

Deliver Us From Evil

7 Deadly Sins, #1

by Allison Brennan, 1969–

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He who does not punish evil, commands it to be done.
—Leonardo da Vinci

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.
—Edmund Burke

Prologue

ANTHONY SENSED FATHER PHILIP before he saw him on the overgrown garden path that connected the ancient monastery to Anthony's private retreat.

Gently he laid his book on his desk—a four-inch-thick, thousand-year-old Latin tome—and stood to greet his mentor on the porch.

“Good evening, Father,” Anthony said. He used the word out of both respect and affection. Since Anthony had been abandoned as an infant thirty-five years ago, Father Philip had guided both his spiritual and personal growth. There was nothing he wouldn't do for the man.

“Raphael is on the phone,” Father Philip said.

Anthony shut the door of his small bungalow and walked with the old priest toward the main house.

“Make any headway?”

Anthony rubbed his temples; he'd spent two days doing intensive research. “If there is a demon at work in Santa Louisa, I don't know how it is managing not to leave a tangible trail, something to track. I hope Rafe has more information for me.”

When Rafe e-mailed him last week, his comments were vague and Anthony couldn't get much more from him during their subsequent e-mail exchange. The twelve semiretired priests in Rafe's charge were acting “strange.” Or, rather, stranger than usual. Rafe described them as forgetful, melancholy, and angry.

“Perhaps you should go out there yourself,” Father Philip suggested.

“I am not a demon hunter,” Anthony replied. “I'm doing what I do best, and that's identifying the problem. Then I can send the right person to fix it.” Though he certainly wasn't making headway on Rafe's situation. “Maybe this isn't a supernatural problem, but a mental one.”

Four weeks ago, Rafe had been called to minister to the reclusive priests at Santa Louisa de Los Padres Mission, who had each been sent there to recover from supernatural and human evil. Most would never be able to serve in full capacity again. But even Rafe's arrival at the mission was odd; since when did a seminarian get called into such a sensitive service?

When Father Philip didn't say anything, Anthony tensed. "You disagree?"

"I don't think either of us can make that determination without going to the mission."

Seven years ago Anthony had failed in the worst way and someone died. He wouldn't jeopardize another life, preferring to work with inanimate buildings. "If it is a demon, Rico and John are the two best hunters out there."

"Rafe needs you, Anthony."

Father Philip didn't need to say more. Anthony had been the one who had sanctified the ground the mission stood on. He'd renovated the facilities five years ago, declared the mission safe for the troubled souls sent there. That was his job—historical architect and demonologist. If a demon was there—if it could break through all Anthony's precautions—Anthony must have missed something.

The library housed the only phone in the monastery. Father Philip left Anthony in privacy. "Rafe?"

"Eight minutes it takes you to get to the phone? I tried your cell phone first."

"I had it turned off. I've been trying to research your problem, but I can't find anything in the ancient texts that addresses your specific observations. Do you have anything else for me?"

"I need you to come here."

"To America?"

"It's a feeling. I can't describe it. It's like I'm looking at these men and someone else is inside them."

"What about—"

"There are no cold or hot spots," Rafe interrupted. "No sulfuric scent. No superhuman strength or unexplainable events. I know what to look for, Anthony. We've been through the same training. It's like—they're here, but they're not here. They rarely sleep and when they do they succumb to violent nightmares."

"What about Dr. Wicker?" Psychiatrist Charles Wicker lived a few hours from the mission and made monthly visits.

"He thinks one of my men is communicating with a spirit. But he doesn't know who. We've used every test we can think of and they all pass."

"The tabernacle is still secure?"

"Tabernacle? Yes, of course, it's right behind the altar." Rafe sounded confused.

"Then you're okay," Anthony explained. "The tabernacle is embedded with the cross of Saint Peter and blessed with water from the river Jordan." There were also other protections, but Anthony didn't need to go into details now.

"You're one of the few people I trust. I need you. I don't want to lose any of them."

Suicide among those who have faced evil was unfortunately common. Like Anthony, Rafe had once failed in his mission.

The fear in Rafe's usually calm voice set Anthony on edge. They'd known each other for twenty-nine years, since the day Rafe had been left on the doorstep of the same monastery Anthony grew up in. Rafe was as close to a brother as Anthony had ever had. How could he refuse him?

Rafe said quietly, "Anthony, I think something evil has slithered inside. And I don't know how to get rid of it."

"I'll leave within the hour."

Chapter 1

BLOOD ISN'T RED.

Blood goes beyond color. Rich and textured, dark and fathomless, blood was life and death. *Burgundy* didn't do it justice. If blood were wine, it would be a full-bodied cabernet, perhaps a zinfandel, certainly not something as boring, mundane, two-dimensional as red.

Especially spilled blood, filling the crevices of the nearly two-hundred-fifty-year-old limestone floor of a forgotten California mission. Every hole, every nook, every imperfection in the aged floor filled with blood, corner to corner, the porous stone absorbing death so dark red it was almost black, as black as the heart of the evil man who had murdered the twelve priests in this oppressive chapel.

Evil men. Certainly it had taken more than one person to slaughter twelve unarmed priests.

Until this morning, the most spilled blood Sheriff Skye McPherson had witnessed was a vicious murder-suicide three years ago. A man had stabbed his family to death, then shot himself, the bastard. Even the arcs of blood slashed against those white walls didn't come close to the tragedy before her today.

She'd never rid this image from her mind, never forget the stench of violence.

Violence? Twelve people dead. It was a massacre.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." Detective Juan Martinez crossed himself as they proceeded carefully through the carnage.

They were in the chapel of Santa Louisa de Los Padres, a small mission closed to the public. Skye had hiked up here many times with her father, Chuck McPherson, a U.S. forest ranger who had known the Los Padres National Forest better than anyone and had befriended the priests who came to the mission on sabbatical.

That was before. Five years ago the diocese relocated the few who'd lived there, ended the sabbatical program, and moved in retired priests who weren't as friendly as their predecessors. But Skye was too busy now for weekend hikes anyway. And with her father dead, she didn't enjoy the wilderness as she once had.

Skye let the criminalists do their job as she surveyed the scene. So much violence in such a small room—it was as if the imprint of what happened last night would forever taint this hall. The altar drew her eye. She wasn't Catholic, she didn't care much for any religion, but it was obvious something sacrilegious had occurred.

The huge stone crucifix had been turned upside down. It must weigh hundreds of pounds, in addition to the deceptively simple six-foot solid-wood carving of the crucified Christ. Blood coated the crown of thorns on Christ's head, whether spatter from the killings or put there on purpose Skye wouldn't know until the crime scene team finished their work.

One of the dead lay on the raised altar; the remaining victims were scattered around the room, on the floor or in the pews. Not all bodies were intact.

There was good news, bad news. The good news was that they had the prime suspect in custody, along with the man who had discovered the bodies. The bad news was the suspect was allegedly in a coma. She'd believe it when she had a second opinion.

"I thought de Los Padres was for retired priests," Martinez said as he looked around. Many of the dead were too young for retirement.

"That's what the diocese has said, but they've been pretty hush-hush about this place for the last couple years," Skye said. "They did some major renovation five years ago, but I haven't been here for more than a decade." She forced herself to look at the faces of the victims. Their frozen expressions of terror gave her additional motivation to find the killers.

"The crime scene has been compromised." Head of the small county CSU Rod Fielding carefully approached, his face grim, stating what they already knew. "The guy who brought Mr. Cooper to the hospital didn't take any care about stepping in blood or disturbing evidence. I need his prints, his shoes, and a statement. What he touched, why, the whole nine yards."

"I sent a deputy to the hospital to hold Mr. Zaccardi until I get over there to interview him." Skye stared at the crime scene. "I don't expect it'll be anytime soon."

"Sooner than you think."

Skye whipped around and saw a tall, broad-shouldered man with dried blood on his white tailored button-down shirt. His naturally tan face was as hard as the stone walls that framed the mission, but his eyes were as deep and rich as dark chocolate. He looked like a pirate, not only out of his country but completely out of his element. His commanding presence caused everyone to pause a beat.

Anthony Zaccardi, no doubt.

"You're in the middle of my crime scene," she said.

Zaccardi stared at her with haunted eyes, his black hair falling to his shoulders. He wore a small dark stud in his left ear and bore a three-inch scar on the side of his neck along the edge of his collar. He was physically fit and muscular, more than capable of killing. But twelve men without a scratch? Doubtful. Besides, she had already verified his itinerary and the timeline wouldn't have worked, otherwise he'd be in lockup.

Chances were he had nothing to do with these murders. But *she* wasn't going to assume anything.

"I want my cross back."

She frowned. "What's he talking about?"

Tommy Reiner, the cop she'd sent to sit on Zaccardi, stepped into the room. He paled at the sight and scent of death. "He wanted to talk to you."

"I told you to keep him at the hospital."

Zaccardi repeated, "I want my cross."

Just what she needed, a lawsuit that she was denying Catholics their right to worship the way they saw fit.

"Uh—" Tommy hesitated.

"Give it back to him."

“It appeared to be a weapon.”

“For shit’s sake,” she muttered. She motioned for them to leave the chapel, then turned to Rod. “You need me, I’m outside.”

“I have enough to keep me busy,” he said. “But when you’re done with Zaccardi, I’d like him to walk me through his exact steps.”

She ushered everyone out of the chapel and into the courtyard. “This is a crime scene. I—”

“You need to know what I touched when I arrived, where I went. I understand. I need my cross, Sheriff.”

Zaccardi spoke with a subtly luxurious European accent. He looked Italian, dressed well, and had an aura about him that suggested he always got what he wanted, when he wanted.

Reiner said, “It’s a knife, Skye. I swear.”

She snapped her fingers. “Let me see it.”

The cop left through the main courtyard entrance. They’d cut the lock on the gate when they entered. With one survivor at the hospital, they had to assume going in that there were other survivors, regardless of what Mr. Zaccardi had said over the phone.

There weren’t.

“So you weren’t lying when you told my deputy you just flew in from Italy.”

“I don’t lie.”

Everyone lied, but she refrained from saying so. “What are you doing so far from home?”

“Rafe asked me to come. He was concerned about something happening here. He felt something—” He paused.

“Something what?”

“He said something evil had slithered inside.”

She raised her eyebrow. “Were those his exact words?”

“Yes.”

“And you dropped everything and flew halfway across the world?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Rafe wouldn’t ask for help if he didn’t need it.”

“Help?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of help.”

“I told you. Something—”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Something evil, right.”

“What kind of evil?”

Skye had almost forgotten her detective, Juan Martinez, had followed them out of the chapel, until he asked the question. A few years older than she was, Juan had been one of her few close friends in the department since she became a cop eleven years ago.

“The kind of evil I understand.”

“For a man who doesn’t lie, you’re being awfully evasive,” Skye snapped.

His jaw tightened. “I’m a demonologist.”

That was the last thing she expected to hear. She glanced at Martinez, who was nodding. "You study demons," he said, as if it were in the same career category as brain surgery.

"Among other things." Zaccardi stared at the chapel doors. "I was here five years ago. It had been safe." His voice trailed off.

"And now? You're saying *demons* killed those men?" Skye snorted. "Please. We're looking for the men who helped your *friend* butcher those priests."

Zaccardi stepped toward her, aggressive. She put her hand on the butt of her gun, but he didn't so much as blink. "Rafe did not kill those men. He didn't have any part in it."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"That doesn't matter—"

"All I'm saying is we don't always know our friends, especially those we don't see all the time." *And sometimes we don't even know our own family.* Skye steeled herself against her memories.

Zaccardi shook his head. "Rafe and I might as well be brothers. I know his heart. He knows mine. We were raised together, studied together in Europe."

"When?"

"Until he moved to America ten years ago."

"And you haven't seen him since," Skye said flatly.

"No."

Deputy Reiner came back with an evidence bag. Inside was a knife in the shape of a cross. Dagger would be a more descriptive word.

"This is your cross?" Skye took the bag from Tommy. "How'd you get this on the plane?"

"I checked my baggage. It is a cross."

"Right." This guy was getting weirder and weirder. But he didn't seem dangerous. Not physically dangerous, at any rate. His alibi had checked out. Between the time his flight landed in San Francisco and the four-hour drive to the mission, he couldn't have killed the priests. She handed him the bag.

Surprise lit his face. He retrieved the cross and slid it into a loop on his belt. For a moment he looked just like the pirate Skye had envisioned earlier, the dagger-cross his sword, a breeze lifting his hair, the morning sun chiseling his face.

Rod stepped into the courtyard. "Skye, you have to see this." He stared at Zaccardi. "You should come, too."

Skye didn't want to discipline Rod in front of the other cops, but he didn't have authority to bring civilians into the crime scene, even though he'd been working the job almost as long as she'd been alive.

"Do you really think demons did this?" Martinez asked Zaccardi without derision.

"Yes," Zaccardi responded. "I know they did."

"I don't know about demons," Rod said, "but something weird is going on, and if the press gets hold of this, PR will be hell."

Anthony walked through the carnage, trying to push aside the silent screams for salvation. He didn't have answers, and the panic in the pleas told him the dead knew their fate.

Did none of these cops see the evil around them? Didn't the presence of darkness terrify them as it tried to overtake their souls?

For his entire life, he'd heard the cries of the dead and cackle of evil. If it hadn't been for the wise men at St. Michael's on a small island off Sicily, he would have gone insane. He'd learned to control it, to let them inside in small doses, in order to help the dead as well as preserve his own sanity. But here, with so much evil and pain in one place, his head ached with the struggle to keep the agony of the lost souls at bay.

They entered the small, narrow sacristy on the far side of the altar, the room where the priests stored chalices, vestments, unconsecrated hosts, sacramental wine. The destruction was complete, broken glass everywhere and the scent of sweet wine.

An odd drawing was painted in red—probably blood—on the stone wall. It was the seal of a demon, but Anthony didn't recognize the crest. Four circles, one within the other, evenly spaced. Inside the first ring was a phrase written in ancient Latin. The second ring held three symbols Anthony recognized as traditional demonic marks—an upside-down cross at the top, a common symbol of the devil that has been around for thousands of years; a seven-point triangle in the lower right; and an upside-down hook in the lower left with a triangle at the top and an oval circling the bottom curve.

The third ring had markings he would need to analyze, but they appeared to be a numeric code of some sort. Some who practiced demonolatry used numerology as part of their rituals.

But the inner circle held three filled ovals that formed a fat triangle, a mark he'd never seen but filled him with an unexplainable primal fear. The image reminded him of soulless eyes, of which he had seen far too many.

Rod said, "It looks almost like hieroglyphics, but not exactly. Too much detail. The words are Latin."

"*'Summon the fires to serve in death; relinquish the soul to serve your lord; walk in the willing dead.'*" Anthony translated.

"What the hell does that mean?" Skye demanded.

"I'm not sure, but it's part of a ritual."

"A satanic ritual?" she questioned, disbelieving.

"This isn't the mark of Satan."

"Well?" she prompted when he didn't continue.

"This is the seal of a demon. It's used as part of the ritual to bring a specific demon from Hell." He gestured at the crude painting.

"Demons, Satan, does it really matter? I mean, we're dealing with a bunch of violent psychos anyway."

"It matters," Anthony said. *Walk in the willing dead.* He'd never heard that phrase before. Fire was a common element to call upon, particularly when dealing with demons. To serve Satan, one had to relinquish their soul to the fires of Hell. But the willing dead? Physical death or spiritual death?

"And who is he?" Skye asked.

If he were in Italy or in some other countries, Anthony could explain in far greater detail what they were dealing with. Believers would be appeased with his explanation that someone had brought forth evil and until they knew *what* evil

they faced they'd never be able to send it back. But here in America? This pretty blond cop with intelligent, sad eyes? Her entire demeanor said she wouldn't believe anything he had to say.

"I don't know," he finally said. He didn't know which demon had been called, a first for him. All those years of study, and he was at an impasse.

"Great." She rolled her eyes. "So we're dealing with some satanic cult," she said, obviously not listening to—or believing—Anthony. "You're right, Rod, the press is going to have a field day."

"You think we have a wacko group running around performing satanic rituals and killing people?" Rod asked. "The crime seems too—disordered."

"Very Charles Manson-ish," Skye said with a smirk.

Anthony said, "You don't know what you're up against. These aren't satanists, and they're not disorganized. This is pure demonolatry. Someone called this spirit up and helped it kill those men. This seal is—how would you say it?—like his signature. He's gloating over death."

Skye rubbed her temple. Anthony resisted the anger that rose because of her disdain. He'd faced ridicule many times before, and he knew whatever spirit had been unleashed would feed on his anger, fear, and insecurity.

"So you think a demon killed those priests? And your friend just happened to survive the slaughter?"

Anthony chose his words carefully. "I think that a person brought forth the demon and used the power of Hell to kill those men. How, I don't know. Why Rafe was spared, I don't know. But I can tell you that it"—he pointed to the circle on the wall—"is still here. And more people will die if I can't find him and send him back to Hell."

Skye sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Let's get out of here."

Anthony didn't move. He took out his wallet, extracted a business card, and began to re-create the seal of the demon on the blank side. Anthony needed to find out exactly who—and what—he was up against. Maybe there was a chance to save those souls. *The willing dead.*

These men hadn't been willing. The demon would be looking for someone who was. One of those who summoned him? Did they know what the demon would demand of them?

"Look, Mr. Zaccardi," Skye said, sympathy crossing her face. "You've been through a lot today. I'm sorry about your friends, but I'm asking you to leave the crime scene. I'll be in contact later."

He finished the sketch and wrote down the Latin phrase. "You do not know what you are up against," he repeated.

"Yes I do. I'm up against a group of brutal cowards who killed twelve unarmed men."

"You are up against those who worship *him*." He stabbed his pencil at the drawing. "It is his strength that slaughtered those men. The people who called him—and there had to have been more than one—are tools. They may be frail old women or strong teenage boys. It doesn't matter, after bringing forth this demon they have the power of Hell on their side."

Anthony must sound crazy to the sheriff. The more she tried to dismiss what he knew to be true, the angrier he became. He had to control his temper. Not only to

be able to work with this cop, but to prevent the spirits from using his temper against him.

“Sheriff,” he said quietly but firmly. “You don’t believe me. But you must. We don’t have time for doubts.”

“Please leave.”

“You wanted me to tell you if anything was missing.”

“Do you know where the written records are kept?”

“In the caretaker’s office.”

“I’ll let you know if anything has been stolen,” she said.

He stared at her, her green eyes never leaving his, her mouth firm, her posture rigid. She wore her long blond hair back, in a complicated French braid. But the tight hairstyle didn’t diminish the femininity of the tall, athletic woman. Skye was attractive, but deliberately downplayed her assets. To be seen as a leader first, a woman second.

The men around her were watching the situation closely. This was her turf, her pride at stake. There would be another time, soon, to reason with her. When they were alone, maybe she would let her guard down, soften her heart to the reality she denied.

“We’ll talk later.” He pocketed the drawing and left.

Skye watched Zaccardi leave, nodded to Martinez to follow him out. She turned and stared at the hideous drawing, the eyes inside the circle seeming to look right at her. Watching her.

Demons.

Ridiculous. “Don’t listen to him,” she said to Rod. “The guy’s a whack job.”

Rod didn’t say anything.

“What? Man of science believes in demons?”

Rod put away his equipment and stared at her. “Skye, I’m fifty-two years old. I’ve been a crime scene analyst in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles. I came here because Santa Louisa was supposed to be one of the safest places to live.

“I’m telling you, in my thirty years of law enforcement, I have never seen anything like this. I’m not a religious man, but I believe in God. And if God exists, why not demons? I just can’t wrap my mind around this crime scene. It makes no sense. No one tried to leave the chapel. The killers should have been drenched in blood, but not one drop was found outside this room, except for what Mr. Zaccardi tracked out when he saved his friend. If we are to believe Zaccardi that he broke down the kitchen door, which was bolted from the inside, that means that the only two entrances to the mission were *locked by someone inside.*”

“Which means Rafe Cooper is our only suspect.”

“Where are the weapons? We have searched everywhere and there are none. As far as I can see, at least four different weapons were used, all blades. Yet there is not one knife in this room, and certainly nothing that can decapitate a man.”

Skye opened her mouth, closed it. She had no answer.

She walked out of the sacristy and saw Anthony Zaccardi standing next to the altar. “Reiner! Escort Mr. Zaccardi back to his car.”

What the hell was he doing standing like that? What was he looking at?

He turned to her with a strained expression. “The tabernacle. It’s missing.”

Juan stood next to her and pointed. “It’s right there.”

Skye stared at a small, simple antique metal box with gold mesh wire for sides. Zaccardi shook his head. "That's not the tabernacle I installed five years ago. Now I know exactly how the demon got in."

Chapter 2

ANTHONY CLOSED HIS CELL PHONE and stared at the fountain in the mission courtyard. He'd called the only person who might know which demon had been summoned, the only person who knew more about demons than he did.

And if Father Philip didn't know, they were in mortal danger.

He'd stepped out of the chapel as soon as he realized the tabernacle had been replaced. Without the ancient protection against evil, these men had been in jeopardy from the moment the tabernacle had been switched. For how long? Was this a slow-working insidious evil, or a sudden awakening? Anthony had specifically asked about the tabernacle, and Rafe hadn't seemed worried. Had it been switched before he arrived last month? Or more recently? The fake looked nearly identical to the original. Only someone with Anthony's expertise would be able to tell the difference.

How long had the demon been tormenting these men?

A silent cloak of frightened whispers wrapped around the former sanctuary, suffocating the mission. The vicious imprint of what had happened inside these walls could never be cleansed.

Help us help us help us.

The chant wrapped around him, invisible tentacles reaching for his soul, the pleas growing in urgency as a sharp sliver of icy fear rolled down his spine and his heartbeat doubled. Sweat broke out on his brow and he leaned forward, putting both hands on the fountain, the trickle of water soothing. Breathing deeply, eyes closed, he forced his heart rate to slow and regained his internal composure. He needed all his energy focused on learning who and what was responsible for these murders.

He opened his eyes. Blood poured from the statue of Saint Jude. He gasped, blinked, and the blood was gone.

Help us help us help me.

The keening of trapped souls, the souls of the men being carted out of the chapel in black plastic body bags, surrounded Anthony, deafening in their persistence. He'd heard the cries of the dead before, had saved countless souls before they were forever lost. But never like this, never this strong. Never this lost.

"What's wrong?"

He turned and faced Sheriff Skye McPherson.

Needful, he soaked in her raw beauty to clear his mind of all he'd seen. She did everything possible to diminish her sensuality, but nothing could destroy what lay beneath. Her creamy, clear skin. Her sharp, intelligent green eyes. Her full, red, unpainted lips. Makeup would only have destroyed what nature had created to be pleasing to a man.

Anthony desperately needed hope. Skye's presence strengthened him. It was as if she'd been conjured from his dreams. As if he'd seen her before. As if he was *meant* to be at her side, helping her. Watching her. Protecting her.

He turned from her, unsettled by the thought that there might be a bond with a woman he did not know, a woman who doubted him and everything he believed in.

He touched the statue, water—not blood—flowing over his hand. Certainly his mind was clouded and troubled by what had happened here. The bond with Sheriff Skye McPherson was only through death.

"Saint Jude," he murmured, "the patron saint of desperate causes. The men inside were desperate, Sheriff. Desperate because of what they had lived through. I put this statue here, personally selected and retrieved it from a monastery in France that had given sanctuary to other desperate people. Jews escaping the Holocaust. Desperation and hope. Without hope, we have nothing."

Uncertainty flashed in her eyes, then the steady face of the cop he'd first met returned. She wouldn't understand, she hadn't believed him even when faced with the violence inside; why did he even try to explain?

Because of *hope*. He sensed the hope and goodness within Skye McPherson as strongly as he felt the evil that permeated the formerly hallowed grounds of Santa Louisa de Los Padres.

"All I *feel*," she said, "is that someone—most likely several someones—slaughtered twelve people. Considering they were priests and this is a place of worship, it is being looked at as a possible hate crime."

Anthony almost laughed, pulled his hand from the water and crossed himself. A faint scream from the trees taunted him. Skye didn't hear it.

"Hate crime?" he repeated. "All violence comes from hate."

She glanced at the doors of the chapel where another body bag was being removed, then looked at him. It was obvious to Anthony she had grave questions for him.

"Did you remove anything from the crime scene?" she finally asked.

"Other than Rafe, no. Why?"

She didn't answer, then suddenly it became clear. He pictured the destruction he'd walked into at dawn.

"There are no weapons."

"Someone removed them. And if you were telling the truth about breaking into the kitchen—"

"I was."

"Then they are in here, someplace."

"The killer left. He could have taken them."

"You said a *demon* killed these men." She couldn't keep the derision from her voice.

He sighed, ran a hand through his hair. *Patience, Anthony*. "Demons don't act on their own. They need human intervention. They need someone to bring them forth. Once here, they have more power, but in the netherworld, their power is only that which they are given by Satan himself. This is why demonolatry is so dangerous. It is *humans* who are giving these demons power, enabling them to walk on earth stealing souls.

"Yes, a demon was responsible, but only with the help of people."

“Then how did the *human* being leave a locked mission?”

“You’re the cop, you figure it out!” Anthony turned away from Skye, angry with himself for his temper. He couldn’t allow himself to fall. He leaned into the fountain, put his hands in the water, seeking peace.

Help us help us help us

“You told my deputy that the mission was locked when you arrived.”

“Yes. The gate here”—he motioned to the courtyard fence—“had a padlock. I have a key to the mission, and went through to the kitchen door because it was closest. But the door was bolted from the inside. I broke in.”

It had been like an invisible hand, dark and twisted, holding him back. The sensation of evil slithering across his skin. Malevolence hung thick in the air, whipped his tongue, and he knew he was too late.

“The lights were out.”

“It was five in the morning,” Skye said, as if his comment were ridiculous.

“For some of these men, dark is as much an enemy as Satan himself. The wall sconces are always on, and in the event of a power outage, the mission has a generator.”

He saw Skye scribble a note. Of course, a sabotaged generator was tangible, something she could investigate. But who would know these men feared the night?

Anthony held the crucifix—dagger point out—in front of him as he ran down the hall toward the smell of death.

“I smelled fresh blood. The chapel doors were closed.”

Resisting the urge to call out, he pushed open the solid wood doors and stepped into the house of worship. A rush of burning heat came at him, then the temperature dropped and he saw his own breath.

Anthony couldn’t tell this cop about the demon he felt vacating the chapel. She wouldn’t believe him.

“I checked for survivors, but it was clear they were butchered. I was too late.”

Eerily beautiful, the early morning sun filtered through the tall, narrow stained-glass windows bathing the dead in colorful rays of light. Body upon body filled the narrow chapel. Some decapitated, some without limbs, all murdered.

The crucifix hung upside down. It was a sign of demons, of Satanists, but this cross weighed too much for even a large group of men to invert and rehang. It had been carved from granite in Mexico and brought to the mission when it was first built in 1767.

“I began looking among the dead for Rafe, giving blessings as I went.”

“What spirits tortured you?” Anthony whispered to the dead. Where was Rafe? He carefully crossed the floor, checking the pulse of the men he passed. All dead. As he neared the altar, he saw his friend.

“I found Rafe behind the altar.”

He lay facedown, white T-shirt covered in blood. Anthony squeezed back tears of anger, regret, and deep sadness as he knelt beside Rafe and turned him over. Anthony wasn’t a priest, but at this point he doubted God would care who gave last rites. The crying for help intensified as Anthony began the prayer.

“After I turned him over, I saw that he was breathing. His pulse was strong and I ripped open his shirt to find the wound that had caused all the blood, but there was nothing. No visible injuries. I couldn’t wake him, so I carried him out.”

The trapped souls of the dead priests cried out to him. Maybe they hadn't been dragged down to Hell. Maybe they were in between worlds, like ghosts, waiting for help. Waiting for him.

First, save Rafe. Then he could return to save the dead.

"I called 911 as soon as I started down the mountain."

"We have the call logged at 5:32 A.M. You told my deputy you arrived at the mission about twenty minutes before that."

He nodded, rubbing his temples as the whispers continued, scratching at his subconscious. "Skye," he said quietly, not looking at her, calling on the person, the woman, not the sheriff.

"Yes?"

"Do you know of doubting Thomas?"

"Vaguely."

"He had to see Jesus to believe. He had to touch His wounds to believe in the Resurrection."

Anthony turned, stronger now, faced the woman whom he needed in order to save these men. He could stop the demon, but it would be her investigation that led him to those humans responsible for calling on Hell. To the ritual that maybe, with luck, strength, and faith, he could reverse.

He reached out, touched her soft skin. "I am asking for faith from a doubting Thomas. But I am still asking."

Skye stared at Anthony Zaccardi, the dark pirate, because that was most certainly what this man was. She should be laughing in his face—demons and Hell? Ridiculous. Her own mother had left to seek God and look what happened to her. Their entire family had been torn apart. Skye didn't need religion or belief in anything she couldn't see when she had cold, hard facts that didn't lie.

But she couldn't laugh at this man whose middle name could be *Serious*. His expression when he recounted finding the dead priests would stay with her for a long time. So full of pain and agony, as if he felt what they'd gone through. Zaccardi believed everything he told her, of that she was positive, and she couldn't figure out how he had anything to do with the murders.

But the investigation was still young and she refused to let her feelings cloud the facts.

"I am a cop," she finally said, her voice a mere whisper. "I want the people who did this. Demons or not, *someone* was responsible for killing these men and I will find them."

Skye turned from Anthony Zaccardi's eyes, so piercing it was as if he could read her mind. She didn't like that, not one little bit.

She surveyed the courtyard. Two wings extended on either side, leading toward the main entrance, with the traditional rounded arches of California missions. Entirely surrounded by the Los Padres National Forest, Santa Louisa had been built by a reclusive sect of the Franciscans and dubbed the "lost mission" because it wasn't easily accessible from the Mission Trail that started in San Diego and ended in San Francisco.

The courtyard was beautiful in its simplicity. Six arches on both sides framed the buildings. Brick walkways. And roses, everywhere roses. The fountain in the center was designed as a natural rock waterfall, water trickling over gray and

brown stones that looked so precariously balanced that Skye was surprised they didn't topple over.

Saint Jude, Zaccardi had said. Patron saint of lost causes. She was certainly a lost cause. But one thing she *was* good at, thrived in, was being a cop. And her instincts told her that God or no God, a man was responsible for these deaths.

"I'll need your passport, Mr. Zaccardi," she said, regretting her decision when a cloud of disbelief crossed his face, but knowing a good cop would insist that Zaccardi not be able to leave the country. He reached into his back pocket and handed her the documents.

"I'm sorry," she found herself saying.

"You're just doing your job," he finished for her.

"Where are you staying?"

"I don't know."

"The Coastal Inn outside town is a nice place. I know the owners. Tell them I sent you, they'll give you a good rate."

He looked over her shoulder. What did he see? All she saw was a simple stone building. His troubled eyes told her he saw something more. She wanted to ask, but bit her tongue. She couldn't, wouldn't, be sucked into his fantasy. Or hers.

Detective Juan Martinez stepped out of the chapel, waved her over.

"I'll keep in touch," she said to Zaccardi.

A chill wind swept through the courtyard as he turned and left, as if he'd summoned the elements himself.

Or they came in his wake.

* * * * *

Trapped himself without a human body, the ancient demon imprisoned the twelve souls that fought for the Light, but didn't have the strength to bring each soul back to his Master.

He had failed. Black pain twisted his noncorporeal mind as he hovered in the mountains, invisible to those who did not know what he looked like, how he smelled, how he felt, in his true form.

He had never faced Zaccardi, but the human was known to all in Hades. Zaccardi was a relic from the past, relishing the destruction of that which ensured balance on earth.

If the Master of Heaven hadn't wanted them to exist, He would have extinguished Satan and the rest of them during the Great Battle. But it was a game. How many souls could they win over? How many would serve the Dark Lord? The more they won, the hotter Hell burned, the more of his kind walked the earth.

But Zaccardi was among those pathetic humans who wanted a piece of the pie. As if destroying demons would grant him a larger room in Paradise. Because of Zaccardi and his powerful friend, he'd failed. He hadn't been able to keep Zaccardi at bay and Cooper trapped at the same time he manipulated death. And in that sliver of time, the soul he'd been promised got away from him.

He burned at the unfairness of it!

Losing the body chosen for him greatly irritated the demon. That which was lost would have given him more power than he'd ever had. He'd have ruled on earth

forever! He would have opened new portals for his Master, converted more humans to dark service. They would be a potent force, undefeatable. No angel would be able to destroy them. No human would be able to fight them. They'd have the numbers and strength to come and go at will among the pitiable human bodies.

What a travesty that he needed such a weak vessel to survive in this dimension!

With the remaining strength from the ritual that had brought him from Hell, he'd be able to keep the souls trapped until he could complete his mission and send them to the fiery pit. He needed another body, which his earthly servants would soon provide.

He could survive in an unwilling body, but the constant battle to restrain a fighting soul would prevent him from attaining his highest power. Sooner or later, he would need a willing human to increase his strength.

The dead around him moaned with dread of their fate.

No one can save you. You were betrayed by one you loved, and you're mine for eternity.

The demon laughed, and waited, and the trees of the forest groaned.

Chapter 3

SKYE LISTENED TO DETECTIVE JUAN MARTINEZ as she drove from the mission back to town.

"While you were talking to Zaccardi in the courtyard, I spoke to the delivery boy," Juan said, glancing briefly at his notes. "Brian Adamson. He delivers every Monday morning between nine and noon."

"Did he have anything to add?"

"He confirmed what Zaccardi said about Cooper being a recent transplant. Came here a month ago. The interesting thing is that Cooper recently fired the housekeeper, a Ms. Corrine Davies."

"Do you have an address?"

"Ten Seaview Lane. North of town."

"Let's go pay her a visit."

Juan flipped through his notes and said to Skye, "According to the property manager, Corinne Davies and her daughter, Lisa, moved into the house nearly two years ago when the mother took a job as cook and housekeeper at the mission. They've never been late on the rent, no complaints, not even a call for repairs. Ideal tenants."

"How old is the daughter?"

"Twenty. A college student."

"Background?"

"No warrants, no arrests. I have Ms. Davies's credit application. A widow, her last address was in Salem, Oregon, where she worked for the Catholic diocese. Her references included the bishop."

"Who hired her in Santa Louisa?"

"Bishop Carlin."

Martinez had spoken with the bishop earlier in the day to inform him of the murders and ask questions about Rafe Cooper. Skye had met the bishop only once before, when he presided over the funeral for one of her deputies. She was more comfortable with Juan handling the religious contacts. She didn't need religion, didn't understand people who sacrificed everything for something they couldn't see. People who abandoned their family, their homes, everything, for a promise only good when you were dead.

Skye pushed that all from her mind. Already, this case was eating at her and memories of her mother threatened to return. She was as done with her mother as the last criminal she'd locked behind bars.

"Why is Cooper here?" she asked.

"Raphael 'Rafe' Cooper is a seminary student up in Menlo Park," Martinez said. "The bishop doesn't have any personal information on him."

"How does he just move to the mission without the diocese knowing his history? Isn't there some sort of background check, employment verification, anything? I need Cooper's background, ASAP. But what I really want to know is, why is he *here?*"

"Bishop Carlin didn't know. The mission, though technically part of the diocese, isn't under his control."

"So who controls it?"

"The Vatican."

"As in Vatican, do you mean like the Pope and the Catholic Church Vatican?"

"Apparently. Someone in Rome, Francis Cardinal DeLucca, sent the bishop an introductory letter a month ago stating that Cooper was being sent to evaluate the priests for service. Cooper is a psychologist, perhaps he was giving them a mental health update, I don't know."

"And?"

"And that's it. That's all he knew."

Switching gears, she asked, "Why did the diocese fire the housekeeper?"

"They didn't. Cooper did. Ms. Davies is still on the payroll," Martinez said. "Bishop Carlin told her to take a couple weeks and he'd find her a different position. He seemed angry with Cooper for firing her without consulting him."

"Maybe I should talk to the bishop."

"Are you questioning my investigative abilities?"

Skye bristled at the accusation in Martinez's voice. "No, and you shouldn't think that I would. But you're Catholic, you have respect for the office, maybe you didn't ask the right questions."

"I asked the right questions."

Skye changed the subject as she turned off the highway. "Do you know why Davies left Salem?"

"No, but her daughter is a student at UC Santa Barbara."

"She's commuting an hour to college?"

"We do what we can when we're broke," Martinez said with a half grin.

"Let's go."

The coastal cottage on Seaview Lane had an exquisite view of the ocean, almost identical to Skye's own property three miles down the shoreline. The cottage rested on a bluff with a sheer drop to the Pacific Ocean beyond.

Skye surveyed the rental house. Small, neat, functional. The perfect place for a recluse or lovers, separated from nearby homes by nature. Craggy, wind-sculpted cypress trees lined the property, and with the smell of salt water and sound of crashing waves below, the entire setting was picturesque.

She opened the door of her police-issue Bronco and they walked up the cobblestone path to the porch. The cottage looked well lived in with lots of plants, herbs, and flowers growing in pots resting on every available inch. Skye rapped on the door.

A moment later a young woman answered. She had long dark hair and large pale brown eyes. To say she was beautiful would be an understatement.

“May I help you?”

“Sheriff Skye McPherson and Detective Juan Martinez,” Skye said. “We’d like to speak with Corinne Davies, if she’s home.”

“My mom is on vacation. Is something wrong?”

Lisa Davies would hear it from the press, so Skye said, “There’s been a multiple homicide at the mission.”

The girl’s eyes clouded with tears and her delicate hand went to her mouth. “What happened?”

“I can’t say, but we’d like to speak to your mother about anything she may have witnessed or heard during her time working there.”

Lisa shook her head. “Mom was so upset after—I hate to speak ill of the dead, but Mr. Cooper was a vile human being. He hurt my mother cruelly, fired her for no reason. She’s at a health spa, trying to accept what happened and look for another job...” Her voice cracked. “She knows I love going to college here and she’s trying to find something local.”

“Where can we reach your mother?” Skye asked.

“I don’t want to trouble her. She’ll be heartbroken.”

“I need you to trouble her. This is important.”

Lisa relented. “I’ll call her. I’m sure she’ll come home immediately.”

“Please have her call us as soon as she returns.” Skye handed Lisa Davies her business card. “Did you frequent the mission?”

“I went up there a few times.”

“And what was your impression of the men who lived there?”

“Harmless,” she said. “Nice, I guess. I really didn’t talk much to them.”

“Did you meet Rafe Cooper?”

She hesitated, and Skye suspected she was about to lie. “Once.”

“Did you have an impression?”

“He seemed mightier-than-thou. I’m sure my feelings are clouded by what happened to my mother. He fired her. For no reason.”

“Please have your mother contact us as soon as possible,” Skye said and led the way back to her Bronco.

“What are you thinking?” Martinez asked.

“There was so much wrong with that conversation I don’t know where to start.”

“She assumed Rafe Cooper was dead.”

“Exactly. And she didn’t ask who else had been killed, if we’d caught the suspects, nor did she seem fearful of her mother’s life.” Skye paused as they

climbed into the truck. “You said the bishop kept Corinne Davies on the payroll. Why did her daughter think she’d been fired and needed to find a job?”

“Perhaps the bishop is keeping her on payroll until she finds something,” Martinez suggested.

“Hmm.”

“You think she was involved?” Martinez asked.

“I’m not making any assumptions at this point, but I can hardly wait to speak to Corinne Davies. I’d like you to do a deeper background check on mother and daughter.”

Skye turned the ignition. “Let’s go check in with Rafe Cooper’s doctor.”

Chapter 4

ANTHONY SAT AT RAFE’S bedside, praying over him, concentrating so hard that he was oblivious to everything else, trying to figure out what had happened.

If only it were that simple. If only he’d been blessed with second sight, like some of the others. If only he could reach into Rafe’s mind and see what had happened...

He admonished himself for his futile plea. As Father Philip often said, accept the gifts you have and don’t covet the gifts of others.

As a young child, he had found it difficult to understand what advantages he would have in the ongoing war. He’d been sheltered by the monks because of his strong empathic ability. He sensed good and evil in both people and things. When he was young, overwhelming waves of negative emotion nearly destroyed him; it was only with age and training that he learned to control his senses.

Now, his ability served him well as a demonologist. And sitting here, at Rafe’s side, he knew there were no demons inside him, nothing evil that kept him comatose. Only emptiness, a void, as if Rafe were already dead.

“What happened in there, Rafe?” he whispered.

Perhaps the coma was Rafe’s way of dealing with the tragedy. Where had he been during the slaughter? Had he witnessed it? Had he listened to it? Had he been somehow trapped by the demon? Why had he been spared? What had caused him to collapse at the altar?

So many questions, and Anthony had no answers, and likely wouldn’t until Rafe woke up.

Anthony was six when he first met Rafe. He’d instantly bonded with the child who radiated goodness.

But there had always been questions. Rafe was older than most, abandoned at the monastery at the age of three instead of infancy. He’d been dying until Father Philip laid hands on him. He had scars no one could explain, as if he’d survived a brutal battle, though he was still a toddler.

By the time the boys of St. Michael’s reached puberty, their gifts had been revealed. Demon hunter, psychic, healer, among others. For Anthony, it was his recognition of good and evil, his empathy, his ability to purge demons from

inanimate objects like buildings. But as for Rafe—his gift was still unknown. At the age of twenty-one Rafe had decided to serve as a priest. He'd been sent to America because Father Philip sensed it was right. Yet ten years later, Rafe had still not received the Sacrament of Holy Orders. It was as if God Himself was pushing him in another direction, Rafe had told Anthony on more than one occasion.

"I go through the ceremony and I can't say the words. Something holds my tongue."

"Why didn't you call me sooner, Rafe?" Anthony whispered. "I would have dropped the world for you, my friend."

Anthony reached for Rafe's hand and stared. His right hand was in a cast, his left bandaged. He pulled Rafe's chart from the end of the bed and read.

Three broken fingers on his right hand and a shattered wrist. Fingernails on six fingers half torn. Wood slivers embedded in the tips, down to the bone.

There had been so much blood at the chapel Anthony hadn't noticed Rafe's hands had been so damaged. Slivers of wood? Had he been trapped somewhere during the massacre? How? Who? The demon?

"I must go to the mission tonight," Anthony whispered. "I need to find out what happened to you."

He would search not only for answers to what had happened to Rafe, but for some way to free the souls still trapped.

"I'm going to try," he said aloud. How could he not? How could he do nothing? Evil would triumph, the demon would grow stronger, Hell would burn hotter.

Anthony sensed that he stood on the edge of something big. Hell churned, working overtime. They, the fallen ones, would be coming in waves. As more human beings worshipped the darkness, more demons would rise to the surface. This, the slaughter at the mission, was the beginning of a battle that Anthony feared would last until end times.

He took out his holy water and prayer book. He blessed Rafe, then surrounded his friend with a powerful protection against Hell. Rafe was at his weakest now; Anthony refused to let Satan claim him.

* * * * *

Martinez was silent on the drive to the diocese's main office.

"What?" Skye finally said.

"Have you considered that maybe Mr. Zaccardi is right?"

Skye rolled her eyes. "I should never have told you what he said."

Martinez's light brown face tensed. "Are we partners on this case, or are you pulling rank, *Sheriff?*" he asked.

"What's that supposed to mean? You're the best detective on the squad."

"If you want me to do my job, you need to listen to me."

"I always listen to you." Skye was hurt that Juan thought she was pulling rank. "I value your opinion."

"Then take it," he said. "I think you should listen to what Mr. Zaccardi has to say."

“That *demons* killed those priests? Come on, Juan. You’re not so damn superstitious to think that something not even human could slaughter those men!”

“And I didn’t think you were so closed-minded that you couldn’t see the possibilities.”

“Please.”

“You’re letting your mother stop you from seeing the truth.”

Skye fumed. “Don’t talk about my mother. She’s dead, if you haven’t forgotten. And if anything, her murder should tell you that those people are all a bunch of freaks.”

Juan’s jaw tightened. “Is that how you think of me? A freak?”

“That’s not what I meant—” It had come out all wrong. But isn’t that what those people did? Promise the world as long as you give up everything you know and love? If her mother had never left, her father would never have been out in the woods that night; he wouldn’t have died and left her alone.

Juan didn’t say anything. She was angry with herself for hurting him, and angry with him for being so easily swayed. *Demons*. Right.

“Dammit.” She resisted the urge to pound her head against the steering wheel.

“Look, you know that one man could not have done that. Not all those priests were old. They would have fought back. Rafe Cooper has no marks on him whatsoever. No defensive wounds. No offensive wounds. His hands are bruised and scraped and Rod thinks it’s from pounding on his bedroom door. The blood from the door matches Cooper’s blood type.”

After Zaccardi left the mission, Rod had discovered evidence in Rafe Cooper’s room that suggested he’d been trapped inside. But there were no locks on the door and no plausible way he could have been locked in.

“What do you think happened?” Skye finally asked.

“I don’t know. But I think you need to look at all possibilities.”

She didn’t want to hurt Juan—he was one of her few friends in the Sheriff’s Department. But what he was saying was ludicrous. “Okay, here are the facts. Twelve men between the ages of thirty-six and eighty-one were murdered in cold blood. Rafe Cooper was unharmed. A thirty-one-year-old man, healthy, strong, unconscious for no reason?”

“Maybe he walked in on the scene after the fact, collapsed from the stress. Especially if someone had locked him in and he heard what was happening.”

Skye weighed that and admitted that perhaps Juan was onto something. “Then let him out of his room when they were done? I don’t know. It doesn’t make sense to me, to leave a potential witness.”

“Why was no blood found outside of the chapel?”

“They’re still processing evidence,” Skye said, “but an organized killer might wear a jumpsuit and shoe coverings. Strip upon leaving the chapel.”

“Good point. But why? Why was it important not to get any blood outside of the scene?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe the vandalism occurred before the attack, while the priests were praying or something.”

Martinez flipped through his notes. "Time of death is estimated at four-thirty A.M., take or leave thirty minutes." He glanced at her. "Odd time for a prayer meeting."

They were dead between four and five in the morning. Anthony Zaccardi had arrived just after five. Dawn. Right on the heels of the murders.

* * * * *

Skye had called ahead for a meeting with Bishop Zachariah Carlin, but the sun had long set when she and Juan arrived late that evening.

"Thank you for speaking to us," Juan said.

Carlin shook his head solemnly. He was in his sixties, with a full head of gray hair and bright blue eyes. "I won't be sleeping tonight. I'm still in shock."

"We're sorry to have to ask you these questions," Skye began, "but it's important that we have an understanding of who lived at the mission, who worked there, and any threats you, they, or the church may have had."

"Threats? Someone is always threatening the church."

"I'm talking something specific. A letter or phone call aimed at the mission."

Carlin shook his head. "The mission is its own entity. It isn't really part of the diocese."

"But you own the property."

"Yes, but five years ago the Vatican asked if they could use the mission as a home for retired priests."

"Certainly you noticed that not all the priests there were of retirement age," Juan interjected.

"We didn't want to advertise that the mission was for mentally disturbed men of the cloth."

"Mentally disturbed how?" Skye asked.

Carline steepled his fingers. "I'm not at liberty to say."

"They are *dead*," Skye said. "Murdered in cold blood. They couldn't care less if you discuss their mental health. All I want is to find their killers."

Carlin said, "I was told that the mission priests were on sabbatical after being witness to horrific acts of violence. I was given one example. Father Diego Ortega. He was serving the people in Africa. He and a group of missionaries built a church and school in a village and taught the natives how to grow food. The village began to thrive, be self-sustaining. One Sunday during Mass a rival tribe barricaded the church and burned it to the ground. Many died. Father Ortega survived without a scratch. He believed this was a sign to preach the word, but he went to two more villages and met the same fate—his parishioners died and he survived. He was recalled when he showed signs that he was not capable of serving as a shepherd."

"Well, he's dead now," Skye said, cringing at how cruel that sounded. "So he was recalled to what? Get over it?"

"To heal. To know that God's plan is not our plan."

Skye inwardly winced. What God would allow a bunch of innocent people to be burned to death? What God would allow his most faithful servants to be brutally slaughtered in cold blood?

She didn't know what she believed, but she held fast to the knowledge that bad people did bad things, and it was her job to find justice for the victims.

And no acts of *God* would stand in her way.

“Why wouldn’t the diocese or the Vatican or whoever was in charge hire a qualified doctor to counsel these men?”

“Dr. Charles Wicker is retained by the U.S. Bishops,” he replied. “He works up in Santa Clara and, from what I’ve ascertained, makes monthly visits to the mission. I don’t know him personally.”

Skye switched gears. “Who hired Rafe Cooper?”

“He’s not an employee of the diocese,” Carlin said carefully.

“Then why was he there?”

“I received word that Mr. Cooper would arrive to counsel the priests.”

“You didn’t like him.”

“He’s not a likable person.”

“How so?”

Carlin didn’t respond.

“Bishop, I need all the information in order to do my job.” When he didn’t say anything, she asked, “Who paid him?”

“No one.”

“No one?”

“Mr. Cooper is a seminarian, I believe from a seminary in Northern California. He’s also a trained psychologist, from what I’ve ascertained. He’s been to medical school, but doesn’t have a doctorate or medical license.”

Skye made some notes. Rafe Cooper was becoming even more interesting as the day—and night—wore on.

“When did he arrive?”

“March sixteenth.”

“And he fired Ms. Davies two weeks ago. Under what authority?”

“He had no authority,” Bishop Carlin said, anger in his voice.

“But you didn’t reinstate her.”

“Under the circumstances, I could hardly put her back into that hostile situation. I suggested that she take a week or two vacation and I’d find her a position in another church. We run numerous schools and a hospital.”

“Did Mr. Cooper tell you why he fired her?”

“No.”

“You didn’t ask?”

“He refused to tell me. All he said was that she was a threat to the mental health of his priests.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t there some sort of hierarchy here? How could he just fire a diocesan employee without your permission?”

“He can’t. He told her she wasn’t allowed at the mission.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know!”

This was going nowhere. “When was the last time you were at the mission?”

“Months ago. Thanksgiving dinner was my last visit.”

“When was the last time you saw Mr. Cooper?”

Carlin thought. “Two weeks ago, after he’d banished Ms. Davies.”

Walking out, Skye whispered to Juan, “You dig into Corinne Davies and contact Dr. Wicker. I’ll pump Zaccardi for information on Rafe Cooper and work with Rod at the crime scene. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.”

Chapter 5

FIVE YEARS AGO , Anthony had explored the forest surrounding the Santa Louisa de Los Padres Mission and remembered an alternate way in. The unpaved road was overgrown, but it would lead to the back slope and, hopefully, allow Anthony access to search the mission without police interference. He couldn’t use the main entrance. During his earlier reconnaissance he learned Sheriff Skye McPherson had left a deputy to guard the place, either against the killers returning, or curious citizens.

He parked as far down the trail as possible, his headlights cutting harsh swaths of light against chaparral oaks and rocks. The eyes of an animal glowed against the black and gray, then disappeared with a blink. An easy wind tapped the car, the *swish-swish* of oak leaves brushing the roof.

Anthony pulled a windbreaker from the back of his rental and stuffed a small packet of tools into the pocket. He doubted the locks had been changed, but if they had he’d still be able to get in.

Rafe was no killer, and Anthony had to find proof to turn the course of the police investigation. While Sheriff Skye McPherson didn’t believe a demon was at work, she was searching for human killers. Someone had used the strength of demons to murder those priests, and Anthony had to work with the sheriff to find those people. Because there were two evils in Santa Louisa: the evil of Hell itself, and the evil human beings who had brought a piece of Hell to earth.

Demonolatry was alive and well in the world, a platform for Hell to prevail. Anthony was a soldier in the fight against evil. He couldn’t do it as a priest, and he couldn’t do it within the rigid structure of the church. There was a place for men like him, and that was fighting against the most insidious evil of all.

That which preyed on the innocent.

People would die if he did nothing. That was *his* fate, and a charge he did not take lightly.

With a deep breath, he stepped from the car and into the cold spring night, snapping on his flashlight. He walked parallel to the mountain, the slope treacherous and overgrown with saplings that slapped him in the face. He tasted blood on his lip. The moonless sky aided his disguise, but thwarted quick movement.

Help us.

The whispers of the dead told Anthony he was close. The path to the mission was steep, but his years of physical labor aided his journey up the mountainside. He spied the three-story bell tower under the dim light of an ancient lamp. Faint, subtle, like everything about the mission.

He paused at the tree line, trying to sense where the guard was while catching his breath. All he sensed was evil.

Help us help us help us

Rafe had been extremely worried these last few weeks, otherwise he would never have contacted Anthony in the first place. Anthony wished he'd asked more questions, pushed Rafe for answers. Now, he had to think like his friend. Had he kept a journal? Where would he have hidden it? Had the police found it? Would Skye tell him if they had? The police had no weapons to fight incorporeal beings, but if Rafe had left a clue, a message, anything, it might help Anthony in this battle.

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket shortly after he crossed the tree line and walked through open space. "Hello," he said quietly, kneeling low to the ground to avoid being seen.

"Anthony, I found what you're looking for."

The voice of Father Philip gave Anthony the only sense of home and family he'd ever had. The image of the demon on the wall of the sacristy had haunted Anthony because it wasn't a common demon, one he was familiar with. He'd spent most of the afternoon trying to figure it out, but he didn't have access to his books and papers and so had called the one man who knew more about demons than he did, the one man who had never let him down, the one man who had saved him.

"Is it Aabassus?"

"No, but you are close. *Ianax*."

Anthony's heart turned cold. Ianax was an ancient demon rumored to be one of the most powerful under Satan until a falling out with the devil himself had sent Ianax farther into the pits of Hell.

"Are you certain?"

"I am. You were correct that three human souls are needed to summon him. The interior circle shows the powerful connection between the three, and how that connection creates a second sight. An energy, for lack of a better word. They can use that energy to control inanimate objects."

"But only when they're together, correct?"

"They are most powerful when all three are together and the demon is at their center. But I suspect they are long practitioners of demonolatry and black magic."

Anthony feared the same. "Anything else?"

"Ianax can't survive long without a body. Are you sure he hasn't claimed Raphael? Perhaps the coma is his way of fighting the demon."

"No," Anthony insisted. "I was with Rafe this afternoon. I would have sensed the demon."

"Yes, my son, yes, you would have." Father Philip sighed. "The danger of these people is they believe they will grow stronger with the demon at their side. And for a time, that is true. Perhaps one of them offered their body to him."

"Why? Why would they willingly give up their body?"

"It is said that those who willingly sacrifice their body to a servant of Satan will be given rewards in Hell. Some believe aiding the demon will give them the key to the fountain of youth. Immortality."

Walk with the willing dead. The phrase took on a dangerous new meaning.

"But it's not a possession?"

“No. That’s what makes this demon more dangerous, and the human immortal. If someone willingly gives up their body, the demon is not waging an internal battle. All his strength can be used for evil. Be careful, Anthony. Now that Ianax is loose he is growing in power and seeking revenge. Soldiers like us have kept him trapped for centuries.”

“I’ll be careful.”

He hung up and considered how the presence of Ianax changed everything. During the battle between Satan and Saint Michael the Archangel, Ianax had been Satan’s strongest ally. He’d betrayed Saint Michael with lies and treachery, and had been sent with Satan into the pits of Hell for eternity. For his loyalty, Ianax wanted to rule half of Hell, but Satan’s ego would not have it. A smaller battle ensued and Ianax was sent to rule the lowest pit of all, the darkest corner. He fed on revenge, betrayal, and lies, and could only be summoned by a union of three dark souls chanting the proper ritual. A ritual Anthony thought the earth had long forgot.

But it wasn’t just a ritual he required. Ianax demanded human blood, and he’d be doubly pleased with the blood of God’s men. Was the death of those men a rite of passage for Ianax’s worshippers?

Had Rafe seen something that made him suspicious? Who were the three responsible for this evil act? Three couldn’t have killed twelve people, unless...

Unless the priests were incapacitated in some way. Had they not been able to fight back? Had they been led like lambs to the slaughter?

Anthony wanted the crime scene report, but after his disappointing meeting with Skye McPherson, he doubted she’d include him in this investigation. The head of the crime scene unit, Rod Fielding, was too loyal to go behind her back. Maybe the detective—he might agree to help. But at risk to his career? Anthony would have to tread carefully.

The sheriff didn’t know where to look. She was suspicious of Rafe, didn’t have any faith to accept—on Anthony’s word alone—that Rafe wasn’t involved. He’d have to prove it to her. Skye didn’t seem like the type of woman to rely on faith or trust for anything. He needed to learn more about her, find a way through her emotional shields. Earn her trust. Quickly.

The cold whipped Anthony as he hid downslope of the mission, a hundred yards away.

Help us help us help us.

The windlike chanting grew louder, the dark whispers taunting him, begging him with fearful urgency.

Moving low and fast, he ran toward the mission.

* * * * *

Skye relieved her deputy at eleven that night. She dismissed his inquisitive stare. She knew what he wanted to ask: why was the sheriff staking out a crime scene?

She didn’t answer the unspoken question. She wasn’t even sure herself why she was here. Except that she knew, as certain as the sun would rise in the morning, that Anthony Zaccardi would be here tonight.

The generator had been sabotaged, Rod had told her shortly after her meeting with the bishop. Rod had dusted the equipment, but it was devoid of any fingerprints. Wiped.

Rod fixed the generator so the crime scene techs could finish working once the sun went down. When they'd turned on the power, every wall sconce came on. Now, in the dark of night, each narrow window glowed yellow. Every window. What had those men feared that the dark terrified them?

She shivered in her Bronco. When was Anthony Zaccardi going to show?

After meeting with the bishop, she'd further researched Zaccardi—he was who he said he was. A historical architect hired by the Catholic Church to restore ancient buildings. He was a citizen of Italy, specifically Sicily, but he was born in a small town she'd never heard of. There were no other records for him until he'd used his passport for the first time at the age of ten, from Italy to France. She had no records of parents or guardians, which seemed odd, but she was dealing with foreign governments. Still, everyone she'd spoken with had been protective of Zaccardi. One high-ranking priest in the Vatican even threatened her.

“You can't hold Anthony,” the man had said. “I demand you allow him to return to Italy.”

“He doesn't seem to want to return right now,” she'd said and hung up. Interesting.

What was more interesting, however, was the light behind the mission. Anthony Zaccardi, right on time.

Chapter 6

ANTHONY PICKED THE POLICE LOCK .

He didn't need his flashlight; the lighting had been restored in the mission. He quickly walked through the kitchen and down the main hall.

The mission had been destroyed from within. He'd seen the destruction earlier when he'd broken in to save Rafe; now the sad reality sank in.

Beautiful artwork, hundreds of years old, had been defaced. Every statue in the alcoves had its head removed. Paintings slashed. This, Anthony thought, was the work of human hands. A demon would crush the statues; humans defaced.

Anthony found Rafe's room, accurately guessing that it would be closest to the kitchen. There was one small window facing the rear of the mission. A small night-light in the corner illuminated the room with shadows.

Anthony closed the door, looked at the wood. It was splintered and cracked, as if someone had been scratching from the inside. He shined his light on the marks, saw the damaged wood stained with dark blood. Deep gouges, likely made with something metal or hard wood had been used to pry open the door. Now Anthony knew how Rafe's fingers had been broken, his fingernails torn.

The police had obviously gone through the room. Rafe's computer was gone, only wires remaining. His files had been rifled through and many had been removed. The drawers of his desk were open.

But the police didn't know the secrets the mission held, nor the many hiding places.

Anthony traced the ridges of the stone wall. He'd been in many missions, in many ancient buildings. He could find any hiding place... there. Around the edge of one stone he found a small, ancient release. A façade for a stone safe.

Sure enough, Rafe had left something in the space. A leather-bound journal. Anthony removed it, put the stone back in place.

Anthony carefully opened the journal, hoping for a clue. Several sheets of paper fell out and he stooped to pick them up.

The door opened and the lights came on.

"I thought you were going to do something stupid." Skye McPherson stood in the doorway, gun drawn. "You're under arrest."

"Don't."

"Hand me those papers."

He did.

"And the book."

Reluctantly, he handed it over.

"Are you armed?"

"I don't carry a gun."

"Turn around and put your hands on the desk."

"I told you—"

"You expect me to believe you? You broke a police seal and entered this building in the middle of the night. You're attempting to remove evidence. You're in hot water, Mr. Zaccardi."

Help us.

Skye frowned, glanced around the room.

"You heard," he said, incredulous.

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

Hope claimed a corner of his heart. "You heard the voices."

"I don't hear any voices," she snapped. "Turn around."

He complied. Her hands moved around his waist, his thighs, his ankles. He wanted to think of her as a cop; he could only think of her as a woman. A woman who didn't know what danger she was in, nor what power she had.

She removed his cross. "You're clear, but I'll keep this for the time being."

He faced her. She was close, only inches from him as she holstered her weapon. He reached up to touch her face, and she flinched. He dropped his hand and said, "You can't deny what you heard."

She swallowed, took a step back. "What's this?" She started flipping through the journal.

"I suspect it will speak of Rafe's concerns. He would have hidden his notes if he thought something was going on here."

She frowned, reading the journal.

"What?" he asked, inching closer. She smelled of pine and soap. All natural. All woman.

"It's in Latin."

Latin? Rafe hated Latin. Anthony could practically hear him groaning during class.

She tucked the journal under her arm and looked at the papers.

“What are those?” he asked.

“Copies.”

“Of?”

She didn’t say. He peered over her hands. *Santa Louisa Grocery*.

“Why would he keep copies of the food deliveries?” Anthony asked.

When Skye didn’t say anything, he knew she had an answer. “We need to work together, Skye.”

Her head shot up. “You said you weren’t a cop. Has anything changed in the last”—she glanced at her watch—“fifteen hours?”

“You need me.”

“I don’t know you.”

“But you know I had nothing to do with what happened here.”

“How? Maybe you were working with your friend Rafe. Maybe you’re supposed to steal artifacts while I’m trying to solve a mass murder. Maybe—”

“You don’t believe that.”

“I don’t know *what* to believe.”

“*Ianax*.”

“What?”

“That’s the name of the demon in the sacristy. Human blood was used, wasn’t it?”

“I can’t discuss the investigation with you.”

She had a great poker face, but her eyes exposed her soul, which told him he was right. He also had thousands of years of history to draw upon.

“*Ianax* was a triple agent, so to speak. He was a spirit on Satan’s side, but attempted to convince Saint Michael the Archangel that he was gathering evidence against Satan, all in an attempt to find out how many were staying on the Lord’s side and who were going with Satan. He gave information to both sides.”

She stared at him blankly. “You’re a lunatic.”

He hardened. He was used to people not believing him, but he desperately wanted Skye to trust him. The dead depended on it.

“*Ianax* was banished to the deepest pits of Hell by Satan when he attempted to overtake Hades. He’s an ancient demon, feeding on hate and revenge. It takes three dark souls and human sacrifice to draw him out.”

“I’ve read thousands of crime reports. There’s no proven case of human sacrifice by Satanists in America.”

Anthony continued. “Your people don’t know everything, and human sacrifice is rarely what you envision. He’s here. You sense it. You heard the voices of those trapped between Heaven and Hell. But you won’t open your heart.”

“You can’t tell me that a spirit killed those men.”

“Not alone, but *Ianax* was part of the massacre and if we can’t send it back to Hell more people will die.”

“Bullshit. More will die if we don’t capture the people who killed those priests.”

“That’s irrelevant.”

“I don’t know what planet you live on, Mr. Zaccardi, but where I come from you put people in prison and they stop killing innocent old men.”

He'd said the wrong thing, but he persisted. "I agree, we need to find the three involved in order to send Ianax back. If we don't, he will grow more powerful."

"Why are you so certain there are three people involved?"

"The seal. In the sacristy." How could he convince this woman of what had taken him a lifetime to learn?

"You look so normal," she muttered.

A rare anger grew in Anthony's chest, the rage he fought to keep firmly at bay.

He grabbed Skye by the arms and pulled her close. "If you think this is a game, more innocent people will suffer. I am deadly serious, Sheriff McPherson."

Her lush mouth opened, closed, opened again. "Let. Me. Go."

Anthony dropped his hands, the anger washing away in embarrassment. He didn't manhandle women. It was Skye's total disdain of him and what he said...

He should be used to it by now. Few people truly believed that evil existed. They talked about it, gave it lip service, but didn't believe in evil spirits, that they could be summoned and used, that they grew more powerful with every moment they spent outside of Hell, feeding on the cruelty and rage and hatred of human beings.

"Trust me," he said simply, imploring her with his eyes. He saw a hint of doubt in her face, the desire to believe him. Then it vanished.

But hope was all he needed. He'd worked with far less.

"I'll translate Rafe's journal for you," he offered.

Skye wanted to say no. She didn't want to trust this man who talked about demons and demonolatry and evil spirits. Those were the fantasies of religious nutcases like her mother and the man who sold her a bill of goods under the guise of being a man of God.

But she'd walked into the crime scene today and felt odd. She could dismiss the idea that someone was watching her in the daylight, but when she'd been sitting in her car in the courtyard tonight her skin prickled and every nerve seemed to stand at attention. She wasn't a flighty female. She wasn't scared of the woods or of being alone—she'd hiked and camped for weeks with her dad or by herself. But here—this was different.

A crash echoed through the mission. Skye's gun was out as she walked through the door.

"It came from the chapel," Anthony said.

"Stay," she commanded him.

"No."

She didn't have time to argue. Cautious but quick, she darted down the hall, Anthony right on her heels.

The closer they came to the chapel, the hotter the air.

"Stop," Anthony commanded.

She didn't take orders from civilians. Someone was in there. The killer? Murderers often revisited the crime scene.

She opened the doors of the chapel and smelled smoke over the stench of dried blood. She blinked and saw the carnage of that morning, in full sunlight. Every body, every dismembered limb, lying there. All eyes looking at her.

Help us!

She stifled a scream. She wasn't seeing this. She closed her eyes. When she opened them, she saw a flame in the sacristy, where the drawing had been left.

The bodies were gone. That had been her imagination, after all the nonsense Anthony spouted.

Someone—someone *human*—was destroying evidence. Her crime scene was on fire.

She whirled around to face Anthony. “You! You distracted me so your partner could destroy the evidence.”

“You know that’s not true,” he said, but he was looking over her shoulder.

She followed his gaze but saw nothing. “I need to put this fire out before it takes the whole chapel!”

Skye ran down the hall to the kitchen where earlier she’d seen two extinguishers on the wall. She started back down the hall toward the chapel, but Anthony blocked her path. “Don’t go back there. You’ll be trapped. We have to get out of here. Now!”

She ignored him, but instead of going through the interior entrance, she flung open the side door, pushed a tank at him, and exited the building, running around to the main courtyard entrance.

The iron gates that had been locked and sealed were wide open, proof that the fire had been set by humans, not demons. The fact that she was beginning to believe Anthony, that she wanted to believe him, was a testament to her poor judgment when it came to good-looking men. He was sexy and handsome and *sounded* normal. She’d overlooked the fact that he was a lunatic to insist that something supernatural was at work.

She’d fucked up the crime scene because of him. She should have stayed at her post. She may have been able to not only stop the fire, but arrest the killer.

She saw the flames in the narrow arched windows, bright against the moonless night. Running to the chapel doors, she touched them; warm not hot. She readied the canister and kicked open the doors.

A loud roar emanated from the building on a wave of flames and laughter.

She was thrown to the ground and only after her back hit the cold, hard dirt did she realize Anthony had pushed her down. He’d saved her life.

He was still standing, facing the flames. He had his hands up as he walked toward the fire, chanting something foreign and ancient. She couldn’t make out the words, just an urgent, fierce rhythm. The fire whirled around him, and she could no longer make out his frame.

Anthony was being burned alive.

Skye tried to jump up to rescue him, but an unseen weight pushed her back down. Her heart leapt in her throat as she watched the fire turn bright red, twirl, and like a reverse tornado, rise into the sky with a sickly, deafening scream.

Anthony’s body lay faceup on the stone path. She crawled over to him, her limbs like lead.

He was staring at the sky, his dark eyes searching. His clothing was scorched and reeked of smoke, but his hands, his face, his limbs had no burn marks. How could that be? How could he have survived the fire unscathed?

“Watch out!” He rolled and flung his body on top of hers. From the corner of her eye, she watched the fireball come back down from the dark sky, heading straight toward them. She tried to crawl away, but Anthony pinned her down, his entire body covering hers in a protective shield.

The flames hit the roof of the chapel like a comet. Glass exploded from every window. An unreal screech surrounded them as the fire spread into every nook, every room, every corner of the building.

Except the courtyard where they lay.

Hot air filled her lungs and all she wanted was to escape, but Anthony held her still.

“Don’t move.” His lips were on her ear, but she could barely hear him over the roar of the flames.

What was happening? He grabbed her wrists when she struggled to escape, held them tight against his chest. His heart pounded against her hands. Power and fear radiated from his body. He completely covered her, shielding her, her face buried in his neck. He murmured something that might have been a prayer or a plea.

In the middle of destruction, she’d never felt so completely safe.

A cry surrounded them, and suddenly all the air in the courtyard disappeared with a violent *whoosh!*

She gasped, straining to breathe against Anthony’s chest. He still held her, but now she fought for air. *Air...*

He covered her mouth with his and pushed air into her lungs.

Suddenly she was off her feet and being carried through the courtyard. She clung to Anthony’s neck until he eased her into the passenger seat of her Bronco.

She looked over his shoulder at what had been the mission. Smoke rolled from the windows, out the chapel door, rose from where the roof had once been, filtering into the dark sky. Not a flame could be seen, just smoldering ruins. Yet less than ten minutes had passed since she first saw the flames.

It couldn’t have gone out on its own. Could it? There had to be a logical explanation, something the fire chief would be able to explain to her.

But she had no logical explanation for what she had seen. That Anthony had been wrapped in flames, completely immersed, and yet he knelt here before her, without a mark.

He touched her face, his large hands surprisingly gentle. “You’re okay.” It was a statement, not a question, but she nodded.

His thumb brushed against her lips. She stared into Anthony’s dark eyes and knew she had a crime she couldn’t handle alone.

“I lost the journal,” she whispered.

Anthony reached into his shirt and handed her the journal. “I picked it up when you ran from Rafe’s room.”

“Did you know what was going to happen?”

He shook his head. “But I’ve seen it before.”

“What? Spontaneous combustion?” She tried to make light of it, but neither of them smiled.

“No, that fire was most certainly set by one of the people responsible for summoning Ianax.”

Skye ached in disappointment. Not because she wanted to believe in evil spirits, but because he wasn’t being consistent. “First demons, now humans? You’re messing with me, Mr. Zaccardi.”

“Demons can’t set fires or do anything without a person to help them. They may be able to control those humans who have already given up their souls, they may

even be able to temporarily control humans against their will. Possessions. And the most powerful among them can use the elements by becoming part of the element itself. But they can't set a fire alone."

"So what just happened? Someone put out that fire"—she snapped her fingers—"like that?"

"Once the fire started, Ianax became the flames. Destroyed his image and everything he touched, and disappeared."

"But he didn't kill you," she said softly.

"He couldn't, even though he tried." Anthony held her face in his hands. "But you, Skye, are in grave danger."

She laughed uneasily. "You know this how?"

Anthony didn't return her humor, his fathomless eyes drawing her inexplicably closer.

"He couldn't sustain the fire and defeat me at the same time. He is not that strong. Yet."

"But what does that have to do with *me*?"

Anthony touched her cheek. "You don't know what you're up against, Skye. You don't know what evil incarnate can do. That makes you vulnerable."

She scoffed at that remark. Typical male chauvinist. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"Not against this."

Skye jumped up and out of the truck, paced even though she still felt unsteady. "Dammit, Zaccardi, you're pissing me off. I don't know what's going on. I don't know how you weren't burned in the fire. But there is a logical explanation. And I will find it."

"It's logical, Skye," Anthony said, sinking to the ground. She frowned. Maybe he had been injured in the fire. "But you have to open your mind to see the logic." His eyes closed and he leaned his head against her truck's tire. "I saw your soul," he whispered.

"That's ridiculous." But there was no venom in her voice, only concern. "What's wrong?"

"I'm drained."

"I don't understand."

"I'll be okay. Just—let me be."

"Leave you? Here? At midnight?" She knelt beside him. "Let me help you."

Anthony rose unsteadily, stumbled, and fell against the truck. His body was solid muscle; Skye couldn't carry him if she wanted to. He climbed awkwardly into the passenger seat.

"Just take me to my car," he said wearily, his eyes already closing.

"Right. And let you drive off a cliff. I'll take you to your hotel. You can get your car in the morning."

* * * * *

Ianax's essence slithered along the ground in the form of black mist, losing power the longer he was without a human body.

Fool. You consumed your energy with the fire. You should never have fought for Zaccardi's soul.

His primal scream rang through the levels of Hell like nails on a chalkboard, and on earth with the moaning of trees. He rolled over a nocturnal rodent who collapsed dead after breathing his mist; a pair of owls fell from a tree above, landed with a thud.

He was eternal death.

Lifetimes of failed attempts to rise from the deepest pit of Hell, giving him a taste of freedom that was taken away because of the weakness of the trio left him angry, unsatisfied, hungry. Finally, his minions had perfected the call and he'd come, with a willing body for his use. Payback for the willing was immortality. And even in the dark heat of the netherworld, immortality for as long as the earth breathed was a tempting apple.

And he, Ianax, would be able to stay, walk the earth, experience lust in everything—sex, food, death. *Power*. He would have been able to claim an infinite number of souls for his master.

He fed on souls, and the pure souls of the righteous tasted better than the black souls of the damned.

Zaccardi would have satiated him for a millennia, proven his worth. But the hunter's protective shield was too strong for one demon to destroy. Even Satan himself wouldn't be able to penetrate the barrier.

A sudden gale-force wind pushed Ianax off course. He was being pulled under, down, back to Hell.

I'm sorry, Master. My thoughts betray me.

The wind softened.

I am all-powerful, lowly demon. I am your Lord and Master. Zaccardi is not yours to have. When the time is right, I will consume him.

When, Master?

Go, finish what you were summoned to do. Then bring me my due.

Yes, Master.

Ianax's essence was released from the underbelly and flung over the tops of the trees, down the mountain, dead birds raining from their nests as he stole their breath.

Chapter 7

ANTHONY HAD REGAINED some of his strength on the drive back to town, but walking to his hotel room drained him.

He'd fought evil and won, this time. But he needed to rejuvenate. He couldn't protect Skye or save the lost souls at the mission until he regained his strength.

He couldn't let Skye leave.

What he'd seen in the flames would haunt him for the rest of his life. She didn't believe him, and if everything remained the same she would die. Horribly. Painfully. Her soul would be trapped and tortured for eternity.

Losing her was not an option. He would sacrifice himself first.

“Get some rest,” she was saying to him. “I’ll pick you up at seven and take you to your car.”

“No!” He swallowed. “Please.” She stared at him, perplexed. How to keep her here? “I need your help.”

He sagged heavily onto the sofa, exaggerating his fatigue and pain. She looked skeptical. *Oh, my little doubting Thomas. You’re a tough one.*

“Please—I need you to—” What? She already thought he was a nutcase. *Make something up, Zaccardi.*

“Pray with me.”

Her face clouded.

Good one.

“In Latin,” he added.

“You’ve got to be joking.”

“I’ll teach it to you. It might come in handy.”

He wasn’t joking. She didn’t have to know what the words meant. If she remembered them, at the right time, they might protect her. At least buy some time.

She sat next to him looking as exhausted as he felt. Maybe he could get her to let down her shield a bit. Enough to lull her to sleep. If she slept here, in his presence, she would be safe. For tonight.

One night at a time.

He took her hands in his. She tensed, but didn’t pull away. *You think your gun can save you. You think your smarts will get you out of any difficulty. You’ve never faced a demon, sweetness.*

He’d felt her soul in the courtyard when he’d covered her body with his. She was holding on to a deep regret and bitterness, he didn’t know from what, but her innate goodness and honor shone through. A strong core of loyalty. Strength.

Satan would love to claim her as his own.

An overwhelming protective urge washed over Anthony. He swallowed, uncertain what he was supposed to do. What he *should* do. He’d never allowed himself to grow close to any woman, because in love he would be vulnerable. In love, he would be risking more than his own life. Already, his soul was inextricably entwined with Skye’s. The fire had fused them together, a bond he could not break.

Save her. Save us.

He whispered in Latin.

“What does that mean?”

He repeated the prayer and she frowned at him, but didn’t pull her hands from his. Progress.

“Say it. Please, Skye. It—it would comfort me.” He exaggerated a sigh.

She hesitated, then repeated the ancient words of protection, her voice quivering.

“Again.”

She complied. He touched her hair, murmured a poem. “That’s French.”

He hadn’t realized he’d spoken in French. “The monks made sure I learned many languages.”

“Monks?”

"I was raised in a monastery."

"What happened to your parents?" Skye seemed much more at ease talking about his past than things she couldn't see or touch. While he didn't like to share things about himself, he had no hesitation in telling Skye. He wanted her to know. To build trust, to strengthen their bond. And more.

"I don't know about my parents. I was left on the doorstep of a monastery on a small island off Sicily."

"An orphanage?"

Anthony couldn't tell her the whole truth, but he didn't lie. "In some ways. Women in Europe, particularly in the old country, are frowned upon if they have children out of wedlock. Some are disowned or ostracized. It can be very difficult. Many infants are left at orphanages or with the nuns. Or at a monastery. St. Michael's—we had an unusually high number of abandoned babies."

"Why?"

"The monks are among the most brilliant men in the world. Doctors. Lawyers. Theologians. Scientists. Scholars. They raise boys and send them to live all over the world."

"You never knew your parents." She frowned.

"Don't feel sorry for me. It is hard to miss what you never had."

"Is it?"

Anthony longed to know where he came from, but he'd buried those desires years ago when he tried to find his mother and came up with nothing.

"It is easier, with time," he corrected. "What about you?"

"My parents are dead."

She spoke so flatly, suppressing emotion that bubbled just beneath the surface.

"An accident?" he asked softly.

"My father was a U.S. forest ranger. He was hiking in Los Padres, fell off a cliff and broke his back. His radio got caught on a tree out of reach and he couldn't call for help. He died two days later."

"I'm so sorry." He squeezed her hands.

She shrugged. "So what was it like growing up in a monastery?"

Changing the subject. She didn't want to talk about her mother. He should push, but he didn't want to scare her off. He needed her to be comfortable here, with him, for the night. But he couldn't share everything with Skye, not yet. If he said too much, she would bolt like a rabbit.

"Father Philip, a missionary, often stayed at St. Michael's. I'd always loved history and architecture, even as a young boy. Father Philip works with the church to renovate historic buildings. He became my mentor, my friend." And he taught him to harness his senses, to locate demons in buildings and destroy them. He didn't say that to Skye.

"So you became an historical architect?"

Anthony nodded. "I traveled throughout Europe, as well as Africa and parts of the Middle East working with Father Philip, before I went to college in England."

"You said you were raised with Rafe Cooper."

"Rafe was raised in the monastery as well."

"He doesn't look Italian."

Always questioning, always suspicious. “He isn’t. He’s probably of Irish descent.”

“Doesn’t that seem odd to you?”

He shook his head. “We have children from all races and cultures.”

She still seemed perplexed, but asked instead, “How many live there?”

“At any given time, fifteen monks. We have four young ones—under sixteen. When Rafe and I grew up, there were many more. At one time twenty-two of us.”

“What happened? Women start using birth control?”

Anthony frowned. The truth was, they didn’t have an answer to the diminishing chosen ones. Rafe was one of the last. There had only been six since him, and none in the last ten years.

“It was a joke. I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m sorry. Look, I should go.”

“Please don’t.” He took her hand. “Do you remember the prayer?”

“Words can’t protect anyone from anything,” Skye said.

“Faith can.”

“Please, Anthony, don’t do this.” Skye ran a hand through her hair. She’d lost her clip and her hair fell in creamy blond waves, no less alluring being mussed from their earlier ordeal. “Belief in God certainly didn’t save your friends up on the mountain. And it didn’t save my mother,” she snapped.

“Your mother?”

Skye stared into Anthony’s dark eyes. Why had she said anything? She didn’t want to talk about her mother. But maybe he would leave her alone, stop talking to her about this nonsense. Trapped souls and demons...

“My mother left when I was ten. Met a guy, someone who talked all about God and salvation and dedicating your life to Jesus. And she gave him everything she owned and went away with him. Just like that. She left and never spoke to me again. Six years later a California Highway Patrol officer came knocking on the door and told us she’d been murdered. By the same kook who had talked her into joining his stupid cult.”

Why had she said all that? The last person she wanted to talk about was her mother. She tried to pull her hands from Anthony’s, but he held firm. She wanted to avert her eyes, but he turned her face to look at his.

“Skye.”

Suddenly, his lips were on hers, consuming her.

No tentative kiss. He claimed her with a confidence she’d rarely seen, hungry but patient; determined but gentle. She put her hands on his arms, surprised at the dense muscle hidden under his shirt. She wanted to push him away. She couldn’t. Her body reached for him while her mind told her to run. Heat pooled in all the right places, her heart beat triple time, her skin tingled from the electricity they generated.

All in a kiss.

His hands barely touched the back of her neck, but his presence captivated her. Anthony didn’t try to dominate her, but conquered her nonetheless.

Think, Skye! Forget the kiss, this guy is bizarre.

Shut up, she told herself and wished for once she could separate her physical needs and desires from her logical cop mind.

She opened her mouth to tell him to stop, but instead found her tongue seeking his, being the aggressor. If he had carried her off to bed right then, she would have gone. Her body wanted him and no amount of logic would have convinced her to stay away.

Her own guttural moan was lost in Anthony's mouth, but the sound—too passionate to be coming from her—jolted her back to reality. She didn't sleep with strangers. She didn't sleep with men who weren't grounded in reality. What was she doing? She was the damn sheriff with a massacre on her hands.

She pushed Anthony back. Hard. He didn't take his eyes from hers. His confidence was incredible. He already looked like he'd bedded her. "Don't leave," he said.

"You're fine," she snapped, jumping up. "I have work to do."

He stood, followed her to the door. "Please stay. I'm worried about you."

"Worried about *me*? I'm a cop, Mr. Zaccardi. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

He leaned toward her. "I think we've gone beyond Mr. Zaccardi, don't you?"

He tried to kiss her again, but she averted her face and his warm lips landed on her flushed cheek. He looked more amused than insulted. Damn him.

He also looked worried. That didn't sit well with her.

"Look, *Anthony*," she said. "I'm a smart cop. It's after two in the morning. I'll be up bright and early to continue this investigation. With the mission destroyed, I have a lot more work to do."

"You need me."

"Only to translate this." She reached down and picked up the journal that she'd placed on the table. "I'll keep it with me for now, you can meet me at the station at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow morning."

"I can work on it tonight, have a translation for you—"

She held up her hand, anticipating his request.

He nodded curtly. "All right, Skye. May I have my cross back?"

What was she expecting? More protests? To take her kicking and screaming to bed? She didn't know how much she would have fought him. Damn, but Anthony was hot.

Too bad he was a weirdo. Just like the man who'd lured away her mother.

She pulled his cross—his dagger—out of her belt buckle and handed it to him. "Don't make me regret this," she said, more curtly than she intended.

She turned and left, felt his eyes watch her open the door to the stairs because she was too impatient to wait for the elevator.

All the good men were married, gay—or nutcases.

* * * * *

A wall of flames surrounded him, but Anthony felt no heat.

"You again," the fire spat.

Again? He didn't remember this demon, one so strong it could control the elements.

The flames danced in laughter.

"Someday you'll remember. I won then, I will be victorious now. You can't save their souls if you're dead."

“You can’t kill me, Ianax, spawn of Satan,” Anthony said, his mouth working but no sound escaping.

“I can’t. Humans will.”

The flames disappeared, leaving him cold, shaking. He saw Skye standing at the edge of a cliff.

She was going to jump.

* * * * *

Anthony fought sleep, weary, unusually exhausted. Something—a spell. Those who had summoned Ianax had made his sleep deep. Recognizing it, he shook his head violently, side to side, reciting the Lord’s Prayer in clipped phrases as he rolled from the bed, landing heavily on the floor.

Every limb was weighted. With a primal growl he pulled himself up. Unseen demons clawed at his skin. Burning. Restraining him.

“Forgive us our trespasses!” he tried to shout but a demon clawed at his throat.

His body staggered across the hotel room, stumbled, knocked over a vase. It landed with a thud on the thick carpet.

“—those who trespass against us.”

Anthony pulled on his slacks, fumbling with the zipper and collapsing onto the couch. The spell was weakening. The demons tried to hold on to him, pin him to the couch. To slow him down. To stop him from reaching Skye in time.

“Lead us not into temptation!”

His voice was stronger. He found his shoes where he’d taken them off. Where was Skye? How would he find her?

A clear image came to his head and he knew exactly where she lived and how to get there.

“Thank you, Lord,” he mumbled in recognition of the vision.

Please, he couldn’t be too late.

He ran out the door, the bright hall lights blinding him. He hit one wall, then the other, as if drunk. But his sight cleared and he turned north on the street.

He ran, pulled by an invisible string to Skye’s house. *Faster, Anthony. She’s hurting.*

“But deliver us from evil!”

Amen.

Chapter 8

SKYE WOKE , glanced at the clock. Five A.M. Damn, she didn’t have to get up until six, and here she was, wide awake, her mind crammed full of the crime scene. While driving Anthony from the burned-out mission the night before, she’d called Rod and asked him to get the arson investigator out there. Rod planned on meeting him at the mission to see if they could salvage anything after the fire, but he assured her they had enough evidence and photographs to hold up in court once they arrested a suspect.

“And,” he’d added, “I can’t say that I’m sorry that painting in the sacristy is destroyed.”

First Juan, now Rod. Two strong, reasonable, smart men completely snowed by a few odd circumstances. Maybe it was the history of the mission itself, or Anthony’s strange comments, or the brutality of the murders. It was human nature to want to blame some ethereal “evil” when Skye knew damn well a person had killed those priests.

Five-ten. No going back to sleep now that her mind had kicked into full gear. She padded down the hall to the kitchen and flicked on her coffeepot, which she always prepared the night before.

The night was still black. She shouldn’t feel this alert, she’d only had two hours of sleep. But her mind was working double time. She stared out the breakfast nook window. She lived in her family home on the coast. It was just her now.

Intense sadness flooded her senses as it always did when she unexpectedly thought of her father. His death had been so *wrong*.

Skye poured herself coffee, adding a teaspoon of sugar. Her dad had been a quiet, calm man. Never raised his voice. Never harmed anyone, human or animal. He cared for all living things, taking his job as a forest ranger seriously. He was in those woods every day, even on his days off. He stayed in the ranger’s cabin more often than at home. Skye had a room there as well, but she also needed to attend school. She’d pretty much raised herself, especially after her mother left.

“I can teach you,” her father had said, asking her to live at the cabin with him.

“But I *like* school. I don’t want to live in the woods with no one around.”

She’d hurt her father, she knew, but not on purpose. Never on purpose. He’d hurt her, hadn’t he? By loving the land more than his own daughter?

A tear escaped and Skye watched it hit the table. She *never* cried. But this was her father, and her emotions were always close to the surface with him. She’d loved him so much...and then he’d died. He’d never have died if she’d agreed to live with him in the mountains like he’d wanted.

The autopsy report said he’d been alive for two days after the fall. With a broken back, he couldn’t move. He’d died of internal bleeding.

She hadn’t even worried about her dad until the assistant ranger called. After all, her father often disappeared into the woods. He could take care of himself. Then it took them two days to find him. Dead.

Skye poured another cup of coffee, angry with her mother for leaving in the first place. Her father had never recovered from Marjorie running away. To find herself, to find God, whatever, she’d left to join this freaky religion in the middle of Oregon. What did Oregon have on Central California? Why did any god want a mother to abandon her only child?

“Take me with you, Mom,” Skye said out loud, feeling ten again. Torn. Between a father she loved, and a mother she knew.

Marjorie had said children were a distraction. “You’re your father’s daughter.” As if that were a bad thing.

Why was she thinking about her mother? It was Anthony’s fault, making her talk about the past. She’d gone to sleep thinking about her empty life, and woken up with these odd emotions she usually kept under tight control.

Feeling claustrophobic, Skye stepped out on her deck to breathe in fresh, cold air. The biting predawn salt air wrapped around her and she shivered, barely noticing she only wore the tank top she'd slept in and panties. She heard the waves crashing on the rocks below her house. The dark water topped with the glowing foam of breaking waves. They crashed in, rolled out.

She walked down the wooden stairs and across the rough and rugged cliff, rocks sharp against her bare feet. The sensation didn't pain her, instead it made her feel alive. Her skin prickled, her hair rippled, in the brisk ocean wind.

She was alone. Her father had died because no one thought to look for him. Her mother had died because she'd run away to find herself, and ended up being murdered by a man she'd trusted. Her own husband would never have killed her, but she trusted a stranger more.

The memories of what was lost flooded her and she couldn't stop them.

Skye's body hung with despair. So much death in her life. She had no one. No family. No parents, grandparents, brothers, or sisters. She was sheriff, but what did that mean? Constantly on show. Constantly worrying that someone was going to stab her in the back. Her election was coming up. Her first election. She'd been appointed by the board of supervisors after the Santa Louisa sheriff died of a heart attack. She'd been held up to the media and community as the first female sheriff. They'd passed over well-qualified men to be able to say they'd appointed a woman.

Who was she to have this job? She didn't deserve it. She was a chess piece. A pawn. All she'd wanted was to be a cop. To stop predators from luring lonely housewives into cults. To know that when someone was missing, maybe they'd better look, just to be on the safe side. Better to be embarrassed than grieving.

Rocks shifted beneath her feet and she looked down. She should step back from the cliff. It wasn't stable here. The sandrock crumbled continually. Her house, which had at one time been one hundred eighty feet from the edge of the cliff, was now, after only thirty years of erosion and storms, one hundred fifty-two feet from the edge.

What would it be like? To be truly free? Not grieve, not regret, not constantly question her own competence, her job. Herself.

She'd always been alone, but she'd pretended. First that her mother wanted her, then that her father loved her. She was a lie. No one would miss her if she disappeared. No family, few friends, and those she had—who? She couldn't remember even one close friend. There had to be someone...

"Skye."

She shook her head. Her imagination talking to her.

"Skye, stop."

Stop what? she tried to say, but her words sounded funny. Who was calling her, anyway?

"Skye!" The voice was commanding. Gruff.

Step forward. Peace is only a foot away. Do it, Skye.

Her father's voice, calm, quiet. *You let me die. You didn't even look for me.*

She stared at the space above the sea. He was there, right in front of her. So real she could touch him. Have him hold her like when she was little. Tell her stories, his wonderful stories about princesses who flew like the birds. Love her again.

“Daddy, I’m sorry.”

He held out his hand.

She held out her hand.

“Skye, come home.”

“I miss you, Daddy.”

She stepped forward. The ground disappeared. She was falling, falling—

* * * * *

Through human eyes, Ianax watched Sheriff Skye McPherson walk along the edge of the cliff, much too close to the edge. A smile across the face of the body he’d fought to possess.

Die, weak one. Die.

He sent a bolt of energy across the space and created the image of her father.

She reached out for him.

Pain exploded in his head as the soul trapped inside chanted a prayer. His eyes glowed, turned inward, and he saw the human soul inside the physical body he possessed. Ianax sent a sharp snap of energy to silence the plea, and the soul went quiet.

The human had fought him fiercely, but after he had rid the body of all protective shields, he’d been able to gain a foothold. Just enough to subdue the human conscience and take over. But an unwilling possession was a constant battle, and energy surges to quiet the consciousness drained him. The momentary high of possession would quickly diminish. He needed to find another body, one that wasn’t as emotionally strong, but first he had things to do.

“I need that journal. Where would she keep it?”

He searched the memories of the human trapped inside and looked in two places before he found it. He picked up the journal and his human hands burned.

“Argh!”

The bastard had protected the journal from those acting on Ianax’s command. The mild irritation at being slowed down was replaced by a spine-chilling shriek of excitement.

You can’t stop me!

Using ancient chants from his master, he rid the journal of all protective elements. He picked it up, flipped through the pages, wanting to see what they knew of how to defeat him.

The pages were blank. The ink itself had been blessed, and with his spell he’d removed it.

In a rage befitting Satan himself, the book flew across the room, pages shredding in midair.

“I’ll have your soul in my teeth yet, Raphael Cooper!”

He left the cottage, feeling around for Skye McPherson’s soul. He would claim her, now.

But he couldn’t find her.

Then he saw *him*, the bastard who’d interrupted his gathering of souls at the mission.

He wanted nothing more than Anthony Zaccardi’s soul in his black gut. But Satan had other plans for him.

Impatience was only one of Ianax's vices.

Chapter 9

SHE BEGAN TO TUMBLE OFF the cliff when someone grabbed her hand.

"Skye!"

She screamed, kicked, scrambling, trying to climb up the sheer rocky slope. What had happened? Where was she?

Had she just walked off the cliff? No. Yes. Was she losing her mind?

"Help!" she shouted.

"I'm going to pull you up."

The wind picked up. The salty spray from the violent waves crashing below dampened her near-naked body. Her free hand, her feet, tried to grab for purchase, but rocks continued to fall beneath her kicking legs.

"Give me your other hand!"

It was Anthony. He clutched her wrist with one hand. His other hand was reaching for hers. He was lying flat on the ground to keep from falling over the edge with her.

She swung wildly, kept reaching for him. The wind blew at her, pushing her from his seeking hand.

"No!" she cried.

"Skye, focus!"

Focus. What did he think she was doing?

On the third try his free hand caught hers.

"I'm going to pull you up."

Anthony had looked strong earlier, but he proved it as he pulled her back up the cliff. To safety. She scrambled up, falling into his arms, shaking uncontrollably.

"What happened?" she cried, burying her face in his chest.

"What did you see?" Anthony asked.

"My father..." No. Her father wouldn't have asked her to walk off a cliff, to kill herself. She shook her head, trying to collect her thoughts, but everything was jumbled. "I don't know. Why am I out here? Why are you here?"

"Shhh," he said, stroking her tangled hair. "Shhhh." He held her tight against his chest, his warm body absorbing the cold that penetrated her bones.

She looked up at him; he stared at her. The depth of his dark eyes caught her breath. His black hair fell loose on his shoulders, the brisk wind blowing it to and fro. Anthony Zaccardi had saved her life.

Twice. First the fire, now the cliff.

Suddenly, their lips touched. She didn't know if she kissed him first, or he her, but neither of them were cautious or tentative. He kissed like an experienced man, a man who had a right to kiss her, to touch her, to hold her. It was the taste of last night, when they'd first kissed, plus so much more.

She opened her mouth, her tongue seeking his, the intimacy of the embrace igniting her nerves.

Anthony's arms wrapped tight around her, one hand holding her head to his, the other roaming up the back of her shirt, so hot, so rough, against her bare skin. She groaned into his mouth and he tilted his head in the other direction, the kiss diving deeper, holding her lips captive. Every cell in her body yearned for Anthony, a man she barely knew. She'd lusted before, but not like this need that had her wanting to make love right now.

Skye had always been in complete control of her sex life. But here, on the edge of the cliff, with this man, she lost control.

She shivered at the thought, and Anthony pulled her even closer, his hot mouth moving to her ear. "You're cold."

Cold? In his arms? Never.

She wasn't thinking, not like a rational woman, not like a cop. The realization that she'd almost died—had walked off the cliff because she'd *thought* she'd seen her father—hit her. She didn't want to die, and certainly didn't want to kill herself. The overwhelming sensation of being alive, whole, and safe wrapped her in such a tight cocoon that coldness was foreign to her. In Anthony's arms she was at peace for the first time in forever. She needed to feel safe. And loved. Just a little longer.

The creeping eastern sun highlighted every feature, every crevice, every shadow of Anthony and the coast, which glowed like sea foam in the rare light that came only at the edge of dawn.

She kissed him hard, pushing him back onto the ground. Touching his hard, lean body wherever she could reach. She fumbled with the buttons on his white shirt, roughly pushing it aside, ran her hands over Anthony's warm muscled chest. How could a man generate so much internal heat that her fingers burned at the touch? Her mouth found his nipple, hard and broad under her tongue. She moaned, the anticipation of sex making her writhe on top of him.

"Skye," he murmured as if in prayer. "My Skye."

My Skye.

She yearned to be somebody's, to belong to a person as she wanted them to belong to her. Partners. Friends. Lovers.

His hands went up under her shirt and touched her bare breasts, which had pebbled in the cold. He rubbed her nipples back and forth in each hand, warming her, heating her to the brink of combustion. Her mouth found his again, exotic and forbidden. Anthony satisfied a thirst she hadn't known she'd had. Reaching down to his pants, she fumbled with the zipper, feeling his hard, heavy weight. Wanting her as she wanted him.

"Skye," he whispered in her ear, reaching for her hand. "Skye, do you want—"

"Shhh," she said, interrupting his question. She felt his desire for her. Right there, in her hand. She squeezed.

He groaned, a deep guttural sound that vibrated within her.

"Make love to me, Anthony. Right now. I need you to love me. I need you inside of me. Make me feel alive."

Anthony swallowed, every cell in his body fully aware of Skye. He wanted her. But he didn't take women in distress. Though she was leading him, he knew something was wrong. This wasn't Skye, not fully. She'd gone from one extreme to

another. His mind told him not to listen to her words, that she would regret this, but his heart—his soul—demanded that he be with her. In her. Now.

“Skye, do you—”

She clasped her lips over his mouth, hard, her tongue exploring. Her hand rubbed his cock, pulling it toward her. He groaned again, tasting her. Wanting her.

He had the strength to push her away, to demand that she think about what she wanted them to do. To insist she consider the consequences.

But he didn't use it. His mind was clouded with lust and desire and something indefinable. This woman had touched his heart earlier. At the mission in the fire. At his hotel with her quiet regrets. Her strength. Her heart. Her boundless compassion.

“Anthony,” she whispered as her tongue found his ear.

It took all his self-control not to roll over and take charge of the lovemaking. But he wouldn't place her delicate body against the rough ground.

His hands found her beautiful ass and he squeezed, wondering only fleetingly when her panties had disappeared. Skye was all woman, lean and muscular, but soft and rounded where a woman should be. Her firm hips filled his hands as he lifted her up.

She clasped his cock and touched it to her moist center.

“Anthony,” she gasped as she slid onto him without hesitation.

He bit back a cry of pleasure as he filled Skye. Opening his eyes, he stared at her face in the rising sun. Her blond hair was loose and wild, the breeze lifting it from her body. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open, her skin flushed, a sheen of sweat making her shine in the early light. She was a goddess, exquisite and beautiful, and his. He knew then, at their union, that she was as much his as his own mind and soul. How he knew, what it meant, he couldn't be sure, but there was no mistaking this knowledge.

“Skye,” he commanded. “Look at me.”

Her eyes fluttered open. Unfocused. Then they caught his, full of the same deep desire and longing that he had. He pulled her head down to his, kissed her softly as he wrapped his arms around her body.

Her pelvis rocked back and forth and she gasped into his mouth. He bit back his own release, his primitive need, in order to give her everything she wanted and more.

Her muscles tightened around his and he reached down, holding her tight against him. One of his hands found her clit and pressed firmly on the nub. She cried out in his mouth, then arched her back up as she orgasmed.

Then, he gave up his own pleasure.

She held him tight as they lay there catching their breath. “My Skye,” he murmured in her ear.

When she started to shiver from the cold, Anthony sat up, Skye still wrapped in his arms, and pushed up off the ground, bringing her with him. Awkward, he pulled up his pants, buttoned them with one hand as she clung to his neck. Then he carried her toward the house.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” she whispered in his ear.

“Shhh, Skye, no regrets. I will take care of you.” He meant it. He would take care of her until his dying day.

Suddenly she was struggling against him. “Put me down.”

“Skye—”

“Put me down!”

He complied. He sensed no demon within her, nothing supernatural. Whatever had compelled her to walk off the cliff must still be tormenting her, and he had to find out what happened.

Skye shook her head, disoriented. She rubbed her temples, sudden pain beating within her. She’d just had sex with a man she barely knew. On the cliffs, after she nearly died.

What was wrong with her?

I will take care of you.

She didn’t need anyone to take care of her. She didn’t believe anyone would want to. A sharper pain jabbed at her head and she squeezed her temples.

Anthony’s hands were on her, holding her up. She batted them away. “I’m okay,” she said.

“I’m here to help.”

“How did you know where I live?” Skye said, pulling away from Anthony, a sliver of suspicion hitting her. Her body temperature fell as soon as his arms dropped.

And the doubt grew.

“I knew.”

“Oh, please.” She turned back toward her house, stumbling in the rocky soil. Anthony reached for her hand. She pushed his arm away, fell to her knee and winced. “You followed me, didn’t you?” she accused him as she rose unsteadily. She wrapped her arms around her body, trying to regain the warmth she’d had with Anthony, but to no avail.

“I didn’t follow you, Skye. You’re not thinking straight. Maybe it’s a spell.”

“Spell? First demons, now witches? I should call myself Alice and start looking for white rabbits.”

“*Spell* may not be the right word—”

“You have no car,” she interrupted.

“I ran. You’re less than a kilometer from the inn.”

That was true. But that still didn’t explain how he knew where she lived.

“Skye,” Anthony said, taking a step toward her, his arms outstretched, palms up. His shirt hung open. She’d done that. She remembered pulling apart his shirt with such clarity, when everything else was becoming fuzzy. “I had a dream you were in danger.”

“You expect me to believe *that*?” She turned away from him, half running toward her house. *Why don’t I remember leaving the house? How did I walk off the cliff?*

Her feelings of unease grew to near panic. Why couldn’t she remember? It was as if she wasn’t completely inside her own body. How absurd.

She stopped to take a deep breath. “I just didn’t get enough sleep,” she said out loud, as if that would convince her that there was a logical explanation for leaving the house in the cold morning wearing nothing but a tank top and underwear. That it made sense for her to see her dead father. Lack of sleep intensified her complex emotions about her parents. And all Anthony Zaccardi’s talk about demons and whatnot had her thinking about her pathetic mother, leaving everything for a cult, for a god Skye didn’t know existed.

Stop it! Stop thinking about it!

She pressed her fingers against her head as another wave of pain crashed around her. She stumbled and tripped coming up the steps.

Anthony caught her. She wanted to hit him, send him away, at the same time she wanted him to hold her, to make her feel as loved and safe and alive as when they'd made love.

"Skye, something's wrong." His voice was low, almost a warning.

Skye squeezed back the pain, let Anthony help her up the deck stairs and through the sliding door she'd left open.

A foul stench assaulted her, as if someone had defecated and vomited throughout her house. She scowled. "What's that smell?"

"Hell." Anthony eased her into a chair.

"What—" She wanted to shower, to dress, to forget she'd thrown herself at Anthony.

Her face burned. I practically raped him.

"Wait." He pulled a crucifix from his pocket and thrust it into her hands.

"What's this for?"

"Trust me, Skye."

Skye nodded and Anthony turned, holding his own daggerlike cross in front him. For the first time, Skye believed that if demons really existed, Anthony could defeat them.

Confident Skye was safe, at least for the moment, Anthony walked slowly toward the living room.

An invisible, foglike warmth enveloped the house, making each step forward like walking through a swirling, resisting, unseen mist. The sulfuric scent of Hell worried Anthony. Was Ianax still here?

His instincts told him the demon had left. Already, the smell was fading, the heat dissipating. But there was no doubt that a demon had been inside Skye's house.

He searched the house, quietly repeating God's name in Aramaic, waiting for the telltale growl of a masked demon hiding in the furniture, the walls, the very air he breathed. There was none. The house grew colder.

Every room appeared untouched, except for Skye's bedroom. Inside, shredded paper filled the room, little glass jars from her dresser had been knocked over, some shattered, some spilling their sweet-smelling contents. He would have smiled at Skye's love of perfume if he didn't know what had happened in here.

Only a demon—an angry demon—could have done this.

Anthony picked up a piece of paper. Thick. Slightly yellowed with age. Then he saw the binding and knew that what had been destroyed was Rafe's journal. He picked up more torn paper—blank. Every one of them blank.

How?

He left the house. He couldn't tell Skye what he was doing, she wouldn't understand. And right now, gaining her trust was paramount. Not only because of what they'd shared on the cliffs, but because her life was in grave danger.

He took out a vial of holy water, twisted off the cap, and circled the house, sprinkling the blessed water in strategic spots to ensure a protective barrier.

It wouldn't stop a powerful demon, but it would slow and weaken it. It would have to be enough.

He returned to the kitchen, but Skye wasn't there. Panic clutched his heart and he started toward the kitchen door, fearing she'd already walked off the cliff. Someone, or something, wanted her dead. What if he wasn't strong enough to protect her? What if his faith wasn't powerful enough to save her?

He listened, heard running water, followed the sound and found the bathroom door locked.

"Skye?" he called.

"Leave me alone."

Guilt flooded him. He'd taken advantage of her. He'd known something was wrong, that Skye wasn't completely herself, but he craved her. Their shared kiss earlier in the evening had fueled a flame he'd kept under control for the better part of his adulthood. Her claim on him was greater than he'd realized, and then she lay on top of him and he saw her in all her beauty, her inner goodness, and he wanted her.

His desire had consumed him and he'd allowed it to happen, potentially damaging their already strained relationship. Worse, he'd given in to wants that he should rightfully postpone until the demon returned to Hell.

He'd let his guard down, a deadly sin in his vocation.

"Are you okay?" he asked through the door.

She didn't answer him, but the water shut off. "I'll be out in a minute," she said.

He wandered through Skye's house and saw her life as clearly as if he were a psychic. True crime books on the shelves. Furniture that was clean, but old and worn. Decorations that, while free of dust, seemed to be remnants of another generation. A lone picture of a young Skye with her parents.

A sense of loneliness assaulted him, a sorrow he understood all too well. It was a pain he lived with every day.

"I have to get down to the police station," Skye said, standing behind him. "Someone destroyed the journal."

He turned around, embarrassed to be assessing her home. She'd put on her uniform and was pulling her damp hair into a ponytail.

"Skye," he murmured.

She was still wary around him. Embarrassed, perhaps, and he wished he could ease her fear. Tell her how he loved to hold her. Of course he couldn't, she'd push him away. He understood that about her.

He noticed the crucifix he gave her was around her neck. She glanced down, shoved the cross under her shirt.

He needed to reach out. "Skye, don't feel—"

"Did you do it?"

He didn't understand. "What?"

"Did you destroy that journal? Break my things?"

Her voice cracked and he saw the strain, uncertainty, and unease in her eyes.

"No," he said.

"It's all my fault." She looked both irritated and physically ill. "It was evidence, and I brought it home, left it in my bedroom. Stupid." She ran a hand over her face.

“It was two in the morning.”

“I don’t care! I broke protocol and now the journal is ruined. Someone shredded it and must have bleached the pages or something while—” Her voice tapered off.

“Skye, something happened to you this morning. Tell me everything.”

“Why?” Her eyes bored into his. “Did you have something to do with this?”

He quashed feelings of anger and frustration. That he would use sex as a ruse to keep her from her house? “You know I didn’t.”

“I don’t know anything right now,” she snapped. Her voice softened, full of anguish. “I don’t jump strange men on the cliff every day of the week.”

Anthony tried not to be hurt by her comment. “How did you get out on the cliff?”

“Walked,” she said sarcastically. Her defense mechanism.

“You know what I mean.”

Her forehead wrinkled. “I was tired. I wasn’t thinking straight.” She avoided his eyes and crossed over to the coffeepot. It was half full. She picked up a mug from the counter and poured. As the mug touched her lips, Anthony stepped forward and grabbed it from her hand. Hot coffee sloshed over the edges, scalding them both.

“What the—” she exclaimed, jumping back.

Unmindful of the burn, he smelled the coffee, grimaced.

“What?”

“You drank some of this already, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I have coffee every morning.”

“Someone poisoned your coffee.”

“That’s a crock.”

He shoved the mug under her nose, trying to be patient. “What do you smell?”

She breathed in deeply, wrinkled her nose. “It’s sort of metallic.”

“I think it’s mercury. Deadly in large doses, but on a small scale it’s a hallucinogen. My guess is that someone added it to the coffee grounds or water. The bitterness of the coffee would mask the taste.”

“Why didn’t I notice it before?” she asked, still skeptical. “I need to get this to the lab.”

“You were tired. You’d had two hours of sleep. My guess is that something woke you up, but you don’t know what. You rose, started the coffee.” He pulled the tray that held the grounds from the coffeemaker. “Poured a cup.” He looked at her. “Then what happened, Skye?”

She blinked rapidly, her eyes coated with tears. “I... I started thinking about my parents. I don’t know why, it’s stupid, really. I told you about my mom leaving for some whacked-out religious cult, and my dad dying eight years later. I’ve been on my own for a long time, I don’t get all sappy about it, but...” Her voice trailed off and she wasn’t looking at him.

“But it hurts.”

She nodded, probably without realizing she was doing so. She seemed disconnected, and Anthony knew the drug was still having an impact on her.

Skye’s inhibitions were down. When he saved her on the cliff, her emotions went from one extreme to the other. Despair to joy to relief to passion. He didn’t stop her. They made love, but it wasn’t Skye. It was the drugs. Guilt and nausea swept

over him. He knew something had been wrong, but he'd ignored his instincts. He accepted her offering like a dying man would water.

"Skye?"

"Just leave me alone."

"You're still under the influence."

"How do you know? Did you drug my coffee? You could have followed me home, drugged my coffee while I slept, then waited for me to hurt myself so you could ride to the rescue. So that I would trust you." She spat out the word as if it were a curse.

"That's paranoia talking, Skye," Anthony said calmly, taking a step toward her. "That's the drug."

"Bullshit. That's deductive reasoning." She rubbed both temples with her fingers, a pained expression crossing her face.

"Come here."

She stared at him, doubting. He stepped forward, took her wrists, lowered her hands, and led her to the couch.

Her living room was sparse and functional, like the rest of the house. He sat on one end of the couch, pulled Skye down next to him.

"Close your eyes, Skye," he said.

Skye felt so out of balance, but here, sitting with Anthony, she was regaining her footing. Her bottom lip trembled. Slowly, she closed her eyes.

His thumbs pressed her temples and his fingers grasped the back of her head. For a fleeting second she pictured Spock performing the mind meld, but as soon as Anthony started rubbing, his fingers moving in firm circles, all thought ceased and she relaxed for the first time since walking into the mission massacre twenty-four hours ago.

The pain faded, from sharp and burning to dull and throbbing. She relaxed and sighed in relief.

"Turn around and put your head in my lap."

His deep, European voice sounded far away, as smooth as butter, as exotic as a tropical rain forest.

She lay on her back, Anthony turning to a forty-five-degree angle on the couch to hold her head and shoulders comfortably. He continued to massage her temples, moving down to her cheeks, behind her ears, and her body gave up all its tension from sleep deprivation and drugs.

"Do you really believe in everything out there?" Skye asked, keeping her eyes closed.

"You mean in demons?"

"Demons and Heaven and Hell and everything in between."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I've seen the gates of Hell. I've felt the presence of evil. It's real. I can't conjure up a spirit to prove it to you, I can only tell you that you had a visitor, you smelled him, you sensed him, but you're only thinking with your head, not listening with your heart. You want a logical explanation, but there isn't one."

He paused, and she opened her eyes. His eyes held hers, strong, deep, fathomless. She whispered, "And?"

He leaned down, kissed her forehead. "I'm asking you to trust me."

Skye didn't know what to think anymore. Anthony was so ethereal and real at the same time. One minute she had everything sorted in her mind, knew exactly what she needed to do; the next, she wanted to place her entire faith in a man. In *this* man.

She'd never fully trusted anyone but herself. Even then, she doubted. Worried over her decisions. But always, she had her reasoning. It had gotten her this far in her life and career, how could she place her trust in someone else now? That would be like turning her back on herself, on the very thing that had kept her sane and whole during years of loneliness.

What would she have if she listened to Anthony? She'd be just like her mother, wanting to believe in fantasy because real life didn't satisfy her.

As if he could read her mind, he said, "You can't live in the past. Your mother hurt you, and then she died and you couldn't tell her how much she hurt you. It's easier to be angry with her and God than it is to acknowledge you miss her, that she killed your trust."

She closed her eyes, trying to trap the tears that came, but they slid out the corners. Anthony brushed them away with his thumbs.

"It's the drugs," she said, not wanting to admit that after twenty years she still ached for her mother.

"It's your heart, and it's okay."

His lips touched hers so lightly, so tenderly. Her heart skipped a beat. This quiet intimacy, the emotion, was difficult for Skye. She choked back a sob.

Anthony pulled her into his lap and held her, rubbing her back, his chin on her head. She could stay here in his arms forever.

"My mother abandoned me," Anthony finally said. "And while I knew it was for a higher purpose—that I had a calling—there were times, especially at night, especially when I was young, when I cursed God for giving me this life. For forcing my mother to sacrifice me. But in the end, it had been her choice."

"You never had a real family," Skye said, feeling a kinship with Anthony she didn't expect to have.

"We were a family, but I missed—we all missed—having a mother. Skye, I know how betrayed and hurt you feel. But you are strong, beautiful, smart. It's your mother who lost out on knowing what an incredible woman you have become."

She tilted her face to Anthony and said, "You're a miracle worker. My headache is gone." She spontaneously kissed him, then turned away. Almost embarrassed. But this felt—right.

"I need to talk to Rod about the fire, follow up with my detective about the housekeeper—"

"Let me drive you. Just until we know the drug is out of your system."

She felt herself—more herself now than she had for a long time—but she nodded.

Her cell phone rang, and she jumped up, popped the phone from its charger, and said, "Sheriff McPherson."

"Skye, it's Rod Fielding."

She glanced at her watch. "I thought we weren't meeting for another hour."

“After you called about the fire, I came back to the morgue. I’ve had a guard posted outside all night.”

“You think someone is going to come after the bodies?”

“Possibly. But now I have a larger concern.”

“What?”

“I ran the tox screen myself. Twice. These men were drugged.”

“Drugged? So they couldn’t fight back?”

“I don’t think so. I think they were drugged to become aggressive, and it’s been happening for a long time. Months, up until two weeks ago. But I’m checking their blood for more possibilities.”

Two weeks. *The same time the housekeeper was fired.*

“How can you tell?”

“Hair samples. It’s not a routine screening, but after the fire I decided to test for a wider range of narcotics, hallucinogens, and heavy metals.”

“Test for mercury poisoning.”

“Mercury? That would explain my findings. How did you know?”

“I’ll explain when I get there. What about Cooper?”

“The hospital drew his blood, he had no alcohol or recreational drugs, but I’ll need to broaden the panel. Now that I know what I’m looking for, it won’t take long.”

“Good.”

“There’s one more thing. I think I know what happened.”

Finally, answers based on hard physical evidence. “What?”

“You need to come down and see for yourself. You won’t believe me if I tell you over the phone.”

Chapter 10

ON THE WAY to the sheriff’s department, Anthony asked Skye about the conversation he’d overheard between her and Dr. Fielding.

“They were drugged?”

“Apparently it had been happening for months and ended two weeks ago. The same time as your friend fired the housekeeper.”

“Housekeeper?”

“Corinne Davies. Know her?”

Anthony shook his head. “Do you know anything about her background?”

“Not much. Detective Martinez is working on it. She came from Oregon highly recommended from the diocese up there. The bishop was ticked off that Cooper fired her, but apparently has no control over the workings of the mission. She’s on vacation.”

Corinne Davies. “I can make some calls,” Anthony suggested. “Someone in the church might feel more comfortable talking to me than the police.”

Skye didn’t say anything for a moment, and Anthony wondered if she was going to tell him to stay out of the investigation. Instead, she surprised him and said,

"I'd appreciate that. Anything about her history, complaints, background. She has a daughter, Lisa, but there's no father in the picture. I don't even have his name."

She'd taken a step toward trusting him. Anthony was elated.

"What happened to the journal, Anthony? How did"—she paused—"the killer erase all those pages?"

She couldn't say *demon*. But asking for his advice was a huge step. "I think Rafe used blessed ink."

"Excuse me?"

"When the demon touched it, the ink disappeared."

"Disappearing ink."

By her cool tone, he was losing her. He changed tactics, using a cop's logic. "Rafe must have written something the killer doesn't want us to know," Anthony suggested. "Maybe evidence of who had been drugging the priests."

"Why wouldn't he have just called the police?"

"Maybe he didn't have proof. Maybe he didn't think you'd believe him." But Rafe had suspected something supernatural, that's why he'd called Anthony in the first place.

In light of the evidence of the men being drugged, everything made sense. Their odd behavior. Rafe's unease, but unable to explain why. Why hadn't Anthony seen it? He hadn't expected the trio of humans. He'd been looking at demons only, not at the ritual of summoning one. He'd bypassed the process of elimination and looked only at the obvious. Had his personal arrogance jeopardized Rafe and killed the others?

Whatever Rafe had sensed that spurred his call to Anthony was the beginning of the ritual to bring Ianax from Hell. And perhaps, in light of the long-term drugging, one of the priests had been concerned and asked Rafe to come to the mission in the first place.

"Why did he write it in Latin?" she asked. "To keep the information from the priests?"

"They all knew Latin," Anthony said. "The only reason to write in that language would be to keep the information from laypeople. Those who have reason to be at the mission. Repairmen, housekeepers, deliverymen."

Skye asked, "Do you know a Dr. Wicker?"

Anthony couldn't lie. "Yes."

"And?"

"What do you want to know?"

"You want to help, right?"

"You know I do."

"Then why were all these priests seeing a shrink?"

"I explained that to you. They've all witnessed evil." Anthony remembered the conversation he'd had with Rafe right before he left Italy.

He thinks one of my men is communicating with a spirit. But he doesn't know who.

"The bishop implied they were all mentally unbalanced."

"Dr. Wicker is a psychiatrist specializing in helping those who have witnessed the worst man can do to man," Anthony responded. He didn't tell Skye about what

Rafe had said. She wouldn't believe him, and right now keeping her trust was his highest priority.

Skye frowned.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Juan was supposed to call me after talking with Wicker." She flipped open her cell phone. "No missed calls."

Had he missed something? Was the rest of Skye's team in danger? "Have you spoken to him?"

"Not since we saw the bishop yesterday, but that was late."

"Call him."

"Why?" she asked.

"This case is dangerous."

"Well, if all you need is *faith* then he's fine," she snapped. "Juan's the most devout Catholic I know."

Anthony winced at the derision in Skye's voice. He'd thought they'd been closer to a real understanding.

Skye said into her cell phone, "Hey, Juan, call me when you get this message. I'm on my way down to the morgue. Meet me there."

She hung up, concern clouding her eyes. Before Anthony could say anything, she was justifying Juan's inaccessibility. "He's probably in the shower. It's still early."

"He's married, call his wife."

"How do you know he's married?"

"He wore a wedding ring, did he not?"

Skye mumbled something, dialed. "Hi, Beth. It's Skye McPherson. Has Juan left yet?" She frowned as she listened to the wife speak. "No, I'm sure everything's fine. He's investigating a difficult case right now. I'll make sure he calls, I'm meeting him in thirty minutes. Right. Give the girls big kisses for me."

She slowly closed her phone. "He didn't come home last night. He called Beth after I talked to him about the fire and said he was working late and would sleep at the station."

She called headquarters. "Detective Martinez, please." A minute later, she hung up. "He's not there."

Anthony couldn't placate her. His fear for the detective had grown almost as much as his fear for Skye. Whoever was responsible for Ianax roaming the earth had piqued Martinez's interest.

"First things first," he said. "We need to find out what Dr. Fielding learned. Maybe it will help us find your detective."

She nodded. "Remember, you're not a cop. I shouldn't be bringing you in at all, except—" She stopped.

"Except you don't trust me," he said as he pulled into the police department parking lot and turned off the ignition.

She shook her head. "No." She looked him in the eye and he saw how conflicted she was. "I trust you, Anthony," she said softly. "I trust that *you* believe something supernatural killed those men. I don't, but I think you can help me figure out what happened at the mission. You have insight and experience. And you're not as, um, wacky as I first thought. Okay?"

It was a start. And it kept him by Skye's side, where he needed to be when the demon came calling.

He squeezed her hand. "Okay."

* * * * *

The morgue was in the basement of the hospital down the street from the police station. The coroner, a small wiry man in his late sixties named Rich Willem, who'd been here since before Skye was born, was preparing the first body for autopsy when they arrived. Dr. Willem, who never appeared happy, looked particularly sour. Skye would be, too, if she had to face twelve butchered men on the slab.

Rod was agitated and excited at the same time. He barely gave Anthony a second glance. "Look at this." He shoved a printed report into Skye's hands.

She'd seen tox reports before, but she didn't want to take the time to decipher the shorthand. "What does it say?"

"The three men I tested all had evidence of being drugged with a heavy metal, up until two weeks ago."

"Mercury," Anthony said.

Rod shot him a look. "How did you know?" He glanced at Skye. "Is that why you asked me about mercury?"

Skye nodded, handing Rod a box that contained her coffee maker, coffee, a sample of her water, sugar bowl, and the remainder of the coffee she had brewed this morning. "My coffee was poisoned this morning. If Anthony hadn't—"

Anthony could tell how uncomfortable she was. "I came by early this morning to ask about the investigation and found Skye out of sorts."

"I'll test it immediately."

"Whoever poisoned my coffee also destroyed the journal." Skye explained how she had found Rafe Cooper's journal at the mission before the fire.

"I'm more concerned about you. The effects of mercury poisoning can be severe: death, suicidal depression, or extreme aggression," Rod said. "And that would be consistent with my theory."

"I thought you only believed in facts, not theories," Skye said, irritable. Her headache was returning.

"Our crime scene is destroyed. The fire chief said it started in the sacristy. Nearly everything is gone except for the courtyard."

Where Anthony and I were.

Anthony asked, "What do you think happened, Doctor?"

"I think these men killed one another."

"Why on earth would you think that?" Skye exclaimed.

Rod led the way into the main morgue. Dr. Willem gave them a perfunctory nod, continuing about his business without comment. Three bodies were displayed, and on the far wall Rod had put up photographs of the bodies as found. "I asked Dr. Willem to start with these three because they were found here, close together, and they tell a story."

He used a metal pointer and tapped the picture of what used to be a tall, physically fit young man. He lay across the floor. "He killed himself. When we X-rayed the bodies, we found the tip of a knife in his abdomen. From the angle, he

stabbed himself and bled out. Took less than five minutes, but he was unconscious most of it. The same knife nearly decapitated this man.” Rod tapped the photo of the man lying on the stone floor, his head almost completely severed from his body. “And it was used on this man, who was stabbed in the chest fourteen times. We tested the blood—the decapitation occurred first. Other than external blood spatter, no foreign blood was found in his wound. He was also, I believe, the first to die based on other blood evidence.”

“Are you saying that Father Jordan killed this old priest?” Anthony said, his voice shaking in the first sign of stress Skye had seen.

“I can’t prove it, but it holds with the evidence. There is blood from this priest in the stab wounds on the second man’s chest. The striation marks are the same. Absolutely the same knife.”

“So you think that Father Jordan killed first this man, then this one, then committed suicide?”

“Yes.”

“Couldn’t another attacker have killed him? Where is the knife?” Skye asked.

“That’s your domain, but the angle suggests that it was self-inflicted and—look at his hands.” He gestured toward the body on the table. “These cuts are consistent with an attacker blindly wielding a weapon, not defensive wounds. In virtually every knife attack, the attacker nicks himself.”

“Someone else was in the room. Someone collected all the weapons,” Anthony said.

Rod nodded. “Someone had to, and it wasn’t Father Jordan. The knife was lodged in his rib. That’s why it broke. Someone had to really tug to remove it. Father Jordan was dead for at least thirty minutes before the knife was removed.”

“Maybe he had an accomplice. He killed himself out of guilt,” Skye suggested.

“I don’t know why, all I can tell you is that my theory is consistent. Dr. Willem and I are going to piece together the blood evidence on the victims and determine how many weapons were used. I have the lab working on the other collected evidence. I think we can put together exactly what happened, given enough time.”

“How much time?” Skye asked.

Rod shrugged. “We’re working on this twenty-four/ seven. Three days for a preliminary report. Some tests will take a little longer.”

“If the mercury poisoning stopped two weeks ago, why did they turn violent now?” Skye asked. “What about their stomach contents?”

“We’re working on that. The tox screens I originally did were on blood and hair samples. I haven’t received the blood tests back yet. That would show if they were drugged more recently. The hair samples are for long-term poisoning.”

“Rush it, Ron.”

“I’m doing the best I can,” he said.

“There were no footprints,” Anthony interjected. “How did the killer remove the weapons?”

“That’s where I think the killer—or the accomplice—messed up. There were footprints, and that’s why I think they burned the mission. At least that’s the most obvious reason. Let’s go to my office.”

“Have you talked to Juan Martinez today?” Skye asked as they walked.

“No. I assumed he was working with the arson investigator up at the mission.”

"I haven't been able to reach him."

Skye pulled out her cell phone and dialed dispatch. "Milt, can you plug in to Martinez's GPS and give me his whereabouts?"

"Two secs."

Why hadn't she done this before, when she knew he hadn't gone home last night? She pinched the bridge of her nose. The headache was still there, taunting her. A hand rested on her back. Anthony.

Milt said, "He's stationary on Highway 1, one-point-three miles south of Arroyo Grande."

"What the hell is he doing all the way up there?" That was halfway to San Luis Obispo.

"His radio is off."

"Off?" That was against regulations. "Keep trying to reach him on both radio and cell phone. I'm heading up there." Juan wouldn't have gone off half-cocked. He was a by-the-book cop, one she trusted implicitly.

"I gotta go. Juan's in trouble. I feel it." She was about to leave, then asked, "What about those footprints?"

"We took hundreds of photos. No one involved in the carnage left the chapel. But *someone* came in after the fact, walked over to several of the bodies, and left."

"Rafe Cooper," Skye said.

"But he didn't leave, and the prints don't match his. Cooper was barefoot when he came into the chapel. I easily traced his path. He came in through the side door, the one closest to his bedroom, walked halfway around the room, then ran up the center aisle and fell."

Rod continued. "I think one of the killers was still on the premises when you arrived, Mr. Zaccardi."

"Why do you think that?" he asked, his voice tight.

"You wear a size-twelve shoe, we matched your prints earlier. Someone intentionally slid their feet to make it impossible to match. But the individual crossed over your prints, Mr. Zaccardi, and the only way they could have done that was if they left after you."

"Which would explain how the mission was locked from the inside when Zaccardi arrived," Skye said. "And if these men killed one another, then perhaps only one person needed to be involved. But it still doesn't explain how. If they hadn't been drugged for nearly two weeks, why now?"

"Perhaps the killer tainted their food supply," Anthony suggested. "Gave them a larger dose. There must have been a purpose to the slow poisoning, and when it stopped—when the housekeeper was fired—the killer panicked."

"That certainly points to the housekeeper. I need to talk to her, dammit." Skye turned to Rod. "Please tell me you cleaned out the kitchen."

Frowning, he shook his head. "There was no reason to do so. I would have done it today, after getting the tox screen results, but—"

"The fire. Dammit."

Skye tried to piece together the facts. "The priests were all drugged for several months, up until two weeks ago. But why did they all go crazy two nights ago? If they were being drugged, why was that night any different?"

"Perhaps they were given a larger dose," Rod suggested.

Skye frowned. "This is what I don't get. Why were they killed? What is the motive?"

Anthony spoke up. "They were killed for their eternal souls."

Not now, Anthony. Skye couldn't accept that as a motive to kill. She said to Rod, "I need to find Juan. Call me as soon as you have something definitive."

Chapter 11

THE PATROL SKYE SENT to Juan's location came up with nothing: his car was there, he wasn't, and there was no sign of a struggle.

"I'm going to talk to the Davieses," Skye said to Anthony as she slid behind the steering wheel of her Bronco. "I have some more questions."

"If this Ms. Davies has anything to do with Ianax, she's dangerous," Anthony said.

"You said the demon needs *three* humans," Skye said, exasperated. She really wasn't in the mood to listen to Anthony's religious garbage right now. Juan was missing. "If she poisoned those men, she's just as guilty for their deaths as if she stabbed them herself."

Based on the *evidence*—something Anthony Zaccardi seemed to be ignoring—the twelve priests had committed a mass murder-suicide. Coupled with the poison, at least it proved that human beings—not some fictitious "demon"—had been responsible for the deaths. That gave her a modicum of peace. Murder, she understood. Supernatural forces? She'd leave that to Hollywood.

On the way to the Davies' cottage, Skye called Dr. Wicker. It was after nine in the morning and he was in his office. "Dr. Wicker? Sheriff Skye McPherson in Santa Louisa."

"You're calling about Santa Louisa Mission."

"Yes. It's my understanding that you served as psychiatrist to the mission priests."

"I did."

"Have you spoken to Detective Juan Martinez regarding this case?"

"He left a message after hours last night on my answering machine stating he would be coming by first thing this morning, but he hasn't arrived yet."

She'd assumed that Juan had been traveling to SLO, but he could have also been heading farther north, to Santa Clara, to speak with Wicker. "Thank you, Doctor. I'll be in touch."

Anthony held out his hand. "May I?"

She handed over her cell phone.

Anthony said, "Charles, it's Anthony Zaccardi."

"Anthony? When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday morning. I was too late. Rafe told me he talked with you about the strange behavior at the mission."

"Rafe is safe?"

"He's in a coma."

“Someone betrayed him. Someone betrayed all of them.”

“The housekeeper, Corinne Davies?”

“Rafe believed she was partly responsible, but he didn’t know how. And even after he fired her, the men weren’t right. He was looking internally.”

One of the priests? Anthony didn’t want to believe it, but he’d witnessed worse betrayals. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know. They all passed every test I know. But one of those twelve—Anthony, one of them was communicating with demons. I know it, it’s the only explanation for the fear.”

“Fear?”

“Rafe didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“They couldn’t sleep. They could barely eat. They were jumping at shadows. They got to sleeping in the chapel during adoration, the only time they felt safe. But after a while, even adoration terrified them.”

The tabernacle had been replaced.

“Thank you.” Anthony hung up.

“What?” Skye asked.

He told her about the abnormal fear, but refrained from explaining the significance of the fake tabernacle. She wouldn’t believe him anyway, not with her focus on finding Detective Martinez.

“If they were drugged long-term with what I consumed only once, it’s no wonder they freaked out.” Skye’s voice was laced with sympathy.

When Skye pulled up in front of a small cottage near the cliffs outside Santa Louisa, Anthony’s instincts hummed.

“Something is wrong,” he said.

“What?”

“I can’t explain.”

“Or won’t?”

He took a leap of faith. “You know I’m a historical architect, but you seem to have forgotten I’m also a demonologist. I study demons. I also have a certain—empathy—where demons are concerned. I sense evil. This house is evil.”

“Houses can’t be evil. The people inside, maybe, but houses are wood, nails, and glass.”

“Demons can be trapped in inanimate objects,” Anthony tried to explain further, but Skye’s eyes darted away. She was letting him help—but she refused to listen to the truth.

As they approached the house, Anthony’s body grew cold and his head throbbed painfully. A spell. He reached the path leading to the porch and his heart felt like it was being shredded. He could go no farther.

Skye didn’t have a problem crossing the threshold. As his fear for her grew, he stepped forward and fell to his knees.

She knocked on the door, and when no one answered, walked around the perimeter, finally declaring, “No one’s home, the house is locked up tight.” She frowned at him. “What’s wrong with you?”

He’d been sitting at the edge of the path, physically unable to cross the spell’s threshold. He slowly rose to his feet and said, “They cast a powerful spell around

that house to stop me. Don't come here without me, not until I find a way to reverse it. You're in danger."

"Stop." She spoke softly and held up her hand.

"Skye, listen—"

"No more talk of demons and spells. That's a load of crap. You've distracted me enough from this investigation. I have a missing cop, a friend. I have evidence that points to the priests being poisoned to the point that they committed murder and suicide. When I get those responsible into interrogation I will damn sure find out why. I want whoever drugged those men to go to prison for a long, long time. That's my job. Those are the facts."

She rubbed her eyes and sighed. Anthony's heart fell. He knew what she was going to say before she opened her mouth.

"I wasn't myself this morning." Skye averted her eyes. "You saved my life and I jumped you. It didn't mean anything, but I've felt guilty enough about it that I let you come with me to the morgue, to come here. That was not only wrong, it's against protocol. I'm going to take you to your car. You're not a suspect, and you can pick up your passport at the station."

"Your life is in danger!" Why couldn't she see what he so clearly saw?

"I can take care of myself, Mr. Zaccardi. I've been doing it for a long, long time."

He touched her cheek softly. As if his touch could convince her that he was right, could show her that he spoke the truth. That there were things in this world that people didn't understand, but it was his job to convince them. To convince Skye.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"You are a civilian and you will not be part of this investigation."

She said the words, and her body language told him she was serious, but her eyes—they were confused.

"You don't mean that, Skye."

She straightened. "Yes I do. Juan is missing. I have twelve victims. How do I know that Rafe Cooper wasn't involved? Because you've told me he's this noble guy? I need to ask the hard questions, and every time I do you throw out crap about demons!" She gestured toward the house. "Like a *house* can be evil? That some sort of *spell* is protecting it, against what? Burglars? *You?*"

"I have a serious crime on my hands, and you're steering me in the wrong direction. I'm neglecting logic and reason for supernatural excuses. No more."

Anthony's anger built. He tried to tamp it down, but it came out in a rush.

"What about the fire last night?" he demanded. "The flames that almost killed both of us?"

"The arson investigator will have a scientific explanation for it," she said matter-of-factly.

"Can't you look beyond what your eyes tell you? Into what your heart sees?"

"I'm a cop, Anthony! What am I supposed to tell the jury? A demon made him do it? Give him five-to-ten, call an exorcist, and with some counseling he'll be okay? I deal with human beings, who are just as bad and rotten as the demons in your imagination."

That stung. This woman hadn't seen what he'd seen. She hadn't watched friends die horribly in the grips of Satan's fire, or watched an entire evil building

disappear into the ground with people trapped inside. She couldn't see what was right in front of her—the fire, the visions of her father on the cliff, the evil emanating from the house in front of them.

“You would deny what you feel?” Anthony said. “What you know to be true?”

“Feelings aren't fact.” Skye held fast to that truth.

Arguing with Anthony was delaying her. Just being around him was clouding her judgment. How could she find Juan, investigate these murders, when she was being diverted by a dark fairy tale of good versus evil?

Anthony grabbed her, pulled her close, his face tight with anger. “Would you deny what happened between us?”

She shook her head. “That was a mistake. The drugs—”

“It was *not* a mistake! I will not deny how I feel.”

Anthony's mouth claimed hers, hard and passionate. Skye would have collapsed had he not been holding her up. He poured his anger, his frustration, his emotions into her, making her tremble.

She pushed him away, stumbled backward, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Stop.”

“You cannot deny us. The power between us.”

She steeled herself against Anthony's growing intensity. “I'll take you to your car—”

His entire body seemed on the verge of exploding, then he tightened his jaw and stated, “I'll walk.”

She watched him leave, afraid to let him go—but knowing if she was going to get to the bottom of these murders, she needed logic and reason over supernatural delusions.

Why did she suddenly feel so cold?

Chapter 12

ANTHONY BOWED OUT OF RESPECT when he was escorted into Bishop Carlin's office and kissed his hand. “Thank you for seeing me, Bishop.”

“Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Zaccardi.” The bishop's tone was neither awestruck nor cynical.

“Rafe Cooper is a friend of mine.”

“And you came out here when you heard about the murders. Tragic.” He crossed himself.

“I found the bodies, sir.”

Surprise crossed the bishop's face, in addition to concern. “The police didn't tell me that.”

“They didn't like what I had to say.”

“Which was?”

“A demon is at work here.”

The bishop didn't say anything for a long time. “Demons cannot kill unless they possess someone. You know that.”

“I do.”

“So what is your theory?”

“First, did Rafe come to you recently about the missing tabernacle?”

“I told the sheriff that Mr. Cooper and I were not on very good terms, Mr. Zaccardi.”

“Why is that?”

“He’s a difficult man.”

“He can be.” Rafe was stubborn—sometimes to a fault—but he was intensely loyal.

“The tabernacle isn’t missing,” Bishop Carlin said. “I gave the mission a replacement.”

Anthony couldn’t keep the surprise off his face. “You have the original tabernacle? Why?”

“It’s very old, as I’m sure you know. Several of the stones had fallen off and needed to be replaced. Father Hatch brought it to me nearly two weeks ago.”

“Father Hatch?” Anthony didn’t know him.

“He arrived at the mission a year ago. He’s one of the few who leave the property. I’m sure you know that the mission had, frankly, become an asylum of sorts. The men are mentally ill.”

Anthony’s jaw clenched. “They witnessed evil, Bishop.”

“We’ve all witnessed evil.”

“Have we?” Anthony countered.

“Look around you, young man.”

“I have faced demons. I have freed souls.”

“You are not a priest.”

“I am not.”

“I know exactly who you are, Mr. Zaccardi. And you are given a lot of latitude because of your friends in the Vatican.”

“I am given latitude because I can see demons. Where is the tabernacle now?”

“In storage awaiting shipment to Rome. Perhaps you’d like to take it back with you?”

Anthony bit back his first, angry remark.

“Perhaps I would,” he said.

“I will ready it for you immediately.”

* * * * *

The demon looked at his minions through his new human eyes, relishing with hubris the worship in their expressions. He craved adoration.

“Is it done?” he asked.

“Yes. We have the records.”

“Have? Why didn’t you destroy them?”

“We thought the information would be valuable,” the older woman said. “The doctor was very detailed in his comments. There are prayers and protections that may help us grow stronger.”

She was right. He’d been in a destructive mood ever since the journal disintegrated and Zaccardi saved Skye McPherson. That soul should have been his!

“You—” He pointed to the older woman. “Drive.” He stared at the younger woman. “You, in back with me.”

“I—”

His eyes glowed. “I have lusted for nine hundred years since I last possessed a human body. You will serve me.”

She nodded, fear and excitement in her eyes, unable and unwilling to deny his lust.

He roared his satisfaction and ripped off her clothes.

* * * * *

Anthony sat in the Santa Louisa Public Library, his knees hitting the low table, hunched over a computer. He typed into the Google search engine: “*Jeremiah Hatch*”.

He’d already woken Father Philip in Italy who was covertly looking into the mission records. The mentally disturbed priests were given necessary compassion by the church and cared for, but no one wanted to admit to the public that the presence of evil could break the strongest of the faithful. What hope could there be for regular people if devout priests crumbled within Satan’s grasp?

There were far too many hits on the name, so Anthony narrowed the search to “*Jeremiah Hatch + priest*.”

Fewer than a hundred sites came up and Anthony began clicking through.

He found an article published four years ago in a national newspaper about a group of missionaries, led by Monsignor Jeremiah Hatch, gone missing in Guatemala. When representatives from the Teach the Poor project had visited the site, they found it completely empty. Six missionaries gone, as if vanishing into thin air. The local villagers refused to talk, but by all accounts they knew what had happened. They’d been scared silent.

There was a bio on each missionary, including Hatch.

Monsignor Jeremiah Hatch, 43, was born in Denver, Colorado. Orphaned at the age of twelve, he was taken in by the Sisters of Mercy. A graduate of Notre Dame University, he entered St. John’s Seminary in California at the age of twenty-seven. Ordained three years later, he served as a priest in the Los Angeles Diocese, the Portland Diocese, and most recently in the Washington, DC Diocese. He’d been an advisor to Teach the Poor for the past ten years.

Anthony wondered what Hatch had done between the time he graduated college and joined the seminary. Was it just a coincidence that he’d attended the same seminary where Rafe was studying?

Another article published just a year ago mentioned Hatch again.

Three years after he went missing and was presumed dead while a missionary in Guatemala, Monsignor Jeremiah Hatch walked into a hospital in Belize. Though physically healthy, he had no recollection of the last three years.

Representatives from the United States Bishops came to bring Msgr. Hatch back to the States, but one unidentified nurse said, “He kept repeating, ‘They’re dead. They’re all dead.’”

That would explain why he was sent to the Santa Louisa Mission, Anthony surmised.

Curious about Hatch’s childhood, Anthony tried other search terms, focusing on Denver.

Nothing. The bad thing about the Internet was that while information over the last decade was easily searchable, the further back you went the harder it was to find anything. Archives often didn’t make it online.

Why would Monsignor Hatch bring the tabernacle to the bishop? Anthony had inspected the damage, and it was minimal—a few missing stones, a few more loose. The stones themselves were replaceable.

The importance of the tabernacle was that it protected the priests against evil. Its removal put them all in jeopardy. If Davies was responsible for summoning the demon, she may have been poisoning the priests to make it easier for the demon to gain a foothold. And if Hatch was one of the three humans needed to extract Ianax from Hell, he would know to remove the tabernacle.

It didn’t make sense *unless* Hatch knew of the protective qualities of the tabernacle. And wanted it gone.

And the only reason he’d want it gone would be because he knew what was coming. Who was coming.

Which meant he had betrayed everyone at Santa Louisa de Los Padres Mission. Just like Charles Wicker said.

But Hatch was dead. Had someone betrayed him? Or...

Anthony ran from the library. He opened the trunk of his rental—he’d taken a taxi to retrieve his car after leaving Skye—and inspected the tabernacle more closely.

He crossed himself. “Please forgive me, Father.”

On the bottom panel an ancient Hebrew incantation was stamped in the metal. Anthony had to take apart the tabernacle to remove the inscribed prayer. This would help him break the spell surrounding the evil house on the coast. Skye would return, and if he couldn’t get past the invisible barrier, she would most certainly die.

He slid into the driver’s seat and picked up his cell phone. He had to get Rod Fielding to talk to him. Then he would know for sure whether Monsignor Hatch had worshipped demons.

Chapter 13

FEELING ALONE WASN’T UNUSUAL , but when Skye watched Anthony walk away that morning, she felt lost. Almost as lost as when her mother deserted the family. When her father died.

She shook her head. Ridiculous. It was the remnants of the drugs, the long day and lack of sleep. That's why her mother and father were in her thoughts. That's why she couldn't get Anthony out of her mind. She wanted to trust him, but how could she?

He walked through fire.

The arson investigator told her over the phone it might have appeared as if he walked in the fire, but no one could survive unscathed. He explained the concept of backdraft, and how fire seemed to disappear, then could return more powerful and destructive, consuming everything in its path.

Skye suppressed what had happened at the mission. Her mind must have tricked her eyes, just like when she thought she saw her father on the cliffs.

She was a cop in the U.S.A. Anthony Zaccardi worked for the Vatican. A religious cult, as far as she was concerned. It wasn't as if he would stick around once the killers were in custody. He'd go back to Italy—Rome, Florence, Sicily, wherever—and that would be that.

She rubbed her face, missing him. What had gotten into her? She wanted to place her trust in a man she'd just met, a man who had an illogical but quick answer to every one of her problems? The fact that she missed him proved her judgment was damaged, as least as far as Anthony Zaccardi was concerned.

After checking with Rod and learning it would be another day before the autopsies were complete, she checked in with dispatch. No word yet on Juan Martinez. Guilt twisted her heart. She should know where her people were at all times. Instead, when Juan went missing, she was screwing a European hottie on the cliffs.

She rubbed her face. In her heart she knew it wasn't like that, but in the end she was responsible for the destruction of Rafe Cooper's journal, for Juan's disappearance, for sending Anthony away.

She went by the hospital, ostensibly to check on the status of her main suspect, but in her heart she knew it was to see Anthony. He wasn't there, nor had he been.

She drove by the inn. He wasn't there, either. She called dispatch and he hadn't picked up his passport.

Her instincts overrode her personal wishes. What was he up to?

She'd already put a BOLO on Corinne Davies and her daughter, Lisa. If anyone saw them, they were to call her. She wanted to talk to them, not scare them or send them into hiding.

Running through her mental checklist, she called Brian Adamson, the delivery driver whom Juan had spoken to the morning of the murders, asking if Juan had spoken with him since yesterday morning. He hadn't.

What Skye didn't understand was if Ms. Davies was poisoning the priests, why would the grocery records matter to Rafe Cooper? Why couldn't she have brought her own poison to the mission? Using the grocery would only heighten suspicion and leave a trail. She could easily have brought hemlock or whatever from her own garden. Unless, maybe, he first suspected the produce from the grocery was tainted.

And why had the killer removed the weapons? Perhaps to make it *appear* that something supernatural had happened when it was simply another example of

human violence? The weapons probably didn't belong in the mission. Someone had brought them there. Skye's head hurt as she contemplated that someone had drugged twelve men, put weapons in proximity, and watched the brutal show. The weapons themselves must hold significance to the killers, or be traceable, otherwise why would they need to reclaim them?

She wanted to ask Anthony. He obviously understood religious nutcases.

That's not fair.

Skye ran a hand through her hair, messing with the ponytail, and she undid it, shaking her head.

Someone must have drugged the men after Davies left. If, in fact, Davies was involved at all. Perhaps she had been a scapegoat? Maybe the men had been drugged by someone inside, and Rafe Cooper arrived and pointed a finger at Corinne Davies. Maybe she was truly an innocent, but knew something. Could she, too, be in danger?

She'd gone off to a spa and her daughter was alone. Had her daughter reached her? Where were they now? Could they also be victims, and in Skye's exuberance to find a suspect and close this case she had put potential victims in the suspect column?

She called Rod. She had one more question for him.

"How were the drugs administered to the men the night they died?"

"All I can tell you is that they ate stew the night they died."

"Stew?"

"You know, beef, potatoes, carrots, onions, gravy. Stew."

"What about additions? Were the drugs in the stew?"

"The drugs had to have been in the stew. All but one of the men ate it. The richness of the food would have disguised the bitterness. I don't have the lab reports back yet to confirm."

Just like the sugar she added to her coffee disguised the bitterness.

"Who didn't eat the stew?"

She heard him flipping through papers. "Jeremiah Hatch. He had lettuce, carrots, onions, and bread, no stew."

"Why wasn't Rafe Cooper affected?"

"He wasn't dead. I couldn't examine his stomach contents," he said sarcastically.

"What about tox screens? Wouldn't the hospital have run tests?"

"Is this important?"

"Yes."

"I'll call over to the hospital and find out. I had the lab test his blood and he had no mercury or heavy metal poisoning."

"Didn't you say that you could see traces in the hair of the priests?"

Rod paused. "Yes, but that ended two weeks ago. And your comatose friend was only there for a few weeks before."

"Can you check, anyway?"

He sighed. "Of course."

"And don't forget the prints at my house."

"I have someone working on it."

“Thanks, Rod. I didn’t mean to snap at you. This case—” She didn’t have to say anything else.

“I know. Be careful.”

She hung up and considered the new information. Either Cooper hadn’t eaten the stew and he was involved, or as the evidence showed, he was locked in his room. A room with no locks.

If Cooper had suspected the housekeeper of drugging the priests, why hadn’t he pressed charges? Nothing had come through her department. And if Davies was no longer in the picture, how was the food tainted? By this Hatch guy who had no stew in his stomach? But he was dead when the fire started—had Davies broken into the mission to set it? Had they been working together? Why? And what purpose would she have had for drugging those men and turning them into killers?

Motive. That’s what was bugging Skye. There was no damn *reason* for those men to be drugged.

By the time she walked into the station late that evening, she was exhausted, but Juan was still missing and she’d get no sleep knowing he could be injured, imprisoned, or worse.

She ran the delivery guy and Hatch through the database. Nothing. Hatch didn’t even have a driver’s license, in California or any other state. Which made sense because there had been only one car at the mission, a ten-year-old Chevy Suburban registered to Raphael Cooper.

Deputy Tommy Reiner dropped a thick file folder on her desk. “Background on the dead priests,” he said.

She opened the folder. “Anything pop out at you?”

“Lots of holes. Only three were United States citizens. The other nine were from all over the world. Got one guy from Argentina, another from Nigeria, another from Denmark. A regular melting pot up there.”

“Why’s the folder so thick?”

“I pulled medical records, at least what I could get without a court order. They were all under the care of the same doc, a shrink named Charles Wicker.”

“I spoke to him this morning.” And then she’d let Anthony talk to a potential witness. How could she have done that?

She had more questions for Dr. Wicker. Because it was after hours, she dialed his home number first.

After four rings: “Wicker residence.”

“This is Sheriff Skye McPherson from Santa Louisa. I’d like to speak with Dr. Wicker regarding a patient of his.”

A long pause. “Badge number?”

She didn’t expect that, but she recited the number from memory.

“Sheriff, this is officer Timothy Young from the Santa Clara Police Department. Dr. Wicker was shot earlier today. We arrived on the scene an hour ago after his daughter discovered him and called 911.”

“How?”

“Gunshot to the head. He apparently surprised a burglar. We think his attacker may have been after drugs.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Dr. Wicker was a psychiatrist. His garage was converted into an office. We believe it happened between one and two when he returned from lunch.”

“Will he make it?”

“Touch and go. He’s in surgery now.”

“Do you know what was taken?”

“Not exactly. The file cabinets were broken into, drugs all over the place, the room is a mess.”

“I need you to do me a favor,” she said. “Can you check for a specific file?”

“Is this related to a case?”

“I’m working the murders at Santa Louisa Mission. Dr. Wicker was the psychiatrist for the men who lived there.”

Skye could almost see officer Young nodding. “I’ll have to talk to the detective in charge; he arrived a few minutes ago. I’ll have him get back to you. What are you looking for?”

She read him the list of names of the dead priests, Raphael “Rafe” Cooper, and asked for any files related to Santa Louisa.

She hung up and told Reiner what she’d learned. “I don’t think Wicker’s shooting was a coincidence.”

Reiner was reading her report from her meeting with the bishop. “Hey, I don’t know if this means anything, but it says that the housekeeper, Davies, had worked in Salem. One of the dead guys, Hatch, was in Salem about five years ago. Think they knew each other?”

Hatch hadn’t eaten the stew.

“Maybe,” she said. “I made a call to the diocese earlier today, but haven’t received a call back.” She called again, but it was after hours. She wondered if Anthony would be able to get information from them tonight, but again she hesitated to ask for his help. She could just as easily make the call in the morning. “Let’s assume that Davies and Hatch knew each other, what does it mean?”

Reiner shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe they had a thing going on. Maybe they hated each other. Maybe she wanted to kill him, but poisoned everyone so there wouldn’t be a connection.”

“Let’s go out to the Davies property again.”

Her phone rang again. It was Rod.

“What do you have for me?”

“Hello to you, too.” His words were slurred.

“You okay?”

“Never been better,” he said sarcastically. “Just came home from the morgue to shower the stench of death off my body.”

“You’re drunk. Let’s talk in the morning.”

“I have the report from my team who went to your house.”

“And?”

“The only fingerprints are yours, Juan’s, and Mr. Zaccardi’s.”

That made sense. Juan was a regular visitor, they often had drinks after work, especially when his wife took the girls out of town to visit their large extended family. And Zaccardi had gone through her entire house.

“What about the coffeepot?”

“Yours and Zaccardi’s. You told me he’s the one who checked the grounds.”

“What about the jar I keep my coffee in? The back of the coffeepot where the water goes?”

“I know how to do my job. The entire coffeepot was checked. Mercury-laced grounds, a borderline lethal dose. You’re lucky Zaccardi was there.”

Lucky? What if he had poisoned her to begin with? To distract her while his accomplice searched her house? Destroyed the journal? Or replaced the journal with blank, torn pages? She’d told him to leave the country; what if he had helped the killer? What if he was part of a larger conspiracy?

Her head pounded. “Thanks,” she said quietly and hung up.

It was Anthony all along. He’d poisoned her coffee, his were the only fingerprints on the pot. There was no other explanation.

How could she have been so wrong about him? How could she have screwed him? He’d filled her mind with doubt and confusion, steering her away from the truth, giving her hope through trickery. She’d wanted so much to believe him when he told her he never lied. Even her heart lied to her, telling her she was safe in his arms.

Anthony was a master of deception.

“I want an APB put out on Anthony Zaccardi,” she told Reiner. “Call the front desk sergeant. I told Zaccardi he could pick up his passport. When he does, I want him arrested.”

Chapter 14

ANTHONY FOUND ROD FIELDING at his house. The head CSI was three sheets to the wind, and still drinking.

“Hey, preacher,” Rod said, opening the door wide, looking like an old man.

“I’m not a priest.”

Rod shrugged. “What can I do for you?”

“Can I come in?”

He shrugged again and Anthony stepped in, closed the door. “You’re done with the autopsies.”

“Eight of them. Four more tomorrow. Then tissue analysis, blood work to follow up on, body parts to catalogue. Fun.” He drained a tall glass that looked more rum than Coke.

“I—”

Rod interrupted. “We found the eyes, by the way. Skye was upset about the eyes, but I found them.”

“Where?” he asked quietly.

“In the hands of another victim.”

Anthony swallowed thickly. “I need to ask you something.”

“I can’t tell you anything, you know that.”

He raised his eyebrows. “But you can share the information about the missing eyes?”

“Where’s Skye?”

“Working.”

“She booted you off the case.”

“I’m not a cop.”

“She can be prickly, but she’s a good cop.”

“I know.”

“She doesn’t believe your theory.”

“Do you?”

He rose, mixed himself another drink—rum with a splash of Coke. He sat down across from Anthony, leaned forward, face flushed but eyes surprisingly sober. “I don’t know what the fuck to believe, Zaccardi. This shit doesn’t happen here. I’ll never get rid of these images. I *want* to believe that something supernatural did this, that no human being could be so vicious. But I know we can. I saw what a man did to his family last year. Stabbed them to death while they slept. But nothing, nothing like this.”

“Who was on the altar?”

“Why?”

“I need to know.”

“Does this prove your satanic ritual theory?”

“I never believed it was a satanic ritual,” Anthony said. Not in the way Rod did.

“Altar.” He closed his eyes as if mentally going through files, then opened them and said, “Hatch, forty-seven, six foot even, one hundred eighty-six pounds.”

A sick feeling crept in.

“Does that mean something?”

“Yes.” Anthony frowned.

“What?”

“Do you have the time of death for all the men?”

“Time of death is an inexact science. We established they all died between four and five Monday morning.”

“Do you know in what order they died?”

“Three or four fatal fights broke out at once. I can tell based on blood spatter and foreign material in each body who was stabbed first, for example, but I don’t know the exact time they died. Not until we finish the autopsies, and even then we’re talking about minutes apart.”

“What about the man on the altar?”

“I can look it up at the office. Why? What do you think happened?”

“I need to know if he was the last to die. I need to know how he died.”

Rod stared at him for a long minute. “Skye would have my job if she knew I was telling you this. The guy on the altar had been stabbed in the shoulder, but that’s not what killed him. The wound was superficial. He died of a heart attack.”

“He was young.”

“Forty-seven isn’t too young for a heart attack. I’ve had victims as young as thirty-five on the table. But—” He stopped.

“What?”

“He had a healthy heart. No sign of an attack. His heart just—stopped.”

Because the demon tried to possess him. And something happened.

Had Rafe interrupted the process? Did Hatch have a change of heart? Right now, Anthony believed Jeremiah Hatch was intimately involved in the massacre.

He had to have been one of the three. He sat on the altar watching the violence. Waiting. To willingly give up his soul. If Ianax has a willing human possession, he becomes twice as powerful than if he has to fight his way in. A willing human gained the immortality of the demon as long as they were united.

Walk with the willing dead.

A willing possession always ended in death once the demon was exorcized, but it was much more difficult to defeat the demon when the possessed soul wasn't fighting.

It was no coincidence Rafe had been on the floor next to the altar. He would have been dead or possessed had Anthony not come when he had. Rafe must have known what Hatch was doing. Stopped the ritual. But he'd been too late to save the others. He'd been held captive in his room—evidenced by the scratch marks and wounds on his hands—until the actual possession began and the demon couldn't hold Rafe off.

Why hadn't Rafe been poisoned? Was it as simple as the fact that he wasn't a priest? Or that he'd never seen evil incarnate? Or—

“Do you know how the poison was given to the priests?”

“I know how they consumed the last dose. In stew served late the night before.”

“Stew.”

“Everyone but Hatch and your friend Cooper. There's no evidence of heavy metal poisoning in Cooper's body.”

“Rafe is a vegetarian,” Anthony said.

“Since you and Skye are on the outs right now,” Rod said, “you probably haven't heard. But it might be important. The psychiatrist treating the priests was shot today. All files related to the mission are missing.”

Anthony froze. “Someone tried to kill Charles Wicker?”

“Yep, he's in surgery.” He drank half his rum. “I heard through the grapevine that Skye put out an APB on you. She thinks you're the one who poisoned her coffee.”

“Why?”

“Your fingerprints, and hers, were the only ones found in the kitchen.”

Skye was looking at the facts, the evidence—and thought he'd planned to kill her. That she had such a low opinion of him ached, but he didn't have time to wallow in self-pity or indignation.

“If I'm supposed to be in prison, why did you talk to me to begin with?”

Rod drained his rum and said, “Because I've been in this business a long time and something doesn't add up. Hell, a lot of things aren't making sense to me.” He stared at Anthony. “I don't think you're a killer, and God help me if I'm wrong, but I think you're the only one who can stop whatever's happening.”

* * * * *

Anthony sat in Rod Fielding's personal car outside the sheriff's department watching Skye's police-issue Bronco. He'd talked Rod into swapping cars with him, though he wasn't confident Rod wouldn't let it slip if Skye called again that night. He could only hope the scientist passed out before that happened.

It hurt and angered him that Skye thought he'd poisoned her. Her doubts—or guilt—told her he must be involved. He couldn't convince her with words; only seeing would lead her to believe him.

He called Father Philip. "What do you have?"

"Not much, I'm afraid."

"Give me everything." He told Father Philip about the altar, Jeremiah Hatch, and his theory.

Silence.

"Father?"

"I fear you are right."

"What do you know?"

"Monsignor Hatch was never supposed to be at the Santa Louisa Mission. He returned to his home parish in D.C. after Guatemala and then one day asked his local bishop for a sabbatical. He asked if he could spend time at the Santa Louisa Mission, but the bishop felt he'd be better served at a retreat in Canada. He never showed up, and the bishop filed a missing persons report with the police department."

"How'd he get into the mission?"

"You know they were very reclusive. They wouldn't have turned away one of their own who was hurting."

Hurting.

"What about Hatch's childhood?"

"I spoke with the Mother Superior at Sisters of Mercy and she couldn't find his records."

"Missing records?"

"It happens, Anthony. But—"

"It's suspicious, given what we know now."

"It's a theory."

"How did his parents die?"

"I don't have that information."

"It should be in his seminary records." *The same seminary where Rafe was studying. Had he learned something about Jeremiah Hatch? Or had he been ignorant up until the final hour?*

"I'll check, but they may not talk with me."

"This is important, Father. Maybe Cardinal Ciccoli can ask."

Silence again. While Father Philip was satisfied to be considered a relic in the church who saw demons on every corner, Cardinal Ciccoli wanted to uphold his image as a statesman. He had helped Anthony on several occasions, though as quietly and discreetly as possible.

"I will ask him," Father Philip finally said. "If it is truly important."

Anthony watched as Skye left the sheriff's department with a uniformed deputy. They jumped into her Bronco and left. He followed.

Anthony couldn't say for sure Hatch's past was important, but the more information about how Ianax had been summoned from Hell, the better. He already feared he wouldn't be able to save Skye.

"It's important, Father."

"Very well."

“Assume that Hatch was a willing participant for the demon, but the ritual couldn’t be completed. What would Ianax do? He didn’t go straight back to Hell. I felt him in the fire.”

“He must have a human body. The longer he is without one, the weaker he becomes.”

“But he needs a willing participant.”

“He needed three people to draw him out of Hell, but now that he’s here, he’ll take anyone he can. And remember—he can move in and out of souls at will. He may have used people without them knowing it. Protect yourself.”

Anthony watched Skye turn toward the coastal highway. Fear gripped him. He stayed far back. He now knew where she was going; he couldn’t let her see him.

“I have more important things to protect.”

Chapter 15

SKYE HAD TAGGED Deputy Tommy Reiner to join her in the stakeout of the Davies house that night. Though it was only nine when they settled into their hiding spot in a cove of trees to the north of the house, she was beat. There was a connection and she kept circling her mind around possible answers. Everything went back to the Davies and the poisonings. But why? Was Corinne Davies a serial killer? One of those mercy killers? Women serial killers were more likely to use poison or another less “violent” method of death. Male killers usually stuck with knives and guns and hands-on strangulation.

She watched the house and sipped lukewarm black coffee from a thermos she had picked up at Starbucks earlier in the evening. The house was dark and the car registered to Corinne Davies wasn’t in the carport. More than that, the place felt as empty as it had when she’d been here this morning with Anthony. Was she wasting her time?

What was Anthony up to? Was she wrong to have put an APB on him? How else to explain his fingerprints all over her coffeepot?

He’d checked the grounds when you came back from the cliff.

Whoever poisoned the coffee would have worn gloves, wouldn’t they?

Was Anthony himself in danger? Dr. Wicker was fighting for his life. Perhaps the killer would go after Anthony if he—or she—thought Anthony had damaging information. She should have put him in protective custody instead of sending him off.

She rubbed her head. It was going to be a long night.

* * * * *

Anthony hid in bushes on the far side of the Davies house. Skye was in a grove of trees, but he could barely make out a glint of moonlight reflecting off the Bronco. He could, however, see the road. He needed to get into that house without Skye knowing, before the Davies women returned home. But first he had to break the spell protecting the cottage.

His cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He answered with a quiet, “Yes, Father.”

“Twelve-year-old Jeremiah Hatch found his parents murdered in their bed. Stabbed to death.”

“Did they catch the killer?”

“A drug addict claimed demons made him do it. He committed suicide his first night in jail.”

“And?”

“He choked on his own tongue. He’d apparently smuggled in a razor blade, severed his tongue, and attempted to swallow it.”

“A razor blade. Are American prisons that poorly monitored?”

“I doubt it.”

“Someone brought it to him. Forced him to do it.”

“That would be my guess.”

“And Jeremiah? Where was he during his parents’ murder?”

“Asleep. In his bed down the hall.”

“That would be enough to traumatize a child. Enough to be interested in demons.”

Silence.

“Father?”

“Maybe he was interested in demons before the murders,” Father Philip said quietly.

The realization hit Anthony hard and he swallowed. He heard a car on the highway.

“Pray, Father.”

Anthony hung up and walked the long way along the cliff to the back of the house. There was a twenty-five-meter open stretch. The moonlight decreased as filmy clouds moved rapidly overhead.

Thank you, Lord.

He ran low across the ground whispering the prayer he’d memorized off the tabernacle. The cliff moaned and the house swayed in front of him.

It was working.

He took out holy water and sprinkled it in front of him as he ran toward the back of the house. Steam rose from the ground where the blessed water fell. But it cleared his path and, aided by the Hebrew incantation, he reached the back of the house without pain. A swath of light cut across the house as he flattened against the back wall.

He used his tools to quietly break the rear window—a bedroom—and eased himself in, just as the side door opened down the hall.

* * * * *

Skye had a great hiding place, but she couldn’t see anyone approach the Davies cottage until the car was practically in the drive.

It was a dark Ford minivan, similar to the one Corinne Davies drove. She couldn’t make out the exact model or color, but it could easily have been the black Windstar registered to the elder Davies.

A plump female exited the driver’s seat. There was no porch light and Skye only made out her shape in the moonlight. Corinne Davies’s driver’s license had her at five foot six and two hundred pounds. It could have been her.

A shorter, slimmer woman exited from the sliding rear door. Her lithe frame reminded Skye of Lisa, the daughter. The woman appeared half clothed and limped to the side door. Skye frowned. Had she been assaulted?

“Okay, we’ll go and just talk. Take my lead. Watch them. If they poisoned those priests, we need to be cautious. No food or drink, don’t touch anything they hand you. Got it?”

“Yes.”

She was about to open her door when the sliding door of the minivan opened again and a man exited the car. She stared. She recognized the build, though she couldn’t see his face or features. He walked like Juan Martinez.

Why was he with them? Why hadn’t he called in? Didn’t he know she—and his wife and the entire sheriff’s department—were frantic? Maybe he’d found the younger Davies injured and brought them home. Why hadn’t he called in the assault?

Maybe it wasn’t Juan. Just someone who had the same short, lanky build.

She glanced at Reiner. He didn’t seem to think anything of the man. “Boyfriend?” he asked her. “Looks like he had his way with her while Mommy drove.”

Sick. Definitely not Juan Martinez.

She radioed in where she was and who she was interviewing, then left the Bronco.

A cold fog had crept in from the ocean. It hadn’t been there earlier in the evening, but seemed to roll in quickly as often happened on the Central Coast. Skye cut through the mist, the house fading behind the fog even as she approached.

The occupants still hadn’t turned on any lights, the porch was dark, but candles flickered behind the blinds.

The door opened before Skye raised her hand to knock. Skye couldn’t hide her surprise that Juan Martinez stood in front of her.

“Right on schedule,” he said.

Juan’s voice was flat, with a hint of humor.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

He turned to Reiner. “You can go.”

Reiner glanced at Skye, looking as confused as she felt.

Skye put her hand on her gun. Reiner attempted to follow suit, but froze.

His body shook as it rose from the ground. His head moved back and forth quickly, too quickly, and suddenly the snap of breaking bone filled the air, along with the sudden stench of sulfur.

Reiner collapsed on the porch, dead, eyes wide and full of fear.

Skye had her gun in hand, but suddenly her gun was on fire and her hand burned. She screamed in pain and surprise as the gun pulled itself from her grip and flew across the lawn, landing beyond her eyesight.

She turned to run but could not move.

“Come in, Skye. Let’s get this nasty business over with,” Juan said, arms open, palms up.

She stared at his hands. They were burned, but he didn’t seem to notice what looked like painful blisters.

What was happening? Reiner—her gun—Juan?

For the first time she believed. Everything Anthony had told her was the truth. And she'd sent him away.

"You've been making friends with the enemy," Juan said, "and you'll be the one to kill him."

Chapter 16

SKYE WAS A cop willing to stand against bad guys when necessary to save innocents, but she wasn't stupid.

Juan had no weapons she could see, but that didn't mean he wasn't armed. She dove to the right, toward two metal chairs. She toppled them, hoping they would provide her with a shield so she could jump off the porch and buy time to call for help.

She leaped over the railing like a horse, twisting her ankle as she fell to lower ground. She winced, knew it was sprained but not broken, and endured the pain as she ran limping in a zigzag pattern toward her Bronco.

She thumbed her lapel mic in Morse code, sending an SOS to her department.

Her radio broke under her thumb. The mic smoked around her neck and she pulled it off, coughing at the fumes.

Her chest tightened and she had no air. Maybe she'd broken her ribs when she fell and hadn't noticed. They didn't feel broken. Only tight. Tighter. She couldn't breathe.

She collapsed on the ground, gasping for air that would not fill her lungs.

"Foolish daughter of Eve," Juan said, standing over her. "You are alone. No one is coming to help you. No human can save you."

He picked her up as if she weighed but a feather. Her attempts to struggle left her fatigued.

"Juan, what happened to you? Why are you doing this?"

He laughed. And it was in his laugh that Skye knew this wasn't Juan. Not the Juan Martinez she'd worked with for eleven years. Not the Juan Martinez who stood by her when she'd been elevated to sheriff, when others in the department snubbed her.

This man looked like Juan, but he was possessed.

By something... evil.

By a demon.

Anthony, I'm so sorry I didn't believe you. Forgive me.

The demon in Juan chuckled as he walked up the porch steps. "Is it ready?"

"Yes, sire."

It was Corinne Davies who spoke, her eyes lit with excitement. Juan dumped Skye on the couch inside the door, which slammed shut behind them.

The dead bolt slid closed with a sharp metal click. Skye watched—no one touched the lock.

It. Moved. By. Itself.

She looked around the room, trying to contain her panic. She could think like a cop, but how could she reason with an entity that knew no human bounds? That not only didn't have a conscience, but had no soul?

The blinds were drawn tight. Candles burned on every available surface. Someone had carved odd symbols in the walls. Painted shapes on the hardwood floor. The symbol she'd seen at the mission had been burned into the back of the door.

Corinne Davies, late forties, overweight, wearing her long dark graying hair down, looked like the witch out of Hansel and Gretel. She glared at Skye with hateful eyes that seemed to glow, her lips parted as if she would bite. An image of Corinne and Lisa and Juan dancing and howling naked, wearing a jackal's head and hooves for feet, clouded her vision and Skye feared she was losing her mind.

Trapped in this room. Unable to move though no ropes bound her. These lunatics—as wild-eyed as her mother had been when she told Skye she was leaving—had controlled forces that no human should be able to control.

They'd brought evil into her town, and if she didn't end it here, more people would die.

She didn't want to die, but if that was the only way to stop them she would.

Lisa Davies sashayed into the room. She wore a long, see-through white gown and nothing underneath. "The bedroom window is broken."

Juan whirled at her. "So?"

"I don't know who might have come in."

"Didn't you do as I commanded? Protect the ground?"

"Of course—"

Juan closed his eyes, held up his burned hands. "No one is here." But his face twisted in pain. "He's fighting me. Prepare the ritual."

Juan sat cross-legged on the floor, in the middle of the painted symbol.

"What are you doing?" Skye demanded.

Corinne slapped her across the face and Skye tasted blood. Skye couldn't control her movements and the older woman easily pulled her up and dragged her into the circle with Juan.

"You drugged those innocent men," Skye said, spitting out the words, each one a chore as she fought to breathe. What were they planning on doing with her?

Skye focused on the older woman. "What did you hope to gain by killing those men?" she asked.

"I didn't kill anyone. They killed each other." Her face glowed with pleasure.

Skye said, "You poisoned them."

Corinne laughed, put her hand on Skye's neck and squeezed. "You have never experienced true power until you give up your soul. I have immortality. I will live forever. But you will die. The worms will eat your flesh, the earth will claim your bones. But I will dance on your grave in a hundred years!"

"Quiet!" Juan hissed.

He chanted under his breath in a language Skye had never heard, but it sounded vaguely like what Anthony had spoken earlier.

She had sent him away, ridiculed him, accused him of awful things, and yet something was going on here that only Anthony would understand. Only Anthony would be able to stop this...this evil.

Anthony, I'm sorry. I should have believed you. You were right. Forgive me.

"Juan, how could you do this to me? To Beth? Your girls are going to grow up knowing their father is a killer."

Juan's face wavered in front of her, as if a million bugs moved just beneath the skin. His brown eyes glowed red. Her stomach rolled and she nearly choked on her own bile.

"Shut up, human!"

A burning filled her from the inside out and her vision faded.

"Don't!" Lisa screamed. "We need her alive!"

Juan's fierce anger turned on Lisa. Her body flew against the wall, her feet inches from the ground, her mouth open to scream but no sound escaped.

Then she collapsed, gasping for breath.

"Get the knife, stupid girl," Corinne told her daughter. "Don't make him punish you."

"Yes, Mother," Lisa whispered hoarsely.

"What are you doing?" Skye whispered.

"Both Lisa and I are willing to give up our bodies. Jeremiah would have been better because of his experience in these matters. He's been a willing host before. But then Rafe Cooper somehow got out of his room before the ritual was complete. We lost Jeremiah."

"It was your fault," Juan said. "You didn't cast a strong enough shield. I told you Raphael was a threat!"

"I did exactly what Jeremiah told me," Corinne snapped.

"Then it's a good thing he's dead if he's that stupid."

Whatever internal battle waged within Juan, the other presence—the demon—appeared to have control again.

"Why didn't you just kill him?" Skye asked, her breath coming in short gasps. The room grew hotter and she began to sweat. She felt like she was breathing in a thick, hot mist.

Corinne frowned. "We planned on it, but he didn't eat the stew. He's a damn vegetarian! And he was already suspicious."

"You could have put him in the chapel," Skye said. "It was a massacre."

"He would have stopped the ritual."

"What I don't—" Skye took a deep breath, but it grew more difficult. She struggled to get free, but she'd been caged in an unbreakable, invisible bubble. "Why did you poison them for so long?"

"We had to put them in the right mind-set. Bring back their past. Show them their culpability, their guilt, their pain," Corinne said. "They were weakening. And then, when the time was right, we would have increased the dose and the result would have been the same, except that we'd have a greater reward. But that intruder nearly ruined everything. He had me removed from the mission." She smiled and glanced at Lisa. "I almost had him, too."

Skye closed her eyes. She was tired. Very tired. Her limbs felt heavy, and she found herself lying down in the circle.

Juan's chanting continued.

She had a million more questions, but couldn't find her voice. With great effort, Skye reached into her shirt and pulled out the cross Anthony had given her. She

recited the Latin phrase he had had her repeat the night before, her words a mere whisper.

Juan screamed in pain and every candle flared simultaneously.

Corinne grabbed the cross and jerked off the chain, breaking it and drawing blood across Skye's neck. She threw the cross into the fireplace and chanted something that sounded like no language Skye had ever heard. Corinne's hand was in flames and Lisa wrapped it with a blanket.

The fire behind her roared to life. Juan leaned over her prone body, looked down at her, his face full of broken blood vessels.

"I will not be defeated!"

His eyes glowed and his mouth opened in a deep roar that vibrated every cell in Skye's body.

Juan began to chant again, looking into her eyes. She couldn't draw her gaze away, as if someone held her lids open. Corinne and Lisa joined in the ritual. The heat in the room increased until sweat poured from Skye's body. The foul stench that had permeated Skye's own house that morning seeped in, filling her nostrils, her lungs, until she wasn't breathing air, but thick sulfur. Her eyes drooped; she was on the verge of passing out.

On the ceiling, over Juan's shoulder, she saw flames. Bright, hot, red. She saw eyes, everywhere eyes, glowing, howling, laughing, shrieking. She tried to scream but no sound came out.

Her father stood in front of her, consumed by fire.

You forgot me. You let me die.

No, Daddy! I loved you.

He ignited in front of her, his flesh turning black, falling off his bones, raining down on her.

She screamed.

Her mother—her beautiful, elegant mother—floated in the flames. Her face twisted, her cheeks hollow. Skye watched the fire dance in the large hole in her chest.

"Mom," Skye muttered, her voice distant, as if she was hearing a poor recording of herself.

I left because of you. I never wanted a child. You should never have been born.

She was so alone. Dead to the world. No one to love. No one who loved her.

They were going to burn her alive. The whole cottage was on fire and she was going to die...

...then she saw the knife in Lisa's hand.

Anthony. Help me.

* * * * *

Ianax had one common trait with every demon Anthony had encountered.

Arrogance.

Ianax couldn't sense him because in his arrogance he'd believed he'd taken care of Anthony by erecting a protective circle and making Skye doubt him. Ianax also had to battle to keep Juan's soul imprisoned, which consumed a huge amount of satanic energy.

Anthony knew exactly what the three were doing. They were destroying Skye from the inside out in preparation for the purging of Juan's soul to the netherworld. Juan was an unwilling host and fighting the possession, so they needed to weaken Skye so she wouldn't fight Ianax when he claimed her. If that failed, they would sacrifice her.

Skye had been worn down to raw nerves, her grief and guilt and loneliness being used to destroy her.

Anthony. Help me.

Anthony heard Skye's plea, didn't know if she had screamed it or thought it. He peered from his hiding place into the living room where the demonic ritual was unfolding. Skye writhed on the floor as if in pain, but nothing was touching her. Skye's eyes were wild, unseeing—at least not seeing what was in front of her. Something was scaring her, something that made her believe. Believe in him. And that was all Anthony needed.

Juan and the Davies women stood over Skye, chanting, drawing out her soul.

Corinne's speech to Skye made sense to Anthony. The two women and Hatch had summoned Ianax, and had he successfully possessed Hatch's body, the demon would have been far more powerful on earth. He would have finished the ritual and dragged the other souls down to Hell. A huge victory for Satan to have God's own men in his domain, and as a reward Ianax would walk on earth in human form but with inhuman power, the goal of every demon.

But Rafe had interrupted the process, possibly begun an exorcism, and Hatch died before the possession was complete, his soul already damned. And Rafe—

Anthony remembered the rush of heat followed by icy cold when he'd entered the chapel and saw the carnage.

Rafe was unconscious; he would have been a perfect vessel for the demon. Tortured, unable to save his men. Guilt had consumed him. Ianax could have taken him, used his anguish against him, but Anthony had interrupted.

Where had the women been?

In the sacristy.

He hadn't searched the chapel, he'd been so intent on saving Rafe.

He could have stopped it two days ago. But he'd been blind in his own fear and failures. And now Skye was going to die because of him.

No. He shook his head. *I will not let her die.*

He brought out his dagger-cross and held it in front of him as he said in a loud, deep voice, "By the power of the heavens, of the Holy Spirit, by the order of Saint Michael and all the angels and saints, Ianax! You are dismissed!"

The demon in Juan screamed. Corinne stepped toward Skye while Lisa jumped at Anthony with her long nails outstretched.

Anthony pushed aside all notions that hitting a woman was wrong, and put all his strength into a right hook that stopped Lisa in her tracks. The girl crumpled at his feet, knocked cold.

"Bastard!" Corinne screamed, holding a knife at Skye's neck, crouched over her like a wild animal. Skye was sweating profusely, her body jerking as if being poked and prodded.

She's dying.

"Fight, Skye!" he shouted.

Corinne couldn't kill Skye because Ianax needed her.

Anthony hoped he was right. He hadn't faced such an ancient demon, nor one who was so powerful that he could survive on earth without a body, which he'd done for hours after Hatch's death.

Anthony held his cross high, chanting ancient words of exorcism.

Juan twisted, his body rising from the ground. The demon stared at Anthony.

"YOU!" he howled, his mouth straining. "I will not go back!"

The screech hurt Anthony's ears, but he continued. The demon held up his hand and Anthony was slammed against the wall, his body inches from the ground. Pain hit him like a million pinpricks. He couldn't draw air into his lungs.

Skye was pinned to the floor but looked right at him.

In her eyes, Anthony saw her pain and love and loneliness and, mostly, her trust.

Suddenly she screamed, "*NO!*" as her body arched in pain.

The demon's hold on Anthony slipped. Anthony pushed back from the wall. Corinne grabbed Skye's hair, held the knife to her throat.

The demon's horrid face could be seen in Juan as he touched Skye. "Blood for my Master and two souls."

Corinne brought the knife up and, chanting with the demon, aimed the tip for Skye's heart.

Anthony tackled Corinne, threw her from the circle. The tip of the knife sliced his side. He grabbed her wrist, slammed it against the edge of a low table, hearing the bone crack.

The smell of smoke grew. In the struggle, candles fell and both the couch and the curtains ignited.

Anthony grabbed the knife and pulled from his belt a vial of holy water from the river Jordan. He poured the water on the knife; steam rose and the knife burned his hand. It was a demonic knife, one used in many deadly rituals.

And very likely one of the knives used in the massacre at the mission.

Anthony had one chance.

The demon grabbed Skye and held her to him. Her face twisted in pain. She struggled to breathe.

Anthony glanced to Skye's right. She blinked once.

He raised the knife. "Let her go, Ianax!"

An unnatural voice rose from Juan's throat. "Mine."

Anthony felt his chest tighten. He threw the knife at the same time as Skye pivoted right. The demon's hold on her was tight and she couldn't get away. The fire grew around them, feeding on the fuel that was the house.

The knife missed her by an inch, landing exactly where Anthony aimed in Juan's thigh.

The demon screeched, his head thrown back, and Skye fell to the floor. Thick black smoke shot out of Juan's mouth, up to the ceiling, then with a shriek that made Anthony's ears ring, the demon disappeared through the fire.

He would be back. Anthony had to get them out of the house.

"What have you done?" Corinne shouted.

As soon as the demon was gone, Skye could breathe. But the smoke was thick, the fire hot. She crawled over to Juan's prone body.

“Juan!” she cried. The knife was in his leg and she knew it would be even more dangerous to attempt to remove it now.

“We have to get out now,” Anthony said, staggering toward her.

Blood soaked through the side of his shirt.

The ceiling began to collapse around them. Skye stood unsteadily, grabbed Juan under his arms, and dragged him toward the door.

Corinne blocked the door. “You will die with us!” she said. “And I’ll drag all your souls down to Hell!”

Anthony lunged at her, knocked her to the side. They fought and Anthony shouted, “Get out, Skye!”

Skye couldn’t leave Anthony. But Juan was unconscious.

She struggled to open the door, an ungodly scream echoing around them in the night sky. Coughing out smoke and taking in as much air as possible, she dragged Juan off the porch.

The house was engulfed in flames. She couldn’t see the sky through the smoke, but something looked off. The fire itself was red, the flames dense. The house seemed to be shrinking in front of her.

Anthony.

She ran up the steps and through the open door. Anthony was lying on the floor, unmoving. *No, no, no!* He’d saved her life. Again. She wasn’t going to let him die, not when she had so much to tell him.

It took all her strength to drag him out. The smoke weakened her, the fire burned her skin. She glanced at Corinne Davies, unconscious. She couldn’t see her daughter Lisa through the smoke, on the far side of the living room.

She couldn’t save them. She didn’t even know if she could save Anthony and herself.

“You are mine!”

The flames danced and whispered, a cacophony of heat and flames and burning wood and falling timber, but all Skye heard was the call of the demon.

“You are mine. You are mine. You are mine.”

Skye didn’t stop. She used strength she didn’t know she had to drag Anthony from the burning house. The porch collapsed as they crossed it, and Skye rolled down the stairs with Anthony. He grunted when they landed on the sandy soil.

“Anthony!” She crawled away, dragging him, feeling the house pulling her back. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the face of evil in the flames as an inhuman scream echoed through the night.

With a deafening roar, the house collapsed into itself, and nothing but the smoldering foundation remained.

Sirens pierced the air. “Anthony, Anthony, talk to me,” Skye whispered, her voice hoarse and dry from the smoke.

“Skye,” he murmured. “My Skye.”

She cried with relief. She kissed him, her hand touching his chest.

The blood.

She ripped open his shirt. A deep cut sliced open his lower abdomen. He’d lost so much blood already. It coated his shirt, her fingers. She pressed her hands on the wound, but it didn’t stop the bleeding.

“No, no!” She couldn’t lose him. “I’m sorry.”

“Do. You. Trust me?” His speech was labored.

“Yes, of course. I’m so sorry I didn’t believe—”

“Water in my pocket.”

“I don’t—”

“Hurry.”

She reached into his pockets. In one was a plastic bottle half full of a clear liquid. Water?

“Pour it. On the wound.”

“I don’t think—”

“Trust, my Skye.” He coughed.

Hands shaking, she unscrewed the cap. She smelled the liquid. Nothing.

She poured it over his wound. Before her eyes, the wound stopped bleeding. It seemed to...shrink.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

He reached for her, pulled her into the nook of his arm. “My faith, your trust.”

She relaxed in his arms. The sirens were closer, the lights of the rescue vehicles cutting across the cliff where the Davies house used to stand.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered.

“Never.”

She took his hand in hers, brought it to her lips. “I thought I’d lost you. I’m so alone, Anthony.”

“Not anymore.”

She turned her head, looked at his face. “What is this, Anthony? I feel complete. With you.”

He smiled. “We’re complete together. I love you, Skye.”

“You live in Italy.”

“I live with you.”

Realization hit her, but she didn’t want to believe. Didn’t want to be hurt. “But your life—”

He kissed the top of her head. “My life is with you. My soul belongs to you while I walk this earth. I am what I am, warts and all, but I am a man who believes in fate, a man who believes I came here for a reason. To save you.”

He kissed her again, his lips stealing her loneliness.

“I was a lonely man,” he whispered in her ear. “Until I saw you.”

Skye had never felt truly at peace, until now, lying in the nook of Anthony’s arm, being held, and holding.

Maybe, maybe she could believe in love.

Chapter 17

One week later

SKYE WATCHED ANTHONY from afar. He stood in the middle of the rubble that had been the Santa Louisa de Los Padres Mission. His dark hair was pulled back

into a leather band, his white shirt billowed in the wind, and his hands were outstretched.

He was the most beautiful creature who had ever walked on earth, and the knowledge that he was *hers*, that he loved her, that he wasn't going to leave, had finally sunk in.

She'd had a lot of work this past week, rarely saw him, but he waited for her at her house each night. He made love to her with passion and tenderness, heat and softness, showing her a love she had not believed existed. Because Anthony was in her bed and in her heart, she could put aside the questions from her colleagues, the lawyers, the threats of lawsuits by Corinne Davies's surviving family in Oregon, the forensic evidence that was still a puzzle because—except for Rod Fielding—she'd told no one about the demon, or her belief that supernatural forces were responsible for so much of the destruction.

As far as the public was concerned, Corrine and Lisa Davies had worked in conjunction with Jeremiah Hatch to poison the reclusive Santa Louisa priests until they committed suicide. The press had implied that it was a Catholic hate crime aimed specifically at the mission, and Skye did nothing to dissuade the rumors.

But there were still so many questions and evidence to sort through. Fielding and his team were scouring the ashes at the Davies house to identify remains. And even though Skye had heard the motive out of Corrine Davies's own mouth—immortality—she had a difficult time accepting it. Without Anthony by her side, she would have believed everything she'd seen had been caused by drugs. But her eyes hadn't deceived her.

With Anthony, she would not only survive but heal. She hoped Juan could as well. A very weak Juan had finally been released from the hospital that morning. He remembered everything that had happened, was tortured by his actions.

"It was the demon." She had finally said it. And believed. She had seen the face of evil, and doubting Thomas was no more.

Juan still tortured himself. Anthony was talking with him daily. If anyone could help Juan, it was Anthony.

The funeral for the priests had been that morning, and Anthony and Skye were the last to leave. Anthony had insisted that the men, except Jeremiah Hatch, be buried at the mission. No one argued. Hatch's body had been shipped overseas, for what purpose Skye didn't know.

Anthony saw her watching him and waved. She stepped over the stones, to the rose garden that had—miraculously—been spared in the fire. Something else unexplainable that Skye was beginning to simply accept as part of her new life.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

"The demon didn't get their souls, but I don't know if they are at peace."

"I'm sorry." She didn't know what Anthony meant exactly, but he was upset and that, in turn, saddened her.

"They may have a message, but they're not sharing with me."

"Like ghosts?"

He shrugged. "I should be grateful they're not in Hell."

She leaned up and kissed him. "You did everything you could."

"Not everything."

He was thinking about his friend Rafe Cooper. “The doctors said there’s nothing physical keeping him from making a recovery,” she said.

“I thought—I thought when Ianax was destroyed that Rafe would come out of the coma.”

She touched his handsome face, her finger gliding over the dark stone in his ear. “You did everything you could.”

“It wasn’t enough.”

“He’ll recover. Have faith, Anthony.”

He opened his mouth, closed it. Smiled. “I love you, Skye.”

“I love you, too, Anthony Zaccardi.”

He pulled her to him. “I spoke with Father Philip earlier. He’s going to convince the historical preservation committee at the Vatican that I need to oversee the rebuilding of the mission.”

“You’re going to rebuild?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll need to stay in town.”

“I don’t have a place to live. I suppose I could go back to the inn.” His mouth turned up in a half grin.

She kissed him. “You already have a place to stay. As long as you want.”

He rubbed her back, ran a hand through her hair. Made her feel warm and loved and whole for the first time in her life.

“Is forever too long?” he murmured into her lips.

