Chapter 13 – Patrick

Chris

The room we entered was large and empty. A sign on the dusty window indicated it was closed for renovation, but it didn't say what was closed. Antone was in front with Sylvio behind him. I noticed that neither of them made a noise or left footprints in the dust, but Mom's were quite clear. I looked behind me and mine were too. It must be a vampire thing.

We crossed the whole space, passing columns that supported the floor above. The door at the far side opened for Antone and revealed stairs going down. Mom couldn't stifle a gasp, and neither could I. Evil oozed up the stairs and out the door, bringing memories of excruciating pain and raw fear. The dark spirits around us swelled and absorbed that evil into themselves. They *liked* it. I felt sick at their intent as they gathered around me, anticipating what was next. I wanted to brush them away but did as Mom was doing and brought them with me.

When my feet hit the stairs I could feel the other beings in that basement. There were five children, five innocent souls who were now wounded and terrified, at least four of them were. I could sense the fifth one but there was only blankness there. That was more disturbing than the fear of the others. Mom looked back and caught my eye. I saw her mouth move to say "There are five kids, they're alive," but she spoke so quietly I couldn't actually hear the words. Antone did, his clawed hands fisted and his rage filled the air, adding to the power of the dark spirits.

I felt for the other souls and found them. Once I focused on that I felt their lust, contempt, and actual ecstasy, as they soaked in the dark magic that came from the evil done they had done to their captives. Antone hesitated at the top of the stairs. I reached out and touched his arm. He turned to look at me with eyes that were dark embers, inhuman eyes. Sylvio's turned to look at me as well, his expression even more menacing than Antone's. I held up two fingers. They understood.

Then they were gone, leaving Mom and me at the top of the stairs. I felt the air moving as they sped down to the lower floor, and caught a flash of motion, but it was unclear. I understood now why stories said vampires could disappear. They hadn't teleported, they had simply sped away.

The dark spirits filled the stairwell. Mom and I began descending slowly. We heard a crunch like plastic breaking and then some thumps, but it was the fear that swelled up the stairway that made us move faster and into the room.

It was a large space with columns like the floor above. Most of the floor was cement and part was dirt so that it smelled of damp and mildew – and blood. Black magic pulsed through the room. A circle with symbols had been drawn on the floor. The candles surrounding the circle were black in color with crimson streaks through them . The stench of burnt flesh came from them as they flickered, their flames too strong and high for such small candles. A knife, black around the edge but otherwise clean, flashed in the candlelight. It had clearly been dropped only moments before.

Tied in the center of that circle was a small girl, perhaps eight years old. Blood oozed from sharp precise cuts – symbols carved into her skin that mirrored those on the outer edges of the circle. I felt for her emotions and found – nothing. I gave an involuntary shudder. She had been taken to a point in her mind that was even beyond pain. The little girl's mind was blank, but she still breathed, if shallowly.

I felt a sharp stab in my palm. I had clenched my fists so tightly my fingernail had cut my hand. I forced my hands to relax.

Just outside the circle Sylvio and Antone held the witches, a man and a woman, in their grasp, drinking their life. The pair of witches stared up at the beams with eyes as blank as the little girl's. I had never seen a vampire feed before. It was another shock, as strong as that of the damage that had been done to the little girl's mind. The humans in their arms were absolutely helpless. They were in thrall and what I felt in their minds was intensely disturbing. The two witches *wanted* this pleasure to continue and cared about nothing else, not even that their life was being drained from them as surely as their blood was. The dark spirits reveled in the evil of it, welcoming the vampires, who are their kindred.

I looked away, and blocked my awareness of them. I felt sick and wanted to throw up. Mom's face was as pale as that of the children but her jaw was set in determination and her eyes blazed with anger. She spared only a glance for the vampires then went quickly to the girl tied in the circle, knelt down, and touched her cheek.

When we entered the room the spirits had become visible to me instead of only a presence that I felt. An oily black mass covered all surfaces and floated in the very air. But where Mom's hand touched the girl's cheek there was light, a rainbow of color. Good spirits flowed from her hand and into the

child's mind. They were the spirits of the earth and living things. I wondered where she found them among all that evil? Then I realized we had brought them with us, they were part of us.

The little girl lay still at first then she shivered and shook. Finally, she gasped and sat up. Her eyes lost their blank stare and focused on Mom's face. She began to cry. Her emotions were now a jumble of contradictions, but that was much better than nothing.

I walked toward the other children, who were tied to the far wall on the other side of the circle from Sylvio and Antone. There was more black magic surrounding them. There were three boys and another girl who stared in mute shock at the scene before them. They were all naked. Blue veins showed starkly against their pale, grey skin – the color of illness, death. Fresh scabs covered cuts that still oozed a little. They were weak, and terrified but began to stir when the girl in the middle sat up. A little hope came through to me from them.

I asked the spirits to free their hands and ankles and all four began to fall to the floor, but softly. The air spirits had cushioned them and now wrapped them in warmth. It was cold down in that place. I went to them and gathered them in a huddle. I sent them reassuring feelings that all was well. I found my voice and whispered "You'll be okay, we're here to help you."

We hadn't seen or sensed the third witch standing in the darkness under the stairs. She'd used a concealment charm so powerful we missed it, and the dark spirits would not have shown us – there was too much potential for chaos if they helped her stay hidden.

She flung a curse at Mom. I caught the movement out of the corner of my eye. The curse rebounded off the good spirits shielding both the little girl and Mom. It hit Antone instead.

Antone dropped the witch he'd been feeding from and came toward me, his eyes focused on the children. I had a moment's time to step in his way. In an instant he had a hand in my hair. His claws scored my scalp and his red eyes gleamed with desire. I could do nothing to fight him, the few good spirits we'd brought with us were occupied with the children, and the dark spirits wanted Antone to have his way. His fangs sank into my neck.

I felt his lips, hot from the witch's blood, against my skin. Then he began to suck and I felt the pull in every vein. I was absolutely powerless to stop him. My hands pounding his shoulders might as well have been striking solid granite, and I was too shocked and afraid to concentrate on using magic.

Through my impotent terror I heard my mother's voice in my mind, *"You can control his desires and break the spell. His power is weaker than yours. Allow yourself to blend with his mind then push the demon aside."* Her words rang in my head like a gong, chasing away my fear and filling me with belief. I could think again, but how do I let him in? What did she mean by blending with his mind? I willed myself not to resist and stopped pounding at his shoulders. I sent a plea out to the spirits and opened myself to them.

The room disappeared, we were in a black void, and there were three of us there. The demon in Antone laughed. It was a clear, cold, icy sound that chilled my very bones. I could even see its skeletal white body with red embers for eyes. Antone's mind screamed back at it, he did not want to do this but was impotent under the power of the spell cast by the witch.

I reached for his soul, which glowed brightly in the darkness, and it slid from my grasp, afraid to let me near. I tried again, softly this time, and sent reassurance that we want the same thing. It let me touch it then, and both our souls merged. I was met by a world of pain, and sorrow, and light. This had been a good man, and still tried to be, despite the evil that had been done to him. I felt something else too, his soul was tired of this fight, weary of holding onto its light.

Black strings, sent by the demon, crept toward our souls and began to envelop them in evil. I struck at them, envisioned them burnt to a cinder, but when they began to curl from the heat of my magic Antone's entire being shuddered in pain. I could not separate those strings from Antone, they were a part of him and he could not exist without them.

I brushed the strings aside, made them stay on the outer rim of our souls and not cover us both in darkness. When I stopped resisting their presence the black void was replaced by a miasma of desire, lust, and pleasure. Antone was no longer fighting his need for blood, and I was no longer sure I wanted him to stop.

Mom's voice rescued me again as I began to lose myself and join with him in the pleasure he felt from feeding. *"Now push him away, but gently."*

Again I wasn't sure how to do what she said, but left my trust in the spirits. They unraveled my mind from his, letting his soul slip away, and the tendrils of the demon slid away as well. The dark void dissolved and the basement room came into focus.

I sensed that Antone was licking my neck but I couldn't really feel it. It seemed to be numb. Then he stepped back, breathing hard, and my knees almost wouldn't hold me up. He kept a hand on my shoulder to steady both of us.

Mom was still holding the little girl. She smiled when I looked at her. The fear on her face was replaced by relief that I'd been able to follow her commands. It was clear she had not felt as positive as she sounded when she had spoken in my mind.

I saw movement and turned to see that Sylvio had the third witch in his grasp. He looked from Mom to me then down at the witch. She hissed at him, clawing at his arms and then reaching up attempt a strike at his eyes. He shook her hard enough that she flopped like a rag doll, then hung limp. She was the same size as he was, but her weight was nothing to him.

I thought for a moment he'd broken her neck, but then she revived and twisted in his grip, glaring up at him through her long hair that hung over her face. Black painted fingernails clawed at him again, but her long nails slid off his skin, leaving no marks. Her eyes and the soul behind them were heartless, not as wicked as the demon inside Antone had been, but not far off.

"Do you have the information you need?" Mom asked Sylvio. His eyes slid from the witch, to Antone, and then me. I caught an apology in his gaze before he looked at Mom. He nodded.

She stood up with the girl cradled in her arms. She held her out for Antone to take but he let go of me and took a step back. "I cannot," he croaked, his face a mask of horror. I felt his desire then. He still wanted blood. Mom and I sent calm to him at the same time, gave him peace, and his face relaxed, but he didn't reach out for the girl.

"Go get them some blankets then." Sylvio ordered, but his tone was kind. Antone turned and disappeared on the spot without another word. I felt disappointment spread through the dark spirits whose presence still filled the room.

The witch snarled at Sylvio, "Their souls are tainted now, they'll be drawn to us."

"Thanks for that tidbit, we'll be sure to fix that too." Sylvio shook her again, harder. "I had intended to drink your death myself, but I think I'll leave you for Antone. He'll gladly send your soul to Satan." When he stopped shaking her she hung limp, gasping, and the hatred in her eyes had changed to real fear. She had felt the truth of his words as Mom and I had.

The children huddled behind me were in shock. They had hardly moved at all. I turned my back on the others and concentrated on them. I sent comfort to their souls, trying to hide the rage I felt as I saw once again the evil that had been done to them. It was not only their bodies that had been ravaged. Black magic clung to them, it seemed to be tied to their souls, as it was in Antone. They were all so young. I swallowed the bile that rose up in my throat. There had to be a way to undo this.

Antone reappeared holding a bundle of thick blankets. Mom took them from his and we wrapped them gently around each child. As we did I saw in their eyes that they were beginning to believe they were going to be safe now.

"Antone, will you do away with this thing for us - for them." Sylvio held the witch with her feet off the floor and nodded at the children as he said that last.

"Gladly," Antone's voice was strong and deep again. He walked over to the witch and slowly wrapped a clawed hand in her tangled hair. His eyes held hers and soon she stopped moving, caught by his gaze. Sylvio let her go. Then she cried out in pain as his fangs sank into her neck. Involuntarily, I reached up and touched the small holes on my throat. They had sealed over, and that spot was still numb.

Sylvio said, "I can erase their memories; they've only been here a couple of days. I'll give them false memories, and this part of their lives will only show up as an occasional nightmare."

I sighed with relief and said without thinking, "Thank God for that."

He smiled grimly, "Well, I've no idea if He has anything to do with this but I'm glad it can be done."

He looked over at Antone, who was dropping the dead witch. I noticed she was far too thin now. He had taken every drop it seemed. I felt he was justified. "I'll take them to my condo, but after taking five of them I'll be too tired to come back. Call agent Collins to meet you here." Antone's eyes still gleamed but his face was not as anguished. He nodded.

Sylvio walked over to the children and smiled at them. In only a few moments their fear of him was replaced with trust. Again, I gave a shudder at how easily he captured their minds. He picked up one of the boys and carried him over to one of the chairs the witches had been using. It was a plain chair made of green plastic, the kind people use for outdoor parties, and looked far too ordinary to be down in that dark place. He sat down with the child in his lap.

“You two need to rid the place of the black magic that’s here. We don’t want armed federal agents suddenly feeling the need to kill.” He sounded positive we could do that.

“I really want to burn this place.” Mom growled.

“Well squash that desire and think up something else while I fix these kids’ memories.” He stroked the boy’s hair and looked into his eyes, and suddenly I knew what he intended. I reached out to touch Mom’s arm. The look she gave me told me plainly that this was necessary.

She said, “It’s better in the long run if they never remember what really happened. They won’t recall the magic that was done here, just that bad people took them, Satan worshipers. Their parents and doctors will need some explanation for the cuts on their skin.”

Sylvio felt surprised at her words and looked at her with relief. “I was thinking I’d get an argument from you for what I’m about to do.”

“It’s the lesser of two evils.”

He bent and began to feed. After a few moments I blocked sensing the feelings of pleasure and lust that came from him. I felt Antone’s desire too. He turned his back on the scene.

The children were mostly bundled in blankets but I could see an arm or their faces, and when he’d finished drinking he made them each drink a little from him. The purple and black bruises on their wrists where they had been tied faded to yellow and the cuts on their skin sealed over, showing only scabs rather than open wounds. If they were still bleeding from a cut he would lick it and the bleeding would stop. It took far too long for him to finish with all five.

The most disturbing thing was the look on their faces when he’d finished, they gazed at him with adoration and absolute trust. He picked up the first one and disappeared, coming back in less than a minute to get each of the others.

Antone didn’t turn back around until all the children and Sylvio were gone. When he did face us again his expression was bleak. Mom walked over to him and put a hand on his cheek, sending comfort into his soul. He smiled a wan smile and took a deep breath.

“Leave the bodies and other things for the investigators to sort out.” He said, “It’s the black magic that needs to be purged.”

I said, “My mentor Amanda, in my coven, has shown me how to erase magic spells that have been done, but I’ve never tried on something of this extent.”

Mom smiled at me, “Well, that’s more than I know how to do. I’ll see what I can do with the spirits.”

Rachel

Chris and Antone looked at me with expectation. I thought of each elemental spirit, and besides fire, which I knew how to use to burn away evil, which could be helpful? Air is no good; dark spirits reside in the air anyway. I could use air to keep the bad spirits from leaving, and as I thought of that I wrapped them in a bubble of air before they could wander away.

Chris’s eyebrows rose and I was glad he could now see the spirits; it would make it much easier for him to do our kind of magic. I was still puzzled what to do though. There wasn’t any water near here, so the alternative was earth. I looked at the square of dirt cut into the concrete that lay in front of the space where the kids had been kept tied to the wall, and felt a glimmer of hope.

I gathered the elemental spirits around me. They do not seem tied to time and place as individual spirit beings are – that’s what dark spirits are, individual spirits bent on evil. The elementals exist in a different sphere from the one ordinary humans inhabit.

“Patrick, are you there?” I directed my question at the bare earth, sending the earth spirits down and out, seeking an answer.

Chris and Antone were staring at me like I’d lost my mind. I didn’t look at them directly but had to smile at the expressions I caught a glimpse of. It felt good to smile. “Patrick, can you hear me?” I pushed the earth spirits out with more strength and intent. There was no response for several seconds. It took long enough that I was trying to think up how to explain myself when the entire building lifted and fell, as though a giant were holding it up and had flexed his shoulders. The ground thrummed and made my teeth hum with it. Then there was silence.

I started to say something more but the dirt in that corner began to mound up until it was a column almost as tall as I am. Patrick emerged from the top. Only a few weeks earlier I had learned that if the earth elementals want to show themselves they most often appear as gnomes, although not quite the cute lawn ornaments. He looked like a withered potato with stick arms and legs, a long white beard, and large black eyes, like pebbles of onyx. The line that was his mouth curved up in a smile and he shook

himself. A tiny cap, shorts, and jacket appeared on his body, which lost its wrinkles and dirt, and now looked like old leather.

"Aye lass, what can I do for ya?" His voice was clear but gravelly.

"Hello Patrick. As I recall, not long ago you said it was your turn to use my magic. How about helping us rid this place of the black magic that pervades it? I don't know how to do it on my own."

He looked around at the scene, a little nose appeared on his face and he sniffed. His smile was replaced by a scowl and his black eyes settled on Antone. "All the evil?" he asked.

"Antone is a friend, one of the good guys."

He huffed at that and looked disapproving, then peered at Chris. "Ah, and you lad, you belong to her don't ya?"

Chris looked from the little gnome to me and closed his mouth, then said, "Yes, she's my Mom."

"Well join us in this laddie." He rubbed his little fingers together. The tips of them looked like tiny round shovels.

He grinned wickedly at the mass of black spirits I'd trapped in air. The column of dirt he was standing on cut itself off so there was only a disc for him to float on next to me, the rest melted back into the ground. "And where would ya like the evil to go lass?"

"Where it can do no harm, and can't be accessed again."

His tiny bushy eyebrows rose at that and he smiled with glee, very pleased by my request. I was puzzled why exactly, then he said, "Permanent banishment is powerful magic. The dark spirits will resist it. We'll need the Sylph to assist us."

I gathered all the spirits of the air that I could sense around us, and Chris copied me. They spun in the air and showed themselves in a riot of color. As we pulled at them more came down the stairs, through the cracks in the far doors, and the small dusty windows. They were good spirits, of light and life. The evil pall that had enveloped the place began to weaken with their presence.

I could see forms within the varied colors that now vied with the blackness the witches had called there. They were tiny beings whose wings were bigger than their bodies, and were lit with a light

of their own that was too bright to see their features clearly. I could hear a tinkle of laughter and joy from them, and my heart swelled.

Chris's face was a mask of wonder. He spread his hands and the Sylph covered his palms and lined his arms. He closed his eyes and basked in the joy they brought.

"There hasn't been a sorceress with your powers in this part of the world for centuries." Patrick's Irish lilt was gone when he said that, it was a flat statement, without inflection. I looked at him, trying to read if he thought that was a good thing or not. I couldn't tell from his odd face. Then he shook himself and smiled, showing tiny sharp teeth. He glared at the dark spirits I had captured.

"The Sylph will be glad to be rid of those, but I don't want them roaming my realm either. We will send them to Salamander, who will consume them."

"I was asked not to burn this place." Although if he wanted fire to take them I doubted I would have much say in it.

His eyes twinkled then, "Salamander resides in the heart of the earth." I understood, and smiled back at him. The tension I'd held since we stepped in that room fell from my shoulders. Things were going to be ok.

The spirits began their dance, I'd come to recognize it was when they sensed a chance for their power to be used. They swirled and tossed around us, being careful not to interfere with the bubble the dark spirits were trapped in. I could feel it as those dark beings began to resist and push at their cage. Chris felt it too and sent more power to assist me with holding them.

Patrick was staring intently at the center of the square of dirt. I wondered absently why it was there. Had something been removed maybe, or buried there? The evil in the place seemed to be centered on that patch of earth.

Nothing changed for several minutes, but Patrick maintained his stance and the dance of the Sylph became a tempest. Then I felt a request, a pull to give my magic to the gnome. At first I could not figure out quite what to do. Then I thought of how I let Sylvio into my mind and shared with him. So I tried that.

Many things changed at once. I could feel Patrick's own power blend with mine, our minds were bent on the same goal, and he pulled at my magic with such force it was painful. Chris's magic joined

ours and I heard him gasp from the shock of it. Then we were simply conduits as the magic sank into the ground and enhanced what the earth elements – Patrick, had been doing. I felt the spear of magic he'd made sinking farther and farther into the depths, opening a tunnel to the very fires that give the planet life. A tempest so hot nothing else can exist. The fire of the stars. All of me was consumed by the magic, I could not see, hear, or feel anything else.

When the spear found Salamander's home it sent a shock through all of us, like a giant cymbal crashing over our heads. The room came into focus again. Patrick looked tired; his leathery face seemed to have aged, matching his scraggly beard. There was a hole in the middle of the bare dirt, about the size of a frying pan, and it glowed. I could feel the fire wanted to shoot up out of that space and consume us all.

I could see bones in the earth; this place had been used many times for malicious acts. I wondered if that's why it was empty. Normal humans can feel the evil in a place, even if they can't sense the magic.

We didn't have much time. I asked the Sylph to wrap the dark spirits in a column of the same size and felt Chris lend his help. There was movement on my left and I saw that Antone was wrapped in air spirits. Like they had done with the dark spirits they were pulling at the evil in him and he writhed in the air, his face contorted in pain. My heart sank; I could do nothing to help him. All I could do was watch in mute horror as the Sylph ripped the darkness from him. They brought the ball of evil they had torn from him and pushed it into the column to join the other dark spirits. Antone fell backwards onto the cement floor, crashing sideways like a column of stone, his eyes open and staring. He lay dead and still.

I had never called on so much magic before. I could feel it was costing me. But the air did our bidding and the black magic in the place was sucked into the column as it began a slow spiral. I could see the limbs of the evil spirits clawing at their prison, and feel their anger and then despair as the column touched the glowing hole.

Salamander appeared then, crawling out of the hole, this time as a long, slim golden dragon with streaks of fire on her sides. She slithered like a serpent around the column and her ruby eyes glittered with glee. She wound her way to the top and opened her mouth wide; her teeth were silver like tiny spears and her tongue glowed orange. She swallowed the whole column, her sides expanding as she went, and crawled back down into the hole.

It took even longer to send them down than it had for Patrick's spear to make the pathway, but finally they were taken by Salamander down to the center of the earth and were no more. The tunnel collapsed. Chris and I fell to our knees at the same time. We were both trembling, our breaths coming in gasps.

Patrick tipped his hat and smiled at us then turned over and reached toward the earth with his little spoon fingers. He swam beneath the surface without disturbing any dirt and was gone.

We didn't move for some time, my legs wouldn't hold me up anyway, so I lay down on the floor and stared at the big wooden beams that ran the length of the room. Cobwebs clung to the corners and the tops of the columns that held up the beams. The room seemed not to have changed, other than the oily feel of black magic was mostly gone, and the only spirits wandering the room were a few Sylph. It was incongruous that so much could have happened and the room still appeared ordinary.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Antone stir and rub his face. He got to his feet and brushed himself off. Then he walked over and looked down at me.He was grinning widely and seemed almost giddy with joy. I smiled back and raised an eyebrow.

His voice rumbled through the dim and dusty room. "I don't know what you've done to me, but damn, it feels good." He held his hand out and helped me to my feet.

"I don't know either, but I'm glad." I touched his cheek and he leaned on my palm for a moment then stepped over to help Chris stand up.

Chris said, "I feel like I just ran a marathon."

"Yep, that's a pretty good comparison." I agreed. There was still magic in the air, a little of the magic that comes from enchantments and spells lingered. "You said you can erase magic?"

He rubbed his face, took a deep breath, and let it out. He reached under his coat and produced a wand from his back pocket. I had to smile at that. He shook his hands then spread his arms wide and said, "Dileu hud yn awr"

I had learned from the Grimoire my mother had left for me that most spells are spoken in Old English, Celtic, or Welsh, I wondered which this was, but didn't want to distract him with a question.

The remaining magic in the room coalesced and centered on Chris's wand. When it was all near him he said, "Mynd, nid oes unrhyw niwed." I felt a blast of air and then there was no more magic, even

the spirits were calm. Cold returned to the room, and more light came from the small windows at the far side of the space.

I let out the breath I hadn't known I was holding, and Chris sagged back down to sit on the floor. I stepped to his side and joined him. My legs were wobbly anyway. We both looked up at Antone, who was still grinning. He took a phone out of his pocket. I was surprised; he rarely had a cell phone on him. But I hadn't been invited on a witch hunt before now either, so maybe he brought it for that.

He called someone and held the phone at arm's length as it began to ring. He'd put it on speaker. A pleasant voice came on the line that was obviously a recording with a menu. Antone typed four more numbers and we heard it ring again.

They picked up after two rings. "Antone?" it was a woman's voice.

"Good morning Agent Collins."

"Hang on a moment." We heard her speaking to someone else but I couldn't catch the words, then there was the distinct sound of a door closing. Moments later she said, "Ok, it's only me here now."

Without preamble Antone began, "We've found some kids who are likely to be on your kidnapped or missing list."

"Found?" She obviously knew there would be more to his story than that.

"They're alive but in rough shape. They'll need a doctor, but it's not urgent. Sylvio took them someplace safe."

They're not at the crime scene?" Now she sounded annoyed.

"It was best that they be taken away from here."

I caught a sigh, "Are you're at the crime scene?"

"Yes, can you get a fix on it from my phone? I can go up and get the address if you need it."

There was a pause and we heard a muffled order, but I'm sure Antone could hear it fine. He waited. A couple minutes later she said, "Ok yes, we've got it. You're only about twenty minutes away. But it'll take a while to gather the right people for this investigation."

"How long?"

“Give us an hour or so. Do the kids need to be taken to a hospital?”

“No, Sylvio helped them out.”

There was a pause, “Do I want to know what that means?”

“Probably not.”

“What will we find when we get there?”

“A nest of black witches, three are dead, but it might be easier if your reports say they were Satan worshipers. There’s plenty of evidence to photograph.”

There was another pause, and I had time to realize this was not an unusual conversation for Agent Collins. I wondered how long she had known Antone.

Eventually, she asked, “Does this have anything to do with the man who died at Snowbird?”

“He was the start of the trail.”

Still sounding annoyed she said, “Have you found the end of that trail?”

“Not yet, but the witches here provided us with more information.”

“You two cause me to practice a lot of creative writing on my reports.”

“You’re welcome.”

The sigh she gave that time was loud and clear. “Where are the kids?”

“Sylvio will give you that information.”

We heard some papers shuffling and the click of a keyboard, then she said, “We have three cases this past week that look like kidnappings but no one has contacted the parents yet. What are the kids’ names?”

“We didn’t ask them. They should be well enough when Sylvio contacts you to talk.”

“Ok I’ll get the ball rolling here, and come up with a way to keep the other agents on those cases out of it. See you soon.”

Antone hung up and grinned at us again. He patted his pants pockets, reached in and pulled out a wad of bills, then put it back in. “I’ll get you something to eat, or do you want to go with?”

I really didn't want to stay down there with the dead, but I felt wrung out. Chris rolled to his knees and stood up, then offered me his hand. Antone took my elbow on the other side, and we started up the stairs. When we emerged it was late morning. I saw from the signs and billboards that we were in Sandy. We found a McDonalds around the corner and I realized I was quite hungry. I ordered McGriddles, breakfast is my favorite meal.