

The Pledge

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Chapter 1

Jack O'Connor was supposed to be working, sort of. Jack was supposed to be doing many things of late, and none of them seemed to get past the 'sort of' stage. His house, which was also his place of work, was still littered with boxes, packing crates, and bagged items even though he'd lived there for two months now. In that respect, even the move had only been 'sort of' too. Before that, Jack had sort of lived in a two bedroomed flat, which he hated. Before that he'd lived in another house that he'd never felt comfortable in, because of it's close proximity to the house he'd lived in prior to that. That had been twelve months ago and Jack had sort of floated along ever since. He looked at the pictures on his computer screen and smiled. Yes, he'd liked that house very much indeed. It was a big, three story building, much like the one he'd sort of moved into now, both had four bedrooms and five downstairs rooms. The only thing that was in the first house that wasn't in the current house was Lynne. She was so beautiful and she looked so happy on those pictures. Jack had only ever seen hair like Lynne's in magazines, but Lynne's was natural red, flame red.

"It's nice here, baby." He smiled at the screen. "I couldn't stay in the town, I know you understand that. I need a clean break to get a grip on my senses. Work's doing quite well, or at least it will if I ever get round to doing some. It's quiet here and the natives seem friendly. I've not heard even a whiff of trouble at all." Jack sighed loudly and poured himself a drink. "I'm putting all these pictures on disc, sweetheart. You'd have told me to do it months ago." He slid a CD into the drive. "I love you, Lynne." Jack watched the little arrows moving across his monitor as his memories were moved into storage.

"Dad?" A mop of flame red hair poked round the office door. "I did knock."

"Hey, Slogger." Jack held out his arm for his seven year old son, Alex. Alex was a walking tribute to Lynne in every respect except gender. He was exactly like her, something that Jack would be grateful for as long as he lived. "Aren't you supposed to be in bed?"

"I came down for a drink. Mrs. Wilson forgot to leave me some milk by my bed." Alex scrambled onto his dad's knee. He loved this room simply because he wasn't usually allowed in it. No one was, not even their housekeeper-come-child minder-come-godsend, Mrs. Wilson. "Are you hacking?"

"Alex!" Jack burst out laughing. "I don't hack! Where did you hear about hacking?"

"I told my teacher at school that you got into other peoples' computers from home and Gary Towers said you were a hacker. He's my best friend now because he thinks that's so cool." Alex said proudly.

"Well I'm pleased your friends think I'm cool, but I'm not a hacker. That's against the law." Jack laughed again. "I'm a systems analyst and anyone's computer I get into is with their full and written permission. Yes?"

"Nah. Hacker sounds cooler." Alex shrugged. "Dad, why are you deleting mum's pictures?"

"Huh? Oh! Oh Alex I'm not." Jack smiled and hugged his son. "I'd never do that. I'm burning them onto disc so we'll have them forever and we can look at them any time we want to. See?" He

showed Alex the flashing lights on the disc drive. "I'd never delete them."

"I miss her." Alex said, watching the arrows.

"I do too." Jack kissed the top of Alex's head.

"I think it's a good idea putting them on disc, dad." Alex nodded. "It makes you sad when you see them."

"Is that why the one in your room is overturned? You think it was making me sad?" Alex nodded. "There's no need to do that. Of course I get sad sometimes, just like you do, but I'm not sad all the time now, you aren't either. I bet we're the same." Jack nodded conspiratorially at Alex.

"Same how?"

"I bet you remember all the fun we had with mum. All the nice things and the happy things. I know I do." Jack nodded and smiled.

"I do, yes. Like when she climbed up that tree and got stuck. The sad bits don't hurt as much now. Is that right?" Alex asked.

"Exactly right. What about when she crawled in the hole after your ball? She got stuck in there too!" Jack laughed with Alex.

"And when she hit you in the belly with the cricket ball"

"Ouch! Hmm not so funny." Jack ruffled his son's hair. It hadn't been his belly she'd hit with the damned thing. "Come on, I'll get your milk."

"Mrs Wilson says if she falls over another box she's going to stuff you in one." Alex smirked.

"Oo! She just might too. I'll empty the ones in the sitting room tomorrow, for definite. I don't want told off by Mrs Wilson again." Jack said grimly, carrying Alex's glass of milk. Alex bounded upstairs ahead of him and ran into his room. "See? No boxes in here."

"No they're all in your room. Can we go to the park tomorrow after I finish school? Gary says his nan is taking him and we can play football if I'm there."

"That sounds like a great idea." Jack nodded. "Isn't Gary Towers the one you were fighting with last week?"

"Yes but we don't now. We were only fighting because Dawn Scott was being a nuisance. She said she was going to sit with me in maths, then she went and sat with Gary. Then she sat with me in English and Gary got all windy about it when I told her to go away." Alex said seriously.

"Fighting over women at your age?" Jack laughed at the serious expression on his seven year old's face.

"Pfft. No chance." Alex pulled a face. "I'm never going to have a girlfriend, dad, they're hard work. I'll just have boyfriends."

"Er ... I know what you mean." Jack tucked his son into bed. "Sleep. You'll be as crabby as an old goat tomorrow if you're tired." He watched Alex snuggling down into bed. Jack was very, very

proud of Alex. He'd handled the whole, nightmare situation of Lynne's death far better than Jack had. His young, simple and open understanding had been a great comfort to Jack, and had helped him come to terms with it himself. Twelve months wasn't a long time, and Alex was a credit to himself, as well as to Jack. "Night Slogger."

Jack was just about to hole himself up in his office again, when the front door bell rang. He glanced in irritation at the clock. Nine thirty. He didn't usually like being disturbed after nine o' clock in case it disturbed Alex too.

"Greg!" Greg Moore was an exception. Greg had got Jack his first job in computers and he'd been a good friend for many years. "Come in! No Hilary?" Hilary being Greg's lovely wife.

"No she's back home. I'm on a course in the city, starting tomorrow. I couldn't *not* call in on you. Sorry it's late, I got lost. That pissing sat-nav sent me all over the place. Stupid thing." Greg took off his coat.

"No worries. I wasn't doing anything." Jack showed his friend into the sitting room. "Er ... as you can see." He pushed a box of curtains on to the floor so Greg could sit down.

"How's Alex?"

"He's fine. He loves his new school and he's made quite a few friends." Jack nodded.

"More than you have, I bet. You bloody hermit." Greg lit a cigarette.

"Who are you? My mother?" Jack laughed. "I'm doing very well, thank you very much."

"No more phone calls? Hilary was really worried." Greg said in concern.

"No, they seemed to have eased up." Jack sighed. "I still feel a bit torn over that, Greg. It just seems a bit petty, especially now. I wish Lynne had had the chance to sort all that."

"Yes it's a shame." Greg agreed. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I should ask Alex, I suppose. Is he old enough to decide things at seven?" Jack chewed his lip. "I think it just got left, Greg. The longer it got left, the harder it was to forgive and forget. It wasn't exactly a great tragedy was it? And they are his grandparents, the only ones he has." Alex had only been a few months old and Lynne's parents were looking after him. He'd somehow rolled off the couch and landed on an empty glass, resulting in two curved cuts on his chest. They hadn't even needed stitches, although they had left a faint silver scar that was still visible seven years later. Jack fully understood that it could have been far worse and they were lucky Alex's face, or eyes, hadn't been injured, but he also understood that it had been no one's fault, an accident. Lynne had hit the roof, big style. Jack understood that too, she was his mother, but Lynne hit the roof and never came down from it. She'd gone ballistic with her mother and father and flatly refused to let them see Alex again. Obviously they attended Lynne's funeral and that was the first time they'd seen Jack and Alex since the day of Alex's accident. Jack just hadn't know what to do when Joan and Robert asked to be part of Alex's life again. Lynne had spent six years actively and firmly keeping them out of it. He'd tried to explain how painfully awkward the situation was for him, and he'd still not made any decisions to that day. Joan and Robert had eventually stopped phoning and Jack was rather relieved, even though he felt slightly ashamed of himself for feeling that.

"Just take it as it comes, Jack." Greg advised. "Maybe asking Alex, if they get in touch again, would be a good move."

"I'll see what happens." Jack smiled.

"So what are the neighbours like?" Greg asked.

"Yes I'm a hermit. You've made your point." Jack went for two beers.

"I bet you've never been out of the house socially, since you got here." Greg sniffed.

"No but that's because I've been busy." Jack protested.

"Yes I can tell." Greg put his feet on a packing crate.

"I meant with Alex, and I do work from here too, remember?" Jack laughed, then looked surprised when the doorbell rang again. "Who the hell's that at this time of night? Excuse me, Greg." Off he went to answer it. A tall, dark, elegant woman dressed in a black skirt and a smart jacket was standing on his step. Jack immediately thought her to be a prospective customer, judging by her smart clothes. "I'm sorry, miss, the computer systems aren't running after 6pm." He reached for a business card off the hall table. "If you call me back tomorr ..."

"Lavinia Stark." The woman interrupted, holding out her perfectly manicured hand for him to shake. "May I?"

"Well actually my son's ... sure go right ahead." Ms Stark breezed past Jack anyway. "This is a friend of mine, Greg Towers. Like I was saying, Ms Stark, I can't start up the systems until tomorrow. I can give you an appointment ..."

"I don't need an appointment." Lavinia smiled.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I presumed that you were a business lady in need of my professional services." Jack apologised.

"Myself and a group of friends would like to invite you to dinner, Mr O'Connor."

"Huh?" Jack was a bit surprised. "That's very generous of you, Ms Stark, but I'll have to decline."

"Decline? I'm sure Mrs Wilson can cope with your son for a few hours." Lavinia said casually.

"Yes, I'm sure she could too." Jack said sharply. Who on Earth was this having an opinion on Alex's childcare? "Pardon my saying, Ms Stark, But I don't actually need a reason to decline an invitation."

"No, of course not. Forgive me." Lavinia said graciously. "I meant that I do understand how difficult it is trying to get trusted child minders, especially when you're new to the area."

"Well I've never had reason to try. Mrs Wilson suits our needs just fine. Do you have children?"

"Me? No." Lavinia smiled. "As much as I adore them, I don't think my maternal streak is as capable as some of my fellow females."

"They're OK if you can give them back." Greg commented. "I hear you loud and clear, ma'am."

"Ah you'll have a houseful soon, Greg." Jack laughed.

“No chance. Yes, he'll go to dinner with you and your friends, Ms Stark. Don't take no for an answer. He's a recluse!” Greg sniffed.

“Greg, I have a lot of work to do, and I have to think of Alex too.”

“Bah! Even if Mrs Wilson isn't up for an evening shift, I am. I'm only staying a thirty minute drive away. Me and Alex can unpack some of your junk here.” Greg nodded.

“You really will be made very welcome.” Lavinia contributed.

“OK. I'd love to go.” Jack said eventually.

“Excellent!” Lavinia beamed. “We use the top room above the Sail Makers Arms. You know it?”

“I know where it is, yes.” Jack nodded.

“Splendid. I must be off. Goodnight to you Jack, and to you too, Mr Towers.” Jack let Lavinia out of the front door.

“Big mouth.” He said, returning to the sitting room.

“Oh get off.” Greg tutted. “I know you like your own company but get a life will you? So who was that? You sly dog.”

“I've no idea.” Jack shrugged. “Lavinia Stark, obviously. I've never seen her before. There again I haven't taken much notice of people outside of Alex's school teachers.”

“She seems like a nice lady.” Greg observed. “Classy too.”

“And so not my type, it's unreal.” Jack rolled his eyes. “Pack it in, cupid. So you babysitting? I know Mrs Wilson wouldn't mind, but I also know she likes to get home to her other half at a decent time.”

“I'd love to. Me and Alex have a good laugh.” Greg said. “Seriously, Jack, you have a good job, great home and the best kid in the world, but you need adults. I mean ordinary friends, I'm not trying to get you fixed up.”

“I know, you're right.” Jack sighed. “I don't want you thinking I'm sitting moping though, because I'm not. I got passed the moping stage months ago. There's just so much to do here and I don't know what to concentrate on first.” Jack laughed.

“I know you aren't moping.” Greg stood up and reached for his coat, Jack opened the sitting room door.

“Give my best to Hilary.” He opened the front door too and peered out into the pouring rain. “Ugh, it's pissing down.”

“I'm only parked up the street.” Greg pulled up his collar. “I'll give you a call tomorrow.” He hurried off down the road. Jack went to close the door, then opened it again. A young woman was standing on the opposite side of the street looking straight at him, or at the front door at least. Her head was uncovered and her long, flat hair clung to her face and denim jacket as the rain soaked

through it. She pushed a sodden clump of it behind her ear, then walked off in the opposite direction to Greg. Jack shrugged his shoulders and closed the door.

Chapter 2

Jack sat in his car outside the school gates and waited for Alex. The rain had poured itself out during the night and most of the morning, now the sun was glowing brightly. Jack rolled down the window to let in a bit of air and a flat, heavy jawed face appeared next to him, almost making him jump out of his skin.

“Mr O'Connor.” The broad faced woman said.

“Yes.” Jack answered uncertainly.

“Denise Williams.” A heavy hand appeared through the window for Jack to shake. “I'm so pleased you're joining us for dinner tonight.”

“Oh yes.” Jack smiled. “So you're a friend of Ms Stark's?”

“We're all friends together here, Mr O'Connor.” Denise smiled. “And here's Master O'Connor.” Alex was hovering about behind Mrs Williams.

“Hello.” He said politely, opening the back door of the car.

“I'll see you at dinner.” Jack smiled and started the car.

“Me and uncle Greg are going to make a model. He's going to buy me one especially from the shop on Topp's Lane. I'll remember to say thanks when I see him. How come you're going to dinner with Stacy Williams' mum? Her dad's a policeman.”

“Is he? Oh well it's not just Mrs Williams, there are a few people going. The person who invited me is called Ms Stark. You know her? I didn't recognise her at all.” Jack said, over his shoulder.

“I don't remember anyone called Stark in school. I think Gary's mum's going too, that's why he's with his nan after school. Gary doesn't have a dad.” Alex said.

“So it's quite nice to have these evenings out for grown-ups, don't you think? I mean, you see Gary every day in school, us oldsters are just cooped up at home all day.” Jack smiled and parked the car.

“Are you old? You don't look old like Mrs Williams.” Alex complimented, getting out of the car.

“Um Alex? That's quite rude, you know, saying someone looks old. Especially a lady.” Jack tried not to smirk.

“Oh sorry. I didn't know.” Alex held Jack's hand while they crossed the road. “So are you old like her?”

“Well I've no idea how old she is and like I said, it would be rude to ask. I'm thirty remember? You made me a card with a three and a zero. Thirty.”

“Maybe Mrs Williams has another zero on the end. Gary! Dad, there's Gary! Can I go and play football?” Alex jumped up and down.

“Yep! Go for it. Keep out of the way of the swings.” Jack let go of his son's hand and Alex sped off in the direction of his friend, Gary, who was in the company of his grandmother. Jack tried not to groan out loud when he saw the said grandmother headed for the bench he was sitting on.

“Mr O'Connor?”

“Yes. Hello.” Jack stood up. “Gary's nana?”

“Ruth Baxter.” The senior citizen sat herself down on the bench. “I believe you're off to the Sail Makers tonight?”

“Well yes, yes I am.” Jack said in surprise. Had it been on the news or something? “Mrs Baxter, is it a big event? I mean, is it a special occasion of some sort? I think I may have misunderstood. I presumed it was just a friendly, informal dinner type of thing.”

“Oh it'll be friendly, don't worry.” Ruth smiled.

“Alex tells me Gary's mum's going too, and Mr and Mrs Williams, that's why I asked if it was special occasion. I wouldn't want to be out of place.” Jack explained.

“Oh pish.” Ruth laughed. “Yes, Jilly's going too. Quite a few in the area are.”

“And you're babysitting young Gary. He's a fine little lad, Mrs Baxter.” Jack smiled.

“Thank you. Yes he is, and spoiled rotten. My husband isn't one for socialising, we love having Gary with us. Arthur had a mild heart attack a few years ago. He takes it easy these days.” Ruth took a bag of crumbs from her bag and began to feed the birds. “I hope I'm not being too pushy here, but if you're ever stuck for a sitter, I'd be glad to help out. Gary told us you were a widower. I'm sorry.”

“No need to apologise.” Jack smiled. “That's very kind of you, I'll remember that. Yes, Alex's mother died a year ago.”

“Oh my. That's so sad. I must say, the lad's doing remarkably well.” Ruth nodded towards the children.

“Yes he is. I'm very proud of him.”

“They're a lot stronger than us, are kids. It was different for Gary and his missing parent, he never knew him. It hasn't knocked him back having just Jilly.”

“You're right. They just get on with it eh?” Jack smiled. He loved talking about his son to anyone at all. “Mrs Baxter?” The older lady was looking at the trees to the left of where the boys were playing. “Are you OK?”

“What? Yes of course I am.” Ruth said brightly. Jack looked over to the trees too and caught a glimpse of denim and long blond hair vanishing behind the ice-cream van. Was that the girl who'd been outside his house? “Some of the older kids are too rough if you don't watch them.” Ruth continued.

“Yes.” Jack frowned. He was almost certain that wasn't a kid. “Wasn't ...”

“Ruth! Did you ... oh.” A man of around Jack's age came running up behind them, then saw Jack.

“Yes, it's fine.” Ruth smiled. “Dan this is Mr O'Connor, Alex's dad. This is Dan Wells who runs the newsagents.” Ruth introduced the two men.

“Afternoon.” Dan nodded. “Ruth, if Lavinia ...”

“Oh nevermind that, Dan.” Ruth wafted her hand at the shopkeeper.

“Lavinia Stark?” Jack butted in. “She was the one who invited me to dinner tonight. Is everything OK?”

“Everything's fine, Mr O'Connor.” Ruth smiled. “Dan's one of the organizers of these sorts of things. He always gets a bit jittery beforehand. Can I have a word please, Dan? It's about the charity fund raiser next month. Excuse us please, Mr O'Connor.”

“No worries.” Jack nodded. “I'll go get the boys an ice-cream.” He wandered over to the van and bypassed the queue completely in order to peep round the back of the vehicle. Trees, and nothing more. Jack told himself to get off the paranoia kick and went to queue for ice-creams.

Back at home, Jack was getting a shave, while running Alex's bath. He was rapidly going off the idea of this dinner. It seemed like the whole district was going to be there and it also seemed like they'd all been told individually that Jack was going.

“And why would they do that?” He sneered at his reflection. “You arrogant sod. Alex! Bath's ready!” He turned off the taps and resumed his shave.

“Dad, will this go soggy?” Alex had a white leather lace round his neck. On the end of the lace was a white, inch long cylinder. On closer inspection, Jack saw it was a miniature candle, that had been lit at sometime, and it was wrapped tightly in white, silk thread.

“Where did you get this? What is it?”

“I found it in the park. It's nice, isn't it?” Alex lifted the lace over his head. “Gary wanted it too, but if you look between the threads it says AOC on it.” Jack took the pendant and had a look for himself. AOC was etched into the wax. Alex O'Connor.

“And you just found this? It's very unusual.”

“It was next to the stones we were using for goalposts. Is it valuable, dad? Maybe I should have said something. Should we take it to the police?” Alex said seriously and Jack smiled.

“Well I can't see why you shouldn't keep it. There aren't many AOCs around are there?” Jack heard the front door bell ringing. “That'll be Greg. You have a nice time while I'm out, Alex, be good for uncle Greg.” Alex nodded. “I'm coming, Mrs Wilson!”

Jack walked the fifteen minute journey to the Sailmakers Arms. He almost turned around and left again when he saw the car-park packed with vehicles.

“Mr O'Connor!” Jack vaguely recognised the couple getting out of their, as parents from the school. “Doug and Kath Ball. Remember?” Mrs Ball smiled.

“Yes of course.” Jack forced a smile. “I hate my awful memory. Well I suppose we'd better be getting inside.” He looked like that was the last thing he really wanted to do. Jack bypassed the crowded bar altogether and headed straight for the thick, carpeted stairs that lead to the upstairs function room.

“Just keep her out! It's not hard, for crying out loud, Eric!”

“Well with all respects, Lady Lavinia, yes it is.” A man's voice replied. Lady Lavinia? She was titled? “I can't keep her out if she doesn't want kept out.”

“Damn this place!” Lavinia rasped. “If I ever find out who the big mouth is ...”

“Oh come on, she was bound to find out.” Eric sighed. Jack pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. This sounded like some extra-marital affair type thing to him, and therefore not something he should be hearing. He purposely scuffed his shoe against the skirting board a few times to let the couple know he was approaching.”

“Jack! It's lovely to see you again.” Lavinia swept over and grasped Jack's hand. “I've sat you next to Eric and myself. I wasn't sure how many of the others you'd actually met.”

“Just a few.” Jack looked round the dining room. Around fifty people were in there, some he recognised, most he didn't.

“Oh I'm sure you'll soon get to know us all. Barrymore? Could you bring Mr O'Connor a drink please?” Lavinia smiled.

“Just a beer, please.” Jack said awkwardly. This really wasn't his scene at all. He'd have been a lot more comfortable in the bar downstairs, with a bag of fish and chips on the way home. Having said that, he was extremely impressed with the three course dinner that was served. It was superb and it had been a very long time since Jack had eaten as well as that. Lady Lavinia was quite a charming host, including Jack in polite conversation all the way through the meal. He rested back in his chair, feeling as stuffed as a pig, while the waiters cleared away the table. One of them went to remove the cloth and Lavinia almost slammed her hand through the table, holding it in place. Jack jumped a foot in the air at the slam.

“You know these tables are horribly ... scratched ... Davis.” She smiled nastily at the man. “Are you trying to embarrass me in front of my guests?”

“No, Lady Lavinia, of course not.” The waiter looked terrified of losing his job. “Force of habit. Please pardon my forgetfulness. My apologies, sir.”

“Oh it's fine. Don't worry about it.” Jack shrugged. “Lovely meal, by the way.” He loosened off his top button and stifled a yawn. “Oh please excuse me. I was up early this morning.” Jack apologised when he saw Lavinia watching him. “That fantastic meal has certainly set up the inertia.”

“Busy man. Barrymore, another drink for Mr O'Connor, please.”

“No, that's fine.” Jack shook his head. “Really, I'll be keeling over on you.” He was actually a bit surprised at the wave of fatigue that had crept up on him. He simply wasn't used to being out and about like this. Usually, if he was tired, he oafed about in his home.

“Oh piffle.” Lavinia smiled. “You really need to chill a bit.”

“So people keep telling me.” Jack rubbed his eyes. “Actually, I don't feel too well.” He squinted up to see a wall of faces watching him in concern. “Dizzy. I think I need some fresh air.”

“Do you want me to help you?”

“Help ... ugh ...” Jack held his head in his hands to try and stop everything from spinning.

“Help with the dizziness.” Lavinia took a pendant from her purse and opened it. Inside, there was a tiny, purple stoned stud.

“Hey! No ... no thank you.” Jack slurred, swatting Lavinia's hand away from his ear. “I don't have it pierced, for one thing.” His head reeled and everyone's faces blurred into a mist.

“No?” Lavinia looked at Eric in surprise. “How?” Eric shrugged in confusion. Lavinia grit her teeth and walked to the front of the table so she was standing opposite Jack. She closed her eyes and ran her fingers over the cloth. Jack tried to focus on her to stop himself from blacking out completely. Lavinia suddenly opened her eyes and glared straight at Jack. “Put in the earring.” She growled softly.

“Huh? Are you nuts?” Jack screwed up his eyes. “I'm leaving.” He tried to stand up and grabbed at the table for support, dragging the cloth off onto his lap as he fell back down heavily onto his chair. “Wha ... wha ...” Patterns and sprawling sigils had been burned into the table in front of him. Even if Jack's head hadn't been befuddled, he still wouldn't could have understood them. The patterns began to smoulder before Jack's eyes and he was vaguely aware of an astonished murmur rippling around the room. “Your table's on fire.” He slurred.

“Damn you!” Lavinia snarled. “How are you doing this?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” Jack tried to stagger to his feet, only to have Eric push him back onto his chair by his shoulder. “Hey! Get the hell off me, pal!” His focus seemed to sharpen a touch.

“The earring.” Lavinia said darkly. By now, the markings on the table were glowing red hot.

“I don't want your ...” Jack swallowed hard as a huge wave of nausea washed over him.

“Lady Lavinia, the south sigil.” A woman who may have been Denise Williams, pointed to the table. One of the markings had blinked out and was now just a black scorch mark. Another one followed suit shortly after that.

“Find her!” Lavinia whirled round on the other guests. “She's here somewhere. Find her!” The other guests hurried off in various directions, leaving Jack trying to make sense of his senses, under the watchful eye of Eric.

“What the hell is going on?” Jack looked at Eric. Eric ignored him and began looking around the floor and table. “Fine. I'm going home. You're all bloody nuts!” Jack lurched to his feet and Eric stared at the chair. Jack blinked at the seat. He'd been sitting on more patterns and sigils, only these ones looked more like a stain than a scorched burn. “What the hell is that? And that?” Jack yelped.

“Bitch!” Lavinia was back.

“Re-cast.” Eric said. “I’ll restrain him.”

“That glyph is too strong just now, he’s been in contact with it.” Lavinia snapped.

“Right!” Jack shouted. “I have no idea what this shit is all about. I’m sorry if this is some newcomer’s prank you all pull, but I really don’t see the funny side of it! I’m leaving and if anyone lays a finger on me, I’ll kick the shit into them. Get it?” He swayed slightly and stumbled past Lavinia. “You come to my house again and I’ll have you arrested.” He pointed at the woman and left the room as steadily as he could. The stairs blurred and spun in front of him and Jack clung onto the bannister as he staggered his way down them. “Come on, you drunken arsehole.” He muttered to himself, focusing on the main exit doors.

“Taxi for O’Connor!” A voice shouted from somewhere close to the doors.

“Oi! I mean yes!” Jack took a deep breath and noted in relief that the small bar was almost empty so he didn’t show himself up too much by tottering to the exit. “Fourteen Charles Road.” He collapsed into the back seat of the taxi. As the vehicle was reversing out of the carpark, Jack saw a tiny figure standing between the rows of cars, her long hair tied back in a braided plait. Her again? Were all the locals here weirdos? Actually, where had the taxi come from? Jack couldn’t remember booking one. “OK. Enough, you drunk.” He shook his head. “Home and sleep.”

“Jesus!” Greg burst out laughing when he saw Jack reeling in through the front door.

“I know. Don’t ask.” Jack muttered. “Can you go check on Alex please Greg? I don’t want him coming down and seeing me like this.”

“No problem.” Greg looked at his friend. “Are you OK? You don’t sound as drunk as you look.”

“I don’t know.” Jack headed for the sitting room while Greg went to check on Alex. He was certainly feeling much better than he had earlier and that awful dizziness was lifting.

“He’s fast asleep. What the hell have you been drinking?” Greg was back, and looking at Jack trying to get his shoes off.

“Two pints of beer, I swear.” Jack exhaled loudly. “I think someone spiked my drink, Greg. Two pints, that’s all. I was fifty times worse than this in the pub.” He rubbed his temples as the numbing, white fog in his head, cleared a bit more. “I don’t remember much about it really. I hope I didn’t make an arse of myself.”

“Should I call the doctor?” Greg asked in concern.

“If it hasn’t worn off after I’ve slept, I’ll phone him myself. It was so weird, Greg, like hallucinations. Lavinia Stark smiling at me. She was wanting something from me, or wanting me to go somewhere ... I don’t really remember.”

“Right. I’m staying here tonight. No buts, shut up. If you’re ill during the night then there’s no one here except Alex.”

“I would appreciate it.” Jack nodded.

“I’ll lock up. You get up those stairs.” Greg steered Jack through the door and pointed him towards the stairs. “Jack? You didn’t bring anyone home did you?”

“What? No of course not, I came home in a taxi ... blonde girl? Denim jacket?” Jack lunged for the door.

“Jack? You didn't reel in here and forget about her did you?” Greg said in surprise. “She's off down the road now, she's gone. I'll get after her.”

“No, it's fine Greg. I've seen her a few times hanging around, that's all. She was in the carpark. Oh sod it, my poor head. Thanks Greg. I'm going to bed.” Jack trailed up the stairs, flopped onto his bed and blacked out completely.

Chapter 3

Jack felt absolutely foul the next morning. What little sleep he did have was interrupted by shifting squiggles and burning shapes and Lavinia Stark turning into a dragon and chasing him round his bedroom. He had a stiff neck, stiff back, and his eyes felt like they'd been rubbed with sandpaper.

“Yuck.” Greg complimented. “Mrs Wilson's taken Alex to school, then she's going to run some errands.” He pointed at a handwritten note from the housekeeper. “You OK?”

“Stiff and sore. Sleeping on top of the bed with the window open. I'm fine Greg. Whatever went on last night has worn off. I wonder which arsehole did that?” Jack said angrily.

“Anyone dodgy there?”

“I wouldn't know who was dodgy and who wasn't. I hardly know anyone here. Lavinia Stark and a few others all saw I wasn't well so hopefully they'll look into it.” Jack shrugged. “Thanks for everything, Greg, I really do appreciate it. I'm fine. Go get yourself to your course, otherwise you'll be thrown off it before you're on it.” He smiled. “I need to get my scruffy self showered and shaved.” He let Greg out of the front door, looking both ways for weirdo blondes, just in case. He shook his head and tutted when he realised what he was doing.

A glint of light caught his eye as he was closing the front door. Jack went to investigate and found a glass bottle wedged under the window sill. It was a small bottle with a glass stopper, the type used for perfumes, only this one was full of coloured threads of some sort. Every colour imaginable had been crammed into the vessel and he caught a slight whiff of herbs when it removed the stopper. He frowned in confusion and turned to go back into the house.

“What the hell?” Another glass bottle of threads had been tucked away in a corner next to his front step. Jack proceeded to check all around his house and found a total of nine glass bottles, all poked out of the way under his windows and doors. Jack had them all lined up on the kitchen table and was completely perplexed as to their function. Air fresheners? No of course not, not outside the house. Some sort of 'secret treasures' belonging to Alex?

“Oh my!” Mrs Wilson was standing behind Jack, her mouth and eyes open wide.

“Are they yours?” Jack asked, uncorking another bottle. “Hippy scent! That's what the smell is.”

“No they aren't mine.” Mrs Wilson shook her head. “Patchouli. That's the smell. Rosemary too.”

“Mrs Wilson you look a tad perplexed. What are they for?”

“They're Protection Bottles.” Mrs Wilson said seriously.

“Eh?” Jack laughed and handed his housekeeper a cup of tea. “They're what?”

“Someone's trying to protect your home.” Mrs Wilson nodded. “Patchouli and rosemary are both strong protection wards. The threads represent pathways into the house, the colours are the different

intentions and feelings. Whoever packed these bottles has tangled the pathways to misdirect harm. Nine, is three times three, obviously. That's a triple strength seal."

"Ah right." Jack nodded and went for the biscuits. "I'll put them back. If Alex thinks I've spoiled his experiments there'll be hell on."

"No, Mr O'Connor, they can't be Alex's." Mrs Wilson said. "They were made and placed by someone who knows what they're doing."

"Mrs Wilson you're starting to creep me out." Jack said warily. "They're bottles of coloured thread, that's all."

"Every thread in those bottles will be no longer that three finger-widths wide and they'll have all been put in there one at a time and the herbs and scents will have been infused gradually. Think how long that must have taken." Mrs Wilson picked up another bottle. "These will have taken weeks, maybe months to cast."

"Cast?!" Jack burst out laughing. "So they're bottled spells? Oh give over, Mrs Wilson."

"I'm sorry. You did ask." Mrs Wilson said stiffly.

"OK I'm sorry. Finish your tea Mrs Wilson. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. I just didn't expect such a strange explanation from an intelligent and sensible lady like yourself." Jack refilled Mrs Wilson's cup.

"Laugh all you like but that's what they are." The housekeeper nodded at the bottles. "Someone thinks you need protection."

"You're serious about this, aren't you?" Jack said in surprise. "Surely you don't believe in all that stuff?"

"I've seen more evidence to believe it than I have to disbelieve it." Mrs Wilson shrugged. "You'll probably have noticed that the community isn't a strictly Christian one."

"What?" Jack said in complete bewilderment. "Er ... well no, I hadn't actually. So no one here believes in God? Do you?"

"Do you?"

"Well I've never been a practising church goer. I believe that there's ... something. Look I can't believe I'm having this conversation. So everyone's a ... a ... what are they? Satanists? Devil worshippers?"

"That's very offensive and hurtful, Mr O'Connor. The people here would be as offended by that comment as the priest from the next city would be. Non-Christian doesn't mean Satanist. How can it when Satan or the Devil are both inventions of the Christian church?"

"I didn't mean to be offensive." Jack said in a daze.

"I know." Mrs Wilson got up to wash the cups. "Announcing that you're a Christian doesn't automatically make you a good person, nor does being Pagan mean you're a bad person. There are good and bad everywhere."

“Good and bad Pagans too. So whoever left these bottles is a good Pagan trying to protect me from bad Pagans? Seeing as the community is all Pagan. Yes?”

“It could just be a friendly gesture to set up a pleasant atmosphere in your new home.” Mrs Wilson said. “Although those Bottles are very well made, and triple sealed. When my Stephanie went away to university I had someone else create wards for her protection, my own ability isn't that strong like that. They were nowhere near as perfect as those.” She nodded at the bottles again.

“You cast spells for each other?”

“Please don't mock what you don't understand. Everyone's entitled to their own system of beliefs.”

“Yes I agree, but spells?” Jack shook his head. “OK, you're right, I don't understand. I'm probably brainwashed with all the wicked witch tales we're brought up with.”

“Not here we aren't.” Mrs Wilson smiled. “And it looks like your witch is anything but wicked.”

“I suppose I'll put them back. They're doing no harm.” Jack began to collect the bottles. “Mrs Wilson? Does a white candle wrapped in white thread on a white lace mean anything to you?”

“You were given one of those?” Mrs Wilson blinked in shock. “Mr O'Connor whoever gave you that, and left these bottles on thresh-holds is arming you to the teeth with protection amulets. White candles are used for protection as well as blessings, and the white thread binds that securely. You're personally blessed and protected by whoever made that amulet.”

“Initials would make it more personalized, I presume?” Jack asked warily.

“Indeed it would. Who would give you such strong attention like this?” Mrs Wilson was clearly very impressed.

“So could anyone make this stuff? Kids, for example?”

“No, not likely.” Mrs Wilson shook her head. “Nor could I. I mean, I could wrap a candle but it would be little more than just that, a wrapped candle. I never could concentrate enough to focus and channel to any degree no matter how many ways I was taught. Scatterbrain.” She smiled. “I can tell by your face that you aren't too comfortable with all this. I'm sorry. I hope it hasn't altered your opinions of me as a housekeeper? I'll not go on about it at all unless you ask me directly.”

“No. Er ... no it's fine.” Jack said in utter bewilderment. “You're my saviour, Mrs Wilson. I'd be lost without you.” He smiled brightly. So *Alex* had some sort of personal protection? Why? Had that blonde stalker anything to do with it? Had Lavinia Stark? “Is there any way of telling who they're from?”

“Not unless they're marked with a glyph. That's like a personal signature. The bottles aren't, I checked. I can't think of anyone who still uses bottle magick. It's very old and it's very time consuming, but that makes it very strong. It dates back to the witch hunts when women used to disguise their healing and spell herbs as ordinary kitchen-ware.” Mrs Wilson explained.

“Umm well I can see the sense in that.” Jack admitted. “I'll go put these back.” He went to replace his bottles, still not fully convinced that they weren't 'hidden treasure' belonging to Alex. Jack had just replaced the last bottle by the front door when he saw a familiar, black-clad figure coming down the street. He wasn't quite sure how to feel. Had he embarrassed himself the previous night? Had he insulted the woman? He couldn't shake the feeling that he had and that lead him to

feel that she'd done something to deserve it. Jack was not a rude or offensive man.

“Ms Stark.” He said as Lavinia stood in the gateway. “As you can see, I'm not feeling too bright.” Jack was still in his dressing gown and looked rather seedy.

“I had to call round and see how you were.” Lavinia said in concern. “It was too hot and stuffy in that room and you had mentioned that you'd been working hard. I'm sorry for pressing you to stay like I did.”

“That's fine. It wasn't your fault at all.” Jack was very relieved. “I hope I didn't put too much of a dampener on the evening. Would you like a coffee? I'm just about to make one.”

“Thank you.” Lavinia started to follow Jack then stopped so abruptly that she almost fell over. Her face set in concentration, and the muscles bunched around her jaw. She literally *leaned* forward and pushed herself over the step.

“Are you OK?” Jack asked warily.

“I'm ... fine.” Lavinia replied through gritted teeth, then lurched forward suddenly. “Coffee. Thank you.” She smiled and followed Jack into his home.

Jack excused himself to go and dress properly and he almost had a panic attack when he returned and saw Lavinia. She looked dreadful. Her already pale face was ashen and she was sitting clutching her temples.

“Good grief! Are you sure you're OK?” He asked in alarm.

“Yes!” Lavinia snapped. “Sorry. Damned headache.” She forced a smile. “Actually I'd better go. They creep up on me suddenly. I need to take something for it.”

“Yes, of course.” Jack nodded in agreement.

“Have you had many visitors here?” Lavinia screwed her eyes shut tight.

“Huh?” Jack said in confusion. “No, why?” This population was starting to put the wind up him.

“Damn you.” Lavinia muttered.

“I beg your pardon?” Jack blinked. “Look, I'll call you a taxi, Ms Stark. Maybe we can talk another time.”

“I'll be fine. Migraine.” Lavinia stood up and knocked one of Alex's stuffed toys to the floor. Jack picked up the toy, a spider called Mr Crawley, and put it on the table, as Lavinia headed for the door.

“I hope you feel better soon.” Jack said. Actually 'soon' was an understatement. Lavinia's colour improved drastically once she was outside again.

“I'm sure I will. I'm sorry, Jack. I've been plagued my migraines most of my adult life. They come as quickly as they go. I do apologise.” Lavinia smiled weakly.

“No need for apologies.” Jack smiled back. “Nasty thing to suffer from.” He watched Lavinia walk down the street, then he returned to the house. “Bugger this. Mrs Wilson! Mrs Wilson I'm going back to bed. Give me a hefty kick at around noon please.” Mrs Wilson came out of the sitting room

with a duster in her hand.

“Visitor gone? I heard voices.”

“Yes, no one here now. I'll be up in time to go for Alex. Thanks for taking him this morning, Mrs Wilson. You're an angel.” Jack trailed upstairs to try and sleep away as much of the day as he could.

Jack felt perfectly fine as he set off to drive to the school for Alex. This feeling, however, was gradually replaced by irrational paranoia during the drive, collection of his son, and return home. He was convinced everyone was talking about him and was prepared to swear that Denise Williams and Kath Ball had actually pointed at him! He tried to give himself a shake and told himself not to be so ridiculous.

“Alex?” He said, getting his son some milk and sandwiches in the kitchen. “You know the pendant you found? Did you see anyone around that may have dropped it?”

“It is valuable isn't it?” Alex moved Mr Crawley to make room for his plate. “No dad, if I'd seen anyone I'd have told them. I thought Mrs Taylor at school was going to take it off me. She saw the lace under my shirt.”

“Well jewellery isn't allowed, Alex. Maybe you should keep it in your pocket.” Jack nodded.

“I thought she was going to confiscate it. She pulled it out of my shirt then went ... OOO!” Alex clapped his hands to his face. “Just like that. OOO! She told the headmistress too.” He said glumly. “I didn't mean to cause any trouble. I'll keep it in my pocket, but it's not dangerous. Look.” Alex demonstrated how the lace was fastened in a slip-knot. If it had got snagged on anything, it would have simply slid undone. “I won't have an accident with it on.”

“Oh yes I see. What a good idea eh?” Jack smiled. “Well no one's said anything to me, and you still have it, so you can't be in that much trouble.” He went to answer the ringing phone. “Jack O'Connor.”

“Jack! Hello!”

“Oh hello! How are you feeling?” Jack asked Lavinia.

“Apart from embarrassed at my bizarre behaviour, just fine. I phoned to apologise again. Damned headaches come out of nowhere.” Lavinia said.

“It's not a problem. Here's a deal. I'll forget your bizarre behaviour if you forget mine. OK?” Jack laughed.

“Deal!” Lavinia laughed too. “Are you busy? I know I have a cheek but could you come and look at this infernal computer of mine? I cannot get any sense from the dratted thing, but I do need it for my work, unfortunately. Do you do house calls?”

“Not usually but I can make exceptions. We haven't got off to a good start have we? We keep fainting on each other!” Jack smiled. “I take it Eric isn't technically minded?”

“No, not really. I phoned him already and he's stumped.”

“Get him to unplug it all for me.”

“OK, If I need to. I'll have to phone him though.”

“He's not there?” Jack said in confusion.

“Well, no. Oh! Oh Jack!” Lavinia started to laugh. “I think you have the wrong end of the stick. Eric's my brother.”

“Oh! I'm so sorry. Yes, I'm dense. I presumed he was your husband. I'm sorry.” Jack cringed.

“Right! I need to nab my fantastic housekeeper to watch my son, then I'll come take a look at the computer.”

“Would you? That's wonderful. Thank you. I hate it, I really do. It has me in tears half the time. Forty One Gall's Villas.”

“Oooo!” Jack whistled at Alex after he'd hung up. “Gall's Villas! I better polish my discs. Posh eh?”

“Wow!” Alex was very impressed. “They're mansions!”

“And I think Ms Stark is a Lady. A proper one, I mean.” Jack frowned and tried to recall who he'd heard calling her Lady Lavinia.

“I better go and tidy my room. Uncle Greg got Lego all over the place and Mrs Wilson said she was going to make him eat it.” Alex said seriously and Jack sniggered.

Chapter 4

Gall's Villas was absolutely stunning. It was an estate made up of around fifty mansions and it took up the whole of the North area. Lavinia Stark's house was vast. It had four floors and Jack couldn't even guess at the number of rooms. The one he was shown into was almost as big as Jack's sitting room and study put together. It had rows and rows of books on mahogany bookcases and one wall was taken up by a massive marble fireplace. The infernal computer stood pathetically on a desk in the corner, looking very lifeless indeed. Lavinia poured two glasses of wine and handed one to Jack.

"I'll sort that out first." Jack headed for the desk. "Otherwise I'll be seeing two monitors." He sat down and began to troubleshoot. "You have a whole nest of viruses in here. I'll get rid of them and put in a software anti-virus and firewall."

"OK you're the boss." Lavinia shrugged. "I like clever men. They aren't as easy to come by as you'd think." Jack paused in his typing. Oh no. How naïve could he get? He decided to get on with the job, then run. "Do you ever get lonely on your own? I know you have your little boy, but I mean adult company. I know I do."

"No not really. Some people are just more sociable than others, I suppose. I'm more of a hermit, as Greg told you." Jack concentrated on the screen.

"Well you can't be a strict hermit. You were sociable enough to get a family together." Lavinia commented. "I beg your pardon. That was rude of me. I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine. Actually my wife was a hermit too. We always managed to find interests that didn't involve many other people." Jack shrugged and smiled.

"You don't miss the company?" Lavinia asked.

"Yes, I miss her, even after twelve months." Jack nodded. He honestly didn't mind talking about Lynne at all, but Lavinia was making a very obvious pass at him. She was sitting not two feet from him with her long legs crossed and her silk blouse undone a bit too low at the neck.

"What went wrong? Please tell me if I'm pressing too hard. I'm often over sympathetic, I can't help it." Lavinia said sincerely.

"Well she was only eighteen when we got Alex. Not that that made any difference." Jack said. It hadn't been a suit at all with Lynne's parents at first. Things soon worked out though, when they saw how happy Lynne and Jack were together. "I'd taken Alex to a theme park and we were staying there in a hotel overnight. Lynne couldn't go because she was working and couldn't get time off." Jack stopped typing and looked at the desk.

"I'm sorry." Lavinia said quickly. "That was unforgivable. It's none of my business."

"Well it's not often I get to talk about it, so I don't really mind. Good to talk sometimes." Jack

smiled. "Lynne was stabbed during a bungled break-in at the house."

"Oh! Oh my word!" Lavinia stood up. "Jack I'm so terribly sorry! I didn't know! If I'd known it was something as horrific as that, I'd never, ever have mentioned it."

"Lavinia, don't be upset." Jack stood up too. "I should apologise to you for being so blunt. I've obviously shocked you."

"Poor woman." Lavinia said sadly. "I'll never forgive myself for mentioning it like that."

"Hey it's fine. Don't cry, please." Jack said gently. "It was a long time ago. It's gone and it can't be undone." He hated the tears. "It's natural for my friends to ask about my family. It's OK Lavinia." He handed Lavinia her wine.

"I have associates, professional and social. I could attend a dinner every night, but I have no friends." Lavinia said sadly.

"Everyone has friends. Even a hermit like me has friends." Jack smiled.

"I don't. Really I don't. I can buy anything I want, whenever I want but you can't buy friendship. It takes me and my big, insensitive mouth for someone to tell me he's my friend, just to make me feel better." Lavinia sighed.

"That's not why I said it." Jack argued. "You had no need to feel bad in the first place."

"You're a lovely man, Jack O'Connor." Lavinia smiled and walked over to Jack. "Humans are social creatures. We aren't meant to exist on our own." She stood very close to Jack and ran her hand down his arm. "It goes against all nature's laws to be without contact." Jack caught his breath when he felt Lavinia's fingers brush his neck. Yes, he had missed contact, very much so. Twelve long and stressful months was a long time. "I'll take care of you. You don't have to be on your own. It's the way it is." Lavinia trailed her fingertips down Jack's now bare back. Jack felt almost as zoned out as he had the other night, but he knew that this time, his hormones were to blame. Suddenly, the door was booted open so hard that it slammed against the wall. Lavinia yelped and grabbed for her clothes and Jack didn't know if to feel relieved, pissed off, embarrassed or shocked.

"Get off him, Lavinia."

"You!" Jack blinked in shock at the blonde haired woman that he thought had been following him around. There she stood, jeans, denim jacket and her hair hanging free to her waist.

"Get out of my house!" Lavinia spat. "Don't you ever come here!"

"Back off!" The blonde woman advanced into the room. "Get dressed." She said to Jack, without taking her eyes off Lavinia.

"What the hell is going on?" Jack shouted. "Who the hell are you?" He demanded of the tiny 5'1 woman. She was no bigger than a child, but quite obviously an adult. "Ms Stark asked you to leave. I think you should take the advice."

"She'd better." Lavinia snarled, edging away from Jack as the other woman got closer to him.

"I will. Get dressed." She repeated to Jack. "Has she cut your skin?"

“What?” Jack looked at her in complete bewilderment.

“Has she broken your skin? Are you deaf? Cut? Scratch? Oh Lavinia, not the earring gag.” The blonde woman rolled her eyes. Jack spotted a purple stoned stud on the rug and instinctively grabbed for both of his ears. “A bit slow there eh Lavinia? As well has hella boring.”

“I'm warning you Ziggy, get out of my house before I call for Eric.” Lavinia growled.

“Ha! Oh belt up Lavinia. The days of getting big brother in on the act have long gone.”

“Z ... Ziggy? What sort of bloody name is Ziggy?” Jack said hysterically.

“I know.” Ziggy sighed. “My dad had an odd sense of humour. OK, enough of this. You, out!” Ziggy nodded at Jack.

“What? Not likely. Who are you? Lavinia, call Eric.”

“Look, you big horse's arse.” Ziggy scowled at Jack. “This mausoleum of a house is glyphed from here to Jupiter! You remember the length of time she could stand being in your home with mine? Yes well imagine how I'm feeling here on her own patch.”

“You left those bottles?” Jack blurted. This couldn't be happening!

“Yes you little bitch!” Lavinia yelled. “How long were you brewing that little lot up for?”

“Long enough to stuff you up for a while.” Ziggy shrugged. “So did my wardings at your sad little dinner party.”

“I knew that was you.” Lavinia pointed at Ziggy. “I don't know how you got in, but I knew you were protecting him. Back off, Ziggy, you don't know what you're doing.”

“Protecting me?” Jack half sobbed. “Look ladies, I'm sure there's a perfectly rational explanation for all this. There's no need to fight.”

“Jack, I can't stay here for much longer.” Ziggy looked at him. “Her own binding spells are working against mine, like they're meant to. Not very well, I might add. How pissy is that, Lavinia? Once I leave here she *will* get that stud in your ear. That earring is her own charged tool. She'll completely reverse the protections I have on you and you'll agree completely with her.”

“This is bullshit!” Jack shouted. “Just pack it in, the pair of you!”

“Where will it leave Alex if this bitch has you running at her beck and call?” Ziggy squinted at Lavinia, feeling quite light headed.

“How dare you mention my son! I can look after my own family, thank you.” Jack snapped.

“I know you can. You let him keep my talisman.” Ziggy said and Lavinia glared daggers at Jack. “I bet that put the wind up you and your cronies Lavinia.”

“Keep my son out of this!” Jack roared. “I don't know what you're both playing at, but keep the hell away from my son! You! If you have anymore baubles for him then I see them first.” He snapped at Ziggy.

“Quite sensibly. Yes, of course.” Ziggy agreed.

“No!” Lavinia yelled. “Jack don't let her give you anything! Accept nothing from her! I'll kill you Ziggy, I swear it.”

“Oh yah yah. Like I haven't heard that before. Jack, will you get out of here, you dozy buttock! Go on! Go to your son.” Ziggy blinked a few times to clear her head. “You have my word that I'll never approach your boy again in any manner. I'd expect you calling the law in if I did.”

“You'd better bloody not.” Jack snapped, grabbing his computer gear. “Thirty four quid, please.” Ziggy snorted a laugh.

“Pardon me?” Lavinia said in surprise.

“House call plus the software. I won't charge you for the hardware you almost got.” Jack said bluntly and Ziggy sniggered again.

“Bill me.” Lavinia sniffed.

“Don't worry, I will. You're all bloody mental!” Jack marched from the house and slammed the door.

Jack was visibly shaking by the time he'd reached home and was vastly relieved that Alex was asleep in bed.

“What's the matter?” Mrs Wilson looked up from her knitting.

“Mrs Wilson, do you have a few minutes to talk to me, please?” Jack sat down and rubbed his hands through his hair. “Who's Ziggy?” Mrs Wilson dropped her knitting all together. “Is she insane or something? Mrs Wilson it's very important, she knows Alex.” Jack said desperately.

“I did wonder when I saw the bottles and you mentioned the talisman.” Mrs Wilson chewed her lip. “Mercy me, what's happened to bring Lady Ziggy out of the woodwork?”

“I don't know! She burst into Lavinia Stark's house and told her to keep away from me. She mentioned Alex too. The pair of them were ranting on about glyphs and wardings and it's all bull!” Jack exclaimed.

“It is not bull, Mr O'Connor. The fact that Ziggy Rigby has put in an appearance proves that. She's a outcast. No one hardly sees her at all but they all know she's there, up at Hallow Break House.” Mrs Wilson said seriously.

“So she is nuts? Like the town whacko?” Jack nodded.

“No, no.” Mrs Wilson shook her head. “Far from it. She was more or less driven out by her sister and her clan. Not many speak out against them. Er ... well that includes me.”

“Jesus.” Jack flung up his hands. “OK Mrs Wilson, just single words. Ziggy Rigby, Lady Ziggy, good or bad?”

“Good. Very good. Oh that's three.”

“So we have good sister, bad sister?”

“Very much so.”

“Bad sister has lots of mates and they shun good sister to the hills?”

“Eventually, yes.”

“Bad sister is Lavinia Stark?”

“I'd rather my name wasn't mentioned if it comes to confrontations, Mr O'Connor. Lady Lavinia tends to just ignore ordinary folk like us.” Mrs Wilson chewed on her lip again.

“What interest could they have in me and Alex?”

“I honestly don't know. Alex is only a child. If I had any ideas, I'd tell you.” Mrs Wilson nodded sincerely. “Excuse my saying so, but the interest in you may not be a big a mystery.”

“Huh? Well what ... oh yes, I see.” Jack coughed and went red. “Well I like my women of sound mind.”

“Mr O'Connor, if Lady Ziggy has given a personal protection blessing then I wouldn't look lightly upon it. She hasn't openly practised in eight years that I know of. You have to appreciate how out of the ordinary this is.” Mrs Wilson said seriously.

“It's *all* out of the ordinary!” Jack shook his head. A loud yell from upstairs had both Jack and Mrs Wilson jumping to their feet and running for the door.

“Dad!” Alex sobbed and Jack lifted him up into his arms.

“It's OK Slogger, just a bad dream.” Jack soothed. This was the first nightmare that Alex had had for quite a while. He'd had a lot after Lynne's death but they'd gradually faded away.

“Dad don't leave me.” Alex sobbed into Alex's neck.

“Never.” Jack promised. “I love you more than anything. I'll never leave you.” He slipped the white lace from around Alex's neck. “And we don't need this either.”

“Mr O'Connor, maybe you should leave the talisman.” Mrs Wilson was clearly very distraught.

“I don't want that crap in my house.” Jack settled Alex back into bed. “I've had enough of this nonsense and I want those things moved from my windows too. I'll leave the light on, Alex. I'm right outside if you want me.” He tucked his son into bed with Mr Crawley.

Back downstairs, Jack collected the bottles and dropped them into a plastic bag.

“Mr O'Connor, please.” Mrs Wilson followed him. “I know it all sounds crazy ...”

“Mrs Wilson.” Jack sighed loudly. “Believe me, there isn't anyone or anything can get past me to get to my son.”

“No of course not. I'd never suggest that.” Mrs Wilson said quietly.

“Look, I don't know why you're so scared, but you obviously are. All this doesn't apply to me and

Alex, Mrs Wilson, it can't do. All it's doing is making me edgy and him frightened. We don't need this forced into our lives. I wouldn't do it to anyone else.” Jack looked at his housekeeper's worried face. “Alex needs you Mrs Wilson, and you know I do.” He smiled and elbowed a packing crate.

“Thank you.” Mrs Wilson managed a smile. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get hysterical.”

“No. I was the one throwing hysterics. I'll get you a taxi.”

Jack gave up trying to sleep after four hours of Alex sobbing and crying out during the night. He eventually carried the child downstairs and settled him on the couch in his office. He was more than a bit pissed off that all this mumbo-jumbo had affected his son and he was furious with the twisted sisters for even mentioning Alex. Jack looked at the tiny purple stud on his desk. He'd picked it up with his shirt in Lavinia's house. That was twice the psycho had tried to pierce his ear for him. He'd put the first attempt down to his own fuddled head, originally, but now he thought differently. What was her problem? Some sort of weird fetish? Ziggy said it was a personalized tool. What in hell was that about? What in hell was Lady Ziggy Rigby about? Modesty aside, Jack simply refused to accept that this was just two jealous sisters fighting over him.

“Bloody mental.” He turned on his computer. “Lavinia goes for me, Ziggy goes for Alex. Not bloody likely.” He searched for local information pages and looked for Ziggy Rigby. Absolutely nothing at all. Lavinia Stark, however, was a different result completely. The list of community work she was involved in was astonishing. There was everything from gardening improvement schemes to charity fund-raisers to committees for everything imaginable. Lavinia Stark was the backbone of the community.

“So you're the little weirdo eh Ziggy?” Jack sighed.

“Dad?” Alex sat up and rubbed his eyes.

“Hiya Slogger. Back to sleep, it's still night.” Jack smiled.

“So why are you up? Dad I'm sorry about the pendant.”

“No need. I'll buy you another one.” Jack reassured Alex.

“Where's Mr Crawley?” Alex looked under his blankets for his stuffed spider.

“I'll go get him.” Jack nodded. Lynne had made this for Alex when he was only a baby. She'd been so proud of her handiwork seeing as her knitting skills were zero. It had taken her months to make it. Alex had carried it around everywhere with him and even now, he liked the toy in sight when he was at home. Jack returned and tucked Mr Crawley into the blanket with Alex. “Back to sleep, Alex. I'm right here.”

Chapter 5

Jack glanced at the clock, some hours later, then at Alex. He was still sleeping but he'd had an horrendous night. Jack decided to leave him. A day off school wouldn't go amiss. He was on the phone to the headmistress when Mrs Wilson arrived.

"He looks exhausted, Mr O'Connor." She observed, peeping round the study door.

"I'm thinking he does look a bit pale." Jack agreed. "I think I'll call a doctor, just in case. Can you suggest one?" He began looking down the list of general practitioners in the phone book. "I don't believe this!" Jack's eyes blinked at one entry in particular. "Mrs Wilson? Ziggy Rigby is a doctor?"

"No. Read it again." Mrs Wilson pointed at the entry. "She's a medical practitioner. She can examine and offer diagnoses to other doctors but she can't describe medical drugs, obviously." She explained.

"We are talking proper doctors here? Qualified doctors of medicine?" Jack was feeling pretty exhausted too.

"Of course, otherwise it wouldn't be illegal to describe themselves as such. That's a very old list, Mr O'Connor. Ziggy Rigby hasn't been a part of the community for almost a decade. Dr Pallister is still active. He's my GP." Mrs Wilson pointed to the number of the doctor mentioned.

Jack had a huge surge of relief when Dr Bernard Pallister turned out to be a respectable looking gent on around fifty years of age and he looked like a doctor. He wore a suit, carried a leather bag, and Jack almost hauled his hand off when he shook it. Jack explained the nightmares, and his concern for his son's pallor. He also explained that Alex was in the office so Jack could stay close to him.

"Hello Alex." The Doctor smiled. "Feeling a bit rough?"

"My head hurts and so does my tummy." Alex muttered.

"That's because you're all hot and sticky, young man." Dr Pallister took Alex's temperature. "Can you take off your t shirt so I can listen in?" Alex nodded and Jack helped him off with his top. "See this stethoscope? Well it's always cold no matter what I do with it so it'll make you jump." The Doctor smiled. "You ready?" Alex tried to smile and nodded. "Good lad. OK, take a deep ... deep ..." Dr Pallister's stethoscope was poised over Alex's chest.

"What?" Jack panicked. "What's wrong?" He pushed past the Doctor to look at his son. "Oh that!" He smiled. "He fell and got cut when he was a baby. It wasn't even deep enough for stitches. It's OK, it's a very old scratch."

"Er ... yes." Dr Pallister packed up his stethoscope. "Keep him cool, Mr O'Connor. Cool sponges, plenty of fluids."

“Huh? Hang on! Is that it? I thought you were going to listen to his chest?” Jack said in surprise.

“No. I don't need to.” Dr Pallister mumbled.

“Why is his temperature up?” Jack persisted and the doctor merely glanced at him. “I'm talking to you! Is he sick? Do I need another doctor?” Dr Pallister looked at Alex and closed his eyes. Jack felt the hysterics hurtling towards him. “Dr Pallister, he's a little boy. He's seven years old. If he's sick then I need your help!”

“It isn't my help you need.” The Doctor said quietly. Jack hauled him out, physically, into the hallway.

“Now you listen to me.” He snarled. “He has a roaring temperature, he can hardly support his own head, his eyes are glazed and he's as white as a sheet! If you won't give him any medical help, then refer him to someone who can! All I'm asking for is a straight opinion.”

“Dr Pallister?” Mrs Wilson was shaking. “He's only a little boy.”

“Mr O'Connor your son has been hexed.” Dr Pallister said bluntly. Jack actually felt the darkness trying to edge in that would have rendered him into a dead faint if he hadn't visibly shook himself.

“I don't believe I've just heard that coming from a respectable, qualified doctor. Right! I'm taking him to a hospital. You're all raving lunatics!” Jack yelled hysterically.

“He won't respond to any treatments.” Dr Pallister said seriously. “He's in prolonged contact with some sort of token, left by whoever cast that hex. Only that person can lift it, which means you'd have to go to that person for their help. Consequently, you'll be indebted.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.” Jack sat down heavily on the bottom stair. “Someone hexes my son to get to me?”

“I don't think so.” The Doctor frowned. “Someone hexes your son in order to get you to hand him over for cure. I've not seen an active hex for over thirty years.”

“This can't be happening.” Jack said in sheer disbelief.

“The boy got that scar accidentally?”

“What? Yes of course he did. He fell off the couch at my late wife's parents' home and landed on a glass. He was a baby, Dr Pallister, seven years ago.” Jack explained.

“I mistook it for a marker.” Dr Pallister glanced at the study door. “A sign that marks Alex out as ... reserved. That would explain the hex too. I hope with all my heart that it is an accidental scar. I really must be going.”

“Could Ziggy Rigby have done this?” Jack blurted and the Doctor looked quite taken aback.

“Absolutely not. You've had contact with Lady Ziggy?”

“This is surreal! Listen, you're obviously an educated man, Dr Pallister.” Jack told the middle aged professional every weird thing that had happened to him, beginning with the dinner party and ending with his introduction to Ziggy Rigby, and Alex's subsequent illness.

“Mr O'Connor, you need Ziggy Rigby.” Dr Pallister nodded. “I can say no more, in fact I've probably said too much. I can't stop you taking Alex to hospital but they won't be able to help him. You need Lady Ziggy.” He jut about ran from Jack's house.

“Am I seriously supposed to believe all this?” Jack asked Mrs Wilson, who was close to collapsing.

“Dad!” Alex screamed from the study and Jack and Mrs Wilson raced to the door.

“He's convulsing!” Jack held his son's rigid body. “Shit! He's fitting Mrs Wilson!” He shrieked.

“It's burning me dad.” Alex sobbed. “Make it go away!”

“Mrs Wilson, get Dr Pallister back in here. He'll only be down the road there ... there ...” Jack looked out of the window and straight at Lady Ziggy Rigby. “Get her in here Mrs Wilson. Ziggy Rigby, she's right outside.” Alex let out another agonised sob. “Hurry Mrs Wilson, please!”

Jack lay Alex on the couch and found himself checking his ears. No earrings. He ran his hands over his son's clothing and bedding for any other 'tokens' but Jack hadn't a clue what he was looking for.

“Mr O'Connor.” Ziggy was standing in the doorway.

“Can you help him?” Jack asked desperately. “He's having convulsions.” Ziggy nodded and knelt down next to Alex.

“Shh, it's OK little man.” Ziggy said gently. “You're a very brave boy and I bet your dad is so proud of you. Shh, it's going to be OK.” She placed a violet coloured crystal on the pillow above Alex's damp head. “Bad dreams are pretty crap eh? I've had them too in the past.” Ziggy balanced a deeper purple crystal on Alex's forehead. “Hey, well done! That's it little man, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.” A blue stone was placed on Alex's neck and a green one on his chest. He'd stopped convulsing now and the sweat was pouring from him. “Ah good lad. That's right, send all that sickness into Ziggy's stones. They don't mind at all. Go on, force all the burning into the crystals.” Ziggy put a yellow stone just above Alex's belly button and tucked a red one under his backside. “Good lad. Dad'll put this orange one in it's place.” Ziggy handed the red crystal to Jack. “In his shorts, Mr O'Connor.”

“Y ... yes, yes of course.” Jack did as he was told, in a complete daze. “He's calmed down. I don't know what you did, but thank you.”

“Dad you're in the way.” Alex scowled.

“Oh ... er ... sorry.” Jack took a bewildered step back.

“He can feel you panicking. He's concentrating on pushing all the bad feelings into the crystals. I'm very impressed actually.” Ziggy smiled. “He seems to be using all seven chakras and that's not easy to do.”

“Oh. OK.” Jack nodded. “Well done Alex.”

“Now then.” Ziggy turned her attention back to Alex. “Where did that old cow leave her shit.” Alex sniggered and Jack was too relieved to ask Ziggy to mind her language. “So no old cows been giving you prezzies? Well except me, but I'm a nice old cow.” She grinned. “Maybe dad'll give you that back if we ask him nicely.”

"I'll need some answers first." Jack took the white candle talisman out of his pocket. "If anyone had given him anything, he'd have told me."

"I believe you. So the old wart's sneaked one in." Ziggy frowned.

"She's never met Alex." Jack said.

"Good how you know who I'm on about." Ziggy smirked. "But she has been here. I'm a bit miffed about that you know. Nine protection bottles and the manky old bat still gets in. Did you leave her on her own at any time, Mr O'Connor?"

"A few minutes while I went and changed, that's all. She was in the kitchen. I stripped and changed Alex during the night and I didn't see any talisman type things. None of these either." Jack showed Ziggy the ear stud.

"Small isn't it? Pillows." Ziggy turned to Alex again. "Oo! Can I see your spider?" She focused on the stuffed toy.

"He's had that for years, Ziggy. It isn't a new toy." Jack explained.

"But obviously a very treasured one and one he'd never lose. Right Alex?" Ziggy nodded.

"I've had him since I was a baby. Dad has a photo of me in my cot with him. His name's Mr Crawley." Alex handed over the spider. Ziggy began squeezing the toy in her hands. "Don't tear him!"

"I won't. Ha! Found you, you bugger." Ziggy scowled. "Got any tweezers?" Mrs Wilson set off for the bathroom. "You feel any better?"

"Yes thank you. I'm tired though." Alex yawned. Ziggy took the tweezers and poked about through the woollen loops.

"What is it?" Jack asked. It was a tiny purple stone about the same size as the ear stud.

"It's what was causing the sickness." Ziggy said. "Alex, you OK without dad?" She began removing her coloured crystals. "I think he may want to talk to me in the other room."

"I'm going to have a sleep." Alex said, taking Mr Crawley from Ziggy.

"Good idea. Isn't crystal medicine cool?" Ziggy smiled.

"Hella cool." Alex agreed. "Can I have my lace back dad? It was nice of Miss Ziggy to make it especially for me."

"Here you go." Jack put the talisman on the blanket for Alex. "Miss Ziggy made it for you, not me."

Jack lead Ziggy to the sitting room and left Mrs Wilson sitting with Alex.

"So what did you just do to my son?" He asked.

“Chakra crystals.” Ziggy replied, sitting down. “Nothing too mysterious, there's tons on stuff on the internet about it. Basically, the colours match a vital body area, and it gave Alex something to concentrate and focus on too.”

“Way over my head.” Jack shrugged. “So that's the token used to keep up the hex, is it?” Ziggy was looking at the purple stone.

“Yes. You bitch, Lavinia.” Ziggy said in disgust.

“So we flush it down the toilet and have done with it. Right?” Jack asked hopefully.

“That would be easy eh?” Ziggy heaved. “It'll be active until it's either cancelled or reversed.”

“By Lavinia, yes? Dr Pallister said it was to force me to go to her for help.” Jack told Ziggy.

“I could try and cancel it.” Ziggy frowned. “There aren't many can tackle Lavinia, but I'm one of the not many.”

“You can fix it?” Jack asked eagerly. “I'd pay you anything you asked, I'd do anything at all you wanted, just put an end to this lunacy.”

“That's the reaction Lavinia was after.” Ziggy smiled. “I can't be certain of anything, Jack. Lavinia is very skilled and very strong. She's also very arrogant though, a weakness.”

“But you'll try? Please Ziggy?” Jack begged.

“Of course I will. I'll need a few things from home. Keep this safe, and the earring you have.” She handed Jack the purple stone she'd removed from Mr Crawley. “Hopefully they'll both get neutralised. She'll have this to be more active at night when Alex is sleeping, and so more susceptible to dreams. Sadistic old shitbag. I'll have more chance of scrambling the signals while they're active. Does that make sense?”

“Er ... no. Not in the slightest.” Jack laughed nervously. “How did you know we needed you? I don't believe for one minute that you just happened to be strolling past the house.”

“No. I've been following you around quite openly, much to the unnerving of the community.” Ziggy laughed. “I saw Dr Pallister heading this way and I knew then that you'd removed my wardings and my talisman.”

“Shit. So if I'd left them all Alex wouldn't have got sick?” Jack asked.

“Well Lavinia did get through my Bottled Bugger-Offs.” Ziggy shrugged. “And that's when she left her little gift for Alex. He's a fine boy, by the way. You must be very proud of him.”

“I certainly am, thanks.” Jack smiled. “I don't understand any of this, not a single thing. Why did Lavinia have a go at me? Twice!”

“Probably because it would be easier with you onside. Lets face it, not many could interfere with a parent/child relationship. Lavinia's about as much use with kids as that litter bin is.”

“So if she'd got that earring in me I'd have been hexed too?” Jack was trying so hard to keep up.

“Completely. It would be virtually impossible for anyone to do anything about it too, she'd have got

your blood. That's why I asked if she'd cut your skin the other night. If she'd got you in bed and got those claws of hers in gear, then you may not have even noticed." Ziggy explained.

"Er ... yes well she didn't." Jack said awkwardly. "I can't believe she got me so easily. I'm not a sex maniac."

"No but you're a healthy, normal man." Ziggy smiled. "She's such a cruel bitch. I can't understand how she'd use such tactics. It's despicable. Jack, she knew perfectly well what happened to your wife. That shows you the lengths she'll go to to achieve her ends. Horrible old bitch."

"How did she know?" Jack said in alarm. "No one knows me here!"

"I don't know how she knows, I swear I don't. I don't know why she wants Alex either, but she does. I took an interest purely because I saw her taking an interest. That was as soon as you moved here, incidentally. Anyone at all that Lavinia shows an interest in, I want to know why." Ziggy said darkly.

"I know she's your sister, Ziggy." Jack said warily.

"Ack!" Ziggy pulled a face. "Half sisters. Different fathers, hence the different names. My mother was exactly like Lavinia, a greedy, power-crazed bitch. She was tried and convicted of killing Lavinia and Eric's dad after she was arrested for trying to kill mine, four years later."

"Good god." Jack was extremely shocked.

"Gerald Stark got cold feet when Alicia, my mother, started to bend and twist what we all believe in. She used her knowledge and her skills for all the wrong reasons. She got rich and powerful, Gerald got edgy. He was found dead from arsenic poisoning and it was put down as suicide. As if eh?" Ziggy flung up her arms. "Any retard knows that suicides don't bloody overdose on arsenic! Such was Alicia's influence round here. Eric would have been seven then, Lavinia five. You with me so far?" Ziggy smiled at the look on Jack's face. "My dad was from out of town. He walked straight into it, poor bugger. Alicia married Troy Rigby and I appeared a year later. Lavinia is seven years older than me, in case you're lost."

"I was just doing the maths." Jack said in a daze.

"My dad recovered from arsenic poisoning when I was ten, but he died of a heart attack in a nursing home five years later. As you'll have noticed, my outlook on life is a tad different to Lavinia's. Her power grabbing tactics were appealing to some though, and there wasn't a shortage of people to jump on the Lavinia bandwagon. I wouldn't."

"So you were exiled for it. Yes?"

"More or less, yes. Lavinia is aware that I can kick her arse though. I was taught as much as she was, but I chose to use my knowledge in a different way. I also had my dad's influence, he was a very good man." Ziggy smiled rather sadly. "Ten years and my mother had him hook line and sinker. Like I said Jack, Lavinia is just like her, you had a lucky escape."

"Is your mother still here?" Jack was struggling to take all this in.

"No. I doubt anyone loses any sleep over it. I know I certainly don't. You look a bit shocked at my coldness." Ziggy smiled.

“Do I? Nope. Not at all, it's not my business.” Jack babbled. He was a bit shocked actually. He knew first hand with Lynne how strong a mother and child bond could be.

“Well let's just say she wasn't a model mother.” Ziggy shrugged.

“Are you all so openly explanatory here?” Jack laughed.

“As in 'shut up prattling on Ziggy?'. ” Ziggy laughed too. “No, actually I'm not. I'm not sure why I'm parading my skeletons out in front of you either. I'm usually a secretive little shit.”

“Ah well it's good to talk sometimes. That's one thing your sister was right about, even though she's contrived the whole situation.” Jack sighed noisily. “I still can't get my head round all this. I'm lost. Would it be rude to ask what it is that you actually do believe in?”

“Not rude at all. It's quite refreshing actually. Makes a change from the usual 'devil worshipper' war cry.” Ziggy saw Jack wince. “Been there, done that eh?” She laughed. “Well you'll have heard of Pagans, Jack, it's not all hush-hush these days and witchcraft isn't a hanging crime anymore.”

“So is that what everyone is here? Witches?” Jack was still desperate to find a normal explanation for all this, then to stick to it like glue.

“Not everyone, no, although there are an abnormally high number of us together here. That's because of parents passing it down to their children. The non-pagans just get used to it after a while, providing the don't get Lavinia and her goons on their cases, like you have.” Ziggy pulled a face.

“So you mistrust Lavinia so much that you automatically protect anything she shows an interest in?” Jack asked.

“Yes. I don't need details, just the fact that she's among it, especially when it involves a family that has no apparent connections with this place. I wasn't even sure who she was interested in at first. Here, I made two.” Ziggy handed Jack a talisman identical to Alex's. “I took advantage of the natural curiosity kids have and 'planted' Alex's where he'd see it. I'm sorry about that, by the way. I really did need to get those protections to you, especially after Lavinia's performance at that dinner dance. If I'd walked up to you with that, you'd have I was the village idiot.”

“Umm ... been there done that too.” Jack cringed. “Sorry. So you talismaned my chair?”

“Yep! I was quite pleased with that, you know. I put the bottles round your house after I saw Lavinia coming out of it, that night it was pissing down. I'm presuming she'd been to invite you to dinner.” Ziggy explained.

“They worked too!” Jack nodded. “She could hardly keep her head up or her eyes open. I think her comment of 'damn you' may not have been directed at me at all.”

“Ha-ha! In your face, you old troll!” Ziggy guffawed.

“Look Ziggy, I'm way out of my depth here and I have to trust someone among it all. You come highly recommended by Mrs Wilson and Dr Pallister mentioned you too. Will you help me?” Jack asked seriously.

“I've been helping you for two months.” Ziggy nodded.

“Do I have to do anything? You said you'd have to sort that hex stuff out here. Alex won't need to be here will he?” Jack asked uncertainly.

“No, that's not necessary. Just make sure you cancel all your visitors and the phone's off the hook. Do you have a picture of Alex I could use? That's one thing Lavinia won't have and that gives us the edge.”

“I have hundreds. Anything else? Do I have to do anything?” Jack ran his fingers through his hair.

“You're nervous eh?” Ziggy winked at Jack. “No. Your love for your son is all we'll need. I'll phone you before I come, if I may? After that, unplug the line.”

“Yes of course.” Jack nodded. “I'll go and put my bottles back. I won't have buggered them up will I? I ... well I put them in the bin.” He said apologetically.

“Put them back and I'll give them a swift recharge when I get back.” Ziggy opened the front door. “Jack? I know all this must seem like something out of a nasty b-movie and I know you're about cabbaged with it. I don't for one minute expect you to trust me fully, but thanks for giving me a chance.”

Chapter 6

Jack tucked Alex into bed in his own room, then sat on a chair next to him. He still wasn't well, but nowhere near the day's alarming state. He was still very pale and still complaining of his head feeling fuzzy.

"Ziggy says those bad dreams should stop now." Jack smiled and put Mr Crawley into bed with Alex. "But if they do come back, remember they're only dreams and I'm only downstairs."

"I think I could make them go dad." Alex said bravely. "If I pretend Ziggy's glass stones are here then I can push the bad dreams into them. She said they didn't mind at all." This non-plussed Jack completely.

"Well if that works for you, yes." He shrugged. "You obviously understand it better than I do."

"It was like I could feel all the main bits of me, all separate. I went all stiff and it hurt but when I thought of my main bits, Ziggy's stones pulled the sore bits off me." Alex nodded.

"Yeah? That's weird." Jack shook his head. "Cool, but weird."

"She's nice isn't she dad?" Alex rearranged his pillow.

"Yes she is." Jack agreed.

"Is she coming to see you tonight? I wasn't being nosey, I heard you on the phone." Alex pulled up his blankets.

"She is, yes." Jack smiled.

"Is it because of me?"

"Well she'll want to know if you're OK, of course she will." Jack deflected. "Nothing to worry about, Alex, she's just a very nice lady and she's concerned about us, that's all. Come on, get some sleep."

"I will." Alex nodded. "Dad?" Jack paused at the door. "She won't mind me having mum's picture here will she?"

"Oh Alex." Jack came back and sat on the bed. "Of course she won't. Why on earth would she?"

"Well maybe if she likes you she won't want mum's picture around." Alex frowned at Mr Crawley.

"Hey now come on." Jack brushed his son's hair out of his eyes. "That's not how it works, Alex. Ziggy is our friend, both of us. She's our friend because of everything about us, and that includes the fact that we had mum. It's part of us."

“So she won't want to be in mum's place?”

“No way. I very much doubt Ziggy's even thought about that even a teensy bit. She's our friend. No one could be in mum's place Alex and real friends would know that too.” Jack was rather surprised at Alex's thoughts on this. Did kids always jump the gun like that? “Does it upset you that I have female friends? I'd never upset you on purpose.”

“No it doesn't upset me at all. I like Ziggy, she's ultra cool. As long as I can have Ziggy as my friends, and mum in my head, then that's good. You do the grown-up bit dad, I'm just a kid.” Alex shrugged and Jack started to laugh.

“A kid with a very active imagination.” He kissed his son's forehead, then left the door open.

Jack had unplugged the phone, shoved the packing crates into the cupboard under the stairs and was now sitting on the edge of the sofa feeling rather apprehensive. What the hell had he agreed to? He could just picture Greg's reaction to all this and it involved much mirth and laughter at Jack's expense. He was vaguely aware of voices in the street and he went to switch on the radio to add a bit of noise to his silent surroundings.

“Oh shit. What now?” He recognised Ziggy's voice straight away and peeped through the curtains. “Jesus.” Ziggy was there, so were Lavinia, Eric and about a dozen other people. Jack ran to the front door and pulled it open.

“Stay in there Jack.” Ziggy said.

“Yes do as you're told Jack.” Lavinia sneered.

“Up yours, Lavinia. He knows you can't go in there without puking your guts up, and he knows why.” Ziggy sniped and Lavinia seethed. The rest of the congregation exchanged uncertain glances. “You're not getting him, Lavinia. I couldn't give a rat's arse why you want him, but the fact that you do means I don't want you to. Piss off!”

“Can we *not* have a fight in the bloody street?” Jack eventually found his voice. “Clear off! There's people asleep in here. Naff off out of it before I call the coppers.”

“At your service.” A uniformed man shrugged and walked over to stand next to Lavinia.

“Oh wonderful.” Jack rolled his eyes. “What do you want?”

“I was on my way here to see you.” Lavinia smiled at Jack.

“You were on your way here in a panic because you found out I'd been here. You wanted to know how much damage I'd undone, hence the pet ape brother over there. Hiya Eric!” Ziggy gave everyone a false smile.

“So does that involve half the district?” Jack snapped. “Who I have in my house is my own business.”

“You don't understand, Mr O'Connor.” This was Mrs Hattersly, Alex's head teacher.

“Damn right I don't, you bunch of weirdos.” Jack shouted. “What I do understand is that even Ziggy's talisman had you all wetting yourselves, let alone Ziggy herself. That's all I need to know for now.”

“You're a very ignorant man.” Eric spoke up. “You have no idea of the magnitude of this, or of the importance of your son.” That was a definite red rag to the bull.

“I'm very well aware of my son's importance *to me*.” Jack snarled. “Mention him again and I'll knock every tooth out of your head.”

“Oo! Owned or what Eric?” Ziggy hauled her backpack up to Jack's front door. “They know I'm going to try and reverse the hex.” She whispered to Jack. “They'll do anything to distract me, even damaging your property. I'm so sorry, Jack, I did my best to get away from them, and to get them away from here.”

“Yes I heard.” Jack pushed Ziggy behind of himself. “So? I can stand here all night, although I'd rather not.” He shouted to the rest of them.

“It won't work, Ziggy!” Lavinia shouted. “It has nothing to do with you, you little fool.”

“Bah, you old bat.” Ziggy was in the hallway. “I am protected by your might ...” Jack turned round to see her kneeling on the floor and smudging something on herself that smelled like peppermint.

“Ziggy?” Jack blinked a few times.

“Shh. Just keep them occupied.” Ziggy waved her hand at Jack. “I am protected by your might, Gracious Goddess, day and night. Thrice around the circle bound, Malice sink into the ground.” Jack was absolutely transfixed on the scene in his hallway. It amazed him, confused him, but also fascinated him. Eric kicked an empty can at Jack's steps and jolted him out of his daze.

“Oi! Go on, keep it up. I'll kick the shit into you, mate!” Jack pointed at Eric. “Back off! I'm warning you. Your pisspot coppers here might be in your pocket but I doubt the district headquarters are.”

“And what would you report us for?” Lavinia sneered.

“I think over a dozen people giving me aggravation outside my own house could be seen as harassment. Don't you? Oh and you still owe me seventy four quid lady. A quick feel of your boobs doesn't let you off the hook.” Jack bellowed and Lavinia snarled in outraged embarrassment and her companions looked very awkward indeed.

“You are making a very big mistake.” Lavinia hissed. “People are going to get hurt, they already have been hurt because of your damned family.”

“Yeah yeah.” Jack coughed and pulled a face at whatever it was that Ziggy was flinging around his house.

“A pledge is a pledge Jack O'Connor. Ziggy can't change that.”

“She can have a bloody good go as far as I'm concerned.” Jack said through a coughing fit.

“Ziggy! You bitch!” Eric yelled, looking up towards the roof. Jack did likewise and saw clouds of dust billowing from his upstairs window. “Lavinia, get out of the way!” Eric pulled his sister clear of the clouds.

“I will kill you for this, Ziggy.” Lavinia screeched.

“Oh go boil your head.” Ziggy gave her the two fingered salute from the upstairs window. “You can't get in so blah blah. None of your other kiss-arses would dare try. You lose. Bugger off.” Some of the 'kiss-arses' were already sloping off out of sight.

“My delusional sister can't change a thing, Jack.” Lavinia pointed at Jack. “Even if she lifts my hex, more will follow.”

“And I'll lift those too.” Ziggy appeared at Jack's side. “I'll be in your face at every turn, Lavinia. Nice eh? Hey Eric! Your knuckles are trailing on the ground! Come on Jack.” Ziggy went inside. Jack waited until Lavinia and Eric were out of sight, then joined Ziggy. “I'm sorry for traipsing around your house like that, please forgive me.”

“What was that stuff? Pepper?” Jack blew his nose on a tissue.

“Yes. Black and red pepper, ginger and the good old hippie scent. Great stuff is that, and it smells the part.” Ziggy grinned. “It's a more irritating version of the bottles, and it's airborne. The dust's just about covered your house for now so it's pretty effective. See it as an asshole repellent.”

“So they just cleared off because it was making them sneeze?” Jack asked in bewilderment. “And what was that poem you were saying?”

“You aren't going to believe in spells even when you see one being cast, are you?” Ziggy smiled. “The poem was a protection ritual for me. I charged the dust with my own energy so it'll work for quite a while.”

“Er ... If you say so.” Jack shrugged in a daze. “I had the police district phone number up on the phone.”

“Well by the time they'd got here, Cruella De Ville and her crew would have been long gone.” Ziggy shrugged and began unpacking her rucksack. “May I borrow your coffee table? I've brought a cloth so I won't mark the wood.”

“Yes, go for it.” Jack nodded, standing there like a spare part. “Do you want anything? Drink?”

“I'd love a beer please, if you have any.” Ziggy smiled. Jack wandered off into the kitchen to re-question his own sanity. He'd agreed to some sort of Pagan spell-casting and protection ritual with his seven year old son upstairs. How insane did that sound? When he got back to the sitting room, Ziggy had draped a grey cloth over the table and set three candles on it, a grey one, a black one and a white one. “Is ... is that a cauldron?” Jack blurted, pointing at the four inch diameter miniature pewter pot.

“Cute isn't it?” Ziggy smiled. “Do you have Alex's picture?” Jack handed her one from his wallet and Ziggy placed it next to a small mirror and a bundle of grey coloured tape. “Is anyone asthmatic? I can leave out the incense if you don't like it, not everyone does.”

“It's fine. Do as you see fit, Ziggy.” Jack sat on the sofa out of the way. “It smells quite nice actually.”

“Frankincense.” Ziggy told him. “All the grey is symbolic of delaying or obscuring. I need to 'confuse' Lavinia's hex into dissipating itself.” Jack just nodded. “Binding Alex's picture to the mirror means that anyone directing anything towards him will have it reflected right back.”

“Yes, I'm with you so far.” Jack frowned and nodded. “The black and white candles?”

“Black is a 'mind' thing. I need to get pretty spaced out to handle Lavinia's shit and black opens the mind. White's pretty obvious, protection and purity.” Ziggy stood up. “Now then, let's have at it.” She stood and concentrated on the floor while Jack sat perfectly still and wished he'd brought a few dozen cans from the kitchen.

“Great Forces to my right, Mighty Goddess to my left. Temple Moon above me, Goddess Earth below me.” Ziggy touched her right shoulder, left shoulder, forehead and stomach. “Archangel Raphael, master of the Air, guard me from the East.” Ziggy faced Jack and made a complicated looking gesture in the air. Jack tried not to look nervous. Then she turned to face the door.

“Archangel Michael, wielder of Fire, guard me from the South. Archangel Gabriel of the Waters, guard me from the West. Archangel Uriel, commander of Earth, guard me from the North. Great forces to my right, Mighty Goddess to my left. All around me shines the light of the Angels, within me shines the light of the Lady.”

Jack was completely enthralled and fascinated. He thought he actually felt the temperature changing! He looked at his can and put it down quickly when he thought he saw a very thin, very hazy, blue bubble forming around Ziggy. She knelt down in front of the table and closed her eyes. Jack found himself holding his breath, afraid of disturbing her peace and tranquility.

“Lift this hex from this innocent child.” Ziggy began to wrap the mirror and the picture of Alex together using the grey tape. “You will find your way to him no more. Your path will be obscured and unreadable. The mirror reflects no lies, what is dealt to Alexander O'Connor will be returned three times three. I triple seal this thread, and offer it to the heart of the Great Mother for protection. Blur and fog, mist and haze, lay your breath along their ways. I seal this bidding three times three, my own free will so let it be.” Ziggy put the completely wrapped picture and mirror into the cauldron and sprinkled it with water. “Goddess Tears for one so young. I place Alexander into the very womb of the Mother for protection. Lift the hex and let him be free.”

Ziggy fell silent again and Jack was feeling extremely emotional. Emotional stress, confusion, and the sheer unreality of all this. It was like something from a fairy tale, and fairy tales were always enchanting and beautiful. This was no exception. Even if this was a lot of hippie twaddle, something that Jack was seriously doubting now, he would have to have been a stone slab not to be moved by something so beautiful and sincere.

“Gracious Goddess, my appreciation and gratitude for your presence tonight. Archangels of the Quarters, my humble thanks for your protection.” Ziggy frowned at the floor again and breathed deeply and evenly. Jack was prepared to swear for the rest of his life that he *saw* the blue tinge lifting from his sitting room. “Woohoo! What a blast! I love fortification spells. What a ritual!” Jack saw that Ziggy was shaking slightly and he got up off the sofa, shaking more than slightly himself.

“I'm OK to come over, am I?” He asked. “I won't be wading through anything, will I?”

“No, all done. Nothing to break now.” Ziggy smiled. Jack tiptoed over anyway, carrying his own beer and what was left of Ziggy's.

“I don't know what to say.” He sat on the floor with her. “I honestly and truly don't know what to say.”

“Well at least you aren't laughing.” Ziggy smiled.

“Of course I'm not! I don't claim to understand even half of all that, but I know it was beautiful and heartfelt.” Jack nodded. “I've given up on giving opinions on spells and magic and the like, but anything said with so much feeling, and so much sincerity, is worth a hundred doctors and a chest of gold. Thankyou Ziggy.”

“You're quite receptive to all this.” Ziggy said truthfully. “That's your unconditional love for Alex. The whole thing touched your emotional self quite strongly and quite easily. All I did was channel my own sense of right, and your overwhelming love just shone through.” Ziggy smiled at Jack. “Yes it was beautiful and wonderful, and you were a big a part of it as I was.”

Jack pushed a strand of hair behind Ziggy's ear, then touched her face with his hand. He thought he saw the blue haze seeping back, Ziggy knew it was back. There wasn't a force in existence that could have got through that bubble as it protected Jack and Ziggy in their own world. Protection by the blue tinged haze and everything it stood for.

Jack seriously doubted that he'd ever stop smiling again. The night air was rapidly chilling their sweat-sheened skin and Jack pulled a rug off the back of the sofa to wrap them both in.

“How old are you Ziggy?” Jack studied Ziggy's beautiful, elven face. She was absolutely nothing like her half-sister. She had the type of face that you simply couldn't put an age to and her tiny size confused the issue even more.

“Twelve.” Ziggy sniggered. “You bad man.”

“And you're drinking beer?” Jack laughed.

“Ha! I'm twenty five. Birthday yesterday.” Ziggy nodded.

“Happy birthday!” Jack kissed her nose. “So you were brought up with all this?”

“Yes. It's a beautiful way of life, Jack. It's never meant to be abused like it has been by Lavinia and her scrubbers. It's terrifying to think about the retribution she'll get for all that abuse.”

“She'll be aware of all that.” Jack shrugged. “I can't believe *this* happened.” He kissed Ziggy's shoulder. “Of all the goings on of tonight and all the outcomes, this just wasn't in the equation at all.”

“Well if this is what happens after a veiling spell, I dread to think what the pair of us would be like if I got out the rose petals and chocolate.” Ziggy laughed.

“I'll hold you to that.” Jack grinned. “You know, I didn't actually realise what a rut I was in. Alex and me are just fine, we always will be, but I didn't realise how much I'd missed closer, adult company.”

“How long has it been?”

“Twelve months. I thought you knew?” Jack said.

“I knew nothing until Lavinia screeched it at me in her house. What a digging I gave her.” Ziggy sniffed.

“You hit her?” Jack burst out laughing.

“You bet I did! Nasty old bitch. That was unbelievably vicious and cruel of her. Her nastiness still astonishes me, even after this length of time.” Ziggy sighed. “So do you think Lynne would approve?”

“I'm positive of it. So is Alex.” Jack laughed.

“Alex? I thought you said this was unexpected?”

“Oh it was. Or at least it was to me, apparently not so to Alex. He told me to get on with the grown up stuff and leave the easy kid's stuff with him.”

“He's a fantastic kid.” Ziggy found that very funny indeed. “He must have been so confused this afternoon and a mad hippie sticking crystals all over him isn't exactly ordinary.”

“It is to him. If I didn't stop you, why should he?” Jack shrugged. “Trust.”

“Makes sense. He seems to be having a quite night.”

“Quieter than his old man anyway.” Jack grinned and caught hold of Ziggy.

Chapter 7

“Hey Slogger!” Jack held out his arms as Alex walked into the kitchen the following day. “Sleep well?”

“All night!” Alex ran to his dad. “And I don't feel wobbly at all, much.”

“Great! Wobbly enough for a day off school though, right?” Jack smiled and began getting breakfast.

“Oh yes. I'm too wobbly for school.” Alex said pathetically. “What's that up there?” He changed the subject and pointed to a row of glass jars full of salt. Three jars containing the earring, the stone from Mr Crawley, and the grey bound photograph and mirror.

“Ziggy's stuff. She's collecting them later.” She'd asked for them to be left undisturbed for a few hours before she took them away.

“Did you tell her I feel better?”

“I certainly did. She'll see for herself later. She's coming for lunch, if that's OK with you?” Jack sat down at the table with his son.

“As long as you don't make it. You'll show us all up. Let Mrs Wilson do it.”

“Good idea.” Jack laughed. “You are OK with Ziggy, aren't you Alex? You're not worried like you were last night?”

“No. I wasn't really worried, dad, just checking. Ziggy's way cool.”

“She is. Anyway I'm going to catch up on some work so you can go and find a DVD to watch. Mrs Wilson will be here in half an hour.”

Jack spent a good two hours getting through a backlog of work he'd accumulated and was feeling very pleased with the world in general. Even the phone ringing only caused a mild apprehension attack.

“Jack O'Connor.”

“Jack, it's Robert.” Jack almost dropped the phone and felt his mood tightening. A call from Lynne's dad wasn't really what he wanted right now. Having said that, he'd avoided this for far too long and he knew it. “I hope you've settled in OK?” Mr Reynolds asked formally.

“Yes, Robert, thanks. We've settled in great.”

“I presume you've had no letters regarding Joan and myself?” Here we go.

"I haven't, no." Jack said warily.

"We've placed an official court order regarding access to see Alex." Robert said quickly.

"You're taking me to court?!" Jack exploded.

"It's just to have it clarified sensibly, Jack, to give it a bit of structure." Robert said firmly.

"Robert, I don't have time to turn up at bloody court hearings!" Jack snapped.

"We were getting nowhere! We've asked and better asked to see Alex and nothing ever came of it." Robert argued and Jack couldn't really argue back.

"I ... I know Robert. I know. I know it was my fault too. I just didn't know what to do, I've told you all that."

"Well you don't have to now. We've done it for you." Robert said shortly.

"Robert this won't go well with Alex. It'll look like we're battling over him. Please let me talk to him first? He's old enough now to understand a bit more. I'd actually decided to talk to him about it a few days ago, Robert. I've just had a lot on the go." Jack exhaled loudly.

"Jack, you always have a lot on the go." Robert stated. "We've been kept from our grandson for seven years."

"Yes, yes I know." Jack said patiently. "The last twelve months were purely a continuation from what Lynne started. I've honestly no idea why she reacted so strongly Robert, but she was my wife, Alex's mum. Please let me talk to him first. We don't need legal intervention, Robert."

"I'm of the opinion that we do, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt." Robert said and Jack let out a sigh of relief. "Oh one more thing Jack."

"Yes?"

"Your new girlfriend isn't a substitute mother for Alex. Don't cut my daughter out of the picture when it comes to Alex."

"I beg your pardon?" Jack's usually very mild temper rocketed. How the hell did he know? What the hell did he know? How dare he try and order his life like that? "My private life, and how I conduct it, is none of your business, Robert! The time I had with your daughter as my wife was fantastic and no one, not anyone, can take that away from me and Alex. Something like that isn't replaceable so don't dare suggest to me that it is. Do you understand me?" Jack said darkly. "And while we're on the subject, how did you know I had a girlfriend? I only knew I had a girlfriend last night!"

"We know people in that area, Jack. You knew that when you moved there." Robert replied.

"So what were these people that you know doing? Looking through my window?" Jack asked angrily.

"Ziggy Rigby isn't exactly a run of the mill member of society, is she Jack?" Robert said testily.

"You ... you know her?" Jack said in disbelief.

“Know of her. She's a ... weirdo Jack! I'm thinking of Alex.” Robert said and Jack could tell even down the phone that he was playing a sympathy card.

“I always think of Alex! Ziggy Rigby is no weirdo. She's a fantastic lady and both Alex and me think a great deal of her. Do you honestly think I'd introduce a bad influence to Alex? Come on, Robert, you know me better than that.” Jack snapped.

“You, yes. Her, no. Remember Jack, she isn't a factor in all this, she isn't Alex's mother.” Robert lectured.

“Ah right.” Jack nodded. “I think I know where this is coming from. I think I know what's bugging you. Robert I promise you that Ziggy would never assume she had the right to an opinion on access rights between you and Alex, absolutely not. For a start, I wouldn't even involve her in it, there's no need to.” Jack shook his head in disbelief. Was this a bloody conspiracy?

“I'd hope not. Have that talk with Alex after your guest leaves.” Robert said ominously.

“I don't have any ...” The doorbell rang and Jack looked at his watch. “Where the hell are you, Robert? Are you having my house watched?!” He shouted. “Get your nosey friends out of my business, Robert, I'm warning you. You'll have legalities until you're a hundred if you don't back off!” Jack threw down the receiver. “You old bastard!”

“Dad?” Alex was peeping round the door.

“You knock first!” Jack snapped. “Shit! I'm sorry Alex. I didn't mean to yell, Slogger. Come here.” Alex ran over to his dad.

“You weren't grumpy before.” He said warily.

“No and I shouldn't be grumpy now, not with you especially.” Jack ruffled his son's red hair and smiled. “Sorry.”

“Ziggy's here. Don't get grumpy with her, she can swear better than you.” Alex said seriously and Jack burst out laughing.

Ziggy had turned up armed with the hugest trifle created. Mrs Wilson hid it on the top shelf of the fridge until after lunch, which made Alex tut loudly seeing as he thought the trifle *was* lunch. Jack was still seething inside and hoped he was hiding it well. Robert Reynolds was certainly *not* going to tell him who he could speak in front of, and about what, in his own home.

“Alex I need to talk to you about something very important.” Jack said in front of Ziggy in his own back kitchen.

“I'll go wash the trifle dish. I need it at home.” Ziggy smiled and stood up.

“To make another trifle?” Alex asked eagerly.

“You bet. Sweets bad for you? Pfft!” Ziggy wandered over to the sink.

“Are we going to talk about Ziggy?” Alex asked in a voice as loud as a fog horn.

“Er ... well no.” Jack said awkwardly and Ziggy sniggered childishly. “You won't can remember

mum's parents, can you?"

"No but I've seen pictures of them." Alex nodded. "Have they died?" He asked bluntly, as seven year olds did.

"No, no of course not." Jack said quickly. "They used to look after you sometimes when you were a baby. They haven't seen you for a long time, Slogger, and they've missed you." He picked his words very carefully.

"If they missed me, why didn't they come and see me?" Alex asked logically and Jack grimaced inwardly.

"They moved away for a while, that's all." Jack lied. He flatly refused to tell a seven year old child that his mum had disowned her parents. He'd never understand that at all. "They phoned me and asked if you'd like to see them again." Jack nodded.

"No, not really." Alex shrugged and wiped a blob of cream from his t shirt.

"Huh? Why?" That threw Jack a bit and Robert was almost certainly see it as Jack's negative influence, or even worse, Ziggy's. "Well they're your grandparents, Alex. It wasn't really their fault that they couldn't see you for so long." Jack tried.

"But I don't know them." Alex said simply.

"No, that's true. You could get to know them though." Jack suggested.

"Oh. Oh OK then." Alex nodded. "Can I go up to my room now, please? I'm tired."

"Of course you can. Are you OK? Not wobbly?" Jack asked in concern. Alex shook his head and trailed out of the room. "Why do I have to have a neurotic seven year old?" Jack sighed and Ziggy came to sit on his knee. "I think I ballsed that up. I can understand it actually, they're strangers to him."

"It's a shame they lost contact." Ziggy wiped a smear of jelly from Jack's collar. "Where did they move to?"

"They didn't." Jack exhaled loudly and told Ziggy all about the circumstances surrounding Alex and his grandparents. "The thing is, after all the dithering about I've done, they're going to think a refusal is my doing. Actually the mood I'm in with Robert just now, it just might be. I can't believe the old fart threatened me with legal crap!"

"It could be just desperation to see Alex. Like you said, it wasn't really their fault they couldn't see him." Ziggy shrugged.

"So I said ... what ... exactly, to upset him?" Jack frowned at the kitchen door.

"I'm not sure." Ziggy shrugged unhelpfully. "I'm not used with kids. Maybe he thinks you're insisting? I honestly don't know." They heard the front door closing and didn't put much pass on it until Jack saw Mrs Wilson, three seconds later, hanging out laundry.

"Alex!" Jack jumped to his feet sending Ziggy staggering into the table. "Alex!" He ran for the door, Ziggy close behind him. Jack could see his son's red head marching purposefully down the

road. "Alex! Wait!" Jack set off at a sprint after him. "Alex, the road!" He screamed as Alex walked straight across a side-street, causing a motorist to break sharply. "Jesus." Jack was pushing people out of his way as he ran down the pavement. Alex turned and sprinted down the side street, the street that lead to the main road. "Someone stop that child! For shit's sake are you all retarded!" Jack bellowed. "Alex!" He watched in complete horror as Alex tried to stop, then stumble into the main road, right in the path of an oncoming bus. "Oh no. Jesus Christ no!"

Ziggy shot across the road, grabbing Alex, then rolling with him to the very middle of the road. She curled up in a ball with Alex and shielded his head as traffic sped past on either side of them.

"It's OK Ziggy." Jack put one arm round Ziggy and lifted Alex with the other before steering them to safety on the pavement.

"Let me go!" Alex kicked at Jack. He was terrified. "Put me down!"

"Alex!" Jack dropped his son then took him by the shoulders. "What the hell is wrong with you? Don't you ever *ever* do that again! Do you hear me?!" He roared.

"Let go of me!" Alex sobbed. "You don't want me now!"

"What?" Jack almost burst into tears. "Alex of course I want you!"

"No you don't. You have her now so you're sending me away to people I don't even know!" Alex yelled back.

"Hey! You'll watch your rude mouth!" Jack pointed at his son.

"You said I didn't have to forget mum and it would be OK." Alex shook with tears. "You promised! I hate you!"

"Alex it is OK." Jack knelt down on the pavement. "I want you more than anything. Anything in the world."

"You want her more than anything." Alex snivelled.

"Now stop that." Jack said firmly.

"Jack, it's OK." Ziggy warbled in shock.

"No, no it's not OK. Alex I would never send you away, not for any reason or any purpose. Not ever. Do you understand? Ziggy knows all about mum and she knows how much we both loved her. OK? She'd never tell anyone to stop loving, Alex, let alone two people who she cares so much for." Ziggy let the tears stream down her face. This was heart-wrenching and poor Alex was so confused. "She doesn't want to take mum away, please believe me. She wants to be with us, all of us. Ziggy wants to be with you too, not just me. No one would send you anywhere, you're too important."

"I'm ..."

"It's OK." Jack held Alex in his arms. "It would have been wrong if I hadn't passed Granda Robert's message on to you. I promised him and Grandama Joan that I'd tell you. They miss you, that's all. That's fine too though, if you don't want to go. I'm happy as it is now."

"I'm sorry." Alex started to cry again.

“You don't have to be sorry, Slogger. It's been just me and you for so long eh? Now all of a sudden you get Ziggy and you get grandparents and they all want a piece of you!” Jack smiled. “Hey Ziggy, what would you have done if I'd told Alex he had to go away?”

“I'd have kicked your big arse until your nose bled.” Ziggy's voice cracked through her own tears and Alex managed a watery smile.

“See? Hella cool.” Jack winked his encouragement to Ziggy.

“So!” Ziggy said planting her hands on her hips. “This is shite.” She swore on purpose to make Alex laugh. “There used to be ice-cream vans all over this street! Bah! Every corner should sell ice cream. Oi! Do you sell ice cream?” She darted at a very startled man dressed in a smart business suit.

“Er ... no. I'm in real estate.” The man blinked in alarm at Ziggy. Jack and Alex howled with laughter.

“Real estate? As in ... ice cream factories?” Ziggy jumped up and down in front of the man.

“N ... no. Domestic market.” The poor man stammered.

“Aww!” Ziggy stamped her baseball boot foot. “Come on Alex, we'll go to the park. Pfft!. Oh you can come too if you like, Jack.”

“Great!” Alex grabbed his dad's hand.

“Thanks Mr Frobisher.” Ziggy grinned at the bemused estate agent.

“Er ... no worries Lady Ziggy.” Mr Frobisher almost ran away down the street. Jack almost fainted when Ziggy shot up a tree, ice cream in mouth, then hung out of it to help Alex up there too.

“You're nuts!” He squeaked. “For crying out loud be careful, the pair of you.”

“Is he always such a fuss pot?” Ziggy said loudly, blowing Jack a kiss.

“Oh yes.” Alex nodded, clinging to the tree trunk. “Ziggy? I'm so very sorry for being rude like that.”

“Bah. Call that rude?” Ziggy sniffed. “You should hear me being rude.”

“No he shouldn't. I heard that.” Jack called from the foot of the tree.

“I bet you're very good at it.” Alex dropped his voice to a whisper.

“The best.” Ziggy whispered back.

“Ziggy should I go and see my grandparents? I don't know what to do. I don't want to upset my dad.” Alex looked at Ziggy with his huge eyes.

“Sweetheart, I honestly don't know.” Ziggy put her arm round the little boy. “The way I see it, it's

completely up to you. That's a very lucky position to be in. Whatever you want to do, your dad will be right there behind you. Anything you do will always be fine by him, you know that."

"Have you got grandparents?"

"No. They never got chance to see me when I was a baby. They'd gone before I was born." Ziggy smiled.

"What about your mum and dad? Dad has no mum and dad anymore." Alex looked through the leaves to see Jack.

"I don't either." Ziggy shrugged.

"The lady with the black hair is your sister though, right?" Alex asked. "I sometimes wish I had a brother or sister."

"Well don't wish for one like mine. She's a horrible old toad." Ziggy pulled a face and made Alex laugh. "Ah it's sad when families fall out. All mine fell out with each other! Oo! There was cussing and rudeness all over the place!" She grinned.

"You don't look like your sister at all." Alex nodded.

"That's a compliment. No I look like my dad did. Me and Lavinia had the same mum, but we had different dads. She's my half sister. Um ... did you get all that?" Ziggy hugged Alex.

"I think so." Alex frowned. "Does that work the other way round too? If you and dad had a baby then we'd have the same dad and different mums. Is that the same?"

"Yes it is. Well you are a smart one, Alex O'Connor." Ziggy didn't know what impressed her more, his intelligence or his matchmaking. "But you'd be a proper brother, so that makes it a bit different. You'd be a nice brother. I just got an old bitch and an old creep. I have a half brother too and he's the pits!"

"Ah I think you're OK on your own." Alex said wisely. "If your brother's like your sister then they'll be a pair of bitches together." Ziggy snorted a laugh.

"Oi!" Jack had heard that too.

"Oh you *so* got that out of context" Ziggy shouted. "Come on Alex, we'll go and dive on your dad."

Alex eventually ran off to assault the climbing frame, leaving Jack and Ziggy sitting on the grass.

"I'm not telling you, so don't ask." Ziggy said.

"Hmm?"

"You were going to ask me what Alex was talking about." She looked sideways at Jack.

"I wasn't!" Jack protested. "Ok. Yes I was. Well?"

"Families. Hopefully his outlook and mine will give him a base for thought of his own." Ziggy smiled.

“Match up? Ziggy, you don't like yours.” Jack laughed.

“With good reason.” Ziggy nodded. “Obviously I didn't go into detail, but I told Alex they were ... um ...”

“A pair of bitches.”

“A bitch and a creep. Lavinia and Eric, respectively.” Ziggy smiled. “You do realise that my borderline language is just for the situation, don't you? I certainly don't agree with adult language to or in front of children.”

“Yes of course. I know why you're doing it and it's working perfectly. He loves you, so do I.” Jack kissed the top of Ziggy's head.

“Already? Hell I'm good.” Ziggy smiled widely. “For shit's sake, even his shadow's gibbonish. Hello Eric.” She turned round to see the old creep in person.

“Eric don't start here.” Jack said darkly. “Alex is over there. No crap.”

“Isn't this cosy?” Eric sat down with them.

“Well it was. What do you want?” Ziggy looked at her half brother.

“I want you to back off, Ziggy.”

“You don't say.” Ziggy heaved.

“No one expected you to become his lover. You're in too deep.” Eric lectured.

“Bugger all business of yours.” Ziggy replied. “If I wasn't going to back off when I *wasn't* his lover, I'm hardly going to now that I am, am I? Logic never was your forte, Eric.” Ziggy said patiently.

“You probably won't believe this, but I do care, just a tiny bit, what happens to you.” Eric said and Ziggy snorted loudly. “Lavinia couldn't give a rat's arse, she hates you. I'm not Lavinia.”

“No you're her right hand kiss arse, you always were.” Ziggy turned to face Eric squarely. “You know what's really incredible about all this? I don't even know what you're telling me to back off from! The fact that Lavinia wants her claws in him, and that child, is enough for me. *That's* caring, Eric. That's all the motivation I needed and it worked out great for me. The reason I'm with Jack *now* is a result of the pure and good reasons I went to him in the past. You said you care what happens to me? Don't start now, you never did. I don't need your care, Eric. I have someone right here who cares about be, because I care about him.”

“It's that unconditional caring that's going to get you hurt, Ziggy.” Eric sighed. “You can't undo this, and you can't fight it. How big will the wrench be now, compared to a week ago? I'm your brother Ziggy. I remember the belts, the whips, the fists, as well as you do. I remember hiding you in drawers, cupboards and with my own body to save you a stick across your back. We all got that, Ziggy, all three of us. It's well known that violence perpetuates from parents to children and it has done in Lavinia. She's exactly like mother, you know she is. Who's needed the most influence over the years, Ziggy? Who's needed the stability to counteract the insanity? You? I don't think so.”

“You drove me out of my community, Eric. You all did. You saw me on a hut on France Lane before

I bought Hallow Break.”

“You had to leave, she'd have killed you otherwise.” Eric shook his head. “And you couldn't come back. The psychosis she'd have unleashed on the folk here would have been unthinkable. She hates you, Ziggy. You wouldn't join the majority and she despises you for it. She needs me to keep her on the right side of sanity.”

“So she's a loony.” Ziggy shrugged. “Are you going to tell me anything new? So she needed you more than I did? Well nothing's changed there then, has it?”

“The wrench that's bound to come from this will cripple you, Ziggy. It'll destroy you and you'll never pull through it. Go back to Hallow Break and leave it be.” Eric said wearily.

“How about no!!” Ziggy said flatly. “It actually means more to me that I'd like to admit that you took the time to come and see me now. It's too little, too late. You sided with the greed, the misplaced power and the sheer numbers. Don't use Lavinia's screwed up head as an excuse, it was your choice. I have what I want.” Ziggy pointed to Jack. “If you do care anything for me, tell me why she wants them.”

“I can't.” Eric shook his head.

“That much eh? OK. Warning heard, not heeded. Bugger off.” Ziggy stood up and Jack struggled to his feet in a daze alongside her.

“Bernard Pallister is dead, Ziggy. This is how it will be if you fight on their side.” Eric pointed at Jack. “Get out, Ziggy, and get out quickly.”

“I think you should go.” Jack stepped forward when he saw Alex running over. “Ziggy will be fine with me. I'd never let anything hurt her, your ugly insults included.”

“That's the least of her worries, and yours.” Eric spun round and almost fell over Alex. “Don't get too comfortable, you're ours.”

“No chance, you old creep.” Alex ran behind Jack.

“Well said, son.” Jack put his arm round Ziggy, and held Alex's hand. “Leave my family alone, Eric.” Ziggy and Alex both turned round at the same time and stuck two fingers each up at Eric.

Chapter 8

Ziggy sat in Jack's sitting room in a gloomy silence.

“Alex? You want to go out and play in the garden for a while?” Jack asked his son.

“Has your brother upset you Ziggy?” Alex wasn't easily fooled, even though he was only seven.

“No sweetheart.” Ziggy smiled. “He can't upset me when I've got two fantastic men looking after me!”

“You bet.” Alex said seriously. “You should have kicked his head off, dad.” Off he went to play in the garden.

“My son is a hooligan.” Jack frowned at the door, before coming to kneel in front of Ziggy. “You OK? Had it a bit rough as a kid eh?”

“We all did.” Ziggy smiled sadly. “I told you my mother was nuts. Lavinia and Eric's dad wasn't much better. It's just as well she planted him six feet under.”

“What about your dad? You've mentioned him a few times, very fondly.”

“Well I can't despise him just because he was a doormat, can I?” Ziggy shrugged. “She trampled all over him Jack, broke him completely. Oh don't get me wrong, he didn't ignore the abuse that Alicia was dishing out, he just didn't know. I was too scared to tell him. I can't stand to think about the shit she must have lashed out at him. Don't ask me why he stayed, I honestly don't know.”

“Probably because he loved you, Ziggy.” Jack said. “Single dads are only a recent thing. I know I had the children's services in everything after Lynne died, in a good and supportive way. They wouldn't have involved themselves at all if I was his mum, instead of his dad.” He smiled at Ziggy. “I don't blame you for resenting Eric either. He's obviously one hundred per cent pro Lavinia, and one hundred percent anti Ziggy.”

“He is, yes. I can't deny that he did protect me from a few beatings, but when it came to the crunch, I was still only a half sister and he never let me forget it. He's dished out a few hidings himself until I was too strong for him to do that.” Ziggy said miserably. “What's going on, Jack? They killed Bernard Pallister. You do understand that, don't you?”

“Yes.” Jack nodded. “He was here examining Alex just before you did. You knew he was here didn't you?”

“Yes, of course. That's why I was outside.”

“He was absolutely fine while he was examining Alex at first. He saw the scar on his chest and that was that. Clammed up completely and couldn't wait to get out of the place.”

“The one he got falling off the sofa? Yes I saw it too when I was using the crystals.” Ziggy nodded.

“He said it was a marker.” Jack tried to recall what the doctor had actually said. “Like Alex had been reserved. Then he said he'd said to much, to see you, then he all but ran out. Now he's dead.”

“Marker?” Ziggy frowned. “Made by who?”

“Well no one. It was a scar left by an accident.”

“He told you that you needed to see me? He told me to clear off when he saw me outside. That's when he thought he was treating a little boy for nothing more than a bug. Right. I'm going to rip lumps out of Lavinia.” Ziggy stated flatly.

“Eh? Hellno you are not, you nutter.” Jack sat Ziggy back down. “So these weirdos in town mark people for some reason? They mistook Alex's scar for one of their markers, Ziggy. It's all a mistake! Oh come on! Who the hell marks kids?” Ziggy lifted her hair at the back and turned round. Jack winced and caught his breath when he saw an ugly red scar on the nape of Ziggy's neck. Then he almost fainted when he saw the shape of it. Two curves coming from a single point.

“Branding iron when I was eighteen months old. Three guesses.” Ziggy let go of her hair.

“Good god. I feel sick.” Jack said in sheer revulsion.

“So if mine's a marker, no one's come to lay claim to it.” Ziggy chewed her lip.

“Alex's is a scar!” Jack protested. “We lived fifty miles from here and hardly saw anyone from one week to the next. I think I'd have remembered if there was a freak with a branding iron lurking about.”

“I know. It doesn't make sense does it?” Ziggy scowled.

“It does when you tell yourself that this goofy lot here have it wrong.” Jack nodded. They've seen Alex's scar and mistaken it for one of these markers. He's a kid, Ziggy. He was darting around in the park shirtless on a few occasions, and he goes swimming.”

“So I still go and batter Lavinia. She wanted you to just hand him over, the bitch. That's why she tried to hex you. Cow.” Ziggy said darkly.

“I don't suppose you could hex her into leaving us alone?” Jack suggested.

“I don't cast hexes.” Ziggy smiled. “It would be the equivalent of you pulling a gun and using it on someone.”

“We have to tell them they have the wrong one, Ziggy.” Jack rubbed his eyes.

“Listen carefully to me, Jack.” Ziggy said seriously. “There was no surprise, no outrage, no astonishment, only a casual acceptance, tinged with excitement. Then Lavinia honed in on you. I got wind of her interest in this family as soon as you moved here. They were not phased at all by seeing Alex's scar, Jack. They were expecting a seven year old kid.”

“But not Alex. They got it wrong.” Jack said stubbornly.

“Think about what you've just said.” Ziggy said patiently. “So if it isn't Alex, who is it? They are

expecting a seven year old child. They know one of their markers has been carved on a seven year old child.”

“Shit.” Jack sat down heavily. “They're hurting kids? What the hell are they up to?”

“I don't know but it stinks. OK so even if Alex's is a scar ...”

“Which it is.”

“Aside from Alex's scar by accident, mine certainly isn't. I was burned deliberately, you've just seen it. Up until now I'd filed it away together with the rest of Alicia's wig-outs. Whatever the old loony marked me out for, she didn't get the chance to collect because she was jailed and she died there.” Ziggy frowned in concentration. “Lavinia took over where the old buzzard left off. Obviously Lavinia wasn't as old or as strong. No way could that boiler collect me for anything, I'd kick her teeth in.”

“So she got Eric onside and you kicked his teeth in too. After him came another cronie, then a few more until you were pushed out of the town. Not collected.” Jack nodded. “Arseholes.”

“If I find out why I was marked, then I find out why the interest in Alex. Mistake or not, they think it's the real thing.” Ziggy scratched her chin in thought.

“Mr O'Connor?” Mrs Wilson tapped on the door. “Mr and Mrs Reynolds are here. They said you'd want to see them.”

“What the hell do they want?” Jack erupted. “Six hours can't possibly be classed as procrastination, for shit's sake! Oh, Lynne's parents, Ziggy.” Jack informed her. Ziggy nodded and stood up. “Hey, you don't have to leave.”

“Yes I do.” Ziggy nodded. “I'll go and say 'bye to Alex for five minutes first.”

“Ziggy! When are you coming back? Gah. How pathetic does that sound?” Jack heaved. “I mean, do I phone you?”

“Good idea.” Ziggy smiled back and went into the hallway where Robert and Joan were standing very awkwardly indeed.

“I didn't expect you round here. You didn't give me a lot of time, did you?” Jack said evenly to Robert.

“I couldn't just leave it as it was. You threatened me and hung up.” Robert looked at Ziggy down his nose.

“I'd say I had every right to be a bit abrupt. I'll call you later Ziggy.” Jack smiled. Ziggy nodded and headed for the back door. The Reynolds were oozing dislike and resentment and Jack tried to tell himself that this was understandable. Ziggy was the first girl for Jack since the tragic death of their daughter.

“I see we aren't quite welcome here.” Joan said, sitting stiffly down on the sitting room sofa.

“What? Of course you are.” Jack's patience was at breaking point. “I didn't expect to see you only six hours after I'd spoken with Robert, that's all.”

“Joan agreed with you about the legal action, Jack.” Robert said. “It would look like we were fighting over Alex and that could frighten him.”

“Thanks Joan. He simply wouldn't understand that at all.” Jack sat down too. “It's been too long, I know it has. I just didn't know what to do about it.”

“You could have always put your foot down.” Robert stated.

“We didn't work like that, Robert. It was Lynne's decision and it involved her own parents. I loved her a great deal so I respected that.” Jack had said this a million times. “Time bred stubbornness and Lynne never got the chance to fix it. I think I have by speaking to Alex.”

“I presumed you blamed it all on us.” Joan said starchily.

“Good god, no.” Jack was so drained with all this. “Joan, it's me, Jack, remember? I'm not a total asshole and I have more sense than that. I told him it was no one's fault at all and that you weren't living in the area. I'd appreciate it being left at that too. We can't throw the word 'blame' around when it involves a seven year old child. It doesn't matter anymore.”

“And what did he say?” Joan asked.

“He hasn't said anything yet. I only spoke to him a few hours ago, after all.” Jack looked at Robert.

“What about that woman?” Joan sniffed and Jack went straight on the defensive.

“What about her?”

“I've been told that she might not be good for Alex.”

“Oh? Well I know differently. This has nothing to do with Ziggy. Why do you think she left?” Jack tried not to growl.

“People talk, Jack.” Robert put in. “There are quite a few round here who see her as the town misfit.” Jack actually started to laugh.

“Robert, everywhere has misfits. I've seen one or two around here. Were any of the people you spoke to only twenty five, for example?”

“All we're concerned about is the effect she'll have on Alex. I don't need a lecture on non-conformity.” Robert said shortly.

“And I don't need one on my ability to decide who comes in contact with my son. Robert it really isn't an issue. If she was a bad influence, she wouldn't have got through the door. Let me keep an eye on that, yes? It doesn't affect you two and Alex.” Jack tried to sound reasonable and sensible.

“So can we see him?”

“Of course. I'll give him a shout.” Jack nodded. He was very close to evicting his former in-laws. Even given that his procrastination and uncertainty had made it hard work for the Reynolds, he certainly did not deserve to have his home and private life spied upon.

“Am I going with them now? Can I take My Crawley?” Alex was clearly a bit apprehensive.

“No, you don't have to go now. Just when we get it organised a bit better. Yes?” Jack smiled and lead Alex into the sitting room by the hand.

“Good grief! He's Lynne's double!” Robert blinked.

“Yes he is.” Jack said proudly. “Alex, these are your grandparents. Granda Robert and Grandma Joan. Feel free to change the titles.” Jack sat down with Alex.

“Dad says I'm welcome to come and stay with you.” Alex said nervously.

“You are. You always were.” Joan smiled. “We never wanted to stop seeing you.”

“I know. Dad told me.” Alex nodded.

“Dad's right. You don't have to listen to anyone else.” Joan got in a sly dig at Ziggy and Jack gave her a very warning look. “We have hundreds of pictures of you, Alex. We have one when you were five minutes old!”

“Five minutes?” Alex was fascinated.

“Yep!” Robert laughed. “You were a little wriggler and by gum could you screech when you were hungry! We have a picture of you on a motorbike.”

“Whoa!” Alex was hugely impressed. “By myself?”

“No, you were down the front of your dad's jacket.” Robert nodded at Jack. Alex beamed all over the place and Jack couldn't help but smile at the memories, and his son's obvious delight. “He wasn't allowed to start it though. Oh no. Your mum would have slapped him silly. They're all just there waiting for you to see! We have boxes full of ... of ...” Robert's voice trailed off and he glanced at his wife, then at Jack. “Where did he get that?” Jack leant forward to see.

“Oh that. It was a present.” Ziggy's talisman. “You can get all sorts of bits and bobs like that round here.”

“It's not very trendy, is it?” Robert said and Jack almost choked. Robert was as straight-laced as they come! He wouldn't know 'trendy' if it got up and danced with him. “You look like a hippie!”

“It's magic.” Alex said eagerly and Jack groaned inwardly.

“Is it now?” Robert rose his eyebrows. “I'm surprised at you, Jack.”

“Ah well Alex likes it.” Jack shrugged casually. “So, Alex! You think you'd like to start spending time with granda and grandma?”

“Yes I'd like that.” Alex nodded and Jack almost collapsed with relief. “And you too dad?”

“Well we'll all be in touch again, which is good.” Jack deflected.

“We could go on a picnic tomorrow and you could stay over.” Joan nodded eagerly. “We have a bed with a den under it especially for you.”

“Oo! Cool! Gary has a bed at his nana's but I bet mine's better. Can I phone him, dad? Please?” Alex

hopped from one foot to the other.

“Use the phone in the kitchen.” Jack said and Alex ran out.

“Not too difficult, was it?” Robert said to Jack and it irritated him.

“I never thought it would be. It was the decision behind it that was difficult. Now can we stop with the digs, please?”

“He's our only family, Jack. Our daughter's only child.”

“Robert I know.” Jack was close to tears of sheer stress. “I'm not saying anything different. I agree with you. What's bugging you? Something obviously is.”

“I think you know.”

“For god's sake.” Jack heaved. “I'm not even going to get into that again, Robert. I can't help how you think. Alex likes Ziggy a great deal so there's a good chance he'll mention her. It's good to know that would never lower yourselves to badmouth her to him. He is only seven, after all.” He couldn't believe how childish all this was.

“Threatening us?” Joan commented.

“Looking after my son, Joan.” Jack said flatly. “And speaking of threats, if you ever have my house watched again I'll kick up so much stink that they'll smell it in Canada. I can't believe you did that Robert.”

“We just needed to know the people coming here were safe for Alex.” Joan said and Jack almost hit the roof.

“This is my bloody house Joan! And he's my son! It isn't your business to say who's safe and who isn't. Look, we've done all this.” Jack rubbed his eyes. “We're going to have to agree to disagree. You don't like her, or the position she has in my life. That's just tough. Sorry. I won't let you invade my private life when it isn't relevant. The communication channels with Alex are open again and that's what everyone wanted, yes?”

“Yes.” Joan nodded. “Come on Robert, we have a bedroom to air out.”

Chapter 9

“What do you want? Go away.” Ruth Baxter tried to close the door on Ziggy but Ziggy wedged herself in. “I said go away Lady Ziggy. If anyone saw you coming here ...”

“They didn’t. I don’t get seen when I don’t want to be.” Ziggy pushed herself into Ruth Baxter’s back kitchen. “Arthur?”

“Arthur’s sick, you know he is.” Ruth sighed. “Leave him be, please, Ziggy.”

“No chance. I need answers and only Arthur can give them to me.” Ziggy sat on the table.

“It’s been ten years since Arthur was active in anything Ziggy. He’s a sick man, leave him be.” Ruth said sadly.

“He wasn’t a sick man when he was teaching Alicia the tricks of the trade.” Ziggy said bluntly. “I’m sorry to drag that up Ruth, really I am, but I need answers. Alicia’s dead, gone. You have your man back, but only in the condition that she left him. You owe her, or her ways through Lavinia, nothing at all.”

“Arthur never ran the show, you know that. Alicia did.” Ruth objected.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. She was an old sow. She was also an old leech. She used Arthur as a refined and intelligent man, took advantage of his skill, then left him broken. Those skills she tore from him are now being used by that troll of a sister of mine and she has you scared, Ruth. She’ll never scare me.” Ruth started to cry. “Ruth, Arthur is the only one alive who knew Alicia. He’s the only one who knows what she passed down to Lavinia. We just mentioned scared, Ruth. There’s seven year old baby out there who’ll be more than scared if that twisted bitch gets him. Seven years old, Ruth. He’s Gary’s friend.” Ziggy looked at the older woman in genuine anguish for Alex.

“But Lavinia ...”

“Is a vicious old relic. I’ll hammer her arse for her. You know I can do it, Ruth. I have to know what I’m hammering. Look at the evidence. I’ve protected the O’Connors fully for two whole months without knowing what I’m protecting them from. Just think of the dent I’m going to make when I do find out.” Ziggy said darkly.

“I always suspected you were the stronger one.” Ruth smiled weakly. “Eric feeling the need to side with Lavinia tipped the scales for me.”

“Tipped the buggers over all together probably. Lard-arsed moron.” Ziggy sniffed.

“Ruth? Who’s in?” Arthur Baxter came shuffling into the room on two sticks. “Ah I see. You shouldn’t be here Lady Ziggy.” Arthur was only a shadow of the man he once was due to the rapid advancement of arthritis and diabetes. His joints were painfully swollen and his milky eyes saw only lines and blurs. But he knew Ziggy was there.

“My mother told me that quite a few times.” Ziggy shrugged. Arthur cracked a laugh.

“You're like your dad.”

“I'm very pleased about that too, given the alternative. Arthur, what's Lavinia up to?” Ziggy said quietly. “Whatever it is, she's planned it. Whatever it is involves newcomers. Whatever it is involves a seven year old child.”

“What makes you think I know Lady Lavinia's business?” Arthur narrowed his eyes and a million wrinkles sprang up around them.

“Because it was Alicia's business before that. What do me and Alex O'Connor have in common, Arthur?” Ziggy asked darkly. Arthur smiled and shook his head. “Whatever shit you helped Alicia with involved the psycho burning a marker into my neck. Lavinia's continuation of this involves a defenceless, ignorant, seven year old outsider. Do you want to explain to your grandson why his friend is being hunted by half the town? Believe me, if I've to find out myself then I'll make sure you're hunted by the other half.” Ziggy's low, menacing voice had never sounded so sincere. Ruth let out a terrified sob.

“It could never have been like this.” Arthur muttered. “It shouldn't have ended up like this.”

“Go on.” Ziggy prompted.

“The crescent mark is the only thing you have in common with the O'Connor boy. Well that and Jack O'Connor now.”

“Get on with it, Arthur.” Ziggy warned.

“You were both promised to The Circle. It's a revival of a very old ritual that dates back to pre-Grecian times when people worshipped the Titans, the Creators. Chaos was the original Creator, from her came everything.”

“Yes I'm aware of that.” Ziggy nodded.

“And everything returns to her. For every pure spirit returned to Chaos, a reward is granted on the mortal plane. The Old Ones sacrificed black lambs, dogs, chickens. Black to represent the void and the veiled moon of the mind. It was revived symbolically, Ziggy. You know as well as I do that the power of visualisation is huge, as is power transference and mind focus. Bloodshed is not only unnecessary, it's mostly illegal too. Black candles, belladonna, black foliage is what we used, and it worked. We had the protection and favour of Chaos.” Arthur massaged his sore knuckles and sighed sadly. “Greed, Lady Ziggy, and I'm as guilty as anyone else. Alicia owned the power. You should know, she exercised it on her children often enough.” The old man began to cry as he dredged up these memories. “I should have told Troy. He loved you Ziggy. He stayed with Alicia to keep you close to him. No one would let a dad keep his child by himself in those days.” Ziggy nodded. That's just what Jack had said too. “I really do believe that if he'd known about the abuse, he'd have taken his chances and just took you, probably the other kids too.”

“Well he didn't. He didn't know until it was too late and I can't undo that. I know he loved me.” Ziggy hung her head. “So Alicia upped it to the animal sacrifices once again, then progressed.?”

“It was a perverse ... fad. I never, ever expected her to actually stick to it, or carry it out. Obviously she couldn't sacrifice a child for every new moon, so we devised a plan, a crazed theory that was

just that, as far as I knew, theoretical. I was sick to my stomach when I saw what she'd inflicted on you, Ziggy. You were only a baby." Arthur's tears rolled down his cheeks and splashed onto his gnarled hands. "That was your Marker. Your mother pledged you to The Circle, and marked you to be reclaimed when you were seven. This was to be repeated every eighteen years in return for the grace and favours of Chaos. You'd be physically ill to realise how many parents would actually agree to accept that honour on behalf of their children."

"So why wasn't I sacrificed at the age of seven?" Ziggy did feel ill, very ill.

"Quite simple. There was no way that Alicia could have done that without the involvement of your dad. By that time, Troy wouldn't have even got into a conversation with Alicia, let alone anything else. She tried four times that I know of to take you by force. Each time you fought her. She just couldn't hex you, Ziggy, even at the age of seven."

"Because I'm awesome." Ziggy said modestly.

"You certainly are. Because she couldn't fully hex you, you howled like a banshee every time. She got you as far as the altar once and the howls you were emitting were ear-splitting. I dispelled the lot of it and you ran off. I had my fourth heart attack the day after. Go figure eh?"

"I don't remember any of that." Ziggy frowned. "I remember the beatings and such like, but I don't remember that at all."

"Be thankful for it. Once you reached your eighth birthday, your time had passed. Alicia hadn't long to go either, so she started schooling Lavinia. As cowardly as it was, I took advantage of her preoccupation with Lavinia and came back home to beg forgiveness from Ruth."

"Which you gave him." Ziggy smiled at Ruth.

"Yes I did." Ruth nodded and held Arthur's hand.

"And it's not my place to pry, or drag all that out anywhere else. It's gone." Ziggy nodded.

"Thank you." Arthur said and Ruth nodded.

"So who marked Alex O'Connor?" Ziggy asked darkly. "You said mother or father and I can tell you now, it wasn't his father."

"I've no idea, Ziggy." Arthur said wearily. "Someone in very close contact with the boy, family. It would have to have been with the parents' consent so Alex's parents would have to have been in The Circle at one time or another."

"I know I'm a tad biased here but it wasn't Jack. Seriously. He was freaked out beyond belief with all us weirdos here. How the hell do I put it to him that his late wife, who he adored, could have been part of all this shite?" Ziggy said in despair. "I'll rip Lavinia's skin off for this. She's miserable on her own so she'll make sure I am too. Jack will go berserk, he'll hate me." She wandered off towards the back door. "Well done Arthur." Ziggy left the ambiguous comment for the Baxters to digest.

Jack hung up the phone and returned his attention to his visitor, Greg. He was grateful for his company as the misgivings about Robert and Joan slagging off Ziggy to Alex were seriously grinding on his nerves. Jack had told Greg all about his beautiful new girlfriend and couldn't help grinning like a big ape.

“So when am I meeting her?” Greg asked.

“Well I had hoped tonight but she's not feeling too well. That was her on the phone.” Ziggy had mentioned 'women's pains' and very effectively called a halt to further fussing. “She's fantastic, Greg. I can't wait for you and Hilary to meet her. She's nothing like Ms Stark and the rest of them. Ziggy's her real name too, dad was a new age hippie, apparently. Alex thinks she's fantastic.” He chattered happily.

“So I can understand why you don't want Robert and Joan trying to throw a spanner in the works via Alex. If he likes her, they should let it be.” Greg said.

“I can half understand, actually. I was married to their daughter, after all. Maybe they were thinking I'd just drop them out of the picture. I bloody well will if they have my house watched again. I couldn't believe that, Greg. It was surreal!”

“Paranoia maximus.” Greg said and Jack nodded in agreement.

“Anyway, Alex is all up for this picnic tomorrow so hopefully they'll get over their hangups. I know I have. I should have done this months ago, Greg. It's a huge relief.”

“Sounds like you're on the up and up. Heck Alex!” Greg laughed as Alex came struggling through with a huge suitcase on wheels. “How long you going for?”

“Alex you won't need all that!” Jack laughed.

“Yes I will.” Alex sat down with Mr Crawley in one hand, and his talisman in the other. “How do I get this in here without tearing him?”

“I'll poke a hole in it.” Jack took the items off Alex. “Why do you want the talisman in here? You don't think Granda Robert or Grandma Joan will take it off you, do you?”

“No, not really.” Alex took back Mr Crawley, the leather strings left poking through a tiny hole. “I'll take it back out and wear it when I get back.”

“Sounds good to me. OK, upstairs to clean your teeth and wash your hands and face.” Alex nodded and ran out of the room. “Present from Ziggy.” Jack explained to Greg. “I have one too so Alex sees them as very special indeed.”

“He's a very clever kid.” Greg observed. “Misses nothing does he?”

“He's certainly missed nothing when he was packing.” Jack hauled over Alex's luggage to thin it out a bit.

Ziggy climbed through Lavinia's window while the woman was sitting listening to music with her eyes closed, looking irritatingly serene.

“Yo! Got any David Bowie?” Ziggy shouted and frightened the life out of Lavinia. “Stay down or I'll pummel you.”

“How dare you! Get out!” Lavinia screamed.

“How about ... no! Right bitch! I know why you want Alex O'Connor and I know why the old loon

wanted me. She couldn't take me and you have no chance of taking him. You really are a sick woman, Lavinia. You're a monstrous and perverted old horror." Ziggy sat on the coffee table and picked her ear.

"You know nothing!" Lavinia snapped.

"Oh? How about the nice little brand I have on my neck? Alex has one too and I know why, so shut the hell up before I brain you with that poker." Ziggy growled. "Was Lynne O'Connor part of your sick crew?"

"I'll tell you nothing, Ziggy." Lavinia said flatly.

"I'd think about what you're planning, whacko. You're planning a murder, you nutter. A child murder at that. You and the Ape Creature wouldn't last five minutes in the nick once the other cons got wind of that."

"Good grief Ziggy, you'd never prove that!" Lavinia laughed. "I wonder who the big mouth is. It shouldn't be hard to find out."

"Don't bother. I've taken care of it and you'll get nowhere near. How did you get your shitty mark on that boy?"

"You're wasting your time, Ziggy. Go home." Eric said from the doorway.

"Oh look, it's the Yeti. Go shave your palms, Eric." Ziggy drawled. "Look, you pair of freaks, I'll sit here talking twenty four seven if I need to. OK? Now I know Jack didn't sign his son up for the moron squad, so he'll happily kick the shit into any one of your goons who goes near him. The only other person that leaves is dead, sadly. Eric was right, I have been hurt with all this. I have to go and tell Jack that his late wife was in the Retard Ring and I don't think he'll like me much after that. He'll flip and come straight for you and he will never stop. You won't get Alex, end of story. What you will get is a strong, society raised man on your case. He's not one of your local small-timers that you command terror over, he's an outsider who couldn't give a shit who you are, or think you are. I'd rather give him those answers, Lavinia. It'll save his torment, and yours."

"Are you trying to make a deal with me?" Lavinia laughed again.

"Not in a million years. I couldn't give a rat's arse about you, but I could about Jack. Even after he's turfed me out on my arse I'll still be on his side. I'll never stop helping him even if he doesn't know I'm doing it."

"Isn't she sickly, Eric?" Lavinia sniffed. "And for someone who's sitting spouting about society's rules, you really are dense. You've just broken into my house, though my window, you little snot."

"So you'll have to come with me, Lady Ziggy." Officer Barry Potter was standing next to Eric. Lavinia hooted with laughter. "I saw you climb in, Lady Ziggy. I was standing right outside talking to Eric."

"How convenient." Ziggy said sarcastically. "Cuff me and I'll kick your balls off." She warned Potter.

"Oh I won't press charges, Ziggy. You're my sister! Just lock her up for the night, Potter. You'll be out by tomorrow evening, Ziggy, don't worry."

"I'm not. You should be." Ziggy walked out in front of the Officer. "You in on this too eh Baz? Shame." Baz Potter was the same age as Ziggy, they'd gone to school together.

"Stop making it hard work, Ziggy, please." Baz let Ziggy sit in the front of the police car. Lavinia had the whole town terrorised. How and when had it got as bad as this? When Ziggy had left, Lavinia was a megalomaniac bitch, but now she was uncontrollable!

"I should have stayed down here." Ziggy sighed quietly.

"Plenty think you should have, yes." Baz muttered.

"Oh? Well maybe a bit of support at the time wouldn't have gone amiss, Baz. I was seventeen, remember? I had a town full of adult men and women, the gruesome twosome back there included, attacking me in the streets. I had my house burned down and my possessions vandalised and destroyed. Can you remember the night your dad let me stay at your house, Baz? Can you?!" Baz just nodded. "And can you remember why?" Another nod. "How old was I?"

"Fifteen." Baz mumbled.

"That's right. It was the day my dad died. Eric hit me with a bike chain because I went to the hospital to see his body. Remember? Of course you do. I ran to your house in the rain in my pyjamas and bare feet while Eric went for my mother so she could beat me up too. Don't you tell me there's plenty thought I should have stayed here. They should have helped me to do just that." Ziggy stormed out of the car and into the police station on her own. "Either lock me up in that cell to calm down or I'll wreck the place!" She yelled at the officer on the desk.

"Ziggy if you calm down, you can ..."

"Shut up Baz!" Ziggy roared. "That means I'll have the thought of Lavinia ripping into you for letting me go on my mind too."

"I'll handle Lady Lavinia."

"Yeah right. The whole town will know within hours how nasty Ziggy got you into trouble." Ziggy barged into the cell and flung herself on the bunk.

"Leave it unlocked, Stewart." Baz told the desk officer. "Ziggy do you want me to call Jack?"

"You do and I'll castrate you." Ziggy snarled with her back to Baz. The last thing she needed was Jack leaving Alex to come running down here.

Chapter 10

Jack waved as Robert and Joan's car pulled away from the house. Alex smiled happily and waved back from the rear window. He closed the front door and went to use the office phone, again. He'd expected Ziggy to come and say goodbye to Alex and was very surprised when she hadn't showed. No reply from Ziggy's house, for the third time. Maybe she just wanted left alone if she wasn't feeling well.

"Hello!" Mrs Wilson trilled from the hallway. "He get off OK?"

"He was biting at the bit." Jack smiled. "I should have done this ages ago, Mrs Wilson. I wish I had."

"Ah well it's all sorted now. Tea?" Mrs Wilson bustled off to the kitchen. "You'll be at a loose end now."

"I am, yes. Ziggy's not feeling too good either just now. I'm abandoned." Jack laughed and sat at the kitchen table.

"Oh! Nothing to serious I hope?"

"Stomach ache." Jack said awkwardly. "A ... and that sort of thing."

"Oh she'll be among the ginger and honey." Mrs Wilson smiled and Jack coughed uncomfortably. "They get worse once you've had kids, you know."

"Er ... well not for me they didn't." Jack said quickly. "I've phoned her three times. Do you think she's OK? I'm being an old washerwoman, aren't I?"

"She'll be fine." Mrs Wilson handed Jack his tea. "I used to have to take myself to bed for hours when I was that way."

"Yes. OK, yes. I'm pleased Alex is a boy." Jack muttered. "You should see the clutter he's taken with him. Both wellies and sunscreen, just to cover all weather options." He laughed. Alex had calmly repacked his bag after Jack had pruned it.

"Aww he's enjoying himself. You should too while you have a break."

"My breaks consist of ploughing through computer systems for bugs." Jack got to his feet. "I'll phone Ziggy after lunch."

Jack did phone Ziggy after lunch, then again at 3PM and again at 5.30.

"Mrs Wilson! Mrs Wilson how do I get to Hallow Break? I know she's not well but she isn't deaf. Missing the phone once I understand, but six times?" Jack pulled on his jacket and opened the front door.

Ziggy knocked on his chest.

“Ziggy! Where the hell have you been? I've been ringing you all day!” Jack shouted in relief.

“Jail. Hiya Mrs Wilson.” Ziggy walked past Jack.

“Jail? Jail as in ... jail?” Jack blurted.

“Sort of. Police cells for breaking in through the scrubber's window. Jack I need to talk to you.”

“Are you OK? Jail?” Jack said in shock.

“I'm fine-ish.” Ziggy wandered off into the sitting room. Jack followed her in a daze.

“You missed Alex. He made you a get well card.” He handed Ziggy a folded piece of card with Mr Crawley drawn on the front. Ziggy burst into tears and Jack nearly fainted. “It's fine! Ziggy it's OK, he knew you weren't feeling well. Please don't cry. I hate tears.” He went over and put his arms round Ziggy. “What happened? She had you locked up?”

“Oh that's nothing. I was harassing her, as I do.” Ziggy snivelled. “Jack, about the scar on Alex's chest.” She swallowed hard.

“The one he got accidentally, yes.” Jack said warily.

“Jack it's a marker, just like mine. Mine was burned in, Alex's was cut in.”

“I've had enough of this.” Jack said flatly. “OK, stop it Ziggy, I've just about had my fill of that crap.”

“Oh it gets worse. It's a marker given by parents to their kids as a sign that they're up for sacrifice when they're seven. The plan being to do that every eighteen years, as per ritual. I sodded the first one up because I'm a pest. Alex is eighteen years younger than me.” That all came out in a long, hysterical string and Jack was just staring at her.

“Do you realise how deranged that sounds?” Jack flung up his arms. “Think about what you're saying Ziggy. I'm his father! I think I'd have remembered if I'd agreed to that!”

“You aren't making this easy, Jack.” Ziggy hung her head and her lip trembled.

“Lynne?” Jack sat down heavily on the couch. “Lynne?”

“Arthur said someone in close contact, family. I'm sorry. I'll be at home if you need me, and I think you will.” Ziggy stood up.

“N ... no! Ziggy don't go! Sweetheart, you're wrong.” Jack took Ziggy's hands. “We haven't had a very run of the mill time of it lately have we? You're wrong, Ziggy. You're exhausted and you're feeling a bit ill too just now.”

“Jack I'm not ill.” Ziggy was crying again. “I wanted answers for you, I really did, that's why I went to Lavinia's. Eric called the police, the arsehole. Lavinia refused to tell me anything. I'm sorry.”

“Ziggy, there's nothing to tell. Lavinia is messing with your rather stressed out head. Mind games. Listen to me.” He sat her back down on the sofa. “Lynne bathed Alex that morning and I dressed him. I dressed him *after* Lynne had bathed him, Ziggy. He had no scars. Lynne was at home with

me all day, the entire time. It was her who took the phonecall from her dad when Alex fell off the sofa.”

“You've told me so many lovely things, Jack. I feel like I know Lynne as well as you did. I know how unforgivably disrespectful that all sounds. Jack, I know what a marker is. I was told by the man who devised the whole screwed up and sick system.”

“I believe you. What I'm telling you as an absolute certainty is that neither me or Lynne marked Alex, that wouldn't be possible at all, Ziggy, it's abhorant. Alex is fine and he's safe. We need a break from worrying too.”

“I thought you'd go ballistic and turf me out for even hinting at something like that about Lynne.” Ziggy said miserably.

“I would have if it had been anyone else. We've been in the weird zone far too much Ziggy and Joan and Robert didn't help, giving you the evil eye.” Jack exhaled loudly.

“Um ... Jack? How much could you tolerate as being my stressed out head before you went ape and lobbed me out of the window?”

“A lot. I love you.” Jack smiled

“It was Robert and Joan that marked Alex and I can see the steam coming out of your ears so remember you love me.” Ziggy said quickly.

“Ziggy, drop it. Please?” Jack said.

“I can't!” Ziggy snapped suddenly. “In fact it makes more sense. Jack please hear me out. I've probably pissed you off way beyond fixing so a bit more won't make much difference. Then I'll leave. They were willing to take you to court to get Alex. After six years. Why now? Because he's seven. Alex was with Joan and Robert when he had his accident. Lynne recognised the mark, Jack. She knew what it was.” Ziggy said desperately. “Why else would she react like she did? You said yourself it was incredibly extreme. She kept them from Alex for all that time to protect him. Robert and Joan are in The Circle and Lynne was aware of it at least. How old was she when she found out she was pregnant? Seventeen? Eighteen? Jack she'd still rely on her parents a great deal even with a great man like you at her side. They pledged their grandson, your son, to The Circle. They had your house watched and they wet themselves when they knew I was on the scene, just like Lavinia did. Her hexes failed, your sense of duty didn't.”

“I ... I ... Ziggy I've just let them take him!” Jack sobbed hysterically. “Phone Lavinia.”

“She won't talk to me.”

“No I know. She won't be able to answer at all if she's on her way for my son!” Jack handed Ziggy the phone. There was no answer. Ziggy tried Eric's number, no answer. She also tried a few other Lavinia cronies, no answer. “J ... Jesus. Come on.” Jack dragged Ziggy to her feet. “Holiday, Mrs Wilson!” He shouted as the housekeeper wandered into the hallway.

“How? How Ziggy?” Jack sobbed as he floored the accelerator. “How did Robert and Joan join a sect, or whatever it is, that's based here?”

“I don't know.” Ziggy said. Actually she had a pretty good theory, but decided not to voice it. The whole 'sect and cult' scene just wasn't appealing to people in the Reynolds' generation. Their teenage daughter, however, would have been attracted like a moth to a flame. This would be before

she met Jack and packed it all in as a teen-fad. By that time, her parents had also shown an interest and Lavinia and her mob got their hooks in. This was all Ziggy's speculation though, and certain to upset Jack even more. Ziggy believed that it was definitely Joan and Robert who orchestrated this pledge. Lynne would have gone along with anything because, naturally, she trusted her mother and father. What had kept the pressure going? Stability? Money? Their blessing for her to marry Jack?

“Jesus Christ, no!” Jack almost crashed the car as he rounded the corner that lead to Robert and Joan's sprawling bungalow. The front grounds of the house were packed with cars, Lavinia Stark's shiny black BMW was slap bang in the middle of them.

“You're too late, Ziggy.” Eric appeared from the house with Joan. “You bloody fool! You wouldn't listen, would you? You'll never leave here now, nor will he.”

“You bastard.” Jack went towards Eric and Joan stepped in front of him. “You twisted old cow, Joan! He's your bloody grandson! He's Lynne's child, for shit's sake!” Jack roared. “Where is he?”

“You don't understand, Jack.” Joan said calmly. “He's your son too. You'll also benefit from this.” Jack backhanded Joan so hard across the face that she fell into a side hedge.

“Back off, Eric!” Jack bellowed. Eric smiled and pointed a gun at Jack! “Shit!”

“Shit indeed. You see, Zig ... where the hell is she?” Ziggy was nowhere in sight. “Damn that little bitch! In here, Jack. I warn you, don't try anything. We don't have the time.” Eric prodded Jack indoors with the gun. “Joan, look for Ziggy. Don't approach her, alert the others. Do you understand?” Joan nodded and dabbed her bloodied lip. Jack was forced into the sitting room and almost passed out in sheer fury when he saw Robert standing there. It took Eric's gun poked into his kidneys to stop him from attacking Robert and throttling him with his bare hands.

“I don't believe this.” Jack sank to the sofa and cried. He was devastated. “How could you do this, Robert? How could you plan this for all these years?”

“Once Lavinia Stark showed us how clear it all was, it wasn't difficult. How do you think we bought this house, Jack? The cars? The boat? The land?” Robert smiled. “It's a wonderful way of life and we deserve it. You do too. You looked after Lynne and Alex.”

“You had no right to involve Lynne and Alex in your twisted, perverted cults, Robert! No right at all!”

“Is that what you think?” Robert laughed. “Oh Jack, we're a bit old for the cult scene, but Lynne wasn't. She was there first, for crying out loud! As it turned out, she preferred you.”

“Oh and I wonder why? You bloody lunatic!” Jack yelled.

“We let her have you. Don't you understand?”

“You're kidding me. You gave your blessing for her to marry me in exchange for Alex? Bullshit!”

“We're her parents, she loved us.” Robert shrugged.

“You exploited her, you asshole. I'll kill you for this, Robert.” Jack growled. “All these years I thought Lynne was overreacting and all she was doing was protecting Alex. How the hell could I have ever doubted her.”

“This is unbelievable!” Lavinia screeched from outside the door before bursting through it. “You raging great simpleton!” She roared at Eric. “And as for you! I'm sick of the damned sight of you!” She bellowed at Jack.

“Bloody bad luck, bitch!” Jack bellowed back. “I'll haunt you for the rest of your sad little life!”

“Bring him.” Lavinia ordered Robert and Eric. “You'll be bait for that bitch, Ziggy. Then I'll kill you. I'll claim *both* my markers tonight.” She stamped out of the room.

Ziggy crouched in the rafters of a disused barn on the Reynolds' property. A pentagram circle had been drawn perfectly on the floor and the quarter candles were lit, casting shadows up the high walls and, thankfully, over the rafters.

“Blessed Mother, Divine beauty, hear me now.” Ziggy muttered. “See the abominations they're casting in your name! I'm here, sacred Mother, hear me first, I beg you.” Ziggy felt the tears as she watched the room filling up with around two dozen people, and she recognised every one. “John Frazer, you shitbag! Let's see how many eggs your hens lay after this, you arsehole. Oh no!” She stifled a sob as Robert and Eric lead Jack in at gunpoint. “G ... guns? Blessed Mother they're turning your Sacred Circle into Miami Vice! No! Oh no, no no!” Lavinia came swanning in, followed by Joan who was carrying Alex.

“You filled him full of whiskey?!” Jack exploded. “He bloody reeks of it! You'll poison him, you dick!”

“That matters ... how?” Lavinia drawled. “Gag him.” She set about arranging her altar tools, which included an over-sized athame, something that should never, ever be used as a cutting tool, let alone the purpose Lavinia intended it for. “And where's that bitch?”

“Right, you old buzzard.” Ziggy held a match to one of the straw-stuffed beams behind her, then swung to the next beam along.

“What the ... fire!” Robert shrieked. “It's a barn! It'll go up like ... like a barn!” The burning beam crashed to the ground, missing Lavinia and Alex by inches. Jack had no choice but to attack Eric, he was the most dangerously armed. Ziggy let out a sob when she heard a shot ring out as the two men struggled.

Lavinia made a grab for Alex.

“Oh no you don't.” Ziggy half climbed, half fell from the rafter and landed in a heap on a hay-bale. “Back off!”

“I am sick of you!” Lavinia screamed. “Eric!”

“You'd think you'd have learned by now, Lavinia. Eric is a lumbering great dirigible with the brains of a cheese sandwich.” Ziggy walked slowly towards Lavinia, keeping a very close eye on the burning beam to her right.

“Z ... Ziggy?” Alex turned his head and vomited profusely.

“You sadistic old boiler, Lavinia.” Ziggy snarled. Lavinia grabbed for the athame, Ziggy dived for Alex. She dragged the child to her and covered him with her body, just like she'd done in the road that day. Alex vomited again but Ziggy held on tightly. “Mighty Raphael, Master of Air, guardian of the East, hear this child.”

"I can't see." Alex slurred. "Zig ..."

"Hear this child, Raphael! Your brother, commander of the flames, Michael, guardian of the South, awaits you. Help us together!" Ziggy sobbed and felt a breeze across her arms. "Thank you. Keep us safe." Ziggy cried. The breeze blazed the rafter further and hay-bales ignited immediately. Ziggy saw Lavinia trying to get to her and Alex, only to be blocked and driven back by a wall of flame. A gust of wind sent the flames fanning to the left and Robert screamed as a plummeting, burning bale consumed him.

Ziggy peered through the searing heat, and the choking smoke, and saw Eric dragging Lavinia towards the barn doors.

"Jack!" She yelled. "Jack! We're over here!" Joan got there first and tried to prise Alex away from Ziggy. Ziggy only hit her once, straight in the teeth with her fist. "Touch him again and I'll bend your face! Piss off!" Joan staggered back to grab for Alex again and Alex clung to Ziggy with all his might. He was terrified and Ziggy felt the bolts of hysteria shooting from his body. Or were they? "Alex! Show her Mr Crawley! Quickly Alex!" Alex managed to pull the stuffed spider from under his shirt. "Michael!" An impossibly hot and bright blue flame shot from the encased talisman, straight into the eyes of Alex's grandmother. Joan screamed in pain and Alex screamed in terror. "Shh. It's OK , Alex, it's fine. Jack! Oh where are you man?!"

"Nag, nag, bloody nag." Jack came wading through the carnage. "Come on, the fire's spreading." He lifted Alex and dragged Ziggy over to the barn. "Help me, Ziggy!" He began kicking at it with his his feet. "Shite!" He hopped out of the way when Ziggy ran at it with a pick axe.

*

Robert Reynolds died in the blaze at the barn, as did four other people, John Frazer included. Joan Reynolds was blinded due to heat damage. The stroke she suffered later in hospital left her almost completely paralysed. Lavinia and Eric Stark vanished, along with thousands of pounds from trust-funds for which they were responsible. Jack O'Connor was treated for a deep grazing burn caused by a ricocheting bullet, the gun was never found. Alex O'Connor suffered a major hangover for three days, something Ziggy got for five just with lager. All she suffered was singed eyebrows.

Chapter 11

“Where's that packing crate?” Jack shouted from his 'sort of' new study at Hallow Break House.

“Can we narrow it down a bit?” Mrs Wilson said in exasperation from the kitchen. “Good grief. He's only been here ten months. Or is it eleven?” She muttered to Ziggy, who laughed.

“Twelve next week.” Ziggy nodded.

“Really? So How is he *still* unpacking?”

“It's a Jack thing.”

“Ziggy!” Alex came haring into the kitchen. “Troy just said Boo to me!”

“Did he now?” Ziggy smiled. “So dad's big mouth woke him up eh?” Ziggy followed Alex into the sitting room. Troy O'Connor lay gurgling in his pram. “So he said Boo?” Alex nodded and let his two month old baby brother grasp his finger. Troy gurgled again.

“See? Hear him?” Alex said in delight.

“Whoa! Yes I did! So he spoke to his big brother before he spoke to me and dad? That's awesome.” Ziggy laughed.

“He said something else too.” Alex told Ziggy as she lifted her son from his pram to feed him. “But it's a secret.” Troy babbled on cue. “Oh OK Troy.” Alex nodded seriously. “Troy said it was OK to tell you, Ziggy.”

“Sounds good!” Ziggy smiled and nodded. “What did he say?”

“He said it would be better if you were called O'Connor like the rest of us.” Alex nodded maturely.

“Ah I see.” Ziggy looked up to where Jack was rummaging under the table. “Does dad know?”

“Um ...” Alex had to think about this. “I think Troy told dad first.”

“I see. So dad told you and said Troy told him?” Ziggy tried not to laugh. “Proposal by proxy. Hey Jack! Will you marry me?”

“Hmm? Maybe later sweetheart.” Jack said absently and began rifling through a drawer. “Bloody hell where's my external drive?”

“Top shelf of the wall cupboard.” Ziggy juggled Troy over to the other tap.

“Ah! Thanks Zig ... what did you say?”

“Top shelf.”

“No, before that.”

“Oh that. Nothing. Ask the kids.” Ziggy winked at Alex and Alex winked at Troy.

-----End.