

PAIGE AND ADAM SUPER SLEUTHS!

THE CASE of the HALF-DEMON SPY



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The Case of the Half-Demon

Spy

Adam watched as Paige took a water glass from the tray outside the meeting room door. She lifted it to the side of her head, the base pressed against her left ear, then she cocked her head, her brow furrowed in concentration. After a moment, she replaced the water cup with a coffee mug, and closed her eyes.

“Say something,” she said.

“I’m afraid to. What the hell are you—?”

She cut him off with a brusque wave, lowered the mug, then grabbed the water glass with her other hand and looked around.

“There,” she said, jerking her chin at the closet. “Go in there.”

Adam shook his head, grabbed his new Walkman and took out his cassette case.

“Fine,” she said. “*I’ll* go in the closet.”

“Again . . . what the hell are you—?”

“Stop swearing. It doesn’t make you sound cool, you know. Not that anything could . . .”

He balled up a napkin and pitched it at her. “At least I don’t have a huge zit on my nose. Makes you look like a witch.” He snapped his fingers. “Hey, maybe it’ll help you cast spells. Hope so. You can use all the help you can get.”

“Ha-ha. Take those headphones off and give me a hand. I’m doing this for you.”

“Doing what?”

“Saving you from a boring afternoon hanging out in this hallway waiting for the council meeting to end. Now, do you want to go into that closet or should I?”

“We both could,” he said with a sly grin. “That would be one way to pass the time.”

She gave him a look, as if the suggestion didn’t warrant a response. Couldn’t blame him for trying, even if he knew the answer wouldn’t change and, really, he wasn’t sure what he’d do if it ever did.

He’d been friends with Paige for almost two years now, and there were times when, alone like this, with a girl who was cute enough, and . . . His gaze dropped to her chest, at fourteen, already bigger than a lot of grown women’s . . . Well, sometimes he *did* entertain thoughts of darkened closets and misplaced hands and—

“Adam.” She glowered up at him, hands on hips. “Are you going in there or am I?”

“If you do, can I lock the door?”

A roll of her eyes, and she strode past him to the closet, opened the door and waved him inside.

“What am I supposed to—?”

“Just talk. That should be easy enough.”

He opened his mouth to retort, but she shut the door in his face. Christ, like he'd *want* to be in a closet with her. She'd probably spend the whole time giving him orders. Do this, do that kiss me here . . . touch me there . . .

His groin tightened and he shoved back the images. Better not to think of it. If he ever did get Paige in a closet, he'd regret it. She'd make sure of that.

"What am I doing?" he asked.

"Helping me conduct a scientific experiment."

"Scient—?" He grabbed the door handle, but she'd spell-locked it shut. "Is this homework? You promised you wouldn't spend the weekend doing homework again."

"I'm not. I don't have any." She opened the door, ushered him out and held up the water glass. "Glass works better than china. Or maybe it's because of the longer tube. I'm not sure."

"Works better for what?"

"Conducting sound. I'd read about it, but I wasn't sure it would work. I guess I should have known better. Simple physics, really."

"Uh-huh."

"Come on," she said, handing him a glass. "Let's find out why they kicked us out of that meeting."

"We're going to spy on them?"

"Of course not," she said, already striding off. "Spying means watching. We're going to eavesdrop."

They'd been outside the door for ten minutes, and had caught no more than a few words. The interracial council meeting was being held in Vermont, as they often were, at one of the remote locations the council used. This particular one was a cabin turned into a small rental lodge for church groups, Girl Scouts and the like. The meeting area was a long, narrow room with the door at the far end . . . too far from the meeting table to eavesdrop, even with high-tech spy gear like empty water glasses.

"Maybe I can burn a hole in the door," Adam whispered.

Paige snorted, and put her ear to the glass again.

Adam leaned back against the wall. "I don't know why we're bothering. They're probably discussing something boring, like interracial politics."

"Do they ever kick us out for that?"

She had a point. There had been many times when Adam had wished his dad *would* boot them out of some endless policy discussion, but that was just the kind of thing his stepfather and Paige's mother insisted they pay attention to, as future delegates.

"If they're going to make us wait out here, it must be something they don't want us to hear." She glanced over at him, brows raised meaningfully. "Something not fit for our young ears."

Adam grabbed his glass from the tray and put it against the door. But it was no use. He couldn't hear more than scattered words, then a slow thumping, getting louder, almost like . . . footsteps.

The handle turned. Adam backpedaled, glass going behind his back. Paige wheeled and began reading the list of "rental rules" on the wall. The door opened. His dad looked out, then stepped into the hall and closed the door.

“I’m afraid this is going to take longer than we thought.” He took out his wallet, reached for a ten, then paused, and plucked out a twenty. “Why don’t you two walk into town and see if you can find something to do. There isn’t much there, but I think I saw some arcade games at the General Store.”

Adam reached for the bill, but his stepfather handed it to Paige, his eyes twinkling. “Just to be sure it’s split evenly.”

“Or split at all,” Paige murmured as his dad retreated into the room.

“Think they overheard us spying?” Adam asked as they walked into the back hall.

“Probably. Between my mom and your dad . . . “ She shook her head. “We definitely need to work on our stealth skills.” She lifted the twenty. “I think I saw Mortal Kombat in the store.”

“Half for games, half to the winner?”

She grinned. “You’re on.”

They stepped outside. Adam started heading for the road, but Paige tapped his arm, and nodded at the path leading into the woods.

“That looks like it heads in the same direction. I bet it’s faster. And certainly cooler.”

Inviting him to walk with her into the deep, dark, deserted forest? With any other girl, that would mean he was in for something even more fun than video games. But this was Paige. She probably wouldn’t even think of that. Not with him anyway.

He watched her walk onto the shaded path, her ponytail bobbing as her hips swayed, the darkness of the forest closing in behind her. Maybe she did have something else in mind . . .

“Mom said aster grows wild around here,” she called back to him. “If I could get it fresh, I might be able to get that second-level wind spell working.”

Figures. He sighed and followed her into the woods, feet scuffing the dirt path as he walked.

Something rustled behind him. He turned, but saw nothing.

“Aster is bushy with—” Paige began.

“Shhh. I heard something.”

She turned, and mouthed, “What?”

“A rustling noise,” he whispered.

“Try lifting your feet when you walk. Oh, and while we’re here, if you want to practice—”

Another rustle, quieter, as if farther away, but drawn out, like someone moving through a pile of dead leaves. They both stopped to listen.

“Could be a deer,” Paige whispered, but her eyes were doubtful as they followed the sound.

The noise stopped around the other side of the cabin, closer to the road.

“We should check it out,” Adam said.

He didn’t wait for Paige’s nod. He knew she’d be right behind him. As much as she liked to pretend *he* was the adventure-seeking one, he hadn’t been the one testing water glasses for eavesdropping, had he?

Still, he never called her on it. Paige was expected to be the responsible one of the pair, only one of many expectations her mother—and others—piled on her. Not a burden he cared to share, but he could lighten it by being the one who barreled heedlessly into danger . . . leaving her obligated to follow and “keep an eye on him.”

By the time they reached the side of the cabin, Paige had already overtaken him. He smacked into her back as she stopped at the rear corner. He tried to brush past her, but she planted a hand against his chest, then leaned forward to peek around the corner.

She pulled back. “There’s someone there.”

He moved forward to see around her. She hesitated, then let him take a look. A man stood to the side of the meeting room window. He was tall and lanky. His hair was short on the sides and long in the back—the way Adam had been trying to grow his until his mom used the Walkman to bribe him into a haircut. Tattoos covered the man’s stringy arms. Adam had seen those tattoos before . . .

As he craned to see the man’s face, Paige yanked him back.

“I know—” he began.

Paige shushed him and moved them into the woods.

“I know him,” Adam said when they were far enough away to speak. “He’s a half-demon. He came to Dad’s office last week, when I was there. He wanted to talk to him.”

“About what?”

Adam shrugged. “Dad made me stand outside. Getting a lot of that lately. But whatever the guy said, it really pissed Dad off, and you know that’s tough to do.”

“Did your dad say anything afterward?”

“Not to me, but when he was kicking the guy out, I heard something about the council. Dad told the guy he wasn’t fooling him, he knew what he was trying to do, and if he ever came to him again with something like that, he’d bring it up to the council himself. The guy was furious. Kept saying Dad would regret—”

Adam stiffened, then turned to run for the back door. Paige caught his arm. He should have been able to yank free easily enough—she barely came up to his shoulder—but when she dug in her heels, she was tough to budge.

“He’s not going after your dad,” she said. When he gave an experimental tug, she tightened her grip. “Think about it. Robert’s in a room with five other delegates, all supernaturals. No half-demon is stupid enough to take him on in there. If he did come for your dad, he’s going to lie in wait. Running in there would only scare him off. Scare him off, and he’ll just come back another time . . . when you aren’t around to help.”

Adam hesitated, then nodded. As Paige released his arm, she shook her hands, and he could see the palms were red.

“Did I burn—?” he said, reaching for her hand.

“Nothing a little healing salve won’t fix.” She lowered her hands quickly, before he could see them. “Wait here. I want to get another look. I thought I saw something.”

He watched her slip back to the corner. When she returned, she was frowning.

“He’s taking notes,” she said.

“About what?”

“The meeting, I guess. He must be writing down descriptions, seeing who’s there, though I don’t know why he’d bother. Everyone knows who the delegates are—or can find out easily enough. But if we couldn’t hear through the door, there no way he can hear through that window.”

“He could if he was the right kind of half-demon. Dad called him an Exaudio. That’s hearing, isn’t it?”

Paige nodded. “A mid-level auditory-enhanced half-demon. Vastly improved general hearing, plus the ability to induce temporary deafness in a single individual.”

She recited the information as promptly as if he’d asked for her home address. Any other time he’d have ribbed her about spending too much time with the council research books, but today his only thought was “good thing someone knows it,” followed by “maybe I should know it.”

He dismissed the second part as soon as it came. As long as Paige did the research, there was no reason for both of them to waste sunny afternoons poring over dusty books. When they grew up, that could be her job, and he’d do the fun, more dangerous stuff better suited to a fire demon.

“That means he could hear through that window and spy on the meeting, doesn’t it?” Adam said.

“A lot easier than we could . . . and without a water glass.” She cast a reluctant glance at the cabin door. “I suppose we should go in and tell them.”

“He could be gone before we did.”

“True . . .”

She looked at the door, and he could see her thinking it over, trying to figure out an excuse for handling it themselves, an excuse her mother would accept.

Adam returned to the corner, peeked around, then came back.

“He looks like he’s getting ready to leave,” he whispered. “We have to do something.”

She nodded, making no move to check for herself, as if knowing he was lying. The truth, as they both knew, was that even if the guy wasn’t leaving yet, and they reported it to the council,

by the time the adults figured out what to do about it, the spy would be gone. The council was much better at discussing plans of action than taking them.

“Okay,” she said after a moment.

“Good, I’ll take him down. Once I have him, you run in and get my dad—”

She shook her head. “First-degree burns aren’t going to stop a guy like that. I’m no help until I learn my binding spell, and I’m nowhere—not quite that far yet.”

“I can take him. He’s not much bigger than me, and I’ve been working out—”

“Which isn’t going to help you if he pulls a knife or a gun.”

“Supernaturals hardly ever use that stuff.”

“And are you going to take the chance that this guy is the exception to that rule?” She met his gaze. “Let me rephrase that. *I’m* not letting you take that chance. Try it, and I’ll get the others.”

When he glanced back at the corner, jaw setting, she laid her hand on his arm. “As much as I’d like to hog-tie the guy and hand him over, all we really need is that notebook. Your dad obviously knows who he is. If we get the notebook, the council can find out what he was up to and go after him. That’s good enough, right?” She looked up at him. “For now.”

After a moment, he nodded.

“I can create the distraction,” she said. “But you’ll need to get the book. And you’ll need to have your powers ready, in case he turns on you. Have you been practicing?”

He nodded, though he didn’t tell her that he’d been using his own methods, not hers. Almost since the day they’d met, Paige had been trying to help him hone his powers, helping him learn to control them so he could burn on purpose, not just accidentally when he got upset.

She'd taught him the techniques she used for spellcasting concentration. Trouble was, they didn't work for him.

To cast a spell, you had to clear your mind and turn off your emotions. To invoke fire, he needed to do the exact opposite—turn his emotional valve on full blast. He didn't tell Paige that, though. She wanted to help, so he let her. And telling her how he *did* ignite his powers would only upset her. Sometimes reaching down into that darkest part of himself disturbed even him.

So they came up with a plan. Well, Paige came up with the plan, as always, but she did pause once or twice to get his nod of approval, which was nice.

"You sure you're okay with it?" she asked when she was done. "If you don't feel—"

"I'm fine."

"If something goes wrong, I'll have to go for help. You know that, right? I can't—" She swallowed. "I can't do a damned thing."

"Don't swear."

He smiled when he said it, but she didn't smile back, probably didn't even hear. Last year, when they'd started being allowed to hear details of council investigations, Paige had noticed that her mother never undertook anything without backup, not even something as simple as delivering a warning.

Sure, Ruth Winterbourne was old, older than most moms, but his dad was almost as old, and he issued warnings and stuff by himself. He might not like invoking his darker powers, but at least he had them.

Paige looked at her mother, the most experienced witch she knew, and saw her future. Leader of the Coven, leader of the supernatural council . . . and completely defenseless except for her binding spell.

Paige had been fretting about it ever since. Adam tried to tell her she didn't need that stuff—she'd always have him for backup—but that didn't seem to help. All he could do now was reassure her that he'd be careful, and that if something went wrong, and she had to get help, he'd understand.

Next, they took their places. Adam left Paige near the cabin door. Then he circled through the woods and came out on the half-demon's other side. He crouched there a moment and watched him, but there wasn't much to see. The guy was standing beside the window, head tilted, jotting down notes. Exciting stuff.

Across the clearing, a light sparked in the forest. Paige's signal. Adam hunkered down and waited. A moment later, a bright orb bounced from the forest, hovered there a moment, then evaporated. The spy never even saw it. Adam imagined Paige stamping her foot as her light ball fizzled. The farther it went from her hand, the faster it would fade, but that wouldn't keep her from blaming her own inexperience, and vowing to practice more.

A second later, another light ball appeared. This time, it stayed long enough for Paige to kick a pile of dead leaves. At the sound, the half-demon spun. The ball went out. He blinked, then shook his head and returned to his spying. But he didn't turn his back on the woods, so when the next light ball came, he saw it the moment it zipped from the darkness.

The spy strode for Paige's hiding spot. Adam held back until the man had barely passed him. Then, gaze fixed on the notepad, he bolted from the bushes. He'd make a beeline for the notepad, and grab it from the half-demon's hand while his attention was on Paige's distraction, then keep running for the back door, where Paige would already be waiting, holding it open.

At the last second, Adam realized he'd jumped out too soon, before he'd been completely out of the half-demon's view. The man must have caught a movement out of the corner of his

eye. He saw Adam charging and whipped his hand back—the hand holding the notepad. Adam tried to check himself, but it was too late and when he veered, he crashed right into the man.

The notepad went flying to the ground . . . and the man's hands went flying to Adam's throat.

Adam managed to duck the throat-grab, but the man caught him by the arm. Adam swung. The man yanked, and Adam flew off his feet. As he twisted, he tried to invoke his power, tried to pull the deepest, darkest thoughts from his brain, but all he could think was that he'd made a fool of himself in front of Paige and, soon, everyone in the council. Made a fool of himself and embarrassed his stepfather . . . and he wasn't sure which was worse. Then, as the half-demon flung him down, he realized he might have something more serious than humiliation to worry about.

As Adam hit the ground, and the air flew from his lungs, he saw a blur behind the half-demon. Paige, running at the man.

Oh, shit. She'd said she'd run inside for help, but he should have known she wouldn't run away and leave him alone. Her mouth opened to call for help, to attract the council's attention that way. Before she could get out a syllable, though, the half-demon must have heard her running footsteps behind him.

The half-demon turned away from Adam. Paige skidded to a stop, eyes going wide, lips moving in some useless incantation. Adam flew to his feet and grabbed the man, hand going around his upper arm. The man yelped and tried to yank away, but Adam tightened his grip, feeling the heat flood through him.

The man fought harder, panicked. Adam's grip slid. The man pulled free and ran for the forest. Adam tore after him, but the man was faster and Adam reached the road just in time to see a car jump to life and take off down the road.

At a noise behind him, he turned to see Paige running over. She stopped in front of him and looked up, head tilting back, eyes dancing, cheeks glowing, curls flying free from her ponytail. Whenever his friends asked Adam what his “Boston friend” looked like, he’d say “cute, I guess,” but as she looked up at him then, grinning, just for him, she looked better than cute. Her lips parted, and he knew if he just leaned over—

“You did it,” she said, and waved the notepad between them.

He looked into her eyes then, saw only the glowing happiness of a friend, and knew that’s all he’d seen before, and probably all he ever would. Which was, really, for the best. So he let her throw her arms around his neck, and hugged her back. When she pulled away, she held out the book.

“Take it,” she said. “I’ll do the talking, but you can give them this. You’re the one who got it.”

He took the notebook, and they walked back into the forest, heading for the cabin.

“Our first adventure,” he said. “The first of many.”

“Oh, I’m not sure about that.”

He grinned down at her. “I am.”

“This should work,” Robert said, handing Leo a bottle of salve. “It’s Ruth Winterbourne’s recipe and she finds it works particularly well on Adam’s burns . . . though that one seems to be worse than he usually inflicts.” A smile erupted from beneath Robert’s beard. “He does seem to be making remarkable progress . . . though I’m sure you aren’t nearly as impressed, being the

recipient of that progress. I do apologize. This is the first time he's ever caused second-degree burns—”

“I'm fine,” Leo said, waving off the apology. “The kid did good, and I owed you.”

Robert finished talking to Leo, then hurried back to the hotel. Just his luck he'd run into Ruth on his way back. If she ever found out the truth . . . Better not to think on that. It was the kind of thing that could threaten a very old and very dear friendship.

Yet, even if he knew he'd be caught, he wasn't sure he would have done any differently. The council was sliding into old age along with him and Ruth, and as it did, he looked back and realized it had never been the vibrant, active force for good it could have been.

With Paige and Adam and the next generation, that could change. The will and the desire for innovation was there. He saw it in Paige, and knew Adam would follow her on whatever new path she proposed, particularly if it offered more excitement than policy meetings.

When they'd come running into that cabin, notebook in hand, he'd seen by their expressions that his ploy had succeeded—their glows of victory tempered with the knowledge that they'd picked a fight they may not have been ready for. Someday they'd be ready, though. They'd make sure of that now.

Robert picked up his pace and began to whistle.