

Excerpt from The Art of Fang Shui

Chapter One

“I searched the world for two years to find you.”

Ordinarily, those words would have flashed a thrill or three down her spine, but Hannah knew better. In her convoluted life, she'd heard much stranger stuff. She gaped at the man who lounged casually against the self-help bookshelf. If tall, dark and handsome was an overdone cliché then she was face to face with the best-looking cliché she'd ever met. Actually, it was more like face to shoulder, but what did that matter? The man before her was serious eye candy.

“Pardon me?” Hannah abandoned her task of rearranging bookshelves.

He stared at her with eyes the color of Alaskan glacier ice and just as cold. “Are you sure you need to speak specifically with me? I mean, there are several clerks that work here. Perhaps you need to see one of them?” A curvy girl with an hourglass shape, Hannah struggled with the fact men could find her attractive. “Give me a name, and I'll call them over.”

“I am not mistaken.” A curt nod followed the statement. “You are the one I desire.”

A shiver danced down her back, even as her brain scrambled to follow his stilted speech pattern. She hadn't been the object of anyone's desire for years. “Excuse me?” Hannah glanced around the bookstore to see if they attracted undue attention but no one glanced their way. “I don't understand what you mean.”

“You will come with me now.”

The man obviously wasn't very well versed with the ability of small talk. That was unfortunate since conversation was a dead art form. “I'm sorry but my shift isn't over.” She glanced at him again and frissons of electricity zipped through her at the sight of the shoulder-length black hair and dusky olive-hued skin. She sighed. “If you want to ask me out, I have to tell you, I'll need way more information than what you've given me. At least a cup of coffee or something. I don't even know you.”

“You will come with me now.” A long forefinger pointed in the direction of the door to emphasize his repeated request.

She rolled her eyes and wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans. She could very well be in trouble. “Okay, I get it, you don't date much.” Small talk was an overrated skill anyway.

Since he was easy on the eyes, she'd rather look at him, except the troubled mask that marred his classic features seriously destroyed any fantasy she could concoct. She stepped past the frowning man then slipped behind A Novel Idea's checkout counter to

wait on a customer. She wasn't pleased to discover the shopper threw him an appreciative glance as well. A surge of unwarranted jealousy sloshed through Hannah's gut when the woman dropped her key ring in an obvious attempt to draw his attention to her.

"Have a good evening." Hannah gave her last buyer of the evening a cheery wave, a firm look and a smile, glad when the woman finally took the hint and left the store. She then focused her attention on the dark visitor. "I'm Hannah, by the way." She frowned when he did nothing but stare at her, his gaze intense. "And this would be the part where you tell me your name. It's how civilized people converse." If she hoped to draw him out, to ascertain the reason for his sudden appearance, she was destined for disappointment when he didn't get the hint.

"My name is Edwin Mason, and I hunt paranormal beings for bounty."

Hannah swallowed. The dread she'd tried so hard to ignore all these years churned in her stomach. "Sorry, Edwin Mason, but welcoming the paranormal back into my life is not on my agenda at the moment." Grabbing a stack of colorful yellow and green pamphlets, she flung them in his face and darted through the aisles of the bookstore. Once she gained the backroom, Hannah slammed the door. Her heart pounded as she picked her bag from its hook and hurried out the street door, hoping the lock caught. A quick fumble in the purse brought her key ring into trembling fingers.

Sprinting across the darkened parking lot to her car, she risked a glance over her shoulder. No time for a sigh of relief when she didn't spot the stranger. Instead, she scrambled into the vehicle as her lungs burned, turned the key and threw it into gear. Her tires squealed as she raced out of the parking lot. Sure, leaving a potential stalker-burglar inside the store probably wasn't the best thing to do in the circumstances but Hannah didn't care. The need to get home overrode common sense. Even still, she took a roundabout way to her apartment, in case he followed her. She careened into the nearest parking spot, yanked the keys from the ignition and bolted up the walkway to her door.

"Come on, come on," Hannah mumbled when her hand shook so badly the key wouldn't slide into the lock. Finally, she shoved it home. She shut herself inside and secured all three locks, raced through the living room and checked the lock on the patio entry. With slightly less haste, she returned to the front door and leaned her back against it. As long as she stayed inside and everyone else stayed out, she should be fine.

Twenty minutes later, her pulse had returned to normal level, but fear caused cold sweat to trickle down her spine. Was it possible they had found her? The better part of her adult life was spent wracked with worry and denial so she supposed it was only natural the eventuality would occur now. If she kept herself removed from the paranormal world, she wouldn't run the risk of almost killing again.

Hannah stroked the pendant of moss agate that hung around her neck and held out hope the stone would increase her self-confidence and bravery. She never had cause to believe in the metaphysical properties of gemstones before, but now she wondered if she could remember all the old stories her grandmother had tried to impart during her childhood. It was doubtful. That had been years ago, and Hannah wasn't at all interested in the folklore at the time. Her attempt to forget those stories was in vain as they spewed forth from their locked and forbidden prison, unbidden, mocking. Vague recollections of whispered tales of fairies and dragons, witches and magic skittered through her memory. She shivered.

"You should have listened to your grandmother, Hannah."

Panic spiked along her spine. Hannah choked on the bile that rose into her throat. She twisted around, her fingers closed tightly around the smooth pendant as her heart beat strong and erratic against her ribcage. "How did you get in here?" She tested the latches again—glad to see they at least were still firmly in the locked position. "How do you know about Gramma?" Hannah's hands shook and she released the pendant. She clasped them behind her back, away from his prying gaze.

"It is not important how I know." He shrugged. A tiny grin lifted the corners of his mouth. "I used the patio door as an entry point."

A coil of fear wound its way up the base of her spine, cold and joyless. She had just locked that door so how did he get in...unless. Of course, he couldn't materialize through walls. That thought alone terrified her, but the more urgent issue was what did she do with him now? Hannah watched as he paced around her small living room, his attitude a mix of rampant boredom and barely restrained excitement.

"Why don't you tell me why you're here? Or better yet, why don't you leave, maybe drop me a letter? I don't appreciate being stalked, and I have to warn you that I'm a fairly loud screamer." She scanned the immediate area for a weapon. Would she be able to fend off an attack with an extendable duster?

"I am hardly stalking you, Hannah Weybourne."

"How did you know my last name? I'm certain I never told you."

Hannah's nerve endings tingled from adrenaline or from the strained atmosphere. She sat down at the edge of the recliner to glare at the man then frowned at the fresh mud stains on her beige carpet. "I guess bounty hunters don't wipe their feet."

He ignored her sarcastic comment. "Your name is symmetrical, a palindrome." His statement brooked no further conversation. "It is the same forward and back. It is good luck."

His formal speech pattern was an annoyance enough but now he had a severe case of obsessive-compulsive disorder on top of it all? Hannah mentally rolled her eyes. “What do you want, and so help me if you make another move, I’ll beat you senseless with this.” She pulled a small, handheld vacuum from its resting place behind the sofa and brandished it before her like a sword as her heart raced.

“I will not harm you, Hannah.” The tiny grin vanished as he took a seat on the sofa.

“What do you want?” She dropped the small vacuum in favor of her purse. “You’ve got ten seconds to tell me or I’ll call the police.” Hannah scrabbled in her bag for her cell phone. She couldn’t locate it quickly enough for her peace of mind and knew it had probably slipped to the bottom.

“You will accompany me to see the Witch of the North Forest.”

“Who?” Her cell forgotten, she gawked at him in amazement. “I will do no such thing, thank you very much. Besides, I don’t believe in witches.” His unexpected presence at the bookstore dredged up hidden memories, and made her second guess herself. Hannah knew other worldly beings did exist. It didn’t matter if a person believed them to be true. “And even if I did, there aren’t any forests around here.” Her initial fear began to ebb away the longer she talked with him. Yes, he was a stranger—a very demanding man, but something about his eyes gave her pause, a hidden gentleness maybe.

“It does not interest me whether you believe in the magical world or not. You will come with me.” He rose to his feet, his lips pressed into a thin line.

Hannah tried to resist his gaze, but he had some sort of magnetism about him that compelled her to stare into those icy blue depths as he took another two steps toward her. “I think we need to talk about that.”

She had the chance to look directly into a whirlpool once while her family went on a sailing trip. As she looked into Edwin’s eyes, she experienced the same sort of hypnotic effect, only on a much more personal scale. She fell into the blue depths with a mixture of excitement and exhilaration. Hannah gasped for air, tore her gaze from his only to have it land on the dimple on his left cheek. She idly wondered why he didn’t have a matching dimple in the other cheek. That dimple was definitely going to pose a problem. She had a weakness for them. “Who are you?”

With a frustrated sigh, Edwin extended his right hand. The plain band on his fourth finger caught a flash of light. “I am Edwin Mason. My family has been in the vampire hunting business for the last two centuries. I need your help.”

Against her better judgment, Hannah shook his hand, startled when her fingers tingled where they touched his. She could feel the carefully controlled power that exuded from deep within him. It had been a very long time since she had felt something even remotely similar, and it had never occurred since she moved to this tiny town. “Why me?”

Why do you search for me?" She swallowed past the lump of anxiety in her throat. "I'm nobody."

"You have been chosen because you possess a supernatural ability. Your grandmother refers to it as a Gift. You have distinctive talents of the mind, but you are afraid of that power."

"No, that's not true." She wished she could stick her fingers in her ears and not hear what would probably be a long discussion on what she tried to keep bottled deep inside.

"It is. In fact, you are an energy conduit of sorts, a power enhancer if you will."

"You're wrong." Denial had always worked well. No reason not to stick with it now.

"Because of your unique ability, you are in grave danger—not only in the paranormal world, but also in this one. I suspect your grandmother told you to never tell anyone of your power because then people would hunt you all over again."

"I...I do move around a lot." She refused to admit his words as the truth.

That part of her was long gone.

"That is cowardly of you. People with paranormal ability will always be drawn to each other, especially when they know what you are." He drew a small leather-bound book from a pocket of his jeans. As he flipped it open, he flashed a wallet-sized photo at her. "This is your grandmother, correct?"

Her gut clenched when she recognized the gray haired woman in the picture. Around her neck, she wore the same pendant that now rested around Hannah's own neck. "Yes." Cold sweat trickled down her back.

"The family resemblance is unmistakable. She once commanded the same power that you do, which spurred her protectiveness. It is commendable on her part; however, even she knows destiny will always find its way." He pocketed the slim volume. "No further information is needed. We must go."

"No." Hannah shook her head, her common sense finally kicking in. She sprang up from the chair to pace about the room. Her stomach churned. "I don't have this Gift or whatever it is. You're mistaken. Things like that often times skip a generation. Possibly, even skip two generations, who can say?" Her laugh was tight and forced. "Genetics are a funny thing."

She needed to get away from him. Obviously, he was dangerous. People like him just didn't break into houses everyday and raise kittens on the side. Fear clogged her throat until she thought she'd choke. She couldn't be associated with the paranormal world. Not again. Not after everything that had happened.

His sigh was barely audible. "You cannot deny that which is within you, Hannah."

She could feel him approach, the energy in the air almost hummed between them. "I don't have a special talent or anything else for that matter, so you can just leave." Closing her eyes, Hannah bit the inside of her lip and wished he would go away.

She hoped he was a gorgeous bad dream.

He wasn't. He was still there when she opened her eyes.

"You do. It is for that reason I needed to find you. I do not know why you deny the truth."

Hannah shook her head then attempted to skirt around the enigmatic man. He laid a strong hand on her arm that stopped her cold. "Fine. I might have some powers," she conceded, reluctant to meet his gaze. "I don't understand them, and I don't want to. My Gramma tried to train me to strengthen them but my mom freaked out and we moved away." She jerked her arm from his grip and scuttled to the far side of the room. "When I got brave enough to mess around with my ability, someone got hurt. Almost killed, in fact. I will not put another person in jeopardy."

"You must learn how to use your power properly. It is not a toy or parlor entertainment. If you consent to join me, I will teach you how to harness and focus yourself as an enhancement conductor and when necessary, meld with my own." He crossed the cozy room then drew Hannah to the sofa and sat beside her. "My great-grandfather was a vampire with recessed tendencies. He possessed a soul and fangs but ultimately he was only a gene carrier. He would on occasion drink blood and become sensitive to sunlight. Most popular fiction is untrue. Vampires do mix freely through society, and they hold normal, mundane jobs."

She narrowed her eyes. "And?" Hannah scooted down the length of the sofa, glad to get away from his warmth. "Is there more?" There was always more.

Edwin sighed. "As my family progressed, more and more human genetics mixed into the bloodline. The family hoped those dark genes would remain dormant." The grin he turned on her almost knocked her off the sofa by its sheer brilliance. She wondered what it would feel like to bask in a smile with the full wattage. "As you can probably surmise, some of those genes have surfaced in me."

By that time, one sofa cushion separated them. "I'm sorry for your bad luck, but you still haven't told me why you're here."

Edwin ran a hand over his face in apparent exhaustion. His elegant fingers scratched his stubble-covered cheek. "I am contracted to track a rogue vampire named Duncan. For whatever reason, he has killed several people and will require prosecution. I need your help to find him. If, for some reason, he is beyond rehabilitation, he will have to be dispatched."

Hannah's hand shook as she raked her fingers through her hair. "Dispatched as in killed?"

"Yes. However, recently, I have been aware of other, more powerful disturbances through the paranormal world and cannot ascertain whom or what is responsible. This troubles me."

"What does? The fact you haven't found the source or that you can't?"

Anxiety roiled in her stomach, and doubled in intensity as he stared at her, unblinking. She was irritated to note ranking at the top of her class in college didn't prepare her for banter with paranormal beings. "If you're a hunter, don't you already possess the skills to track this Duncan person?" Nervousness skittered through her chest. "Why do you need me?"

He assumed an air of a parent explaining a relatively simple concept to a child for the third time. "As I explained before, my vampire genes are too diluted. If a vampire or other being's bloodline is true, they can elude me quite easily. I can sense when they are in the general vicinity. I am able to use telepathic power to subdue them. I have the ability to neutralize a weakened vampire or any other being I track. You have a specific Gift and you possess certain other paranormal skills that are useful to me."

"That doesn't help me." Paranormal skills. She curled her fingers into fists until her nails bit into her palms. "I refuse to open myself up to that again."

"Let me put it in the simplest terms I can. Pretend someone is an electronic device that runs on batteries. That device can only do so much on its limited power. Now, imagine that you happen to walk by that person and suddenly, the small power they harness is multiplied a hundredfold because you enhanced it, much as if they plugged themselves into you as an electrical outlet. Do you understand now?"

Oh my God. It was worse than she thought. "Yes." The urge to run grew strong. She made a move to leave but he trained his icy blue eyes on her and she paused.

"It took me two years to find the one mentioned in my grandfather's prophecy. I will not give up because that woman is afraid of exploring her full potential."

Hannah shivered and tamped down the hysteria in her brain. Words like power, prophecy, or even vampire caused fear to choke her throat. "I'm going to have to disappoint you, Mr. Mason. Whether or not I have this vague Gift is none of your concern. I certainly don't command any other sort of power." She stood on shaky feet and hoped he couldn't read her churning thoughts. "I would like to say it's been a pleasure but that would be an outright lie. Good luck with your quest." Hannah moved to the door and worked the locks. The task seemed to take forever. "Good luck."

"What are you afraid of, Hannah Weybourne?" Edwin stood as well, his very presence seemed to fill Hannah's apartment with strength, power, and raw masculinity. "Your

name has been woven into the tapestry of Fate. That tapestry must be finished. Your grandmother told you this long ago.”

Surprise filtered through her confusion. “My grandmother is ... different.”

She paused over the word and found there could be no other way to describe Gramma Eileen. She could not, would not, get involved in this issue. She couldn’t be responsible for another disaster. Hannah refused to open her mind to the unspeakable force that traumatized her life five years ago.

“Hannah.”

Her thoughts tumbled to a halt by the authority that coated his silky voice. Her eyes lingered on the broad sweep of his shoulders and the unmistakable way his jeans clung to the curve of his rear. Damn. She wondered why he hunted vampires when he could be doing a handful of other things, specifically wooing the world’s most beautiful women. “Please leave.” She heard the hysterical edge to her own voice and wished she were brave. “I can’t go back to that world again.”

“Quiet.” Edwin cocked his head to one side, a finger to his lips to signify silence. His movement swift, he extinguished the lamps. As he twitched the curtain aside to stare down into the street, a frown marred the exquisite line of his lips. “We must leave this place immediately.”

“I told you—no! I’ve got to be at work tomorrow.” Hannah stood firm, her hands planted on her hips, and glared. “You’re seriously deluded if you think otherwise. I’m calling the police.” She scabbled for the house phone but it fell off the table and onto the floor with a dull thud. “Get out.” She uttered the demand through gritted teeth.

“Hannah, get away from the door.” Edwin grabbed her arm, pulling her to him. “If you do not move now, I will be forced to manipulate you until you obey.”

“No.” As she looked into his face, her breath caught at the fury reflected in his icy eyes. “There’s nothing you can do to convince me otherwise.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“As you wish.” The bounty hunter brought his mouth crashing down on hers.

Stunned, Hannah’s struggles stopped. Was that what he meant by manipulation?

Two seconds later, her blood sizzled through her veins as his lips moved over hers. His hands grasped the ample curve of her hips, and he held her against his body as his tongue stroked hers with delicious accuracy. In an effort to remain upright, Hannah clutched his shoulders then sucked on his bottom lip, purely for the pleasure of it. Fear was temporarily lost as warmth flowed into her body at the frenzied contact. As his

fingers grazed the underside of her breasts, tiny flames ignited under her skin. Just when she would have given him an all access pass, he weakened his hold.

“What the hell?”

His lips parted in a smile. “Now you are in a more docile frame of mind, get away from the door. I will not repeat that action.”

She yanked her arm out of his grasp, angry with herself because he made her forget the urgency of the situation with one simple kiss. “Bastard!”

The door to her apartment burst apart with such force that bits of the white painted wood were flung all over the room. She barely had time to think before Edwin shoved her to the floor with his body over hers in a protective stance.