

The Witch in Scarlet

A Trick Molloy Mystery

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Part One

There are constants in life. Death. Taxes. The sun rising in the East.

My brother lying, cheating and scheming.

I could understand it if he did it with a purpose. With him it's just hardwired in. It would be funny if he wasn't smart, but he is. Like a viper. Full of venom for anyone or anything that isn't him. And it would be hell to pay for anyone who got in his way.

Frustrating him is worth it, every bit.

Harry sent me a ticket for Phoenix and a reservation for a hotel in Scottsdale. A resort. Pricey. The kind of place where he'd feel at home. The kind of place that would toss me out on my ear just because, except that he'd made the reservation. He had everything under control, and it would all be played by his rules.

Everything to his advantage.

Naw, we couldn't have that.

I hit the airport two days early and used the ticket to fly standby. I got the second flight in, then found myself a no-tell motel that preferred to rent by the hour. It didn't require a credit card. I had one—I have several, in fact, and a couple of them are even in my name—but my brother couldn't trace cash transactions. Cash also worked at the rent-a-wreck place where I snagged an old Crown Vic. It had once been a police cruiser. Didn't look like much, but could move if I needed it to.

After I'd gotten the ticket and reservation from Harry, a guy named Reid Landers sent me another packet of information. Landers worked for the law firm Harry's father—my step-father—used to execute his will. The Landers packet contained a general outline of the will's provisions for the contest that would decide who got the Anderson fortune; and then the specifics for this, the first of a dozen trials.

I studied the stuff on the plane in. The first contest was for one of us—Harry, his sister Miranda or me—to “complete the Coven” of witch paintings by a German artist named Odo von Jergin. The painting we were after was called *The Witch in Scarlet*. A collector, Alfred Wayne Patterson, was putting the painting up for sale. The gathering in Scottsdale was to welcome a number of prospective buyers.

The printout of some art blog article suggested the painting would fetch something on the order of \$4.8 million dollars.

Which was about \$800,000 more than Harry said my end of the estate would be under his revenue-sharing plan.

And about \$4,799,000 more than I had in liquid assets. Any assets, for that matter.

That was the least of my problems. All the rest could be summed up in one word: Harry. So, I came in two days early, scoped out the Tierra del Oro resort, and made some friends. Landers had included a schedule of events in the packet—the first being a meet-and-greet that was scheduled to go off at a Scottsdale club well before my original plane reservation would have had me on the ground.

Harry clearly didn't want me there, so I invited myself. I visited Onyx Key both of the previous nights, drank quietly, tipped well, chatted with locals and regulars. The staff knew me and my drink. When I walked in the night of the party, my Irish whiskey was waiting on the bar.

The twin vibes of hope and desperation fueled Onyx Key. Young goldiggers dressed like used hookers.

Cougars squeezed into their daughters' clothes. Young men too dumb to know a shirt could be buttoned up higher than their navels. No cash. All bling and credit cards. When the bills came due, fake Rolexes would flood pawn shops.

Normally the patio was packed—it was the place to be “seen.” Tonight a couple of sumo-wrestlers in dark t-shirts were keeping most folks away. I caught the bartender’s eye and jerked a thumb in that direction. “Got some movie star out there or something?”

He shook his head. “Private party. Gotta be rolling in it. Ten large for the patio, another ten in guaranteed drinks and tips.”

I watched two more bottles of Dom head out there. That ten grand wasn’t going to last. My half-brother, Harry, wasn’t so crass as to drink champagne directly from the bottle, but his flute never went dry. A bottle waited on deck in case there as the least little threat that it might. Like the flute, he was long and lean. His hair was the color of that champagne, and his restless eyes flashed pale blue. When he smiled, women went weak in the knees. Men either aped the grin, or waited for the dagger in the back.

My recon told me what what a normal night looked like at Onyx Key. The game that night was spotting what wasn’t supposed to be there. The party was the most glaring example, with my brother being one of three men around whom people clustered. Everyone had dressed up—especially the women. The hopeful and desperate regulars cast envious glances toward the promised land.

Those folks didn’t concern me, nor did the people on the patio. It was the others who attracted my notice. Two men, sitting in the shadows, alone but in direct sight of each other, constantly studied the place. Private security, wearing dark turtlenecks and long slacks, short hair. Not completely out of place, but unusual enough to be noticed if you were looking. And when one passed close on his way to hit the head, I spotted tattoos on his neck.

Aside from them, only one other person caught my attention. A small woman, with long wavy hair, Mediterranean complexion. Brown eyes and quick. She sat close enough to the patio to overhear things, but played it very cool. She chatted with others around her, just enough to make it appear she was not there alone. She remained a constant in a sea of change. A ship on station.

That was good. Three wild cards. I could handle that, no worries.

And then she came in, and everything changed.

Part Two

I felt her before I saw her. She had talent—like me she could work magick. She was powerful and triggered, ready to roll. The talented usually can feel other talents around them. Most often it’s an itch or a burn. With one guy I’d known it felt like I was getting my flesh stripped off with sandpaper.

With her it was a velvet caress. Warm and soothing; and quick to build to an inferno.

I forced myself to look at my watch, then slowly turn. That’s when I saw her. Medium height, on the slender side, with light brown skin and slightly darker eyes, she glided effortlessly through the doorway. She wore a little red dress with a square neckline that clung tighter to her than a coat of paint. Her dark hair had been cut boyishly short, but those curves and high cheekbones left no doubt about her gender.

I shifted my vision and looked through magick. Most folks look dark, maybe with a few pinpoints of light, like the night sky in a city. Occasionally you’ll see the Milky Way splashed over someone—a firefly. They’ve got talent but don’t know it or don’t know how to trigger it. I expected her to be a golden statuette. Wrong. She glowed purple, like a white shirt under a blacklight. Intense, almost hurtful to see. Interesting. I’d only seen it once before.

The memory wasn’t a good one.

For the record, the two security guys were snuffs. The girl, a firefly, but I suspected she didn't know she had talent.

The new woman glanced at the patio, hesitated for a heartbeat, then diverted toward me. I blinked, returning my sight to normal. It was worth it. She moved with supple grace and lithe strength. Prowling. Stalking. Feline, but so much more.

She offered me her hand. I took it. Big spark. Blue. The sting drove a needle through my palm. She hung on and pumped my hand twice. Firm grip. Warm.

I found myself wondering what she'd be like on the dance floor. And in bed.

"Sahara O'Shea." Her voice, silken and rich.

"Trick Molloy, Ms. O'Shea." I let her hand go. "You going to dive into the fish bowl, or just watch them swim?"

Dimples captured her smile. "You're very observant, Mr. Molloy."

"It pays to be. My brother's out there. The Prince of Darkness."

Again she glanced at the party. "Courtland Anderson, must be. You look nothing like Kevin Freilich."

I took another look. One of the other two men had a shaved head and wore a goatee—not at all unusual. "When did he start shaving his head?"

"When his hair began to thin."

"And the other guy?"

"Wayne Thomas Patterson, our benefactor's son." Her eyes sparkled. "And my date."

"I shouldn't keep you."

"You couldn't afford to keep me."

I shrugged. "If you love something, let it go. If it doesn't return..."

"...hunt it down and kill it?"

"Nice." I sipped some of my whiskey. "You're definitely future-ex-wife material."

She laughed, exposing her throat in a way that called to every vampire within a hundred miles. "Not your ex-wife, Mr. Molloy. Your widow. I'd break your heart. Then carve it out of your chest. But, I'm too young to be a widow."

"Well, then, I guess the wedding's off. I'll need the ring back."

Sahara laughed again, then took my hand and tugged me off the stool. "Come on, let's see how many people we can shock."

I wasn't quite sure what she meant by that, but I tossed off the rest of my Irish. A white and black couple wasn't news. Could have been the Beauty and Beast contrast. Lots of guys looked at me wondering what I had that they didn't. Her hand on my arm. I gave them a smile that said, "Once you go black, you never go back."

One guy groaned.

His date slapped him.

Mission accomplished.

We hit the patio door. Security moved to stop us. Bobby, one of the Onyx Key guys, checked the list and found me quickly enough. He started to look at Sahara, but I gave him a nod. "She's with me."

He got out of the way.

I steered her over to my brother. "Hey, Harry, surprised to see you out of the rack. Sun's only been down for an hour."

He graced me with a gaze that would have made Mother Theresa bleed from the eyes. Before he could open his mouth, though, Sahara offered him her hand. His expression went from disdain to delight so fast, I was pretty sure he'd torn a muscle or two. The women he'd been charming instantly hated her, and she thrived on it.

He raised her hand to his mouth. "Sahara, darling. It's been too long. Gstaad, wasn't it?"

"That was two years ago, Court."

"Of course. It was Melbourne, for the Grand Prix."

I ignored the two of them and smiled at the women my brother had abandoned. "I'm Trick. Harry's my kid brother."

He arched a blond eyebrow. "At least I've grown up."

"Yeah, you've gone from being a small pain in my a..."

Sahara pressed a finger against my lips. "Come along, Trick, you simply must meet Wayne."

I let her lead me away because it annoyed Harry. "Were you trying to save him or me?"

"I wanted to delay the fight until I could place a bet." She turned, faced me, almost dancing backward. "Aren't you curious?"

"About?"

"Whether or not I've slept with him?"

"You haven't."

"How do you know?"

"He acknowledged your existence, and you didn't spit in his face."

"That's not a wise thing to say to one of his friends."

I stopped, let her get a step away from me. "Harry doesn't have friends. He has serfs. He'd have slaves, but there's that little legality problem. He uses people, then discards them. You're not so stupid you'd get caught in that trap."

Before she could reply, Wayne Patterson came up behind her and hugged her across her shoulders. "Hi, Sahara. Everything okay?"

"Perfectly." She turned within his arms and gave him a brief peck on the lips. "This is Trick Molloy, Court's half-brother."

Wayne, a handsome young man with long dark hair and without a sharp edge to him, gave me a quick smile. I shook his hand. No spark, no talent, and a gentleness to both his grip and his gaze. "I've known your brother..."

I smiled. "You don't have to say nice things. Even to be polite. The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Wayne laughed and Sahara slipped an arm around his waist. "In that case, Trick, we'll get along just fine."

Part Three

Wayne had Sahara and his hosting duties, which meant I was free to drift around the party. The problem is, I'm not good at making small-talk. The usual questions get answers that kill conversation. Or answers they take as an invite to feel superior.

Take the chit-chat staple: "What do you do for a living?" My answer: "I work at a Gentleman's Club helping people like you who've puked on themselves." The first half sounds exotic. Everyone's been to a club, or desperately wants to go. You know, just to see what it's like. The vomit thing, though, that's barely a step up from shoveling raw sewage.

It tends to sour people on me, which is fine. Their answers to the same question—like "I volunteer helping the less fortunate" or "I run a Fortune 500 company and grossed \$40 million last year."—would make me vomit. Those folks look down on me until it's their Dom coming up by the gallon. Then it's "Here's a c-note. Call me a cab and forget I was here."

I got about five minutes of playing the strong-silent type before Harry extricated himself from his circle of serfs and stormed over to me. Stormed is the wrong word. Harry rages, but keeps his face calm. Anyone watching us would have figured we were touching base on something warm and familial.

"You embarrassed me, Patrick."

"And I wasn't even half trying, Harry." I sipped my whiskey. "Nice party. Glad I caught an earlier flight. Wouldn't have wanted to miss it."

His eyes sharpened. "I booked your flight before the agenda was announced. When you get home, you will find an updated itinerary waiting for you. Ditto new flight documents."

"Here's the deal, Harry." I lowered my voice, but kept a smile on my face. "I know you're going to screw me over. I know you're working out a dozen ways from Sunday to run the table for yourself. I know you're going to mess with me—little things like the flights—to keep me off-balance. I get it. I'm good with it."

Harry said nothing, but all the restraint in the world couldn't help that micro-flash of a smile from twitching the corners of his mouth.

"But, Harry, you have to remember something. Winning against your dead daddy is something that's making you feel all warm and fuzzy inside. I win by making both of you lose. Trifecta if mom loses, too. That means I win if I just walk away. You need me. I don't need you."

"But you do, Patrick. If I don't win, if we don't prevail, much of my father's estate will go to people like Freilich. The Church of Jesus Radiant will pick up 2.3 million dollars. Neither of us want that."

"Don't even pretend you care. You'd sell our mother if you thought you could profit on the deal—provided all sales were final."

"And you wouldn't?"

He had a point, especially with the no-return policy in place.

He caught my hint of a smile. "You see, Patrick, we're not that different, deep down. The apples don't fall far from the tree."

"There's a big difference, Harry. I have a soul." I shook my head. "As for Freilich, I can handle him."

Whatever Harry wanted to say died as a small man entered the patio. The two of them exchanged glances and, without excusing himself, Harry wandered over to where the man waited. They began conversing in hushed tones. The woman I'd spotted in the bar earlier moved to be able to hear them, but a hand on my elbow—and an itch denoting talent—demanded attention.

"I heard you use my name."

"Tourette's Syndrome. I often swear in public."

"Droll, Mr. Molloy." Freilich twisted slightly, so the light from tiki-torches showed him off to his best advantage. A superior smile slide onto his face. "Oh yes, I know who you are."

Guys like Freilich say things like that to frighten people. Lets them feel superior. They're smug. They think they have things under control. It's all a big bluff—an attack used as armor.

I tossed off the last of my whiskey and smiled as it scorched my throat. "So you know who. You don't know what. That means it's going to be really painful."

Freilich hesitated, looking down thoughtfully into his glass of beer. Now wine, whisky, brandy; you can look thoughtfully into them and seem intelligent. The only folks who look thoughtfully into a beer are guys wondering how pissed the wife will be if they arrive home a half-hour late. It's just not a position of strength, especially not in a crowd like this.

I didn't give him a chance to recover. "Think of me as a molten-glass enema, pal. It's gonna hurt, and when it cools off, it'll break up into nice little jagged shards. Got it?"

Indignation masked his features. "Clearly you fail to appreciate..."

"You're talking when you should be listening." I let a growl slip into my voice. "I know about you. I know about your master. I know about your church. I've dealt with fringers who flirt with you and your theology. They didn't like it."

"I know about..."

I shook my head. "You know about nothing, since you're still talking. That's okay. I'm done."

I stared him in the eyes, challenging him to look away. My right hand opened and a small blue spark—one invisible to all but the talented—flew from my palm and into his beer glass. Despite his talent, he missed it.

His beer boiled. It poured out steaming over his hand. Freilich gasped and dropped the glass. It exploded with a satisfying plop, drenching his pants and shoes.

Any other time, of course, social disdain would have roasted him alive, but Harry saved him. My brother clapped his hands loudly, then raised them as if a cruise director. He waited until everyone had shifted attention to him, and then smiled.

"I have wonderful news. It is my pleasure to invite you, once we return to the resort, to a very special showing of art." His smile broadened, becoming almost sincere. "For the first time in over seventy years, you'll be able to see the entire von Jergin Coven, all in one place."

Part Four

Harry's announcement attracted a lot of attention. Freilich reacted as if Miss Aryan World had just skanked up to him, claiming she was going to bear his love child or die trying. Wayne took notice with a blank delight on his face. Sahara smiled openly, but her eyes suggested this was an angle she'd not anticipated. The girl who'd been eavesdropping vanished. The two security watchers moved to where someone on the patio could see them.

The announcement killed the party. Everyone wanted to go back and see, but Harry forced them to wait. He ordered another round of champagne and got Wayne to offer a toast. With the two of them sticking around, no one else felt they could leave. Didn't mean I couldn't withdraw, however, which I did, into the shadows at the patio edge. I leaned on an iron fence, my back to the canal which put the club in "the Waterfront district," and watched people buzzing around.

Harry's words had been like a joke I didn't quite get. I could understand the delivery. I read the emphasis. I knew what he said must have been significant. But announcements like that are made by art museums all over the world. Since when was an art exhibit capable of making a hate-monger like Freilich to cream his jeans?

I was pretty sure I'd find out. Soon. I passed on champagne and ordered my Irish in a double. I kept my eyes open, tracking the folks that Harry acknowledged. I paid special attention to those he didn't. He very specifically refused to speak with Freilich. They were up to something together and both working to screw each other.

I was half-tempted to find out who Harry's aide was, but enough folks seemed to know him that he wasn't a total wild card. A lot of them were congratulating him—least that's what I made out of the double-handed handshakes and the firm pats on the back—so I pegged him as the orchestrator of the show. Thinning hair, sallow complexion, with a shirt and tie beneath a grey pullover sweater and a wool blazer, he clearly worked indoors and never did any heavy lifting. Too free with the glad-handing, though, so he wasn't a pure academic.

So, he was a player on Harry's team. I brushed by close enough to learn he had no talent. Made sense. Harry doesn't trust the talented—a fact in which I take much pride. Harry's alliance with Freilich had to be a balance for me.

Harry kept everyone there for another hour. When he finally called for the bill, folks flew out of there as if monsters were attacking from the canal. Freilich caught up with the two security snuffs—no surprise there—and Harry joined Wayne and Sahara in a limo. I snagged my car from a nearby garage, giving it a quick once-over just to be safe, and headed to the resort.

The Tierra del Oro had a little convention center tacked on in the back. Internal walls divided the Grand Canyon Room from its two wings, the Arroyo Room and the Saguaro Room respectively. Harry had commandeered the Arroyo Room, fitting it out with a dozen easels, each with a painting and flanked by two beefy guys in tuxedos, looking a bit bored.

It was good to see the Cardinals' linemen had something to do in the off-season.

While my grasp on art history is about four fingers shy of being secure, the arrayed artwork impressed me. A dozen paintings broken down into four groups: Colors, Elements, Metals and the Heavens. Each had been done in the same style—photo-realistic with enough Art Deco styling to add a fantastic element to each. The paintings used different models for each witch, and had been arranged as if they were Tarot cards. They oozed symbolism.

I missed a lot of it, but recognized the more sinister elements. That's the problem with having been a homicide detective in a world where magick is shunned and segregated. The sociopaths tie into the symbols. They think can get power from them whether or not they have any talent. More than once I'd seen the symbols in a witch's halo carved into a corpse's flesh.

Such was the power of the pictures, that I'd been oblivious to her approach. I should have felt the chill in the air. Maybe talons raking through my brain. Not a talent thing.

Some evil transcends the supernatural.

Her words came coated in ice. "Come to spit on my husband's grave, Patrick?"

"Off by a letter, Ma. Thanks for playing." I turned and opened my right hand.

She noticed, jerked back, her demeanor cracking for a moment as she awaited the final mortification: a spell from the ungrateful and talented child she'd brought into the world.

Nothing happened.

Her eyes narrowed sharply. "You are a vulgar and beastly child."

"I learned from the best, Mommy Dearest."

Julia Foster Molloy Anderson did have one unique quality—her self-control. Completely iron-willed. She'd appear prim and proper even after a little girl from Kansas dropped a farm house on her.

I got under her skin because I reminded her of the one time she'd let her control slip. Didn't matter it was the only time she'd been truly happy. When she married my father in defiance of her family's wishes.

To suggest my mother was high maintenance was like suggesting losing an arm to a chainsaw would sting. My father couldn't afford the designer dresses, the hours in a spa, and the other luxuries his wife had grown up with. When her parents cut her off, she made one last ditch attempt at getting them to reopen their hearts.

She gave them a grandchild.

Me.

When that didn't work, she pitched my father to the curb. The Church annulled her marriage—my existence somehow insufficient proof that the marriage had been consummated. She latched on to Robert Anderson. He gave her Harry and Miranda—real grandchildren—making all concerned happy. Wealth flowed to the the happy couple and all was good.

I got some parental attention only because it would have been beneath her class not to offer it. Her kind so value their volunteer work, especially when it's helping the unfortunate. I was her project child—difficult, but not quite so bad that her friends could lord it over her.

I cut her a break. Calling her "Mommy Dearest" gave her a chance to get herself together again. She'd heard it before. She had defenses. She checked to see if anyone had noticed how close she'd been to losing it, then she sniffed and set herself in her new dual role of hostess and grieving widow.

"You should know, Patrick, that I didn't approve of your brother's plan." She crossed herself, then dabbed at eyes with a lacy handkerchief. "I told him he was making a deal with the devil."

"How right you are. I am the King of Hell." I laughed. "Which reminds me. I saw your husband last night. He's keeping a seat warm for you."

Part Five

My mother flinched, which surprised me. Anderson's death really had hurt her—more than having her money tied up in some trust. She showed weakness, which she didn't do often.

And I was ready for round two. I was ready to burrow right in and go deep. Opportunities like that were rare, and the joy of payback just too rich. A billion comments raced through my brain, each one nastier than the last, masterpieces all. Fifteen seconds and I could have had her thrashing on the floor.

I held my tongue. Not for her sake.

For Miranda's.

Miranda came walking over looking like our mother had back in the days when she was still with my father. Slender, classically beautiful, with dark blonde hair worn short, a peppering of freckles over her nose and cheeks, Miranda perpetually smiled. Not stupidly, like some club-crawling heifer looking for a sugar-daddy,

but honestly. She could find the silver lining in any cloud and pretty much dispel the cloud while she was at it.

Her smile broadened when she saw me. She opened her arms and threw herself at me. I had to catch her, and she trusted I would. She always had.

“Patrick! I couldn’t believe it when Court said you’d be here.” She gave me a kiss on the cheek. “Mother, doesn’t he look great?”

Miranda’s squealed greeting brought all eyes to us, so Mother had to smile. She even reached out to lay a hand on my shoulder. A fleeting gesture, but one that almost suggested maternal pride.

I held her out at arm’s-length. “I thought you were in Nepal.”

“I was, but the Lama allowed me to return home. My share of the estate will let me do so much good, Patrick, I couldn’t not be here, could I?” She shot me a wink. “And I know I can count on you to contribute, too. Court has already pledged to help.”

“Now Miranda, you must remember that Patrick’s circumstances are...”

I smiled full bore. “Oh, Mother, after this, I’ll be filthy stinking rich. I can spare a million or three.” I laughed. “If for nothing else, just think of the tax implications.”

That earned me another kiss from Miranda.

And a glance from my mother that would have melted granite.

Harry, standing between the Earth and Gold painting, clapped his hands. I turned and Miranda slipped her arm through mine. She gave it a squeeze and momentarily rested her head on my shoulder. I smiled again, unable to be dour, and even paid attention to my brother.

“I want to introduce Doctor Adrian Hopeworth, of the Scaife-Mellon Museum of Art. Many of you already know him. What you don’t know is that Adrian and I have been working together to prepare this show. My father had collected the dozen von Jergins you see here, with only The Witch In Scarlet evading his grasp. Adrian has cleaned the pictures, framed them, and has created a comprehensive historical report on them for each of you.”

My brother let a quick smile slip onto his face. “And, of course, he’s prepared a frame for Scarlet, when she comes to join her sisters.”

Freilich laughed aloud. “Rather premature, Courtland.”

“Confidence, Mr. Freilich.”

A couple of local models dressed up like witches from the paintings circulated, passing out copies of the report. Hefty little document, wire-bound, with full color reproductions of each piece as well as some detail shots. It gave a general history of the paintings, and then lined out their provenance. Mostly it worked into a puff piece about how Anderson’s obsession with the paintings had saved this magnificent art from being lost in history. Typical post-mortem transmogrification of rapacious greed into unbounded altruism. It kind of glossed over the fact that Anderson had never let anyone see the paintings while he was collecting them.

Adrian waited for the reports to be distributed and the two model witches to flank him, then spoke. His voice was a bit higher than it should have been. Lacked gravitas. A pack of coffin nails and a couple of tequila shooters would have handled that.

“I want to thank the Anderson family, especially Courtland, for working with me. The Museum has long wanted to host an exhibit of Odo von Jergin’s work. We have some minor pieces, of course, but the Coven is critical to any study of his work. Now, if you will permit me, I would love to give you all a quick curator’s tour of the paintings, starting here at Gold and going right around. I’m sure you’ll all find it fascinating.”

Okay, so any time anyone says that, you know he's lying. It's like a guy telling you that he's happily married and not trying to get into some woman's pants. Pure lie. The only person who'd be fascinated by Adrian's talk was Adrian, but everyone there was too polite to tell him to go away.

I was determined to hang in there for Miranda's sake. They didn't come any more polite. As I looked at her, however, I caught the ghostly flash of a face in a window. The woman from Onyx Key. She rose as if on tiptoe, studying the paintings. She glanced behind her for a second.

Then she vanished.

"Excuse me, Miranda." I gave her a wink. "Gotta see a man about a horse. I'll be back."

"Hurry."

"You won't even know I'm gone."

Part Six

Continuing education is a good thing. Adrian Hopeworth's report on the paintings had a lot of useful information in it. Printed on heavy paper stock, solidly bound, it was a nice little treasure. Most folks would learn from it.

Some would use it as a cure for insomnia.

I was thinking it would function for both. Moving through the resort's corridor and out a side door, I rolled that report up as tightly as I could. Paper's all wood, and while it doesn't weigh that much, the stiffness alone has its uses.

Tightly rolled, it would teach someone a lesson and cure insomnia.

Freilich's two security snuff's had grabbed the girl. The one behind her pinned her arms back. He was tall enough that her attempts to head-butt him just bounced off his sternum. The other one, slightly smaller, caught her with a backhanded slap. He gave her a moment to recover, then reached out for some unwanted intimacy.

All the while sweet-talking her with comments about her being a "Jewess."

Didn't seem to me that this approach was working for him. I mean, if she wants a guy to talk dirty to her, I guess that's okay. Judging by her face, however, I was thinking she just wasn't that type of girl.

I nailed the little guy with a backhanded shot on his ear. As he turned, his hands rising to the side of his head, I swept his left leg, dumping him on his back. A quick stomp to the groin took the fight out of him.

The other guy wanted to react, but he had his hands full. The girl suddenly went limp. His brain hadn't fully disengaged from the idea that he was supposed to prevent her from escaping, so he hung on as she went down. I thrust right over her head, nailing his throat with that report.

Really doesn't matter how tough the guy is. Trying to suck breath in past a broken hyoid bone makes him into a weenie. A smack across the face, a fist in the gut and a knee to that face later, and Freilich's pal collapsed into a rasping heap.

The girl had gone to the ground. I helped her up.

"Oh my God. Thank you. I'm Judith Rom. They were..."

"Hold that thought for a second, will you?" I handed her the report. "Something to entertain you."

I bent down and grabbed the first guy by the throat. "Name."

He glared at me. And eeped at me, just a little.

“Squeaky. Great. I gotta tell you, Squeaky, I don’t like you much.” I smiled, but not in a way Miranda would have liked. From his expression, Squeaky didn’t like it much, either. “And I got to confess, I’m in a judge-jury-and-executioner kind of mood tonight.”

I shifted my vision and viewed him through magick. He was a total snuff—not a hint of magick about him. He was all kinds of mushroom grey, with splotches of brown and black here and there. Those splotches all sported jaggy edges. Pain will do that.

And the pain was about to get worse.

“So look, here’s the deal, Squeaky. I didn’t much like what you were about to do to Ms. Rom here. So, I’m going to deal with that.” I let a silver glow grow in my palm. He couldn’t see it, but I was pretty sure she could. It built to blinding intensity, then sank into his flesh. It worked its way down into his body, and I lost all traces as it disappeared beneath his liver.

Squeaky gasped.

“I’m going to tell you what I’ve done, just so you know why you’re going to be in a lot of pain for the next ten days. I’ve scrambled some nerve connections. Every time you think about sex—every time you get that twinge down there in your loose flesh—your sciatic nerve is going to fire. It’s gonna feel like someone’s stabbed a lightning-bolt in your butt. It will hurt like hell. Any time you pee, lots of pain. Worse than syph. Oh, and God help you if you wake up sporting wood.”

Tears welled in the man’s eyes. Fear-tears, which are about as bitter as they can get.

“So, I’ve done this for ten days. I’ll make it permanent if I ever see you again, got it?”

He stared at me.

“Blink once. That means yes. A blank stare means ‘I’m too stupid to tell time, so you might as well make it forever starting now.’”

He blinked.

I let him go. “Get your friend to a hospital before he chokes to death.”

I straightened up. “Ready to get out of here, Judith?”

She stared at me, her mouth open. “I don’t know if I am safe with a man who has so prodigious a capacity for violence.”

“It’s not the violence worries you. It’s the cruelty.” I gave her a frank stare. “And it’s that you find yourself liking my sense of justice.”

Her chin came up. “Capable of insight, as well.”

I held a hand out to her. “Let’s go.”

We didn’t go very far. I headed to the registration desk and checked into my room. There was a mistake with the reservation, of course. I was sure Courtland had reserved me a suite, but instead all they had was a small room.

Funny thing about hotels. They always have a few rooms that are “closed” for renovation. Wallpaper is peeling, the carpet has a water stain, something like that. I was willing to settle for a small room that adjoined one of the offline rooms, and the staff found a way to accommodate me. This meant I could sleep in a room that wasn’t available, and yet be close enough to my room to deal with anyone who came looking for me.

Judith accompanied me to my room. She was still in a bit of shock, which accounted for her compliance. She sat down in a corner chair as I pattered around, checking for listening devices and anything else I figured Harry might have installed. Both rooms seemed clean, save for a water-stained carpet in my boudoir.

She looked up from the report as I reentered the main room. "This is fascinating."

"I'll introduce you to the author."

"Don't bother." She closed it and flattened it against her lap. "I got my masters with ninety percent of it, and everything else is pure fantasy. And he left out the best part."

I raised an eyebrow. "And that is?"

She smiled. "The reason *The Witch in Scarlet* rightfully belongs to me."

Part Seven

Usually someone making a claim like that—that *The Witch in Scarlet* belonged to her—is a nutbar. Her expression and her voice, however, were cold sober. Unless she was a stone sociopath who could have lied her way past Saint Peter, she was serious and had evidence to back it up.

And, despite how I'd seen her lurking around, I didn't get a stalker vibe off her.

"Okay, one thing at a time. What's the fantasy part of his report?"

She sighed, like a TA ready to lecture a freshman. "Odo von Jergin was, among other things unsavory, an imbibor of absinthe. Gave him a lot of wonderful visions, but really cut down on stability in the job market. Like Hitler, he'd been gassed in World War I, and the two of them met while convalescing. Jergin remembered, Hitler didn't until much later, after Himmler reintroduced them.

"Von Jergin did have a talent for painting. *The Coven* was his masterwork. He created the paintings between 1927 and 1941. Contrary to what Hopeworth has written, *Scarlet* was not the last image—the one to bind them all...,' but the fourth in the series. He did it in 1932, the model was Anna Keppel, the daughter of his landlord in Cologne. He presented the picture to Anna's father in lieu of rent, and earned a year's lodging and meals for it."

I nodded. "And that's info that Hopeworth left out?"

"Yes. See, during that time the whole spiritualism phenomena that caught up folks like Conan Doyle, and against which Harry Houdini fought like a demon, got big in Germany. Heinrich Himmler became fascinated with it all. He saw another of the von Jergin paintings at a friend's house in 1939. He became obsessed with them and even commissioned the final painting, *Eclipse*. The sun in that one is actually the Black Sun—the symbol in the room he used for occult rituals at Wewelsburg Castle. The witch's model, Hedwig Potthast, was Himmler's mistress.

"Himmler's obsession with the paintings fueled many Gestapo searches and seizures of artwork. He and Hermann Göring competed in their looting. Hopeworth has some of the histories correct, since the paintings did get around. One was even recovered from a private home in Stalingrad."

Judith flipped to the section with the color pictures. "But a lot of the paintings were lost during the war. *Iron, Water and Stars* went back to the Soviet Union after the fall of Berlin. *Brown and Air* went away in Allied bombing raids. As nearly as I can tell, Himmler's copy of *Moon* was a forgery done in The Netherlands. We don't know what happened to the original."

"But all those pictures were on display. You saw them."

"Sure, but look at the provenance. *Iron* was stolen from a Politbureau member's dascha on the Black Sea in 1956, kicked around through a number of dealers in Turkey and France, then Robert Anderson bought it in a private sale in 1996? That history is sketchy, the dealers are very dodgy, and newly-opened Russian and

Ukrainian security archives contain nothing about the theft.”

“You can’t rule out it having happened, but it sounds too good to be true?”

“Right. And Anderson’s owning the paintings, and the Scaife-Mellon Museum pulling a show together, resets the clock on the provenance. Folks will believe it’s all legit.”

“What about Scarlet. Why is she yours?”

“Anna Keppel was my grandmother. Her entire family died in the death camps, but she survived. When they were taken, so was Scarlet. Himmler had it at Wewelsburg Castle—there’s a photo with the painting in the background. We know the Soviets took it back to Moscow. Armand Hammer arranged for its private sale to Alfred Wayne Patterson, the current owner. It’s got the cleanest bill of any of them.”

I frowned. “Your grandmother can identify it?”

“She died last year.” Judith looked up at me, closing the report. “When I heard that Patterson was putting it up for sale, I had to come. I had to try to speak to him and see if he would return it to the family. We’ve filed claims with the appropriate committees and commissions, but someone like Patterson has an army of lawyers...”

Gut-check time for me. The painting had to be worth a fortune. Anyone with two working brain cells would want it. That didn’t mean her claim wasn’t legitimate. I replayed what she’d said.

It rang true to me.

Which meant I had another problem, or two.

“What’s so special about Scarlet?”

Judith shifted uneasily in the chair. “If you look at the first three paintings, the occult symbolism is minimal. My grandmother said that von Jergin had a mistress during the time he painted Scarlet—a powerful witch. She designed the symbolism in the painting and von Jergin had to redo things many times until she was satisfied. Grandmother said that they even pricked her finger and used some of her blood in the paint. And Grandmother said there were times, when the painting was hanging in the house, that odd things would happen.

“Von Jergin and the witch had a falling out, which is why none of the other paintings have quite the organization of occult symbols as Scarlet did. Von Jergin studied as he went along, refining things, but Scarlet is, to occultists, the most complete and correct of the paintings.”

I nodded. “Leading to the belief it was the final painting.”

“Right. Himmler believed that if he could collect the entire Coven, he could work some serious magick. Others have suggested that Scarlet alone would do the job.”

So, my problems began to multiply. The first was ownership. If the painting belonged to Judith, she should have it. That her owning it would frustrate my brother, this was on the plus side. That it would frustrate Freilich was a bonus. The fact that Freilich or his boss might be wanting the painting for its occult power, made keeping it out of his hands an imperative.

“Okay, looks like I’ll be helping you recover stolen property.”

Judith stood. “I don’t need your help. I’m not sure I want it.”

I blinked.

“Don’t get me wrong. I appreciate your help with those guys, but... I mean, where do you even learn to cast magick like that?”

I smiled. "I work in a strip club. That spell is really effective in cooling drunken ardor. Skinnerian conditioning in one easy pass."

"But you're working for Courtland Anderson, aren't you?"

"No, darlin', I just happen to be related to him." I flashed teeth in a feral grin. "You're doing your thing because of your blood, and I'll do mine to spite every drop."

Part Eight

Judith remained unmoved by my comment. I could have taken that as her revulsion with me and what I'd done, but that didn't read right. Instead I imagined that she had other plans for recovering her family's property. She was confident in her success, and had now tagged me as a wild card that might be played to her benefit.

We exchanged phone numbers and I showed her the door. I let her keep the report as a parting gift. She promised to let me know if she found anything else out, which was polite considering she was lying. She knew that I knew, and that made it okay.

It took about two minutes before the knock came on my door. I figured it for Freilich, but instead found myself facing a solid wall of blue wool. Defensive ends from the looks of them. They were nasty enough that if they'd been coming after me, I'd have yelled "Uncle!" and run for the sidelines.

"Mr. Patterson would like to see you." The guy's expression added the unspoken "now."

Patterson had a penthouse suite large enough to house a circus. He sat in leather chair in the corner of the sunken living room. Walls of glass provided a wonderful nighttime view of Phoenix, including Camelback Mountain. Patterson probably had a house or three there.

He sat in shadows. The only light hitting his face came from the glow of the cigar he occasionally puffed. Ashtray on a side table, glass of scotch next to it. A rather substantial man—meaning he would've had nothing to fear from my escorts back in his prime—he flicked ash from the cigar and pointed the glowing cherry at the couch next to him.

I sat, putting my back to the city, and catching bright light from the suite foyer. It blinded me, so I shifted to looking through magick. The football players were snuffs—no surprise, the NFL didn't allow the talented to play. Patterson remained dark, too, but too dark. I didn't feel the itch, but something wasn't right there.

"You have my gratitude, Mr. Molloy."

"For?"

"The incident outside the convention center." The cigar cherry glowed hot. "I am in your debt."

"I don't think either one of us believes that."

"But it is true. LaVonne, a drink for Mr. Molloy."

The smaller defensive end brought a rocks-glass, half full of amber liquid, no ice. I accepted it. Sniffed. Single-malt Irish, older than I was. I nodded and sipped.

"I am not a man who leaves anything to chance, Mr. Molloy. From the drink selection, you know I have been watching you. You came to Onyx Key two nights before the party. I had people in place two weeks prior, plus had the bar staff on my payroll for the month. I know who drinks what, how much, how they tip and a host of other details that are as fascinating as they are ordinary. From this you will conclude that I have excellent surveillance here, too, and saw the incident with Ms. Rom. You might ask yourself if I would have intervened

had you not; and you will get no answer to that question.”

I took another sip of my drink. “So you’re telling me that I amused you. That’s why you wanted the closer look.”

“I wanted the closer look to reconcile you with your being Robert Anderson’s eldest.”

“Really, you want to watch my reaction to that comment?” I set the glass down and leaned forward on the couch. “The closest he got to paternal was giving me \$200 in hopes I’d drink myself to death. I wouldn’t be here but his estate will go to bad people if I’m not.”

“And you won’t let that happen, no matter the personal cost?”

“Nope.”

“Ah, I wish my son had your spine.”

“No, you don’t. He’d be a major pain in your neck, and working his way south really fast.”

Another puff on the cigar. “How much money does your brother say you’ll get?”

“A thirty share, about four million.”

Patterson laughed aloud. “Oh, very good. Your brother is using the set of books Anderson prepared in case of divorce. Robert Anderson was worth in excess of a quarter billion dollars at the time of his death. Most all of it is off shore. The winner of the little contest will get the account numbers and passwords to access all that money. Surprised?”

“What surprises me is when someone gives me two bucks for escorting him to his car.” My eyes hardened. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I never liked Robert Anderson. I knew you were a major thorn in his side. I wanted to reward you for that. And I am serious about being in your debt for helping the Rom woman.”

“You shouldn’t be. She has a claim on ownership of Scarlet.”

“Yes, I’ve already bought two lawyers new yachts in dealing with her. Still, had she been injured, given her claims, it would have reflected badly on me. Though you did not know it, you did me a big favor.”

“You’re welcome.” I picked up my glass and drained it at a gulp. Horrible thing to do to really fine whiskey, but I had a fifty-fifty shot that he wouldn’t expect it. “I’ll remember you owe me. Now is there anything else? Do you want to tell me to mind myself, so I don’t get in your way or anything?”

The man chuckled in a manner that I found mostly annoying, but slightly inviting. “Perish the thought. I want you to enjoy yourself.”

“Even if that means I’ll be causing you all sorts of trouble?”

“Oh, I’ll look forward to that, Mr. Molloy.” He sketched a question-mark in the air with the cigar. “Very few people can surprise me and maybe, just maybe, you’re one of those who will.”

Part Nine

I’m not sure what bothered me more: knowing that Harry was royally screwing me, or that we had a Svengali orchestrating events so people would collide and provide him amusement. The thing with Harry I expected. Of course, my brother was being stupidly greedy. He could have figured a way to get the account numbers and passwords without going through the whole contest charade. In fact, I counted on it. So his going along with the contest was just to mess with Miranda and me.

For that, he'd pay.

Patterson's playing puppetmaster made my flesh itch. I really hate being controlled. This attitude has gotten me into a lot of trouble. But the look on the puppeteer's face when you yank your strings, drag him down to your level and bust him in the mouth has great appeal. And Patterson was wanting a shot like that, if for no other reason than he'd not had one in a long time.

I liked one aspect of the guy's operation. That Irish whiskey had been very good. Probably the best I'd ever had. It was racing around in my veins, all high-octane. I'm not sure he knew exactly what it meant to me, but it flipped my switch just fine.

Irish whiskey is my trigger: it opens my path to using magick. The more and better the whiskey, the better and broader my connection. If Patterson realized that's what it was to me, he might be able to cut me off. That would not be a good thing. If he did know, would he hint at it or not?

Probably not.

Most folks who had talent never discovered their trigger, and it takes more than the trigger to work magick. To make it work they needed to know their channel. For most folks it is simple: earth, air, fire, water. A vintner with a water channel can work wonders. But that is provided he has the third aspect going for him: capacity and training. If he can handle powerful spells, and is trained in them, he'll be a miracle worker. Without it, all the hand-waving in the world over a glass of water won't transform it into a glass of wine.

My channel is rare, and I've learned a lot of spells here and there. I'd told Judith the truth. I'd hit Squeaky with a spell we use at the club to keep guys in line. Usually a five second burst works. If he's a real pain, he'll be in real pain.

Patterson's spying annoyed me. I wandered back out to area where I'd rescued Judith and took another look. Nothing out of the ordinary, no evidence left behind, no cameras that I could see. I even used a nightvision spell but that revealed nothing. The only change from earlier was that the lights had gone out in the exhibit room.

Everything was quiet.

Too quiet.

And someone had to go spoil it.

I caught the scrape of shoe leather on concrete well before Freilich got close. I didn't turn to face him. "First shot is yours. Make it good."

"You put two of my men in the hospital."

I came around slowly. "I'll fill a ward with your guys. Two. How many you got?"

"You have no idea who you're dealing with."

I love it when guys say that. They expect you to be terrified because of their connections or reputation. A detective once told me that at Club Flesh. He wanted some special service from one of the girls. She objected, I intervened, and he hit me with that line.

I provided him some perspective on the world.

He had to have his badge surgically extracted.

I folded my arms over my chest. "Okay, do you want to tell me why I should be afraid, and then have me tell you why I'm not, or do we take this pissing contest to the next level?"

Freilich arched a blond eyebrow. "Have I misjudged you, Mr. Molloy?"

“You don’t know me well enough to judge me.” I closed the distance between us, getting nose to nose with him. He had to look up at me, and skinny as he was, he couldn’t see around me. “You said you know all about me. If that was true, you’d be running right now.”

“So either I am stupid, or I don’t find you to be a threat.”

My eyes tightened. “I’ll lay it out for you: cross my path and you’ll join your boys. Got it? Whatever game you’re playing, it’s over. You’ve lost. Take your balls and go home.”

Freilich began to laugh, and used it as a reason to step back. He brought his hands up and clapped for show. “Bravo, Mr. Molloy. Very dramatic. I’ll feel threatened for a while, if that will please you.”

“It ain’t about me, jerk-off, it’s about how long you’ll be in physical therapy.” I threw my arms wide. “You heard me. Take it to heart.”

“Oh, I shall, Molloy. I shall.” He gave me a little smile—smug and petty—and a half-bow. “I bid you adieu, and I hope you sleep well.”

I watched him retreat. That made me feel pretty good. He moved faster than fearlessness would have allowed, and his swagger had hitches. He was working it, but I wasn’t buying. I wasn’t going to go out of the way to tangle with him, but I wasn’t going to walk away, either.

But it was late, so I made my own tactical retreat. Back in my room, in my ‘sleeping annex,’ I stripped down to comfortable and tucked myself into bed. I called Natalia, needing to hear a friendly voice. One thing led to another and she made all sorts of suggestions that made sweet dreams a sure bet. I hung up, thinking long and hard on her husky whispers.

I really wanted to sleep.

But Freilich’s hoping I “slept well,” meant I wasn’t going to sleep at all. And, as events unfolded, that definitely turned out to be a good thing.

Part Ten

When I was a cop, I hated stake-outs. Sitting around in a car—waiting on a felon to do something stupid, or your partner to arrive with something other than doughnuts—gets old very fast. I didn’t like being cooped up and waiting. I preferred doing something useful.

This was where magick and the law hit a grey area. Most folks know magick exists. They pretend it doesn’t or buy into the Church’s idea that it’s demon-inspired and want nothing to do with it. Since they can’t see it or touch it, for the most part, it’s easy to ignore. In a court of law, it really doesn’t exist. Evidence obtained by magick is inadmissible. Cate Chase, a medical examiner, can use her magick to point her in the right direction for investigation, but she’s got to have hard science backing everything she brings to court.

The Hollywood version of magick oversells things. It’s all very flash-bang. For most of the talented, you get more damage from a static spark than any combat spell. This is why felons still prefer guns and knives to ye olde enchantments.

If you have power and control, however, you can do a great deal with magick. Moving through the darkness outside the hotel, I invoked my nightvision spell. At first glance, I didn’t see anything.

So I clicked another spell in line. It pushed my awareness out into a sphere, with the emphasis on the sense of touch. I caught bits of heat and cold, and then micro-tremors tickled the air. Currents moved and swirled, marking the passage of a bat. The echoes of its sonar showed up as a shiver, but I locked into something else, a steadier vibration. Something low. Mechanical.

I headed toward the convention center and crouched next to a dumpster. The vibration was coming from the Saguaro room. Since my brother set his exhibit up across the hall, I figured The Witch in Scarlet was

probably hiding in there.

Patterson wouldn't have left it unguarded. I stood. A quick glance in the dumpster revealed two linebackers out cold.

I glanced to my left, at a shadow. "What do you think, Sahara? Call the cops?"

Her surprise rippled to me. Her voice betrayed nothing. "I'm not carrying, are you?"

I shook my head. "I'm fully loaded."

"So am I."

She emerged from the shadows wearing a cat-suit. If those were her bedclothes, Wayne was a little bit luckier and a whole lot kinkier than I imagined. I wanted to imagine a lot. Shifting my sight to magick, I got that intense glow again.

This would be good.

The linebackers were snuffs, but had a lingering trickle of magick—a sparkly dusting. Magick had taken them down. The door's external lock also sparkled, meaning we were getting to the party fashionably late.

And quite the party it was. I eased the door open. We poured in, splitting left and right. It was like we'd practiced assaults all the time. Four men had gathered around the case containing The Witch in Scarlet. They'd swathed a drill in a thick mover's-blanket and had gotten through the lock module. One of them crossed a pair of wires and the painting, encased between two thick Lexan panes, began to rise, illuminated from above and below.

I got the wire-guy first. He crouched there, looking up, watching the painting ascend. A kick to the back of the head smashed him face-first into the case. Something cracked. It wasn't Lexan. He rebounded to the right, a couple teeth went left.

The next guy brought both of his hands together. Raised them like he held a baseball-bat. A red energy blade rose up, rendering half his face in hellish backlight. He snarled, all ready to go Darth Vader on me.

But magick isn't like in the movies.

Sure, that spell probably took out the two Pro-Bowlers, but I've been to this dance before. He swung hard, looking to do some limb-lopping.

My right hand convulsed into a fist. Blue armor sheathed my forearm. I blocked his cut, then the second. Then blue flowed up over my hand and I caught his blade on the third. He stared at my hand, willing the blade to melt through my flesh. He snarled and pushed hard.

I let him work at it for a second, just letting him focus on my hand, then cranked my left fist around into his face. Something else broke. Him, not me. He tried to wrench the sword from my grasp, but his concentration was shot.

The blade wavered. Wilted. Just like he did when I hit him again.

He collapsed on his buddy.

Sahara stood above the two she'd taken out. Definitely more elegant and refined. Two barely-visible whiplash tentacles retracted over her shoulders and into her back. She smiled. Her victims snored.

Normally I'd have made some sort of a comment, but the painting distracted me. As beautiful as the others had been, The Witch in Scarlet pushed beyond. The model did resemble Judith a little, yet was somehow more innocent and more sinister than she ever could have been. Red predominated, with a pentagram inscribed on the table in front of the witch. Within it a small woman lay, bound there, arms and legs spread. She, too, had been modeled on Judith's grandmother.

And a demon, modeled on nightmares, was materializing within the circle inscribed around the pentagram.

I couldn't help but shiver. I'd seen a summoning circle like that before. Serial murder case. The last victim had been a ten year old girl. She was number seventeen. The only demon on site was her killer. His only regret was that none of the summonings had worked.

When we got him, I had to ask. "Why'd you keep repeating the same ritual? It always failed.

He'd looked me, smiling that lunatic smile and said, "It will work some day. You better be ready."

Scarlet's eyes snapped me back to reality. You always hear folks say a painting's eyes follow them. Scarlet's eyes bored through me. I expected her to move and speak, as if she were one frame, frozen, from a film.

The look on Sahara's face. She expected much the same.

We stared at each other, stunned and motionless.

That was a good thing.

The room's doors flew open. Cops poured in, guns drawn. The lights came up, ditto their gun muzzles and, as if on strings, so did our hands.

Part Eleven

I let the local heat know I'd once been 'on the job.' I spoke their language and wasn't carrying, so that calmed them down. A detective pulled me aside, her partner did the same with Sahara, and our statements matched.

While they conferred, I studied the thieves. Three of the four said nothing, just glowered. They were a professional crew. The fourth, Darth Stupid, had a couple of prison tats and squirmed. One of the tats was a gothic "88" marking him as an Aryan. That made linking the crew with Freilich just too easy; but White Supremists had never struck me as being terribly bright.

Satisfied with our involvement, the cops let Sahara and me go. She met Wayne outside, so we didn't get a chance to talk. Turned out that was a good thing. I needed time to think. I got a little before sleep caught up with me.

Then I dreamed about Natalia, Sahara and the Witch in Scarlet.

Proving, once again, why there's a difference between the word sleep and the word rest.

Pounding on my door summoned me to a breakfast meeting. A linebacker gave me ten minutes to get ready. Hair still wet, I entered the penthouse. Freilich, Harry, Sahara and Wayne were waiting for me. The senior Patterson was nowhere in sight.

Didn't mean he wasn't watching.

Wayne smiled. "Very good, we can start now." He waved us to seats. I perched on the arm of a couch. Freilich took the chair that Patterson had used the night before. Harry sat near him on the couch and Sahara centered herself between us.

The younger man stood in the middle of the room. "Last night there was an attempted theft of The Witch in Scarlet. Save for the intervention of Mr. Molloy here, thieves would have made off with it. Because of him, the police captured the thieves. One of them is affiliated with your organization, Mr. Freilich."

"If you even think of suggesting that I had anything to do with..."

Wayne cut him off—a ballsier move than I'd have given him credit for. "Doesn't matter what I think, Mr. Freilich. My father has decided you are to be eliminated from the bidding. Your bill has been paid. Your things are being packed. Our people will escort you from the premises."

Freilich's eyes narrowed. "So, this is how you choose to play things."

Harry smiled. "Given that Mr. Freilich is out of the running, then I suggest we conclude business right here. 3.5 million. I'll write the check right now."

Way to go, Harry. 1.3 under the estimate.

Wayne smiled, but looked down. "My father anticipated that offer, Mr. Anderson. He declines. The auction is still set for Friday. More bidders may come."

Freilich's face lit up for a nano-second, then he glared at me. "You know this isn't over between us, yes?"

"Take your best shot." I turned my back to him. "Come on, do it now. You know you want to."

Wayne waved a linebacker forward. "We'll have no violence here, thank you. Go in peace, Mr. Freilich."

The linebacker dwarfed Freilich. I wanted to see him tuck the smaller man under his arm, but things remained civil.

Once the door closed behind them, Wayne looked hopefully toward me. "My father suggested we keep Sahara out of all this. Based on your conversation last night, he didn't think you would mind."

"That's another one he owes me." I wondered if Wayne actually knew what his father was doing. He wasn't saving Sahara. He was focusing Freilich on me. The kid probably didn't. He'd existed so long in the rat-maze his father made of life, he probably couldn't see the manipulation. That had to be it. Wayne wasn't that conniving.

Harry stood. "Is there anything else?"

"My father wanted you to know he has doubled security. The rest of the Coven should be safe."

"Thank you." Harry smiled. "I've already taken the precaution of moving the paintings off-site, to a secure location."

"A wise idea." Wayne bowed and pointed us to the door. "I hope to see you both later."

Out in the hallway Harry grabbed my arm and steered me across the hall to his suite. We entered in silence. He crossed immediately to the bar and poured himself three fingers of Scotch. He offered me nothing, then dropped himself into a brown leather chair. It matched Patterson's.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd met Patterson, Patrick?"

"That's the kind of detail I usually share over drinks."

He waved me to the bar.

"With people I like."

"Patrick, focus. This is not about liking or disliking, this is about the will."

No Irish at the bar. "What difference does it make?"

"You are kidding." Harry sat forward, cupping the snifter between both hands. "When Alfred Wayne Patterson pays off favors, things happen. Mountains get moved, literally. There are at least two Central American

nations that have undergone regime change because of him.”

I shrugged. “So you want me to burn a favor and get him to give you his suite?”

“No, I want him to cancel the auction.”

I crossed to the corner with a small dining table, drew one of the side chairs around. I sat, then tipped it back against the wall, right above a packing case for a painting. “That’s not going to happen.”

“It will if you ask.”

“No, Harry, it won’t.” I opened my arms. “Patterson doesn’t care about the money. He’s just interested in watching what folks will do for money. It’s his only form of entertainment.”

“I can’t believe you won’t help out the family.”

He used his offended, little-brother voice to make that comment. Blindsided me. Part of me almost blurted out an agreement. Another part wanted to sooth him. In a flash I was back being the screw-up older brother, with Harry coming to ask me why Mommy was crying. The hurt in his voice used to get to me, back before I knew he just enjoyed manipulating me.

I tipped the chair forward and stood. “No, Harry, it’s not helping the family. It’s helping you. Maybe I’ll help myself. Maybe I’ll just head over there and burn a favor, getting him to give me the painting. I win.”

The smile he couldn’t cover betrayed him.

I shook my head. “Planned for that contingency, too, did you? Great.”

“You can’t out-smart me, Patrick.”

“Then I’ll stop trying.” I opened the door. “But don’t forget. You need me. And there will come a time when my help is going to cost more than you can afford.”

Part Twelve

I clawed hands back through my hair, kind of wishing I had talons that could rake through flesh, bone and brain. It would make a mess, but my head would be hurting less. My blood pressure was probably up where it would make the price of oil look reasonable. Harry was a distraction I just didn’t need.”

I rode the elevator down to the lobby, not sure what I wanted to do. A long walk seemed like a good idea. The problem was that I’d just keep walking. Patterson had painted a target on my chest. Harry was free and clear to win the first contest. Worse yet, I had to admit he was right. I wasn’t going to outsmart him. He was playing on his home turf. I just didn’t know enough of the angles to cover them all.

The elevator opened and my stomach growled. I really had no interest in eating, but I know better than to ignore my body. That growl usually means I need animal protein. A side of waffles usually doesn’t hurt, either. That’s the fun thing about breakfast. You can eat the most god-awful combination of things and no one will blink an eye. But try to order a filet ala mode and watch everyone twitch.

I headed for the coffee shop buffet. Resorts all have them. The nice part is that folks like Harry never patronize them. They think calories are better when purchased at boutique prices. Me, I’d just as soon buy in bulk.

The hostess gave me a smile and was about to lead me to a single table in the corner when I saw a hand up and waving vigorously. The hostess noticed, too, and sat me opposite Miranda. She’d picked the one table that caught warm sunlight and she appeared radiant in it.

I surveyed her plate. “Not quite what you get in the monastery, is it?”

She smiled. "But I have to have waffles. This place has real maple syrup. And the omelet guy is pretty good, too."

"Gonna bug you if I eat meat?"

"I'll come visit you when you have the bypass."

I laughed, then went to the buffet. Waffles. Omelet with ham, half a pig's worth of bacon. To make it healthy I added a strawberry. Parked it on top of a cinnamon roll.

Waiting for the omelet, I found myself smiling. Miranda had been Harry's opposite; and yet not like me. Anderson had doted on her, but she avoided being spoiled. She'd always been sensitive. When her daddy would give her five bucks to buy ice cream, the change never got any further than the nearest guy from a homeless shelter. Anderson lectured her a couple of times, but she ignored him and his anger would melt faster than the ice cream.

I was pretty much gone as she grew up, but she really liked seeing me. I'd occasionally get calls from the house staff telling me that Miss Miranda was going to be skating in the park or off doing something else away from the scrutiny of her parents. I'd be there. We'd have some laughs. When I started on the force, she'd been getting out of high school and into college. She'd been a normal kid in that regard, and I rescued her a couple times. Not that she was getting into trouble on her own account—she did it trying to save friends.

I'd never had that strong a sense of family. The Molloys—and there was a boatload of them—gave me cousins, but most of them spent their free time upstate making big rocks into little rocks. They were colorful. I learned a lot about criminal behavior from them. My going on the force strained relations. Not my being on the force, per se, since plenty of Molloys went that route. It was my refusing to take bribes that put them off.

Miranda had pretty much been it for family. I know better than to think normal is a term that applies to any families; but Miranda came as close to normal as I had. She was the only one who kept in touch. She actually cared.

So I joined her in the sunbeam. She kidded me about my culinary choices—but commented positively on the strawberry. Then she asked me how I was doing.

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, that question merits a, "Fine." I almost grunted it, but that look in her eyes stopped me. Happiness mixed with honest interest. No sympathy, no pity, no judgment, just wanting to know.

So I told her everything.

Well, not everything. Gory details she's not big on. She knows what I do, so I tell her the funny stories. And I told her about Natalia—but left out the detail that we'd met while I was looking into a murder.

Her eyes burned brightly. "Natalia sounds wonderful, Patrick. A smart woman—just the sort you deserve. You are pretty high maintenance, you know. It's not good for you to be bored. You love a challenge, and she sounds like a challenge. When can I meet her? You should fly her down here."

"Here?" I shook my head. "I don't think so. Maybe you stop on your way back to Nepal, yes?"

Her smile broadened. "I'd like that. I'll stay at your place, so we don't have to tell mother I'm in the city. Deal?"

"Deal."

My phone rang. I turned in my chair and answered it. "Molloy. Make me happy."

"I wish I could, Mr. Molloy." Fear poisoned Judith Rom's voice. "Something's happened."

Part Thirteen

I snarled. "Put Freilich on."

A rustle, then another voice filled my ear. "You're dealing with me, Molloy."

"That you, Squeaky?"

His reply blistered my ear. I'd have held the phone at arm's-length, but I didn't think Miranda had ever heard such language. At least, not recently, not in a Tibetan Monastery.

When his voice calmed down, I started listening again. "You got that, Molloy?"

"One more time, slowly."

"You get the painting, you bring it to me, you get the Jewess. Two hours I'll call back. You better be successful."

"I got it." My eyes narrowed. Back during my time on the force I took a course in hostage negotiation. A couple things stuck. "When you call back, I'll want to talk to Judith."

"Make sure there's good news for us."

"I will. And I'll need to talk to your boss."

"You're dealing with me."

"You'll relay the request."

"And no cops, Molloy. We see any boys in blue and it's over for you and the girl, got it?"

"I hear you." I tried to keep my voice light. A key thing about negotiation is rapport. You build rapport because you want trust, and you trust that the guys on the other end of the line aren't nuts.

But I already knew they were.

So, I went off script. "Hey, Squeaky, one thing."

"You have your orders, Molloy."

"Remember the promise."

He hung up.

Miranda laid a hand on my forearm. "What's the matter?"

"Little spot of trouble." I shrugged. "Nothing to worry about."

"You sure?"

I laid a hand over hers and squeezed. "Tell you what. If you want to be visualizing some world peace, center it on me. It would probably help."

The two linebackers outside the Patterson suite really didn't want to let me in. They didn't even want to relay a message for me. I managed to convince them otherwise. I explained to one that, in fact, getting his leg shattered in a playoff game was not the most pain he'd ever been in.

And when he got back up, he limped into the suite and returned quickly to usher me in.

Patterson had taken his chair and despite full daylight pouring in through the window, he remained in shadow. He was talented at a decently high level. I sought the itch, but couldn't feel it. I guess that was a matter of control—control of the sort I'd never seen before.

"What may I do for you, Mr. Molloy?"

"I need to call in one of those markers."

"Indeed."

"I need The Witch in Scarlet."

He shook his head. "Under no circumstances. Not possible."

"Judith Rom will die. Freilich and his goons have her. It's the painting for her, straight up."

A low growl rolled from his throat. "You're a fool if you think that's what will happen."

"Yeah, I know it won't be a picnic, but the girl's life is in the balance."

A cigar, already lit, materialized in his right hand. "I'm sorry, it's off the table. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

I nodded slowly. "Let me have Sahara."

"I have no idea..."

"I'm not stupid. I figure things out. Sahara, nice girl, travels in high circles, great match for Wayne. But Wayne catching her eye? No way. She's not a gold-digger, so it's something else. You want her here, and I've seen her in action. You let the blame for the take-down go to me. Wayne thinks it's to save his squeeze. You just don't want your agent exposed."

"Oh, you are clever."

"I'm more clever than you want to imagine." My eyes tightened. "Judith Rom was at Onyx Key. She had someone inside the group. And she didn't want my help in getting Scarlet for her. She had a champion, and I'm betting that's Sahara. If Wayne knows, he approves. I'm betting he doesn't know, does he, AI?"

Patterson sucked on his cigar, the glow failing to penetrate the shadows hiding his face. "Never call me AI."

"Is Sahara mine?"

"If she were an employee, I might be inclined to lend her to you. She is an independent contractor, with specific duties. What you are suggesting, whatever you are suggesting, would be outside the job description under which she was hired. You'd have to convince her to go with you."

I nodded. "I'll take my shot."

Sahara emerged from one of the suite's side rooms. "Forgive my eavesdropping. Freilich has Judith?"

"Yeah. I've only got three hundred bucks, a light rail pass and a winning smile, but all of it's yours. And, on the plus side, it'll be all-you-can-beat at the bigot-bar. Hungry?"

"Famished." She smiled like a tiger. "A hunting we will go."

Patterson laughed quietly. "I'm going to guess, Mr. Molloy, that your first act will be to work with Ms. O'Shea to steal Scarlet? After all, without the painting, the chance of rescuing the Rom woman will be negligible."

"You're not in a lending mood. I don't have a choice."

"Tell him, Sahara."

She shook her head. "I can't do it."

"Can't, or won't?"

Sahara looked down. "Can't."

Patterson's cigar flared again. "Sahara befriended my son to gain access to some of my treasures. She was apprehended. I have some very talented people who have made sure that if she moves against me, she will die. And not at all in a pleasant way."

I shivered. Magick has some rules, like the Laws of Similarity and Contagion. Cate Chase can use Contagion to link tissue samples with the folks who leave them behind. There are rumors about talented assassins who get a sample of cells, culture and then poison them, killing the original host. That would make for a rather robust way to discourage thieves.

"And you're guessing that I don't have the knowledge to crack your storage crate and get the painting out?"

Patterson leaned back in his chair. "If you do, Mr. Molloy, the people who did background checks on you missed something, and I don't pay them to miss. You might have learned some things from your Uncle Jimmy, but that case would have been beyond even him."

I shivered again. "Dammit."

"Indeed, hell and damnation, Mr. Molloy." Patterson shrugged. "Without Scarlet, I'm afraid Ms. Rom will die. And I suspect, as much as we might wish it otherwise, there will simply be no cheating Mr. Freilich."

My head came up and I smiled. "And I'm willing to bet you a bottle of your Irish, that you're wrong."

Part Fourteen

Just for a second I wondered if Patterson chose his words to point me in the right direction. Given the way things unfolded, I'm pretty sure he didn't. He probably didn't even anticipate where I'd go. I sure as hell wasn't going to tell him, however. He'd been a fat lot of good so far, and since he seemed to get his rocks off watching the rest of us like rats in a maze, I figured on giving him a show.

Harry smiled as he opened the door for Sahara. "Well, well, tired of the boy scout?"

I blew past her and grabbed to handfuls of Harry's shirt. Shock on his face. Then fear. That fear melted into pain as I turned and slammed him against the wall.

"What the hell are you doing, Patrick?" My mother rose from the couch, dramatically casting aside a cup of tea. "Have you gone mad?"

I pulled Harry away from the wall, then slammed him into it again. The pictures on either side of him slid askew. "You get one chance to answer my question, Harry. Lie to me and you'll hurt for the rest of your life. Which won't be long."

"Patrick, you can't do that to your brother!"

"Sahara, she says another word, turn her into a toad."

My mother gasped and shrank back.

Harry collected himself. "What's your question?"

"Where's your copy of Scarlet?"

"What are you talking about?"

The third time he hit the wall plaster cracked. "Where is it?"

"I don't..."

"The elevator shaft is on the other side of this wall. Long drop. Where?"

Harry lifted his chin. "Over there. The corner. You almost sat on it earlier."

My mother blinked. "What is he talking about?"

I walked over to the carton. The front was screwed tight. "You'll be proud of Harry, Ma. He was determined to win no matter what. If someone else walked off with the painting, he'd just produce his fake, say he made an after-market deal for the original. His curator would authenticate the piece, and he's home free. That about the size of it, Harry?"

He tried to smooth wrinkles from his shirt. "You make it sound so tawdry."

I straightened up. "How good's the fake?"

"Brush-stroke for brush-stroke, it's perfect. Had the pigments formulated specially to account for shortages in Germany. And I had it done years ago, as a surprise for father."

Mother sighed. "You were always the best son, Courtland."

Harry smiled, but it was because of more than our Mother's praise. Something else. Something sneaky.

I ran a hand over my forehead. "No, wait, that's too easy. You were never going to pass this off as the original. You were going to have Sahara steal the original from the new owner, and they'd take this one home."

I glanced at her, and she just shrugged. "A girl has to eat, Trick."

"Can't fault you there." I sighed. "Okay, we're taking this."

"You can't!"

"I can, Harry." I couple things began to click in my brain. I didn't have time to sort them all out, but they demanded I act. "Let me make sure you understand one thing really clearly, Harry. Freilich has a girl he will exchange for Scarlet. We're giving him your Scarlet. If he finds out there's a switch, I'll know where he got the information from. It'll be you. And I don't care if I end up in prison for the rest of my life, but I will kill you."

Harry arched an eyebrow. "And if Freilich kills you?"

"Figure the odds, Harry. If you think he's that lucky, you go for it. But you know he isn't. Don't make things worse for yourself."

"Ten points."

"Ten points off my split? You'd sacrifice a girl for that?" I shook my head. "Why am I even asking? Sahara, we're out of here."

We entered the elevator and started down, then I hit the stop button. "We need to talk."

She looked surprised. "Something wrong?"

"Tiny thing. I'm going to guess that you were originally hired to steal Scarlet. That's when you got caught. Your client was Freilich?"

"There was an intermediary."

"Did Freilich know you were the thief?"

She leaned back against the elevator's wall. "I don't know. It was six months ago. He sent at least one more thief after it since then. And that crew."

"Okay, so far I have you working for Patterson, Freilich and my brother. Judith thought you were working for her. Anyone else?"

Sahara shook her head. "I really like Judith. I want to help her."

"So do I. I need to know that you have my back."

"If you have mine."

I nodded. "They're going to call in about an hour. I'll set things up for this evening. It will give us time to get triggered and learn a bit about the meeting site."

"You know it's not going to go down straight, right?"

"Yeah. That's why you're there to get the girl out. Whatever it takes." I hit the button with my elbow and the elevator resumed its descent. "Get her clear and don't bother to look back. It won't be pretty."

Part Fifteen

Hostage exchanges are always tricky. The kidnappers don't want to be too visible. The person doing the exchange doesn't want to be too hidden, since being taken for a ride along with the ransom isn't desired. Since we knew that Freilich and his crew were unstable, the chances of ending up dead in the whole deal were good.

Squeaky called back. "You got the painting?"

"Let me speak to Freilich."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Here's the deal, skidmark. You need the painting more than I need the girl. I talk to Freilich now, or the next sound you hear will be Scarlet flambé." I was pretty sure he didn't know what that meant, so he deferred to someone higher up in the food chain.

"Go ahead, Molloy."

"I love you, too, Freilich. When and where?"

"I was thinking the Tempe Marketplace. There's a public gallery there, and a café nearby. Wait for us. Five PM."

That gave me ample time to recon the area. "Done. Let me talk to Judith."

"Don't try anything funny, Molloy."

"I'll leave my comedy monologue at home. The girl."

Judith's words tumbled out in fear. "You're going to do it?"

"That's the plan."

"Don't."

"What?"

"Don't give her to them!"

Freilich came back on the line. "Five. Don't be late."

"I'm very punctual. And remind Squeaky that I will keep my promise."

Dealing with Freilich was like dealing with my brother. I knew he was going to cheat, but I was having the devil's-own time figuring out how. The Marketplace was a huge, outdoor shopping center near one of the freeways. It had all the stores that homogenized the world, letting folks dress up the same, eat the same, read the same and gadget the same. If things got blown up there, no one would notice. Clone stores would be dropped in before the smoke cleared. Business as usual.

The stores lined either side of a cobblestone boulevard. Gaps provided access to the parking lots, but it was mostly open space, and chuck full of people. Despite the gaps, things could be shut down fairly quickly. If I was still a cop and had back-up, this would have been a perfect place for an exchange.

I hit the place for a couple hours for recon, then returned to the resort to pick up the painting. Sahara headed off for her own recon. She knew the set up and positioned herself to watch the exchange go down. If there was trouble, I was counting on her to get Judith clear.

I arrived a half-hour early. I sat in the café and ordered some tea. It went better with the Irish already in my belly than a double-shot espresso soy-milk latte. I was keeping the magick on the simmer, ready to launch, but not invoking anything prematurely. Freilich knew I was talented, but just not how talented. I didn't want to spoil the surprise.

He sent Squeaky to be his mouthpiece. Good choice. Set me on edge. Bonus: if Squeaky died, no great loss. For my part, if I was going to kill him, I'd toss him into the Victoria's Secret franchise, just for the pain.

He sat down. "You got the painting?"

I glanced at the big packing box leaning against the table. "No, I haul that around because my wallet's already too full of pictures. Where's the girl?"

Squeaky raised a hand. Ten second delay, then an SUV slid into view down the alley next to the gallery. The door opened. A woman sat there, bound and gagged. "There she is."

I shifted vision over to magick.

The woman wasn't Judith. She was a snuff.

"I don't know what you think you're pulling, Squeaky, but..." I stood.

He leaped back, upsetting his chair. He pointed at me. "Gun, gun!"

Shoppers froze, stared then broke and scattered. A bunch of guys came in my direction. They all wore windbreakers, dark blue, with yellow stars on the breast. A couple carried shotguns. "Police! Get down! Get

down!”

I hesitated. I'd known Freilich would cheat. I just hadn't expected something so bold. No hiding. They just came at me in disguises that meant no civilian would complain or interfere. Even a cop on patrol might hold back. It looked like a sting and that was more than enough to make lot of folks turn a blind eye.

My right hand clenched. Power gathered. Golden flame wreathed my fist—the same fire that would cauterize Squeaky's chest when I pulled his heart out. “Come here, little man.”

That's when someone shot me in the back. Rubber bullet. It caught me at the base of the spine. Kind of like getting hit by a line drive. Burst of pain and my legs went numb. I went down hard, toppling the table, spilling my tea. The glass broke. A shard punctured my forearm.

One of the limitations of magick is that you've got to concentrate to be able to use it. There are some exceptions, like your body using it to heal you up, but Squeaky and his boys weren't going to give me a chance for even that. Another guy shot me. Nailed my left shoulder. That flipped me onto my back.

I got to watch them crowding around for the boot parade. They laughed about how I was resisting arrest with each kick. An ambulance-chaser came running over to inform them of my rights. He got a shotgun butt in the mouth for his trouble.

Then someone shouted that they'd gotten my accomplice.

Part Sixteen

When you wake up after a serious beating, you're pretty sure you're dead. The stiffness has to be rigor mortis. Breathing is painful. Ribs ache. Your nose is stuffed with red snot. My right eye was swollen shut. That's good. It kept the eyeball in there. The left was glued shut thanks to leakage from a scalp gash. I squeezed my eye tight, made it tear. That loosened things.

I opened my eye.

Not much light. Tough to focus. I saw another body lying on the floor, about ten feet away. Might as well have been miles. Inertia had me. A body at rest remains at rest. That's even more true when you're stuck to the ground with stuff leaking out of you.

I assumed the other body was Sahara. Whoever it was, was wheezing. Not in a good way.

Being alive pissed me off. I didn't know why Freilich hadn't just killed us. Usually you leave enemies alive so you can gloat. You reveal your plans to them, just to torture them. You know they can't stop you. The frustration is supposed to make their physical pains worse. Then you toss them into a deathtrap.

Freilich was doing half the “criminal mastermind” schtick, but not the reveal part.

And, somehow, that annoyed me more than any torture ever could have. I mean, if I was going to die, I wanted to know what for. After all, I would have told him him. Actually, I was counting on it. Fair is fair.

Sahara started sounding worse. My eye finally did dial her in. The outline of her face was wrong. She was all Mrs. Potato-head. Ankle looked broken, left arm, too. Then I shifted my vision to magick. Very bad. I caught hints of that ultraviolet glow here and there. Not much, though; and fading fast.

I'd gotten enough whiskey in me that I could have done a good job healing her up. Problem was that nine-thousand tiny Kodo drummers were pounding away inside my skull. I didn't have enough concentration to figure which way was down—even with gravity's help. Accessing magick for me just wasn't doable.

Might not be the same for her.

“Hang on, darlin'.” I rocked a bit, then flopped over onto my face. That wasn't much help, except it got both hands on the ground. My right leg wanted to work. My left shoulder was MIA courtesy of that second rubber

bullet.

I would have quit right then save for the desire to give the shooter a rubber-bullet enema.

Eventually I dragged myself over to where Sahara lay. As bad as I'd thought she was before, it was hideous close up. I'd seen worse, but not by much. And her wheezing was coming more quickly and shallow.

I had to take a chance.

I'd seen that weird ultraviolet glow before. The perp had been very tough to kill—and exceedingly good at murder. No matter what we did, he kept getting stronger. At least until I separated two of his vertebrae by about five inches.

I got right up to her then scraped fingernails across the puncture wound in my forearm. That started a trickle, but it wasn't quite enough. I jammed my thumb in there and worked it around until things really got flowing. Then I pressed it to her mashed lips.

“Go ahead and drink, Sahara.”

Through the pain I couldn't tell if she was doing anything. She was a vampire, but only by the definition that she drank blood, like those bats and that one species of moth. Just as whisky was my trigger, blood was hers. Not a common trigger. Drove most of the folks who had it utterly insane. There's your source for nightmare stories about Dracula and the Blood Countess.

Then I felt it. The tickle of her tongue. She lapped and sucked, becoming stronger. One hand grabbed my arm. She held tight. A death-grip.

I couldn't have broken free after a week in a distillery.

Then she bit. That I felt. I swallowed my yelp. I needed her whole, and shouting would have brought them down on us. But I couldn't let her drink as much as she wanted.

I tangled my other hand in her hair and pulled. Hard. “Sahara, stop. You're going to kill me.”

Her eyes, now set in a perfect face, flashed open. No recognition there at all. Her body was reacting to preserve her life. She was all animal. Wasn't hard to see how vampire stories got started.

I yanked again. “Sahara, stop!” A wave of nausea passed over me. “Sahara, you need me.”

She blinked, then closed her eyes for a second more. The teeth went deeper. She drank again, then the pressure broke. Her teeth slid free of my flesh, and she pulled back.

“Trick?” She scooted away, putting a body's-length between us. She wiped a trickle from her lips with the back of her hand, then licked it off. “How did you...?”

“Lucky guess.” The world swam. I rolled onto my back. “Know any healing magick?”

“My talent doesn't run in that direction.”

“You gotta have something. For a headache, maybe?”

“Honey, you're going to need more than that.” She stood, crossed to the door and tested the knob. “Locked.”

“I can fix that.”

She gave me a look. “Trick, I cut my teeth on locks like this.”

“Yeah, and you ground them on my arm.” I tried to sit up, but couldn't. “Just clear my head for a sec and I'll do the rest.”

She knelt beside me and placed both hands on my head. "Damn, Trick, you are a mess."

"I'm just first runner-up, darlin'; and since you can't serve any more..."

"Quiet."

I closed my eye. Her hands felt heavy on my scalp, then cold. That cold seeped in. The drummers fled for warmer climes. They started pounding on my guts, but everything north of my ears was as quiet as a snowy Christmas morning before the six-year-olds got up.

I didn't know how long the solitude would last, so I went to work. I evicted the drummers. I fixed my shoulder and lower back. I also took the swelling down around my eye. I stopped the other leaks, but left the bruises and scrapes for later. I needed magick more than I needed looking pretty.

Still sore as all hell, I sat up and then got to my feet. I wavered a bit, but she caught me. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Sahara glanced at the door. "Get out of here, get back-up and return?"

"Without thanking our host for the good time he's showed us?" I shook my head. "Where are your manners, girl? I have a big ole guest gift for him, and Freilich's going to get it, even if the delivery kills me."

After that, there was nothing more to remember.

Part Seventeen

Sahara made short work of the lock. I pushed my senses out into the corridor beyond, declared the immediate area clear, and retracted my sense. It would have been smarter to push it fully out, but in my state that would drain me. I needed to save something for the fight.

We'd been dumped in a small office suite at the front of a warehouse. Looked like a furniture showroom gone bust. The furniture appeared nice—the leather still soft. Dust coated everything except fresh fast-food wrappers, empty beer cans and the two couches the kidnapers had been using. Someone had been living in little office across the way. The signs were pretty clear.

A stained mattress, a blanket, and every stitch of clothing Judith had been wearing.

That was not a good sign.

Sahara pointed at the door leading into the back, but I shook my head. Instead I mounted what had once been the store's counter and pushed aside one of the ceiling's false panels. Storage had been built over the showroom, but they'd left a gap for the air-conditioning conduit.

We opened a vent and tore a beer can in half. That gave us a blade that slit through the flexible conduit. I went up first and squeezed through a narrow service space. Sahara followed silently.

That wasn't really necessary. They were never going to notice us. They were making too much noise, and the hanging lights blinded them. Not that they were looking. Everyone's eyes were on the center of the floor.

The Witch in Scarlet had been set up on an easel at the north point of the pentagram painted on the floor. That put it between Judith's feet. She's been bound wrist and ankle to eye-bolts set in the floor. Outside the pentagram another circle had been inscribed, just like in the painting. The arcane symbols from the painting had been painstakingly reproduced in between the lines.

Judith didn't struggle, but she did move. "Drugged?"

Sahara nodded in response to my whisper.

A dozen of Freilich's disciples had donned black velvet robes, complete with hoods. It looked like the Ku Klux

Klan gone formal, though the little symbols on the chest were more Gestapo than hillbilly. They'd arrayed themselves around the circle, outside it, each one in front of another of the Coven paintings.

Oh, Harry, you're going to pay for your part in this.

I put Squeaky at 4 o'clock, beside Silver. That position gave him a good view of Judith's body. He was twitching as that nerve fired.

Freilich, wearing a black robe fronted with a sun-symbol in gold, bowed bare-faced toward the painting. He opened his arms, then let his head tip back. His eyes closed. His voice filled warehouse.

The words, though, weren't anything I recognized. Didn't stop a chill from running down my spine. Each word, each syllable, hit me like a static spark. It was some weird language, an ancient language. It soothed and grated at the same time.

Down below, something began to happen. The sigils in the circle began to glow, as if the floor beneath them had become molten. But the funny thing was, they didn't produce heat. The warehouse's temperature plummeted.

Freilich's words steamed. I swear they started coming out of his mouth in chains of cuneiform symbols.

Part of the painting started to move. Rivulets of brown liquid ran like tears from every scarlet surface. It poured down and dripped to the floor. It puddled there, then clotted and drew itself together.

It resolved itself into the demon from the painting.

It didn't remain miniature for long. The thing grew into a hulking creature best described as a gator-gorilla with a T-rex head. The eyes burned red. I almost switched to magick to take a look.

I knew I wouldn't like what I saw.

Sahara gripped my arm. "Do you..."

"Yeah. Waking nightmare."

"Worst kind."

Freilich's eyes opened and he smiled. "Welcome, Lord Molek. As the Ammonites worshipped you, so do we, and beseech your blessing."

The demon watched him with unblinking eyes. Freilich's followers sank to their knees and bowed their heads toward the demon. In unison they chanted ancient phrases.

I glanced at Sahara. "Can you get her out of there?"

She nodded. "There are some obstacles."

"I'll deal with them." I gave her a peck on the cheek. "Wait for my signal."

She took my face in both hands and kissed me full on the mouth. "Don't get yourself killed."

"No, ma'am." I smiled and moved along the edge of the storage level. Freilich's minions covered my advance with their chanting.

Freilich looked up from his position near Judith's head. "Lord Molek, we have prepared for thee this sacrifice. It shall be the first of many, as we extend the war to your ancient enemies. Please look upon this sacrifice with pleasure."

I hit the warehouse floor at that point and laughed aloud. Freilich's head whipped around. The demon spotted me, too, but only tilted his head.

I opened my arms, sheathing both fists in golden, spiked gauntlets that Freilich's snuffs couldn't see. "So what's the deal here, Kevin? What's up with giving Lord Molek inferior goods?"

The two closest snuffs got up to restrain me. They went back down again rather unceremoniously. None of the others saw fit to block my path to Freilich. He set himself, but the demon's low growl stopped him.

"Don't listen to this deceiver, My lord."

"Heh, now there's the pot calling the kettle black." I turned to face the demon. "As one deceiver to another, take a look at what he's brought you. A Jewess! Search his heart. She's not even human as far as he's concerned. Inferior goods. Blemished. Not prime sacrificial material. Not very respectful."

Freilich threw a punch.

I caught his wrist. And smiled.

Then I tossed him back through the circle.

To the demon.

And, literally, all Hell broke loose.

Part Eighteen

Back when that crazy man had told me I'd better be ready for the time the demonic summoning worked, I did some studying. I talked to my cousin Thomas, the one the Molloy's the clergy captured. He had me talk to a couple Jesuit buddies of his. They gave me a lot of mumbo-jumbo. I had trouble accepting grown men would still believe in demons, but there was one thing they were adamant about in demon summoning situations.

Never break the circle.

Oops.

Molek one-handed Freilich on the fly and took a big bite. The demon shook his head, like a terrier dispatching a rat. I never did see where Freilich's legs ended up. His right arm clothes-lined one of his followers.

Freilich's people started running which, as it turned out, was the wrong thing to do. As bad as breaking the circle. Predators orient on movement. They read panic. They measure. They pounce.

Molek was all about the pouncing. He'd land with both feet and splash a lot of crimson around. He drenched himself in it. Very little ran off onto the floor. He just sucked it in as if every pore was a mouth with serious thirst.

Sahara leaped down from the storage area and landed inside the circle. She freed Judith and tossed her over her shoulder.

I pointed toward the back. "Go."

She started off, and I squared around to face the demon.

Molek looked up, a thick tongue collecting an arm, then turned toward me. He sniffed. Growled. Tilted his head again.

"Unstoppable. We."

The words came less as sounds than barbed vibrations. They ripped through me, reawakening every hurt adrenaline had tried to calm. I wanted to run. The only thing that stopped me was seeing twitching piles of

human-chew-toy scattered around the floor.

"You've had your fun. Go home." I tried to keep my voice even. "Don't make me get all exorcist on you. In the Name of the Father..."

Molek slammed a fist into the floor. Concrete cracked. Shelving groaned. I went to a knee. An office chair did the high-dive and shattered behind him. "No binding. Unbeliever."

He had me there. Here I was hoping for salvation, but that same God I wanted to save me had created Molek and his companions. If He didn't clean up His mess back then, not much chance of His doing so now.

And that unbeliever thing wasn't helping.

The demon slowly began stalking toward me. "Amusing. Tasty. You."

I spread my open hands. A shower of golden sparks flew at the demon. He made no attempt at dodging. The sparks just sizzled into his flesh. A scale or two plinked to the ground.

About the only real change in Molek was that that whole amusement thing ended. I was about as funny as a sand-flea now. And not quite as powerful. That shower had tapped my last magick reserve. I was done.

And still tasty.

The demon gestured. A swarm of black and red flies buzzed at me. I swatted at them. Didn't make any difference. They landed on needle-feet and stabbed their proboscis into my skin. They lapped at the blood, reopened wounds. My body reacted. Welts rose—mumps from mosquito-bites.

Molek ambled toward me, then his head came up.

The flies scattered, chased by a purple sparrow that snapped them out of the air. Sahara dropped to a knee and grabbed me by the shoulders. "Move it, Molloy. No dying, remember?"

"Right!" I lunged to my feet, taking her by a hand.

We got about three steps before something pulled hard, almost ripping her hand from mine. Molek had grabbed one of the purple tentacles connected to Sahara's back. She shot others out anchoring herself to a pillar, but the demon jerked again.

Still holding tight, I dove to the floor. I had her hand in my right. I wrapped my left around one of the eye-bolts and hung on. Molek tugged again and my shoulder creaked.

"Shut your magick down, Sahara."

"We'll die." She got her other hand on mine, too. "I am definitely anti-dying."

"It's our only shot." I arched my back and pulled. "When he tugs again, do it!"

Molek's muscles tensed. He yanked. Sahara's magick vanished and the demon went flying backward. He tumbled into the office wall. Major league hole in the drywall. He snapped a power line. A couple of sparks, but no denizen of Hell was gonna worry about a couple thousand volts.

Sahara collapsed in my arms at the pentagram's heart. "Didn't even slow him down."

"Didn't expect it would." I slid from beneath her and quickly inscribed a new circle on the floor, using the only pigment I had available. Blood had worked in the painting, so why not now?

Molek crawled forward, then raised his head again. His lower jaw dropped in a demonic grin. "Clever."

Still on my knees, I smiled. "That's right. We're safe."

Then one of his flies landed on me and started drinking again.

Sahara and I exchanged glances.

“Damn.” My shoulders slumped. “I guess I missed a spot.”

Part Nineteen

A weird noise echoed through the warehouse. It started with a click, then a slithery-skiddy kind of sound tailed it. I thought maybe it was Molek’s pass at laughter, but something came skittering along the floor toward me. Small, silver, the size of a hockey puck, it slid between the demon’s feet. I scooped it up with my left hand.

Silver flask, round, with a gold plate. Engraved initials. AWP.

Alfred Wayne Patterson.

The demon spun as Patterson and two other men stepped through the hole in the wall. Patterson raised a hand, said something, and the demon hissed. Patterson repeated himself in a commanding voice, and Molek slunk back. He thrust his muzzle toward the men and roared. Though his breath flapped their black long-coats back, none of the men shied.

The shadows which had clung to Patterson reversed themselves. Similar to the way Sahara glowed in magick, Patterson burned with a pure white light. Blinding light. Light that went beyond energy, visible and invisible. It was something more and Molek didn’t like it.

The demon lunged, both fists raised high. He brought them down hard. They slammed into a white shield. Light flew off in shards. The concrete cracked. Patterson’s knees half-buckled as his feet sank into gravel, but he didn’t go down.

Molek vented his fury on the shield, pummeling it. Blow after blow flashed lightning into the warehouse. More concrete cracked, as did the bones in Molek’s hands. He bit at the shield trying to crush it in his jaw, but withdrew with bleeding gums.

Sahara grabbed my hand. “Let’s go.”

I shook my head and unstoppered the flask. “Not ’til it’s done.”

I drank deep. Irish. Really good stuff. Better than I’d been offered in his suite. Better than I’d ever had before.

Liquid fire flooded through me. Fatigue vanished. Pain forgotten. All the wounds closed without the hint of a scar.

And that thirsty fly exploded in a fiery mushroom cloud.

Sahara raised a hand to shield her eyes. “It’s a lot, but it’s not going to be enough. The forces they’re dealing with...”

“Titanic, I know.” I emptied the flask and tossed it to her. “If I was you, I’d be getting my butt out of here.”

“And you’re not leaving why?”

“I’m not as smart as you.”

Patterson’s two companions moved to flank Molek. A net of coruscating energy connected the two of them. It didn’t look strong enough to hold the demon. That’s what they were going for, however, and almost too late Molek figured it out. He took a swipe at the one nearest me, then leaped high toward the center of the warehouse.

Toward The Witch in Scarlet.

Which is what I'd been waiting for.

I gestured. My magick hadn't been able to hurt Molek before, but that was a flask ago. A golden sphere surrounded the painting. Wickedly curved, razor-sharp blades sprang out.

And then the sphere began to spin.

Unable to control his descent, the demon flailed. His broken hand grabbed at a girder, but pulverized bone doesn't make for a firm grip. Then a purple tendril wrapped itself around one ankle. Sahara pulled. Molek's grip failed and he landed muzzle-first on the floor, shattering concrete and knocking me down.

Patterson's companions swooped in, entangling the demon. Molek bit at the net, then roared in pain. Flesh sizzled where the net touched him. The net contracted, growing smaller, shrinking the demon along with it. It got down to the size of a mail-sack, with Molek writhing within, and the two men hauled it away. They disappeared through the hole, and a half-dozen more people came in.

A couple of them checked on Patterson, but he rose from the ruins of the concrete floor and brushed himself off. He held a hand up, then walked over to where Sahara and I staggered to our feet and leaned against each other. No longer hidden in shadow or sheathed in brilliance, he had a craggy ruggedness about him. Just the way he moved, and the way he looked at us, I'd have put money on him taking Molek even without the assists.

"You're not going to get the explanation you want."

"Yeah, we're glad to see you, too, Al."

Sahara smiled. "Thanks for saving our lives."

"Don't thank him, Sahara." My eyes narrowed. "Our lives wouldn't have been in jeopardy except he put us here. Right where his superiors needed us to be."

Patterson raised an eyebrow. "If you continue to make assumptions, Mr. Molloy, this conversation will head off in directions you don't want to go. Be very careful."

"Oh, I know exactly where this is going."

"I don't believe you do."

Sahara held her hands up. "I can smell the testosterone starting to boil. I left Judith outside. I'm going to go tend to her."

I waited for Sahara to leave, then looked around at the men collecting the Coven. "How long has the Vatican known Molek was trapped in that painting?"

"What makes you think..."

"Look, Patterson, I've been around for a long time. This is the sort of thing that gets royally screwed up when there is a bureaucracy dealing with it. And your garden-variety magician doesn't come equipped with the power or knowledge to be netting demons. Fisherman's net, nice touch. How long?"

"Von Jergin confessed on his deathbed. By then Scarlet had disappeared. There were rumors. I had the opportunity to acquire it."

"Why not destroy it?"

The elder man laughed. "You don't just destroy things like that, Molloy. Molek's presence in that painting was the metaphysical equivalent of a dirty bomb. Torch the painting, he's released in every particle. Moral ebola

unleashed upon the world. You've seen the dark side of normal life. You want that on angel-dust?"

"No." I thought for a moment. "And it would have imperiled someone's soul to release the demon, so your side couldn't do that. But you could have let Freilich or any number of other idiots do what they did here under far more controlled circumstances."

"We didn't know if the summoning would require the entire Coven or not. Anderson had put the others together, but he was too dangerous."

"Dangerous?" I blinked. "Maybe to a dessert buffet."

Patterson's chin came up. "You don't understand about him, do you?"

"I understand he hated me."

"He didn't hate you. He envied you. He was jealous of you." Patterson shook his head. "No, don't even start with a denial. Look, the vast majority of people out there think magick died with the scientific revolution and witch-burning. It doesn't concern them. Those with power, however, are concerned. That's why the owners of sports franchises—some being very talented in their own right—refuse to allow talented players. That's why you or I can scoff at the way Hollywood presents magick. It's not realistic at all. We know that. And the masses buy it.

"But Anderson, he craved the power. If you want magick and you don't have it, you have two choices. You can do what Uri Geller did and fake the power. Bask in the glory, amaze your friends. Or, you do what Anderson did, and traffic in magick. Try to corner those items that would give you power."

I shook my head. "Not possible." Yet even as I said it, I remembered all the sociopaths who bought the idea. And Anderson had those leanings.

"You know I'm right. You said the only paternal thing he did was give you money in hopes you'd drink yourself to death. You know why?"

A shiver ran down my spine. "He wanted to be rid of me."

"No." Patterson's voice grew quiet. "He wanted to claim your body. There are some people who believe that if you consume talented flesh, you can catch talent."

"That's insane."

"Not to those who believe."

"Does Harry know about the demon?"

Patterson shrugged. "I would not discount the sins of the father falling to the son."

Something clicked inside my head. "Oh my god. Harry didn't know about the switch, did he? He thought he had a forgery in his suite. Sahara arrived late at Onyx Key because she'd broken in and hidden the real Scarlet in his case, and put the fake in your display safe."

Patterson raised a hand. "Don't go further down that path."

But I was already there. Patterson wanted Freilich to get the real painting. That's why he refused to loan me his Scarlet, which was Harry's fake. So I'd been played and played very well.

I looked Patterson straight in the eye. "I think you owe me more than the two already on the books."

He smiled. "I will grant you that."

"Good." I nodded slowly. "And this is how you're going to pay me off..."

Part Twenty

It took me a couple days—right up to Auction day—to recover. Magick had handled the physical stuff. Getting back into reality was the tough part. That demon just wasn't supposed to exist. Just thinking about it had me scratching at where those demon-flies had been sucking.

Patterson had friends in really high places, and that's not an allusion to Heaven. I didn't see any mention of the events in the warehouse on any newssites, or in the weekly hardcopy of the Arizona Republic. The latter did mention an abandoned furniture warehouse that had burned to the ground, but no casualties. Electrical fault cause the fire.

I didn't see anything of Sahara after she left the warehouse. Her absence had Wayne down, but Miranda consoled him. If it was anyone else but Miranda, I'd have figured some serious gold-digging was going on. I know my mother hoped it was, but she'd never been dialed into Miranda's reality.

I guess it was a good thing Sahara was gone. I'd felt an attraction there, a serious one, but wasn't going to move on it. I don't poach. So her leaving Wayne made me feel good, but I also knew she was trouble. Gorgeous, yes; skilled at magick, yes; and made her living as a thief who was willing to play all sorts of people off against each other. Her fickle nature would have made it easy to dismiss her; but the kiss she'd laid on me made it impossible to forget her.

Which is what she wanted. Patterson wasn't the only one good at the manipulation game.

I didn't see Judith, either, after the warehouse. I guessed that Patterson took care of her—and not just because that was part of our deal. He'd stave off boredom watching her recover from her ordeal. His kindness would confuse her and he'd take that, since the other part of our deal didn't sit well with him.

Not only did he have to take care of her, but he had to make her happy. That cost me a favor, but was worth it.

Busting a puppetmaster in the mouth always is.

Two days of enjoying massages and soaking up sun pool-side worked wonders for me. I usually hate that crap, but my being carefree drove my brother and mother batty. It took a lot to lay still, being poked, stroked and broiled, but I managed it for their sakes.

And on auction day, I sat in the back. The auctioneer had those thick round glasses that gave him bug-eyes. He wore a yellow bow tie and a jacket with leather patches on the elbows. Behind him and his podium, The Witch in Scarlet was in full view in her protective shell. She looked gorgeous and even seemed to be smiling at the assembled crowd.

The folks attending the auction were mostly local friends of Patterson's, and a handful my mother or Harry had roped in. No other credible bidders had arisen, so the auction was a formality. Harry sat up front, paddle number one ready to flash.

The auctioneer adjusted his glasses. "Lot number one, the 1941 painting of Odo von Jergin, The Witch in Scarlet. The opening bid is 3.2 million dollars."

Harry waited for the gasp to run through the crowd, then casually flicked his paddle.

The auctioneer pointed at him. "We have 3.2 million. Do I hear 3.3?" He looked hopeful for a second, then nodded and smiled. "We have 3.3."

Harry's head snapped around as if I had it on a string and had tugged hard. His eyes widened as he saw the raised paddle in my hand. He sneered, then turned back. "3.5."

I shrugged. "3.6."

"Four million."

Another gasp.

I flicked my paddle. "4.5."

Harry's jaw dropped open. He turned to look at me. "This is impossible. You don't have that sort of money, Patrick. This is a fraud."

The auctioneer pushed his glasses back up his nose. "Bidder number two has placed a sum in an escrow account to cover his bidding. The bid now stands at 4.5 million dollars."

Harry's nostrils flared. "5.35 million."

Another gasp, my mother's voice being the loudest in the mix.

The auctioneer looked at me. "5.35 million to you, sir."

I inspected my fingernails, then lowered my paddle. "He can have it."

The gavel fell. "5.35 million is the final bid. Congratulations, Mr. Anderson, The Witch in Scarlet is yours."

Harry waited for the crowd to thin before he approached me. He kept his smile even, but fire blazed in his eyes. "You idiot. What did you think you were doing? We complete the tasks my father set, and you get your split, remember?"

"And you must remember that you told me we'd swap our percentages if I beat you in completing tasks."

He took a moment, then nodded. "Yes, yes, I did. Very good."

By that he meant that now he had an angle on me. I was greedy, and he could use it against me. That worked very well for him. Add to that the fact that I apparently had some money, and he decided he wanted both his father's estate and my money.

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "How much did you have, and where did you get it?"

"Five million, from Patterson." My eyes hardened. "Your loaning the rest of the Coven to Freilich created a problem that I solved. Patterson was grateful."

"Overbid by \$340,000. I can live with that. It will hurt for a bit, but I can live with it." He smiled. "What are you going to do with your five million?"

I shrugged. "Don't have it anymore."

"What?!"

"I bet Patterson double or nothing that I'd win the auction."

"You did what?"

"You heard me. And that \$340,000, just consider that a down payment on what you owe for cutting a deal with Freilich."

“That’s the one thing I like about you, Patrick. So predictable.”

I patted him on the chest. “You just keep thinking that, Harry, but, whatever you do, don’t bet on it.”