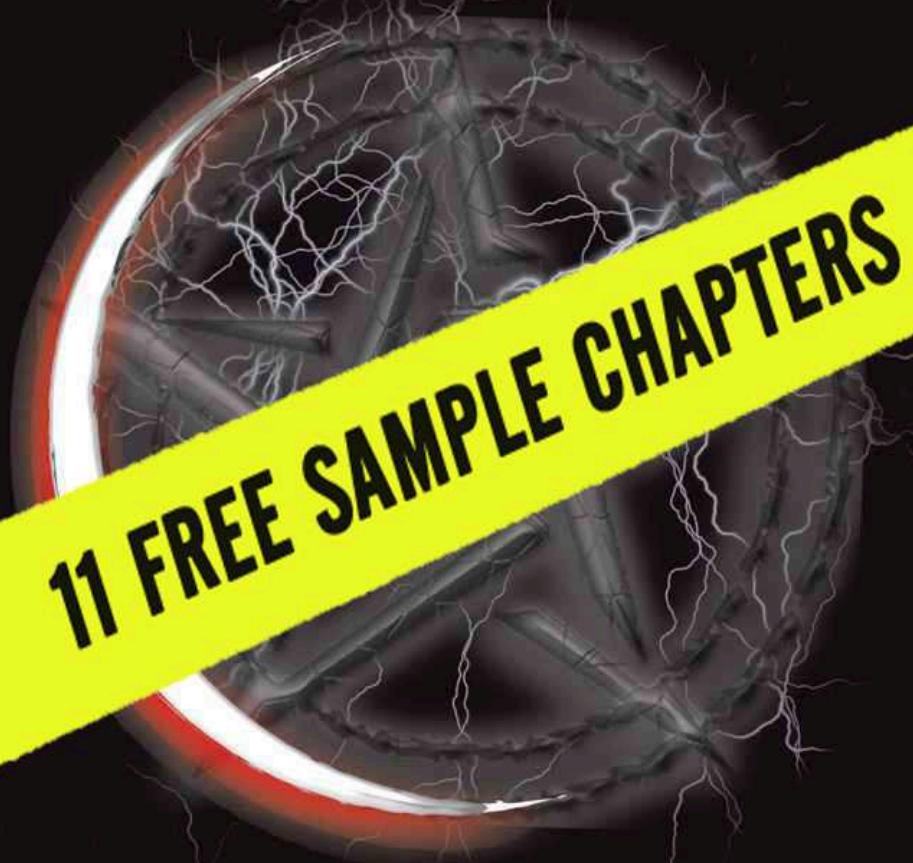


CRONE'S MOON

A Rowan Gant Investigation

A glowing sphere with a red ring around its equator, set against a dark background. The sphere is covered in intricate, branching patterns resembling lightning or a complex network. A bright yellow diagonal banner cuts across the sphere.

11 FREE SAMPLE CHAPTERS

M. R. SELLARS

CRONE'S MOON

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

11 FREE SAMPLE CHAPTERS

An Occult Thriller Novel

By
M. R. Sellars

E. M. A. Mysteries

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental, except as noted.

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CRONE'S MOON: A Rowan Gant Investigation

An E.M.A. Mysteries CHAPTER SAMPLER

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WillowTree Press E-Book Edition – 2012

For my father,

M. R. Sellars, *Senior*

If, in my lifetime, I am able to be
even half the man you were in yours,
I will truly have accomplished something.

When the moon is high and new,
kiss your hand to her times two.

When the moon rides at her peak,
then your hearts desire seek.

*When the moon turns to the Crone,
in Saint Louis, don't walk alone...*

Couplets #5-6

The Wiccan Rede

Lady Gwen Thompson, First Printing, Green Egg #69, Circa 1975

Couplet # 7 as written by Rev. Duane Marshall, 2004

Thursday, January 10
Three days prior to the new moon
10:00 A.M.
North of Granite City, Illinois

PROLOGUE

Her jaw is hurting.

It isn't the only part of her body that is aching by far, but at the moment, it is in the forefront of her mind. She can tell she has been grinding her teeth. There is no doubt about it, because she always does when she sleeps.

Bruxism, that's what her dentist calls it. Pain, that's what she calls it; especially right now. She has a plastic mouth guard she sleeps with that is specially designed just for the affliction, and it helps; but, she knows that considering the amount of pain she is experiencing and the fact that she can't feel it in her mouth that the appliance must not be here.

Thinking about it doesn't help much.

She is beginning to take notice of the laundry list of aches plaguing her body. Her head, her chest, her wrists, her ankles... hell, there isn't an inch of her that doesn't hurt. There are just some parts that are screaming louder than the others.

She starts to move, then flashes on a distant memory. She's not supposed to move? She shouldn't move? She can't move? She tries anyway and finds that option three is apparently the winner. She doesn't know why she can't move, but she decides not to think about it. It just seems easier not to.

It is odd to her that she can remember the word bruxism, but for some unknown reason she can't recall much else. She has no idea how long she has been here. A day? A week? A month? No clue. But what does it matter? She doesn't know where 'here' is.

Come to think of it, she doesn't even know WHO she is. Confusion seems to be the order of business, and she has absolutely no idea why. The only thing she knows for certain is that it is dark, cold, smells odd, and she is hurting.

She lets out a sudden whimper as a glut of visceral fear gives her stomach a hard twist. She has no idea where it is coming from, but it blindsides her. The terror starts winding its way up from her gut, driving along her spine, and rushes into her brain. She catches her breath as the flush of warmth spreads over her face. She thinks she is going to vomit and swallows hard. She feels a wet tear streaming across her cheek.

A moment later, the fear passes with the same urgency and no more warning than when it had attacked. Again, it seems easier to just forget than to try analyzing it. The question 'why' seems so moot.

She decides to move.

"Oh, that's right," she thinks to herself. "I can't move."

She wriggles her hands, but that only serves to make her wrists hurt more. She tries to move her feet and they hurt too, but there is something more.

She moves her feet again and hears the splashing sound of water. She can feel it against her skin, but it isn't the soothing sensation one would expect. It actually feels as if her feet have been soaking for days.

"Why are my feet in water?" she wonders to herself and then answers the query within the same stream of thought. "Good question. Where am I again?"

She moves her feet and listens closely. Other than the sound of the water, it is quiet.

It's almost too quiet.

She doesn't like that at all. She wishes it wasn't so still. It can't be this quiet.

She stops moving and listens.

Distant footsteps.

Heavy. Deliberate.

She's not so sure she likes that sound any more than the quiet. But she keeps listening.

She feels the fear welling in the pit of her stomach once again and tries to focus on something else.

"Who am I?" she wonders aloud in a barely audible whisper.

Her brain feels scrambled, and even the past few moments seem like a washed out memory from another lifetime. She forces herself to concentrate and begins whispering whatever she can grasp from the disjointed thoughts.

"T..."

"Tee?"

"Tuh?"

"Tay?"

"Two?"

"Two, what?" she wonders.

"Two. Two times one is two. Two times two is four. Two times three is six. Two times four is twelve... Twelve? That's right isn't it? Of course it is. Two times four is twelve. Two times twelve is sixteen... Wait... Sixteen? No... Wait... I'll start over. Two times two is eleven... No, that's not right... What was it I was trying to remember again?"

She gives up. It doesn't seem worth it.

She notices that her mouth tastes funny—strangely metallic.

"That's weird," she murmurs. "Hmph. I can remember what metal is, so why can't I remember what time it is? It sure is dark. Maybe that's why. There's that sound again. Like a motor or something. I wonder what it is?"

The sound grows louder for a moment as a dim light falls across the floor in an ever-widening swath. The luminance chases away just enough of the darkness for her to see the grey concrete floor. A pair of heavy black lines snakes across the filthy surface. She doesn't know what they are, but there seems to be a familiarity about them. She thinks she should know what it is, but she just can't make the connection in her befuddled mind.

Familiar or not, she knows for sure that she doesn't like the look of them.

She hears a low creak of hinges that are in desperate need of oil, and the faint light slowly disappears as the motor-like sound is muffled once again.

A noise comes from above and behind her, and she immediately identifies it. The heavy footsteps are back, but now they are loud. They begin descending into the darkness, coming closer with each deliberate thump.

The cold terror returns, and this time it doesn't go away.

Friday, June 7

Three days prior to the New Moon

7:32 A.M.

St. Louis, Missouri

The television set tossed light out into the room as the picture flickered and changed. The logo of the news station sat prominently in the corner, proudly displaying the network affiliation along with the current time.

It was 7:32 in the morning.

The picture suddenly switched to a shifting, bright background overlaid with an artistic shot of a hovering helicopter, complete with the slow motion blur of its rotors blending into the gradient of colors. The words **BREAKING NEWS** slashed in bold letters across the screen, and a fanfare of syncopated beats underscored the image.

The screen switched again to a fresh-faced, young reporter holding a logo-adorned microphone. Behind him was a lush scene; leafy trees and dense vegetation disappearing into the unfocused depth of field. It was immediately obvious that he was in a rural or wooded area somewhere.

As he held one hand to his ear, presumably listening in for a cue, he began to speak.

“Thank you Chloe and Russ, I’m on the scene at Rafferty Park overlooking the Missouri River where last evening a jogger made a gruesome discovery. Mike Rickman was coming down this path when he stumbled upon what appeared to be a badly decomposed human arm.

“Authorities were called to the scene and after a thorough search have confirmed finding more remains in a shallow grave well off the path.

“While there has been no confirmation as yet, there has been speculation that the body may be that of Tamara Linwood, the grade school teacher who disappeared from the parking lot of Westview Shopping Mall back in January of...”

The man watching this particular television set this morning might have had an interest in the story had he been able to hear or see it. Unfortunately, he was sprawled on the hardwood floor; face down in a puddle of coffee where his cup had shattered.

He convulsed and postured as the sudden seizure ravaged his body, forcing him to bite his tongue and writhe as if holding the bare end of a live extension cord.

CHAPTER 1

My tongue felt like someone had taken hold of it with a meat-tenderizing mallet or some other equally heinous implement of destruction. Whatever it was that had happened, at the moment, the salty tang of blood was effectively presenting its unmistakable flavor to the few taste buds that remained intact.

My head was throbbing too. Well, maybe not so much throbbing as imploding and exploding all at once. I knew full well that such was a literal impossibility, of course; even so, that was what it felt like all the same. It didn't take long for me to realize that trying to think about it too hard made it hurt just that much worse, so I accepted my brain's knee-jerk comparison as a cold fact and left it at that.

Additional sensations began sneaking in through the tiny fissures in the pain that was hammering my skull; each of them petitioning to be heard, felt, and otherwise experienced to the fullest. Unfortunately, none of those sensations were any more pleasant than the one occupying center stage at the moment.

Given my current inventory of pains, the only somewhat neutral feeling I could identify was linked directly to the right side of my face. In fact, at this very moment, my cheek was reporting back to me that it was firmly pressed against something hard. What that something was, I had no idea, but it was definitely hard... And if my inner ears weren't deceiving me, it was horizontal... Not to mention wet. Overall, it was not an exceptionally painful feeling, but it was most certainly uncomfortable. Still, combining the uncomfortable with the excruciating and then multiplying it by a healthy measure of confusion— well, when you did the math, it all pretty much took on the same properties, none of which could be considered any more desirable than any of the others.

I wondered for a moment if the wet portion of the present feeling was, in part, the blood I thought I tasted. It seemed logical: it was wet, warm, and in the vicinity of my face. Unfortunately, I was forced to abandon the whole idea with urgent haste in order to escape the sharp stab of pain in my skull that the simple act of wondering about it had invoked. Apparently, at this particular moment, my brain wasn't much interested in logic or anything else for that matter.

Between throbs, I noticed that my forehead felt cold. Not just cool but actually flat-out, ice pack cold. It was the only portion of my head that wasn't embroiled in pain at the moment, but judging from the sensation it was announcing to me, that might only have been because it was well on its way to numb. Of course, it hurt to think about that too.

It occurred to me that there was something else just as disturbing as the pain. A pair of something's actually: One, I had no idea what had happened to me in order to bring about this level of agony; and two, I didn't know where I was. If I actually knew the answers to the two questions, I couldn't remember them, and that wasn't good either. I briefly considered the idea that I might be able to obtain one of the answers simply by opening my eyes. However, considering and doing are two different things entirely, and it seemed my eyelids weren't listening to my brain right at this moment.

My vision wasn't the only sense that was nullified either. Up to this point, my auditory nerves had apparently been on vacation somewhere in the land of white noise, as all I seemed to be hearing was a nondescript roar in my ears. The good news was that they now returned from their sabbatical, in a manner much like a radio being switched on and the volume being turned slowly upward. A distant voice began echoing down the hollow tunnel that was my hearing, and even though the simple act of concentrating brought with it an overtone of pain, I strained to make out the words.

The voice sounded male, young, somewhat tinny, and was coming across as no more than a garble of meaningless syllables. The distorted edge of the voice competed for my attention through the warbling hum that still invaded my ear. I swallowed hard and steeled myself for the added aches I feared that I was about to bring down upon myself, and then I concentrated harder.

Another mish-mash of sound worked its way into my ear and with each beat morphed from the unintelligible into a Doppler distortion of noise that whistled past me, only to fade quickly away. I seemed to recognize some of the clamor as words. However, what registered was, "...to be a badly decomposed human arm."

I pondered the incomplete sentence and decided that I was hallucinating, because I just knew the voice couldn't have actually said 'decomposed human arm.'

My addled brain locked in on a piece of the distant voice once again. "...have confirmed finding more remains in a shallow grave well off the path.

"While there has been no confirmation as yet, there has been speculation that the body may be that of..."

The sharp taste of metal suddenly filled my mouth, overpowering the salty blood that had dominated the sense moments before. Every muscle in my body tensed at exactly the same moment, pulling up like rubber bands stretched to their limits and then tugged just a little farther for good measure. I could feel my teeth gnashing against my already tortured tongue once again as my body shuddered uncontrollably through some manner of violent seizure. My face took on a fresh ache as I felt my eyes rolling back in my head.

A vague memory wandered through the maelstrom of my thoughts, and I realized I had been here before. At a different time certainly, and even a different place, maybe. I wasn't sure about the latter, but the fact remained that this was not something new.

I could feel my consciousness starting to flee, and I wasn't so sure that it was a bad thing. However, the split second before it managed to exit, the elastic strands that were my muscles and tendons released. Without warning, they snapped instantly back to relaxed positions— or, as relaxed as they could be under the circumstances. Thankfully, the abuse my tongue was taking from my teeth stopped as well.

I felt limp, weak, and maybe even a bit more disoriented than I had been before if that was possible. I took in a deep breath and laid near motionless; panting as a distant ring echoed in my ears then faded into a low buzz that eventually became a voice.

"... From the Major Case Squad have arrived on the scene and will be taking over the investigation from municipal authorities. Back to you Chloe and Russ."

There it was again, that distant, tinny voice.

This time it had said, "Major Case Squad." Then it said, "Chloe and Russ." Now, these things actually made sense. A by-product of that sense was an answer to one of my earlier questions.

Maybe.

From the sound and content, I thought that what I was hearing might be the audio from a television newscast. A partially revealed memory lumbered through the inside of my skull, and I took hold of it.

I was watching the morning news at home in my living room before heading upstairs to my office and getting to work. I got up from my chair during a commercial break and went into the kitchen. I poured myself a fresh cup of coffee, then turned and went back into the living room.

After that, the remembrance grew a bit fuzzy around the edges. Well, actually it was completely obscured from my view because the real truth was that I had absolutely no idea what had occurred in whatever span of time had elapsed since I had poured that cup of coffee.

Still, maybe I wasn't hallucinating as I'd earlier thought. Of course, if I could get the rest of the memory to come into some kind of focus, I might get a better handle on my current situation.

The thud in my skull was actually starting to subside, for which I was more than grateful. The bizarre in and out thrum, however, continued rumbling in my ear, competing with the sound of the television. I started taking stock of the other sensations and happened across the fact that while my forehead was freezing, my neck was actually warm—very warm. In fact, it was downright hot.

I thought about that for a moment and then realized that there also seemed to be something soft but weighty involved. As I continued pondering this latest sensation, I started feeling pressure against my left cheek that seemed to be moving in time with the warbling hum.

I took another shot at opening my eyes, and slowly my left eyelid responded to the instruction. I looked out of the corner of my eye and found that the majority of my limited field of vision was filled with black fur. The soft pads of a pair of feline paws continued pushing against the side of my face as Dickens, one of our trio of cats, kneaded in rhythm with his own purr.

Some semblance of clarity was beginning to creep back into my head as the various pains began to subside. I rolled my eye forward and saw a close up view of polished hardwood strips stretching out before me, although the tableau was a bit on the fuzzy side. While this was a vastly different angle than to what I was accustomed, I recognized what I was seeing to be my living room floor.

A few inches in front of my face, I could see shapes rising out of the horizontal plane. These were also tinged by blurriness but still identifiable as my eyeglasses and as the fragmented remains of a ceramic coffee mug. I guess that would explain why the side of my head was wet.

Well, at least now I knew where I was, which was a plus. Unfortunately, I also had a nagging suspicion that I knew why I was in my current, uncomfortable position. I felt my stomach do a double flip at the very thought and decided not to go there. Not yet, anyway. Maybe I was wrong, and this had been nothing more than me being a klutz. At least, that's what I tried to tell myself. In the back of my head, I knew better.

I let out a groan and gently shoved the now drooling feline off my neck then pushed myself up to my hands and knees. I let my head hang for a moment and took a deep

breath. A chilly draft tickled my bare arms, and the reason behind my semi-frozen forehead became immediately obvious— I had been lying directly in front of the air conditioning vent.

The television was still chattering in the background when I dragged myself to my feet. The newscasters had moved on to another, far less horrific story, and the screen was filled with the image of a hyperactive blonde feature reporter whose actual name escaped me at the moment. Synapses were continuing to fire with fewer misses each time around, so I tried to grasp at the obscured bit of information for no other reason than to take my mind off the things I didn't want to face. But, it didn't help. I could still sense the foreboding tickle growing in the back of my brain, and in the end, all I seemed to remember was that she was named after a state.

I stared at the screen for a moment longer and then gave up. I knew it wasn't important and wasting my time on it would probably just make my headache worse. I reached up and rubbed my palm across the lower half of my face then gently touched my fingertips to my tongue. When I pulled my hand away and had a look, I found blood just as I knew I would.

My tongue still felt like ground meat, and I hadn't yet rid myself of the metallic tang that was invading my mouth. My head was continuing to throb with a dull ache, but other than that, the rest of my body's agonies seemed to have fled as fast as they had arrived. That was both good and bad. Good, of course, because the pain was gone. Bad, because that meant they had been phantom pains. Oh, they had felt real enough at the time, but that was the extent of it. They only felt real. There were no wounds, abrasions, or bruises. There was no physical evidence to explain why they had been there to begin with. And, unfortunately, this led me back to my earlier suspicion.

My stomach twisted into a knot once again, and I felt a brief spate of nausea come over me. This was exactly the kind of thing that happened whenever I was experiencing someone else's physical pain. And for them, it was real pain, not imagined.

This had been a psychic episode, and it was all too familiar. Sometimes they were the same, and at other times they were vastly different. Usually they came in groups that were so similar as to not be able to tell them apart. But, no matter what, they maintained the common thread of blackouts and migraine-like headaches that seemed to linger forever. The types of phantom pains, odd tastes, auditory anomalies, or anything else always depended upon exactly what was being experienced by the other person.

The last episode I'd had like this one had actually been a series of them, but that had been something like four or five months ago. As abruptly as they had started, they had ended. I'd tried to forget about them, but I couldn't. I knew then that it was only a matter of time before they would return.

The sickening part was that every time this sort of thing happened to me, somebody died. Worse yet, it was usually more than one somebody.

I guess that's what I get for being a Witch.

CHAPTER 2

I was rinsing my mouth out with warm salt water when the phone rang. I gave a final swish and spit the pink tinged liquid into the basin, then grabbed a hand towel and blotted my bearded chin as I walked out of the bathroom. The electronic warble issued again, making the telephone sound just about as impatient as any inanimate device could be.

“Chill out! I’m coming, I’m coming...” I said aloud, as if a verbal scolding would make it stop. It didn’t.

I was still wiping my chin when I rounded the corner into the kitchen and glanced at the caller ID box on the wall. OUT OF AREA and a row of dashes was showing on the liquid crystal display, so I lifted the receiver then allowed it to drop right back into the cradle. I had no interest in dealing with a salesman who believed it was okay to ignore the no-call list, not to mention that I still had that headache.

I continued walking over to the counter and retrieved a mug from the cabinet, then filled it with water from the filtered tap. I had just placed it on the turntable in the microwave when the phone began peeling for attention again. I slammed the door on the microwave shut, then quickly punched in three minutes and hit start before stepping back over to the phone.

OUT OF AREA and a row of dashes displayed yet again, and once more I lifted the receiver then let it drop with a heavy clunk.

The microwave was humming away behind me as I stepped over to the multi-tiered spice and herb rack mounted on the wall and began my search for dried willow bark. The search was going to be a huge pain in and of itself, and that just made my head ache more.

Had I been in charge of the rack, the task wouldn’t have been a big deal at all, as everything would be in alphabetical order. My wife, Felicity, however, was the keeper of the herbs, and she had her own way of categorizing the bottles. Little groups of related and semi-related spices, barks, herbs, and teas lined the rack. The organization of such simply defied any explanation I could muster.

However, put Felicity in front of it, and she could easily snatch up a bottle of whatever you asked for without even looking. Unfortunately, she wasn’t here at the moment.

The closest I had been able to come in the minute or so I had been looking was in fact bark, but it was cinnamon and not willow. Even though it would have tasted quite a bit better, I desperately needed the salicylic acid, not the flavor. I was dragging my finger slowly across the labeled tops of the myriad of bottles, wondering if I should just give up and take some aspirin, when the phone began ringing once again.

I tried to ignore it, but it wasn’t helping me concentrate, so I threw my hands up in a dismissive gesture and let out a heavy sigh. I took the few steps over to the phone and saw the same message as before blinking on the display of the caller ID. Now I was annoyed.

I snatched the phone up from the wall cradle and stuck it to my ear, then barked, “I don’t want any!”

I was just getting ready to slam the phone back down when I heard my wife’s stern voice issue from the earpiece in a quick stream, “Rowan Linden Gant, don’t you hang up on me again!”

I tucked the handset back up to my ear, “Felicity?”

“You don’t want any of what?” she demanded.

“Sorry, I thought you were a salesperson,” I apologized. “The caller ID is coming up with ‘out of area’ and no number.”

“Ahh,” she replied. I could almost see her nodding at the other end. “I forgot to charge my cell battery, so I’m using someone else’s. It’s an out of state number.”

“Oh, okay, makes sense,” I replied, then sighed and didn’t do a very good job of hiding it. “So what’s up?”

“That’s why I’m calling YOU.”

“Come again?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing that I’m aware of,” I told her.

“Don’t lie to me, Rowan,” she pressed.

I tried to circumvent answering the question by placing the burden back on her. “So what makes you think something is wrong?”

“Give me a break, Rowan. You aren’t the only Witch living under that roof.”

At times I forgot that my wife was prone to pseudo-empathic episodes where I was concerned. Much like I would experience someone else’s pain via an ethereal bond, she would see flashes of my torment within her mind’s eye. Due to the shifting and uncertain nature of the psychic realm, these images would at times be symbolic or incomplete. The first time it had happened to her, she thought that I was dead.

Thankfully, they didn’t happen to her all of the time, and she didn’t have to endure the same physical torture as I. If she did, I don’t think I would have been able to handle it. The fact that she faced mental pain because of me was enough to make me nauseous just by itself.

Realizing that she was going to get it out of me one way or another, I let out a resigned sigh.

“Remember those seizures I had back in January?” I asked.

There was a brief moment of silence at the other end, and then she spoke quietly, “Not again.”

Her comment had been couched as a statement rather than a question, but I answered it anyway, “Afraid so.”

“Why, Rowan?” There was almost a pleading tone in her voice. “Why you? Why does this keep happening to you?”

“I wish I knew, honey,” I said, reaching up with my free hand to rub my temple. “Seems like we both ask that question a lot every time this kind of thing happens.”

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Headache,” I grunted, then added, “Did a number on my tongue again. Broke my favorite coffee mug. But other than that, okay I guess.”

“I’m only half an hour away,” she informed me. “And we haven’t even set up yet. Let me see if we can re-schedule the shoot, and I’ll be home within an hour.”

“What for?” I returned. “I told you, I’m fine.”

“But, Rowan...”

“Really, Felicity, I’m fine,” I cut her off. “I’m a big boy, and I can take care of myself. I was just making some willow bark tea when you called.”

“You’re sure, then?”

“Absolutely. We can talk about it later,” I assured her. “Besides, they need you there to make pretty pictures for them.”

“I don’t know about pretty,” she replied. “I’m shooting automotive parts today.”

“What, no swimsuit models?” I asked her with a hint of good-natured sarcasm.

“No, but I’m doing a lingerie shoot for the Kathy’s Closet chain next week,” she answered and then added her own query. “You want to help set up and tear down the backdrops and lights?”

“Yeah, right,” I returned with a chuckle to what I thought was a facetious question.

“Actually, I’m serious,” she returned. “It’s going to be an all day shoot, so I could use the help.”

“Yeah, okay, if I don’t have a rush job or something for a client, sure,” I told her. Then I joked, “But are you sure you really want to get me around all those young models?”

“Doesn’t matter,” she replied. “I trust you. Besides, you’ll be working for me and you’ll have to do everything I say.”

“Everything?” I asked.

“Uh-huh,” she purred and then repeated the word with somewhat exaggerated pronunciation. “Ev-er-y-thing.”

“Sounds interesting.”

“And, of course, if you don’t, then I just might have to take some disciplinary action.”

“Again, sounds interesting.”

“You never know,” she answered with an amused giggle. “By the way, they also offered me a nice discount at their stores.”

“No kidding?”

“Uh-huh, so if you do a good job maybe I’ll let you take me shopping after we wrap it up.”

“That could be fun,” I said.

There was a period of silence following my comment and soon there was a palpable sense of seriousness creeping into the void between us. Our momentary lightheartedness disappeared in the wake of the recent verbal distraction.

“You’re certain you don’t want me to come home, then?” Felicity finally asked, the concern edging her voice once again.

“Positive sweetheart,” I told her. “We’ll talk when you get home.”

“Okay. If you’re sure,” she said.

“Go make some sexy pictures of carburetors,” I told her. “Gear heads need pinups too.”

I heard her laugh at the other end of the line, once again breaking through the mantle of seriousness that originally cloaked her.

“And, honey?” I added.

“Yes?”

“Thanks.”

“For what? Inviting you to a lingerie shoot?”

“No,” I returned. “For everything else.”

I could almost feel her smiling when I hung up the phone.



I absently took a sip from the coffee mug and screwed up my face in disgust. Willow bark tea was not the most pleasant drink one could ingest to begin with and being an hour cold didn't help it at all. I suppose that would teach me to look first and then drink. I glared at the cup as if it were at fault, then set it aside and hooked my finger into the handle of the cup I'd been reaching for to begin with—the fresh cup of coffee I had just put on the corner of my desk a few minutes ago.

I took a sip from the new mug and found it to be only slightly less cold. I cocked an eyebrow and shot a glance at the clock in the corner of my computer screen. 10:47 A.M. was staring back at me. The few minutes had somehow expanded into forty-five. I guess I had been a little more preoccupied with my work than I'd originally thought.

I leaned back in my chair. The springs underneath the piece of furniture creaked as it tilted, then I was almost certain that I heard my joints creak as I stretched. I drew in a deep breath then pushed my eyeglasses back up onto the bridge of my nose. As of late, I'd been finding myself allowing them to slip down so I could look at the monitor over the top of the rim.

I knew that meant it was time for a trip to the optometrist. Actually, I'd known it for a while, but I'd been avoiding it. I fully suspected I was going to need bi-focals, and that just meant I was getting old. No one ever wants to admit to aging, and I suppose I was no different.

I looked at the coffee cup in my hand then back at the clock. I mulled it over for a minute and then decided I would go ahead and get one more fresh cup—if there was any left. I was just pushing my chair back from the desk when the phone rang. This time it was my business line, so I didn't bother with caller ID. I simply rolled the chair back in and took the receiver in hand, cutting the device off mid-peal.

“Gant Consulting,” I answered.

“Yeah, kin you fix my com-pooter? It's broke.” A poorly disguised and all too familiar voice grated from the earpiece.

“No, Ben,” I returned without missing a beat. “How many times do I have to tell you? I do custom software and networks, not computer repair.”

My cop friend guffawed at what he perceived to be an amusing prank call, and I had no choice but to break into a grin myself. His good humor had a tendency to be contagious, as did his sullen moods; and I'd been on the receiving end of enough of that type of phone call from him to know, so this was a pleasant change.

To be honest, considering what I'd experienced earlier I was surprised to find his tone so jovial. I had been expecting that I would hear from him but figured it would be something I didn't want to hear. That was what always seemed to happen whenever I had one of my episodes.

“So what're you doin'?” he asked.

“Working,” I replied. “And for some reason, feeling very old.”

“Yeah, funny how it creeps up on ya’,” he said. “I remember goin’ to bed one night feelin’ like a twenty year old. When I got up I had all kinds of old man pains, and I had no freakin’ idea where they came from.”

“Same here.”

“Come on, though,” he jibed. “I thought you Witches were immortal.”

“Have you been watching sixties sitcom re-runs again?”

“It’s the only thing on TV worth lookin’ at anymore. Besides, the Montgomery gal is pretty hot.”

“Ever wonder why they changed Dicks mid series?” I made an obscure reference to the change of actors from the old show.

“Not really,” he replied. “But I have been wondering when you’re gonna wiggle your nose and make shit show up outta thin air.”

“Not going to happen, Ben.”

“Crap. I hate when you tell me that.”

As entertaining as the conversation had been, I was still wondering if another shoe was about to drop. “So, what about you? Shouldn’t you be out catching bad guys or protecting us from evil doers?”

“Day off,” he told me.

“Lucky you,” I said, still slightly suspicious. “So what are YOU doing?”

“Talking to you.”

“You’re in rare form today.”

“So sue me. So you wanna do lunch? I’m buyin’.”

“You’re buying? What’s up, you win big at the riverboat?” I chuckled.

“Hell no,” he answered. “Lost fifty bucks last time I did that.”

“It’s a little early for lunch yet isn’t it?” I asked.

He came back with a question of his own. “Depends. When’d you get up this morning?”

“Point taken,” I replied. “Yeah. Lunch sounds good. I could use a break anyway. What did you have in mind?”

“There’s a great little Indian place on Olive, downtown.”

“Yeah, been there. I can go for that,” I told him. “So you want me to meet you?”

“Nah,” he returned. “I’ll pick ya’ up.”

“Okay, so I need to change into something Felicity wouldn’t be ashamed of me to be seen wearing in public.”

“Well light a fire under it, Kemosabe. It’s hot out here.”

I wondered for a moment at the comment then said, “Where are you, Ben?”

“Right now? Standin’ at your freakin’ front door waitin’ for you ta’ get your happy ass down here and let me in.”

His comment was followed by a click as he hung up, and then the doorbell began ringing in a vicious staccato brought about by him leaning on the button. Our two dogs joined in with a chorus of barks and howls as they squared off with the door downstairs in order to protect the house from invaders.

Yeah, I definitely needed a break. I dropped the phone back in the cradle and pushed back, gathering up the used coffee cups before tugging open the office door. As I started down the stairs, I wondered if I should fill my friend in on what had happened to me earlier this morning.

Before I reached the bottom, I had decided it could wait. There was already a niggling feeling in the back of my head that told me Ben and I would be spending a lot of time together in the very near future. Whether he knew it yet or not.

We might as well start off on a happy note; because I already knew what was looming before us would be far from pleasant.

CHAPTER 3

I wasn't someone you could describe as a big fan of heights. Standing here at this particular moment, looking down through the railing from the top level of the old Peerless-Cross department store parking garage, smack in the middle of downtown Saint Louis, I was reminded of that fact in no uncertain terms.

The honest truth is that for the majority of my life heights had never been much of an issue. I hadn't spared as much as a moment's consideration to the idea of fearing them; at least not any that I remembered. But, of course, that was all before the night when a deranged serial killer had tossed me over the side of the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge somewhere near the middle of its span across the Mississippi river. Now to that, I had given more than just a passing thought. I had dwelled on it. And, to say the least, it was definitely something I wasn't going to forget. Not in this lifetime and probably not even the next.

Fortunately for me, the rope he had been trying to hang me with had held fast. The other bonus was that it had been wrapped around my arm instead of my neck. It was only due to this stroke of blind luck that I had the luxury of being able to recall that night in all of its Technicolor detail.

But that's another story, sort of.

Now, to clarify, I have to point out that I'm not one to panic or go into an immobile stupor due to a fear of heights— not at all. Whenever confronted by the vertical demon, I simply feel an involuntary catch in my throat and then experience that sinking flutter in the pit of my stomach that always precedes the 'fight or flight' adrenalin dump of fear. Of course, it is just about then that said adrenalin does exactly that— dump.

With a sudden flood into my circulatory system, the hormone embarks on an emotionally driven attempt to rescue me from the perceived danger. A few seconds later I, mutter some form of exclamation, the cleanliness of which is directly proportional to the height multiplied by the amount of adrenalin then divided by my heart rate. That accomplished, I remove myself from the situation.

For the most part, all it ever really does is make me tense muscles I don't even remember having and then battle a lingering headache for an hour or two.

"Sudden stop." My friend's deep voice uttered the two simple words from behind and above my left shoulder.

I glanced back without fully turning and questioned him. "Do what?"

"The sudden stop at the bottom," Detective Benjamin Storm returned with an almost jovial undertone. "Ya'know... It ain't the fall that kills ya', it's the sudden stop at the bottom."

It was comments like this one that had long ago convinced me that my best friend, a homicide detective with the Saint Louis City Police, would make the perfect wisecracking cop for a weekly television crime drama. He was loyal, honest, and good at his job. And, as evidenced by his most recent verbal observation, he was inextricably tied to clichés. There were even times when they would season his speech the same way some

people salt their French fries— too much. Still, while not always an especially endearing quality, it was a part of his makeup, and I accepted it for the personality trait it was. Of course, accepting it didn't keep me from retaliating against it at times.

Like right now for instance.

“Not actually,” I said as I turned, unsure as to whether or not he would take the bait I was about to toss before him.

I put my hand up to shield my eyes against the late morning sun. The sky was clear and the yellow-white globe had already driven the air temperature past ninety, with the relative humidity making it feel as if we were in a Jacuzzi. Worse yet, the hottest part of the day was still to come. Of course, that was just ‘Mother Nature’s Tourism Bureau’s’ way of saying welcome to June in Saint Louis, Missouri.

The only thing that made it bearable standing up here on the open concrete deck of the parking structure was the slight breeze rising and falling around us, and more importantly, the fact that a table in an air-conditioned restaurant was waiting for us down at street level.

I tilted my head up to look at my friend’s face. While I wasn’t the tallest person around, I was still of average height. Ben, on the other hand, took average and built upon it with reckless abandon. He stood a full six-foot-six and carried himself on an enviable broad-shouldered, muscular frame.

The sun silhouetted him so I had to squint in order to make out his angular face. Framing his countenance was coal black hair, worn as long as departmental regulations allowed. His dark eyes gazed out over high cheekbones, revealing little and missing nothing. It was impossible to look at him and not immediately know that he was full-blooded Native American.

“Whaddaya mean, ‘not actually’?” he huffed.

And with that, we officially had the ‘hook.’

On the fly, I dredged up an old childhood myth and applied my own twist to it. “What I mean is that you’re dead before you ever hit the ground.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Seriously. The fear of falling is so intense that your system overdoses itself on adrenalin. It pretty much shorts out your nervous system and causes you to suffer a heart attack as you fall, end of story. You’re a corpse before you ever hit the ground.”

I watched his rugged features as his right eyebrow furrowed. I could literally see him rolling what I had said over and over inside his head, trying to get a handle on it.

“Bullshit,” he retorted.

The one word comment wasn’t exactly what you would call swallowing the ‘line,’ but I’d known he would be a hard sell.

“Oh yeah.” I nodded vigorously as I spoke and offered up a bogus factoid to lend credence to my lie. “It’s a known fact. Now, of course, the fall has to be greater than twenty feet for the fear to reach that level and cause your system to dump that much adrenalin.”

He cocked his head to the side and gave me an unsure look.

I pressed on. “You know how when you fall you get that bizarre feeling in your gut like you just lost your stomach?”

“Like when ya’ top a hill on a roller coaster, you mean?”

“Exactly. Well it’s like that, but since you don’t fall far enough you don’t have the heart attack.”

“No way. Hills on roller coasters are way higher than twenty feet.” He shook his head as he argued.

“Sure, but that’s different. Your subconscious knows you are in a roller coaster.”

“You’re just yankin’ my chain.”

“Why would I do that?”

“So what about skydivers?”

“Parachute. Again, the subconscious knows.”

The look on Ben’s face told me that he was struggling with this sudden contradiction of perceptions. He wasn’t stupid by any stretch of the imagination, so I was actually surprised I’d managed to take it this far.

My friend slipped his hand up to smooth his hair and then allowed it to slide down and began to massage the back of his neck. He always performed this gesture when he was thinking hard on a subject.

“Really?” he eventually asked, giving his head a slight nod as he squinted at me.

Now, there was the ‘line.’ I thought about going for the ‘sinker’ as well, but I wasn’t feeling particularly ornery today, and I doubted my luck would hold out. Besides, it had only been one cliché, not to mention that he was bigger than me and he had a gun.

I gave it a long moment before finally answering him with a simple, “No.”

He shook his head and screwed his face into a frown. “Jeezus, Rowan, don’t fuck with me like that.”

“Hey,” I splayed my hands out in a ‘don’t blame me’ gesture. “You’re the cop here. Aren’t you supposed to be able to tell when someone is lying? Besides, I’ve never known you to be gullible. How was I supposed to know you’d fall for a line of BS like that?”

“Because it came outta *your* mouth,” he replied with a grunt as he stabbed a finger in the air toward me. “I EXPECT everyone else to be lying but not you. And, you got so damn much trivia runnin’ around in your head, I just figured maybe you knew somethin’ I didn’t.”

“Well...” I shrugged. “Maybe I do on some stuff. Sudden stops at the bottom, though, not really my area of expertise.”

“Yeah, mine either, but I’ve seen a couple of meat sacks sprawled out on sidewalks. The friggin’ stop at the bottom’s what did ‘em in. Trust me.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I replied, consciously chasing away the visual his words had conjured, and then I paused for a moment before changing the subject. “So, I may be wrong, but I didn’t think we came here to discuss the physics of falling from tall buildings. Or did we?”

“Nope.” He shook his head. “But you were the one starin’ off into space over here.”

“I wasn’t staring off into space.”

“Yeah, Kemosabe.” He nodded. “Yeah, you were.”

I didn’t issue another rebuttal. It occurred to me that perhaps my earlier self-assessment was in error. Maybe these days heights did make me seize up after all.

“So, speaking of lying, are we at least here to go to lunch like you said when you showed up at my door?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “Why would I lie about that?”

“You tell me? It wouldn’t be the first time you’ve used a free meal as a carrot to get me somewhere.”

“C’mon, man, I told ya’ already. This is my day off.”

“I seem to recall you once telling me that you are never really off duty,” I reminded him.

“Jeez, what are you, a freakin’ tape recorder?”

I merely chuckled in reply.

“Yeah,” he continued. “Maybe so, but even when I’ve done that to ya’, I didn’t screw ya’ over on the deal.”

“You sure about that?”

“Hell yes.” He waved his index finger in the air to punctuate his comment. “I know for a fact that I still bought chow.”

“I wasn’t talking about the meal,” I said as we began walking along the inclined parking lot toward the glassed-in elevator enclosure.

He ignored the comment. “Well, to be honest, I do have somethin’ else I wanna do while we’re here, now that ya’ mention it. I need to hit *The Third Place* after we eat.” He offered the name of the tobacco shop we both frequented with what could have easily passed for reverence. “You good with that?”

“Yeah.” I gave him a nod. “I need to have Patrick order me some more *CAO MX Two’s* anyway. It’ll save me a call.”

“You and those damn double maduros,” my friend muttered.

“What’s wrong with MX Two’s?”

“Too strong, white man,” he told me.

“Hey, I like what I like.”

“Yeah,” he said as he tugged open the door to the glass enclosure and motioned for me to go through. “I just wish you’d like somethin’ else.”

I shook my head as I entered the somewhat air-conditioned waiting area. “What does it matter?”

His matter-of-fact reply came as he followed me through the door. “‘Cause I don’t like ‘em.”

“So?” I queried, stabbing the call button for the elevator then looking at him with a puzzled expression. “You aren’t the one smoking them.”

“Exactly,” he replied. “So if you don’t smoke the ones that I like, then it makes it kinda hard for me to bum them off ya’ now doesn’t it?”

“Ohhh, now I get it.” I nodded slowly. “You want me to smoke something you like so you don’t have to buy any.”

“Damn straight,” he chuckled. “Cigars are expensive.”

“So quit.”

My friend looked back at me like I had suddenly grown an extra head. “Yeah, right. I already told ya’ once today ta’ quit yankin’ my chain.”

A sickly electromechanical ding announced the arrival of the elevator car. The signal was followed by the scrape and groan of the doors parting down the center with a moment’s hesitation then sliding laboriously open. Looking through the widening gap, we could see the car still in motion as it rose the last few inches and then halted with a clunk and a shudder.

“Oh yeah,” Ben announced. “This looks real safe.”

“You want to take the stairs?” I queried.

“I’m thinkin’ maybe yeah,” he replied.

“The stairs are outside.”

“Yeah, so?”

I held my arms out and glance around. “Hot out there, cool in here. Well, cooler anyway.”

“Lemme see... Hot or splattered? Hot or splattered?” He motioned with his hands as if he were physically weighing the two options. “Considering the conversation we just had, I’m not all about splattered if ya’ know what I mean. Elevator or not.”

“I’m with you on that one.”

He stepped back toward the glass door of the waiting area and tugged it open. At that moment, as if cued by some unseen director, our ears were met with what had to be the single most panicked scream I had ever heard in my life to date.

CHAPTER 4

Training and experience instantly became the primary driving forces behind my friend. With a quick jerk, he flung the door wide and propelled himself through the opening, each of his motions deliberate and purposeful. His head twisted from side to side as he scanned the area. His right hand shifted immediately to his hip and rested on the grip of his nine-millimeter sidearm.

In the few seconds that followed the initial cry, time seemed to expand. Adrenalin injected into my system, this time for reasons wholly unrelated to heights, and in that instant, I experienced a complete lack of coordination. My brain began issuing commands that my body wasn't ready to accept but was forced to execute anyway. In a series of half-stumbling steps I twisted away from the elevator, aiming myself toward the exit. I reached for the door just as it was swinging shut, only to completely miss it with my hand and drive my shoulder against the metal frame instead. Before I could elicit my own surprised yelp of pain, a second scream echoed through the parking structure.

I had believed that the first wail was the most panicked I had ever heard. Without a doubt, the second one made that assessment null and void.

"Gotta be down!" Ben declared, bolting for the stairs at the opposite end of the elevator enclosure.

I ignored the stab of pain in my shoulder and ran after my friend. I apparently hadn't struck the doorframe hard enough to do any actual damage to myself, so it was really nothing more than an annoyance anyway. Ben was already rounding the first landing and taking the stairs in fours by the time I arrived at the top of the flight.

I was coming down from the initial adrenalin rush, and my coordination, while far from perfect, was returning. Still, not being possessed of the expanded stride of the giant Indian in front of me, I grabbed the rail and took the stairs in a more manageable two-at-once pace. I heard him come to a stop below as I quickly rounded the landing and shot down the second flight, hitting the bottom just as a third, more muffled scream sounded.

"Goddammit!" Ben exclaimed. "With the fuckin' echo, I can't tell for sure where it's comin' from!"

Again, a tortured voice cried out, this time with distinguishable words appended to the dire scream. "HELP! Somebody help me, please!"

Ben immediately cocked his head to the side then whipped around and flew by me, shouting, "Next level!"

I stepped back onto the lowest step for a split second to allow him past and then threw myself forward while keeping a firm grip on the handrail, using the momentum to swing me around to the next set of stairs.

Our frantic footsteps were thumping in the stairwell, inciting a disjointed rhythm that resounded through the concrete parking structure. Ben was well ahead of me, and I heard him hit the next level before I even reached the landing. I could hear him shuffling around as he searched for the source of the commotion. A pair of seconds later I bounded

off the stairs just in time to see my friend wrapping his large fist around the grip of his pistol and sliding it out of the belt rig.

“Nine-one-one, Row.” He called to me over his shoulder as he started across the yellow-striped concrete. “Tell ‘em officer needs assistance, code one.”

By the time he got the second sentence out of his mouth, he had broken into a dead run.

I pulled my cell phone from my belt and thumbed off the key lock then stabbed in the emergency number. I could hear an immediate click from the device as I placed it to my ear.

“Nine-one-one, what is the nature of your emergency?” came a tinny, female voice.

It occurred to me that at this point that I wasn’t exactly sure what the emergency was. I looked up and in the direction Ben had run, looking for whatever he had spied. My friend had covered a fair amount of distance in the few seconds that had passed and was still barreling full tilt up the inclined parking lot. Well beyond him, near the opposite corner, I could see an intense struggle going on between a young blonde woman and an individual who was bear hugging her from behind. They were positioned near the back of a vehicle that was parked in the traffic lane with the trunk lid and driver-side door wide open.

They spun in a circle as the attacker slammed the woman against the side of the car, slipping slightly out of view, so I bobbed and shifted to see around the support pylons. The aggressor in the altercation was nondescript enough to defy identification, but based on stature and what few details I could make out, such as hair length, I assumed the person to at least be male.

They made a half-spin outward then back, bouncing against the rear quarter of the sedan. As they turned, I caught a quick glimpse of the woman’s face. For some reason, she looked familiar to me, but at this distance that didn’t really mean anything.

“Nine-one-one, what is the nature of your emergency?” the woman at the other end repeated, capturing my attention.

“I’m... I’m not sure,” I stuttered and then began spilling the information as quickly as I could. “I’m calling for Detective Benjamin Storm with the city homicide division. He said to tell you ‘officer needs assistance, code 1’.”

“What is your location, sir?”

The old adage about not being able to look away from a train wreck passed through my mind as I continued staring, frozen in place and mesmerized by the crime playing out in front of me. I forced myself to quickly shift my glance to my friend, checking his progress, and then leveled my gaze back on the fight.

Due to the design of the structure, a low wall and cable barrier separated Ben from them. He was still running up the incline and would need to hook around the end before he would be within close enough proximity to confront the situation. He still had several feet to go before he could even make that turn.

My mind raced as I wondered whether or not we should have come at this from the next level up, but it was too late for that now.

“Sir, your location?” the voice barked from the phone.

“I’m sorry... The old Peerless-Cross department store parking garage, orange level,” I replied.

“Is the detective injured?” she asked.

“No. He’s trying to stop a carjacking, or a mugging or something, I’m not...”

I was interrupted by yet another scream that sounded vaguely like ‘help’, and I watched as the young woman broke partially free and suddenly lurched forward. Her attacker managed to maintain a grip on her arm and yanked it hard, knocking her off balance. She fell backward against the car, and as she came to rest against the fender, the man swung around in front of her. Without hesitation, he drew his arm back and landed a fist square into the young woman’s face. Her head snapped back, and even at this distance, I could see crimson blood running from her nose.

“Damn!” I exclaimed and then remembering that the phone was still to my ear added, “He just hit her in the face!”

He drew back and hit her a second time then grabbed her by the hair and dragged her to the back of the vehicle. In a rough motion he rolled her into the trunk then slammed the lid shut and raced back to the open driver-side door.

“Sir, can you tell me what is happening?” the operator asked.

The audible thunk was still fading as Ben’s authoritative voice boomed outward, ricocheting from the angular surfaces of the garage. “POLICE! STEP AWAY FROM THE VEHICLE NOW!” He was just reaching the corner and beginning to make the turn as he shouted, running with his weapon hand extended and trying to draw a bead on the man next to the vehicle.

“Sir, are you still there?”

“Gods! I think it’s a kidnapping!” I exclaimed aloud, making the statement to myself as much as to the 9-1-1 operator.

The attacker had been pre-occupied with the struggling woman and only now noticed Ben barreling around the corner. He ducked quickly into the driver’s seat, audibly wrenching the vehicle into gear and gunning the engine even before closing the door.

Tires squealed as the car sped forward, climbing up the incline toward the level above us. Ben slipped out of view behind a support pylon then reappeared on the opposite side, pistol stiff-armed before him and taking aim at the vehicle. I saw him snap his head in disgust as he realized it was too dangerous to take a shot with the victim in the trunk. He followed the tail of the car with his eyes as it screeched into the turn then whipped his gaze around and darted to his right toward the downward corkscrew of the exit lane on the corner of the building.

“Sir?!” I heard the faint but frantic voice issue from the cell phone and realized that I had allowed my hand to drop away from my ear.

I brought the device back up and began speaking, “He just shoved her into the trunk and sped off. Ben is chasing after them.”

“Are you still in the parking garage, sir?”

“Yeah,” I responded, realizing suddenly that I had to be her eyes. “Yeah, he was heading up, so Ben took off for the exit spiral. He’s on foot.”

“Sir, we are on the line with dispatch, and they have units responding to your location. I need you to stay with me.”

I could hear the roar of the vehicle crossing above me on the next level, revving up then fading as it passed. My view of Ben was obscured by a row of cars occupying the spaces near the center of the level, so I began running up the incline. I was moving slowly at first then began increasing my pace as I tried to get in a better position to see

the exit ramp. There was a squeal, another roar, and then the crunch of metal against concrete. Following that, there was nothing.

I broke past the line of cars and stumbled to a halt, directing my gaze through an empty parking space. In the distance, I could see Ben's form in a three-quarter silhouette as he stood at that level's opening to the exit, weapon at the ready.

I started to wonder if the vehicle above had crashed into one of the dividing walls, but then the relative silence was punctuated by the protests of its overtaxed engine as it started down the spiraling ramp.

The car suddenly came into view at the opening, and the tortured wail of scraping metal filled my ears. A pair of bursts from Ben's pistol abruptly punctuated the grating noise as he fired into the windshield of the vehicle.

I watched in horror as the front fender clipped my friend and sent him flying backward. The scrape of sheet metal against concrete began to fade as the vehicle continued down the ramp.

"He's been hit!" I shouted into the cell phone as I began moving once again, breaking into a run toward my downed friend. "Ben's been hit!"

I knew the operator was asking me something because I heard her voice issuing from the speaker, but I no longer had the device to my ear. I pumped my legs and arms as hard as I could, pushing myself up the incline and hooked around the parked vehicles at the end of the row. I had a lot of distance to cover, and I wasn't going to be setting any records for sprinting. By the time I was within forty or so feet of the arc, the exit came once again into view.

Not knowing how hard he had been struck or the extent of his injuries, I was fully expecting to see my friend in a crumpled heap. Instead, I was greeted by the sight of him on his feet, fully upright and very pissed off.

"Fuck ME!" he shouted across the lot as he limped forward. "Sonofabitch!"

"Ben!?" I barely managed to call out against my rapidly shortening breath.

He looked up and saw me running toward him. "Backup, Row. Fuckin' tell me I've got backup comin'!"

I waved the cell phone in the air then sucked in a quick breath and called out to my friend as I continued toward him. "The operator said units have been dispatched."

Below us, the fading sound of the scraping metal had now transformed into the clamor of squealing tires, and out on the streets, angry horns were beginning to blare.

The wail of emergency sirens in the distance was so faint they may as well have been a lifetime away.

CHAPTER 5

“No, I don’t wanna go to the freakin’ hospital,” Ben’s voice carried across the lot as he shouted. He continued walking away from the paramedic but looked back, pointing his finger as he added, “How many times do I hafta tell ya? Now leave me alone and let me do my job.”

My friend was disheveled and still moving about with a limp, but other than that, he didn’t appear to be seriously injured. But then, this was Ben Storm we were talking about. I’d seen him lie through his teeth to avoid going to a hospital, all because he had a phobia about needles, go figure.

Even though he had relayed a description of the vehicle to the 9-1-1 operator, it had all come down to placement and timing, neither of which factored in our favor. The car was gone before the first police cruiser even arrived on the scene. Between Ben, the parking attendant from the booth downstairs, and me, we had been able to provide miscellaneous details about the sedan as well as a license plate number. Since the car had Illinois tags, officials from that state’s patrol division were already in the loop.

I was keeping my ears open for lack of anything else to do. Thus far, from what I had been able to pick up from the various conversations I overheard, there was presently an alert out on both sides of the river but still no sign of the vehicle.

I felt like I should be doing something. I’m not sure what, but that wasn’t the point. I hated the idea of being useless with regard to everything that had transpired. But, I suppose being ordered to ‘wait over there until we need you’ can tend to do that to a person. All in all, I was starting to feel like an extra in a B-movie but without the paycheck or catered buffet lunch.

At the moment, I was watching from the stairwell, sitting on the third step up from the bottom and trying my best to stay out of the way. So far, I had been managing to do so but not without some shifting and shuffling to allow the occasional cop to pass. From what I could see going on in front of me, this was probably the only spot where I was going to have any success whatsoever in the endeavor.

I looked away from the scene long enough to glance at my watch. Somewhere around an hour and a half had slipped past us since this all began: ninety minutes disappearing into history only to be relived by eyewitness accounts, repeated over and over to the point of tediousness. And then repeated again.

Still, even though I had only been asked to tell my accounting a half-dozen times so far, it felt as if I had been in this parking garage just shy of forever. On the other hand, it seemed like the span of interconnected moments had gone by in a sudden blur. I suppose it was yet another of those peculiar stress-induced dichotomies that blindsides you following an unexpected adrenalin rush.

As I watched, I took particular note of the fact that the number of warm bodies occupying the parking garage had increased several fold over what it had been just thirty minutes ago. Now, while I was no expert, unfortunately, I was also not a stranger to crime scenes. The ratio of cops to the singularity of the crime seemed to me like it was already

moving beyond overkill. On top of that, something told me there would be even more by the time it was all said and done. There was something more to this than met the eye; even the eye of a witness, or so it seemed.

For the time being, it looked like I was stuck here. Ben was still limping around angrily, but now he was heading in my direction. He had been barking at anyone in a uniform and even some who weren't. This was far from the first time I had ever seen him agitated, but there was something different this go around. It wasn't that this scene felt any more tense than any other I'd been on, just different. There was an overtone of urgency that went beyond any I'd felt before. To me at least, there was even a palpable sense of personal fear coming from the cops on the scene. Not just for the victim but for themselves as well. That was something I had never before experienced at a crime scene, and it bothered me.

I already knew my friend wouldn't be going anywhere for a while. His day off had ended the moment he heard the woman scream. As for me, even if I wanted to get myself a taxi home, I was a witness and I'd already been told that I would need to give a statement. I had thought I'd already done that when I told them what I saw the first six times, but apparently that was not official. When they would be getting around to me again was anyone's guess.

"Hey, Row," Ben greeted me sullenly as he drew himself up against the stairwell railing.

"Hey, Chief," I returned, starting to pull myself to my feet. "You need to sit down?"

He motioned for me to stay seated. "Sit, sit. I'm good."

"You sure?" I asked, stopping mid-rise. "It looked to me like you had a pretty serious limp there."

"I'll live."

I lowered myself back to the step and regarded him for a moment. "The paramedic threatened you with a hypodermic, didn't he?"

"Yeah." He let out something between a laugh and a sigh. "The words 'tetanus booster' got mentioned."

"You probably need one."

"We'll see. Nothin's broke." He gave a slight nod as he spoke, but the expression on his face was saying 'hell no.'

"So much for lunch, eh?" I offered after a moment.

My friend was looking out across the lot, massaging the back of his neck and lost in thought.

I spoke again, "Ben?"

He started and glanced over at me, "What? Oh, yeah. That's a bust for sure. Maybe dinner depending on how this goes."

He brought his hand up to smooth his hair then allowed it to fall back down to his side. He huffed out a heavy breath then addressed me with an added seriousness, "So listen, Row, the Major Case Squad is gonna be runnin' this one."

"Okay," I acknowledged. "That's not a big surprise."

"What I'm tryin' to tell ya' is that Bee-Bee is on her way," he emphasized. "Hell, she's probably downstairs already."

"Bee-Bee," I repeated and rolled my eyes. "Just what I need."

The moniker struck home. It was short for Bible Barb, which was probably the least offensive of the nicknames given to one Lieutenant Barbara Albright. She was a cop and a self-serving bureaucrat all rolled into one package, and she was in command of the MCS.

Like most of those her rank and above, she spent the majority of her time pushing a pencil. But that is where the similarity ended because unlike the others, she had a penchant for getting directly involved. Unfortunately, her involvement was not always a plus.

What had garnered her the various epithets was her self-righteous attitude. That, combined with the fact that she not only wore a badge but also a prominently displayed gold cross around her neck, had earned her the reputation of 'God's Personal Cop.'

She consciously built upon that distinction as well. She wore her badge like a shield and wielded the cross like a sword, using its symbolism like a heavy-handed weapon with which to mete out her own interpretation of justice. To Lieutenant Albright, the laws she was sworn to uphold were but secondary suggestions to the commandments held within the Holy Bible; and she was more than happy to tell you so in no uncertain terms.

While this didn't necessarily make her popular among the ranks, she still had her supporters, and there were enough of them to make a difference. She managed to skirt around various departmental policies and flaunt her religion without reproach. Still, none of this would really matter at all were it not for one simple fact: she absolutely despised me.

While her initial hatred of me began simply because of my Pagan roots and religious practices, my being a Witch was not the only reason for her disdain. Unfortunately, I had no choice but to accept responsibility for a portion of it, as I had been partly responsible for sparking an Internal Affairs investigation of her.

Just a handful of months ago, I had been the object of a madman's quest to eradicate WitchCraft from the face of the earth. Eldon Andrew Porter had taken the lives of several innocent people in the process, two of them my friends. Before all was said and done, I had come close to losing my own more than once.

During a single day that had been spawned by nothing less than hell itself, far too many things had gone horribly wrong. Information had been leaked; potentially dangerous mistakes had been made, and events that could have only been deliberate sabotage had occurred. All of these things had placed my life in jeopardy at every turn and had almost allowed Porter to escape. I, among a few others, believed that 'Bible Barb' had been responsible for it all.

While in the end she had admitted to using me as the bait to draw Eldon Porter out of hiding, she had been officially cleared of any other wrongdoing and was given nothing more than an administrative slap on the wrist. As for me, I was never fully convinced of her innocence and didn't know that I ever would be.

At the same time, her own convoluted thinking made her believe that I was the root of the problem. She had even commented during a newspaper interview that had it not been for me, at least two of the victims would still be alive. I was already torturing myself over that very fact on a daily basis, and I sure as hell didn't need her fueling the fire for me. I was doing a fine job of that all by myself.

"Look, Row, if it was up to me, I'd get you outta here right now before she gets here," Ben offered. "But we both know that ain't gonna happen."

“Yeah,” I nodded. “It’s okay.”

“If it’s any consolation,” he added, “I ain’t exactly one of her favorite people either.”

“Yeah, I know.”

He wasn’t lying. He had gone toe to toe with her for the sole purpose of defending me and had done serious harm to his career in the process. While my friend was still a homicide detective, Albright had seen to it that he was no longer allowed to work as a member of the Major Case Squad as long as she was in command. That serious blow to his advancement was yet another thing I held myself responsible for, even if he didn’t.

“So, I don’t want to sound crass,” I said. “But what’s so important about this particular case that she feels like she needs to get her fingers in it?”

“Nice try,” he returned. “But it ain’t funny.”

I shook my head and looked back at him with a puzzled expression. “What are you talking about?”

“C’mon, Row,” he chided.

“No, really.”

He arched an eyebrow then cocked his head to the side, squinting while looking at me hard. “You aren’t friggin’ serious are you?”

“Serious about what?” An audible note of annoyance crept into my question.

“Do you have any clue at all what you just witnessed?” he asked.

“I’m guessing a kidnapping.”

“Yeah, and?”

“And what?” I asked, growing more impatient.

He shook his head and gave me an incredulous look. “Don’t you ever watch TV?”

“Sometimes. So what?”

“You watch the news, right?”

“Ben, will you just spit it out?” I demanded.

“You’re gonna sit there and tell me you didn’t recognize the woman who was grabbed?” he asked.

I flashed on a quick memory of the blonde victim and remembered having had a passing thought that I should know her.

I shook my head and shrugged. “Not really. She looked a little familiar, but other than that...”

“She’s all over the news,” my friend returned, shaking his head as well. “The Gateway Club Telethon, all kinds of charity events... You know, anything with a cause and a donation jar.”

“I’m sorry, Ben,” I barked the words. “But I still don’t know who she is. Now, would you please quit trying to make me feel stupid, and just clue me in?”

“Jeezus, Rowan,” he blurted, still shaking his head. “That was Brittany Larson.”

I looked back at him, stunned as the name sunk in, and my brain made the connection. “You mean...”

“Yeah, I mean Brittany freakin’ Larson,” he replied. “The goddammed mayor’s daughter.”

CHAPTER 6

Ben was busy going over the turn of events with some other detectives when Lieutenant Barbara Albright arrived. She strode purposefully out of the elevator, headed straight for the door of the enclosure and whipped the door open with a swift yank.

Her low-heeled pumps were clacking out a determined cadence across the concrete decking of the parking lot as she started for the opposite end of the structure. I almost wish I'd had a camera on hand to catch the look on her face when she glanced to the side and saw me sitting on the stairs.

She stopped dead in her tracks, staring at me as her lips drew into a thin frown. After a brief pause, she unbuttoned her jacket and marched toward the stairs, coming to a halt in front of me and placing her hands on her hips.

"Would you mind explaining just exactly what it is that you are doing here, Gant?" She spat the words more as a demand than as a simple question.

She was slight but still altogether imposing just given her attitude. Her appearance placed her somewhere in her mid fifties even with her shoulder length hair having turned prematurely white. She was dressed in a dark grey pantsuit that looked like it came from an upscale department store. Felicity probably could have taken one look and spouted off the name of the designer, but as for me, well, all I knew was that it looked like money was involved.

Her hands, strategically placed to reveal more than just a glimpse of her sidearm, now pushed back the folds of the double-breasted jacket. I'm sure it was an intimidation tactic, probably something learned by all cops, but I had been around this sort of thing far too much. The sight of a gun on someone's hip was old hat to me.

As in my past dealings with her, she was coming across as the mother that every kid on the block was afraid of, and she wasn't planning to do anything to change that opinion. If nothing else, I would say that she was trying to bolster it.

As usual, the gold cross was suspended from a chain around her neck, obvious against the white background provided by her blouse. The breast pocket of her jacket held her badge case, shield flipped outward and prominently on display.

"It's really a simple matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Lieutenant," I answered with forced civility as I rose to my feet.

I was mutely beating back my desire to launch into a string of unpleasantries aimed directly at her. I knew such an act would bring me nothing but trouble, but I was having a hard time explaining that to my subconscious mind.

"Oh, I'm sure that it is," she remarked sarcastically. "Go on. Tell me."

"Lunch," I replied.

"Lunch?" she repeated.

"Yes," I returned, pointing over her shoulder at a group of officers near the actual scene of the abduction; in particular, at Ben's back. "Feel free to ask Detective Storm over there. We were going to lunch and just happened to be waiting for the elevator when it all happened."

“Storm is here, too?” she barked, turning to look in the direction I indicated.

“Yes, as a matter of fact...”

Her hand came up to cut me off as she spoke, “You wait right here.”

“Sure,” I answered. “I’ve got no place else to be.”

I don’t know if she heard me or not because she was already stalking away toward Ben. While I couldn’t see her face, I had the distinct impression she was no happier to see him than she had been me.



“That was pleasant,” Ben muttered the sarcastic remark as he cranked the steering wheel of his van and backed it out of the parking space.

I didn’t wait for the follow-up I knew he was going to utter, “Don’t say ‘like a root canal’, Ben.”

“How’d you know I was gonna say that?”

“Experience,” I replied.

“Hmmp,” he grunted. “So what’d she say to you?”

“She demanded to know why I was here, so I referred her to you.”

“Thanks a lot,” he told me with no sincerity whatsoever.

“What about you?” I asked. “From where I was, it looked like she was having a meltdown.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” he answered. “She was just her normal pissy self up ‘til she found out I discharged a couple rounds into the vehicle. That’s when she lost it.”

“What did she expect you to do?”

“Hell, I dunno.” He shrugged then cranked the steering wheel to guide us into the downward exit spiral. “Throw myself in front of the fuckin’ car I guess.”

“You pretty much did,” I observed.

“Yeah, well I guess I didn’t get run over enough for her liking.”

It was just before 2:30 in the afternoon, and the scene had officially been cleared. Skid marks had been measured, paint scrapings had been taken, and photographs snapped from every imaginable angle. None of it seemed to me like it would do any good, but there were procedures to be followed, and my opinion of them amounted to very little—in fact, nothing.

“So what happens now?” I asked.

“You’re in for a treat,” he returned. “We get to go back to headquarters and tell our stories to some more coppers.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that.”

The syncopated tone of a cell phone began its rising chirp. I didn’t recognize the tone, so I knew it wasn’t mine. Ben reached to his side and fumbled the warbling device from his belt, swallowing it in his large hand.

“Storm,” he huffed when he got it up to his ear.

As if the mood in the vehicle needed any further darkening, I felt it grow just that much colder in that very instant. A swirling turmoil of pain, anger, and confusion was emanating from my friend, and as I watched him listening to the cell, I saw his shoulders physically droop.

“I know, I know,” he finally said. “But have you noticed the news?”

He fell silent for a moment, and his tumultuous emotions became even more tangible.

“Listen, I can’t do this right now...” he said into the phone, voice rising slightly. “No... No, I’m not... Look, we’ll have to talk about this later... I can’t...”

He stopped mid-sentence, pulled the device away from his ear and regarded it with an angered glance. He stabbed the off button with his thumb then threw it into the console between us as he muttered, “Shit.”

We had just rounded the last turn of the spiral and now sped down the exit ramp, finally coming to a halt at the booth. Ben flashed his badge, and the attendant nodded as he waved us through.

Remnants of the splintered black-and-white-striped barrier gate were piled off to the side of the concrete island. The metal portion of the lift arm protruded as a twisted stub from the mechanism rendering it totally useless, all of it the visual evidence of the kidnapper’s hasty exit.

My friend edged the van forward and after a quick glance in either direction, pulled into the afternoon traffic. I had always made a rule of staying out of Ben’s business. If there were something going on in his life he wanted you to know about, he would tell you in his own due time. Asking him before he was ready only served to drive him away and make him bury the subject even deeper.

However, in extreme cases I was known to break my own rules, and this was one of them. I watched him in silence as we navigated the traffic to the corner and then stopped and waited for the traffic signal to turn.

“You okay?” I finally asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he answered tersely. “Why?”

“I really couldn’t help but overhear...” I let my voice trail off, leaving the rest of the sentence unspoken.

“Sorry about that,” he replied. “Forget about it. It’s nothing.”

“It didn’t sound like nothing, Ben.”

“I said forget it,” he snarled.

We made the rest of the trip to police headquarters in complete silence.



“Where are you?” My wife’s voice issued from the speaker on my cell phone.

It was rapidly approaching six P.M., and I was still downtown though fortunately, not sitting on the concrete stairs in the parking garage. I had finally lost count of how many times I had given my accounting of the events and to how many cops I had given it. They eventually concluded that with the exception of a few adjectives and conjunctions, the story was always the same. No more or less information than the previous recitation.

I don’t guess I could blame them for trying. I was as aware as anyone else of what can be seen but not consciously remembered.

“What, no hello?” I asked.

“I said hello when I answered the phone,” she replied. “Now, where are you?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me” came her guarded response.

“Downtown with Ben.”

“Tell me you’re at a bar, Rowan,” she half asked, half instructed, but the tone of her voice told me that she knew that wasn’t true.

“Sure,” I answered. “It’s called Police Headquarters.”

“Oh Gods, Rowan,” she moaned, then asked, “The seizure?”

“No... Yes... Maybe... I don’t know yet” was my response, confusing as it was to us both. “Have you heard about Brittany Larson?”

“How could I not? It’s been all over...” she started then stopped herself mid-sentence. “Oh, Rowan, no... What? What happened?”

“Kidnapped as far as anyone can tell right now,” I answered. “Although I don’t think whoever did it has any qualms about hurting her.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well... I kind of had the bad fortune of being a witness to the abduction, and it was a bit violent.”

“You what? How?”

I gave her a rundown of the day’s events since we had last spoken; all of which had finally culminated in me using my backside to warm a molded plastic chair next to Ben’s desk for the past few hours.

The promised lunch had eventually happened sometime around three in the afternoon. Unfortunately, it had taken the form of a stale jelly doughnut and a cup of what the officers of the homicide division referred to as coffee. My personal jury was still deliberating on that point.

I told her about that too.

“So anyway,” I continued. “Ben is going to be tied up down here for a bit longer, but they’ve given me the okay to leave.”

“Give me twenty minutes,” she replied to the unasked question.

“I’ll be waiting outside.”

CHAPTER 7

“Bar food?” I said to my wife. “I’ve been stuck down here all day with nothing but a stale doughnut and bad coffee, and you want me to eat BAR food?”

“It’s not ‘bar food,’” she replied as she dropped the Jeep into third gear and veered onto the Kingshighway exit from westbound Interstate 64. “It’s PUB food.”

The top was down, and the warm wind was whipping through the open cab of the vehicle. There was still better than an hour of sunlight left in the day, so it was still hot and humid. Fortunately, the temperature had dropped off by a few degrees, so it wasn’t quite as bad as it had been earlier in the day; if you liked steam baths, that is. Although, I had to admit the artificial breeze generated by the motion of the Jeep went a long way toward making it tolerable.

“There’s a difference?” I asked with a chuckle.

“Aye, and you’ll be finding out soon enough, then,” she answered, dredging up her inherent Celtic brogue with no effort whatsoever. Truth was, it was probably more of an effort for her to hide it.

Felicity was second-generation Irish-American, but you wouldn’t know it to look at her— or especially at times, to hear her. In fact, one would think she had just stepped off an airplane direct from the Emerald Isle.

Her looks were straight out of Celtic myth. She was petite, standing shoeless only slightly more than five feet tall. Her complexion was milky white and smooth like porcelain with the only exception being a light spate of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Bright, green eyes peered out of her doll-like face, and the whole package was framed by spiraling locks of fiery auburn hair that hung down past her waist. If a toy company were to produce a doll to represent Ireland, my wife would make the perfect model for it.

If the looks weren’t enough, she was also possessed of the stereotypical temper that, whether politically correct or not, was so often associated with both the ethnicity and hair color. Fortunately, it wasn’t one that was easily ignited although I had managed to spark it on a few occasions.

Growing up, she had spent almost as much time in Ireland as the United States, even attending college there; hence, she was never completely devoid of a light, Irish lilt in her voice. However, get her around her family, get a few alcoholic drinks in her, or wait until she got overly tired, and her guard would drop. The lilt would morph into a thick brogue, replete with slang and colloquialisms the average American was hard pressed to understand. We’d been married better than twelve years, and she still came up with some that perplexed me.

When she really got riled up, she would even mix languages on you. While certainly not fluent in Gaelic, she had more than a passing familiarity with it. That particular vocabulary, however, consisted of innumerable curses and derisive phrases born of the ancient language, and if provoked, she was more than happy to use them.

On the flip side, she even knew a few of the endearments, and I'd had the good fortune to hear them whispered in my ear from time to time.

"I love it when you talk with an accent," I said, shooting her a grin.

"Aye, what accent?" she asked, still laying it on thick and laughing as she spoke. "You're the one with the accent, then."

"Right," I answered. "Midwest plain and dull. So what's the name of this place again?"

"Seamus O'Donnell's."

"Sounds Irish," I joked.

"Well, duh," she returned.

"So it doesn't sound familiar. Have we been there before?"

"No."

"Hmmm. I thought we'd been to every Irish pub in Saint Louis by now."

"They've only been open a few months."

We had made the loop and merged into the afternoon traffic. She sped up to the next intersection, just catching the light before it switched and turned the vehicle to the right from Kingshighway onto Oakland.

"So how do you know this so called 'pub food' is any good if we haven't been there?" I asked, shooting a glance over at her.

Her hair was pulled back, but loose strands were whipping about her face as she looked over and smiled at me. "I said we haven't been there before. I never said that I hadn't been there."

"Oh," I exclaimed playfully. "So you went there without me, did you?"

"Hey, a girl's got to have lunch, doesn't she?" she laughed.

"Yes, I suppose she does," I replied. "So do they have colcannon and Dublin coddle?"

"Among other things, yes they do."

"And Guinness, of course?"

She glanced at me and raised an eyebrow, giving me an unmistakable stare.

"Okay," I held up my hands in surrender. "I know, I know. Stupid question."

"Well, it IS an Irish pub, Rowan," she laughed.

She downshifted as the traffic signal ahead of us winked yellow, and we rolled to a stop at the white line just as it switched over to a glaring red.

Considering the events of the day, I was surprised to find myself in such a good mood. Truth is, even if today had never happened, I still would have been surprised. I hadn't felt this good about life since the first time I'd been cold-cocked by an unwanted ethereal vision of a horrific murder; and that had been almost four years ago.

A far cry from past experiences, my seizure-induced headache had faded relatively quickly. None of the typical creepy sensations that always accompanied these events had plagued me in the least. Even though I could still feel a troubling shadow falling across my life yet again, it was faint and nebulous. Nothing like the dark foreboding that always forced me into a brooding stupor.

I didn't know if it was some sort of artificially conjured euphoria brought on by my wife's contagious good mood, or what. Maybe I was just getting better at keeping myself grounded and centered. As basic a task as that is for a Witch, it was something I'd been having trouble with for some time now. In the end, I simply didn't care what it was, but I knew one thing for sure— I planned to enjoy every minute of it.

I simply felt good. I was truly relaxed and happy for the first time in a very long while.

I felt my wife's fist thump hard against my shoulder as she playfully punched me. "What are you grinning about, Row?"

I hadn't realized that the broad smile had carved itself into my face, but I suppose it was just part of the mood. "Nothing," I replied, rolling my head to the side so I could look at her. "Not a thing."

"Sure, whatever," she replied with her own smile, then asked, "So, did Ben say when he would be getting out of there?"

"Probably in a couple of hours is what he said. Why?"

"Well, it's only a little after six right now, so that would still be early yet," she replied, pulling her hand across her forehead and dragging some of the wild strands of hair from her face. "Maybe he and Allison could join us later for a pint or two."

"I'm not so sure about that," I replied, remembering that I had purposely not told her about the phone call I'd overheard. Truth was, I didn't actually know to whom Ben was talking on the other end, but I had my suspicions. Still, it was best not to start a rumor, even if it was only between us.

"Come on," she urged. "It'll be fun. *The Don't Be Brothers* are supposed to be playing tonight."

"The what?" I asked, frowning one eyebrow and squinting at her.

"*The Don't Be Brothers*," she repeated. "It's a play on..."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it," I told her as I nodded my head. "I'm just not sure I want it."

"They're really good, Row. I've heard them play before."

"Okay, so speaking of playing, what DO they play?"

She shrugged. "Irish folk songs, what else?"

"You mean Irish drinking songs."

"Of course, they're playing in a Pub."

"So that means we have to sing along."

"Your point?"

"I don't know any of the words, and I doubt if Ben or Allison do either."

"Aye," she said as she shook her index finger at me. "But I do."

"Okay," I gave in, reaching to my belt and grabbing my cell phone. "I'll give him a call, but I don't make any guarantees."

I wasn't actually sure if I would be able to reach him, but I was willing to try. If I was correct, and the earlier call had in fact been from Allison, maybe they had managed to patch things up by now. An evening out might even be just exactly what they needed. After all, it was Friday. They were adults. Their son was old enough not to require a sitter, so that shouldn't be an obstacle. Looking at it that way, there was really nothing to keep them at home.

I thumbed in the speed dial code and put the phone up to my ear. I heard the ringer at the other end issuing from the earpiece, but halfway through the trill it suddenly became muffled. As I listened, a heavy, rhythmic thrum was starting to fill my ears and was effectively dulling the ambient sounds. I glanced around expecting to find a car with a radio blasting heavy metal music somewhere nearby. If that was the source of the noise, however, I couldn't locate it.

When the second ring sounded, a coppery metallic taste began creeping up the back of my tongue, and I instantly tensed. The sensation wasn't new to me, and I desperately feared what I thought it was about to bring. The false sense of security I had felt a few moments ago was now fleeing in earnest.

A tidal wave of déjà vu slammed into me full force, and I knew it was more than just a trick of an overactive imagination. I had been here before, experiencing an unwanted psychic event from the passenger seat of my wife's Jeep. I opened my mouth to warn her of what was about to happen only to have my words halted in my throat by the sound of Felicity's own frightened voice.

"R... Ro... Rowan..." she stuttered, a note of confused terror like I'd never heard from her before was interwoven through the syllables of my name.

I turned my head only to see my wife's normally beautiful face drawn tight into a pained grimace. Her teeth were clenched, and her back began to arch, pressing her body hard against the shoulder belt. A split second later she was shaking uncontrollably. Her head snapped back, thudding against the headrest as her eyes began to roll upward.

The Jeep suddenly lurched forward as her feet slipped from the clutch and brake, her right foot landing momentarily on the accelerator. I dropped the phone, grabbing at the steering wheel as I wrenched the stick shift into neutral. The engine coughed then settled to an idle, but we were still rolling forward.

"Felicity!" I screamed, but she couldn't hear me. I could only barely hear myself as the driving rhythm continued to grow inside my head.

Her body was bucking in violent spasms against the safety harness, and she continued to vibrate with the physical tremor. Her arms were drawn up to her chest, turned inward, and her hands were postured like tight paws, her fingernails digging into her palms.

A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth as she frothed, and I could see that she was biting her tongue. The back of her head continued to slam against the padded headrest, and I mutely thanked the ancients for it being there.

Sharp but distant noises began to invade the heavy beat in my head, and I recognized them as blaring horns. A quick glance forward told me that the traffic signal had switched to green. We were moving forward, rolling by the grace of leftover momentum, but it was far from what traffic would bear. Still, it was too fast for my liking considering the circumstances.

"Felicity!" I called out again, ignoring the futility of the action.

I was struggling to guide the rolling Jeep while at the same time unbuckling my own seatbelt. My first thought was to get my foot on the brake and bring the vehicle to a stop, but I wasn't the most limber individual on the face of the planet, and I wasn't sure I could get around my wife's stiffened legs. In a hostile attempt to assume control of my emotions, a wave of panic began sweeping over me as it elected to challenge my desperate concern for Felicity and move itself into the top position.

A prolonged whimper emanated from my wife as she jerked against the tensed muscles of her body, and I realized it was a scream that couldn't escape. The other realization that struck me square in the face was that the tables had turned. I was helplessly watching her go through all of the things she had stood by and watched me suffer so many times before.

I managed to release the catch on my shoulder harness and twist toward her, leveraging myself against the back of the seat. As I brought my leg up, my knee cracked hard into

the dash, sending a lance of pain through the joint. I barked out an expletive as I pitched forward, and the back of my hand raked against the jangling key ring that hung from the ignition switch.

It was then that I realized the panic had taken over long before I'd ever noticed its icy fingers clawing at my stomach. A brief but welcome stab of lucidity hit me, and the logic it brought along set off a chain reaction in my brain. I reached for the keys and gave them a hard twist, switching off the engine. That done, I quickly wrenched the gear shift into first with a hard shove, doing little good for the transmission but bringing us to a lurching halt.

The dark music was pounding inside my skull as I scrambled from my seat amid the dulled blare of horns. Angry motorists were pulling around our stalled vehicle and speeding off, narrowly missing me in the process. The commotion began to die down only after I could be seen pulling my wife's still-seizing body from the driver's seat.

It was official. I was no longer in a good mood.

CHAPTER 8

“Lemme get this straight...” Ben’s voice came at me over the cell phone. “Firehair went all *Twilight Zone* this time instead of you?”

Firehair was just one of the nicknames he had for my wife, but it was by far his favorite.

“Yeah, kind of,” I answered. “Or maybe in addition to.”

Felicity and I were parked diagonally across from one another in a booth at Seamus O’Donnell’s. She had pressed herself as far into the shadows of the corner as she could get, and I was keeping a close eye on her.

The pub wasn’t my first choice of places to be given the situation, but it was the closest for what she needed. Fortunately, the evening rush had not yet started, so I was able to carry on the phone conversation without yelling over the noise of a crowd or stepping outside.

“What?” he chirped, a note of concern leaping into his tone. “You were both all zoned out in a moving vehicle?”

“No, not exactly,” I explained, still trying to get a handle on what had happened myself. “I had some ethereal background noise in my head, but I never stepped over the line. I did that this morning before you came by.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Do what?” he barked again. “So you did the la-la land thing this mornin’, and you’re just now tellin’ me?”

“I didn’t have anything to connect it with at the time, Ben,” I replied. “Then the whole thing with the kidnapping happened... I mean, give me a break.”

“So you think it all has something to do with the Brittany Larson abduction?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

“Don’t be so goddamned overconfident, Rowan,” he chided.

“Cut me some slack, Ben,” I replied stiffly. “I’m still a bit rattled. This kind of thing has never happened to Felicity before. I’m not real happy about it, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Yeah... Sorry. You’re right,” he apologized. “So listen, where are you two right now? Home?”

“No.” I shook my head out of reflex as I spoke. “We’re in a bar down on Oakland called Seamus O’Donnell’s.”

“What’d ya’ go to a bar for?” he asked, a note of confusion in his voice.

“It was the closest place where I could get her out of the heat and let her rest up,” I told him. “Besides, it’s actually where we were headed for dinner anyway.”

“She doin’ okay?”

“Seems to be.” I looked across at Felicity. She was still at the far end of the booth but had leaned forward now, elbows on the table, eyes closed, and fingers slowly massaging her temples. “But judging from the looks of her and speaking from experience, she’s got a killer headache at the moment.”

“What about you?” he pressed. “You gonna go all loopy or anything?”

“Like I actually know when that’s going to happen, Ben?”

“Yeah, forget I asked.” He huffed out a heavy sigh then muttered, “Jeezus fuck, white man. What am I gonna do with you two?”

“Wish I could help you there, Chief,” I told him. “I’m wondering the same thing myself.”

“Not what I wanted to hear,” he replied. “So listen, stay right where you are. I’m pretty much done here, so I’m gonna shake loose and come down there.”

“We’ll be waiting.”

I thumbed off the phone and clipped it back onto my belt then turned my full attention back to my wife. Her eyes were still closed, and she was carefully working her fingers from temples to forehead and back again. Her lips were parted slightly, and I watched the rise and fall of her chest as she struggled to regulate her breathing. I knew exactly how she felt, and it was killing me to see her like this.

Of course, I suppose now I knew exactly how she felt when the roles had been reversed.

“I’d like to tell you it gets better,” I said softly. “But, it’s more like you just get used to it.”

“*Fek*,” she muttered the colloquial Irish profanity.

“Yeah, I know,” I agreed.

“How do you do it?” she asked then moaned, still not opening her eyes.

“I wish I could answer that,” I replied. “I just do. If it’s any consolation, I’d rather not.”

“Aspirin,” she murmured.

“Let me see if I can get you some,” I told her as I started up from my seat.

“Purse. Side. Tin,” she told me, exaggerated economy in her selection of verbiage.

I pulled her purse across the table and rummaged about in the side pocket. Under any other circumstances I wouldn’t have dreamed of sticking my hand into the carryall. As I had told my wife countless times before, a woman’s handbag seemed to me to be a kind of tame black hole: a place where an impossible number of items disappeared and could only be found by the woman who owned the receptacle in the first place. At the moment, hers was definitely living up to that assessment.

“Left. Bottom. Yellow tin.” She offered another set of terse instructions.

I pushed my hand deeper into the pocket and finally managed to withdraw the sought after container of aspirin. I sat it on the table and pushed it over to her then started sliding out of the booth as she slitted her eyes and reached for the tin.

“I’ll go get you some water,” I told her.

“Black Bush,” she asserted.

“No whisky with aspirin,” I replied. “Water.”

“Black Bush,” she repeated.

“Water.”

She tossed the tin in front of her and it bounced across the table, tablets noisily rattling around inside. Then it slid off the edge and clattered to the floor.

“Black Bush.” This time it was a demand.

I knew exactly where she was coming from, and I didn’t fault her a bit. The truth was that the aspirin really wouldn’t do much good for the kind of headache she had anyway. Not that booze was any better remedy, but it would help take the edge off.

“Shot or rocks,” I conceded with a soft sigh.

“Bottle,” she replied.



“Slow down,” I said to my wife as she drained the tumbler and clacked it back onto the wooden table with a heavy thunk. “That’s your second double.”

Her hand was still wrapped around the glass, and her head was tilted back, face pointing upward to the ceiling. She drew in a deep breath and then exhaled heavily, puffing out her cheeks as she did so.

“Aye, but I said bottle, not double,” she stated as she lowered her gaze down to meet mine.

“Give those a chance to work,” I told her. “They aren’t even in your bloodstream yet.”

She frowned back at me but didn’t argue. She slouched down in her seat, and a moment later I felt her sneaker-clad feet slide up onto the bench next to me. She reached up and pressed her palms against either side of her head as if she were trying to squeeze it back into shape.

“This sucks,” she moaned.

“I know,” I replied.

I was fully aware that the words were of little consolation, but they were the best I had to offer at the moment. I wanted desperately to ask her about the experience. But, she needed some time to come to terms with what had happened, so I didn’t broach the subject.

Usually such an ethereal event came with some manner of built-in, albeit obscure, reference to something in the here and now—although, admittedly, mine from earlier this day had held no such prize. Neither had the similar ones I’d suffered through at the beginning of the year.

Patrons were starting to fill the establishment as round one of the dinner rush came upon us. It hadn’t reached the point of obnoxious as yet, but the noise level was rapidly approaching that of annoying static. It didn’t seem to be bothering Felicity, though.

“You look like shit.” Ben’s voice cut through the hum of the growing crowd.

I looked up to see him standing over my shoulder, his gaze locked on my wife.

“But you’re still a hell of a lot prettier than paleface over here.” He jerked a thumb at me as he added the comment.

A waitress sidled up to the table and shot me a questioning look. “Do you folks need anything?”

“I’m good,” I replied.

“Black Bush, neat, double,” Felicity chimed in.

“Felicity…” I admonished.

“All right then.” She cut me off with an annoyed tone lacing her words. “Jamieson, neat, double.”

I shook my head and waved my hand in surrender as I looked up at the waitress. “Give her whatever she wants.”

“Black Bush,” my wife chirped.

The waitress craned her neck and looked up at Ben. “How about you?”

“Beer,” Ben told her.

“We have Guinness on tap,” she offered.

“No honey,” Ben shook his head. “Beer isn’t s’posed to be black. Bring me somethin’ in a mug that’s cold, fizzy, and beer-colored.”

“Whatever you say.” She shook her head back at him then before she turned and walked away, she added rhetorically, “Do you want me to bring you a straw with that?”

“Friendly place you picked here.” Ben made the sarcastic comment as he slid into the booth next to Felicity.

“Aye, you’re in a pub, Ben,” my wife informed him, still lounging in her seat. “Quit bein’ a Colleen.”

“She’s doin’ the accent,” he remarked as he looked over at me. “The *Twilight Zone* thing do that to her?”

“Leave me alone,” Felicity muttered.

“I’m sure it wore her out, but I think the two double Irish whisky’s are to blame,” I replied.

“Yeah, okay.” He nodded, glancing over at her then back to me. “She’s not gonna start talkin’ that gibberish is she?”

“*Duairc*,” Felicity chimed.

“That answer your question?” I asked.

“She just called me a name, didn’t she?”

I shrugged. “Probably.”

“I said you’re a rude man,” she offered.

“Well, at least this time you got the gender right.” He shook his head and looked back to me. “So explain it to me. What’s up with the squaw doin’ the la-la land thing? I thought that was your gig.”

“Me too,” I answered with a nod. “I’m not sure what’s going on there myself.”

“Will you quit talking about me like I’m not here, then,” Felicity insisted.

“Okay. Chill.” Ben jumped the tracks and boarded another train of thought. “So what about this mornin’? What’s up with that?”

“Again, I don’t know.” I shrugged. “The episode was almost exactly like the ones I had back in January.”

“You mean when you were floppin’ around like a fish outta water when Porter was...” his voice trailed off at the mention of the name.

“Yeah,” I acknowledged and finished the sentence for him. “When Porter was trying to kill me.”

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly. “Didn’t mean to dredge that up.”

“No problem. It’s not something I’ve managed to forget yet anyhow.”

“So I thought those stopped after he was locked up?”

“They did. Until today that is.”

Ben frowned hard and stared back at me. Without a word, he reached to his belt and pulled out his cell phone. After an aborted attempt, he managed to key in a number with his thick finger and tucked the device up to his ear. I had a feeling that I knew what he was getting ready to do, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer he was seeking.

“Yeah, Roy?” he said after a moment. “Yeah, it’s Ben Storm. Not much, you?... Yeah, so listen, I need a favor. Can you check somethin’ for me? Yeah, I need status on an inmate... No, don’t have his number, but you’ll probably remember ‘im. Uh-huh...

Name's Eldon Andrew Porter... Yeah, thought you would... Yeah. Not a problem. Yeah, on my cell. Great. Bye."

As Ben ended the call, the waitress came toward the table, expertly maneuvering through the crowd with a drink-burdened serving tray held above her shoulder. In a practiced motion, she swooped it down and plucked a tumbler full of whisky from it then slid the glass in front of Felicity. Next, she placed a pint glass of beer in front of Ben. In a reverse motion, she hefted the platter back up to her shoulder and regarded my friend.

"Cold, fizzy, and well, yellow-colored," she said, reaching with her free hand into the change pouch around her waist and withdrawing a straw. She tossed it in front of Ben and shot him a smile as she walked off. "Enjoy."

"Jeez..." he muttered, shaking his head at me.

"So you don't really think Porter has escaped or something do you?" I asked abruptly, the edginess in my voice was obvious even to me.

"Don't know," he replied. "But we'll know shortly. Roy's an old friend of mine, and he works for the Missouri Department of Corrections."

"But wouldn't there have been some kind of bulletin or alert or something if he'd escaped?" I pressed.

"Depends, Row."

"That doesn't make me feel very secure, Ben."

"Listen, Kemosabe, don't get all worked up," he told me. "I'm just checkin' to be sure. C-Y-A and all that shit."

"Yeah, okay."

I knew that my tone was less than convincing. My friend shook his head then brushed the straw out of the way and lifted the pint of beer. After a long swallow, he rested it back on the coaster and watched it intently as he slowly spun the glass.

"So you said on the phone that you were movin' when Felicity went all la-la," he finally said, bludgeoning the stalled conversation in a new direction with a blunt segue.

"Yeah." I nodded. "Kind of. When she seized, her foot slipped off the brake, and we started into the intersection."

"Not too fast then?"

"Not really I don't guess." I shrugged. "But I still probably didn't do the transmission any favors."

"How so?"

"When I popped it into gear."

"I don't follow."

"To stop the Jeep," I explained. "I switched off the key and then popped it into gear. Kind of an abrupt stop, but it worked."

"I thought you said you weren't movin' too fast?"

"We weren't really. Just rolling more or less."

"Just rollin'?"

"Yeah, why?"

He creased his forehead. "Then why didn't ya' just pull the emergency brake?"

I closed my eyes and hung my head in sudden embarrassment as the mental picture of the Jeep's center console painted itself in my brain.

Ben looked back at me, his face spread into a grin, and I could tell that he was already formulating a wisecrack. Fortunately for me, his cell phone began its low warble, cutting

him off before he could utter the taunt. He motioned me to wait and answered it. “Storm. Yeah. That was fast. Yeah. Yeah... You’re sure? Okay, thanks, Roy. I owe you one... Uh-yeah,” my friend hesitated for a moment before continuing, “Yeah, I’ll tell ‘er. Bye.”

A slightly pained look crept in to replace his grin, and I wasn’t sure why, but for some reason, I could tell that it came from something other than the query about Eldon Porter.

I raised an eyebrow and dipped my head at him. “All good?”

“Yeah,” he replied as he fumbled to put the cell phone back on his belt, finally giving up and dropping it on the table in front of him. “Porter is locked away safe and sound, preaching to all the other wingnuts in the population.”

“Great.” I frowned.

“Hey, a coupl’a minutes ago you were getting’ ready to panic on me,” he observed. “What’s up?”

“No I wasn’t.”

“Yeah, right. What’s the deal?”

“Okay, maybe I was,” I admitted. “A little. But I guess maybe I was still just hoping for an easy explanation to all of this.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Woulda been nice, but look at it this way; at least he’s not on the street.”

“True. So since we’ve ruled that out, maybe it is the Brittany Larson thing after all,” I offered with a shake of my head, not really believing it myself. “But that wouldn’t explain why I was having the seizures in January.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” he agreed.

I picked up my pint of Stout and took a sip then set it back on the table. The murmur of the crowd was ramping up to a dull roar now, and I looked out of the booth, glancing around at the milling bodies.

Across the way, the bar itself was stacked two deep with people waiting for drinks or simply inhabiting their claimed bit of real estate at the polished, wooden counter. I knew it should be approaching eight, and the band would be playing soon. At that point, we would be unable to carry on any kind of worthwhile conversation, not to mention the fact that I was in no mood for singing along with drinking songs. I suspected that Felicity no longer was either.

I scanned the wall, looking for a clock, and my eyes came to rest on the television set perched on a shelf above the rows of liquor bottles. I watched as a news update filled the screen, absently taking note of the ever-changing price of gasoline.

When the tube flickered and displayed the picture of a twenty-something young woman inset over the shoulder of the anchor, my heart skipped a beat. Beneath the photo was the caption, Tamara Linwood.

Neurons fired in rapid succession, flooding my brain with a not-so-distant memory as I stared at the picture.

Gruesome discovery.

Badly decomposed human arm.

Shallow grave.

Body may be that of Tamara Linwood, the grade school teacher who disappeared from the parking lot of Westview Shopping Mall back in January...

The memory of the phantom metallic tang tickled the back of my tongue, and I closed my eyes. I definitely wasn't going to call it easy, but there it was— the explanation for at least a part of my day.

And, I was absolutely certain that I didn't like it.

CHAPTER 9

“Tamara Linwood,” I said aloud, turning my attention back to Ben.

“Do what?” he asked with a puzzled look.

“Tamara Linwood,” I repeated, pointing at the screen across the room. “On the TV.”

He twisted in his seat and shot a quick glance over his shoulder. The news anchor had already moved on to the next story, but my friend managed to pick up on what I’d meant anyway. “What? You mean the missing teacher?” he asked. “So, what about ‘er?”

“That’s why the seizures. She’s got to be what this is all about.”

“How do you figure?”

“It adds up,” I offered. “She went missing in January, right?”

“Yeah.” He nodded.

I continued. “And they found her remains this morning.”

“That hasn’t been confirmed.”

“I’m confirming it for you, Ben. Those are Tamara Linwood’s remains.”

“You sure?”

“They’ve got to be.”

“Listen, Row.” He held up his hand and nodded quickly. “I know better than to not believe what you’re sayin’, but we’ve been down this road before. I can’t just march into my lieutenant’s office and announce something based on one of your feelings. Besides, that case belongs to the MCS... And well... you know that situation.”

I gave him a frustrated nod. “I know, but they ARE her remains. I’m sure of it.”

“How?” he asked.

“I just told you,” I replied. “The timing of the seizures. It makes sense.”

“To you.”

“I thought you believed me?”

“I do, white man,” he appealed. “Kinda. I mean I know you’re makin’ a connection with somethin’... or someone... or whatever the hell, but how do ya’ know it’s actually her? How do you know it’s not someone else who got murdered in January? I hate to say it, but we had a few cases runnin’ then besides hers.”

“It’s a gut feeling, Ben.”

“And I can respect that, believe me, but you still don’t have any proof. Listen, since we’re talkin’ about a schoolteacher, look at it this way. It’s just like homework from eighth grade math class. Just havin’ the answer ain’t good enough. You gotta show the work that gave ya’ the answer.”

“With the ethereal, that is easier said than done,” I replied.

“Yeah, I know. But lemme ask you this: So what? So what if they are her remains?”

“Then maybe we can figure out who killed her.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the plan whether that’s what’s left of her or not.”

“You know what I mean, Ben. Maybe I can help.”

“How? I thought you said your little trips into the *Twilight Zone* hadn’t been real informative.”

“They haven’t,” I agreed and then added, “Yet.”

“Yeah, and there’s the catch. Yet may never happen.”

“Come on, Ben. You know how quickly these things can turn.”

“Yeah, I do, but which way is it gonna turn? This whole thing might just go away like it did back in January.”

I didn’t want to admit it, but he had a valid point. Still, for me, there was an overwhelming imperative. The psychic episodes were happening to Felicity now. I simply wasn’t willing to stand by and allow that to continue, be it a half dozen more times, or only one. Something had to be done.

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. This feels different,” I appealed.

“Hate to say it, Row, but…”

“…I’ve got to give you more than that,” I completed the sentence before he could. It was a lament that I’d heard from him more than once, so the lyrics were all too familiar. “Well then,” I switched tactics, “How long before they know for sure about the identity?”

“Not my department.” He shrugged. “Could be tomorrow, could be next week. Could be never, I guess. Dunno.”

“Rowan?” Felicity interjected.

“What’s up, honey?” I turned to her. “You okay?”

My wife was still lounged in her seat, arms folded across her chest. Her head was tilted back, and her eyes were closed. She actually looked relaxed for the first time in the past couple of hours.

“We’ll need to go before too long, then,” she murmured. “I have papers to grade for class tomorrow.”

I knew she wasn’t fully conscious of what she had just said. I had been in such a state before, myself. She was simply repeating a memory that wasn’t even her own. While it was a far cry from the ‘work’ Ben said I needed to show, in my mind her words served to verify the revelation I had just espoused.

I slowly turned my face back to Ben but didn’t utter a sound. I allowed my wife’s comment to stand alone as my personal vindication. He looked over at Felicity for a moment then back to me.

“She’s teachin’ a photography class somewhere, right?” he finally asked, but I could tell from the tone of his voice he already knew the answer.

I just shook my head.

My friend’s hand slipped up to his forehead, as if on automatic pilot, then slid slowly back, smoothing his hair. When his fingers came to rest on his neck he spoke. “Okay. Fine. I don’t know what good it’ll do, but I’ll make some calls.”



Felicity was still sleeping when the phone rang the next morning. I had just finished filling my coffee cup for the third time and was walking out of the kitchen when the device emitted its annoying demand for attention. I took a step back and plucked the receiver from the cradle without even looking at the caller ID box.

“Hello?”

“I wake you up?” Ben asked at the other end.

“Nope. Neither has the coffee,” I quipped.

“That’s ‘cause you don’t make it strong enough. You need some cop coffee.”

“I’ll pass. I think that cup I had yesterday is what kept me up last night.”

“See what I mean?”

“Because it was eating a hole in my stomach,” I added.

“Shoulda had another doughnut. They soak up all the bad shit.”

“Yeah, right. I’ll still take a pass on it.”

He chuckled. “Your loss.”

“That’s a matter of opinion, Ben,” I told him then took a sip of my java. “So what’s up?”

“You want the good news or the bad news first?” he queried.

“Depends. How bad is the bad?”

“Bad enough. I’ve been re-assigned to the Major Case Squad.”

“I thought that was a good thing?” I questioned.

“Yeah, well, it’s the good news too.”

“Ooo-kaayyy,” I replied slowly. “I’m assuming there’s an explanation to go with that?”

“Good news, I’m back on the MCS. Bad news, I’m workin’ the Brittany Larson abduction with the Bible Bitch.” He offered the matter-of-fact explanation like someone who had not quite come to terms with having been condemned.

“Lucky you.”

“Yeah,” he agreed sarcastically. “Lucky me.”

“So what brought this on do you think?” I asked.

“Who knows?” he replied. I could almost see him shrugging at the other end. “Got the call this morning. I’m thinkin’ maybe the fact that Mandalay’s the lead agent coulda had somethin’ to do with it.”

He was referring to Constance Mandalay, a mutual friend and special agent assigned to the FBI’s St. Louis field office. It stood to reason that the Federal authorities would have been called in since it was a kidnapping. And, considering that they had worked together before, Constance might well have requested him to be a part of the team from local law enforcement. In a sense, that was slightly amusing itself, because the first time the two had met they had absolutely despised one another.

Still, it was surprising that Lieutenant Albright would be willing to give in, considering her personal mandate regarding Ben’s involvement with the MCS; unless, of course, she had her own motives, that is.

“Makes sense,” I acknowledged, then voiced my thought. “But, what about Albright?”

“Search me,” he replied. “But you’d better bet I’ll be watchin’ my back. Somethin’s hinky with that if ya’ ask me.”

“Yeah. Good idea,” I agreed. “But, hey, at least you’re back in the fold. That’s good news.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m not so sure I’m all that excited about a Feeb fightin’ my battle for me though.”

“Look at it as reinforcements,” I offered.

“Yeah, sure.” He didn’t sound convinced.

I decided to maneuver away from what was obviously a sore spot. “So do they have any leads yet?”

“They’re workin’ on a couple, but I haven’t got the full run-down. Headin’ in for a briefing in about forty-five minutes.”

“What about the car? You got the license plate number, right?”

“Car was found abandoned in North County,” he replied. “No fuckin’ idea how they got that far without gettin’ popped, but they did. Both it and plates were on a hot sheet. Car got jacked in Racine, Wisconsin. Plates were off a van registered to a homeless shelter in Chicago. Both of ‘em were stolen weeks ago.”

“Great,” I offered with a healthy dose of sarcasm. “No evidence though?”

“The crime scene guys have been all over it. Found Larson’s blood in the trunk. Some hairs. Plenty of prints but still no hits on AFIS yet.” He referred to the automated fingerprint identification system. “So yeah, there’s evidence all right, but this ain’t a TV show. Evidence helps convict, not necessarily find.”

“Yeah, you’ve pointed that out before.”

“The thing that’s got ‘em worried right now is that we’re comin’ up real fast on twenty-four hours, and there hasn’t been any contact from the kidnapper yet.”

“That’s unusual I take it?”

“Yes and no. Usually if you’re gonna get a ransom demand, you get it within the first twenty-four.”

He didn’t have to tell me what it meant if no such demand was forthcoming. My own tortured imagination was taking care of that just fine.

“But there are exceptions, right?” I asked.

“Hell, there’re always exceptions,” he sighed. “But the odds do a big nosedive if ya’ know what I’m sayin’.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “I know what you mean.”

“So listen, Row, there’s another reason I called.” He proceeded to steer the conversation back onto the original path. “About the whole Tamara Linwood thing from last night.”

“Yeah, do you have something?”

“Nothin’ you’re gonna like,” he continued. “I made some calls, but it ain’t good. The real deal is I’m not tight with anybody who’s workin’ it.”

“Nobody?”

“Nope. Nobody. The case has actually aged enough with no new leads that it kinda got back-burnered for a while. There’re only a coupl’a coppers assigned to it at this point, and they’re disciples of her holiness, Bible Barb.”

“Okay, so what about the remains? Did they make an ID yet? Wouldn’t that get them rolling?”

“They’re still waiting for results,” he answered. “There wasn’t much left, so it might all come down to DNA.”

“I seem to remember DNA takes awhile,” I remarked.

“Yeah. Could be a coupl’a weeks.”

“What about dental?”

“Between you and me?”

“Sure.”

“Seriously, Row,” he pressed. “What I’m about to tell ya’ is not for public consumption.”

“I understand, Ben,” I acknowledged. “What is it? Did the killer pull her teeth or something?”

“There’s no head,” he replied succinctly.

“You mean…” I allowed my voice to trail off.

“I mean whoever killed her sawed her head off, and it didn’t get buried with the rest of the remains,” he answered.

“Gods…” I muttered.

“Yeah.”

A memory flitted through my brain, and enough of it made an immediate impression on me to spark a question. “Wasn’t there another murder similar to that awhile back?”

“Sarah Hart,” Ben answered. “Disappeared from the same parking lot. Remains turned up in a wooded area several months later. No head. That’s why that info hasn’t been released about the Linwood case yet. Not until we get a handle on it at least.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Haven’t we had our quota of serial killers yet?”

“Guess not.” His voice held a disgusted tone. “Shit, Row, statistically there are more of ‘em out there than you imagine. The connection between crimes just doesn’t always get made right away.”

“Maybe so, but I still want to know what’s making me a magnet for their victims.”

“Yeah…” he responded, voice quiet.

I stared at the floor for a moment, listening to the silence that had swollen between us. In the edge of my vision I could see a quarter-sized pentacle resting against my chest. The five-pointed star enclosed by a circle was dangling from a chain around my neck, and I couldn’t remember the last time I had taken it off. It was a symbol of man, spirit, and the elements— a symbol of my faith. It was a constant reminder of the path I had chosen long ago and of my identity as a Witch.

At this particular moment, I wished that I could take it off and shed that identity in a bid to stave off the horrors I knew were soon to come. But, as surely as I knew they were coming, I also knew the piece of jewelry was only a physical symbol. I could not change what I was or what I was destined to do that easily. In fact, I doubted I could change it at all.

“So it all hinges on the identity of the remains right now?” I finally asked.

“Yeah,” he replied. “The general feelin’ is that it’s her. They’re workin’ on that assumption, but until it’s official, no one’s jumpin’ to any wild conclusions. Right now they’re workin’ a partial print but dunno if that is gonna go anywhere.”

“So where does that leave us for now?” I asked.

“That’s the thing, white man,” he replied. “It kinda leaves us nowhere. Pretty much me working the Larson abduction and you doin’ your thing with computers.”

“This is really going to heat up if those are in fact Tamara Linwood’s remains, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Yeah it is.”

“So, what about the seizures?” I asked.

“What about ‘em?” he asked rhetorically. “I told ya’ the deal on that last night.”

“But what if Felicity has another one?” I pressed. “What if I have another one?”

He huffed out a sigh and then said, “There’s nothin’ I can do, Row. If there was, you know I would. So… So, maybe you two shouldn’t be doin’ any drivin’ for a while.”

CHAPTER 10

“You know, you’ve been avoiding talking about this all day,” I said to my wife.

It was now rapidly approaching seven-thirty in the evening, and she was rushing around the house haphazardly stuffing ritual items into her nylon backpack. As usual, she was running late.

Physically, she had bounced back from the episode the previous evening much better than I had expected. In fact, on the outside, if I hadn’t been a witness to it, I wouldn’t have been able to tell anything had happened. Still, I knew something had to be going on behind those green eyes, and she wasn’t being very forthcoming. Scratch that; she was all but denying it.

I had filled her in on the conversation I’d had with Ben, but much to my dismay, she had simply taken it all in with calm detachment. I’m sure it was largely due to the seizure she had experienced, but the radical shift in her personality was disconcerting to say the least.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she told me matter-of-factly.

“I know better than that, Felicity,” I replied. “Think about who you’re talking to. I’ve been there, remember?”

“Exactly, so you know there’s nothing to talk about,” she returned.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged. “I saw nothing. Just like you.”

“You must have seen something,” I countered. “What about the grading papers thing?”

“I don’t even remember saying that, Row.”

“But you did, whether you remember it or not.”

“Okay, so I said it. Your point is?”

“That you were channeling the spirit of Tamara Linwood,” I said. “Or her memories at least, which means recent experiences can’t be far behind.”

“So?”

“So you have to have seen something, it’s just not in your conscious mind.”

“Good.”

“What do you mean, ‘good’?”

“I mean, good. Maybe I don’t want it to be in my conscious mind.”

I shook my head harshly. “You aren’t like that, Felicity. You and I both know it. You aren’t going to run from the responsibility.”

“Maybe I don’t want the responsibility,” she spat back. “Did you ever think of that?”

“Do you think I wanted it?” I returned. “It pretty much just got dumped in my lap.”

“And it’s been fucking up our lives ever since,” she stated with enough bluntness to give me pause.

“I haven’t exactly got control over it you know,” I replied sharply.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” she answered.

I shut my eyes and rubbed my forehead for a second before reopening them and letting out a heavy sigh. “You’re right. This whole conversation has gotten off track.”

She looked back at me wide-eyed, gave her head a slight shake, and shrugged again. “Has it?”

“Yes it has. My original question in all of this is *why*. *Why* is this happening to *you* now?” I submitted. “*Why you* instead of me?”

“Not instead. It happened to you too.”

“You’re being evasive, Felicity. You know what I’m talking about.”

“Coincidence. Sympathy. Destiny.” She offered the words in a quick stream and then followed them up with a quick change of subject. “Can you hand me that copy of *Everyday Magic* on the table there?”

I looked at her in silence, inspecting her face carefully. There was something just not right about the way she was acting and moreover, the way she felt to me, and I didn’t mean the current argument.

She had erected an ethereal wall about herself, creating a shield against the outside. It was something she had automatically done the moment the psychic episode had ended last evening. I knew it was an act of self-preservation, and it was exactly what any Witch in her position would do. That, in and of itself, was a good thing; but, she was keeping me out as well, and that bothered me.

I kept telling myself that the enforced distance was just because of the newness of the situation and though she wouldn’t directly admit it, because of the fear I knew she must be experiencing deep down inside. I had lived with the very same emotion swirling in my gut for long enough to know the pain.

Still, I couldn’t help but feel there was something more going on. I just couldn’t get it to sit still long enough to peg exactly what it was.

She looked back at me questioningly and raised an eyebrow. “It’s right there. Behind you. Please?”

I twisted and picked up the book then slowly handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said as she took the tome from me and then stuffed it into her backpack. She continued flitting about the room as if the previous conversation had never occurred.

I continued watching her and resigned myself to the fact that I wasn’t going to be able to pressure her into talking to me about this. I suppose it wasn’t all that much different the first time it had happened to me, but that didn’t make it any easier to take.

“After what happened yesterday, I’d still be a lot more comfortable if you rode with someone,” I finally said.

“Okay,” she replied. “I’ll ride with you.”

“Funny,” I told her. “Very funny.”

“I was being serious,” she answered without looking at me.

I borrowed a page from her current playbook and ignored the comment. “Maybe you should beg off and just stay home. They’ll be fine without you for one evening.”

“Can’t,” she told me. “I’m the one giving the lesson tonight.”

“So postpone it.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to. Besides, what good is a Coven meeting without a Priestess?”

“Felicity...”

She turned to face me, shuffling things in the knapsack and then zipping it shut. “Come with me.”

I shook my head. “You know I can’t do that.”

“Rowan...” she spoke my name then looked away while chewing at her lower lip. She brought her gaze back to my face and adopted an almost pleading tone. “This was your decision alone. No one in the Coven wanted you to leave.”

“I had to,” I answered succinctly.

“No you didn’t,” she appealed. “No one blames you for anything that happened.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do,” she shot back. “You are the only one to hold yourself in contempt. You had no control over what a crazed maniac did.”

“He did it because of me,” I replied.

“If it hadn’t been you, it would have been someone else who was openly Pagan. You know that.”

“But it wasn’t someone else. It was me, and he killed them to get to me.”

“So?” she spat. “That doesn’t make it your fault.”

“It’s my fault that I didn’t stop him.”

“You DID stop him.”

“Not in time to save Randy or Millicent.”

We stood looking at one another. A gelid hush frosted the air between us, expanding out to fill the room. The rhythmic tick-tock of the swinging pendulum on our wall clock clacked dully out of time with my slow breaths as I watched my wife. The passing seconds kept appending themselves to the end of the measure, lengthening the painful silence with each beat. As if pre-ordained to mark the end of the torture, the hammer on the timepiece drew back with a mechanical whir then fell hard, striking a single blow against the chime. The initial sharpness of the bonging sound slowly flowed through the room, softening as it faded to nothingness.

“I have to go,” Felicity stated simply, slipping a single strap of the knapsack up over her left shoulder as she brushed past me.

I didn’t turn nor even say a word. I heard the deadbolt snap and the door creak slightly on the hinges as she swung it open. I could sense her hesitation as she stood in the open doorway, and I could feel her eyes on my back.

“You know, Rowan,” she finally said. “You can stay gone for a year and a day, or you can stay gone forever, it’s up to you. But a Coven is family. You know that. You have people... people who are more than just friends that are worried about you. They’re your family, and they want to help if you’ll just let them.”

She grew quiet for a moment, and I slowly turned to face her. She was standing with one hand on the doorknob, staring back at me with a pained sadness in her face.

As I watched her, she swallowed hard then spoke again. “You know... This will never be over until you stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

With that, she was gone.



I was still brooding when the dogs began barking at the heavy noises on the front porch. I shushed them as I glanced away from the television to quickly check the clock. Only a little over an hour had passed since Felicity had left, so it didn't seem likely that she was already returning.

I muted the sound on the television and listened closely, wondering if the noise had simply been one of the cats leaping down from the ledge and thudding on the decking of the porch. It wouldn't be the first time such a thing had set off what we affectionately called the 'dog alarm'.

There was nothing but ambient sound for a moment, and I was just about to up the volume again when a scrape and thud sounded. The new thump was followed by the creak of the screen door levering open. The canines stood their ground and renewed their vocal attempt to keep the intruder at bay, our English setter emitting a dangerous sounding growl that was echoed by a throaty rumble from the Australian cattle dog.

A moment later the doorbell rang, sending its harsh tone echoing through the house. The dogs immediately exploded once again into angry barks meant to repel the invader.

I wasn't expecting anyone, and I couldn't imagine who would be dropping in unannounced this late in the evening. Even Ben normally called, albeit at times while he was already standing on the porch, but he called nonetheless.

A paranoid thought raced through my head, and my heart seemed to stop as an artificial hollowness filled my stomach. My subconscious assumed control, and I was gripped by a sudden fear that something was wrong. Given the situation, the first thing that came to mind was that Felicity had been afflicted with another seizure while behind the wheel of her Jeep and that she had been in an accident.

I jumped up from the chair and strode quickly to the door, not even bothering to look through the peephole before unbolting the lock and swinging it open.

The sudden impact of a massive fist against my shoulder was pretty much the last thing I had been expecting.

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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...

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