

Crimson Crow

Sorcerer's Creed, prequel

by Neal P. Martin, ...

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Chapter 1

A Stranger Calls.

BACK IN THE DAY...

I had been in Blackham City a total of ten and a half hours before there was a loud knock on the door of the brownstone that I was now to call home, all thanks to my uncle back in Ireland, who bought the building years before to use as a Sanctum. The old place was now mine apparently, and I was free to stay for as long as I liked.

I'd had enough of traveling at that point, and I was tired of moving from one city to the next, whether it was in Europe, Central Asia or South America (they all blended into one another after a while, the only thing that connected them being the loneliness I felt as I ghosted along from one to the other). I thought it time I put down some roots, lest I become that guy with perpetually itchy feet, always yearning to be somewhere else. Always thinking that a better, different future awaits him in the next place when all that really awaits is the same damn thing but with different surroundings.

So after hitting New York, Chicago, Los(t) Angeles and a few other American cities I don't even care to remember the names of, there I was in Blackham City, a place so steeped in the desperation and misery of those who lived there, it would have made a fine backdrop for the darkest of noirs. "Give it time," Uncle Ray said. "You'll learn to love it as much as I did."

Yeah right. Which was why dear old Uncle Ray was sitting in a grand Sanctum hidden away in the rolling hills of County Connemara in Ireland, with not a single soul or trace of sickening smog anywhere near him.

I'd say one thing, though. The old Sanctum was an interesting place inside. There were still stacks of old books lying around the place, and evidence of Ray's magic practice in the form of symbols drawn everywhere, as well as a large magic circle drawn in red on the oakwood floor in the living room. Various empty jars and vials and small containers lay around as well, having once contained some magic infused potion or substance at one point. There wasn't much furniture, needless to say. A busted old leather sofa in the living room, a free standing lamp and a writing desk in the corner. That was it. The walls were a dull yellow color, and the plaster was cracked in many places also.

I didn't mind the aged, rundown appearance of the place, though. It gave it character. As long as I had somewhere to sit while I got drunk on the bottle of Glenfiddich I had bought from a local corner store an hour or so before, I was content enough. Indeed I was well on my way to getting blind drunk so I could sit and lament on the state of my life when the door was knocked by someone.

Who the hell could that be? No one knows I'm here.

Unless whoever it was thought Ray still lived there. Which he didn't, not at that precise moment in time anyway, so the person knocking at the door could just go away as far as I was concerned.

Which they didn't do, of course.

"Maybe Ray's ordered me pizza," I said to no one, completely comfortable that I was talking to myself and not feeling weird about it. Hey, you have to talk to someone when you're traveling all alone in the world, right? Besides, I was a good listener, which I very much appreciated, especially when I was drunk (I'd heard it all from me, I tell you).

The bottle of whiskey was still in my left hand as I used my right hand to fumble with the three locks on the front door, which weren't actually locks but magical seals that I was a bit too drunk to focus on properly. "Three goddamn locks... Christ... there we go, at last." I opened the door, and it creaked on its hinges like the door to Count Dracula's castle (it's true, I'd been there). I even had my best Boris Karloff voice ready to go when I said, "Ye-e-e-ess?"

But when I saw who was standing there, my Boris Karloff voice was replaced by my Mickey Mouse voice instead, and I all but squeaked, "Yis?" because the person I was confronted with was not the person I expected. I don't know who I expected (a spotty pizza delivery boy maybe). Certainly not the platinum blond vision in white I was currently gawking at like a schoolboy with a hard-on.

"August Creed?" the gorgeous woman in the white skirt and shoulder-padded jacket said.

I frowned at the woman for a moment, thinking her jacket wouldn't look out of place on an American football player (stick a number on the back, and away you go). Her sparkling glamor was completely incongruous, given the neighborhood she was in. I hadn't been there long, but East Oakdale was not Upper Manhattan or Sunset Boulevard. More like Brooklyn, I'd say. Certainly not the ideal surroundings for someone who wouldn't have looked out of place on Dynasty. Parked on the road behind her was a black limo. A man in a dark suit with a wolfish stare stood by the front of the limo, hands clasped in front of him, his gaze firmly on me. Clearly, the woman had gotten the wrong address. It was the only explanation for her standing there.

But she knows my name.

There was that, of course. Didn't have an answer for that one, unless Uncle Ray had sent her, which I wouldn't have put past him.

Maybe she's a hooker, one of those high-class types.

I didn't think so. She was too beautiful but in an unconventional way. And her dark, chocolate colored eyes had too much knowing in them, too much experience. One thing is for sure, I thought as I couldn't help but be captivated by her face. She is no Sleepwalker.

Supernatural power was in the woman's blood. I could almost smell it on her. A sweet sort of scent, yet laced with something sharper, and with more bite.

Her eyes looked deep into mine as she seemed to size me up. I noticed her nostrils raise almost imperceptibly as she tried to get a scent of me the way a predator would nose the air at their prey. "Is there something I can do for you, Miss..."

"Crow," the woman said, offering her hand. "Angela Crow, and yes, I hope there is something you can do for me, August Creed." She smiled after she said my name as if she liked what she saw, or maybe that was just me, and she was only being polite. The whiskey haze surrounding me made it difficult to tell.

I stood waiting for her to tell me why she was there. She didn't though. Instead, she stared for a moment and then said, "Well, aren't you going to invite me in?"

And that's when I realized that Miss Angela Crow was a vampire.

Chapter 2

The Vamp in White.

Despite my travels over the previous six years, I would admit to having little or no contact with vampires. They were a mysterious lot, preferring, for the most

part, to keep to themselves. As part of my education as a sorcerer, I was required to read the lore on every supernatural creature there was, including vampires, just in case I one day ran into one of them. Before leaving Ireland, I had no first-hand experience of any of those beings. Only the information I read in books, information which was often untrue and contradictory, depending on what text you were reading.

I did end up coming across many of those supernatural beings on my travels, though, and found almost all of them to be far more complex creatures, and much more human in many cases, than the textbooks often made them out to be. Not that this made them any less dangerous.

One night while I was walking along a Paris street early on in my travels, I came across a man in need of assistance. He was lying on the side of the road, seemingly injured, moaning in pain and asking for help. As no one else was around, I went to assist the man, at which point he sprang to his feet at frightening speed and grabbed me in a chokehold before dragging me into a side alley. It all happened so fast that I was caught completely off guard. Once in the alley, the man (who I knew was a vampire by that point) proceeded to sink his fangs into my neck and started gulping down my blood at an alarming rate like an alcoholic chugging from a bottle of spirits. For a long moment, all I could do was stand there in shock as the vamp continued to drain me. I must say, I found the whole experience to be deeply unpleasant, having a parasite attached to my neck like that. It was a gross violation of my body, and it felt like I was being raped.

Then my survival instinct kicked in, and my magic activated, sending out a blast of energy that propelled the blood-drinker across the alley where he slammed into the wall so hard he caved in a number of bricks. I was as stunned as he was as I stared down at him, still dizzy from the blood loss and the shock of the whole situation, my adrenaline dumping like crazy.

When the vamp sprang up into a crouch, he hissed at me like a cornered animal with his fangs bared and dripping with my blood. Without even thinking about it, I formed a sphere of crackling blue energy in the palm of one hand and held it up as if to fire it at the hissing vamp, who then bared his blood stained teeth at me one final time before scurrying off on all fours like a scampering rat.

Needless to say, since that incident happened, I did my best to avoid all contact with vampires. I certainly didn't trust them. Although I should thank that vampire in a way, because he helped me realize I could protect myself, and that I could rely on my magic to do so. Suddenly, that lifelong sorcerer apprenticeship of mine back in Ireland started seeming useful instead of just intellectually interesting.

Understandably then, I was a little reticent about inviting Miss Angela Crow into The Sanctum. But I was drunk and a bit tired of life by that point (to be perfectly honest with you), so I didn't care all that much about letting a vampire through the door. Besides which, she had sought me out, and I was somewhat interested in finding out why exactly, even though I knew it had to have something to do with Uncle Ray. There was also the fact that she was beautiful and alluring, and for a vampire, she gave off an enticing sort of scent that I found myself unable to resist.

"Thank you," she said as she walked through the door and past me into the hallway, slowly making her way into the living room, her heels clacking on the hard wood floor as she gracefully moved along. From behind, she was a lithe sort

of creature with her white skirt stretched tight over her ass, which jiggled slightly when her heels made contact with the floor. I shook my head at some of the thoughts going through my mind at that moment and walked into the living room behind her. Then I stood and watched as she strolled around the room, running her long fingers over the covers of books, smelling the potion jars, smiling at the books stuck to the ceiling. "I've always liked this place. Haven't been here in a while, though. It's usually more... full when Raymond is here."

I knew it. What are you playing at Ray, cavorting with vampires?

"He shifted most of his stuff out when he heard I was coming here," I said. "I think he's hoping I'll fill it back up with my own stuff."

Angela Crow sat down in the armchair by the fireplace and crossed her legs. Then she sat staring at me until I sat in the other armchair. "So are you going to tell me why dear old Uncle Ray sent you here? If it's a sex thing, I'm not interested." I took a swallow from the bottle of whiskey still in my hand as if to underline my disinterest. Although it was more to do with disguising the fact that I was lying. Vampire or not, the woman was goddess-level beautiful. I didn't imagine any man would turn her down given a chance.

"You look like him," she said, completely ignoring my last comment, making me feel like a fool for even saying it. "A lot younger obviously, but the features are the same. The strong chin, the high cheek bones. Your eyes are a darker shade of gray than his, though. More intense, I'd say. And that thick, dark hair, which surely must be a Celtic thing."

"Ray's hair is gray now."

She barely smiled. "Your youth is adorable."

To my ears, the only thing missing from that sentence was, "...and I want to drink your blawd." You could say she made me a little nervous, sitting there like the apex predator that she no doubt was. Despite not looking out of her early thirties, I could still smell the centuries of age underneath her eternal youth. I also knew that the older the vampire, the more powerful they were. If I weren't half drunk, I would have been feeling more than a little uncomfortable, even threatened, under her steady gaze.

"Do I frighten you?" she asked, taking me by surprise.

I stared at her a moment, unsure of how to answer before shaking my head. "I'm just not sure why you're here. I only landed in this dump of a city about eleven hours ago. Forgive me if I seem a little put out by your visit. I was expecting to be alone so I could sit and drown my sorrows in this bottle."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No."

The quickness of my answer didn't escape her, and she smiled that enigmatic smile again. "I intrigue you."

I smiled back. "How could you not?"

"Such charm," she hit back, leaving me unsure if she was being sarcastic or not.

As alluring as she was, I still wanted to know the reason for her visit. What could someone like me—a lost and wandering magicslinger who still hadn't gotten over seeing his whole family get massacred, and probably never would—have to offer someone like her, who likely had everything she ever wanted?

It turned out there was one thing she didn't have at that moment, though.

"I have a daughter," she said. "And she's gone missing. I want you to find her for me, August Creed."

Chapter 3

Vampire's Kiss.

Angela Jordan's daughter was named Jennifer, and she was sixteen years old. After many centuries of living, Miss Angela Crow had obviously thought it high time that she had a kid, probably to carry on the bloodline. And by the way that she talked about her daughter, it was clear to me that Angela Crow considered her progeny to be not much more than a possession to be retrieved. A mere tool to be used to further her own aims, whatever those aims were. At that point, her motivations were unclear, except that she needed her flesh and blood back. There was also the fact that full-blooded vampires were quite a rarity in the world (most vampires being made, having been human once). That alone would have made Angela Crow's daughter a valuable commodity.

What was clear, though, was the fact that Miss Crow had obviously attended the same school of parenting as my father. That was the problem with having great power at your fingertips, you see. It made you selfish and completely subservient to its needs and further development. Everyone else was only around to be used in this endeavor. My mother always taught me that people came first and that whatever power I had only existed so I could help others (Miss Crow and my father apparently skipped that lesson, or more likely, completely ignored it). And despite my father trying to ingrain in me the opposite, teaching that power and its gathering mattered most above all other concerns (including people), I usually managed to live my life by my mother's credo, and not by the philosophy my father tried so hard to indoctrinate me with while I grew up under his tutelage. Of course, there was also the fact that my father was a sociopath, which handily helped him ignore the feelings of others.

I suspected Miss Crow to be of the same ilk as my father, possessing the same sociopathy, if only by virtue of being a vampire. Vamps were not known for their bleeding hearts. They preferred to bleed the hearts of others instead.

"So let me get this straight," I said to Miss Crow after taking another swig from the bottle. "Your teenage vampire daughter has gone missing, and despite your probably vast reach and influence—not to mention bottomless resources—you come to me, a lowly magicslinger with no connections in this city and even less experience in finding people, and you want me to find your missing daughter?" I shook my head. "That doesn't make any sense to me at all, even if you did used to fuck my uncle."

I probably shouldn't have said that last part. Something flashed in Miss Crow's eyes, breaking her former eerily calm demeanor, something like anger maybe.

Great. I've just gone and pissed off a centuries old vampire. Way to go, Creed.

"Your uncle was never this... disrespectful," she said, a hint of malice in her voice now that made her seem more dangerous than before. "Even at your young age."

Let's see if I can claw this one back before she claws me.

"I apologize for that last remark," I said, holding my hands up. "I'm just jet-lagged and more than a bit drunk. I meant no disrespect."

"Do you use hostility to cover your insecurities, August, is that it?"

"Hostility?" I was genuinely shocked. "Of course not. I'm not hostile. Or insecure."

"You know how long I have been alive? One thousand two hundred years. You are a mere child to me, August, and as such, I can see right through you, as I can with most humans. You would do well to remember that. There is no hiding yourself from me."

Things were getting heavy if they weren't before. She was telling me to drop the act, an act I was barely aware of at that time. A front I quickly learned to put on when I first started traveling. It was a defense mechanism, a way to cover my loneliness, a way to stop others from seeing my vulnerabilities. It wasn't who I was before I left Ireland, but it was who I became. Who I needed to be in those days so I could survive in the world.

"All right," I said seriously. "Tell me exactly why I'm your man, and I'll do my best to help you out. Hell, I got nothing better to do in this city."

"You will do more than your best. You will find my daughter."

I shifted in my seat. "Is that a threat?"

Her blood red lips parted as she smiled, and I caught a glimpse of her fangs, which she brought down just for me as vampires kept their fangs retracted usually. "I'm just trying to make you understand that you are involved in this now, whether you want to be or not. Ray said if I gave you a choice that you wouldn't do it, so I'm not giving you a choice."

"I take offense to that," I said, shaking my head. "I would have helped you."

"So if I say that you don't have to, and I get up and walk out of here, never to return. Unconditionally. You would still help me?"

I said nothing. Merely smiled and shook my head. "So why did Ray put you onto me? Did he think I would get bored and that I might need something to do? If so, it wouldn't be the first time he's stepped in on my behalf."

"Partly," she said nodding. "Your uncle wants you to stop running and start using your gifts constructively, instead of fleecing casinos and giving most of the money away to the human detritus that lives on the streets out there. Did it make you feel any better, by the way?"

"Not really. What's the other reason?"

"I need someone who isn't known in this city. By a twist of fate, you happen to be such a person."

Lucky me.

"And why would anonymity matter so much?"

Miss Crow sighed, and for a brief moment, looked more human—more vulnerable—than before. "My daughter has... run away. If she finds out I have people looking for her, she'll burrow in deeper. There's less chance of that

happening if it's you looking for her. She doesn't know you. No one does. Except me now."

Again with the thinly veiled threat. She was so used to talking like that, she hardly realized she was doing it. "May I ask why she ran away?"

"No, you may not."

I shook my head. "You're giving me little enough to go on here as it is. Knowing why she ran—"

"Wouldn't help you much."

God, she isn't making this easy.

"Jesus," I said after considering everything in silence for a moment. "I'm not the right man for this. I don't know the city, and I'm certainly not any kind of detective."

"That's not what Ray said. He said you would be ideally suited to this job."

"Oh really? Why?"

"Because you care, he said."

I stared straight at her. "I'm not getting out of this, am I?"

"It's either that or I kill you."

"Ray said that as well?"

"No, August," she said, then crossed the floor in a flash, and I found myself trapped in my chair as she leant down on the armrests and put her face right by mine. "I'm saying that."

Then she bit me. On the lip. Hard. "Shit!" I said, tasting my own blood in my mouth.

Her face was still right by mine, her coffin-wood brown eyes looking right through me as she slowly ran her tongue over her lower lip to lick my blood. "Sebastian has a file outside, which he will give you when I leave. The file should give you enough to get started finding my daughter."

Miss Crow straightened up then and stood tall over me. I noticed a speck of my crimson blood on the collar of her white Gucci jacket, though I decided not to tell her about it (the best idea, I think). She smiled down at me, seemingly satisfied that she had accomplished what she had gone there to do, and without any bloodshed (well, hardly any). "I think you will find, August," she said as she was about to leave, "that after tonight, a whole new path will open up for you. You should be happy you decided to come to this city."

Happy wasn't the word I would have used right then.

Not that I told Angela Crow that.

Chapter 4

The Eyes Have It.

After Angela Crow left, her driver (or whatever he was, bodyguard probably), Sebastian, came to the front door with a manila folder and went to hand it to me. When I gripped the folder to take it from him, he held onto it, his piercing blue eyes intimidating as they bored into me. "Don't fuck this up, kid," he said in a

calm, assured voice before letting go of the folder, smiling and walking away. And with those few words, he managed to convey quite clearly that if I did fuck things up, there would be unpleasant consequences.

What the hell have I just got dragged into? Thanks a lot, Ray.

Still cursing my uncle, I closed the door and walked down the hall and back into the living room where I tossed the folder on top of the mantel over the fireplace. Then I went to the phone that was hanging on the wall next to the doorway and dialed my uncle's number, knowing before I did so that the bastard wouldn't answer because he would be away on some expedition somewhere. I went through the motions of letting the phone ring several times before slamming the receiver back down. Then I stood there and considered doing a communication spell, which I had done before and which would give me a direct link to my uncle's mind. But I shook my head at the idea as it felt like too much trouble to go to so that Ray could blow off my concerns by telling me the whole situation would be character building and a good experience for me.

Like the time a couple of years ago when he underhandedly set me up to stay in an old mansion while I was traveling through the Romanian countryside, and when I got there, the place was full of ghosts. I couldn't leave the mansion until I had found a way to exorcise the ghosts from the house, which ended up taking me a week to do, by the time I figured it all out using only the knowledge I was taught growing up in Ireland, which thankfully, was quite extensive. Even armed with so much knowledge of spells and supernatural lore, however, I still struggled, and those bastard ghosts put me through the mill before I managed to get rid of them (which is to say, force them into the Astral Plane where they could move on somewhere else). Uncle Ray was like a proud mentor when I next spoke to him after that, even while I was cursing him up and down. There were many more incidents like that during the rest of my travels, of which this latest was just one.

"When the hell am I going to learn not to listen to Ray?" I said aloud, seeking out the whiskey bottle again, finding it on the floor next to the armchair I was sitting in earlier. "Check out Blackham City, August. It's a great place. You'll have fun there. I even have a place you can stay in. Trust me, you'll love Blackham!" I shook my head. "Yeah right. I'm here less than twelve fucking hours and already a damn vampire wants me to go all Mickey Spillane and find the daughter who probably couldn't wait to get away from her. Shit." I took a swig from the whiskey bottle, then wiped a hand across my mouth before eyeing the folder on the mantel. Sighing, I walked over to the fireplace, lifted the folder and went and sat down on the creaky leather couch.

I stared at the folder for a moment before opening it, delaying because I knew that when I opened the folder to see what was inside, there would be no turning back. The thing about me is that if I see a problem that grips me even a little bit, I won't stop until that problem is solved, no matter how long it takes. When I was younger, I spent years on certain problems, nearly all of them in some way related to magic and spellcraft. Some of those problems I still hadn't solved and those were always in the back of my mind somewhere, being mulled over unless I drowned out the noise with alcohol, which I had a habit of doing. Ray knew this about me. He knew how easily I was gripped by certain challenges, and that I ended up caring deeply over whether a problem was solved or not.

Finding a missing person was a new one on me, though. As I said, the problems I gravitated towards were mostly of the arcane variety. How to get a certain spell to work. How to control a certain form of magic. Solving the mystery of how something works. Stuff like that. Nerdy shit, if you want the truth, because that's who I am, a nerd obsessed with magic and the arcane. It was who I was raised to be by my family, by my father especially. When that all collapsed, I ran away, but I soon found I couldn't leave my interest in all things magic behind. Even on the road, I would ponder magical problems in my head (which also helped to counter the boredom and loneliness that came with traveling). In every town and city, I sought out libraries and studied books. Not just books on magic or esotericism, but books of all kinds, on every subject that tickled my interest. Learning and studying was all I knew growing up, so it's what I did when I hit the road as well.

And then there I was, in another city, about to tackle a different sort of problem than what I was used to. This one involving people. Vampires. Opening the plain folder, a tinge of excitement hit me at the prospect of what I might find inside, and at the prospect of sinking my teeth (no pun intended) into a new challenge.

"Fuck it," I said with the folder now open in my lap. "What else am I going to do?"

Forgetting about the likely dire consequences of failing the challenge before me, I instead reveled in the delicious feeling I always got upon examining a problem for the first time as I wondered what treasures, intellectual or otherwise, might lie within.

Inside the folder were two sheets of A4 paper. The top sheet was typed upon and contained information on Jennifer Crow, which I hardly looked at before examining the bottom sheet of paper, which held my interest more. It was an exquisite pencil drawing of a girl who I assumed was Jennifer Crow. What stood out most to me in that drawing was not the long mane of thick dark hair or the striking beauty of the girl herself, but the eyes. Whoever had drawn the sketch had done so with consummate skill, capturing the girl's soul in those eyes with barely a few pencil strokes. I was no stranger to an artist's pencil myself (having studied art in my own time during my apprenticeship), but I wouldn't have had half the skill of the person who drew Jennifer Crow's portrait.

Dwelling on the girl's eyes, I saw something there, something that I instantly connected with, though I wasn't sure what. Perhaps a sadness, or a yearning for something just beyond reach. Whatever it was, it made me instantly care for the girl (and almost forget about the fact she was a vampire and had probably killed innocent humans so she could feed on them).

Wherever Jennifer Crow was, I knew I had to find her. Not just because her mother would likely kill me if I didn't, but because my intuition told me the girl needed help. Help that I could give her.

Of course, my instincts about Jennifer Crow could turn out to be completely wrong and the girl could have winded up being a total brat bitch who liked to run away from Mommy (I suspected there was no Daddy on the scene, Angela Crow didn't strike me as the relationship type) just to get some attention and it was all just an oft repeated game of cat and mouse that she liked to play.

But I didn't think so. My instincts were rarely wrong, especially about people. Six years of mingling with every kind of person from all around the world saw to

that (if you wanted to stay alive and unmolested on the road, you had to learn to read people).

So it was settled. I would find Jennifer Crow, wherever she was, and I would help her if I could. Hopefully, she wouldn't try to kill me when I did.

I also hoped her mother wouldn't kill me if the help I gave to her daughter weren't to her liking. Obviously, Jennifer had run away for a reason. If I found her, and those reasons turned out to be valid, was I going to just hand her straight over to be thrown back into the strife she tried to escape from in the first place?

Let's just find the girl first, I told myself. After that, we would see what's what. Although my gut was already hinting at future complications. Nothing was ever easy or straightforward in my experience, at least not for me. I had no reason to believe that particular situation would turn out to be any different, if only because of the simple fact that I was involved.

Sighing, I sat back in my chair, took a contemplative swig from the whiskey bottle and then proceeded to think about all the different ways one could kill a vampire.

Chapter 5

Like A Virgin.

I'm not much of a fancy dresser. Hell, I've worn practically the same set of clothes for the last six years as I've moved around the world on my travels (I say travels as if my wanderings had some higher purpose, like self-discovery for instance, when in fact, they were just that—aimless wanderings because I didn't know what else to do with myself). Growing up in Ireland, the dress code was quite conservative, especially in the McCreedy household, where suits and waistcoats were required dress for my brother and me each day. For my sister, it was a plain, shapeless dress that hung to her ankles. On the rare days that our father was absent, we would discard the jacket and waistcoats and roll up our shirt sleeves. Roisin, my sister, would borrow one of our mother's dresses. Those days were happy and free, the days without our father.

But even after leaving all that behind, the dress code still stuck with me, if only because I was used to it and try as I might, I didn't feel comfortable in anything else. So I always wore dark moleskin jeans (they last longer than trousers, as I found out on the road), a shirt made from hemp because they last a long time, and a tan colored waistcoat. No suit jacket, though. Instead, I wore a trench coat that was given to me by my Uncle Ray before I left Ireland. The coat was made out of demon skin, and as such was resistant to most things, including bullets and fire. It was a dark green color and looked like thick leather. It also had secret pockets and hiding places all over it, and a stitched-in holster for a pistol, which I didn't carry as I didn't see any need for having a gun when magic had sufficed in every threatening situation I had encountered. The coat gave me comfort, and I felt more secure wearing it, which goes a long way when you are constantly traveling to strange new locales full of unknown threats.

Like Blackham.

It was just after 9.00 a.m. and I was sitting in a local diner having breakfast while I looked over the information that Sebastian had provided me with the night before. The waitress serving me looked like that pop star Madonna, or tried to, as she was too short and plump to pull the look off properly and came across as vaguely sad instead, especially as she looked to be pushing thirty. Not that I was any expert on pop culture (I preferred the comforting heft of an old book to the flimsiness of a record, especially from someone like Madonna, who despite being the world's biggest pop star at the time, didn't interest me one bit, except for the fact that she was so successful, which to me, had to indicate dark dealings somewhere along the line because what other explanation could there be?).

Growing up, my brother and sister and I were pretty much shielded against outside influences, which meant no TV in the house, no radio (except the one my brother kept hidden, but rarely ever got the chance to play) and no newspapers either. It was all about the magic and the studying in our house. I'm sure you can imagine my sense of culture shock when I finally left Ireland. When I hit London, I was left reeling for months as I desperately tried to acclimatize myself to what was nothing short of an alien world to me. Six years later, I still struggled to understand how the world worked and why people were the way they were. Why they all acted so damn crazy most of the time. Therefore, waitress Madonna might have totally got why she was dressed like an overgrown teenager, but I certainly didn't, and I doubted I ever would.

"Pretty girl," the waitress said, smacking on that horrible chewing gum stuff with the sickly sweet smell. She was nodding down at the drawing of Jennifer Crow, which lay inside the open manila folder on the table next to my half eaten breakfast of bacon and eggs. "She your girlfriend or something?"

"My girlfriend?" I said. "A little young, don't you think?"

The waitress batted her false eyelashes and made a not so subtle show of running her gaze over me. "You don't look so old. I love that coat, is that like cyberpunk or something? You one of those? Those guys are pretty intense, though you don't look nerdy enough. Cyberpunks are just nerds really, aren't they, underneath those punk haircuts, which you don't have, and those black clothes, which you don't have either. Maybe you're not a cyberpunk. It's just the coat, I think." She stopped talking, probably because of the utter perplexity that I was looking at her with. "Oh hey, sorry, I was just talking. Sometimes I don't know when to shut up." She laughed a school girl laugh, which had to have been fake. If it wasn't, I pitied her.

"I'll call you when I need the check," I said, turning my attention back to the piece of paper in my hand, hoping the waitress would take the hint, which she did, shuffling off without saying another word. I didn't see her face, but no doubt she was offended. Offending people was like a specialty of mine, largely because I had little or no tolerance for the modern ways of most people. I couldn't help it. Everyone just seemed completely mad to me most of the time. Maybe everyone felt like that about everybody else as well. Whatever. It didn't make it any less true.

I went back to looking over the report (or whatever you wanted to call it) in my hand. In case you're wondering, the report didn't say very much. It gave a detailed physical description of Jennifer Crow, most of which I had already picked up from

the sketch of her, except her height (5'8), weight (110 lbs) and eye color (sable, but I already guessed that). She also apparently had a tattoo of a dragon on her back, but as I had no plans ever to see the girl topless, I didn't focus too much on that detail.

What interested me more in the report was the list of places Jennifer liked to hang out in. I was glad to see there weren't many. A couple of bars and a club called Aquarius, which the report described as a "hangout for New Romantics and people who liked to read their desperately dire poetry on stage."

I smiled upon reading that description and wondered who wrote the document. It was cold enough in tone to be Jennifer's mother, but I suspected it was her right-hand man, Sebastian who wrote it. He seemed sneering enough of anything human, including me. He went on to mention the name of some boy (Jasper Conrad) who "was infatuated with Miss Crow" and that "Miss Crow called this miscreant her boyfriend."

Again, I smiled, but this time not at Sebastian's sneering tone, but at the fact that I now understood at least part of the reason Jennifer had run away. Like most teenage girls, there was always a boy involved somewhere, even with vampire teenage girls. Like in that movie I watched the year before in LA, *The Lost Boys*, coincidentally also about vampires. The girl in it, Star was her name, wanted to run away with a human boy. She ended up getting killed, I think. Let's hope Jennifer's story doesn't end the same way, for my sake, if not for hers.

By the time I had finished my breakfast, I had decided to start my search for Jennifer Crow in the few bars that were listed in that report. I could throw her name around, and that of Jasper Conrad's, and see what came up. If nothing else, it would give me a chance to get to know the city a bit better. And who knows, maybe I would get lucky and find Jennifer and her boyfriend smooching in the corner of some dive bar.

There was no point in going to those places yet, however. It was too early in the morning, and given that Jennifer Crow was a vampire, she wouldn't have hung out in such places during the day. So I decided to wait until early evening before I started my search. At least then, I would have been more likely to run into people who worked or hung out at night, and therefore would have a better chance of knowing Jennifer Crow. In the meantime, I decided to spend the day traveling around the city, seeing the sights and gauging exactly what kind of city Blackham was.

I left the money for the food on the table, and as I was walking out of the diner, waitress Madonna said in a girlish voice, "See ya soon, cowboy," and I left shaking my head, wondering what she meant by that in all her arrested development.

Chapter 6

Black is the Color.

From the little research I had done on Blackham before I got there (a quick browse through a guide book at the airport, which made the city out to be up and

coming and culturally significant at the same time), I knew that it was divided in half by the Gadsten River. At the north end of the river, you had Bankhurst, where all the money was. I hadn't seen much of that side of the city yet, except on the cab ride from the airport, which didn't reveal much, except that it was constructed mostly of glass and steel (or so it seemed), and that the people who resided there had money. People like Angela Crow, I would imagine. She was a woman—excuse me, vampire—that appeared used to the finer things in life. The lifestyle and luxuries that only considerable wealth could buy, like a limousine and a driver. No doubt her living quarters were extravagant as hell, probably with a pantry stacked full of virgin girls to feast on whenever she got peckish. It was doubtful Miss Crow did much hunting for food. She probably had lackeys for that. On the other hand, it wouldn't have surprised me if she, in fact, did do her own hunting. Going by our recent encounter, she certainly seemed to have the predatory instincts in spades.

South of the river was Freetown, where I was now based. Going by the old buildings and winding streets, the general look of age and dilapidation everywhere, it wasn't hard to work out that the most unsavory parts of Blackham were located there in Freetown. And judging by the residents I saw as I rode the subway and then started walking down the streets of a neighborhood called Treymont, Freetown had no shortage of miscreants, both human and supernatural. It didn't surprise me that the supernatural fraternity in Blackham seemed to be gathered mostly there, in the darker parts of the city. It was the same in every city I had been in. Vampires may like to play high society, but most other supernatural beings did not. Walking the streets, I saw several different establishments that were clearly hangouts for a certain brand of supernatural. The biker bar ran by werewolves, for instance. The New Age hangouts that were just fronts for covens of witches being another example. In my experience, every supernatural had their own place where they liked to hang out. The one thing each place had in common, though, was that they were invariably located on the fringes, far enough away not to be bothered by the maddening crowd, but still close enough to pick off victims from said crowd.

So it was no real surprise that Jennifer Crow apparently gravitated towards Freetown as her favorite hangout spot. It was classic teenage rebellion really, assuming that I was right about her lavish background. I doubted Jennifer Crow wanted for anything, but she still felt the need to spend her time in a place that seemed to struggle for everything she took for granted. She was basically slumming it to piss mommy dearest off.

In Treymont, I located a bar called The Dive Down Under. Yes, really. It was the first bar mentioned in the report on Jennifer. And going by my first impressions of the outside, it seemed like a Goth's paradise. Its wood paneling was painted black, and a few characters dressed mostly in dark leather hung around outside, though to be fair they looked more punkish (or should that be cyberpunkish?) to me thanks to their choppy haircuts and the wraparound sunglasses they were all wearing, even though it was almost dark. Whatever the case, the kids (as they seemed to be) all turned their heads to look at me as I stood staring at the front of the pub like a lost tourist.

“You lost, cowboy?” one of them said, a young guy about eighteen with long, foppish dark hair and who wore a coat that hung down to his ankles.

Cowboy? Really? That was the second time that day someone had called me that, though I didn't know why because I can't say I looked much of anything like a cowboy. Maybe it was just the coat, I didn't know.

"Nice coat," another of them said, leaving me unsure if he was serious or not. With kids, it was hard to tell.

"Thanks," I said anyway, then stopped as I went to walk into the bar. "Listen, guys. Maybe you could help me out."

"You lose your fucking horse or something," the guy in the long trench coat said, and they all snickered, except the guy who said it, who stared my way through his dark wraparound shades, which I guess was supposed to unnerve me or something.

"No, no," I said. "The horse is fine. Tied him up around the corner back there. He's probably eating hay right about now. You know horses. They love the stuff."

All of them stared at me like I was a crazy person, though it was hard to tell through the wall to wall sunglasses. "Get the fuck out of here," the trench coat kid said as he fished out a pack of cigarettes and coolly popped one into his mouth.

"I'm actually just looking for somebody," I said, unfazed by the cold shoulders and wall of cool slammed down in front of me. "Her name's Jennifer Crow. Any of you know her?"

No one answered, but the kid in the trench coat lit his cigarette and then turned towards me, blowing smoke in my general direction. "Like I said. Get the fuck out of here."

I nodded, then smiled.

So it's going to be like that then, is it?

I would have walked away, but there was a girl there, small in stature, wearing a black dress with red Doctor Martin boots. The whole time, she was making a show of being bored and looking around her while her friend "dealt" with me, but when I mentioned Jennifer Crow's name, her head snapped around towards me as if she knew the name. Then she quickly looked away again. That was enough for me to deduce that she knew something. If not precisely where Jennifer was, then at least Jennifer herself.

The girl wasn't going to talk to me. Not unless I made her. Ordinarily, I didn't like to make people do things against their will. Just because I knew magic didn't mean I could use it on whoever I pleased to further my own ends like some sociopath. But this was a special case. My life was literally on the line, so if that girl knew something that could help me find Jennifer Crow and save me from being drained dry by a twelve hundred-year-old platinum blond vampire, then I could put whatever qualms I had aside easily enough.

Staring over at the girl (who was still making a point of not looking at me) I inwardly repeated the words to a spell that would basically give me full control over her. She would have to obey whatever I said to her (you can see how this magic thing could get dangerous in the wrong hands, can't you?). "Excuse me," I called over to her. "The girl in the dress. Can you come here, please?"

The girl turned her head towards me, a deep frown on her face, like a subtle force was exerting itself on her, and she didn't understand what it was. Of course, a subtle force was exerting itself on her. My intent, backed by my magic, though

she obviously didn't know that, which is why she looked so freaked out when she found herself walking towards me.

"What the fuck?" one of the boys said. "Donna, where the fuck are you going? Fuck that weirdo."

They're calling me a weirdo? The nerve.

Donna stopped right in front of me, that same look of confusion on her face as she looked up at me. "I don't want to talk to you," she said. "I don't know why I even came to you."

"That's okay, Donna," I told her reassuringly. "Why don't you just tell me what you know about Jennifer Crow and then you can go back to hanging out with your cool little gang again. Okay?"

She nodded, which caused her to scowl more deeply as she couldn't understand why she was bowing to the whims of a stranger. "Yes."

I smiled. "Good girl. Now tell me what you know."

"Tell him nothing, Donna," one of the boys said.

Pissed off at their interruptions, I gave them my best dark and menacing look, which isn't too hard for me because I tend to scowl a lot anyway as it just seems to fit most situations. The gang all turned their heads away from me after a moment, their former bravado now waned somewhat. Smiling again, I looked at Donna. "Go on, Donna. You can speak now."

Donna shook her head as if she didn't want to, but spoke anyway as she had no choice in the matter. "We hung out a few times, that's all. Sometimes we run in the same circles."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"Two days ago. There's an old tenement building over in Astoria." She stopped and shook her head like she was fighting against the control I was putting on her. To be sure she didn't break that control, I applied a smidgen more magic to it to tighten things up.

"Go on."

"It's in Amsterdam Street somewhere. A lot of artists hang out there. Jennifer runs with that crowd mostly."

"Do you know what Jennifer is, Donna?" I asked her, lowering my voice slightly. "Do you know what she is?"

"Yeah. She's just a rich girl from Bankhurst. But she's okay. I guess." She didn't seem to know what I was talking about.

"Okay. You've been very helpful, Donna. Thank you." I was about to release her from the spell I had cast upon her when her foot suddenly shot forward and she planted one of her hard, Doctor Martin boots into my balls, dropping me to my knees quicker than a silver bullet drops a werewolf. After that, little Donna of the small stature spun around and charged at her friends before wildly attacking them, screaming like a hellcat as she did so.

"Shit..." I said, wincing from the sickening pain in my testicles.

I should probably explain something here about magic. The thing is, there are a lot of paradoxes attached to magic. One of those paradoxes is this: If you use magic in front of the uninitiated (Sleepwalkers, with no knowledge that magic even exists), then there is a high probability that whatever spell you happen to cast will lead to some unfortunate consequences. The bigger the spell and the more magic

being used, the more disastrous the possible consequences. Which is why you had to be careful when using magic in public. Whether or not you chose to use your magic in public was dependent on how badly you wanted results, and at that point, I needed results. I knew there was a possibility that something could go wrong, but since the spell wasn't a particularly powerful one, I had decided to take the risk.

And then the girl I used magic on turned into a hellcat. Not literally, of course, but she was doing a good approximation of one as she swiped and clawed viciously at her friends, who were doing their best to get the hell away from her as they spilled out onto the street screaming and cursing in shock. As magical side effects went, I'd had worse happen, though my throbbing testicles would likely have disagreed.

I stood up and gingerly cupped my balls as if to make sure they hadn't been driven into my body by the force of Donna's kick, which thankfully they hadn't. "Okay then," I said, hobbling away from the pub and nodding at the pile of black, wriggling clothing on the pavement as I tried to ignore the screams. "Good talk guys. Thanks."

Hey, they wanted edgy? They just got it.

Chapter 7

Knock Knock.

I took a cab to Astoria, so I could nurse my swollen testicles in peace without a subway car full of people staring at me strangely as I made periodic faces of pain and discomfort. That girl had a kick on her, I'd give her that. She was also fearsome when she got started, as I was sure her friends would no doubt attest to when they grilled her on what the hell she was playing at attacking them like that (luckily for them and her, the spell would have worn off quickly). And she would either tell her friends that she didn't know what came over her, or that I was somehow controlling her and making her do things. Either answer would not be satisfactory or consoling to her friends, I was guessing.

You see why I don't like to use my magic too often? Or at least not directly on other people? Shit can happen. Then I end up feeling guilty for the other people involved. Like Donna. She was probably a decent kid. Now her friends would think she was mad. They might even disown her. And all because I needed information. And because my life was on the line, of course. Can't forget that. That gave me some leeway, right?

"Where you headed?" the cab driver asked when I got in.

"Astoria," I said. "Amsterdam Street."

The cabbie, a gray-haired man in his fifties with a gruff disposition, shook his head as he pulled out into traffic. "So which is it then, artist or junky?"

I made eye contact with the gravel-voiced cabbie in the rearview mirror just as another wave of sickening pain traveled up from my groin and into my lower belly.

It must have looked to him like I was trying to take a shit in the back seat of his precious cab. "Excuse me?"

"Are you stringing out in the back of my fucking cab? Cause if you are—"

"No! I'm not strung out. Jesus, I'm just in a bit of...pain, that's all."

The cabbie seemed to stare at me a long time in the mirror, which made me nervous because he wasn't looking at the road. "Sorry, buddy. I thought you were a junky. The only people who want to go to Amsterdam Street are junkies and artists. I'm taking it you're an artist?"

"An artist? Of sorts, yeah."

"What's your thing then? Painting? Sculpture? Not that fucking pussy performance art that's everywhere at the minute?"

Could slinging magic be construed as performance art? Possibly. "I'm just looking for somebody there."

"Let me guess. Family member?"

"Sort of."

The cabbie shook his head as he made a right turn into a market street that was full of stalls stacked with fresh food and bootleg clothing. As Halloween was a day away, pumpkins were in abundance, as was the amount of people there to buy them. "Thought so. You wouldn't believe how many kids run to that place like it's a fucking mecca, excuse my French. Who is it, your sister? Brother?"

"Sister," I said.

"She a junky?"

"Yeah. She is." Well, she was. A blood junky.

"I'm sorry, man. I hope you find her."

"So do I."

The cabbie concentrated on the road for a few minutes until we were on the freeway heading for Astoria. "I couldn't help noticing your accent," he said. "Irish, right?"

"Well spotted," I smiled, going through the motions. I'm not big on small talk. It always seems pointless to me, to talk for the sake of it to complete strangers.

"I'm Irish myself, you know. Well, third generation anyway. My great grandparents on my father's side are from Cork. What part you from?"

"Fermanagh."

"That's up north, right?"

"That's right."

"You know, my father told me once that—"

That's about as much as I heard before a sudden stabbing pain in my head made me cry out and grab my skull with both hands. "Jesus Christ..."

"Knock, knock, August."

It was a voice in my head. A voice I knew straight away. Angela Crow's voice. "How are you doing this?"

"What?" the cabbie asked, thinking I was talking to him. "I ain't doing nothing buddy."

"We exchanged fluids, remember?" Angela Crow said.

The stabbing pain finally stopped, and I let out a breathe. "A migraine," I said to the cabbie. "Just give me a minute here."

The cabbie stared at me in the mirror and nodded. "Sure, buddy. Take your time."

"You can enter my head whenever you want now?" I said silently to the vampire in my head.

"Temporarily, yes. We can arrange to make it permanent if you like." She gave a small laugh that echoed unpleasantly around the inside of my skull.

"No thanks. What do you want? I'm out looking for your daughter."

"I need her back by tonight."

"Tonight? Why? I've only just got my first lead. It mightn't pan out."

"Then find another one, August. As long as Jennifer is back in my possession by tonight."

Or what? I felt like saying but didn't. "Your possession?"

"She is my daughter. She belongs to me."

I shook my head at her cold arrogance, a trait that reminded me so much of my father I had to grit my teeth to keep my anger down. "Whatever you say. Why do you need her back so urgently?"

"Do your job, August, and you will find me a generous benefactor. I could set you up in this town, help you network. Introduce you to all the players."

"And why would I need a benefactor? I don't plan on staying here."

"Oh, you will stay, August. This town is made for you. You'll see, but only if you do as I ask of you. If you don't..." She trailed off and I shook my head.

"I don't owe you anything, you know. Not a damn thing."

"Don't be naive, August. You owed me the second you invited me into your Sanctum. The second you set foot in this city. My city."

"And that's really how you work things, is it?"

She laughed again, and I found myself wincing at the sound. "August dear, you will soon learn that this whole town works like that."

A second later, I felt her presence disappear from my head as if she had hung up the phone on me.

"You feeling better there, buddy?" the cab driver asked. "We're in Amsterdam Street now."

"Worse actually," I muttered as I looked out the window just as the cab stopped at the start of a wide street that had a mishmash of houses and tenements running up both sides, with storefronts in between. I paid the cabbie and got out onto the road.

"I hope you find your sister," the cabbie said through the open window as he pulled away again.

"So do I," I said, looking around. "So do I."

Chapter 8

Franklyn.

Amsterdam Street felt like walking into a strange sort of twilight zone. On the one hand, you had all these grimy, dilapidated pre-war houses and tenement

buildings that looked like they needed pulling down before they fell by themselves. And on the other hand, you had recently constructed buildings, all shiny and new and looking like they belonged in a different part of town. Most of the new buildings were business premises that sold art supplies and books and records and fashionably used clothing. It was like the Bohemian set had decided to infringe upon a random, drug-addled neighborhood and set up shop there.

The people I saw there seemed to be mostly young, many of them emaciated whips in need of a good meal. It was hard to tell who the drug addicts were and who the so called artists were, since everyone slinking about on that street looked much the same to me, and I guessed this was because there was a lot of crossover between the junk and the art. It certainly seemed that way in similar places I'd been in the rest of the world, where often being an artist also apparently meant you had to be a junky as well. Amsterdam Street appeared no different in that respect.

Donna had said Jennifer was last seen hanging out in one of the tenements, but the problem was, she never specified which one because she didn't know. I nodded to myself, realizing I would have to pound the street until I came across someone who knew Jennifer and could hopefully point me to her or at least the building she supposedly stayed in around there.

As I worked my way up the right side of the street, I ended up trying to elicit information from half a dozen different people who barely seemed to know what day it was, never mind anything else. Thinking to myself that it might prove more fruitful to talk to someone who was on the same planet at least, I crossed the street, my interest spiked by what appeared to be a New Age/Occult type store.

Like every other such shop that I'd seen (and I'd seen many all over the world), this one had the requisite occult tomes displayed in the small window, along with small glass jars and bottles filled with God knows what, artfully placed around some black candles and witchy looking stick figures made out of twigs and twine. From experience, I knew most of those shops sold or procured little of any real occult value. Maybe a few rare books on magic if you were lucky, but that's about it. Most of the time the stores were just gateways so the owners could try to upsell the customers with psychic readings and seances. Such shops were also popular with those who liked to dabble in ritual magic. Hedge magicians as they were also known. Individuals or groups (especially cults) who sourced rituals from old books, sometimes with disastrous consequences, as when they inadvertently summoned dark spirits and got themselves killed. Most did the rituals for the thrill of it, for the taste of danger that came with it. Others took things a bit more seriously, but that didn't make them any less foolhardy.

There's a reason why it takes so long (decades or more) just to get to the point where you can start to get a handle on magic and occult practices in general. Magic as a property is immensely complex and hard to control, even for those skilled in it. Magic never stops being dangerous and foolhardy, even when you know what you're doing. Of course, that didn't stop the uninitiated from dabbling, usually to their detriment. There didn't exist the same respect for magic as their once was. Now anyone who read a book on the occult or who owned a Ouija board thought they could play around with magic.

And so it was that I entered the little occult store with a scathing disinterest in what was on display inside, crinkling my nose at the expected, sickly sweet smell of incense that tried to make me feel like I was walking into some darkly sacred place that was filled with all things strange and dangerous and enticing, when in reality, it just made me feel nauseated. My boots sunk into the plush red carpet tiles as I walked further into the shop, briefly glancing at a bookshelf and recognizing the expected titles from the likes of Crowley, Mathers, and the newest guy on the scene, the Satanist, Anton Le Fey. Such figures were always present in popular culture, having found a way to exploit people's ignorance for their own gain, which was usually money and infamy.

"May I help you, sir?"

A small man in a black suit from a different era stood at the back of the shop in front of a wooden counter, his hands clasped in front of him as he looked at me expectantly with a pleasant smile on his face that didn't mask his apparent curiosity in me, maybe because I didn't look like his usual class of customer. Which is to say I wasn't pale-skinned, sullen and dressed completely in black.

I returned the little man's pleasant smile. "Maybe," I said, fishing the sketch of Jennifer Crow out of my coat pocket and showing it to him. "You know this girl, by any chance? I was told she hangs out around here."

He looked at the sketch for a brief second, then nodded. "She comes in here with her friends sometimes. Her boyfriend usually."

Finally, some progress.

"Do you know which building she hangs out in around here?"

The shop owner, who I placed in his late fifties going by the lined face and white hair, looked into me for a moment with his sharp blue eyes. "I'm sensing you're no stranger to the arcane practices. No stranger at all."

I laughed as if to dismiss him. "And you can tell, right?"

He nodded and held out his hand. "My name is Peter Franklyn." I shook his hand, surprised at his firm grip. "And yes, you could say I can tell these things."

Looking harder into him, I saw that Peter Franklyn had hidden depths. Magic of a sort that he kept well concealed. "Let me guess. You're a medium, right?"

A slight smile appeared on his face as he nodded. "That is one of the gifts I am blessed with, yes."

Gifts? I never saw magic as a gift, not with the toll it extracted on the long-term user. I saw magic as more of an addiction, something you couldn't do without after a while. Something you rather wouldn't have at all half the time, as it seemed to bring more pain than pleasure, more heartache than joy. "And what of your other gifts?" I asked him.

Again, Peter Franklyn smiled. "To only be revealed to those in need of them," he said. "You don't seem to be in need of what I have, Mr..."

"Creed. August Creed. And how would you know what I need or don't need?"

That deflective smile again. "Tell me, why are you seeking the girl? You are certainly not one of her ilk. Perhaps you work for her family?"

"Something like that."

Franklyn nodded and went behind the wooden counter, producing a teapot from underneath. "Can I interest you in some tea? It's a special blend of my own. Good for opening the chakras."

"My chakras are open enough, thanks," I said as he went ahead and poured himself one into a small china cup. "You seem familiar with Jennifer. Does she talk to you when she comes in here?"

Sitting cross-legged on a stool, Franklyn sipped from his tea cup and then held it under a saucer in his other hand. "Sometimes. She comes in here after dark, obviously. I keep the shop open late most nights. Many of my customers don't come in until then. The days here are slow."

"I can imagine. What does she talk about?"

Franklyn stared at me a moment. "Do you mean her harm, Mr. Creed?"

"Harm?" I shook my head. "No, of course not."

"It's just you seem to have a deep interest in her."

"Listen," I said, holding up my hands. "Her mother asked me to find her as apparently Jennifer has done a runner from home. I have no interest in hurting her. Although I will admit, she intrigues me somewhat."

"Why?"

"The same reason she does you, I'd imagine. Someone of her background, fleeing to a place like this, no offense."

"None taken."

"It makes me wonder why. It might even make me want to help her."

"Help her?"

"If she needs help, that is."

"And if she doesn't?"

I shrugged. "Then I call mommy dearest to come pick her up."

Franklyn took a long, contemplative breath before placing his cup and saucer on the counter. "I believe your motives are genuine, Mr. Creed, which is why I might tell you where to find Jennifer."

"Might?"

"I'll be frank with you, Mr. Creed. I lost a daughter once, in a horrible accident that haunts me to this day."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said as I thought of my own dead family members.

"Thank you," he said. "Jennifer reminds me of my dead daughter, enough for me to feel protective of her, vampire or not."

"So why are you going to tell me where to find her then?" I didn't get it.

That enigmatic little smile creased his face again. "Like I said, I have other gifts. Your motives are pure, it seems. I trust you will do the right thing by Jennifer."

"I never planned on doing anything else," I said. "Though I make no promises. There are other factors involved here."

"There always is, isn't there?"

"Look, Mr. Franklyn, it's like this. If I find her, I'll talk to her and see what she wants to do. I'll do my best to help her out. But if I don't find her soon, then her cold-blooded mother is going to flood this neighborhood with vamps, who will tear the place apart, including this shop of yours until they find Jennifer, and I don't think that's a scenario any of us wants to see go down. With me, at least she has a chance."

Franklyn maintained eye contact with me for a long time it seemed, then he nodded. "There is a tenement building at the very end of this street that sits on its own on a patch of waste ground. Jennifer squats in there with her boyfriend, who I

don't care for at all, by the way. There are others in the building as well that come and go. I've never visited the place so..." He trailed off just as the phone on the counter started ringing.

"All right," I said, shaking hands with him again. "Thanks for your help, Mr. Franklyn."

"Call me Peter. And do let me know about Jennifer."

"Sure, I'll let you know. Peter."

He picked up the phone and covered the mouthpiece, his blue eyes fixing on me. "My gifts have a darker side, Mr. Creed. I hope you never have to see that side."

I stared back at him a moment, then smiled and nodded.

Franklyn gave me his enigmatic smile once more before finally turning his attention to the phone, and I left the occult shop feeling like I had made a new friend.

Chapter 9

First Contact.

The dilapidated tenement building was at the very end of Amsterdam Street where Franklyn had said it was. It sat on its own, back from the other buildings with about twenty feet of waste ground on either side of it, the buildings that once stood there long since demolished. Graffiti, old and new, was scrawled all over the face of the building, and every window had a weathered wooden board over it. The building did appear to have a working front door, though, so I walked up the worn concrete steps and knocked on it. As I waited for an answer, I stood looking around at the neighboring houses. Most of them were in such bad shape it was difficult to tell if they were occupied or not. A few young children were playing ball in the street, so I assumed they lived in there somewhere, the last dregs of the street's longtime occupants, holding on in the face of imminent gentrification from investors looking to create the next trendy neighborhood so they could line their pockets.

There's no stopping progress, I thought to myself, turning my attention back to the front door with the few strips of peeling blue paint on it hanging on for dear life. I had knocked three times already and gotten no response. Not that I expected Jennifer Crow to open the door in the middle of the day, but I half-expected some response from whoever else lived in there with her, if indeed she was in there at all.

After banging the door with my fist a few more times, I finally heard a lock open on the other side of the door and then the door itself was cracked open. "Yeah," said a young but gruff sounding voice through the gap in the door. "What do you want? There's no dope here. Score somewhere else."

The door went to close, and I quickly jammed it with my boot, coming face to face with the person on the other side, who had long stringy dark hair hanging over most of his face. "Hey, wait a minute," I said, trying to sound non-

threatening, even though jamming the door open didn't exactly make me seem so. "I'm just here to see Jennifer. Is she here?"

The boy, around nineteen or so, scowled back at me through his hair. "There's no Jennifer here, man. Get your foot away from the door. I have a fucking knife here. I'll cut you man, I mean it."

Jesus, what is this kid wired up on?

"Hey, relax," I said, wondering now if I was going to have to use magic to gain entry. "I just need to talk to Jennifer, that's all. I have something important to tell her. Is she here?"

The kid went quiet for a second as he continued to lean his weight on the door. "You don't look right to me, man."

I doubted anything looked right to him, having just glimpsed how dilated his pupils were, which probably meant he was speeding his tits off. "All right, how about I just take my boot away from the door and we can—"

The door slammed in my face the second I removed my foot from it. "Son of a bitch!"

I stood there shaking my head, looking around in annoyance as I considered what to do next. From what little I got from the kid who answered the door, it seemed that Jennifer Crow was in there. And if she wasn't, it was more than likely that someone in there knew where to find her. There was no point knocking the door again. The psycho kid from before certainly wouldn't be opening it. I could have just blasted the door off its hinges using magic, but that would have attracted too much attention. Besides, the kids playing in the street were eyeballing me, and I didn't want any more magic related injuries or unfortunate accidents to happen just because my magic use was witnessed by Sleepwalkers.

So I did the obvious thing and went around the back of the building where I found the back door to be unlocked (after I stepped through the mounds of garbage leading up to it, that is).

"Idiots," I said, shaking my head as I barged in through the door and into a back hallway that smelled dank and damp, then into a kitchen area that smelled even worse, as if there was a compost heap in the corner somewhere. The place stank to high heaven, exactly how you would expect a place occupied by a bunch of dirty kids to smell. Dusty bulbs in the kitchen and hallway bathed the place in a dull light that did little to take away from the general gloom of the place.

Indeed, it was because of this gloom that I almost didn't see the shadow figure running down the main hallway towards me, something shiny in their hand that I realized a tad too late was a knife. It was the creepy speed freak who answered the door to me a few minutes before. A screech left his mouth as he came barreling into the kitchen and charged at me with the knife pointed at my belly. Surprised by this sudden attack, I was somehow able to whip myself sideways just in time so the blade of the knife glanced off my trench coat instead (I mentioned it was made from demon skin, right? Everyone should have one).

The strung-out kid tried to push the knife through my coat, but the blade wouldn't penetrate, so I took advantage and grabbed the kid's scrawny wrist with both hands before snapping his wrist sharply to the side (after five years of traveling and quite a few violent encounters along the way, I had managed to pick up a few moves which I combined with the advice Ray had given me before I left

Ireland, which was, and I quote, Keep hitting the fuckers until they go down, then run like Billy-o!).

The kid screamed as I violently twisted his wrist, causing him to drop the knife, which clanged onto the dirty broken-tiled floor. The kid hit the floor a second later. "You broke my fucking wrist!" he yelped.

"No, I didn't," I told him, keeping the pressure on the wrist lock as I planted a boot in the center of his chest, just hard enough to keep him pinned. "You would know if I did. You would have heard the bone snap, for a start. And you would be screaming the place down right now, not complaining that I'd broken your wrist when I haven't."

"Who the fuck are you anyway, man? What do you want?"

"Those are good questions."

Questions I was about to answer when another voice sounded from down the hall, and I snapped my head around to look. A lean looking guy was walking down the hallway, dressed in blue jeans and nothing else, tribal tattoos covering most of his arms and shoulders. Long brown hair was swept back from his high forehead. He didn't seem to be particularly put out by my presence as he lingered in the doorway staring at me with intense brown eyes.

"Sorry to intrude," I said, still holding my knife-attacker down. "I'm looking for Jennifer."

"You one of them?" he asked.

"No, but going by that stake in your hand, you're obviously expecting 'one of them'."

The guy, who looked more in his early twenties than teens, fully revealed the wooden stake he had been trying to hide behind his leg. "Who are you?" he asked, pointing the stake at me.

"My names Creed," I said, finally allowing the kid on the floor to get up, which he did, scurrying out of the kitchen like an injured goblin. "I'm here to see Jennifer."

"Why?"

"I'd prefer to tell her that. Who are you?"

"Jasper. Her boyfriend."

I nodded. "Of course, yeah. Well, Jasper, I'm not leaving here until I speak to Jennifer, and since I know she's slumbering in this place somewhere for the next few hours, how about you find us some whiskey and we can go and drink and chat for a while?" I smiled. "How's that sound? And in case you're wondering, I'm not here to hurt anybody. Your paranoid, strung-out mate here attacked me, not the other way around. I'm only here to help if I can."

Jasper stared at me for a long moment as he twirled the stake around with his fingers. Then he motioned with his head. "Follow me."

"Good lad," I said smiling.

Chapter 10

Jasper The Great.

Jasper brought me into the living room at the front of the apartment. The room was medium sized and stank of weed and incense. Thick black curtains provided extra protection from any daylight that might have penetrated the boards outside. The walls were painted a deep purple color that might as well have been black. Light came from the dozens of candles sat around the room, most of which were gathered around the large stone fireplace that still had a few logs inside smoldering away. Above the mantle, attached to the wall, was the skull of a large horned animal, a steer it looked like. Hanging from the horns were various small leather pouches and what appeared to be amulets of the kind you would expect to find in a shop like Peter Franklyn's, the leather pouches probably filled with herbs and whatever else that were supposed to have magical properties but didn't. Same for the amulets. A quick magic detection spell told me that. Nothing more than costume jewelry, although I passed no remarks about it. If people wanted to kid themselves with that stuff, that was their business.

I walked into the room and sat down on a busted leather couch, noticing that there was a magic circle drawn on the floor with red paint. A quick inspection of the symbols painted on the outside of the circle told me that enough of them were genuine to enable some magic to be generated with the right rituals and spells. It made me wonder about the kind of ritual magic being done by Jasper and his friends. In my experience, dabblers in magic only did so out of pure self-interest. They would try to use magic to increase their bank accounts, make someone fall in love with them or maybe even get revenge on someone who pissed them off. In their haste to get what they wanted, they often completely missed the dangers of what they were doing, and they would end up making deals with malevolent entities, or their spells would have disastrous side effects, often resulting in one or multiple deaths.

"So tell me," I said to Jasper as he retrieved a half empty bottle of whiskey from off the mantle, having just found two glasses in the room somewhere. "What's your interest in ritual magic?"

Jasper came and sat down on the opposite end of the couch, filling one of the dirty looking glasses with whiskey and handing it to me, which might as well have been a glass of warm piss as far as my face was concerned, though Jasper ignored my look of distaste as he filled his own glass and then put the bottle on the floor, which was in danger of being lost amongst the forest of bottles already there. "What do you know about magic?" he asked, looking over the rim of his glass at me with darkly hooded eyes.

"Enough to know that it's dangerous." I stared at the glass in my hand for several seconds before drumming up the courage to drink from it, hoping the whiskey would sterilize whatever germs and bacteria were likely crawling all over it.

"Only if you don't know what you're doing."

"You sound confident." Too confident if you'd asked me. Magic likes nothing better than to knock people off their pedestals without them even knowing there was a rope around their necks the whole time.

Jasper shrugged like some rock star with a vastly inflated opinion of himself. "Not everyone knows how to ride the lightning, you know what I'm saying. It takes a certain... talent."

Ride the lightning? Is he serious?

"What kind of rituals do you do?" I asked him.

He cocked his head to one side. "Private ones."

I nodded. "Sure. Private ones. Of course."

A frown appeared on his face as he slowly drank from his glass. "So why the hell are you here...what's your name again?"

"Creed. August Creed."

"Who says Jennifer even needs your help anyway?"

"Have you met her mother?"

"Once, when she came here looking for Jenny. Jenny wasn't here, and her mother threatened to set her guard dog on me if I didn't tell them where she was."

He shook his head. "Fucking crazy bitch."

"Did you tell her where Jennifer was?"

He raised his chin. "What do you think?"

"How are you still alive then?"

"You know what an Entrapment Spell is?" He waited a second for an answer and then shook his head as if it was too much to ask that I knew what he was talking about.

If indeed Jasper didn't just run for his life when confronted by Angela Crow, frankly, I was surprised that he was able to pull off such a spell at all. He must have set the trap beforehand, then activated it later, which still would have taken a fair amount of power that for most adepts would have taken years to master. It made me wonder if Jasper was doing deals with low-level demons or other entities in exchange for power. If he was, it was foolish of him and would almost certainly end in him dying or losing his soul. Or both. Most likely both. But I wasn't his keeper and as such was under no obligation to waste my breath trying to warn him of the dangers.

"Does Jennifer play with magic also?" I asked.

"What's it to you anyway, man?" he said, suddenly sitting forward, staring at me like he was trying to scare me with his awesome power.

"Relax," I said. "I'm just doing a job here. Angela Crow asked me to find her daughter and bring her back to her."

Jasper leaped off the couch and stood with his chest pushed out. "Well that isn't fucking happening, so you might as well leave right now."

After placing my half empty glass on the floor, I held up both hands in a supplicating gesture. "I'm afraid I can't do that, Jasper."

"Oh yeah. We'll fucking see about that, then, won't we?" He took a step back and brought his arms around in a very dramatic way, holding his hands as if he was trying to conjure something from midair, at the same time beginning to mutter words that he could only have learned from a spell book, or if someone or something had taught him them.

"What are you doing?" I asked him. "I wouldn't do that, Jasper."

His face had taken on a darkly focused expression as his eyes bored into me, his spell, whatever it was, almost complete.

Enough of this nonsense.

Just as I felt the weakly powered magic begin to emanate from him, I held out my hand and used my own magic to block the spell he was trying to cast on me.

"What?" he said, unable to understand why his Gandalf routine had no effect on me.

"I'm blocking your spell, Jasper. You might as well stop now before you pop a blood vessel."

Jasper let out a cry of frustration and then came flying at me with his fists instead. Before his knuckles could bruise my face, however, I switched the focus of my magic and created a minor blast of energy that sent Jasper flying back a few feet before crash-landing on his ass. He got back up quickly but stayed where he was across the room, staring at me with a newfound level of wariness. "What the fuck?"

"I told you to stop."

"Where'd you learn how to do that?" he asked, most of his hostility now replaced by the excitement of witnessing and feeling the effects of a power greater than his own.

"In a place you probably wouldn't have lasted a day in before you cracked under the pressure," I said, thinking of the long hours my father used to force me to practice, and the mental and emotional torture that went along with it.

"Can you teach me?"

Jesus. Why are people so power hungry these days?

I hardly knew what to say to him except, "No."

He was about to plead further when a girl's voice interrupted him. "Who is this guy, Jasper?"

It was Jennifer Crow, in the flesh finally. She was standing in the doorway wearing a black lace dress that seemed to suit her more than just about any dress I'd ever seen on anybody except my mother before she died. Jennifer Crow looked even more beautiful than she came across in the sketch I had of her. Even if she wasn't a vampire and didn't have that effervescent beauty that all vamps seem to have, she would still have been beautiful. It was then that I realized why I found myself so taken in by Jennifer Crow, even though I had never met her until then. She reminded me of my dead sister, Roisin. My sister had the same dark, lustrous hair, and the same bottomless eyes. Our mother's eyes.

Before Jasper could spout off any bullshit about who or what he thought I was, I stood up and introduced myself to the girl. "Hey," I said, trying to come across like I was just there to offer my help. "My name is August Creed."

Jennifer stared at me with suspicion. "Did my mother send you here?"

"She asked me to find you, bring you back to her, but—" I held up a hand as I could see she was about to go hostile on me, and as she was a pure blooded vampire (and therefore possessed of frightening speed and strength amongst other things, even at her young age), I didn't want her getting too upset by someone she probably saw as just an extension of her mother, the person she had run away from in the first place. "—I was hoping maybe we could resolve the situation to everyone's satisfaction."

"Oh really," she said. "And just how do you plan on doing that?"

I stared over at her. "Well, I guess that all depends on you, Jennifer."

Chapter 11

Babylon Calling.

Jennifer Crow stared over at me for long moments, quite composed I thought, for one so young...and for one being so rudely awakened from her slumber. She could have been forgiven for being a tad more tetchy about things, but for whatever reason she didn't seem to view me as a threat to her. I wasn't sure if that made the girl a good judge of character, or just plain arrogant, as many vampires tend to be in their dealings with humans. For the sake of peace, and also because I found myself trusting the girl, I chose to believe she saw that I was telling the truth. More than that, it was clear she wanted away from her mother and was desperate enough to hear out a complete stranger who had practically broken into her home (home away from home at least) and assaulted two of her housemates, one of which was her boyfriend.

Just how bad was this girl's life? I wondered. What made her so reluctant to go back home?

I hoped it was something other than just good ole teen angst. If it wasn't, and Jennifer was acting out for attention so she could piss off her mother, then there would be nothing for me to do except hand her over. I was pretty certain her situation was about more than that, though, as I wouldn't have felt the need to care otherwise, even though I didn't know why exactly I cared yet. I just knew that I did and that I was justified in doing so. Call it magic. Call it intuition. They're one in the same anyhow.

"Jasper, would you leave us alone, please, babe?" Jennifer said to her boyfriend.

"What?" Jasper exclaimed. "You think I'm going to leave you alone with this guy?" He rushed over and stood beside her like some sort of tattooed guardian, even though we both knew he couldn't stop me from doing a single thing. "This fucking dude knows magic, baby. He's dangerous."

"So am I," Jennifer said throwing me a look before turning to Jasper and kissing him lightly on the lips. "I'll be fine. Wait in my room." She looked at me again. "I'm sure this won't take long."

I didn't respond to her comment. Instead, I sat back down on the couch and waited for her to finish reassuring her clueless boyfriend. I say clueless because he was dabbling in things he didn't understand, not even a little bit. If he did, he wouldn't have been doing what he was doing, which was making deals with spirits of the Underworld. Maybe not demons, as I doubt he had the skill or knowledge to conjure one, but most certainly with one of the many dark spirits that haunt the outskirts of the Underworld, souls who for whatever reason didn't quite make it into the Underworld itself and ended up lost and trapped in the fringes. Some of those spirits can be contacted if reached out to in the right way. My father, during my long training, used to make me (and my brother and sister) summon such dark spirits so that we could learn how to control them. I was twelve years old the first time I summoned one of those spirits. It was a terrifying experience and one

which never got any easier the more times my father forced me to do it. Quite often, he would take over and command certain things from the spirit, things I wasn't allowed to hear. He even invented a spell to render me temporarily deaf, just to be sure. To this day, I still don't know what he demanded of the spirits. Neither do I care. The point is, Jasper was accepting power from a spirit whose only goal would be to bring him down in some unfortunate way, the endgame being death and the capture of his soul so the spirit could feed upon it (pickings in the dark fringes are meager). What Jasper was clearly enjoying now was a small taste of power that would turn sour soon enough and slowly melt his life away until there was nothing left.

Jasper finally left the room after giving me a final look that said he would be somehow watching me, which I ignored, thinking he might just deserve what was coming to him for being so bloody stupid. When he was gone, Jennifer walked to the red brick fireplace and stood facing me, her dark eyes as steady as her mothers, though not as cold. Nowhere near. "I suppose you think I'm just some spoiled, rich bloodsucker who enjoys running away from home?" she said.

"Maybe, in the beginning," I said, liking how direct she was. I was no fan of beating around bushes either. "When your mother first came to me, that's what I thought. But the longer your mother hung around, the more I understood why someone would want to get far away from her. Then I saw a sketch of you that came with a report. Something about you captured the attention of my...intuition, shall we say."

She raised her thick eyebrows and smiled a little. "Your intuition? Okay. So what did your intuition tell you, August Creed?"

"It's hard to define these types of feelings. Maybe I just sympathize with anyone who has to endure the harsh reality of being controlled by a despot parent."

She shook her head emphatically. "Not controlled. Not anymore. And what would you know about it anyway?"

"More than you think," I said, my eyes firmly on hers for long seconds.

Jennifer nodded. "So you get it."

"I do."

"Did you run away much?" she asked, sitting down on the edge of the hearth, more relaxed now, but still poised to spring if she had to.

I snorted humorlessly. "I'm still running away." That came out more blunt and honest than I expected. For a while there, I thought I had convinced myself that what I was doing wasn't running from my past, but somehow traveling into the future (or stagnating in the present). Whatever the case, I just knew then that the truth was much simpler: I was still on the run.

"I haven't really ran away, you know," she admitted, her demeanor becoming despondent. "I just needed space from my mother and her crazy fucking world. She knows that, but she enjoys the drama of trying to fetch me back home again." She paused and stared at the floor for a second. "The truth is, there's nowhere I could go where she wouldn't find me eventually."

"So you keep moving. Don't let her catch up to you."

Her dark eyes focused in on me. Her look was almost as devastating as her mother's but in a much better way. Certainly not as withering. But powerfully captivating. "Is that what you did? Is that what you're doing?"

I nodded slowly. "Maybe, yeah."

"And how is that working out for you?"

I almost didn't want to answer that. "The demons are never far away, no matter where you go."

"My point exactly."

I smiled. "For one so young, you seem...wise."

"I had to grow up pretty fast, believe me."

"I know the feeling."

She smiled then, warmly, as if she hadn't properly connected with anyone in a long time. Truth be told, it felt good to talk to someone who seemed to understand the way things were. I hadn't discussed my past with anyone but my uncle in the last six years. "So," she said. "What did my mother threaten to do to you if you didn't bring me back?"

"It was pretty clear she would drink me dry if I failed."

She smirked and shook her head. "Crazy fucking bitch. Cross Countess Bathory with Alexis from Dynasty and that would go some way to describing my mother. She didn't get the name The Crimson Crow for nothing."

I laughed. "The Crimson Crow. An apt name if there ever was one, I'd say."

"Man," Jennifer said. "It's not even fucking funny. I don't think I can take centuries more of her craziness. Seriously."

"Are you serious?" I asked her. "If you are, I can arrange for you to disappear. Not even your mother would ever find you. No one would."

She stood up slowly and stared at me hard for a moment. "You're serious."

"You ever heard of Babylon?"

"The ancient city? Yes. If my mother did nothing else for me, she at least got me a good education."

"And did that education extend as far as the arcane and the true nature of the universe?"

"Not really," she said, her brow furrowing as she probably wondered where I was going with this.

"Babylon still exists, but in another dimension. I can arrange passage for you to go there. Your mother would never know."

Jennifer's eyes widened now. "I can hear your heartbeat. You're not lying."

"No."

"Holy shit."

"So are you interested?" It was a rhetorical question as she was pacing back and forth in front of me now, probably considering all the possibilities and ramifications of what I'd just offered her. You might also be wondering at this point, why I wasn't strolling around the great architecture of Babylon myself if I was so desperate to escape my past and the simple reason for that is because I wanted to see this world first before I hightailed it to another. Now that I had seen most of this world, maybe I would consider going with Jennifer to Babylon. I could think of worse people to travel there with.

Jennifer stopped pacing to look at me. "You'd do all that for me?" she asked.

I nodded after a moment. "I would. Just you, though. No Jasper."

She shook her head dismissively. "Forget Jasper. I just hang with him sometimes. He thinks that makes us fucking boyfriend and girlfriend or something."

"All right," I said, standing. "I'll make the arrangements. You'll be going to Ireland first. The only person I know who can get you passage to Babylon is my uncle, and he lives there. In Ireland, I mean."

Jennifer gave me a nervous smile, and for the first time since entering the room, she looked vulnerable, not to mention her age. "Will you be going with me, Creed?"

I shook my head after a moment. "I don't know yet."

And that was the truth.

Chapter 12

Photograph.

The timing of everything seemed fortuitous. I had been considering going off-world for a while up until then, and now I had the perfect excuse to do so. But something was stopping me, and I wasn't sure what it was. Clarity maybe. A rare glimpse into the reality of my own existence, one which was, for a change, free from the self-deceit and delusion I had been laboring under for so long, telling myself that staying on the move was the only thing for me to do, despite the emptiness of such an existence.

A truth my Uncle Ray had seen all along. That's why he kept setting up those encounters for me wherever I went in the world, knowing they would force me to go deeper into the reality of my existence as I went about helping people and using my magic skills to do so. Ray knew I didn't have a purpose and that my existence held little of any meaning. Personally, I was mostly fine with that aimlessness, choosing not to care. But then I would end up helping someone on behalf of Ray, and however long the job lasted, I would feel different. I would feel energized, purposeful, like what I was doing held real meaning. In helping Jennifer, that sense of purpose had returned, and I felt once again like I was doing what I was meant to be doing. But I knew, as soon as the job was over, that the old sense of meaninglessness would sink in again, and my feet would start itching once more. Then I would be off on the road again until Ray would decide to maneuver me into doing another job.

As I walked around the Sanctum on Poker Street, exploring the many rooms (and hidden rooms) within—marveling at the amount of arcane material lying around still (left there on purpose, no doubt, by Ray, in his continuing effort to get me to lay down roots)—I realized that it was that sense of purpose I now had which was making me doubt my desire to keep on the move, and to head to Babylon with Jennifer. I also knew that if I did go with Jennifer, it wouldn't be long before she never saw me again because I would be off when I hit Babylon, pounding the roads that would take me to strange but familiar places, exploring cities and out of the way spaces that would ultimately serve only as marker points on my aimless, never-ending journey around the universe.

Sitting on the bare wood floor in one of the upstairs rooms (the room piled floor to ceiling with old books and wooden crates whose contents at that point were a mystery), I came across an old photograph sticking out of one of the books as if it had been left there for me to find. It was a photo I had never seen before, of my mother holding a small boy in her arms, both of them smiling for the camera. The picture was taken outside, in the grounds of the house I was brought up in. I recognized the ancient oak tree in the background (my brother Fergal had tied some old rope to one of the thick branches to make a swing one time, but my father, when he found out, cut the swing down because he said we were abusing the old tree and that it would sour our magic if we didn't stop, though we all knew he only cut that rope because he despised seeing us having anything approximating fun).

My mother looked young and beautiful in the photograph, her fiery red hair tied back, her summer tan contrasting against the white dress she was wearing. Her smile was one of love and happiness, a smile I saw less and less of the older I got. The boy in the picture was me at four or five years old. I was quite small as a child, fragile looking in my short trousers and tan T-shirt. My smile was also one of happiness. This was before my father properly sunk his claws into me and before my at times brutal (but always intensive) sorcerer training began.

Looking at myself in the picture, I saw a young boy who was wide-eyed with promise, someone who should have gone on to live with strength and purpose. Seeing my mother's face in that photograph—her pride and joy in bringing such potential into being—I could have cried as I imagined how disappointed she would be if she knew how I was living, how I was wasting the gifts I had been given.

And it was a gift, this way with magic that I had, despite being acquired by enduring years and years of pain, suffering, and at times torture at the hands of my main teacher, my father. Despite how it all ended (in the death of my entire family), it didn't change the fact that I possessed something that could be used to help people and that I as a person could help people. If my mother were there, she would have insisted that I take responsibility and live as she had taught me to live (despite my father's never ending stream of indoctrination).

"August, my dear boy," my mother used to say to me. "Life is pointless if you don't use what you have to help other people."

Reaching out, I gently ran my finger over the photograph as if I was touching my mother's beatific face. "I miss you," I said, and a single tear ran down my cheek, which I wiped away.

Putting the photograph into one of the pockets of my trench coat, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly as I wondered what my next move was going to be.

As it happened, I didn't have to wonder too long because the front door banged several times and someone turned up who would decide my next move for me.

Chapter 13

An Unfriendly Visit.

As soon as I heard the door bang, I knew it had to be someone from Angela Crow's brood as no one else knew where I lived (at least I didn't think so, though you wouldn't know with my uncle, who could have informed half the city I was around for all I knew). And indeed, upon opening the door, I wasn't surprised to see the wolfish face of Sebastian staring back at me. The vampire was wearing motorcycle leathers and cradled a black helmet in his hand. Outside, dusk had just fallen, the street now bathed in twilight. Sebastian's blue eyes were intense, even though he was smiling at me. "Hello, Creed," he said. "Are you going to invite me in?"

Every word that came out of his mouth sounded threatening to my ears. "No limo tonight?" I asked, looking past him to the red motorbike parked on the street.

"Just me. Can I come in?"

"That depends."

He kept his smile up, but it didn't distract me enough not to notice the flash of irritation in his eyes. "Depends on what?"

"Are you here to threaten or hurt me?"

The vampire shook his head. "That depends," he said, his smile widening. "Have you done something to warrant me threatening or hurting you?"

I smiled back. "Not that you know of."

Another flash of irritation in his eyes. "Well then, I think it's safe for you to let me in, wouldn't you say?"

Staring at him, I eventually stepped to one side and told him to come in. The way I saw it, there was no point delaying the inevitable.

"Thank you." He stepped past me and waited for me to close the door, then followed me as I walked into the living room. I stood by the fireplace as he spent a minute looking around the room with a slight look of distaste on his face like the place was a hovel compared to the grandeur he was probably used to.

"So," I said, eager to get rid of the vampire as soon as possible. "What brings you here? I said I would bring Miss Crow her daughter by tonight when she rudely jacked my head earlier."

Sebastian sat down in one of the armchairs, but not before he had wiped the cushion over first with his hand. His stare was unnerving, I have to say. Eyes like orbs of pure ice. Cold. Emotionless. I couldn't help wondering how many people Sebastian had killed over the course of his lifetime, murdering them in horrible ways before drinking every drop of their blood. Maybe he didn't drink all of them. Maybe he just killed some of them for the sake of it. For the sheer pleasure. Whatever the case, I felt like immediately rescinding his invitation into the Sanctum, just to get him away from me. As it was, I held back, unwilling to come across as hostile or uncooperative, which probably wouldn't have worked out well for me. Or Jennifer, for that matter. "I'm just here to see how things are going," the vampire said, his unsettling grin appearing permanent on his face. "Have you located the girl yet?"

Do I tell him? I wondered. Probably best not to lie. Something told me he would know. Mind reading was not uncommon amongst older vampires, and Sebastian came across like he had been around for a while. "Yes," I told him. "I found her."

He didn't seem especially surprised or pleased that I had managed to track down Jennifer. "Good. Did you speak with her?"

“Yes.”

“What did you talk about?”

“Not much.”

“Not much?”

“She told me she didn’t want to go home.”

“Did she say why?”

I shook my head. “No, not really. Mommy issues from what I can gather.”

He stared at me for an uncomfortably long time before speaking again. “Mr. Creed, I hope you are not thinking about helping the girl in any way. I hope you know what the consequences would be if you did.”

Shit. Did he just read my fucking mind? Careless. I should have shielded myself when I had the chance.

I wondered how much he uncovered from digging around in my noggin. “I’m well aware of the consequences.”

“Are you?” He stood up slowly, his grin now a predatory sneer. “I don’t think you are.”

“Look,” I said, raising my hands. “Why don’t I just tell you where she is and you can go get her yourself? At least then—”

“I already know where she is.”

I frowned. “So why—”

“Why send you to look for her?” He took a few steps toward me. “Don’t be fooled by the girl’s seeming innocence. She can still be formidable when she wants to be. And slippery. Last time I tried to bring her back, she almost killed me. Then she went to ground and wasn’t seen again for weeks.”

Was he talking about the same girl? Vampire or not, Jennifer didn’t strike me as the type of person who could nearly kill a psychopath like Sebastian. But then again, who knew? She was a full-blooded vampire, a direct descendant of a powerful vampire queen. Someone like Sebastian was probably turned at some point, and therefore wouldn’t possess the same inherent power. Made vampires were the watered-down versions of the real thing, which made them no less dangerous to most people, myself included. “So you think she’ll come quietly with me, is that it?”

“She’d better, Mr. Creed,” the vampire said, taking another step forward. The bastard was too close for comfort now. Was he trying to intimidate me? If so, it was working. “Jennifer is royalty, and therefore a future leader of our species. If she were to disappear again, perhaps to somewhere off-world like Babylon maybe...” He paused to watch my reaction, my eyes giving away my surprise, and probably, fear. “You can rest assured that her mother will get mad, and when Angela gets mad, blood is usually shed. A lot of blood. They call her The Crimson Crow. Did you know that?”

“I may have heard it mentioned.”

“Do you know why?”

“Not really.”

“It’s because she plucks the eyes out of her victims, preferably before she kills them. Then she eats their eyeballs.”

I nodded, doing a pretty good job (I hoped) of not appearing too rattled by the fact that he had read my mind and saw that I was planning to help Jennifer Crow

flee to Babylon. I was still cursing myself for that one. "Look, I get it," I said. "Your queen will kill me."

He snorted. "Not just kill you. She'll make you suffer in ways you could never imagine."

I could imagine actually. Very well. "Shouldn't the choice be down to Jennifer?"

Sebastian shook his head at what he saw as my naïveté for asking such a question. "You don't live in our world, Mr. Creed. Believe me when I say, Jennifer doesn't have a choice in any of this. She knows that already, she just isn't ready to accept it yet. But she will. In the meantime, we put up with her occasional bouts of rebellion."

I felt like telling him that Jennifer seemed to have made up her mind already about her future, but I knew he wouldn't want to hear it. Instead, I told him what I thought he wanted to hear, just to get rid of him. "Fine. I'll bring the girl to you. She'll be here, before midnight. Trust me."

Sebastian stared at me once more, clearly trying to read my intentions, but I didn't let him this time, walling off my mind with magic. When he felt the resistance I was offering, he backed off. "Don't get involved, Mr. Creed," he said, just before he left. "Just do your job, and all will be well."

Somehow, I didn't believe him.

Chapter 14

Point of No Return.

After Sebastian had left, I sat in the living room, staring into the cold grate of the fire as I considered my options. According to Sebastian, I had no options, but that was bullshit. There were always options. Years of growing up solving what amounted to magical puzzles had taught me that there was nearly always a solution to even the most difficult of problems. You just had to figure out the best approach to the problem and then keep prodding at it until a solution revealed itself.

The situation I was currently in was no different. A solution existed that might just resolve things, but not necessarily to everyone's satisfaction, and certainly not without significant risk to myself. The question was, did I want to put myself at risk for the sake of a sixteen-year-old vampire girl that I barely knew?

I could have just ran, of course. I could have fled the city, never to return. Forget I was ever there and continue on with my aimless traveling, maybe to Babylon with the aforementioned vampire girl, or maybe alone, which seemed a safer bet. Thinking about it, though, I didn't fancy looking over my shoulder the rest of my life, waiting for some vampire to trek me down and kill me. Besides which, I didn't feel like going on the road again. I was sick and tired of constantly moving around at that point. My soul was suffering, demanding that I put down roots somewhere. And maybe also, I wanted to become a valid member of society, so I could use my gifts to contribute, to help people. Blackham was starting to seem as good a place as any to do that. It was certainly a place where I could

thrive if I wanted to, doing the job my uncle had intended for me all those years, whatever title you wanted to give that job (Magicslinger? Arcane fixer? Occult detective maybe? As in magic He Wrote? You see what I did there?).

The more I thought about it, the more staying in Blackham seemed like a good idea. The only thing was, if I was going to stay, I would have to deal with the vampire situation first, which also meant deciding what I was going to do about Jennifer Crow.

It was time to pay the girl another visit.

After I had taken a cab to Amsterdam Street (with a thankfully much less chatty driver this time, and one who spent the entire journey listening to a Richard Prior live recording on tape, laughing hard even as he took my money), Jennifer Crow let me into the tenement once I banged on the front door. This time, she ushered me up a flight of stairs and into a bedroom that had a single mattress covered with a few scratchy looking sheets, and candles in bottles placed on the floor amongst scattered items of mostly black clothing, all of which I half expected to see before going in. What I didn't expect was the art that covered every grubby wall in the room. Charcoal drawings mostly, with a few oil paintings in between.

"You did all these?" I asked as I examined the art pinned to the grubby walls. Many of the charcoal drawings were of people, some obviously of those who shared the building with her, others that looked like vampires. The few oil paintings looked surrealist in nature, depicting Daliesque dream images of dark, stick-like figures stalking nightmarish landscapes.

Jennifer looked around for a moment as she stood next to me. "All my own work."

I nodded approvingly. "You have talent."

She smiled, but it was a plaintive smile. "Mother doesn't approve, thinks I'm wasting my time when I should be learning how to become a ruthless bitch like her. Needless to say, I don't get to practice my art much at home. It's why I like coming here, so I can indulge my creativity. Creating these pictures makes me feel like I have an actual soul, you know?"

"Who says you don't have a soul? Your mother?"

"She said vampires don't have souls."

Cruel bitch.

"Vampires have souls, Jennifer," I said. "Including you."

She shrugged. "Doesn't feel like it sometimes."

I nodded. "I know."

We stared at each other for a moment, her because she saw some depth of understanding in my eyes, me because I was looking deep into her like I was trying to see the soul she thought she didn't have. Which I was in a way, using every sensory power I had to gauge her essential nature so I could make up my mind about what to do about her. "What?" she asked after my stare went on a little too long for her liking.

"Tell me, Jennifer." I firmly took hold of her strong shoulders. "Are things really that bad for you? Do you really want to disappear? For good?"

She frowned. "You think I'm lying?"

I shook my head. "Of course not. I'm just making sure before going down a dangerous path."

Jennifer took a step forward so that she was standing right up close to me, her dark eyes effortlessly drawing me in. "I may have been born a vampire, but I don't have to live like one. I take no pleasure in cruelty and spilling blood. Innocent blood. I have as much right to live my life as anyone else does."

"Your mother would likely disagree. So would Sebastian."

"Sebastian," she spat, anger showing in her perfectly unblemished face. "That fucking toad. I hate him. He's my mother's lapdog. Nothing more."

"He says you nearly killed him once."

She nodded. "I regret not finishing the job."

"You're not a killer."

"How do you know?"

"Because if you were, I wouldn't be about to help you."

The almost innocent light came back into her eyes. "You'll help me disappear?"

"If that's what you really want."

"It is," she said. "Believe me."

"All right," I said. "Do me a favor then. Get me that bottle of whiskey out of the living room. That's if Jasper the Great hasn't drunk it all in my absence."

Jennifer tittered at that. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sharpen your teeth and polish your claws. I have a feeling you might have to use them before the night is out."

No sooner had the words come out of my mouth when there was loud crashing noise from downstairs.

Like someone had just kicked in the front door.

Chapter 15

Tooth and Nail.

Jennifer and I looked at each other for a second when we heard the noise from downstairs, both of us knowing that something was up and what that something was.

"Sebastian," Jennifer snarled, opening her mouth just as her fangs came down.

"Shit," I said, my adrenaline spiking as I heard a loud scream from downstairs, a sick feeling forming in the pit of my stomach as I realized one of Jennifer's friends had just met an untimely death.

Jennifer stood listening for a moment, her previously placid face changing with the anger and aggression building up in her. Eyes darkening to a near pitch black, fingernails lengthening, Jennifer looked dangerous now like a panther about to strike. "This ends now," she growled in a low voice, her eyes still on me.

Saying nothing, I barely nodded back at her as I prepared myself for what was to come. I had been expecting to meet some violence at some point that night, but not so soon. Clearly, Sebastian didn't believe me when I told him I would bring Jennifer back to the fold. He must have known I would try to help her, which was

why he was chancing confronting Jennifer himself, even though she had nearly killed him when he tried to bring her back before.

Running to the window, I looked out into the semi-darkness and wasn't surprised to see at least a dozen burly looking vampires outside, all gathered around the steps leading up to the building we were in. "There's more outside," I said, wondering how I could best defend myself against that merciless looking lot.

Then I spun around upon sensing movement in the room, and my adrenaline spiked again when I saw a massive bald man dressed in dark clothes standing in the doorway. Opening his mouth, he bared fangs at me and then glowered at Jennifer, who had backed into the middle of the room. The vampire looked around for a second with a look of total distaste on his face. "We've come to escort you home and out of this shithole, Princess Crow" he said in a deep voice.

It was the first time I had heard Jennifer's official title being used by anyone, and it somehow underscored the importance of who she was, at least to her own kin. I also found it interesting to note the differences between the two vampires. As a full-blooded vampire, Jennifer was an evolutionary machine. When her fangs came down they did so to a length not seen in made vampires. Jennifer's fangs were a good inch longer than the vampire before her (who came about through infection, not evolution), and her claws were much longer as well. To me they seemed sharper too. More deadly.

Jennifer's antagonist didn't stand a chance against her, which he surely must have known. I could only conclude he had his orders and that he would die anyway if he disobeyed them. Which made him and the many others like him in the employ of The Crimson Crow nothing more than cannon fodder.

"I don't think so," Jennifer said back, crouched down slightly, both arms out, her lengthy claws ready to strike.

Another scream sounded from the floor above. A girl this time.

"You don't have to kill them!" I shouted, coming forward slightly, my magic already crackling within me as I thought about blasting the vamp in the doorway with it.

But before I could do anything, Jennifer leaped at the vampire in front of her, who was almost twice her size. She became a blur of movement as she went about slashing the bigger vampire with her claws and biting him with her fangs. The other vampire tried to fight back, but he was much slower than Jennifer was and she easily evaded every one of his blows, finally latching herself onto his back and grabbing hold of his enormous bald head. Then, with a shrieking sound, she pulled hard and ripped the vampire's head right off his shoulders, immediately tossing it away like it was mere trash. The head bounced off the filthy carpet and landed somewhere around my feet. I couldn't help fixating on the still open eyes, disgusted by what lay before me, but even more shocked by how awesomely lethal Jennifer had been. Suddenly, I didn't feel as insecure about the situation. I could also fully understand Sebastian's reticence about going after Jennifer himself.

Jennifer stood looking at me for a second, hardly out of breath after her whirlwind assault on the bald vampire. "I hope you're ready to fight, Creed," she said, before licking a spot of blood from her lower lip.

I nodded at her, realizing fully then that I had chosen the path that I was now on. I could have been moving in the opposite direction by then, avoiding what was

about to happen. But even as the fear I was facing rose in me, I was somehow still confident I had made the right decision. No one said putting down roots in a place like Blackham was going to be easy after all. "I'm ready to fight," I told her.

As it turned out, I didn't have to wait long in order to prove my intentions, for a second later, two more vampires burst into the room, the female of the duo locking horns with Jennifer, the other male vampire rushing at me with one hand out ready to grab my throat and rip it out.

Luckily, I was ready. As the vampire came arrogantly forward, plainly seeing me as no threat at all, I shot out the palm of my right hand, so it was level with the vampire's face. Then out of my hand came a beam of almost pure white light that immediately made the vampire stop dead and scream in pain as he covered his face with his arms. As I continued to beam the magical light down on the vampire, I was aware of Jennifer and the other vampire fighting furiously beside me, sounding like two feral cats going at it. As distracting as the tussle beside me was, though, I kept my attention on the vampire in front of me, who was still screaming as the light from my hand caused his skin to sizzle as if it was being exposed to direct sunlight. The light from my hand would not kill the vampire. His pain would ease the second I stopped beaming it onto him, at which point he would try to kill me again, probably just as Sebastian had ordered him to do.

So with my left hand, I reached inside my coat and pulled out the knife that was sheathed inside. The blade on the knife was twelve inches long, curved at the end, as razor sharp as the fangs of the vampire in front of me. Normally, it would take a wooden stake to end a vampire for good, but the knife in my hand was no ordinary knife. It was over a thousand years old and forged by Druids to help kill their many enemies at the time. The Druids wanted a tool that would kill anything they stabbed or cut with it, so they used their magic and alchemy skills to make what became known simply as a Death Knife, for that was its only purpose. To cause death. And on that front, the knife did a very thorough job.

Of course, when I plunged the knife into the chest of the vampire, he didn't know his life was about to end. Staring at me with the same supremely arrogant look on his face even while his skin continued to bubble under the light from my hand, he thought I had stabbed him with an ordinary knife and was about to come forward so he could attack me again. But when he went to move, his face changed as he realized something was wrong. He looked down at the knife still in his chest, then up at me again, his eyes full of shock. That's the thing when you think you're immortal. When someone kills you, it's like the biggest kick in the balls ever as you realize you aren't going to be around forever after all.

When I pulled the knife from the vampire's chest, he staggered back a step and fell to his knees. Then as I watched, the once immortal being seemed to fall apart all at once as if whatever dark force had held him together previously had now vanished, taking with it every ounce of the life it once gave, right down to the very last cell. What remained after the vamp had fallen apart was just a pile of gray dust on the carpet.

"You've done this before." Jennifer stood over the dusty remains of the other vampire whose heart she had ripped out of her chest, and which she still held in her hand as blood dripped from it onto the floor. Two seconds later, the heart

turned to dust like the rest of the vampire, the tiny grains flowing through Jennifer's hand like sand in an hourglass.

"No, actually," I said, staring now at the remains of vampire I had killed, then at the bloodless knife in my hand, unsure of how to feel. In the past, I had killed a few full-blown monsters and had banished or obliterated several spirit entities. But never a vampire. It was hard to shake the feeling that I had just killed a person of sorts, a human being, albeit one who was already dead.

"Hey," Jennifer said so I turned my head to look at her. "Process later. We gotta go. Babylon, remember?"

I nodded, bringing my focus back to the whole reason I was there in the first place, which was to help Jennifer escape the evil constraints of her mother. "We have to get out of here then."

As I said it, a voice called from downstairs. "Princess Crow." It was Sebastian. "I have your boyfriend here, Princess. If you don't come down, I'll snap his neck."

Jennifer snarled, showing her fangs. Then she went to the door and shouted down, "If you hurt him, I'll kill you, Sebastian. You know I can."

"It won't come to that if you just come back with me," Sebastian shouted back. "Your mother just wants you home, where you belong."

"I don't belong there! How many times do I have to tell you and her? You're evil, both of you!"

"Fine. I'll snap the boy's neck then."

"No!" Jennifer flew down the landing to the stairs, and I ran after her. As I reached the top, she was already at the bottom, standing in the downstairs hallway. I went down the stairs, pausing halfway when I saw Sebastian standing in the dimly lit hallway, holding a terrified Jasper tight to him, one arm wrapped around Jasper's neck. Behind Sebastian stood two dark-suited men, and behind them, more out on the street.

"Don't let him kill me, Jennifer," Jasper pleaded in a frightened voice. "Please..."

"Let him go, Sebastian," Jennifer said, her tone less aggressive now as if she didn't want to antagonize the older vampire any further.

But Sebastian wasn't even looking at her. He was staring up at me. "Mr. Creed," he said. "I assumed you were dead already."

"You thought wrong."

"That's a nice knife," he said, smiling.

"Why don't you let the boy go, Sebastian," I said. "He has nothing to do with this."

"Neither do you, Mr. Creed. You were only supposed to retrieve the girl, not help her run."

"I didn't ask to be involved in the first place. You and your mistress forced my hand. Now I'm just helping the right person."

Sebastian shook his head. "I knew you'd be the wrong choice for the job. But then, no one listens to me, do they, Jennifer?"

Jasper made a choking noise as Sebastian's forearm tightened further around his throat.

"Don't!" Jennifer shouted. "Wait! I'll go with you. Just let him go, Sebastian."

"I'm not a fool, Princess," Sebastian said scowling at her. "The second I let him go, you'll attack. Which is why Jasper here is coming with us."

Just as Sebastian's smile returned, something happened that I didn't expect. Despite only being half conscious, Jasper's hand flew up as if he was attempting to slap Sebastian in the face. But out of his hand came a weak sort of magic blast that was barely visible such was its lack of potency, though it was strong enough to shock Sebastian into releasing his arm from around Jasper's throat so that Jasper fell to the floor in a heap.

If I'd had time, I would have smiled at Jasper's tenaciousness and his daring use of magic. For a hedge magician, he didn't do too badly. But I didn't have time to think about any of that because I knew I had to act so that Jennifer and I could take full advantage of the opening Jasper had just given us.

Knowing that Jennifer would immediately go for Sebastian, I sent a double magic blast at the two large vampires standing by the front door. A bright sphere of amber energy hit each of the vampires on the chest, sending them flying back through the front door and out onto the steps. Then I telekinetically slammed the front door shut before any more vampires could come pouring into the house (no doubt Sebastian had already issued them all invitations, after one of Jennifer's friends had unwittingly invited Sebastian himself in).

Just as Jennifer predictably flew towards Sebastian, I rushed down the rest of the stairs, stepping over Jasper (who was gasping on the floor) and past the whirlwind of violent motion that was Jennifer and Sebastian. Then I put a ward on the front door by placing my hand on the wood and uttering a few words that would prevent any of the vampires getting through it. If they tried, a blast of energy would come from the door and knock them back.

When I turned around again, Jennifer was on top of Sebastian, lashing her razor sharp claws across his face, back and forth at incredible speed so that the flesh on the other vampire's face became a shredded mess. Nothing that wouldn't heal in time, if Jennifer let him live, that is.

As much as I disliked Sebastian and his cold-blooded ways, I had seen and caused enough bloodshed for one day. There was no need for Jennifer to kill Sebastian as long as she followed the plan I had worked out for her. "Jennifer!" I shouted to get her attention.

Jennifer stopped hitting the unmoving Sebastian and snapped her head around like some carnivore that had been disturbed during feeding time. She stared at me with pure violence and bloodlust in her eyes, and at that moment, I couldn't help but be amazed, and more than a little unsettled, by her complete transformation into a lethal predator, her carnivorous vampire nature at once awesome and truly frightening. The longer she looked at me, though, the more her feral mask began to slip, until eventually the innocent girl's face I was used to seeing came through once more. "What?" she said, her face flecked with Sebastian's blood.

"You don't have to kill him. We should just go."

She shook her head just as Sebastian groaned underneath her. "I made the mistake of not killing him last time. He will keep hunting me."

"It doesn't matter," I said, coming towards her. "Where you're going, no one will find you. I'll make sure of that. Trust me."

Staring hard at me, she considered for a moment. Then she got off Sebastian. "I trust you," she said.

"Good. We need to leave then."

"You're leaving?" Jasper said, sitting up on the floor now, nearly recovered from almost being choked out.

Jennifer looked down at him. "I have to, baby. I'm sorry."

"I'm coming with you," Jasper said, standing up.

"No," I said. "You can't."

"Fuck you!" Jasper snapped. "Who the fuck are you anyway?"

Jennifer went to Jasper then, putting her arms around his neck and focusing her dark eyes on his, her voice taking on a low, soothing quality as she spoke. "Jasper, baby, you're going to forget you ever knew me. You're going to forget everything that happened here tonight. After I kiss you, you're going to go out the back door and go home to your parent's house, and you won't remember any of this. In fact, you will realize how much you've missed your parents, and you will make it up with them. Okay?"

Jasper nodded in a dazed sort of way. "Okay," he said.

Smiling, Jennifer leaned in and kissed Jasper softly on the lips, then she took her arms from around his neck and stood back. "Now go."

Nodding once more, Jasper turned and made his way to the back door before leaving the building. And that was that. He was gone.

"Nicely done," I said. "Not your first time, I'm sure."

"It was the kindest thing to do," she said.

"Yes, it was. You ready to get out of here?"

"How? My mother's goons are outside. They'll bust in here soon enough, once they realize Sebastian isn't coming out."

I went forward and placed my hand on her shoulder. "A new method of transportation I've been working on," I said. "Teleportation."

Chapter 16

Travel Arrangements.

Teleportation is something that takes a long time to master. You have to manipulate a lot of different strings at once to pull it off successfully. I mean, it involves splintering yourself into a gazillion tiny pieces and then transporting those pieces across space and time so you can reassemble them all afterward. Imagine if you threw a handful of sand as far as you could, and then tried to rearrange that handful of sand into the exact same formation as it was in before you threw it. Every single grain. Does that sound hard? Impossible even? Well, that's the level of difficulty you're up against when you attempt teleportation.

Fortunately, magic is on hand to help out. With magic, one can achieve the impossible after all, but you still need to know what the hell you're doing, and you still need to manipulate the magic correctly, so it does what you want it to do. So it follows your intentions to the letter. That in itself is hard enough to do, never mind anything else.

But enough of my yakking. The point is, I did manage to teleport both Jennifer and me away from the tenement in Amsterdam Street, landing us both seemingly

intact just a few blocks away, next to a dumpster in some alley. A drunken homeless guy at the end of the alley sat up and stared for a moment, then lay back down again as he probably thought he was seeing things.

"Holy shit!" Jennifer said. "I thought moving fast was a rush. That was like...I don't know what that was like. I feel like I was blown up and then put back together again." She checked herself over as if to make sure everything was still intact.

"This is as far as I could manage," I said, looking around. "Any further and I think we would have come out of it like mutants."

"Mutants?"

"Yeah, as if a child had reassembled their doll in the wrong way. Something like that. Not pretty anyway."

"So what now?" Jennifer asked, seemingly enjoying the experience of her getaway.

"Now we grab a cab and get you to the airport. My uncle passed along a contact of his who owns a private jet, should I ever need to get somewhere in a hurry. I'll make the necessary arrangements so you can fly to Ireland. My Uncle Ray will take care of you once you're there. He'll arrange your passage to Babylon."

Jennifer frowned. "You're not coming with me?"

I was mildly touched that she seemed somewhat disappointed that I wasn't going to Ireland with her. "I've decided to stay here," I told her.

"But you can't. My mother will kill you."

I shrugged. "That's a chance I'll have to take. I'm tired of running, and there's something about this city that's making me want to stay."

"This city is dangerous."

"I know. Maybe that's why I'm staying."

She shook her head. "You must be mad. You'll be committing suicide if you stay here, trust me."

Her words weren't lost on me. "It doesn't feel that way to me. And besides, you might have noticed I'm not completely powerless."

"My mother is a bloodthirsty demon, seriously."

"Let me worry about your mother," I said, directing her down the alley now towards the street. "Right now, we need to get you to the airport before the wrong eyes see us."

After taking a cab to the airport, I left Jennifer in a dark corner inside one of the bars while I found a phone so I could begin making her travel arrangements. The one thing I was worried about was not being able to contact my uncle, who was often out of the country on sorcerer business. If he didn't answer his phone at home, I would have to try and establish a psychic link with him. And depending on where in the world he was, that could take some time. Plus I needed quiet and privacy to do it, which wouldn't have been easy to find in a noisy airport.

My luck was in, however, as Uncle Ray answered the phone when I called his house in Ireland. "Ray, it's August," I said, my eyes flitting around the airport in search of vampires, thankfully seeing none.

"August, my boy!" Ray said. "It's good to hear from you. Where are you?"

"You know full well I'm in Blackham City, Ray. You directed me here in your not so subtle way, remember?"

Ray laughed like he laughed at everything. It was like he'd been around for so long that he had now dispensed with the need to take anything seriously as if everything was just one big cosmic joke to him now. "I do remember."

"And before we go any further here, thanks for sending that The Crimson Crow to my door. I'm in fucking deep shit with that bitch now."

"Who said I sent anyone to you?"

"She did, so don't even try and deny it, Ray. Like you try to deny all of these little tests that you somehow arrange for me no matter where I am in the world." Ray laughed again, and I shook my head at him. "I'm glad you think it's funny."

"Oh, August, everything is funny, lad. You'll see that one day. But in the meantime, why don't you explain to me the nature of the deep shit you're in?"

I went on to explain everything to him, about Jennifer, about the plan to send her to Babylon and about the almighty bitch-fit her mother would take when she found out about it all. "She'll make me suffer, of that I've no doubt," I said, referring to The Crimson Crow.

"Can you handle a vampire like that?" Ray asked casually as if asking if I could handle doing my own tax returns (if I actually paid tax, that was).

"She's over a thousand years old."

Ray went silent for a moment. "Tell me, August. Why aren't you getting on that plane with the girl? Why are you choosing to stay?"

I almost didn't want to tell him, so that I didn't have to hear his satisfied laughter. "I'm tired of traveling, and I want to help people. Your plan worked, Ray. It's the only purpose in life I can find."

"And a damn good one, my boy," he said seriously. "Your mother would be proud."

I closed my eyes for a second when he mentioned my mother, emotion welling up in me out of nowhere. "Yeah," I said quietly. "I'm sure she would be."

"Get the girl on the plane. I'll take care of the rest." He paused. "As for that other problem."

"The one where I might die?"

"That's the one. Just remember, a vampire like The Crimson Crow only cares about power, even above her own daughter or someone betraying her. Show her the way to more power, and she should leave you alone."

"Should?"

"One never knows with these situations."

"That's reassuring."

Ray laughed. "I have faith in you, boy. I've always had faith in you."

I nodded. "I know you have, Ray."

"And August?" he said before he hung up.

"What?"

"I'm proud of you as well. Always have been."

I couldn't help smiling. "Thanks, Ray."

Chapter 17

Farewells.

As I was about to walk Jennifer Crow out onto the runway where the private jet awaited, the young vampire girl stopped and turned to me. Her normally confident demeanor was now riddled with anxiety it seemed, and I knew why before she even said anything. I had a very similar moment with my Uncle Ray before I left Ireland six years ago. Despite the fact that my family was dead and all I had was an empty house and an obscene amount of money that I didn't want or need, there still felt like there was something in me that didn't want to let go of everything I had ever known. Yes, my life up until that point had been filled with sacrifice and pain, and also tragedy at the end, but it was all still hard to walk away from. It felt like if I did walk, I would have been committing some huge act of betrayal that I would never be able to come back from. A betrayal against who or what, I wasn't really sure. But as Ray soon explained, what I felt was fear. Fear of the unknown, of what lay ahead of me. And the pain of separation also, from the roots that ran deep in the place of my birth.

"It's all about you now, boy," Ray had said, placing his hands on my shoulders and smiling like a father whose son was about to leave and make his way in the world. There was pride in his smile, something I never saw in father's smile, even if the bastard had smiled at all. "Go out into the world and find your place in it. It's your right to do so. Never forget that."

Now, with Jennifer looking at me with her lost puppy eyes, I placed my hands gently on her shoulders and told her what my uncle had told me. "You're doing the right thing," I said, smiling. "It's your life. You can live it how you want."

Jennifer smiled back. "My mother would disagree with you. She gave birth to me, provided me with everything."

"Maybe, but that doesn't give her the right to mentally abuse you. Or treat you like a possession."

"Is that what happened to you?"

I nodded after a fashion. "You could say that."

"And you're happy now that you left it all behind?"

I laughed without much humor. "Happy? I'm not sure what that is. You just make choices and hope they work out, don't you?"

She stared at me a moment with searching eyes. "Yeah, I guess you do."

"Anyway," I said, letting go of her shoulders. "Your jet is waiting. You'll fly to Belfast. My uncle will meet you there."

"How am I supposed to know who he is?"

I couldn't help laughing. "Trust me. He'll find you right away. And if you happen to get peckish on the flight, I'm sure one of the crew will oblige you."

Jennifer nodded, looking nervous again. "I'll take your word for it." She stepped forward then and planted a kiss on my mouth with her soft lips, which I had to admit, felt kinda nice. "Thank you, August. I won't forget this."

"I know I won't."

She laughed. "Seriously, though. Thank you. I don't why but I see things clearly when I'm around you. You should help more people. I think that might be your purpose, the reason for all your pain."

"I'm starting to think so," I said. "I guess I'll see what happens. I still have to deal with your mother first."

Jennifer shook her head, still unable to believe I wasn't getting on the plane with her to escape her mother's inevitable wrath. "How are you going to stop her from killing you?"

It was a pertinent question, and one I didn't have an answer to yet. At least not a complete one. "Let me worry about that. You go now. Enjoy your new life in Babylon."

She opened the door to step out onto the runway, then stopped to look at me. "Will we ever meet again, do you think?"

I gave her the warmest smile I could and nodded. "I'll be pissed if we don't."

She smiled back. "So will I."

Chapter 18

Nocturnus.

Rather than wait around for any of Angela Crow's goons to ambush and kill me, I thought it best if I went straight to the vampire's abode in The Highlands. Jennifer had already given me the address, so I took a cab to the building where the Crows had made residence, which happened to be a heavily guarded fortress a quarter mile outside of Green Street where the city's financial traders gathered every day. It didn't surprise me that Angela Crow lived so close to the action, so to speak. From what I could see on the cab ride over, The Highlands was where all the movers and shakers of the city had chosen to make their base. Grand government buildings were sandwiched in between massively tall skyscrapers of steel and glass, many of which were interconnected by walkways. It was a place of money and politics, a place from which to control the masses. I had no doubt that Angela Crow had made herself one of those controllers, albeit a more shadowy one than most.

When I stepped out of the cab, I was greeted immediately by four guards all dressed in black, shiny suits, automatic weapons barely concealed under their expensive looking jackets. As the guards rushed forward to the road, recognizing me straight away, I raised my hands just as the cab drove off. "I'd like to talk to Angela," I said. "My name is—"

That was as far as I got before one of the vampire guards slammed the butt of his gun into my forehead, knocking me unconscious.

When I came to, I opened my eyes to a darkened room, unsure for a second of where I was. Then I sat straight up in a mild state of panic when I remembered what had happened and I quickly scanned the room I was in for any sign of

threats. As it turned out, there was only one threat in the room, and she happened to be the most dangerous one.

The Crimson Crow.

"You must have a death wish coming here," she said as she stood by a large old-fashioned brick fireplace with nothing but ashes in the grate.

I had been laid out on a red velvet chaise lounge which I now sat on the edge of, my heart beating faster than I would have liked. Although given the circumstances, I couldn't blame the old ticker for sweating bullets.

There was also the girl hanging from a rope that was tied to a hook in the ceiling. A naked girl, hanging by her wrists, blood running out of various twin puncture marks in her body. The girl appeared motionless, and I couldn't tell if she was still alive or if Angela Crow had drained her dry. Regardless, there wasn't much to be done about her. It wasn't like Angela Crow was going to let me cut the poor girl down, was it?

So I focused on Angela herself, who was dressed in a white pantsuit with wide shoulders. Her platinum blond hair was neatly tied back in a ponytail, and her rouged lips seemed to stand out like a warning sign against all that white. The way she was looking at me, I could tell I had about ten seconds before she made her move on me and I was dead. Sure, I could have tried a few spells on her, but why delay the inevitable?

"I'm not mad," I told her, keeping my voice level. "I simply have a proposition for you. One I know you will like."

She stared back at me, her eyes seething. "The only thing I want from you is the location of my daughter. Tell me that, and I will kill you quick. If you don't tell me, I will torture you until you do, and believe me, I can make your suffering last for an eternity." As if to demonstrate her intentions, she walked over to the girl hanging from the ceiling and ran her fingers over the girl's belly, glancing at me as she did so. Then, in a movement I barely seen, she slashed her long fingernails across the girl's stomach, and I watched in horror as the girl's intestines spilled out onto the dark wood floor with a wet slapping sound. If the girl wasn't dead before, she certainly was now.

Swallowing, I thought to myself that I was mad for thinking this ploy of mine would work. That I was about to suffer greatly for betraying this psychopathic vampire. But I managed to keep those thoughts in check before they spilled over into full-blown panic. "I can help you walk in the daylight."

I just threw it out there, seeing no point in holding back. Either she went for it, or she didn't.

Again she stared at me as blood dripped from her already red fingernails. The cold look of murder had at least gone from her eyes now, replaced with what appeared to be a mixture of surprise, curiosity and an unmistakable desire. Which was understandable, because the ability to walk in pure sunlight was the equivalent of turning lead into gold for a vampire. Vampires had never managed to solve the problem of being fatally allergic to UV light. Scientists and spellcasters alike had worked on the problem, but for some reason, nothing they tried ever worked.

But let me tell you a story. My mother was a witch, a distinguished one as it happened. She was also a lover of botany, knowing everything there was to know

about plants and herbs, their individual properties and applications. But there was one particular plant that my mother could never figure out. A rare plant that was only to be found on the island of Madagascar. The plant was called Nocturnus, and as the name suggests, it only came out at night so it could bloom its single black rose-like flower before closing up again and shrinking back into the earth at dawn every morning. Somehow or other, my mother had gotten a hold of one of these specimens, which she kept in the huge greenhouse at the back of the main house in Fermanagh. She became fascinated with the little plant and spent months trying to unlock its secrets. Most of all, she tried to find out why the plant was unable to survive in sunlight, why it withered and died in a matter of minutes. It became something of an obsession for my mother, trying to figure this out. She kept many clones of the plant, just so she could experiment, trying to keep the plant alive in the daylight. Failing with science, she finally turned to magic, until one day, one of the spells she had designed actually worked and she managed to keep Nocturnus alive in the daylight without any ill effects. She was so ecstatic that she brought me to the greenhouse to show me what she had done, explaining every single step in detail because she knew I would appreciate the delicate intricacy of her work. And her work was amazing. The spell she crafted was one of the most ingenious I had ever come across, and also the most intuitive, because no one else would ever have thought to put the things together she did, combining various forms of magic and fusing them with science in a way that was inspiring, to say the least, to a young student of spellcraft like myself back then.

I still remembered the entire procedure and everything needed for the spell to work. What I didn't know was if the spell would work on a vampire. Making a little plant impervious to sunlight was one thing, but a much more complex organism such as a vampire? I wasn't sure at all. The only thing I was sure of was that the spell was my only shot at staving off The Crimson Crow.

Luckily for me, Angela Crow was like every other vampire her age. Despite her obvious love of the dark, she still yearned to walk in the light. It was a possibility no vampire would ever turn down, for any vampire who could walk in both day and night was going to become more powerful than the rest. And if I've established anything about Angela Crow, it's that she lives for power.

"Only I can do this," I said, encouraged by her apparent interest, but still wary of her blatant mistrust. "I can make you more powerful than the rest." I spoke deliberately, making sure she knew the implications of what I was saying.

When Angela Crow finally smiled, I knew I had her.

Chapter 19

Dealing with the Devil.

"Why should I trust you?"

It was an expected question from the vampire queen. How did she know I wouldn't just try to kill her, or banish her to some far off dimension forever?

Still inside her art deco room, the dead girl hanging from the ceiling, the stench of her spilled guts drifting unpleasantly into my nostrils, I stood up and walked towards Angela Crow, stopping just in front of her and looking into her hardened eyes. "Your daughter trusted me," I said. "So should you."

It was a bold thing to say when I had just helped her daughter run away for good. Indeed, after I said the words to her, I immediately regretted them, knowing she wouldn't be able to see past my betrayal of her.

Before I knew it, she had gripped my head in both hands, holding me firm while she flashed her fangs at me. "You have some nerve saying that to me," she said, her lips peeled back like a predator. "You betrayed me!"

I held her gaze, despite the fact that her eyes were now a deep red color and full of murderous rage. "I betrayed no one. I did what was best for the girl."

She hissed again and snapped her jaws at me, her teeth mere centimeters away from my firmly held face. "It was not up to you to decide what was best for my daughter! Nor was it up to her. It was up to me and me alone!"

I said nothing, knowing there wasn't much I could say to justify my perceived betrayal.

The vampire glared at me with her red eyes for long moments as she seemed to be on the verge of killing me. It was all I could do not to try a spell on her, but I knew whatever spell I came up with would only be a temporary fix. Angela Crow was too old to be held back for long by mere magic, or at least not the kind of magic I had available to me at the time. A true master sorcerer could have perhaps taken her down long enough to destroy her heart, but my skills were not at that level yet. Far from it, in fact. The only thing I could bank on was that her desire to walk in the daylight was stronger than her desire to kill me.

As I continued to hold her hypnotic gaze, it quickly became apparent that she was rooting around inside my head. She was much more skilled at it than Sebastian was. I didn't even feel her initial entry, and the only way I could tell what she was doing was from the look in her eyes, which had intensified as if she was looking past me and into my mind. Too late, I tried to defend against her intrusion, but she batted away my psychic defenses without even blinking an eye.

Then finally, she let go of my head, and I took a step back, exhaling sharply as I regained my movement.

Angela Crow never moved. She just smiled and stared at me. "I know where my daughter is going," she said, sounding satisfied that she had got what she wanted from me.

Sighing, I shook my head. "You're going to go after her, no doubt?"

"That depends on you, August Creed."

A frown crossed my face. "What do you mean?"

Her eyes went back to blue again, and she seemed to relax, which didn't relax me any. "Here's the deal. You make it so I can walk in the daylight and I won't go after Jennifer. She can stay in Babylon if she wants. But, if you can't deliver what I want for any reason, or if you try to trick me in any way, I will go after my darling Jennifer, and I will enslave her for the rest of her days, which as you know, for us vampires, is a long time. I know you care for her, Creed. You see yourself in her. If you want her to stay free, you will deliver on what you promised."

What a cold, conniving bitch, I thought. Using her own daughter like that. Jennifer was truly better off away from her.

"All right," I said. "But how do I know you won't kill me and go after Jennifer anyway, once I give you what you want?"

She smiled and licked her lips. "You don't. I'm afraid you will just have to trust me, as my daughter put her trust in you."

Nice, throwing that back at me. "Looks like I don't have a choice then, do I?"

"One always has a choice, Creed. It's what you chose that matters."

"Fine," I said after a moment. "We'll have to do the spell at my Sanctum. I'm sure Sebastian can drive us, assuming he's recovered from the flaying your daughter gave him."

"He's still healing. It will take some time."

I smiled inwardly, glad to hear it. "Not to worry. I have a quicker mode of transportation anyhow."

Chapter 20

Enter the Chaosphere.

I teleported Angela Crow and myself to the brownstone on Poker Street, which I had already decided to make my Sanctum in Blackham. Assuming of course that I managed to pull off the spell that would allow the Crimson Crow to walk in daylight. The truth of the matter was that I wasn't entirely confident that I could pull it off. Don't get me wrong, by any standards, I'm a skilled sorcerer. Given my upbringing and my teachers over those years, there was no way that I could be anything other than good.

But the fact was, in sorcerer terms, I was still a fledgling with many more years of practice and study needed to reach the heights of a master sorcerer like my Uncle Ray, or even my dead father for that matter. So while it was certainly possible that I could properly execute the Nocturnus Spell, it was also possible that I might just fuck it up completely. My mother had been a spellcaster of rare talent and only a talent like hers could have created something as intricate and sophisticated as the Nocturnus Spell. It was one thing having the recipe to bake a cake, but quite another to actually bake it so that the cake came out the way it was supposed to. It was much the same thing with spells. So all in all, you could say I was more than a little nervous when I landed in the Sanctum with Angela Crow. At that point, I knew there was no turning back. It was either find my game or die.

"I take it you have never done this spell before?" Angela Crow said, standing in the living room as I slipped my trench coat off and placed it over the back of a chair. "I take it no one has, otherwise I would have heard of it by now."

I nodded. "You are correct," I said reluctantly.

Her eyes narrowed. "Then how do you know it will work if no one has tried it?"

It was a fair question. The Nocturnus Spell had only ever been used on a single plant species. After my mother had cracked the code so to speak, she had no

interest in trying to apply the spell to anything else, least of all vampires. For her, it was just an intellectual puzzle that she had now solved and so she moved onto other things. So you may now be forgiven for thinking the same thing as Angela Crow. Why do I think the spell will work on a vampire?

The only answer I have to that question is faith. I have faith that the spell created by my loving mother will work as I want it to. Sometimes, faith in something is all you have to go on. In this case, that was especially true.

The vampire Crow got edgy as she waited for my answer, which I finally gave her. "My mother created the spell. I have faith in my mother that the mechanics of the spell are sound. Besides, it has been tested before. Just not on a vampire like yourself."

Angela Crow frowned. "On what then?"

"A plant."

She seemed to stifle a laugh before looking at me seriously again. "A plant?"

"Yes. A special plant that could only survive at night. My mother made it so the plant could survive in the daytime also."

The vampire seemed to think about that for a moment. "Once again, Creed, let me remind you of our deal. And let me also tell you that if you are fucking with me, I will hunt down every person you have ever met and tear them into tiny pieces."

I held my hands up. "Hey, I'm not stupid. I get it. I promise I'm not fucking with you."

"No," she said, coming towards me, which always made me nervous. "Maybe not, but you are winging it here, aren't you?" She stopped in front of me and gave a slight smile. "I don't know whether to admire you for that or just kill you right now."

Holding her gaze, I kept my cool. "The spell will work. I'll make sure of it."

"Yes, you will."

And with that, I went to work on getting things organized and preparing for the spell, while Angela Crow waited impatiently in the living room, sometimes appearing behind me in the basement while I was down there, scaring the shit out of me, seeming to enjoy doing so. After the third time she did it, I just ignored her, brushing past her as I continued my search for the right ingredients needed to do the spell. Which was a lot, by the way. Like I said, my mother threw everything she had at the problem, which ended up being a long list of rare ingredients. Things like Wolfsbane, the eyes of a Scarlet-Backed spider, the claws of a Singing Bat, Belladonna, petals from a black rose, anus of newt (yes really), toad sweat, wizard's eyelashes and a whole slew of other ingredients. As spells went, it was more complicated than any I had ever tried before, and believe me, I'd slung many a spell that would make even Einstein weep at their complexity.

Luckily for me, Ray kept the basement of the Sanctum fully stocked with every ingredient a magicslinger could ever need, and then some. It was almost as if the old bastard knew I would need access to all those ingredients at some point. Sometimes I wondered if he had found a way to see into the future. Given the circumstances, the thought brought me some comfort, because if Ray knew what shit was going to go down before I did, then that meant he must have thought I could handle whatever was going to happen next. Or maybe I was just making shit

up to make myself feel better, I don't know. Either way, it didn't change anything. It was still do or die.

Hours later, I had finally managed to assemble everything I needed for the Nocturnus Spell. I had also managed to mix or combine whatever ingredients needed doing so, the whole time working under the pressure of not only Angela Crow's stalking presence, but also trying to recall from memory everything that I had to do. One missed step and the entire spell would fall flat, or worse, drastically misfire.

"Kindly fill that with your blood," I said to Angela Crow as I handed her a wide brimmed wooden cup that dated back to medieval times and which had become darkly stained by all manner of liquids (magical and otherwise) over the centuries.

The Crimson Crow gave me a suspicious look, but she took the cup after slicing open a vein in her wrist with one of her long, sharp fingernails, allowing her blood to spill into the cup until it was almost full. Then she handed it back to me, and as I took it carefully, I noticed the deep slice in her wrist heal over in a matter of seconds. "A useful ability," I said, placing the cup on the floor of the living room, next to the array of bottles, jars and vials I had gathered around me.

"Yes," she said, looking straight at me. "It makes me hard to kill."

I glanced only briefly up at her as I caught the emphasis in her voice. "I've no doubt."

After that exchange, I worked in focused silence for the next while as I carefully added all of the ingredients around me into the cup containing the vampire's blood, fittingly using the foot of a crow to gently stir the mixture around.

Once that was done, it was time for the real work to begin. I now had to infuse the blood mixture with magic--magic that had to be perfectly conjured and processed in a certain way, and all done without mistake. It was the part of the spell I was most worried about as it was going to take a phenomenal amount of focus and concentration on my part, not to mention an expert handling of the magic itself once it was fully conjured and shaped to perfection. It was akin to trying to solve a puzzle with just your mind, moving pieces around whose properties could drastically shift in any given moment as you tried to put them together in a way that made no sense at all, but which you knew to be right anyway. And if that sounds hard and confusing, that's because working with magic was exactly like that most of the time. Working with magic was more about feel and intuition which could only be cultivated so far with training. You still needed to have a certain connection with the magic itself, and often that was achieved through pure faith.

Which was all I had to go on as I requested that Angela Crow remain quiet and not disturb me in any way until I had completed what I had to do. Then I knelt by the cup of blood on the floor, closed my eyes and went to work.

Within moments, I was somewhere else. Not physically, of course, but in my mind, I was literally somewhere else. A giant open space filled with the buzzing, crackling energy of pure magic. It wasn't a real place. It was simply a place I created long ago, a place where I could access and work with the magic I had learned how to cultivate and channel inside me. Every magic practitioner had their own version of this place. I called mine the Chaosphere because that's what it resembled. A giant sphere of pure energy that was completely chaotic in nature

and which required my skills as a sorcerer to tame and channel it so it could do my will. I stood in the center of this Chaosphere, like standing in the center of a hollowed-out sun, the energy buzzing around me at once terrifying and exhilarating as I began to pull strands of that energy towards me, twisting them this way and that, melding them together, twisting them again, forging them into new forms and shapes, the whole time allowing my intent to infuse every single strand of magical energy to ensure each strand would bend in the direction of my will.

I don't know how long I was in the Chaosphere for. In there, the constructs of time and space ceased to exist. I could have been in there minutes or days at a time, and I wouldn't have known either way.

When I finally opened my eyes, Angela Crow was kneeling in front of me, her eyes full of fascination as she watched what I was doing, almost like she wished she could see inside me to observe me working the magic. I barely registered her, however, as I placed my hands just above the cup of blood and began to direct the magic I had conjured and shaped in the Chaosphere into the blood mixture. A yellowish-green energy released itself from my hands and infused with the blood mixture in the cup, causing it to go from a dark crimson to a deep yellow color with streaks of purplish-red in it. At the same time, I began to recite the incantation that was part of the spell. It was an awkward incantation because it was formed with over a dozen different languages, none of those languages having been spoken in this world for centuries. The only saving grace was that the incantation was relatively short and basically helped to focus the effects of the spell on a certain subject, which in this case, was Angela Crow.

After finishing the incantation, I finally lifted the cup and held it out towards the vampire Crow. "Drink," I said simply, sweat running in rivulets down my face, my shirt stuck to my back.

Angela Crow took the cup and stared at me as if she was going to voice some doubt, but whatever she saw on my face made her think otherwise, and she finally drank down every drop of the blood in the cup, licking her lips afterward as she placed the empty cup on the floor. "Is that it?" she asked, hardly able to keep her excitement from her voice.

Nodding, I said, "That's it."

The vampire stood up. "How do we know if it worked?"

I nodded to the rays of light coming through a crack in the living room curtains. "Only one way to find out, isn't there?"

Swallowing hard, I watched as the vampire walked to the window and stood there for a moment. Then she flung open the curtains and the morning light swallowed her whole.

Chapter 21

Sunshine Girl.

Standing in the pure morning sunlight streaming through the living room window, Angela Crow made a noise that I at first interpreted as pain, and my heart sank as I fully expected to see the vampire erupt in flames before me. But then I realized that the vampire wasn't expressing pain, but joy. I could only stare in wonder and gratitude as The Crimson Crow appeared to be resistant to the incendiary effects of the UV rays bathing every inch of her. "Yes," she said as she probably realized that she was now the most powerful vampire in the city, in the world even. Walking in the daylight would not necessarily make her invincible or even any more powerful than she already was, but it would certainly make her special, and more often than not, that's all it took to dominate those who were less special. Which of course, Angela Crow knew all too well. To the rest of vampirekind, she would be held up as god, as The Daywalker perhaps (it remained to be seen what catchy titles were assigned to her).

Eventually, she turned to me and smiled, looking more powerful than ever as the sunlight lit her up, giving her an angelic appearance that belied the darkness in her soul. "It appears you have succeeded," she said to me as I continued kneeling on the floor, exhausted now from the long hours of concentration.

"So it seems," I said. "Thankfully."

"One final test."

Angela Crow left the living room and went to the front door. A moment later, I heard the door open as she must have stepped outside. I stayed where I was, having no wish to witness her day-walking firsthand. All I wanted to do was get rid of the bitch, so I could have a drink before going to bed. It was all I could do to hold myself up.

From outside, I heard joyous laughter, and I imagined Angela Crow standing in the middle of the street, her arms extended as she welcomed the rays of the sun on her milky white skin. No doubt it was a rush. Overwhelming even.

She didn't seem too overwhelmed when she came back in, however. She seemed as calm and composed as always in fact, apart from the grin on her face and the unashamed delight in her normally cold eyes. Her smile widened as she came and stood over me. "Creed," she said. "You are truly a talented boy. Your uncle's faith in you is well placed. So was my own it seems."

"Are we even now?" I asked, only wanting to be rid of her.

She breathed in deeply as a conciliatory look came over her face, a look I didn't welcome seeing because I knew what was coming next. "Not quite, I'm afraid."

I shook my head. "Why am I not surprised."

"Come on, Creed. You must have known I couldn't let you live after this. I can't risk you giving this precious gift to any other vampire. Surely you can understand that?"

With the little energy I had left, I got off my knees so I could stand and face her. "I do understand," I told her, my voice dulled from fatigue, but also blunt so she would feel what I was about to tell her. "That's why I built a failsafe into the spell I just did."

The girlish delight left her eyes and became replaced with cold suspicion. "What did you do?"

“I put the magic equivalent of a bomb right next to your heart. The bomb is linked to me, so that if I die, the bomb goes off and your heart is destroyed. I’m sure you can guess what happens next.”

Angela Crow’s scarlet lips slowly peeled back to reveal her fangs. Her eyes burned red as she seethed from within, her body tensing as if preparing to attack and kill me. I held her murderous gaze so she’d know I was deadly serious. “You fucking rat,” she seethed, extending her hand towards my throat, but stopping herself at the last second. “I should—”

“What?” I said, unafraid. “You’ll kill me? If you do, you’ll also kill yourself. You got what you wanted, Miss Crow, which is power. But like all power, it comes at a price. You of all people should know that.”

She stared at me a moment longer before shaking her head and turning away, after which I allowed myself to breathe normally again. When she next turned around, the cold smile was back on her face. “How do I know you’re not bluffing?”

“You don’t, not unless you kill me and find out...”

She shook her head again frustratedly. “Damn you, Creed.”

“Relax,” I said. “As long as nothing happens to me, you’ll be fine.”

“And what if someone else kills you?”

“That’s a chance you’ll have to take.”

“And when you eventually die from old age?”

“I’ll deactivate the bomb before that happens.”

“Very considerate of you.”

I smiled without humor. “You can go now, Miss Crow. Our business is concluded. I rescind your invitation here.”

Upon saying those words, it was like the vampire got pulled back by a rope wrapped around her as she was dragged against her will by an invisible force, out of the living room, down the hallway and out the front door where she came to a stop on the front step. Rejuvenated slightly by my victory over The Crimson Crow, I walked to the front door to see her off for good.

“I’ll find a way around this,” she said. “And when I do, I will make you suffer, Creed. Mark my words.”

“Mark my words also,” I told her. “If you do anything to Jennifer, if you hurt her in any way, I will activate that bomb around your heart and obliterate you out of existence. Are we clear on that?”

Angela Crow nodded reluctantly. “We’re clear.”

“Good,” I said. “Bye Miss Crow. Enjoy the sunshine. Maybe some of it will even penetrate that black heart of yours, who knows?”

And with that, I closed the door on The Crimson Crow.

Chapter 22

Slainte.

After spending the next few hours sleeping and recuperating, I called my uncle to check on Jennifer. I wanted to know if she had landed in Ireland safely, and as

it turned out she had. I had a brief conversation with her on the phone as I explained what had happened with her mother and how I had managed to sort things out with her. I also told Jennifer that her mother would not be bothering her again anytime soon, although I did warn the girl that her mother knew of her travel plans, so I told Jennifer to keep an eye out when she was in Babylon. Jennifer thanked me once more, her gratitude creating a sense of contentedness and satisfaction in me that went a long way towards strengthening my motivation to not only stay in Blackham City but to also use my particular skills to help more people, supernatural or otherwise.

I told Ray as much when I spoke to him on the phone again. He was happy to hear I had found the right path at last.

"A path," I told him. "Time will tell if it's the right one."

"It is," Ray said before he hung up the phone. "Trust me, my boy. It is."

After the phone call, I took a walk around The Sanctum. It was the first real physical Sanctum I'd ever had (the Sanctum I kept in the Astral Plane not counting). For as long as I needed it, the Sanctum in Blackham City was mine. More than that, it was a permanent base. A place to call home at long last.

Throughout all those years of traveling, I thought I didn't need anything permanent in my life, apart from magic. But walking around the Sanctum, feeling the history and magic steeped in its walls, I realized that permanency (as much as such a concept exists) was what I craved all along. For some reason, I had spent the last six years convinced otherwise, perhaps because (I was now realizing) I was scared of stopping anywhere for too long for fear of what would catch up with me.

That fear was still there in the background, but the difference now was that I was prepared to face whatever came along, from my past or from the present. And Blackham City was as good a place as any to do that.

Of course, now that I was there, I wasn't sure exactly how to proceed. I knew I had to set up shop, but I wasn't sure what kind of shop or even how to go about it. But that was okay because these things had a way of sorting themselves out when you decided on a particular path in life. In the meantime, I would make The Sanctum my own while also getting to know the lay of the land in Blackham City. Something told me that the more I knew about the place and its inhabitants, the easier my job (whatever job that was... magicslinger for hire, I guess) would be.

Standing now by the fireplace in the living room, I poured myself a glass of whiskey and looked around the room for a moment with a contented grin on my face. Then I raised my glass to the empty room and my new Sanctum. My new life. "Sláinte," I said, before knocking back the whiskey. And I don't mind telling you, it was the nicest glass of whiskey I'd ever had.

Oh, and you're probably wondering about that magic bomb I put next to Angela Crow's heart. Did I really do that, or was I bluffing, as The Crimson Crow had tried to say I was?

Well, all I'm going to say on that is this:

A sorcerer has to have his secrets, doesn't he?

Sláinte!

Chapter 23

Blood Sacrifice Sample Chapter.

The sheer force of the magical energy that crackled through the air was so powerful it slammed me against a brick wall as surely as being punched in the chest by the Devil's fist. I slid down the wall to the stinking floor like I'd just taken a hard right hook to the jaw. The invasive magic that had been unleashed fused within me, setting off a chain reaction that I couldn't stop. The spell blew through my every defense, including the talisman around my neck, the protective tattoos on my body and the Druidic runes etched into my trench coat. I might as well have been a goddamn Sleepwalker with no protection at all.

What am I even doing here? Where am I?

The faint smell of decayed flesh mixed with sulfur hung thick in the air, signifying that black magic had just been used, and that was never good. It was like turning up at a children's party to find Beelzebub tying balloon animals with a shit-eating grin on his face. Nothing good could come from that. Same with black magic. Bad shit always followed.

I sat dazed on the floor, blinking around me for a moment, my mind fuzzy as if I had just awakened from a dream. It appeared I was inside an abandoned office space, the expansive rectangular room lined with grimy, broken windows that let cold air into the place and which went some way towards drawing me out of the daze I was still in. It was night time, so darkness coated the room, the only real light coming from the moon outside as it beamed its pale silvery light through the smashed skylights in the ceiling.

Confused and more than a little uneasy, I struggled back to my feet and blindly reached for the pistol inside my dark green trench coat, frowning when I realized the gun wasn't there. Then I remembered it had gone flying out of my hand when the spell had hit. Looking around for a moment, I soon located the pistol lying on the floor several feet away, and I lurched over and grabbed it, slightly more secure now that the gun's reassuring weight was back in my hand.

There were disturbing holes in my memory. I vaguely recalled confronting someone after having tracked them to where I was.

But who?

Try as I might, I couldn't get a clear isorcerer. The person was no more than a shadow figure in my mind. It could have been anybody. I didn't even have a clue why I was tracking the mysterious person in the first place. Obviously, they had done something to get on my radar. The question was what, though?

The answer came a few seconds later when my eyes fell upon the dark shape in the middle of the room, and a deep sense of dread filled me straight away. A dread that was both familiar and sickening at the same time. Swallowing, I stared hard at the shape lying prone in the gloom. Then, over the sharp scent of rats piss and pigeon shit, a different smell hit my nostrils. The heavy, festering stench of blood.

When I gingerly crossed to the center of the room, my worst fears were confirmed when I saw that it was a dead body lying on the floor. A young woman with her throat slit. Symbols were carved into the naked flesh of her spreadeagled

body, bound by four ropes leading from her wrists and ankles to rusty long metal spikes hammered into the floor. I marveled at the force required to drive them into cement flooring, a feat that surely could only be achieved through magic.

Along the circumference of a circle painted around her was what looked like finger drawn symbols in the blood most likely harvested from the woman's wounds. The sheer detail of their forms unnerved me as I took in a quality that could've only come from a well-practiced hand. The tingling in my spine from all these factors combined with a vague recognition, one inhibited by whatever spell I'd absorbed.

I breathed out slowly as I reluctantly took in the callous butchery on display. The dead woman looked to be in her early thirties, though it was difficult to tell because both her eyes were missing. Cut out of their sockets with a knife it seemed like, the same knife used to cut her throat. I shook my head as I looked around for a second, trying to see where the dead woman's eyeballs might be, but I couldn't see them, which meant the killer probably took them away. Sick bastard.

The woman also looked underweight for her size. She was around the same height as me at six feet, but there was very little meat on her bones as if she rarely ate any food. The needle marks on her feet and the bruises around her thighs told me why, as did the leather mini skirt and bloody white boob tube discarded on the floor not far from her body. The woman was clearly a prostitute, and a drug addict to boot. A convenient, easy victim for whoever had killed her.

And if the symbols carved into her pale flesh were anything to go by, it would seem the girl wasn't so much murdered as ritually sacrificed. I would have to look the symbols up later when I got back to my Sanctum. At a guess, I would have said the girl was an offering to one of the Dimension Lords, though I had no clue which one because there were many. The symbols themselves were not only complex, but they were also carved with surgical precision. The clarity of the symbols against the girl's pale flesh made it possible for me to make out certain ones that I recognized as being signifiers to alternate dimensions. Though again, I didn't know which dimension was being referred to. Glyphs such as the ones I was looking at were always uniquely different in some way. No two people drew Glyphs in the same way, each person adding their personality into them, which could often make it hard to work out the precise meaning of certain ones. The intuitive feelings I got from those Glyphs however, were enough to make me believe that each one resonated only evil intent.

Crouching down to get a clearer isorcerer, I took out my phone to photograph the symbols so I could compare them later to the one's in my reference, and also my old case files. It was clear, though, that I had been onto whoever did that. And if I had to guess, I would have said the girl wasn't the first person to be murdered in a similar fashion by the killer. Not by a long stretch, given the precision and clear competency of the killer, whoever they were.

"Son a bitch," I said, annoyed now that I couldn't recall any details about the case I had so obviously been working on. It was no coincidence that I had ended up where I was, a place that happened to reek of black magic, and which housed a murder that had occult written all over it, quite literally in the victim's case. I had been on the hunt and I had gotten close to the killer, which was the likeliest

reason for the dark magic booby trap I happened to carelessly spring like some bloody rookie.

Whoever the killer is, they wield profoundly powerful magic. A spell that manages to wipe all my memories of the person in question wouldn't have been an easy spell to cast, or even come by for that matter. The killer is also a sorcerer or magicslinger of some kind, of that that there is no doubt. And given the depth of power to their magic, it also feels to me like they channel power from some other source, such as whatever Dimension Lord they are sacrificing innocent victims to.

Whatever the case, the killer's spell had worked. Getting back the memories they had stolen from me wasn't going to be easy, and that's if I could get them back at all, which depressingly, I feared might just be the case.

After shaking my head at how messed up the situation was, I went to stand up so I could get some full-body shots of the victim, but a commanding voice stopped me in my tracks.

“Don't move, motherfucker!”

