

Chapter One

Ernie

Detective Ernie Benasco pulled his county sedan up to a “no parking” zone, punched the hazard button, and jumped out. He dashed toward the corner of 17th and Broadway as fast as his short legs would carry him, ducking and weaving through the pedestrians like a mini Mack truck.

Gotta catch the Little Guy, gotta catch the Little Guy. His inner voice sounded as breathless as his real voice would have, had he voiced the resolve out loud. He was moving so fast that he actually *did* catch the Little Guy—by crashing into him as he rounded the corner. For some reason, the damn kid had switched directions. With naturally fast reflexes, the kid put his right arm protectively across his chest, and Ernie ran face-first into his forearm.

“Ow. Son of a bitch,” Ernie groused, briefly cupping the middle of his face, but he instantly redirected his attention to his job, and pointed at the kid as if trying to recall his name. “Hey, Danny, right? Danny Heller?”

His expression momentarily startled, Danny gave a nod then, apparently, he recognized Ernie, and took off walking again.

Now, a nod was by no means an invitation, but it was also not the “fuck you” Ernie had been expecting. It was unusual to catch one of these Shadow Clan guys out on his own, and if Ernie couldn’t figure out a way to take advantage of it, then he didn’t deserve to be called a paranormal cop. (Actually, he wished he didn’t deserve to be called a paranormal cop, but that’s what happened when you called your lieutenant “an ignorant bastard” to his face.)

He spun on his heel and went after the young man, working hard to match his long stride. The kid was tall, maybe six-two, in his early twenties, and dressed like a Brooks Brothers model in a pricey, although somewhat wrinkled, suit. His hair was one of those weird styles young people seemed to favor, cut to a deceptively conservative standard in the back, but reaching practically to his chin in front. Usually, he kept it moussed back, but today it hung down like a sheepdog’s hair, a black curtain of protection that constantly needed to be pushed back out of his eyes.

Ernie searched for something to say that would demand his attention. Something that would make him stop and listen.

“Hey, man. You do know those High Coven witches are after you, don’t you? Man, they really got it in for you, don’t they?”

Danny heaved a sigh, as if all his days were marred by chunky police detectives wanting his ear, but he did stop. His expression of mild frustration would have made Ernie’s partner, Davey Jane, wax poetic. She was always remarking that, with his innocent good looks, the kid could have been a movie star, or in a boy band, or something.

He spoke so low that Ernie could hardly hear him above the sounds of the city. “Well, I didn’t do anything, so...” He shrugged in a don’t-give-a-crap sort of way, and started walking again, heading back toward his car.

Danny had gotten his nickname, “the Little Guy,” because even though he was respectably tall, he was still shorter than the two Sasquatches he hung around with. The witches had told Davey Jane his real name, and had also brought up the fact that he was a member of the Shadow Clan, their detested magical rivals.

Other than that, he and Davey Jane knew little about him, except what they had uncovered with their own efforts. The kid drove a silver Porsche 960 that was registered to the Shadow Clan Corporation. He lived lease-free and probably rent-free in a ritzy, lakeside apartment, which the Shadow Clan Corporation also owned. (Quite an acquisition, Ernie thought, for an organization of small-time thugs.) He worked at a seedy, hip-hop nightclub called “Shady,” which was, not surprisingly, owned by the Shadow Clan Corporation.

They hadn’t been able to figure out what Danny’s job was, though: Bodyguard? Hit man? Companion animal? Whatever the case, he was a potentially valuable asset because he was often in the company of the gang’s two head honchos, “NBA” and “Dreadlocks.” Because of that, even if he was a janitor, getting him on his own like this was a potentially enormous opportunity—an opportunity that could not be allowed to get back in its car and drive away.

“Hey, hold on a minute, Danny,” Ernie called after him. “What’s your rush? How about lettin’ me buy you a cup of coffee?”

They were at a busy intersection in downtown Oakland. It was early November, a week after Daylight Savings Time, and even though it was only three-thirty in the afternoon, it seemed that people were trying to get a jump on rush hour to get home before the early sunset.

Ernie didn't really expect Danny to respond to the offer of coffee—he'd just thrown it out there to give himself time to think of something better—so he was surprised when Danny seemed to consider it. He stood like a rock in a river, disregarding the pedestrians who had to swerve their course to go around him. He stood so still that Ernie thought he must be considering it very deeply, indeed—until he looked where Danny was looking and realized that his sleek, silver, Porsche was blocked in by a huge, double-parked Yukon.

Ernie wanted to pump his fist in triumph, but, instead, he knit his brows in feigned sympathy.

"Wow, look at that," he lamented. "People are so rude, huh? I mean, who even needs a car like that in the city? Get yourself something you can park, right?"

He glanced up at the face barely visible behind the curtain of black hair. He saw that the lips were pursed and there was a faint darkness below the eyes.

"You look like you've had a hard day," Ernie noted. "Hey, me, too, man. Me, too. Bosses just don't appreciate what grunts like us go through, do they? I pour my heart and soul into this job—every spare minute—nights, weekends. You've seen me, right? Tailing you at three in the morning. Nice bit of driving last night, by the way. I almost wrecked into the side of a bridge trying to keep up, but do you think my supervisor appreciates it? No, I just get chewed out for using 'unauthorized overtime.'"

Danny's eyes shifted toward him, naturally suspicious. "That woman cop is your boss?"

"Her? Oh, no way. She's my partner, although try and convince her of that."

He grinned conspiratorially, but the kid continued to regard him with all the animation of a Russian mannequin. That unblinking gaze of his was really kind of creepy. After a moment, he said, "She's a witch, you know."

"My partner? You think so?"

"I know so. No magic, but she's still a witch."

Ernie looked around to make sure Davey Jane hadn't unexpectedly appeared. "Actually, the word I was searching for started with a B, not a W."

To his surprise and relief, Danny's lips twitched at the corners.

After weeks of watching the Shadow Clan from afar, this was Ernie's first time speaking to one of their people, and he could barely hide his excitement. His stomach did a little flutter, like it did when he had a fish on the line, but the hook wasn't set, and there was still a chance it might get away. Just reel him in, nice and slow, he told himself.

Across Broadway, he spotted a sidewalk café.

“So, listen, Dan. Maybe we could help each other out here. If you sit down with me for five minutes then maybe I won’t feel compelled to chase you around the city tonight, and you won’t have to worry about trying to give me the slip. What do you say?”

Although Danny gave no outward signs of saying *anything*, just the fact that he was hesitating made Ernie feel he wanted to say yes, so he urged him on.

“Come on. Aren’t you getting tired of seeing my face wherever you go? I know I’m getting tired of seeing yours,” he added, with what he hoped was an engaging grin. “All I’m asking for is five minutes.”

Danny’s shoes, (Prada, Ernie was pretty sure), shifted against the grimy sidewalk as he glanced at his cornered car again...

“... Yeah, all right,” he finally said.

It took some major self-control for Ernie not to start jumping up and down.

Danny didn’t seem like a particularly quick thinker, and paused to let the idea settle into his brain before reaffirming his decision. “Sure, why not? How’s that saying go? What’s good for the goose...?”

“Oh!” Ernie chuckled. “Absolutely.”

Bingo. He didn’t know what “goose” they were talking about, but he had high hopes it was one of Danny’s bosses. Maybe Davey Jane’s impromptu interview with Mr. NBA that morning had paid off in a way she hadn’t anticipated. Maybe Danny had found out about it and now he wanted to exact a little revenge.

Ernie led the way across Broadway and Danny ambled along behind him like a pet cheetah. He moved with a weird kind of feline grace that seemed characteristic of the Shadow Clan. To Ernie’s mind, they were a strange-looking bunch—mostly African American, mostly over six feet—including the women. They tended toward slim builds, longer than average limbs, and large eyes. When Ernie would see a few of them walking together, he would be put to mind of otherworldly predators slinking through the shadows of some alien jungle.

“Want to sit inside?” he asked, thinking Danny might relax more if he wasn’t in fear of being spotted with a cop by someone he knew, but he said, “Outside is fine.”

“You want something to drink?”

“No.”

They sat on white, wrought iron chairs at a matching table that held a centerpiece of paper flowers and unlit votive candles. It looked like someone had started this place on a

budget, and, if it was like a lot of other small businesses in the area, it probably wouldn't be around six months from now.

A college-age waitress in jeans, T-shirt, and annoyed expression, came out with menus.

"We're not going to be ordering," Ernie told her. He almost bit his tongue to stop the "sweetheart" that naturally started to roll off his tongue. If he had to do one more sensitivity training, he was going to scream. "We're just going to sit down here for a little while."

When she started to recite a spiel about the purchase minimum, he flashed his Alameda County Sheriff's badge and ID. He didn't give her the chance to look at it very carefully because of the improbable department name on his ID card—Alameda County Paranormal Task Force. It was downright cringeworthy for an old veteran like himself—as if he worked for Hop-Along Cassidy's Good Guy American Squad or something.

She took a good look at it, then at him, then returned inside, where she sat in a booth by the window and took out her phone.

Danny relaxed in his chair, his suit coat falling open, soft leather shoes planted three feet apart. Despite his angelic face, Ernie had always thought there was something very off about this guy. His lack of animation was almost chilling, and Ernie could see why the witches suspected him of being responsible for some pretty horrible shit. But the situation required Ernie to push through his suspicions. *Friendly*, he told himself. *Be friendly. The kid may look like a killer android, but I'm pretty sure there's a real person under there, so put him at ease.*

"You know," he said, with a chummy smile, "I'm not even going to ask why you decided to talk to me. I'm just glad you did. My name is Detective Benasco, by the way."

He offered his hand across the table, but Danny pretended not to notice it. "I know who you are."

"Oh, yeah, you probably do..." Feeling a bit foolish, not to mention annoyed, Ernie clasped his hands on the tabletop. "Your boss has ears everywhere, doesn't he?"

"My boss?"

"Yeah. The big guy? Too-yook?" Ernie's tongue stumbled over the unfamiliar name. He much preferred "NBA."

"Tuyouk," Danny said. "He's my brother. Not my boss."

This actually didn't come as too much of a surprise. Davey Jane had guessed as much from observing them through binoculars. "But he must not be a full brother, right?" he said, repeating another of her speculations. "I mean you guys don't look that much alike." Tuyouk was a giant. He had skin the color of cinnamon, a hawkish nose, and narrow, almost slanted,

eyes. To Ernie, Danny's surfer-boy tan and Anglicized features weren't much of a match. "Half-brothers, maybe? Same mother, different fathers? What are you guys, anyway? Samoan or something?"

His questions seemed to both amuse and annoy Danny. He snorted softly then dropped his gaze to examine his fingernails, the pinky and thumb of which were chewed ragged. Still, he betrayed no nervousness.

"Is this what you really want to talk about, Ernie? I mean, Detective?"

Ernie could sense Danny's energy coiling to rise as if he'd already changed his mind about talking, and had halfway convinced himself to leave.

"Well... What do *you* want to talk about, Danny? You must have something on your mind, or you wouldn't have sat down with me."

Blowing out a sigh, Danny leaned back, effortlessly balancing on two chair legs. He laced his fingers across the front of his shirt, and looked through the café window to watch the waitress texting away on her phone.

"I... want to talk about space aliens, I think," he said.

Ernie hesitated, not sure he'd heard correctly. Then, a moment later, *knowing* he'd heard correctly, his smile tightened. So the kid didn't want to get revenge by ratting out his brother; he just wanted to mess with the cop who'd been following him around every night. He hid a wave of annoyance.

"Why do you want to talk about that?"

"You want me to talk about my brother, don't you? Well, he's an alien." He waved at the window to get the waitress's attention.

Ernie stared at him. He didn't really know where to go with that.