

## CHAPTER ONE

Tons of icicles encased the limbs of thousands of trees behind the walls of Central Park. Where multicolored leaves had embraced these trees only a few months before, translucent ice encased them now. They reflected the light of the full moon that hung so low and mysteriously over Manhattan. The black clouds that lightly floated across the moon were not enough to interfere with the illumination of the ice-laden trees.

The air vibrated with the humming, scraping, and hissing of the city's snowplows. They continually shoveled back the snow from the roadways—the snow that kept coming and coming and coming.

Bundled up in a suit, overcoat, snow boots, scarf, and an alpine fedora, Daniel Davenport was pushed by winds that came from all directions as he trudged up Fifth Avenue to his ultimate destination on the eastern side of Central Park. He was glad that Manhattan blocks running north to south were normally short—even though on a night like tonight they were more than a bit challenging.

Daniel Davenport, a rangy, athletic man in his mid-forties, had just left his office at the Ballard Media Group, on the Avenue of the Americas. He was one of an army of vice presidents in charge of corporate acquisitions for one of America's mightiest media giants. Ballard Media owned newspapers, magazines, and television and radio stations, as well as a variety of other ventures.

As Daniel walked, he tried to hail a cab. On a night like this, however, most New York City cab drivers didn't care who you were; they were very much in demand and chose their fares when they wanted to. With inflated self-importance, they simply didn't go out of their way for

anyone, including Daniel Davenport.

He didn't want to be late for his late evening meeting, so he pushed against the wind as best he could. When he arrived at his destination, a building he visited once a month, the doorman opened the apartment building door for him. Max was a burly fellow with a reddish complexion.

The acoustics of the building were such that, even in the lobby, one could hear the howling, echoing sounds of the winds outside.

"Cold night, Max," said Daniel as he stamped the snow off his boots.

"I'd say it's colder than a witch's tit," Max replied.

Daniel smiled somewhat self-consciously and nodded.

"Shall I ring Mr. Topping for you, sir?" Max asked.

"Please do."

Daniel looked around the lobby and saw a huge, beautifully decorated Christmas tree, as well as an ancient-looking golden menorah. But it was the tree that caught his eye. It was magnificent, with multicolored lights and bulbs, and draped with tinsel and angels' hair. The tree reached to the full height of the lobby's twenty-foot ceiling, and it gave off the deep aroma of pine. It brought back nostalgic boyhood memories for Daniel.

He laughed to himself and thought, *And look at me now, four decades later; I practice Wicca and belong to a coven.*

Max got the okay from Bruce Topping when he called upstairs. "Okay, Mr. Davenport," he said. "You can go up now. Mr. Topping is expecting you."

"Thank you, Max. Have a good holiday."

"And you do the same, Mr. Davenport."

As the elevator door closed behind him, Daisy, the downstairs maid, wheeled the vacuum cleaner out into the lobby.

Max said to her, "Daisy, I wonder what the hell they do up there?"

Daisy nodded. "It seems like they always go up there around this time of the month. They are all nice-looking people, important-looking people. They stay late—and have you noticed? They come back again in just about thirty days."

“Well, I guess it’s none of our business,” Max replied.

He continued his thoughts as Daisy’s vacuuming took her away from the main lobby and out of sight. *It sure as hell is a cold night*, he thought. Then he thought about the gorgeous blonde who lived upstairs with Mr. Topping and wished he had her to keep him warm. *But that’s impossible*. He smiled. He had something else in mind.

He looked around, saw that no one was in sight, and pulled a large silver flask from the inside of his overcoat pocket. He took a good swig of brandy.

“Ah, now that feels better,” he mumbled with satisfaction.