

Client: Charming Environments

by Wendy Despain

Marie heard the main door open and someone talking to the receptionist. A someone with a charming voice. A dangerously charming voice. Marie leaned back in her chair and put her feet up on her desk, crossed at the ankles, her three-inch stilettos pushing aside paperwork. She had a reputation to protect after all. She pulled out the cherry red nail polish and was painting on a fresh coat by the time the new client opened the office door.

She was tall and almost painfully graceful. Her dark hair was short and stiff with styling gel. Her business suit had a tight, straight skirt and was a shocking shade of purple. She looked down her nose at Marie like she was a frog in an ice cream dish.

"Good afternoon," she cooed, and her expression was one of saccharin pleasantries. Marie was glad the bundle of

herbs in her top desk drawer had been replaced with fresh just two days ago. This woman could charm.

"Hi, I'm Marie," said Marie, without looking up. "Charlie's out on a beer run. Is there something I could help you with?"

The woman hesitated. "You're the junior partner?"

"Yes," said Marie, blowing on her nails. "And you?"

The charm crept into her voice again. "My name is Ellie Wycliff." It sounded habitual. She couldn't even introduce herself without layering in several sheafs of magic. "I'm an interior designer." She paused, like this should mean something.

And actually, it did. Marie had a face now to go with a name that had been floating around in the archives for years. She tried not to think too much about the implications. She didn't want it to show.

"What can we here at Curious Investigations do for you?" Marie asked, holding her hand out at arms-length to admire.

"I'd really rather discuss this with Charlie," said Ms. Wycliff. "Perhaps I'll come back later." And the charm underneath suggested that Marie should forget this encounter ever happened. Marie didn't like that idea.

"I'll tell you what," said Marie. She took her feet off the desk and rolled the office chair closer, leaning forward. "You tell me why you came to see us today, and I'll tell Charlie she doesn't have to worry when she gets back with the beer. Leave now, and this magic you're dropping all over the place will get you killed. Charlie doesn't like charm in her office."

Ms. Wycliff looked around pointedly at the standard-issue shelving and steel desks from the thirties. "I can tell," she spoke dryly, with just a hint of magic in her voice.

"Charlie means business. You can't just come here, stink up the air with enchantments and then walk away. Charlie assumes the worst about people - it's one of her more endearing traits. She'll walk in, smell a trap, get your style off the optional clauses in the spells and hunt you down." Marie smiled sweetly. "It's how we make our living around here, finding people who drop their magic in places it's not wanted. And when she finds you - she'll kill you before you get a chance to explain. She doesn't take chances, either."

"Don't threaten me, child," said Ms. Wycliff, although she looked about the same age as Marie. The things witchdoctors can do these days.