

Chapter 1

“New Avalon?” the woman asked. “What exactly is this place?” She was tall and thin but well built; both in a fit sense as well in her womanhood. She was in her mid 30’s with striking blue eyes and long blond hair pulled back into a tight bun. She had high cheek bones and full red lips. Not quite what one would expect from a top-rated investigator.

Formerly of the F.B.I, she had an explosive affair with her married Director whose estranged wife had killed him with an old Vietnam War machete that once was on display in their living room. The wife nearly killed her as well before going out the window of the Manhattan high-rise hotel’s window in the ensuing struggle.

Isabella was found of no wrong doing in the woman’s death, but then fraternizing with her boss was perhaps another matter. Never the less she had decided to get away from the bureau and the whole toxic mess and had come Upstate to try her hand as a private investigator.

She was smooth and refined in her black skirt and cornflower blue button-up blouse that made her matching eyes both spectacular and penetratingly inquisitive at the same time.

“Yeah, what the heck is this place anyways?” The man sitting next to her asked. He had a country twang and a definitive drawl to his speech that instantly brought to mind pick-up trucks and hound dogs. His appearance was quite the opposite of the woman he sat next to.

Jack Williams always thought of himself as a simple man, and many of his adversaries had made that mistake. A calm, though often ill-spoken hick didn't equate to stupid by any means.

He was a little rough around the edges; his gray suit was severely wrinkled, his black shoes scuffed horribly and were in desperate need of a good shine. Two-day stubble lay over reddish skin that bespoke of a man that drank a little too much and the years were starting to show it. His hair was a sandy brown, a little shaggy and long over the ears; his eyes also brown, soft and seemed to linger on Isabella's nice tanned legs a little too often. Though the attractive woman, like many of her kind had much practice trying not to notice.

“New Avalon,” the elderly woman began, “is not, I imagine, like anything you've come across before.” She sat before the two across a six foot dark oak table. The study was cozy, the shelves lined with old books. The place looked like it was hundreds of years old, but the two investigators knew the place had gone up just last month.

Truly astonishing.

This architectural feat did not go unnoticed by the local paper. And the Times Union had several articles about the place, though the stories often lacked any decent photographs, and the details were quite non-exacting at best. So was this new mystery to the area, but like all things would soon fade and just become another oddity to New York's landscape.

Many of the study's shelves held various items other than dusty old tomes. There was a pink crystal skull, numerous pewter fairies, wooden carvings, rolled parchment, and a number of wooden boxes of all shapes and sizes –several of which had painted dragons set upon leather and nailed to the side with dull copper tacks.

There was a tall black iron coat rack that held a full collection of fall time jackets and scarves as well as multi-coloured cloaks that seemed oddly fitting to this witch's lair. A half dozen wood and straw brooms were stacked in the far corner of the room; lonely and clearly out of the way, but Jack found his gaze travel there as frequently to the profile of Isabella's well formed breasts. Despite her cool façade Isabella couldn't help but glare at Jack finally in a non-verbal "stop staring at me you fiend!"

Jack kind of grinned and whispered not too quietly, "whoa take it easy Izzy."

A brown tabby cat lie lazily in front of a creaking hearth where within flickered an inviting fire. It rhythmically licked its paw and then swiped it up over its ears and down the side of its face. Again and again it went, almost in time with the crackling fire. The cat had a contented feline smile and squint of its eyes, playfully perhaps listening to the human conversation in delight.

Much of the floor was covered with lush rugs of diverse designs and origins. A few were decorated with intricate Celtic patterns. Others held a southwestern influence where Kokopelli could be seen peeking out from the jagged lines that ran across the length of the fabric. Others contained Aztec and Oriental patterns but despite their apparent incongruity they accented each other perfectly and made the room most pleasing to the eye.

“As my invitation had indicated,” the old woman continued, “I need your combined help investigating some matters for me and new Avalon as it were.”

“You are Lady Demeter then of course,” Isabella chimed astutely.

“Quite; if you two haven’t introduced each other...” She paused, “Isabella Marois this is Jack Williams.” The gesture was perhaps moot but proper. Of course the two knew each other. Albany wasn’t that big where the P.I.’s in town wouldn’t rub shoulders in say the first week

they were in town. It was a cut-throat business and many of their peers probably spent more time trying to bring each other down than actually working cases. Oh you've gotta love America.

Isabella and Jack briefly locked eyes and nodded toward the other and quickly back at the old woman. "I'm sure I don't need to remind you that discretion is of principal importance." Lady Demeter's eyes were gray, like steel daggers. The investigators nodded in acquiescence at the tip of her blades.

"Yes of course," they mumbled hastily in unison.

Lady Demeter pulled a red folder out of her robes like a stage magician and placed it on the table. She spread her fingers in a web over them lightly. "Secondly," She paused again for effect, "the information you are investigating will perhaps lead you to some, how shall I say, unusual findings. Don't, I repeat don't try to figure out why, just get the information to me, I will figure out what it means."

"But," Jack began.

"Ah!" Lady Demeter barked.

"I've gotta..."

"Ah!" she went again.

“You see,” Isabella tried.

“Ah! Ah! Ah!” She went three times and slammed the folder down on the table with a loud crack. “If you want this job, and I know you do. It offers three times your usual fees. But the conditions are that you have to work together, tell no one but us what you find, and don’t waste your time putting the puzzle pieces together, just bring them to me.” The effect would be as though she was screaming at them, but she hadn’t raised her voice. Lady Demeter was like a sitting lion and it was as though the antelope before her knew they could be destroyed at any second.

“Just investigate, gather information for me, but don’t think. Can you do that?” She was as a mother or even a teacher admonishing her child students.

“Of course,” Jack said. His face broke into a pleasant smile, “No problem.”

“We will do as you ask,” Isabella conceded without any further thought.

“Good.” She slid the folder across the table to the two investigators. “Please start immediately. You can work out of the office we set up for you in Clifton Park. I expect you to call in with status

reports every 12 hours. You will speak with either Rheaven or Lord Sibor. Everything you need to get started is in that folder. Good Day”

On cue it would seem, the double doors opened and a young woman in a white robe and gold braided belt stood in the doorway. Her lovely red hair virtually set afire by the sunlight coming through the hallway window behind her.

“Follow me please,” was all she said and then turned away down the hall.

Jack and Isabella were up and away from the table without a word and soon out of sight down the hall. The doors closed of their own accord as an old man in gray robes and a long gray beard stepped magickally out from the solid bookcase.

“You don’t truly believe those two won’t ask why?” Lord Sibor said sarcastically.

Lady Demeter turned and smiled at him. “Of course they will, but for them to believe they have to see, and we have provided that opportunity. Why is the *only* question they will be asking.”