

FUTURE PERFECT

A Charmed Fanfiction by AmandaK

PROLOGUE

Cole rested a hand on top of the cool stone of the railing. Behind him, blackened curtains fluttered lazily in a soft breeze coming in from the bay. He gazed out across the twinkling lights of San Francisco but didn't notice them. Nor did he see the brilliant orange sunrise when morning finally came. His face was grim, his teeth clenched in anger. Beneath the anger, though, his blue eyes were dark with despair.

He was still alive.

Cole threw his head back and roared into the purple sky, giving voice to his anguish.

In the distance, a ship's horn echoed mournfully through the air. It was as if the gods answered Cole's pain.

When he lost the last of his air and needed to gulp in a deep breath, Cole stiffened his back and headed inside. Much as it chafed to admit, the avatars had been right all along. He had nowhere else to go, nowhere to turn to. He had tried so hard to make a place for himself in the world of good, only to get the door slammed in his face time and again. Phoebe would never again be his. He realized that now. She hated him so much that she wasn't even willing to end his misery and vanquish him. It hurt that she was so fiercely opposed to him. In the past, it was always Phoebe who believed in him, who found it within herself to forgive him and offer him a second chance. But no longer. She was so convinced he was evil that she pushed him relentlessly to prove her right. And he had done so yesterday. No matter his reasons, when he helped the darklighter attack the sisters, he committed an act of evil.

In a way, it was a relief, Cole decided while he carefully stepped around the charred remains of the dinner table. The road to Phoebe's heart, the bridge into the trust of the Charmed Ones, was forever closed to him. All hope was gone. No longer would he need to try and prove himself. No longer would he have to struggle with his powers, when they urged him to strike out in anger or fear. A burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

Then why did his shoulders still slump and why was it so hard to drag one foot in front of the other?

A soft 'ding' announced the elevator's arrival. The doors swished open with a whisper and Cole stepped into the carriage without looking back at the burned ruins of his apartment, and of his life as a human. He chuckled softly. "Going down, Turner," he murmured as he pushed the button for the ground floor. "All the way down."

As soon as the carriage set itself in motion, he disappeared in a brief, red glow, leaving an empty elevator to arrive in the lobby of the apartment building.

CHAPTER 1

Paige stuck her fingers in the jar and gathered some of the dry, crumbly leaves between her thumb and forefinger. "I am telling you, Piper, something is wrong. Very wrong."

She dropped the herb into the bubbling cauldron. The potion burped and let out a thick, yellow cloud. "Ha!" Paige nodded in satisfaction. "A pinch of broomrape, that's the missing ingredient." She leaned sideways to grab a pencil and scribbled something onto a sheet of paper.

"And what would be wrong, Paige?" Piper sat on a kitchen chair, watching her sister invent new concoctions on the fly. "Your potion-making skills are improving every week. Phoebe is happily dating Kenneth, the very non-magical accountant. Not a single demon has attacked us for a while. The only one that might be upset is the clockmaker. It's been ages since we needed clock repairs." Piper's brow bunched as she gazed down at her stomach. "The only thing wrong is this lazy baby that refuses to come out!" Her voice raised on the last word.

Paige lifted her eyes from the notepad. She chuckled. "Oh, honey." She rounded the cooking island and rested a hand on Piper's belly. "Don't mind your Mommy, Melinda. She's just impatient."

"Damn right I'm impatient," Piper snapped. "Nine months is plenty long enough for a baby to grow. And I'm sick and tired of looking like--like a teakettle with legs!"

Paige giggled. "Do you whistle?"

Piper growled and Paige backed away.

"Okay, okay. Don't get all heated up." Paige giggled again before her expression turned grave. "I'm serious, Piper. Don't you think it strange that for years demons have attacked you --us-- at least once a week, and suddenly nothing's happened for months? How long

has it been? The last attack doesn't even really count. That was Cole trying to get us to kill him. And that was nearly six months ago!"

"I'll admit it is strange. But I won't look a gift horse in the mouth. I'm glad things have quieted down somewhat. Perhaps we scared the life out of the underworld. We did vanquish their boss, after all. Twice, I might add. Or maybe the demons are busy elsewhere. Whatever the reason, I'm grateful for the peace and quiet. At least it's given me the chance to pretend I'm having a normal pregnancy."

Paige tested the cauldron's content to see if it had cooled enough so she could pour it into the tiny glass vials that were standing in a row at the edge of the island. "I'm not saying it isn't nice. I just hope it's not the calm before the storm."

The doorbell rang, the sound shrill in the quiet manor. Paige and Piper exchanged a glance.

"Uh oh," Piper muttered. "I hope you didn't jinx it."

Paige started for the door when Piper waved her away. "I can still answer the door, you know," she said. "You clean away this mess, I'll go see who it is."

She waddled from the kitchen across the hallway to the front door. "Darryl?"

"Piper. I'm afraid I have some bad news. There's been an accident."

oOo

Cole pivoted on his heels so abruptly that the edge of his long black mantle hit his shins when the cloth settled back around his frame. Torches on the walls flickered with the sudden gust of air. His blue eyes flashed angrily as they came to rest on the bulky frame of the demon in his chamber.

"No."

"I'm just saying, Sir, that with the Charmed Ones dead--"

"What part of 'no' did you not understand?!" Cole bellowed. A blue sphere of liquid fire appeared in his hand and hovered an inch above his palm. "If all you have to offer is more rigamarole about going after the Charmed Ones, Refan, maybe it's time I find myself another clerk."

Tiny beads of moisture broke out on Refan's shiny, bald pate and he took another step back. "Mr. Turner, Sir--"

"The Charmed Ones are off limits, you hear? I will not have them mentioned again! We leave them be, and they will leave us be. Anyone that so much as pulls a hair from their heads will answer to me. And I will show no mercy, am I clear?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Turner, I understand. Your wish is our command." Refan bowed his head.

Cole took a deep breath to calm himself. Damned demons. All they could think about was killing the Charmed Ones. Didn't they understand that the three witches were far too smart and strong for their sorry powers to take on? And why go up against such a force when there was a world of possibilities waiting out there? A world of wicked opportunities for those daring enough to grab them? A world of accidents looking for a place to happen? All they needed to do was be in the right place at the right time. That's what he kept telling his minions. That this tactic also kept Phoebe safe from harm and heartache was an added bonus, which Cole secretly cherished but never mentioned.

He gestured for Refan to continue. "Good. Now that that's settled, tell me what our position is regarding the GenEx Corporation. Did Rork succeed with the investment banker in Hong Kong, whasisname?"

Refan swallowed. "Mr. Lu. And yes, Rork persuaded him to side with us."

The demon consultant droned on about the latest dispatches coming in from all corners of the globe. Since Cole took over, the underworld had been consolidating its power in the world of man, using the proven Brotherhood tactic of taking over important businesses and multinational corporations. Cole's days were filled with board meetings and decisions and status reports. It wasn't much different from his days as a lawyer. Except nowadays he was in charge of the underworld, which made him the most powerful being on earth.

Voices outside the chamber's entrance drew his attention and he tuned out Refan's litany to concentrate on the muted conversation. He recognized the voices as those of the guards that were stationed at the entrance to his chambers. The guards weren't there for his protection --he was too powerful for anyone to be much of a threat to his dominion-- but to keep the rabble of demons away that would otherwise occupy his time with their petty squabbles.

"Have you heard?" said the first guard.

"Yeah. Pretty funny, isn't it?" The second guard chortled. "For all her power to see the future, she never saw it coming. Has anyone told Mr. Turner yet?"

Cole's brow furrowed. He motioned for Refan to hold his tongue and strode in three quick steps to the entrance.

"Who should tell me what?" he demanded. "And why hasn't anybody done so yet?"

The guards jumped and exchanged a startled look.

"Well, see, Sir, it's like this," stammered the first one.

"We've only just heard ourselves," added the other.

"It's a major blow for the other side," continued the first guard, a little bolder.

"A fortunate accident and a glorious day for us," added the second.

Cole's head swiveled from one guard to the other and back as if he were watching a tennis match. "Get out with it," he growled. "You're making me dizzy."

"Sorry, Mr. Turner," mumbled the first. "It's the Power of Three. It's been broken. The middle witch is dead."

CHAPTER 2

"Who!?" Cole thundered. His voice echoed through the halls and tunnels of the underworld, leaving a stunned silence in its wake. "Who did this? Who dared go against my orders?"

"N-n-no one, Sir," stuttered the first guard.

Blue light flashed through the tunnel. It enveloped the guard and he shrieked as the fire consumed him.

Cole turned to the second guard. "I asked a question. Who is responsible?" His voice had taken on a dead calm quality that left the guard, a big, muscled demon, quaking in his boots.

"Gry s-spoke the truth," he said. "It was an accident. A bus--"

"A bus!?" Cole exploded again, losing his composure. "Are you trying to tell me that the San Francisco Muni is responsible for the death of a Charmed witch and the destruction of the Power of Three?"

"Y-yes, Mr. Turner." The guard backed away and raised his hands. "Please don't kill me. It is the truth."

Cole realized another fireball was shimmering in his right hand.

"Perhaps it was the witch's time." Refan stood behind him in the entrance to his chamber. "The Charmed Ones--"

Cole released the fireball. "I told you not to mention them." He watched the flames for a moment before he turned back to the cowering second guard.

"What's your name?"

"B-Baryor, Lord."

"Well, Baryor, I don't believe you tell the truth. Someone is responsible. And I will find them. Now leave me be."

The guard scurried away, as fast as a big demon could scurry. Cole watched him go, already regretting not having called another fireball to kill the guard. If nothing else, it would have eased some of the pain that held his heart in a crushing vise. An accident, they said. Could it be true?

No, Cole decided as he marched back into his chamber and resumed his pacing. "Someone's responsible. And I'll find them."

oOo

It was as if the ground fell away beneath Piper's feet while she listened to Darryl. Somehow, she didn't think his words made much sense. She thought she heard 'bus' and 'drunk driver' and 'Phoebe'.

"No..." She heard an anguished moan coming from far away. "No..." It took her several seconds to realize that the strange, pinched voice she heard through the roar in her ears

was her own.

"I'm sorry, Piper." Darryl sounded like he had a bad cold. "The doctors say there's nothing anyone could have done. She died instantly."

Piper backed away on leaden feet, staring at the policeman as if he were a three-headed demon. Her mouth opened and closed but no sound came out. When the back of her knees connected with a wicker chair, her legs buckled so she fell into it with a thud. It creaked ominously beneath the sudden weight.

"Piper!" Paige came running from the kitchen. "Darryl? What are you doing here? What's wrong?"

Darryl repeated his terrible story in muted tones. Piper barely heard him. All she could think about was that Phoebe was dead. She had lost another sister. And this time there would be no magical *deus ex machina*, no last minute rescue, and no whitelighter healing that could bring her back.

The soft tinkle of chimes announced Leo's arrival. One look at his face told Piper he already knew. Of course he knew. He was tuned in to all his charges; he would have known the second Phoebe died.

"Piper..." He opened his arms.

At last the sob that had lodged itself in her throat and locked up her voice escaped. Another desperate sob followed. And another. Soon she found herself clinging to Leo as if she feared drowning in the tears that were streaming down her face. Another warm body pressed against her back, arms encircling her round waist. Paige. Paige was hurting too.

Piper turned away from Leo and wrapped her arms around her youngest sister.

Together, they cried for the sister lost to them.

oOo

The more Cole hollered and threatened and killed the beings of the underworld, the less answers he received. Even after he slaughtered his entire board of directors, setting his work back at least six months, the tale didn't change. Everyone told him the same thing. It was an accident. Not a single demon was responsible. In the end Cole was forced to

admit that perhaps Refan had been correct after all. It had been Phoebe's time to die.

"You could send someone back in time to prevent it," Argus, Refan's successor, suggested.

Cole shook his head. "No. That will only delay matters. The Angel of Death is neither good nor evil. When he wants someone, there's nothing anyone can do to stop him. Not even me."

He wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at life's grim sense of irony. Phoebe Halliwell, witch, Charmed One, former Queen of the Underworld, had died when she was run over by a bus. He couldn't help but feel that such a mundane death tarnished her memory.

"What did you say that bus driver's name was?"

"Johnson, Sir. Stanley Johnson." Argus pushed his hands into the opposite sleeves of his dark robe as he answered Cole's questions.

"And Mr. Johnson lives in the apartment over the body shop on Columbia Street?"

Argus nodded. "Yes. That's where he moved after his wife died in a fire, three months ago."

"Hmm." Cole stroked his chin. "Tell anyone that wants to see me to come back tomorrow. I have some personal business to attend to."

"Of course, Mr. Turner."

o0o

The smell hit him as soon as Cole entered the dark room on the second floor. The place reeked of mildew, old booze, and motor oil from the shop below. He wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Who...Whoorru?"

Cole turned in the direction of the voice. The floorboard creaked beneath his weight.

Huddled on the sofa sat a smallish man with sagging shoulders. Strands of unwashed hair hung around his face and round glasses perched on the tip of his nose. He pushed them up while he squinted at Cole with red-rimmed eyes.

"Stanley Johnson?" Cole asked.

The man nodded. "Who wansano?"

The smell of cheap liquor that came from the man in waves made Cole feel sick to his stomach. So this was the pathetic drunk who was responsible for Phoebe's death.

"My name is Cole Turner," he said carefully, his voice filled with the kind of quiet command that left powerful demons wetting their pants. "You took something from me, Stanley."

Stanley sat up a little straighter. "I didn't no s-such thing! I'm no thief."

"Sorry, Stanley, you're wrong. You see, you took my wife away from me. Ran her over with your bus. Her name was Phoebe. She was my life. I'd say it's only fair I take from you what you took from me, don't you?" Cole held up his right hand and called on his power.

"Wife? The pretty girl that died was your wife?" Stanley's face crumpled. "My wife's dead too. You can't take her. I miss her so much." A fat tear trickled down a stubbled face and he brushed at it with the back of his hand.

Cole clenched his jaw. He stood motionless, the blue orb rotating silently above his hand, his arm poised to strike.

"Oh hell."

He threw the fireball.

The heat of the fire singed the stubble on Stanley's cheeks. He let out a squeak and flung up his hands. The bolt struck the bottles on the sidetable next to the couch, shattering them. Glass splinters and liquor fanned out in a wide circle.

"Oww!" Stanley howled when the glass struck his hands.

Cole forced back a sob. "You killed Phoebe, Stanley. Her blood is on your hands. I came to take your life in repayment for Phoebe's, but I changed my mind. I'll let you live with the knowledge that you took hers." He leaned closer, putting his face inches away from Stanley's. He could smell the alcohol on the man's breath. "Don't you ever dare touch a bottle again. Or I will be back. And then I will kill you. Painfully. You understand me?"

Fear filtered through the alcohol vapors that clouded Stanley's mind and he cringed back from Cole's anger. He nodded. "Yes. Yes. Please, don't hurt me."

Cole straightened. "I'll be watching. Remember that."

CHAPTER 3

After leaving Stanley Jones, Cole traveled to the south of France, where some bittersweet memories awaited him. Memories of a happier time, when Phoebe loved him and all was well. A time before everything went to hell. It took him a while before he felt in control enough to return to the underworld but at last he could no longer afford to stay away.

"Sir?" Baryor stuck his head into the doorway. "Sirvat is here. She has something she says will please you."

Cole harrumphed. "That'll be the day," he muttered. However, he waved his hand for the guard to let Sirvat in. He could do with the distraction.

"You shouldn't encourage her, Mr. Turner." Argus adjusted the hood of his robes. "You should--"

"Yes, I know what you think I should do." Cole settled himself in the oak chair on the raised platform. It was a ridiculous heirloom of one of his predecessors and uncomfortable to sit in. But it seemed to intimidate the beings of the underworld, thus he had had it placed in his chamber. "She's too simple-minded to cause much trouble. What harm can it do to let her live? She merely tries to amuse me."

Argus grunted but refrained from further comment.

A moment later a young woman glided into Cole's chamber, a bright smile showing off her small, white teeth. She carried a package wrapped in a blanket in her arms.

"Greetings, Milord." She genuflected and lowered her head.

Cole rolled his eyes at the honorific. He didn't like demons calling him 'Lord'; it reminded him too much of the days when the Source possessed him. But Sirvat was incorrigible. "What is it you have for me today, Sirvat?"

She moved closer, the smile widening. Cole stretched his neck when she pushed the cloth aside. "You'll like this a lot, Lord Cole."

Cole blinked. Curious blue eyes blinked back at him from a round, pink face. He sat up straight.

"A baby?" he asked, bewildered. "Why do you think giving me a baby would please me?"

"This is not any baby." Sirvat's eyes sparkled with merriment. She lowered her voice as if to convey the import of her next words. "This is a special girl baby. Look."

She dropped the girl.

"No!" Cole yelled and flung himself at the child. Even as he moved he knew he was too far away.

The baby disappeared in a flurry of tiny blue lights, and reappeared three feet lower, safe on the chamber's floor. A gurgle rose from the bundle of cloth.

Cole stopped in mid-jump, frozen in shock.

"She--orbed."

Sirvat giggled at his astonishment. "I brought you a charmed baby, Lord Cole. Her name's Melinda."

"What?" Cole exclaimed. It suddenly struck him. The girl was Piper and Leo's daughter. Sudden, jealous anger boiled in his veins and pierced his heart. They had had a baby. He and Phoebe never got that chance. And they never would.

He clamped down on the urge to lash out at the child. This baby was an innocent little girl. And she was Phoebe's niece. In his mind he heard Phoebe's voice, telling him that she was pregnant. But it was this child, Piper's daughter, who was the first of a new generation of charmed witches.

"Give me the baby," he grunted.

Argus knelt to lift the bundled child off the floor and placed her in Cole's hands before he backed away.

"Are you pleased, Lord?" Sirvat asked.

Her beaming expression faltered beneath his glower. "Let it be known that the remaining Charmed Ones, their offspring, and anyone under their protection are off limits for all time," Cole snarled.

He had been wrong. Sirvat could cause plenty of trouble. He knew he should kill her for the infraction but couldn't bring himself to do so. A childish mind lived beneath the adult features. It wasn't her fault. She only meant to make him happy; she didn't know better.

Argus nodded. "Right away, Sir."

"I'm going to take the child back."

Alarm washed over the advisor's features. "No! Mr. Turner, let someone else go. The witches will kill you."

Cole chuckled wryly. "No, they won't. They can't. They couldn't even with the Power of Three. Besides, they won't see me. I'll go in the night, when everyone's asleep."

o0o

Piper sat in the darkness. She had waited until Leo fell asleep before she snuck out of bed and came here, to Melinda's room, with the mobile of white doves and the rainbow her husband had painted on the pink walls. She clutched a small blanket to her chest. The faint odor of baby powder wafted up from it, and occasionally a wet tear dripped from her cheek onto the blanket.

How could she have let herself be lulled into believing that their lives had quieted down? That the lack of demon attacks meant they were safe? She should have known better. They were not meant to live normal, safe, tranquil lives. Paige had been right. The calm spell had been deceptive. Whoever was in charge 'down there' must have plotted this from the beginning. Lay off on the attacks until their guards were down. Then strike, when they were distracted.

She was beginning to believe that Phoebe's death had not been an accident after all. Perhaps it served as a diversion, a way to swing their attention away from the baby.

And now her baby was gone too. Snatched from its cradle, so to speak. The woman who addressed her on the street, a girl, really, had seemed so innocuous. What harm could a simple-minded girl do to a little baby? So, when she had ooh-ed and aah-ed over Melinda's stroller, Piper sensed no danger. Until the stranger snatched her daughter and blinked, leaving the stroller empty except for the blanket that Piper now clutched to her chest.

The memory brought fresh tears to her eyes, even when she believed she had done all the crying possible. Through the watery blur she thought she saw a soft, orange glow that faded as soon as it appeared. Piper blinked to clear her vision. A gasp escaped her when in the place of the glow stood a tall, dark shape. The man leaned over the cradle.

"Hey!" Piper sprung to her feet and raised her hands, ready to blow him up if the shadow made a threatening move. "Who are you? What do you--"

The words died in her throat when a soft noise came from the crib.

"Melinda?"

"I'm sorry Sirvat took her," said the man in the shadows. He stepped back from Melinda's cradle into the beam of moonlight that slashed through the window.

"Cole?" Piper asked incredulously. "How--" She had to clear her throat and Cole spoke again before she could continue.

"She shouldn't have taken your daughter," he said softly, meeting her eyes. "It was my mistake. My orders were unclear. But you don't have to worry that it will happen again. Nobody from our side will harm you or your loved ones. Not as long as I'm in charge."

"Our side?" Piper raised an eyebrow.

Cole shrugged. "Phoebe was right after all. Only one place I could go."

"Ah. I see. And Phoebe?"

The flash of pain that washed over Cole's face told her the truth before he spoke.

"An accident."

"I'm sorry," Piper said, and meant it.

"Yeah. Me too." Cole hesitated a moment, as if he was about to say something else, then he was outlined briefly in a reddish glow and was gone.

CHAPTER 4

"Reverend Elders, you won't believe what happened!" Breathless, a young, female whitelighter blurted out the words before she fully recovered from the orb.

"Calm down, child." A blond-haired man with a kind face leaned forward in his chair and gestured for her to take a seat. "Tell us what happened."

She remained standing and smoothed her robe. "Simone is one of my charges. She knows a lot about potions and herbs and making medicine. Sick people come to see her all the time, people that regular doctors won't help because they are poor. Tonight, after the last visitor was gone, we were talking about a little girl that she had helped feel better, when a man came in. He was tall, dark. I thought he was quite handsome." Her cheeks colored a slight pink.

"Go on."

"Simone asked what she could do for him. I knew she was suspicious. He was dressed well, like he had money."

Ania started pacing. It wasn't something young whitelighters were wont to do in the Council chamber but none of the Elders lifted an eyebrow. They hung on her every word. "He said he wanted Simone to give him her power. Then he reached up and lightning struck the room. That's when I realized he was a demon." Her eyes were distant, as if she were reliving the experience. "Simone screamed and I thought she was hurt. I raced over to her. But she was all right. Except when she pointed her finger at the man to freeze him. That's Simone's power, cryokinesis. Making ice, you know." Her hands fluttered in agitation.

The blond Elder smiled. "Yes, Ania, we know."

"Oh. Of course you do." Ania flushed. "It didn't work. Her power. I thought we were both dead for sure. I mean, really dead in my case. But the demon just thanked her and disappeared."

"You mean, he walked out of the door?" asked a female Elder.

"No, no," Ania said. "One moment he was there, the next he was gone. In the blink of an eye."

A murmur rose from the Council of Elders. "Must've been a warlock, then."

The blond Elder gestured for silence. "And your charge's power?"

"Gone too. Simone tried to freeze a flowerpot. Nothing. Not so much as a snowflake. It was as if he had absorbed her power and taken it from her."

"I see." The Elder sat back and pondered her report. His gaze traveled around the room, meeting the eyes of the other Council members. "This is the ninth of our witches who lost their power in a similar way." He paused for a moment; his tone was grave when he continued. "The Hollow is loose; it's the only explanation that makes any sense. Someone managed to get past its guardians and opened the box. Whoever this handsome-looking demon is, he has released the Hollow."

The Council of Elders nodded in assent, their expressions grim. They had all been thinking the same thing, horrible as it was, since the whitelighters' reports came flooding in. Every report mentioned a good-looking man attacking and another magical power being lost when he was gone. So far he had not killed anyone, for which they were grateful. Unfortunately, it could only mean one thing: this demon was so sure of himself and his might, he didn't need to kill his opponents. After all, once he stole their powers, the witches were virtually defenseless against his magic.

"What should we do about it?" asked one Elder.

"We have to find the Hollow, and lock it back in its box," said another, wringing her hands.

"Obviously. Unfortunately, we don't have the power to do so ourselves. It needs both good and evil magic," objected a third.

"It does," the blond Elder agreed. "And I've taken the initiative to look into the matter. I was afraid it would come to this, when the first report came in. I know who can help."

"Who?"

"Cole Turner."

"Cole Turner? Surely you don't mean the Cole Turner who was once known as the demon Belthazor? I don't think I need to remind you how much trouble that man has given us in the past. He's led the underworld with an iron fist for the last three hundred years. He owns half the stock markets, for heaven's sake! I would hope, Elder Wyatt, that you make a bad joke?" The speaker, a pudgy man with gray hair and ruddy cheeks, leaned forward and fixed the other with a scowl. "Who's to say Turner isn't the one who released the Hollow? It's not unheard of for evil overlords to use such dangerous means to achieve their goals."

Leo offered his colleague a smile, not in the least fazed by the man's rudeness. "Very true, Elder Price. But I don't think that's the case. Cole Turner has seen what the Hollow can do. He wouldn't unleash it upon the world. He knows that the Hollow devours all magic, good and evil. That it cannot be controlled." He twined his fingers and rested his chin upon his folded hands. "The underworld must experience this theft of their powers just like we do. I think Cole will be amenable to talk. Unless someone has better suggestion?" His intent gaze moved over the gathered faces. Nobody spoke.

"We are agreed then. I'll go pay him a visit."

oOo

"Mr. Turner?"

Cole glanced up from the pile of ash on the floor. Five seconds ago the pile had been a darklighter who had failed to blink in the face of his master's wrath. He wasn't the first of Cole's underlings that returned to confess botching up his assignment and the inexplicable loss of his power. Cole felt no remorse for killing a defenseless being. Without magic darklighters and demons were less than one step above bugs to be crushed beneath his boots, as far as their usefulness was concerned.

"Yes?"

"There's someone here to see you, Sir." The guard lowered his voice and added in a confidential whisper: "It's one of them Elders. He says he knows you from a long time ago."

"Does he, now?" Cole's curiosity was awakened. He couldn't recall ever meeting a member of the Council of Elders. "Send him in."

The guard nodded and disappeared from the door opening.

"Argus?" Cole gestured at his long-time clerk and second-hand man to come forward.

"Yes, Sir?"

"We need to fix this cash flow problem if we are to expand our influence in north-west section of the Greater United States. Bay City Financial is taxing my patience. Send someone new to ensure they will agree to our terms. I don't care what you have to do, if you discredit them, kill their CEO, or threaten their stockholders. Just get the job done."

Make sure, though, that whoever you send this time is a little more capable than that idiot." Cole pointed at the stain. "And get someone in here to scrub my floor."

"Yes, Mr. Turner, I'll get on it right away." Argus turned on his heels and hurried from the chamber. At the entrance he had to step aside to allow Cole's visitor, a white-robed man, to enter.

The visitor waited until they were alone before he pushed back his hood, revealing his features.

Cole's eyes widened. He recognized the Elder instantly; his was a face Cole remembered well from the past. Perhaps the hairline had receded a little, and a few more wrinkles had appeared around the eyes, but time had been kind to the whitelighter.

"Leo! Long time no see." He grinned and clasped a hand on Leo's shoulder. "So they made you an Elder? Well done, my friend, well done."

Leo gave a curt nod. "A lot has happened since we last saw each other. I've been an Elder for nearly three centuries. They promoted me, shortly after Piper passed away." He shrugged. "I guess they attributed it to my guidance that she died of old age in her bed, unlike most witches of her stature. But I didn't come to talk about old times. I came to ask for your assistance."

"What do you need? Stock tips? A loan?" Cole laughed. "Be serious, Leo. What could you possibly want my help with? I expected you wanted nothing to do with me, ever again."

"I never thanked you for returning Melinda to us. I'm sorry, I should have."

Cole lifted a dismissive shoulder. He was no longer comfortable with gratitude or apologies. In the demon realm as well as the business world those were considered a weakness which would draw enemies like sharks scenting blood.

Leo's face held on to its serious expression while he looked Cole up and down as if sizing him up. After a moment he said, "Haven't you noticed a decline in magic? Demons losing their powers, darklighters failing to carry out their mission?"

"I have." Cole's mouth tightened. "What do you know about it? Is it your doing?"

"No." Leo shook his head to reinforce his words. "I wish it were. But we've been experiencing the same problem. I believe it's the Hollow. Someone released it and it is swallowing up all magic, good and evil. I hoped you might know who would do such a thing."

"I see." Cole turned away, considering. What Leo said made sense. He should have figured it out himself, from the dispatches that his agents sent from all across the globe. He ran down a mental list of possible opponents, of demons who might try to topple him and take over his reign. Who could have released the Hollow in an attempt to further their cause?

Cole dismissed one name after another, coming up empty. At last he looked back at Leo. "I'm sorry, I have no idea who it could be. I doubt it's anyone on my side. They wouldn't dare."

Leo sighed. "That's what I thought. It doesn't really matter, anyway. We need to put the Hollow back where it belongs, that's most important. We'll have to work together to get it done."

Cole recalled the days --it seemed eons ago-- when the Source released the Hollow in his quest to defeat the Charmed Ones. Phoebe still loved him, then, still believed in him. It had been a better time.

It occurred to him that it had also been a time when the other side, Leo's side, had had command one of the most powerful forces to exist in the world of magic. A time when the Power of Three was whole.

"Even if I wanted to help, you don't have anyone powerful enough to work with me," Cole said after pondering the matter for a while.

"We plan to reinstate the Power of Three."

Cole let out a dry laugh. "Leo, the Power of Three is lost forever."

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," Leo said. "The Power of Three can be restored. We have mature witches from two different bloodlines. We will bring Phoebe back to complete the trinity."

CHAPTER 5

With a soft clunk the airtaxi settled down on the top of an enormous skyscraper. A tremor ran through the floor when the anchors caught hold and the doors of the cabin opened. Paulina followed her friend out of the vehicle and glanced around. Unfortunately it was overcast. On a bright day, at four hundred stories above the Bay the view from the building's rooftop must be grand. As it was, she could barely see her

companion when they hastened through the murky gray into the reception area of the building.

"Ania? What building is this? Why did you take me here?"

Ania slowed as the door closed behind them and lowered the scarf from her hair. It was covered with tiny droplets from the fog. Paulina was a little taken aback by the seriousness in her friend's eyes. Ania's grave look caused her to change her mind about the airtaxi trip being one of Ania's prankish ideas.

"I am your friend, Paulina. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. But that doesn't answer my questions." Paulina shrugged out of her jacket and tied the sleeves around her waist. It was warm inside the foyer of the skyscraper. "Ania, you're scaring me."

"I'm sorry," Ania said. "I can't really tell you anything right now. Someone will be here soon enough to explain. You do trust me, don't you?"

Paulina sighed and rolled her eyes. "Yes." She mock-glared at Ania. "This had better be good. We're missing the final episode of *Survivor: Stranded On Venus*. I hope Sacha wins."

Ania chortled. "It's not like you can't watch it later! Did you ever hear of video libraries?"

"You know what I mean." Paulina refused to rise to the bait. "That's not live. It's not the same."

The brief grin melted and Ania's features settled back into the grave expression that looked so out of place on her usually cheerful face. "All I can tell you is that this is important. This could be the most important day of your life."

Paulina shrugged. "Ri-ight."

She looked away to survey the waiting room. Ania had brought her to one of the many office buildings that cluttered the metro area of modern-day San Francisco. Rows of tiny spotlights hid in the ceiling and cast a warm glow onto the brushed steel columns that lined the lobby. In the spaces between the columns, comfortable sofas and chairs upholstered in warm red and orange hues provided secluded sitting areas. The tiled floor had been polished until it gleamed and cast back the reflection of the columns. To the left a reception desk was visible, and banks of elevators took up the right wall, ready to take people down to whatever floor they needed to go to. Windows at the far end offered

a view of the leaden clouds. Paulina assumed that on weekdays the hallway would be filled with milling crowds, business people and office workers coming and going while airtaxis shuttled back and forth between this and other buildings in the sprawling city. Today being a wintery Sunday, the lobby was almost deserted, the reception desk unmanned.

Only two other people occupied the foyer. A man and a woman sat on one of the sofas nearby. The man would be in his early thirties, Paulina guessed. Of course, she could be wrong. She considered anyone over twenty to be ancient and wasn't a good judge of age. The woman with him had to be really old; her hair was going gray at the temples. However, when she got up and walked toward the girls she wore a gentle smile that made her look younger.

"Good to see you again, Ania. And this must be Paulina. I have heard so much about you."

Paulina's threw Ania a questioning look.

Ania offered a reassuring smile in return. "Only good things, Paulina, I promise. This is Elayne McCarthy, an old friend of mine."

The woman held out her hand and after a moment's hesitation, Paulina shook it. "Pleased to meet you," she murmured. It never hurt to be polite.

"And this," Elayne said, gesturing to the man who had walked up beside her, "is Joren."

He gave her a friendly but cautious nod.

"Hi," Paulina said, not sure why she was meeting these people. She wouldn't have come at all except for the fact that Ania had been her friend since she lost her parents, ten years ago. As a little six-year-old orphan, she had been very happy to have the older girl for her friend and confidante. And although Ania enjoyed playing practical jokes on people, she had never gotten Paulina into real trouble.

"Joren is your great-great-great-great-cousin. Or something like that." Ania chuckled. "I might have missed a couple of greats."

Paulina studied the man with more interest. He looked as startled at Ania's revelation as she felt. Paulina hadn't known she had any family left. Even if it was distant family. After the 2310 earthquake killed her father and mother, she was raised in foster homes. If not for Ania, she would have been very lonely. Yet here was a live, flesh-and-blood cousin.

"Is that why you asked me to come here?" Joren asked Elayne. "To meet a distant relative?"

She shook her head. "No. Consider that an added bonus."

Elayne was about to say more when a sudden blast of cold air across her back made Paulina turn around. Two men walked in from the airtaxi platform, bringing chill tentacles of fog with them. The closing doors cut off the misty feelers abruptly and the tendrils quickly faded in the warmer lobby air. Paulina rubbed her forearms to ward off the goosebumps.

"Good," Elayne said. "They're here. Now that everyone has arrived, we can go to my office and answer all your questions."

"This is Elayne's building," Ania confided in a loud whisper.

Elayne laughed, a pleasant sound. "Don't exaggerate, Ania. Although I do happen to rent some office space a couple of floors down, that's true."

Paulina didn't pay the two women much attention. She watched the new arrivals instead, wondering if they were members of her family also. They didn't look anything alike, though. One was of average height with kind blue eyes and blond hair. He wore a retro-styled checkered shirt and jeans. The other was taller, broad-shouldered and had a commanding air about him. Dark curls covered his head while deep blue eyes looked out from a ruggedly handsome face. His gray suit was cut according to the latest fashions.

"Cole, this is Joren Matthews. He is from Paige's lineage. And this is Paulina Winslow. Piper's descendant." It was the blond man who spoke first.

"And yours, as well." The eyes of the man called Cole bored into Paulina's. "So. These are the two witches who will help restore Phoebe back to life?"

CHAPTER 6

Cole leaned against a cabinet near the wall while he listened to Leo explain to the witches why they were here.

Elayne had preceded them to a large conference room. A big, oval table that could easily seat twenty people took up a big part of the room. Tall windows on one side of the room

looked out into the thick fog. The other wall held colorful reproductions of modern paintings, and a couple of closets. After Leo had taken a seat near one end of the table, he had begun to tell his story.

It had surprised Cole when he found out that neither witch knew much about their ancestry, or the powers that were dormant within them. Over consecutive generations, the magic that ran in the witches' blood had transformed into quaint family myths. To the offspring of the Charmed Ones witchcraft was a thing of the past, a fantastic notion only seen in telecasts. According to Leo, the Elders lost track of Paige's descendants generations ago and only recently located Joren. At least the whitelighter had kept an eye on his own great-great-great-grandchildren and their offspring. Now the future of magic depended on these two reluctant and incredulous witches.

"This is ridiculous!" Joren exclaimed when Leo was finished explaining his ancestry. "You claim that you have been around since the twentieth century? That you're her great-something-grandfather?" He gestured at Paulina who sat opposite him. "I'm supposed to believe that Elayne's a witch? And that she and I are too? What's that supposed to mean? That we should sell love potions? Curse people? Fly on broomsticks? Come on!"

"I don't want to grow warts," Paulina muttered and squinted cross-eyed at the tip of her nose.

Ania giggled. Leo shot her a withering glare that wiped the grin of her face. Contritely she went back to studying her hands.

"I know it's a lot to take in," Leo said. "And hard to believe. But I'm afraid it's all true."

"You can't tell people something like that and then expect them to take your word for it. They need to see some proof," Cole said. "Maybe if you orbed." He smirked. "Or I can throw them a couple of energy balls."

Leo exchanged a look with Elayne, who nodded. He sighed. "All right. You two, pay attention."

Without warning, he orbed. Joren paled when Leo disappeared in a swirl of tiny sparks and reappeared beside the chair at the other end of the conference table.

Paulina gasped. "Wow!"

Joren's eyes boggled. "Wha--what just happened?"

"That was orbiting you witnessed," Elayne told them. "It's a magical power and a means to

transport oneself to other places."

Paulina leaned over to Ania. "You're a whitelighter too, right? Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Wow. Then why did we have to airlift to get here? You could have orbed us!" Paulina sounded indignant.

"And scare you out of your mind? I couldn't tell you what I was, Paulina. Not before Elder Wyatt talked to you."

Leo rounded the table and walked back to them. "As for your powers," he said, picking up his explanation where he had left off, "there is no telling what they are. It's impossible to predict what's been passed down to whom. My wife Piper --your great-grandmother and aunt several times removed-- could freeze time or blow things up. Paulina might have inherited my power to orb. And your great-aunt Prue had telekinesis."

When he noticed Joren's dubious frown and Paulina's dumbfounded look, Leo explained. "She could move objects with her mind, by force of her will."

"That sounds cool," Paulina muttered. "What about those broomsticks? That sounds kinda like fun too!"

Leo's lips turned up in a smile. "That's mostly legend. But your other great-aunt did fly on a broomstick once. During Halloween. She had premonitions about the future and could levitate. Her name was Phoebe."

Although he had known it would come up sooner or later, the sound of her name caused Cole to wince as if in physical pain. He remembered the Halloween Leo spoke about. It was the day he realized that the impossible had happened, that he had fallen in love with the very witch he was sent to kill.

"And this Phoebe is the one you say you want to--resurrect?" Joren still sounded skeptical. "That's just as crazy as you being an angel. How would it be possible? She must be dead for centuries."

"Three hundred and seventeen years, four months and six days." Cole spoke before he could stop himself.

All heads swiveled in his direction, the faces of the witches and Ania wearing similar

expressions of surprise. Leo's look showed understanding and sympathy. Cole wanted to bite his tongue.

"What's his role in this, anyway?" Joren asked. For the moment he let himself get distracted from the subject of bringing a long-dead witch back to life.

"Yes. If he's as evil as you say, shouldn't we be, like, fighting him?" Paulina added.

Cole smiled to himself. She had the right attitude. He wasn't sure about the man, but the girl was definitely a Halliwell.

"No." It was the older witch who spoke. "At least not today. As Elder Wyatt explained, to banish the Hollow, good and evil must work together. Cole is here to help."

"Yep." Cole pushed away from the wall and walked up to the table in the middle of the conference room. He placed his hands on its surface and leaned forward, fixing the others with a pointed look. "Shall we get on with it? I have other important matters to see to. And the Hollow isn't going to wait while you catch these witches up on their family's history."

Leo met Cole's eyes for a long moment, then sat back to face Joren and Paulina. "Are there any more questions you want to ask? Because if not, crude as he puts it, Cole is right. Time is running out. If we are going to do this, we better do it fast."

Silence fell over the room. Paulina peeked sideways at her friend and whitelighter Ania, who nodded back encouragingly. Joren's gaze traveled from Elayne to the two girls to Cole and finally back to Leo.

"I don't say I believe you," he said. "I still think it's nuts. But if it's as important as you say, I'm willing to give it a try."

"Paulina?"

Cole waited for the girl to make up her mind. He was unsure what he wanted her to say. He dreaded being face to face with Phoebe again, and at the same time he longed for it with all his heart.

"Okay, I guess."

CHAPTER 7

Cole paced in nervous circles around the conference room. He feared he was marking a trail in the plush carpet but found himself incapable of sitting still. The lights had been turned down and dozens of candles bathed the room in a warm glow. At the far end, the carpet had been rolled up, exposing the concrete floor so Elayne could more easily draw the magical symbols that were needed for the resurrection spell.

"Done." Elayne stood up and brushed off her knees. She put the piece of chalk on the table and gestured at Joren and Paulina. "All that's needed now is some of your blood." She lifted a wicked looking athame from the table. Although the undulating blade seemed pure evil, Cole knew it was so infused with the magic of many good witches that he would not have been able to touch it if he had wanted to.

Joren and Paulina stared at the knife. Paulina shrugged as she took a step forward and held out her arm. She yelped when Elayne sliced a quick cut across the palm of her hand. Blood dripped from the wound and the older witch collected it in a white china bowl. It mingled with the herbs and sweet-smelling blooms that would reinforce the spell.

Joren took Paulina's place; he inhaled sharply when the knife pierced his skin.

Taking care not to blur the lines she had so meticulously drawn, Elayne put the bowl in the middle of the chalk circle and five-pointed star on the floor. When she was satisfied with the bowl's placement, she withdrew from the pentagram. "All set."

Leo gave both Paulina and Joren a piece of paper. "At my signal, read those lines aloud," he said. "Please, Paulina, you should be here." He gestured her to the northern rim of the circle, where one of the five points of the star was located. "Joren, go stand opposite Paulina." Joren took his position on the circle's edge, between the two legs of the star.

Paulina giggled nervously. "We're not going to conjure some horrible beast, are we?" she asked. "Like in the movies?"

Leo smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. Elayne's an experienced witch; she has been practicing magic for a long time. She knows what she's doing. We will restore one of your ancestors to life, that's all."

"That's all, he says." Sweat beaded Joren's upper lip.

Cole couldn't blame him. He felt the same way. Anticipation warred with apprehension, causing his stomach to shrink to a leaden ball in his gut. His defensive powers were on high alert, his nervousness making it hard to control them. He wished they would hurry and get it over with.

"Now, please read the spell."

Joren and Paulina each took a deep breath while their eyes met for a moment. Then both looked down at the piece of paper in their hands. In one voice they read the spell.

*"Phoebe Halliwell, blood of our blood;
Our great great great great great aunt;
Hear our call, heed our plea;
Return to us;
We summon thee."*

Nothing happened. The circle remained empty. Time stretched to an eternity. Cole's heart slammed against his chest so violently he feared it might break his ribcage.

Suddenly the contents of the bowl in the center of the circle ignited. Blue and yellow light streamed up, fanning outward until a ball of light formed over the circle. It exploded in a flash so bright that Cole had to close his eyes, and a loud boom made the windows rattle in their casings.

Silence followed.

Cole's ears rang with the echo of the explosion. He cautiously opened his eyes and squinted at the magical circle. His breath caught in his throat. There, in the center of the circle, lay the naked form of the woman he knew so well. Her skin was pale in the light of the candles, her dark hair hanging in bangs in front of her face as she crouched. Cole stood stiff, enthralled with the vision, rooted to the carpet as Phoebe slowly raised her head. Time healed all wounds, they said. Obviously, three hundred odd years weren't enough to heal the pain of losing her.

Gradually, her eyes shifted into focus and they settled on Cole's face. Her visage darkened with anger. "You!" she hissed.

Before anyone could stop her, she had sprung up and slapped him. The sound of her hand connecting with his cheek reverberated in the dead silence of the room. "What have you done to me this time?"

Fresh, sharp pain tore at his heart as he once again realized she would never, ever look at him again with love and understanding in her eyes.

"So nice to see you again too, Phoebe."

"And that's why we brought you back, Phoebe," Leo finished. They had gathered around one end of the conference table again. The carpet in the far corner covered the magical circle. Phoebe was wearing a sweater that was slightly too big and a pair of pants that Elayne had the foresight to bring with her. Paulina couldn't keep her eyes off of this aunt from the past. Her mind was reeling from trying to come to grips with the incredible feat she and Joren had accomplished, but Phoebe took it all in stride. She acted as if being alive again after three hundred years was nothing out of the ordinary.

"So, this is like that time when we brought Melinda Warren into the future, right?"

"Well..." Leo hesitated. "Not exactly. Melinda's presence was temporary, as long as she was needed. Yours is more permanent."

Phoebe waggled her hand. "Leo! Don't be so vague. What are you talking about?"

"Leo means that you have been restored to life," Cole said from the shadows.

Paulina started as he spoke. She had forgotten the presence of their evil ally. He was so quiet, keeping to himself, outside of the little cluster of witches and whitelighters.

"Leo means that you cannot go back," Cole continued. "You can't leave this world. Not until you die again."

"What?" Phoebe jumped to her feet. "Is that true?" Leo nodded somewhat unhappily. "Oh, and I bet that was your idea, wasn't it, Cole?"

"Yeah, right," he snapped back. "Like arguing with my three-hundred year dead wife is my idea of having a good time."

"Ex-wife," Phoebe corrected, stressing the first syllable.

Paulina's eyes went round while her gaze shifted back and forth between Phoebe and Cole. "You-- were married to him? To an evil guy?" She was breathless with awe.

"Yep." Cole smirked. "She was queen of the underworld for a while. Enjoyed it too, right?"

Phoebe pierced him with a sharp glare. "That was a long time ago, Cole. And I won't make the mistake of trusting you again, I can tell you that much." She turned to Leo. "Do we really need him?"

Leo sighed and looked at the ceiling. "Yes, Phoebe, we do. And for the record, it wasn't Cole's idea to bring you back to life. It was mine. This is the only way we can stop the Hollow. What you girls did with Melinda, transporting her to the future, requires the Power of Three. Since that was unavailable to us, Elayne had to improvise. It took the magic of many witches to make it possible. We need you, Phoebe. We would never even have tried to revive you if we weren't so desperate."

"Oh, great. Couldn't you have brought Prue back, then? Or Grams? She'd love having another go at life."

"It had to be you," Elayne came to Leo's aid. "When you died, without having had children-- You were the last of the third line of Warren witches."

"Yeah. And whose fault is that?" Phoebe muttered angrily.

Leo patted her hand. "Your death was an accident, Phoebe. You must know that."

She pulled her hand back. "I wasn't talking about my death," she muttered sadly. "I was talking about my life. I could have had a daughter. If not for him."

Cole flinched as if Phoebe had slapped him again. Paulina watched, fascinated. There was more to the story, she just knew it. This was so much better than the soap telecasts that she sometimes watched during the afternoon!

"Maybe you should get some rest, Phoebe," Leo suggested. "We can figure it all out later."

"I'm fine. I've been resting for three centuries. Let's get this over with, so you can figure out how to make me dead again. What can they do?" She indicated Paulina and Joren with a nod of her head.

"We--don't know what their powers are." Leo blinked a bit sheepish.

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"Things have changed, Phoebe. How did you and Prue and Piper first activate your powers, after reading the spell that broke your grandmother's bond?"

Phoebe frowned in thought. "I don't really know. They were simply there."

CHAPTER 8

There was something to be said for progress. Frozen dinners in the twenty-fourth century were much more appetizing than they had been in the twenty-first. Whereas TV-dinners used to be too bland, too salty or too mushy to Cole's taste, these chicken noodles were quite delicious. He pricked a pale strip of dough onto his fork and popped it in his mouth before he lifted the bowl.

He chewed another noodle as he made his way from the kitchenette back to the conference room, which he secretly had dubbed their war-room. Phoebe was arguing with Leo. The other witches and the young whitelighter were nowhere in sight. Cole guessed they had beaten a hasty retreat and were hiding out until Phoebe's temper cooled.

"Leo, I need the Book!"

"No, you don't." Leo was shaking his head. "You can make up the spells you need."

"Much as I hate to admit it," Cole said around a mouthful of pasta, "Leo is right. Phoebe, your strength has always been your talent to improvise. You don't need the Book of Shadows for that. Noodle?" He offered her the fork and was rewarded with a dark scowl. He shrugged and took another bite.

"Phoebe, the Book is gone. Ten years ago a major earthquake hit San Francisco. It was the one expected for so long, the Big One. Despite vast improvements in design and construction since you were alive, it killed hundreds. The manor went up in flames; the fire killed Paulina's parents and destroyed the Book. To this day, we have no idea how Paulina managed to make it out alive. The neighbors found her crying on the sidewalk."

Phoebe's shoulders sagged. "I don't know if I can do this, Leo. I've been dead for a long time."

"There may be a way to recover the Book." Cole placed the empty bowl on the table and ran a hand through his hair. "Remember when I went back in time on All Hallow's Eve?"

"Yes. You were trying to wipe out the entire Warren line. How could I forget? But it's a good idea." Phoebe's face lit up and she gave him the first remotely friendly look. "You can take the Book from the manor before it burns down."

"You'd have to come with me," Cole continued.

Her eyes narrowed with fresh suspicion and the scowl returned. "Oh? And why is that? Is this offer to help another of your ploys to get me alone and convince me of your

goodness?" She wiggled two fingers in the air to indicate quotation marks around the last word.

Anger rushed through Cole. "Dammit, Phoebe! Will you give it a rest? I realized three hundred years ago that you would never forgive me, would never again love me like I love you! This isn't about you or me. This is about the future of magic. All magic." He took a deep breath. "I need you to come with me because I can no longer touch the Book. I'm evil, remember?"

Phoebe blinked. "Oh. Right." She rubbed her face. "I'm sorry. It's been a weird day."

Cole's tone softened. "I know. It's not every day you come back from the dead. But please, believe me, my intentions are good. Can't we bury the hatchet, at least until this is over? I didn't come here to fight with you."

She laid her head back and met his eyes. "Okay. I guess I should believe you. Truce?" She held out her hand.

Cole took it and smiled. "Truce," he repeated.

oOo

"Woah." Phoebe swayed on her feet, grateful for Cole's supporting hand on her elbow. "That was--blurring." She swallowed. "I think I prefer orbing. Or even shimmering. Much easier on the stomach." She and Cole had just appeared onto the sidewalk in front of the Halliwell manor. Although, she supposed it should be called the Winslow manor now.

"Sorry," Cole said. "I lost the ability to shimmer a long time ago."

"I know," Phoebe muttered absently. She took a step away from Cole and squinted up at the manor. The night was dark and overcast, so she didn't have the light of the moon or stars to see by. The glare from the street lamps was enough to make her realize the house looked different. It took her a few minutes to figure out the change. The wood walls no longer were the familiar faded red. Instead, they were painted what looked like a pale yellow.

"It's different." She chewed her lip while she studied the house. "I like it." She turned on her heels and looked up at Cole. "Can you get us to the attic?"

"Is that where you think they hid the Book?" He looked dubious. "They don't even know they're a witchy family, remember."

"Uh huh. The attic is where most people keep things that they no longer use but haven't thrown out. It's the most likely place to find the Book of Shadows."

"Okay. The attic it is, then." Cole held out his hand for Phoebe to take. As soon as she did, he transported them to the top floor of the house.

Clouds of dust rose up when their arrival disturbed the thick layer, which coated the floor boards and everything else in the attic.

"Uhg!" Phoebe pinched her nose and suppressed a sneeze. "Someone should do some cleaning here!" She looked around. There was barely space to move. It appeared as if each generation of Halliwells and Wyatts and Winslows had used the attic to store every piece of furniture they no longer used.

"Where do we start?" Cole stared at the jumble of furniture and boxes, a dismayed expression on his face. "This could take forever. I don't know how much time we have, I didn't take us back far before the quake."

Phoebe considered the clutter for a long moment. "You start over there." She pointed to the corner where a tall oak cabinet rested against the wall. "I'll begin here."

Cole had to clamber over a couch with a faded flower pattern and a crooked wicker chair to reach the closet. Phoebe wove her way past boxes and sidetables. It was strange, being back in the attic after all this time. The room was so familiar, yet the rubble so unknown. But then her eye fell on something she recognized. Gram's old chest!

She pushed aside an upholstered easy chair with a hole in the seat where the springs peeked out. A rusty birdcage blocked her path and she set it on the chair. She dropped to her knees in front of the wood box. A grayish, sticky layer of dust coated its cover. Phoebe reached for the lock and lifted the lid cautiously. Something caught in her throat as she recognized the worn leather cover of the Book of Shadows. It looked exactly as she remembered it.

Almost reverently, she lifted the heavy book from the chest. As she placed the Book on the floor and looked in the chest again, a tremor ran through the house, causing the heavy beams in the ceiling to groan. Phoebe didn't notice. She blinked back unbidden tears when she recognized the faded picture that lay beneath the Book. It had stood on her night table beside her bed for quite a while. A younger, happier Cole smiled down on her image that beamed up at him. A wool hat covered her head. She remembered the day that photo was taken as if it were yesterday. She had been happy then, happier than she could remember having ever been.

"Any luck?" Cole sounded worried. She glanced over her shoulder. He was ruffling through a stack of papers in the oak cabinet.

"Yes. I found it." She quickly snatched up the picture and stuffed it in her pocket. "Here." She held up the Book for Cole to see.

"Good." He dropped the papers and began scrambling back past the sofa. "We should go."

As if to prove him right, another tremor shook the house, stronger than before. The windows rattled and the ceiling squeaked. With a loud crack one of the beams let go and crashed onto the floor between them in a cloud of dust and splinters.

"Phoebe! We've got to go!"

Phoebe ducked beneath the beam, the Book of Shadows tightly tucked under her arm.

"Come on." Cole grabbed her other arm and dragged her after him. "We've got to get out of the house!" he yelled at her over the ruckus of shattering glass and wailing support beams. "Wait for the quake to be over. I can't get us back to the exact right time and place with all this shaking going on."

She nodded and raced after him down the stairs. The house was shaking constantly and although Phoebe had experienced earthquakes before, she quickly realized this one was serious.

They reached the landing and turned the corner to find the flight of stairs down from the second floor. Phoebe froze. In front of her was a little girl wearing a pink nightdress. She clutched a stuffed bear against her chest. Frightened tears glimmered in big, dark eyes that grew even wider when she saw the two strangers in her house.

"Go!" Cole shouted. He broke her spell and shoved Phoebe past the girl to the stairs.

From one of the bedrooms drifted voices. "Paulina? Howard, go get her! Oh God!" Something big fell over with a heavy thud and a woman screamed.

Phoebe turned back. "Cole. We can't leave her."

Cole scooped up the little girl, who started crying harder, and again shoved Phoebe toward the stairs. Relieved that the girl was safe, Phoebe dashed down the steps. The ground rippled beneath her feet as she ran out the front door and away from the house. Cole followed on her heels.

Even before they reached the sidewalk, a loud thunderclap bellowed through the night. An invisible hand pushed Phoebe off her feet and onto her knees. With an angry roar, flames exploded out of the manor, their fiery tongues licking at the black sky. Her mouth fell open in shock. Wide-eyed, Phoebe watched her ancestral home go up in flames.

Cole gently set the little girl on the sidewalk beside them. The earth stilled, the occasional tremor all that remained of the quake. The night, however, was anything but still. Flames crackled while distant explosions rent the skies. Sirens howled and everywhere people cried for help.

"We have to go," Cole said softly, reminding Phoebe they weren't supposed to be here.

Phoebe glanced down at the little girl. She wanted to take her with them, even though she knew she could not.

"She'll be okay," Cole assured her, reading her mind. "Remember what Leo said? The neighbors found her on the sidewalk."

"Yes." Phoebe swallowed the tears that clogged her throat. "Yes."

She took Cole's hand, feeling for a moment the Book resist his touch. Then the street disappeared in a blur, and so did the little girl with the fat tears trickling down her cheeks. Tears that were tinted orange with the flames that consumed the manor.

CHAPTER 9

"Come on, Paulina! Concentrate." Ania sounded desperate. "You can do it. Reach for your power. You know it's there."

Paulina growled in frustration. She had been trying for hours. The others had coaxed, threatened, pleaded with her to access her magic. Leo tried to put her in a trance. Phoebe suggested meditation. Nothing worked. It would help if she knew what she was searching for, what a magical power felt like. All she sensed was hunger, exhaustion, and a sore butt from sitting on the floor in a lotus position for the last half-hour.

"It's not working," she grunted and scrambled back to her feet. "Maybe you're all wrong. Maybe I don't have any magic after all."

"You helped bring Phoebe back, didn't you?" Ania offered.

Paulina shrugged and rolled her shoulders. "Maybe that was all Joren."

She knew it couldn't be true. In another part of the room, Elayne and Phoebe were having as much success with teaching her distant cousin to tap in to his powers as Leo, Ania and she herself were having. She reached for the ceiling to stretch the stiffened muscles in her back when out of the corner of her eye Paulina noticed a bright, blue light heading straight for her.

"Watch out!" Phoebe yelled in the same instant.

Without thinking, Paulina dropped her left hand to ward off the light. It changed course abruptly, as if it had hit an invisible wall, and ended up in the large rubber tree on the opposite side of the room. The tree exploded in a gush of flames, which vanished so fast that the sprinkler system didn't have time to kick in. Bewildered, Paulina stared at the soot staining the carpet where the plant had been.

"Cole, damn you!"

Slowly, Paulina moved her gaze away from the stain to see the evil boss standing stiff and motionless, like a statue cut from granite. His arm was raised as if he was about to throw something.

"What happened to him?"

"I froze him," Elayne said.

"What the hell was that?" Joren circled Cole's motionless form, studying him.

"A fireball," Phoebe grumbled. "I knew we shouldn't trust him." She turned to Elayne. "Can you unfreeze his head?"

Elayne looked doubtful. "I've never tried that before. I don't know if it's even possible."

"It is. Piper could do it. She had the same power."

Elayne nodded. "I'll try." She gestured with her fingers.

Cole's right knee came up and while he balanced on one leg, he waggled his foot at them.

"His head, I said," Phoebe said over her shoulder at Elayne. "We can't very well ask his foot what this was about, can we?"

"Sorry," Elayne mumbled. Her cheeks colored pink. She gestured again. This time, Cole's left hand moved and waved at them.

Phoebe growled.

Cole's body began to shake and a rumbling sound came from his chest. It took Paulina several seconds to realize it was laughter. Then his entire posture relaxed. He set his foot back on the floor and his right arm dropped to his side.

"Sorry," he grinned at Phoebe. "Couldn't resist. You didn't really believe the witch could freeze me, did you?"

"Why not?" Phoebe demanded. "Piper could."

"Yes, she could. But that's a long time ago, Phoebe. Back then I didn't have the abilities I do now. Plus, I've had a lot of time to learn how to use my powers. Magical powers are like a fine wine: they grow better with age."

"Care to explain what you were doing flinging fireballs at Paulina?" Leo's voice held a slight tremor and he looked shaken.

"Sure." Cole gestured in Joren's direction. The chandelier let go from the ceiling and was about to drop on the man's head, when he batted a hand at it. The lamp flew through the air and shattered against the door several feet away.

Joren's jaw dropped. "I--didn't even touch it," he whispered.

"I'd say that Paulina has the power of deflection." Cole sounded smug. "And Mr. Matthews over there has Prue's telekinesis. Need and desire is what triggers a power for the first time. Not meditation or breathing exercises."

oOo

The pages whispered as Phoebe flipped through the Book of Shadows. Many of the spells and potions described on those pages brought back memories. She discovered that after she had died, Paige and Piper continued to do battle for the forces of good. Although it appeared they didn't have much battling to do. In the span of a few months, San Francisco changed from a demonic nexus to a tranquil, peaceful place. Phoebe's brow furrowed. It was strange. As long as she could remember, after Gram's died and she and her sisters discovered their destiny, the evil attacks never let up. On a weekly basis every demon and warlock imaginable had tried to kill them, steal their Book, or swipe their powers for themselves. Perhaps, she mused as she flipped another page, once the Power

of Three was gone, evil was no longer interested.

Her gaze fell upon the photos and the drawing on the next page and breath escaped unbidden through her teeth. She couldn't tear her eyes away; they were glued to words that she knew by rote, even after all this time. Her lips moved as she read them.

"Beware of this demonic soldier of fortune. As sinister as he is intelligent, he is not to be trusted."

She had studied the description so often in the past, in an attempt to understand Cole's demonic half. Then Emma vanquished Belthazor and only the human Cole was left. It had been hard on him, but those had been the happiest days on her life. Until an evil seer came along and used Cole for her own diabolical ambitions.

"Phoebe?" Paulina's voice startled Phoebe out of her reminiscence.

"Yes?" She looked up to see the girl standing beside her chair.

The young witch creased a piece of paper in her fingers. "Could you--I mean, I tried--I wrote a spell?" Her face twisted in uncertainty.

Phoebe smiled and held out her hand. "Sure." She unfolded the piece of paper. "You really enjoy discovering you're a witch, don't you?"

Paulina gave a shrug. "I guess. The night my parents died--they said the fire destroyed everything in the house. I never had anything that belonged to them. Except for a few vague memories." Her face lit up with a dreamy smile. "Now, I do."

Phoebe recalled the little girl she left on the sidewalk, with big, fat tears on her round cheeks. "I'm sorry," she said. She squinted and tried to read the words on the sheet. Why couldn't they have remade her glasses as well, when they resurrected her body? Or fixed her eyesight, while they were at it.

"Sorry about the handwriting," Paulina mumbled. "I usually use a voice-activated scribe."

"It's okay," Phoebe assured her absently. She held the page at arm's length to make out the scribbles.

"This is really good," she added once she had finished reading the spell.

"Really?"

"Yes. I only have one suggestion. See, if you replace 'fate' with 'fortune', it is much more specific."

Paulina repeated the change Phoebe suggested aloud as if to taste the words on her tongue. "You're right! Thank you!"

Phoebe smiled at her enthusiasm. "Just remember, the true power is not in the words. They are merely an aid. A witch's power is in her blood."

"I know. I remember." Paulina folded the piece of paper and stuffed it in a pocket of her jeans.

"What are you doing?" She took in the Book of Shadows on the coffee table. "Hey! Isn't that you? And--" She leaned forward to get a better look at the pictures.

Phoebe followed her gaze. The Book lay open on the page she herself had added, as a warning to future witches to beware one Cole Turner. "Yeah. That's me. And Cole." Her voice was soft as she remembered how devastated she had been the first time --or should that be second?-- when Cole betrayed her and killed the witch Jenna.

"Is it really true?" Paulina asked. "That you and he were married, I mean."

"It is. It didn't work out. We tried to hard to make it work but--I guess we came from too different worlds." She shrugged. Admitting failure still hurt. She could feel tears form in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Paulina said guiltily. "I didn't mean to bring up bad memories. It must be hard for you, having to work with him."

Phoebe nodded, distrusting her voice.

She was spared any further painful trips down memory lane when the door opened. Joren walked in with Leo. Cole followed on their heels.

"So, now that we have Phoebe and that spell, how will we get this Hollow to come here?" Joren articulated the words 'spell' and 'Hollow' carefully, as if he wasn't sure of their pronunciation. He was having a hard time coming to grips with the concept of being a male witch. It was more difficult for him than for Paulina. She was much younger and therefore much more open to strange and incredible developments. Phoebe suspected that if Joren hadn't seen a few spells come into effect with his own eyes, or done magic with his own hands, he would have left a long time ago.

"Simple," Cole replied. "I will put out word that the Power of Three has been restored. There's no way the Hollow's wielder will be able to resist the shine of that much magic."

"Wouldn't that bring half the demon world down on us, trying to kill us?" Phoebe asked. "Again."

Leo glanced sideways at Cole, who was studying his fingernails.

"No, it won't." Leo crossed his arms. "Not as long as Cole is in charge. He has declared the Halliwell line off limits to any demon under his rule. They won't dare cross him."

Phoebe opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her teeth grazed her lower lip as she thought it over. Cole had been the cause of the peace in San Francisco? It was because of him that Piper had been able to live a normal life, as she so often proclaimed to want? That Paige had returned to being a social worker, something she did so well before dedicating herself to the Power of Three full-time?

"Is that why their powers were lost?" She dipped her head at the two witches.

"Not lost," Leo amended. "Gone dormant. But yes. Without the need to defend themselves, the knowledge of the craft was slowly lost from your family line."

"An unexpected side effect," Cole muttered. He avoided her eyes. "I wanted your sisters and their children to be safe, that's all."

Phoebe placed a hand on Cole's arm. He tensed beneath her touch.

"Thank you."

His arm muscles relaxed under her fingers. "You're not upset?"

"Upset? Cole, you did what you did for unselfish reasons. How could I ever be upset about that?"

CHAPTER 10

Cole manifested in the conference room without a sound. He glanced down. His feet stood planted in the center of the pentagram drawn within the circle on the concrete floor. "Looks like that entryway spell works," he muttered when he looked up and found four witches, a whitelighter and an Elder eye him expectantly. "I was aiming for that

corner of the room." He indicated the corner furthest from the circle with a nod.

Elayne's features smoothed with pleasure.

"It is done," Cole continued while cautiously stepping over the chalk lines. "The underworld is buzzing with the news of the restoration of the Power of Three."

"So. Now we wait." Phoebe idly twirled a white crystal between her fingers.

Four similar stones were placed at even distances on the edge of the circle, each on a point of the pentacle. When completed, the circle of crystals would create a magical cage to restrain the wielder of the Hollow. Phoebe held the fifth crystal; she would put it on the last point of the star as soon as the demon appeared. The cage was strong enough to contain any but the most potent magic. Cole had tested it and found he could fight free from the cage if he exerted himself but nobody expected the wielder of the Hollow to be that powerful. Not yet, at least. Cole hoped they were right.

"Yes. We wait."

oOo

Joren stood at the window, staring out into the night. "How much longer is this going to take? It'll be morning soon." A strong wind had blown away the clouds and the night sky was clear. The stars, however, were invisible. They vanished before the glare from millions and millions of windows that made up the sprawling city below. The full moon was a pale round disk far to the south. "How do we know he's telling the truth? Maybe he's been behind it all along."

Cole didn't need Joren to elaborate to know who the 'he' was that the witch was talking about. The man had been suspicious of him from the first moment Leo explained his role.

"It takes time," Leo said, "for word to travel along the grapevine to the far reaches of the underworld. Be patient."

Joren snorted.

Paulina sat on a chair near the southern edge of the circle. Her right foot jumped as she dangled one leg across the other. She looked at Leo. "If this thing eats magic, what happens when it's all gone?"

"Then no creature of magic could live. Faeries, goblins, mermaids, they would cease to exist."

"Those aren't real! Are they?"

Leo chuckled. "Did you believe witches were real, before today?"

"Uhm, no." Paulina's brow creased. "You mean, Joren and I would--die?" Her tone held the incredulity of any sixteen-year-old with a strong sense of their own immortality.

"No," Leo assured her. "You would be fine. A witch is a human being with magical powers. Without them, you would still be a human."

"But all those evil things that you told us about, those demons and warlocks, they would be gone, too, right? They couldn't hurt anyone ever again. Isn't that a good thing?"

"Whitelighters are magical, like demons. Without magic, we can't exist," Ania said softly. "Leo and I would be gone."

"Oh..." Paulina fell silent for a while. "What if the demon doesn't come? Maybe that Hollow-thing knows it's a trap."

"He'll be here," Cole mumbled. "The Power of Three is too alluring to withstand. The Hollow will force him to come."

Phoebe peered at Cole, watching him with a pensive expression on her face. "This is the worst part," she whispered. "The waiting. Knowing something's coming, but having no idea when or how or what it will look like. Once the action starts, you have no more time to be afraid. You just do what must be done. It's the waiting that will kill you."

She hopped from her chair, walked down past the table and started browsing the Book of Shadows. "There has to be a faster way," she muttered below her breath. "We didn't sit around to wait last time."

She turned another page. "Ha! I thought I remembered something." She tapped a finger on the Book. "We can use this spell. It'll call whatever witch powers the Hollow already consumed. Whoever has it, will come along with it." She glanced up at Cole. "It's how we got the Source to come to us."

Leo contemplated for a moment. "Let's do it."

Phoebe held out her hands to Joren and Paulina and they went to stand beside her. They squinted down and read from the Book:

*"Powers of the witches;
Rise;
Course unseen across the skies;
Come to us who call you near;
Come to us and settle here."*

For a few seconds nothing happened. Paulina opened her mouth to say something when the world exploded into a flare of bright light.

"Watch out!" Cole shouted.

Out of nowhere a yellow globe shot forward and, trailing flames, streaked across the room to hit Phoebe's shoulder. She cried out in pain, dropping the crystal from a suddenly useless hand. The stone skittered across the room and disappeared beneath the conference table.

A shape began to form in the middle of the magic circle. It quickly gained substance until a tall, good-looking man, with broad shoulders and a shock of wavy brown hair stood in the room. White teeth were bared in a smirk.

"That's him." Ania was rooted to the floor.

The stranger flicked a finger at Paulina and green lightning struck out for her.

She instantly raised her left hand to defend herself.

"No!" Phoebe yelled a warning, but it was too late.

Paulina deflected the lightning.

The Hollow consumed her power.

The man in the circle chortled. "Thank you, dear." He raised his hand once more.

"Hey!" Cole shouted while he pelted a blue fireball at the stranger. He knew the power would be lost to him the instant he turned it on the Hollow, but he couldn't allow the wielder of such magic to attack Phoebe again.

The stranger laughed, a cackling noise, while he turned Cole's energy ball aside with his newly acquired power of deflection. The sphere came tearing back across the room.

Cole ducked. Too slow. The bolt hit him square in the chest. Breath whooshed from his

lungs on impact. He flew several feet through the air to crash into the wall and land in a heap at its bottom.

Phoebe scrambled back to her feet; her right arm dangled limply beside her body. Paulina stood stock still, staring open-mouthed at the stranger. He hadn't moved from the middle of the circle. He either thought himself invincible, or simply didn't realize what danger the magical symbol represented.

Cole struggled to draw a new breath. His ears were ringing. Good thing he was nearly invincible, he dimly thought while he shook his head to regain his bearings. Or he'd have been killed with his own fireball. He chuckled wryly.

One of Cole's familiar blue spheres appeared over the man's hand. It hovered while he smirked in Cole's direction. "I thank you, my friend. This is some power you gave me." He turned away and met Joren's gaze. "So, witch, what have you got to offer?" The ball zipped through the air.

The male witch flung up his hands in defense.

"Don't!" Phoebe warned. "The Hollow will take it."

"The crystal. Get the crystal!" Cole pointed beneath the table where the stone glistened in the shadows.

Understanding washed over Joren's face. Instead of warding off the fireball, he dove out its path. As he landed on the floor, he gestured with his fingers. The white crystal flew from beneath the table and landed on the fifth point of the star, completing the circle. Five beams of sizzling white light shot from the stones to connect over the stranger's head.

He threw a blue ball at the light. It bounced back and forth against the light bars, forcing the captive to duck until it sizzled out harmlessly. The man screamed in rage.

Cole took up his position at the northern tip of the pentagram. A white crystal pulsed brightly in front of him. Joren scrambled back onto his feet and joined Paulina and Phoebe at the southern edge. He looked shaken.

Leo hurried closer and opened the little box that was meant to contain the Hollow. It emitted a black light, ready to take back the power and lock it within.

"Let's do this," Phoebe muttered. With her left hand, she dug a piece of paper from her front pocket and gave it to Paulina. The girl unfolded it. Joren and Phoebe leaned closer

as in one voice they read the spell that was written there.

*"Prudence, Penelope, Patricia, Melinda;
Piper, Paige, Josephine, Elizabeth;
Astrid, Helena, Laura and Grace;
Halliwell witches, stand strong beside us;
Vanquish this evil;
From time and space!"*

As soon as the last word left their mouths, Cole directed his massive power toward the cage to add it to theirs. His magic worked differently, he didn't need spells or rhymes to activate it.

For an eternal instant nothing happened. Then the man in the circle shrieked. The flesh seemed to melt from his bones, the pleasant human facade fading. What appeared beneath it--Cole had to look away. The creature was too ugly to behold with human eyes. It screeched, a sound so alien and shrill, Cole had never heard anything like it. He winced in sympathy. He had experienced the agony of being vanquished.

The shriek rose in pitch and Cole threw up his hands to cover his ears. An invisible fist shoved him back as hot air rushed out from the circle. Behind his closed eyes, he could still see the flash of lightning. Its afterimage faded slowly. Then all was still and dark. Cautiously, Cole peeked out from beneath his lashes.

Smoke drifted up from a scorch mark in the middle of the circle. The crystals were a grimy black and no longer pulsed. At other side of the circle, the three witches stood huddled.

"What the hell was that?" Joren seemed rattled.

"I have no idea," Cole answered. "I've never seen anything like it before. Probably came from another dimension."

Paulina's gaze remained focused on the spot on the floor and she was trembling. Phoebe reached for the girl and hugged her tight. Cole thought she looked rather satisfied with the outcome.

A soft click sounded loud in the silence and all heads turned in the direction of the noise. Leo held up the little black box. "The Hollow is gone," he announced. "It's been put back where it belongs. All magic it took has been returned to the world. All magic is safe from its influence now."

"What--what does that mean?" Paulina stammered, finding her voice at last.

Cole grinned. He tossed her a blue sphere the size of a ping-pong ball. She turned it away with ease. "It means that the world is returned to how it was supposed to be."

He caught Phoebe's dark eyes and she glanced away, the satisfied expression bleeding from her face. "Not all," she muttered.

EPILOGUE

They found her outside on the hover deck, huddled deep in a jacket she'd borrowed off Joren. The wind whipped strands of dark hair about her face and she absently brushed them from her eyes while she stared out across the city. The maze of skyscrapers and highrises bathed in the soft, pink glow of the rising sun.

"Phoebe?"

She gave a start when Leo called. Her eyes fixed on the Elder as she turned toward them. "Can you send me back?" Her voice was soft.

Leo shook his head. "I'm sorry, Phoebe, but I can't. Not unless I kill you."

She glanced up at Cole. "Cole?"

"What?"

A gasp escaped him when the implication hit. "No! Phoebe, I could never hurt you!"

Tears gleamed in her eyes. "Cole, you don't understand. What am I going to do in this world? I don't belong here." She waved a hand at the awakening city. The sky was slowly filling with airtaxis, taking commuters to their jobs. "Look at what's become of the San Francisco I loved! I don't understand this time. Too much has changed since I lived, I don't think I could ever adapt."

She sighed and blinked back tears. "It was--nice where I was. Quiet, peaceful. And Grams was there, and Mom and Prue and everyone I knew. They will miss me. I need to go back. And I will. With or without your help." Her gaze left them and she stared at the abyss between the skyscrapers with longing.

"Phoebe, I think you may have another option," Leo offered. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder to turn her away from the view.

She looked suddenly hopeful. "What is it?"

"The Hollow," Leo said. "Its guardians were killed when that thing set it loose. Two new guardians are required to protect the box. I have asked Cole to take the responsibility for the other side. He has accepted. I would like you to be our guardian. It would give your life a purpose that this world could never offer."

Phoebe's mouth worked. Her gaze shifted from Leo to Cole and back. "With him? For all time?"

"See?" Cole said resignedly. "Told you she wouldn't want to do it." He looked off. "Listen, Phoebe, it doesn't have to be me. If you want to do this, be the Hollow's guardian, I will find someone else to guard it with you. Someone more to your liking. The decision is yours, and only yours." He turned to walk away.

"Cole, wait." Phoebe laid a hand on his arm to prevent him from leaving. "That's not it."

"You know," Leo said suddenly, "I remembered something I need to discuss with Ania before she takes Paulina home. Why don't you take your time to think about it? I'll hear what you decided later." He didn't bother to wait for a reply; he didn't even walk away but simply orbed.

Silence hung heavy in the air when Phoebe and Cole were alone. Her hand felt warm on his arm, even through the cloth of his jacket. He was reluctant to shake it off.

"Phoebe, I understand that you don't want to guard the Hollow with me. I know how much you hate me. You don't have to explain, I understand."

She shook her head. "No, you don't understand, Cole. I don't hate you. I never did. I love you. I haven't stopped loving you." She peered up at him, her eyes dark and unfathomable. "Don't you see? That's the problem. I love you. I loved you so much that I let you crown me queen of the underworld. I deceived my sisters, betrayed everything I believed in. For you. For love. It killed me inside, being evil, realizing what I had done. I couldn't be with you after that. I didn't dare take the risk. It was too dangerous. I had to push you away, because it frightened me to be with you, Cole. You frightened me to death."

He was at a loss for things to say. 'I'm sorry,' would sound feeble.

"I suppose you were right, too," he mumbled, taking a step away so her hand fell off his arm. "I am evil. I did return to the underworld. If you had stayed with me--"

"It might not have happened," Phoebe broke in. "I can see that now. Nobody is all evil, or all good. Everyone is a mix of both sides. It was out of fear for the darkness within me that I pushed you away, pushed you right back into the hands of the underworld. But you have done good things too. What you did these last few days. When you helped me get the Book back from the past. What you did for the Warren line of witches." She glanced up to meet his gaze. "And I know that you returned Piper's baby after she was kidnapped."

Cole's eyes widened in surprise.

She smiled. "Piper wrote about it in the Book, right next to the pictures of you I put in there. I don't know why she thought it would be useful information, but it helped me see the truth." The smile faded and her expression turned serious. "Cole, I apologize for not believing in you before. And if you'll have me, I would love to guard the Hollow with you."

"I take it that's settled then?" Leo's voice startled them both as he reappeared in a shower of tiny lights.

"Leo!" Phoebe cried. Her eyes narrowed. "You didn't have anything to discuss with Ania, did you? You were listening in! That's not very polite."

Leo shrugged and offered her a sheepish grin.

Cole chuckled. "And they dare call me bad."

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