

Prologue

"Got another CSI question for you," Gloria said as Simon walked into the communication hub with an armload of papers. "If you're not busy."

"Perfect timing," Simon said. "I'm just about to start my coffee break." He started pulling a chair to Gloria's workstation, then hesitated. "Can I get you something?"

Gloria smiled and shook her head. Simon moved the chair beside hers, being careful not to block her view of the digital display city map on the side wall. That's what Gloria loved about shamans, they were so damned considerate. You want a nice guy, you get a shaman. You want a self-centered jerk, you get a half-demon.

Her shift partner, Erin, hated it when Gloria said that. Racial discrimination, she called it. Of course Gloria didn't really believe every half-demon was a jerk—she was a half-demon herself—but that didn't keep her from saying so to Erin. Night shift in the communication hub could get deathly dull, and there was nothing like a good political correctness debate to liven things up.

Gloria pushed her chair back, one eye still on her monitor. "Okay, so I'm watching CSI last week, and they trick this guy into giving them DNA. Then, like five minutes later, they tell him it's a match. Can you really analyze DNA that fast?"

"Can they? Or can we?" Simon said. "For a municipal crime lab, it's damn near impossible. With our lab, though, there's no political wrangling about overtime and budgets and case precedence. We can't analyze a DNA specimen in five minutes, but—"

Gloria's headset beeped twice: an incoming call on the emergency line. She lifted a finger to Simon, then swung around. Even before the call connected, data began flashing on her computer screen as the call tracer went to work. She glanced over her shoulder to see the map of Miami replaced by another city: Atlanta.

Gloria reached for the button to page Erin back from lunch, but Simon beat her to it, simultaneously grabbing Erin's headset to put it on.

The line clicked.

"Cortez emergency services," Gloria said.

A female voice came on, shrill and garbled with panic. "—help—park—man—"

Gloria soothed the caller with reassurances that help was on its way. She could barely make out a word the caller said, but it didn't matter. The computers had already pinpointed the location, a pay phone in an Atlanta park. The Cabal had an office in Atlanta, which meant they had an emergency crew there, and the computer automatically dispatched them the moment it located the call's origin. Gloria's only job was to keep the caller calm until the team arrived.

"Can you tell me your name, honey?"

"D —an M—ur."

Sobs punctuated the words, rendering them unintelligible. Gloria glanced at her monitor. The computer was analyzing the voice, trying to match what it heard against the roster of Cabal employees and employee families. A list of several dozen names appeared. Then the computer factored in gender, an age estimate, and the call location. It came back with a list of five names. Gloria focused on the top one, the computer's best guess.

"Dana?" she said. "Are you Dana MacArthur, honey?"

A muffled "yes".

"Okay, now, I want you to find someplace—"

The line went dead.

"Damn!" Gloria said.

"The Atlanta team just phoned in," Simon said. "Ten-minute ETA. Who is it?"

Gloria waved a hand at her screen. Simon leaned over to look at the photo. A teenage girl grinned back.

"Ah, shit," he said. "Not another one."

The driver swung the SUV into the park and dowsed the lights. Dennis Malone stared out the window into the overcast night. He turned to tell Simon they'd need good lighting, and saw that the crime-scene tech was already fiddling with his flashlight, replacing the batteries. Dennis nodded, stifled a yawn, and rolled down the window for some air. On the jet, he'd loaded up on

caffeine, but it wasn't kicking in. He was getting too old for this. Even as the thought flitted past, he dismissed it with a smile. The day he retired without a fight would be the day they found him cold and stiff in his bed.

He had the best damned job a cop could want. Head of the finest investigative unit in the country, with the kind of resources and funding his old buddies in the FBI could only dream about. And he didn't just get to solve crimes, he got to plan them. When the Cortezes needed to get rid of someone, they came to Dennis and, together with his team, he'd devise the perfect crime, one that would stump the authorities. That was the best part of his job. What he was doing tonight was the worst. Two in one week. Dennis told himself it was a coincidence, random attacks unconnected to the Cabal itself. The alternative . . . well, no one wanted to consider the alternative.

The SUV stopped.

"Over there," the driver said, pointing. "To the left, behind those trees."

Dennis swung open his door and stepped out. He rolled the kinks from his shoulders as he surveyed the site. There was nothing to see. No crime scene tape, no television crews, not even an ambulance. The Cabal EMTs had been and gone, arriving silently in an unmarked minivan, then speeding back into the night, headed for the airport where they'd load their passenger on the same jet that had brought Dennis and Simon to Atlanta.

Over by a stand of trees, a flashlight signaled with an on-off flicker.

"Malone," Dennis called. "Miami SD."

The light went on and a heavyset blond man stepped out. New guy, recently come over from the St. Cloud Cabal. Jim? John?

Greetings were a brief exchange of hellos. They only had a few hours until daybreak, and a lot of work to do before then. Both Jim and the driver who'd brought them from the airport were trained to assist Dennis and Simon, but it would still take every minute of those remaining hours to process the scene.

Simon moved up behind Dennis, camera in one hand, light source in the other. He handed the light source to the driver—Kyle, wasn't it?—and pointed out where he wanted Kyle to aim it.

Then he started snapping pictures. It took a moment for Dennis to see what Simon was photographing. That was one advantage to having shaman crime techs—lead them to a scene and they instinctively picked up the vibes of violence and knew where to start working.

Following the angle of Simon's camera lens, Dennis looked up to see a rope dangling from an overhead limb, the end hacked off. Another length lay on the ground, where the EMTs had removed it from the girl's throat.

"It took me a while to find her," Jim said. "If I'd been just a few minutes faster . . ."

"She's alive," Dennis said. "If you hadn't been that fast, she wouldn't be."

His cell-phone vibrated. He took it from his pocket. A text message.

"Have you updated Mr. Cortez?" he asked Jim. "He hasn't received a site report yet."

From Jim's expression, Dennis knew he hadn't sent one. With the St. Cloud Cabal you probably didn't phone anyone in the family at three A.M. unless the Tokyo stock market had just crashed. Not so when you worked for the Cortezes.

"You've filled out a preliminary report sheet, right?" Dennis said.

Jim nodded and fumbled to pull his modified PalmPilot from his jacket.

"Well, send it to Mr. Cortez immediately. He's waiting to notify Dana's father and he can't do that until he knows the details."

"Mr . . .? Which Mr. Cortez?"

"Benicio," Simon murmured as he continued snapping pictures. "You need to send it to Benicio."

"Oh? Uh, right."

As Jim transmitted the report, Simon moved back to photograph the rope on the ground. Blood streaked the underside of the coil and Dennis flinched, imagining his granddaughter lying there. This wasn't supposed to happen. Not to Cabal children. You worked for a Cabal, your kids were protected.

"Randy's girl, wasn't it?" Simon said softly behind him. "The older one?"

Dennis could barely picture Randy MacArthur, let alone know how many kids he had. Simon was almost certainly right, though. Lead the man once around a corporate picnic, and the next day he'd be sure to ask Joe Blow in Accounting whether his son's cold was improving.

"What is her father?" Jim asked.

"Half-demon," Simon said. "An Exaudio, I believe."

Both Jim and Dennis nodded. They were half-demon, as were most of the Cabal's policing force, and they knew what this meant. Dana would have inherited none of her father's powers.

"Poor kid never had a chance," Dennis said.

"Actually, I believe she is a supernatural," Simon said. "If I'm not mistaken, her mother is a witch, so she would be one as well."

Dennis shook his head. "Like I said, poor kid never had a chance."