

Author notes: I'm indebted to Barb, who once again came through as the bestest *Charmed*-beta in the world!

In my *Charmed*-verse, Cole has survived *Centennial Charmed* (if you want to know how, read my story *Prisoner's Key*, otherwise you'll have to take my word for it :-)) and sets off to seek redemption for his evil past. I originally envisioned this fic to be the first of a spin-off series, but I fear I no longer have the stamina to write *Charmed*.

Since I have rarely seen a show so inconsistent about its own mythology and laws of nature, I decided to ignore anything that has been established after *Centennial Charmed*. So, no School of Magic, no pacifist-Leo-turned-ruthless-fighter, no... Well, you get the picture. Oh, and just so you know: if you are looking for a story that features the sisters prominently, this is not the fic for you. It features Cole (obviously), several OC's, and cameos by Phoebe, Darryl and even my wonderful beta Barb.

CONFESSIONAL

A Charmed Fanfiction by AmandaK

Chapter One

"Central, this is three-David-eleven"

"Three-David-eleven, go ahead."

"I've got a 2, possible 7. 10-32."

Kit Watson bolted upright in the right hand car seat. Mark DeWitt, slumped behind the wheel, opened one eye at the sudden movement of his passenger.

"What's--" he began, suppressing a yawn.

"Shh!" Kit hissed. He reached with one hand for the volume knob, his head cocked to hear better.

Despite his misgivings about the propriety of the journalistic methods his partner deployed, Mark found his interest piqued and he tuned his ears to the scanner that was spitting out numbers and code words in terse male voices.

"10-4, three-David-eleven. 2, possible 7. What's your 10-20?"

"8th and 19th."

"10-4."

None of it made sense to Mark, but Kit seemed to absorb every word easily. "So? What is it?" he demanded when the radio went silent for several seconds.

"That was a police unit reporting a civilian victim. They asked for an ambulance," Kit said. "Start the car. We have to check it out. If we're lucky, we got a murder on our hands." He reached for the back seat to grab his Nikon, its case scratched with wear, and checked the film.

"Okay," Mark said. "Care to tell me where?"

"Ybor City, corner of 8th and 19th. That's Centennial Park."

"Ybor City?" Mark exclaimed. His hand rested on the ignition key but didn't turn it. "Kit, it's Friday, it's after midnight. And you're telling me we should go investigate a report about a body found in Ybor City? I bet you ten bucks, before we get halfway there, that cop'll be back on radio to call off that ambulance. Just wait, your murder victim will turn out to be a fallen-down drunk kid!"

Kit rolled his eyes, the whites reflecting the light of the streetlamps. "What are you? Stupid? Didn't you hear the tone of that cop's voice? He didn't say it out loud, but there's something going on. I can feel it in my gut. And trust me, kid, my gut's never wrong."

Mark sighed as he started the engine. He turned on the headlights and carefully wove his way into traffic.

This was not how he had envisioned his journalistic career to be when he received his Master's at USF. Scanning police radio frequencies and chasing an ambulance through Tampa in the middle of the night was a far cry from his fantasies. Like so many eager hopefuls, he dreamed about scoops and Pulitzers. But there were far more wannabe journalists than there were openings at the respectable newspapers. And one had to eat. So, when a position for junior reporter at *The Bay Enquirer* opened up, Mark had applied -- and gotten the job.

They had partnered him with Kit Watson, the grumpy black man with a round belly, a bald head and a trusted old camera who was their star photographer. "Listen to Kit, kid," Antony Santano, the editor-in-chief, had said, and laughed at his own wordplay. "He will teach you all you need to know about chasing the news."

Although it was after midnight, traffic was crowded on the Nuccio Parkway, and it took them a good twenty minutes to reach Centennial Park. Blue and red lights flashed, illuminating a crowd of spectators being held back by harried uniformed police officers. Paramedics hovered near their ambulance, one of them lighting up a cigarette.

"See?" Mark said, gesturing at the ambulance crew. "Nothing happening."

"Ha!" Kit snorted. "And what would you call that?" He directed Mark's gaze to the left. A long, black car inched slowly through the crowds, waved forward by the police.

"Someone died, my boy. Told you something was going on."

Mark was not prepared to admit Kit was right. "Okay, so, we have a dead person. People die in Florida all the time. I still don't see how that makes a story worth more than three lines in the police report columns."

"Didn't they teach you anything in that fancy school of yours? Get out there, kid. Investigate. Listen to the cops. Talk to the paramedics, talk to the crowd. Find out what you can. And maybe, if you're as good as you think you are, you'll discover the story. If it doesn't turn around and bite you in the ass first!"

Grumbling to himself about lazy punks still wet behind their ears, Kit clambered from the old, sun-bleached Impala and wandered over to the policemen that were holding the crowd back. Mark watched him wave to one of the officers before he got out of the car himself.

He worked his way through the spectators, listening to the conversations around him but not really expecting to hear anything worthwhile. The onlookers were drawn to the scene by the arrival of the ambulance and what he overheard was mostly useless speculation.

"... heart attack..."

"... three dead people..."

"... drug overdose..."

"... ran him over..."

Mark was about to go back to the car and wait for Kit to return with the pictures when he noticed a plain clothes police officer talking to a uniformed cop. They were near the end of the taped-off area, beside the ambulance. The paramedics were climbing back into their cabin as it was obvious nobody needed them. Mark knew it was a matter of minutes

before the ambulance would leave, destroying his opportunity to overhear the two policemen talking.

He snuck closer, hiding behind the ambulance.

A part of him was horrified at the sneaky way he was trying to gather information. It was not what they taught him in college, where entire classes were dedicated to the ethics and conduct of the serious journalist. But another part of him, the bigger part, was too eager to let the opportunity go to waste.

"... victim is an elderly woman," the uniformed officer was saying. "She carried a driver's license in the name of Gillian James. Here." He put a small card in the other's hand and waited expectantly.

Plainclothes looked at the license. His eyes widened and his gaze shifted from the plastic card to the black bag that someone from the coroner's office was zipping closed. "This belongs to a young woman!"

Uniform grinned. "My thought exactly. Her way of dress fits the license, but not the looks. Tight black skirt, high heels. You know how the kids walk around here at night."

"Uh hum," Plainclothes said. They were both middle-aged men, watching the crowd of onlookers, who were mainly youngsters dressed to dance the night away.

"Did you move her? Touch anything?"

The ambulance's engine started and Mark had to exert himself to hear the rest of the conversation.

"No sir, nothing, except to turn her over to see if she was still breathing. I called it in and requested an ambulance as soon as I found her, but it turns out she was already dead. Think she stole the license somewhere?" Uniform sniggered. "Maybe she was reliving her youth, prob'bly dropped dead with a heart attack or something."

Plainclothes gave him a stare and Uniform flustered. "I'm sorry, Detective Morris. I'm just saying that it's odd!"

"I suppose you're right at that," the detective admitted with a grunt.

Mark backed away. He had heard enough for his budding journalistic instinct to rear its head and start paying attention. He made a mental note about the name; he'd have to look for information on this Gillian James later.

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The tall woman ignored the heads that swiveled in her direction as she strode through the arrivals' terminal at San Francisco International Airport. She was used to being stared at and ignored the gawkers without effort. It wasn't just her height that drew the stares, she knew. She was well aware that she was also both beautiful and imposing, and always took meticulous care of her appearance.

Her high heels clicked across the tiles and the leather of her black dress caressed her skin as she walked. It felt nice. And it was good to have both feet on the ground again. She didn't like flying; never had. But it was the only way to get from one place to another fast.

She cast a look over her shoulder at the small man who trailed after her. He was straining to push a heavy luggage cart loaded with three large suitcases and an assortment of smaller bags. His balding head glistened with moisture and his breath came in short gasps. She chuckled at the sight but slowed down so he could catch up with her. It wouldn't do to have him drop dead of a heart attack; she wasn't quite ready to lose him just yet. It was hard to find good minions and Theo had been around for many years. Most of them didn't last this long in her employ. But he was anxious enough of what she might do to him to not try and cross her yet still showed the occasional initiative on her behalf. So far, he had never been wrong either; his instincts were good.

When he finally caught up with her, she smiled. "So, Theo, what have you arranged for me?"

"A limousine is waiting outside, Mistress Birgit," he gasped, still trying to catch his breath. "And I have booked the Mendocino suite for you at the Prescott Hotel."

"Very good, Theo," she murmured and patted his shoulder. He stiffened beneath her touch and she chuckled again.

The sliding doors opened upon their approach and Birgit marched out, leaving it to Theo to maneuver the large cart through the doors. It was as he had promised: a limousine was waiting, a uniformed driver -- she was pleased to see it was a pretty young woman -- standing beside it. When she noticed Birgit and Theo, the girl leaned into the car, pressed a button and a moment later the trunk opened. The driver walked around to open the back seat door for Birgit. "Welcome to San Francisco, Ms. Freda," she said with a pleasant smile. "My name is Cassie. I'm your driver for the day."

Birgit studied the driver's face beneath her uniform cap. Seen close up, the girl was more than pretty, with the kind of innocent face and unblemished skin that Birgit was always keeping an eye out for. She would have to remember this girl; she might want to offer her a job with the modeling agency later. Birgit tapped a finger against the young woman's cheek. "Thank you, child."

Theo was busy trying to cram the suitcases and bags into the limo's trunk and Cassie went to help him. Birgit looked around and watched the bustle that was characteristic to any large airport. She squinted in spite of her dark-tinted sunglasses and the large-brimmed hat that covered her short, blond hair. She despised the sun. It was too bright, too happy. San Francisco was infamous for its fog. Why couldn't it have been gray and misty when she arrived?

She drummed her fingers on the roof of the car. "Are you almost done, Theo?" she asked. "I do have other plans today."

"Yes, Mistress." His voice sounded muffled because he was leaning forward deep into the trunk. Birgit had a sudden vision of making him sit out the ride to the hotel there and she chortled. Too bad it would draw too much attention.

She decided she had had enough of the glare of the sun and seated herself inside the car. She leaned against the headrest and closed her eyes. It was too damn early! Normally she wasn't up at this outrageous hour; she preferred to stay in bed until noon and work till late at night. A useful predilection too, in her line of work. Thus, it had been a great annoyance when every plane from Tampa to San Francisco appeared to be fully booked this Saturday morning, except for the early morning flight.

Theo and Cassie finished cramming all the suitcases into the trunk and Cassie climbed behind the wheel. Theo stuck his head in the back of the car and Birgit gave him a withering glare. He swallowed and went to sit beside Cassie in the front.

She would have to keep an eye on Theo. He was getting a tad presumptuous, it seemed. Maybe she should have stuffed him into the trunk after all.

* * * * *

"Ania informs me that you threatened to return to San Francisco." Rhiannon fixed Cole with the piercing look she reserved for those who displeased her. Behind her, Ania hovered, her gaze shifting between Cole and the redheaded Elder.

Cole didn't flinch from her glare, like so many whitelighters or mortals had done over time, but he did have the sense to look sheepish. "I'm getting bored. You said you wanted me to work with you, that's why you saved my life, right? So, how much longer do you plan to keep me here in Pineville, Nowhere, USA?"

"Wisconsin," Rhiannon corrected him absently. She studied him for a moment. He did look better than he had when she had Ania book him into the motel room in the smallest rural town she could find. How long ago was it? She did a quick mental count and was shocked to learn it was nearly three months ago that she conspired with the Cult of Avatars to rescue Cole from instant obliteration. No wonder he was getting edgy. But the time alone had done him good. His cheeks, though unshaven, had lost their gauntness. The eyes, which could turn from ice cold to warm blue in an instant, no longer held the haunted look. There was still a sadness in Cole but his shoulders were squared and he stood straight; he no longer looked like the beaten little puppy that returned to its master time and again in search for a scrap of affection that never came.

"You know San Francisco is the last place on Earth you should go to, right?"

He gave her a sudden, impish grin that she didn't expect. "Got your attention though, didn't it?"

She blinked, taken aback. Then she began to laugh. "Okay. Fair enough. Perhaps I have been neglecting you a bit. But I know you needed the time. Time to mourn, to adjust, and to learn about those powers you collected from the Wastelands. So, you think you're ready to face the world again?"

The grin faded and Cole's expression turned serious, almost sullen. "I know all about my powers there is to know. And it doesn't get any better. I still miss Phoebe. Every thinking moment of every day. She haunts my dreams. Sometimes, I think that you should've let me get vanquished."

"I know."

"No, you don't know! You have no idea what it is like to feel such emptiness. It's like there's a black hole inside me, where Phoebe's love used to be. And now there's nothing. How could you know what that's like? You're a damn *Elder!*"

His angry outburst was sudden, and Ania uttered a startled yelp. She reached for Rhiannon, ready to orb the Elder away at the first sign of danger. Rhiannon gave her an assuring wave before she placed a hand on Cole's arm. His muscles were quivering with tension beneath her touch.

"I *do* understand, Cole," she said in a low, calm voice. "I haven't always been an Elder. Once upon a time I was Rhiannon Gruffudd, of Rhylyfnwyd." The Welsh words tasted strange on her tongue; it had been decades since she uttered those names. She gestured for Cole to sit and he sank down on the edge of the bed. Rhiannon settled herself in the single easy chair in the room.

"I was born in Wales, in 1631," she added. She stared off, her eyes going out of focus as her mind traveled back in time. "Rhylyfnwyd was a village by the sea. One of those places small enough for everyone to know everyone else and their business. The people lived off the land. They raised sheep or were fishermen. My father was a mariner, a sea-faring man; he was away months at a time. When I was five, he went out on what was supposed to be a six-month journey. He never returned. It took me almost a year to accept that he was never going to come walking up the road again, a large burlap sack strung over his shoulder."

"Do you remember much of him?" Cole asked. "I don't recall much of my father except blurry images of a stern man with a high collar."

Rhiannon smiled. "I have some memories. I guess I was a little older when he disappeared than you were when your mother took you away. He was a big man; I always believed he was so tall that he must be able to touch the moon. I inherited his height, I suppose. I have his hair color too, although in his case he wore it in a thick scraggy beard, while his skull was nearly bald. I remember he laughed a lot and how much he loved my mother. Every time he came home from a journey, he whirled her around in his arms until her skirts flared and she squealed he should put her down. And there were always presents. Dolls, or a necklace made of wood beads for me. Sometimes a bolt of cloth or a bale of wool for my mother.

"Mam never remarried after he died. He had left her a few savings, some coppers and pennies, and she managed to make a living by selling herbs she grew on a little patch of land, and potions and salves she made herself."

"Was she a witch?" Cole interrupted. He was leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees.

"No, not in the sense you mean," Rhiannon said. "Her skills weren't magical. They were based in extensive knowledge, passed down from mother to daughter for generations. She could cure just about anything: boils, fevers, gout. She helped people with migraines and she sold potions and salves to prevent infections. You must remember it was the 17th century. Modern medicine was in its infancy. Physicians were a rare breed who often did more harm than good, and only the rich folks could afford the services of one

to begin with. The nearest town that had a doctor was eight miles away. A long walk if you had to do it on foot and in a fever.

"So, most folks depended on women like my mother. Herb women they called them. And my mother was one of the best. Rhylyfnwyd should count itself a lucky town. Over the years, she must have saved dozens of lives. If not hundreds." A hint of resentment crawled into her voice. "She died in 1648, when I was seventeen. She contracted diphtheria from Rhys ap Evan, father to a family of fourteen. Ap Evan lived, but my mother did not."

Rhiannon's eyes were closed. On the inside of her eyelids, the memories were projected, flickering like a tiny slideshow. Her mother's feverish brow. The brown hair plastered to her skin. Her green eyes, so like Rhiannon's own, filled with pain. Her breathing ragged and labored. There was nothing Rhiannon could do. No potion or salve she could prepare that would cure her mother. By the time she admitted to being sick, the illness was too widespread. Her mother's struggle didn't last long.

A soft noise, a low grumble, broke through her memories. Her eyes snapped open. She realized that the sun had set outside while she told her tale. The room was shrouded in darkness. The glare of streetlamps outside cast a reddish glow over the non-descript furniture. Cole's eyes were gleaming in the darkness. Rhiannon noted that some time during her storytelling Ania had disappeared. Quite possibly one of her charges -- she had been assigned two budding witches after her recent graduation from what Rhiannon secretly called *Whitelighter School* -- had needed her help or guidance.

The low rumble was repeated and Cole grimaced in embarrassment.

It dawned on Rhiannon what she was hearing. She chuckled. "Maybe we should get dinner first, before I tell you the rest, eh?"

"Lunch happened hours ago," Cole murmured, a little defensive. He got up. "This town you dumped me in isn't much, but I did discover it has a restaurant that serves quite fine Italian cuisine.

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Cole's Italian restaurant turned out to be a small mom-and-pop place less than half a mile down the road from the Striped Badger Motel. It didn't take long before they were seated and plates laden with steaming pasta were placed before them.

Cole poured her a glass of red wine. "It's not Italian," he commented after reading the label, "but it's a pretty good one."

Rhiannon took a bite of pasta. Cole had been right, the food was delicious. And it wasn't often that she got to indulge in Earthly pleasures.

"So, there I was," she picked up her narration. "Seventeen years old and all alone. There had been an aunt once, but she passed away the year before my mother died."

"Pretty young to be left to your own devices," Cole commented. He took a sip from his glass.

"These days it would be," Rhiannon agreed. "But those were different times. Most girls were married by fifteen, and had a baby by the time they turned sixteen."

"Why weren't you? You're a good-looking woman, you must have been a pretty girl. Or should I say 'lass'?" He smiled.

"That's not a Welsh word," Rhiannon murmured. She wondered if he were flirting with her, and observed him through her lashes. Unselfconsciously, he was enjoying his meal. No, she decided, Cole was merely displaying his innate charm. The wounds over losing Phoebe were too raw; it'd be years before he'd flirt with another woman.

"I'd been too busy to find a husband, helping my mother, learning her skills. And the villagers weren't too keen on us. They didn't really understand that our skills were based in knowledge, not dark magic, so they avoided us mostly. Except when they were sick, of course. Besides, even then I had this crazy notion about true love." She chuckled, self-consciously. "Guess you could say I'm a hopeless romantic. And the boys of the neighborhood -- they smelled of manure and sheep and old sweat; they had these thick, stubby fingers with dirty nails and callused hands. They'd've lost their teeth by twenty-five. Mam ingrained in me the importance of personal hygiene when I was still a little girl. She was centuries ahead of her time. And I swore to myself that I would rather die a spinster than let any of those unwashed local men lay a hand on me.

"In any case, I may have been young, but I wasn't completely without means. Mam left me the one-room shack we lived in, a single cow and half a dozen chickens. She also left me her knowledge and skills. I took over her work without missing a beat. And although the villagers avoided me as much as they had my mother, it wasn't a bad life."

Rhiannon grew silent and concentrated on her meal. She ate several bites of her pasta in silence, chewing and swallowing with care.

"Until?" Cole prodded, when she let silence linger too long.

Rhiannon swallowed the last bite, put down her fork and knife together on her plate in the European way to signal that she was done, and dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin.

"Yes, until," she said. "Until I fell in love." She reached for the wineglass and took a large gulp.

"His name was Jeremy Ockley. He was everything the local young men weren't. He didn't stink of sheep. He was handsome, with white teeth and graceful, clean fingers. He was educated; he spoke English instead of Welsh. And he didn't treat me like an indispensable yet regrettable necessity, someone best shunned. Jeremy swept me off my feet with his charm. He read me Shakespeare's sonnets. He let me ride his horse. I loved to ride, loved to race through the fields at high speed, the cacophony of horse hooves beating a rhythm on the ground while the wind whipped my hair about my face. Jeremy owned this big stallion, with a pelt so deep gray that it appeared to be black. I don't remember what his name was, but I called him Hwyrddydd. That's Welsh for dusk, because the color reminded me of the evening sky.

"Jeremy's family was not from Wales. His grandfather was a merchant who made a fortune in the wool trade. And Jeremy's mother desired for her son to be created a baronet. That was her ambition in life: for her family to ascend on the social ladder to nobility. She would let nothing stand in her way to achieving this goal, as I was to find out.

"The Ockleys lived in this big manor, on the top of a hill. Jeremy's grandfather had built it. The house overlooked the green meadows that rolled all the way down to the cliffs at the Irish Sea. Compared to my little cottage near the edge of the forest, that house resembled a palace."

She chuckled wryly. "I sometimes fantasized myself living there."

She took the last sip of her wine and held out the glass. Cole refilled it without a word, and she put it down before she continued. "I should have known better, of course. But like I said, I was a hopeless romantic. Still am, I suppose. And Jeremy made me so happy. He made me feel like I could fly, like nothing could hurt me anymore.

"Until one spring day, in 1661, when it all fell apart.

"It was one of those rare days in May, when the sun beats down from a clear blue sky unmarred by clouds but summer hasn't progressed far enough to turn the air humid and

stuffy. No, the air was crisp and clean as we rode Hwyrddydd across the fields and into the forest. There was a clearing beside a small brook, which was our secret place. We often went there. To talk, to make love, to enjoy each other's company undisturbed."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. For a moment, her nostrils filled with the scent of pasta and red wine, and then the memories came.

"I can still smell the air. It was sweet and clean, filled with the scent of spring flowers and fresh greenery, with just a hint of salt carried in by the breeze coming in from the sea.

"Jeremy had urged the horse into a wild ride; he knew how much I enjoyed the speed and power of a horse in full gallop. Hwyrddydd was panting and quivering, his coat glistening with perspiration. I was busy rubbing him down with a tuft of grass I had plucked when Jeremy called my name. From the tone of his voice I knew whatever he wanted to say couldn't be good.

"Isn't it a wonderful day?' I asked without turning around. Even as I said it, I knew I was being silly, trying to prevent him from speaking the words by changing the subject. Of course, it wasn't that easy.

"Rhiannon, please look at me. I have to tell you something. And it's hard enough to do without speaking to your back.'

"I slowly turned, and gasped when I met his eyes. Something in them frightened me deeply and I desperately wanted him to stop talking, to not say what he was about to tell me.

"I love you,' Jeremy told me. 'Nothing will ever change that. You know that, right?' I nodded, afraid my voice would desert me if I tried to speak. Jeremy continued. 'But I cannot see you any more. I'm leaving on Sunday. I'm going to London, to get married. Edith Patterson is the daughter of a low-ranking nobleman who has done business with my father and--'

"Do you love her?' I interrupted him. I was amazed at how calm my voice sounded, there in that clearing with the birds singing and sunlight dappling the ground with molten gold, while my heart shattered in a thousand pieces and my knees threatened to give way.

"No!' Jeremy shook his head in vehement denial. 'I told you, I love *you*, nobody else.'

"Then why are you marrying this girl? Why not marry me?'

"Because I cannot,' Jeremy whispered. 'Mother would never--' His voice broke, and it sent me off on another whirl of emotion until I felt like screaming.

"Let's leave here!' I cried. 'We can go to Rhyl. Or we could go to Liverpool and find passage on a boat to the New World. We could be together there.'"

"What did he answer?" Cole asked. Rhiannon blinked. She had forgotten her listener, so vividly did she relive her memories in her mind. She waited until the waitress cleared away their plates before she continued.

"He was tempted. I know he was; I could see the spark in his eyes while he considered my suggestion. But then the spark died and his eyes turned back to a dull hazel.

"We can't, Rhiannon dear,' he sighed. 'How would we live?'

"I tried to tell him it didn't matter, that we would find a way, that we were both young and healthy but I knew it was hopeless, that I'd lost him. And in a way, I wasn't surprised. Deep below the romantic fantasies, I'd always known it wouldn't last. It couldn't; we came from such different worlds, worlds that could never mix."

"Is that why you took an interest in me and Phoebe?" Cole asked. "Because we came from different worlds?"

Rhiannon offered him a soft smile. "I suppose so," she said. "I have always had a soft spot for star-crossed love affairs. Piper and Leo. You and Phoebe. You had the courage to do what Jeremy failed to do: you stood up to the expectations of others, refused to be what the world wanted you to be. I'm sorry Phoebe didn't dare see it that way."

"Me too," Cole murmured. He didn't meet her eye but busied himself pouring the last of the wine from the bottle. She noticed that, although he sounded sad, there was a resignation and acceptance in his voice that had not been there three months ago. She was pleased to find he was moving on, learning to accept the inevitable.

"So, this Jeremy went off and got married and that's the end of it?" Cole asked.

"Oh no," Rhiannon said. "There's more.

"The ride back to the cottage passed in silence. Neither of us had anything left to say, and I had a lot to think about. When we entered the yard in front of my little home, Jeremy stiffened in my arms. I looked up and over his shoulder I saw a black carriage with two dappled horses. Next to the carriage were two men. I recognized one of them; he was

Ieuan Barnatt, the constable in Rhylyfnwyd. I assumed the other was a constable too. He had that same self-important air about him.

"I had no idea what was happening. The carriage belonged to Jeremy's mother. But what purpose could she have to visit me, along with two policemen?"

"I didn't need to wait long.

"The second constable approached me as Jeremy helped me off Hwyrddydd's back. 'Miss Gruffudd? You are to be arrested and stand trial for witchcraft,' he said pompously. 'You are accused of the felony of exercising the invocation, or conjuration of evil and wicked spirits with the intent of bewitching and charming the heart of Mr. Jeremy Ockley.'

"They thought you had cursed him?" Cole blurted out in surprise. "But you said you and your mother weren't witches!"

"We weren't," Rhiannon said. "But the truth didn't matter much in such cases. And although the situation in Britain was never as extreme as for example in Germany, where nearly 100,000 women were burned or hanged in the span of two centuries, it was not unheard of for people to be convicted of witchcraft and sentenced to death." She toyed with her napkin for several seconds before she continued.

"Anyway, I was too shocked to speak. Jeremy was the first to find his voice again. 'I'll handle this,' he said and strode over to the carriage. 'Mother, what is this nonsense? I love Rhiannon, and you know that has nothing to do with witchcraft. That's just a silly superstition.'

"Mrs. Ockley never even bothered to get out of her carriage. But I could hear her voice, cold and emotionless. 'You just proved my point, Jeremy. Please get in, and let the constables do their work.'

"'But--' Jeremy began, throwing a bewildered look over his shoulder in my direction. The two constables had grabbed my arms and were dragging me to their prisoner's cart.

"'That woman is a devil's spawn and I will no longer allow her to keep her claws hooked into you. Come Sunday, you will go to London, and this matter will be forgotten and never spoken of. Now, be a good boy, and get in.' She never even raised her voice.

"The last thing I saw before the constables put me in the cart was Jeremy's face. He mouthed, 'I love you,' but his eyes spoke volumes. He wasn't going to help me."

"Blasted coward," Cole muttered. "What happened to him?"

"He married Ms. Patterson, as his mother desired. She gave him two children, both girls, before she died in childbirth with the third, a boy. Jeremy and his children outlived the Plague that raged through London in 1665, but died in the big fire in 1666."

"Serves him right."

Rhiannon shook her head. "Don't be so harsh. It took me a while to see it this way, but he had the rough end of the deal. *He* was the one who made the choices; he was the one who had to live with his conscience. I had no choice but to accept what was. Just like you have to."

"But you had to stand trial as a witch. And you're an Elder now--" Cole's voice trailed off and his eyes widened. "Does that mean... Did they find you guilty? I mean, are you dead?"

Rhiannon chuckled. "For an ex-demon you know remarkably little about how our side works. Elders are often humans, people who are elevated to a higher plane. Remember that boy, Kevin? The one with the magical drawings?"

"Oh yes." A tiny smile curled around Cole's lips. "How could I forget him? He turned Phoebe and her sisters into superwitches."

"Exactly. He's an Elder now. Quite a smart one too, I must say."

"So, what happened to you?"

"They convicted me," Rhiannon continued. "That was rare with accusations of witchcraft; most women managed to clear their name with the help of their neighbors, but Jeremy's family had some influence and the magistrate court found me guilty. It didn't help that my family had a history of herb women. But in a way, I guess I was lucky. They didn't need my confession. Unlike some of the women that shared my fate, and who were tortured until they were ready to confess whatever the courts wanted them to."

"The end wasn't very spectacular. Or perhaps that depends on your perspective." She chuckled at a private memory. "On the night before my execution, two whitelighters came into my cell. Scared the wits out of me, when they suddenly appeared. They took me away. I always wondered what the goalers must have thought when they found this witch's cell empty, and the door locked tight."

Cole chortled along with her. "Must have frightened the living daylights out of them."

"Yes." She was silent for a long minute, lost in thought. At last she looked up. "So, you see, Cole, I *do* understand how hard it is to let go of Phoebe, how difficult it is to accept her choices. All I can tell you, is that it will get better with time. And you never know what the future holds."

Cole made a sound that sounded suspiciously like a suppressed snort. "Whoever said that it is better to have loved and lost, than never loved at all, has to be the biggest fool that ever lived." His tone was wry, lined with a hint of bitterness.

"Tennyson," Rhiannon said.

"What?" Cole stared at her.

"Alfred Tennyson said that. The poet."

"Oh." Cole was quiet for a moment. "It's still a fool thing to say."

"That it is," Rhiannon agreed.

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes, each engrossed in their own memories.

"Tampa," she broke the silence at last.

Cole gave a start, having been deep in thought. "What?"

"I want you to go to Tampa, Florida. That city is a major hub for evil, and I have a sense your talents are needed there pretty soon."

"What am I supposed to do in Tampa?" He appeared a little alarmed at the thought that she was actually going to send him out of Wisconsin. He gave a helpless shrug.

"What you do best," Rhiannon said. "Develop a cover, blend in, and keep your eyes and ears open. You'll know when the time comes. Don't worry, you'll do fine. Just remember, don't use--"

"--my powers when I don't need to," Cole finished for her. "Yes, Elder Rhiannon, I did get that particular message. Don't worry, I won't. I don't like the way using them makes me feel."

She smiled warmly. "I knew I made the right choice when I decided to help you. Now, if

you don't mind," she got to her feet, "I have to get Ania to take me back. Work for the Council never ceases."

Chapter Two

Heather wandered the upstairs bedrooms of her home one last time before she continued down the stairs, running a hand along the banister. Dark rectangles on the wood-paneled wall showed where Woodard family photographs were removed. The house was a house and no longer a home; it had been stripped of its personality. Carpets had been rolled and put in storage; white sheets covered the chairs and coffee tables in the living room. It gave the rooms an empty, deserted look yet at the same time it exuded confidence that one fine day, it would be a home to a family again.

And some day a family would make their home here, Heather knew.

It just would not be her family, the family who had lived here the last two decades.

Was it indeed only last week that she buried her father in the small plot beside her mother's grave? It felt like much more time had passed. Tom Woodard had been her last tie to the town, to this house. When he passed, that final tie had been severed as surely as the others had been: the one to her mother, who died six months ago, and the tie to Bob, who had been her fiancé until he decided that he was not ready for a married life.

Her eyes dry -- she had cried enough over the past few weeks to last her a lifetime -- Heather closed the front door behind her, locked it, and dropped the key in the mail slot. Bill Hobson, the real estate agent, would collect it the next time he showed someone the house. He had promised he would get her a good price, but in all honesty, Heather didn't care much. No amount of money could make up for the family she lost or the loneliness she felt. Sure, her father had had a brother who lived somewhere up in Alaska, and whom she had seen perhaps three times in her life. This uncle didn't care much for his adopted niece. He had not even bothered to show up for the funeral, although she had received a printed sympathy card.

Heather walked down the steps from the front porch and across the path to the road. Her car, the white Hyundai Accent her father had given her when she had gotten her driver's license, was already waiting for her. Its boot and back seat were filled with her things. Clothes, photographs, personal mementos, mostly. She didn't need much else.

Before she got into the car, she spared one last glance for the house. It sat silently in the shadows of the large oak trees, with the shades drawn and its yellow paint slightly chipped. Already, her home looked like a distant memory. Still, she had lived here for

nearly seventeen years, ever since Tom and Jennifer Woodard had adopted her when her real parents died.

Thoughts of the birth parents whom she barely remembered made her finger the heavy, silver pendant that hung just below her collar bone. That pendant and a few yellowed photographs were the only tangible objects she had to remember her birth parents by. Her mother had slipped the chain around Heather's neck on the night she died, as if she had known something bad was about to happen.

"Heather," she'd said, "this has been in our family for generations. Promise me you'll take good care of it. And never, *ever* take it off." Her solemn admonition had made a deep impression on the four-year old girl, and Heather could remember the words to this day. She didn't remember much else about her mother; her young brain had been still too untrained to etch many images into its synapses, but she had heeded her mother's words. In all those years, she'd only taken the pendant off twice. The first time because its lock had broken and needed to be replaced; the second time when she had grown from child to young adult and the chain had grown uncomfortably short. She recalled feeling naked without the silver trinket, naked and watched, the way one sometimes feel eyes pricking in the back of one's head and it turns out someone looks at you as you walk down the street. It hadn't been a pleasant feeling, and she was glad when the pendant had taken its rightful place around her neck again.

With a small, wry shake of her head, Heather got into the car and started the engine. Today was going to be the first day of the rest of her life. And she was determined to make the best of it.

* * * * *

A warm, clammy hand caressed his face, and a wet blanket was draped over his shoulders the moment Cole stepped out of the air-conditioned terminal. Instantly, beads of perspiration sprang up on his brow. The air was bright, but the humidity caused a thin haze to dull the glare of the sun. Cole let out a sigh. He dropped his weekend bag at his feet and proceeded to take off his suit jacket.

"Note to self," he muttered. "Obtain summer shirts." He rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, draped the jacket over one arm, and picked up his bag again. He took a deep breath. Beneath the reek of hot pavement, kerosene and oil, he detected the faint scent of salt in the air. The sea. He felt a stab of homesickness. The scent reminded him of San Francisco. And of Phoebe.

Cole shook his head to chase away the unwanted thoughts. He wondered if Rhiannon was right, if it would ever get better, if he ever came to a point where not every scent or taste or song reminded him of one moment or another spent with Phoebe.

"Mr. Turner?"

"Yes."

The woman who had addressed Cole smiled and held out her hand. She was dressed in a pale, tan skirt and jacket, with a white blouse and low-heeled pumps. Tiny wrinkles showed beside her eyes and gray streaked her blonde hair. "Welcome to Tampa. I'm Barbara Hamilton; I work with Chandler-Thompkins Realty. You hired us to help you find a suitable place to live. I have several furnished apartments lined up that you might like to look at. But I assume that you first want to collect your luggage and go to your hotel?"

Cole shook the proffered hand. "This is all I brought," he said, hefting his bag with the other hand. "Let's take a look at those apartments." He had spent the last three months holed up in a motel; he'd be damned if he spend one more night in a non-descript, impersonal hotel room.

"Sure." The smile faltered only an instant at the unexpected reply. "If you'll follow me."

She proceeded him to a dark green convertible with the roof up, where he stuffed his bag into the tiny boot and took the shotgun seat.

"I hope you had a pleasant flight," she commented while she put the car in motion and began to wind her way through the maze of streets that surrounded Tampa's airport.

"Uh huh," Cole muttered politely. In fact, he had not. During the first part of his journey, the fat lady to his right took up most of his elbow room, while on the second stretch from Atlanta to Tampa the kid in the seat in front of him had not sat still for more than a minute at a time. He feared his knees were quite bruised. But he had promised Rhiannon not to use his blurring power until absolutely necessary, so travel by plane it had been. He should have gotten a first class seat, though.

"Is it always this warm here?" he asked, pulling on his tie and loosening the top buttons of his shirt.

She glanced sideways and smiled. "It's not really hot yet," she told him. "It's barely seventy-one degrees, but it's the humidity that will kill you. Don't worry, though. It's unseasonably warm for this time of year and they predict thunderstorms later this

afternoon. It'll cool off a bit then. And of course all the apartments I plan to show you are air-conditioned."

"Of course," Cole murmured. The temperature in the car was gradually improving as the AC-unit did its work. By the time he felt comfortably cool again, the car was speeding on the Interstate to the east. Soon Barbara took an exit and a minute later the car was crawling its way through the downtown Tampa traffic.

"That's the library," she pointed to Cole's right. He got a glimpse of a low-slung concrete building before she turned left, and then right at the next intersection.

Tampa Street, Cole read. He chuckled. Original street name. She drove him past modern office buildings and various plazas. Another few turns took them onto Franklin Street. Cole sat up straighter. "This is where my office is," he said, a little surprised.

"Really? Franklin Street is one of the major business streets in downtown. Can I ask what your business is?"

"I'm a lawyer," Cole said, peering out to try and find One City Center while having no clue what the building looked like. "After my wife divorced me, I decided I needed to make a new start." He stopped, bracing himself for the pain. He was surprised to find that, instead of the hot lance through his heart he expected, the words cause a dull ache somewhere deep in his chest. He took a deep breath.

"I was fortunate enough to be able to take over a law practice from a retiring lawyer here in Tampa. I thought it was as good a place as any."

She stopped in front of a red light. "Oh, you'll love Tampa," she said with honest enthusiasm. "It's a very laid back city, with lovely weather all year 'round. Except when we get a hurricane, that is, but that doesn't happen so often. It is why the high-rises don't go over twenty stories high, though."

The light turned green and the car sped forward again. They drove underneath an overpass -- "The Lee Roy Selmon Expressway," according to his self-appointed tourguide -- and once they cleared the bridge, sunlight glistened on deep blue water ahead of them. To Cole's right, a large complex sprawled along the waterfront. "That's the Tampa Convention Center," Barbara informed him. "Up ahead is Harbor Island. And over there," she pointed, "is Tampa General Hospital."

Cole filed away the information. If he was going to live and work here, it was best to familiarize himself with his surroundings as soon as possible. He didn't know what Rhiannon wanted him to do, or why she sent him to this particular city, but she'd looked

worried when she mentioned she expected to need his talents here soon. The sooner he knew his way around, the better equipped he would be to fight the good fight.

"Here's is the condo I wanted to show you," the realtor said. She parked the car next to the sidewalk, in front of a seven-story whitewashed apartment building. "The apartment is on the top floor, at the opposite side, overlooking the harbor."

He followed her in, nodded at the doorman, and joined her in the elevator. She pressed the button marked '7' and with a lurch the elevator went up. For a moment Cole feared it was all too familiar, but when the elevator doors opened, he realized it exited onto a hallway, and not directly into the apartment, unlike his old home in San Francisco.

Barbara unlocked the door to apartment 7b and gestured for Cole to enter.

The instant he walked into the living room, he knew he had found his new home. The apartment was furnished, as he had requested. A pale carpet covered a wood floor that was polished to a gleaming dark red.

"Mahogany," Barbara said when she caught him looking. "Imported from Honduras. It's stronger than oak, and, if you ask me, prettier."

Cole agreed it was pretty. Especially when combined with the cream-colored sofa and the leather easy chairs. The room might have looked feminine if not for the modern glass-and-steel dining room table. But what truly sold him was the view.

"Grand, isn't it," the real estate agent pointed. "You can see downtown Tampa from the balcony, and you'll be able to admire the Florida sunsets right from your living room."

She proceeded to show him the master bedroom (that held a four-poster bed of such dimensions, Cole was glad he did not suffer from agoraphobia), the kitchen ("equipped with all modern appliances") and the bathroom ("it has a shower as well as a separate Jacuzzi").

"Every apartment has its own boat slip. Everyone in Tampa owns a boat." Barbara pointed out the living room window where Tampa Bay was indeed speckled with white motorboats or sailing yachts.

"I'll take it," Cole said.

"Um... Don't you want to see the other homes?" She sounded a little confused.

"No, thank you, Miss Hamilton. This is perfect." He went to the window and stared out

across the blue waters. Perhaps Florida wouldn't be such a bad place after all.

* * * * *

Birgit paced the length of her one-bedroom suite at the Prescott Hotel. She was bored and frustrated: a dangerous combination. Dangerous enough that Theo, who knew her moods intimately, had made himself scarce.

Three weeks! She had been in this cursed city for three weeks. And what did she have to show for it? Blisters on her feet. Well, okay, not actual blisters. Cassie and the limousine had seen to that. But figuratively speaking, yes, she had blisters. She'd lost count of how many office buildings and high-rises she had visited in her search for the perfect location to set up her business. She needed office space first before she could really start the San Francisco branch of the agency, before she could start recruiting and finding new clients.

The buildings she had visited were not upscale enough. Or too upscale, which would draw the wrong sort of attention. Too rustic. Too close to the tourist areas. Too far from the main routes. Too expensive. Too small. She found a flaw with every single office the estate agent had shown her. And now she was beginning to get thoroughly annoyed. She wanted the San Francisco branch. This city and its inhabitants were too important to neglect. It was filled with young, beautiful women in their prime and rich, old women who yearned to regain such beauty and youth.

The modeling agency was a front. Birgit dealt in the power of youth. She hired pretty girls, offered them a career as supermodels while tapping into their youth. Rich society ladies on the verge of losing their looks to the inevitability of age paid small fortunes for the life-force of those younger women. They never asked questions but wrote their checks and took what Birgit gave them. It allowed her to lead a comfortable life, but her ambitions ranged farther than mere comforts and luxury.

She grabbed one of the vases that decorated the suite and flung it against the wall. It hit with a loud crash and the shards flew all over the room. It gave her little satisfaction. She needed something else to get rid of the pent-up frustration. Maybe she would call Cassie up to the rooms and have her-- No, that would be a waste of perfectly good material. She had the female limousine driver pegged as her first source, not her personal toy.

She recalled the events of that afternoon. The latest real estate broker Theo hired had taken her to yet another building that rented out vacant office space. It was far too small and when she saw it, she'd raged at the agent, nearly releasing her power. It had taken a great effort of will and decades of training to restrain herself. John Polson, that was his

name.

Perhaps she should give him a ring? Tell him she was sorry for the outburst and that she wanted to make it up to him? Birgit knew he would accept her invitation without a second thought. From the moment they met, it had been clear that he was attracted to her. He'd dropped the usual clues, brushed his leg against hers in the back of the car, his hand against her breast when steering her this way or that. Birgit had ignored him. But she had kept score. Now it was time to even up.

Feeling better already at the prospect of an evening full of fun, she closed her eyes and concentrated for a moment on locating him. It was easy. With the power of telelocation at her disposal, a simple touch, skin on skin, was all it took to find anyone, anywhere. And the human habit of shaking hands upon meeting made things even easier.

Ah, still in his office. She walked over to the phone and dialed the number on his card. After some small talk, arrangements were made. John would come by the Mendocino suite at eight-thirty for a private dinner. Birgit hung up and whistled a tune. Time to make some preparations.

* * * * *

Mark sat at his desk, which stood in a small niche between the coffee machine and a file cabinet. The editorial room, abuzz during the day with the effort of putting together a weekly newspaper, was quiet. In the far corner, an elderly man was wiping the floor, his mop uttering a soft swish-swish on the linoleum. Occasionally, the sopping noises were drowned out by a crackle of static and terse voices from the police radio scanner on top of the file cabinet, announcing mysterious numbers. Mark had adopted the trick from the *Enquirer's* photographer, Kit Watson. "Always keep the scanner on, kid. You never know when news breaks."

The computer screen in front of Mark glowed bluish-white with narrowly typed words but he didn't see the copy he had written. Instead, Mark was staring off into space, tapping the butt of a pencil against his notebook. His mind was on Gillian James.

Ever since the night he and Kit investigated the death of the unknown woman who carried Gillian James's driver's license, she had never been far from his thoughts. Ironically, he had been right after all: the strange woman's death had warranted a few lines in the police columns of the dailies but so far he had failed to find the story that the *Enquirer* would be interested in. Still, he knew something strange was going on. His budding journalistic intuition told him there was a story there, somewhere. There were

simply too many loose ends. If only he could discover how to tie them together.

The woman's death had been deemed to be of natural causes. Her body was old, and her heart simply gave out. Except for the fact that so far the police had failed to find out her identity (or so the official word was), there was nothing unusual about her death.

But why had she carried another woman's license? Why had she been dressed so inappropriately for her age? And more importantly, where the hell was Gillian James?

A quick, yet somewhat illegal peek in the police database that listed missing persons had shown Mark that she had been reported missing by her roommate three days after the woman carrying her license had been found.

"Keep at it, buddy," Santano encouraged Mark when he took his thoughts to the editor-in-chief. "Keep at it. You might break the story yet. But first, I want you to investigate these accusations of aliens impregnating a elderly housewife in Zephyrhills."

Perhaps he would try and talk to the roommate. What was her name again? Mark reached to grab his notebook from the desk. He was browsing the pages filled with tiny scribbles when the police scanner squeaked again. A voice called out.

"Two-Bravo-Nine, this is Central."

"Two-Bravo-Nine, go ahead, Central."

Something about the tone more than the words caught Mark's attention. He stopped flipping through his notebook and turned toward the scanner, perking up his ears.

A minute later, he was out of the door and seated behind the wheel of his car, racing along Kennedy in the direction of West Shore Boulevard. Fortunately, traffic was light at this time of night, and he covered the two miles in record time. He hopped from the car and approached a small crowd already forming at the foot of the multi-storied apartment building. Everyone's head was craned and muted whispers ran through the crowd.

Mark followed their gaze and gasped involuntarily. Although the police reports over the radio should have prepared him, it was quite a different thing to actually see the girl perched on the balustrade of the top floor. She wore a black skirt and a red blouse. Her long, blond hair streamed behind her in the breeze coming in from the ocean. Behind her, in the shadows, Mark could make out shady figures moving slowly and carefully. The police officers, he knew, who would try to either talk her down from the railing, or would try to get close enough to grab her.

For a long moment, the world seemed to stand still. Then, without making a sound, the red-and-black clad figure of the girl fell forward, as if in slow motion. He could see everything with unnatural clarity. Her blond hair fanned out behind her, and the black silk of her skirt fluttered. Her features changed while he watched. Mark knew her eyes would forever be etched into his memory.

Splat.

* * * * *

In San Francisco, Birgit spent several long, and for the broker very unpleasant hours toying with him before she finally tired of her games. She morphed back to her human form. Her yellow eyes dulled until they were the cold gray of her human form. Her hair lost the golden sheen and faded into platinum blond. The tufts disappeared from her ears and they grew into a human's curved shape. Birgit heaved a sigh: part tired satisfaction, part reluctance because she didn't want to revert to her earthly self. Her mortal form was as nice as she could make it but her true self was so much more pleasing.

She stared down at the quivering lump of flesh that was once a cocky real estate agent. Theo would have to see him home; he was in no shape to get himself anywhere. Polson would never talk about what had taken place this night; shame and fear would make sure of it. She snorted. Mortals!

She leaned forward, removed the bonds from his wrists and ankles and tore the blindfold from his eyes. The look she saw in them was extremely pleasing. Stark fear mingled with the memories of the pain.

"You'll be a good boy now and find me the ideal location for my office, won't you?"

Polson's head snapped up and down, and he gulped as he searched for his voice. He had to try three times before he managed to gasp a whispered "Yes, Miss Freda."

"Good." She walked over to the house-phone and dialed the number for Theo's room. She let it ring two times, then hung up and left the door to her suite ajar. Theo would recognize the signal.

And indeed, not a full minute later, he knocked on the door and entered, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "You called, Mistress Birgit?"

"Yes, Theo. It seems that Mr. Polson needs some help getting dressed and getting home.

You'll see to it, I trust."

"Of course, Mistress," Theo muttered without even blinking at the sight of Polson.

Birgit chortled beneath her breath and disappeared into the bathroom for a well-deserved bath. Good ol' Theo. How had she ever managed without him?

* * * * *

Mark stared at the lifeless body of the woman, aghast with horror. Her limbs were folded at unnatural angles; sightless eyes stared up at the night sky. A trickle of blood seeped from the corner of her mouth and onto the long, gray hair that fanned out beneath her head.

Mark couldn't move. He was too deeply shocked to feel much of anything, except a faint nausea in the pit of his stomach that he dimly expected would grow much worse once reality sank in. For now, though, he forgot his purpose. He forgot why he had answered the call over the police radio, forgot that he was supposed to be an uninvolved journalist who would write fair and objective reports. Instead, he was a witness, an onlooker who could only gape along with the other gawkers that quickly gathered around the body.

A siren howled in the distance, quickly growing louder, until it ended with a last whoop close behind the crowd. "Make way! Move aside, please!" Uniformed police officers swept a path through the crowd for the paramedics to reach the victim's body.

The disturbance rippled through the crowd, jostling Mark and he had to take a quick step to keep his balance. It pulled him from his stupor. He shook his head to clear it, for the first time taking in the scene around the woman. He realized he carried his notebook in his hand still, pen poised to paper. He remembered the job he came to do here.

Resolutely he pushed his way through the crowd, closer to the victim, hoping to overhear something he could use. But there wasn't much to say. One of the paramedics, a female with dark hair tied back in a ponytail, looked up at the nearest uniformed police officer. She shook her head. "She's gone," she said.

He nodded. "I'll tell Detective Morris."

"Tell me what?" A second man pushed his way through the crowd.

With a start, Mark recognized him. He was the same detective that had been at the scene

of the Gillian James incident.

"That she's dead. And Sir--" The uniformed cop hesitated and glanced at the crowds pushing in.

"Let's get these people moving, shall we?" Morris observed. He turned to direct himself at some of the other officers. "Please have these people move out," he called. "Nothing to see here."

Mark frowned with annoyance when a uniformed officer took his arm and gently but firmly forced him to step back until he was out of earshot of the two policemen. But as he watched without being able to overhear, Mark suddenly realized he didn't need to hear. He knew what the uniformed cop would tell the detective. The woman was not what she appeared to be. No doubt she carried some identification in a younger person's name. She had *been* that younger person, until she died.

Mark finally knew where Gillian James was. Gillian James was dead. Just like this nameless girl. And someone had to be responsible. With the afterimage of the body floating through the air burned on his retinas and the sickening plop of the body hitting the ground echoing in his ear, he swore to himself he would discover who was to blame for these killings. And would expose them in the Enquirer.

Chapter Three

Birgit stood naked in front of the closet, surveying her wardrobe with a critical eye. Tonight, she needed to look her best. Attractive, self-assured. A woman of the world. A woman who exuded confidence in her own appearance as well as her life and work. Because tonight, she would start recruiting new girls to join the agency. Although the office that Polson found her after their night of play was still being redecorated to her desires, she could not wait any longer. Events in Tampa compelled her to act, and act quickly. Rich geriatrics all over the world clamored for their monthly dose of youth elixir and the loss of two valuable sources in a few short weeks made it hard to meet those demands.

She gritted her teeth in anger while she pulled out a black leather dress that looked more like a torture contraption than a garment. First, the James girl was stupid enough to step in front of a moving car and get herself killed. And last night the Squire-woman. She found the latter the greater loss. The girl had been brand new to the agency. Birgit had recruited her herself during her last visit to Tampa. The girl would have had so much more to offer before she outlived her usefulness. At least so far nobody seemed to have noticed the strange inconsistencies between the girls' ages and their appearances in

death, which was something to be grateful for, Birgit admitted to herself albeit reluctantly. It was the one thing of the extraction procedure Birgit had failed to remedy. Normally, once she was done harvesting the life force from one of her girls, she gently broke the connection, leaving the girl dull and spiritless yet with a rich career to look back upon and otherwise unchanged to the eye. They often did not survive long after she cut them loose, but the cause of death was usually determined to be some sort of disease or heart failure. Only when a girl was wrenched free violently, did the sudden aging happen.

She finished dressing quickly, applied make-up and gathered up her purse before making her way downstairs to the lobby of the prestigious Prescott Hotel. Tonight's concierge was a young man with red skin and pale hair.

"So, what's the hottest place in town for a girl like me to be seen?" Birgit purred. She leaned forward over the concierge's desk, enjoying the owlish look that washed over the young man's face.

"Erm... that depends," he stuttered. "What are you looking for? Dinner? Dancing? The theater?"

Some of Birgit's good mood evaporated. Was every human in this town dimwitted? "Do I look like I want to sit in the dark and watch a couple of would-be's cavort around on stage?" she snapped.

He blinked, and had the good grace to fluster a bright pink. "No, Ma'am, I guess you don't. You'll be wanting to go to P3. That's a popular nightclub downtown. Has been around for several years. I think I heard Barenaked Ladies are playing again tonight."

"Good. Then that's where I want to go. Now, be a sweet little concierge, and get me a cab."

"Yes, Ma'am."

* * * * *

Ten minutes after departing from the Prescott Hotel, her taxi pulled up in front of a nondescript building. A long line of extravagantly dressed people was waiting below the pale pink-and-blue sign that read P3 in the center of a triangle. Birgit got out of the taxi and studied the club. The people in line were waiting patiently for their turn to enter, but that wouldn't do at all.

She marched past the queue, once again ignoring the stares and dirty looks people gave her, and stopped in front of the beefy bouncer.

"Miss, you'll have to--" He met her eyes and the rest of his words never made it past his lips.

She gave him her most pleasant smile, her gaze boring into his. "I'd like to enter now, please." Her polite words belied the dangerous glint in her eyes and the look was not lost on the man. He shrugged.

"Go ahead." He pulled aside the rope, ignoring the protests that floated up from the queue, and allowed Birgit to enter.

Pounding music greeted her, the noise mixed with the smell of alcohol, smoke and various expensive perfumes. A staircase descended into the main area and she stopped for a moment at the top to take in the throng of bodies that churned at her feet. They were young, beautiful and full of life. She smiled to herself. The concierge hadn't said a word too many; this was her kind of crowd. It was the perfect place to begin her recruitment.

First, however, she wished for something to drink, and her eyes searched for the bar while she began to descend the stairs.

She stopped dead in her tracks, and her heart rate speeded up with excitement when she caught sight of the girl who sat on a stool, chatting easily with the long-haired bartender. She was perhaps a little old for Birgit, who liked her charges as young as legally possible but otherwise, she was perfect and Birgit instantly declared the evening a success.

She was fairly small, too small for regular modeling agencies to consider her, with a narrow waist and a full bosom. The bright pink top she wore showed it off to its fullest advantage. Her hair, dark and shiny, was pulled up onto her head, with small ringlets cascading down beside her ears. Her skin was unblemished, marked only with symbolic tattoos on her wrists. But most importantly of all, she possessed an inner beauty fuelled by a life force that was strong enough to take Birgit's breath away. A girl this vibrant in her grip would sustain her clients for years.

Shaking away the pleasant visions of how much money and influence she would gain from so much power, Birgit closed the last few paces and settled herself onto a stool beside the girl.

* * * * *

"Miss Birgit. Miss Birgit!"

The urgent voice cut through the haze of a pleasant dream where Birgit was expanding upon the evening's events and the girl, who had introduced herself as Phoebe, was under her full control. Yet even in her sleep, she recognized the voice as Theo's. It shattered the pleasant imagery in a thousand pieces. Birgit's eyes snapped open. They flashed angrily at the servant who had dared to disturb her.

"Theo!" she growled. The air around them crackled with static as she gathered the energies, preparing to release a blast of lightning. Theo flinched and paled, but he stood his ground.

"I'm sorry to wake you, Misstress Birgit, but I've got Rena Mason on the phone, from the Tampa office. It is important."

Birgit grumbled some more but she eased her hold on her power and sat up. She pushed a pillow in her back for support and gestured impatiently at Theo to hand her the phone. Despite her temper, she was curious. Rena and Theo had both been in her employ for a long time; they knew what she could do when enraged. If they decided something was important enough to defy her wrath, then it probably was.

She snatched the cell phone from Theo's hand and brought it to her ear. "This better not be about another of my charges you lost," she snarled into the mouthpiece.

She could hear the woman at the other end of the line swallow as she gathered up her courage.

"No, Miss Birgit." A slight tremor in her voice gave away Rena's fear. The head of the Tampa office had to be very sure of her message. "I have good news, I believe. I would never dare disturb you at this hour otherwise."

Good. Rena had at least paid attention to the time difference. The care with which her two minions approached the issue made Birgit all the more curious as to what their news might be.

"Well, then tell me. Or did you want me to start guessing?" Birgit didn't moderate her tone. It was best to keep the servants on their toes.

"No, no, of course not. I'm sorry." The tremor was more pronounced and Birgit smirked

to herself.

Rena gulped a deep breath before she continued in a firmer tone. "I found the amulet."

"What amu--" Birgit gasped mid-sentence, her stern demeanor cracking from shock. She wasn't aware that her free hand lifted to fold around the trinket lodged against her throat. She was too busy calming her heart that had suddenly started a gallop. Better not to get overexcited. Twice before had she believed the search for the missing piece was over.

"Where is it? How did you find it? Are you sure?" The words tumbled from her mouth, betraying her eagerness.

"I'm quite sure," Rena said. Her voice now held a tone of satisfaction. "Of course, you will want to see it for yourself. The amulet is around the neck of a young woman. She came into my office this morning, looking for a job."

"And did you give her a job?"

The long silence told Birgit the answer before Rena spoke. "No, Miss Birgit. I didn't see the trinket until she was about to leave, after I told her the job was no longer available. I didn't want to raise suspicions by suddenly changing my mind about the job. But I did get her name and address," she hastened to add.

"All right. I'm on my way. Have them prepare an executive king suite for me."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Birgit pressed the disconnect button and the line went dead. She tapped the stubby antenna against her chin as she pondered these latest developments. It was all slowly coming together, everything she worked so hard for all these years. With the two pieces of the amulet, she would be a formidable power, someone to be reckoned with within the underworld. She would no longer need the agency or its clients. And with the demon realm currently leaderless...

She swung her legs out of bed. It wouldn't do to get ahead of herself. Overconfidence had been the downfall of many a demon and she better make sure that the amulet Rena saw was indeed the missing piece.

"Theo!"

"Yes, Mistress?" He stepped back into the room instantly, apparently anticipating she

would need his services.

"Book me on the first available flight to Tampa. I want you to stay here and look after matters here." There was still the matter of her possible recruits. Especially the Halliwell girl showed great promise. If she decided to take Birgit up on her offer, someone had better be around to accept her call.

"Right away, Mistress Birgit." With a nod Theo hurried out of her bedroom again. A few seconds later she heard him talking on the phone in the sitting room of her suite.

* * * * *

"Thanks." Heather accepted the tall plastic cup from the young man behind the counter. A pale brown liquid filled it, twined through with strands of thick orangy syrup. A large dot of cream floated on top.

She took the cup to the table in the corner and plopped onto the stuffed couch covered in dark green velvet. She sucked up a sip through the straw and closed her eyes with a contented sigh. She loved this drink.

It had not taken her long after leaving the small, backward town in Virginia to discover the pleasures of the Starbuck's franchises in the larger cities. And several experiments later, she settled on their caramel frappuchino as her drink of choice. She spooned some cream into her mouth with her finger. She'd better be careful, though, or she would quickly grow as round as Aunt Betty, their next-door neighbor in Virginia.

If she didn't go broke first.

Some of the simple pleasure of enjoying a quiet moment and a sweet coffee faded while she considered her situation. Between gas for the Hyundai and motel rooms, the small inheritance from her parents dwindled quickly. And Hobson had not yet sold the house. Not many people were interested in moving to a small town, he'd said when she called him. She needed to find a job. And she needed it fast.

Heather dug up the small business card that the strange woman had given her this morning. *Rena Mason, Vice President Gitta Models Inc.*, plus the address of the office on West Shore Boulevard she had visited earlier this morning. A temp agency had redirected her to the model agency, saying they had a secretary position open. But the interview had not gone well -- if one could even call it an interview. The woman, Ms. Mason, had been distant and aloof, telling Heather the position was already taken. With

her pinched looks, sharp nose and gray bun resting in her neck, she had somehow reminded Heather of a 1920's schoolteacher. One of those teachers that would lash their students' palms for the least infraction. She'd instantly known that this woman wouldn't be a pleasant boss to work for. So, when Ms. Mason told her that the job was no longer available, Heather had been secretly relieved.

The strangest thing had occurred afterwards, though, when she had gotten up to leave. Heather had offered Ms. Mason her hand in parting -- always be polite, her adoptive mother ingrained in her -- and the woman had suddenly frozen in mid-movement, her eyes glued to Heather's throat. Involuntarily and uncomfortable under the sudden scrutiny, Heather's hand closed around the pendant that dangled from its chain. As if a spell had been broken, Rena continued the gesture she started seconds ago, shaking Heather's hand. She'd suddenly been most pleasant, announcing her regrets about the job and agonizing that Heather had come in for nothing. She had insisted that Heather fill out a form with her name and address, "in case another opening comes up".

Heather complied -- again being polite -- although she knew she would never work for Gitta Models if she could help it. She crumpled the business card.

Unfortunately, it meant she was still jobless, and soon to be penniless.

Movement at the next table drew her attention just as she took another sip of her frappuchino. A red-headed woman had been seated beside Heather and she currently got up and began winding her way to the door.

"Excuse me," Heather called after her. "You're forgetting your newspaper." She grabbed for the folded paper and was halfway up off the overstuffed couch when the woman turned. Her green eyes were warm and twinkling with merriment.

She smiled. "That's all right, child. You keep it. You need it more than I do." She turned again and walked out the door.

Heather frowned at the odd remark but sat back down. She was encountering one strange woman after another today, but at least this meeting did not make her uncomfortable. This woman had seemed warm and kind, while the Mason woman came across as cold and calculating. Heather put down the paper and happened to glance at the page it was folded to. A small classified jumped up at her. *Small law firm seeks office assistant.* Heather's head snapped up, but the redhead had disappeared down the street. Heather's attention turned back to the paper.

* * * * *

The leather creaked in protest when Cole leaned back in the comfortable swivel chair at his desk. He placed his hands behind his head, put his feet up and gazed out of the window. The office was quiet. Had been ever since he started his work here, about a fortnight ago. Matt Hardy, the lawyer from whom he bought the practice, had failed to mention that he would leave a chaotic jumble of files behind, and not many clients to speak of.

When Cole arrived, the office furniture had been as ready for retirement as the old lawyer. But a few well-placed phone calls and generous personal checks had seen to the problem. Now, nearly two weeks later, the office looked spick-and-span, with shiny new furniture, a glass enclosure that housed Cole's inner office, and a small anteroom to receive clients.

All that was missing to complete his cover were those clients.

A good thing I don't have to make a living from practicing law, Cole thought while he gazed at the mirror windows of the office building opposite his on Franklin Street.

As it was, the funds accumulated during his demonic life would allow him to live in comfort for many decades to come. He wasn't sure, though, what the rules were regarding those funds. After all, they were amassed doing the work of evil. Somewhere deep down he suspected that true redemption would only be achieved by living a frugal life in misery. But misery had never been his thing. And, so he reassured his conscience, Rhiannon must know about the money. Since she never mentioned it...

However, although he didn't need the work to make a living, the quiet office allowed him too much time to think. And Cole felt he had done enough thinking to last him the rest of his days during those three months he was holed up in Wisconsin. Thoughts of Phoebe, although no longer as painful as they once were, were nevertheless discomfiting and something he could do without. He longed for action to take his mind off of the life he left behind in San Francisco.

But the law practice he took over had been dwindling for a long time. Along the walls of the brand new anteroom crates and boxes stood stacked, filled with unsorted case files. Most of those would be dead, Cole knew. Right now, he didn't have the courage to tackle the job of sorting them and following up on the ones that still showed signs of life.

He sighed, and closed his eyes, cutting off the glare from outside.

Why had Rhiannon sent him to Tampa? She'd been so sure his talents would be needed

soon. But despite his alertness for anything remotely evil, he had not crossed paths with any magical creature unless one counted the garden gnomes tending the shrubbery in Lykes Square. Nor had he heard anything from Rhiannon, or her whitelighter Ania. He wondered if they had forgotten him.

A hesitant knock on the glass door of his office startled Cole from his reverie. He opened his eyes to see a woman hover in the antechamber, just beyond the door to his inner office. And though recovering from heartache, he was human enough to notice she was young and beautiful. Her hair, long and lush, had the honey-colored sheen of newly cut hay and her skin was smooth with a hint of a tan. She also appeared a little uncertain, with a small purse tucked under her elbow and a folded newspaper clutched in her hand.

With a start, Cole realized he was not exactly portraying the image of a busy lawyer. He pulled himself up, dropped his feet to the floor and gave a vague wave at the papers on his desk. "Thinking position," he explained with a faint smile. "How may I help you, Miss...?" He left the question unvoiced.

"Woodard," she offered. "Heather Woodard. I came about the ad."

Cole's brow furrowed. "Ad? I'm sorry, I don't think I understand."

Heather's shoulders slumped into further uncertainty. "This is the office of Cole Turner, isn't it?" She glanced over her shoulder at the door where brand new gold lettering announced his name and the words *attorney at law*, confirming she was in the right place.

"Yes, it is. But I didn't place any ad. What sort of ad?"

"Seeking an office assistant." She sounded a little surer now that she had her location confirmed. "See? It's right here." She unfolded the newspaper and pointed it in his direction.

He took it. A bright red circle from a pen drew his attention. It was drawn around an announcement for a new self-tanner. A most pointless product to try and sell in Tampa if there ever was. "*A natural sunless tan, thirty day money-back guarantee*," Cole read aloud. He chuckled. "I'm sorry, Miss, but you must have misread the paper."

"What?" She snatched the paper out of his hands and studied it. "But-- but-- it was right there! I know it was!" She looked up at him, pleading, her eyes wide and startled. "I'm not crazy. The ad was right here."

"Someone must have played a prank..." Cole's voice died away when the pieces of the

puzzle clicked in place.

"Where did you get this paper?" he asked in a low, urgent voice.

"I--I found it," Heather said. "In a coffee shop. Or no, someone left it there."

"Who?"

"A woman."

"What did she look like?"

Heather shrank back, and Cole realized that in his desire for the answer, he towered over her, invading her personal space. He forced himself back.

"Red hair. Tall. In her thirties, I think. Why?"

Rhiannon. With a little help from a glamoring spell to change Heather's view of the paper. Cole relaxed. He studied the girl for a moment, deciding she had no idea she'd been maneuvered into his path like a pawn in a game of chess. How to explain the disappearing ad?

He gave her an encouraging smile. "I'm sorry. That must have been Rhiannon. She's a friend of mine, who likes to play tricks on people. This is her way of telling me I should hire someone to help around in the office. She probably switched the newspaper for the real one without you knowing it after she showed you the fake ad."

"Oh." Heather still looked dubious.

"And she's right, I could use some help, you know." He gestured around the anteroom, where a small receptionist desk was covered in piles of more paper. "So, what makes you think you qualify?"

He folded his arms while Heather rattle off her qualifications. He already knew he would hire her -- he didn't have much of a choice -- but he had to play his part in the charade.

* * * * *

Mark strode past the library on the campus of the University of Tampa. He could see the contours of the building that had to be McKay Hall shimmering through the trees, the

glitter of the Hillsborough River behind the house. He skirted the two-story complex to reach its western front. Here, the rooms each had their own entrance. And if his information was correct, the third door from the left would be Gillian James's room.

He squinted at the nametags beside the door, noting that the upper tag was left blank. He checked the bottom one against his mental file. "Jean Bradford." That was the name in his notes for Gillian's roommate. He had come to the right place. A shiver wanted to run along his spine when he realized what the blank tag meant. Although no one had ever found her body, people had given up on Gillian returning.

And they were right, of course. She was dead. And they would never find her body, since it was already found -- except it appeared to belong to a seventy-year old woman instead of the twenty-one year old history-student.

Mark checked for a doorbell, realized there was none, and instead rapped his knuckles against the wood. He waited, beginning to fear no one was home when the door slowly opened and a pair of blue eyes framed by blond hair looked out.

"Yes?"

"Miss Jean Bradford?"

"Yes."

"My name is Mark DeWitt." He flashed her his press card. "I'm a journalist. I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about your friend, Gillian?"

Jean mulled over his request for a few minutes, her face blank and distant. Then she gave a soft sigh and pulled the door open further. "I only have a few minutes," she warned him. "Class starts in fifteen minutes."

"I won't need long," he assured her, stepping inside. The blinds were drawn in front of the small windows and the room seemed dark after the bright glare of the afternoon sun outside. Mark glanced around, recognizing the functional furniture and simple closets universal to dorm rooms everywhere.

One half of the room was Jean's, with Shania Twain posters tacked on the wall and a flowery bedspread covering the bed. It was slightly rumpled, and a book lay upside down on the pillow. The other side of the room was empty, in keeping with the blank nametag outside. A blanket lay folded neatly on the foot of the bed, the mattress bare beneath it. The closet door stood slightly open, revealing empty shelves.

"Her parents came for her things last weekend," Jean said, following his gaze while she seated herself on the edge of her bed. "I still can't believe she's gone." The last was said softly, almost as if she were talking to herself instead of Mark. "Do you believe she's dead?"

"I-- don't know," Mark said, reluctant to dash the last glimmer of hope he heard in the roommate's voice. He *knew* what had happened to Gillian, at least partly, but how could he explain such an outlandish thing to this young woman? *Yes, she's dead. She's the old lady they found with her license.* That would go over well.

The police had to be aware of the strange situation, of course. How could they not be, with modern science and DNA testing at their disposal? But they would be able to make as little sense of it as Mark did. That was why they kept up appearances and acted as if they were still looking for Gillian while trying to solve a Jane Doe's death as a seemingly unrelated case.

"Would she have any reason to run away?" Mark asked, doing his part in keeping up appearances. "Bad grades? Abusive boyfriend?"

Jean looked up, her blue eyes wide. "No! She was one of the best students I've known. It came so easy for her that sometimes I was a little jealous. But--" She cut off and looked away.

Mark waited. When the clock continued to tick the seconds away he prompted her gently. "But?"

"Lately, she wasn't doing so well," Jean admitted. "Her parents don't know but the last few weeks she started skipping classes more and more, not showing up for tests and not handing in her assignments."

"Do you know why?" It was a struggle to keep the excitement out of his voice.

Jean shrugged. "Not sure. She kept going on and on about being a model. Some months or so ago, someone from some agency talked to her on the streets and told her they'd make her famous. It was weird; we've been roommates for two years and she never mentioned she wanted to be a model. But ever since that meeting, it was all she talked about. Do you think that has something to do with why she disappeared?"

"I don't know," Mark admitted, truthfully. But his instincts were screaming at him to find out more. "What was the agency's name? Did she tell you?"

"Yes." Jean walked over to her desk and started going through some scraps of paper piled

on it. "She gave me a card, said I should go see them, perhaps they would want to sign me up as well." She huffed self-deprecatingly. "Me, a model. Ah, here it is."

Mark took the proffered card. "Gitta Models Inc, Rena Mason, Vice President." The address was an office block somewhere on West Shore Boulevard. "Can I keep this?" he asked.

"Sure. It's not as if I have any need for it. And, oh, wait." She again browsed through the papers until she found what she was looking for. "This came in the mail yesterday. I was going to forward it to Gillian's parents, but perhaps you can use it to find out what happened to her. I would really like to know."

Mark took the cream-colored envelope she gave him. Dark blue letters informed him it was the stationary of Matthews, Crowther & Associates, Attorneys at Law. He shook out the contents that consisted of several sheets of paper, with a cover letter printed on the same cream stationary as the envelope.

"*'We regret that we cannot carry out your request to advise you on the validity of your contract, due to your deposit not being completed. We hereby return said contract and your check,'*" Mark read aloud. Folded within the paper was a personal check, stamped with bright red letters: *Insufficient Funds*.

Jean shrugged. "I suppose the bank closed Gillian's account when she went missing." She glanced at the clock. "I have to go. What paper did you say you were working for?"

"The Bay Enquirer," he muttered, not meeting her eye. "Thank you for your time, Miss Bradford. You've been most helpful." He slipped out of the door before the name of his employer could fully sink in.

* * * * *

"Well, I think I'm done. What do you want to do with the old files?"

Cole looked up from his copy of *The San Francisco Bay Mirror* to see Heather standing in the doorway of his inner office. Her face was flushed, and strands of her honey-colored hair had escaped their ponytail and were now plastered against her skin. She blew against the bangs on her forehead while she waited for him to reply.

"You got them all sorted already?" He failed to keep the surprise from his voice.

She shrugged, a little self-conscious, and he felt a pang of guilt. He knew she had been desperate for a job when she came to him, and he had not really made it easy on her. For some perverse reason he had wanted to take it out on Heather that Rhiannon was moving them like so many pieces on the board.

He dropped the paper and got up, walking past her. "I take it that's the hopeless pile?" he asked, pointing at the larger of two piles of file folders.

"Afraid so," she confirmed. "Some of that stuff hasn't been looked at for decades."

Cole chortled, amused. "Figures. I'll go chuck them in the trash, then. Why don't you put the rest in our brand new file cabinet over there?" The way her eyes lit up told him that his usage of the word 'our' wasn't lost on her.

"Listen, when I'm done with those old papers, I was going to run next door to get a coffee. Can I get you anything? Then we can discuss our strategy."

"Strategy?"

"Yes. On how to turn this place into a flourishing law practice." He grinned at the surprise on her face. "What? You think I can do it alone?"

Her smile widened. "Does that mean you want to keep me on?"

He grinned. "It does."

"You won't regret it, Mr. Turner."

He paused in gathering the old files in his arms and glanced up at her. "Call me Cole," he said. "If we're going to be working together, I'd much appreciate it."

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later they sat at his desk, each cradling a steaming cardboard cup in their hands, sipping hot coffee. "First thing," Cole said, "we should get a new coffee machine. We can't go running off next door every time we have a client and want to offer them coffee."

"Right," Heather agreed. She put her cup down to make a note on the pad before her. "The copier is busted too."

"Hmm. I forgot we would need that. I only replaced the furniture."

"That looks nice, though," Heather said shyly. "You have good taste."

Cole smiled. "Thanks." He sipped his coffee, wondering what else he had overlooked in setting up his cover.

"Why do you read that paper?"

"What?" He started from his musing, looking at Heather in incomprehension.

She nodded her head at the paper discarded in the middle of the desk. "That one. Why would you read a San Francisco paper when you live in Tampa?"

"Eh..." Cole was at a loss for words. He'd subscribed to the paper the first day after his arrival in Tampa. Despite what Rhiannon told him about starting anew with a blank slate, it was easier said than done, and he liked reading her columns. It told him a lot about her frame of mind. Besides, strange occurrences that spoke of magic to the initiated sometimes made the papers and perhaps some day Phoebe would be in need of his help. He would never contact her; he was fully aware of the price he'd have to pay if he did, but they *were* fighting for the same team, whether she knew it or not.

"I'm sorry," Heather hastened to say in the face of his obvious discomfort. "I didn't mean to pry. It's none of my business, really. I just thought it odd, so--"

He held up a hand to stop the barrage of words. He had noticed the girl had a tendency to babble when she was nervous. "It's all right. I can see why it would raise one's curiosity. It's just--" He took a deep breath and decided to tell her the truth. "My ex-wife lives in San Francisco. I like to keep abreast of events in her town."

"Oh."

He could see Heather still felt uncomfortable at having pried. She was fingering a silver chain around her throat. Or rather, the small pendant at the end of the chain. That was--

Cole squinted in sudden suspicion, and he drew in a shocked breath when he found his suspicions confirmed. It took every ounce of self-control he had gathered over the decades not to display any further signs of his agitation.

"Are you okay?" Heather had not missed the sudden intake of breath.

"Yea. Coffee's hot," Cole covered but his mind drifted back in time.

"This," Raynor announced while dropping something on the table, "is one half of a magical amulet that will give us power beyond your wildest imagination."

A mutter of excitement rippled through the gathering. The promise of vast power was always a good one. Belthazor glanced at the tigerlike demoness opposite him to see her tufted ears twitch in agitation.

"It doesn't look like much," someone over to Belthazor's right commented. The tigress's eyes blazed and she bared her fangs with a growl.

"Ah, but appearances can be deceiving," Raynor commented. "It was Birgit over there," he pointed at the tigress, "who obtained it from a magical shop over in Toronto last week. For which you shall be rewarded properly, my dear," he added pleasantly.

The fangs were bared again, but this time the sneer resembled a pleased smile more than a warning.

"With a restored amulet at our disposal, nobody will be able to stop the Brotherhood from reaching world dominance. All in the service of our Lord, The Source, of course."

The demons around the table nodded in agreement. Who would dare consider bypassing that evil of all evils? Certainly they would not. And neither would Raynor, who had the ear of The Source.

Bored with the knowledge that the demons present would launch into vehement assurances of their loyalties, Belthazor reached for the trinket, and had to agree with the first speaker. It did indeed not look like much. It was made of old silver, blackened with age. The lump, heavy in his large hands, resembled nothing so much as a waning moon with its crescent shape. Except in this case, someone had taken a chunk out of the inner curve. It didn't need a genius to figure out that that's where the other half of the amulet would fit.

Belthazor realized that Raynor was speaking again. He dropped the object back on the table and began paying attention once more.

"... located the second half of the amulet," his mentor was telling the gathered demons. "Apparently, it has been in the hands of a witch family for generations."

"How come we did not know this?" someone asked.

Raynor sighed. "The amulet is invisible to magic, which means it can only be detected with real eyes. It has taken us many centuries to locate the family. It will be even more difficult to obtain."

"Why? I can shimmer in and grab it from the neck from whatever filthy witch is wearing it," another demon growled. Belthazor's lips curled at the exasperation in his mentor's eyes.

"Don't you think someone would have already, if it were that simple?" Raynor snapped. His dark eyes blazed and the demon that had spoken shrank back. "The amulet protects itself, and its bearer. It takes a demon of tremendous strength as well as cunning to steal the amulet from the witch. Someone who understands human nature, someone who can manipulate a human without their knowledge."

Many eyes swiveled in Belthazor's direction. Some displayed envy, others barely contained disgust for the hybrid that would once again get the choicest assignment from his mentor.

"Think you can handle it?" Raynor asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Of course," Belthazor grunted through his many teeth. "Did I ever not?"

Chapter Four

But he had failed his assignment, Cole remembered, not paying attention to Heather who prattled on about the staplers and magic markers they needed to buy. By the time he had paid a visit to the witch, the amulet was no longer around her neck. She had known he was coming. And despite horrible torture of her husband -- it had been a source of endless fascination to discover exactly how many square inches of skin covered the human body -- she had refused to tell where the amulet was hidden. At last, frustrated and foiled, his temper had snapped. He let go of an immense bolt of fire, sending the house up in flames. Raynor had been quite disappointed, he recalled.

Yet, here it was, that much-coveted amulet. Cole wondered what happened to the other half, in whose hands it had fallen when the Brotherhood was broken, all those long months ago, when he'd been an accepted member of the Charmed Ones' inner circle.

He tried to remember the name of the witch whose family had guarded the amulet for so many generations, the woman he had so brutally murdered. It hadn't been Woodard, he knew that much. So that broached the question of how Heather had come into possession of the amulet. Should he ask her? Did she even know what it was? Could this

be the reason why Rhiannon had placed Heather in his path? Or him in hers.

"That's a very nice pendant you have," he commented, trying to sound off-hand when he caught Heather fingering the silver jewel again.

"Uh? Oh, yeah." Self-consciously she let it drop back beneath her collar. "It belonged to my mother. She gave it to me before she died. She said it's been in the family for generations."

"Well, then you better take good care of it," Cole said, as if it wasn't an important issue. But inside his mind, the wheels were whirring, trying to make sense of what Heather told him and coming up one clue short. He would have to look into Heather's past, he knew, if he were going to figure out how the pieces of the puzzle fit together.

* * * * *

Mark left the university campus in a hurry, not wanting to deal with the indignation Jean would undoubtedly heap upon him when she came to realize *The Bay Enquirer* was a tabloid of the worst sort. How could he explain to her that he had the best intentions and wasn't about to drag Gillian's name through the mud? But despite the shame he felt at his job, excited butterflies kept fluttering in his stomach.

He had a clue. A first, honest-to-God clue! It wasn't much, but he sensed the business card Jean had given him was important. After all, it preceded Gillian's radical shift in life. It simply had to be significant.

Not sure how to proceed with this tentative clue, he decided to check out the address on the card. It wasn't far from the campus to West Shore Boulevard, merely a few miles. But as he approached the address, Mark unconsciously lifted his foot from the Impala's gas pedal. His heart grew cold when it coasted to a stop at the curb. The last time he had been here, it was night. And he had been watching a woman plummet to her death, from right up there.

When he found that the address on the card denoted the same building that Jenna Squire had chosen to take her desperate jump from, it didn't really come as a surprise anymore.

And as shock faded, it was replaced with more excitement. He was definitely on the right track. Somehow the Gitta Models agency was involved.

* * * * *

Once they had finished their coffee, Cole sent Heather shopping. He gave her a thick wad of cash and told her to buy all the office supplies she felt they needed without delay. She'd blinked at the money, but her eyes lit up at the prospect of having a genuine shopping spree and she'd quickly compiled a list of necessities.

Cole breathed out with relief when the door closed behind her. He needed some time to think and regain some equilibrium. It had been unnerving to discover that Heather wore the pendant that marked one of Belthazor's few failures, and he couldn't quite decide how to approach the subject again without raising her suspicions. Either she was a very good liar, or Heather had no idea about the value of her jewelry.

But before Cole could start a thorough introspection, the outer door opened again. He looked up, prepared to find Heather announcing she had forgotten something. Thus it took him a few seconds to realize that it wasn't his secretary, but a young man who stood in the entrance.

A client?

Clients would be good for his cover, and Cole sprang up from his seat while waving the young man to enter.

"Please, come in. What can I do for you?"

"Are you Cole Turner? The lawyer?"

"Yes, I am." Cole offered a friendly smile. "I'd offer you coffee, but I'm currently out of a coffee machine."

"That's okay." The young man reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out sheaf of papers. "I'd like to you to look over this contract and tell me if it's kosher," he said, handing Cole the sheets.

"Sure," Cole said. "Please, sit down."

He waited for his guest to seat himself, then took his own chair behind his desk and unfolded the contract.

"Gitta Models, blah blah," he began to read, lips moving. "Gillian James..." Cole raised an amused eyebrow in the direction of the young man. "You don't strike me as someone

named Gillian."

The other man flustered. "Oh, no... no, I'm sorry. I'm Mark DeWitt. I'm here for a friend of mine. I'm a little worried about her, so I want to make sure she isn't signing her firstborn away or something. You know how you hear always strange stories about modeling agencies."

"I see. Well, Mr. DeWitt, I'll look into it for you. Where can I reach you?"

He wrote down the number Mark gave him, and saw his first client out before he went back to brooding over Heather's heirloom.

* * * * *

"Dammit," Cole swore beneath his breath when the computer screen in front of him turned blue and announced yet another fatal error. It was the sixth time that evening. Or was it the seventh? He couldn't even recall how many times he had to restart the infernal machine and reconnect to the Internet. Phoebe had always made it seem so easy, with her cute little laptop. But Cole found himself longing for the days of yore, when he could have send out minions to do the legwork and return to him with all the paper trails he could want.

While he waited for the machine to run through its startup cycle, he picked up the printouts he had managed to procure and leafed through them. Obituaries, mostly; people had no idea how much information could be gleaned from those sad advertisements announcing the demise of the near and dear.

He'd found obituaries for both a Tom and a Jennifer Woodard. Both came from the online archives of the *Blackstone Daily News*. Heather hadn't told him, but he now knew that she came from the tiny town of Blackstone, Virginia, where her parents had died shortly after another. It was sad, really. In late 2002, her mother had died, much to the sorrow of 'devoted husband Tom and loving daughter Heather'. Then, a few months later and not that long ago, Tom had followed his wife into an early grave, leaving behind a 'bereaved daughter'. Both parents had been in their early fifties.

Cole could not help but feel sympathy for the orphan in his employ. His human heart had warmed up enough for such empathic feelings, and although he couldn't clearly remember his father, he did recall the vague longings of his youth for someone who would care for him. And it took one look at Heather to know she had grown up in a safe and happy environment.

Unfortunately, the obits did not answer his most pressing question: how did the amulet come to be in Heather's possession? If she spoke the truth, and Jennifer Woodard had given it to her, how had *she* come to it? He was damn sure that she wasn't the woman he murdered. Neither name nor timing nor cause of death fit with his recollection. Maybe an aunt? Witch family trees could be complicated and extensive, the Halliwells had taught him.

He realized the computer was ready for him, and he dropped the pages onto the desk before leaning back over the keyboard, intent to find out if Heather had any aunts that died in a house fire some fifteen years ago.

"She was adopted." The soft voice behind him startled Cole so badly that he jumped up from his seat, banging his knees painfully against the edge of the desk while he swung around, hand raised with a threatening fireball before he could stop himself.

"Heavens, woman, do you have a death wish?" he cried, letting the ball wink out when he recognized his visitor.

Rhiannon smiled enigmatically and seated herself onto the leather sofa. "I don't have much time," she said, indicating the easy chair to her right. "But I will tell you what I know, so you can concentrate on the important matters at hand."

"Gee, thanks," Cole muttered, vexed that his slaving at the computer apparently was not considered important.

"Heather was adopted," Rhiannon repeated when she was sure she had Cole's full attention. "Her birth name is Heather McDaniel."

Cole's eyes widened at the name and suddenly the memory clicked into place. The face of the woman he murdered appeared before his mind's eye, and he could clearly see a family resemblance to Heather. The same dark, slightly slanted eyes, a tiny nose and full lips framed by honey-colored hair. Unfortunately, with the memory of the face came also the memory of the expressions he'd seen on that face. Pain, horror, resigned sadness.

Rhiannon nodded seriously when she recognized the expression on his face. "That's right," she said softly. "The witch you murdered was Heather's mother. Megan had seen you were coming -- she was a precog -- and had placed the amulet around her daughter's neck for safekeeping. Heather was barely four years old. Her mother had sent her to the neighbors, knowing the McDaniel residence would not be a place for a young child that night."

Cole shuddered and rubbed his arms at his recollections. "I'm sorry," he croaked, his

voice unsteady. "I've done so much..."

"Shh," Rhiannon shushed him. "Now's not the time to fall apart with guilt. You have a chance to redeem yourself a little for what you did. Heather needs your help. Soon. You're not the only one that has seen and recognized the amulet she wears."

"Is that why you sent her to me?"

"Yes. So you figured that was me." Rhiannon offered him a smile. "Can't put much past you, can I?"

Cole took a deep breath, banishing the horrid memories to a deeply hidden part of his brain where they would hold for later examination, and he squared his shoulders.

"Does she know?"

"About the amulet? No." Rhiannon shook her head. "Neither is she aware she is a witch. Her mother bound her powers at the same time she gave her the amulet. I think the binding is tied in to it. I don't know what, if anything, will break that bond. Heather was safe while nobody knew where the amulet was. Now, though, they will come after her."

She stood up, and blue lights announced the arrival of her whitelighter-assistant come to take the Elder away. Cole wanted to ask so many questions but failed to come up with a single one, as the memories of the murder of Heather's mother threatened to make themselves known again.

"Oh, and Cole?" Rhiannon accepted the hand Ania offered her. "You better get rid of your subscription to *The Bay Mirror*. You don't need it..." The last word faded out amidst a swirl of sparks. Cole was left alone to contemplate the things she told him while he stared out across the shimmering bright lights of downtown Tampa.

* * * * *

"I knew it!" Mark dropped the phone back on its cradle and let out a yell fit for a rodeo cowboy. Everywhere in the editorial room people looked up from their work, fingers stilling on keyboards. Some smiled at the young reporter's enthusiasm while others seemed annoyed at the interruption of their concentration.

"Found something?" Kit Watson, the photographer asked.

"Oh yeah!" Mark rolled his chair back, grabbed his print-outs and rushed past the photographer to Santano's sanctum.

The editor-in-chief looked up from an article he was reading when Mark knocked on his door. At the look on his young employee's face, he dropped the red pencil and motioned for Mark to come in. "I take it you have something I'll like?"

"Yes... yes, I do." Mark was out of breath from excitement more than from running across the large room. "Remember that woman who was killed in Ybor City, a while back?"

"Uh huh." Santano nodded. "You kept digging at that?"

"Yes sir. And I found something! There have been others. Young women missing, old ladies showing up dead with their IDs in their purses. There's Gillian James, the girl in Ybor City, and the suicide, Jenna Squire."

"That's only two," the editor noted. "Could be a weird coincidence."

"I know," Mark admitted. "That's why I dug a little deeper. I found another case, in Miami, a year ago. And another two in New York in the past five years."

Santano sat forward, resting his hands atop his desk, his eyes twinkling. "It's beginning to sound like a pattern. Did you find any connection, anything they had in common?"

"Yes, I did." Mark grinned with pride and anticipation of revealing his winning card. "Every one of those women had signed with Gitta Models. They have an office right here in Tampa, on West Shore Boulevard. Same building Jenna jumped from. And they have offices in New York and Miami too." He waited with baited breath for his editor's response.

"And *that's* a story," Santano said with a satisfied nod.

"There's more." Mark couldn't keep the excitement out of his voice. "I've had one of the agency's standard contracts checked out. The lawyer said, and I quote: 'If someone signs this, they will have sold their soul.'"

Santano stapled his fingers and thought for a moment. Then he looked up and met Mark's eyes with a grin. "Let's print it."

"Wha-- What?" Mark stammered, shocked at the prospect. "But-- but all I have is suspicions and circumstantial evidence! I mean, it's not an article yet!"

"Sure it is," Santano explained patiently. "It's got everything a good, juicy story needs: beautiful women, mysterious deaths, the glamorous and dangerous world of modeling. Listen," he continued as he caught the flabbergasted look on Mark's face, "we are not the *New York Times*, all right? We are *The Bay Enquirer*. You know the best thing about running a tabloid? We can do things the big respectable boys can't. We'll print what we have, and then we wait and see. Maybe we'll jar them enough to give us the rest of the story. Wouldn't be the first time that happened."

Mark left Santano's office with mixed emotions and set down to write up his final draft of the story. Part of him was thoroughly excited at seeing the story in print, *his* story, the story he broke. But the other part of him dreaded the paper hitting the streets. He didn't have enough. The evidence wasn't enough. And a company like Gitta Models would employ a slew of lawyers eager to rip his throat out and kill his journalistic career before it fully started.

Perhaps, he thought as he started up the word processor, he should get a lawyer of his own. Just in case.

* * * * *

A crackling bolt of white-hot lightning streaked through Rena's office and destroyed the coffeepot on the conference table. Shards of glass and plastic mixed with splatters of hot liquid that scattered about the room. Rena ducked her head just in time to not be sliced by a particular ugly looking shard that she vaguely recognized as the pot's bottom.

"All the hounds of Hell..." A stream of colorful invectives tumbled from the mouth of the other person in the room. Birgit Freda, her demonic boss, was having a temper tantrum. And Rena was catching the brunt of it.

"Are you totally incompetent? Remind me again why I keep you on? If you can't find one particular girl in this sun-scorched city--"

With regret, Rena watched the next blast hit the Monet painting on the wall, bursting it into a thousand splinters that would only be fit to turn into matches. It had taken a lot of money to obtain that picture. But she kept silent; she knew better than to utter a word in her defense. Previous experience had taught her to simply weather the tantrum until it blew over. Or the next lightning strike might hit *her* instead of the furniture. And she figured she really had herself to blame for the storm currently raging in the room. After all, if she had not been so quick to dismiss the girl, she might have had her working in the next room right this moment. At the very least, she should have offered the girl a

modeling career to hold her attention. She'd been pretty enough to make the lie credible.

And who was the person who called Birgit with the news of having found the amulet in the first place? Exactly. She did. Rena sighed. She should have waited until she had the girl securely in her hands.

She ducked beneath the desk as the computer screen burst apart. That was three. Birgit would be done by now. The one good thing she could say about her boss's powers was that they were limited. *Three strikes, and it's safe to come out*, was the standard joke amongst Birgit's inner circle of minions.

"Find her!" Birgit growled, now looking pale and worn beneath the close-cropped platinum of her hair. "Find her, or the next discharge *will* have your name on it." She turned on her heels and stormed out of the office, leaving Rena standing amid the rubble like a survivor in a disaster movie.

She blew out a breath, relieved at having survived another fit of Birgit's temper. Those outbursts got old fast but it was always best to simply weather them and pick up the pieces afterwards. She wasn't too worried about Birgit's threats. They did have the girl's address, after all. It would only be a matter of time before the staff could pick her up.

Maria, her assistant, stuck her head in the door. "Are you--" she began, but the words died on her lips as she goggled saucer-eyed at the destruction within the office.

Rena suppressed a chuckle. The girl was new, only been employed for a few weeks. She had gained the job the girl with the amulet had come asking about.

"I'm fine," she said. "You might want to call an interior decorator for me, though. Seems like I have some remodeling to do."

"Oh... yes... right," Maria stammered, breathless with shock.

When she didn't move, Rena raised an eyebrow. "Something else you wanted, Maria?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Miss Mason, I think you should see the paper." With those words she pushed a folded newspaper at Rena. The bright colors that seemed to jump from the page and the thick black headlines told her it was a tabloid. With a little grimace of distaste at the black ink that would rub off onto her fingers, Rena opened the paper.

* * * * *

"Mr. Turner? Cole, I mean. Can I offer you the first cup of cof-- oh my!"

"Cofomy?" Cole raised an amused eyebrow, but the grin quickly faded when he followed Heather's gaze. She was staring at the copy of the newspaper that was spread out on his desk.

He had not taken Rhiannon's advice to stop his subscription to San Francisco's *Bay Mirror*. He wasn't quite ready to sever the ties so completely yet. But the words in Phoebe's advice column told him she had moved on. No longer was her writing laden with bitterness and cynicism, like it had been six months ago when they were going through a painful divorce. He even suspected she had found a new love. Strangely, the thought didn't hurt half as much as he had imagined it would do. Matter of fact, he found himself wishing her well.

In any case, it wasn't the west coast's *Bay Mirror* that had got Heather's attention so wholly. She was staring at the headlines of *The Bay Enquirer*, the local rag, instead. Cole had learned a long time ago that tabloids were indispensable sources of information regarding magical workings in any city. The incidents that the reputed newspapers deemed too incredible or outlandish to cover often made headlines in the less reputed papers. Most of those incidents were made-up stories, the fantasies of would-be journalists or citizens eager for their fifteen minutes of fame. But sometimes they were real, and magical.

"What's wrong, Heather?" he asked, his voice betraying none of his desire for a break in their daily routine. Instead, he sounded sincerely concerned.

"No-- nothing," she said, giving a brief shake of her head and looking away from the paper. "It's just that... I applied for a job with them, before I found your classified." She pointed at the headline blazing up at them.

"Gitta Models models' mysterious deaths," he read the capitalized headline aloud. A small furrow appeared in his brow. The name sounded familiar. Wasn't Gitta Models the same agency whose contract he'd just been asked to judge?

"You wanted to be a model?" he asked Heather.

"No... no," Heather shook her head. "The temp agency said they needed a secretary, so I went for an interview. I didn't get the job, obviously. They said the position had already been filled. But... it was weird."

"Weird?" Cole's inner excitement raised another few notches.

"Yeah." Calmer now, Heather continued. "The woman I talked to? She's the one that's mentioned in the article. She was very cold and distant at first, but when I was about to leave, she turned like a leaf on a tree. Suddenly she was all smiles and regrets that she couldn't hire me. She gave me the willies."

Rhiannon's voice echoed in Cole's mind, a memory of their last conversation. "... you're not the only one that has seen and recognized the amulet..." Could that be what happened? Heather had a tendency to fidget with the pendant when she was feeling uncomfortable. It was how she had drawn his attention to the trinket around her neck. This Mason woman would need looking into. If she was a demon, Heather was in serious danger.

"... had me fill out a form, just in case they had another job opening," Heather was continuing. It took Cole a moment to tear his concentration away from his thoughts and back to the woman who he was protecting.

His eyes narrowed when her words sank in. "Wait, did you give them an address?"

"Yes. The motel where I'm staying."

"You'll have to leave there right away," Cole decided. He thought quickly. "You can stay at my place. I have a spare guest room."

"What?" The easy camaraderie of days of shared dust and cobwebs dissipated and renewed wariness appeared in Heather's eyes.

"Listen," Cole said. "If that story speaks even half the truth, you could be in danger. You said yourself that this woman gave you 'the willies'. She would know where to find you, if she wanted to."

Heather nodded reluctantly, some of the suspicion again fading at his logic. "Why would she want to?"

"I'm not trying to come on to you," Cole continued urgently, ignoring the question and desperate to make her agree. "I just want to make sure you're safe." He gave her his most disarming smile, knowing he was pushing too hard. "You've already proven yourself indispensable to this business." He gave a vague wave in the direction of the shiny new file cabinet. "And you can't stay at that motel forever, can you? I'm just offering you a safe place, until you can find an apartment of your own. Know what? I'll even ask my own real estate agent to help you look. Okay?"

Heather gave him an intent stare for a long moment. Then her shoulders relaxed and Cole breathed a sigh of relief. She nodded. "Okay. I'll pack tonight."

"No," he said, grabbing the keys to his BMW from the table. "Right now. Come on. I'll drive you."

* * * * *

The first thing Darryl did when he entered the squad room and reached his desk was take off his jacket and loosen his tie. The heat wave was too much for the ancient air conditioning unit in the police department. And leave it to the pencil pushers over at city hall to refuse to make the funds available for a new unit.

With a sigh, silently cursing the weather gods, Darryl dropped in his chair. At least inside the station, out of the sun, it was slightly better than out. Who would have thought it could get so hot in San Francisco this early in the season? Maybe, a horrible thought struck him unexpectedly, it wasn't a natural phenomenon? Darryl shivered despite the heat and made a mental note to ask the Halliwell sisters about the matter -- although he was not certain he wanted to know the answer.

He reached for a file, determined to get some reading done, when his phone rang. He glanced at the clock. A few minutes after eight. Would the mayhem that always accompanied hot weather start this early in the morning?

"Morris," he grunted into the mouthpiece.

"Same here," said a voice on the other end, a hint of humor along its edges.

Darryl frowned, for a moment unsure whether it was a prank call or not. Then it dawned on him. "Uncle Dan! What a surprise. How's life in Tampa?"

"Hot," Daniel Morris replied a continent away.

"Same here." Darryl laughed. "But that's how you like it, Uncle Dan. It's why you and Aunt Phyllis moved to Florida in the first place, remember? How is my favorite aunt, by the way?"

The two men chatted about the weather and family for a few minutes. Then Daniel Morris, Tampa PD, came to the point.

"Darryl, I'd like your opinion on something." He was silent for a beat. "Something weird."

Instantly Darryl's good cheer melted away, like a Hershey's Kiss before the unrelenting sun that beat down on the squad room's roof. Uncle Dan was the most down-to-Earth person he knew; he did not do weird.

"I know you have a reputation for having an interest in strange cases," Dan Morris continued. "Well, I have something that might be right up your alley."

"Shoot." He really didn't need to confirm his reputation, especially with his uncle, but how could he refuse?

"Several unexplainable deaths," Dan continued. "Or rather, the deaths are quite simple to explain. It's the victims that have me stumped. Both are older women, in their seventies. One suicide, one car accident. But that's not what worries me. What *does* worry me..." Here Dan fell silent again for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts. "What worries me, is that DNA testing has them identified as two women of a much younger age. Who both have gone missing. And nobody has reported losing two grandmothers." Another pause. Then, "It's almost as if--"

"As if the missing young women aged before their time," Darryl finished for his uncle. He rubbed his brow, rescheduling his visit to Prescott Street to the top of his priorities list.

"Yes." Dan sounded relieved that he didn't have to spell it out for his nephew. "And then today there's an article in the paper. Well, it's a tabloid, so normally I wouldn't pay much attention to it, except that the journalist seems to have uncovered the link between the two victims. And to several others."

"What's the link?" Darryl was furiously making notes on the pad he kept for just such purpose beside his phone.

"A modeling agency. Gitta Models. They have branches in several other cities."

"San Francisco too?"

"Not that I know of," Dan replied. "But I haven't really had much of a chance to look into it." He sounded vexed that the tabloid reporter knew something the police had so far failed to uncover in their victimology. "I wanted you to take a look at the case notes, if you've got the time."

"For my favorite uncle? Always."

"Thanks. I'll fax you my notes. And I'll fax you a copy of the article too."

"I'll be waiting."

* * * * *

"This has top priority." Rena tapped the photocopied file in the demon's hand with a manicured, blood-red fingernail. She handed out a similar copy to his partner.

No matter how hard they worked on keeping up their human appearance, she thought while watching them, demons never quite managed to blend in. Look at this pair. Both of them were tall, barrel-chested, with black eyes and dressed in dark suits that they didn't seem very comfortable in. In her view, they resembled demon biker bar bouncers who had dressed up for a formal wedding.

The newspaper article in *The Bay Enquirer* had caused quite some turmoil at the Gitta Models' offices on West Shore. Still picking splinters of the Monet's frame out of her bun while she read the article, Rena had thanked whatever deities she could think of that Birgit had just depleted herself, and that Maria had had the good sense not to bring in the paper during her boss's visit.

She decided that the best course of action to avoid further disaster and possibly painful death was to find the journalist responsible for the story. She would find out what he knew, how he had obtained his information, and then she'd hand him over to Birgit.

"What about the girl?" Demon Number Two asked.

"She can wait," Rena said. "We know where she stays, she's not going anywhere. We need to find that journalist, need to know what else he had uncovered. Before Miss Birgit reads the paper. And then she'll want his head on a platter for causing such trouble."

The two demons exchanged a look and a smirk.

"Piece of cake. One measly journalist." Demon Number One gave a dismissive snort. "One of us could do the job, while the other goes after--"

"No!" Rena interrupted. "You'll do as I say."

* * * * *

Although he had been wary of danger, senses extended and fireballs within easy reach, nothing untoward had happened while Heather packed her belongings into a suitcase and some boxes, and loaded them into the trunk of Cole's BMW. The trip from the motel to his seventh floor apartment on Harbor Island had passed as uneventfully. And as Heather cleared away the dinner dishes -- having insisted she cook as a thank-you for his hospitality -- Cole began to wonder if perhaps his eagerness to do some good had led him to jumping to wild conclusions.

But Rhiannon had confirmed that Heather was his charge now. And what better place to keep an eye on her than in his own apartment?

Homely sounds drifted from the kitchen. The noise of plates being stacked, running water, and tinkling cutlery. It made Cole long for those days past, when he lived with Phoebe and her sisters in the mansion in San Francisco. He had not realized how lonely he had become until he had someone to keep him company in his own home again. He should have been used to the loneliness; as a demon it had been all he knew, despite the apparent bonhomie among the elite in the Brotherhood of the Thorn. They had never truly accepted him, the half-breed, either.

Sighing, Cole wondered if that was his curse: never to be fully accepted, always watching from the sidelines, even as he played in the field.

"Cole?" Heather's voice drifted from the kitchen. "Where do you keep the dishwasher detergent?"

Cole's brow furrowed, for a moment confused by the mundaneness of the question after his more philosophical musings. "Uhm... I don't think I have any. I usually eat out," he called back. "We can get some tomorrow."

His gaze fell on the tabloid, which stories had caused Heather to come stay with him. He realized he had not even read the full article about the model agency yet, too concerned as he had been with Heather's safety. Silently admonishing himself for his negligence, Cole reached for the paper and scanned the article.

As he read the words printed on the thin paper, the temperature seemed to drop a few degrees when the cold realization sank in. *This is it*, he told himself. This was evil at its greatest. Every instinct, honed in more than a hundred years of doing evil's work, told him so. Although the journalist skimmed over several details, such as the exact causes of

death, or the fact that the aspiring models had merely disappeared, while old women died with the girls' IDs in their purses, Cole knew. The deaths were probably accidental, he thought, fall-out in the process of garnering innocents for foul purposes in the guise of a modeling contract.

"He's got no clue what sort of people he's dealing with," Cole muttered beneath his breath while reading the byline.

"What? Who?" Heather's voice interrupted. He had completely forgotten her presence, and he blinked up at her.

"Him," he indicated the byline. "Mark DeWitt. He's in grave danger."

"Cole..." Heather hesitated. "You're all worked up about that article. You keep talking about people being in danger. I guess that modeling agency won't like this sort of publicity, but aren't you a little overreacting? It's not exactly a trustworthy newspaper."

"You have no idea what's out there. You've been sheltered from it most of your life. Your mother was a wise woman to give you that amulet and hide you. If I'd found you then..." His voice trailed off when he realized he had already said too much. He gave a shudder that made Heather frown upon him.

"What are you talking about? What amulet?" She was fingering the pendant again and he couldn't help but stare at it. She followed his gaze. "The pendant my mother gave me? Oh my God!" She gasped and her eyes widened. "I think that's what the Mason woman caused to change her behavior. When she saw my necklace!"

She'd just confirmed Cole's worst suspicions, and he made a decision. He pushed back his chair from the dinner table and got to his feet. "I've to go out for a while," he announced.

"What? Now? No! I want you to tell me what is going on! What's so special about this heirloom? What's 'out there'? Why do you keep saying we're all in danger?"

"Later," Cole said. He searched the drawers for a phonebook and started browsing the pages, looking for Mark DeWitt's address. "I have to get to this journalist first. Before they kill him."

"*Kill* him?" Heather gasped. "You have lost your mind! And I'm not staying a moment longer!" She ran to the guestroom, where she began throwing her newly unpacked clothes back into her suitcase.

Cole followed her. "Heather, please. I will tell you everything. I will tell you what

happened, the night your parents died." She stilled at that, as he had known she would.

Turning around, eyes flashing hotly in sharp contrast to the emotionless quality of her voice, she asked, "What did you say? What do you know about that? *Who are you?*"

"I don't have time, right now," Cole said. He knew he was only postponing the inevitable. Heather would have to learn the truth about him. "I won't be long. I promise, I'll tell you everything I know. Just promise me you'll stay here until I get back."

Heather blew out a breath that made the strands of hair on her forehead flutter. "All right," she said after a long pause. "I'll stay that long. But only because I think I deserve an explanation."

"Okay," he agreed. If she left, it would make it so much harder to protect her. And he was quite sure she would leave, after he had finished his tale. Who wouldn't? But perhaps the journalist had some information he could use. Nip this thing in the bud, get Heather out of town and away from whoever was after her and the amulet. He'd be sad to see her go; a tentative friendship had started forming between them, two strangers in a new town. But had he not just realized that his curse was to remain alone and lonely?

Chapter Five

"That was a job well done," Santano remarked with a satisfied smirk while he folded the copy of *The Bay Enquirer* and dropped it on his desk. "Good work, son."

Mark grinned, giddy with the sight of his name on the front page, even if it were the front page of a tabloid newspaper. "Thank you, boss."

"Now, get out of here and celebrate," his editor waved him out of his office, "so I can deal with the fallout."

"Fallout?" Mark's glorious feeling dissipated.

"Legal stuff. Don't worry about it. Your ass is covered. Company policy. Our lawyers will handle it. Comes with the territory, you know. Didn't I tell you to go and celebrate?"

"Uh, yes." Mark left the office, closing the door behind him, for a moment involved in glum thoughts and misgivings about his first major story.

"Congratulations, Mark!"

"Good job."

His co-workers cheered at him from across the room, giving him a thumbs-up and big grins. Although they published a newspaper every seven days, it did not happen every week someone broke a story like the one Mark wrote. Santano had been correct in his evaluation: the story had everything. Beautiful women, mysterious deaths, a glamorous company.

A hard clap on his shoulder made Mark stumble. "Well done, kid," a voice growled in his ear. He turned to see the photographer, Kit Watson, smirk down on him, the eternal scowl for once softened with a glint of humor. "We might turn you into a journalist yet. And you didn't even think it was worth going to Ybor City."

Mark felt a pang of guilt. Technically speaking, Kit had been involved in the story too, at least at first. Without the veteran photographer's insistence that they check out the police-call that set the story rolling, none of it would have become known.

"Uh, yeah... I've been meaning to thank you..." he stammered.

Watson snorted. "When you're around as long as I have been, your instincts get razor sharp. You'll see. You've got the right stuff."

With another smack against his shoulder, the photographer sent Mark on his way. It took him another twenty minutes to make his way across the editorial room from the editor's office to the door, with colleagues and co-workers accosting him, wanting to know how he'd known where to look, or to congratulate him on his first byline.

At last he closed the door behind him and breathed in the cooler night air. Overhead, the sky was unclouded and a few bright stars pierced the glare of the city lights, blinking silently. Feeling quite pleased with himself, Mark stopped along the way to buy himself a bottle of overly expensive red wine. He felt he deserved it in celebration of his success.

At last, he reached the apartment building where he lived. He got out of his car, collected the bottle and locked up the Impala before making his way to his fourth-floor apartment. He fumbled for a moment with the key, his hands full with extra copies of the paper and the wine but finally managed to get inside without dropping anything.

When he turned on the light, he got the fright of his life.

Two big men, dressed in dark suits and with matching eyes that glittered dangerously, were seated side by side on his old sofa.

"Wha-- Who-- How--" Mark stuttered.

They grinned, twin smirks revealing white teeth gleaming in the light of the single overhead lamp.

"Shouldn't have stuck your nose where it don't belong," the guy on the left growled.

"Now our boss wants your head," said the other. He grinned in a way that caused Mark to suspect he wasn't speaking metaphorically, and the journalist slowly began to inch his way back to the door.

"You've got some explaining to do," Left said.

"You better come quietly," Right said.

"Or what?" Mark found his voice again, although it was definitely more high-pitched than he would have liked. "You'll make me?" He turned on his heel and ran for the door.

Something bright and yellow and *hot* seared past him to explode against the door's surface. Flames licked briefly at the plywood, before they extinguished.

"Yes."

Mark wasn't sure which of the two strangers in his living room spoke. They were behind him and he was staring in shock at the door. He realized that perhaps having turned his back wasn't the smartest thing to do, and he slowly pivoted on his toes so as not to startled them in throwing any more ... *fire?* at him.

* * * * *

Cole brought his BMW to a halt next to the sidewalk. He'd found a parking spot behind a light blue Impala that had known better days and maneuvered his car into the slot carefully. He scanned the area, trying to be unobtrusive about it, searching for possible demonic observers. The area wasn't nearly as upscale as Harbor Island, and the street was deserted. A Burger King soda cup chased a Wendy's hamburger wrapper along the pavement, driven by the slight breeze. But that was as evil as it got.

Until he looked up at the building.

"Damn."

Something flashed behind one of the windows on the fourth floor. It wasn't terribly bright -- any regular passerby would have thought it was a television showing a fire report on the evening news -- but to Cole's experienced eyes it could only mean one thing.

They were here.

He quickly considered his options. Running up four flights of stairs would take up precious time. Time that the journalist didn't have, judging by the flicker of demonic fire held in tight control but ready to let loose any second.

No, if there ever was a time he had to use his magical powers, it was now. He was generally reluctant to use them; he didn't like the way they made him feel. They were of demonic origin, and always left him feel slightly nauseous, as if he'd eaten something on the verge of going bad. Secretly, Cole thought it was using those powers that had chased Phoebe from him, that had convinced her he was evil, and sometimes he regretted obtaining them. On the other hand, if he had not, he'd still be stuck in the Wastelands, and Phoebe would have been just as lost to him as she was now. At least in this world, he could make a difference.

Decision made, Cole wasted no time blurring into Mark's apartment. He reappeared in the middle of the room, where the young man, looking both frightened and shell-shocked, was facing off two large demons, one of which was about to throw another searing flame across the room.

Cole couldn't decide who looked more surprised at his sudden appearance: the journalist, or the demons.

"Belthazor?" the demon holding the fire ventured. "I thought you were--"

"Dead. Yeah, I get that a lot," Cole muttered. "You heard right. Belthazor is dead. So is The Source. And so are you." Even as he spoke the last word, a ball of blue fire streaked through the air and hit the demon in the chest. Flames shot up, and he screamed in pain and anger.

His colleague growled and shifted into his demonic visage. He cast a last look at the young man behind Cole, then began to shimmer. Even as the fireball left Cole's hand, he knew he was too late, and the ball obliterated a curtain in a brief but hot inferno.

Cole turned around. "So, you were worried about a friend, isn't that what you told me?"

Mark goggled at him, scared and shocked. One arm was raised, poised to strike, a wine bottle in his hand.

Cole lifted an eyebrow. "You know, if you break that bottle over my head," he grinned, "that would be a terrible waste of a perfectly fine Cabernet."

"Wha-- How--"

"Not here," Cole interrupted. "They will come back, with reinforcements. There's only so much I can do to keep them at bay. Let's go, and I'll explain everything. Then you can tell me all you know about Gitta Models and their dirty business."

It was easier than he had expected. Apparently the abduction attempt combined with the displays of magical power had Mark shocked into submission, and he allowed Cole to take him down the stairs and to his car.

* * * * *

"Who were those guys?" Mark demanded as he followed Cole out of the elevator. They had reached the apartment on Harbor Island without incident.

"Demonic hit squad," Cole replied absently while digging for his keys. His mind was on the explanation he had promised Heather and he was trying to figure out how to tell her that he was the one who murdered her parents.

Mark snorted and followed Cole inside. "When you say 'demonic', that's a metaphor, right?"

"No, it's not. Listen," Cole turned around, "I'll explain everything, but I only want to do it once. It's going to be difficult enough as it is."

He realized that the apartment was dark, and for a moment he feared that Heather had left after all, despite her promise to stay until he returned. If she had, he didn't know how to find her again, let alone how to protect her. But as his eyes adjusted to the gloom he noticed her standing at the window, silhouetted against the city lights across the bay.

"Heather?" He reached for the light switch and flooded the room with a warm glow that made the mahogany floor shimmer.

She turned around, and met Mark's gaze. "Who's this?" they asked in unison, then looked

startled.

Cole chuckled. "Heather, this is Mark. The reporter. Mark, this is Heather Woodard, my -- secretary."

If Mark noticed the slight hesitation, he didn't show it. "Secretary?" he echoed.

"Yes," Cole answered while he walked to the kitchen and turned on the coffee machine. He realized he was stalling but couldn't help himself. And perhaps a cup of coffee would help ease the palpable tension that would only increase once he began to tell his story.

"What happened to you?" Heather asked, looking at Mark. Cole followed her eyes and for the first time realized what a close call the reporter had had. His clothes bore scorch marks and his hair appeared singed at one side.

"Someone tried to--" Mark turned to Cole. "What, *exactly*, did they try to do to me?"

"Burn you to cinders, looked like to me," Cole replied. He poured coffee into three mugs and carried them back to the dining table. He waved at Heather and Mark to seat themselves.

"Am I going to get my explanation now?" Heather said.

"And mine?" Mark echoed.

"Yes." And Cole started to tell a tale of magic and evil demons.

* * * * *

"So, what you're saying," Mark concluded twenty minutes later, "is that those people in my home were demons, and that Gitta Models is some sort of front for demonic activity?"

It sounded ridiculous. Mark realized he was still holding his coffee cup, a few cold swallows left, clamping it so tight his knuckles were white. He forced himself to relax his fingers. The story this guy, Cole Turner, told was too outrageous to be true. If he had not worked for a tabloid that dabbled in the realm of the impossible, and if the smell of burnt hair from his right temple wasn't wafting into his nose, he would have walked out the door nineteen and a half minutes ago.

But if Cole was insane, at least he managed to make sense of the evening's insanity.

"Yes."

"And they want my necklace," Heather picked up the recapitulation, "because it gives them incredible power?" She sounded as dubious as Mark felt. More so, even. But he had seen things that evening, impossible things. And obviously Heather had no first hand experience with those creatures that could throw fire with their bare hands.

"Yes. When combined with the other half."

"And you are some sort of... of guardian angel who will protect me?"

"Well, no." Cole tiredly rubbed the bridge of his nose, and Mark noted that his voice sounded a little hoarse. "Not exactly. I'm not an angel. But I do have a job to protect you. That's why Rhiannon put you in my way."

"Who is Rhiannon?" Mark wanted to know.

"She's one of the good guys," Cole explained. "An Elder. Sort of like an angel, I suppose."

"Oh."

"I don't believe you," Heather said coolly. "It's an intriguing story but I think you are making it all up. You should consider a career as a fiction writer. And you haven't told me about my parents yet."

Mark caught the slight flinch Cole gave, almost as if Heather brought something up he would rather have forgotten. Interested, the journalist leaned forward. After the incident at his house, he was a little more inclined to give Cole the benefit of the doubt, but it appeared that twenty minutes of exposition merely scratched the surface of what was going on.

"What about her parents?"

* * * * *

Cole sighed inwardly and wished he had gotten himself a glass of water along with the coffee that was long since gone. Talking made him thirsty. And he could tell that what he said to them didn't go down well. They were skeptical and, in Heather's case, hostile.

He supposed he couldn't blame them. And he knew the hostility and disbelief would grow worse. But he had no choice. She needed to know the truth.

"Before I became," Cole hesitated, "who I am today, I was someone else."

"Oh yes, that really helps in the credibility department," Mark muttered.

Heather gave him a withering glare. "Let him speak."

"I was a half demon. My father was human, my mother was not. She abducted me to the underworld when I was three." Heavens, how was he going to tell them everything, and make them understand? His life sounded like a soap opera, even to himself. "I've done terrible things. Unspeakable things. Until I met Phoebe. She was a witch, like her sisters. I was hired to kill them, but instead I fell in love with her."

Heather harrumphed. "That's all very touching, but what has that got to do with my parents?"

"I'm getting there," Cole said, a little annoyed with her impatience. "Please, just hear me out." The only way he could tell her the whole story was if he could make her see he was a different man now.

"To cut a long story short, a lot of things happened, and my demon half got vanquished. Things didn't work out between Phoebe and me and I left and came here." He turned toward Heather, and took a deep breath. "Megan, your mother, was a witch too. Like Phoebe, she came from a long line of witches."

"When you say 'witch'..." Mark said.

Cole directed his gaze in the young man's direction. "No, I'm not speaking metaphorically, but neither is that cliché about broomsticks and the full moon true. A witch is someone who can tap into the magical energy that's around us, who knows about herbs and potions and spells. All right?"

"Okay." Mark nodded. "Please, continue."

"That jewel you wear," Cole told Heather, "has been in your family for many generations. As I said, it is one half of a powerful amulet. The other half was given into custody in another witch family. I don't know what happened, but fifteen years ago, a demoness named Birgit found that other half. I was told to get your part, and make the amulet complete. Your mother had the foresight. She knew I was coming. That's why she gave you the pendant to wear, and sent you to stay with the neighbors that night. Heather..."

He paused, taking another deep breath and suppressing the urge to close his eyes before taking the plunge. "The house fire wasn't an accident. *I* did that. *After* I killed your parents."

The silence was as deafening as any he'd ever heard. Soft breathing from his two listeners and a distant police siren drifting in from the Nuccio Parkway was all that broke it. It lasted several minutes. Minutes during which Cole grew more and more uncomfortable beneath Heather's piercing stare.

"So. *You* murdered my parents. Made me an orphan." Her voice was calm. Far too calm, Cole thought, for someone who had just heard that her parents' death wasn't an accident. Heard it from the murderer in question, no less. "And now you found me. And the amulet. What are you going to do next? Kill me too?"

"No!" Cole exclaimed. "I told you, I'm not that person anymore. I stopped working for evil when I met Phoebe. I'm sorry about what I did, but I can't change it. I can only make sure that the same thing doesn't happen to you."

"Right." Tears burned in Heather's eyes. "I'm sorry, but I find that really hard to believe." She pushed back her chair and grabbed her jacket.

"Wait! Don't go," Cole pleaded. "It's not safe out there."

"And in here is?" The disgust in her voice tore at his heart. "You just told me you killed my parents. I need time to think. I can't do that with you around." She ran out of the door, slamming it behind her.

Cole made to follow her, but a hand on his arm stopped him. A little confounded he looked down to find Mark's fingers clamped on his wrist. He had forgotten about the reporter's presence. "Let her go," Mark said quietly. "Give her some time."

For long moments, Cole looked at the door, longing to follow Heather but knowing that the younger man was right. At last, he sighed, and the tension left him. He plopped back down on the table.

"When you say Birgit," Mark asked, "are you talking about Birgit Freda?"

"Uh... Yes. How did you know?"

"She's the CEO for Gitta Models."

* * * * *

The limousine was cruising through the quiet streets of the Harbor Island district of Tampa. Birgit rested her head against the leather seat in the back. Her rushed trip back to Tampa had paid off in one respect: she'd signed on a new client, another dowager who was desperate to hold on to her looks and willing to pay handsomely for it.

At least the evening wasn't a total loss. Of course, she continued the conversation in her head, it should have been better. A *lot* better. With the newspaper report that threatened to expose her and Rena losing track of the girl... But perhaps a message would be waiting at the hotel, she thought hopefully. A message with the wonderful news that the girl was in Rena's care, along with the amulet. Once she possessed both halves, no measly journalist could hurt her any longer.

The car suddenly squealed to a stop and the force caused Birgit to slide forward off the leather seat. She narrowly avoided hitting the Plexiglas that divided the driver's compartment from the backseat. What the hell? Anger surged through her and it took an effort not to use her power and call lightning on the driver.

The Plexiglas slid down. "I'm sorry, Ms. Freda," the man said, his voice shaken. "She stepped in front of the car without warning." He pointed outside. In the pool of light thrown by a streetlamp, Birgit could make out a crumpled shape on the concrete in front of the limousine.

She realized they had hit someone. Just what she needed! Even angrier, though not at the driver but at the dumb bitch who couldn't watch where she was going, Birgit threw open her door and got out. She took a deep breath, fully intending to give the woman in front of the car a piece of her mind, when she caught a good look at her.

Not quite a woman, still almost a girl. She couldn't be much older than twenty. And she was gorgeous. Her complexion was flawless except for a small bruise forming on her forehead. Her eyes were wide, and a bit shocked, no doubt from the collision with the car. Birgit couldn't decide if they were green or brown. And although it was difficult to see through the jeans and sweater she wore, her figure appeared curved where it was supposed to curve.

This girl was perfect! She didn't wear any make-up – and she didn't need it. Yet, with a few carefully applied lines and colors, she would be even more breathtaking. And she was alive. Wonderfully alive, nearly vibrating with the power of youth that the old sows so desperately sought.

Birgit knew she had to tread carefully if she wanted to gain this girl for her purposes. She schooled her face into a concerned expression. When she truly wanted, Birgit could appear quite compassionate. "Are you all right, dear?" she asked gently while she knelt beside the girl. "Come, sit in the car and we'll take you to a hospital." Birgit reached out and helped her to her feet.

"Oh no, that's not necessary, I am fine," the young woman protested. She brushed off her knees and hands. "It was my fault, I should have looked."

No argument there, Birgit thought. "What's your name? I'm Birgit." She stuck out her hand.

"Heather," the girl replied. "Heather Woodard."

Birgit blinked, for a moment certain that she was hearing things. After all, had her mind not been focused on the missing girl moments ago? Then she realized there was nothing wrong with her ears, and it took all her self-control not to burst out in delighted laughter. Today was turning out to be quiet a grand day after all, so it seemed.

"Well, Heather, why don't you get into the car anyway, and we can drop you off wherever you have to go. I do feel a bit guilty about this, I was distracting my driver." Not quite true, but she couldn't let this girl out of her sight.

Heather hesitated. "I don't really have anywhere to go," she sighed. "I was just wandering."

The answer surprised Birgit. "Wandering? Do you live around here? Perhaps we can drop you off at your home?"

"Oh, no, I don't live here." The shock appeared to be wearing off a little and Heather sounded more controlled. "I was... staying with someone but... Oh, I shouldn't be bothering you with my problems."

"Nonsense," Birgit scoffed. "You're not bothering me the slightest. My working day is done, and I have time. You'd be surprised how relieving it can be to talk about your woes to a stranger. And don't worry, I'm very good at keeping people's confidences." She paused for a beat. "Why don't you return to my hotel suite with me for a bit. You look like you could use a drink. And then you can tell me what's disturbing you so much that you step in front of cars without watching." She gave the girl an encouraging smile and held her breath. The problem with the amulet was that it protected its wearer to a fault. It couldn't be taken with force. It couldn't be taken in stealth. It had to be given, so she needed to gain Heather's trust to obtain the amulet.

"Well, all right," Heather agreed a little hesitantly. "If you're sure it's not a problem. I don't really want to go back to my host's place right now."

* * * * *

Cole stretched, listening to the vertebrae in his back pop, and looked at the clock. Several hours had passed since Heather stormed out after he revealed he killed her parents, and it was far past midnight. Although he had reluctantly agreed with Mark that Heather needed a little time to herself to work through the news, he nevertheless couldn't stop worrying. She was placed in his care, after all, and he couldn't afford to botch his first none-Halliwell related attempt at doing good. The more minutes ticked away, the stronger his suspicion grew that something was wrong.

He and Mark had spent the remainder of the evening exchanging information and putting a lengthy file together on Gitta Models, Inc. Mark was a wonder on the computer, and Cole's printer had ran out of ink in the process.

"It's getting late," Mark noted. A note of worry crept into his voice also.

"Something must be wrong," Cole agreed. "Or Heather would have returned by now. Wouldn't she?"

"Well..." Mark paused. "It was quite something you told her."

"Why are you still here?" Cole asked, wondering. Not many people would willingly stay in the company of a self-professed killer.

Mark shrugged. "I'm a curious creature. I want to know more about this demon stuff. Plus, I've seen you in action. You saved my life. So I guess I decided to give you a chance to prove you tell the truth, that you have changed."

"Right." Cole nodded. "I better see if Rhiannon can help. If Heather decided to run, we'll never find her again."

He thought for a moment. How did one go about summoning an Elder? She had always come to him of her own accord, never when he felt he needed her. At least back in Wisconsin, he'd been able to use Ania to forward his threat about returning to San Francisco.

Ania! That was it. At least he knew how one summoned a whitelighter. He opened his mouth and looked up at the ceiling expectantly. "Ania!"

Mark stared at him curiously. "Is that the magical version of long distance?"

Cole ignored him and repeated his cry. "Ania!"

Mark sprung up from his seat when blue lights began to twirl in the corner of the room. His jaw dropped when the young whitelighter appeared. "Wow..."

Ania looked harried, Cole thought. But then, she always had an air of worry about her. "I need to speak to Rhiannon," he said. "Heather ran off, and I don't know how to find her."

Ania began shaking her head. "Elder Rhiannon cannot come right now. It's not safe. The Titans have been released and--"

"Titans?" Cole echoed. "I thought they were banished eons ago."

"They were," Ania confirmed. "But someone released them. They've gone after the Elders in revenge. Many have died already."

"Anything I can do?"

Ania shook her head again. "No. The Cha--" She stopped mid-word and looked flustered. "Others are handling it."

"The Charmed Ones, you mean," Cole finished for her. Nobody else would be powerful enough. "Don't worry, you can say it. I can handle it."

Ania cocked her head, as if listening to an unheard call. "You've got to hurry," she rushed the words out. "There isn't much time. The amulet is nearly in the hands of the demoness. Sorry, I've to go." She disappeared in another flurry of lights.

"Wow..." Mark repeated. "That was..."

"Yes," Cole interrupted, impatiently. "It was. Didn't you hear what she said?"

"About Titans? Weren't they--"

"Not our concern. The other thing. Heather's in danger. Birgit must have found her."

"That would be bad," Mark agreed. "But we still don't know how to find--Wait a second!"

Turn the computer back on."

"How's that going to help us?" Cole wondered.

"That Freda woman always stays at the poshest hotels. If she's in town, all I need to do is hack into the guest registration systems and we'll find her."

"Oh."

Mark worked his Earthly magic with the computer while Cole kept shifting his gaze from the clock on the wall, which ticked the seconds away at frightening speed, to the computer screen where Mark scrolled through long lists of names.

"Bingo! There!" He pointed at the screen. A single name was highlighted. "She's staying at the Wyndham."

"That's right here on Harbor Island," Cole said in surprise.

Mark grabbed his jacket. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

* * * * *

A glass of water and a few sips of something stronger later, Heather began to feel better. So much had happened today that it took her brain a while to catch up, especially after almost getting herself killed in a car accident. But now that she was starting to think clearly again, Heather questioned the wisdom of going with the stranger. The woman was giving her looks that made her feel like she was being appraised for an auction. It wasn't a pleasant feeling.

The woman was obviously rich. Who else would be able to afford a luxury suite like the one she currently occupied? What had she said her name was?

Suddenly, Heather's heart skipped several beats. It couldn't be -- could it? But the coincidence was too great to be dismissed out of hand. How many women were rich and named Birgit at the same time?

Certain now that coming here was a mistake, Heather began to search for an inconspicuous way out. But she was on the twelfth floor of the hotel, with a long drop down from the balcony into the Tampa harbor, and the only exit was the door -- which Birgit was currently leaning against, a calculating glint in her eyes. Almost instinctively,

Heather's hand traveled up to curl around the amulet.

"That's a pretty trinket you have there," Birgit said, attempting to sound off-handed but Heather could hear the barely concealed greed in her voice. "Would you mind selling it?"

"Yes, I would," Heather squeaked, wishing she hadn't drunk so much water. "It's been in my family for a long time."

"I'd give you a fair price."

"It is not for sale." Heather got up. "It's getting late, I really should go. My friend will be wondering what happened to me."

"You're not leaving," Birgit stated, giving up any pretense of being a graceful hostess. "Not until you give me the amulet."

"I'm not giving you anything! And Cole said you can't take it from me by force."

Heather stumbled back several steps in fear when Birgit began to change into something frightful. The woman's eyes turned golden and were flashing angrily, her hair grew longer and what a moment ago had been perfectly manicured hands turned into sharp tiger claws. "Can't, eh?" Birgit bared long fangs with an angry growl and sprang for Heather.

In what she knew was a futile attempt to defend herself, Heather threw up her hands. The amulet glowed hot at her throat, a flash of light filled the room, so bright it momentarily blinded her. Birgit screamed and Heather ducked. But the attack never came.

When she dared open her eyes again, she was shocked to see Birgit crumpled on top of a broken cabinet. As she looked the demoness groggily shook her head and climbed back to her feet.

"Witch!" she snarled. She pointed with her left hand, and lightning forked through the hotel suite, heading straight for Heather. Again, the amulet glowed, forming a shimmering force field that enfolded Heather and fended off the lightning.

More scared than she had ever been in her life, Heather looked for the door, but Birgit was still between her and the way out. "I *will* get that amulet," the demoness snarled. "I worked too long and too hard for it."

Heather didn't know what to reply. She found herself thrust in a world she didn't

understand. All she knew was that she couldn't give the amulet to this -- this *thing*. Her mother had died for it, and she wouldn't give it up.

"Heather!" someone called suddenly from her left.

Heather yelped and waved in the general direction of the voice. Much to her astonishment, she next caught sight of Mark DeWitt sailing through the air, landing on the king-sized bed with such force that the down pillow tore and white feathers flew up in a cloud of fluff.

* * * * *

Cole was as shocked as Heather when she propelled Mark across the room with a simple gesture. So, she had inherited witch powers from her mother. The threat to the amulet must have broken the binding the mother had placed on her daughter all those years ago. A good thing the girl possessed telekinesis, Cole vaguely mused, and not the kind of power that Piper Halliwell had. Or Mark's venture into the world of magic would have come to an abrupt and painful end.

"It's okay," he told her in what he hoped was a soothing voice.

Apparently, it wasn't, because as soon as he spoke Heather whirled in his direction and even before he could see recognition wash over her face, he felt the impact of her power. A good thing he'd been prepared, he thought while staggering back several steps. Or he would have ended up as a crumpled body against the far wall. But his own strength allowed him to withstand most of the impact.

"Keep your hands down," he urged Heather. "It'll be all right. We're here to help."

"Belthazor!" Birgit hissed. "I thought you died at the hands of your witch lover."

Cole rolled his eyes. "You heard wrong," he grumbled. He flung a fireball at Birgit, and missed her by inches when she ducked behind the rubble of what might have been a closet.

Lightning shot across the room, and Cole narrowly jumped out of its way. He could feel the crackle of energy as it singed his hair. "Heather, get down!" he barked. The girl obeyed instantly, her eyes wide and frightened.

"You're not getting your filthy hands on that amulet, you traitor." Birgit turned to

Heather. "Girl, you have no idea who you're in league with. Do you really want him to have the amulet? Don't you know who he is? He's the monster that killed your parents! He tried to take the amulet from your mother. You can't trust him!"

"Oh, and I can trust you?" Heather laughed bitterly. She'd crawled behind the large bed. "I already know what Cole did. And he's not trying to take anything away from me. He's protecting me from monsters like you!"

While Heather distracted Birgit, Cole crept into a position where he had a clear field of fire. He formed another fireball and hurled it at the tiger-demon. It hit her squarely and instantly yellow flames engulfed her. She shrieked, an unworldly cry that sent shivers down Cole's spine, although he'd heard the demonic deadcry many a time.

Then the fire winked out, and nothing was left of Birgit except a few wisps of black smoke.

* * * * *

Fire alarms started to blare in Tampa, Miami, New York, Tokyo, Paris and San Francisco as the offices of Gitta Models went up in searing flames. And despite thoroughly combing the rubble, none of the firefighters in any of those cities was ever able to determine the cause of the fire. Except for Darryl and Daniel Morris, nobody even realized that a multinational company making millions selling the beauty of youth went up in smoke in a single night -- and Darryl made sure his uncle would not dig too deep to find the truth; he had learned a long time ago that knowing too much could be a dangerous thing.

Around the world, many young women, every single one of them remarkably beautiful, felt a painful stab, as if something that had gotten hold of them suddenly let go. Once the pain passed, relief flooded them and it was as if a burden was lifted from their shoulders. The world had never looked prettier, they thought.

On Prescott Street in San Francisco, Phoebe Halliwell woke with a gasp and the discomfiting sensation that she had just escaped from dreadful danger. She could, however, not recall if she had dreamed or experienced a premonition before waking and without that knowledge, she put the strange feeling down to the stress of worrying over the escaped Titans.

Epilogue

Mark hurried up the stairs of the office building on Franklin Street. He skipped every other step in his eagerness to reach the law office on the fifth floor. His haste was partly fueled by his desire to tell Cole about his latest findings and to hear if he was right this time, that the story he worked on involved the strange world of magic. Ever since that night in the top-floor suite at the Wyndham, two weeks ago, the young journalist had developed a keen interest in the hidden realm Cole knew so well. He no longer cared that he was earning a living writing for one of the city's most disreputable tabloids. After all, how often does one get the chance to tell the truth about matters so insane nobody will believe the story for a second -- and not get dragged off in a straitjacket? Thus, he had visited Cole's office repeatedly, for background information or to check if one of his leads would take him once more down the path of magic. So far, nothing had panned out.

Truth be told, in most of those cases he had known the answer before he went to see Cole. But they formed the perfect excuse to visit the firm and say hello to Heather, something he thoroughly enjoyed.

Today, though, he was certain he was on to something. The story simply made no logical sense -- and that meant something illogical was involved. Something like magic. Plus, he had decided that today would be the day: today he would ask her out. And that was the other reason why Mark did not have the patience to wait for the elevator but ran up the flights of stairs until he was gasping for air.

As he approached the office, he frowned. He tried to breathe shallowly so his own gasps weren't drowning out the worrisome noises that drifted through the door. A cry, then the sound of crockery breaking. Mark ran the last few paces and threw open the door. He had but a second to take in the scene before him -- Cole standing in his shirt sleeves in one corner, shards of porcelain near his feet; Heather in the opposite corner, her face flushed and strands of hair having escaped her neat ponytail -- when something blue came hissing straight at him.

Mark ducked; but he was too late. The ping-pong-sized ball hit his left shoulder and flared in a burst of pain.

"Ow!" he cried out. His nose wrinkled at the stink of burned cloth. He peered at his shoulder. There was a neat, round hole the size of a silver dollar in his shirt. The skin he could see through the hole was an angry red. "Ow," he said again. "What the hell are you two doing?"

"Target practice," Cole said. "I'm teaching Heather how to deflect tiny fireballs." He was struggling to suppress a grin and Mark scowled at him.

"And I look like a bull's-eye?"

"Oh no, Mark, not at all!" Heather had recovered from her initial shock and was rushing to his side, full of apologies and blushing a deep red. "I am so sorry! I did not mean to hit you. It's just..." She looked at the ground shamefacedly.

"She doesn't have much control over her power yet," Cole finished her sentence. "Don't worry, it'll come in time. You did not learn to ride a bicycle on the first try, did you?"

"I guess not," Heather mumbled. To Mark she added, "I'm really sorry. Come, sit, and I'll get some lotion to put on that."

A few minutes later, she had pushed the ruined shirt down his arm, baring his shoulder, and was gently rubbing it with some menthol-scented ointment. She was standing close enough that he could smell her hair -- it scented of herbal shampoo -- and her fingers were cool on his skin. Mark closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying the feel of her touch, and decided that perhaps getting a little scorched wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Cole interrupted his daydreaming. "So, what did you want me to look at today?"

"Oh, yes." Mark reached one-handed for his notebook and clumsily flipped it open. "Something near Temple Terrace," he said, and talked for several minutes about his findings. "This is the real thing, isn't it?" he asked when he was finished.

Cole's face told him the answer before the other man spoke. "Yes. Sounds like the work of a darklighter."

"What's a darklighter?" Mark wondered if there would ever be an end to the many kinds of evil beings Cole seemed to know.

Cole explained quickly, then added, "I better go and show him it's a bad idea to mess around in Tampa."

"I?" Heather said. She put the lid back on the pot of salve and Mark sighed, pulling up his shirtsleeve. "Don't you mean, we?"

Cole blinked, a little taken aback. "Uhm..."

"That's why you've been teaching how to use my powers, isn't it?" Heather continued. "To use them against those creatures? Besides," a rueful smile lit up her face and Mark felt his heart flutter, "I'd much rather practice on those nasty beings than on your coffee

mugs or poor Mark here."

Cole contemplated for a moment. "Okay," he said at last. "But only when I've determined it is safe to reveal you as a witch. Understand?"

"All right, boss," Heather agreed happily. She grabbed her purse and skipped out of the door. Mark was about to follow when Cole held him back.

"You should ask her," he said with a knowing grin. "Can't have you walking in here all the time, distracting her with excuses. Don't worry, she'll say yes."

And with those words, he disappeared through the door. With a laugh and a light heart, Mark followed.

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