

M. R. SELLARS

PERFECT TRUST

10 FREE SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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A ROWAN GANT INVESTIGATION

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

10 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.

PERFECT TRUST: A Rowan Gant Investigation

An E.M.A. Mysteries CHAPTER SAMPLER

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For Chris, Jo-Jo, Eliot, Kat,
everyone on the hill that stormy afternoon,
the ladies at the Highway K canoe rental,
both sets of ambulance crews,
the doctors and nurses at Ellington Hospital,
the entire staff of Three Rivers Medical Center in Poplar Bluff,
and most especially Dr. James W. Gieselmann.

You all know why...

*Bide the Wiccan laws we must,
In perfect love and PERFECT TRUST.*

Couplet One
The Wiccan Rede
Lady Gwen Thompson
Original Printing—"Green Egg #69"
Circa 1975

Late February
Old Chain of Rocks Bridge
Saint Louis, Missouri

PROLOGUE

Eldon Andrew Porter was trying desperately to make sense of his current situation.

He knew that he shouldn't be unsteadily perched here on this cold steel girder high above the icy waters of the Mississippi river. He also knew that he shouldn't be forced to finish by hand a job meant for, and started by, a hangman's noose. But the most important thing he knew, without any sense of doubt, was that he was short on time.

What he *didn't* know was just how this peril had come to pass.

The thing that kept going through his mind was that this very simply was *not* how it was *supposed* to happen. Still, no matter how hard he tried he couldn't focus on exactly what had gone wrong.

Once again, he mulled through the last few events leading up to this particular moment in time.

He had lured the warlock to the bridge.

He had applied the razors of the Malleus Maleficarum, a mere formality as such, because by the warlock's own public actions and admissions he was quite obviously guilty of the sin of WitchCraft.

He had even applied the test of "pricking" in order to be certain of the accused one's guilt. Of course, the warlock had tried to deceive him in this test by screaming out in pain when the ice pick pierced his flesh, but Eldon knew this to be a ruse. A trick used by the impenitent sorcerer in order to avoid his due punishment.

He had not been fooled.

With the warlock's guilt proven, Eldon had then set forth the judgment as decreed by Almighty God and the Holy Church.

He had proceeded with the sentence by placing the noose about the man's neck and pronouncing his punishment as death by hanging. And finally, he had executed that sentence by throwing the warlock over the side of the bridge...

That should have been it. End of story. But something had gone quite terribly wrong.

Eldon was finding it hard to think, his head ached so miserably. As he mulled over the events yet again, he vaguely remembered that for some reason he had pitched over the railing himself. Somewhere within that ghostly memory he also recalled feeling a jarring impact against the steel girder that stopped his fall. Then, everything had faded to black.

The top of his head burned like fire whenever he touched it. There was a tortured spot on his scalp that seemed devoid of hair. It was damp and sticky and the wetness clung to his hand when he pulled it away. From its feel, he assumed it must be blood.

The raucous clamor of loud music blaring from the warlock's vehicle on the bridge above blended hesitantly with the eerie sounds of the ice-choked river. The cacophony was disconcerting, and when combined with the pain, it made it even harder for Eldon to concentrate.

"What could have gone wrong?" he wondered silently.

Again, he rewound the sketchy memories and thought through the scenario yet another time.

He had lifted the warlock upward, pronouncing the punishment as he did so. Then, straining against the man's weight, he had pushed his arms outward to thrust the condemned over the railing and into the foggy night.

It was then that his head suddenly began stinging.

His scalp had felt as if it was on fire, and he was instantly doubled forward against the railing himself. Gasping, he was deprived of the breath that had been forced from his lungs by the sudden crush against the blue and green steel barrier. The rest of it was a blur, and a split second later he had blacked out.

The fact that he had blacked out was troubling. He hadn't had any of those episodes for such a long time. Not since prison. He didn't even want to think that it could possibly be happening again. It had been years since he had blacked out, hadn't it?

Or had it only been months? He couldn't remember. The uncertainty forced him to consider another option. Could this predicament be his own fault? Had he simply fainted and fallen over the side?

No, he decided. There was something different at work here. There was the burning in his scalp. His episodes had never been preceded nor followed by pain, ever. This felt like someone had physically ripped the hair from his head.

But how could the warlock have done that?

His hands were bound.

He had tied the warlock's hands, hadn't he?

Surely he had done so.

The sudden rush of the real-time events brushed aside his fractured attempts at reasoning and flooded in to answer the question.

Eldon watched his hand as he sought to choke the life from the warlock hanging in front of him. He also watched, as well as felt, a smaller hand desperately clawing at his own bony fingers.

The warlock's hands weren't bound. They were free.

Had he been in such a rush that he had merely forgotten to bind the hands of the condemned?

No, he couldn't have been that careless. He refused to believe it. He wouldn't have forgotten to do so simple and necessary a task before hanging one accused of the heresy of WitchCraft.

Somehow the warlock had tricked him. He had conjured a glamour that made him believe he had completed the necessary tasks when in fact he had not.

But...that couldn't be. He should be immune to the conjurings of the demonic, for he was righteous in his path. This revelation was almost as disturbing to Eldon as the fact that the warlock still lived. He felt certain that it bore a need for inner reflection and perhaps even judgment upon one's self.

But not right now.

Not at this particular moment.

There was a more pressing judgment at hand.

Still, Eldon found himself unable to ignore the question of why the hangman's noose had *not* done its job...

In a burning fit of curiosity, he relinquished his single-handed grip around the man's throat for an ever so brief moment and quickly felt for the nylon rope.

It wasn't there!

In that fateful second, the warlock coughed and gasped, quickly sucking in the air he had previously been denied.

Through the darkness and fog, Eldon could just make out the rope stretched taut from the railing above, thinly scribing a tight line in the night to finally disappear behind the man's outstretched arm. He had thought perhaps the rope had merely twisted beneath the man's shoulder during the struggle, but now he knew this was not the case. The noose was cinched tight about the warlock's arm instead of his neck where it should have been. A triple twist of the rope serpentine around the man's appendage and trailed through his tightly clenched fist.

The warlock had managed to slip out of the noose and save himself. But he still couldn't avoid his final judgment. Eldon would see to that.

"It won't be long now," he thought, as he slipped his pale hand back around the man's throat and compressed it tight with a renewed urgency. Just a few more moments and the sentence will have been carried out.

The warlock would finally be dead.

He was sure he could feel his victim's windpipe starting to give way against the pressure of his long fingers. As his bony digits spasmed slightly from the force he was trying to exert, he was forced to stretch them quickly, fighting to keep his grip secure.

Warlock.

Witch.

Sinner.

Heretic.

Different words but all the same. This one—the warlock Rowan Gant—was himself evil incarnate. A minion of Satan set forth on this earth to do the bidding of the Dark Lord. Surreptitiously spreading the vileness of sin and debauchery among the lambs of Almighty God under the false guise of goodness and light.

Eldon could not allow it to go on. He could not allow those who worshipped the devil to remain among the righteous. Why no one could understand this was a fact he couldn't fathom. Why no one realized what was happening by allowing these appalling sinners to cast shadows upon the earth, frightened him.

But, it didn't matter.

He understood what needed to be done. He hadn't at first. Not for the longest time. He had been just like everyone else. In fact, he had been worse. He had committed sins that had eventually put him in prison. But his time there had been a hidden blessing. It was prison where he had learned of his true purpose in life. It was there he had learned he was a part of God's righteous army. It had taken that incarceration for him to discover he was chosen by God himself to eradicate the infestation of heresy.

There would be others to help him of course; of that he was sure. He needed only to find these brothers and sisters, and then together they would show everyone the true might of God.

The warlock was struggling. Not as much as he had at first, but he was still fighting. Now, something pressed upward from beneath Eldon's arm, cold and hard against the flesh of his wrist.

Puzzling.

It must be the warlock clawing at his hand again.

But this felt different. It didn't feel at all like the hand that had fought to pry against his fingers moments before.

This was cold.

Hard.

Metallic.

A sharp, chemical odor blended with the moist air to tease Eldon's nostrils. He knew that smell. Its pungent edge was painfully familiar to him.

Gun cleaning solvent.

In a panic he released his grip and rotated his arm quickly away. In that moment an explosion pierced his ears, and the muzzle of the handgun erupted with bright orange flame.

He just didn't rotate it quickly enough.



Harried voices barked commands with life and death urgency through the cold night air. The tinny bursts of police radios punctuated the sounds coming from the scene above, all mixed with the frenzied pace of the music. The activity sounded rushed but methodical.

Intense.

And all focused on the rescue of the warlock, Rowan Gant.

A strong voice filled with authority but edged with what sounded almost like fear, parted all other sounds to make room for itself. "Goddammit, somebody shut that fuckin' music off!"

After a moment, the frenetic instruments fell quiet, in comparison bringing what almost seemed to be silence to the landscape even though the voices and activity continued on unimpeded.

Fog was still clinging in a moist, grey shroud to anything and everything in its path, and most especially, to anyone. Eldon felt its clammy insistence as it pervaded his clothing, sending tendrils of cold dampness inward to chill him all the way past the bone and directly to the soul. Through his mist-soaked clothes, the cold metal of the girders pressed against him, mercilessly leeching the warmth from his body.

The sharp sting in his scalp, which had earlier occupied the foremost position in his list of unwanted sensations, had now taken a back seat to the fiery burn in his left arm. The bullet, which had been expelled at high velocity and point blank range, had ripped into the soft flesh of his wrist and fragmented in a diagonal trajectory along several inches of his forearm. He wasn't entirely sure, but judging from the amount of movement still left in the appendage, the wound involved only muscle and no bone.

Even so, it hurt like hell.

But he knew the fact that he was here, now, feeling the pain, was yet another of those hidden blessings, because it could have been far worse. In fact, it almost had been...

As the projectile had executed its damage upon his arm, Eldon pitched to the side, absenting himself from the precarious balance that once kept him planted on the supporting steel girder. With that tenuous stability gone, he had begun to fall.

To him, how he managed to keep from plunging into the ice-choked Mississippi river was nothing short of a miracle. As he howled in agony, his torso had slipped quickly through the open space between the girders, moving heavily downward beside the warlock. At almost the same instant, his knees slipped from the latticed girder in the exact opposite direction, landing his waist along its edge with a sound thud. Then, he had continued his rotation forward much like an out-of-control gymnast on the uneven parallel bars. Out of a purely reflexive survival instinct, he had sent his uninjured hand pawing frantically for anything he could grasp to break the fall. Through what, in his mind, could only have been divine intervention by God Himself, Eldon managed to entwine his fingers in the lattice on the underside of the steel beam. With the forward motion impeded, he came to a stop, folded dangerously over the support.

He hung there for a long moment, a mere foot away from the suspended warlock. He fully expected another shot to ring out and bring an end to him. But surely, Eldon thought, God would not save him from the icy plunge that would certainly have spelled death only to allow the warlock to execute his demise?

He had remained as still as he could, gritting his teeth against the pain while waiting for any movement from the condemned Witch.

None came.

It was a sign...it told him that he would not die at the hand of Satan. There was a much grander plan at work, and his time had not yet come. There was still far too much for him to do on this earth.

Even as the ringing in his ears began to subside, he heard the sirens in the distance, punching sharp holes in the still clamoring music from above—and they were growing closer with every heartbeat.

He wondered if the warlock might well be dead. Perhaps the pull of the trigger had been done with his last breath. Of course, it was more likely that he was simply unconscious. Whichever it was, there was no time to check now. The authorities would be arriving soon, and God had seen to it that he had survived thus far. He knew that escape was his only recourse at this point and that it would be entirely up to him. God would help him, but only if he helped himself.

And now, here he was, hiding in the dead space between the diagonal lattice of supporting girders and the deck of the bridge, intently listening to the activity above. He could feel a cramp forming along the muscles of his back as he used his shoulders to hold himself in place. His free hand was occupied with keeping pressure on the pulsing wound in his left forearm. He would need to make a tourniquet soon, that much was certain. He just hoped he would be able to do it in time because he had a feeling he was going to be here for a while.

The cold and the pain were already taking their toll. He wanted desperately to sleep but knew that he couldn't. He had to stay alert. He had to remain free.

He was positioned out of sight behind a diagonal upright support and beneath the deck of the bridge itself. If he kept himself still and quiet, he should be virtually undetectable. The detectives would most certainly piece together the visible evidence, and if so, they would

assume he had met his end among the muddy water and buckled ice floes below. The assumption would be logical, as it had very nearly been fact. Eldon prayed that they would draw this conclusion.

Through a small gap between the girders, he could make out the form of the warlock, still suspended by the rope only a few feet away. A second rope had already been thrown down, and it was obvious from the sounds of metal tinkling against metal that someone was being lowered at this very moment.

The commanding voice that had earlier demanded the music be quelled spoke again, thickly layered with concern. “Can ya’ tell if he’s alive?”

“Not yet,” a much closer voice called back. “Another couple of feet or so... Slowly... Okay... A little more... A little more... Okay... Hold it. Right there.”

Glimpses of someone outfitted in a climbing harness shone through the gap. Eldon pressed himself further into the shadows and held fast against the surge of pain in his arm.

No movement.

No noise.

He listened intently for the verdict, hoping against all hopes that his mission had been carried out to its conclusion. Praying that, by the grace of Almighty God, the warlock was dead.

His prayer went unanswered.

“He’s still alive!” the nearby voice called upward with momentous relief and then seemed to direct back upon the suspended figure. “Can you hear me, Mister Gant?”

The warlock lived.

Eldon had failed.

He closed his eyes and waited in silence. All that he could do now is make certain he escaped.



More than a dozen hours passed before the scene was finally clear, and he could safely extricate himself from his hiding place. Weak with cold, pain, and surely blood loss—even with the makeshift tourniquet bound tightly just above his elbow—Eldon made his way cautiously across the steel beams.

He was deeply chilled and felt clammy with the remnants of a cold sweat. His trousers were still damp and reeked of urine where hours ago he had finally been forced to empty his bladder while still wedged in his cramped hiding place. He felt degraded by the act of urinating on himself, but there had been no other choice.

The fog had long dissipated, and he could see the ice-packed river far below. A swift wave of vertigo touched him, and he held fast to the latticed girder. Several minutes later the wave of fear passed, replaced by his dire need to escape, and he continued his shaky climb.

Carefully, he pulled himself up and back over the railing to finally collapse on the concrete deck of the bridge.

He lay there for several minutes, breathing deeply and feeling the warmth of the sun’s rays soaking into his chilled body. He simply wanted to relax and rest after the constant strain of keeping motionless and stable on the cold steel beam for what had seemed a lifetime.

But rest was not an option.

At the beginning of the long night, he had made a promise to God. During the prolonged police search, each time the swath of a powerful flashlight came close, or the echo of footsteps on the bridge stopped immediately above his hiding place, he had reiterated that promise in full.

If he made it through—*if he remained free and survived his wounds*—he had promised he would not fail again.

Rowan Gant would die.

Ten Months Later
December 1
Saint Louis, Missouri

Heather Burke only half awoke, a substantial part of her remaining submerged in a state of semi-conscious anguish. As consciousness relentlessly crept in, among the heightened sensations to immediately register were a dry throat and a headache like no other she could remember in her thirty-three years. Rapidly following, and skirting the edges of the pain in complete disharmony, blind terror paralyzed her body. Her muscles were tensed, aching, and she felt clammy with cold sweat. Her heart was racing, and out of reflex she sucked in a sharp breath with a startled gasp.

Holding tight to that frantic gulp of air, she listened, waiting for the source of her terror to make itself known. But no matter how intently she focused, she heard nothing other than the beating of her own heart. Even so, she refused to expel the breath until she could simply hold it no longer. When that moment finally came, the only new sound to be added to the silence was that of her timid whimper.

She continued to wait while fighting to keep her breathing quiet and shallow. She desperately wanted to suck in the cool air as fast as she could, but something was out there. Something fearful in the darkness and she didn't want it to find her. She felt like she was seven years old again and hiding from the boogey man of her childhood nightmares.

Her mind trudged through a thick fog as she tried to center on just exactly what it was she feared so much. Each passing thought bringing her closer to the surface of consciousness. Her muscles finally began to relax as the wakefulness blossomed from half to full, though the murkiness that obscured her thoughts remained.

And, so did the fear.

Heather's head was throbbing in agonizing pulses. This was a mother of a migraine, she thought. No, she decided after a moment, it wasn't just a mother. This was the great matriarch of the entire clan. It had to be the very one that had spawned all the others throughout history, and it had apparently elected to go into labor inside her skull.

Slowly, bracing herself against the still unknown terror, she opened one eye. It seemed as though it took forever before she stopped squinting and allowed herself to see. As her blurry vision adjusted, she took note of the gradient blue-black shadows slicing angular paths through the room.

Nothing moved...

Nothing leapt at her from the darkness...

Nothing.

She allowed herself to relax a little more.

Letting her monocular gaze roam, she scanned the room. Her eyeball hurt as she moved it, and she realized quickly both of them were sore and itching. They felt gritty and allergic, like something foreign had invaded their sanctity. She blinked hard, but the feeling remained.

At least what she saw was intimately familiar, shrouded by darkness though it was. There was the TV in the corner with a cheap plastic, tabletop Christmas tree sitting on top of it. The second hand papa-san chair was sitting catty-cornered from her—a basket of wrinkled, to-be-folded-someday clothing occupying it as usual. Everything looked just like it normally did whenever she was sprawled out on her couch in sofa-spud mode.

And to her relief, there was still nothing there that shouldn't be.

This was definitely her apartment, and she found that comforting. However, something still wasn't right about it all, and although it was continuing to dull, she just couldn't fully shake the feeling of terror deep down in the pit of her stomach.

Giving in to a sudden attack of bravery, she moved to sit up, and pain lanced through the center of her head from back to front. She eased herself back down and lay perfectly still, not wanting to further aggravate the troll with the jackhammer that was apparently excavating inside her brain.

This was not good at all. It was unnerving. Along with the pain, there was an increasingly desperate feeling of disorientation, as if the fog of sleep had given way only to be replaced by another obscuring mist in wakefulness.

Between staccato bursts of agony, Heather took mental inventory, searching to put her finger on a reason for the headache. It felt a little like a hangover, but not exactly, and she didn't remember doing any drinking last night. In fact, she didn't remember much of anything at all from last night. She remembered leaving work, driving home, and then...

Then what?

She didn't know. She concentrated for a minute but gave up almost immediately when she realized that it only served to make the pain worse.

Her tongue felt thick. She swallowed hard, and the dryness in her throat formed a lump that hesitated for a moment before painfully making its way downward.

She tried to approach the situation from a different angle. She could see that it was dark. So maybe that meant it was still last night...or tonight...or whatever...night, anyway. Hopefully it wasn't already tomorrow night. No, it couldn't be. Could it?

It made her brain hurt too much to think about it, so she gave up again.

"Oh man," she muttered. "This sucks big time."

She waited, considering how apropos the statement was. Eventually, there was a temporary lull in the migraine, and she gave thinking another shot.

She was at home, that much was for certain, but she couldn't quite remember how she had arrived here or even when. She wasn't even sure if she could really remember the last thing she remembered. Now wasn't that a kick?

So, she was at home, on her couch, and it was dark. In the overall scheme of things, that really wasn't much to go on. But at least she was at *her* home, and she hadn't gotten drunk and gone home with some sleazy bar asshole. *Or had she?*

A different kind of fear rippled through her abdomen. *Had she screwed up, gotten trashed, and brought some dumbass home with her?* God! She hoped not! If only she could remember.

Without thinking, she lifted her arm to check her watch and regretted it instantly. A new ache added itself to the growing list, this one taking the form of a burning soreness in the vicinity of her ribcage. It seemed isolated to her left side, for the moment at least.

Opening both eyes this time, she struggled to focus on the face of her wristwatch. Fumbling with her free hand, she managed to press the button to illuminate the digital timepiece, although she was fairly certain that said button had always been on the opposite side from where she finally found it. Centered in the eerie blue glow, she watched as the liquid crystal flickered from something that looked like the number 91 followed by the letter E, to suddenly become the word L I: E.

The jumble of LCD segments made little sense to Heather's clouded mind, and she blinked several times, trying unsuccessfully to get a clearer picture. The digits still read L I: E.

"Lie?" she mused aloud, her voice hoarse and thick. "What the? Awww, screw it..."

The fear had finally become a faded shadow of what it had been a few minutes before, and she told herself that her earlier flashback to childhood must have been dead on. She probably just had a nightmare. She gritted her teeth and pushed upward once again until she was in a sitting position. Swinging first one leg, then the other, over the edge of the cushions, she let her feet touch the floor, then she leaned forward. Elbows on her knees, she cradled her head in her hands and massaged her temples.

The big question on her mind now was whether or not a nightmare could make you forget what you had done when you were conscious.

After something just short of forever, she stood and almost immediately fell. With a grimace she kicked off her heels, absently wondering why she hadn't bothered to do so earlier. "Of course, since I can't remember much of anything else, why should I be surprised?" she thought.

Heather stumbled through her apartment toward the bathroom on a single-minded quest for aspirin. If she could make the pain go away then maybe she could concentrate. Surely she would be able to remember how she got here. People don't just lose entire chunks of time out of their lives, except maybe in those alien abduction movies.

"Yeah, right," she laughed as she mumbled to herself. "Get real, Heather. You *weren't* abducted by aliens."

Her fingers found the light switch automatically and flicked it on. She squinted and turned her head away as the sudden flood of luminance assaulted her. She groaned audibly and wondered why her entire body seemed to ache. Flu, maybe? That could be it, she thought. Flu, fever, and the whole nine yards. Yeah, maybe that was the explanation.

Still squinting, she looked up and reached for the medicine chest over the sink. Through slit eyes she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and gasped.

Her shag of blonde hair was an absolute mess, but that wasn't what startled her most. Bright crimson smears streaked across her mouth, and her face looked splotchy, uneven. It was as if someone had haphazardly wiped away layers of heavy makeup. Reddish-purple bruises stood out against the pale skin of her neck, almost as if they were glowing.

The visual trigger set hidden memories in motion, and it was at this very moment that the source of her earlier fear called out from the secret places inside her skull where they had been laying in wait.

The parking lot...

The pain in her side like an electric shock...

The medicinal bitterness on the back of her tongue...

The darkness...

The feeling of helplessness as rough hands groped her without apology...

A deep feeling of violation bludgeoned her now. She backed away from the mirror as the earlier terror returned full force. Hot tears were already streaming along her cheeks, and she soon found her back pressed against the tiled wall. She allowed herself to slide down to the floor and hugged her knees against her chest even though it hurt like hell.

Heather Burke sat on the cold floor and sobbed for a solid hour before finally summoning the courage to drive herself to the hospital.



“Did you already do a rape kit?” Detective Charlene McLaughlin asked before taking a cautious slug of her hot drink.

She was still working on a chai latte from the corner stop ‘n grab she had hit on the way here and was already regretting it. She knew better than to be adventurous and try something new this morning. She should have just stuck with her regular large coffee—two creams, four sugars. That way she would have known exactly what to expect. Charlee hated surprises, and what was in her cup this morning definitely fell into that category. What was worse, it wasn’t of the good variety.

Everyone called her Charlee. Some even shortened it to Chuck, but only if they knew her very well. Even fewer people actually called her Charlene, mostly because it just didn’t seem to go with the overall picture. Petite and sporting an ash blonde pageboy coif, she could almost always be found wearing jeans and running shoes. Given her tomboyish appearance and tough demeanor, the moniker just seemed to fit.

Before her recent transfer to the sex crimes unit, she had been assigned to City Homicide. Among that close knit group of cops, there had actually been a running bet that she didn’t even own a dress or skirt. Catching wind of it, she’d made a deal to split the pool with an office worker then showed up one day wearing a nicely tailored skirt and jacket ensemble. She’d been totally uncomfortable the entire day and vowed to never again wear pantyhose for as long as she lived, but it had been more than worth the looks on their faces—the hundred bucks cash she got from the split was just icing on the cake. She never did tell them that she’d had to borrow the outfit from a friend.

This morning she was dressed in her usual. A well-worn leather bomber jacket fit over her torso, hanging just loose enough to hide the nine-millimeter Beretta riding in a shoulder rig beneath her left arm. Her badge was clipped on her belt, visible, but unobtrusive.

“The nurse is finishing up with her now.” The doctor nodded as they walked, answering her query about the kit before adding, “We called it in as soon as she arrived.”

Generic instrumental Christmas music was filtering softly in from overhead to mix with the ambient sounds of the ER. It wasn’t doing much to lift Charlee’s spirits though. She had been on edge with an itchy, nervous kind of energy for over a week now. She’d had the feeling before and she’d known what was coming—this. The truth is, she’d been fully expecting this call ever since that second case file hit her desk, and she’d been dreading it all the while. Now that it was here, the dread wasn’t subsiding.

“Good, good,” Charlee nodded as she absently took another swig of the latte then screwed up her face. *Yeah, this stuff was definitely an unpleasant surprise.* Trying to ignore the bizarre taste in her mouth, she asked, “Get anything?”

“Unfortunately, not much.”

“Did she wait?”

The doctor had traveled this road before and immediately understood the meaning behind the question. “No, not long. She said it had only been an hour or so since she regained consciousness. She’s a smart girl. She had enough wits about her not to shower or clean up, so there’s definitely evidence of the rape. We did collect semen, and that will be on its way to the lab shortly.”

“So she was unconscious? I’m already not liking the sound of this, Doc. You get pictures?”

“The regular routine, yes,” he returned. “But she wasn’t really abused. There are a few bruises, but it seems to profile almost like a date rape.”

“This may sound crass, but what I wouldn’t give for a simple date rape right now... She say whether she can ID the guy?”

“She can’t remember anything other than that she thinks she was attacked in the parking lot of her apartment complex.”

“She *thinks* she was attacked?”

“She appears to be suffering from anterograde amnesia. Possibly drug induced.”

“Yeah, that actually fits.” Charlee nodded as she spoke, her mood darkening even more as the conversation progressed. “Blood test?”

“Of course. We’ll screen for Benzodiazepines. Rohypnol, GHB, etcetera.”

They came to a stop outside the door of the treatment room.

“This’ll probably sound strange, but how about hickeys? She have any of those?”

“Actually, yes, there are a few large hematoma on her neck,” he answered with a hint of surprise.

“I was afraid of that. Okay, let me see if I can bat a thousand here,” she continued. “This woman is in her early to mid-thirties, petite, and blonde—Am I right?”

“Of course, but don’t try to tell me that you are psychic, Detective,” the doctor returned. “We gave all of that information when we called it in.”

“Yeah, well that information is exactly why *I’m* here instead of a uniform.”

The significance behind Charlee’s comment was in no way lost on the doctor. He acknowledged it with a simple nod and a query of his own, “Serial rapist?”

“You didn’t hear that from me. Not yet, anyway, but let’s just say I’ve got two case files just like it on my desk right now. In my book, two makes it a suspicious coincidence. Three makes it a pattern.”

“I see,” he nodded thoughtfully and motioned to the door. “Well, she’s in here. If you need anything else you can have the nurse page me.”

“Hey, Doc,” she addressed him as he turned to go.

“Yes, Detective?”

“You going past a restroom or a sink?”

“Most likely, why?”

Charlee held out the almost full cup of chai latte to him. “Do me a favor and dump this crap, will’ya?”

CHAPTER 1

Overwhelming violation saturated my very being. I hated the feeling, but I clung to it like a piece of flotsam in a raging flood because it was very simply all I had to keep me afloat.

Waking up in a cold sweat seemed to be the norm for me as of late. When it first started, it had only been once every few days, maybe twice at most. Now it was rare for a week to pass without it happening three or even four times. Recently I'd even had an incident where it occurred twice in one night. The lack of a decent night's rest was taking a measurable toll, and I was definitely feeling the effects.

More often than not I spent my waking hours on autopilot, fueled by bitter coffee and an almost constant, insatiable desire for a cigarette. Considering that I'd quit smoking—well, except for an occasional cigar—somewhat over a year ago, I found the craving more than a bit unusual. Thus far, I'd managed to keep it in check with nicotine gum, but I wasn't sure how long that would last. The need was beginning to achieve absolutely ridiculous proportions.

Of course, one could easily imagine that after surviving a run-in with a crazed serial killer, nightmares would be expected. The problem was that I'm not exactly sure you could call these events nightmares; this is not to mention the fact that they hadn't even begun until several months after the fact. On top of that, the episodes weren't about my brush with death at all. At least I don't think they were.

To tell the truth, I couldn't really be certain what they were about.

The bald facts were that I would wake up in a cold sweat with my heart pounding in a furious attempt to escape the confines of my chest. My mind would be a jumble of nothingness, and I would be incapable of pinning down a single thought. That, in and of itself, brought on sudden panic. I had always been very cognizant of my dreams and night terrors, remembering them in vivid detail. It went way beyond troubling for me to suddenly be devoid of that clarity.

And then there was this inexplicable feeling of violation.

All of it together was bad enough, but there was something even worse happening—I wasn't always waking up in my bed. Sometimes I would find myself sprawled on the living room floor. Other times, it might be the kitchen. One time, I had even awakened lying next to my truck on the cold concrete of my garage. I can personally guarantee you that is definitely not a place you want to find yourself half-naked in the middle of winter.

I think perhaps that was the incident that frightened me most. Upon gathering my wits, I had even felt the hood of the truck to see if it was warm. It wasn't, but it hadn't really meant much since I had no clue how long I'd been lying there. For all I knew, the truck could have had plenty of time to cool down. Of course, as cold as it was, I wasn't suffering from hypothermia, so my only assumption could be that it really hadn't been for very long. The only thing that finally quelled my panic to any extent, however, was the fact that the fuel gauge hadn't appeared to have budged. So most likely I hadn't been

driving in my sleep, but if I had, then at least I hadn't gone far. Still, the not knowing was a threatening cloud that had been hanging over me ever since.

Other than the sensation of debasement, there was one constant in all this I was able to grasp, that being no matter where I awoke it was always with a very particular sort of pain. It was always localized, though not always in the same place. Sometimes it would be in my side, sometimes my back. Another time it had been on my shoulder. Wherever it occurred on my body though, it was always the same savage burning sensation. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, depending on your point of view, it would always fade away within a handful of minutes and there would be no visible evidence with which to identify its cause.

The fear and panic brought on by all these constants was a different story. They took quite a bit longer to subside.

So far, I'd managed to keep these incidents to myself while I tried to figure out just what they were all about. However, the increased frequency was making them much harder to keep a secret. Unfortunately, my wife was bound to find out soon, and she wouldn't be happy about it. She knew as well as I that when these kinds of things started happening to a Witch—*especially me*—something beyond terrible was about to make itself known in spades.

And as usual, I was going to be right in the middle of it.

Either that or I was finally going completely insane. Given my recent history, I had to wonder if that might be the preferable option.



As neighborhood diners go, Charlie's Eats at the corner of Seventh and Chouteau was just about as boilerplate as you could get. Housed in the renovated and whitewashed cinder block remnants of a long-closed gasoline station, *Chuck's*, as it was affectionately labeled by the regular patrons, was busy 24/7. Being located well within the Saint Louis city limits and not terribly far from police headquarters, it was also a regular hangout for cops. There were two favorites, *Chuck's*, and *Forty*, which was directly across the street from headquarters. Word among the cops I knew was that *Forty* was the place for a quick sandwich or greasy burger. *Chuck's* was where you wanted to go for something served on a plate—and to flirt with the waitress.

Whatever the case, time of day wasn't even a factor, as the greasy spoon never seemed to be at a lack for a uniform at the counter or occupying a booth. Whether it was one officer or several coming off duty or just taking a meal break, there was always a blue shirt nearby. The small parking lot even had a pair of spaces reserved just for city police cruisers.

I took a quick right from Seventh Avenue into the entrance of the lot and then slowly cajoled my truck between the rear end of an old station wagon and a slightly canted utility pole. As I tucked my vehicle into the first available space, the sun was just beginning to peek up over the jagged horizon that was East Saint Louis, Illinois. Now that it was filtering across the Mississippi river in a glittery band, it momentarily bathed the city in that indefinable yellow-orange glow that immediately precedes the actual dawn of the day. The eerie kind of color that occurs only in nature, and then, fleetingly—a shade of the light spectrum that will never be found in a box of crayons nor be captured in exactness by any artist, no matter how talented.

As it always did, the glow rose quickly in intensity to become a full-fledged sunrise, raising several visual octaves from the chalky orange to bright yellow-white. I gave a quick glance around the parking lot and spotted a tired-looking Chevrolet van which I knew from first hand experience was nowhere near as decrepit as it appeared. The vehicle's owner was the reason I had made this early morning trek into the city from the outlying suburbs where I lived, and since I couldn't see him through the windshield, it was a safe bet that he was already inside the diner.

I switched off the truck and levered the door open, tucking my keys into my pocket as I got out. A crisp breeze was blowing and the temperature was holding steady for the moment at a brisk 42 degrees Fahrenheit. According to the radio, the high for the day was expected to be somewhere around 65. Considering that it had been in the mid 20's on Thanksgiving day with snow flurries, this was about par for the course. It was December in Saint Louis, and it was as unseasonably unpredictable as it could get.

I locked my vehicle, even though it was probably unnecessary considering that there were two police cruisers on the lot, not to mention that the person I was here to meet was a city homicide detective. Security around here definitely wasn't much of an issue, but locking up was a habit, and a good one at that.

I yawned as I started around toward the front of the building. Even though for all intents and purposes I was a morning person, I had been dragging a bit when I climbed out of bed on this particular day. I had been up late working on a piece of software for a client of my home-based computer consulting business. I couldn't complain, really. I got to work from home and set my own hours. No neckties, no suits, and I did fairly well pulling down a decent enough living for my wife and me. And with her being an in-demand freelance photographer, we were actually living fairly comfortably. Still, I'd be forced to pull a late night every now and then, and last night happened to be one of the *thens*.

I'll admit though, in this instance it had been less by absolute need and more by choice. With what had been happening to me lately, I wasn't in any real hurry to go to bed. Don't get me wrong, sleep was definitely something I had a strong desire to embrace, but I preferred to wake up in the same place I started, sans the pain, panic, and profanation. These days that was a game of chance with the odds stacked in someone—or something—else's favor.

I stifled another yawn as I rounded the corner of the building and dodged an exiting patron with a mumbled "Sorry, excuse me." Coffee, bacon, eggs, sausage, toast, and a host of other *breakfasty* smells enveloped me in a warm, olfactory hug as I grabbed the handle of the glass-fronted door before it could fully close, then tugged it open, and stepped inside the small diner. My ears were filled with the murmurs of ongoing conversations between patrons, liberally punctuated with throaty chuckles, clanging utensils, and barked food orders—all of which were underscored by the sizzle and pop of items on the hot griddle.

Directly in front of me was a Formica-sheathed counter complete with vinyl-capped stools bolted to the floor before it and the busy grill behind. Around the perimeter were small booths, the cushioned seats of which were covered with the same obnoxious red vinyl as the stools. A clear Plexiglas enclosure occupied one end of the lunch counter, and its shelves were piled with donuts on their way to being stale. A squat cash register took up residence at the opposite end.

Aged but carefully lettered signs posted on the wall offered such things as "Bottomless Cups of Coffee" and "Slingers" to go—a local indulgence involving among other things,

hash browns, eggs, and chili. A sheet of paper was laminated to the back of the cash register with strips of once clear, but now severely yellowed, packing tape. Judging from the fuzzy edges and lack of clarity, it was obviously a photocopy of a photocopy to the power of ten at least. But it was still readable, and posted in plain sight it boasted: *These Premises Protected by Smith and Wesson.*

It took only a quick survey of the scene to spot my friend in a booth at the back corner. Of course, it would have been hard to miss him, considering that he was most likely the tallest individual in the room with the possible exception of the cook manning the grill. At the moment, however, he was certainly the only full-blooded Native American present. Shrugging off my jacket, I made my way toward him, my progress impeded for a short time as I did a quick box step in the narrow aisle with a young coffeepot-wielding waitress. With the dance and a quick apology out of the way, I hooked around the end of the counter and traversed the scuffed tile floor to the corner booth.

“Heya, Kemosabe,” Detective Benjamin Storm greeted me as I slid into the seat opposite him.

“Yo, Tonto,” I returned before stifling yet another yawn.

“Long night? Ain’t you usually the early bird.”

“Yeah, usually.” I nodded then explained. “I picked up a new client, so I had quite a bit of customizing and data conversion to do for them, so I was up pretty late.”

I wasn’t about to tell him that the project was something I could have easily done during regular business hours. He had a tendency to worry about me just as much as my wife, and if I told him what had been happening lately, I would end up having both of them to deal with. Besides, something told me that it was all going to come to the surface soon enough, so I was going to make the best of what peace I had left.

“Decent cash?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s a pretty good account,” I answered.

“Good deal.”

“Coffee, sir?” The young woman who’d done the two-step with me moments ago appeared stealthily at our table, a Pyrex globe of the black liquid in each hand. They were distinguished, as usual, only by the green or orange pour spout.

“Don’t call ‘im sir,” Ben quipped with a chuckle. “He’ll get a big head.”

“What’s wrong? Are you jealous?” she asked him before returning her attention to me. “Sir? Coffee?”

“Absolutely,” I answered, instantly turning the heavy mug in front of me upright and sliding it toward her. “Regular, please.”

She deftly filled the mug, pouring expertly from the side of the pot, then topped off Ben’s in the same fashion. “You guys ready to order, or do you want a few minutes?”

“I’m ready.” Ben looked over at me and raised a questioning eyebrow. “How ‘bout you, Row?”

“Uhhh,” I muttered as I pulled a single page menu encased in well-worn laminate from behind the napkin holder and gave it a quick once over. “How about...a number three, over-easy, wheat, and a side of biscuits with sausage gravy.”

“Ewwww, runny eggs? Don’t you know you can get sick from those,” she said as she wrinkled her nose.

“Wendy ain’t ‘actly the most tactful person when it comes to ‘er opinions,” my friend expressed.

“Oh, shut up, Storm,” she chastised him with the same good-natured familiarity of her earlier jab, which told me he was a regular here just as I’d suspected. Then turning back to me, she offered, “How about you have scrambled instead?”

“Would that make you feel better?” I asked with a grin.

“Yes. Yes it would.”

“Okay, scrambled is fine.”

“You want cheese on those?”

“Sure.”

“Cheddar, American, or Monterey Jack?”

“Hmmm, do I want cheddar?” I asked her with a bit of hesitation.

“Yes, you do. Good choice.” She smiled. “Now, what about you, Storm? I guess you want your usual?”

“Yeah.” He nodded and flashed a quick grin her way.

“You’re in a rut, Storm,” she told him with a grin of her own as she turned and headed back up the short aisle.

“Hey, Wendy,” Ben called after her, a good-natured tone underscoring his words. “Tell Chuck I said don’t be so friggin’ stingy with the onions this time.”

He had purposely spoken loud enough to be heard by virtually anyone in the diner but most especially the fry-cook. His answer came as a grumble and a mock threatening wave of a spatula from the large man behind the grill. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, Storm. Yer always complainin’ about somethin’.”

The exchange was met with a few lighthearted chuckles from some of the other regulars in the diner, along with some additional friendly jibes. Chuck finally laughed then threw up his hands in an imitation of surrender, announcing in the process, “Hey, if youse don’t like it, go eat somewheres else.”

The restaurant settled quickly back into its morning routine, leaving our booth in a quiet wake.

“Okay,” I finally said after taking a healthy swig of coffee and giving Ben a solemn look. “So what’s up? It’s been my experience that when you offer to buy me a meal, something is going on, and it’s usually not good.”

“Hey,” he feigned insult. “Did’ya ever think I might just wanna buy ya’ breakfast and visit with ya’?”

I nodded. “It crossed my mind, but then reality got in the way.”

“Jeez, white-man.”

“So, am I wrong?” I asked. “Is this just social? If so, I apologize.”

He sat mute, took a sip of his coffee, and then stared out the slightly fogged window next to us for a moment before turning back to me. “Well, no, but it ain’t necessarily a bad thing. *Maybe*.”

“Okay.” I shrugged. “So what is it, *maybe*?”

He sent his large hand up to the back of his neck and gave it a quick massage as a mildly troubled expression panned across his features. After a moment he reached down into the seat next to him and brought his hand back up with what looked like an oversized index card in it.

“Porter, Eldon Andrew,” my friend told me succinctly, tossing the name out as a raw fact for me to digest.

“Sounds like a beer,” I replied.

“Just look at the picture,” he returned as he handed over the black and white mug shot.

I took the card and stared at the muddy grey tones of the photo as I leaned back in my seat, feeling a slight wince of pain in my shoulder in the process. The twinge might very well have been psychological, but the surgery to repair the joint and its associated musculature was still less than a year old. If I could believe the doctor, whom I had no reason to doubt, an occasional pain wouldn't necessarily be all that unusual for a while yet.

I suppose that when you consider all the facts, a minor pain should actually be welcome. I mean, first, a madman bent on ushering me across into the world of death rams an ice pick into my left shoulder. Nearly up to the handle... Twice... Planting it firmly into bone on the second plunge I might add. And, if that weren't enough, I ended up plummeting off the side of a bridge, only to have the very same shoulder forcibly dislocated by the sudden stop at the end of the fall. Of course, I suppose I should be thankful that the rope held, or the sudden stop would have been farther down and more along the line of fatal. And finally, I proceeded to hang from the damaged joint while the crazed serial murderer attempted to finish the job he'd started. I was lucky to even be alive, much less to still have the arm intact and functioning.

Still, looking at the photo that was officially labeled Texas Department of Corrections brought that night back to the forefront of everything with painful clarity. A finger of acidic fear tickled the pit of my stomach, threatening to invoke nausea. I ignored it and continued to stare at the picture.

The countenance depicted in the photograph was younger than I recalled and lacking the greasy shag of white hair that had framed it earlier this year. In fact, in the photo his head was shaved. His cheeks were fuller, and though the picture was black and white, one could tell from the grey scale tones that his complexion held a healthy color. The gaunt mask I had faced ten months before had been almost devoid of such pigment, appearing pasty and ghostly white in pallor—the color of death. Even so, his eyes hadn't changed at all. Dark and sunken, almost hidden in their deeply shadowed sockets, they burned with a furious malevolence. Just as they had done when I stared into them months ago.

When last I had seen this face, it had been firmly attached to the ice pick wielding lunatic.

The self-proclaimed Witch hunter...

The modern day, self-appointed inquisitor with a singular purpose—to eradicate from the world those he perceived as heretics. Being a Witch, and a male one at that, I matched up easily with his set of criteria for those belonging on his hit list.

He had managed to kill six others before getting to me, two of them not even actual Pagans. Why he had not yet killed again, I was at a loss to explain.

If you asked the authorities why—even the cop sitting across from me now that I call my best friend—you would be told that it was because he was dead.

You would be told that I had shot him in self-defense, perhaps mortally, though no one could be sure. And even if the wound was not fatal, it didn't matter because he had then fallen to his certain death from the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge into the ice-laden Mississippi river.

That was the official story. But I knew better.

Yes, I will admit that I had most definitely shot him. However, I fired the round into the arm he was using to try to choke me to death. And while there was plenty of solid evidence that I had not missed when I pulled the trigger, something told me that the wound wasn't

nearly so grievous as others believed. That same something also told me that he did not in fact fall into the river that night, but instead, escaped.

How? I couldn't begin to tell you, but it was a feeling far in the back of my head. One of those sensations that begins as a slight itch that can't be quelled by any means and then quickly grows into a fearful foreboding. The kind of mysterious intuition you just don't ignore—especially if you are a Witch.

I think I might have breathed an inner sigh of relief while I stared at the picture. I had fully expected Ben to produce a case file or crime scene photo from beneath the table that would somehow tie into my current unexplained somnambulist excursions. On second thought, the sigh might not have been only one of relief but of disappointment as well. I really did need to figure out what was going on, and the sooner the better.

"I've been carryin' that damn thing around for a week," my friend told me, gesturing toward the photo. "I wasn't sure if I should even show it to ya' or not."

I could sense the concern in his voice, and the careful way in which he was watching me was physically palpable. I looked up from the mug shot and noticed that his jaw was held with a grim set. This expression wasn't a hard one for him to achieve, what with his deeply chiseled features and dusky skin that visually announced his full-blooded Native American heritage. Even sitting, he was better than a full head taller than me. Standing, he measured six-foot-six and was built like an entire defensive line. The nine-millimeter tucked beneath his arm in a shoulder rig and the gold shield clipped to his belt made him appear just that much more formidable.

His hand went up to smooth back a shock of his coal black hair and lingered once again at his neck, a mannerism that told anyone who knew him that he had something on his mind.

"You worry too much," I said as I dropped my eyes back to the photo.

"Yeah, you keep sayin' that, but I know how ya' are," he returned.

He was correct. He did know how I was. Until recently, he knew most of the details—though certainly not all—of the nightmares I had experienced, both during and after the investigations surrounding two separate serial killers. Both of which had terrorized Saint Louis in the span of less than one year. He had personally witnessed me involuntarily channeling the victims—and their horrific ends. He had even saved my life in both instances when I had recklessly taken on the killers myself.

He was fully aware of the emotional toll the investigations, and especially the supernatural elements of them, had taken on me. I had been affected on many levels. Because of this and his deep loyalty as a friend, he worried more about my mental health than I did. The fact that I had only become involved in the cases at his request played more than a small part in it as well.

"I'm not going to wig out on you, Ben," I returned in a fully serious tone. "I'm okay."

"Yeah, but all that *Twilight Zone* shit you go through..." he let his voice trail off.

"Really, Ben. I'm fine," I offered and then changed back to the subject at hand. "How did you find out who he is? I thought the evidence was inconclusive, and there were no identifiable fingerprints in his van. Besides, it's been almost a year now."

"Dumb fucking luck," he answered. "A coupl'a weeks ago, County got a call from a distraught woman babblin' about somethin' she found in her basement. Turns out she was the owner of the house where this wingnut was doin' his thing."

"Oh yeah?"

“Yeah, no shit. Right outta the blue. The house was a piece of rental property she’d inherited. She lives outta state, and it was hung up in probate for a while, so she didn’t even know he was livin’ there. She thought it was vacant. Anyhow, the legal BS finally got cleared up, and then she got around ta’ comin’ inta town ta’ get it fixed up for sale. Well, when she starts cleanin’ up, guess what she finds in the basement? The fuckin’ *holy torture chamber*. The shrine, the candles, all of it. Everything just like you described from that vision thing ya’ had. Even found a copy of that book ya’ kept talkin’ about.”

“The *Malleus Maleficarum*?” I offered, referencing the fifteenth century Witch hunting manual the killer had adopted as his manifesto.

“Yeah, that’s the one.” He nodded. “So anyway, the copper that took the call gets a hinky feelin’ and calls Deckert over at County Homicide. He goes and has a look, then calls me before he even leaves the place.”

Carl Deckert was a mutual friend who had also been assigned to the Major Case Squad during the investigation. He was intimately familiar with the case, and I’m sure that when he’d seen the basement of that house it had set off more than one alarm.

“So, why didn’t you call *me*?”

“For the same goddamn reason I’ve been packin’ that friggin’ mug shot around for a week,” he explained. “I wasn’t so sure it was somethin’ you needed ta’ see.”

“You’re being overprotective, Ben.”

“So sue me. Hell, I’m still not so sure I should be showin’ it to ya’ now.” He sighed and then added, “Why do ya’ think I’m doin’ it here instead of droppin’ by your place?”

“Because you don’t want Felicity to know about it,” I returned, knowing for certain that he was alluding to my wife.

“Zactly.” He nodded. “After everything that happened, I promised ‘er I’d keep some distance between you and the cop shit. She finds out and she’ll pull ‘er damn face off.”

“She’s being overprotective too.”

“He looks real pleasant,” a feminine voice came from behind me, interrupting us before Ben could object further. I looked up to see that the waitress had reappeared at our table and was looking at the mug shot over my shoulder. “Number three, scrambled with cheddar,” she continued un-fazed and slid a plate in front of me. “...And a side of biscuits with sausage gravy.”

“Thanks.” I smiled at her while laying the card to the side, face down and out of sight. I suspect it was just a reflex on my part, as she didn’t seem bothered by the photo at all. With the diner being a cop hangout, she’d probably seen and heard more than her share of things like this—probably even worse.

“Kitchen sink omelet with chili and extra onions.” She stressed the word *extra* as she planted a steaming plate before Ben with a wide grin. “Anything else I can get you two? More coffee?”

“We’re good. Thanks, Wendy,” Ben answered.

As was my habit, I took a moment to twist the cap off of the pepper shaker and liberally blacken my scrambled eggs while Ben watched, and then I returned the condiment to its original state before offering it to him.

“Jeezus, Row. That stuff’ll kill ya’,” he told me as he accepted the glass shaker but set it aside without using it.

“And what’s on your plate won’t?” I countered. “So anyway,” I continued, pointing toward the card with my fork. “That’s him all right. It’s an old picture, but it’s him.”

“Yeah, when we compared it to the sketch that was made from your description, there was pretty much no doubt. We found enough good prints in the house ta’ get a match through AFIS, and in no time we had ‘is file from the TDC. Seems ‘e was a guest of the Lone Star state for a few years. Once we had the file, everything fell inta place. Blood type, all that jazz.”

“What was he in prison for?”

“Aggravated assault and manslaughter,” he stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

“So have you notified NCIC or put out an APB or whatever acronym it is that you law enforcement types like to do?”

“A BOLO? What for?” He shrugged.

“So you can *be on the look out* for the guy, maybe?” I stated incredulously. “I’m assuming that’s what BOLO means?”

“Yeah, that’s what it means...But Jeez, Row, you ain’t gonna start that again, are ya’? The asshole is dead.”

“Did you ever find a body?” I demanded.

“No. So what?” he asked, but he didn’t wait for an answer. “He’s suckin’ mud on the bottom of the river.”

“The body would have surfaced by now, Ben.”

“Not necessarily, Row.” He shook his head. “What goes down don’t always come up. Trust me. Plus, the river flooded pretty good this spring. Maybe I *am* wrong and ‘e ain’t suckin’ mud at all. Maybe ‘e ended up bein’ fish food in the gulf or somethin’. At any rate, he’s gone. Dead. Eighty-sixed.”

“I’m telling you he isn’t, Ben.”

“All right, tell me. How do ya know?”

“It’s just a feeling, but I know I’m right.”

“Like I’ve told ya’ before, white man, this is just one feelin’ I can’t get with you on. I think you’ve just got some left over heebee jeebees or somethin’.”

“No, Ben,” I spat back tersely. “It’s more than that.”

“Okay,” he took on his own hard edge, “then where is he? Why hasn’t he killed again? Hell, why hasn’t he come after *you* again?”

I had to admit that I didn’t have the answers to these questions. It was somewhat of an ongoing theme between Ben and me. Something would tickle the back of my brain, and I would have some manner of instinctual feeling or precognitive episode. I would tell my friend, stressing the urgency of the vision, and he would start asking questions. Then like an idiot, I would sit there and say, “I don’t know.”

I had to give him credit though; he had come a long way. The first time I had helped him with an investigation, he had been a complete and total skeptic. This last time around, he had been extremely open-minded and willing to chase down the avenues I pointed out with only my word as a catalyst.

The real truth was that I had even been a bit of a skeptic myself at first. Even though Magick is a very real part of my religious path, until recently, I’d never experienced it to anywhere near the extent that I had during my time helping with the murder investigations. That’s the funny thing about faith. Believing in something is one thing. Having it sneak up and bat you over the head is something else entirely.

Suffice it to say, I was only now getting over the resulting headache.

But as accepting as he had become, on this particular point of contention between us Ben was not about to budge. He was firmly convinced that the now identified Eldon Andrew Porter was dead, never to return.

This was one instance where I wished with every fiber of my being that he was correct and that I was completely and unequivocally wrong. But that itch in the back of my head just wouldn't go away.

"Yeah, I thought so," my friend finally replied to my silence then let out a sigh. "Look, Row, I'm not tryin' to be an ass here. And this is exactly what I was afraid was gonna happen. I know your intuition is pretty good. Hell, I've come to rely on all that hocus-pocus stuff at times, but I really think you're wrong on this one. ID'n this whack-job was just a piece'a blind luck, and it's nothin' but clerical shit now. It's just a name an' face ta' stick in the case file. The *closed* case file."

I didn't argue. Belaboring the point was going to cause nothing more than strife between us. Besides, I really and truly did want him to be correct this time instead of me.

"Yeah." I nodded. "Okay."

"Okay. So if we're settled on that, here's somethin' else we found out about 'im that ya' might find interesting," Ben offered, as if giving me a consolation prize for losing the disagreement.

"What's that?"

"During his trial it seems there was a bit of a ruckus over his mental state," he explained. "Coupl'a expert witnesses rattlin' a bunch of psycho babble about 'im being highly suggestible and incapable of distinguishin' right from wrong. But as it was, he had an overworked and under funded PD for an attorney. Just couldn't get the jury to go for the insanity defense."

"So you think he was insane?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged. "I think any asshole that goes around killin' people is insane, but then I also don't think they should get off scot-free because of it."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, but I'm not sure I follow."

"That's 'cause you haven't heard the really hinky part yet."

"And that is?"

"When they put 'im away he ended up in a special kind of cell block. Somethin' called a *God Pod*."

"God Pod?"

"Yeah, it's a cell block that's run by a prison ministry. Rehabilitation by gettin' religion."

"That's not entirely a bad thing, Ben," I said. "Faith can be an important part of a person's life. It can provide a moral compass to those who need direction."

"Yeah, but this is some pretty strict shit, Row," he returned then scooped up a forkful of the dangerous looking omelet. "They pretty much brow-beat the inmates with the holy scripture."

"And you think that if he was insane to begin with..." I let my voice fade, leaving the end of the sentence unspoken. It wasn't that I didn't know what to say. It was the fact that the thought of the penal system having created this monster suddenly overtook me, and my earlier brush with nausea was returning.

Ben picked up where I left off, expressing his own thoughts aloud. "What I think is that if ya' got a mentally unstable fruitcake who's that open ta' suggestion, and ya'

subject 'im to Bible study and prayer meetins' from sunup ta' sundown, seven days a week, somethin's bound to snap. Maybe it snaps good. Maybe it snaps bad. I think ya' can guess which direction I think this wingnut went."

"Don't tell me," I shook my head in disbelief, "They preach Evangelical, Old Testament."

"From what I understand, yeah. Why? That mean somethin'?"

"It would explain a slight discrepancy that bothered me."

"What's that?"

"Well, he embraced the *Malleus Maleficarum* along with a very old, very outdated, and no longer accepted Catholic ideal—that being the literal eradication of heretics. He even went so far as to dress as a priest," I explained. "But, in my encounter with him, he seemed to come at things from a far more fire and brimstone approach, as opposed to the calmer, ritualistic trappings of Catholicism. The words he spoke were more than a sectarian ceremony for him. He was, for all intents and purposes, preaching."

"Like I said, that's one screwed up wingnut," Ben offered. "But I guess it'd be a hell of a sermon."

"Exactly." I nodded.

"Guess it's a good thing he's history then," he stated before shoveling a portion of the formidable breakfast into his mouth.

The twinge that had lanced through my shoulder earlier now returned with a treble hook of barbs trailing in its wake. The pain deep in the joint burrowed its way up the side of my neck and joined with that unforgiving itch in the back of my brain.

Now I had two problems to worry about. But for now they were mine—and mine alone.

I didn't say a word.

December 18
Saint Louis, Missouri

CHAPTER 2

I was trying very hard to remember exactly what it was that I was doing here. For some unknown reason, I was at a complete loss. Truth was, I didn't even know how I had come to be anywhere other than my own warm bed, and it was more than just a little disconcerting. Still, it certainly wasn't the first time I'd experienced this phenomena recently, although the sickening feel of personal defilement was conspicuously absent this time. While somewhat of a consolation, that fact still did nothing to quell the oncoming panic, so I forced myself to remain calm and try to think it through.

Cognitive reasoning isn't exactly an easy task when you feel like a refugee from the amnesia ward. My thoughts felt jumbled, but I was heartened that I actually had some of them for a change. Unfortunately, I don't really think that they all belonged to me. Every now and then I would grapple with one of the memories as it tumbled through my numbed consciousness, inspecting it closely before it could get away. I was reasonably certain that such thoughts as "which pair of shoes I should wear with my new dress," and "setting up an appointment to have my nails done before the party" belonged to someone else entirely. It was also a safe bet that said someone was female. What I was doing with her memories I couldn't say, but they were fading from existence as quickly as they came in, and that wasn't going to make it any easier to figure out.

There were, however, two things that kept circulating around my muddled grey matter with an uncharacteristically sharp clarity. One was a large glowing yellow rectangle. The other was a particularly nasty, and relatively familiar, burning sensation on the side of my neck coupled with a feeling of utter helplessness and disorientation. I couldn't quite tell which of us should lay claim to this pair of thoughts. Until recently I'd thought of them purely as my own. Now in retrospect, I had to wonder. Of course, I suppose it was always possible that they were being shared by both of us.

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat and continued to stare at the scene before me while pondering the greater meaning of luminescent geometric shapes and inexplicable pains. For the moment I resigned myself to the present situation in hopes some thought of lesser obscurity would finally provide an answer.

The tableau beyond the slightly fogged window strobed frantically with patches of red, blue, and white like an insane outdoor disco. Strings of holiday lights entwined through evergreen hedgerows were winking in and out of time with the brighter flashes in a futile attempt to find dominance over the darkness. I should have found the panorama saddening, but instead I felt little empathy for much of anything.

Flickering light bars mounted atop emergency vehicles were things to which I was growing far too accustomed. I reached this conclusion quickly with no resistance whatsoever from my rational self. It was undeniable. There was a time, when gathered in such an excessive number, the flashing beacons would have reminded me of severe tragedy. At this particular moment, however, they were simply an annoyance that my eyes were being forced to contend with.

Once upon a different time in my life a garish slash of yellow crime scene tape would have insinuated itself into my soul, bringing with it quick fear and deep sorrow. Now, an example of that thin plastic barrier was close by, slowly undulating on a cold winter breeze. In this instance it seemed simply a part of the everyday landscape. At least that is how it seemed to the “me” I had become.

Even the squawking radios and idling engines that tainted the night with their continuous disharmony seemed nothing more than a normal slice of reality. They neither belonged nor didn’t belong. They were very simply just there.

The bare truth was that nothing mattered to me now. Nothing but the yellow rectangle of light pouring through the open door of the townhouse apartment, a haunting incandescent spill that was being easily absorbed by a thirsty sponge of darkness.

Regrettably, it looked like I was going to have to answer some serious questions before I got anywhere near that doorway. At least that was the impression I was getting from the stern look molded onto Detective Benjamin Storm’s features.

I hadn’t seen my friend since meeting him for breakfast earlier in the month. It wasn’t surprising really, what with the holidays barreling in upon us—Chanukah had already arrived, securing first place in a yearly contest; with Yule, Christmas, and Kwanzaa lining up in the queue. Schedules were tight—being full of parties, relatives, and even in light of the season, work. I had hoped that the next time we saw one another, it would be at a gathering of family and friends where we could share a drink and forget about the everyday rigors of the world.

Of course, this was *my* bizarre life, and something like that wasn’t about to happen.

I guess I should have known I wouldn’t be blessed with such normalcy considering the circumstances, not to mention the fact that just over one year ago my very existence had veered off course to follow this far more tremulous path. On a sweltering August night, an ability that would soon become my life’s bane had exited thirty plus years of shadow to come fully into the light.

It was on that night that a perverted serial murderer had taken the life of one of my friends—a student I’d instructed in the ways of The Craft. Her final passage across the bridge into Summerland had cost me dearly.

I would never again be the same. In fact, I often wondered if what that really meant was that I would never again be *sane*.

It was during the investigation of her death—as well as the subsequent victims—when I discovered that a cigar is not necessarily always a cigar. I had learned that for me at least, a nightmare is quite possibly a harbinger of reality; that an intimate supernatural connection with the “other side” was my talent as a Witch—and at the same time, my torment.

Just as unfortunate was the fact that the random visions and nightmares didn’t always make much sense—like right now. And they were very often accompanied by a headache that would make a migraine seem like a welcome relief. Sometimes a sensation would even manifest as an unexplained pain localized in some other part of my body—once again, just like now.

The only saving grace was that this didn’t happen *all* the time. There were actually long stretches where I was able to experience “life as usual.” But, torment did happen frequently enough to keep me off balance and always wondering. I just never knew when or where to expect it.

Judging from the current circumstances, this was obviously one of the *when's*, and wherever I was at the moment was, well, one of the *where's*.

And once again, as I'd known for some time that I would end up, I was smack in the middle of something I'd rather have no part of. Especially given the fact that I was parked in the chilly back seat of a Saint Louis City police cruiser, wearing a pair of handcuffs and staring out the window at my best friend's incredulous face.

As I said before, how I'd come to be here I wasn't entirely certain. The last thing I remembered for a fact was climbing into bed next to my wife, Felicity. From there, to the best of my recollection, I had gone to sleep.

The next thing I even begin to remember after that is chasing after the glowing yellow rectangle. Upon adding up the imagery with the circumstances and carrying the remainder, I had concluded that the luminous shape was none other than the doorway to the apartment in the near distance. It didn't help that said doorway was quite obviously the entrance to an active crime scene.

"Rowan? Jeezus..." Ben's voice came to me, initially muted by the tempered glass of the windows, only to have the rest of the sentence leap in volume as he jerked open the car door. "What the fuck?!"

From what I could tell, the woman's thoughts that had commandeered my synapses were pretty much gone, for now at least. At the moment, I was feeling relatively lucid, though there was still a definite fog hanging over me that kept threatening to obscure rational thought altogether. I hoped it would hold off long enough for me to figure out what was going on.

"Hey," I answered sheepishly.

"Jeezus H. Christ, white man," he continued. "What's goin' on? What're ya' doin' here?"

"Honestly?"

"Hell yes, *honestly*, Rowan!" he barked. "This is a fuckin' crime scene, not a shopping mall."

"I don't know." There it was. The omnipresent and wholly unsatisfactory answer to a serious question that had become my pat answer. But as much as I wanted to give him something different, once again it was all I could conjure at the moment. I shrugged then continued, "I was actually hoping that you could tell *me*."

"No way, Row." He shook his head. "No way. You're gonna hafta do better'n that." With a thick frown pasted securely to his face, he huffed out a heavy sigh and stepped back, pulling the door open wider as he did so. "C'mon, get outta there."

I rocked myself forward, and scooted across the stiff upholstery of the cold bench seat, then twisted toward the opening. Impatiently, my friend took hold of my upper arm with one large hand and guided me out onto the curb, telling me to watch my head at just about the same instant the back of it impacted with the doorframe. I'm pretty sure he timed it that way on purpose because it was more than plain that he wasn't at all happy with me right now.

As amazing as it seems, even in the middle of the night, if you happen upon a crime scene, you will find at least a handful of onlookers seeking a morbid thrill. At the moment I was apparently the object of that thrill. If that wasn't enough embarrassment for one sitting, we were being paid even more intense regard by a clutch of reporters and

cameramen. Blue-white cones of artificial brightness instantly glared outward from their powerful lights, making the two of us the centerpiece of the harsh setting.

“Friggin’ assholes... Don’t turn around, Row...” Ben instructed me in a clipped voice, helping me forward with a rough hand as he stepped quickly in behind me.

We walked at an even pace, him guiding me with a hand planted firmly on my shoulder, weaving through cops and evidence technicians until we were positioned in the shadows behind a Crime Scene Unit van. Out of sight of the cameras and prying eyes of the reporters, we came to a halt and he told me to stand still.

I heard the clinking of metal, followed by a muted ratcheting noise, and my left hand was suddenly free. I rolled my shoulder and felt it give a slight pop as I brought it back to its natural position. A moment later, the metal was no longer chafing my other wrist, and I repeated the motion for my right shoulder as I turned around.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Yeah, thank me later after I kick your ass,” my friend told me. “Now what gives? What’re ya’ doin’ here?”

“I was serious, Ben,” I answered with a shake of my head. “I don’t know. I don’t even know how I got here.”

“Hell, that’s easy,” he told me while jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “Your goddamned truck is parked right over there in the middle of the fuckin’ street blockin’ traffic.”

“Who was murdered?” I unconsciously dismissed his statement and blurted out the question while looking past him at the glowing doorway.

“No... Me first, Row.” He shook his head vigorously. “Is there somethin’ about this I should know? Is this some kinda *Twilight Zone* shit here? You havin’ one of those visions or somethin’ like that?”

“It might be, Ben. I don’t know.” I shook my head again as I gravitated ever so slightly toward the scene.

“Whoa, Kemosabe.” He reached out and stopped my progress easily. “Just where do ya’ think you’re goin’?”

“I want to have a look at the scene, Ben,” I answered automatically.

“What for?”

I didn’t reply because I simply didn’t know the answer.

“Look, Row, this is a pretty routine investigation here, if you can call somethin’ like this routine. Truth is we don’t even know if it’s a murder or an accidental death just yet. There’re no weird symbols or any crap like that, so I don’t get what you’re doin’ here.”

He was making reference to the anomalous evidence that had prompted him to bring me into the two previous investigations. I could understand his point of view, but it was becoming apparent to me that visible evidence wasn’t always going to be what triggered my involvement.

“Now, let me ask ya’ somethin’,” my friend continued. “Did’ya know someone who lived in this apartment?”

The shroud of disorientation was descending on me again, rendering my fleeting clarity a thing of the past. My scalp was starting to tighten, and the back of my head held fast to a dull throb that was threatening to increase exponentially. I still had no real clue what I was doing here, but the growing pressure in my skull told me that there was definitely a reason. I was just too mesmerized by the doorway to recognize what it was.

“Look, Rowan, you’re actin’ pretty weird. How ‘bout I call Felicity and get ‘er down here to pick you up.”

“I’m fine,” I said, looking past him and focusing on the door. Something unseen, but very powerful, was compelling me to move toward that oblong patch of light.

“No, man, you ain’t fine,” he told me, emphasizing the word. “It’s two-friggin’-thirty in the mornin’, and you just showed up outta nowhere at a crime scene. Uninvited mind you. Then ya’ ducked under the barrier tape and started walkin’ across the yard like some kinda zombie, completely ignorin’ the officers who told you to stop. I got news for ya’... not every copper in Saint Louis knows who you are. You’re damn lucky ya’ didn’t get hurt. I mean, Jeezus... Hey... Hey... HEY Rowan! Are you even listenin’ ta’ me?”

“What?” I asked in a distracted timbre. I’d only barely heard him talking and hadn’t actually registered any of the words. The only thing that mattered right now was the doorway.

“Have you been drinkin’?”

“What?” I stammered absently.

“Pay fuckin’ attention! Have you been drinkin’?”

“No...” I shook my head as punctuation. “Of course I haven’t been drinking.”

At least I didn’t think I had. The truth was, I had no earthly idea.

“Okay... So... Ya’ don’t smell toast or somethin’ do ya’?” he asked in earnest.

“What?” I shook my head, this time in confusion, and stared at him briefly. “Toast?”

“I read somewhere that ya’ smell toast when you’re havin’ a stroke,” he offered.

His words came to me in a random sputter of sound as my cognizance shifted in and out of phase with the rest of reality.

“What?” I mumbled, not sure I had heard him correctly.

“That’s it,” Ben said, sounding as much concerned as annoyed this time. “I’m gettin’ you to a hospital. There’s definitely somethin’ not right with ya’.”

Inside my skull I heard a loud electric snap and felt a burning sting along the side of my neck. The nasty tingling sensation that had been at the back of my concerns had now burst into searing flame through my entire side. I tried to reach upward but found my body was ignoring any instructions issued to it by my brain. I felt myself shaking violently and beginning to stiffen as my mind short-circuited into oblivious disorientation. My chest tightened and began to sharply spasm with the same intense pain that accompanies a nocturnal leg cramp.

My sight was taken over by a darkened tunnel of fading vision, and in a flash the ground leapt upward to meet me. On impact, a sharp hammer blow of agony peened the side of my skull and spread rapidly outward into a migraine-like ache that settled in for the long haul.

As I lay crumpled onto the cold lawn, I could just barely make out the distant sound of my friend’s frantic voice yelling, “Somebody get a paramedic! Now!”

The last thought I remember clearly was that I had a pair of red patent leather pumps in my closet that would go perfectly with my new dress.



I’m not sure which assault on my senses was the most disconcerting—the smell or the sound. I suppose it could have been either one, or even a combination of both.

On the one hand, there was no mistaking the antiseptic funk of a hospital emergency room. An odor that was the filtered medicinal smell of alcohol, gauze, and used tongue depressors dancing in an olfactory ballet with the stench of sweat, fear, and blood. Of course, all of that was underscored by the “can’t quite put your finger on it” smell of death, just to drive the point home. As a whole, it carried with it an easily recognizable signature that told you exactly where you were without even opening your eyes or hearing a thing.

Then on the other hand, there was the terse exchange going on between my wife and my best friend. A pair of hedged voices, both straining not to outwardly display the overabundance of the anger they were quite obviously holding back. From the sound of it, they were bickering somewhere just beyond the door of the treatment room where I was presently lying flat on my back.

Whichever of the two was responsible, the job was done. I was jarred back from the semi-conscious ledge of introspection I’d been tiptoeing along since the doctor had finished poking, prodding, and interrogating me.

“I asked you not to get him involved any more, Ben,” Felicity was stating in a flat tone. “At least not for a while. He still hasn’t recovered from what he went through the last time, and you know it.”

“That’s what I’ve been tryin’ to tell ya’, Felicity,” he appealed. “He just showed up outta the clear freakin’ blue. I *didn’t* get ‘im involved this time.”

Their tones were hushed and muted by the hinged obstruction, but if I listened closely I could still make out what they were saying.

My mind had continued to replay the memories of recent events ever since I had come to in the back of an ambulance. I had quickly pieced everything together, but I was still at a loss to explain why I had suddenly “awakened” from what I could only explain as a trance, while at a crime scene in progress to boot. Two things I knew for certain were that my midnight wanderings were no longer going to be a secret and that I was now starting down a road toward an explanation for why they were happening in the first place. I only hoped that I would survive the trip.

The earlier fog that had been ruthlessly shrouding my brain had apparently lifted, though a dull ache still persisted in the back of my head. I knew from past experience that this wasn’t a good sign at all.

It was obvious to me that I was somehow connected to this crime. Ben had already verified for me that the victim was in fact a woman and that her name was Paige Lawson. This information at least seemed to explain the rogue thoughts I’d experienced. However, I hadn’t recognized her name at all, so to my knowledge I didn’t know her, and therefore, I seriously doubted that she knew me.

I remembered feeling a sharp stinging sensation on the side of my neck just before I blacked out. An active tingle still occupied the swath of flesh behind and below my left ear, so I slowly reached up and gingerly probed the area with my fingertips. There were no obvious welts or abrasions that I could feel, but the burning sensation continued. No big surprise there.

“Well what was he doing there then?” I heard Felicity almost hiss.

“I don’t know,” Ben answered as forcefully as he could without raising his voice. “Hell, when I asked him, *he* didn’t even know.”

I had been trying to ignore them while I concentrated, but I was failing miserably at blocking out their banter. Also, I was getting the impression that they were going to escalate if something didn't alter their current course. I concluded that I had best intervene.

"He's right," I spoke loudly, casting my words in the direction of the door. "It's not his fault, so will you two please quit arguing about it."

Silence instantly replaced the tempered squabble. After a moment Ben and Felicity came sheepishly through the door and positioned themselves next to the bed.

"Row..." my wife sighed as she brushed my disheveled hair back from my forehead, "shouldn't you be resting, then?"

Felicity gave the outward appearance of a fragile china doll standing next to Ben. Petite, with a milky complexion, her own hair was a pile of flaming auburn resting atop her head in a loose Gibson girl. Whenever she let it down, it was a rush of spiral curls reaching almost to her waist. Her green eyes held more than a hint of concern as she gazed back at me. Her normally smooth face was wrinkled with mild anguish. A second generation Irish-American, her voice usually held only the barest hint of an accent but could blossom fully into a thick brogue—at times liberally peppered with Gaelic—if she were tired, stressed, angry, or had recently spent time with certain members of her family. Right now, it was obvious that at the very least the first two options were weighing in, maybe even the third.

"I'm trying to," I answered, "but it's a bit noisy."

"Sorry, white man," Ben offered apologetically. "Didn't mean to keep ya' up."

"You weren't, actually," I replied. "The doctor told me I had to stay awake until the test results came back."

"So ya' wanna help me out and tell the red squaw here that I didn't call ya' in on this."

"What were you doing there then?" Felicity queried without waiting for me to fulfill Ben's request.

"Ben didn't have anything to do with me being there." I went ahead and made the statement for his benefit then addressed my wife's question. "And, I haven't quite figured that part out yet."

The last half of my sentence was joined by the swooshing sound of the door to the treatment room swinging open. A tired looking brunette woman dressed in blue hospital scrubs and a lab coat followed the door inward. In her hand she carried an oversized brown envelope clearly marked with my name and a handful of other scrawlings that only made sense to someone in the medical profession or a two-year-old. I wasn't sure which.

"How are you feeling, Mister Gant?"

"About the same, I guess," I answered.

"Good." She nodded as she crossed the room to the opposite wall. "No new pains or tremors?"

"No. Just a bit of a headache."

After pulling a rectangular x-ray from the envelope, she deftly popped it into a pair of holding clips on a wall-mounted box and then switched on the backlight.

"How about your memory?" she queried as she stared at the black and white study of my skull. "Can you tell me what day this is?"

“Tuesday, December eighteenth,” I answered, exasperated that I was being put through this line of questioning for yet a third time. “My middle name is Linden, I’m thirty-nine years old, I’m married...”

“All I wanted was the date, Mister Gant,” she cut me off, sounding slightly distracted. “And by the way, it’s past midnight, so it is actually Wednesday the nineteenth.”

“Do I lose any points for that?”

“There doesn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary on your x-rays,” she began, ignoring my jibe and giving the film a final once over. She then turned and crossed her arms over her chest as she leaned against the wall. “And your blood work is fine.”

“So why don’t you look pleased?” I asked.

“I’m a little concerned about the fact that you blacked out, as well as the description of your earlier dementia provided by Detective Storm. These could be indicators of a mild ischemic stroke. What I’d like to do is get a head CT and keep you under observation for a while.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary,” I protested.

“Well, I do,” she returned flatly. “And while I certainly cannot keep you here against your will, I strongly suggest that you have this test.”

The door whooshed once again, and a nurse urgently poked her head through the opening. “Doctor Morrison, we need you in Trauma-two.”

“Why don’t you discuss it with your wife, Mister Gant,” the harried MD told me as she headed out after the nurse. “Someone will check back with you in a few minutes.”

As the door swung shut behind her, I knew better than to open my mouth. Felicity and Ben were looking at me with steeled expressions, and it was immediately plain that they were on her side. Effectively it had become three against one. I never even stood a chance.



It was just past 6:30 in the morning. Felicity had headed out in search of coffee, and I was all but imprisoned in a hospital room against my wishes. Ben had headed back to his crime scene as soon as he was convinced that I would stay put without drastic measures. He had even gone so far as to offer Felicity his handcuffs. Something told me she gave it serious consideration; even though when she declined the offer her comment included a pointed joke, saying that she just might be interested in borrowing them when I was feeling better. At least I think it was a joke. I didn’t always know where she was concerned.

I was hoping the doctor would get the results of her test back soon or at least see fit to release me so that I would be able to head home, but so far it wasn’t looking very promising. I had been trying to squeeze in a nap ever since she had okayed it, but all I’d really managed to do was doze in and out for the past 45 minutes.

My head was resting in the deep depression of a too soft pillow, and I was settled uncomfortably on the inclined bed. I was just taking another run at getting some sleep when I heard the doctor’s voice.

“How are you doing, Mister Gant?”

I opened my eyes and found her standing at the end of the bed. She appeared just as tired as she had a few hours ago.

“As well as can be expected I suppose.”

“Good,” she answered succinctly as she jotted something on a clipboard, then without looking up she added, “Interesting talent you have there. Is it legible or are you just doodling?”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“The writing without looking.” She gestured to the adjustable table that was positioned over the bed in front of me. “You were even doing it with your eyes closed when I walked in.”

I tilted my head forward to gaze in the direction she indicated and watched in astonishment as my left hand, gripping a pencil, moved swiftly back and forth across a small notepad. Several pages had already been filled and flipped upward.

The fact that I was right-handed isn’t even what bothered me most. Or even the fact that I was writing both forwards and backwards. No...it was the realization that I’d had no idea what my left hand was doing until it had been pointed out to me that really got under my skin.

As I watched, my hand automatically flipped the newly filled page up and set the tip of the pencil against an empty sheet. I stared on as it continued of its own accord to scribe in smooth, clear, and wholly unfamiliar handwriting, repeating over and over the same line of text as it had on all the previous pages.

Dead I am. Dead I am. I do not like that dead I am.

CHAPTER 3

“So what’re ya’ doin’ now?” Ben asked as he stared at the pad of paper. “Tryin’ ta’ be some kinda morbid Doctor Seuss?”

I’d expected that. I didn’t necessarily like it, but it was bound to come out of someone sooner or later. And the more I thought about it, the more I suspected it would end up being not just sooner or later, but both. Even I had no choice but to admit that the similarity between what I’d written and one of the most memorable lines from a beloved children’s book was uncanny. I was certain to be hearing about it from anyone who became privy to the product of my unconscious scribbling. Under wholly different circumstances the parallel might even have been amusing.

But it was under *these* circumstances, not different ones, and the word “dead” played a prominent role in the repetitious line of text. Couple that with the fact that the pad full of paraphrased prose came out of me involuntarily, and I didn’t find it amusing in the least.

“I’m being serious here, Ben,” I returned, my voice dull.

“Okay, okay.” He tossed the notepad onto his desk blotter and leaned back in his chair. Propping one ankle across his knee then clasping his hands behind his head, he gave me a serious look. “I’m listenin’. What’s the deal with this notepad?”

I had called my friend as soon as I’d been released from the hospital. The doctor still had no definitive results back from the tests that had been run, but I was feeling fine, so she’d relented and allowed me to leave. I knew full well that I hadn’t had a stroke, but I wasn’t about to try explaining what had caused my very pronounced symptoms. If I had, I’d probably still be talking to the staff psychiatrist as well as being taken on a tour of their lovely padded accommodations. I’d been down this road before, and I was in no hurry to visit it again.

You tend to get a small spectrum of reactions when you look at someone and say, “I’m a Witch.” The three biggies go something like this: One, they look at you like you are crazy. Two, they try to introduce you to Jesus and save you from yourself; or, three, they run screaming in the opposite direction. In my case, being male, I also get the added, “Don’t you mean warlock?” This usually prompts me to give the actual definition of the word *warlock*, that being “oath breaker.” The resulting short explanation of the fact that male or female, a Witch is very simply called a Witch, is usually a good one for glazing over the eyes of the uninitiated in less than sixty seconds.

Though I don’t make a secret of my religious path or even my mystical leanings, I’ve learned to avoid the subject in given situations. Sometimes it just doesn’t pay to be honest—plain and simple.

When I’d made my call, I had found Ben behind his desk at City Homicide working on the situation that had gotten him out of bed only a handful of hours before. I’d suspected as much would be the case and hadn’t even tried calling him at home. When I told him what I wanted to show him, he’d suggested that I go to my own home and get some rest. I doubt he’d really expected me to follow the suggestion because he didn’t

seem at all surprised to see me coming through the glass-fronted double doors of his department just over thirty minutes later.

Felicity on the other hand, had been a tougher sell. Though her outward appearance may be that of fragile beauty, my wife was as headstrong as they came. I was fully aware that what came across on the surface as stereotypical Irish stubbornness and temper was truly born of intellect, will, and protective instinct. Still in all, igniting that temper was something better left undone unless you had a damned good reason. I just didn't feel I had a choice this time around, even if my reason was no more than repeating pages of nonsensical rhyme on a notepad and a gut-twisting bad feeling about them.

In the end, it took me all of fifteen minutes to convince her that if she didn't take me by City Police Headquarters on the way home, I would simply find a way to take myself. She had finally given in, and at this particular moment she was parked next to me in one of the stackable, molded-plastic chairs the detectives used for visitors. It was no secret that she wasn't happy with me in the least, but I was betting she would get over it. She always did.

I shifted in my own seat, it also being a refugee from the stack of seventies era furniture, and succeeded only in moving the discomfort from one side of my body to the other.

"Did you happen to notice anything other than the similarity to a children's book about green eggs?" I asked.

"You got nice handwriting." Ben shrugged. "Kinda pretty. I especially like that little curly-q thing you do with the bottoms of the I's."

"Exactly," I affirmed, ignoring his sardonic addition. "It *is* nice handwriting. But it's not *my* handwriting."

"Whaddaya mean? I thought ya' said you wrote it."

"I did, but not of my own volition."

"You wanna explain that?"

I sighed. I'd been through this with him already when I'd called, but obviously either I hadn't made myself clear or he'd been ignoring me. I suspected it was the latter, but considering the altered states I'd been in recently, I couldn't say for sure.

"It's called automatic writing, Ben," I explained. "It's a psychic event that occurs when a spirit or entity channels through someone on this plane of existence. The person doing the channeling simply acts as the conduit for the spirit who then communicates by writing."

"Okay..." my friend said as he tilted his chair back forward and picked up the notepad once again. "So what you're sayin' is that this is one of those *Twilight Zone* things?"

"It has to be." I nodded. "I was completely unaware of the fact that I was writing any of that until it was pointed out to me. Also, I was writing with my left hand. I'm right-handed."

He picked up a large mug and took a swig then set it back on the stained blotter. "So if I'm connectin' all the dots here, you think maybe Paige Lawson is tryin' to communicate with ya'."

"That's my guess."

"Okay."

I was dumbfounded by the matter of fact tone in his voice and his apparent lack of interest. I know I had at least one false start before I managed to stutter, "What do you mean, 'okay'?"

"I mean, okay." He shook his head and shrugged. "I've seen some weirder shit than this since I've been hangin' around with ya', so I'm willing to believe what you're tellin' me here."

"So? Are you going to do anything about it?" I asked.

"Whaddaya want me ta' do, Rowan?" he asked. "I've got a pad of paper here that has a little rhyme written on it about five jillion times."

"Well shouldn't you look into it? It's a message from a dead woman."

"You don't know that for a fact, but just for the sake of argument, okay... Let's say Paige Lawson is communicatin' with ya'. I gotta admit I can see where she's comin' from. I expect that if I was dead I wouldn't be all that happy about it either."

"What?" I couldn't believe what he was saying.

"Look, it's not like this is some kind of hot clue you're handin' me here. It's a piece of paper that says someone is dead and ain't happy about it. News flash, Kemosabe, we already knew the first part... The second part's just kinda obvious, don't ya' think?"

"But..."

"But nothin', Row." He cut me off before I could even form the objection and then ran his hand up to smooth his hair. "Look, here's the real deal, between you and me. It's lookin' like this might not even be a murder. We're still waitin' on the autopsy, but there were no signs of a struggle. No forced entry. The place wasn't trashed. She wasn't shot, stabbed, or beaten. The only thing out of place is a small welt on the side of her neck..."

"Which side?" I interrupted quickly.

"Left, I think. Why?"

"Because I had a burning sensation on my neck last night." I indicated the area with my hand. "It was on the left side too."

"Okay," he shrugged, "but if you'd let me finish what I was sayin', you'd know that didn't kill 'er. It could be from a thousand different things, so even though we haven't discounted it, it's prob'ly nothing. The preliminary report I got from the coroner says she has a blunt force trauma to the side of her head that could be consistent with the corner of the end table just inside 'er doorway. It looks like she prob'ly just slipped, fell, an' clocked 'erself. Damn shame for a young, good lookin' woman like her, but it happens."

"But why was I there, Ben?" I implored. "What made me show up at the scene like that?"

"You tell me," he stated with a frown. "'Cause I'll be honest, it's got me a little worried."

"So you mean you think I'm right and it might not have been just an accident?" I latched on to the glint of hope in his words.

"No," he shook his head vigorously and turned the glimmer to worthless pyrite. "I'm worried about *you*. I think what happened out on that bridge earlier this year has still got you fucked up."

"That's not it, Ben, and you know it."

"Felicity? A little help." Ben appealed as he looked over at her.

"I have to agree with him, Row," she stated, voice even. "You haven't been yourself lately at all."

“You’ve got to be kidding,” I muttered, more than just a hint of incredulity in my tone. “You’re on Ben’s side with this? Come on, Felicity, last time I checked you were just as open minded about this kind of thing as me. You’ve seen the things that have happened. You’ve even experienced them first hand.”

“Yes, I have,” she agreed. “But I was never in as deep as you have been. This is different somehow. Ever since you got involved in that investigation last February, you’ve seemed disconnected. Ungrounded. You even admitted it then.”

“Yes I did, but that was months ago. I’m well over that.”

“No, you’re not,” she replied. “In some ways you’re even worse than you were then. You’ve seemed almost out of control at times.”

“Out of control how?”

“Like tonight,” she asserted. “Disoriented. Not knowing who or where you are.”

“But this was an isolated incident.” I spoke the lie and didn’t look back. I figured I’d be caught in it eventually, but I thought I’d at least have some time to prove I was on to something important. I definitely wasn’t expecting my capture to be so immediate.

“Rowan, you’ve been sleepwalking for almost two months now.” My wife offered the truth back to me without judgment or anger—just a simple recitation of cold fact. “And the night terrors came like clockwork before that. I know you thought you’d kept them hidden from me, but you didn’t.”

We were fortunate, for the sake of my ego anyway, that the homicide division was less than fully staffed at the moment. There was no one close by enough to overhear the embarrassing revelations that were being put forth. I looked over at my friend’s somber face as he nodded and stared at me from behind his desk.

“I’ve known for a while too, white man. Felicity called me. Why do you think she was so mad at me earlier when she thought I might have brought you in on this? I gotta admit though, I was pretty surprised to have you turn up at an active crime scene like that.”

I sat there completely mute. I wanted to be angry with them both, and in a sense, I was. I wanted to lash out at them for engaging in these clandestine discussions behind my back. I wanted to admonish them for their conspiring to betray me. But I was still rational enough to realize that I was dealing with my wife and my best friend, and that they were obviously worried about me. The growing conflagration that was my ire was quickly reduced to a smolder when I asked myself simply, what if the two of them were correct? What if I was, in point of fact, out of control? What if I was so completely disconnected and ungrounded that I was starting to channel anything and everything without discrimination. The prospect brought a completely new and totally real fear into the fold.

“Listen, Row...” Ben now had a business card in his hand and was fiddling with it aimlessly. “Remember I told ya’ my sister had moved into town?”

“Yeah,” I answered absently as I contemplated what my situation might possibly have now become.

“Well, here’s the deal,” he continued. “She’s a shrink...a good one. Hell, I’ve called ‘er a coupl’a times for advice myself. She’s even helped me with some of the shit I deal with on the job, and you know how I feel about shrinks.” Ben paused and brought a hand up to massage his neck then held the card out to me. “Anyway, Felicity and I have discussed it, and we both think it might be a good idea for ya’ ta’ talk to ‘er.”

“So now I’m crazy,” I said.

“No, Rowan, that’s not what we’re saying at all,” Felicity interjected.

“It’s called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Row,” my friend offered. “We see it here all the friggin’ time. I’m not sayin’ I’m qualified ta’ diagnose it, but if anyone’s a prime candidate, Bubba, it’s you.”

He had a point. It was even a valid one. Still, a painful depression was starting to set in. I’d fought harder than I’d ever thought I could just to get Ben to accept the things I was telling him at times—things where I had no tangible proof of their validity. I’d eventually won. I’d managed to convince him and others that I wasn’t a raving lunatic, and he had for a time accepted my word on an almost blind faith.

Now, I was right back where I started—maybe even a step or two to the negative—and it was very possible that this time I wasn’t the one controlling the dice.

“Just what do you think she’s going to do when I tell her I’m a Witch?” I tried to play the only card I had left.

“Not much, Kemosabe,” my friend replied. “She’s quite a bit more open than most folks. Hell, we’re fuckin’ Indians, think about it.”

“Yeah, and you’re the biggest skeptic I know. So what’s your excuse?”

“You don’t wanna know,” he grumbled then shifted back to the original focus. “Besides, doesn’t matter. She already knows about it. I’ve told her about the two of ya’.”

Felicity had taken the business card from Ben as I sat there in silence, mulling over exactly how much I despised being backed into a corner. I felt a small spark of defiance deep inside, but I was going down fast. I still desperately needed something to cling to—some kind of life preserver that would keep me afloat long enough to give me a fighting chance.

I allowed my stare to fall on the surface of the desk before me and the answer became instantly clear. Deliberately, I reached across and picked up the notepad, which had been the center of our earlier discussion. Slowly, I peeled off a pair of the pages and tossed them back on the blotter in front of Ben.

“Now, here’s *my* deal,” I submitted carefully. “I go talk to your sister, and you have the crime lab compare the handwriting on those papers with Paige Lawson’s.”

“Row...” He began shaking his head as a furrow formed across his brow.

“I’m not asking much, Ben.” I held fast. “Just find out if it’s her handwriting and let me know one way or the other. That’s it.”

“Okay.” He finally nodded but still kept a frown plastered to his face. “Okay, but I don’t know what it’s gonna get ya’.”

“A place to start” was all I said.



“So are you mad at me?” Felicity asked, her voice somber as she guided her Jeep down an exit ramp and off the highway.

Our trip from police headquarters thus far had been made in almost total silence. The reason was not so much because either of us were angry, but because there was simply too much to think about. The extent of our conversation to this point had been my asking whether we should swing by to pick up my truck. In truth, I actually had no idea where I’d left it, plus all I really wanted to do right now was sleep. I wasn’t disappointed in the least when she told me that task had already been handled.

It was approaching mid-day, and the sky was still heavily overcast with a flat-bottomed stratum of grey clouds. A misty rain had begun to fall at some point while I was still being held captive by the hospital, and it hadn't yet subsided. Winter's chill was sharp in the air, even with the official start of the season still a few days away. The temperature was staying a few steps ahead of the magical point where precipitation solidifies, effectively making the difference between the landscape being a "winter wonderland" and "wintry blah." Depending on your tastes, it was the kind of day that either made you feel great to be alive or depressed you into a mood that begged to be slept off like a bad drunk. Since I was already lacking in the sleep department, I was being pushed toward the latter with hardly any resistance.

"Not really," I replied. "Although, I wish you'd said something about all this earlier. Then maybe I wouldn't have wasted so much energy trying to keep you from finding out."

"Why didn't you want me to know anyway?"

"It wasn't something you needed to worry about," I answered. "You have enough to do without taking on my problems."

"Row," she admonished, "we've had this talk before."

"Yeah," I admitted, "but you get a little overprotective at times."

"Aye, and just what is it you'd call what you're doing then?" A slight hint of her normally veiled Irish brogue seeped into the question, audibly announcing her growing fatigue.

"Yes... I'm being overprotective too," I returned. "But that's nothing new."

"And it's something new from me then?"

"I didn't say that."

We were only a few blocks from home when she gave a quick downshift and turned the Jeep into a parking lot of what appeared to have once been a multi-tenant strip mall but was now occupied by only a single business. Hooking past a light standard, she serpented through the lot then pulled into a space before the entrance of Arch Color Labs. She shifted into neutral then set the parking brake before switching off the engine.

"What *are* you saying then?" she asked as she peered at me, her green eyes searching for a hidden answer. "Are you saying it's okay for you but not for me?"

"Like you said," I sighed. "We've had this talk before, and obviously we've never resolved it, or we wouldn't be having it again now. We're both just too stubborn, I suppose."

"Aye," she agreed softly, "I suppose we are."

We regarded each other quietly for a moment, neither of us certain where to take the conversation next. I finally motioned at the storefront and broke the lull.

"This doesn't look much like our house."

"Sorry, I forgot to tell you." She gave her head a quick shake. "I need to drop off a batch job for a client."

"You don't need to apologize." I shook my head as the realization overtook me. I hadn't really thought about how my escapades might have affected her, and this detour drove the point home. "You'd probably already have this done if it weren't for me throwing you off schedule."

"It's no problem," she returned.

"Maybe not," I echoed, "but I still feel bad about it."

“You do? Good, then my mission is accomplished,” she told me with a sly grin.

“I just walked right into a waiting guilt trip, didn’t I?”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded as she rummaged behind my seat and withdrew a heavy-gauge envelope. “You can wait here if you want. I’ll only be a few minutes.”

“You sure?” I asked. “I know how long your ‘few minutes’ can be sometimes.”

“I’m sure. I just need to drop this off.”

“Okay.”

True to her word, Felicity was in and out in less than five minutes but then spent another ten beneath the awning in front of the lobby chatting with a wiry young man. I couldn’t blame her for the delay though because he had followed her out the door, talking nonstop except for quick lulls to light a cigarette. He’d been through two already and was heading quickly toward finishing off a third.

It was almost amusing to watch my wife as she maintained a constant distance between herself and the rambling chain smoker. What wasn’t amusing was the fact that every time he took a puff, I had to stop myself from getting out of the vehicle and bumming one from him. It did, however, serve as a reminder as to just how much she despised smoking, and that helped steel my resolve to fight the craving.

She finally managed to get away and flashed him a smile and a quick wave as she climbed into the Jeep.

“Friend of yours?” I asked as she buckled herself in.

“Oh, that’s just Harold. Nice enough guy but Gods! He smokes like a fiend.”

“I noticed.” I nodded, trying not to let on that I was within inches of joining him in the act, then cryptically changed the subject by asking, “So how about you?”

“How about me, what?” She furrowed her eyebrows as she shook her head in confusion. “I don’t smoke.”

“What? Oh, no, not that,” I replied. “Sorry, I meant what we were talking about earlier. Are you mad at me?”

“Oh, that.” She nodded as she cast a glance back over her shoulder then backed the Jeep out of the parking space. “I was,” she answered, chewing at her lower lip, “but I’m getting over it.”

“How long before you think you’ll be completely over it?” I asked.

“Aye, that’s going to depend on you.”



My truck was parked nose first beyond the gated fence that hemmed in our back yard. Felicity pulled her vehicle up to the chain-link barrier and popped the stick into neutral.

We sat in silence for a long moment, simply listening to the world continuing about its business around us. The Doppler-affected sound of tires against wet pavement grew in the distance, achieved its peak as they made their way past us, and then faded into oblivion on the opposite side. The Jeep’s engine idled softly in the background. The on-again, off-again mechanical whirr of the windshield wipers kept time in a widely spaced rhythm, setting a languid tempo that kept you waiting expectantly for the next beat. In a half bare tree next to us, a raven punctuated all of it with a trio of forlorn caws, leaving the moment to hang in the moist air before falling silent once again.

Even with the heater running, the damp chill was working its way into my bones. On top of that, I was still dying for a cigarette and didn't have any of the nicotine gum with me that had thus far been my only barrier between abstinence and re-kindling the habit.

"So you think maybe we should go inside?" I asked.

"I'd love to, but I have a shoot to do and I've already rescheduled it once," my wife told me. "I'd rather not lose the account."

"Supermodels?" I asked jokingly.

"Sure," she replied, her own tenor lightened somewhat. "Super new models of anodized cookware for a catalog. Want to come along?"

"I think I'll pass." I gave her a weak grin.

"I thought you might."

"Actually, I could really use some sleep."

"That makes the two of us," she returned. "But I'll have to wait for mine."

"Sorry," I apologized for something I could do nothing about.

"Maybe yours should too, then..." she added, voice trailing off at the end.

"Why? Jealous?"

"No." She shook her head to punctuate the reply. "I just don't want you wandering again. And since I won't be here..."

"I see." I nodded. "I'll try to stay in one place until you get back. Deal?"

"Aye."

"Okay. Since I don't have my keys, any chance you could unlock the house for me before you go?"

"Oh," she replied, "Ben said he'd have them put your keys in the mailbox."

"Good enough." I leaned over and gave her a kiss then unlatched my door.

"Row," Felicity called after me as I climbed out. "Speaking of deals..."

I turned back to see there was still a hint of concern in her eyes. Her hand was extended toward me, and in it was the business card Ben had given her.

"Promise me you'll call for an appointment." She made the statement more as a gentle command than a request.

I'd almost escaped, for another few hours at least. I should have known better though, as this was something she perceived as far too important to wait. I sighed heavily and nodded as I reached back in and took the card from her. She was correct, I'd made a deal with both of them, and my own principles wouldn't allow me to back out.

"Promise," she softly demanded again.

"I promise," I told her.

I stood in the driveway and watched her back out then followed with my eyes as she headed off down the street in the direction of Highway 40. When she was no longer in sight, I made my way along the flagstone walkway and then climbed the stairs to our front porch.



My keys had been exactly where Ben had said they would be. After retrieving them I had unlocked the door and tripped my way across the room as our English setter and Australian cattle dog expressed their great relief that someone had finally come home after being gone, in their doggish perception of time, forever. I punched in my alarm code

and followed with a second series of key presses. A prerecorded female voice issued from the panel announcing that it had switched from the away mode to the stay-at-home setting. Basically, switching off the motion sensors but resetting and rearming the doors and windows.

I'd never really thought all that much about the household alarm system. It was something we had really only used whenever we were out of the house, and then only to protect "stuff." It had always been there for the express purpose of guarding our possessions. These days, however, it had served yet another purpose. Protecting us.

In the month following the incident on the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge, I'd had the system upgraded. Every window in the house had been equipped with sensors and cell technology had been added to avoid the alarm being disabled by simply cutting the phone lines. There were additional motion detectors and even secondary panels added to main rooms to allow for quick access to panic buttons. It all seemed so terribly paranoid to me at times, and Felicity had definitely thought it to be overkill, which she had told me in no uncertain terms. But I did it anyway. I wasn't going to take any chances. I knew that Eldon Andrew Porter was still out there no matter what anyone else believed, and I had no doubt that he would eventually be coming for me.

Now that I was inside and secure, my first order of business was to go in search of a piece of nicotine gum. I hadn't even tried to hide my withdrawal-like symptoms from Felicity since I had at one time been a smoker. Of course, I'd recently discovered that I hadn't succeeded in hiding anything else anyway, so it wouldn't have mattered. At any rate, I didn't have to get the gum from a secreted stash. However, I did have to remember where I'd last put it. Once I found the box and quelled the immediate crisis level desire for a cigarette, I set about finding anything I possibly could do in order to waste time.

After a round of behind the ear scratches for the boisterous canines I disabled the back door sensor long enough to let them out—then back in once they'd discovered that the weather was not what they'd expected. Our three felines, Emily, Dickens, and Salinger, were nowhere to be seen, so I simply filled their food bowls and moved on to something else.

There were a few dishes in the sink, left over from the night before, so I took my time washing, drying, and putting them away. I could have simply loaded them into the dishwasher, but that wouldn't have taken near as long.

I thumbed through the mail that had occupied the box along with my keys, discarding several pieces of poorly targeted direct market advertising in the process. After extracting those items pertinent to my consulting business, I tossed the remainder into the basket next to the front door.

Before starting up the stairs to my office, I took a moment to listen to the messages on our personal answering machine. Two hang-ups and one quick hello from a friend who was inquiring about what to bring to the Yule ritual we'd planned for a few days hence. I started to jot a note down as a reminder to call him but found that the notepad, which normally lived by the phone, had apparently gone AWOL. A quick search through my pockets for a scrap to write on rewarded me with two things—the pad containing the repetitious morbid rhyme and the business card of Doctor Helen Storm.

I rubbed my bearded chin absently with the back of my free hand while I stared at the simple calling card. I'd very consciously been putting this moment off, but I'd made a

promise, and there definitely wasn't anything pressing at the moment that should keep me from making the call. Nothing I hadn't purposely produced for that very reason at least.

With a resigned sigh I snatched up the handset and punched in the phone number from the upper right corner of the card. Even in my tired fog, my mind began calculating, and I latched on to the idea that it was probably going to be at least a week or two before she'd be able to get me in. That might very well give me enough time to prove I was correct about Paige Lawson, although even I wasn't entirely sure what I was being correct about.

After six rings the phone was answered by a pre-recorded message announcing that I had reached Metro Counseling and that the offices were currently closed for lunch. I felt a wave of relief as the voice continued on, telling me that if this were an emergency I should call the doctor's exchange, otherwise I should leave a message and someone would get back to me as soon as possible.

Following the high-pitched tone at the end of the message I began to speak, "My name is Rowan Gant and I need to see about making an appointment with Doctor Storm. My number is..."

I was cut off by a burst of squelchy feedback, combined with the fumbling knocks of someone rushing to pick up the phone. A female voice barely overrode the squeal, telling me to hold on for a second. Various warbles and clicks followed then fell quiet as the person at the other end managed to stifle the recorder.

"I am very sorry about that, Mister Gant," the woman's soothing voice apologized. "This is Helen Storm. Benjamin told me I should be expecting your call."

My earlier relief turned to instant surrender when she told me that she wanted to see me late tomorrow morning.

CHAPTER 4

D-E-A-D-I-A-M!

D-E-A-D-I-A-M!

What's that spell?

Dead I am!

Louder!

Dead I am!

One more time!

DEAD I AM!

I awoke in darkness.

I really wasn't all that surprised. Nightmares and darkness tend to go hand in hand. I'd grown relatively used to the cycle by now.

The bizarre Seussian chant was still echoing inside my head with a frighteningly excited edge to its morose verbiage. I laid completely still, letting the imagined sound fade to crisp silence, only to have the quiet replaced by a low, repetitious rumble. I slowly turned my head and found myself face to face with one of our resident felines. The paws outstretched to touch me and incessant purring, as my shoulder was being kneaded, led me to believe it was most likely Dickens, since this was the norm for him.

The familiarity of my surroundings was a relief. For once, I wasn't at a loss for the how's, where's or why's of my situation; and, I also wasn't forced to deal with the nauseating sense of violation I had come to know so well. I knew exactly where I was—safely tucked in my bed, more or less under a blanket, with one arm hugging a pillow against the side of my head. My other arm, however, had gone thoroughly numb from the uncomfortable angle it was crooked into beneath my body. I shifted the appendage, and circulation instantly took hold full force. I winced as an astronomical number of pinpricks began traversing up and down its length.

In addition to knowing where I was at the moment, I also had a fair recollection of how I'd gotten here. These simple facts may seem obvious and mundane to virtually everyone else, but to me they were comforting revelations.

As to the why I was here, well that was obvious—it was the middle of the night and I was trying to sleep. Unfortunately, there was a perverted mantra running around inside my head that was insisting that I do otherwise.

I rolled to the side, upsetting Dickens in the process, and sleepily scanned the face of the clock. The digital readout showed it to be almost a quarter past four. For all intents and purposes that simply meant 4:00, since my wife kept the timepiece set fifteen minutes fast to avoid being late. The self-imposed mind trick didn't actually work for her, but that's another story entirely.

My arm was beginning to regain its feeling, and every moment that passed was bringing me closer to being fully awake. The eerie echo reverberating inside my skull had

been absent for a good number of minutes now; however, it had been replaced by my own inner voice repeating the rhyme over and over.

D-E-A-D-I-A-M!
D-E-A-D-I-A-M!
What's that spell?
Dead I am!
Louder!
Dead I am!
One more time!
DEAD I AM!

The seeming approbation of death was imprinted upon my consciousness with indelible permanence, and it continued to loop like a snippet of a song that you simply can't get out of your head. If its intent was to keep me from sleeping, it was accomplishing that task with absolute perfection.

Letting out a resigned sigh, I climbed out of the bed as quietly as I could in order not to wake Felicity. My eyes were fairly adjusted, and I managed to pull on some clothes without much fuss and then retrieved my glasses and Book of Shadows—a Witch's dream journal of sorts—from a drawer in the nightstand. Even though I knew I was in no danger of forgetting the morbid ditty, I figured I'd best make written record of it because I was certain that anything this insistent meant something important.

I just didn't know what.



“How'ya feelin'?” The left field greeting issued from the handset immediately following my “hello.” Ben's down to business approach to telephone conversations, sans the typical salutations, was as identifiable as his voice, so I wasn't at all phased by the abruptness.

“About as well as can be expected, I suppose,” I returned, glancing at the clock in the corner of my computer screen, “considering that I have an appointment with your sister in a couple of hours.”

I didn't offer the fact that I had been up since 4 a.m. because I was pretty sure I knew where the conversation would turn from there. I was also fairly certain that he wouldn't accept the uneventful truth for an answer. He would assume I was hiding something then belabor the point, and I really didn't need any more distractions right now. As it was, I'd been parked in my office for the better part of my somewhat expanded morning trying to get some work done. So far I'd accomplished little more than going through the previous day's mail and moving a pile of paperwork from one side of my desk to the other. I hadn't exactly been what you could call productive.

What I really needed to do was return a few phone calls and put together some proposals for clients, but I simply didn't have the motivation. Even though I was trying, I was still feeling so overwhelmed by everything; it seemed useless to attempt anything more than simply existing.

“Cheer up, white man,” he told me. “She's good at what she does. It's not like she's gonna bite or somethin'.”

“I know, Ben. I know.”

We both fell speechless, him becoming just the sound of someone breathing on the other end of the phone and me turning quietly introspective.

“Well, there’s really no easy way ta’ tell ya’ this,” my friend finally spoke. “But I’ve got some news ya’ prob’ly don’t wanna hear.”

“The handwriting?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s not Paige Lawson’s.”

“Are they sure?”

“No doubt, Row,” he replied. “They don’t look anything alike.”

“Damn,” I muttered.

This latest revelation did nothing to help my overall sense of demoralization. I had been certain that Paige Lawson was trying to communicate with me. Now, I couldn’t even be sure that it wasn’t simply all in my head.

“Graphologist said that based on the slant, the sample was most likely from a left-handed individual,” he continued. “And prob’ly female, although they get a little hinky ‘bout swearin’ to one gender or the other.”

“Well, I told you that much,” I offered.

“Yeah, I know, but like I said, the samples are worlds apart...and yours still ain’t from Paige Lawson. Ta’ be honest, the difference is so obvious I really didn’t even need the crime lab for this. But just ta’ be sure, I had ‘em verify it anyway. Accordin’ to the experts, the buck-fifty analysis is this, and I quote—The moderate left slant coupled with the narrow spacing denotes an independent and possibly introverted individual. The heavy pressure and ornate loops in the letters indicate a secretive personality...

“There’s some more here about the margins, size, and stuff, but it all boils down to the same thing. It ain’t Paige Lawson’s handwritin’.”

“It isn’t mine either.”

“Yeah, I know. I went ahead and had ‘em compare yours from some of the forms I’ve had ya’ fill out down here. There wasn’t enough to get a fancy analysis, but they were confident that you weren’t the one pushin’ the pencil. I didn’t tell ‘em any different.”

At first I was surprised at what he’d done, but Ben’s actions made perfect sense. He had to rule out all of the possibilities, and since I claimed the writing had come out of me, it was a logical move.

“Anyway, on the bright side,” he told me, “there’s a note here sayin’ that the little curly-q thing with the I’s is pretty unique. Very personal...for whatever that’s worth.”

“Not much, apparently.”

“It’d be easy to identify in another handwriting sample if we ran across it.”

“And the odds of that are?” I asked rhetorically. “Besides, you’ve proven that it’s not her, so I suppose it doesn’t really matter.”

“Yeah, so maybe it’s someone else.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Hey,” he contended, “like I said, I’ve seen weirder shit than this. Especially outta you.”

“Yes, but neither you nor Felicity seemed terribly convinced yesterday.” I allowed the words to hang between us in a verbal challenge of his sudden professed faith in my sanity.

“Look, Row, let’s not go there. I wish I’d been able to give ya’ somethin’ here, but...” He sighed. Without even seeing him I knew he was massaging his neck with a large hand. “It’s just not there, white man. Sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” I told him. I meant it even though I’m sure I didn’t sound very convincing. “So what about Paige Lawson?”

“Whaddaya mean? What about ‘er?”

“You said yesterday that you weren’t even sure it was a homicide.”

“Oh, that. Well, it’s lookin’ less and less like it. Right now we’re waitin’ on the final results of the autopsy, but there’s just nothin’ there at this point that says foul play.”

“How was she found anyway?”

“Row...”

“Can you humor me?” I appealed, my voice dull. “You just blew my theory apart. You could at least throw me a bone here.”

He exhaled heavily at the other end. “Nothin’ spectacular really. Squad car drove by on regular patrol and noticed the door hangin’ open. When the copper came through about half an hour later it was still open so he stopped ta’ check it out. Found her layin’ facedown just inside.”

“And he didn’t notice anything else?”

“Rowan, he’s a cop. We may not be perfect but this is what we’re trained ta’ do.”

“Yeah, I know,” I responded, feeling mildly chastised. “I’m just really having a hard time with all of this.”

“That’s kinda obvious.”

For the second time during our conversation, silence reared its head, bringing all conversation to a halt. I’m sure by now Ben was thinking I was worse off than he’d originally imagined, but so far he was tactfully keeping the observation to himself. I would almost have agreed with him were it not for the fact that I kept reminding myself of the old bromide about not being insane as long as you had enough wits about you to wonder if you were.

“So anyway,” my friend finally put the brakes on the swelling pause with a change of subject. “How ‘bout that Yule thing of yours... That’s this Friday, right? What time were ya’ wantin’ Allison and me over?”

He was correct. Yule was only two days away, and as usual we had invited some non-Pagan friends to our traditional gathering. This was the first year that any had accepted.

The switch in the focus of the conversation was awkward, much like any shift that occurs in a chat such as ours. Even with its abruptness, it gave me something tangible and far more pleasant to grasp. Finally there was something familiar among the discord.

“You’re welcome any time,” I answered. “The official ritual will be around six-thirty or seven. I’ve already spoken to the group, and they are fine with the two of you joining in if you’d like.”

“We don’t hafta do anything weird, do we?”

“You don’t have to do anything at all,” I returned. “But if you do anything *weird* it’s going to be of your own accord, because we don’t have anything *weird* planned. Just a simple Yule ritual.”

“Well, you know what I meant.”

“You know, for a Native American you sure have a bizarre view of alternative spirituality.”

“Like I’ve said before, it’s a long story, Kemosabe, and ya’ don’t wanna hear it. Trust me... But hey, at least I’m tryin’,” he replied, then chuckled. “So what happens after the ritual? Do we like commune with ghosts or somethin’?”

“No, wrong Sabbat. That would have been back in October for Samhain.” I referred to the traditional holiday non-Pagans call Halloween. A night when the veil between the worlds is at its thinnest, and we honor those who have passed before us, which made his comment closer to the mark than he realized—especially since he had intended it as a joke. “Actually, after the ritual we have a late dinner and wait for dawn.”

“Why, is she gonna be late?”

I winced as he delivered another joke in an attempt to further lighten the mood. It wasn’t terribly effective in its intent, but I still responded in kind. “Yeah, Ben. She’s probably not going to arrive until morning.”

“So ya’ want us to bring anything?” He returned a serious question, thankfully leaving the pun to die a quick death before the exchange could deteriorate further.

“We’ve pretty much got it covered,” I said. “If there’s something special you want to drink, you might want to bring it along, but other than that, just yourselves.”

“Okay, so what’re we eatin’?”

“Food.”

“Yeah smartass, what kinda food?”

“It’s a surprise, Ben.”

“You’re not gonna try ta’ make me eat nothin’ but vegetables or somethin’, are ya’?”

“No, Ben.” Even with my current mood I had to at least chuckle at the seriousness of his query. “There’ll be meat on the table.”

“Beef? Pork?”

“You’ll find out Friday.”

“It ain’t gonna be somethin’ strange, is it?” he pressed.

“You’ll find out on Friday.”

“Jeez, Kemosabe...” He let out an exaggerated sigh. “Okay, be that way, but don’t be surprised if I bring a sack of Whitey burgers as backup.”

“Felicity will kill you.”

“So I’ll leave ‘em in the van, and sneak out if ya’ try ta’ feed me tofu ala whatever kinda shit.”

“Uh-huh. And, if you stink up the van with a bag of Whitey’s, then Allison will kill you.”

“Yeah, ya’ got a point there... Hmmm... Pizza’d prob’ly be okay.”

“You won’t need it. Trust me.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that,” he said. “So look, I gotta get back ta’ work. You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, Ben,” I assured him. “I’ll be fine. Sure, I’m disappointed that I was wrong, but I’ll be just fine.”

“Okay. Tell Helen I said ‘hey’ and that I’ll call ‘er later about Christmas Eve.”

“Will do.”

“Later.”

“Bye.”

When I hung up the phone, the distraction it had provided immediately dissipated, leaving me once again alone in my thoughts. Or, perhaps not so alone if I counted the

cheerfully taunting female voice that was echoing deep inside my head as it repeated, “*What’s that spell? Dead I Am! LOUDER! DEAD I AM!*”

Again I applied the razor I’d used earlier while on the phone. The one that basically says if you are insane, you are unable to recognize your illness and will simply assume that you are fine. Conversely, if you are in fact sane, you should be fully cognizant of the two differing states of mental health and therefore able to question said sanity.

I made it a point to ask myself this question aloud. But even though I was able to do that and not simply assume I was fine, the resulting uncertainty in my answer wasn’t terribly comforting.



The offices of Metro Counseling were located just on the outskirts of downtown Claymont, only a few miles from my home in Briarwood. Still, it took me longer to get there than it really should have due to my two semi-aborted stops to purchase cigarettes. The first time I hadn’t even climbed out of the truck. I’d simply sat there for several minutes, arguing with a sudden attack of will power, before eventually backing out of the parking space and starting once again on my way to the appointment. But on the second stop I had actually gone in to a small convenience store, and purchased a pack from the cashier, then tossed them unopened into the trash outside before heading out again. Earlier in the day, I’d even considered lighting up a cigar from my humidor, but I’d been doing my best to avoid them of late. I knew if I had one in my hand I’d inhale it, and that was the last thing I needed to start doing.

Obviously, this craving had increased disproportionately over the past twenty-four-hour period, and the nicotine gum simply wasn’t doing its job any longer. At the moment, I had two fresh pieces stuffed simultaneously into my cheek and was considering a third, even though I was fairly certain that doing so could make me dangerously ill.

Just as I was about to throw that particular caution into the trash and reach for another dose of the gum, without warning the pains of the urge were temporarily replaced by, of all things, a woman. I had just swung into a parking space and was switching off the engine of my truck when I noticed her. She was petite. Dressed in a long skirt and boots. A leather jacket hugged her torso from the waist up, and her shoulder-length blonde hair was flying on a cold breeze. She had a milky complexion and her face bore a tasteful amount of makeup.

After a moment, I caught myself literally ogling her as she walked across the parking lot from her car and then disappeared through the glass doors at the entrance of the building.

I physically shuddered as I shook off the stare. Two specific thoughts were pin wheeling around inside my head taking turns at the forefront as they bounced.

The first was that I hoped she hadn’t noticed my rude gaze. But even if she had, at worst I would simply be embarrassed.

The second, however, was a bit troubling and, in a sense, even mildly disturbing.

For some reason I seemed to be trying very hard to imagine what she would look like if she had long red hair.

CHAPTER 5

“It is a terrible habit,” Doctor Helen Storm said aloud and then took a drag from a cigarette. “I really should quit, but I enjoy it far too much.”

I had arrived early for the appointment, as was my nature in all things involving a scheduled time. We had actually met at the door as I was on my way in and she was on her way out. She’d been hoping to grab a quick smoke break. To her credit, she had started to put the cigarettes away and take off her coat, but I insisted that she go ahead and indulge the addiction. Instead of having me wait alone, she had invited me to walk outside with her. We were now standing at the railing of an outdoor lounge that occupied an architecturally truncated corner of the seventh floor of the building. The air was chilly but it had calmed, and with the late morning sun to dull the bite, the crispness was for the most part pleasant.

“I know what you mean,” I replied, mentally beating down the desire to bum one from her as I shifted a half step away from the enticing smoke.

“I am so sorry, is the smoke bothering you?” she asked, noticing my obvious move and shifting away herself.

“Yes and no,” I shrugged. “I quit a couple of years ago, but for some reason I’ve been having some pretty horrendous cravings lately.”

“I apologize, Rowan. I should have asked before I invited you out here with me.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I shook my head and waved her off before she could extinguish the cigarette. “I’m fine.”

“Are you certain?”

“Absolutely.”

“So why do you think you have been craving cigarettes?”

“Dunno.” I shrugged. “Stress I suppose. Aren’t you supposed to be the one telling me why I’m all screwed up?”

Helen Storm regarded me with mysteriously dark eyes that were a mirror image of her brother’s. She bore an unmistakable family resemblance to Ben, but with a far softer edge to her features. Her pretty face was framed by shiny black hair that fell across her shoulders and was interspersed with strands of grey. My friend had once told me that she was a handful of years older than him, but the streaks in her hair were the only telltale sign of that fact. The one physical attribute that came into severe contrast with her sibling was her size, she being almost a foot shorter than he.

“You do not have a very high opinion of psychiatrists, do you, Rowan?” she asked after a moment.

“It’s not really that,” I answered, somewhat embarrassed that I was broadcasting my distaste for the situation so clearly. I thought I’d be able to maintain at least some amount of control, but quite obviously I had not. “I’m just not entirely sure that I need one.”

“You might not,” she answered easily.

I paused, slightly taken aback. “Well, I have to admit, that’s not exactly what I was expecting you to say.”

“I got that impression.”

“I’m sorry.” I apologized for my challenge. “That was pretty rude of me, wasn’t it?”

“Not really.” She shook her head and smiled. “You are simply voicing your anxiety.”

“I suppose you’ve dealt with worse.”

“Were I at liberty to do so, I could tell a few stories,” she chuckled.

“Okay, so now that we have the awkward moment out of the way, I guess I can assume Ben has filled you in on some things?” I posed the question without accusation.

“Yes. Some.” She nodded. “I will not lie to you. Benjamin and I have talked at length about your situation. I have even spoken with your wife.”

“The conspiracy grows,” I remarked flatly.

“That is one way to view it,” she returned. “Or you could look at the other side and see it as some people who care very deeply for you and are trying to help.”

“You’re right. That comment was unfair.”

“Fairness is somewhat subjective. It is all a matter of the individual perception.”

“So it’s okay for me to perceive that my wife and best friend have conspired against me? I thought that was considered paranoia.”

“It is perfectly natural to feel a sense of betrayal when a loved one disagrees with you on something such as this,” she explained. “But healthy individuals will reason it out and understand that they are not being betrayed at all. It would only be paranoia if you took it to the extreme.”

“So you don’t think I’ve taken it to the extreme?”

“Seriously, at this juncture, no I do not.” She took a drag from her cigarette and made it a point to exhale the smoke downwind before bringing her penetrating gaze back to my face. “To begin with, you are here and obviously no one is forcibly escorting you. Secondly, you are not visibly angry. Maybe a bit apprehensive... Some confusion... Yes, I can sense some definite confusion... But I do not really detect any fear. If anything, you are somewhat curious about what I think about everything I have been told thus far. All in all, I would have to say you are probably a perfectly rational human being. Of course, we have only been talking for a few minutes now. So I suppose I should reserve me judgment.”

At the end of her impromptu analysis, she gave me a disarming smile.

“Don’t you need to show me some ink blots or play some word association games with me before you can draw that conclusion?” I asked.

“I tend to trust my instincts,” she chuckled. “It would appear that you have as many misconceptions about psychiatrists as the general public have about Witches.”

“So Ben told you about that.” I offered the words more as an observation than a question.

“Of course, not that he needed to do so,” she explained. “You have made no secret of the fact and therefore have attracted more than your share of media coverage from your involvement with the Major Case Squad.”

She was correct. I had been the hot topic earlier this year in both print and broadcast media. Among the headlines were such things as “SELF PROCLAIMED WITCH AIDS POLICE IN MANHUNT” and “POLICE SEEK HELP FROM PAGAN PRACTITIONER.” There was usually a picture of me to accompany the story, so my faith and way of life weren’t exactly secret. The worst, however, had to have been the moniker coined by a local TV station news team. Ben, FBI Special Agent Constance

Mandalay, and I had been dubbed the “Ghoul Squad.” That one, along with a video clip of the three of us at a particularly gruesome crime scene, had even made it into the national media pipeline.

“So the Witch thing doesn’t bother you?” I asked.

“Should it?” She raised an eyebrow and questioned me as much with her gaze as her words.

“No.” I shook my head. “But it did take some time to convince Ben, so I assumed maybe you might be...” I let my voice trail off as I searched for the least offensive phrase.

“...Just as closed minded?” She offered the words to me. “My brother is peculiar that way.”

“I thought so,” I agreed. “Especially for a Native American.”

“Benjamin never truly embraced his heritage,” she told me. “Only on the surface, culturally perhaps, though not completely in that respect either. And especially not deep down. Certainly not at a spiritual level. I cannot fault him for it; he has his reasons. But I can easily see where it would seem odd to you.”

It was obvious by the way she spoke that she was intimately familiar with the history to which Ben would occasionally allude, but never reveal. Still, she didn’t offer any further details, so I didn’t ask.

I said, “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“You didn’t.” She shook her head and gave a slight shrug as she crushed out the remains of her cigarette. “With that said, however, what do you say we go inside and see if we can figure out just exactly what has been keeping you off balance as of late.”

The remainder of my time spent with Helen Storm was relaxing if nothing else. She was so easy to talk to that I actually felt calm and even partially grounded while we chatted in the comfort of her office. My earlier apprehension had melted quickly away, only to return for wholly separate reasons when the session came to an end.

While we hadn’t stumbled across any great revelations or uncovered any “ooga-boogas,” as she called them, lurking in my psyche, Helen felt that we had actually made some amount of progress. I just didn’t know exactly how much or of what type that progress was, and she didn’t elect to tell me.

Still, though it was hard for me to believe that simply talking with her for an hour could have such an effect, I wasn’t about to knock it. Without a doubt, I was actually looking forward to my next appointment with her.



“Jeezus fuck! I can’t believe this is happening!” an extremely agitated Ben Storm exclaimed as he came through my front door.

I’d barely managed to pull the barrier open in response to the repeated jangle of the doorbell that was coupled with an impatient knock. His six-foot-six frame was already in forward motion the moment I turned the knob.

“Well, hello to you too,” I said as I quickly sidestepped out of his way.

I was gnawing my way through yet another piece of nicotine gum and, for the moment, wasn’t feeling nearly as jittery as I had fifteen minutes before. I’d been home for several uneventful hours now and was actually in the process of throwing together

dinner when Ben first assaulted the front doorbell. Felicity and I had intended to spend the evening going over our plans for the upcoming Yule ritual. Unfortunately, the frenzied tone of my friend told me that was about to change.

He completely ignored my jibe and using one of the handful of nicknames he'd assigned to my wife asked, "Is Firehair home?"

"Not yet, why?"

"Shit. She got 'er cell phone with her?"

"Probably. What's going on, Ben?"

"Well, we can't wait, so ya' better call 'er and tell 'er ta' meet us. Make sure ya' tell 'er ta' not even come home first." He shot his hand up to rub his neck as he began to pace. "Jeezus she's gonna freakin' kill me for this."

"Why not? Meet us where? What are you talking about?"

He didn't seem to hear me and instead of answering simply muttered, "Dammit, white man, you are just too fuckin' spooky."

"BEN!" I exclaimed, raising my voice to capture his attention. "Would you mind telling me what the hell you're going on about?"

He stopped and looked at me with a deadly serious gaze then shook his head. "Ya'know your little foray inta' the world of sick poetry?"

"What about it?"

"Well the handwritin' might not have belonged ta' Paige Lawson, but it sure as shit belonged ta' Debbie Schaeffer."

"Debbie Schaeffer? Why does that name sound so familiar?"

"Because she's been all over the friggin' news. She's the college cheerleader that went missin' about two months ago."

D-E-A-D-I-A-M!

D-E-A-D-I-A-M!

What's that spell?

Dead I am!

Louder!

Dead I am!

One more time!

DEAD I AM!

The words rang inside my skull with painful clarity, and the exuberance of the morbid cheer was now sharply obvious. Ben didn't need to say anything more for me to know that Debbie Schaeffer was no longer a missing persons case. Her legacy now belonged to homicide and the Greater Saint Louis Major Case Squad.

"Where should I tell her to meet us?" I asked quietly as I turned toward the phone.

I had no doubt it was going to be a very long night, in more ways than one.

CHAPTER 6

My wife's cell phone was either off or out of range, and based on the way her schedule often ran, I wasn't exactly certain when she would be home. Ben seemed almost in a panic, edged with a sense of urgency that he'd thus far left a mystery. He made it clear that he wasn't at all interested in waiting for her to call back, and he insisted upon us leaving immediately. Knowing him like I did, I elected not to press for any further explanation until his adrenalin level started to drop off. As much as I hated to, I had done the only thing I could and left a quick message on Felicity's voice mail telling her to meet us at his house.



My keyed up friend was already navigating his van out of the subdivision before I could get fully into my seatbelt. The sun had fallen past the horizon almost an hour before, and the light of the waxing crescent moon was diffused into a weak halo by thin, wispy clouds that fell across it like a shroud of frost.

For some unknown reason, Ben cranked the van into a quick right turn onto the side street that was positioned diagonally across from our driveway. Considering where we were headed, I thought it odd since it wasn't exactly the shortest route to the highway. Out beyond the windshield, darkness overwhelmed a no-man's land of unlit asphalt that stretched at regular intervals between the streetlamps. I caught only a brief glimpse of motion as a vehicle came barreling toward us from one of the puddles of blackness.

The van lurched left then almost instantly to the right, narrowly missing a parked Thunderbird and tossing me against my door just as I was about to snap the buckle of the shoulder harness into place. Judging from the blotches of primer decorating the otherwise darkly hued T-Bird, if we'd made contact we wouldn't have been its first scrape by far.

I hadn't remembered noticing the vehicle in our subdivision before, but there was something terribly familiar about it, although I couldn't put my finger on exactly what. Still, it was the kind of aggravating feeling that makes a person say to oneself, "Whoa, déjà vu." The thought went as quickly as it came, however, since any further concentration on the subject was unceremoniously truncated by the sound of my friend's voice.

"Asshole!" Ben exclaimed the epithet as we narrowly avoided slamming into the oncoming news van. "Learn ta' fuckin' drive!"

I straightened in my seat and returned to the task at hand, quickly coupling the safety belt before my friend's infamous driving could send me tumbling again.

"So have you calmed down a bit?" I asked.

"Whaddaya mean?"

"I mean have you calmed down yet?" I repeated. "You just came through my front door like a runaway train, and so far you've been a little short on explanations."

"I told ya'," he offered. "That handwriting sample matched up ta' Debbie Schaeffer."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I started, "but if I'm understanding this turn of events correctly, Debbie Schaeffer has been murdered, right?"

"Yeah."

"Which by definition would make her dead already, right?"

"Oh, yeah, she's definitely dead. No two ways about that."

"Okay, then. So, I hate to sound cold," I said as a preface to my question, "but what's the rush?"

"Simple," Ben returned. "Because of a chucklehead with a big mouth, there's about ta' be a goddamned media circus bustin' out all over this thing."

"That's to be expected," I shrugged, not seeing the correlation. "It was news then, it'll be news now."

"Yeah, well did ya' happen ta' notice the logo on the side of the van that just tried to kill us? Whichever asshole leaked the info also knew about the handwriting sample and decided ta' toss your name inta' the mix. The circus is headin' for *your* friggin' front yard, Kemosabe. Shit, it looks like I just barely managed to beat 'em there."

"So that's why you didn't want Felicity to go by the house."

"Exactly. I just hope she gets the message and doesn't blow it off." He let out a heavy sigh before continuing. "Look, it's bad enough that you're gettin' dragged inta' somethin' like this again, 'specially now. I just wanna at least make sure ya' don't get caught up in the hype this time."

"I don't see how you are going to keep that from happening, Ben."

"By doin' exactly what I'm doin'. Gettin' ya' the hell outta there."

"Maybe that will work tonight, but what about tomorrow? And the next day? And the next?" I asked.

"There might not be a tomorrow, or a next day for 'em. My plan is ta' keep ya' as far away from this as possible," he told me.

"They'll just camp outside my door."

"Already on it. The coppers in Briarwood know what's up and they're gonna take care of it."

"They can't restrict the freedom of the press, Ben."

"No, but they can protect the rights of a private citizen."

"Okay, so then why didn't they just take care of it now instead of this whole clandestine escape crap?"

"They are. We just gotta give 'em some time to do it."

"I really don't think this is going to work, Ben."

"Well, we're gonna *make* it work," he shot back.

"Think about it, Ben," I appealed. "You just said yourself that I'm being dragged into this. The damage has already been done. I think at this point it's out of your control."

"Not entirely."

"Wouldn't it be easier if I just made a statement to the press telling them I'm not involved in this investigation?" I offered.

"No reason for them to believe ya'," he answered. "Especially once they find out you're lyin'."

It took a moment for the balance of his comment to sink in. When it finally did, I almost stuttered my next question. “Just a second ago you said you were keeping me as far from this as possible. Did I miss something here?”

“Missin’? No. Denyin’? Yeah, prob’ly. Gimme a break, I know how ya’ are.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You ain’t serious? I gotta spell it out for ya’?”

“Please.”

He huffed out a heavy sigh then launched into an explanation, “It means, number one, less than forty-eight hours ago ya’ just showed up at a crime scene right out of the blue, so somethin’ tells me ya’ just might do it again.” He paused as he hooked the van through a quick right turn and down the ramp onto the highway. “And number two, ya’ handed me a piece of paper with Debbie Schaeffer’s handwritin’ all over it that ya’ say ya’ wrote yourself. So, whether I like it or not, you’re already connected to all of this by some of that weird ass *Twilight Zone* shit.

“Believe me, this is a decision I did *not* wanna make,” he continued, “but the way I got it figured, I have two choices. Either I keep ya’ as isolated as possible and not even let ya’ know what’s goin’ on; or, I go ahead and bring ya’ in on it right from the git’go and try ta’ keep your involvement to a minimum.

“Considerin’ what you’ve already done and what I’ve seen ya’ do in the past, I doubt the first choice has any chance of workin’—period. That leaves me with nothin’ but option two. So I figure if I can exert some control over the contact you have with this case, then maybe ya’ won’t go off into la-la land on me.”

“That’s a pretty big maybe,” I told him. “I don’t exactly have control over it myself.”

“That’s why I want Felicity ta’ meet us,” he explained. “I want ‘er there with ya’ every goddamned second.”

“She might not have that much control over it either.” I shook my head at the comment. “Besides, you know she’s not going to be happy about this.”

“Whaddaya mean ‘not happy’?” he returned. “She’s gonna be freakin’ mad as hell. I just hope she leaves me some hair.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” I told him. “So what are you going to do? Sneak me in and out of my back door?”

“If I hafta.”

“You know, they’ll get to me eventually.”

“As long as that eventually is after it’s all over and they’ve got no reason to put the spotlight on ya’, then I’m okay with it, ‘cause ya’ won’t be interesting to ‘em anymore.”

“I don’t think we’ll be that lucky,” I sighed, “but I do appreciate the effort.”

“Not a prob, Kemosabe.”

Having dispensed with my confusion over the immediacy of the situation, I moved on to the next point that needed clarification for me. “So how did you make this connection to begin with?”

“Don’t you watch the news, Row? Old dude out pickin’ up aluminum cans stumbled across a body wrapped up in a plastic drop cloth this morning,” he explained. “What was left of a body anyway—she’d been there for a while. M.E. says a couple of months probably.

“She was stuffed back up in the brush on a kinda isolated section of Three Sixty-Seven on the way ta’ the Clark Bridge. Best guess is that’s why she didn’t get found until now.”

Disgusting visions of a corpse left unattended for the better part of two months flitted through my head. Having never witnessed such a thing before in real life, the mental picture was an imagining based on remembrances of Hollywood special effects. The image was more than enough to turn my stomach, and I was afraid that the real thing might be far worse than anything I could conjure in my head.

I blinked back the imagining and willed away the sudden churning in my gut. “If she’d been out there that long, how’d you identify her so quickly?”

“We had our suspicions based on size, clothing, all that,” he explained, “but positive ID came this afternoon from matching dental records. They were already on hand at the coroner’s office from a check on another Jane Doe, so there was no waitin’.”

“Okay, but all this still doesn’t answer my first question. How did you make the connection with the handwriting?”

“Once this case went from a missin’ person to a homicide and got turned over to the MCS, the investigation went in an entirely different direction.

“The real deal is that most of the time the victim knows the killer. It’s standard procedure to look for anything in the personal effects that could give us a handle on who might’ve done it. So we spent part of the afternoon back at her parents’ house goin’ over everything in ‘er bedroom. The minute I looked in ‘er notebooks and saw that curly-q thing on ‘er I’s, I knew. I had the graphologist in the crime lab verify it, but Jeezus, I friggin’ already knew.”

“Did you find anything else worthwhile?” I asked solemnly.

“Not really. We got a coupl’a leads ta’ run down, but I don’t think they’ll go anywhere.”

“So if you’re pulling me in on this, why are we going to your house instead of the morgue or a crime scene or something?”

“Because right now I just wanna keep ya’ out of the spotlight while I figure out what ta’ do,” Ben answered. “Not to mention gettin’ Firehair on board before I go any further with this.”

“Have you figured out how you’re going to do that yet?”

“I was thinkin’ I might start with beggin’ ‘er not ta’ kill me.”



“What happened to the promise you made me, then?” Felicity asked in a carefully measured cadence that audibly displayed the weakening foundation of her composure. Her outrage was more than palpable; it was literally filling the room with tension, and at the moment, she was ground zero to what I’m certain was soon to be a catastrophic explosion of anger.

The three of us were seated around a small dining table that occupied one wall of Ben’s kitchen at the rear of his house. Felicity was directly across from Ben, and I had taken up residence next to her.

My friend had at least been farsighted enough to send his wife and young son out to a local pizza parlor before my wife had arrived. He was expecting the worst, and it was looking very much like he was going to get it.

What had been a guarded smile on my wife's lips when she first walked in had morphed instantaneously into a thin-lipped frown the moment Ben outlined the reason for her being here. That frown had grown thinner and more severe with every word that came out of his mouth. The current set of her jaw was visible evidence of her tightly clenched teeth.

"I'm sorry, Felicity." He shook his head.

"You're sorry?" she spat incredulously. "You're *sorry*? Is that the best you can come up with?"

"Whaddaya want me ta' say?" He held his hands out, palms upward as he shrugged surrender.

"Aye, for starters I want you to tell me this is all some sort of sick joke, then," she hissed.

"I wish I could, but..." He allowed his voice to trail off without completing the sentence.

"Then why don't you tell me you aren't really dragging him into another murder investigation."

"Me draggin' 'im in? I don't suppose ya' noticed that he's not exactly kickin' and screamin' here."

"Are you two going to spend the whole night talking about me like I'm not even sitting here?" I interjected with a perturbed edge to my voice.

"You stay out of this," my wife commanded as she flashed an angry glance my way.

"Why would I stay out of it?" I shot back. "I'm the one who's being talked about here."

She ignored me and turned back to Ben. "You know how he is. But you're still bringing him into this even after everything that's happened."

"Well, if ya want the truth, he pretty much brought 'imself into it."

"He's right." I nodded in agreement.

"And how would that be?"

"Well you were there when he handed me that writin' sample," he answered.

"So?" she shot back. "You didn't have to take it."

"I didn't see *you* do anything ta' discourage it," he returned. "So you're just as much at fault as me."

"*Go n-ithe an cat thú is go n-ithe an diabhal an cat!*" Felicity snarled.

"Excuse me?" Ben's face was washed over with abject confusion as he cast his questioning glance from me to my wife and then back again. "What the hell was that?"

"It's Gaelic," I told him, having heard the Celtic epithet from her before. "She just said something on the order of 'May the cat eat you, and may the cat be eaten by the devil.'"

"Do what?"

I glanced at my wife and she was still seething, so I continued with the explanation. "It's a traditional Irish curse. One that she's particularly fond of using when she's angry."

"Fuckin' great," he huffed. "Now I got a curse on me?"

“Not exactly...” I answered. “Besides, it was pretty mild. You don’t really need to worry until she starts tossing in the Gaelic profanity.”

“*Damnú*, I told you to stay out of it then!” she ordered, shooting her glare my way as she rejoined the conversation.

“Like now,” I said to Ben before casting my own stern look at Felicity and adding, “And I told you, I don’t think so. I’m not some little kid who can’t make decisions for himself you know.”

“Aye, I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Look what you’ve done to yourself so far.”

“You know as well as I do that I haven’t got any control over this.”

“Damn your eyes, but you do!” she snapped. “You didn’t have to run off chasing a maniac in the middle of the night!”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“But it’s what *I’m* talking about, then! If I let Ben drag you into this you’ll just do something stupid again.”

“That’s what I’m tryin’ to tell ya, Felicity,” Ben interjected. “I’m not gonna let it get that far.”

“Like you think you can stop it, then?” she chided before mumbling, “*Tá tú glan as do mheabhair.*”

“What?”

“You’re crazy,” my wife spat the general translation.

“Maybe so, but what makes ya’ think I can’t stop it?” he shook his head. “Look, Felicity, I wish it wasn’t this...”

“Don’t you ‘look Felicity’ me!” She cut him off. “We had an agreement!”

“I know,” he pleaded. “But...”

“But what?!” she demanded. “It wasn’t convenient for you, then? *Fekking breugadair.*”

“Jeezus, speak English will’ya’... And, no, it’s just that...”

“Aye, *what* then? Your career is suddenly more important than your best friend’s sanity?”

“Now dammit, you know better’n that.”

“I’m not so sure I do.”

“Oh come on, Felicity...” I tried to wedge myself back into the dispute.

“No, Rowan.” Ben held up his hand and sharply cut me off. “Stay out of it. This is between me and her.”

“Excuse me?!” I rejoined. “Hello? Do you hear what you’re saying? What the hell has gotten into you two? You’re arguing about *me* here, so I think I have a right to voice my opinion.”

He didn’t seem to hear me. With each word, their voices had grown louder and even more strained. Ben’s heretofore-defensive posture was starting to lean further and further toward the offensive. I could tell by the look on his face that there was next to nothing holding him back. My wife’s hammering staccato of interruptions were taking a toll on his patience as the escalation of tempers progressed.

“So just what the hell are ya’ tryin’ ta’ say here, Felicity?” Ben demanded.

“What is it you think I’m sayin’, then?” she spat.

I desperately wanted to defuse the situation, but I had no real clue how I was going to do it. My temper was flaring just as much as theirs were, and that wasn’t going to do any

good. Thus far, every time I opened my mouth I only seemed to stoke the fire burning beneath them, and that blaze was starting to grow rapidly. In a very short time they'd reached a level where I wasn't entirely sure that they were even acknowledging my presence in the room any longer.

It had now become plain to see that the issue was one that was most definitely between the two of them. It was also clear that it had festered for several months, and recent events were simply bringing it to a head.

"Goddammit, dontcha' think I have enough guilt over what happened on that bridge?"

"Well if you do, then maybe you should think about all this a bit harder then!"

The sharpness in their voices had intensified several-fold. I had no choice but to resign myself to the fact that we wouldn't get anywhere until this was played out to conclusion. Since they had drawn a bead on one another, for all intents and purposes ignoring me, I could only watch.

"What? Ya' think I haven't?!"

"You're askin' to bring him into another investigation, aren't you?!"

As angry as I was at being treated like a fifth wheel, I fought to stifle it. "Fine," I finally muttered, though I sincerely doubted either of them heard me. "Go ahead and kill each other. Give me a call when you're finished."

With that, I pushed my chair back from the table, placing some small, symbolic amount of distance between them and me. Hard as it was to stay out of it, I made a half-hearted attempt to distract myself by leafing through a cookbook that had been holding down a sheaf of papers on one corner of the table. However, just as I was afraid it would, the growing conflagration won out over recipes for such things as Beef Wellington and Broccoli-Onion-Cheese Casserole. Like a horrific train wreck that you just can't stop staring at, I again returned my attention to the duel between my best friend and my soul mate.

"Felicity, will you..."

"Will I what?! Stand by quietly and let you get my husband killed?!"

"C'mon," he shot back. "You know that's not gonna happen!"

"Aye, do I?!" She widened her eyes and shook her head. "And just what have we been discussing for the past several months then?"

"I know exactly what we've been talkin' about, and ya' know I'm not gonna let anything happen to 'im."

"Just like you didn't let anything happen to him the last time?!"

"Dammit, you know I already blame myself for that!"

"As well you should!"

"Screw you!"

"Like I'd give you the pleasure!"

A brief lull insinuated itself into the argument, brought on I can only assume by the intensely personal level of the attacks. But though it slipped suddenly in like the eye of a hurricane, its tenure was far shorter.

"Felicity, come on," Ben pleaded, once again making an attempt at reasoning with her. "Rowan is my best friend."

She wasn't having any of it. "You've an odd way of showin' it."

"Listen, do you really think..."

“What I really think is that you’ve lost your mind!”

“You know as well as I do...”

“What?! What do I know as well as you do?!”

“I’m tryin’ to tell you...”

“Come on, then! Tell me! What is it?!”

Her relentless attacks finally brought the roiling argument beyond the red zone it had consistently occupied. What had started as a simmer, then progressed into a rapid boil, now erupted like steam from a burst pipe.

“JEEZUS FUCKIN’ CHRIST, FELICITY!” Ben shouted in exasperation. “Will’ya’ just shut up for a minute and lemme finish?!”

At that moment, for lack of a better description, my wife “pulled her face off.” Her tight frown and locked jaw opened wide into what could be metaphorically pictured as a fanged maw, allowing her own anger to explode outward.

“FINISH WHAT?! FINISH KILLING MY HUSBAND?!” she screamed as she physically rose from her chair. “DAMMIT, BEN, YOU PROMISED ME YOU WOULDN’T DO THIS!”

“SO I BROKE THE FUCKIN’ PROMISE! DEAL WITH IT!” he returned in the same demonstrative tone, rising from his seat as well.

Even with the table between them, he towered over my petite wife. They locked spiteful gazes with one another and a tense silence slid smoothly in as if to underscore their words.

A period of time that felt to be the greater portion of a quarter hour, but that in reality was surely less than a single minute, oozed by as I watched them. Even with the quiet permeating the room, I didn’t know if the conflict was fully over. I wasn’t entirely sure that it would be to my advantage to make another try at interjecting my opinion—or if it would even be heard if I did.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t by my own choice that I interrupted the terse mood that was now blanketing the scene. In fact, I didn’t even realize I had done so until Ben and Felicity turned their stares away from one another and sighted them in on me.

The first sound I noticed came as a thin, rapid scratching that held an even and almost hypnotic rhythm.

The second sound came as the first abruptly ended then was replaced by a rustling of paper—like the sound of a page being flipped.

The third sound announced its presence as a recurrence of the first, matching rhythm perfectly with the point where it had suddenly ended.

I didn’t want to look. I already knew what I was going to see, but I also knew that ignoring it wouldn’t make it go away. I followed their gazes down to the tabletop and joined them in watching as my left hand methodically defaced the pages of the comb-bound cookbook—scribbling quickly and evenly across the paper, moving of its own accord.

With a little concentration, focusing on the fluid scribbling and ignoring of the preprinted words that made up the recipes, one could make out the repetitious couplets.

Hey, hey, hey, whaddaya say!

Don’t ya know I’m dead today!

Hey everyone, I’m here to say!

I'm dead today! I'm dead today!
Gotta let Rowan come out and play!
Gotta let him do it 'cause I'm dead today!

I looked back up as Ben huffed out a haggard breath and turned his gaze back to Felicity. My hand continued to move, though it now seemed to be slowing and had begun to falter at the end of each line. An effect, I assume, of the fact that I was now fully aware of its activity.

In a calm voice my friend finally asked, "So, ya' wanna keep arguin' about this, or do ya' wanna help me keep 'im from doin' somethin' stupid?"

My wife kept her eyes locked with mine and let out her own resigned sigh. "Aye...it looks like I don't really have a choice, then."

CHAPTER 7

The hands of the clock were firmly pressed up against midnight when we arrived at the Saint Louis City Morgue. Situated on Clark Avenue, the building was flanked by police headquarters on one side, an on-ramp to Highway 40 on the other, and across the street from the rear entrance of city hall. All in all, the structure was less than obtrusive in appearance—simple brick and mortar construction with nothing that would make it stand out, architecturally at least—against the rest of the buildings in the area. In reality, there would be nothing outwardly distinctive about it at all if it weren't for the small, black-on-white, block lettered sign above the main entrance that stated simply, MEDICAL EXAMINER.

Even though it was clearly marked, it was easily possible for someone to drive past the building on an almost daily basis and not even realize just exactly what it was. It looked like nothing more than just another office building, and even the sign above the door didn't truly betray the fact that inside was the final stop for those departed from this world under suspicious circumstances. In fact, it was more than likely that the majority of the civilian population of Saint Louis didn't even know that this was more than just a business office, it was the place where bodies were dissected in search of hidden answers.

But, unlike the majority, I knew those details all too well.

I'd been here more than once, and each time when I had taken my leave, I'd been completely devoid of any desire to ever return. Still, it seemed that I always ended up back here whether I truly wanted to be or not. Even worse, it was sometimes at my own behest.

Like right now.

It had taken a good while to talk Ben and Felicity into allowing me to come here and view the remains of Debbie Schaeffer. Neither of them was particularly keen on the concept, least of all my wife, so she had taken the most convincing by far. If that weren't bad enough, my friend was absolutely no help. I had been completely on my own in accomplishing the task.

I suppose in some ways it was understandable. For one thing, Ben was already treading on thin ice with her, and both their tempers were only now beginning to cool as it was. Add to that the fact that my coming into direct contact with the young woman's remains didn't exactly fit with his concept of keeping me as far removed from the investigation as possible, and there you had it. The combination was easily more than enough to make him unwilling to help me plead my case.

Considering the fragility of the current truce between Felicity and he, I can't say that I blamed him.

Not much anyway.

I might have simply given up, gone ahead without her, and then suffered the consequences later if it hadn't been for one simple fact—I needed Ben in order to get into the morgue, and his tenuous agreement with the plan was entirely contingent upon her being present to keep an “ethereal eye” on me just in case I started to slip.

At one point, in a failed attempt to change his mind, I had made the mistake of again mentioning the fact that Felicity may not be able to do anything about it whether she was there or not. For that remark I promptly ended up working double time, not only to win over my wife but to re-convince my friend as well.

When all was said and done, it was already half past eleven when we climbed into Ben's van and made the trek downtown. The intensity of my own stress level finally decreased a fraction as soon as we were under way. Unfortunately, the quiet ride also allowed for earlier forgotten nuisances to return full force.

I was completely out of nicotine gum, and my inexplicable desire for a cigarette was now reaching unnatural proportions. What was worse, I still had no idea why the cravings had come upon me. I hadn't even been this bad when I was actually addicted to them. It was becoming increasingly harder for me to keep the outward manifestations at bay. At the moment I was only slightly to one side of irritable, and I was traveling directly toward it at high speed.

The impending collision wasn't going to be good at all.



“You ain't plannin' on doin' any of that hocus-pocus stuff where you become *one with the corpse*, are you?” Ben asked me as he levered the gearshift into park and switched off the van's ignition.

“That's not something I actually plan, Ben,” I answered with an impatient edge to my voice. “It just has a tendency to happen.”

My wife expressed her feelings on the subject in a single terse sentence. “It might not if you kept yourself grounded.”

“I do.”

“Yeah, right.” Her voice held more than a hint of sarcasm.

“Don't even go there.”

Felicity paused for a moment, obviously taken aback by the sudden bite of my words. “Excuse me?”

“Forget it,” I answered, shaking my head. “Just forget it.”

Emotionally, I was poised to bite her head off. Logically, I knew she was correct and that I had no valid reason to do so. But, that bit of reality didn't make the urge any easier to quell.

I simply couldn't afford to take it any further. If I let the comment bait me, it would only serve to re-ignite the argument we'd just barely settled less than thirty minutes ago. With all of us on edge as we were, such an altercation could turn ugly fast.

Given my current state, *very* ugly, *very* fast.

“Look,” Ben interjected. “I've had enough arguin' for one night. Now, the last time we were here I seem to remember ya' havin' ta' come outside to get away from all the ghosts or whatever ya' see in there.”

“Lost souls,” I offered flatly.

“Fine. Lost souls, ghosts, ooga-boogas, whatever...it's all the same ta' me 'cause I can't see 'em. I just wanna know if all that shit is gonna send ya' over the edge or somethin' like last time.”

“They weren’t the real problem last time,” I explained, fighting to keep the annoyance out of my voice. “It was the fact that I was channeling the actual death of a victim that...”

“Don’t split hairs with me, Row,” he interrupted. “I need ta’ know whether ta’ take ya’ in there or start the fuckin’ van and get outta here right now.”

“We already talked about this back at the house, Ben,” I shot back a harsh rebuke.

“Yeah, well B.F.D. Is it gonna be a problem or not?”

I gave up and told him what he wanted to hear. “They won’t be a problem.”

Apparently, he was a little short on trust at the moment.

“Is he yankin’ my chain?” He directed his question to Felicity.

“Aye, he is. But if we take some precautions, I think it will be okay.”

“You *think* it’ll be okay?”

“What do you want? It’s not like I do this every day, you know.” A mild spark of anger flashed in her voice. She was tired; we all were. Her own irritability was showing just as Ben’s was, and I’m certain my uncharacteristic moodiness wasn’t helping in the least. As I had suspected it would, the night was getting longer by the moment.

“Okay, okay,” Ben returned, a slight defensive note in his voice. “I’m not exactly an expert on this *Twilight Zone* crap myself y’know.”

“Are we going to sit here and fog up the windows, or are we going to go in?” I asked impatiently.

“When I’m ready,” Ben said. “Why don’t ya’ tell me again just what it is that you’re expectin’ ta’ find out?”

“We’ve already discussed this too.”

“Yeah, and we’re discussin’ it again.”

Truth was, I didn’t really have a good answer for the question. All I knew was that someone was communicating with me from the other side, and all indicators now pointed to that someone being Debbie Schaeffer. Coming here was the only way I knew to “complete the call,” so to speak.

“I don’t know.” I gave him the only answer I could. “A clue or something. You know, it’s not like this is the first time we’ve ever done this.”

“Yeah, I know,” he affirmed, “but in the times I’ve seen ya’ do this I’ve also seen it go south. Way south. You’ve almost died on me twice. Three’s a charm, white man. That’s ‘zactly what we’re tryin’ ta’ avoid in case ya’ missed that earlier.”

“Think positive,” I grumbled.

“I am thinkin’ positive. I’m positive I ain’t willin’ ta’ trade your life for a handful of flaky clues in a murder investigation.”

“Look,” I sighed, desperate to at least get out of the confines of the van. “It took me half the night to convince you two that we should come down here, so can we just dispense with this never ending committee meeting or whatever the hell you want to call it?”

“I just wanna make sure we’re doin’ the right thing here,” my friend expressed. “‘Cause somethin’ in my gut tells me I should put some distance between you and this place and not look back. I tend ta’ trust my gut.”

“That’s just you being overprotective, *again*,” I countered.

“There’s no such thing as bein’ overprotective when dyin’ is one of the possibilities.”

“Well, that’s why you wanted Felicity here, right?”

“Don’t be trying to use me as a pawn, then,” my wife declared. “I want to hear you rationalize this too.”

I hadn’t been backed completely into a corner yet, but it was getting very close. I’d had my fill of the ping-pong oration I’d had to repeatedly deliver just to get this far, and it didn’t seem there would ever be an end.

I was exhausted.

I was ready to kill for a cigarette.

But the worst of it was that I was getting very tired of being treated like a child. My resolve was set in concrete, and I wasn’t about to let them make me turn back now.

I knew that exploding wasn’t going to get me anywhere even though it was what my knee jerk impulse was telling me to do. I drew in a deep breath and held it for a moment before exhaling heavily. In my head I’d made a connection that they apparently had not. Thus far, I’d managed to hold it back as my one trump card, and it appeared that now would be a good time to toss it onto the table.

“Look,” I verbally threatened, “we can either do it this way, right now, or we can just wait until I go out sleepwalking again and see where that takes us.”

“What’s that got to do with it?” My wife shook her head slightly as confusion contorted her brow.

“Yeah, white man,” Ben added, “ya’ wanna expand on that?”

“Debbie Schaeffer went missing two months ago, right?”

“Yeah, so?” he returned.

“So, I started sleepwalking two months ago. You do the math.”

My friend puffed out his cheeks and expelled a deep breath as he sent one large hand up to massage the back of his neck.

“Shit. There’s just no winnin’ with you” was all he said.



Luck seemed to be on our side for a change, as Ben knew the security guard on duty for this shift, so there were no prying questions or even odd looks. The two simply exchanged pleasantries, including what I’m certain was a tired joke about cadavers escaping, and then we were in. The watchman seemed perfectly content to return to the game of solitaire that was occupying the screen on the computer at the reception desk.

The dim lighting at this time of night lent an eerie feel to the corridors of the city morgue. Pale shadows tempted your mind into playing sadistic tricks on your eyes, seeing movement where there was nothing to move.

Seeing light where there was dark.

Seeing dark where there was light.

In reality, some of those sadistic tricks weren’t tricks at all, but anomalies within the veil between the worlds.

If they chose to listen, even those with closed minds could hear the tortured cries of spirits in transition—some in acceptance of their fate, some in utter disbelief, but all with one thing in common. Each of them was trapped between the worlds of life and death, never making it fully to the other side.

Unfortunately for me, I didn’t have the luxury of choosing to listen, or to ignore. It had been made for me. A relentless cacophony echoed from the walls to assault my

senses even before we passed through the door. It was much like walking into a crowded party; only this party was one where most of the guests are screaming and sobbing with pain. It took almost everything I had to put up a mental shield and block them out. Even then they remained, a static-plagued radio, tuned between stations and set at low volume, interrupted every now and again with a burst of angry noise.

A brief glance told me that Felicity was feeling a similar buzz inside her own head.

Earlier this year I had actually spent the night in this place when the worst snowstorm we'd had in a decade had brought Saint Louis to all but a complete standstill. Ben and I had been trapped here with the chief medical examiner and a severely charred corpse whose spirit staunchly refused to move on. My ethereal dealing with that victim was yet another piece of the puzzle that made up the current fractured state of my psyche. I can say without a doubt that, to date, those dark hours had been the longest night of my life.



In the back of the building, we were met by the night morgue attendant. Ben simply flashed his badge and told him that we needed to view the remains of Debbie Schaefer. The pallid young man never even uttered a word and simply handed a clipboard to my friend so he could sign us in. That completed, he mutely led us into the cold storage area, flipping on the overhead lights as we entered.

The right wall of the tiled room was lined with rectangular stainless steel doors. Each of them was a gateway to an individual compartment where a corpse would spend its stay with the medical examiner. On the opposite wall there were two large sinks, each equipped with a table capable of holding a body. Here were also such things as examination gloves and implements I wasn't the least bit interested in knowing the purpose of.

At the back of the room was another set of doors that led, as I was told later, to the garage which was accessible from the back of the building. This was where recovered bodies were brought in and would begin their journey through the various stages of the postmortem process.

The attendant took us to a wheeled table positioned near the individual storage compartments. On it was a rubberized body bag, an identification tag affixed to the heavy-duty zipper pull. The faint malodor of decay had been noticeable ever since we entered the back area of the building. Upon entry into the cold room, the intensity of the strange funk began to increase several fold. Now as our proximity to the remains was within a matter of feet, the foulness was thick in the atmosphere.

"That's great, thanks," Ben told the attendant who was just starting to pull on a pair of latex gloves. "We can handle it from here."

The young man stopped in the middle of sheathing his hands. Frozen in place like a statue, he simply stared at Ben as if waiting for him to say that he was only kidding.

"Really." My friend nodded and coughed, wrinkling his nose at the smell. "We'll call ya' when we're finished."

I was right there with my friend, and I'm sure Felicity wasn't far behind. My stomach was already starting to churn, and it was all I could do to keep from screwing up my face in disgust.

Giving a slight shrug the attendant pointed toward the sinks and, displaying perceptible effort, muttered, “Gloves.”

With the one syllable utterance out of the way, he left us alone in the chilled room.

“That was a little bizarre,” Felicity commented quietly after the young man disappeared out the door.

“If ya’ ask me, all of ‘em that work here are fuckin’ nut cases,” Ben asserted as he stepped across the room and began pulling a pair of oversized latex gloves onto his hands. With a nod, he indicated for us to do the same then turned his attention directly on my wife. “You said there were some precautions we need ta’ take for this?”

“Do you think he’s going to come back anytime soon?” She cocked her head toward the door.

For some wholly bizarre and unknown reason, I took great notice of the way her hair almost shimmered in the light when she tossed her head. The perfection of her auburn mane as it cascaded down her back in a fiery plume of loosely spiraling curls. The way it softly brushed against the ivory skin of her neck when she tilted her head to the side.

“You mean Mister Personality? Not likely,” he answered.

“It would be best if he doesn’t,” she continued. “Because what I need to do might look a bit strange to someone who doesn’t understand.”

“What, like he’s not strange enough on ‘is own?” Ben offered a rhetorical answer.

“Aye, but that’s beside the point.”

I watched her closely—observing the way the layered cut of her hair framed her face and accented her dainty features. I was amazed that I had never noticed it in such intense detail before.

“So how strange are you gonna get?”

“Not terribly. I just need to cast a spell.”

“Cast a spell? I thought you guys didn’t do shit like that.”

“No,” Felicity explained, “we *do* cast spells, just not the way most people think we do.”

“So you’re not gonna whip out some bat wings and crap like that, right?”

“Just some salt, Ben.”

She used the back of her hand to brush a tousel of her feathery coif back from the side of her face, and I was entranced as she let it linger there.

“Salt?” he queried with a shake of his head.

“Salt.”

“Where are you gonna get salt?”

Felicity rummaged about in one of the many pockets of her photo vest, and when she withdrew her hand she was holding some individual condiment packets of the substance.

“Not exactly sea salt, but it’ll do.”

I felt a rush of excitement course through my body, and my skin literally prickled with the energy of overwhelming desire. I wanted to simply reach out and touch her.

“You always carry that stuff around with you?”

“Pretty much.”

“What, so ya’ can do shit like this?”

“No, not really. I just happen to like salt and you don’t always get any when you order at a busy drive-thru.”

I was beginning to have trouble containing the intense burst of longing for the woman in front of me. I couldn’t turn my gaze away, and if I continued to stare I was certain to embarrass myself.

“Yo, Rowan!” My friend’s urgent and concern-tinged voice slapped me hard in the face, breaking the trance. I felt his hand on my shoulder as he started to shake me lightly. “You all right? You aren’t goin’ all *Twilight Zone*, are ya’?”

“Wh-wh-what? No... No, I’m okay,” I managed to stammer as I blinked.

I had no idea what had just happened. I did know that I wasn’t about to tell the two of them that I had been standing there having some sort of disconnected, uncontrolled psychosexual fantasy about my wife’s hair. That was odd enough in and of itself, but considering where we were and what we were supposed to be doing, I was certain they would have me committed immediately. To be honest, I probably wouldn’t blame them if they did.

I was, to say the least, more than a little disturbed by the incident, but I tried not to let it show. I made a mental note to mention it to Helen Storm during my next session with her. I was really beginning to wonder if my sanity had finally fled in a futile attempt to save itself.

“Aye, help me out here,” Felicity demanded as she struggled to move the wheeled table out from the wall.

Ben stepped over to help her, and after a brief moment of mimicking her struggle, he located the parking brake and released it. The two of them moved the gurney out and, at my wife’s direction, centered it in the room before locking it down once again.

“What else ya need me ta’ do?” Ben asked.

“I’m a bit disoriented,” she returned as she looked around, trying to gain her bearings. “Which direction is east?”

“Shit, ummmmm,” he muttered as he spun around as well, slowly motioning his arms in various directions while mumbling aloud to himself. “Clark runs east and west, building faces Clark. Highway would be there... Headquarters...” he stopped and pointed at a wall, “this way.”

“Okay.” Felicity nodded as she directed her attention toward me and motioned for me to come over. “Rowan, you come stand here, then.”

I did as I was instructed, still feeling somewhat wistful at the sight of her and that auburn mane.

“Ben, you stand on the other side here,” she instructed.

“Okay.” He moved into position. “What now?”

“Just be quiet and don’t open that bag until I tell you to.”

“This isn’t gonna get all hinky, is it?”

Felicity had already stepped behind him, facing toward the east and was tearing open the salt packets. “Just be quiet and do what I tell you to do.”

“Yeah. Great,” he answered in a flat tone then mumbled, “Jeezus, I can’t believe I’m doin’ this.”

Felicity carefully began sprinkling the salt along an arc as she walked slowly clockwise around us. She would stop only briefly at each of the quarters—south, west, and north—and give a slight nod of her head, silently acknowledging the elements. By the time she made her way back around to the east, she had emptied a half dozen of the small paper packets onto the floor in a rough circle, leaving only a small opening unsalted. Though it was not visibly perceptible, the energy of the purified barrier was something I could easily feel.

In a fluid motion my wife moved smoothly deosil—or clockwise—around us a second time. Holding her arms outstretched, she moved silently until she was once again before the small opening where she started. After a slight pause she repeated the circuit twice more.

“What the hell’s she doin’?” Ben whispered the question to me from across the wheeled table.

“Cleansing the work area,” I replied in my own hushed tone.

As Felicity came to rest at the end of the third revolution, she brought her arms down, around, and back up in front of her as if gathering something unseen into a bundle. Then she forcefully pushed her palms outward, casting the invisible detritus she had gathered through the opening she had left just for this purpose. Immediately upon completing this task, she sprinkled the remains of a salt packet on the floor at her feet, effectively closing the now purified circle.

“Is that it?” Ben voiced.

“Shhhh!” my wife warned as she remained at rest—arms at her sides, facing east with her back to us, and her head bowed.

He started to retort but halted before uttering a sound as I slowly shook my head and mouthed the word, “Don’t.” Instead he simply rolled his eyes and allowed his shoulders to fall slightly.

I could sense that Felicity had fallen into an easy rhythm with her breathing, taking deep lungfuls of air in through her nose and exhaling softly out through her mouth. In an almost symbiotic reaction, my own breathing slipped into time with hers.

After a short meditation, she slowly raised her arms from her sides, palms upward, then allowed her chin to rise from her chest, bringing her face upturned toward the ceiling.

“Lord and Lady spin about,” she began in a quiet, singsong voice, “Watch over us this night throughout. In the dark, *one* journeys long, in search of answers hidden strong. Please guide him through and guard his fate, for on this side, I shall wait.

“Please lead me through these passing hours, and grant to *me* your protective powers. For here and now are spirits still, kept at bay by *my* own will. From head to toe, above and below, watch over him as west winds blow. From earth to air, sky to ground, keep Rowan safe and well and sound.”

Chilled silence filled the room as her last words faded. Ben stood staring at me, mute but questioning with his eyes. I’m not entirely sure what he had been expecting to happen

in conjunction with this bit of SpellCraft, but he seemed almost disappointed. His face visibly betrayed his reaction to what must have been anticlimactic in a host of ways. The sort of letdown that comes from seeing real WitchCraft firsthand, but only after first being saturated with years of too many Hollywood special effects and inaccurate portrayals by the entertainment industry.

I couldn't place all of the blame in their laps, however. Even though they were only partially connected with my spiritual path, one could be certain that the bizarre psychic phenomena that seemed to plague me on a regular basis had helped to cloud his perceptions as well.

"Like I've told you before," I whispered in answer to his unasked question, "casting a spell for a Witch is pretty much just like praying is for a Christian."

Felicity had left her station at the eastern point of the circle and had now sidled up next to me. I felt her right palm press against my own and her fingers intertwine with mine in a vise-like grip. Immediately I felt the chaotic energy within my body connect with hers as she took firm hold of my ethereal self. She simply ignored my own earthly bond, fleeting and tenuous as it was, and forcibly grounded me through her own solid coupling with this plane of existence.

She looked into my eyes, silently daring me to even try letting go of her hand, and then glanced over to Ben with a look of extreme concentration furrowing into her brow.

"Aye," she said with a nod. "*Now* you can open it."

CHAPTER 8

If nothing else, I was most definitely no longer fantasizing about my wife's hair.

The malodorous stench of decay spewed outward in a cloud of invisible but uniquely vile smelling gases. They escaped the body bag in an instantly rising plume that marched lockstep directly behind the zipper pull as Ben tugged it open.

The noxious vapor forced the three of us to cough and twist our heads away as it pushed its way into our nostrils. I felt a column of bile searing upward in my throat, and I swallowed hard to force it back into the depths from which it came. My churning stomach did a somersault and twisted into a tight knot as it threatened to evacuate what little contents it held.

I shifted my watery-eyed glance between Ben and Felicity and saw that they were in no better shape than me. My wife was seriously green, and Ben's head was cocked away with his eyes tightly shut. He had already seen this at least once, and he didn't appear to be particularly interested in a repeat viewing.

"Awww, Jeeezzz..." my friend's voice trailed off as he mumbled.

Two months, fluctuating temperatures, and even some of nature's children had been hard at work on the earthly remains of Debbie Schaeffer. What was left of her body was still clad in the tattered leavings of a pair of blue jeans and a sweatshirt that bore the partial logo of Oakwood College.

The clothing had already begun along the same journey of decomposition as the rest and was heavily stained with the purge fluids that escape the confines of the flesh during decay. The fibers had already begun to break down in places, creating large holes in the garments. One side of the sweatshirt was particularly desiccated, revealing a substantial portion of her ribcage and even some remaining mold-covered flesh. One running shoe still hugged the remnants of her right foot, but the other was gone, leaving the left exposed and skeletonized within the disintegrating weave of a white cotton sock.

I suddenly remembered having once seen a cable television documentary about forensic pathology and a place in Tennessee nicknamed "The Body Farm." While a plot of land where decomposing human cadavers are studied wasn't exactly high on my list of things to recall, the sight before me triggered the forgotten memory and a handful of facts returned to the forefront of their own accord.

What came to me immediately was the recollection that there were basically five states the human body would go through post mortem—fresh/autolysis; bloating/putrefaction; wet decay/skin slippage and fluid purging; dry decay/partial mummification; and finally, skeletonization.

This young woman's remains represented at least four of these five stages, and they were fully embroiled in seeing the process through to its conclusion. At the moment the gelid atmosphere of the cold room was holding them off only slightly, which is what triggered the next arcane factoid to bubble up from the depths of my memory—any and all of these stages could be hindered or hastened by a wide variety of factors such as temperature, humidity, and even body type.

Debbie Schaeffer had been dumped in the woods, fully clothed, and wrapped in plastic sheeting. To the best of the medical examiner's determination, it had been sometime around the end of October or beginning of November. The temperatures had ranged from well below freezing, right up into the sixties and even seventies over the past two months. Rain had fallen. Sun had shone. Opportunistic predators from mammal to insect had come and gone. Mother Nature had worked to reclaim what, in the end, rightfully belonged to her.

This young woman had literally become a self-contained forensic pathology specimen suitable for inclusion in a textbook. I had to consciously remind myself that she had once been whole and full of life, not the putrefied and skeletonized mass I was seeing before me now. The visual evidence didn't make it easy.

"Jeeezzz, white man," Ben sputtered. "Ya' wanna do your thing so we can close this up. I'm about ready ta' spew."

His words rattled in my ears and registered as little more than background noise because I was already *doing my thing*.

A calm like I had not felt in more than a year fell over me. I had all but forgotten what it felt like to be fully and completely grounded. I squeezed Felicity's hand tight and basked in the vibrant flow of energy passing between us. Almost instantly I found myself wishing I could remain this way indefinitely.

I drew in a deep breath and sputtered as I immediately regretted the action. After a quick shake of my head, I pulled myself back together and focused on the task that brought me here.

Slowly, I brought my free hand up and reached outward. I could feel a growing static electricity-like attraction flowing between Debbie Schaeffer's remains and me. The ethereal magnetism took hold, and like the opposite poles of magnets, it sucked my palm downward until it brushed against a tangled mass of blonde hair that had pulled away from the skull.

Where am I?

Darkness underscored by a faint, high-pitched whine.

I scream... Or do I? I hear nothing.

What is happening to me?

An explosion of blinding light.

Blink.

Psychedelic spots before my eyes.

Staring into nothingness.

Darkness.

A second bright blast.

Blink.

My heart races.

The kaleidoscope goes on.

Darkness...

Darkness...

Yet another sudden infusion of brightness.

More spots in the mix.

Darkness fading to a soft light.

*A silhouette moving in the shadows.
Visceral fear.*

My ethereal self jerks quickly back as the most recent experiences of Debbie Schaeffer's life—and perhaps death—assault me without apology. Her fear wraps its icy grip about my heart and begins to squeeze mercilessly. I have no idea what I am going to see, but I am certain it will be less than pleasant.

Felicity's grip on me remains steadfast; I don't think I could break free of her even if I wanted to. As I force myself back forward into the ethereal quest for answers, I feel a wholly familiar presence in the room. In the here and now—in the land of the living. But I can tell beyond a shadow of a doubt that it no longer belongs on this side of the bridge.

Phasing in and out of synchronization with time, the entity's feminine voice rings directly into my ear.

“Well, look who finally decided to show up. I've been waiting for you, you know, Rowan. What took you so long?”

Before I can respond, Debbie Schaeffer turns her attention elsewhere. She is apparently observing something that I cannot see. She continues her recitation off in the distance, speaking as much to herself as to me.

“What's he doing now? Oh man, is he kidding? Would you look at that, Rowan? Is he an idiot or what? I mean it's not like it's rocket science to pick out an outfit, you know. He's got to be color blind or something.”

I have no idea what she is talking about.

I cannot see what she is seeing.

The volume of her voice fades from high to low and then low to high as it moves about my head in an insane demonstration of stereophonic principles. The disconcerting pattern of her speech continues to shift in and out of time between planes of existence.

“Get a grip, will'ya? Those red shoes don't go with that skirt. The black ones, you moron, the BLACK ones!” Her voice seems directed at someone unseen by me.

“I don't think he can hear me. Hell, I can't even hear me. What do you think, Rowan? Can he hear me?”

“Who?” I ask aloud. “Tell me *who* can't hear you.”

“What's that?” Ben's voice slowly rumbles past me in a discordant echo.

Oh God, what's happening?

Where am I?

Absolute terror burns its way into my chest.

I can see only a silhouette in the dim light. I can't make out any features.

An explosion of brightness sears my eyes.

I'm blind.

I try to scream, but it catches in my throat and rests there, making me choke.

I can feel the burn of tears welling in my eyes.

An angry voice exclaims, "Fuck! Not again! STOP IT! STOP CRYING! Your makeup is running!"

"I don't care. It serves you right, you weirdo. Oh, no way. Are you blind? That lipstick is way too dark. Look at me, you idiot." Debbie Schaeffer's voice vibrates inside my head as she admonishes some unseen figure.

She turns her attention back to me for a moment. "Can you believe this guy, Rowan?"

Before I can even begin to answer, she is yelling at him again.

"Go ahead, make me look like a circus clown, you dipshit!"

Her voice bounces around inside my skull, trying on my psyche for size. From one moment to the next, I am she and she is me. We are one and the same. We are neither and separate. We phase in and out of one another like playing cards shuffled into a deck.

She stands at my shoulder.

She faces me.

She steps into me.

She steps out of me.

She runs to the brink of a distant unseen abyss and casts her deprecating observations into its depths.

The darkness enveloping me bleeds black then suddenly shifts to blue grey.

Then it all becomes blackness again.

She jumps in and out of my head as if trying to find the most comfortable spot to reside.

I try not to fight the process but wonder if the pain is truly worth what I may eventually discover from her; if I discover anything at all.

She settles in behind my eyes, and the landscape becomes a muted haze. I am beginning to see what she sees. But what for her is vivid color, for me is nothing more than a faint outline.

Together, we watch with growing interest as the shadow moves about.

Who are you?

Why are you touching me?

No! Please, no?!

Oh God, please don't!

A violent thrust from nowhere purges Debbie Schaeffer from me. The suddenness of it all is even more painful than her careless entries and exits have been. The scene changes point of view, and I see a young woman clad in a party dress. She is arranged in a chair, her body limp. Her face is a palette of colors, painted haphazardly on delicate features.

Visceral, primal thoughts race through my head.

Electrically charged sexual desire wells within me, coursing throughout my body with an animalistic passion.

The feeling is unnatural and foreign.

The intensity of the desire frightens me, but I cannot back away from it.

In the real world I am disgusted by something dark that permeates the arousal.

In the real world I begin to feel physically sickened by the perversity that is woven within the shroud of lust.

Between the worlds I am engaged by it and craving more.

Oh Jesus! She is just so gorgeous!

She's so close! So close!

Damn! She's almost perfect!

Muted darkness.

Explosive blinding light.

Muted darkness.

Explosive blinding light.

Muted darkness.

Jesus...So close.

My desire is stiffening, and I can't wait any longer.

I must fulfill the need.

Quench the fire.

On this side of reality I deny the urge to take myself in hand. In the darkness between, I am unable to resist.

“Dammit, Rowan! Don't let him in!” Debbie's voice scrapes past my ears with anger charged static. “You aren't like him. Stop it!”

Panting...

Heart racing...

Quickening...

She's so close...

She's the closest yet...

If only she was really her...

So close...

Quickening...

Faster...

Again, Debbie's voice punches inward and wrestles me away, evicting the sudden perversion from its warm and comfortable place in my head. For all the disconcerting imagery she brings with her, I am thankful for the rescue. Her voice is frenzied and caustic—aimed at me, him, whomever. She slips into the three-piece suit of my id, ego, and superego taking absolutely no care as the seams rip. The intensity of her emotion painfully rends the garment that is I.

“Look at me, shithead. I must look like a two-year-old who got into Mommy's makeup. Are you blind or are you just stupid? How in the hell can that be getting you off?”

She slips out without warning and stands before me. I feel the hard sting of her palm against my cheek. “Don’t you ever do that again! It’s GROSS! You’re supposed to be HELPING me, Rowan, not acting just like HIM!”

Her voice calms, and she studies me carefully.

“Okay. That’s better. So now that you’re back, you want to tell me what is up with this guy, Rowan?”

Again, she flits away before I can answer. I am left standing in the cold darkness.

I hear her distant tenor echo in the abyss.

“Hey, you! Perv boy! Are you listening to me?”

She returns as quickly as she left, making my stomach churn as she turns my neural pathways into an amusement park ride.

Her momentary occupation of my conscious ends as she is bludgeoned from behind and thrown forcibly into the cold.

My hand is warm and wet...

Panting.

Heart still racing.

I’m spent...for now.

I tug at my zipper.

She’s so beautiful.

She’s so very close.

If only she really was her.

Then...

Then she would be perfect.

I tap directly into the solid grounding Felicity is forcing upon me and fight to expand my “self” outward. My growing consciousness forces the vile invader from within me. But it isn’t enough. I’m caught between Debbie and the shadow of her tormentor—effectively outnumbered. And, each time I chase one of the them away, the other comes from behind to occupy the space. I struggle to follow the tennis match going on between the hemispheres of my brain.

For one brief instant, calm ensues and I find myself face to face with a petite blonde.

She strikes a pose then begins to dance about.

Hey, hey, hey, whaddaya say!

Rowan’s here, now we can play!

Hey, hey, hey, whaddaya say!

Look at me, I’m dead today!

Take a good look, don’t you turn away!

Just look at me, Rowan, I’m dead today!

She stops and glares at me with a serious frown.

I’m dead, Rowan. So what are you gonna do about it?

“Rowan?” Ben’s voice slides in behind the morose prose. “What’re ya’ seeing? Tell me what you’re seein’.”

Before I can open my mouth to answer, my “self” is hijacked yet again.

“Oh yeah, that’s a great dress, asshole—if I was going to some kind of retro masquerade prom, MAYBE. Who the hell wears that much puke green taffeta? It makes me look like a bridesmaid in some kind of wedding from hell.” She unleashes a verbal assault then whispers into my ear, “Can you believe this guy, Rowan? He’s got the fashion sense of a rock.”

I just can’t even move.

I’m just so tired.

Don’t know why.

I’m so scared.

What is he going to do to me?

“But, you know, that dress is just plain ugly.”

What is he doing back there?

Oh God no, please...

I’m sobbing inside.

“Will you quit messing with my hair, you freak?” She shifts her view and yells angrily into the darkness, “Can’t you see that you’re scaring me?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Come around here where we can see you.”

She turns her attention to me with a quickly uttered instruction, “Watch close, Rowan, here he comes.”

Blinding light.

“Dammit! Did you see him, Rowan? Did you?”

I see nothing but darkness.

“All right, you weirdo, quit messing with my feet. Get up and turn around so Rowan can see you, fetish boy.”

What is he doing now?

OUCH! That hurts!

What is he doing to my feet?

Why?

My heart rattles in my breast.

I can hardly breathe.

I’m so frightened.

“Look at that. The moron can’t even tell left from right.

“Move so Rowan can see you. Yeah you, you fathead, Rowan needs to see you.

“Oh, this is good. Look at this, Rowan. Sequined pumps. SEA FOAM GREEN sequined pumps. And would you look at how high those heels are! Where the hell did he get those things? Now I ask you, do I look like I have doll feet?”

A sudden flicker of light.

Psychedelic spots again.

“I think he’s got a wiring problem in that place. The lights kept doing that.”

Another bright flicker.

Pain rakes through my grey matter like a cheap wine hangover as the sudden switch of personalities occurs again. The throb hammers in my temples as the alternating trio of psyches begin a knock-down, drag-out battle for possession of me.

Oh sweet Jesus, she’s so beautiful.

She’s so close.

So close...

“What are you doing?

Please, no.

PLEASE let me go?!

Please don’t put that in my mouth.

Please no!

Somebody help me, PLEASE!

Gagging.

Bitter.

“You shouldn’t have given me that, you moron.

You already gave me too much to begin with.

You ever hear the word overdose?

Sheesh! What an idiot. Man, I just don’t care anymore.

Just let me sleep.”

Heavy breathing.

Struggle.

I feel so tired.

My chest hurts.

My heart is pounding so hard I can hear it.

Breathe.

I need to breathe.

“Come on you jerk, quit grunting. I’m not that heavy.”

Panting.
Excitement.
Arousal.
It hurts.
Oh God, it hurts.
Why is my heart racing?
God it hurts.

***“Look, I may be a cheerleader,
but I don’t bend like that.
Give me a break.”***

Heavy breathing in the darkness.

Oh God, why can’t I breathe?!

“Look at him, Rowan. LOOK AT HIM!”

Hair just so.
Chin tilted up.
No, stay that way.
Yes.
Legs crossed.
*The silky feel of her stockings
against the back of my hand.*
Another rush of arousal.
Yes! Perfect!

POP!
Bright Light!
POP!
Bright Light!
POP!
I can’t feel anything.
I can’t even feel my heart anymore.
I don’t care...

“Talk to me, white man.” My friend verbally insinuates himself into the vision once again, only to become a weak fourth voice in the turmoil.

If only it was really her...
Really her...
Really her...

Darkness.
Fear gives way to warmth.

*Warmth gives way to cold.
Cold gives way to nothingness.
I don't care...*

***“Oh, man, what are you taking
your pants off for, you idiot?
You gonna jerk off some more?
Oh, no way.
You aren't going to are you?
Can't you see I'm already gone?
You fucking killed me already...
You're gonna be screwing a dead body, you moron!
God, you're just sick.
Man, put 'em back
on, that's just disgusting.
You sick bastard.”***

*So beautiful...
So close...
For now...
She'll do for now...*

***Look at me, Rowan, don't turn away.
Look at me, Rowan, I'm dead today.***

So what are you gonna do about it?

CHAPTER 9

“If I’d been told it was anyone else, I never would have believed it.”

The feminine voice issued from the doorway and was accompanied by the low whooshing sound of the door being forced quickly open. Sheathed in an authoritative tone with an underlying note of incredulity, the words glanced sharply from the tile walls, striking their targets from all sides. Those targets were, without a doubt, Ben, Felicity, and me.

The comment didn’t exactly seem angry, but it wasn’t altogether friendly either. It was more along the line of a mixture between disturbed chastising and a cold statement of fact. In any event, no matter what emotion could finally be pinned to the verbiage, the sentence cut through the atmosphere in the room on a determined course. The intent behind its mission was fulfilled as all three of us came instantly to attention, swinging our startled gazes toward the issuer of the remark.

Doctor Christine Sanders, Chief Medical Examiner for the City of Saint Louis, didn’t look at all pleased. Truth was, she looked like she would much rather be asleep. Considering both the hour and her ruffled appearance, she’d obviously been roused from bed. Her close crop of brunette hair, flocked with grey static, was tousled, and her eyes were heavily lidded with a weary haze. She was hastily adorned in a pair of jeans, a baggy sweatshirt, and sneakers. Her parka-like coat hung across her slight frame, unzipped, with the hood carelessly thrown back.

“Hey, Doc,” Ben offered sheepishly.

Under his breath, my friend muttered a quick trailer to his statement, “Damn, she got here quick.” The barely audible addendum was spoken as if he wasn’t at all surprised by her arrival.

“Just what the hell have you got against me, Storm?” she asked as she allowed the door to swing shut and ventured purposefully into the cold room. “Did I do something awful to you that I’m not aware of?”

“I dunno why ya’ got called,” Ben shook his head as he stepped toward her. “There was no reason ta’ bother ya’ over this.”

It was obvious, to me at least, that he was playing dumb. The observation didn’t escape the M.E.’s attention either.

“Excuse me?” she returned. “I should have been called before you ever came in here. It’s called procedure, or have you forgotten?”

“I didn’t wanna bother you.”

“You didn’t want to bother me.” She offered the statement back to him, a much heavier note of incredulity lingering in her voice this time. “What’s wrong with you? You didn’t think someone on my staff would call me anyway? You know better than that.”

“What for?” he shrugged.

“Well, let’s see.” She rolled her gaze upward and gestured toward us. “For starters, three people show up in the middle of the night to view a body from an active homicide investigation.”

“Yeah, so?”

“I just told you. Procedure. You know full well that this is outside the norm. If we didn’t know her identity it would be one thing, but we know exactly who she is. I’m also betting that none of you are next of kin.”

My friend continued to press his luck. “Yeah, so? Since when did viewin’ remains become outside normal procedure?”

“Dammit, Storm! Will you quit it with the innocent act! You know exactly what I’m talking about. It’s almost one in the morning for God’s sake! This is a morgue, not a quick shop!”

Felicity and I remained silent during the exchange. My wife still hadn’t released her grip on my hand, and in fact, she was squeezing so tight that my fingers were beginning to go numb. I gave her a quick nudge and glanced down at the entwined extremities. She followed my gaze, immediately picked up the queue, and let go.

Itchy pinpricks assaulted my digits as blood flowed once again unfettered into my hand. Far worse, however, was the sudden feeling of isolation and detachment that washed over me as we separated. I had known that I was having trouble staying grounded—even if I hesitated to admit it—but the depth of this sensation drove firmly home the severity of my problem. It had been so long since I’d felt so truly centered and at ease that the feeling had been almost like a drug. I wanted it back, I wanted more, and I wanted it now.

Being suddenly and instantly without the warm comfort it brought had ushered in its own brand of fear to fill the void. I had to consciously tell myself not to reach for Felicity’s hand like a frightened child.

“Okay, so we aren’t exactly keepin’ banker’s hours,” Ben rebutted. “But we’re just havin’ a look. No big deal.”

“If that is the case, Storm,” Doctor Sanders contended, “then why did you send the diener out of the room?”

Ben shook his head at the mention of the morgue attendant. “I figured he had better things ta’ do than stand around and watch us look at a dead body. Besides, he’s a little creepy, ya’know?”

“Spare me. And, it’s his job to stay in here with non-staff and you know it. Are you sure it wasn’t so he wouldn’t see what you were doing with that dead body?” she shot back.

“We weren’t doin’ anything with it.” He went immediately on the defensive. “Just what are you implyin’?”

“I’m not implying anything, Storm,” she declared. “Johnathan told me he heard some kind of chanting back here after he left you three. Do you have an explanation for that?”

“That would have been me,” Felicity chimed in.

“Stay out of this,” Ben ordered over his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor directed her gaze toward my wife, “I know we’ve met, but I don’t recall your name.”

“O’Brien. Felicity O’Brien.”

“Right. Well, Miz O’Brien, since Detective Storm seems to be stuck talking in circles right now, would you like to explain what is going on here?”

“Listen, Doc...” Ben took another step forward and insinuated himself physically between the M.E. and us. “Let’s leave them outta this. If ya’ got a problem with all this, take it up with me.”

“I tried that already and it didn’t get me very far, now did it?”

The tension was rapidly building between the two of them, and my friend’s heretofore uncooperativeness was at its root. He was now making a fresh bid for control over the situation, but I wasn’t entirely sure he was going to win out. As was his nature, he was using his physical stature as an intimidation tactic; or trying to at least. Doctor Sanders appeared totally unfazed.

“So what are you gonna do about it, Rowan?” Debbie Schaeffer whispers softly into my ear.

The sudden return of the disembodied voice took me by surprise. I had been fully under the impression that any link with the other side had been completely severed the moment the medical examiner had interrupted us. Obviously, I was wrong.

“Look,” Ben told the M.E., “I’m sorry. Let’s just work this out, okay?”

She met his challenge with one of her own. “If you want to work this out, you can start by telling me what is really going on here.”

Ben’s hand shot up to smooth back his hair and came to rest on his neck as his fingers began to work at a knot of tension. “It’s not as bad as it looks, okay?” he appealed.

“Just tell me what’s going on, and I’ll decide that for myself.”

“Just let them have their little tiff,” Debbie Schaeffer whispers into my ear again. “I’ve got something to show you.”

I feel the touch of icy fingers against my palm, followed by them intertwining with my own. The frigid grasp of death encircles my hand, and I feel its frost creep upward along my arm.

I looked down at my hand the moment the sensation took hold. There was nothing to see, but the chilled feeling was definitely there.

“Look, Doc, you’ve seen the stuff that Rowan does, right?” My friend was starting into his explanation.

“I’ve been witness to one or two of Mister Gant’s episodes, yes,” Doctor Sanders answered. “Is that what this is all about?”

“Come on, Rowan. You need to look at this.” Debbie Schaeffer is pulling me by the hand.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Ben affirmed.

“Is there a particular reason it needed to be done in the middle of the night?”

I glanced over to Felicity and saw that her attention was focused fully upon the exchange between Ben and Doctor Sanders. Consciously, I wanted to tell her what was happening. The recent revelation I’d reached regarding my own ability to ground and center once again brought forth the acid tang of fear on the back of my tongue. I knew that no matter how much I verbally denied it, my current state left me open and

vulnerable. It wouldn't take very much at all to get me into deep trouble—potentially fatal deep trouble. My mouth opened as I started to voice the concern, but before any sound escaped I felt my hand squeezed and heard a rush echo inside my skull.

“Shhhhhh! Don't tell anyone. Just come with me and look. You need to see this.”

I closed my mouth and looked over the tableau again. My friend had his back to us and his large frame was positioned such that he was almost completely blocking the slight medical examiner from my view. I could only assume that I was just as obscured from her sight.

I could feel something tugging at my hand, and when I looked, my arm was actually moving. I tried to stop its progress, but the spirit of Debbie Schaeffer was fully in charge, and her strength came from sources beyond this plane of existence. I was no match for her. I closed my eyes and desperately fought to achieve a solid ground. It was the only way I could think of to regain control over my own body.

“Come on, Rowan. They aren't watching. You really, really need to see this. Trust me.”

“It was a judgment call,” Ben told the M.E. “Maybe it wasn't the best one I've made, but those are the breaks.”

“You're pretty good for that, aren't you?”

“Come on, Doc. There ain't a need ta' make this personal.”

“Then what about the chanting Johnathan heard?” she fired off another question. “What was that all about? I don't recall chanting being a part of Mister Gant's episodes.”

“I think maybe he didn't really understand what he heard.”

“What did he hear then?”

“Felicity here said a prayer, that's all.”

“COME ON, ROWAN! Don't you trust me?”

I started to appeal to my wife for help, only to find the words caught painfully in my throat. Instinctively I reached for her with my free hand, but grasped nothing more than a handful of cold air. I opened my eyes and became suddenly aware that I was no longer standing next to her. Without any realization whatsoever, I had moved several steps away and now found myself positioned in front of the wall bearing the cold storage drawers. Directly before me on a rectangle of stainless steel was a temporary label annotated with a case number and the name. The number meant nothing to me, but the name was all too familiar—Lawson, Paige.

The disembodied voice of Debbie Schaeffer echoes with the insistence of an excited five-year-old. “Go on, open it. You really, really, really need to see this, Rowan!”

I stood there completely dumbfounded for a moment. The pit of my stomach was churning in a way vastly different from what had been brought on by the stench of decay. The acrid boil that was happening down there now was one of pure, unadulterated fear. I

had felt such things before, and with even greater intensity, but what was most disturbing about this instance was that this fear was my own—no one else's.

I watched on helplessly as my hand moved of another's volition, guided by an invisible though firm and icy grip. As my fingers drew closer to the handle of the drawer, I fought to cry out for help. Still, my voice caught in my throat, and I managed nothing more than a weak, raspy gurgle that went unheard.

“I said SHHHHHHHH!” Debbie Schaeffer admonishes me. “You have to trust me.”

“A prayer,” Doctor Sanders stated flatly, her tone betraying her lack of belief in what she'd just been told.

“Open it, Rowan. Open it.”

My hand moved in a jerking parody of a mechanical appendage as it was forced to grasp the handle and then tug the latch open. A second later I was sliding the drawer smoothly outward on the heavy-duty rollers amidst their mild roar of friction.

In an instant I was face to face with the pallid remains of Paige Lawson, and still my hand moved, guided by an invisible but wholly distinguishable force. My arm literally vibrated as I struggled against Debbie Schaeffer's ethereal control. My palm hovered mere inches above the chilled corpse of the young woman.

“Touch her, Rowan. You REALLY, REALLY, REALLY need to see this!”

“Is there a particular...” Doctor Sanders started to continue her interrogation only to be interrupted by the sound of the opening drawer. “MISTER GANT! JUST WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?!”

The sharpness of the medical examiner's demand shattered the delicate pane of the trance like a baseball hitting a plate glass window. Unfortunately, it was too late.

Debbie Schaeffer's ghostly form drove my hand downward, bringing my latex sheathed palm against Paige Lawson's cold flesh.

Colors flashed in a riot of sparks, blooming to the absolute pinnacle of saturation then bleaching to dull shades of grey. An otherworldly electricity coursed through my body on a never ending quest to jangle every nerve, seeking out and destroying anything in its path. Light flickered before my eyes and then drained away in a chaotic whirlpool of luminescence, bleeding red then black.

A rapid burn ripped its way along the side of my neck.

Blinding pain erupted inward from the side of my skull and wrapped around to repeat the assault.

My chest tightened and spasmed as I felt the breath chased from my lungs.

My own words mixed with those of Doctor Sanders as the catch in my throat opened wide to release the escaping air in the form of a tortured scream, “HELP ME!”

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

While the city of St. Louis and its various notable landmarks are certainly real, many names have been changed and some minor liberties taken with some of the details in these stories. In an instance or two, they are fabrications, such as the existence of a coffee shop/diner across the street from the Metropolitan Saint Louis Police Headquarters. These anomalies are pieces of fiction within fiction to create an illusion of reality to be experienced and enjoyed.

In short, I made them up because it helped me make the story more entertaining, or in some cases, just because I wanted to. After all, this is *my* fictional version of Saint Louis.

And since we are talking about *fiction*, please note that this book is *not intended* as a primer or guide for WitchCraft, Wicca, or *any* Pagan path. It is important to mention that the vast majority of rituals, spells, and explanations of these religious, spiritual, and “magickal” practices used in these works are, in point of fact, drawn from actual Neo-Paganism – *but they are not tied to any one specific tradition or path*. The mixture of practices engaged in by the characters in these novels is often referred to as “Eclectic Paganism” and “Eclectic WitchCraft,” being that they borrow from *many different religious paths and traditions across the full gamut of spirituality* in order to create their own. Therefore, some of the explanations included herein will not work for all Pagan traditions, of which there are countless. This does not make them *wrong*, it simply makes them *different*.

If you are actually seeking in-depth information on the subject of Paganism and WitchCraft, there are numerous **Non-Fiction**, scholarly texts readily available by authors such as Margot Adler, Raymond Buckland, Scott Cunningham, and more.

Also, remember that the “magick,” and of course, the psychic abilities depicted here are what some might call “over the top,” because it doesn’t really work like that, as we all know. But, like I have been saying all along, this is *fiction*. Relax and enjoy it for what it is...

Finally, if you are saying, “I’ll bet he had to write this note because someone took these stories way too seriously,” give yourself a cigar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would be sorely remiss if I didn't take a moment to thank at least a few of the individuals who were there to act as my sounding boards and as my moral support staff throughout the creation of these novels—

As this series has been ongoing for more than a dozen years, the list has grown, with specific mentions for specific novels. With this being a collection of the first three books, that list could be endless. In the interest of brevity, there are the usual suspects who have been there from day one – *or close to it* – and have remained with me throughout...

Sergeant Scott Ruddle, Metropolitan Saint Louis PD

Scott “Chunkee” McCoy

Johnathan Minton

Duane Marshall

My Wife

My Daughter

Anastasia “Missus Loota-Chack” Luettecke

Mike Luettecke

Daystar

Countless others

And Coffee...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A member of the [ITW](#) (International Thriller Writers), M. R. Sellars is a relatively unassuming homebody who considers himself just a “guy with a lot of nightmares and a word processing program.” His first full-length novel, Harm None, hit bookstore shelves in 2000 and he hasn’t stopped writing since.

All of the current novels in Sellars’ continuing Rowan Gant Investigations saga have spent several consecutive weeks on numerous bookstore bestseller lists as well as a consistent showing on the Amazon.com Horror/Occult top 100. In 2010, a short spinoff novella titled MERRIE AXEMAS, and featuring one the supporting characters from the Gant novels, spawned an new series centered on Special Agent Constance Mandalay.

Sellars currently resides in the Midwest with his wife, daughter, and a pair of rescued male felines that he describes as, “the competition.” At home, when not writing or taking care of the household, he indulges his passions for cooking and chasing his wife around the house. She promises that one day she will allow him to catch her.

M. R. Sellars can be found on the web at:

www.mrsellars.com

And on major social networking venues...

BOOKS BY M. R. SELLARS

Series novels listed in order of release

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LOVE IS THE BOND
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THE END OF DESIRE
BLOOD MOON
MIRANDA

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