



The Case of the Invisible Witch



PATRICE LYLE



Welcome to  
POISON IVY  
CHARM SCHOOL

Mystery Series  
by  
PATRICE LYIE

BOOK 1  
Case of the  
Invisible Witch

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, or events is entirely coincidental.

The Case of the Invisible Witch

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# The Case of the Invisible Witch



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BOOKS BY PATRICE LYIE



Poison Ivy Charm School

Case of the Invisible Witch

Case of the Washed-Up Warlock



Lethally Blonde





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## TULIP BONNAIRE, WITCH PI 4 HIRE

"Tulip, you've got to help me," a panicked, high-pitched voice said from somewhere in my room. "I'm sorry it's so late, but this is a matter of life and death."

I yanked off my lavender bejeweled sleep-mask and sat straight up in bed, my red hair tumbling past my shoulders like crimson flames. I switched on my tulip lamp that sat on my nightstand, and violet-colored light illuminated my room.

But there was no body to go with the voice I'd just heard.

OK, that was totally *weird-o-rama*. I was positive I'd heard something. A twinge of fear shot through me, all the way down to my purple-painted toenails. What if a ghost had slipped into my room and was trying to scare me?

"Hello? Who's there?" I wrapped my comforter tightly around my legs and braced myself. No way would I let some freaky ghouls mess with me.



"It's me," the voice said. "Missy Ulums."

"Where?" I reached for my sparkly silver glasses and slid them onto my face. "I recognize your voice, but I can't see you."

"I'm right here. Look." The purple fleece blanket thrown across the foot of my bed twitched. "I'm invisible."

An indentation formed on my comforter as if someone was sitting down next to me. I jumped up from my bed. "Is this some kind of joke? I saw you at dinner tonight. You had the lasagna and garlic cheese bread, just like I did."

This didn't make any sense, even to me. And I'm pretty darn open-minded for a thirteen-year-old.

"I also had the four-layer chocolate cake, but I've been like this since midnight," she said. "Totally invisible."

I glanced at my crystal ball alarm clock. 3:31 AM. So much for my beauty rest. "What happened?"

Missy sighed. "I guess I made the wrong bunch of mean girls mad at me."

"You mean the Belles?" Their nicknames were pretty dumb. I mean, who created exclusivity on the basis of similar first names? Even if Annabelle, Isabelle, and Rosabelle were triplets. Certainly not me or my friends. We were way more interested in the latest development in detective work and spells.

And cute boys. Especially one in particular.

"Yeah, but I don't know what I did," Missy said. "All I know for sure is I woke up around eleven thirty to find them in my dorm room casting

a spell on me.”

That got my attention. We were all live-in students at Poison Ivy Charm School (the school for *polite* witches and warlocks) and the school’s administration – run by my cool Aunt Marsha, by the way – had strict rules about casting spells against each other.

“That’s totally forbidden,” I said. “We’re supposed to enhance the image of witches everywhere with white magic, not sling bad spells at each other. It’s in the Poison Ivy Proclamation.”

“I know, but they did it anyway. They don’t care what the PIP says.” Her voice hovered somewhere between angry and defeated. “You have to help me.”

I stared at the empty space where Missy sat and pictured the two long red braids that used to frame her pale, freckled face and the blah beige glasses she always wore. “Look, I can’t stand the stupid Belles. I hate how snotty they are, but I honestly have no idea how to reverse an invisibility spell. I’m still learning magic, like you. Plus I only moonlight as a private investigator.”

I pointed to the sparkly sign on my door:



That gave me just enough time for spell-work and getting my beauty sleep.

"That's exactly what I need. A witch PI," she said. "One who knows about spells."

"What you need is a professional adult witch, like my Aunt Marsha."

"No!" Alarm sliced through Missy's voice. "You can't tell her what happened to me. They told me not to."

"Bullies always say stuff like that." *Duh*, I wanted to add. But that would have been mean. Poor Missy was already having a really bad night.

"This is different. They told me they would lift the spell if I can find out what I did to offend them. If I can't, then I'll probably be like this forever."

*Hmm*. Maybe I could help her out? I reached for my official Spells & Spies day planner and flipped through a few pages. "Let's see. Tonight I've got a stolen spell kit and a girl who thinks her boyfriend is lying about who he visited last weekend. And on Thursday, I've got this guy who thinks he has a secret stepbrother in Belgium." I hesitated to mention Friday because that was my day off.

I always kept it open in case - fingers crossed, before I turned fifteen - Garrett asked me out.

"So," I said, feeling pretty generous. "I'll pencil you in for this Saturday. I have to tell you that I usually request a retainer of twenty bucks."

I didn't like charging for my services, but I wasn't moonlighting for the fun of it. OK, so it actually was pretty fun solving mysteries. But I needed the money. My mom was a barista at the Witch's Brew by day and a yet-to-be-published mystery writer by night.

So money was always an issue.

"But this can't wait until this weekend." Missy's voice spiked with panic. "They said I only have seventy-two hours to figure out what I did, or I'll be like this for the rest of my life."

"Well, that changes things." My pulse zipped as I mulled it over. "Wait, you mean I've only got until late Friday night to solve this?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Can you still help me? You're my only hope, Tulip."

I totally wanted to help her, but I was slammed with stuff to do. PI cases, spell work, etiquette lessons, and visiting Monk the Third, my latest Praying Mantis. How would I fit it all in? I could reschedule the stolen spell kit. I mean, it was just a toy one anyway.

"I don't know, Missy. I'm only a part time PI, but I really do want to help you. The Belles shouldn't get away with stuff like this, but honestly, this might be beyond my capabilities."

A one hundred dollar bill fluttered down onto my bed, settling neatly beside me.

"Sorry, I don't have change for that." My purple bejeweled cash box consisted of five one-dollar bills, nineteen quarters, eight dimes, twenty-three nickels, and oodles of pennies.

"You can keep it all."

"That's five times my retainer," I blurted out. "I could buy lots of new stuff with that kind of money." Like the spy scope I'd just seen in the latest *Spies R Us* magazine, a huge tube of fairy dust, and maybe even a new haircut, plus some bugs for Monk the Third.

Could I really accept her offer?

"Please take my case, Tulip. You're the only PI I know, and I can't call my parents," Missy said. "The Belles said if I told any adults, the spell would never be lifted. I know I'm kind of invisible in school for real, but I don't want to be like this forever."

Then Missy was silent for a moment. So was I. All I could hear was the tap of raindrops against my window.

"It's an awful feeling, being invisible," she said.

Sadly, I could relate.

My mom had an annoying new boyfriend (who was *not* awesome-sauce like my super detective dad), and when she and Mr. Lame-Sauce were together, they made me feel like I was a ghost. Like I didn't exist. Not to mention my top-secret crush on super cute Garrett, who didn't even know I was enrolled at Poison Ivy.

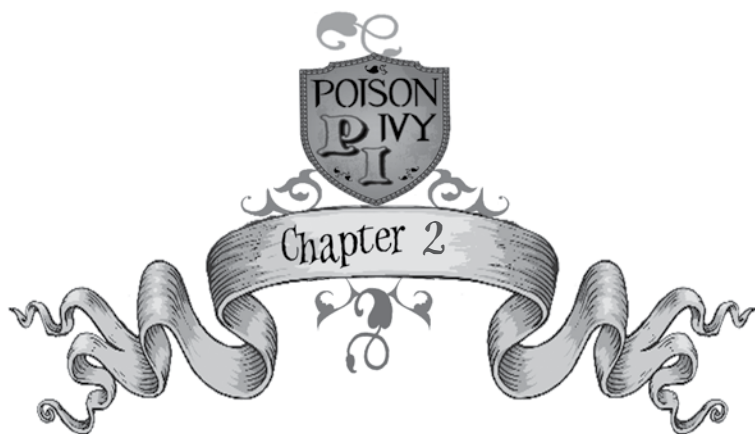
So, yeah, I knew how she felt.

"I'll take the case. We redheads need to stick together, you know." Especially the invisible ones.

"I owe you, Tulip. Big time."

"No, you don't. Keep your money, Missy. This one's on me." I shoved the one hundred dollar bill away from me. "But I will take my alternate retainer, though. Hot chocolate with tons of whipped cream."





## ICK...IT'S CHESTER

"Polly want a cracker?" I asked as I pushed open the squeaky wooden door and peeked inside the attic.

Instantly, the scent of strong coffee drifted past my nose. I set my hot chocolate by my feet and lit the two oil lamps on the shelf next to me. Yellow light brightened the walls covered with swirls of blue code and symbols from ancient spells that the Poison Ivy teachers were still trying to figure out.

My school was the coolest one ever. I mean, what other school was in an old Victorian estate that used to be owned by a coven of elderly witches? Um, that would be none. The main mansion - where the attic was - perched like a hungry hawk on the tallest hill in Mystic Tide, Oregon, overlooking the small fishing town.

The big rumor was the witches of the Poison Ivy Coven had all died together on Valentine's



Day in 1893. At the same time. While drinking their morning coffee.

In the attic.

But I wasn't scared. Nope, not me.

Soili and Alexandria would be here any second. I strode over to the red velvet drapes covering the south window and drew them back, securing them with a heavy gold chain. Pale moonlight streamed in, and the tops of the tall fir trees formed ghostly shadows against the dark sky.

"Spells & Spies," a creaky voice squawked from the ceiling. "Smells and lies. Smells and lies. Aaawwkkk."

"Whatever, Chester. I've never lied to you before and you know it." I rolled my eyes, because it was kind of hard to get mad at a dead parrot.

Chester had been the parrot guard back in the days when the coven ruled the mansion. Rumor was he'd gone to parrot heaven the same day the witches had died.

But that didn't mean he was really gone.

"Smells and lies," Chester squawked again. "Smells and lies." Then he belched.

"Eeww," Soili said as she sauntered into the attic.

"Aw, let the poor bird be." Alexandria shut the door and pulled the lid off her hot chocolate. Then she blew splotches of whipped cream on her nose in a poor effort to cool her drink down. "What other fun does he have?"

"That's true." Soili removed a pink water bottle from her Hello Were-Kitty purse and took a sip. "It's not like he can go get a pedi or anything."

"Yeah, like a parrot's dying to have a spa day."

Alexandria wrinkled her forehead.

Chester belched again.

“Gross!” Soili glared at the ceiling. “We’d get in big trouble if we did that, you know. That’s definitely not the definition of etiquette according to *The Rules*.”

Soili was right. Students at Poison Ivy were expected to follow an ancient text called *Queen Withania’s Rules of Refinement*. I thought Withania, the witch queen who came up with these so-called rules was a bit stodgy, but I followed them. Well, most of the time. But I didn’t see why Chester should have to abide by them. He was a parrot, for heaven’s sake.

And a dead one at that.

I sipped my hot chocolate and waved Soili and Alexandria over to our meeting table near the window. A crystal ball sat in the center. Not that we used it – because we hadn’t taken that course yet – but it looked cool. “Girls, we’ve got a live one, and I’m not talking about Chester.”

I called the meeting with my two *associates*, as I liked to call them, to brief them on the situation with Missy. Soili and Alexandria were the only reason *Spells & Spies* was as successful as it was. Without them, I’d never be able to pull off being a full-time student at spell school and a part-time PI.

I spilled the story and then waited for their response.

“The Belles made her invisible?” Alexandria’s auburn eyebrows vaulted toward the ceiling as she poked what was left of her whipped cream with her pinky finger. “Wow. Brutal.”

Soili squirted a dollop of vanilla moisturizer

onto her perfect hands and massaged it into her cuticles. "Those *dumbbells* are so rude."

"Listen up. We've only got about sixty-eight hours left." I handed them each a sheet of Spells & Spies lavender letterhead. "Here's a list of Missy's major activities for the past week. I've reviewed it, and only a few things jumped out at me. You guys see anything where Missy might have annoyed the Belles?"

Alexandria held up her paper and pointed at number eight. "Could be this one right here. Where she told them that she didn't have any more chocolate left when they asked for it in the library?"

"I bet that really irked them." Soili pulled a wooden brush out of her purse and then swept it through her glossy, white-blond bob. "You know how they love to talk about the antioxidants in dark chocolate. And they claim the darker the better."

"I only like milk chocolate." Alexandria held up her hot chocolate like it was a first place trophy at a *spelling* (as in spells, not words) bee. "This would be lame if it were dark chocolate."

I tapped my finger on my list to steer the conversation away from chocolate and back to the case. "Good thinking, but Missy and I went over that in lots of detail. See, the librarian walked in right *after* they asked for her Witch's Kisses, so they would have gotten busted for eating candy in the library."

"So it was a good thing that Missy hogged it all herself, then?" Alexandria guzzled the rest of her hot chocolate and set the empty cup on the table. "We could use some coasters in here, you know."

Like some cute ladybug ones for Tulip."

"Not to mention a lighted makeup mirror." Soili gestured toward me. "And I still want to lighten Tulip's hair to strawberry blonde."

"I'm not going blonde. It looks totally natural on you, but it'd be way too fake on me." Plus the maintenance would be horrible, and I couldn't afford it. I was more than happy as a redhead.

"All right, all right." A smile creased Soili's face. "Just some highlights then. I'm telling you they'd really make the golden flecks in your eyes pop."

"Later." My tone was a wee sharp. I was all business when I was working a case. "I'm thinking numbers one, three, and eleven are serious prospects."

Alexandria pursed her lips while she considered what I'd said. "I'll take number one. I've been wanting a reason to talk to Willard."

"You really think Willard could be involved in this?" Soili asked. "I'm just not seeing that. He's way too bookish."

"Precisely." Alexandria jabbed her unpolished finger at the page. "And when Missy refused to share her *Book of Light* book with him in front of the Belles, he probably got ticked and could have asked them to do something to Missy in revenge."

Soili whipped out a tube of dark pink lip-gloss and slicked her lips with the wand. "He doesn't seem mean, but you never know."

"We can't write off anyone as innocent right now." I'd learned that principle long ago. "Soili, how about you look into number three?"

"I'd love to." Soili's shiny pink lips twitched up

into a perky smile. "I'd love to have a reason to get into the exhibit room to see the Amulet Pendant. That crabby museum lady, Mrs. Cox, hardly lets anyone in."

"She will if you tell her you're working a case for Spells & Spies." I couldn't stop the goofy grin from erupting across my face. "What can I say? My aunt totally rocks the Ive."

"Always pays to have connections." Alexandria smiled.

That it did, and having my cool aunt as the head enchantress of Poison Ivy had turned out to be a factor of ultra-awesomeness. Aunt Marsha frequently granted us special liberties when we were working a case. She knew my mom's financial situation wasn't good, so this was her way of helping us out.

"Sure does," Soili said. "Did Missy say why she told Mrs. Cox the Belles were trying to get in there to see the Amulet Pendant?"

"Nope. She was hush-hush on that, so I think there's way more to the story." I folded my paper in half and shoved it into my back pocket. I was ready for action. "I'm also going to research the spell they used. If I'm not mistaken, I think it's an advanced one."

"I'm pretty sure it is." Soili dropped her lip-gloss back into her purse. "I remember my mom talking about someone using it on some freaky guy who stole someone's ice-cream cone."

"Was it dipped?" Alexandria's cola-colored eyes got huge. An avid ice cream lover, she would freak if someone ripped off her cone. Especially a dipped one.

“With sprinkles.” With Soili’s Finnish accent, it wasn’t hard for her to pull off splashes of major drama-rama.

“The nerve of some people,” Alexandria said. “Some things are just sacred.”

“Agreed.” I wanted to steer the conversation back toward the case. “Anyway, I’ll ask my mom about the spell, but she may be too gaga over her new boyfriend to be much use.”

Aunt Marsha and I operated on kind of a *don’t-ask-don’t-speak* policy. She knew I was a PI, but it was better for her not to know the details. So I consulted with my mom a lot because she was a mystery writer and a graduate of Poison Ivy.

But that was *P.D.* As in Pre-Dominick, her new boyfriend.

Soili and Alexandria exchanged knowing glances. They knew how annoying I found Dominick.

Or better known as *Ick*.

“So...” Alexandria socked me in the arm playfully. “Eleven’s sure got your name stamped in red ink, doesn’t it?”

My face flared with heat. “I’m just curious about our school’s Levitation Department, that’s all.”

“That’s all?” Soili shot Alexandria an amused glance. “Funny, she didn’t offer us that one.”

“You two can have it.” My voice turned into a total squeak-fest. “Go ahead. I don’t care.”

“It’s all yours, Tulip.” Alexandria cocked her head to the side. “I have to know, though. Why did Missy ask Garrett out in front of the Belles? Everybody knows Belle Number Three has the



hots for him.”

“That one has me really baffled.” I remembered the tension in Missy’s voice when I’d questioned her about it. “She was pretty hush-hush on that one too.”

“Did he say yes?” Alexandria asked.

“Hmm. Not sure.” I hadn’t thought to ask. “She didn’t say.”

“Sounds like she was pretty hush-hush about a lot of stuff.” Soili whipped out an emery board and buffed her already perfect nails. “That seems a little weird.”

“Maybe there’s a good reason why the Belles made her invisible?” Alexandria inspected the label of a granola bar and then tore open the wrapper. “What if she deserved it?”

“No one deserves to be invisible or to be made to feel that way.” My face flushed for the second time. “It’s just not right. I mean, it’s completely horrible.”

This case had hit a nerve with me. For several seconds, the only sound in the attic was Chester squawking and belching.

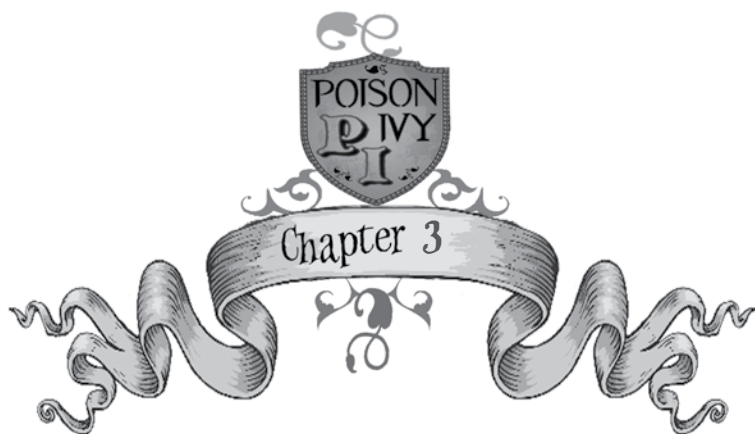
Alexandria broke the silence. “You’re right, Tulip, nobody deserves to be invisible. What they did is awful and totally unforgivable.”

“Exactly.” Soili nodded. “And we’re going to find out why those bratty Belles cast the spell on poor Missy.”

I flashed them a smile to show them how much I *hearted* them. “The Case of the Invisible Witch is on, and we’re on a time crunch.” I pushed back from the table and jumped to my feet. “Time for Spells & Spies to rock the Ive.”

“Smells and lies. Smells and lies. Aaawwwkkk!”





## I HEART PIERRE

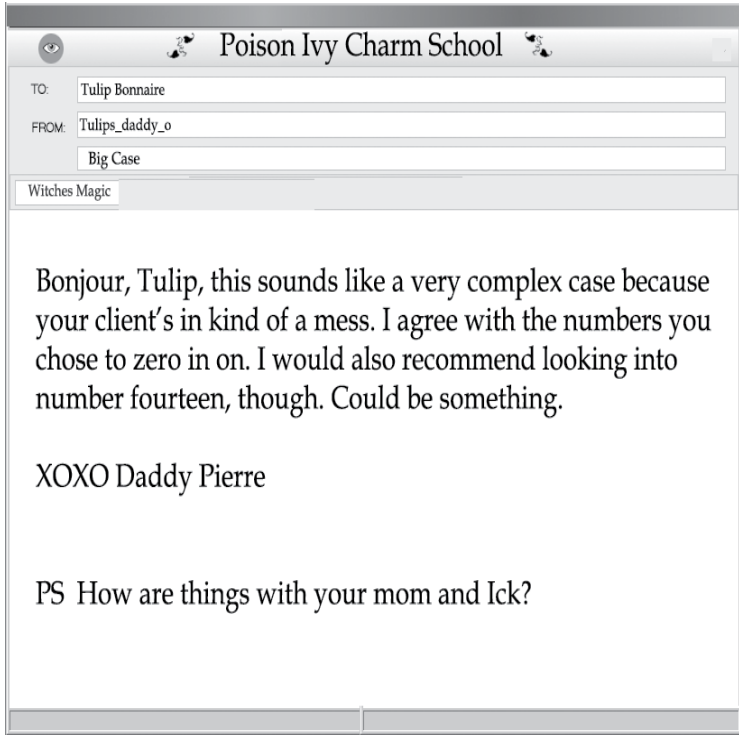
The second I got back to my room, I pounded out a quick email to my dad as fast as my finger bones would let me. As soon as I was done, I picked up my Poison Ivy Locket from my desk.

All students were required to wear the magical, silver pendant during school hours. I wasn't a huge fan of such an *obvious* piece of jewelry - it looked like a silvery thin mint cookie with a huge blue eye in the middle of it - but I didn't mind because you could use it to send pictures and messages to your friends. Plus I'd rigged mine with a tiny digital camera.

Cool, huh?

I was just fastening the clasp when my laptop zinged. *Tulips\_daddy\_o* had responded as quickly as I had expected. He never, ever let me down. I

clicked on the email and read:



I knew I could count on my dad to pick out the one thing I might have missed. He was a PI in Paris – my mom and I had moved back home after she divorced him when I was four – so I frequently tapped him for his expertise. I hated that he was so far away.

But email and video chats made him seem a lot closer.

It was a little after five o'clock in the morning. I loved being awake before the sun peeked over the horizon. I zipped up my favorite windbreaker (the one with the giant purple tulip on the back,

a recent gift from my dad) and slipped out of my dorm room. Luckily for me, Septembers on the Oregon coast were only rainy, not freezing. I hated cold weather. I could never live in Alaska, where I hear it's like forty below. My DNA would squawk louder than Chester.

The corridor of Sapphire Hall was eerie. Totally silent. No one else was up yet. I glided through the halls softly. When I stepped into the lobby, I grasped my pendant, intent on orb-ing my good friend, Dexter. I had a cell phone, but orb-ing was more fun.

It's a super cool way to send a magic bubble, with a tiny icon of you in it, to your friends. Kinda like an insta-video. Unfortunately, orb-ing required spell brilliance and intense concentration.

Neither of which I exactly sparkled at, but that was beside the point.

I popped open my locket and studied its inner workings. Encased in silver, the flat circle flashed colors faster than a disco ball. Blue to pink to green to gold to orange to yellow to...well, you get the picture. I closed my eyes and willed an image of Dexter to appear in my mind (this was the concentration part).

"It's Tulip," I said into the pendant. "I'm coming over." That was the spell part.

Dexter was probably up anyway because I swear that boy was nocturnal. I mean, the only time he slept was during class. So hopefully he would get right on the hot chocolate.

If my orb spell worked, that was.

I snapped my locket shut and slid it under my shirt, but Dexter stayed in my thoughts. He was

the best kind of guy-friend a witch PI like me could have. One, he wanted to be a professional ghost hunter when he grew up, so he was extremely open-minded. Two, he was a total tech genius. And three, he always had tons of chocolate. And I'm not talking any plain old chocolate either. He had the best chocolate *ever*. Witch's Kisses in oodles of flavors.

Campus was deserted except for a flock of seagulls hovering near the trash bins. I sprinted through the misty salty air, across the squishy lawn, and up the steps of Emerald Hall, the boys' quarters.

Dexter's residence glowered down from the hill behind the cemetery where the members of the coven were buried. The manor's two stone towers poked above the ground floor like gargoyles with nowhere to go. I expected Dexter to buzz me in the second my hand hit the door handle, but he didn't. I hit the buzzer.

And waited.

The mist was fast turning into droplets that were now blowing horizontal, pelting my head. I lifted my locket and closed my eyes, preparing to orb Dexter again.

A fuzzy sound trickled out of the intercom. Then a croaky, tired-sounding boy's voice said, "Too-lup. I thought I didn't hire you 'til Thursday?"

"Johan?" He was the boy who'd hired me to see if he had a stepbrother in Belgium.

And he was right. That was Thursday's case. What happened?

*Oh.* My cheeks heated. I must have orbed the wrong boy. I mean, I guess Johan did *sort of* look

like Dexter. They both had brown hair, but Dexter's body was spy-scope-shaped. Lean and narrow. And Johan could pass for a bunch of grapes if he painted himself green.

"I hate to be orbed before six AM." Johan's annoyance bit through the intercom.

*Oops.* "Sorry, can you just buzz me in? I meant to orb Dexter."

He let out an irritated breath. "Sure, but I hope your PI skills are better than your magic ones."

*Gee, thanks.* I ignored his zinger because, after all, I had woken the poor guy up.

"Want me to let Dex know you're on the way?" he asked.

"Sure." Then the intercom shut off. Embarrassment flooded me. I was such a dorkette with spells sometimes.

The door buzzed and the lock released. I was about to walk in when another voice came over the intercom.

"Hey, Tutu."

*Dexter.* And, unlike Johan, he sounded happy to hear from me.

"I accidentally woke up Johan," I said. "And he was kinda irked."

"So what? He tried to cast an orb spell to find his toothbrush at his parents' house last week and totally bombed out."

I laughed. Dexter always tried to make me feel better. "I'm surprised you didn't see me out here on your monitors." I waved at the tiny camera hidden in the stone ledge above me.

Dexter had installed cameras all over campus, hoping to catch a glimpse of one of the deceased



coven witches. I *so* loved that his obsession with getting real-life ghost footage could also provide me with intel on my cases.

"I was in the closet, installing a new ghost monitor," he said.

That figured. "I'm on my way."

Dexter's room was on the first floor, and his door swung open the instant I arrived.

"What's the code word?" The fiery look on his tan, boyish face told me he wanted a response. And the right one, too. But the smile in his hazel eyes told me he was kidding.

"Bond," I said, in the most sarcastic tone ever. "Dexter Bond."

He gestured me inside. "Enter, Tutu."

"You know I hate nicknames."

"I love 'em. They're fun."

I walked in and sat down on a folding chair at his massive surveillance desk. "This is so cool." On the gazillion computer screens in front of me, nearly every spot on campus was visible from just one location.

"Here." He handed me a purple mug with the words *Spells & Spies* splashed across it in silver glitter, filled with hot cocoa. "I saw the three of you leaving the attic not too long ago."

"We're officially working a case. It involves Missy Ulums and the Belles."

I briefed him on the situation, just bullets. He bit, as I knew he would. He didn't care for the stupid Belles either, and he (like me) couldn't resist trying to solve a mystery.

I took a sip of hot chocolate. *Mmm*. So witchy-licious. "I need you to do a little undercover work

and review your campus footage from the past week.”

Dexter’s face lit up like a firefly. “I’m on it.”

He was bookishly cute on the outside and a total tech geek on the inside. Super smart guy and a killer informant. He had been on the Spells & Spies payroll for some time.

OK, so he didn’t exactly get a real, live paycheck, but we did have cool pizza and root beer float parties whenever we solved a case. Success was a reason to celebrate in my book.

“I need you to infiltrate the eighth-grade Levitation Team.” The seriousness in my tone even surprised me. ‘Course, I was hovering dangerously close to the whole Garrett subject, and that always made me nervous.

His intense eyes were full of questions. “You after Garrett? Number eleven?”

Boy, was I ever after him, all right. I stifled a laugh.

“Yep. Maybe his friends know something. They might have talked to him after Missy asked him out,” I said. “You know. Boy locker talk and all.”

“I’ll see what dirt I can uncover. Garrett himself’s got a pretty big mouth. I might be able to get him to tell what’s up with him and Belle Number Three.”

“If anyone can get me the info, it’s you. I’m going to talk to the Belles’ worst enemy, Fiona, this morning. See what she knows.”

He smiled. “That should be fun.”

I shot him a pained look. “Not.”



The only good thing about Fiona Manglow was her hatred of the Belles. Other than that, forget it. She was as full of herself as they were, which probably explained why she despised them. And the Belles despised her, because she was far prettier than any Hollywood starlet ever dreamed of being.

And she totally knew it.

Her skin was the same shade as creamy vanilla yogurt, her hair was the color of sun-bleached wheat, her eyes were aquamarine, and she was the most primo developed girl at Poison Ivy. A deadly recipe when it came to competition for the attention of cute boys. Luckily for me, I was too busy with work and school to really care.

Note the word *really*.

"Hey, Fiona," I called out, ten steps behind her on the stone pathway. Every day Fiona was the first student to arrive at the Hexology Laboratory. Her routine never altered.

She whirled around and tossed her veil of smooth, blonde hair over her shoulders. "Not another one of your cases. That's the only reason you ever talk to me."

"That's not true." I set my hands on my hips and cocked my head to the side. "There was that time I loaned you my Everyday Spells homework last year. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah. I guess you did."

"We're friends then, right?"

"I wouldn't go that far." Her gaze ran from my feet up to my head and back down again. "You

should go strawberry blonde. It would look so much better on you."

*My hair's ruby red, people.* But there was no point in explaining. "Not going to happen." If I didn't need some intel out of her, I would have scrambled right then. But I sacrificed my all for my clients. "Look, I've got something on your arch enemies. I thought maybe you'd want to get in on it."

Her eyes lit with evil interest. "What'd they do this time? Can we get them expelled?"

I briefed her on the case as quickly as I could. "You had any run-ins with them lately?"

"Actually, yes. That bratty Belle Number Three really made me mad last week about Garrett."

"Why? What happened?" My heartbeat sped up like it always did when I found myself dancing on the edge of major intel. Not to mention the subject matter at hand. *Garrett*. Even his name could send me into a tizzy.

"She asked him to the Mystic Dance. Right in front of me."

Had everyone at Poison Ivy asked him out? I had to ask the next question, as much as I despised it. "What did he say?"

"He said he'd love to take her, but then he whispered something to her."

"About what?"

She rolled her eyes and shot me a look like I was a total doofus. "I said he whispered it."

"When and where exactly did this happen?" Maybe Dexter could get me an instant replay.

"Tuesday in the Hexology Lab." She hiked her pricey purse over her shoulder. "I really ought to

turn him into an armadillo.”

Even though those sorts of spells weren't allowed, I couldn't help but ask, “Why don't you turn her into one instead?”

“I'd love to, but I don't really know how to turn anyone into an armadillo. I guess I could try to embed a change spell into an Enigma song. You know how the Belles love her.”

“They do, but didn't you already get in trouble for embedding a spell into a song when we were, like, seven?” How could she have forgotten the “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” incident?

“That's history.” Fiona sighed. “Besides, I didn't mean for her to turn into a plastic boat. It was an accident.”

Try telling Suzie Walker that. The poor girl was still afraid of water. “If that had happened now, Suzie wouldn't have been a red miniature dingy for a week. Dexter found some cool un-embedding software.”

“Really? Never heard of it.”

“He ordered it online from Lithuania or somewhere,” I said. “Anyway, if you hear anything else, let me know, OK? I'm really curious what they were whispering about.”

I spun in the opposite direction and headed for the cottage where Aunt Marsha lived. She should be up by now, stumbling around the kitchen making coffee.

The Poison Ivy cemetery lay on my right. A shiver of fear shot through me even though I didn't look directly at it as I strode by. A couple of years ago around Halloween, I'd walked through this very cemetery, and a hand reached up from

an old, vine-covered grave and grabbed my ankle. I fell face first onto another grave and freaked out, blubbering like a baby.

Then the stupid Belles appeared, laughing at me. Turned out it had been a stupid Halloween prank, but that's beside the point.

I still hated cemeteries. Even if you could cast stronger spells in them using the power of the dead. But I'd rather give the honor roll to Fiona and the Belles, who often practiced around the tombs, than walk among a bunch of dead people. To be sure, I braved a quick peek at a tall, cross-shaped tombstone. Chills shot down my back. Nope, not happening. I hurried toward my aunt's house.

The lights were on inside her stone bungalow. For as long as Poison Ivy had existed, the headmistress had lived on campus. Not sure how or why that practice started, but my aunt liked it. Sure cut down on her commute time. Her little house reminded me of one you might see in Europe. Quaint and cozy, with lots of colorful flowers potted in the boxes lining the old, warped windows.

I pressed the buzzer and announced my arrival. A second later, she told me to come on in.

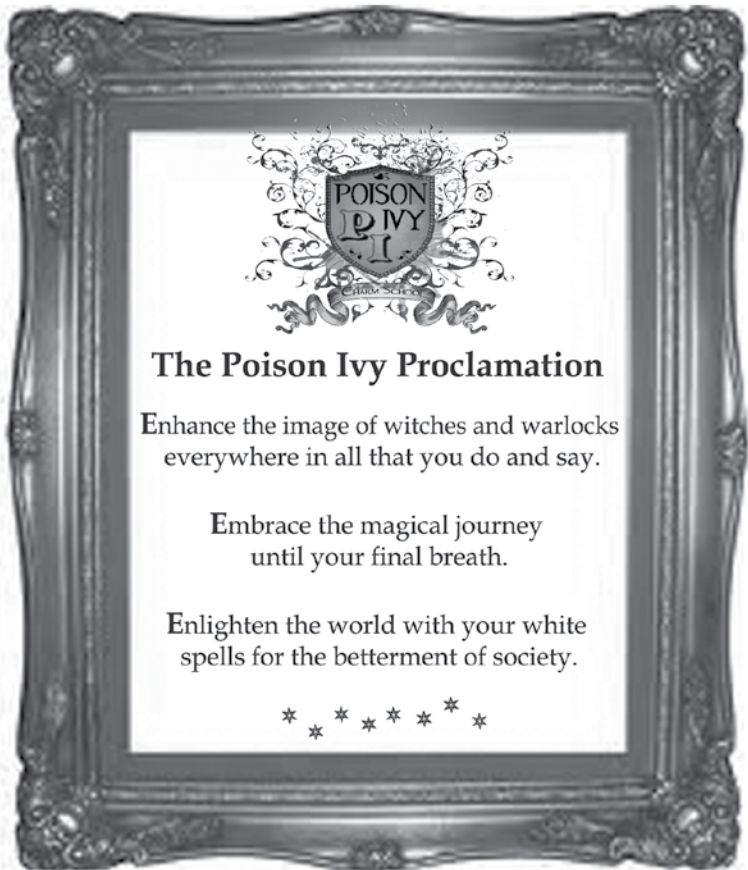
The hallway was lined with a tan-and-pink Oriental rug and pictures of our family. I stopped to look at them. The first section was mainly my mom and my aunt when they were girls, growing up in Mystic Tide. Back in the days when Aunt Marsha was known as *Mars*. She'd since reinvented herself as a serious principal-type. My mom, Raine, however, had stayed an artsy *hitch*.

A hippie witch.



My baby pictures decorated the wall. Me with my mom. Me with Aunt Marsha. Me with my dad. Me at my first witch's circle. It was like a complete history of my life on one beige wall.

Across from the family shrine hung a framed ivory scroll. The Poison Ivy Proclamation (aka the PIP), my aunt's favorite thing ever. I had a copy in my room - not as elegant as this with its red fancy letters and shiny gold frame - but it never hurt to skim the words again.



I was just wondering how the dumb Belles could have blatantly violated PIP number three when my aunt called me.

"Tulip?" My Aunt Marsha's normal singsong voice was strained.

"You in the living room?" I asked.

"Yes, we're in here."

We? Who else would be over at my aunt's house at such an early hour? I was her only regular visitor before classes started.

I rounded the corner, and my heartbeat stopped. Just for a second.

The Belles, all three of them, were sitting like statues on my aunt's couch. My right hand instantly reached for my Poison Ivy locket, groping for the power quietly harnessed inside.

*What the hex are they doing here?*

"Well, well. If it isn't Tulip Bonnaire." Belle Number One shot me an icy glare and narrowed her eyes. "We've been expecting you."

