

GRAVE MISTAKE

HEDGEWITCH FOR HIRE – BOOK 1



CHRISTINE POPE

Mark & Valentine Press

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The Pits and the Pendulum

MAZEY HOSKINS, THE OWNER OF CRESCENT CITY — MY FAVORITE WITCHY supply shop — leaned over the counter as I began to pull out my debit Visa card and said in a conspiratorial murmur, “Word on the street is that Lucien Dumond is coming for you.”

Although I generally did my best to maintain a Zen attitude, no matter what troubles might cross my path, her words still sent a sharp stab of worry through me. But I managed to smile, even as I tried to tell myself that Mazezy was probably exaggerating things. I loved Mazezy — she was like the cozy, friendly grandmother I’d never had — but boy, did she love to trade stories.

Most of the time, I did, too, since chatting with Mazezy was one of the best ways to stay in touch with what might be happening in the various local magical groups. Even in this connected age, rumors tended to stay off the internet when it came to L.A.’s pagan community. The last thing any of us wanted was to give some ammo to the mundanes...aka, those who didn’t believe in magic of any sort.

However, the tale she’d just related was one I definitely didn’t want to hear. Several practitioners who’d come down on Lucien Dumond’s bad side had disappeared from the scene. The rumor was that they’d simply decided to relocate, but darker whispers hinted that Lucien might have come up with a more permanent solution to his problems.

Doing my best to shrug off Mazey's comment, I said lightly, "He's probably pissed off that I turned him down for another date," then handed over my debit card. "Guy can't take no for an answer."

Which was definitely not an exaggeration. Lucien Dumond was the leader of GLANG — the Greater Los Angeles Necromancers' Guild — and he attracted groupies like the Rolling Stones on a worldwide tour back in the '60s. Not that I'd been around to witness those sorts of shenanigans, of course, but still, I'd read a few stories.

Despite Lucien already having a slavishly devoted group of women — whom I tended to refer to as his harem — he was always on the prowl for fresh meat. Unfortunately, a while back, he'd decided I was exactly the kind of meat he wanted.

Mazey shook her head. "Selena, I don't think this is something you should ignore. People are saying that he wants to shut you down...by whatever means necessary."

Again, I had to fight back a wave of unease. I'd been hearing a whisper of rumors along those lines for a few weeks already, but this was the first time anyone had come right out and told me to my face that I might be in actual danger, that Lucien might have decided it was time to get rid of the troublesome pebble in his shoe.

Trust Mazey to do the hard work. Since she wasn't really a practitioner, except to amuse herself, she hadn't crossed the leader of GLANG and his band of lackeys.

I, on the other hand, was a "hedgewitch," a phrase used to describe a practitioner who worked on her own, who had her own way of approaching the arcane arts. My psychic abilities had come on early, and I'd basically trained myself, first from books I got at the library and ordered online, then later on by watching YouTube videos to help fill in the gaps. I didn't follow any particular practice, but picked and chose from a variety of different disciplines as they suited my own particular talents. Most people tended to think I was a practicing Wiccan, but I really wasn't, although I called out to certain Celtic deities, such as Cerridwen and Brigid, as the need arose.

At any rate, I was basically the antithesis of Lucien Dumond and his squad. He'd trained with a master on the East Coast, and he pretty strictly followed the rulebook of the Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society that was the predecessor to Wicca...although with his own unique twist.

Anyway, Lucien had been trying to coax me to his way of doing things — and into his bed — for the last year or so. Before then, I probably had barely been a blip on his radar, since he hadn't seen me as any kind of a threat. But then I got a client who ended up following my advice and landed a starring role in a hot new TV series, and suddenly Lucien realized there was another skilled practitioner in the L.A. area, one who quite possibly had poached a client who should have gone to him.

"Last I checked, this was a free country," I said, and watched as Mazey, expression still troubled, slipped my debit card into the chip reader before handing it back. "I mean, even Lucien can't think he's entitled to every new client in L.A."

"No, only the ones who can bring him a lot of money," she responded pithily. Her expression had turned resigned, as if she'd guessed that I wasn't going to heed her warnings and was now trying to tell herself that she'd done her best and could wash her hands of the whole affair.

I shrugged. Performing readings for people over the past ten years had allowed me to develop something of a poker face, so I hoped she couldn't pick up anything of the worry that had begun to churn in my gut. It was easy to be dismissive in order to let her think the whole situation was no big deal, but I knew better...even if I didn't know what I should do next.

Tone dry, I said, "I doubt Lucien Dumond is hurting for cash," and Mazey let out an unwilling chuckle.

"No, probably not."

I picked up my bag of herbs, stuffed it in my purse — I had several candles I wanted to pour for my new moon observance — and thanked her, then hurried out of the shop. A little ways down the street, my Denim Edition Volkswagen Beetle awaited. I got behind the wheel and pulled away from the curb.

The thought crossed my mind that maybe I should have picked a slightly less

conspicuous car a few years back when I'd finally decided to replace my ancient Nissan Sentra, but then I wanted to shake my head at myself. Yes, GLANG was nothing to trifle with, but even that group of sorcerers and witches didn't number more than thirty or forty people at the most. It wasn't as if Lucien could have spies planted on every street corner in L.A., or operatives capable of hacking into L.A.'s traffic-cam system.

At least, I didn't think he did.

Frowning, I headed for home, which was a rent-controlled duplex I'd been lucky enough to find more than five years earlier. Or really, it probably wasn't luck so much as a home-manifestation spell that had turned out exactly the way I wanted.

I parked in the carport, waved to my neighbor — Mr. Hanley, a retired aerospace engineer — then went inside. At once, the comforting scent of sage and incense surrounded me, and I let out a breath. In my house, with its shabby chic collection of mismatched furniture and my carefully curated collection of crystals and art, I felt safe.

Too bad that just because it felt that way, it didn't mean it actually was.

After putting my bag of herbs and my purse down on the little round table in the dining area, I stood in my living room, irresolute. Mazey's words worried me more than I'd let on. Yes, I'd been doing this dance around Lucien, trying my hardest to pretend I had no idea what he wanted from me, but clearly, he was tired of doing the avoidance two-step and was ready to play hardball.

If you'll pardon the mixed metaphors.

I went into the kitchen and put the kettle on, figuring a nice calming cup of tea might be just what I needed to settle my nerves. Yes, it was a glorious spring day, one of those perfect seventy-five-degree slices of heaven that you often got in Los Angeles in the springtime, but I still thought a hot drink would help.

Or maybe I just needed something to occupy myself.

My brain churned away, testing and then discarding various possibilities. That I would throw up my hands and meekly give in to Lucien Dumond was just not an option. Yes, the guy had a certain reptilian charisma, but it definitely wasn't anything I personally found attractive. And that didn't even take into

account his “business model.”

His group was called the “Greater Los Angeles Necromancers’ Guild,” but it wasn’t as though he and his cohorts were going around Southern California and digging up bodies for reanimation spells. No, they used their powers for something much subtler. Instead, the enchantments they cast were put to use keeping people preternaturally youthful. You know those actors and actresses who barely seem to age, who keep working decade after decade with hardly any loss of vitality?

In one case out of ten, it was awesome genetics and some extremely good cosmetic surgery, and nothing more. In all the rest...GLANG had been on the job. I probably don’t have to point out that there’s a lot of money in that sort of work. Because there was a lot of money involved, Lucien wanted to make sure no one interfered with the magic he invoked to create that false youthfulness.

And no, the actress I’d helped land the perfect role wasn’t anywhere close to the age where she’d be needing that sort of assistance, but Lucien was all about the long game. He wanted to have been her savior so he could start cultivating a relationship that would last decades. Maybe she didn’t need anything smoothed or tightened right now...but in ten years or so, that would be an entirely different story.

Which was why he was so annoyed with me. As long as I dispensed advice to dissatisfied housewives and anxiety-ridden lawyers and dentists, he couldn’t care less what I did. But as soon as I horned in on his territory — Hollywood — well, that was an entirely different situation.

Sigh.

I briefly considered going straight to him and promising I wouldn’t take any more clients in the entertainment industry. That seemed like a cowardly thing to do, though. The guy wasn’t some all-powerful god — he was just a sorcerer who’d actually been born Luke Dershowitz, the oldest son of a very successful oral surgeon in Encino. Why should I have to bow and scrape to him?

Because he’s a lot more powerful than you are, I thought then, although that wasn’t strictly the truth. He was really good at invoking some of the world’s darker forces to firm an actress’s jaw line or nudge a few pounds off some aging

actor's waist, but his real power lay in the witches — male and female — he'd gathered around him. If nothing else, Lucien was very good at getting people to become followers, and when he combined his own powers with theirs, they constituted a force that a solitary witch didn't have a chance of beating.

That I'd refused to become one of his acolytes...on top of letting him know I had no interest in jumping in the sack with him...well, no wonder I was probably number one on what my mother referred to as a "fecal roster."

Another option would be to flat-out ignore Lucien. That proposition, of course, would be a hell of a lot riskier. He liked to stay in his fancy mid-century modern house in the hills above his hometown of Encino, but he ventured out from time to time if necessary...and putting down an impudent hedgewitch was probably reason enough to draw him down to West L.A. If nothing else, coming down hard on me would serve as an object lesson to anyone else who might have been contemplating getting in his way.

I briefly considered reaching out to some of the other witches I knew for help, but even if they agreed with my opinion of Lucien Dumond, none of them were strong enough to take on GLANG. Like me, they tried to fly low and avoid the radar.

Except I hadn't done such a great job of that, had I?

Double sigh.

The third option was one I really didn't want to consider. Since Lucien viewed Southern California as his territory, I could just...leave. Pull up stakes and go someplace where he couldn't be bothered to follow me, just like those other witches and warlocks who'd made the mistake of making an enemy of Lucien Dumond.

If they'd really left at all, and hadn't ended up buried in a shallow grave in the Angeles National Forest or something.

As soon as the thought of running away crossed my mind, I wanted to immediately reject it. Why the hell should I have to leave my treasured little duplex, my clients, the quiet life I'd built for myself? I didn't have a lot of relatives — my mother still lived in Sherman Oaks, where I'd grown up, although I didn't have any other immediate family — but L.A. was still my