

M. R. SELLARS  
NEVER BURN  
A WITCH

16 FREE SAMPLE CHAPTERS

A ROWAN GANT INVESTIGATION

# NEVER BURN A WITCH

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

**16 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.

**NEVER BURN A WITCH: A Rowan Gant Investigation**

An E.M.A. Mysteries CHAPTER SAMPLER

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In remembrance of  
Vito John Ponticello  
January 5, 1949 – September 29, 2000  
Mystic Valley goes on but you will be sorely missed...

For Kat...

My Wife.

My Best Friend.

My Confidant.

And most of all, my Soul Mate.

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,  
or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,  
or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press;  
or the right of the people to peaceably assemble,  
and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*

Amendment I  
Constitution of the United States of America  
Ratified December 15, 1791

*Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to live.*

Holy Bible – KJV  
Book of Exodus  
Chapter 22, Verse 18

# PROLOGUE

Wet clumps of snowflakes streamed heavily downward from the low blanket of clouds that covered the city. Along Wellington Parkway, a large clock on a bank marquee winked languidly in the frosty night. With several of its bulbs having long since expired from usefulness, dark holes were left gaping in the teeter-tottering display of time and temperature. Four-Oh-something A.M. Twenty-something degrees F. Minus-something degrees C. The sign continued silently dispensing the information even as yet another of its incandescent elements flared and sputtered into nonexistence. Now, only an empty black rectangle stared back from where the “something” used to be.

The old man cinched his threadbare overcoat tighter against the chill winter wind and took another pull on the pint of off-brand whiskey before burying his half-frozen hands in his pockets. Watching the clock with bleary, watered eyes, he muttered nonsensically to himself. His slurred voice recited a local adage that said, “*If you don’t like the weather in Saint Louis, just wait a minute. It’ll change.*” Thus far, the only change he had witnessed had been for the worse.

This winter felt just as fickle to him as the recent summer. Brief reprieves followed by endless torture. It made no difference that the experts were proclaiming this an unusually harsh winter for Saint Louis. The harshest in more than twenty years, they said. If you lived on the streets, isobaric graphs were mere scribbles on a map, and “El Niño” was just a foreign phrase. Reality was that you either froze or you broiled. The pleasant weather in between the two extremes never seemed to last for long.

The whiskey finished burning its way down the old man’s raw throat and splashed hard in the pit of his empty stomach. The merest tingling sensation spread outward, lending him only the faintest illusion of warmth. In his clouded brain, he feared it wasn’t real. In his apathetic heart, he knew it wouldn’t last.

Recent events bleached lackluster by the alcohol flickered unevenly through his brain, bringing a brief smile to his blistered lips. The warmth and comfort of the mall before the rent-a-cops had chased him from its sanctuary. A fresh pint of whiskey. A half pack of cigarettes carelessly lost by someone who could afford more and serendipitously found by him. But most especially, he recalled watching the televisions through the window of the video store just like he did every night. Yes, most especially that.

He never missed the evening news, and he always made sure to watch Channel Four. The others were okay, but Channel Four was his favorite, all because of Tracy. Tracy Watson, the cute, brunette weather girl with the red, pouting lips and bright blue eyes. Now, even in the frigid night, he felt a rush of warmth as he fantasized about the way she enhanced the burgundy sweater she had been wearing when she gave her forecast. The pearl necklace around her delicate neck. The way she brushed the hair from her face with manicured fingernails just before smiling at him and motioning to the chroma-keyed radar map.

He knew she was smiling at *him*. He knew she was talking *directly* to *him*. He knew because she always talked specifically to *him*, warning of heat waves and cold snaps.

Tracy cared about the old man, of this he was sure—and last night was no exception. With loving concern, she had instructed him to find someplace indoors to sleep because it was going to get colder, and it was going to snow very soon. She was worried about *him*, and it made the old man feel wanted.

He took heed of her caution, for Tracy was always right about the weather. But, he mumbled aloud as his libido assumed control, even if she wasn't right this time, "Tracy's got great tits."

Bitter wind hacked away at the old man in small choppy gusts, snapping him out of his lurid fantasy and testifying that the pretty meteorologist had truly been correct this time. Icy gobbets of snowflakes spattered against his wind-chapped face and clung momentarily to his scraggly beard before morphing into their liquid state. He took another quick pull on the whiskey bottle then gathered the buttonless front of his overcoat in frostbitten hands before hurrying across the dimly lit street. The sign on the bank winked and visually announced it to be four-thirty-something A.M.

Meadowbrook Park. The old man trudged across the hard ground, his numb feet making crunching noises on the frozen grass as he took staggering aim at a not too distant building. The public restrooms were always unlocked and open, and it was here he would seek refuge whenever Tracy warned him to do so. When it was hot, running water and a cool concrete floor would chase away the sweltering heat of a typical Saint Louis summer. When it was cold, cinder block walls and a roof offered shelter from the bitter wind. To a homeless individual like himself, the Meadowbrook Park public restrooms were like a suite at the *Adam's Mark* downtown.

Just a few more steps and he would be inside where he could escape the winter tempest and its dangerous chill, and then he would be okay. Tracy had told him so just before she blew him a kiss.

Sickly yellow light emanating from a low-wattage, incandescent bulb flowed down the side of the small building, struggling to chase away the cold darkness, only to be swallowed by it. He pressed forward, only to be halted by a recent attack of bureaucratic efficiency. Elongated shadows spread diagonally across the brown painted door, cast prominently by a freshly installed, heavy-duty hasp and padlock. The reflections from the shiny hardware taunted the old man as he reached out to touch the ice-cold metal barrier. Yes. Yes, it was really there—not a sour mash-induced hallucination as he had hoped. Of all the times for the county maintenance crews to suddenly do their jobs, why now?

Dammit! What was he going to do? He'd been wandering all night, and if he didn't find shelter soon he would surely freeze to death. He knew that such a thing would make Tracy sad, and he couldn't bear such a thought. Even worse, he'd never again get to see her wear that pink blouse he liked so much. The one he was sure he could see right through. The one he was certain she wore just for *him*.

The old man continued murmuring his random musings about the lovely, young television personality, stopping only for a moment to suck eagerly on the rapidly depleting pint of cheap whiskey. With frost-deadened fingers, he fumbled the cap back onto the bottle and thrust it into his thin coat. Burying his hands in his pockets, he hunched his shoulders forward to ward off the wind and turned in place as he stamped his feet. The warmth of the alcohol was fading as rapidly as it came, and the bottle would soon be empty. The old man needed to find a place to sleep.

Fire.

At first, he thought it might be just another of those bourbon-induced mirages, but the padlock on the door had definitely been for real, so maybe this was too. Squinting through bleary eyes, the old man struggled to focus on the bright, yellow-orange glow in the near distance. The flickering light was growing brighter by the second and now illuminated the interior of the nearby picnic pavilion from which it came.

Fire.

The old man could smell it, even over his own unwashed stench. The scent of fuel being relentlessly consumed by the ravages of flame. And where there was fire, there would be warmth. Each end of the pavilion housed a large fire pit, vented by a brick chimney. The Parks and Recreation Department had built it that way, so families could seek shelter against a sudden rain and still enjoy their Sunday cookout. The old man knew this because he had been chased away from this shelter only months before by shouting picnickers. Picnickers who selfishly assumed they owned the park on weekends. Angry people. Frightened people. People who didn't care about him the way his beautiful Tracy did. But it was wintertime now, and there shouldn't be any picnickers in the park. It was the middle of the night, too. No, there definitely shouldn't be any angry people here now.

The old man hugged his ratty topcoat tightly about his body once again and started across the frozen landscape, slitting his eyes against the biting wind and crystalline lumps of blowing snow. He shuffled as quickly as he could on cold-anesthetized feet, occasionally tripping over them for their lack of feeling.

One-half measure of the distance across the frigid ground, a sharp sound reached his ears, and the old man came to a stumbling halt. A slamming sound. The sound of a large metal door being quickly shut. He stood in the open, confused, not knowing whether to retreat or press forward. No one should be here in the middle of a frostbitten February night. It just didn't make sense. The slamming noise was soon followed by the sound of an engine starting and was in turn chased by the disharmonious wrenching of improperly meshed gears. On the opposite side of the pavilion, a large, boxy shape moved in the parking lot. A black panel van—greyed with a patina of salt and winter road grime—shone briefly in the flickering firelight. The old man watched as the van disappeared behind the rows of trees and finally re-appeared at the distant park entrance. Only then did the driver switch on the headlights before turning onto the street and accelerating slowly away.

The old man watched until the dusky red tail-lights were no longer visible and audibly reminded himself to tell Tracy about the incident when he saw her on the television again. He was sure she would think it just as strange as he did, but she was smart. She would understand and explain it to him as she always did.

The yellow-orange radiance was flickering madly now, and it belonged only to him. He gleefully giggled and followed with a raspy coughing fit as he pressed forward to the shelter.

Warmth and light filled the pavilion, emanating from the fire pit at the near end. The old man shuffled gratefully into its embrace, standing with his back to the rising column of flame. The fire crackled and sputtered; the fuel whistled a dying wail as it fed the blaze. It was obvious that the fire had been recently set, as the pungent odor of kerosene insinuated itself into his nostrils. That was good. He would get to enjoy the whole fire instead of just the dying embers.

Intermingled with the sharp scent of the blaze, the old man imagined he could smell meat cooking on a grill, and that made him feel hungry. That was far too much to hope for, however, and that aroma, he was certain, had to be a delusion.

Yellow-white light painted itself playfully around the interior of the brick shelter, casting oblique shadows and illuminating the sturdy, wooden picnic tables. On the surface of the table directly in front of the ever-increasing blaze, a thick, rectangular shape was carefully positioned. For a brief moment, lucid curiosity flitted through the old man's rapidly misfiring neurons, and he shuffled forward to inspect the eccentricity. A book. Black and leather-bound with gold embossing on the cover. He picked up the book and brought it closer to his face then squinted carefully to read the words impressed on the cover. Slowly, he mouthed the letters, remembering somewhere in the back of his booze-pickled grey matter that he knew how to read.

“H-O-L-Y-B-I-B-L-E.”

*Holy Bible.* He knew this book. He remembered his mother making him read from it when he was just a child. He remembered also that none of its promises had ever come true, for him at least.

A thin strip of white ribbon, attached to the binding, protruded from the book. It appeared to have been placed there with great purpose. A bookmark. The old man fumbled with deadened fingers to open the leather-bound scripture and pulled the place marker aside. By the firelight he could see that a passage had been deliberately highlighted. He rubbed the back of his chapped hand across his tired, clouded eyes and concentrated on the words. He sounded them out under his breath, which wasn't easy since his mouth was still watering from the imagined smell of grilling meat. “EX-O-DUS. TWEN-TEE-TWO EIGHT-TEEN. THOU - SHALT - NOT - SUFF-FER - A - WITCH - TO - LIVE.”

The old man stared at the passage and tried to understand what its significance could possibly be. His eyes hurt, and all this concentrating was giving him a headache. He would much rather think about what Tracy wasn't wearing under that sweater she had on tonight. Concentrating on THAT didn't hurt. It felt good. REALLY good. Maybe thinking about Tracy would keep his mind off his hunger too, for he would almost swear he could smell burning meat. With a lecherous cackle, he closed the book and stuffed it into his pocket.

“Tracy, Tracy. I love Tracy. Tracy with the big, big tits!” he sang gleefully to himself, making cupping gestures at his own chest as he wriggled in place while turning slowly back to the warmth of the fire.

He pulled out the treasured pint bottle and drained the remaining brown liquor down his throat, almost choking because he forgot to quit singing his pornographic ditty before swallowing. He wiped the spittle from his face with the back of his thin sleeve and coughed raspily once again. When he lowered his gaze to the fire, his mouth fell open and the contents of his stomach, cheap whiskey and bile on the whole, were propelled to the concrete with a liquid splatter. Putrid smells rose steamily from the vomit to mix with the foul reek of sizzling flesh. The old man fell heavily to his knees and pitched forward, heaving twice more. When he finally looked back up, the body of the charred human being was still there. Still there, teeth grinning at him morbidly where the flesh was even now searing away.

Out in the darkness, wet clumps of snowflakes streamed heavily downward from the low blanket of clouds that covered the city.

# CHAPTER 1

I rolled over in the darkness and tugged the blanket up over my shoulders, but only after a brief, lethargic struggle with Salinger, our overstuffed, under-exercised Himalayan. His mild protestation came as a short pause in his otherwise incessant purring, coupled with a wimpish “mew” one would expect from a kitten, not from a full-grown cat. My ears further discerned that the wind was sighing forlornly through the leafless branches of our tree-lined yard, audibly bringing the outside chill into the bedroom.

I shivered slightly at the thought and assumed that Tracy Watson, the Eyewitness News meteorologist, had probably nailed her forecast squarely on the head yet again. If I were brave enough to crawl from the warmth of the bed and look out the window, I presumed I would be witness to the snowfall she predicted as well. Her uncanny accuracy would most likely be capturing her another American Meteorological Society Award in the near future. Not that this fact was all that important to me, but half-sleep has a tendency to make one concentrate on things that would normally flit past unheeded.

With a contented sigh, I let the thoughts of snow, and sub-freezing temperatures, and other people’s achievement awards drain from my mind, dwelling instead on the comfortable warmth of the heated waterbed.

Lazily slithering my arm beneath the sheets, I hooked it around Felicity, my wife of just over nine years. She let out a sleepy murmur and snuggled herself closer against me. Her long, auburn curls were pinned neatly atop her head, looking for all the world like they had been arranged there just moments ago. I was still amazed at her ability to crawl out of bed looking just as she did when she crawled in. Astonished as I was, I had long since given up trying to figure out how she managed to do it.

I allowed my one open—but barely focused—eye to roam in the direction of her alarm clock. The radiant, electric blue digits shone back at me, attesting to a time of 4:47 a.m. In my mind, I was fully aware that Felicity kept her clock set fifteen minutes fast. A psychological trick used by millions in order to be on time. Of course, for the majority of those millions, since they knew the clock was fast to begin with, the trick failed to work. In the case of my lovely wife, not only did the ruse falter miserably, it simply caused her to be even later. I stubbornly attempted the mental calculation to subtract the phantom fifteen minutes from the displayed time of 4:47. Unfortunately, in my half-conscious state, I succeeded only in giving myself a headache and producing a string of meaningless numbers. Though for some reason, the ratio twenty-two to eighteen kept returning to the forefront.

Finally, I dismissed the entire process, along with its product, in favor of the infinitely more pleasant nether world between sleep and wakefulness. Judging by the nightmare that followed, I wish I had concentrated on the equation a little harder.

*Fear.*

*Anger.*

*Fear.*

*Anger.*  
*Surprise.*

*"I didn't expect you to come back." A man is speaking to me.*

*We are surrounded by darkness, yet we are awash in an eerie light. A little girl clad in white lace levitates near him. Floating weightless in the air. There is no visible means of support for her tiny body.*

*"Sorry to disappoint you," I return, this time my words echo through the air instead of disappearing into nothingness as they had done before.*

*He is standing no more than twenty feet away from me, dressed in a dark ceremonial robe. The hood is pushed back to reveal his face, and it lay limply across his shoulders.*

*"I'm not disappointed," he says. "Just surprised. I don't know what you think you're going to do."*

*The little girl's body is drifting about on a gentle breeze, bobbing up and down slightly but never straying far from him.*

*"Stop you," I tell him evenly.*

*"You can't stop me," he says. "I told you, she's The One."*

*"Why are you doing this?" I ask.*

*His only response is a sour, demonic laugh.*

*I'm falling.*

*I'm screaming.*

*Silence.*

*"Rowan, so nice to see you." Ariel Tanner is standing before me. Beside her is the same little strawberry-blond girl holding tightly to her hand.*

*"Mister, why don't you stop the bad man?" The little girl looks up at me with wide, sad eyes then turns her gaze to the right.*

*I follow her eyes, looking far off into the distance. There is a grove of trees surrounding a small clearing. Centered in the clearing is a hooded, robed figure standing with hands raised high. Moonlight glints from an object held in those hands. Moonlight glints from an athamè. A ceremonial knife.*

*A small figure lies prone before the cloaked one. A small figure clad in white lace. Preened and arranged. Unblemished and virginal.*

*The scene begins to grow increasingly distant as trees erupt from the landscape, obscuring the view as they continued to appear, closer and closer.*

*Immediately before us, the earth trembles and begins to sink. Almost as quickly as the depression is formed, it is filled with water. The glossy surface ripples in the slight breeze, moonlight reflecting from it in a shimmering stripe.*

*The ground continues to shake, and another stand of trees erupt skyward. The tall pines form a line before us, now completely obscuring the clearing and all but the smallest glimpses of the shallow lake.*

*I turn to the little girl. She is pointing at the sign. "What does it say, Mister?"*

*I look downward, following along her finger to the small white sign. Bold, black, capital letters spell out PLEASE DO NOT FEED GEESE.*

*"Only you can save her now, Rowan," Ariel's lilting voice gently touches my ears.*

*I turn to her, and she holds forth her hand. In it, a tarot card. A tarot card known as The Moon.*

*She stiffens and the card flutters from her hand. Her eyes go wide, and blood streaks down the front of her dress.*

*“Hey, Mister, what time is it?” the little girl is talking to me. “What time is it? Hey, Mister!”*

*I look up to the glowing marbled disk of the full moon high above. Spinning around its face are the hands of a clock. I watch as the minute hand chases rapidly after the hour hand, overtakes it, then begins the race anew.*

*“Hey, Mister!” the tiny voice demands. “What time is it?”*

*Darkness.*

*A deafening, demonic chord.*

*The sound of water splashing violently.*

*I can't breathe. My lungs are on fire, and the flames are licking up my throat. My chest feels heavy, and there is something tightening about my neck. The atmosphere feels thick and fluid around me. I want to gasp for air, but something is telling me I shouldn't. My thoughts are beginning to cloud; my mind is turning murky and dark.*

*I open my eyes, flailing my arms in front of me. I so desperately need air. I need to breathe. The air is thick and murky. It stings. I catch a distorted glimpse, rippling and blurry, of the full moon above. It is all that I can see. All except for one thing—a pair of murderous gray eyes.*

*My world begins to fade.*

*Twilight.*

*An endless scream, “Why, Rowan, why?”*

*Darkness.*

*Falling.*

*Impact.*

I was vaguely aware of struggling toward consciousness as my nightmare world sought to meet reality. Something, or someone, wasn't ready for that however.

*Running.*

*I am running blindly through a forest.*

*Chased.*

*Hunted.*

*The icy snow numbs my frozen feet. I am nude. Nude and streaked with blood. Wounds cover my tortured body.*

*Fear tears mercilessly at my soul as my labored breaths take in the wintry air, bringing frozen pain to my already frostbitten lungs.*

*I stop and search frantically for a place to hide. From what, I do not know.*

*A tortured scream in the night.*

*Fire.*

*Fear absolute.*

*The taste of death.*

*I am running.*

I started to sudden wakefulness, eyes snapping open, and my body feeling as though it had just been soundly pummeled with a two-by-four. Foggy disorientation quickly lifted and was replaced with knotted fear in the pit of my stomach. Fortunately, after a few short moments of deep, labored breathing, I realized that it had only been a nightmare. It was simply yet another terror in the long series of phantasms that had once again begun to plague my sleep in these recent weeks. I thought I had seen the end of them, September last. Apparently, I was mistaken.

It was coming up on six months since my friend and former student of the Wiccan religion, Ariel Tanner, had been hideously tortured and finally, murdered by a sadistic killer. It was also approaching six months since I had stopped that killer from doing the same thing to an innocent little girl for the purpose of a twisted ritual sacrifice. To this day, no one had been able to determine what he had hoped to accomplish; perhaps fortunately, four 9mm slugs had seen to it that we probably never would. What we knew for certain was simply that his deranged mind had pushed him to mutilate, torture, and murder five women. Then, in the name of some perverse evil, kidnap a small child with the intention of doing the same to her. In stopping him, I had almost been separated from my own life that night in Wild Woods Park beneath a full, silver-veined moon. Had it not been for the marksmanship of my friend Benjamin Storm, a Saint Louis city homicide detective, I'm firmly convinced he would have succeeded. Ironically, Ben was the very reason I had become involved in the investigation to start with.

The vignette so forcefully appended to the end of the nightmare was another story entirely. I had no rhyme or reason for its cryptic display and wasn't entirely sure I wanted any. Mutely, I wished for it to be an anomalous event that would never recur.

Shaking off the vivid remembrances that, in my opinion, couldn't fade quickly enough, I gently tossed back the covers. Being careful not to wake Felicity, I let my feet touch the hardwood floor and drew in a sharp breath. A quick glance at the clock showed it to be 5:24—minus the phantom fifteen minutes, of course—which readily accounted for the fact that the electronic thermostat had not yet signaled the furnace to increase the comfort level in the house.

I quickly pulled on socks and sweats and then stuffed my feet into a pair of tennis shoes. Our English setter and Australian cattle dog both stirred as soon as they were convinced that I was up and moving about. With a choreographed pair of lazy stretches and slowly wagging tails, the two of them followed me through the house and into the kitchen where I let them out the back door. The motion sensor on the outdoor sentry instantly detected their movement and snapped the floodlights on full. The intense halogen beams pierced the darkness to illuminate our white-blanketed back yard and deck. Countless jewel-like pinpricks were reflected back from the crystalline snow, making the pristine landscape appear to be covered with a fine dusting of tiny diamonds.

Clusters of the cottony ice were still falling steadily from a grey sky; the low strata of clouds reflected the omnipresent lights of the city, lending to an illusion of almost brightness. Emily, our calico cat, brushed against my leg and started out the doorway onto the snowy deck. The moment her paws contacted the frigid substance, she lurched back with a hiss, back arched and tri-toned fur afrizz. The weather having brought about an abrupt end to her planned morning hunt, she pranced back into the atrium, leaped lithely into a chair and settled herself in, electing to watch rather than participate. The dogs had seen to their business and were now reveling like small children in the wonders

of the snow that hadn't been there less than eight hours before. They would be at play for some time yet, so I shut the door and proceeded back into the kitchen. I knew they would let me know when they wanted in.

After dumping a healthy portion of roasted Columbian Supremo beans into the grinder, I covered it with a dishtowel before depressing the button. I was still trying not to wake Felicity, and I wanted to muffle the noise. A choked rattle began immediately and was followed by an escalating whine as the blades increased in speed, first cracking and then crushing the contents. After a couple of sharp taps, I removed the shroud and emptied the near-powdered contents into the filter basket then filled the coffee maker with purified water. Rich inviting aromas were already screaming "CAFFEINE" at me when I let the dogs back in and made my way to the shower.



After my shower and a change from sweats to casual but more respectable attire, I had dialed the Saint Louis city police headquarters and asked for Ben Storm's extension. He had picked up on the third ring with his usual gruff and succinct, "Homicide. Storm."

"So everything is still on for this morning?" I said into the telephone handset.

"Hell yes," my friend's voice issued jovially from the earpiece. "Coppers don't get to stay home when it snows. Shit, you think the bad guys take the day off?"

Since my recent involvement in solving one of the most violent killing sprees in Saint Louis' history, my friend had become readily accepting of the fact that I was a practicing Witch—and the uncanny abilities that I developed because of it. Taking it even a step further, he was now a staunch purveyor of educating his fellow officers about Wicca and The Craft. In a very short period of time, he had come to realize the importance of dispelling the myths about the religion of modern day Witches. His persistence, along with my success in aiding a serious investigation, had allowed him to convince the department to establish a program of lectures. The series of seminars was designed for the purpose of instructing everyone within the ranks—from chief to beat cop—about alternative religions and the fact that being a Witch did not mean that one was a "child-eating, broom-riding, sacrificial murderer." Ben's fierce determination about this had gotten me through the door. Now, it was my job to stand up in front of them and do the convincing. Today was to be the first formal lecture to a group.

"Well, you never know," I answered with a laugh. "Seems like half the city shuts down if someone sees a flurry. You'd think they'd be used to it by now."

"Yeah, well, what're ya gonna do?" he stated rhetorically. "Especially when you got a bunch of prima donnas runnin' around worried about gettin' sno-melt on their new Lex-eye."

"Lex-eye? Is that really a word?"

"Lexus, Lexuses, Lex-eye, whatever..." he answered with a chuckle. "Anyway, yeah, everything's still on. Even with the snow, they'd be nuts to cancel now, especially after that article in the paper."

"I suppose it would look a little strange to do that after that kind of coverage," I said, knowing exactly what he was referring to. "You know, when I agreed to that interview, I really didn't expect the article to be on the front page."

“That’s nothin’, rumor has it the national wire services are picking it up. Face it, Row, a self-proclaimed Witch giving instructional seminars to coppers? You’re news, Kemosabe. Either that, or,” he added wryly, “it was a really slow day.”

“Thanks a lot,” I feigned hurt sarcasm. “That makes me feel real important.”

He laughed heartily on the other end. “No problem, white man. Hey, by the way, happy Candlestick or Endblock or whatever you call it.”

“Candlemas or Imbolc, either one is fine.” I corrected his crucified reference to the Pagan holiday that had been celebrated only the day before. “I’m impressed you remembered. Thanks.”

“Hey, I’m tryin’. So what was this one all about anyway?”

“It’s a celebration of the coming of the spring season,” I replied.

“Yo, Kemosabe.” He took on a mock serious tone. “I don’t wanna bust your bubble and all, but you might wanna take a look at a calendar. I’m pretty sure spring is a ways off yet.”

“Like I said, the *coming* of the season,” I told him, and then jibed, “You mundanes have your own bizarre and even less than scientific version of Imbolc, you know.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, you all gather around and wait for a rodent to come out of a hole to see if it casts a shadow. Then depending upon the result, you proclaim the length of the winter season. On the other hand, we Pagans all gather ‘round, hold a simple rite welcoming spring and the growing season that we know to be just around the corner, then we have a party. In the long run, which one do you think makes more sense?”

“Okay, okay,” he laughed. “I give up... You win.” In the background, I could hear him shuffling papers about his desk. “So anyway, back to business. According to the departmental memo here, looks like the class is all set up for around ten. You need me to come get you?”

“No. Not at all.” I declined his offer. “I’ve got about two hundred pounds of sand bags in the bed of the truck, and it’s four-wheel drive.” With a chuckle, I added, “Question is, should I have given YOU a ride?”

“What, and leave the tank at home?” He asked facetiously, referring to the dilapidated looking, but well maintained, Chevy van he always drove. “Not a chance! Someone might think it’s abandoned and tow it! Besides...” He paused and I heard faint voices in the background. “Hey, Row...Could you hold on a sec?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

The sound from the handset cradled on my shoulder took on the familiar dull hollowness of being placed on hold. Absently, I filled my hand with an ink pen from the jar on the bookshelf and began doodling on the notepad next to it. Outside the window, a muted dawn was managing to filter weakly through the clouds that still lay like a comforter across the city. Wet clumps of snow continued chasing one another in a frantic, never-ending race downward to the already fleeced ground. My hand moved on its own, tracing non-sensical patterns on the notepad. I ignored it and continued staring through the double pane of glass. Distorted noises of metal against asphalt distantly reached my ears, growing louder, then fading once again as a street department snow plow pushed past my house, spewing salt in its wake.

“...So listen, Row,” Ben’s voice suddenly replaced the mechanical *tick-ticking* static of the hold button, “I gotta go have a second look at a crime scene, so I may not be around when you get here. If I’m back in time, you wanna grab lunch? I’ll buy.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there. Especially if it’s on you!”

“Good deal. I’ll catch ya’ then. Later.”

“Bye.”

I was just settling the phone back onto its base when my eyes fell across the message pad. At first, I dismissed the concentric circles and figure eights of blue ink gracing the page as simply the random scrawling of my unoccupied mind. It was only upon the second glance, as I was tearing the page from the backing in order to discard it, that something struck me as odd. More than just meaningless scratches, the curves and lines twisted around, traced and retraced, forming numbers.

2218.

An obscure remembrance in the back of my head told me that I had dreamt this number earlier this morning. I stared at it for a long moment, wondering at its significance, before discounting it as a bizarre coincidence and crumpling the page in my fist. As I dropped it in the wastebasket, a pair of flannel-covered arms hooked about my waist, and a soft, curvaceous body pressed against my back. Any remnant of the puzzling number left in my mind was immediately and thoroughly replaced by thoughts vastly different.

“Aye, who were you talking to this early in the morning, then?” Felicity’s sleepy voice murmured.

“Ben,” I answered, turning in her embrace and squeezing her gently. “I was just checking in to see if I was still supposed to give that lecture this morning...what with the snow and all.”

“What did he say?” she asked quietly.

Her warm breath tingled my skin as she nuzzled in closer, her soft lips roaming up my neck.

“Still on. It’s set up for ten. I guess I need to be there by nine-thirty or so.”

“Mmmmm... You smell good.”

“Thanks...You don’t smell so bad yourself.”

Clouds of her loose auburn curls floated about her lightly freckled face as she looked at me with drowsy, jade green eyes. She was a perfect picture of her own Irish-American heritage, and the Celtic lilt in her voice tied the package together. While normally a singsong note simply underscoring her words, she needed only to spend a few short hours with her family, or be tired as she was now, to re-kindle a heavy brogue that even included occasional lapses into Gaelic.

“So what time is it now?” she cooed, rubbing cat-like against me and nibbling lightly at my earlobe.

“About eight.”

“I don’t have any clients scheduled this morning...” she whispered, referring to her profession as a freelance photographer.

“Good for you.”

I was feigning ignorance of what she implied, but she continued undaunted. When Felicity had set her mind to something, there was little I knew of that could stand in her way.

“...And you’ve got some free time,” she breathed.

“Uh-huh.” I was rapidly starting to melt.

“I’m loving you a whole bunch right now...”

I wasn’t exactly late, but it was close. I didn’t arrive at the Saint Louis city police headquarters until five minutes to ten.

# CHAPTER 2

“Really. Trust me on this,” I said in a calm but very firm tone. “Witches DO NOT have lurid orgies by the light of the full moon for the purpose of spawning demon children. I don’t care WHAT that newsletter says.”

The bulk of the lecture was finished and by all accounts had gone very well. For the better part of ninety minutes, I had outlined the philosophy of WitchCraft and the Wiccan religion. Taking great pains to stress their benevolence, I recited the *Wiccan Rede* and focused on its most important covenant—*An it Harm None, do what ye will*. I had covered the rituals and the symbols of the two, most especially, the Pentacle and Pentagram. For centuries, negative connotations had been placed on the five-pointed star hemmed by a circle. It had obviously come as a shock to the group that the true meaning of the symbol, no matter how you turned it, was that it represented man and his relationship to the elements. Nothing evil. Nothing Satanic. Of further distress to their preconceived notions was the fact that Witches don’t even believe in Satan. They weren’t entirely sure what to do when I informed them that Lucifer wasn’t our boy, but theirs and theirs alone. That fallen angel was simply a deity more closely associated with Judeo-Christian practices and held no place in the Wiccan faith. Even so, there was still at least one of them who remained unconvinced. Because of him, I was now explaining to a room full of blue-uniformed police officers why a particular right-wing publication he flaunted like a shield was factually incorrect.

“My best guess on this would be that they are drawing an incorrect conclusion from two basic facts. One, that Witches and Wiccans often hold their ritual circles on the full moon... And two, that there are certain groups which hold their meetings in a manner known as *skyclad*. And yes, that very simply means that they are ‘in the buff’ so to speak.”

“So you are confirming what the article says then.”

The cocky challenge issued from the young buzz-cut-sporting officer who was responsible for bringing the literature in question. He had made it obvious from the beginning that he intended to discredit me in some fashion consistent with his own beliefs. His momentary false impression of victory told me that he sincerely believed he had just caught me in a lie. Thick, red anger was seeping through from his comments, and I was certain that I wasn’t the only one aware of the obvious chip on his shoulder. In the back of my mind, it frightened me that someone as prejudiced as he was allowed to wander the streets with a loaded gun on his hip.

“No, I am not,” I returned, biting back my own rising impatience. “*Skyclad* means just what I said. They aren’t wearing any clothes. Being nude does not presuppose sexual activity.”

“So you’re saying you are completely nude when you practice this religion?” Another officer interjected her question. “Doesn’t it get a little cold for that this time of year?”

A light-hearted chuckle hopped through the room, rending a hole in the balloon of tension and deflating it to a much less explosive level. I added my own laugh to that of the group.

“Yes, I suppose it is a bit chilly on a day like this. But I, personally, am not nude when I perform a ritual or practice my religion. There are some groups who do worship *skyclad*, and there are many others who don’t. I happen to be one of the *don’t* crowd.” I smiled back at her. Though we were still on the subject of nudity, her query was of great relief to me. “Like I told you earlier, there are several traditions of The Craft and Wicca, as well as many other Pagan and/or alternative religions.” I made quote symbols in the air with my fingers to punctuate the word *alternative*. “To assume that they are all exactly the same would be as ludicrous as saying that Catholicism and Judaism are exactly the same thing. You all know, and accept I might add, that there are numerous facets of Christian and mainstream religions... There are the Catholics, the Baptists, the Lutherans, and the Jewish... just to name a few. It is the same for other faiths as well. The whole reason behind this lecture is to show you that just because someone doesn’t follow what is considered by the masses as a mainstream religion, it doesn’t make them evil. Being a Druid, Buddhist, or even an atheist doesn’t mean that you have any more proclivities toward violence than anyone else. This seminar could be given by any open-minded individual of any religion. It just so happens that I am a Witch.”

“I still think you’re hiding something,” the young rookie in the front row spat.

A deeper, coarser voice issued from the back of the room, “Then ya’ obviously didn’t pay attention, did ya’?”

Heads quickly swiveled at the sound of the unfamiliar voice and were greeted by a six-foot-six column of muscle. Clad in casual tan slacks and knit sweater with a gold shield clipped to his belt, the classically angular features of the Native American were carved from dusty red granite. His hardened face was framed by jet-black hair worn at a length just barely within tolerance of his superiors. Dark eyes that had already witnessed far too much suffering for one lifetime focused tightly on the crew-cut patrolman. Detective Benjamin Storm pressed the door shut behind himself and ventured farther into the room.

“Sorry for the interruption.” He nodded at me and slid into the first empty chair he spotted. Even seated, he towered over the rest of the group. “Please continue.”

Gnawing sensations tickling my lower abdomen prompted me to glance at my watch. The fact that Ben was here joined in to tell me that lunchtime was just the other side of now.

“Well, that pretty much concludes the lecture...unless there are any more questions?”

I can only assume that fear of retribution from the large man in the back row kept the heretofore-argumentative patrolman from continuing his verbal attack. As for the rest of the officers, I was certain that their minds were just as occupied by the thought of filling their stomachs as mine was. The room remained silent, and not a single hand moved to rise.

“...Then you all have my number on the handout I gave you. If something comes to mind, don’t hesitate to call me. I’ll be glad to answer any questions.”

Low-pitched squeals of rubber-footed, metal chairs against unwaxed linoleum joined with the quiet mumblings and shuffle of footsteps. As the sea of dark blue funneled through the now-open doorway, a few of the officers took a moment to shake my hand

and thank me for the presentation. The literature-bearing heckler, however, maintained a wide berth and held his gaze elsewhere. As he made his way out, Ben stood and motioned him to the side. There followed a short private exchange between the two, and he let out what appeared to be a nervous laugh. Ben's face bore a wide grin as he clapped the young patrolman on the back with a meaty paw and sent him to join his fellow officers.

"What did you say to that guy?" I asked when the room was finally clear and my friend sauntered to the front.

"Who? The jerkoff?" He angled his thumb over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. "I told him if I found out about him harassing you on the phone or anything, that I'd shove his night-stick so far up his ass it'd take a team of proctologists a week just to find it."

"You know, Ben, intimidation isn't exactly the message I was trying to get across to these people today."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." He brought a hand up to smooth back his hair and left it resting on the back of his neck, a mannerism I'd long ago learned to be a blatant signal that my friend had something of import going on in the back of his mind. "Sorry 'bout that. It just pisses me off when assholes like that won't listen."

"Yeah, Ben," I sympathized. "Remember, I deal with it all the time. Not all that long ago, even from you to some extent"

"Yeah, well, I got over it."

"Yes, you did. Now just give them a chance to do the same."

"Yeah, okay, you're right... So, anyway, white man. Enough with that. You ready to grab somethin' to eat?"

"Sure. What'd you have in mind?"

"There's a great Chinese place not too far from the morgue. Just gotta make a real quick stop first."

"Why do I get the feeling that the stop you are referring to and the morgue are one and the same?"

"You tell me. You're the Witch."



"Brianna Louise Walker," Ben was reading to me with quick glances from his ever-present notebook as he drove. In reality, the Saint Louis city morgue was right next door to the police headquarters, but Ben had expressed extreme disdain at the thought of walking the short block in the cold only to have to walk back to get his vehicle. "Twenty-eight years old, single. AKA *Mistress Bree*, AKA *The Wicked Witch of the West End*. One a' those dominatrixes. Regular bondage queen. Charged five bills an hour to use ya' and abuse ya'." He spared a quick glance at me before swinging the van around a tight arc into the parking lot of the morgue. "Coupl'a nights ago she took a nosedive off a sixth story balcony at the Riverfront Hilton wearin' nothin' but a studded collar and too much makeup."

"Suicide?" I queried.

"Don't think so..."

Ben urged the van into a snow-packed space, making a judgment call as to where the yellow demarcation lines might be and nosed it up against a pile of the freshly plowed

white stuff. The fan on the heater shut down as he switched off the engine, and we were left in a sudden pounding quiet.

"...Cause she was also handcuffed. Probably her own. Best guess at first," he continued, turning in his seat to face me while stuffing the notebook back into a pocket. "Maybe she spanked one of her johns too hard or something. Maybe a dispute over payment, dunno."

"Okay," I paused, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Ben reached up and smoothed his hair then began massaging the back of his neck. He looked past me out the corner of the windshield and let out a troubled sigh. I turned my eyes from him and looked out across the lot. The snow had begun to taper off to small flurries, leaving the final accumulation total somewhere around seven inches. Bitter northern winds sliced down the frozen streets, kicking up miniature tornados of the icy white crystals. It just plain *looked* cold.

The thump of the other shoe still not forthcoming, I pressed my friend further. "Come on, Ben. You've been telling me all this for a reason. What is it?"

Ben exhaled loudly, puffing out his cheeks, and returned his reticent gaze to me before pressing ahead, "Okay, white man, it's like this. She's got marks all over her body that obviously didn't come from the double gainer she took. Lacerations... Burns... Looks like the sick bastard that chucked her out the window took time to torture her first."

"Go on."

"One of the marks appears to be a symbol, and I was kinda wonderin'..."

"...If I would have a look at it for you." I finished his sentence for him.

"If it makes any difference, the request for you came from higher up the line," he said.

"All you had to do was ask, Ben." I told him. "You didn't have to get all anxious about it and drag me down here under the pretense of going to lunch. Did you really think I'd say no?"

"Look, Row," his hand continued working on the self-induced tension in his neck, "I talked to Felicity the other day. She said you've started havin' nightmares again... Ya'know, about Ariel Tanner and all that..."

"A few. So?"

"So I don't wanna drag you into somethin' that's gonna fuck you up, man." He forced out another exasperated breath and turned away, once again avoiding eye contact with me. The windows of the van had fogged from our breath as we talked, and the winter landscape was all but completely obscured from view. Chilled silence filled the van for a long moment before Ben finally spoke in a near whisper. "I did that once already."

"Dammit, Ben!" I snapped. "I'm telling you this for the last time. You didn't drag me into anything. I *volunteered* to help you with that case. Any "demons" that I'm dealing with because of it are my own and, very simply, are *not your fault!*"

I felt like grabbing my friend and shaking him as hard as I could. I didn't know if I would ever be able to convince him that he wasn't to blame for everything that had occurred during that investigation—my brush with death, my nightmares, and even Felicity's miscarriage. Each of those things had come about directly because of my involvement in the search for a sadistic serial murderer. Ben's loyalty as a friend caused him to cling to that blame like a security blanket, as if by taking responsibility he could

protect me from an evil that he himself did not understand. In *his* mind, he thought all of this was because he'd asked me to decipher a symbol left behind at a crime scene. In *my* mind, I *knew* it was because my destiny was to square off with that unseen evil and face it down.

I let out my own piqued sigh between pursed lips and sent the mild anger with my friend to spin away down an imaginary drain. I knew he meant well and that this was all a part of what made Detective Benjamin Storm, "Ben Storm the devoted friend."

I unlatched my door and shouldered it open. "Let's go have a look. If I can help, you know I want to."

"Ya'know... I really hated to ask you to do this, Rowan." Ben turned back to face me, his eyes betraying the pain he still refused to let go. The temperature inside the van had quickly dropped, and his words came in a cloud of steamy breath.

"I know you did, Chief," I answered. "But get over it. You can't protect the entire world."

"Maybe not. But I can sure as hell protect my corner of it."

# CHAPTER 3

“We haven’t cleaned her up yet,” the emotionless voice of the medical examiner told me officially. “We just finished the external examination early this morning. Detective Storm asked us not to proceed with the rest of the postmortem until you had a look.”

The climate controlled gelidity of the autopsy suite, though still a fair amount warmer than the current outdoor temperature, injected itself uninvited into my joints, quickly hardening them to ice. Insinuating itself like a prickly arthritis, it froze me in place next to the stainless steel table bearing the young woman’s partially shrouded corpse. The only sound to reach my ears was the dull thudding of my own heart. I had been in this very room before with none but the living, but even then the restless souls of the departed had called out to me.

*Clawed at me...*

*Pleaded with me...*

*Spoken to me as their conduit to this physical plane...*

They had sought me out as the one who understood their continued existence and as the one who could pierce that unyielding veil between life and death.

And, they had spoken to me then just as they were speaking to me now.

This unearthly connection to the other side was my own personal bane as a Witch. Something I had never wanted but could never deny.

My eyes were beginning to burn, and I suddenly realized that I was staring. A fixed, unfocused gaze upon her uncovered face and torso. A face that had once belonged to a vivacious and beautiful young woman. I blinked and removed my glasses before rubbing my eyes and taking a moment to will away the voices of the dead. All of them but one, I hoped.

In life, I am sure that Brianna Walker had been the proverbial knockout blonde. Even in death, she was beyond striking. Measuring five-feet nine-inches, she would have been described as statuesque. From what was visible, her shape fit the criteria for the much sought after hourglass figure, and the Mother Goddess had been more than kind to her in the area of endowment. Still visible along her shoulders and upper arms were the subdued lines of trim musculature. Her stomach was tight and flat. All of this gave silent testimony to her superlative physical condition. Soft but powerful, which is exactly what clients seeking her particularly specialized services would have been after. It was also a fact that told me she wouldn’t have gone down easily. This woman would have fought for her life if given half a chance.

Her natural blonde hair was cropped neatly, shoulder length; and what had been a stylish coif was matted with a dried crust of her own blood. The back of her head had impacted violently with the stone inlaid courtyard in front of the hotel but not before the rest of her body had won that final race. According to the medical examiner, the x-rays showed countless fractures along her spine and each of her limbs. Like Ben had wryly

commented—it wasn't the fall that killed her, it was the sudden stop at the end. Cliché, but then everyone had their own way of dealing with the horrors that they saw. Defense mechanisms are what the psychologists like to call them. Clichés and dry humor just happened to be Ben's. Brianna Walker's fine Grecian features and clear complexion bespoke of an austere beauty combined with a cold arrogance that exuded supreme confidence. She knew she was beautiful, and she had not hesitated to use that fact to her advantage.

Now, however, her lifeless blue-grey pallor contrasted hideously with the painted face of fantasy she had worn that night. Once full, pouting lips sagged flatly, still lacquered a garish red. Dusky steel-greys coated her now sinking eyelids in sharp contoured lines. Thick blue-black mascara still clung in places to spidery lashes, but only where both it and eyeliner hadn't run in dirty streams down her rouged cheeks. She had cried beyond the threshold of waterproof makeup.

She had sobbed in pain.

She had whimpered for mercy.

She had died in unfathomable fear.

No longer the cold seductress, she now wore the mask of a weeping clown, and her pain reached past her cloak of darkness to tear at my very soul.

I felt Ben's large hand rest lightly on my shoulder. "Hey, Kemosabe. You okay?"

"Yeah, Ben." I whispered past the frog that had made a home in my throat. "Yeah, I'm okay."

"You aren't gonna try anything, are ya'? Ya'know, like..." He allowed his voice to melt into silence.

I had previously worked side by side with Ben on a gruesome serial killer case almost every step of the way. It was then that he had seen me exhibit abilities that until that time he had discounted as pure invention. Among those talents had been the capacity to channel and witness the death of a victim first hand. However, he had also learned that in doing so, I could run the risk of joining the victim on the other side permanently. It was to this that I knew he was now wordlessly referring.

"I don't know," I answered. "I'll try not to without warning you first."

"Good enough." After a brief, brotherly squeeze, he released my shoulder and stepped back. I could hear him flip open his notepad, and the rustling sound was punctuated by the metallic click of a ballpoint pen. "Go ahead, Doc."

Ben spoke to the medical examiner who stepped around my motionless form and pulled back the pristine white sheet to reveal the rest of the nightmare.

I slipped my glasses back on to my face and adjusted them down the bridge of my nose with slow determination, and only then did I allow my eyes to roam across the rest of the young woman's body.

"As you can see," the M.E. began as if he were giving a lecture while directing my gaze with his gloved hand, "there are several deep lacerations along her hips and thighs."

Razor precise incisions lined her shapely, once unblemished legs in diagonal, half-chevron stripes. Lifeless flesh, now growing mildly flaccid, shrank away in opposing directions, exposing the severity and depth of the cuts.

"Whoever made the incisions managed to miss any major blood vessels." The doctor continued his dispassionate dissertation of the facts. "And, as I told you, her spinal column was virtually shattered, most likely from the fall. However, there were several

fractures in her limbs, and both shoulders were displaced. Bruising would indicate that both the dislocations and a number of the leg fractures occurred well before she died.”

“How long?” I asked.

“Six to twelve hours, approximately.”

“I assume she rented the room and not her client?” I directed the question over my shoulder to Ben. “Or else I wouldn’t be here looking at this.”

“Yeah,” he grunted. “Room was in her name. Rented that afternoon on her credit card. Not unusual for her accordin’ to her Vice rap sheet. Considerin’ what she charged per hour, I expect she just considered it the cost of doin’ business.”

“What time did she take the fall?”

I heard him flip back through his notes. “Call came in around one-forty a.m. She bounced off the hood of a BMW and set off the alarm. It was parked right in front of the lobby entrance, so she wasn’t layin’ there for long.”

I mused aloud for my friend’s benefit as well as my own. “That means, theoretically, he could have been torturing her almost the entire day. But why didn’t anyone hear her? Surely she had to have screamed.”

“We found fibers matching the hotel linens in her mouth and bite lacerations on her tongue,” the medical examiner offered. “As well as tape residue around her mouth.”

“There were washcloths and a lot of duct tape in the room,” Ben added. “Lab’s checking for saliva and all that, but we’re pretty sure he used ‘em to gag her. Show him the other marks, Doc.”

“Mister Gant, if you’ll step over here.”

I moved down the length of the metal table toward the M.E., and Ben followed along behind. With heartless clinical detachment, the doctor carefully scissored Brianna Walker’s legs apart. In a sense, I had begun to feel sorry for him. Dealing with the cruelties of death on a daily basis had robbed him of his compassion. I loathed the thought of becoming as he was but at the same time wished for the ability to switch off the emotions I was now feeling.

“Here on the inner thigh.” He indicated a patch of incised flesh as he held a large magnifying glass above it.

The lens did its prescribed duty and visually enlarged the area, showing a circle carefully carved into the skin. Around the edges of the circle, small hash marks bisected the curved line. Centrally located in the ringlet, a large X intersected and formed union with a large P. I simply stared in utter disbelief.

“There is an identical marking on the left inner thigh as well. There are several small but unremarkable puncture wounds on her back and buttocks. It also appears that several cigarettes were used to burn the soles of her feet.”

The doctor continued his antiseptic diatribe, carefully outlining the facts of the examination for my benefit. He was still holding the magnifying glass in place while I blindly gazed through it. Staring dumbfounded, only superficially aware that it was he who was speaking, yet still assimilating the information that was voiced.

“Her pelvis is fractured in a manner inconsistent with injuries from the fall. Evidence of bleeding and preliminary examination would seem to indicate that some foreign object was inserted forcibly into her vagina.”

“A *Pear*,” I whispered, ending my muteness.

“What?” Ben asked. “You mean the shithead stuck fruit up ‘er?”

“No. Not fruit, Ben.” I broke my gaze from the symbol inscribed in her flesh and turned to him. “It’s a spiked, medieval torture device used during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was inserted, sometimes into the mouth but more often, rectally or vaginally. I guess the best analogy is that it worked like a shoe stretcher. By turning a screw it would expand or contract. Its purpose, however, was to rend flesh and crush bones.”

“Jeezus fuck...” he muttered.

My mouth was beginning to water, and sharp convulsions of nausea were threatening to overtake my stomach and relieve me of its contents.

“What did you say she called herself?” I asked as I closed my eyes and forced down the overwhelming need to vomit.

“*Mistress Bree?*”

“No. The other one.”

He shuffled back through his notes once again. “HmMMM, yeah, here it is. The Wicked Witch of the West End.”

I turned back to the doctor and opened my eyes, careful to keep my gaze on his face and the young woman’s body well out of my field of view.

“Doctor. Did she have any distinguishing birthmarks? Possibly a mole? Maybe even a distinctly shaped scar or a tattoo?” I raised my left arm and used my right hand to indicate the area. “Either under her arms, on her shoulder, or on her upper back. Either side, it doesn’t matter.”

“She has a tattoo of one of those devil worship symbols just above her right scapula. A five-pointed star, whatever they’re called.”

“A Pentacle,” I told him as I clutched my stomach and sent my eyes searching for the door. I didn’t bother to correct his evaluation of the symbol’s meaning. Fact was, in this case, his perception was closer to the reason this young woman had been murdered than was the truth.

“Why do you ask?”

“Yeah, Row.” Ben chimed in. “What’s it got to do with anything? What’s that other symbol anyhow? Did’ya recognize it or not? Hey, where’re you goin’?”

“I need some air.” I was halfway to the exit, and it was all I could manage to say.



When Ben finally caught up to me, I was in the corridor with my back pressed into the institutional grey wall. I had carelessly stuffed my glasses into a shirt pocket, and my face was now buried in my hands, shielding me from the horror in the autopsy suite, trapping, however, the vivid remembrance of it in my mind. My breath was labored, and I slid slowly down the wall until I was seated, hunched on the frigid tile floor.

“Rowan! What the hell’s goin’ on, man? Are you all right?” Ben was kneeling in front of me, hands clasping my shoulders. “What’s happening? Answer me!”

I had pitched my head forward the moment I noticed the darkness edging into my vision. I was still hyperventilating and now rode the fence between consciousness and unconsciousness. I struggled to control my breathing. Reaching deep inside, I forced myself to ground and center, a Witch’s equivalent of relaxing and focusing. My breaths began to come slower, deepening with each draw. I could feel electric tremors still

dancing up my spine and knew I was shivering, but the cold was far from being the cause.

“Dammit, white man, talk to me!” Ben demanded.

“You think you’re safe,” I finally told him softly from behind the wall of my palms.

His confusion was evident. “What? Safe? What’re ya’ talkin’ about?”

Slowly I rubbed my eyes and let out a heavy breath. Pressing my palms together, I steepled my hands and rested the point of my index fingers on my bearded chin then looked him squarely in the eyes. His expression told me that he was not only confused but also frightened for me as well. The last time he had witnessed me behaving such as this, I had almost died, and there had been nothing he could do to stop it.

The medical examiner had followed him and now stood across the corridor looking helpless. He displayed his own grimace of fear as he nervously milled about. I was certain, however, that his fear was not for me, but rather, of me. His profession dealt with the dead. Silent corpses devoid of feeling or emotion. To this he had grown accustomed over the years, and its comfortable emptiness had left him with little skill in the realm of the living.

“You think you’re safe,” I repeated before continuing the explanation. “You believe it no matter what you see on the news at ten. ‘No, that could never happen to me. That only happens to other people.’ We all say it. We all believe it. Then it strikes a little closer to home. A friend. A relative. It hurts, but you still think you’re immune. Then it comes even closer...”

“What the hell are you talkin’ about, Rowan?” Ben pressed, “Did you know her? Was she a friend? Like Ariel Tanner?”

“No. No, I didn’t know her. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“You’re not makin’ sense, white man.”

“It’s the Burning Times, Ben,” I told him carefully. “All over again. There’s a Witch hunter out there.”

“A Witch hunter? What the...” He stood and proceeded to massage his neck. “Listen, Row, I think maybe you’d better start at the beginnin’...”



We were sitting in a small, comfortable office. Mauve walls were decorated with picturesque watercolor landscapes in unobtrusive chrome frames. Institutional grade but nicely piled carpet covered the floor. It was the office of Doctor Christine Sanders, chief medical examiner for the city of Saint Louis. She was also the M.E. who had handled the posts on the victims from the previous investigation.

“Doctor Sanders said to take all the time you need,” Doctor Friedman, the other M.E., told us, “She’s going to be tied up for a while.”

“That’s great, Doc, thanks.” Ben answered him and then added, “Could you let her know that I’d like to get her involved in this if at all possible?”

Doctor Friedman’s mouth formed a series of puckered fish-like O’s as he began to object but suddenly thought better of it. He left us with a curt nod and carefully closed the door behind him.

Ben had just finished stuffing the cellophane wrapper from a cigar into his pocket and now clenched the Cameroon leaf-encased stogie between his teeth.

“Want one?” he offered.

“Not right now, thanks,” I answered. “And I doubt if Doctor Sanders would appreciate you smoking that in here. Besides, this is a government building, isn’t it?”

“I’m not smokin’ it, I’m just chewin’ on it.” He hooked the cigar in his finger then thumbed forward to a fresh page in his notebook. “So you wanna fill me in on what got under your skin back there? And start at the beginning.”

“You want the beginning?” I asked rhetorically. “Here it is. At least the official one, anyway. Around the year 1484, two inquisitors named Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, masquerading as theologians, produced a document. It was known as the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and it was endorsed by the Catholic Church... It’s possible you may have at some time in your life heard of it by the name *Hammer of the Witches*. At that time in history, the church set the law of the land. Not just moral law but political and social as well. The Pope at that time, Innocent VIII, issued what is called a Papal Bull. An official decree of sorts. In it he stated, and I quote, ‘...by the tenor of these presents in virtue of Our Apostolic authority, We decree and enjoin that the aforesaid Inquisitors be empowered to proceed to the just correction, imprisonment, and punishment of any persons, without let or hindrance, in every way as if the provinces, townships, dioceses, districts, territories, yea, even the persons and their crimes in this kind were named and particularly designated in Our letters...’”

I paused for a moment to let the quote sink in and drew a deep breath. I had amazed even myself that I could remember the diatribe in such vivid detail; it had been quite some time since I had last read it. Unfortunately, that which we fear and loathe the most is what seems to remain with us the longest, and with the greatest clarity.

“Yeah, and that means?”

“In effect,” I explained, “he legalized the Inquisition; essentially giving the church’s blessing to those who tortured and executed anyone accused of heresy and consorting with ‘Satan.’”

“The *Malleus Maleficarum* became the handbook of the inquisitors for nearly three centuries. It contained instructions regarding how to determine if someone was a Witch, wizard or sorceress, right down to the questions you should ask of them. It went even further in that it prescribed the use of torture in order to extract confessions and especially to force those already accused to implicate others. Finally, it blueprinted the methods by which they should then be tried, convicted, and executed.

“Using this book, the various interpretations of the *Holy Bible*, and the permission of the church, literally thousands of innocent people were hunted down and imprisoned. Once in custody they were brutally tortured, maimed, and murdered by the delegated inquisitors for what were then called ‘heretical depravities.’”

“So you’re tellin’ me you’re all weirded out because of some old book?” my friend posed incredulously.

“Not just because of the book, Ben,” I appealed as I shook my head. “Because of what it stands for, and because I was just looking at the corpse of a young woman who has been subjected to those horrors it prescribes.

“This is the twenty-first century. While I’m not naive enough to believe prejudice no longer exists, I find it hard to deal with someone reviving the Witch trials of the Middle Ages.”

Ben stared back at me silently for a substantial portion of what seemed an eternity. I had just spilled an enormous amount of information into the room, and to him, I probably appeared to be rambling. His stoic face told me he was still completely unsure of what the brief lesson in European history had to do with the investigation at hand.

“Okay... So I’m not quite sure that’s the beginnin’ I was talkin’ about,” he eventually stated then proceeded to gnaw on the end of the cigar thoughtfully. “So why are ya’ so sure this Witch Hammer has something to do with this dead call-girl?”

“*Hammer of the Witches,*” I corrected and motioned to his notebook. “Let me borrow that for a second.”

He handed over the worn notepad and a promotional giveaway ballpoint with a D.A.R.E logo screen-printed along the plastic barrel. I carefully scribed a circle on the page that I then decorated with small hash marks around its perimeter. In the center I placed a large X and vertically intersected it with a large letter P.

“That is the symbol carved into Brianna Walker’s inner thigh,” I told him as I handed the pen and pad back. “Are you absolutely positive you’ve never seen it before?”

“Well...” He scrutinized the blue ink rendition of the marking. “It looks kinda familiar, but I can’t place it for sure.”

“If you walked into a Catholic church you would. They’re Greek letters. The X is Chi, and the P is Ro. The first two letters of the Greek word Christos, or Christ. What you are looking at is called the *Monogram of Christ.*”

“You mean like Jesus Christ?”

“One and the same.”

“So you’re sayin’ it’s a Christian symbol then?”

“Absolutely. It represents Jesus Christ and all that he means to Christianity as a whole.”

My forearm had begun tingling with a mild itch that now burst into the crawling sensation of having a handful of ants marching across my skin. Absently, I pawed at the annoyance while waiting for Ben to digest the first course of information.

“Guess that would fit...” he muttered.

“Fit what?”

“Well, there was a Gideon’s Bible on the bed in her room.” He quickly referenced his notes. “The passage Leviticus twenty seven was highlighted. *A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones; their blood shall be upon them.*”

“Really,” I finally muttered. “I would have expected Isaiah fifty-seven three. *But draw near hither, ye sons of the sorceress, the seed of the adulterer and the whore.*”

“Shit, Rowan! You quote Bible verses too?”

“I’ve told you before, Ben, I may be a Witch, but I’m a student of religions in general. It’s how I stay on top of what I’m being accused of, and, *whom* I’m being accused by.”

Again my skin burned with an un-quelled itch, and I dug my fingers in, working at it through the material of my sleeve.

“Somethin’ wrong with your arm?” Ben asked, pointing to indicate my sudden preoccupation with the task.

“Just an itch. Probably nerves.” I forced myself to stop clawing at the bother and focus on the conversation. “Did you find anything else?”

“Other than the Bible, duct tape, and the washcloths, just her clothing and about a grand in sex toys an’ leather goods, if ya’ know what I mean. Place had been wiped clean as far as prints go... And all the blood on the sheets was hers.”

“No semen or fresh evidence of sexual intercourse?”

“Not accordin’ to the M.E. so far, but what’s it matter? She was a hooker. Somethin’ like that wouldn’t be unusual.”

“Just trying to get a handle on what this guy is thinking. It wasn’t unusual for inquisitors to rape their victims as a part of the torture.” I explained. “The things they did in the name of their God were the only true depravities... They were, to say the least, a rather sick lot. Of course, if there’s no evidence of intercourse, then that could well establish that he isn’t doing this for kicks. In my mind, that makes him even more frightening.” Ben was noting my questions as well as my explanations in his pad as we went along. He looked up from his quick scribbling and peered at me quietly for a moment.

“You seem pretty stuck on this whole Inquisition thing,” he commented. “You really think since he didn’t screw her that he isn’t just some sick fuck that got off on carvin’ this chick up? I mean, look at her customers. That S&M shit goes both ways, ya’know.”

“The *Monogram of Christ* is definitely one sign,” I answered. “It was put there for a reason. It wasn’t random or even an afterthought. It was placed on her inner thighs to purify her because of her profession. The killer was seeking to cleanse the ‘whore.’ Another thing would be the Bible and the highlighted verse.”

“So maybe he’s just after hookers.”

“I doubt it. Remember, the Bible verse highlighted mentioned wizardry and having a familiar spirit, something heavily associated with The Craft. Also, she had a Pentacle tattooed on her upper back. A tattoo, mole, or birthmark in that area would have been considered a *Devil’s Mark* during the Burning Times. It would have signified that she consorted with Satan, as all Witches were believed to have done. Let’s not forget the fact that she was tortured using a *Pear*. Medieval torture devices aren’t what I would consider standard fare for someone out to kill hookers. No, he was definitely looking to get a confession out of her.”

“How could she confess anything if she was gagged?”

“She wouldn’t have needed to confess anything verbally. Besides, whoever did this obviously removed the gag at some point.”

“Okay, but ya don’t know for a fact that he used that pear thing. The doc just said *somethin’* was inserted. And besides, that Wicked Witch of the West End shit was just a street name she used. She wasn’t really a Witch... I mean not like you and Felicity, right?”

“I can’t say for certain, Ben. We don’t exactly carry union cards you know. Just because I’m a Witch it doesn’t mean I know every other Witch in Saint Louis. It doesn’t matter anyway,” I shook my head. My hand had crept back over and with a mind of its own was once again scratching my arm. “The majority of those executed for the so-called crime of WitchCraft weren’t Witches either. If the killer perceived her to be a Witch, then to him, that is exactly what she was. A confession would merely be a formality, and the torture, a means to that end.”

“Maybe so, but all this Inquisition stuff...”

“Come on, Ben,” I implored. “You know you don’t really believe that this was just some bondage game gone too far. If you did, you never would have asked me to look at that marking.”

“Okay. So say you’re right, and there is a wacko runnin’ around playin’ judge, jury, and executioner against Witches.” Ben was desperately seeking a way out. I knew he didn’t want to accept the fact that we were dealing with another serial killer, especially since only six months had passed since the demise of the last one. “Then why didn’t he burn ‘er at the stake or somethin’. I thought that’s how they executed Witches back then. You yourself keep callin’ the whole thing the Burnin’ Times.”

“Yes, burning was done in some parts of Europe, and it *is* the very reason modern day Witches call it the Burning Times. But it was only one form of execution and not the most common at that. Witches, and those accused, were often garroted, hung, disemboweled, drowned, or even slowly crushed to death.

“In this case, he was trying to see if she would save herself instead of facing such a death.”

“Whaddaya mean ‘save herself’? She never had a chance. He chucked her off a fuckin’ balcony.”

“That wasn’t just an execution, Ben, it was also a test to verify the validity of her confession.”

“A test how?”

“He wanted to see if she could fly.”

# CHAPTER 4

“The Empress Chicken combination plate is pretty good,” Ben was telling me as he cranked the steering wheel and arced us through the intersection in a left turn that went far too wide for comfort. Fortunately, there was nothing in his way, and he serpented the vehicle back into the middle of the lane. “But ya’ hafta tell ‘em ta’ lay off the MSG.”

We were back in his van and making our way down a near deserted, snow-packed street in the direction of lunch. He had produced a crumpled menu from the depths of the glove box and offered it to me before we left the parking lot of the city morgue. The tri-fold piece of paper screamed neon yellow in between the scribbled lunch orders, phone numbers, and smudges threatening to completely cover its face. In the center of the outer fold, it bore a caricatured cartoon likeness of a balloon-headed Asian man in a tiny car, gleefully rushing to some unknown destination off the page. The name of the restaurant emblazoned above the line drawing read “Happy Wok Express—We Deliver.”

“I’ll probably just have some vegetables and steamed rice,” I told him after half-heartedly inspecting the list of specials. “I doubt if I need to eat anything very spicy at the moment.”

“Vegetables and rice?” He glanced over at me and chuckled. “Are you serious? Don’t ya’ want any real Chinese food?”

“Actually, Ben, vegetables and steamed rice are probably closer to being *real* Asian food than your suggestion of Empress Chicken.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Hmmp. Well, I’m still gonna have the chicken.”

“I figured you would.”

Doctor Sanders had arrived in her office shortly before we left the morgue. Much to my surprise, she remembered me and made it a point to ask about Felicity’s well being. Of course, it hadn’t been that long since we’d met. Considering that we had seen each other several times due to the body count of the last case, there was no real reason to be shocked. Truth be told, by the time local media finished trying to make me into an overnight celebrity—Self Proclaimed Witch Aids Police In Satanic Serial Killer Investigation, etcetera—I should have been amazed if someone *didn’t* know me.

Ben engaged in a short banter with the city’s chief medical examiner and persuaded her to take over the postmortem on Brianna Walker. She had begun by assuring him that Doctor Friedman was more than qualified to complete the autopsy but within minutes agreed to handle it herself. I wasn’t entirely certain if Ben had been just eloquent enough in his arguments or if she had agreed for no other reason than to get him to shut up. In any event, Ben got what he wanted, as usual, and invited her to lunch with us in return for the favor. She had declined for reason of a full schedule, pointedly citing the fact that she now had yet another post to perform on top of her never-ending administrative duties.

The radio was playing softly from strategically placed speakers and intermixed with an occasional tinny spurt of chatter from the police radio mounted vertically to the face of

the dash. The cigarette lighter receptacle stood ready to accept the plug for the magnetic bubble light that rested on the engine cover between the seats. I knew from past experience that a hidden switch somewhere on the driver's side would activate a deafening siren behind the exterior grill. Ben was dedicated to his job, and the modifications he had made to his personal vehicle showed it.

"A lotta coppers eat here," he said as he urged the van over the curb into the unplowed lot and created his own parking space next to the small building. "I got turned on to it when I worked this district a coupl'a years back."

He was making conversation. Going purposely out of his way to avoid the subject of Brianna Walker and the revelations I had bestowed upon him less than an hour before. I knew he was doing so for my benefit. It must have been obvious that I was still rattled by the entire experience, and this was even without my having engaged in any psychic exploration of the young woman's death. I had to admit to myself that I was already in deep and that any other fear I had faced in my life to this point was a cakewalk as compared to what awaited me now. In my mind, I mutely convinced myself that I was just going to have to get over it.

"You know, Ben, I appreciate what you're doing, but we can't keep avoiding the subject. We have to talk about this."

The itching sensation on my forearm had tapered off to a dull annoyance for a brief time but had now returned with a growing intensity. The thick, polyfiber-filled fabric of my coat was positioned armor-like between my clawing fingers and my burning skin, rendering my attack useless.

"Yeah, white man, I know," he conceded with a nod. "But I don't mind tellin' ya, I could really do without another serial nutball runnin' around loose. Shit! The last one was bad enough."

"I hate to tell you this," I ventured, "but if I'm right, and this guy is re-creating the Inquisition, it could get much worse than the last one... *much* worse."

"Yeah, I was afraid you were gonna say somethin' like that." He paused thoughtfully then turned to stare out the window for a brief moment before centering his gaze back on my face. "Sixty-four thousand dollar question, Row. Are ya' gonna be able to handle this?"

"Yeah, Ben. I think I will." I was still pawing at the itch mindlessly.

"You *think*, or you *know*, Rowan?" he stressed. "I'm not gonna have ya' in the middle of this crap if it's gonna put ya' over the edge or somethin'."

"I understand your concern, Ben, but I'll be all right. The whole idea of someone reviving that part of history just caught me a little off guard. Besides, I thought you said my involvement in this was requested from further up the line?"

"Yeah, it was. You made a big impression with that whole mess last fall... But I'll tell the chief he can kiss my ass if this is gonna be any danger to you. It's not like you're gettin' paid for this."

"I'm in danger whether I help with the investigation or not, Ben."

"How do ya' figure that?"

"I'm a Witch and I'm open about it. 'Out of the broom closet' so to speak. My picture has been in the paper and all over the news. Not to mention the article we were just talking about this morning. If he's hunting Witches, then I'm a prime target who's already publicly confessed to the *crime*."

“Sonofabitch... Mutherfuck...” He muttered the expletives as he shook his head. “Damn...I just can’t win for losin’.”



The interior of the Happy Wok Express was just as small as the outside of the building had professed it would be. Ben told me that it was once a carryout fried chicken franchise that had been shut down due to several health code violations. The building had apparently remained vacant until just a few years ago when the current owners had taken it over. Of the few tables, we had selected the one in the farthest corner of the establishment. We were the only patrons at the moment, but there was no guarantee it would remain that way. What we would be discussing was definitely not meant to be overheard by the general populace.

“You shoulda had the doc look at your arm when we were at the morgue.” Ben gestured at my incessant preoccupation with the itch. “Maybe ya’ touched somethin’ in there that you were allergic to, ya’know?”

“I can’t ask her for treatment every time I see her, Ben. She’s already stitched me up once.” I asserted, referring to the first time she and I had met. I had been bleeding from a minor scalp wound received in the course of an investigation, and she had tended to it without hesitation.

“Yeah, well,” he retorted between mouthfuls, “she’s a doctor, right?”

“Right. But she’s getting paid to be a medical examiner, not a general practitioner.”

It was painfully obvious that the present management had ruled out the entire concept of remodeling, as the interior motif still contained blatant references to the goodness of deep fried poultry. Dark brown ceramic tiles on the walls and floor, sporting more than their share of chips and cracks, married with replacements of carelessly unmatched colors. A flickering soft drink sign hung above the worn Formica counter, balancing a painted menu on either side. Cardboard rectangles with handwritten additions were taped over a number of the original selections announcing price changes in bold strokes from a wide-tipped marker. Low on a nearby wall, where most likely there had once stood a drinking fountain, a copper pipe jutted out; the stem of its shutoff valve was clamped with a small pair of vise-grips. I couldn’t speak for the decorating and maintenance of the place, but at least it appeared to be clean.

We continued our meal through the momentary lull in our conversation. The sounds of metal utensils rattling against heavy pans echoed from the kitchen area, occasionally punctuated by a rapid string of speech in an Asian language. Their phone was still ringing off and on, though the mid-day rush should theoretically have ended. I assumed that since the weather had forced a later start to the workday, lunch breaks had been pushed back as well. Who better to call on a day like this than someone who would deliver?

The food was edible but nothing that was going to make the Riverfront Times annual restaurant guide. For some reason, they had found it necessary to blanch my vegetables beyond doneness, turning them into a limp pile covered with something resembling a slightly thickened beef stock. The rice was cold and dry, which led me to believe it had been steamed far in advance of today. Ben sang the praises of his selection between enormous forkfuls of deep fried chicken nuggets in a thickly sweetened hot pepper sauce; of course, Ben wasn’t the pickiest diner I had ever met. I simply pushed my

lunch around the Styrofoam plate with the plastic fork, occasionally stabbing a broccoli floret or slice of carrot that hadn't been cooked beyond recognition and popping it in my mouth.

"Your food okay?" Ben asked. "Ya' don't seem ta' be eatin' much."

"It's fine," I lied. "I'm just not real hungry right now."

"So..." He paused for a moment and guzzled cola from a thirty-two ounce plastic cup before continuing, "You're pretty sure this nutcase is gonna keep killin'?"

"Yes. If he's following the mentality of the inquisitors, I would guess that he sees himself as apostolic. He probably believes that his actions are being directed by God."

"Don't tell me God's talkin' ta' this wingnut through his electric razor or somethin'."

"I don't know, Ben." I said. "If you're looking for an accurate and expert psychological assessment, then I'm not the one you need to be speaking to. You know that. I can help you with the historical aspects, and if I *visualize* something up here..." I tapped my forehead with my index finger. "But other than that..."

"You think I need ta' call the Feebs, don'tcha?"

"If you want a profile of him." I confirmed his comment with a nod then added, "Look, I know you have a problem with the FBI getting involved, but you've got a pretty good working relationship with Constance Mandalay in the local field office. She's pretty open-minded and you know it."

"Yeah," he grunted. "She's workable. I just don't wanna get stuck with another one of those know-it-all's with an Ivy League sheepskin an' a big fat zero in the experience department. I don't need that kinda aggravation when somethin' like this is goin' on."

"So request her specifically."

"I s'pose I could get 'er involved unofficially and see where it goes. If the Feebs end up knee deep in it then..."

Ben's vocal musing was bitten off cleanly by the shrill cry of his pager as it demanded immediate attention. He thumbed the button to silence the device and peered at the liquid crystal display with a thin-lipped frown.

"Office," he proclaimed as he proceeded to slip the beeper back on to his belt, only to have it begin blaring loudly once more. Extracting the screaming palm full of electronic components, he glanced at its face with sharp disgust before returning it to his side once again. "Jeezus... Fuckin'... It's the goddamned office *again*."

Ben reached around the back of his chair and into the folds of his coat. After a moment of wrestling with the flap on the pocket, he withdrew a hand-held cell phone and pressed the power switch. The compact apparatus looked like a child's toy in his massive hand. The moment the ready tone announced the phone's status, he stabbed out the department number from memory and then held it to his ear.

"Yeah, it's Storm," he said after a short wait. "I was paged."

He paused for another moment, apparently holding to be transferred to the individual who had done the paging. I decided I was finished with my lunch and pushed the plate of gelatinized gravy and cold vegetables to the side then began molesting my itchy forearm in a distracted fashion.

"Yeah. I'm at lunch. What's up?" Ben finally spoke into the cell phone once again.

I watched him as he listened to the voice at the other end. Slowly, his face took on an expression of deep concentration, and his free hand went to the back of his neck and began automatically massaging.

“Yeah... Yeah... Uh-huh,” he grunted. “Hold on a sec...”

He switched the phone to his other ear and fumbled for his notebook. The struggle ended quickly, and he flipped the pad open on the surface of the table then snapped the button on his ink pen. Resting one elbow on the notepad to hold it in place, he looked like a contorted giant trying to use miniature replicas of everyday items.

“Okay, go ahead... Yeah... Uh-huh... Yeah, I know ‘im...” He scribbled furiously, stopping only briefly as breaks in the information coming to him warranted. “Sure. We worked together a few months back.”

Ben scrawled a line on the paper and accented it with a double underline then motioned for me to have a look. The blue ink scribble read “Carl Deckert.”

Detective Carl Deckert worked for the county police department. We had met during the last case I worked when he had been assigned to the Major Case Squad, Saint Louis’ version of a violent crime task force. The MCS was formed as a collective of municipal police departments, all supplying manpower whenever a particularly heinous or high profile case came along. That case would then receive the highest priority and the undivided attention of the officers assigned. The intention was for the squad to be a trump card, activated only when absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, these days, they seemed to spend more time active than not.

“Yeah... What’s the name of the place again? Uh-huh... Uh-huh... Got it.” Ben flipped to a fresh page and returned to scribbling. “Yeah, I took ‘im down ta’ the morgue a little while ago.” He pointed at me, verifying for me that I was the *him* to whom he was referring. “He identified the symbol and he’s got a theory. It ain’t a good one, but I’m guessin’ you already figured that out. Yeah, he’s with me right now... I dunno, hold on....”

He cupped his free hand over the mouthpiece and turned his attention completely on me.

“Jonsey says the chief wants ta’ know if you’re free ta’ go check out another crime scene.”

“When?” I asked.

“Now.”

I mulled it over for a moment. I had at least two clients waiting for updates on their software, and I had to customize it specifically for them. Fortunately, owning my own consulting firm and working from home allowed flexibility in my schedule. It didn’t take me long to decide that I could spend a few hours working in the evening to catch up.

“Sure. No problem.”

“He’s okay with it,” Ben said as he resumed speaking into the phone. “Yeah... No problem. We’re on our way.”

He remained silent after switching off the device and stowing it in his coat, then he gathered up the notebook. His grim countenance was almost enough to verify what I already suspected.

“He killed someone else, didn’t he?” I asked, following Ben’s example and shrugging into my coat.

“That’s gonna be your call,” he responded. “But yeah, looks like it. Meadowbrook Park out in the county. Carl Deckert’s waitin’ for us.”

“How was the victim killed?” I pressed.

“Not sure ‘bout that, but the body was burned,” he answered. “The vic was found tied to a piece of a telephone pole in one a’ the pavilion fire pits where it’d been torched.”

The itching sensation on my forearm had now mutated into a knife-edged pain.

# CHAPTER 5

Ask any number of people on the street, and they will tell you that they abhor violence and crime. Then ask those people how they feel about rubbernecking sightseers who slow down to gawk at automobile accidents, and they will tell you that they despise them. They will tell you that such individuals are sick and twisted. They will tell you that such individuals are morbid and in need of psychiatric help.

Now, using the very same people you've been questioning, throw in yellow crime scene tape, flashing lights, police cars and a dead body. Mix well.

Suddenly the morbid becomes the curiosity and they, along with scores like them, will flock to the perimeter in order to catch the tiniest glimpse of what the commotion is all about. Meadowbrook Park was filled with those people today.

Normally, the paved road through the park would remain untouched during the winter; there was no reason to waste taxpayers' money plowing a street that wouldn't be traveled. Of course, when a murder scene planted itself in the middle of the snow-covered venue, the concept of normal became quickly obsolete.

Street crews had cut a double-wide swath from the park entrance to a point thirty or so yards past the easiest access point to the main pavilion, effectively clearing a small avenue to allow ingress and egress for the multitude of emergency vehicles present. Mounds of the wet winter precipitation were piled unceremoniously in the center of the road exactly where the plows had left them, and there they would stay until removed slowly by the process of thaw.

Ben plugged in his magnetic bubble light and positioned it on the dash before nosing the Chevy through the crowd of onlookers. He flashed his badge to the uniformed patrolman blocking the entry and was told that we were expected. Once we were waved through, he pressed the van forward up the salted drive and carefully edged it in next to a row of county police cruisers then levered the gear shift into park and switched off the engine.

Wide strips of bright yellow plastic tape—repetitiously imprinted CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS—were strung between pillars and trees, forming an official barrier against the spectators and the unauthorized. Mother Nature dispassionately ignored the carefully erected boundary, sending icy gusts of wind to tear angrily at the tape and to blow swirling white devils of crystalline snowflakes throughout the pavilion.

Nearby, arctic-suited maintenance workers were laboring with shovels to dig out the first vehicles that had arrived on the scene. Small levees of snow had been piled to their rear bumpers by the passing plow. Ben and I buttoned up then climbed from the warmth of the van into the frigid winter afternoon. The sky was still marbled splotchy grey, and the second round of the predicted snowfall was barreling down upon us from the northwest. Even at this distance, along the frosty backbone of the crisp air, I could detect the sickly sweet odor of scorched flesh. I knew it would only get worse as we drew nearer.

I had to remove my thick glove in order to sign the homicide scene log before entering the area. I was just dragging it back onto my frozen hand when I heard my and Ben's name called out across the snow-whitened landscape.

Detective Carl Deckert was a fiftyish, portly, grey-haired man possessing at once a boyish charm and a grandfatherly demeanor. He had been the only member of the Major Case Squad, aside from Ben, to accept me when I was first brought in as a consultant on Ariel Tanner's murder all those months ago. It didn't take long for us to form a strong friendship. He was trundling toward us now, bundled in a heavy topcoat with a matching scarf. A brown fedora sat perched atop his head, threatening to take wing on the chilly gusts. His nose and ears glowed red from the early stages of mild frostbite, giving an immediate visual indication of how long he'd already been out here.

"Ben! Rowan!" He greeted us again as he drew closer and thrust out his gloved hand. "Sorry I called you guys out in this mess, but I gotta tell ya', I'm sure glad you're here."

"Hello, Carl." I shook his hand heartily. "Good to see you too, though I wish it were under different circumstances."

"Tell me about it."

"Carl." Ben followed suit, shaking his hand as we continued walking. "So, whaddaya have here?"

Carl reached up to press his hat back down as a prickly sideways surge of wind sought to rip it from his head. He proceeded to fill us in as we headed briskly for the negligible shelter of the picnic pavilion.

"Near as the coroner can tell from what's left, it looks like we're dealin' with a female. Looks to be about five-six, five-seven and pretty well developed, so we're most likely talkin' adult. She was secured with chains and a padlock to what appears might have been a piece of a telephone pole."

The acrid stink of burnt flesh mingled with the putrid smells of urine, feces, and vomit to form a sickeningly malodorous potpourri. Every step closer to the scene intensified the stench by yet another factor.

"We didn't get a call on this till a couple'a hours ago," Carl said, still continuing with his rundown. "But judgin' from the pile of ashes and the amount of damage to the body, we're guessin' she was torched sometime after midnight. Probably real early this morning."

"I suppose it'd be too much to hope for a witness," Ben spat the rhetorical comment as we rounded a wide stone pillar and came face to face with the unbridled horror.

Shriveled black patches of skin and cooked flesh were drawn tight over the gnarled skeleton held partially erect in the fire pit. The jaw of the charred skull locked open in a silent, agonized scream, hideously baring blackened teeth where the softer, unsupported flesh had been completely seared away. Surprisingly, more than enough of the torso remained intact to show with relative certainty that the corpse was in fact that of a woman.

"Jeezus..." Ben exclaimed, unable to pry his stare from the disfigured remains.

"Coroner wanted to take her on in," Carl offered, "but I wanted to wait until you got here."

Though an autopsy was yet to be performed, I knew that she had been alive when the fire was ignited around her. In my mind, I could see the flames licking up her body,

first blistering her skin and then consuming it with an appetite unmatched by a starving animal. The fire enveloped her, searing her nose as she fought not to breathe, only to then be sucked deep into her lungs when she could no longer hold her breath. She wanted to cry out. To scream. But she couldn't. She had been gagged.

The barrier had eventually burned away, but by then it was too late. I could sense without a doubt that she had been aware of her fate to the very end.

Color and light began to drain from the scene around me in a glittering whirlpool, and I knew I was being pulled into a place I didn't dare go. Without even trying I was about to channel her last moments on this physical plane. Consciously, I knew that without a solid anchor to pull me back, this was one I could not survive.

Steeling myself against the onslaught of desperate emotions and excruciating unearthly pain, I latched myself onto the nearest thing I could find.

"Rowan!" Ben yelled, finally breaking his stare as I grasped his arm and stumbled forward. He took hold of my shoulders and steadied me before I could plunge face first onto the concrete.

Standing on the opposite side, Carl came to my aid as well. "Hey, Row, are you all right?"

"Thanks..." I muttered to them both as I shakily regained my balance. "Sorry about that."

"You were goin' all *Twilight Zone*, weren't ya'?" Ben asked. I'm sure that having witnessed similar episodes before he knew the signs all too well.

"Yeah," I sighed. "But I think I caught it in time."

"You sure you're okay?" Carl interjected in his usual fatherly tone.

"I'll be fine."

"I hate ta' ask," Ben queried in an apologetic tone, "but ya' didn't happen to see the asshole who did it when you went... Well, went wherever it is ya' go when ya' do that."

"No. I wish I had."

The flesh rending pain that had started as a simple itch on my forearm was eating at me with a vengeance. I could feel my eyes watering as I fought to suppress tears.

"Did you find a Bible anywhere on the scene?" I queried Detective Deckert while attempting to ignore the torment.

"No. No Bible." He shook his head. "But funny you should mention that."

"Why?"

"Well," Carl ventured and extended his arm, pointing toward the corpse. "The real reason I called was the symbols."

My eyes followed his finger down to the stone base of the fire pit. There, skillfully drawn in matte black spray-paint, was the Christian symbol that had become painfully familiar over the past few hours. The *Monogram of Christ*.

"Fuck me," Ben muttered.

"Excuse me?" Carl looked at him curiously.

Ben shook his head. "Sorry... Just that we got one just like it carved into a dead call-girl in the city morgue."

"You found Christ's Monogram at another murder scene?" Carl asked incredulously.

Ben cocked his head to the side and gave Deckert a sideways look. "You know what it is?"

“Yeah. I’ve seen it before.” Carl nodded. “Not a lot, but I remember it from church when I was a kid.”

“You said symbols,” I interjected the question between stabs of blinding pain. “Plural.”

“Yeah,” Deckert answered with a nod. “The other one is layin’ on the ledge of the fire pit. It’s one of those Pentacle necklaces. That’s kinda why I wanted to get your opinion.”

By now I could take no more. It felt as if someone were driving a white-hot blade mercilessly into my flesh.

“I told ya’ you shoulda had the doc look at that, white man,” Ben chided, noticing my attention to the appendage.

“Somethin’ wrong with your arm?” Carl asked, genuine concern wrinkling his face.

“I don’t know. It started itching when we were at the morgue,” I grimaced against another bolt of pain as I answered. “Now it’s killing me.”

I peeled off the glove and unzipped my coat. The cold no longer mattered at this point. I had to see what could possibly be exacting such pain upon my arm. I knew that I hadn’t injured it, and there had been nothing wrong until Ben had taken me to the morgue. I couldn’t imagine that I had touched something and not noticed doing it. Besides, I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt.

Carefully I slid my throbbing arm from the thick coat. It had begun to feel sticky and wet, and upon seeing it the answer became obvious. Blood had soaked through the fabric of my shirt along the forearm and matted it to my skin.

“Shit, man, you’re bleeding!” Ben intoned.

Unbuttoning the cuff and gingerly rolling up the sleeve, I revealed the source of the crimson flow. My flesh was bruised purple and black, looking for all the world as if I had been beaten. Off-centered, in the mass of dark contusions, blood oozed freely. Carved deeply into my skin was a circle, decorated with hash marks along the side arcs and encompassing a large letter X that was bisected by a large letter P.

Carl Deckert was the first to break the silence as he softly muttered under his breath, “Holy Jesus, Mary Mother of God.”



Even with the intense pain radiating up my arm, I still felt that Ben’s reaction was overkill. Despite my reservations, I had been instantly hustled into a county police cruiser and taken to the nearest emergency room. Inescapable, as well, were the full benefits of a warbling siren and rapidly flickering light bar. When all was said and done, the trip to and from the local medical center had taken less time than the treatment itself. Of course, as if I didn’t have enough to think about, the lengthiest portion of my stay in the E.R. was the period spent trying to convince the doctor of two basic things. One, that, *no*, I did *not* purposely carve the design into my own arm. And two, *no*, I did not need a psychological consultation because, I repeat, I did *not* purposely carve the design into my own arm. Since I knew they wouldn’t believe the truth, and I had been unable to concoct a convincing lie, I was unable to give them a reasonable explanation for the injury. In the interest of time, and my own sanity, I was finally forced to assure them that I would seek help for what they had deemed to be an “unhealthy proclivity toward self-mutilation.”



Pastel blue-greys streaked the clouds where the sky finally fell earthward to meet the cluttered horizon. Dusk was nearly upon us, and what little muted light remained was fleeing the oncoming night with hasty dispatch. The promised second wave of snow had blown in and began falling in hesitant showers before finally applying itself in an all out assault on the already blanketed white landscape.

Ben and Carl were waiting in the van when the officer delivered me back to the nearly deserted crime scene. Snowflakes dying on the Chevy's windshield, first becoming water then steamily evaporating, told me the vehicles heater had been running for some time. I had scarcely managed to thank my escort and unlatch the door before the two of them were out of their warm sanctuary and heading toward me.

"So what'd the docs say?" Ben's words were opaque with concern as he came around the front of the squad car.

I took a moment to wave to the departing officer as she backed out, and then I turned to face my friend.

"They thought I did it to myself," I answered wryly. "So, other than being diagnosed as a self-destructive masochist, I'm fine. It looked worse than it is."

"You sure?" Carl pressed. "It looked pretty bad to me."

"Yes. I'm sure."

"They give ya' anything for the pain?" Ben pressed.

"Acetaminophen," I replied. "It really isn't that bad any more. I think it was primarily a psychic reaction of sorts. My body's way of getting me to look at it. Like the itching probably was."

Carl appealed, "Yeah, but why'd it show up on you to start with?"

"Best guess? Someone or something is trying to get my attention. Obviously, it has something to do with the two murders so far. So now I just have to figure out what that something is."

"Whatcha mean *someone* or *somethin*?" He shook his head in a gesture of confusion. "I thought that thing just... Ya'know, like, just appeared on yer arm."

"It did," I confirmed his comment. "The someone or something I'm talking about probably doesn't reside on this physical plane. It's similar to when Ariel Tanner was speaking to me in my dreams after she had been murdered. This is just a physical manifestation of a similar type of contact."

"Holy shit," he murmured.

Ben shook his head and expelled a short whistle that puffed a jet of steamy breath into the night air. "You're just way too spooky sometimes, white man."

"Yeah, Rowan," Carl echoed. "Spooky."

"Is 'spooky' an official police term?" an unmistakable feminine voice asked from behind our huddle.

We turned as a group and were nearly blinded as a powerful light mounted atop a video camera suddenly snapped to life and vomited its harsh glare across us. So intent had we been on our conversation that we hadn't noticed Brandee Street and her cameraman when they drove up. We had been under the impression that the media had given up their vigil outside the gates of the park and gone in search of other news to

sensationalize. Apparently, Brandee had laid in wait for the last squad car to leave before descending upon us in search of a video byte.

She looked like the living rendition of a magazine advertisement for a ski lodge. With brightly rouged lips and thick lashes, she was decked out in stylish hiking boots that no doubt had never seen an actual hiking trail; leggings; and a high-collared, white fur jacket. A matching set of earmuffs completed the ensemble, and her teased mane of blonde hair appeared to have been styled to purposely incorporate them. I half expected the wind to start whistling as it blew through her stiffly moussed, unmoving coif.

“How’d you get in here, Street?” Ben shot back his disgusted query while shielding his eyes from the blaze of the video light.

“We drove,” she answered, her voice ripe with sarcasm as she pointed a gloved finger over her shoulder at the news van. “All right, Jay, we can shoot the intros later...”

Before any objections could be made, she drew in a breath and brought a logo-adorned microphone up from her side.

“Detective Storm. Can you give us any insight as to why the Major Case Squad has been called in on this investigation?”

Ben squinted and jerked back perceptibly as she thrust the business end of the device at him, then he coldly remarked, “This is a closed crime scene. I’m gonna hafta ask ya’ ta’ leave.”

The determined young woman staunchly ignored him and swung her attention immediately to Carl.

“Detective Deckert. What is your reasoning behind getting the MCS involved?”

“I’m afraid I can’t comment on that at this time, Miss Street,” Carl returned tactfully.

“Is there any truth to the rumor that you specifically requested Detective Storm on this case?”

“Detective Storm is a fine officer, and I welcome any opportunity to work with him.”

“But is it true that you contacted the city police chief to request his assignment to the MCS?”

“I have no control over assignments to the Major Case Squad,” he explained in a calm, slightly patronizing tone.

“Let me rephrase the question.” Brandee was quickly becoming annoyed, and it was easily apparent in the crisp tenor of her voice. “Sources close to both the city and county police departments indicate that you specifically asked that Detective Storm be assigned to the Major Case Squad. These same sources have also indicated that you requested Mister Gant be brought in to consult as well. Would you like to comment now?”

“No, Miss Street, I would not.”

“Mister Gant...” In a flash she abandoned the unresponsive cops and concentrated directly on me. “Given your involvement last summer with the Satanic Serial Killer investigation, your presence here would seem to indicate some type of occult element in this murder. Is that true?”

“I’m sorry. No comment,” I told her apologetically.

“We have it on good authority that you were rushed to the hospital earlier for a wound on your arm. Can you tell us more about that?”

Before I could get another “Sorry, no comment” out of my mouth, Ben interposed his large frame between the relentless reporter and me.

“Listen Brandee, if I’ve told ya’ once I’ve told ya’ a thousand times, ya’ want a statement, ya’ talk ta’ the public relations officer.”

“The people of Saint Louis have a right to know what’s going on, Storm!” she barked back, glaring up at him and holding her ground.

“Don’t give me that old freedom of the press speech, I’ve heard it before,” he answered. “You know full well we’re not in a position to tell ya’ anything. Call Public Relations in the mornin’ and I’m sure they’ll have a statement prepared.”

“I’m after the real story here, Storm. Not that P.R. department crap!” She then added, bitterly stressing each word, “I... Am... Trying... To... Do... My... Job.”

“So are we, Brandee, and like I said before, this crime scene still hasn’t been cleared, so technically speaking, you’re trespassin’. I’m only gonna tell ya’ ta’ leave one more time, then I’m gonna arrest ya’.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” she spat angrily.

“Try me.”

She didn’t.



“I guess I don’t have to tell you that Street wasn’t too far out in left field. The Major Case Squad is running the show now.” Ben told me as he carefully propelled the van down dark streets through a thickening veil of white. “Carl and I are both assigned to it. Big surprise.”

During my brief absence, the crime scene unit had finished gathering and cataloging anything remotely resembling evidence. The weather had not been a friend to them, and the aforementioned items had been few. Of course, little had been found at the scene of Brianna Walker’s death as well. Inwardly I pondered the fact that no Bible, or even Bible verse, had been found at this latest homicide. I had fully expected one and even hoped that it might help to determine a pattern. Perhaps a clue as to the way the victims were chosen, some tangible connection between them other than their religion, or his perception of such.

Very simply, I was looking for anything.

The idea that the verse may have been nothing more than an afterthought at the first scene crossed my mind. It was something I didn’t believe but at the same time couldn’t dismiss, so it remained cocooned in my brain as a minor bother until such time as it could emerge as a full-fledged aggravation.

With the mobilization of the MCS, Ben had pulled some strings in order to get the body of the latest victim transferred to the city morgue where Doctor Sanders could be in charge of the postmortem. The county coroner had put up a minor fuss, citing jurisdiction and various boundaries, but whomever Ben had in his corner had made short work of the red tape and the unprecedented occurred. With all the I’s dotted and T’s crossed, the case was transferred to the city without delay. By the time I had returned from my visit to the ER, the remnants of the woman’s charred corpse had been carefully removed and were already en-route downtown. It was there to which we were now endeavoring to return.

The crisp halogen beams of the headlights seemed, from one moment to the next, to be more hindrance than help in the near blizzard conditions. Cacophonous rumblings overhead were randomly punctuated with still louder aerial booms, each one seeming to add another measure to the deluge of fluffy white flakes. For the first time in many years, Saint Louis was experiencing the meteorological phenomenon aptly called “thunder snow.”

“Plan is,” Ben continued, throwing a quick glance at me, “ta’ go with your theory that this asshole is creatin’ his own Inquisition, or whatever, and assume he’s not gonna stop at two.”

“He won’t,” I asserted.

Ben slowed the vehicle and ignoring the barely visible signal, cautiously hooked a sweeping right turn through an empty intersection. The road conditions were deteriorating with each passing minute, and he didn’t dare come to a complete stop for fear of becoming stuck. He gave me an animated nod and spared only a quick glance in my direction as he spoke.

“I believe ya’, and apparently so do a few people in important places. Not that anyone is happy ‘bout the theory, mind you. At any rate, word came down from on high while you were gettin’ patched up. The chief wants ya’ involved... Every step of the way.”

“I can think of a lot of other things I’d rather be involved in,” I said. “But it’s nice not to be considered a crackpot for a change.”

“I’ll be honest with ya’, Row. I told ‘im I’d ask ya’, but I also let ‘im know I wasn’t all that keen on it and...”

“I thought we had this conversation this morning, Ben.” I cut him off with an exasperated sigh and prepared to refute another episode of his self-imposed guilt.

“Yeah, well that was before ya’ ended up bein’ some kinda mystical carvin’ board,” he shot back. “But lemme finish, will ya’... Like I said, I told ‘im I wasn’t keen on the whole idea and that I ‘specially didn’t like bein’ put in the position of askin’ you just because we’re friends...” Before I could voice another objection, he drew in a deep breath and continued. “Then, I told ‘im that knowin’ you like I do and considerin’ what you’ve seen so far today, I figured we’d be hard pressed to keep ya’ *out* of it without lockin’ ya’ up.”

After a short pause, he added, “The decision is still yours to make, though. Ya’ don’t have to do this.”

“Well, since I’m the one that wanted to head down to the morgue in this mess, I guess you already know what that decision is,” I said. “So that’s a moot point. If it would make you feel any better though, tell him that next time he can ask me himself.”

“I already did.”

“I guess I should have known you would.”

Ben tacked the lumbering van down the snow-packed avenue and fell in behind a city maintenance dump truck. In the hard swaths of the headlights, we could make out the attached salt-spreader spewing bluish granules of chemical deterrent in tired, jerky bursts. If the temperature fell to the lows predicted for later this night, the corrosive sno-melt would be well beyond its threshold of usefulness, and Mother Nature would be winning this skirmish. Considering the current conditions, my money was on her.

Visibility had dropped to zero, and we tracked the plow by the evenly spaced flares of yellow brilliance emitting from the pulsing warning lights. A twenty-minute long half mile later, Ben suddenly cranked the steering wheel hard to the left, and the rear end of the van fishtailed in an oblique arc.

“Shit! Almost missed it!” he exclaimed.

The tires spun with a raspy crunch until they chewed through the loose ice and bit into pavement. With a short squeal of rubber against asphalt, we were launched forward over a small snow dike and bounced our way once again into the near-deserted parking lot of the Saint Louis city morgue.

Once Ben parked the van in what he declared to be a valid space, we braved the cold wind and deepening drifts to hurry inside. We both took a moment to shake off in the outer foyer before pushing through the second set of double doors and embracing the welcome warmth of the building’s interior.

Ben had just unzipped his coat and was about to display his badge to the receptionist when she spoke up. “Was that you that just pulled in the lot?”

“Yeah, that a problem?” he responded as he held the gold shield up for her to see.

“Haven’t you been listening to the radio?”

Ben looked at me then back to her and raised an eyebrow. “Should we have?”

“The snow is coming down at over an inch per hour,” she explained with mild exasperation in her voice. “All city and county streets are closed to traffic except emergency vehicles and road crews until further notice.”

“So, did the body make it in from the county?” Ben queried, dismissing what he had just been told without acknowledgement.

“About two hours ago,” she returned. “Doctor Sanders is back there with her now.”

I looked at the clock on the wall behind the young woman’s desk and then drew in a deep breath. It was already approaching seven p.m.

“Excuse me,” I addressed her politely, “but could you direct me to a phone I can use? If we’re going to be stuck here, I need to call my wife.”



“I just saw you on television,” Felicity told me as soon as I had finished explaining where I was, along with the fact that I wouldn’t be home anytime soon.

“Wonderful. I hope they got my good side,” I returned without even trying to hide the sarcasm. “What are they saying?”

“A lot of speculation for the most part,” she answered. “The popular theory at the moment is that a cult is getting their revenge for that whole thing last year.”

“Cult, huh? They just love that stuff, don’t they?”

“Row, what’s really going on?” I could hear mild concern in her voice. “And what was all that about you being wounded?”

“That? It was nothing.”

“Rowan...”

“Seriously, just a minor cut. No big deal.”

“You’re positive?”

“Yes, honey,” I assured her. “A doctor has already looked at it.”

“Okay,” she conceded. “But you still haven’t told me what’s really going on.”

“Well,” I exhaled the word heavily. “It’s not something I can get into over the phone except to say that it’s pretty bad.”

“As bad as last summer?” she prodded.

“Worse... Potentially, a *lot* worse.”

I could hear her measured breathing on the other end of the line and knew she was digesting what I had just said. I suppose I could have told her more, but I saw no reason to subject her to the same fears I was barely holding at bay this particular moment. Especially not while she was alone.

“You can tell me about it tomorrow then,” she said, realizing fully that I was simply trying to protect her. She allowed the subject to drop for the time being, but I knew she would expect a full explanation soon enough. “Oh, by the way, I was cleaning up around here and I found a note you left next to the phone. Did you need to keep it?”

“Note?” I echoed in a puzzled tone.

“Well, I guess that’s what it is,” she explained. “It’s mainly just scribbling, except for a number. Two-two-one-eight.”

All that happened today had managed to push the haunting, senseless number out of my mind. Now, it returned with a vengeance, tattooing itself across the front of my grey matter and refusing to be ignored. Demanding my full and absolute attention, of this I was certain, for I had thrown that note away.

“Where did you say you found it?”

“Next to the phone,” she replied. “It looked like it had been crumpled up and then smoothed back out. Like maybe you decided not to throw it away or something.”

A Wiccan poem known as *The Rede* scrolled through my brain as I mentally weighed what Felicity had just said. Without realizing it I mumbled aloud the snippet of verse that had parked itself in the forefront, “When the wind blows from the west, departed souls will have no rest...”

“What was that?”

“Huh? Nothing. Nothing... Just... Just hang on to it for me, okay?” I said hesitantly.

“Rowan, is something wrong?” Her earlier troubled tone embraced the words. “Does this mean something?”

“Yes... I mean no...” I stumbled over the answer. “I mean I’m fine. Everything’s just fine.”

“Rowan...”

“Really. I’m okay... Listen, I’ve got to get off the line here. I’ll explain it all to you in the morning, okay?”

“Well, okay,” she reluctantly agreed. “Be careful. I love you.”

“I love you too. Stay warm. Bye.”

“Bye-bye.”

I left my hand resting on the handset after lowering it back into its cradle. The number twenty-two eighteen did in fact mean something. It was a warning. An ethereal signal meant to get my attention, and when it hadn’t worked, the harsher measure of physical pain had been employed through the wounding of my arm. Even with that, however, the note had returned. Placed back into prominence by one unseen in the physical world.

The number’s significance, at least on the surface, was something I had known all along but had no reason to remember until now. I made a conscious decision to keep this

entire incident to myself for the time being—at least until I could figure out just who was telling me this and why.

“I should have seen it,” I finally muttered aloud to no one but myself. “Exodus twenty-two eighteen. *Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to live.*”

# CHAPTER 6

“Here.” Doctor Sanders handed me a small glass jar and brushed at her upper lip with her index finger. “Put some of this under your nose. It will help a little with the smell.”

I took the offered container of Tiger Balm and did as she instructed. The sickening reek of scorched flesh had been intense at the crime scene, and that had been outdoors. Here in the enclosed autopsy suite, the odor was nearly intolerable.

The infinitely more pleasant menthol-clove perfume of the waxy salve competed with the airborne foulness as I dabbed it around my nostrils. While there was no one true victor in the battle, as long as I kept my breaths shallow, the atmosphere in the room became at least bearable. I then passed the container quickly on to Ben who already had his hand extended.

Doctor Sanders had just finished tucking her shoulder-length, salt and pepper hair beneath the elastic band of her cap and was now pulling on a second layer of latex gloves.

“I don’t know how you did it, Storm, but in all my years with this office, I’ve never seen a body from an open investigation transferred across jurisdictional boundaries,” she said. “This is definitely a first.”

“Guess it’s just my charming personality,” Ben replied.

“Sure it is,” she grumbled, her voice sarcastic. “Or maybe you just can’t stand to see me have any time off.”

“What can I say, Doc? I like working with the best of the best.”

“So you’ve told me numerous times before, Detective.” She sighed. “Anyway, surprisingly enough, your corpse wasn’t as frozen as one might have thought, so I decided that if I was going to be stuck here all night, I might as well get some work done.” Her back was still to us as she spoke from across the room. “I wasn’t really expecting to have an audience, however.”

The double gloving completed with a loud snap, she returned to the stainless steel table centered in the room and slipped a wide pair of clear safety shields over her prescription frames. “Am I correct in assuming this is the first time you’ve ever witnessed an autopsy, Mister Gant?”

“Yes, you are,” I responded.

“Well, I can’t say that this is the one I would have picked were I in the same position,” she expressed. “Storm, why don’t you make yourself useful for something other than creating more work for me and start the CD player.”

“Yeah, no prob, Doc.” Ben took the mock insult in stride and did as she asked before dragging a tall stool out from the tiled wall and perching his large frame upon it.

Blending into the background from unseen speakers, music began to play on low volume. It took only a moment for me to recognize the beginning notes of *Black Cow*.

“Steely Dan?” I mused aloud.

“Absolutely,” she replied, giving a tray of instruments a quick once over. “I saw the reunion tour out at the amphitheatre a few years back. There are other CD’s over there if you don’t like the selection.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m just surprised is all. I figured you more for the Bach or Brahms type.”

“Catch me in the morning, although it’s more likely to be Tchaikovsky or Copland.” She paused for a moment then adjusted the overhead light more to her liking. Satisfied, she carefully drew back the crisp white sheet.

Nothing in the way of obvious identifying characteristics appeared to have survived the conflagration. In fact, little more than charred bone remained below the waist of the blackened corpse. The only blatant attribute of the partially intact torso seemed to indicate the female gender—something I had already deemed as accurate by less corporeal methods. Her hair had been completely singed away, as well as most of her scalp. As it had been at the scene, her jaw was locked open in a tortured wail; so intensely silent, it overpowered all sound in the autopsy suite.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought I could hear her screaming.

“Everyone left before the snow storm really got going,” Doctor Sanders explained as she began, keeping her eyes fixed on the remains and penning notes on an acrylic clipboard. “Everyone except Cecelia that is. Sometimes I think she’s too dedicated for her own good, but there isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t wonder what I’d do without her. Anyway, this will go a little slower than usual since I don’t have a P.A. here to help.”

After setting the paperwork aside, she adjusted a gooseneck microphone then engaged a recorder, “Case number oh-two-oh-three-oh-oh-dash-seven. Doe, Jane. Remains appear to be that of a Caucasian female, mid to late twenties. The body was subjected to intense heat and flames, effectively incinerating the soft tissues on the lower extremities and just below the pelvic region. Withering of the phalanges and metacarpus is evident.” Shooting a brief glance in Ben’s direction and making a claw-like gesture with her hand, she added, “The fact that her fingers curled into her palms protected the tips. I was able to obtain a decent set of fingerprints for both right and left.”

“What about dental records?” he asked. “I can run a check against missing persons...’Course she might not have been reported yet.”

“I finished shooting those films just before you arrived. We’ll get them processed as soon as possible.”

I was keeping my distance from the autopsy table—visibly at least. My breathing was thready and thin. I stood transfixed by the process as each passing moment drew me further inward; every second that ticked by was bringing me that much closer to the horror the young woman had faced. The events of the day were exacting their toll. I was tired, both mentally and physically.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I was becoming convinced I could hear her screaming.

“There was an odd residue in her mouth.” The M.E. had taken a scalpel from the tray, working as she spoke. “I took a sample for the lab. I’m not quite sure what it is but it appeared to be synthetic. Like plastic.”

A bright flash of the young woman’s torture stabbed into my grey matter like a blunt arrow. Ravenous tendrils of yellow-orange flame raked across her flesh, hungrily rending it from her bones. An anguished scream fought to tear free from her throat, only to be detained by the soggy mass that filled her mouth; denied exit by the tightly stretched fabric that had once been an article of her clothing. A pitiful nasal whine was all she

could manage as tears rolled down her cheeks and vaporized steamily in the intensifying heat.

I blinked away the talon of agony that raked through my brain and cleared my throat. I could still feel the thick gag in my own mouth.

“It IS plastic,” I volunteered in a quiet, scratchy voice. “Nylon. He gagged her with her own pantyhose so she couldn’t scream. They probably melted in the heat.”

The sound of Ben scribbling in his notebook filled the silence that followed my comment.

Doctor Sanders held the scalpel in mid-air above the young woman’s chest and stared back at me, unblinking. “I’ll mention that to the lab,” she finally said.

This wasn’t the first time she had experienced one of my ethereal revelations, and she definitely wasn’t the skeptic she had once been. On the other hand, she certainly wasn’t as used to them as Ben, and I understood that at times the intimacy of my visions could be somewhat disturbing.

Turning back to the job at hand, almost painfully oblivious to our presence, she proceeded to make a Y-shaped incision in the trunk of the body. She first carefully forced the blade through the cauterized skin then into what remained of the softer flesh beneath. With three smooth strokes, she exhibited skill gained by years in the profession and it became instantly apparent to me why Ben called her “the best of the best.”

The arms of the Y curved upward below the breasts and to the shoulders. The tail extended downward to the pubic area. With the deep incision made, still using the scalpel, she proceeded to peel back the burned tissues and muscle. She displayed nowhere near the cold, unfeeling demeanor of the M.E. we had met in this room earlier in the day. However, her professional detachment was evident as she pulled the “chest flap” upward to expose the front of the ribcage.

In a fleeting thought, I was reminded of what a perverted killer had done to his victims those few months ago. Mercilessly skinning each of them for a purpose I was happier not knowing. One primary difference was that his victims had been among the living and conscious when he began cutting.

“In case you are interested, Mister Gant, what I am preparing to do is remove the chest plate. This will allow me to extract the internal organs in one block. This is something we medical examiners refer to as the ‘Rokitansky Method.’”

She glanced quickly over at my motionless form before proceeding. The scalpel clattered noisily against the metal tray where she dropped it. Then she wrapped her gloved hand, smeared with blood, around a somewhat larger device.

“I’m not exactly sure how you do what it is that you do, Mister Gant.” She had returned her attention to the corpse as she spoke to me. “Or, how it is that you know the things you know...but, if it would help at all, please feel free to come closer. Just don’t touch anything.”

I didn’t move. My eyes were still fixed in the direction of the autopsy table even though the clarity of focus had long since fled. The macabre scene had taken on the blurred, grainy appearance of a poorly received image on an old television. Colors were hastily blooming and collapsing—bleeding into one another in a palette gone berserk as rushing noises filled my ears. Doctor Sanders continued speaking for the recorder, and her words became thick mouthfuls of gibberish joining with the mutated cadence of the

background music. My vision tunneled and fire danced across my skin as I realized too late what was happening.

The angry, high-pitched cry of a Stryker saw meeting bone neatly pierced the roaring in my ears. Physical reality spun uncontrollably into formless void as I joined with the young woman on the metal table. Her recent pain was no longer confined solely to somewhere in the back of my thoughts.

Everywhere in my mind, I heard her screaming.

*My mouth tastes tinny.*

*Metallic.*

*Electric.*

*Blistered.*

*Raw.*

*My chest is shrieking in protest. I can feel my flesh being smoothly peeled back, as though I am being violently wrenched inside out. With each passing second, I become aware of more nerve endings being delivered naked and screaming into the cold antiseptic air.*

*"Why is she doing that?" a weeping feminine voice asks.*

*I search through slitted eyes while gritting my teeth against the pain.*

*I try to turn and suddenly I find myself slowly spinning.*

*Twisting lazily on an unfelt breeze.*

*Floating.*

*"Why is she doing that to me?" the voice asks again.*

*"Where are you?" I ask as I continue to turn lethargically in a formless void.*

*I can see no one.*

*I can see nothing.*

*"Who are you?" I call out through my agony.*

*"Why is she cutting me like that?" The voice is beyond weeping. She is sobbing now. Her words break off in hard bewildered pieces between each breath, tumbling forth and shattering in my ears, "Haven't I been through enough?"*

*A violent sensation, making agony seem a mere discomfort, bites into my side, gnashing at my bones with countless glittering metal teeth.*

*My body stiffens.*

*A tortured cry fills the void.*

*An angry crimson wail explodes inside my skull.*

*I'm falling.*

*Spiraling downward.*

*Faster.*

*Faster.*

*I crash into nothing and splinter into a thousand obsidian shards reflecting the inky darkness. Absorbing and smothering all that is light.*

"Mister Gant?" Doctor Sanders' voice mimics itself in a grotesque parody of speech, casually piercing the ethereal veil. "Did you want to come closer?"

*Gradually, I open my eyes.*

*The black formless void still envelops me.  
I can't see.  
Where am I?  
Who am I?  
Something is tightly stretched across my mouth.  
Between my teeth.  
It bites into the corners of my lips, abrading them roughly before continuing its  
constriction around my head.  
My mouth tastes of plastic.  
Of sweat.  
Of blood.  
I cannot speak.  
I cannot scream.  
I can only cry.*

“Mister Gant?”

*I'm nude.  
I'm cold.  
I cannot move.  
My arms are extended above me, and something rigidly encircles my wrists. I can  
feel my flesh being torn. I can feel the trickles of my own blood running along my skin  
from the wounds, mixing with sweat and forming rivulets from the headwaters of my pain.  
My mind is numbed by the agony. My muscles are stretched beyond their limits.  
Something cold and hard cinches my ankles.  
It pulls stiffly downward, unyielding.  
The stress threatens to tear me in half.  
Sharp spasms rack the muscles along my back, and I arch against it. Bucking  
against my bonds as best I can.  
If it weren't for the pain, I would swear I was already dead.  
A soft-edged whimper escapes my throat.  
Hoarse but distinctly feminine.  
Who am I?  
I cannot remember.  
I only know that I am not who I am supposed to be.  
It's dark.  
I can't see.  
Where am I?  
Who am I?*

“Holy fuckin’ shit! Goddammit!” Ben’s voice was echoing distantly. “He’s done this before and the last time his friggin’ heart stopped.”

Doctor Sanders’ voice followed thickly, her words ricocheting from his. “What do you mean his heart stopped?”

“I mean it just fuckin’ stopped! He almost died.”

“Calm down, Storm! He still has a pulse. Mister Gant? Mister Gant, can you hear me?”

*My ears discern the mournful squeal of rusted hinges.*

*I've been in the darkness for what seems an eternity.*

*A faint light filters in from above, and it is almost blinding.*

*How long have I been here?*

*I strain to lift my head.*

*My ears have grown accustomed to the unbroken silence, and the mechanical snap of a light switch comes like a gunshot.*

*I can even hear the hum of the electricity as it arcs along the contacts.*

*A bare incandescent bulb ignites above me, casting harsh streams of light.*

*I wrench my head away, regretting the act the moment the pain it brings bludgeons me. I blink. I regret that too.*

*Even blinking hurts.*

*Slowly, biting back the stabs of misery, I raise my face once again to look around.*

*I peer cautiously through the stringy mats of my long, flame red hair as it hangs in front of my face, and I try to focus on my surroundings.*

*A rough concrete wall, grey and pitted with age, confronts me. A large crucifix adorns its otherwise blank emptiness. Countless unlit white candles of all shapes and sizes cover a small wooden table before the shrine.*

*I am in what appears to be a basement.*

*Biting hard on the gag in my mouth, I tilt my head farther back, squinting my eyes against the harsh light.*

*Black iron shackles encompass my scraped, blood crusted wrists. Connected by a heavy chain, they are affixed securely above.*

*I am hanging from a thick beam.*

*I am suspended from the rafters.*

*The small amount of strength I mustered is fleeting at best, and my head tilts back forward of its own accord, bringing my chin to heavily meet my chest.*

*Breasts.*

*I am a woman.*

*Something sequestered in the nether regions of my mind tells me that this isn't right. I am not supposed to be a woman. Or am I?*

*I have no idea who I AM supposed to be.*

*Slow, deliberate thudding partnered with the doleful cry of creaking wood meets my ears and chases my latest revelation away from immediacy—along with its still unanswered questions.*

*Someone is coming.*

*HE is coming.*

*Unfettered, acidic terror rips outward from my abdomen and singes me.*

*Something warm begins to run down my inner thighs and splatters wetly to the floor.*

*I have no control as my bladder releases.*

*I begin to cry.*

A strangely familiar feminine voice stretches itself past me in a textbook example of Doppler distortion. "Help me get him on the free table over there."

*"Noooooooooooooooo!" My scream is muffled by the soggy, biting fabric in my mouth. A mechanical sound reaches me, felt as well as heard.*

*Tick, tick... Click!*

*Tick, tick... Click!*

*Tick, tick, tick... Click!*

*My body tenses as I feel my shoulders slowly and simultaneously ripped from their sockets. Something is pulling down against my ankles and my legs are straining to remain joined with the rest of my body.*

*The metallic click of a gear ratcheting reverberates again.*

*Tick, tick. Click!*

*Tick! Clunk!*

*"Noooooooooooooooo." My cry is no more than a meek whimper.*

*Muscles and tendons are tearing. Various spots along my upper back spasm and snap like broken rubber bands. White-hot projectiles of torment race through my nervous system at a quickening pace.*

*Bursting like bullets from my chest, they only turn to re-enter and retrace every inch over and over again.*

*It is more than I can stand.*

*As the light begins to fade, I can see his shadow on the floor in front of me, large and foreboding. I can barely hear muffled words.*

*Something about proof of my crimes.*

*Something about proof of my heresy.*

*Something about evidence to validate my "confession." Something about begging the forgiveness of God.*

*Darkness overwhelms me.*

A deep voice echoes to me. Someone I should know. A name comes to mind. Ben. "Come on, white man, you sonofabitch! Don't you die on me!"

*I am no longer in the basement.*

*I am outside.*

*I am still nude.*

*It is freezing.*

*Icy wind is slicing through me like a razor.*

*My arms are bound behind me, as if it mattered. They hang limp and useless from my shoulders. I am secured to something that is rough against my back. It feels like a post or a tree, but I can't be sure.*

*The pain is the only thing of which I am positive.*

*Even the frigid night cannot kill the pain.*

*I can taste something oily and acrid mixing with the blood in my mouth.*

*Something strong.*

*Something caustic.*

*It numbs my tongue and burns my nostrils.*

*The smell of it is familiar.  
The memory tickles my brain.  
Something about light.  
Something about warmth.*

*Kerosene.*

*It is kerosene and I can feel it splashing down my body.*

*Dripping.*

*Corrosively eating away at my open wounds.*

*"Kendra Darlene Miller." A dark voice accuses me, "You have openly admitted your crimes of heresy and of engaging in the practice of WitchCraft."*

*An enormous, gloved hand roughly grasps my jaw and forces my face upward.*

*Oily kerosene drips from my soaked hair and into my eyes, burning them.*

*Blurring my sight.*

*"I hold before you evidence. Evidence recently obtained from your apartment which validates your confession of these crimes."*

*Through my clouded sight I can scarcely make out the silver shape of a pentacle dangling from a chain.*

*A necklace.*

*My necklace.*

*His proof.*

*The hand releases its grip, and my head is dragged rapidly downward by gravity.*

*I can hear shuffling footsteps amidst the bitter, sighing wind. The footsteps come to a halt behind me.*

*An involuntary shiver trickles through my freezing body.*

*"We, by the mercy of God," the dark voice begins in an imperious tone, "seeing that you, Kendra Darlene Miller, have been accused before us by public report of heresy, and that you have for many years persisted in those heresies to the great hurt of your immortal soul; and We, whose duty is to exterminate the plague of heresy and WitchCraft, wishing to be more certain of whether you walked the path of darkness or light, have diligently examined you, and find you are indeed infected with the said heresy."*

*"No. This isn't happening," is the only thing that passes through my mind.*

*"In as much as you have duly and properly admitted your crimes, and having before us the Holy Gospels that our judgment may proceed as from the countenance of God, by this sentence we cast you away as an impenitent heretic, Witch, and Concubine of Satan, and do hereby deliver you unto the power of our most Holy God. As you are damned in body and soul, your sentence on this day is death. The sentence is to be executed immediately, without appeal, in the manner of expurgation by fire."*

*"No! No! This can't be!"*

*"May The Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon your soul."*

*I cannot move.*

*I can hear the scraping of a match against stone.*

*I cannot scream.*

*I can hear the explosive spark as the match ignites.*

*Somebody please help me!*

*I can see the faint shadows cast as the flame on the match head flares and settles to an even burn.*

*NO! THIS ISN'T HAPPENING!*

*I am crying.*

*Thunder crashes in my ears as the kerosene ignites.*

*Hot yellow agony licks across my body.*

“He’s posturing.” The distantly familiar female voice pierces my nightmare. “Look at his hands.”

“GODDAMIT, ROWAN, NO!” I can hear the deep voice now. The one called Ben. “You’re NOT gonna make me tell Felicity you’re dead!”

*Fire clings to me in a vicious shroud. I’m holding my breath as the flame washes over my face furiously catching my hair and blossoming upward with yet another loud crash.*

*I want to scream as the angry blaze literally cooks my flesh.*

*A sudden roar mixes with the rush of the fire and marries with a high-pitched grind before fading away on the night.*

*Flames consume all that is.*

A sharp sting ripped through my left cheek.

Of all the hurt I was experiencing, this was the least. At the same time, it was the worst.

There was something different about it.

*Sizzling noises.*

*Crackling noises.*

*I know that they are coming from me.*

*The gag is burning.*

*A pair of pantyhose melting into my skin.*

*I can’t hold my breath any longer.*

*Maybe I can scream.*

*I gasp.*

*Liquid fire rushes down my throat.*

*Expanding through my lungs.*

*I choke.*

*No sound comes past my seared lips.*

The bizarre, piercing discomfort attacked me again. This time, my right cheek reported the sensation. Off in the control center of my brain, a series of comparisons took place. A vague recollection of something called the plane of physical reality was suddenly rushed to the forefront.

I snapped my eyes open.

I awoke to find myself sprawled on a metal table in what I knew to be an autopsy suite at the city morgue. Ben was towering over me, one meaty paw entwined in the front of my shirt, the other reared back in preparation to impart a serious-looking backhand to

my face. Just as I started to cringe, I caught a swift motion from the corner of my eye and saw Doctor Sanders reach out to grab his wrist.

“Hold it, Storm!” she barked as she leaned in and brought her concerned gaze to meet mine. “Mister Gant, can you hear me? Are you all right?”

I felt Ben’s hand relax and release my shirt immediately following my gravelly-voiced answer, which simply came out as “I could really use a drink.”

# CHAPTER 7

My hands were still shaking as I poured myself a second drink from the bottle of Gentleman Jack. Under normal circumstances I would have preferred Scotch to bourbon, but obviously, the word “normal” wasn’t something that one would readily apply to what had just transpired. At this particular point I wasn’t about to argue, and since Tennessee whiskey was what Doctor Sanders had hidden away in her desk drawer, it would have to do. At least it was *good* bourbon.

My shakes weren’t blatantly obvious, but they were perceptible, and very little escaped Ben Storm’s scrutiny. A veteran witness to my sometimes sudden, supernormal departures, he stood mute on the other side of the office, holding up the wall with his back and nursing a drink while patiently waiting for me to continue. Doctor Sanders, on the other hand, while knowing of my perceptions, was a novice in this arena. Seated opposite me at her desk, she was still staring in wide-eyed amazement. Every now and then she would shift her gaze from me to Ben then back. Having only recently been baptized by fire, so to speak, she had done little more than listen and tend to her own libation as I relayed the experience to the best of my ability. No matter how hard I searched, I was unable to find words that could truly describe what I had just shared with the tortured soul of a dead woman.

Tossing my head back, I downed the second three-finger measure of the brown liquor and set the highball glass back onto the desk, taking care to place it on the notepad I was using for a coaster.

“Like I said, I never saw his face... I... She...never had the chance.” As if to punctuate my statement, the handful of ice cubes in the tumbler clinked musically as they settled. “I’m pretty sure I’d recognize his voice if I heard it again, though.”

“And you’re pretty sure on the identity of the corpse too, right?” Ben turned up the notebook he held at his side and glanced quickly down at it. “Kendra Miller. Middle name, Darlene.”

“That’s what he called her.” I nodded as I wrapped my hand around the neck of the bottle of bourbon. “He stated her full name when he passed judgment and informed her of her sentence.”

“You think maybe she knew him?” he asked. “Sure sounds like *he* knew *her*.”

“I didn’t get that impression,” I answered. “She was very confused... And she was afraid of him, that’s for sure. But I don’t think she knew who he was, or I would have picked it up. His familiarity with her was probably from afar. He might have stalked her...” I shrugged. “I don’t know. At any rate, the fact that he knew her full name was a formality. It was kind of a ‘legal necessity’ shall we say, for when he passed his sentence on her. Just like it would have been during the time of the Inquisition.”

“By all means, let’s make sure the legal necessities are all friggin’ covered,” Ben muttered sarcastically. “Any possibility this one might’ve been a hooker too?”

I touched the mouth of the bottle to the rim of my glass and carefully splashed another double over the melting ice. “I don’t know. I can guarantee you of one thing about her though... She was guilty as charged. Kendra Miller was a practicing Witch.”

“How can you be sure of that?” Doctor Sanders hesitantly broke her self-imposed reticence. “I mean if I understood you correctly, the killer’s proof was the necklace. It might not have even belonged to her.”

“Oh, it belonged to her all right. No doubt in my mind.” I twirled the alcohol in the tumbler while watching the light glow through its amber translucence and then rested the glass on my knee. I had hammered the first two drinks, and on an empty stomach they had quickly served their purpose by chasing away my trembles with their liquid courage. I was beginning to feel a mildly warm tingle creeping along the back of my scalp and decided I had better take it easy with this one. “I’m sure she was of The Craft because of the strength of the vision and the force with which I was drawn into it. I had a similar experience with Ariel Tanner when she was murdered... Only the spirit of a Witch could have pulled me in like that.”

“Amazing,” she muttered before taking a sip of her own drink.

“You said this asshole told ‘er he got the evidence—the necklace—from her apartment *recently*. Right?” Ben pressed.

“Yeah. That’s what he said.”

“But ya’ don’t know how long she was left alone?”

“The whole thing was pretty disjointed,” I confessed. “I really couldn’t determine any type of reference point for time, so I guess the answer would be no. Why do you ask?”

Ben set his drink atop a nearby filing cabinet, and his now free hand went up to smooth his hair then slid easily down to begin massaging his neck. “Just curious. I thought maybe once we found ‘er apartment, we could determine a radius or somethin’. An area where this wingnut might be operatin’ out of. But if ya’ don’t know how long he was gone...” He let his voice fade.

“Sorry,” I offered.

“Not your fault,” he returned. “So what about the basement, if that’s what it was. Do ya’ remember anything about it? Anything unique?”

“Just what I already told you. Your standard grey concrete walls and floor. They were a little on the pitted side though, so I’d guess it was an older house... Kind of hefty rafters... Wooden stairs... Had a fairly high ceiling, considering... And then there was the oversized crucifix and the candles. Get rid of those and it’s just a pretty basic basement.”

“Crucifix and candles,” he echoed under his breath then paused. “That would imply that the killer is Roman Catholic.”

“Or Greek Orthodox, or Russian Orthodox, or Lutheran for that matter...” I let my voice trail off. “I’m inclined to agree that he practices some manner of Catholicism based on his adherence to the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Of course, Saint Louis is just like most large cities. We have a rather substantial population of traditional Catholics as well as the various offshoots. The religion factor, in and of itself, really doesn’t narrow the field much.”

“Don’t remind me,” he sighed.

The ensuing silence was interrupted by a muffled electronic warble demanding immediate attention. Ben stepped over to a chair and rummaged about in his coat then

produced a hand-held cell phone from a pocket. Flipping it open and stabbing it on, he cut off the third ring mid-peal and placed it against his ear. “Storm.”

Only he was privy to who was on the other end of the line, but his broken attempts to reply made it apparent that the person was a mere heartbeat away from hysterics. The caller’s identity became immediately obvious when he was finally able to forcibly wedge a sentence into the one-sided conversation. “Whoa, whoa, calm down, okay? He’s right here and he’s fine. I’m standin’ here lookin’ at ‘im... No problem. Hold on.”

Ben had covered the short distance between us as he talked and now offered me the device. “It’s your wife. If I understood her right she seems ta’ think that you’re dead.”

Upon hearing my voice, Felicity abandoned her frenzy of concern and burst into relieved sobs. Running the full gamut of emotions at a breakneck pace, her solace was quickly followed by happiness, embarrassment, and eventually anger. I allowed her to vent, and after five minutes of bombarding me with her particular brand of Irish fury at my having engaged in such a dangerous endeavor, she completed the circle and returned once again to relief. A few moments later I finally convinced her I was fine and promised to stay that way.

Doctor Sanders had been sitting quietly and now stared at me incredulously for a moment as I switched off the phone and handed it back to Ben.

“Your wife could see what you were seeing?” she asked.

“Not exactly,” I returned. “More along the lines of a premonition or a nightmare. She saw me being burned and felt some of the pain that I was feeling.”

She continued to stare across her desk at me and slowly cocked one eyebrow. Momentarily, she drained her glass of bourbon and planted it on the desktop then pushed her chair back. “I’m not entirely sure what to make of anything I’ve heard so far tonight, Mister Gant... But on that note, I believe I have an autopsy to finish.”



My dinner consisted of a stale Zagnut coaxed unceremoniously from a recalcitrant vending machine in the lobby of the building. I had washed it down with coffee served in a cheerfully decorated paper cup left over from a holiday office party. It now felt as though it was lodged sideways in the pit of my stomach, angrily fighting for space with the three tumblers of bourbon. Not exactly fine dining at Kemoll’s, but I took what I could get.

Quarter-sized clumps of snow were pelting me mercilessly as I tipped my head back and swallowed the last dregs from the red and green, holly-inscribed vessel. The remaining brew had already begun to grow cold, and it slowly forced its way down my throat in a bitter, watery lump.

While sitting alone in the break room, choking down the dry candy bar, I had been subjected to only slightly muted versions of the earlier pains brought about by the procedure going on in the autopsy suite. Physically, I could neither see nor hear what was happening in that room. Mentally, I was being treated to—or more accurately, tortured by—a first hand view through a dead woman’s eyes. Before long I was left with no choice other than to seek safe haven by placing even more distance between the corpse and myself. Constrained by the hazardous travel conditions and my only avenue for refuge being outdoors, I had ventured out into the snowy night. The added distance

served to blunt a good deal of the pain; however, even the frozen darkness couldn't remove it entirely.

I had continued to feel the spirit of Kendra Miller cry out in protest at what was being done to her earthly remains. I was unable to escape her wailing lament at what she could only view as more torture.

I crumpled the empty paper cup and stuffed it into my coat pocket then turned my back to the frigid wind, seeking what shelter I could alongside the glassed-in foyer that jutted from the front of the building. With cold-numbered hands, I slipped the cellophane from a Cruz Real #2 and neatly guillotined the end. A thick swoosh sounded behind me as the sluggish metal-framed door was forced open, and I heard heavy footsteps squeakily crunching in the snow.

"Still hooked on those Mexicans, eh?" Ben's voice met my ears, the words making a weary jab at my choice of cigar brands.

The match I held cupped in my hands flared to life, and I touched its fire to the cigar clenched between my teeth. Staring into it, I felt myself becoming mesmerized by the tiny flame. A hot knife dragged down my spine, and I closed my eyes tightly, forcibly willing away the vibrant Technicolor flashes of my recent vision.

"I guess you could say that," I answered as I turned and shook out the nearly spent wooden match.

He had just finished paring the end from his own smoke and now tucked it into the corner of his mouth before burying his hands into his pockets. "One good thing 'bout this freakin' blizzard," he mumbled, "the bastard's prob'ly snowed in just like the rest of us."

"Probably, but I wouldn't count on that stopping him for long."

"Yeah. Great. Bust my bubble why don'tcha."

We stood in silence, listening to the relentless pattering of the falling snow. Ben shielded the end of his cigar with large hands and lit it purposefully, taking time to remove it from between his lips and inspect the glowing tip once he had extinguished the lighter. Satisfied, he placed it back in his mouth and gazed out across the white-blanketed parking area. Of the three vehicles on the lot, his van was the least buried. The other two seemed to be no more than huge shimmering dunes cast in soft blue shadows.

Directly across the street, the backside of the building that housed City Hall was a dim, hulking shadow in the night. Catty-cornered from where we stood, a small coffee shop was all but obscured by the downward streaming curtain of ice crystals. A short distance behind it, the lights of the indoor ice arena that was home to the Saint Louis Blues hockey team cast an upward glowing halo. No sound was issuing from the nearby highway, and it seemed that even the police headquarters, which dominated most of the block, had fallen silent and still.

"So, Red Squaw was pretty upset, huh?" he finally asked.

"Yeah, she was. Scared mostly, but she's okay now," I replied. "What about you?"

"Whaddaya mean? I'm fine."

"Yeah. Right," I returned, sarcasm flowing through my words. "You put up a good front, Ben, but you aren't fooling me. I know for a fact that what happened in there scared you. I could feel it then and I can feel it right now."

A nervous laugh emitted from between my friend's clenched teeth. "Yeah, well, you're wrong. I wasn't scared. I was more like fuckin' terrified if you wanna know the

truth. When ya' went all *Twilight Zone* in there, I just kept thinkin' about that whole deal last time... Last summer... Ya'know what I'm sayin'?"

I allowed my mind to wander for a moment, recalling the incident to which he referred. In an almost reckless attempt to identify a sadistic killer, I had channeled the last living moments of his second victim, a young woman named Karen Barnes. I could still feel the same tortuous pain she had felt when the killer physically ripped her beating heart from her chest. My own heart had gone still that day, and had it not been for the actions of Felicity, it would have remained that way.

I shuddered inwardly and pushed back the horrific remembrance. "Yeah, Ben, I know what you're saying. I was a little on the 'fucking terrified' side myself."

"I didn't hit ya' too hard, did I? I mean... Well I wasn't quite sure about what ta' do."

"No. No, you didn't," I replied and then added, "But remind me never to make you angry."

We both let out a light chuckle, and the sea of tension ebbed, if only for a brief moment.

"You can still feel 'er or whatever, can't you?" He asked, glancing sideways in my direction and squinting against the wind.

"Yes," I admitted. "That's why I came out here."

"And it ain't just her, is it? You pick up all kinds of shit the rest of us can't see, don'tcha'?"

I nodded. "It happens."

"All the time?"

"No, not all the time, fortunately." I puffed on my cigar as I paused. "But enough."

"Jeezus, white man..." He shook his head. "How do ya' stand it? It's gotta drive ya' nuts."

"How do *you* stand the things you see every day as a cop, Ben?" I asked rhetorically. "Just like you, I've learned to tune it out. But sometimes..."

An awkward pause rushed in behind my words to fill the void once more. Held fast by the chilled darkness surrounding us, it was cemented securely in place by our own fears of what we were facing. A thin streak of light danced hesitantly through the distant sky, spreading spidery tendrils and bringing an orange glow to the flat underbelly of the low-hanging clouds. Languid seconds flowed by, and finally a throaty rumble of thunder echoed in from the west, announcing the storm's relentless advance.

*When the wind blows from the West, departed souls will have no rest.* The line of poetry drifted through my mind yet again.

"So what did Doctor Sanders find out?" I asked, forcing a minor redirection of the subject.

"She found soot and blistering in her trachea," Ben answered. "That pretty much confirms she was alive when she was torched. Her shoulders were dislocated like you described. She had several torn ligaments and stress fractures. It was all just like ya' said... Only other obvious thing was a few deep puncture wounds on 'er back. She was only able ta' find those because a portion of 'er back was shielded from the fire by what she was chained to... Other than that, we'll hafta wait on the lab stuff."

"They called that *pricking*," I sighed. "Witches aren't supposed to bleed or feel pain, so it was believed that by stabbing them, the accusation could be proven."

“That must not’ve been too effective,” he ventured. “Ya’ stick somebody, they’re gonna bleed.”

“They often used stilettos with retractable blades. Like a magician’s trick knife. That way there was no wound and therefore no blood and no pain.”

“They’d rig the test?”

“Of course. It wouldn’t do for them to be proven wrong after making a public accusation of heresy.”

“Yeah, but he didn’t rig this,” he protested. “She actually had wounds. Deep ones. Doc says she prob’ly woulda’ died from the internal injuries if he hadn’t torched ‘er first. She definitely bled an’ I’ll guarantee ya’ she had ta’ have screamed. I sure as hell would’ve.”

“He probably just assumed the blood wasn’t real and that it was an illusion. A spell cast by a consort of the devil. Any cries of pain were more than likely attributed to an attempt to trick him as well.”

“So even when this asswipe disproves his accusations with his own tests, he just changes the rules?”

“Correct,” I answered. “Once he accuses someone of heresy and WitchCraft, there is no reprieve. We’ll end up with a body.”

“Shit,” he muttered.

“You know, Ben,” I volunteered, “I hate to bring it up, but there is a relatively large and outspoken Pagan community in Saint Louis. Especially Witches and Wiccans. He isn’t going to have to look very hard for victims.”

He puffed quietly on his cigar then let out a long, frosty sigh before replying, “Yeah. Don’t remind me.”

# CHAPTER 8

Bright sun shone down from a deep blue sky, decorated here and there with only the barest trails of wispy cirrus clouds. Though no longer pristine and unblemished, a deep blanket of snow still covered the city. Wide swaths of trampled footprints from children at play cut paths through otherwise smooth, white, rolling lawns. Across the street a stocking cap adorned snowman stood sentry outside the entrance of a carefully constructed snow fort. Armed with a broomstick, he stood rigidly at attention, executing his assigned duty like a frozen Marine.

Dirty grey mounds replete with grime, cinders and chemical additives were heaped alongside curbs, courtesy of County maintenance crews, resting exactly where they had been placed by the passing street department plows. They lined the avenues like the ornamental walls of a fairy tale winter wonderland estate. Each passing hour of warmth from the radiant sunlight slowly and painstakingly sculpted the piles into smaller versions of themselves, sometimes gouging Swiss cheese holes through areas of lesser density.

Later, when the temperature would again dip well below the freezing point, the process would switch gears, grinding mid-motion into reverse, and they would once again harden with crusty layers of glistening ice.

Iridescent stalactites flowed downward from the edge of our roof—several of them refracting the sun as Mother Nature’s slender prisms. Electric-hued primary colors danced through their conical, transparent shafts seeming to undulate slowly as the frozen water hovered just the other side of liquid fluidity. Shimmering droplets rolled steadfastly downward and gathered purposefully at the tips. Each drip growing and bulging ever larger until its weight combined with gravity to send it plummeting toward the earth below, only to be followed momentarily by yet another, and another...

I took a sip from my steaming oversized mug of hazelnut coffee as I watched the scene through the picture window of our living room. A little more than a week had passed since the great midwestern blizzard had all but completely buried Saint Louis and most of the bi-state region for that matter. It had taken a full two days for the city to dig itself out, and talk had already begun about the ability of the metropolitan sewer system to handle the impending run-off. Twenty-three inches of snow—all in one fell swoop—wasn’t exactly normal for the area, and winter still had a good month left to go. There was even panicked speculation that we could be in for a spring that would make the flood of ‘93 look like a minor mishap with a backed up kitchen sink.

As devastating as a flood would be, it was the least of my concerns at this particular instant. Fear had stalked me every moment, asleep or awake, since my becoming involved in this investigation. Each day that passed without another body turning up allowed me to relax a little more. But I knew deep down that it was only a temporary reprieve. This killer would be passing judgment on someone else and carrying out an execution based on his warped interpretation of an equally warped manuscript. Of this, there was no doubt in my mind. My only question was “When?”

Absently, I reached over and tended to a tickling itch on my forearm. Entirely unlike the burning pain that had once occupied that spot, the sensation was merely that of new skin growing as my body repaired itself. The wound had healed almost as quickly as it had appeared, lending even more credence to my feeling that it was an ethereal sign meant solely to gain my attention. With its mission accomplished, there was no longer a need for it to remain. The symbol was now visible as nothing more than a faint pink scar. With luck, that too would soon fade.

The savory smell of Felicity's family recipe corned beef hash wafted throughout the house, riding piggyback along the sweet scent of freshly baked sourdough bread. My mouth watered slightly, and the mixture of aroma's sparked a low grumble from my empty stomach.

"Honey," her singsong voice called from the kitchen. "How many eggs do you want?"

"Two would be fine, thanks," I answered over my shoulder.

"Over easy?"

"Always."

"Toast?"

"Please."

Upon returning home I kept my promise—as if I had a choice—and recounted for her the details of the day I had spent with Ben as well as the night sequestered in the city morgue. Doing so had been like re-living a nightmare for me. Fortunately, at the same time, it had been necessary and unquestionably therapeutic—an overall catharsis that allowed me to expunge at least some of the horror.

I could talk about my visions and my feelings with Ben, or anyone else for that matter. I could even make them believe. Then I could prove incontrovertibly that what I witnessed by ethereal means was in fact ultimately true and painfully accurate in the physical realm. Still, no matter how much I talked to the uninitiated, for me it remained a dark and lonely ache; for even my best friend could never truly understand the experience.

However, another Witch could not only understand but could empathize as well. This fact, among many others, served to make my auburn-tressed wife both my friend and confidant—my personal psychiatrist and steadfast anchor in this reality. But, most of all, Felicity was my soul mate.

Beyond the double-paned window, I could make out the faint noises of rubber singing against wet asphalt as vehicles cautiously made their way up and down the street. The muted but unmistakable squeal of damp brakes punctuated the other outdoor sounds, and the familiar shape of a Chevrolet van halted in front of the house. After waiting for a car to pass in the opposite direction, the worn-out looking vehicle canted a shallow turn into my driveway, splashing through the gutter full of icy slush and squeaking again to a stop.

My heart catapulted itself into my throat then dropped slowly back down to its rightful place in my chest, performing an advanced series of somersaults all the while. My first assumption was that our self-proclaimed inquisitor had passed sentence upon his third victim. Even though I was expecting it, the possibility thrust me into a weary catatonic gaze.

The dogs began the boisterous announcement of their presence in order to chase away the intruder and in the process disrupted our three peacefully slumbering felines. Furry masses bolted from perches on sunny windowsills, and our English setter led the canine charge for the front door. Thankfully, the sudden commotion wrenched me away from the unblinking stare.

Ben hadn't called this morning and neither had Carl Deckert. There had been no mention on the news of a body being found as yet. I quickly decided it would be more logical to at least wait until my friend had made it to the door before jumping to any conclusions. I took another sip of my coffee and pushed back the unwanted thoughts, calming perceptibly. However, I was still left with the sickening aftertaste of fear on the back of my tongue.

"Sweetheart," I called out as I watched the occupant of the van unfold himself from the seat and start up the narrowly cleared path of our walkway. "You'd better get out another half dozen or so eggs. We've got company."

Our friend's appetite being legendary, as well as his proclivity for showing up at mealtime, she didn't even bother to ask who it was. My only slightly exaggerated estimate of the additional food needed was clue enough. From the kitchen I heard the faint sound of cracking eggshells as she added more to the skillet. The muttering that followed formed a simple, matter-of-fact comment. "Okay, we'll have *scrambled* eggs then."

The dogs had settled for a moment and now burst back into excited yelps at the sound of heavy footsteps on the porch. I shushed the two noisemakers and commanded them to sit, which they did in almost perfect unison. Ben was just reaching for the bell when I opened the heavy oak door.

"Morning, Chief," I greeted him as he pulled on the screen door. "Business or social?"

"A little of both, Kemosabe," he admitted as he stepped in, waving a large manila envelope at me. "Got the labs back on the Miller woman."

No new bodies. That was good news. I breathed an inner sigh of relief and felt the knot in my stomach wind tighter by one more turn. The tense waiting game would continue, for now anyway.

"Coffee?" I offered while he shrugged off his coat.

"Absolutely." He nodded and sniffed animatedly in the direction of the kitchen. "That wouldn't be one of Firehair's world famous breakfasts I'm smellin', would it?"

"You know it." I chuckled at yet another of his nicknames for my flame-maned wife while I took his coat and hung it in the closet. "You hungry?"

"Starvin'."

"You don't look terribly starving to me," Felicity chided as she rounded the corner from the dining room.

"Yeah, okay, so I'm not really starvin'," he returned with a grin and leaned in to kiss her atop her forehead. "But I'm not about to turn down a meal in this house."

"Well then you'd better come in here and grab a plate," she told him with a pleased smile. "I'm not going to play waitress for you... and by the way, for showing up when you did, you win today's door prize."

"Seconds and thirds?"

"Aye, even better. You get to help wash the dishes."



“Looks like he doped ‘er up with Roofies,” Ben told me as he finished drying the last pan Felicity handed him and then hooked it on the pot rack suspended over the stove. Where my wife and I had to stretch to accomplish the same task, he had to duck to avoid getting beamed by a saucepan.

He took the next item and began distantly working on it with the dishcloth. I had to stifle a laugh at the sight of him being so blatantly domestic. It’s not every day you see a six-foot-six Native American drying dishes and being ordered around by a petite, redheaded Irish woman. Especially when that “Indian” had a badge on his belt and was packing a nine-millimeter Beretta in a shoulder holster.

“That might explain why she was so foggy when I channeled her.” I had propped myself at the breakfast nook and was looking over the contents of the manila envelope he had brought.

“They also identified the residue in ‘er mouth,” he continued. “You were right on the money. Nylon. Consistent with a pair of pantyhose. The rest of it just shows elevated carbon monoxide levels in ‘er blood which gives even more proof that she was alive when he torched ‘er.”

“No offense, guys,” Felicity interjected, “but what good is all that? All it does is confirm what Rowan already told you.”

She had a point. And unless I was missing something, all of this information seemed moot.

“You’re right, ‘cept for the Roofies,” he returned.

“So he drugged her with Rohypnol,” I remarked. “Did he use it on Brianna Walker too?”

“No, but that’s not the point.” Ben continued talking while he finished folding the dishcloth. Then he topped off Felicity’s coffee and poured himself a fresh cup. “Roofies aren’t available in the U.S. by any *quote quote* legal means.” He made two-fingered quotation marks in the air with his free hand as he repeated the word twice—yet another Ben Storm original mannerism. “So the only place you’re gonna get ‘em is on the streets. Also, they aren’t good for anything except makin’ ya’ damn near a zombie. That’s the reason they call it the ‘date rape drug.’”

Lights went on behind Felicity’s eyes as the realization reached her a full step ahead of me. “College campuses.”

Ben looked at her and touched the tip of his index finger to the end of his nose. “Unfortunately, that’s exactly where they tend ta’ show up. We’ve got Narcotics on it right now.”

“But we still have no idea what this guy looks like or even how old he might be,” I volunteered. “What good is it going to do to shake down a handful of drug dealers?”

“You got a better idea?” He shrugged and shook his head. “At least this is a place ta’ start. It might narrow the field down some. Besides, didn’t you say ya’ thought ya’ might be able ta’ recognize his voice if you heard it again?”

“Well, you’re right,” I admitted. “I might be able to recognize the voice... at any rate, it can’t hurt.”

“What about working up a profile or something? Can’t Constance help you with that?” Felicity offered, referring to our mutual friend with the FBI.

It had been hate at first sight between Special Agent Constance Mandalay and Detective Benjamin Storm when we all first met last summer. She was a strong-willed woman in a male-dominated profession, and he was the lead detective with the Major Case Squad. To her rigid set of views, I was nothing more than a carnival charlatan, and she made her opinion well known. More than a few sparks were brought forth from that point of contention.

Less than forty-eight hours later, she was violently subjected first hand to the horrific realities of true evil and misused Magicks. I just happened to be the one who saved her life. We had all been friends ever since.

“Already called the field office,” Ben answered. “She’s on some kinda security assignment at the moment, so I ended up talkin’ ta’ some SAIC named Bartlett.” He shook his head in disgust. “This guy’s a real winner. Reminded me of why I can’t stand Feebs.”

“Do you think he’s going to be able to help?” she pressed.

“He said he’d see what he could do, but I’m not holdin’ my breath.”

“Did he at least say when Constance would be back?” I asked.

“Accordin’ ta’ him she’s s’posed to be back in the office Monday. That’s only two more days countin’ today. So, if our luck holds out, and this prick doesn’t off anyone for a little while longer...”

“That’s a pretty big ‘if,’ Ben.” I shook my head. “The weather has settled down, and something tells me we haven’t got that long.”

“Yeah, well, I hope like hell you’re wrong this time.”

We all sat in the gathering silence for a moment, sipping our coffee and pondering the weight of what we faced. Ben reached up to begin working on a muscle in the back of his neck, and Felicity chewed at her lower lip. Working against the clock was definitely not new to any of us.

Dickens, our solid black cat, eventually sauntered into the mute room, tail at attention, and leapt lithely onto the table. Taking a seat and closing his large eyes, he let out a regal you-may-pet-me-now mew.

“What about the particulars on Kendra Miller,” I finally asked. “Obviously the dental records matched up. Were you able to find out anything more about her?”

Ben broke out of his stupor and rummaged around in his pocket. After a moment he withdrew his ever-present notebook and began flipping through the pages. “Yeah, yeah... The records matched up perfect. Yeah, here it is. Kendra Darlene Miller was ‘er name all right. Twenty-four, single. Worked as a secretary over at the gas company.”

“Not a hooker then?” I interjected.

“Not a hooker, no,” he echoed, “but accordin’ to ‘er co-workers, she was a definite party-girl.”

“No law against that,” Felicity said in an almost defensive tone.

“Maybe not,” he said, “but they said she played it fast and loose on the singles scene. Also, rumor has it she buttered both sides of the bread if ya’ know what I mean.” He paused momentarily as he scanned his notes. “She was real open ‘bout her religion too... Yeah, here it is, she was a member of a *Dianic* Coven. That mean somethin’ to you two?”

“Basically it is just a tradition within The Craft,” I answered.

“The Dianic tradition places the focus purely on the feminine aspect,” Felicity expanded on my response. “The Coven will almost always consist only of women and will engage in Goddess worship with little or no mention of the God or male influence.”

“Humph.” He rolled his eyes as he grunted out the sound. “Guess that’d explain the whole *Bi* thing.”

“Don’t be so judgmental,” Felicity chastised. “Being in a Dianic Coven doesn’t automatically make you a lesbian or bisexual. But even so, what if she was? What difference does it make?”

“Hey, whoa!” He held his hands up in mock defense. “I’m just doin’ my job here. I don’t care what anyone does as long as they aren’t hurtin’ anybody, and I don’t hafta look at it...”

“Unfortunately though, her bein’ *Bi* does set off a few alarms. Couple it with what ‘er co-workers had ta’ say, and you got someone at high risk for all kinds of shit.”

“So, to you, her lifestyle puts her in the same category as Brianna Walker,” I proposed.

“Hate ta’ say it, but yeah. Damn near, anyway.” He took a sip from his coffee cup and then set it back on the counter where he was leaning. “I should also mention that she was takin’ a couple of classes over at the U of M. Narcotics is payin’ special attention to that campus.”

“So are you coming back to the theory that this guy is only after hookers?” I asked.

“Not completely, but I do think his choice of victims so far does say somethin’.” He paused and let his gaze rest on me then added, “Don’t you?”

“Maybe.” I shook my head. “But I still think he’s after Witches not prostitutes.”

“Listen, white man...” He let out a frustrated sigh before continuing, “No one has thrown out your theory ‘bout the whole revival of the Inquisition thing, least of all me. But I’ve got a job ta’ do, and we hafta look at all the angles. Whether he’s after hookers, Witches, or...” He flung his arm out in a sweeping gesture as he searched for the elusive words. “Awww hell, whoever! I just want the bastard in a cell waitin’ for his last meal, that’s all.”

“I know you do, Ben,” I murmured half-heartedly, “I know you do.”

“Look, Row, we’ve got the Narcs workin’ the dealers, and personally I think that’s a hot lead. We’ve been over the Miller woman’s apartment with a microscope... Twice...” He held up two fingers to punctuate. “The place had been tossed, but all we found were some smudges. The guy was obviously wearin’ gloves. Shit, it’s the middle of winter! *Everybody’s* wearin’ gloves!”

He reached up to smooth his hair and then shook his head. He was already starting to show signs of stress over this case himself, and my unsupportive-sounding reply hadn’t helped.

“We’ve been canvassin’ the area around Meadowbrook Park, and so far nobody’s seen a thing. If we can figure out where she was last, we’ll be all over that place too. Other than that I don’t know what ta’ say...”

“I’m sorry, Ben,” I quickly apologized. “I didn’t mean to sound like I was doubting you.”

“S’okay, Kemosabe. I think we’re all a little wired. Kinda standin’ around waitin’ for the other shoe ta’ drop.” He folded his arms across his large chest and pursed his lips

for a moment as he stared out through our atrium window then turned his attention back to us. “So, Deckert and I are s’posed to go talk to some members of ‘er group this afternoon.” He bobbed his head in our direction. “You two wanna come with?”

“What time?”

“Around four.”

Felicity shook her head and looked over at me, “I should really stay here and take care of a few things, but you could go as long as you’re back in time. We’re supposed to be at the party by six-thirty.”

“That’s right, I almost forgot,” I replied.

“Party?” Ben raised an eyebrow.

“My grandparents’ sixtieth wedding anniversary combined with a double family reunion,” my wife explained. “And being a daughter of the O’Brien clan, I’m expected to dance, so I have to put the finishing touches on my outfit.”

“You need a special outfit so ya’ can dance?” He shot a glance in my direction and jibed, “You got somethin’ pretty ta’ wear too?”

“*Céilidh* dancing, Ben,” Felicity interjected. “Irish folk dancing. My cousins and I are providing the entertainment at my grandparents’ request. It’s like a family tradition.”

“So you mean ya’ do like that *Lord of the Dance* thing, then? Allison loves that stuff.”

“It’s pretty much the same thing,” she nodded. “Not exactly, but close. And there is the fact that we do it for fun and celebration. Not professionally.”

“Wow. Sounds like a big deal.”

“Regular Irish shindig,” I grumbled. “Lots of colcannon and whiskey followed closely by sightings of leprechauns and the traditional ‘dancing of the jig’ right on into the wee hours.”

“What the hell’s a cold cannon?”

“Colcannon. It’s a traditional Irish dish made of potatoes, onions and cabbage,” Felicity explained, then with her face bearing a broad grin, reached across the table and jokingly slapped my hand. “And you? Stop it! You’ll have fun and you know it.”

“You sure ya’ got time?” Ben questioned. “I’d really prefer to have ya’ there but it’s not like it’s your job. Deck and I can handle it.”

“He’s got plenty of time,” my wife answered for me. “He’s not the one dancing, I am. You just have to promise to have him back here in one piece by five-thirty, so I can get him dressed.”

“Deal.”

# CHAPTER 9

“That’s with a K,” a pretty young blonde woman with a neatly clipped pageboy haircut anxiously explained to Detective Deckert.

“K-a-r-o-l?”

“No sir,” she answered. “With a K and a Y. K-a-r-y-l. Karyl.”

“K-a-r-Y...” Carl muttered to himself as he wrote the name in his notepad emphasizing the K and the Y, “Gotcha. Last name?”

“Steinbeck.”

“Like the writer?”

“Yes, Detective.” She gave a slightly bothered sigh that was only partially masked by her obvious jitters. “Like the writer.”

“Any relation?”

“Not that I am aware of, Detective.”

“Great book, that *Grapes of Wrath*.”

“I wouldn’t know, Detective,” she told him, “I’ve never read it.”

“Too bad, you really ought to. Excellent book,” he told her then moved on to the woman seated at her side. “And your name again, Miss?”

“Miz.”

“Excuse me?”

“I prefer Miz,” she stated flatly as she brushed a shock of coal black hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear.

I couldn’t help but notice the lobe was decorated with a row of three rather significant diamond studs.

“My apologies,” Carl returned without missing a beat. “And your name again, *Miz*?”

“Starr,” she answered coldly, “with two R’s. Starr Winston.”

He mumbled softly as he scribbled, “Of course. Starr with *two* R’s...”

We had arrived at the upscale address in the historic section of Lansbury at ten minutes of four. Detective Deckert had driven himself and met us in front of the restored home. Though we were expected, the reception had been less than warm to say the least. Upon entering, we were quietly led to a sizeable sitting room by the young blonde who then excused herself and disappeared momentarily.

The room, like the rest of the interior we had seen, sported meticulously restored hardwood floors, three-member base accents and crown moldings. Throughout, eclectic paintings adorned strategic points providing embellishment for the muted colors of the walls. Otherwise, the furniture and decor seemed a paradox of feminine tastes driven by masculine undertones. The layout was nice, neat and altogether functional in design.

Karyl had returned shortly with her partner, and the two young women were now huddled close together on a high-backed love seat holding hands, their fingers tightly entwined. Carl and I had taken up residence on the matching couch across from them. The short distance between was occupied by a spartan antique coffee table. Ben remained standing, hands buried in his pockets, quietly surveying the room. I knew he was using

his size to, as he would put it, “compel full cooperation”; but in this case it was accomplishing nothing more than scaring the wits out of one of the women and putting the other on the extreme defensive. At least he was wearing a sport coat, so his sidearm wasn’t adding to the intimidation.

Having worked with me before, Carl had slipped easily into the habit of treating me as if I were just another cop; therefore, I doubted he was aware—or even concerned with the fact—that from my vantage point seated next to him, I could see everything he was putting on the paper. Next to Karyl’s name he made the notation, “blonde/blue nervous”—hair color, eye color, and demeanor. Next to Starr’s was the description “black/blue bitchy.”

On a separate line beneath the two names, he scrawled “lipstick lesbians” and double underlined it. I assumed this to be a reference to the fact that while they were obviously involved with one another, they were both very feminine in their appearance and dress. Yet another slang term born of the same misconstrued stereotypes of homosexuals that had given us such epithets as “bull-dyke” and “flaming-fairy.”

“Nice house you got here,” Carl observed aloud. “Must be one heck of a mortgage payment.”

“As if it is any of your business, Detective,” Starr hissed, “it is paid for.”

He let out a low whistle. “Nice. Have a good job, do you?”

“I am an attorney, Detective Deckert,” she returned. “A very successful one. Of course, I’m sure you were well aware of that before you ever came here.”

Next to her name on the notepad, he penciled in “lawyer/bucks.”

“Just the two of you live here, I take it?”

“Yes,” she huffed. “If I may, Detective Deckert, I am certain you were well aware of our names and countless other facts that are none of your business before you ever arrived here. So, if I may ask, is there a point to these questions other than a transparent attempt to antagonize me?”

“Just makin’ an observation, Miz Winston.” He shrugged. “That’s all. I’m not tryin’ to antagonize anyone.”

Her eyes quickly darting back and forth between Deckert and Starr, Karyl suddenly blurted, “Are we suspects?”

“Not at all, Miss Steinbeck.” Carl shook his head. “Not at all. We’re just tryin’ to get some information, so we can solve this case.”

The reply to her question was followed by a thickening silence. Information wasn’t going to flow freely from these two women, and being a Witch myself, I could fully understand their reluctance to speak. Considering the way the media had already begun sensationalizing their erroneous and unconfirmed rumors of “Cult Revenge,” the entire Pagan community in the area was probably running scared. Two of the local television stations had even started weeklong exposés titled something on the order of “WitchCraft: Saint Louis’ Hidden Evil.”

“Listen, Miss Steinbeck, Miz Winston...” Carl volunteered. “I’m not at liberty to discuss the details of this case except to say that the current speculation in the media is way off base... Don’t pay any attention to it.”

Their silence continued.

“Should we be expectin’ anyone else?” Ben finally asked from his station, semi-blocking the doorway. “Or is it just gonna be the two of you?”

The blonde woman stared past him into the next room at first, obviously making note of his blatant positioning, then tensely chewed at her lower lip before answering, “No, Detective...”

“Storm,” he reminded her.

“Detective Storm,” she said with a nod. “No. No one else.”

He paused for a moment and thoughtfully rubbed his chin. “Mind if I ask why? When I called yesterday I was given ta’ understand that there were several members in your group, and I asked that you all be present for this meeting.”

“On my counsel they have elected to remain anonymous,” Starr replied in her still frosty tone. “Not everyone in our Coven is as outspoken about their religious practices as Karyl and I. To be perfectly honest, Detective, the last thing they need is to have the police putting their names on their hit list.”

“Ladies,” Carl interjected with a fatherly chuckle, “I can assure you that there is no such thing as a ‘hit list.’”

“Officially,” she spat.

“Listen,” Ben began, “like Detective Deckert said, we’re just tryin’ ta’ solve a coupl’a murders here. The media is just runnin’ off at the mouth, as usual, and you two are *not* suspects. Now, we know Kendra Miller was a member of your group, and all we wanna do is ask ya’ a few questions. This isn’t some kinda shakedown. We are *not* on a Witch Hunt, okay?”

The two women simply stared back silently, making no move to speak or even acknowledge what he had just told them.

“I was afraid of this... That’s why we brought Rowan along,” he appealed, gesturing in my direction. “Give us a break, willya’?”

Still facing a mute audience, he turned his exasperated gaze on me and threw his hands in the air. “Okay, I give up... Row, speak some Witch to ‘em or somethin’.”

As I suspected would happen, I was unceremoniously dropped into the hot seat, and the two women turned to me almost in unison. Starr continued her piercing stare with ice blue eyes. Her stony expression combined with the frigid glare was enough to show me why she was so successful in her practice of the law. I somehow doubted that losing was an acceptable option for this young woman, and I was inwardly glad that I wasn’t on a witness stand being cross-examined by her; although, I wasn’t entirely sure if I was any safer where I sat at the moment.

Karyl was quite obviously the weaker of the two. Though while she certainly wasn’t as stoical as her partner, she remained completely mute. She simply cracked a fleeting, tight-lipped smile and watched me with wide, troubled eyes.

I cleared my throat and shrugged then stated succinctly, “They *are* telling the truth.”

“I read about you in the newspaper last weekend. You’re the one who helped find that murderer last year, aren’t you?” Karyl finally peeped.

On the edge of my vision, I caught a slight movement as Starr squeezed her hand and, getting her attention, almost imperceptibly flashed her a stern look. She wasn’t going to make this easy for me.

“Yes, I am,” I replied.

Starr cocked an eyebrow and spat sarcastically, “So what did they do, make you an honorary cop? Promise to leave you alone if you helped root out a few Pagans?”

“No, Ms. Winston, there were no such promises made, very simply because they aren’t necessary. I am merely a consultant.”

“A consultant for the police,” she added.

“Look,” I sighed and shook my head. “I’m not going to tell you that there aren’t cops who are prejudiced against Pagans. If I did, I’d be lying. We’ve all heard of friends being pulled over just because they have a Pentacle bumper sticker on their car. But if you happened to read that article in the paper, you know that I’ve been working toward educating the law enforcement community about The Craft—with Detective Storm’s help, mind you. You need to remember that it’s a two-way street. You can’t pass judgment on all cops just because of a stubborn few with preconceived ideas. And you can’t run around being paranoid all the time.”

“And why should we be any more trusting of you?” she demanded. “As far as I’m concerned, that article was nothing more than propaganda.”

I knew that even as we spoke, I was being checked out. Poked, prodded and inspected on an ethereal level by the two women. I had felt it ever since walking into the house and even more so since this terse conversation began. I decided that if we were ever going to get anywhere, I would have to go ahead and show my hand. I was going to have to let them feel for themselves that they could trust me.

“You’re both Witches,” I expressed evenly. “And judging from what I’ve been picking up, fairly practiced ones at that. Why don’t you tell me?”

I relaxed my inner self and drew a deep, cleansing breath. As I softly exhaled I allowed all but my most basic defenses to lower. Taking away any walls and putting out a psychic welcome mat. In effect, I invited them to come in and spiritually shake my hand. Just get to know me. Just get comfortable.

Even considering the energies I’d been feeling thus far, I didn’t expect anything in the way of a major psychic event. That level of talent comes with years of practice and is not necessarily achieved by everyone just because they practice Wicca. Such abilities are not a given. They are not an automatic bonus that comes with the religion. They are acquired. Even so, any Witch with the most rudimentary knowledge of The Craft should be perfectly capable of “feeling someone out” and that was my hope with this exercise.

What became instantly apparent the moment my defenses dropped, however, was that these two Witches were by no means mere beginners. Unfortunately, for all three of us, I was soon to find out just exactly how talented they were.

Karyl’s energies reached me first. They were warm, cautious and soft, moving carefully around the periphery of my aura. Starr’s touch followed and was the direct opposite. Plunging sharply inward and demanding complete attention—as hard and abrasive as the outer personality she had demonstrated thus far. I winced and fired off a quick mental warning to her, basically letting her know “Witch to Witch” that she was a guest and that I wouldn’t tolerate being challenged by her on this level. The small volley hit its mark, and she toned down her insistent energies noticeably, though they remained raw and somewhat grating.

Not surprisingly, it was Karyl’s tender and subtle delving that located the locked and barred door in the dark corner of my mind where I cloistered away all the horrors I had witnessed throughout my life. No doubt, she had done this while my attentions had been on Starr’s assertive ethereal contact. They made a good team, and unfortunately, I hadn’t foreseen that they would do this. What was worse, I didn’t notice until it was too late to

stop it. Before I could throw up a barrier, or even warn her, she unbolted and threw open the imaginary door that held back my nightmare world. Then with the unsuspecting innocence of a child, stared directly into the maelstrom of vivid atrocities I so desperately sought to forget.

*My body tenses as I feel my shoulders slowly and simultaneously ripping from their sockets. Something is pulling down against my ankles, and my legs are straining to remain joined with the rest of my body.*

*I don't know where I am...*

*I don't know how I got here...*

*What is happening to me?*

*The metallic click of a gear ratcheting reverberates again.*

*Tick, tick. Click!*

*"ADMIT your heresies woman!" a dark voice demands.*

*Tick, tick. Click!*

*Tick! Clunk!*

*Muscle and tendons are tearing. Along my upper back, they spasm and snap like overstressed rubber bands sending white hot projectiles of torment through my body.*

*I try to cry out in pain.*

The memories screamed forth like air escaping from a balloon, ricocheting from the corners of my mind and raking steely, barbed hooks through my very soul. As painful as they were for me, I couldn't imagine what the two young women must be feeling as they bore naked witness to my personal demons.

*Fear.*

*Pure unadulterated terror.*

*"Please come in," a voice.*

*I turned to face the direction of the voice.*

*It is my friend. Why am I so frightened?*

*Ariel Tanner is standing before me, radiant and lovely in a white lace gown. She smiles at me.*

*"Rowan, how nice to see you." Her voice floats mellifluously, displacing a demonic rushing noise in my ears. "It's been so long."*

*I cannot believe it is she. She is dead. This cannot be her.*

*"Ariel?" I question.*

*She jerks and spasms. The smile flees her lips. Her eyes grow wide and she looks down. A small spot of crimson appears on the high neck of the lace gown and begins growing.*

*Spreading.*

*Her mouth falls open in shock, and bright blood trickles from the corner of her lips. She looks back at me with questioning eyes, and the vermilion stain waxes unceasingly, covering her chest.*

*Running.*

*Dripping.*

*"Why Rowan?" she mouths. "Why?"*

*“Why don’t you stop him, Rowan?” her gurgling voice echoes, “Why?”*  
*Darkness.*

I could feel that the unstoppable flood of hideous visions had completely overpowered both Karyl and Starr. Enthralled by sadistic nightmares that no one should be made to witness, let alone live. I braced myself against yet another wave of remembered agony as I struggled to slam the ethereal door.

*“Kendra Darlene Miller...”*

*“...As you are damned in body and soul, your sentence on this day is death. The sentence is to be executed immediately, without appeal, in the manner of expurgation by fire.”*

*“Expurgation by fire...”*

*“Kendra Darlene Miller...”*

*“Expurgation by fire...”*

*“No. No, this can’t be.”*

*“May The Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon your soul.”*

*I cannot move.*

*I can hear the scraping of a match against stone.*

*I cannot scream.*

*I can hear the explosive spark as the match ignites.*

*“Somebody please help me!”*

*“Kendra Darlene Miller...”*

*“Damned in body and soul...”*

*“Your sentence on this day is death...”*

*“Expurgation by fire...”*

*Hot yellow agony licks across my body.*

*Fire clings to me in a vicious shroud. I’m holding my breath as the flame washes over my face, furiously catching my hair and blossoming upward with yet another loud crash.*

*I cannot scream...*

With one final push, I levered the mental door shut and forcibly ejected Karyl and Starr from my mind. From beginning to end the entire incident took place in less than a minute. Our outward expressions, however, were enough to tell Ben and Carl that something was definitely going on.

“Hey! Knock, knock...” Carl’s voice poured into my ear in a viscous flow. “Earth to Rowan.”

“Yo, white man? Are you three okay?” Ben’s voice followed, whirlpooling in behind Deckert’s as I snapped soundly back to the physical realm.

I nodded as I turned my concerned attentions to Karyl and Starr. “What? Yeah. Fine. Yeah, I’m okay.”

The two women were staring back at me blankly. Momentarily, a small glimmer of emotion crept into Karyl’s expression and was almost instantly followed by a pair of large tears rolling down her cheeks. A split second later her face was joined with the palms of her hands, and her shoulders began to heave as she quietly sobbed.

"I'm sorry," I delicately offered, "but at the risk of sounding heartless, you brought it on yourselves."

"Brought *what* on their selves?" Carl interjected in a puzzled tone as he switched his gaze back and forth between the two women and me. "What're you talking about?"

"I apologize," Starr announced, eyes watering as she choked back her own desire to cry. "You are, of course, correct, and that was..." She swallowed hard and steeled herself against the sorrow and fear that threatened to overtake her. "...It was very rude of us."

"It's okay," I soothed. "I understand."

"I am afraid that Karyl is in no condition to proceed with this interview," she continued while she could. "However, if you gentlemen would be so kind as to wait right here, I will be back in a moment... and I will do my best to answer any questions you may have."

I nodded. "Of course. Take your time."

Carl waited until the two women had left the room and were out of earshot before turning to me and tossing his hands up. "Could someone please tell me what just happened? One minute she's a freakin' ice princess then the next thing you know she looks like she's about to start bawlin' and she's apologizin' to you... And what was that 'you brought it on yerself's' stuff?"

"In their zeal to... read me psychically shall we say," I explained, "they got a little carried away and looked at a few memories they would have been better off not seeing."

"They did WHAT?" His eyes grew wide as he made the exclamation.

"Trust me, Carl," I told him. "It's a Witch thing."

Behind me, Ben softly whistled the opening theme from the *Twilight Zone*.



"I apologize for Karyl," Starr told us as she centered herself back on the love seat and self-consciously smoothed her pleated, tartan skirt. Her slightly reddened eyes testified to the fact that she had shed a few tears as well. "She and Kendra were lovers once..." She paused then added, "Before us of course."

"She was taking her death pretty hard to begin with and seeing that...vision..." She allowed her voice to melt into silence then took a deep breath and continued, "My apologies once again to you, Mister Gant. I am certain that reliving those images must have been just as painful for you as well."

"Rowan. Please," I replied. "And it's all right. I just hope the two of you will be okay."

She smiled. Briefly, but she smiled. She was very striking to begin with, and the smile betrayed the gentle side of the sharp-edged attorney who had been seated there only minutes ago.

She drew in another deep breath and exhaled heavily then asked, "How can I help?"

"Do you know if Miss Miller, or anyone in your group for that matter," Carl responded, "has been threatened or harassed lately?"

"She mentioned that she had been receiving religious junk mail," she answered. "But that's not unusual. Once your name is on a mailing list, it gets circulated everywhere."

“Nothing else?” he pressed. “Was she maybe approached by anyone that you know of?”

“No. Not that I am aware of, unless you count e-mail.”

“Go on.”

“She received some rather nasty messages on the internet... A month or two back if I remember correctly. ‘Repent now, or burn in hell’ kind of messages. She reported them to her provider, and I assume they took care of it. She never received any more.”

“Did she have any idea who the messages were from or how the person got ‘er e-mail address?” Ben interjected.

“No. She had no idea who was sending them.”

“Whoever it was probably pulled her address down from a newsgroup or something,” I offered. “That would also explain why the person knew her religion. There are several discussion groups about Paganism, Wicca and The Craft. All she had to do was post a message to one of them and her e-mail address became public knowledge.”

“Lovely,” Ben huffed as he scribbled in his notebook.

Turning back to Starr, I asked, “Do you happen to know who her provider was?”

“Not offhand.” She shook her head. “I have her e-mail address, if that would help?”

“Yes. I would appreciate getting that from you later.”

Ben and Carl both shot me curious looks.

“If her internet service provider was filtering the e-mail for her in order to bounce or trap the offensive messages,” I outlined for their benefit, “we might be able to get a domain designation from them.”

They continued to look at me expectantly.

“Kind of like tracing a phone call.” I simplified my explanation. “If we’re lucky, we might be able to determine the origin of the message, the account it was sent from, and maybe even the person who owns the account.”

The expectant looks turned into amazed stares.

“Remember, I make my living with computers. WitchCraft is a part of my belief system. It’s not my profession.”

“I’ll get one of our gurus on that,” Ben assented with an *oh yeah, now I remember* expression on his face and penned himself a quick reminder.

Carl looked back to the young woman and continued the line of questions. “Did anyone else in your group get any of these e-mails or junk mail?”

“I don’t think so.” She pursed her lips and canted her head to the side then stared off thoughtfully for a moment. “No. I can’t remember anyone mentioning any, although... Brianna did say she had been getting quite a few prank phone calls. Hang-ups mostly, but she did seem a little disturbed by them.”

“Brianna?” Ben looked up from his notepad, shot a glance at Carl then me and finally back to Starr.

“Yes,” she answered. “Brianna Walker. She is a member of our Coven. I can give you her number if you’d like, though she may be out of town. I haven’t been able to reach her this past week.”

“Brianna LOUISE Walker?” Ben ventured again. “Also known as Mistress Bree?”

“Yes, Detective Storm,” she returned. “Please don’t tell me you arrested her while working vice or something. At a time like this, I hardly see why something like that should...”

“Miz Winston,” Carl interrupted as Starr began to defend her friend and fellow sister of The Craft. “I don’t quite know how to tell you this...”

“Tell me what? What’s wrong?”

“Brianna Walker appears to have been the killer’s first victim,” Ben detailed concisely. “Her name hasn’t been released yet because we’ve been unable to contact her next of kin.”

She looked at Ben incredulously, then to Detective Deckert, then brought her eyes to meet mine and shook her head. Her lips parted slightly as she mouthed a silent “No.”

The blunt hammer of emotional pain that descended upon her secured itself a two-for-one deal as she remained supernaturally connected to me through our locked gaze. For a fleeting moment, I felt a hard lump rise in my throat and a caustic burn flood through my sinuses as my own eyes began to water.

I glanced away to break the ethereal union then stared off into space and uttered the only words that came to my clouded mind, “I’m so very sorry.”

“Miz Winston,” Ben ventured calmly but firmly as she started to tremble. “In light of this information, I think it’d be prudent for you to give us a list of your Coven members and their phone numbers. For their own safety...”

# CHAPTER 10

“Well sure I could be wrong... I hope like hell I am if you wanna know the truth.” Ben was forcing himself to speak in hushed tones.

Earlier, he had sequestered himself outside the entrance of the room in the narrow hall in order to jumpstart the Major Case Squad with the latest information. He had then proceeded to contact the local police department trying to obtain protection for Karyl and Starr. While he made a seemingly endless series of calls, one leading to the next, Carl Deckert and I remained in the sitting room with the grieving young attorney. She was holding up amazingly well under the circumstances, even considering her connection with The Craft. I suppose her profession had taught her how to remain calm and detached. Still, her distress was visible.

“Look, I’d just rather be wrong on the side of caution instead of endin’ up with another body.” He continued, “Can you understand that?”

Both Carl and I could still hear Ben’s voice and with only a little effort were able to make out everything he was saying. Starr, on the other hand, was too distraught to notice much of what was going on around her. Considering the subject matter of his conversations, doubtless that was for the best.

There was a short pause while, I assume, he was listening to the person on the other end of the cell phone. I almost didn’t need my heightened senses to feel his impatience—it was simply that palpable.

“I don’t get this! Am I just not makin’ myself clear to you or somethin’? Do ya’ want me to say it slower, is that it?” he spat sarcastically into the phone. “Listen close. A prominent member of your quiet little community here just might be the target of a serial killer. What I want is for *you* to get a uniform over *here* and give ‘er some protection! It’s that simple! Uh-huh... Yeah... Well tell ya’ what then, why don’tcha put someone on the line who *can* help me.”

While we waited, Starr went upstairs to check in on Karyl. She returned briefly, having elected not to inform her of Brianna’s death as yet, and told us that the young woman was resting peacefully in the bedroom. Earlier, she admitted, the help of a recently prescribed sedative had been necessary to calm the overwrought blonde, and now it seemed senseless and cruel to wake her only to give her another dose of heartbreaking news. I was inclined to agree.

“Is there someone you’d like us to call for you?” Carl asked in a soothing voice. “A relative? A friend maybe?”

“No. No one, Detective.” She shook her head. “Thank you for offering.”

“Can we get you anything?” I queried and shrugged. “A glass of water? Coffee? Aspirin?”

“No... Yes... Yes, Mister Gant, you could.” She pointed across the room. “There is some brandy in that cupboard.”

At Starr’s request I poured her a stiff ration of the liquor from the heirloom cabinet bar in the corner. Judging from the label on the bottle and the cork that sealed it, the

brandy was in reality a rather pricey cognac. She sipped it eagerly, almost gulping at first. Remembering my recent and similar actions with a bottle of bourbon, I urged her to slow down. She nodded, realizing through her distress that I was correct, and set the crystal snifter aside with at least a small amount of the expensive spirits left in it.

Momentarily, she rummaged about in the drawer of an end table then withdrew a small rectangular box and opened it.

"I have to keep them hidden," she told us with a small, sorrowful laugh as she placed a cigarette between her lips, "Karyl thinks I quit... But I'm sure she knows."

Carl and I simply nodded mutely and watched her light it with trembling hands.

"Well frankly I don't give two shits about your goddamned contract!" Ben's voice echoed into the room as he tersely erupted out in the corridor, "Right now I've got two bodies down at the morgue. One of 'em was thrown off a balcony and the other one was... No, YOU wait just a minute!" his voice rose in pitch again. One thing you never did to Ben Storm was to interrupt him.

His tone lowered to a simmering "I mean business" tenor and he continued, "Look, number one—both of these women were tortured before they were killed. Number two—we have reason to believe the killer is targeting persons with alternative religions. And finally, number three—both of them were members of the same small religious group—the *same one* that two of your local residents are members of. Now for me, that sets off some alarms. What about you?"

He paused for a moment, and I heard him let out an exasperated huff.

"Yeah... Yeah... Well why don't ya' do that... Uh-huh, well trust me, I will... Yeah, I'll be sure to let Ms. Winston know just exactly how concerned you folks are for her welfare... Yeah, same to ya'."

We heard him close the flap on the portable phone with an angry snap that was followed immediately by a disgusted mumble, "...And the fuckin' horse you rode in on, too, ya' lousy sonofabitch."

I caught Carl's eye and jerked my head toward the room's entrance. He nodded acknowledgement and gave the anguished young woman next to him a fatherly pat on the shoulder.

"Will you be okay for a bit, Ms. Winston?" he asked as she broke her hollow stare and looked up at him. "Rowan and I need to talk to Detective Storm for just a minute."

"Yes...yes, Detective, I'll be fine," she answered mechanically.

"We'll just be right outside the door," he added and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze before joining me to crowd into the narrow passageway.

"That didn't sound good," I remarked in a near whisper as I wedged myself through and leaned against a doorjamb. "What did they say?"

"Awww, they're all fucked up," Ben replied, still seething from the conversation with the uncooperative Lansbury Police Department. "They don't wanna send anyone over unless I can tell 'em who's gonna pay for it."

"Pay for it?" I was confused.

"Lansbury is pretty small," Carl explained. "Their police department isn't really a police department per se. Truthfully, it's not much more than a handful of rent-a-cops hired out through a third-party security firm. All they're ever worried about is money."

"So what are you going to do?" I appealed.

“Well, they’re still inside the county, so technically we have jurisdiction...” he mused. “Of course, we’re stretched pretty thin as it is...”

Ben reached up and smoothed his hair back then let his large hand rest on the back of his neck. Slowly his fingers started working on a tense knot at the base, and he grimaced thoughtfully, “Yeah, Carl, I know. Right now I’ve got Martin and Kelly back at the command post contactin’ everyone on the list she gave us.” He cocked his head toward the other room to indicate Starr.

“From what we can tell so far, it looks like they all live in areas with real coppers,” he detailed. “That’ll help a lot, so there shouldn’t be much fuss about gettin’ police protection for ‘em. Of course, they haven’t reached everyone on the list yet.”

He continued working the back of his neck with his large hand and puffed his cheeks out with a fatigued sigh.

“Jeezus, what a mess!” he finally exclaimed. “I guess it’s gonna be up ta’ us to keep watch over these two.”

“How are the higher ups going to feel about you playing bodyguard?” I asked, “Seems to me they get a little concerned over budgets too.”

“Lemme ask you this,” He stared directly into my face and raised an eyebrow, “Do you think this asshole might come after another one of the women in this group?”

“Well, Starr did say that no one else has received any threats,” I offered.

“That she *knew* of.” He qualified my statement and thrust his index finger at me. “But that’s not what I asked ya’.”

I took a moment to weigh the facts before I replied, “You can’t entirely rule out the possibility that he might go after someone else. Like I’ve said before, there are a lot of Pagans in this city, and I still believe that the eradication of Witches is this guy’s main focus. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be going about the murders in the manner he has so far.”

I let out my own troubled sigh. Ben was seeking my advice, and my nagging doubts were keeping me from giving a singular commitment to this avenue of thought. I knew he was depending on me, and I didn’t want to let him down.

“I suppose I would have to agree though that by killing two members of the same Coven, he’s established something of a pattern. I don’t want to put all the eggs in one basket, but in answer to your question... yes, I think it is very likely that he will target another member of this circle.”

“Well, that’s good enough for me, and I’m bettin’ it’ll be good enough for the chief. He’s the only higher up I’m worryin’ about right now. Whaddaya think, Carl?”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” Deckert nodded as he spoke. “I got a hinky feeling about the whole deal.”

“Okay. So what now?” I inquired.

“Let’s see...” Ben turned his wrist and glanced quickly at his watch. “It’s five after five now... Oh shit! Man, I’m s’posed to have you home in twenty-five minutes.”

“I’ll just have to call Felicity and tell her to go on without me,” I remarked.

Ben looked hard at his watch again as if by doing so he could somehow turn the hands back by sheer force of will. “No way, white man. No freakin’ way. The red squaw would scalp me for sure. I promised ‘er I’d have ya’ home. Besides, there’s nothin’ you can really do right now.”

"I can cancel, Ben," I insisted. "I'm really not looking forward to it anyway. You know her father doesn't much care for me, and I can do without that grief at the moment."

"Yeah, but it's family and ya' do what you gotta. Besides, she'd kill us both. Anyway, like I said, there's nothin' more for you ta' do at the moment. Seriously."

"Are you certain?"

"Positive. Just let me know where you're gonna be, and if somethin' comes up, I'll get in touch with ya'."

"Why don't you go ahead and take Rowan home," Deckert volunteered. "I'll hang loose till you get back."

"You sure, Carl?" Ben asked as he gave him a questioning glance.

"Yeah. No problem," he returned easily. "Mona's outta town visiting her sister, so I was just gonna grab a burger and work late anyway. Ya'know, maybe I'll make a few calls. I got a coupl'a guys that owe me a favor or two. If either of 'em is off duty, maybe I can get one of 'em over here on a payback."

"Good idea." Ben nodded vigorously. "I've got a few markers out there myself. I'll make some calls too."

"You guys go on ahead," Carl ordered and shot me a grin. "Don't need your wife gettin' upset... If she's anything like Mona... Well, you know."

"Thanks, Deck," Ben told him as he ushered me toward the doorway, "I shouldn't be gone more'n forty-five minutes, tops."

"No problem. I'm not goin' anywhere."

There are those times when it pays to have a cop behind the wheel. Being in a hurry to get somewhere can definitely qualify as one of them.

Ben dropped me off in front of my house with slightly over one minute to spare.



Felicity reached up and casually cranked the Jeep's rear-view mirror in a direction I'm firmly convinced the engineers had not really designed it to go. I am also fairly certain that in order to avoid breaking said mirror, the out of specification contortion was something that could only be accomplished by a woman applying makeup while in the driver's seat. I suppose I should be thankful we were currently parked.

Leaning into the steering column, she frantically brushed what she obviously considered to be a stray hair or two from her forehead and urged them to disappear into the rest of her auburn mane. Still pitched forward, and using only one hand, she spun the barrel of a lipstick with practiced fingers then swiped it across her lips with fluid, almost surgical, precision. Turning her head from one side to the other and inspecting her reflected image from the corners of her eyes, she let out a satisfied purr. Only then did she stuff the tube of gloss back into her coat pocket and return the mirror to a crooked semblance of its proper position. Still, even after seeing for herself, she twisted in her seat to face me and asked, "How do I look?"

"Like a regular Colleen," I answered. "A real Irish lassie if ever there was one."

"You didn't even look," she insisted.

I groaned assent and turned to give her more than just a cursory glance.

Her fiery spiral tresses billowed out softly to frame her smooth alabaster face. Falling in a silky flow across her shoulders, her hair disappeared in a cascade down her back that I knew reached almost to her waist. A pair of thin braids encircled her crown, neatly held in place by strategically placed, hidden hairpins, until they joined in the back and coalesced into a whirling eddy of loose curls.

She was looking back at me with her eyebrows arched questioningly over sparkling green eyes, and by the dim glow of the map light, I could see the narrow swath of freckles that rode faintly across the bridge of her nose. Her full, red lips were slightly parted, and the corners turned up in a girlish smile. Her cheeks were flushed pink from the cold.

The sight of her was enough to make me forget, if only for a moment, the horrors I had re-witnessed just hours before. I didn't realize it until she spoke, but I was simply staring at her.

"What?" she asked and started to reach for the mirror once again. "Do I have lipstick on my teeth or something?"

"No." I caught her hand before she could assault the device any more. "There's nothing on your teeth. I was just noticing how gorgeous you are."

"Oh stop it!" she insisted, throwing me an embarrassed glance as she reached over to straighten my tie. "You're just saying that because you're my husband and you have to."

"If that's what you want to believe, but it's not true. You're beautiful."

She ignored my further comment. "There, that's better."

I reached up to loosen the knot she had just cinched around my throat, and she playfully slapped my hand away.

"Don't. I just fixed that."

"I hate ties, honey. They're too constricting. That's why I work at home, so I don't have to wear them."

"You want constricting? Try wearing pantyhose and a lace-up, metal-ribbed bodice. Aye, now there's constricting for you. Besides, it's only for a few hours, so deal with it," she instructed.

"Okay. So long as I get to be the one who unlaces that bodice later."

"Rowan!" she giggled then winked. "Keep that up and I think it can be arranged... Now, come on. Let's go inside before we're late."

"Yeah, I suppose the sooner we get in there the sooner we can leave."

"Aye, would you be showing disrespect to me family now?" she jibed with an overstated Irish brogue. Though she had purposely exaggerated the affectation, I knew I would need to get used to it because, after a scant few hours inside, her normal lilt was going to be embellished with the heavy accent for several days. It always was.

I just grinned back at her and unlatched my door.

"By the way, Rowan..." She looked back before stepping out of the Jeep.

"Yes?"

"Thanks. You look kind of sexy yourself."



"Club soda, twist of lime," I told the bartender and held up a pair of fingers. "Two, please."

The family had pulled out all the stops for this affair. From renting a large banquet room at the Westview Regency, to the open bar and traditional Irish food catered specifically for the party. As I had told Ben there would be, plenty of colcannon was to be had, along with mutton stew, spiced beef, potato cakes, and countless other ethnic comestibles. I had no doubt that Felicity's mother had been in charge of the menu as she was a phenomenal cook.

Both of Felicity's parents were first generation Irish-American, born of immigrants. Her maternal grandparents were the ones celebrating the anniversary tonight; for her father's parents had long since passed, well before she and I were married.

As her mother and father both came from large families, aunts, uncles, cousins and other relations were springing from every corner of the banquet hall; some had even come over directly from Ireland for the express purpose of attending this combination party/reunion. Many of them she hadn't seen for ages. Many I had never even met. Be that as it may, there was definitely no shortage of red hair in the room.

After checking our coats, I was charged with the mission of obtaining drinks for the both of us while my wife skittered about squealing with glee as she and long missed relatives became re-acquainted. Having located one of the two bars and placing my order, I decided to try and make the best of it. Had present circumstances been different, I'm sure I would have been more in the mood for a party. But they weren't, and I wasn't.

I was still wrestling with the re-awakened visions of Kendra Miller burning to death in the middle of a public park. I fought, from one moment to the next, with bleak stabs of pain mirroring the emotions I experienced coming from the two young women this afternoon. I steeled myself against the fear I didn't want to acknowledge. And all of this I did alone, for I hadn't uttered a single word of today's events to Felicity. She had been preoccupied with her preparations, and I felt that at least one of us should remain unburdened by thoughts of loathing and death during what was intended as a celebration of love and life. Of the surplus of mental trauma I was struggling to keep at bay, the worst was my own agonized speculation. I couldn't stop worrying over when the killer would strike next.

How would he strike?

Who would be the victim?

A dull ache through my very being told me that it was going to be soon, and I wasn't going to be able to stop the inevitable. All I would be able to do is sift through the aftermath for another misshapen piece of the puzzle and, if it was there, try desperately to fit it into place with the bleak handful we had thus far.

I reached up and worked the knot of my necktie back and forth to loosen it and leaned against the bar. My eyes darted through the crowd searching for where Felicity might have settled. She was clad in festive Celtic attire—much like most everyone else in the room—and with the abundance of auburn curls filling the hall, it took me a few moments to pick her out.

She was wearing, not unlike several of the other women, a slightly shortened version of a traditional chemise and Irish skirt. Her shapely torso was cinched into a low-cut bodice complete with boning and laces. On her feet, she had replaced her snow boots with flat, black slippers secured firmly to her ankles with a criss-crossing leather cord tied in a neat bow.

I finally located her on the far side of the room, arm in arm with two of her cousins, executing a short, quick series of lithe leaps, kicks and jumps. The three of them bobbed up and down in perfect unison as they spun about in mock rehearsal for the dancing yet to come and came to a halt, laughing wildly at a minor misstep. I felt like I had landed in the middle of an Irish dance troupe and was beginning to feel self-conscious and terribly out of place in my grey tweed sport coat and slacks.

“Aye, keeper! Why don’t you be givin’ ‘im a real man’s drink then!” The thick timbre met my ears and was coupled with a rough slap across my back.

A pair of meaty paws proceeded to manhandle my shoulders, and I broke from my glassy stare.

“Me Grandmother wouldn’t be drinkin’ that fizzly water now,” my brother-in-law’s voice boomed once again. “Whiskey man! We’ll start with two and ye keep it flowin’!”

Felicity’s older brother was hopelessly enamored with his ancestral roots and had spent a large amount of time in Ireland during his youth. To this day he spent as much time there as he could. Fortunately, his position with an overseas firm as a structural engineer allowed him great latitude in his choice of assignments, and he had been able to work there continuously for the past several years. Because of this, his brogue was unfaded by distance and time and was only slightly tarnished by his inherent Americanism.

Coming from the same stock as my wife, he bore the ruddy complexion and bright red mop of a classic Irishman, right down to his rust-colored beard. He was at once jovial, cantankerous, loud, obnoxious, loyal, hard-drinking, and if the stories I had heard of his youth were true, hard-fighting as well. Of all my in-laws, he and I got along the best. I was sorry we didn’t get to see each other more often.

“Austin!” I cheerfully yelped as he greeted me further with a brotherly bear hug. “When did you get in?”

“Just last night, Rowan old man, just last night.” He cuffed me on the shoulder again and pushed a full shot glass of whiskey along the bar to me as he grasped his own.

In one motion he lifted the glass with his right hand and thrust it straight out from his shoulder. I mimicked the motion, and he clinked his shot against mine as he said, “May the grass grow long on the road to hell for its want of use! *Slainte!*”

“*Slainte!*” I echoed the Gaelic equivalent of “cheers.”

With that he tossed back the ounce of liquor and loudly clacked the glass back onto the bar. I followed suit with somewhat less gusto. I suspected he already had a substantial head start on me.

“Again, man!” he shouted to the hustling bartender then turned back to me. “And where would ye be hidin’ me charming sister then? I trust you’ve been takin’ good care of her now.”

I chuckled and pointed. “She’s across the way there. With a couple of your cousins.”

He followed my finger and nodded as he saw her repeating her earlier mini performance with the other two women.

“Aye, old man, you definitely got yourself the pick of the O’Brien crop with her. She’s the loveliest of the sisters.”

“As I recall she’s your only sister, Austin,” I laughed.

“Aye, and I’m prejudiced as well!” he chuckled in return.

The frantic bartender had refilled the two shots, and my brother-in-law nudged one to me again. "Here's to the health of your enemies' enemies!"

"I can go for that. *Slainte!*"

"*Slainte!*"

We raised our drinks in unison and clinked them together soundly. Before we could bring them to our lips, however, we were interrupted by the Celtic lilt of a familiar female voice.

"Austin! There you are!" the voice exclaimed, and we both swiveled our heads toward it. "Oh, hello, Rowan. I didn't know you and Felicity had arrived."

"Maggie," I smiled and nodded to my mother-in-law.

"Austin, dear," she continued, "your father needs to speak with you. You don't mind, do you, Rowan?"

"Not at all."

"Aye, can't it wait?" Austin protested at first. However, since he instantly found himself on the receiving end of a sharp "don't question your mother" glare that an offspring of any age would obey, he tossed back the shot of whiskey and settled the empty glass on the bar. "I'll be catchin' up with ya' then, old man," he told me as he followed her away. "Don't you be runnin' off now."

"Don't worry," I called after him. "I'll be here all night. Promise."

Had I known at the time I would have to break that promise, I never would have made it.

# CHAPTER 11

“Shamus O’Brien, my father-in-law, would never be in any danger of becoming elected president of my fan club; of this you could be certain. Our relationship was one that stressed the boundaries of polite tolerance and mute indifference. I am sure he allowed this much solely for the benefit of his only daughter. In general, he wasn’t what you would call outwardly discourteous to me. I was, of course, well aware of his feelings, and I endeavored to respect them by keeping my distance; therefore he was rarely even given a chance to become rude. However, we would invariably be thrust together by holidays or other family functions at intervals throughout the year. At these times I would make it a point to avoid any controversial topic on which he may have a strong opinion—which was only a shade left of everything.

The one subject that remained an absolute taboo on any and all occasions was my choice of religious paths; for you see, that was the one and true reason Shamus didn’t like me.

If asked about it, my stern in-law would return a blank stare and pretend to ignore the subject entirely. But, if one were truly inclined to press the matter, he could be made to speak of it, and speak of it he would.

The entire discourse would begin with him muttering a long string of Gaelic expletives under his breath. Soon, his ruddy complexion would flush even brighter, and he would begin gesturing with a stiff index finger while making his opinions adamantly known. Finally, he would proceed to explain how I had turned his fair daughter from the righteous path of God with my heretical Pagan practices. The story seemed to grow more heinous each time he told it.

My mother-in-law, Maggie, would simply roll her eyes and sigh then sternly admonish, “Oh Shamus, just you hush now!”

It didn’t matter to him that Felicity was a practicing Witch long before our first chance meeting—a meeting that interestingly enough occurred at a local Magickal and Earth religion festival. No. He would have none of that, and he would even deny the fact with great fervor. She was his little Colleen, and she couldn’t possibly have taken this road without being tempted by some unsavory character such as myself. Each time she would try to reason with him, it simply flowed into one ear and straight out the other. To Shamus, his little girl could do no wrong, and in his mind, she was just going through a phase.

Needless to say, I went to great lengths to avoid this subject entirely.

Tonight, however, much to my chagrin, I had no control over the topic being debated no matter how hard I tried to evade it. My face had been plastered all over the news, both electronic and print, placing me in the astringent beam of an unwanted limelight. My religion had suddenly made me something of a morbid celebrity among those relatives of local residence, and whispered stories of my involvement in the murder investigations, both past and present, were spreading through the room like fire through a

dead forest. One of Felicity's second cousins, a wide-eyed, round-faced, young girl of eight or nine, had even asked me for my autograph.

Like everyone else, my father-in-law had been at work on his own share of Irish whiskey in celebration, and the alcohol had freed his sharp tongue from the sheath where it was normally kept. Felicity and I had only been here the sum total of one hour and twenty-minutes. I had been backed into a corner listening to his closed minded diatribe for the twenty.

"...Aye, and how can you be expectin' us to plan our family gatherin's 'round your Pagan holidays now?" he queried, his voice a mere notch away from belligerent.

"I've never asked you to do that, Shamus, and you know it," I returned, struggling to remain calm and looking past him in search of my wife. I needed to be rescued soon before I lost my temper and said something I would regret.

"What about last March then?" he shot back. "We tried to plan your mother-in-law's birthday party, we did. But you had one of your godless holidays conflictin'!"

"It was a Spring Equinox celebration, and if anything, I'm *polytheistic*, so you can hardly call it godless. Besides, it was only one weekend, and you know you wouldn't have given it another thought if we had simply told you we were busy and left it at that."

It was getting harder by the moment for me to keep my cool. Continuing my search, I spied Felicity across the room as haunting violin music began to fill the hall. The mournful wail of the fiddles quickly took on a brighter tempo, and my wife began dancing about with her similarly garbed cousins. Having witnessed her perform this particular traditional prancing jig before, I knew it was going to last for several minutes. She wasn't going to be providing me with an avenue of escape anytime soon.

I was just bracing myself for what I was sure would be a spitefully barbed comeback when I felt a hand rest on my shoulder. I looked back to see the concerned face of my brother-in-law, and knew I was about to be emancipated. Unfortunately I also knew that I was only going to be chained to another situation I would rather not face.

"Aye, Rowan." He gave his father a quick nod then looked at me. "There's a pair out in the hotel lobby flashin' badges and askin' after you. Considerin' that, I don't suppose it would be good news then?"

My heart double thumped in my chest, and my throat turned instantly dry. An intimately known and caustically burning itch I had been struggling to ignore once again announced itself on my forearm in an extremely familiar spot.

"No, Austin," I agreed sadly. "It isn't at all."



"...So anyway, I'm standin' there tryin' to calm these two guys down, and the one keeps yellin', 'His fuckin' dog ate my bird! His fuckin' dog ate my bird!'"

"Yeah?"

The two uniformed officers guarding the entrance to the apartment continued their chitchat while I signed my name on the crime scene log and noted the time alongside. I was starting to become an old hand at these procedures, but every time I had to do it, I felt like I had just swallowed a crucible of molten lead.

The two Major Case Squad detectives that had picked me up had ushered me in and informed the patrolmen that I was here in an official capacity. Upon hearing this

revelation, they immediately began to treat me with the same casual indifference afforded any other cop. I suppose the fact that I was still wearing a sport coat and tie made me look like I belonged.

“Well the other guy starts screamin’, ‘He’s crazy! He’s nuts!’ and shit like that...” the officer with the story continued. “So now I’m startin’ ta’ think I’m gonna have a fist fight on my hands, ya’know?”

The other cop was already starting to chuckle, “Yeah? Then what?”

I took an offered pair of surgical gloves and pulled them over my damp hands. It was a struggle to get them on properly as my palms were so thick with cold sweat. I realized I was nervous and suddenly felt very human and vulnerable. I tried to convince myself that it was at least a sign that I hadn’t lost all my compassion.

“Next thing I know the dog starts heavin’ and makin’ all these weird-ass gackin noises, ya’know?”

The officer who was listening could see what was coming and was now barely able to contain an all out guffaw.

“Then *yarrrrp* there it is! The freakin’ dog ralphs up the goddamn bird all over the guy’s shoes... It was one of them parrots or whatever so it was like this psychedelic projectile puke or somethin’!”

“No shit? What’d you do?”

“No shit, man. I thought I was gonna lose it right in front of these two guys...”

Obviously, the tale was intended to be humorous, but my present mood wasn’t conducive to laughing along with it. Though the telling of the story under current circumstances seemed outwardly callous, I’m sure it was merely a defense mechanism automatically kicking into high gear. Nothing more than a way for them to relieve their minds from the stress of the job. A way to deny the horror that waited in the next room. Given that, I certainly couldn’t blame them.

I was just preparing to go ahead into the open apartment when I heard Ben’s voice call from behind me, “Hey, white man.”

“Hey,” I returned sullenly and waited as he lumbered up the hallway.

“Sorry to have ‘em drag ya’ outta your party and all,” he apologized as he flashed his badge to the uniformed officers and penned its number and his name on the log. “Carl’s on ‘is way. He oughta be here in a bit.”

“No problem. I was just getting chewed on by my father-in-law anyway...” I paused and sighed heavily. “I could have asked for better circumstances for an escape, though.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“Were you able to find someone to look after Starr and Karyl?” I inquired while watching him don his own pair of oversized latex gloves.

“Yeah, I got an off-duty copper friend of mine over there. Ended up costin’ me a box of Santa Damiana’s though. So, did Ackman and Hirst fill ya’ in?”

“Just that there was a body and that you would meet us here. Do you know who it is?”

“Not officially confirmed but looks like it’s the apartment’s occupant.” He referenced his notepad with a practiced flip of his wrist. “One Sheryl Keeven. Caucasian, thirty-four years old, divorced.”

“Was she...”

“...On the coven list?” Ben finished the question for me. “Yeah. She was on it. Martin was tryin’ to get a hold of ‘er earlier this afternoon. We were just gettin’ ready ta’ send a car by when the suicide call came in.”

“Suicide?” I puzzled aloud as I followed him through the open doorway, unthinkingly scratching at my arm through my coat.

“Yeah, they didn’t tell ya’? The bastard left ‘er hangin’ off ‘er balcony. Neighbor called it in.”

“Did anybody see anything?”

“Hell no. Nobody ever sees anything any more.”

The third floor dwelling was fairly standard as apartments go, with a combination living room and dining area divided from the small kitchenette by a half wall lined with potted houseplants. A narrow corridor led back along the far side giving access to the bathroom, a closet with louvered luan doors, and finally, the bedroom. The walls were standard apartment complex white but had been cheerfully decorated with numerous framed pictures forming a silent gallery of what I assumed were relatives and friends. A faint odor of potpourri still permeated the room.

Bookshelves lined one end of the living area and were stuffed with novels, both paperback and hardcover. Anything ranging from mysteries to romances filled every available space. One set of shelves in particular held my attention as they were neatly arranged with non-fiction titles regarding herbs, alternative religions, and more specifically, WitchCraft.

My otherworldly senses were bombarded with random energies and sensations from the residence. The primary feeling in the room was one of abject fear and death. Not surprising at all, and I would have expected nothing less. The underlying impression that peeked out from behind the horror, however, was one of warmth and love. It told me that Sheryl Keeven had been the kind of person who dotted her i’s with smiley faces and went out of her way to help someone in need—even a stranger.

The ethereal touch slipped in and introduced itself. Now, I could no longer view her as an unfamiliar name. I could only see her as someone I wished I had had the opportunity to know. Even though we had never met in this physical plane of existence, the fact that she was dead filled me with the dull ache of loss.

I shook off the wash of emotion and forced myself back into stoic objectivity then continued to scan my surroundings.

In the corner, a nineteen-inch television with a severe chroma problem flickered mutely, displaying a weather update that warned of yet another approaching snowstorm. Though it was not expected to be anywhere near the strength of last week’s blizzard, we stood to accumulate a good two to four inches. At least, that is what they were saying.

A set of sliding glass doors at the center of the living/dining area’s back outer wall stood levered wide open. The frigid night air streamed in through the opening only to clash with the warmth being continuously pumped into the room through the furnace vents. One of them would eventually win, and I suspected it would be the cold.

A crime scene technician with a wind-chapped face stood quietly frowning as she expertly dusted the door handle and the glass surrounding it. When she slid the door partially closed for a moment, I could see a segment of a white, curved line decorated with hash marks. Encompassed within the arc, there appeared to be one side of a large X

and possibly a piece of the vertical line that may form a capital P. It was apparent that the marking was large enough to spread across the face of both door panels.

At random intervals the room would brighten for a brief instant as the thyristor flash on another evidence technician's camera exploded harsh white light out on the balcony. The runny lines of the large painted symbol cast an eerie shadow each time and left me with an oblique after-image branded on my retinas.

"They bring you in the front or the back?" Ben asked me as he stood surveying the room.

"Front," I answered. "It was a mess."

"Shit, you think the front's bad?" he huffed. "Goddamned news vultures are all over the back parkin' lot. That's where the balcony is, and we can't move the body until the M.E. gets here."

Sarcasm gelled my one word response. "Wonderful."

"And here I thought you were leaving all those messages at the office because you guys wanted to pay up on that dinner you owe me." A feminine but distinctly authoritative voice issued from the doorway.

Constance Mandalay was holding forth a leather case containing her badge and FBI ID to the officer at the door while simultaneously scratching her name into the log. With a curt nod to the patrolman, she closed the wallet and thrust it into her pocket as she entered.

The brunette federal agent was clad in a wide-collared beige overcoat that now hung open to reveal her petite figure hugged in an intriguing fashion by a shimmery, metallic-blue cocktail dress. Completing the ensemble, she wore matching satin high-heels and a splash of unpretentious silver jewelry. Her shoulder-length hair was elegantly styled, and her face had seen a very tasteful brush with a handful of cosmetics.

Ben let out a blatant, teasing wolf-whistle as he stopped and did a double take. "Whoa, the Feeb's wearin' girl clothes! Nice legs, Mandalay."

"Watch it, Storm, or I'll call your wife!" she warned jokingly.

"I'll risk it, 'cause I'm just dyin' ta' know where you're hidin' your Sig in that getup," he returned with a grin, referring to her sidearm.

"I'm afraid that's a government secret," she quipped then smiled over at me. "Hi, Rowan. I see he's got you involved in this one up to your eyeballs."

"Heya, Constance," I acknowledged. "I thought you were on some kind of security assignment?"

"Visiting dignitary," she said, as she nodded and held the front of her overcoat open wide for a brief moment. "Just finished working the farewell party. A real *Yawwwn* if you know what I mean." With a quick nod she canted her head toward me. "What's your excuse?"

"Felicity's grandparent's anniversary party."

"Watchin' after a *vip*, huh," Ben snorted the acronym as a word instead of spelling it out. "I would'a figured that for a Secret Service gig."

"Normally it would be," she answered with a sigh. "It's a long story. Suffice it to say he's gone, and I'm all yours now. Would you like to bring me up to speed? All I know is what you told Agent Bartlett and what's been on the news. The only reason I knew you would be here is that I returned your call figuring I'd leave a voice mail and got a live person instead."

Someone loudly cleared his throat nearby. Ben held up a finger to Constance and turned to the evidence technician. "Yeah, what's up?"

"We're all finished out here," he said. "It's all yours."

"Get anything?" my friend asked.

"A few smudges on the sliding door. Nothing of any consequence. There's a Bible out there, King James Version. Hardback, like you'd find in just about any bookstore. It's bagged."

"Was it marked in any way?" I questioned while pawing at the insistent itch on my forearm.

"Yeah," the tech said with a nod as he referenced a sheaf of papers attached to a worn clipboard. "Plain Jane cardboard bookmark. Looks like a standard yellow hi-liter was used on a passage in the book of First Samuel. Chapter fifteen, verse twenty-three. For rebellion is..."

I interrupted and finished the passage for him. "...As the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king."

"Yeah. That's it," he acknowledged, the paused and nodded toward my absently clawing hand. "Something wrong with your arm?"

"Trust me," I answered. "You don't really want to know."

"Anything else?" Ben queried, cutting him off before he could comment.

"Well, the rope looks like regular utility clothesline you can get at any hardware store. We're gonna check it out. The symbol on the door was spray-painted. We took samples. That's about it."

"Okay, thanks." Ben gave the tech a quick pat on the shoulder. "Do me a favor, will ya? Check downstairs and see if the coroner is here yet. I wanna get this body moved as soon as possible. The uniforms can't hold off those reporters down there for much longer, and we really don't need 'er showin' up on the ten o'clock news."

"Will do."

"Thanks."

The technicians were barely out the door when Ben turned to me with a concerned gaze. "What's goin' on with the arm? I thought it was all healed up."

"It was," I answered and began tugging off my coat. "But it started itching again earlier this evening."

"Why do ya' think that is?"

"Well, obviously I'm being told something. Maybe I was being warned about this murder."

"Ahem." Constance mimicked the earlier noise made by the tech to grab our attention. "You guys want to fill me in? What's wrong with your arm, Rowan?"

"Show 'er, white man," Ben told me.

He held my coat and jacket for me after I wrestled out of them, and I proceeded to unbutton my cuff and roll back the shirtsleeve. There was no blood soaking through the fabric, so it apparently had not yet progressed as far as it had the last time.

Agent Mandalay stepped closer to have a look as I finished peeling back the material and turned my forearm upward to bring it into view. The faint pink scar of the original wound was barely visible as a pale outline against my brightly flushed skin. The flesh of my forearm was hot and already beginning to take on shades of purple and blue as the

unseen force bruised me. On the surface of my arm was a raised circular welt encompassing a large X bisected by a large P.

“Christ, Rowan!” Constance exclaimed as she reached out and gingerly touched my arm. “How in the world did that happen?”

“You shoulda seen the first one,” Ben interjected.

“I think it’s a sign from the other side,” I told her as I reached up and started to dig my nails in for a blissful scratch.

“Don’t,” she admonished and grabbed my wrist. “You’ll just make it worse. What do you mean a sign from the other side? I thought you saw things in visions or something?”

“I do,” I explained. “But communication from an ethereal plane can take different forms. I think someone is trying to tell me something, and I just haven’t figured out what, so they are getting a little insistent.”

“Damn, Rowan,” she muttered. “You’re like something out of a horror movie.”

The door to the balcony was still hanging wide open, and the temperature inside the room was spiraling toward equilibrium with the frigid night. Outside, a thumping echo sounded rhythmically in the distance. I realized as we were standing there that I was beginning to shiver.

“Guys,” I said between teeth that were starting to chatter. “It’s getting a little on the chilly side. Mind if I put my coat back on?”

“Wait a minute,” Ben insisted. “Look at your arm again. Does it look a little strange to you?”

“I think that’s already been established, Storm,” Constance told him in a sardonic voice.

“No, I mean look at the symbol,” he huffed in exasperation and directed our gaze with his finger. “It’s like a twin image or somethin’.”

“Twin image?” I asked.

I was so intent on what Ben was trying to point out that I scarcely noticed that the reverberating clamor outside had grown louder.

“You ever seen a coin that’s been double-struck?” he asked. “Like that. One image overlappin’ the other.”

“He’s right,” Constance agreed. “Look.”

Upon closer inspection, I could see exactly what Ben was trying to say. The welts that formed the itching Monogram of Christ on my arm were offset slightly over another similar set. The blemish was carefully enjoined to scribe two circles encompassing a matched pair of X’s bisected by P’s.

“Whaddaya think that’s s’posed ta’ mean?” Ben queried.

I didn’t get a chance to answer him. Just as I opened my mouth to speak, a violent rush of wind and icy snow blasted through the open sliding door. Outside, amid a thunderous din, the light of a small sun was born into the chilled darkness.

# CHAPTER 12

“Sonofabitch! Goddammit!” Ben exclaimed at the top of his lungs. “That’s gotta be Street!”

Special Agent Mandalay and I could barely hear him over the cacophonous racket of the news helicopter hovering a frighteningly short distance from the balcony. We were all half-blinded by both the screaming wind and blazing spotlight, and I knew he could no more see into the aircraft than I could. However, if the Eyewitness News logo emblazoned across the side of the Bell JetRanger was any indication of the machine’s occupants, his intuitive guess was most likely correct.

I scooped up my coat from where he had allowed it to drop and quickly pulled it on as I made my way to the door. Ben had already barreled through the opening with Constance close on his heels and was now fighting to hold down the sheet that had earlier been placed over the still hanging corpse. By the time I pushed myself out onto the balcony to help him, Agent Mandalay was stiffly holding her ID forward in plain view and making angry motions with her free arm—vigorously indicating without any ambiguity whatsoever that the aircraft was to leave immediately if not sooner. The hostile bite of the manmade gale tore through my unzipped coat and buffeted the three of us wildly as it continued kicking up a cloud of snow from the overhanging watershed dormers. The intense spotlight burned across the balcony in a harsh antiseptic beam, starkly illuminating everything in sight, even the shadows. I was forced to squint and turn my head away from the glare while fighting to keep my side of the sheet pulled taut through the wrought iron railing.

By now, the raucous event had attracted one of the uniformed officers that had been guarding the door to the apartment, and he burst out onto the balcony.

“Get on the goddamned radio and call it in!” Ben screamed back at him over the maelstrom. “I want everyone on that chopper in handcuffs the minute it touches down!”

The officer gave him an animated nod to the affirmative and shot back through the door. A frigid zephyr suddenly tore upward and billowed out the sheet, threatening to rend it from my grasp. I hunched down and entwined my fist in the fabric, holding on so tight I could feel my fingernails biting into my palm.

“GET OUT OF HERE NOW!” Agent Mandalay’s shrill demand sliced through the cacophonous thudding to reach my ears as she continued to wave her free arm furiously.

Obviously, there was no way the pilot could have heard her command, but it was at this moment, he apparently elected to obey her pointed gesticulations. Either that, or someone elsewhere had told him it was time to go.

The brilliant spotlight suddenly switched off, and the pitch of the hovering craft’s engine rose with a rapidly increasing whine. Still seeing multi-colored spots before my eyes, I watched as the helicopter smoothly nosed forward then canted to the side and sped off and upward across the thickly clouded night sky.

I slowly began relaxing my grip on the sheet as I watched the winking, red and blue anti-collision lights of the craft shrink in the distance. My friend was staring after it as

well, his face grim and temper seething. His heated glare was a textbook example of looks that could kill, and I was more than relieved that it wasn't aimed in my direction.

"DAMMIT!" Ben exclaimed and hammered the heel of his fist against the top of the iron railing in a frustrated release of anger. "I just don't believe that bitch!"

Constance was standing next to me on the other side, and I noticed that she had traded her badge for her cell phone. She held the device pressed tightly against her ear as she pushed her ruined hairdo from her eyes with her free hand.

"Yes, FAA?" she began speaking, "This is Special Agent Constance Mandalay with the FBI, Saint Louis field office. My badge number is nine-five-seven-four-dash-three-six-six. I need to speak with someone regarding an airspace violation..."



"I shouldn't even hazard a guess at a time of death before I get an internal temperature," Doctor Sanders informed Ben and Constance. "Not with her being exposed to the elements unprotected like that."

"I can understand that, Doc," Ben returned, "but if you can ballpark it, I'd really appreciate it."

"Well," she replied, "I can tell you this much. The wounds on her back and abdomen appear recent, and the bruising would indicate that she was alive when they were made. She's definitely not completely frozen yet..."

I was standing across the room next to the gurney containing the woman's body. I followed along distractedly with the banter between the coroner and the two law enforcement officers. Hearing, but not really listening to what was being said.

The sliding doors leading out to the balcony were now shut, and the temperature in the room was returning to something more bearable. While Doctor Sanders and her assistant were moving the corpse, I had mechanically removed my coat and unrolled my sleeve then slipped back into my tweed jacket.

Ben had turned up the volume slightly on the television when the Saturday night movie had been interrupted for a breaking news update. Brandee Street, her cameraman, and the pilot had been arrested all right—but not before getting the morbid video into the station's hands. Even through the overblown colors of the malfunctioning set, you could easily make out Ben, Constance and me on the balcony of the apartment. We had fought a desperate fight, but in the end the sheet had fluttered enough to give at least a partial view of the woman's nude remains.

We all stared silently at the picture as the talking heads behind the anchor desk identified us each in succession. It was all we could do to stifle disgusted sighs as they proceeded to tag us with a sensationalized nickname. A moniker that would unfortunately not only stick for some time to come but was also picked up immediately by every other station and newspaper in the bi-state area. We had been christened "The Ghoul Squad."

The welts on my arm had continued growing, and my flesh was dappled with the full spectrum of colors normally associated with bruises—and a few unrelated shades as well. The itching was growing fiercer by the moment, and each time I tried to tend it, I would wince at the soreness my fingers awakened. I knew it was only a matter of time before the welts would turn into bleeding lacerations. Whoever was trying to get my attention definitely had it. Apparently, I just didn't comprehend the message.

I stood, looking down at the shrouded body. The earlier emotions that had welled up inside me fought to return and I let them. I had never known this woman, but the sense of loss overwhelmed me as I stared mutely at her covered remains. My nose tingled with an acidic burn for a brief moment, and a single watery tear crawled from the corner of my eye to begin rolling across my wind-ravaged cheek.

"...at my office." Agent Mandalay was speaking now. "If there's anything you need, I can get it rushed through the lab in Washington."

"I appreciate the offer," Doctor Sanders replied. "I'll be certain to call you if..."

I ignored the snippet of the conversation that had intruded on my sorrowful introspection. While they continued to talk, I knelt next to the gurney and then carefully pulled back the sheet and tugged down the zipper on the body bag. Absently I reached over to claw at my savagely itching arm, and the stiletto of pain that shot up to my shoulder reminded me of why I hadn't done it sooner. I flinched and pulled my hand away then continued to quietly stare at the young woman's lifeless face.

Sheryl Keeven's strawberry-blonde hair was tousled about her head in a tangled halo, whipped there by the wind and elements. The thin poly-cotton cord was still snugged about her neck, visible against the blotchy contusions that surrounded it. I visually counted the loops in the slipknot. Then I counted them again. Both times the total ended in thirteen.

A hangman's noose.

Her features were a grotesque mask of fear and pain, sculpted in life and frozen in death. Her eyes were locked open in an endless stare, showing the glassy, bloodshot whites where they had rolled upward. Gummy tape residue still surrounded her mouth. The wide swatch of silver duct tape that had once been there had eventually come loose but was still precariously attached by one small corner. The same kind of tape had been used to make several revolutions around her wrists. Her now exposed lips were parted to reveal the bulbous purple mass of her swollen tongue as it forced its way between them.

She had asphyxiated.

She had strangled to death while suspended by the neck with her arms bound behind her back. Hanging was simply another of the favored methods of execution used during the Inquisition. Its effectiveness had not waned over the years.

I closed my eyes, and the scene flashed haphazardly through my mind. I could see her struggling.

Fighting.

Kicking.

Wrestling to free her hands so that she could claw at the constriction around her neck, until finally, the lack of oxygen to her brain won out, and she slipped into darkness.

"I realize it's the weekend but the sooner you can get the labs started the better," Ben was saying in the background. "We're still followin' up the lead on the Roofies."

"I can have samples ready to go to the lab first thing Monday morning," the coroner replied. "But other than that I..."

Once again, I forced the distant conversation out of the forefront and focused entirely on the corpse in front of me. I knew how Sheryl Keeven died. I even knew the twisted reasoning behind why. What I now desperately wanted to know was who had killed her... And Kendra Miller... And Brianna Walker...

But what I wanted most desperately of all was for him to stop.

Without even thinking I reached out my latex gloved hand and laid my palm across her cold forehead. The connection that formed was as immediate and piercing as if I had just wrapped my hand about a frayed electrical cord. The jolt that followed exploded through my consciousness with blatant disregard for the here and now, ferociously replacing present with recent past.

*Pain.*

*Why are you doing this to me?*

*I can't stop crying.*

*The pain again.*

*Please!*

*Please stop stabbing me! Just take what you want and leave! Please!*

*I cannot scream.*

*There is tape across my mouth.*

*I cannot see.*

*Something dark covers my head.*

*The pain again.*

“Sir?” the voice of the coroner’s assistant echoes in my skull. “Sir, what are you doing?”

*I am so cold.*

*What is that hissing noise?*

*Paint?*

*I smell paint.*

*“Sheryl Renae Keeven, in accordance with the thirty-third question, in as much as you stand accused of the heresy of WitchCraft by another of your kind, and as you have admitted these crimes and remain still impenitent, and that on this day evidence of your heresies has been found in this very dwelling...”*

*That voice.*

*I am so cold.*

*I still can't see.*

*Where am I?*

*Something is wrapped around my neck. It is uncomfortable. I can feel wind.*

*I cannot scream.*

*I want to scream.*

*“...In as much as you have been found guilty, and that you are damned in body and soul, you are hereby sentenced on this day to death. The sentence to be executed immediately and without appeal in the manner of hanging. May the Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on your soul.”*

*Guilty?*

*Sentenced to death?*

*Help me, someone! Please help me!*

*I don't understand.*

*What is happening?*

*Why are you doing this to me?*

*I feel something brush my face, and suddenly my tear-blurred eyes can see.*

*Outside?*

*We are outside?*

*Black.*

*Black fabric.*

*Dear Mother Goddess, he's a giant.*

*Someone please help me.*

*Wait...*

*He is picking me up. What is he doing?*

*Oh no!*

*The balcony?*

*He's going to throw me off my balcony?*

*He's going to hang me?*

*NO!*

*Someone please help me!*

*Black and white.*

*Collar.*

*Black and white.*

*Collar.*

*Black and white.*

*Black.*

“Mister Gant?”

I looked up to see Doctor Sanders kneeling on the opposite side of the gurney and peering at me curiously across the open body bag. Her fingers gently encircled my wrist and held my hand out away from the corpse.

“You doin’ some of that hocus-pocus stuff, white man?” Ben asked from his position next to her.

I looked up at him and blinked. He and Agent Mandalay were staring back with mildly concerned expressions creasing their faces. My eyes were dry and itching, which told me I had been staring. My throat was parched and seemed almost obstructed by a hard lump. The welts on my forearm were on fire.

“Yeah...” I answered in a faint voice. “Yeah, something like that.”

“What did you see?” Constance asked.

The vision replayed in a sandpapery loop, abrasively dragging itself over and over through my mind.

*Black and white.*

*Collar.*

*Black and white.*

*Collar.*

“A priest,” I finally whispered. “The killer is a priest.”

“A priest?” Ben echoed. “You mean like a ‘bless me father for I have sinned,’ communion givin’ and all that jazz kinda priest?”

“I think so,” I croaked.

The pain from the ethereal markings on my arm had intensified twofold, and it was beginning to radiate up through my shoulder and spread dully through my torso. I knew without even looking that the welts were now full blown wounds.

“What do you mean you think so, Rowan?” Constance pressed. “What exactly did you see?”

Noting that I didn’t outwardly appear to be repeating the performance she had witnessed at the morgue, Doctor Sanders released my hand and proceeded to re-zip the body bag. I stood and backed out of her way, taking a moment to try and clear my head. The vision was there, but it was starting to blur, and I didn’t know why.

What I did know was that something definitely wasn’t right, and I was the only one who seemed to notice.

A sudden, heavy aching filled my chest and was paired with an acrid chemical taste forming on the back of my tongue. The bitter taste welled up through my sinuses, reminding me of the smell of bleach. I drew in a shallow breath and felt it gurgle in my lungs as if I had just blown through a straw into a glass of water. I reached up and loosened my tie even farther then fumbled with the shirt button at my throat.

I propped myself against the edge of a couch and watched on as the coroner and her assistant wheeled Sheryl Keeven’s body from the room. I tried to tell myself that maybe my connection with her was too intense. Maybe I was just experiencing a latent effect of the vision. After all, she had choked to death, and I had just channeled the experience. There were bound to be some phantom pains. Yes, that had to be it, I recited inside my head. If some distance were put between us, then the pain would surely stop.

“A collar,” I wheezed.

I sucked hard again, fighting to breathe, and the wet gurgle rattled deeper in my chest. This time not only did I feel it but faintly heard it as well. It felt like a car was parked on top of me, and I was beginning to gasp. The terrifying thought of a heart attack scrolled through my mind, and I quickly fought to dismiss it. No, I kept telling myself, this is just an aftereffect.

“Go on,” Constance urged. “You saw a collar... Like a clergyman’s collar?”

Ben had pulled out his worn notepad and was waiting patiently for me to give him something to scribble in it.

“Yes,” I sputtered and wheezed. “Black and white... like a priest...”

My voice was gurgling with an odd viscosity, and what was happening was no longer my own private secret. Abject horror was unceremoniously paroled from its prison cell in my subconscious as I suddenly realized what was happening. My one greatest personal fear was coming to pass. I was suffocating. In the middle of a bone-dry, Saint Louis apartment, nowhere near water, I was drowning.

“Hey, Kemosabe...” Ben looked up from his notes with a cocked eyebrow. “You okay? You sound like you’re havin’ trouble breathin’ or somethin’.”

“I... I...” I panted damply.

I wrestled to beat back the terror that had just ignited within my body but met with only limited success. I could feel myself beginning to tremble as I tried to tell my friend what was happening. The words only caught in my tightening throat and bubbled back down into my lungs. Each breath was becoming more labored and shallow than the last. I sucked hard and was rewarded with nothing but pain. My chest was heavy, and what little air I inhaled felt horribly thick.

Humid.

Wet.

I was growing dizzy, and the room was starting to reel and spin slowly. My ears were ringing, and everything was taking on an unnatural contrast. Lights were blooming and shadows darkening viciously. Something more than my ethereal connection with this latest victim was definitely at work. I brought my hand up and clawed at my chest. I was toeing the harshly scribed line of panic, and I was teetering precariously close to the edge.

“Good God, Rowan!” Agent Mandalay’s voice distorted in my ears. “You’re bleeding!”

I cast my blurred eyes downward to see my gloved hand covered in bright crimson rivulets. I held it out from my body and inspected it groggily as blood dripped from the latex sheath. Heavy cramps racked through my upper torso, but I didn’t need them to tell me that the open wounds on my arm were the least of my worries at this moment. I let my hand drop to my side and stared back at Constance. I couldn’t breathe.

I needed to breathe.

“Hey!” Ben screamed as he ran to the door. “Get the Doc back in here right now!”

I was having trouble remaining upright. As my knees began to buckle, I slid from the arm of the sofa and barely caught myself before I reached the floor. My legs were weak, and a bizarre tickle was working its way along the back of my throat. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t bring air into my lungs.

“I dunno what it is!” Ben barked at Doctor Sanders as she met him at the door. “I think he’s havin’ a coronary or somethin’!”

A rushing noise nudged the ringing from my ears and then was followed closely by a loud thudding as my heart hammered furiously in my chest. I opened my mouth and fought to beg help, only to form wordless, wet noises.

My legs gave way completely, and I went crashing to the floor. I could see Agent Mandalay’s lips form my name as she started toward me in slow motion. Ben and Doctor Sanders were angling at me with the same lethargic movements, rabid concern on their faces. The tickle in my throat began migrating upward.

My knees impacted, and I automatically thrust my hands out in front of me as I pitched forward. My eyes were beginning to roll backwards in their sockets, and I felt my back arch involuntarily. The tickle mutated abruptly into a spastic cough, and my body heaved violently.

Water.

Water exploded from my nose and mouth and splattered on the carpet in front of me. Reflexively, I gulped in air and felt it gurgle roughly through my body. A second brutal spasm rippled up my throat, and fluid once again erupted from my lungs.

Cool air rushed in to fill my chest as I coughed and sputtered. The tightness that had occupied that space only a moment ago had fled, and my breaths started coming easier with each passing second. I was still pitched forward on my hands and knees, and I merely allowed my head to hang and gratefully gulped in the desperately needed oxygen. My body still shuddered with the adrenalin tremors of nightmarish fear, and I felt like a small, frightened child.

Slowly, the pounding in my ears began to fade, and the room lights settled to an even incandescent burn, no longer wildly blooming and casting angry shadows. Finally, I heard my name being urgently spoken.

“Mister Gant?” Doctor Sanders questioned me. “Mister Gant? Can you tell me where you are having pains?”

I felt her hand on my back. I opened my eyes then lifted my head and glanced slowly around. Constance was kneeling to one side of me with Doctor Sanders on the other. Ben was standing a few steps from us looking deeply concerned and utterly helpless.

I was breathing raspily now, but the wet gurgle had disappeared. I could feel the fresh air washing through my lungs, and my heart was beginning to back down from its frantic pace. I started shaking my head as I bit off hungry breaths and struggled to stand up.

“Mister Gant,” Doctor Sanders spoke as she helped me to my feet. “Are you having chest pains? Any pains in your neck, jaw or left arm?”

I continued to shake my head and spoke between the welcome unrestricted respirations, “No. Not chest.”

“Jeezus, Rowan!” Ben exclaimed. “Did’ya just have ta’ puke or somethin’?”

“No. Water,” I sighed as I shakily seated myself on the arm of the sofa.

“You need a glass of water?” Constance asked.

“No.” I shook my head again and pointed at the soaked area of the carpet. My breathing hadn’t yet fully slowed, and I was only able to communicate in short, choppy sentences. “That’s water. Drowning.”

“Drowning?” she looked at me quizzically.

“Do any of you smell that?” Ben suddenly asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Now that you mention it, yes,” Doctor Sanders answered. “It smells like a swimming pool.”

I knew the chemical odor, to which they referred, to be coming from the fluid I had just expelled onto the floor. It was how I knew what had just happened. I had tasted it on the back of my tongue when this all began, and the smell was permeating my nose where the liquid had elected to make an exit. I was starting to settle now—somewhat—and I tried to explain further.

Sucking in a deep breath, I pointed again to the damp carpet. “That’s not vomit, it’s water. It came out of my lungs. I was drowning.”

“You were WHAT?” Ben exclaimed.

Doctor Sanders glanced back and forth between Agent Mandalay and Ben then knelt next to the wet patch. Cautiously, she touched it with gloved fingertips. After rubbing her fingers against her thumb to check the consistency of the substance, she apprehensively brought her hand up to her nose and sniffed.

“He’s right,” she said, looking up at the two of them. “This doesn’t appear to be stomach contents. It’s water. Heavily chlorinated water.”

“But how?” Constance asked. “You’ve been right here the whole time. How could you possibly get pool water in your lungs?”

I shook my head wearily and held up my blood-covered hand, “I don’t know for sure, but I’m guessing from the same place I got these symbols.”

“Take off your jacket and let me have a look at that arm,” Doctor Sanders ordered.

“Jeez, Rowan, that’s way out there.” Ben shook his head as I complied with the doctor’s instruction. “I mean water just appearin’ in your lungs from nowhere?”

“I know,” I agreed with a nod. “Trust me, I’m as freaked out by this as you are.” Even now I was fighting an involuntary urge to tremble. Precognition, psychometry, channeling, even the stigmata were one thing, but this... This was beyond anything I had ever experienced, and I was at a loss to explain it. More than that, however, I was afraid of it and that made it even worse.

“You mean this isn’t something that happened because you’re a Witch?” Constance asked.

“Maybe,” I answered, using my explanation to direct my attention away from the rancid fear still slithering up and down my spine. “But WitchCraft is merely a practice and way of life coupled with a religion. Even though it’s not unusual to develop some level of psychic ability through meditation and all, conjuring matter into thin air is the stuff of myths and fairy tales.”

“What about your arm then?” she contended.

“As bizarre as it seems, stigmata aren’t unheard of. My body is simply reacting to an outside stimulus. Granted, in this case the stimulus is coming from the other side of the veil, but nothing was conjured or made to appear from nothingness.”

A muffled peal emitted from Ben’s coat. He thrust his hand into his pocket and withdrew his cell phone.

“Storm,” he answered tersely after flipping the device open. “...Deck? Where the hell are ya’? You were s’posed ta’ be here an hour ago... What? No. You ain’t serious?”

My respirations were now almost normal, and I sat quietly, allowing Doctor Sanders to treat my bruised and bleeding arm. Constance and I watched Ben, listening in on the one-sided conversation as the concerned M.E. tended to my wounds. She had been told about the original occurrence of the symbol, but this was the first time she had witnessed it for herself. However, after what she had seen that night at the morgue, she seemed to be taking this all in stride.

“...Damn!” Ben spat. The phone was now cradled between his ear and shoulder while he scratched in his notepad. “How long ago? Uh-huh... Yeah... Who called it in? Yeah... Okay, gimme that address again... Uh-huh... Yeah, Cherry Wood Trails. Got it. Uh-huh... Yeah, and Mandalay’s with us too... Yeah, we’ll be there as soon as we can. Bye.”

We stared at him expectantly as he ended the call and returned the phone to his pocket. He rested his gaze on me and sighed.

“What was that all about,” Constance asked.

“That was Deckert. I think I just found out why Rowan’s got two of those marks on his arm.” He lifted his free hand and smoothed his hair back.

“Well?” She raised her eyebrows and looked at him questioningly.

“Deck got a call while he was on ‘is way over here. Seems a security guard was makin’ ‘is rounds over at the Cherry Wood Trails condo complex, and he noticed the gate was open leadin’ in to the swimming pool. He went in and found one of those monograms spray painted on the side of the pool house and a Bible layin’ on the snowdrift in front of it.”

I spoke. “Victim number four.”

“They think so. There’s a hole in the ice.” He bobbed his head. “It hasn’t even started to freeze back over yet.”

“I was afraid that might be why there were two.” I nodded toward my arm as Doctor Sanders mechanically wrapped gauze around it and listened in. “But I ignored it again, and whoever is trying to talk to me resorted to the water...” I let my voice trail off as a spasm of the recent personal horror worked its way back into my thoughts.

“Is that what you meant earlier?” the M.E. questioned cynically. “You actually think the water was somehow mystically conjured into your lungs because of what the killer did to the latest victim?”

“No offense, Doctor,” I ventured, “but do you have a reasonable explanation for how it got there? Medical or otherwise?”

“Fluid can build up in lung tissue due to a variety of medical conditions,” she replied.

“Fluid heavily laden with chlorine?” I asked.

She didn’t answer. She just shook her head and continued taping the gauze in place.

“Jeezus, white man,” Ben mused with a loud sigh, “I thought I was gettin’ used to this *Twilight Zone* shit, but this...”

“Too weird,” Constance muttered.

“Yeah,” Ben echoed quietly. “What she said.”

# CHAPTER 13

For the most part, my disquiet had faded into the background during the short drive to the Cherry Wood Trails subdivision. I still did not fully understand why, but suffocation and drowning were my most deep-seated phobias. They had been since I was a small child. To now have my darkest fear brought that close to realization was very nearly more than I had been able to bear.

After twenty minutes of intense concentration, I had almost succeeded in forcing the disturbing thoughts from my mind. Unfortunately, our arrival at the latest crime scene dredged them immediately back to the forefront.

Ben nosed the van into the only available parking space he could find and switched off the engine.

“You gonna be okay?” he asked, worry once again creasing his brow.

I realized as he spoke that my breaths were quickly becoming shallow gasps. The panting had begun as soon as I stared out across the street at the bustling activity around the swimming pool enclosure. I knew there had to be terror in my eyes when I looked at him, and when I jerkily nodded my head to the affirmative, he stared back with an unconvinced, thin-lipped frown.

“Bullshit,” he replied. “You’re a friggin’ wreck. You shoulda gone ta’ the hospital. I’m grabbin’ a squad and sendin’ ya’ home.”

“No.” I shook my head while trying to calm the rampant panic that was building in the pit of my stomach.

He was correct. At the moment I was a wreck, but it was a luxury I couldn’t afford. There simply wasn’t enough time. Me breaking down would not do any good for anyone, including myself, and it definitely wasn’t going to help find the killer.

“No. I’ll be all right,” I continued. “I just need a minute.”

Knowing I had to get a grip, I began to inwardly visualize myself surrounded by an impenetrable shield of white light. In my mind I was carefully constructing a barrier, tangible only on a supernatural level, but exactly what I needed to hold the frightening visions at bay nonetheless. Almost instantly I began to relax.

“Well if ya’ won’t go to the hospital and ya’ won’t go home,” he ventured, “why don’t you just wait here in the van? The techs from the crime scene unit are takin’ pictures, and I can fill ya’ in on any other details afterwards.”

“That may not be enough, Ben,” I returned and cocked my head in the direction of the scene. “Maybe this victim saw his face. Maybe there’s something in there that won’t show up on a photograph but *will* be visible to me. I can’t let a stupid phobia keep me from doing what I was brought here to do.”

“Fuck phobias, Rowan!” he shot back. “I just watched you almost drown in a goddamned dry apartment. That’s not a phobia, white man, that’s... that’s... Well hell, I dunno what it was, but I know ya’ coulda died. And that was the second time too! In my book that’s worth more than just a little fear.”

“I let you know right from the very beginning that this one was going to be worse than the last case,” I told him quietly.

“Yeah...” Ben nodded. “But I thought you were just talkin’ about the body count.”

“Unfortunately, so did I.”

I was feeling much more at ease now, though it was a sensation that was most certainly only temporary. I had successfully wrestled the demon known as terror back into its cage for the time being, and the thick supernatural armor I had erected around myself would protect me from the outside influences of the scene. I knew I wouldn’t be able to stay hidden behind it the entire time, for if I did my particular talents would be useless. However, what I would do was try to keep myself safe for a little while. At least until I was fully grounded and ready to face whatever horrific image was waiting for me on the other side.

“Okay,” my friend eventually huffed. “Short of bannin’ ya’ from the scene, I know I’m gonna play hell tryin’ ta’ keep ya’ out, so I might as well give up. But,” he added sharply and thrust a stiff index finger at me, “first sign of you bein’ in some kinda spooky ass trouble, you’re outta here. No arguments. Understood?”

“Understood,” I agreed.

“Better yet, no hocus-pocus without warnin’ me first.”

“I can’t always control it, Ben. You know that.”

“Yeah, but sometimes ya’ do shit without tellin’ anyone and ya’ get yourself in trouble. That’s the kinda thing I’m talkin’ about.”

“Okay, okay. If I try to do anything, I promise I’ll tell you first.”

“Like I said, *don’t* try anything. If it just happens ain’t much I can do about it, but don’t be makin’ it happen.”

“Yeah. Okay. I won’t.”

“I’m serious, Row.”

“I know you are.”

After he finally gave his reluctant, negotiated blessing, Ben and I climbed out of the beat up Chevy and started across the small parking lot toward the crux of the activity. Since we were on the opposite side of the street, we had to stop for a moment and wait as a large, black panel van rolled past. A patina of grey and white from salt and road grime dusted its dark exterior, blending it in with every other vehicle in the city that had yet to see time in a car wash. A multi-pitched mechanical groan emitted from beneath the van, audibly announcing improperly meshed gears as the driver shifted and slowed. The van coasted for a second while the occupant stared at the spectacle, or so I assumed. A fraction of a minute later the engine gunned and roared its protest in an off key duet with the transmission as it was up-shifted again.

“Take a picture, asshole,” Ben called after the pair of dusky red taillights. “It’ll last longer.”

As we crossed the narrow lane immediately behind the passing vehicle, a cold tingle danced up my spine. My scalp tightened painfully, and the hair on the back of my neck tilted upward, sending a prickling sensation throughout. I caught myself as I tripped across the low curb and stifled a small gasp. Fortunately, Ben didn’t know the real reason behind my stumbling, and I was able to mask the event as a random attack of clumsiness.

I was more than a little surprised and took a moment to bolster my defenses even more. I shouldn't have felt anything yet, and if something was getting through to me already, then this was going to be worse than I originally thought.

In that moment, I became even less pleased by the prospect that I would soon need to cast away these ethereal shields in order to view the scene with senses other than the physical. I tried not to think about it as we continued walking. Needless to say, I met with only limited success.

The street immediately in front of the pool enclosure was alive with light bars atop emergency vehicles flashing in and out of sync. Each revolution temporarily stained the snow with harsh, multi-colored blotches of brilliance. The wildly flickering show was almost enough to mesmerize.

Powerful halogen lamps were mounted high on strategically placed standards around the pool area, and they now flooded it with severe blue-white illumination. Originally meant to extend the hours of swimming enjoyment deep into summer nights, they cast eerie shadows across the frozen tableau. The hard edges of obscurity served only to underscore the horror and misery that had forced its way into this place intended for happiness and pleasure.

Ben slipped his badge onto a thick cord as we walked and then hung it around his neck in plain view before we signed ourselves in on the crime scene log. The officer tending the entrance to the pool area was from the local municipality that encompassed the subdivision of condominiums and was unfamiliar with my part in the investigation. Since I lacked a badge, it took a terse and abbreviated explanation of my role by Ben in order to overcome the patrolman's unwillingness to allow me entry. Finally, we continued past the yellow tape barrier without further challenge.

"Ben, Rowan." Carl Deckert addressed us grimly as we skirted around taut stretches of bright, canary-colored plastic labeled with simple black letters—CRIME SCENE - DO NOT CROSS.

"Carl," I returned with equal bleakness in my voice.

Ben just nodded and silently inspected the surroundings, all the while casting an occasional watchful eye in my direction.

"I thought Connie was comin' with you," Deckert remarked, cocking his head and glancing past us for the absent federal agent. He was the only person I'd ever met who could get away with calling her by the clipped version of Constance. I guess it had something to do with his grandfatherly demeanor.

"She should be here in a bit," Ben replied. "She doesn't live too far away, and she wanted to stop and change clothes."

"Change clothes? What for?"

My friend just shook his head. "She was dressed a little on the formal side tonight. Somethin' to do with an assignment."

"Ahhh. Okay."

A deep, recessed basin in the mantle of snow outlined the swimming pool, in and of itself. It was fairly common as private pools go—roughly kidney-shaped and not huge by any means but not the smallest I'd ever seen either. A path had been carefully cleared through the snow around the perimeter on one side. The opposite border was marred by a single row of foot traffic and appeared to be the path the killer had taken. Therefore, it had been left intact to preserve any possible evidence. Small spots of red were scattered

here and there along the trail up to a small depression where they blossomed into several garish blotches. The victim had been bleeding.

We were standing in the shoveled area opposite the low brick building that housed the pumps, filters, and changing rooms. Here, the pale, crystalline blanket of snow came nearly even with the concrete deck. If the pool had been properly winterized, which considering the neighborhood I was certain it had, somewhere around two feet below the pristine white cover would be a sheet of ice. Beneath that would be murky, chemical-laden water, along with leaves and anything else that had blown or fallen in since its closure just after the Labor Day holiday.

All in all, it was a normal swimming pool that had been shut down for the winter months, with one glaring exception—tonight someone had deliberately beaten a hole through the thick crust of ice and placed another human being into the water’s chilled depths.

“Looks like he used something to chip away at the ice,” Deckert announced with a frosty sigh as he pointed across the depression to a gaping hole in the snow on the other side. “Not sure what, but he broke it up pretty good. Enough to get a body through anyway.”

“Don’t they normally put covers on pools when they close them up?” I asked.

“Most of the time, yeah,” Carl answered. “But not always. Obviously they didn’t on this one.”

“Anybody besides the security guard notice anything?” Ben asked.

“Not that we’ve heard yet, but we’re doin’ a door to door,” Deckert replied.

“Prob’ly give us a big fuckin’ zero,” my friend mused aloud.

“Yeah,” Carl agreed, “probably. But maybe we’ll get lucky. I’m guessin’ this wacko’s been here before.”

“Why is that?” I inquired.

Deckert pointed across the pool and traced the cordoned off route through the air with his finger, starting at the gate and ending at the hole in the ice.

“The whole cover thing for one, but more importantly, look at the path. We’ve isolated the rent-a-cop’s footprints and kept the area blocked off,” he explained. “The killer cut the padlock on the gate, prob’ly just used some bolt cutters. From there he followed that path straight to where he broke through the ice.”

“Yeah,” I shrugged, “I guess I’m still missing something.”

“Okay, pretend the hole’s not there,” he instructed. “Now tell me which end of the pool is the deep end.”

“Shouldn’t it be right there? Farthest from the gate?” I asked. “Isn’t that an insurance thing?”

“Exactly,” Deckert replied with a nod. “But there’re two gates, and they just kept the one at the deep end padlocked all the time rather than replace it with regular fencing. If you look at the tracks, that’s the one he came through, and the deep end is actually right there where the hole is. So, since you can’t really tell which gate is the proper entrance just by lookin’ at ‘em, that tells me our killer somehow knew right where to go.”

The moment he finished, the realization struck me full in the face. If the tracks and the hole weren’t there, the landscape would be nothing more than unspoiled snow. The symmetrical hollow of the pool’s perimeter gave no clue as to which end was which. The shallow end of the pool was closest to the main entrance, and it was also the more

secluded of the two by virtue of an evergreen hedgerow. But the killer wanted to be sure the victim drowned as opposed to just death by exposure. He had purposely gone to the deep end to ensure this... And he knew exactly where the deep end was. I mutely chastised myself for missing such an obvious fact.

“Good point,” Ben whistled. “He couldn’t have known which end it was unless he’d been to this pool before. Not with all this snow.”

“That’s what I’m thinkin’.” Carl nodded.

“Well I doubt if he lives here,” I offered. “This subdivision is primarily condos, and the few houses we passed look way too modern to have the kind of basement I saw when I was channeling Kendra Miller.”

“Yeah,” Deckert nodded as he spoke. “Besides, as reckless as he’s been he’s probably too smart to do it in his own back yard. He’s been spread out all over the place so far.”

“So what’s the plan for recoverin’ the body?” Ben queried.

“Well, as soon as the CSU is finished with the tracks and such, they’re talkin’ about sendin’ a diver in. It’s either that or drain the damn thing, so they got the local muni’s fire department on standby. I think they’re pretty much waitin’ on the coroner to make the final decision,” Carl answered then shook his head. “Damn! This SOB has gotta have some freakin’ balls. I mean the hotel, the park, now this.”

“Tell me about it. He hung number three off her own frigg’in’ balcony,” Ben added. “Right out in plain sight.”

“Yeah, I heard,” Deckert acknowledged. “Also heard about that whole chopper thing with Street. Sheesh, ‘Ghoul Squad.’ No offense, but I’m glad I missed that one.”

“Don’t worry,” Ben spat sarcastically. “Your dues to that club are paid in full. I’m sure they’ll have ya’ listed on the membership rolls soon enough.”

“Freakin’ wonderful. Mona’ll love that,” Deckert muttered then paused and clucked his tongue thoughtfully. “So you think maybe this screwball is an exhibitionist or something?”

“Maybe. He hasn’t been hidin’ his work, that’s for sure.”

“I don’t think that’s it,” I volunteered. “He’s making the murders public executions for a deeper reason. I don’t believe he’s doing it for the thrill. Like I told you originally, he most likely views himself as divine or chosen. He sees himself as the hand of God. That’s why he’s picking these venues. They’re his town square, in a sense. He wants everyone to see the penalty for heresy in order to teach them a lesson.”

“Puttin’ the fear of God into ‘em, so to speak,” Ben grunted.

“Exactly.”

“Still,” Deckert objected, “he can’t keep going around killing out in the open like this and there not eventually be a witness. Even with the cover of darkness, he’s gotta know someone is gonna see him.”

“Obviously he’s willing to take that risk in the name of ridding the world of that which he views as evil,” I stated matter-of-factly.

Deckert repeated a paraphrased version of his earlier comment, “Like I said, the wacko’s got some balls.”

In the near distance, we could hear the voice of a uniformed officer as he announced to the waiting evidence technicians, “Meat wagon’s here.”

The three of us watched mutely as the head of the crime scene unit filled in the bedraggled county coroner. After a brief exchange, he nodded his head, visibly agreeing with the officer in charge. Shortly thereafter a member of the condo complex's maintenance staff that had been standing by was put to the task of clearing as much snow as he could from around the hole.

"Do ya' know if the command post was able ta' get ahold of everyone yet?" Ben shifted the direction of the conversation momentarily while we waited.

"Yeah, they did." Carl nodded. "All accounted for. Whoever's down there, she's not a member of that group."

"Hmmpmph," Ben grunted thoughtfully. "That's odd."

"What do you mean odd?" I asked.

"Well, this wingnut had established a pattern by goin' after the women in this particular coven. It's just a rule of thumb on serial killers—they tend ta' stick to an established pattern. So why all of a sudden did he decide ta' pick someone outside of that target group?"

"Do you think he might know that the members of Starr's coven are being watched?" I offered.

"I s'pose it's possible. 'Specially if he was stalkin' 'em or somethin', but there're eight more women on that list. That's a lot of stalkin' for one guy ta' do in a short period of time. Plus we've been tryin' ta' keep the protection low profile on the chance we could pop 'im tryin' to nab one of 'em," he replied, all the while shaking his head. "Now we go back to the drawin' board. How'd he pick this one? How does she fit in to the pattern?"

"Both of you have said *she*," I commented. "What makes you think this victim is female?"

"Well, he's only killed women so far," Ben, answered.

"Storm is right." Agent Mandalay's voice filtered in from behind our small huddle. "That's another rule of thumb. Serial killers don't typically cross gender lines. Normally it's one or the other but not both. Hello again. Sorry I'm late."

We had apparently been so engrossed in our conversation that we had not noticed her arrival, and until now she had elected to remain silent. She was much less conspicuous after having traded her party dress and overcoat for blue jeans and a dark, hooded parka; although, her face still bore the cosmetic accentuation of a more than average make over. Even so, her somber expression matched the grim edge of her voice.

"Connie," Deckert greeted her as only he could.

"Hi, Carl," she replied then turned to me and continued, "I'd say odds are the killer is misogynistic. Also the general public commonly associates Witches with being female, not male."

"I can understand that theory to an extent, and I'm not trying to second guess you by any means," I admitted, "but this guy isn't a typical serial killer. I don't believe he's doing this on a lark, or even because of a hatred of women. He has a specific agenda, and it includes anyone accused of WitchCraft, regardless of their gender."

"Is this something you saw in one of your visions?" she questioned.

"No. Just a feeling."

"Well, I've learned better than to doubt one of your feelings, Rowan," she conceded solemnly. "But male or female, we still have a fourth victim on our hands."

"This is true," I agreed.

Carl captured our attention with a lethargic gesture, and he volunteered in a sober tone, "Looks like they're gettin' ready to go after the body."

His voice was both preceded and followed by a muffled thudding noise that emanated from across the pool area. Under the supervision of the head CSU technician, a maintenance worker was laboring to fracture the layer of ice and widen the entry point for the diver. A second pair of thuds resulted in a sharp cracking sound as the frozen strata splintered. Another of the technicians struggled with a shepherd's hook to fish the broken chunks of solidified water out of the way.

A crowd had been gathering out beyond the barrier tape and was still gaining mass as more gawkers straggled in. Die-hard thrill seekers that even the weather couldn't deter from a feeding frenzy of morbid curiosity. Some of them were just as bad, if not worse, than the media hounds that were vying for position with them. This fact was unequivocally proven when our concentration on the scene was diverted by the clamorous sound of a verbal altercation and physical scuffle.

Outside the fence a patrolman was shining his flashlight directly into the lens of a video camera that was being operated by an onlooker in the front of the crowd. The bright light effectively blinded the device, and the spectator began boisterously protesting the action.

Another uniformed officer quickly joined the patrolman as he attempted to calm the man down; however, after a few moments of the complainant loudly misquoting constitutional amendments, it became obvious that they were fighting for a lost cause. Finally, the obnoxious individual was unceremoniously handcuffed and parked in the back seat of a squad car where he continued his now muffled vociferations.

During the short commotion, the maintenance worker and crime scene unit technicians had managed to slightly more than double the size of the hole in the sheet of snow-covered ice. A diver clad in a dark wetsuit was now sitting on the edge of the pool nodding his head at a series of instructions he was receiving from the coroner who squatted next to him.

After a moment, a sharp hiss of air blasted into the now quiet site as he tested his regulator then slipped the mouthpiece between his lips. In a smooth, practiced motion, he shifted and turned, lowering himself into the icy pool, then snapped on a powerful underwater lamp. Seconds later, he slid into the murky depths, leaving us to stare at a dimly glowing hole and an occasional burst of bubbles rising to the surface.

"Man, that's gotta be some cold ass water." Ben whistled between his teeth and shot me a sideways glance. "You doin' okay so far?"

"I'm fine," I nodded in assent.

"No *Twilight Zone* or anything?"

"No. Not yet."

"You having those visions again, Rowan?" Deckert inquired.

"Some," I returned.

"Some my ass," Ben spat. "He scared the piss outta all of us at the last scene."

"What happened?"

"Long story, man," Ben shook his head. "You'd think I was nuts if I tried ta' tell ya'."

"You had to be there, Carl," Agent Mandalay offered in agreement. "There's no way to explain it and keep it from sounding like some kind of fantastic tale."

“Well, we *are* talkin’ about Rowan here.” Deckert gave me a half-hearted, knowing grin.

“Let’s just say that when we put two and two together, all of a sudden your call wasn’t much of a shock,” Ben explained.

Deckert made the connection quickly and glanced from Ben and Constance to the pool, then to me. “So you mean you predicted this murder? You’ve done that sorta thing before. No big deal, right?”

“I wouldn’t say predicted really. More like someone on the other side went out of their way to make sure I knew exactly what it felt like,” I answered then paused as the remembrance made me shudder. “In any event, it was a little too late to do anything about it I’m afraid.”

“What it felt like?”

“Drowning,” I explained.

“You mean someone wanted you to know what it felt like to drown?”

“Yeah,” Ben answered for me. “In a bone dry apartment, nowhere near water.”

“So, how?” Deckert pressed.

“Let’s just say my lungs are still a little damp,” I replied.

He just looked at me and muttered, “Weird.”

Agent Mandalay agreed softly, “That’s the word that came to my mind too.”

A large burst of bubbles shot through the surface of the water on the other side of the pool, and the shiny neoprene-covered head of the diver poked through. A raspy exhale through the regulator hissed into the night as he clamped one hand on the side of the deck and removed the mouthpiece with the other. He spoke briefly with the coroner and senior evidence technician before finally nodding and sliding back beneath the surface, trailing a rope behind him.

The tech looked up from the hole and glanced across the short expanse at Carl then gave a curt nod. The aging detective let out a steamy breath and announced quietly, “He found the body.”

The talk of my recent otherworldly contact prompted me to recall the reason I was present at this crime scene to begin with. As much as I feared what I had to do, I knew I needed to get on with it. I realized fully that opening my senses to the surroundings would not necessarily bring useful information, though I dearly hoped that it would. I was patently aware, however, that it would most certainly bring a handcart full of painful emotions and Technicolor horror streaming directly into my very soul.

The dim glow of the diver’s flashlight was starting to grow brighter, and small eruptions of expelled air bubbling up through the surface of the murky water were coming at increasingly regular intervals. The coroner’s assistant and a burly crime scene unit tech were steadily and carefully pulling on the rope that had been attached to the body.

We stood watching the macabre scene unfold under the harsh glow of the halogen lights. Oblique blue shadows cut across the still forms of the officers on the other side of the pool giving a surreal appearance to their stoic faces. Each gurgle of bubbles that broke the surface of the water seemed to echo louder in my ears and reverberate through my body.

Slowly my chest began feeling heavy, and I noticed my heart was rattling mercilessly against my ribs. Bitter fear surged upward from my bowels at the thought of

once again feeling the water in my lungs. I was only seconds away from panic when the first of two cinder blocks appeared above the edge of the ice as they were dragged from the turbid depths. I exhaled heavily, and it instantly dawned on me that I was not reliving the drowning, as was my immediate suspicion. I had simply been holding my breath.

The twinge of panic subsided, and I continued to watch across the expanse of smooth, crystalline snow to the gaping wound in the sheet of ice. I was amazed by how silent the scene had suddenly become. The only sounds to be heard were the rhythmic bubbling of the diver's expelled air coupled with the wet scrapings of the two concrete weights rubbing against one another as they were wrestled from the hole. Even the multitudes of police radios riding on the hips of uniformed officers and in the hands of detectives seemed to have fallen unnaturally mute.

I was concentrating so hard on what was before me that I scarcely realized my meticulously erected defenses had fallen of their own accord. I wasn't even aware that my hand had crept over to begin tearing at a violent itch on my forearm.

A tangle of blonde hair finally breached the surface of the water and was slowly followed by the nude body of a young woman being skillfully supported by the diver. From where I was positioned, I could easily see that her arms were bound tightly behind her and that the rope stretched down her back to encircle her ankles.

As she was lifted out of her recent and final hell, and gently placed on an open body bag, profane sound once again returned to the night. The clamor of the camera crews, blaring police radios and murmurs of the gathered spectators began assaulting my ears as if they had never stopped.

I understood then that the silence had never been real at all. It had merely been a product of my own deep-seated reverence for the passing of a life.

"Female," Carl mumbled sadly. "Looks like Ben and I were right."

The maintenance worker who had helped clear the snow and ice was now gesturing to the coroner and pointing beyond the fence. Even at this short distance, we were unable to make out for sure what was being said, but it appeared that he knew the victim.

"I think they might have an ID or something," Ben spoke. "I'm gonna go see what's up. I'll be right back."

I was completely unprepared as the sharp stab of light pierced my eyes and burned mercilessly into the back of my skull. Color fled from my surroundings in a whirling tempest of shattered psychedelic glass as the illumination bloomed again and then slowly subsided. Disjointed sounds crashed in distorted waves against my tortured eardrums, and fear drove a steely spike into my heart as the grainy black and white inhumanity played itself out in my mind.

*I am bound painfully.*

*I cannot move.*

*I can barely breath.*

*Tape covers my mouth and I cannot cry for help.*

*"Robert! Where are you? ROBERT, HELP ME!" My scream is trapped between my teeth, only to be swallowed in a bitter lump.*

*This can't be happening.*

*No! This can't be happening!*

*Who are you?*

*Why are you doing this to me?  
What have you done to Robert?  
“ROBERT!!!”*

*There is a voice speaking to me.  
It is the one who asked me the questions.  
The one who hurt me.*

*“Christine Liann Webster, in accordance with the thirty-third question, in as much as you stand accused of the heresy of WitchCraft by another of your kind, and as you have refused to admit these crimes, remaining still impenitent, and that on this day evidence of your heresies has been found...”*

*Evidence?  
What evidence?  
What are you talking about? WitchCraft? I don't understand.  
I am freezing.  
Why did he bring me out here in the snow?  
Why are we next to the pool?  
What is that noise?  
What is he doing?  
“ROBERT, HELP ME!!”*

*“...In as much as you have been found guilty, and that you are damned in body and soul, you are hereby sentenced on this day to death. To be executed immediately and without appeal in the manner of drowning. May the Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on your soul.”*

“...Is Christine Webster,” Ben’s voice muscled its way into my ears, forcing me back to reality. “Maintenance guy over there ID’ed her. Apparently, she lived in a condo about half a block up this street. Got a coupla uniforms checkin’ it out.”

“Robert,” I muttered.

“Excuse me?” Agent Mandalay questioned.

“Robert,” I repeated. “She kept trying to cry out for Robert to come help her.”

A jagged shard of agony tore through the flesh on my forearm and felt as though it scraped against bone. I sensed its sickening message deep in the pit of my stomach, and all I could do was issue a tired sigh because I hated the fact that I had become so accustomed to violent death.

My head was starting to ache, and I closed my eyes for a moment.

“Dammit, Rowan! Whaddid I tell you?” Ben admonished.

“It just happened, Ben,” I barked back as I rubbed my throbbing temples. “I didn’t have any control over it. Besides, it’s what I’m here for, right?”

“Jeezus... Okay... Shit...” he stuttered for a moment, and then decided to make the best of the situation. “Well, any idea who this Robert is?”

“A husband. A boyfriend. I don’t know.” I shook my head as I opened my eyes and began to carefully peel off my glove. My bare hand revealed a smear of blood across its back, now spreading from beneath my coat sleeve. “But, unfortunately, it looks like we were all correct because I’m certain that he’s victim number five.”

My comment was punctuated by a nearby patrolman's radio as it crackled and spewed forth a dispassionate voice from its tinny speaker, "Yeah, this is Ross. You want to advise Detectives Storm and Deckert that we have another body up here..."

# CHAPTER 14

“His wristwatch stopped when the face was shattered,” Doctor Sanders told us over her shoulder. She was kneeling next to the latest victim and carefully affixing bags over his hands to preserve any possible evidence. Mundane things such as hair follicles or even a shard of the killer’s skin beneath his fingernails could be crucial in the investigation. “Assuming death occurred sometime during the struggle, which is a pretty safe bet, I would place the T.O.D. on or around eleven-forty this evening, give or take.” She peered over the rim of her glasses at her own timepiece and made a note on her clipboard. “That’s just a little over two hours ago which is also consistent with his liver temp.”

“We just missed him,” I breathed sadly.

The harried Saint Louis city chief medical examiner had arrived shortly after the young woman’s corpse had been pulled from the depths of the swimming pool. Her counterpart from the county jurisdiction had seen to the care and transport of that body leaving Doctor Sanders free to do the same for Sheryl Keeven. This now being the third murder in one evening, she had scarcely had time to see to the delivery of those remains to the morgue before heading out for this scene. In the somewhat crowded condominium, I couldn’t help but overhear a veteran detective from the local municipality speaking to another uniformed officer. With a respectful, somber tone, he referred to the almost choreographed conveyance of the corpses as a “dead man’s dance.”

Robert Webster’s body was positioned, for the most part, just as it had been found. He was sprawled against the wall in the small dining room that adjoined the kitchen. He was still fully clothed and bore none of the signature markings that had screamed so prominently from the bodies of the previous victims. A double strand of nylon cord was still looped tightly about his throat, and bloody abrasions were visible along his neck where he had apparently clawed at the makeshift garrote. The opposite end of the thin noose trailed out across the floor, ending at a jumbled pile of beige vinyl strips—the remains of mini-blinds that had once been mounted over a now bare window.

“Gal. 3:1” was harshly scribbled in black on the wall directly above him. A wide-tipped magic marker was found on a nearby counter and had already been bagged by the CSU technicians.

Various signs of a brief struggle were obvious throughout the room. Mini-blinds that had been unceremoniously ripped from their mountings now lay in a crumpled heap. A chair overturned near the table. A potted plant now rested on the floor, its terra cotta planter shattered beyond repair and dark soil sprayed across the tile in a wide caricature of a comet tail. The cluster of aloe vera that had once called the clay pot home now sat upright in the middle of the debris field almost as if it had been placed there purposely. I made a mental note to myself to re-plant it once the crime scene had been cleared. I saw no reason for it to become a victim too.

As futile as the struggle turned out to be, at least Robert Webster had put up a fight.

“Sure doesn’t fit the profile of the other murders. Actually, it looks more like he wasn’t expectin’ the husband ta’ be here,” Ben muttered as he surveyed the scene. “That could kinda blow a hole in the stalkin’ theory.”

“Maybe not,” Agent Mandalay offered. “If he’s stalked all of the other victims, I doubt he’s suddenly going to change that aspect. Could be that the husband was normally gone on Saturday nights.”

“Yeah. Like bowlin’ or somethin’,” he nodded as he spoke. “Good point. We’ll check it out.”

“He was never intended to be a victim,” I announced. “This was quite obviously unplanned. You’re right, I don’t think he was expecting him to be here...”

I tilted my head to the side and stared at the shaky inscription on the wall. It was plainly scrawled in extreme haste. What was even more perceptible, to me at least, was the fact that it had been done as an afterthought.

The visual inconsistencies were by no means the only problem with the setting either. There was no feeling of greater purpose for this killing as there had been for all the others. My empathic senses registered none of the conviction and fiery intent that had thus far been woven through the fabric of horror that shrouded each successive scene.

What I detected instead was blinding anger and, to my surprise, painful sadness. All were the product of a presence recently in the room... A presence that had been at every other site... A presence that had until now conveyed only misguided determination coupled with the passing of a terrifying judgment.

“...In fact,” I finally submitted, “I think he could be upset by what he’s done here. I think he may even be feeling very intense remorse, and he’s trying to come to terms with what he has done.”

“How do ya’ figure that?” Ben asked.

“The Bible verse,” I answered with a nod in the direction of the wall. “Galatians chapter three, verse one. ‘O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been set forth, crucified among you?’...”

“I think the killer is trying to tell us that this man was bewitched by his wife and her path, and for that he had to die. Kind of a guilt by association thing.”

“You sure he didn’t just kill ‘im because he was in the way?”

“In reality that’s probably exactly what happened. But remember, this individual doesn’t kill just for kicks. He has an agenda, and in some perverse way, he still respects life—but only the life of the good and righteous as defined by his beliefs. This is his way of justifying his actions as much to himself as to us.”

“Man, I know it’s been awhile since I’ve been ta’ church,” Ben declared. “But I sure as hell don’t remember the Bible advocatin’ all the shit this asshole is doin’.”

“It doesn’t in a literal sense,” I replied, “but it *is* written in a way that leaves itself open to a wide range of interpretations. The killer is picking and choosing passages and taking them out of context in order to vindicate his actions. Notice they always contain a key word—Witch, bewitched, wizard, sorcerer...”

“This guy is just plain demented,” Mandalay expressed.

“You’ll get no argument from me on that account,” I told her. “But in this case, I doubt even he believes the message he left behind. I think he might even be in some

severe emotional pain over this. That's what I'm feeling anyway, for whatever it's worth."

"Yeah, we should all feel real sorry for the fuckhead," Ben spat.

"On the one hand, this could give us some breathing room," Agent Mandalay ventured. "If he really is broken up over this or whatever, then maybe he will shut down for a while. Decompress. Stop killing."

"Uh-huh," Ben grunted in agreement. "I'm all for anything that'll stop the body count from risin', but it's gonna make the prick a helluva lot harder to find if he just withdraws."

"He will withdraw for a while, I'm sure. How long is anyone's guess," I offered. "The feelings of sadness I'm picking up are far too intense for him to keep going without first coming to terms with this. But something tells me that he'll cycle through it. He's not finished with what he set out to do."

"Of course not," Ben expressed. "We could never be that friggin' lucky."

"Another thing," I said. "I don't think that killing the husband was his only mistake. Something just doesn't click with this scene."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Take a look around. No books on WitchCraft or Wicca in the house. No pentacles or other symbols. No trappings of the religion anywhere in here that I've seen."

"So maybe she kept all her stuff hidden or somethin'." Ben shrugged. "Like ta' keep friends or relatives from knowin'. What's it I've heard ya' say... 'Hidin' in the broom closet' or somethin' like that."

"Yeah, that's the colloquialism. And, maybe she was, but I don't think so. Not this time. There's something else too... Like I said before, he passes judgment on his victims. It's very formal and strict. Even more so than pronouncing sentence in a court of law. It's important to him that the accused be fully aware that WitchCraft is considered an unforgivable crime."

"Yeah, so? I'm not sure I'm followin' you."

"Do you get the feeling that he didn't do that this time or something, Rowan?" Mandalay asked.

"Oh no, he pronounced sentence all right." I shook my head. "But what I picked up when they were recovering her body was that she didn't understand. The fact that he accused her of being a Witch made absolutely no sense to her. It was an unfathomable concept in her mind."

"So that's why you don't think she was a Witch?" she pressed.

"That's why I'm almost positive she wasn't."

"Then she doesn't fit the victimology any more than the husband," Ben expressed. "What would have prompted 'im to pick her?"

"I wish I knew."

Further musings were cut short, and our small cluster grew larger by one when Carl Deckert trundled through the doorway from the living room. He had been out leading the door-to-door interviews and from the look of his face had only just now come inside.

"Okay, here's the run down," his voice issued as he sidled up next to us. "We got nuthin' in the way of witnesses."

Out of habit he removed his fedora and smoothed back his disheveled, greying hair then perched the hat back atop his crown and tilted the brim upward out of his face. His

fleshy cheeks were flushed bright red, and he was visibly winded. A cloud of coldness still seeped from the fabric of his coat to noticeably chill the air around us.

“Looks like almost everyone was at a meeting of the condo association when all this apparently went down,” Deckert explained. “Nobody saw or heard a thing till the security guard found the pool gate open.”

“Nobody normal ever goes ta’ those things,” Ben stated incredulously. “What’s up with that?”

“I always go to mine,” Constance confessed. “Second Friday of every month.”

Ben stared back at her briefly, “No offense, Mandalay, but you might want ta’ get a life.”

“Well, I *am* on the board,” she admitted.

“Correction,” Ben chided. “Change *might want to desperately need*.”

“Yeah, well how’s this for a kick in the teeth,” Deckert remarked dismally before she could retort. “They were listenin’ to one of the local department’s finest talk about settin’ up a neighborhood watch program to supplement the hired security.”



“How’s that arm?” Ben asked me as he guided the van onto the exit ramp from Highway 40.

“Sore,” I answered flatly. “Still throbbing a little, but it’ll be okay.”

We were both exhausted, and there was no doubt in my mind that we were operating on automatic pilot. I wasn’t entirely sure what was keeping my friend going at this point. I knew for a fact that for every ounce of energy I had lost through the painful physical manifestations of my unknown ethereal guide, Ben had expended more than double that amount in worrying about me. Personally, I felt like I could sleep for a week, and my mind was all but completely numb. How he was even managing to stay awake was beyond me.

“What about the pool water thing and all that? Are ya’ sure you don’t wanna see a doctor about it?” he pressed.

“I already did, Ben. Doctor Sanders, remember?”

“Yeah, I know, but...”

“I’ll be fine,” I interjected with a weary yawn. “Stop being such a mother hen.”

“Okay. Fine. I’m too goddammed beat to argue with ya’ about it anyway.”

“Good.”

He cautiously turned through the blinking yellow traffic signal at the intersection and continued down the salt-and-cinder-dulled asphalt strip. Streetlights cast yellowish glows at evenly spaced intervals along the roadway, forming harsh puddles of sickly light separated by thick, blue-black shadows.

“So you gonna be able to make it in the mornin’?” Ben finally asked, switching the subject to the hastily scheduled emergency meeting of the Major Case Squad, which was in reality only a few painfully short hours away.

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Shit, I oughta just go on in now,” he lamented. “I’m barely gonna have enough time for my head ta’ hit the pillow as it is.”

“You should really go home,” I told him. “You need the rest as much as I do. Besides, I’m sure Allison would appreciate it.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “She sure as hell didn’t know what she was gettin’ into when she became a cop’s wife.”

“Have you heard her complain about it?” I asked.

“Nope. Not a word,” he replied. “She’s really great about that.”

“Then I would expect she probably knew what she was getting herself into. Give her a little credit, Tonto.”

“Yup. You’re right. I s’pose maybe she did.”

By now he had turned the Chevy down my street and was slowly pushing it the last few blocks toward my home. Leafless tree branches bowing under the weight of ice and snow hung low over the roadway, forming an eerie canopy. I was already starting to imagine that I could feel my bed.

“Oh, by the way,” Ben started as a thought was apparently remembered and brought to the forefront, “the Bible they found next ta’ the pool house was book-marked just like the other two. The same passage as from the Sheryl Keeven murder was highlighted. First Samuel, 15:23. Whaddaya make of that?”

“Off the top of my head, I don’t know,” I answered as he hooked the vehicle into my driveway and rolled it to a halt. “I’m sure he assigns a particular significance to each passage and applies it to the victim based on that.”

“Yeah. That’s what we were thinkin’ too.”

“We still need to figure out the why’s and wherefore’s behind how he picked his latest victim to start with.”

“I hear ya’... That’s kinda why I asked... So that passage doesn’t mean anything in particular to ya’?”

“Not in that respect, no. It fit Sheryl Keeven but not Christine Webster, so I don’t know what to say about the aberration. Sorry.”

“That’s okay white man, just thought I’d check.”

“I’ll sleep on it, and maybe it’ll make more sense in the morning,” I offered.

“Yeah, go get some rest,” he told me as I unlatched my seat belt then popped the passenger door open.

As I climbed out I looked up at the thick comforter of grey clouds hanging low in the sky and could feel the utter stillness around me. The fatigue coursing through my body was so viscid that I felt enveloped in a total fog.

I just looked back to my friend and said, “Gonna snow.”



I could hear the dull, muffled bong of our antique clock announcing the hour as I twisted my key in the lock and pushed the front door open. The final measure of the tone sharpened for an instant then it faded away to silence on the cold breath of the night. I quietly pressed the door shut and latched the deadbolt before proceeding to unzip my coat. A tired glance at my watch told me the evaporated peal had been the last note in a trinity of chimes. It was three a.m.

“Canya’ tell me why you’re shuttin’ me out of this then?” Felicity’s somewhat slurred voice, brimming with a heavy Irish brogue, pierced the darkness as I turned.

I was startled enough to involuntarily flinch at the question and almost drop my keys. I had fully expected to be subject to the wet-nosed greetings and cursory inspections customarily doled out by the dogs. The throaty trilling and prancing rub of one or more of our three cats dancing around my ankles wouldn't even have surprised me.

What I hadn't been prepared for at all was my wife curled lazily in a chair, camouflaged by a crocheted afghan of dark, muted blues, still awake and palpably angry. My eyes were fairly well adjusted to the dark, and I could just make out our black cat, Dickens, huddled in her lap, soaking up the attention her fingers were absently paying a spot just behind his ears.

From her slurred speech and the shape on the marble end table that looked suspiciously like a bottle of Bushmills, I had to assume she was somewhat marinated. It was readily apparent that I had arrived just in time for the umbraged portion of her emotional thrill ride. From what I could make out of the tousled look of her auburn locks combined with random sniffing, I suspected I had only recently missed the segments consisting of mild panic and heartfelt sobbing.

Felicity was never able to hide it from me when she had been crying, no matter how much she sought to cover the evidence with makeup or shadows. It was very obvious that she had done her share of it tonight, but right now she was in no condition to try concealing the fact even if she wanted to. I got the impression however, that in this particular case, she didn't.

"Shutting you out of what?" I asked.

"Aye, you know exactly what I'm talking about," she parried then swilled down the remains of the whiskey from a hi-ball glass in her dainty hand and set it aside with an uncoordinated motion that attested to her impaired depth perception. Fortunately, the crystal tumbler didn't break, but the loud clatter of its base against the marble end table sent Dickens flying from her lap to scurry into the shadows. "Surely now, you weren't thinkin' ya'woodn't be missed at the party, then."

"Of course I knew I would be missed... But it's not like I snuck out or anything. So just how much have you had to drink?"

"Don't chainch the zubejct." She mumbled the command through an alcoholic stupor that was creeping up on her much quicker than I think she realized. "You left wiffout me."

"I didn't exactly have much choice in the matter, Felicity," I answered her calmly as I finished shrugging off my coat and tugged open the closet. "You had just started dancing, two detectives were in the lobby of the hotel waiting for me, and it was *your* family reunion. Just what did you expect me to do?"

"Donchu unnerstan how worried I was?" she demanded as she attempted to wrestle herself from the folds of the afghan. Had the situation been different, her inebriated bumbling would have been almost comical. As she fought to disentangle the fabric, she continued to mutter, "I know what those things you do to...to...do...do...Oh, *cac!* They do you to you do...to...*Fek!* Oh, you know whad I mean... I feel them too."

"I know you do, honey," I soothed as I hung up my coat then pressed the closet door shut. "Austin and Shamus knew I was leaving. They were supposed to let you know what was up."

I still wasn't entirely clear on what she was driving at, or just as important, why she was sitting in the dark, bombed out of her gourd. Felicity wasn't really much of a drinker under normal circumstances. She would have a glass of wine now and then or sometimes a mixed drink at a party, but Irish whiskey straight up? I'd seen her drink it that way but not often. Even considering her heritage, this was something generally unheard of for her. I had only seen her drunk once before in the dozen years I'd known her, and that time she had only qualified as slightly tipsy.

"Thaz nod da' point," she mumbled then started and immediately aborted an attempt to stand up. "Aye, don'chu know everyone was watchin' you then."

"Excuse me? Watching me what?"

"Well dey have televisions in the hotel, don'chu know."

The much touted and endlessly replayed film of Ben, Constance, and I on the balcony of Sheryl Keeven's apartment streamed through my mind in a painfully colorful burst. "So you mean everyone was watching the news?"

"Onna news," she repeated matter-of-factly and bobbed her head then rocked herself up to her feet where she stood precariously wobbling. "Oh Felicee, your husband is zo brave. Oh Felicimmy,... Oh Felimiccy... FEK! Oh me." She thumped herself in the chest with a flaccid hand. "Me...I should be so proud of Roman... Rolan..." She staggered a moment. "Of YOU... Aye, bud da' bartenner was laughin' an' then dey took Aussin to jail."

She swept her arm out in an all-encompassing gesture and on the back swing began to lose her balance. I took a pair of quick strides across the room and hooked my arm around her waist as she began to fall.

"Sweetheart, you aren't making a lot of sense at the moment. What are you talking about? Who took Austin to jail and for what? Is he okay?"

"Becawsh the bartenner has a brokem nodze," she giggled.

"A what? A broken nose? Let me get this straight. You're saying that Austin hit the bartender?"

"Aye, 'e thrashed 'im good for you too."

"What do you mean?"

"Becawsh, ah'm still mad atch'you then. Aye, there I am."

The alcohol had immediately overtaken her the moment she came upright. Not that she was making much sense before she was standing, but she was only a hair this side of coherent at this point. The look in her eyes was a good indicator that she was now riding a brakeless train toward unconsciousness, and the engineer called whiskey had the throttle open full.

"Felicity, honey, try to stay with me here." Supporting her almost dead weight, I eased her back down into the chair and knelt in front of her. Cupping one hand beneath her smooth chin and brushing a tangle of fiery red curls from her eyes with the other, I continued. "Why did Austin hit the bartender?"

"Aye, are you listenin' toomee then? Waz for laughin' of coarsh."

"There has to be a better reason than that, sweetheart. Your brother wouldn't just hit someone for laughing."

"Aye, buddee wood." She thrust her chin upward and blindly poked me in the chest with her limp index finger. "If the laughin' they're doin' is at his fammy an' thiz bashtard was doin' 'is laughin' atchyu, 'e wuz. Callin' you the good witsh of the easht an' such."

“Felicity,” I sighed. “Why didn’t you just ignore it? You know people are like that sometimes.”

“Oh I did... I did, I did, I did... But Aussin dinnit. No, he dinnit.” She closed her eyes and shook her head animatedly then fluttered them back open wide. “Oooohh, don’ do that. It maygz the schair move, thin.”

She was almost gone. Any moment she was going to pass out right where she sat.

“Okay, okay. Is Austin all right?” I pressed her.

“Wy wunnit ‘e be?”

“The fight, Felicity.”

“Aye, ef coarshee iz. Auzzin won.”

“No, Felicity. Is he in jail right now? Do I need to go bail him out or something?”

“Oh I alrenny...no...allll-reddddy did’dat,” she told me then pitched forward and grasped my collar in her hand. “Aye, *Caorthann*...” she said, her voice becoming momentarily clear as she used the Gaelic version of my name. “Aussin...Heesh very proud of you, ya’know...he iz.. Bud I’m shtill man at’chu.”

“Okay, honey, I give up. Why are you mad at me?”

She let go of my collar and fell back in the chair then looked back at me very seriously, widening her eyes in an unsuccessful attempt to remain awake. Her eyelids were already closing, and her body was quickly sinking deeper into the chair. She barely managed to mutter the soft, slurred answer before slipping into the arms of sleep, “Beecawwsh... you were downing an’ you woonen’t lemme help.”

So intent had I been on the events unfolding around me throughout the evening that it hadn’t even dawned on me that Felicity might remotely feel the same pains I was experiencing first hand; or even that she may have been reaching out to me across the ethereal plane. She had done it before, and I should have realized that it was likely to happen again. Especially when considering both the intensity of the experiences on an emotional level and our deep connection to one another.

I carefully slipped my arms around my unconscious wife then gently lifted her from the chair and carried her into the bedroom. She was still dressed in her traditional Celtic garb from the party, and it took me nearly fifteen minutes to undo the various laces and wrestle her limp body out of the clothing. I wasn’t overly worried about waking her, for I expected that at this stage of the game that task would be nearly impossible.

After finally getting her tucked into the bed, I debated making a few calls to check on Austin and then decided against it. If I understood her correctly, she had already bailed him out of jail, and even if she hadn’t, I was certain his parents would be seeing to it. If not, it could wait a few hours. I wasn’t going to be much good at doing anything about it as I was barely able to keep my own eyes open. I needed to be at the Major Case Squad command post by ten in the morning, and it was already coming up on three-thirty. After subtracting time for a shower and travel, that left me with only about four hours to get some sleep.

The question settled, I stripped wearily and shut off the lights. Then with a satisfied sigh, I crawled into the bed next to my temporarily comatose wife. As I relaxed, a sleep deprived wrinkle in my brain told me to make a note to ask Ben if there was some statistical reason known only to law enforcement as to why dead bodies seemed to always turn up in the middle of the night.

When I finally began to drift off, I felt for all the world like I was falling to my death. I knew then that it wasn't going to be the restful sleep I had hoped for.

# CHAPTER 15

*A baleful cry in the fold of darkness.*

*A crystalline blanket hued blue by shadows cast in the dim moonglow...*

*Fear.*

*Hatred.*

*Horror.*

*Silence.*

*My heart is racing in my chest. It is one of only two sounds that break the stillness. The other is the report of my naked feet crunching frenzied through the sharp crust of ice to the mantle of snow beneath. I am running from something.*

*I am running from someone...*

*I do not know where I am...*

*I know only that I run in fear.*

*Frigid air sears my lungs and chills me throughout. A hardened ache tears at my throat, dry and cold. I gasp for breath as I slow my pace and finally halt, struggling to deny the pain. A grove of twisted trees surrounds me.*

*Envelopes me.*

*The moon's filtered shine dances eerily between the gnarled branches and plays across my nude body. Streaks of sticky wetness stream across my skin. In the muted light they appear oily and black. I run my hands across my body and wince at the soreness of the festering wounds.*

*The streaks are my own blood.*

*My staggering footprints stain the snow.*

*My feet are also raw and bleeding.*

*My wheezing breath punctuates the night.*

*A deep, familiar voice rumbles from the darkness. "Wherefore, since you, Rowan Linden Gant, are fallen into the damned heresies of Witches, practicing them publicly, and have been by legitimate witnesses convicted of the sin of heresy..."*

*I start in fear at the words.*

*I bolt forward blindly.*

*A baleful cry in the fold of darkness.*

"Yo, mission control ta' Rowan." Ben's voice snapped me back to the reality at hand. "You want any of this coffee, Kemosabe?"

He was waving his hand before my face and looking at me quizzically. From his expression I assumed I had once again slipped into the glassy-eyed, slack-jawed trance that had been plaguing me all morning. Snippets of a vivid horror kept ricocheting about the inside of my skull, disjointed and making no sense whatsoever. Thus far, I had been unable to piece together anything from the randomized remembrance of the nightmare and was beginning to doubt I ever would. Fact of the matter was, it might simply have been just that, a nightmare. No more than a product of my overtaxed senses and the

frightening spectacles to which I had been witness in the past hours and days. It may mean nothing at all. But it was painfully reminiscent of the small vignette that had appended itself to my recurring nightmare about Ariel Tanner, and that was what concerned me.

“Yeah, sure,” I nodded as I spoke, shaking off the fog.

“I’ll warn ya’ up front, this stuff is strong enough ya’ damn near hafta slice it. There’re some donuts over here too.” He indicated a large white box as he rummaged about for a clean coffee cup. “Great little place over on Chippewa. All they had fresh was glazed, though.”

I shook my head, declining the offer. I wasn’t sure how something like that would sit with my stomach at the moment. It already felt like my hastily gulped morning meal was lodged in it sideways. Considering that the meal had consisted of cold leftovers from a traditional Irish dinner, it probably was.

“So, what’s up with you this mornin’?” Ben continued pressing me as he filled a chipped ceramic mug from a brown streaked globe of Pyrex then slid it across the table in my direction before returning the pot to its equally discolored warming base. “You’ve been glazin’ over left and right ever since ya’ got here. Somethin’ I should know?”

“I’m not sure,” I returned, accepting the mug and taking a sip of the brew. It was acrid and bitter. Ben’s wisecrack about ‘strong enough to slice’ had been right on the mark. “Could just be lack of sleep, I don’t know. I keep having these weird flashes...like pieces of a nightmare or something.”

I placed the cup back on the table and absently rattled clumps of sugar from an off-white cardboard cylinder, scarcely noticing when they plopped into the black liquid. Scanning the area around the coffeemaker, I searched for a stirring stick and found none. Ben noticed my fruitless quest then reached into his pocket and offered me a cheap plastic ballpoint.

“So you’re goin’ all...” He finished the sentence by letting out a low, vibrato whistle tied to an animated gesticulation with his outstretched arm. Over time, I had come to know this as his particular brand of sign language for “out there.”

“Not really... maybe... I don’t know.” I finished stirring and tapped the pen on the rim of the cup before laying it aside on an already stained paper napkin. “It doesn’t really feel the same... It could be just pieces of a bad dream.” I shrugged and took another sip of the bitter brew. The sugar hadn’t helped. I don’t know that I had really expected it to.

“You didn’t by any chance come up with anything on the doubled up Bible verses from last night didya?”

“You mean the one from First Samuel?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Not really.” I shook my head. “The only thing I can think of is that it’s a pretty generic verse as far as the condemnation of WitchCraft goes. It would easily fit as a catch-all if he doesn’t have a specific heresy over and above that in mind.”

“So no greater reasoning that might give us a bead on this wacko then, eh?”

“Not that I can see.”

Ben pursed his lips and nodded back. “Well if anything else clicks, just say the word. I don’t give a damn if ya’ interrupt the meeting even, ‘kay?”

“Okay.”

“So where’s the little woman this mornin’?” He changed the subject as he wandered in the direction of his desk with me tagging along. “I kinda figured she’d be with ya’.”

“When I left her she was holding her head and muttering Gaelic curses about a bottle of whiskey,” I answered.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. The party. Sorry again ‘bout that... Did ya’ get yourself any of that Cold-cannon stuff?” He’d never know just how accurate his mispronunciation matched the way the contents of my stomach felt at the moment.

He wheeled out his seat and pointed to a molded plastic chair next to his desk. It looked like something from a discarded seventies era dinette, and I suspected it would be even less comfortable than it appeared.

“Something like that, and yeah, she brought me home a plate. It was my breakfast.” I rested my mug on the corner of his workspace as I sat down and glanced quickly at my watch. “Of course, I expect she’s on the road by now. Had a photo shoot for a client today.”

“On a Sunday? I thought she went freelance so she could set ‘er own hours.”

I held my hands apart wide in a one-that-got-away type of gesture. “Really big client.”

The answering bob of his head told me I needn’t say any more. “Ahhh, much wampum. I get it. Well, at least she has a choice in it.” He sighed as he looked around. “Some of us have a crazy fuck makin’ the decisions for us.”

I mimicked his swiveled head scan of the room, and his reference dawned over the sleep-deprived fog that clouded my mind. On a normal Sunday morning, the homicide division squad room was relatively still and near lifeless. Today, however, with the advent of the emergency meeting and the fact that the Major Case Squad was using it as a base of operations, it was slowly coming to bustling wakefulness.

Phones were beginning to add their annoying jingles to the vanishing silence as calls were transferred from the main switchboard into the squad room. Bleary-eyed detectives with vacant faces were cradling handsets against their ears; some while lethargically scribbling notes, others while just leaning back in their chairs and pretending to listen.

The petite thud of a hurried pair of cross-trainers against aged linoleum started softly at the door and grew louder as their owner came breezing in. Making her way through the grid of desks, the tousled-haired federal officer shot us a quick good morning without so much as slowing down.

“Sorry I’m late. I overslept,” Agent Mandalay announced as she strode past us with an oblong white box in her hands. “Hope you like glazed. It’s all they had fresh.”

“Don’t tell me,” Ben offered, “Rachel’s Donut Hut down on Chippewa.”

“How did you know?” she asked as she deposited the container on the table next to the other box of morning sweets.

“Great minds think alike.”

“Okay, I’ve heard that before, but what’s *your* excuse, Storm?”

My friend chuckled a muted expletive at the playful jibe but, other than that, elected not to reply.

Constance unzipped and shrugged off her coat while at the same time surveying the scene in front of her. When she turned back to face us, we could see that over her denim jeans she was wearing a slightly faded sweatshirt emblazoned with a steeple like logo, the lower portion of which disappeared into a line of stylized text that read, *Cornell*

University, Ithaca, New York. The tail of the garment was tucked behind a worn leather holster clipped to her right side, and high on her hip rode a forty caliber Sig Sauer. I knew from the experience of having seen her in action that this young woman could be much more dangerous than was boasted by her rumpled college co-ed appearance.

She swept her hand back at the disorderly mess and frowned. "Sheesh, don't you guys ever clean up after yourselves?"

"It's not that bad," Ben grunted then sipped his coffee. "Besides, ain't my turn."

Agent Mandalay rolled her eyes and proceeded to remove the visitor's badge from her jacket and clip it onto her belt before finding a place to hang the garment. "Is everyone here, or am I not the only late one?"

My friend rolled his arm up and peered over the rim of his cup at the watch face on his wrist. "Just you'n Deck. He called about fifteen, twenty minutes ago, so I expect him ta' be walkin' through the door any time now. Doc Sanders is here, but she ran down the hall for a minute. Other than that, I think we're all accounted for."

"I didn't sleep too well last night." She let out a small sigh as she dragged over a chair similar to mine and dropped her petite frame into it. "What about you guys?"

I looked at her and shook my head.

Ben simply shrugged and took a pull at his cup of java then said, "Me neither. Nightmares. Of course, it's not like there was an overabundance of time for sleepin' anyway."

"I know what you mean. The alarm went off way too early," she agreed. "Either of you catch the national news this morning? That video byte got picked up by the wire services."

"Don't tell me..." Ben muttered the rhetorical question.

"Yeah. The 'Ghoul Squad' is national news."

"Were they at least a little more selective about which part and how much of the tape they showed?" I asked.

"Not the station I was looking at," she returned.

"Figures," Ben spat.

"Ben, Connie, Rowan," Carl Deckert's gruff voice met our ears as he trudged in, holding a box of donuts in one hand while working the buttons of his overcoat with the other. "I hope you guys like glazed. It's all they had fresh."

"So we've heard," Ben answered and raised an eyebrow at Constance.

"Rachel's Donut Hut over on Chippewa," she chuckled.

"How'd you know?" Carl continued fumbling with the last button and gave them both a puzzled expression. After a moment, he began eyeing the carton on all sides, presumably in search of a telltale marking.

"Table," Ben answered and pointed to the other boxes near the coffee.

"Maybe I shoulda called or somethin'," Carl stated apologetically as he added his offering to the pile. "That's an awful lot of donuts."

"Doesn't really matter, does it?" I quipped. "I mean we are sitting in a room full of cops and it's only a few dozen donuts. What are the odds that there will be any left over by the time lunch rolls around?"

"Ya'know, you civilians have gotta get over that whole *cop slash donut* thing," my friend returned, verbalizing the punctuation as he spoke. Then he let out a small laugh.

"Sure, whatever you say, Ben. But tell me this, am I right?"

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, you’re right,” he answered with a broad smile. “Now shut up.”



“So I’m sure everyone is aware that our boy was real busy last night. For those of you who were on the scenes, this may be a little bit of a rehash. For those who weren’t, or who just got assigned to the MCS, we’ll try ta’ bring ya’ up ta’ speed as quickly as possible.” Ben was sitting on the edge of his desk in the squad room addressing the attentive assembly of detectives attached to the Major Case Squad. “Last night we got three bodies...” He held up his hand and displayed three fingers to the group, turning his hand front to back. “...Three in one night, people. Two fittin’ the M.O. of our bad guy from the Walker and Miller cases. The third was one of the latest victim’s husband, and it looks like he just might’ve been in the way. Most of ya’ are familiar with the first two victims, those that aren’t, everything we have is on the handouts I just gave you.” He waved a sheaf of papers at the group.

“Now, some of ya’ have prob’ly already heard the theory that the husband wasn’t the only screw up for our boy last night. From all indications, Christine Webster was not a Witch and in fact didn’t actively practice any religion at all, much less an alternative one. Well, the good news is I think we’ve solved the mystery behind this break in the M.O.”

Ben had already told me this simple revelation upon my arrival at the MCS command post, but from the attentive stares he now commanded, I could tell that this was new information to most everyone else present.

“As you’re aware, we’ve been operatin’ on the assumption that the killer is workin’ off a list. This list contains the names of several women who are members of a local Witches coven. All of the victims up until this point have been on that list. Now what we believe we are dealin’ with on the most recent victim is a case of mistaken identity.”

“So there’s a Christine Webster out there that actually is a member of that coven?” one of the cops asked.

“Exactly,” my friend answered. “Only ‘er name is spelled with a K instead of a C-h. K-r-i-s-t-i-n-e, ta’ be exact. Other than that, the middle and last names are identical.”

“The mistake makes sense if you follow the killer’s brand of logic,” I interjected. “It stands to reason that someone with a deep religious conviction would hear Christine and automatically spell it with a C-h. After all, the origin of the name is Christ.”

Ben grunted in agreement.

“So the original theory holds?” the questioning cop asked.

“For now, yes.” Ben nodded. “Okay. Now that we’ve cleared that one up, I’m gonna turn the floor over to our distinguished city M.E. So, Doc, you got anything for us on last night’s unfortunate souls?”

Doctor Sanders set her own coffee aside while simultaneously slipping her reading glasses onto her face. The spectacles that hung from a simple chain about her neck were like a permanent fixture. I couldn’t recall ever having seen her without them. She opened a file before her and peered at the scribbled notes, reciting from them without looking up.

“I have the preliminary posts on all three. First victim is Sheryl Kee...” The last few words of her sentence elongated and rose in pitch as she yawned deeply. Covering her

mouth with her hand, she drew in a second breath and sighed, "Excuse me. I'm terribly sorry."

"S'alright Doc," Ben told her. "Been a long one for all of us... Go on."

"As I was saying," she continued, "first victim, Sheryl Keeven, Caucasian, female, thirty-four years of age. She was hung by the neck from the balcony of her apartment. Prelim shows a stress fracture at the third cervical vertebrae, but that didn't kill her immediately. There are indications that she expired due to asphyxiation. There were thirteen remarkable puncture wounds in soft tissues that were made pre-mortem. I would venture to say from an ice pick or something very similar.

"Next..." She flipped a page in the manila file and stifled another yawn. "Christine Webster, again Caucasian, female. Twenty-seven years of age. Cause of death was asphyxiation due to drowning, pure and simple. Her lungs were full of water. Ms. Webster's body also exhibited a number of puncture wounds consistent with the Keeven woman as well as the two earlier victims.

"Finally, Robert Webster. Caucasian, male, twenty-eight. Contused larynx. Cause of death, again, asphyxiation. He was choked to death using the cord from a set of mini blinds. No other wounds in this case save for some minor, unremarkable bruising and abrasions that most likely occurred during a struggle. Judging from the upward angle of the contusion, I would venture to hypothesize that the attacker was a rather large male, probably over six feet in height. Other than that..." She flicked the folder shut then removed her glasses and gently massaged the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "...we will have to wait for the tox and labs to come back."

She allowed her glasses to dangle down on their omnipresent chain and looked up at us with a slight shrug. "I'm afraid that's all I've got for you at the moment."

"Thanks, Doc. I really appreciate ya' gettin' on that so quick," Ben told her then turned his attention back to the rest of the room and nodded in the direction of a thick, stocky man who was absently smoothing his moustache as he listened. "You and your team have anything for us from the crime scenes, Murv?"

The man gestured in the direction of Doctor Sanders, and when he spoke, his voice was richly timbered and affected with a slight, lazy, southern drawl. "I'd say the Doc's prob'ly right about our bad guy. We got one decent imprint out of the snow around the pool last night. Matches up to a man's size seventeen hiking boot, so I'd have to say he's a big boy. Best estimate, anywhere from six-six to seven foot tall."

He paused as he again brushed imaginary crumbs from the whiskers on his upper lip and then took a moment to scratch the back of his head. "So far we haven't had a single worthwhile print, but it's winter and everyone is wearin' gloves so I don't really expect any. He's left a different kind of Bible at each scene, all of them being of a type readily available from any bookstore. We're runnin' it down anyway. The spray paint he's used to leave the symbol is just your standard commercially available stuff." He stopped talking for a moment and shrugged. "Either way, got a sample of it off to the FBI crime lab. Couple of fibers. Poly-cotton blend, dyed black. Pretty generic stuff. Besides that we got a big fat zippo. Sorry ya'll, but this ol' boy ain't givin' us much to go on."

Ben nodded. "You'll let us know if ya' come up with anything else?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Great. Thanks, Murv."

"No problem."

“Okay, tox on the Miller woman showed Roofies in her system,” Ben announced to the room and looked around. “Who’s workin’ with Narc on that?”

“Over here,” a hard-edged but still feminine voice came from across the room. “Detective Baker. I’m your liaison to County Narcotics.”

“Great, Baker. Whaddaya got?”

“Unfortunately, nothing,” she returned. “We’ve worked the college campuses and all the small time dealers we can think of. Of course, we haven’t really known what we were looking for.”

“Understood,” Ben replied and gave her a nod. “I’d like for ya’ ta’ hit ‘em again and work from the basis that we’re lookin’ for an unusually tall individual. That might help.”

“Will do.”

Ben gave his notes a quick scan and without looking up from the fistful of paper, queried the room, “Computer crimes. Do we have anything on this whole Internet stalkin’ lead?”

“The Miller woman’s hard drive is clean,” a younger detective announced. “According to the system registry, the operating system was a recent install, and we found a receipt from a local repair shop. Looks like she upgraded.”

“I hate the damn things, Chuck,” Ben returned grumpily. “You mind puttin’ that in English?”

“She souped up her machine and had a new piece of hardware installed in place of the original mass storage device,” the detective answered. “I called the repair shop, and they said the drive was toast, and it went into the trash. To put it simply, as far as getting something off her system goes we’re screwed. We aren’t going to get anything from it.”

“What about her... Whaddaya call it... You know...” He rotated his hand in a circular gesture while frowning his brow.

“ISP,” I offered. “Her service provider.”

“Small local outfit in South County” came the answer. “No weekend hours.”

“Great,” Ben sighed. “They got an alarm?”

“Probably, I dunno,” Chuck returned.

“Find out. Call the local muni and the alarm company. Get the contact list and get someone to open the doors. If that doesn’t work, go down there and throw a brick through the window or somethin’. We wanna talk to ‘em today. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“All right then, there’s another angle I want us to look into.” My friend huffed, paused for a moment then pointed over at me. “Most of ya’ are familiar with Rowan here from the last time he worked with us. As well, most of ya’ are aware that we’ve asked for his help again with this case.” His hand went up automatically as he spoke, smoothing back his hair and coming to rest on his neck. After a short pause he let out a resigned sigh. “Now, while I’ll be the first one ta’ admit that his methods seem more than just a little weird to the rest of us, I think we all know just how accurate he can be. At any rate, Row here has given us reason ta’ think maybe our bad guy might possibly be a priest. This isn’t a definite, but I’d like ta’ follow that avenue an’ see where it goes.”

“You mean like a Catholic priest?” a voice piped up.

“Yeah. Could be,” he answered. “Or Lutheran I s’pose.”

“What makes you think it’s a priest?” the detective queried again.

Ben slapped me on the arm with the sheaf of papers he held in his hand. "You wanna go ahead and take that one, Row."

I had been expecting this when Ben asked me to be at the meeting. Now, the feeling of déjà vu that had been tittering up and down my spine forcibly seized me by the shoulders and whispered in my ear, "Be afraid. Be very afraid."

The last time I had addressed the Major Case Squad had been a few scant months ago during the last frantic investigation. At that time I had been severely heckled, almost to the point of Ben losing his temper in an attempt to defend me. Now, however, it seemed a small legend had arisen from the final success of that case, and while there were certainly those who still thought me a crackpot, as Ben had said, a number of the officers present today were individuals I had worked with before.

I watched nervously as they shifted their glances over to me and waited just as attentively as they had for Ben.

"Quite honestly," I began, choosing a direct approach, "it was something I saw through Sheryl Keeven's eyes when I channeled her last moments."

The room remained quiet, save for the muted ringing of phones and normal background noises of the offices. No laughs. No heckling. No comments of outright dismissal. As unorthodox as they may have found me, I had been accepted. I had gained their respect. In some small way, I had become one of *them*, and worthy of their attention.

I continued, indicating to my neck as I spoke, "What I caught a glimpse of was a black shirt with a white collar insert. Like a priest's collar."

"So what about a seminary student then?" Detective Baker spoke this time. "My cousin was in the seminary and he wore one of those collars."

"Good idea, Baker," Ben interjected then gestured to a nearby detective. "Morrow. You and Buchanan check that out. Osthoff, you and Martin ask around the local Archdiocese. Carefully." He stressed the word. "Remember, it hasn't been all that long since the Pope graced our fair city with his presence. There're a lotta Catholics in this area, and they're still ridin' high on that. Last thing we need ta' do is piss off over half of Saint Louis."

"Got it," the officers replied almost in unison.

"Okay. That's about all I have." Ben's shoulders dropped noticeably as he let out a tired sigh. "Anyone got any questions?"

"Any theories on why he changes the way he kills the victim each time?" A slightly greying officer queried. "Seems a bit off for a serial killer. I thought they stuck to an established pattern."

"I'll leave the floor to you on that one, white man," Ben told me.

I simply bobbed my head and began. "In this particular case it actually makes perfect sense. We've already established that the killer appears to be targeting members of alternative religions. In point of fact, Witches."

A ripple of nods coupled with the warbling hum of murmured concurrence ran through the assemblage. I pushed off from the edge of the desk I was leaning against and began to pace as I ticked points off on my fingertips.

"So far, there has been one victim burned, one hung, and one drowned," I continued. "All of these are methods of execution that were used during the time of the Inquisition. The manner of death selected back then oftentimes depended on a wide range of criteria."

Anything from the pre-ordained level of the heresy committed to the way the inquisitors happened to feel at the time of passing sentence.”

“What about the first one?” another detective questioned. “The Walker woman. She was thrown out a window. Was that one of their methods?”

“Of execution, no. Of verification, yes.” I answered then paused to allow my statement to take hold. “I would postulate that the killer was applying a razor... A test if you will... He threw Miz Walker off the balcony in order to see if she would save herself by flying or levitating.”

The officer who had started us along this line spoke again, “I seem to recall reading an article in the paper recently where you yourself said you Witches don’t do that sort of thing.”

“We don’t.” I nodded in agreement. “But during the times of the Inquisition, ‘Witch Hysteria’ was rampant. All manner of accusations were made, and it is where many of the popular myths about us came from. People believed that Witches could fly. They thought we were made of wood and therefore wouldn’t sink in water. Supposedly, we didn’t need to breathe and could be deprived of oxygen and still live. That’s just to name a few.”

“So why hasn’t he been testing the other victims?” another voice asked.

“He has to an extent,” I replied. “Witches, and those accused, were tortured for a variety of reasons, the obvious one being to make them confess. Other tortures, such as the stabbing seen on these victims, also known as ‘Witch Pricking,’ were used to prove out the accusation. You should understand, of course, that the accusation was then and will always be proven out for him, no matter what.”

“Okay, so what about this whole torture thing?” A young detective waved his handout in my direction. “According to this, the first two victims were rather severely tortured, whereas numbers three and four weren’t nearly as bad. What’s up with that?”

“That’s a good question,” I agreed with a nod. “I have my own theories, and I think there are a combination of answers. The most obvious is probably the constitution of the victim combined with the amount of time he had to conduct the tortures.”

“What are the not so obvious reasons?” another voice asked. “Just out of curiosity.”

“Well, as we know, the first three victims were all members of the same coven. For the sake of argument, let us pretend that victim number four was as well, because even though we know she wasn’t, I don’t believe the killer has realized that yet. Victim five, we will leave entirely out of the equation because as Detective Storm stated, he simply appears to have been a spouse who got in the way.

“Now forgive me if this starts to sound like a college lecture, but if you would, please bear with me for a moment. What I need to do here is back up and give you some background so you understand how I came to this conclusion. For this to all make sense, what you absolutely must understand is the mentality behind the concept of ‘Witch Hysteria.’ Those accused of heresy were tortured for several reasons, not just for a confession or just for proving out the accusation. In fact, sometimes it was just because the particular inquisitor was a sadistic bastard who enjoyed inflicting pain. But more importantly, by the prescription of Church Doctrine it was specifically done in order to get an accused heretic or Witch to incriminate others.

“The first deviation in our killer’s torture pattern occurs with victim number three. While she was not put through the same rigors as the first two, she was subjected to some

amount of torture. Judging from what I picked up at the crime scene, I would say she folded rather easily and didn't require an excessive amount of torture to extract that which the killer sought.

"Then you have Christine Webster, who we are pretty sure was the *wrong* Kristine Webster. Throw into that mix the fact that she had a husband who lost his own life trying to protect her. Basically the husband being there knocked the killer's entire plan off kilter. It probably forced him to rush the ritual of applying proof and confession to the judgment for the simple fear of being caught."

I paused for a moment and took a quick sip of the bittersweet coffee I had set aside earlier. It had grown lukewarm and tasted even worse than it had before, but I desperately needed something for my rapidly drying throat.

"This is where the not so obvious comes into play. Something that I have witnessed through the various visions I have experienced while working this case is the fact that the killer passes judgment on the victims much as an inquisitor would have. He is even going so far as to actually quote a 'Witch Hunting' manual known as the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

"His last two quotations have been the same and are as follows—'In accordance with the thirty-third question, in as much as you stand accused of the heresy of WitchCraft by another of your kind...'—This is what leads me to believe that he has been actively seeking to add heretics to his list."

"What does he mean 'thirty-third' question?" a female detective with close-cropped blonde hair queried.

"The *Malleus Maleficarum* is laid out as a series of questions with applied criteria," I explained. "An accused Witch or heretic would be put to these questions and convicted on the basis of the one that matched the closest. The thirty-third question for example is relative to the passing of sentence upon someone accused by another Witch who either has been, or is to be, burned at the stake. In this case, I would venture to guess that both Sheryl Keeven's and Kristine Webster's names were given to the murderer by Kendra Miller under the pain of torture. As you will note, her manner of execution was burning."

"So how is it that you know about these *questions*?" another detective asked as he poured over his handouts. "I don't see anything about that in the chain of evidence."

"That's part of why it's not so obvious," I answered him head on. "I saw it when I channeled the last moments of the victims lives."

"Oh," he returned. The look on his face told me that he wasn't sure if he should challenge me or keep quiet. I still don't know for sure why he elected to do the latter, but at that moment I could feel a large presence over my shoulder and knew that Ben was no longer leaning against his desk.

"So that explains the list," a voice interjected into the quiet. "Do you think he's just going right down the page, line by line?"

"That's the theory," I acknowledged. "He probably started by picking Brianna Walker because of her street moniker 'Wicked Witch of the West End.' She in turn gave him Kendra Miller's name and probably several others for that matter. Kendra Miller gave him even more... Let me just add that he undoubtedly has the names of every Witch in their coven because when asked who else they know that's a Witch, the obvious answer would be those they worship with. Of course, it is probably a safe bet that they gave him other names as well. I can't say for a fact at this time how he might be picking each successive victim from his list... It obviously doesn't appear to be alphabetical... But

starting at the beginning and working forward seems as logical as any. Be that as it may, I'm willing to bet he has plenty of names to work from because of the tortures he put the first two young women through.

"I'd also like to add a personal theory, and this one is just based on a feeling. I think that he's probably very overwhelmed by what he perceives as the sheer magnitude of an infestation of heretics. Every time he executes one, most likely two or more are added to his list. He's probably just trying to get rid of them as quickly as possible. Therefore, he may no longer be as interested in extracting names from them as he was in the beginning. This might also account for the lessened amount of torture, and it would certainly explain the little spree last night.

"Still, because of the nature of what he is doing, he will continue to demand names, and the list will just keep getting longer."

"So, whether he wants it to or not, the rolls keep growing, and in a sense the victims perpetuate the crimes by continuing to add names to the list," the blonde detective stated matter-of-factly.

"Unfortunately, yes," I agreed.

"You're right, it would explain the change in his pattern and definitely the sudden escalation," Agent Mandalay remarked from behind me. "If he feels that he's losing control, another spree could be just around the corner."

"Great," Detective Deckert muttered sarcastically then appealed, "Just how long is this crackpot's list?"

"Depends on how many names the previous victims gave him. And like I said, it just keeps growing," I offered the detail in answer. "Your guess is as good as anyone's. There is quite a large Pagan community in Saint Louis whether you know it or not. Just using myself as an example, while I certainly don't know every Witch in Saint Louis, I could probably name twenty-five without even thinking hard. If pressed, I might be able to give you a hundred. I'm sure Brianna, Kendra and Sheryl could have done the same.

"On that note, however, I would like to mention something else. I have made my case for the fact that this guy is after Witches or anyone he perceives to be one. As you know, last night, he deviated from that pattern when he killed Robert Webster. Now based on the facts at hand, I think we can all agree that Mister Webster was NOT on the list, especially since the Kristine Webster he was supposed to have gone after is unmarried. That would mean his death was purely unplanned, at least as far as the pattern has been established. Now unless I grossly misinterpreted the scene, I believe the killer is feeling some pretty heavy remorse over this."

"Enough to make him stop killing?" a voice asked.

"I think so. Not for long, mind you," I returned. "But, yes, I do feel that it might buy us a short reprieve. I would suggest we find him before he gets over it, however. I'm no psychologist, but I have a bad feeling that he is going to turn this guilt into anger and blame. When he does, I'm betting the blame will end up on the heads of Witches and Wiccans, and like Agent Mandalay said, another spree could be just around the corner. Maybe even worse than last night if he..."

Across the squad room the glass-paned door swung open, and a young, uniformed officer poked his head through. "Excuse me, Detective Storm?"

"Yeah, whatcha' need?" Ben looked up and across at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he proceeded, “but a unit just came in with an old bum they popped for an assault, and, well... I think you should come down and have a look.”

“What for?” Ben shot him an impatient frown.

“Well, when they searched him they found a Bible in his pocket with a passage highlighted.”

“What was the passage?” I asked.

“Exodus, twenty-two-eighteen.”

Stunned silence layered itself across the room in an almost stifling fog. Colors bloomed and flashed in a sparkling fireworks display that rained outward in slow motion. A distant ethereal scream shattered my ears.

*Liquid fire rushes down my throat.*

*I cannot scream.*

*The pain is piercing my very soul.*

*Why doesn't someone help me?*

The colors had begun to spiral back into themselves, and the imagined silence breaking shriek was fading steadily. I clung to the vision a moment longer, fearing it intensely, yet knowing that it had been triggered for a reason.

*I'm floating.*

*Flames lick at me from below.*

*I cannot feel them.*

*I CAN feel them.*

*I still cannot scream.*

*Something... Someone... A movement in the darkness.*

*An old man.*

*Stumbling.*

*Sudden horror in his eyes*

*Flames lick at me from below.*

Chroma, hue and sound completed their sudden wild pinwheel through the fold of the room and settled back to an even tone. The bloom faded and normalcy once again prevailed. The jangle of ringing phones filtered into my ears as if they had never been absent. I knew my brief excursion into another realm had been just that. Brief. I doubted anyone noticed other than myself.

“Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to live,” I recited aloud then glanced back at Ben. “I knew there should have been a Bible at the second scene... That has to be it... He was there...”

“Jeezus,” Ben muttered under his breath.

“Son of a bitch,” Deckert echoed behind him.

“And by the way, Mister Gant,” the uniformed officer added. “There’s a woman downstairs asking for you. Pretty redhead about so tall.” He held his hand up to illustrate. “Say’s she’s your wife. Seems she’s the one who tackled the guy and sat on him until the squad car arrived.”

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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:

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And on major social networking venues...

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