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The Law Of Three

A Rowan Gant Investigation



M. R. SELLARS

The Law Of Three

A ROWAN GANT INVESTIGATION
(Book Four In The RGI Series)

11 FREE SAMPLE CHAPTERS

An Occult Thriller Novel

By
M. R. Sellars

E. M. A. Mysteries

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THE LAW OF THREE: A Rowan Gant Investigation

An E.M.A. Mysteries CHAPTER SAMPLER

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For Dorothy.
Thank you for reminding me
that this is supposed to be fun...

Rabbit!

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves,
but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written,
Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

Romans 12:19
Holy Bible, KJV

Mind the threefold law ye should,
Three times bad, and three times good.

Couplet twenty-three
The Wiccan Rede

Thursday, January 10
St. Louis, Missouri

PROLOGUE

White video static raked itself across the barely-focused television screen in a free-for-all wrestling match with overblown chroma and luminance. The brightest spot on the tube fell somewhere near the center where the thick dust had been haphazardly wiped away by a bare hand. As if actively seeking this small porthole, the oddly hued video flickered in random bursts through greasy fingerprints to create angry shadows dancing throughout the confines of the small room.

Splotchy stains washed across the walls, illuminated by the swiftly shifting silhouettes. Most of them had long ago been rendered unidentifiable by the growing layers of filth. They now competed for attention with their more recent counterparts. Some of them looked as though they could be the remnants of foodstuffs, possibly hurled in anger or disgust. Others bore more than a passing resemblance to various bodily excretions better left unconsidered by those easily sickened—or in at least one instance, horrified. Still others might simply be nothing more than the result of water damage from the sieve-like roof. Whatever they had each been in their individual existences, they now blended to become a single stomach-turning mosaic.

The canvas for this nauseating mural was the paint that covered the crumbling sheetrock. It might have been pale blue in a previous incarnation, but the color, much less the particular shade, now defied any positive recognition. Dirty grey did not even come close to describing it, and the patina of grime did nothing to lend even the smallest clue.

“It’s now six seventeen a.m., and here’s Jennifer to fill you in on what to expect for your morning commute.” A muddy voice rattled outward from the speaker on the geriatric television set. “How’s it looking out there, Jen?”

A higher-pitched voice buzzed through as the hand-off was taken in a smooth segue. “Not so good, Skip.”

The screen switched to what might have been a chroma-keyed map being gestured at by what might have been a somewhat attractive woman—it was hard to say through the blur.

She continued. “Traffic is at a standstill at Forty-Four and Two-Seventy extending all the way back to Bowles Avenue due to an earlier accident, so you might want to avoid that area this morning if at all possible. And a reminder, police and MoDot crews are still on the scene of an overturned tractor trailer on I-Seventy, just east of Bermuda...”

The rushing sound of water in conjunction with a hollow, porcelain-throated burp echoed from a curtained corner of the room to drown out the thick audio of the TV. A steadily increasing whine followed, punctuated by a deep thud inside the walls as the plumbing complained. The familiar wet hiss of a toilet tank automatically refilling fell in behind—the pronounced noise droning unmuted for lack of a lid.

“Thanks, Jen.” The news anchor’s voice once again projected into the room from behind a faux woodgrain plastic grill. “In local news, the Saint Louis Major Case Squad is still looking for leads in the disappearance of Tamara Linwood. You will remember Eyewitness News was first to bring you this story when the twenty-seven-year-old grade

school teacher was reported missing over one week ago after not showing up for work. Her locked car was found abandoned on the parking lot of the Westview Shopping Mall.

“Authorities suspect foul play but have declined to comment on a possible connection with the case of Sarah Hart. Hart disappeared from the same parking lot just under one year ago. Her badly decomposed remains were found several months later in a wooded area along the Missouri River. Anyone with information should contact the Major Case Squad at the number on the bottom of your screen.”

Eldon Porter was paying little attention to the prattle of the reporters. They were nothing more than background noise filling the small motel room. He listened with only passing interest to the periodic weather updates and even less concern for the actual news.

Pipes sang a pained lament once again as he twisted the faucet handle on a rust-stained basin that barely clung to the wall—supported more by the deteriorating drain pipe beneath than the corroded lag bolts that were supposed to be doing the job. He frowned at a cracked rectangle of glass mounted on the wall over the canted sink, peering into a kidney-shaped section where the silver had not yet peeled from the back. With no more than a sigh, he automatically set about the task of washing his right hand. There was a time in his life, not that long ago, when he would have washed his hands. Not the singular, hand. But the plural, hands—as in two.

However, there is no reason to wash something you almost never use, and that is how it had been for almost a year now.

Ever since that night on the bridge—ever since the warlock, Rowan Gant, had tried to kill him with something so mundane as a bullet.

Of course, Gant had been left with no other choice than to turn to such a commonplace method of attack to save himself. Eldon’s devotion had prevailed, and he had not been taken in by the sorcery and tricks. He had seen through the chicanery that masked the true depravity of the Satan-spawned heretic. The mundane was all that was left, for he was immune to the mystical. Had he only realized that the warlock would be carrying a pistol, he would have been triumphant.

Instead, he had failed in his task. Still, his righteousness and loyalty to his God’s mission had protected him from death that night—but not from the hardship of injury.

Perhaps a skilled surgeon, or even a back alley quack for that matter, could have repaired some of the damage that had rendered his hand so useless. Perhaps yes, perhaps no. The point was moot now, as it had been then, for he could ill afford the risk of being caught.

Not as long as the warlock, Rowan Gant, was still alive.

Eldon looked down at his left forearm. The monstrous pink and white depression extended from just below his wrist to a point halfway up to his elbow where the bullet had ripped away a tunnel of flesh. It might not have been so severe had it not been for the raging infection that almost instantly made a home in the wound, killing off even more of the ragged tissue. The resulting fever had seared his brow for days and was quelled only after he had been able to muster enough strength to break into a pharmacy for antibiotics and dressings.

He’d done as little damage as possible when breaking in, made a guess about what might work, took only what he needed, and then begged his Lord to forgive him for the

sin of theft. He knew his absolution had been granted when the fever finally broke three days later, and he had remained free.

Unfortunately, his penance had come in the form of lameness. The severity of the bullet's cruelty, combined with the infection, had left his hand a shriveled and useless claw and his forearm a misshapen appendage that was still visited by constant pain. Considering what the outcome could have been, in some small way he counted himself fortunate.

Gazing at the mostly healed wound, he noticed that the flesh surrounding the scar was reddish and swollen. The infection was gaining a hold again, as it had done several times now. He would need more antibiotics soon. Something different, stronger this time, because obviously what he had was no longer doing the job.

"...So if you haven't pulled out your snow shovel yet, you might want to think about it, because this front is definitely going to bring frozen precipitation with it this afternoon and evening. Most likely in the range of three to six inches." Yet another, different feminine voice squawked from the television in the corner.

"There's no way we can get a reprieve from that?" the anchor joked.

"Sorry, Skip, I don't make the weather, I just forecast it," the woman returned with a good-natured lilt in her voice.

"Meteorologist, Tracy Watson. Thanks, Tracy. It's six twenty-eight, and coming up in the next half hour of Eyewitness News this morning, health reporter Doctor Patrick Kennedy will tell us about some alternative treatments for back injuries."

"...And," the co-anchor chimed in on cue, "We'll have more on why the Major Case Squad has enlisted the aid of Saint Louisan and self-proclaimed Witch, Rowan Gant, to solve a bizarre homicide. We'll be back right after this..."

All that was within the small motel room came to a complete and abrupt halt.

The endless prattle that had in Eldon Porter's mind heretofore served only to chase away silence *now* had his full and undivided consideration. The mere mention of the warlock's name peeled loud and clear through the muddy audio, striking deep into his soul and bringing him to instant attention.

Water continued to sputter from the faucet as he turned to look at the flickering TV screen. He continued to stare, silent and completely motionless throughout all one hundred eighty lethargic seconds of inane commercials—advertisements for everything from fruit juice to car loans. Never once did he twitch or so much as even blink. In point of fact, he scarcely even breathed.

He had been in Saint Louis for over a week now and thus far had been completely unable to track down the warlock. On the surface, Gant's house appeared completely unoccupied. But, he knew it was not—not completely anyway. He knew this as he had been watching it carefully. Very carefully, because he also knew that he was not the only one watching.

Others were spying upon the house. In addition, others were spying from it. However, they were not looking for Rowan Gant; they were looking for him.

Eldon had begun to fear that the warlock had fled. That he was far removed from Saint Louis. Perhaps even from the state. It was this fear that had driven him to force the warlock's hand; that action had brought him here, to this room, to wait.

Now, his wait appeared to be over.

A tinny riff of music that intermixed with syncopated drumming noises suddenly spilled into the room to announce the resumption of the morning news broadcast. As it faded out, a dead-on shot of the anchors popped in to replace the station ID graphic.

“Welcome back to Eyewitness News this Thursday morning, it’s six thirty-two, I’m Skip Johnson...”

“And I’m Brandee Street, filling in for the vacationing Chloe Winchell.” The co-anchor dropped into the cadence with practiced timing. “At the top of the news this morning, peace talks are continuing...”

As per usual, the teasers that came before the station break were just that—teasers. Tidbits of information intended to keep you tuned in while the unimportant drivel is paraded before your eyes. Eldon held fast to his firm resolve and continued his frozen stance for yet another three-minute eternity.

“Greater Saint Louis Major Case Squad officials have confirmed reports that a self-proclaimed Witch is playing an important role in a murder investigation. Rowan Gant most recently aided the police in solving the murder of Debbie Schaeffer, the Oakwood College cheerleader who went missing late last year. He has now been called in once again to help with a bizarre homicide. Eyewitness News field reporter, Colin Kelso, joins us live outside city police headquarters. Colin...”

The screen switched to a video feed showing the image of a reporter clutching a logo-adorned microphone and staring stoically into the camera. Even with the extreme blur, his overly youthful appearance was evident. “Thanks, Brandee. As you stated, we have confirmed that self-proclaimed Witch, Rowan Gant, has been brought in to help with the investigation of a very strange and brutal murder. At around three a.m., police were summoned to an abandoned warehouse at the corner of Locust and Fourteenth streets. There they found the body of a man suspended by a rope from the roof ledge.”

“Colin,” the anchorwoman’s voice cut in, “I understand that there has been some speculation that this crime might somehow be linked with another murder?”

“Yes, while authorities have not made an official statement, there has been speculation on that fact. Viewers will remember that two weeks ago, the body of Lena Duke was found hanging from a tree in Cherokee Park in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. The ritualistic manner in which she was killed bears a striking resemblance to this crime.

“Statements released earlier this week indicate that the Cape homicide may be somehow linked to the killing spree of Eldon Porter which occurred here in Saint Louis early last year.

“Right now, authorities are still being tight-lipped about this case. We will keep you updated as the situation develops. Back to you, Brandee and Skip.”

The screen cut back to a headshot of the unnaturally honey-blond newscaster paired with a smaller inset of the field reporter. “Colin,” she spoke. “Has Mister Gant actually been to the scene of this particular crime?”

“I’ve been told by one detective that, yes, in fact Mister Gant was brought in early this morning. An interesting development, however, just moments ago Mister Gant was seen leaving the scene with Detective Benjamin Storm of the city homicide squad and a woman we believe to be his wife, Felicity O’Brien. Although we were unable to obtain a comment, we did get this footage showing some type of altercation.”

The screen switched to show the wildly shaking image of a van, partially illuminated off and on by video lights. Unintelligible, but obviously heated voices could be heard in

the background over the shouts of reporters and camera operators. As the centerpiece of the video byte grew larger and began to stabilize, a man shot into view from behind the open door of the vehicle, apparently rushing toward the cameras. In an instant he halted, then appeared to be jerked backward, disappearing into the vehicle.

“Any idea what was going on there, Colin,” she asked as the video repeated.

“We were unable to obtain a comment from anyone on the scene at this time, I’m afraid.”

“Okay, thanks Colin,” she said, and the inset was replaced by a wide shot of the news desk, revealing both anchors as well as a third figure seated at the L-shaped return. “Keep us updated on this breaking story.”

“Will do, back to you Brandee and Skip.”

After a measured beat, the anchor continued. “So, how many of us have complained about lower back pain?”

“I know I have,” chimed in Skip Johnson. “Joining us this morning is Doctor...”

Eldon finally blinked, and as he did he instantly tuned out the voices coming from the television, relegating them once again to muted background noise. He allowed a thin smile to pass briefly across his face, the only outward sign of the elation he now felt.

The warlock was still here.

He had just needed to draw him out, and his plan had worked even quicker than he had hoped.

He absently wiped his wet hand on his shirt as he took the few steps across the room to the broken down bed. The water continued sputtering and splashing in the rusty basin, melding in an off-kilter tune with the voices from the TV. On the scarred surface of a makeshift nightstand, a book was positioned with supreme care, as if on display. Eldon reached out with his good hand and lifted it reverently, then used the knuckles of his clawed left hand to open it and flip through the pages.

Near the back of the tome, he finally stopped, bringing his gaze to rest on a particular passage, his eyes darting back and forth as he read and re-read the words. Slowly, his lips began to move, and then eventually a whisper of sound began to slip between them. Finally, his gravelly voice spoke aloud to be heard only by him.

“For it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”

He continued to repeat the passage with growing rabidity, clipping the sentence until the only words spoken were “Vengeance is mine.”

Three Hours Earlier

CHAPTER 1

Graphical images of playing cards expanded in happy accordion patterns across the glowing screen of my notebook computer as the machine proclaimed me victorious in this latest game of solitaire. Unless I'd lost track, this one made six for me and something on the order of ten million for the machine, give or take. I wasn't actually keeping count, though. Well, not of the computer's wins, anyway.

I tucked my fingers back in behind my eyeglasses, forcing the frames to ride up on the bridge of my nose, then rubbed my eyes before directing my bleary gaze at the lower corner of the screen. I'd started this mindless activity at twelve and it was now 3:07.

That was a.m., mind you.

Of course, there wasn't much else to do. Watch TV, surf the web, read a book. None of these options were particularly appealing to me, not even the endless games of solitaire. What I really wanted to be doing was sleeping, but the way my head was throbbing, that wasn't about to happen.

The annoying thud that was pounding out a droning rhythm throughout the whole of my grey matter began early in the evening and had not subsided in the least. But, so far it hadn't grown any worse, for which I was thankful. Of course, I knew that wouldn't last. It would be getting *much* worse. I just didn't know exactly when.

I'd had this kind of headache before, more times than I cared to count, actually. It wasn't sinuses, and it wasn't just your normal stress related "take two aspirin and lie down for a while" kind of pain either. This was an ache born of unnatural influences. It was the pure physical manifestation of fear and dread. The kind of headache I experienced every single time I knew something horrible was about to happen, and there was nothing in this world I could possibly do to prevent it.

Unfortunately, for me, I tended to be afflicted by these damnable things way too often.

I ran my hand across the lower half of my face and felt the rough crop of stubble that, by now, was certainly shading my jaw line. Then I tugged at my goatee for a moment. The action prompted me to remember that I'd recently noticed the dark brown was being infiltrated by grey and white like a quickly spreading fungus. I absently considered a dye job for a moment then dismissed the idea as silly. I'd never been particularly vain before, so there was no reason to start now.

I reached behind with both hands and massaged the back of my head for a moment, hoping that it might help quell the ache.

It didn't.

Picking up my coffee cup, I took a swig of the remaining contents and noticed immediately that it had grown cold. I guess I'd been a little more caught up in solitaire than I'd realized. Oh well, it had kept my mind off the pain, at least a little.

I pushed back and quietly got up, then carefully hooked around the small dining table where I'd been seated. I aimed myself toward the orange glow of the light on the coffeepot, using it as a beacon in the darkness. Since it was presently residing on the

counter in the closet-sized room that was supposed to pass for a kitchen, I gave little thought to this being a problem. However, since I still wasn't used to the layout of this apartment, in my single-minded quest for fresh java I cut my entry through the doorway far too shallow.

There was a loud thump, followed by me quickly listing to one side, and then the ache in the back of my head was pushed aside in favor of a new sensation. Of course, that feeling was a sharp, and far more extreme, pain in my toe.

I caught my breath, quickly swallowing the yelp that I'd managed to stop midway in my throat, and then fought to stifle a groan that quickly followed on its heels. A pitiful sounding mixture of the two managed to escape anyway.

Just for good measure, I stuttered a few random selections from the big book of four-letter expletives, passing them as quietly as I could through clenched teeth. Finally, I half limped, half hopped into the kitchenette and leaned against the counter.

I'd been propped there for no more than a minute when my muffled swearing was interrupted by a sleepy voice at the doorway.

"Row? Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I grunted with little conviction in my voice. "Yeah, I'm okay."

I hadn't heard her approach, not that I was surprised. I was a bit preoccupied to say the least, and besides, she was far more graceful than I would ever be. I grimaced, not so much from the pain, but because waking Felicity was exactly what I had wanted to avoid.

"What are you doing up?"

"Just attempting to break my toe," I muttered, turning my head and looking back toward her.

"What happened?" my wife asked, her voice a quiet blend of two parts sleep to one part concern, all underscored by a faint Celtic intonation. "You're sure you're okay, then?"

Felicity was second generation Irish-American, and she had spent an enormous amount of time in Ireland throughout her life. She was never completely free of the lilt, though it was most pronounced whenever she was overtired, under stress, or as in this case, half asleep. It almost always came bundled with a rich and colorful brogue to match.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I told her as I focused on her slight form. "Just stubbed it, that's all."

She had propped herself in the doorway, using the back of her hand for a pillow as she rested it against the frame. In the dim light, I could see that her eyes were closed as she yawned. A loose pile of fiery auburn hair sat atop her head in a Gibson-girlish coif. Whenever she let the cascade of spiraling tresses hang free, it would easily reach her waist. Her pale skin seemed to almost glow in the darkness.

She let out a heavy sigh and stretched slowly. She was clad in an oversized t-shirt, but her tight figure still managed to tug it into varying degrees of eye candy as she languidly arched her back. How she managed to look this good even when she had just climbed out of bed was something beyond my comprehension, but I certainly wasn't going to complain.

"Aye," she said as she reached out and switched on the overhead light. "So tell me why you're awake, then."

“Because I couldn’t sleep?” I offered, squinting against the sudden infusion of brightness.

“Aye, don’t be a smart ass now. You know what I meant.”

“Would you believe I was trying to get some work done?”

“No.” She shook her head.

“Getting a drink of water?”

“Rowan.” She cocked her head and shot me a frown as she paused—effectively impaling me with her *I’m serious* look. “I’m half asleep, but I’m not blind. You’ve coffee on, and you’ve been playing solitaire on your computer. Quit screwing with me, then.”

“Okay,” I answered with a defeated sigh. “I’m waiting for Ben to call.”

As absurd as it sounded, it was the truth.

It may be the middle of the night, but I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the telephone was going to ring, and Detective Benjamin Storm was going to be at the other end. For me, very simply, this was a foregone conclusion.

What’s more, it was not because he happened to be my best friend and that he just felt like talking at an odd hour. It was going to be something I didn’t want to hear but probably already knew. In any case, I knew it would be something that I had no choice but to deal with.

Felicity closed her eyes and let her head tilt forward, dropping her forehead into her hand.

“Nightmare?” she asked softly as she began massaging her brow. She was intimately familiar with the forms my precognitive intuition would sometimes take.

“Headache.”

“Humph,” she grunted, then asked hopefully, “Did you take anything just in case?”

“Not that kind of headache,” I replied.

“You’re certain, then?”

Her question was answered by the grating peal of the telephone vibrating against the walls of the small room before I could even utter the “yes” that now lodged itself in my throat.

My wife looked up at me with sadness in her jade-green eyes and then gave a slight nod to the coffeepot. “Aye, I’ll go put on some clothes. Best pour me a cup of that as well.”

I started to protest. “I don’t think...”

“...That I should go?” she shot back, filling in my sentence and cutting me off. “Are you planning to stay out of it?”

I sighed and fidgeted at the sudden tension. She already knew what my answer would be.

“Aye, I thought so. We’re not discussing this, Rowan,” she continued with a stern shake of her head. “If you go, I go. End of story. Now answer the phone, then.” She was already turning around the corner of the doorway on her way back to the bedroom as she issued the last command.

I knew better than to press my luck, especially on this subject. We’d beaten it beyond recognition already, and we were both too stubborn to give in. I took a step forward, picked the phone out of its cradle on the fourth ring, and then placed it to my ear.

“Yeah, Ben. I’m here” was all I said.

“Awww, Jeezus H. Christ, Row... Jeeez... Goddammit...” He launched immediately into a string of curses, his voice a peculiar mix of relief, anger, and disgust.

Whenever my friend started a sentence this way, I knew that what followed probably wasn't going to be good. Of course, I'd known that before the phone ever rang, but there was always that small inkling of hope that I might be wrong. Judging from the baseness of Ben's first words, I knew that this would not be the occasion.

“Porter?” I inserted my question into the lull that trailed along in the wake of his outburst.

“Yeah,” he returned, his voice slightly calmer. “But that was a given, I guess.”

In an instant, the “probably” became an absolutely, and the “wasn't going to be good” was nothing less than a cold fact.

“Uh-huh. Truth is I'm surprised he waited this long,” I replied. “It's been more than two weeks since he killed that woman in Cape Girardeau.”

“Yeah.” He paused. “So, what gives? You sound like you were awake already.”

“Yeah. I was.”

“So what's up? Don't tell me you were waitin' for me to call.”

“Okay, I won't.”

“Jeez, Row...” The note of resignation in his voice was clear. “So, did you have one of those nightmares or somethin'?”

“No. Just a headache.”

“Bad one?”

“Bad enough.”

“Regular, or was it one of those hinky, weird-ass, *Twilight Zone* ones that you get?”

“Something like that.” I shook my head even though he couldn't see me.

Twilight Zone. That's what my friend liked to call it whenever I would engage in any form of psychic detection or supernormal communication. He was accustomed to the peculiar psychic events that had seemed to plague me for the past couple of years, but he still had his own unique branding for them. He had a whole handful of euphemisms—“la-la land,” “out there,” and even just plain “weird,” but *Twilight Zone* remained his favorite. I guess I couldn't blame him for the interpretation though. Even I wasn't always comfortable with the paranormal excursions myself, but then, I also didn't always have control over them either. And, while a certain amount of mysticism comes along with being a practicing Witch, at times I felt almost as if I had plugged directly into the main switchboard of the “other side.”

Disconcerting is just about the nicest word I could use to describe it. You don't want to hear the others.

“So why didn't you call me?” he asked.

“And do what? Tell you I had a headache?”

“Hasn't stopped you before.”

“Actually, when I've called you in the past I've had a little more to say.”

“Yeah. Maybe so.”

“So, do you want me to meet you?”

“For what?”

“To go to this crime scene?”

“No, actually. I was just calling to make sure you were okay.”

The meaning behind his words was quickly apparent to me. For a number of reasons, I was most likely at the top of Porter's hit list; not the least of which was the fact that I had shot him. Of course, he was trying to kill me at the time, so I didn't have much choice. However, since he had already tried once, we had every reason to believe that he would do it again.

This was exactly why Felicity and I had spent the past two weeks residing in a tiny, unfamiliar apartment in a secure building instead of our own home. We were in hiding, and it was starting to get on my nerves.

"So, the victim is male?" I asked

"That's what they said. I just got the call a few minutes ago."

"So where is the scene?" I pressed again.

"No way. Stay put, Row. Let us handle this."

"You know I can't do that, Ben."

"You don't have a hell of a lotta choice now do ya'?" he shot back.

"I'll just show up," I told him calmly. "I can find out where the scene is without your help."

"And I'll fuckin' arrest your sorry ass if you do."

"Ben..." I just allowed my voice to trail off.

"You know, Rowan, we ain't just a bunch of bumblin' idiots. Cops solve murders all the time without your help."

"I know, Ben, but this is different."

"Yeah, I know you think it is, but it's not. Why can't you just stay put where I know you're safe, and let me handle this?"

"Because I want my life back, Ben."

"Gettin' yourself killed would kinda defeat the purpose now wouldn't it?"

"We've had this discussion before, Ben."

"And I don't recall bein' convinced that time either."

"I need to do this," I appealed.

He huffed out a heavy sigh after an extended silence. "Fine. Jeez. Okay. At least if you're with me, I can keep an eye on ya'. I'll swing by and pick you up. But listen, Row, you'd damn well better tell Felicity before I get there. I don't have time for an argument like last time."

"Don't worry. She'll be coming with us."

"Both of you?" he groaned. "Sheesh. Lucky me."

"Hey, it's not my idea."

"Are you willin' to stay home and let me handle this?" he queried flatly.

"I thought we'd already established that as a no," I replied, somewhat confused by the question.

"Then quit tryin' to blame her. It IS your fuckin' idea," he huffed. "Meet me in the lobby. I'll be there in fifteen."

CHAPTER 2

“This is fucked...” Ben spat, shaking his head in a display of disbelief and looking upward as he spoke. “This S.O.B is just plain sick.”

It was just after four a.m. by the time we arrived, and we found ourselves standing in the middle of Locust Street downtown. We had signed in on the scene log with Felicity and me listed as consultants and allowed in only by Ben’s graces.

Stepping onto the active participant side of the bright yellow strip of barrier tape that cordoned off the street was akin to entering another world. I glanced around, feeling both out of place and right at home in the same instant. In the past two years, I’d visited more active homicide crime scenes than many cops see in their entire careers, and I didn’t even have a badge. Something seemed very wrong about that, but it was a fact I simply could not change. I didn’t find it reassuring at all that I was becoming so accustomed to it.

Cold wind sliced in a linear gust down the thoroughfare, flaring the band of plastic tape as if to highlight the repeated imprint of block letters along its length. Bold strokes formed words that had become all too familiar to me—CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS. The temperature was settled for the moment at an even thirty-six degrees, but the computed wind chill pushed the overall feeling downward into the range of the mid-twenties.

There were a half dozen crime scene technicians milling about on the ground, while another handful could occasionally be spotted working on the roof of the building that was before us. The medical examiner’s hearse had already arrived, and the area was illuminated by the visual insanity of flickering light bars on idling emergency vehicles.

When the street-level scene was taken as a whole, my friend’s candid observation simply became a commentary that mirrored my own feelings. Unfortunately, he was talking about something far worse, for what was taking place on the tableau of the cold asphalt was only a supporting backdrop for the spectacle above.

My gaze followed Ben’s, coming to rest between the second and third floor windows of the four-story, brick building. There, carefully directed spotlights illuminated the centerpiece of this nightmare. Garish shadows molded themselves in a shroud about the nude and blood streaked corpse of a man. Suspended by a rope tied about his ankles, he was hanging upside down. His head was obscured by an executioner’s hood, and his arms were splayed out to the sides, perpendicular to the rest of his body, as if to form an inverted cross. The appendages were held stiffly in place by what looked like a two-by-four across his shoulders. At this distance, I couldn’t be positive, but the piece of wood appeared to be held fast by something encircling his wrists and neck.

This, in and of itself, was macabre enough to make anyone believe that it could only be a Hollywood “slasher flick” in the making. If only that were true, for it didn’t end there. From the victim’s groin, downward to a point in his mid-torso, his abdomen was split open. There, protruding from the ragged tear like a grey-white serpent, his intestines cascaded across his chest to hang in a pendulum-like loop several feet beneath. Each time the wind would pick up, the sash of organ tissue would move with the breeze, undulating

like heavy drapes next to an air vent. Blood still dripped at protracted intervals from the exposed viscera to plop wetly onto the dark stain that now graced the sidewalk below.

Behind us, a loud and very wet sounding splatter tore our attention away from the scene as a patrol officer involuntarily launched the contents of his own stomach onto the pavement.

I looked back over my shoulder in response to the sound and then glanced over at Felicity. She was clutching my arm tightly and staring upward while absently chewing at her lower lip. She had been to a few crime scenes before but had not been subjected to anywhere near as much of this grisly scenery as I had. Still, she looked stable for the moment, so I returned my stare to the three-dimensional horror show that was playing out in front of me. I swallowed hard, because to be honest, I was only a half step away from heaving myself.

“Ya’know, Doc Sanders told me once that the average adult has about thirty feet of intestines.” Ben paused for a moment after reciting the fact. “Man, I’ve seen a lotta crap in autopsies, but I never really expected to see anybody’s guts stretched out like that.”

“Disembowelment was not uncommon during the Inquisition.” I spoke quietly, struggling to keep my voice even. “Actually, it was a favored form of punishment and torture.”

“You mean he did that to ‘im while he was still alive?” Ben asked with a thin strain of disbelief in his voice.

“Oh, yes,” I nodded as I spoke, then swallowed hard again. “Probably rather slowly...”

As I’d known it would, my headache was starting to get worse. The stark chill of fear climbed up my vertebrae and began clawing at the base of my neck. There was something unseen here that was begging my attention, and I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to give it.

“Jeezus...” He shook his head. “Guess I shoulda suspected that, considering...”

I knew full well what his unspoken words implied. Eldon Porter made a habit of torturing his victims mercilessly before finally bringing about their end. During his last spree, he had even burned two of them alive.

I allowed my gaze to fall away from the corpse as I turned my head, but I didn’t have to let it fall far. I was of average height, but I still had to crane my neck back to look up at Ben’s face; average in stature he definitely was not. His particular pencil mark on the doorjamb had hit six feet when he was in junior high school, and he had still proceeded to grow another six inches after that. He was no stranger to the weight room either, and the rest of his physique made a perfect match for his elevated height.

Formidable was a word that came to mind at first glance; when he had still been a uniformed officer, just plain scary tended to be the more accurate description.

He was looking back at me with dark, questioning eyes that peered out of angularly defined features and natural reddish-tanned skin—unmistakable visual evidence of his full-blooded Native American heritage. His large hand was tucked beneath a shank of collar length, jet-black hair, and he was slowly massaging the back of his neck. This was a common mannerism of his, and it told me that his mind was doing far more behind those eyes than simply waiting for me to say something.

I said something anyway. “Was there a Bible?”

While an outside observer might have found the question somewhat odd, it was something I was certain he had expected me to ask.

“Yeah, that’s what they said when they called,” he told me, giving a short nod to the affirmative as he spoke. “Bookmarked and highlighted.”

“Passage?”

My friend stopped massaging his neck long enough to thumb through a small notebook then read his shorthand back to me, “At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses, shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death. Deuteronomy seventeen, six.”

“He’s working from his list again...” I muttered. “When you ID this guy, he’ll be someone that one of the original victims knew.”

“Yeah,” Ben agreed. “That’s kinda what we figured.”

The “he” I referred to was, of course, Eldon Andrew Porter. The list was exactly that, a list. It comprised the names of Witches, Wiccans, and various other Pagan individuals living in the Saint Louis metropolitan area. It was, of course, by no means a comprehensive census of persons engaging in what is often collectively referred to as alternative spirituality; however, the odds were that it wasn’t terribly short either. Porter had compiled it himself by way of various sadistic tortures, such as the one displayed above us now.

A bookmarked Bible was his calling card and the highlighted passage, a message. What we were being told was the reason this particular victim had been chosen. His crime was that of being a Witch. We’d been here before, so that much was a given. And, just like the Bible verse said, he had been accused by more than one witness. There was never much reading between the lines necessary, for Eldon was nothing if not precise about the messages he left behind.

Basically, Porter was a single-minded killer. What made him unique was his highly particular criterion for committing murder. Put very simply, he executed Witches.

That was the short answer. The long answer went something like this: Porter was a highly suggestible sociopath with a mild paranoid psychosis. Several years ago he committed a crime, was caught, convicted, and sent to prison. That should have been the end of the story, but society simply wasn’t that lucky. While incarcerated he had been deeply affected by a fire-and-brimstone prison ministry. Something called a “God Pod.” Unfortunately, he completely missed the allegorical sense of biblical text and took much of it literally. In the end, what should have been a tool for rehabilitation had, in his case, created a serial spree killer.

The man literally came to view himself as a modern day equivalent to the inquisitors of fifteenth century Europe, and just two months shy of one year ago, he had started his own series of Witch trials here in Saint Louis, Missouri. Far removed from medieval Europe in a geographical sense, yes, but he’d gone to great lengths to adhere to the tortures and execution methods of that long ago era as prescribed in the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

Roughly translated from the original Latin, *Malleus Maleficarum* meant the *Hammer of the Witches*. In fact, the “hammer” was a book—an instructional manual written by a pair of inquisitors by the names of Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger. In its day, it had been the one true and official guidebook for the persecution of accused Witches and heretics.

The language did not matter, however. Whether scribed in Latin or English, the tome was most definitely not my favorite piece of literature.

At the time of Porter's original killing binge, I'd been asked by Ben to consult on the case because of a symbol found carved into the flesh of the first victim. My own spiritual path and studies of various religious practices had helped my best friend solve a crime before, so I guess I had seemed like a natural choice at the time.

The truth is that unbeknownst to me, I was already being sucked into it by an ethereal beckoning. Once I became directly involved on this plane, those forces came to bear with a vicious intensity. After that, it had all been downhill for me.

Much to Ben's horror, I had even ended up becoming one of Porter's prey; on a very foggy night, on a pedestrian bridge spanning the Mississippi River, February last, the self-proclaimed "Hand of God" had almost succeeded in making me his seventh victim.

"Yo, white man, you okay?" Ben asked.

It took a moment for the words to register, and I realized that I was just staring at him. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"You don't look fine. You were kinda zoned there for a minute."

"Have you looked in a mirror?" I asked in retort.

"Yeah. Funny. Ya'know, I'm still not all that keen on you bein' here, Row," was his answer. "Felicity either."

"Yeah, you've told me that several times already."

"I'm serious," he added.

"I know you are."

"For one thing, it's only been a coupl' a weeks."

"I know." I nodded assent as I spoke.

The pair of weeks he was referring to amounted to the period of time it had been since I had played a fairly significant role in the capture of a serial rapist. In and of itself a good thing, except that due to various factors in the investigation—both seen and unseen—I hadn't been coming across as particularly stable lately. Of course, considering my gift—or curse, depending upon how you viewed it—it was the unseen that really caused the problems.

"And then there's..." he began, but seemed to purposely allow his voice to die away on the wind. I noticed then that he was staring past me and at Felicity.

What he left unsaid was the fact that the rapist had come after her, actually managing to effect a kidnapping if for only a few short hours. Even though we'd stopped him before he could go any further, in her case, it made it only slightly less traumatic. In light of those events, I could certainly understand his concern.

I looked over at my wife and saw that she was still staring upward, oblivious to our exchange. "I know, Ben. Believe me, I know."

"You know, Rowan, we set you two up in that apartment for a reason."

The point he was trying to make was simple: Porter was going to be after me, no two ways about it, and my friend didn't want me out in the open.

Of course, if your aim is to kill Witches, you might as well go after the real thing, and I definitely made no bones about being just that. Considering everything that had gone on in my life over the past couple of years, I was just about as far "out of the broom closet," so to speak, as one could be. Therefore, I was not very hard to accuse. I had already admitted it in public—which, by the way, Porter had been sure to remind me of as he pronounced my condemnation and attempted to throw me over the side of a bridge with a noose around my neck.

Thankfully, much of that night had now become a blur. I still had nightmares about it and probably always would, but they were finally starting to fade into two-dimensional representatives of what they had once been. Dulled and flattened, they were much easier to take than the full-blown, Technicolor reenactments. Still, I was looking forward to a future when they would be visited upon me with less frequency.

I knew that day wouldn't come as long as Porter was free.

Of the things I recalled clearly from that night, I knew that in my bid to escape I had shot him. I definitely remembered pulling the trigger, and there was even a blood spatter at the scene that provided physical evidence that I'd hit him. Nevertheless, when the police arrived, there was no body to be found.

No lifeless remains.

No hard and fast proof of his demise.

I had blacked out at almost the same instant the handgun had discharged, so I was no help in the eyewitness department. At the time, Ben had been convinced that Porter had fallen from the bridge to a certain death in the icy river below. The other members of the Major Case Squad on the scene concurred.

For them, it was all over but the paperwork—one of my friend's favorite clichés and one that I'd heard him quip several times before.

But for me... Well, I was the proverbial odd man out. I held the one dissenting opinion in their clutch of optimism. Something in the back of my head told me that Porter was still alive, that the wound I'd inflicted was not so grievous as to take his life, and that he had disappeared into the fog—not the water. That inkling had eventually become an issue of extreme contention between Ben and me—to the point where I finally just kept my nagging intuition to myself.

Well, for the most part anyway.

Unfortunately, when all was said and done, I was the one with the correct answer to the sixty-four thousand dollar question: Eldon Andrew Porter was alive and still just as demented—if not more so—than before. It had merely taken him ten months to come out of hiding.

Now that he had surfaced, I found myself wishing that I had been a better shot.



“It's a bit of a climb,” the patrol officer ahead of us said over his shoulder. “We have to go up to the fourth floor, then over to the roof access.”

My eyes were still adjusting to the darkness inside the building as we climbed the debris-strewn concrete stairs. The faint nasal bite of urine, both stale and fresh, joined in a pungent reek with feces and rotting trash to foul the gelid air.

“Careful there,” he warned, directing the beam of his flashlight on a crumbling step.

We picked our way around the hazard, single file—Felicity in front of me and Ben bringing up the rear.

“There're a lot of homeless that crash here, what with the ministry across the street handing out free lunches and all,” the officer continued, offering up an explanation for the background stench. “Actually smells quite a bit worse over at the freight elevator shaft.”

“Any of 'em in here when you arrived?” Ben asked.

“No, not when I got here,” he answered. “Stockton was first on the scene though.”

“He up there?”

“No, he’s the green one downstairs tossing his cookies.”

“Friggin’ wunnerful,” Ben spat with more than just a note of sarcasm. “He say if he saw anyone?”

“Just the dead guy.”

Ben grunted his displeasure before moving on to his next question, “Who’s runnin’ the scene?”

“That would be Lieutenant Albright.”

“Whoa.” Ben all but halted on the stairs. “Not Barbara Albright... Tell me you’re not talkin’ about ‘Bible Barb.’”

The uniformed officer stifled what might have been a knowing or perhaps a nervous laugh. Maybe even both. It was hard to tell. “Yeah. That’s the one.”

“Shit! What the hell did I do to deserve this?”

“What’s the problem, Ben?” I asked back over my shoulder as we began ascending the next flight of stairs.

“Well, I know ya’ know Arthur McCann with the county police,” he offered.

There wasn’t a Pagan in St. Louis who didn’t know McCann. He was a devout Christian with a badge who claimed to be an expert on occult religions, and he used his position within the police department to preach his own brand of intolerance and hatred. I’d had more than one run-in with him myself.

“Yeah, sure,” I answered.

“Well, stick him in a skirt and give him a little authority and you’ve got Barbara Albright.”

A loud burst of static sounded ahead of us, overcoming the background chatter that had been issuing from the officer’s radio. The tinny hiss was followed by a questioning voice, “Unit Fourteen?”

The officer thumbed his microphone and answered, “Fourteen.”

“Fourteen, Lieutenant Albright wants to know if Detective Storm has arrived on scene yet. Over.”

“That’s affirmative,” he returned. “I’m bringing them up right now. Over.”

“Fourteen, be advised that Lieutenant Albright is requesting that Detective Storm come up alone. Copy.”

“Say again?”

“Fourteen, switch up.”

The officer reached to his belt and twisted a control knob on his radio, changing to a clear frequency, then spoke again. “Yeah. Go ahead.”

“Yeah, Shelton, she doesn’t want any civilians up here,” the voice answered.

“Tell him they’re consultants,” Ben instructed. “They’re logged and cleared for the scene.”

“Yeah, Detective Storm says they are consultants, and they’re cleared,” the officer relayed into his microphone.

A short burst of static followed then was replaced by silence. We had halted midway up the second set of stairs when the original call came over the radio, and we now waited in the cold darkness a half dozen steps below the second floor.

The pop and crackle of interference once again broke the silence and the disembodied voice of the other officer audibly sighed before continuing. “Shelton, here’s a direct quote, ‘tell Storm to leave his devil worshipper downstairs where he belongs.’”

Ben’s own words came in a slow drone directly behind the echo of the radio. “Fuuuuck me. Just fuuuuck me.”

CHAPTER 3

I protested, but it didn't do any good. This time it was out of Ben's control, and no amount of complaining from me was going to accomplish anything positive. Besides, he was on my side, or at least that is what I thought. In the end, he continued up the stairs, and we were escorted back out onto the street.

The wind had picked up as a storm front rolled in, so we were waiting in my friend's van with the engine running and the heater on. He had been somewhat reluctant to relinquish the keys, and I guess I could understand why, since he had just gotten it back from the shop a week ago. I'm sure the fact that I was the one responsible for putting it in there to begin with was a big stumbling block for him as well—but that was another story.

I suppose that is probably why when he finally gave up the keys it was to Felicity instead of me, which also was why she was sitting in the driver's seat.

"You've been pretty quiet." I leaned back in the passenger seat and let my head roll to face her as I spoke. The vehicle's heater had not yet defeated the chill, and my words vented outward on an opaque cloud of frost. "Are you doing all right?"

Felicity looked back at me with a flat expression. It was apparent that she was tired, but more than that, it was plain to see that she was overwhelmed. "Aye, that would depend on your definition of all right, wouldn't it, then?"

"Pick one," I offered.

She took a deep breath and exhaled heavily, then reached to the dash and clicked the controls to dual-duty—vent and defrost. The warm air slowly started clearing the fog that had formed on the inside of the windshield. "I'm not going to throw up if that's what you're asking."

"That's a start."

"What about you?" she asked.

"I'm fine." I shrugged, rolling my head back to face out the window. I watched as the arc of clarity inched its way up the glass from the bottom. "Still have the headache, but I expect that will be with me for a while."

"Any worse yet?"

"Yeah. Still tolerable, but it's ramping up."

She reached out and laid the palm of her hand across the back of mine. After a moment she spoke, "Aye, you're well-grounded for a change. And without my help."

My ability, or lack thereof I should say, to center my energies and maintain a solid connection with the Earth had been a concern as of late. In the psychic realm, grounding was your first line of defense and one of the most basic of all abilities. During the past year, Eldon Porter's attempt on my life had taken its toll, leaving me just about as grounded as a runaway helium balloon. It was only recently that I had recaptured the simple ability.

"Can't stay dependent on you forever, can I?" I shot her a tired grin.

Our impending moment was interrupted by a sharp rap on the passenger-side window. I turned to see my friend's face staring back at me. Even though the frost had all but completely cleared from the windshield, I hadn't noticed his approach. His brow was entrenched in a deep furrow and his jaw clenched so tight it made my headache worse just to look at him.

I quickly rolled down the window. "What's the story?"

"Don't ask," he returned with a curt shake of his head. "You don't wanna know. So, listen, you think you can come up with somethin' off this scene?"

"That's why I'm here," I replied, somewhat puzzled by the question.

"You're sure?"

I shook my head and stammered for a second, searching for the words to form an answer. "Well... Ben... You know I can't say that. You know as well as I do, that's not how it works."

He shook his head vigorously and held up a hand. "Just friggin' tell me if you can get somethin' off this scene or not."

"Maybe." My voice took on a defensive tone. "I won't know until I try."

Ben rubbed his eyes then sent his hand back to massage his neck and muttered, "Shit."

"What's going on, Ben?" I asked again.

After a moment, he began shaking his head as a decision visibly fell upon him and his shoulders drooped.

"Not here," he said, then shifted his gaze over to Felicity. "You better get in the back unless you're drivin'."



"Okay, I give up. What's going on?" I asked. My frustration had finally festered to a point of eruption.

"Settle down," Ben ordered with a hushed voice and a stern glance.

The drive had been short but conspicuously wordless. In complete silence, we had traversed slightly more than a mile of block-long jaunts and eleventh-hour ninety-degree turns. Fortunately, less than five minutes passed before we arrived at our final destination, which turned out to be a small diner at the intersection of Seventh and Chouteau. Still, even five minutes can seem like forever when you are sitting next to a taciturn cop who outwardly appears to be pissed off at the world, you included.

I was no stranger to "Charlie's Eats," and neither was Ben. In fact, this is where he had first shown me the case file that proved Eldon Porter's identity. But, that wasn't its only distinction. With its proximity to police headquarters, officers frequented it at all hours. There was even a pair of parking spaces on the lot designated specifically for patrol cars. The standing joke was that, other than the food itself, "Chuck's" was probably the safest place in the entire city to have a meal.

Joking aside, the truth was that while the fare was far from four-star gourmet, it was good, with sizeable portions, and reasonably priced. Anything from a doughnut to a cheeseburger, or even the house specialty—appropriately dubbed "The Kitchen Sink Omelet"—was available 24/7. On top of that, everything on the menu came complete with a bottomless cup of coffee.

“Look, Row,” my friend continued after I reluctantly followed his instruction and sat back in the booth with deliberate heaviness. “I know where you’re at, really I do, but you gotta listen to me for a minute.”

“I’d like to, but you haven’t been saying anything,” I fired back.

“Jeez, Felicity, could you kick ‘im or somethin’?” He aimed his glance at my wife as he made the rhetorical statement.

“Aye, I doubt it would do any good,” she answered anyway.

“Heya, Storm,” a bear-like man with a wild bush of a red beard called to Ben from the other side of the counter then nodded in my direction. “Rowan.”

I dipped my head in acknowledgement and did my best to replace the frown I knew I was wearing with at least some semblance of a smile.

“You ever go home, Chuck,” Ben asked the man.

“What for?” The man chuckled as he re-tied the string on his stained apron. “This your wife, Rowan?”

“Felicity, meet Chuck.” I made the introduction. “Chuck, Felicity.”

“Nice to meet you,” my wife said with a lilt, following the words with one of her winning smiles.

“Same here,” Chuck agreed.

“Little slow this morning?” Ben asked.

Chuck cast an eye at the clock and shook his head. “Nah, shift change comin’ up. Just the calm before the storm. Heh-heh,” he chuckled. “But I guess the ‘storm’s’ already here, huh?”

“Yeah, Chuck.” Ben shook his head. “Friggin’ hilarious.”

“Gimme a break, it’s early. So, can I get youse guys anything?”

“Just coffee,” my friend told him.

“Make that two,” I said.

Felicity added, “Three.”

Chuck reached under the Formica-sheathed counter, and when he withdrew his large hand, a trio of ceramic coffee mugs were hooked on a single index finger. He set them down, then in a swift motion snatched up a full Pyrex globe of java and filled them all with a single practiced pour.

Ben slid partially out of the booth and in a pivoting motion ferried the steaming mugs to our table.

“Youse gonna be here for a bit?” Chuck asked.

“A while, probl’y,” Ben returned. “Why?”

The large man behind the counter hooked his thumb over his shoulder. “I gotta go in the back and check in a delivery. Wendy oughta be here in a bit. You wanna yell back there if someone comes in before she gets here?”

“We can do that.”

“I ‘preciate it.” Chuck nodded as he turned, then called back over his shoulder before disappearing into the back of the diner, “If youse want any more coffee, help yerselfs.”

A quiet lull ensued, broken randomly by the noise of Chuck shifting boxes in the back room and Felicity stripping open packets of sugar. The static-plagued tune of the *Talking Heads* “*Psycho Killer*” fell in behind the duet as it wafted from the speaker of a tinny radio behind the counter.

Considering what was happening a few blocks away, I suppose the song was appropriate.

“Can you tell me what’s going on now, Ben?” I finally appealed.

“There ain’t no other way to say this. You’ve been banned from any investigations involving the Major Case Squad.”

I blinked. I waited for him to tell me he was kidding. He didn’t, so I spoke. “Excuse me? Banned? Why?”

“Listen,” he started again. “That’s what I was gettin’ ready to tell ya’. With Bee-Bee runnin’ the show, there’s not a hell of a lot I can do.”

“Who’s Bee-Bee?” I asked, shaking my head. “I thought somebody named Albright was in charge.”

“That’s Bee-Bee. Bible Barb,” he explained. “Lieutenant Barbara ‘fuckin’ holier than thou’ Albright.”

“But, I thought you were running this investigation,” Felicity said.

He shook his head. “I’m just the investigating officer of record for the original case.”

“Well doesn’t that carry any weight?” I asked.

“For gettin’ me outta bed in the middle of the night, maybe, but that’s about it. It’s pretty simple. She lieutenant, me lowly detective, and that’s the size of it.”

“Banned?” I repeated again.

“Yeah, Row. Banned.”

“Aye, but you seemed to be running things before,” Felicity interjected.

“Yeah, well it doesn’t usually happen that way. It did then, but only because I was originally assigned the case, and the powers that be gave me some breathing room.”

“So why aren’t they now?” I asked.

“Well, let’s see…” He rolled his eyes and huffed out a breath. “For starters, the lieutenant I reported to with the Major Case Squad retired.”

“And this Albright woman is the replacement?” my wife half asked, half stated.

“Exactly.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” I posed, “but I was under the impression that lieutenants were basically management and that they didn’t get that directly involved in investigations.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” he agreed with a nod. “But not always. Some of ‘em get involved. As it happens, Bee-Bee is a real hands-on, stir-the-shit type.”

“So can’t you go over her head?” I pressed.

“Not really. I dunno if you missed it, but in the past year we’ve gotten a new mayor and a new police chief in the city.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Yeah, so, there’s been a change in management my friends, and I’m not exactly considered a model employee right now.”

“Why is that?” Felicity asked.

“Does a little nocturnal incident at the morgue a few weeks ago ring a bell?” he asked.

Unfortunately, it did. During the hunt for the serial rapist, I had convinced Ben to get me into the medical examiner’s office to view the remains of a victim from an overlapping investigation. Normally, this wouldn’t have been a problem, except that I had talked him into doing so in the middle of the night. The chaotic psychic events that

ensued from there had caused quite a bit of commotion in this realm and my friend a generous share of trouble at the time. Apparently, they still were.

“Well, what if I had a talk with her?”

He scrunched his brow and looked confused. “What about?”

“About me and what I can do to help.”

“Were you just not listening?” he asked incredulously. “The woman flat out said for me to ‘leave my devil worshipper downstairs where he belonged.’ News flash, Kemosabe. She was talkin’ about you.”

“I realize that, Ben, but she doesn’t know anything about me.”

“Oh hell yes she does,” he returned. “At least she thinks she does anyway.”

“How can she?” Felicity chimed in.

“Neither one of you is particularly low profile,” he answered.

“You mean the papers?” I asked.

“...And the TV.” He nodded.

“But that’s just media hype,” I told him in a dismissive tone. “That’s not going to tell her anything.”

“Well, guess what?” he chided. “She’s read ‘em and watched ‘em all, and as far as she’s concerned, they’re gospel. And she didn’t get the nickname ‘Bible Barb’ for nothin’. She’s drawn her conclusion, white man. You’re the wicked Witch, and that’s all there is to it.”

“But that’s just her,” I objected.

He countered with a statement I hadn’t expected, “And a few others.”

“Who?” Felicity asked. “Arthur McCann?”

“He’s one, obviously. But there’re more... A handful of uniforms. Couple of detectives... Couple of the higher-ups, including the new chief...”

“What about my track record?” I asked.

He started shaking his head again, “I got news for ya’, Row. Your track record has a few potholes, which is another reason why you aren’t scorin’ any points. Right now you’re kinda looked upon as a loose cannon.”

“What?”

“Yeah,” he continued. “Chasin’ after Porter on that bridge, the thing at the morgue...”

“What about you?” I asked with a nod in his direction. “What do you think?”

He fell silent for a moment, looked away, then sighed before bringing his eyes back to meet mine.

“After what you did a few weeks back, I think maybe you might be a bit of a danger to yourself, yeah.”

He was talking about the fact that I had deliberately run his van through a set of plate-glass windows in order to get inside a building.

“That was different, and you know it,” I argued. “The sonofabitch had Felicity in there.”

“Yeah,” he rebutted. “And that’s the only reason I let it go, white man. If you’ll remember correctly, I lied about what really happened on my report.”

I didn’t have a comeback for the comment because I knew he had done exactly that.

“Listen, Row,” he started after an uncomfortable silence. “You’ve still got friends in the department, and I’m one of them.”

“Even though you think I’m a danger to myself,” I volunteered with a slightly sarcastic edge to my voice.

“Yeah, even though,” he echoed. “Cut me some slack here. I know what you can do. I’ve seen it first hand. And I’m even willin’ to trust you if you wanna know the truth.”

“Trust me to what?”

“To help stop this bastard.”

“That will be hard to do if I’m cut off from the investigation.”

“I know.”

My friend turned to stare out the window, and I allowed my gaze to follow his. Our muted reflections stared back from the pane of glass, mirroring our weariness like an overexposed snapshot. The darkness of night was still holding its ground and seemed in no hurry to relinquish its position. A quick glance at my watch told me that there was a pair of hours yet to go before the morning would ooze in above the heavy clouds.

“So, where do we go from here, then?” Felicity piped up again.

“Back to the beginning. Back to what started this whole conversation.” He turned his gaze to her, then to me. “Do you think you can come up with somethin’ worthwhile off that crime scene?”

“That’s kind of a moot point isn’t it?” I shook my head as I asked the question.

“No. No it’s not,” he replied.

“But you said I was banned from the investigation.”

“Officially you are.”

“Aye.” My wife cocked her head to the side and raised an eyebrow. “What are you saying?”

“What I’m sayin’ is that if I’m gonna take a chance on losin’ my badge, I need to know it’s gonna get us somewhere.”

I never got a chance to answer my friend’s question.

CHAPTER 4

The muffled electronic wail of a pager began sounding from somewhere across the table. By the time it had completed its second demand for attention, it was joined by the steadily rising trill of a cell phone vying for the same.

“Jeeez...” Ben complained aloud as he pulled the beeper from his belt and fumbled with it until he managed to switch it off and then peered at the display while sending his other hand to rustle through his coat pocket. “It’s Albright,” he told us as he laid the pager on the table and withdrew the screaming phone.

Before he could thumb the button on the second device to answer the call, the beeper began pulsing once more, prompting him to clumsily stab at it again.

“Yeah, Storm, hold on...” he barked into the phone while struggling to mute the pager.

The device was swallowed by his large hand, and his searching fingers were no match for its relatively diminutive size. Felicity finally reached out, snatched the noisemaker from his palm, and pressed the appropriate button. He quickly mouthed the word “Thanks” in her direction before turning his attention to the voice at the other end of the cell phone.

“Uh-huh, yeah, I’m here,” he said as he sent his free hand on another fishing expedition, withdrawing it from his pocket a moment later and laying his notepad on the table. “Yeah... Yeah...”

My friend held his pen poised over the paper as his eyes closed, and his face noticeably slackened. He dropped the pen and sighed heavily.

“Yeah, okay. You’re sure? Uh-huh. Yeah, great... No, I’ll take care of that. Jeez, I don’t fuckin’ need this... Yeah, I know. Okay. Yeah.” He picked up the pen, and his hand began moving as he scratched out a jumble of letters that were legible only to him. “Can ya’ spell that? Yeah... Yeah... Uh-huh... t-i-g-k-e-i-t. Yeah. Two S’s? Okay... Got it.

“Okay, yeah. You sendin’ someone?” He shook his head as he spoke into the phone. “Yeah. Yeah. No problem. He’s with me now. We’ll be there in about ten. Yeah. Later.”

He pulled the device away from his ear and immediately began stabbing at buttons in an ordered fashion.

“What’s going on?” Felicity asked.

“Just a sec,” he told her as he tucked the phone against the side of his head once again. “Yeah, Osthoff, it’s Storm... Yeah, tell me about it. Listen, there’s a file folder in my desk, middle drawer. Yeah... Yeah... Got it? Good. So there’s a list in there. Yeah. So, I need you to call Ackman and feed him the numbers. Yeah, yeah... It’s not good. No, he’s with me. Yeah, I know. No, he’s on scene so call his cell. You got the number? Great. Thanks. Yeah, I’ll tell him. Bye.”

The cell phone beeped as he pressed a button to end the call and then stared across the table at us with an eyebrow arched and a pained frown deepening the fatigue lines in his face.

“What?” I finally asked.

“I’m thinkin’” was his reply.

“Uh-huh,” I returned. “Now tell me something that isn’t obvious.”

“Chill, Row.” He reached up and rubbed his forehead. “This ain’t good.”

“What is it, Ben?” Felicity asked, her voice carrying far more concern than had mine.

“Well, that was Ackman back at the scene. Albright had him call. Looks like she wants you there after all.”

“Why the change of heart?”

“Seems Porter left you something.”

“What?”

“A note. But they aren’t sure quite what it says. Well, not all of it, anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s apparently a page from a book,” Ben explained. “Or a copy of a page. His handwritten note reads ‘Gant—your wife has lovely hair.’”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I shook my head and frowned.

“Beats me, but the rest of the printed text is in German, so until it’s translated we won’t know much. Albright did recognize a few words; apparently, she took German in high school or somethin’. *Prossneck, Deutschland, Folterung, Hexefertigkeit* and the year sixteen twenty-nine.”

He stumbled over the pronunciations, but I’m not sure I could have done much better.

“According to Bee-Bee they roughly translate as *Prossneck*, Germany, torture, and WitchCraft.”

Felicity audibly caught her breath and jerked, dropping her coffee cup in the process. Hot java splattered across the table, spilling over the edge. The ceramic mug bounced once from the wet surface before falling to its demise on the tile floor. Ben jumped back in his seat and instantly began extracting handfuls of paper napkins from the metal holder next to the window. In his haste, he sent the salt and pepper shakers spilling into the seat and a bottle of catsup rolling toward me. The condiment-filled vessel came to rest against my own coffee cup with a sharp plinking noise, which is fortunate, because I wouldn’t have caught it. I was otherwise paralyzed by the words my friend had just recited.

“You okay, Felicity?” he asked as he began mopping up the spill.

My wife’s normally pale complexion was washed to stark white as she sat frozen, staring across the table at Ben. Her green eyes were wide, and it didn’t take a Witch to literally feel the fear coming from her.

“Felicity?” Ben called her name again and then shifted to me when she didn’t answer. “Row? What the hell? What’s going on?”

The throb in my head moved up the scale a pair of notches, instantly becoming far more than a nuisance. Fear-induced nausea welled in the pit of my stomach and sent a bitter burn into the back of my throat. I slipped my hand along the edge of the table until I reached Felicity’s and then clasped her fingers tight.

“It’s not going to happen,” I said, fighting to mask my own distress.

“What?” Ben pressed as he threw more napkins onto the puddle of cooling liquid. “What’s not going to happen?”

I turned my gaze to him but continued to hold Felicity’s hand tightly. “The page is most likely from a book by Wilhelm Pressel,” I recited. “It’s pretty obscure, but most anyone who’s studied the Witch Trials of the Burning Times is familiar with it. It didn’t dawn on me at first, but the minute you said *Prossneck*, Germany, well, that’s a bit of a

giveaway. Anyway, if it is in fact a page from *Hexen und Hexenmeister*, then the text is an actual accounting of the first day of torture inflicted upon an accused Witch in the year sixteen twenty-nine.”

“Okay. That’s the kinda thing that would fit with this wingnut’s profile. But, what’s with the comment about Felicity’s hair?”

“The first thing the hangman did to this woman,” I explained, “was to bind her hands, attach her to a torture ladder, and cut her hair off.” I swallowed hard before continuing. “He then doused her head with alcohol and set it on fire to burn the rest of her hair off down to the roots.”

“Aye,” Felicity muttered quietly as she regained her voice. “And that was only the beginning.”

“He’s taunting me,” I stated as anger began to creep into my voice. “The sonofabitch is telling me what he plans to do to my wife.”

“Jeezus... Goddamnit...” Ben whispered. “And I thought I was takin’ the easy out. So much for breakin’ it to you gently.”

“You couldn’t have known,” I offered with a shrug.

“No,” he returned. “But the note is only half of it.”

“What else,” I asked with a grimace.

“Aww man, Jeez...” He rested an elbow on the table then dropped his head into his hand and closed his eyes. “They ID’d the victim...”

The portent in his voice was unmistakable, and it struck both Felicity and me with no less force than a physical slap across the face. I could almost guess what was coming, and I am certain Felicity could as well.

The ache inside my skull took on the properties of root canal sans anesthetic. I braced myself for the news, not truly wanting to hear it but unable to escape its reality.

“Oh, Gods...” Felicity murmured into the silence between us, audibly broadcasting her dread.

“Yeah,” Ben returned. “Randy Harper. He took out a member of your Coven.”

“Dammit,” I spat the curse. “Isn’t this how I got involved in all this shit to begin with?”

My reference wasn’t lost on him. The first investigation I’d helped Ben with had been the murder of Ariel Tanner. She had been one of my students in The Craft as well as a good friend. Moreover, she had been the priestess of the Coven Felicity and I had since adopted.

“Yeah. Déjà vu and all that crap,” Ben returned.

“Gods...” Felicity moaned, and her eyes grew wide. “What about everyone else? If he knew about Randy...”

“That was the second call,” Ben said as he nodded. “I’ve kept a list in my desk since this all started. Ackman is going to contact them, and we’ll go from there.”

“What about Nancy?” my wife appealed. “Someone should be with her. Unless...”

She caught her breath as the thought struck. She didn’t have to voice it for us to know what it was.

“Don’t panic,” Ben told her. “Ackman is making the calls. We don’t know anything yet, so let’s just assume that she’s okay.”

Felicity closed her eyes and took a deep breath as she nodded affirmation. I gave her hand a squeeze but wasn’t certain how reassuring it would be. I knew she could easily

sense that I was just as worried as she was. I dropped my chin to my chest and stared at the table as a solemn hush blanketed our little corner of the diner. Even the radio behind the counter was spewing only dead air.

“I’ve had enough nightmares this decade,” I finally muttered. “Will someone please wake me up.”



“Here she comes.” Ben canted his head toward me and whispered, “Play nice and keep the *Twilight Zone* stuff to yourself.”

It was obvious that we had not only been expected but that our arrival on scene had been announced. We had just barely topped the metal stairs leading to the roof access of the warehouse a few seconds prior to his comment. Before we could get our bearings, we were greeted by the sight of a woman wearing a heavy trench coat walking purposefully toward us from several yards away.

The assortment of circumstances combined with the raging pain in my skull had centered my mood somewhere between foul and just plain pissed off. “What if I don’t?”

“I’m not kidding here, white man. She’ll kick your sorry ass outta here,” he snarled under his breath. “And I’m damn liable to help her. Got me?”

“Listen to him, Rowan,” Felicity demanded as she squeezed my arm. “This isn’t the time. Not now.”

“When will it be the time?” I asked, my voice flat. “Tell me that.”

“I don’t know. But not now. Please.”

She was still frightened, and I couldn’t blame her. The written threat was enough by itself, but backing it up by torturing and killing a member of our own Coven drove the point past home. It fueled the horror and urged it across the line that separated intimidation from violence. Omen from action.

While I still felt some of the same fear that enveloped my wife, mine was rapidly turning to calculating anger. Still, they were both correct. I needed to keep myself on an even keel, or I wasn’t going to get anywhere.

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Okay.”

“I’m friggin’ serious here, Row,” Ben said.

“I know. I know.”

Lieutenant Barbara Albright reminded me of someone’s mother. She didn’t resemble anyone in particular, actually. She just fit the appearance of a generic, prim and proper, sixties sitcom mom who had been strategically updated to fit the style of the decade—but only where absolutely necessary. She was slight of figure and wore her white hair in a shoulder-length coif that was just traditional enough not to be out of vogue but wasn’t exactly riding the cutting edge either. She looked to be in her mid-fifties, but that, in and of itself, could have been an illusion. She was very simply just that nondescript.

The one thing that stood out about her appearance was the thin-lipped expression she now wore. According to Ben, it was how she always looked. At any rate, it was the kind of mask a card player would kill for, and I was betting she knew exactly how to use it.

“Mister Gant, we need to get some things straight right now.” She started talking three steps before she reached us. “I am not exactly sure what went on during my

predecessor's time in charge, but I know for a fact that I do not like the things that I have read."

She came to a halt directly before us and took a firm stance before thrusting her gloved hands into her pockets. She stared at me with glacier blue eyes, unblinking and unwavering, never taking a moment's attention away from my face nor acknowledging the presence of Ben or Felicity. At the V where the lapels of her dark grey trench coat overlapped, a yellow-gold, cross pendant stood out against her sweater in a blatant display.

"I also do not like you or what you represent," she continued her speech. "Your involvements in previous investigations were a travesty and an embarrassment to the Major Case Squad. It is only by the grace of God Almighty that no officers were injured or killed because of your antics. You should also know that I am of the opinion that had you stayed out of it and allowed us to do our jobs, there would have been far fewer victims. Not to mention that Eldon Porter would now be incarcerated."

"Exc..." I started to make an objection, but the first word was cut off by Felicity's instantly tightening grip on my arm. Even in the midst of her apprehension, she was remaining logical and level headed, something at which she was very practiced, until you pressed the correct button, of course. If that occurred, well, let's just say that your only hope would be if your deity of choice happened to be listening.

"Yes, Mister Gant?" Lieutenant Albright cocked her head and frowned even more, which is something I hadn't thought possible.

"Nothing," I answered flatly.

"Now then," she started again. "You need to understand that you are here only because Porter left a message specifically for you. Otherwise, I would have you arrested if you came within a mile of a crime scene. The truth is that I want you to see what you have caused through your interference, and I am not the only one who sincerely hopes that it haunts you for the rest of your days."

"Lieutenant, you don't even begin to know," I returned with a cold edge in my voice.

She ignored my comment. "Be aware that any further involvement you have in this case will be at my discretion, and you can rest assured that I will exercise it to the fullest extent. I intend to keep you on a very short leash, Mister Gant. VERY short. Am I making myself clear?"

I stared back at her for a long moment, remaining mute. The temperature atop the building seemed even colder than it had down on the street, but that was most likely an effect of the company rather than the climate. The expectant lull was filled with forlorn sighing noises as the wind weaved its way through broken windows on the floor below us then gushed up the stairwell and out through the open door.

In my head, I flipped through several responses for her question, but unfortunately, not one of them was particularly appropriate, given the circumstances. They would have made me feel better, most definitely, but would have served only to get me cuffed and processed just for good measure. I finally decided on a one-word answer. I took a deep breath and fought to ground my ire, or at the very least, keep the brunt of it out of my voice.

"Perfectly," came my response.

“Good,” she returned. “I am glad to know that we understand one another. Now if you will kindly go back downstairs, I am going to have Detective Storm here escort you to the medical examiner’s office. I will meet you there in due course.”

“Wait a minute.” I shook my head and blinked as I felt my forehead automatically crease from the sudden feeling of confusion. “Aren’t we going to look at this crime scene?”

“We have been looking at it, Mister Gant,” she told me as she turned on her heel. “You, however, are not.”

I started toward her as she began walking away, and felt not only Felicity’s grip tighten, but also Ben’s barrier-like forearm thud across my chest as I ran into it.

“Then what the hell did you call me up here for?” I shouted after her.

She stopped in her tracks and stood with her back to us for a measured handful of seconds before twisting slightly and looking back over her shoulder at me.

“I thought we had already established who is in charge here, Mister Gant” was all she said before turning and continuing on her way.

CHAPTER 5

“I can’t believe she did that!” I punctuated the angry comment by slapping my open palm hard against the side of Ben’s van. The force of the impact joined with the frigid sheet metal to send a loud thump in one direction and a jarring sting up my arm in the other. I instantly regretted the action but did it again anyway. In fact, I did it twice more and would have continued had my friend not circled his hand about my wrist and stopped me mid-swing.

“Calm down,” he barked. “My friggin’ van didn’t do anything to ya’.”

I turned to face him, my infuriation seething outward in hot waves. “Dammit, Ben, she called us up there just so she could try to intimidate me.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “That’s her style. Whaddaya want me to tell ya’? Now shut up and quit makin’ a scene.”

I took quick notice that my outburst had, in fact, attracted attention from some nearby uniformed officers and crime scene technicians, but I didn’t really care.

“Who the hell does she think she is?!” I demanded as my voice rose well above any necessary volume.

A sudden swath of blue-white light fell across us, struggling to fend off the darkness and expose us to the world. It slashed drunkenly back and forth, growing brighter with each pass. The varied sounds of interested commotion blended with frenzied footsteps at an ever-increasing volume.

Ben shot a startled look over his shoulder and declared a staccato string of expletives that ended with “I really don’t need this shit.”

With a quick jerk, he yanked the passenger door of the vehicle open and shoved me at the opening as he ordered, “Get in.”

“Hell no!” I exclaimed. “They want a story, I’ll give them a story!”

I shuffled back and sidestepped him as he reached for me again. I don’t know how I pulled it off, but I somehow feigned a quick shift in position that left my friend grasping at air and me skirting quickly around him and the open door. The television reporters were almost upon us, and I was aiming myself toward them with fire in my throat and a vitriolic commentary on my tongue.

Before I managed to take a second step, however, the front of my coat laminated itself to my chest and forced the air from my lungs. I could no longer feel the ground beneath my feet, and my stomach fluttered with the butterflies of momentary weightlessness as I literally arced backward in flight. I stumbled once more to the ground, remaining upright only by the grace of the large hand that was twisted into the back of my coat.

I was stiffly swung in a shallow half circle, and after that I didn’t see much of anything other than the seat of the van rushing headlong toward me. I twisted and fought to step upward into the vehicle as I was propelled at it and in the process raked my shoulder hard against the frame. The door was already being slammed behind me as I fell in a twisted heap with my torso lying across the engine cover. Toward the rear, I heard the side door groan in a discordant harmony with my own as it was quickly forced open. The

rush of activity was instantly followed by Felicity climbing in and slamming the opening shut.

I pushed myself up from the shadows and into a sitting position, twisting in the seat as I rose. The stark lights now filled the interior of the Chevy from the front and sides as video cameras were brought to bear on it. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut and twisted my head, throwing up my hands to shield my face, but I still saw spots from the brief glance into the man-made suns.

We were parked outside the cordoned area of the crime scene proper, and therefore, fair game. Now that I had called down their unrelenting attentions upon us, we had become the main course.

The muffled exterior noise jumped in amplification as the driver's side door of the van opened, and a chaotic mix of voices began ricocheting around us.

"I said, NO COMMENT!" I heard my friend shout over the unintelligible questions as he folded his large frame in through the opening and levered the door shut.

The intensity of the clamor was once again suppressed, but the beams of garish light still sliced through the shadows. If they were to be denied a sound byte then they were intent on fighting like a pack of wild dogs for the best clip of video.

"Thanks, Rowan," Ben snarled at me with thick sarcasm in his voice as he thrust his keys into the ignition and started the van. "Thanks a whole hell of a lot. Just what the fuck did you think you were doing?!"

"Giving them what they want!" I barked in return.

"Have you lost your goddamned mind?! Where the hell do ya' think that's gonna get ya'?!"

"Someone has to tell them what's going on."

"That's for the public relations officer to handle, not you."

"I'm talking about that bitch upstairs! Someone's got to tell them what she's doing!"

"Don't you get it?!" he declared, thumping his fingertips against his forehead and gesturing angrily. "Have you suddenly gone stupid on me or somethin'? You run off at the mouth about Albright, and you're screwed! Like it or not, in this situation, you're the odd man out. They'll spin the whole fuckin' thing to make you look like a freak, and the way you're actin' right now it wouldn't be hard!"

It took a moment for what he said to sink in, but I knew he was correct. I was as out of control as I had ever been.

"I'm sorry," I exclaimed. "But there was no call for what she did. It was a power play, and you know it."

"Yeah, it was," he admitted as he pulled the gearshift down into drive and pounded his fist twice on the horn before letting off the brake. "I told ya' how she was..." He took a moment to direct an exclamation toward the windshield. "Get outta my way you friggin' asshole, or you're gonna get run over! Jeezus!"

My friend twisted the steering wheel and nudged the vehicle slowly forward through the group of reporters and camera operators as they began parting. As he brought the van around and rotated the wheel back toward center, he shot me a quick glance.

"Listen, Kemosabe, I had no idea that was what she had planned, but it doesn't surprise me. I told you what she thought of ya'."

"But that whole exercise was done for no other reason than to get under my skin." I asserted.

“Uh-huh,” my friend grunted. “That’s how she plays the game.”

“Well, her rules suck.”

“Aye, but that doesn’t matter,” Felicity said from behind me. “She succeeded in exactly what she set out to do. Look at yourself, then. I’ve never seen you lose your temper like this.”

“Yes you have,” I shot back as I turned in my seat to face her. “You just don’t remember it because a sick sonofabitch had you drugged up on Rophynol.”

“Aye,” she answered with an uncharacteristic hardness in her voice. “He did at that, but I remember more than you know, Rowan Linden Gant. More than you know.”

As she slumped back in her seat, she continued to stare at me with a cold fire in her jade green eyes. I knew at that moment that I had flipped the wrong switch.

I hoped my chosen deities were listening.



In keeping with the theme set forth by Lieutenant Albright, the security guard at the Saint Louis City Medical Examiner’s office had been phoned about our impending arrival. He let us in while on his way out the door to grab a smoke. He had been instructed to tell us to wait in the lobby until she arrived. Another tactic on her part, obviously, but there was nothing we could do. The door that led farther into the building was locked. I knew, because I succeeded in raising Ben’s anger a notch by ignoring his vehement instructions not to check it.

Remnants of the recent holiday season still visibly occupied the reception area of the office. Customarily, the room was bland and functional, so the ornamentation was quick to conjure a “what’s wrong with this picture” feeling.

Intertwined silver and gold garland still hung in shallow swags along the edge of the counter with a dozen or so holiday cards folded over them and on display. The screen saver on the computer behind the desk offered a snowy scene, complete with an inviting-looking log cabin and a twinkling Christmas tree. Here and there, other decorous attentions to detail could be picked out—a coffee mug emblazoned with a picture of Santa Claus; a wreath on the door leading back to the offices, also locked; and even a half-depleted bowl of festively-wrapped candies. All of them came together to form the whole: an unlikely clutch of cheer in the midst of a place that seemed overwhelmed by depression. I didn’t know about anyone else, but it just wasn’t working for me.

I’d seen the inside of this building too many times, not only in my waking hours but in nightmares as well. I had grown to despise its plain façade over the past couple of years. Still, as much as I hated it, I couldn’t escape. If it was nothing more than morbid fascination that brought me here, at least I could seek help, but I wasn’t fortunate enough to have a sickness to blame. I had become a permanent satellite inextricably gripped by the gravity of circumstance; my erratic orbit inevitably intersecting with an occupied autopsy suite. As often as not, I felt compelled to bring about the collision myself, and right now, I was at ground zero of yet another impact. Even though I was not at fault this time around, the ever-associated migraine was looming like a dark shadow over me.

This place was always a seething well of pain for me, and this morning was no different; of course, my irascibility factor being off the scale as it was didn’t help matters at all. I had started hearing the voices of the dead—screams mostly—the moment we

turned onto Clark Avenue. Staving them off became a somewhat violent internal struggle as soon as we entered the building.

I sought refuge from the ethereal by embracing the mundane. I occupied my mind with trivial tasks in order to erect a mental barrier—anything from mutely reciting the alphabet in reverse to intensely pondering a shadow on the wall. At one point, I even found myself wondering about the holiday cards. Considering that the clientele of a morgue are normally beyond any need for celebration, they seemed out of place to me. I reached down and flipped one of the greetings partially open to reveal the inscription, which showed it to be from a sales rep at *Stryker Corporation*, a well-known maker of medical implements. I checked another and saw that the sender was a local wholesaler of surgical supplies.

I guess I had been over thinking the situation. Of course, in my agitated state, perhaps I was not truly thinking at all.

Unfortunately, seeing the names of the companies led me to dwell on such things as powered bone saws and stainless steel scalpels, which in turn brought back memories of post-mortems I'd witnessed first hand. Fearful cries from the other side rose in volume for a brief moment as I rushed to switch channels on my thoughts before they could suck me in.

"Aye, Ben. How long do you think we'll be waiting, then?" Felicity asked aloud, her voice thankfully snatching my attention away from the place I'd been heading.

There had not yet been enough time for me to redeem myself, and I was still firmly entrenched on her bad side. She hadn't spoken directly to me since my offhanded comment over half an hour ago, and it wasn't looking like she intended to change that any time soon.

I looked over and focused on her. She was seated in a chair across from us, her leather jacket unzipped and revealing the stylized logo of a previous year's Kansas City Pagan Festival that adorned the front of her sweatshirt. Her legs were crossed, and one foot was bobbing in time with music only she could hear.

I absently pondered the wisdom of the logo on her shirt being visible, given the current situation. For the first time in years, I was actually considering not being quite so open about my spirituality. Of course, once you've taken as many steps out of the broom closet as we had, getting back in was almost impossible, so the idea was moot. Still, calling attention to it might not be the best course.

She looked up from her wristwatch and gazed toward Ben with an expectant expression that barely masked the fatigue showing in her face. "It's been almost twenty minutes now."

He pushed away from the counter then looked out the doors and through the glassed-in foyer. "Who knows? Bee-Bee probably wants Row to stew long enough to do somethin' stupid."

"Like he hasn't already?" she volunteered.

"Yeah, well I'm talkin' stupid enough to give her a reason to arrest 'im."

"Hey!" I declared. "I'm standing right here you know."

Ben looked at me. "Yeah, and?"

"Yeah, and, you two seem to have a bad habit of talking about me like I'm not here, that's what. You do it all the time."

"Not all the time. Just when it's for your own good."

“That’s subjective.”

“Uh-huh. Two-way street, Row. You aren’t exactly the pinnacle of objectivity yourself.”

As much as I hated to admit it, he had a point. Of course, that didn’t mean I had to like it. “Well, it’s still annoying.”

“Yeah, well so’s when you talk to dead people the rest of us can’t hear.”

Felicity piped up, a matter-of-fact tone permeating her voice. “Aye, Ben’s right.”

“What do you mean?” I scrunched my forehead as I spoke. “You’ve ventured over to the other side yourself as I recall.”

“Not about that.” She dismissed my comment with an impatient shake of her head. “About your giving Lieutenant Albright a reason to arrest you, then. If you don’t calm down, you’re going to do just that.”

“You’re not gonna win, Row,” Ben offered. “Especially if you play ‘push me-shove you’ with her. She’ll knock your ass down and kick you while you’re there.”

“Whatever happened to the whole ‘to protect and serve’ thing?” I asked.

“Number one,” he returned, “you’ve been watchin’ too much TV. And number two, never pull the ‘taxpayin’, law-abidin’ citizen who pays your salary’ crap with a copper. Trust me, it just pisses us off.”

“So, it’s okay for her to treat me like a criminal?”

“How many times have I gotta tell ya’, Row? This is reality. She’s holdin’ the cards here, not you.”

“Yeah, I know,” I grudgingly admitted. “But she’s still getting to me.”

“That’s YOUR problem, then,” Felicity said. “You know how to get around that. Ground and center yourself.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right,” I said as I pulled my glasses off and rubbed my eyes, lingering for a moment as I pinched the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger.

“How’s your head?” Felicity asked, her voice still edgy but softened by a few degrees of concern.

“Killing me,” I answered.

“*Twilight Zone*?” Ben asked.

“Yeah,” I nodded slightly. “And we’re already hell and gone past the signpost.”

CHAPTER 6

Lieutenant Albright breezed in through the front doors of the medical examiner's office just over twenty minutes later. True to what Ben had told me earlier, her gelid expression had not changed in the least.

"Mister Gant," she said as she entered, cracking what might have passed for a pleasant smile had there not been so much sarcasm affixed to it. "I am surprised to find you here in the lobby as I asked. Apparently you CAN obey the law if you try hard enough."

"The door is locked," I answered coldly. "You know that."

"Of course." She nodded. "But that sort of thing has never stopped you in the past."

I caught an acidic response in my throat and choked it back down, turning my head to the side and closing my eyes as I did so. I heeded Felicity's advice and took an audibly deep breath in through my nose, then exhaled slowly through my mouth as I opened my eyes and turned back to face Albright. I could feel energy flowing along my spine and coupling with the Earth in a solid ground. It was as tangible to me as a hot and neutral lead on an electrical outlet. Still, it didn't bring complete calm, and simply being in this woman's presence made me bristle.

"Look, Lieutenant," I began. "You've made your feelings perfectly clear. I have no desire to continue down this path with you."

"And which path would that be, Mister Gant?" she asked, feigning ignorance.

"I'm telling you that I am not going to allow you to bait me any longer, Lieutenant," I replied. "I'm here, just like you asked. I'm just waiting for you to tell me what it is you want from me."

I cannot say that she was visibly disappointed by my stance, but I definitely had the feeling that some of her steam had instantly become just so much condensation. There was a short period of silence while she considered what I had just said. I fully suspected that she was using the time to regroup and plot her way around the obstacle I had just placed before her.

"Mister Gant," she proceeded with a tilt of her head. "What I want, you cannot possibly give."

"How so?"

"No matter what powers you may claim to have, you cannot change that which has already happened. I firmly believe that the man on the table beyond that door is there because of you. There is nothing you can do to bring him back nor any of the other victims for that matter."

"No. No I can't," I agreed in a quiet tone.

"Now, just a little while ago I had the unpleasant duty of phoning Mister Harper's wife to ask that she come down here to identify his remains, and..."

She didn't get a chance to finish the sentence. Like a banshee wail, Felicity's voice pierced the air between us, rendering everyone mute. "You what?!"

"Excuse me?" Albright turned her hard stare on my wife.

“Aye,” Felicity began as she stood and moved forward, bringing herself eye-to-eye with the lieutenant with no more than a pair of steps between them. “You told Nancy that Randy was dead, over the phone?”

“And what would you have had me do, Miz O’Brien?” she shot back.

“Send someone to tell her in person.”

“That is not how it is done.”

The one word response that my wife uttered next surprised everyone, including me. “Bitch.”

The thick calm that enveloped her as she spoke was something I had seen only once before and was in no hurry to see again. The button that had now been pushed was well up the column from what I’d done earlier. I wasn’t sure if there were enough Gods to create a pantheon that was capable of quelling the fire that had just been ignited.

I actually saw a wash of surprise flow across Lieutenant Albright’s features as she stared back at the redheaded tempest in front of her. It was obvious that Felicity’s outburst had blindsided her.

“What did you just say?” she asked.

“I think you heard me, then,” my wife answered with frigid purpose in her voice as she cocked her head to the side and glared. “But I’ll be more than happy to repeat it for you if you’d like.”

The door on the back wall of the lobby clicked loudly and then whooshed open just as Albright started to open her mouth. A pale young man with a stoic expression and scraggly goatee poked his head through the opening and regarded us with general disinterest. After a moment, he pushed the door wider and held it open with his back against it.

“Doc says for you to come on back” was all he said.

Albright swung her gaze from the young man back to Felicity and shook her index finger perfunctorily as she mustered a menacing tone. “We will finish this discussion later.”

“Aye,” my wife retorted as she gave her a curt nod, but still never broke eye contact. “I’ll be looking forward to it, then.”



“Johnathan, could you please turn that down?” The medical examiner on duty called out to the diener who had led us back to the autopsy suite, raising his voice to be heard over the music that filled the room.

On the opposite wall, the young man was standing at a stainless steel sink performing what must have been some daily routine considering the mechanically adept way he was approaching it. Whatever it was, it involved angry-looking medical implements that appeared as though they would be more at home on the set of a horror movie.

Aphrodite’s Child’s “Four Horsemen” was blaring from the speakers of a compact stereo nestled on a shelf in an out of the way corner. Considering the tune was one that came from my generation, it was not the type of music I would have expected to appeal to someone as young as the assistant, but to each their own.

He wordlessly abandoned his task for a moment to step over and spin the knob on the bookshelf sound system. He dropped the volume out of our range of hearing just as the chorus was about to inform us as to the color of the fourth horse.

It didn't matter. Like most anyone, I already knew the color and what it represented. I found no particular amazement in the coincidental symbolism either. It was the sort of thing that seemed to be happening to me constantly these days, and I'd grown jaded to it.

"Thank you," the M.E. stated aloud, the tone sounding as though the words came more from habit than actual courtesy.

We were standing next to a metal table in the tiled room. The form resting atop it was zipped partially into a body bag that could be seen at the foot. From the vicinity of the waist upward, it was also covered by a white sheet, a necessity because of the two-by-four that was still attached to the corpse.

The weathered length of wood jutted out on either side, exposed for all to see. Randy's pale hand was twisted into a pained claw, his wrist mottled purple and swollen where several circlets of bailing wire held it fast to the wood. Frozen blood streaked the appendage and glistened wetly as it thawed.

I stole a glance at Felicity. She was holding her eyes tightly shut with her fist pressed against her lips. Her visceral anger had been replaced for the moment by bitter anguish.

I took a deep breath of the frigid air in the suite as I struggled to maintain control, myself. The smell of death and raw meat stung my nostrils, and I choked back the desire to vomit. The fact that a good friend was lifeless beneath the shroud made this experience different from any other. Even when I'd helped investigate Ariel Tanner's death, I had never been in close proximity to her corpse as I was now with Randy. I wasn't entirely sure I could handle it.

If the increasing throbs inside my skull were any indicator, I would have to say no.

The doctor turned his attention to us. "Now then, we won't be starting the post until later this morning..."

"Is Doc Sanders doing it?" Ben interjected, referring to the chief medical examiner for the city.

"Doctor Sanders is on vacation right now," the M.E. replied.

"What about calling her in," my friend pressed. "She's familiar with the way this wingnut operates, and I'm sure..."

"I am certain Doctor Friedman can handle the task, Detective," Albright announced with a thread of agitation in her voice, cutting him off mid-sentence.

"I'm afraid she is unreachable." The doctor was obviously miffed but offered the explanation anyway. "If I remember her itinerary correctly, she is on a cruise ship somewhere in the Bahamas."

"When's she get back?" Ben forged ahead.

"Storm!"

"Yeah, okay, sorry Doc. You were saying?"

The M.E. sighed and then continued, "We won't be starting the official post until later this morning; however, I assume you are all aware of the condition of the body, so the cause of death is not likely to be much of a mystery."

"How did you ID him?" I asked

"His driver's license," Lieutenant Albright answered for him.

“He was nude when I saw him hanging from the building,” I ventured. “Where did you find that? With the note?”

“Not exactly,” she replied. “Doctor?”

The M.E. looked surprised. “Lieutenant, since Mister Gant knew the deceased, I am not certain that...”

“No, Doctor,” she returned. “I insist. Mister Gant needs to see this.”

Doctor Friedman glanced at me with an apologetic shake of his head. I had met him before, and this was the closest I’d seen to real compassion from the man. That made me fear what I was about to see even more.

His sudden attack of humanity was well placed, but he just didn’t have the backbone to stand up to Albright. Without another word, he pulled back the sheet, hesitating initially before finally executing the deed.

“Awww, Jeeez...” Ben exclaimed. “Lieutenant...”

“Shut up, Storm,” she cut him off yet again.

Eldon Porter wanted no mistakes made in identifying Randy Harper. In point of fact, he had gone out of his way to be certain of it.

Bile rose in my throat, and I began to physically tremble from the sickening mixture of sadness, pain, and overwhelming anger as I stared at the horror before me.

Felicity yelped, and I heard her behind me as she began to sob, but she was soon drowned out by the thick noise of blood rushing in my ears as my pulse began to race.

The means of identification was just what Albright had said it to be—a Missouri driver’s license. What she hadn’t warned me of was the fact that it was firmly affixed to the center of his forehead by a framing nail driven deeply into his skull. Judging from the lack of severe trauma, Porter had probably used a nail gun.

I probably would have stood there transfixed by the appalling sight, eventually falling into ethereal sync with the final violent moments of his life had it not been for the anguished scream that suddenly sliced through the room.

CHAPTER 7

My muscles tensed as the unconscious fight or flight response took over. I instantly flinched, and the action sent a stab of pain through the shoulder that I'd earlier bounced off the doorframe on the van. The sharp ache crawled up my neck and bore straight in to join with the rank and file of my preternatural migraine. It didn't help either that I immediately followed the wince by jerking my head up from the grisly horror on the autopsy table and shooting a startled glance over my shoulder in the direction of the scream.

At least I thought it was the direction of the scream.

The piercing wail glanced once again from the tiled walls before folding itself into a fading echo that melded with pained whimpers. I twisted slowly around, searching for the source of the noise, but found none.

"What's wrong, Row?" Ben asked.

"Did you hear that?" I answered, asking the question of myself as much as of him.

"Hear what?"

"That scream," I explained. "Someone screamed."

Under most circumstances, I was perfectly capable of distinguishing between the real and the ethereal, and this scream definitely sounded like the former. However, with no one in the physical realm to whom I could attribute it, and since it was apparently audible to no one else, I could only assume that it had originated on the other side. But, something didn't feel right about it. I couldn't explain why, but it didn't fit. It was just too real.

I shuddered as I tried to wrap my thoughts around it. For a split second it made me itch all over.

"You goin' *Twilight Zone*, white man?" he asked with sudden concern as he nudged my wife. "Felicity, do that thing."

She was still choking back a sob. "What thing?"

"That thing where you make him not 'zone out,'" he stated urgently. "Ground 'im or short 'im out or whatever."

"Please, Mister Gant," Lieutenant Albright spat as she tilted her head and shot me a disgusted stare. "Spare us your theatrics. This is neither the time nor the place."

"I wish I could, Lieutenant," I answered as I leaned to one side in order to look past her at the door. "But trust me, I'm not that good an actor."

"Come now, Mister Gant. You have obviously fooled Detective Storm for some time now."

"Lieutenant," Ben started. "There's more to this than you know."

"I don't think so, Storm," she answered without looking at him. "I know exactly what is going on here, and to be honest, it bothers me that an officer attached to my unit can be taken in by such blatant chicanery."

"I'm not bein' takin' in by anything, Lieutenant," he returned.

“Of course you are, Storm. This man is nothing but a charlatan, and you are blinded by misplaced loyalty. You have been bewitched by his lies.”

“Don’t go there, Lieutenant,” he responded with more than a mere hint of anger in his voice.

Benjamin Storm was capable of taking a level of personal abuse that would set off the most even-tempered of individuals, and yet he would remain perfectly calm. However, he had his own set of triggers, among them being an almost fanatical devotion to his friends and family. Albright’s treatment of me had been wearing on him with each sardonic jibe she made, and it was finally beginning to show.

From the corner of my eye, I happened to catch a thin smirk that passed across the lieutenant’s features and knew that this was exactly what she wanted. Without missing a beat, she seized on the trigger and squeezed.

“How does it feel to be personally responsible for this man’s death, Mister Gant?” she asked.

“Back off, Lieutenant,” Ben instructed before I had a chance to respond.

“It’s okay, Ben,” I said.

She ignored both of us—or pretended to at least. “This is the second acquaintance of yours to meet a violent end, is it not? It would appear that being your friend is rather hazardous.”

“I said, BACK OFF, Lieutenant!” My friend’s voice raised a pair of notches in volume and filled the room to capacity.

“Or what, Detective?” She placed heavy emphasis on his title as she turned to face him.

“Let’s you and me go have a talk,” he instructed, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the door.

“I think perhaps we should,” she retorted. “You seem to be forgetting who is in charge here.”

He stepped back and aimed a hand at the exit. “After you.”

As Albright brushed past him, he turned to the medical examiner who had been shuffling about in silent discomfort during the entire exchange. “You wanna get them outta here, Doc.” The words were more a command than a question. “I think they’ve seen enough.”

Doctor Friedman nodded and muttered a quiet “yes” in acknowledgement. Ben then brought his eyes to rest on us and pointed at me. “You stay on this side of the never-never-land county line, got me?” He shifted his gaze to Felicity without waiting for me to answer. “And you make sure he does. I’ll be with ya’ in a few minutes.”

“Ben, it’s not worth...” I started.

He cut me off as he turned and stalked after the lieutenant. “Just go with the doc, and do what I tell ya’ for a change. This ain’t gonna take very long.”



Ben’s voice carried.

Even with several walls and closed doors between us, it carried, and it did so beyond anything I’d expected. It rode up and down as if someone was repeatedly twisting a volume knob back and forth just to see what it would do. You couldn’t really make out

everything he was saying, but at the peaks, you definitely picked up on the expletives. He even used a few that I wasn't sure I'd ever heard before, but I was positive I wouldn't be attempting to repeat.

Lieutenant Albright's stern voice fell into the low volume valleys between, inching up an octave or so in pitch but never even beginning to approach my friend's elevated level of animated expression. There were enough snippets of both voices to get the general gist of the argument and that it was yours truly who sat at the center of the conflagration. No big surprise there, but still, between the both of them, within the past five minutes my name had been mentioned seventeen times. Actually, a more accurate statement would be that it was mentioned by Ben and taken in vain by Albright.

"He's screwing up his career." I tossed the comment out as nothing more than an idle observation. I didn't really expect an answer.

"Aye, but better him than you," Felicity replied, giving me one anyway. "At least it is his choice this time."

We were sitting in the lobby of the medical examiner's office, occupying a pair of seats against the wall opposite the reception desk. Doctor Friedman had not seemed entirely sure what to do with us once Ben and Albright left, so he had parked us here for lack of a better place.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"It wasn't all that long ago that you were ready to do it for him, then. Remember the reporters?"

"Oh, yeah, that," I replied with mild embarrassment in my voice. "I wasn't really thinking about the various consequences at the time."

"We noticed."

"That would have been manageable, though," I offered. "He could have done some damage control. Thrown it all on me and distanced himself."

"Aye, Rowan, we're talking about Benjamin Storm," she outlined. "He'd never abandon you like that. The man is more loyal than a Saint Bernard."

"You're right," I acknowledged. "I think he still could have found a way around it though. But this, I don't know..."

"Aye, maybe so, but I'm betting it's moot now," she said.

She tilted her head back and closed her eyes, then let out a heavy sigh. Her face was still flushed from her recent bout of weeping as well as the attempt to contain it. Her composure had returned for now, but the emotional burden remained, for both of us.

"Probably," I muttered, then finally asked, "So, what about you and me?"

"Aye, what about us?"

"I had the impression that I pushed a button or two earlier."

"You did," she acknowledged.

"So?"

"So, that was before the bitch in the other room got under MY skin."

"Not wanting to choose between being the pot or the kettle?"

"Aye, let's just say I gained a thorough understanding of how you felt."

We fell quiet as the argument down the hall continued for another round. I rolled my arm up and pushed back the sleeve on my coat to glance at my watch. I frowned when I saw that the bezel was shattered, and what I could make out of the display was mostly a darkened splotch where the liquid crystal had cracked and burned out. I looked at it for a

moment, puzzled by what I saw. I quietly shifted in my seat, slightly twisting left then right as I mentally reenacted being forcibly shoved into the van.

Without a doubt, I remembered my left shoulder striking the doorframe, but I couldn't recall anything happening on the right. Still, it was the only explanation, and cliché as it was, it had all happened too fast for me to remember for sure.

“What are you doing, then?” Felicity asked.

She must have sensed my gyrations in the seat because her eyes were still closed.

“Trying to figure out how I broke my watch.”

“Aye, it probably happened when Ben tossed you into the van.”

“That's kind of what I was figuring.”

She lifted her arm and held it out to me. I reached up, pushed back the cuff of her leather jacket and looked at the timepiece that encircled her delicate wrist. I found myself stopping to think about the jumble of lines on the display before remembering to mentally flip them over. The lack of sleep was catching up with me.

“Remember to subtract fifteen,” Felicity reminded me about her penchant for setting her watch fast, ostensibly so she would always be on time.

I didn't bother to point out to her that she was still habitually late.

The calculation worked out to the time being 8:15 a.m. It had been a little over four hours since we'd first arrived at the crime scene with Ben, but it already felt like it had been a week. Unfortunately, I knew from experience that it was only going to get worse. One of these days I hoped to be able to experience the other side of that coin—the one where it actually got better after the getting worse part.

I lowered my wife's arm back to her lap and turned my head to look out the entrance foyer. The sun had officially peeked over the horizon something around an hour ago, give or take a few minutes. Still, the cloud cover that layered itself over the city wasn't about to relinquish its hold. The muted light that managed to filter downward took on the grey pallor of dusk and oozed in to bring illumination, though not necessarily to brighten the landscape.

I heard my wife rummaging in her pockets as I stared through the windows at a wintry morning in Saint Louis. From where we sat, I could see the upper edge of the city hall parking lot on the opposite side of Clark Avenue. Cars were already filling the spaces as people went about their routines, oblivious to the horror going on behind these walls. To them, Randy Harper was no more than an unnamed victim of an atrocity that had been reduced to a ten-second breaking-story byte—and even that was only for those who actually caught the morning news.

A part of me wanted to be angered by their apathy, but for once this morning logic prevailed, and I knew they couldn't be blamed. Still, it hurt. It was a throwback to the whole “misery loves company” thing. I was in mourning. In my heart, I wanted everyone else to mourn as well.

What pained me even more, however, was the fact that I wasn't entirely certain that Lieutenant Albright was far off the mark in hanging me for the crime. Perhaps I was an unwitting accomplice in some bizarre, convoluted sense of the concept. People were dying; friends were dying. Moreover, for all the horrors I saw in my mind, I was powerless to stop it. In fact, I seemed to be at the center of it.

Felicity was still shuffling around behind me, and I finally heard her soft voice filled with deep concern, “Nancy?”

Silence filled the lobby. Even the argument between Ben and Lieutenant Albright had fallen to a level easily muffled by the walls. I could faintly hear the frantic sobbing coming from the earpiece of the cell phone my wife had to her ear.

“I know, I know...” Felicity murmured. “Is someone with you? Good.”

I closed my eyes and slowly massaged my temples while listening to the local side of the conversation. My wife was possessed of an intense maternal instinct. Ever since we had adopted this young Coven, they had become like foster children to us. In many ways, that feeling ran even deeper for her.

“Aye, I know dear, I know. Put Cally on, then,” she continued. “Cally? How are you making it? Is Nancy okay? Aye... Aye... I know. Have you spoken to anyone else? Aye, that’s good. Gather them. She needs her friends with her. Good. Yes. That’s where we are now...”

I looked back over my shoulder to see my wife nodding gently as she spoke, sadness woven through her pretty face and eyes glistening with tears that she was barely holding back.

“No honey, don’t bring her down here,” she instructed, as the gentle nod of her head became a semi-vigorous shake. “Not yet. She doesn’t need to see him like this.”

I reached over, covered Felicity’s free hand with my own, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. I didn’t envy her at the moment, but I respected her devotion to the Coven and loved her even more for it.

“Aye, make her a strong cup of chamomile and willow bark tea. Aye, keep her grounded, and just listen to her... I know... I know... Yes, Rowan and I will be there as soon as we can... I don’t know, dear, I don’t know... Aye, it’s not good, then... Aye, we’ll see you soon, I promise... Remember—just listen to her... Aye, goodbye.”

The phone issued a forlorn peep when she disconnected, and she sat there mutely staring at the device in her hand. A tear broke loose from the well in the corner of her eye and began rolling slowly down her cheek.

“How is she?” I asked.

“Hysterical,” she answered softly. “Cally is with her.”

“Yeah, I kind of picked that up. What about everyone else?”

“On the way. They’d been contacted by the police already, just like Ben said.”

“Good.” I nodded.

“How did...”

She anticipated the question. “Nancy was out of town on a business trip. Training seminar or something like that, then.”

“Okay.”

“This is wrong, Rowan,” Felicity made a quiet, almost emotionless declaration. “It is just wrong.”

Silence rushed back into the room, filling the void as the words faded out. I squeezed her hand once again and tried to think of something to say but failed. I knew exactly how she felt, but we had fallen out of sync.

At this particular moment, I was shifting out of the early stages of grief and rushing headlong into anger.

CHAPTER 8

“Aye, where are we going?” Felicity asked from the back seat of the van.

Ben hadn't rubbed more than two words together in the same breath since he'd come through the door and into the lobby of the medical examiner's office. The best we'd gotten was a short “come on” coupled with a jerk of his head as he continued past us and out the front doors. He already had the Chevy started and was waiting impatiently for us by the time we caught up with him.

Now, we were heading through the city, him brooding behind the wheel and paying even less attention to traffic signals than usual. The turns he was taking formed no discernable pattern and fell in place with no particular destination I could imagine. The only thing that was obvious was that we were heading away from the M.E.'s office at an accelerated clip. It seemed, very simply, that he couldn't widen the gap between himself and Lieutenant Albright fast enough.

“Dunno,” he muttered in return, keeping with his current trend toward one-word responses and grunts.

Thus far, I'd kept my mouth shut, but I was about to lose what little control over my tongue I had left. Knowing Ben as well as I did, I was fully aware that it was best to just leave him alone when he was like this, and he would open up when he was ready. Right now, I didn't consider that an option. I had more than enough on my mind without piling this on top of it. I felt responsible for whatever had gone on behind those doors, and selfish or not, I didn't have time for that guilt to be getting in my way. I was going to clear this slate, and I was going to do it right now.

“All right, out with it,” I demanded.

My mood was darkening at a thoroughbred's pace; I had already bypassed coldly succinct and moved full bore into rudely abrupt.

“With what?” he shot back without looking in my direction.

“Whatever you've got going on in your head,” I returned. “I know you probably want to yell at me, so just do it and get it over with.”

“What the hell are you talkin' about?” he asked.

“That whole deal back there with Albright,” I pressed. “It's not like we couldn't hear the explosion.”

“If you were listenin' in then what the hell are you goin' on about?”

“Aye,” Felicity interjected, using her voice to drive a wedge between us before the situation could become any more volatile. “We weren't exactly eavesdropping you know. We could hear voices but couldn't make much out, then.”

My wife had placed her hand on my shoulder, and I could feel her acting as a lightning rod, forcing me to discharge at least some of my welling anger.

“Yeah,” he huffed as he released the wheel with one hand and smoothed back his hair before allowing his fingers to come to rest on the back of his neck. “Yeah, I know. Got kinda loud, didn't it?”

“Aye, just a bit,” she agreed.

“So fill us in,” I asked when at least a modicum of calm had crept into my voice.

“Well, I’m not workin’ this case anymore if that’s what you’re askin’.”

“But, do you still have a job?”

“Yeah, for now,” he answered. “But I dunno how long that’ll last.”

“So she didn’t suspend you?” I asked.

“Nahh,” he shook his head as he spoke. “She can’t. Not directly anyway. But, she can pull strings, and you can bet she’s makin’ those calls right now. The other thing she CAN do is kick me off the Major Case Squad, and she did that before I even opened my mouth.”

“I’m sorry, Ben,” I sighed. “Man, I’m so sorry.”

“What’re you apologizin’ for?”

“For doing this to you, of course.” I shook my head. “This wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t been defending me.”

“Is that why you think I wanna yell at ya’? Fuck that.” He screwed up his face and gave me a dismissive wave. “This was just the sprinkles on the icing for her. Albright has had it in for me from the git-go.”

“But...”

“But nothin’, white man.” He cut me off. “You aren’t responsible for this, so give it up.”

“Aye, what if she gets you suspended, then?” Felicity asked.

“Then I get a vacation,” he offered with a shrug.

“Are you sure about that?” I asked.

“At this stage of the game, yeah,” he nodded. “I haven’t done anything to get myself shit-canned yet. Reprimanded, yeah. Transferred, maybe. But it’s nothin’ I can’t live with.”

“Then why did you come out of there so pissed off?” I questioned.

“Hey, Kemosabe, I was in there with Bible Barb. I seem to recall you losin’ it yourself a little earlier. You wanna re-think that question and ask it again?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Besides,” he ventured. “She said some shit about you that really got to me.”

“Like what?”

“No way, man. I’m not gonna repeat it.” He shook his head. “But let’s just say the bitch is lucky I won’t hit a woman.”



“I’m so glad that you’re here,” Cally told Felicity as she hugged her tight. “Nancy’s upstairs in the bedroom. She just fell asleep a few minutes ago.”

“Aye, dear.” My wife returned the embrace and spoke in a comforting tone. “That’s good then.”

We were standing in the entryway to Randy and Nancy Harper’s two-story home on Arkansas, just a block off Grand Avenue in the city. We’d been here several times before when they’d hosted circles for the Coven. Those happier recollections now seemed to dull against the painful sharpness of this new memory in the making.

I glanced around and noticed a small, wheeled suitcase, which was parked at an angle against the wall, pull-handle still extended. It had obviously been forgotten in light of the

current circumstances. In the opposite corner, a bentwood coat tree stood at attention beneath a crush of winter outer garments. Next to the stairs, a small, antique telephone table sat with a pile of mail strewn across its top. A digital answering machine occupied one corner, its green power indicator glowing in the muted light of the hallway. I absently wondered why, at times like this, the normally insignificant things around us would stand out in stark contrast to everything else. Without warning and for no apparent reason, they would become illuminated details in a darkened tableau. It was more than just curious to me. In a sense, it was almost disturbing.

“Oh, Rowan...” Cally let her voice trail off for a moment as she released Felicity and wrapped her arms around me. “The police were just here. They looked around for a while and asked a few questions.”

I gave her a reassuring pat on the back as I returned the hug, feeling her conspicuous anguish connect with my own purposely subdued emotions. “It’s okay, Cally. It’s okay. They have to do their jobs.”

“She’s been asking for both of you,” she told us as she pulled away.

“Aye, we’re here now,” Felicity said. “But let her rest. She’ll be needing it.”

“Everyone else is here,” Cally continued. “They’re in the back.”

“Go ahead.” I nodded to them. “I’ll wait for Ben.”

“Detective Storm?” the young woman asked.

“Aye, he brought us.”

“He’s finding a place to park the van,” I added.

“He’ll be along in a bit,” Felicity told her as she took her arm and guided her back down the hall.

I watched them disappear through a doorway at the end of the corridor, then turned and opened the front door as I heard a familiar voice and shuffling feet on the other side. Ben had just raised his hand to knock as I swung the barrier open and moved to the side.

“How’d you know I was there just now?” he asked as he stepped in through the opening.

“You mean besides the fact that we arrived together?” I asked, not really expecting an answer to the sardonic question.

“Don’t be a smart ass. I mean how’d you know I was there right at that moment? You doin’ that hocus-pocus stuff?”

“Nothing quite so ethereal,” I answered. “I heard you talking.”

He seemed almost disappointed. “Oh. Okay.”

I cast a glance outside before swinging the door shut and noticed a uniformed officer getting back into his patrol car, which was parked on the street in front of the house. Moderately sized flakes of snow were beginning to float down from the grey sky, drifting at ever changing angles on the gusts of cold wind.

“Starting to snow,” I said, announcing the observation for lack of anything better to say.

“Yeah.” Ben nodded as he shrugged off his coat, keeping his voice low. “Gonna get bad out there. They’re callin’ for three to six inches.”

“They were saying just one to two last night.”

“Yeah, well you know how it is,” he answered while looking around the foyer. “Nice digs.”

I took his coat and hung it from an available hook on the dark, bentwood tree, then slipped out of mine and did the same.

“Randy is...” I caught myself and reformed the sentence. “Randy was a real estate agent,” I continued the explanation as I turned back to my friend. “He picked this place up back when property down here was going for pocket change. Gutted it and rehabbed it himself. Kind of like you and Allison did with your place.”

“He did a hell of a job.”

“Yeah. Yeah he did.” I frowned as I nodded. The past tense references were sickening reminders of why we were here.

“So,” Ben spoke after a moment of awkward silence, still keeping his voice at low volume. “How’s she doin’?”

“Nancy?” I raised an eyebrow. “She’s asleep upstairs. Everyone else is in the back.”

“Probably good for ‘er,” he replied.

“Yeah, for now,” I agreed before proceeding into voicing a worrisome thought. “Cally said someone from the department was already here. They aren’t going to descend on this place and turn it into a circus are they?”

“Nahh.” He shook his head. “They shouldn’t anyway. Copper outside said it was Muv from the CSU and Osthoff from Homicide. Matter of fact, we just missed ‘em. They couldn’t find anything though. Looks like Porter didn’t grab him from here.”

“A clue would have been nice,” I said. “But in a way, I’m glad they didn’t find anything. Here anyway. Nancy doesn’t need them crawling all over the house right now.”

“Yeah. Prob’ly not,” he agreed.

“So is the officer outside going to hang around or what?”

“He’s stayin’ put. There’ll be someone assigned to watch these kids ‘round the clock.”

“That’s good.”

“Ya’know, Rowan.” Ben reached up and massaged his neck for a moment. “You once told me that there’s a huge number of Pagans in Saint Louis...”

I gave a vigorous nod as I confronted his unspoken comment. “There are, but I suspect that they will be safe this go around. For now, anyway. Porter is after me personally, and the only reason he killed Randy was to bait me.”

“Yeah, that was kinda obvious. So, I don’t wanna sound crass or anything, but considerin’ your track record, couldn’t he have just killed any Pagan on his list?”

“Yes and no,” I answered.

“You think he’s really plannin’ all this that deliberately?”

“I don’t know. He’s not stupid, Ben. I’m betting he’s done his homework. He knows that re-initiating the spree he went on a year ago would draw me out, but I think he wants more than that.”

“Yeah, he wants you dead, white man.”

“Exactly, but just getting me out of hiding isn’t going to make that happen. He has to get me vulnerable and unprotected.”

The look on his face told me that my comment was merely verbal corroboration for his own theory. “So killin’ Randy was his way of tryin’ to piss you off then. Just like the note about Felicity.”

“And knock me off balance. That’s how I see it, anyway,” I agreed and then continued with an explanation of Coven dynamics. “Groups like ours are literally a family unit within Pagan culture. There is a bond within a core of a Coven that can often times be

stronger than blood relation. Going after any one of these kids is the same as going after one of my own. It's the difference between killing a stranger and killing a family member."

"Yeah," he sighed. "I had a feelin' that's what this was all about. I just wanted to hear it from you before I opened my mouth."

"Glad I could help," I replied, my voice short on emotion.

"You're right," he told me. "He's not stupid. You came after him by yourself once, so he figures he can make it happen again."

"Yeah. Simple as it sounds, I'd have to say that's his plan."

"Well, he's screwed 'cause you ain't gonna do that, white man."

"That remains to be seen."

My friend took on a hard expression and thrust two fingers stiffly against my chest. "That wasn't a question, Row. It was a statement of fact. You're NOT doin' it. Not this time."

"Okay," I returned in order to appease him.

"I'm serious as a heart attack, white man," he detailed, still trying to keep his voice low as it developed a stern edge. "This ain't Hollywood. The sonofabitch wants to kill you."

"Trust me, I'm well aware of that, Ben," I told him.

"Yeah, well we're not talkin' videogame dead here, Row. We're talkin' about the real thing. For keeps."

"Yeah, Ben. I know," I answered, my hackles raising a bit at once again being treated like a child.

He splayed his hands out in a gesture that visibly told me to stop and that it was the end of the discussion. "Listen, don't make me lock your ass up just to keep you outta this."

"Okay, fine," I answered curtly. "You win."

Thick tension hung between us for a measured beat, eventually softening but never really dissipating entirely.

"So is there anyone else we should know about?" Ben finally asked. "Former Coven members? Anyone like that?"

"No, not that I can think of off hand." I shook my head as I ticked off the points. "No one has left this group since Felicity and I adopted it. I've practiced solitary most of my life. And, the only other Coven I was truly a member of dissolved a long time ago."

"Any of the members still around?"

"Not in Saint Louis," I replied. "It was a fairly small group, and we only split because everyone but me ended up moving out of state."

"What about family? Like your old man?"

"He's out of town right now. Besides, he won't go after a non-Pagan. Not intentionally."

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure."

"'Pretty sure' don't cut it." He reached up to massage his neck, and was obviously pondering something. After a moment he seemed to make a decision and spoke again. "Well, if your old man is out of town, we're covered there. What about your sister?"

“Ironically, she’s in Germany right now. Her husband is stationed there with the Army.”

“Okay, well I think we should have someone keep an eye on Felicity’s family just to be safe.”

“Shamus will love that,” I muttered sarcastically.

My wife’s father was not exactly what you would call a big fan of mine. Truth was, he believed that I had corrupted his daughter and diverted her from Christianity. He refused to take into account that she was already walking a Pagan path when I met her. At any rate, my dealings with the Major Case Squad investigating occult-related crimes were nothing less than fuel for his disdain. This would just stoke that fire.

“Yeah, well he’ll just have to live with it,” Ben returned.

The muffled but cheerful warble of a ring tone started behind me, and my friend reached around to his coat and searched through a pocket. I stepped to the side as he withdrew his cell phone, quickly perused the display, then stabbed it on and stuck it to his ear.

“Yeah, Helen, thanks for calling back,” he spoke into the device.

The name struck a chord, and I knew immediately that the individual at the other end had to be his sister, Helen Storm. She was a psychiatrist and probably one of the most understanding individuals I had ever met. Ben had talked me into making an appointment with her just recently when the nightmares about the horrors I had seen started becoming too much to handle. I had made that first visit under duress but quickly struck up a friendship with her.

Unlike her brother, Helen fully embraced her Native American heritage. While I was never able to pin her down on anything, something told me there was more to the woman than just the framed diploma on her wall—something mystical, in fact.

“Uh-huh, I’m afraid so,” Ben continued. “Yeah, that was us. They didn’t waste any time gettin’ it on the air, did they?... Yeah, I know... No, he’s okay. For the time being anyway... Yeah... Well, he’s in the middle of it whether I like it or not, so there’s not a lot I can do... Uh-huh, that’s what I’m thinkin’... Yeah... Uh-huh... So, what’s your schedule lookin’ like today? Any chance you could come over?... That’d be great... Yeah... In the city, on Arkansas. ‘Bout a block off Grand... I can give ya’ directions... Okay, lemme check...”

My friend twisted the phone away from his mouth and shot me a questioning look. “She wants to know if Nancy is gonna be okay with havin’ a shrink show up? Whaddaya think?”

I started to open my mouth to answer but never got that far. My lips froze as I shuddered, every nerve ending in my body jangling as though each was connected directly to an electrical wall socket. The involuntary jerking motion was immediately joined by an excruciating pain that lanced sharply through my head. The rush of blood in my ears rose and fell, only to be replaced suddenly by the violent sound of a horrified scream.

The muted light in the entryway strobed to unbearable brightness then collapsed in on itself. Color faded, leaving the scene before me a grainy black and white representation of its former self, depicted in overblown cartoon contrast.

I heard my friend’s concerned voice call my name in a long, slow-motion drone as I began physically slipping downward.

My knees announced their displeasure with the situation as they thudded on the hardwood, and I continued to literally vibrate. I could feel my fingernails cutting into my palms as my hands involuntarily twisted into clawed fists. I was gnashing my teeth, and I could taste blood in my mouth from where I was repeatedly biting my tongue.

However, at this particular moment, any concerns I had for those problems gave way to the fact that the floor was now slamming itself hard against my face.

CHAPTER 9

I wasn't sure what the noise echoing in my head actually was. It was struggling to be heard over the blood rushing in my ears, which in and of itself, was already in heated contention with an unnatural ringing sound that permeated my skull. At any rate, my violently distorted thought processes attempted to assign a familiarity to it.

One possibility presented itself as the rumble of a weak earthquake. Another was that it was a small explosion. There were several others, but in retrospect, those two were the only ones that came close to anything even remotely possible. What I later found out was that it hadn't been any of the above. In reality, what it had been were the frantic steps of several feet thudding against the hardwood flooring as everyone ran to the front of the house.

Right now, however, as far as my brain was concerned it was an unsolvable and very perplexing mystery. The vibration rolled toward me down the hallway, growing in intensity as it traveled through the polished surface. Upon reaching me, it joined with my cheek, made its way inward through some bizarre osmosis, and reverberated throughout my skull. The final effect was that of turning the sound into a tactile sensation as much as an auditory one.

I could feel myself being rolled over as my back arched and my muscles stiffened once again. Pain I can only describe as a full body leg cramp assaulted me, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. The physical sensation was accompanied by an elevation in my mental confusion—an elevation a full order of magnitude beyond anything I had experienced thus far.

In that moment, the source of the noise no longer mattered.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the seizure reached its zenith then plunged immediately to an anticlimactic end. My body fell limp, and the hot air that had been trapped in my lungs expelled in a violent rush. I wheezed loudly as I sucked in a fresh breath, at once gasping and then choking on the coolness.

Light flared in a kaleidoscope of colors and then slowly began fading back to muted normalcy. A tangle of voices competed for attention as my short-circuited neurons reset and began processing sensory input once again. Heavily contrasted shapes were moving around me, and I struggled to focus in on them.

“Rowan?” Ben’s voice bled in behind the rapidly declining rush in my ears. “Rowan? You okay?”

Felicity’s concerned tone mixed in with his. “What happened? Ben? Rowan?”

“Is he okay?” Cally was asking from somewhere above me.

A male voice I recognized as R.J. weaved its way between the others. “What’s going on?”

“Oh no...” Shari’s voice began a different sentence.

“...is he okay?” Her twin sister Jennifer finished it.

I was surprised that I was able to understand any of the words, much less make any sense of them, considering that they were all speaking at once. However, I was at least

able to pick out those few fragments. I blinked hard and willed my eyes to adjust to the dim light of the hallway. It still seemed darker than it had before the seizure had overtaken me, but as clarity returned, I found myself staring at the reason.

Everyone but Nancy was huddled in a tight circle above my prone body, blocking out what little illumination there was within the corridor. I felt a quick wave of claustrophobia but managed to suppress it as I focused on their faces.

“Rowan, are you okay? What just happened?” came Ben’s voice once again, firing the words in a rapid staccato.

“I’ve fallen and I can’t get up?” I croaked the first thing that popped into my head. My tongue was filled with a series of sharp pains, and I took notice of the fact that when I spoke my pronunciation was thick and blunted.

“Jeez, Row,” my friend admonished as he screwed up his face. “This ain’t the time to be crackin’ jokes. What’s goin’ on here?”

“Aye,” Felicity added. “Ben’s right.”

“Thorry,” I told them as I pushed myself up on one elbow and used my other hand to massage my jaw where it had impacted the floor.

I opened my mouth and touched my fingertips to the end of my tongue. When I pulled my hand away, it was wet with saliva-diluted blood.

“You’re bleeding,” Cally gasped.

“I think I bith my tongue,” I said.

“Yeah, no kiddin’,” Ben spoke again as he offered me his hand. “That still doesn’t explain what just happened.”

“I donth know,” I answered as I gripped his forearm. “Buth I think I know whath an epileptic seizure feelth like now, and ith not pleathant.”

Everyone in the group shuffled back as I stood. I didn’t have to exert myself much as Ben did most of the work, levering me upward with a steady pull. Felicity stepped forward the moment I was upright and touched her hand carefully to my face, moving it from side to side as she inspected it. I wasn’t sure, but I thought I heard a frantic voice calling out in the distance. I listened hard, but my ears were met only by the ambient noise of the house.

“Was it some kinda *Twilight Zone* thing?” my friend asked.

“I donth know. Maybe. Probably.”

“Well shit, white man, what DO you know?”

“I know my fathe hurths.”

“I’m not surprised,” he returned. “You tried to dent the floor with it a minute ago.”

“Aye, into the bathroom with you then,” Felicity ordered with a slight nudge then directed her attention to the others as she assumed command. “Shari, do me a favor and grab some salt and a glass from the kitchen, please. Cally, you go check on Nancy. The commotion may have disturbed her, and she shouldn’t be alone if she’s awake. The rest of you go on back to the dining room, and I’ll see to Rowan.”

“I’m fthine,” I objected.

“Aye, so you say, but I’ll be the judge of that, Rowan Linden Gant,” she returned.

“So, was it one of those visions or something?” Ben threw out the question.

“In a minute, Ben,” Felicity instructed him as she made a shooping motion with her hand. “Let him at least rinse his mouth out with some salt water, then. Go ahead with everyone else, and we’ll be along shortly.”

The group split apart, and Cally headed up the stairs. Shari hurried several steps ahead of the rest of us on her way to the kitchen at the back of the house. As Felicity took my arm and started guiding me along, I heard the faint voice again. This time, I could actually make out the words, and unless I was mistaken, the disembodied vocalization was calling Ben's name.

"Didth you hear that?" I asked as I halted and cocked my head sideways.

Felicity continued for a half step past my sudden stop, then looked at me. "Aye, hear what?"

Again, tinny words floated into the air, "Helllloooo! Benjamin! Talk to me!..."

I slowly turned back to my friend who was bringing up the rear. Without a doubt, the sound was coming from his direction.

A look of embarrassed realization washed across his features as he stared back at me then down at his hand and muttered, "Dammit."

I followed his gaze then gave him the answer to his earlier question. "Thtell her I think ith'll be fine."

As Felicity and I continued down the hall, he had his cell phone pressed against his ear and was both apologizing to Helen and explaining what had just transpired.



I spit a mouthful of salt water into the washbasin for the fifth time. The first go around it had been bright red, but this time it had only a slight pinkish tinge. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand then poured the rest of the solution down the drain and twisted on the faucet. After rinsing out the basin and washing my hands, I took a seat on the closed lid of the toilet.

Felicity offered me a hand towel, and I took it. She reached up and pulled the free strands of her hair away from her eyes as she stood over me and inspected my face once again. With extreme care, she tenderly pressed the tips of her fingers around my cheekbone until she hit a spot where I winced noticeably.

"Aye, nothing broken, but you're going to have a bruise," she announced as she cocked her head to one side. "Tongue."

"What?" I asked.

"Show me your tongue, then," she directed.

I opened my mouth and did as she told me; I knew it wouldn't get me anywhere to argue. She leaned a bit closer and squinted for a moment then nodded. I closed my mouth and peered back at her.

"So, what's the verdict, 'Doc O'Brien'?"

"You chewed on it pretty good, that you did," she answered. "Still bleeding a bit, but not too bad."

"Yeah. I figured as much."

"Your speech has cleared up."

"That's a plus."

"Aye, it is. So what did happen out there?"

"Like I told Ben." I shook my head as I spoke, "I don't know. It just hit me out of nowhere."

She took a step back and crossed her arms, regarding me silently for a long moment before speaking again. "So, are you thinking it might have been Randy trying to communicate with you?"

"Don't know. Maybe," I answered. "There was that whole thing back at the M.E.'s office."

"Aye, I wondered about that."

"You and me both."

"What really bothers me is that you still seem to be well-grounded, then. You shouldn't be affected this way."

"You won't get any argument from me there. This is kind of weird too. Usually I 'see' something or get sucked into an empathic experience; even if it is usually pretty obscure."

"So?"

"So there's been none of that this time. Just a nondescript scream and now this seizure thing."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you think it's something else then?"

I shrugged. "Believe me, I'm just as confused by this as you."

"Aye, but remember, you did start out with one of those headaches this morning."

I nodded. "Yeah, I did."

"Did you have any nightmares to go with it?"

"Never really got to sleep." I shook my head. "So there was never much of a chance for one."

"How is that, by the way?"

"What, the headache?"

"Aye."

"No better I'm afraid. Actually, a bit worse I think."

She stepped forward and swung open the right side of a tri-fold mirror over the sink. After a quick glance, she closed it and moved on to the center. A moment later, she was twisting the cap from a plastic bottle and shaking some of the contents into her hand. She tilted the container back and let the pills rattle back into it, deftly retaining three rust-colored tablets in her palm. She shoved the heavy dose of ibuprofen into my hand then filled a glass halfway with water and held it out to me.

"Go ahead, then, take them."

"You know this won't do anything for this kind of headache," I said in a puzzled tone.

"Aye, that I do." She closed her eyes as she nodded. "But they aren't for that. They're for your face. It will be hurting soon enough, and you don't need that on top of the headache."

"Oh, yeah, okay."

I popped the trio of pain pills into my mouth and took the glass of water from her. Unfortunately, the medicine was only midway down my throat when, for the fourth time this morning, a bloodcurdling scream pierced my skull.

CHAPTER 10

The ibuprofen tablets lodged sideways in my throat as I involuntarily jerked at the sound. I sputtered and gagged for a moment, then thumped my chest hard with my free hand, forcing the lump of pills to continue along their way. With a quick gasp, I wheezed in a lungful of air. My eyes were watering, and I coughed to expel the water that had ventured down the wrong pipe.

I looked up, fully expecting Felicity to be gazing back at me and wondering why I was suddenly choking. Instead, I found that she was wearing just as startled an expression as I'm sure was plastered to my features. On top of that, she was looking toward the open door. Before either of us could utter a word, a second cry echoed through the house sounding vaguely like the word "no." As it faded, it became an anguished sob, supported on all sides by sympathetic words uttered softly by a second voice.

"Aye, that would be Nancy, I'm afraid." Felicity turned to me and spoke in a hurried voice as she rested a hand on my shoulder, "Are you okay, then?"

The earlier stampede was already being repeated as everyone came back up the hallway, passing by the bathroom on the way.

"I'm good," I choked out as I coughed once again. I was still sitting on the toilet lid and leaning against the washbasin. I motioned at the door with one hand. "Go. I'll be along in a minute."

I didn't have to tell her twice. In fact, she was already moving in the direction of the doorway as I answered her. I watched her go and then pushed myself upward. My muscles were already feeling the leading edge of soreness from the convulsive attack they'd endured. I rinsed out the glass and set it to the side before taking a handful of the cold water running from the tap and gingerly splashing my face. I lingered for a moment at my eyes, letting the coolness soak in as I rubbed. They felt tired and gritty, and that was only one of the many unpleasant sensations coursing through me.

I dried my face with the hand towel and stood for a moment, my expressionless countenance staring back at me from the vanity mirror. My cheek was already swelling noticeably, and my eyes were bloodshot. I desperately needed a shave, and my goatee could have stood a trim as well. It seemed as though every time I looked into a mirror lately I would see just that many more grey hairs.

"Hell gettin' old, ain't it?" Ben's quiet voice came from behind me as he voiced the observation.

I glanced over my shoulder at him then back to the mirror. "Do you need to get in here?"

"Nah," he replied. "Just checkin' on you."

"Old," I muttered with a sigh as I gazed back at my less than flattering reflection. "I'd be inclined to agree with you, but the problem is, according to my driver's license I'm only forty."

"It's not the years, Kemosabe..."

I finished the cliché bromide for him. "...It's the mileage. Yeah, I know."

“Cheer up. You got a few left in ya’, white man,” he said.

“I don’t know, Ben. I’m feeling like a bad re-tread right now.”

“So, like maybe you need to do that groundin’ thing you and Felicity are always talkin’ about,” he offered. “Ya’know, so the creepin’ ooga-boogas can’t fuck with ya’ so much.”

“That’s the other problem,” I said. “I’m already doing that.”

“For real? You ain’t just sayin’ that to get me off your ass?”

I guess I’d lied to him about my condition too many times for him to take my word for it right off the bat.

“Yeah, for real. You can ask Felicity if you want.”

He pondered my answer for a moment before speaking. “So, that’s not a good thing then, huh?”

“No.” I shook my head. “No, it’s not.”

“So, whaddaya gonna do about it?”

I tucked the hand towel across the bar on the wall then turned to face him and leaned back against the vanity. “I don’t know,” I told him as I shrugged. “I haven’t figured that out yet.”

“Can’t you cook up a potion or wear some garlic around your neck or *somethin’*?”

“What was that you told me earlier?” I answered. “I think it was, ‘you’ve been watching too much TV.’ Besides, garlic is for warding off vampires.”

“Does it work?” He grinned back at me.

I couldn’t help but allow myself a small chuckle. “I don’t know, Chief. I’ve never met one.”

The sobbing noises that were filtering down the corridor had diminished for the moment. They had actually been sliding up and down the scale ever since they began, and this appeared to be one of the low points. More soft voices, including the unmistakable Celtic brogue of my wife, could be heard joining the first in an attempt to shore up the explosion of grief. I needed to get out there myself, but I didn’t know that I was ready to face it; not quite yet, anyway. I felt a bit selfish, hiding away and wallowing in my own problems, but there was far more to this than just Randy’s death. And, since I was at the center of it, I was bearing a disproportionate load that was getting heavier all the time.

A small tickle had been working on the back of my head for a good part of the morning, and it was now resurfacing. This time it bypassed its normal annoyance stage and leapt directly into a nagging question.

I furrowed my brow and pursed my lips for a moment as I mulled the query over. I wasn’t entirely sure why it mattered, but for some reason it was begging an answer.

“You got that look,” Ben announced.

“Excuse me?”

“You know, that look like you’re confused about somethin’.”

“Maybe a little puzzled.”

“Okay, so spit it out.”

“I don’t really know if it’s important.”

“Yeah, so spit it out anyway.”

“Okay. You wouldn’t happen to know where Porter is originally from would you?”

“Not off the top of my head, why?”

“Because of some of the choices he’s made lately,” I explained. “Using the page from *Hexen und Hexenmeister* for one. The nail for another.”

“I thought the nail was pretty obvious,” he said.

“On the surface, yes, but he could have guaranteed that we could ID the body in a lot of other ways. The nail has symbolism of its own...” I let my voice trail off.

After a moment, Ben spoke up. “Okay, so you wanna enlighten us mortals?”

I was so caught up in pondering the query that I just gave him an offhanded answer. “Witches aren’t immortal, Ben.”

“Yeah, whatever. You wanna fill me in please? What about the nail?”

“What?”

“The nail, Rowan. You’re obsessin’ about the nail, and I’m kinda lost.”

At some point while I was staring off into space, he had retrieved his notebook from his pocket, and he now appeared poised to record any pearl of wisdom I may utter. I was afraid he was about to be disappointed by a cheap, plastic imitation.

“Oh, that. Nails are a major component of Witch jars and have been long thought by certain cultures to act as a deterrent to magickal forces and WitchCraft. Kind of a protective talisman of sorts.”

“Do I wanna know what a Witch jar is?”

I shrugged. “It’s just a version of the talisman. I can give you details if you want them.”

“Is it important?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t seem to know a lot today.”

My reply was laced with sarcasm. “Thanks a lot.”

“Just an observation.” He shrugged then continued. “Okay, so anyway, two plus two equals what? Thirty-seven?”

I furrowed my brow deeper and shook my head. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m tryin’ to figure out where you’re headed with this. You’re just talkin’ about nails and the Hex Meister book. What’s that got to do with where Porter comes from?”

“Like I said, the whole nail mythology fits in very well with particular cultures, such as the Pennsylvania Dutch. Add in the book which is German...”

The distance-muted jangle of a telephone floated down the corridor and came to us through the doorway.

“So what you’re sayin’ is that you think Porter might be from Pennsylvania.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. It’s just a thought.”

“And it tells us what?”

“That’s what is puzzling me. I don’t know.”

“I see.” He flipped his notebook shut with a frown and stuffed it back into his pocket. “Well that was a waste of time.”

“Cut me some slack, will you, Ben,” I stated. “You’re the one who asked.”

He held up his hands. “Yeah, yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry. It’s been a long one for all of us I guess.”

I heard R.J. pick up the phone on the fourth ring and answer it with a solemn “Harper residence.”

Ben glanced up the hallway from his position leaning against the doorframe of the bathroom, then looked back at me, and cocked his head toward the front of the house.

“Looks like they’re gettin’ ready to bring ‘er back this way,” he told me. “Guess we’d better make an appearance.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “You’re right.”

“Hey, Rowan.” A young man with long dark hair poked his head around the side of the door. “How are you doing?”

“I’m okay, R.J.,” I told him with a slight smile.

“Good,” he nodded quickly. “So, like, the phone’s for you.”

“For me?” I asked, “Who is it?”

“I didn’t catch his name, but he said he was a cop.” He shrugged. “He just asked if he could speak to Rowan Gant.”

“I’m with Ben already. Why would the police be calling me here?” I puzzled.

“Albright’s probably got a copper checkin’ up on you,” Ben offered. “It’d be just like her.”

“Great.” I rolled my eyes. “Just what I need. Okay, R.J., I’ll be right there.”

“Kay.”

The young man disappeared behind the wall, and we heard him moving back up the hallway.

“Be just your luck she’ll get on the phone and start chewin’ on you again,” my friend offered.

“This wouldn’t be a good time for that,” I returned.

“Hey, at least I warmed her up for you.”

“Thanks, Ben,” I said with something nearing good-natured sarcasm rimming my voice. “Thanks ever so much.”



Everyone had moved back into the dining room before I ventured into the corridor and made my way to the front of the house. Ben tagged along behind me, ostensibly to lend some moral support if I was about to be verbally worked over by Albright yet again.

My left shoulder was beginning to ache, and the pain was going out of its way to make itself known. I’d had trouble with the joint ever since Porter had rammed an ice pick into it that night on the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge, especially when I was faced with a change in the weather like today. Not to mention, bouncing it from the doorframe on Ben’s van had only served to aggravate the old injury. I took a moment to rotate it in the socket and felt a grating pop, which just made it worse. I winced and hoped the ibuprofen would be kicking in soon.

“You okay?” Ben asked.

“Shoulder,” I told him.

He nodded then leaned his back against the wall opposite me. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“Uh-huh,” I grunted. “I’ll get you back.”

“So, don’t worry too much,” he continued, keeping his voice low. “If they want you to come in, I’ll go with ya’.”

I nodded acknowledgement back at him as I picked up the handset from the telephone table and pressed it against my ear. “Hello. This is Rowan Gant.”

I was greeted with the hollow sound of static that told me the phone was definitely off hook at the other end, but there was nothing else. For a moment, I thought that I might have been placed on hold. However, as I listened I was certain that I could hear the thready sound of breathing intertwined with the semi-silence issuing from the earpiece.

“Hello?” I spoke again. “Anyone there?”

“You must excuse me,” a painfully familiar voice returned. “It is not every day that I speak with the spawn of Satan.”

To read the rest of the story
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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

While the city of St. Louis and its various notable landmarks are certainly real, many names have been changed and some minor liberties taken with some of the details in these stories. In an instance or two, they are fabrications, such as the existence of a coffee shop/diner across the street from the Metropolitan Saint Louis Police Headquarters. These anomalies are pieces of fiction within fiction to create an illusion of reality to be experienced and enjoyed.

In short, I made them up because it helped me make the story more entertaining, or in some cases, just because I wanted to. After all, this is *my* fictional version of Saint Louis.

And since we are talking about *fiction*, please note that this book is *not intended* as a primer or guide for WitchCraft, Wicca, or *any* Pagan path. It is important to mention that the vast majority of rituals, spells, and explanations of these religious, spiritual, and “magickal” practices used in these works are, in point of fact, drawn from actual Neo-Paganism – *but they are not tied to any one specific tradition or path*. The mixture of practices engaged in by the characters in these novels is often referred to as “Eclectic Paganism” and “Eclectic WitchCraft,” being that they borrow from *many different religious paths and traditions across the full gamut of spirituality* in order to create their own. Therefore, some of the explanations included herein will not work for all Pagan traditions, of which there are countless. This does not make them *wrong*, it simply makes them *different*.

If you are actually seeking in-depth information on the subject of Paganism and WitchCraft, there are numerous **Non-Fiction**, scholarly texts readily available by authors such as Margot Adler, Raymond Buckland, Scott Cunningham, and more.

Also, remember that the “magick,” and of course, the psychic abilities depicted here are what some might call “over the top,” because it doesn’t really work like that, as we all know. But, like I have been saying all along, this is *fiction*. Relax and enjoy it for what it is...

Finally, if you are saying, “I’ll bet he had to write this note because someone took these stories way too seriously,” give yourself a cigar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would be sorely remiss if I didn't take a moment to thank at least a few of the individuals who were there to act as my sounding boards and as my moral support staff throughout the creation of these novels—

As this series has been ongoing for more than a dozen years, the list has grown, with specific mentions for specific novels. With this being a collection of the first three books, that list could be endless. In the interest of brevity, there are the usual suspects who have been there from day one – *or close to it* – and have remained with me throughout...

Sergeant Scott Ruddle, Metropolitan Saint Louis PD

Scott “Chunkee” McCoy

Johnathan Minton

Duane Marshall

My Wife

My Daughter

Anastasia “Missus Loota-Chack” Luettecke

Mike Luettecke

Daystar

Countless others

And Coffee...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A member of the [ITW](#) (International Thriller Writers), M. R. Sellars is a relatively unassuming homebody who considers himself just a “guy with a lot of nightmares and a word processing program.” His first full-length novel, Harm None, hit bookstore shelves in 2000 and he hasn’t stopped writing since.

All of the current novels in Sellars’ continuing Rowan Gant Investigations saga have spent several consecutive weeks on numerous bookstore bestseller lists as well as a consistent showing on the Amazon.com Horror/Occult top 100. In 2010, a short spinoff novella titled MERRIE AXEMAS, and featuring one the supporting characters from the Gant novels, spawned an new series centered on Special Agent Constance Mandalay.

Sellars currently resides in the Midwest with his wife, daughter, and a pair of rescued male felines that he describes as, “the competition.” At home, when not writing or taking care of the household, he indulges his passions for cooking and chasing his wife around the house. She promises that one day she will allow him to catch her.

M. R. Sellars can be found on the web at:

www.mrsellars.com

And on major social networking venues...

BOOKS BY M. R. SELLARS

Series novels listed in order of release

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CRONE'S MOON
LOVE IS THE BOND
ALL ACTS OF PLEASURE
THE END OF DESIRE
BLOOD MOON
MIRANDA

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