

Screwball

By Deb Walsh

Michael Burton laced his fingers behind his head, leaned back in his chair, and smiled benignly on the world around him. At the front of the room, an auctioneer lifted yet another piece of Hollywood memorabilia, asking for a starting price higher than his annual LAPD salary. The people around him were the cream of Hollywood society, here to bid on these treasures of film history in support of the United Hollywood AIDS Task Force, and every one of them was wearing clothing from exclusive shops he couldn't afford to walk into. But the woman at his side was Veronica Howles — smart, beautiful, successful, and although she had the pick of Hollywood, she had chosen to be with *him*. Life was a wonderful thing.

"Y'know, sweetie, y'could do a lot better," a sultry feminine voice said from behind him.

Burton jumped in his seat, twisting around to look at the woman who had spoken.

She was beautiful in the style of the '40s, with carefully crimped platinum blonde hair and a white satin sheath dress that left little to the imagination. She smiled her cupid's-bow smile and waggled her fingers at him. To one side of her sat a big studio executive and his overdressed wife, and on the other sat a darkly-intense Academy Award-winning screenwriter. None of them had noticed the blonde bombshell who'd popped into their midst, and his companion had given no sign of hearing the catty comment. He turned around in his seat again and closed his eyes in desperation. Then he turned back and opened his eyes once more. She was still there, smiling and wagging. He turned back to the front of the room and closed his eyes again.

"Michael, are you all right?" asked Veronica, an up and coming independent director of quality low-budget art films.

Sparkling brown eyes wide open now beneath thick dark brows, he goggled at her a moment before stammering, "Yeah, sure, just fine. I just ... I just need a little air," he added, nodding. His mind raced to find a palatable excuse to get him — and the ghost no one but he could see — out of the auction room. "Yeah, a little air will do me up right. I think I'll just step out for a minute, if that's okay," he finished awkwardly.

She glanced toward the auctioneer, then back at him. Her expression said she'd go with him, but he knew the lot she wanted to bid on was coming up. And he certainly didn't want her to listen to him talking to what appeared to be thin air.

"No, you stay here. You don't want to miss your piece. I'll ... I'll just take a short walk. Don't you worry," he assured, patting her on the arm, and darting nervous glances at the coquettish beauty

sitting in the row behind them.

"Well, if you're sure ..." she offered doubtfully. "I mean, if you're not feeling well —"

"No!" He took a deep breath. "No. I'm fine. Just need a little fresh air. I'll be back before you know it."

She nodded in her sensitive way, her big dark eyes wide with concern behind her designer glasses. But her attention kept drifting back toward the auctioneer's podium, and he sketched a wave and slid apologetically past the other people in their row.

Out in the lobby of the auction house, he searched desperately for a private place to talk. He slipped into an alcove, and called out softly, "Okay, I'm alone. We can talk."

"Usually when I'm alone with a man, talkin's the last thing on my mind," cooed the blonde, materializing in front of him.

"Samantha Marlowe," he breathed. "What are you doing here? You've been dead for almost 50 years!"

"Don't remind me," she pouted. "Limbo is such a dreary place — not a decent night club in sight. And no champagne!" She looked around briefly. "Although Hollywood ain't what it was, either." "Things have changed a lot in the past 50 years," he agreed. "Okay. You're a shade and you're here — what's your beef?"

"Is that any way to talk to a lady?" He merely glared at her. "Okay. Word in Limboland is that you're the guy to talk to back here in the land of the living," she explained, her voice dropping into the husky tone she'd made famous in screwball comedy films of the '30s and '40s. "Y'got somethin' you need to take care of, you're the man to see."

"Yeah, that's me," Michael affirmed with a note of bitterness.

For two years he'd been acting as the local shade waystation between the living, Limbo, and the next world. Private detective to the dear and not-so-dear departed, that was Michael Burton. He was getting tired of deceased people showing up every time he thought his life was getting normal. He was definitely tired of other people's — dead people's — problems.

He was also tired of being the only person who could see or hear these visitors from the afterlife. His cosmically-tuned-in friend, Annie Brighton, believed in them, but that didn't make it any easier when he found himself talking to what appeared to be no-one-there.

*He was especially tired of it interfering with his job as a detective. He was a good cop, efficient and effective at his job. It was being a good cop that had put him in this situation — two years ago, he'd been killed — as in **dead** — during a stakeout that had gone bad. He'd been clinically dead long enough to make a quick stopover in a weird place he'd later learned was Limbo. The paramedics had revived him, but ever since then, he — and the small piece of bullet shell still lodged in his head — had been a magnet to ghosts with unfinished business in their old lives to be resolved before they could move on. A channeller, the shades had called him. A patsy, he often called himself.*

Most of all, he was tired of this "gift" interfering with his life as a man. He was an attractive young man in his thirties, with a broad smile and ready wit. Yet he hadn't had a steady girlfriend since before the accident that had put that piece of metal in his head; nobody wanted to stick with an apparent nutcase. Women tired quickly of a man who jumped at things that weren't there, and who talked to people they couldn't see. If it weren't for Annie, he'd probably have been committed by the police shrink Doctor Johnson by now ...

Samantha Marlowe batted her long eyelashes at him, looking up at him coyly. He was still feeling sorry for himself, so it didn't work. "Okay. You got a beef, too. I'll be serious. That blonde bombshell routine's an act I used to put on for the press anyway." She shrugged. "It played with my image in the movies. But you're the only game in town — there isn't anyone else I can go to, and I do have a real problem, honest."

Michael's expression softened slightly. "Yeah? What is it?"

"Well, you know how I died —"

"In a plane crash on your way to a USO show. Very patriotic," he commended with a slight nod of his head, remembering. Samantha Marlowe had died only two years after screwball-comedy-queen Carole Lombard's fatal airplane crash returning from a war-bond rally. The loss of another screen queen had prompted some movie studios to refuse to allow their stars to travel by air to patriotic events. Marlowe had been a popular film legend, winning two Academy Awards, the second right before her death.

Michael wasn't about to admit it, but he was a big fan of hers, and had several of her films on tape at home. "And?" he prompted aloud, already feeling a little guilty for his less-than-gracious welcome to this legendary shade.

"And I left behind a grieving husband —"

"That's right — I read that he never remarried —"

She smiled sweetly. "He was a wonderful man. And we had a wonderful little girl ..."

"I'm sure she's all grown up by now."

"All grown up, and dead, too. She and her husband were killed in a car accident, oh, more than twenty years ago. It's their daughter I'm concerned about."

"Their daughter? You've been hanging around in Limbo all these years because of your granddaughter? But she hadn't even been born by the time you died —"

"Well, I didn't move on right away because I was concerned about what was going to happen to Harrison and Lydia, and then Lydia ran away from home and got married and I wanted to make sure she was going to be all right, and then ... well, everybody just sort of passed away and went on. I never even saw them when they crossed over." She sighed heavily. "I guess I waited too long. But by the time they passed on, it was Lydia's daughter I was worried about."

"Okay. Why are you worried about her now? She's what — over twenty years old, right? She's old enough to take care of herself —"

"Well, when Lydia and her husband died, friends of theirs took care of their daughter. They loved her — that much I could tell. But now they're dead, too. So my granddaughter is all alone, with no family. And Jameson — he's the family lawyer — he doesn't know there's an heir." She looked at him as though that explained everything.

"An heir," Michael repeated. "An heir to what?"

"Well, my fortune, of course. The studio paid me well, and I invested well. And Harrison was brilliant with money. And after I died, he didn't spend it on anything but Lydia. And when she took off ..." she shook her head sadly. "Trust me. There's a great deal of money, just sitting in the bank collecting interest."

"Still?" Michael squeaked in disbelief. "It's been nearly 50 years!"

"Still. Jameson is still administering my estate. My will specified that if there were no claimants, the law firm was to administer my estate. I'm worth millions. For all I know, there's an inheritance from Harrison, too." She picked at the spaghetti strap of the satin gown. "I could probably use a few bucks and pick up a new wardrobe while I'm in town, too."

"I doubt they accept Spook Express on Rodeo Drive," he reminded.

She shrugged, a shrug that had been famous in the '40s and had driven men wild. She gave him the look that had made her a pin-up girl in hundreds of American barracks in the Pacific and European theaters of war. He simply stared at her, his patience again wearing visibly thinner with each pose.

*"Boy, you're a hard sell! Okay. Here it is — I want you to help me find my granddaughter, get the proof that she **is** my granddaughter, and help her claim her inheritance."*

"Why now?"

She frowned slightly. "The poor kid's all alone in the world. Her adopted mother just recently died, and her adopted father passed away a couple of years ago — I can feel her grief, even if I don't know anything else about her. At least if she can be identified as my heir, she not only gets the money, she gets some family — cousins, aunts and uncles, that sort of thing."

For the first time since Samantha Marlowe had materialized in the auction room, Michael smiled. "That's nice. Any idea of where to start?"

"Well ... there's got to be a marriage license on file."

"From what ... 1960-something?"

"Hmm. Jameson Page — as I said, he's the lawyer administering my estate — he'd know when Lydia ran away from home. She and her father quarrelled, very angry, very hurtful, over someone Lydia loved, I think."

"Wait a minute — most shades can't even remember the exact details of their deaths, but you know stuff that's gone on in your family's lives since you died — what makes you different?"

She pursed her lips a moment, an expression that appeared on hundreds of movie magazines during her career. Columnists had called it the "Marlowe Mouth." "Well, it's not something I let get around ..."

"Yeah?"

"But ... well, I'm sort of descended from ... you know, witches."

"Witches?"

*"That's what some people call them. Nowadays, I don't know what you call them — psychics, channellers ... but I was always sort of tapped into the other side. I even had a spirit guide who gave me advice on which films to do — and she was never wrong. I would have turned down **Love Happy** if it hadn't been for her"*

— and that was my biggest success. And my second Oscar. The critics stopped comparing me to Lombard and Colbert with that one. Anyway, when I got over there, it was like I was suddenly tapped into this side. Only until today, I haven't really been able to communicate with anyone still alive. I've only picked up on strong emotions — that's how I know there was a fight and deaths — anger and grief are pretty easy to sense. To be honest, I don't even know what my granddaughter's name is or what she looks like, just how much her mother loved her. And how lonely she is now."

"Reverse channelling. That's weird."

"Tell me about it."

"Michael? Michael, are you out here?" came the voice of his companion.

"Cheese it! I'll see you later!" Samantha Marlowe promised, suddenly fading from view.

"Veronica!" Michael greeted, glancing over his shoulder to assure himself that Samantha had indeed gone. "Are they done already?"

Veronica shrugged, casting a wistful look back at the auction room. "For me, anyway. I lost it to the head of Monumental Pictures. Said it would make a great prop in this film they're doing about a psychic investigator from England. Can you imagine?" she scoffed.

Michael shook his head. "No," he lied. "Don't believe in the stuff myself."

"Good," she told him, taking his arm. "Why don't you take me out to dinner and help me forget my loss?"

He grinned at her. "Sure. Let's go."

* * *

Next day in the squad room, Burton asked his friend and sometimes partner, Liz Carmeli, to do a background check on Samantha Marlowe, including a search for next of kin.

"What are you into now, Michael?" she asked, taking the slip of paper from the detective. A slim and athletic-looking woman, Liz had short blonde hair and a waif-like face. She had worked with him on several cases and knew his instincts to be as frequently accurate as they were weird. She studied him warily. "Is this another one of your 'hunches'?"

He squirmed uncomfortably. "Hey, you know me. I get interested in things. I was at an auction

yesterday and some stuff of hers went up — people were talking about the stuff and her and a possible descendant — I'm curious."

"You think there was something shady about the auction?" Liz pressed. "That's bunco, not homicide."

"Well, let's just say some questions got raised in my mind. I'd like to get some answers before I do anything with it," he explained, turning on his charm.

"Well ... okay. But you owe me, Mick Burton. And someday I'm gonna expect you to pay up," she warned, waving the paper under his nose.

"Thanks, Liz. How about dinner some night?"

"You're on," she agreed, breaking into a grin.

"Okay," he replied with a fond smile.

She left to return to her desk, leaving Burton to face the mammoth task of clearing paperwork from his overloaded desk.

"Smooth operator," he heard from somewhere behind him.

"Samantha," he whispered. She materialized on the edge of his desk, her slim body draped in a cowed dress of royal blue, its skirt slit up nearly to her hips. "Y'know, I always thought the '40s were kind of ... well, puritanical. You'd never know it by the way you dress."

She beamed at him. "Like it? You know — Hollywood stars were expected to be flamboyant. I got used to it after a while. So — what have you got for me?"

He shook his head. "I've asked for an information search on your family — we'll see what that brings up. But is there anything that would identify your granddaughter? Some family trait, a keepsake?" he asked quietly, keeping his head down so no one would realize he was talking to the corner of his desk.

She thought for a moment. "Well ... there was a locket I gave to Lydia. Little heart, about so big," she spread her thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. "It was made for her. She might have given it to her daughter. I hope she did, anyway."

"And how would that identify her?"

"It's engraved. Says 'Be Love Happy Always'."

"And would your family lawyer recognize it?"

"You bet. He helped me pick it out. It's platinum, with one perfect diamond in the center of the heart. I had it made at Cody and Sons Jewelers."

"Hmm. They're still in business, up in the Hills. Something that was custom-made, they might even still have records on it."

"Oh, Cody was a fanatic for records. He had ledgers going back 100 years, to when his family was making jewelry for the crowned heads of Europe."

"Okay, well that's one place we can check."

* * *

"Ah, Detective, a custom piece like that would have been well-documented. But what is your interest, may I ask?" the current Cody of Cody and Sons asked as he ushered Burton down the hallway from the store to his office.

"I'm, ah, following up on a hunch, I guess you could say. A rumor, really. I picked it up when I was at an auction recently."

"Oh? The AIDS auction, perhaps?"

Burton nodded. "Some people were talking. Idle gossip, probably. But worth following up — in my free time. I appreciate your seeing me at lunchtime."

Cody waved the inconvenience away dismissively. "And that gossip was? Ah, here we are," he announced, opening the door to his office.

"That Samantha Marlowe might actually have a descendent."

They entered the office and Bryant Cody gestured toward a worn, comfortable-looking chair. Burton seated himself as Cody went to his desk. The jeweller shook his head. "Her death was truly tragic. My father used to talk of her often — she was one of his favorite customers. Always a delight, and always looking for the unusual. He really got a chance to practice his art in designing jewelry for her. I remember he was devastated at her death, even though I was just a child. So

many greats were lost during that War — Carole Lombard, Glenn Miller ..." He shook his head again. "Tragic. She did have a daughter, a lovely girl. She ran away from home sometime in the early sixties. Of course, she was above the age of consent, but her father took it hard."

"That's what I heard. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Cody thought for a moment, then indicated the negative. "No. Lydia Marlowe wasn't really interested in jewelry — her interests ran more to books and such. A good thing actually — her mother's collection disappeared, you see. There was a quiet investigation at the time of Miss Marlowe's death, but nothing turned up. Actually, the disappearance of that collection is why my father kept the records intact — and why we had all the records computerized —" he gestured toward the computer on his desk, "— in the hopes that someday they'd turn up, and we'd have proof of their origins." He shook his head sadly, mourning the loss of his father's work.

"There must have been insurance on the jewels —"

Cody nodded. "A significant sum, I believe. As I recall, Harrison Marlowe added it to Lydia's trust fund when the insurance company paid up. The jewels were supposed to go to Lydia, you see. But she really didn't care about the jewels themselves, I think."

"Did you know her well?" Burton asked gently.

Cody shook his head. "I didn't see much of her, although we were of an age. She spent a lot of time away from home, first at school, then at college — I believe she was working on her doctorate before she disappeared. I did go out to the house shortly before that to appraise what was left of the Marlowe Collection — her father's family heirlooms, actually, quite old and very beautiful, but not the magnificent pieces my father had designed for Miss Marlowe." He slipped once more into a brief reverie in remembrance of those lost baubles.

"And?" Michael prompted.

"I believe there was a man, someone of whom her father disapproved," Cody replied, smiling apologetically and getting back to the subject at hand. "Lydia was quite headstrong, in a quiet sort of way. Not fiery, like her mother could be, just determined, so I'm told."

"Do you think you could check into this locket for me ...?"

"Of course." Cody turned to the computer terminal on his desk. "Let's see ... that would have been about what, 1943? 1944? Before the end of the War — Miss Marlowe died en route to a USO benefit. Yes." He punched a few keys, scanning the information that scrolled past him on the

monitor. "Ah. Here we are. My — platinum. And a blue diamond in the center of the heart. Amazing. Oh, this is curious."

"What's that?" Michael asked, getting up and coming around to look at the terminal. On the screen was displayed a digitized image of the locket, with information organized on the lower part of the screen.

"The locket was designed to hold something very specific. A key. The key was provided to my father, and he designed the locket around it. How very odd."

"No indication what the key was for?" Michael questioned.

Cody looked up from the screen. "No. I don't imagine my father was ever told ... and in our business, it pays to be discreet. I'm sure he never asked."

"Hmm. Is there any way I could get a picture of this locket? I mean, it could very well help to identify —"

"Of course." Cody hit a series of keys and smiled up at Burton. "Modern technology. That'll print out at the secretary's desk. We can pick it up on your way out. Now — what sorts of things did they have at the auction? And who was there? I love celebrity auctions, but I was unable to attend. Do tell ..."

* * *

The next day, Burton was unable to work on the afterlife case of Samantha Marlowe. His superior officer, Lieutenant Wesley, had roared out of his office, spied Michael hiding behind a prodigious pile of paperwork, and ordered him to clear up every one of those casefiles before he left that day. Grumbling and swearing softly, Michael attacked the paper with something less than enthusiasm, but managed to clear at least one of the piles by lunchtime. While his comrades slipped out of the squad room to enjoy their lunches outside in the good weather, Michael remained at his desk, gnawing disinterestedly at a pizza he'd ordered in from the shop around the corner from the station.

"Ah, you're here," Liz said. Michael looked up hopefully, bestowing a sour grin on her.

"Here now, here forever," he complained, waving a hand at the slowly diminishing piles of manilla folders.

"Well, you shouldn't let it get piled up," she commented. "If you kept up with your paperwork, it

wouldn't get like this." She settled herself on a recently excavated corner of his desk. "I don't know if you want to add this to the clutter," she added, waving a file under his nose.

"What's this?" he asked, eyeing the folder suspiciously.

"This," she announced with some ceremony, "is the stuff of movies. I had to do some real digging — Samantha Marlowe did have a daughter," she paused, looking for a reaction. Michael nodded encouragingly. "Okay. You knew that." She opened the folder, scanning the contents. "Well, this daughter was nothing like her mother," she outlined. "She had a coming out party in the late fifties, but that's about all that ever showed up about her in the society columns. She attended UCLA, then got her masters at Berkeley — quite a scholar, it appears. She was working on her doctorate at Berkeley in the early sixties. Then in 1964, she cleared out her savings account and disappeared. That's when she showed up in the newspapers again."

"There was a search."

"Nationwide. Apparently Harrison Marlowe had a lot of money of his own — he was East Coast blueblood, it seems, and Samantha Marlowe had left her husband very well off. He funded the search, offered a million dollar reward to whoever could find her."

Michael whistled. "A million bucks in 1964 was really worth something, too. Not that it's peanuts today. And?"

"And nothing. Lydia Marlowe didn't want to be found. She had quite a lot of money herself, from her mother. She managed to hide herself pretty effectively." She glanced at the pizza on his desk possessively. "Can I have a slice? I haven't had lunch yet."

"But you found her," Michael provided with a grin, offering the pizza box.

Liz took a little bow, put down her folder, lifted a slice of pizza out of the box, and took a bite, closing her eyes with pleasure. Then she got back to business, chewing quickly to resume her story. "Well, they didn't have the data network then that we do now. I cross-checked drivers' licenses, marriage licenses, death certificates, that sort of thing ... and came up with a marriage license. In 1966. The year Harrison Marlowe died."

"And her married name was?" Michael was starting to feel like he was on a game show.

"Rubenstein. She married Professor Howard Rubenstein of Berkeley University in 1966."

Michael could imagine what must have happened. His only daughter intended to marry a man older

than herself, and of a different ethnic origin to boot. The Civil Rights movement of the '60s had barely begun by 1964, and racial, religious, and ethnic prejudice was still very much condoned by society. Harrison Marlowe's blue blood had been able to overlook the notoriety of his being married to a popular film star — she at least had been part of Hollywood society — but this had been unacceptable. And Lydia had probably seen him as a close-minded bigot, unwilling to overcome his own prejudices for the sake of her happiness. He was sure that was the source of the argument that had driven Lydia Marlowe into hiding. Liz was right — this was the sort of thing that fueled films and soap operas alike.

Michael nodded. "So what happened to Lydia and Howard Rubenstein?"

"Well, I cross-checked the marriage license with wedding announcements in the area — the license says they were married in Oakland. Apparently, he was a professor of literature at Berkeley. Fifteen years older than Lydia. The wedding announcement in the newspaper even says that Lydia was Samantha's daughter. I guess by then, with both her parents dead, she didn't feel she needed to hide anymore."

"Hiding in plain sight," Michael murmured. "I wonder why the family lawyer didn't track her down then — I mean, she must have had quite an inheritance coming to her from her father."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" She took the opportunity to finish off the slice while Burton considered the possibilities. She looked hopefully at the remaining pizza, and Michael grinned. She took another slice and munched.

"Usually when a rich person dies, there's a search for heirs. Or the heir comes forward to claim their inheritance," he said.

"Mmmm. I checked that. The will's a matter of public record, and the newspapers ran a piece on it at the time. Harrison's will specifically mentions Lydia — he cut her off without a dime. But it does make provisions for her offspring. Apparently, the inheritance was to be kept in trust for her children. So he was punishing his daughter for marrying somebody he didn't like, but not any children of the marriage. He must have been pretty hurt to do something like that."

"Yeah. And he died before he could have a change of heart." Michael shook his head sadly. Samantha had said that she'd never seen Harrison's shade, so apparently when he'd died, he'd felt no remorse for disinheriting his daughter — nothing to keep him cooling his spectral heels in Limbo. Burton wondered how he felt now, almost 30 years later — had they reconciled when Lydia herself had died?

Liz licked grease from her fingers and frowned as a new thought struck her. "You know — I hope you don't think sharing your pizza with me gets you off the hook." He looked up at her quizzically.

"About dinner. I put a lot of work into this search — you still owe me a dinner. And not Burger King," she warned seriously.

"You got it," he chuckled. "So long as the tab doesn't exceed my annual salary, you can pick the place. You got anything on the granddaughter?"

She wiped her fingers off with a paper napkin, scrunched it up and tossed it in the wastebasket. She picked up the file again and read off, "Howard and Lydia Rubenstein had a daughter, named Emma Ann, born in 1967. Then in 1971, Howard and Lydia were killed in a car accident between San Francisco and Oakland. Bad weather, skidded on the bridge and slammed into the abutment. Killed on impact. Nasty," she added, shaking her head.

"And the daughter? Was she with them?"

"No. It appears they'd left her with some friends while they took this trip. Their will made this couple guardians, so the courts just confirmed it. She was adopted in 1972, and her name was changed to ... ah ... 'Charles'."

"Okay. So we've established that there's an heir. Where is she now?"

"What do you think I am — a miracle worker?" Liz protested.

"Certainly looks that way to me," he answered, indicating the file she held.

She beamed, preening. "Well, I do know my way around a data base. All those years at Northside weren't a waste."

"And do you think you can tweak that data base to cough up her current location? Please?"

"Well, if it's that important to you ..."

Samantha resolved at the opposite corner of the desk, clad this time in a fashionable suit in '40s style. A decorative hat with a netting veil perched atop her stylish chignon. She settled on the edge of the desk and turned imploring eyes on Michael.

"It's that important to me, Liz. I think you've learned enough to make me think it's worthwhile finding this Emma Charles."

"Me, too. It's really kind of romantic in a way, don't you think? I mean, a long-lost heiress to a movie star's fortune ..." she sighed heavily. "Okay. I'll get back to you with what I find. And

Michael —"
"Yeah?"

"Make that dinner and dancing ..." She smiled sweetly, handing him the folder, and left the squad room.

"Drives a hard bargain," Samantha commented. "May I?" she asked, reaching for the folder.

Michael handed it to her absently. He was so caught up in his thoughts about the "case" that he failed to notice that to anyone else in the room, it would appear that the folder was floating in mid-air. All-too-frequently, Burton forgot that he was the only living person capable of seeing his spectral companions. With Liz gone, there was no one else there right now, but someday, that slip of the mind might get him into trouble.

She flipped through the computer-printed and microfiche-copied sheets idly. "A lot of sadness. I had no idea Harrison had been so angry — to disinherit his own daughter! Emma ... that's a pretty name. Michael ..."

Roused from his reverie, Michael looked up at Samantha Marlowe. He noticed then that she was still holding the folder, and gently took it out of her hands and laid it on the desk. "Don't want anyone to think I'm practicing magic," he told her in a low voice.

She smiled at him and shook her head, then leaned over and kissed him on the cheek, the fabric of her hat's veil tickling his face. "Thank you." She smiled down at him, a sincere smile that she had always reserved for off-screen and away from cameras.

For the first time, he felt that he was really making contact with Samantha the person and not Samantha the personality. He patted her hand with his own. "You're welcome. We haven't found her yet, though. But if anybody can track down the information, it's Liz. She's pretty amazing."

"She likes you, too. Fortunately for you, not enough to be more than just good friends," she smiled more broadly. "I told you — I sense strong emotions among the living." Her expression turned serious. "Which brings me to this Veronica you're seeing — I don't think she's good for you, you know."

He closed his eyes, grimacing. "I know. You said I could do better. What is it about you shades that you think you can run my love life, huh?" he demanded. He shook his head, "Look, let's just concentrate on finding your granddaughter, and you leave my love life to me, okay?"

She pursed her lips, considering whether or not to be offended. She decided not to be and smiled.

"Okay," she agreed.

The clamor of Michael's fellow detectives returning from their lunch break echoed up the hallway in advance of the men and women. Samantha wiggled her fingers in farewell and faded from sight.

Michael smiled, lifted the last piece of pizza from the box, cold now but still edible, and bit into it.

* * *

It was two more days before Michael could do anything about Samantha Marlowe's problem. Liz had managed to dig up an address in Fullerton based on DMV files, but Michael wanted to know more before he approached Emma Charles. He made an appointment to meet with Samantha's attorney, Jameson Page, for 5:30 that evening. The lawyer, now in his 80s, had suggested the early evening meeting rather than a lunch appointment. Burton, still struggling to reduce the pile of folders to nothing, was grateful for the time, late enough so he could make a dent in the stack, early enough that he'd be ready for his date with Veronica.

He drove up into the parking lot across the street from the old building, and smoothed back his hair one more time. No matter how many lawyers offices he'd visited in his years as a police officer, he was never comfortable in them. He told himself he was being silly, but all that education and all that money still made him feel like a kid with chocolate ice cream smeared on his face. As he entered the Simmons Building, its stucco a brilliant white despite the smog, he felt even more inconsequential. This was old Los Angeles, preserved in time so that he felt he was taking a step back to the glory days of the film industry, when money had flowed through the city like molten gold. He stepped up to the desk and told the uniformed guard his name and purpose. The guard looked him up and down, his expression critical; Michael felt he had just been tested and found wanting. He straightened the cuffs on his corduroy jacket, and fiddled with his tie while he awaited the guard's verdict. Surreptitiously, he smoothed his hair again.

"Mr. Page will see you now," announced the guard imperiously. "Take the left elevator to the fifth floor."

Michael smiled nervously and did as he was told. Just as he had expected, an elevator operator stood in the plush interior of the car, standing at attention as Burton got on board. "Floor?"

"Fifth," Michael answered tersely.

The door creaked shut with a wheeze. Suddenly, the operator broke into a grin. "Don't let Fred get to you. He likes to think that this is a military installation, and that he's the commandant. I like to think of it as a little piece of LA history, a living museum. You wait 'til you see the law offices

on Five — you'll see what I mean."

By the time the ancient elevator had cranked its laborious way to the fifth floor, Michael and the operator, Joe, were laughing. "Hey, good luck," Joe called as Michael stepped out of the elevator into the sumptuous pile of the law office carpet. "I'll see you on your way out."

"Thanks," Burton replied, looking around him. The cavernous main lobby of the office was straight out of a movie set of the '30s. A good thirty feet away from the elevator bank sat the heavy mahogany receptionist's desk, an old-fashioned PBX set into the wall. The deep-piled crimson carpet runner led to an enormous pair of deeply carved doors, while gleaming marble tile set in a black and white diamond pattern stretched away to smaller doors to the left and right. Decorative moldings edged in gold defined the cathedral ceiling, and teardrops of Austrian crystal dripped from the massive chandelier dominating the center of the magnificent vault.

"Pretentious, I know," came a whispery voice like dry leaves. "It serves its purpose, however. And the building itself is on the National Register of Historic Places. Under 'anachronistic but gaudy', I believe."

The source of the voice was an incredibly tall man, only slightly bent by age. His deeply-tanned skin was stretched taut over high cheekbones, his snow-white brows straight over clear blue eyes. A smile spread over his face as he extended his hand toward Burton. "You'll forgive me if I don't make that horrendous trek to you — age does have its prerogatives, you know."

Burton returned the smile and crossed the space to take the old man's hand. He had a strong grip, despite the slight deformity of his fingers due to arthritis. "Mr. Page?" Michael asked deferentially.

"Detective Burton. Come inside," he gestured toward the office beyond the massive doors.

*If the anteroom was epic in its proportions and style, the office of Jameson Page was cluttered and comfortable and deeply personal. Recently-oiled hardwood panels made up the walls of the room, with ceiling-high bookcases built into the walls and crammed with heavy volumes. Books and papers accumulated on every surface not taken up with film memorabilia; framed, autographed photographs hung on the walls, dwarfing by their numbers the many diplomas from prestigious universities. Pride of place was taken by a circle of photographs of Samantha Marlowe in her prime — some studio shots, some candid, including one with two young men, one tall and muscular, one even taller and much slighter. Beneath the photos sat a gleaming gold statue: the Academy Award Samantha had won for **Love Happy**.*

"You must have been very close to Miss Marlowe," Michael said at last, gesturing toward the Oscar.

"Yes. I introduced her to Harrison — we'd been roommates at Harvard. I was always captivated

by the screen — if I hadn't been so afraid of what my family would say, I might well have pursued a career in the films. Samantha always said I had the gift," he added wistfully.

"Yeah, well, from my experience, a good trial lawyer needs that gift," Michael responded warmly.

This delighted Page, and he clapped his hands together in applause. "Please, have a seat, Detective. I'm afraid I can't offer any alcohol — doctor's orders — but I can offer you some mineral water ...?" Michael nodded acceptance, and while he seated himself in an ancient but well-upholstered leather chair, Jameson Page busied himself arranging a silver drinks tray.

Setting the tray in the middle of the enormous old desk, Page lowered himself into his own chair, steepled his fingers, and stared across at Michael. "Now, Detective — what can I do for you?"

"Well," Michael began, taking a sip of the mineral water, noting absently that the crystal was cut, not molded. "I was at a charity auction last week — you know, one of those celebrity things where they auction off memorabilia from films and stars' lives — and someone mentioned that they thought that Samantha Marlowe might actually have an heir still living. I'm a big fan of hers, so I got a little curious."

"So this is not an official investigation," Page surmised quietly. "I had wondered what interest the police might have in Miss Marlowe at this late date."

"No," Burton replied with a smile. "I admit I did use police resources to do a search, and I think I might have found that heir."

This did surprise Page. "An heir? Well, of course there was Miss Marlowe's daughter, Lydia, but she collected her inheritance when her mother died. She used some of it for her education, some of it to fund her special passion — books. And some of it, I imagine, to run away with," he explained, his voice growing colder with each sentence. Obviously, Mr. Jameson Page had not approved of Lydia's choice of husband either.

"But Mr. Marlowe's will set aside a fund for her children, if there were any." At Page's raised eyebrow, he elucidated, "The will's a matter of public record."

"Ah, yes. But no such heir has ever come forward, Detective. Not in almost 30 years."

"That heir wouldn't — not if he or she didn't know they were an heir," Burton countered.

"No ... no, I suppose not. And I suppose you've tracked down this mythical heir?" Page asked skeptically. "Someone to claim this inheritance — and believe me, it is a significant sum of money

we're discussing."

"The records check I had run uncovered a daughter, born to Lydia and Howard Rubenstein," Michael stated. "Born in Oakland, California in 1967. Four years before Lydia and Howard were killed in a car accident."

*Page leaned back in surprise. Michael allowed himself a small smile of triumph: both Page and Harrison Marlowe had been very careful to keep Rubenstein's name out of the press; no one had known the name of the man Lydia had planned to marry. Page nodded, impressed. "You **have** done your homework, young man. And what do you get out of this?"*

Michael shrugged. "Nothing really. As I said, I was curious. I'm a detective — I like puzzles. And that's all it was, really, until I actually found that there was a real heir."

"And when might I meet this heir, Detective?"

"I don't know. I haven't gotten in touch with her yet. After her parents died, she was taken in by friends of her parents. They'd been cited as guardians in her parents' will, and they adopted her. She might not even know who her real parents were. I doubt very seriously she has any idea that she's Samantha Marlowe's granddaughter."

"So what is it you want of me, then? Permission to go meet her? You realize what all this sounds like, Detective."

Michael nodded. "Like a scam to defraud the estate of Samantha Marlowe for the inheritance. Yes, I know what it must sound like. Quite honestly, I have no interest in bringing this young woman here for an unpleasant experience. It's not fair and it's not right. That's why I brought my research — you can verify it for yourself, contact her yourself if you like." Michael extracted a large manilla envelope from a pocket inside his jacket; the envelope was dog-eared and wrinkled and bore the insignia of the LAPD. He handed it across to Page.

Page accepted the envelope, opened it, and scanned the contents for a few moments. He looked over at Michael, his expression subtly changed. "Perhaps I've misjudged you, Detective. This all appears to be quite in order. The wonders of modern communications technology," he praised.

"Hmm. Detective Carmeli — that's the person I asked to do the checks — did say that our information retrieval capabilities are considerably more advanced than they would have been in 1964. In a way, it's a little unnerving — no one really has any secrets anymore."

"Yes, I agree. I'm afraid I haven't really acclimated to this electronic world. I would like to look

into this further. Imagine — an heir after all these years! It really is something right out of one of Samantha's movies, isn't it?"

"You bet it is!" came Samantha's voice. "And there's going to be a happy ending, too." Michael glanced quickly over his shoulder to identify where she was in the room. "Gosh, Jimmy — look how old you've gotten!" She walked forward and went to stand next to the old man, her fingers reaching out to touch the wispy white hair. He shook his head slightly, as though he'd actually felt her touch.

"There's one other thing, Mr. Page," Michael said suddenly. "The people who were talking at the auction — they mentioned a locket, a heart. I don't know — maybe they were hoping it would be offered at the auction. I checked around and talked to Bryant Cody at Cody and Sons Jewelers — he said it was custom made for Miss Marlowe. To contain a key. Do you know anything about that?"

Samantha looked at Michael quizzically, but turned her attention avidly to Page for his answer.

Jameson Page settled back in his chair, his face relaxed in pleasant nostalgia. "That was Samantha's little joke. She called it the key to her heart. It was actually the key to a lock on a trunk she left in my keeping. According to her will, if anything happened to Samantha, the trunk was meant to go to Lydia when she turned 21. Lydia never claimed it, I never knew why — perhaps she was too involved in her studies to remember a dusty old trunk. I still have it. I have no idea what's inside it." He sighed and Samantha relaxed. Michael noted that reaction and filed it away. "Lydia had the locket. Quite possibly her daughter has it now. That would certainly be incontrovertible proof in my eyes of her legitimacy as an heir, but after all these years ... I wouldn't be at all surprised if Lydia had sold it. It was worth a fortune in itself."

Samantha started indignantly. "She wouldn't sell that! It was a gift from her mother!"

"Platinum and a blue diamond. Quite an expensive little bauble to give a child." Samantha made a face at him.

"Samantha was like that. Extravagant gifts. Her will was really quite generous — she left considerable sums not only to Lydia, but to all the servants and people from the studio. As I recall, at least one of them invested the money and eventually started his own studio."

Samantha was sitting on the edge of the desk now, smiling fondly at Page. "He's really just an old softie, you know. He was always a dear."

"Did she leave you anything, Mr. Page?" Burton asked quietly. "If that's not too impertinent ... ?"

Page's eyes widened in surprise, but his face softened with a smile. "No, not really. It's a matter of public record too, I suppose. There was money, of course, but that was really just a token — she knew I didn't really need it." At Michael's upraised eyebrows, he chuckled. "Oh, I know — most people feel you can't have too much money. But my tastes are generally simple, and I have a family fortune of my own — and a lawyer, even one at my age, can command significant fees. No, the thing she left me which meant the most was that statuette," he said, indicating the Oscar. "That and her studio stock. My ticket to the world of the movies. I still hold that stock, and used its influence to begin a restoration of her old films. It's almost complete, and there will be a screening in a few weeks."

Samantha beamed at Page's recollections. She reached her hand out to him again and touched his face. Again he moved his head as though he'd felt her.

"I'd like to see that, Mr. Page."

"If all goes well, I'm sure I can arrange for a ticket or two for you. When one gets as old as I am, one feels the right to indulge in a ... fancy or two. I shall enjoy playing movie mogul for an evening," he added with a smile.

Michael smiled back. "I'd appreciate that. Well, I also appreciate your time, Mr. Page. I won't keep you any further —"

"Detective Burton ..." Page began. "Detective Burton, I appreciate the fact that you stopped by. It's not often I get a chance to talk about Samantha these days — so few people remember her, only what they see in poorly maintained prints on television. They don't do her justice. This restoration should revive interest in her work." He closed the file Burton had given him, and planted his hands palms-down on the desk to lever himself out of the chair. Standing, he extended his hand to Burton. "Thank you for bringing this young woman to my attention. I promise you I will look further into it. If I satisfy myself that she is genuine, would you like to meet her?"

"Say yes!" Samantha urged.

Michael opened his mouth and paused. Then he smiled. "Yeah. I think I would like to meet her. Let me know." He fished out his billfold and extracted a card and scribbled his home phone number on it. "Call me at the station or at home when you know something," he added, handing Page the card.

"I will." Page moved slowly around the desk and escorted Michael to the door of his office. "Goodbye, Detective."

"So long, Mr. Page. I'll look forward to hearing from you."

The door closed softly behind Michael, and Samantha passed through the wall to join him. Together they began the long walk across the anteroom to the elevator bank.

"He's still got quite a thing for you, Sam," Michael told her as they walked.

"For me?" she asked, genuinely surprised. She glanced back over her shoulder at the office door. "I never realized ... poor Jimmy. I always wondered why he never found himself a good woman."

"Good women are hard to find, Sam," Michael replied with a smile. "Now, are you going to tell me what that key is for?"

Samantha stopped, holding him back with a hand on his arm. "Later. I will tell you, but later. Let's get Emma what she deserves. And then I'll answer any of your questions, Michael."

"Promise?" She nodded in reply. "Okay. Now I've got a date — with a good woman. I'll see you later."

She dissolved from view. As he pressed the call button for the elevator, he heard her say, "They're harder to find than you think, Michael ..."

* * *

Burton winced as he noted that the menu bore no prices; that always boded ill for his wallet. He was wearing his one good suit, and was keenly aware that it was several years out of date. Dimitrio's was one of the places one went to be seen, one where image was critical to success; he hoped he didn't embarrass Veronica by looking so ... out of step.

It was a tribute to Veronica's stature in the film industry that they'd gotten a reservation at all. While it was not a haunt of the upper echelon of the industry, reservations were normally unavailable for weeks and even months at a time, unless one was recognized as truly up and coming. Veronica had made the reservation two days earlier. Michael had to admit to being impressed, and not a little intimidated.

Her chestnut hair was swept back and gathered in an simple but elegant twist, and elaborate, avant garde earrings dangled from her ears. She was attired in a stylish suit of mauve silk, looking much more formal and effortlessly elegant than Michael did in his old suit. She looked up over her menu and smiled. "Don't worry about the prices, Michael. I'm on an expense account."

Michael glanced up from his frowning perusal of the menu, and his frown deepened. "Expense account? I'm not a legitimate expense."

She adjusted her big-frame glasses and smiled conspiratorily. "Well, no, not precisely."

"Not ... precisely. What does that mean?" he asked, warning bells beginning to echo in the recesses of his brain.

"Well ... well, you know this film I'm going to be working on?"

"No."

"Ah. Well, the script — it's by this wonderful new writer, you'll love him — well, it's about ... the darker side of police life. You know — corruption, graft, misuse of power, that sort of thing."

"Uh-huh."

"And of course we're going to need some sort of ... well, technical advisor," she added, laughing softly.

"There's a department that handles that sort of thing," he reminded her warily.

"Oh, I know," she dismissed it with a wave of her finely-manicured hand. "Public relations people. Not real cops. Not like you," she pointed out, a tiny furrow appearing in her brow.

"No. I'm a detective," Michael agreed.

"Right. You're out there, in the front line. You've seen what it can be like. And after that wretched Rodney King business, the public is looking for an inside view of the police department —"

"Oh," Michael said, nodding his head. "I see."

Her smile was smug as she leaned back in her chair. She regarded him possessively. "I knew you would. I'm looking to make a film about truth, not public relations. Sort of a docudrama, only more realistic. Not movie-of-the-week kind of stuff. You see what I mean?"

"Hmmm."

"And the viewpoint of a real cop — an honest cop — could really make the difference. I mean, you can't see the darkness if you don't have light for contrast."

"Right."

"There will be a retainer, of course. Not large — it's a small-budget film — but something, you know, for your time. I mean, I knew you'd want to do it to help me ... Michael?"

Burton rose slowly, folding his napkin and placing it on the table in front of him. He straightened his jacket and simply looked at her.

Veronica's mouth slowly fell open. Michael stood staring at her for a moment longer, then shook his head. Without saying a word, he turned and left the restaurant.

Samantha was leaning against the outside wall of the restaurant, her arms folded over her chest. As Michael came out into the cool night air, she pushed away from the wall and fell in step with him.

"I don't want to hear a word," he snapped, angrily speeding up his steps.

*"Michael, I'm sorry. I had no idea what was wrong, only that she had no real strong feeling for you," Samantha said urgently, laying her hand on his arm and arresting his forward advance. With an effort, Michael turned to look at her, and she touched his face gently. "I know you're hurt, Michael. Your ego is stung. But she's not worth it — and she's not worth **you**. You're a good man. You have so much to offer — and not just to shades like me. There's a living woman out there for you, you just have to find her."*

"Easy for you to say," he grumbled sourly. "Ever since this ... this hunk of junk got lodged in my head, I haven't had a decent relationship, I have no privacy, there are dead people popping in and out of my life — I've had enough!"

He wrenched free of her, and stormed away down the street toward his car. Looking sadly after him, she slowly faded from view.

* * *

Burton slammed the door of his apartment with a satisfying bang, tore off his jacket and tossed it on the floor, and flung himself on the couch to enjoy a truly monumental pity party. Driving around the city for a couple of hours hadn't helped to soothe the bitter sting of being used, although he had been able to vent some of his frustration against the other drivers on the freeway.

He glowered at the emptiness in his apartment, and cursed the emptiness in his life. He especially cursed himself and his naiveté in thinking that someone like Veronica Howles was interested in him for himself.

It was then that he noticed the blinking light on his answering machine. He grimaced and returned momentarily to his wallow in self-pity. Even Buster, his cat, was absent, probably out romancing some unsuspecting purebred or playing kitty poker with his buddies. But finally curiosity got the better of him, and he got up off the couch and went over to the answering machine.

The first message was from Veronica; the machine's readout noted the call was received at 11:00 p.m., a couple of hours after he'd left the restaurant. "Michael, I'm sorry I upset you — I thought you knew what my film was about. I honestly didn't mean to — well, I do like you, Michael. I thought you'd want to help. I had no idea ... well, call me, okay?"

"Hmmp. When hell freezes over," he snorted, pressing the erase key.

*The second message was from Jameson Page, logged in a little past 11:30, shortly before he'd come in. "Detective Burton. Hello. I apologize for calling so late, but it has taken me some time to verify your information." Michael whistled softly; Page obviously wielded considerable clout in the state to have verified that information in only a few short hours — and **after** business hours, at that.*

"I have investigated both the documents you left in my care — and you. I hope you won't mind. You're a very modest young man; you are very highly regarded in the Police Department, and your honesty has been lauded by everyone I spoke to. I have located Emma Charles, and I spoke to her earlier this evening. I hope you will forgive yet another indiscretion — I have told her that you will meet her tomorrow evening and bring her to my office. I feel you should be here too when I speak to her about her inheritance — after all, if it weren't for you, the young lady would never have known about her grandmother. You were right — she didn't know Samantha Marlowe was her grandmother." He rattled off the address Liz had found, in the Los Angeles suburb of Fullerton, and added a time when she would be expecting Burton. He ended with, "And by the way — she still has the locket. She'll bring it with her. At last — an old mystery will be solved." Michael could imagine the smile on the old man's face.

Page's message brought a smile to his own face. He turned off the machine and returned to his seat on the couch, his face thoughtful. Finally, Burton called out, "It's okay, Sam — you can come back now."

Nothing happened for a moment. He looked around, and said, "Really. It's okay. Come on — Page has found Emma."

After a moment, she resolved on the arm of the couch. "It's been a long time since anyone's called me 'Sam'. I always kind of liked that name. Are you okay, Michael?" she asked solicitously, placing her arm around his shoulders.

He shook his head. "I'll recover. It could have been worse." His thoughts touched briefly on the time when another shade — Ruth — had warned him of the intentions of his then-current flame, and she had been right, too. He might just have to start paying more attention to the advice of these unwelcome visitors. "And tomorrow we'll solve your problem and you can move on."

"Yes." She smiled a bittersweet smile. "I can move on at last. How strange that will be — I wonder what it's like up there?"

"I don't know. Nobody's ever come back and told me." He patted her hand resting on his shoulder. "Maybe you'll be able to."

"Mmm. Reverse channelling." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll try."

* * *

The next day, Michael awoke with a sense of anticipation. The end of this particular spectral investigation was in sight, and as ever, he was hopeful that he might just be allowed to get on with his life for awhile. The fact was, he did get a kick out of helping these shades resolve the unfinished business in their lives, and seeing them move on ... some of them he had been sorry to see go, too. Some, he had rejoiced at their departures, a few more avidly than others. He liked solving puzzles; he hadn't been lying to Page when he'd told him that. But he sometimes wished that other people could see these departed visitors; he wouldn't feel such a fool if he weren't the only person who could see and talk to them.

He arrived at the station with a renewed sense of enthusiasm, certain that he would soon be able to go back to business as usual. His positive mood was immediately shattered when he entered the squad room, and saw Lieutenant Wesley waiting for him at the Lieutenant's office door. Wes looked particularly dour this morning, and Michael knew he was in for it. Wordlessly, he followed Wesley's imperious pointing finger into the office. He seated himself in Wesley's visitor's chair and awaited sentencing.

"All right, Michael — what are you up to now?" demanded the Lieutenant roughly.

Average height, portly, gray-haired and slightly balding, Lieutenant Wesley was nonetheless a formidable adversary when he was angry. Michael attempted to joke his way out of a scolding. "Hey, Wes, what're you talking about —"

*"The Commissioner gets a call — **after hours, at home, and during dinner** — about one of my men — from the oldest partner in one of the most respected law firms in LA — to verify that he's not on*

the take. So the Commissioner gets a little curious, calls Internal Affairs. Internal Affairs has a file on this man, but it shows he's clean — they begin to wonder a little, though. And so Internal Affairs calls me. During one of my favorite TV shows, I might add. Seems one of my men is investigating a long-lost heiress, and one of Los Angeles' old guard lawyers is trying to find out if this is a scam to defraud the estate. And this man hasn't told me about it, has he? Well?"

Michael frowned. "Well ... I was seeing this woman," he started, ticking off items on his fingers. "And I went to this auction —" he glanced up to see if Wesley was paying attention; the Lieutenant was focused entirely on him, although not as favorably as he would have liked, "and some people were talking — you know, idle gossip, but it got me thinking."

"Idle gossip. About?"

"About the late Samantha Marlowe. That she might have a descendent no one knew about ..."

"And why would anyone care? She's been dead nearly 50 years!"

Samantha chose that moment to materialize in Wesley's office. She planted her fists on her hips and stuck her tongue out at Wesley. Then she settled herself on the edge of his desk, looking to Michael for her defense.

"Yeah, I know that," Michael agreed, glancing sidelong at Samantha and gesturing for her to keep quiet. "I dunno — you know how Hollywood legends start. I guess there were some things she had at some point that these collectors were interested in — or maybe she never had them, but they were still interested — you know how these myths get started. Anyway, one of them said that all that stuff was in trust of the estate. And another said that wouldn't it be funny if there was an heir to that estate and they didn't even know it ... and you know how I am — I get an idea —"

"And you make my life miserable with it. And did you find this heir?"

Michael said nothing for a moment, then finally nodded. "Yeah. Liz helped me do some research. On her own time," he amended quickly when Wesley was about to protest anew. "And I did my own research on lunch hours and after work. I admit we did use police resources to do the data search, but Wes — we found her. There really is an heir."

"And Jameson Page called to confirm that you weren't a cop on the take," Wesley finished flatly, although a hint of a smile was beginning to play around the corners of his mouth. "An heir, huh? That's something right out of one of her movies, isn't it?" he asked dreamily. "Lovely long-lost heiress, living in poverty, is found by young, virile detective ..." Michael chuckled, and Wesley blushed, harrumphing. "Ahem. So — what now?"

Samantha giggled, clapping her hand over her mouth. Michael shot her a quick glare when Wesley turned around to look out his window.

"Well, Page called me late last night — apparently you told Internal Affairs that I'm not such a bad sort, and IA told the Commissioner, and the Commissioner told him I'm on the up and up," Burton explained. Samantha crossed her arms over her chest and smiled proudly at him while Wesley seated himself behind his desk. "Page is satisfied that I'm straight, and he's apparently satisfied too that this young woman is Samantha Marlowe's granddaughter. So I'm supposed to go meet this heiress tonight and bring her to his office."

"Well, well ... another Hollywood legend is born, eh? I'll hand it to you Michael — you've got the best instincts for the weirdest hunches," Wesley said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, thanks, Wes," Michael replied, abashed. He started to rise.

*"And you are going to explain just **where** these weird hunches come from, right?"*

"Uh, well, uh — maybe some other time, yeah. Right now, I've still got a stack of paperwork on my desk and I've really gotta get through that — I mean, you know how the DA's office is — you don't cross all your 't's and dot all your 'i's and the case gets thrown out of court, and —" he backed quickly out of the office, leaving Wesley laughing as the door shut behind him.

"Knew that would get the paperwork done," Wesley chuckled to himself.

"Oh ... you!" Samantha swore at Wesley, then walked through the wall to Michael's desk outside.

Burton was already applying himself to the stack of paperwork on his desk, groaning at the new accumulation of folders for his review.

"It wouldn't get like that if you didn't let it pile up," Samantha mimicked Liz. Michael shot her a quelling look. She ignored it with a smile. "Someday you're going to have to tell him, you know."

Michael put down the folder he was leafing through and looked up at her. "You think so?" he asked quietly. He picked up the telephone and pretended he was talking into that instead of to her. "I've already been sent to a police shrink more than once over this. He hears I can actually talk to ghosts ... and my career's history. It was one thing when it was right after my accident ... but two years later? I like being a cop, Sam. It's what I am."

Her expression softened, and she rested a hand on his arm. "I understand that — acting, that's all I

know. It's what I am, too. But don't you think he'd understand?"

"I don't understand, and I'm living it! If I didn't have to face it everyday, and if my friend Annie — she's the only one I've ever told about this — wasn't there to help me through it — I'd have gone nuts long ago. There's just no place for ghosts in police work, Sam —"

"No? That's not what I hear in Limboland. You've solved more than one case because of help from ghosts —"

"Help! Hell is more like it —"

"Michael, who're you talking to?" he heard from behind him, and whirled to face Liz. Her expression was concerned as she gestured toward the phone.

He put his hand over the mouthpiece and whispered, "My cousin Sam. Real nutcase — thinks he sees ghosts. Let me get rid of him, okay?"

Samantha was fuming at this point and, with a toss of her head, vanished.

"Yeah, Sam, look, I'll talk to you later, okay. You just take your little green pills and it'll be okay. Right. Bye." He put the receiver down, glanced around and found the squad room full of living people only, and turned his attention back to Liz. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I wanted to know ... what's happened?"

"Happened. Oh! I'm gonna meet her tonight, take her to the lawyer. Yeah. Looks like it's all going to work out fine."

She smiled, hugging the folders she carried. "That's nice. Will I get to meet her, too? I mean, after all —"

Michael smiled. "Yeah. I think that's a good idea. I'll ask her if she'd like to come in to meet you. You deserve it, kiddo."

"Thanks. And how about that dinner — tomorrow?"

"You got it!" Feeling better, Michael returned his attention to the stack of paperwork and immediately sighed. A policeman's lot was not always a happy one.

* * *

Michael pulled his car up to the curb, shut off the engine, and looked one more time at his reflection in the rear-view mirror. He ran his fingers through his hair, and grimaced. "That didn't do any good," he said to himself. Straightening his tie, he took a deep breath.

"Well, come on, already!" Samantha demanded, popping into sight sitting in the passenger seat. "I can't see her until you go in there — you know I can't manifest if you're not around!"

"Keep your shirt on, Sam. I — well!" he breathed, looking at her for the first time. She was dressed in a gorgeous suit of black silk, with a high-necked white silk blouse. Rhinestone-studded high heels were on her feet, and her hair was pulled back in an elegant french twist. "You look nice, Sam."

She smiled, ducking her head slightly. "It's not every day you get to meet your own grandchild, Michael. Forgive me if I'm impatient — I've waited a long time for this."

"I know," he sympathized, patting her hand. "Let's not put it off any longer. Come on."

Together they got out of the car and made their way across the little suburban street. Children were playing in the waning hours of the day, riding their bicycles up and down the street, tossing balls, skateboarding. Samantha looked at it with a sigh.

"I could have had a life like this — home, family, kids. I might have lived to see my grandchildren born."

"You wouldn't have been happy — you said yourself, acting is what you are."

She smiled sadly. "Yes. And I am what I am, aren't I? Well, let's not keep her waiting."

Steering her with a hand on her elbow, Michael led the way up the short walk to the front door and knocked. A moment later, a soft female voice answered.

"Yes?"

"Miss Charles — it's me, Michael Burton. Mr. Page sent me."

The sound of a chain being drawn back and a deadbolt thrown answered him, and a moment later, the door opened. Michael caught his breath, staring shamelessly.

Before him, behind the screen door, stood Samantha Marlowe. No, not Sam — she was still standing next to him, as shocked as he was. But looking at Emma Charles, there was no doubt as

to the source of her genes — her face was as identical to Sam's as it was possible to be, and her long blonde hair was so pale it was almost white. She picked at the collar of her blouse self-consciously and smiled a self-deprecating smile.

"Won't you come in, Detective? Please?"

Michael roused himself and entered the little house, Sam clinging to his arm as he did so.

Emma closed the door quietly, paused as though composing herself, and turned to face Burton. "Well, Detective. It seems that I owe you a great deal," she said in that same soft voice. The voice wasn't unlike Sam's when she was being serious. A glance around the living room, lined from floor to ceiling with books, periodicals, and papers crowding on bookshelves and tabletops, added to the illusion. He looked at the pile of books on the coffee table, and picked one up. It was a textbook on Middle English.

He turned his attention to her. "Do you? Is this what you want?" he asked seriously.

She shrugged and reached for her glasses on the end table. With them on, the resemblance to her grandmother was lessened. "I've always wanted family. The Charleses were wonderful to me — don't get me wrong. But they were both only children, their own parents were long dead. Now they're both gone, and I've been alone. I thought moving down here to LA might change that ... but I'm not very good at meeting people," she explained with a small, self-conscious laugh. "I've spent my whole life around books. My real parents were both professors, and my adopted parents were, too. It's only natural I followed in their footsteps — I just started teaching English Literature at UCLA this term. I was very fortunate to get the job, actually." She paused, looking off into the middle distance. "You know, it's hard to imagine my mother growing up as the daughter of a famous movie star. What little I remember ... she was very quiet, very studious. I'm told I take after her."

"Your grandmother, too," Michael added. "You look very much like her, you know."

Emma Charles smiled. "Thank you. People have told me that over the years, but I thought it was just a silly coincidence. Here it is genotype." She sighed. "How odd ... I've never had a grandmother. And yet, I feel like ... well, even though she's been dead a long time, I feel like she's with me somehow," she said, a tiny furrow appearing in her pale brow.

Michael smiled as Sam went over to her granddaughter and reached out a trembling hand to touch her face. Emma started at the touch, her frown increasing. She shook her head, her fingers probing the place where Sam's rested. To Burton, it looked as though she were laying her hand over that of her grandmother. "How odd, indeed," she repeated.

"She's got the gift, Michael," Sam breathed. "She **is** my granddaughter! Oh, Michael —" Sam's eyes were filled with tears as she turned back toward Burton.

"Miss Charles —"

"Oh, you must call me Emma. You know so much about me, you've given me ... well, my past, haven't you? I don't believe that my parents — my real parents — ever told my adoptive parents much about themselves. I mean, they were both professors at Berkeley, that much they knew, they all worked together — but their pasts ... it wasn't important, I suppose. But it is to me. What can you tell me about them?"

"First, call me Michael. And it's a long ride to Mr. Page's office — why don't I tell you on the way?"

She smiled that same sad smile. "Yes. Why don't you?" She reached for her purse and slung the strap over her shoulder.

Samantha was gesturing toward her neck, mouthing "Locket," at Michael.

"Oh — did Mr. Page mention anything about a locket to you?"

"Oh. Yes, he did." Her hand reached under her collar and she drew out a chain. At the end of the chain was a heart-shaped locket, with a perfect diamond in the center. "I got a longer chain for it when I got older. But it was my mother's — my real mother's. It's the only piece of jewelry I ever wear. I have all her books, all my father's books. But this always made me feel close to her." She studied it a moment. "I don't really know why — there are all sorts of notes and scribbles in her books, but this," she held it up, "seems to embody her so much more."

Samantha wiped the tears from her face, smiling fondly at Emma. Michael nodded, and gestured toward the door. "Why don't we get going?"

* * *

Fred the guard was on duty again when they entered the lobby of the Simmons Building. This time he was considerably more deferential than he'd been the first time Burton had visited, and Michael was grinning as they approached the elevator bank. As the elevator door clanked open, Joe greeted him warmly.

"So, this is the long-lost heiress, eh? Well, Miss Charles — it's my pleasure to take you to the fifth floor," he welcomed as Michael and Emma stepped onto the elevator.

"My — does everyone know about this?" she breathed.

"Well, it is kind of like a fairy tale, don't you think?" Joe asked cheerfully. "I mean — it's just like something out of the movies, huh?"

Michael had been hearing that phrase a lot of late, and Samantha merely shrugged. Even almost 50 years after her death, drama and mystique still surrounded her.

Page was waiting for them at the secretary's desk when the elevator delivered them to the fifth floor. Joe gave Burton a thumb's up sign and closed the door, and they could hear the elevator wheezing its way back down to the first floor.

Emma's eyes were wide as she tried to take in all the details of the incredible lobby. Burton guided Emma carefully down the carpet runner toward the lawyer, concerned that she might trip as she stared all around her. Samantha walked next to them, but only Michael was able to see her, although Emma whispered to him that she still had that funny feeling that her grandmother was nearby. Finally, they stood before the ancient attorney. He was smiling, his gnarled hand outstretched in welcome.

He stared a long moment at the face of Samantha Marlowe's granddaughter. "I had no idea ... it's as though she's come back to life," he breathed, shaking his head. "But I am being rude — Miss Charles — please, come inside."

* * *

"I can recommend an excellent accountant — with all this newfound wealth, there will be taxes to pay which even the most seasoned aristocrat might find daunting. There are no back-taxes, of course — the estate has kept up with them. But inheritance taxes, et cetera — quite a lot of money will go to the government, I fear, but you are still a very wealthy young lady."

Page, Emma and Michael were all seated in Page's office, and Samantha had seated herself on the edge of the desk next to Page so she could watch her granddaughter. She hadn't said a word to Michael since they'd entered the office, just sat there and drank in the sight of her grandchild.

"I'm not sure I want to know just how wealthy," she replied, chuckling softly.

Page smiled. "Let's just say you won't have to work anymore if you don't choose to. Ever."

"Oh," she answered, eyes wide.

Page inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Now that Detective Burton has helped us both solve one mystery, I would like your help in solving a mystery that has haunted me for nearly 50 years." He gestured toward an old trunk that was sitting between their chairs. "That was your grandmother's. She entrusted it to me while she was still living, oh, perhaps six months or so before that awful plane crash. I have never opened it — the key was not in my possession. It was placed in a locket your grandmother had made for your mother. And which you now wear around your neck."

Emma's hand flew to the locket and closed around it. "I've never opened the locket. I didn't know how —"

"May I?" Page asked, his palm opened to take the locket. Emma looked to Michael, who nodded. She lifted the chain over her head and dropped the locket into the old solicitor's hand.

"It's been well-cared for all these years," he approved, looking it over. "A truly magnificent piece of the jeweller's craft by the late Mr. Cody. That man was a true artist," he added with a nod of his head. "I helped Samantha pick out the design, you know. Let me see if I remember ..." He fiddled with the locket a moment, then with an "Ah," he thumbed a catch along the side of the heart. The locket split into two faces, a glittering key in its center. "I'm afraid my fingers are not so dexterous as they once were — Miss Charles?" he asked, handing the opened locket back to her.

She took it and lifted the key out, staring at it in wonder. "And it opens this lock?" she asked, looking back at Page. He nodded. Smiling at Michael, she leaned over and inserted the key into the small lock dangling from the trunk. It went in easily and they all held their breaths — including Samantha — as she turned the key. A soft click was heard in the silence, and Emma removed the lock. She looked at Page, who had come around the desk and was now perched on the edge of the desk, watching the trunk intently.

"There's a small switch to the side of the catch — just press it with your thumb."

Emma did as she was told, and the catch sprang open. Her fingers were trembling as she lifted the trunk lid.

They all craned to peer inside the trunk, including Samantha. She had moved from Page's desk to sit on the arm of Michael's chair. Michael glanced at her curiously; she was tense and nervous as the faded cloth covering the contents of the trunk was lifted away. Beneath the cloth were carefully stacked papers, brittle with age, tied with discolored ribbons, once pink and blue and violet. Emma lifted these out carefully, handing them to Jameson Page.

"My. Love letters from Harrison to Samantha. She really meant it when she said that was the key to her heart," he murmured, glancing at the packet of letters in his hand. "Is there anything else?"

Sam nodded urgently. "Keep looking. There's more," she whispered to Michael.

Michael helped Emma extricate a medium-size chest and they placed it on the desk as Page moved out of the way. Emma nodded to Michael, and he unfastened the catch on the box, lifting the lid. Inside the chest were exquisitely-wrought necklaces, rings, and bracelets, tarnished after their years in the trunk.

"I think you just got wealthier, Miss Charles. I always wondered what happened to her jewel collection — I thought perhaps it had been stolen by a servant, but all her people were terribly loyal and they all knew they'd be taken care of in her will. A legend in your grandmother's lifetime, and more recently it has fallen to the status of mere Hollywood myth. She must have put them in here in trust for Lydia, your mother."

Sam whispered in Michael's ear, "I used to think of this as my hope chest. For Lydia. I never meant for the jewels to stay hidden for so long." She shook her head sadly.

Page held up a ruby necklace, the incandescent light from his desk lamp catching like fire in the perfectly cut gems. "And here are the papers authenticating the collection — provenance should you decide to sell the jewels." He set the necklace back in the case and looked expectantly into the trunk. "Anything else?"

Michael looked at Sam, who was still staring intently into the interior of the trunk. He turned his attention to the bottom of the trunk, brushing aside another stack of letters, and lifted out a large disk-shaped object. He dusted off the label in the center of the lid. "A film can — there are two others — the writing is faded ... 'Property of ...' uh, oh, yeah — 'Monumental Pictures'. There's a title, too —"

"'Delusion'?" Page said reverently, his eyes wide.

"'D ...' yeah — how did you know?" Michael asked, glancing up at Page. Then he looked at Sam, and she was smiling, her eyes closed.

"Delusion was Samantha's last picture. It was a brilliant piece of work, but controversial. It's a wonder it was made at all — the subject was sensitive, you see — Samantha played a woman suffering from mental illness, and the censors went mad over it. Sam wanted to do a dramatic film, on a serious subject. This was not your typical Hollywood treatment — it was more in the manner of an exposé. She found the screenwriter — a grave young man whose career went nowhere after this film — he was blacklisted, long

before the McCarthy Era," he explained, nodding toward the tarnished silver can. "She financed the project herself. Even had it shot on an experimental film stock to ensure the best picture quality. But the studio wouldn't allow it to be released. Too controversial. Too dangerous, they said."

He shook his head sadly. "The studio controlled the distribution back then. They owned the movie houses, too. Sam was furious — she wanted the film shown. It was her best work, and it ... well, Samantha believed very strongly in it. Her mother had suffered from schizophrenia, you see. She died in a mental institution. But the studio killed any news about it. And then the film disappeared.

"I should have guessed Sam would have taken it. This must be the master negative — no, don't open it!" Page warned as Michael tried to pry the lid off. "We don't know what condition it's in ... a never-before-seen Samantha Marlowe film. **Delusion!** I must take it to a film restoration firm — if you will allow me, Miss Charles. Have it looked over in the proper environment, prints made ... My heavens," he breathed, his eyes fixed on the film can.

When Michael turned to look at Samantha, he saw her attention fixed on the film canister, too, a look of resolution and pride on her face. She lifted her eyes to look at Michael and smiled. "It's my best work — it should have been shown all over the country, made people face up to mental illness. But the studio was thinking of its wallet, not its conscience. Make sure it gets seen, Michael." With that, she faded from sight.

* * *

Sealed inside the film canisters and locked away in a trunk for almost 50 years, the experimental negative stock of **Delusion** had weathered the years better than many of her films which had been released and played over and over again on television. A watchable, if dull and scratchy, black and white print had been made from the negative in time for the retrospective. One scene had dissolved entirely, but it had not been a crucial one; another had been damaged, but was still somewhat watchable. The negative was then turned over to a premiere film restoration firm to undergo painstaking restoration for a general release the following year or possibly later. The damaged material would be repaired and enhanced to the extent possible, and some of it could be rebuilt from the yellowed and brittle studio stills that had also been found in Samantha's trunk.

Page had come through on his promise of tickets, and Burton joined him and Emma at the premiere with Liz Carmeli on his arm. The discovery of not only the heir to the Marlowe fortune, but a previously unknown Samantha Marlowe film had brought the press out in droves. Hollywood's elite had clamored for tickets to the premiere of **Delusion**, and Page had finally had to change the venue of the retrospective from a small art movie house in Hollywood, to a restored old movie palace in downtown Los Angeles. The delay in schedule had allowed time to have a back-up print of **Delusion** made, in case anything went

wrong with the first print. Hundreds of neon bulbs glittered and pulsed as Samantha's name was spelled out on the marquis. Liz goggled no less than did her three companions, as the best known names and faces in the film industry moved through the lobby to the reception down in the lower salon of the theater.

*Considering that the entire affair had been thrown together in a matter of weeks, it was grand in the tradition of Hollywood's golden days. Champagne was served in crystal glasses by liveried waiters carrying silver trays, and **hors d'oeuvres** were served at tables lining the outer perimeter of the reception room. Famous people mingled all around them.*

"Samantha would have been proud — look at this!" Page commented, beaming. "There's Robert Redford ... and look, Helen Hayes! Hume Cronyn, Jessica Tandy ... Angela Lansbury! Oh my — Elizabeth Taylor! I wish I had the nerve to ask for her autograph," Page said softly. "I've always had a sort of crush on her. Those lavender eyes ..." He sighed, still smiling. He looked at the young woman on his arm and shook his head. "But none of them — not even Miss Taylor — are as lovely as you are tonight, my dear," he told her.

Emma blushed furiously. She wore some of her grandmother's jewelry in honor of the occasion, and a simple but elegant black silk chemise evening gown. Her white-blond hair was piled on her head in ringlets and tumbling curls, but she was clearly uncomfortable as the center of attention. Many of those famous personages had come by to pay their respects to Page and especially Emma, openly curious about Samantha Marlowe's granddaughter and heir. Page had presented Emma as though she were royalty, and several times during the reception, she'd had to fight down the urge to curtsy in response.

"I don't think I could ever get used to this," she breathed. "It's no wonder my mother ran away from it. It's horrific," she added, shaking her head. In fact, her whole body trembled slightly.

Page looked at her, startled. "You know, I never really thought about that. Lydia was a studious sort, happier with her books than being seen in public. She hated this sort of thing. Used to get sick before any public appearance — her coming out party was a total disaster. Her father couldn't understand — he was raised in the public eye, and his marriage to your grandmother ..." He shook his head. "I never realized. Poor Lydia." He took her hand in his and patted it gently. "One is never too old to learn, I suppose. The furor will die down shortly, I'm sure. Unless one does something to attract attention, the press these days loses interest quickly. I promise I'll help you return to your quiet life, Emma," he vowed.

"Oh, I didn't mean — well, yes, I suppose I did," she amended, chuckling softly. "I don't mind giving lectures at the university, but this," she gestured toward the glittering room and the famous people, all glancing surreptitiously toward her, "is just not for me." She reached out to touch Michael's arm. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful — I am very grateful. Just the other day I got a

call from my great-aunt, my grandfather's sister. She's as rich as Croesus and doesn't want a dime from me — just a visit to Connecticut. That means more to me ... more than all this, certainly. But I think I'll be happier when people forget about me. It'll be easier to teach classes then, I'm sure!"

Liz smiled sympathetically. "Look, why don't we go on up to the theater — there's a private box for us in the balcony, yes?" she asked Page and he nodded. "We'll get settled in there to watch the movie, okay? Come on."

Emma breathed a sigh of relief and allowed herself to be led through the crowd by Liz, a veteran of many a crowded booking room.

Burton and Page watched them go, and then Page cleared his throat. "Well, they'll all be disappointed that she's slipped away, but I'm sure the film — and the notoriety — will suffice. Your young lady friend is a kind person, you know. And she certainly earned this evening as much as the rest of us, after all her hard work in tracking down Emma."

Michael nodded agreement. He and Liz had had a nice dinner a couple of weeks earlier in payment for her help, with dancing afterward, and confirmed that they enjoyed each other's company, but nothing more. His best friend, Annie, would have loved this, but Page was right — Liz had earned it.

"I suppose it's time for me to make a speech — why don't you join the young ladies, Detective?"

"If you're sure ..."

"I'm sure. Unlike Miss Charles, I enjoy the limelight. Remember? This is my moment of fame. The night I make Hollywood history. I shall enjoy it. You go on." Page walked stiffly but resolutely into the center of the room, picked up a spoon from the buffet table, and rang it against his glass for attention. All eyes turned toward him, and Michael slipped out the door to make his way to the private balcony.

* * *

Swing music from the forties played over the theater's speaker system, a jazzy number by the Glenn Miller Orchestra. The murmur of voices wafted up from the reception room below. As Michael made his way up the last flight of stairs to the private balcony area, he saw Samantha waiting for him at the top. She was dressed like something out of an Astaire-Rogers film, all frills and pastels with a long full skirt made of something shimmery and light. She was smiling, and held out her arms to him.

"Dance with me, Michael," she asked softly.

Ruth, that earlier shade who had also accurately advised Michael on his love life, had said exactly the same thing to him, at the dance at the elderly center after he'd found her will and resolved her unfinished business. He smiled at the memory, nodded and took Sam's hand in his, placing his other around her waist. On the downbeat, he swung her into the dance, and she threw her head back, laughing.

"It was the film all along, wasn't it — all those years. Emma was just a bonus," he said as they twirled.

She nodded. "But Emma is what brought me to you. The trigger, if you like. And now ... now she has what's hers, my film will finally be seen, and Jimmy ... Jimmy has his fame, his place in Hollywood history. Everybody wins."

"And you?" In unison, they dipped, and together they rose and spun in time to the music.

"And I ... get to go on. Finally. It's funny — I can't feel anything from your side anymore. Once you found Emma. Once you had the film. Now," she smiled, her expression nostalgic, "Now I can sense other things — perhaps it's the other side calling to me. I think I can sense Harry, and Lydia. They made up, I think. It was stupid, really. And I'll get to meet my son-in-law. I'll have a family, too." She released his hands and pirouetted away from him. "Thank you, Michael. For everything. Find that good woman. And be love happy always!" As she whirled, a cone of brilliant white light shot down from the ceiling and surrounded her. She waved, and then she and the light were gone.

"You, too, Sam," Michael whispered, and turned to open the balcony door just as the opening credits began to roll.