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WITCHBLADE[®]



**A Terrible
Beauty**

JOHN J. MILLER

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PROLOGUE

It was late September. New York City was in the grip of a lingering Indian summer. The cool promise of autumn had barely touched the streets. The temperature was scorching hot during the day and uncomfortably warm at night, but the old man walking down the dark, deserted street had more pressing things on his mind than the unseasonable weather.

Something was following him. Something that wanted to kill him.

The old man paused as he heard the sound of clanking chains being dragged on asphalt. There was almost an element of harsh music to the noise, like a rhythmically lurching techno-industrial dance mix. He thought he'd shaken whatever was following him by suddenly dodging into a dark cross-street, but that sound meant that it was still on his trail.

He realized he shouldn't be standing alone in the night, listening to strange sounds emanating from nearby alleys. It wasn't a prudent thing to do. The streetlight on the corner, forty yards away, cast what little light there was on the pavement. He suddenly felt as if the dim illumination thrown by the flickering lamp could protect him from the unknown thing following him in the darkness.

He took a faltering step, then another, but suddenly the noise of clanking chains was almost upon him. It had moved faster than anything human. He only had time to

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turn his head, time to see the thing looming above him like an avalanche of death with one long arm raised above its head.

The figure was huge in the night, bigger by far than the old man. It was dressed in tattered rags and, yes, dragging several lengths of chain behind it on the sidewalk. A portion of its face gleamed like ivory in the darkness, and the old man saw that the thing wasn't a man—it had only half a face. The rest was bare skull with flesh stripped away from bone and one empty eye-socket a deeper darkness than the night that surrounded them both.

The old man recognized him now. He knew who he was and who had sent him. Worse, he knew what the creature was going to do to him.

The old man took a deep breath so he could scream his lungs out, but choked instead on the stench emanating from the thing. The creature stank of the grave, of rot and mildew and wet ground. The old man put his hand out helplessly, and the thing's upraised arm swept down with terrific speed and the old man caught a glint of light off a machete blade and then felt a terrible blow to the side of his neck.

His head slipped sideways and hung downward, connected to his body by only a shred of flesh and skin. For a long, horrible moment, the old man still could see. He blinked rapidly at the gleam of white finger bones in the hand that wielded the machete, and, as his blood gushed out of his body in a pulsing column, his eyes closed and his legs failed and he slipped bonelessly to the sidewalk.

The last thing he knew was the high, cruel laughter of the creature that had killed him, as he slid into welcome oblivion.

Brooklyn was not Sara Pezzini's regular turf.

She was a detective working out of Manhattan. She was young to be a detective, and, many thought, too beautiful. Being a young, beautiful woman made for constant battles in the cop world, but to Sara her age and looks were at most a minor distraction. Usually she had more important things to worry about.

Currently her worries centered about what the press had already dubbed the Machete Murderer. Twenty-four hours earlier a headless and handless body had turned up in a Manhattan Dumpster. It was still unidentified. Twelve hours later two more corpses had washed up on the Manhattan side of the East River, also headless and handless. Although they'd been discovered after the first, the coroner had established that actually they'd been killed and dumped in the river twelve hours earlier than the Dumpster John Doe. The East River was just a lot bigger than a Dumpster, and it took longer for them to be found.

Precinct Captain Joe Siry gave the case to Sara and her partner, Jake McCarthy. There was a reason for that.

Though both were young, they were tough, smart, and dedicated if not entirely orthodox in their approach to police work. They got results. They'd already developed a reputation for solving the tough cases, the oddball killings, and to Siry these beheadings and behandings already looked more than a little kinky.

Jake concentrated on the Dumpster corpse and Sara the floaters. After twenty-fours of fruitless labor, they'd decided to call it a night, head for their respective apartments and grab some sleep. But, once home, Sara couldn't sleep. Something was pricking at her consciousness, some little bit of information she should have looked at further, some avenue of investigation she should have explored.

Besides, it was also a bad night for the voices. They nagged at her, not letting her sleep. She got up with a sigh, turned on her computer, and checked into a database she'd previously overlooked.

And found the connection that led her to Brooklyn.

Normally this meant, at the least, polite queries of the appropriate Brooklyn precinct, but Sara had no time for polite queries that often led to not so polite runarounds. She also didn't like second-hand information. Second-hand information was often inaccurate information. She didn't care to deal with other peoples' mistakes. If mistakes had to be made she preferred to make them on her own. Nor did she want Jake involved, at least not yet. She didn't want him to pay for her mistakes. Besides, the boy needed his rest.

She found herself wandering around Cypress Hills, a quiet Brooklyn community with narrow, tree-lined streets and rows of mostly semi-attached two story houses. She

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liked it. It was mostly clean, mostly neat. There was a sense of age about the neighborhood, though a tide of recent immigrants from Haiti and India sprinkled among the older residents of eastern European origin also gave it a certain color and vivacity.

Sara found Fulton Street, which seemed to be the heart of the community, the main street, and business district. It was fairly early on a warm September evening, and the street was still crowded. The pedestrians were a mixture of black Haitian, brown Asian, and white eastern European, though the European population seemed to consist mostly of older people with only a few youngsters here and there. The stores that lined the streets were mostly mom and pop types, and though it was nearly ten o'clock at night, most of them were still open. Although Sara passed three curry joints and a couple of Caribbean-style coffee shops, there was nary a golden arch in sight. For some reason, maybe because it gave the community a stamp of individuality and independence, Sara liked that.

She found what she was looking for at the entrance to an arcade already crowded with young people. Three young black men, in their late teens or early twenties, were heading into the dark cave to slay virtual dragons, steal virtual cars, and blow away virtual citizens by the score. The one wearing a black Batman T-shirt had a cross tattooed on his left cheek, reaching from his eye-socket to his jaw line. Another had a cross tattooed on the back of each hand.

She followed them surreptitiously. The arcade was incredibly noisy with computer-generated *beep-bop-boops*, the sounds of racing engines, and continual muffled blasts of artificial gunfire. The third member of the group,

she saw, had the tattoo on his neck, under his jaw and running down to his shoulder.

As she'd discovered on the 'net, the cross tattoos were the recognition sign of the gang called The Saturday Night Specials. They would have other, probably more elaborate, cross tats on their bodies hidden by their clothes, but they all had to have at least one visible at all times as a recognition sign both to those members of the public who were aware of the gang and, of course, other gang members.

They stopped before "Blast Billy the Kid," a quick-draw shooting game, and Sara went up to them before they had a chance to feed their quarters into it.

"I'm looking for a friend of yours," she said.

The oldest of the three Specials, the one in the Batman T-shirt with the cross on his cheek, looked her slowly up and down.

"You found me, momma. Can I do?"

"Probably not," Sara said.

She took out a photo and held it up so all three could see it. It was a Polaroid taken by the coroner, showing a thin torso that had three crosses tattooed on it, one large one between the flat male breasts, flanked by smaller ones under each nipple.

"Achille—" one of the Specials blurted, and the one with the cross on his cheek threw up his hand against his chest, silencing him.

"What makes you think we'd recognize some skinny guy's tats?"

Sara smiled. "They're gang symbols. Specifically, for The Saturday Night Specials. Each gang member has a unique, identifying tattoo. You should know that, consid-

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ering you all have the recognition cross on your face or hands or neck."

"It's not a gang," the spokesman said. "It's a social club."

Sara shrugged. "Whatever."

"What you want him for?" he asked Sara.

"I don't want him," she replied. "I've got him. His body, anyway. He's dead."

She pulled out another photo, this one a full body shot, showing—or not—the missing heads and hands. The bangers glanced at each other. The one who'd blurted the name looked a little queasy.

He's the one, Sara thought, I can break.

"You a cop?" their spokesman asked.

"Do I have to show you my badge?"

The three again exchanged quick glances.

"No. I guess not." He pursed his lips and seemed to come to a decision. "Look here, momma—"

"That would be 'Detective Momma' to you."

He smiled, without humor. "Sure. Whatever you say. Listen, uh, Detective, this ain't no place to talk. Meet us in the churchyard. Say, about an hour?"

"Churchyard?" Sara asked.

"Yeah—St. Casimir's. Right down the street. You're a cop. You should be able to find it."

The voices roiled in Sara's brain like an angry medusa.

"Insolent brat—"

"—teach him a lesson—"

"—teach him to mock us."

Later, Sara said silently. Aloud, she said. "I'll manage. In an hour, then."

She left the arcade, suppressing a smile.

* * *

A little way down the street, on a cross-street running roughly north and south, Sara saw an old, dark, stony mass of a building poised on the crest of a sloping hillside south of Fulton. The church looked as if it had been built sometime around the turn of the century, give or take a couple of decades, and hadn't seen prosperous times recently. It was constructed of dark stone that hadn't been sandblasted in a couple of generations. The sloping churchyard was almost entirely taken up by a cemetery whose monuments ranged in age from the last century to last month. As Sara climbed the worn concrete stairs leading up the hillside, she could see that the churchyard was neatly maintained, but many of the older tombstones were in need of straightening or more serious repair. Like a schoolteacher with a dusty eraser, the toxic city air had rubbed out many names and dates with its acidic breath, leaving behind sad, blank slates that had once commemorated generations of New Yorkers.

It was dark and quiet. A nice place for a secret meeting. Or, of course, an ambush. She settled down in the darkness behind a concealing tombstone. She didn't have long to wait.

The three gangbangers showed up fifteen minutes later. Cheek Cross, as Sara thought of him, evidently had high ambitions, and had seen this as an opportunity to begin his long and probably bloody climb to the top.

"I just got off the phone with the man," he was telling his associates, "and he said this was our chance."

"Our chance?" asked Neck Cross, who had blurted out the name "Achille" when Sara had first showed them the photo.

"Our chance to go big, dog. He said I got to handle this

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cop. I got to get her off the case. Then, I move up, and I bring my bros with me."

"We got to *kill* her?" Neck asked, clearly uncomfortable.

"We got to do the job," Cheek said. "You just back me. That's all."

He took a snub-nosed pistol out of his pocket and caressed it lovingly.

The voices took exception to his apparent plan.

"Impudent fool—" they told Sara.

"—let us punish him—"

"—punish him severely."

Sara almost laughed.

I don't need your help with these morons, she said to herself. She drew her .45 from its snug hiding place in the small of her back, and stepped out into the open from behind the tombstone.

"School's out, boys," she said, the barrel of the .45 centered on the middle of Cheek's chest, not more than seven feet away. "Welcome to the real world."

Their eyes got round, their jaws dropped. Cheek made an abortive move to raise his pistol, but Sara only shook her head. "Freeze or die."

He froze.

"I need only one of you bozos to give me the info I need, and you're not my favorite banger right now."

She approached him, smiling.

"Hey," Cheek said, trying to laugh. "You're here early."

"Early bird gets the scumbag," Sara said, and slapped him on the side of the head with the barrel of her automatic. He went down like a bag of cream of wheat. She turned to Neck Cross. "You."

"Me?" He swallowed hard. His eyes were soft and scared. Sara could almost smell the fear coming off him

in waves. *He's the one*, she thought again. She tossed him a pair of handcuffs.

"Cuff yourself to that bush." It was more a sapling than a bush, with a main trunk that was almost too big for the cuffs. He fumbled in his haste to comply with her orders, but finally succeeded in chaining himself to the tree.

He'll be an easy nut to crack, Sara thought.

She waved her pistol at the last Special.

"Come with me."

"Where?" he asked suspiciously.

"Where we can have a little chat. Privately."

"I don't—"

She jammed her gun barrel into his solar plexus, hard enough to hurt but not to stun. He made no more protests as they went off into the depths of the graveyard.

"Far enough," Sara said. "Now, call for help. Not too loudly."

"Help," he said tentatively.

She pushed the barrel of her gun up one of his nostrils.

"Like you mean it," she suggested.

He called out in a low voice, but with some desperation, like he meant it.

"Now groan a little. Moan, too."

He did. Sara reached out and grabbed the flesh between the thumb and index finger of his left hand. She squeezed and twisted and he went down to his knees with an authentic yelp of pain, cut short as she released him. He kneeled in the dark, looking up at her with fear in her eyes.

"You're crazy, man," he said.

Sara nodded. "And don't you forget it. Now get out of here."

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He looked at her as if he couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"You got it right," she said. "Scat."

She didn't have to repeat herself. He took off between the tombstones as if the wolves of hell were on his track. Smiling, she went back to the banger she'd left cuffed in the other part of the churchyard.

He was practically shaking with fear as she walked up to him, stopping a moment to check on Cheek Cross, who was still dreaming on the ground.

"What'd you do to Henri?" he asked, eyes wide.

Sara shook her head.

"You don't want to know. But I'll tell you—he wasn't smart. He wouldn't answer my questions." She fell silent, looking at him. He started as she touched his forehead with the barrel of her automatic, and ran it down his nose, around his mouth to the tip of his chin. He was trying not to shake, but failing. "On the other hand, you strike me as a smart guy. You let me know what I want, I let you go. Simple as that. If you don't tell me what I want to know . . ." Sara let her voice trail off, and shrugged.

"What you want to know?" Neck asked. "I'll tell you what I can."

"Of course you will," Sara said. "You're the smart one."

She showed him the photo again. "You know who this is." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, yes. That is Achille de Petion. I've know him a long time—"

"He was a member of The Saturday Night Specials?"

"Yes, of course," Neck said, eagerly.

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know—"

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Sara shook her head. "Not what I wanted to hear."

She lifted her automatic.

"I swear, I don't know. I know he was in trouble. He and the doc."

"Doc?"

"Doctor Caradeuç. Dr. Cladius Caradeuc. He has a clinic farther down on Fulton. They was involved in something, together. I don't know what. They—something went wrong. We heard whispers, is all. Something went wrong."

"Caradeuc." She took out another photo, showed it to him.

He squinted at it in the uncertain light.

"I don't know if that's him. Could be. He's got no head, man. Like Achille."

"Observant," Sara said. "Ever think of going into police work?"

He cringed as she took him by the wrist, but she only unlocked the cuffs from his arm and the tree.

"Get out of here," she said, "and take your friend."

Neck scuttled back, and after a couple of tries managed to heave Cheek up from the ground, and, hugging him to his chest, started to drag him out of the churchyard.

"One last thing," Sara said.

He stopped and looked at her.

"Take my advice. Find another social club to join. You're not cut out for this one."

He looked at her as if seriously considering what she said, finally nodded, and disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER TWO

At least, Sara thought, she had someplace to start. At least the vics now had names.

She should either call Jake and let him know what she'd discovered, or better yet, go home, get some sleep, and call Jake first thing in the morning.

Instead, she did neither. She stood at the edge of the quiet churchyard and looked at the church.

It had been many years since Sara had seen the inside of a church.

She'd been raised Catholic in a conservative Italian Queens parish. Her mother had been devout. Her father, a cop, less so. He'd gone to Mass sometimes to please Sara's mother, but he'd died in the line of duty when Sara was very young, and she didn't have many memories of him. She cherished those few she had, but none of them were of him and church.

Something inside her made her pause in front of the church, some inner need unconnected with the case. Something deeper than the voices in her head told her to go in, just for a moment. There was something or some-

one who could help her. The urge was irresistible. She went up the rotten concrete stairs and the voices, started again to whisper in her head.

“What are you doing—”

“—do you want with this place—”

“—nothing for you here—”

“—nothing to help you—”

“—only we can help you.”

“I’ve had enough of your help lately,” Sara replied aloud. She strode up the pathway to the double-doored entrance. One of the doors had a worn sign whose weathered words welcomed her to St. Casimir’s. She flung open one of the double-doors and entered the vestibule.

The voices shrieked as her hand touched the door, and rose to a cacophonous maelstrom as she crossed the small vestibule and opened the door leading to the nave. Her knees weakened as the shouts and shrieks buffeted her brain, but the part of her that was the fighter, the part of her that refused to give in to the voices’ suggestions and sly offers, knew that if the voices didn’t want her to enter the church, she should.

With the great force of will that had driven her to the rank of detective before she’d reached the age of thirty, Sara bulled her way into the nave, and suddenly the voices were gone. Finally, there was blessed peace in her troubled, tired mind.

She’d almost forgotten what internal peace felt like. It was such a relief that she had to grab the back of the pew in the last row to keep from collapsing. The tranquility, the utter isolation that she felt, alone at last in her own brain, almost bought tears to her eyes. She

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wouldn't, however, allow herself that last bit of release. She held onto the back of the pew and surveyed the church's interior.

It looked like what it was: a small, unpretentious church that served a small, poor parish. It was dark inside, lit only by infrequent, dim electric candelabras, and by banks of votive candles alongside the old-fashioned confessional box and before the low, white railing that separated the altar from the rest of the nave.

To the right of the altar, opposite the confessional, was a baptismal font—currently dry—and behind the font something Sara had never seen in a Catholic church before. It was an exhibition of crosses. Crosses, hundreds of crosses, some metal, some wood, some plain and severe, some intricate and fanciful, were crowded together in a jumbled mass against the wall behind the font. It was a chaotic, but somehow beautiful display that suggested a mountain, or at least a hill, of crucifixes.

A handful of people were sitting or kneeling in the pews, praying silently. They were mostly women, mostly elderly. None were as young as Sara or as well dressed. A group of them sat together, saying the rosary in a European language that Sara didn't recognize. Others were scattered about the nave, some at the banks of votive candles lighting tapers, dropping change into the money boxes and lighting their own offeratories with the long white wicks supplied for that purpose. An old man leaning on a cane, hobbled by his many years, came out of the penitent side of the confessional box and made his way slowly to a nearby pew where he knelt rustily, and started to say his penance.

It had been years, Sara realized, since she'd made con-

fession. Not since she'd joined the force, certainly not since she'd taken on the burden of the Witchblade.

If the voices that were the spirits of the Witchblade didn't like her being in the church, how would they react to confession, penance, and a cleansed soul fit for holy communion?

She hadn't thought of that before. Maybe the voices had purposely blotted that notion out of her mind, until something, some slight lapse of attention on their part, some deepening of Sara's need to get a respite from them, culminated in this visit.

Without thinking about it any further, Sara scurried to the confession box along the side wall, entered the penitent side and pulled the curtain shut behind her. She kneeled on the uncushioned wooden rail.

Sara realized that this parish must be at least as conservative as the one she'd grown up in. When she'd been a little girl, twenty years before, many Catholic parishes had initiated a somewhat more informal method of communion. Penitent and priest met privately, but in the open, face to face. However, some parishes with deep roots to their old countries and their old traditions, still maintained the ancient form of the rite, the anonymous confessional.

The Catholics of Cypress Hills must be more conservative than most, Sara thought. Inside the confessional, you couldn't tell if it was the twenty-first century or the twelfth.

It was dark inside the box, but cozy rather than claustrophobic. Sara felt like a little girl tucked safely in her bed. The penitent's side was separate from the priest's side by a blank wall with a small, wire-screened window.

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All she could see in the priest's side was a vague shadow waiting silently.

"Bless me, Father," she murmured. The words of the ancient ritual came back to her easily across the intervening years. "For I have sinned. It has been . . . too long . . . since my last confession."

She halted for a moment, then a voice said quietly from the darkness, "Go on, my daughter."

She took strength from the voice's quiet strength. It sounded young, deep and resonant, but soft. Almost, Sara thought, like the trained voice of an actor or singer. It was the voice of a man you could believe in. You could trust.

"I accuse myself of the following sins . . ."

She stopped again. The voices hadn't come back, but memories of them did, like echoes recounting her past transgressions, of the men she had killed, the deeds she had done while under the influence of the Witchblade.

The Witchblade . . . the source of her all her problems and, paradoxically, a great portion of her strength. She still didn't know exactly what it was, though it had been in her possession for some time now. It was a mystic artifact that had a horrible life—or maybe lives—of its own. It spoke to her constantly in the form of murmuring voices, tempting her, trying to seduce her to abandon herself to its use. She had used it, God knows, used it repeatedly, often to good effect. She had saved lives with it, but she had also killed with it, too often and too easily. And it was hungry for blood. It feasted on the blood of the evil, the blood of the guilty, but it took innocent blood just as eagerly. And it always wanted more.

But this was the twenty-first century. How could she confess sins such as these, and have anyone believe her?

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Worse, she whispered to herself, what if the priest *did* believe her? The transgressions she'd committed under the influence of the Witchblade ran too deep and too cold in her soul. Could she ever do sufficient penance to be forgiven of them?

She stood suddenly and swept the curtain aside and bolted from the confessional. The voices thrilled somewhere deep in her brain, as if exultant at her weakness as she fled from the box, her shoes clacking on the bare flagstone floor. She glanced back at the confessional as she ran, and saw the priest look curiously out from behind the curtain that shielded his side of the box. He was young and handsome, with a broad brow and the pale complexion and dark compassionate eyes of a saint. He was clearly puzzled as he watched Sara. She felt a stab of longing as the handsome priest watched her, but was unable to overcome her sudden shame and fear, unable to respond to the offer of understanding and forgiveness on the priest's face.

As she stepped outside the church the voices came back, briefly and exultantly, in a quick babble of derision. But they cut themselves off quickly, as if afraid of pushing Sara too hard too soon, and steeling her resolve while she was still close to St. Casimir's.

The thought swept through Sara that all she had to do was open the door, go back in, and unburden herself to the priest. After all, he was in the business of healing hurts of the soul and dispensing forgiveness. She stopped, half turned to the door, and then her cell phone rang.

"Yeah," she said, half-thankful for the interruption, half-angry.

"Yeah, yourself."

It was Jake McCarthy, her partner. He was a blond, handsome young surfer dude who had somehow found

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his way from the left coast to New York City, and traded in his surfboard for a badge and a gun. As a cop he was as tenacious as a bulldog and as honest as Abe Lincoln. He not only watched Sara's back when they were in action, he guarded her from official inquiry as well. He didn't know about the Witchblade, exactly, but he knew something spooky was happening with Sara. He was fiercely protective of her, whether from scum in the street or higher-ups in the department.

"I wake you?"

"No," she said. "I've been checking out some things."

Jake grunted. "Too bad Siry didn't call you, then. I was sensibly getting some shuteye when he phoned me."

"What you got, Jake?" she asked.

"Another body," he replied laconically. "Brooklyn, this time. Cypress Hills."

Sara paused. "That's not our turf," was all she said.

"Yeah, but you'll want to see this body. It looks familiar."

"Familiar?" Sara said. "You mean, familiar like you know him?"

"Yes and no. The deceased is one Philip Pierre-Pierre, according to the I.D. in his wallet. When I say 'familiar' I mean he resembles certain other *corpus dilecti* we've come across recently."

Sara felt a cold finger poking her heart. The voices twittered loudly, excitedly, in her brain. She could feel her nerves twinge, like the hot flashes that raced across her muscles when the Witchblade took over.

"You mean—"

"Yep," Jake interrupted. "Dude's missing his head."

CHAPTER THREE

Two uniforms stopped Sara at the crime scene tape. It was a big city; she'd never run into either before.

"Nothing here for you to see. Better move on, miss," the taller one said.

They were both taller than Sara, though she was fifteen, and wore their facade of authority as easily as they wore their blue uniforms. Sara suppressed a tinge of anger. She knew she was beautiful. Her looks were an advantage in many social situations. In the cop world they meant that she had to prove herself over and over again. It was tiresome. At times it was infuriating.

"They are arrogant," one of the voices whispered.

"They are weak and puny," a second took up.

"Teach them a lesson," pleaded a third.

"Show them our might," ordered a fourth.

It'd be easier, Sara said to herself, if I just showed them this.

She took out her wallet and flipped it open, showing them her detective badge.

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"Well, Detective Pezzini," one of them said after a moment, "come right in."

He lifted the length of sagging tape so Sara wouldn't have to duck under it.

"Yeah," the second said with more than a trace of false solicitousness in his voice, "but be careful. It's pretty gruesome over there."

Sara, already past the checkpoint, turned and looked at the two cops. "I've seen worse than headless bodies, boys—a lot worse."

She smiled. From the look on their faces, they seemed to believe her.

Sara was the last to arrive on the scene. The Emergency Medical Technicians were waiting to take the body away in their ambulance, the Crime Scene Unit was crawling all over the street, taking photos, measuring, scouring the vicinity for clues under the glare of their too-bright flashlights. Later, they would come back in the daytime, just to make sure they hadn't missed anything.

Jake McCarthy was standing with a heavy-set black guy in plain clothes, watching as representatives from the coroner's department put a loose-limbed corpse in a body bag, and zipped it out of sight.

Sara didn't recognize the other cop with Jake, but she recognized the man leading the coroner's team. It was Coroner's Assistant Kilby, well-known to Sara from past cases. His presence on the scene was both good and bad news. Good, in that he really, really liked her and would answer totally and truthfully any question she asked. Bad, in that he really, really liked her and was basically a pain in the ass who didn't hesitate to make inappropriate

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suggestions and offers in the mistaken belief that he was being romantic.

"Sara," Jake said, as she approached. "Meet Lt. Carl Dickey. He was first detective on the scene. Carl, Detective Sara Pezzini, my partner."

Dickey was a middle-aged black man with a round, sad face. Sara thought he was either a poor dresser or had recently lost a lot of weight. Though Dickey was more beefy than lean, his unfashionable brown suit hung on him like it belonged to his fatter brother. If Sara's weight-loss theory was correct, he still had a few more pounds to go.

"Pleasure," Dickey said. "Sorry for the circumstances."

Sara shrugged. "I'm used to it."

Dickey shook his head. "I'm not. Never will be."

Kilby came over to join them like an eager puppy, leaving the body bag to be carried away by the waiting EMT's.

"And you know Kilby, of course," Jake said sardonically.

"Hi, Sara," Kilby said eagerly. "Fancy meeting you in a place like this."

"Yeah," Sara said, glancing over the crime scene, her disinterest in him evident. "Fancy, all right."

"What you got for us, Kilby?" Jake asked.

"Strange case, all right. Probably not the place of death." He gestured at the ground. "There'd be blood all over if he'd been decapitated here. Only blood was on his clothes and body. Those were soaked, but maybe not as much as you'd expect in a beheading."

"So," Sara said, "he was killed elsewhere, then dumped here after his heart stopped pumping."

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"*Exactly*," Kilby said brightly, beaming at Sara as if she were his prize student. "But, dumped not too long after he was killed. Minutes, at most. Hell, the body was still warm when we got to it. Kind of surprised that there wasn't a trail, or anything. No blood, no footprints, nothing being dragged here. It's almost like he dropped here out of the sky or something."

Sara and Jake exchanged glances, but said nothing.

"Who found the body?" Sara asked.

"The classic anonymous informant," Dickey said. "Uniforms were on the scene in three minutes. As it happened, I was close by and arrived two minutes after the uniforms."

"Could the anonymous informant be the one who killed, moved, and dumped the body?" Sara asked.

Dickey shrugged. "Why not?"

"Interesting. Why the call reporting the body, then?"

"Killer wants the body found," Jake theorized. "He wants the world to know about this killing."

"He does?" Sara said. "That's a change. Why hide the identities of the first three vics and not this one?"

Jake shrugged. "He's getting careless."

"Or cocky. What was the vic's name again?"

"Philip Pierre-Pierre. How can you forget a name like that?" Jake checked his pocket notebook. "Apparently he owned a restaurant on Fulton Street."

"Cypress Hills? I just came from there," Sara said.

"You did?" Jake asked.

"Yeah. Met an informant. He's the one who gave me the names of the other vics."

"Other vics?" Dickey interrupted, finally able to get a word in. "What other vics?"

"A couple of possible victims of this so-called Machete

Murderer turned up earlier in Manhattan," Sara said. "Three to be exact. Two, at least, seem to have ties with Cypress Hills."

"That's news to me," Dickey said.

"Don't you ever watch TV?" Jake asked.

"Only sports," Dickey said morosely. "The news is too depressing."

"Can't argue with that."

"But I shouldn't have to get information like this through the TV," Dickey said doggedly.

"I just identified the first couple of victims," Sara said smoothly. She wasn't above spreading a little fudge to smooth things over. "I was just on my way to the precinct to let you guys know when I got the call from Jake about this new killing."

"Uh-huh," Dickey said, but Sara could tell from his eyes that he didn't believe her. She shrugged, to tell him she didn't particularly care.

Sara turned to Kilby. "This Pierre-Pierre was killed with a machete?"

"Well . . ." though clearly happy with Sara's attention, Kilby was too good a coroner to jump to conclusions. "Officially, all indications are yes. No broken bones. No stab marks from a smaller blade. No bullet wounds. Could conceivably been strangled, poisoned, bludgeoned, and then beheaded to confuse things. The autopsy will tell for sure. But, just for now, for something to go on, I'd say death was probably caused by decapitation by a heavy blade."

"Single blow?" Sara asked. The voices within were getting excited at Kilby's news. She had to concentrate to block them out.

Kilby nodded. "Yeah, but it wasn't clean. The blow cut

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through most of the neck, leaving the head attached to the body by a flap of skin and flesh. Then, it looks like the perp just ripped it away." He stopped. From the expression on his face Sara knew that he had more to say, but was uncertain if he should reveal anything further.

"What else?" she asked.

"Well, I . . . I shouldn't say. Not really certain." Kilby brightened, and smiled at Sara. "But, for you, sweetcheeks . . . There were marks around the stump of the vic's neck. Teeth marks."

Jake frowned. "You mean, like the killer was biting the vic's neck?"

Kilby shook his head. "No. More like he was sucking. Sucking at the stump."

Sara and Jake looked at each other. Dickey made a noise somewhere between sadness and disgust.

"My God," the detective said. "My God."

"Maybe that's what happened to the missing blood," Sara said. "Maybe he was killed right here after all."

"And someone slurped down a couple of gallons of blood?" Kilby asked.

Sara shrugged. "It's a possibility."

Kilby looked thoughtful.

"It's disgusting," he said. He smiled at Sara. "I like it."

"Here we are," Jake said. "Fulton Street, Cypress Hills."

"I was just here," Sara said, as they parked Jake's car in an open spot next to a fire hydrant.

"Canvassing the neighborhood for info on the other murders?" Jake asked.

"Something like that."

Jake looked at her suspiciously.

"Look," he said, "I know you've got your methods, and I know that sometimes they even work. But let's not forget we're partners. You're not holding out on me, are you?"

Sara forced a smile. She couldn't tell him about her trip to St. Casimir's. Even if the voices would have let her, and she didn't think they would. "Holding out on you? My partner? Nahhh.

"When I left the station house I couldn't sleep. Thought I'd do some checking on the 'net, and on a site devoted to New York City gang symbols. Found a reference to a gang called The Saturday Night Specials that used cross tattoos as a recognition sign and initiation symbol. Remember those crosses on the one floater's body?"

"Yeah," Jake said.

"Well, I was able to find someone who could identify the corpse from the tattoos. He was one Achille de Petion. Haven't been able to run a check on him yet, but I expect he'll be in the computer. My informant told me that an associate of his, Dr. Claudius Caradere, is also missing."

"And how'd you get this informant to be so talkative?" Jake asked.

Sara smiled. "You know what a winning personality I have. Oh, look." She changed the subject, gesturing at the restaurant before them. "This must be the place."

The sign over the door said PIERRE-PIERRE'S. Engraved in the glass window was the same name in an elegant flowing script with FINE FRENCH CUISINE below it. There was also a CLOSED sign in the window, and, indeed, the restaurant was dark and empty though most of the other businesses on the street were still open.

Jake put his nose up to the glass and looked in.

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"Seems like no one's about," he said. "Weird."

"Maybe Mr. Pierre-Pierre was having some financial difficulties," Sara said.

Jake shrugged. "Maybe the people next door might know something."

"Maybe they might."

The shop to the right of the restaurant was a bookstore called THE SERPENT AND THE RAINBOW. The store to the left was somewhat more mysterious. It seemed to be a souvenir or gift shop of some kind, called MAMBO MARIE'S NOTIONS, POTIONS, AND LOTIONS. Like many of the Fulton Street stores, both were still open though it was getting late.

Jake and Sara looked through the shop's front window. It was dimly lit inside by a mixture of low-wattage fluorescent, some pastel neon signs, and electric faux candles. Despite the less than brilliant lighting, both cops could see the tall, voluptuous black woman behind the counter with tight, low-riding jeans that exposed her pierced navel and svelte waist, and a form-fitting, low-cut T-shirt that was two sizes too small.

"I have a notion," Jake said. "Let's check this place out."

Sara looked at him. "Bookstore. Bimbo store. Not hard to figure which one you want to investigate."

Jake shrugged. "We'll get to the bookstore. This one looks like it has more possibilities."

Sara gave a wordless grunt as she followed her partner into the dimly lit shop that was also ripe with dozens of heavy, clashing scents, and cluttered to the point of claustrophobia. The aisles were narrow, the tables and shelves were piled with all sorts of strange and tacky merchandise, from fake plastic glow-in-the-dark skulls to sprays of chicken feathers dyed bright fluorescent colors,

to bank upon bank of glass-enclosed candles to arrays of perfume and incense, to bundles of what looked like suspiciously real chicken feet.

Jake went up to the counter where the girl was watching them closely. He flashed his badge. "You'd be Mambo Marie?"

"I'd be Juliette," the girl said. "This place is a franchise."

Her skin was a golden honey-brown, her eyes were dark and almond-shaped. She wore her hair in a retro Afro. Close-up, Sara, could see that she didn't wear a bra under her T-shirt, and, despite the size of her breasts, didn't need one. Jake seemed to realize that, too.

"Detective McCarthy," Jake said, smiling. Juliette smiled back.

After a moment Sara said, "I'm Detective Pezzini."

Juliette continued to smile at Jake, who eventually remembered to put his badge away.

"Can I help you, Detective?" Juliette asked. Somehow she managed to make her innocent question sound like an indecent offer.

"I hope so," Jake said. Sara realized that if they were going to get any information relevant to the case they were working, she'd have to take the lead.

"Do you know why Pierre-Pierre's is closed?" she asked.

"The restaurant next door?" Juliette spoke to Sara but continued to look at Jake. She leaned forward, putting her hands on the glass countertop in front of her, creating a deep valley between her large, round breasts. Jake looked at them as if he were gazing at the clue that would wrap up the case. "I hear the owner is having problems. I hear he's sick."

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"He's more than sick," Sara said. "He's dead."

Juliette looked at her for the first time. "That's too bad. He was a nice man."

"What can you tell us about him?"

Juliette leaned back languorously. She seemed as supple as a big, black cat, a fact obviously not lost on Jake. "He was a nice man. That's all I know."

"What kind of store is this?" Jake asked, finally managing to get a word in.

Juliette looked at him. It was as if, Sara thought, she herself wasn't even in the room.

"This is a voodoo store, honey. We sell candles to call the spirits, charms to soothe the savage breast." Juliette crossed her arms under her own, lifting and emphasizing. "Even Sir John the Conqueror root." She gestured down at the glass case in front of her. Among the rows of cheap silver-plated ear and toe rings were some small, shriveled brown things that looked like dolls parodying the shape of men. "Make you strong for love," she said, half-closing eyes that were glued on Jake. "But you don't look like you need Sir John, do you?"

"Not usually," Jake said.

Sara looked disgustedly at her partner. The bell on the front door chimed as someone else entered the store. The newcomer was a tall woman with a lean, boyish figure, pale skin, and fine, narrow, fox-like features. Her blonde hair, so light as to be almost white, was cut short and slicked back like a silent film star's. She moved with a sinuous litheness that spoke of a highly-conditioned athlete or martial artist. Her eyes had almost a physical impact when they met Sara's. Sara couldn't tell their color in the dim light, but there was strength in her gaze and a

promise, if they'd been man's eyes, of an extraordinary erotic appetite. Sara caught herself catching her breath as she swept past.

The newcomer looked at Juliette, and nodded almost imperceptibly. She went into a back room off the main body of the store. Jake didn't notice.

"I think we're done here," Sara said after a moment. "I'm going to check out the bookstore."

"Okay." Jake said, smiling at Juliette.

"You coming?"

"I'll catch up."

Men, Sara thought. She strode out of the shoppe and had almost reached the bookstore when Jake hurried up to her side. She glanced at him.

"That was useful," she said.

"I got her phone number," Jake said. "Just in case."

"In case?"

"In case we need to investigate her, uh, more closely."

Sara just looked at him and reached for the door handle. A bell jangled musically as Sara pushed the glass door open, Jake at her heels. They stepped inside and looked around what seemed to be the classic small-time independent bookstore. The lighting was pleasant. The bookshelves were from floor to ceiling and stuffed with books both new and used. A comfortable old rug cushioned the floor and comfortable old chairs were scattered about. Some of the chairs were occupied by customers thumbing through books and magazines, other customers were browsing the shelves.

"Hey, take a look at this," Jake said. Sara joined him where he stood before a bookcase and gestured at the shelf that was on eye-level.

"*Spirits of the Night*," Sara read. "*Strange Altars, The*

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Serpent and the Rainbow, Divine Horsemen, Written in Blood, Voodoo Fire in Haiti, Mythologie Vodou, Go Tell My Horse, Magic Island."

"What's with all this voodoo stuff?" Jake said. "Pretty freaky, huh?"

"Can I help you?" a voice asked in French-accented English.

They turned to see a young black man standing behind them. He was Sara's height, and slim, with short hair curled tight against his skull and large, dark eyes. His hands, Sara noticed, were large and well-kept with short, neat nails. He seemed to be regarding them with bland suspicion, as if they were tourists who'd been caught remarking on the quaintness of the local customs. Which, of course, they had been.

Sara pulled out her wallet, and flashed her equalizer, the badge, which gave them the upper hand in almost every social confrontation.

"I'm Detective Pezzini," she said. She nodded at Jake. "This is my partner, Detective McCarthy."

The man before them seemed unaffected by her revelation.

"Yes," he said coolly.

"You are?" Sara pressed.

"Paul Narcisse. This is my shop. Is there a problem?"

"Do you know Philip Pierre-Pierre, who owned the restaurant next door?" Jake asked.

Instantly, Paul Narcisse's eyes became hooded. "Owned?"

The voices in Sara's brain started to chatter. It seemed they didn't like Paul Narcisse. It seemed they were wary of him. Grateful for the warning, Sara nevertheless wished they would shut up so that she could concentrate.

She also wished that Jake wouldn't blunder through conversations like a bull in a china shop. She put her hand on Jake's forearm, stopping him from answering the question. "We're sorry, Mr. Narcisse. Did you know him? Was he a friend?"

Paul Narcisse nodded. "Yes. He is."

"He was killed earlier this evening. Murdered," Jake said baldly.

If Jake expected Paul Narcisse to gasp aloud, run away screaming, or make any other kind of incriminating gesture, he was disappointed. Paul Narcisse's gaze narrowed further and his expression hardened.

"Killed with a machete?" he asked.

"How'd you know that?" Jake asked quickly.

Paul Narcisse shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "He would not be the first from this street to die that way, would he?"

"No," Jake admitted.

"Mr. Narcisse—" Sara began.

"Call me Paul," he said. "Most do."

"Paul, then. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

He gestured toward the rear of the store. "I have an office in the back. Please—"

Paul Naricisse waited for the two policemen to precede him, and stopped to have a few words with a young woman who had been behind the counter, working the cash register.

"This way." He led them through a curtained doorway and down a short hallway, opened the door to his office and gestured to them to enter.

It was a small, comfortable room with an old wooden desk heaped high with paperwork, a recent model PC,

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near-shapeless old chairs, and an old, over-stuffed sofa along one wall. The Serpent and the Rainbow, Sara could see, was not exactly making money hand over fist.

Along another wall an amazing collection of artifacts rested on a wooden table that was set up like an altar. In the middle of the table a tree branch was braced against the wall. Carved, cleverly jointed and brightly painted wooden snakes climbed around it. Set up beside the limb were empty wine and rum bottles, some with white candles stuck in their open mouths. Dozens of earthenware pots and jugs jostled for space. A small bowl with a cluster of chicken eggs occupied a central place of honor, and the wall behind the altar was covered with framed religious lithographic portraits: a whole cast of Catholic saints.

Paul Narcisse took the seat behind the desk, watching as Sara and Jake took in the altar.

"Yes," he told them, "I am an adherent of voodoo, the religion of my native country. That is my shrine to Damballah, my personal *loa*."

"There a lot of that in this neighborhood?" Jake asked.

"A lot of voodoo?" Paul Narcisse asked. "Of course. Cypress Hills is home to many thousand Haitians, more than anywhere in the United States, except Florida. More Haitians live here than in most cities in Haiti."

"This Damballah dude," Jake pursued. "What's he all about?"

Paul Narcisse smiled. "You mean, does he encourage his worshipers to go around chopping off peoples' heads with a machete?"

Jake was unembarrassed. "For starters."

"Hardly," Paul Narcisse said. "Damballah is the cosmic

snake. The world was hatched from his egg. He is a *loa* of life, regeneration, and rebirth. Together with his wife Aida-Wedo, who is the rainbow, he rules the sky."

"*Loa*," Sara said, "what's that?"

"*Loa* are sacred spirits. Those on the right hand, like Damballah, Papa Legba, and Erzulie Freda, are the good spirits who help mankind. Those on the left are the *mal-facteur*, the dark *loa*. Erzulie je Rouge, Baron Samedi and his brothers, are those whom the *bokor*—the evil sorcerers—call upon."

"Yeah," Jake said. "Any of them have machetes?"

"Some," Paul Narcisse said with a smile. "Some don't need weapons. Their teeth and claws are potent enough."

There was a brief knock at the door, and it swung open.

"Hello, Paul," said the newcomer. "Clarisse told me you had visitors."

Paul Narcisse nodded. "Indeed. Come in, Father Baltazar. I'd like you to meet Detectives McCarthy and Pezzini."

"I've already had the pleasure of meeting one of your visitors," he said, nodding at Sara.

She looked at the newcomer with surprise. It was the handsome young priest from St. Casimir's. Seeing him in good light gave Sara an even more favorable impression. He was every bit as handsome as she'd thought he was. His hair was thick and black. He wore it combed back and long enough to fall to his shoulders like a thick mane. His face was pale, not with the pallor of ill health, but rather the purity of fresh ivory. His forehead was broad and unlined, his cheekbones high and prominent, his jaw strong and charmingly dimpled. His eyes were dark, almost black, and Sara could discern both compassion and wisdom in them, for all his comparative youth. He looked

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like a model portraying a saint. As Sara looked at him her pulse raced, but that might have been caused by the voices which had begun to stir in her brain when he'd first appeared.

"We should continue our little talk," Father Baltazar said to Sara, "whenever it would be convenient for you."

"Sure . . ." Sara said. Desperate to change the subject, she blurted, "Baltazar. That's an odd name."

The young priest smiled, showing a set of straight, white teeth. "Not where my family came from."

Sara flushed. "Of course."

McCarthy, not fearing to rush in, said, "Where's that?"

Father Baltazar turned his smile to Sara's partner. "Poland by way of Lithuania. It means 'Baal protect the king.' Somewhat ironic for the name of a Catholic priest, no?"

McCarthy shrugged. "I guess. So, Cypress Hills is a mixture of—what?—Haitian, Jamaican, Indian, and Lithuanian?"

Paul Narcisse nodded. "That's right. The Lithuanians came mostly at the turn of the century, the Indians after World War II. The Jamaicans in the 1960s, the Haitians last of all."

McCarthy smiled, as though he found this all very interesting. "And how do you folks all get along?"

Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar looked at each other. It was Narcisse who answered the detective's question. "We get along fine."

McCarthy smiled again. "Yeah. Until bodies started showing up without heads."

"That is not a question of race or ethnicity," Father Baltazar said firmly. "That is a question of good against evil."

As he spoke Sara almost staggered. The voices in her head had turned up the volume from a gentle background murmuring to a full-fledged roar. They were agreeing, it seemed, with the priest. He was telling the truth. This wasn't a simple gang-inspired conflict. Some aspect of it existed on a cosmic scale, which made it the provenience of the Witchblade.

McCarthy didn't say anything, but Father Baltazar obviously read the skeptical look on his face. "You don't believe me, Officer?"

"Well, this is the twenty-first century. I believe more in gangs and guns than I do in evil spirits."

Father Baltazar turned to Sara. "How about you?"

She couldn't look away from his eyes. They seemed to captivate her, draw her inside his own. The voices were yammering at her. She couldn't quite understand what they were saying. There was warning and approval mixed in their fragmentary messages. *Screw the voices*, she finally told herself. She couldn't let them make all her decisions for her.

"I—I have an open mind," she finally told the priest.

Priest and bookseller looked at each other, and seemed to come to some kind of silent decision.

"All right," Paul Narcisse said. "We shall take you at your word. We've been reluctant to take this matter to the police because we've felt, first, the police wouldn't believe us, and, second, couldn't help us if they did." He looked at Jake McCarthy. "There are some things the police are ill-equipped for, possibly precisely because this is the twenty-first century. But not all knowledge was born in this century, nor was all evil."

McCarthy frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

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Father Baltazar smiled. "You can see tonight, if you want."

Paul Narcisse smiled, too, and it made Sara uncomfortable. "You shall look upon the face of evil. And your guns will do you no good."

In Sara's mind the voices finally all spoke as one. And what they said was, "But we will. *We will!*"

CHAPTER FOUR

I don't know," Jake McCarthy said. "This isn't exactly my thing, but I wouldn't call it *evil*."

The detectives stood in a tight knot with Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar at the rear of Club Carrefour. It was packed with an audience that was going wild to the heavy, yet eerily melodious sounds of the Goth Rock band on the small raised stage at the end of the hall. The music was so loud that everyone had to lean towards Jake to hear his words, despite the fact that they were well in the club's rear.

Narcisse shook his head. "Not the band. Listen, and wait."

Sara had to agree with Jake. This music was not really her thing either. But there was something to it, some vital, original beat that she could feel in her heart which was throbbing almost in time to the music. And the voices in her head really dug it. They went silent as the band played. She could feel them absorbing the sound like it was energy, absorbing it and pulsing wordlessly in time. Odd that, but she couldn't see exactly how this was

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forwarding the investigation. She was tired. She didn't feel like clubbing, and she was regretting the impulse that had caused her and Jake to accept the priest's offer.

Still, the voices seemed to approve of their presence at the club, and while she was more than a little wary of them, she also knew that frequently it was worthwhile to follow their often-cryptic advice. Besides, she was more than willing to give Father Baltazar some slack and let him prove himself. Or, maybe, disprove himself.

She leaned forward and got Father Baltazar's attention by tugging on the sleeve of his cassock. She took her hand away quickly, not wanting to let it linger on his arm. "Who are they?" she asked.

"What?"

"The band. What's their name?"

"Oh. Mountains of Madness. A local group that's just made the national scene."

She nodded, and turned her attention fully to the group, as the male lead singer said, "I think you might all know this one—our first charting hit, 'Dreams in the Witch House.'"

Sara wasn't familiar with it, but almost everyone else in Club Carrefour roared ecstatically.

There were five musicians in the band. The lead singer was tall, broad shouldered, and long-legged. His black hair fell in a torrent around his shoulders. Sara was too far away to discern his facial features, but he was dressed all in black with leather boots and a long black duster that was probably way too hot for a crowded club on an evening that was as warm as mid-summer. His voice was strong and deep, and sang lyrics too complicated for Sara to follow, even if she'd been interested enough to try to understand them. Which she wasn't. She was more inter-

ested in gathering an overall impression of the band to see where they might fit in with the recent odd occurrences in Cypress Hills.

A pale-faced girl who also was wearing layers of black clothing played the keyboards and supplied counterpoint vocals. She, too, had long black hair, heavy dark eye make-up, and red, red lips. Her voice was light and soaring, perfectly complementing the lead singer's bass tones as they wove a complex set of lyrics around the eerie melody supplied by harpsichord and guitars.

The guitar and bass player couldn't have contrasted more with the other band members. Their pale hair was short and they were dressed simply in jeans and T-shirts, one bright orange and the other a vibrant yellow. They dashed frenetically around the stage, making faces at each other and the audience, cavorting where the singer and keyboarder were serious. They were underdressed by rock star standards and colorful by Goth standards. Sara couldn't be sure from a distance, but they looked like twins. They certainly resembled each other so closely that they had to be brothers.

The drummer, the final member of the band, was so far in the rear of the stage that Sara couldn't really see him. He was black, and lost in the darkness among his drumset. It seemed as if he was someone who didn't seek out the limelight.

Sara could catch only the barest essence of "Dreams in the Witch House." It was evocative of lost dreams and forgotten hope, of spirituality in a mechanistic age. When it was over the lead singer raised his hands, bowed deeply, and left the stage. The rest of the band followed him as the crowd went nuts.

"Let's go," Paul Narcisse said.

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Though Sara and Jake stood within a couple feet of him, they could barely hear him for the delirious crowd noise. They followed him and Father Baltazar as they made their way toward the stage. When they reached the curtained door heading to the wings, a big bald black dude with biceps the size of baby heads blocked them for a moment, then obviously recognized either Paul Narcisse or Father Baltazar, or both, and let them pass.

"You're better than a backstage pass," Jake said as they went past the curtain.

Father Baltazar smiled. "We're not unknown in the community."

As they went backstage the band was retaking the stage for an encore. A short, balding man in a gray rumpled suit was standing among the light and sound crew. Paul Narcisse went to him.

"Kristoforas—good to see you again, my brother."

The man turned a harried face to them, and relaxed somewhat as he recognized Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar. He was young, not much—if any—older than Sara, but was prematurely balding, prematurely chubby, and his face had what seemed to be a perpetually worried expression. But he did seem genuinely glad to see Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar, though he cast a momentary suspicious glance in the direction of Sara and Jake.

Paul Narcisse turned to the cops and gestured at the man he'd just greeted. "Detectives Pezzini and McCarthy, this is Kristoforas Gervelis. He manages The Mountains of Madness. His brother, Aleksandras, is the lead singer."

The worry was suddenly back in Kristoforas' eyes. "Detectives? They're police?"

Jake looked at Sara, his eyebrow quirked significantly, but Father Baltazar laughed. "Relax, old friend. Don't

worry so much. We were just showing the detectives around the neighborhood, and what better place to take them than the triumphant return of Mountains of Madness to Cypress Hills?"

Meanwhile, on stage, the band had settled back behind their instruments, and Aleksandras was shouting, "Thank you! Thank you, my friends! We're so happy to come home for tonight's benefit, hosted by our first and greatest patron, Mister Guillaume Sam!"

Aleksandras pointed to the opposite stage wing and a large black man wearing a silk Armani suit strolled out onto the stage to take a bow. He was huge, with great shoulders, a wide, deep chest and an expansive gut. He wore dark sunglasses that hid his eyes. A three-inch-long gold crucifix dangled from his left ear. He waved at the crowd, and they responded vociferously, as if most knew him. Then he turned, bowed politely to the band, and made his way back into the darkness of the wings.

As Aleksandras gestured and the band swung into their encore, Sara suddenly froze, her gaze on Guillaume Sam. She almost didn't need the confirmation of the twittering voices in her head. She could tell from his arrogant posture, from the self-satisfied set of his mouth. He was the one. He was the evil that Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar had brought them to see.

As the band began to play their signature song, "Rats in the Walls," he looked up across the back of the stage and caught Sara in his gaze. The voices in her head bleated with sudden urgent warning, and, almost unheard of from them, fear.

"—power, awful power—"

"—the one to watch—"

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“—the blade, call upon the blade!”

For a moment Sara was almost unable to fight them down. For a moment her gaze darkened, her will weakened, and she could feel the constricting bands of cold metal began to appear upon her flesh, shredding the fabric of her jeans on her upper right thigh. But she clenched her teeth and drove the Witchblade back, telling herself, telling the voices, “No! Now is not the time!”

For once they obeyed, and the Witchblade flickered and subsided. She could only hope that no one would notice her ruined jeans, or if they did, just think them fashionable.

But as her eyes came back into focus, she found herself still staring across the back of the stage. As The Mountains of Madness rocked into “Rats in the Wall” she saw Guillaume Sam looking at her with unconcealed interest. And there was something, some dark thing sitting crouched on his shoulder, unseeable in the dim light, save for two glaring red eyes.

She broke Sam’s gaze with a conscious effort, and turned her head to see Father Baltazar looking steadily at her with concern, wonder, and, yes, even a little suspicion in his eyes.

It took only a simple request from Paul Narcisse to get them all invited to the post concert party on the second floor of the club, which consisted of Guillaume Sam’s office and, as Kristoforas imprecisely put it, “private function space.” Club Carrefour’s second floor was a bit more intimate and furnished a lot fancier. The bar was almost as big as in the club downstairs, but was much more ornate, with a marble top over a teak and mahogany

base, a huge mirror dating to a previous century or two, and bottles of liquor, wine, and brandy that were also aged and rather more exotic than those found downstairs.

To Sara's eyes there seemed an inordinate amount of religious iconography about the place. Crosses, saintly icons, and the like festooned the bar, the walls, and even the metal candleholders on the tables adjacent to the dance floor. Music rumbled on a stereo system that sounded almost as good as the real thing. One end wall was dominated by a large throne-like chair that was set atop a three-step dais.

As Sara and the others entered the hall the throne was empty, though there were already several dozen people dancing, collecting drinks at the bar, or attacking the buffet laid out on a series of long tables set against one of the long walls of the rectangular room.

McCarthy spotted the spread, said a hasty "Excuse me," and headed for the food at a run. Clearly, he hadn't been to the donut shop lately.

"Can I get you a drink, Ms. Pezzini?" Kristoforas asked with genuine solicitude.

"A soft drink," Sara replied. "On duty and all that. And please, call me Sara."

Kristoforas smiled briefly, a smile that was extinguished as the Mountains of Madness guitar and bass players approached.

"Hey," one of them said.

Close up, Sara could see that they were indeed twins. They were about Sara's height and probably not much more than Sara's weight. Skinny would be an accurate description of their build, and not quite endearingly ugly an accurate description of their features. Their eye color was as non-committal as their hair, gray-green and

brown-blond. Their front teeth protruded, their chins were almost non-existent.

"Hey," the other one said.

"We're in the band," the first said.

"We're brothers," the second said.

"I'm Roger Stern."

"I'm Jerry Stern."

They got on either side of Sara and each put an arm around her waist.

"Want to be the filling in a Stern sandwich?" they asked in unison.

"Jesus, Jerry, and you, too, Roger," Kristoforas said, "behave for once. This is Sara Pezzini. *Detective Sara Pezzini, N.Y.C. Police Department.*"

"Wow," Roger said.

"Cool," Jerry said.

They looked at each other.

"I don't think I've ever done a cop before," Roger said.

"I *know* I haven't," Jerry said.

"Rog—Jer—" Kristoforas said in warning tones.

Sara began to understand why he had a perpetually harried look. She stepped back out of their grasp.

"Don't worry," she said. "I can take care of myself. I'm armed, after all."

"Wow," Jerry said.

"Cool," Roger said. "Can we see your gun?"

"Later." Sara looked at Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar, who had been bemusedly watching the exchange. "Right now I'd like to meet the rest of the band."

"Sounds like a good idea," Paul Narcisse said. He took Sara's arm and guided her away. "Come along."

Sara glanced at the brothers as they ambled off to the bar with Kristoforas.

"Are they for real?" she asked.

"Oh yes," Paul Narcisse said. "Pretty much harmless though. Shameless hedonists, but they can play. Alek is the only one who's ever been able to keep them in line for more than a couple days at a time. I'm not sure how he does it, but he does have a somewhat dominating personality." They stopped at the buffet table, where the lead singer of Mountain's of Madness was helping himself to some chopped liver from the statue shaped into the Angel of Death. "Right, Alek?"

Alek turned around slowly, smiling. He was a tall man, perhaps six-two, and the wild hair and dark clothes and leather boots made him loom even larger. His pale face was untouched by the usual Gothic make-up. His eyes were dark like Father Baltazar's, but they had a different quality to them that made him seem harder, tougher than the priest's. He was as handsome and impressive as a man could be. When he spoke, his deep, rich voice only added to his aura of power and dominance.

"Paul," he said, smiling. "Great to see you. I'm glad you made it to the benefit."

He turned toward Sara and their eyes met. His smile widened. It was difficult to say which was more attractive, his eyes or his smile. She felt herself smile back automatically, and caught herself, angry at her unthinking response. Sure, he was a handsome, charismatic guy with great eyes, a great smile, and a great voice, but she had to watch herself. This was developing into the weirdest case she'd run across in a very weird career. She had to maintain her distance from all those involved, as well as her hard-edged perspective.

"Hello." His voice oozed charm, but it was a natural, al-

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most unconscious ooze. He wasn't trying to charm her. He just did. "I'm Aleksandras Gervelis. Please, call me Alek."

"I'm Detective Sara Pezzini," she said, her voice harder, more formal than she intended it to be. "You can call me Detective Pezzini."

Damn! Sara said to herself. She sounded like she had a stick up her butt. But something was making her keep her distance from Gervelis: Were the voices, though quiet, perhaps exerting a more subtle control over her mind?

"Certainly, Detective Pezzini," another voice said, interrupting her thought. "Can I ask why the New York City Police Department sees fit to make its presence felt at my little get-together?"

Sara turned toward the new speaker, and caught her breath. The voices in her head suddenly chattered like mad mice, offering a mixture of challenge tinged with fear, which was most unusual for them. Normally they feared nothing.

It was Guillaume Sam. He loomed taller than Alek Gervelis, and bulked much larger. His face was bland and expressionless, though Sara could well believe that his eyes could burn with fire and emotion if he'd let them. His suit was impeccable, his large, powerful hands faultlessly manicured. The beady-eyed creature still sat on his shoulder, its long, naked tail looped around his neck, great bucked teeth gleaming in its pointed muzzle.

"Excuse me," Sara said, "but is that a rat?"

Guillaume Sam laughed. It was deeply musical and seemed genuine.

"You are not much of a naturalist, Detective. This is Baka, my pet possum."

"That's . . . unusual . . ." Sara said.

"Much about Guillaume Sam is out of the ordinary," Paul Narcisse said.

Guillaume Sam turned his eyes upon the bookstore owner and for a moment he let the power in his gaze shine through. "Ah, Paul, always good to see you. I trust you're enjoying yourself."

Paul Narcisse bowed. "As you say, monsieur."

A palpable tension was in the air, broken when Kris Gervelis hustled up to the group with the drink he had promised Sara. He bumbled forward and there was a moment's confusion as if he realized he was breaking up something, but not sure what, then Guillaume Sam excused himself, saying he had other guests to attend to. The female member of Mountains joined them an instant later. Kristoforas introduced her as Magdalena Konsavage. Like the Gervelis brothers, she was a member of the Cypress Hills Lithuanian community. She and Sara chatted amiably for a few minutes. Alek asked if she wanted to dance, but Sara made her excuses to go hunt down her partner.

She was wary of Alek, whether it was the voices subtly warning her or whether she was subtly warning herself she couldn't say. She also felt that it'd be more useful if she drifted and mingled. So she did.

The results were interesting if not conclusive. She wandered through the crowd, collecting impressions and what information she could. Guillaume Sam was now esconced on his throne-like chair, drinking rum like it was water, Baka sitting on his shoulder and observing everything far too intently. She passed Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar, who seemed to be keeping their eyes out for her, and also her partner, who seemed more interested in the food and the females present than police business.

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She ducked the Stern brothers, who were drinking up a storm and eating and chatting up everything in a dress.

At one point she noticed they were with someone who seemed familiar, so she let the eddies and swirls of the crowd's tidal flow deposit her close behind them where she could watch and listen unobserved.

"Hey," Rog—or maybe it was Jer—was saying, "how'd you like to be the filling in a Stern sandwich?"

They were standing with their arms around a woman's waist, each looking a little worse for wear from the ever-present drinks in their hands. This woman was as tall as Sara, though slimmer. Her short, blonde hair was slicked back and she was wearing masculine evening dress, an elegant black tuxedo and tails, as if she'd escaped from a Fred Astaire movie. It took a moment, but Sara recognized her as the woman who'd come into the notions and lotions store earlier that evening. She was elegantly seductive, and, as Sara watched, left the ballroom arm in arm in arm with the twins.

It was, Sara thought, all a mystery. Unfortunately, she wasn't Sherlock Holmes. Jake wasn't even Dr. Watson. But she'd figure it all out in the end, somehow. In the meantime, she realized that she'd been awake for over thirty-six hours, and was running on empty.

She looked around the room to track down Jake. Finally she spotted him and Magdalena Konsavage engaged in what seemed to be earnest conversation. When she made her way over to them she heard them arguing the merits of the Beach Boys versus Nick Cave and the Bad Seed. Jake wasn't winning, but was obviously willing to give the discussion the good old college try. He paid Sara minimal attention as she said her goodnights.

Before she left the ballroom she hunted down Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar.

"Thanks for an interesting evening," she told the pair.

"Is your mind still open?" Father Baltazar asked.

Sara shrugged. "Yeah, but I don't want it so open that my brain will fall out. Still..."

"Think about what you've seen tonight. We'll talk later."

"That's a promise," Sara said. "Right now, though, I need some sleep."

Father Baltazar nodded.

"Pleasant dreams, Detective," he wished, or perhaps predicted, for her.

But, unfortunately, he was wrong.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sara fell into the bed as if it were the welcoming arms of a long-sought, sorely-missed lover. Her head hit the pillow, her eyes closed. For once it seemed that the voices were as tired as she was. At any rate they didn't bother her with unnecessary chatter as she reviewed the day's events like she always did when she was on a case. Sometimes as she approached the walls of sleep her subconscious gave her insights that her wide-awake mind missed. Sometimes, she even remembered those insights upon awakening.

Four bodies were now laid at the hands of the Machete Murderer. One, found in a Manhattan Dumpster minus hands and head, was still unidentified. Two had washed up on the Manhattan side of the East River, also minus heads and hands. Also with no I.D., but tentatively identified as Haitians living in Cypress Hills. One had been a doctor, perhaps a respected citizen, the other a not-so-respected gang member. Both probably had been killed if not together, then at about the same time. Finally, one found in an alley, in the Cypress Hills neighborhood itself. No head, but identified by cards found in his wallet.

WITCHBLADE

The differences in the last killing bothered Sara. It seemed as if the killer really wanted to hide the identities of the first three victims, but could care less about the fourth. Assuming, of course, that the murderer took Pierre-Pierre's head for some arcane purpose of his own. Perhaps there was a reason for the decreasing attempts at secrecy. Or perhaps the killer was getting a little more out of control with each slaying. Maybe the Machete Murderer was feeling more invincible after each murder, more contemptuous of the police.

If that was the case, he would get caught sooner than later. The killer would get sloppier and sloppier and make a critical mistake. At least, Sara fervently hoped that it would be sooner than later.

In the meantime . . . meantime . . . her mind conjured up a pair of eyes, brown and soulful. Father Baltazar looked at her with kindness and understanding. She realized that she was attracted to him . . . but he was a priest. Untouchable. Vowed to celibacy. Not like Alek Gervelis. His eyes held understanding, too, understanding of what she wanted, what she needed. They were dark, too, brown . . . no . . . red . . . Red glaring pinpricks that burned with a feverish heat.

Sara sat up, startled. She was sitting on a thick grassy sward, a clearing in a luxuriant jungle lit only by the light of the full moon. She was wearing the short silken chemise she'd worn to bed, and could feel warm breezes whisper about her face, her bare shoulders, and long, lean legs. Vines entwined about the trees surrounding the clearing and night-blooming flowers were everywhere. They perfumed the warm, caressing breezes with their heady musk.

"Welcome to Guinee, *blanc*," a voice said.

Sara stood slowly. The voice was soft and pleasingly

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feminine. Sara couldn't fear it. In fact, she felt more at peace than she had for months. It took a moment before she realized the voices in her head were utterly silent. It was as if they'd vanished. She searched for them among the corridors of her mind, but if they were still present they were hiding. That seemed good enough for now.

Sara turned to see a beautiful black woman who had thick, wavy hair that fell to her waist. She wore heavy eye make-up: mascara and eye-shadow, and probably false eyelashes as well because no natural lashes could be so luxuriantly long. She had large hooped earrings and a shiny necklace of silver and gold, as well as three bands on the ring-finger of her left hand. A crimson and gold orchid was enmeshed in her hair behind her right ear. Her dress was long and flowing with rather more flounces and of a costlier fabric than an ordinary peasant's shift. She looked like a goddess.

"Guinee?" Sara repeated. "Where is that?"

The woman gestured around herself.

"Guinee is here, where you are. More importantly," she said, "you should ask *what* is Guinee?"

Sara smiled. "All right. What is Guinee?"

The woman smiled a smile that was the definition of charming. "It is the dream-home of the voodoun *loa*, the spirits of voudon."

"Are you a *loa*?"

"I am Erzulie Freda Dahomey, patroness of love and lost dreams. Someone has asked that I watch over you. Come, *blanc*, walk with me, and we shall talk."

Erzulie gestured and Sara fell in step with her as they went down a path Sara hadn't noticed before, leading out of the clearing.

"Who set you to watch over me?" Sara asked.

"Ahhh," Erzulie said. "That is the mystery, is it not? Who are your friends, who are your enemies?"

"Can't you tell me?" Sara asked.

On a branch above them there was a sudden stirring where moments before there had been only silent darkness. A black shadow leapt down to the ground, and Sara started as she realized that a leopard had landed right next to them. She drew back in fear and surprise, but Erzulie didn't seem to notice her reaction. She simply put her hand out and the leopard slunk down low, as if bowing, then licked her hand with his long, raspy tongue.

"Your enemy," Erzulie said, scratching the leopard on top of its sleek head, "is Guillaume Sam. You know that, even if you don't quite believe it. He is a *malfacteur*, a person of the worst sort. He never sacrifices to me, but to my sister Erzulie je Rouge—someone, believe me, you never want to meet. Baron Samedi is his patron."

The leopard joined them as they walked down the trail, pacing along calmly by Erzulie's side.

"Samedi?" Sara asked. "Who's he?"

"He is the head of the Guede Family," Erzulie told her. "Baron Saturday. The *loa* of Death, Guardian of the Cemetery, and Protector of Sorcerers. He is very powerful. Though you seem to have your own odd... abilities... you would never be able to defeat him."

"Defeat him?" Sara said. "I don't want to have anything to do with him. I just want to catch a murderer. I just want to be—"

Sara abruptly shut up. She was about to say: *I just want to be normal again. I'm sick of these voices whispering in my head. I just want to be a cop, go to work, catch the bad guys. Maybe meet somebody someday and fall in love . . .*

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Erzulie laughed. "Yes, *ma petit*, you do not want much, do you? Still—" She shrugged. "People have asked for more than you do. You are not unreasonable."

A white dove fluttered down from the branches of one of the trees over-arching the trail and landed on Erzulie's shoulder. Erzulie put a soft hand on the bird's back, caressing it.

"I must be going. Be sure to thank the *houngan* for his sacrifice to me, in your name. Think of me sometime. I cannot fight your battles. It is not our way to contend against each other. But I will give you what information I can. For now, a final gift: I am not the only *loa* who knows you walk in Guinee tonight. Beware Bakula-baka."

Sara looked at her, confused. "*Houngan?* Sacrifice? What are you talking about?"

But Erzulie and her leopard were only broken spirals of mist, shimmering on the hot night breeze.

"What's a Bakula-baka?"

"Not what, foolish *blanc!* Who!"

Sara whirled at the unexpected voice coming from behind her to face something out of a madman's nightmare. It was a huge dark figure, taller than Sara, broader by far. It was human-shaped, but could hardly have been alive. One of his eyes was missing. The empty socket was dark as the mouth to hell. Half of his face was exposed skull, skin and flesh stripped away to the white bone underneath. He was clothed in torn, filthy rags, and Sara could see that other parts of his body were missing flesh as well. White bone gleamed here and there as he moved toward her. He dragged several lengths of thick chain, as if he had been tied down but had burst his bonds. As he approached Sara smelled him on the night breeze. She gagged at the waves of noxious corruption that came off

him in waves. He smelled like a recently opened grave. He smelled of death and corruption and black hatred, and in his right hand, half flesh, half naked bone, he carried a machete.

"I am the least of Samedi's brothers," Bakula-baka snarled. "If you dare to oppose him, you must face me first."

The part of Sara's mind that wasn't cringing in fear wondered how he could speak so clearly with a mouth that was half naked teeth and bone, but she quickly realized this wasn't the time to worry about such petty things. Bakula-baka was bearing down on her like a riptide. She could see dried blood caked on his machete blade. She thought she knew where the blood had come from.

The Machete Murderer had taken the lives of four men, but now, she thought, he faced the wielder of the Witchblade. She held her right hand out pointing at the creature, and called silently, imperiously, for the mystic artifact to appear, to sheath her in its invincible armor, to put the razor sharp blade in her hand or blast the charging *loa* with its sphere of deadly fire.

She called upon it, but it did not come. The voices remained silent in her head.

She stood there a moment, stunned, her mind blank. She gestured again, but nothing happened.

"Jesus!" the word sprung from her lips, prayer or curse she didn't know, and the thing was upon her.

Sara took a deep breath, choking on the creature's charnal house stench as he loomed above her, machete starting the downward sweep of a death blow, when her subconscious, or perhaps her instinct to live, made her move her feet, twist, and duck away. Bakula-baka's machete just missed her. She felt the wind of its passing, heard the crea-

ture grunt as the force of the blow buried the blade of the machete in the dark jungle soil at their feet.

The voices are gone, Sara thought, and so is the Witchblade.

It had refused to come to her before, she thought, but this was not the time for it to be sulky. She knew full well that wherever this place was, she could die here. Permanently. And without help, having to face Bakula-baka bare-handed, her death seemed pretty likely.

She sprinted down the path, trying to put some distance between herself and the horrid creature, looking for a weapon, a way out, anything she could turn to her advantage. The *loa* followed with thundering footsteps. Once she risked a glance backward and to her horror saw that despite his size and awful bulk, he was fast on his feet. He was catching up to her. She was losing the distance she'd put between them when he paused to wrench his blade from the ground.

He was charging like a deadly tsunami. She could smell his awful stench get stronger and stronger. The flesh between her shoulder blades crawled as she imagined the terrible pain of the machete biting into her back, perhaps cutting through her neck. Bakula-baka growled an inarticulate cry of hate and bloodlust and Sara, heart bursting, tried to put on more speed.

But she couldn't.

Crying out in frustration, she decided to turn and throw herself upon her foe and hope for a miracle, and suddenly there was an imperious ringing sound and she sat up in her bed, drenched in sweat, the Witchblade blossoming around her body as she became a flower enshrouded in thorns.

Her chemise ripped to shreds. The metallic armor of

the Witchblade cupped her soft flesh in its hard, cold grasp as she gasped for breath. The imperious ringing continued to shrill in her ear. She took two, long shuddering breaths, and reached for the phone that sat on the night table by the side of her bed.

"Hello?" she gasped.

There was a momentary silence, then a familiar voice came over the line.

"Sara?"

It was Jake.

"Yeah, what?" she shuddered out.

"I, uh, you, uh, alone?"

"Of course," she said sharply. And she was. The Witchblade vanished, leaving the shreds of her chemise hanging on her like it had suffered the death of a thousand cuts. "What do you mean?"

"Well, uh," Jake said, "you sound all out of breath and all. Like you've been running a marathon. Or something."

Sara lay backward. Her pillow was soaked with sweat.

"You woke me out of a dream," she said. She took a long breath, calming her shuddering lungs. "It was a nightmare." It was, Sara thought, more than that. It was her death. "Thanks."

"Sure. No problem."

Sara closed her eyes. She didn't want to think about what had just happened. She wanted to put it away, and, maybe examine it more closely when the sun was shining, when the stench of Bakula-baka was gone from her nostrils. It still lingered there, more than a mere memory. Meaning, perhaps, that she'd just experienced more than a mere dream . . .

"So what's up?" she asked her partner.

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"Thought you'd want to know first thing," Jake said. "The first vic's been ID'ed."

"And?" Sara prompted.

"His name was Tom Jackson. He was an agent for the Immigration and Naturalization Service—"

"Working out of Cypress Hills," Sara interrupted.

She could almost see Jake nod his blond surfer-boy head.

"That's right," he said. "His office was in Manhattan, but the region he was in charge of included Cypress Hills."

It was a nice late September day, warm, slightly breezy. The Mets were in first place. The city was in a good mood, but Sara wasn't. There was too much on her mind. The case of the Machete Murderer was too hard to fathom, just too damn weird. And now she had to visit the morgue.

That place always put her in a bad mood, and when she was in a bad mood to begin with it was really a downer. It was never warm enough down there in the basement and the air was always dank. Kilby assured her this wasn't so. They had to keep the humidity low because of—as he put it—their clients. But it always felt clammy on Sara's skin. The smell didn't help any, either. It was always antiseptic but not *fresh*. There were undertones to the morgue's odor that Sara didn't like. No matter how hard they scrubbed, they couldn't rid the place of its aura of loss, sadness, and incipient decay.

Plus, Kilby was always so damned cheerful. He grinned like a demented cherub. Today was no different as Sara came in, still rather shook up by her experience of the night before.

WITCHBLADE

"Hello, Detective," Kilby said, bustling up to her, white lab coat rustling, clipboard clasped to his chest like a shield.

"Jake said you had some info on the vic from the dumpster."

"Right-o. Come this way."

On the best of days, the morgue was a downer. This wasn't even close to the best of days.

"I don't want the tour," Sara said. "Just the information."

"Right-o," Kilby said in the same happy tone, incapable of taking offense. He looked at Sara with the eyes of a devoted puppydog, and Sara sighed. "Here we go."

He handed Sara the clipboard. She scanned the form on top.

Thomas Clayton Jackson. 38. Caucasian. Divorced. Two children in the custody of his ex-wife, Mildred Jackson, Forrest City, Queens. Death by physical trauma (decapitation). Employed by Immigration and Nationalization Services, Manhattan branch.

"I picked his name out of missing persons," Kilby said proudly, "and ID'ed him from an old football injury. Compound fracture of the left tibia."

Sara glanced at him.

"Good work," she said, and he practically wagged his tail.

"Everything else seemed to fit, so we had the wife come down and ID the, uh, body. It's him, all right. No doubt about it."

"Donuts, anyone?" Jake appeared with a grease-stained paper bag and a couple of cups of coffee.

"Any cream-filled?" Kilby asked.

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Sara sighed. "Try not to be so stereotypical, Jake. Donuts. Would it hurt to eat healthy for a change? How can I maintain my figure on a diet of sugar and grease?"

"It looks great to me!" Kilby said gallantly.

"Hmmm," she said, non-committally, but she did take one of the plastic cups of coffee as Jake and Kilby fought over the cream-filled donuts.

"The problem," she said, sipping the cold brew, "is that we have almost too much to look at, but no leads leading anywhere in particular."

"Let's split 'em up," Jake said around a mouthful of his second donut, "and run 'em down. I'll take the restaurant guy—"

"Uh-uh. I know why you want to take the restaurant guy. Juliette lurks nearby. *I'll* take the restaurant guy, the doctor, and the gangbangers. They're clearly all connected. Maybe. You check out the details on this I.N.S. guy."

Jake sniffed. "And I know why you want to go back to Cypress Hills. I saw the way you looked at that priest."

"What?" Sara and Kilby said simultaneously.

Kilby looked at her with hurt in his eyes.

"A priest?" he said.

He sounded disappointed as well as hurt.

Sara made a sound of annoyance. "God, it's nothing like that."

Jake and Kilby looked at each other and nodded.

"Sure," Jake said.

"Is that all you guys think about? Yes, there are some questions I'd like to ask him—questions about the case."

Jake and Kilby exchanged looks again.

"Of course," Kilby said. "Whatever you say."

WITCHBLADE

Men, Sara thought, as she stormed out of the morgue. Outside, it was warm and sunny. Inside, she was cold and shivering. The voices chuckled quietly in the back of her mind.

St. Casimir's rectory was located behind the church, nestled in a small pocket-like depression. It was cottage-sized, from the outside appearing to be no more than a couple of small rooms, and of the same general age and dilapidation as the church.

A looping gravel path ran from the front of the church to the rectory. As Sara went along the walkway she passed a figure going the opposite way, as if from the rectory itself, which Sara could just see around the bulk of the old church. She kept walking after only the barest glance at the pedestrian who in turn looked at her disinterestedly and kept going in his own direction.

Sara took a few further steps around a loop in the path and stopped. She'd recognized the figure. Or thought she had. It was the woman she'd seen first in the potions shop and later at Club Carrefour. The same facial features, the same lean build, the same slicked-down hair. Except this person was a man. Or at least he'd had a distinct pencil-thin mustache on his upper lip. Maybe she was mistaken. When their eyes had met briefly there'd been no recogni-

tion in his, as if he'd never seen Sara before. And she'd gotten only a glimpse of his face as they passed on the path. But she was a trained observer with a quick mind and she was pretty sure of what she'd seen. Indecision usually wasn't one of her problems.

She stood in the curve of the pathway for a moment, hidden from his view in case he happened to glance back. Her cop instincts were vibrating like a struck gong. His look-alike was connected somehow to Guillaume Sam. He probably was as well. He'd had a furtive air about him, an aura difficult for a civilian to pick up, but quite readable for a cop who dealt with dissembling on a daily basis. He was possibly, if not probably, up to no good.

As Sara saw it, she had two choices. Check where he'd been. Follow him to where he was going. She hesitated, torn. If Father Baltazar was involved in a struggle against Guillaume Sam, he could be lying hurt—or worse—in his rectory even as she stood there, desperately thinking. On the other hand, the blond guy hadn't been carrying a blood-soaked machete, and had looked perfectly cool and composed as they'd passed on the path. There were people in the world capable of whacking somebody's head off and then sitting down next to you a couple minutes later at McDonalds and calmly eating a double cheeseburger. But the Machete Murderer seemed to be more of a maniac gore-splattering and blood-sucking type. You'd expect him to be at least a little disheveled after lopping somebody's head off. Besides, he hadn't looked anything like Bakula-baka. Of course, the creature might not have same physical manifestation on Earth as he had on Guinea.

Damn, Sara thought. There were too many if's to con-

sider in this case. There were too many things out of the realm of ordinary experience. Give me a plain old murder for hire any day.

Sara made up her mind, but realized she didn't have to leave Father Baltazar hanging, either. She got out her cell phone and punched Jake's number on the speed-dial. He answered immediately with his laconic, " 'Ello."

"Jake—Sara."

"Sara, hey, wait until you hear what I found about this Jackson guy—"

"No time," she said tersely when she could break into his excited exclamation. "I'm on to something—but I need you to check on something else for me."

"Sure." Jake could be terse if he had to.

"Come on down to St. Casimir's. Immediately. Make sure Father Baltazar's okay."

"Why wouldn't he be?"

"Someone's been lurking around the rectory. Looks like a double of that blonde chick with the slicked-back hair we saw at Carrefour's. You remember?"

"Sure. She went off with those Stern dudes. Man, what—"

"Yeah, well, never mind. This one looks like her brother. I suppose. Just hustle on down and check on the Father."

"Okay." Jake was silent for a moment. "You be careful."

"I will." Sara peeked around the corner. Her quarry had reached Fulton Street. He was, in fact, crossing the street and heading deeper into the residential part of Cypress Hills. "The suspect is crossing Fulton Street, heading north. I'm after him."

"Check in early and often."

"Will do."

Sara pocketed her phone and started off down the path at a brisk walk.

Tailing a quarry in the city is fairly easy as long as you're observant and there're plenty of pedestrians between you and the target. Sara was and there were. He moved at a good clip himself, as if he had places to go and things to do, but wasn't a fanatic about it. Sara stayed within forty feet of him, slipping between the knots of pedestrians like an angelfish in a school of mullet. It helped that he didn't look around, didn't window shop, didn't glance at birds, or flowers, or pretty girls as he went down the street.

For the first couple of blocks north of Fulton the pedestrian traffic was fairly thick, but it began to thin out as they got away from the commercial thoroughfare and deeper into the residential part of the community.

Even among the rows of town homes, though, there were plenty of people hanging out on the sidewalks. The neighborhood seemed to be predominantly Lithuanian. It had the look of an old settlement, not rich but moderately comfortable, relatively well taken care of. Kids played on the streets, old people hung out on the stoops or ambled up and down the sidewalks, gossiping with friends and long-time neighbors. Sara sauntered on, trying to look as much as possible as if she belonged there. It wasn't too difficult.

She followed her target for a good twenty minutes as he made his way north on the meandering streets. This was an old part of the city, constructed when growth had been more organic and followed the natural patterns of local geography. The streets twisted like cowpaths. Trees

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

that were more than a century old grew in sidewalk cutouts. As they went further north, the aspect of the community changed from urban to village-like. The houses were set on bigger plots of land, with wooden, single-family dwellings predominating.

The landscape changed again, taking on a relatively rural aspect as Sara's quarry made a sharp turn into what seemed to be a fenced-in park, going through an open arched metal gateway.

Sara followed him at a distance, even more carefully, as there were no other pedestrians around the park entrance.

Only it wasn't a park, she quickly discovered. It was a cemetery.

A bronze historical plaque on the wrought-iron barred gate provided the snippet of information that the Cypress Hills National Cemetery was the only national cemetery located in New York City. Sara wasn't sure of what exactly a national cemetery was, but apparently it had something to do with (as the plaque said) the burial of Union soldiers from a nearby military hospital. The cemetery had been opened in 1848 and was used extensively during the Civil War, but there hadn't been any burials there for almost fifty years. From Sara's observation, it was clear that the abandoned grounds had gone wild.

Though it was peaceful and quiet, Sara's cop mind couldn't help but notice that the cemetery's overgrown state offered numerous places of concealment and almost unlimited opportunities for ambush. She watched as her quarry slipped between two wildly overgrown rhododendrons that towered fifteen feet in the sky, choking what apparently was a path that had once gone between them.

She hesitated.

This isn't too smart, she told herself.

"What are you afraid of?" a voice asked.

"You bear the Witchblade—"

"—you carry the mystic weapon—"

"—you should fear no puny mortal—"

"Maybe," Sara said to herself. "But I'm not stupid, either."

She went cautiously into the park, taking her cell phone from its belt pouch. "Jake."

"Right here," he answered after the first tone.

"Father Baltazar—"

"He's fine."

"Then I was just being paranoid about the blond guy?"

There was a slight pause. "Maybe not. Seems that he delivered a message to Father Baltazar."

"A message? What kind of message? From who?"

"It was an *ouanga*."

"What?"

"*Ouanga*. A, a kind of talisman, an evil charm. Father Baltazar says it's a warning from the *bokor* to back off. He says be careful. It seems you're following one of the *bokor's* right-hand men. His name is Gene. The Father doesn't know his last name, or even if he has one. The sorcerer's other right hand man is Gene's twin sister. Her name is Jean—J - E - A - N—if you can believe it."

Why not? Sara thought. *I've come to believe a lot stranger things.*

"Where are you?" Jake broke into her reverie.

"I've followed him to Cypress Hills National Cemetery. That's why I'm calling. It's a hell of a place for an ambush."

"Wait," Jake said. "I'll be right there."

Sara was approaching the bank of humongous rhododendrons, so she spoke quietly. "Can't," she said. "I'm going to lose him."

So what--"

Sara didn't have time to articulate an answer, and wasn't even sure herself why she was following him into such a dangerous place. She couldn't tell if it was her cop intuition that something important was about to happen, or if it was the voices whispering insidiously in her head, promising her that such risky activity was worth pursuing. Unfortunately, it'd been her experience that sometimes the voices' promises were lies.

"Come quick," she told her partner. "Be careful."

And she flipped her phone shut and put it back in its holster.

She stood before the rhododendrons, listening, and hearing nothing.

Here's the first test, she thought, as to how good a job I did shadowing this Gene guy.

If he knew she was on her trail, this was the perfect ambush point. She took a depth breath, and pushed into the leafy, enfolding arms of the feral bushes. Thin, pointy branches grabbed and poked her as she tried to slither by them without making a sound. She didn't quite succeed, but she was fairly quiet. She made her way through about six feet of rhododendron jungle before bursting out into the open, blinking at the sudden sun and the figure looming right in front of her.

The Witchblade surged to life, but before it could encase her in its sharp metallic shell she pushed it back to wherever it went when she wasn't wearing it, as she realized suddenly that she was confronting a stone angel.

It was an old angel. Its marble body was pitted with age and acid rain, eaten into by almost one hundred and forty years of corrosive city air. It was also crippled. One marble hand, reaching upwards to heaven, had broken away from its arm, one marble wing had cracked off its shoulder. Oddly, the angel's face was relatively untouched and still smiled a tender stone smile at all passersby.

It stood on a stone pedestal. The words once chiseled into the face of the pedestal had been obliterated by age. What few marks that still remained were hidden by a tangle of wild rose growing from the grave over which the angel stood guard, twining around the pedestal and up the angel's legs to its waist. The rose was thorny, its buds small but numerous, and fiery as a sunset in various shades of orange and red.

For a moment Sara stood contemplating the aged monument and felt oddly at peace. It seemed a gentle, somehow appropriate guardian for the apparently forgotten old soldier buried beneath its upraised arms and beatific smile.

Then a sound came from further inside the cemetery turned to jungle, the sound of a pick or shovel striking stone, and Sara's head snapped up. The noise came from behind another screen of greenery. She crept closer, sunk low, and got down behind an unidentified bush with lots of foliage, and, feeling like a character out of *The Last of the Mohicans*, slowly and carefully parted the branches in front of her.

Her sensibilities lurched from *Mohicans* to a Boris Karloff flick about bodysnatching, because that was happening twenty feet in front of her. Three men were taking

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

turns digging up a grave while Gene supervised, leaning back casually upon the canted tombstone and smoking a cigarette.

"I don't have all day," Gene said in a slightly irritated drawl.

The man leaning on his shovel looked at him respectfully. From her vantage point behind the wall of greenery, Sara could see fear in the man's eyes. Gene, she thought, must be a lot tougher than he looked. The resemblance to his sister, now that Sara could study his face at leisure, was indeed remarkable. They had the same high, delicate cheekbones, the sharp chin, the lofty, unlined brow. In fact, the only discernible difference between the two was the pencil-thin mustache that Gene affected. Even their physical build was quite similar. They were the same height, had the same breadth of shoulder, and slim hips. Sara had never seen male-female twins that so resembled each other.

Could it all be, Sara wondered, some kind of elaborate charade? Were they really only one person, pretending to be two? But . . . to what purpose?

Whatever the reality of their supposed identities, it was clear that the graverobbers were wary of Gene.

"But you don't have to be—" the voice insinuated softly in Sara's brain.

"You have the Witchblade—"

"Use it—"

"Use it—"

"Use it—"

Sara snarled to herself, to the voices murmuring in her brain. She shook her head as if to clear it and rattled a nearby branch.

"What was that?"

The man leaning on his shovel looked up, in Sara's direction. Gene flicked his cigarette aside. Down deep in the grave, one of the digger's shovels grated on wood.

"We hit it," he announced.

Gene looked back down at him as the idle digger shouldered his shovel like a rifle and started to meander in Sara's direction.

"The coffin?" Gene asked.

The man in the grave who had spoken grunted. "Must be."

There were more scraping sounds as the other stopped digging, and watched his colleague drop down to hands and knees and scabble among the well-rotted boards.

"Yep," he said with satisfaction. "Here we go."

He reached down into the partially uncovered and broken coffin, and stood up holding a round, brownish ball. Only it wasn't a ball. It was a skull.

Gene grunted. "Good. We need two more for the ceremony," he said, to the apparent disappointment of the diggers. They complained but not for too long, or too audibly.

Meanwhile, the man with the shovel over his shoulder wandered casually, perhaps a bit too casually, Sara thought, in her general direction. He whistled, looking everywhere but at her. When he pounced, she was ready.

He came right at her with a shout, holding his shovel near the end of its handle, ready to swing it like a club. But Sara was partially shielded by the bushes she was hiding behind, so his swing was ineffectual. She stood and drew her .45 from the holster snugged down against the small of her back.

Sara was furious, and ready to take it out on her assailant. She didn't know if she angrier at herself for her

carelessness, or at the voices that again seemed to have goaded her into an unthinking action that had given away her hiding place.

To hell with them, she thought as she sprang to her feet. *I'll handle this on my own.*

The man screamed again as he swung the shovel clumsily. Sara slipped through the shrubs that separated them and floated inside his striking range. She could have shot him half a dozen times, but instead slapped him against the side of his head with the barrel of her automatic. He went down like a pig in the slaughterhouse. As he fell Sara noticed the cross tattooed on his forehead.

"Hold it!" she shouted, gripping her gun with both hands and taking a wide-legged shooter's stance.

One of the bodysnatchers had jumped out of the excavated grave and was advancing towards her in a crouch, shovel gripped low and high as if it were a fighting staff. The other looked on stupidly, mouth agape. Gene, meanwhile, had also taken a few steps forward, casually, silently, his eyes narrow slits.

Sara shifted her pistol back and forth between the two who seemed the most dangerous. "I said freeze! I'm a—"

Something glittering spun through the air, hooked, and caught around the barrel of her gun. Astonished, she realized that Gene had trapped her weapon with one end of a weighted chain. He yanked and the gun's muzzle snapped upward. Her finger tightened on the trigger and it fired once, harmlessly, in the air. Gene shifted his grip on the chain, twisting so that Sara lost her hold on the automatic. He jerked the chain and it went flying back to him, taking her gun along. It fell to the ground halfway between them. She tried to keep an eye on it to see ex-

actly where it landed, but the graverobber rushed her, demanding her attention.

"Use the Witchblade," the voices screamed shrilly, but Sara had closed her mind to their urges.

"No!" she screamed aloud, and leapt forward to meet her assailant.

This man was smarter than the first. He wielded his shovel like a fighting staff, hands far apart on the handle, ready to strike with either the wooden handle or pointed metal blade. Small crosses were tattooed on the first joint of all his fingers. He was another Saturday Night Special.

The Special took a short, vicious swing with the shovel's blade end, aiming at Sara's midriff. She twisted in mid-stride and the gleaming blade missed her stomach by a fraction of an inch. His follow-up with the other end struck her across the ribcage. She rolled with the blow, trying to absorb as much of its force as she could. It hurt like hell. Pain flashed across the left side of her body. She was relieved when it slackened and she discovered that she could still breathe easily.

But her assailant didn't give her much time to catch her breath.

He came at her again, this time swinging the shovel more wildly in a two-handed, over-the-head fashion, trying to finish her off all at once. Sara rolled, and the shovel's blade thudded into the ground, sinking deeply into the fine soil covered by the cemetery's green sward.

Her assailant jerked the shovel head free. Sara kept rolling, hoping that her memory was accurate. He ran after her, winding up for another deathblow.

Fortunately for Sara, her memory *was* accurate.

She rolled over the implement dropped by her first assailant, and came up in a half crouch, the shovel's handle

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

planted firmly against the ground, the shovel head pointed outward like a spear braced against oncoming calvary.

The graverobber ran into it, gut high, and gave himself an unexpected appendectomy.

The voices in Sara's head roared with delight.

He screamed in agony, clutching his punctured abdomen, and fell writhing to the ground. Sara looked up. Gene was smiling, and pointing his pistol at her.

"Police!" a familiar voice roared behind her. "Drop it! Drop it *NOW!*"

She risked a glance over her shoulder and saw Jake standing braced in the approved shooter's stance, gun aimed unwaveringly at Gene. Behind him stood Father Baltazar, consternation on his face.

Her eyes went back to Gene, who made a small moue of disappointment as he slowly bent over and carefully placed his gun on the ground. The last of the grave-robbers had already flopped down in the open grave in an ultimately futile attempt to escape notice.

"What the hell is going on here, Sara?" Jake asked.

She stood, flinching a little as her ribcage twinged.

"Arrest these mooks," she said.

"On what charge?"

"Attempted murder of a police officer, assault with a deadly weapon, resisting arrest, graverobbing. Oh yeah, and corpse abuse," Sara said. "I'm sure we'll think of a few other counts when we get them down to the precinct."

Father Baltazar hurried up to her. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Sure. Perfectly fine."

His dark eyes caught hers and held. "No, you're not.

Something troubles you. Something beyond—" he gestured vaguely, implying the recent actions "—all this."

The voices snickered in her head.

"No," Sara said. "Really—"

He laid a gentle hand on her arm. "We'll talk later. Maybe we'll finish the discussion we'd started when we first met."

He went past her, to minister to the man who'd impaled himself on the shovel, as Jake called for transport and an ambulance. Sara took a deep breath, winced, and started to fight off the shakes as they descended upon her.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Captain Joe Siry was a big man with a gray-dusted mustache and severe male pattern baldness. He still had most of the hair around the side of his head, but it was mostly gone from the top, save for a strip across the very crest of his skull running from front to back like a thin and tired Mohawk. He had a florid face that got even redder when he was angry.

Now it was very red indeed.

"So." Sara knew he was mad because his voice was so soft and low. "You *didn't* identify yourself as a cop when you drew down on them?"

Sara had her faults, she knew, but lying to her boss wasn't among them, even if it came down to saving her butt. "There wasn't time—"

"Wasn't time!" Siry's voice exploded. Jake, along for the little chat in Siry's office, gazed up at the ceiling, pretending to be somewhere else. Siry, sitting behind his disheveled desk in an uncomfortable chair that was old during the Lindsey administration, slammed his big hand down on the only slightly more recently acquired blotter,

making stacks of paper shift and slide as if they'd caught the edge of an extremely localized earthquake.

Siry looked down at the open manila folder in front of him, again scanning Sara's report. Sara stood at stiff attention, holding back her anger as the voices twitted at her in her brain.

"Corpse abuse!" Siry said. "Corpse abuse! Jesus Tap-dancing Christ!" He looked up at Sara. "It's a damn good thing the thugs you pistol-whipped and carved on with a shovel didn't die. If that'd happened, we'd *all* be up to our asses in lawsuits. As it is . . ."

His voice slipped into inaudible grumbling, and Jake cleared his throat.

"Sir?" he said.

Siry fixed him with a stare. "Yes?"

A lesser man might have wilted, but Jake plunged ahead. "There's no doubt those perps are involved with the Machete Murderer. Somehow. Sara could have been killed—"

Siry waved a beefy hand. "I know, I know." He fixed them both his hard-edged stare. "That's why Pezzini's career is still hanging by a thread. And you're both still on the case." Siry waved his hand again, indicating a dark form silhouetted on the shades that were drawn down upon the glass walls of his office. "I've spoken to the Padre. God knows why, but he seems to think highly of you two. He seems to think you're making good progress on the case and are going to eventually get this Machete Murderer—hopefully before more bodies end up in either the East River or random Dumpsters."

"He—" Sara began.

Siry pointed a blunt forefinger at her and she stopped.

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

"But this is my last warning. No more cowboy stuff. No more lone wolfing around abandoned graveyards. And for Christ's sake, try to let the Brooklyn people know what you're doing. Every now and then, at least." Siry glanced down at the report. "Lieutenant Dickey is being assigned to the case as a liaison. *Do* keep him informed."

Sara and Jake exchanged wary glances.

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

"One last thing," Siry said in a hard voice, stopping them as they turned to go. As they looked back his face softened, took on a worried expression. They could also hear concern in his words. "This isn't a normal serial killer run amok. This case smells funny. Really funny. Just—be careful."

"Yes, sir," they said again, and turned and left the office, Jake closing the door behind them, letting out his breath in a deep sigh as he did so. He turned to Sara.

"What the hell do you think you're up to?" he said in a low, insistent voice, so quietly that even people working at the nearby desks couldn't hear him.

"What?" Sara asked, confused.

"Siry's right. Partly, at least. I'm your partner, dammit. You seem to conveniently forget that when you want to go haring off on one of your lone wolf adventures—"

"I didn't forget," Sara said. "I thought of you immediately. I called you because I knew you'd be there, at my back."

"Oh." Jake frowned, as if he only half-believed her.

He should, Sara thought, *since I'm telling only half the truth.*

She knew that Siry and Jake were both right. She was too much of a loner, taking risks that were too great,

WITCHBLADE

rushing in where any other fool would dread to go. Part of it was her fault. She *was* reckless. She did sometimes act before thinking through the consequences of her actions.

But part of it was the fault of the voices and the temptation of the Witchblade. They encouraged her recklessness. Their whispered promises played to her deepest desires, but as she well knew, their promises were sometimes lies. The Witchblade sometimes had an agenda of its own, one that didn't always coincide with Sara's interests or well-being.

She knew that she'd be well-advised to keep that in mind, for she was certain that if she always gave in to the voices, one day they'd lead her to her death. Or worse, perhaps her damnation.

She looked up and met the eyes of Father Baltazar, who was standing alone in the precinct room, watching her with compassion in his eyes.

Did she see something else, she wondered, besides compassion? Was there a promise of release as well, release from what had become the curse of the Witchblade?

"Well," Sara said, sitting back gingerly, all too aware of the pain in her ribs—which, thankfully, had been bruised but not broken, "that was a wasted day."

Sara, Jake, and Father Baltazar sat in a dark booth in a quiet bar on a placid street, far from the maddening crowds of Manhattan or even Cypress Hills. It was a time to regroup, for thought and quiet discussion, and, Sara hoped, for the sharing of secret knowledge on the Father's part. It was evident that he knew more about what was happening in Cypress Hills than he'd told them. So far he'd tossed out some hints for them to investigate.

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

Sara hoped that now he trusted them enough to open up and tell the story behind those hints.

"I wouldn't say that," Jake said in reply to Sara's complaint, smiling as he took a long pull from his beer glass.

"Why not?" Sara asked.

"While you were playing tiptoe through the tulips with our graverobbing friends," Jake said, "I was getting some real information on our vic, Thomas T. Jackson."

Sara toyed with her own beer glass. She was too upset to drink, contenting herself with pushing the glass back and forth on the tabletop, spilling a little bit every now and then.

"Like what?" she asked.

Jake made a dramatic flourish out of consulting his pocket notebook. "Let's see. He lived alone in a middle-class four-room apartment in Forrest Hills. No surprise there. He was always on time with his alimony and child support. Maybe a surprise. Maybe he was just a good father. But here's the fun stuff: he also owned a beach home in the Hamptons. Small, but pricey. His car was a mid-priced Porsche." McCarthy looked at Father Baltazar. "I don't know what they pay priests nowadays, but mid-priced Porsches are usually out of the price range of cops."

Father Baltazar took a small, precise sip of his beer and smiled. "Priests, too, I fear."

"Also, Jackson had a 'cabin' in the Adirondacks that was bigger than his Forrest Hills apartment. He also took three vacations this year. A luxury cruise to the Caribbean, a long weekend in Paris via the Concorde, and ten days on some island in Micronesia for skindiving. First-class airline tickets, of course. I forgot to mention that he took a different honey to each exotic location."

Sara whistled. "Man, we should go to work for the I.N.S."

"Yeah," Jake said seriously. "They seem to be a lot more generous with their vacation time than N.Y.P.D."

"And their salary," Sara pointed out.

McCarthy shook his head. "Nope. According to Jackson's tax returns he made a little over sixty thou last year."

Father Baltazar took another precise sip of beer. "That's more than I get."

Sara smiled. "Maybe. But is it enough for an apartment in Forest Hills, child support, a beach house, car payments, a mountain cabin, plane tickets, scuba diving, and three demanding girlfriends?"

"What makes you think his girlfriends were demanding?" Jake asked.

Sara's smile widened. "Just a guess."

Jake downed most of his beer. "Anyway, you're right. Where did this guy come up with all the extra jack?"

"What does Immigration and Naturalization have that's all that valuable?" Sara asked.

"Green cards, of course," Father Baltazar said into the sudden silence. "One of the most valuable commodities in a community of recent immigrants. A green card can make all the difference in their lives. Without one you're subject to what can be little more than the whims of elected, or even non-elected, officials. With one, you're a citizen. There's no one looking over your shoulder. You can breathe easy and live a real life in your new country."

"You knew this?" Sara asked.

Father Baltazar shook his head. "Knew that someone was selling green cards? No. Suspected . . ."

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

"For how long?" Jake asked.

"Not long," the priest said. "And we had no proof of it. We still have no proof. We had suspicions, and when the bodies started showing up our suspicions were somewhat confirmed."

"Who's we?" Sara asked.

"Paul Narcisse and I," Father Baltazar said.

"The bookstore owner?" Jake asked.

Father Baltazar smiled at him. "He's more than that. Paul Narcisse and I are also brothers of the cloth. Unofficially, of course."

"He's a priest, too?"

"Of course. He is a *houngan*. A priest of *voudon*."

"Dude," Jake said, "you mean, he's a voodoo priest? Like with the dolls and pins and zombies and stuff like that."

"You watch too many Hollywood movies," the priest said with mild reproof in his voice. "And that is not the best source to get your knowledge of historical or cultural matters."

Sara suppressed a smile. "Better than comic books."

"Perhaps," Father Baltazar said. "In any event, *voudon* is an ancient, authentic religion. Now is not the time to give you a lesson in its history and theology, but I assure you that the business about the dolls and pins was grafted onto it by Hollywood to thrill credulous audiences."

"And the zombies, too, huh?" Jake said, quaffing the dregs of his beer.

The priest looked at him. "Oh, no. Zombies are quite real."

Only the low level of beer in his glass prevented Jake from performing a classic spit-take. As it was, the remnants

of brew swam up his sinus passages and trickled out of his nose and down his chin as he snorted first in disbelief, then in sudden, burning pain.

"Gee—" Jake coughed as his eyes watered. He waved his hand under his nose. "Holy crap, Padre—"

Father Baltazar held up his hand. "Let's not get distracted from the matter at hand by a theological discussion. If you want to learn about *loa* and zombies and *zobops* and such, I'll tell you all I know later."

"And Guinee?" Sara asked.

"Yes," the priest said, "and Guinee."

Sara nodded, and something of a promise passed between them.

"What—" Jake began, but Sara cut him off.

"The Father's right. Voodoo later. Now, let's try to figure out how all these murders fit together."

"It seems fairly clear," the priest said, "although, of course, this is all theoretical."

"You seem to know the situation better than we do," Sara said. "Theorize away."

"All right." Father Baltazar took a deep breath. "One: Thomas Jackson. He had access to official documents. Two: Cladius Caradeuc. A doctor. Through his clinic he had access to the people who needed the green cards." The priest paused to sigh. "His death, though, was a surprise. And a hurt. We always thought he was one of us."

"Us?" Jake inquired.

Father Baltazar nodded. "An informal group of Cypress Hills citizens. Those in opposition to the *bokor* who is the source of most of the evil in the community."

"Paul Narcisse spoke of a '*bokor*,'" Sara said, half-questioningly.

"Yes. An evil sorcerer who walks the left-hand path.

Who serves the dark *loa* for his own personal gain. Who preys on his own people like a *loup-garou*."

"I don't even want to ask what that is," Jake said.

Sara remembered some of her high school French. "That would be werewolf," she said.

"God," Jake groaned. He looked at his empty glass. "I need another beer."

"Just a minute," Father Baltazar said. "Two more people need to be tied into the web of killings."

"Achille de Petion," Sara said. "He was just a thug, just a street criminal, wasn't he?"

"Not entirely," the priest replied. "He was also a *zobop*."

Sara shook her head. "That, I don't know the meaning of."

Father Baltazar smiled. "A *zobop* is a low-level *soldat*, that is, initiate in the *bokor's* secret society. I suspect he was the go-between between the I.N.S. man and the doctor."

"So what happened to cause the bloodbath?"

The priest shrugged. "I don't know. Perhaps someone got greedy and wanted a larger cut. Perhaps someone got scared, or got a conscience, and threatened to go to the authorities. The precise reason for the killings still needs to be uncovered, and in fact may never be known."

"How big a business are we talking about, to make it worth all these murders?"

"A green card can go for three to five thousand dollars apiece on the street. If you sell a thousand a year—certainly a conservative figure—that's three to five million dollars. Tax free, of course, with little cost to the seller. And these cards were *real*. Not counterfeit. Impeccable and unquestionable."

"But we're forgetting one thing," Sara said. "The fourth victim. Jean Pierre-Pierre, the restauranteur."

Father Baltazar shrugged. "No. I'm not forgetting him. But I don't understand how he fits into this scenario."

"Was he one of your allies?" Sara asked.

The priest nodded. "Yes. He was one of us." He was silent for a moment. "The best I can figure is that his death was a warning from the *bokor*, to all of us. Despite our best efforts, we've been little more than a thorn in his side. But we've been getting stronger. We've been unifying the community against him. Perhaps this was a warning to us to cease our activities, or suffer the same fate as poor Pierre-Pierre." The priest took a drink from his glass, and put it back down on the table. "Of course, there is another explanation."

"What's that?" Sara asked.

"The *bokor* is playing with great forces. He has called something powerful and evil into the world."

"Bakula-baka," Sara said in a low voice.

Father Baltazar was startled. "Yes. That is what all the signs point to. How do you know?" he asked in a worried voice.

"Apparently," Sara said, twisting her beer glass as if trying to screw it down into the surface of the table, "I've met him. I've been to Guinee. Maybe in a dream."

"My child," the priest said, placing his hands on hers.

Sara flinched, as the voices roared in her head at the touch of the priest's hands. Father Baltazar took them away, as if he sensed he caused her pain, and the voices went back to a background rumbling.

"Just what is going on here?" Jake asked.

Sara shook her head. She couldn't even begin to explain about the Witchblade, about the mystic forces

swirling about her, imprisoning her with the promise of great power. Not now. Perhaps not ever.

"This Bakula-baka," she urged the priest.

"A dark *loa*," he said. "One of the worst. Not as powerful as his brothers, but vile and vicious and difficult for any human to control. Often the human thinks he's riding Bakula-baka, and then discovers to his surprise that the opposite is true."

Sara felt a shiver run down her spine. The exact same thing could be said of herself and the Witchblade. If Father Baltazar and his friend Paul Narcisse understood this, perhaps they knew a way to help her deal with her own mystic problem.

"So," Jake said, frowning, "what you're saying is that our serial killer is really some kind of demon or spirit called to earth by this *bokor*, who may be losing control, who may be unable to keep it from going on its own murderous rampage?"

"That could be," the priest agreed, "the situation."

"And if it is," Sara said, "then God help us all."

Father Baltazar nodded.

"And this *bokor*, this evil sorcerer—"

"Is Guillaume Sam, of course," Sara said.

Jake shook his head.

"I need another drink," he said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Club Carrefour was as crowded as if it were Saturday night, but it was actually only Tuesday.

Sara and Jake made their way across the floor and through the obstacle course of densely packed tables. The air was hot from the press of bodies and the frenetic activity on the adjacent dance floor, redolent from the fumes of perfume and aftershave, beer, wine, and hard liquor. Many of the drinks had been made with fruity bases whose aroma reminded Sara of the odors wafting through the Guinee jungle that she'd visited in her dream.

The music blaring over the sound system was loud and punctuated by a complicated rhythm. It was salsa-like, but spiced with unfamiliar Carribean overtones. It would be fun to dance, Sara thought, if she had someone to dance with. Fun to lose herself if only for a little while in the music and the motion and to forget all about death and murder and evil spirits. And whispering voices in her head.

At that thought they giggled on cue and Sara knew

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they were laughing at her. She knew, also, there was nothing she could do about it.

Jake put his mouth close to her ear and spoke just loud enough for her to hear him. "So, how do we go about proving that Guillaume Sam is a *bokor* summoning evil spirits to do his murderous bidding?"

Sara would have smiled, but she didn't find the question all that amusing. It was a serious problem. New York State wasn't about to burn someone at the stake for witchcraft. It was, after all, the twenty-first century. If they accused Guillaume Sam of sorcery it was more likely that they'd lose their jobs than that Guillaume Sam would be bought to justice.

"We'll just have to find evidence proving the green card racket. Or any of the other rackets he's undoubtedly got his dirty hands in. That would probably be enough to burn him."

Jake nodded. "Easier said than done."

Sara looked at him, and did smile this time. "Jake, if it was easy, anybody could do our job."

His retort was silenced as someone came out of the crowd and slipped an arm around his waist. He looked down, surprised, to see Juliette from the voodoo shop smiling at him.

She looked stunning. Her hip-huggers, riding low on her waist, looked painted on. Her T-shirt looked even tighter, clinging to every curve and angle it covered. The shirt's neckline was rather more demure than the one they'd first seen her wearing. But more than making up for that were the numerous horizontal slits in the fabric, running from waist to neck, that gave tantalizing glimpses of the curves her shirt was supposed to cover.

"Well, it's my big policeman," she said in a purring, melting voice. "Why haven't you been back to visit your little Juliette?"

"Been out bringing criminals to justice," Jake said with a smile. "Without my constant vigilance the city just isn't safe."

"How 'bout using some of that vigilance on me, honey?"

Jake shrugged. "I suppose I can entrust the safety of the city to my partner for a few minutes. Let me have a word with her, and I'll be right with you."

"Don't be long," Juliette said with a teasing tone in her voice.

"Uh-huh."

She headed toward the dance floor, looking back with an imploring smile. He leaned over and spoke again in Sara's ear.

"I should really follow this up. I think she may know something."

Sara nodded with skepticism. "I'm sure she does. I'm not sure if what she knows has anything to do with this case."

Jake grinned. "Hey, let me enjoy myself for at least a few minutes. What's it going to hurt?"

He started off after the girl, who was backing onto the dance floor, beckoning him with open arms and hips undulating to the music. Sara caught his forearm.

"Jake," she said, "be careful. Nothing in this case is what it seems."

He shook his head, laughing. "Sure."

"I mean it!" Sara insisted.

Jake paused for a moment, his face serious. "I know, partner, I know." He spoke almost reluctantly. "You know,

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it wouldn't hurt you to relax for a bit, to loosen up a little. You're wound tighter than a yo-yo string, and some day you're gonna snap."

Sara had nothing to say. Jake nodded gently and stepped onto the dance floor with Juliette. Within seconds they disappeared in the mass of boogying humanity, lost to Sara's sight in a sea of waving arms and gyrating torsos.

He's right, of course, Sara thought, but what could she do? She wasn't in the sixth grade. She couldn't go out on the dance floor by herself and dance the night away with a pretend partner. That would be just too—

Almost as if on cue a voice said, "Well. Detective Pezzini. How nice to see you again," and Sara turned, a smile on her face. A smile she quickly lost when she realized who was standing beside her.

"The last time we saw each other we were pointing guns. I'm glad that this time we're in more congenial surroundings."

It was Gene. There could be no doubt that he was one of twins, because next to him, her arm around his waist and his around hers, was his sister Jean.

They were a stunning pair. Both wore formal evening clothes, Gene, a wonderfully tailored, classic black tuxedo, Jean, a tightly clinging dress that plunged daringly from neck to waist and was cut high up the side of her thighs, exposing plenty of ivory-white flesh in both areas.

It was, Sara thought as she looked from one to the other, fairly mind-boggling. They looked so much alike that without Gene's mustache and without the masculine/feminine clothes they wore, it would be difficult if not impossible to tell them apart. Yet both were beautiful, and, more so, smouldering with a palpable sexuality.

Sara had always been attracted to large, masculine men, but there was something about Gene, his superior smile, his air of utter confidence, the hard edge to his eyes that promised more strength than that found in most. Too bad, Sara thought, he was a thug. Or maybe that overt sense of danger he exuded added something to his potent aura.

She cleared her throat, realizing that some time had gone by without her reply.

"Made bail, then?" she asked.

Gene shrugged elegant shoulders. "It wasn't hard. You didn't have much of a case." He looked her up and down, shaking his head. Rarely had Sara ever felt more scrutinized than when his and his sister's eyes were on her. "You'd think a policewoman of your experience would have remembered to identify yourself. Why, my colleagues and I thought we were being robbed, and only acted in self-defense."

"Thought you were being robbed," Sara said, "while you were robbing a grave?"

"It's a strange world," Gene said blandly.

Jean took a long pull from the cigarette she'd been holding at her side and let the smoke out in a stream through her nostrils. She regarded Sara intently, her head tilted to one side.

"Corpse abuse," she said. Her voice was husky for a woman's, but not unpleasantly so. Not unpleasantly at all. "That was a very imaginative charge. A new one to add to your list, dear brother." She suddenly smiled and her face became that of a charmingly beautiful carnivore who seemed undecided whether to lick you or bite you. "I should thank you, Detective. Rarely does something new like that come into our lives."

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This is, Sara thought, the strangest conversation I've ever had in my life. And that's saying a lot.

"Would you care to dance, Detective?" Gene asked urbaneily.

"With you?" Sara asked, disbelievingly.

"With both of us," Jean said.

"Ummm—" was the best reply Sara could come up with.

"No need to be shy," Gene said. "So you arrested me." He shrugged again. "We both have our jobs to do. That doesn't mean we can't enjoy each other's company when we're off the clock. Besides—" and here again came that wicked grin "—I admire the way you handled yourself in the graveyard this afternoon. Your exhibition of shovel-fu was most entertaining. And the manner in which you used your gun . . ." Gene shook his head like a gourmet remembering a particularly lavish and tasty meal.

"Um —" Sara repeated.

She was saved by a sudden commotion that diverted all their attention.

"Hey, hey! We're here!"

"Let the party start!"

It was Rog and Jer Stern. As far as Sara could tell, they were wearing the same clothes they'd had on the previous day, as well as the same carefree, if more than slightly goofy smiles.

"Hey, momma!" One of them caught sight of Jean—Sara at this point couldn't remember which twin was wearing what and so couldn't tell them apart—and put his arms around her from behind. She gave her brother a knowing smile, and turned her sleek head on her elegant neck and caught Stern's mouth with her own.

Stern said something like, "MmmmmHmmmm," as they kissed deeply.

"Hey," the other Stern said, "save some of that for Pappa Jer." He pushed in from the other side and kissed her at the same time as his brother.

Gene looked knowingly at Sara, his smile sliding into a leer. Sara was suddenly grateful to see Aleksandras Gervelis standing behind the increasingly occupied brothers.

"Alek," she said with a hearty smile. "Nice to see you again."

Gene's smile slipped a little, then became fixed as Alek came forward.

"Thanks," he said to Sara. "I can say the same." He nodded in Gene's direction, and Gene nodded back a precise millimeter. He glanced at Jean, but she and the brothers were already slipping away to the dance floor. He looked back at Gene. "Give my greetings to Jean when she manages to extricate herself from the boys."

"They seem . . . persistent," Sara said.

Alek sighed, watching them flail away with arms and legs as they did their best imitation of dancing. "If only they were so persistent with their music. Well." He looked back to Sara from the trio as they disappeared into the maw of the dance floor. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes," she said. "That would be great."

Alek turned to Gene, whose eyes were turning icier by the second. "Gene?"

"No. Thank you. I have some business to attend to."

"All right, then."

"All right."

Gene nodded to Sara. There seemed something of a promise in his gesture, something that said that he wasn't finished with her. Despite her essential toughness, she had a hard time suppressing a shiver as he walked away.

"He doesn't seem to like you very much," Sara said as they both watched him stalk off.

"That's all right," Alec said. "I don't like him very much, either. Although, he seems to like you. A lot."

Sara shook her head. "I arrested him earlier today," she said.

"Really?" Alec seemed surprised and amused. "Let's get those drinks and you can tell me all about it. If it doesn't involve police secrets."

"Secrets?" Sara laughed. "I have no—" She hesitated for a moment, catching herself in an unintentional lie. "—official secrets."

Alek held his hand out and Sara found herself taking it without thinking. It was large, warm, and strong. It felt good in hers. They started toward the crowded bar. "So, what'd you arrest him for?"

"Corpse abuse. Among other things."

Alek looked down at her. "*Corpse abuse?* Man, this should be good."

Sara knew she should be working. She tried to tell herself that maybe, in a sense, she was. Alek Gervelis knew Guillaume Sam, had known him for years. He could be a valuable source of information about Sam's operations. The trouble was their conversation regarding Sam was over pretty quickly. Alek really didn't know much about him.

Sure, he'd helped Mountains of Madness in the beginning of their career, but that was all money stuff. Management. That was Kris's territory. Kris worried about all that stuff—worried too much about it, in fact—and Alek took care of the music end. That was what he lived for, that was what he loved. That was all he cared about.

And yet, Sara discovered that Alek wasn't a man who

talked continually about himself. Most men Sara knew were like that, though Sara had to admit that when she thought about it she didn't know many men. Practically none outside the job. She had no time for a personal life. The job was everything.

But as she sat and talked with Alek about what it was like to be a cop—and she told him a suitably edited version of events of that very afternoon—and he told her stories of his life, of what it was like being a creative person in a field where they wanted you to be precisely as creative as the last successful band—and no more—she felt the pressure of the job flowing away from her.

She forgot momentarily about the Machete Murderer, about her strange visit to Guinee, about the necessity of getting the goods on Guillaume Sam before his henchmen could kill again. She forgot even the voices in her head and the thing called the Witchblade. She began to enjoy herself.

Alek Gervelis wasn't an ego-driven rising rock star. He was an interesting man with an interesting life, who also seemed interested in her life and what it was like to be a cop. It didn't hurt any that he was also crushingly handsome, and that it really didn't seem to matter to him.

Time went by. They had a few drinks, but found themselves talking more than drinking, and taking turns listening more than talking. Sara was surprised at how fast the time went. She checked her watch when Kris Gervelis and Magdalena Konsavage showed up and sat at their table, and was surprised to see that nearly three hours had passed.

Alek went to the bar to get fresh drinks for all as Sara studied his brother. She didn't want to slip back into cop mode, but her conscience was bothering her. She'd been

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having too much of a good time and she had to get back to work, even if only for a little bit.

"You know Guillaume Sam pretty well?" she asked Kris.

He shrugged. He was smaller than his brother, and not nearly as handsome. Not, in fact, handsome at all. It could have been tough having an older, much more charismatic brother, but Sara was glad to see that they seemed to have a decent relationship. She thought of her own sister and despaired of their relationship. Their different attitudes toward life was only one of the reasons why she thought of her so infrequently, if at all.

"Know him?" Kris frowned thoughtfully. "Not really. We're not friends or anything. We don't hang out together, if that's what you mean."

"No, but you do have a business relationship."

"Sure."

Alek returned with the drinks and managed to set them down on the crowded table without spilling any. He had to step over his brother to get to his own seat, and put his arm around Sara's shoulder to steady himself during the maneuver. Sara did not object.

She took a sip of her drink and leaned toward Kristoforas. "I'd like to get together with you some time, maybe tomorrow, talk about him some."

"Sure," Kris said, "if you want to. I'm got some stuff to do in the morning, some contracts to go over with a couple of different venues in the city, but I'll be free in the afternoon. Call me and set up a time. Here's my cell number."

He handed Sara a card, and she tucked it away.

"Sara gave me an idea for a new song tonight," Alek said.

"What about?" Magdalena asked.

"Corpse abuse."

Kris sighed and shook his head. "I just don't get you artists," he said.

Sara laughed, the case again slipping away from her mind.

The night turned toward midnight and beyond. The four sat laughing and talking. Sara was tired, but it was a pleasant weariness. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so completely relaxed. Jake had been right, she thought. She did have to unwind a little, she did have to take a little time and enjoy herself. For a moment she wondered about Jake. She hadn't seen him in hours. She thought of looking for him, but something told her he was no longer on the dance floor. She figured he had taken Juliette to a more private venue for questioning, probably of a somewhat personal nature.

Sara was with Kris and Magdalena for only a little while before she realized that Kris loved the singer passionately, but she didn't return the feeling. Sara didn't think that Magdalena was playing him—she seemed too nice for that—but there was an almost desperate sadness about Kris when he looked at her. He tried to conceal it, but wasn't very good at dissembling. It was as if he knew that her love was beyond his reach, but he couldn't keep himself from trying to grasp it over and over and over again.

With visions of unattainable love running through her mind, Sara was surprised to suddenly realize that she was also thinking about Father Baltazar, wondering where he was and what he was doing. She brought herself up with a start, glancing at Alek.

He smiled at her. She smiled back. The voices in her

brain, silent almost all evening, suddenly chattered laughingly. Further confused thought was cut short when Jean suddenly appeared before their table.

"Where are the boys?" Alek asked, as if amused to see her unaccompanied by the panting Stern brothers.

"I've left them to their own devices for a while," Jean said. She turned, looked directly at Sara. "Mr. Sam wants to see you."

"Me?" Sara was glad to turn her mind to something immediate, something concrete. She was afraid of where it had been wandering lately. "Why does he want to see me?"

Jean shrugged. It was a lithe, almost lascivious movement. "I was told to bring you. That's all."

Now, if ever, was the time to be cautious, but Sara felt more excited than cautious. Who knew what this meeting portended, but it was likely to lead to something big, perhaps something that could help break the case.

"All right."

She made her excuses to the table, stood, and followed Jean through the press of the crowd, still thronging the bar despite the lateness of the hour. They went around the dance floor, through an unmarked door next to one end of the bar. The short corridor beyond terminated in a dark wood door that had MR. SAM embossed upon it in metallic lettering. Jean gestured at the door with a cryptic smile, half of humor, half of anticipation. Sara raised her fist to knock, but the door swung open silently, as if, Sara thought, they were in a cheap horror movie.

The room beyond was of middling size and expensively if eccentrically furnished. Along the far wall was a wooden desk with two comfortable-looking chairs in front. Guillaume Sam, lit cigar in his mouth, sat behind it

in an even larger and more comfortable-looking chair. It was obviously a working desk, not just for show, and littered with papers. Sam, pen in his left hand, was reading through them carefully and making notes. Baka, perched on his shoulder, his naked tail curled around his master's neck, seemed to be giving the papers as much attention as Guillaume Sam was.

It would have been comical, if the possum didn't appear so damn serious. There was also a half-empty rum bottle on the desk accompanied by tumbler-sized glasses, and a human skull that had a strange depression at the top of its cranium.

"Ah, Ms. Pezzini," Sam rumbled in his deep voice. "Come in. He gestured at one of the chairs in front of his desk. "Sit down."

The luxurious carpet muffled her footsteps as she crossed the room, glancing from the desk to the altar that took up a whole corner of the room. It was similar in its chaotic busyness to the one she had seen in the back room of Paul Narcisse's bookstore, but different in its details. There were many empty liquor bottles and the central place of honor was taken up by another human skull, this one wearing a top hat, with crossed human thigh bones set before it. The altar was also adorned with dozens of crosses, much like the display in Father Baltazar's church. The crosses were of wood and metal, stone and glass, plastic and paper. Behind the altar, looming over it, was a large wooden cross, its horizontal arm hung with scores of rosaries.

Sara sat in the chair before the desk while Jean circled around and stood behind the desk next to Guillaume Sam's chair. Baka watched with what Sara would swear

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was an almost human grin on its pointy little muzzle. The voices in her head were suddenly hushed. Guillaume Sam scared them. Sara knew that that fact should scare her as well, but somehow it made her feel just a little bit cheerier.

Sam put his pen down, leaned forward and placed his smoldering cigar in the cranial depression of the skull that sat on the corner of his desk. Sara suddenly realized that it was an ashtray.

"I don't believe in wasting time, Ms. Pezzini," Sam said, regarding her closely, as both Jean and Baka looked on. "I am a businessman. Time is money to me. I prefer to keep things as simple as possible. So tell me, what do you want?"

"Want?" Sara asked, surprised.

"Yes, Ms. Pezzini. It is a simple question. What do you want? What do you desire? What do you dream about at night when you lie in bed and dream true dreams? Money? Power? Fame? I can give all of that to you. All you want, and the best you've ever had."

"No one's ever tried to bribe me quite like this," Sara said, impressed despite herself.

Guillaume Sam shrugged. "We're all adults here, and as I've said, I don't like to waste time. I'm not subtle. I'm direct."

"Me, too," Sara said, "so I'm sure you'll take it the right way when I tell you to go to hell."

Guillaume Sam grinned, and the sight was enough to make Sara feel suddenly queasy. "I've been, Ms. Pezzini. Oh, I've been there and back again."

He leaned forward and took the still smoldering cigar out of his skull ashtray. He puffed on it until the tip

glowed red, then with the barest glance at Jean he stubbed it out against her chest, on the bare skin between her small breasts.

She arched her back, but did not pull away. A small cry slipped between her clenched teeth. Sara couldn't tell if it was a cry of pleasure or pain.

"Jesus!" Sara said, starting up from her chair.

Guillaume Sam continued to look at her with no expression on his face as the stench of burnt flesh soured the aromatic fragrance of his cigar smoke. He took the cigar away from Jean's chest and put it back in the skull ashtray. Jean panted rapidly, but smiled, glancing down at the circular burn mark that marred her ivory flesh.

"You've just seen what I've done to a loyal associate whose work is indispensable to me. Imagine what I'd do to someone who angers me."

"I'd arrest you this minute if I had a charge that would stick," Sara said between clenched teeth.

"But you don't," Guillaume Sam pointed out. "And you won't. Ever."

They looked at one another for a moment, and Sam nodded.

"There's something about you that is unnatural," he finally said. "In that respect we are similar. You may make a fine foe. In the end, though, you will die. I'll have wasted time. You'll have wasted your life, and, perhaps, the lives of those around you."

"First a bribe," Sara said. "Now a threat. Neither's gonna work."

"We shall see, Ms. Pezzini. I'll give you tonight to think it over."

"I don't need any more time. I've already given you my final answer."

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"As you will, Ms. Pezzini."

Sara marched out of the room, pausing in the doorway, sickened to see Jean touching the burned spot on her chest, her face screwed up in exquisite agony, while Guillaume Sam gazed at her expressionlessly.

Only Baka watched Sara leave the room, and she could swear that she saw a predatory hunger in the creature's beady eyes.

The voices in her head sounded impressed as they twittered about what they had just witnessed.

CHAPTER NINE

That night, Sara walked again in Guinee.

The air was warm but not hot, humid but not soggy. The sweet-smelling nectar of night-blooming flowers perfumed the refreshing breeze. There were no buzzing, annoying insects, only large, slow-fluttering moths that beat the heavy air with their great painted wings. It would have seemed an idyllic place if Sara didn't know what lurked in its shadows.

The night was lit by a glorious full moon and more stars than Sara knew existed, stars that were mostly drowned out by the hazy city lights of her time and place. The light was softer, revealing more than illuminating, giving everything it touched an almost out-of-focus aura that contrasted strangely with the harsh reality of the waking world.

No one came to greet her as she wandered through the quiet land, neither beast nor *loa*. The fear she felt upon arriving gradually dissipated, turning completely to wonder when she came upon a dirt road, which was the first sign she'd discovered of man's hand upon this land.

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She hesitated, then decided to try the road. Presumably, it led to or from somewhere, and taking it seemed preferable to walking randomly through a jungle, no matter how beautiful the jungle was. Also Sara's practical part realized it would be hard for anyone, beast or *loa*, to ambush her on an open road. The shadowy jungle, on the other hand, presented limitless opportunities for an attack.

She walked for a while. She had no idea for how long. The road's surface was soft earth, easy on her bare feet. It was relaxing. It seemed almost as if she were again in Father Baltazar's church. As before, the voices were gone from her head. The universe seemed to consist of only her, the darkness, and the road. She felt free and unencumbered for the first time since taking on the Witchblade.

A crossroads came into view. An old man was standing in one of the corners where the roads met, almost as if he were waiting for her.

He looked harmless, but then at first almost everything seemed harmless in this place. Still, Sara figured there was nothing to be gained by avoiding him, besides the fact that she'd feel pretty foolish if she just turned around and started walking the way she'd already come.

She kept going toward the crossroads. The old man stood waiting patiently. As she approached Sara realized that he was a *really* old man, with white hair, a seamed face, and thin body and limbs. His clothing was ragged and he leaned heavily on a crutch as he watched Sara approach. The benign expression on his ancient face was marred by the fact that the whites of his eyes were red as fresh spilled blood. The color of the irises floating in the scarlet pools was only a shade somewhat less subdued.

"Hello, missy," he said as she approached.

An odd sense of formality made Sara drop a brief curtsey, something she hadn't done since she was a small child. Somehow, here and now it seemed appropriate, and it did seem to please the old man.

"Hello, father," she said, still feeling as formal as a deb on her coming-out night, "can you tell me where I'm headed?"

The old man smiled even wider, revealing strong white teeth, unusual for a peasant of his apparent age.

"It seems you recognize Papa, even if you do not know my name. You are a courteous child, and your courtesy should be repaid."

"Thank you," Sara said, feeling obscurely pleased.

"I am Papa Legba," the old man said. "I guard the crossroad. I let people in. I let people out. Sometimes I help them." He grinned wickedly. "Sometimes, as the mood takes me, I hinder. But since tonight you are so beautiful and also so courteous to an old man, and also since someone has begged me to look out for you, I will give you three boons. I believe that is the customary number."

Sara knew now that she was dreaming. She wondered if momentarily Prince Charming would show up with a pair of expensive Nikes to shod her naked feet, and then they would dance until midnight when she'd be forced to run away, ultimately waking up alone and Nike-less in her little apartment back in Manhattan.

"Further," Papa Legba went on, "I will invoke one of those boons immediately, because I perceive that without my immediate help you'll wander into disaster."

Sara nodded. She felt she could trust the old man. There was no rational basis for this feeling, but it was rock solid and unshakable.

"Don't go further on this road tonight," the old man

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said. "Further lies the cemetery and you're not yet ready to confront what lies there. You have no idea of your enemy's strength, and in entering Guinee you've left a portion of your own strength behind. Learn more before you enter the cemetery. I am tempted to say more, but cannot."

"Thank you for what you have said."

The old man smiled. "It's little enough. I wish I could do more, but I am bound by laws just as you are. Though we both ignore them, sometimes, when we want, eh, missy?"

Sara laughed in agreement.

"Remember," Papa Legba said, "you can call upon me two more times. I cannot stop the world from spinning in its tracks, nor bring love to a frozen heart, but, eh, I have my abilities. I can help you when you need it, either in Guinee or in your world. Twice you can call, and I will answer."

Sara nodded. "What can I do to repay you for your kindness?"

Papa Legba looked thoughtful. "Some rum might be nice, when you get the chance. Oh, and double-cheeseburgers. I like those."

"I'll remember," Sara said.

"Now," the old man said, "you'd better get home. A friend needs your help."

Sara frowned. "Who?"

But the old man didn't answer her. He made a loud, horrible ringing noise, and for an instant Sara's mind went dark. She could see nothing, only hear that incessant ringing. When she finally thought of it, she opened her eyes and realized that she was in her apartment, lying on her bed, and it was her phone making that awful noise.

She grabbed it. "Hello?"

"Detective? This is Lieutenant Dickey."

It took her a moment to chase the remnants of her strange dream from her head, but finally she remembered the detective who'd been on the crime scene when they'd discovered Pierre-Pierre's body.

"Yes, what is it, Lieutenant?"

He sighed heavily. "We've found another body. I've been trying to get ahold of Detective McCarthy, but he's not answering his phone."

"That's strange," Sara said. "He's usually pretty conscientious about staying in touch."

"Well, not this time," Dickey said, and something cold and unsettling flashed through Sara's mind.

"The body," she asked, "male or female?"

"Female," he replied. The sudden wave of relief almost made Sara feel guilty. Jake was alive, then. But that meant, of course, somebody else wasn't. "Headless, of course. Young. Probably pretty . . . thanks," he said, off phone. "Somebody just handed me her purse. Either the murderer is getting careless, or he doesn't care if we ID his latest victims immediately. Hold on . . . let me look . . . Yeah, she was pretty, even in her driver's license photo. Her name was Juliette LeMaye . . . Detective?" he asked, after there was a long silence.

"I'm here," Sara said. "I'll be right there."

Dawn arrived, and so did Sara at the murder scene. Three hours' sleep punctuated by strange dreams wasn't near enough, but she had no choice. Even if Lieutenant Dickey had told her to go back to bed, she couldn't have. The first thing she'd done, even before dressing, was try Jake's cell phone number herself. It rang and rang, but he

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didn't answer. That wasn't normal. Jake never went anywhere without his cell phone. Sometimes she thought he took it into the shower with him so he wouldn't be out of contact even for a few minutes. He was that dedicated.

Given the not-so-veiled threats that Guillaume Sam had made the night before—given the fact that Jake's companion for the evening had been horribly, brutally murdered, it seemed as if Jake himself was in big trouble. Guillaume Sam must have him. Guillaume Sam must be holding him hostage for her good behavior.

Sara had no proof of that, of course. *But screw proof*, she thought. If she knew where Jake was, she'd just go get him. *Screw the law, and screw Guillaume Sam, too.* But she had no more idea where Jake was than she knew where Jimmie Hoffa was buried. Sam *might* be hiding him somewhere in Club Carrefour, but if she went busting in there with guns blazing they'd probably just kill him. There were certainly at least half a dozen places where they could secret Jake's body where no one would ever find it.

Papa Legba! she suddenly thought.

But could she gamble Jake's life on a dream, no matter how real it seemed? It was a risk she might have to take, but first there might be some clues to his current whereabouts at the crime scene, which, as it turned out, was somewhat familiar.

Police crime scene tape sealed off the entrance to the Cypress Hills National Cemetery. Sara recognized the uniforms guarding the tape. They'd been doing the same job at the last Machete Murderer killing.

"Detective Pezzini," one said with mock courtesy. "So nice to see you again."

Sara just looked at him until he lifted the tape for her

to pass under. As she went into the cemetery grounds she heard him say to his partner, "Just who the hell does she think she is?" but she walked on, her anger growing with her fear for Jake's safety.

The body was waiting, covered by a sheet, on a go-to-Jesus cart. The Crime Scene Unit was swarming like locusts, taking photos and measurements and scouring the area seemingly grass blade by grass blade.

Sara stopped by the dolly waiting to be loaded into the ambulance. She didn't really want to check the corpse, but knew she had to. There was always the possibility of wild coincidence. Perhaps this wasn't the girl Jake had been with last night.

But even that forlorn hope was mercilessly dashed by unpleasant reality as Sara lifted the sheet and gazed at the decapitated body. Even though the corpse was missing a head, there was no doubt that it was Juliette from the lotions and potions store. She was wearing the same clothes that Sara had seen on her the night before, and her body was rather unmistakable, even without a head.

Once vibrant and full of life she seemed sadly diminished as she lay on the dolly. The spark that had animated her was gone, blown out, and now she was just so much cold meat without beauty, with hope, without promise.

Sara turned away and saw Lieutenant Dickey watching her with a hangdog expression in his sad eyes. He, too, was much the same as the last time she'd seen him. He was even wearing the same suit, or one remarkably similar, that looked like it belonged to his bigger brother. His expression was the same. Sara wondered if he were habitually lugubrious, or if that was just a mask he wore to conceal his real feelings.

Sara looked around their surroundings, struck by a sudden thought.

"Who found the body here?" she asked, here being the proverbial middle of nowhere.

Lieutenant Dickey approached, gesturing at the emergency med techs to put the body in the ambulance and take it away. He sighed profoundly. "A passerby heard gunshots coming from the cemetery—" he checked his small pocket notebook "—at 3:37 and phoned nine-one-one. Didn't leave a name. It took a while, but the first uniform on the scene found the vic."

"No gunshot wounds on her that I saw. Was it her gun?" Sara asked, knowing already that it wasn't.

Dickey shook his head. "No, and probably no. From footprints in the area it looks like she had a companion. Male. He may have fired the shots. CSU is looking for slugs, but . . ."

Dickey gestured. Sara knew what he meant. The cemetery was wide open. There were no convenient walls to stop a bullet soon after it'd been fired. If they'd missed their intended target they might have hit a nearby tree, they might have plowed into the ground. Or they might have traveled hundreds of yards in any direction. It was an almost impossible trail to follow, but if anyone could do it, CSU could. In the meantime, Sara had something more important to consider.

"This companion," Sara said with a slight catch to her words. "Any trace of him. Or his body?"

"Not yet," Dickey said. "But we've got men out looking." He gazed around the cemetery grounds, not looking very happy. "It's like a damn primeval forest out there. It'll take days to search it properly."

"Yet the killer didn't bother to hide the body," Sara said hopefully.

"This killer," Dickey said with some deliberation, "is nuts. Who knows what's motivating him?"

I do, Sara told herself. And it's all my fault.

But she couldn't tell Dickey that Guillaume Sam had had Jake snatched so she'd back off the investigation. He'd think she was as nuts as the Machete Murderer himself. Maybe he'd be right, too. It was only a theory, but it fit the facts as she knew them, it fit the warning Guillaume Sam had given her the night before. It was somewhere to start, but how in the world could she follow up on it with Dickey on her tail?

"We got a place of residence and a place of employment from the vic's ID," Dickey said. "Where do you want to start?"

For once Sara agreed with the voices as they told her to watch out, to move carefully as far as Dickey was concerned. They didn't want other people to know of them and the Witchblade. She didn't want Dickey to know that Jake had been with the girl last night. She couldn't say why with any degree of certainty, except she was coming around to the feeling that the less people who knew the details of this case, the better.

"Let's see the address," she said, and Dickey handed over his notebook. Sara nodded. "Maybe we'd better split up. If her companion's not lying dead somewhere in the cemetery—" *Please, God, no*, Sara thought to herself—"—maybe he's been taken hostage, for whatever weird reason. Time may be of the essence."

Dickey nodded agreeably.

"I remember this shop from my last trip to Fulton

Street," Sara said. "I'll check that out. You can go to her home address."

"I don't like to deal with grieving families," Dickey said.

"It's part of the job," Sara replied, trying to sound sympathetic.

"Never said it wasn't," Dickey said, taking his notebook back from Sara and returning it to his jacket pocket.

Fulton Street was just waking up. Coffeeshops and lunch counters were opening for breakfast. Bakeries and some of the small food stores were opening their doors as well. Lotions and Potions was still closed, of course. The sign on the door said it opened at nine. Sara looked into Paul Narcisse's bookstore as she went past, but it, too, was dark.

She stopped at the walk-up window of a hole-in-the-wall coffeeshop and ordered a large black coffee and, not to be stereotypical, a danish. She wasn't hungry at all, but she knew she had to eat something. She needed the calories and caffeine for energy. A long day stretched ahead of her and she felt as if she were already running on empty.

She ate and drank as she walked. The coffee was hot and strong and fragrant. Any other day she would have enjoyed it immensely. Now it just burned a hole in her gut that the danish did little to fill. She had to, she thought, take better care of herself.

The voices agreed sternly, but fell silent again as she reached her destination.

People were walking down the path that led to St. Casimir's, alone and in groups of two or three. The first of

the daily masses had ended. Father Baltazar, she thought, was on the job as early as she was.

She went into the church where the priest was talking to a little old man who seemed as ancient as the Papa Legba of her dream. The language they used seemed to consist of mostly consonants, and the conversation ended with the old man hobbling out into the autumn morning on his two wooden canes.

"He reminds me of someone I met last night," Sara said, "I think."

"You think he reminds you of somebody, or you think you met somebody?" Father Baltazar asked with a smile.

"Depends if you count dreams," Sara said, and told him what had happened, and how it had ended with the phonecall waking her up. She completed her story with the discovery of the body in the cemetery and her theory of what had happened to Jake.

The priest justified her trust. She could see that he believed her, immediately and implicitly. "You're probably right about Guillaume Sam kidnapping your partner. He's more than capable of such an act. As we've seen—he's done worse." He looked seriously at Sara. "There's no shame if you back out of this. Though you're brave and clearly seem to have more experience with such... odd... occurrences than most people, you're out of your depth here. Guillaume Sam is like nothing you've ever faced before."

"Yes, he is," Sara said flatly. "He's a criminal. He's a killer. Maybe not by his own hands, but certainly by his orders. It's my job to put scum like him away so he can't hurt anyone any more. Besides." She frowned, feeding on the anger building up in her mind. "He's made it personal."

"All right," Father Baltazar said gravely. "Just so you

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understand. This isn't something you can solve with a pistol. Or even the weight of the law."

"What can we do then?" Sara asked.

"We face the devil with our courage, our knowledge, and our faith," he said quietly. "First, though, we must rescue your friend. With him under Guillaume Sam's control, our hands are tied. We dare not make a move against the *bokor*."

"Do you have any idea where he might be keeping Jake?"

Father Baltazar shook his head. "There are several possibilities, but we have no room to guess. If we guess wrong, then Guillaume Sam will know you've completely rejected his offer, and . . ." The priest paused, as if gauging his words. "And he will kill your partner. You can depend on that."

"Then we must be certain when we strike," Sara said. She looked at Father Baltazar. "How can I get in touch with Papa Legba?"

The day seemed to go on forever. Sara tried to immerse herself in the routine of police work, but the minute hands on her wristwatch dragged like hours. It didn't much help that she was chained to Carl Dickey. He seemed like a decent man and a good cop. He was thorough in his investigation and respectful of Sara and her capabilities, but she couldn't confide in him. She couldn't trust him with her knowledge and her suspicions, so basically they spent the day spinning their wheels as they tracked down background information on Juliette LeMaye.

Dickey was curious about Jake's continuing absence, but Sara made a plausible excuse for him, saying that he

was investigating the death of Agent Jackson of Immigration and Naturalization and trying to define how it related to the case.

It was night before she managed to shake him off, saying that she was going home to get some sleep. Instead she doubled back to Fulton Street and The Serpent and the Rainbow, where Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar were waiting for her. Both looked solemn. Both were clearly deadly serious.

"This isn't a frivolous step," Paul Narcisse said. "It may have repercussions regarding your career—your entire life."

"I'm prepared for that," Sara said.

"Father Baltazar has told me that you've had . . . unusual . . . dreams of Guinee. That you also seem to have or know something you've chosen so far to keep to yourself that may have a bearing on all this—"

"Believe me," Sara said sincerely, "if it was something I felt I could share . . ." She paused as the angry murmur of the voices swept over her. "I would . . . but I can't. Now. Don't ask me to explain. I simply can't."

"You ask much of us, Detective Pezzini," Paul Narcisse said. "You ask us to reveal our secrets, yet keep yours hidden." He regarded her silently for a moment. "But very well. It seems as if that's the way it has to be. For now." He looked at Father Baltazar, and nodded. "Let's go."

They went out the bookstore's back door, locking it behind them. The priest, Sara noted, was wearing civilian clothes, not his usual clerical garb. Paul Narcisse was dressed in white, white pants, neat and sharply pressed, and a white shirt of soft linen. They went up a dark alley, traveling north from Fulton Street, up a couple of residential blocks to the area less densely settled than the

streets around the business district. The houses here were single-family dwellings instead of attached townhouses. They sat on their own plots of land with taller trees, more expansive lawns, and fewer streetlights. It all looked somewhat familiar. She thought she knew where they were headed.

They walked in silence, though right at the start of their journey Paul Narcisse had looked at her and asked, "What's in the bag?" gesturing at the small white paper bag that Sara carried.

More because she felt somewhat foolish than because she felt any need to be mysterious, Sara simply said, "A present for someone."

"I see," Paul Narcisse said, leaving it at that.

Though they were approaching it from a different angle and via a different street, Sara knew that they were headed in the direction of the Cypress Hills National Cemetery. And they weren't the only ones. Single pedestrians, as well as small groups of two or three, were silently walking along with them in the darkness, all headed for a common destination.

She wanted to confirm her feeling with Paul Narcisse or Father Baltazar, but the night through which they moved was permeated by a deep silence that Sara was loathe to break. It was almost unbelievable that they were within the boundaries of New York City. Only occasionally did a city noise, the sound of a car horn, the sudden squeal of brakes, penetrate the quiet night through which they moved. It was almost as if they'd been transported to another place or time where there was no city around them, only the quiet solitude of an empty countryside.

Within minutes they arrived at the cemetery's open gate. They followed those who had arrived before them,

acknowledging others with a nod or a glance, but never a murmur, never even a single word passed anyone's lips. If the others thought Sara's presence strange or unusual, they never said so, nor even indicated such a feeling with an expression or gesture. The fact that she was with Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar seemed to confirm an instant acceptance.

They went deep into the cemetery, deeper than Sara had gone when she'd followed Gene the previous day. At one point they approached what looked like an impenetrable thicket, but to Sara's surprise once they reached the veritable wall of bushes, shrubs, small trees, and entwining vines, she discovered several paths. Reaching the beginnings of the paths involved a lot of stooping and twisting and pushing through the living barrier that protected them, but once past the initial camouflage the foliage opened up so that the going became as easy as a stroll through the park.

They came upon a sheltered hollow surrounded by a dense stand of trees. The trees were thick with scores of pigeons and doves. They cooed quietly and incessantly like a continuous, wordless chorus. Open torches blazed in the night and Sara felt as if she'd stepped back into another century. The voices murmured to her, uncertain. She didn't like that. She didn't want to be bothered by them now. But then, she never wanted to be bothered by them.

An odd structure stood in the center of the sheltered hollow, with perhaps a hundred people standing quietly around it. More were joining the crowd as Sara and her guides approached, but it seemed that they were among a final trickle of newcomers. Most of those attending the night's ceremony were already present.

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Paul Narcisse turned to Sara. "I have to leave you here. I have many duties to perform this evening."

"You'll put me in touch with Papa Legba?" Sara asked. "Is that what all of this is about?" Her gestures included the sheltered hollow, the structure, and the assembled crowd.

Paul Narcisse shook his head. "I am but a vessel. It is impossible to predict who will fill me." He glanced at Father Baltazar. "My brother seems to think that you have the favor of at least some of the *loa*. Sometimes they have their own reasons for doing things, and they chose certain people as their champions. We shall just have to see how it all works out."

Paul Narcisse and Father Baltazar exchanged nods and he walked off through the crowd, exchanging murmured greetings with many as he went to the wooden structure beyond.

"What is this place?" Sara asked.

"It is the *hounfort*," Father Baltazar said quietly. "The temple, if you will, of this particular parish."

"Why here, in this graveyard?"

The priest shrugged. "Why not? It's consecrated ground, a holy place already. It's hidden. Few except the believers know of it. Others who might know a little look away and let the people worship as they will."

"Don't you have a problem with any of this?" Sara asked. "You're a priest. A Catholic priest."

"I'm a believer. I have faith in God and his creations. I have seen things here . . ." A sudden faraway look came into Father Baltazar's eyes. For a moment he looked up at the heavens, and when he looked back at Sara there was something of knowledge in his gaze.

"You of all people should know that the universe is a mysterious place. Man has only skimmed away the top-most portion of its secrets."

Sara nodded. He had her there.

"Besides," the priest continued, "over the centuries *voudon* and Catholicism have grown together in many ways. The saints are identified with *loa* and worshiped as such." He shrugged. "Who knows which guise they may prefer? The Father in Rome may say one thing, but he's in Rome and I'm here. I have seen things . . ."

"What exactly is going to happen?" Sara asked as Father Baltazar's voice faded away. He seemed to be watching the reminiscences playing in his mind.

He shrugged. "Paul will call upon the *loa* through music and dance. One can never be certain what will happen or exactly who will answer the summons. If all goes well Papa Legba will come forth first. He's the gatekeeper. He opens the way for the other *loa* to enter the world."

The *hounfort*, Sara saw, had two main parts. In the back of the structure were a series of small rooms built of stone. Father Baltazar called them the *caille mysteres*, or the sanctuary. He explained that they contained altars to various *loa*, along with supplies and equipment needed for the ceremonies that took place in the front of the *hounfort*, which was called the peristyle.

The peristyle consisted of a corrugated tin roof held up by a number of poles painted brilliant shades of red and green and orange and blue. The central pole, called the *poteau-mitan* (or, naturally enough, the center post), was the pivot around which the dances would flow. Also, according to the priest, it was the ladder by which the *loa* descended to the earth. Instead of being a single solid color like the other posts, it was decorated with tightly

wound spirals of various bright, complimentary colors, so that it looked like a big, multi-flavored candy stick. A circular pediment ran around the base of the *poteau-mitan*, about four feet high and two feet thick. Sara watched people approach this ledge, put items on it, bow respectfully, and then rejoin the waiting crowd. She couldn't tell exactly what they were leaving behind. Some of the items were bottles, some were bowls, some were so swathed in wrappings they were complete mysteries.

"What's going on there?" she asked Father Baltazar.

"The initiates are leaving offerings for the *loa*," he explained. "Food, drink, perhaps small bottles of perfume, or other items associated with specific *loa*. They hope that the *loa*, if called, will find favor with them because of their gifts."

Sara nodded. "Excuse me for a moment."

She made her way through the crowd. Though she was a stranger, no one spoke to her or tried to hinder her. They watched as she approached the concrete altar around the base of the pillar, and placed the small paper bag she carried among the plates of chicken, bowls of rice and egg, and small bottles of soda or spirits, then rejoined Father Baltazar.

"What was that?" he asked.

"My own little sacrifice," Sara said with a smile. She nudged the priest and pointed. "What's happening now?"

"Ah," Father Baltazar said, "Paul is 'drawing' the *veve* for tonight's ceremony with flour."

He had come out of one of the *caille mysteres*, accompanied by three other men. Taking handfuls of white flour from the burlap sacks they carried, they carefully sifted it onto the dirt floor around the *poteau-mitan*, drawing, as Father Baltazar put it, a complicated pattern.

"Pretend that I know nothing about *voudon*," Sara suggested, "and tell me what's going on."

"All right," he said. "I don't want to come off like a stuffy university lecturer, but if you're interested—"

"I'm interested," Sara said. "I've got to understand this stuff if we're going to find Jake and stop the killer."

And, she added to herself silently, *to see if any of this could help with me own predicament*. At that, the voices roiled quietly, almost amusedly. They had been rather quiet so far, as if they too were observing everything around them. Perhaps they were learning about voudon themselves, and were leery of its power and uncertain of its efficacy.

"Each *loa*," the priest explained, "has its own symbol, called a *veve*. It's like a . . . wave pattern that draws a symbolic picture of the *loa*'s characteristics. For example, that of Erzulie Freda Dahomey, the goddess of love, dreams, and romance is basically, a checkered heart surrounded by lace. However, that of her sister, Erzulie je Rouge, her left-handed incarnation, is that of a heart with a dagger plunged through it. Red Erzulie's love is jealous and angry. Those possessed by her throw tantrums. The muscles of their bodies tighten in uncontrollable spasms, their fists clench in rage."

"Who would call upon such a creature?" Sara asked.

"Those who want to do harm. *Bokors*. But," Father Baltazar added, "sometimes she comes when her sister is called. *Voudon* is not a science. And it is more than an art."

Finally, Paul Narcisse and his helpers seemed satisfied with the design they'd created around the *poteau-mitan*. After a brief, quiet consultation, they retreated back into the rooms at the rear of the *hounfort*.

It looked as if the peristyle was a later addition grafted

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onto the *caille mysteres*, which were older structures, built in mossy stone. They were attached like townhouses, arranged in a shallow, semi-circular arc. Sara suddenly realized that they were above-ground crypts, probably once used by a large family or group of related families when the Cypress Hills National Cemetery was still an active concern.

There was a sudden murmur in the crowd as a man emerged from the sanctuary carrying a large drum. He looked familiar. Sara realized that he was the drummer of Mountains of Madness. She also realized that she didn't know his name.

Two other men accompanied him, carrying, respectively, a medium-sized and a small drum. They took up a place together behind the *poteau-mitan*.

The drummer from Mountains of Madness skimmed the surface of his drumhead and a low rumbling came forth.

"It begins," Father Baltazar said quietly.

As the assembled crowd turned their attention to the dancing ground, Paul Narcisse came again out of the *caille mysteres*, his arms spread wide, his expression intent and serious. Following him, a woman dressed in white led a line of a dozen or so dancers out of the sanctuary and they stalked counter-clockwise around the *poteau-mitan*. The men wore white shirts, the women white dresses and colorful kerchiefs tied about their heads.

Paul Narcisse started to speak in a language Sara had never heard before. Somehow, maybe from knowledge leaking from the voices in her head, she knew it was an old language from an antique land. She couldn't understand the words, but from the intonation of Narcisse's

voice she could tell that it was a plea, an invocation of strong and strange powers. It was, Father Baltazar whispered to her, *langage*, the mystic tongue *hougans* used to communicate with the *loa* in Guinee.

It seemed as if everything in the world was waiting, silent, expectant. The crowd was quiet, without a whispered murmur or shuffle of feet. The three drummers stood alert by their drums, watching Paul Narcisse who, face shining with sweat, arms thrown wide with gourd rattles in each hand, still prayed in *langage*. His eyes were closed, his teeth clenched. Those who had accompanied him from the *caille mysteres* were also watching him, silent and expectant.

When he finished his impassioned plea the sudden utter silence exploded like a thunderclap on Sara's brain. Even the voices in her head went totally silent. Tension built to an almost sexual peak. Sara could see the dancers' muscles start to twitch.

And then the drums began.

The small one first. It was no more than eighteen inches tall, and the only one played with sticks instead of the drummer's hands. It sounded like a staccato barrage of hail hitting a tin roof.

The medium drum added a steady, rolling surf surging against a dark beach.

Then came the largest drum, played by the drummer from Mountains of Madness, and from it erupted the booming heartbeat of the world.

They each had their own pitch. They each had their own rhythm but they blended together like the braids of a rope. Sara had never heard anything like it before.

Led by the woman in white, the dancers began to weave around the *poteau-mitan*, ignoring the delicately-

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drawn *veve* at their feet, mixing it with sand as they shuffled through it. They danced singly, not in pairs, almost flat-footed, their shoulders shuddering and arms flapping clumsily.

Sara wasn't sure how long the dancing went on, but suddenly the man on the big drum threw his head back and she saw that his eyes were wild. Before he had played passionately but he'd been in control. Now he played like a man possessed. The big drum broke away from the others, smashing the rhythms that had meshed them together. Its beat hurled a broken counterpoint that struck the dancers like a volley of spears.

Suddenly something seemed to strike Sara in the head, exploding like white darkness in her brain. She grabbed her temples, swaying. Father Baltazar, noticing her distress, caught her. She sagged into his surprisingly strong arms.

"What is it?" he asked, concern on his face.

"The drum," she gasped. "Every beat feels like a nail driven into my brain, down my spine, across every nerve ending . . ."

"We can't stop the ceremony now," Father Baltazar said. "It would be dangerous to all involved!"

Sara grit her teeth. "I can take it."

She was panting like an animal, trying to control her pain.

"Hold on," Father Baltazar said, gripping her closely as if he could confer his strength to her shaking body.

Sara tried to focus on the dancers. Like the drummer, they too, seemed to have lost control, and were wildly shaking and gyrating, no longer in concert, but as if in some chaotic mosh pit where everyone was dancing to a different song.

She blinked rapidly. Paul Narcisse was gone. He'd disappeared from the dancing ground.

The pain in her head mounted, and with it the babbling of the voices. They were almost incoherent as if they too were in pain. Sara felt her grip loosening. Under her garments a metal band popped into existence and she gritted her teeth trying to hold it back. She couldn't allow the Witchblade to materialize in front of all these people. For one thing, its razor-sharp edges would tear Father Baltazar to pieces. She concentrated fiercely, holding it at bay, but she knew she couldn't keep it away for long.

And then Paul Narcisse emerged again from the *caille mysteres*. He must have ducked back into the sanctuary soon after the drummer had gone into his mad beat. It was Paul Narcisse returning to the dance floor, certainly. Yet, as Sara gazed at him, she couldn't be sure.

He had shrunken, somehow. Become smaller and twisted. He walked now with a pronounced limp. He probably couldn't have walked at all if it wasn't for the crutch that he leaned against heavily.

He shuffled slowly like an old man, and, even from where she stood Sara could see that his eyes had changed. They weren't the eyes of Paul Narcisse at all. They were ancient eyes, old with knowledge and experience well beyond a human lifetime. Their whites were shockingly bloodshot.

He went to the concrete altar built around the *poteau-mitan*, walking through the gyrating dancers as if they weren't there. He went straight to the bag that Sara had placed there, took out a double cheeseburger, unwrapped it, and began to eat. He looked directly at Sara, and the pain in her head went away. She hung in

Father Baltazar's arms, more from her desire for warm human contact than from weakness.

"That was good," Papa Legba said, as he slowly came towards Sara with his hobbling gait. "Next time bring a large fries, too."

He stopped before Sara and the priest. The rest of the crowd continued to watch the ongoing ceremony, giving them a bubble of privacy in the controlled chaos that had gripped the old graveyard.

There was no question in Sara's mind that this was Papa Legba, that he'd descended from Guinee and taken over Paul Narcisse's body. The movements, body language, facial expression, even vocal inflections were those of the ancient *loa*. Wherever Paul Narcisse was, he no longer inhabited his own body.

"I need your help, Papa Legba," Sara said.

The spirit inhabiting the body of Paul Narcisse nodded. "You may ask for it, twice more. I'm afraid that is all I may help you, for many are in need of my aid."

"That should be enough," Sara said. "My partner, Jake McCarthy, is missing. We think Guillaume Sam has taken him as a hostage."

"Ah, the great *malfacteur*. He is a dangerous one, with a powerful patron."

"Who, Papa Legba?"

"Baron Samedi, master of the Guede Family, god of death and patron of sorcerers. A most puissant *loa*."

Sara was afraid that Legba would confirm what she had been told. It looked as if rescuing Jake would fall somewhere between the impossible and the miraculous, and she figured that she couldn't do it alone. She would have to call upon the Witchblade.

With that thought, the voices inside her, strangely quiet and respectful in the presence of Papa Legba, quivered with barely suppressed delight.

"How can I find Jake?" she asked with determination.

"I will send you a guide," Papa Legba promised. "His name is Sandro. Meet him at the Club Carrefour. He will show you a place you never thought existed in this city."

Sara looked around herself. "I've already been to such a place tonight."

Papa Legba laughed. "No, you haven't, child." He gestured freely with the hand that did not grip his crutch. "This must all seem very strange to a most modern *blanc* as yourself, but, believe me, much more good than harm ever comes from this *hounfort*. Why, you yourself have sought—and received—help here." He shook his head. "No, Sandro will take you to a place is not like this at all. He will take you to the heart of darkness in the city, where play the *loup-garou* and *zobop*. You must go there if you're to save your partner, but—" and here the old spirit looked concerned "—I despair of your ever coming out."

"She will not go alone," Father Baltazar said, speaking for the first time. "I will accompany her."

The *loa* nodded. "That is good. You are a man of the spirits. A strong man. She will need your aid."

Sara shook her head. "I can't have you coming with me. The danger—"

"That's why," Father Baltazar said with quiet firmness, "I'm going with you."

"Let him come," Papa Legba told her. "You'll need his help." He turned to the priest. "And Father—"

"Yes?"

"You will be better off bringing a gun than a cross. Just so you know."

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The priest nodded solemnly. Papa Legba turned back toward the *poteau-mitan*, where the drumming and dancing had continued unabated.

"Now I must return to the ceremony," Papa Legba said. "The night is young. There is much dancing ahead and many *loa* will be called to possess a mount and walk again on this earth."

He hobbled back toward the *poteau-mitan*. They watched him for a moment, then Sara turned to Father Baltazar.

"What kind of dream have I fallen into?" she asked.

"For these people," he said, indicating the dancers and the raptly watching crowd, "it is simply life. For others—for you, for Jake, for those fallen to the Machete Murderer—it is a nightmare."

He took her arm and together they walked swiftly from the forgotten graveyard.

CHAPTER TEN

How are we going to find this Sandro?" Sara asked. She paused, thinking. "And how will we know him when we see him?"

"Good questions," Father Baltazar said. "Let's just hope he—or she—is better informed than we are."

There were again in the city, a world of cars and noise and electricity, only a few miles removed from the primeval sanctuary where the *hounfort* lay unsuspected, where the drums called down the *loa* to meet their worshipers on quite a personal level.

A crowd had already gathered around Club Carrefour. Many stood outside, smoking and talking, and getting a breath of fresh air. The autumn warmth still lingered, but something else was also in the air, a sense of expectancy. Of hesitancy. Sara could feel it, but she couldn't quite understand it. It was as if the city were waiting for something. There was a sense of change in the air, and Sara felt sure that it was connected to Guillaume Sam and the Machete Murderer and spirits coming down the sky to dance in old, forgotten graveyards.

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A familiar figure came out of the club, noticed them standing outside, and headed in their direction. It was Alek Gervalis. He had a worried look on his face.

"Hello, Sara. Father," he said.

"What's the matter?" Sara asked.

"Oh, probably nothing," Alek said. He shrugged, and Sara could see that there was an element of annoyance as well as worry on his face. "It's the boys."

"Rog and Jer?" Father Baltazar asked.

"Who else?" This time the exasperation showed clearly in his voice. "We're trying to work out some new songs before we leave next week for the road, and they've gone off somewhere. You haven't seen them around, have you?"

"Not since last night," Sara said.

Alek sighed. "That's the last time I saw them myself. They were with that chick Jean." He shook his head. "I never cared much for her. She's strange. Beyond strange, actually. Her and her brother."

Sara, remembering the stench of burned human flesh, nodded in agreement.

"This isn't the first time they've gone off, is it?" Father Baltazar asked.

"No," Alek said. "And probably not the last. It's damned annoying, though." He stopped for a moment, frowning slightly. "What are you guys doing here, anyway?" he asked. "If I'm not prying into police department secrets, that is."

Sara and Father Baltazar exchanged glances.

No, Sara said to herself, you see, we just came from a voodoo ceremony where Papa Legba promised us a spirit guide to lead us to the lair of an evil sorcerer who's kidnaped my partner.

"Um," Sara said, looking at Father Baltazar.

"Um," Father Baltazar replied, looking at Sara.

Alek, who was facing the opposite direction, suddenly started. "Jesus Christ, did you see that?"

They both turned quickly, but the dark alley down which he pointed was quiet and empty.

"No," they said together.

"What was it?" Father Baltazar asked.

"I'm not sure," Alek said slowly. "I just caught a glimpse of it. It was moving fast. Some kind of big animal, I think. It went right down that alley beside the club."

"Well," Sara said, "maybe I'd better check it out. Uh, good luck finding the boys."

Alek made a sudden grimace of annoyance. "Ah, screw the boys. I want to see what that thing is."

Sara and Father Baltazar exchanged glances.

"No, my son," the priest said. "Don't worry about it—"

"I'm not worried," Alek said. "I'm curious."

"You know what they said about curiosity," Sara muttered.

"I'm not a cat," Alek said. "There's something there. Let's find out what it is."

He stalked off toward the alley. Sara opened her mouth, but Father Baltazar laid a hand on her arm.

"He saw it, not us. Maybe he's meant to accompany us. I've often thought there was something about him, an aura of power—or at least the possibility of power."

"I can't let him go into danger unknowingly—"

"What danger?" the priest asked. "What can happen here in the open? Besides, it's probably nothing."

Alek, already at the mouth of the alley, turned towards the others. "Are you coming or not?"

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"We're coming," Father Baltazar called out.

They caught up to him, Sara muttering to herself, "Yeah, what could happen?"

The voices, though, seemed to approve of Alek's presence—though whether that was good or bad for Alek, Sara didn't know. But she decided that it would be foolish to fight the voices and the priest both when they finally seemed to agree on something.

The alley ran between the Club Carrefour and an adjacent three-story building. It was longer than Sara would have expected and narrower than she liked. There were no streetlights, no lights at all. It was choked with Dumpsters and old garbage sitting piled up around Dumpsters. The Dumpsters on the Club Carrefour side were overflowing with empty liquor bottles and the combined fumes wafting from the discarded bottles—beer, wine, and every kind of spirit known to partiers at the dawn of the twenty-first century—was enough to turn Sara's stomach. The narrow confines of the alley seemed to trap the odors so that a swamp-like miasma clung to the vicinity.

"Phew," Alek contributed. "This place stinks."

"Thank you, Dr. Watson," Sara said. "What did this thing look like, anyway?"

"I told you," Alek said, "I didn't get much of a look. But it was some kind of animal. Furry. White. Maybe a weird dog of some kind. It was too big to be a cat."

"Was it?" Father Baltazar said in an odd-sounding voice.

"Yeah—" Alek turned to where the priest was looking. "Holy . . ."

It was, after all, a cat, but a cat unlike any Sara had ever seen before.

He was standing by a side door to the club, staring at the three of them with eyes the color of blood. He was white, gleaming white, as if a spotlight was shining on him. His fur was thick and fluffy, his tail was a high plume that he carried arching over his back, his breast was covered by a bushy mane like that of a lion. He was three times the size of an ordinary domestic cat, probably forty pounds of long, lean, and lithely muscular feline.

"I wasn't expecting something like this," Sara said in a soft voice, "but that must be him."

"Him?" Alek asked. "Who?"

She looked at the singer.

"This is something you don't want to be mixed up in," she told him.

"Police business?"

Sara hesitated.

"Yes," she finally said.

"You're looking for a big white cat on police business?"

"Look—"

"Does this involve the boys in any way?"

Sara looked at Father Baltazar. He shrugged, as if telling her that it was her call.

"Possibly," she said, unable to lie to him. "But this could be dangerous."

"Not could be," the priest corrected quietly. "Will be."

Alek looked from Sara to the priest.

"Count me in," he said.

This is not going, Sara thought, exactly by the book. But then things she was involved in rarely did.

"All right," she said. "But you do what I tell you. You obey my orders, or I'll send you packing."

"Yes, ma'am," Alek said with an amused grin.

"I mean it."

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The tone of Sara's voice wiped the smile from his face. "I know you do."

"You better."

Alek nodded. Sara took a deep breath. "All right. Let's . . . go see the cat."

"Just who *is* the cat?" Alek asked Father Baltazar in a low voice.

"Possibly a spirit guide sent by Papa Legba. If it is him, his name is Sandro."

"Oh," Alec said.

The cat was sitting, waiting patiently, his great plume of a tail curled around his feet. As the three approached he stood and stretched languidly. He arched his back in greeting and rubbed against Sara's legs, his head nearly reaching her thighs. She hunkered down. He reared up and put his front paws on her knees so that they were almost eye to eye.

"Are you Sandro? Did Papa Legba send you?" she asked, feeling more than a little foolish.

The cat didn't speak or make any other kind of overt response, but there seemed to be understanding in his red eyes.

"We're looking for Jake McCarthy," she continued, only somewhat reassured by the cat's continuing attention. "Can you lead us to him?"

He stalked off, stopped in front of the side door to Club Carrefour, and waited there patiently while the three exchanged glances.

"It seems he wants us to go in," Father Baltazar said.

"Maybe he can give us a sign," Alek suggested. "Like meowing twice, or something."

Sara thought she could detect a sign of growing impatience on Sandro's feline features.

"I think we should just go on in," Sara said.

She pulled open the door, which squeaked alarmingly, exposing a portal into blackness. Sandro slipped past them into the dark, pausing only long enough to toss a backward glance in their direction as he disappeared into the building.

Sara took a deep breath and drew her weapon.

"All right," she said in a low voice. "I'll go in first, then Alek. Father Baltazar, you bring up the rear. And move *quietly*."

They were in a short corridor. Sara could barely make out Sandro at the other end of the passage, waiting before another closed door. The hallway was unfurnished, and just this side of filthy. Evidently, it was a short service corridor used to ferry garbage to the alley Dumpsters, more than a little of which had ended up on the floor rather than in the alley. Sara figured they'd better move quickly before they met with a busboy carrying another carton of empties.

The door blocking the corridor turned out to be an unlatched swinging door. Sandro waited for them to get closer, then he reared up on his hind legs, put his large paws against the door, and swung it open himself. Thankfully, it opened a lot more quietly than the outer door. As they moved closer to the interior of the club they could hear music throbbing. They could feel the muted vibrations of numerous pairs of feet on the dance floor.

Sandro waited only a moment, as if confirming that they were following, then took off like a flash down the next stretch of corridor, turning left down the first branching hallway.

"I hope he knows where he's going," Alek said in a low voice.

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"Shhh," Sara and Father Baltazar admonished simultaneously.

They followed the cat down a set of rickety wooden stairs, moving slowly because they were going into deeper darkness, Sara almost stumbled at the head of the stairs, and Father Baltazar hissed to get her attention.

"Here," he said, passing down a pen flashlight.

"Thanks—" Sara began, and cautiously started downwards, the light focused on Sandro's plumed tail as he pranced along ahead of them.

They got halfway down the stairway when a sudden sound made them all freeze. Sara clicked off the light and they stood on the stairs, holding their breath, looking back behind them toward the source of the noise.

Behind and now above them, in the corridor they'd just quit, someone came through from the club, whistling off-tune and dragging a full garbage bag. They could just barely discern him in the corridor. They waited until he passed, until they heard the sound of the outer door screeching open, a signal he'd reached the alley. Then Sara flicked on the light and they went down the stairs as quickly and quietly as they could, only to find themselves in a dark storeroom.

Sandro was waiting for them patiently at the foot of the stairs before a stack of crates of Importer Vodka.

"We don't dare turn on the light," Sara said after the penflash had swept over a bare bulb hanging down from a wire in the ceiling. "This'll have to do."

Alek looked around.

"They couldn't have stashed Jake here," he observed. "There's no door. He could just walk away."

He was looking at Sara, and it seemed that the same thought hit both of them at the same moment.

Unless, Sara told herself, they were stashing a body.

"Uh—" Alek said. "He could be tied and gagged, though."

"Yeah," Sara said in a low voice. Bleakness shot through her at the thought.

"I don't think it's as simple as that," Father Baltazar said. "Papa Legba wouldn't go through the trouble of sending us a spirit guide to lead us down a corridor and a flight of stairs."

The three looked at Sandro. He seemed to be nodding in agreement. He went down an aisle formed by two rows of stacked liquor cartons and stopped about halfway to the far wall. He stood there for a moment, then began scratching at the floor at his feet, barely visible in the light cast by the small penflash.

"There's something there," Sara said.

They followed the tiny spotlight. Sandro looked up at them expectantly, then down to a spot on the floor covered by a rubber carpet runner. Alek kneeled down and flipped the runner aside to expose a wooden trapdoor set into the floor, held in place by a padlocked shaft shot through an eyebolt.

"What have we here?" he asked rhetorically.

The three hunkered down around the trapdoor, glancing at each other.

Sara rattled the padlock. "I don't know about you guys, but my breaking and entering skills are a little weak."

"I'm a musician," Alek said, "not a burglar."

Father Baltazar shook his head, but then glanced at Sandro. "Papa Legba is the opener of the way. The guardian of the door."

Sandro, who was sitting on his haunches in his familiar position with his tail wrapped around his feet, seemed to grin a feline grin. He stood, reached out, and tapped the lock gently with a paw. It sprung open like he'd used a lockpick on it.

The three looked at each other.

"Thank you," Father Baltazar said.

Sandro seemed to nod.

"Carefully and quietly," Sara said, as he reached out to shoot the bolt and open the trapdoor.

The door was well oiled and opened without a squeak. Alek carefully set it down on the floor without making a sound and the three—the four, counting Sandro—kneeled around the opening, looking down at a ladder leading into blackness.

A soft breeze wafted up from the unknown below. It was cool and rather moist, smelling of damp and naked earth. Sara leaned over the opening and cautiously flashed the beam of the penlight into the darkness, but it was too feeble to illuminate whatever lay below.

"Can you see anything?" Father Baltazar asked in a low voice.

Sara shook her head. "We'll have to go down blind." She looked at the men. "I don't think Sandro'll be able to negotiate a ladder. One of you will have to take him."

Alek cleared his throat. "I don't want to, uh, shirk any duty, but I'm, uh, allergic to cats. I'd hate to sneeze at a critical moment."

"No problem," Father Baltazar said. He held out his hands and Sandro leaped lightly into his arms, pressed against his chest, and hooked his front paws over the priest's shoulder.

"All right," Sara said. "Down we go."

It was not a long descent, no more than thirty or forty steps down a ladder made of narrow gauge metal piping. Descending a ladder in utter darkness isn't the easiest thing to do, but at least the rungs were regularly spaced and the ladder was solidly constructed. This must be, Sara thought, a commonly used route to wherever Sandro was taking them. She wondered if it was used frequently enough to be guarded, or if security was lax. Or, better yet, non-existent. She hoped it were the latter.

Sara reached the bottom first, descending to a paved surface of some kind. She stepped aside, giving the others room to drop down from the ladder, and stood listening and looking as hard as she could.

She heard only silence, saw only darkness. They seemed to be in a tunnel of some kind. She waited until all were down from the ladder, then chanced a brief flash of the light. It really wasn't bright enough to illuminate anything, but there was no reaction from hidden guards, so she thumbed it back on after some moments of quiet darkness.

They were standing, she discovered, on a raised concrete platform that dropped off into yet more darkness only a few feet in front of them. She went forward cautiously. Sandro, who had been let down by the priest, stalked at her feet.

Leaning over the edge of the precipitous drop-off, Sara saw that they were overlooking a dirt-floored tunnel some ten feet below their current level. She pointed the penflash upward, but couldn't discern the tunnel's ceiling in the feeble light.

A sluggish rivulet of water was running through the center of the tunnel's floor. Running, though, was the

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wrong word, Sara thought. It was barely trickling. They could all smell it from where they stood, especially Sandro, who seemed displeased with its strong odor of decay. Also in the center of the tunnel floor were broken iron tracks, clearly long unused.

"A lost subway tunnel?" Father Baltazar speculated as he kneeled next to Sara, looking down with her at the tunnel floor.

"Seemingly so," Sara said. "It could make for a convenient hideout, all right."

Sandro rubbed against her arm, impatient to get on. He did all but announce, "This way," as he led them down the tunnel's platform into the waiting darkness.

They walked for fifteen minutes, though perhaps because of the darkness it seemed much longer.

The concrete platform ended abruptly after twenty yards or so. They had to hang from the lip of the platform and drop down four or five feet to the tunnel floor below. It was an unnerving thing to do in the near darkness, and less than pleasant to walk so close to the stinking rivulet paralleling their path through the subterranean depths. The ground was soft, almost muddy, and seemed to suck at their feet with every step, making Sara feel like they were trekking through an underground swamp. The air was cool, but with that peculiar musty taste common to caves and other sunless, closed-in environments. It was almost impossible to gauge time and distance, but eventually Sara knew they were approaching something when she could see faint light leaking in from around the tunnel curve.

She switched off the penflash. It was light enough so she could discern the white blur of her companions'

faces, as well as the even whiter blur that was Sandro, leading them onwards.

She looked at the others, and held a finger across her lips. They nodded, Father Baltazar grimly, Alek with suppressed excitement. They went on, Sara using gliding steps to minimize even the tiny sucking sounds made by their feet oozing through the mud.

Finally they rounded the curve and stopped to stare at what lay before them.

It was a subway station, built in the 1920s and perhaps abandoned and forgotten not too long afterwards. But though it was clearly old, it showed no signs of decay. Someone had lavished time and money on its upkeep, even pirating electricity to flood the station with light.

The platform was clean and neat. There was no garbage, not even any dust on the platform. Its tile walls were a colorful Art Decoish mosaic depicting a desert oasis at night that looked as fresh as the day it was made. Several empty kiosks stood next to the blocked-off stairways that once led upwards. On the tunnel floor, resting next to another platform, was a subway train, an indeterminate number of cars stretching out into the darkness beyond the lighted area.

The cars looked as old, or older, than the station, and were in just as fine condition. They were red with gold trim. Lights glowed dimly inside the first couple of cars, but Sara was at the wrong angle to see into the cars' interiors.

Sandro fastidiously found a dry spot to sit while he regarded Sara and the others with a look that plainly said, "It's your show. What do you want to do now?"

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Sara thought about it.

"I'm going on ahead," she finally said in a low voice. "You wait here until I give the signal to advance—" She shook her head, stopping Father Baltazar's objections before he could voice them. "That's the way it's going to be," she said. "Don't worry. I'll yell for help if I need it."

She handed the penflash back to the priest, and again unholstered her sidearm. She and Sandro went together deeper into the subway station.

It was action time. Or soon would be. The voices in her head were whispering excitedly to each other, as if they could already smell that blood that would soon be spilled.

Sandro regarded her suspiciously with a sideways glance, as though he could hear or otherwise sense the voices.

"Don't worry," she told the guide. "They want to help."

He regarded her dubiously, but said nothing.

She moved as silently as the cat by her side. Together they reached the last car in the line, and went up the short stairway to its rear door, Sandro in the lead.

Sara put her hand on the door handle and tested it. It was unlocked.

She'd gone through a lot of doors leading to unknown but probably dangerous situations, sometimes alone, usually with Jake at her side. Never before with a cat.

Always a first time for everything, she told herself. She looked down at Sandro. He seemed to wink at her. She pushed the door open and he darted into the subway car. She followed after him, her gun drawn, arms braced in the shooter's stance, ready to fire.

There was no one to shoot at. Though furnished with luxury appliances, the car was otherwise empty. All the

seats had been torn out and replaced by what seemed to be a modern, well-appointed kitchen. A refrigerator emitted a low hum next to a stove and oven combination. What looked like a closet at the far end of the car turned out to be a pantry, well-stocked with canned foods, dry goods, and various bottles of expensive scotch, tequila, gin, rum, and other liquors.

Sara went through the car wonderingly. The kitchen in her apartment had a sink, a can opener, a stove she rarely used, and a microwave. This place was a gourmet's delight.

Idly, she stopped at the refrigerator and opened the door to glance inside. Immediately she wished she hadn't. Among the leftovers and condiments, resting on their own shelf, were five heads, glassy-eyed and staring, sheered through cleanly at the base of their necks.

She recognized one of them. Juliette. She could imagine who the other four were. At least Jake's head wasn't among them. That had to be a good sign. She closed the door quickly, anger and nausea fighting for control of her brain.

The anger won.

Sandro, waiting impatiently by the far door, turned to face her. Sara didn't need his warning glance, nor the whispers in her head. The lights in the second car glowed through pulled window shades. They went quietly through the door and stepped over to the platform of the second car. Sara listened for a few moments, but could hear nothing.

Something inside her—not the voices, but something of and by her own self—told her that this was it. She tested the door. It, too, was unlocked.

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Please, Jake, she plead silently. Be inside. Be okay.

She flung the door open, and was thrown into deep, dark disappointment, as she realized that her prayer had gone unanswered.

The interior of this car had also been gutted and refitted, but as a bedroom, not a kitchen. It was the most luxurious bedroom Sara had ever seen.

The bed itself was enormous, bigger than king-size, with brass head and foot boards. On each side of the bed was a nightstand with a small Tiffany lamp glowing with stained glass, depicting blooming orchards that looked disturbingly sexual. She didn't care to examine the paraphernalia heaped up on the nightstands too closely.

Erotic paintings hung on all the walls. Erotic statues—from bronze miniatures to life-sized marbles—were scattered about, seated on pedestals, small tables, and, in the case of the life-size Hercules and the Three Graces, resting on the deep, ancient, richly colorful handmade rug that covered the car's floor.

Sara had no time to study the paintings and statuary, though a glance showed her that some were playful, some passionate in the extreme. She moved toward the bed and then stopped, staring at what she saw among the rumpled linen.

There were two forms. One, face up, was handcuffed to the brass headboard. One, face down, was handcuffed to the brass footing. One was Roger Stern. The other was Jerry Stern. They didn't look to be in good shape.

Sara went to the side of the Stern—Jerry?—at the head of the bed. His eyes were open, but staring and glassy. An empty vodka bottle lay on the rumpled sheet next to him, a half-empty pizza box rested on top of various imple-

ments and impedimenta that lay on the night stand. There were bruises on his face and across his skinny chest.

Sara reached out to feel his pulse, but immediately knew she wouldn't find one. His flesh was already cold.

With a grimace Sara moved to the other Stern. His back was marked with livid welts. Gently she turned and lifted his head to look at his face. One eye was swollen shut by bruising. A trickle of dried blood traced a line from his nose down his chin. He, too, was cooling.

"You just can't find good toys nowadays," said a voice. Sara dropped Rog—or Jer's—head back onto the mattress, and jumped backwards, swinging her gun up.

It was Jean. She stood at the front of the car, legs braced wide, hands on her hips, so that her short black silk robe covered nothing of importance. Her body was as white as the marble statues that adorned the sleeping car, and all lithe muscle. Her breasts were tiny, although the nipples were large and dark. Her hips were narrow, but she exuded an overpowering female sexuality.

Her skin was flawless, and, Sara realized, that was wrong. The spot between her breasts burned only the previous day by Guillaume Sam's cigar was as smooth and white as the rest of her ivory skin. There was no way such a burn could have healed in a single day. No way.

"They break so easily," Jean said with a teasing smile.

"I should blow you away right now," Sara said, scarcely needing the urgent voices clamoring in her brain.

"Really?" Jean stretched like a cat, lifting her arms high over her head and arching her back. Her breasts disappeared, except for their hard, dark nipples. "I don't think Gene would let you do that."

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Sara followed the direction of her gaze, glancing behind her to see Gene, drawing down on her and smiling. He was wearing the matching pants to Jean's silk top. He was as slim as his sister, only somewhat harder sculpted, with taut muscles standing out on his arms and chest. There was a burn mark in the center of the muscled ridges of his chest.

Wait a minute, Sara thought.

"Drop it, copper," Gene said out of the side of his mouth. He grinned sardonically. "I've always wanted to say that."

"Detective Pezzini has been so good to us, darling," Jean said. "She's enabled us to indulge all sorts of fantasies."

Sara wavered, uncertainty whirling in her brain. It had been Jean whom Guillaume Sam had burned, she was sure of it. Yet it was Gene who now bore the scar on his chest. How could that be?

"He means it, Detective," Jean said in a hard voice. "Drop the gun or he'll drop you."

Sara started to let her gun droop and Sandro made his move.

He came out of nowhere, striking silently and viciously, leaping like a tiger and fastening his teeth in Gene's gun wrist. The masculine twin screamed in sudden pain as Sandro's forty pounds dragged his gun arm out of line.

Sara brought her arm back up and squeezed the trigger three times as fast as she could. She didn't have time to be fancy so she went for the torso and put three slugs inside a soda-can top sized circle around the burn spot in the middle of Gene's chest. The bullets made small holes

going in and blew out big chunks coming out. Gene jerked at their impact like he was being hit by hammer blows. He flew backwards, knocking a small bronze of a passionate Pan off a pedestal. Blood spewed from his mouth to mix with that flowing down his chest and he collapsed in a strangely graceful heap.

Jean screamed in agony, and by the time Sara had turned her weapon toward her, she was gone, the door of the sleeping car slamming behind her. Sara went after her, Sandro at her heels.

They went through the door recklessly, heedless of possible ambush, and stormed the next car without even thinking about what might be waiting for them.

Sara could register only a confused impression of the third car's contents. It was dominated by the same kind of altar that she'd seen in Paul Narcisse's office, though it more closely resembled Guillaume Sam's. But she had no time to take in details.

Jake was kneeling in chains before the altar. He'd been viciously beaten. His face was battered and swollen. His eyes were shut. Jean held his head up by a fist wound in his hair, and was jamming a gun against his temple. Her face was screwed up as though she were crying, and strange dry sobs were wracking her chest.

She crouched over him like a menacing animal, and Sara knew that her partner was a moment away from death.

"Let him go," she said, her voice as calm as she could make it, her pistol centered on Jean's forehead.

"Oh, no," Jean said. "He's going to die. He's going to die right now."

Sandro flashed towards them, wailing like a banshee. Sara could see with great clarity as Jean's finger tight-

ened on the trigger. Her mind seemed to throb with her heart as milliseconds seemingly stretched into minutes. She knew that Sandro wouldn't reach them in time. She knew that if she pulled the trigger of her own weapon, her bullet couldn't save Jake, but only revenge him.

"Nooooo!" she screamed as she watched Jean's finger start to depress the trigger of her gun, and as she screamed she changed.

The Witchblade ripped into existence, drawn from the plane where it slumbered when it wasn't riding Sara. Instantaneously the detective found herself encased in metal so cold that it burned her skin, so sharp it razored her clothes into fragments, so hideously intelligent that it shot a limb forward faster than a human finger could pull a trigger. A thin, needle-sharp tentacle took Jean between the eyes, punching upward through her skull and shattering her brain. Her body went lax, her gun slipped from her dead fingers.

A paean of exultation slashed through Sara's mind as the voices blended together in a great harmony of joy. But they weren't finished yet. They weren't satisfied.

The metallic tendril of the Witchblade withdrew from Jean's skull and, like a striking snake, whipped towards Sandro, who had watched Jean's death with something like suspicious disbelief on his feline features.

Only his more than cat-quickness saved him as the Witchblade shot in his direction. The tendril clanged against the floor as Sandro leaped sideways and up, landing lightly on the altar and scrambling behind the centrally placed wooden cross that had half a hundred other crosses nailed to it. The cat arched his back and hissed his outrage as the questing tendril withdrew and readied itself for another strike.

"Noooooo!" Sara cried again, and only her fierce will drew the Witchblade back to her. It clasped her in its cold embrace, shuddering, begging to be released, but Sara's iron control clamped down upon it, holding it tightly to her like a lover cold from his grave. It withdrew sullenly and suddenly disappeared. Only the voices remained, crooning like sated gourmets, whispering about the quality and essence of the kill they'd just made.

Sara ran to Jake. She cradled his head, relieved to feel that his skin was warm against her exposed flesh, relieved to feel his heart thudding strongly under his own ripped shirt.

"Jake!" she called. "Jake! Come on, man, come on!"

After a moment he opened one battered eye, barely able to see for the swelling and bruising.

"Hey," he said in a weak, but almost recognizable voice. "What took you so long?"

Sara hugged him, almost crying.

After a moment he said, "And what the hell happened to your clothes?"

"I'll tell you later," Sara said.

Alek and Father Baltazar burst into the car, their panic barely under control.

"What the hell?" cried Alec, as the priest crossed himself repeatedly.

The musician looked from the altar to Jake to Jean's body to Sara's body, peeking out of the torn remnants of her clothing. "What . . . what happened to your clothes?"

Sara shook her head. She rattled Jake's chains in frustration. "Forget about that. See if you can find the keys to unlock these chains."

"Maybe Sandro can help," Father Baltazar suggested.

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The cat remained sitting on the altar, staring at Sara and twitching his tail.

"I think he's mad at me," Sara said.

"What happened?" the priest asked.

Sara shook her head. "Later. Just find the keys."

Wordlessly, the priest shrugged out of his coat and handed it to Sara. She slipped it over her shoulders, still cradling Jake's head, and nodded her thanks.

"How about these?" Alek said. He dangled a set of keys he'd found on a big ring that'd been looped around the horizontal arm of one of the altar crosses. Sara gestured and he tossed them to her.

"Wow," Alek said, disgust and a certain amount of admiration in his voice as he hunkered down over Jean's body. "You killed her. A single shot between the eyes."

Sara, looking through the couple of dozen keys for one that would fit the padlock on Jake's chains, didn't bother to correct him.

"I never exactly liked her, but she wasn't an asshole like her brother,"

Sara grunted. "He's in the next car."

"Dead?" Father Baltazar asked quietly.

Sara nodded. "Got it," she said, finding the right key to unlock Jake's chains.

"Should I make sure?" Alek asked uncertainly. "Maybe he's just wounded."

"No. He's dead," Sara said. "Give me a hand here."

Father Baltazar hurried to her side and helped her lift Jake to his feet. The two had to support the cop's entire weight until his knees stopped shaking.

"I'm okay," he muttered.

"Can you hold him?" she asked the priest, and he nodded.

She went up to Alek, who was examining the altar with a look of fascination on his face. She didn't want to do this, but she had to tell him. "Alek."

He looked at her, surprised by her solemn expression.

"What?"

"It's Rog and Jer. They're in the next car."

"Why didn't you say something before?" he asked eagerly. "Are they tied up or something? We'd better go get them."

Sara grabbed his arm as he went by her, heading for the sleeping car. His eager, inquisitive expression turned uncertain as he looked into her face.

"What's the matter?" he asked. Then, seemingly, it struck him. "They're not dead . . . are they?"

"I'm afraid so."

From her hand on his arm Sara could feel the strength run out of Alek's body. He wavered for a moment, and she almost put her arms around him to hold him up. But he stiffened and looked at her wildly.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "They were already gone when I entered the car."

He pushed by her without a word and rushed for the sleeping car. Sara stopped to glance at Father Baltazar and Jake.

"Go on," the priest said. "Go after him."

"Jake?" she asked.

He nodded, almost impatiently. "I'm okay. Make sure he is. And go make sure that asshole Gene is dead. He's the one who did most of this to me." Jake touched his face gingerly, wincing as he traced the swollen bruises that blossomed over his features like malignant flowers.

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Jake was right. She should have confirmed the kill. Still, even if he wasn't dead, Gene wasn't going to be up to making mischief with three holes punched in the center of his chest.

Alek had gotten to the car ahead of her. He stood in the doorway, blocking her view.

"Where are they?" he asked in a strange soft voice.

"On the bed," Sara said, pushing past him.

Only they weren't.

The bed was still a mess with rumpled, stained sheets, empty booze bottles, and even fragments of food strewn about it, but Roger and Jerry Stern were gone. Startled, Sara looked up at the other end of the car where she'd last seen Gene lying in a crumpled heap, blood running from his mouth and oozing out of the holes her bullets had punched in his chest.

He was missing, too.

"It can't be," she said.

"You're sure they were dead?" Alek asked insistently.

"They weren't breathing. They had no pulse. They were *cold*."

"Something weird is going on here," Alek muttered.

"I know that," Sara said flatly. She looked at the musician. "Some of Guillaume Sam's people must have snuck in and taken the bodies out."

"We would have seen. Or heard," Alek said distractedly, staring at the rumpled bed. Suddenly he snapped his head up and looked at her. "Wait a moment. Did you say Sam? Guillaume Sam?"

Sara sighed. "He seems to be the one behind this, this whole spree."

"Sam?" Alek said again, as if trying to convince himself.

WITCHBLADE

Sara was thinking fast. If Guillaume Sam knew they were here, he wouldn't waste time beating around the bush. He was, as he told her, a direct man. He would send an assault team powerful enough to crush them.

"Come on," she said, grabbing Alec's arm. "We have to get out of here."

"But Roger—Jerry—"

"There's nothing we can do for them now," she said. She shook his arm, trying to break him out of the daze into which he'd fallen. "We've got to get out of here before reinforcements show up."

She suddenly had a vision of Bakula-baka chasing them through the abandoned tunnels, his bloody machete held high. She didn't like it. Neither did the voices in her head. Seemingly finished congratulating themselves on the Witchblade's kill, they agreed with Sara's assessment that the sooner they left the tunnel, the better.

"Come on."

Sara practically dragged Alek back to the altar car. Jake draped an arm around each man's shoulder, and they helped him hobble away.

Once out of the train, Sandro found an unblocked stairway that led to the street above, so they didn't have to trace their steps back to Club Carrefour. He sprang the locked door that led to the open street. Jake insisted that he could walk by himself. Although that proved too optimistic an opinion, Sara could see that his injuries weren't terribly serious. He was already starting to recover.

Sandro refused to come near her. She couldn't blame him. The Witchblade would have taken him just as it had taken Jean. Sandro seemed to know that. She could read it in his eyes. In the end, he simply vanished when they reached the open air. No one saw him disappear, but one

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moment, when no one was looking, he simply ceased to be with them. They couldn't tell if he'd literally vanished or had just ducked away when no one was paying attention.

"He saved my life," Sara said in a low voice. "Gene had the drop on me, and he wasn't afraid to tackle him."

And then, she added silently, I tried to kill him. But it really wasn't me. It was the Witchblade.

"Perhaps you'll see him again," Father Baltazar said.

Sara shook her head.

I hope not, she thought. For his sake.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was quite late by the time Sara finally stumbled into her apartment, physically exhausted and mentally depleted, as she always was whenever she used the Witchblade. Like the macho idiot that he was, Jake refused to go to the emergency room, so Father Baltazar had volunteered to wash and bandage his cuts, bruises and minor wounds. They hadn't discussed in any detail an official report. One look from Jake had told Sara that he'd defer to her judgment, as he always did when something "out of left field" happened. No way could Sara envision explaining the night's events in the plain black and white of an official report. Some things, she knew, were best left unofficial.

She barely had the strength to strip off her tattered clothes and drop them on the floor beside her unmade bed.

She was so exhausted she couldn't even conceive of taking a shower, despite the fact that she smelled strongly of an unpleasant combination of odors: adrenalin sweat, the stink of the subterranean station, and the metallic stench left on her skin by the Witchblade.

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She collapsed naked on the mattress and pulled her rumpled sheet over her dead-tired body and closed her eyes, desperate for sleep.

But it wouldn't come. The voices wouldn't let it. They were angry at her. They had tasted death, but it hadn't been enough. They'd wanted more, and were furious that Sara hadn't let them have Sandro.

"How dare you derry us?"

"We saved your wretched partner."

"And you would not let us have the creature."

"Vile, vile creature."

Stop it, Sara told them. Stop it! He was on our side. He helped us—

"It was a thing of the others."

"It was NOT a good thing."

"It was not one of us."

WILL YOU LET ME SLEEP! Sara shouted at them.

They ignored her, but somehow, despite their annoying twitterings, Sara did finally manage to drift off into coal-black slumber so deep she was still asleep when she reached the shores of Guinee.

She felt something moist and rough slather across her face and she awoke, opening her eyes to see that she lay on a beach with gentle waves washing almost to her feet and a big black panther, perhaps the very one that had accompanied Erzulie during Sara's first visit to Guinee, standing by her head, licking her face with his sandpapery tongue.

She was too tired to be afraid.

"Hello," she said, looking the big cat in the eye. "Are you any relation to Sandro?"

He smiled a sly feline smile and sat on his haunches like Sandro with his tail curled around his feet.

"If you are, tell him I'm sorry. Tell him that I never

meant the Witchblade to hurt him. Tell him that sometimes the thing gets out of control—oh, hell.” She sat up, unsurprised that she was still naked. Little, or maybe nothing, could surprise her now. “Here I am in a dream, sitting on my bare butt and talking to a cat while there’s a perfectly good ocean right at my feet.”

She stood in a single lithe movement and ran into the waves until they surged over her waist, lapping against her torso. The water was warm and indescribably soothing. She dove below the surface and swam out deeper, letting the gentle rocking of the surf envelope her entire body. The waves felt like a thousand caressing fingers delivering a soothing massage from head to toe. She flipped over on her back and floated for a few moments, eyes open and staring at the star-spangled night sky, riding the gentle waves like they were a lover.

She felt better by the second. The weariness washed out of her muscles. The voices, perhaps afraid or unable to exist in this place, were out of her mind. There was no sense of time passing. She may have rested in the waves for an instant, she may have rested in them for an eternity. When she finally reached the point of complete contentment, she simply headed back to the shore with strong, hard strokes.

She walked back onto the beach, water running in sensual rivulets from her hair down her back to her buttocks, puckering her skin with fleeting goosebumps as they dried in the cool breeze. She felt rested and richly alive with her skin washed clean of all the awful odors as the perfumed breezes dried her hair.

The panther was still waiting for her on the beach, but he wasn’t alone. His master, the *loa* Erzulie, sat next to

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him, rubbing his head between his ears and eliciting a rumbling purr that sounded like steam escaping from a leaking pipe.

Somehow Sara didn't feel uncomfortable in her nakedness before the *loa*, though she was glad that it was Erzulie and not Papa Legba who sat before her.

Erzulie stood, brushing the grains of sand from her palms with a business-like gesture.

"Papa Legba asked me to come see you," she said grinning, "though, seeing you, I'm sure he would be sorry not to be here himself."

That almost made Sara blush, though she said, "It seems like I don't have a choice when I come here or how I'm dressed."

Erzulie laughed.

"How little people know. You are here because you want to be. You need help. You are vexed by terrible problems that need solutions. You sense that you can find the solutions here, but you are groping about, unsure how to find them. Tonight you found the tranquility that you crave. It has refreshed your body and soul, no?"

Sara nodded. She had been desperately weary. Now she felt ready to take on almost anything. Even Guillaume Sam. Perhaps even the voices and the Witchblade.

"We cannot solve your problems," Erzulie told you. "That, mainly, is up to you. But we can provide a place where you can solve them for yourself. This—" she gestured around them at the beach "—is one such place. You come here searching for peace . . . and find it, ultimately, in your own heart and mind. There is another place where you may be able to solve another problem."

Sara followed where Erzulie was pointing, and saw

past the beach, past a line of trees to iron gates highlighted on the horizon. Iron gates that enclosed a forest of crosses. The cemetery looked ancient and frightening, and alive, not dead. Alive and waiting.

"But when you go there, *blanc*," Erzulie said in gentle warning, "be careful. Be very, very careful. For some problems, you see, are solved simply, by death. And that, I think, would not be a solution to your satisfaction. No, not at all."

Sara awoke before the alarm went off, still feeling more refreshed than she had any right to be. She even smelled clean. The stink of sweat and gunpowder and underground goo was gone from her body, as if they had indeed been washed away by clean water with a salty tang and the residue of tropical breezes.

If it was a dream, she thought as she rummaged through her closet for clean clothes, *it was quite a powerful dream*. She shimmied into underwear and pulled on a new pair of jeans. *If it wasn't a dream . . .*

For some reason her mind refused to complete the thought.

Sara concentrated on getting dressed and down to the precinct. She and Jake and Detective Dickey from Brooklyn had a meeting scheduled that morning with Captain Siry about their progress—or lack thereof—in the Machete Murderer case. She would, Sara knew, have to walk a fine line with Siry this morning.

Siry greeted her in an almost human manner as she knocked and entered his office. Jake was already seated before Siry's desk, looking only a little worse for wear. He was young, almost as young as Sara, and his recuper-

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ative powers were enormous. That, and his thirst for justice kept him going when almost everyone else would have quit.

"Come in, sit down, have coffee." Siry made it more of an order than an offer, but Sara shook off the coffee anyway. Her stomach was squishy enough as it was. She didn't think it could survive a cup of precinct-house coffee. She had barely settled in her chair when Lieutenant Dickey from Brooklyn came in. Today, he was wearing his too-large grey suit.

"Come in, sit down, have coffee," Siry repeated.

Dickey moseyed around the captain's desk and helped himself from the pot on the adjacent credenza.

"Donut?" Siry offered.

Dickey declined. "I'm on a diet," he said, emptying a couple of packets of Sweet'N'Low into his little plastic coffee cup.

"Looks like it's working," Siry grunted.

"Thanks." Dickey sat down carefully, looked carefully at Jake's face. "That's something new since I last saw you," he observed.

"Yeah," Jake said ruefully. "Ran into some difficulty when I was following up some leads on the green-card aspect of the case."

"And what would this 'green-card aspect' be, exactly?" Dickey asked as he sipped from his little plastic cup.

Jake looked at Siry and the captain nodded. Jake glanced at Sara and then launched into a somewhat edited version of his investigation, leaving out any mention of the abandoned subway station and what had gone down there the night before. He made it sound as if he'd run into a couple of heavies while running down info on

the green card scheme, but although he'd gotten in a fight and been damaged he'd managed to escape. Or as he put it, they'd managed to escape him.

"So you think Guillaume Sam is behind this?" Dickey said thoughtfully.

"It seems like it," Sara offered. "Heard of him?"

Dickey shrugged heavy shoulders. "Of course. Everyone round the 'hood has. He's a big man with big influence in the community."

"Does it surprise you that he'd be mixed up in something like this?" Sara asked.

Dickey turned his dark, soulful eyes on her. "Detective, nothing on this job surprises me any more. Nothing."

I bet I could show you a thing or two, Sara thought, but kept quiet and only nodded.

"Sounds like it's time for an old-fashioned door-kicking raid," Siry said. "I'll get a judge to issue the papers. Dickey, can you supply uniforms from your precinct?"

The lieutenant started to nod, but Sara suddenly spoke. "Captain, maybe it'd be better if we used our own uniforms. Like Dickey said, Guillaume Sam has big influence in the Cypress Hills community."

"You suggesting that one of my men might tip him?" Dickey asked sadly.

Sara shrugged. "Like you said. I'm not surprised at anything anymore in this job."

Siry looked steadily at the Brooklyn detective. "It's your call, Carl."

The big detective drained his coffee cup and tossed it, empty, into the basket by the side of Siry's desk. He sighed, seemingly from the bottom of his shoes.

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"All right," he said. "We'll use Manhattan men." He stood. "I've always wanted to see the upper crust in action."

"Mind if I smoke?" Guillaume Sam asked the uniform who was rummaging through Sam's desk drawers as Sam sat behind it. He had cigar and end-clipper ready to put into action.

The officer glanced at him. "I do. I'm allergic."

"Besides," Sara said, "it's bad for you."

Guillaume Sam grinned, showing rows of even, white teeth. "I'm not going to die of lung cancer," he said. "I've been assured of that."

"By Baron Samedi?" Sara asked with raised eyebrows.

"Oh, yes, Baron Samedi himself," Guillaume Sam assured her.

"How *are* you going to die?"

Guillaume Sam laughed. "I'm not," he said. "I'm going to live forever."

"Uh-huh."

The search team from Sara's Manhattan precinct had been at it for hours, but besides confiscating a couple of computers for detailed analysis at HQ, they'd found nothing remotely incriminating. Or even remotely interesting. Guillaume Sam had been so accommodating that Sara figured there was nothing dirty on the premises to find. Clearly Club Carrefour was and had always been clean as a whistle, or Guillaume Sam had been tipped and he'd hustled any evidence of illegal activity out the door.

He put the unlit cigar in his mouth and rolled it around zestfully.

"Tell me," he asked Sara, "how's your partner?"

McCarthy, I believe his name is? I heard he ran into a little trouble yesterday.”

“He’s fine,” Sara deadpanned. “He’s checking out some rooms downstairs, I believe. Tell me. How’s Jean and Gene?”

For a moment Guillaume Sam’s face darkened in a frown, then it lightened and he laughed aloud.

“You *do* like to play rough, Ms. Pezzini.” He took the cigar out of his mouth and studied it carefully. Finally, he said, “Jean had to leave my employ. That was unfortunate. She will be missed. Gene, however . . .” Guillaume Sam shrugged. “We shall see about Gene. We all shall see.”

Intrigued, Sara was going to try to push him further, but one of the cops looking at the altar that dominated the rear of Guillaume Sam’s office picked up an opaque lidded jar, held it up to his ear, and shook it.

“What’s in here?” he asked.

Guillaume Sam looked at him and sat straight up in his chair, the frown back on his face. “Careful with that, fool! It is a *pot-de-tete*. It contains my soul.”

“Sure,” the cop said laconically, and put it back down on the altar.

“Okay, boys,” Sara said. “I think we’re done here. Let’s go collect Detectives McCarthy and Dickey and the rest of the team.”

“Finished so soon, Ms. Pezzini?” Guillaume Sam asked.

“We’ve seen enough.” Sara paused. “By the way, where’s your rat?”

“Possum, Ms. Pezzini. Baka is a possum. Being nocturnal, he’s having his afternoon sleep.” Guillaume Sam grinned widely. It wasn’t a pleasant grin. “But you’ll see him again. Soon. I promise.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

From the outside St. Casimir's rectory looked shabby. The stone was grimy with accumulated city grit. The shingled roof was obviously in need of repair. Even the welcome mat was so worn that you could no longer read the large WELCOME imprinted on it.

The battered outer door had a brass knocker. No new-fangled electric doorbell for St. Casimir's, no sir. Father Baltazar answered the door after Sara rapped—not too hard, because she was afraid that a solid blow would bring it down.

"Come in," he said, gesturing Sara inside the vestibule with a welcoming wave.

From the inside, though, the rectory was charming.

The furniture was old, but old furniture is often well-made and costly when in good repair, as Father Baltazar's was. Sara couldn't tell Chippendale from Louis XXIV, unless they were dancing barechested before her in collars and cuffs, but she could tell quality when she saw it. The desk, chairs, glassed-in bookcase, and even the old sofa in the cozy office-library that Father Baltazar ushered her

into oozed quality. The room was filled with dark wood and old books and was well-kept, well-dusted, and extremely neat.

"Who's your maid?" Sara asked, looking around. "I could use her around my place. I have about a fifth of the stuff you do and my apartment is five times as messy."

Father Baltazar laughed. "I am," he said. "I'm afraid that I've always been excessively neat. It's one of my character flaws."

"It must be your only flaw," Sara said, sinking into what turned out to be a most comfortable sofa, "as you're brave, reverent, and cheerful. I'd guess you're thrifty as well, or else you wouldn't have accumulated all these books on a priest's salary."

"I don't have to pay rent," he said, taking the end of the sofa. "That counts for a lot in this town."

He was, Sara saw, trying to keep things light, but that wasn't what she wanted. She was afraid to admit to herself what she really wanted, but she knew that she longed for more than light-hearted comradery from the handsome—and brave, and loyal, and cool headed; God, she could go on and on—young priest.

"I meant what I said," Sara said. "About your flawless character."

"I'm blushing," Father Baltazar said, though he looked more troubled than embarrassed. He leaned forward and took Sara's hands in his. "You're a remarkable woman, Sara. Beautiful, terribly tough, brave, yet oddly vulnerable. I'd back you in damn near anything—and I already have. I'll stand with you against anyone—and, before this is over, I fear that I will. You have to realize one thing, though. I'll be the best friend to you I can be. But that's *all* I can be."

His hands were warm and strong and felt good on hers. She wanted more from them.

"I know you're a priest. I know you have vows—"

"I do," he said solemnly. "I live with them every day and have never broken them. But, Sara, even if I weren't bound by my vows what I just told you would still be true."

She looked into his deep dark eyes and saw the truth there.

"You understand?"

She nodded reluctantly, feeling like a fool. Of course, he would be gay. The best man she'd met in years. Handsome, brave, intelligent . . . She tried to pull her hands away, but he wouldn't let her go.

"Do you forgive me?"

Suddenly she felt ashamed at the flash of anger she'd felt. "Forgive you? Father—Baltazar." Suddenly she didn't know what to call him. "Father" seemed way too formal, "Baltazar," way too cumbersome. "There's nothing to forgive."

"How about a hug, then?"

She came into his arms and they hugged fiercely. The voices were disapproving, but she ignored them. At least for a while. It felt good to be in his embrace, as chaste as it was, and Sara realized that perhaps she needed a friend even more than she needed a lover.

"Call me Caz," the priest said. "All my friends do."

"All right," Sara said. "Caz."

"Good." He let her go. "Now tell me what's been troubling you since you ran from the confessional that day we first met."

Although they separated, Sara realized that from that moment on they'd never be totally apart. There was a

bond between them, a bond not only of shared experiences, but of understanding and of emotional closeness such as she had with no one else. Not even her sister. Not even her partner. She had to hide things from both of those people. With Father Baltazar—Caz—she could discuss those very things she had to hide from others. He'd understand. He might even be able to help.

Despite the voice's warnings she told him about the Witchblade, at least the little she really knew about it. She told him how she'd acquired it, seemingly by accident but actually, as she'd come to realize, by some sort of strange cosmic design. She told him what she'd done with it. Of the men and women she'd killed, of the strange menaces she'd faced, of the battles she'd fought and not dared tell anyone lest they think she was insane.

As she spoke Sara was surprised to realize how little concrete knowledge she had of the Witchblade. She told him about the reservations she had, of how it often acted against her will, how sometimes it even tried to trick her into doing something bad like killing Sandro, which had not only been against her wishes but also without any conscious warning.

Father Baltazar was fascinated by the story. "I've certainly never heard or read of anything exactly as you describe, though there are obscure writings and even more obscure legends about such a thing . . . Paul Narcisse may know more. He's much more of an expert on the occult than I am. I'm just a dabbler, really." He stared thoughtfully into the distance. "There are obvious parallels between what happens to you when the Witchblade takes control and what happens when a *voudon* initiate is 'mounted,' as it's called, by a *loa*. Though nominally at least you seem to have more control over the object

known as the Witchblade, clearly there is some kind of force lurking in it that can take control if you're not constantly vigilant, if for some reason it feels it really wants control."

"I noticed the parallels myself," Sara said. "In fact, I was wondering if you or Paul could help me. Could—I don't know—give me some kind of guidance to help control the thing."

Father Baltazar shook his head. "Paul's the expert on possession. I'm just an interested observer." He checked his watch. "He should be here soon. We can either consult him, or set up some time to talk about your, uh, problem, privately." He looked at Sara speculatively. "I don't suppose you could give me a demonstration of this Witchblade in action?"

Sara shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea. I call upon it only when I feel I must. Otherwise, I'm afraid that I'd lose even more control." The voices in her head chuckled, and Sara grimaced. "The voices are laughing. That's a pretty good indication that my fears are valid."

Father Baltazar frowned in disappointment. "I suppose you're right. In any case, it seems that this Witchblade is nothing to fool around with for trivial reasons. We may need it in the fight against Guillaume Sam, but I guess you're right to call upon it only when you feel it's absolutely necessary. Still," he said, his gaze turned inward, "it would be something to see."

"Be careful of what you wish for," Sara muttered.

As if on cue, the knocker boomed loudly against the front door, making an impressive percussive sound that reverberated through the cozy rectory.

"Excuse me," Father Baltazar said, and went to answer the door.

He returned with a troop of visitors. A serious-faced Paul Narcisse led the way. He nodded solemnly to Sara. Behind him were Alek and Kris Gervelis. Father Baltazar had mentioned that Alek was going to be present at the gathering, but Kris's attendance was something of a surprise. Neither brother looked particularly happy, but Kris was especially uncertain.

"Well," Father Baltazar said, "we're all here. Please find a seat. Make yourselves comfortable."

Alek nodded, smiled at Sara, and sat down next to her on the sofa. The others distributed themselves around the room, the priest taking the chair behind his desk. The five of them pretty much filled up the room. Sara had thought about bringing Jake, but ultimately had decided against it. She'd decided that the less Jake knew about such matters, the better. He wasn't one for mystic conspiracies. She hadn't even considered inviting Lieutenant Dickey.

Paul Narcisse took control as they all settled in. "I'm sure you all know why we're here," he said, looking at each in turn.

Kris Gervelis was patently uncomfortable. "I'm not. Not really. Alek has told me some pretty wild stuff. Stuff I think the police should investigate. Or maybe the Church. I don't know anything about such things."

Everyone looked at Alek, who grinned a little weakly. "I had to tell him. Kris has to know what's going on with Mountains. He's not only in charge of us business-wise, but Roger and Jerry were our friends, for Christ's sake."

"No one's saying you shouldn't have told Kris what's happening," Father Baltazar said. "But, anyway, what exactly did you tell him?"

Alek shrugged. "You know. About that cat or whatever it was called Sandro, and the boys disappearing with Sara

thinking they were dead, and Gene and Jean getting shot and killed, and Guillaume Sam being a *bokor*—”

“Crazy stuff,” Kris said, looking down at the floor as if unwilling to look the others in the room in the eye.

“Maybe you’re right, Kris,” Paul Narcisse said softly. “Maybe it’s all crazy stuff. But it’s all true, just the same.”

He looked up, anger in his eyes. “Are you telling me the boys are dead, Paul? Is that what you’re saying? Because they can’t be dead. They can’t be!”

Paul looked at him. Everyone looked at him.

“Why not, Kris?” Paul asked in a gentle voice.

“Sam, he wouldn’t—” Kris caught himself, and finished sullenly, “They can’t be. That’s all.”

“Sam wouldn’t what, Kris?” Paul asked again. “He wouldn’t hurt them? Have them killed? What kind of deal did you make with Guillaume Sam, Kris?”

Kris Gervelis looked at him stubbornly. “Deal?”

Paul nodded while everyone looked on, silently. “You seem unwillingly to believe that the Sterns were hurt, maybe even killed. But you don’t deny that Guillaume Sam is a *bokor*, do you?”

Kris glanced around the room, then laughed weakly. “Of course he’s not. Who’d believe such a thing?”

Alek sat back heavily on the sofa. “You were always a bad liar, Kris,” he said in a low voice. “Always.”

Kris turned on him angrily. “Do you know what it takes to launch a band nowadays? Huh? Do you? Of course not. No, for you it was the music. Always the music. But what about paying for the instruments? The sound system? Demo records? A tour? Drugs for those goofball Sterns? Where do you think that money came from, Alek, huh? The two-fifty a night we got playing lo-

cal gigs? Do you have even the slightest conception of what it took? *Do you?*"

Alek, not looking at him, shook his head. "No, Kris. No. I don't."

Kris snorted. "Of course not. You just expected it to be there when you needed it. And I made sure it was."

"At what cost?" Father Baltazar asked quietly.

Kris sat back in his chair, his defiant gaze back on the floor. "Not much," he said. "I let Sam do the band's books."

Sara knew instantly what that meant. "You were letting him launder money through the band," she said.

Kris shrugged, but the defiance was gone out of him. "The band—we were doing okay, but maybe not as well . . . not as well as Alek and the others thought. Sam let us keep some of the money we ran through our accounts, for expenses. He said we could pay him back when we hit it really big."

"My God," Alek said, closing his eyes.

Sara could hear the pain in his voice. She put a comforting hand on his arm, but he didn't react. He didn't even look at her.

"It's not like we were doing badly, Alek," Kris said, a pleading tone in his voice. "We've doing better, really. It's only a matter of time. We're getting there. Soon we'll be able to do without Sam entirely. Then we can pay him back."

"That's why you say he wouldn't hurt the boys," Sara said.

"Of course," Kris said eagerly. "He has as big a stake in Mountains' success as we do."

"Except," Paul Narcisse said quietly, "he is riding the

lightning. He thinks he controls it. He might even control it sometimes, for a little while. But sometimes he must feed it, even when he doesn't want to."

"What do you mean?" Sara asked.

"Bakula-baka has needs of his own that must be satisfied. Even the *marassa*, the Twins that Guillaume Sam employed had to be paid in more than money."

"*Marassa*?" Alek asked. "You mean Gene and Jean?"

Paul Narcisse nodded. "They've worked for Guillaume Sam for years. In the beginning they just had a reputation as sadistic killers, but under the *bokor's* tutelage they walked far on the left hand path. Twins, you see, are sacred. They can have great powers. They can switch bodies, enjoy an inhuman vitality that allows them to survive terrible wounds that would kill anyone else. But to stoke the fires of their magic, they must drain the powers of others—preferably twins such as themselves."

"Rog and Jerry," Alek whispered. He looked at Paul Narcisse with an agonized expression.

"So you think they're dead. You really think they're dead."

Paul Narcisse looked at him as if gauging how much he could really take. "I don't know," he finally said quietly. "But I fear their situation may be even worse."

"Worse than death?" Alek asked incredulously. "There is worse than death?"

"Oh, yes," Paul Narcisse said. "Much."

There was a protracted silence that no one seemed willing to break. Sara could feel an emotional vortex running through the room threatening to snap out in unspeakable violence between brothers and friends. But she sensed that they hadn't plumbed the depths of revelation

yet. And they had to. They had to get everything out in the open.

"But," she said into the pregnant silence, "all of this doesn't explain why Kris isn't surprised that Guillaume Sam is a *bokor*. Does it?"

"No," Father Baltazar and Paul Narcisse said simultaneously. Alek just looked at his brother, who glanced wildly from face to face.

"Well . . ." he said. "Well . . . we did have some talks."

"What did he promise you?" Alek asked. "What did he offer you for the soul of Mountains of Madness?"

"It's not like that!" Kris Gervelis protested, but everyone could see that despite what he said, it was indeed exactly like that.

"I know," Sara said quietly, again breaking the awful silence.

Everyone looked at her, except Kris, who in his agony looked at nothing.

"Magda Konsavage."

The look on Kris's face, his awful silence, confirmed her suspicions.

Alek sighed as if all the life had gone out of him. Even Father Baltazar slumped in his chair. Paul Narcisse wearily rubbed his eyes.

"He said," Kris said thickly, "he said that she would love me. Love me as I loved her. He would give me this when we paid him the money we owed."

"He lied, Kris," Paul Narcisse said softly. "He can't make her love you. Not really. It would be a hideous simulacrum of love that wouldn't have fooled you for a second."

Kris began to cry. Tears ran down his face, although it was hideously blank of emotion. He made no sound as he

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wept, but said in a voice as blank as his face, "I knew that. I think I always knew that. I just couldn't help myself."

With that admission he covered his face with his hands and broke down into great wracking sobs wrenched from the bottom of his heart and soul. Alek broke also. He slid off the sofa to his knees and lurched to the chair where his brother wept inconsolably, gathering him into his embrace, weeping and murmuring, "My brother, oh my brother."

Sara wept herself, wiping away tears, surreptitiously glancing at Father Baltazar and Paul Narcisse. Father Baltazar was grim as an Old Testament prophet. Only Paul Narcisse wore a trace of a smile, a sad smile burdened by the grief that had been loosed in the room, but a smile just the same.

"The bonds snap," he said, almost to himself. "One by one he loses his allies. He weakens—yet becomes all the more dangerous for it."

"Guillaume Sam?" Sara asked, wiping the tear tracks from her cheeks.

Paul Narcisse nodded. "Oh, yes. Weep not, friends, for we have sundered another cord of the *bokor's* power, weakening him ever more."

Emotions spent, the Gervelis Brothers slowly regained control. Father Baltazar tossed them a box of tissues, and Kris blew his nose and rubbed his eyes.

"A good cry cleanses the soul," the priest said. "Too bad our society frowns upon it."

Paul Narcisse leaned forward and put his hand on Kris's arm. "You've done nothing that's irredeemable. But if you move to our side, Guillaume Sam will grow desperate. We sit here in the eye of the hurricane, my

friends, and when we pass through it into the storm again, it will blow upon us like a wind from hell."

"Do we wait for this wind to blow," Sara asked, "or do we take it to the source?"

"We have to know where to strike," Paul Narcisse pointed out. "Your search of Club Carrefour turned up nothing," he said. "The abandoned subway station belonged to Gene and Jean. It was their headquarters, not Guillaume Sam's."

"That means," Father Baltazar said, "that his *hounfort* is probably still hidden. Could he have held his ceremonies at the Club or the subway station?"

"Hmmm." Paul Narcisse considered the matter. "No, probably not. The club is too open. Anybody could find their way there. The subway station is too limited, the cars are too small to host ceremonies of any size. Besides, there was no *poteau-mitan*, no sanctuaries. Only the one altar to Baron Samedi."

"We can call on Papa Legba again," Sara said. "He owes me a third boon. I can ask him to send Sandro to lead us to Sam's *hounfort*."

Paul Narcisse frowned. "Papa Legba's boon is not an advantage to be used lightly. I'm not saying we shouldn't call upon Papa Legba. I'm saying we should hold back from using that card as long as we can."

"And if we don't play it before the game ends?" Sara asked.

"Then it's wasted," Father Baltazar said.

"We don't have to waste anything," Kris said quietly. "I've been to Sam's *hounfort*. I know where it is."

They all looked at him. His face was set, his expression that of a man who had made up his mind after a long period of uncertainty.

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"Excellent!" Paul Narcisse said. "If we can destroy his *hounfort*, Guillaume Sam will be greatly weakened. He may be panicked into a desperate move. Do not underestimate his powers. They still are great. But if we can strike quickly, while he is off-balance, that will certainly be to our favor."

"What kind of resources would he have at the *hounfort*?" Alek asked. "What can he do there?"

Paul Narcisse shrugged. "There's no telling for sure. Perhaps, though, you will learn that there can indeed be a fate worse than death."

Sara nodded. She knew that that was true. And so did the bodiless, soulless voices twittering in her head.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They assembled in the back office of The Serpent and the Rainbow: bookstore owner, priest, police officer, musician, and Goth Rock band manager. It was, Sara thought, an unlikely and motley group with which to storm the gates of hell.

Sara thought for about a second of bringing Jake along. He had a steady nerve and a cool head and God knows he owed Guillaume Sam personally, both for the death of Juliette and the beating he'd taken at Sam's orders, but ultimately she decided to leave him out of this party. He'd come along willingly, but he'd be confused by the utter weirdness of the situation and any confusion on his part would probably cost him his life. Sara couldn't have that on her conscience. She couldn't live with Jake's blood on her hands.

"I'll have to ask you to look the other way, Detective," Paul Narcisse asked.

"Why?"

He gestured at the closed box that rested on the top of

his desk. "You're armed," he said. "But the rest of us shouldn't go to that place emptyhanded."

Sara sighed. He was right, of course. Their lives, and perhaps even more, were on the line. But once you started to compromise your vows, Sara wondered, where did it end? Of course, she hadn't *just* started compromising her oath to the police department. She started long ago when she first picked up the Witchblade and slid it, gauntlet-like, over her right hand. But now was not the time to get squeamish. Now was not the time to stop compromising, either, though someday, she realized, that time would probably come.

She only hoped that she'd be able to stop when she really had to.

"Are you two familiar with guns?" Paul Narcisse asked the brothers.

They glanced at each other and Alek shook his head.

"I'm a city boy. I played with guitars when I grew up, not guns." He jerked a thumb at his brother. "His weapon of choice was a pocket calculator."

"Better take these, then." Paul Narcisse lifted the lid of the box and removed two firearms and handed them to the brothers.

"Jesus," Sara said. "Where'd you get those?"

Alek looked at them, took the one Paul Narcisse offered him, and turned it over in his hands like he was uncertain which end the bullets came out of. "What the hell are these things? They look like props from some Italian after-the-holocaust movie."

"They're Jackhammers," Kris said. "Twelve-gauge automatic combat shotguns. Ten round plastic magazine placed behind the trigger. On automatic the full magazine

will empty in two and one-third seconds with a Cutts-style compensator on the muzzle brake off-setting barrel jump and also acting as a flash eliminator." He looked at the others, who were all staring at him in surprise. "What? I read an article about them in *Soldier of Fortune* magazine once."

"Have you ever fired one?" Paul Narcisse asked.

"No."

"Better select single-round fire then. And stick to it."

Kris tried to hide his disappointment. "All right."

Paul Narcisse turned to Father Baltazar. "What about you? Are you armed?"

The priest patted his windbreaker's side pocket. "I have everything I need right here."

"All right then." Paul Narcisse gazed at the small band. All looked solemn, all looked determined. "There's no doubt that this will be dangerous. Perhaps even deadly. Some of us—" and here he looked right at the Gervelis brothers "—are not exactly trained for this sort of thing. Damballah knows I'm not, particularly. But if we stay alert, have faith, and listen to Detective Pezzini, we might all come back in the end. And in the end we all might have done the world some good."

Not a bad speech, thought Sara. She only hoped that she could live up to her part of it.

We hope so, too, the voices chorused in her brain. *We hope so, too.*

Paul Narcisse drove them to the *hounfort* in a battered old Volkswagen van that looked to Sara as if it had survived, though just barely, more than one previous foray into urban warfare. Or perhaps those holes in the body were just rust spots.

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Indian summer had finally broken. There was a distinct chill to the air. Everywhere across the city people were sitting down to dinner and looking forward to a movie or a Mets game to round out their evening. Or perhaps they were just planning a long, quiet night at home with their loved ones.

Meanwhile, she and her companions were facing the promise of violent death. Not that Sara loathed the adrenaline-laced excitement that was already warming her stomach with a nervous energy that belied her calm exterior. But sometime it would be nice, she reflected, to see what that quiet evening at home would feel like.

She found herself looking at Alek Gervelis. He looked up and met her gaze.

"You're probably used to this sort of thing," he said.

"Maybe too much so."

"Well, I'm just hoping that I can get through this without peeing my pants."

She put a hand on his forearm and squeezed it gently, reassuringly. "You'll be okay."

He leaned toward her and put his head close to hers.

"If we get through this," he said in a soft voice, "how about we go somewhere quiet, just the two of us? Have a nice dinner. Maybe a few drinks. Then just relax and get to know each other a little better."

Sara smiled, amazed at how his thoughts seemed to parallel her own. "Sounds good," she said. "It's a date."

"Good." Alek leaned back against his seat. "Now just make sure I live through tonight so we can actually make good on it."

"I'll do my best."

"That's it," Kris said. He was in the shotgun seat in front, guiding Paul Narcisse through the streets of Brook-

lyn. They had moved from residential neighborhoods to a blasted industrial warehouse zone made up of huge block-like stone and brick structures of a peculiarly ugly neo-penal style of architecture. None seemed to be the centers of particularly successful industries or businesses, and many looked abandoned.

The building that Kris indicated was well up the block and across the street. Paul Narcisse guided the VW into an adjacent sidestreet that was actually more alley than street. He maneuvered the van so that they could watch the front of the building through the windshield while they themselves were hidden by the darkness of the unlit street.

Paul Narcisse made a sound of disgust deep in his throat.

"This is a vile place to have a *hounfort*," he said. "There are no trees, no grass, no plants at all, no clean running water. Only concrete, cement, and dirty brick. There is nothing to nourish the *loa*, or their people. Such a place would only find favor with those like Guillaume Sam, who worship death and decay."

He spit out the van's open window.

"Someone's going in," Father Baltazar said.

Two figures scurried from the dark side of the street to a door in the center of the warehouse's front facade. They paused there for a moment, then apparently were admitted. They disappeared inside.

"Perhaps there's a ceremony tonight," the priest said.

"I think we can count on that," Paul Narcisse replied. "I think we can count on the presence of Guillaume Sam and many of his *zobops*—" he turned to glance back at Sara and Alek, in the back seat "—those are the low-level cultists in his *bizango*, or secret society, probably recruited from all over the city and beyond."

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They watched for a few minutes as seven or eight of what Paul Narcisse had termed *zobops* entered the structure, alone or in small groups of two or three.

"Is there a password?" Paul Narcisse asked Kris.

He nodded. " 'We meet at the crossroads.' "

"Right," Paul Narcisse said. "Let's split up. Caz, you go with Detective Pezzini. I'll go in with the brothers. You and I had best keep our faces hidden as much as possible, because we're the most likely to be recognized by those guarding the doors. Remember. 'We meet at the crossroads.' "

"All right," Sara said.

"Let's do it," Alek said. Quickly, he leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. "For luck," he said.

She smiled at him, her pulses already hammering wildly, the voices singing in her brain. She put her hand on the back of his head and twined her fingers in his long, thick hair.

"We'll need more luck than that," she said, and pulled his mouth back down to hers.

Their mouths met and opened and Sara kissed him hard, as if it might be the last kiss in her life. She was breathing heavily as she broke away and so was Alek. The voices laughed at her, thinking she was foolish. She knew what they thought and she didn't care. For a moment she put the palm of her hand against his cheek and he caught it and brought it to his lips, then they followed the others out of the van.

Alek and Kris and Paul Narcisse sauntered down the street. Alek, who wore a black duster that reached down to his ankles, had both his and Kris's Jackhammers, as well as a selection of extra ammo cassettes, secreted in the voluminous folds of his great coat. Sara and Father

Baltazar waited until they'd crossed over the *hounfort's* side, then exchanged glances and followed. As expected, they were challenged at the door. Sara gave the ritual password. Father Baltazar kept his face averted and in shadow as much as he could.

Security was about as lax as they could hope for. The two guards waved them through almost disinterestedly. They were wearing ceremonial outfits that consisted of long flowing robes and pointy red caps with cheek flaps on either side that hung down to their shoulders. Despite the caps Sara could see crosses tattooed on their cheeks and the back of their hands. They were members of Guillaume Sam's private gang, The Saturday Night Specials, the bangers who were the foot soldiers for his various illegal enterprises.

The Gervelis Brothers and Paul Narcisse were waiting for them in the anteroom where the initiates donned their ceremonial robes. Alek was having a difficult time finding one large enough to fit over his tall frame, and that served as an excuse for them to mill about until they were all reunited.

Once properly enrobed they left the anteroom under the not-so-watchful gaze of another pair of bored Specials and followed other recent arrivals into the ground floor of what had obviously been a warehouse of some sort. Fifty or sixty *zobops* had already assembled.

The building had been gutted some time in the past, leaving a huge open space that encompassed nearly all of the structure's first floor. Clearly, Guillaume Sam didn't care about the place's aesthetics. It was post-industrial-depressing: bare concrete floor with piles of trash heaped randomly around the edge of a great open space supported by bare steel beams and columns badly in need of

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paint. The area was lit poorly by naked bulbs strung on wire. Some of the bulbs dangled from the ceilings, others from wires twisted around the pillar-like supports running from floor to ceiling. The light cast by the bulbs was fitful and distorting, throwing odd monstrous shadows that seemed to jump and jerk like inhuman marionettes. It was, Sara thought, vaguely unsettling even when nothing much was happening. She couldn't imagine what it would look like during the chaotic dancing of a *vodoun* ceremony.

The peristyle had been reduced to a *poteau-mitan* set in the usual circular concrete support whose surface doubled as an altar. The great pole was the only bit of color in the *houngfort's* concrete and steel environment.

Sara and the others kept to the margins of the crowd, watching as a higher-level initiate drew the ceremonial *veve* around the dancing pole. A couple of small chambers serving as sanctuaries, *caille mysteres*, as Sara remembered they were called, were clustered behind the pole along one of the warehouse's interior walls. They were the size and general shape of office cubicles, roofed with thin, sagging, black plastic sheets. She could see flickers of movement in the chambers, but the sanctuary wasn't well lit and she couldn't quite make out what was happening inside the tiny rooms.

"What do we do now?" Alek whispered.

"Wait," Paul Narcisse said, "for the ceremony to start. Once the dancing and drumming begins we should start to work our way around the fringes of the crowd to the sanctuary. What we're looking for will likely be found before the altar in one of them."

They didn't have long to wait. The *houngan* finished creating the *veve* on the bare concrete floor and

disappeared into one of the *caille mysteres* behind the dancing pole. After a moment the lights dimmed even lower and the chamber took on a murky, almost underwater-like darkness. Sara became abruptly aware of the concrete and steel smell of the place, underlain with an unpleasant musk of sweat and spoiled food. It was unpleasant, but so then was the *hounfort's* overall environment.

The drummers came out of the *caille mysteres* when Sara wasn't watching. One moment the chamber was empty, the next it was reverberating like a concrete and steel amphitheater to the pounding of the *voudon* drums. The *houngan* led a line of dancers out of one of the sanctuaries and they began to make their way around the *poteau-mitan*, much like the dancers that Sara had seen at the ceremony in the Cypress Hills National Cemetery.

The drumbeats echoed in Sara's ears. There was, she realized, a qualitative difference between this ceremony and the previous one she'd witnessed. Everything associated with this ceremony was unpleasant. The surroundings were depressingly trashy. They smelled bad and looked even worse. Even the drumming, which had been thrilling and invigorating at the outdoor ceremony, was reverberating painfully in her skull. The voices complained of it to themselves. All and all it was a disagreeable experience promising even more disagreeable results. She could well imagine that evil would result from what was happening here tonight. She felt the Witchblade tingle at the edge of her consciousness.

The *bokor* leading the dance suddenly jerked about, flailing his arms oddly. It was clear that he had been mounted by a *loa*. He disappeared into the *caille mysteres* and came out with the cane and hobbled walk of Papa Legba. He cried out in *langage* as the dancers continued

to whirl around him. There was no immediate response, but the drumbeats became so loud, so wildly arrhythmic that Sara's head began to ache.

The pounding force of the drums drove her to her knees. She wasn't the only one so affected. All around the room people were going down, a total of half a dozen or more. Some were rolling on the floor and moaning as if in the grip of brain seizures. The affect on her was less dramatic, just a weakening of her knees and a sudden inability of her legs to support her weight. When she went down, Alek bent over her, a concerned look on his face.

"Sara, you okay?"

She found that she couldn't speak, but she nodded and leaned on the arm he offered. She used it to pull herself up to her feet. When she looked back toward the *poteau-mitan* she saw Baron Samedi standing before it.

He was an awesome figure in top hat and coat, bigger than Alek, bigger than anyone present. He had a gigantic cigar in his mouth and was wearing a pair of sunglasses which was missing one of the lenses. His exposed eye shone like the eye of one possessed, which, of course, he was.

"Rum!" he roared in the voice of an angry bull. "Rum and food!"

He was as imperious as a king. When one of the female initiates offered a full bottle of white clairin rum, a raw, powerful drink potent enough to intoxicate a god, he pulled the cork with his teeth, spat it out, and then downed half the liquor in a single gulp. Another initiate approached him with a bowl of chicken and rice. He shoveled the food into his mouth while juggling bowl and bottle both, alternately gulping down mouthfuls of food and rum. He finished both in seconds, and threw the

containers down on the floor where they smashed into dozens of sharp shards. He strode through the dancers, rubbing his crotch suggestively as he passed attractive female initiates.

The chamber's atmosphere was charged with a sudden sexual heat that Sara realized was flowing directly from Samedi. She looked at Alek, fighting the desire to throw herself upon him and rip away his clothes. He looked at her uncertainly, seemingly not as susceptible to the psychic suggestions floating in the air as she was.

Baron Samedi roared out an order in *langage*. The words struck Sara's ears like bullets. She could almost understand them. She felt she would understand if the voices weren't badgering her, if Alek, standing so close, wasn't such a smouldering pillar of masculine sexuality.

Torn by conflicting sensations and needs, she clung to his arm like a drowning person would cling to a buoy. She couldn't conceive of what might have happened next if two teams of four *zobops* each hadn't brought two wooden crates out of the *caille mysteres*, creating a new focus of attention. They were rough-hewn, long and narrow, and Sara suddenly realized what kind of boxes they were.

They were coffins. The men carrying them, two in the front, two in the back, set them down carefully against the circular cement altar around the *poteau-mitan* so that they leaned nearly upright. They were uncovered. Sara could see that they contained the bodies of Roger and Jerry Stern.

The Sterns looked no worse than if they'd been sleeping. Their faces were relaxed, their arms hung naturally and loosely at their sides. They didn't look at all like day-old corpses—at least, no more than the Sterns did when they were alive.

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At her side, Sara heard a painful intake of breath as Alek recognized them. He made half a move toward them, checking it when he realized that Sara still leaned against him with most of her weight. She straightened, feeling strength returning to her legs, but was loath to release Alek. There was nothing, she thought, that he could accomplish by going to the Sterns' side.

Kris Gervelis moaned as he, too, realized who lay in the coffins. Probably until that very instant he'd believed that the boys were okay, that, sure, they may have gotten themselves into a bit of difficulty like they so often did, but it was nothing that he or Alek couldn't fix. It was nothing irreparable . . . except, this time it was.

Baron Samedi strode up to the coffins. A collective gasp went through the onlookers as he planted himself before the Sterns, and began to speak again in *langage*.

"We must stop him," Paul Narcisse said in a low, urgent voice. "It's the ceremony for zombification. We must stop him before it goes too far."

But Paul Narcisse's warning came too late.

Baron Samedi shot his hands out. He placed one large palm over the heart of each corpse, and the *loa* cried out an impassioned order in *langage* that Sara felt she understood all too well. He was commanding them to rise, to open their eyes and walk from their coffins, and as they all watched, too frozen by horror to move, the brothers' eyes popped open.

Alek moaned at Sara's side. Even from where they stood they could see the awful emptiness in the twins' eyes, the utter lack of intelligence and will. But that didn't stop the walking corpses from stepping from their coffins.

Alek turned his head away from the awful sight. Sara

gripped the sleeves of his cloak, holding him now as he'd just held her. Only the strength she willed him from the sheer force of her personality kept him on his feet.

Then Kris, standing between them and the two priests screamed like a dying animal and all hell broke loose in the *hounfort*.

Ignoring Paul Narcisse's earlier advice, he thumbed his Jackhammer, which Alek had passed to him in the cloak-room, to full automatic and emptied the ammunition cassette into the ceiling.

His memory of the article in *Soldier of Fortune* had been accurate. It took two and a third seconds.

It made a sound like a series of nearly simultaneous bomb blasts, partially overlapping, each blending into a roar that seemed to last for a hell of a lot longer than two and a third seconds. The stench of gunpowder smothered the air. Screams of sudden panic came from the initiates both watching and participating in the ceremony as fragments of the ceiling rained down like cement hail, knocking some initiates off their feet while dust swirls kicked up by the blasts blinded others.

You couldn't have a more thorough panic, Sara thought, if God Himself had stepped out of the pages of the Old Testament and in a voice compounded of booming thunder and blazing lightning condemned everyone in the room to eternal damnation in the lowest, foulest pits of hell.

"I've got to reach them," Father Baltazar shouted, reaching into the pocket of the windbreaker that he still wore under his initiate's robes.

Baron Samedi whirled about to face the source of the confusion. His gaze met Sara's and for the first time a

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bolt of recognition ran through her. The body the *loa* inhabited was Guillaume Sam's. Of course. She should have recognized him earlier, but somehow he seemed larger, more regal, and even more powerful than Sam did in normal life.

The *loa* pointed a finger at them and purred in a low, laughing voice, "Kill them. Kill them all."

Roger and Jerry Stern—or rather, the soulless animated corpses that they had become—took slow, shuffling steps forward. They were an awful parody of humanity. Their faces were stiff, devoid of emotion, their eyes were blank, devoid of will. As they made their way through the panicked crowd, their movements became more fluid, surer, and stronger, though they never totally lost their inhuman stiffness.

Father Baltazar was the first to reach them—or, they reached him. His face was heavy with anguish, as was his voice.

"What have they done to you, my sons?" he asked, overcome by the emotion of the moment.

Of course, neither could reply either vocally or emotionally. Impassively, one of them reached out his arms—at this point, Sara still had no clue as to which Stern was which—and tried to grab Father Baltazar by the throat. The zombie's movements were still inhumanly slow and the priest dodged his clumsy embrace with ease.

But in that same instant the other zombie lifted his fist and swung it downward, stiff-armed. It was an awkward blow, but Father Baltazar didn't see it coming and it caught him right where his neck and shoulder met, driving him to his knees.

He grunted in pain. Paul Narcisse, lips moving in a silent prayer, drew an automatic from a shoulder holster

and pumped three shots into the Stern who towered over Father Baltazar, looking down at him, devoid of pity or any other human emotion.

The zombie didn't even grunt or stagger. The shots punched through him with no visible effect. He reached out again and this time the priest couldn't evade his grasp. The zombie fastened his hands around the Father Baltazar's throat and began to squeeze.

By this time several of the *zobops* who had kept, or regained, their heads, had drawn their own guns and began to return fire. Bullets zinged about the warehouse like angry bees. Baron Samedi put his hands on his hips and laughed insanely.

"Find cover!" Sara shouted, and then ignored her own order.

She could see that Father Baltazar was really in trouble. The priest had dropped the little golden box he'd taken out of his windbreaker and gripped the zombie's thin arms with his own powerful hands, but wasn't able to break the creature's stranglehold. His face was turning red, his eyes were starting to bulge from their sockets.

Sara ran to his side and hurled herself against the other zombie who was also maneuvering to get his hands around the priest's throat. In an awful flash of memory, the movements of the dead Sterns reminded her of the time they'd both slipped their arms around her waist in Club Carrefour. This time, however, their faces weren't plastered with goofy smiles and their intentions were much more deadly.

She struck the Stern in his side with her shoulder at full running speed. It was like ramming a sack of cement, but the zombie couldn't absorb all her inertia and he crashed down on the concrete floor, still reaching out

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with his hands and opening and clenching them in strangling gestures. His legs also moved aimlessly as if he were still upright and walking.

The creatures, Sara realized, were apparently as slow of mind as they were of body. She leapt to her feet and turned to the one who was slowly strangling the priest. Father Baltazar had given up his futile efforts to break the zombie's hold and was scrabbling around on the floor trying to pick up the small golden box that he'd dropped. He couldn't see where it was, so he wasn't even coming close to retrieving it.

Sara bent down swiftly and picked it up. It took a moment for the word to come out of the mist of her almost-forgotten Sunday School education, but finally she recognized that it was a pix, the small container in which sanctified communion wafers were kept.

She quickly opened it and saw that it contained a small stack of the white circular wafers. She remembered when receiving communion as a child she'd take them on her tongue and they'd stick to the top of her mouth and tastelessly melt away.

What the hell? she thought. She looked at them blankly for a moment, then figured, *Well, Father Baltazar must know what he's doing. Obviously, he'd brought them along for one reason.*

She took a wafer from the container. The voices scolded her and for a moment she felt guilty as the realization hit that perhaps she shouldn't be handling a sanctified object with her unblest hands.

No time to worry about finer theological points, she told herself, and stuffed the communion wafer in the zombie's mouth.

It was easier than she'd thought it would be. The thing

could only focus on one problem at a time, and strangling Father Baltazar occupied what little was left of his mind. He was also slack-jawed, with his mouth hanging open idiotically, so Sara was able to pop the wafer right in.

Automatically, his mouth closed on the morsel of food and he chewed like a cow working on its cud. He swallowed and, as if he were a living thing hit in the forehead with a killing hammer blow, immediately went down.

Father Baltazar tore free from the zombie's suddenly loose fingers. The creature's knees lost all strength and he slipped bonelessly to the floor. His expression relaxed as he fell and for that fraction of a moment Sara saw the man that the zombie had once been on his suddenly tired-looking features. And then his eyes closed and he was lying in a sad, dead heap, his arms still outstretched, almost beseechingly.

Father Baltazar choked, his hands gently probing his own nearly crushed throat. He tried to talk, but couldn't. Instead he pointed at the other zombie who had just clumsily regained his feet, and was coming towards them menacingly, not cognizant of his brother's fate.

Still on his knees the priest pointed, waving his hands. Sara understood what he meant. She took another wafer from the pix, and, ducking under the zombie's reaching hands, deftly placed the wafer in the zombie's mouth.

The result was the same. The zombie automatically ingested the morsel and reacted as quickly and as thoroughly as his brother had. He collapsed upon his brother's corpse, embracing him with his open arms.

Perhaps fitting, Sara thought, but a terribly sad sight.

She turned to Father Baltazar, helping him up to his feet. "How did you know the communion host would kill them—or whatever it did to them?" she asked.

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The priest shook his head.

"It wasn't the host," he said. "Probably not, anyway. Salt breaks the bond between the zombie's body and whatever is left of their soul still animating it. I figured it wouldn't hurt to use something blessed to bring the salt into the zombie's system," so I salted down a stack of communion wafers. But maybe now isn't the best time to speak of this."

The priest was right. Although only seconds had elapsed, the firefight had grown exponentially in volume. Alek, Kris, and Paul Narcisse were all pinned down behind metal beams and structural supports, along with forty or fifty unarmed cultists who were cowering and screaming. Sara's faction had the superior firepower with the Gervelis brothers' Jackhammers blasting away at the more than a dozen armed Specials who were returning fire with handguns.

Sara and Father Baltazar were trapped in the open, halfway between the area where Alek and the others were making their stand, and the Specials, who were firing from cover behind similar girders on the other side of the *poteau-mitan*. Baron Samedi, who had been standing right at the center pole, observing the developing firefight with more than slight good humor, was now casually strolling back to the *caille mysteres*, ignoring the bullets whizzing by him as if they were so many stingless bees.

"We've got to stop him," Father Baltazar, crouching now next to Sara said. "God knows what he's up to."

"Right." She turned to look back over her shoulder. "Suppressive fire," she called to the Gervelises, hoping that they at least had an inkling of what she meant.

One of them came through. She suspected that it was

Kris, whose *Soldier of Fortune* addiction had apparently not been a complete waste of time. After he'd emptied his first ammunition cassette on full automatic, he'd switched back to the more manageable single-fire option, the efficacy of which was pointed out by several Specials lying in pools of blood behind their inadequate cover.

Now Kris switched to full auto again and laid down a suppressive arc of fire; aimed, Sara hoped, above their heads. She scurried after Baron Samedi, who had already disappeared in the warren of small rooms that was the sanctuary.

Sara serpentine over the open ground. It took Father Baltazar a moment or two to realize what was happening, and then he took out after her. Paul Narcisse was at their heels as Alek joined the barrage with his Jackhammer, wisely taking the single shot option.

The reverberations from Kris's first ammunition cassette hadn't yet died as Sara reached the sanctuary, running through little or no return fire. The gangbangers kept their heads down as Kris's barrage echoed throughout the warehouse. She did have to pass one support that covered a crouching Special. He reached out to try to stop her, but without breaking stride she slapped him against the side of the head with her automatic, and he went down in a heap.

The voices laughed, calling for his head.

"Finish him—"

"—send his damned soul to hell—"

"—where it belongs."

She ignored their bloodthirsty urgings, concentrating on reaching the *caille mysteres* right before her. The chambers were poorly lit and small, although not without

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

cover that could conceal, well, just about any crazy thing, from armed Special to undead zombie to angry loa.

She flung herself into the small room. An altar was set across the back wall, and crouching under the altar was someone or something.

"Get up!" Sara ordered. "Let me see your hands!"

A frightened squeal came from under the altar, and one of the female dancers scuttled out into the open, her hands up and empty, her expression terrified, as Sara threw down on her. The cultist ran out into the open area, evidently figuring her chances would be better out there, and almost bumped into Father Baltazar as he blundered into the small room and threw himself against the wall, panting with exertion.

"Find Samedi," he said when he could get his breath. "Try to get him out of Sam's body."

"How do I do that?"

The priest shook his head. "Not sure," he said, still short of breath.

Great, Sara thought. The expert doesn't know, but he expects me to figure it out.

There was a doorless opening on the wall against which Sara leaned, leading into yet another sanctuary room that was darker than the one they were in. She took a deep breath and rolled into the next room, keeping low.

Another altar stood against the back wall of this cubicle, but with even less light Sara was less sure of what it contained. Stuff. Piles of stuff, with no time to examine any of it. No Baron Samedi, though. Apparently.

She pushed herself through to the next room, thinking that this was like hunting poisonous snakes in the dark. Only maybe a little more dangerous. But there was noth-

ing to do but go on and trust to her skill, and, maybe, that the voices would warn her in time if she was going to run into anything terribly dangerous.

She went through several of the rooms, flushing a couple of cultists who had no fight in them. She heard sounds coming from behind her, but when glancing back saw that Father Baltazar had been joined by Paul Narcisse. Both were following her as the firefight still raged.

She prayed that Alek and Kris were holding their own, that they wouldn't run out of ammunition, that their blood wouldn't be on her hands when this was all over. She prayed that they would find what they were looking for, that somehow she'd figure out how to chase Baron Samedi from the body of Guillaume Sam, that they'd find a way to end this all here and now without any more blood being shed.

Suddenly, her prayers were answered, though not all were granted.

She reached what seemed to be the last sanctuary room. Light shone through the open doorway in the back wall of this room, indicating that it was last in the warren of *caille mysteres*, and that it opened into the space of the warehouse's first floor.

She didn't need the voices to tell her that danger lay beyond that doorway, but they did so in no uncertain terms. She hesitated. Father Baltazar and Paul Narcisse joined her in the small chamber. She looked at them and realized that they knew the danger inherent in going through the doorway. But they couldn't stay in that empty little room forever. She gestured right, pointed to herself. Gestured left, pointed to them. They nodded, and Father Baltazar made the sign of the cross in the air before them all.

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

Before Sara could do anything he went through the door with a yell, unarmed, leaping to the left. She and Paul Narcisse followed, going right and left themselves, but a single shot cracked, catching the priest and slamming him against the outer wall of the sanctuary, blood suddenly running down his face.

Sara looked up to see Baron Samedi, laughing aloud, holding Guillaume Sam's pet possum in his arms, stroking it. Next to him stood Gene, smiling, pistol in his hands. Father Baltazar lay in a growing puddle of blood.

Baron Samedi calmly dropped the possum to the floor. It landed lightly, staring at them with its beady little eyes.

"Kill them!" Baron Samedi said, and the possum started toward them.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As the possum came toward them, it changed.

Sara had never thought it a particularly cute beast, but now it was downright ugly. It had always seemed more intelligent than it could possibly have been, but now its beady little eyes gleamed with a malicious understanding that seemed more than animal. As it scurried toward them the air shimmered around it, as if it was pushing through heat waves thrown off desert sands. And like a mirage viewed through distorting waves, the possum's outline rippled as it grew taller and bulkier, metamorphosing into something either a little more or a little less than human. Before Sara realized it, the Machete Murderer was shambling toward them, dragging his chains behind, armed with his favorite weapon and more than ready for action.

"Bakula-baka," Sara whispered.

"Damballah preserve us," Paul Narcisse prayed.

"Get Caz out of here!" Sara screamed, and moved, waving her arms, trying to attract the thing's attention.

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY

Of course, there was Gene as well as Baron Samedi himself to worry about, but right now they were beyond Sara's consideration. If she didn't figure out a way to neutralize the creature that called itself Bakula-baka, it would all be over, quickly and horribly. She remembered their meeting in Guinee with little fondness and even less hope.

Her half-conscious plan seemed to work. She attracted his attention and he went toward her, away from Paul Narcisse, who was running to the fallen priest. That was the good part. The bad part was that she had attracted his attention and he was coming toward *her*.

And it was clear that he recognized her.

"You escaped me in Guinee," Bakula-baka said, missing flesh slightly slurring his words. "Tonight you will not."

He waved his machete emphatically and grinned skeletally.

Sara knew she was no match for him physically, but she did outgun him. She fired, quickly and accurately, and hit him three times in the chest and abdomen.

To absolutely no effect.

The slugs penetrated Bakula-baka's massive frame, but didn't even slow his advance. He bore down on her with murderous glee, machete held high and ready for a decapitating blow. Her gun was useless against his supernatural defenses. She couldn't out fight him with her hands. She couldn't outrun him. She had no choice.

She surrendered to the voices. They'd been slavering in her brain like chained attack dogs demanding to be freed. So she let them go.

Bakula-baka was almost upon her as she calmly holstered her weapon and stood quietly facing him, her arms open as if to embrace him. Her unusual behavior

penetrated even his rather thick skull and he stopped, staring suspiciously at the serene expression on the face of his intended victim.

Sara's mind exploded in a fireball of white heat, as it always did when she was enveloped in the Witchblade, and the cold metal appeared instantaneously upon her body, encasing her thighs, breasts, and abdomen in its chilly embrace. She shuddered at its touch, yet part of her welcomed it, like the caress of a lover whom she half-hated. Her mind danced in the incandescent blaze, her senses expanded to an inhuman degree. Every nerve, every fiber of her being felt more alive and vibrant than it did when she was outside the Witchblade's embrace. She felt invincible.

Bakula-baka was wary of the sudden change in her appearance. He advanced tentatively, impressed by the armor that Sara suddenly wore. But the Witchblade was more than mere armor.

Sara laughed aloud and pointed at him imperiously.

The Witchblade ran down her arm to her hand and to the tip of her extended finger, and it didn't stop there. It flung itself across the open space between Sara and the killer, extruding a razor-sharp tentacle.

The *loa* was astonished, but, reacting with more than human speed, brought up his machete with exquisite precision and parried the Witchblade's thrust before it could pierce his chest. The Witchblade's tentacle shrieked off the machete blade and the strangest battle in Sara's career began.

Sara had never before faced an opponent with such supernatural strength and skill. Bakula-baka looked big and clumsy, but in reality he was big and quick and handled his butcher's blade with all the finesse of a master

fencer. She found herself in a back-and-forth struggle as she and her opponent circled each other like dancers in a graceful yet deadly minuet, thrusting and parrying, each probing for that crucial weakness, each looking for that moment when they could strike true and end the dance in a shower of blood.

Seconds ticked by. Despite the Witchblade's fury, Sara found herself having trouble focusing on her immediate problem: Bakula-baka. She had too many other things to worry about. She couldn't help but wonder how the Gervelis brothers were doing in the ongoing firefight, a situation so alien to them and so dangerous. Just on the edge of her peripheral vision she could see that Paul Narcisse had reached Father Baltazar. He had half-lifted the fallen priest in his arms and Baron Samedi was shouting to Gene, who was staring fixedly at the fencing match between her and the demonic *loa*, his gun ready, just waiting for the opportunity to revenge the death of his sister and his earlier wounding at Sara's hand.

She couldn't believe that Gene was still alive—*Damn!*

Bakula-baka had snuck in under her defense as she'd lost her focus. Not even the Witchblade could prevent him from landing a machete blow that slashed across her ribcage. The mystic armor pulled itself together in time to protect the area of her body where the blow landed, but it could only cushion. It couldn't soften the tremendous blow.

Sara grunted as the blade whipped across her, flinging her to the ground. Her head snapped down on the concrete floor with enormous force and a shower of bright lights exploded in her brain. She blacked out.

It must have only been for a moment because when she opened her eyes again Bakula-baka still hadn't

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reached her. She couldn't breathe. Her huffing lungs were struggling to draw in air.

And the Witchblade was gone.

It had vanished when she'd lost consciousness, leaving her virtually naked, protected only by her tattered clothes. Her breasts shuddered as she tried to focus her mind to draw a breath and call back the Witchblade.

She caught Gene's smile from the corner of her eye as he realized that he finally had a clear shot at her, and the hideous smile on Bakula-baka's half-face as he loomed over her, stinking of death and the grave. She desperately tried to summon the Witchblade in time to save her from the simultaneous attacks.

Gene's features suddenly blurred as if he were looking through radiating heat waves. When they settled again less than a second later he was still grinning widely, but his upper lip was missing its pencil-thin mustache.

Sara thought, *Jean?* and suddenly Baron Samedi roared in his great bull-like voice and Paul Narcisse fired two shots almost simultaneously.

The first hit Gene, or maybe it was now Jean, in the throat. A geyser of blood erupted from the wound, spraying in a fountain through the severed jugular. The second blew off the top of his, or her, skull, and Sara knew that he, or she, wouldn't recover from this wound.

A stricken, almost angry expression washed over Jean's face. It blurred again for an infinitesimal moment. By the time the body hit the floor it was wearing Gene's face once again, and both twins were finally, irrevocably, dead. At least, Sara hoped so.

Bakula-baka responded to the urgency in Baron Samedi's voice. He turned to see Paul Narcisse pointing his weapon at the *loa's* mount. Sara still couldn't breathe

and couldn't even draw in enough air to shout a warning as Paul Narcisse pulled the trigger and Guillaume Sam's body staggered at the impact of the slug tearing through it, just as Bakula-baka reached the *houngan's* side.

Sara tried to scream but her lungs still weren't drawing enough air. Her voice could only croak so quietly that only she could hear the pitiful sound it made as Bakula-baka swung his machete and with one blow neatly took Paul Narcisse's head from his shoulders.

It flew away like an ugly, misshapen football. Sara felt almost as if she had been struck, not Narcisse. She watched in horror as Bakula-baka roared in glee and grabbed the headless body as it swayed drunkenly on its feet. The *loa* opened his mouth wide and clamped down upon the neck stump, making greedy sucking noises as it drained the spurting blood from Paul Narcisse's corpse.

Bakula-baka released the body, letting it fall over Father Baltazar, then whirled, turning his mad, staring eye on Sara. He started to lurch toward her as she still fought for her breath, fought to call the Witchblade back and direct it upon him, but Guillaume Sam shouted again, this time in his own voice. Samedi had apparently fled back to Guinee.

The *loa* answered Guillaume Sam's summons. He went swiftly to the *bokor's* side and scooped him up in his powerful arms. Together they disappeared among the maze of the *caille mysteres*.

Sara suddenly realized she was breathing again, though the entire right side of her body felt as if it were on fire. She looked down and saw a great bruise already darkening her skin from her right breast down her ribcage and across her waist to almost the top of her thigh. In the center of the dark bruise was a dead white line an inch across, directly where the machete blade had

struck her. Only the mystic armor of the Witchblade had kept her from being chopped through from chest to groin.

But that wasn't important, now.

She couldn't get up. She couldn't walk, but she dragged herself across the concrete floor to where Paul Narcisse's corpse lay over Father Baltazar. It took what seemed to be a long time. Right before she reached the pitiful bodies the gunfire from the other area of the floor ceased, and Sara knew she had to hurry. If the Gervelis brothers had been outgunned, if they were lying dead or wounded, her own life would be measured in minutes.

But first she had to see about Father Baltazar.

She pulled Paul Narcisse's headless and bloodless body off him, and laid it aside as reverently as she could, though she hadn't recovered enough strength to keep it from dropping the last foot or so to the hard concrete floor. Holding back tears, she turned the priest's face toward hers, so that she could see his features. She tore a scrap of cloth from the tatters of her shirt, not noticing that she nearly bared her chest, and wiped away the blood flowing down the side of his face.

Gingerly, she probed the wound on the side of his skull, feeling through his hair clogged with blood, and then had to fight back tears of relief. The bullet had only creased the side of his skull, tearing his scalp. Like most scalp wounds, this one was bleeding like a mother, making it seem much more serious than it actually was. She probed the area of the wound gently with her fingers, feeling around his skull. As near as she could tell, it wasn't broken. His wound wasn't fatal, or probably even particularly serious. She tore another strip of cloth from her tattered raiment and bound his head loosely to help ease the already slowing flow of blood.

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Sara then realized that someone was calling her name. She recognized Alek's voice and shouted back.

"Here! We're here!"

It took the brothers a couple of moments to find her, but they finally tracked her by the sound of her voice. They burst through the warren of the *caille mysteres* disheveled and a little bloody. She was damn happy to see them.

She managed to get to her feet and started to hug a startled Alek Gervelis, but gasped in pain as they met in an embrace. *This time*, she thought, *something is broken*.

He looked down at her, still a little wild-eyed because of the adrenalin running through his system. He had shed the initiate's robe and his duster was tattered by bullets that had come uncomfortably close, but he seemed unwounded. Kris was bleeding from his right arm, but the wound was already bound and didn't seem to be troubling him half as much as the scene he now gazed upon.

"What happened here?" he asked in a small voice, his eyes wide at the sight of Gene's body, and Paul Narcisse's. "And—?"

He looked at Sara, who made no attempt to hide her near nakedness. Now wasn't the time for false modesty. She was too tired, too sore, too mentally exhausted. Wordlessly, Alek stripped off his duster and put it around her shoulders. She draped it around herself, grateful for his silent chivalry, grateful that his garment still retained his human warmth.

"What are we going to do?" Kris asked, as they heard approaching sirens in the distance. "What are we going to do?"

Sara shook her head. She had run out of ideas.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There was only one thing to do. Run.

It wasn't the first time since Sara had acquired the Witchblade that she'd found herself running from her fellow officers like a common criminal, but maybe it was the most painful time. She wasn't alone. She was with others who depended on her. Some of them needed medical attention, and she had no real idea of what to do besides bolt like rats from a burning building.

Fortunately they were able to exit the building before the police arrived in any appreciable numbers. Their presence at the *hounfort* was not something she wanted to explain to anyone in an official capacity. Not only would her career be over, she and her friends would be looking at serious jail time if their participation in the night's activities was ever discovered.

Although they all hated to do it, they had to abandon Paul Narcisse's body. There was simply no way they could take it with them and hope to avoid capture. It was difficult enough to drag Father Baltazar along, but fortunately

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he revived as they were making their way out of the building, and was soon able to walk under his own power.

He took one look at their faces as they stepped into the chill of the late September evening, and Sara knew that he didn't have to ask about Paul Narcisse. He knew his friend was dead. His expression hardened, as if he simply refused to let himself grieve at this time.

"Where are we headed?" he asked.

"I'm glad you're conscious, Caz," Sara said. "I want to go to your place—but not without your permission. We can't go to Paul's. The police will be there soon. And my apartment is too far to be our bolt-hole."

"That's a good idea," the priest said. "You can tell me what happened when we get to the rectory."

Sara nodded and they set off down the alley, one step ahead of the cops, who were still arriving by the car-full. Ironically, it was Sara herself who now slowed them the most. Her side ached at every step, as if a red-hot poker were lodged between her ribs. But she gritted her teeth and kept walking.

Alek Gervelis was a welcome presence beside her. She leaned into him and he helped her along as best as he could. He was smart enough to stay silent, secure enough to keep his thoughts, worries, and doubts to himself as they made their way across the borough back to Cypress Hills.

They kept to the dark as best they could, avoiding streetlights and crowds and all forms of public transportation. They couldn't afford to take a cab or bus or subway. Father Baltazar's clothes were soaked in blood from his creased scalp. Kris had an obvious gunshot wound. It was pretty clear that Sara had been in a serious

fight. Anyone taking a long look at them would call the cops just on general principles. They looked like the aftermath of the climactic battle in a cheap gang movie.

It took longer, much longer than the trip out, but, bleeding and wounded, they finally got back to Cypress Hills and St. Casimir's, exhausted in body, mind, and soul. Father Baltazar's cozy study felt like a little bit of heaven as Sara flopped down into the comfortable old chair by the sofa.

The priest sighed. "Let me wash the blood off my face. Then I'll check everyone else. You can tell me what happened after I lost consciousness."

Father Baltazar saw to their wounds after he came back from the bathroom with a clean face and a gauze bandage wrapped around his head. Alek Gervelis was the only one to escape the raid on the *hounfort* essentially unscathed. Kris had taken several wounds, but they all were rather minor, the worst occurring when a bullet passed entirely though his upper right arm without hitting bone or anything vital.

Sara's injury appeared to be the most serious. She winced as the priest opened the duster and gently probed her ribcage.

"Follow me," he ordered, leading her to the bathroom. He detoured for a moment to his bedroom, coming out with a pair of sweatpants and an old shirt for her to wear, and then took her into his tiny bathroom to examine her more closely. She sucked in her breath as he ran his hands lightly up her ribcage. He nodded seriously.

"Looks like at least one rib's broken. I can tape them for now, but you'll have to see a real doctor soon to make sure nothing's floating around loose in there." He looked

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up at Sara. "In the meantime," he said quietly, "you can tell me what happened to Paul."

Sara did so, gasping a couple times as the priest put a little too much pressure on her ribcage. She finished the story just as the priest finished bandaging her.

"I'm so sorry about Paul," she said. "I feel so bad to have gotten him into this mess."

Father Baltazar shook his head. "Paul was involved in this long before you realized that it even existed." He sighed. "He loved the people of Cypress Hills. He'd give anything for their welfare—up to and including his life. But there's one thing he must not lose."

"What's that?" Sara asked.

"His soul," the priest said.

"His soul? But, surely, on his death—"

"It's not that simple for those who believe in *voudon*—certainly not that simple for initiates of the religion. Paul has already had his soul stripped from him. And, so to speak, put aside for safekeeping."

"Is that possible?" Sara asked incredulously.

"Certainly. At least Paul thought so," Father Baltazar said. "Voudonists call the soul the *gros-bon-ange*—the great good angel—and believe that with the proper ceremony it can literally be taken from the body and placed in a *pot-de-tete*, a small jar which is then kept for safekeeping on the *houngan's* altar."

She remembered the confrontation Guillaume Sam had had with the cop searching his altar. But the whole idea still seemed crazy to her.

"Safekeeping from what?" Sara asked.

"From getting stolen and placed in a zombie's body, or an animal's body. From being trapped after the death of

the body and not allowed an existence in the afterlife. Which is exactly what I'm afraid Guillaume Sam will try to do with Paul's soul."

"How—" Sara started, then stopped. She realized that she had no business questioning someone's supernatural beliefs, considering her experience with the Witchblade. "What do we have to do?" she asked simply.

"One of us has to go to the altar in Paul's office and retrieve his *pot-de-tete*," Father Baltazar said.

"I'll do it." Sara said.

Father Baltazar looked at her gratefully. "You'd be the best choice—but even so, you're hurt. Tired."

"I've been hurt worse in my life, and been more tired," Sara said, though truthfully she wasn't sure of the latter. "If you think the fate of Paul's immortal soul rests on whoever has control of this pot, we can't let it fall into Guillaume Sam's hands."

"You're right," Father Baltazar said. He took a ring of keys out of his pocket and extracted one, handing it to Sara. "This is to the back door of the bookstore. The *pot-de-tete* is on his altar. You can't miss it. It's a round earthenware jug about six inches high stoppered with a cork. Plain brown color, but with a rainbow painted in a horizontal arc on the front—or back, if he turned it around the last time he dusted."

Sara could hear the sudden catch in Father Baltazar's voice and for a moment she thought he was going to cry. She took him in his arms and held him as hard as she could with her sore ribs. He responded, hugging her tight enough to cause her to gasp.

"Sorry," he said.

"Nothing to be sorry about, Caz," she said. "I wouldn't be anywhere near stopping Guillaume Sam without you

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and Paul. Now it's just you, but we'll get him yet. We'll take him down together, no matter what it takes. For Paul. For all the helpless people of Cypress Hills whom he's preyed upon for years. We'll get the bastard. Don't worry."

The priest released her and stepped back, smiling.

"Go with God, Sara," he said.

Though unhappy about going out dressed like a refugee from a gym class, Sara knew she didn't have much of a choice in the matter. She couldn't waste time going back to her apartment to change clothes, and at this time of night, or morning, no stores were open.

She went back into the study and holstered her piece in the snug of her back. Kris was off making coffee in the kitchen. Alek watched her worriedly.

"What are you up to?" he asked.

"Just a little errand to run," Sara answered as lightly as possible.

"I'll go with you," he offered.

Sara shook her head. "No need."

"Still—"

"No need," she said again, with a little more emphasis.

They looked at each other silently for a moment.

"All right," Alek finally said.

She nodded, went to go by him. He touched her arm lightly and she stopped and looked into his eyes. He bent his head down and, mindful of her injuries, took her gently in his arms and kissed her softly and lingeringly.

"For luck," he said.

She smiled back at him and walked out of his arms.

"Come back to me in one piece," he called after her.

"I'll do my best," Sara said.

* * *

The Serpent and the Rainbow was shuttered and dark. Looking in, Sara thought it seemed a sad place. She wondered what would happen to all the books without Paul Narcisse to shepherd them. She hoped they wouldn't end up in some big garage sale priced at a quarter each. She hoped they'd all find a home someplace with someone who would love and cherish them as much as Paul Narcisse had.

She went past the store on the dark and empty street, into the nearest alley and headed for the rear entrance. She took the key that Father Baltazar had given her and silently unlocked the door and silently went into the building. The rear door opened into the receiving room where Paul Narcisse had unpacked his book shipments. She went into the corridor beyond, past the restroom, and finally to the office with the old, comfortable furniture that she remembered from her first visit.

She flicked on the lights as she entered the room, heading toward the altar. There was a slight creaking sound behind her and the voices in her head screamed a sudden warning. She whirled, drawing her weapon in the same motion, and found herself staring at Lt. Carl Dickey, who sat in the comfortable old chair behind Paul Narcisse's desk.

"You're pretty fast with that, aren't you?" he observed mildly.

"You're an eighth of an inch from dead," Sara said, "which is exactly how far I have to move my finger to pull the trigger. Let me see your hands."

Wordlessly, the lieutenant took his hands from his lap and placed them, palms down, on the desk. They were empty.

"What are you doing here?" Sara asked.

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"Same as you, I imagine. Looking for the *pot-de-tete* with Narcisse's soul. Only, I don't have a single damn idea what it looks like and there's only about two and a half dozen jars on that damn altar to choose from."

"*Pot-de-tete*?" Sara asked. "How do you know about that?"

They stared at each other wordlessly for a long second, and then Sara nodded her head.

"Of course," she said. "When you've been at this job long enough, you're not surprised at anything."

"That's right," Detective Dickey said.

"How long have you been Guillaume Sam's man?" she asked.

The detective sighed from the depths of his soul. "Long as I've known what he's been doing in Cypress Hills."

"Why?" Sara asked with gritted teeth. She hated criminals who preyed on the helpless, but most of all she hated those who took their salary, hid behind their badge, and *helped* criminals feast on the helpless.

Lt. Dickey shrugged. "I wanted to go on living."

"You're saying he threatened you?" Sara asked.

"'Course he did. Just like he threatened you." Lt. Dickey looked at her with pursed lips, considering her as if she were some kind of odd bug he'd just discovered. "But *you*. There's something strange about you, girl. People around you turn up dead. Or worse."

"You've got something to say about me," she said, "say it."

Lt. Dickey shook his head. "Nope. Got nothing to say. I can keep my mouth shut. That doesn't mean others aren't talking. You got something strange going on. That partner of yours, and your Captain, they can't cover for you forever."

"Is that a threat?"

"Lord, no." Lt. Dickey frowned. "I already got one son of a bitch oddball on my ass. I don't need another."

"I see," Sara said, suddenly understanding the gist of their conversation. "And you don't know which oddball is going to win this particular confrontation, me or Guillaume Sam?"

"I never bet against Guillaume Sam," the policeman said, "but, like I said, people around you seem to end up dead. Or worse. He ends up dead or worse . . ." Lt. Dickey shrugged. "No meat off my bones."

"And I end up dead? Or worse?"

"I'll be sorry. Real sorry. But I'll still be here."

"Uh-huh. I suppose you were the one who warned Guillaume Sam about the raid of Club Carrefour," Sara said.

Dickey heaved one of his patented sighs. "I suppose I was," he said.

Sara shook her head and went up to the altar, keeping her gun out and an eye on Dickey at all times. She scanned the neatly cluttered tribute to Paul Narcisse's protector, Damballah, and wondered with a pang, *Who will lovingly take care of the altar with Paul gone? No one*, she thought sadly. *It'll all just go to the dustbin.*

She spied the *pot-de-tete*. Much like Paul Narcisse himself, it didn't occupy a place in the spotlight. It was tucked behind a pair of votive candles in glass containers dedicated to Aida-Wedo, Damballah's wife, the rainbow. She took the pot and turned back to Lt. Dickey.

"Here it is," she said. "You want it?" It wasn't an offer. It was a challenge.

Lt. Dickey shook his head. "You can have it."

"You're letting your boss down."

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"Guillaume Sam may have a mortgage on my soul," the policeman said, "but he don't own it outright."

Sara sidled toward the door, gun in one hand, *pot-de-tete* in the other. She stopped in the doorway and looked at the cop, who had swiveled in Paul Narcisse's old chair to keep his eyes directly on hers.

"We'll talk again," Sara told him.

Lt. Dickey nodded. "I'm sure we will. Maybe on this earth, maybe in hell." He sighed again, sincerely enough that Sara believed in the sadness that seemed to course through his system. "You probably won't believe this. But good luck."

She turned the light off and left him sitting there in the dark, in a dead man's chair.

That night Sara found herself in the priest's bed.

She had brought the *pot-de-tete* to the rectory. After thinking it over she'd decided to keep quiet about Lt. Dickey's secret allegiance to Guillaume Sam, at least for the present. She recognized that she'd made the decision partly because of her secretive nature, which had become all the more secretive during her association with the Witchblade, but also because for now it would do no good to share such a confidence. Certainly things could change, and if she'd have to rat him out for the safety of her fellow conspirators she would. But for now, she'd hold it among the other secrets she was forced to live with on a daily basis.

Sara, Father Baltazar, and the Gervelis brothers held a brief strategy session despite the weariness that hung over them like an impenetrable fog. But the only strategy they could come up with was to have a good night's sleep

and see what the next day would bring. Their battle against Guillaume Sam was like a heavyweight fight reaching its final rounds. They'd spent most of the first rounds slugging it out toe to toe and both sides had suffered grievous losses. Neither side could allow the struggle to go on much longer. Both had to go for the decisive knockout, and deliver it soon.

They decided that it'd be best if they stayed together, not even separating for the night. Safety lay in numbers, and they weren't going to make the mistake common in bad horror movies of splitting up to search the house. Sara, despite her protests, got Father Baltazar's bedroom, while the priest took the sofa in his study, and the brothers lay down on cushions on the floor in the adjoining living room.

Father Baltazar's bedroom, located at the rear of the house, was as quaint and cozy as his study. Other words to describe it, Sara thought, would be small and cramped. There was a single bed with an old handmade quilt, a nightstand, an ancient trunk at the foot of the bed, and more bookshelves crammed with more books, prints, icons, and other small *chackas*.

She would have stripped down to her underwear and tumbled into bed, but she had no underwear left. She unbuttoned Father Baltazar's shirt and draped it over the trunk at the foot of the bed, unbuckled her holster and set it on the night stand that held a small lamp and the earthenware pot that, according to Father Baltazar, held Paul Narcisse's soul. She unknotted the drawstring of the priest's sweat pants and let them fall in a pile about her feet, then slipped into bed and pulled the sheet and quilt over her.

She had never been so tired in her life, yet also never

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so far from sleep. Her mind was awlirl with the day's happenings, and speculation as to what the next day would bring. They were headed, she knew, toward a final confrontation with Guillaume Sam, and they'd lost the one who knew best how to fight him. Without Paul Narcisse they were going into battle blind. No one else in the community could replace him. There were lower-ranking *houngans*, but Father Baltazar was reluctant to bring them into the conflict, reluctant to risk more lives in what might be turning out to be a hopeless cause. Still—tomorrow he might have to face that reluctance, and overcome it, just as Sara might have to overcome her reluctance to bring Jake into the fray, if they wanted to have the barest hope of winning.

She was grateful to hear a low tapping on her door, grateful for anything to take her mind off the roller-coaster of fear and anticipation that was making it impossible for her to sleep.

"Come in," she said in a low voice at the tentative sound at her door, and it opened a crack. A tall, broad shouldered form slipped into the room. She recognized the dark silhouette immediately.

"Alek."

"Sara."

He stood by the side of the bed, hesitant. "Sorry if I woke you up," he said.

"You didn't. I couldn't sleep."

"I couldn't either. Mind if I come in?"

"If I did, I wouldn't have said come in, would I?"

Alek laughed lowly. "I guess not."

He only had to take a couple of steps to reach the edge of the bed. Sara sat up against the pillows, holding the sheet up to her chest. She looked at the arm holding the

sheet. She was almost surprised to see that it was flesh, not covered by the metallic sheath of the Witchblade. The voices were suspiciously silent in her mind. Almost distractedly, she wondered what they were planning.

"I just felt that I had to see you. Alone. To talk to you. To—"

Sara lifted the edge of the quilt, and Alek quickly slid into the bed next to her. It was a small bed. Just lying there, they were actually embracing, her arm under his neck, their legs pressed together from thigh to calf.

"I had to tell you," Alek said, "that these have been the most amazing days of my life. They've been awful, yet somehow exhilarating. You know the music we've been doing. Gothic. Dark. All that stuff." He shook his head. "Christ. What did I know about darkness, until this? What did I know about cold, soulless evil? Or pure valor?"

He reached out and touched her cheek gently. "This is just some crazy down-the-rabbit-hole adventure I've wandered into. But you—this is your life! How do you do it, day after day? How to find the courage to face this evil, nasty shit like Guillaume Sam and his creatures?"

Sara shook her head. "I don't know," she said simply. "I don't think about it. If I did, I suppose I couldn't do it."

"Yeah," Alek said, "but how do you keep from thinking about it? I mean, I know we have to face Guillaume Sam again. We're all hanging on a highwire suspended over a bottomless pit leading down to hell. And one of us—either Guillaume Sam's group or our group—is going to fall down into it and never come out. Probably tomorrow. How do you keep from thinking about it?"

"Here's one way," she said.

She leaned over him, her hair fluttering down upon his face like the wings of a dove, and kissed him.

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It was a kiss that fulfilled the promises of their earlier embraces. It lasted a long time and, soft and sweet at first, grew harder and more insistent. She felt his hands discover that she was naked. Gentle as his touch was, she flinched when his hands brushed her taped ribcage.

"Sorry," he said into her mouth and, in concert, they maneuvered so that no weight or pressure would be brought upon her injured side.

Either the voices left her or she forgot they were there. Afterwards, looking back at it, she couldn't tell which was true. All that she knew was herself and Alek Gervelis, holding back the fear, holding back the promise of the future, losing themselves and finding themselves in each other.

It was the sweetest, most human experience she'd ever had.

When it was over he fell asleep in her arms. He was too serious to smile, but she was happy enough to see his simple contentment. She held him close for his warmth, for the beating of his heart, for the blood coursing through his veins, and the sheer human electricity running on the network of his nervous system.

He slept, but she didn't.

She still couldn't, because she knew that she couldn't subject him or his brother or Father Baltazar to any more of what they'd experienced this day. They were not meant for it. They were not meant to face evil, whether coming from the barrel of a gun or the whisper of a *bokor's* curse.

She was. It was her job. She carried the Witchblade, but, more importantly, she carried a badge.

She would see this thing ended. One way or another. Alone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In a sense, Sara thought, it had all begun here. And perhaps it can end here as well.

Guinee was as peaceful and tranquil as ever. The weather was perfect, the scenery breathtaking. It seemed, Sara thought, like a great place to retire to, but she figured that at this rate it was unlikely she'd be around long enough to get a pension check. A nice headstone was probably the best that she could hope for.

She was at the crossroads. She sat down and waited, enjoying the feeling of the warm night breeze scented with tropical aromas playing over her nakedness, as the old man hobbled up the road toward her.

He shook his head and whistled at the sight of her.

"You are a vision," Papa Legba said as he reached her side. "It's a good thing you've called the old man to you, not one of the younger spirits."

Sara smiled. "Would they help me like you, Papa?"

"Maybe," Papa Legba said, leaning on his crutch. "Maybe for your smile, maybe for your favors, depending on who you called."

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"Why have you helped me, Papa?"

"Maybe for your smile," the old man said, his face wrinkling into a hundred creases as he smiled himself. "Maybe because you're polite and need my help. Maybe because you seek my help only to help others. Maybe because a favorite son asked me to."

"Paul Narcisse?"

"Aye," the old man said, nodding. "He was a good boy. Respectful to his elders. Always ready with a proper sacrifice. Even sacrificed himself in the end."

"I know," Sara said, tears wetting her cheeks.

"Don't cry, child," Papa Legba said gently. "This is Guinee, land of the *loa*. All things are possible here. Speak from your heart, girl. What do you need?"

Sara looked down at her nakedness. "Well, I'd hate to go where I have to go tonight like this. I could probably use some clothes."

"Probably," Papa Legba said, and she was suddenly wearing a typical outfit of boots, jeans, and a pullover loose enough to move comfortably in, tight enough to show her lithe curves. "Just where do you have to go tonight, child?"

"You know." Sara gestured up the road to where the dark and forbidding cemetery lay. "I want to finish this. I want to finish it tonight, here, where no one else can get hurt."

Papa Legba nodded. "That would be good."

"I just want to know that I have a chance," Sara told him, suddenly desperate. "I just want to know that I'm not going to throw my life away and that my friends will continue to suffer at the hands of Guillaume Sam."

Papa Legba laughed. "Would it comfort you to know that Guillaume Sam is asking the very same thing of his benefactor, right now?"

Sara was surprised. "He is?"

"Would it comfort you further to know that you don't have to go on this journey alone?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

A small head popped up from the *macoute*, the straw tote bag slung over Papa Legba's shoulder. It was covered with white fur and, like Papa Legba, had eyes the color of blood. It climbed out of the sack, and sat on the *loa*'s thin, frail shoulder.

"Sandro!" Sara exclaimed.

The spirit guide *meowed* a faintly distant greeting. He was kitten-sized, perhaps in concession to his patron's apparent frailness, but with the same intelligence, the same fierceness underneath his placid surface that Sara remembered from their past encounter.

"Can he go with me?" she asked Legba eagerly.

But the old spirit shook his head.

"We cannot take sides in the battle between right and left. We partake of both, though my sympathies most often lie with the good and respectful. Besides," he grinned, "I'm not sure Sandro trusts you—or rather, that which rides you like a *loa* rides his mount. But do not worry. I am the opener of the door, the guardian of the gates. I allow the spirits to descend. Or, sometimes, ascend. Look, child, at who comes down the road."

Sara followed his steadily pointing finger to see someone trudging up the road the way Papa Legba himself had come. It took Sara a moment to realize that it was Paul Narcisse, whole and alive. Apparently. He seemed as serious as ever, and was dressed as neatly, as conservatively, as ever.

"Paul . . ."

Sara went to embrace him, but stopped before they

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touched. Viewed from close up, he was ethereal. The moonlight shone through his eyes, making them dark pits in his skull. His legs faded into uneven nothingness at his ankles. This wasn't Paul Narcisse after all, Sara realized, but just part of him. His *gros-bon-ange*.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "I mean—"

"I'm fine," he said. "Thanks to you my *gros-bon-ange* was saved from Guillaume Sam. It rests safely in the *pot-de-tete* by your sleeping form as our spirits walk and talk in Guinee."

"You're the one who asked Papa Legba to watch over me?"

"It was the least I could do for someone willing to risk her life, her immortal soul, for my people."

"What do we do now?" Sara asked.

"Your instincts were good," Paul Narcisse told her. "The final confrontation could be fought on Earth, where many might die, or here in Guinee where it will be limited to those occupying this plane."

"But," Sara said, "in Guinee I lack my most potent weapon."

Narcisse shook his head.

"You only think you do," he told her. "Father Baltazar told me of your . . . situation. You have allowed this thing which mounts you to take possession of your body on its terms, when it wants to, so that it can further its own agenda. But you are stronger than that. You can bend it to your will. You have to stop being in awe of it. And being afraid of it. It needs you as you sometimes need it. You will never be able to control it entirely, but you can partner with it on your terms."

"How?"

"By being yourself, Sara," Paul Narcisse said gently. "It

chose you. It doesn't want you to know that it needs you more than you need it. Before it came along you were doing just fine. Before you came along it was in limbo, looking for someone like you.

"You're a rare person," Paul Narcisse told her. "You're a born warrior, full of strength and pride. But, rarer yet, you are a warrior with compassion. You don't fight for glory. You don't fight for financial reward. You fight to protect the weak and innocent." He smiled. "You're a rare commodity, Sara Pezzini, and the Witchblade knows that."

"But it can't even come into Guinee," Sara told him. "Every time I've come here it's been silent."

"That's because subconsciously you haven't allowed it to accompany you. You've been seeking a sanctuary from it, and you've found one in Guinee. But Guinee isn't preventing it from following you here. You are. Open your mind. Reach out for it. You will find it."

Sara found it hard to believe that she'd been exerting that much control over the Witchblade without realizing it, but there was no reason for Paul Narcisse to lie to her. He was the expert on such matters, she—despite the fact that she hosted the Witchblade—the novice.

She closed her eyes and concentrated. The silence around her was as perfect and as deep as the night. She reached out, questing with her mind, and after what might have been minutes or might have been hours, touched upon the familiar voices that were her omnipresent company. They were complaining grumpily to themselves.

"—left us again—"

"Where does she go—"

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“—that we cannot accompany her—”

“What does she do—”

“—that we cannot see—”

“Miss me?” she asked, and caught the sudden tinge of startlement in their essences. “Then come and join me.”

They did. Instantaneously. She was surprised to find them somewhat fearful of Guinee, as if it were a foreign land not suited to their taste. It was clear they didn't like this realm. Their uncertainty, oddly enough, made them seem more human, perhaps easier to deal with. She would certainly test Paul Narcisse's theories thoroughly before this sojourn in Guinee was over.

“You see?” he asked, as if he could read her mind.

Sara nodded. “Now for Guillaume Sam.”

“You know where to find him?” Papa Legba asked.

Sara gestured down the road to the waiting cemetery. “Will he be there?”

“He will,” Papa Legba said. “His presence is the third and final boon that I grant you. Of course, he will not be alone.”

“Neither will Sara,” Paul Narcisse said.

“Farewell, then,” the *loa* said, “and good luck. Remember your old Papa from time to time.”

Sara leaned over and hugged him. He felt as thin as the wind, but a strange electricity ran through his form and it seemed to impart some of itself to her. Suddenly she felt stronger than she had for weeks, mentally rested and ready for anything.

She looked at Sandro. He condescended to allow a swift pat on the head and scratch behind the ears. Sara smiled, feeling that perhaps they had at least gone some way toward making up.

"All right." She turned to the *gros-bon-ange* of Paul Narcisse, who stood wavering before her in the night wind like a mirage. "I hope you're not afraid of cemeteries," she said.

"A cemetery will hold my body," he said. "Nothing can hold my soul."

"I hope so," Sara said, and they started down the road together.

There being nothing more to say, they walked in silence, dead man and possessed cop, to the home of the Guede Family, of which Baron Samedi was the head.

Someone was waiting for them at the entrance to the graveyard. Paul Narcisse seemed to recognize him.

"Ah, Captain Zombi," he said. "How good of you to meet us."

For an evil spirit, Captain Zombi seemed a cheerful, even comical sort, with his trousers rolled up above his knees, a fat cigar in his mouth, and a half-drunk bottle of rum grasped by the neck in one hand.

"Not at all," he said sunnily. "We don't get such distinguished guests very often, and my lord, Baron Samedi, did not want you to lose your way among the tombs."

He gestured backward into the cemetery. Even with the full moon shining like a soft and gentle sun, it was a dark and disturbing place. Gravestones and monuments and crypts crowded closely together. Funeral statuary seemed to move like living things as clouds glided across the moon or the wind shifted the shadows of overhanging trees.

"This way, if you please."

The *loa* led them up a crooked pathway between the

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graves. It was cold inside the cemetery. The night breeze was no longer warm, nor sweet. There was a chilly edge to it, and it smelled of wet earth and things that had lain in graves inside rotting wooden caskets for a long time. Darkness could be tasted on the air, and mysteries that Sara didn't want to know the solutions to.

They were waiting for her atop the hill that loomed in the center of the cemetery. Paul Narcisse named some of them for her. Just the important ones, for there were far too many for him to name in the time that they had.

There was the trinity of Baron Samedi, the head of the Guede family, in his top hat and sunglasses, alongside his brothers—or maybe other aspects of himself—Baron La Croix and Baron Cimetiere. There was Samedi's wife, Big Brigitte, goddess of black magic and ill-gotten gold, dressed in a flowing purple dress, and their three sons, General Jean-Baptiste Trace, General Fouille, and Ramasseur de Croix, Collector of Crosses.

Below them on the hillside were the lesser spirits, Guede Souffrant, Erzulie of the Black Heart, Marinette bwa Chech—Marinette of the Dry Arms—and Criminelle and the one-legged Ti Jean, and too many others to name or even remember.

Below them all, in a small open space in the graveyard at the foot of the hill was a man. He seemed almost small and insignificant among the gathering of *loa*, but Sara knew he was as powerful as many of them and more evil than most. It was Guillaume Sam. Chittering on his shoulder was the beast he called Baka, short for his real name of Bakula-baka.

Baron Samedi roared forth a welcome, and all the *loa* joined in with cheers and jeers and catcalls. The cemetery

sounded like Pandemonium, the demon city of hell. Samedi threw his arms wide, and his sons called for quiet and the chaos melted into silence.

"No, my spirits," he said. "We should be kind to our guests. Never has Guinee seen such rare entertainment. A policewoman and a dead man on the right hand. A *bokor* and our own Bakula-baka on the left. Who will prevail?" Baron Samedi shook his head, chuckling with evil mirth.

"The Guede!" he shouted.

The assembled spirits took it up as a chant: "Guede! Guede! Guede!" until Sara could no longer hear the voices in her own head. She fell to her knees, covering her ears as the *loas'* voices speared into her brain. Paul Narcisse tried to help her rise. He shouted into her ears but she couldn't hear a word of what he was saying. He pointed and she looked and saw that Bakula-baka was charging at them.

"Tonight I drink your blood, *blanc*," the *loa* roared, machete held high, his horrible face rent by the thing he called a smile.

Guinee was the land of the spirits. Her body was back on the realm of earth, sleeping in the arms of Alek Gervelis, but somehow she knew that if her spirit were defeated here, she would never awake. Her flesh would turn cold and stiff and Alek would wake up with a corpse in his arms.

That horrible realization brought her to her feet to face the charging *loa*, made her reach deep into the abyss of her being and call forth that which she knew as the Witchblade, a thing of cold metal and razor edges, to armor her frail human flesh.

For a moment there was no answer to her summons,

no sudden, familiar embrace. But she did not panic. She called out again, imperious in her desire to protect those whom she loved, as well as the innocent and weak whom she didn't even know. To shield them from the rapacious maw of Guillaume Sam and his band of cutthroats and killers. And certainly love was stronger than mere greed, or how could the world survive at all?

The Witchblade came to her, arriving with Bakula-baka. Sara fell to the left, Paul Narcisse to the right, as the spirit, confused for a moment, deliberated over his target. He picked Sara and swung his machete in a great decapitating blow, but she had already moved and his thrust met no resistance whatsoever. His momentum yanked him forward and he fell, thudding face first into the rich Guinee soil.

Sara sprang upon his back with the lithe grace and ferocity of a jungle cat. She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed, as if trying to hug him to death.

Bakula-baka roared. Even from behind him she could smell the grave-stench on his breath. She could smell it emanating from his body in waves of gagging putrescence.

Can you kill that which has no life? Sara thought, then answered her own question. *I guess we'll find out.*

The spirit bucked and wrenched and Sara grimly held on. She wrapped her legs around his chest, gripping with her knees and heels. He shook like a mastiff trying to throw off a flea, yet Sara still grimly held on.

The Witchblade grew razor edges and quills and spikes that bit into Bakula-baka's flesh, but the flesh of a *loa* is not that of a human. It's stronger, harder, more resilient. But Sara gritted her teeth and pulled harder until the ten-

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dons and ligaments stood out like iron bars on her arms and neck, and she felt as if she herself were going to break.

Suddenly the *loa* had no more breath to waste bellowing in anger and growing fear. He flung himself backward to the graveyard earth and Sara felt the weight of a mountain slap down upon her. The weight of the *loa* was crushing her, the chains that dangled from his limbs dug into her flesh. At least her broken ribs didn't hurt. That would have given Bakula-baka an edge she probably couldn't have overcome. Still, she couldn't draw her breath, and for a moment was on the verge of passing out. Darkness clouded her vision and the stench of the Bakula-baka filled her mouth and nostrils.

NO! she screamed, or thought she did. Perhaps the sound came from the voices clamoring in her mind.

"NO!"

"NO!"

"NO!"

"NO!"

She didn't know how long she screamed, but suddenly she realized that the weight pressing her down into the earth was dead weight. Bakula-baka was no longer moving, no longer trying to dislodge her. She felt wetness upon her face and chest and she realized that it was the blood, or the life essence of the thing, running back down upon her.

She heaved with all her strength and rolled the gigantic body off of her. She kneeled in the dirt next to him as he lay unmoving. She panted like a dog, her body crying for oxygen, as she looked down at him. The razor edge of the Witchblade had nearly hewn through his bull-like

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neck. Bakula-baka's head was attached to his body by only a thread of dried flesh.

An awful scream made her look up from the body. Guillaume Sam, his face twisted into a demented mask, was running toward her like a maniac. Like Sara, he didn't seem to feel the sting of his earthly wounds, or perhaps Paul Narcisse's bullet hadn't done him any real damage. He bent over and scooped up the machete that Bakula-baka had dropped. Sara had only time to lift her arm up as he swung it at her, and the machete hit the Witchblade and shattered into dozens of dull iron shards.

Guillaume Sam looked at the broken blade, dumbfounded, and suddenly Paul Narcisse grabbed him by the shoulder and whirled him around. Narcisse grasped his cheeks and put his mouth on Sam's, tight and hard, and kissed him long and deep, but without passion or love.

It was a spirit duel of will power and mental strength as each strove to absorb the other's *gros-bon-ange*.

In the end, Guillaume Sam tried to pull away, but the spirit of Paul Narcisse was too strong. Guillaume Sam made an awful moaning sound and started to shrivel. First his legs and arms were sucked up into his body, then his abdomen and chest started to wither. Soon his entire body was just a flap of wrinkled skin hanging from his head, which still remained in Paul Narcisse's deadly grasp. Then that too began to shrivel like an apple in a hot oven and finally Paul Narcisse was kissing nothing. Guillaume Sam had vanished.

Paul Narcisse looked down at Sara and put out a hand to help her to her feet.

"What happened?" she asked.

He took a small earthenware jug out of the *macoute*

that he carried over his shoulder and showed it to Sara. "I was no longer using my *pot-de-tete*. I thought Guillaume Sam's *gros-bon-ange* might find it comfortable."

"That means—" She couldn't articulate the words.

Paul Narcisse nodded. "His soul has been captured. His body lies empty." He smiled at her. "Yet Guillaume Sam will waken this morning. And my body will rest easy, knowing I have a new and interesting home."

"But—"

"Hush," Paul Narcisse said gently. He wiped Bakula-baka's blood from Sara's cheek and neck. "We can talk about this later. Now we have to pay our respects to Baron Samedi, his family, and allies."

"Respects!"

"Certainly. They are most deserving of it. They are great and powerful *loa*. And if they live in the darkness, do they not therefore help to define the light?"

They approached their audience, which had been deadly silent during the latter stages of the duel. Paul Narcisse kneeled and put out his arms in supplication while Sara, still clad in the Witchblade, stood by his side.

"Great Baron Samedi," Paul Narcisse intoned, "Baron La Croix, Baron Cimetiere. Madame Brigitte, and other spirits high and low, accept our sacrifice to your greatness, and our thanks for our sojourn in Guinee."

"Hmmm," Baron Samedi harumphed. "A poor enough sacrifice, as it turns out. Do you know how long it will take to mend our brother, Bakula-baka?"

"At least you can fix him," Sara observed. "Unlike those humans he killed on Earth."

Baron Samedi laughed his earthshaking laughter. "Defiant to the last, eh, girl?" He shook his head and sighed.

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"Well, it shows how little you know if you think that. Still, you'll find out soon enough."

Sara didn't like what Samedi implied, but decided it would be better if she didn't question him any more closely.

"And you," Baron Samedi asked. "Will you sacrifice to us as well?"

"If it'll keep you off my turf," Sara said.

Samedi laughed, and his brothers joined in. "Go, *blanc*," he said, waving his hands at her in a shooing gesture. "Go home. You are needed there, and here, after tonight, I think we all need a rest."

Paul Narcisse touched her shoulder and together they turned and walked out of the cemetery. The air, she noted, was again warm and sweet. She could hear night birds singing in the trees as they walked down toward the crossroads and the old man waiting for them there.

"It's funny," Sara said, "but Guillaume Sam told me once that Baron Samedi promised him he'd live for eternity."

"Oh, he will," Paul Narcisse said, shaking the *pot-de-tete*. "It just won't be a very exciting eternity."

Sara sighed.

"Unlike our next couple of days," Sara said. "How are we going to explain all this to my Captain? We need a fall guy to take the blame, or you'll have a much too exciting twenty-to-thirty in Attica."

"We have a fall guy. Two, in fact: Gene and Jean. Give the police their underground headquarters. We can put enough information there to pin dozens of killings on them—killings they did indeed commit. The green card scheme will come to an end. I'll see to that. The money

laundering is more problematic, but we can always blame it on an amuck accountant. Guillaume Sam will gladly pay back taxes and restitution. Don't worry. It'll work out."

Sara sighed. She was paid to solve crimes, not cover them up. This was another fine mess the Witchblade had gotten her into. Or at least complicated, once she'd gotten herself into it.

"It is not our fault—"

"—we did nothing—"

"—no blame—"

Oh, shut up, Sara thought.

And they did.

EPILOGUE

It was an unusually warm and mild spring, flowers and birds arriving early and abundantly.

Sara had little time to visit Cypress Hills, but she went to St. Casimir's whenever she could. Father Baltazar was always glad to see her. The church was clean and neat, freshly sandblasted, and well lit by a new electrical system donated by Guillaume Sam. Carl Dickey had retired from the N.Y.P.D. He was running a bookstore that had recently come on the market, and seemed happier, though he still had his deep, sad voice, and suits that were two sizes too big.

Club Carrefour was still the neighborhood's most popular club. Little had changed there, unless you were privy to the back office, where the altar that had once been there had been taken down and replaced by another whose main attributes were snakes and rainbows.

Magdalena Konsavage had retired from the music business. It seems that she had fallen in love with the manager of her old band, Mountains of Madness, and

they had married and moved far away from Cypress Hills. Father Baltazar thought they'd opened up a travel agency in Miami, specializing in tours of the Transylvanian Alps.

The drummer from Mountains of Madness—Sara never did learn his name—had become a priest, but had not retired from the music business. Father Baltazar said you could hear him play quite frequently in Cypress Hills National Cemetery, if you wanted to.

Alek Gervelis disappeared for a while, then released a solo CD that garnered a small but intense critical and popular following. It was introspective, lyrical, almost mystical in nature. The most popular song on it was called "Sara Seraphim."

Sara got postcards from him from Kathmandu, Casablanca, Lhasa, and Leng. They said that he had learned much, but there was still much to learn. Someday, they always said, he would find his way back to New York City, and her.

Sara tucked each and every postcard into a painted tin box she'd taken as a keepsake from Paul Narcisse's altar. And each time she did so, the voices in her head were blessedly silent.