

# CHAPTER ONE

## Bad Dreams

Carson sat bolt upright in bed, heart hammering, brain thick with sleep. There was a repeat of the knock on the door, knuckles on wood, and he was dimly aware that it was the knocking that had awakened him. He struggled to throw off his sheets and the stubborn clutches of a vague and disturbing nightmare, both of which he had been wrestling with in a deep but troubled sleep. "Coming! I'm comin'!" he mumbled and shouted, too foggy to wonder who could be knocking at his door at three in the morning or to consider whether or not he was wearing pants.

Carson staggered across the floor toward the front door, misjudged the distance in the dark, crashed into it face first. He winced, clutched his head. "Whozzit?!"

There was a slight pause.

Then a voice, soft but clear: "It's me. Don't you remember?"

Carson processed for a moment. "Whozzit?!"

Another pause. "We don't have time for this. It's important. I want... I want you to come with me. Now. Someone... needs you."

Carson blinked bleary eyes. It was dark, his head hurt, and he wanted to curl up in his warm soft bed, pull his Batman sheets up around his neck and drift off into the blissful, empty world of dreamless

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sleep. He tilted forward, eased the undented side of his forehead gently against the smooth, cool wood.

"Carson?" It was a woman. "Are you there?" She sounded scared. Worried. Desperate. "It's about... about what happened. Before."

He should care. He really, really should. If only he wasn't so...

"It's the Curio Shop."

He was wide awake. "Curio Shop? Did you say..."

"Yes."

He lifted his eye, still bleary but now wide open, to the peephole, blinking, struggling to focus. On the doorstep of the basement landing, wedged between ivy-crawled concrete walls, stood a slender brunette, young, moon-faced. Pretty, even through the fish bowl. She looked back over her shoulder, seemed to shiver.

Pretty and worried.

When she looked back, it was as if she could meet his gaze, even through the thick one-way glass of the pinhole. Her eyes matched her expression, worried... and something else. There was movement in them, something deep, desperate, almost hungry. For a moment, they held him, looked right through the glass, right into him, held him like a squirrel in its underwear in the path of an onrushing SUV.

Carson threw the deadbolt. "Jus' a sec... pants..."

They were in the street before he realized it, out of the darkness of his basement apartment at Granny Dudley's and into the darkness of the midnight streets of Las Calamas, Belfry District. Dark to dark. Hurrying. The brunette hugged herself through a long navy pea coat, buttoned tight against the night. She was pale and drawn. And paranoid. She checked every shadow and cranny, firing furtive glances at rooftops and manhole covers, looking places one usually didn't look for purse-snatchers. Carson's head was still fuzzy. He didn't remember leaving, how they'd gotten so far, if he was wearing pants... was he wearing pants?

Jeans.

He sighed with relief, ran his hands along the familiar faded denim, his favorite pair, same ones he'd worn to the House of Beef months ago, when they'd fought Vanessa. He shivered, skin going goosey as an image of her ravaged face swam before his eyes. His right hand flexed, missing the grip of his Louisville Slugger, and he immediately regretted not snatching it up on the way out. Since the House of Beef, he always kept it in the bucket by the front door, along with his lightsaber umbrella. Never could be too careful. He'd learned that the hard way.

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Funny. A very, very tiny part of his thinking apparatus seemed to be screaming that at him now, like Whoville was on the road to another major shakeup, and he was the only one who could stop it.

Think. Think think think.

Questions. Questions would help.

"Why, uh... what's... you said someone..."

Carson struggled to put words together in a way that made sense. He shook his head to clear it, screwed his eyes into focus on the woman. She turned to him, the corners of her expressive mouth turned down into the slightest frown. It cut through him and left him with an inexplicable sense that she knew more than he did and that what she knew, he was fairly certain he didn't want to know, but that he would find out soon whether he wanted to or not. It was that kind of frown. He also felt... struggled... somehow... that he knew her. Recognized her. Or should. He blinked, rubbed his face, wrestling with the inert mass of his brain, tugged at his chin beard like the pull on a lamp, hoping to pop the lightbulb into life.

Nothing came. Still... he should know that face...

"Yes. Someone needs you. Now hurry... it's just ahead. There..."

Suddenly, through the fog ahead... *fog?* He blinked again. He hadn't noticed it. But there, through the swirling, soupy gray, the comforting green-and-yellow neon of the 24/7 sign shone like a beacon. His hopes rose.

The 24/7.

The mini-mart.

Home.

"Oh, baby! The store. Sweet! But why'd you...?"

"No. Not there. *There...*"

He followed the line of her pale finger, pointing across the street to a grim, shadowy, blockish structure that huddled in the night. It swallowed light like the fog. Carson's fleeting grin cracked, fell apart.

The Curio Shop.

Nervous juice squirted through his stomach.

"Come on," the girl breathed. "There's no time to waste." She ducked across the street, and far too quickly, they were there. She paused before the door, checked over her shoulder, hands stuffed anxiously in her pockets. Overhead, the weathered antique sign, barely legible in the dark, brooded down over them like a guillotine blade. Innocent and harmless at rest, it dared all comers to step beneath it.

Carson hesitated. Had they crossed the street? He glanced back,

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unsure of the last few moments. The 24/7 sign had vanished, swallowed in the mist. Not even a faint glow pierced the gray. Gone as if it had never existed.

"Carson?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm... I'm here."

He shivered, stared up at the sign above them, at the old fashioned paneled door. He'd been here before. Lots. How many times? Dozens. Standing right here, staring into the dirty windows at the musty, cramped store, its shelves packed with shrunken heads, skull candles, gargoyles and other odd bits of cheap supernatural bric-a-brac. He couldn't keep away. It drew him. Mesmerized him. Even now, his breath caught a little as he stared into its darkened corners, imagination tugging at the looser threads of his sanity as he let it run a little with the possibilities.

"But we can't get in," he grumbled. "There's never anyone..."

A creak of rusty hinges, a whiff of mustiness and a hint of something else... spicy, faintly earthy. A shiver of something colder than the fog slid from the black maw over his skin.

The door was open.

Carson's jaw gaped.

The girl's face was a ghost in the night. "Follow me. Stay close." She ducked inside. He hesitated. Just a moment. On the threshold, hands clammy. It was like facing the first step out of an airplane, or into the doctor's office the day he calls and says, *There's something on this x-ray we need to discuss.*

Carson sucked in a deep breath of cool night air. It tasted like mystery. He plunged in.

And rapped his head smartly against the door frame.

"Watch yourself," the girl murmured. "It's low."

Carson rubbed his new sore spot briskly. "Yeah. Ouch." Then he took a step, and the pain vanished in a wash of adrenaline. A thrill shot up his spine.

He was in.

After all those months of staring, wondering, waiting... the Who's were screaming at him again, but he bottled them and stuffed the lid on tight. He was in now. It was answer time.

They were moving quickly through the shelves, shadows and shapes blurred in the dark. As they moved deeper, Carson's skin tingled, the hairs on his neck standing up. There was something, just at the edge of perception, an oppressive sense of something *wrong*.

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Something very much like... evil? He could almost taste it, bitter and sharp.

Something brushed his skin, sent shivers up his arm. He heard whispers, turned sharply. Nothing there. He turned back and came face to face with a face. Hooded, haughty, poised over a struggling blonde in a gauzy robe strapped to an altar, long steel sliver of knife poised to strike at her pulsing heart. The image swam before his eyes, he gasped and jerked back... then caught himself. It was a portrait. Nearly life size, surrounded in a gold filagree frame. For some reason, it took his breath away. The eyes under the cowl held him. They were pits of night, pinholes in the abyss. Black and cold as death. And they weren't looking at the victim on the altar. They were looking at him.

"Over here... quickly!"

Somehow he had lost the girl... had wandered off in the little store. Only now that he was inside, in the dark, it no longer seemed little. She beckoned from the far side, a wisp of pale skin like a sliver of moon peeking through a black curtain. He tore his attention from the eyes with difficulty and moved toward her whisper.

They were in another room, trotting fast, breath rasping over nerves and adrenaline. More smudgy shapes lurked in the darkness around them, crowding close and looming large. Carson's head spun, and he felt like he was under water, struggling to see, to hear, to find which way was up. It was as if he was working his way down the gullet of a large and hungry shark. Or something worse.

"Not much further now," the girl muttered. She caught the wild look in his eye. "The shop is bigger than it looks. It's because..." the rest of her words became garbled and he missed them.

"What... what did you...?" He struggled to focus, but a whiff of something repulsive drifted through the dark, snatched his attention. "Ugh!" He wrinkled his nose. "Stinks..."

She smiled wryly. "Everyone says that the first time."

They moved on, the girl just a head of him, silence falling like a cloak. Another room. Another.

A door slammed. He started, whirled, and realized they had stopped. And the girl was there - *behind* him now. She stood in the sudden silence, a slip of a thing in the dark, framed by the black, peeling wood of an ominous looking door. He took an unconscious step backward, glanced nervously over his shoulder at the way they'd been going and tried to wrap his brain around how he had gotten from following her to in front of her. But there were no answers in that

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direction either. Just a plain wall, set with aged, cracked stone, dank and crawling with lichen.

Dead end.

"There. That's better."

Carson turned, confusion making his face as blank as the wall. "I don't..."

"No." Her voice had an edge to it. "You don't."

Something had changed. The young woman looked smug now, hands resting loosely on hips, smiling an unpleasant smile. She pushed a cold gaze around the small, dank chamber. "I like this better than your place. It's more private. Don't you think?"

Carson sucked air, steadied himself. He could see his breath, a puff of white. He shivered, but not from the sudden cold. Something was wrong. Very wrong. He cleared his throat. "You said... er... you said someone needed me..."

"I lied." Her mouth was cruel, the moon shape of her face changing from full to sickle as she slid a sidelong glance at him from the shadows. She took a step and another, stalking, keeping parallel to him, casual but calculating. Lean, pale fingers slipped the buttons on her pea coat.

One. By one. By one.

Her eyes never left him.

She tsk-ed, her bottom lip forming into a petulant pout. She shook her head. "You've been a bad boy, Carson." Dark eyes bored through him, unblinking. They were stirring again with the strange movement he had seen through the peephole. Only now it was different. Meaner. Hungrier.

Just about the time Carson was thinking he might want to make a break for the door, she switch-stepped, and swung gracefully back in front of it like a lioness stalking prey, making sure she was always between him and the exit.

When she was in front of it again, she stopped. Black eyes pierced him. "You've done bad things."

With a sultry shrug the coat slipped off her shoulders and hit the floor. Carson's jaw followed. Underneath she was decked head to toe in leather buckles, straps and milky white skin. She grinned, hands flexing like claws, and tossed her long brown hair back over shapely shoulders. Carson's blood went cold. The whole scene was starting to feel familiar. Dangerously familiar. His shiver was back, and it brought friends.

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"You took someone from me," she drawled, enjoying the tangible sense of panic, relishing Carson's fear and the trickle of nervous sweat that ran down out of his tousled hair across his cheek. "Someone very, very important."

Carson edged away, checking for exits, feeling his stomach lurch. There was nothing. "I took... so... leather... what now...?"

Then it hit him.

"Wait..."

He did know this girl. Or her face at least. He'd stared at it every day for a week. It had hung in the mini-mart window on a missing poster just below the words *Have You Seen This Woman?* His heart gave a jump, skipped two beats.

The girl leered. A booted heel clicked. She took a step, not sideways now, but directly at him. The lioness had found her prey. She was moving in.

Carson retreated, was stopped immediately by the wall. He felt it against his back, as cold and hard as her eyes.

"You..." he stammered. "Vanessa... you're one of...!"

"Yes..." A step.

"And I..."

"Yes!" Another step. A pair of gleaming fangs slid out, like needle tipped exclamation points.

Carson's breath locked in his chest. His arms were frozen, unresponsive, dead. "You... you were...!"

"Yes!"

"And now you're gonna...?"

She threw back her head, tore the air with a fiendish cackle. It was a tune he had heard before - but from a different set of pipes - and it still turned his legs to jell-o. When the girl looked back, her eyes were lit with the hot red glare of hell, her face a Halloween mask of pure mean stretched over hate.

"Yes... Carson Dudley... YES!!!"

"Crap."

She leaped.