



BRIAN YANSKY

THE LIBRARIAN
AND THE
WITCH

STRANGELY SCARY FUNNY

The Librarian And The Witch

Strangely Scary Funny

Brian Yansky

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THE LIBRARIAN AND THE WITCH

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Chapter One

I sat at the counter talking to Rip, and he made the point that if we ever had to fight angels, we wouldn't have a chance. I argued that there were more of us, many more, and that Supernatural humans might have a chance because of our numbers. He said I wasn't counting on how powerful angels were.

“It would be like sling shots against nuclear weapons. How much chance do a thousand slingshots have against one nuclear bomb?”

I heard the little bell above the door of Lucy's café tinkle but didn't pay much attention until the voices in the cafe, all at once, fell silent. The sound of silence. It's loud.

I turned, like everyone else, to look at the door and saw a witch, the witch. Easy to spot. She was wearing a black dress, big black pointy hat, black Mary Jane heels. Her hair was green and a tangled mess. Think magpie bird nest. She had a very prominent wart on her chin. She was obviously a traditionalist.

“I'm looking for the librarian,” she said. She was making a dramatic entrance, I thought. She was looking right at me when she said it, so, actually, she was looking at the librarian.

It wasn't every day a witch entered the café, just most. A witch in traditional garb, though. That was another thing entirely. Very few of those were still around, even in the haunted woods.

All eyes turned to me and then back to her, like they expected a verbal tennis match.

Another day. Another emergency. I raised my hand, and she strode over, looking very much like someone who had woken up on the wrong side of the bed and then fallen out of it.

“I’m here to collect my favor,” she said.

“Let’s find a table,” I said.

“How are you, Rowena?” Rip said, swiveling around to face her. “You look good. Is that a new wart?”

“Made from my dearly departed toad, Frederick. You remember Frederick?”

“Very talkative for a toad,” Rip said.

“He croaked,” she said, “and then he croaked.”

“Could jump like a frog if I remember correctly.”

“You usually do,” she said. “It is a rare trait in men.”

“I remember a certain picnic you and I took,” he said, staring into her startlingly green eyes.

“Do not undress me with your eyes, Mr. Van Winkle,” the witch said in a flirty voice.

He smiled. “Apologies.”

“That’s what the Creator made hands for.”

“I’ll remember that,” Rip said.

I could see he had affection for her.

She turned to me. “Lead on Librarian.”

I led on over to a booth in the corner. Olive brought me a fresh cup of coffee and the witch a steaming purple drink. Maybe tea, but I doubted it. Maybe eye of newt. The witch seemed pleased by it, whatever it was. Rowena and Olive seemed to know each other. Of course, Olive was a witch. I suppose the witches had conventions and witchy events.

“You remembered,” Rowena said to Olive.

“Of course, your Highness.”

Olive asked me if I wanted more coffee and I said yes because I found it difficult to say no to coffee.

“Highness?” I said after Olive had moved on.

“We witches are a democracy,” Rowena said, “but the witches of the haunted forest make one witch their queen by ballot. I am that one.”

“For how long?”

“As long as I can stay alive,” she said. “Generally, much longer than librarians, from what I’m told.”

I couldn’t argue with that. On average, librarians didn’t have life-spans much longer than flies.

“I owe you a favor,” I said. “I’m not giving you my first born though.”

She had hinted that might be the price of that favor back when I asked her for a favor, but only after I’d made the deal.

“You don’t have one yet, anyway.”

“You’re not getting him or her when I do,” I said. “If I do.”

She smiled slightly. I remembered the teeth from when I visited her in the forest. They looked like weathered tombstones in a sinking graveyard.

“It’s a small favor I’m here to ask, young librarian.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I need you to find my familiar. We had a little tiff, and she has wandered off. I need her back.”

“What kind of animal is your familiar?”

“Traditional black cat. She’s hiding. The little devil is good at it. She could even be in Eden, but I think it more likely she’s in the haunted forest.”

I was relieved. The favor wasn’t excessive. I was good at finding things, alive or dead, animal or human, or one of the many other creatures that inhabited the world and, likely, the universe beyond.

She leaned forward and, holding her cup with both hands, drank down all of her drink. She wiped her mouth with the back of a boney hand.

“Blood of a virgin,” she said. “Nothing quite like it to pick you up after a long night out doing witchy things.”

“Why did your familiar run away?” I said.

“Creative differences.”

“It might help me find her faster if I knew.”

“Not my problem.”

“What if she doesn’t want to come?”

“Use this.” She slid a collar attached to a leash. The collar had the word Chaos on it.

“You named your cat Chaos?” I said.

“It seemed a good idea at the time,” she said. “Slip that on her and she won’t be able to use any of her magic on you.”

“Why me? You must have dozens of witches you can send out.”

She shrugged. “They don’t owe me a favor. Bring her to me and your debt will be paid.”

She stood up.

“Librarian,” she said, nodding.

“Rowena,” I said. “See you soon.”

She left and Rip came over and sat across from me.

“You promised her something?”

“No,” I said. “Yes.”

“What did you promise?”

“A favor.”

“Never promise a witch a favor. Promise her something specific.”

“It’s a little late for that. I promised her a favor when she gave me some information a few weeks ago. Now she’s

cashing in.”

“What does she want you to do?”

“Find her cat.”

“Chaos?”

“Who names a cat Chaos?” I said even though technically I knew Rowena, queen of witches.

“She tell you about her sisters?”

“She didn’t.”

“Katrina and Zeena. Three witch sisters. If she didn’t tell you, it means she probably thinks one of them has Chaos.”

Olive came back with the glass coffeepot and poured me a fresh cup of coffee.

“Did you really serve Rowena virgin blood?” I asked Olive.

“Dandelion wine with a touch of blackberry,” she said.

She moved on to refill other customers’ cups.

“Why wouldn’t she tell me about the sisters?”

“You owe her the favor. Not the other way around. Rowena would think it’s up to you to fulfill your obligation.”

I asked him for directions to Zeena’s cabin in the woods and he gave them, but added that even if I faithfully followed his directions, I might get lost.

“You know how it is. You’ve been out there enough. The woods likes its games.”

I’d been lost in the woods for three days before I stumbled upon Eden. I remembered its games. The sounds at night. The quicksand. The fearsome creatures. The talking trees who liked to give bad directions and make their leaves whisper your darkest secrets. A troop of monkeys chattering about how I would die and a dozen of them attacking me just as night fell. I would have died, but something helped me fight them off, something I couldn’t see, a shadow. I know how that sounds.

Like maybe I'd eaten too many magic mushrooms along the way. But whatever it was, it moved too fast for me to see.

I doctored my coffee with the proper amount of sugar and cream and drank it while Rip told me that making love to a witch while flying on her broomstick was something every man should strive for before he died. Then he gave details. Far, far too many details.

I interrupted him to say I had to go to the library. When I was outside and walking toward the library, I glanced into the café through the picture window and saw Rip, the old goat, laughing with Olive, who was standing by his booth holding a pot of coffee.

Rip was a man with many secrets and many experiences, in spite of the fact he'd once fallen asleep for twenty years. He was my best friend in Eden, with the exception of Olive. That was kind of a surprise. Life was full of them.

Chapter Two

I opened the library three minutes before nine. The government man, Mr. Rosenbottom, was waiting. He looked at his watch and made a little hmph sound. I thought he was disappointed he couldn't chastise me for opening the library late. He went in and got *The New York Times* and sat at a table in the kitchen. Somehow, *The New York Times* showed up every morning in the library. However, we did not get the internet or access to the web. No one in town did. We did get, from time to time, television reception, though it was unpredictable. It usually lasted a day or two, but at some point and the color would drain away and the picture become black and white. Sometimes squiggly lines, fuzz, and white noise took over. There could be pretty strange sounds from it for a few minutes. Screaming, crying, old men talking in tongues, an old woman named Sally giving advice on sex—that sort of thing. It was nice while it lasted.

I might want that on my tombstone. It was nice while it lasted. The TV reception did always come back after a few days or weeks. Some people in town used this to support their belief in reincarnation.

Mrs. Betty Waters came in after a few minutes. She was looking for a book on conversing with the dead.

“A general guide?” I asked. “I think we have *Talking to the Dead for Dummies*. Something like that? We have more sophisticated books if you're experienced. I know some people like the *Speaking to Spirits* series.”

“Seth comes to see me every morning, but we often have disagreements. He can be as infuriating in death as he was in life.”

“Seth,” I said. I made a guess. “Your husband?”

She nodded. “Late husband.”

“But you still talk to him.”

“Technically, I’m a widow. He is disagreeable on purpose. It drives me crazy.”

“Can you give me an example?”

She gave me ten of them. He smelled bad. He said he could hear her breathing and was offended. She wanted him to get a wig, and he refused. He wanted her to cut her throat so they could be together, and she refused. He was always complaining that he was cold and turning the heat up to 88 degrees.

“It sounds to me like you want him to be alive,” I said.

She frowned. “When we were married, it was until death do we part. We’ve parted.”

“You need to be honest with him.”

“He’s haunting me. I’ve told him it would be best if he stopped coming. He won’t listen.”

“What about seeing the therapist?”

“Forgive me, but she is batshit crazy,” Mrs. Betty Waters said.

“I can’t really argue with that,” I admitted.

“I want to get rid of him. Do you have any books on how to get rid of dead people? That’s what I need.”

“Let me take a look upstairs,” I said.

I went upstairs and back to one of the non-fiction bedrooms. I asked the library to send me books about ridding a house of a spirit. Books flew at me from every direction. I dodged them. I realized I was getting books about exorcism and such. Even a long short story by James Joyce called “The

Dead”. There weren’t even zombies or ghosts in that story. It was disappointing.

I made my request more specific. I wanted a book about a spirit that wasn’t an evil spirit but an annoyance. There was one pamphlet written back in the 1700s that I thought might help Mrs. Waters. It was titled “How I got rid of my wife’s ghost.” However, as I read it in more detail, I realized the author had killed his wife, and she was very upset about it and so he had to kill her again to get rid of her.

When I took the pamphlet downstairs to Mrs. Waters, I told her that the only material I could find was a pamphlet written by a man who had murdered his wife and whose wife was coming to see him every day to talk about what had gone wrong between them.

“It doesn’t really apply to your situation,” I said, “but it’s all we’ve got. Maybe you should go see Walter and the ghostbusters. Maybe they could help you.”

She took the pamphlet from my hand. She said, “Even though the situation is completely different, I think it might be helpful.”

“Are you sure?” I said.

She carefully looked away. Not a second of eye contact. “I’ll be sure to get this back to you within two weeks.”

I brought up her name in the computer system and added the book to her account.

The ghost of the library (the second one I’d had in my short time as librarian) Captain (in the Civil War) Bennett Longstreet, appeared and told me that I should have asked him about the dead. He had first-hand experience.

“Apologies,” I said.

“This is one of the problems,” he said. “You, in this modern age, do not regard the dead’s opinions as mattering. You prefer not to look back, to see history for what it is.”

“And what’s that?”

“Foreshadowing. If you can read the past, you can see the future.”

“How does that help Mrs. Waters?” I said.

“Her husband is acting this way because he wants revenge. If she can find a way to make peace with him, instead of escalating the arguments, she might convince him it’s in his best interest to move on. Likely, that starts with admitting what she did to him and apologizing.”

“That actually makes sense,” I said.

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“Maybe you should think about using it for your situation. Your wife and your best friend had an affair while you were off fighting in The Civil War and when you returned they decided to murder you rather than end the affair. And you ended up stuck here in the library. What would your foreshadowing tell you to do?”

“Nothing to do,” he said.

“Really?”

He gave me a haunted look. Of course, he was technically a ghost haunting the library, so it wasn’t a completely new look. He disappeared.

Just before eleven, I had one more customer. He was large and hairy. Hairy hair, hairy beard, hairy arms, hairy neck. Something about the way he walked (a get out of my way walk) and his looks made me pretty sure he was a werewolf.

“You got any books on anger management?” he said angrily.

I knew we did, and I went and got them for him. I brought him six. I thought he could use them.

“I may be a little late getting them back,” he growled. “I’m a slow reader.”

“That’s all right,” I said.

“You’re too fucking kind,” he said and then at the door, taking a deep breath, he turned toward me.

“Thanks,” he said.

He banged the door open and slammed the door shut.

Chapter Three

I closed the library and went downstairs to get my day pack for my trip into the haunted woods. I had found the pack in the collection of curiosities. As far as I could see, the pack had no magical properties or any reason to be in the collection. I assumed that a former librarian had left it there. I got a bottle of water from my fridge, some cookies, an apple and a piece of fried chicken I'd brought home from Lucy's yesterday. I got the magic sword (that might or might not be Excalibur) from the collection of curiosities and went upstairs. I was about to make my way out of town when a crow landed on my shoulder.

"Can you stop by my house?" the crow said.

A crow asking me to stop by its house would have been very troubling. How would I even find it? Fortunately, crows were excellent mimics, and this one used Olive's voice when it asked its question, so I knew the message was from Olive.

I walked over to her house, which was about three blocks away. On the way, I fantasized that she was calling me because she had the sudden overwhelming desire to have sex with me. We had not had sex yet. We had almost had sex, but her father had been cutting up a body in the basement and the sawing and hacking had spoiled the mood.

Olive was standing on the wrap-around porch of the family home, an old Victorian that had a haunted house look even though it wasn't. No ghosts. One zombie, but I didn't think he counted since he was her father.

She asked me in, and we went down to the comfortable small room Olive called a sitting room. We sat on an old Victorian hand-carved walnut sofa. Very comfortable. I thought of sex again. We could easily have sex on this fancy sofa.

Olive was not looking at me in a way that said she had any intention or even any desire to have sex with me at that moment. She looked worried and a little angry.

“Please don’t get all upset before I explain what happened,” Olive said.

“All right,” I said, but of course the use of the all before upset me.

“My father learned that we have a Nazi in Eden,” she said.

“A Nazi?” I said, surprised. “A real one?”

“A colonel,” she said. “Over a hundred, but looked less than half that.”

“Who?”

“Maybe I should say had a Nazi.”

I looked her over. I could see the strain on her pretty face. She pushed back her hair. I was sitting with my back against the back of the sofa. She was perched. Almost as if she was ready to fly off at the slightest provocation.

“Maybe you better tell me what you want to tell me,” I said.

“A commandant of one of the death camps,” she said. “Someone who oversaw the murder of thousands of Jews.”

“How did he end up here?”

She shrugged. How did anyone end up here? They took a wrong turn somewhere down in the flatlands and the next thing they knew, they were in a haunted forest. At some point, they realized this fact because a tree screamed at them or they ran into a monster or a fair maiden sharpening her knife. The haunted forest played its game of death. But the person escaped because they found Eden. Eden saved them.

“One of the Nazi’s former lovers told my father about the man, Herr Berber. I’ve seen him but never talked to him. He’s one of those townspeople who keeps to himself. But he had an affair with Mary Plimpton and she spoke to my father about him.”

“Offered him to your father? Nazi. Deserved something bad. She was angry at him and your father was hungry?”

“I don’t know if it was because of time travel or if the man was sick, but Mad Mikey spoiled almost right away. My father only got one good meal from the gangster.”

“So, Mary Plimpton convinced him to pay Herr Berber a visit.”

“My father found a picture in a history book that convinced him Herr Berber was the commandant whose real name was Adolph Schultz. The man deserved to die.”

“I understand the thinking,” I said.

“He tried to kill my father. He tried to choke him to death, which was, you know, kind of redundant in a zombie.”

Her father happened to be passing by and stuck his pale head into the room and said, “I’m sorry, librarian. I know I’ve put you in a tough position.”

He was a tall man, handsome in an intellectual kind of way: sculptured beard, deep-set dark eyes, and thick curly gray hair. He stepped into the room.

“Dad, don’t,” Olive said.

He went on, “I was salivating as I caught a whiff of his flesh. I could hear his blood pumping. It was a Mozart concert for me. He was unarmed, but he still had that arrogant confidence of Nazi officers. His piercing blue eyes held mine. Only when I opened my mouth did fear come into those eyes. I grabbed his shoulders, tearing off his shirt and exposing the tender flesh. Are you getting the picture, librarian?”

“Dad, please,” Olive said.

“I tore him open. To be honest, the flesh tasted disgustingly sweet, like overripe fruit. It didn’t stop me. I just

bit him in other places. In the end, the Nazi did what most did. He begged for mercy. I asked him if he gave the Jews in his concentration camp mercy? He tried to bribe me. That was the only point I became really angry.

“I tore off chunks of flesh, ripping through his skin and muscle. Chomping on his bones. It was a real workout. When I was finished, I stretched my limbs before shuffling on home for a nap.

“There. That’s the truth of it. I wouldn’t blame you if you called a mob together and had a publicly burning. The truth isn’t pretty. You know what’s worse? I enjoyed every minute of it.”

He continued down the hall.

“He’s not a good advocate for his own survival,” Olive said. “I have to be. He feels guilt. Sometimes he wants that mob to get him.”

“You do know we can’t have people going around killing other townspeople and eating them are. You do know that, right?”

“He feels bad,” she said. “You can see that right. That’s why he went into all that detail. He wants you to punish him.”

“Maybe I should.”

“The Nazi did try to kill my father.”

“It’s difficult to ignore that your father was eating him first.”

“He was a bad man,” she said.

“The Nazi was most definitely a wicked man, but it doesn’t change the fact that your father ate him.”

“A war criminal hiding in Eden.”

“Still,” I said. “If anyone finds out, there will be a mob and there will be an execution. People are touchy about zombies, anyway. They don’t trust them.”

I couldn’t help the thought; they were right not to. A hungry zombie might as well be a hungry tiger. They were

going to worry about the mess after dinner.

Olive's father shuffled back into the room, looking contrite. He stood over by the window. The velvet curtains had been pulled and there was a view of the street. I saw an old couple walking by.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I know I'm putting you in an awkward position, librarian. I don't really want to die in a public way. The urge is just so overwhelming. It's like a man who has been lost in the desert for two days who comes upon a burbling stream. It gets the best of me."

The librarian in Eden had many duties. Besides taking care of the library and the collection of curiosities, he was the protector of the town and its citizens. I wasn't doing my job. Maybe this time it was a Nazi. Some time it might be someone just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"If this happens again, I'll arrest you and they'll be a trial. They'll hang you, Professor. It would make me very unhappy, but that's the way this plays out."

"Just as a point of order," the professor said. "My neck has already been broken several times. You'll need to burn me at the stake if it comes to execution."

"Not helping, Dad," Olive said.

"Thank you for pointing that out," I said.

"No problem," the professor said.

Olive was biting her lip. "He's not like other zombies. He still has a conscience. Even though the man was obviously evil and had been a mass murderer of men, women, and children, my father feels bad about killing and eating him. That's got to count for something."

"To be honest," the professor said. "Not so much about the eating."

"There aren't any more Nazis in town," Olive said. "He won't do it again."

"What if he does?" I said. "You say he won't and I'd like to believe that, but what if he does? It's true there are other

bad people in town. That can't be the justification for killing. He can't be the judge of who lives and dies."

"He was a Nazi commandant in a death camp," Olive said.

"What if the professor doesn't stop there? What if he can't? He gets hungry, so he has to eat. You need some kind of strategy to keep him from killing. If he kills again, I'm going to arrest him."

"Like what? Lock him in chains in the basement?" Olive shouted.

"I don't know," I admitted.

The professor said, "The librarian's right. I can't be trusted. There are times my instincts kick in and I can't control myself. I am sorry."

"He is sorry," Olive said.

The professor yawned. He said his meal had made him sleepy. He was going to go down to the basement and take a nap.

Olive and I went out onto the front porch. We sat on porch chairs. Like most days in Eden, the weather was what I considered perfect. Sunny. Seventies. Clear sky.

We argued for a while longer. Olive kept repeating how important her father was to her and how she couldn't bear the thought of him starving and if I really loved her, I wouldn't let her father starve.

Finally, I said, "We'll figure something out. Maybe we can find another way for him to sustain himself."

Olive looked at me with tense, hopeful eyes. "You promise?"

"I promise," I said. "I like your father. You know I don't want anything to happen to him."

"But," she said.

"I worry."

"He can control it."

“That he’ll be that guy in the desert again. He’ll see the water. He’ll drink. What if it’s someone who just happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time when it happens? What then?”

It was a rhetorical question. She didn’t try to answer it, but I could see her face set and I knew the “what then?” for her would not be answered in the same way the “what then?” would be answered by me. I had the whole town to protect. The truth was, even the Nazi—though I had to admit I wasn’t too upset about him—should have been protected by me.

I knew, sooner or later, something was going to have to be done about him and I would have to do it. She knew it too. We looked at each other with resentment.

“We’ll find a way,” I said.

She didn’t say anything.

Chapter Four

I crossed the bridge over the fast-moving stream gurgling beneath me and into the haunted woods. At first it didn't look all that haunted. The trees were tall and straight and full of healthy leaves (except the tree that had been poisoned by Diana on orders from Beelzebub, Lucifer's right-hand demon, because she thought it was The Tree of Life).

But after the length of about two football fields, the forest began to turn. The trees became gnarled and twisted, their limbs reaching out like skeletal fingers. Vines crept up them and strangled the green away; the once-lush foliage was replaced with scrub brush and weeds. The sun faded, and the woods were shrouded in shadows, and it was hard to shake the feeling that something threatening was just out of sight. The air turned damp and the pungent smell of decaying leaves, moss, and mildew hung in it. The silence was unnerving. Suddenly, it was broken by the screeches and screams of monkeys in the trees above. They kept up a ceaseless chatter, but they didn't attack.

I came to a fork on the path and went left just as Rip had told me to, but then I came to a second fork, which Rip had not mentioned. I had to make a choice, and I went with my gut. I took the path less taken, like the narrator of the Frost poem, though neither of them looked like much more than animal paths. A foul wind blew over me and I sneezed. That made me feel a little better. I was allergic to cats.

It was a yin, yang situation as I walked down the path. I continued to sneeze uncomfortably, but I continued to sneeze uncomfortably. Cat. Of course, it could be something else. There was a lot of flora in the haunted woods, much of it poisonous, according to Olive. Also, a lot of faunas. If I was allergic to little cats, maybe I was allergic to big cats. I kept my eyes wide open.

I'd gone about half a mile when a slim, handsome man with a neatly trimmed coal-black beard, leaning leisurely against a tree, said, "I thought you might be along this way."

In hell, I always smelled Sulphur, decay, and the metallic smell of blood. A little brimstone on the side sometimes. Here I smelled nothing but the forest. But here was hell. There could be no doubt about that. He was standing right in front of me.

"Hello, father," I said.

"I have a favor to ask of you, Son," he said.

"As long as it's not that, I usher in the end of days by running for President."

"Who told you I was going to ask?" he said, pushing off the tree.

"I know you don't want to be president," he said. "How about a billionaire or movie star or pop legend? Would you like to be any of those?"

"Thanks, but no thanks," I said.

"Everything you desire. You can even take that girl with you and her zombie father."

"Sorry."

"And the revenge you could have on all those foster parents who treated you badly and on anyone who ever insulted you? Think of the fun you could have cooking them over an open flame."

I shook my head.

He sighed. "I have faith in you, son. Someday, you'll let that evil in you rise up from where it's buried and you will own the world. I know it's in there. Damned if I can figure out how to get it out, though. Of course, damned in any case, and proud of it. I wish you had that pride."

"You should have t-shirts made for you and your demons. Damned and Proud of It."

"Thank you," he said. "That is an excellent idea. Now, be the best you, by which I mean the worst you. Let me help you."

"I appreciate the confidence," I said, "but I just don't think it's me."

He frowned and let out a calculated (seemed to me) sigh.

"Inferno has run off," he said.

"Who?"

"The hellhound. My hellhound that you ruined by calling him Fluffy and showing him love."

"Run off where?"

"I believe he's near here somewhere. I think he might be looking for you."

"Was someone being mean to him?"

"Of course, someone was being mean to him. He's a Hellhound. Demons in hell are unkind. It's the way they're made. Anyway, he's supposed to be mean. Like my demons are supposed to be mean."

"I'll keep an eye out for him."

"He belongs to me and to hell. He belongs with his pack."

"I'm looking for a cat right now."

"Are you?"

"You want me to look for a dog and a cat? I'm becoming a pet detective."

"A Hellhound is not really a dog," Karl said.

“It’s sort of a dog.”

“It is a force of evil. It serves the lord of darkness”

“Fluffy?” I said.

“That right there. That’s the problem. You undermine the hellhound’s nature with the name.”

He made a sound that caused a tree to catch on fire. It burned, and I was afraid for a moment the whole woods was going to light up, but it was magic burning and it caught only the one tree.

“All He did was a bush,” he said, and he winked at me.

“You don’t know where He is, do you?”

“No.”

“I thought you could see everything,” I said.

“I can,” he said.

“No, you can’t.”

“No, I can’t. And the Prestige can’t either. He is a show-god. Likes to show off.”

Two angels descended from above in a flash of light, their white wings spread wide and flapping angrily. They had golden hair, regal features, flawless skin, and were wearing simple white robes. They radiated a pure white light that hummed with power.

“Go away, little angels,” Karl said.

“You are not permitted to walk upon the earth, Lucifer.” one of the angels said, his melodic voice in contradiction to the angry flapping of his wings, the light glowing stronger in his hands.

Lucifer laughed, “I am the ruler of hell, little angel. I do not even remember your name. Maybe you better go back to heaven before you get hurt.”

The angels were unmoved. Twin beams of pure white light shot from their palms, striking Lucifer squarely in the chest. He stumbled back with a cry of pain and outrage.

Lucifer roared, his body erupting into flames. He shot flames out at them. The angels' robes caught fire where the flames licked at them, but they did not retreat. They dove down on him, this time drawing gleaming swords from belts at their waists. With a single sweeping motion, they slashed at Lucifer with the blades. He howled as the blessed metal cut into him, divine fire racing through his veins.

A shockwave of hellfire burst from him, blasting the angels backwards. Their wings smoldered, feathers falling away in ash. But a moment later, they were diving at him again.

He struck them with a staff that appeared from nowhere in his hands. It exploded when it struck them. They retreated into the air, huddled. Lucifer glowered at them. Two more angels appeared beside the others.

Karl looked over at me. "I'm going. Not because they forced me, but because I have things to do. Find my hellhound, Son."

He vanished in a swirl of sulfur and smoke. The scent of brimstone lingered in the air. The angels sheathed their swords and nodded at me before taking flight back into the heavens.

I walked on. After about ten minutes, I came to the beginning of a slope and the trees cleared a little. I saw the cottage down below. It sat eerily among the twisted trees of the haunted forest. It was small and unassuming, but I could feel the presence of a Supernatural even from where I was. She must be powerful.

The cottage's walls looked like they were made from gnarled tree branches and its roof was covered in mossy thatch. The windows were dark. Something inside them seemed to watch me as I approached. The stream nearby was still and the water dark as oil. A screech owl screeched as I carefully made my way down the incline. It sounded like an alarm.

I knocked on the door to the cottage. It opened. I expected, since I knew she was one of the triplets, that the witch would look like her sister. She did not. She was beautiful. She had a

delicate, heart-shaped face with high cheekbones and a small, bow-like mouth. Her thick, yellow hair cascaded down her back in soft waves. Her skin was smooth and radiant, without a single wart or even a faint blemish.

The witch's dress was completely different from her sisters, too. She wore no pointy hat. She wore a lime green mini-dress with black boots. She had nice legs, and the dress showed them off.

"Katrina?" I said.

"Librarian," she said. "I've been expecting you. Come in."

Inside the thatched cottage, the cabin was cozy, inviting. It had a brick fireplace with a pot of stew bubbling over a small crackling fire. Cobwebs clung to the corners as sunlight filtered through a dirty window, casting a soft yellow-orange glow. The walls were lined with dusty old books, many of them with titles like *HOLIDAY POISONS FOR FAMILY GATHERINGS*. A cat laid on a spot of sunlight on an old leather couch, cracked and scared with what appeared to be cat scratches. Was this the cat? I sneezed. The cat didn't even look up.

"Tea?"

"Yes, thank you."

Her asking me if I wanted tea reminded me of going to Master Lee's. Only place I ever went where the first thing asked was if you'd like tea.

Katrina told me to have a seat. She'd be right back. I sat on the sofa. She went into the kitchen and a few minutes later, came out with tea. It gave me time to ask the cat a few questions.

"Are you Rowena's familiar or Katrina's?"

The cat looked at me like she had no idea what I was talking about, but I persevered because I was pretty sure she was someone's familiar. I asked why she had left her witch? What had Rowena done, or what had she done to make her staying impossible? She pretended that her paw suddenly needed cleaning and licked it.

Katrina came back, carrying only a cup for me but nothing for herself. She set the tea down on the coffee-table in front of me.

“My sister sent you?” she said, sitting in an armchair.

“No.”

“How’d you find me then?”

“Rip Van Winkle told me that you and your other sister live out here.”

“How is Rowena?” She asked casually, like she was just making small talk. But I saw or heard something in that small talk that wasn’t small. Worry?

“Seemed fine to me.”

“Good,” she said.

“She wants her familiar back?”

“It’s all a big misunderstanding.”

“What’s a big misunderstanding?”

“Chaos didn’t run away. She just came to visit me.”

“Is that true?” I said to the cat.

“Yes,” she said. She had what I thought of as an East Coast accent. Suburban. Probably educated in one of the Feline Ivy League colleges.

First word out of her mouth was a lie, but I didn’t let that get me down.

“Why’d you run away?” I said.

Katrina interrupt to tell me that I could tell Rowena Chaos was fine. She’d make her way home before supper.

I pulled the collar out of my pocket and quickly dropped the collar around the cat. She didn’t struggle. In fact, she pretended not to notice it.

“That is very rude,” Katrina said. She raised a hand.

“Best not,” I said, touching my sword.

She looked at it more closely and lowered her hand.

“Fine,” she said, “but Chaos only wanted to talk to me. She’s just visiting.”

“It’s all right,” the cat said. “I need to get back, anyway. Will you come with us, Katrina?”

“No,” she said firmly. She turned to me. “I haven’t seen either of my sisters in decades. We do not get together.”

“No family gatherings?”

“Never.”

“Why not?” I said.

“That is a long story,” she said. “For another time.”

“A sad story that could get sadder,” the cat said.

“Enough,” Katrina said, giving the cat a warning look. “I’ve given you my answer. I will not go with you.”

I looked from the witch to the familiar. I realized the cat hadn’t run away from Rowena. She’d run to Katrina. She wanted her help for Rowena.

“Is Rowena in some kind of danger?” I asked the familiar

Katrina’s brows furrowed as she locked eyes with the cat, her gaze sharp and intense

“Yes,” the cat said defiantly.

“My sister has called up a demon,” Katrina said. “We’ve all done it before. It’s dangerous, but sometimes you need a demon to do a job in the haunted woods. This isn’t the enchanted forest after all. No rainbow unicorns here. Rowena can take care of herself.”

“Is that true, Chaos?” I said.

“The demon is dangerous,” Chaos said. “Too dangerous. Rowena needs her sisters.”

“She chose this path,” Katrina said. “I’m not following her.”

“What path?” I asked.

“This doesn’t concern you,” Katrina said.

The cat made the leash and collar disappear with a nod of her head. I guess the familiar had more magic than Rowena thought.

Then she disappeared.

“Where’d she go?” I asked Katrina.

“Perhaps to Zeena’s. Perhaps back to Rowena’s. I will not be drawn into this. You should not either. It will end in death. It doesn’t take a Seer to see that.”

“Let me help. At least tell me what is going on.”

“You are leaving,” she said. “I am staying.”

I could see I wasn’t going to get any more out of her. It was just my first run. Sometimes it took a few, and sometimes more than a few. I’d be back. I thanked her for the tea.

Chapter Five

The haunted woods seemed even more ominous on my return journey. The sunlight was strong in the clearing, but as soon as I got into the woods, it was dark as night. The trees loomed over the narrow path; their gnarled branches reached out like claws. An icy wind whipped through the woods, stirring up dead leaves that swirled around my feet. In the distance, I heard the lonely cry of a night creature.

I tightened my pack and walked on, keeping a wary eye on the shadows. More than once I thought I saw something dart between the trees, but when I turned to look, there was nothing there.

Up ahead, the path forked around a massive oak tree, its trunk covered in moss and fungi. I hesitated, trying to recall the way back. I didn't remember this tree. I was pretty sure I didn't remember it because it wasn't there before. Somehow, I was not on the path I'd used to get to Katrina's. I had to choose. I chose the less travelled. After about twenty minutes, the path ended abruptly at a fallen tree.

I backtracked to the massive oak and took the other fork, hoping it was the correct one. The trees crowded closer, and I felt hemmed in. Something moved in the underbrush. It was a giant python. Its ancient reptile eyes looked at me and seemed to go through some binary thoughts, Prey/ No Prey, Hungry/ Not that hungry. He slithered on through the flora.

I walked a little farther before admitting to myself that I was lost. The woods seemed to shift and change around me as

I walked, which was disconcerting. I stopped and surveyed the surrounding woods; I wasn't even sure which direction I'd come from.

Rowena's cabin was out here somewhere. I closed my eyes and tried to see with my third eye. Nothing. Then something. A ghostly blue light began to glow between the trees up ahead. Wispy like fog, it floated in the air, beckoning me forward. I followed it cautiously, ducking beneath branches and stepping over gnarled roots. The blue light led me along a winding path. I didn't even see the pit camouflaged by foliage. I didn't even feel the danger of the five rows of sharpened spears that would skewer any living thing that fell into that pit.

A second before I stepped into it and to my untimely death (but not completely unexpected) I heard a squeaky voice shout, "Hey dipshit, don't move."

I recognized that squeaky voice.

"Mocking man?" I said, looking around and seeing no one.

"Up here, dipshit."

I looked up. About twenty or thirty feet above me, strapped onto the tree with a climbing belt, was a ten-inch man with a red beard, bright red hair and clothes like a lumberjack. He looked just like I remembered him when I'd almost fought him for Olive's affections. Fortunately, she'd chosen me and allowed me to avoid getting my butt kicked by a ten-inch man.

"You taking care of my girl?" he asked. "Better be."

"My girl," I said.

"My girl," he mocked. "Just make sure you take care of her or I'll have to kick your ass and take her back."

"OK, Mountain Man," I said.

"You making fun of my size?"

"No," I said.

"No," he mocked in a voice that did sort of have the inflection of my own, I had to admit. "OK then, I'll save your worthless life for the sake of my girl. Do not take a step

forward and fall into one of the tribe's booby-traps that will puncture enough holes in you could be a watering can."

That was when I realized I was on the very edge of the trap and one step forward would have landed me in the pit. I crouched down and removed some leafy branches. Sure enough, there were a dozen spikes down there waiting for me.

"You did that?"

"You did that?" he said. "Of course not. Those damn headhunters. Always looking for easy kills. Gotten lazy. A couple of generations ago a headhunter would have been appalled at even the thought of booby-traps. Now there are dozens of them in the woods."

"Thanks," I said.

"The world is going to shit," he said.

"There are those who think so," I said.

"There are those who think so," he mocked. "Take a stand, librarian. Is shit, is not shit. Decide."

He began chopping away at the large branch. He was using an ax, which was the size of a normal one even though he was under a foot tall.

"Can you point me toward the witch Rowena's cabin?" I asked.

"I could," he answered and started chopping again.

"Would you?" I said.

"Would you?" he mocked. "I might, given the proper incentive."

"What's the proper incentive?"

"I would like you to say I am stronger and smarter than you and more handsome and Olive made a foolish mistake choosing you."

"No," I said.

"Not any of it?" he said.

"Not the last part about Olive. The other three are ok."

“Not the last part about Olive,” he mocked. Or maybe he was just agreeing to my terms. “Go on then.”

“You are stronger and smarter and more handsome than I am.”

“All right,” he said, and he gave me directions and told me not to step off the path again.

“The path ended,” I explained.

“The path ended,” he mocked. “Even if it ends, keep walking. Things aren’t always what they seem.”

He was right about that. Kind of obvious, but he was right. I thanked him and walked on for about twenty, twenty-five minutes.

Finally, a clearing opened up ahead of me. In the center sat Rowena’s decrepit cottage, its walls a mess of creeping ivy. The thatched roof was patchy and sagging, and the windows covered in grime. I approached the front door of the ramshackle cottage and raised my hand to knock, hesitating before rapping my knuckles against the weathered wood. No one answered. I listened and heard no sound inside. Not even a breath. The cabin had the stillness of a grave. I pushed on the door. It opened.

I ducked to pass through the low doorway into the single-room cottage. The bookcases on one wall were filled haphazardly. Spells books next to fiction, next to gardening. Some of the books looked as old as some in the Eden library. Strings of plants and animal bones hung drying from the ceiling. The room smelled dusty and musty. A few more steps in, I smelled the coppery stench of blood and I froze. My heart raced as the rush of adrenaline ran through me. My breaths came fast and shallow.

“Rowena?” I called, putting my hand on the hilt of my sword.

There was no answer. A second later, I saw why. Rowena lay crumpled on the floor, eyes staring sightlessly, throat slashed open in a crimson smile. I saw other stab wounds. The murderer must have reached around her. Maybe holding her up

with the left hand and stabbing her in the chest with the right. Her blood was everywhere - splattered on the walls, pooled on the floor. It was vicious stabbing, angry.

The witch appeared older than she had in Eden and I realized she'd likely put a little glamour on herself for the town. Her hair was straggly gray and there were many more wrinkles on her face. Same witchy dress that made her appear to have stepped out of a book of fairytales about wicked witches in the forest. Of course, dead didn't look good on anyone.

"I'm sorry, Rowena," I said.

"Where is my familiar?" a ghostly voice (you developed an ear for it after you'd heard a few ghosts speak) said.

I spun around and saw the ghost was lying on the sofa.

"Rowena?" I said.

"You were expecting someone else?"

"Shouldn't you be on your way to the afterlife?" I said.

"I refused to go with Death. I spelled my cottage. As long as I stay in here, he can't force me to leave. Seemed a bit put out by that. Said he'd had a similar problem with a few wizards. Warned me. It always ended the same way."

"Sooner or later, he gets you?"

"Good guess, Sherlock. You may have noticed someone killed me."

"A lot of blood," I said.

"Cut my throat. Stabbed me."

"Who?"

"Don't know. He or she did it from behind."

"You have no ideas?"

"I have a lot of ideas," she said. "I just don't know anything."

"I'm sorry," I said.

“I’m going to need more than sorry from you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I need you to find my killer. You’re the law on the mountain. The closest we have, anyway.”

“For the town of Eden.”

“I need your help. I can’t leave until I know who killed me. This isn’t just for me. My sisters are in danger. Maybe others. You’re in this now, librarian.”

“Your familiar said you summoned a demon?”

“Maybe.”

“To do what?”

“I can’t tell you yet.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t speak of it until my sisters are safe.”

“You brought me into this in case something happened. You knew what you were doing was dangerous.”

“I was so close. A little more and I would have succeeded. Now I need you to make sure my sisters are safe.”

“Safe from who?”

“Whoever murdered me.”

“What if it’s one of them?”

“Who?”

“Your sisters?”

“Once upon a time, that would have been true. Not now.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Find who murdered me, librarian. You’re the only one I can count on now. Consider it the dying wish of a queen.”

I asked her more questions, and she gave me more reluctant and incomplete answers. She would tell me everything as soon as she knew her sisters were safe, she said. Until then, she couldn’t risk it.

When I stepped outside, I met Death. He was what I expected. The black robes. The black hood. The bow to his back. The outdated scythe. His face was hidden, making it appear as if it didn't exist, which it may not have.

He looked at me, I think. I couldn't be sure, of course, but I felt him looking. He said, "Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm." His head leaned right and then left.

"I thought we had an appointment today," he said.

"Not that I know of," I said, my throat suddenly very dry.

"Hmmmmmmm. Humans often don't know. But I know. Yes, we had one."

"Now?"

"I thought so. I am never wrong, but this feels wrong. How did this happen?"

I shrugged, mostly because I thought my voice might squeak if I tried to speak.

"Not today," he said.

"Not today," I said, relieved.

"Tomorrow," he said.

The word felt like a stab to my heart. I forgot to breathe, which, given who I was with, was at the very least careless. I forced myself to breathe deep breaths. He kept watching me."

"Straaaaaaaange. Very straaaaaaange." He shrugged.

This time, I really wanted to know what that shrug meant, but I had no idea. The word "tomorrow" was distracting me.

"Is the witch ready to let me in now that she's spoken to you?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"She is being unreaaaaaaaasonable. The witch is being unreasonaaaaaaable. It's her time. It will cause a ripple. Very bad. Very dangerous."

"She wants to be sure her sisters are safe," I said.

He stared at me (I thought) for a moment. “See you tomorrow, librarian. I looooooook forward to it.”

He disappeared.

As I left Rowena’s cottage and made my way down the path toward Eden, I had a lot of questions about Rowena’s death and what she was trying to do, and no answers. Then there was Death. Tomorrow.

Rowena believed her sisters weren’t involved in her death, but were in danger. Why were they in danger? And why hadn’t they talked in decades? I should know more about that troubled history beyond just that it was troubled if I was going to get involved. No use fooling myself. I was already involved.

And what about this demon? Another very possible candidate for murderer. Demonic bargains seldom ended well. What was this demon after? What did he or she need so badly he was willing to help Rowena in her goal, whatever it was?

Killing someone by cutting their throat was personal. Somehow, he or she had snuck up on the witch, which was a hard thing to do, witches having a very active sixth sense. It was likely she knew him or her.

My first step had to be questioning her sisters and familiar more thoroughly; the cat clearly knew more than she had revealed. Rowena’s sisters or the demon she had a deal with were likely possibilities, but her murderer could also be another witch. There was a lot of animosity in the witch community and Rowena was their queen. She wouldn’t be the first queen killed because someone else wanted to be queen. I’d go back to Rowena when I had a better understanding of how to force her to tell me what I needed to know.

As I hurried through the haunted forest, I thought of Death and while I pitied Rowena, my first thought was that he was coming for me tomorrow. If it was my time, it was my time. Not much I could do about it. But that didn’t mean I wouldn’t try. There must be some way to avoid him. I was well aware I wasn’t the first, by a long shot, to have that thought.

Chapter Six

When I crossed the bridge over the stream to Eden, my first stop was the mayor's office. I needed to inform him I was going to look into the murder of Rowena, queen of haunted woods witches. The secretary (new to the office, a handsome woman, very pale, her straight black hair parted in the middle, with eyes that made you think of moonless nights) greeted me with a "Good afternoon" that sounded very much like a Dracula "Good evening".

"New to Eden?" I said.

She heaved certain words in a rhythmic way. "I just crossed over into de haunted forest. I was chased out of my castle by a mob of peasants with pitchforks toward de famous Abraham Van Helsing waiting for me in the woods. Zee man wants my head. Somehow, I crossed the stream. Well, to be honest, I flew over it to escape zee mob, and Van Helsing. I met zee witch who said I was in a haunted woods. She directed me to Eden."

"Lucky you."

"I have survived worse, but for now, I am content to be here. Zee mayor gave me this job as a secretary. I have never had a job before. Zee experience it is new. It is a lovely town, though. Zo many interesting peoples."

"Best of luck," I said.

"The mayor will see you now, librarian," she said.

She stood and ushered me into the mayor's office, a stately room lined with bookshelves and paintings of former city leaders. The mayor sat behind a large oak desk, fingers tented in front of him. He motioned for me to sit in one of the chairs in front of the desk. He listened closely as I told him the details of Rowena's death.

"Rowena was a good, bad witch," he said. "If you met her in the woods at night, you were properly scared. You should be. She's said to have carried off many a lost traveler in the woods and they were never heard from again. Perhaps just stories, perhaps not."

"How well did you know her?"

"We were both on the board of the Haunted Forest Preservation Society."

"What can you tell me about Rowena and her sisters?" I asked.

The mayor leaned back in his chair. It creaked under the shift of his weight. "Hated each other. I think they've hated each other since childhood. My understanding is they haven't talked to each other for decades. Not a word."

"Did anything happen recently to change that?"

"Not that I know of."

"Could the sisters, Zeena or Katrina, have killed Rowena?"

"I'd say it's very possible," he said. "They nearly killed each other decades ago."

"You knew them back then?"

"I knew them back then," he said. "I know them now. They're killers. If they thought Rowena was a threat, either or both of them could kill her."

"She was involved in something," I said. "Maybe it was a threat to them."

It didn't quite add up. Why would Rowena be so concerned about her sisters if they weren't talking? Why would her familiar go to the sisters? I thought they were close

to reconciling. Also, I wondered why the mayor wanted me to think the sisters had murdered Rowena.

“Rowena talked me into agreeing to find who murdered her and now it seems like she’s doing everything she can to make it hard on me.”

“I thought you said she’d been murdered.” For just an instant, out of the corner of my eye, my third one, I saw the mayor’s eyes focus, drill right into me. The man had threatened to kill me once, and that look was disconcerting. This one was worse. It made me think of the haunted forest on a dark moonless night and the shuffling of feet nearby. Chilled me right down to the bone.

“Her ghost is still in her cottage,” I said. “Somehow she’s made it so Death can’t take her as long as she’s there. She’s worried about her sisters, but I think there’s another reason she’s staying.”

“What’s that?”

“Revenge.”

“I wouldn’t trust any of the sisters if I were you. They’re all wicked witches. You can’t really expect the truth from them.”

I thanked him for his time and left the office and made my way down the street. Secrets. Every family had them and some had ones planted deep. The family had been ripped open so violently that sister had turned against sister. I needed to know why. I couldn’t ignore that the sisters were the most obvious choice for killer of the queen even if the queen didn’t think they were her murderer.

Did I trust the mayor? He was the reason I was the librarian. He was the one who had been adamant I become the librarian. He’d helped me rid the town of the demon Deadeye. He hadn’t done anything to make me distrust him. But there was something bothering me. Every time I was around him, I felt uneasy, like something was out of place, even if everything seemed where it should be.

I saw the traveling hotel was still in town. It was worth stopping in and seeing if the mayor's brother had anything to add to what the mayor had told me about the sisters.

Charles, the hotel manager, was often informed about what was going on in town and sometimes the haunted woods. He stood behind the front desk, going through papers. The hotel's opulent lobby was quiet. As usual, Charles was neatly dressed in an expensive suit.

"Hello, again, Sir," he said. "I've been expecting you."

"You have?"

"Oh yes. I hear there's been a murder."

"You hear a lot; despite the fact you never leave this hotel."

"People often come to see me, though. They are often talkative and, after all, we do have a cocktail lounge. People do talk in a lounge. It's only natural."

"You have a bar?" I'd been in the hotel several times and had never seen or heard about a lounge.

"You weren't informed? I'm sure I told my brother to invite you."

"No, I wasn't—"

"Fine spirits. Appetizers made by Miguel every afternoon. It is an invitation only club, but you are certainly invited by virtue of your position as librarian."

"How does he do it all?"

"It's almost as if there's more than one of him," Charles said.

"Anyway," I said. "You've heard the witch Rowena was murdered?"

"Yes."

"Have you heard who killed her?"

"No, Sir. However, my brother and Rowena have been meeting over the past several weeks. I suppose you already

have heard this.”

“Why?”

“Good question. He mostly goes out to her cottage, but she met with him in his office this morning, I believe.”

“He said they were on a committee together.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “But this seemed more serious than that. You know yourself that any trip in the haunted woods is a dangerous trip. Preservation business could be done in town.”

I thought about what the familiar had said about a demon being summoned. The mayor was said to be a powerful magician.

“You have no idea what they were working on?”

“You may or you may not know this. My brother doesn’t like to let on, but he is a wizard.”

“I thought he told me, magician.”

“Technically. He didn’t finish his studies. But he has a wizard’s education. You can tell by the academic beard.”

“It is a nice beard,” I admitted.

“He’s overly proud of it.”

“The mayor has his finger in a lot of pies, doesn’t he, Charles?”

“You have no idea,” he said. “I would never say my brother was guilty of killing Rowena, but is he capable of murder? Ask around. Many people in town will say what I will not say.”

The mayor had threatened to kill me once.

“Did Rowena stop by this morning to see you?”

“She stopped by. She wanted to discuss my brother.”

“What about him?”

“I’d rather not say,” he said.

“I need you to say.”

“You know my loyalty to my brother is strong.”

I couldn't help noticing it was so strong he was looking for any excuse to give me incriminating information about him.

“She wanted to know if he was someone who could be trusted. That's what it came down to. I believe she was doubting him on some point.”

“What did you say?”

“I felt I had to tell her the truth. He can be trusted as long as his interests are in line with the person he's working with.”

“Thank you for your honesty,” I said. I was careful not to let sarcasm in my voice. I knew we'd have more talks.

“Happy hour is just beginning in the lounge,” the hotel manager said. “Feel free to stop in anytime. As librarian, and also the recent savior of the town, of course, your membership to the club is fully complimentary.”

“I've never heard of this club.”

“The hotel calls it a club because only members can use the lounge. It's the owner's decision, of course.”

“The mayor's,” I said. “All right. How do I get there?”

He pointed to a doorway on the other side of the lobby that I'd never seen before. I was sure it hadn't been there. I went through the door. The lounge was large and airy, with deep mahogany paneling and thick tartan carpet. It had elegant leather armchairs at small, round tables. Silver-framed portraits decorated the walls (richly dressed European ladies and gentlemen from long ago), alongside richly colored, finely woven Persian rugs. Golden light spilled down from crystal chandeliers overhead. The bar was a long, polished marble counter, with a variety of liquors and crystal decanters on display.

I was surprised to see Olive sitting in one of the leather armchairs across from a white-haired, handsome man. My supernatural sense, sort of like a Spidey tingle, tingled.

I went over. When Olive saw me, she looked nonplused for a second but recovered.

“The is the new librarian, Kevin Austin,” she said. “Sir Ronald Holmes.”

He asked me to join them, but it didn’t take a third eye to see that I wasn’t really welcome. Unfortunately, Olive seemed hardly more welcoming.

“Some other time,” I said. “I have something to do.”

I left without another word or another glance. I tried to put the strange meeting out of my head. I had a mayor to confront. I headed back to his office. His secretary gave me another, “Good afternoon” that made me sure the fangs were going to come out at any moment. I asked to see the mayor, and she said he was gone.

“Any idea where he went?” I asked.

“My guess is zee haunted forest. He was looking a little haunted, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t.”

“You will.”

“Why don’t you just tell me?”

“He told me I must sign an NDA to work for him. What could I do? I need zee job.”

“I guess it’s his right.”

“In blood,” she said.

“Whose blood?”

“I cannot tell you,” she said.

“Because you signed an NDA,” I said before she could.

“I will tell the mayor you stopped by.”

I walked out of the office. I saw a sign over a shop I’d never seen before (actually, come to think of it, I’d never seen the shop before) that said Fortunes Revealed. I stepped inside the cozy space. The shop smelled of incense and spices and a mix of sandalwood and cedar. The fortune-teller sat at a round table draped in a beautiful red cloth. She wore a silk dress, headscarf, her fingers adorned with glittering rings. She had

high cheekbones like all fortunetellers seemed to have. It was a requirement for the job, I surmised. She was shuffling tarot cards. Her voice was low and soothing.

“Welcome,” she said.

I had recently seen the town’s resident Seer, who told me I had no future. She looked in her crystal ball and declared me futureless. It was always best to get a second opinion when you heard something like that.

The fortuneteller greeted me and told me to sit and make myself comfortable.

“You would like to look into the future?”

“That’s not why I’m here, but I wouldn’t mind a glimpse.”

I sat down. She turned up a few cards and then looked at me, her eyes uneasy.

“No future?” I said.

“I’ve seen death and sometimes terrible events, but never nothing at all. It is as if you were never born.”

“Well, here I am, so that’s wrong.”

“It cannot hide unless—”

“Unless what?”

“It is only a story. Something I heard one time from a teller in a circus that disappeared a few years ago.”

“Mysteriously?” I said.

“Is there any other way for a circus?”

“I bet it had a devious clown,” I said. I’d never met a clown I could trust.

“I don’t know,” she said, “but the teller told me a few of us do not have futures written by the Creator. You make your own. It is a great gift and a great burden. You might destroy the world. You might save it.”

“No pressure,” I said.

“You’d better take this seriously.”

If I took it too seriously, how could I do anything at all? I'd always be worrying about the effect. I had to just keep wandering in the dark as I had much of my life, hoping for the best. "What I'd really like to know is where the mayor is."

"Have you met the Creator?" she asked, lowering her eyes.

"Of course not," I said.

She looked like she didn't believe me. But then she said, "Twenty dollars."

I handed her the twenty.

The fortuneteller told me her name was Madame Zelda. She flipped over several cards. She looked up, troubled.

"He is with a demon," she said. "I can tell you that much."

"Where?"

"In the haunted forest."

"Where in the forest?"

"Oh," she said, and sat back and I could see the pain spread over her face like a migraine had just crashed into her mind.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"It saw me. So much power."

"Can you tell me its name?"

"An old one, probably long before Christ appeared in the Roman Empire."

I thanked her. Gave her another twenty as a tip and because I felt guilty that she'd been hurt trying to get information for me, and left the shop.

Chapter Seven

I decided to stop at Rip Van Winkle's house on the edge of town before going back into the haunted woods. As I walked there, I noticed the sun was hanging low over the mountain, which meant twilight was not far off. The haunted woods was not a safe place to be at twilight or what came after twilight. The things that came out at night in the haunted woods were worse than the things out during the day.

I decided I'd have a talk with Rip and get what information I could. After all, he'd had a relationship with Rowena and might give me some insight into the family. After talking with him, I'd decide whether to risk going into the forest at night.

I found Rip relaxing on his front porch, puffing lazily on his pipe. He smiled when he saw me coming up the path.

"Good evening librarian," he said. "Come to invite me to dinner at the cafe?"

The man was an eating machine.

"Not exactly," I said.

I took a chair beside him. "Actually, I'm here for a little help."

He blew out a mouthful of smoke. "You'll be feeding me for the rest of my life if you keep coming to me for a little help."

"I'll ask the café to start a tab. The witch sisters, Rowena, Katrina and Zeena. What happened between them? What

drove them apart?”

“That’s a bit of a story, librarian.”

“I’ve got time.”

“I hope that’s true,” he said ominously.

“Just tell me, OK? Dinner for the next month.”

“Anything on the menu?”

“Deal.”

“Fine,” he said. “First, the obvious. Beauties, all three of them. Or I should say they were born beauties. Triplets. Come inside, I’ll pour us a couple of bourbons.”

Soon we settled in Rip’s cozy den, each with a tumbler of whiskey in hand. I explained about finding Rowena murdered and the task her ghost had forced upon me. I looked out the window. The sun was about to drop behind one of the top of the mountain. It seemed in a hurry to get home today.

Rip shook his head sadly. “Poor Rowena. She was a troubled soul, but so much fun to be around. An excellent wicked witch. Knew how to throw the best parties. Her punch made you see things that were there but shouldn’t be. Never a dull moment at Rowena’s parties.”

“She is still a troubled soul,” I said. “Just not a living one. Tell me the long story.”

Rip swirled his whiskey pensively. “It starts with their parents, Rowena the Red and Wilhelm Bork, a warlock from the old country.”

“Which old country?” I asked.

“There’s only one old country,” he said. “The warlocks were soldiers. Fought in the old wars. Rowena the Red was a potion witch. She could make up some of the most potent potions in all the haunted forest. They met each other at a party given by Lord Byron. It may have been that one where a few guests wrote or at least started stories. One of them written by Mary Woolstencroft.”

Rip took another drink of his whiskey.

“Rowena told me that her mother and Wilhelm fell passionately in love after only one terrible date a few nights after the party. Wilhelm took her to a haunted house in the haunted forest. It was cursed, and it was said to have many cursed things in it. They knew as soon as they entered the front door, it was exceptionally dangerous. The creaking floorboards, the low howling wind, the musty smell of decay and the damp curling around them like fog were all clues. Then the voices began, old and haunted voices.

“They were thrilled, of course.

“They held hands as they pushed through cobwebs. A figure appeared on the stairs, a ghostly pale woman crying uncontrollably. She spoke through her tears of a terrible monster that had torn out her heart and ate it after doing unspeakable things to her.

“‘What sort of unspeakable things?’ Rowena the Red had asked.

“‘The sort you can’t speak about,’ the woman said.

“Then she told them what the monster had done in gory detail. The details involved removal of organs and chains and whips and a Tiny Tim recording he played over and over again.”

(I interrupted him to ask him who Tiny Tim was, but he told me to look him up.)

“She smiled, and they saw she had no teeth.

“‘It’s upstairs, deary,’” she said to Rowena the Red, though Rowena the Red hadn’t asked her where anything was.

“Rowena told me that her father and mother, pushing through secret passageways and hidden chambers, fighting off a house demon named Clyde, and a zombie of the tribes that ate brains, realized they shared a love of adventure.

“Once they got to the attic, the lights went out. The air became cold and stifling. There was a shuffling sound that moved across the floorboards. Wilhelm lit a match. The faint light spilled over boxes and old furniture shrouded in sheets. In the corner, a humped shape lurked beneath a stained

blanket. Rowena the Red took a hesitant step forward. The shape slowly turned, revealing a hairless head with bulging black eyes and a mouth filled with jagged teeth. It emitted a gurgling hiss and scuttled forward; its crab-like limbs bent at impossible angles. The monster emitted an unearthly shriek.

“According to Rowena, her mother was about to cast the spell to capture him in a giant spider’s web (her best spell) when she recognized him.

“‘Uncle Rottingwood?’

“‘Oh, hello Dear,’ he said.

“‘What are you doing here?’

“‘Just helping out a friend and having a snack or two if the appropriate meal comes along.’

“He had his hooked claws out, six inches at least, but retracted them.

“They had some tea and caught up and Wilhelm was asked by the uncle what his intentions were, her uncle being an old-fashioned monster who just wanted the very best and the very worse for his niece. Apparently, Wilhelm passed the interview because her uncle told her he was a keeper just before they left.

“When they were out of the haunted house and into the woods, Rowena’s mother told her father it was the worst first date of her life. He agreed. And that was the moment they realized they were in love, real love, the kind that pulled you in like quicksand, the kind that made it seem like there was a spotlight following you everywhere you went.

“After that, they loved each other more and more every day.

“But such devotion to each other and such magical power inflamed the jealousy of the gods, who did not believe mortals should have such gifts. There was one goddess in particular, Morgana (a goddess of an eastern cult, worshipped by the Assyrians) who was jealous of them. She had known love once. She and the great Zeus had been in love long ago. For six days and six nights they lay together and on the seventh,

Hera, his wife, showed up. She demanded that Zeus hold Morgana in his arms while Hera drew her Knife of Other Worlds (the only knife known to cut even immortals) and, with Zeus holding Morgana, disfigured her beautiful face so Zeus would never be tempted to lie with her again. This end to her own affair had made Morgana bitter, and she hated any young lovers who she saw, but she fixated on Rowena the Red and Wilhelm because their love was so intense.

“One night, as Rowena the Red and Wilhelm lay entwined in each other’s arms, Morgana stole into their bedchamber. Seeing them like that, seeing the depth of the love between them, enraged her. She cursed the sleeping Rowena to never be satisfied with Wilhelm’s love, to always yearn for more. She hoped this curse would drive the young witch mad.

“When dawn came and Rowena awoke, the seed of discontent had taken root in her heart and a kind of terrible weed spread everywhere, choking her happiness. She still loved Wilhelm, but now she was haunted by doubts. Why couldn’t he love her more? Every act of love by Wilhelm seemed to fall just short of her needs. Everything he said had just the hint of inauthenticity.

“Wilhelm was crushed at the change in his beloved. He didn’t understand it. But he did not give up no matter how much she demanded and relentlessly complained,.

“Meanwhile, Morgana went to the demon lord Beelzebub and together they hatched a plot to destroy the couple completely. Beelzebub agreed to help if Morgana would sleep with him. Anyone who knew Beelzebub knew his tastes were sadistic and any sex would involve pain and torture. Morgana made him think she would love this and convinced him by cutting out her heart and handing it to him to do with as he pleased. He gave it back, and she put it back where it belonged and they came to an agreement.

Her hate could have burned up the entire world. It was hate for Wilhelm and Rowena but really it was just hate and they bore its focus until she achieved her goal of destroying them both.

“On the summer solstice, as Wilhelm and Rowena the Red walked in the forest, Beelzebub appeared in a rage, falsely accusing them of coupling in his woods. He stole away Rowena before Wilhelm could stop him. Wilhelm searched madly for her everywhere on the earth and beyond, even in hell.

“He found her in the haunted woods on the magic mountain where Eden was. She told him she’d escaped Beelzebub, and they fell into each other’s arms. They made love right there on the bank of the creek. Too late, Wilhelm realized that she was not his wife. He tried to pull away, but she held him in the embrace long enough that Rowena the Red came upon them and saw Morgana’s true form.

“Rowena the Red watched in horror, and then cut her own throat with one of her belladonna knives. She died. Wilhelm, seeing this, took the knife and slit his own throat. Rowena the Red was then saved then by Morgana who brought her back from the dead before she had made it past the final step into the Land of No Return.

“Nine months later, Rowena gave birth to three daughters—the witches Rowena, Katrina and Zeena. All bore the mark and abilities of their supernatural bloodlines. All had the great powers of their parents.

“Rowena the Red descended into madness after their births. She could not bear to look at her daughters. When the girls were very young, she tried to poison them. Only the appearance of a member of the High Council had saved them. The mother fled into the haunted wood and was never seen again.

“The three sisters grew up in a secluded orphanage for the supernatural in a small town in Western Colorado. Though they had great power, their mother’s madness and their father’s death drove them all to dark places.

“When the sisters were young women, a betrayal split them apart. Rowena envied Katrina’s beauty (they were triplets who looked alike, but she believed Katrina more beautiful) and in her bitterness she brewed a potion to turn

Katrina hideous. But sly Zeena recognized the potion and switched tea cups, so when they drank Rowena cursed herself.

“Rowena’s beauty melted away into the ugliness that was inside her. The three descended into accusations, each blaming the other. By then, the sisters’ powers had matured. In their rage, they brought terrible storms over the cities closest to their own. All of western Colorado was suddenly battered by natural disasters that were not natural at all.

“The three caused the rivers to flood, twister winds to smash towns flat, and fires to burn the forests. Then came the plagues, and these spread over many states. Each attempt by one of them to destroy the other brought attention to the mysterious disasters. Many ordinary humans began to question what was happening. Some of the humans who knew of Supernaturals demanded the high council stop them immediately and they be put to death. Demanded. Threatened.”

“The high council banished the three sisters to the haunted woods, but some did not think this was enough punishment. They argued for greater retribution. The high council agreed. They bound the sisters in unbreakable chains said to be forged by Hephaestus himself in ancient times.

“The council sentenced them to a decade of pain. Each sister was imprisoned in a far corner of the haunted woods. One was locked in a cave far below the earth. One was chained to a cliff on a snowy mountain peak. And one was imprisoned in a ring of fire. They stayed this way for ten years and when they were finally released, they each vowed to never speak to the other.”

Rip drank down the remaining whiskey in his glass.

“Quite a story,” I said.

I hadn’t finished my drink. I’d forgotten about it. I drank it down then. It burned in my throat.

“The curse of the parents was visited on their children,” Rip said. “Some never escape the traumas of childhood, do they?”

He said this pointedly, but what did he really know about me? What could he know?

“So, the sisters hate each other,” I said. “Maybe Rowena is fooling herself about how her sisters feel toward her.”

“Both are very dangerous. No doubt about that.”

“I pay them a visit first thing tomorrow.”

Rip walked me to the door. “If you need backup, librarian, I’m at your service.”

I considered for a moment, but I didn’t think it was fair to put him in danger. It was my job. “You’re a good friend, but I’ll be fine.”

“You be careful in those woods.”

I walked out onto the street. The moon was full. I heard wolves howling. They were strangely comforting.

Chapter Eight

I walked down the street back toward the library. I made a stop in the park and sat on the park bench by the Tree of Life. The big moon cast a bluish tint over everything. I was thinking about what Rip had told me about the three witch sisters. The curse the jealous goddess, Morgana, had put on their parents—killed the father and drove the mother mad—had festered in the sisters. Some curses spread a wide net. They were handed down from generation to generation. I was sympathetic toward the sisters, but I also realized Rowena couldn't be sure her sisters wouldn't turn on her. This family was seriously messed up.

Why would Katrina or Zeena kill Rowena after their violent attacks had been put to rest decades ago? What might set them off? If I could learn what Rowena was up to, maybe I would have my answer.

I supposed it could be the two of them together taking out their sister. At the back of my mind was Death's warning. The big, hulking, dark figure and the way he stretched words. Tomorrrrrrrrow. I was pretty sure our appointment wouldn't involve him taking me out for a drink or a bite to eat. How would I go out? Maybe the witch sisters? Maybe the mysterious demon? Maybe I'd trip over the root of a tree in the haunted forest or fall walking down the library stairs. Could be a dozen different ways on any given day.

Somewhere near, an owl hooted. The night air turned suddenly cold. That happened sometimes in Eden. Sudden

drops in temperature. Sudden flames in the sky. That sort of thing.

A second later, the cat, or its head anyway, floated in the air just in front of me.

“Miss me, mortal?” It said.

Though I had seen several versions of the time-traveling cat, this was the one I’d seen most often. Black sculptured face, high cheekbones, lion yellow eyes, a superior attitude like an English lord or lady. Usually, she had a body to go with the head, but you had to expect the unexpected when it came to time traveling cats.

“Aren’t you missing you?” I said. “Or part of you, anyway?”

“Oh,” she said, looking down and seeing her body wasn’t there. “Time travel isn’t as easy when you don’t have a 1965 Cadillac Sedan Deville to ride around in.”

The cat’s body landed on a limb of the Tree of Life, the original tree where you know what was picked by you know who because you know who convinced her to pick it and take a bite. So ended a brief run in paradise for humans. The cat’s head floated over and attached itself to the body.

“This is the kind of thing that happens when you time-travel. It’s not for amateurs like you, librarian. You might lose your head and not be able to get it back.”

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” I asked the cat.

“I have a question for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“How many lives do you think cats really have?”

“I’ve always heard nine.”

“That’s what I’ve always heard. I’m thinking of giving you one of my lives.”

“You can do that?”

“I honestly don’t know. I’ve never tried.”

“Why would you try now?” I said.

“This is a little embarrassing.”

“You’ve started to care for me,” I said. “You have feelings for me?”

You couldn’t beat a cat for a contemptuous look.

“You want to be my little friend?” I said.

“I may kill you myself if you keep talking,” the cat said.

“Save me, kill me; you seem a little confused.”

“At least scratch your eyes out.”

Then it looked embarrassed, or as embarrassed as a cat could look. “I’ve lost the Creator.”

“Lost him where?”

“If I knew where, I wouldn’t say that I’d lost him, would I?”

“I don’t think you can lose a Creator. Seems like they’re too famous to be lost.”

“You are the only being I know to have inhabited The Tree of Life. It allowed you to touch, for a second, its great power. The Creator’s own blood nourished the tree as a sapling. His secrets are there. Did you see anything that might help me find him?”

“I was a little busy trying to stop the angels from starting Armageddon. I didn’t actually communicate with the tree. Not with words anyway.”

“Humanity began in that tree. Right here, where I sit and where you sit. Think back. Close your eyes. Remember.”

He was trying to use hypnosis on me. I knew this because I had the gift myself and had used it on others many times over the last decade.

“An army of demons just over the bridge and all those angels, black-wings and white-wings flying up above. That’s what I remember.”

“I’ve seen your death, librarian. It’s close. Death himself is expecting to make a call on you very soon.”

“I know. I talked to him today. He got the days mixed up. Thought our appointment was today but then said he’d see me tomorrow so—”

“Death does not confuse appointments.”

“That’s what I thought. I think it’s what he thought, too. But he did.”

“He was telling you something you are too dense to hear.”

“What?”

“How should I know? He was telling you.”

“You think he was giving me a warning about my death tomorrow?”

The words were bitter when I spoke them. Funny thing was, we all knew one day Death would come for us, but we never quite believed it. You could be a hundred years old and wake up every day thinking it might be your last, but still not quite believe that it was. Not that day. Not you. It was the way we humans were made. We needed that delusion in order to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

“I don’t think Death does that.”

“Why would you give me another life?” I said.

“You seem to have a purpose here I can’t see. It made me think maybe the Creator is on his way back and needs you to do something to keep angels and men from destroying the world.”

“Do what?”

Cat shrug. “How should I know?”

The cat jumped down from the tree, landing gracefully on all four paws. She took a few steps closer to me, her yellow eyes locked on mine. “Or maybe I’m wrong. Maybe you’ll be gone tomorrow. You really talked to Death? Are you sure it was him?”

“About ten feet tall, all in black, back like a strung bow?”

“Sounds like him. He doesn’t talk to anyone who is still living. But if the Creator wanted to protect you surely, he could order Death not to take you.”

“Maybe he can’t. Just because you create something doesn’t mean you’ll be able to control it later. Ask any parent.”

The cat shook his head. “When it is your time, it’s your time. Unless you are a magical time-traveling cat. Then you have nine times.”

“I’ve heard that the Creator is in another universe.”

The cat shrugged.

“How many universes are there?” I asked.

“An infinite number.”

“You don’t know?” I said. Generally, when someone said infinite, it was another way of saying a whole lot, but I don’t really don’t know how much a whole lot is in this case.

The cat shrugged. “A whole lot.”

“Have you ever been to another universe?”

“No.”

“Yes, you have.”

“Maybe.”

He disappeared.

I took a deep breath and tried to clear my head. I knew I couldn’t focus on everything at once. Universe jumping. Death coming for me. The lost Creator. Armageddon looming. Olive and her secret rendezvous with the handsome old guy, Sir Ronald. The murder of Rowena. The danger for her sisters and familiar. My head felt like it was going to explode.

As I started to walk out of the park, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being watched. I spun around, half expecting the big black robed guy with the bowed back. My heart was pounding in my chest. Then I heard a rustle in the bushes to my right. I stopped in my tracks, my hand going instinctively

to the sword. What was I going to do, stab Death to death? What were the chances that would to work? What were the chances that anything would work? Rich and poor, strong and weak, had tried many ways not to be taken and as far as I knew, none had ever succeeded.

Fortunately, nothing was in the bushes. Just the wind blowing through the trees and the distant sound of a bird calling.

I decided not to go to the library. Instead, I turned toward Olive's house. It seemed a good time (though when I thought about it, a better word would be necessary than good) to ask her a few pertinent questions about this Sir Ronald Clark. That unexpected meeting had been stewing in the back of mind ever since I saw her and the older man—who was not old exactly. Too old for her, but not exactly old. Maybe fifty. And he looked exceedingly rich, which took several years off his calendar age for some women. But not for Olive. Surely not for Olive. But what if it was for Olive?

I walked up the steps to the big old Victorian with a wrap-around porch and knocked on Olive's door. After about a minute, it opened.

"If it isn't the librarian," she said. "I thought you might be by tonight."

She didn't sound like herself. Not sweet. Not kind. Not welcoming.

"Based on the fact that you looked pretty surprised to see me earlier today with Sir What's His Name, I guess I'm not surprised by your not being surprised," I said.

"You can call him Sir Ronald."

"Is that what you call him?"

"Ronald," she said and stepped into the house, and I followed, shutting the door behind me.

She led me into the sitting room, keeping her distance, her steps measured and precise, her posture stiff and unyielding. She gestured to the sofa, and I sat down, but she remained standing. She didn't say anything, just looked at me, waiting.

So I asked what she knew I was going to ask. “What was that about?”

“What do you mean?” Her expression was guarded and unreadable.

“Who is Sir Ronald to you?”

Her face remained stony. This was a side of her I hadn’t seen. I felt disoriented by this new her. A new her I didn’t like much. She was still standing. I crossed my arms across my chest. What had I done to deserve the way she was acting toward me? The fact that I had no idea was at least as unsettling as her attitude.

“He’s a friend,” she said.

The way she said it, I knew something more was coming, something she was having trouble saying, something I likely wouldn’t want to hear.

“Come on,” I said. “Why are you being so—”

“So what?”

“Secretive.”

She sat down, but not on the sofa. She sat in one of the wingback arm chairs.

“He’s someone I’ve known for years. He does business with the mayor.”

“Comes and goes?” I said. He was the first one I’d ever heard of doing that. Charles and Miguel came to the hotel, but they couldn’t leave it.

“The hotel brings him. He never leaves the hotel. As far as I know, he’s the only one that the hotel brings.”

“Must cost him a lot.”

“He’s a billionaire. Also, like I said, he has a connection with the mayor.”

“So he’s an ex-boyfriend of yours?”

“I wouldn’t call him a boyfriend. We dated until he asked me to marry him.”

“You said no.”

“I said no. Then.”

My head was swimming. She said it as if she didn't care what I thought or felt. Didn't care. Never had. My body was tense, tight everywhere. I leaned back on the sofa, trying to look relaxed when what I felt was anything but.

“Then?”

“I turned him down five times before he gave up and went away, and he hasn't been back since. Until today.”

“When he asked you to marry him again?” I said.

“How did you know?”

“The way he was looking at you. So you turned him down again, and he's left town.”

Sarcasm. It never helped much, but I just couldn't give up on the off-chance it might.

“He knows about my father,” she said.

“What about him, exactly?”

“You already know. He's dying.”

“Technically, he's already dead.”

I wondered about that, though. Had he actually met the Grim Reaper?

“He's not dead-dead. More like reborn to a state of in-between.”

“He ate the Nazi, right?”

“That kind of evil doesn't taste great. He's had to force it down.”

“It can't all be prime cuts,” I said.

“You've made clear that if he makes any more mistakes, you'll arrest him, let the townspeople hang him or burn him at the stake. You've refused to help us.”

“I can't let him go around killing people, if that's what you mean.”

“Like I said, you’ve refused.”

“What’s Sir Whatshisname’s offer?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I think it does.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t talk about it. I’ve accepted his offer. You won’t have to worry about my father anymore. We’ll probably move down to the flatlands.”

“But—”

“No use,” she said. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

“That’s it then?” I said. “You don’t want to talk it over?”

“I’d like you to leave now.”

I could have argued the point. I could have fought for her. But she asked me to leave, and I did. I walked right out the door.

Chapter Nine

I stopped by The Bar and bought a bottle of bourbon, and I took it back to the library and went down to my apartment. I got a glass and poured bourbon into it and sat in my armchair in my little one-bedroom apartment. I drank several glasses. I tried to avoid thinking about Olive by thinking about the cat and what she'd said and what Death himself had said.

If I died tomorrow, if I went off with Death as I would have to do if Death came for me because he would make me an offer I couldn't refuse, at least I wouldn't have to live with losing Olive to Sir Ronald. Of course, the reason I wouldn't have to live with losing Olive was because I'd be buried in the Eden graveyard while she would be taking marriage vows with the billionaire. Hard to get any comfort out of that.

I thought back over my life, the twists and turns that led me here. My life as an orphan in foster care, my escape from Texas, my years on the road. It was the life on the road that had felt most natural to me. As long as I kept moving, I didn't have to get too involved in any other life. I helped people who needed the kind of help I could give. That felt good. I wasn't always successful, but often enough that it seemed like a life well-lived.

Then the big discovery. I had a father. I had a father who wanted to meet me. Just one problem, his name was Karl, whose more common names were Lucifer, Satan, Prince of Darkness, The Devil, et al. Not the greatest moment for me.

Then it turned out the real reason he came looking for me was he thought I was the anti-Christ and he needed me to get started working on the end of days. Was I really the anti-Christ? TBD.

I was going over my life early, so I didn't have to do in that last second. People always said that was what happened. Your life flashed before you. Then you moved on. The big question was where?

Wow, I was drunk. I was very drunk.

Tomorrow. Whether it was a good day to die or not, it was my day. I felt sorry for myself. I had so many things I wanted to do.

I poured another healthy bourbon. I thought, if only I could I stop time. Then I remembered I could.

That was how I could escape Death. I could drive off in the 1965 Cadillac Deville Time Machine. I could get lost in time. I could return after each trip for a few seconds, as I seemed to have to do, as per the rules of the time-travel car. Then leave immediately. As long as the Deville didn't break down, I could stay alive by moving through time.

I would be like the great Time Lord himself. I would live for a long, long time by essentially stopping time. Almost.

I loved to travel. This would just be traveling on another scale. I'd travel through time. I'd keep moving. I'd keep away from Death. All I'd have to do was give up my life in Eden. How hard could that be? Especially now.

I wandered upstairs to the main floor of the library and sat on the sofa. I kept replaying my conversation with Olive. She had been so cold, so matter-of-fact about it all. It was like she was a different person. The warm, caring Olive I knew was gone, replaced by this remote stranger. Now she was shutting me out, keeping secrets. More than keeping secrets. She was cutting me out of her life without regret.

"A bad Olive," I said. When I drank and was alone, I sometimes talked to myself. It always seemed odd to me that people thought this was odd. He talks to himself. We all did it.

We all did it all the time in our heads. We had conversations running most of the time.

What if this new Olive wasn't my Olive?

"An imposter?" I said.

Maybe an evil spirit or alien had taken her over. In my current state, I wished this was true. After all, how hard could it be to find an exorcist in Eden?

I considered going to Ryan's and Camila's, my ghostbuster friends, and asking them to help me excise the demon inside of Olive so I could have my Olive back. But I had to give up on this after about ten seconds because it was ridiculous. Her eyes hadn't turned red. No horns had sprouted on her head. No strange voice had come from within her.

Anyway, I knew the truth. It was my fault I'd lost her. I hadn't paid attention. I should have seen how upset she was about her father's situation. Maybe I could have found some way to help if I'd tried harder.

How many books in this library were on the subject of lost love? Must be thousands. The truth was, my situation wasn't even all that unique.

"I should have listened," I said.

This was love? This was what it felt like? I'd never been in love. Honestly, it sucked. I drank down the rest of the glass. I stood up, unsteady on my feet.

"Librarian," I heard someone shout from upstairs.

I walked, stumbling once or twice, to the stairs. I looked up them to the top. They looked like they went straight up from my angle. They looked like the Mount Everest of stairs.

"Librarian," a voice shouted again from the second floor.

At first I wasn't going to move, wasn't going to climb the intimidating stairs to face whatever voice was shouting at me in the empty (well, apparently not) library, but then I lost my balance and I landed on my butt. That made me mad.

“Now you’ve done it,” I said to the stairs. “I accept your challenge.”

Then another voice and another and another shouted from upstairs. Could have been an echo except the voices weren’t the same. There were male voices and female voices, young and old, tall and short. Someone was having a party in my library and I couldn’t allow it. Not without me.

I climbed the stairs.

Chapter Ten

I used the banister to keep my balance as I went up the stairs. When I got to the top, I could hear talking from down one of the hallways that came and went into the library. I walked down it toward the voices. At the end was a room I didn't remember being in. There were bookcases filled with books. I examined a few. Seemed like novels. A room full of novels. I could hear the voices in the back somewhere beyond the stacks.

I remembered too late that I didn't have my drink. I was surprised—though this was not the first time it had happened—to find several characters from books sitting around a table talking away. The polished oak table was big enough to accommodate at least ten and there were ten there. I made eleven. They were dressed in clothing from different times. What was I walking into?

“Come in, come in, you poor love- sick bastard,” a voice said.

I looked over these characters from novels, literary figures who'd escaped their books. Some I recognized, and some I didn't. I slumped down into the big empty leather chair at the head of the roundtable after some coaxing to do so by the crowd. I hadn't been so drunk for a long time and it felt good and bad. Olive. Olive was the reason. I should go over to her house. I should tell her what a fool I'd been or what a fool she'd been. What a fool we'd both been. What a, what a, what a—I lost my train of thought. It had flown right off the tracks.

“Oh, what a dark day is that day you lose the woman you love,” a voice boomed, startling me from my brooding. A muscular, bearded man jumped up and began pacing back and forth. He was dressed in what I thought were ancient Greek robes. He grabbed me with his powerful arms and lifted me off my chair like I was a child. “Do not despair. I was lost at sea for twenty long years thanks to that villain Poseidon, but I found my way back to my sweet Penelope. You may find your way back to your sweet Olive, too, if you fight with all your might against the forces that pull you apart.”

“Right,” I said. “All my might. Got it.”

“You can do no less. You must do no less.”

“Mind putting me down,” I said to Odysseus, (had to be.).

“Of course,” he said and dropped me in my chair.

“You remind me of my son, Telemachus,” he said. “Love must be fought for. You hear me? Love of a woman is a great gift from the gods, but children are also great gifts. You must have a dozen children.”

“Ah, the allure of romance. Intoxicating but treacherous,” said a man wearing a wrinkled white suit, looking as if he hadn’t slept in days and when he had, he’d only dreamed bad dreams. “Passion is not always the wisest thing. Look at me.”

“Trust me, relationships can take you to dangerous places,” cautioned a powerfully-built Roman soldier (at least he was wearing a flowing red cape, leather and bronze armor, military sandals that were laced up his legs) “Cleopatra and I were great lovers but in the end we lost a kingdom because we didn’t pay attention to how far out to sea our relationship had taken us. Be ever vigilant, young librarian.”

“Pish posh, love is everything,” cried a dashing, boyish figure from the other end. He was slender, elegant, handsome and wore in a pastel suit and silk shirts. “Listen to old Jay Gatsby, old sport.”

I was sensing a pattern. Fall in love. Give it your all. Suffer. Possibly, no probably, die because of it.

“I thought Olive was my soulmate,” I said, “but maybe she doesn’t feel the same way, maybe she never has. Maybe I was fooling myself.”

I was slurring my words. They dribbled out of my mouth and onto my chin.

“Keep your head up, darling!” trilled a pretty young woman (she reminded me a bit of that pretty girl in the pirate movies) in a breezy, cosmopolitan accent. “Plenty more fish in the sea!”

I sighed. There were no more fish in the sea for me. The sea was as empty as my heart. The sea was. The sea was. I reached for my drink. It wasn’t there. The sea was there, somewhere, not here. Why did I have to fall in love? It hurt. It hurt a lot.

A handsome young man, probably a teen, wearing stylish azure and crimson doublets, tights, and a cape, clapped a hand on my shoulder. I knew who he was once he was almost immediately. His voice was passionate. He was quoting from his own play.

“But soft! What light through yonder window? Your fair lady is the sun!” He recited with exaggerated theatrics. “You must climb her balcony and pledge your heart anew! Do I not speak the truth, fair lady Bennett?”

He turned to a woman, a little older than Romeo, with dark eyes wearing a simple but elegant high waisted long linen dress. She gave him a slightly amused look.

‘Oh, do be serious, Romeo.’ chided Elizabeth Bennett, not unkindly. “Know you own worth, I say.”

“Love is far greater than self-worth,” Romeo said. “It slays the gods themselves.”

“Love is dangerous,” she said. “I will give you that, Romeo.”

He turned to me. “Your love has not vanished, nay, she is, but the sun obscured by clouds, who shall blaze forth again if thou hast the courage to pursue her. Hark, let me spin for you a stratagem worthy of the noble bard.”

I thought this was more quoting from the play he lived in, but I wasn't sure. It might have been a mix of recitation and his character making up advice. I knew that characters that escaped from books in the library were always a mix of what they were in the books and something new.

“The moon is dark and full tonight, and beneath its veil you shall make your way to your love's window. With a vigorous step, you shall climb the vines that cling to her balcony. Atop her railing you shall pour forth in soulful soliloquy all the passion dwelling in your lovesick heart! Do not spare her or yourself.

“Speak boldly of stars crossed and destiny thwarted, of cupid's arrow! Recount tender moments past, the glimmer in her eye, the silk of her hair. Remind her of whispered vows beneath summer's moon, and the cruel hand of fate that pulled you apart.”

“It wasn't fate,” I slurred. “It was Sir Ronald.”

Sir,” Romeo said. “I am in the middle of a soliloquy. Do allow me my time.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Apologies.”

“Declare that neither time nor tears nor troubles can erase your bond, your love etched eternal as Romeo and Juliet's! Which, as we know, is the greatest of all love stories.

“Beseech your lady fair, fair, fair lady, to hearken to love's call once more. If she denies you, persist till her icy reserve melts in the fire of your devotion! Should her father appear shout to him, ‘Our passion transcends your terrestrial realm!’ Do not allow him to calm your fire.”

“Fear not the heights, for love conquers all! You've heard this before. Pay attention. Fortune favors the bold, and the fruit of your labors shall be the restoration of your lady's radiant love! Love. Do you hear me? Lament no more, but win her love with your passion! Fight for her, librarian. Win back the touch of your true love's lips.”

He bowed. I thanked him for his wise words. The advice from Ms. Bennett. was different.

“While I sympathize with your current distress, I must encourage you not to allow this unfortunate affair to utterly ruin your spirits or sense of self-worth. Consider that perhaps this relationship was not meant to be, however painful that thought is to your troubled psyche.”

“Do not let your disappointment cast a shadow on all else that life has to offer. There are still friendships to cherish, new passions to pursue, worthy causes to devote yourself to. Not all joy is found in romantic attachment. Find comfort in the constancy of family, or lose yourself for a time in a good book, preferably one by that wise and witty literary giant, the great Jane Austen. Delight in life’s simple pleasures - a long walk in the countryside, an evening’s music, the laughter of children at play.

“Examine if you truly knew the heart and character of the woman you pine for. Infatuation can sometimes blind us to flaws in those we think we love. Consider if she would have proven a worthy partner through all of life’s trials and triumphs to come. If you discern she would not, then your sorrow is misplaced. The right lady for you is still waiting to be found, if that is the case. Do trust me on this, librarian.

“Do not shun the company of others - true friends can provide cheer and sage perspective. Nor should you abandon all care for your duties and self-improvement; work can provide a constructive distraction while reminding you that you are more than your romantic disappointments. There are yet many chapters left to be written in your life’s story. Do not turn away from them. Do not allow a failed love to isolate you.

“Reflect also on whether you acted nobly and sensibly in this affair. If you discern you behaved rashly or improperly, resolve to demonstrate more prudence and propriety in such matters henceforth. Disappointment often stems from our own follies. Learn from this experience, but do not punish yourself endlessly for any perceived missteps.

“Take comfort that time heals all wounds. Each day will lessen your sorrows if you face the future with courage and an open heart. Have faith that there is a greater design beyond our limited vision. God’s hand is behind it all. For now, be kind to

yourself. Know your true worth lies not in one lost love, but all the good you have to offer this world. In short, be sensible.”

“Be good to yourself, darling,” the pretty young woman (who this time reminded me of someone who might wander into a Sex In The City episode) said. “Soak in an indulgently long bubble bath, mix yourself a perfectly dry martini, watch the glittering lights on the river at sunset. Flirt harmlessly with strangers in cafes. Surround yourself with fabulous friends who make you laugh. Live. Truly live. Be free.”

“Nonsense,” Odysseus thundered. “Never give up. After the Trojan War, I wandered the world for twenty long years. I encountered dangerous monsters like the Cyclops Polyphemus, treacherous passages between Scylla and Charybdis, alluring and deadly sirens, the lovely Circe, and more, and still I found my way back to my beloved.”

The group began to bicker. I asked them to quiet please. I was a librarian, after all, and we were in a library.

I said, “Some say give her space, others say woo her aggressively. How can I know what to do?”

Romeo said earnestly. “Follow your heart, my friend. If you love deeply, you will win her back with poetry, your own or another’s.”

Several thought poetry was the very thing needed to win back a lover, but some said that it would take a lot more than pretty words. I thanked them all for their help, but the truth was, as I went downstairs to my apartment, I was just as confused as before.

I went to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

The thing about being a dreamwalker and having dreamwalker acquaintances (some of whom were family) was that sleep was often not that restful. That night, before I'd even closed my eyes (or at least that was how it seemed) someone shook me awake. At first I was groggy but then I remembered I was in my apartment and no one else was supposed to be there, which was like a shot of espresso. My eyes popped open. Part of it was just the normal fright of waking in the middle of the night with a stranger in your bedroom. But part of it was because I knew it must be after midnight, which meant I was in yesterday's tomorrow, which meant today was the day Death and I had an appointment. Seemed a bit early but...

It turned out it wasn't a stranger. It was Lola, my beautiful (raven haired, emerald eyed, whip smart) old best friend (not exactly a friend anymore). She stood over me. It took me a second to work out how this was possible. Then I realized where I was. I heard the waves rolling in and the seagulls off in the distance and saw the sun setting off over the gulf, a ship out in the distance, too far to identify, chugging over the horizon. The sand was still warm from the day. It took me back to this place I'd spent many a setting suns during my teen years.

"Been a long time," I said.

"A lot of good times here," she said.

"Did my father give you the dreamwalker gift, or did you have it when we were kids?"

She ignored my question.

“I heard you broke up with your girlfriend,” she said.

“It only happened earlier tonight,” I said, suspicious she was spying on me.

“News travels fast,” she said.

“You’re watching me?”

“Grapevine,” she said.

Someone in Eden was her grapevine. Had to be.

“I just wanted to be here for you,” she said. “Like the old days. I know I’ve messed things up between us. I’d like us to be friends again. I’d like us to help each other.”

The last time I’d seen her, she was yelling for her fellow demons to kill me. I thought I heard her tell them to rip my head off. Naturally, I was skeptical of this sudden change.

“You didn’t, by any chance, try to convince Rowena to kill me in exchange for help with some bit of magic, did you?” I said.

Maybe a jump, but she had sold her soul to the devil. (Yes, yes, he was my father, but still, she was a demon now and she served one master.)

“Why would I do that? I don’t want you killed.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I just know some demon tried to convince her to kill me.”

She looked sincerely irritated by this, even angry. “I’ll check into it. If someone did, they did it without Lucifer’s permission. You really thought it was me?”

“I don’t know many high-ranking demons,” I admitted.

“If I come for you,” she said. “It will be me. I won’t be making any deals with someone else to do the dirty work.”

“Good to know,” I said.

She pulled out a bottle of wine from the air. She was a demon witch, so she could do things like that. Also, this was a

dream. She took a drink from the bottle and handed it to me. I took a drink.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“Not bad,” I said.

“Domaine de la Romanee. Worth half a million a bottle.”

“But this is dream wine, right?”

“The bottle is real. I have it in my apartment in Paris. If you visit me, we’ll drink it.”

“I guess crime does pay,” I said.

“You’ve always known that.”

I did, and I didn’t. I was a burglar for several years before I turned eighteen. I did manage to steal a lot of things, but what stopped me was when I was caught and cornered by an owner. I lost it and beat him up to get away. I put him in the hospital. That scared me. I realized if I kept doing what I was doing, there was a good chance I was going to hurt someone, maybe kill them. Before that, I kept convincing myself what I was doing wasn’t so bad. I was stealing from the rich and giving to the poor, just like Robin Hood. In my case, the poor happened to be me.

“Why am I really back here in Port A.?” I asked.

“I told you. I want us to be friends again. When you’re ready to talk, I’m here if you want to talk to me.”

She sounded like her old self, like the self that had been my best friend when we were in a foster home together as teens.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Meanwhile, I’ll look into who is trying to kill you. I’d be careful. Must be someone pretty powerful if she defied Lucifer.”

“Or foolish,” I said.

“A lethal combination,” she said.

We drank the expensive wine and watched the sunset and talked about times we'd spent in this place on the beach when we were teenagers. A Remember when... Remember when... talk. I had to admit I enjoyed it.

After a while, we said goodbye. I watched her walk away. She could still walk down a beach like no one else.

Chapter Twelve

I awoke with a pounding headache, my mouth dry as dirt. The light from the small rectangular windows near the ceiling was shining faintly in the room. It was early morning.

I considered going back to sleep, but I had obligations. I would have to open the library at nine. Then I'd need to venture into the haunted forest and inform the two witch sisters about Rowena's murder. How would they react? Did they have alibis?

I went into the kitchen and found a bottle of aspirin in the cupboard. I swallowed two and drank two glasses of water. I made a cup of coffee and put in even more milk than usual, hoping to avoid more upset to an already uneasy stomach. After eating a quick bowl of Lucky Charms, I was ready to go. Not exactly ready, but getting there. Before leaving the basement, I stopped to get the magical sword that might or might not be Excalibur. With the press of an invisible button on the hilt, it would transform into a pocket-knife, the long, thin kind called, I thought, a stiletto. Today I wore it as a sword in a scabbard on a belt. Let the world see. Let Death see.

Like death would be scared.

On the way up the stairs, I made a change in plans. When I got to my desk near the front door of the library, I found a magic marker and wrote a hastily scrawled sign on notebook paper, "Closed today for Personal business." I taped it to the front door and went down the front porch stairs.

The morning sun did little to burn away the fog clinging to the woods, or the one in my hungover mind. I crossed the bridge over the fast-moving stream that separated the forest from Eden and began my hike along a winding dirt trail. Tendrils of mist wrapped around massive trunks and snaked across the path. The woods were eerily silent except for the crunch of leaves under my boots.

About a mile into the forest, I caught a flash of movement from the corner of my eye. I turned to see a large black shape dart behind a tree. I called out, "Hello? Who's there?"

A menacing growl was the only reply. I reached for my sword, but the creature was too fast for me. I felt its massive paws against my shoulder and its head, the size of a boulder, ramming into my own. It pinned me to the forest floor. Its mouth opened wide, and I saw its large razor-sharp teeth. And then, and then, the tongue. It was like a thunderstorm of saliva as the creature licked me. It took me a second, but I got it.

"Fluffy?" I said, but it wasn't really a question. I'd know that tongue anywhere.

The hell hound, a huge red hound with spiky black tiger stripes and small, almost cat-like ears, was on top of me licking my face and drooling, making little whimpering sounds. I petted him as best I could from underneath him until I could convince him to get off me. Then I got up and petted him and told him what a good boy he was. I could see that there were healing scars across his thick, short coat. Those demon bastards had done a job on him.

"You're a good boy," I said. "Let's go see a witch."

I don't think he understood me exactly, but his stubby tail wagged. Before we'd gone ten steps, he ran off into the woods. I thought he might have seen something, but he actually just brought me back a stick, only it was a sapling he'd pulled out of the ground.

"No time for playing right now," I said.

He nudged me with the stick.

"Later," I said. "Work now."

He whined a little. I told him work first play later. Anyway, I doubted I could throw the “stick” he’d brought me more than two or three feet. He reluctantly dropped it and danced around me down the trail.

Rip had given me directions to Zeena’s cottage. I followed a windy path through thick woods. The Hellhound was big, and I took two steps for every one of his but moving through the woods wasn’t particularly fast because he kept stopping to pee here and there to mark his territory which, like most dogs, seemed to include wherever they happened to be.

Finally, we reached a small clearing and the cottage. It had a large, well-tended garden with flowers and herbs in front and a freshly painted white picket fence around it. Zeena’s cottage was very different from her sisters. Its stone walls were draped in lively green ivy. The cottage looked freshly painted, with white shutters around clean windows.

As I approached the three steps up to the porch, the cottage’s bright blue door swung open. Zeena was a haunting beauty, more exotic than Katrina, with thick, curly golden hair, and a model’s angular cheek-boned face. Her blue eyes regarded me coolly. “You must be the librarian. I’ve been expecting you,” she said in a gentle voice. “Please, come in. I’ll put on some tea.”

I followed her inside. The interior was just as tidy and welcoming as the exterior. A fire crackled merrily in the stone hearth. Dried herbs hung from the rafters, and shelves along the walls contained jars of roots, minerals and arcane components. A black cat dozed by the crackling fireplace. Aside from the more exotic elements, it could have been the home of any woodland herbalist or doctor or botanist.

What struck me most was how meticulously neat everything was. The rows of leather-bound books stood in perfect alignment without a speck of dust. The neatly arranged well-cared for furniture. The lack of cobwebs. It seemed odd to find a witch’s lair so spectacularly spotless, but maybe I was projecting my own bias toward what a witch’s cottage in a haunted forest should look like.

“I’ve come to tell you your sister is dead,” I said.

Zeena gestured for me to sit, smoothing her black dress before settling cat-like into an armchair. “Ask what you came here to ask. I wish to return to my studies.”

So much for a reaction of grief or surprise or anything else. She seemed unmoved by my news.

I cleared my throat. “I’ve heard you threatened to kill Rowena. Is that true?”

“A long time ago. We were all foolish girls—angry, hurting, violent. I might have killed her back then if I had had the chance. But that day was in the last century. After we served our punishments, we all were sent to this forest. We did not socialize. There was no getting together for birthdays or Halloween, but we had no more quarrels. I bore her no ill will and I am sorry she is dead.”

Her tone was calm. I thought I could see what might be sincere regret on her face or might just be indigestion from an ill-considered meal.

“You wish it could have been different?” I asked.

“Of course. Despite it all, Rowena was still my sister. We shared a wretched childhood and I suppose in some strange way we blamed each other. That was what led to our (she paused, looking for a word) disagreements. However, we put that in the past long ago. I did not kill her, nor do I know who did.”

I studied her carefully. If she was deceiving me, she was good at it. Before I could ask her more questions, the front door banged open. A powerfully built man strode in. He was wearing a traditional lumberjack’s red plaid shirt and suspenders and carrying an ax over his shoulder.

“She’s dead,” the man said. “She killed her.”

The man halted when he spotted me. He had a bushy black beard, longish curly hair, and steady brown eyes. He swung the ax down.

“Who is this?” he asked.

“The librarian of Eden.” She turned to me. “This is the woodsman, Angus.”

“Librarian,” he said, squinting at me.

Some people were naturally suspicious of people who loved books. I sensed Angus was one of them. I supposed it was true that we readers had caused a lot of trouble, historically speaking.

Zeena moved closer to Angus in a protective way. Was she protecting me or him, though? I could feel the frown on my face and tried to disguise it. This generally didn't work very well for me.

“What were you saying before?” I said.

“What?” he said.

“Something like she killed her. Who killed her?”

“I heard Rowena is dead,” he said, “from a woodchuck. Maybe the woodchuck said her.”

“Is this the same woodchuck people are always asking about? How many chucks would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?”

I sensed I could tangle the woodsman up in confusion with just a little nonsense. He gave me a puzzled look. He thought I was laying a trap.

“What else did that woodchuck say? A name.”

Angus shook his shaggy head. “Nothing.”

“Not how she was killed, or who killed her?”

He shook his shaggy head.

“How was she killed?” Zeena said to me.

“Poison,” I said.

“No,” the woodsman said. He was handsome and strong and could no doubt swing an axe with the best of them, but he was not the sharpest tool in the shed.

“No?” I said. “Come to think of it, you're right. No. How?”

Zeena frowned.

“How was she killed, Woodsman?”

“Throat cut, I was told.”

“Who killed her?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

Seemed true. Unfortunately.

“Someone was making a statement,” Zeena said.

“They didn’t need magic to kill her?” I said. “The queen of witches?”

“I think you’ll find that this was not done by a witch of the haunted woods. Wicked witches seldom resort to weapons.”

“Who is she?” I said, looking at Zeena.

She shrugged. “No telling.”

“What was Rowena up to?”

“We haven’t talked in decades. But I heard she was going deep into the dark arts. A dangerous place. Perhaps she got lost.”

I wasn’t getting anywhere.

I didn’t think it was time yet to tell her that Rowena’s ghost was holding out against Death in her cottage. I wanted to get more information. Zeena seemed to be involved in some way. One thing for sure, she knew more than she was telling me.

I needed to speak to Katrina again. And to the familiar. Shake the tree a little. Often in my time on the road, I had investigated deaths or thefts or abductions and come to a place in an investigation that seemed to lead nowhere. Sometimes you just had to shake things up and see if something revealed itself. I’d try Katrina and the familiar first. If that didn’t work, then maybe the woodsman and his woodchuck friend.

Chapter Thirteen

I went back to where I'd left Fluffy and he gave me a greeting, much like before. I ended up on my back again with the 400-pound Hellhound on top of me. He was roughly the weight of some of those defensive linemen in pro football. I wondered how the quarterbacks survived that kind of weight landing on them several times in a game?

I had to insist we find a gentler greeting before I ended up with broken bones. I'd seen lions greet humans in a gentle way by placing their paws on their human friend's shoulders. I thought this was a method that would work well for us. I tried to communicate this to Fluffy. It took some practice.

Maybe that was how I would die. An accidental greeting by my hellhound. I was already thinking of him as mine, which was foolish, I guess. I might only have one day to live. I had always wanted a dog, though. If I'd made a bucket list, I guess that would be one of the things on it.

If I died, I knew that Karl would take Fluffy back to hell. If I lived, he'd probably still try to take him back, anyway. A hellhound belongs in hell, I could hear him say. But I didn't think Karl could physically come to Eden, so if I got Fluffy to the library maybe Karl couldn't make me give him back.

If I survived.

That was a big if.

A hunched over old witch in traditional garb—black dress, black hat—her face haggard and warty, her skin wrinkled as a prune, stepped in front of us on the path. She took a few steps

toward us. They were crone steps. It would take her an hour just to cross a road. She was so bent over she had to twist her neck to look up at me. She cackled, revealing a toothless mouth. Her breath was a dead animal by the side of the road. She carried a basket over her arms.

“Fresh apples, dearie?” she croaked, holding out a gnarled hand with an apple. “As succulent as a young mother’s tit.”

“No, thank you,” I said.

“Very cheap. Give me that hellhound of yours and you can have the whole basket.”

“They’re poisoned, aren’t they?”

“Course not,” she said, looking away.

“It’s an old story,” I said. “The old witch with her poisoned apples.”

“No, it’s not,” she said.

“I bet you haven’t sold an apple in years.”

She began to cry then. They were witch crone tears which, as soon as they hit the soil in the haunted woods, became weeds.

“I’m just a poor old witch trying to make a living.”

“By poisoning people.”

“That’s the good part, but the bad part is I don’t seem to have the old salesmanship skills I once did.”

“Your apples don’t look very good,” I said.

I saw a worm stick its head out of one of them.

“Maybe you could just buy one to help an old lady out. Take a little bite to show we’re friends.”

“And die?” I said.

“All right. Just buy an apple and give it to a friend, then.”

“You’ve got to set yourself apart,” I said. “Try selling poison watermelons.”

“You think that would work?”

“Might,” I said.

“Hmm,” she said. “Might. Yes. Might. All right. You still smell of death, but all right.”

She disappeared

“Funny,” Fluffy said. “Old witch. Carry watermelon in haunted forest.”

My mouth involuntarily formed into a small grin. “You can talk?”

“A little English. You make witch carry watermelon. Yuck Yuck.”

I shrugged. “She is trying to poison people. I don’t think it should be easy on her.”

“Funny,” he said.

“It is a little funny,” I admitted.

He sniggered. He was, after all, a hellhound.

Chapter Fourteen

We'd walked about fifteen minutes farther on the path when the ninja-demons attacked.

I was aware—watching and listening for threats. What I wasn't listening for was no sound, which was what I should have been listening for. Silence. Silence was unusual in the haunted forest. No monkeys in the trees or buzzing insects or birds or rutting animals or howls or screams. Not even a banshee cry. Rip had said she came in to Eden to sing with the church choir from time to time, but she wasn't singing her sad song of death today.

I knew the attackers were ninja demons because they announced their attack by shouting, "We are ninja assassin demons from hell and you are going to die."

A little on-the-nose but still, oddly, effective. I felt the chill of fear rush through me.

The demon-ninjas were nine feet tall, though they moved with the speed and stealth of ninjas, cloaked in black, hoods up. They had wide shoulders and their hands had claws instead of fingers. Each demon ninja assassin wielded vicious looking weapons—swords, daggers, nun chucks, and throwing stars.

As the first two hit the ground in front of me, I snapped into action. Better to snap than be snapped was my thinking; they were growling furiously. I ducked under the first demon-ninja's sword swipe and delivered a spinning back kick to his chest, sending him flying into a tree trunk. It took him at least

a second to recover, which worried me some. He came at me again.

The second ninja demon slashed at me with his daggers, but I managed to block his thrusts. He over-committed to his attack. I seized his arm and used his momentum to flip him over my shoulder into another one. The two ninjas, against usual protocol for two soldiers fighting on the same side, got into. The larger of the two ripped the other one's head off and then tossed it scornfully into the haunted forest. I saw two monkeys carry it off.

Entertaining as this was, four more ninja-demons landed, encircling us. These seemed less inclined to attack each other, unfortunately.

"Now would be the time to attack," I told Fluffy, who, up to that point, had just been watching. It turned out all he needed was an invitation. He leaped at one of them and took him down to the ground and his large teeth tore out his throat.

Another came at me, nun chucks swirling. I jumped and spun, avoiding blows while lashing out with my fists and feet. My strikes crushed his nose. He breathed through his mouth, as if the squashed nose was just a minor inconvenience, and punched me so hard I landed on my butt.

Another two moved in, swords glinting. I managed to grab one's arm and use his sword to block the others swing. A swift kick to the back of the knee brought one demon down, where I managed an elbow strike across the chin. As he was going down, he threw a ball of fire. I ducked. It caught the hair of the other demon-ninja. Even I had to admit this was a shame. He had long, straight, beautiful black hair, and it was going up in flames. He was dancing around, which was adding fury to the flames.

I drew my sword.

I heard a ferocious growl, followed by screams of pain. Fluffy had joined the fray with greater enthusiasm, tearing into the remaining three demon-ninjas with his powerful jaws. One demon-ninja's arm hung limp and bloody in Fluffy's mouth. It grabbed his ear and Fluffy whined. The unattached hand and

arm squeezed tighter. I chopped it off at the wrist. Even then, Fluffy was still whining, so I guessed the hand was still squeezing. I had to peel the fingers off Fluffy's ear. The hellhound grabbed it from me as soon as I got it off, and swallowed the whole hand.

“Demon hand,” he said. “Tastes like chicken.”

He sniggered.

Dogs loved to eat some pretty gross stuff.

Four more demons attacked. Four against two. Normally not great odds, but they didn't have a Fluffy on their side.

I flipped backwards as shuriken whizzed past me, embedding into a tree. I was just showing off, but I wanted these half-ninjas to know I had a few gymnastic moves, too. Master Lee, my martial arts teacher, had always said there was no reason you shouldn't add an entertaining style to your fighting if possible.

Two ninja-demons came at me with blades and I parried and saw an opening and drove my blade into the heart of the ninja on my right. The one on my left was charging me, so I asked him, using my hypnotic voice, to please drop his weapon. He did. He looked very surprised at himself. I waved my sword at him. He ran, but ran straight into a tree and knocked himself out. I let him sleep. I needed to catch my breath.

Fluffy had pounced on the other two ninja demons. They were on the forest floor groaning and moaning, pieces of them missing or at least no longer part of them. Fluffy stood panting nearby, blood dripping from his muzzle. He seemed content.

“Are you smiling?” I asked him.

He seemed to be.

“Who's the good boy?” I asked rhetorically.

“Fluffy,” he said.

He wagged his nub of a tail. We set off deeper into the woods, moving as quickly as the twisting trail would allow in case there were more ninja-demons looking for us.

The sun was past its high noon point when we arrived at Katrina's. Katrina's thatched cottage in the woods looked in poor shape compared to Zeena's, but was in better shape than Rowena's. As wicked witches' cottages went, it was probably a C+.

"You'll have to wait here," I told Fluffy. "There's a cat."

"Like cat," he said.

"Really?"

"With salt." He sniggered.

"Good one," I said.

"I watch. You go."

"Fine. Good."

As I went down to the cottage, I looked back, and he was gone.

My legs ached and my stomach rumbled with hunger after the day's exertions and only Lucky Charms to keep me going. My head had cleared, but the lethargy of a night of too much drinking lingered. I longed to go home and fall into bed, but I had to press on.

I knocked on Katrina's door. It opened. She seemed surprised to see me.

"Not expecting me this time?" I said.

She smiled uneasily. "Come in."

I stepped in. Like before, her cottage had a comforting feel. Wooden furniture and shelves filled with books on one wall and little jars with various herbs and who knew what else on another. A pot of stew was still bubbling over a small crackling fire. Cobwebs still clung to the corners as sunlight filtered through a dirty window, casting a soft yellow-orange glow.

She said I should sit down and she would make us tea. I did. The familiar wasn't in the room, but I knew she was in the house because I sneezed.

“The tea will help,” Katrina said when she came back in carrying the tea on a tray.

I remembered the last time then. I had been stuffed up and sneezing when I’d come into the house and the tea had helped.

“Good for allergies?” I said. I blew on the tea to cool it so I could take a sip.

“And hangovers,” she said.”

I took a sip. Almost immediately, I felt less lethargic.

“Where is the familiar?”

“She’s out in the woods killing her lunch. Familiars like to catch and kill their food.”

I told her about Rowena, and she set her teacup carefully back in its saucer. She was harder to read than her sister.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Cut her throat?” she said. “No magic used?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “The cut on her throat and the loss of blood made it the clear cause of death. But magic could have been used some other way. To paralyze her or to sneak up on her or something like that.”

“Poor Rowena.”

“She seems to think you aren’t safe. Why would she think that?”

“Seems? I don’t understand.”

I took another sip of tea. With each sip, I felt a little better. “Her spirit. She’s holding out against Death. She’s put a spell blocking Death from entering her cottage.”

“Isn’t that just like Rowena? Always coming up with creative ways to use magic. It’s a gift.”

“She won’t be able to hold out forever.”

“I wouldn’t put it past her,” she said.

“Death seemed a little put out by her refusal to go with him. He’ll find a way to get to her.”

“You spoke to Him?”

“He spoke to me. Why aren’t you safe? I thought you sisters didn’t have any communication?”

“We haven’t met or spoken, but this past year we started writing each other. Emails. Texts.”

“I haven’t heard of anyone being able to use texts or emails up on the mountain.”

“Rowena used magic to create a signal transmitter. She thought she might be able to create it for the entire haunted woods someday, link us to the world below. She was quite good with technology. That’s a myth that all witches don’t get along with technology.”

“What were you writing each other about?” I asked.

“I need to go,” she said. Her voice trembled slightly. “If someone killed, I am in danger. She’s right.”

“Why would they come after you? What were you up to?”

She shrugged. “Rowena was working on her own. I discouraged her, but they might think we were working together.”

“Who are they?” I asked.

“Whoever killed her.”

“And who was that?”

“Whoever cut her throat,” she said, her voice trembling slightly.

I was getting nowhere. I tried a different direction.

“Why was she killed?”

“Going places she shouldn’t go, I expect,” she said. She glanced around nervously. “She was always going places she shouldn’t go.”

“You must have some idea. You’ve been emailing and texting. Some text that hinted at something.”

“I really need to get out of here,” she said. “We’re in real danger. You too. If someone killed her—we need to go.”

“Be straight with me,” I said. “I’m trying to help you.”

She told me I needed to leave and then waved her hand to help me out and I found myself out of her house and on the front lawn. I had never been helped out that way before. Of course, a witch that lived in the haunted woods was bound to pick up tricks.

I went back out to where I’d left Fluffy. He wasn’t there. I shouted his name several times, but no Hellhound. I hung around for five minutes, but when he still didn’t show, I started the walk back to Eden, aware that if another platoon of ninja demons showed up, I wouldn’t have much chance.

Maybe it was time for my appointment with Death.

Chapter Fifteen

I walked about ten minutes before Fluffy fell into step beside me, rubbing up against me.

“What have you been up to?” I asked him.

“Guarding Kevin.”

“It didn’t seem that way,” I pointed out.

“Chased squirrel,” he admitted.

“Did you catch it?” I said, hoping he said no.

“Like squirrel,” he said.

“With salt?” I said.

He snickered.

As we walked through the misty woods back towards Eden, I thought about the sisters. I was still sure they were hiding something, but I was not the least bit sure what. The demons-ninja attack could have been part of their story, but I had the feeling it was more part of mine. Ninja demons just had the sound of creatures from hell.

I didn’t think they came from my father, though. Why would Karl send ninja demons to kill me? He wouldn’t unless he’d discovered proof I wasn’t the anti-Christ and he couldn’t use to me to get The End of Days and Armageddon. Even if he discovered proof, why send a whole gang of ninja demons?

“Not my father,” I said to Fluffy.

He looked at me questioningly. It reminded me of the dog in that old cartoon, Scooby Do. Perplexed. Dogs were good at that perplexed look. He wasn't a dog exactly, but he wasn't not a dog either. He was, after all, a hound.

"Someone else from hell," I said. "I think someone else from hell sent those Ninja demons to kill me. What do you think?"

Perplexed look again.

Lola, former best friend? Deadeye, demon enemy, who would want revenge on me? Even Beelzebub was a possibility; I'd messed up his plan to kill the Tree of Life and conquer Eden, after all.

One thing was sure. The sisters were afraid. Who or what were they afraid of? The woodsman had been taken into Katrina's confidence. He might be the one to tell me. The weak link.

"It isn't safe here," Katrina had muttered nervously while packing her things. It took a lot to frighten a witch who lived in the haunted woods.

Very strange how these sisters who hadn't seen each other for over a century and who had, that last time they'd seen each other, been filled with such hate they'd practically destroyed one another, had recently started emailing and texting. Something had changed. What?

Also, the cat, the familiar, hadn't left Rowena because she was angry with her. Why had she really left Rowena? It was no small thing for a familiar to be separated from her witch. Something was missing in her explanation, too. Honestly, important bits of information were missing all over the landscape of this story.

It was the middle of the afternoon, but the day had turned cold and dark in the woods. Of course, the woods were haunted, so bright and sunshiny wasn't really something you could expect. It would be like Voldemort suddenly singing "Imagine".

So many questions, so few answers. But one thing was clear. The sisters had been up to something and that something that had gotten one of them killed. It was possible only Rowena had been up to that something, but the others, at the very least, had been supporting her in some way.

A snapping twig jolted me from my thoughts. I froze, scanning the trees around me. Fluffy froze. He made a low growl. But it was nothing, just a mother armadillo and three little armadillos following her. Of course, it was odd seeing armadillos, common enough where I grew up, in the haunted woods, but you never knew what you'd see. Anyway, I suppose it made sense. They were survivors. I read they'd been around 60 million years, large as rhinoceros back then. They'd shrunk a bit over time (thankfully), but they were still around. What were the chances humans would be in 60 million years?

We passed by where the demon-ninjas attacked me. I'd planned ongoing through their pockets (did ninja demon armor have pockets? I hoped so. They needed some place to keep their shuriken. Maybe I'd find a clue about where they'd come from and who had sent them. But when I got to the place, I thought the bodies would be they weren't.

I glanced at Fluffy padding beside me, his red eyes gleaming with an almost human-like intellect if humans had gleaming red eyes.

“What do you think, boy?” I asked.

“In hell.”

“Why?”

“Cleaners. Messy, messy. Cleaners clean.”

“Someone doesn't want anyone to know about the attack?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

So someone was cleaning up their messes. This was beginning to seem a little more than just a demon deciding they wanted to kill me. My experience with demons was that they didn't clean up after themselves. Someone ordered them

to. Someone who had the power to order demons around. Lola? Karl? Some new enemy?

We walked on.

As for the witches, I needed to know more before I saw them again. There had to be clues about Rowena's relationships and rivalries that would shed light on possible motives for her murder. Maybe some town records or history books at the library might give me clues. I was a reader. I would read.

As we approached Eden, I slowed. It was the middle of the afternoon. Fluffy tensed beside me, growling softly at the darkened woods. I rested my hand on his back. "Easy boy."

As we crossed the bridge back into Eden, I cast a wary glance over my shoulder. I knew he was right. There were unseen forces back there watching us. I could feel them even if I couldn't see them. It didn't feel like the random malevolence of the haunted forest. Not only that, anyway. Ninja demons. Who even came up with such creatures? Designer demons. It was almost as if they were made just for me.

Chapter Sixteen

I thought I was going back to the library and take a nap, but on the way to my apartment, I realized I was hungry. I took Fluffy to the library, thinking the town might not be ready for a hellhound.

I gave Fluffy the run of the place and told him if he read any books, he had to put them back in their places. Perplexed dog look.

He followed me to the door and sat by it looking forlorn. I had seen this look before. Dogs had perfected it over the centuries. Those eyes were saying something along the lines of how could you leave me to a fate worse than death when I have nothing but love for you? I shut the door feeling guilty.

I walked over to the café for dinner. Inside, the cafe was just starting to get the early-birds. Already the smells of baking fresh bread and fried and grilled meat were floating in the air. I was in time to grab a booth and I did.

Olive came over and asked me what she could get me. She didn't look me in the eye. She had her pad out. I ordered the pot roast. I studied her discreetly as she poured my coffee. She looked tired.

“Are you all right?” I said.

Olive finally looked at me. She leaned in and spoke softly. “I wanted to say I'm sorry for how I acted the other day. I know I was kind of a bitch. I was upset, but I—I was—you know. You've been good to me and I respect you. I hope we can be friends.”

“I was just surprised,” I said. “I thought everything was good.”

“It was,” she said. “I don’t want you to think I’ve been faking it or you misread something or it wasn’t real. It wasn’t like that. I just have to move on. I’m doing what I have to do. It’s no one’s fault.”

“Thanks for saying that,” I said.

“It’s the truth. I hope we can be friends.”

I sipped my coffee, hesitating. “That’s a tough one. If we’re friends, then I have to tell you the truth. You’re making a mistake. I know you don’t love Sir Ronald. Friends don’t let friends marry the wrong man.”

Olive bit her lip, looking down at the counter. “You know I have to do this. Can’t you just let me be?”

“Not if we’re friends. I would be a bad friend.”

“I have to be an adult about this. People get married for all kinds of reasons. Love is a fairy tale. I can’t afford it. My father comes first. So, if you can’t understand that, then I guess we can’t be friends.”

“It would relieve me of my responsibility. I wouldn’t have to keep telling you that your father wouldn’t want you to throw your life away for him or that you’re going to be miserable with a man like Sir Ronald.”

“You don’t even know him.”

“I feel like I do.”

“I’ve made my choice,” Olive said sharply. “Nothing you say will change my mind.”

“Then I won’t say anything,” I said.

“Fine,” she said.

“Fine,” I said.

She walked off. I fumed. It was true that I was lying when I said I knew Sir Ronald. I knew people like him, though. I saw that same look on his face, that same smug condescension

I'd seen on other rich people. The look said, I may be arrogant, selfish, carless, dishonest, conceited, and a narcissist, but at the end of the day I have money and you don't. And that's all that really matters. You can pretend like there are other things that matter, but I know. I have money. When all is said and done, I have it and you do not. So maybe I didn't know Sir Ronald, but I knew Sir Ronald. Even after this internal venting, I was still upset.

Lucy brought my food when it was ready. She gave me a disapproving look when she put my plate on the table. I picked at it half-heartedly, my appetite diminished. The café filled. The bells at the door tinkled as people came in. Some said hello, and I said hello back, but they didn't linger. I guess they sensed it wasn't a good time for small talk.

Voices, pottery plates being dumped in bus-tubs, silverware clanging, the smell of fries and hamburgers floating in the air. It all seemed far away. Everything seemed far away. I would never get Olive back.

Maybe Olive was right. Love was a fairy-tale, an illusion. In the real world, practicality ruled. People married for all kinds of reasons. A lot of them had very little to do with love. They'd been doing it for centuries.

I was roused from my brooding by Rip sliding into the booth across from me.

"You look like you need a drink," he said.

"I do," I admitted.

We left the café. We went down the street to The Bar. It was not as crowded as the café, but there were a dozen people scattered around the large room.

We sat in a booth. There was no waitress working, so I went up to the bar and bought us a couple of whiskeys. It made me remember last night. It reminded me that I was not dead, which meant that I must only have a few hours left. Or maybe a few minutes. I thought again about getting in the Deville and going back in time to escape Death. Where would I go?

I took the drinks back to the table and sat across from Rip.

“What’s Sir Ronald like?” I asked. Rip seemed to know everyone in Eden and everyone who passed through.

“Rich Arse,” he said. “Been a rich arse even before he was rich, from what I hear. Likes to buy things, people included.”

“About what I thought,” I said.

Rip drank down his whiskey and banged the glass on the table. “Truth is, son, you can’t protect someone from their own bad choices, much as you may want to. Best you can do is be there when they need you.”

“I don’t know if I believe that’s the best I can do.”

“Why?”

“I love her,” I said.

“You sure?”

“It’s a surprise to me,” I said. “I’d sort of decided I wasn’t made for it, love I mean, and then I came here and I met her. I’m sure.”

“That changes things.”

By the time we said good night, the ache inside me had lessened. I didn’t know how he did it, but just talking it over made me feel a little less buried alive. A little less buried alive was better than buried alive.

I took a deep breath of the cool night air and stood in front of the bar as Rip walked toward his house. I noticed a lone woman sitting in the park on the bench by the Tree of Life gazing up at the stars that always seemed, to me, to be gazing down on us. I realized it was Camila, ghostbuster, so I walked over.

“Good evening, Camila,” I said, letting her know I was there fifteen or twenty feet away.

“Have a seat, Librarian?” She gestured to the bench. “Nice night for stargazing, or brooding, as the case may be.”

I sat beside her. “Is my brooding that obvious?”

She laughed, her dark eyes twinkling. “I heard the wedding news from Olive, and I watched you walk across the street. I’d say your look is classic brooding.”

I knew I should just shrug and not say anything, but I couldn’t seem to stop myself from saying what I knew could be perceived as self-serving criticism. “Olive is marrying the wrong man. She doesn’t love him. She’s just doing it for her father, and she won’t listen to me, but she’s going to be miserable.”

Camila nodded thoughtfully. “Sir Ronald is a jerk, but he’s promised to take care of her father and her. She believes him. I’m not sure I do, but she seems determined to marry him..”

“If her father knew what she was doing, he’d never let her go ahead with the wedding.”

“Wrong way, librarian. You tell her secrets, and she’ll hate you for it.”

“What’s the right way?”

“Everyone says you’re smart,” she said.

“Not everyone,” I said. In fact, in grammar school, some of my teachers had said I was stupid and inattentive and disruptive. A trifecta.

“Isn’t it a little odd that her father hasn’t been able to get food after years of finding a fairly regular supply?”

“You mean this has never happened before?” I hadn’t thought about it because I’d only been in town for about two weeks.

“Bingo,” she said.

I thanked her. I said I hoped the stars would shine favorably on her. She said that was a nice thought. If I were a better man, I would have asked her why she said that because it had the sound of discontent. She and her husband, Ryan, had troubles from time to time. But just then I felt compelled to pay a visit to Doc who besides being the town doctor was the town undertaker (yes it was a conflict of interest, but folks in

small towns often needed more than one occupation to make ends meet.).

I thanked her again and hurried off.

Chapter Seventeen

I didn't go to Doc's right away because, as I thought about it, I realized that I might need some evidence to persuade him to tell me the truth. I made a quick stop at the records office (which was closed and I had to use old skills from my misspent youth to break into) and found the records for deaths over the past couple of weeks. Then I made a trip to the graveyard to talk to Henry, the caretaker. At first Henry wasn't very talkative, but I offered him three twenties and explained that I might have to lock him in one of the mausoleums while I investigated my suspicions, which could take weeks. Carrot and stick. He took the money.

The doctor's office was in his home, which was a large two-story Victorian that stood tall against the evening sky, its white-painted facade glinting in the moonlight. Its windows were shuttered by ornate wooden frames carved with intricate designs. Attached to the door was a brass knocker with a curved handle shaped like a lion's head. I banged it on the door.

Doc swung the door open a minute or two later. He was a thin man, with thick white hair and a white curvy mustache. As always, he wore a black suit, which fit both his duties as undertaker and doctor.

"Well, well, look who's here."

"Been expecting me?"

"Yes, is the short answer. Thought you might be horizontal and someone carrying you, but I'm not completely surprised to

see you on my doorstep looking put out.”

“I’m here to arrest you or to get your help. Your choice.”

“Interesting. I didn’t know we had a jail.”

“I have a cage in the library basement. Holds Supernaturals, monsters, and regular old humans who break the law.”

The full-moon had risen in the sky. Third one this month.

“You better come in.”

I followed him in. The house’s entrance opened up to a grand foyer. A staircase wound its way up to the second floor, the wooden railing carved to look like a serpent. The walls were maroon, and the floors covered by a richly patterned carpet. To the left was a sitting room filled with velvet chairs and couches in shades of deep red and dusty blue.

We stepped in there and he gestured for me to sit in one of the chairs and said he was just about to have a sherry and would I join him. I said I would.

Doc moved with the stiffness of an old man as he crossed the room to the liquor cart by a cabinet. I’d seen him work on patients. His hands still moved with the grace of a dancer. He poured the sherry into crystal sherry glasses and came back over and sat in a chair across from me.

“Let’s see which it is then,” he said. “Arrest or help.”

“Beautiful house,” I said, looking around. I appreciated the work of a craftsman.

“Thank you. We’ve had some very fine carpenters in Eden over the years. At the moment, we seem to be without one, but I imagine one will show up soon.”

“Is that the way it works?”

“Often.”

“You think the town decides?”

“I don’t think you came to talk to me about the mysteries of Eden,” he said.

“I’ve got a problem, Doc,” I said.

“We’ve all got those,” the doctor said.

“I’ve been to the county office and I notice we’ve had some deaths, but, and I know you’ll find this odd, the bodies haven’t been disposed of the way they have for years.”

Doc took a sip of his sherry. I took a little sip. I had to admit, it was lush and smooth. He sighed. “Henry was always the weak link in all this.”

“The mayor, you, and Henry are in league with the billionaire. I’d call that a conspiracy.”

The doctor shrugged. He took off his glasses and pulled out a handkerchief and cleaned the lenses carefully with the cloth. The cleaning of his glasses was done with precise movements.

“The billionaire paid you to do what, exactly?” I said.

“Just as Henry told you. If someone turned up dead, we went through our usual charade, but instead of getting the bodies to Professor Hanover, I directed Henry to bury them in the woods. We kept the deaths as quiet as possible. A smooth operation.”

“How many have died?”

“Four in the last month, which is normal for our little town. We’re regular in that way. The spikes are always caused by unnatural events, usually caused by humans.”

“How much did Sir Ronald pay you?”

“Too much to refuse, I’m afraid. I have a weakness for female companionship. At my age it’s necessary to pay for the company of a young woman and I like my woman young. Another unfortunate weakness.”

There were a few women in town and at least one man I knew was not above having sex for money on occasion. They weren’t exactly prostitutes, and they weren’t exactly not prostitutes. They were amateurs who made a little here and there with occasional side hustles.

“I’m going to need you to write a confession of your sins, Doc.”

“Which ones exactly?”

“What you did for the billionaire? The favors of young women aren’t necessary.”

“Am I correct in thinking that I will be writing this for Olive and not for the judge who, in this case, would be my conspirator?”

“You are.”

“You mind if I apologize in my confession? I do feel bad about it. Both Olive and Henry are friends.”

“Not at all,” I said.

“Thank you.”

We went back to his small office. The walls were bookcases filled with books. I felt at home. He sat behind a big oak desk and pulled out a piece of nice stationery and a fountain pen, and wrote a letter over the next fifteen minutes. I ended up drinking all the Sherry in my glass.

He handed me the letter.

“The billionaire is a dangerous man, librarian.”

“But he’s just a man, isn’t he?”

“Never underestimate the power of money.”

“I’ll take care,” I said.

“Love makes fools of us all,” Doc said. “Well, I’m afraid I have a woman visiting me shortly and your presence might frighten her off.”

“I’ll be on my way,” I said.

Walking back to the library, I thought of how far the billionaire had been willing to go to manipulate Olive into marrying him. He was willing to let the professor starve in order to have his way, willing to abuse Olive’s trust. That wasn’t love. He’d probably use her father to keep her acting the way he wanted her to act once he had them wherever he

was going to take them. There would be no escaping him then. He would own them.

I knew she might not believe me, but when I showed her the letter, she'd have to, wouldn't she? I couldn't be sure she would leave Sir Ronald, even if she did believe me. Maybe she would go through with it just to protect her father. Maybe she would shrug and say love was a fairy tale. I guess I'd have to live with it. I wasn't going to let her marry him without knowing what he was up to. After that, it was her choice.

I was angry with Sir Ronald, but I was disappointed with Olive. Maybe I was just being foolish. Maybe it was time I tried to think of her in a different way. Distance myself.

I walked into the library and Fluffy greeted me wildly, turning in circles, but he was gentle when he jumped up and put his paws on my shoulders and gave me one of his big tongue licks. We went downstairs.

“What wouldn't people do for money?” I asked Fluffy.

He didn't have an answer, but of course, English was his second language and he wasn't anywhere near fluent. Even though I was, I didn't have an answer either.

Chapter Eighteen

I got into bed and Fluffy lay beside the bed. I looked at the clock. It was one minute until midnight. I thought maybe I'd made it through another day and that might mean I would make it through the next and the next. Then I realized the clock wasn't moving.

Death stepped out of the shadows. He was wearing his usual uniform, his black robes, his hood pulled up.

“Sorrrrrrry,” Death said. “I’m runnnnnning a little late. Traffic was bad.”

“Seems kind of last minute,” I said. “If you’d like, we could wait for another time.”

“Good one,” he said.

He towered over me. The ceilings were twelve feet tall, and he had to hunch over to fit. Of course, he was always hunched over so it might not have been an inconvenience..

“Hmrrrrrrrr,” he said.

“Hm?” I said, hopefully.

“You should be floating off the bed. Hmrrrrrrrrrrr ___”

“But?” I said.

“Have you been traveling through time recently?” he said.

“Maybe,” I said.

“Hmmmmmmmmm. Yes. No, that’s not it. This is very unprofessional. They shouldn’t do this to me.”

He scratched his head with one long, boney finger on a hand of boney fingers and a boney thumb.

“Who shouldn’t?”

“Management,” he said. “Do you, by any chance, have a drink of water?”

“Sure,” I said. I got out of bed and went into the kitchen and poured him a glass. When I turned around, he was right behind me. Because of his height and the bow of his back, it was as if he was hanging over me. His arms were out, his robe hanging off them, so that appeared for a moment that he had wings.

“Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm,” he said.

“You don’t want any water, do you?”

“No,” he said. “I thought it might be easier to take you from behind.”

“But no?”

“I have your paperwork, but it seems that this is not your time after all. A change was made, and I was not informed. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“No worries,” I said.

“Ah, yes, no worries. These things will work themselves out. Expect me sometime in the future.”

“Care to tell me when?”

“Not today,” he said, “which just became tomorrow and so today.”

“Care to be more specific, or at least less confusing?”

He disappeared. I looked around for Fluffy. I didn’t see him, but when I went into the bedroom, I noticed the bed was a few feet off the floor. I got down on my hands and knees and looked under it and there was Fluffy, too large to actually hide under the bed without raising the bed off the floor.

“Death gone?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I hide.”

“You did a good job.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s all right.”

I had to hold the bed in place while he crawled out from under it. Then it dropped hard on the floor but it was made of solid wood from the haunted forest so it didn’t break.

I sat down on it. Fluffy rubbed up against me.

“Scary?” I said.

“Hellhound not scared,” he said.

I petted him. “Of course not.”

“Hellhound never scared. Just don’t like Death.”

“Most people don’t. I wonder if that wears on him.”

“Never come back?”

“He’ll come back,” I said. “I’m mortal.”

“Next time I bite him.”

“Won’t matter.

“I bite him.”

“If it makes you feel better.”

“Save you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Let’s go to sleep now.”

“I guard.”

I fell asleep quickly. Just before I fell asleep, I heard Fluffy snoring.

Chapter Nineteen

I woke up in the middle of the night. I checked on Fluffy. He was asleep at the base of the bed, still snoring. He literally slept with one eye open, which apparently was something hellhounds did. Being raised in hell, I supposed, you needed to keep an eye open at all times. But he couldn't protect me from dreams and not long after I fell back asleep, I was visited by a dreamwalker, my father (Karl, Lucifer, Satan, The Devil, Prince, King of Darkness, Et al.).

"Hello son," he said, sitting in a chair over in the corner of the room.

"Father," I said, from my bed. I had that light airy feeling I often felt in dreams.

Karl had a difficult time being on earth. Even if the angels didn't discover him, he was uneasy. He managed it for short periods sometimes, but mostly he was forced to travel in dreams. He wouldn't be able to get into Eden unless he was in a dream. Last time he visited, things had not gone so well for Eden. The town held it against him..

"I've seen Death hovering around Eden lately," Karl said.

"He thought it was my time, but there was some mix-up with the paperwork," I said.

"Things just aren't run the way they used to be," Karl said.

"They never are," I pointed out.

"So, you're safe for now?"

“I wouldn’t say that,” I said. “Someone from hell sent demon-ninjas to kill me.”

“How many?”

“Nine or ten.”

“So not just a symbolic gesture.”

“I’m pretty sure their intention was to take me out of the story.”

“That is against my orders. I am going to have to punish whoever is responsible.”

“Any ideas?”

“There are many who would like to see you dead. “

“Not many,” I said, though I thought there were certainly more than a few.

“Your brothers and sisters,” he said. “Jealous. One of my most powerful tools in recruitment to the dark side is jealousy. I know how well it works in all creatures. Humans, demons, angels, gods even.”

“It’s a good one all right,” I admitted. “But why would they be jealous of me?”

“You’re a threat to their pecking order.”

“I get that a lot.”

“Also, Deadeye and Beelzebub would like revenge on you. They would be likely candidates.”

“Maybe even Lola?” I said. It hurt to think she would try to kill me, but how could I think otherwise, given that she had tried to kill me not very long ago?

“She wouldn’t disobey me,” he said. “She is angry with you. She might send one ninja assassin, but not nine. Nine really should have been enough to do the job.”

“I had Fluffy.”

“So I see.”

“I think he thinks he’s mine.”

“What do you think?”

I looked over at him, so cute, sleeping with one eye open. Of course, it was my dream, so he had no idea anything was going on.

“He’s mine,” I said.

“You defy me?”

“He’s my hellhound. You said that yourself.”

“When you were young, I sent him to guard over you sometimes. You never knew. I suppose the bond was formed.”

“You’ll let me keep him?”

“Maybe I will send one ninja assassin to try his hand at you,” he said, and disappeared.

Family. I hadn’t had one for most of my life. Now that I did, I wasn’t sure I could survive them. I didn’t think that was what family meant normally, but then again, what did I know? It was all new to me.

Chapter Twenty

I woke up to snarling and hissing. The Hellhound and the familiar were squared off across the room. The hellhound loomed over the cat like a giant storm cloud, but the familiar did not seem afraid. Not that she wasn't up on her tippy claws or the smooth black hair wasn't rising up like the rest of her, but her eyes were calm.

I shouted, "Fluffy."

He ignored me, keeping his eyes on the familiar, growling that deep growl of the hellhound. I thought I smelled sulfur and hellfire on his breath. I jumped out of bed and hurried over to get between them, which was not a place I in any way wanted to be.

"Easy," I said "Easy now. Let's all act like civilized animals."

They both ignored me, but when I worked my way into a position where they'd have to attack me to get at each other, they finally acknowledged my presence. I told them that we were all on the same team though, in truth, I didn't know that, and I wasn't even sure what I meant by team. Honestly, I'd never been on a team, really. I was a more of a loner type, but that wasn't going to work in this situation. What would I say, "We're all loners here so we shouldn't fight each other." Didn't have the same ring to it. I had to try the "we're all on the same team" approach.

"We're all on the same team," I said again.

One growled, one hissed. So much for teamwork.

“Why are you here?” I asked the familiar.

“Katrina told me about Rowena. Is she really dead?”

“Yes.”

“Then we need to go. I can talk to her ghost. She’ll tell me what really happened. I fear for Katrina and Zeena. Rowena would not have spelled off Death without good reason. She wants to tell me something.”

“All right,” I said.

Was it a good day to die? Hell no. It was a bad day to die. Any day was a bad day to die unless you were very sick or old and in terrible pain. Otherwise, no day was convenient. But even though Death had given me a reprieve, I knew it wasn’t forever. I had to get on with my life. Right now, my life was finding out who killed Rowena.

“I’ve got to do one thing before we go,” I said.

The familiar started to object, but I shook my head. “One thing or I don’t go. Well, two, stop by the store for a bottle of water. We’ll need water.”

“Fine,” she said. “Do hurry. We don’t have much time.”

“Either of you want anything?” I asked, expecting that they wouldn’t, that they, as wild creatures, took care of themselves.

“Spoiled meat,” Fluffy said.

“Spoiled?” I said.

“Bad smell that is good smell,” he said.

“A piece of white, fluffy cake,” the cat said. Cats were known to have sweet-teeth.

I dressed and hurried over to the mayor’s office. His secretary said, “Good morning” in that creepy, I want to bite your neck, way she had. I asked to see the mayor, and she told me he still wasn’t in and hadn’t called or sent messages by crow.

I tried to hypnotize her and asked her, “Do you know where he is?”

She gave me a condescending look. “Wee vampires have been hypnotizing for thousands of years. You are zee amateur. No means no.”

“If you see him tell him, tell him it’s urgent, a matter of life and death.”

“I vill tell him. You smell of Death, librarian. He is an old friend of mine. Say hello if you zee him again.”

I said I would and hurried over to Olive’s. It was almost eight, and I thought she was probably already at the café, but sometimes she set up the night before and wouldn’t go in until right at eight.

I was lucky. She was just coming out the door as I ran up.

“I don’t want to talk to you,” she said.

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry. I just need a second.”

“I don’t have a second,” she said.

I held out Doc’s letter. “Just read this.”

“I don’t want to read anything you’ve written, and I don’t want to hear anything you have to say. I don’t see how I can be more clear than that?”

“It’s not from me. It’s from Doc.”

“On your behalf?”

“Just read it,” I said.

“This is—,” she said, grabbing the note angrily from my hand.

I thought she might tear it into pieces or use magic to flame and burn.

“Please,” I said. “Read it. I’ll stop bothering you.”

“You’ll leave me alone?” she said.

“If that’s what you want.”

“That’s what I want.”

“After you read it,” I said.

“I’m going to be late.”

She gave me a look of frustration and irritation, but then she made a show of holding it out in front of her and reading it.

When she finished, she looked up at me.

“This is true?”

I nodded. “It’s absolutely true. I have documents from the town files and anyway, Henry admitted it when I confronted him. Doc, obviously, too.”

“Doc wrote this?”

“Yes.”

“That son of a bitch.”

“He does say he’s sorry and—”

“Not him,” she said. “Well, him too. Yes, him too. But I meant Sir Ronald.”

“Despicable,” I couldn’t help saying.

“I still can’t believe he’d do this.”

“You need to. Unless you’re going to marry him, anyway.”

“Marry him? He is the last man on earth I’d marry. I’m going to kill him.”

But then she started to cry, which was a relief. She had killed the previous librarian (not on purpose) so my concern was justified.

“I’m sorry,” I said, putting my arms around her. She hugged me back, but then a second later shrugged me off.

“My father is a dead man. He will be a dead man. Either he’ll actually go swimming or he’ll kill another bad man in town and you’ll expose him and he’ll be burned at the stake.”

“I never said burned at the stake.”

“Whatever way it’s done. He’s dead.”

“He’s already dead,” I couldn’t help pointing out. She always seemed to move right past the fact of his life, which was that he didn’t, technically, have any. No beating heart.

“Not dead-dead. I could still marry Sir Ronald and wait a few years and kill Ronald in his sleep.”

I didn’t think she was being serious, but I wasn’t sure.

“I might have a better idea,” I said.

I told her I had something I had to do—lives at stake and all that—but would be back very soon and I thought I had an idea that might solve her father’s problem. She was very happy about that. I would have been too if I really had an idea. But this was no time to worry about that. I would have to worry about it later when there would be plenty of time. Unless I was dead, which was still a possibility—the day was young. The one good thing about death was it took the worry out of living. Of course, that was the bad thing about it, too.

I went to the grocery store to get Fluffy his stinking meat and the cat her piece of cake. The grocer was tall and thin and had dark skin, a sharp nose, and high cheekbones. My guess was he was originally from India. His accent was soft, and he stretched out certain syllables and words in a way that gave his speech a subtle musicality.

“Do you want the stinky stinky meat or just the stinky meat? We have a special on the stinky stinky meat.”

“It’s for a hellhound.”

“Ah, a hellhound. Been a long time since we’ve had one of those pass through town. You want the rotten meat then. Drives those devil dogs wild. I think I have some frozen rotten elk. Want me to pop it in the microwave? Just take a second.”

“Please.”

He disappeared for a few minutes and came back with some really awful and gross meat.

“You’re in luck. I found some maggots to add to the rotting meat. Your hellhound will love it.”

“The cupcake is for you?” the grocer asked.

“A cat,” I said. “A familiar.”

“Hmm,” he said. “I have some mice I could put frosting on.”

“Just the cupcake.”

He seemed disappointed, but got a cupcake.

“And a bottle of water?”

“Please.”

Rotting meat with maggots was not cheap. I paid, and he thanked me and told me he hoped to see me soon.

“I’ll keep some meat ready for you,” he said. “You will need it if the familiar and the hellhound do not kill each other.”

He said this in a cheery voice.

I went back to the library and opened the door and let the animals out onto the porch and fed them. Fluffy gobbled the rotting meat with maggots down in one bite. The cat complained about how there wasn’t enough frosting on the cake. She took forever to finish the cupcake, but she ate every crumb in the end and pronounced it “Adequate,” when she’d finished.

I had drunk my whole bottle of water by then. I left the sign on the door about the library being closed for a second day. As we left town, I filled the bottle in the stream that bordered Eden. We crossed the bridge to the haunted woods.

Chapter Twenty-One

We made our way through the dark, tangled haunted woods. I had been in the woods many times in the past two weeks. They didn't get any less frightening, but traveling with a hellhound and familiar did make them a little less dangerous. As usual, there were strange sounds. A whole crowd of whispers falling from above like rain were drowned out by the monkeys up in the trees. The trees began to thin as we moved into the valley. The monkeys stayed behind in the thicker part of the woods. I smelled smoke. Then I saw a fire off in the distance.

"The cabin," Chaos said.

We ran through the woods. I must admit they were both faster than me, but I did my best to keep up. The familiar was right. When we got to the cottage it was ablaze, an orange glow in an otherwise dark wood.

Before I could stop her, Chaos ran toward the cabin and up onto the porch. We ran after her. She would have made it in, but Fluffy battered her back with one gigantic paw. She flew twenty feet, hissing and yowling the whole way. Fluffy stood between her and the fire. Her claws were out, and she was still hissing, but she didn't try to get past him.

I heard Rowena's terrible wailing in the fire. Death appeared next to me. He looked, as always, terrifying. I could feel coolness radiate off him like the air escaping from a freezer. He walked up onto the porch and into the house. A second later, a glowing light came out from the cottage. It was not orange like the fire, more pale. It was in the shape of a

woman, of Rowena, I thought, but the features had mostly disappeared.

Death enveloped her, and they disappeared. Not a good development that I now could see Death when he took another soul. It made him that much closer to me.

“We better get away from here,” I said to the Chaos and Fluffy.

Chaos wouldn't leave right away. She watched the fire with the cool gaze of a cat thinking up revenge.

“The sisters are in danger,” I reminded her.

“Yes,” Chaos said. “Yes, you're right.”

“What was Rowena up to?” I said.

“I warned her.”

“The sisters were doing something together, weren't they?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Why go to Katrina's?”

“She is the most reasonable of the three. I thought I could convince her to stop Rowena.”

“They were going after the goddess, Morgana?” I said.

The cat nodded. “They wanted revenge. I warned them the goddess was too powerful. Rowena thought the power of three could catch her unaware and was trying to convince the other two to join her.”

“Did they?”

“They were about to.”

“You think Morgana found out somehow?”

“She has many spies. She is a goddess. There are many ways she might have found out.”

“Rowena was working with the mayor?”

“Another mistake.”

“Why now? Why now, after all these years?”

“She thought she had found a weapon she could use against him. She’d read about it in ancient texts. A knife that could kill immortals. The knife of death.”

“Did she find it?”

“Of course not,” she said. “It doesn’t exist. It was just a myth. She was foolish to think she could kill a goddess.”

“The other sisters are hiding?” I said.

“Yes.”

“Can you take me to them?”

“I don’t know where they are or if they’re together.”

Seemed like the best thing to do was to get back to Eden and regroup. Try to find the witches tomorrow—before the goddess did.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Fluffy, Chaos, and I hurried back through the haunted forest. The leaves crunched under our feet and the wind howled through the barren branches above us. The forest felt alive with supernatural energy. We were all on alert for the appearance of Morgana. Chaos thought her spies might have told her about my visits to the sisters. If Morgana saw me as a threat, she'd come for me.

"I'm not worried," I said.

"Well, you should be," Chaos said.

"Well, I'm not."

"Well, you should be."

Before we'd gone a mile, a figure appeared on the path ahead of us, blocking our way. It was a woman, lithe and pale, with jet black hair and ruby red lips. Power radiated from her, but it wasn't Morgana. I wasn't sure how I knew, but I did. Not a goddess.

It was like she had a supernatural signature that I could read. Demon. Sister. Well, half-sister, to be more accurate. I had twenty-three brothers and sisters. Same father, but most of us had a different mother. Karl (Lucifer) got around. Big surprise there.

"Lilith," I guessed. Though it could have been any of the others, based on what Karl had told me, my best guess was this was the devious, murderous half-sister Karl was so proud of.

“Very good,” she said. “They told me you were one of those smart-dumb humans.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I said.

“You are human. You are inferior to the other children of Lucifer. But, for a human, you aren’t stupid. Like a smart dog.”

She gave Fluffy a condescending look. She was good at being bad.

Fluffy growled low in his throat. I rested my hand on his back.

“Easy boy,” I said. “

“Yes, easy boy,” she said, “or I will turn you into a mouse and the cat will eat you.”

Fluffy growled at her again, but he didn’t make any moves.

Chaos edged off to the side of the path. She was flanking Lilith. She sensed what Fluffy and I sensed. Lilith wasn’t here for a family get-together.

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” I said.

“I wanted to see who father has mistakenly dubbed the anti-Christ. You’re just about what I expected. If you’re really the anti-Christ, I won’t be able to kill you. Lucifer will see I’m right when I do. Case closed.”

I turned to Fluffy. “I don’t like her.”

“Yappy, yappy,” Fluffy said. “Always yappy, yappy. We hellhounds call her yappy yappy.”

“No, you don’t,” she said. “No, they don’t. The real hellhounds.”

“Yappy yappy,” he said.

Lilith smiled. That smile was as twisted as the twisted trees in the haunted forest. I could feel it chill my heart. Then I realized she was literally trying to freeze my heart with some magical unspoken words. I used a hammer to shatter the spell

to pieces. She looked surprised. I was a little surprised myself. I didn't do magic. This sort of seemed like magic, though.

I stiffened, gripping the hilt of my sword. I had recently been told by the ghost of the library that the sword had come to the collection through the Lady of the Lake, adding to the possibility it was Excalibur.

“Yappy yappy,” Fluffy said.

“You need to die,” she said. “Nothing personal. That’s not really true in this case. This is very personal. You are in my way.”

“Are my other brothers and sisters like you?”

“No one is like me. I am the anti-Christ.”

“Unless I am,” I said, which to be clear, I hoped I wasn't. Still, I almost wanted to be the anti-Christ just to irritate her. I realized this was not a good reason.

“You are not.”

“I think I might be.”

She hissed.

Chaos hissed, her coat crackling with magic. Fluffy snarled, the fur on his back rising. I drew my sword just as the demons stepped out from the shadows.

There were a dozen of them, horned and fanged, armored in black iron, eyes glowing like hot coals. They carried axes, maces, and spears, but it was the one at their lead that drew my attention—a hulking beast with curling ram horns and a face that was almost human, but for the sharp-toothed maw. His intelligent, cunning eyes fixed on me and I guessed this was Dragoon, captain of the legion, and Lilith's husband.

“Send him to death,” Lilith commanded. You could tell this was one of the orders she enjoyed giving.

“Technically,” I pointed out, “Death comes to us.”

No one paid any attention.

The demons rushed forward. Fluffy leapt to meet them, claws and fangs bared. Chaos arched her back, spitting curses that manifested as scorching flames alternating with bursts of wintry air. I raised my sword, the blade glinting in the little sunlight that slipped down through the trees.

Steel sang its loud and off-key song as it met infernal armor. The demons were fast. They zigged and zagged. I ducked and dodged and side-stepped. It was a kind of dance, but with weapons. I stabbed several in their evil hearts. They made hideous sounds. A few of them screamed, “Long live Satan,” before turning into dust.

Fluffy fought at my side, a whirlwind of snapping jaws and lashing claws. Throats were torn out or bellies gutted and private parts snapped right off and spit out (we were fighting for our lives—all’s fair in, you know). The demons started to avoid engaging with Fluffy. I saw one push his fellow-demon toward Fluffy so he could engage me instead. I didn’t blame him, but I did take a little extra pleasure in driving my sword into his neck.

Chaos had climbed a tree, as cats will do. She hurled spell after spell.

But the demons kept coming. For each one that fell, two more seemed to spring up. This was a troubling pattern. They sought to surround us, to overwhelm us through numbers. It was a pretty good strategy if it was available to you.

With a fearsome cry—so fearsome I scared myself a little —, I called up something deep from within me. At first I thought it might be the great power I had felt from the Tree of Life, but this was not that. This was from the shadows. From my own darkness. Deep down darkness. I felt the magic sparking at my fingertips. I unleashed it in a shockwave that sent demons flying. Those not quick enough to flee were reduced to smoking husks.

The power from the Tree of Life had been the power of light. This was from death and darkness. My genetic inheritance. This was power from Karl. It frightened me.

Dragoon barreled towards me, roaring, his face filled with rage.

I raised my sword just in time to parry his mighty axe. The force of the blow knocked me off my feet. I jumped back up. He looked angry about that, but then he looked angry about everything. Just the kind of anger that led to high blood-pressure and heart attacks. I hoped.

We traded vicious strikes, sparks flying as our weapons collided again and again. Around us, the chaos of battle raged on. Chaos the cat also battled on, heaving spells that crippled demons or put them to sleep or made them suddenly unable to see or add and subtract small numbers. Fluffy, working with her, took care of the finishing touches on the demons she immobilized by, in most cases, biting off their heads. They made a good team.

Sensing an opening, I feinted right, then rolled left, bringing my blade up and across Dragoon's face. Or it would have been if he hadn't backed away so quickly, I could hardly see him move. I left a nice mark on his iron breastplate.

With a bellow of rage, he rushed me and swung his axe in a savage downward arc, intending to split me in two. I deflected it with the flat of my blade and rolled away from the blow that would have killed me. We circled each other.

"Go ahead and run," I said. "There's no shame in it. You are clearly beaten."

He looked hardly winded, if I was honest. But I had no intention of being honest. I had noticed that Chaos was about to cast a spell on Dragoon. I waited, hoping for an edge.

I was so focused on my Dragoon that I failed to notice Lilith slip behind me. Not until her icy hand touched my back, leaching all warmth from my body, did I realize my fatal error. I gasped, paralyzed, as darkness strangled the light. With my last bit of strength, I twisted away, feeling Lilith's nails rake bloody furrows down my side.

I collapsed to my knees. My sword fell from limp fingers. Through the encroaching shadows, I saw Dragoon loom over

me, axe raised for the killing blow.

This was it then. I couldn't believe it, even though I knew I should. Death was beside me.

“HMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM,” he said.

I was swept into darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I woke up in a cell with Fluffy and Chaos. The jail cell was small and dank, with damp, rough stone walls. A single candle in a holder in the corner flicked and cast a faint light, barely illuminating the room. A wooden bench sat near the entrance, while a rusted bucket was in another corner. The walls were covered in patches of mildew and streaks of rust. Cobwebs lined the ceiling, and spiders hung among the shadows. I couldn't see them clearly, but they looked about the size of pancakes.

I sat up. My head hurt the most, but the rest of me didn't feel much better. I had some bruises I didn't recognize. I had aches and pains everywhere. I was surprised not to be in the next life or in Death's boney grip. I wasn't happy to be in what seemed to be a very unhygienic dungeon (although a clean dungeon wouldn't have made me much happier), but it was an improvement over where I thought I was going with my last waking thought.

"Why didn't they kill us?" I asked the hound and cat.

"I suspect they have some use for us," the cat said.

"Going to yappy yappy," Fluffy said. "Sing us song and make us dance. That what he say when he in mood. Dance dogs dance."

"Who?"

"Beelzebub. Dance dogs dance."

Lilith would have wanted to let Dragoon swing the axe. Why didn't she let him, or why had he stopped himself? He

didn't strike me as a demon with restraint. Maybe someone had intervened?. Who and why?

I had time to stew on this. It was a few hours before the cell door opened and six demons circled round it out in the narrow hall. One, over seven feet with red scaly skin, claws, and horns, wielded a spiked mace. Another had yellow eyes and bat-like wings, and carried a barbed whip. A third had three heads that constantly whispered insults (he or they were demons, after all) to each other. One demon was covered in fur with the head of a jackal, fangs dripping as he clutched an axe. Another had gray stone-like skin and blank white eyes, with massive fists the size and shape of sledge-hammers. He was the one who motioned for me to step out. They had chains, and they locked me in them. I didn't fight. One look at the freakishly over-sized bunch discouraged the idea.

Anyway, I had no idea where I was. Even if I did get free (I wouldn't), where would I go? Fluffy barked and Chaos meowed, but the demons ignored them.

"Time for your trial," the gray skin said.

"My trial for what?" I asked.

"Treason," he said.

"Against who?"

"Not who. What? You half-demon. You supposed to be bad. You trying to be good. You a disgrace."

"Disgrace," many of them agreed. It was the only thing the three heads on the one demon had agreed on in our short acquaintance.

"I want to kill you right here," one of them added.

I wouldn't call them a jolly bunch, but this got them all talking and agreeing that killing me was a great idea. Snap my neck like a twig. Light me on fire. See who could reach into my flesh and pull out my heart? There were many other suggestions. Some of them, I had to admit, were creatively gruesome.

The brainy one of the bunch said, “We get in trouble with Lilith.” That quieted them into a pouty silence for the rest of the way.

We finally came to the end of the narrow, twisty stairs and up to a room that was an imitation of an old English courtroom. The room was shadowy and while I couldn’t see clearly I did pass by several of Hell’s citizens in the audience as I was led to the defendant’s box: A Nazi in full uniform, an angel with black wings, several horned red devils, a young couple that looked like the king and queen of a recent prom, both covered in blood—the scariest of all.

Lilith, her raven hair cascading over her shoulders, was the judge sitting on an imposing wooden bench above everyone else in the court. Its dark, polished wood gleamed ominously under the dim, flickering light of the torches lining the vast hall.

Lilith wore a dark crimson gown that seemed to absorb the feeble light around her. My half-sister had a dark, dangerous beauty. She pounded her gavel on the sound-block and it echoed throughout the chamber.

“This court will be brought to order,” she said. “Judge Lilith Lucifer presiding.”

The jury box was comprised of my half-siblings. I recognized a bit of me and a bit of each other and a bit of our shared father in all of them. Some of them gave me malevolent stares, but others seemed to look at me more with curiosity than disdain or disapproval.

As the trial began, Lilith rose from her imposing bench and said, “Will the prosecution give her opening statement?” As soon as she said this, she disappeared and reappeared on the courtroom floor. She too had a white wig on when she declared herself the prosecutor, thanking the court for the permission to begin. Prosecutor and judge. I didn’t think I had much chance when I walked into court, but it decreased even more.

“Ladies and gentlemen, and my dear half-siblings, we are gathered here to address the most grievous matter of treason.

Our half-brother, Kevin Austin, librarian of Eden, stands accused of betraying his own blood and turning against the infernal legacy that binds us all. He stands accused of committing the most heinous of sins. Instead of spreading Lucifer's evil in the world, he has sided with heaven and the white-winged angel hypocrites."

There was a gasp. I thought it was theatrical. The whole courtroom was theatrical.

"He has chosen the side of the angels against his own. Worked for them even. Protected them. How can we call him anything but a traitor? Our hideous and terrible father has tolerated Kevin Austin's behavior because he thought he might be the anti-Christ but we now know I am the anti-Christ and so father will not mind our punishing our sibling with a terrible, vicious death."

One of the jurors, tall and lanky, taller and lankier than me even, stood. He said, "I object."

"You can't object," she said. "You're a juror, not a barrister."

"I still object," he said.

Lilith disappeared and appeared back on the bench without her wig. She pounded her gavel. "You are out of order, but very well. What case do you wish to make for the accused?"

"None," he said. "Why would I make a case for our pitiful human brother? I am ashamed father lowered himself to mate with a weakling human at all."

"Then what do you wish to say?"

"I just wanted to point out that it has not been determined you are the anti-Christ."

"You think you are?" she snarled.

"I might be."

"You?" she scoffed. "You are practically human yourself. Your mother was a goddess, so minor she was worshipped in only one small village in India. You are not the anti-Christ."

“Or one of our other siblings,” he said quickly. “All I’m saying is there is no consensus you are the anti-Christ.”

“I believe you all know it is me. You can feel it. Most in hell say it is me.”

Several clearly did not know it was her. A few backed Lilith. For just a moment I thought maybe they would attack each other, and I’d have my chance to make a desperate run at escape. But Lilith, after several attempts to silence them with the gavel, convinced them that they needed to focus on the traitor at hand and could deal with each other at a later date.

She appeared back at her prosecutor’s table wearing her wig and gave several examples of “good” things I’d done when I was traveling around the country getting assignments from an angel.

“An angel,” one of them said, shaking his head in disgust.

They booed me, which was very uncourt like behavior.

Lilith moved seamlessly between her roles. One minute she was sitting on the bench agreeing with the prosecution and praising the excellent points she was making. The next minute she was, with uncanny accuracy, talking about some of the truly traitorous acts of my life, which were actually things I had done right and had helped people. She ignored all the bad things I had done, which I considered unfair. In my teen years in Texas, I had often been in trouble.

She paced before the jury, her eyes shifting from juror to juror. She saved particular outrage for my ridding a priest of a demon. This was the height of infamous behavior.

“We had him,” she said. “He was one sin away from eternal damnation. He would have been an excellent addition to our collection. And what did Kevin do? What did our own half-brother do? He freed him from Deadeye’s grip.”

There were gasps followed by more boos.

“My half-siblings,” she continued, “you are the witnesses to this dark chapter in our family’s history. You are the ones who have seen the librarian’s betrayal of our infernal heritage. He conspired with the forces of light, the sworn enemies of

our kind, to undermine our dominion over the realm of the damned and our opportunities to gain strength on earth before Armageddon. Once we have defeated heaven, the earth will be ours. But our brother here works for our defeat. We must make an example of him.”

There was a chorus of agreement.

She was back in her place as judge. She asked herself if the prosecution rested, and she disappeared from the bench and back at the table. She adjusted her wig and told herself and all the rest of us that the prosecution did rest. Then she asked me if I had anything to say in my defense.

“What could he possibly have to say?” one of my siblings said.

Several agreed I would only make matters worse by speaking. It was best to say nothing.

“Let him speak,” one half-brother said. He sounded almost sympathetic.

I cleared my throat, the sound echoing in the chamber, and addressed the court. “Your Honor, members of the jury, this power mad, psychopathic witch, who is both prosecutor and judge, and who is certainly not the anti-Christ, is out of control. Here’s the one thing you need to know. Lucifer still thinks I’m the anti-Christ. In all honesty, I’m not so sure. But because he is, and because he told you all not to kill me, I think you might feel his wrath if you go ahead in this conspiracy. Consider it from Lucifer’s point-of-view. When all your adult children get together to go against your wishes, it might just make you think about the other things they might get together to do. I think we’re all aware of how royal families in history frequently murdered each other to make their way to the throne. Lucifer probably helped this along sometimes. Maybe he will decide to make a preemptive strike. Make you all a more manageable number to handle. Some of you will not survive.”

I noticed some discomfort among my siblings, which I took as encouragement.

Lilith's eyes flashed with anger. "I find the defendant guilty of all the charges and more. I sentence him to death by hanging. No, make that death by being burned at the stake. Wait, what's that one with four horses that pull a man apart?"

"Drawn and quartered?" one of the sisters said.

"Drawn and quartered," Lilith said. "That's the sentence for your crimes against hell, librarian."

"You aren't the jury," I pointed out.

"Take the prisoner back to his cell."

"Let the jury vote," I said. "Or does only your vote count? You've put them all in danger of Lucifer's wrath and you won't even let them vote?"

"This is not a democracy. I brought you here."

"Then allow them to vote since you are their queen and decide such things."

Lilith's face remained unmoved, but her crimson lips curled into a cruel smile. I had to admit, it was a pretty good one. "You fail to grasp the essence of our existence, dear librarian. We are the darkness, the torment, the eternal suffering who cause eternal suffering among your species. You are not that. You do not belong among us. And you don't belong in heaven either. They will never take you. So where will your spirit go after I take your life? Nowhere. You will join the black matter of the universe."

I thought most of them agreed with her. What gave it away is the majority were shouting, "Death to the human, death to the human, death to the human!" You couldn't call them a subtle bunch.

"Any one of you could be the anti-Christ," I said.

There was a slight pause in the chants for death. Some seemed to consider this fact. Self-interest was, with demon and human, always an attention-getter.

But then Dragoon began the chants again, and the jury, my brothers and sisters, joined him. I saw how they were afraid of him and Lilith.

“The jury has made its decision,” Lilith said, though technically there had been no deliberation and no vote.

They were going to execute me right away, but someone had to find some black horses to pull me apart, so Lilith set my execution for dusk, two hours away. She ordered someone to bring mint juleps, which apparently was her favorite drink, and also because horses would be involved in the event.

“Take the prisoner back to his cell. Kill the animals in his cell in front of him and make sure to torture them.”

The six demons took me back to the cell in chains.

Chapter Twenty-Four

My chains were undone, and I was thrown into the cell. The demons stood outside arguing about who was going to kill the hellhound and who was going to kill the cat. The one with three heads and the one over seven feet got into a fight, growling and smashing fists, or at least things that resembled fists, into one another. There was some grunting, but no words from them. The other demons all started making bets on who would win and cheering on their preferred fighter.

I slid over to Fluffy and Chaos and told them that no matter who came through that door, we'd have to overcome them and get out of the cell to have a chance. Chaos said her witch powers had been taken from her by the prison somehow. She could feel them, but something held them out of reach. She could only fight as a cat.

“Then fight as a cat,” I said.

“Demons die,” Fluffy said. “I kill. I take them with us.”

“I'd rather not have them with us,” I said.

He gave me that perplexed look. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't help enjoying seeing that look.

“Would you want them to go anywhere with us?”

“No,” he said. “No, no.”

One of the demons was thrown against the wall so hard it cracked. The fight got louder, and I heard cries and screams. We three backed up together against the far wall, ready for

them to come rushing in. There was a sudden unexpected silence, which was oddly more terrifying than the noisy fight. The prison door swung open.

Lola entered, along with one of the jurors, one of my half-brothers.

“We’ve got to move fast,” she said.

She didn’t have to say it twice. We moved fast out of the cell. My step-brother introduced himself as Dread. He said he knew Lilith’s castle well enough to get us through the maze of hallways, but not well enough to go undetected. That’s what he said.

The hallway of the dungeon was like the cell, made of cold, damp stone. The walls were slimy and wet, dotted with mysterious symbols and carvings. A few torches hung along the walls, casting an eerie glow over the narrow hall and the thick wood doors to the cells. The sharp stink of human waste mixed with mold and stale air added to the unpleasant ambiance. Besides the echo of our boots on the stone floor, the only sound was the occasional moan of a prisoner locked behind the wood doors of cells.

Chaos clung to my shoulders, her claws digging into my skin. Fluffy stuck by my side. Dread led the way. He was burly with blood-red skin. He had the dark eyes of our father and most of the siblings, including me.

We rounded a corner, nearly crashing into a startled imp guard standing watch. Dread roared and swung his club, crushing the imp’s skull against the rough stone wall in a spray of greenish-black blood. Lola leapt over the twitching body.

We came to a hall. It was like we were at a crossroads of hallways. Dread looked left and right uncertainly. I wondered if he actually knew where we were going or if we were just blindly racing through the labyrinth of twisting corridors and shadowy chambers.

We went left and dashed down a vaulted hallway decorated with weapons and grisly battle trophies hanging from the ceiling on chains—heads of animals, monsters, and humans.

Some of them spoke to us. “You’ll never leave.” “You will hang here with us soon.” One disgusted bearded head of a beast with three eyes complained, “Tourists.” Chaos hissed and sank her claws deeper into my shoulders as we passed a choir of shrieking souls chained to a wall.

“Left!” Dread bellowed, turning down a narrow passage. I scrambled after him, nearly losing my footing on the uneven stones now slick with some dark substance. I was careful not to look down. I didn’t want to see what it was.

The passage opened into a guardroom, where a handful of lumbering ogres were playing dice around a stone table. They fumbled for their spiked clubs in surprise as we tore through. Fluffy leapt upon the largest, knocking him backwards and tearing out his throat. A fountain of black blood squirted up into the air.

We raced up a winding staircase, the stone steps smooth and worn.

Dread led us to the roof of the palace, where we were blasted by a hot, sulfurous wind. Far below stretched the bleak hellscape—rivers of fire, distant volcanoes spewing ash, plumes of smoke rising from vast bubbling pits. Lost souls drifted listlessly over fields of jagged obsidian. In the blood-red sky, winged demons circled like vultures. Not a vacation destination.

I froze, momentarily mesmerized by the hideous beauty of it all. Here was my father’s home and by extension mine. But it wasn’t mine. I didn’t belong.

“Go!” Dread snarled. “Hurry now or she will kill us all.”

“How?” I said.

“Click your heels together, Dorothy,” Lola said.

“Really?” I said.

She gave me a look of disdain I remembered from our teenage years. She was a demon now, so it was almost as condescending and judgmental as when we were teenagers..

A patrol of armored guards rushed onto the roof.

“Crap,” I said.

“This is inconvenient,” Lola said.

Dread and I charged. I landed a flying sidekick and jammed an elbow into another guard. Dread clubbed a bearish guard to death. The guard, with his last act before dying, managed a swing of his sword that cut Dread’s arm off. Fortunately, Dread was ambidextrous. He picked up his sword with his other hand. Fluffy joined the fray, claws and fangs, claws and fangs.

The guards were brutal with their swords, knives, clubs, and spears. We fought with desperate fury. Fluffy’s size gave him an advantage as he savagely mauled any guard within reach. Lola used both magic and claws that appeared where her fingers had been. I fought with my magical sword.

We were doing pretty well, but more guards poured onto the porch, surrounding us. A spear caught Dread in the shoulder, eliciting a bellow of pain. Lola was slammed to the ground beneath an armored boot. Fluffy howled as he was forced back into a corner by a dozen guards using pikes. And I was held down by three of them, face jammed into the stone floor. I could taste my blood. Above me, the guards cheered their success.

As I was pressed against the floor, I felt the rough surface scraping the skin off my face. Then I heard one of the soldiers swear and let go of me and it was just enough I was able to flip over and kick a guard in the face and punch another one. I got hold of my sword. I saw then what had got the first guard off me. Chaos was on the top of the guard’s head, clawing at him and biting and expertly avoiding his swatting hands.

The guards had been a little premature in their celebration.

Lola finished a long spell, and a portal opened. We all quickly squeezed through the opening into total darkness, and Lola closed the portal before the guards could follow.

Inside was a cramped hidden passage just wide enough for single file. I could hear the guards’ angry screams and the banging of weapons all around us. The sound faded as we ran

in what became a tunnel and then a cave. When we surfaced at an opening, we were outside the castle walls.

“I owe you,” I said to Lola.

“You owe me, Brother,” Dread said.

I agreed.

“You know Lilith is right,” Lola said. “You are fighting for the other side.”

“I’m fighting for what I am. I’m fighting for the humans.”

I realized that this was the truth when I said it. I had been directed by an angel in my assignments before coming to Eden, but I was helping humans, not angels.

“She isn’t the anti-Christ,” Dread said. “You might not be either, but she isn’t. She’s always been too full of herself. I’m happy to teach her a lesson.”

I could see he was worried about how unhappy she would be, but he said nothing more.

“I’ll send you back to the woods,” Lola said. “Be careful.”

A second later, Fluffy, Chaos, and I were standing in the haunted woods. I knew where I was. It was probably thirty minutes to Eden. We hurried through the woods.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It was dark by the time we walked across the bridge into Eden. I took Fluffy and Chaos to the library and put them in. I locked the door. Then I walked over to the mayor's big house on the same street as Lord Blackstone's mansion. I knocked on the big black wood door. A minute later, the door swung open.

"Librarian," he said, standing in the door. "I've heard we've been just missing each other."

"I've been missing you anyway," I said.

"I'm glad you're here. Everything all right? You look a little disturbed."

"I was kidnapped and taken to hell, but I escaped."

"You can't keep a good man down," he said.

"Actually, it happens all the time," I said.

"You'd better come in."

It was a big house, richly furnished, with pictures on the wall, a couple I thought should be in museums. Probably, but not necessarily, copies. I wondered if I was in the house of the richest man in town.

"Are you the richest man in town?" I said.

"I don't know," he said, but his smile said he did.

He led me to an office with a large desk in the corner, a leather sofa and armchairs. He motioned for me to sit in one of the chairs, and I did.

“What can I do for you?” he said.

“Tell me why you killed Rowena and set her house on fire?”

“You’re a character all right,” he said, shaking a finger at me. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Someone killed her. I’m betting it was you.”

He shrugged. I wished I could read shrugs. So many people use them.

“You’d lose that bet,” he said.

“You’ve been working with her.”

“On the preservation committee for the haunted forest.”

“I know you’ve been working with her on finding a way to get revenge against the goddess.”

He leaned toward me. “She came to me. She offered me a lot of money and a favor. We made a deal.”

“She’s a powerful witch. Why would she need you?”

“Between us fellas, she’s very talented, but she is not one to spend a lot of time with the books. Her knowledge is limited.”

“You do spend a lot of time with the book?”

“Yes.”

“Wizard?”

“I could be. I have the brain and education to be one.”

I knew the order in the magical castes, even though I had no formal training. Wizards and Crown Witches were the highest. Nearly all wizards were academics or learned gentleman or occasionally ladies. Crown Witches used the power of the earth and wizards of the air. There were transmagentals, of course, which tended to make the distinctions less distinct.

“You’re a magician then?”

He nodded, but his nod seemed evasive. Unlike shrugs, I was pretty good at reading nods. He thought of himself as much more than a magician.

“Yes.”

“She needed your knowledge.”

“That’s right. You’re right that she was powerful, but she couldn’t read many of the ancient texts. I could.”

“So, you helped her find a spell to kill Morgana?”

“Classified.”

“By who?”

“I do some work for the high council.”

The high council did, I knew, hire help from time to time. Contract labor. They had hired me once to help on a case of a magician serial killer. No one could catch him because he was so good at disappearing. But it turned out he was actually very good at appearing to disappear. A magician who was a master of illusion, go figure. My third eye, twin teenage witches, a kangaroo, and six little people, allowed me to capture him after his seventh murder. Not a lucky number for him.

“Why is it classified?” I said.

“Afraid the sisters were going to start another war.”

“But not with each other,” I said.

“Not this time,” he admitted.

“Morgana?” I said.

“Yes,” he said.

“You were paid to stop Rowena?”

“It was the three of them. That was what worried the council. They were making plans. But Rowena was the one who was taking action.”

“The high council wasn’t willing to let them start a war,” I said. “You were just doing what needed to be done.”

“When they’d had their family squabble decades ago, they destroyed several towns. The high council (like high councils everywhere tend to do) punished the sisters for not following their orders to desist in their magical violence.”

The sisters broke one of the cardinal rules. Never expose us. It was believable the high council would hire the mayor to make sure the sisters didn’t do it again. They’d probably even give him the power to decide if Rowena should live or die.

“You killed her?” I said.

“No,” he said.

“What then?”

“I did what I was ordered to do.”

“Paid,” I said.

“It was a business arrangement, but the order came from the high council. It wasn’t something I could ignore.”

That was all he had to say. What he had done was legal in our world. It was, in fact, necessary. He had the powerful men and probably a few women who were always in the shadows making decisions. If they decided someone needed to be executed because they were a danger, then that was that.

But he said he hadn’t killed her. Someone had.

“You made her think she was fighting Morgana with a powerful spell that would overwhelm the goddess.”

“Yes.”

“So she tried to use the spell, and Morgana killed her.”

“She was determined.”

“You set her up?”

“I did what I was ordered by the high council to do.”

That was what someone like the mayor would always fall back on. He’d get the powerful shadow rulers to allow him to do what he wanted to do, anyway.

“They weren’t going to risk another potentially damaging situation. Their way of doing things is to stop a problem

before it becomes a problem.”

“What if they’re wrong?”

“Better wrong and safe.”

“It doesn’t bother you?”

“Had to be done.”

“Morgana isn’t done according to Rowena,” I said.

“They were all in on the planning. I suspect she will see them as a danger.”

“And you?”

“Up to the council.”

I thought about bringing up his role in the billionaire’s scheme to convince Olive to marry him. But there was nothing actually illegal about it, although I suppose it was technically a misuse of a city official’s power. I wasn’t going to give him a pass, though. I thought it was time for a new mayor.

I said good night to the mayor, who walked me to the door. On the way out, he told me to be careful. The goddess was dangerous and unpredictable.

I felt the eyes of one of the paintings, one of a matron from another century, watching me as I opened the front door. I stared at her. She didn’t look away.

“My dear mother,” the mayor said, turning to the painting. “Do stop staring, Mother.”

He turned back to me. “The high council will be watching, librarian.”

I left the mayor’s mansion thinking the sisters never had a chance with the way things started for them. To hold on to the hate for over a century, though, to hold it so close that they were willing to risk everything for revenge after all these years, reminded me of how important it was to let certain things go. Some things you just had to accept the loss and move on.

Rowena was killed because she couldn't move on. She was betrayed by the mayor, who had calmly and without a hint of remorse told me about his work for the council that led to Rowena's death. On the other hand, Rowena and her sisters were trying to imprison a goddess for what she'd done over a century ago.

Now, Katrina and Zeena were in danger. I had no illusion the goddess or the high council would spare the witches. The mayor would do whatever the high council paid him to do. No illusions about that either.

I had to find the goddess, Morgana, and try to talk her into letting the witches live. Maybe they could pay her some tribute. I had to at least try to save them.

Chapter Twenty-Six

On the way to the library, I went by the bar and looked in the big picture window. The bar looked crowded, as if often was in the evenings. I saw many familiar faces. Although I didn't know the names of everyone, I was becoming more familiar with the townspeople. Even the ones who weren't exactly people in the sense of being human, which were a significant number.

I saw the ghostbusters all sitting at a table by the window. They motioned for me to come in and I went around to the door and went in. Many people said hello as I walked over to where the ghostbusters were sitting. It was a good feeling, if a little strange to me, because for the past decade I'd been traveling, never staying in one place for very long. I'd been mostly anonymous in those places. A visitor at best. My place in Eden was different. I had, almost from the beginning, been a part of it. Only a few hours after arriving, I was the librarian.

I sat down with the ghostbusters. Ryan and Camila sat on one side and Gabriela and Walter on the other. I sat beside Camila and Ryan and ordered a whiskey when the waitress stopped by.

After the usual greetings and chitchat, they told me they'd been working on the sixth floor of the hotel that day.

"It's well known that the sixth floor is haunted," Ryan said. "Over the years, some pretty bad haunts have happened there. If the spirits get off the floor, that's when we have real trouble."

“What kind of trouble?”

“There was a serial killer got off the floor and started killing women in town once,” Gabriela said. “That was many years ago, before our time. Twelve women were killed before he was caught and sent back to wherever he came from.

“He called himself Jack Ripper after his hero,” Camila said.

“What was on the sixth floor today?”

They all looked at each other.

“Tell him Walt,” Camila said. “You have the best speaking voice.”

Ryan looked a little hurt by this, but we all knew it was true. Some voices were meant to tell a story.

“We got the call around noon today,” Walt said. “Apparently, the activity on the sixth floor had spiked and a couple entities had managed to manifest and get out into the hallway. The manager told us they seemed aggressive, based on the icy chill and flickering lights up there. So we geared up with our proton packs and headed over, not knowing what we’d find but preparing for the worst.

“When we stepped off the elevator onto six, the temperature drop was noticeable. Our breath fogged in front of us as we swept our flashlights across the dark hallway. The lights overhead were flickering and a couple emergency exit signs sparked and went out as we passed. Definitely some serious paranormal activity stirring up there.”

“We were all pretty nervous,” Ryan said.

The waitress stopped by and I ordered four whiskeys for my friends and told the waitress, whose name was Sara, to put them on my tab.

Walter continued. “We crept down the hall, PKE meters humming. About midway down, we heard a crash and some glass breaking. I signaled to the others, and we rushed forward, proton guns raised. We burst into one of the rooms to

find it completely trashed - bed overturned, furniture broken, the mirror smashed. But no visible entity.

“Then we heard a woman’s scream from the room next door. We kicked the door open and there they were—a man and woman dressed in dated clothes and with an unnatural pallor.

“Sort of a give-away,” Ryan interrupted.

The ghost woman had her hands around the throat of a living maid who was struggling against her. The male held another maid close to him, and his mouth was on her throat like a vampire’s, but he wasn’t.”

“Wait,” I interrupted. “What were the maids doing on the sixth floor?”

“The hotel manager said they don’t have maids,” Camila said.

“These were definitely maids,” Gabriela said.

“How can you run a hotel without having maids?” Camila said.

“Maybe he pretends he doesn’t have any because they’re illegals.”

“Maybe Miguel cleans,” I said. “He seems to do everything else. Maybe there’s more than one Miguel.”

The waitress set down the four whiskies.

Walt continued, “We powered up our proton packs. At the sound, the male ghost dropped the maid he was sucking the life out of. He turned and looked right at me.

“His face was cracked with big black veins and blood dripped out of one eye. The female ghost looked even worse than the male. Her hair was patchy, as if ripped out. Her nose was gone, and she had long scars down one side of her face like a tiger had swiped her.

“‘Is it killing time?’ she asked her partner. ‘Is it finally killing time?’

“I could see she was excited. I fired a warning proton blast between them, scorching the carpet.

“This seemed to enrage the female. She let out an unearthly wail and flew at me, claws outstretched. I strafed her with proton fire, dispersing her form momentarily while she reorganized.

“When she came back, she was beautiful. She made me think of a young Cher. That sexy kind of beauty. I don’t mind telling you, I was smitten for a brief second before I remembered what she was.

“Her partner went for Ryan on my left. Ryan blasted him dead on, the proton stream crossing through the ghost’s body and slamming him into the wall. The ghost vaporized. But in a second he was back.

“‘We’ve been locked up so long,’ the woman said. ‘We just want to have a little fun. Take us to the bar and we’ll be good. We promise. We’ll have you for dinner. No, that isn’t right. To dinner.’

“She was practically drooling,” Camila said.

“She made her move and came at me again, dodging my proton stream,” Walt said. “She raked her long nails across my shoulder, shredding my uniform. The touch of her hand was so cold it felt like fire. I cried out in pain. She got her hand around my wrist and squeezed. I could feel my life energy draining fast.

“Gabriela blasted her from behind with a boson dart, disrupting her corporeal form. As she spun in a whirl of ectoplasm, some of it staining my already ruined uniform, she hit me square in the chest. My heart stopped. Her husband attacked Camila. He got her in a choke hold.”

“He thought he did,” Camila said.

“He didn’t know she was standing inside a spectral cage,” Ryan said. “Camila broke his hold and jumped out and I hit the remote on my phone and we caged the husband.”

“Gabriela and I fired in unison, crossing the streams to hold the female in place. She writhed and screamed as we

moved her into the other containment unit.

“My heart started again, thanks to these two,” Walt said. “The husband saw his partner trapped with him and let out an unearthly roar. He assumed the form of a grotesque human-bat hybrid and, spreading his wings wide, tried to fly out of the trap but couldn’t get free.”

“Have to give him an A for effort though,” Gabriela said.

“Ryan checked the PKE meter. The psychokinetic energy had dropped significantly.

“We transported the traps containing the vanquished ghosts back to our storage facility. After some research, we uncovered their identities; they had lived two centuries ago and murdered dozens across Eastern Europe before being captured by a posse of demon hunters from America.”

“Wow,” I said.

“It was just another day at work,” Ryan said.

“You all deserve a medal. The mayor should give you a medal.”

“Our mayor is too busy to give out medals,” Camila said.

“He’s too busy making money,” Ryan said.

“He’s not that bad,” Gabriela said.

“He’s pretty bad,” Camila said.

“We’ve had worse,” Walt said.

It reminded me of my first day in Eden, which seemed long ago but wasn’t, when the mayor had said the same thing about the newly dead (murdered, it turned out) librarian. The one I replaced. I remembered thinking at the time that it was faint praise. Not something you would want on your tombstone.

“He’s been up to some bad things lately,” I said. I told them about what he’d done to Olive for the billionaire.

Camila and Ryan, both good friends of Olive’s, were outraged. I asked them how long he’d been mayor and no one,

not even Walt, seemed to know. Everyone agreed it had been for decades.

“Maybe it’s time for a change,” I said.

They all agreed that it might be, but no one could think of who might take his place.

“How about you Walt?” I said.

“Me? No. I’m a scientist, not a politician.”

“You could be both.”

I spent the next half-hour trying to convince him to maybe, and that was where we left it. His main argument was that he couldn’t continue his work as captain of the ghostbusters and devote himself to his work in the lab and be mayor. I said he could. Everyone who worked for the city government had another job. Our current mayor was much more a businessman than a mayor.

He agreed to think it over. I walked back to the library feeling pretty good about the possibility. Walt was someone people might vote for. He had the gravitas to be mayor.

On the way back to the library, I ran into a troll. The troll was huge with bulging muscles, wide shoulders and giant feet and hands. His skin was pale green and his shaggy hair mossy. I smelled the forest on him, earthy and musky, like the wet soil of the forest. He carried a large club, narrow at the gripping point and wide at the other end.

First look, you might think he was one of those wild trolls who liked to sit under bridges and demand a troll toll from anyone who passed over the bridge.

“Hello Armstrong,” I said.

“Librarian,” he said.

He was actually a farmer who sold at the monthly market (which I had yet to attend because it was still over a week away).

“How are things up on the mountain?” I asked.

“Got a good crop going.”

“Your wife and kids?”

“Doing well.”

“Good to hear it.”

“A fine crop this year,” Armstrong said, his lips curling into a grin. “The wife and I have been working hard to get the fields ready. Nothing like a troll’s green thumb for growing thunder weed!”

Troll crops were notorious for their magical properties, which were sometimes very good and sometimes not. Glowberries were essential for homes that didn’t have electricity. Shadowstone roots and moonstone fruits were also good. Thunderroot not so good. The booming sound it made, almost like an explosion, when it was picked could be annoying. Trolls were also fond of growing belladonna, which had many medicinal uses. The most common one was what they called the blahs. When a troll had the blahs, a little bit of belladonna could cheer them right up.

“What brings you into town today?” I asked. Armstrong’s eyes grew somber, and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Werewolves have been stealing our sheep again. I caught one. He told me something so I wouldn’t punch him.”

“Did you punch him, anyway?”

“Needed punching,” Armstrong said.

“Sure.”

“He told you something about what?”

“Something for you. Can we go somewhere more private?”

I hesitated. I was tired. On the other hand, Armstrong wasn’t one to waste words.

“The library,” I said.

We walked down the street to the library. Along the way, we heard the werewolves, or maybe just wolves howling out in the haunted forest. We got to the porch. Unfortunately, my porch furniture wasn’t large enough for him to sit on.

I used my ring to open the door and go into the library. Fluffy met me at the door and licked me and made little noises and turned in circles. I petted him and made a fuss over him. Chaos sat perched on the desk, but took off when she saw the troll.

We sat in the living room. Armstrong could fit on the sofa. Barely. He pulled out some belladonna and chewed on it. He asked me if I'd like some, but I declined. He told me he wanted to tell me but a troll couldn't give something for nothing so he had to ask me for something.

He was petting Fluffy. I never thought another creature could make Fluffy look small, but Armstrong did.

This was literally written into their laws. Trolls were willing to barter and discuss prices for anything they sold, but they did not give away anything.

“Let me guess,” I said. “A book.”

“Good guess. Librarian is very smart.”

“All right,” I said.

“Troll farming. One year and I bring it back.”

“Done,” I said.

“Mayor is a liar,” he said.

“And?” I said.

“That all. Mayor is liar. You think on it.”

It seemed pretty obvious that the mayor was a liar. I didn't see how that was going to help me, but a deal was a deal. I went upstairs and got the farming book and gave it to Armstrong. He thanked me and at the doorway, which he had to duck down and turn sideways to get through. He said it again, “Mayor is liar.”

I locked up. Fluffy said, “Mayor is liar.” He rubbed against me. I asked him what that meant.

“He tell lies.”

“Right.”

Chaos appeared. She complained loudly about letting trolls into the library. As a rule, trolls did not like cats, thinking they were shifty, and cats did not like trolls because they thought they were bumpkins. I told her he rarely came into town, but that didn't, as I hoped, make her less irritated.

As I was about to go down the stairs, the ghost of the library appeared. He made a whoooooooh whooooh sound for effect.

“I heard you talking to the troll.”

“Okay.”

“I'm going to tell you about an experience I had in the Civil War.”

“I'm a little tired now,” I said.

“I insist.”

I stopped walking toward the stairs, which were a few short steps away.

“If you insist.”

“I remember when Captain Jefferson was about to be hung for treason. Captain Jefferson was caught passing information to the Yankees. He claimed many reasons for his actions. He said he did it because he opposed slavery and wanted it abolished on the grounds of his deeply held religious beliefs. He said he passed secrets reluctantly, under threats from Northern agents against his family. He said he thought the war was futile and just wanted it to end as quickly as possible so that both sides could go home to their loved ones. He said he felt more loyal to the Union than the Confederacy. He said it was obvious the Yankees were going to win, and he just wanted to save lives.

But a sergeant, my sergeant, shouted, “All a bunch of nonsense. You are going to your maker, Captain Jefferson. If the last words out of your mouth are a lie, you will surely go to hell. Jefferson turned to the chaplain we had with us who was standing by his side and the chaplain, unexpectedly, nodded that this was true.

“Captain Jefferson, sheepish grin on his face, said, ‘To be honest, boys, it was the money. They flat-out offered me too much money to refuse.’”

“I see,” I said, but I didn’t, really.

“That’s the way it is for some people, librarian. They’ll do anything for money.”

He said good night and disappeared. I was too tired to think straight. But I could think straight enough to know that the days ahead were not going to be any easier than today or the recent days behind today.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

When I got down to my apartment, I downed a glass of water and went into the bedroom. I lay in bed. The cat jumped up from somewhere. I hadn't even heard her come in, but cats were sneaky that way. Fluffy stood over her and decided to give her a lick. Chaos hissed. The hellhound looked at me with pleading eyes.

"Sorry, buddy," I said. "The bed would collapse."

"Maybe not."

"Definitely," Chaos said. "And please do not lick me again."

He ignored her. He looked at me with pleading dog's eyes, but he had the gift of speech, so he added a little to it.

"Maybe bed stronger than you think?" he said.

"Lay down, boy," I said.

He sighed but lay down.

Chaos wanted to know what I'd found out, and I told her.

"The high council," the familiar said. "Why would the high council get involved?"

"According to the mayor, they were afraid the sisters were going to set off some argument with the goddess that might spill out into the humans without special abilities world."

"I suppose he told you it happened once before. The sisters going at one another."

“He told me.”

“The high council is a little touchy about them. It’s still thought of as one of the closet calls of modern times for Supernaturals.”

“The mayor said it was the high council’s decision to allow the goddess to kill Rowena to avert a war between the goddess and the witches. They hired him to be an undercover agent.”

“I was unaware they did such things,” the familiar said. “He was working for them all along?”

“Apparently.”

“A spy?”

“Sounds like it.”

“The goddess will come for the sisters now, then. They’re a danger to her. More of a danger now that she’s killed Rowena. No one will protect them when word gets out about the high council.”

She was probably right. High councils were high. They were not to be trifled with. They had the spooks and their own connections. They liked being high and were certainly not going to let any witches lower them.

“We have to find them, warn them,” I said.

She said she was going out to talk to some cats she knew.

“You mean familiars?” I said.

“Of course, I mean familiars. The wicked witches of the haunted forest will have all heard what’s going on. They’ll be calling a meeting. I’ll go and plead for the sisters. Someone is bound to know where they’re hiding, and they will tell me because I can be most persuasive when necessary.”

She disappeared.

That night I dreamwalked. I didn’t plan on dreamwalking. I went to sleep with every intention of keeping my eyes closed for as long as I could, but that wasn’t what happened. I dreamwalked.

I was back in hell, back in the castle where I had been imprisoned. It was dark and shadowy, lit by torches. I was in a great hall. It was large and imposing. At the center of the room was a long rectangular table made from dark wood. Six demons sat at the table, their monstrous faces mostly hidden in shadow. At the end of the table was a throne. Lilith sat on it. Standing at her side was her husband, Dragoon. The room was filled with what passed for air freshener in hell—acrid stench, sulfur, and brimstone. Lilith, looking every bit a princess of hell, was talking, and all the demons' eyes were turned to her.

All she needed was a crown. I wondered about that. Was that really all she needed?

“He must be killed,” she said. “Are we so weak we will give up after he has been tried and sentence to death?”

“We are not quitters,” Dragoon said.

“Try, try again. That's someone's motto,” one demon said.

“The girl scouts,” another said.

This got some sniggers and guffaws, demon style. Two had smoke coming from their mouths when they laughed.

“We will not give up until he is dead. This must be done quickly, before Lucifer tells me to stop. Every one of you will send hit squads to kill the librarian.”

“But how?” one of them said. “He is in Eden. Protected.”

“I will lure him out into the woods,” Dragoon said.

“How?” one demon asked.

“It is a secret,” Dragoon said.

“You don't know how, do you?” Lilith said.

“I know how,” Dragoon said, and then reluctantly, “generally.”

“Whoever kills him will get his weight in gold and I will owe him or her a favor. I don't care how you do it, kill him, wipe him off the earth.”

“The problem remains,” one lieutenant said.

Dragoon said, “Here is what we will do. Lure his girlfriend’s father out into the woods. He’s a zombie. Promise him brains and flesh and when you’re got him, hold him and force the girl out and then hold her and force the librarian out.”

“Seems a bit complicated,” one of her lieutenants said.

There was a general murmur of agreement.

They tried to come up with other possible ideas, but they were stumped until Lilith said that they needed to get Paris to help them.

“I suspect she had something to do with breaking them out, but I will promise her something she dearly wants.”

“She can’t be trusted,” one of them said.

“Of course, she can’t be trusted. No one in hell can be trusted. I will promise her freedom. She will help.”

She looked directly at them, daring anyone to disagree with her. I could see many of her lieutenants looking away. I had the feeling that not everyone had survived past meetings.

They all agreed this would absolutely work, though I thought some of them looked at their hands, paws or claws when they announced their agreement.

I was about to hear her response when I was pulled from the castle into an even larger hall in an even larger castle. Karl sat on his throne. He was wearing a handsome version of himself. He had a lot of versions. He changed them more frequently than Lady Gaga changed outfits at her concerts. No horn, no decayed teeth, no fire engine red skin today for the king of Hell. Not twelve-feet tall. A priest’s frock and a big silver cross. In a way, this version was the most outrageous of them all.

“I have the feeling you were someplace you weren’t supposed to be,” he said.

“Watching my sister plot against me,” I said. “She’s very ambitious.”

“She’s beginning to worry you are the one. She says you are very hard to kill. She finds you frustrating, a threat. All of

which, in her vocabulary, means you have to die.”

“The feeling is mutual,” I said. “I see her as a threat because she is.”

“Everyone is always scheming in hell,” he said. “Don’t take it personally. It is our nature. Let us be frank, it is your nature too.”

“I always take someone trying to kill me personally,” I said.

“Demons look for any little weakness to exploit. Part of the demon code.”

“Demons have a code?”

“Certainly. Do a lot of harm. Be sure every day to tell a thousand lies and destroy a few souls and recruit a few for our army at the end of the world. Spread evil. It grows like weeds if you just give it a little sun and water. What do you think?”

“Leaves no room for misunderstanding,” I said.

“That’s because I followed the great bard’s advice and killed all the lawyers. At least all of them who were working on the code. They can tangle up a sentence worse than pokeweed in a hunted forest.”

“You brought me here, didn’t you?” I said. “You wanted me to hear what Sis was up to?”

“I can’t go there. She has many subtle spells. I am aware she is the most dangerous of my children.”

“Thanks for the warning.”

“You are the son of the king of hell, the son of the fallen angel the Creator once thought of as his most powerful creation. But you are also the son of a human woman. It gives you a special place. I was never supposed to be able to mate with a human. I tried many times.”

“And your other children aren’t?”

“Human? No, their other half are demons and monsters and, in one case, a goddess.”

“Who was she? My mother.”

“A woman,” he said. “A beautiful woman.”

“She’s dead?”

“Yes,” he said.

I thought he might be lying. How could I know for sure? He pretty much set the bar for liars.

“I’m going to keep Lilith from killing you,” he said.

“Thank you.”

“I am going to have a competition to determine the anti-Christ. It will be called the anti-Christ games.”

“Catchy.”

“You and your brothers and sisters will compete. I’m going to send out an email today.”

“Demons use email?”

“Of course, we use email. You think we’re stuck in the middle ages?”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll need you to save the date. It will be an all-day affair. The winner will be the one who is still alive in the end. I will forbid Lilith to kill you until the games.”

“When you say alive you’re speaking a figurative sense?” I said hopefully.

“Sure,” he said. “We’ll go with that.”

I woke up back in my bedroom. Fluffy had somehow gotten on the bed and was taking up about 9/10ths of it. I was curled up in a corner. At least the bed hadn’t collapsed. I tried to wake him, but he didn’t budge. Whether he was faking it or really asleep, he was not moving.

I tried to turn over and fall asleep. The Anti-Christ games. Save the date, but no one was going to save me in those games but me. Anyway, they were in the future. I needed to survive tomorrow. I had a feeling that was going to be a challenge in itself.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The next morning at about eight, I got up and dressed and hurried over to the café. Chaos had still not returned. Fluffy wanted to be let out, and I let him out thinking he would stay close, but he said, “Got to go” and took off across the bridge into the haunted forest.

The café was full. Some just finishing up, some coming in like me. I got behind the Ripley brothers, twins, Donny and Ronnie, who some called giants because they were nearly seven feet tall and around 350 pounds. They had been big football fans when they lived down in the flatlands and always asked me if I could work on getting the TV provider to be more consistent so they could watch the games during the season.

“Cowboys and Giants this weekend,” one of them said.

“We like the Giants.”

“Because they’re big like us.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” I said. “I mean no bigger than other pro-football players.”

“Hello, Giants big. Cowboys little,” one said.

“Watch the Giants stomp the little Cowboys,” the other one said.

I could never tell which was Ronnie, and which was Donny.

“I’ll do my best,” I said. “To get the TV provider to provide.”

They were already on to how many pieces of bacon they could order.

Rip was in the café at a booth, drinking coffee. He waved me over. He seemed to be waiting for me, and it was pretty obvious he was ready to collect on one of his free meals.

I sat down across from him.

“I’m going to have a big breakfast,” he said.

“Fine,” I said. “That’s fine. I’m buying, of course.”

“That a boy,” he said. “A man who pays his debts is a man who pays his debts.”

“Always full of wisdom.”

“How’s Rowena?” he asked.

“Dead.”

“I heard,” he said.

“So why did you ask?”

“I heard her ghost is still in the cottage.”

“You hear a lot, but not the latest. Someone or something burned up the cottage with her in it.”

He leaned forward across the table. “Who would do such a thing?”

“She was trying to kill Morgana, so the odds are Morgana.”

“Thank the gods.”

“What?”

“I’m glad it’s not the sisters. Family killing family always stirs up the evil in the haunted forest.”

“Pretty bad, even if you’re a ghost, to be burned up in your house.”

“Or anywhere I would imagine.”

Olive stopped by and asked us what we wanted to order. We gave her our orders. I told Olive that I’d talked to Walter

about running for mayor. She said he'd be a good candidate and that she already had some volunteers who'd offered to help defeat the mayor in an election.

"We'll need to meet with them," she said. "Work out a strategy."

"Absolutely," I said.

When she walked off, Rip said, "Well, something's changed."

I told him what had changed.

"Be careful with the mayor."

"Something is off about that man," I said. "If he is a man and even if he isn't."

"Way off," Rip said.

"What can you tell me?"

"You can't buy me enough meals. If there's one man in town to fear, it's him. And he's the one man I know almost nothing about. Except one thing."

"What?"

"He's not a man."

"What is he?"

"Not sure. Whatever he is, it's something from deep in the dark. It hides in him."

"It's not him?"

"That is hard to say."

Olive brought our food. I had to eat mine quickly, or I'd be late opening the library. After I finished, I left Rip, who said he was staying to have another cup of coffee and read the paper.

As I was going out the door, I heard Olive tell Lucy she was going to take ten and Lucy nodded, but gave me a disapproving look. I wondered about that. Olive followed me out.

“I’ll walk you back to the library,” she said.

We crossed the street and walked through the park. It was another beautiful day in paradise, well, former paradise anyway. I asked Olive what that look from Lucy meant.

“She’s worried about me.”

“Why?”

“She thinks I’m going to get hurt.”

“Has Sir Ronald ever threatened you?” I felt the anger rising up in me. It always started with a tingle in my fingers.

“No,” she said. “She’s not worried about him.”

“Then—”

“You,” she said.

“Me?”

“She thinks we’re in a dangerous place because we’re in love.”

“I thought that might be a good thing,” I said.

“It might,” she said. “But she says it’s like riding a 70-foot wave. Dangerous.”

“I’ve never surfed,” I said.

“Me neither,” she said.

I put my hand in hers and I thanked the gods I could because not very long ago, I thought I probably never would again. I thought I’d lost her.

“A 70-foot wave,” I said. “You have to know one thing. You’re alive.”

“But maybe not for long,” she said.

“Let’s be optimistic,” I said.

“Looks like there’s no choice,” she said.

We sat on the park bench. We were still holding hands. That felt pretty good. The library could wait a few minutes.

“Want to make out?” I said.

“I don’t have time,” she said. “You don’t have time either. Later, when we can do it properly.”

“OK.”

“Can you tell me what you were thinking?” she said. “About my father, I mean.”

“I’m waiting for a message,” I said.

“What kind of message?”

“The kind a crow will deliver. I’ll probably know today.”

“Ok,” she said. “I checked the rules about the mayoral election. We can recall him with a simple majority of the voters. There are 1521 registered voters in town right now. So, we need 757 names on a petition and we can force a vote. You know how people come and go here, though. We ought to get as close to 800 as we can. The vote happens two weeks after the recall.”

“All right,” I said.

“I’ve got the recall clipboards set up. I’ve got friends from my knitting circle and my coven and my poker game who are going to visit people’s homes at two today. I thought it was best we coordinate it so he won’t know it’s happening until after we have the votes. We should be done before supper.”

“I’m beginning to think the mayor isn’t the mayor.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “He worries me, is all.”

“Me too,” she said.

“Everything is going to be all right,” I said.

“I know,” she said.

I kissed her. I was distracted. He came up behind us. He walked softly.

He said, “That’s a sight an engaged man doesn’t like to see. His fiancé kissing another man.”

“I thought you couldn’t leave the hotel?” I said.

“The mayor got me a special pass.”

We faced him. He was a handsome man. You couldn't get around that. He was confident. He was used to giving orders.

Olive said, “I'm glad you're here. I wanted to give you back something.”

She pulled the engagement ring off her finger and handed it to him.

“I thought I could change your mind,” he said. “This librarian has poisoned you against me.”

“Like I said in the letter,” she said. “I can't forgive what you did.”

“I did it for love. I know it was wrong, but love will make you a little crazy. You should rethink your position, though. I'm the only one who can keep your father alive.”

“I don't think so,” I said.

“I promise you I will take care of your father. I will give him a good life and you a great one, everything you've ever dreamed of.”

“So, you starve her father,” I said, “because you love her so much. You trick her into marrying you. Now you want her to forgive you because you only did it all because you love her so much.”

“Please,” Olive said, putting her hand on my arm.

“He's manipulating you,” I said.

“All is fair in love and war,” he said. He turned to Olive. “You have to know I wouldn't have starved him. I'm sorry.”

“Maybe you better let me talk to Sir Ronald myself,” she said to me.

I didn't want to. Every bit of me wanted to stay right there and not move one inch.

“You sure?” I said.

“I'll be fine.”

She was a strong woman. She would be fine. Anyway, it was up to her now. I trusted her. That's what I told myself and I mostly believed me.

I went to the library to open up. The morning sun was already bright and warm on my face, in stark contrast to the cold knot of anxiety in my gut. No Fluffy on the porch or Chaos.

I was five minutes late. Of course, today the persnickety government man was waiting, tapping his foot impatiently, and he lectured me on my tardiness and on not opening for two days. He promised that he was going to talk to the mayor about me and demand that I be fired.

“The mayor is a personal friend of mine,” he said.

“Talk to him,” I said dismissively, and I opened the door, my hands a little shaky, thinking about Sir Ronald talking to Olive in the park. I motioned for him to go in ahead of me, looking back nervously at the park once more. The government man was glaring at me the whole time.

I pretended not to notice. Of course, that just made him angrier. I pretended not to notice that, too.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

While the government man read his newspaper, I looked at the database and in books for information on the goddess Morgana. I found several books that mentioned her. She had acted badly many times and done terrible things. The worst was what she had done to the parents of three witch sisters, killing the father and driving the mother insane. She had done it out of bitterness and jealousy, two of the most harmful dark feelings in men and gods.

I knew this story about the witches' parents and Morgana's vengeance on love itself by her destruction of two people in love. I didn't know the story of how she herself had been betrayed by a feckless god. I read about it in one of the books:

It is said that Morgana was a young goddess, full of passion and life. She had caught the eye of many a god, but her heart belonged to the feckless Zeus.

For a time, their love burned hot, but eventually, Zeus grew bored. This was slightly different than what Rip had told me. In this version, Zeus called Hera and pretended to be discovered by her when he had actually arranged the whole thing. He wanted the two goddesses to fight over him. In the end, he held Morgana while Hera disfigured her with the knife of death.

Morgana cried for days, for weeks, for months. She ate chocolate and watched telenovelas and slept in her clothes and didn't change them for days and days. She still looked beautiful. She was a goddess, after all, and she still smelled

like a fragrant flower because, yes, a goddess. But her sorrow was so great she contemplated ways of killing herself. Maybe becoming a constellation that warned lovers of the treachery of love.

What she had come to hate more than the feckless god (though she still hated him) was love itself. Love had turned her into a weakling, a pitiful creature. Her sorrow turned to rage.

Morgana seduced and murdered a few Demi-gods, but she didn't find any relief from her rage. Her bitterness and anger consumed her.

She did terrible things. The worst of all was what she did to a witch and a wizard who were in love.

I did find one bit of recent news that said the goddess had not been seen for decades. She had disappeared on earth somewhere, but it was unclear where. There was one rumor that she was in Tibet, though what she would be doing there, no one knew.

At eleven, I told the government man that we were closing. He left, reminding me that he was going to talk to his friend the mayor about my tardiness.

Still no Fluffy. I wasn't worried about Chaos, but I didn't like thinking of Fluffy wandering around the haunted forest. I suppose worrying about a hellhound was a little ridiculous, but there were some pretty terrible things in that forest.

I went over to Lord Blackstone's mansion. I knew he was mourning the loss of his daughter, but I needed his help.

The butler answered the door and took me back to Lord Blackstone's office. I heard he'd been drinking a lot, but he wasn't drinking that morning. He was sitting in his large office with bookcases of texts on magic and other topics, staring out a window.

He motioned for me to sit down and after a few pleasantries, I asked him about the mayor.

Lord Blackstone leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers as he regarded me thoughtfully. "He's not what he

seems, as I'm sure you've learned."

"To be honest, many people and other creatures in Eden are not what they seem. What is he?"

"Even I cannot say. On the one hand, he is the mayor, you see. A greedy, manipulative, political creature. A magician who is like a wizard. But there is something else in him far worse. Something that seeks destruction, something that is destruction. Behold, I am the destroyer of world's level destruction."

"He wants something more than money?"

"For part of him, that is the most important thing, but there's the other part."

"The darker part," I said. "Something more dangerous than even greed?"

"That needs destruction. Craves it. Desires it. That you should fear more than the heartless businessman."

"One of my father's demons?"

"Not one of Lucifer's. I can't say what exactly, but something from another story of evil."

I knew I'd have to prepare myself for a confrontation with the mayor, eventually. I knew that it would likely end in violence. The nature of the world. Wars end in peace, but peace always ends in war. Evil and good and every shade in between are the storms that pass over the earth in constant turmoil.

I would have to face the mayor, but not today. Today, I needed to find Morgana and try to convince her to leave the witches alone. Then I would have to convince Zeena and Katrina not to seek revenge for their sister.

I asked Lord Blackstone if he knew Morgana.

"I know her," he said.

"I need to find her," I said. "Can you help me?"

"She is both far and near," he said.

I tried to see with my third eye. I couldn't actually see her, but I could feel her. A powerful presence. He was right. She was near and far away.

“She's on this mountain?”

“In a sense, yes.”

“What sense?”

“This mountain is every mountain, and every mountain is this mountain. Time and space are a little subjective up here. She is in Tibet in a monastery and she is also here in the same monastery and the time is before now and after now and now now. It's a little tricky to navigate”

“She lives on another plane,” I said, taking a stab at what he was saying.

“Another and this one, too.”

Lord Blackstone whistled, and a crow flew into the room from an open window. It landed on the desk.

“Write her a message,” he said to me.

“Wouldn't she already know what it will say if she lives in the future, too?”

“I think that she won't really know what will happen until it does happen, even when what does happen is almost always what she knew what would happen. It's the almost part that's tricky.”

I was getting a headache.

“I want her to come here, meet with me,” I said.

“You know what she's done?”

“Many terrible things.”

“If she killed Rowena, she will say it was self-defense. I advise you not to argue with her.”

“Not a goddess who takes criticism well?” I said. “What a surprise.”

He shrugged. “I hear she burned the witch's spirit in her own cottage. That surprised me. After all these years, she must

still feel rage.”

“I’ll meet with her in the library.”

“Even in the library, you won’t be safe if the goddess decides to punish or kill you.”

“Chance I’ll have to take,” I said.

I wrote my note, telling her who I was, and asking her to come to the library so I could discuss the three witch sisters with her. Lord Blackstone expertly folded the message and tied it with a ribbon around the crow’s claw. He told the bird to hurry, and it said, “On the way. On the way” and flew out the window.

“Eden has not allowed her here for centuries,” Lord Blackstone said, “but maybe she will now. It seems like Eden trusts you. It’s curious that it trusts the son of the devil who caused humans to be pushed out of Eden.”

“How do you know Eden is a she?”

He shrugged. “A feeling.”

“You think Morgana will come?”

“Most likely.”

“Why?”

“Curiosity.”

I thanked him for his help.

“My wife wants to come back,” he said.

“Does she?”

“I’m afraid she wants to raise our daughter from the dead. She has been visiting with Voodoo witches from Hatti. She thinks she can do it.”

“You want her back?”

“Never let her back in Eden, librarian. When the dead cross over the final bridge of the final stream, they should not be brought back.”

“What bridge is that bridge outside Eden?”

“Not the final one.”

That was a relief.

I walked back to the library. I thought about my conversation with Lord Blackstone. I thought he was right about the mayor having two parts to him, maybe like a Jekyll and Hyde, but more extreme on the Hyde. A troubling thought. The kind that would keep a librarian up at night.

His involvement with Rowena’s death might just have been for money or maybe for something else. But what? And why was he here in Eden in the first place? I was going to need to investigate the mayor more closely.

I didn’t understand how Morgana could be both here on our mountain and in Tibet simultaneously and be in the past, present, and future but I didn’t understand a lot of things—like birth, death, and a lot of what happened in-between or how to make scrambled eggs so they were fluffy.

Blackstone’s warnings about the goddess made me uneasy. Morgana’s reputation was fearsome. But the alternative was to let what would happen to the two remaining witch sisters happen. I couldn’t do that.

I made the turn into the library, which was built on a little rise, a bump on a magic mountain, and I saw what was pretty obviously a barefoot goddess sitting on my front porch (the glow gave her away) in a chair drinking something, probably nectar. When I got closer, I saw it was a Coke.

Chapter Thirty

I came up the stairs. I said, “I guess you got my message.”

“I got your message,” she said, “and then I got your message.”

“And here you are.”

“You must have a lot of pull. Eden hasn’t let me in here since I was a girl.”

I sat down in the chair next to her. “Eden works in mysterious ways.”

“Like the creator you call God.”

“Apparently,” I said, “but a lot of gods and Supernaturals, humans and otherwise, do, too. It seems to me it’s a universe of mysterious ways.”

“And you only know a tiny grain of it,” she said.

“I think I know one thing,” I said. “You didn’t kill Rowena, did you?”

“No, I did not.”

“And you aren’t going to kill the sisters?”

This was the part I wasn’t sure about.

“I would die first,” she said. “I’m a born-again Buddhist.”

“What’s that mean?”

“I’ve given up immortality, the traditional goddess immortality, for reincarnation. It takes some practice and I will

most likely start by coming back as a cockroach or maybe mold. I'll need to make up for my bad karma, but eventually I will be free of what I've done. That is a burden I never dreamed I could escape, but if I can, it will change everything for me. Killing or harming others would destroy my chances."

"Worse than mold is hard to imagine."

"There's always worse. The three sister's lives were deeply affected by what I did to their parents. Bad as that was, if I killed off the children too, for whatever reason, I might not even be allowed another life. I will die before I harm them more than I already have."

"Do you know where they are?"

"Hiding in the hotel," she said.

"Am I too late?"

"I don't believe so."

"But he's coming for them."

"He is already there."

I left her sitting on the porch drinking a coke. I ran through town. It was a sunny, cool day. Many tried to say hello, and I said hello back, but did not break my stride. An air-balloon flew overhead. I hoped it did not crash in the haunted forest. I could see two children waving down at me from the basket. People in town were stopping to watch it float by.

Someone said that it was Hansel and Gretel in the balloon. If so, it would probably crash in the forest and they would survive but get lost and end up at a wicked witch's cottage, one with a penchant for cooking. It would be an updated version of the Hansel and Gretel story, but with the same ending. Some stories just had to go a certain way.

I hurried into the hotel. It was as resplendent as ever. Charles was behind the front desk, as usual. Dressed in a suit, as usual.

"Welcome, Librarian," he said. "The bar is not open until four, I'm sorry to say."

“You know I’m not here for the bar,” I said.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Sir. Perhaps you are here to die, then?”

“Your finger touches the button under the counter and I’m going to break your arm. Both your hands on the top of the counter.”

He put them on the counter.

“Which floor are the sisters on?”

He started to tell me a lie (all over his face) and I raised my index finger. I said nothing. Sometimes that was best.

“Sixth,” he said.

“Appropriate, I suppose. The floor of evil spirits.”

“Not always evil. We had two delightful old women visit us when we were in Boston. They stayed on the sixth floor. In life, they had run a B&B. They were kindness itself to most of their guests, but they did murder the ones they felt needed murdering.”

“And who were those?”

“I believe they were rude people. They had a rather broad definition of rudeness, if I remember. Very charming ladies, though.”

“How long ago did he go up?” I said.

“He?”

“Your brother.”

“Ten minutes,” he said.

“You’re going to take me up.”

“Miguel will—”

“You,” I said. “Now.”

He tried to tell me he couldn’t. I told him he could if he tried. He argued that his brother would kill him. I said that was a risk I was willing to take.

We went up in the elevator. It seemed to take forever. The sisters could already be dead. The mayor would have a story about why he had to kill them. It wouldn't be believable, but it would be accepted by those high council members who mattered. They would say what the men in the shadows, even if they were in the bright lights of a grand office building in New York, said: It was necessary for the safety of the many. Things had to be done. People who were of poor character sometimes had to be used to do them. It was the way things worked, the way they had to work, the way they always had worked.

The elevator door slid open.

“Take me to the room.”

The hallway was different from the hallways on other floors. It was dimly lit, with most of the overhead lights flickering or burnt out entirely. Strips of peeling paint clung to the water-stained walls. There were pockets of damp chill as we walked down the hall. Many of the room doors hung crookedly off their hinges, and a few gaped open to reveal the darkness within. Blood slowly dripped from the ceiling at the end of the hall where Charles led me. It formed a puddle on the floor.

Very different from the other halls of the luxurious hotel.

Charles seemed to have developed a limp. I told him to open the door, and he said he didn't have the card, so I opened with a hypnotic suggestion.

“You shouldn't have been able to do that,” he said. “We have Magic Guard.”

“Better try another company,” I said.

I swung open the door.

Both the sisters were naked and tied up on the sofa. They weren't dead yet. The mayor had probably hoped to ramp up the fear in them by delaying his fun. His type of fun was the kind that took hours, preferably days or weeks, if he had the time. He would know he didn't. Probably he expected me.

The mayor came in from one of the back rooms. He gave his brother a dark look. I could see them now. Dozens of ghosts surrounding him. I could see what he'd done to them. Their eyes looked at me with a mix of shame and anger and even hope. He held them prisoner.

“Mr. Mayor,” I said.

He smiled and wagged a finger at me. “I made a mistake choosing you. I can see that now. The town tricked me. I thought you would be easy to control, like the last one.”

“Gambler. You saw it.”

“Of course. In you, I saw the dark and thought you give in. Live and learn. Well, I will live and learn. You, I'm afraid, have come to the end of your road.”

“You're from the sixth floor, aren't you?”

“My brother told you.”

“Just a guess.”

“I don't believe you. He told you.”

“You thought you could move the hotel around and lure prey up to your floor. Keep moving to keep from getting caught. Kill all over the world. But Eden wouldn't let you leave.”

“Where do you get your information?”

“You told me.”

“Mind reader?”

“I can see the dead gathered around you. Those you murdered. But you're not the mayor, not Charles' brother, are you?”

“You're guessing.”

“Why kill Rowena?”

“Does one need a reason to kill a witch?”

“In my opinion, yes. Unless he's a psychopathic murderer.”

He smiled a distressing smile.

“OK, yeah, but you had a reason. And you’re trying to bury it. Why would you do that?”

He shrugged. “I like to bury things.”

“You had a reason,” I insisted.

“Doesn’t matter. The council agreed to my terms, and the council doesn’t make mistakes. Just ask them. It’s one of their rules. They never make a mistake. I’m going to kill these two witches, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

He smiled. He had a Jack Ripper smile. I had seen this smile once before and seeing it in him chilled me like walking through an Alaska night in January (which I had done so I knew what I was talking about). In one smooth and very fast motion, I drew my sword and chopped off the mayor’s head.

Recall accomplished.

The dead, who really do have dead eyes that seem to be looking at you from a long, long way away.

“Go,” I said.

Only then did they seem to realize the cage door was open. They all escaped. The head’s eyes popped open.

Chapter Thirty-One

I stabbed the eyes with my sword, just in case. When you were dealing with psychopathic murderers, it was always best to err on the side of caution.

I untied the witches. I tried to wake them. I couldn't. I asked the brother what the mayor had done to them. He claimed not to know.

"Can you wake them?"

"No."

"Go get Olive for me."

"I'll send Miguel."

"All right," I said. "send him."

Miguel appeared in the doorway.

"Yes, Sir?" he said to Charles.

"Go to the café and get Olive and bring her back. Tell her we have a situation and the librarian needs her."

He was off.

"Is he really your brother?" I said, nodding toward the head.

"He was once," Charles said.

"What happened to him?"

"Even as a child, he was off. But I think it happened in college when he chose to make money over a girl he loved. He used her in some way. He ruined her father, a self-made

millionaire, and made a small fortune. That was the start for my brother. His love of money overwhelmed everything else.

“He did a lot of bad things. That’s all I know. He made a lot of deals with the kind of people you shouldn’t make deals with at all. He had people killed. As far as I know, he never killed anyone himself until He took over.”

“He who?”

“You could call him a demon, I suppose, but that doesn’t really do him justice. Something old though. Something from the deep. A monster is maybe the best word.” He shivered.

“A monster?”

“Called himself Jack. That’s when it started.”

I must have heard the name with my third ear, which was like my third eye only for hearing.

“What started?”

“Killing. It was a shift. He didn’t care about money the way my brother had. He cared more about killing. Both of them existed. In the beginning, my brother was in the front more. Then it was both of them, and one day the monster took over. He used my brother for cover.

“He forced me to help him dispose of bodies. He was careful here in Eden, but even so, he killed a few. He convinced the librarian to bring a few girls back from Las Vegas. He kept them up here on the sixth floor for several weeks.”

“And you buried the bodies for him,” I said.

“You think I had a choice? That thing in him, that thing would have done to me what he did to those poor girls if I hadn’t done what he said.”

“Jack,” I said. “No last name”

“He said he’d been Jack before.”

“Jack the Ripper.”

“I don’t know. He said he was known by many names. My brother wasn’t the first to make a deal with him. My brother wasn’t near the first.”

“Why was he here?”

“I’d tell you,” he said, “if I knew.”

I saw with my third eye the telltale signs of a lie. I put my hand on his shoulder.

“I believe you,” I said.

“Good.”

“But if you could just tell me the truth, I would be very happy. I hate breaking things in a way I can’t put back together.”

I broke into his mind. He managed to keep me from getting the whole truth, but I saw enough of it to know that the monster was looking for something, something it yearned for, needed. That was why it was here.

“You better put the head in the stream,” he said. “Let it float down the mountain by itself. If he gets back to the body, we’re all dead. Probably worse.”

“What could be worse?” I said.

“There are many things,” Charles said.

I moved the mayor’s body to the hall. If the head did wake, I didn’t want the body to come running. I might not be able to stop it. I locked the door.

I tried again to wake the sisters with a waking spell, but I was no witch and didn’t have the power to make it work. This was no ordinary sleep. If I could touch a conscious, I could use hypnosis, but their consciousnesses were too distant for me to reach.

Someone knocked on the door. I went to it and looked out through the peephole and saw the body of the mayor.

“Go back to sleep,” I said.

The body didn’t move one inch.

I swung the door open, brandishing my sword. The headless body of the mayor stood there, swaying slightly. It lurched toward me, arms outstretched. I slashed at it with the sword, but the blade passed cleanly through its neck, not slowing it down at all.

The body tackled me, bony fingers clawing at my face. I kned it in what should have been a soft spot. It wasn't affected. I shoved it off me. It tumbled but was up in a second and moving toward its head, which was over by the fireplace. I grabbed its ankle and held tight as it tried to kick free. How could I stop something that was already dead?

“You're dead,” I shouted. Like maybe it forgot.

The reminder had no effect. Though when I thought about it, the body had no ears, so maybe it was just that it had no way of hearing. I tried a thought. I tried to send it. Hello, you're dead. Nothing.

I jumped to my feet and swung my sword. I concentrated on the sword's mythic power and cut the legs away from the torso. Now the legs were separated. It didn't stop them running over to the head, but fortunately they didn't have the needed hands or neck to get the head back where it belonged. The torso crawled toward me using its hands and arms. The hands reached for me. I stomped on them repeatedly until they cracked and splintered. I cut them away from the torso.

The torso, the belly dragging, used its fat arms to drag itself across the floor toward the head. I raised my sword and brought it down with all my might, right where the neck (what was left of it) met the shoulders. The blade sunk deep, lodged in the bone. I put my foot on its back for leverage as I tugged it out with all my strength. The sword was stained with black blood.

I had fought some very strange things in my time. This was in the top five, no doubt. I pulled the torso apart right down the middle. The two pieces twitched and jerked but could not reassemble.

I grabbed the still clawing hands and threw them out in the hall. I gathered up the rest of the body parts and put them in

trash bags I found in the kitchen. The head in one bag. The legs in another. Other body parts in a third.

This puzzle of pieces was not going to be reunited.

Panting, I leaned against the wall. There was a knock on the door. I went to it. I looked out into the hallway through the peephole. I didn't see anyone.

“Olive?” I shouted.

No answer. I opened the door. They flew at me, and a second later, I was stumbling back into the room. The fat hands were around my neck, squeezing the breath out of me.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I opened my eyes. The hands were torn off me. Olive said, “We don’t have time to fool around. We’ve got to get these pieces of the homicidal maniac out of here.”

I sat up, rubbing my neck with my hands. The mayor’s hands (maybe I should say former mayor now) were floating in the air. They were struggling to get back to my neck. One of them gave me the finger. Then the other gave me the finger. Olive’s spell was held.

I jumped up, flipping open my knife, and chopped that offensive finger off. And then the other.

“I can’t tolerate a rude finger,” I said.

That gave me an idea. I grabbed one of the hands and took it into the kitchen and got out a cutting board and chopped off all the fingers. Then I got the other hand and did the same. I put the fingers in baggies and the palms in trash bags.

Meanwhile, Olive was trying spells to wake the witch sisters. None of them worked. Chaos appeared and said she was sorry. It took her so long to get back. Apparently she’d been held up by a Tom cat named Tom. Something about a gang of rats led by Ratso Rat they needed to rid the woods of.

Chaos helped Olive. Together they woke the sisters. First, Katrina woke, coughing and shaking her head and then Zeena.

Both looked like they were going to vomit. They were asking what had happened, but I could see they were remembering and the memory was painful.

“What kind of freaking creature was that mayor?” Zeena said.

“A bad one,” I said.

“I’m bad,” she said. “Somewhat bad. That was much worse than bad. That was—”

She was at a loss for words. That happened sometimes.

“A very bad one,” I said.

Both witches shook their heads. They had seen evil, real evil, and they thought I wasn’t seeing it. They were wrong. I just didn’t have the words either.

They got up, both wobbly on their feet. I told them what I knew. I said that they should send crows to the high council. I would also send the high council a crow with my report. The high council was never going to admit a mistake, but they wouldn’t want to have that mistake exposed, either. I was going to have to write a persuasive note.

Both witches asked where the head was. I pointed to the trash bag over by the fireplace. They wanted to take it, make sure it was disposed of in a way it couldn’t return.

“All right,” I said.

“You’d better dispose of the other body parts in the stream,” Katrina said. “There are fish there who will eat him without turning evil.”

They left, and Chaos went with them. Charles said he was late for an appointment in Paris. The hotel was due for a three-night stay in the Latin Quarter. A prince was paying for it. Charles wouldn’t say which one.

He was in a hurry to get out of Eden. I saw that much. I couldn’t say I blamed him. Not then.

Olive and I took the body parts of the mayor down to the stream and dropped them in a finger at a time and then the palm and then the legs and feet and finally the torso.

“I guess I’ll cancel the recall meeting I scheduled for this afternoon,” Olive said, watching the former mayor’s body

parts float off. I was glad she hadn't tried to keep any of his parts for her father to eat. No telling what they might do to him. Indigestion, at the very least. At the worst, well, something very bad.

We watched the parts float off. I saw a small, large-mouth bass surface for a finger.

I was nervous, but I forced out the question. "Are you going to marry Sir Ronald?"

"Don't be an idiot," she said.

"All right," I said, though I knew it wasn't as easy as that. When you were an idiot about something, it took a lot of work to quit.

"The man has proposed to me six times," she said. "He deserved to know why I wasn't going to marry him and to know I was pretty angry about what he'd done."

"What was his reaction?"

"A little disappointing. He asked me if I was going to poison him like I had the former librarian. People keep harping on that point. It was an accident."

"Absolutely," I said, though it was not absolute. She had meant to poison him. She hadn't meant to kill him.

"Anyway, I reminded him I hadn't actually killed him. I mean, technically yes, but not actually."

"There's a difference," I said. This was no time to be anything but supportive.

"There is," she said.

"What did he say?"

"He said he wouldn't be back for a few years. He'd see me then. I think he thinks you'll be dead or have left us."

"We'll see about that," I said.

Just thinking of him coming back to console Olive gave me a reason to stay alive. There were other, much more

important reasons, sure, but I liked the thought of irritating the billionaire.

Olive and I walked back toward the library, talking about the mayor and about Eden's need for a new one. I saw the crow perched up on the library railing.

"Finally," I said. "You'd better come along with me. I'm hoping that crow has good news."

Chapter Thirty-Three

We walked up to the porch, and the crow said, “Message for the Librarian. Message for the Librarian.”

“Go ahead.”

“The party of the first part is willing to provide said service if an agreement to terms and payment can be reached. This will need to be done in person. Open today until five.”

I pulled out my pocket-watch. It was 2:30.

“What’s this about?” Olive asked.

“The solution to your father’s problem. We need to talk with Mr. Black.”

“I don’t know a Mr. Black.”

“He’s not here in Eden.”

“Where is he?”

“My birthplace, Austin, Texas.”

It had been a few years since I’d been back, but over the past decade I’d made six trips to Austin, often staying a few weeks. One time I even thought I might settle and stop travelling, but it didn’t work out. Funny how traveling got in your blood. I had become used to the idea that I might not ever settle anywhere and then Eden had happened to me and now for the first time in a long time I thought I might.

Olive wanted to know more, but I told her she’d have to wait. I didn’t want to get her hopes up.

“I’m coming along then,” she said.

I tried to talk her out of it. I pointed out that the integrity of the timeline was at stake and adding another person to time travel, even if we were only going a few minutes into the past, was dangerous. I was glad when she didn’t listen.

I took a look out on the porch to make sure Fluffy hadn’t come back. He hadn’t. We went down to the 1965 Cadillac Deville time machine in the basement where the collection of curiosities was located, and I pulled down the visor and the keys fell into my lap. I told the Deville where we wanted to go and it said, “Groovy, man” because it had been invented by hippies (I had only recently got that much out of the car and that one of the inventors had been a friend of Timothy O’Leary—famous for his experiments with LSD—and a certain gonzo journalist).

This time we were using the time machine to get from one place to another rather than to travel back in time. It was the only way I knew to leave Eden. Most people couldn’t leave any way at all.

We landed in South Austin just across the river, and I drove down South Lamar and into the neighborhood where Black’s Funeral Home was located. I parked, and we went into the home. Mr. Black met us in the front room, where a dozen casket models were on display. He was a tall man with white hair and a quiet air about him. He had soft hands, which I noticed when we shook.

I knew he was a Supernatural. He could commune with the newly dead and this helped him both calm them for the journey ahead and allow them, when needed, to communicate a final message to their loved ones.

I explained the situation to Mr. Black. We needed bodies on a regular basis and were willing to pay a premium for them. He said that he would be able to fulfill our needs. Just leave it up to him.

“If you come every third Thursday of every month, I can have three bodies for you. Always adults, of course. The gender will vary.”

“Will that be enough?” I asked Olive.

She said it would.

We agreed on a price. Mr. Black shook our hands and escorted us to the door. His manners were old-fashioned.

“It will be a pleasure doing business with you,” he said.

If he had any compunction about a body being consumed, he didn't show it. I almost thought he had made the deal before. I considered asking him, but I didn't want to make him uncomfortable. Zombies had to eat, too. Eating the dead was far better than eating the living. It could be said that Mr. Black was performing a public service.

It was after three by the time we finished at the funeral home. I rushed us over to Franklin's, hoping they might have some of their famous BBQ left and we were lucky because they did. Olive was in proper awe of the BBQ, which some called life changing.

Then we drove downtown to the Driskill to visit the hotel bar for a drink before we returned. I parked the Deville right on Sixth Street. The Deville said we had twelve hours and three minutes to return to the time machine before he would be forced by the laws of time and space to return to Eden.

We went into the bar. It was old Texas. Rich leather couches and chairs, a hand-carved wooden bar, and colorful stained glass depicting the Texas flag and state seal behind the back bar. The high-domed ceiling had a painting of a cattle drive. Statues of longhorns book ended the bar.

We had a drink.

“So, this is Texas,” she said.

“One version,” I said. “Anyway, Austin is a little different from the rest of Texas, but a lot of the rest of Texas is a little different from the rest of Texas. It's complicated.”

We had a second drink.

When we came out the Deville was not where I'd parked it. We looked around. We walked up and down the street, doing our best to keep ourselves in denial and away from

panic. It was nowhere to be seen. How? What? Who? Why? We were stranded. It wasn't an issue of time; it was place. How could we get back to Eden when nobody knew where it was or how they had got there in the first place?

“What do we do now?” Olive said.

It was one of those moments. They're always a surprise. Master Lee had warned me about them when I was a teenager. He called them sink or swim moments.

“We swim,” I said.

“Backstroke?” she said.

“Backstroke,” I agreed.

THE END

Hope you enjoyed *The Librarian and The Witch*. If you did, I'd be grateful for a review or rating. They really help me find an audience for my strange stories. Even a single sentence is helpful. Thanks so much!

[My Book](#)

Here are two more possible actions if you feel so inclined:

I'm working on book 5 in the series, *The Librarian and the Knife of Death*, due out on Jan. 31. There's a librarian, of course, all the main characters in books 1-4, including the town of Eden which is a prominent character. It begins with Death's knife. It ends with, well, I can't tell you that. More strange, more scary, more funny and more description to come before publication. You can preorder right this very second if you like. Here's the link:

[My Book](#)

If you feel so inclined, check out my blog and sign up for my newsletter. I send out info and free or discounted book info about once a month. Also, when you sign up you get a short collection of strangely scary funny stories for your reading pleasure. <http://brianyansky.blogspot.com>

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