd figured it evened out. He couldn't have gone far on two hundred bucks, and I had wanted him out from underfoot. I had blithely thought I would drop a word in the right ear, and the whole mess would blow over. Well, I'd been wrong -- not for the first time.

How did I explain all that to Joe Friday?

He didn't wait for me to explain, apparently believing he had scored with his last question.

"How well do you know the detective who discovered the body?"

"Jake Riordan," his partner put in suddenly.

I thought, here it comes. Meanwhile, the entire damn neighborhood knows we're sleeping together. I said noncommittally, "I know him."

"You're friends, right?"

"We're friends," I said.

"Good friends? You're gay, right?"

I said steadily, "Jake disapproves of my lifestyle. But we're friendly."

Best gave a kind of chuckle. "In fact, you see each other a couple of times a week. You vacationed together last spring in the High Sierras, right?"

I felt the pulse beating hard in my throat and hoped it wasn't visible. I had it on authority that when I got nervous, it showed. That's the downside of being a normally honest person.

"Not exactly. I ran into trouble up there. Jake helped me out. I'm not following what this has to do with Angus."

"Well, you never know what's going to prove useful," Best informed me, reminding me of what Gabe Savant had said shortly before he disappeared on his "stress break." "Sometimes the least likely lead turns out to be the key to the entire case."

"What made you call Riordan?" Vidal Sassoon chimed in. "Gordon asked you to pick up his mail, didn't he?"

"Jake wanted --"

"Jake?" repeated Best.

I slapped my forehead. "Damn, you caught me!" I gave him a disgusted look. "Didn't I already confess to being friends?" It wasn't a great idea to get shirty with these two, but I was starting to lose my temper despite my good intentions.

"Touchy, touchy," Best murmured, making a note. Several notes -- which I guessed was supposed to worry me. The other flatfoot snickered. "You were saying?" Best inquired of me with ultra politeness.

Apparently both sides had decided I was going to be a hostile witness.

I said, "Jake wanted to talk to Angus about a couple of unsolved murders that he believed might be tied to the Satanic underground. He thought Angus might have heard or seen something, since he was apparently on the edge of that scene. Beyond that you'd have to talk to Jake."

"Oh, we intend to," Best informed me.

* * * * *

I let the investigators out, locked the doors, went upstairs to call Jake on my cell phone. He picked up on the third ring.

I said, "Can you talk?"

"No."

"Call me when you can."

"Fifteen minutes." He rang off.

Thirteen minutes later my cell rang.

I didn't waste time on chitchat. "I just had a visit from a pair of legal investigators working for Martin Grosser. I could be wrong, but the impression I get is that Angus's defense is going to throw a lot of mud in a lot of different directions in hopes of establishing reasonable doubt."

"Translation?"

"They show undue interest in our...us."

Silence.

He had to have realized that was a danger. I said, "Angus has told them that you're over here a couple of times a week. He also told them about last spring."

"How would Angus know about last spring?"

"Oh, for God's sake," I said impatiently. "If you'll remember, you *asked him* where I'd gone when I left town. For another, I probably mentioned some of what happened up there." I felt a sudden rush of resentment. "I don't advertise my personal life, but I'm not used to conducting it like an undercover operation either."

Jake ignored my outburst. "His defense will end up subpoenaing your phone records. They'll need them to support the argument that Angus didn't have time to kill Kinsey and still get back in time to call you."

We hadn't talked that much on the phone, especially not in recent weeks. A lot of the time we used cell phones. I didn't think Jake's number would raise any flags, unless someone probed for a connection. Unfortunately that appeared to be the case. I wondered where he was calling from now. A pay phone?

I reflected that none of this would be a problem -- let alone a threat -- if Jake wasn't paranoid about our relationship. His fear of discovery was turning something innocent into a weapon that could be used to destroy either of us.

When I didn't answer, he asked, "What did you tell them?"

"I told them we were friends. *I lied*. That's what you want, right?"

"It's no one's business but our own."

I agreed with him there. I sighed. "Where are they going with this? Am I going to end up testifying about our relationship? Am I supposed to commit perjury? Is that what you're expecting?"

He didn't respond.

"Swell," I said. I disconnected.

* * * * *

Once, when he was in an uncharacteristically indulgent mood, Jake told me I had that peculiar blend of attitude and ability that makes a good detective, namely, I was curious, analytical, and persistent. I liked people. I was a good listener. I was -- though this pained him to admit -- intuitive. I knew a lot of useless information -- tangential knowledge -- that frequently turned out to be helpful (or at least gave me material to chat up potential witnesses).

Of course, as Jake was quick to point out, I was also impulsive, naïve, and untrained, which made me more of a liability than a help in any investigation. But since I didn't have Jake's support this time, I had to rely on myself.

I spent the rest of the evening familiarizing myself with Garibaldi's *The Devil's Disciple*. Despite the lurid glossy cover depicting Hans Memling's *Hell*, the book itself was a serious philosophical treatise on Satanism.

It is a popular misconception that Satanism is the worship or deification of the Christian Devil. Nothing could be further from the truth. The word "Satan" stems from Hebraic/Judaic context. It means to oppose. In opposing the ideology of the Judeo-Christian religion, by default we ally ourselves with the tenets of "Satan," which is to oppose the dogma of state recognized church. In

effect it is to rebel against the establishment and the sense of smug entitlement that seems to characterize so many so-called Christians.

Huh? I thought. I didn't want to be close-minded, but this view didn't sound typical of club members I'd met so far.

It is true that a small minority of Satanists are theistic and believe in a personal deity known as Satan or Lucifer, yet we reject the notion that this concept is based upon Judaic or Christian theology. In any case the aberrant behavior of a small sect is no more reflective of the overall picture of Satanism than the Plymouth Brethren were reflective of typical Christianity. The vast majority of Satanists do not indulge in the notion of a personal, all powerful being known as Satan. We do not ascribe to superstitious belief in gods, demons or superheroes. In the strictest sense, we are atheists.

So no summoning of demons to do the bidding of discontented Yuppie offspring? Were the pentagrams and black candles and ritual daggers so much stage dressing?

I flipped through the pages. Nine Satanic Statements. Nine Satanic Sins. The Eleven Satanic Rules of Earth. What did that remind me of?

One Ring to rule them all. One Ring to find them...

The basic tenets of Satanism seemed to boil down to a belief in the animal nature of man -- life lived in the moment, autonomy of the individual, self-help, knowledge as power, personal responsibility, magick, and the concept of Satan.

Nothing particularly unique or original in any of that -- and the whole belief in magic weakened the idea of Satanism as a serious philosophical school of thought for me. Still, I recognized what the attraction would be.

Outcast, outlaw, Satan embodies the triumph of the rebel individual. Satanism is not for the herd. Satan walks alone.

So how come all these individualists dressed in black and traveled in packs?

Your demon guide waits within you. You must turn your vision inwards; do not seek the demon outside.

Unlock your inner demon? But someone was seeking the demon outside. Pentagrams written in the blood of human sacrifice indicated that someone was doing his or her best to summon something more tangible -- and a lot more dangerous.

Chapter Seventeen

I told myself that if I hadn't decided to trust Guy, I wouldn't be taking a jaunt to the seaside with him, but in case my carcass wound up floating off Will Rogers State Beach, I used a bar of soap to scrawl a message on my bathroom mirror: *Went to see Oliver Garibaldi in Pacific Palisades with Guy Snowden.*

On the bright side, if Jake ever saw that message, I wouldn't have to hear another lecture about butting into that which was not my business.

It was sunny and unexpectedly warm for December. A great day for the beach. Although this wasn't a date, I took time trying to decide what to wear before settling on black jeans and a brown camp shirt with inconspicuous black polka dots, a shirt that Jake liked. Truthfully, I think he liked it for *himself*, had it come in jumbo size.

While I waited for Guy to show up, I went through the photos the girls next door had taken the night of Gabriel Savant's signing. Midway through the stack of candid shots -- apparently taken after the girls had a couple of glasses of champagne -- I had another brainstorm and started hunting through the desk drawers for pictures of other author signings. I found a couple of snaps of Angus and slipped them into my Day Planner.

Guy walked into the bookstore a little after ten. He wore faded jeans, a loose white muslin shirt, and sandals. I tried to picture Jake in a pirate shirt -- or myself, for that matter -- and failed. But it suited Guy. That masculine blend of force and grace.

He smiled, I smiled. We were both slightly self-conscious, mindful of our recent awkward phone conversation.

I gave Velvet several last-minute directions -- to which she almost, but not quite, rolled her eyes -- and we went outside.

"I'm parked down the street," Guy said, his hand resting briefly on the small of my back as the door closed behind us.

I said, "Can I ask you something? Did you recognize the girl behind the counter?"

"I don't think I did more than glance her way."

"Would you do me a favor? Step inside and see if you recognize her?"

His brows rose, but he went back inside. I followed. Velvet, in the midst of making a call on her cell phone, looked up. She clicked off and lowered her phone -- which maybe meant little more than she didn't want to be caught making a personal phone call on my dime.

She had seemed pleased, even sort of relieved when I'd told her I would be leaving her to fend for herself once again. Maybe she wanted a chance to make up for sticking her nose where it didn't belong. Maybe she was delighted at the chance to do more snooping, but it would be a madhouse this afternoon; she wouldn't have time for much search and seizure if that was the plan.

"I left my wallet," I said cheerfully, walking back to the office. I opened and closed a drawer, then walked back out.

"Very cool place," Guy said sincerely, turning from a shelf as I rejoined him. We went back outside, the glass door swinging shut behind us. "I don't know her. Should I?"

"You've never had her in class?"

He laughed. "Do you have any idea of how many kids I've had in class over the years? I can't say for sure. She looks like a million other girls. Why?"

"I don't know. I'm paranoid, I guess. She's sort of odd."

His expression confirmed my self-diagnosis, but he humored me. "You think she may be involved in whatever is going on?"

"I don't know. It's pretty unlikely, but she did show up out of the blue."

"You must have people applying for work all the time."

"Well...true. Though I did catch her going through my desk."

He glanced at me as we wove our way through the morning sightseers littering the sidewalks of Old Town. "That's not good." He added, "Had you told her your desk was off-limits?"

"No, that's the thing. I had her scoping eBay the day before at the computer there. She may have thought the desk was community property."

"Possibly." He shrugged. "What is it you think she might be up to?"

I shook my head. "I have no idea. She's not stealing from the register; I'm watching the receipts. She could do a lot of damage if she wanted to, but I'd know she was the culprit, and I'd prosecute, which she has to realize." I concluded, "I guess she could be spying on me."

Guy grinned wickedly, eyes catching mine. "What are you doing that would be worthy of peeping?"

I laughed, surprised to feel my face warm. "Nothing."

"How disappointing." He said more seriously, "Did she offer references?"

"Yes. She checked out."

He shrugged. "Well, if you're uncomfortable with her, why don't you fire her?"

I'd been asking myself the same thing since I caught her with my heart meds. "Seems unfair. Besides, do you have any idea how hard it is to get good help? Especially around the holidays." Especially since I kept leaving her to fend for herself while I ran off to play Boy Detective -- this morning being a prime example.

Besides, if she was up to no good, this was one way to keep an eye on her.

We reached Guy's car. He pulled his keys out, saying, "Do you mind if we have the top down?"

* * * * *

Pacific Palisades perches atop the Santa Monica Mountains, offering its small, affluent community breathtaking views of the coast from Malibu to Palos Verdes. The poor people get to look at Santa Monica and West Hollywood.

Towering palms and old-fashioned street lamps line winding roads that lead to charming shops and cozy cottages; there's a small-town quaintness to the place.

Top down, wind in our hair, sun on our faces, we whipped along the winding highway, enjoying the dramatic green bluffs, sunlight sparkling on blue water dotted with sail boats.

Guy had tied his hair back. I studied his lean, brown face. It was a youthful face despite the time he'd spent in the sun. I thought he was in his forties, but he could have been a well-preserved fifty. Sixty was pushing it, unless he really had sold his soul to the Devil.

"You know, there are no photographs of Garibaldi," I said. "I was reading *The Devil's Disciple* last night. There's not even an author photo."

Guy, eyes on the road, inquired, "What did you make of *The Devil's Disciple*?"

"Interesting. A more rational approach than I expected. Not that I'm planning to convert anytime soon."

He smiled that superior smile. "Are you...as they say...religious?"

"Not particularly. I dig Jesus. I hope that bit's true."

His laugh was ironic. "Satanism has a lot to offer people like us. People of our sexual persuasion, that is."

"That would confirm a conservative stereotype or two."

"Think about it. Think about the Nine Satanic Sins. Stupidity, for example. Our society embraces ignorance, we celebrate and reward it -- and we call those who challenge the accepted doctrine unpatriotic or ungodly."

"I personally like the ninth sin. Lack of Aesthetics. That's guaranteed to appeal to the gay community."

He glanced my way, his eyes serpent green. "Try to keep an open mind, Adrien. It's the only way you'll discover the truth."

Guy turned off the main drag. We drove another mile or two before coming to a pair of tall, ornate gates. He spoke into the speaker box. The gates swung open. We drove through, following a long, circular drive shaded by ancient cypress trees.

"Wow," I said, as what appeared to be a Mediterranean estate on the bluffs swung into view.

"It was built back in the 1930s for Elias Creighton. He was a big silent film star. When talkies came in, he was reduced to doing a lot of character parts in cheesy horror films. They called him the poor man's Lon Chaney."

"I don't think I've heard of him."

"Probably not, but you'd recognize him if you saw his picture."

We parked and got out, crossing the immaculate green with a panoramic view from Palos Verdes to Point Dume. The house had that Old Hollywood vibe. It was built of mellow butter-colored stone contrasting warmly with the red-tiled roof. There were many large, elegant windows reflecting the drifting clouds overhead.

An elderly manservant, who might have been a relic from Elias Creighton's day, opened the door and informed us that the "master" was out by the pool.

We followed him through giant, airy rooms filled with eighteenth-century French antiques to a flagstone terrace -- which led down to another terrace where the pool overlooked the ocean.

The pool was tiled in aqua, green, and indigo. Between palm trees, Grecian-style statues were strategically positioned down its length. Two red-haired women -- twins -- sunned themselves beside the water's edge. In the pool, a man did laps, his powerful brown arms cutting through the water.

The manservant excused himself. We sat at a table a few feet away from the girls, waiting for our host to complete his morning constitutional. One of the girls sat up and removed her top without any apparent self-consciousness, lying back to soak up the fitful seacoast sun.

Garibaldi finished his laps and climbed the pool steps, picking up the monogrammed towel lying over a chair. He dried himself leisurely, as though unaware of us. I'm not sure what I had expected: maybe a dry, desiccated stick of an academic or the puffy *savoir faire* of the professional hedonist.

Garibaldi was tall, olive-skinned, and hard-bodied, with a shock of white hair. His features were severe, but rough-hewn, as though his creator hadn't had time to finish sculpting him. He moved with deliberation, giving an illusion of power rather than grace.

I glanced Guy's way. His mouth curved cynically, watching me.

When Garibaldi had finished drying himself, he wrapped a purple silk dressing gown around his compact body, and on cue, Guy rose. I followed suit.

"Guy, my dear," Garibaldi greeted him. His voice was unexpectedly light. They bussed each other on their cheeks in French fashion.

"This is Adrien English," Guy introduced me.

"Hello, Adrien English." Garibaldi offered his hand. He had a strong grip, but his fingers were uncalledused, his skin as soft as a woman's. His eyes were black and intense, his mouth flesh-colored and sensual in line. It was a face of great character -- what kind of character, I had no idea. "Guy tells me you have a small problem. Small, but interesting."

I glanced at Guy, wondering exactly how much he had told Garibaldi. Everything -- or at least everything that Guy knew -- I bet.

"I hope you'll find it interesting. I appreciate your agreeing to see me."

He shrugged, a Gallic gesture. His eyes followed one of the girls -- the topless one -- as she rose from her lounge and dove neatly into the sparkling water. As though recalling himself, he beckoned us to follow him inside.

We found ourselves in a long, elegant room with a black and red Chinese screen and a marble statue of a noticeably excited satyr. The cause of the satyr's excitement was not visible, but the results were pretty impressive.

Garibaldi went to the carved cherrywood paneling. He swiveled one of the brass sconces. The panel slid back, revealing a hidden bar well stocked with an inviting selection of expensive bottles and crystal stemware.

"It was built during Prohibition," Guy informed me as Garibaldi poured green shots into three parfait glasses. I deduced that Guy had spent a fair amount of time visiting Oliver Garibaldi in his mansion on the hill.

I watched Garibaldi dip a perforated spoon into a jar, then pour water from a carafe over the white powder so that it drained into the glasses.

"Are you familiar with the green fairy, Mr. English?" Garibaldi inquired. His eyes met mine in the etched mirror above the bar.

"The green fairy?" I felt sure this was someone I should know.

"Absinthe," Guy informed me.

The toast of La Belle Époque? I didn't think that stuff was legal. Not that I wasn't curious to try it. I felt certain that Oliver Garibaldi drank only the best.

"Hemingway was a fan, wasn't he?"

"Hemingway, Poe, Wilde -- Aleister Crowley. You're heard of Aleister Crowley?"

Writer, painter, mountain climber, occultist, and sexual revolutionary? The tabloids had labeled him "The Wickedest Man in the World." He had modestly referred to himself as "The Great Beast 666."

“Sort of the father of modern Satanism, wasn’t he?”

Garibaldi permitted himself a curve of his lips at this. He brought Guy and me our drinks.

I could imagine what Jake would have to say about this, I reflected, sipping the milky potion. It tasted a bit like licorice, but with an herbal or floral undertone. It was like nothing I’d tried before.

I glanced up. Garibaldi was watching me with those coal black eyes. He had incredible presence, close to animal magnetism. It was hard to take my eyes off him.

“Cheers,” I said.

He fetched his own glass, taking one of the elegant chairs across from us. I reminded myself that he was sitting in a pair of damp swim trunks, however magnetic his personality.

“So?” His eyes held mine. “Tell me about this small problem of yours, Adrien English.”

I pulled the photo of the pentagram out of my Day Planner, handed it across to Garibaldi. He took it, made an expression of distaste.

“Paint.”

“Yes.” I wondered how he knew that at a glance, but perhaps he assumed the obvious.

“This is a childish prank. There is no mystery here.” He seemed disappointed. I found that I didn’t wish to disappoint him.

“There may not be mystery, but there is murder. That symbol has turned up at the scene of three ritual slayings.”

The black eyes raised, met mine. Moved to Guy for confirmation. Guy nodded imperceptibly.

“Ah.”

That was it. *Ah*. He made it sound profound.

I said, “That symbol. It’s a sigil, isn’t it, representing the name of a demon?”

He nodded, pondering the photograph.

“Would you happen to know which demon?”

He answered without hesitation. “The fifty-sixth spirit. Gremory. Also called Gamori, Gemory, or Gomory.” “What does it do?”

“What do you know of demons?”

More than I had two weeks earlier.

“Well, I know that before Christianity, demons were considered either good or evil. Post Christianity, they seem to be primarily viewed as malevolent. Like junior league devils. Apparently a lot of earlier pagan deities have been dumped into the pantheon along with fallen angels and political figures.”

Garibaldi considered this gravely. "It is better not to judge demons by human standards of good and evil. Let us think of them as useful or not useful."

"I actually don't think of them as real," I felt obliged to point out.

He fastened those jet eyes on mine. "No?"

One simple word that seemed to contain unspoken volumes.

I said, to fill the silence, "So what does Gremory do?"

"Do?"

Like, did I think he had a day job? Maybe he lounged around the pool drinking absinthe and fooling with red-haired nymphs.

"Would he be considered useful or not?"

Garibaldi replied, "He's a powerful Duke of Hell who commands twenty-six legions. He appears as a beautiful noblewoman riding a great camel. It is his office to tell of all things past, present, and future."

My demon was a camel-riding transvestite? *The Devil Wears Prada*, indeed.

"That's it? He can tell the future?"

For the first time a glimmer of humor crossed Garibaldi's austere features. "But you see, because the Duke knows all that has been, is, and will be, he has the ability to deliver all the lost treasure of the material world -- as well as the sexual favors of the most desirable women."

In other words, useless.

"So this demon's seal at a grave site would indicate what? Human sacrifice in exchange for treasure and sexual favors?" It sounded like a frat boy's dream come true.

Garibaldi shook his head. "You're attempting to attribute logical motivations to an aberrant psyche. To the true Satanist, all life is sacred."

We seemed to have moved away from the idea of useful and non-useful demons. Was I being fed the party line, or was this Garibaldi's personal opinion?

"So it's your opinion that these crimes were committed by a person with a warped view of Satanism?"

"I imagine this is the view of the media and the police, is it not?"

"That these killings are the work of Satanists? Yes." But interesting that Garibaldi had leaped to the same conclusion. I remembered something from my reading. "I thought Aleister Crowley advocated blood sacrifice. Didn't he actually boast about carrying out the ritual killing of children?"

"Crowley was a showman. He delighted in his reputation as the Wickedest Man in the World. Nor was he a true Satanist, although many of his ideas and writings were used as a foundation for traditional -- theistic -- Satanism."

Guy said, "Anton LaVey is generally regarded as the real father of Modern Satanism. He borrowed from everyone from Crowley to Gardener to Ragnar RedBeard and formed the Church of Satan."

"If these murders are the work of renegade Satanists, would you know of such a group?" I inquired of Garibaldi.

He handed me back the photos, saying lazily, "But they've caught the madman who committed these atrocities. The madman and his accomplice."

At my expression, he said, "I read the papers, Mr. English. Indeed, I read several publications each morning. It is important to remain informed."

"Have you ever heard of a group called Blade Sable?"

Lifting his glass, Garibaldi seemed to pause for the tiniest fraction of a second. He finished the motion, sipping and swallowing with great deliberation.

"No," he said. He met my eyes.

He's lying, I thought. But he expects me to recognize that. I took out the photos of Angus and handed them across.

"This is the man they arrested. He worked for me -- and for Guy."

"The boy was my teaching assistant, Oliver," Guy said. "The police are trying to draw a connection between him and my own teachings."

"That is awkward, but hardly unexpected. Witch hunts are a national pastime here, are they not?" Garibaldi's olive face was impassive as a basilisk's as he studied the pictures. He handed them back. "Are you asking whether I know this man? I don't."

"I don't believe Angus committed these murders," I said. "But I think he knows about them. I think he was involved with a group called Blade Sable."

"A group?"

"A cult."

His lips twitched as though he found this funny, but was too polite to laugh in my face. "Where did you learn of this Blade Sable?"

"From a writer who disappeared about a week ago."

Garibaldi permitted himself a colorless smile. "You believe that this sect is guilty of abduction and murder, but that the police would have no inkling that such an entity exists?"

"The police don't have a lot of imagination."

"Whereas you have a great deal." Yep, he was distinctly amused. "Well, perhaps I shall make inquiries for you. It is an interesting problem. I make no promises, but if such an order exists, I'll soon know."

He drained his glass. Guy and I hastily did the same as he rose. The royal audience was clearly concluded.

"May I offer you luncheon?"

Guy said quickly, "Unfortunately, we've plans. However, I think Adrien would enjoy seeing your library, if you've the time."

"But of course, my dear. It would be a pleasure."

We followed him downstairs to a long, oddly shaped room papered in blood red brocade, lined with glass-fronted bookshelves. In the center of the room were several library tables and a couple of glass chests. A magnificent mummy case stood at the far end.

"Originally this was the screening room of Elias Creighton. I don't suppose you would know of him, as he was long before your time. He killed himself in this room one night while watching one of his final films."

I guessed that the room had begun its existence as a basement; it was chilly. There were no windows.

Garibaldi added with caustic humor, "No one knows whether this was a critical commentary of his own work or despair over the knowledge that his career was finished. Now the room serves as my library and personal museum."

The books alone in that room had to be worth a fortune. I moved slowly from shelf to shelf, absorbing the titles with a combination of shock and lust. *Magick in Theory and Practice* by the Master Therion (Aleister Crowley), *Moonchild* by Aleister Crowley, *Spirit Slate Writing and Kindred Phenomena* by William Robinson, the Qabalah, *The Golden Bough*...shelf after shelf of occult classics.

The glass cases contained old and fragile grimoires as well as gem-studded ritual artifacts such as athames, chalices, wands, ceremonial masks, mortars and pestles. I noted a belt made of faded blue silk strands intertwined with beads. *Not a belt*. A scourge.

Strange exotic artwork hung above the bookshelves. I thought I recognized the efforts of Austin Spare and Rosaleen Norton from my recent reading. Demons and devils smirked and spread their wings -- as well as other body parts -- for the viewer's pleasure.

"Would it be impertinent to ask whether you're a Traditional or Modern Satanist?" I inquired of Garibaldi as he stood to the side conversing quietly with Guy.

He looked faintly amused. "Neither, I'm afraid. Like the true philosophers I've come to believe that religion is an illusion of childhood, outgrown after proper education."

Chapter Eighteen

We stopped for lunch at Gli Amici off Sunset Boulevard, eating soup and French-style sandwiches at an uncomfortable wrought-iron table on a crowded patio. Overhead, seagulls swooped and sailed, their cries mingling with the crash of the surf a few yards away.

Surprisingly, there was plenty to talk about without once veering off into murder or demonology, but eventually we circled back to what was on both our minds.

"What did you think of Oliver?" Guy asked. He drew his pipe out, then put it away again. Apparently he was still adjusting to the fact that California was not a smoker-friendly state.

"He's an interesting guy. But I think he knows more than he's letting on. He avoided answering what significance the sign of Gremory might have at a crime scene."

"He didn't avoid it," Guy objected. "He pointed out that it's impossible to follow the reasoning of a disturbed intellect."

"Not so. Profilers do that very thing. If the sigil has symbolic or ritual significance, then that's an important clue to the killer."

"Oliver doesn't believe that's the case."

"Maybe he's wrong. He dismissed the idea of group involvement, and I know that's wrong. I didn't imagine my run-in with Betty and Veronica."

"Who?"

"Sorry. Betty and the Perone girl. Someone painted an inverted pentagram on my threshold. It wasn't Angus, ipso facto, other people are involved."

He didn't reply. I studied his brown profile as he stared out at the beach. The sea breeze stirred the long silver tendrils on his forehead back from his face. His silence, his stillness seemed to shut me out -- and I realized I didn't like that.

"You said you spoke to this former student. Whatever he told you led you to infer that others were involved." Casually, I added, "Granted, whatever he said also led you to believe that the problem had been resolved."

Once again, I had Guy's full attention. His face mirrored exasperation. "The point of visiting Oliver was that he's the expert in this field. If he says there's no cult involved, there's no cult."

I noticed Guy seemed touchy every time I brought up the subject of this mysterious former student. "Garibaldi didn't say that. He said he had never heard of Blade Sable. I think he was lying."

"*Lying?* Why should he lie?"

"Maybe he wanted to know a bit more about me before he revealed trade secrets." I paused. "Or maybe he's involved."

"Oh, come on!"

"Well, you've got to admit that for one who professes to be above any form of religion, he's got an awful lot of expensive religious artifacts lying around."

Testily, he answered, "The fact that he's reached a point in his own intellectual and spiritual development where he no longer requires the opiate of religion doesn't nullify a lifetime spent in exploring and studying these mythologies."

What was with me? I couldn't seem to resist needling Guy. By his expression he was thinking the same thing. I said, trying to appease, "I agree. I'm not seriously suggesting he's involved, just that I think he didn't spill all he knows."

The waitress arrived with the bill, forestalling an answer. I reached for it, but Guy was faster.

"Hey, this one's on me," I protested.

"I've got it." When I opened my mouth to argue, he repeated, "*I've got it.*"

"Well...thanks, then."

He nodded curtly, our earlier rapport gone.

Too bad, because I liked Guy, even if I didn't totally trust him -- although apparently I trusted him enough to coerce him into helping me help Angus.

I sensed he had allegiances to people who might not be as sympathetic to my aims. Garibaldi was one such person; another was this former student whom Guy had originally suspected of being involved in harassing Angus. Apparently Guy didn't entirely trust me either, since he wasn't sharing that person's name -- or maybe he was demonstrating loyalty to an old friend. Loyalty wasn't a bad trait in a friend or a lover.

The problem was, I had made a bad mistake once -- a nearly fatal mistake -- and not that long ago. I didn't intend to repeat history.

We walked back to the parking lot, folded ourselves into the red Miata, still without speaking. Guy started to pull out of the parking lot, then braked.

"D'you want to take a walk on the beach before we head back?"

I hesitated, thought, *why not?* "Sure."

We parked along the highway and walked the steep, curved path to Abalone Cove.

As it was off-season, we had the beach to ourselves except for a pair of seals sunning themselves on rocks. Several yards out in the slate blue water, wet-suited surfers sat on their boards waiting for the next wave. Gulls squawked overhead, hanging motionless in the salty air.

Guy nodded out at the sun-dazzled ocean. "They're seeing more white sharks along this stretch of coast."

"Great whites?"

"Juveniles and sub-adults mostly."

"Juveniles and sub-adults can do a lot of damage."

"True."

With his hair pulled back and the loose sleeves of his shirt, Guy had the look of a buccaneer. I admitted to myself that trust or no, I was increasingly attracted to him -- but then, let's face it, I've got a thing for pirates.

"You're not seeing anyone?" I asked, against my better judgment.

He replied, as though stating it for the record, "I'm not involved in a serious monogamous relationship."

I was, but it was apparently a solo effort.

I stopped to dump the sand out of my shoe, gripping the hand Guy offered as I balanced there on one foot. The muscles bunched in his forearm as he steadied me, his fingers locking with mine. He didn't immediately let go when I straightened. We stood there for a moment holding hands; I tried to remember the last time I'd held a guy's hand.

"It's funny," he said. "But the older I get, the more I value the conversation that takes place between the hot sex, as opposed to the hot sex itself."

I grinned. "You *are* getting old."

He laughed and let me go.

We walked and talked a while longer, both of us deliberately avoiding any subject that might disturb our newly-recovered amity. Guy spoke about studying and living in Great Britain, and I talked about the thrilling adventures of running a local bookstore.

We were sitting on the rock wall, still gabbing, when Guy glanced at his watch, said, "Good God. It's five o'clock."

I couldn't believe it. It felt like we'd been gone an hour or two. "We should get back."

He nodded, then smiled faintly. "The sun's bringing out freckles on your nose."

“It’s probably sand.”

He reached up to brush a finger along the bridge of my cheek. A gentle touch. “The sand isn’t rubbing off.” Our eyes met -- held.

He was going to kiss me.

I laughed and rubbed my nose, getting to my feet.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Guy sitting very still. Then he relaxed and also rose. We climbed back up the rocks to the highway.

* * * * *

The shop was closed, the upstairs flat very quiet when I got home. Quiet and empty. I tried to imagine coming home to someone who welcomed me, who looked forward to seeing me.

I went into the bathroom and wiped my soap message to Jake off the mirror, shaking my head at my earlier jitters.

Back in the kitchen, I grabbed a beer, checked the machine for messages.

Nothing.

I headed back downstairs to view my e-mail. Several Internet orders, a couple of e-mail Christmas cards from friends, the usual spam, and the usual offers of spam blockers.

I opened blackster21’s e-mail.

Nothing.

I decided to post another message to Dark Realm.

Los Angeles novice urgently seeking Blade Sable. Any information welcome.

I combed the web for the demon Gremory. There wasn’t much to be found, although a site called Lemegeton listed all seventy-two demons from the *Ars Goetia* and gave their availability status. Amon, for example, was noted as “currently Bound by Mindspring,” while Gremory aka Gamori was down as “currently available.”

Bored and strangely restless, I signed off and went upstairs.

The answering machine light was blinking. I hit Play.

Guy, sounding unexpectedly self-conscious, had phoned. I called him back.

For once he answered right away. We chatted briefly. He said very casually, “There’s a club in Hollywood called Hell’s Kitchen. Supposedly Betty Sansone and her crowd hang there most Monday nights. Would you like to go?”

I hesitated. Jake generally chose Monday nights to put in an appearance, but I doubted I’d be seeing him anytime soon -- now having attracted the interest of Angus’s defense team and Jake’s own colleagues. I didn’t want to wait by the phone in hopes that he might show, but I didn’t want to have to explain what I was up to on the off chance that he did call.

From the moment Angus had been arrested, I had considered any promise -- let alone one given under duress -- to stay off Jake's turf, null and void. If Jake knew anything about me at all, he had to know I wasn't going to stand by while the cops railroaded Angus into prison or a nuthouse because they hadn't the imagination to look further than their own noses. That didn't mean he would be pleased to find out that I was playing detective again. The situation was dicey enough between us.

"I'm not sure I can get away. Can I let you know?"

"Of course," he said, disappointed.

I felt a little disappointed myself.

* * * * *

Sunday I was going through a box of books I'd bought on eBay, when Lisa called with a spur of the moment invitation to go over to the Dautens' and watch NFL football.

I can just about tolerate college football. Overpaid, steroid-enhanced goons wrecking each other's joints for a few feet of turf? Thanks, but no thanks. Not for all the beer and spicy wings I can hold.

"It's San Francisco at Cincinnati," Lisa parroted, like she had any idea what that meant.

Eyes on a copy of *The Pale Egyptian* by R.M. Friedlander, I replied, "I'm not from San Francisco. I'm not from Cincinnati. Why would I be interested?"

"Because Bill asked you. He knows you went to school at Stanford. He wants to see more of you."

"He's seen plenty this month alone. I've had dinner twice with him. How much bonding do I need to do with these people?" I flipped open the book to the copyright page. Copyright 1989 by Robert M. Friedlander.

Velvet, standing a couple feet away, said, "I can manage. It will be dead today." Which showed how little she knew. Our customers would not be sitting home chugging beer and cheering on the gladiators. With two weeks to go to Christmas, they would be out on the mean streets, plastic in hand.

In my ear, Lisa's insect voice persisted, "It's three weeks to the wedding, Adrien. There remains *a lot* to do."

"Well, why would I be doing it?" I protested. "I'm not getting married."

"Do you not have any interest in this wedding at all?"

Did she want an honest answer?

"Have you read the papers lately? I'm kind of..."

"Kind of what?"

Danger, Will Robinson. I'd nearly strolled right into that crater.

“Nothing. What *time*?” I wondered if maybe she and the big guy would take one of those year-long honeymoons like Victorian couples did. Maybe I could get Lauren and Natalie to work on that plan.

Lisa happily relayed the details. I promised Velvet this would be the last time I’d leave her on her own.

“No big thing,” she said.

* * * * *

The Dauten homestead was located in the Chatsworth Hills on a residential street that seemed to have seceded from Santa’s Village.

The house on the left was going for a Dr. Seuss Does Christmas motif. There was a small-scale Whoville encircled by a miniature train track. The train bore a tipsy-looking Cat in the Hat along with the Grinch and his pup, Max. Lights flashing, whistle tooting, the dwarf train whizzed around the miniature Whoville in ceaseless and annoying activity. It appeared that the homeowners had actually hired an armed security guard to keep the onlookers at bay. Was hitching a ride on the toy train punishable by death?

The house on the right aimed for a Nutcracker Suite theme. Candy canes lined the front walk. Fluorescent Sugar Plum Fairies were cunningly placed amidst the bushes and trees. A two-story Nutcracker Prince guarded the front entrance, while a giant inflated Clara bobbed gently in the smoggy night, hissing helium in a never-ending fart.

By contrast, the billions of white lights adorning the roof and trees and bushes of Dauten Manor looked Spartan. I walked up the pseudo-cobblestones to the peacock blue door framed by two topiaries.

I rang the bell, and Lisa answered, which was a jolt.

“Darling, you’re *late*,” she reproached. “It’s already the first inning.”

“First quarter?”

“Mmm. Possibly.” Then she smiled, reaching for the case of Beers of the World I had picked up at Costco on the way over. “What a lovely job I did of raising you, Adrien.” Adding under her breath, “He’s in the den.”

“He knows I’m coming, right?”

“Of course! You’re going to *bond*.”

Dear God.

I followed her through the immaculate and beautifully decorated foyer, into an immaculate and beautifully decorated living room, through an immaculate and beautifully decorated dining room, into a less immaculate, but still beautifully decorated family room, which adjoined a kitchen that was full of girls. It sounded like an aviary. Or possibly a hen house.

Actually it was only Lauren and Natalie.

"Hi, Adrien!" they chorused.

Did they *all* live here?

"Hey there," I said. I could not for the life of me figure out why they were all beaming at me with the delight of Aztec priests at the arrival of a well-nourished youth. What did they imagine this bonding ritual entailed?

"For God's sake," shrieked Dauten from down the hallway. "The guy's wide open!"

Lisa made whisking motions toward the den.

I went down a long hallway paneled with photographs of the Dauten girls through years of bangs and braces and bustiers.

The den was neither immaculate, nor beautifully decorated. It was a barn-sized room with a TV that took up an entire wall, two recliner chairs, and a long sectional sofa in a muted plaid. A book shelf held a collection of beer steins and golf trophies.

Emma knelt at a huge coffee table littered with chicken wings and an assortment of dips and chips. She was laboring over a pile of colored pencils, rulers, and what looked like a Spirograph. Dauten lounged in one of the recliners. He held the TV remote control in one hand, a beer mug in the other.

"Crrrrap!" he howled. "Go around the end! *You idiot!*" He glanced my way and said pleasantly, "Hello, Adrien. Grab a beer and pull up a chair."

I sat on the sofa, which was as wide as a twin bed. Emma looked up at me from under the fringe of dark bangs.

"Hello. Who do you want to win?"

"Hello." I reached over and selected a barbecue chip. "I don't care."

Her mouth dropped. Her eyes popped. I opened my mouth to retract this unsportsmanlike sentiment, but she giggled and returned to her squiggles. I realized that a twelve-year-old had successfully yanked my chain.

Natalie slipped into the room, deposited a bottle of Carlsberg and a frosted pilsner on the table in front of me, gave me thumbs up, and slipped out again.

I stared at the screen watching the burly ant figures race up and down the green field, my thoughts on the brief visit I'd paid the Library of Congress Web site before driving over.

Robert M. Friedlander, born in 1954, had several literary works to his name. Unlike the early efforts of G.O. Savage, Friedlander wrote "beautifully written, critically acclaimed literary fiction that no one wanted to read." He had stopped writing in 2000, which coincidentally was when Gabriel Savant had appeared on the literary scene with *The Illuminati Initiative*, which had rocketed to the top of the *New York Times Best Sellers* list.

So you had two capable, but not particularly successful writers who had given up writing at approximately the same moment that the immensely successful Gabriel Savant had appeared on the scene with his “handler,” Bobby Friedman.

Gabriel Savant’s prose reflected none of the literary flourishes of Robert M. Friedman or the pulpy excesses of G.O. Savage. It was fast-paced, easy-reading, well-researched mass-market fiction. But the thing that truly set these books apart was the author himself. By all accounts Savant was a marketing genius. He was tireless and inventive. He was handsome and charismatic. He was a publisher’s dream come true -- and he managed to turn out a book every nine months like clockwork, *while constantly touring and promoting*.

I remembered my first visit to Friedlander at the Biltmore. He had been printing off his laptop. His world disintegrating around him, his author-charge MIA, Friedlander had been running off a manuscript. Now who did that sound like? It sounded like 99.9% of the writers I knew.

Emma spoke, interrupting my reflections.

“Did you ever notice,” she said, tucking her long, dark hair behind her ear, “that if you change the ‘p’ in pink for an ‘o,’ it spells oink?”

“No.”

“It looks really funny.”

“I bet.”

“Halftime.” Dauten snorted. “They call this excuse for a Las Vegas floor show halftime? Emmy, do *not* look at this TV.”

“Do you know what?” Emma said, fixing me with those doe eyes. “Santa spelled backward is Satan.”

I did a double take. She continued to look at me, all rosy-cheeked and innocent. I mean, come on. What was I thinking. Damien?

“It spells Atnas, doesn’t it?” I objected.

She frowned at her paper. “Oh, yeah. It’s a mammogram.”

I narrowly escaped spilling my beer in my lap. “Anagram, maybe?” I suggested.

“Umm-hmm,” Her tone implied that this is what she had said. She went back to working on her crossword or Da Vinci’s code, or whatever the heck she was scribbling at so earnestly.

* * * * *

I didn’t want to go back home to my lonely flat after the noise and hubbub of the Dautens’ -- not that I could take five minutes longer at my future in-laws. I didn’t know what I wanted.

Yeah, I did, but that wasn’t possible.

So I took a chance and went to see if Bob Friedlander had already checked out of the Biltmore Hotel.

I didn't bother inquiring at the front desk. He was either there, or he wasn't. I didn't want to give him a heads-up.

The elevator opened onto the hushed hallway. There wasn't a soul to be seen. I walked slowly to the room, thinking they could use more lights up here.

He took a long time to answer my knock. I began to fear I'd missed him, when I heard the bolt slide.

The door swung open. I had a glimpse of a tidy and impersonal hotel suite. No printer, no clothes strewn about, no booze, and no gun as far as I could see -- which wasn't that far. Bob appeared to be packed and ready to go.

"Adrien!" Bob exclaimed with a distinct lack of pleasure. "What are you doing here?"

"I want to talk to you."

"No." I hadn't wasted time on social niceties. Neither did Bob. "I don't have time." He started to shut the door. I reached out to stop him.

I said, "Bob, we both know Gabe isn't staying out in Malibu. They have him, don't they?"

"*Be quiet*," he said fiercely and grabbed me by the front of my jacket, dragging me into the hotel room. I didn't resist; I wanted into that room.

The hotel door slammed shut. Bob let go of me, breathing hard. "You're crazy," he said. "You're going to get us both killed."

Same old song, same old story. "Tell me what I want to know, and I'll go away. Who or what is Blade Sable?"

"I don't know!"

"Bullshit. You have to have some idea."

"Why the hell can't you leave this alone? What the hell does it matter to you?"

Not a bad question, but moot.

I didn't move, didn't speak, just waited him out. Jake had pulled that trick on me a couple of times, so I knew it was effective.

After forty seconds (which is a sizable stretch of silence when you're mad enough to throttle someone), Bob burst out, "Blade Sable was Gabe's project. How many times do I have to tell you? Gabe was doing his own --" He stopped.

"Gabe was doing his own thing," I said. "And that isn't how it works, is it? Gabe is the front man. *You* write the books. It's a partnership, but not an equal partnership, because you do all the work, and Gabe gets all the glory."

His face, already flushed with anger, turned a medic-alert shade of puce.

“What do you know? That’s the way we wanted it! We started out trying to write together, but it worked better this way. I don’t want what you call “the glory.” I don’t want to get out there and meet my public -- our public. You saw those freaks. You think I want to rub shoulders with *that?*”

“Okay, so it’s a real partnership. But Gabe decided he wanted to write this book, this exposé.”

“He’s always taken this stuff too seriously. The occult. He had to dabble -- he had to experiment.”

In other words, *It’s his own damn fault.*

I guessed, “But then he connected with Blade Sable.”

He ran his hands over his sparse hair. “He went to a party the last time we did LA. That was a year ago in October. I remember because we were doing a lot of Halloween tie-ins for *Vertex of the Vampyres*. Anyway, something happened. He saw something or overheard something. Whatever it was, it terrified him. I’ve known him twenty years, but I’ve never seen him like that.”

“You have no idea what?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know the details, because he never shared any. Though he was scared, he kept poking, kept prying, kept trying to find out more. He thought it was huge, that it reached all the way to City Hall and beyond. He thought there was a book in it.” He added bitterly, “A book for him, not us.”

“Where was the party held?”

“I don’t know. In Los Angeles, I think.”

I took a random shot. “Pacific Palisades? By the ocean?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Did he say who was at the party? Did he ever mention any names?”

“I told you, I don’t know the details.”

“Did he write the book?”

“I think so. He must have written a lot of it.”

“Was it on that disk that disappeared?”

“I think so.”

“He must have had a couple of backups.”

“I’m sure he did, but they wouldn’t be where I would find them. He didn’t want me to know what he was doing.”

“The panic over the lost disk was because he was afraid this group or this person would find out what he was writing? He was afraid of them.”

Bob nodded.

Then why the hell had Savant brought that disk with him? Why had he told these people about it -- because he must have told someone. I didn't believe they saw it in a crystal ball.

I turned my attention back to Friedlander. "What was the deal with that postcard? Why did you try to convince me that Gabe was safe when he's still missing?"

"They told me to. They told me to let it go. They said a postcard would be coming from Gabe and that it would prove he was alive. They said if I didn't play along, he would be dead, and I'd be next. They said the police didn't believe me, anyway, and it's true. The police didn't believe me. Or at least they pretended not to."

"Who told you all this?"

"I don't know. I didn't see them. They called from a phone inside the hotel. They knew my room. They knew everything."

"When did they call you?"

"I don't remember."

I was tempted to prompt him, but I knew better. "Try," I said.

He thought hard. "Last Wednesday, I think."

"The day I came to see you?"

He looked confused, then nodded. "The first time, yes, that's right. They said to call you and tell you that it was all okay, Gabe was safe --"

I interrupted, "They said to call *me*? They mentioned me by name?"

"Yes. They said you were nosing around, that if you kept it up, they'd kill Gabe and then me."

I put that aside to consider later. "So what happens now?"

He couldn't meet my eyes. I said, disbelieving, "You're walking away from this?"

"What am I supposed to do? Getting myself killed won't change anything. Gabe is dead."

"You don't know that."

He looked up then. Though he shook with anger, I understood that the anger was not truly directed at me. "They couldn't let him go. He knew too much."

"You don't even know what it is he knew -- knows."

"Whatever it was, it was too much."

"So you're going to pack up and fly out of here and...you think no one is going to notice when bestselling author Gabriel Savant never shows again?"

"They won't find him, and anyway, I have the postcard. The police are the ones who decided he left by his own volition. I did what I could."

"Bob..." I gave it up as I read the stubborn fear on his face.

He said, "Don't worry about me. Worry about yourself."

* * * * *

Monday was Velvet's day off, and I was too busy dealing with the legions of shoppers to worry about the legions of evil. The holidays were great for art books like *Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction 1949-1969*, and audio books. We were having an unbelievably good Monday. By eleven o'clock I had sold Langman's *A Guide to American Crime Films of the Forties and Fifties*, priced at over a hundred dollars, which had been sitting on the shelf for over a year, and three copies of Gunn's *The Gay Sleuth in Print and Film*. One customer even tried to talk me out of the replica Maltese Falcon statue perched behind the counter.

Then, like that, the rush was over, and the place was a boneyard. I washed down half a chicken salad sandwich with a can of cold Tab and was lugging coffee-table books the size of paving stones back to their shelves, when Jake walked into the shop.

I smiled, then stopped smiling at his expression.

"I need to talk to you."

I nodded. "We're alone," I said, turning toward the office, but he walked toward the front of the shop, so I followed. We stood in the alcove that faced the street. His face looked like granite as he stared out the window trimmed with the fake pine boughs he had helped me hang so short a time ago.

Had he found out about my trip to Pacific Palisades? I'd realized that he might be pissed. But no... This was different. My stomach churned, waiting for whatever was coming.

He met my eyes levelly. "I'm telling you first. Kate and I are getting married."

I had known it was coming, but that didn't make it any less painful. My throat closed, so I nodded.

He folded his lips tightly. "I want this marriage to work. I want it to be a real marriage."

"I figured."

Then he seemed to run out of words. We stood there. I was afraid my face would give me away, so I stared out the window at the cars flashing by down the street. Red, white, white, green....

"I'm not going to try to explain or make excuses," Jake said, and his voice sounded too loud, like if he didn't speak strongly, it would shake. "This is my chance for a normal life. I'm taking it."

"Okay."

"I'm not going to apologize. You knew the score going in."

I lifted a shoulder.

There were things I might have said. Maybe even things I should have said. But I knew they wouldn't change the outcome, and I wasn't sure I could say them and keep control of my voice and face. Right now, keeping control in front of him seemed like the paramount thing.

"It's not because of your health."

"I know that." Hostility turned my gaze back to his. He looked away from me.

"I know that asshole you were with in college --"

"Can we leave that asshole out of it?"

Please, gentlemen, one asshole at a time.

He seemed reluctant to drop this tangent. "It's got nothing to do with the way I feel about you," he added, as though I were making an argument.

But, after all, that was a stupid comment. I surprised myself by giving a sort of ironic laugh and saying, "Whatever."

"Whatever?"

His eyes were so dark they looked black. I realized that he wanted to get angry, that anger would make it easier, and I didn't want to make it easier. He didn't deserve to have it made easy.

So I met his gaze. Asked quietly, "What do you want me to say, Jake?"

His face worked. His jaw clenched so hard, my own hurt watching. He shook his head fiercely.

"Good-bye," I said.

* * * * *

"Is everything all right?" Guy asked suddenly. The Miata whined as he downshifted to veer around a slow-moving dump truck materializing out of the darkness ahead of us.

It was Monday night, and we were on our way to Hell's Kitchen. Guy had picked me up about fifteen minutes earlier.

"Sure."

He was silent.

The CD playing almost inaudibly in the background clicked over. I recognized the delicate opening chords to "Rain." Instinctively I reached across to turn off the CD player.

Guy glanced my way. "Patty Griffin. She's sort of an acquired taste."

I made a noncommittal noise.

He made another try at conversation. "I saw on the news that Angus and Wanda were denied bail."

I nodded. "Flight risk."

I'd had another visit from the defense team investigators late that afternoon. I'd told Best I had nothing more to say and shown him the door.

I didn't know if I was making life harder on myself or not. I just didn't give a damn at the moment.

We finished the rest of our trip across town in silence.

There was no parking near Hell's Kitchen. We parked down the street, Guy set his car alarm, and we hiked back to the club. From a block away we heard the music -- the bass thudding against the heavy night clouds.

Outside the building there was a short queue of Hammer Films extras waiting to get in. Guy and I were conspicuously underdressed, me in black jeans and a black turtleneck (which fitted my mood nicely) and Guy in black jeans and a black muslin Renaissance-style shirt with leather ties. The flock of femme fatales in black plastic and leather minidresses -- hair lacquered about three feet high or arranged in Medusa-like dreadlocks -- kept a prudent distance. There seemed to be a lot more girls than boys present.

We paid the cover charge, wriggled our way through the crush of young bodies blocking the doorway. Once inside we were engulfed in smoke and purple mist. Strobe lights flashed, illuminating glimpses of the monster mash on the gameboard-sized square that served as a dance floor. Canned music boomed overhead. I felt the bass vibrating in my chest cavity. *You make me want to La La...*

It really *was* the Devil's playground.

We stood there for a time, adjusting to the heat and noise and mass of people. The place had to be in violation of the fire code. That was probably the least of their violations.

How were we going to find anyone in this hellhole? I could barely see six feet ahead of myself. Guy's hand closed on my shoulder. I turned back and saw him indicate an abandoned table covered with empty glasses and spilled liquid.

I nodded. We fought our way upstream, grabbed the chairs, and sat down. I stood up again. I'd sat in a puddle of beer. *Jesus*. I hoped it was beer. I grabbed some crumpled napkins and mopped the seat to the great amusement of the spiky-haired and very drunk couple next to us.

A waitress, dressed in red sequins -- not many of them -- flitted by, but didn't stop to take our order for drinks.

I couldn't see Betty Sansone, but it was difficult to make out anything through the combination of haze and bodies in motion. I became aware that Guy was trying to get my attention.

I lip read his words. "Want a drink?"

I nodded. I'd need a lot of drinks if we were staying long.

He vanished into the mob.

I peered at the drunk couple at the table next to us. I realized they weren't talking, they were singing the background soundtrack to each other, their faces about one inch apart. He had green spiky hair and rings in his ears and eyebrows. She had magenta spiky hair and rings in her eyebrows and her nose -- and a gleaming stud in her tongue. I wondered if they had any trouble disengaging after a kiss. I watched her mouth the lyrics to her be-ringed swain across the unsteady table.

"Save me from the nothing I've become..."

Maybe that was what it was all about, I thought. Sure, rebellion was part of it, but maybe the fascination with the dark side, the flirtation with death and danger, was an attempt to pierce the isolation and alienation inherent in adolescence and young adulthood. Or maybe they were just the bored and pampered spawn of Satan and needed a good spanking.

Guy was gone a long time. I watched the mob of dancers writhe and wriggle in tribal ecstasy, awarding them points for persistence. As I watched, a girl slipped and fell on her ass. No one seemed to notice, including her. She continued to gyrate from a sitting position.

At last Guy returned with two glasses of blood red liquid. It could have been poison or Kool-Aid. I didn't much care.

"Love Potion No. 9," he shouted.

I nodded, made my stiff lips smile. I knocked mine back. Cheap red wine.

Guy's brows drew together. He said again, "Is everything okay?"

I pretended I couldn't hear him and turned away in time to see Betty Sansone stalk through the front entrance with a coterie. I recognized one of her companions, the kid from the Biltmore who looked a bit like Harry Potter. The rest of Team Wicked was unknown to me.

I reached for Guy's arm, nodded toward Betty.

He nodded back. Then he did a kind of double-take. I couldn't tell what had startled him; the next time I looked his way, his face was expressionless.

We watched Betty and the gang appropriate a long table across the room. Two of the minions rose and shoved their way onto the dance floor to join the other thrashing bodies. Harry Potter headed for the bar -- and who would blame him?

Guy's hand closed fleetingly on my arm, and we abandoned our table, making our way through the carnival of souls toward our target. Guy was ahead of me. I saw him raise his hand in a cursory greeting. Betty smiled, looked past him, saw me. Her pug features twisted into disbelieving anger.

She made an aside to her compadres and pushed away from the table. There was a shuffling of chairs and bodies, and a couple of scraggy youths rose to block us as Betty made her way to the dance floor. I broke off from Guy and moved to intercept her.

The music blasting above our heads changed again, a driving beat that seemed to ricochet off the black walls. I caught flashes of Betty in the lightning strikes of the pulsing strobe.

She plowed her way through the dancers, but I was catching her up fast. Belatedly, I wondered if she was armed -- this was LA, after all.

Narrowly managing to avoid falling over three more downed dancers squirming and rolling on the slick floor like earthworms on crack, Betty scooted past the DJ, darted around the corner, and disappeared down a cramped hallway.

I plunged after her. A single bare bulb cast stark shadows over the graffiti-covered walls. She paused at a doorway, turned back to me. I thought she was flipping me off, but instead she made this funny flicking gesture with her hand. Had she given me the Evil Eye, or was there something my hairdresser should have told me?

She wheeled and disappeared into the room optimistically labeled LADIES.

"Damn!"

"Where'd she go?" Guy yelled into my ear. I hadn't realized he was right behind me.

I pointed to the restroom. He shook his head, apparently indicating game, set, and match.

"It's an old building, there's probably a window."

He shook his head again, apparently not understanding.

I indicated that he should stay and watch the door. I continued down the hall and out through the back exit.

The dented door swung shut. I found myself in a long and badly lit back street. A low wall separated this alley from an adjoining parking lot. The businesses on the other side of the wall were all dark, though the parking lot was packed. I guessed that patrons of Hell's Kitchen were parking over there and then dropping over the alley wall.

I skirted along the outside of the throbbing building, looking for a window. After a couple of minutes, I found one. It was unlit, the glass frosted, so that I couldn't see inside. Was this an office or was it the restroom? Was it the right restroom?

There was another window several feet down. It was also dark, but it stood open about a foot. The screen appeared to have been kicked out.

Of course, she might have been hiding inside with the lights off, pretending she had split.

If she had crawled out, where did she go? I looked up and down the alley. She had a couple of seconds' head start. How had she totally disappeared?

She had to have gone over the wall.

At the other end of the alley a car's engine roared into life. Headlights flashed on. The glare was blinding.

Oh, shit.

I started toward the Hell's Kitchen back door.

With a screech of rubber on pavement, the car hurtled toward me. Zero to sixty in less than a minute; I couldn't believe how fast it traveled. I was never going to make it....

I zigged across the alley, jumped for the wall and swung myself up as the car charged past. I felt the car's exhaust like hot breath on my back. I struggled to pull myself over the top, lost my balance, and fell. I crash-landed on the hood of an already battered Toyota truck, bounced off, and hit the asphalt -- hard.

In the distance, I heard the scrape of a car chassis slamming down on pavement, and then the squeal of tires vanishing into the night.

For a moment I lay there, gulping in the smoggy night air, waiting for my achy breaky heart to blow up.

I must be out of my mind, I thought. *Angus isn't worth this. No one is worth this. What am I doing?*

I stared at the rafters of black rain clouds. Felt a bit of wet on my cheekbone.

Let's recap, I thought. *How did I get from dropping a word in the right ear to chasing teenage thugs down alleys?* Maybe Jake had a point after all. Was Angus any better off for my interference? Was I?

From the other side of the wall I heard the surge of music. A door slammed. Guy called quietly, "Adrien?"

I opened my mouth, then didn't speak.

Not to be unduly paranoid, but what the hell took him so long? What was the deal with that stricken look he had given Betty and her blithe spirits? This field trip had been his idea. Had he led me into a trap?

But how could anyone predict that I would run out the back exit?

My mind was spinning -- only partially due to hitting my head on the pavement.

Guy called again, louder this time. I listened to the crunch of his feet on gravel as he walked along the alley.

Was he looking for my body?

Or was he -- naturally enough -- wondering where I'd disappeared to?

I sat up carefully, drew a couple of experimental breaths. My heart, though still in overdrive, showed no sign of slipping out of rhythm. I pulled myself up. No bones seemed to be broken, although I was going to have a set of colorful bruises by tomorrow.

The car alarm in the Volkswagen parked next to the Toyota went off, splintering the stillness.

Definitely not my night.

At the mouth of the alley I spotted Guy. He ran toward the sound of the alarm.

A lot more slowly than the first time, I climbed back over the stone wall.

“Adrien!” exclaimed Guy. “What the hell happened?”

I dropped down, and he reached out to steady me. I pulled away from him, and we stepped back from the shrieking alarm system.

“What happened? Where did you go? Why are you limping?”

I finally had my breath back. “Where’s Betty?”

“She must have gone out the back. A couple of girls went in, and the bathroom was dark. You didn’t see her?”

“No.”

“What happened? Why are you limping like that?” He wrapped a hand around my elbow.

I pulled away. “Somebody in a blue sedan was waiting for me in the alley.”

Guy stopped walking. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“That’s impossible. No one could know you were going to walk into that alley.”

“Did you tell anyone we were coming here tonight?”

“Of course not!” I couldn’t see his features in the dark alley, but I knew that tone.

“You’re lying.”

He gasped. “Are you nuts? I didn’t tell anyone.”

“But?”

His lips parted, but no sound came out.

“Come on, Guy, there’s more.”

Slowly, he said, “I spoke to a friend. I asked if he knew of a club where kids involved in the occult scene might hang out.”

“Who was this friend?”

“What does it matter? You don’t know him. He’s not involved in this. Look, I didn’t tell him we were coming here, let alone that we were coming tonight. He gave me the name of a couple of clubs.”

But the news that Betty Sansone could be found at this particular club on Monday nights had been communicated during that conversation, so how hard would it have been to guess that this would be the night Guy and I would show up?

Guy said, “Did you get the registration plate of the car that tried to run you down?”

“Did I --?” I sputtered, “Well, no, in my rush to stay alive, I failed to note the license number. It sort of looked like a Mercury Cougar, but I wouldn’t want to testify to that. Does your friend happen to drive a blue sedan?”

"Not that I know of." He glanced back at the club; the walls seemed to be vibrating with the din from inside. "What do you want to do now?"

I wanted to talk to Jake. Since that was impossible for a couple of reasons, I wanted to go home.

"I don't think there's any point hanging around here now."

"We could try to talk to the others."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. I need to approach this from another angle." Prone. In my own bed.

He stayed silent as we walked the rest of the way back to his car. He unlocked my side, went around to his own. I lowered myself gingerly into the leather seat, massaged my sore knee.

"Did you hurt yourself?" he asked stiffly.

"Mostly my ego."

He started the engine, but did not pull away from the curb. "His name is Peter Verlane," he said.

"What?"

"The friend who told me about this club. His name is Peter Verlane. He's a former student and a -- well, that doesn't matter."

I suspected what that unfinished sentence was and felt an unexpected ripple of jealousy. Disconcerting. "Is this Peter Verlane the ex-student who you spoke to about harassing Angus?"

"Yes."

"You still think he's not involved?"

"Do you imagine everyone interested in the occult is involved in this?"

"You must have thought of him for a reason."

Guy said reluctantly, "I thought it would be pleasant to see him again."

Oh.

I heard myself say coolly, "And was it pleasant?"

"Yes. It was. It always is."

The first rain drops splattered against the windshield, trickled crookedly down the glass.

I didn't have an answer. I didn't care anymore. I just wanted to go home.

When I didn't say anything, Guy put the car into gear.

Chapter Nineteen

The alarm went off on Tuesday morning, and I slapped it off the nightstand. Every bone in my body ached. My head throbbed. And that was the good news. I could as easily have wound up pain-free in the morgue. What had I been thinking for the past two weeks? I was not up to this shit. I imagined what Jake --

No.

I didn't want to start thinking about what Jake would or wouldn't say. Thinking about Jake was not useful. In fact, thinking about Jake was liable to lead to pulling the covers over my head and canceling the day due to lack of interest.

This was one time when I was not going to examine and analyze and rationalize and agonize. He was right. I knew the score. He'd never pretended it was other than it was -- whatever the hell that was. I had never kidded myself there was really a chance for us. Well, not often anyway.

I guess my mistake had been in believing that he was too smart and too honest not to eventually realize...

Not his feelings for me -- because I didn't think what he felt for me was that significant -- but his own true nature. How could he deny who he was? How could he choose to live such a profound and cancerous deception?

I didn't begin to understand. It was better not to try.

Throwing aside the blankets, I sat up. Every muscle screeched protest. There were bruises on my hips, legs, ribs. My knee was definitely wrenched. My wrist felt sprained.

This verged on self-destructive.

I showered and dressed and hobbled downstairs.

* * * * *

It was a quiet day. Business was brisk, but unexceptional. When lunchtime came, I decided I had better things to do than sit at the computer feeding more horror stories into my brain. I grabbed a falafel at King Tut's on West Colorado and limped around Old Town in a kind of blank abstraction, threading my way down sidewalks crowded with holiday shoppers and street performers and tourists.

I reminded myself that while Angus might not be a murderer, he wasn't exactly an innocent bystander either. I remembered our fleeting phone conversation before I had headed over to his house and the discovery of Kinsey Perone's mutilated body. That revealing *I didn't have anything to do with it*.

Maybe he hadn't participated in what happened to Tony Zellig or Karen Holtzer, but he also hadn't done anything about it.

Yes, I understood that he had been frightened, but there was a difference between ignoring someone wrongfully parked in the handicapped zone and ignoring murder.

Velvet was on the phone when I walked in after two. Immediately, she replaced the receiver.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Er -- my mother."

She turned away. I felt an unfamiliar surge of anger. "Then why did you hang up? Why is it you hang up every time I walk in on you making a phone call?"

She stared at me owlishly. "I thought you might not like it."

"You're right. The next time I catch you making a personal phone call during work hours, you're fired."

She gaped at me.

"Just kidding," I said. I walked back into my office, sat down at the desk, and put my face in my hands.

* * * * *

I was tempted to cancel the Tuesday night writing group. But then I'd been tempted to not get out of bed that morning. I knew the drill. I'd been through it before. All I had to do was keep to the routine, stay busy, not stop to think -- not drink too much -- and before I knew it, it would be in the past. A dull, distant ache that would be easy to put aside and ignore.

It couldn't possibly hurt worse than Mel, and I'd managed to get past that. Mel and I had been together for five years. Jake and I hadn't lasted one. This shouldn't take long at all, if I put my mind to it.

So when the Partners in Crime started arriving, I was ready for them. The coffee was made, pastries set out, the chairs circled, pencils sharpened. I was able to meet Chan's awkward gaze like nothing was wrong.

Thank God, being heterosexual, he wasn't going to sympathize or ask how I was doing.

"Man, Adrien," said Max, arriving late as usual, "is there a jinx on this place or what? First, your old pal Robert gets bumped off, then Angus turns out to be a serial killer."

"Whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty?" I said.

They all gave me different versions of the same all-knowing sympathy.

"You're such a nice person, Adrien," Grania said, patting my shoulder and reaching past me for the last cheese croissant.

What was the point of arguing? For all I knew, they were right.

We went through the stories, one by one, starting with Max's new chapter. Against my best intentions, I found myself considering whether it might be possible to find this Peter Verlane without Guy's help. Would it hurt to ask a question or two?

Maybe Guy was right, maybe Verlane was floating on the fringe. Or maybe Guy was wrong. Or maybe, as little as I liked the idea, Guy was involved.

I needn't pursue what I discovered, but I couldn't deny that I still wanted answers. Now that I had a name, I could try to track this latest lead through the university. For that matter, I could try Information. I wondered if I was spelling Verlane correctly. Maybe it was supposed to be like the poet Paul Verlaine.

Jean's soft voice penetrated my consciousness.

"Avery walked across the lobby of the Biltmore hotel..."

"What is Avery doing at the Biltmore Hotel?" I interrupted.

"He's following the guy who he thinks killed the mime," Grania said, through a mouthful of cheese croissant.

"He ought to leave that to the police," Chan muttered, adding another red mark to a page that already looked like he had bled onto it.

"No. Why is he at the *Biltmore*?"

Jean met my gaze. Bit her lip. Her cheeks were scarlet.

"Sheesh, Adrien, relax," said Ted, looking from me to his wife. "Why not the Biltmore? It's a great location."

"I can change it," faltered Jean.

"Yeah, I think you should."

Grania and Max exchanged a look which suggested I needed to take a pill. Or two. Or maybe the entire bottle.

I bit off the rest of it and sat back. Jean returned to reading. Her voice was slightly unsteady.

* * * * *

When the group had cleared out for the evening, and I'd finished cleaning up, I dragged upstairs to discover that Guy had left a message. I weighed calling him back, then decided maybe it was better to let that ride.

Dimming the lights, I put on Peter Davison's *Adagio* and went slowly through my tai chi exercises. I focused on deep breathing and relaxing every muscle. It had been awhile. I was stiff and sore, but as I went through the routine, I felt better. More limber in body, if not spirit.

Of course, Jake's idea was that I should focus on cardio stuff and forget the tai chi.

But it didn't matter what Jake thought or didn't think. That was my new mantra.

The phone rang. I listened to it ring, then right before the machine picked up, I abandoned my combat pose and grabbed it.

"Hello there," Guy said, elaborately casual. "I wondered how you were recovering from last night."

My heart slowed. "I think the wine did more damage than the crash landing. I've had a headache all day."

"Me too." He gave an odd laugh. "I've been placed on administrative leave."

"What does that mean?"

"In effect, I've been suspended pending the outcome of the police investigation into the death of Tony Zellig."

Phone propped between my shoulder and ear, I poured myself a brandy and sat on the sofa. I should have known Jake wouldn't abandon his original line of inquiry. This must mean that the police were now openly and officially connecting Kinsey Perone's death with the others. I wasn't sure if that was good news or bad news for Angus. Good news if he could prove his alibi for the night Kinsey had died.

"So Zellig was a student?"

"Yes. Practical Magic 101."

Funny, I'd thought to ask him about everyone except Tony Zellig.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Me too. But you don't have anything to be sorry for. My impression is that the police pushed for this, and the administration was relieved to have the decision made for them."

I said, "I'm sure it will all work out." I wasn't sure of any such thing, but I had no idea what to say to him.

There was a silence that lasted too long, then he said, "I tried to get hold of Peter today. I wanted to ask whether he would be willing to speak to you, but he's out of the country. He's celebrating the holidays with his parents in Germany."

It was possible. Lisa and I had celebrated Christmas in Germany when I was eighteen. It was the year before I'd started college. The year before I met Mel.

"I appreciate that."

"What will you do next?"

"I don't know. I'm running low on ideas." And I was completely out of enthusiasm. I had no proof that my inquiries hadn't made everyone's situation, including mine, worse. Maybe the biggest favor I could do myself was to butt out.

"I see," he said quietly.

Once again there was an unnatural silence.

Once again Guy broke it. "If there's anything I can do to help, I wish you'd let me know."

"I'll let you know," I said.

* * * * *

Rewind Tuesday, hit play: that was Wednesday.

When it was over at last, and my wish to be alone again -- silent and barricaded in for the night -- was finally granted, I realized I was too restless to stay home.

I couldn't do tai chi all evening. I had no desire to write. Less desire to read. Sitting home with the brandy bottle was not a good plan in any case.

What did single people do on Wednesday nights? I didn't seem to remember, although technically I had never stopped being single. Did they sit home and watch TV, or did they go to clubs, bars, single events? I was pretty sure the majority of them did not run around trying to solve murders.

I decided to get my hair cut. You know, stiff upper lip. Standards must be maintained. Here in the African bush we dress for dinner.

I decided if I couldn't wrangle an appointment with Paolo, I'd settle for Super Cuts, but the risk turned out to be minimal. When I walked into That Jones Boy, the place was empty. One of the stylists was kicked back in his chair reading *GQ* and Paolo and a third kid were leaning on the front desk.

Paolo is about as Italian as I am British. He's tall and thin with blue black hair -- more blue than black -- and permanent eye makeup. He's one of this new generation of gay guys who seem to be totally apolitical and essentially fear free -- about everything except getting fat.

He nudged the Asian boy with a shaved head who stood beside him and greeted me. "*Look* what crawled out of the train wreck!" The Asian stylist met my eyes. Winked.

"Sweetness, do you *have* to wait till you look like Beethoven's baby brother before you'll come and see me?"

I slipped off my coat, draping it over one of the brass hooks. "I know you enjoy the challenge."

A young, platinum blonde manicurist was summoned from the tanning room where she had been toasting herself midsummer brown. I sat in the styling chair; the manicurist wheeled her nail station over to me. Paolo positioned himself behind me, comb in hand, like the maestro about to conduct the symphony.

"So, are we doing something different?"

"No."

"Sweetness. You know, hair style *has* evolved through the centuries."

The girl buffing my nails snickered.

I tuned out while Paolo fluted on about waxing my eyebrows, his strong clever fingers massaging my scalp with what I had to admit was hypnotic skill.

"Why so gloomy, Heathcliff?" he asked finally.

Someone who sounded a lot like me answered, "My boyfriend dumped me."

The crispy manicurist squeaked and dropped her nail file. The stylist to the right of me, still poring over *GQ* raised curious eyes over the glossy pages.

Paolo exclaimed, "The heartless *bastard*. Right before Christmas!"

But I was listening in horror to the echo of my own words. Had I actually said that? I don't think I ever permitted myself to think of Jake as my boyfriend even when we were seeing each other. Now here I sat spilling my guts to my hairdre -- er -- stylist.

When I tuned back in, Paolo was going on about honey almond masks and mango deep conditioning. "Sweetness, you are having the works. My Christmas present to you. Or are you Jewish? I can never remember. I didn't know you were seeing anyone."

"Just the cut and the manicure, really."

"Maybe we should dye your lashes," he mused.

"No. Really --" As I spoke, the manicurist, bent industriously over my fingers, sniffed dolefully. A tear drop splashed hotly on my hand. I met Paolo's gaze in the mirror. He said cheerfully, "Don't mind Jemma. She got dumped too."

"Sorry, Jemma."

She nodded without looking up.

"Just the cut," I reiterated to Paolo.

He pouted. "You are so *butch*, sweetness."

Oh, yeah. Watch out, Arnold, 'cause I'll be back. With a great haircut and skin smoother than a baby's butt.

Paolo reached to clip a stray hair, and I noticed his ring. A chunky silver ring with what I first took to be a leaf design. A moment later, I realized it was the All-Seeing Eye.

"Are you into that stuff?" I inquired. "The occult?"

"Hmm?" He tilted his head, studied me. Snipped again. "Not actually. I used to know a guy."

"There's a lot of that going around."

He whacked me lightly with his comb, like a fan-wielding Regency debutante.

"Sex magick, sweetness. Very kinky." He made a face. "Too kinky, actually. Peter was one thing, but his friends...ultra creepy."

"Peter? Peter Verlane?"

Paolo smiled an Oracle of Delphi smile. "Oh-ho, you know him."

Talk about six degrees of separation.

"No. I'd like to."

"Drop your shoulder. Better. He's not your type, sweetness -- *although* he did have a thing for older guys."

Older guys...

"I'm interested in the -- er -- the occult. That sex magick stuff."

"No! Are you really?" He leaned his head and thoughtfully nibbled his comb. "I think I still have his number. Tell you what. Let me try something new with the do, and I'll give you Peter's number."

* * * * *

It was around eight by the time I escaped from Paolo's clutches. Still unready to face the silence and solitude of home, sweet home, I decided to wander around the Paseo and maybe get something to eat.

I wondered if Paolo would be able to put me in contact with Peter Verlane. I wondered if he was the right Peter Verlane. How many occult-involved Peter Verlanes were there in Los Angeles County? If Paolo did get me Peter's number, would I act on it? Hadn't I convinced myself yesterday evening that hanging up my deerstalker would be my wisest move?

The night air was scented with flowers and cooking. A group of carolers entertained a crowd as I walked through the courtyard, past the apartment buildings and fountains and boutiques decked out for the holidays.

Once again I had that weird feeling of being watched. I paused in front of one of the shops, watching the reflections of people passing to and fro behind me, smiling and laughing, toting their shopping bags. No one seemed to be paying me any attention.

I caught my own image in the window, momentarily startled. The change was subtle, but definite. Not bad. Maybe that lavish tip hadn't been too much after all.

I started walking again.

I wasn't really hungry, and there was nothing I needed to buy. I settled for a cup of hot cocoa and listening to the carolers finish off their evening's performance with "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." It's not that great a song for caroling, and I found the message sort of depressing, although the crowd seemed to enjoy it.

I finished my cocoa, found my car, and drove back to Cloak and Dagger.

Pulling into my parking place, I waited a minute to make sure there was no one lurking by the side entrance. Turned off the engine.

I got out, locked the car. As I went around to the side door, I felt a twinge of unease. I glanced behind myself. Nada. I put my key in the lock, thinking that something didn't feel right. I turned the key and pushed the door open, stepping inside.

Behind me, I heard the scrape of a sole on asphalt. I spun around as someone whispered, "Adrien..."

Angus stepped out of the shadows of the building.

Chapter Twenty

My heart paused. Paused. The feeble parking lot lights swirled, and I reached out for the doorframe.

Bad timing.

“Adrien, it’s me,” a voice said from a long way off.

The ground tilted back the other way. I rested my cheek against the peeling paint, breathed deeply of night air tasting of smog and trash, waiting for things to level out.

“Are you okay?”

I got control of myself. Opened my eyes. The continental plate seemed to have steadied once more. Look, Ma, no hands! I nodded. “Great,” I managed. “What are you doing here?”

Angus hugged himself against the cold, his thin hands looking skeletal against the dark flannel shirt. “They released me. My alibi held.”

“Why are you here?” I repeated.

His glasses winked blindly in the lights above the parking lot. “I need a place to stay.”

I stared, uncomprehending.

“I can’t go home. It’s a crime scene. My landlord won’t let me back anyway.”

“What about Wanda?”

He shook his head. “She’s staying at her parents. They don’t want me.” He swallowed. “It’s over for us.”

Welcome to the Heartbreak Hotel. I could have shown more sympathy for a fellow sufferer. I said, “There must be someone...”

“There’s no one I can trust. Only you.”

I wished I felt the same way.

Moving aside, I let him into the shop. He walked onto the main floor, staring around at the tall shelves hungrily, as though he had been gone a million years.

I shut the side door, leaned back against it. I felt shaky, but otherwise okay -- all things considered. It occurred to me that I needed to get the locks changed.

As I stood there, clearly unsure of what to do next, he said pleadingly, "Can I crash here?"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"But why? You helped me before --"

"Angus..." I raked a hand through my beautiful new hair cut. "That was before I realized that you were involved in murder."

"I have an alibi!"

No protestation of innocence, unfortunately. I said, "You have an alibi for Kinsey's death. Her murder was designed to implicate you, to punish you. It doesn't absolve you from the other two murders."

"The police released me."

Again, no plea of innocence. Why did I always work so hard to avoid seeing what was right in front of me? Wearily, I said, "Because they haven't been able to pinpoint the dates that Karen Holtzer and Tony Zellig died. They can't connect you -- yet."

He licked his lips, then gave a weird giggle. "Well, guess what, Adrien, I'm not their lone suspect!"

"I know. And I know I have you to thank for throwing suspicion my way. You told them you thought Jake and I were involved, didn't you?"

"Thought? It doesn't take a detective." He looked away from me. "Anyway, it was that bastard Riordan I wanted to get, not you."

"But you expect me to put you up now?"

He stared at me dumbly.

"Is there a reason I should involve myself any further in this goddamned mess?"

His pale mouth quivered. "Adrien, I'm begging you. Let me stay the night. I'm scared."

Me too, I thought, but I was supposed to be the grown-up.

"Please..."

He did look terrified, and he probably knew better than anyone if he had reason to be. "One night," I said finally. "And you're going to have to sleep down here."

"Thank God," he whispered. He looked toward the front windows -- the dark street beyond -- and shivered.

I opened my mouth, then shut it.

"Have you eaten?" I asked finally.

He shook his head.

“Come on.”

I took him upstairs and defrosted one of the steaks I’d bought for a dinner with Jake that was never going to happen.

While the steak cooked, Angus sat at the table drinking a beer. He had lost weight in jail. He looked like an undernourished adolescent. Harmless, vulnerable.

I asked, ““What happened to Holtzer and Zellig?”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re lying.”

He shook his head. Wiped moisture from the corner of his eye.

“How would you have gotten involved in that?”

He gave me an impatient look. “Someone like you wouldn’t understand.”

“Because I’m gay?”

He tittered. Shook his head.

Maybe it was a silly question. I’d learned from my research that it wasn’t only lonely, ignorant, insecure, or troubled kids who were lured in by the promises of charismatic cartoon-character-like evil. One point most of the experts stressed was that people don’t join *cults*, they join interesting groups that seem able to satisfy their desires and dreams. Members were recruited based on skills and abilities and the needs of the group. That’s why it wasn’t unusual to find doctors and lawyers and CEOs and movie stars involved in some of the more powerful and sophisticated cults. Cult members rarely understood the hidden agenda of their leaders. Everyone has their vulnerabilities. Cult recruiters knew exactly how to exploit them.

I contemplated Angus. He was already tipsy with exhaustion and nerves. One beer had oiled him nicely; I was pretty sure that a second one would slide him right over the edge. I went to the fridge, uncapped another brew, and put it before him.

He smiled gratefully.

I let him drink a while before asking, “When you understood what was happening, why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“No one would have believed me. I didn’t have any proof. Not real proof.” At my expression, he said defensively, “I tried to quit. You know that. But they don’t allow it. They can’t allow it.”

I wasn’t buying. I wanted to. I would have felt a lot better about everything if I believed that Angus was truly an innocent.

“You could have talked to the police. You should have talked to Jake.”

“He thinks I’m a freak.”

And your point is?

But I didn’t say that. I said, “When did you realize what was really going on?”

"Really going on? I don't know what's really going on. I never have. I thought we were..." He did it again, tailed off before he actually revealed any useful information.

"You thought you were *what?*"

At my tone his face quivered. Tearfully he said, "It was very powerful, very spiritual, so don't make jokes about it. Don't mock what you don't understand."

"I won't. I'm not." I thought it over. "I mean, it's not like you actually sell your soul to the Devil, right?"

"*Adrien!*" he shrieked, jumping to his feet and knocking over his glass.

I jumped too. "What? For Christ's sake!"

"*Don't make fun of it!*"

My jaw dropped. "Are you telling me..." I couldn't complete it, it was so ridiculous.

"It isn't how you make it sound. It's a commitment, a pledge, an oath of honor."

Beer dripped onto the hardwood floor. I grabbed a towel and began to wipe the table. "You've got to be kidding me. And in return for selling your soul?"

He said huskily, "Whatever you want. Whatever you need."

"What does that mean? What did you get out of it?"

"You don't get it immediately. You have to...you have to pay your dues. You have to..."

"Work for it?"

He glared at me. "Someone like you can never understand."

"Help me understand. Are you telling me you joined this group and you...sold your soul to Satan?"

"No. Of course not. We all made a pledge to serve His Grace. In return, He will grant us whatever we want. Money. Great jobs. Beautiful women."

Angus got Wanda and ten dollars an hour at Cloak and Dagger. Maybe he should ask for his soul back.

"When you say 'His Grace,' are you talking about Satan or a person?"

"His Grace," Angus snapped. "My Lord Gremory, the fifty-sixth Duke of Hell."

Ah, yes. The house demon. "Gotcha. But there must be someone in charge. Someone human."

"Each Blade has an Adept. Only the Adept can know the Master."

I felt a tingle of alarm. "How many Blades are there?"

"Three Blades edge the Scythe of Gremory," quoted Angus mechanically. "Sable is the blade of the first cut. Silver blade cuts deepest. Scarlet is the blade that deals the death blow."

The smell of burning steak broke the spell. I muttered an imprecation and grabbed the pan off the burner.

Three blades. Whatever happened to Flower Power? No, it had to be knives, blades, scythes. What was with kids these days?

"How many members per scythe?"

Behind me, Angus said, "Thirteen."

"Do you know the members of the other blades?"

"That's not permitted."

"So thirteen of you took part in killing --"

"No! Adrien, I keep telling you I didn't have anything to do with it. It was a rumor that got started within the group."

"It wasn't entirely a rumor. Bodies are turning up." I set his steak in front of him, and after a moment's hesitation, dug a fork and knife out of the silverware drawer.

"But we weren't all involved in it. We aren't all on the same level, you know."

High school, college, the office, evil cults, everywhere you go, there's that social hierarchy to contend with.

"But you know who's behind it."

He began to carve his steak. "I don't know who's behind it. I'm not even sure who all took part in the sacrifices. I know that I couldn't go on. I couldn't be a part of that. I wanted to resign, but they wouldn't permit it. They told me I was a traitor. Even the other ones who wanted out called me a traitor."

"Then why --?"

"I made a pledge. In blood. *My* blood," he hastened to add at my expression. He rested his utensils on the table edge, gazing at me earnestly. "Adrien, they think I'll return to the fold. I won't. But I can't break my oath."

"Why would they think you might return to the fold?"

"That lawyer. Martin Grosser. He's part of it. He's the one who got me off."

"How do you know that? Did Grosser say so?" I tried to picture that conversation.

"Not in so many words."

"How many words did he use, and what were they?"

Angus shook his head, chewing ferociously.

"Who paid him?" I asked. "Do you know that? He must have told you."

"Pro bono. He said he was doing it as a favor to me. A favor to a brother of the Blade."

"But the Blade set you up."

"Blade Sable set me up. He's not with Blade Sable. He must be with one of the older Blades. Maybe even Blade Scarlet. That's where all the bigwigs are supposed to be."

I recognized that they might have a certain amount of success if they ran their group like a fraternal organization. Networking for Evil. Why not? The older, established members

could help the younger to find those dream jobs and social connections. The younger members could provide whatever they had to offer: sex, drugs, cheap labor...their weekly allowance.

Angus drained his beer. "Adrien," he said tentatively. "Do you think you'd be able to pay me my last paycheck?"

I thought of the eight hundred dollars I had already shelled out for the privilege of involving myself in another murder case.

"Er...yeah. Sure. When did you need it by?"

"Tonight." He turned back to his dinner. "I'll try to be gone by the time you open the shop."

I thought that was probably a good idea.

When Angus finished his meal, I pulled out the inflatable mattress I kept in the disaster area I fondly called my store room. I removed a stack of blankets from the linen cupboard, following Angus as he walked none too steadily downstairs.

He chose to sleep in the back of the store deep in the canyons of bookshelves.

"I won't forget this, Adrien," he said, building a nest of blankets for himself.

"It's okay." I hesitated, then had to ask. "Is Guy involved with the Scythe of Gremory?"

"What guy?"

"Guy Snowden."

He shook his head. "A couple of us met during his courses, but I don't think..." He stopped.

"You don't think what?"

"I don't think so, but I guess he could belong to one of the other blades. I kind of wondered about that myself."

"Did you ever hear of anyone named Oliver Garibaldi?"

He snickered. "No. Sounds like a spaghetti sauce."

"I'll leave the bank draft on my desk in the office."

"Okay." He wrapped himself in the blankets, set his glasses carefully to the side. He blinked at me. "Thank you, Adrien. For everything."

"Uh-huh. Sweet dreams."

Chapter Twenty-one

I made sure to get downstairs early next morning. Even so, Angus was already gone. He had made himself coffee in the office, and taken the check from the desk. The blankets he had used were folded on the chair.

I tidied away all traces of his visit before Velvet arrived.

As disloyal as it seems, I hoped he did not come back. I was sorry for him. I didn't want him punished for something he hadn't done, but I couldn't understand or reconcile myself to his moral apathy. Oh, I understood that he was afraid, and I believed what he had told me about not actively participating in murder. I could cut him slack for being young and being (as Guy had pointed out) a follower rather than a leader. I knew it wasn't fair to judge when I didn't know what in Angus's past might have knocked his moral compass so far off-kilter. I knew -- but the simple truth was, I was appalled.

I pulled out the pictures from Gabriel Savant's signing that I had started to sort through days ago. One by one, I flipped through them, scrutinizing each glossy candid. The place had been wall-to-wall Goth princesses and Stevie Nicks clones. So much for celebrating the individual.

I paused at a picture of Savant giving his talk. In the background was a girl with blonde hair, feathery tips tinted black. She had turned her face at the moment the shutter clicked. I examined the next photo. A slice of her two-toned hair had made the frame, but next to her was a now-familiar mohawk and pugnacious face behind heart-shaped glasses.

Betty Sansone.

I laid the photo aside. Studied the next one. Well, well. A Kodak Moment.

Kinsey Perone alive and in the flesh. A lot of flesh, as a matter of fact. It's a wonder she hadn't died of pneumonia.

So, even if Betty and Kinsey had not been part of the Savant entourage, they had been at the bookstore that evening -- the evening the disk disappeared. The evening that had apparently sealed Gabe's fate.

I reached for the phone, then stopped.

Did this prove a connection between the two cases? If the police went to Bob Friedlander, he would show them a postcard from Gabriel Savant, claim that Savant was fine and that I was the wacko. Hundreds of people had been at the bookstore that evening. Betty and Kinsey's presence might have been a coincidence. Not that I believed that, but the police would if Bob chose to play it that way. After our last conversation, I couldn't imagine Bob playing it any other way.

The desire to talk it over with Jake was nearly irresistible. But I couldn't do that. Even if Jake and I had still been on those terms, it wasn't his job to fix my mistakes, to absolve me of responsibility. Especially when he had been warning me from day one to stay out of it.

I shuffled through the photos once more. Did Kinsey and Betty's involvement automatically intimate Guy's guilt? Jake believed that Guy was involved. Maybe Jake was right; certainly the Amazing Kreskin had nothing to fear from my batting average.

But Jake had been skeptical when I'd told him about Blade Sable, and I didn't think I had learned anything that would change his mind. He would say Angus was playing me, and he could be right there too. No, I didn't believe what I had discovered would justify the risk of contacting Jake.

Besides, Jake might believe I was using Angus's story as an excuse to see him again.

If I was going to pursue this any further, it would have to be on my own. The question was, did I want to pursue it any further?

"Hello?" called Velvet from the front.

I shoved the photos back in their envelope, put the envelope back in the file cabinet, and relocked it.

* * * * *

I hadn't put a lot of faith in Paolo's promise to get me Peter Verlane's private number in exchange for being allowed to texturize my hair, but midmorning he called.

"Are you enjoying your hair, sweetness?"

"Uh, sure."

"I have Peter's cell number. Do me a favor. Don't tell him you got the number from me. He's...quirky that way."

"Fair enough."

He quoted the number, and I wrote it out. "One other thing, sweetness. Don't leave your wallet lying around. Not that he's not worth every penny, but..."

"Thanks for the warning."

"You enjoy yourself, sweetness. You *so* deserve it."

I hung up. Stared at the number. Swell. The guy was a hustler?

Assuming it was the right Peter Verlane, wasn't he in Germany, sharing schnapps and strudel with the folks? There probably wasn't any point in calling.

Unless Guy had lied.

Did I want to know? Did I want to take this any further? It's not like my sleuthing had resulted in universal happiness so far.

I was still trying to come to a decision, when I realized I had dialed the number.

"Yeah?" a young male voice inquired.

"Peter?"

"Yeah."

"I got your name from a friend. I wondered if maybe we could get together sometime."

Silence.

"What friend?"

"Does it matter?"

He chuckled. "Maybe not. What did you have in mind?"

"Sex magick."

I felt surprise in the static between us.

"You mean an initiation?"

Is that what I meant? "Right," I said, with a certainty I didn't feel.

Warily, he asked, "Are you craft?"

What did that mean? Was that like, are you a Top or a bottom? Did I see myself as an Art or a Craft? Or was he asking whether I was a witch? Or maybe he wanted to know if I was pro cheese-macaroni?

I fought a nervous desire to laugh and said, "No. I'm curious, and willing to pay to have my...itch scratched."

I thought of Jake's face if he were to overhear this conversation, closed my eyes to block the image.

"Wow," Peter said. He sounded like he might laugh too. Probably not the desired reaction. "Well, I'll tell you what. I'm booked through the holidays, but maybe I can fit you in after Candlemas."

Candlemas? Wasn't that in February? Maybe this kid really was worth pursuing.

I said, "That's quite a wait. I'm impressed. I'm also impatient. Can you recommend someone else?"

Silence. He said at last, "Perhaps we can work it out. What did you say your name was?"

Good question. I opened my mouth. "Oxford," I said at random. "Avery Oxford."

"Where can I reach you, Avery?"

Another good question. Maybe I should have taken half a minute to inspect for rocks before I dived in head first. "I'll call you," I said curtly, and rang off.

"What an idiot!" I announced to the room at large. Shaking my head, I tucked the number in the Rolodex on my desk. I happened to notice the business card I had received from the Wiccans at Dragonwyck. I inspected the silver scripted numerals. Dial M for Magick.

Hadn't I embarrassed myself enough for one day?

Any more of this and I'd believe some unseen hand was trying to give me a shove in the right direction. I practically felt the palm print between my shoulder blades -- or maybe that was the lingering bruises from my visit to Hell's Kitchen.

Which reminded me. Guy had lied about Peter Verlane being out of town.

* * * * *

I was having a BLT at Johnny Rocket's when I happened to notice Jean Finch peering in the front window. When she saw me gazing back at her, she ducked away. Then she appeared in the window again, waved at me with frantic friendliness, and walked off hurriedly.

Holy moly.

Leisurely finishing my sandwich, I paid the bill and stepped outside into the gloomy afternoon. No sign of Jean. I started walking, stopping every so often to glance into a shop window.

I finally spotted her, lingering several yards behind me.

I started back toward her. She froze in panic, then looked around as though planning to flee. She didn't flee, however; she stood her ground, practically trembling in her little white trench coat.

"Jean, what are you doing?" I asked as I reached her.

"N-nothing. I was Christmas shopping. I saw you at Johnny Rocket's. Is the food good there? I've never been."

"Where are your packages?"

"I haven't bought anything yet."

I met her gaze. She looked away. Now certain, I said, "You were following me."

"I wasn't!"

But she was. It was in her tone of voice, in her facial expression. If she wasn't following me, she was sure guilty about something.

"Jean," I said, "come off it. You've got a character in your book who looks like me and talks like me and dresses like me. Tuesday you had Avery Oxford following someone to the Biltmore Hotel. That's a hefty coincidence. Next week are we going to read about Avery having lunch at Johnny Rocket's and chasing someone through the Paseo?"

She shook her head, the black curls bouncing. She looked like a kid caught stealing the shoes off a rival's Barbie. "We keep getting rejected," she said disconsolately. "Agents, editors, even the writing group doesn't like our book."

I bit my lip.

She raised her eyes to mine. "I only thought...everyone you talk to, agents or publishers, they all want you to have a platform, and I thought..." she swallowed hard. "I thought our platform could be that our gay sleuth's adventures are based on the real-life adventures of...you."

My jaw dropped. "Are you out of your mind?" I got out at last.

"But you don't understand, Adrien --"

"You're right."

"This kind of thing is so big right now, the novelization of people's real-life adventures."

If she said "real-life adventures" one more time, I was going to put her under the next passing bus.

"Jean..."

"Sherlock Holmes's adventures were inspired by a Dr. Joseph Bell. And did you know there actually was a Gidget? All those movies and TV shows were based on the real-life ad --"

"*Jean.*"

She stopped, swallowing hard.

"Jean, you can't follow me around. I don't want you to write a *roman à clef* based on my life. Or what you imagine is my life."

"But maybe I could help you," she said eagerly. "I know you're working a case. You're trying to find out if Angus did kill those other students, aren't you?"

I had this sudden vision of how Jake must have felt when I kept insisting on helping him.

"No, I'm not," I said. "I'm leaving this to the police. You need to do the same."

She looked away from me. "Okay."

"I'm serious, Jean. This stuff is too dangerous."

"*Okay.*"

I studied her mutinous profile.

“Okay,” I said. “But if I catch you following me again, I’m telling Ted.”

I had one fleeting look at her outraged expression before she stalked away down the street. I sighed and headed back for the shop.

The rest of the day passed in sales receipts and register rings.

At last I sat down at my desk, thumbed through my Rolodex, and removed the card the Dragonwyck proprietress had given me.

“A specialist,” she had said.

Would it do any harm to call?

I contemplated the silver numerals. The area code was 661. What was that, Bakersfield? Wasco? I didn’t think of Bakersfield as being a spiritual center.

I dialed the number, tried to imagine myself explaining my dilemma.

On the second ring, the phone picked up. A low, rather melodious voice spoke.

“Hello.”

Hello? I was expecting a “Merry Meet,” at the very least.

“Uh, hi. I got your number from the...ladies at Dragonwyck.”

“Yes?”

I couldn’t tell if that untroubled voice was male or female. I guess it didn’t really matter.

I took a deep breath. “I’m having this problem with...uh...well, it has to do with a demon. I was wondering if I could make an appointment?”

Chapter Twenty-two

Selene Wolfe lived in Palmdale.

To be exact, she lived in the Angeles National Forest on the Palmdale side of the San Gabriel Mountains. The light was failing by the time I left Pasadena. I did not look forward to the night's return drive, dipping and winding through miles and miles of dense chaparral that slowly gave way to pine-studded peaks.

The traffic was surprisingly heavy, cars whipping around the narrow road with scant regard for the tumbling slopes below. For a time, I found myself one of a long line of cars trapped behind a yellow Celica with the bumper sticker VISUALIZE WORLD PEACE.

I missed the turnoff and had to find a safe place to pull over, then double back. By the time I found the stone cairn mailbox with the correct house number, it was dark, and I was late.

The long dirt road had been graded, but that was the sole sign of civilization as I rolled cautiously along, the headlights of the Forester occasionally pinpointing gleaming eyes in the darkness.

At last I saw lights. I pulled into the front yard of a small stone cabin. I parked and got out. Wood smoke drifted from the chimney. The night air was spicy with pines.

An old-fashioned lantern hung above the door. A dog barked from inside the cabin.

I knocked. Moments later the door opened. The woman who answered my knock was taller than I, lean, with a riot of salt and pepper hair. She wore jeans and a flannel shirt; she was barefoot despite the cold. A three-legged dog stood beside her, still muttering under its breath.

"Blessed be," she said in that sexless, but soothing voice.

"Hi. I'm Adrien English."

She moved aside. I stepped into a rustic, but comfortable-looking cabin. Nothing particularly weird or witchy about it. If there was a cauldron bubbling, it was being used for chicken soup.

"Would you like tea?" Selene Wolfe asked.

"Thanks. Yes."

She gestured for me to sit at the table, and I did while she went into the kitchen. The three-legged dog planted himself between the two rooms, clearly determined to keep an eye on me.

One wall had been given over to bookshelves: Frazier's *Golden Bough*, Buckland's *Complete Book of Witchcraft*, the Farrars' *Witches' Bible*. All the woo-woo classics as well as a lot of books on psychology and sociology. There were cheerful sprigged curtains covering the windows, thick woven rugs covering the stone floor. Fur brushed against my ankle. I glanced down to see a large white rabbit hopping beneath the table.

Selene returned carrying a tray with an earthenware teapot and mugs. She sat across from me. "Sugar? Cream?"

"Black."

She nodded. Poured the tea, passed me the cup with a smile. "How can I help you, Adrien?"

I don't know if it was that smile, which was warm and reassuring and genuinely interested, or the worn beauty of her face, but for the first time in a long time I felt myself relaxing.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't think there's much you can tell me about this that I don't already know." I offered the well-handled photos of the inverted pentagram. "I have a feeling this is not your line."

She took the photos, going through them slowly, without expression. Then she set them aside. "No, they're not my line. Tell me what you know about them."

I can't explain why -- maybe it was the profound peace of that isolated cabin or the grave serenity of the woman herself -- but I found myself pouring out all my troubles.

I told her about the Scythe of Gremory and the three blades. I told her about Angus. I told her about Guy. I even told her about Jake. I probably would have blabbed all night if she hadn't finally said, into one of my rare pauses for breath, "What do you think is behind these murders?"

"What or whom?"

"What."

"You mean the motive?"

She smiled a little. "If you want to call it that."

I stared at her bleakly. "I think Kinsey was killed because they wanted to frame Angus."

"But to kill one of their own?" She spoke gently.

She was right. I hadn't given much thought to motive -- partly because Jake always said that if means and opportunity were there, motive would turn up. And partly because I had spent all my energy chasing demons, but the real demon of this case was named MacGuffin.

"She did something to turn the others against her," I said slowly. What had Angus's sin been? By attempting to leave the club, he had threatened disclosure, exposure, revelation. What he had threatened, Kinsey had unwittingly accomplished. "She came to the bookstore that day and tried to intimidate me. Until then, I didn't know who any of them were. After that I had names, faces."

Selene nodded, sipping her tea. "And so did the police -- through your friend Jake. That was a serious miscalculation on her part. Whatever her previous ranking, and I imagine it was quite high for her to persuade the other girl to follow, she would have lost favor following her visit to you. Remember, in these groups there's a good deal of rivalry and competition."

"So someone aspiring to her position as...Adept...might have been willing to silence her?"

Her expression was grave. "It wouldn't be the first time, would it? That's what frightened your young assistant. Murder."

I nodded. Drank more tea. It had an odd aftertaste, but it was good. I felt less weary, less depressed.

"The other two murders..." I had been thinking aloud. Selene was silent. "One kid disappeared in October. One kid disappeared in May. Those correspond with witches' Sabbats, right?"

"Samhain and Beltane both fall in those months."

"How many Sabbats are there?"

"Eight."

"How many of the Sabbats require human sacrifice?"

She opened her mouth to object, I said, "I realize that Wicca doesn't follow these old traditions, but you share the same Sabbats with the Satanists."

"The four major Sabbats are Imbolc, Beltane, Lammas, and Samhain."

"So there could be more deaths."

She nodded.

"There might be more bodies out there."

"It is possible."

I reached for the photos. “Was this meant to scare me, or was this an actual death threat?”

“I think it was intended to frighten you. I can’t be sure. In any case, you’re more of a danger now than you were then.”

I considered this from a tired distance. It occurred to me that if I didn’t hit the road soon, I’d be asking for a place on her sofa.

I stood. “Thank you for your time. This was helpful.”

Selene rose also. The three-legged dog, still watching us from the doorway, made a determined hopping effort to get to its feet.

She walked outside with me, her bare feet seemingly impervious to the frost on the ground.

As I opened the car door, she touched my arm. “Adrien, you’re very tired. Be careful driving back.”

I looked at her in surprise. Took the hand she offered.

“Can I ask you a question? Do you make a living at this?” I gestured to the cabin, outlined in silver moonlight.

“You mean do I have a day job? Yes, I’m a criminal psychologist.”

She chuckled at my expression. I climbed into the Forester.

I caught a final glimpse of her standing in the cabin doorway, the dog beside her. The firelight seemed to form an aureole around her.

The next bend in the road took the cabin from sight. It was dark out here, deathly quiet. The headlights picked out the sign leading back to the main road.

High overhead, a wicked crescent moon shone like a crooked smile over the waves and waves of black pine trees. I clicked my high beams on.

After the earlier workday traffic, Angeles Crest Highway was startlingly empty. Miles ahead, I spotted a single pair of headlights winding their way toward me.

As I drove, the winding highway seemed to pick up a kind hypnotic rhythm. Accelerate in, decelerate out, the road looped and rolled around the mountains, narrowing to a pass between hills that looked more like rockslides and then widening deceptively.

I passed the car I had seen miles below me, dimming my high beams briefly as we flashed past each other. Then nothing more but a long empty stretch of invisible road.

Selene Wolfe was right. I was tired. I had been sleeping badly. It was harder to avoid demons in dreams -- especially when they were your own.

Shortly before he died at age eighty-one, Joseph Hansen started a blog called *Lastwords*. I’d found it once, surfing the ’Net. Three posts filled with the loneliness of having outlived pretty much everyone and everything that mattered. Three posts and about as many replies.

If Hansen was that forsaken at the end, what chance did the rest of us have, especially those who had never quite managed to find someone to share their life? I tried to cheer myself by reflecting that with my heart there was no way I'd make it to eighty anyway. The problem was, I couldn't imagine feeling much more alone than I did right then.

I blinked. My eyelids felt weighted. How could eyelashes be so heavy? I blinked again. The smart move would be to pull over and nap for five minutes, but I wanted to get home.

My God, it was a long way away. A long, unraveling way that kept rolling, winding through the empty blackness. On and on and on.

Easiest thing in the world to stop fighting sleepiness, to close my eyes for a moment, to let go.

It would be all over in two minutes. Slam. All she wrote. The end. Nobody left with anything to regret or be guilty about because anyone could have an accident on this road.

They probably wouldn't find the car for days. The trees were so dense down that mountainside. Maybe they'd never find the car.

Wouldn't it be a kind of relief? No more struggling against the tide. No more dead of night fears about winding up ill and helpless and alone. No more anything.

Gravel spat under the tires. I corrected quickly, instinctively.

As I merged onto the I-210 East heading toward Pasadena, I thought, *I wish I'd known about the blog, Joe. I'd have written you.*

Chapter Twenty-three

“Can I get off early tonight?” Velvet asked on Saturday morning. “I have a big party to go to.”

Bad timing. I had been hoping to slip out of there early myself, to get ready for Lisa’s shindig at Mondrian’s. But considering how much time Velvet had put in covering for my extracurricular activities, I could hardly say no.

Though this was the busiest shopping weekend before Christmas, the day passed without incident, which was saying something these days.

Velvet took off about three, and by the time I had dealt with the last customer, I was running late.

I went upstairs and dusted off (literally) the tuxedo. That’s one of the advantages of having a society dame for a mother: you don’t have to rent the monkey suit.

I showered, shaved, and spent about ten minutes chasing shirt studs. And another five minutes swearing over cufflinks. This is where another guy would come in useful. Or maybe just a valet.

I drove over to Mondrian’s, left the Forester with the usual aspiring model-slash-valet, and made my way to the SkyBar, which was already packed with a well-dressed older crowd. Big Band music floated from the clouds. Candles twinkled in trees.

I was instantly snared by Lisa, looking bridal in white silk. She had Dauten in tow. Dauten made the tuxedo look like a monkey suit for real.

“*Darling.*” She offered a scented cheek and whispered, “You’re the *handsomest* man in the room.”

Dauten offered a beefy hand. “Adrien.”

“Bill.”

We shook.

Lisa frowned. "Is Jake with you?"

"No."

That posed a dilemma for her. She wasn't keen on Jake, but she wasn't keen on being dissed either. Before she could react, we were joined by Natalie, looking fetching in an unnervingly short iridescent blue shift. She had glittering blue flowers in her hair.

"Wow, you look spiffy," she informed me.

Spiffy? Did that translate to "not bad for an old guy?" I said, "You look spiffy too."

We all laughed gaily, and I wondered where the hell the bar was. As the latest influx of guests separated us from our parental units, Natalie said, "Our plan is working beautifully."

"I can see that."

"Daddy's over the moon."

I glanced back at the stoic-looking Dauten.

"So where's this mystery man we've heard about? Lisa said he's a detective."

"Did she?" I glanced around. "I don't know about you, but I could use a drink."

"Oh, the drinks are fabulous!" She chattered blithely on while I steered her to the bar. She continued to chatter while we sipped our drinks. I was watching the crowd, mulling the possibility that I might actually be the only gay person in the entire gathering, when her smile faded.

"Uh-oh." Her hand fastened on my arm. "Let's go say hi to Lauren."

Lauren, looking like Hollywood royalty, stood with a giant Ken doll. At least that was my first impression. When he moved, I realized only his hair was plastic. They seemed to be arguing in that intense, but expressionless way that couples do in public, but as soon as Lauren spotted us she forced a smile.

"We were beginning to think you had gotten lost," she greeted me.

"No such luck."

Her smile was perfunctory. "Brad, this is Adrien, Lisa's son. Adrien, this is my husband --"

Brad said curtly, "Excuse me," brushing past.

There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Laurie," Natalie began, but Lauren cut her off sharply.

"Don't say it!" Her eyes glittered with a mix of fury and tears. At my expression, she blinked rapidly, forced a smile. "He's under a lot of pressure. That wasn't personal. So! You didn't bring anyone?" She looked past me to the ghost at my shoulder -- my usual escort.

"He had to work." For now and forever.

"Adrien's being mysterious about this guy," Natalie said. She shook her head disapprovingly. "You need to lay down the law, Adrien."

No pun intended? I said, "Are you an expert?"

"I'm an expert in what *not* to do," Natalie said cheerfully. She and Lauren did one of those wordless exchanges. She wrapped her arm around mine and gave me a quick hug: a disarming gesture.

"Come on and meet the rest of the family."

"There are more of you?"

They laughed at my ill-disguised horror, and I did Lauren a favor and let Natalie drag me off.

There really weren't an unreasonable number of relatives; in fact, the majority of the guests were business and social acquaintances of both Dauten and Lisa. There were a number of beautiful male and female versions of Natalie and Lauren who turned out to be cousins. Apparently the good-looks gene skipped a generation, because Dauten's brother and a sister -- pretty much indistinguishable -- looked like Bill.

With the exception of Lauren's socially-challenged spouse, they were all nice enough, although I don't think I imagined the curious looks. I wasn't sure if they were on Lisa's behalf or my own, but it didn't matter. Odds were I'd never have to see any of these folks again. It was an easy, if boring gig. I switched on automatic pilot, gliding along shaking hands and making small talk.

Our duty done, we circled back toward Lauren, who looked less like a beautiful statue.

Natalie tilted her head, appraised me smilingly. "What *do* you think of us, Adrien? We can't read you at all."

"I think you're all...amazing."

"Hmm." She gave me an unexpectedly shrewd look. "I don't think we should take that at face value." And before I could respond, "You know, Em's right. You *do* sort of look like that actor. The one in *A Place in the Sun*."

"Elizabeth Taylor?"

She giggled, then had to report this witticism to Lauren, who smiled vaguely, her eyes following the progress of her husband, who was now at the bar.

The bar sounded like a good idea, but I didn't want to rub shoulders with my soon-to-be brother-in-law.

And that's when I noticed Oliver Garibaldi.

He was talking to Lisa. She laughed, her voice rippling across the pool. He gazed at her with that enigmatic hooded gaze. I wouldn't say it all fell into place, but I did recognize a piece of the puzzle -- with a stab of alarm.

"Excuse me," I said to Lauren and Natalie, and cut my way through the space heaters and strategically placed futons and giant pots of flowers.

Lisa smiled as I reached them. "Oh, Adrien, have you met Oliver?"

"Yes. How are you?"

Oliver said, "We meet again." I was struck again by that light, fruity voice. You expected God-like John Huston tones.

"This handsome stranger is my son," Lisa informed him.

"I didn't realize you knew each other," I said to Lisa.

"Oliver is an old friend of Bill's."

Garibaldi said smoothly, "We met many years ago. We share interest in a number of worthy causes."

"What causes?"

Lisa laughed. "Adrien writes mystery novels, you know. He's terribly clever. And terribly curious." She patted my shoulder. "My clever grown-up son."

"I did not realize." Garibaldi smiled, reminding me of a phrase I'd read describing Aleister Crowley: "eyes that could spoil everything."

"Did you ever find your friend?" he inquired.

"My friend?"

"The mystery novelist who disappeared. You thought he had been abducted?"

"Abducted!" Lisa would certainly have pursued this, but she was distracted by the appearance of yet another bosom buddy from yet another charity committee. Departing, she squeezed my arm, said urgently, "Darling, we must talk before you leave tonight. Don't forget."

I nodded. Replied to Garibaldi's inquiry, "No."

"No? No word at all?"

"You mean like a postcard from the Great Beyond?"

He stared at me. "Perhaps he wished to disappear," he said at last. "It happens, you know. Have you never wished it were possible to leave the past behind? To erase your mistakes, your missteps. To start completely fresh."

"I don't think he disappeared voluntarily." I drained my glass.

"Perhaps not." He shrugged, a sort of these-things-happen gesture. "Did you find out any more about this...Black Sable?"

"Blade Sable." I smiled. "Apparently it's the junior branch of a larger organization called The Scythe of Gremory. Kind of like the Cub Scouts."

Again, a long moment passed without a word from Garibaldi. Then he smiled that twist of wine-stained mouth. "The Scythe of Gremory. Fascinating. And what purpose does the Scythe of Gremory serve?"

"I'm not sure they're what you'd call a service organization," I said consideringly. "I don't think they go in for baking cookies, for example, or contributing to children's hospital funds -- although they may supply patients."

The pupils of his eyes were enormous, making the entire eye appear black. He might have answered, but we were joined by a truly striking brunette. She reminded me of one of those Botticelli angels, plump, white-skinned, with raven black hair parted down the middle.

"My fiancée, Dr. Ava Wilding."

Ava and I shook hands. She had a rock on her left finger that looked like the Hope diamond and a silver star on a chain about her long, white neck. I wonder if she knew about the red-haired nymphs. Then again, maybe she liked red-haired nymphs.

"You two look awfully serious."

"My love, this is Adrien English, soon to be William's stepson. Adrien was asking if I had ever heard of a religious sect called the Scythe of Gremory."

Ava raised her brows. "Had you, my love?"

These two should have taken the show on the road. Their timing was impeccable.

"But all is not bad news," Garibaldi said, apparently changing the subject. "I see that your other friend has been released by the police."

"Angus Gordon? Yes. His alibi held up." I hadn't seen Angus since the night after his release from jail. Nor had I seen the investigators hired by Martin Grosser. Or the police. Even the newshounds seemed to be seeking fresh meat. It was as though everything were in a holding pattern.

"That must be a relief to you," Ava said. "Nothing hurts us more than when bad things happen to the people we love."

Stillness washed through me.

"The pendulum swings between a tear and a smile," Garibaldi said. "Perhaps it is true of the Scythe." He gave one of those French shoulder lifts.

Ava sipped her drink and said, "You run a bookstore, don't you? I think that's what Lisa said. In Old Town?"

I said, "Yes. Cloak and Dagger Books."

"Is business good?"

"It could be worse."

"Things can always be worse." She smiled like a Renaissance courtier, glanced at Garibaldi. Winked. *Winked?*

Garibaldi said, "This sect, the Scythe of Gremory -- if such a group existed, you must realize what a premium they would place upon discretion. It would not be easy to find someone willing to..."

"Betray the secrets of the guild?"

"Just so. One who broke the oath of loyalty would be harshly dealt with. Inquisitiveness would not be welcome."

"How do these groups separate curiosity seekers from true seekers?"

He was silent. Ava took a sip from her champagne and gazed at the star-scattered sky. She looked rather bored.

"There you are!" Natalie, looking more and more like an escapee from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the evening wore on, joined us. "You're supposed to dance with Lisa."

I made my excuses and let her drag me away through the forest of shoulder-high pots of trees, past the swimming pool, and up the stairs. All the time I was thinking that only in mystery novels was the obvious answer wrong. How many times had Jake jeered at my efforts to over-complicate crime in my own writing?

The one person who had no reason to lie to me was Angus, and according to Angus, the benefit of belonging to Blade Sable and the Scythe of Gremory was material as well as spiritual. Putting aside for a moment the promise of all the world's lost treasures -- and sex with the world's most desirable women -- what were the more obvious perks of membership? Money, power, influence, social position. And in order for any of that to happen, the highest echelon had to consist of a tight network of well-connected A-listers. The single well-connected occultist A-lister I knew was Oliver Garibaldi. Which meant I could pretty well discount everything he'd said to me before this evening as a pack of lies.

That wasn't the alarming part. The alarming part was that he knew that I was belatedly adding two and two together -- and he was not concerned by any answers I drew. It kind of reminded me of that famous exchange between Holmes and Moriarty.

All that I have to say has already crossed your mind...

Except that I was not Sherlock Holmes. I wasn't even Watson.

I did my duty on the dance floor and escaped. After a time, I found myself at the bar again with Bill Dauten.

Bill nodded owlshly. "Enjoying yourself?"

I nodded back. I wasn't as tight as Bill, but I was drinking too much. That seemed to be happening a lot again. I wondered if I should be concerned, then decided that since I was questioning it, probably not.

"Business good?" he inquired.

"Pretty good."

"It's a good time of year."

“Yep.”

He was silent. I tried to think of polite ways to ask if he was tied into a demonic cult.

“So,” I said. “How long have you known Oliver Garibaldi?”

Bill stared at me solemnly. “Oliver and I go way back. He’s a good man to know. Very useful man to know. Very influential.” He nodded, watching me with his bear-like eyes. “Very good man to know.”

Swell.

After that we seemed to have run out of things to say. Bill ordered us each another drink. “Your mother wants you to be happy. That’s the main thing,” he said finally, apparently continuing an earlier imaginary conversation.

“I’m happy.”

He nodded wisely, patted me on the back with his massive paw, departed.

Starry, starry night above and below. I took a moment to enjoy the spectacular view of the city lights beneath us when Lisa joined me. “*Darling...*”

Uh-oh. I knew that wheedling tone of old.

“No,” I said. “Whatever it is, no.”

She gave one of those shimmering laughs. “Oh, Adrien. Now this is serious. What would you think about hiring Natalie?”

“I would think that I was having a very bad dream. Why?”

“Weeeell, Nattie needs a job. She doesn’t seem to have any *direction*. It’s ever so worrying for Bill. And meanwhile, you’re working yourself to death in that awful little shop, so this would really solve two birds with one stone.”

“Solve two birds? Now there’s a euphemism.”

“Don’t change the subject, Adrien. I’m thinking of what’s best for you. It frightens me to see you so...fine-drawn.”

“I’ve already hired someone,” I said.

“What does that matter? You can hire as many people as you like, can’t you? And Nattie would be wonderfully useful to you. She’s such a smart girl. And she’s family.”

“Which is exactly why I don’t want to hire her.” Not that my heart didn’t go out to anyone saddled with the nickname Nattie.

A frown appeared between Lisa’s elegant brows. “That’s a strange comment. How is hiring your perfectly charming sister any worse than employing That Boy, when anyone could see *he* wasn’t normal.”

“Who is?” I muttered, and drained my glass.

She sighed. “Now you’re being silly. I’ve already told Bill that you would, so please think about it.”

Off she sailed, with the unassailable poise and grace that won her rave reviews in *Swan Lake*. I decided I needed another drink and headed for the bar, negotiating my way through the strategically arranged mattresses and space heaters and potted trees.

On my return journey, I spotted Emma seated on a puffy cushion by the pool. Her hair was piled on her head, long tendrils framed her face. She wore something pink and frothy and absurdly formal. She looked bored out of her mind.

"Hi," I said, drawing up a pillow and lowering myself.

"Hello," she said gloomily. She was staring at the dancing on the upper level. The music drifted down. "Fools Rush In." Probably not her trip. Not mine, either.

On the landing above us, I caught a glimpse of Lisa and Dauten lumbering by in a foxtrot. Sort of like the dancing bear and his trainer. Nah, that wasn't fair. He wasn't bad for such a mammoth. Lauren and her husband moved stiffly in and out of my line of vision.

My wandering thoughts were recalled by Emma's abrupt, "Why do you call her Lisa?"

"I just always have."

She made a disapproving face. "She told me to call her *Mummy*."

I blinked. "Did she?" I said finally. This was followed by several long moments of total and probably none too healthy self-absorption before it registered that the cheese mite looked unhappy.

"Is that a problem?" I inquired.

"My mom's dead," she said flatly.

"I know. I'm sorry."

She shrugged a bony shoulder. "Lisa's okay. But she's not my mom." Her eyes met mine on a sideways slant.

"Maybe she could be a friend to you, though. Me too, maybe."

She nodded primly. Tucked a long strand of shiny hair beneath one small ear.

I had no idea what to say to her. She didn't seem much for small talk. I shook the ice in my empty glass. "Can I buy you a drink, kid?"

She giggled.

Chapter Twenty-four

The holiday garland stretched across the empty street was unraveling in the wind when the taxi let me off in front of the shop at three a.m. I let myself in, sliding back the ornate security gate, pausing in the darkness and silence. The Christmas lights twinkled like little colored stars amidst the bookshelves. Tired, but too wound up for sleep, I went back to the stock room and logged onto the computer.

Nothing interesting in e-mail. I yawned, scratched my bristly jaw.

On impulse I logged into blackster21's e-mail, and found a message from aeternus@something.com. Wasn't *aeternus* Latin for everlasting or eternity?

Hmmm. You've Got Hell!

I clicked on the e-mail, waited, wincing, for my computer to lock up. The e-mail opened.

Dear Blackster21,

Those that have a common quality ever seek their kind.

6:00 a.m. 9182 Hobb Street.

Six a.m. on a Sunday. These people truly were fiends. I connected to the Internet and plugged in the address. It brought up a list of references to a Satanic Grotto, but when I clicked on the URL, the web page came up as unavailable.

I dug out my *Thomas Guide*, searched for Hobb Street.

East LA. Wow, it really was Hell. I glanced at my watch. I could grab a couple of hours sleep before I'd need to head over to the Mondrian to retrieve the SUV.

I typed a note to Jake, offering my theory and telling him where I was going. I saved it in my e-mail drafts folder. Then I went upstairs and dug out my Grandmother Anna's gun.

After two uneasy hours of sleep, I got up, pulled on Levi's and a bulky sweater, and phoned a taxi, which let me out in front of the hotel.

West Hollywood looked like a ghost town. I got into the Forester and pulled onto Sunset. No sign of a red Corolla; hopefully, Jean had abandoned tracking my real-life adventures. Either that, or she wasn't so dedicated to stalking me that she was willing to sacrifice beauty rest.

The sun was up by the time I got across town. The wind blew hard; trash swooped and cart wheeled along the street as the *Santana* scoured the city.

I slowly cruised Hobb Street, keeping an eye out for 9182. Graffiti marked the walls and sides of buildings.

I spotted the building from down the street. It was an old structure painted a vivid purple, probably a nightclub at one time. There was a startlingly well-drawn, life-like painting of Baphomet, the winged humanoid goat symbol used by Satanists, on the parking lot side of the building. The windows were all boarded and covered with iron bars.

Interestingly, though just about every flat surface on this street was covered in graffiti, the grotto had not been defaced by so much as a pen mark.

There didn't appear to be a sign of life on the entire block. An abandoned doughnut shop stood on one side, and on the other, an auto body repair place surrounded by a tall fence topped with rolls of barbed-wire. A disgruntled rottweiler paced along the fence.

I tucked the gun into the waistband of my Levi's beneath the bulky sweater, got out, and went around to the front of the church. I tried the door. It opened. I stepped inside.

The deep gloom was broken by a candle on the ledge of a boarded window. A black candle. This must have originally been the front lobby. I went through to the main room, following the trail of fluttering candles.

I saw that the walls of the building were covered in ornate artwork, but I couldn't make it out, although there were several sets of eyes painted in phosphorescent colors. It was cold and stank of pot and incense and bad plumbing.

There was a stage in the front of the main room. A chair was placed in a giant pentagram. Black candles burned on the outermost points of the pentagram.

Oliver Garibaldi sat on the chair. As I made my way toward him, he smiled. It was an uncanny smile.

"Ah. As I expected," he greeted me. "I am never wrong about these things."

I'm never wrong? Who besides Republican presidents and evil masterminds can say that with a straight face?

"Thanks for the invitation." I looked around myself curiously. "Not sure why I thought it would be more...plush."

"Humble beginnings." He smiled again, the candlelight throwing shadows across his rough features.

“Humble beginnings? Is that what it’s about?”

“What do you wish it to be about?” He shook his head. “Persistence such as yours deserves reward, but I’m afraid you will be disappointed with the truth.”

“Try me.”

“What did you wish to know? Ask me whatever you like. We have nothing to hide.”

“Then why the cloak and dagger stuff?”

He laughed. “But you love the cloak and dagger stuff, as you call it. Everyone does.”

“So there’s no penalty for betraying secrets?”

“There is a penalty, of course. Not the penalty you seem to imagine. We don’t kill people because they choose to abandon their faith. To find themselves on the outside is usually punishment enough.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw movement in the deep shadows of the room. I realized that we were not alone in the room and felt a tingling at the back of my scalp.

Into my distracted silence, Garibaldi added, “Surely you understand the need for discretion. Death is often the price for nonconformity in our society.”

“Speaking of death,” I said. I made an effort not to look into the crowded shadows. The gun was a comforting weight against my back.

He laughed with genuine amusement. “When your delightful mother informed me that you wrote mystery novels, I at once understood both your inquisitiveness and your conviction that a dark and deadly secret waited to be revealed.”

I’ve never understood why in TV crime shows the sleuth makes a point of arguing with the villain and revealing all the reasons why he thinks the bad guy is guilty. I thought my best bet of walking out of there in one piece was to allow myself to be convinced of Garibaldi’s blamelessness. I took it as a positive sign that he was bothering to chat.

I said calmly, “So Blade Sable wasn’t involved in these ritual deaths? But then why lie about its existence, about the existence of the Scythe of Gremory?”

“Because people hate and fear what they do not understand. Tell me of a great religion that has not faced persecution by nonbelievers and infidels. Add to this the fact that we are extremely successful, and I think you will understand why I wish to protect the anonymity of our members.”

“I think I can understand that.”

“Yes. As I can understand your desire for knowledge, for the truth at all cost. You remind me of myself many years ago. That is the great difference between our religion and the others. We don’t lie to ourselves.”

“When you say that you are extremely successful...”

“Ours is an invitation-only membership. Most exclusive. Many of our older members are wealthy or well-established in their chosen profession, but this is not the criterion for

membership. We seek those with a desire for the truth, with -- like yourself -- a questing spirit. We look for persons of intellect and reason, persons of quality."

I hated to interrupt the sales pitch, but when he paused for breath, I interjected, "That's flattering. But you're not Satanists, correct?"

"No."

"But you do worship the demon Gremory?"

He hesitated. His eyes swerved to the shadows, and I grasped that, unlike Garibaldi, some of the congregation might not have outgrown their need for that old-time religion, complete with fortune-telling demon dukes.

"Worship, no. The demon is a tool, a facet of magic."

"You do believe in magic?"

"We all believe in magic. Those who deny its existence the most fiercely are those who most believe." He made an easy movement as though brushing aside cobwebs. "Magic is as real as love or oxygen or anything else that is real, but cannot be seen."

I didn't see any point in debating this. I tried to figure out how to ask him who he thought had killed three people and written Gremory's sigil in victims' blood, if not one of his own disciples. He said, "You're a young man, and yet I sense that you've had cause to consider your own mortality."

He might have learned that from Lisa or even Bill Dauten, but I had a sudden visual of Velvet standing at my desk holding the vial of my heart meds.

"On occasion."

"Do you believe there's anything beyond this existence?"

"I don't know."

"Does it matter to you? Would the knowledge change any choices that you've made?"

"No."

He nodded, as though this were the answer he had expected. "You have learned to live within the moment. What if it were possible to have all that you wanted on this Earthly plane? Wealth, power, sex..."

"In exchange for?"

"What do you have to offer?"

I grinned. "My immortal soul?"

He smiled too; his teeth looked sharp and yellow in the candlelight. "And we accept. It is the requirement of every religion, is it not? Is there any faith that does not demand spiritual commitment? But we are a bit more pragmatic in our approach. That is the secret of our success: practicality."

Sprinkled with terrorism and vacuum-packed to seal in evil.

"Does that translate into dollars and cents?"

He smiled. "No more than you can afford, no more than membership in any exclusive organization would cost you. Tithing is a time-honored tradition, is it not? I think you will be pleased to learn that there are less tangible resources we most value. You possess many of these: creativity, imagination, energy, and contacts."

"What would I be required to do with these resources?"

"Nothing that you were not willing to do. As you surmised last night, we are a kind of service organization, a network, not unlike the...er...Lions Club."

Or maybe the VFW? It would be hard to think of a more foreign war than the one for souls.

I said -- and I didn't have to fake sounding genuinely troubled -- "But wasn't Kinsey Perone the Adept of Blade Sable?"

He looked a tad irritated. "Adrien, my dear, I have no idea who Kinsey Perone was. I know that she was not a member of Blade Sable. I know each and every one of my sons and daughters. Perhaps she had hopes of joining us one day, but my understanding is that she was an unstable girl. Unstable personalities are attracted to us as they are attracted to fundamentalist religions everywhere."

I nodded thoughtfully.

"Shall I tell you what I think, what I have believed since the day you came to my home seeking answers? I think you are searching for that which is missing in your own life. I think that is what this quest to find an imaginary murderer is really about."

"Inquiring minds want to know."

He said gently, "Always the joke, the flippant comment, the laughter that keeps the wall intact. But behind the wall, I sense a great emptiness, loss, loneliness..."

My mouth was unexpectedly dry. The tug of his personality, his certainty, his calm was overwhelming. My pulse sped up with a mix of anger and fear.

"We could help you, my dear. That is what we do. We help our brothers and sisters realize their dreams -- most dreams are easily realized, did you know that? Most people do not long for much that is not attainable through a certain amount of focus and effort. Everyone wants something."

I said interestedly, "Can you guarantee perfect health?"

He studied me, then smiled that unnerving smile. "But that's not what you most want, Adrien."

* * * * *

I called Jake from a phone booth in a gas station a few blocks away from the Little Purple Chapel.

As I waited for his cell phone message -- no way was he going to be live and in person at eight o'clock on a Sunday morning -- I tried to figure my best angle. Obviously I couldn't tell him the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

I was still floating scenarios when Jake's voice said crisply, "What's up?"

"I --" I floundered.

His voice dropped, he spoke close to the phone. "What's wrong?"

Jesus, it was just Jake. Not exactly cause for cold sweat and stomach cramps. I said, "I think there's a place in East LA you need to check out."

"Why?"

"There's a possibility that it might be where they killed the Perone girl. She wasn't killed at the scene, right? None of them were. So there's a chance this might be the place."

"Did you get that from the kid?"

"The kid?"

"Angus," he said tersely. "We know he spent Wednesday night with you. Did it not occur to you that he was being watched?"

"Not by the cops." I added, although I wasn't sure why, "I let him sleep downstairs. He didn't have any place else."

"You seem hell-bent on getting roped into this investigation."

Which would endanger Jake. Got it.

I said, "Yeah, something Angus said makes me think this might be the place. Can you get a search warrant?"

He didn't answer that, saying instead, "Do you know where he is?"

"Angus? No." His words sank in. I felt a tingle of alarm. "You don't think something happened to him?"

"I have no idea. We lost him shortly after he left the bookstore." He said into my stricken silence, "Relax. My thought is he ditched us."

I let my breath out on a long sigh. All at once I was very tired. I wanted to go home and sleep for a year. The problem was, unless I was mistaken, I had been made an offer I could not refuse. From now until this mess was resolved, I needed to sleep with one eye open.

"Will you try to get a search warrant?"

"You sure there's something to find?"

"I'm not sure, no. But I think there's a strong possibility."

He was silent.

"I also think that there may be a chance that Gabriel Savant is alive. If so, they could be holding him there."

Jake swore under his breath.

I waited, knowing that it all hinged on how much he trusted my instinct and my judgment.

“Why did you wait till now to tell me this?” he asked finally.

Right, he thought I’d been sitting on this information since Wednesday. I said, finding it unexpectedly hard to get the words out, “I was afraid you’d...misread my reason for calling.”

Silence. He cleared his throat. “Yeah. Well. I’ll see what I can do. No promises. What’s the address?”

I gave him the address, clicked off before he could.

* * * * *

I rounded the corner to pull into the back parking of Cloak and Dagger when I noticed commotion out front of the bookstore. I pulled to the curb, got out, joining the crowd outside my front step.

Three women in white gauzy dresses stood inside a large ring of white candles. They were chanting.

By the power of She

By the power of He

By the power of Three

We call upon thee and CAST YOU OUT!

The tallest woman, a freckled, rawboned, red-haired lady, sprinkled water from a silver bowl in three shakes of her hand.

Next to her, a plump, middle-aged woman in spectacles solemnly rang a silver bell three times.

Holy moly. It was the Wiccans from Dragonwyck. Despite the early hour, their performance was drawing quite an audience. The Sunday before Christmas is one of the busiest shopping days of the year. People who normally react like vampires to cock’s crow hit the streets early, shopping lists clenched tight in their sweaty paws. Several people poked their heads out of shop doorways to watch.

The third woman, whom I did not recognize, made a production of pulling out a decorative-looking knife. The crowd around the ring of candles backed away. She held the athame in front of her and began to trace the outline of a pentacle over where I had scrubbed and painted over the inverted pentagram.

“What are they doing?” one woman asked another bystander.

That bystander shrugged, but another answered knowledgeably, “A purification rite. I saw this on the Discovery Channel.”

I edged around the crowd toward the front of the bookstore. Velvet must not have arrived yet. The doors were still locked, the security gate pulled across the front. But the lights were on inside.

By the power of the pentagram we lay

Protection here both night and day

We now invoke the Law of Three

This be our will, so mote it be!

Three more shakes of the bell, three more sprinkles of water, and the show was over. The Wiccan I didn't recognize pulled out a candle snuffer and went counterclockwise around the circle of candles, putting them out. The other two began to shake hands with people, murmuring those "Blessed be's" as they worked the crowd.

I approached the plump lady who had given me Selene Wolfe's business card. She looked up, beaming. "There you are! Blessed be!"

"This is a surprise," I said.

She took both my hands and squeezed them tightly in hers. "I know. But we tried, you know. We had so little to go on."

The tall one, who I seemed to recall had been named Ariel, reached us. She also took both my hands and squeezed them warmly. It was hard not to feel touched by all this apparent goodwill. "Blessed be!"

"Hi again."

She shook her head at me as though I were a naughty little boy. "It took us such a long time to find you," she said. "You didn't contact Selene for ages!"

The third woman approached, nodded gravely. "Blessed be."

"Blessed be," I said, giving up. "And...er...thanks."

She nodded, like, *Damn straight! And don't let this demon stuff happen again!* Then she turned to the other two. "I've got to get home. I've got so much shopping to do, you would not *believe!*"

There was a sudden flurry of activity while they gathered their candles and chalice and bag of salt. The crowd had mostly dispersed by now. I glimpsed Velvet moving around inside the store. Had she barricaded herself in?

I went to move my car. The last I saw of the three witches, they were squeezing into a blue pickup truck. I pulled around the corner, parked in back, and slipped in through the side.

Velvet was behind the counter. She glared at me.

"Give me ten minutes," I told her, starting the stairs to my living quarters. "I want to take a quick shower and change."

"Forget it," she said. "I quit."

I stopped. “Huh? Why?” I came back down the stairs. “What’s going on?”

“What’s going on is that I quit. That’s all.” She was stuffing her personal possessions in her knapsack as fast as she could jam them in.

“But why?”

She glared at me. “But why? *Why?* Because of that!” She beckoned toward the front of the shop and the street now empty of bell, book, and candle. “Because every day is Halloween around here.”

I stared, perplexed.

Wrong again, Adrien. Apparently she was not a foot soldier in the shock troops of The Damned. What did I know? Maybe she really was just a freaked out and much put-upon sales associate in a bookstore.

“Hey, but that’s over. From now on it’s strictly business as usual.”

As I told her this, I mentally crossed my fingers. I was pretty sure Jake would get a search warrant, and I was pretty sure what a search of the Hobb Street building would reveal.

“This *is* your usual business,” she said acidly. “I’m not stupid. I watch the news. The first guy you had working here was murdered by a serial killer. The next guy *was* a serial killer.”

“But --”

“Not only that, you’ve got reporters and detectives and police and all kinds of people asking questions about you.”

“What kinds of questions?” I asked, distracted from my original argument.

“Who knows! I mean, I can’t get anything done without some weirdo walking in here.”

She was not rude enough to say so, but I had a feeling she was including me in that category.

“Velvet,” I coaxed. “I know how it seems, but really, usually it’s not like this at all. Usually it’s so quiet you can hear the dust fall. Truly. Hang in for a while longer. Life will be back to normal.”

She straightened, slung her bag over her shoulder, and gave me a long, level look. “No way. I don’t want to wake up dead one morning. Oh, and Adrien? Get some more help in here!”

With that, she marched out.

* * * * *

So apparently Velvet White was just nosey and nervous -- and maybe made more than her share of personal phone calls. I’d been wrong before. I’d no doubt be wrong again.

I didn't expect to be proven wrong quite so fast though. After a hellacious day of serving irritable and tired holiday shoppers, I closed up, went upstairs, kicked off my shoes, and dropped down on the sofa. I was drifting into an exhausted sleep, when the phone rang.

I rolled off the sofa and dived to grab it before the machine kicked in.

"Thought you'd want to know," Jake said dryly. "Satan's Grotto was a wash."

I wiped my eyes with the heel of my hand, trying to focus. "You didn't find anything?"

"Nothing."

"Did you --"

"We tore the place apart. We sprayed with luminol. No blood stains of any kind anywhere."

I was trying to absorb this as Jake added, "And we dusted for prints. It's going to take awhile to get the complete results on those, but so far none of the victims' prints have turned up. Neither did Gordon's."

"I see." I didn't though. Not at all.

"Also there was no indication that anyone had been held prisoner there at any time."

"Oh."

He sighed. "So whatever your pet nutcase told you, it was a sack of shit."

"Sorry," I said. "I really thought there might be something to it."

"Yeah. Well. Now we all know there wasn't." He was silent for a moment.

"Thanks for checking."

"I've got to go."

"Right."

He hung up.

I put the phone down.

Don't think about it, I told myself. You've got much bigger problems than that.

If my position had been precarious before, it was all the more perilous following a police raid. Like all good sales people, Garibaldi believed in his product, and he had believed that I was in the market for that product; he had been sincere during our conversation. But now...I could always plead that I had, all unknowing, led the cops to their hangout, but I was pretty sure any doubts Garibaldi and/or the Fifty-sixth Duke of Hell may have had about my dishonorable intentions were gone.

I could come clean to the police, tell everything I knew, but it was so pitifully little. I had zero proof of anything. The proof I had been counting on hadn't turned up.

Did it even exist? Maybe I was letting my imagination run wild, reading threats into innocuous conversations, jumping to the same bigoted conclusions about what I didn't understand, what didn't fit into my preconceived notions of religion and spirituality.

The phone rang again. I ignored it and went into the kitchen. I hadn't eaten all day. No wonder I felt like something the cat dragged in. I opened the fridge.

The machine picked up.

Silence.

I felt a ripple of unease, but then Guy spoke, sounding reluctant. More. He sounded grim. "Adrien, apparently I was wrong. Peter is not in Germany. I'd like to...." I missed the next word or two. "Call me. Please."

Dial tone.

Chapter Twenty-five

I called Guy. Unsurprisingly, he was out.

I tried him again in the morning. No answer. On impulse I called the university, and was informed by an uncomfortable-sounding secretary that Professor Snowden was in his office. She put me through.

"Snowden," Guy said, sounding weary.

"It's Adrien," I said. "I tried to call you last night, but --"

"I was out last night."

He sounded like that was my fault.

I said, "Well, one good thing. It looks like the university has cleared you of wrongdoing."

"Hardly. I'm here to clear out my desk."

I didn't know what to say. Into the silence that followed his words, he said, "Look, I've reason to believe that Peter lied to me. I don't know if that matters anymore. Angus has been released."

"Do you know where Peter lives?"

"Yes."

I didn't know how to ask. I was aware that Guy was torn over this apparent defection by Peter Verlane. Assuming that Guy was on the level.

Instead I said, "Did you need help?"

He hesitated, then said, "Yes."

So I closed the shop and drove to UCLA. I found Guy in his office, surrounded by boxes and stacks of books.

"Is this official?" I asked. "I thought you were on suspension?"

"It's inevitable," Guy said, tying string around a stack of books. "I prefer the dignity of walking away as opposed to being put out to pasture." He pointed to a stack of photos. "There are several snaps of Peter in there."

I sorted through the photos quickly. Most of them were of Guy and people I'd never seen in places I did not recognize. But toward the bottom of the stack were a couple of photos of a tall, thin, dark-haired boy of about Angus's age. I recognized the flyaway dark hair and round spectacles.

"This kid who looks like Harry Potter, is he Peter?"

"Yes," Guy said without pausing to glance at a photograph of himself, his arm around Peter's slim shoulders. They were both laughing. I peered closer. There was a glint of silver on Peter's chest -- a star on a silver chain?

"He was at Hell's Kitchen that night."

"Yes."

"But you didn't think he was involved?"

The green eyes held mine. "That club was packed with kids interested in the occult who have absolutely nothing to do with this. Why would I instantly assume that Peter was part of this...this madness?"

"He sent us there!"

"The girl -- Betty Sansone -- that you wanted to talk to was there. He didn't lie."

"He set us up."

"No one could have known you were going to walk out into that alley. They just seized the opportunity."

Yeah, safe to say Guy's feelings on the subject of Peter Verlane were mixed.

I said, "Guy, I've seen Peter with Betty Sansone a couple of times. He may not be involved in murder, but I'm sure he took part in the abduction of Gabriel Savant."

"Gabriel Savant!" Guy looked disgusted. "Please tell me you're not a fan of that hack. If Savant was kidnapped, it was by socially conscious literary critics."

Literary snobbery, alive and well on the astral plane.

"Fine," I said. "Why don't we go ask Peter?"

He stared at me. "All right. Why don't we."

Neither of us moved. Guy reached out and touched my jaw. I blinked.

"Shaving cream," he explained.

"Thanks."

He looked past me. I glanced around. Detectives Rossini and Riordan stood in the doorway of Guy's office.

"Can I help you, detectives?" Guy asked frostily.

Rossini eyed me with open curiosity. Jake never looked my way. I could have been invisible.

"Well, Mr. English, we meet again," Rossini said cordially.

"Always a pleasure," I said.

His smile was caustic. "We wanted to ask you a couple more questions, professor," he said, turning to Guy.

I said, "Why don't I carry this out to my car?"

Guy nodded.

I lifted the nearest box, squeezed through the doorway past Rossini and Jake, who barely moved out of my way.

* * * * *

Half an hour later, I watched Jake and Rossini walking through UCLA's Sculpture Garden, engrossed in animated discussion. They never noticed me sitting on the grassy hill.

When they were out of sight, I got up and returned to Guy's office. He had made a lot of progress in the last minutes. Practically everything was boxed or tied, ready to be moved.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"More of the same. I think their plan is to bore me into a confession."

We carried the rest of Guy's stuff to my car, which was better suited to hauling boxes and a potted palm. I followed Guy over to his place. He suggested that we wait to unload the Forester until after we'd seen Peter, which suited me, and we climbed into the Miata to drive to Peter's.

* * * * *

According to his roommate, Peter Verlane was not at home.

Guy and I returned to the car.

"We could wait?" I said doubtfully.

Guy considered this. "We could have a long wait."

No lie, considering Peter's active social life.

We waited.

A Miata is not the best vehicle for stakeout.

We talked.

"Are you hungry?" Guy inquired at last.

I looked at the clock in the dashboard. Three. Yeah, I was sort of hungry. As hungry as I could get with that perpetual knot in my stomach.

I said, "We're liable to miss him."

"He may not come home this evening. He often doesn't."

I glanced at him. Guy shrugged. "I'm fond of Peter, but there's nothing serious between us."

"That's good, because if I'm right, and you're wrong, Peter is going to jail for a long time."

He stared out the windshield at the apartment house. "You don't trust me, do you?"

"I don't know."

His mouth curved wryly. "That's honest -- if indecisive."

I said, "I want to trust you, Guy, because I like you. But I've been wrong about people before. I don't want to end up with my heart carved out." Literally or figuratively.

We sat in silence for minutes more before Guy said abruptly, "We're wasting our time. Did you want to grab dinner?" He started the Miata's engine.

Stakeout Rule #1. *Bring your own car or rent your own car. Do not rely on other people and their dwindling patience for your ride.*

"Thanks, no," I said. "I've got to get back."

There was another way to do this, I realized.

* * * * *

Bam! Bam! Bam!

I nearly dropped the can of salmon I was opening for my supper.

The shop was locked for the evening. That meant my visitor was probably one of two people -- and that didn't sound like Velvet's knock.

I set the can on the counter, wiped the fish oil off my hands. I opened the door. Sure enough, Jake stood there. Clearly this wasn't a social call.

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?" he said, brushing past me.

I was pretty sure he was not referring to the missing food groups in my evening repast. "Oh, come on," I said. "Guy was just helping me --"

"Yeah, I know what that faggot Snowden is helping you with. What part of *stay the fuck out of it* don't you understand?"

"This doesn't have anything to do with your investigation," I said angrily. Which was not true, although as far as I knew, Peter Verlane had not materialized on the cops' radar so far, so technically I was not trespassing on Jake's turf.

That's what I told myself, but it didn't fly as well with Jake.

"You're not that stupid," he said. "Then again, maybe you are. I go to the trouble of lying -- of falsifying police reports -- to keep you out of this shit, and you turn right around and walk back into it."

My heart slipped into heavy, slow punches against my rib cage. "Give me a break," I said. "You didn't lie to protect me. You lied to protect yourself. You never asked me what I wanted. And I sure as hell never made you any promises about what I would or wouldn't do."

His finger jabbed the air, punctuating his words. "Stay. Out. Of. It. Or this time, bad heart or not, I will throw your ass in jail."

"No, you won't," I said. "You wouldn't want to risk anyone discovering the connection between us."

His face changed, grew ugly, dangerous. "Are you threatening me?"

I hadn't been, but like an ember in dry grass, a self-destructive impulse flicked to life in my mind.

"My existence threatens you."

He shoved me back, hard. I crashed into the hall table, knocking it over, smashing the jar of old marbles I had collected. Glass balls skipped and bounced along the corridor. I landed on my back, my head banging down on the hardwood floor.

I lay there for a second, blinking up at the lighting fixture, taking in the years of dust and dead moths gathered in the etched-glass globe. The silence that followed was more startling than the collision of me and the table and the floor. I heard Jake's harsh breathing and a marble rolling away down the hall -- which seemed pretty damned appropriate, since I'd apparently lost all of mine.

He bent over me. Probably safer to stay submissively on my back, but I got up fast, knocking his hands away. It was a protective instinct and maybe not a wise one. I hadn't had time to inventory what, if any real damage, I'd sustained.

Weirdly, neither of us spoke. There was plenty to say, but no words.

Jake stared at me. In his eyes, I read the urge to knock me down again, to punch, to kick, to silence, to destroy. His hands were clenched by his side. I felt light-headed with anger and outrage -- and yeah, maybe a little fear. He could probably kill me by accident. My heart was tripping in my throat.

I was afraid if I tried to speak I would cry. From rage.

He swallowed once, dryly. He looked sick.

"I won't tell you again. Stay out of it."

He went, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Chapter Twenty-six

"I'm not comfortable with this, Adrien," Chan said when he returned my phone call early Tuesday morning. "Why exactly do you want this information?"

"I'm curious."

"Why wouldn't you ask Jake to nose around, if that's all it is?"

"First of all, because he doesn't have time for it. He's too busy with his big-league cult-murder case. Secondly, as you probably know, the situation between us is awkward these days."

A lot more awkward than Chan knew.

But he said gruffly, "Okay. But promise me you're not planning to do something stupid."

Like he thought I actually planned ahead when I wanted to do something stupid? I said, "Paul, it was just curiosity. Jesus, if it's that big of a deal, don't tell me."

He sighed. "No, I got the intel for you. Oliver Garibaldi owns a second home in Bel Air. Do you have a pencil?"

I stopped doodling little devil faces on the pad in front of me, and took down the address.

"Thanks, I owe you one."

"You can pay me back by not misusing this information. Jake will have my balls if you get into trouble."

"He'll only find out if you tell him," I said. I thanked him again and rang off.

One last try, I thought. One last effort before I gave up and took my lame-ass story to the cops and let them try to sort it out -- whether it compromised Jake or not.

* * * * *

The house, located in one of Los Angeles' most prestigious neighborhoods, was a gated, pseudo-English Tudor mansion on a nice chunk of manicured real estate. It could have modeled for cover art on *The Dain Curse*.

I parked far down the shady street and prepared to wait, sitting low in the Forester, baseball cap pulled over my face. When there were no cars or people around -- which was most of the time -- I used my binoculars to watch the front of the house -- not that there was anything to see. Trees effectively blocked most of the windows.

I listened to Rufus Wainwright's *Poses* a couple of times. After the fourth time, I wished I'd brought some other CDs.

No one came, no one went. No sign of life anywhere. The neighborhood was a quiet one, reminding me of Lisa's home in Porter Ranch, though here there was no pretense at being rural. The houses all sat well back from the street behind tall gates and vigorous foliage.

After a couple of boring hours that knotted up my back and gave me way too much time to think about things I didn't want to think about, I drove to a gas station, used the restroom, and stocked up on bottled water, chips, Ding Dongs, and mini doughnuts. The tune from "Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk" was playing in my head as I paid a small fortune for my repast. Like Rufus, everything I liked these days seemed a little bit strange and a little bit deadly.

When I drove slowly past the Garibaldi estate, the iron gates were wide open. A blue sedan was parked in the circular front court. I kept on driving, parking far down the opposite end of the street. I pulled out my binoculars.

Total void. I couldn't see anyone. I swore. Talk about the world's worst timing...

Was there a back entrance to the estate? The problem with one-man surveillance was that I didn't dare leave except when the call of nature got too loud. And I wasn't quite dedicated enough to the cause to try pissing into a bottle.

A cleaning van roared up, blocking my view of the house. I started the engine and drove still further down the street, parking on the opposite side this time. I knew I was pushing my luck. If I stayed positioned on this street much longer, the cops would be checking me out. Even if the cops didn't bother with me, I couldn't afford to attract my target's attention. The afternoon wore on. My patience wore out.

The ring of my cell nearly sent me into cardiac arrest. I found the phone, verified the caller ID. Lisa. *That* could wait.

Time for another pit stop. I returned to the gas station convenience store. Resisting the lure of comic books and Jawbreakers, I gave Guy a call.

"I need your help," I said. "Feel free to say no."

He said dryly, "I think you know I'm not going to tell you no."

"It involves doing something illegal."

He was silent.

"The thing is," I said, "if I'm right, then there's a chance you can clear yourself with the cops."

"And if you're wrong?"

"We could both wind up in jail or dead."

He said at last, "I take it you're going ahead with this plan whether I help you or not?"

"If you won't help, I'll try to think of another way."

"Oh, for God's sake," he said. "What is it you need me to do?"

Thirty minutes later the Miata pulled into the convenience store parking lot, and I climbed in. After I had directed Guy where to drive, he said, "Why don't we call the police?"

"We will, if I'm right. I want to make sure first."

"Isn't that for the police to determine?"

I didn't want to explain to him that I'd pretty much used all my wild-goose-chase credits with the cops on Sunday.

I directed Guy to a hill behind the estate. We had a better partial view of the front courtyard, though trees effectively blocked the back of the house. I could see the glint of a pool through the greenery.

"I'm not sure what good this is doing," Guy said. "We can't see a bloody thing."

"We can see who comes and goes. When it's dark we can park back on the street."

"If they were up to anything illegal, would they have cleaners in?"

"Maybe." I wondered about that myself. "They're obviously getting ready for some event."

"The whole town is getting ready for some event. It's called Christmas." Guy turned on the radio, and as though to illustrate his point, Bing Crosby babababooed "White Christmas."

We listened in silence to the music. The cleaning van departed. The blue sedan still sat in the driveway.

Guy cleared his throat, disturbing my thoughts. "This guy you're seeing," he began.

"That's over."

I felt his stare. I kept the binoculars trained on the house.

"But are you over it?" he asked finally.

I smiled. I knew I was not fooling anyone. "No."

A beat.

"Any chance of reconciliation?"

"No." I could hear the anger in that one tight word and figured Guy caught it too. That was probably just as well.

He let it go.

Silence fell between us.

"If you want to close your eyes for a bit, I'll watch," he said after a time.

"I'm not tired."

"No?" His tone was derisive, but there was an undertone of gentleness. I studied him curiously. I wondered what it would be like to be with someone gentle. Civilized. Someone not afraid to be who he was -- even if it was a guy with a fake English accent.

Dusk fell. Behind the tall gates and Sleeping Beauty brambles, Christmas lights winked on up and down the street -- not at the Garibaldi estate, however -- not even all red ones. There was no sign of life at all.

"Let's drive down."

Without comment, Guy started the engine. We drove back and parked a few yards down from the Garibaldi estate. I opened the car door -- remembered that I had left my gun back at the gas station in the glove compartment of the Forester.

"What is it?" Guy asked. "You have a weird look on your face."

"Huh? Uh...nothing."

I wasn't crazy about walking in there unarmed. If I was right, these people had very little to lose by adding one more body to the count. On the other hand, if I was wrong -- and let's face it, my batting average was not high these days -- and I ended up getting picked up by the cops with an unregistered gun in my possession, it was going to complicate things.

"I think I should go with you," Guy said abruptly.

I shook my head. "No. For two reasons. One, you're the only person who knows I'm in there. Which means, if I get into trouble..."

"I take it you've decided to trust me."

"And two, you haven't done anything illegal yet. So, if I do get myself arrested, at this point, you're still clean."

"How long will you be?"

"If I'm not back in forty-five minutes...no, make it an hour...call the police." I fished out a card. "Call him."

"*Riordan?* That asshole!"

"He is an asshole, but he'll come, and he won't waste time getting here." If simply for the pleasure of killing me himself.

"You've got forty-five minutes," Guy said. "Too much can happen in an hour."

I nodded, slipped out of the car, and started walking quickly toward the house. As an afterthought, I reached into my pocket, turned my cell-phone on vibrate.

The dusk had deepened to indigo as I slipped through the gates, sticking to the fence line and the blade-shaped shadows of the trees.

There was a long pool, the water as still as black glass in the twilight. A row of cypress stood like spear points. At the far end was a strange, flat-topped marble slab. An ugly piece of modern sculpture, I thought. Then I re-thought. I moved from tree to tree till I was close enough to kneel and examine the slab. It was hard to tell in that light, but it looked like the milky white stone was flecked and veined in black -- as though ink had spilled into the cracks.

No way, I thought, against the wave of revulsion.

But as I stared at the surrounding wall of trees -- and considered the distance to the nearest house -- I realized that it *was* possible. I closed my eyes for a moment. Shaking off the sickness, I got up and headed for the back of the house.

Two bulging trash bags sat at the top of the stairs. The door stood ajar. No light was visible from outside.

I tiptoed up the steps, eased the door open, peeking in. An incongruously cozy light shone from the stovetop, illuminating a long chef's kitchen with an embossed tin ceiling. Stainless steel appliances gleamed dully. The granite-topped center island was big enough to support a double sacrifice.

Several cans of baked beans sat on the island.

Per Chan's info, the house was supposed to be empty. I crossed to the stainless steel fridge, opened it. Bottle upon bottle of champagne nestled there.

Champagne and baked beans? Talk about perversion.

I almost didn't hear the rubber-soled approach of footsteps in time.

Just as the kitchen door swung open, I ducked into the pantry. Betty Sansone strode into the kitchen carrying a tray. She lowered the tray to the granite counter, set a bowl and glass in the sink. She walked out again.

I stole out of the pantry and took a look in the sink. Baked beans residue. I sniffed the glass. Not champagne. Water with something medicated.

Cautiously, I swung open the kitchen door and gazed down an empty hallway. I listened. My watch ticked away in the silence.

I had about thirty-nine minutes left.

I crept down the hall, freezing when a floorboard creaked underfoot. It sounded as loud as a shot to me, but nothing happened.

The hall opened onto an elegant dining room. A chandelier sparkled overhead, but the velvet draperies were drawn so that the light could not be seen from outside. A banquet-length table was covered in black linen and set with crystal, china, and silver. Tall black candles stood in ornate sterling candelabras. Don't ask me why black candles seemed so creepy, but a shiver slithered down my spine at the sight.

I counted thirty chairs and thirty place settings.

And canned baked beans for supper? I thought not. So there must be a caterer coming. Could I somehow use that to my advantage? Like how? Dress up as a waiter and search the house while balancing a tray of hors d'oeuvres?

Voices at two o'clock, approaching fast.

Damn, damn, damn.

I scrambled under the table and pulled the chairs back in position.

The thud of my heart in my ears was so loud I could hardly hear over it.

"How is that my fault?" a young male voice inquired. I thought I recognized the voice.

"I didn't *say* it was your fault. Why does it have to be anyone's fault? I'm just saying I'd like to get my nails done." That voice, I definitely recognized. Betty Sansone: She-Devil in training.

Betty and Wilma -- er, Wilmer, I thought. And all I needed now was for Fred and Barney and Dino the Dinosaur to show up.

Wilmer said, "Somebody has to stay here. We can't leave the caterers wandering around the house."

"Why *would* they?"

I watched twin pairs of Levi's-clad legs stroll past. That's all I could see of them. They passed down the hallway toward the kitchen, continuing to argue.

Crawling out on the other side of the table, I darted through the opposite door. Herringbone wood floors and an elegant white fireplace. No furniture. A giant inverted pentagram had been painted in blood-red at the center of the room.

That ought to give the caterers something to talk about.

I deduced from the conversation I'd overheard that those two were the only ones in the house -- or at least the only ones officially in the house. All the same, I kept an ear tuned as I crossed the room and entered the next hall.

A large staircase rose before me. I ran lightly up.

When I got to the top level, I hesitated, trying to figure which direction to go. I started to the left, then remembered that now that I was upstairs, there was strong possibility my footsteps could be heard from below. I tiptoed into the first room, wincing at each creak of the floor.

In the failing light I could barely discern that the room was carpeted in cream-beige tones and empty of furnishings. A large window overlooked the pool. I peered down at Betty, who was still arguing with Wilmer. He stood out of my line of vision.

Thatta girl. Don't give up without a fight.

I proceeded through a lavishly appointed bath -- as the real estate guides say -- into the next room, also empty. It was getting too dark to see. Another reason to hurry.

There were six bedrooms and four baths in all, each of them empty. By the time I'd finished my search, Betty and her companion had disappeared from the garden.

I crept to the head of the staircase and looked down. Nothing to see. I listened. *Hello darkness, my old friend...*

Damn. Where *were* they?

How much time did I have? I peered at my watch in the gloom. I'd used up thirty minutes already.

I needed to search the downstairs floor, but I was out of time. The longer I spent prowling these rooms, the higher the odds that I would be discovered. Besides, I couldn't believe that they would stash a prisoner on the ground floor with caterers and cleaners on the premises. Even the upstairs had been a stretch.

I'd been wrong. Again.

I crept down the main staircase, tiptoed along the hall that led back to the kitchen. I made my way across the slick tile floor like I was treading a mine field. Every second, I expected to hear someone raise the alarm.

At the door leading onto the garden I hesitated, listening. I didn't want to stroll outside and run into Betty or Wilmer. My gaze fell on an unobtrusive door to the left of the pantry. I had assumed it was a broom closet. Now I wondered.

I left my post at the door and sneaked back, easing open the door, expecting a wall of brooms and pails and mops to come crashing out like in the cartoons.

But the closet was empty. In fact, it felt too big for a closet. I felt around for a light switch. The dull overhead light came on, and I was staring down a flight of steps to what was most likely the basement.

Just like that, I knew I'd been right.

I tiptoed down the stairs and found myself on the outside of a door with an old-fashioned handle. Very cautiously, I turned the knob. It was locked. Big surprise.

I rattled the knob. Someone spoke on the other side. I couldn't make out what he said, but he wasn't yelling for reinforcements, which was probably a good sign.

With an uneasy glance over my shoulder, I pulled out my pocket knife and undid the screws holding the old-fashioned escutcheon in place. I didn't have time to be subtle. The door knob fell out.

I opened the door.

The room was a store room. Junk was piled from floor to ceiling. Enough space had been cleared in the center of the room for a cot. A man lay on the cot. He was talking to the ceiling.

It was Gabriel Savant.

"Hey," I whispered.

He continued to hold forth with the shapes in the plaster ceiling.

I walked over to the cot and stared down. He stopped talking and gazed up at me with bloodshot, dilated eyes.

"Savant," I said. "Can you walk?"

"I know you," he said. "I remember you." He began to hum the melody to the old Johnny Mercer song, "I Remember You." Off key.

"Shhhhhhhh!" I squatted for a closer look at him. One look at his eyes told me all I needed to know. He was drugged out of his skull. No way could I waltz him out of there on my own.

Savant smiled at me.

"You're the bookseller. Avery. Avery...I've forgotten your last name."

"It doesn't matter," I said. I flicked open my cell phone, relieved to see I had a signal. I rang Guy.

"Where are you?" he answered. "There's a catering truck pulling into the gates."

Keeping my voice low, I said, "They've got Savant locked in the basement. He's totally stoned."

"You need to get out of there," Guy said vehemently. "Now."

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah. I'll call the police. Get out of there now. Go!"

"I'm going to try to --"

"No!"

His panic silenced me.

"...a distant bell..." crooned Savant.

Fiercely, Guy said, "If they find you, they won't let you leave. They can't. Don't you realize what today is?"

"Friday?" Then it hit me. "December twenty-first." *Winter Solstice.*

"Yule," agreed Guy.

"Is the blue sedan still parked out front?"

"What? Yes! GO!"

"I'm on my way. Call the cops," I said and rang off. So I still had both Betty and Wilmer to contend with. The arrival of the caterers wouldn't help, if we got ourselves locked up in this soundproof basement -- or taken to another location before the cops arrived. I smacked Savant's gaunt cheek lightly. "Savant? Gabe, wake up!"

He stopped singing. Peered at me. "Wah...wha?"

"We've got to get out of here. Can you walk?"

"Wha -- where?"

“Not far.” I wasn’t sure I could get him up the stairs, and I was damn sure I couldn’t get him across the yard without being seen. Frankly, I doubted I could get him across the yard at all, but maybe I could stash him somewhere safe on the grounds. Just until the cops arrived. I was afraid to leave him in the basement in case someone decided practicality was preferable to ritual and dispatched him when they heard the sirens.

I draped his arm around my neck, levered him to his feet. He hugged me.

“Always liked you,” he said.

“Yeah, not now.”

“When my life is through...” he sang.

“Shut up, for God’s sake,” I told him.

He chuckled, then rolled his head back on his shoulders and bellowed, “...and the angels ask me to reeeecaaaaaaaall...”

I slapped my hand over his chapped mouth. “Shut. *Up*.”

He began to laugh. His whole body shook with gusts of giggles. His eyes ran. Snot blew out his nostrils on my hand.

It wasn’t easy, but I got him up the stairs, one lurching step at a time. I half-dragged him through the kitchen, hauled him out the back door, expecting every moment to hear shouts of discovery behind us. We stumbled drunkenly along the cobblestone walk until I spied the half-shed where the trash bins were kept.

I unlatched the gate, lowered Savant behind the battered bins. He stretched out and prepared to go to sleep.

I got out from behind the bins, eased shut the gate, and started back across the yard. There was no hint of sirens in the chilly night’s breeze. Maybe Guy couldn’t get hold of Jake. Maybe Jake figured this was one way of eliminating a potential leak in his private life.

Or maybe Guy hadn’t called.

I ran past the black and silent pool and the spectral white marble slab.

Rounding the corner, I came face-to-face with Harry Potter.

No, it just looked like Potter in the gloom. It had to be Wilmer aka Peter Verlane.

Verlane was as startled as I was. “Hey!” he cried out after a second. I took advantage and shoved him into the pool.

He went in yelling and splashing, making waves and racket enough for a Sea World main attraction. Lights flared on around the pool courtyard.

“Hey!” shrieked Betty from somewhere behind me.

I ran for the front, past the bewildered-looking caterers with their trays of stuffed shrimp and crab puffs.

Peter Verlane squelched after me.

As I reached the tree-lined driveway, headlights slid along the banks of rosebushes, and a car rolled silently through the tall gates. A black Mercedes. For a moment, I froze in that spotlight.

The driver braked for half a second, then accelerated.

I jumped to the side. I landed lightly in the grass and picked myself up, ready to run.

The car turned sharply, braked, and reversed, heading back my way.

Peter Verlane materialized out of the darkness, sprinting past me. He reached the gates, swinging them closed. They clanged shut before I could reach them.

"Are you nuts?" I panted. "The caterers are right over there."

He glared at me defiantly.

The Mercedes purred up behind us. I turned, and Oliver Garibaldi got out of the car. He wore a red-lined cape. Maybe he thought it was Halloween. Maybe he'd planned on doing magic tricks. He stared at me with eyes like black holes in his face.

"I am disappointed," he said.

"Don't be," I said.

Betty Sansone came puffing up. She leaned against the tail of the Mercedes. "Savant's gone," she said.

Garibaldi turned to me. I shrugged. He pointed at me, abracadabra style. "*You will die.*"

"So will you. That's life." I turned to the gatekeeper. "Get out of the way."

Peter looked to Garibaldi. Garibaldi seemed momentarily nonplussed, as though he couldn't understand why I hadn't died to order. The other car door opened. Ava got out. "*Grab him!*" she commanded.

Peter and Betty moved forward, then stopped as the familiar sound of sirens in the night came wafting on the breeze. Betty turned and pelted back toward the house.

Garibaldi stretched out both hands as though he planned on levitating me. "Spirits of the Abyss, Lords of Hell, cast your darkness on his shell. Break him, burn him, in the night, destroy my enemy with thy might --"

"Open the gate, Peter," Guy's voice said from the other side of the iron bars, and Peter spun to face him.

That prosaic request seemed to throw Garibaldi momentarily off his stride. He swung around, the cape gently unfurling in his wake.

"For Christ's sake, stop him!" exclaimed Ava. And when no one moved, "*Pull yourselves together.*"

For Christ's sake? I bit back a shaky laugh. "Come on, it's over," I said. "The cops will be here in less than a minute." I walked toward the gate. Motionless, Peter blocked my way, one hand gripping the metal bars.

"Peter," Guy said urgently, "Don't make it worse. Let him out."

"No," cried Ava. "Listen to *me!*"

"Lady, get real," I said. "Or do you think you can kill me, Guy, Savant, and the caterers -- and the cops won't notice?"

Peter moved aside, swinging open the gate, and squeezing out past Guy. He disappeared into the night, his footsteps fading as he ran.

Garibaldi said to me, "Death and despair is your future now."

"Blue denims and prison food are yours," I said and slammed the gate behind me.

"Are you okay?" Guy asked. He put his hands to my face as though examining me for signs of bewitchment.

"Yes. Thanks to you."

"I'm sure you'd have come up with a Plan B." He seemed to recall himself, letting me go.

The blue sedan screeched up the drive, swerved around the Mercedes, and began to honk furiously for us to open the gate. Ignoring this, I said to Guy, "Savant is stashed in the shed with the trash bins. Have the cops use luminol when they examine the sculpture by the swimming pool. I think it's an altar."

His eyes looked stricken. Then he said, "What do you mean? Where will you be?"

I said, "Will you do me a favor? Keep my name out of it, if you can?"

"What are you talking about? They all know you were here." He gestured to the frantically honking Betty, and Garibaldi and Ava who were arguing furiously across the top of the Mercedes.

"I don't think they're going to have much to say to the cops. The last thing any of them want is another witness to testify against them."

Guy's eyes were colorless in the moonlight. "You can't be serious."

"I am. And for reasons that I can't go into, I'm pretty sure the cops won't push you to offer my name up. There's plenty here to convict them all without me."

"But...if I take credit for finding Savant...."

"You might be able to redeem yourself in the eyes of the faculty and parents who believe this was your fault."

The sirens were getting louder.

"I've got to go," I said. "Or this will be moot."

"Adrien, this is..."

I said, "Merry Christmas, Guy."

Chapter Twenty-seven

I was trapped in a Perry Como Christmas special.

It had started at the crack of dawn. Dauten, mini-cam in hand, shouting stage directions like Cecil B. de Mille, gathered us around the towering Christmas tree and filmed us taking turns opening our presents -- an embarrassing wealth of presents -- not a tie in the bunch.

"Everyone look at Emma. Look surprised, Emma!" Dauten would command. Or, "I missed that! Adrien, pretend to open that one again."

But I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't touched. Natalie and Lauren and (according to the card) Lauren's inexplicably absent husband had gone in on software called *Journey to the Wild Divine*, a kind of video game with biofeedback sensors. Emma had made me a colorful assortment of bookmarks. Dauten and Lisa had bought me a ticket for one of those Atlantis all-gay cruise ship vacations. Everything had been so carefully chosen and was so eagerly offered; it was excruciating.

The gift exchange segment was followed of necessity by sharing a "wee dram" with Bill. Then we had to comparison shop the booze. Luckily, while we could still walk, the traditional suicide feast was served.

This was followed by charades. Yep, *charades*.

I kept that frozen smile in place, despite the headache, despite the indigestion, despite the nerve-shattering shrieks of laughter and screams of delight. I knew how Scrooge must have felt spending that first Christmas at his nephew's: a smiling shipwreck victim sharing supper with cannibals.

From dawn to dusk there was no letting up of the relentless holly-jolliness, and every single moment I tried to tune out, to think back over the events of the past week, one or the

other of my self-appointed family members would make an effort to re-engage my flagging interest.

Didn't anyone want to take a nap or go for a walk or watch TV? No, they kept hovering. Did they have me on a suicide watch? And here I thought I was coping so well.

It wasn't until Emma finally went off to play the piano that Lisa said very casually, "We saw Jake on the telly last night. He's certainly getting a lot of press. I expect they'll make him Chief of Police one of these days. Have they found That Boy yet?"

She meant Angus. Peter Verlane had been picked up within hours of the police raid on Garibaldi's *Bel Air* estate. "They think he's in Mexico, maybe," I remarked.

"So you'll have to hire someone at the bookstore, won't you?"

"Yes, and I don't want to talk about it now."

She smiled a fleeting satisfied smile, leaning back against the sofa cushions. Emma, seated at the piano, plinked out "My Favorite Things" for the third time in a row.

"Unbelievable," Bill remarked, "that Oliver could have been involved in that stuff -- in murder -- it's absolutely unbelievable."

"I believe it," Lisa said. "He was always a tad too...intense. Something in his eyes..." She shivered delicately.

"When I think of the possible ramifications," Bill said. "Some of the deals he was part of." He knocked back another snootful of Laphroaig and held the bottle up for me.

I shook my head.

"He took a lot of people in," Lisa said. "As for Ava...any woman who would even *think* of wearing red satin to her wedding is a danger to herself and the community."

"I heard on the news that they found over a hundred scrolls in his wine cellar. Scrolls written in blood by people selling their souls to the Devil." Natalie's eyes sparkled with ghoulish delight. Come to think of it, maybe she *was* a good fit for the bookstore.

"Fifty-six," I said. "They didn't just sign their souls away. They signed off on property, making Garibaldi the beneficiary of their wills."

"*So* bizarre."

Lauren, who had been rather subdued all day -- pining perhaps for her missing, life-sized Ken doll -- said, "Human sacrifice. That's the part I can't believe. And in *Bel Air*, of all places. How many people did they kill to honor their so-called demon?"

"Who knows? So far they've confessed to five, including the girl they left at Angus's to try and implicate him."

"He was already implicated," Lisa reminded me too sweetly.

I ignored this. Over at the piano, Emma began "My Favorite Things" yet again.

"He was obviously insane," Bill said. "Oliver, I mean. It's amazing he never showed any sign of it. You wouldn't believe the genius the man had for business."

I opened my mouth, but thought better of it.

“Adrien, you look so much like your father,” Lisa said suddenly.

The rest of them studied me with interest. Bill reached over, poured me another shot from the bottle of his magic elixir Laphroaig.

Lisa prattled on. “It’s uncanny. Of course, he has my eyes. And my nose. And my hands. And he gets his love of the arts from me.”

I bit my tongue -- one of the two things I was truly sure were my own.

The phone rang, mercifully halting what appeared to be the “Chopsticks” version of “My Favorite Things.”

Natalie said brightly, “I guess we’ll see all the details on *Sixty Minutes*.”

“There’s a guy on the phone asking for you,” Emma called.

Before I had time to acknowledge the surge of disbelieving hope, she corrected herself. “I mean his *name* is Guy.” She was smiling, finding that amusing.

How had Snowden managed to track me here? Witchcraft?

Emma waited at the phone like a junior PA, ready to jettison this unsolicited call if I said the word.

I glanced around. Everyone in the room seemed to be looking at me, smiling at me, waiting for me to decide.

Oh, well, what the hell.

I took the call.

 THE END 

Josh Lanyon

Josh Lanyon is the author of three Adrien English mystery novels. THE HELL YOU SAY was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award and is the winner of the 2006 USABookNews awards for GLBT fiction. Josh lives in Los Angeles, California, and is currently at work on the fourth book in the series, DEATH OF A PIRATE KING.