

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Going somewhere?” a familiar voice asked. “Dressed like that?”

Still in shock, I tried to break free, but Cassie held on. “Easy. Take it easy. It’s me. What’s the matter?”

Getting words out took a few tries. “It’s in the shower.”

“OK,” she said evenly. “Let’s have a look. Let me have this first.” When I refused, she tried to pry my fingers off the squeegee. “Come on—let go now.”

“It’s huge. *Gigantic*. It did this thing with its tongue, and—”

Still intent on disarming me, she only half-listened to that. “And you were going to squeegee it to death? Great plan, honey. Let *go*.”

With a vicious swipe, I took it out of her reach. Keeping a sharp eye on her, I put my robe on—rather awkwardly, what with having a squeegee in one hand, but on just the same. “Stand back,” I warned.

“Why?”

Why? I’d show her why. *Then* she’d be sorry. Weapon at the ready, I advanced on the shower curtain and yanked it down the rod, revealing...nothing. No monster serpents, no apparitions, nothing. Just the water still running.

Sighing, Cassie leaned back against the counter. “I can’t wait to hear the explanation for this.”

“There was a snake in the shower,” I said sulkily. “As big as Orson Welles.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. What kind of question is that?”

“Well, honey, it’s winter. There’s a foot of snow on the ground. If your parents have snakes, they’re probably hibernating.”

“Snakes don’t hibernate.”

“How do you know?”

I didn’t, in fact, but we were getting off the subject. “That one was wide awake.”

Cassie thought it over for a second. Then she crossed the bath to give me an oppressively comforting hug. “It’s all right now. Everything’s fine. You’ve just had too much stress lately. Why don’t—”

“I’m not having stress!” I shouted, pushing her away.

“—you get dressed, and we’ll go for a walk. I think we could both use some fresh air. How about it?”

“Don’t patronize me.”

“I’m not patronizing you. I’m trying to get you to calm down and start making sense. *Give* me that.” Making an unexpected move, she seized the squeegee and threw it in the clothes hamper, where it wouldn’t be a distraction anymore. “Now talk to me. What happened?”

Bitterly, knowing she wouldn’t believe me, I told her.

“It’s probably just Monica,” she said.

“Not her style.”

“She has no style.”

I started to argue the point but decided it would be a fool’s errand. “Would it

be too much trouble to tell me what you're doing in here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be downstairs *handling* my family?"

"Oh. That." To my alarm, she looked vaguely guilty. "Well, you see, Devvy—"

"I never end up liking sentences that start that way," I muttered.

"—I was trying to tell them to go easy on you, because it's not against the law, but—"

"What's not against the law?"

"You and me. Us. Together. *You* know." *You'd better know*, her expression added.

"I was trying to get them to back off, but your mother got upset, and...well..."

Worse and worse. "And then what?"

"I handled them," Vanessa said.

We both spun around. Cassie's demon was perched on the counter, filing her claws.

"What did you do?" I demanded.

"Nothing permanent."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning," Vanessa said, affecting great weariness, "that I put them on hold for a little while. All that *talking* was giving me a headache. Does anyone in your family ever shut up, Devlin?"

Cassie tried to make it seem as though she'd been coughing. I added that to the list of things we would discuss later. "On hold?"

"They're fine. Just resting. Don't you believe me?"

By way of answer, I shoved her aside and raced down to the kitchen.

It all looked absolutely normal—Mom scowling, Connor smirking, both of them with their mouths wide open—except that everything was frozen. Tentatively, I pulled Connor's hair. Not even a blink. Amy, for her part, was sitting slumped down with one hand over her eyes.

"They were arguing," Cassie murmured.

I jumped a little, not having heard her follow me downstairs.

"Connor said you were all too old for bed checks," she continued. "But he offered to check up on *us*. Your mother said something about God not making Adam and Steve, and then Vanessa zapped them."

"They bored me," the demon said, behind us.

I didn't even bother to turn. "That's not the point, Vanessa."

"Of course it's the point. Your family is positively awful, Devlin. That explains a lot about *you*, but they're still awful. Want me to put them to sleep for you? Permanently?"

"Maybe later. Right now, I want you to unzip them and then go away so I can get dressed."

"You look all right," the demon said. "For you, anyway."

"I can't go around in a robe all day."

"Oh, I don't know about that. You're not always this uptight. And Lucifer knows *she* isn't. There was that one day at the beach..." She let her voice trail off delicately, to give us time to catch her drift.

"How do you know about that?" Cassie asked, outraged.

"I get around. It's one of the perks of the job."

I was going to perk *her* for that. But Cassie blocked me and refused to move. "You mean you see *everything* that goes on?"

"We can if we want. It's a little like being Santa." The demon smirked and then broke into song:

*We see you when you're sleeping
We know when you're awake
We know if you've been bad or good
So be bad, for goodness' sake...On!*

That last word was supposed to be "Oh!", of course, but Cassie had just pinched her.

"Just fix it," I told Vanessa.

"Oh, all right." Sulking, she started to take the spell off, but then something occurred to her. "Do you want a couple of minutes' head start?"

"What for?"

"You forgot to turn the water off upstairs. If your mother finds out, you're in big trouble."

I hated it when demons were right. Unwillingly, I turned to go back upstairs.

"By the way," Vanessa called. "About the snake."

Damn—I'd already forgotten about it. What did it say for my quality of life that I had worse problems than snakes in the shower? "What about it?"

"That was Monica's idea. I can't help you with her here. Wish I could."

Cassie blanched. "You mean there really *was* a snake?"

"An anaconda," Vanessa confirmed.

I smiled triumphantly at Cassie, who was edging closer to me.

"It might be back," the demon added. "I really don't know what Monica's up to. But don't worry—anacondas aren't poisonous. They just squeeze you to death."

There was a very long silence in the kitchen, and not just on the part of the frozen parties.

"Hurry up and get dressed," Cassie finally said. "I'll call the Holiday Inn."

As soon as we checked in, I curled up on one of the beds to review the ruin of my life: no job, two demons and a blonde girlfriend who'd just outed me to my family. She'd had the best of intentions, but we were still done for. Connor and Ryan would tree us, Mom would finish us, and the giant snake would be lucky if there were any leftovers.

"I was born in this town," I told Cassie absently. "And I'm going to die here. This Christmas."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

"No, you're not." She quit unpacking cosmetics long enough to give me a severe

look in the mirror. "Stop right there. I mean it."

I stopped. But only out loud.

"You're not going to die, Devvy. Even if you want to, I won't let you. Got that?"

The phone rang. Reluctantly, I rolled over and grabbed it. "Got it....Hello?"

"This is your mother," Mom said sternly.

Fear gripped me for a second, but then I remembered that I was a goner anyway, so what the hell. "I don't believe you. Do you have ID?"

"You're not funny, young lady."

"Wrong on both counts, Mother."

Cassie, still busy unpacking, dropped something in the sink with a terrible clatter.

Mom heard. "What was that?"

"Cassie."

"She's in your room?"

For the love of God. "She's in *our* room. Was there something you wanted?"

"Aunt Kitty and Uncle Edgar are coming over for dinner."

"How nice for them. And...?"

"Don't get smart. They'll want to see you. You need to be here by 6."

"Is that an invitation or an order?"

There was silence on the line.

"Mom?" The bed shifted as Cassie sat down next to me; she gave me an inquiring look, which I answered with a shrug. "Hello?"

"This is difficult for all of us," Mom finally said. "I don't think we need to discuss the...*issue* in front of them. Do you suppose your friend could just stay at the motel?"

I slammed the phone down so hard that everything on the night table jumped.

"Devvy? What is it?"

"I'm not leaving you anywhere," I told her fiercely. "Not now, not later, not ever."

She smiled uncertainly and stroked my cheek. "Good, because I'm not going to *be* left. What brought that on?"

"My mother."

"I know." She kept stroking. "What did she say?"

It didn't matter. Suddenly, a five-alarm blaze was burning inside me, and the last thing I wanted to do was talk about my mother. With a suddenness that surprised both of us, I swept Cassie into my arms and down onto the bed.

"Something you want, lamb chop?" she asked.

There was, as a matter of fact. And I was in no mood to wait until Christmas.

Fortunately, she wasn't either.

When we finally left the room a few hours later, we were surprised by a blanket of new snow—several inches of it, topped with a thin layer of sleet. That meant digging Cassie's car out and scraping the windows, which was going to make us late.

After all the trouble I went to, teaching you how to tell time, Mom would say. *Do you know how long it took me to do that?*

I did know, as it happened; she'd mentioned it several hundred times in the course of our acquaintance. Maybe she'd be too distracted by the...*issue* to bring it up

tonight, though.

"You're sure this is a good idea?" Cassie asked.

I smiled at her over the car roof. "No."

She scooped a handful of snow off the hood and threw it at me.

"Not now, sweetheart. We're going to be late."

I'd just bent back over my task when a snowball clipped my shoulder. Cassie struck a mock-defiant pose, gloved hands on hips. "Dare you," she said.

"Don't be a fool. You can't win. And you'll just get your hair all wet."

She blew me a kiss and threw another snowball.

"I love you too, Cassie. Now come on and finish scraping your side so we can get—"

A snowball exploded on my chest, scattering down my coat and inside my sweater. Swearing at the shock of the cold, I danced around a little.

"Don't make me cluck at you, honey," she said.

That meant war. In a matter of minutes, Cassie's BMW was all cleared off—we'd thrown all the snow at each other—and we were going down the parking lot, scooping ammo off other people's cars. We called a truce only when I happened to look at my watch and realized that we were already fifteen minutes late.

Back in the room, we quickly changed clothes. Then, while Cassie dried her hair, I called the house. To my relief, Dad answered.

"Hi, Dad. It's me. We're running behind. Why don't you go ahead and start without—" I broke off, realizing that I was talking to nobody; he'd put his hand over the mouthpiece and was talking to someone in the background. "Dad? You there?"

"Sorry, Devlin. Your mother's a little upset. You know how she gets. Where are you?"

"At the hotel. We'll be leaving in a couple of minutes. But go ahead and start dinner without us. OK?"

He put his hand over the mouthpiece again and relayed that information. Impatiently, I waited for him to come back. "Devlin?"

"Still here."

"Your mother wants to know if you're going to behave yourself tonight." He dropped his voice confidentially. "That's not quite how *I* would have put it, but—"

"Dad?"

"Yes?"

"Would you give Mom a message from me?"

"Of course. What message?"

I slammed the phone down again.

At the mirror, Cassie frowned and switched off the hair dryer for a second. "What now?"

"If you've got any asbestos underwear," I growled, "wear it. This is going to be a hell of a night."

Chapter Twenty-Four

The cul-de-sac was pitch dark when we got there—no lights in any of the houses and no streetlights either. That was odd. We hadn't had *that* much snow, and it wasn't even the heavy kind that knocked down power lines.

"Wonder when that happened," Cassie remarked. "I didn't notice any power outages on the way over, did you?"

"No." Warily, I studied the house. "Park away from it, Cass."

"What are you talking about?"

"The house. Something's not right. Just to be safe, let's park on the street."

She hit the brakes, making the BMW skid slightly. "Would you mind not talking like that? I'm already nervous."

"Sorry, sweetheart."

Not entirely reassured, she pulled up to the curb a few houses away—very close to the plowed-off snow, which was piled up to nearly the door handles. I had some trouble getting out but didn't mention it. Better to save my fire for a battle that mattered.

We walked toward the house in silence except for the crunch of our footsteps on the snowy street. The closer we got, the more apprehensive I got. There was just enough moonlight to show the Christmas decorations on the neighbors' houses—decorations that on this dead, dark cul-de-sac had the effect of wreaths on a tomb.

Cassie touched my coat sleeve. "Look. Full moon."

We stopped to admire it, our breath misting up around us in the frozen night. The moon was half-shrouded in haze, which meant more snow later. But it was a thing of ghostly beauty now.

"You know what they say about full moons," I said. "The inmates take over the asylums, and all the dogs go mad."

She reached into my coat pocket to squeeze my hand. "You're such a comfort, pookie."

"Just telling you what I hear."

Still holding onto my hand, she gave me a little tug to start us walking again. We passed the Hills' house, where the kids had built a crude snowman in the front yard; as we drew even with it, the head fell off, hitting the ground with a thump and rolling toward us. Startled, I kicked the thing away.

Cassie didn't say anything, but she moved a little closer.

As we reached the end of my parents' driveway, the black bulk in it resolved itself into a Cadillac parked at a weird angle. In fact, it had been driven in at a weird angle, judging by the tire tracks across the neighbors' yard. Uncle Edgar couldn't drive worth a damn. It was one of the many things Mom had against him.

Truth be told, I didn't like him either—much less Aunt Kitty. And they were both inside right now, waiting for us like spiders.

Not cheered by this train of thought, I led Cassie up the drive. We were close enough now to notice a dim, shifting glow in the windows, which had to be candlelight. I wished we'd thought to bring the flashlight from the car, but we could

always go back for it. Besides, there had to be a flashlight in that barge of Uncle Edgar's. You couldn't have a car that big and not have something in it.

I'd just touched the doorknob when the doorbell caught my attention. The electricity was out, but the button was glowing. That didn't make sense. As I watched, the light began to change shape, forming into something like a human face—an old man in an old-fashioned nightcap, looking very much like...

"Stop that!" I shouted.

The face vanished and the doorbell reappeared, dark this time.

"Did I just see what I thought I just saw?" Cassie asked.

"That depends," I said cautiously. "What do you think you just saw?"

She thought about it briefly, then exhaled in frustration, sending up a huge plume of steam. "Forget it. It's too stupid."

"Then you saw it. Monica's making a little Dickens joke."

"Not a very good one." She touched the doorbell tentatively. "If we were in a movie, you know, this would be the part where the audience would tell us to run."

"But if we did, there wouldn't be a movie, would there?"

Cassie laughed. "Let's get this over with, then. I've got plans for after the show."

They were in the kitchen, drinking wine—the screw-top stuff Aunt Kitty liked, so sweet you could pour it on waffles—and they were all very civil when we walked in. But it was a chilly kind of civility, a kind I knew only too well. They'd been talking about us, and they were hacked that we'd showed up and ruined their fun.

Well, we wouldn't stay long. I didn't want to ruin *our* fun, either.

Politely, I walked Cassie over to my aunt and uncle. They blinked at her, froglike, while I introduced her. Not for the first time, I wished I had presentable relatives. By candlelight especially, their features were grotesque; they might have crawled out of drains in the middle of the night. On top of that, Uncle Edgar still wore that godawful vulgar gold chain. It was like being related to down-home Mafiosi.

"So," Aunt Kitty said. "You're Candy."

Mom shook her head. "Carrie."

"*Cassie*," I growled.

Cassie smiled sweetly. "Whatever's easiest for you."

"And you're a friend of my niece," Aunt Kitty said.

"A very good friend," Cassie confirmed.

Across the room, Connor snickered. Ryan and Jen both poked him hard, but I got the impression it was just for show.

Aunt Kitty frowned at him over her glasses. "What's funny?"

"Nothing," I assured her. "Connor's a jerk. You know that."

"You're all jerks," she said. "Now give me a kiss."

Cassie, expecting the worst, held her breath. But I simply did as I was told—resentfully and with only one lip, but without argument. Aunt Kitty was even worse than Mom when she wasn't happy, which was almost always.

Dad jumped in before the situation could deteriorate any further. "So now we're all here. Glad you two made it. We don't know about dinner—"

"It was almost ready when the power went out," Mom snapped.

"No one said it was your fault," he soothed her. "I'm just saying we don't know when we'll have dinner."

She refused to be soothed. "As soon as the power comes back on, *that's* when."

Everyone shifted uneasily except Aunt Kitty, who was already deep in the grape, and Uncle Edgar, who hadn't actually participated in conversation since 1971. I glanced over at Ryan; he mouthed the word "Help."

Well, what was I supposed to do? We all knew how this went. Mom didn't like her sister, who didn't like her back, but neither of them would admit it, so these little gatherings made everyone crazy. There was nothing to do but endure until Kitty got on her broomstick and left.

Correctly interpreting the unhelpful look I gave Ryan, Jen tried her luck at damage control. "I don't think we're going to starve with all this food around. Dev, Cassie, come try this cheese ball. It's fantastic."

"It's a heart attack on crackers," Aunt Kitty countered.

I gave her what may have looked like a smile. "Do let me get you some."

Cassie jabbed me.

"Killjoy," I muttered. "Come on. Let's have some anyway."

We were about halfway across the kitchen when Cassie tripped over something and grabbed my arm for balance. As she did, the lights came back on, and we all saw what she'd tripped over:

A big black anaconda.

No one moved. Not a muscle. Even Cassie, who liked snakes about as much as she liked mice, which was not at all, was riveted to the spot.

"Oh, there you are, Milton," Mom said.

Two more beats of silence—and then everyone else jumped up on furniture. It took a few extra seconds for what she'd said to register.

"M-M-M-Milton?" Amy quavered.

Mom, insultingly calm, spread braunschweiger on a cracker. "He was a science project. Got away from one of my students last year when he was a baby. He must've come home with me in my briefcase....Here, Milton. Have some braunschweiger."

Many conflicting ideas crashed in my brain, which was in serious danger of exploding. It was a real snake. My mother knew it. My mother was feeding it braunschweiger. But worst of all...

"Milton?" I demanded, as soon as my voice worked. "Milton? What evil, twisted sonuvabitch would name a snake *Milton*?"

"Watch your language," Mom said, fixing another cracker.

"And why would *you* have a runaway science project? You teach English."

She ignored me, crooning something to the snake, which was swaying expectantly on the linoleum.

Cassie's reflexes finally kicked back in. She'd jumped on the same chair as me, largely because she'd never let go of my arm, and she released her grip slightly now, but not enough to give me full use of my circulation.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She drew a ragged breath. "I don't know anymore. It's been so long since

anything was normal.”

There was nothing to do but laugh. After a second, she did too. Then my brothers and their wives joined in, and even Dad cracked a smile.

“I don’t see anything funny,” Mom complained.

Dad was still smiling. “Never mind, Martha. Boys, get down here and help me with this snake.”

They didn’t move. “You said ‘boys,’” Connor explained. “We’re men.”

“Manly men,” Ryan agreed.

“Doing manly things,” Connor added.

Dad’s patience ran out. “*Now.*”

Grumbling, they climbed down and took up battle positions. There was a long, complicated argument about tactics, but they finally agreed on herding the snake into a packing box. That led to an argument about whether a person could actually herd a snake and, if so, whether that would make them snakeboys or snakemen.

The snake settled the argument by slithering behind the refrigerator.

Mom got up and dusted her hands off briskly. “Don’t worry. He’ll turn up again. Let’s eat.”

We had chicken for dinner (“Tastes just like snake,” Connor declared), and I don’t think I chewed a bite. Cassie, sitting as close to me as humanly possible, bolted hers, too. She was worried about the big reptile loose on the premises; I was more worried about the smaller ones.

Aunt Kitty especially. She’d had four glasses of wine, which was three past her tolerance, and she’d been watching Cassie and me all through dinner as though we might try to steal the silverware. I tried staring back at her, but the woman was shameless.

Finally, Mom brought out the coffee and the rum cake. It was almost over. Uncle Edgar would light one of those two-bit cigars and use his dessert plate as an ashtray, which would give us two disgusting excuses to leave.

“We can go in a few minutes,” I whispered to Cassie. “You OK?”

She nodded. “Just.”

“Hang in there. The worst is—”

“What are you two whispering about?” Mom asked sharply. “Is there something you’d like to share with the rest of us?”

My mother, the terror of the classroom. Wishing she would learn, just once, to give it a rest, I scowled at her.

“Kids today,” Aunt Kitty remarked.

Ryan cleared his throat. “We’re not really kids, Aunt Kitty. I can’t speak for Dev, but Connor and I are snakemen, with all the honors and privileges appurtenant thereto, and I think—”

“Don’t talk back to your aunt,” Uncle Edgar warned.

Connor, Ryan and I gaped at him in astonishment. That was the most the man had talked in years.

“They have terrible manners,” Aunt Kitty complained to Mom. “Especially

Devlin. This is *your* fault for letting her go into advertising.”

“Hey!” I objected.

“She’s not in it anymore,” Mom said. “They fired her a couple of weeks ago.”

Aunt Kitty frowned. “Because of that girl, I bet.”

The only sound in the dining room was the clatter of silver on china as everyone dropped their forks.

“No offense, Candy,” she added, “but this isn’t Los Angeles. Hey, do you two know Ellen?”

Cassie, finally maxed out, started laughing hysterically. But I was not amused, and I pushed my chair back with serious intent.

“Sit down,” Mom ordered. “Don’t pay any attention. Kitty’s had too much to drink.”

“She always does, Mother. She’s an alcoholic.”

Both Mom and Aunt Kitty froze—the latter in the act of raising a glass to her lips.

I bent down to whisper to Cassie. “Go get our coats. I’ll be right out.” Then, to the others, “If we’re going to hang out the dirty laundry, let’s empty the hamper, shall we?”

Furious, Mom started to argue back, but Dad cut her off. “She was insulted, Martha. Let her have her say.”

“You always stick up for her,” Mom spat.

He didn’t back down. “Because you never do.”

Cassie had been halfway out of the dining room and stopped to hear the rest. But Jen and Amy got up in a flash to get her out of the line of fire. “It’s only safe in there for Kerrys right now,” I heard Amy explain.

Wrong. It was safe for no one. Coolly, I grabbed Aunt Kitty’s wineglass and poured what little was left on the centerpiece, which had a lighted candle in the middle.

Mom interrupted her argument for a second. “What are you doing?”

“Burning down the house,” I explained, tipping over the candle.

The centerpiece caught fire in spectacular fashion. Cheap wine was good for that, if nothing else. I watched it burn for a second, watched them argue about how to put it out and then left the room.

On the way out, I saw the snake. It saw me, too, and its eyes glittered ruby-red.

Chapter Twenty-Five

December 24

Contrary to popular opinion, I am not a monster. The first thing I did the next morning was buy my mother a new tablecloth and centerpiece. Not being a fool either, I left them on the doorstep, rang the bell and ran.

Cassie, enjoying this outlaw moment too much, gunned the motor as soon as I jumped in and then took off in a horrible fishtailing, snow-spraying screech. It reminded me of Vanessa doing doughnuts in the J/J/G parking lot. Did she get it from Cassie, or was it the other way around?

"So much for sneaking in and sneaking out," I grumbled, yanking my sunglasses off. It had been her idea for us to wear them, even though there wasn't a hint of sun.

"We got away, didn't we?"

"We aren't away yet. We still have to go back tomorrow."

"We'll worry about that tomorrow," she said serenely. "Right now, let's just have a nice day avoiding your family, OK?"

There was no avoiding those people, not really, not in a town this size. But there was no point worrying her.

Yet.

I took her to lunch at the second-best restaurant in town, the best being booked solid, and we got in at this one only because I knew the owner. True, we didn't like each other; she'd been a cheerleader in high school. But she'd also been one of Mom's students and was still afraid of her, so we got a very good table.

"This is kind of a cute place," Cassie remarked. "What would you call it? Country French?"

More like Alimony French; I'd heard that Debra got a bundle in the second divorce. "Something like that."

"I might redo the kitchen like this. Would you like to have breakfast every morning with calico chickens?"

"No."

She shrugged. "Well, we could lose the chickens."

"Don't let me stop you. It's your house."

"I was talking about your condo."

I looked up from the menu in surprise. "What would I want chickens in my kitchen for?"

"They'd be cute. They'd be decorative. Your place is so...*earthtone*. A little color would cheer it up."

"I don't want it cheered up. Especially not in the morning."

She made a show of studying her fingernails. For an awful moment, I thought she was going to start filing them. "Fine. Then I'll redo my kitchen and your bedroom."

I was rapidly losing track of this conversation. "You want to redo my bedroom?"

“No—I *want* you to move in with me. But if you’re going to keep being stubborn, I think you should let me redecorate something.”

“Why is that fair?”

“I don’t know that it is,” she admitted. “But it would be a nice Christmas present from you to me.”

Unnerved, I considered the implications. I’d already gotten her a nice Christmas present. Several of them, actually; Visa would probably send a thank-you note with my next statement. But this wasn’t about Christmas. It wasn’t about interior decoration, either. It was about—

“Ah. There you are.”

We both jumped a little. Vanessa was pulling up a chair, looking very much at home. She was, in fact, wearing the same dress that the owner of the restaurant had on.

“Can anyone see you?” I whispered.

The demon flipped her hair. “You’re kidding, right? I didn’t get this cute just so nobody could see me.”

All right; whatever. If Debra came out to check on us later, I’d let *her* deal with it.

“Go away,” Cassie told her. “Devvy and I are talking.”

“And you’re losing,” Vanessa replied, getting comfy. “Didn’t you ever learn anything about redirection? You don’t just *tell* them what you want; you weasel around it. If they don’t think it’s their idea—”

“I’m not a them,” I growled.

“—they won’t do it. You know how they are.”

“I’m not a guy!”

“No one said you were, pumpkin,” Vanessa purred. “Now, what’s good here? I could go for eels or snails or something.”

We both stared at her, disgusted.

“What’s the problem? This is a French joint, isn’t it?”

“This is Hawthorne,” I explained.

A dark Presence loomed over my shoulder. “I’ll give her eels.”

Damn. *Damn*. Without even looking at her, I reached over and pulled out the last empty chair.

Monica took it with exaggerated grace. “I can give her sautéed rat, if I really want to. But it’s Christmas. I’ll be nice.” She shot a bad look at Cassie, who gave it right back. “Hello, Cassandra. You’re looking lifelike.”

“So are you,” she said insincerely. “The implants are holding up really well, don’t you think, Devvy?”

I didn’t think. If all went well, I would never have to think again. In grim silence, I studied the menu.

“For the record,” Cassie continued, addressing the demons, “this is a private lunch. You two weren’t invited. So you should go now. We really wouldn’t want to have to ask the owner to throw you out.”

Monica laughed scornfully. “Did you meet her?”

“No. Why?”

“She’s a Junior Leaguer. She wouldn’t do anything that might break a nail. Including sex. Ask her ex-husbands.”

She hadn't bothered to lower her voice, of course, and a few titters broke out among our fellow diners. Mortified, I made a don't-mind-her-she's-crazy gesture to the area at large and then turned on my demon. "Keep it down. This is a public place."

"Would keeping it down make it any less true?" She raised her voice slightly. "Would you rather I discuss *your* sex life?"

Cassie and I answered together: "NO!!"

"Humans," she sniffed. "You act like sex is a life-and-death secret, but you all do it. Or want to. Even your parents, Devlin. Did you know that?"

Yes, I knew that technically. Connor, Ryan and I had worked it out years ago: Mom and Dad had Done It three times. But it wasn't something a person liked to think about.

At all. *Ever*.

Seeing my expression, Monica smiled evilly. "Do you know what a prude is? A prude is someone who's ashamed of having been born naked in bed with a woman."

The titters turned to open laughter. Even Cassie started to smile. To her credit, she caught herself and reached over to pat my knee reassuringly.

I wasn't reassured. "What do you want, Monica? Aren't you supposed to be slithering around my parents' house?"

Cassie still had her hand on my knee, and her grip tightened at that. "What?"

"That wasn't a runaway snake last night. Or in the shower. That was *her*."

"It might have been," Monica said airily. "It might not have been. There really *is* a Milton. There might be two snakes around at any given time, just for fun. But your mother's a head case. You know that, too, don't you?"

Our waitress showed up at that moment, and I could have kissed her for it. Cassie would have ripped my lips off, though. So I settled for smiling.

"Do you have sautéed rat?" I asked.

The girl blinked, uncertain. "Sautéed what?"

"Never mind. We'll start with a bottle of your best champagne. And one of *them* gets the bill." I gestured between Monica and Vanessa. "I don't care which one. Whichever annoys you more."

"But they haven't—"

"They will," I assured her. "Don't worry; I'll make up for it in your tip."

The demons just sat there demurely, looking as harmless as Easter eggs. *Brother*, I thought.

We made it all the way to dessert before the trouble started. I suppose that was some kind of record, considering the personnel. But trashing the restaurant, on Christmas Eve day...

Well, it didn't look good.

Monica started it. Debra had flounced out to see how I was doing, not that she cared, and we'd both been excruciatingly polite. She'd even pretended not to notice that Vanessa had the same dress on. (In perfect truth, it looked better on Vanessa.) She was just leaving when Monica decided to have some fun.

"You knew Devlin in high school, did you?" she asked Debra, all deceptive innocence.

The woman faked a big fat smile. "Not *well*, but yes, I did."

"Not well? Does that mean you didn't sleep with her?"

Cassie almost snorted coffee. I looked around for a trap door in the floor.

"Of *course* not," Debra said, offended. "I had boyfriends."

"So did your boyfriends," Vanessa piped up.

Monica scowled at her. "Keep out of this. I'm working here."

"Oh, working, hell; you're just trying to guilt Devlin out. *Again*." Cassie's demon tossed her head. "So she wanted to sleep with that little bitchkitty in high school. So what? She's got better taste now."

Everyone looked at me—everyone at my table and at every other table within earshot. The people at the next table actually moved their chairs closer. I tried to look outraged, but it was too hard to be outraged and guilty at the same time.

"You *didn't*," Cassie informed me. "You *told* me—"

"Of course I didn't!"

"I'll say," Debra barked. "Just so you know, Devlin Kerry, I'd sooner sleep with a goat."

A *goat*? I shoved my chair back. *Now* I was outraged.

"What kind of goat?" Vanessa asked, interested.

Debra and I were both standing now, glaring at each other. We ignored the question.

"Don't flatter yourself," I told Debra. "*I'd* sleep with a cow first."

"No cow is that hard up," she shot back.

The room found that cute. Cassie did not. She jumped to her feet and to my side, menacing the woman with her worst expression.

But Vanessa just looked petulant. "What kind of cow? I need details."

"I think you should leave," Debra said icily. "And take your...friends with you. What cathouse did you find them in, anyway?"

Cassie slapped her face so hard that one of her earrings flew off. *Attagirl*. I didn't get a chance to congratulate her, though; Debra was trying to slap her back, and I was having a devil of a time keeping between them.

"You get your hands off," Debra snarled at me. "You're not going to cop a feel this way."

Was she crazy? Even if I'd wanted to, even if Cassie wouldn't have killed me for it, I wouldn't have done it in front of an audience. The whole restaurant was paying rapt attention now; even the staff had stopped work to goggle at the spectacle. A couple of the cooks were standing in the kitchen doorway, wiping their hands. I recognized one of them, and vice versa; he waved at me. Great. Our mothers were in a few clubs together, which meant this would be the talk of the town for months.

Then everything went completely to hell. Before I could stop her, Debra dodged around me, grabbed Monica's dessert and smashed it into Cassie's face.

That would really irritate Cassie; she didn't like meringue. Without thinking about the consequences, I straight-armed Debra into the table behind her. It collapsed with a crash as I turned to help Cassie.

The next thing I knew, the very air was alive with flying things—food, tableware, even wine bottles whizzing in all directions. It wasn't even us; the other

patrons had snapped. Cassie and I watched, appalled, as they brawled like beasts. What *was* it with us that this sort of thing kept happening when we were around?

Check that—I knew exactly what it was with us. We had demons. The demons in question were still sitting at our table, looking bored now. Good. I’d meant it about giving them the check.

“Let’s get out of here,” I told Cassie.

“Right behind you, sweetie.”

At the door, she told me to hold up while she dug in her purse for her sunglasses. Reluctantly, I put mine on, too.

“They already know who we are,” I reminded her.

“That’s not the point. The point is looking dignified.” Frowning slightly, she pulled her sunglasses down to study me. “You have mashed potatoes in your hair.”

With all the dignity possible under the circumstances, I opened the door and let her out.

Back at the hotel an hour later, showered and wrapped up in robes, we were lounging on one of the beds, watching an *It’s a Wonderful Life* marathon on cable. It was the first peaceful moment we’d had all day.

So of course the phone rang.

Cassie muttered something about red-hot axes but snuggled closer. I reached over to answer. “Hello?”

“Hi, Dev. It’s Jen. What’s up?”

She didn’t really want to know. “Nothing. We’re watching *It’s a Wonderful Life*. What’s up with you?”

“Nothing.”

The conversation stopped at that point. What now?

“Jimmy Stewart just called Lionel Barrymore a scurvy spider,” I reported. “Lionel Barrymore doesn’t seem to be impressed. So he’s—”

“Your mom says thanks for the tablecloth and the centerpiece.”

“Does she, now? Hang on.” I put my hand over the receiver and turned to Cassie. “Mom says thanks for the stuff. Not herself personally, but through Jen. What do you think?”

“I think your mother is a scurvy spider,” she said.

I kissed the top of her head and got back on the phone. “Tell her she’s welcome. What does she really want?”

Jen started laughing. “I hate this family; you’re all so *smart*. She wants to know if you’re going to church tonight.”

I told her to wait again.

“What kind of service is it?” Cassie asked.

“Candlelight service. Nothing religious; we’re Methodists.”

She sighed. “I guess it can’t hurt. Can it?”

“Probably not,” I told her. “What else could happen?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Christmas Eve

We were in trouble from the minute we walked into church that night. There were many things wrong with the situation, but the wrongest was that the place was full of people who'd known me when I was little. Nice people. Well-meaning people. People who wouldn't know a clue if it dropped out of the sky on their heads. Before we'd made it past the first gauntlet of welcome-home hugs and kisses in the narthex, Cassie was having big trouble not rolling on the carpet laughing.

"It's not funny," I muttered.

She gave me her sweetest smile. "Of course it is."

"Don't let them fool you. They only look friendly. If they knew *anything*, they'd stone me."

"Not while I'm around, honey."

Abruptly, I pulled her off to one side—as much privacy as I could manage in that crowd. "Don't call me 'honey.' Not here."

"What's wrong? Don't you love me anymore?" Wicked blue lights started dancing in her eyes. "Does this mean I have to fall asleep empty and unfulfilled tonight?"

I grabbed her coat lapel viciously. Then, politely, I started shoving churchgoers out of the way so I could drag her outside. Cassie was laughing so hard that she didn't resist. Only when we got to the very back of the parking lot did I feel it was safe enough to talk.

"This is the last place on earth you can do that," I snapped. "I grew up going to this church. I learned everything I know about hellfire and damnation here. If you don't cut it out, God's going to smite me."

She turned serious, finally. "I don't much like your God, Devvy."

"I don't either. But you know what the Jesuits say about getting a kid before he's seven. These people got hold of me when I was born."

"And what did they teach you? That love is evil?"

I said it without thinking: "No. Just sex."

There was long, long silence in the parking lot. Then Cassie pulled me closer to the streetlight and studied my expression. Uncomfortable under the scrutiny, and freezing to death now that we were standing out in the open, I shifted from foot to foot a few times.

"Well, that explains the witch," she finally said.

Did it? Monica herself had suggested as much all those months ago when she'd told me what she was. But...

Never mind. There wasn't time for theology now; we were due in church.

"It's not that simple, Cass."

"You were little. It had to be simple." She sighed in exasperation, her breath white on the calm air. "So does this mean you think *I'm* evil?"

"No. You're just high-maintenance."

Surprised by that answer, she laughed.

"Very, very high-maintenance," I added.

"You can stop any time."

"But I wouldn't have you any other way." Before she could say anything to that, I kissed her. "I love you, no matter *how* evil you are."

"You too, pookie."

"Now will you behave yourself in there? For me?"

She pretended to consider. "For you?"

"You will if you love me."

"That is *so* not fair," she grumbled.

"I know. Believe me, I know." I kissed her again. "Ready?"

She shook her head but took my arm, and we headed back. Light snow was starting to fall, dusting the windshields of the parked cars; it made the brightly lighted church look more inviting. We passed the floodlighted Hawthorne United Methodist Church sign, built close to the ground per the zoning ordinances in that part of town, and as we did, Debra and her current family crossed our path like so many black cats.

Bad luck, all right. I'd meant to go back to the restaurant later to pay for lunch and/or damages, but Cassie had other ideas about how to spend the afternoon. So I'd never—

"Why, Devlin Kerry," Debra said with simulated pleasure. "I haven't seen *you* for a couple of years at least. How are you?"

A couple of years? I frowned. "Fine. You? Listen, about your restaurant..."

Her smile grew larger and phonier. "Oh, you've heard about it? Yes, I'm really enjoying it. It's doing really well. Do stop in while you're in town, won't you? I'll make sure you get free dessert."

Cassie and I glanced at each other warily. We'd *had* dessert at her restaurant just a few hours ago, and neither of *us* was likely to forget it as long as we lived.

"Maybe we will," I told Debra.

Her charity work complete, Debra turned sharply to go inside. She hadn't bothered to introduce her family to me or herself to Cassie, but somehow I felt no loss.

Cassie stared after her. "That was strange. Is she loony?"

"Probably." Privately, I suspected Vanessa was up to something, but it wasn't the time to discuss her. "C'mon. It's cold out here."

All the good pews in the back were full, so we had to sit way up front. That meant going down the center aisle in front of everyone, which meant more being recognized and more getting hugged. I hated it. We'd had a hard time even getting past the greeters, and although Cassie was trying hard not to laugh, she was having a fabulous time. I'd almost had to clock her when Mrs. Rose, who was passing out the candles, started talking about how well behaved I'd been in her Sunday school class.

"Selective memory," I insisted when we finally got away. "My friends and I used to throw spit wads in church."

She just smiled.

"How come *you* didn't have to go through this at Thanksgiving?"

"I'm not stupid, Devvy. I wasn't about to introduce you to any more people than I had to."

Smart. She was smart, all right. I was doomed with this one.

We passed another pew, and I felt the temperature drop sharply, as it does in the most haunted part of the house. Mom and Aunt Kitty were sitting there along with Dad, Connor and Jen, looking particularly unappeasable.

"Evening. What happened to Ryan and Amy?" I asked.

"They'll be along," Mom said curtly. Her glance swept up and down us both, clearly disapproving of our nice wool trousers.

"We didn't pack prom dresses," I explained. "Besides, it's 15 degrees out. Too cold for pantyhose."

She didn't respond except to cross her pantyhosed legs ostentatiously. Well, if she wanted to catch pneumonia, that was her business.

"You can sit here," Aunt Kitty said grudgingly. "There's probably room if we all move down."

With maximum effort, I smiled. "Wouldn't think of putting you to any trouble." Then I pulled Cassie down the aisle to an empty pew, Mom and Aunt Kitty glaring holes in the back of my head all the way.

"What do we do with these things?" Cassie asked, gesturing with her candle.

"This." I stuck mine into one of the holes in the pew back in front of us. They were, I dimly remembered, for the little cups of grape juice Methodists got at communion, but they were just candleholders to me now. She did the same. No sooner had we finished getting settled than Ryan and Amy shoved in.

"You're late," I said, feeling virtuous.

Ryan shrugged. "We were watching a movie. You going to move down and let us in, or what?"

"Depends. What movie?"

"*Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*."

"Move," I told Cassie.

We scooted down to give them room. Ryan climbed over both of us to sit on my right, and Amy sat on Cassie's left.

"It's probably not safe to let them sit together," Amy told her, "but it'll probably be more fun in the long run."

Cassie laughed. "I've known Devvy for six years. It's really hard to scare me."

"Happy to try," Ryan offered.

I was about to have back at him when the choir started filing in. I knew most of the members in one way or another—a friend's father, a local pharmacist, my junior high geography teacher—and was careful to smile. But the friend's father saw Ryan and me sitting together, and a dark look crossed his face.

"I bet he's remembering the Jesus Christmas," Ryan whispered in the sudden hush.

That almost caused me to lose it. A few Christmas Eves ago, for reasons known only to them, Connor and Ryan had started telling me Jesus jokes during the candlelight service, and they got so intolerable that I had to laugh out loud a few times.

Of course, sitting next to either of my brothers at this service was never a good idea. If "We Three Kings" was on the program, which it usually was, they always sang

the version about the rubber cigar. Then we'd all start doing commentary on the sermon, not always sotto voce, and at least one of us would have to leave the sanctuary to laugh.

This year, though, Cassie was with me. I wasn't going to subject her to showtime with the Kerry kids in the middle of church. Even though she might never have to come back to this town, I would, and I wasn't going to have people thinking badly of her for something that wasn't her fault. Let them think whatever they wanted about me, but not—

Something small, hard and wet hit me in the back of the head. Scowling, I turned around. Connor tried to look innocent, pretending to be fascinated by the poinsettia arrangement on the altar, but I wasn't fooled for a second. If he was going to start throwing spit wads, I was eventually going to revert and start throwing them back.

Closing my eyes, I repented most of my life to date. Somehow, I hadn't realized that bringing Cassie to this church would mean giving her a tour of my childhood—the moral equivalent of touring a swamp in a glass-bottom boat. By seventh grade, my friends and I were sneaking out during the sermons to steal Cokes out of the Coke machine in the basement. We'd started filling out the guest books with fake names. We'd even called the church office a few times to ask if their refrigerator was running. And on top of all that, I had these *brothers* to deal with. No wonder I had a demon.

Cassie nudged me. "What's wrong?"

Another spit wad whizzed through my hair; I got a hand up just in time to catch it. For answer, I showed it to her.

Where was Mom while he was being such a brat, anyway? I turned around again. She was deep in conversation with Aunt Kitty; they appeared to be gossiping about someone in the choir. Oh, well, she probably didn't even know why Connor was doing it, so it would be no fun making her mad about it. The reason was that when we were kids, we'd gone to Gatlinburg on vacation several times, and our favorite thing to do there was ride the chairlift up Crockett Mountain. It wasn't that we liked the ride so much; it was that at one point, the line went over a motel swimming pool, fairly low. Connor and I liked to spit on whoever was in the pool.

I repented that, too, as yet another spit wad hit me. *Verily, it is more blessed to give than to receive.*

"He's been practicing," Ryan observed. "Just proves he has no life. Let's make a bunch of wads and ambush him after church."

Amy leaned around Cassie to give him a stern look.

"Oh, c'mon, babe," he protested. "This is about honor."

She shook her head but sat back. It was just as well; the choir was about to sing. I glanced over them with little curiosity, more or less counting heads. One head in particular caught my attention.

I blinked, but it was no use; it was Vanessa, trying to look angelic in a choir robe. *That* was no use, too.

Alarmed, I leaned over to whisper to Cassie. "Third row, second from left."

"I saw," she whispered back. "Fourth row, far right."

Fourth row, far right, fourth row, far... Oh, hell.

Monica waited till our eyes met. Then she smiled just enough to show her fangs.

"Where do you want to be buried?" I asked Cassie.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

There is a French Christmas carol about the Devil. I'd always thought that concept was a little peculiar. But now there were demons in the choir on Christmas Eve, so why not?

Cassie was taking it fairly well, I thought; she looked as though she'd bitten into an apple and found half a spider but decided it was better than half a rat. "We'll get out of this," she whispered.

"In how many pieces?"

She didn't answer. Right—that was my guess, too.

All around us, oblivious to the impending doom, the congregation waited for the choir to get on with it. At the same time, the choir waited for the choir director. He was a real fossil, the oldest man on earth after Strom Thurmond, and you could see his hearing aids from the back row. Technically, a deaf choir director probably wasn't a good idea. But if I remembered this choir right, deafness might be an asset.

The director finally nodded to the organist. She hit the keyboard—and a flock of bats shot out of the pipes along with the chord.

Everything went straight downhill from there. No sooner had the bats left (yes, through the belfry) than an altar cloth caught fire. And no sooner was the fire out than one of the decorative angels fell on an old lady, totaling both her hat and her good will to man. By the time Rev. Pritchard restarted the service for the third time, he was sweating visibly.

I glanced at Cassie, who had been speechless since the bats and hadn't let go of my arm either. "It's usually not like this," I assured her.

She let out a long-held breath. "It's *never* like this at Episcopalian services."

"So you're not having fun?"

"I didn't say that."

No, but she would. Resigned, I checked over my shoulder to see how my family was holding up. Ryan and Amy had moved back to sit with the rest of them after the fire, thinking it might be safer there. They were wrong, but at least the demons were gone; they'd disappeared during the confusion with the bats.

Meanwhile, the choir was at it again. It was impossible to tell what the song was or what key it was supposed to be in, but with these people, there never *was* any telling.

"Just out of curiosity," Cassie asked, "what are they singing?"

I checked the program, which listed some obscure number from the Methodist hymnal. "No one ever knows. It's not really singing. It's performance art."

She snorted.

"No, seriously. It's like folk art that way. Did I ever tell you about the folk art show I went to once? There was a painting with a big rooster on it, and the caption was JIM BOB, THE MIND-READING CHICKEN. HE KNOWS WHAT YOU ARE THINKING."

Cassie lost it, laughing out loud. The choir was making such a ruckus, I figured

no one could hear her or blame me. But seconds later, a wadded-up program hit me in the back of the head.

I refused to acknowledge it. Besides, Rev. Pritchard was staring right at me, not in a nice way.

“Judgmental creepazoid, isn’t he?” Vanessa asked, materializing on Cassie’s left.

We both flinched a bit. She wasn’t wearing the choir robe anymore and was dressed conservatively, for her, but she still looked spectacularly out of place.

“Relax. This crowd can’t see demons. Not enough imagination.” The demon yawned. “This is boring. What if I set something on fire?”

“Again?” I asked sharply.

“Oh, tosh. That was Monica. Don’t worry—she’s not here right now. She said something about going downstairs to steal Cokes out of the Coke machine.”

Cassie, puzzled, waited for me to explain. But I folded my arms and stared at the altar in grim silence.

“So what about this Jim Bob?” Vanessa asked. “Is he a real chicken or just something you smoked?”

“Something I smoked? C’mon, I haven’t touched that stuff for—”

“In the church parking lot,” she prompted.

Oh. *That* time. Well, it *had* been that many years, hadn’t it?

Vanessa nudged Cassie. “She was kind of bad when she finally started rebelling. Kind of wussy bad, though. Not the real thing, or we wouldn’t be here tonight.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cassie asked, impatient.

“Quiet,” I warned. “We’re in church.”

Both my beloved and her demon glared at me.

“Well, we are.”

They continued to glare until Vanessa leaned in to whisper to her. I didn’t want to know. So I concentrated on the music, or whatever that noise was, until something settled in on my right.

Monica didn’t say a word. She just handed me a stolen Coke.

Nothing blew up, caught fire or collapsed for the next half hour or so, which let us sink into the torpor common to these occasions. Even the demons were quiet. Connor had thrown another spit wad, but Monica had deflected it, and it might not have been her fault that it hit the minister. The wad had stuck to his forehead, where you couldn’t miss it if you were far enough up front; it was distracting but not distracting enough to mention.

Otherwise, the only thing that kept most of us conscious by that time was having to stand up and sing every so often. Vanessa, I noticed, sang like a squeaky gate.

Finally, Rev. Pritchard got up to deliver the sermon. What with all the delays early on, it was getting late—almost midnight, by my watch—and children were getting restless. A few pews over, there was increasingly loud conversation about needing to get home and go to sleep *now* so Santa would come.

With perverse pleasure, I listened to that for a while and then checked the program to see what the sermon was about; it was easier than actually paying

attention. I found the title, frowned and checked again. It still read:

THE SERMON

Dr. Pritchard

"Yes, Virginia, there is a baby Jesus."

Cassie leaned on my shoulder. "Something wrong?"

I pointed at the offending text. She closed her eyes briefly and then slipped a hand into my jacket pocket for comfort. After a second, I joined her.

"That breaks one commandment or another," Monica remarked.

It probably broke several, but it still wasn't as bad as being a demon. So I ignored her. Cassie squeezed my hand in approval.

Monica narrowed her eyes to glittering red slits but said nothing. Relieved, I sat back again, lacing my fingers with Cassie's and half-listening to whatever the minister was saying. This wasn't so bad. Nobody could see anything. Who would know?

Then I happened to glance at the choir. They were all looking at us reproachfully. So, when I checked the pulpit, was Rev. Pritchard.

Well, sue me. Mary Beth Miller had gone all the way with her boyfriend in the balcony when we were in high school, and nobody said anything to *her*.

Vanessa, looking very much as though she'd just read my mind, leaned past Cassie to smirk at Monica. My demon scowled at her and then faced the altar again.

A half-second later, the lights went out.

"Goddammit," someone groaned.

Most of the house laughed in sympathy. We weren't in any danger this time, we already had candlelight, and we were getting used to the curse on this service. But Rev. Pritchard was not in a forgiving temper. "I see that we're still having problems," he announced. "I apologize again. Whoever is responsible, we will find them, and we will punish them. Now, if you'll just bear with us a few more minutes, we're almost done here, and then—"

He never finished the sentence, because then the bats came back. And that finally did it. The congregation snapped. People stampeded for the back of the sanctuary, which started to look like one of those tragic nightclub accidents. One little old lady was smacking people with her purse to clear an escape path; another was flailing them with a cane.

"Please," Rev. Pritchard said helplessly into the microphone, which was still working. "Please don't hit each other. It's Christmas Eve."

A bat swooped into his robes at that point, which finally broke him. The last anyone saw of the right rev that night was the soles of his shoes, following him through a stained-glass window. *That* was going to come out of the collection plate every week for a couple of years.

"That was fun," Vanessa told Monica. "It didn't work, but it was fun."

My demon huffed and puffed a bit. "What do you mean it didn't work? I trashed the service, didn't I?"

Vanessa nodded in our direction. "They're still holding hands."

What with one thing and another, I'd lost track of that fact. But yes, we were. There being no point in concealment now, I pulled both our hands out of my pocket.

"You might be a little more than you look like," Monica told Cassie, very grudgingly. "Either that or insane. Any normal woman would've dropped Devlin ages ago. Or at least when the bats came."

I bristled a little, but Cassie spoke first. "I *am* normal, and I'm not afraid of bats anymore. Not after that mother of hers."

Monica did her best not to laugh, but her lips twitched suspiciously.

"Come on, girlfriend," Vanessa told her. "The night's still young. Let's go debauch a priest or something. What do you say?"

She thought for a second. "All right. But I get the wishbone."

Cassie and I watched in shocked silence as she vanished in a pillar of flame.

"She's just teasing you about the wishbone," Vanessa said. Then she frowned a little. "I think. I'd better go see. Merry Christmas."

With that, she herself went up in flame, and it was just us. Well, us and the bats.

"What do you want to do now?" I asked.

"What do you usually do now?"

"*Usually*, I go home now and watch really bad movies with my brothers. But you're more fun than my brothers. A lot prettier, too."

Cassie smiled. "Thanks, sweetie, but I don't think they want to be pretty."

"No danger of that. So what now? Do you want to go back to the hotel? Drive around and look at Christmas lights? What?"

"I'm probably crazy," she said, "but let's go to the house for a little while."

"You're probably crazy," I agreed.

"Just for a few minutes. It's Christmas Eve. OK?"

"What if the snake's there?"

"Let it eat braunschweiger," she declared.

I couldn't help it; I had to kiss her for that. Let God strike me dead.

But I checked first to make sure we were really alone.

We drove around for a while before we went to the house. By that time, everyone had gone to bed except Connor and Ryan—which had been my plan, of course.

"So," Connor said as we settled in. "What was *your* favorite part? The bats? Or Mrs. Zender hitting her son-in-law with her cane?"

I shrugged. "Doesn't count. She's wanted to do that for years."

"He deserves it. His eyes are too close together."

The rest of us waited for an explanation.

"That's what Mom says, anyway. She says you can't trust a man whose eyes are too close together."

Ryan cocked his head in interest. "She does? I thought she said you can't trust a man who has tiny lips."

An image of Cassie's brother-in-law floated into my mind. Michael had tiny ones, all right.

"Well, you know what they say," Connor said happily. "Tiny lips, tiny shoes."

Cassie frowned. "That's not what they say."

"I know. I'm just being polite. They *really* say—"

"Stop being polite," I growled. "We have company."

Ryan coughed significantly. "I don't know about that, Dev."

"What do you mean, you don't know? None of us has many manners, but—"

"I mean," he said, "I don't know that she's really company. She might be sort of *family*. Wouldn't you say?"

Connor almost choked on his beer. "Not now, you ass."

"Well, when? It's not like—"

"I'm having a brandy," I announced in a tone that stopped all conversation.

"Cass? What can I get you?"

She said brandy would be perfect.

"Nobody says *one word* till I get back," I ordered.

They promised. But I heard whispering anyway.

We stayed through about half of some Godzilla movie and too much of the brandy. Connor and Ryan made some bad "Same bat-time, same bat-channel" jokes, and then we left to get a few hours' sleep. By fiat, Christmas started whenever Mom woke up, which was always too early.

Cassie was already yawning by the time we got back to the motel. There was something in my coat pocket that I'd been thinking about giving her that night, but it was late, we were both tired, and it could wait. Besides, my family was civilized; we opened presents Christmas morning, not Christmas Eve.

So I got into bed and flipped on the TV while I waited for her to come out of the bath. There was nothing on except *It's a Wonderful Life*—I was starting to suspect that it was the only thing on the air anywhere—but it was only for a few minutes.

I was almost asleep when Cassie came back, wearing her robe. Instead of getting into bed, she sat on the edge, smiling.

"What?" I asked.

"I have something for you."

"You do? Now?"

"Yes."

Damn. Well, all right; I could give her that present tonight. It would take a couple of minutes. Then we could finally get some sleep. "Don't go anywhere."

She didn't. I climbed out of bed and fished the package out of my coat pocket.

"Who first?" I asked.

"I think probably you."

Her smile when she said that was interesting—something I couldn't quite place. But I was tired, and I could analyze it tomorrow. "OK, then. Here." I handed her the present and got back into bed.

God, I hoped her sister had been right about this. If she wasn't, I was going to kill her. I was going to get on a plane first thing in the morning, take a taxi from the Kansas City airport and kill her as dead as—

"Oh, my God," Cassie said.

I looked over, uncertain. She was staring into the box as though she didn't recognize what was in it. "It's a ring," I said helpfully.

She didn't respond. She didn't even move. Was that good or bad?

"It's not *that* kind of ring," I added. "We're not doing that. And it's not like we've even been doing *this* that long. But Lucy said you might like...and I thought...and...well..." Suddenly, I felt about sixteen years old, without the first or faintest clue. I hadn't liked that feeling then; I *really* didn't like it now. "C'mon, Cass, say something."

She spoke so softly that I could barely hear her. "It's beautiful."

"You sure? Because you can exchange it if you don't like it or if it doesn't fit or—"

"I like it."

"It's a real sapphire." I was uncomfortably aware of my heart hammering. Had I really been that nervous? This was Cassie, not somebody I hadn't already been to Hell and back with. "I know you've already got too many bracelets, and I thought about earrings instead, but the setting in this ring is interesting, and...well, I just thought you might like it."

"I do."

Silence.

"So are you going to try it on?"

She looked at me for the first time since she'd opened the box. No, I didn't recognize that expression, not at all. But it changed my mind about going to sleep.

The ring fit. As for what she gave me...well, it wasn't in a package, exactly. And it turned out to be the best Christmas Eve of my life.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Christmas Day

The condemned arrived promptly at 10. It was too bad I'd quit smoking, because the cigarette and blindfold were starting to sound like good ideas.

"Cheer up," Cassie demanded as we walked up the drive. "It's Christmas."

"Exactly."

"Cranky. Why are you cranky after last night?"

"That was then. This is now."

She sighed. "We really have to work on the romance thing, honey."

I knew from hard experience to ignore remarks like that. Besides, if she wanted romance, she could go buy a cheesy paperback at the drugstore.

"Deevy?"

"Light of my life?"

"You're not fooling anyone, you know. You're sappier than I am."

I stopped walking. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, don't worry—I won't tell. But you *are*."

There she went, leaping to conclusions again. Just because I'd given her jewelry didn't make me sappy. Maybe she meant the poetry later. But that didn't prove anything either. A person ought to be able to get *some* use out of all those years of English lit.

"Are we going to go in and get this over with?" I asked in injured dignity. "Or are we going to stand out here and make false accusations all morning?"

Cassie just laughed and pulled me the rest of the way up the driveway.

We walked into a tableau out of Madame Tussaud's. They were all sitting around the living room like waxworks, not talking, not doing anything. For my family, that was beyond weird, and I didn't like it.

"Hello," I said experimentally.

Mom turned her head slightly and frowned. "Oh. It's you."

Who was she expecting? Reindeer? "Yes, it is. Good morning. Merry Christmas."

I couldn't quite hear her response, but it didn't sound festive. Oh, well, she'd probably just gotten up on the wrong side of the moat. So I tried again. "Where's Dad?"

"Out looking for you," she snapped.

God, give me patience this instant. "Well, he won't find us unless he's looking here. Why would he be doing that anyway?"

"You should have been here an hour ago. He thought something happened to you."

Cassie shook her head slightly in warning; I pretended not to notice. "Nobody said anything about a schedule. I told Connor and Ryan we'd be here by 10. And we were. Why didn't he just call the hotel?"

"He was worried."

Impatient, I speed-read the situation. My brothers weren't talking. Dad was out driving. Yup, Mom was on her horse. It was going to be one of those Christmases.

"Coffee," I said to no one in particular and went to the kitchen.

By the time Dad got back, everyone was more or less done sulking. It had taken several threats and a few blunt reminders that we had company, but I'd finally gotten them talking again. On Planet Kerry, this passed for progress.

So we sat down to open presents. Ryan played Santa, which he'd done every year since he was six, and we were teddibly, teddibly polite about it all. We took turns; we didn't rip the paper off like savages; we didn't even count packages first. That last part was for Cassie's benefit, though, because Connor, Ryan and I *always* counted first. One year, we'd also measured and weighed. But Mom had thrown a fit, so we rarely did that anymore, and only in private.

"Don't shake this one," Ryan told Connor as he handed him another package. "It's from Dev. It's probably ticking."

Cassie smiled at him. "Not that one. But be careful you don't cover the air holes. They get really mad when they can't breathe."

Very funny. My brothers actually thought so, however, so I let her get away with it. Anyway, it was just another of the toys that we always gave one another: laser guns, guns that launched little helicopters, little containers of goo and eyeballs. This one was a Magic 8 Ball. Connor had broken the one he got last year when it didn't give him the answer he wanted.

Cassie looked on, bemused. Mom had been decent enough to get her a couple of small things so that she'd have something to unwrap, but they were along the lines of berets, which she didn't wear. Neither of her daughters-in-law did either, but they got them every year anyway.

Never mind, though—Cass and I were going to have a private Christmas when we got home. I didn't know what might be in all those packages from her parents, but I knew for a fact that there were no berets in the ones from me.

"I love it," Connor said, displaying the 8 Ball for general admiration. "It's stunning. Just stunning. What is it? Does it come with directions?"

"Wise guy," I muttered.

He winked and sailed a small package across the room at me. Then he tossed an identical one to Cassie.

"Hey!" Ryan huffed. "I'm Santa around here."

"These aren't from Santa. They're from Jen and me."

Skeptical, I opened mine. Cassie watched a little apprehensively; the last thing from Connor and Jen had been one of those singing fish. Ryan had liked it, but then, Ryan was weird.

"What is this?" I asked Connor, staring at the plastic egg.

"Open it and see."

I pressed the latch, and the top popped up. Inside was a miniature ocean with plastic whales. "I see. But I still don't—"

"You have to open it all the way," Jen directed.

So I did. The little egg shuddered, and the scene came to life in my hand, the tiny whales swimming and the tiny waves churning. Totally against my will, I was enchanted.

Relieved, Cassie opened hers. She got a pond with little ducks, which was almost—but not quite—as cool as mine.

“I love this,” she told them. “Thank you. I’m going to take it to client meetings and play with it when I get bored. Which will be *all* the time.”

She started her toy again, and as she did, Mom leaned forward, suddenly alert.

“Something wrong?” I asked her.

“I don’t remember seeing Carrie wearing a ring yesterday.”

Cassie looked up from her ducks with a quizzical expression.

“Cassie,” I corrected wearily. “And she has lots of jewelry, Mom. She can’t wear all of it every day.”

It wasn’t a lie, exactly. I wasn’t even sure why I’d told it. But it was none of my mother’s business where the ring had come from, and if she pressed the issue, Cassie could simply lie and say—

“It was a Christmas present from Devvy,” Cassie said.

Hell and damnation. I mentally subtracted one of the packages under her tree back home.

Everyone else, of course, was all ears about this news. Amy jumped up to have a closer look, and only then did I realize which finger Cassie was wearing the ring on. It didn’t mean anything; it wasn’t a diamond; we weren’t doing that. But did she have to wear it on that finger, in front of my mother? Mom took the etiquette books so seriously that she probably didn’t wear white underwear after Labor Day, and she wasn’t going to care that people wore rings everywhere nowadays. Including some places I didn’t even want to think about.

“Let me see that,” Mom said brusquely, moving Amy aside.

Cassie patiently let Mom study the ring from all angles. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It looks expensive,” she said. “I thought you didn’t have a job anymore, Devlin.”

I scowled at her. “We’re appealing. We’ll be back to work any day now. And how is it your affair anyway?”

“You shouldn’t be giving such expensive gifts to a girlfriend. People will talk.”

Of course they would. Talk was the only thing most people of my acquaintance were good for. But it was none of their business either. “Well, she *is* my girlfriend.”

“That’s not funny.”

Cassie started to excuse herself, but I spiked her in place with a look. “You’re right, Mom; it’s not. Which part are you having the trouble with? ‘Girl’? Or ‘friend’?”

“You know very well what I mean, young lady. It’s—”

“Immoral?” Connor supplied.

Jen backhanded him hard in the stomach. Fortunately for him, he was getting a little paunchy, so it couldn’t have hurt much.

Mom frowned—not at the violence, but at the interruption. “Indecent.”

“Indecent,” I repeated. “I see. It’s indecent. Cass?”

“Devvy?”

“Will you answer a question? For my mother’s edification?”

“Shoot.”

“Are you wearing underwear right now?”

Ryan spat coffee several feet across the living room. For her part, Cassie was speechless.

“It’s a serious question,” I assured her. “My mother has really specific ideas about decency. When I was little, she said it wasn’t decent to go around without underwear, even if it *was* August.”

Cassie relaxed visibly. “That’s interesting. My mother said it wasn’t decent to say the word ‘underpants’ in front of company. So I don’t know if we should even be having this conversation.”

I didn’t try to hide the goofy smile. God, I adored her.

“But since you ask,” she added sweetly, “yes, I am. My very best underpants, because it’s Christmas.”

My brothers and sisters-in-law collapsed in snorting, hiccupping laughter. Dad looked as though he wanted to laugh too but didn’t want to pay the price his wife would charge him for it.

Satisfied, I turned back to Mom. “Does that clarify your thinking?”

“You get this from your father’s side of the family,” she said darkly.

Dad cleared his throat. “Now, Martha...”

“Stay out of this, Patrick.”

For a moment, we all thought he was going to stand up to her. It happened as often as once or twice a year. But the moment passed, and before anyone could stop him, Dad had grabbed his coat, hat and keys again.

No one spoke until the sound of the Oldsmobile’s motor faded in the distance. And when she did, she said exactly the wrong thing.

“I hope you’re happy now,” Mom growled. “You’ve ruined Christmas.”

Was that all it took nowadays? Exasperated, I turned to my brothers for help—and got none, which I would remember. “Me? This is *your* fault, Mother.”

She gave me a severe classroom stare over the rims of her glasses. “I don’t mean just you. I mean both of you. You and...Carrie.”

Jen and Amy knew a small-craft warning when they saw it; they jumped up and ran for their lives.

“Go there,” I warned her coldly, “and it will be the last place you go on this earth.”

Mom pulled her glasses down even farther. “It takes two to tango, Devlin.”

I don’t remember much about the next few minutes. Cassie told me later that it was the most methodical rampage she ever saw—supposedly I tore off the Christmas lights first, batting ornaments in all directions, and then shook the tree to knock off the rest of the decorations before I started swinging it around the living room like a mace. There was some property damage, but she said I was careful not to hit the TV. She said I was less careful not to hit Connor, who barely dived off the loveseat in time.

The next thing I do remember was standing in a snowdrift up to my knees, staring at a battered Douglas fir in the street, where I’d apparently thrown it. A few strings of tinsel left on it fluttered in the breeze.

I was bending over the tree, carefully taking off the last of the tinsel, when Cassie put a warm hand on my shoulder.

“I brought your coat,” she said. “Want to get out of here for a while?”

“You’re not mad at me?”

As soon as the question was out, I regretted having asked it. But her smile was worth my having sounded so stupid. “No, sweetie. I’m not mad. I’m proud of you.”

“Proud?”

“Mmmhmm.” She held up my coat, indicating that she would help me put it on. “Very proud.”

I thought about that while she smoothed my coat front. “But I really *did* ruin Christmas just now.”

“You think so? Well, I don’t know about that. I think you just gave your mother a great Christmas present.”

Not following, I blinked at her.

“She gets to tell all her friends about it,” she explained. “She’ll be the martyr of Hawthorne for a whole year.”

Damn. Cassie was right. “I love you,” I told her, meaning every syllable.

“I love you too, honey. Here. I saved your whales.”

I stuck the toy in my pocket and kissed her with feeling, right there in the street, in broad daylight.

“Devvy?” she murmured after a while.

“Hmmm?”

“I really *am* wearing my best underpants.”

She was crazy. She was absolutely perfect. “C’mon, wild thing. Let’s vote each other off this stupid island.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Christmas dinner was Hunan chicken at Happy Lucky Dragon, which might not have been the worst name for a Chinese restaurant but couldn't have been far from it. Under normal circumstances, I avoided restaurants with weird names, but nothing else was open. This time, Cassie and I were lucky dragons; the food wasn't bad, and the service was outstanding.

Granted, it should have been; we were the only customers. But the waiter didn't *have* to keep checking on us every few minutes. I watched him with suspicion, trying to decide what he was more interested in: Cassie, or her duck toy. She'd been playing with it all through dinner. Then she'd borrowed mine. By the fortune cookies, I was starting to worry.

"Are you ever going to give it back?" I asked, watching her watch the whales.

She didn't even look up. "No."

"So you admit it. You only like me for my stuff."

Still no response. But a stockinged foot slipped up my trouser leg under the table.

"Then I get to open all the fortune cookies," I said. "And I get to keep the fortune I like best."

Cassie finally put down the toy. She made unnecessarily sarcastic kissing noises at me, reached for a cookie and cracked it open. A look of evil triumph lit up her face. "Read it and weep, Devvy."

Scowling, I leaned across the table. The fortune said YOU WILL ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT THROUGH YOUR GRACE AND CHARM.

"Read it out loud," she requested. "I want to hear you say it. Don't forget to add 'in bed' at the end."

"Oh, all right, just *keep* the whales," I grumbled.

Cassie laughed. In the next instant, the waiter was back at her elbow, refilling her teacup from the pot that had been sitting right in front of her all along.

"With all due respect to the little blonde lotus flower," I told him, "her arm's not in a sling. She can probably manage a teapot."

The foot that was still up my trouser leg gave me a kick. But its owner was smirking, and the waiter seemed not to understand anyway. He nodded at me, beamed at her, and left us again. Cassie's smirk got a little bigger.

"You love when this happens," I accused. "You do it on purpose."

"Do what, pookie?"

I *hated* that word. But the more I objected, the more she used it, so I was trying to let it roll off. "Collect waiters."

"It's a hobby," she said, amused. "I never had the patience for needlepoint."

"You're getting an attitude on you, Wolfe."

"Can't help it. Look who I'm with."

Trumped. Again. I threw down my napkin in surrender. "I could take the ring back."

"You could get your heart carved out," she replied.

I considered the next few moves. No good. Best to take the high road and concede. "Then I'm glad you like it that much. If we're still speaking next Christmas,

I'll get you earrings to go with it. Are you done playing games with me now?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Why?"

"Because you really ought to call your parents."

Stricken, she checked her watch. "Oh, no—it's *afternoon*. They're going to kill me!"

"They'll have to go through me first." Easy to say; they were several hundred miles away at the moment. Which was the only reason I said it. I could probably handle Mrs. Wolfe in an emergency, but all bets were off with the rest of that crowd. "Do you want to go back to the room and call?"

She was already rummaging through her purse. "That'll make it even later. I'll just call them on my cell....Dammit, where *is* that thing?"

In the spirit of Christmas, I declined to point out that this was what happened when you bought a Barbie-size phone and kept it in a big purse. While she was occupied, I took back my whales. Then I frowned at the waiter, who was making another pass. "She's having a crisis. Tea can't help her now. But if you have a flashlight, or maybe industrial salvage equipment..."

Victorious, Cassie emerged from her purse. "Ha! It was in the little pocket."

"Just the check, then," I told the waiter.

I followed him to the cash register, to pay and to give Cassie some privacy for her call home. Not coincidentally, this meant I wouldn't be on hand if one of her family wanted to say hello. But she didn't have to know that.

After paying the check, I wandered around the lobby, admired the big Buddha, peered into the fish tanks, wandered some more. Then I consulted my watch again. She'd been on the phone for fifteen minutes. How could a person have *that* much to say to relatives?

The waiter, ever attentive, came along when I headed back toward the dining room to check on her. So I pulled him aside. If this didn't stop now, we were going to have an incident.

"Quite a looker, isn't she?" I asked casually. "My friend in there, I mean. Very beautiful. Wouldn't you say?"

He smiled, nodding agreement. Encouraged, I put a friendly arm around his shoulders and went on.

"She has a thousand engagement rings in her old room at home. She kept them all. Every last one of them. And she keeps her old boyfriends' heads in jars in the basement." I pretended that he'd just asked a question. "What kind? Ball jars, I think. She had to shrink the heads first, of course. Ball didn't make jars that big."

The waiter's smile didn't waver, but it was starting to look a bit forced.

"Her parents are dragons, you know. I've seen them myself. The father has spikes on his tail ten feet high. And the mother breathes green fire when—"

"*Denny!*"

Yikes. Where had she come from?

The waiter, who apparently knew more English than he let on, took off like a shot. And just when I *didn't* want to be alone with Cassie. She didn't look upset, exactly, but...

"Feel free to start explaining any time," she said.

I tried to look innocent. "Writing practice?"

"You already get lots of practice."

Not enough, if I was going to keep getting into situations like this. "It's not what you think. The boy was lusting after you. I know *you* don't know this, based on your past, but lust is a deadly sin. I was trying to scare him for the good of his soul."

"How? By telling him my parents are dragons?" Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "What did I miss that you told him about *me*?"

"Nothing."

"Why don't I believe you?"

"Because you're really, really smart. Have I told you today that you're beautiful, too?"

"Nice try. But it won't work, Devvy."

"You don't sound 100 percent sure," I said, encouraged. "What about amnesty on this one, on account of Christmas?"

"One condition."

That was easy. "What condition?"

"We go back to your parents' house for a few minutes."

"Are you *crazy*?"

"There's a 50-50 chance. *You* are. It might be contagious."

I was not amused. "I just trashed the living room with a Christmas tree, Cassie. I'm not going to be very popular."

"No, but it'll help mend fences if you apologize. You don't have to mean it. You just have to pretend."

"Why should I apologize? My brothers acted like frat boys around you. My mother kept calling you the wrong *name*. And don't even start me on that hellcat sister of hers. If she were any more impossible, she'd be co-hosting with Regis. If you think for one second that we're going back so they can insult you again—"

"They're your family, Devvy."

"I know. That's the problem."

"That's not what I mean. I mean, you have to see them at least once a year, whether you want to or not. And I really don't want to go through this again next year. So—"

"*You're* not going through it next year. I'm not throwing you into that snake pit again."

She got her determined look. "You didn't throw me; I jumped. And if I feel like jumping again, I will."

"But—"

"And if you won't go back, *I* will. By myself."

"That's not fair," I argued. "You know I won't let you go in there alone."

"Never said it *was* fair."

I glared at her for a couple of minutes, trying to break her resolve. She refused to break. Finally, I threw up my hands. "All right. Five minutes. In and out. Deal?"

"Deal. Thank you. You can win the next one."

"The next *two*," I countered. "And you buy dinner tonight."

Uncle Edgar's big black Caddy was parked half on the lawn and half in the street this time. The sight of it did nothing to improve my mood.

"Aunt Kitty's here," I told Cassie.

She patted my shoulder. "She can't live forever."

"I'm not up to taking the long view right now. I just want to get through the next few minutes without tearing someone's face off."

"Why would you want to do that?" she asked in an insultingly reasonable tone.

"I don't know," I said irritably. "It was the first thing that came to mind. But it would probably *hurt*. And a person would be in trouble without a *face*, right?"

"All right, all right, calm down. I was just asking."

"I *am* calm!"

Cassie bit her lip to keep from laughing and tried to look sympathetic.

"I know what you're thinking," I growled. "I don't even have to ask Jim Bob the psychic chicken. For your information, I don't need Prozac."

"Devvy, honey, precious, I really wasn't thinking that."

I wasn't convinced. "You weren't?"

"Of course not."

Her expression said *I was thinking Lithium instead*, but she didn't actually say it, so what could I do? Nothing. I just went on into the house, determined to get it over with fast, no longer determined not to take faces.

I could hear them in the dining room. They were still talking about it—had been, in all probability, since we'd left. It sounded as though they didn't approve, but it would be unfair to judge on so little listening in. So I just walked into their midst without a word.

It took a few seconds for anyone to notice. Amy was first; she let out a little scream and threw her napkin in the air. As the others realized what was going on, a whole constellation of reactions went around the table. My favorite was Aunt Kitty's. She'd frozen with the wineglass not all the way to her lips, so wine was trickling out of the glass and down her cleavage. That would do it for *that* dress.

"I came to say goodbye," I told them. "I'm not sure yet whether I came to say I'm sorry, too."

"You have your nerve, showing up here like nothing happened," Mom snapped.

Cassie moved a couple of steps back, out of the direct line of fire, but she put a comforting hand on the small of my back.

"I do have nerve," I admitted. "It comes on one of the chromosomes in this family. My guess is that it would be from *your* side, Mom, but if Dad wants to make a case for his..."

Connor snickered, and Ryan looked a little less hostile. But Dad frowned. "This isn't a good time, Devlin. Your mother's a little upset. Maybe you should come back tomorrow."

"There won't be a tomorrow. We're going back to Greenville tonight."

"Why?" Ryan chirped. "Are there innocent Christmas trees *there* you have to murder?"

Amy and Jen, flanking him at the table, elbowed him hard on each side. Very nice. That would take him out of play for a while.

"We're going back tonight," I repeated, "so I wanted to come by and thank you for the hospitality. Such as it was."

Mom looked daggers at me in absolute silence. But Aunt Kitty was muttering. To be annoying, I cupped a hand to my ear. "Excuse me, auntie dearest? Didn't catch that."

"I said, 'Good riddance,' that's what I said," she barked. "Tearing up your mother's house like an animal. And sleeping with that...that..."

Only Cassie's sudden grip on my sweater kept me from de-facing her then and there. "Woman. That *woman*. I'm aware of her gender. What's your problem with her, anyway? It was *her* idea to come over here and apologize. Not mine. And you were about to call her something I'd have to hurt you for, weren't you?"

She just stared at us, at a loss for words for once.

"My Aunt Kitty is a nut case," I told Cassie. "You already knew that, but sometimes it's nice to have these things confirmed. Do you know what she and Uncle Edgar do every Christmas Eve?"

Mom said my name in a menacing way. I ignored her.

"They open their presents on Christmas Eve. That's barbaric all by itself. But do you know what they do right after they open presents?"

"This is awesome," Connor told Jen cheerfully.

I ignored him too. "Right after they open presents, they take their tree down. *On Christmas Eve*. And you know what the worst part is?" For dramatic effect, I paused. No one interrupted. "The worst part is, it's not even a real tree. It's one of those *aluminum* things. You can't put tinsel on an aluminum tree, now, can you? No. That would be stupid. But guess what? *They do it anyway*. And you know what *else*?"

Amy was starting to recover her wits a bit. She looked around the room nervously before she spoke. "Um, Dev, I really don't think—"

"Then don't think. In this family, you'll live longer." Perplexed by the interruption, I turned to Cassie. "Where was I?"

"You were about to tell me what else," she said, enjoying the spectacle. "Aluminum tree, tinsel..."

"Oh. Right. I forgot the revolving spotlight. It turns the tree different colors. If you half-close your eyes, you think you're in a disco in Hell." Evilily, I smiled at Aunt Kitty. "Go on, Cass. Ask me what's on top of the tree."

Cassie released her grip and slipped her hand inside the back of my sweater. "What's on top of the tree?"

"An angel kitten."

She burst into startled laughter.

"God, I'd forgotten about that," Connor said thoughtfully. "The angel kitten. That's a bad one, all right."

I glanced at Aunt Kitty, who was too poleaxed by now to respond, and then at Mom, who was ditto. But Uncle Edgar might have been on the moon, for all the attention he was paying. I suspected that he secretly agreed with me.

"So let's not get into an etiquette smackdown," I said. "I shouldn't have

wrecked the living room with the tree. But *you* shouldn't have driven me crazy. Agreed?"

There was complete silence for at least a minute—a very long time for silence, especially among people who never shut up.

Then Dad pushed his chair back, crossed the room and extended his hand to Cassie. "It was a pleasure meeting you," he told her sincerely. "I hope we'll see you again."

Cassie shot a bewildered glance at me. "Thank you. I hope so too."

He nodded. They shook and let go. When they did, Dad put his hand on my shoulder. "Devlin, take care of yourself. Come see us again soon."

Aw, dammit, this was going to ruin my exit. Reluctantly, I gave him a hug. "Merry Christmas, Dad."

It wasn't his fault he married into a family of monsters, after all. But next Christmas, I was going to buy him a spine.

There was one last thing I wanted to do in Hawthorne: make snow angels in the park. It was a tradition. And it wouldn't hurt to do *one* traditional thing.

The park was full of kids trying out their new Christmas sleds, so we skirted the hills and went to a flat area by the merry-go-round.

"I haven't done this in years," she mused.

"You'll love it. It's just like you remember."

"I hope not. I got snow in some really bad places the last time."

After a second's debate, I decided that I didn't need to know. "C'mon. Over here."

We jumped as far as we could into a patch of snow that didn't have footprints on it. Then we dropped back into it and made the angels.

"They look great," she said, inspecting them. "People are going to think *real* angels—" Then something caught her eye. "Devvy?"

"Angel?"

To my annoyance, she didn't hear that. "What did you do when you made yours?"

"The same thing everyone does. Why?"

She pointed. I leaned farther forward. There in the snow where I'd made my angel were the clear, unmistakable outlines of horns and a long pointed tail.

"*Monica!*" I shouted.

When the demon didn't show after a few seconds, Cassie slipped her arm around me. "I guess you're just a devil. But you're *my* devil."

"Very funny," I said, trying not to look flattered.

Chapter Thirty

December 26

One more Christmas was over. That much more blood was under the bridge now, and I was tired. It had been a very long couple of months. Maybe I could rest now, just for a while.

That was the plan. But Leonard Nimoy foiled it the first morning back. And then a fish finished me off.

“This is your fault for giving them that tape,” I informed Cassie while we threw some clothes on. *“Your* fault for buying it in the first place.”

“It is not. Besides, I thought you liked ‘Star Trek.’”

On the front porch, “If I Had a Hammer” got even louder. Gritting my teeth, I willed myself not to hear it. “This isn’t ‘Star Trek.’ This is *Golden Throats*. And this isn’t the first time they’ve done this to me.”

She stopped misbuttoning her sweater long enough to give me a very crabby look. “Well, now they’re doing it to *me*, too. Satisfied?”

“No.”

We regarded each other in hostile silence. It was nothing personal; we knew we still liked each other. But it was very, very early in the morning to be awake, let alone to be awake while Mr. Spock was singing. And that part *was* her fault.

“I’ll go let them in,” I said. “If they don’t have a fantastic reason for being here, *you* clean up the mess. You’ll need a big mop.”

“Sweet-talker,” she groused.

Perversely, that made me feel better. I went downstairs, rummaged in the toolbox, and threw the front door open, ready for anything. Or at least for Heather, Chip and Troy.

“Turn it off,” I told Troy.

He turned off the boom box.

“Give me the tape.”

Uncertain, he looked to the others for advice. Heather shrugged. He ejected the tape and handed it over.

“Now you *do* have a hammer,” I told them, bringing it out from behind my back.

They backed off, which was the first smart thing they’d done that day. Carefully, I positioned the cassette on the porch railing.

I was still whacking it when Cassie came out. She watched for a second and then borrowed the hammer. Little chips of plastic flew in all directions as she reduced what was left to scrap. We would never have to hear Kirk or Spock sing again.

The woman had her points.

After truce was arranged, we all went in to have coffee. Cassie tactfully put the

hammer away, and we sat around the kitchen table like civilized people.

"If it's not a secret," I said, "you might tell me why you're here. At this hour, the day after Christmas."

"We're on our way to work," Chip answered.

"Work? We were all fired a few weeks ago."

"Well, that's just it, Dev. We're kind of un-fired now."

Cassie rolled her eyes but didn't comment.

"Un-fired?"

Heather took over. "It's Howard Abner. Jenner hates him. Ever since he found out that Abner won't let him have girlfriends—"

"Won't *let* him?"

"Doesn't want him to, I mean. He says it sets a bad example."

"For who?" I frowned, debating whether it should be "whom" instead, but finally decided I didn't care. "It's an ad agency, not church camp."

"Just let me tell it, will you?"

I gave up and let her. She always took twice as long as necessary to tell a story, but if you kept interrupting her, she took even longer to get to the point. The point in this case was that Jenner feared marital fidelity more than he feared lawsuits. Consequently, he was maneuvering to get rid of Abner, and his first move was to reinstate all of Abner's fires.

"All, as in *all*?" Cassie asked.

Heather nodded. "You two especially. He's been after us every day to find out when you're coming back. I bet he'll reinstate you with big raises, if—"

"We don't want to be reinstated," I said.

They all stared at me in disbelief.

"Sorry—I shouldn't speak for Cass. *I* don't want to be reinstated. At least, not without a lot more information this time. She can do what she wants."

"Not without you," she protested.

I motioned to her to save it for private discussion. "Is that why you're here, then? Jenner sent you to tell us the good news?"

"In a nutshell," Heather admitted. "He really wants you two back. But that isn't—"

"Tell him not to kill the fatted calf just yet," I said. "Now you'd better go. You don't want to be late for work."

"OK, OK, we're going. But we've got a Christmas present for you first."

"It's for both of you," Chip added. "From all of us."

Cassie took the package from him, thanked him and tore the paper off. For quite a while, she just stared at whatever it was.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

Too moved to speak, she handed it across the table. And then I understood. It was one of those singing-fish-on-a-plaque things, just like the one Connor gave Ryan for Christmas, except that...

"It has a Santa hat on," I said numbly.

"Oh, come on, this is really cool," Troy said. "It sings 'Jingle Bells.' Push the red button."

Cassie pushed her chair back so fast that it tipped over. "We will later. Thanks,

guys. It was really sweet of you. *Really.*”

She went on to usher them out, leaving me alone with the fish. It was a while before I could look at it again. It *seemed* harmless. Stupid, but harmless.

I poked it a few times. Plastic. Nothing scary. I inspected the little hat. I pried open the mouth, to see what was in there. Furtively, I checked to see whether it was anatomically correct—not that I would know one way or the other. Finally, and only for research purposes, I pressed the button to make it sing.

Cassie came back to find me literally rolling on the floor laughing. It took her a few minutes to get me to give up the fish and a few more to get me back upstairs, tucked into bed.

December 28

“She’s been in there how long?”

“Two days,” Cassie said, sounding weary. “Give or take an hour or two.”

Already bored with eavesdropping on the conversation in the hall, I went back to flipping channels. When the knock came, I ignored it.

“Dev? It’s Rita Sanchez. Can I come in?”

No. It was nice of her to stop by, and now she could go. Yawning, I switched over to the Cartoon Network.

The bedroom door opened anyway. Sanchez walked in, Cassie right behind her.

“You look awful,” Sanchez declared.

I shrugged. “I’m on strike.”

“That’s not what I hear.” She took a seat on the bed—not too close, just in case I hadn’t showered lately. “I hear you think you’ve cracked up. Have you?”

“I went to pieces over a singing fish.”

“That doesn’t prove anything.”

“It’s a *fish*, Sanchez. It sings Christmas carols. How much more evidence do you need?”

Under her breath, she said something Spanish. I hated when she did that; she was from Illinois.

“I’m going along with her for now,” Cassie explained. “If she wants a little time off from reality, I guess she should have it. She really doesn’t ask much.” She reached over to pat my cheek. “Do you, bunny?”

Impassively, I turned up the volume on a Marvin the Martian cartoon.

Cassie shook her head. “Two days, Rita. *I* may be crazy by tomorrow.”

Well, why not? There was plenty of room in this bed for her, too. And I’d showered and changed the sheets every day, so it wasn’t like she’d have to be insane in squalor. No law said crazy people had to be slob.

“*Can you just tell me why?*” she’d asked at the start.

“*Stress.*”

“*But Christmas is over.*”

“*It’s not just Christmas. It’s everything. Nothing makes sense anymore. Every time I turn around, my office is on fire, or people are turning into possums, or I’m in trouble with God or Jack or*

Jenner or Channel 12. On top of that, you and I are trying to figure out this relationship thing, and—
"Problem with that?"
"No. But it's still new. That's more stress. And when you add in my family...or yours..."
"Oh, come on, Devvy. It hasn't been that bad."
"Michael," I said flatly.
She considered. "All right. Michael's bad. But—"
"Buster."
"He's just a dog."
"Just a dog? He almost had a close personal relationship with me."
She considered again. "OK, you can have that one, too. But that was a month ago. You were fine up till—"
"My mother."
Deep, thoughtful silence brooded over the bedroom. Then Cassie bent down to kiss my forehead.
"I'll get you some more pillows, sweetie," she said.
Back in the present, Sanchez studied the situation. Engrossed in the cartoon, I paid her no mind.
"Mr. Jenner wants you to come back to work," she finally said. "Both of you. He sent an offer along with me. It's in writing. What more do you want? An engraved invitation?"
"No, but I could do with a frappucino. You want to pop over to Starbucks for me?"
Cassie smoothed my hair down. "You're not going to get anywhere with her today, Rita. Maybe if you just leave the offer, I can get her to read it later. OK?"
"Maybe if I just shoot her with Ping-Pong balls," Sanchez grumbled, going into her purse.
Still focused on the cartoon, I reached over to the night table and pulled my own Ping-Pong gun out of the drawer.
"You're kidding," she insisted.
Not kidding, I shot her.
Sanchez gave up and put her weapon away. "You could be in trouble here, Cassie. She might really *be loco*. Let me see this fish that started this mess."
"I hid it. If I'm lucky, she'll never find it again."
"I could find it if I wanted," I told her.
"No, you couldn't, Devvy. I hid it where you'll never even think to look."
"Kitchen, huh?" Sanchez asked.
They had a nice laugh at my expense. In response, I turned the volume up some more.
"Oh, all right, I'm going." She gathered up her purse and then handed an envelope to Cassie. "It's all in here. Make sure she reads it, would you? He's going to bother me about it all afternoon."
"Suppose I walk you out," Cassie said.
She was up to something. She always was, though. Unconcerned, I fluffed my pillow and settled back again, intent on staying there another two days.
A second later, Monica tapped me on the shoulder, and I shot straight up in the air, scattering pillows everywhere.

“Don’t *do* that!” I yelled. “I *hate* that! What are you doing here?”

“Visiting the sick. Move over.”

Not having any better ideas, I moved over.

“Isn’t this cozy?” she asked. “Just like old times. Have you missed me?”

“You never give me a *chance* to miss you. You never go away.”

The demon was unperturbed. “The better to keep an eye on you.”

“Ha! She’s just nosy,” Vanessa said.

I jumped again. No matter how long I was around demons, I could never get used to the way they came and went, and there was no way to prepare for what happened when they did. Right now, for example, I was in bed with two demons through no fault of my own, and if Cassie walked in...

Which, of course, she did.

After interminable silence, she crawled up on the bed and wedged herself in between Monica and me. Thoughtfully, Vanessa handed her a pillow to use as a backrest. No one said a word.

Chapter Thirty-One

Late that afternoon, we left the demons watching the shopping channel and went out for pizza. Cassie was careful to cloak her triumph in finally getting me out of bed, but I knew she was enjoying it anyway.

“So? What do you think?” she asked.

“I think I need a bigger house if they’re going to keep hanging around.”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant about what Vanessa said. But now that you bring up houses—”

I cut her off at the pass. “Vanessa’s loony.”

“Still mad about the shirt, honey?”

Of course I was still mad. Vanessa had given me a late Christmas present—a T-shirt that said CLEOPATRA, QUEEN OF DENIAL—and I didn’t see why Cassie thought it was so all-fired funny.

“Guess you are,” she observed. “Never mind, then—we’ll talk about her later. What do you think about going back to work?”

“I don’t know. Jenner’s sold us out twice already. And I don’t think I can work for Jack if he’s got religion; he was bad enough without it. What do *you* want to do?”

“Seriously?”

I gave her a severe look. “Of course seriously.”

“I want to start our own agency.”

“We’ve had this talk before. You didn’t really mean it. So—”

“I’m not going back there without you. Get that all the way out of your mind.”

“Why?”

Cassie exhaled in frustration and pulled the BMW over to the curb—not recklessly, for once. She put on her flashers. Then she turned all the way sideways in her seat and waited. And waited. And waited.

“What?” I finally asked.

“What do you think? I’m not going anywhere without you. Especially not back into that hellhole.” An involuntary smile tugged at her lips. “Who would scare clients for me when they need scaring?”

“Forget the clients. There are worse problems in-house.”

Now she was smiling openly. “You’re the worst problem. Remember the day Chip had to peel you off that creep from Meridian Motors?”

It was probably bad that I couldn’t place him offhand. Then it came to me: He’d wanted to use his teenage stepdaughter in the ad as a hood ornament, in a bikini, so I’d flattened him. Fortunately, he didn’t press charges. “I’m not big on incest.”

“Or the time you told Walt to kiss his boys goodbye? In front of a client?”

“If we’re going to dredge up the past, Cass, I could tell a few stories on you.”

“We could tell stories on each other forever. That was half the fun. We *did* have fun, didn’t we?”

Past tense.

“Yeah, we did,” I finally said, wondering why it hurt. “Come on. Let’s get a *big* pizza.”

The sun was starting down by the time we drove back to my condo. It wasn't quite dark enough for headlights to help yet but too dark to do without them. Cassie squinted at the street ahead. "This is the worst time of day to drive," she complained. "I can hardly see."

As a passenger, I didn't find that statement reassuring. But being her passenger was never reassuring, so I saw no reason to panic. "Do your best. We're almost there."

We traveled another block or so, and then I noticed the smoke just over the treeline. She noticed too. "That's strange," she said. "It looks like somebody's burning something."

"Better not be. We've got all those open-burning ordinances."

Before she could say anything to that, we heard sirens. They were very high-pitched, higher than ambulance or police sirens, which meant—

"Fire," she said, pulling over.

For no reason, my blood went cold.

"It must be close," she added. "Look."

Now we could see an orange glow through the trees. It was close, all right. And the bad feeling was getting stronger.

I stood it another few seconds. Then I jumped out of the car and started running toward the trouble.

"Devvy! Where are you going?" Cassie yelled.

Home. I knew it for a fact now: My condo was on fire.

We sat on the curb, watching the firefighters finish the job. As fires went, it probably hadn't been much, but no fire is small when it's yours. I'd written off my living room furniture an hour ago, when they'd started hosing it down through the hole in the roof. Now it was starting to dawn on me that what hadn't burned had drowned and was every bit as lost.

"It'll be OK, Dev," Heather said again. "You're insured. You can get all new stuff. We'll go shopping for *days*."

I gave her a tiny smile. She'd come over as soon as Cassie had called her and then started calling people herself on her cell phone. Half the agency was here now, and I thought I would be touched by their concern later, after the shock wore off.

Someone handed me another coffee. I thanked him and tried to warm my hands on the cup. The fire people had given Cassie and me blankets, but even with the blanket and my coat, I couldn't seem to get warm. Not even Cassie helped, and she'd been as close as decently possible the whole time.

Chip parked himself on the curb next to us. "I'm not that kind of person, Dev, but I wish I could beat somebody up for this."

"She usually does her own beating-up," Cassie said—a little absently, watching a fireman carry a smoldering couch cushion out of the condo.

Where did I get this rep, anyway? I'd never really damaged anyone—except Kurt and maybe the Meridian Motors guy—and never anyone who didn't have it coming. "Thanks anyway, Chip. I appreciate the thought."

"Still wish I could. This sucks."

"Yeah. It does."

Cassie put her arms around me again and squeezed a little. There was nothing really to say beyond that.

Then I saw the top of a familiar head moving toward us. "Cass? Chip? Over there. Who does that look like to you?"

"Jenner," he said. "But it can't be. Can it?"

No, but it was. We just sat there, astonished, as he wormed his way through the crowd. Even more astonishing, Wife No. 5 was tagging along behind. They were both dressed to the teeth, as though they were on their way to some nightmarish society event, and I couldn't imagine what they were doing here.

As soon as they got within view, Jenner made straight for us. "Derry? Are you all right?"

As opposed to what? But I kept it to myself; he seemed to be genuinely concerned. "I'm fine. Thanks, Mr. Jenner. What brings you here?"

"Your house is on fire, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said thoughtfully. "It has been for a couple of hours now."

"Well, there you are. I don't like fires. They're bad for business."

Cassie pretended to be coughing. Under the blanket, she gave me a little nudge.

"I don't think insurance companies like them much either," I agreed. "But that still doesn't explain why you're here."

He wagged his finger at me. "I can't have an employee homeless. That would look bad."

"But I'm not an employee anymore. You fired me at the Christmas party."

"Yes. Well..." He shifted from foot to foot for a second, trying to think how to put it. "That was Howard Abner. Howard Abner was a mistake, Derry. A bad, bad mistake. I want you to come back. You and Miss Wolfe. It's not the same without the two of you."

"Yeah. It's a lot quieter," Heather chipped in.

I turned to glare at her. She'd sneaked up behind us, the better to hear every single word.

"You read my offer, didn't you?" Jenner asked. "You're both getting raises, you know."

His wife, suddenly petulant, tugged on his coat sleeve.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Effie, you don't need another fur. And it's my money." He turned to Cassie. "*You* want to come back, don't you, Miss Wolfe?"

"Yes, I do," she admitted. "I may be partly insane. But I'm not coming back without Devvy. And she's not coming back if Jack—"

Jenner didn't have to hear the rest of that sentence. "Forget Harper. He's gone. The miserable son of a bitch found God. I can't have that. What do you say, Derry?"

"This probably isn't the time or place," I told him. "My house is on fire. Could we talk about this later?"

"No," Jenner said.

"No?"

"Yes. I said no." He dug in his coat pocket and produced a key ring. "This is for the house at the country club. We don't need it for clients right now, and you

need a place to stay. The catch is, you have to be an employee to stay there. So if that would help you make up your mind..."

"She's not homeless," Cassie protested. "She'll move in with me."

"Is that what you want, Derry? Or is that what *she* wants?" A little glint appeared in his eyes under the streetlight. Unwillingly, I had to admire his deviousness. "It's a nice house. It'll give you a nice place of your own"—he put a slight extra stress on "own"—"to stay till you find a new one. So what do you say?"

Without any cooperation from my brain, my lips said yes. I may have been the most surprised person there. But a few seconds' reflection didn't change the answer.

As for Cassie, she didn't quite know what to think yet; she'd won one battle, lost another and wasn't sure which counted more. "We'll talk about this later," she whispered.

"Of course we will," I assured her. "Let me finish this." I took the key ring from Jenner. "Thanks. Which key?"

"The square one. You can move in tonight. And now that you're both employees again, you'll come to the New Year's Eve party. Abner's going to be there." That little glint appeared again. "I won't be responsible for anything you might decide to do to him, Derry. Understood?"

Ahhhh. It was good to be back. "Understood, sir."

"All right, then. We're off to a dinner party. Good luck with your fire."

We waited until they were out of earshot again to breathe.

"I'll be damned," Heather remarked.

A faint possibility was tickling at me. But better not to discuss it yet. "We already are," I said.

Cassie was uncharacteristically quiet on the drive to her house. She'd talked me into waiting till morning to move in at the country club—not that she'd had to do much talking-into, because we were both dead tired.

"Well," she finally said, "at least we get to do lots and lots of shopping now. I always *did* want to do something about your wardrobe."

"And you can just keep wanting."

She laughed. "We'll see. I still wish we knew what happened, though."

"They'll find out. It's probably electrical. The wiring in that place was never much good."

She glanced over—maybe a little too long for safety, for someone who was driving. "Do you really believe that?"

"I don't have many choices, Cass. I can believe it was an electrical short. I can believe it was spontaneous combustion. Or I can believe that demons did it. Which explanation do *you* want to give my landlord?"

"I think it was them. They were there. They probably got into a fight over the remote and started throwing fireballs around."

"Tosh," Vanessa said from the backseat.

The BMW skidded a few hundred feet before Cassie recovered. I kept both hands braced on the dash, just in case. "What do you mean, 'tosh'? She's got a point," I

snapped. "It probably *was* you."

"Of course it was me. But I didn't have to throw fireballs. Really, Devlin. Did you read too many comic books when you were little?"

Cassie, who had pulled the car over the second Vanessa confessed, slammed it into park. "*You* burned her house down?"

Monica appeared at the other end of the backseat, looking bored. "She had a theory."

"A theory?" Cassie asked dangerously.

"She thought it would finally get Devlin to move in with you." She smirked at Vanessa. "Wrong *again*."

"It's not over till it's over, Broadzilla," Vanessa shot back.

That started hissing and hair-pulling between them. Not in the mood for it, I reached over to honk the horn—and held it down until they quit. "I don't know about you," I told Cassie, "but *I* think we got Teenage Mutant Ninja Demons instead of the real thing. There was nothing about hair-pulling in *The Exorcist*."

She studied me critically for a second. "You're being awfully calm about this. Vanessa just said she burned down your condo, and you're making jokes?"

"What should I do instead? Call the police? Sue her? Bite her?"

"Empty threat. You wouldn't even bite *me*," Monica sulked.

Cassie murdered her with a look, which she chose to ignore.

"She's a demon, Cass," I continued. "I can't do much about her. If she wants to burn my place down every day of the week, she can. The only option I know of is going back to men—"

"Only if you want to die," she warned.

"—so I'm going to have to live with this till I figure something else out. And so are you."

"She *is* being calm," Vanessa fretted. "I don't like it."

Monica frowned. "Neither do I. She should have blamed you. And then Cassandra."

"*Me?*" Cassie asked, infuriated.

"You're the one who's been bothering her about moving in together. She might have thought you put Vanessa up to this."

"She wouldn't ever have thought *anything* if you'd kept your big mouth shut," Vanessa snapped at her.

"Don't blame *me*, you toad. Any competent demon would know how to do this. You should have burned *Cassandra's* house down."

Vanessa, who had started to argue back, suddenly fell silent.

"Then moving in together would have been *Devlin's* idea," Monica added. "She's a sucker that way. But giving her no choice—"

"What would she do with choice?" Vanessa replied hotly. "If *you'd* given her a choice, she'd still be lusting in her heart after actresses. They were all prettier than you, by the way."

Cassie winced and reached for the door handle, to save time in case we had to run for it.

"This isn't about me," Monica insisted. "This is about you. You should never have gotten above junior apprentice tempter, with *your* powers of logic."

Vanessa sneered at her. "Oh, go kiss a Baptist."

This time, *I* reached for the door handle.

"Go kiss one yourself. You burned down the wrong house, girlie."

Vanessa's eyes blazed bright red. "Well, I can fix that, can't I?"

"No!" I shouted, trying to dive over the backseat and kill her, in complete disregard for what I'd said minutes before. But Vanessa had already aimed her index finger, and just before I grabbed her, she fired.

Cassie jumped as though she'd been stuck with a pin. For a second, nothing happened.

Then we saw the orange glow in the distance.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Cassie's house didn't burn down that night after all. Her demon was a nimrod; Vanessa missed and burned down a neighbor's storage shed instead. (By general consensus, it was no great loss; it had been one of those little-red-barn-in-a-kit jobs, with a white plastic picket fence and plastic cows grazing around it.) But the situation led to some hard talk between us.

In fact, we stayed up all night talking about it. Well, arguing.

"You'd move in with me if you loved me," she finally said, exasperated.

That made two of us. "If *you* loved *me*, you wouldn't keep saying, 'If you loved me...'"

"Oh, yes, I would. Because it drives you crazy."

Blindsided by the admission, I glared at her. "Why do you have to drive me crazy?"

"Because it's such a short *trip!*"

Silence.

"I didn't mean that quite like it sounded," she said, looking a little sheepish.

"Yes, you did."

"No, I didn't. Really. What I meant to say...what I *meant* was..."

More silence.

"Fine," I said sharply, getting up. "I'll be at the guest house, if you ever decide what you *meant*."

Surprised, she grabbed my sleeve. "You can't go now. It's 3 in the morning."

"It'll be 3 in the morning there, too. But at least it'll be *quiet*." Frowning, I searched the dresser again. "Where are the keys?"

"I'll tell you if you answer one question."

"What question?"

"Why won't you move in with me?"

Annoyed, I started to repeat all the reasons I'd given her, over and over, for weeks. (1) We were both used to living alone. (2) We hadn't been together *that* way very long. (3) We had no idea whether this kind of relationship could last. And (4) I didn't want to wake up in a peach-and-white bedroom every morning. But none of those reasons was the whole truth. The whole truth was—

"I don't want to."

Cassie looked stunned.

"It's not that I don't love you. I do. But I also love that we're both independent."

She gave me her very worst bad look. "I'm not asking to put a leash on you."

"Too kinky."

She didn't even smile.

"All right, let me put it another way. I don't think we'd last very long if we moved in together. You know what women say when their husbands retire? 'I married you for better or worse, not for lunch.' You're not with me for lunch, Cass."

"That's not for you to decide."

"Maybe not. But how do you know it would be any different with us?"

"Because I love you." She glowered at me. "Well, *sometimes* I love you. When you're

not being impossible.”

“Forget that for a second. I *know* you. You’re not good at the long-term thing. And I don’t have a clue about relationships anymore. What if we moved in together and then decided we hate each other?”

“We already do,” she snapped. “What’s your point?”

Wearily, I rubbed the bridge of my nose. This could go for on for a few more hours—or the rest of our lives. “Tell you what. I’ll make you a deal. Interested?”

“Depends,” she said suspiciously. “What deal?”

“Let’s try it this way. We keep our own places for now. I’ll rent another condo or something, and we leave things the way they are. Then—”

“That doesn’t sound like a deal to me.”

“I’m not done yet. Then, if we’re still together after a year, we’ll talk about moving in. OK?”

She thought it over. “That’s your best offer?”

“It’s the best you’re getting in the middle of an argument. What do you say?”

Cassie thought a little more. “All right, fine. But we make the year retroactive to Halloween.”

“What? Why would we want to do that?”

“That *was* when all this started. I would say it’s our anniversary, but you hate that.”

“I hate it,” I agreed.

“Anyway, I gave; now you have to give. One year from Halloween. Deal?”

That was two months less than I’d bargained for, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to give them up. So I told her to give me a minute and then started to pace. How many things had I already done that I didn’t want to do?

- I’d admitted to our relationship in public.
- I’d admitted to it on TV.
- I’d admitted to it in front of her parents and—much worse—my mother.
- I’d gone home with her for Thanksgiving.
- I’d taken her home for Christmas.
- I’d bought her a ring. Well, not *that* kind of ring, but...

“Am I taking you out New Year’s Eve?” I asked.

She smiled. “Stupid question.”

That was that, then. I was finished. Not just because I’d done those things, but also because, given the choice, I’d have done them all over again.

“Deal,” I finally said, and spat in my hand. “Shake.”

Cassie looked disgusted, but she reciprocated, and we shook on it.

Wouldn’t want to get sentimental, after all.

Chapter Thirty-Three

New Year's Eve

By the time we got to Jenner's house, the casualties were already stacking up. There was nothing strange about that, considering the guest list, but 10:30 *was* a bit early in the evening to ride the pink elephant.

Cassie stepped cautiously around a victim, trying not to catch her heels on his fake-suede jacket. "Do you think he's dead?"

"Only if the fashion police shot him," I said, half-seriously.

She laughed and reached over the body to hang her coat up. "I'm going to work the room for a while. You *will* dance with me later."

"We'll see."

"You will," she repeated, leaning over to give me a quick kiss before she left.

We'd see.

I'd never liked New Year's Eve, even when I'd had dates. The only really good New Year's Eves were the ones I'd spent at home watching old movies in my pajamas. Cassie, however, loved dressing up and going out, which meant no *Casablanca*, no *Citizen Kane* and no pajamas. Most of my clothes had perished in the fire, except for what I'd kept at her place, so she'd taken me shopping. Which was why I was wearing black leather tonight. Was she crazy?

Rhetorical question.

Dourly, I gave the crazy woman another once-over. She was holding court in a herd of overheated males, reveling in the attention, which was understandable given what she had on. Or, more precisely, didn't. It was less a dress than an innuendo—the black halter was cut too low; the long black skirt was slit too high—and it could only lead to trouble.

Speaking of which...

"So Dev," Walt said, "where'd you two get the Bride of Satan getups?"

I gave him a thin smile and no satisfaction.

"Oh, c'mon, I'm kidding. I like 'em. No kidding." He threw down a shot of Scotch—not his first. "You gonna dance with her? Can I watch?"

"Weren't you married a minute ago?" I asked, unamused.

"Married doesn't mean dead."

"It will if your wife ever hears about this conversation."

He was a good enough sport to laugh, but not very hard. "You take all the fun out of working with gay babes, you know?"

"We're not g—" Oh, hell. "Never mind."

He was about to punish me for that mistake when Heather raced over, breathing hard. "I got here as fast as I could," she told me, glowering at Walt. "Has he been stupid yet?"

"Baby love, you hurt me," he complained. "I was just making nice polite

conversation about how I want to see Dev and Cass do the horizontal mambo tonight, but if that's what you call *stupid*—Ow! Ow! Damn!”

Heather, who had just stamped on one of his wingtips with a very sharp heel, rolled her eyes as he hopped off.

One down, but way too many to go. And Kurt wasn't even here yet.

We met up again a while later in a more-or-less private end of the room. Cassie looked amused. “I've had some interesting comments on the clothes,” she said.

I didn't doubt it. “Have you, now?”

“And a lot of questions about our living arrangements.”

“What kind of questions?”

“Interesting ones.” She smiled, daring me to take the bait.

“Cassie...”

“All right, all right. I'm not telling anyone much. I'm just saying you're staying at the guest house until you figure out what to do.”

Watching her narrowly, I shook my head. “That's not what *I* heard. I heard you said we're going to buy a house together.”

“Gossip,” she said dismissively.

“Gossip that started somewhere, with somebody.”

She frowned. “Well, not with me. Who would start that kind of rumor anyway?”

“Guess,” Monica said.

We spun around. Monica had Vanessa by the ear, clearly having dragged her along, and Vanessa didn't look happy about it.

“Let go!” she told Monica. “That hurts!”

My demon was unsympathetic. “Don't be a baby. It's your own fault for wearing all those earrings.”

Vanessa wrenched free and retreated a few steps, rubbing her ear. It probably *did* hurt; she had enough jewelry on that ear to make her list slightly to starboard. But the excess went with her dress, which might have been something Bob Mackie designed for Barbie.

“Why are you both here?” I asked. “Don't tell me there are no parties in Hell tonight. I've always thought New Year's Eve was invented in Hell, as far as that—”

“Save it,” Monica snapped. “You have bigger problems. Little Miss Disinformation here has been making people think you two are picking out silver patterns.”

“What for? We both have our own silverware.”

“Literal,” she muttered. “Great Satan, I never *saw* anyone so literal. You do it to spite me, don't you?” Before I could answer, she waved me off. “Never mind. Living together is a terrible idea, Devlin. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“I don't remember asking *you*,” Cassie told her hotly.

The look Monica gave her was enough to start a small fire, so I got in the middle. “We're not moving in together. Not for a year at least—”

Cassie cleared her throat significantly. “Ten months.”

“—and maybe never. I don't see what it has to do with you anyway. What's it to you where I live?”

Monica scowled. "Vanessa."

"What about her?"

"I'm not sharing a house with *that*."

Cassie and I exchanged puzzled glances.

"Think," Monica insisted. "If the two of you live together, the four of us live together. And I am *not* living with her."

"Same to you but more of it," Vanessa huffed.

Pretending to have given it some thought, Cassie offered a solution. "We could build doghouses for you. Devvy could walk you once in a while so you don't get fat. Would that work?"

Monica studied her with distaste. "I can't imagine what you see in her, Devlin. She's always going to be like this."

"Good." I almost meant it, too. "Now, is that all you wanted? Because if it is, we're done here."

"We're done," Vanessa said. "Except for one little thing."

She was Cassie's demon, so I let Cassie handle it. "Make it really little," she told Vanessa.

"You're wrong about the ten months, girlfriend. You'll get hooked up sooner than that. I give it six months. Maybe less. You never know."

"Over my dead body," Monica warned.

Vanessa smiled sweetly. "It could be arranged." Then she threw up a hand, and Monica vanished in a little puff of black smoke.

"Did you really kill her?" Cassie asked hopefully.

"Naaaah. Just sent her to visit Devlin's crazy aunt. With any luck, they'll kill each other." The demon regarded me critically. "So what's with the leather? You planning on making love or war tonight?"

Who knew? "The night is young," I said darkly, and stalked off.

Everything started downhill shortly thereafter, when Kurt finally showed. I was listening to Troy and some of the guys from Video lie about their manhood at the time, so I didn't notice him right away. The commotion was another matter.

"What the hell...?" J.B. asked, jerking his head toward the door. People were stampeding both toward and away from whatever had just come in, which we couldn't see from our angle.

Instantly, I scanned the room for Cassie. She was safely removed from whatever was going on, but she could see it from where she was standing—and she didn't look happy.

"Hold this," I said, handing my drink to one of the editors, even though I knew he'd only finish it. Then I headed for Cassie on a path that would put me between her and the trouble. The idea was to protect the trouble.

Meanwhile, the screaming, shouting and laughing around the doorway never stopped. What was wrong with these people?

"Kurt," Sanchez explained when I grabbed her.

"What about him?"

She just dissolved into a fit of giggles, which was no help at all. Annoyed, I pushed aside the last few obstacles, and then I saw all.

I do mean all. Or at least most of it. Kurt was dressed up like Baby New Year, wearing nothing but a sash and a diaper. And he hadn't been particular about how he'd fastened the diaper.

"Criminey," I growled. "Kurt, this had better be a medication accident."

He lit up as though he were glad to see me. "Boss! What's wrong? You don't like the outfit?"

"No. Where's Peg?"

"She stayed home. Said she didn't want to be seen in public with me."

Go figure. "You'd better go home and change. You can't leave your wife home on New Year's Eve."

"It's OK. She went to her mother's. I think they're running Harrison Ford movies or something." Absently, he scratched himself. "What's that guy got that I don't, anyway?"

Fortunately, Cassie turned up before I had to answer. "Hello, Kurt. Don't scratch diaper rash. You'll only make it worse."

He didn't respond, mainly because all the blood had just rushed from his brain to his eyeballs. Lust was a disturbing look on a grown man in a diaper, and I decided I didn't like it.

"Stop it," I ordered.

Cassie smirked at me a little; I pretended not to notice. Kurt certainly didn't.

"Kurt!"

He jumped, causing the diaper to slip and a few girls to shriek. But he didn't notice those things either. "Whoa," he said, still riveted on Cassie.

"I'll take that as a compliment," she told him.

"Oh, *yeah*. Damn, Cass, that dress is something. Really something. You're a piece of work when you want to be, you know that?"

She smirked at me again. I was starting to hate this evening. "Drop it, Kurt," I told him.

"Awfully touchy for someone in leather," he said, unfazed. "And by the way, I kind of like *your* outfit, too, boss. Have I told you how glad I am that you're coming back?"

Unsure which comment to jump on, I waited to hear what he had to say next.

"It hasn't been any fun without you. I thought it would be, but it's not. Abner's a bastard. He's like Jack used to be when he couldn't get laid, only worse, 'cause Abner *never* gets laid. It's against his religion or something." Hitching up his diaper, he looked around furtively. "You haven't seen him yet, have you?"

"Abner? No. But I'm not looking for him. Why would he be here anyway? Parties are evil, right?"

He leered at Cassie again, this time including me at the very end. "With any luck, they are. You two going to dance?"

"If we do," I said wearily, "I'm selling tickets. Now, what's the problem with Abner?"

"Well—"

He never got any further. A large, Baptist-shaped shadow fell over us, and we didn't even have to look to know.

"Mr. Wheeler," Abner intoned.

Kurt tried to squirm behind me. "Hello, Mr. Abner. Sir."

"Does Mr. Jenner know about..." He gestured at the diaper. "That?"

"I haven't seen him yet, sir. But it's a funny thing, you know? At the Halloween party, *he* was dressed up like a c—"

I cut Kurt off with a well-placed grip on the windpipe. Abner was not impressed.

"I'm going to go find him," he declared. "We'll discuss the new dress code. I'll make sure it includes a clause specifically about diapers. Excuse me."

Cassie and I stood back so that no part of him would touch us as he passed. But before he cleared us, something occurred to him, and he backtracked. "Aren't you two supposed to be fired?"

"Not anymore," I said.

Abner's brow contracted. He essentially had only one. "I'll talk to him about that, too."

Cassie stuck out her foot to trip him; I barely managed to pull her back in time. Then I happened to glance after Abner's retreating bulk.

Vanessa was following him, looking as happy as I'd ever seen her. I hoped no one else noticed the bright-red blaze in her eyes.

All the usual suspects were on the scene now, and the closer it got to midnight, the more nervous I got. Demons in one corner, Baptists in another, Kurt in a diaper and advertising people with access to alcohol. *And* Cassie. Something had to happen.

Something worse than just the music, anyway. Jenner had a Wurlitzer that I'd always coveted—one of those huge jukeboxes with neon and bubble tubes and enough chrome for a T-Bird—but his music collection was too retro. We'd been listening to the Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, and that crowd all night, and most of us were getting restless. Didn't Jenner have anything harder? Or at least a little more current?

On the other hand, maybe I wouldn't have to dance with Cassie after all if this kept up. She'd started leaving the room every time someone played "Wipeout," which seemed to be every few minutes.

Bored myself, I wandered over to the jukebox to see what else was in there. Chip joined me. "Find anything good?"

"Depends what you call good." I checked again; one title caught my eye. "How are you for car songs?"

"Car songs?"

After a brief mental debate, I punched the numbers. "You heard me. I always thought the Go-Go's wrote 'Skidmarks on My Heart' to get even for this whole genre. Want to dance?"

He did. "Little Deuce Coupe" wasn't bad as car songs went, and we weren't going to do much better, so we had a little fun.

OK, maybe more than a little. So Cassie got even by dancing with Randy

Harris. Then with Walt. And after that with Kurt. That last one wasn't pretty, to the point that I might have made a trip too many to the bar.

Then, without warning, it was almost midnight, and Cassie was back to oppress me. "One dance. With *me* this time. No excuses. Ready?"

"There's nothing good on the jukebox," I protested.

"Don't worry about that. Vanessa's got it covered."

I tried another tack. "I think I broke my leg a few minutes ago."

"No problem," she said calmly. "I'll lead."

"Dancing's against my religion?"

Cassie shook her head. "Give up, Devvy. You're outnumbered."

"Counting who? Demons?"

"Not them. *Them*." She indicated everyone in particular; they were all watching with great interest. "It'll kill them if we don't."

"Problem with that?"

She ignored the question and pulled me out to the dance floor. I tried limping, but it didn't work.

Cassie closed in and searched the room for Vanessa. The demon was standing by the jukebox, trying to look casual; when she caught Cassie's signal, she kicked the machine. "Louie Louie" cut off, and to my dismay, "Hot Stuff" cut on.

To her credit, Cassie was dismayed too. "That's not what I asked for. I *asked* for Sade."

She turned to glare at Vanessa, who pretended not to understand what the matter was. Meanwhile, the crowd was getting impatient.

"We're not seeing any dancing!" someone yelled.

A second voice added, "Or anything else!"

That caused general merriment at our expense and more encouragement from the peanut gallery. Even Cassie was starting to look like she was having second thoughts. I was about to suggest that we run for it when I saw Howard Abner standing a few feet away, grim as a stone idol.

And that single instant pushed me over the line. Enough was enough was enough. Political Correctness and censure are two sides of a very thin coin, and thanks to Cassie's parents, my parents, my brothers, our co-workers, the Family Foundation and 90 percent of the population, I'd finally had all of both that I needed—enough for a lifetime, probably. It was time to start the payback. And Abner was as good a place to start as any.

So I pulled Cassie in and locked eyes with her. "If they want a show," I told her, "I say we give them one. Want to make this a slow dance?"

She smiled, closing the rest of the distance between us. "Very slow."

We never heard the thud.

"Did you have a good time tonight after all?" Cassie asked, kicking her shoes off.

"Mostly." I kept searching through the CDs; it was here somewhere. "The best part was Abner."

I'd liked that part, all right. True, I hadn't meant for him to have a heart attack,

not even a mild one like that. But when the paramedics came and opened his shirt, and found the tattoo on his chest...

Well, Kurt had said it best: God save the Queen.

It was Vanessa's doing, of course. Even at my most suspicious, I knew Abner wasn't gay. But it had been very fine just the same to see him with a heart-and-snake tattoo with MITCH in the middle. And if the paramedics—and everyone else at the party—had seen it, who was I to say it wasn't real?

Ah, there it was. I opened the jewel case and stuck the disc in the player just as Cassie leaned into me.

"The *best* part?" she asked menacingly, her breath warm in my ear.

"Second best," I corrected.

She didn't back off. In fact, she got closer. "I had all kinds of offers tonight, you know. I could have gone home with anyone. Did I tell you Walt offered me a kidney?"

"You don't need any more kidneys." I pressed Play, cued the disc to "A Common Disaster" and then turned toward her. "Last dance?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

There are worse ways to wind up New Year's Eve. We took one last spin in Cassie's peach-and-white bedroom while Cowboy Junkies told our future:

We weren't out of the woods yet. We were still going to have trouble—maybe even disaster—and it might never get any easier. But when they're playing your song on the jukebox in Hell, you might as well dance.

The Last Word

Cassie again. Everything Devvy said is true, but the way she puts things sometimes is just her opinion. Take the parts about my family. I know what she's going to say about them from now on: She's going to get all sarcastic and say who needs demons after this. But I thought Thanksgiving went pretty well overall. She got off light compared with some of the guys I've brought home. Daddy used to give them dirty looks while he was carving the turkey, and we all knew what he was thinking.

OK, that wouldn't work on Devvy, but he could still have done something stupid—especially after they caught us on the couch. I think she still feels bad about that. But like I told her, my parents have had sex themselves at least twice, so what's the big deal?

Then there are the parts about *her* family, which are a little bit biased too. I think she went *way* too easy on them. Don't get me wrong; I liked her dad and her brothers and her sisters-in-law. But her mom and her aunt and uncle ought to be locked up in a maximum-security zoo somewhere. I can't *say* that, because she's related to them and I love her, but I can think it all I want.

Anyway, even though there were a few bad moments, I loved spending the holidays with Devvy. I told her that, and she asked me whether I'd learned anything at all from the experience.

Well, let me see.

- She's good with kids.
- She's not so good with dogs.
- Daddy doesn't hate her. Much.
- I think we should spend next Christmas with my family.
- I think it's time for us to move in together.

I wonder whether I should tell her *before* I tell her where we're spending next Christmas?

About the Author

K. Simpson was once described as a “surprisingly affable Devil-worshipper,” none of which is true. She spends most days working, drinking coffee and listening to VERY LOUD MUSIC.

Although she likes Halloween best, Simpson has no problem with Thanksgiving and Christmas. She got a baby brother one Christmas Eve and decided to keep him, even though she asked for a horse. She hates fruitcake, eggnog and Christmas decorations before Thanksgiving, but loves the Macy’s parade, *A Christmas Story* and the Grinch. Under oath, she’d admit to liking her relatives, too.

No one has ever thrown food in the Simpson family except a small nephew and niece, who are on probation.

Now Available from Fortitude Press

THE AVERAGE OF DEVIANCE

BY K. SIMPSON

After *Several Devils*, Devlin Kerry and Cassandra Wolfe aren't just friends anymore, but they'd rather not advertise. Trouble is, they're already in advertising, where secrets are practically illegal. Word is out ... so to speak.

Worse, Dev has a demon. Cassie says it's her own fault for being celibate for years ("You can't go around not sleeping with people and *not* expect to get into trouble"). They thought they'd exorcised the demon, but Monica is back. And this time, she plans to stick around.

This sequel picks up where *Several Devils* left off, as the staff of J/J/G Advertising tries to get back to normal the morning after a wild Halloween night. But every day is Halloween at J/J/G, the way these people behave, and everyone there is a devil of some kind. The last thing Dev and Cassie need is an actual demon — a chance for mischief that Monica can't resist. Thanks to her, they have trouble coming from all directions: co-workers, clients, TV reporters, the family-values crowd and even a possum.

Worst of all, a new co-worker may not be what she seems. Dev and Cassie are about to learn the true meaning of "hell to pay."

ISBN: 0971815011

Also by K. Simpson

SEVERAL DEVILS

Published: August 2001

ISBN: 0967768799

Even though she's in advertising, Devlin Kerry doesn't believe in Hell; she thinks that would be redundant. But a demon named Monica believes in her. Between her demon and her best friend, Dev's in for a devil of a time.

Now Available from Fortitude Press

THE BLUEST EYES IN TEXAS

BY LINDA CRIST

Kennedy Nocona is an out, liberal, driven attorney, living in Austin, the heart of the Texas hill country. Once a player in the legal community, she now finds herself in the position of re-evaluating her life - a position brought on by a personal tragedy for which she blames herself. Seeking redemption for her tormented past, she loses herself in her work, strict discipline of mind and body, and the teachings of Native American roots she once shunned.

Dallasite Carson Garret is a young paralegal overcoming the loss of her parents and coming to terms with her own sexual orientation. After settling her parents' estate and examining her failed past relationships, she is desperately ready to move forward. Bored with her state of affairs, she longs for excitement and romance to make her feel alive again.

A chance encounter finds them inexplicably drawn to one another, and after a weekend together, they quickly find themselves in a long distance romance that leaves them both wanting more. Circumstances at Carson's job develop into a series of mysteries and blackmail attempts that leaves her with more excitement than she ever bargained for. Confused, afraid, and alone, she turns to Kennedy, the one person she knows can help her. As they work together to solve a puzzle, they confront growing feelings that neither woman can deny, complicated by outside forces that threaten to crush them both.

ISBN: 0971815003

Now Available from Fortitude Press

CASTAWAY

BY BLAYNE COOPER & RYAN DALY

Where “Survivor” meets “Gilligan’s Island” in “The Twilight Zone.” Sixteen men and women are stranded on a tropical island—with an intrusive camera crew and a psychotic producer, where they fight for survival, TV ratings, and a million dollar prize. The winner is anyone who loves thrill-a-minute misadventures, gut-busting laughs, and ‘broad’-minded women.

The premise may be familiar, though the contestants are anything but, when a desperate network owner is hell-bent on blockbuster ratings and casts the show accordingly. Shannon, a budding novelist and former network employee, falls deeply in lust with tall, dark, paranoid Ryan, a Kentucky survivalist who is determined to win. “The course of true love never did run smooth,” Shakespeare said. Even he couldn’t have imagined the road bumps Shannon and Ryan will encounter en route to love and hot monkey sex.

The women are not only star-crossed, but insect infested and sand crab bitten. In this irreverent spoof, which focuses on an industry where nothing is as it seems, and no one can be trusted, Shannon and Ryan pull out all the stops to ‘get the girl’ – and win the prize. Join them as they discover the best thing about ‘Paradise’ is each other.

ISBN: 0971815089

Now Available from Fortitude Press

**ENGRAVINGS OF WRAITH
BY KIERA DELLACROIX**

Bailey Cameron is a woman with secrets. The reclusive owner of a successful corporation, she is also hostage to a covert life she neither wanted nor asked for. One that refuses to become a part of her past.

Blackmailed into a return to her deadly role as the Wraith, a frightening entity in the world that lives in the shadows, Bailey decides to break free. She settles in for a brutal game of chess with her former employers, prepared for every eventuality but one -- Piper Tate, her new assistant, who decides that the dark, mysterious Bailey is someone she wants to know better. A lot better.

The stakes continue to rise, as Piper discovers in Bailey a gentle, innocent heart. A heart that beats within the body of a killer who can't be tamed and who is prepared to do whatever it takes to preserve the new world Piper has introduced her to.

ISBN: 0971815054

Now Available from Fortitude Press

FIRST
BY KIMBERLY PRITEKEL

Emily Thomas is a successful New York attorney who enjoys a happy homelife with her beautiful partner. Beth Sayers was the childhood best friend with whom she shared big dreams as they grew up in Pueblo, Colorado. Inseparable by age nine, together they learned about life, each other, themselves, and most importantly love.

When Emily hears of Beth's death at the age of 34, after more than a decade of estrangement, she must piece together her tumultuous past and come to terms with the defining relationship in her life. Why had her friendship with Beth deteriorated and what part of herself had she lost with it?

First is Emily's journey back to Colorado, back to her childhood, and back to face the ghost of a woman who had captured her heart and never really let it go.

ISBN: 0971815070

Now Available from Fortitude Press

I FOUND MY HEART IN SAN FRANCISCO

BY S.X. MEAGHER

Despite the questions of her roommates and the objections of her fiancé, Jamie Evans persists in enrolling in a college course that seems an odd choice for a young woman of her background. What no one can know is that the course, *The Psychology of the Lesbian Experience*, will propel Jamie onto a journey of self-awareness and realization.

For the required fieldwork, Jamie is paired with the darkly beautiful Ryan O'Flaherty — a boldly “out” and sexually adventurous lesbian. This somewhat unlikely pair slowly, and sometimes painfully become aware that what they feel for each other is more than just friendship.

The temptation to live life on her own terms is great, but so are the costs, as Jamie struggles to break out of her establishment-fashioned, pre-ordained mold. If she can summon the courage, however, she might find out that love, and life, have so much more to offer than she had ever dreamed.

ISBN: 0971815038

Now Available from Fortitude Press

THE LIFE IN HER EYES

BY DEBORAH BARRY

Real love is not for the faint of heart, and the courage it takes to survive its loss, and love again, is more than the average soul can bear.

Rae Crenshaw does not lack for companionship. The tall beauty radiates charm and confidence, but this attractive combination conceals a vulnerable heart that has known far too much pain. She finds solace for her emptiness in casual trysts, maintaining a severe emotional distance, all the while seeking that which she feels can never be found again.

Evon Lagace's young life has been one of extremes - a failed dance career, a precious, beautiful relationship, and a traumatic, crippling loss. Once so full of exuberance and happiness, she must now struggle to find peace amidst the despair and loneliness.

Share the tears and the triumphs of these two remarkable women as you celebrate their journey to the realization that perhaps, for a lucky few, second chances can exist.

ISBN: 0971815046

Now Available from Fortitude Press

LORIMAL'S CHALICE

BY JANE FLETCHER

The quest for the stolen chalice is a sham - her family's way to banish Tevi from the island without causing a scandal. She soon discovers that the outside world is a dangerous and confusing place. Bandits and monsters are the least of her problems. Someone is prying into a long hidden secret and Tevi is about to get caught up in the deadly consequences.

Jemeryl has her future planned out. A future that will, hopefully, involve the minimum contact with ordinary folk who do not understand sorcerers. Her ambition lies with the Coven and the study of magic. Her goal is to rise up the Coven hierarchy and someday become ruler of the Protectorate. It is all very straightforward - until she meets Tevi.

The fate of the greatest civilisation the world has known is at stake. Tevi and Jemeryl will have to risk their lives in the race to uncover the traitor and retrieve the chalice. If this is not enough, they will both have to re-evaluate their assumptions about society and their places in it, and then figure out exactly what they want from life and each other.

ISBN: 0971815062

Now Available from Fortitude Press

WARLORD METAL
BY D. JORDAN REDHAWK

The heavy metal band, Warlord, is in need of a new guitarist. Only one applicant stands out — a jewel in the very rough — Torrin Smith. She has the ability to make her guitar sing her soul — a sinister and shattered cry.

Sonny Middlestead, little sister to a member of the band, is making her way through high school in accelerated learning classes. Her days are filled with education, her nights with rock and roll. An aspiring journalist, she spends a good deal of her free time writing in her diary.

The two meet — dark and light, anger and love — with both disastrous and remarkable potential. Will Torrin be swept away by her substance abuse, unable to release her fury or accept the brightness of another's heart? Can Sonny find a way to heal a broken childhood, to make up for a lifetime of injustice and hate?

Only time will tell.

ISBN: 097181502X

Also by D. Jordan Redhawk

TIOPA KI LAKOTA

Published: October 2000

ISBN: 1930928033

Anpo, a Lakota woman raised as a warrior, rescues Kathleen, the golden-haired woman of her vision. A vision that includes not only Kathleen's coming, but also the infliction of great pain. Must all dreams come true?

Now Distributed by Fortitude Press

**AT FIRST BLUSH
A JANE DOE PRESS ANTHOLOGY**

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CONSPIRACY OF SWORDS
BY R.S. CORLISS

FBI Agent Alexia Reis is an out-lesbian determined to make it in the bureau. As a junior agent she spent time in the research department, as well as the serial crimes unit where she and her partner, David Wu, were recognized for their work. After breaking several major cases, the two are moved to the hate crimes unit, which is Alex's true area of expertise.

Following the murders of several prominent activists and politicians, Alex and David become part of a task force charged with solving the killings. Together, they are sent to protect a newly declared candidate for the U.S. Senate. For the first time in her career, Alex is named the agent-in-charge, and when the candidate is assassinated, she can't help but take it personally.

During the investigation the agents run into ex-CIA assassin Teren Mylos, who is convinced her partner's death is somehow connected to the FBI case. While wary of each other, Alex and Teren agree to share information in an attempt to find answers to the deepening mystery.

The case takes them to Europe and back, searching for pieces to the unfolding puzzle. As they dodge killers and turncoats, they come face to face with Nazis old and new, stumble upon a hoard of looted gold, and uncover a conspiracy that stretches over forty years and two continents.

And, somewhere along the line, they discover each other as well.

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