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NEVER BURN A WITCH

Rowan Gant 2

By

M. R. Sellars

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Never

Burn A

Witch:

A Rowan Gant Investigation /

M. R. Sellars

E.MA. Mysteries

Paperbacks

This book 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.

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Books By M. R. Sellars

The Rowan Gant Investigations

HARM NONE

NEVER BURN A WITCH

PERFECT TRUST

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Harm None:

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—Nancy Lankford,
Literary Reviewer

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PS. Roxanne, I'm glad you liked Chapter 18 so much.

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

For Kat.
My Wife.
My Best Friend.
My Confidant.
And most of all,
My Soul Mate.

Author's Note

While the City of St. Louis and its various notable landmarks are certainly real, many names have been changed and liberties taken with some of the details in this book. They are fabrications. They are pieces of fiction within fiction to create an illusion of reality to be enjoyed.

In short, I made them up because it helped me make the story more entertaining.

Note also that this book is a first person narrative. You are seeing this story through the eyes of Rowan Gant. The words you are reading are his thoughts. I know of no one who thinks and speaks in perfect, unblemished English, therefore some grammatical anomalies have been retained (under protest from editors) in order to support the illusion of reality.

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

Amendment I

Constitution of the United States of America

Ratified December 15, 1791

PROLOGUE

Wet clumps of snowflakes streamed heavily downward from the low blanket of clouds that covered the city.

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

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

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

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

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

He never missed the evening news, and he always made sure to watch Channel Four. The others were okay, but Channel Four was his favorite, all because of Tracy. Tracy Watson, the cute brunette weather girl with the red, pouting lips and

bright blue eyes. Now, even in the frigid night, he felt a rush of warmth as he fantasized about the way she enhanced the burgundy sweater she had been wearing when she gave her forecast. The pearl necklace around her delicate neck. The way she brushed the hair from her face with manicured fingernails just before smiling at him and motioning to the chroma-keyed radar map.

He knew she was smiling at *him*. He knew she was talking *directly* to *him*. He knew because she always talked specifically to *him*; warning of heat waves and cold snaps. Tracy cared about the old man, of this he was sure—and last night was no exception. With loving concern, she had instructed him to find someplace indoors to sleep, because it was going to get colder and it was going to snow very soon. She was worried about *him*, and it made the old man feel wanted.

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

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

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

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

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

Damnit! What was he going to do? He'd been wandering all night and if he didn't find shelter soon he would surely freeze to death. He knew that such a thing would

make Tracy sad, and he couldn't bear such a thought. Even worse, he'd never again get to see her wear that pink blouse he liked so much. The one he was sure he could see right through. The one he was certain she wore just for *him*.

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

Fire.

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

Fire.

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

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

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

re-appeared at the distant park entrance. Only then did the driver switch on the headlights before turning onto the street and accelerating slowly away.

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

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

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

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

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

"H-O-L-Y-B-I-B-L-E."

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

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

"EX-O-DUS. TWEN-TEE-TWO EIGHT-TEEN. THOU - SHALT - NOT - SUFF-FER - A - WITCH - TO -LIVE."

The old man stared at the passage and tried to understand what its significance could possibly be. His eyes hurt, and all this concentrating was giving him a

headache. He would much rather think about what Tracy wasn't wearing under that sweater she had on tonight. Concentrating on THAT didn't hurt. It felt good. REALLY good. Maybe thinking about Tracy would keep his mind off his hunger too, for he would almost swear he could smell burning meat. With a lecherous cackle, he closed the book and stuffed it into his pocket.

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

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

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

CHAPTER 1

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

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

With a contented sigh, I let the thoughts of snow and sub-freezing temperatures,

and other people's achievement awards drain from my mind, dwelling instead on the comfortable warmth of the heated waterbed.

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

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

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

Fear.

Anger.

Fear.

Anger.

Surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stop you, " I tell him evenly.

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

"Why are you doing this?" I ask.

His only response is a sour, demonic laugh.

I'm falling.

I'm screaming.

Silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey mister, what time is it?" the little girl is talking to me. "What time is it? Hey mister!"

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

"Hey mister!" the tiny voice demands. "What time is it?"

Darkness.

A deafening demonic chord.

The sound of water splashing violently.

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

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

My world begins to fade.

Twilight.

An endless scream, "Why, Rowan, why?"

Darkness.

Falling.

Impact.

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

Running.

I am running blindly through a forest.

Chased.

Hunted.

The icy snow numbs my frozen feet. I am nude. Nude and streaked with blood. Wounds cover my tortured body. Fear tears mercilessly at my soul as my labored breaths take in the wintry air, bringing frozen pain to my already frostbitten lungs.

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

A tortured scream in the night.

Fire.

Fear absolute.

The taste of death.

I am running.

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

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

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

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

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

back from the crystalline snow, making the pristine landscape appear to be covered with a fine dusting of tiny diamonds.

Clusters of the cottony ice were still falling steadily from a grey sky, the low strata of clouds reflecting the omnipresent lights of the city, lending to an illusion of almost brightness. Emily, our calico cat, brushed against my leg and started out the doorway onto the snowy deck. The moment her paws contacted the frigid substance, she lurched back with a hiss, back arched and tri-toned fur afrizz. The weather having brought about an abrupt end to her planned morning hunt, she pranced back into the atrium, leaped lithely into a chair and settled herself in, electing to watch rather than participate. The dogs had seen to their business, and were now reveling like small children in the wonders of the snow that hadn't been there less than eight hours before. They would be at play for some time yet, so I shut the door, and proceeded back into the kitchen. I knew they would let me know when they wanted in.

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

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

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

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

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

my job to stand up in front of them and do the convincing. Today was to be the first formal lecture to a group.

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

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

"Lexi? Is that really a word?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hey, I'm tryin'. So what was this one all about anyway?"

"It's a celebration of the coming of the spring season," I replied.

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

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

"What's that?"

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

"Okay, okay," he laughed. "I give up... You win." In the background I could hear him shuffling papers about his desk. "So anyway, back to business. According to

the departmental memo here, looks like the class is all set up for around ten. You need me to come get you?"

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

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

"Yeah. Sure."

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

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

"Yeah, I'll be there. Especially if it's on you!"

"Good deal. I'll catch ya' then. Later."

"Bye."

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

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

"Who were you talking to this early in the morning?" Felicity's sleepy voice

murmured.

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

"What did he say?" she asked quietly. Her warm breath tingled my skin as she nuzzled in closer, her soft lips roaming up my neck.

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

"Mmmrnrm... You smell good." "Thanks... You don't smell so bad yourself." Clouds of her loose auburn curls floated about her lightly freckled face as she looked at me with drowsy jade green eyes. She was a perfect picture of her own Irish-American heritage. The only thing she lacked was the brogue. However, she needed only to spend a few short hours with her family to re-ignite the singsong accent that would last for weeks afterward, before once again fading into the background.

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

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

"Good for you."

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

"... And you've got some free time," she breathed. "Uh-huh." I was rapidly starting to melt. "I'm loving you a whole bunch right now."

I didn't arrive at the Saint Louis City Police Headquarters until five minutes to ten.

CHAPTER 2

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

The bulk of the lecture was finished, and by all accounts had gone very well. For the better part of ninety minutes, I had outlined the philosophy of WitchCraft and the Wiccan religion. Taking great pains to stress their benevolence, I recited the *Wiccan Rede*, and focused on its most important covenant—*An it Harm None, Do what ye will*. I had covered the rituals, and the symbols of the two, most especially, the Pentacle and Pentagram. For centuries, negative connotations had been placed on

the five-pointed star, hemmed by a circle. It had obviously come as a shock to the group that the true meaning of the symbol, no matter how you turned it, was that it represented man and his relationship to the elements. Nothing evil. Nothing Satanic. Of further distress to their preconceived notions was the fact that Witches don't even believe in Satan. They weren't entirely sure what to do when I informed them that Lucifer wasn't our boy, but theirs and theirs alone. That fallen angel was simply a deity specific to Christianity and held no place in the Wiccan faith. Even so, there was still at least one of them who remained unconvinced. Because of him, I was now explaining to a room full of blue-uniformed police officers why a particular right-wing publication he flaunted like a shield was factually incorrect.

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

"So you are confirming what the article says then."

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

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

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

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

"Yes, I suppose it is a bit chilly on a day like this. But I personally am not nude when I perform a ritual or practice my religion. There are some groups who do worship *skyclad* and there are many others who don't. I happen to be one of the DON'T crowd." I smiled back at her. Though we were still on the subject of nudity, her query was of great relief to me. "Like I told you earlier, there are several traditions of The Craft and Wicca, as well as many other Pagan and/or Alternative Religions." I made quote symbols in the air with my fingers to punctuate the word 'alternative'. "To assume that they are all exactly the same would be as ludicrous as saying that Catholicism and Judaism are exactly the same thing. You all know, and accept I might add, that there are numerous facets of Christian and mainstream

religions... There are the Catholics, the Baptists, the Lutherans, and the Jewish... just to name a few. It is the same for other faiths as well. The whole reason behind this lecture is to show you that just because someone doesn't follow what is considered by the masses as a mainstream religion, it doesn't make them evil. Being a Druid, Buddhist, or even an Atheist doesn't mean that you have any more proclivities toward violence than anyone else. This seminar could be given by any open minded individual of any religion. It just so happens that I am a Witch."

"I still think you're hiding something," the young rookie in the front row spat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Low-pitched squeals of rubber-footed metal chairs against unwaxed linoleum joined with the quiet mumblings and shuffle of footsteps. As the sea of dark blue funneled through the now-open doorway, a few of the officers took a moment to shake my hand and thank me for the presentation. The literature-bearing heckler, however, maintained a wide berth and held his gaze elsewhere. As he made his way out, Ben stood and motioned him to the side. There followed a short private exchange between the two and he let out what appeared to be a nervous laugh. Ben's face bore a wide grin as he clapped the young patrolman on the back with a meaty paw and sent him to join his fellow officers.

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

friend sauntered to the front.

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, well, I got over it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Suicide?" I queried.

"Don't think so... "

Ben urged the van into a snow packed space, making a judgment call as to where the yellow demarcation lines might be and nosed it up against a pile of the freshly plowed white stuff. The fan on the heater shut down as he switched off the engine

and we were left in a sudden pounding quiet.

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

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

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

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

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

"Go on."

"One of the marks appears to be a symbol and I was kinda wondering... "

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

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

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

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

"A few. So?"

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

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

FAULT!"

I felt like grabbing my friend and shaking him as hard as I could. I didn't know if I would ever be able to convince him that he wasn't to blame for everything that had occurred during that investigation—my brush with death, my nightmares, and even Felicity's miscarriage. Each of those things had come about directly because of my involvement in the search for a sadistic serial murderer. Ben's loyalty as a friend caused him to cling to that blame like a security blanket, as if by taking responsibility he could protect me from an evil that he himself did not understand. In *his* mind, he thought all of this was because he'd asked me to decipher a symbol left behind at a crime scene. In *my* mind, I *knew* it was because my destiny was to square off with that unseen evil and face it down.

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 3

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

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

Clawed at me.

Pleaded with me.

Spoken to me as their conduit to this physical plane.

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

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

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

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

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

Her natural blonde hair was cropped neatly, shoulder length, and what had been a stylish coif was matted with a dried crust of her own blood. The back of her head had impacted violently with the stone inlaid courtyard in front of the hotel, but not before the rest of her body had won that final race. According to the Medical Examiner the X-rays showed countless fractures along her spine and each of her limbs. Like Ben had wryly commented—It wasn't the fall that killed her, it was the sudden stop at the end. Cliché, but then everyone had their own way of dealing with the horrors that they saw. Defense mechanisms are what the psychologists like to call them. Cliché's and dry humor just happened to be Ben's. Brianna Walker's fine Grecian features and clear complexion bespoke of an austere beauty combined with a cold arrogance that exuded supreme confidence. She knew she was beautiful and she had not hesitated to use that fact to her advantage.

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

She had sobbed in pain.

She had whimpered for mercy.

She had died in unfathomable fear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Whoever made the incisions managed to miss any major blood vessels," the Doctor continued his dispassionate dissertation of the facts. "And as I told you, her spinal column was virtually shattered, most likely from the fall. However, there were several fractures in her limbs and both shoulders were displaced. Bruising would indicate that both the dislocations and a number of the leg fractures occurred well before she died."

"How long?" I asked.

"Six to twelve hours, approximately."

"I assume she rented the room and not her client," I directed the question over my shoulder to Ben, "or else I wouldn't be here looking at this."

"Yeah," he grunted. "Room was in her name. Rented that afternoon on her credit card. Not unusual for her according to her Vice wrap sheet. Considering what she charged per hour, I expect she just considered it the cost of doing business."

"What time did she take the fall?"

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

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

"We found fibers matching the hotel linens in her mouth, and bite lacerations on her tongue," the Medical Examiner offered. "As well as tape residue around her mouth."

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

"Mister Gant, if you'll step over here."

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

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

The lens did its prescribed duty and visually enlarged the area, showing a circle carefully carved into the skin.

Around the edges of the circle small hash marks bisected the curved line. Centrally located in the ringlet a large X intersected and formed union with a large P. I simply stared in utter disbelief.

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

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

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

"A *Pear*" I whispered, ending my muteness.

"What?" Ben asked. "You mean the shithead stuck fruit up her?"

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

"Jeezus fuck... " he muttered.

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

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

"*Mistress Bree*?"

"No. The other one."

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

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

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

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

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

"Why do you ask?"

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

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

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

labored and I slid slowly down the wall until I was seated, hunched on the frigid tile floor.

"Rowan! What the hell is going on man? Axe you all right?" Ben was kneeling in front of me, hands clasping my shoulders. "What's happening? Answer me!"

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

"Dammit white man, talk to me!" Ben demanded.

"You think you're safe," I finally told him softly from behind the wall of my palms.

His confusion was evident. "What? Safe? What are you talking about?"

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

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

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

"What the hell are you talkin' about, Rowan?" Ben pressed. "Did you know her? Was she a friend? Like Ariel Tanner?"

"No. No, I didn't know her. That's not what I'm talking about."

"You're not makin' sense man."

"It's the *Burning Times*, Ben," I told him carefully. "All over again. There's a Witch hunter out there."

"A Witch hunter? Man... " he stood and proceeded to massage his neck, "I think you'd better start at the beginning... "

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

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

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

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

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

"Want one?" he offered.

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

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

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

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

"And that means?"

"In effect," I explained, "he legalized the inquisition; essentially giving the church's blessing to those who tortured and executed anyone accused of heresy and consorting with 'Satan.'

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

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

"So you're all weirded out because of some old book?" my friend posed incredulously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You mean like Jesus Christ?"

"One in the same."

"So you're sayin' it's a Christian symbol then?"

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

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

"Guess that would fit... " he muttered.

"Fit what?"

"There was a Gideon's Bible on the bed in her room." He quickly referenced his notes. "The passage Leviticus 20:27 was highlighted. 'A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones; their blood shall be upon them.'"

"Really," I finally muttered. "I would have expected Isaiah 57:3. 'But draw near hither, ye sons of the sorceress, the seed of the adulterer and the whore.'"

"Shit! You quote Bible verses too?"

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

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

"Something wrong with your arm?" Ben asked, indicating my sudden preoccupation with the task.

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

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

"No semen or fresh evidence of sexual intercourse?"

"Not according to the M.E. so far, but what's it matter? She was a hooker. Something like that wouldn't be unusual."

"Just trying to get a handle on what this guy is thinking. It wasn't unusual for

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

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

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

"So maybe he's just after hookers."

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

"How could she confess anything if she was gagged?"

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

"Okay, but you don't know for a fact that he used that pear thing. The doc just said 'something' was inserted. And besides, that Wicked Witch of the West End shit was just a nickname she used. She wasn't really a Witch... I mean not like you and Felicity, right?"

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

"Maybe so, but all this inquisition stuff... "

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

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

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

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

"Whaddaya mean 'save herself?' She never had a chance. He chucked her off a fuckin' balcony."

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

"A test how?"

"He wanted to see if she could fly."

CHAPTER 4

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

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

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

"Vegetables and rice?" He glanced over at me and chuckled. "Are you serious? Don't you want any real Chinese food?"

"Actually, Ben, vegetables and steamed rice are probably closer to being 'real' Oriental food than your suggestion of Empress Chicken."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Hmmp. Well, I'm still gonna have the chicken."

"I figured you would."

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

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

The radio was playing softly from strategically placed speakers and intermixed with an occasional tinny spurt of chatter from the police radio mounted vertically to the face of the dash. The cigarette lighter receptacle stood ready to accept the plug for the magnetic bubble light that rested on the engine cover between the seats. I knew from past experience that a hidden switch somewhere on the driver's side would activate a deafening siren behind the exterior grill. Ben was dedicated to his job and the modifications he had made to his personal vehicle showed it.

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

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

myself that I was just going to have to get over it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How do you figure that?"

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

"Sonofabitch... Mutherfuck... " he muttered as he shook his head. "I just can't win for losin'."

The interior of the 'Happy Wok Express' was just as small as the outside of the building had professed it would be. Ben told me that it was once a carryout fried chicken franchise that had been shut down due to several health code violations. The building had apparently remained vacant until just a few years ago when the current owners had taken it over. Of the few tables, we had selected the one in the farthest

corner of the establishment. We were the only patrons at the moment, but there was no guarantee it would remain that way. What we would be discussing was definitely not meant to be overheard by the general populace.

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

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

"Yeah, well," he retorted between mouthfuls, "she's a doctor, right?"

"Right. But she's getting paid to be a Medical Examiner, not a General Practitioner."

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

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

The food was edible, but nothing that was going to make the *Riverfront Times* annual restaurant guide. For some reason, they had found it necessary to blanch my vegetables beyond doneness, turning them into a limp pile covered with something resembling a slightly thickened beef stock. The rice was cold and dry; leading me to believe it had been steamed far in advance of today. Ben sang the praises of his selection between enormous forkfuls of deep fried chicken nuggets in a thickly sweetened hot pepper sauce; of course, Ben wasn't the pickiest diner I had ever met. I simply pushed my lunch around the Styrofoam plate with the plastic fork, occasionally stabbing a broccoli floret or slice of carrot that hadn't been cooked beyond recognition and popping it in my mouth.

"Your food okay?" Ben queried. "You don't seem to be eatin' much."

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

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

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

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

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

"You think I need to call the Feebs."

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

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

"So request her specifically."

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

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

"Office," he pronounced as he proceeded to slip the beeper back on to his belt, only to have it begin blaring loudly once more. Extracting the screaming palm full of electronic components, he glanced at its face with sharp disgust before returning it to his side once again. "Fucking office AGAIN."

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

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

He paused for another moment, apparently waiting to be transferred to the individual who had done the paging. I decided I was finished with my lunch and

pushed the plate of gelatinized gravy and cold vegetables to the side, then distractedly began molesting my itchy forearm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Detective Carl Deckert worked for the County Police department. We had met during the last case I worked when he had been assigned to the Major Case Squad, Saint Louis' version of a violent crime task force. The MCS was formed as a collective of municipal police departments, all supplying manpower whenever a particularly heinous or high profile case came along. That case would then receive the highest priority and the undivided attention of the officers assigned. The intention was for the squad to be a trump card; activated only when absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, these days, they seemed to spend more time active than in the hole.

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

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

"Jonsey says the Chief wants to know if you're free to check out another crime scene?"

"When?" I asked.

"Now."

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

to catch up.

"Sure. No problem."

"He's okay with it," Ben resumed speaking into the phone. "Yeah... No problem. We're on our way."

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

"He killed someone else, didn't he?" I asked, following Ben's example and shrugging on my coat.

"That's gonna be your call," he responded. "But yeah, looks like it. Meadowbrook Park out in the County. Carl Deckert's waitin' for us."

"How?" I pressed.

"Burned," he answered. "Tied to a piece of a telephone pole in one of the pavilion fire pits and torched."

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

CHAPTER 5

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

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

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

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

Street crews had cut a double wide swath from the park entrance to a point thirty or so yards past the easiest access point to the main pavilion, effectively clearing a small avenue to allow ingress and egress for the multitude of emergency vehicles present. Mounds of the wet winter precipitation were piled unceremoniously in the

center of the road exactly where the plows had left them and there they would stay until removed slowly by the process of thaw.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell me about it."

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

Carl reached up to press his hat back down as a prickly sideways surge of wind

sought to rip it from his head. He proceeded to fill us in as we headed briskly for the negligible shelter of the picnic pavilion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Though an autopsy was yet to be performed, I knew that she had been alive when the fire was ignited around her. In my mind, I could see the flames licking up her body, first blistering her skin, and then consuming it with an appetite unmatched by a starving animal. The fire enveloped her, searing her nose as she fought not to breathe, only to then be sucked deep into her lungs when she could no longer hold her breath. She wanted to cry out. To scream. But she couldn't. She had been gagged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You were goin' all *Twilight Zone* weren't you?" Ben queried, having witnessed similar episodes before.

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

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

"I'll be fine."

"I hate to ask," Ben started apologetically, "but you didn't happen to see the asshole who did it when you went... Well went wherever it is you go when you do that?"

"No. I wish I had."

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

"Fuck," Ben muttered.

"Excuse me?" Carl looked at him curiously.

"We've got one just like it carved into a dead call-girl in the City Morgue," Ben expounded.

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

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

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

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

"Yeah," Deckert nodded. "The other one is layin' on the ledge of the fire pit. It's

one of those Pentacle necklaces. That's kinda why I wanted to get your opinion."

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

"Man, I told you shoulda had the Doc look at that, white man," Ben chided, noticing my attention to the appendage.

"Somethin' wrong with your arm?" Carl asked, genuine concern wrinkling his face.

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

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

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

"Shit man, you're bleeding!" Ben intoned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You sure?" Carl posed. "It looked pretty bad."

"Yes. I'm sure."

"They give you anything for the pain?" Ben pressed.

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

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

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

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

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

"Holy shit," he murmured.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ben squinted and jerked back perceptibly as she thrust the business end of the device at him, then he coldly remarked, "This is a closed crime scene. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

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

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

"I'm afraid I can't comment on that at this time, Miss Street," Carl returned tactfully.

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

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

"But is it true that you contacted the City Police Chief to request his assignment to the MCS?"

"I have no control over assignments to the Major Case Squad," he explained in a

calm, slightly patronizing tone.

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

"No, Miss Street, I would not."

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

"I'm sorry. No comment," I told her apologetically.

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

Before I could get out another 'sorry, no comment', Ben interposed his large frame between the relentless reporter and myself.

"Listen Brandee, if I've told you once I've told you a thousand times... Talk to the Public Relations officer."

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

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

"I'm after the real story here, Storm. Not that P.R. Department crap." She then added, bitterly stressing each word, "I... Am... Trying... To... Do... My... Job."

"So are we, Brandee, and like I said before, this crime scene still hasn't been cleared, so technically speaking, you are trespassing. I'm only going to tell you to leave one more time, then I'm going to arrest you."

"You wouldn't dare!" she spat angrily.

"Try me."

She didn't.

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

During my brief absence the Crime Scene Unit had finished gathering and

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

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

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

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

"Plan is," Ben continued, throwing a quick glance at me, "to go with your theory that this asshole is creating his own Inquisition or whatever, and to assume that he's not gonna stop at two."

"He won't," I asserted.

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

"I believe you, and apparently so do a few people in important places. Not that anyone is happy about the theory, mind you. At any rate, word came down from on high while you were getting patched up. The Chief wants you involved... Every step of the way."

"I can think of a lot of other things I'd rather be involved in," I submitted. "But it's nice not to be considered a crackpot for a change."

"I'll be honest with you, Row. I told him I'd ask you, but I also let 'im know I

wasn't all that keen on it and... "

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

"Yeah, well that was before you ended up bein' some kinda mystical carving board," he shot back. "But let me finish, will ya'... Like I said, I told him I wasn't keen on the whole idea and that I especially didn't like being put in the position of asking you just because we're friends... " Before I could voice another objection, he drew in a deep breath and continued. "Then, I told him that knowing you like I did, and considering what you've seen so far today, I figured we'd be hard pressed to keep you OUT of it without locking you up."

After a short pause, he added, "The decision is still yours to make, though. You don't have to do this."

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

"I already did."

"I guess I should have known you would."

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

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

"Shit! Almost missed it!" he exclaimed.

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

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

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

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

"Haven't you been listening to the radio?"

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

"The snow is coming down at over an inch per hour," she explained in mild exasperation. "All City and County streets are closed to traffic except emergency vehicles and road crews until further notice."

"Did the body make it in from the County?" Ben queried, dismissing what he had just been told without acknowledgement.

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

I looked at the clock on the wall behind the young woman's desk, and then drew in a deep breath. It was already approaching seven P.M.

"Excuse me," I addressed her politely, "but could you direct me to a phone? If we're going to be stuck here, I need to call my wife."

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

"Wonderful. I hope they got my good side," I returned facetiously. "What are they saying?"

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

"Cult, huh? They just love that stuff, don't they?"

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

"That? It was nothing."

"Rowan."

"Seriously, just a minor cut. No big deal."

"You're positive?"

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

"Okay," she conceded. "But you still haven't told me what's really going on."

"Well," I exhaled heavily. "It's not something I can get into over the phone except to say that it's pretty bad."

"As bad as last summer?" she prodded.

"Worse... Potentially, a LOT worse."

I could hear her measured breathing on the other end of the line and knew she was digesting what I had just said. I suppose I could have told her more, but I saw no

reason to subject her to the same fears I was barely holding at bay this particular moment. Especially not while she was alone.

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

"Note?" I echoed in a puzzled tone.

"Well, I guess that's what it is." She explained, "It's mainly just scribbling, except for a number. Two-two-one-eight."

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

"Where did you say you found it?"

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

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

"What was that?"

"Huh? Nothing. Nothing... Just... Just hang on to it for me, okay," I told her hesitantly.

"Rowan, is something wrong?" her earlier troubled tone embraced the words. "Does this mean something?"

"Yes... I mean no... " I stumbled over the answer. "I mean I'm fine. Everything's just fine."

"Rowan... "

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

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

"I love you too. Stay warm. Bye."

"Bye-bye."

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

The number's significance, at least on the surface, was something I had known all along but had no reason to remember until now. I made a conscious decision to keep this entire incident to myself for the time being—at least until I could figure out just who was telling me this and why.

"I should have seen it," I finally muttered aloud to no one but myself. "Exodus Twenty-Two-Eighteen. Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to live."

CHAPTER 6

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

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

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

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

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

"Guess it's just my charming personality," Ben returned.

"Sure it is," she grumbled sarcastically. "Or maybe you just can't stand to see me have any time off."

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

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

The double gloving completed with a loud snap she returned to the stainless steel table centered in the room and slipped a wide pair of clear safety shields over her

prescription frames. "Am I correct in assuming this is the first time you've ever witnessed an autopsy, Mister Gant?"

"Yes, you are," I responded.

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

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

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

"Steely Dan?" I mused aloud.

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

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

"Catch me in the morning, although it's more likely to be Tchaikovsky or Copland." She paused for a moment then adjusted the overhead light more to her liking then carefully drew back the starched white sheet.

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

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

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

After setting the paperwork aside she adjusted a gooseneck microphone then engaged a recorder. "Case number oh-two-oh-three-oh-one-dash-seven. Doe, Jane. Remains appear to be that of a Caucasian female, mid to late twenties. The body was subjected to intense heat and flames, effectively incinerating the soft tissues on the lower extremities and just below the pelvic region. Withering of the phalanges and metacarpus is evident." Shooting a brief glance in Ben's direction and making a

claw-like gesture with her hand, she added, "The fact that her fingers curled into her palms protected the tips. I was able to obtain a decent set of fingerprints for both right and left."

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

"I finished shooting those films just before you arrived. We'll get them processed as soon as possible."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

best.'

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

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

"In case you are interested, Mister Gant, what I am preparing to do is remove the chest plate. This will allow me to extract the internal organs in one block. This is something we Medical Examiners refer to as the 'Rokitansky Method.'"

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

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

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

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

Everywhere in my mind, I heard her screaming.

My mouth tastes tinny.

Metallic.

Electric.

Blistered.

Raw.

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

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

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

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

Twisting lazily on an unfelt breeze.

Floating.

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

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

I can see no one.

I can see nothing.

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

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

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

My body stiffens.

A tortured cry fills the void.

An angry crimson wail explodes inside my skull.

I'm falling.

Spiraling downward.

Faster.

Faster.

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

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

Gradually I open my eyes.

The black formless void still envelops me.

I can't see.

Where am I?

Who am I?

Something is tightly stretched across my mouth.

Between my teeth.

It bites into the corners of my lips, abrading them roughly before continuing its constriction around my head. My mouth tastes of plastic.

Of sweat.

Of blood.

I cannot speak.

I cannot scream.

I can only cry.

"Mister Gant?"

I'm nude.

I'm cold.

I cannot move.

My arms are extended above me and something rigidly encircles my wrists. I can feel my flesh being torn. I can feel the trickles of my own blood running along my skin from the wounds; mixing with sweat and forming rivulets from the headwaters of my pain.

My mind is numbed by the agony. My muscles are stretched beyond their limits.

Something cold and hard cinches my ankles.

It pulls stiffly downward, unyielding.

The stress threatens to tear me in half.

Sharp spasms rack the muscles along my back and I arch against it. Bucking against my bonds as best I can.

If it weren't for the pain I would swear I was already dead.

A soft-edged whimper escapes my throat.

Hoarse but distinctly feminine.

Who am I?

I cannot remember.

I only know that I am not who I am supposed to be.

It's dark.

I can't see.

Where am I?

Who am I?

"Holy fucking shit! Goddammit!" Ben's voice was echoing distantly, "He's done this before and the last time his heart stopped."

Doctor Sanders' voice followed thickly, her words ricocheting from his, "What do you mean his heart stopped?"

"I mean it just fucking stopped! He almost died."

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

My ears discern the mournful squeal of rusted hinges. I've been in the darkness for what seems an eternity. A faint light filters in from above and it is almost blinding.

How long have I been here?

I strain to lift my head.

My ears have grown accustomed to the unbroken

silence and the mechanical snap of a light switch comes like a gunshot.

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

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

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

Even blinking hurts.

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

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

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

I am in what appears to be a basement.

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

Black iron shackles encompass my scraped, blood crusted wrists. Connected by

a heavy chain they are affixed securely above.

I am hanging from a thick beam.

I am suspended from the rafters.

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

Breasts.

I am a woman.

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

I have no idea who I AM supposed to be.

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

Someone is coming.

HE is coming.

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

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

I have no control as my bladder releases.

I begin to cry.

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

"Nooooooooooooooooo!" My scream is muffled by the soggy, biting fabric in my mouth.

A mechanical sound reaches me, felt as well as heard.

Tick, tick... Click!

Tick, tick... Click!

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

The metallic click of a gear ratcheting reverberates again.

Tick, tick. Click!

Tick, tick. Click!

Tick! Clunk!

"Nooooooooooooooooo." My cry is no more than a meek whimper.

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

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

It is more than I can stand.

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

Something about proof of my crimes.

Something about proof of my heresy.

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

Darkness overwhelms me.

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

I am no longer in the basement.

I am outside.

I am still nude.

It is freezing.

Icy wind is slicing through me like a razor.

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

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

Even the frigid night cannot kill the pain.

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

Something strong.

Something caustic.

It numbs my tongue and burns my nostrils.

The smell of it is familiar.

The memory tickles my brain.

Something about light.

Something about warmth.

Kerosene.

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

Dripping.

Corrosively eating away at my open wounds.

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

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

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

Blurring my sight.

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

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

A necklace.

My necklace.

His proof.

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

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

An involuntary shiver trickles through my freezing body.

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

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

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

'No! No! This can't be!'

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

I cannot move.

I can hear the scraping of a match against stone.

I cannot scream.

I can hear the explosive spark as the match ignites.

Somebody please help me!

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

NO! THIS ISN'T HAPPENING!

I am crying.

Thunder crashes in my ears as the kerosene ignites.

Hot yellow agony licks across my body.

"He's posturing." The distantly familiar female voice pierces my nightmare. "Look at his hands."

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

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

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

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

Flames consume all that is.

A sharp sting ripped through my left cheek.

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

There was something different about it.

Sizzling noises.

Crackling noises.

I know that they are coming from me.

The gag is burning.

A pair of pantyhose melting into my skin.

I can't hold my breath any longer.

Maybe I can scream.

I gasp.

Liquid fire rushes down my throat.

Expanding through my lungs.

I choke.

No sound comes past my seared lips.

The bizarre, piercing discomfort attacked me again.

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

I snapped my eyes open.

I awoke to find myself sprawled on a metal table in what I knew to be an autopsy suite at the City Morgue. Ben was towering over me, one meaty paw entwined in the front of my shirt, the other reared back in preparation to impart a serious looking backhand to my face. Just as I started to cringe, I caught a swift motion from the corner of my eye and saw Doctor Sanders reach out to grab his wrist.

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

I felt Ben's hand relax and release my shirt immediately following my gravelly-voiced answer, "I could really use a drink."

CHAPTER 7

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

My shakes weren't blatantly obvious, but they were perceptible, and very little escaped Ben Storm's scrutiny. A veteran witness to my sometimes sudden supernatural departures he stood mutely on the other side of the office; holding up

the wall with his back and nursing a drink, while patiently waiting for me to continue. Doctor Sanders, on the other hand, while knowing of my perceptions, was a novice in this arena. Seated opposite me at her desk she was still staring in wide-eyed amazement. Every now and then she would shift her gaze from me to Ben then back. Having only recently been baptized by fire, so to speak, she had done little more than listen and tend to her own libation as I relayed the experience to the best of my ability. No matter how hard I searched I was unable to find words that could truly describe what I had just shared with the tortured soul of a dead woman.

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

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

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

"That's what he called her," I nodded as I wrapped my hand around the neck of the bottle of Bourbon. "He stated her full name when he passed judgment and informed her of her sentence."

"You think maybe she knew him?" he asked. "Sure sounds like he knew her."

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

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

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

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

"Oh, it belonged to her all right. No doubt in my mind." I twirled the alcohol in the tumbler while watching the light glow through its amber translucence and then rested the glass on my knee. I had hammered the first two drinks and on an empty stomach they had quickly served their purpose by chasing away my trembles with their liquid

courage. I was beginning to feel a mildly warm tingle creeping along the back of my scalp and decided I had better take it easy with this one. "I'm sure she was of The Craft because of the strength of the vision and the force with which I was drawn into it. I had a similar experience with Ariel Tanner when she was murdered... Only the spirit of a Witch could have pulled me in like that."

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

"You said this asshole told her he got the evidence—the necklace—from her apartment RECENTLY. Right?" Ben pressed.

"Yeah. That's what he said."

"But you don't know how long she was left alone?"

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

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

"Sorry," I offered.

"Not your fault," he returned. "So what about the basement, if that's what it was. Do you remember anything about it? Anything unique?"

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

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

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

"Don't remind me," he sighed.

The ensuing silence was interrupted by a muffled electronic warble demanding immediate attention. Ben stepped over to a chair and rummaged about in his coat, then produced a hand-held cell phone from a pocket. Flipping it open and stabbing it on, he cut off the third ring mid-peal and placed it against his ear. "Storm."

Only he was privy to who was on the other end of the line, but his broken

attempts to reply made it apparent that the person was a mere heartbeat away from hysterics. The caller's identity became immediately obvious when he was finally able to forcibly wedge a sentence into the one-sided conversation. "Whoa, whoa, calm down, okay? He's right here and he's fine. I'm standing here lookin' at 'im... No problem. Hold on."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While sitting alone in the break room, choking down the dry candy bar, I had been subjected to only slightly muted versions of the earlier pains brought about by the procedure going on in the autopsy suite. Physically, I could neither see nor hear what was happening in that room. Mentally, I was being treated to—or more accurately, tortured by—a first hand view through a dead woman's eyes. Before long I was left with no choice other than to seek safe haven by placing even more

distance between the corpse and myself. Constrained by the hazardous travel conditions and my only avenue for refuge being outdoors, I had ventured out into the snowy night. The added distance served to blunt a good deal of the pain, however, even the frozen darkness couldn't remove it entirely.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah. Great."

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

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

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

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

"Whaddaya mean? I'm fine."

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

A nervous laugh emitted from between my friend's clenched teeth. "Yeah, well, you're wrong. I wasn't scared. I was more like fuckin' terrified if you wanna know the truth. When you went all *Twilight Zone* in there I just kept thinkin' about that whole deal last time... Last summer... Ya know what I'm sayin'?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded. "It happens."

"All the time?"

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

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

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

An awkward pause rushed in behind my words to fill the void once more. Held

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

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

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

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

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

"That must not have been too effective," he ventured. "You stick somebody they're gonna bleed."

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

"They'd rig the test?"

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

"Yeah, but he didn't rig this," he protested. "She actually had wounds. Deep ones. Doc says she probably would have died from the internal injuries if he hadn't torched her. She definitely bled and I'll guarantee ya' she had to have screamed. I sure as hell would have."

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

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

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

"Shit," he muttered.

"You know, Ben," I expressed. "I hate to bring it up, but there is a relatively large and outspoken Pagan community in Saint Louis. Especially Witches and Wiccans."

He isn't going to have to look very hard for victims."

He puffed quietly on his cigar then let out a long, frosty sigh. "Yeah. Don't remind me."

CHAPTER 8

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

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

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

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

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

would make the flood of '93 look like a minor mishap with a backed up kitchen sink.

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

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

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

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

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

"Over easy?"

"Always."

"Toast?"

"Please."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

continue, for now anyway.

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

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

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

"Starving."

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

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

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

"Seconds and thirds?"

"Even better. You get to help wash the dishes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're right, except for the Roofies," he returned.

"So he drugged her with Rohypnol," I granted. "Did he use it on Brianna Walker too?"

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

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

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

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

"You got a better idea?" he shrugged. "At least this is a place to start. It might narrow the field down some. Besides, didn't you say you thought you might be able to recognize his voice if you heard it again?"

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

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

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

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

"Already called the field office," Ben answered. "She's on some kind of security assignment at the moment so I ended up talking to some SAIC named Bartlett." He shook his head in disgust. "This guy is a real winner. Reminded me of why I can't stand Feebs."

"Do you think he's going to be able to help?" she pressed.

"He said he'd see what he could do but I'm not holding my breath."

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

"According to him she's supposed to be back in the office Monday. That's only two more days counting today. So, if our luck holds out and this prick doesn't off anyone for a little while longer... "

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

"Yeah, well, I hope like hell you're wrong this time."

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

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

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

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

"Not a hooker then?" I interjected.

"Not a hooker, no," he echoed. "But according to her co-workers she was a definite party-girl."

"No law against that," Felicity intoned.

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

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

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

"Humph," he rolled his eyes. "That would explain the whole 'Bi' thing."

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

"Hey, whoa!" He held his hands up in mock defense. "I'm just doing my job here. I don't care what anyone does as long as they aren't hurting anybody and I don't hafta look at it..."

"Unfortunately though, her being 'Bi' does set off a few alarms. Couple it with what her co-workers had to say and you've got someone at high risk for all kinds of shit."

"So, to you, her lifestyle puts her in the same category as Brianna Walker," I posed.

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

"So are you coming back to the theory that this guy is only after hookers?" I queried.

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

"Maybe," I shook my head, "but I still think he's after Witches not prostitutes."

"Listen, white man," he let out a frustrated sigh. "No one has thrown out your theory about the whole revival of the inquisition thing, least of all me. But I've got a job to do and we have to look at all the angles. Whether he's after hookers, Witches, or... " he flung his arm out in a sweeping gesture as he searched for the elusive words, "awww hell, whoever! I just want the bastard in a cell waiting for his last meal, that's all."

"I know you do, Ben," I murmured half-heartedly, "I know you do."

"Look, Row, we've got the Narcs working the dealers and personally I think that's a hot lead. We've been over the Miller woman's apartment with a microscope... Twice... " He held up two fingers. "The place had been tossed and all we found were some smudges. The guy was wearing gloves. Shit, it's the middle of winter! EVERYBODY'S wearin' gloves!"

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

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

"I'm sorry, Ben," I quickly apologized. "I didn't mean to sound like I was doubting you."

"S'okay, Kemosabe. I think we're all a little wired. Kinda standin' around waitin' for the other shoe to drop." He folded his arms across his large chest and pursed his lips for a moment as he stared out through our atrium window then turned back to us. "So, Deckert and I are supposed to go talk to some members of her group this afternoon." He bobbed his head in our direction, "You two wanna come with?"

"What time?"

"Around four."

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

"That's right, I almost forgot," I granted.

"Party?" Ben raised an eyebrow.

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

"You need a special outfit so you can dance?" He shot a glance in my direction and jibed, "You got something pretty to wear too?"

"Irish Folk dancing, Ben," Felicity interjected. "My cousins and I are providing the entertainment at my Grandparents' request. It's like a family tradition."

"So you mean you do like that *Lord of the Dance* thing, then? Allison loves that stuff."

"Pretty much the same thing," she nodded. "Except that we do it for fun and celebration. Not professionally."

"Wow. Sounds like a big deal."

"Regular Irish shindig," I grumbled. "Lots of colcannon and Whiskey followed closely by sightings of leprechauns and the traditional 'dancing of the jig' right on into the wee hours."

"What the hell's a colcannon?"

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

"You sure you've got time?" Ben questioned. "I'd really prefer to have you there but it's not like it's your job. Deck and I can handle it."

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

"Deal."

CHAPTER 9

"That's with a K." A pretty young blonde woman with a neatly clipped pageboy

haircut anxiously explained to Detective Deckert.

"K-a-r-o-l?"

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

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

"Steinbeck."

"Like the writer?"

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

"Any relation?"

"Not that I am aware of, Detective."

"Great book, that *Grapes of Wrath*."

"I wouldn't know, Detective," she told him, "I've never read it."

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

"Ms."

"Excuse me?"

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

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

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

"Starr," she answered coldly, "with two R's. Starr Winston."

He mumbled softly as he scribbled, "Of course. Starr with TWO R's... "

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

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

Karyl had returned shortly with her partner and the two young women were now

huddled close together on a high-backed love seat holding hands, their fingers tightly entwined. Carl and I had taken up residence on the matching couch across from them. The short distance between was occupied by a Spartan antique coffee table. Ben remained standing, hands buried in his pockets, quietly surveying the room. I knew he was using his size to, as he would put it, 'compel full cooperation'; but in this case it was accomplishing nothing more than scaring the wits out of one of the women and putting the other on the extreme defensive. At least he was wearing a sport coat so his sidearm wasn't adding to the intimidation.

Having worked with me before Carl had slipped easily into the habit of treating me as if I were just another cop, therefore, I doubted he was aware—or even concerned with the fact—that from my vantage point seated next to him, I could see everything he was putting on the paper. Next to Karyl's name he made the notation, 'blonde/blue nervous'—Hair color, eye color, and demeanor. Next to Starr's was the description 'black/blue bitchy.'

On a separate line beneath the two names he scrawled 'lipstick lesbians' and double underlined it. I assumed this to be a reference to the fact that while they were obviously involved with one another they were both very feminine in their appearance and dress. Yet another slang term born of the same misconstrued stereotypes of homosexuals that had given us such epithets as 'bull-dyke' and 'flaming-fairy.'

"Nice house you got here," Carl observed. "Must be one heck of a mortgage payment."

"As if it is any of your business, Detective," Stan-hissed, "it is paid for."

He let out a low whistle. "Nice. Have a good job, do you?"

"I am an attorney, Detective Deckert," she returned. "A very successful one. Of course, I'm sure you were well aware of that before you ever came here."

Next to her name on the notepad, he penciled in 'lawyer/bucks.'

"Just the two of you live here, I take it?"

"Yes," she huffed. "If I may, Detective Deckert, I am certain you were well aware of our names and countless other facts that are none of your business before you ever arrived here. So, if I may ask, is there a point to these questions other than a transparent attempt to antagonize me?"

"Just makin' an observation, Miz Winston." He shrugged. "That's all. I'm not tryin' to antagonize anyone."

Karyl suddenly blurted, eyes darting back and forth between Deckert and Starr, "Are we suspects?"

"Not at all, Miss Steinbeck." Carl shook his head. "Not at all. We're just tryin' to get some information so we can solve this case."

The reply to her question was followed by a thickening silence. Information wasn't going to flow freely from these two women, and being a Witch myself, I

could fully understand their reluctance to speak. Considering the way the media had already begun sensationalizing their erroneous and unconfirmed rumors of 'Cult Revenge,' the entire Pagan community in the area was probably running scared. Two of the local television stations had even started weeklong exposes titled something on the order of 'WitchCraft: Saint Louis' Hidden Evil.'

"Listen, Miss Steinbeck, Miz Winston... " Carl volunteered, "I'm not at liberty to discuss the details of this case except to say that the current speculation in the media is way off base... Don't pay any attention to it."

Their silence continued.

"Should we be expecting anyone else?" Ben finally asked from his station semi-blocking the doorway. "Or is it just gonna be the two of you?"

The blonde woman stared past him into the next room at first, obviously making note of his blatant positioning, then tensely chewed at her lower lip before answering, "No, Detective... "

"Storm," he reminded her.

"Detective Storm," she nodded. "No. No one else."

He paused for a moment and thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "Mind if I ask why? When I called yesterday I was given to understand that there were several members in your group, and I asked that you all be present for this meeting."

"On my counsel they have elected to remain anonymous," Starr replied in her still frosty tone. "Not everyone in our Coven is as outspoken about their religious practices as Karyl and I. To be perfectly honest, Detective, the last thing they need is to have the police putting their names on their hit list."

"Ladies," Carl interjected with a fatherly chuckle, "I can assure you that there is no such thing as a 'hit list.'"

"Officially," she spat.

"Listen," Ben began, "like Detective Deckert said, we're just tryin' to solve a couple of murders here. The media is just running off at the mouth, as usual, and you two are NOT suspects. Now, we know Kendra Miller was a member of your group and all we want to do is ask you a few questions. This isn't some kind of shake down. We are NOT on a Witch Hunt, okay?"

The two women simply stared back silently, making no move to speak or even acknowledge what he had just told them.

"I was afraid of this... that's why we brought Rowan along," he appealed, gesturing in my direction. "Give us a break, will'ya'?"

Still facing a mute audience he turned his exasperated gaze on me and threw his hands in the air. "Okay, I give up... Row, speak some Witch to them or something."

As I suspected would happen, I was unceremoniously dropped into the hot seat and the two women turned to me almost in unison. Starr continued her piercing stare with ice blue eyes. Her stony expression combined with the frigid glare was enough

to show me why she was so successful in her practice of the law. I somehow doubted that losing was an option for this young woman and I was inwardly glad that I wasn't on a witness stand being cross-examined by her, although I wasn't entirely sure if I was any safer where I sat at the moment.

Karyl was quite obviously the weaker of the two. Though while she certainly wasn't as stoical as her partner, she remained completely mute. She simply cracked a fleeting, tight-lipped smile and watched me with wide, troubled eyes.

I cleared my throat and shrugged, then stated succinctly, "They *are* telling the truth."

"I read about you in the newspaper last weekend. You're the one who helped find that murderer last year, aren't you?" Karyl finally peeped.

On the edge of my vision I caught a slight movement as Starr squeezed her hand, and getting her attention, almost imperceptibly flashed her a stern look. She wasn't going to make this easy for me.

"Yes, I am," I replied.

"So what did they do," Starr cocked an eyebrow and spat sarcastically, "make you an honorary cop? Promise to leave you alone if you helped root out a few Pagans?"

"No, Ms. Winston, there were no such promises made, very simply because they aren't necessary. I am merely a consultant."

"A consultant for the Police," she added.

"Look," I sighed and shook my head, "I'm not going to tell you that there aren't cops who are prejudiced against Pagans. If I did, I'd be lying. We've all heard of friends being pulled over just because they have a Pentacle bumper sticker on their car. But if you happened to read that article in the paper you know that I've been working toward educating the law enforcement community about The Craft—with Detective Storm's help, mind you. You need to remember that it's a two way street. You can't pass judgment on all cops just because of a stubborn few with preconceived ideas. And you can't run around being paranoid all the time."

"And why should we be any more trusting of you?" she asserted. "As far as I'm concerned, that article was nothing more than propaganda."

I knew that even as we spoke I was being checked out. Poked, prodded and inspected on an ethereal level by the two women. I had felt it ever since walking into the house and even more so since this terse conversation began. I decided that if we were ever going to get anywhere, I would have to go ahead and show my hand. I was going to have to let them feel for themselves that they could trust me.

"You're both Witches," I expressed evenly. "And judging from what I've been picking up, fairly practiced ones at that. Why don't you tell me?"

I relaxed my inner self and drew a deep cleansing breath. As I softly exhaled I allowed all but my most basic defenses to lower. Taking away any walls and putting

out a psychic welcome mat. In effect, I invited them to come in and spiritually shake my hand. Just get to know me. Just get comfortable.

Even considering the energies I'd been feeling thus far, I didn't expect anything in the way of a major psychic event. That level of talent comes with years practice and is not necessarily achieved by everyone just because they practice Wicca. Such abilities are not a given. They are not an automatic bonus that comes with the religion. They are acquired. Even so, any Witch with the most rudimentary knowledge of The Craft should be perfectly capable of 'feeling someone out' and this was my hope with this exercise.

What became instantly apparent the moment my defenses dropped, however, was that these two Witches were by no means mere beginners. Unfortunately, for all three of us, I was soon to find out just exactly how talented they were.

Karyl's energies reached me first. They were warm, cautious and soft, moving carefully around the periphery of my aura. Starr's touch followed and was the direct opposite. Plunging sharply inward and demanding complete attention—as hard and abrasive as the outer personality she had demonstrated thus far. I winced and fired off a quick mental warning to her; basically letting her know 'Witch to Witch' that she was a guest and that I wouldn't tolerate being challenged by her on this level. The small volley hit its mark and she toned down her insistent energies noticeably, though they remained raw and somewhat grating.

Not surprisingly, it was Karyl's tender and subtle delving that located the locked and barred door in the dark corner of my mind where I cloistered away all the horrors I had witnessed throughout my life. No doubt, she had done this while my attentions had been on Starr's assertive ethereal contact. They made a good team, and unfortunately, I hadn't foreseen that they would do this. What was worse, I didn't notice until it was too late to stop it. Before I could throw up a barrier, or even warn her, she unbolted and threw open the imaginary door that held back my nightmare world. Then with the unsuspecting innocence of a child, stared directly into the maelstrom of vivid atrocities I so desperately sought to forget.

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

I don't know where I am...

I don't know how I got here...

What is happening to me?

The metallic click of a gear ratcheting reverberates again.

Tick, tick. Click!

"ADMIT your heresies woman!" a dark voice demands.

Tick, tick. Click!

Tick! Clunk!

Muscle and tendons are tearing. Along my upper back they spasm and snap like overstressed rubber bands sending white hot projectiles of torment through my body.

I try to cry out in pain.

The memories screamed forth like air escaping from a balloon, ricocheting from the corners of my mind and raking steely, barbed hooks through my very soul. As painful as they were for me, I couldn't imagine what the two young women must be feeling as they bore naked witness to my personal demons.

Fear.

Pure unadulterated terror.

"Please come in," a voice.

I turned to face the direction of the voice.

It is my friend. Why am I so frightened?

Ariel Tanner is standing before me, radiant and lovely in a white lace gown. She smiles at me.

"Rowan, how nice to see you." Her voice floats mellifluously, displacing a demonic rushing noise in my ears. "Its been so long. "

I cannot believe it is she. She is dead. This cannot be her.

"Ariel?" I question.

She jerks and spasms. The smile flees her lips. Her eyes grow wide and she looks down. A small spot of crimson

appears on the high neck of the lace gown and begins growing.

Spreading.

Her mouth falls open in shock and bright blood trickles from the corner of her lips. She looks back at me with questioning eyes and the vermilion stain waxes unceasingly, covering her chest.

Running.

Dripping.

"Why Rowan?" she mouths. "Why?"

"Why don't you stop him, Rowan?" her gurgling voice echoes, "Why?"

Darkness.

I could feel that the unstoppable flood of hideous visions had completely

overpowered both Karyl and Starr. Enthralled by sadistic nightmares that no one should be made to witness, let alone live. I braced myself against yet another wave of remembered agony as I struggled to slam the ethereal door.

"Kendra Darlene Miller... "

"... As you are damned in body and soul, your sentence on this day is death. The sentence is to be executed immediately, without appeal, in the manner of expurgation by fire."

"Expurgation by fire... "

"Kendra Darlene Miller... "

"Expurgation by fire... "

"No. No, this can't be."

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

I cannot move.

I can hear the scraping of a match against stone.

I cannot scream.

I can hear the explosive spark as the match ignites.

"Somebody please help me!"

"Kendra Darlene Miller... "

"Damned in body and soul... "

"Your sentence on this day is death... "

"Expurgation by fire... "

Hot yellow agony licks across my body.

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

I cannot scream...

With one final push I levered the mental door shut and forcibly ejected Karyl and Starr from my mind. From beginning to end the entire incident took place in less than a minute. Our outward expressions however were enough to tell Ben and Carl that something was definitely going on.

"Hey! Knock, knock... " Carl's voice poured into my ear in a viscous flow, "Earth to Rowan."

"Yo, white man? Are you three okay?" Ben's voice followed, whirlpooling in behind Deckert's as I snapped soundly back to the physical realm.

I nodded as I turned my attentions to Karyl and Starr. "Fine. Yeah, I'm okay."

The two women were staring back at me blankly. Momentarily, a small glimmer of emotion crept into Karyl's expression and was almost instantly followed by a pair of large tears rolling down her cheeks. A split second later her face was joined with the palms of her hands and her shoulders began to heave as she quietly sobbed.

"I'm sorry," I delicately offered, "but at the risk of sounding heartless, you brought it on yourselves."

"Brought WHAT on their selves?" Carl interjected in a puzzled tone as he switched his gaze back and forth between the two women and me. "What're you talking about?"

"I apologize," Starr announced, eyes watering as she choked back her own desire to cry. "You are, of course, correct, and that was... " she swallowed hard and steeled herself against the sorrow and fear that threatened to overtake her, "... it was very rude of us."

"It's okay," I soothed. "I understand."

"I am afraid that Karyl is in no condition to proceed with this interview," she continued while she could. "However, if you gentlemen would be so kind as to wait right here, I will be back in a moment... and I will do my best to answer any questions you may have."

I nodded. "Of course. Take your time."

Carl waited until the two women had left the room and were out of earshot before turning to me and tossing his hands up. "Could someone please tell me what just happened? One minute she's a freakin' ice princess then the next thing you know she looks like she's about to start bawlin' and she's apologizin' to you... and what was that 'you brought it on yerself's' stuff?"

"In their zeal to... read me psychically shall we say," I explained, "they got a little carried away and looked at a few memories they would have been better off not seeing."

"They did WHAT?" his eyes grew wide as he made the exclamation.

"Trust me, Carl," I told him. "It's a Witch thing."

Behind me, Ben softly whistled the opening theme from the *Twilight Zone*.

"I apologize for Karyl," Starr told us as she centered herself back on the love seat and self-consciously smoothed her pleated, tartan skirt. Her slightly reddened eyes testified to the fact that she had shed a few tears as well. "She and Kendra were lovers once." She paused then added, "Before us of course."

"She was taking her death pretty hard to begin with and seeing that... vision... " She allowed her voice to melt into silence then took a deep breath and continued, "My apologies once again to you, Mister Gant. I am certain that reliving those

images must have been just as painful for you as well."

"Rowan. Please," I expressed. "And it's all right. I just hope the two of you will be okay."

She smiled. Briefly, but she smiled. She was very striking to begin with and the smile betrayed the gentle side of the sharp-edged attorney who had been seated there only minutes ago.

She drew in another deep breath and exhaled heavily, then asked, "How can I help?"

"Do you know if Miss Miller, or anyone in your group for that matter," Carl responded, "has been threatened or harassed lately?"

"She mentioned that she had been receiving religious 'junk mail,'" she answered. "But that's not unusual. Once your name is on a mailing list it gets circulated everywhere."

"Nothing else?" he pressed. "Was she maybe approached by anyone that you know of?"

"No. Not that I am aware of, unless you count E-mail."

"Go on."

"She received some rather nasty messages on the internet... A month or two back if I remember correctly. 'Repent now, or burn in hell' kind of messages. She reported them to her provider and I assume they took care of it. She never received any more."

"Did she have any idea who the messages were from or how the person got her E-mail address?" Ben interjected.

"No. She had no idea who was sending them."

"Whoever it was probably pulled her address down from a newsgroup or something," I inserted. "That would also explain why the person knew her religion. There are several discussion groups about Paganism, Wicca and The Craft. All she had to do was post a message to one of them and her E-mail address became public knowledge."

"Lovely," Ben huffed as he scribbled in his notebook.

Turning back to Starr, I asked, "Do you happen to know who her provider was?"

"Not offhand." She shook her head. "I have her E-mail address, if that would help?"

"Yes. I would appreciate getting that from you later."

Ben and Carl both shot me curious looks.

"If her Internet Service Provider was filtering the E-mail for her in order to bounce or trap the offensive messages," I outlined for their benefit, "we might be able to get a domain designation from them."

They continued to look at me expectantly.

"Kind of like tracing a phone call," I simplified my explanation. "If we're lucky, we might be able to determine the origin of the message, the account it was sent from, and maybe even the person who owns the account."

The expectant looks turned into amazed stares.

"Remember, I make my living with computers. WitchCraft is a part of my belief system. It's not my profession."

"I'll get one of our gurus on that," Ben assented with an 'oh yeah, now I remember' expression on his face and penned himself a quick reminder.

Carl looked back to the young woman and continued the line of questions, "Did anyone else in your group get any of these E-mails or junk mail?"

"I don't think so." She pursed her lips and canted her head to the side then stared off thoughtfully for a moment. "No. I can't remember anyone mentioning any, although... Brianna did say she had been getting quite a few prank phone calls. Hang-ups mostly, but she did seem a little disturbed by them."

"Brianna?" Ben looked up from his notepad, shot a glance at Carl and I, then back to Starr.

"Yes," she answered, "Brianna Walker. She is a member of our Coven. I can give you her number if you'd like, though she may be out of town. I haven't been able to reach her this past week."

"Brianna LOUISE Walker?" Ben ventured again, "Also known as, Mistress Bree?"

"Yes, Detective Storm," she returned. "Please don't tell me you arrested her while working vice or something. At a time like this I hardly see why something like that should... "

"Miz Winston," Carl interrupted as Starr began to defend her friend and fellow sister of The Craft, "I don't quite know how to tell you this... "

"Tell me what? What's wrong?"

"Brianna Walker appears to have been the killer's first victim." Ben detailed concisely, "Her name hasn't been released yet because we've been unable to contact her next of kin."

She looked at Ben incredulously, then to Detective Deckert, then brought her eyes to meet mine and shook her head. Her lips parted slightly and she mouthed a silent 'No.'

The blunt hammer of emotional pain that descended upon her secured itself a two-for-one deal as she remained supernaturally connected to me through our locked gaze. For a fleeting moment, I felt a hard lump rise in my throat and a caustic burn flood through my sinuses as my own eyes began to water.

I glanced away to break the ethereal union, then stared off into space and uttered

the only words that came to my clouded mind, "I'm so sorry."

"Ms. Winston," Ben ventured calmly but firmly as she started to tremble, "in light of this information, I think it would be prudent for you to give us a list of your Coven members and their phone numbers."

CHAPTER 10

"Well sure I could be wrong... I hope like hell I am if you wanna know the truth," Ben was forcing himself to speak in hushed tones.

Earlier, he had sequestered himself outside the entrance of the room in the narrow hall in order to jumpstart the Major Case Squad with the latest information. He had then proceeded to contact the local police department trying to obtain protection for Karyl and Starr. While he made a seemingly endless series of calls, one leading to the next, Carl Deckert and I remained in the sitting room with the grieving young attorney. She was holding up amazingly well under the circumstances, even considering her connection with The Craft. I suppose her profession had taught her how to remain calm and detached. Still, her distress was visible.

"Look, I'd just rather be wrong on the side of caution instead of ending up with another body." Ben continued, "Can you understand that?"

Both Carl and I could still hear Ben's voice and with only a little effort were able to make out everything he was saying. Starr, on the other hand, was too distraught to notice much of what was going on around her. Considering the subject matter of his conversations, doubtless that was for the best.

There was a short pause while, I assume, he was listening to the person on the other end of the cell phone. I almost didn't need my heightened senses to feel his impatience—it was that palpable.

"I don't get this! Am I just not making myself clear to you or something? Do you want me to say it slower, is that it?" he spat sarcastically into the phone. "A prominent member of your quiet little community here just might be the target of a serial killer. What I want is for YOU to get a uniform over HERE and give her some protection! It's that simple! Uh-huh... Yeah... Well then why don't you put someone on the line who CAN help me."

While we waited, Starr went upstairs to check in on Karyl. She returned briefly having elected not to inform her of Brianna's death as yet and told us that the young woman was resting peacefully in the bedroom. Earlier she admitted, the help of a recently prescribed sedative had been necessary to calm the overwrought blonde and now it seemed senseless and cruel to wake her only to give her another dose of heartbreaking news. I was inclined to agree.

"Is there someone you'd like us to call for you?" Carl asked in a soothing voice. "A relative? A friend?"

"No. No one Detective," she shook her head. "Thank you for offering."

"Can we get you anything?" I queried and shrugged. "A glass of water? Coffee? Aspirin?"

"No... Yes... Yes, Mister Gant, you could." She pointed across the room. "There is some Brandy in that cupboard."

At Starr's request I poured her a stiff ration of Brandy from the heirloom cabinet bar in the corner. Judging from the label on the bottle and the cork that sealed it the Brandy was in reality a rather pricey Cognac. She sipped it eagerly, almost gulping at first. Remembering my recent and similar actions with a bottle of Bourbon I urged her to slow down. She nodded, realizing through her distress that I was correct and set the crystal snifter aside with at least a small amount of the expensive liquor left in it.

Momentarily she rummaged about in the drawer of an end table then withdrew a small rectangular box and opened it.

"I have to keep them hidden," she told us with a small, sorrowful laugh as she placed a cigarette between her lips. "Karyl thinks I quit... But I'm sure she knows."

Carl and I simply nodded mutely and watched her light it with trembling hands.

"Well frankly I don't give two shits about your goddamned contract!" Ben's voice echoed into the room as he tersely erupted out in the corridor. "Right now I've got two bodies down at the morgue. One of them was thrown off a balcony and the other one was... No, YOU wait just a minute!" his voice rose in pitch again. One thing you never did to Ben Storm was to interrupt him.

His tone lowered to a simmering 'I mean business' tenor and he continued, "Look, Number One—both of these women were tortured before they were killed. Number Two—we have reason to believe the killer is targeting persons with alternative religions. And finally, Number Three—both of them were members of the same small religious group—The SAME ONE that two of your local residents are members of. Now for me, that sets off some alarms. What about you?"

He paused for a moment and I heard him let out an exasperated huff.

"Yeah... Yeah... Well why don't you do that... Uh-huh, well trust me, I will... Yeah, I'll be sure to let Ms. Winston know just exactly how concerned you are for her welfare... Yeah, same to you."

We heard him close the flap on the portable phone with an angry snap that was followed immediately by a disgusted mumble, "... And the fuckin' horse you rode in on, too, you lousy sunnavabitch."

I caught Carl's eye and jerked my head toward the room's entrance. He nodded acknowledgement and gave the anguished young woman next to him a fatherly pat on the shoulder.

"Will you be okay for a bit, Ms. Winston?" he asked as she broke her hollow stare and looked up at him. "Rowan and I need to talk to Detective Storm for just a minute."

"Yes... yes, Detective, I'll be fine," she answered mechanically.

"We'll just be right outside the door," he added and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze before joining me to crowd into the narrow passageway.

"That didn't sound good," I remarked in a near whisper as I wedged myself through and leaned against a doorjamb. "What did they say?"

"Awww, they're all fucked up," he expressed, still seething from the conversation with the uncooperative Lansbury Police Department. "They don't wanna send anyone over unless I can tell 'em who's gonna pay for it."

"Pay for it?" I was confused.

"Lansbury is pretty small," Carl explained, "and their Police Department isn't really a Police Department per se. Truthfully, it's not much more than a handful of rent-a-cops hired out through a third party security firm. All they're ever worried about is money."

"So what are you going to do?" I appealed.

"Well, they're still inside the County, so technically we have jurisdiction... " he mused. "Of course, we're stretched pretty thin as it is... "

Ben reached up and smoothed his hair back then let his large hand rest on the back of his neck. Slowly his fingers started working on a tense knot at the base and he grimaced thoughtfully, "Yeah, Carl, I know. Right now I've got Martin and Kelly back at the command post contacting everyone on the list she gave us." He cocked his head toward the other room to indicate Starr.

"From what we can tell so far it looks like they all live in areas with real coppers," he detailed. "That'll help a lot, so there shouldn't be much fuss about getting police protection for them. Of course, they haven't reached everyone on the list yet."

He continued working the back of his neck with his large hand, and puffed his cheeks out with a fatigued sigh.

"Jeezus, what a mess!" he finally exclaimed. "I guess it's gonna be up to us to keep watch over these two."

"How are the higher ups going to feel about you playing bodyguard?" I asked. "Seems to me they get a little concerned over budgets too."

"Lemme ask you this." He stared directly into my face and raised an eyebrow. "Do you think this asshole might come after another one of the women in this group?"

"Well, Starr did say that no one else has received any threats," I offered.

"That she KNEW of," he qualified my statement and thrust his index finger at me. "But that's not what I asked you."

I took a moment to weigh the facts before I replied, "You can't entirely rule out the possibility that he might go after someone else. Like I've said before there are a lot of Pagans in this city and I still believe that the eradication of Witches is this guy's main focus. Otherwise, he wouldn't be going about the murders in the manner he has so far."

I let out my own troubled sigh. Ben was seeking my advice and my nagging doubts were keeping me from giving a singular commitment to this avenue of thought. I knew he was depending on me and I didn't want to let him down.

"I suppose I would have to agree though, that by killing two members of the same Coven, he's established something of a pattern. I don't want to put all the eggs in one basket but in answer to your question... yes, I think it is very likely that he will target another member of this circle."

"Well, that's good enough for me and I'm bettin' it'll be good enough for the Chief. He's the only higher up I'm concerned with. What do you think, Carl?"

"Sounds reasonable to me," Deckert nodded as he spoke. "I got a hinky feeling about the whole deal."

"Okay. So what now?" I inquired.

"Let's see..." Ben turned his wrist and glanced quickly at his watch. "It's five after five now... Oh shit! Man, I'm supposed to have you home in twenty-five minutes."

"I'll just have to call Felicity and tell her to go on without me," I remarked.

Ben looked hard at his watch again as if by doing so he could somehow turn the hands back by sheer force of will. "No way, white man. No freakin' way. The red-squaw would scalp me for sure. I promised her I'd have you home. Besides, there's nothin' you can really do right now."

"I can cancel, Ben," I insisted. "I'm really not looking forward to it anyway. You know her father doesn't much care for me and I can do without that grief at the moment."

"Yeah, but it's family and you do what you gotta. Besides, she'd kill us both. Anyway, like I said, there's nothing more for you to do at the moment. Seriously."

"Are you certain?"

"Positive. Just let me know where you're gonna be and if something comes up, I'll get in touch with you."

"Why don't you go ahead and take Rowan home," Deckert volunteered. "I'll hang loose till you get back."

"You sure, Carl?" Ben asked as he gave him a questioning glance.

"Yeah. No problem," he returned easily. "Mona's outta town visiting her sister so I was just gonna grab a burger and work late anyway. Ya'know, maybe I'll make a few calls. I got a coupl'a guys that owe me a favor or two. If either of 'em is off-duty maybe I can get one of 'em over here on a payback."

"Good idea," Ben nodded vigorously. "I've got a few markers out there myself. I'll make some calls too."

"You guys go on ahead," Carl ordered and shot me a grin. "Don't need your wife gettin' upset... If she's anything like Mona... Well, you know."

"Thanks, Deck," Ben told him as he ushered me towards the doorway. "I shouldn't be gone more than forty-five minutes, tops."

"No problem. I'm not goin' anywhere."

There are times when it pays to have a cop behind the wheel. Being in a hurry to get somewhere can definitely qualify as one of them.

Ben dropped me off in front of my house with slightly over one minute to spare.

Felicity reached up and casually cranked the Jeep's rear-view mirror in a direction I'm firmly convinced the engineers had not really designed it to go. I am also fairly certain that in order to avoid breaking said mirror, the out of specification contortion was something that could only be accomplished by a woman applying makeup while in the driver's seat. I suppose I should be thankful we were currently parked.

Leaning into the steering column she frantically brushed what she obviously considered to be a stray hair or two from her forehead and urged them to disappear into the rest of her chestnut mane. Still pitched forward, and using only one hand, she spun the barrel of a lipstick with practiced fingers then swiped it across her lips with fluid, almost surgical, precision. Turning her head from one side to the other and inspecting her reflected image from the corners of her eyes, she let out a satisfied purr. Only then did she stuff the tube of gloss back into her coat pocket and return the mirror to a crooked semblance of its proper position. Still, even after seeing for herself, she twisted in her seat to face me and asked, "How do I look?"

"Like a regular Colleen," I answered. "A real Irish Lassie if ever there was one."

"You didn't even look," she insisted.

I groaned assent and turned to give her more than just a cursory glance.

Her fiery spiral tresses billowed out softly to frame her smooth alabaster face. Falling in a silky auburn flow across her shoulders, her hair disappeared in a cascade down her back that I knew reached almost to her waist. A pair of thin braids encircled her crown, neatly held in place by strategically placed, hidden hairpins, until they joined in the back and coalesced into a whirling eddy of loose curls.

She was looking back at me with her eyebrows arched questioningly over sparkling green eyes and by the dim glow of the map light I could see the narrow swath of freckles that rode faintly across the bridge of her nose. Her full, red lips were slightly parted and the corners turned up in a girlish smile. Her cheeks were flushed pink from the cold.

The sight of her was enough to make me forget, if only for a moment, the horrors

I had re-witnessed just hours before. I didn't realize it until she spoke, but I was simply staring at her.

"What?" she asked and started to reach for the mirror once again. "Do I have lipstick on my teeth or something?"

"No." I caught her hand before she could assault the device any more. "There's nothing on your teeth. I was just noticing how gorgeous you are."

"Oh, stop it!" she insisted, throwing me an embarrassed glance as she reached over to straighten my tie. "You're just saying that because you're my husband and you have to."

"If that's what you want to believe, but it's not true. You're beautiful."

She ignored my further comment. "There, that's better."

I reached up to loosen the knot she had just cinched around my throat and she playfully slapped my hand away.

"Don't. I just fixed that."

"I hate ties, honey. They're too constricting. That's why I work at home, so I don't have to wear them."

"You want constricting? Try wearing pantyhose and a lace-up metal-ribbed bodice. Now there's constricting for you. Besides, it's only for a few hours, so deal with it," she instructed.

"Okay. So long as I get to be the one who unlaces that bodice later."

"Rowan!" she giggled. "Come on. Let's go inside before we're late."

"Yeah, I suppose the sooner we get in there the sooner we can leave."

"Would you be showing disrespect to me family now?" she jibed with an unflawed Irish brogue. After a scant few hours inside, she would be slipping in and out of the accent for days.

I just grinned back at her and unlatched my door.

"By the way, Rowan... " she looked back before stepping out of the Jeep.

"Yes?"

"Thanks. You look kind of sexy yourself."

"Club soda, twist of lime," I told the bartender and held up a pair of fingers. "Two please."

The family had pulled out all the stops for this affair. From renting a large banquet room at the Westview Regency, to the open bar and traditional Irish food catered specifically for the party. As I had told Ben there would be, plenty of colcannon was to be had, along with mutton stew, spiced beef, potato cakes, and countless other ethnic comestibles. I had no doubt that Felicity's mother had been in charge of the

menu as she was a phenomenal cook.

Both of Felicity's parents were first generation Irish-American, born of immigrants. Her maternal grandparents were the ones celebrating the anniversary tonight, for her father's parents had long passed, well before she and I were married.

As her mother and father both came from large families, aunts, uncles, cousins and other relations were springing from every corner of the banquet hall; some had even come over directly from Ireland for the express purpose of attending this combination party/reunion. Many of them she hadn't seen for ages. Many I had never even met. Be that as it may, there was definitely no shortage of red hair in the room.

After checking our coats I was charged with the mission of obtaining drinks for the both of us while my wife skittered about squealing with glee as she and long missed relatives became re-acquainted. Having located one of the two bars and placing my order, I decided to try and make the best of it. Had present circumstances been different, I'm sure I would have been more in the mood for a party. But they weren't, and I wasn't.

I was still wrestling with the re-awakened visions of Kendra Miller burning to death in the middle of a public park. I fought from one moment to the next with bleak stabs of pain mirroring the emotions I experienced coming from the two young women this afternoon. I steeled myself against the fear I didn't want to acknowledge. And all of this I did alone, for I hadn't uttered a single word of today's events to Felicity. She had been preoccupied with her preparations and I felt that at least one of us should remain unburdened by thoughts of loathing and death during what was intended as a celebration of love and life. Of the surplus of mental trauma I was struggling to keep at bay the worst was my own agonized speculation. I couldn't stop worrying over when the killer would strike next.

How would he strike?

Who would be the victim?

A dull ache through my very being told me that it was going to be soon and I wasn't going to be able to stop the inevitable. All I would be able to do is sift through the aftermath for another misshapen piece of the puzzle, and if it was there, try desperately to fit it into place with the bleak handful we had thus far.

I reached up and worked the knot of my necktie back and forth to loosen it and leaned against the bar. My eyes darted through the crowd searching for where Felicity might have settled. She was clad in festive Celtic attire—much like most everyone else in the room—and with the abundance of auburn curls filling the hall it took me a few moments to pick her out.

She was wearing, not unlike several of the other women, a slightly shortened version a traditional chemise and Irish skirt. Her shapely torso was cinched into a low-cut bodice complete with boning and laces. On her feet, she had replaced her snow boots with flat, black slippers secured firmly to her ankles with a criss-crossing leather cord tied in a neat bow.

I finally located her on the far side of the room, arm in arm with two of her cousins, executing a short, quick series of lithe leaps, kicks and jumps. The three of them bobbed up and down in perfect unison as they spun about in mock rehearsal for the dancing yet to come, and came to a halt, laughing wildly at a minor misstep. I felt like I had landed in the middle of an Irish Dance Troupe and was beginning to feel self-conscious and terribly out of place in my grey tweed sport coat and slacks.

"Aye, keeper! Why don't you be givin' him a real man's drink then!" The thick timbre met my ears and was coupled with a rough slap across my back.

A pair of meaty paws proceeded to manhandle my shoulders and I broke from my glassy stare.

"Me grandmother wouldn't be drinkin' that fizzly water now," my brother-in-law's voice boomed once again. "Whiskey man! We'll start with two and ye keep it flowin'!"

Felicity's older brother was hopelessly enamored with his ancestral roots and had spent a large amount of time in Ireland during his youth. To this day he spent as much time there as he could. Fortunately, his position with an overseas firm as a structural engineer allowed him great latitude in his choice of assignments and he had been able to work there continuously for the past several years. Because of this, his brogue was unfaded by distance and time and was only slightly tarnished by his inherent Americanism.

Coming from the same stock as my wife he bore the ruddy complexion and bright red mop of a classic Irishman, right down to his rust-colored beard. He was at once jovial, cantankerous, loud, obnoxious, loyal, hard-drinking, and if the stories I had heard of his youth were true, hard-fighting as well. Of all my in-laws, he and I got along the best. I was sorry we didn't get to see each other more often.

"Austin!" I cheerfully yelped as he greeted me further with a brotherly bear hug. "When did you get in?"

"Just last night, Rowan old man, just last night." He cuffed me on the shoulder again and pushed a full shot glass of whiskey along the bar to me as he grasped his own.

In one motion he lifted the glass with his right hand and thrust it straight out from his shoulder. I mimicked the motion and he clinked his shot against mine. "May the grass grow long on the road to hell for its want of use! Slainte!"

"Slainte!" I echoed the Irish equivalent of 'cheers'.

With that he tossed back the ounce of liquor and loudly clacked the glass back onto the bar. I followed suit, with somewhat less gusto. I suspected he already had a substantial head start on me.

"Again man!" he shouted to the hustling bartender then turned back to me. "And where would ye be hidin' me charming sister then? I trust you've been takin' good care of her now."

I chuckled and pointed, "She's across the way there. With a couple of your

cousins."

He followed my finger and nodded as he saw her repeating her earlier mini performance with the other two women.

"Aye old man, you got yourself the pick of the O'Brien crop with her. Loveliest of the sisters."

"She's your only sister, Austin," I laughed.

"Aye, and I'm prejudiced!" he chuckled in return.

The frantic bartender had refilled the two shots and he nudged one to me again. "Here's to the health of your enemies' enemies!"

"I can go for that. Slainte!"

"Slainte!"

We raised our drinks in unison and clinked them together soundly. Before we could bring them to our lips, however, we were interrupted by the Celtic lilt of a familiar female voice.

"Austin! There you are!" the voice exclaimed and we both swiveled our heads toward it. "Oh, hello, Rowan. I didn't know you and Felicity had arrived."

"Maggie," I smiled and nodded to my mother-in-law.

"Austin, dear," she continued, "your father needs to speak with you. You don't mind do you, Rowan?"

"Not at all."

"Aye, can't it wait?" Austin protested, then being on the receiving end of a sharp 'don't question your mother' glare that an offspring of any age would obey, he tossed back the shot of whiskey and settled the empty glass on the bar. "I'll be catchin' up with you then," he told me as he followed her away. "Don't you be runnin' off now."

"Don't worry," I called after him, "I'll be here all night. Promise."

Had I known at the time I would have to break that promise, I never would have made it.

CHAPTER 11

Shamus O'Brien, my father-in-law, would never be in any danger of becoming elected president of my fan club, of this you could be certain. Our relationship was one that stressed the boundaries of polite tolerance and mute indifference. I am sure he allowed this much solely for the benefit of his only daughter. In general, he wasn't

what you would call outwardly discourteous to me. I was, of course, well aware of his feelings and I endeavored to respect them by keeping my distance, therefore he was rarely even given a chance to become rude. However, we would invariably be thrust together by holidays or other family functions at intervals throughout the year. At these times I would make it a point to avoid any controversial topic he may have a strong opinion on, which was only a shade left of everything.

The one subject that remained an absolute taboo on any and all occasions was my choice of religious paths, for you see, that was the one and true reason Shamus didn't like me.

If asked about it my stern in-law would return a blank stare and pretend to ignore the subject entirely. But, if one were truly inclined to press the matter he could be made to speak of it, and speak of it he would.

The entire discourse would begin with him muttering a long string of Gaelic expletives under his breath. Soon, his ruddy complexion would flush even brighter and he would begin gesturing with a stiff index finger while making his opinions adamantly known. Finally, he would proceed to explain how I had turned his fair daughter from the righteous path of God with my heretical Pagan practices. The story seemed to grow more heinous each time he told it.

My mother-in-law, Maggie, would simply roll her eyes and sigh, then sternly admonish, "Oh Shamus, just you hush now!"

It didn't matter to him that Felicity was a practicing Witch long before our first chance meeting; a meeting which interestingly enough occurred at a local Magickal and Earth Religion festival. No. He would have none of that and he would even deny the fact with great fervor. She was his little Colleen, and she couldn't possibly have taken this road without being tempted by some unsavory character such as myself. Each time she would try to reason with him it simply flowed into one ear and straight out the other. To Shamus, his little girl could do no wrong and in his mind, she was just going through a phase.

Needless to say, I went to great lengths to avoid this subject entirely.

Tonight however, much to my chagrin, I had no control over the topic being debated no matter how hard I tried to evade it. My face had been plastered all over the news, both electronic and print, placing me in the astringent beam of an unwanted limelight. My religion had suddenly made me something of a morbid celebrity among those relatives of local residence and whispered stories of my involvement in the murder investigations, both past and present, were spreading through the room like fire through a dead forest. One of Felicity's second cousins, a wide-eyed, round-faced young girl of eight or nine, had even asked me for my autograph.

Like everyone else, my father-in-law had been at work on his own share of Irish whiskey in celebration and the alcohol had freed his sharp tongue from the sheath where it was normally kept. Felicity and I had only been here the sum total of one hour and twenty-minutes. I had been backed into a corner listening to his closed

minded diatribe for the twenty.

"... Aye, and how can you be expectin' us to plan our family gatherins 'round your Pagan holidays now?" he queried belligerently.

"I've never asked you to do that, Shamus, and you know it," I returned, struggling to remain calm and looking past him in search of my wife. I needed to be rescued soon before I lost my temper and said something I would surely regret.

"What about last March then?" he shot back. "We tried to plan your mother-in-law's birthday party we did. But you had one of your godless holidays conflictin'!"

"It was a Spring Equinox celebration, and if anything, I'm POLYtheistic, so you can hardly call it godless. Besides, it was only one weekend, and you know you wouldn't have given it another thought if we had simply told you we were busy and left it at that."

It was getting harder by the moment for me to keep my cool. Continuing my search I spied Felicity across the room as haunting violin music began to fill the hall. The mournful wail of the fiddles quickly took on a brighter tempo and my wife began dancing about with her similarly garbed cousins. Having witnessed her perform this particular traditional prancing jig before, I knew it was going to last for several minutes. She wasn't going to be providing me with an avenue of escape anytime soon.

I was just bracing myself for what I was sure would be a spitefully barbed comeback when I felt a hand rest on my shoulder. I looked back to see the concerned face of my brother-in-law and knew I was about to be emancipated. Unfortunately, I also knew that I was only going to be chained to another situation I would rather not face.

"Aye, Rowan." He gave his father a quick nod, then looked at me. "There's a pair out in the hotel lobby flashin' badges and askin' after you. Considerin', I don't suppose that would be good news then?"

My heart double thumped in my chest, and my throat turned instantly dry. An intimately known and caustically burning itch I had been struggling to ignore once again announced itself on my forearm in an extremely familiar spot.

"No, Austin," I agreed sadly, "it isn't."

"... So anyway, I'm standin' there tryin' to calm these two guys down and the one keeps yellin', 'His fuckin' dog ate my bird! His fuckin' dog ate my bird!'"

"Yeah?"

The two uniformed officers guarding the entrance to the apartment continued their chitchat while I signed my name on the crime scene log and noted the time alongside. I was starting to become an old hand at these procedures, but every time I had to do it I felt like I had just swallowed a crucible of molten lead.

The two Major Case Squad detectives that had picked me up had ushered me in and informed the patrolmen that I was here in an official capacity. Upon hearing this revelation they immediately began to treat me with the same casual indifference afforded any other cop. I suppose the fact that I was still wearing a sport coat and tie made me look like I belonged.

"Well the other guy starts screamin', 'He's crazy! He's nuts!' and shit like that... " the officer with the story continued. "So I'm startin' ta' think I'm gonna have a fist fight on my hands, ya'know?"

The other cop was already starting to chuckle, "Yeah? Then what?"

I took an offered pair of surgical gloves and pulled them over my damp hands. It was a struggle to get them on properly as my palms were so thick with cold sweat. I realized I was nervous and suddenly felt very human and vulnerable. I tried to convince myself that it was at least a sign that I hadn't lost all my compassion.

"Next thing I know the dog starts heavin' and makin' all these weird-ass 'gackin' noises, ya'know?"

The officer who was listening could see what was coming and was now barely able to contain an all out guffaw.

"Then 'yarrp' there it is! The freakin' dog ralphs up the freakin' bird all over the guy's shoes... It was one of them parrots or whatever so it was like this psychedelic projectile puke or somethin'!"

"No shit? What'd you do?"

"No shit man. I thought I was gonna lose it right in front of these two guys... "

Obviously, the tale was intended to be humorous, but my present mood wasn't conducive to laughing along with it. Though the telling of the story under current circumstances seemed outwardly callous I'm sure it was merely a defense mechanism automatically kicking into high gear. Nothing more than a way for them to relieve their minds from the stress of the job. A way to deny the horror that waited in the next room. I certainly couldn't blame them.

I was just preparing to go ahead into the open apartment when I heard Ben's voice call from behind me, "Hey, white man."

"Hey," I returned sullenly and waited as he lumbered up the hallway.

"Sorry to have 'em drag you outta your party and all," he apologized as he flashed his badge to the uniformed officers and penned its number and his name on the log. "Carl's on his way. He oughta be here in a bit."

"No problem. I was just getting chewed on by my father-in-law anyway." I paused and sighed heavily. "I could have asked for better circumstances, though."

"Tell me about it."

"Were you able to find someone to look after Starr and Karyl?" I inquired while watching him don his own pair of oversized latex gloves.

"Yeah, I got an off-duty copper friend of mine over there. Ended up costing me a box of *Santa Damiana's* though. So, did Ackman and Hirst fill you in?"

"Just that there was a body and that you would meet us here. Do you know who it is?"

"Not officially confirmed, but looks like it's the apartment's occupant." He referenced his notepad with a practiced flip of his wrist. "One Sheryl Keeven. Caucasian, thirty-four years old, divorced."

"Was she... "

"... On the list?" Ben finished the question for me. "Yeah. She was on it. Martin was tryin' to get a hold of her earlier this afternoon. We were just gettin' ready to send a car by when the suicide call came in."

"Suicide?" I puzzled as I followed him through the open doorway, unmindfully scratching at my arm through my coat.

"Yeah, they didn't tell you? The bastard left 'er hangin' off her balcony. Neighbor called it in."

"Did anybody see anything?"

"Hell no. Nobody ever sees anything any more."

The third floor dwelling was fairly standard as apartments go, with a combination living room and dining area divided from the small kitchenette by a half wall lined with potted houseplants. A narrow corridor led back along the far side giving access to the bathroom, a closet with louvered luan doors, and finally, the bedroom. The walls were standard apartment complex white but had been cheerfully decorated with numerous framed pictures forming a silent gallery of what I assumed were relatives and friends. A faint odor of potpourri still permeated the room.

Bookshelves lined one end of the living area and were stuffed with novels, both paperback and hardcover. Anything ranging from mysteries to romances filled every available space. One set of shelves in particular held my attention as they were neatly arranged with non-fiction titles regarding herbs, alternative religions, and more specifically, WitchCraft.

My otherworldly senses were bombarded with random energies and sensations from the residence. The primary feeling in the room was one of abject fear and death. Not surprising at all and I would have expected nothing less. The underlying impression that peeked out from behind the horror, however, was one of warmth and love. It told me that Sheryl Keeven had been the kind of person who dotted her 'i's' with smiley faces, and went out of her way to help someone in need—even a stranger.

The ethereal touch slipped in and introduced itself. Now, I could no longer view her as an unfamiliar name. I could only see her as someone I wished I had had the opportunity to know. Even though we had never met in this physical plane of existence, the fact that she was dead filled me with the dull ache of loss.

I shook off the wash of emotion and forced myself back into stoic objectivity, then continued to scan my surroundings.

In the corner a nineteen-inch television with a severe chroma problem flickered mutely, displaying a weather update that warned of yet another approaching snowstorm.

Though it was not expected to be anywhere near the strength of last weeks blizzard we stood to accumulate a good two to four inches. At least, that is what they were saying.

A set of sliding glass doors at the center of the living/dining area's back outer wall stood levered wide open. The frigid night air streamed in through the opening only to clash with the warmth being continuously pumped into the room through the furnace vents. One of them would eventually win and I suspected it would be the cold.

A crime scene technician with a wind-chapped face stood quietly frowning as she expertly dusted the door handle and the glass surrounding it. When she slid the door partially closed for a moment, I could see a segment of a white, curved line decorated with hash marks. Encompassed within the arc there appeared to be one side of a large X, and possibly a piece of the vertical line that may form a capital P. It was apparent that the marking was large enough to spread across the face of both door panels.

At random intervals the room would brighten for a brief instant as the thyristor flash on another evidence technician's camera exploded harsh white light out on the balcony. The runny lines of the large painted symbol cast an eerie shadow each time and left me with an oblique after-image branded on my retinas.

"They bring you in the front or the back?" Ben asked me as he stood surveying the room.

"Front," I answered. "It was a mess."

"Shit, you think the front's bad?" he huffed. "Goddamned news vultures are all over the back parking lot. That's where the balcony is and we can't move the body until the M.E. gets here."

Sarcasm gelled my one word response, "Wonderful."

"And here I thought you were leaving all those messages at the office because you guys wanted to pay up on that dinner you owe me," a feminine, but distinctly authoritative voice issued from the doorway.

Constance Mandalay was holding forth a leather case containing her badge and FBI ID to the officer at the door while simultaneously scratching her name into the log. With a curt nod to the patrolman she closed the wallet and thrust it into her pocket as she entered.

The brunette Federal Agent was clad in a wide-collared beige overcoat that now hung open to reveal her petite figure hugged intriguingly by a shimmery metallic-blue cocktail dress. Completing the ensemble, she wore matching satin high-heels and a splash of unpretentious silver jewelry. Her shoulder length hair was elegantly styled

and her face had seen a very tasteful brush with a handful of cosmetics.

Ben let out a blatant, teasing wolf-whistle as he stopped and did a double take. "Whoa! The Feeb's wearin' girl clothes! Nice legs, Mandalay."

"Watch it, Storm, or I'll call your wife!" she warned jokingly.

"I'll risk it, 'cause I'm just dyin' to know where you're hidin' your Sig in that getup," he returned with a grin, referring to her sidearm.

"I'm afraid that's a government secret," she quipped, then smiled over at me. "Hi Rowan. I see he's got you involved in this one up to your eyeballs."

"Heya, Constance," I acknowledged. "I thought you were on some kind of security assignment."

"Visiting dignitary." She nodded and held the front of her overcoat open wide for a brief moment. "Just finished working the farewell party. A real 'Yawwwn' if you know what I mean." With a quick nod she canted her head toward me. "What's your excuse?"

"Felicity's Grandparent's anniversary party."

"Watchin' after a 'vip,' huh?" Ben snorted the acronym as a word instead of spelling it out. "I woulda figured that for a Secret Service gig."

"Normally it would be," she answered with a sigh. "It's a long story, suffice it to say he's gone and I'm all yours now. Would you like to bring me up to speed? All I know is what you told Agent Bartlett and what's been on the news. The only reason I knew you would be here is that I returned your call figuring I'd leave a voice mail and got a live person instead."

Someone loudly cleared his throat nearby. Ben held up a finger to Constance and turned to the evidence technician. "Yeah, what's up?"

"We're all finished out here," he said. "It's all yours."

"Get anything?" he asked.

"A few smudges on the sliding door. Nothing of any consequence. There's a Bible out there, King James Version. Hardback, like you'd find in just about any bookstore. It's bagged."

"Was it marked in any way?" I questioned while pawing at the insistent itch on my forearm.

"Yeah." The tech referenced a sheaf of papers attached to a worn clipboard. "Plain Jane cardboard bookmark. Looks like a standard yellow hi-liter was used on a passage in the book of First Samuel. Chapter fifteen, verse twenty-three. For rebellion is... "

"... As the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king," I interrupted and finished the passage for him.

"Yeah. That's it," he acknowledged and nodded toward my absently clawing

hand. "Something wrong with your arm?"

"Trust me," I answered, "you don't really want to know."

"Anything else?" Ben queried, cutting him off before he could comment.

"Well, the rope looks like regular utility clothesline you can get at any hardware store. We're gonna check it out. The symbol on the door was spray-painted. We got samples. That's about it."

"Okay, thanks." Ben gave the tech a quick pat on the shoulder. "Do me a favor will ya? Check downstairs and see if the coroner is here yet. I wanna get this body moved as soon as possible. The uniforms can't hold off those reporters down there for much longer and we really don't need her showing up on the ten o'clock news."

"Will do."

"Thanks."

The technicians were barely out the door when Ben turned to me with a concerned gaze. "What's goin' on with the arm? I thought it was all healed up."

"It was," I answered and began tugging my coat off, "but it started again earlier this evening."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Well, obviously I'm being told something. Maybe I was being warned about this murder."

"Ahem," Constance mimicked the earlier noise made by the tech to grab our attention. "You guys want to fill me in? What's wrong with your arm, Rowan?"

"Show 'er, white man," Ben told me.

He held my coat and jacket for me after I wrestled out of them and I proceeded to unbutton my cuff and roll back the shirtsleeve. There was no blood soaking through the fabric, so it apparently had not yet progressed as far as it had the last time.

Agent Mandalay stepped closer to have a look as I finished peeling back the material and turned my forearm upward to bring it into view. The faint pink scar of the original wound was barely visible as a pale outline against my brightly flushed skin. The flesh of my forearm was hot and already beginning to take on shades of purple and blue as the unseen force bruised me. On the surface of my arm was a raised circular welt encompassing a large X bisected by a large P.

"Christ, Rowan!" Constance exclaimed as she reached out and gingerly touched my arm. "How in the world did that happen?"

"You should have seen the first one," Ben interjected.

"I think it's a sign from the other side," I told her as I reached up and started to dig my nails in for a blissful scratch.

"Don't," she admonished and grabbed my wrist. "You'll just make it worse. What do you mean a sign from the other side? I thought you saw things in visions or something?"

"I do," I explained, "but communication from an ethereal plane can take different forms. I think someone is trying to tell me something and I just haven't figured out what."

"Damn, Rowan," she muttered, "you're like something out of a horror movie."

The door to the balcony was still hanging wide open, and the temperature inside the room was spiraling toward equilibrium with the frigid night. Outside, a thumping echo sounded rhythmically in the distance. I realized as we were standing there that I was beginning to shiver.

"Guys," I said between teeth that were starting to chatter, "it's getting a little on the chilly side. Mind if I put my coat back on?"

"Wait a minute," Ben asserted. "Look at your arm again. Does it look a little strange to you?"

"I think that's already been established, Storm," Constance told him sardonically.

"No, I mean look at the symbol," he huffed in exasperation and directed our gaze with his finger. "It's like a twin image or somethin'."

"Twin image?" I asked.

I was so intent on what Ben was trying to point out that I scarcely noticed that the reverberating clamor outside had grown louder.

"You ever seen a coin that's been double-struck?" he asked. "Like that. One image overlapping the other."

"He's right," Constance agreed. "Look."

Upon closer inspection, I could see exactly what Ben was referring to. The welts that formed the itching Monogram of Christ on my arm were offset slightly over another similar set. The blemish was carefully enjoined to scribe two circles encompassing a matched pair of X's bisected by P's.

"Whaddaya think that's supposed to mean?" Ben queried.

I didn't get a chance to answer him. Just as I opened my mouth to speak a violent rush of wind and icy snow blasted through the open sliding door. Outside, amid a thunderous din, the light of a small sun was born into the chilled darkness.

CHAPTER 12

"Sunnvabitch! Goddammit!" Ben exclaimed at the top of his lungs. "That's gotta be Street!"

Special Agent Mandalay and I could barely hear him over the cacophonous racket

of the news helicopter hovering a frighteningly short distance from the balcony. We were all half-blinded by both the screaming wind and blazing spotlight, and I knew he could no more see into the aircraft than I could. However, if the 'Eyewitness News' logo emblazoned across the side of the Bell JetRanger was any indication of the machine's occupants, his intuitive guess was most likely correct.

I scooped up my coat from where he had allowed it to drop and quickly pulled it on as I made my way to the door. Ben had already barreled through the opening with Constance close on his heels and was now fighting to hold down the sheet that had earlier been placed over the still hanging corpse. By the time I pushed myself out onto the balcony to help him Agent Mandalay was stiffly holding her ID forward in plain view and making angry motions with her free arm—vigorously indicating without any ambiguity whatsoever that the aircraft was to leave immediately if not sooner. The hostile bite of the manmade gale tore through my unzipped coat and buffeted the three of us wildly as it continued kicking up a cloud of snow from the overhanging watershed dormers. The intense spotlight burned across the balcony in a harsh antiseptic beam; starkly illuminating everything in sight, even the shadows. I was forced to squint and turn my head away from the glare while fighting to keep my side of the sheet pulled taut through the wrought iron railing.

By now, the raucous event had attracted one of the uniformed officers that had been guarding the door to the apartment and he burst out onto the balcony.

"Get on the radio and call it in!" Ben screamed back at him over the maelstrom. "I want everyone on that chopper in handcuffs the minute it touches down."

The officer gave him an animated nod to the affirmative and shot back through the door. A frigid zephyr suddenly tore upward and billowed out the sheet, threatening to rend it from my grasp. I hunched down and entwined my fist in the fabric, holding on so tight I could feel my fingernails biting into my palm.

"GET OUT OF HERE NOW!" Agent Mandalay's shrill demand sliced through the cacophonous thudding to reach my ears as she continued to wave her free arm furiously.

Obviously, there was no way the pilot could have heard her command, but it was at this moment he apparently elected to obey her pointed gesticulations. Either that, or someone elsewhere had told him it was time to go.

The brilliant spotlight suddenly switched off and the pitch of the hovering craft's engine rose with a rapidly increasing whine. Still seeing multi-colored spots before my eyes, I watched as the helicopter smoothly nosed forward then canted to the side and sped off and upward across the thickly clouded night sky.

I slowly began relaxing my grip on the sheet as I watched the winking red and blue anti-collision lights of the craft shrink in the distance. My friend was staring after it as well, his face grim and temper seething. His heated glare was a textbook example of looks that could kill, and I was more than relieved that it wasn't aimed in my direction.

"DAMMIT!" Ben exclaimed and hammered the heel of his fist against the top of

the iron railing in a frustrated release of anger. "I just don't believe that bitch!"

Constance was standing next to me on the other side and I noticed that she had traded her badge for her cell phone. She held the device pressed tightly against her ear as she pushed her ruined hairdo from her eyes with her free hand.

"Yes, FAA?" she began speaking. "This is Special Agent Constance Mandalay with the FBI, Saint Louis field office. My badge number is nine-five-seven-four-dash-three-six-six. I need to speak with someone regarding an airspace violation... "

"I shouldn't even hazard a guess at a time of death before I get an internal temperature," Doctor Sanders informed Ben and Constance. "Not with her being exposed to the elements unprotected like that."

"I can understand that, Doc," Ben returned, "but if you can ballpark it I'd really appreciate it."

"Well," she replied, "I can tell you this much. The wounds on her back and abdomen appear recent and the bruising would indicate that she was alive when they were made. She's definitely not completely frozen yet... "

I was standing across the room next to the gurney containing the woman's body. I followed along distractedly with the banter between the coroner and the two law enforcement officers. Hearing, but not really listening to what was being said.

The sliding doors leading out to the balcony were now shut and the temperature in the room was returning to something more bearable. While Doctor Sanders and her assistant were moving the corpse, I had mechanically removed my coat and unrolled my sleeve, then slipped back into my tweed jacket.

Ben had turned up the volume slightly on the television when the Saturday night movie had been interrupted for a breaking news update. Brandee Street, her cameraman, and the pilot had been arrested all right, but not before getting the morbid video into the station's hands. Even through the overblown colors of the malfunctioning set you could easily make out Ben, Constance and me on the balcony of the apartment. We had fought a desperate fight, but in the end the sheet had fluttered enough to give at least a partial view of the woman's nude remains.

We all stared silently at the picture as the talking heads behind the anchor desk identified us each in succession. It was all we could do to stifle disgusted sighs as they proceeded to tag us with a sensationalized nickname. A moniker that would unfortunately not only stick for some time to come, but was also picked up immediately by every other station and newspaper in the bi-state area. We had been christened, 'The Ghoul Squad.'

The welts on my arm had continued growing and my flesh was dappled with the full spectrum of colors normally associated with bruises—and a few unrelated shades as well. The itching was growing fiercer by the moment and each time I tried

to tend it I would wince at the soreness my fingers awakened. I knew it was only a matter of time before the welts would turn into bleeding lacerations. Whoever was trying to get my attention definitely had it. Apparently I just didn't comprehend the message.

I stood, looking down at the shrouded body. The earlier emotions that had welled up inside me fought to return and I let them. I had never known this woman, but the sense of loss overwhelmed me as I stared mutely at her covered remains. My nose tingled with an acidic burn for a brief moment and a single watery tear crawled from the corner of my eye to begin rolling across my wind-ravaged cheek.

"... At my office," Agent Mandalay was speaking now. "If there's anything you need, I can get it rushed through the lab in Washington."

"I appreciate the offer," Doctor Sanders replied. "I'll be certain to call you if... "

I ignored the snippet of the conversation that had intruded on my sorrowful introspection. While they continued to talk, I knelt next to the gurney, and then carefully pulled back the sheet and tugged down the zipper on the body bag. Absently I reached over to claw at my savagely itching arm and the stiletto of pain that shot up to my shoulder reminded me of why I hadn't done it sooner. I flinched and pulled my hand away, then continued to quietly stare at the young woman's lifeless face.

Sheryl Keeven's strawberry blonde hair was tousled about her head in a tangled halo, whipped there by the wind and elements. The thin poly-cotton cord was still snugged about her neck, visible against the blotchy contusions that surrounded it. I visually counted the loops in the slipknot. Then I counted them again. Both times the total ended in thirteen.

A hangman's noose.

Her features were a grotesque mask of fear and pain, sculpted in life and frozen in death. Her eyes were locked open in an endless stare, showing the glassy, bloodshot whites where they had rolled upward. Gummy tape residue still surrounded her mouth. The wide swatch of silver duct tape that had once been there had eventually come loose, but was still precariously attached by one small corner. The same kind of tape had been used to make several revolutions around her wrists. Her now exposed lips were parted to reveal the bulbous purple mass of her swollen tongue as it forced its way between them.

She had asphyxiated.

She had strangled to death while suspended by the neck with her arms bound behind her back. Hanging was simply another of the favored methods of execution used during the inquisition. Its effectiveness had not waned over the years.

I closed my eyes and the scene flashed haphazardly through my mind. I could see her struggling.

Fighting.

Kicking.

Wrestling to free her hands so that she could claw at the constriction around her neck, until finally, the lack of oxygen to her brain won out and she slipped into darkness.

"I realize it's the weekend but the sooner you can get the labs started the better," Ben was saying in the background. "We're still following up the lead on the Roofies."

"I can have samples ready to go to the lab first thing Monday morning," the Coroner replied, "but other than that I... "

Once again, I forced the distant conversation out of the forefront and focused entirely on the corpse in front of me. I knew how Sheryl Keeven died. I even knew the twisted reasoning behind why. What I now desperately wanted to know was who had killed her... And Kendra Miller... And Brianna Walker...

But what I wanted most desperately of all was for him to stop.

Without even thinking I reached out my latex gloved hand and laid my palm across her cold forehead. The connection that formed was as immediate and piercing as if I had just wrapped my hand about a frayed electrical cord. The jolt that followed exploded through my consciousness with blatant disregard for the here and now, ferociously replacing present with recent past.

Pain.

Why are you doing this to me ?

I can't stop crying.

The pain again.

Please!

Please stop stabbing me! Just take what you want and leave! Please!

I cannot scream.

There is tape across my mouth.

I cannot see.

Something dark covers my head.

The pain again.

"Sir?" the voice of the coroner's assistant echoes in my skull. "Sir, what are you doing?"

I am so cold.

What is that hissing noise?

Pain?

I smell paint.

"Sheryl Renae Keeven, in accordance with the thirty-third question, in as much as you stand accused of the heresy of WitchCraft by another of your kind, and as you have admitted these crimes and remain still impenitent, and that on this day evidence of your heresies has been found in this very dwelling... "

That voice.

I am so cold.

I still can't see.

Where am I?

Something is wrapped around my neck. It is uncomfortable. I can feel wind.

I cannot scream.

I want to scream.

"... In as much as you have been found guilty, and that you are damned in body and soul, you are hereby sentenced on this day to death. The sentence to be executed immediately and without appeal in the manner of hanging. May the Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on your soul."

Guilty?

Sentenced to death ?

Help me someone! Please help me!

I don't understand.

What is happening ?

Why are you doing this to me?

I feel something brush my face, and suddenly my tear-blurred eyes can see.

Outside?

We are outside?

Black.

Black fabric.

Dear Mother Goddess he's a giant.

Someone please help me.

Wait...

He is picking me up. What is he doing ?

Oh no!

The balcony?

He's going to throw me off my balcony?

He's going to hang me ?

NO!

Someone please help me!

Black and white.

Collar.

Black and white.

Collar.

Black and white.

Black.

"Mister Gant?"

I looked up to see Doctor Sanders kneeling on the opposite side of the gurney and peering at me curiously across the open body bag. Her fingers gently encircled my wrist and held my hand out away from the corpse.

"You doin' some of that 'hocus-pocus' stuff, white man?" Ben asked from his position next to her.

I looked up at him and blinked. He and Agent Mandalay were staring back with mildly concerned expressions creasing their faces. My eyes were dry and itching, which told me I had been staring. My throat was parched and seemed almost obstructed by a hard lump. The welts on my forearm were on fire.

"Yeah," I answered in a faint voice. "Yeah, something like that."

"What did you see?" Constance asked.

The vision replayed in a sandpapery loop, abrasively dragging itself over and over through my mind.

Black and white.

Collar.

Black and white.

Collar.

"A Priest," I finally whispered. "The killer is a Priest."

"A Priest?" Ben echoed. "You mean like a 'bless me father for I have sinned' communion giving and all that jazz kinda Priest?"

"I think so," I croaked.

The pain from the ethereal markings on my arm had intensified twofold and it was beginning to radiate up through my shoulder and spread dully through my torso. I knew without even looking that the welts were now full blown wounds.

"What do you mean you think so, Rowan?" Constance pressed. "What exactly did you see?"

Noting that I didn't outwardly appear to be repeating the performance she had witnessed at the morgue, Doctor Sanders released my hand and proceeded to re-zip the body bag. I stood and backed out of her way, taking a moment to try and clear my head. The vision was there, but it was starting to blur and I didn't know why.

What I did know was that something definitely wasn't right and I was the only one who seemed to notice.

A sudden heavy aching filled my chest and was paired with an acrid chemical taste forming on the back of my tongue. The bitter taste welled up through my sinuses, reminding me of the smell of bleach. I drew in a shallow breath and felt it gurgle in my lungs as if I had just blown through a straw into a glass of water. I reached up and loosened my tie even further then fumbled with the shirt button at my throat.

I propped myself against the edge of a couch and watched on as the Coroner and her assistant wheeled Sheryl Keeven's body from the room. Maybe my connection with her was too intense I tried to tell myself. Maybe I was just experiencing a latent effect of the vision. After all, she had choked to death and I had just channeled the experience. There were bound to be some phantom pains. Yes, that had to be it, I recited inside my head. If some distance were put between us then the pain would surely stop.

"A collar," I wheezed.

I sucked hard again, fighting to breathe, and the wet gurgle rattled deeper in my chest. This time not only did I feel it, but faintly heard it as well. It felt like a car was parked on top of me and I was beginning to gasp. The terrifying thought of a heart attack scrolled through my mind and I quickly fought to dismiss it. No, I kept telling myself, this is just an after effect.

"Go on," Constance urged. "You saw a collar... Like a clergyman's collar?"

Ben had pulled out his worn notepad and was waiting patiently for me to give him something to scribble in it.

"Yes," I sputtered and wheezed. "Black and white... like a priest... "

My voice was gurgling viscously and what was happening was no longer my own private secret. Abject horror was unceremoniously paroled from its prison cell in my subconscious as I suddenly realized what was happening. My one greatest personal fear was coming to pass. I was suffocating. In the middle of a bone-dry Saint Louis apartment, nowhere near water, I was drowning.

"Hey, Kemosabe," Ben looked up from his notes with a cocked eyebrow, "you okay? You sound like you're havin' trouble breathin' or something."

"I... I..." I panted damply.

I wrestled to beat back the terror that had just ignited within my body, but met

with only limited success. I could feel myself beginning to tremble as I tried to tell my friend what was happening. The words only caught in my tightening throat and bubbled back down into my lungs. Each breath was becoming more labored and shallow than the last. I sucked hard and was rewarded with nothing but pain. My chest was heavy and what little air I inhaled felt oddly thick.

Humid.

Wet.

I was growing dizzy and the room was starting to reel and spin slowly. My ears were ringing and everything was taking on an unnatural contrast. Lights were blooming and shadows darkening viciously. Something more than my ethereal connection with this latest victim was definitely at work. I brought my hand up and clawed at my chest. I was toeing the harshly scribed line of panic and I was teetering precariously close to the edge.

"Good God, Rowan!" Agent Mandalay's voice distorted in my ears, "You're bleeding!"

I cast my blurred eyes downward to see my gloved hand covered in bright crimson rivulets. I held it out from my body and inspected it groggily as blood dripped from the latex sheath. Heavy cramps racked through my upper torso, but I didn't need them to tell me that the open wounds on my arm were the least of my worries at this moment. I let my hand drop to my side and stared back at Constance. I couldn't breathe.

I needed to breathe.

"Hey!" Ben screamed as he ran to the door. "Get the Doc back in here right now!"

I was having trouble remaining upright. As my knees began to buckle I slid from the arm of the sofa and barely caught myself before I reached the floor. My legs were weak and a bizarre tickle was working its way along the back of my throat. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't bring air into my lungs.

"I dunno what it is!" Ben barked at Doctor Sanders as she met him at the door. "I think he's havin' a coronary or something!"

A rushing noise nudged the ringing from my ears and then was followed closely by a loud thudding as my heart hammered furiously in my chest. I opened my mouth and fought to beg help, only to form wordless, wet noises.

My legs gave way completely and I went crashing to the floor. I could see Agent Mandalay's lips form my name as she started toward me in slow motion. Ben and Doctor Sanders were angling at me with the same lethargic movements, rabid concern on their faces. The tickle in my throat began migrating upward.

My knees impacted and I automatically thrust my hands out in front of me as I pitched forward. My eyes were beginning to roll backwards in their sockets and I felt my back arch involuntarily. The tickle mutated abruptly into a spastic cough and my body heaved violently.

Water.

Water exploded from my nose and mouth, and splattered on the carpet in front of me. Reflexively I gulped in air and felt it gurgle roughly through my body. A second brutal spasm rippled up my throat and fluid once again erupted from my lungs.

Cool air rushed in to fill my chest as I coughed and sputtered. The tightness that had occupied that space only a moment ago had fled and my breaths started coming easier with each passing second. I was still pitched forward on my hands and knees and I merely allowed my head to hang and gratefully gulped in the desperately needed oxygen. My body still shuddered with the adrenalin tremors of nightmarish fear and I felt like a small, frightened child.

Slowly, the pounding in my ears began to fade and the room lights settled to an even incandescent burn, no longer wildly blooming and casting angry shadows. Finally, I heard my name being urgently spoken.

"Mister Gant?" Doctor Sanders questioned me. "Mister Gant? Can you tell me where you are having pains?"

I felt her hand on my back. I opened my eyes then lifted my head and glanced slowly around. Constance was kneeling to one side of me with Doctor Sanders on the other. Ben was standing a few steps from us looking deeply concerned and utterly helpless.

I was breathing raspily now, but the wet gurgle had disappeared. I could feel the fresh air washing through my lungs and my heart was beginning to back down from its frantic pace. I started shaking my head as I bit off hungry breaths and struggled to stand up.

"Mister Gant," Doctor Sanders spoke as she helped me to my feet. "Are you having chest pains? Any pains in your neck, jaw or left arm?"

I continued to shake my head and spoke between the welcome unrestricted respirations, "No. Not chest."

"Jeezus, Rowan!" Ben exclaimed. "Did you just have to puke or something?"

"No. Water," I sighed as I shakily seated myself on the arm of the sofa.

"You need a glass of water?" Constance asked.

"No." I shook my head again and pointed at the soaked area of the carpet. My breathing hadn't yet fully slowed and I was only able to communicate in short, choppy sentences, . "That's water. Drowning."

"Drowning?" She looked at me quizzically.

"Do any of you smell that?" Ben suddenly asked, wrinkling his nose.

"Now that you mention it, yes," Doctor Sanders answered. "It smells like a swimming pool."

I knew the chemical odor to which they referred to be coming from the fluid I had just expelled onto the floor. It was how I knew what had just happened. I had tasted

it on the back of my tongue when this all began and the smell was permeating my nose where the liquid had elected to make an exit. I was starting to settle now—somewhat—and I tried to explain further.

Sucking in a deep breath, I pointed again to the damp carpet. "That's not vomit, it's water. It came out of my lungs. I was drowning."

"You were WHAT?" Ben appealed.

Doctor Sanders glanced back and forth between Agent Mandalay and Ben then knelt next to the wet patch.

Cautiously, she touched it with gloved fingertips. After rubbing her fingers against her thumb to check the consistency of the substance she apprehensively brought her hand up to her nose and sniffed.

"He's right," she said, looking up at the two of them. "This doesn't appear to be stomach contents. It's water. Heavily chlorinated water."

"But how?" Constance asked. "You've been right here the whole time. How could you possibly get pool water in your lungs?"

I shook my head wearily and held up my blood-covered hand. "I don't know for sure, but I'm guessing from the same place I got these symbols."

"Take off your jacket and let me have a look at that arm," Doctor Sanders ordered.

"Jeez, Rowan, that's way out there." Ben shook his head as I complied with the Doctor's instruction. "I mean water just appearing in your lungs from nowhere?"

"I know," I nodded. "Trust me, I'm as freaked out by this as you are." Even now I was fighting an involuntary urge to tremble. Precognition, psychometry, channeling, even the stigmata were one thing, but this... This was beyond anything I had ever experienced and I was at a loss to explain it. More than that, however, I was afraid of it and that made it even worse.

"You mean this isn't something that happened because you're a Witch?" Constance asked.

"Maybe," I answered, using my explanation to direct my attention away from the rancid fear still slithering up and down my spine. "But WitchCraft is merely a practice and way of life coupled with a religion. Even though it's not unusual to develop some level of psychic ability through meditation and all, conjuring matter into thin air is the stuff of myths and fairy tales."

"What about your arm then?" she contended.

"As bizarre as it seems, stigmata aren't unheard of. My body is simply reacting to an outside stimulus. Granted, in this case the stimulus is coming from the other side, but nothing was conjured or made to appear from nothingness."

A muffled peal emitted from Ben's coat and he thrust his hand into his pocket and withdrew his cell phone.

"Storm," he answered tersely after flipping the device open. "... Deck? Where the hell are you? You were supposed to be here an hour ago... What? No. You aren't serious?"

My respirations were now almost normal and I sat quietly, allowing Doctor Sanders to treat my bruised and bleeding arm. Constance and I watched Ben, listening in on the one-sided conversation as the concerned M.E. tended to my wounds. She had been told about the original occurrence of the symbol, but this was the first time she had witnessed it for herself. However, after what she had seen that night at the morgue, she seemed to be taking this all in stride.

"... Damn!" Ben spat. The phone was now cradled between his ear and shoulder while he scratched in his notepad. "How long ago? Uh-huh... Yeah... Who called it in? Yeah... Okay, give me that address again... Uh-huh... Yeah, Cherry Wood Trails. Got it. Uh-huh... Yeah, and Mandalay's with us too... Yeah, we'll be there as soon as we can. Bye."

We stared at him expectantly as he ended the call and returned the phone to his pocket. He rested his gaze on me and sighed.

"What was that all about," Constance asked.

"That was Deckert. I think I just found out why Rowan's got two of those marks on his arm." He lifted his free hand and smoothed his hair back.

"Well?" she raised her eyebrows and looked at him questioningly.

"Deck got a call while he was on his way over here. Seems a security guard was making his rounds over at the Cherry Wood Trails condo complex and he noticed the gate was open leading in to the swimming pool. He went in and found one of those monograms spray painted on the side of the pool house and a Bible layin' on the snowdrift in front of it."

"Victim number four," I spoke.

"There's a hole in the ice." He bobbed his head. "It hasn't even started to freeze back over yet."

"I was afraid that might be why there were two," I nodded toward my arm as Doctor Sanders mechanically wrapped gauze around it and listened in, "but I ignored it again and whoever is trying to talk to me resorted to the water..." I let my voice trail off as a spasm of the recent personal horror worked its way back into my thoughts.

"Is that what you meant earlier?" the M.E. questioned cynically. "You actually think the water was somehow mystically conjured into your lungs because of what the killer did to the latest victim?"

"No offense, Doctor," I ventured, "but do you have a reasonable explanation for how it got there? Medical or otherwise?"

"Fluid can build up in lung tissue due to a variety of medical conditions," she offered.

"Fluid heavily laden with Chlorine?" I asked.

She didn't answer. She just shook her head and continued taping the gauze in place.

"Jeezus, white man," Ben mused with a loud sigh. "I thought I was getting used to this *Twilight Zone* shit, but this... "

"Too weird," Constance muttered.

"Yeah," Ben echoed quietly, "what she said."

CHAPTER 13

For the most part, my disquiet had faded into the background during the short drive to the Cherry Wood Trails subdivision. I still did not fully understand why, but suffocation and drowning were my most deep-seated phobias. They had been since I was a small child. To now have my darkest fear brought that close to realization was very nearly more than I had been able to bear.

After twenty minutes of intense concentration I had almost succeeded in forcing the disturbing thoughts from my mind. Unfortunately, our arrival at the latest crime scene dredged them immediately back to the forefront.

Ben nosed the van into the only available parking space he could find and switched off the engine.

"You gonna be okay?" he asked, worry once again creasing his brow.

I realized as he spoke that my breaths were once again shallow gasps. The panting had begun as soon as I stared out across the street at the bustling activity around the swimming pool enclosure. I knew there had to be terror in my eyes when I looked at him and when I jerkily nodded my head to the affirmative he stared back with an unconvinced, thin-lipped frown.

"Bullshit," he replied, "you're a wreck. You shoulda gone to the hospital. I'm grabbin' a squad and sendin' you home."

"No," I shook my head while trying to calm the rampant panic that was building in the pit of my stomach.

He was correct. At the moment I was a wreck, but it was a luxury I couldn't afford. There simply wasn't enough time. Me breaking down would not do any good for anyone, including myself, and it definitely wasn't going to help find the killer.

"No. I'll be all right," I continued. "I just need a minute."

Knowing I had to get a grip, I began to inwardly visualize myself surrounded by an impenetrable shield of white light. In my mind I was carefully constructing a

barrier, tangible only on a supernormal level, but exactly what I needed to hold the frightening visions at bay nonetheless. Almost instantly I began to relax.

"Well if you won't go to the hospital and you won't go home," he ventured, "why don't you just wait here in the van? The techs from the Crime Scene Unit are taking pictures and I can fill you in on any other details afterwards."

"That may not be enough, Ben," I returned and cocked my head in the direction of the scene. "Maybe this victim saw his face. Maybe there's something in there that won't show up on a photograph, but WILL be visible to me. I can't let a stupid phobia keep me from doing what I was brought here to do."

"Fuck phobias, Rowan!" he shot back. "I just watched you almost drown in a goddamned dry apartment. That's not a phobia, white man, that's... that's... Well hell, I dunno what it was, but I know you coulda died. And that was the second time too! In my book that's worth more than just a little fear."

"I let you know right from the very beginning that this one was going to be worse than the last case," I told him quietly.

"Yeah," Ben nodded, "but I thought you were just talkin' about the body count."

"Unfortunately, so did I."

I was feeling much more at ease now, though it was a sensation that was most certainly only temporary. I had successfully wrestled the demon known as terror back into its cage for the time being and the thick supernatural armor I had erected around myself would protect me from the outside influences of the scene. I knew I wouldn't be able to stay hidden behind it the entire time, for if I did my particular talents would be useless. However, what I would do was try to keep myself safe for a little while. At least until I was fully grounded and ready to face whatever horrific image was waiting for me on the other side.

"Okay," Ben eventually huffed as he smoothed his hair back, "short of banning you from the scene I know I'm gonna play hell tryin' to keep you out so I might as well give up. But," he added sharply and thrust a stiff index finger at me, "first sign of you bein' in some kinda spooky ass trouble you're outta here. No arguments. Understood?"

"Understood," I agreed.

"Better yet, no 'hocus-pocus' without warning me first."

"I can't always control it, Ben. You know that."

"Yeah, but sometimes you do shit without tellin' anyone and you get yourself in trouble. That's what I'm talkin' about."

"Okay, okay. If I try to do anything I promise I'll tell you first."

"I'm serious, Rowan."

"I know you are."

After he finally gave his reluctant, negotiated blessing, Ben and I climbed out of

the beat up Chevy and started across the small parking lot toward the crux of the activity. Since we were on the opposite side of the street we had to stop for a moment and wait as a large, black panel van rolled past. A patina of grey and white from salt and road grime dusted its dark exterior; blending it in with every other vehicle in the city that had yet to see time in a car wash. A multi-pitched mechanical groan emitted from beneath the van, audibly announcing improperly meshed gears as the driver shifted and slowed. The van coasted for a second while the occupant stared at the spectacle, or so I assumed. A fraction of a minute later the engine gunned and roared its protest in an off key duet with the transmission as it was up shifted again.

"Take a picture asshole," Ben called after the pair of dusky red taillights. "It'll last longer."

As we crossed the narrow lane immediately behind the passing vehicle, a cold tingle danced up my spine. My scalp tightened painfully and the hair on the back of my neck tilted upward, sending a prickling sensation throughout. I caught myself as I tripped across the low curb and stifled a small gasp. Fortunately, Ben didn't know the real reason behind my stumbling and I was able to mask the event as a random attack of clumsiness.

I was more than a little surprised and took a moment to bolster my defenses even more. I shouldn't have felt anything yet, and if something was getting through to me already, then this was going to be worse than I originally thought.

In that moment, I became even less pleased by the prospect that I would soon need to cast away these ethereal shields in order to view the scene with senses other than the physical. I tried not to think about it as we continued walking. Needless to say, I met with only limited success.

The street immediately in front of the pool enclosure was alive with light bars atop emergency vehicles flashing in and out of sync. Each revolution temporarily stained the snow with harsh multi-colored blotches of brilliance. The wildly flickering show was almost enough to mesmerize.

Powerful halogen lamps were mounted high on strategically placed standards around the pool area and they now flooded it with severe blue-white illumination. Originally meant to extend the hours of swimming enjoyment deep into summer nights, they cast eerie shadows across the frozen tableau. The hard edges of obscurity served only to underscore the horror and misery that had forced its way into this place intended for happiness and pleasure.

Ben slipped his badge onto a thick cord as we walked, and then hung it around his neck in plain view before we signed ourselves in on the crime scene log. The officer tending the entrance to the pool area was from the local municipality that encompassed the subdivision of condominiums and was unfamiliar with my part in the investigation. Since I lacked a badge, it took a terse and abbreviated explanation of my role by Ben in order to overcome the patrolman's unwillingness to allow me entry. Finally, we continued past the yellow tape barrier without further challenge.

"Ben, Rowan," Carl Deckert addressed us grimly as we skirted around taut stretches of bright canary colored plastic labeled with simple black letters—CRIME SCENE—DO NOT CROSS.

"Carl," I returned with equal bleakness.

Ben just nodded and silently inspected the surroundings, all the while casting an occasional watchful eye in my direction.

"I thought Connie was comin' with you," Deckert remarked, cocking his head and glancing past us for the absent Federal Agent. He was the only person I'd ever met who could get away with calling her by the clipped version of Constance. I guess it had something to do with his grandfatherly demeanor.

"She should be here in a bit," Ben assented. "She doesn't live too far away and she wanted to stop and change clothes."

"Change clothes? What for?"

Ben just shook his head. "She was dressed a little on the formal side tonight. Something to do with an assignment."

"Ahhh. Okay."

A deep recessed basin in the mantle of snow outlined the swimming pool, in and of itself. It was fairly common as private pools go—roughly kidney shaped and not huge by any means, but not the smallest I'd ever seen either. A path had been carefully cleared through the snow around the perimeter on one side. The opposite border was marred by a single row of foot traffic and appeared to be the path the killer had taken. Therefore, it had been left intact to preserve any possible evidence. Small spots of red were scattered here and there along the trail up to a small depression where they blossomed into several garish blotches. The victim had been bleeding.

We were standing in the shoveled area opposite the low brick building that housed the pumps, filters, and changing rooms. Here, the pale crystalline blanket of snow came nearly even with the concrete deck. If the pool had been properly winterized, which considering the neighborhood I was certain it had, somewhere around two feet below the pristine white cover would be a sheet of ice. Beneath that would be murky chemical laden water, along with leaves and anything else that had blown or fallen in since its closure just after the Labor Day holiday.

All in all, a normal swimming pool that had been shut down for the winter months, with one glaring exception—Tonight someone had deliberately beaten a hole through the thick crust of ice and placed another human being into the water's chilled depths.

"Looks like he used something to chip away at the ice," Deckert announced with a frosty sigh as he pointed across the depression to a gaping hole in the snow on the other side. "Not sure what, but he broke it up pretty good. Enough to get a body through anyway."

"Don't they normally put covers on pools when they close them up?" I asked.

"Most of the time, yeah," Carl answered. "But not always. Apparently they didn't on this one."

"Anybody besides the Security Guard notice anything?" Ben asked.

"Not that we've heard yet, but we're doin' a door to door," Deckert replied.

"Probably give us a big fuckin' zero," my friend mused aloud.

"Yeah," Carl agreed. "Prob'ly. But maybe we'll get lucky. I'm guessin' this wacko's been here before."

"Why is that?" I inquired.

Deckert pointed across the pool and traced the cordoned off route through the air with his finger, starting at the gate and ending at the hole in the ice.

"The whole cover thing for one, but more importantly look at the path. We've isolated the Rent-A-Cop's footprints and kept the area blocked off," he explained. "The killer cut the padlock on the gate, prob'ly just used some bolt cutters. From there he followed that path straight to where he broke through the ice."

"Yeah," I shrugged, "I guess I'm still missing something."

"Okay, pretend the hole's not there," he instructed. "Now tell me which end of the pool is the deep end."

The moment he said it the realization struck me full in the face. If the tracks and the hole weren't there, the landscape would be nothing more than unspoiled snow. The symmetrical hollow of the pool's perimeter gave no clue as to which end was which. The shallow end of the pool was closest to the entrance and it was also the more secluded of the two by virtue of an evergreen hedgerow. But the killer wanted to be sure the victim drowned as opposed to just death by exposure. He had purposely gone to the deep end to insure this... And he knew exactly where the deep end was. I mutely chastised myself for missing such an obvious fact.

"Good point," Ben whistled. "He couldn't have known which end it was unless he'd been to this pool before. Not with all this snow."

"That's what I'm thinkin'," Carl nodded.

"Well I doubt if he lives here," I offered. "This subdivision is primarily condos and the few houses we passed look way too modern to have the kind of basement I saw when I was channeling Kendra Miller."

"Yeah," Deckert nodded, "besides, as reckless as he's been he's probably too smart to do it in his own back yard. He's been spread out all over the place so far."

"So what's the plan for recovering the body?" Ben queried.

"Well, as soon as the CSU is finished with the tracks and such, they're talkin' about sendin' a diver in. It's either that or drain the damn thing, so they got the local muni's fire department on standby. I think they're pretty much waitin' on the coroner to make the final decision," Carl answered then shook his head. "Damn! This SOB has gotta have some freakin' balls. I mean the hotel, the park, now this."

"Tell me about it. He hung number three off her own balcony," Ben added, "right out in plain sight."

"Yeah, I heard," Deckert, acknowledged. "Also heard about that whole chopper thing with Street. Sheesh, 'Ghoul Squad.' No offense, but I'm glad I missed that one."

"Don't worry," Ben spat sarcastically. "Your dues to that club are paid in full. I'm sure they'll have you listed on the membership rolls soon enough."

"Freakin' wonderful. Mona'll love that," Deckert muttered then paused and clicked his tongue thoughtfully. "So you think maybe this screwball is an exhibitionist or something?"

"Maybe. He hasn't been hiding his work, that's for sure."

"I don't think that's it," I volunteered. "He's making the murders public executions for a deeper reason. I don't believe he's doing it for the thrill. Like I told you originally, he most likely views himself as divine or chosen. He sees himself as the hand of God. That's why he's picking these venues. They're his town square, in a sense. He wants everyone to see the penalty for heresy in order to teach them a lesson."

"Puttin' the fear of God into 'em, so to speak," Ben grunted.

"Exactly."

"Still," Deckert asserted, "he can't keep going around killing out in the open like this and there not eventually be a witness. Even with the cover of darkness he's gotta know someone is gonna see him."

"Obviously he's willing to take that risk in the name of ridding the world of that which he views as evil," I stated matter-of-factly.

"Like I said," Deckert submitted, "the wacko's got some balls."

In the near distance we could hear the voice of a uniformed officer as he announced to the waiting evidence technicians, "Meat wagon's here."

The three of us watched mutely as the head of the Crime Scene Unit filled in the bedraggled County coroner. After a brief exchange he nodded his head, visibly agreeing with the officer in charge. Shortly thereafter a member of the condo complex's maintenance staff that had been standing by was put to the task of clearing as much snow as he could from around the hole.

"Do you know if the command post was able to get a hold of everyone yet?" Ben shifted the direction of the conversation momentarily while we waited.

"Yeah," Carl nodded. "All accounted for. Whoever's down there, she's not a member of that group."

"HMMMMPH," Ben grunted thoughtfully. "That's odd."

"What do you mean odd?" I asked.

"Well, this wingnut had established a pattern by going after the women in this

particular coven. It's just a rule of thumb on serial killers—they tend to stick to an established pattern. So why all of a sudden did he decide to pick someone outside of that target group?"

"Do you think he might know that the members of Starr's coven are being watched?" I offered.

"I's'pose it's possible. Especially if he was stalking them or something, but there're eight more women on that list. That's a lot of stalking for one guy to do in a short period of time. Plus we've been tryin' to keep the protection low profile on the chance we could pop him tryin' to nab one of 'em," he replied, all the while shaking his head. "Now we go back to the drawing board. How'd he pick this one? How does she fit in to the pattern?"

"Both of you have said 'she,'" I commented. "What makes you think this victim is female?"

"Well, he's only killed women so far," Ben, answered.

"Storm is right," Agent Mandalay's voice filtered in from behind our small huddle. "That's another rule of thumb. Serial killers don't typically cross gender lines. Hello again. Sorry I'm late."

We had apparently been so engrossed in our conversation that we had not noticed her arrival and until now, she had elected to remain silent. She was much less conspicuous after having traded her party dress and overcoat for blue jeans and a dark, hooded parka; although, her face still bore the cosmetic accentuation of a more than average make over. Even so, her somber expression matched the grim edge of her voice.

"Connie," Deckert greeted her as only he could.

"Hi, Carl," she replied then turned to me and continued. "I'd say odds are the killer is misogynistic. Also the general public commonly associates Witches with being female, not male."

"I can understand that theory to an extent, and I'm not trying to second guess you by any means," I admitted, "but this guy isn't a typical serial killer. I don't believe he's doing this on a lark, or even because of a hatred of women. He has a specific agenda and it includes anyone accused of WitchCraft, regardless of their gender."

"Is this something you saw in one of your visions?" she questioned.

"No. Just a feeling."

"Well, I've learned better than to doubt one of your feelings, Rowan," she conceded solemnly, "but male or female, we still have a fourth victim on our hands."

"This is true," I agreed.

Carl captured our attention with a lethargic gesture and he volunteered in a sober tone. "Looks like they're gettin' ready to go after the body."

His voice was both preceded and followed by a muffled thudding noise that emanated from across the pool area. Under the supervision of the head CSU

technician the maintenance worker was laboring to fracture the layer of ice and widen the entry point for the diver. A second pair of thuds resulted in a sharp cracking sound as the frozen strata splintered. Another of the technicians struggled with a shepherd's hook to fish the broken chunks of solidified water out of the way.

A crowd had been gathering out beyond the barrier tape and was still gaining mass as more gawkers straggled in. Die-hard thrill seekers that even the weather couldn't deter from a feeding frenzy of morbid curiosity. Some of them were just as bad, if not worse, than the media hounds that were vying for position with them. This fact was unequivocally proven when our concentration on the scene was diverted by the clamorous sound of a verbal altercation and physical scuffle.

Outside the fence a patrolman was shining his flashlight directly into the lens of a video camera that was being operated by an onlooker in the front of the crowd. The bright light effectively blinded the device and the spectator began boisterously protesting the action.

Another uniformed officer quickly joined the patrolman as he attempted to calm the man down, however, after a few moments of the complainant loudly misquoting constitutional amendments it became obvious that they were fighting for a lost cause. Finally, the obnoxious individual was unceremoniously handcuffed and parked in the back seat of a squad car where he continued his now muffled vociferations.

During the short commotion, the maintenance worker and Crime Scene Unit Technicians had managed to slightly more than double the size of the hole in the sheet of snow-covered ice. A diver clad in a dark wetsuit was now sitting on the edge of the pool nodding his head at a series of instructions he was receiving from the coroner who squatted next to him.

After a moment, a sharp hiss of air blasted into the now quiet site as he tested his regulator then slipped the mouthpiece between his lips. In a smooth, practiced motion he shifted and turned, lowering himself into the icy pool, then snapped on a powerful underwater lamp. Seconds later, he slid into the murky depths, leaving us to stare at a dimly glowing hole and an occasional burst of bubbles rising to the surface.

"Man, that's gotta be some cold ass water," Ben whistled between his teeth and shot me a sideways glance. "You doin' okay so far?"

"I'm fine," I nodded in assent.

"No *Twilight Zone* or anything?"

"No. Not yet."

"You having those visions again, Rowan?" Deckert inquired.

"Some," I returned.

"Some my ass," Ben spat. "He scared the piss outta all of us at the last scene."

"What happened?" Deckert appealed.

"Long story man," Ben shook his head. "You'd think I was nuts if I tried to tell

you."

"You had to be there, Carl," Agent Mandalay intoned. "There's no way to explain it and keep it from sounding like some kind of fantastic tale."

"Well, we ARE talkin' about Rowan here," Deckert gave me a half-hearted, knowing grin.

"Let's just say that when we put two and two together, all of a sudden your call wasn't much of a shock," Ben explained.

Deckert made the connection quickly and glanced from Ben and Constance to the pool, then to me. "So you mean you predicted this murder? You've done that before."

"I wouldn't say predicted really. More like someone on the other side went out of their way to make sure I knew exactly what it felt like," I answered, then paused as the remembrance made me shudder. "In any event, it was a little too late to do anything about it I'm afraid."

"What it felt like? You mean what it felt like to drown?"

"Yeah," Ben answered for me. "In a bone dry apartment, nowhere near water."

Deckert just looked at me and muttered, "Weird."

Agent Mandalay agreed softly, "That's the word that came to my mind too."

A large burst of bubbles shot through the surface of the water on the other side of the pool and the shiny neoprene covered head of the diver poked through. A raspy exhale through the regulator hissed into the night as he clamped one hand on the side of the deck and removed the mouthpiece with the other. He spoke briefly with the coroner and Senior Evidence Technician before finally nodding and sliding back beneath the surface, trailing a rope behind him.

The Tech looked up from the hole and glanced across the short expanse at Carl Deckert, then gave a curt nod. The aging detective let out a steamy breath and announced quietly, "He found the body."

The talk of my recent otherworldly contact prompted me to recall the reason I was present at this crime scene to begin with. As much as I feared what I had to do, I knew I needed to get on with it. I realized fully that opening my senses to the surroundings would not necessarily bring useful information, though I dearly hoped that it would. I was patently aware, however, that it would most certainly bring a handcart full of painful emotions and Technicolor horror streaming directly into my very soul.

The dim glow of the diver's flashlight was starting to grow brighter and small eruptions of expelled air bubbling up through the surface of the murky water were coining at increasingly regular intervals. The coroner's assistant and a burly Crime Scene Unit tech were steadily and carefully pulling on the rope that had been attached to the body.

We stood watching the macabre scene unfold under the harsh glow of the halogen

lights. Oblique blue shadows cut across the still forms of the officers on the other side of the pool giving a surreal appearance to their stoic faces. Each gurgle of bubbles that broke the surface of the water seemed to echo louder in my ears and reverberate through my body.

Slowly my chest began feeling heavy and I noticed my heart was rattling mercilessly against my ribs. Bitter fear surged from upward from my bowels at the thought of once again feeling the water in my lungs. I was only seconds away from panic when the first of two cinder blocks appeared above the edge of the ice as they were dragged from the turbid depths. I exhaled heavily and it instantly dawned on me that I was not reliving the drowning, as was my immediate suspicion. I had simply been holding my breath.

The twinge of panic subsided and I continued to watch across the expanse of smooth, crystalline snow to the gaping wound in the sheet of ice. I was amazed by how silent the scene had suddenly become. The only sounds to be heard were the rhythmic bubbling of the diver's expelled air coupled with the wet scrapings of the two concrete weights rubbing against one another as they were wrestled from the hole. Even the multitudes of police radios riding on the hips of uniformed officers and in the hands of detectives seemed to have fallen unnaturally mute.

I was concentrating so hard on what was before me that I scarcely realized my meticulously erected defenses had fallen of their own accord. I wasn't even aware that my hand had crept over to begin tearing at a violent itch on my forearm.

A tangle of blonde hair finally breached the surface of the water and was slowly followed by the nude body of a young woman being skillfully supported by the diver. From where I was positioned, I could easily see that her arms were bound tightly behind her and that the rope stretched down her back to encircle her ankles.

As she was lifted out of her recent and final hell, and gently placed on an open body bag, profane sound once again returned to the night. The clamor of the camera crews, blaring police radios and murmurs of the gathered spectators began assaulting my ears as if they had never stopped.

I understood then that the silence had never been real at all. It had merely been a product of my own deep-seated reverence for the passing of a life.

"Female," Carl mumbled sadly. "Looks like Ben and I were right."

The maintenance worker who had helped clear the snow and ice was now gesturing to the coroner and pointing beyond the fence. Even at this short distance we were unable to make out for sure what was being said, but it appeared that he knew the victim.

"I think they might have an ID or something," Ben spoke. "I'm gonna go see what's up. I'll be right back."

I was completely unprepared as the sharp stab of light pierced my eyes and burned mercilessly into the back of my skull. Color fled from my surroundings in a whirling tempest of shattered psychedelic glass as the illumination bloomed again, and then slowly subsided. Disjointed sounds crashed in distorted waves against my

tortured eardrums and fear drove a steely spike into my heart as the grainy black and white inhumanity played itself out in my mind.

I am bound painfully.

I cannot move.

I can barely breath.

Tape covers my mouth and I cannot cry for help.

"Robert! Where are you? ROBERT HELP ME!" My scream is trapped between my teeth, only to be swallowed in a bitter lump.

This can't be happening.

No! This can't be happening!

Who are you ?

Why are you doing this to me?

What have you done to Robert?

"ROBERT!!!"

There is a voice speaking to me.

It is the one who asked me the questions.

The one who hurt me.

"Christine Liann Webster, in accordance with the thirty-third question, in as much as you stand accused of the heresy of WitchCraft by another of your kind, and as you have refused to admit these crimes, remaining still impenitent, and that on this day evidence of your heresies has been found... "

Evidence ?

What evidence?

What are you talking about? WitchCraft? I don't understand.

I am freezing.

Why did he bring me out here in the snow?

Why are we next to the pool?

What is that noise?

What is he doing ?

"ROBERT, HELP ME!!!"

"... In as much as you have been found guilty, and that you are damned in body and soul, you are hereby sentenced on this day to death. To be executed immediately and without appeal in the manner of drowning. May the Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on your soul. "

"... Is Christine Webster," Ben's voice muscled its way into my ears, forcing me back to reality. "Maintenance guy over there ID'ed her. Apparently she lived in a condo about half a block up this street. Got a coupla uniforms checkin' it out."

"Robert," I muttered.

"Excuse me?" Agent Mandalay questioned.

"Robert," I repeated. "She kept trying to cry out for Robert to come help her."

A jagged shard of agony tore through the flesh on my forearm and felt as though it scraped against bone. I sensed its sickening message deep in the pit of my stomach and all I could do was issue a tired sigh, because I hated the fact that I had become so accustomed to violent death.

My head was starting to ache and I closed my eyes for a moment.

"Dammit, Rowan! What did I tell you?" Ben chided.

"It just happened, Ben," I barked back as I rubbed my throbbing temples. "I didn't have any control over it. Besides, it's what I'm here for, right?"

"Jeezus... Okay... Shit..." he stuttered for a moment, then decided to take advantage of the situation. "Well, any idea who this Robert is?"

"A husband. A boyfriend. I don't know," I shook my head as I opened my eyes and began to carefully peel my glove off. My bare hand revealed a smear of blood across its back, now spreading from beneath my coat sleeve. "But it looks like we were all correct. He's victim number five."

My comment was punctuated by a nearby patrolman's radio as it crackled and spewed forth a dispassionate voice from its tinny speaker, "Yeah, this is Ross. You want to advise Detective Deckert that we have another body up here..."

CHAPTER 14

"His wrist-watch stopped when the face was shattered," Doctor Sanders told us over her shoulder. She was kneeling next to the latest victim and carefully affixing bags over his hands to preserve any possible evidence. Mundane things such as hair follicles or even a shard of the killer's skin beneath his fingernails could be crucial in the investigation. "Assuming death occurred sometime during the struggle, which is a pretty safe bet, I would place the T.O.D. on or around eleven-forty this evening." She peered over the rim of her glasses at her own timepiece and made a note on her clipboard. "That's just a little over two hours ago which is also consistent with his current body temp."

"We just missed him," I breathed sadly.

The harried Saint Louis City Chief Medical Examiner had arrived shortly after the young woman's corpse had been pulled from the depths of the swimming pool. Her counterpart from the County jurisdiction had seen to the care and transport of that body leaving Doctor Sanders free to do the same for Sheryl Keeven. This now being the third murder in one evening, she had scarcely had time to see to the delivery of those remains to the morgue before heading out for this scene. In the somewhat crowded condominium I couldn't help but overhear a veteran detective from the local municipality speaking to another uniformed officer. With a respectful, somber tone he referred to the almost choreographed conveyance of the corpses as a 'dead man's dance.'

Robert Webster's body was positioned, for the most part, just as it had been found. He was sprawled against the wall in the small dining room that adjoined the kitchen. He was still fully clothed and bore none of the signature markings that had screamed so prominently from the bodies of the previous victims. A double strand of nylon cord was still looped tightly about his throat and bloody abrasions were visible along his neck where he had apparently clawed at the makeshift garrote. The opposite end of the thin noose trailed out across the floor, ending at a jumbled pile of beige vinyl strips—The remains of mini-blinds that had once been mounted over a now bare window.

'Gal. 3:1' was harshly scribbled in black on the wall directly above him. A wide tipped magic marker was found on a nearby counter and had already been bagged by the CSU Technicians.

Various signs of a brief struggle were obvious throughout the room. Mini-blinds that had been unceremoniously ripped from their mountings now lay in a crumpled heap. A chair overturned near the table. A potted plant that had once resided on a shelf now resting on the floor, its terra cotta planter shattered beyond repair and dark soil sprayed across the tile in a wide caricature of a comet tail. The cluster of Aloe Vera that had once called the clay pot home now sat upright in the middle of the debris field almost as if it had been placed there purposely. I made a mental note to myself to re-plant it once the crime scene had been cleared. I saw no reason for it to become a victim too.

As futile as the struggle turned out to be, at least Robert Webster had put up a fight.

"Sure doesn't fit the profile of the other murders. Actually, it looks more like he wasn't expecting the husband to be here," Ben muttered as he surveyed the scene. "That could kinda blow a hole in the stalking theory."

"Maybe not," Agent Mandalay offered. "If he's stalked all of the other victims I doubt he's suddenly going to change that aspect. Could be that the husband was normally gone on Saturday nights."

"Yeah. Like bowling or somethin'," he nodded as he spoke. "Good point. We'll check it out."

"He was never intended to be a victim," I announced. "This was quite obviously unplanned. You're right, I don't think he was expecting him to be here... "

I tilted my head to the side and stared at the shaky inscription on the wall. It was plainly scrawled in extreme haste. What was even more perceptible, to me at least, was the fact that it had been done as an afterthought.

The visual inconsistencies were by no means the only problem with the setting either. There was no feeling of greater purpose for this killing as there had been for all the others. My empathic senses registered none of the conviction and fiery intent that had thus far been woven through the fabric of horror that shrouded each successive scene.

What I detected instead was blinding anger, and to my surprise, painful sadness. All the product of a presence recently in the room... A presence that had been at every other site... A presence that had until now conveyed only misguided determination coupled with the passing of a terrifying judgment.

"... In fact," I finally submitted, "I think he could be upset by what he's done here. I think he may even be feeling very intense remorse and he's trying to come to terms with what he has done."

"How do you figure that?" Ben asked.

"The Bible verse," I answered with a nod in the direction of the wall. "Galatians chapter three, verse one. 'O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been set forth, crucified among you?'"

"I think the killer is trying to tell us that this man was bewitched by his wife and her path, and for that he had to die. Kind of a guilt by association thing."

"You sure he didn't just kill him because he was in the way?"

"In reality that's probably exactly what happened. But remember, this individual doesn't kill just for kicks. He has an agenda and in some perverse way, he still respects life—But only the life of the good and righteous as defined by his religion. This is his way of justifying his actions as much to himself as us."

"Man, I know its been a while since I've been to church," Ben declared, "but I sure as hell don't remember the Bible advocating all the shit this asshole is doing."

"It doesn't in a literal sense," I replied, "but it IS written in a way that leaves itself open to a wide range of interpretations. The killer is picking and choosing passages and taking them out of context in order to vindicate his actions. Notice they always contain a key word—Witch, bewitched, wizard, sorcerer... "

"This guy is just plain demented," Mandalay expressed.

"You'll get no argument from me on that account," I told her. "But in this case, I doubt even he believes the message he left behind. I think he might even be in some severe emotional pain over this. That's what I'm feeling anyway, for whatever it's worth."

"Yeah, we should all feel real sorry for the fuckhead," Ben spat sardonically.

"On the one hand, this could give us some breathing room," Agent Mandalay ventured. "If he really is broken up over this or whatever, then maybe he will shut down for a while. Decompress. Stop killing."

"Uh-huh," Ben admitted, "I'm all for anything that'll stop the body count from rising, but it's gonna make the prick a helluva lot harder to find if he just withdraws."

"He will withdraw for a while, I'm sure. How long is anyone's guess," I declared. "The feelings of sadness I'm picking up are far too intense for him to keep going without first coming to terms with this. But something tells me that he'll cycle through it. He's not finished with what he set out to do."

"Of course not," Ben expressed. "We could never be that lucky."

"Another thing," I offered. "I don't think that killing the husband was his only mistake. Something just doesn't click with this scene."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Take a look around. No books on WitchCraft or Wicca in the house. No pentacles or other symbols. No trappings of the religion anywhere in here that I've seen."

"So maybe she kept all her stuff hidden or somethin'," Ben shrugged. "Like to keep friends or relatives from knowing."

"Maybe, but I don't think so this time. There's something else too... Like I said before, he passes judgment on his victims. It's very formal and strict. Even more so than pronouncing sentence in a court of law. It's important to him that the accused be fully aware that WitchCraft is considered an unforgivable crime."

"Yeah, so? I'm not sure I'm following you."

"Do you get the feeling that he didn't do that this time or something, Rowan?" Mandalay asked.

"Oh no, he pronounced sentence all right," I shook my head. "But what I picked up when they were recovering her body was that she didn't understand. The fact that he accused her of being a Witch made absolutely no sense to her."

"So you don't think she was a Witch?" she pressed.

"I'm almost positive she wasn't."

"Then she doesn't fit the victimology any more than the husband," Ben expressed. "What would have prompted him to pick her?"

"I wish I knew."

Further musings were cut short and our small cluster grew larger by one when Carl Deckert trundled through the doorway from the living room. He had been out leading the door-to-door interviews and from the look of his face had only just now come inside.

"Okay, here's the run down," his voice issued as he sidled up next to us. "We got

nuthin' in the way of witnesses."

Out of habit he removed his fedora and smoothed back his disheveled, greying hair, then perched the hat back atop his crown and tilted the brim upward out of his face. His fleshy cheeks were flushed bright red and he was visibly winded. A cloud of coldness still seeped from the fabric of his coat to noticeably chill the air around us.

"Looks like almost everyone was at a meeting of the Condo Association when all this apparently went down," Deckert continued. "Nobody saw or heard a thing till the security guard found the pool gate open."

"Nobody ever goes to those things," Ben stated incredulously. "What's up with that?"

"I always go to mine," Constance confessed. "Second Friday of every month."

Ben stared back at her briefly. "No offense, Mandalay, but you might want ta' get a life."

"Well, I am on the board," she admitted.

"Correction," Ben chided. "Change 'might want' to 'desperately need.'"

"Yeah, well how's this for a kick in the teeth," Deckert remarked dismally before she could retort. "They were listenin' to one of the local department's finest talk about settin' up a neighborhood watch program to supplement the hired security."

"How's that arm?" Ben asked me as he guided the van onto the exit ramp from highway forty.

"Sore," I answered flatly. "Still throbbing a little, but it'll be okay."

We were both exhausted and there was no doubt in my mind that we were operating on automatic pilot. I wasn't entirely sure what was keeping my friend going at this point. I knew for a fact that for every ounce of energy I had lost through the painful physical manifestations of my unknown ethereal guide, Ben had expended more than double that amount in worrying about me. Personally, I felt like I could sleep for a week and my mind was all but completely numb. How he was even managing to stay awake was beyond me.

"What about the pool water thing and all that? Are you sure you don't want to see a doctor about it?" he urged.

"I already did, Ben. Doctor Sanders, remember?"

"Yeah, I know, but... "

"I'll be fine," I interjected with a weary yawn. "Stop being such a mother hen."

"Okay. Fine. I'm too goddammed beat to argue with you about it anyway."

"Good."

He cautiously turned through the blinking yellow traffic signal at the intersection and continued down the salt and cinder dulled asphalt strip. Streetlights cast yellowish glows at evenly spaced intervals along the roadway, forming harsh puddles of sickly light separated by thick, blue-black shadows.

"So you gonna be able to make it in the morning?" Ben finally asked, switching the subject to the hastily scheduled emergency meeting of the Major Case Squad, which was in reality only a few painfully short hours away.

"Yeah, I'll be there."

"Shit, I oughta just go on in now," he lamented. "I'm barely gonna have enough time for my head to hit the pillow as it is."

"You should really go home," I told him. "You need the rest as much as I do. Besides, I'm sure Allison would appreciate it."

"Yeah," he agreed. "She sure as hell didn't know what she was getting into when she became a cop's wife."

"Have you heard her complain about it?" I asked.

"Nope. Not a word," he replied. "She's really great about that."

"Then I would expect she probably knew what she was getting herself into. Give her a little credit, Tonto."

"Yup. I's'pose maybe she did."

By now he had turned the Chevy down my street and was slowly pushing it the last few blocks toward my home. Leafless tree branches bowing under the weight of ice and snow hung low over the roadway, forming an eerie canopy. I was already starting to imagine that I could feel my bed.

"Oh, by the way," Ben started as a thought was suddenly remembered and brought to the forefront, "the Bible they found next to the pool house was book marked just like the other two. The same passage as from the Sheryl Keeven murder was highlighted. First Samuel, 15:23. Whaddaya make of that?"

"Off the top of my head, I don't know," I answered as he hooked the vehicle into my driveway and rolled it to a halt. "Maybe he assigns a particular significance to each passage and applies it to the victim based on that."

"Yeah. That's what we were thinkin' too."

"We still need to figure out the why's and wherefores behind how he picked his latest victim to start with."

"I hear ya'... That's kind of why I asked... So that passage doesn't mean anything in particular to you?"

"Not in that respect, no. It fit Sheryl Keeven but not Christine Webster. Sorry."

"That's okay white man, just thought I'd check."

"I'll sleep on it and maybe it'll make more sense in the morning," I offered.

"Yeah, go get some rest," he told me as I unlatched my seat belt then popped the passenger door open.

As I climbed out I looked up at the thick comforter of grey clouds hanging low in the sky and could feel the utter stillness around me. The fatigue coursing through my body was so viscid that I felt enveloped in a total fog.

I just looked back to my friend and said, "Gonna snow."

I could hear the dull, muffled bong of our antique clock announcing the hour as I twisted my key in the lock and pushed the front door open. The final measure of the tone sharpened for an instant then it faded away to silence on the cold breath of the night. I quietly pressed the door shut and latched the deadbolt before proceeding to unzip my coat. A tired glance at my watch told me the evaporated peal had been the last note in a trinity of chimes. It was three A.M.

"Can you tell me why you're shutting me out of this then?" Felicity's somewhat slurred voice, brimming with a musical Irish lilt, pierced the darkness as I turned.

I was startled enough to involuntarily flinch at the question and almost drop my keys. I had fully expected to be subject to the wet nosed greetings and cursory inspections customarily doled out by the dogs. The throaty trilling and prancing rub of one or more of our three cats dancing around my ankles wouldn't even have surprised me.

What I hadn't been prepared for at all was my wife curled lazily in a chair, camouflaged by a crocheted afghan of dark muted blues, still awake, and palpably angry. My eyes were fairly well adjusted to the dark and I could just make out our black cat, Dickens, huddled in her lap, soaking up the attention her fingers were absently paying a spot just behind his ears.

From her slurred speech and the shape on the marble end table that looked suspiciously like a bottle of *Bushmills*, I had to assume she was somewhat marinated. It was readily apparent that I had arrived just in time for the umbraged portion of her emotional thrill ride. From what I could make out of the tousled look of her auburn locks combined with random sniffing, I suspected I had only recently missed the segments consisting of mild panic and heartfelt sobbing.

Felicity was never able to hide it from me when she had been crying, no matter how much she sought to cover the evidence with makeup or shadows. It was very obvious that she had done her share of it tonight, but right now she was in no condition to try concealing the fact even if she wanted to. I got the impression however, that in this particular case, she didn't.

"Shutting you out of what?" I asked.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," she parried, then swilled down the remains of the whiskey from a hi-ball glass in her dainty hand and set it aside with an uncoordinated motion that attested to her impaired depth perception. Fortunately the

crystal tumbler didn't break, but the loud clatter of its base against the marble end table sent Dickens flying from her lap to scurry into the shadows.

"Surely now you didn't think you wouldn't be missed at the party."

"Of course I knew I would be missed... But it's not like I snuck out or anything. So just how much have you had to drink?"

"Don't chainch the zubject," she mumbled the command through an alcoholic stupor that was creeping up on her much quicker than I think she realized. "You left without me."

"I didn't exactly have much choice in the matter, Felicity," I answered her calmly as I finished shrugging off my coat and tugged open the closet. "You had just started dancing, two detectives were in the lobby of the hotel waiting for me, and it was YOUR family reunion. Just what did you expect me to do?"

"Donchu understand how worried I was?" she demanded as she attempted to wrestle herself from the folds of the afghan. Had the situation been different her inebriated bumbling would have been almost comical. "I know what those things do to you, you know... I feel them too."

"I know you do, honey," I soothed as I hung up my coat then pressed the closet door shut. "Austin and Shamus knew I was leaving. They were supposed to let you know what was up."

I still wasn't entirely clear on what she was driving at, or just as important, why she was sitting in the dark, bombed out of her gourd. Felicity wasn't really much of a drinker. She would have a glass of wine now and then or sometimes a mixed drink at a party, but Irish whiskey straight up? Even considering her heritage this was something unheard of for her. I had only seen her drunk once before in the dozen years I'd known her and that time she had only qualified as slightly tipsy.

"Thaz not the point," she mumbled, then started and immediately aborted an attempt to stand up. "Everyone was watching you."

"Excuse me? Watching me what?"

"Well they have televisions in the hotel, don't you know."

The much touted and endlessly replayed film of Ben, Constance, and I on the balcony of Sheryl Keeven's apartment streamed through my mind in a painfully colorful burst. "So you mean everyone was watching the news?"

"On the news," she repeated matter-of-factly and bobbed her head, then rocked herself up to her feet where she stood precariously wobbling. "Oh Felicity, your husband is zo brave. Oh Felicimmy... Oh Felicity... you should be so proud of Roman... Rowan. But the bartender was laughing and then they took Austin to jail." She swept her arm out in an all-encompassing gesture and on the back swing began to lose her balance.

I took a pair of quick strides across the room and hooked my arm around her waist as she began to fall. "Sweetheart, you aren't making a lot of sense at the

moment. What are you talking about? Who took Austin to jail and for what? Is he okay?"

"Becawsh the bartender has a broken nose," she giggled.

"Let me get this straight. You're saying that Austin hit the bartender?"

"Aye, 'e thrashed 'im good. But I'm still mad at you."

The alcohol had immediately overtaken her the moment she came upright. Not that she was making much sense before she was standing, but she was only a hair this side of coherent at this point. The look in her eyes was a good indicator that she was now riding a brakeless train toward unconsciousness and the engineer called whiskey had the throttle open full.

"Felicity, honey, try to stay with me here." Supporting her almost dead weight, I eased her back down into the chair and knelt in front of her. Cupping one hand beneath her smooth chin and brushing a tangle of fiery red curls from her eyes with the other I continued, "Why did Austin hit the bartender?"

"For laughing of coarsh."

"There has to be a better reason than that, sweetheart. Your brother wouldn't just hit someone for laughing."

"Aye but he would." She thrust her chin upward and blindly poked me in the chest with her index finger. "If the laughin' they're doin' is at his family an' thiz bashtard was doin' his laughin' atchyu. Callin' you the good witch of the easht an' such."

"Felicity," I sighed, "why didn't you just ignore it. You know people are like that sometimes."

"Oh I did... I did, I did, I did... But Austin didn't." She closed her eyes and shook her head animatedly, then opened her eyes wide. "Oooohh, don't do that. It maygz the schair move."

She was almost gone. Any moment she was going to pass out right where she sat.

"Okay, okay. Is Austin all right?" I pressed her.

"Of coarsh he is. He won."

"No, Felicity. Is he in jail right now? Do I need to go bail him out or something?"

"Oh I already did that," she told me. "Heesh very proud of you, yaknow. But I'm still mad at you."

"Okay, honey, I give up. Why are you mad at me?"

She looked back at me very seriously and widened her eyes in an unsuccessful attempt to remain awake. Her eyelids were already closing and her body was sinking deeper into the chair. She barely managed to mutter the soft, slurred answer before slipping into the arms of sleep,

"beecawwsh... you were drowning and you woodn't let me help."

So intent had I been on the events unfolding around me throughout the evening that it hadn't even dawned on me that Felicity might remotely feel the same pains I was experiencing first hand. She had done it before and I should have realized that it was likely to happen again. Especially when considering both the intensity of the experiences on an emotional level and our deep connection to one another.

I carefully slipped my arms around my unconscious wife then gently lifted her from the chair and carried her into the bedroom. She was still dressed in her traditional Celtic garb from the party and it took me nearly fifteen minutes to undo the various laces and wrestle her limp body out of the clothing. I wasn't overly worried about waking her, for I expected that at this stage of the game that task would be nearly impossible.

After finally getting her tucked into the bed I debated making a few calls to check on Austin, and then decided against it. If I understood her correctly she had already bailed him out of jail, and even if she hadn't, I was certain his parents would be seeing to it. If not, it could wait a few hours. I wasn't going to be much good at doing anything about it as I was barely able to keep my own eyes open. I needed to be at the Major Case Squad command post by ten in the morning, and it was already coming up on three-thirty. After subtracting time for a shower and travel that left me with only about four hours to get some sleep.

The question settled, I stripped wearily and shut off the lights. Then with a satisfied sigh, I crawled into the bed next to my temporarily comatose wife. As I relaxed, a sleep deprived wrinkle in my brain told me to make a note to ask Ben if there was some statistical reason known only to law enforcement as to why dead bodies seemed to always turn up in the middle of the night.

When I finally began to drift off, I felt for all the world like I was falling to my death. I knew then that it wasn't going to be the restful sleep I had hoped for.

CHAPTER 15

A baleful cry in the fold of darkness.

A crystalline blanket hued blue by shadows cast in the dim moon glow.

Fear.

Hatred.

Horror.

Silence.

My heart is racing in my chest. It is one of only two sounds that break the stillness. The other is the report of my naked feet crunching frenzied through the

sharp crust of ice to the mantle of snow beneath. I am running from something.

I am running from someone...

I do not know where I am...

I know only that I run in fear.

Frigid air sears my lungs and chills me throughout. A hardened ache tears at my throat, dry and cold. I gasp for breath as I slow my pace and finally halt, struggling to deny the pain. A grove of twisted trees surrounds me.

Envelopes me.

The moon's filtered shine dances eerily between the gnarled branches and plays across my nude body. Streaks of sticky wetness stream across my skin. In the muted light they appear oily and black. I run my hands across my body and wince at the soreness of the festering wounds.

The streaks are my own blood.

My staggering footprints stain the snow.

My feet are also raw and bleeding.

My wheezing breath punctuates the night.

A deep, familiar voice rumbles from the darkness, "Wherefore, since you, Rowan Linden Gant, are fallen into the damned heresies of Witches, practicing them publicly, and have been by legitimate witnesses convicted of the sin of heresy... "

I start in fear at the words.

I bolt forward blindly.

A baleful cry in the fold of darkness.

"Yo, mission control to Rowan," Ben's voice snapped me back to the reality at hand. "You want any of this coffee, Kemosabe?"

He was waving his hand before my face and looking at me quizzically. From his expression I assumed I had once again slipped into the glassy-eyed, slack-jawed trance that had been plaguing me all morning. Snippets of a vivid horror kept ricocheting about the inside of my skull, disjointed and making no sense whatsoever. Thus far, I had been unable to piece together anything from the randomized remembrance of the nightmare and was beginning to doubt I ever would. Fact of the matter was it might simply have been just that, a nightmare. No more than a product of my overtaxed senses and the frightening spectacles to which I had been witness in the past hours and days. It may mean nothing at all. But it was painfully reminiscent of the small vignette that had appended itself to my recurring nightmare about Ariel Tanner, and that was what concerned me.

"Yeah, sure," I nodded as I spoke, shaking off the fog.

"I'll warn you up front, this stuff is strong enough you damn near have to slice it. There'r some donuts over here too." He indicated a large white box as he rummaged about for a clean coffee cup. "Great little place over on Chippewa. All they had fresh was glazed, though."

I shook my head, declining the offer. I wasn't sure how something like that would sit with my stomach at the moment. It already felt like my hastily gulped morning meal was lodged in it sideways. Considering that the meal had consisted of cold leftovers from a traditional Irish dinner, it probably was.

"So, what's up with you this morning?" Ben continued as he filled a chipped ceramic mug from a brown streaked globe of Pyrex, then slid it across the table to me before returning the pot to its equally discolored warming base. "You've been glazin' over left and right ever since you got here. Somethin' I should know?"

"I'm not sure," I returned, accepting the mug and taking a sip of the brew. It was acrid and bitter. Ben's wisecrack about 'strong enough to slice' had been right on the mark. "Could just be lack of sleep, I don't know. I keep having these weird flashes... like of a nightmare or something."

I placed the cup back on the table and absently rattled clumps of sugar from an off-white cardboard cylinder, scarcely noticing when they plopped into the black liquid. Scanning the area around the coffeemaker I searched for a stirring stick and found none. Ben noticed my fruitless quest then reached into his pocket and offered me a cheap plastic ballpoint.

"So you're goin' all... " He finished the sentence by letting out a low, vibrato whistle tied to an animated gesticulation with his outstretched arm. Over time, I had come to know this as his particular brand of sign language for 'out there.'

"Not really... maybe... I don't know." I finished stirring and tapped the pen on the rim of the cup before laying it aside on an already stained paper napkin. "It doesn't really feel the same... it could be just pieces of a bad dream," I shrugged and took another sip of the bitter brew. The sugar hadn't helped. I don't know that I had really expected it to.

"You didn't by any chance come up with anything on the doubled up Bible verses from last night didya?"

"You mean the one from First Samuel?"

"Yeah, that one."

"Not really," I shook my head. "The only thing I can think of is that it's a pretty generic verse as far as the condemnation of WitchCraft goes. It would easily fit as a catch-all if he doesn't have a specific heresy over and above that in mind."

"So no greater reasoning that might give us a bead on this wacko then, eh?"

"Not that I can see."

Ben pursed his lips and nodded back, "Well if anything else clicks, just say the word. I don't give a damn if you interrupt the meeting even, 'kay?"

"Okay."

"So where's the little woman this morning?" he changed the subject as he wandered in the direction of his desk with me tagging along. "I kinda figured she'd be with ya'."

"When I left her she was holding her head and muttering Gaelic curses about a bottle of whiskey," I answered.

"Oh yeah, that's right. The party. Sorry again 'bout that... Did ya get any of that Cold-cannon stuff?" He'd never know just how accurate his mispronunciation matched the way the contents of my stomach felt at the moment.

He wheeled out his seat and pointed to a molded plastic chair next to his desk. It looked like something from a discarded seventies era dinette, and would be I suspected, even less comfortable.

"Something like that, and yeah, she brought me home a plate. It was my breakfast." I rested my mug on the corner of his workspace as I sat down and glanced quickly at my watch. "Of course, I expect she's on the road by now. Had a photo shoot for a client today."

"On a Sunday? I thought she went freelance so she could set her own hours."

I held my hands apart wide in a one-that-got-away type of gesture. "Big client."

The answering bob of his head told me I needn't say any more. "At least she has a choice in it." He sighed as he looked around. "Some of us have a crazy fuck making that decision for us."

I mimicked his swiveled head scan of the room and his reference dawned over the sleep-deprived fog that clouded my mind. On a normal Sunday morning, the Homicide Division squad room was relatively still and near lifeless. Today, however, with the advent of the emergency meeting and the fact that the Major Case Squad was using it as a base of operations, it was slowly coming to bustling wakefulness.

Phones were beginning to add their annoying jingles to the vanishing silence as calls were transferred from the main switchboard into the squad room. Bleary eyed detectives with vacant faces were cradling handsets against their ears; some while lethargically scribbling notes, others while just leaning back in their chairs and pretending to listen.

The petite thud of a hurried pair of cross-trainers against aged linoleum started softly at the door and grew louder as their owner came breezing in. Making her way through the grid of desks, the tousled haired Federal Officer shot us a quick good morning without so much as slowing down.

"Sorry I'm late. Overslept," Agent Mandalay announced as she strode past us with an oblong white box in her hands. "Hope you like glazed. It's all they had fresh."

"Don't tell me," Ben offered. "Rachel's Donut Hut down on Chippewa."

"How did you know?" she asked as she deposited the container on the table next

to the other box of morning sweets.

"Great minds think alike."

"Okay, I've heard that before, but what's YOUR excuse, Storm?"

My friend chuckled a muted expletive at the playful jibe, but other than that, elected not to reply.

Constance unzipped and shrugged off her coat while at the same time surveying the scene in front of her. When she turned back to face us, we could see that over her denim jeans she was wearing a slightly faded sweatshirt emblazoned with a steeple like logo, the lower portion of which disappeared into a line of stylized text that read, *Cornell University, Ithaca, New York*. The tail of the garment was tucked behind a worn leather holster clipped to her right side and high on her hip rode a forty caliber Sig Sauer. I knew from the experience of having seen her in action that this young woman could be much more dangerous than was boasted by her rumpled college co-ed appearance.

She swept her hand back at the disorderly mess and frowned. "Sheesh, don't you guys ever clean up after yourselves?"

"It's not that bad," Ben grunted, then sipped his coffee. "Besides, ain't my turn."

Agent Mandalay rolled her eyes and proceeded to remove the visitors badge from her jacket and clip it onto her belt before finding a place to hang the garment. "Is everyone here, or am I not the only late one?"

My friend rolled his arm up and peered over the rim of his cup at the watch face on his wrist. "Just you and Deck. He called about fifteen, twenty minutes ago, so I expect him to be walking through the door any time now. Doc Sanders is here but she ran down the hall for a minute. Other than that, I think we're all accounted for."

"I didn't sleep too well last night." She let out a small sigh as she dragged over a chair similar to mine and dropped her petite frame into it. "What about you guys?"

Ben simply shrugged and took a pull at his cup of Java while I looked at her and shook my head, "Me neither. Nightmares. Of course, it's not like there was an overabundance of time for sleeping anyway."

"I know what you mean. The alarm went off way too early," she agreed. "Either of you catch the National News this morning? That video byte got picked up by the wire services."

"Don't tell me..." Ben muttered the rhetorical question.

"Yeah. The 'Ghoul Squad' is national news."

"Were they at least a little more selective about which part and how much of the tape they showed?" I asked.

"Not the station I was looking at," she returned.

"Figures," Ben spat.

"Ben, Connie, Rowan," Carl Deckert's gruff voice met our ears as he trudged in,

holding a box of donuts in one hand while working the buttons of his overcoat with the other. "I hope you guys like glazed. It's all they had fresh."

"So we've heard," Ben answered and raised an eyebrow at Constance.

"Rachel's Donut Hut over on Chippewa," she chuckled.

"How'd you know?" Carl continued fumbling with the last button and gave them both a puzzled expression. After a moment, he began eyeing the carton on all sides, presumably in search of a telltale marking.

"Table," Ben answered and pointed to the other boxes near the coffee.

"Maybe I shoulda called or somethin'," Carl stated apologetically as he added his offering to the pile. "That's an awful lot of donuts."

"Doesn't really matter does it?" I quipped. "Room full of cops, a few dozen donuts. What are the odds that there will be any left over by the time lunch rolls around?"

"Ya'know, you civilians have got to get over that whole *cop slash donut* thing," my friend returned with a small laugh.

"Sure, whatever you say, Ben. But tell me this, am I right?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, you're right," he answered with a broad smile. "Now shut up."

"So I'm sure everyone is aware that our boy was real busy last night. For those of you who were on the scenes this may be a little bit of a rehash. For those who weren't, or who were just assigned to the MCS, we'll try to bring you up to speed as quickly as possible." Ben was sitting on the edge of his desk in the squad room addressing the attentive assembly of detectives attached to the Major Case Squad. "Last night we got three bodies... " He held up his hand and displayed three fingers to the group, turning his hand front to back, "... Three in one night, people. Two fitting the M.O. of our bad guy from the Walker and Miller cases. The third was one of the latest victims husband and it looks like he just might have been in the way. Most of you are familiar with the first two victims, those that aren't, everything we have is on the handout I just gave you." Ben waved a sheaf of papers at the group.

"Now, some of you have probably already heard the theory that the husband wasn't the only screw up for our boy last night. From all indications, Christine Webster was not a Witch and in fact, didn't actively practice any religion at all, much less an alternative one. Well, I think we've solved the mystery behind this break in the M.O."

Ben had already told me this simple revelation upon my arrival at the MCS command post, but from the attentive stares he now commanded, I could tell that this was new information to most everyone else present.

"As you are aware, we have been operating on the assumption that the killer is working off a list. This list contains the names of several women who are members

of a local Witches Coven. All of the victims up until this point have been on this list. Now what we believe we are dealing with on the most recent victim is a case of mistaken identity."

"So there's a Christine Webster out there that actually is a member of that coven?" one of the cops asked.

"Exactly," my friend answered, "only her name is spelled with a K instead of a C-h. K-r-i-s-t-i-n-e, to be exact. Other than that, the middle and last names are identical."

"The mistake makes sense if you follow the killer's brand of logic," I interjected. "It stands to reason that someone with a deep religious conviction would hear Christine and automatically spell it with a C-h. After all, the origin of the name is Christ."

Ben grunted in agreement.

"So the original theory holds?" the questioning cop offered.

"For now, yes." Ben nodded. "Okay. Now that we've cleared that one up, I'm going to turn the floor over to our distinguished City M.E. So Doc, you got anything for us on last night's unfortunate souls?"

Doctor Sanders set her own coffee aside while simultaneously slipping her reading glasses onto her face. The spectacles that hung from a simple chain about her neck were like a permanent fixture. I couldn't recall ever having seen her without them. She opened a file before her and peered at the scribbled notes, reciting from them without looking up.

"I have the preliminary posts on all three. First victim is Sheryl Kee... " The last few words of her sentence elongated and rose in pitch as she yawned deeply. Covering her mouth with her hand she drew in a second breath and sighed, "Excuse me. I'm terribly sorry."

"S'alright Doc," Ben told her. "Been a long one for all of us... Go on."

"As I was saying," she continued. "First victim, Sheryl Keeven, Caucasian, female, thirty-four years of age. She was hung by the neck from the balcony of her apartment. Prelim shows a stress fracture at the third cervical vertebrae, but that didn't kill her immediately. There are indications that she expired due to asphyxiation. There were thirteen remarkable puncture wounds in soft tissues that were made pre-mortem. I would venture to say from an ice pick or something very similar.

"Next," she flipped a page in the manila file and stifled another yawn, "Christine Webster, again Caucasian, female. Twenty-seven years of age. Cause of death was asphyxiation due to drowning, pure and simple. Her lungs were full of water. Ms. Webster's body also exhibited a number of puncture wounds consistent with the Keeven woman as well as the two earlier victims.

"Finally, Robert Webster. Caucasian, male, twenty-eight. Contused Larynx. Cause of death, again, asphyxiation. He was choked to death using the cord from a set of mini blinds. No other wounds in this case save for some minor unremarkable

bruising and abrasions that most likely occurred during a struggle. Judging from the upward angle of the contusion, I would venture to hypothesize that the attacker was a rather large male, probably over six feet in height. Other than that," she flicked the folder shut then removed her glasses and gently massaged the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger, "we will have to wait for the tox and labs to come back."

She allowed her glasses to dangle down on their omnipresent chain and looked up at us with a slight shrug. "That's all I've got for you."

"Thanks, Doc. I really appreciate you getting on that so quick," Ben told her then turned his attention back to the rest of the room and nodded in the direction of a thick, stocky man who was absently smoothing his moustache as he listened. "You and your team have anything for us from the crime scenes, Murv?"

The man gestured in the direction of Doctor Sanders and when he spoke, his voice was richly timbered and affected with a slight, lazy, southern drawl, "I'd say the Doc's prob'ly right about our bad guy. We got one decent imprint out of the snow around the pool last night. Matches up to a man's size seventeen hiking boot, so I'd have to say he's a big boy. Best estimate, anywhere from six-six to seven foot."

He paused as he again brushed imaginary crumbs from the whiskers on his upper lip, and then took a moment to scratch the back of his head. "So far we haven't had a single worthwhile print, but it's winter and everyone is wearin' gloves so I don't really expect any. He's left a different kind of Bible at each scene, all of them being of a type readily available from any bookstore. We're runnin' it down anyway. The spray paint he's used to leave the symbol is just your standard commercially available stuff." He shrugged. "Got a sample of it off to the FBI crime lab. Couple of fibers. Poly-cotton blend, dyed black. Besides that we got a big fat zippo. Sorry ya'll, but this ol' boy ain't givin' us much to go on."

Ben nodded. "You'll let us know if you come up with anything else?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Great. Thanks, Murv."

"No problem."

"Okay, tox on the Miller woman showed Roofies in her system," Ben announced to the room and looked around. "Who's workin' with Narc on that?"

"Over here," a hard-edged, but still feminine voice came from across the room. "Detective Baker. I'm your liaison to County Narcotics."

"Great, Baker. Whaddaya got?"

"Unfortunately, nothing," she returned. "We've worked the college campuses and all the small time dealers we can think of. Of course, we haven't really known what we were looking for."

"Understood," Ben assented. "I'd like for you to hit 'em again and work from the

basis that we're lookin' for an unusually tall individual. That might help."

"Will do."

Ben gave his notes a quick scan and without looking up from the fistful of paper queried the room, "Computer crimes. Do we have anything on this whole internet stalking lead?"

"The Miller woman's hard drive is clean," a younger detective announced. "According to the system registry the operating system was a recent install and we found a receipt from a local repair shop. Looks like she upgraded."

"I hate the damn things, Chuck," Ben returned grumpily. "You mind putting that in English?"

"She souped up her machine and had a new piece of hardware installed in place of the original mass storage device," the detective answered. "I called the repair shop and they said the drive was toast and it went into the trash. To put it simply, as far as getting anything off her system goes we're screwed. We aren't going to get anything from it."

"What about her... Whaddaya call it... You know..." He rotated his hand in a circular gesture while furrowing his brow.

"ISP," I offered. "Her service provider."

"Small local outfit in South County," came the answer. "No weekend hours."

"Great," Ben sighed. "They got an alarm?"

"Probably, I dunno," Chuck returned.

"Find out. Call the local muni and the alarm company. Get the contact list and get someone to open the doors. If that doesn't work go down there and throw a brick through the window or somethin'. We wanna talk to 'em today. Got it?"

"Got it."

"All right then, there's another angle I want us to look into," my friend huffed, paused for a moment, then pointed over at me. "Most of you are familiar with Rowan here from the last time he worked with us. As well, most of you are aware that we've asked for his help again with this case." His hand went up automatically as he spoke, smoothing back his hair and coming to rest on his neck. After a short pause he let out a resigned sigh. "Now, while I'll be the first one to admit that his methods seem more than just a little weird to the rest of us, I think we all know just how accurate he can be. At any rate, Row here has given us reason to think maybe our bad guy might possibly be a priest. This isn't a definite, but I'd like to follow that avenue."

"You mean like a Catholic Priest?" a voice piped up.

"Yeah. Could be," he answered. "Or Lutheran I suppose."

"What makes you think it's a Priest?" the detective queried again.

Ben slapped me on the arm with the sheaf of papers he held in his hand. "You

wanna go ahead and take that one, Row."

I had been expecting this when Ben asked me to be at the meeting. Now, the feeling of *déjà vu* that had been tittering up and down my spine forcibly seized me by the shoulders and whispered in my ear, 'Be afraid. Be very afraid.'

The last time I had addressed the Major Case Squad had been a few scant months ago during the last frantic investigation. At that time I had been severely heckled, almost to the point of Ben losing his temper in an attempt to defend me. Now however, it seemed a small legend had arisen from the final success of that case and while there were certainly those who still thought me a crackpot, as Ben had said, a number of the officers present today were individuals I had worked with before.

I watched nervously as they shifted their glances over to me and waited just as attentively as they had for Ben.

"Quite honestly," I began, choosing a direct approach, "it was something I saw through Sheryl Keeven's eyes when I channeled her last moments."

The room remained quiet, save for the muted ringing of phones and normal background noises of the squad room. No laughs. No heckling. No comments of outright dismissal. As unorthodox as they may have found me, I had been accepted. I had gained their respect. In some small way, I had become one of *them*, and worthy of their attention.

I continued, indicating to my neck as I spoke, "What I caught a glimpse of was a black shirt with a white collar insert. Like a Priest's collar."

"So what about a seminary student then?" Detective Baker spoke this time. "My cousin was in the seminary and he wore one of those collars."

"Good idea, Baker," Ben interjected then gestured to a nearby detective. "Morrow. You and Buchanan check that out. Osthoff. You and Martin ask around the local Archdiocese. Carefully." He stressed the word. "Remember, it hasn't been all that long since the Pope graced our fair city with his presence. There are a lot of Catholics in this area and they're still riding high on that. Last thing we need to do is piss off over half of Saint Louis."

"Got it," the officers replied almost in unison.

"Okay. That's about all I have." Ben's shoulders dropped noticeably as he let out a tired sigh. "Anyone have any questions?"

"Any theories on why he changes the way he kills the victim each time?" a slightly graying officer queried. "Seems a bit off for a serial killer."

"I'll leave the floor to you on this one, white man," Ben told me.

I simply bobbed my head and began, "In this particular case it actually makes perfect sense. We've already established that the killer appears to be targeting members of alternative religions. In point of fact, Witches."

A ripple of nods coupled with the warbling hum of murmured concurrence ran

through the assemblage. I pushed off from the edge of the desk that I was leaning against and began to pace as I ticked points off on my fingertips.

"So far, there has been one victim burned, one hung, and one drowned," I continued. "All of these are methods of execution that were used during the time of the Inquisition. The manner of death selected back then oftentimes depended on a wide range of criteria. Anything from the preordained level of the heresy committed to the way the inquisitors happened to feel at the time of passing sentence."

"What about the first one?" another detective interposed. "The Walker woman. She was thrown out a window. Was that one of their methods?"

"Of execution, no. Of verification, yes," I answered, and paused to allow my statement to take hold. "I would postulate that the killer was applying a razor... A test if you will... he threw Ms. Walker off the balcony in order to see if she would save herself by flying or levitating."

The officer who had started us along this line spoke again, "I seem to recall reading an article in the paper recently where you yourself said you Witches don't do that sort of thing."

"We don't," I nodded in agreement, "but during the times of the inquisition, 'Witch Hysteria' was rampant. All manner of accusations were made and it is where many of the popular myths about us came from. People believed that Witches could fly. They thought we were made of wood and therefore wouldn't sink in water. Supposedly we didn't need to breath and could be deprived of oxygen and still live. That's just to name a few."

"So why hasn't he been testing the other victims?" another voice asked.

"He has to an extent," I replied. "Witches, and those accused, were tortured for a variety of reasons, the obvious one being to make them confess. Other tortures, such as the stabbing seen on these victims, also known as 'Witch Pricking,' were used to prove out the accusation. You should understand, of course, that the accusation was and will always be proven out for him, no matter what."

"Okay, so what about this whole torture thing?" A young detective waved his handout in my direction. "According to this, the first two victims were rather severely tortured, whereas numbers three and four weren't nearly as bad. What's up with that?"

"That's a good question," I agreed with a nod. "I have my own theories and I think there are a combination of answers. The most obvious is probably the constitution of the victim combined with the amount of time he had to conduct the tortures."

"What are the not so obvious reasons?" another voice queried. "Just out of curiosity."

"Well, as we know, the first three victims were all members of the same coven. For the sake of argument, let us pretend that victim number four was as well, because even though we know she wasn't, I don't believe the killer has realized that

yet. Victim five, we will leave entirely out of the equation, because as Detective Storm stated, he simply appears to have been a spouse who got in the way.

"Now forgive me if this starts to sound like a college lecture, but if you would, please bear with me for a moment. What I need to do here is back up and give you some background so you understand how I came to this conclusion. For this to all make sense, what you absolutely must understand is the mentality behind the concept of 'Witch Hysteria.' Those accused of heresy were tortured for several reasons, not just for a confession or just for proving out the accusation. In fact, sometimes it was just because the particular inquisitor was a sadistic bastard who enjoyed inflicting pain. But more importantly, by the prescription of Church Doctrine it was specifically done in order to get an accused heretic or Witch to incriminate others.

"The first deviation in our killer's torture pattern occurs with victim number three. While she was not put through the same rigors as the first two, she was subjected to some amount of torture. Judging from what I picked up at the crime scene, I would say she folded rather easily and didn't require an excessive amount of torture to extract that which the killer sought.

"Then you have Christine Webster, who we are pretty sure was the WRONG Kristine Webster. Throw into that mix the fact that she had a husband who lost his own life trying to protect her. Basically the husband being there knocked the killer's entire plan off kilter. It probably forced him to rush the ritual of applying proof and confession to the judgment for the simple fear of being caught."

I paused for a moment and took a quick sip of the bittersweet coffee I had set aside earlier. It had grown lukewarm, and tasted even worse than it had before, but I desperately needed something for my rapidly drying throat.

"This is where the not so obvious comes into play. Something that I have witnessed through the various visions I have experienced while working this case is the fact that the killer passes judgment on the victims much as an inquisitor would have. He is even going so far as to actually quote a 'Witch Hunting' manual known as the *Malleus Maleficarum*.

"His last two quotations have been one in the same and is as follows—'In accordance with the thirty-third question, in as much as you stand accused of the heresy of WitchCraft by another of your kind... '—This is what leads me to believe that he has been actively seeking to add heretics to his list."

"What does he mean 'thirty-third' question?" a female detective with close-cropped blonde hair queried.

"The *Malleus Maleficarum* is laid out as a series of questions with applied criteria," I explained. "An accused Witch or Heretic would be put to these questions and convicted on the basis of the one that matched the closest. The thirty-third question for example is relative to the passing of sentence upon someone accused by another Witch who either has been, or is to be burned at the stake. In this case, I would venture to guess that both Sheryl Keeven's and Kristine Webster's names

were given to the murderer by Kendra Miller under the pain of torture. As you will note, her manner of execution was burning."

"So how is it that you know about these 'questions?'" a detective asked as he poured over his handouts. "I don't see anything about that in the chain of evidence."

"That's part of why it's not so obvious," I answered him head on. "I saw it when I channeled the last moments of the victims lives."

"Oh," he returned. The look on his face told me that he wasn't sure if he should challenge me or keep quiet. I still don't know for sure why he elected to do the latter, but at that moment I could feel a large presence over my shoulder and knew that Ben was no longer leaning against his desk.

"So that explains the list," a voice interjected into the quiet. "Do you think he's just going right down the page, line by line?"

"That's the theory," I acknowledged. "He probably started by picking Brianna Walker because of her street moniker 'Wicked Witch of the West End.' She in turn gave him Kendra Miller's name and probably several others for that matter. Kendra Miller gave him even more... Let me just add that he undoubtedly has the names of every Witch in their Coven, because, when asked who else they know that's a Witch the obvious answer would be those they worship with. Of course, it is probably a safe bet that they gave him other names as well. I can't say for a fact at this time how he might be picking each successive victim from his list... It obviously doesn't appear to be alphabetical... But starting at the beginning and working forward seems as logical as any. Be that as it may, I'm willing to bet he has plenty of names to work from because of the tortures he put the first two young women through.

"I'd also like to add a personal theory, and this one is just based on a feeling. I think that he's probably very overwhelmed by what he perceives as the sheer magnitude of an infestation of heretics. Every time he executes one, most likely two or more are added to his list. He's probably just trying to get rid of them as quickly as possible. Therefore, he may no longer be as interested in extracting names from them as he was in the beginning. This might also account for the lessened amount of torture and it would certainly explain the little spree last night.

"Still, because of the nature of what he is doing, he will continue to demand names and the list will just keep getting longer."

"So, whether he wants it to or not, the rolls keep growing and in a sense, the victims perpetuate the crimes by continuing to add names to the list," the blonde detective stated matter-of-factly.

"Unfortunately, yes," I agreed.

"You're right, it would explain the change in his pattern and definitely the sudden escalation," Agent Mandalay remarked from behind me. "If he feels that he's losing control, another spree could be just around the corner."

"Great," Detective Deckert muttered sarcastically then appealed, "just how long is this crackpot's list?"

"Depends on how many names the previous victims gave him. And like I said, it just keeps growing," I detailed. "Your guess is as good as anyone's. There is quite a large Pagan community in Saint Louis whether you know it or not. Just using myself as an example, while I certainly don't know every Witch in Saint Louis, I could probably name twenty-five without even thinking hard. If pressed, I might be able to give you a hundred. I'm sure Brianna, Kendra and Sheryl could have done the same.

"On that note, however, I would like to mention something else. I have made my case for the fact that this guy is after Witches or anyone he perceives to be one. As you know, last night, he deviated from that pattern when he killed Robert Webster. Now based on the facts at hand, I think we can all agree that Mister Webster was NOT on the list, especially since the Kristine Webster he was supposed to have gone after is unmarried. That would mean his death was purely unplanned, at least as far as the pattern has been established. Now unless I grossly misinterpreted the scene, I believe the killer is feeling some pretty heavy remorse over this."

"Enough to make him stop killing?" a voice asked.

"I think so. Not for long, mind you," I returned. "But, yes, I do feel that it might buy us a short reprieve. I would suggest we find him before he gets over it, however. I'm no psychologist, but I have a bad feeling that he is going to turn this guilt into anger and blame. When he does, I'm betting the blame will end up on the heads of Witches and Wiccans and like Agent Mandalay said, another spree could be just around the corner. Maybe even worse than last night if he... "

Across the squad room the glass paned door swung open and a young, uniformed officer poked his head in. "Excuse me, Detective Storm?"

"Yeah, whatcha need?" Ben looked up and across at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Sorry to interrupt," he proceeded, "but a unit just came in with an old bum they popped for an assault, and, well... I think you should come down and have a look."

"What for?" Ben shot him an impatient frown.

"Well, when they searched him they found a Bible in his pocket with a passage highlighted. Exodus, twenty-two-eighteen."

Stunned silence layered itself across the room in an almost stifling fog. Colors bloomed and flashed in a sparkling fireworks display that rained outward in slow motion. A distant ethereal scream shattered my ears.

Liquid fire rushes down my throat.

I cannot scream.

The pain is piercing my very soul.

Why doesn't someone help me ?

The colors had begun to spiral back into themselves and the imagined silence

breaking shriek was fading steadily. I clung to the vision a moment longer, fearing it intensely, yet knowing that it had been triggered for a reason.

I'm floating.

Flames lick at me from below.

I cannot feel them.

I CAN feel them.

I still cannot scream.

Something... Someone... A movement in the darkness.

An old man.

Stumbling.

Sudden horror in his eyes

Flames lick at me from below.

Chroma, hue and sound completed their sudden wild pinwheel through the fold of the room and settled back to an even tone. The bloom faded and normalcy once again prevailed. The jangle of ringing phones filtered into my ears as if they had never been absent. I knew my brief excursion into another realm had been just that. Brief. I doubted anyone noticed other than myself.

"Thou shalt not suffer a Witch to live," I recited aloud then glanced back at Ben. "I knew there should have been a Bible at the second scene... That has to be it... He was there... "

"Jeezus," Ben muttered under his breath.

"Son of a bitch," Deckert echoed behind him.

"And by the way, Mister Gant," the uniformed officer added, "there's a woman downstairs asking for you. Pretty red-head about so tall." He held his hand up to illustrate. "Say's she's your wife. Seems she's the one who tackled the guy and sat on him until the squad car arrived."

CHAPTER 16

"So you picked this guy up on an assault?" Ben asked the arresting officers.

He, a pair of uniformed patrolmen, and I were making our way to the lower level of the station via seemingly endless flights of stairs. Detective Deckert and Agent

Mandalay had remained behind with the rest of the Major Case Squad to go over the facts of the cases so far and see if they could brainstorm any fresh ideas.

"Yeah," one of the uniformed men returned. He was among a small number of individuals I had met in my lifetime who was tall enough to look Ben straight in the eyes. "You know Tracy Watson? The meteorologist over at channel five with the big... " He made an exaggerated cupping motion at his chest with his large hands.

"Uh-huh," Ben chuckled lightly, "the big ratings boosters for the male demographic ages thirteen to still breathing. She the one making the complaint?"

"Yeah," the officer returned, "seems this old dude just ran up to her as she was coming out of a coffee house. He started screaming 'Tracy I love you' and then grabbed himself a couple of handfuls."

"You mean?... " Ben pawed at the empty space in front of him and allowed the question to hang in the air.

The younger, shorter cop nodded, "Oh-yeah! Guess he wanted to find out if they were real. Lucky bastard."

"Looks like he got more than he bargained for though." the tall officer snickered. "Ended up with a nice hot double latté in his face and a psychotic little redhead with her knee in his back. I feel sorry for the asshole that's married to that one if he ever pisses her off."

The young cop's face spread into a wicked grin. As he shot a glance back over his shoulder he began fervently nodding, "Yeah, but you know what they say about redheads. I'll bet if she's got that kind of energy in the bedroom, then... "

"Fortunately," I interjected before he could continue to dig the hole any deeper, "it's been my experience that she doesn't get pissed off easily... but I try to avoid doing it anyway."

All forward motion abruptly ceased and both of the uniformed men swiveled their heads back to look at me. The stairwell fell silent except for the fading echoes of our footsteps.

"That's right," I bobbed my head. "I'm the 'asshole' that's married to her."

The cop who had been about to regale us with his lurid fantasy about my wife flushed through varying shades of red, ending at a particularly bright crimson. Slowly, his jaw began working up and down and he started to stammer, "Well... I, ummm... I... Well... I didn't mean any offense, Mister Gant."

"None taken at this point, but it wouldn't bother me if we changed the subject slightly," I smiled back. "I'd also advise against letting *her* hear your thoughts."

Ben grinned at the stuttering cop and clapped him on the shoulder with a massive hand as we started downward once again. "Open mouth, insert foot, huh, Carter?"

"Taking out a few aggressions, sweetheart?" I asked as I planted a light kiss on

Felicity's forehead and gave her a quick hug. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." She returned the squeeze. "Still a bit of adrenalin jitters, but I'm okay. Surely I feel like I could do with a shower. That old man was pretty rank." She released her grip on me and then leaned back. Out of habit, she reached over and straightened my visitors badge while she spoke, "I wasn't exactly expecting this much excitement today. I suppose that will teach me not to go out for coffee when we break then."

"Wrong place, wrong time, eh?"

"Aye, depends. I suppose Ms. Watson would consider it fortunate I was badly in need of a caffeine fix."

I leaned in again and made a show of sniffing her hair. She hadn't really picked up too much of the old man's malodorous bouquet and what she had was primarily on her jacket, but I played along anyway. "Yeah, I think you're right about the shower. A date with some soap and water probably wouldn't hurt you."

"Aye, and you're askin' for it today aren't you then?"

My petite wife's voice still held a mild Irish lilt, obvious and musical, though not entirely as strong as it had been the night before. Her speech pattern was woven of a rich tapestry of Celtic design and probably would be for the week to come—the audible results of an evening with her family.

Her hair was pulled back in a loose French braid that poured down her back in an auburn stream and she was casually dressed in a pair of jeans and a denim shirt. Her waist length leather jacket was hanging open and her matching gloves peeked out of a pocket in the insulated lining. She looked up at me with tired green eyes as she brushed a fugitive strand of her fiery mane from her face and tucked it behind her ear. Even slightly disheveled she was absolutely gorgeous.

"I'm only kidding and you know it." I grinned. "I don't think much rubbed off on you, although you'll probably want to get your jacket cleaned."

"Aye, I was thinkin' just that," she nodded in agreement.

"How's the hangover?" I questioned.

"Gone for the moment, or at least forgotten. But I still surely feel like I need some real sleep then," she expressed and absently began to chew at her lower lip. "Row, about last night... "

"Forget it," I told her before she could continue. "You were upset and rightfully so... I should have realized you would be feeling what I was going through, especially considering that it has happened before... I just wasn't thinking."

She stared past me into the distance for a moment, continuing to gnaw at her lip, then returned her gaze to mine. "I just don't want you to shut me out then. Even if you think you're protecting me. We both know that won't work and it will just cause problems for us in the long run. Better you let me face it with you... Still, I shouldn't have been such a mess when you arrived home," she sighed. "Not exactly very

supportive of me now, was it then? And if you had actually ended up going to a hospital or something... "

I detected a slight catch in her voice as it trailed off and I knew she was choking back a tear. As my lovely wife would tend to do, I knew that inside she was unnecessarily beating herself up over something she couldn't change.

I reassured her with another tight squeeze. "Ssshhh. Don't worry about it. That's all over and done with. I know I've been keeping you at a distance on this." I paused for a moment to collect my own thoughts before letting out a tired sigh. "Honestly, I don't think I've been very good about staying grounded myself and I think that might be affecting me. The whole idea of what this guy is doing has me kind of rattled."

"Aye and it should," Felicity nodded. "But you are just one man and you can't be takin' the responsibility of stopping him on yourself alone."

"It's my nature, Felicity."

"Aye," she nodded again. "And it's *my* nature to change that about you, Rowan."

"There she is!" Ben's voice interrupted as he sidled up to us. "The Red Haired Terror of Cole Street."

"So I'm an urban legend now, am I then?" Felicity forced a light chuckle as she pulled back from me and quickly whisked away an escaped teardrop from the corner of her eye.

Ben tactfully ignored the motion and threw me a quick glance. I simply nodded and smiled.

"That's what I hear from the witnesses," he answered as he gave her shoulder a light squeeze. "You okay? You don't smell so good."

"Aye, not you too?" She rolled her eyes at him and smiled. "And yes, I'm fine. I swear, everyone has been acting like I just single-handedly captured someone from the FBI's ten most wanted list or something."

"She doesn't know?" Ben looked over at me questioningly.

"No," I shook my head, "hadn't gotten that far yet."

"Know what, you guys?" She swung her glance back and forth between us. "And just what would you two be talkin' about?"

"Well," he began, "the bum you tackled might not have been on the ten most wanted list, but he had something in his pocket that we've been looking for."

"What?" she asked. "Come on now. Out with it."

"A Bible," I told her.

"Okay... " She looked at me and shook her head slightly, while giving me one of her trademark 'so what?' shrugs. "And?"

"Part of the killer's M.O. has been to leave behind a Bible with a verse highlighted and bookmarked," Ben explained.

"Except for the second scene," I continued for him. "There wasn't one and it's been eating away at me ever since that day. It looks like the Bible this guy had in his pocket may very well be the one that was missing."

"You don't think this old homeless man is the murderer do you now?" She searched my face with wide eyes.

"No, not at all," I returned. "But I think he was at the second murder scene and picked up that Bible."

"So I guess I'm still missing something," she appealed. "What does having this Bible do for you?"

"Probably nothing in and of itself," Ben answered her. "Considering that all of the others have been clean, and especially since this one has been in the possession of this bum for a week. But," he held up a finger, "it sure as hell places him at the scene and that makes him a potential witness."

"Miz O'Brien?" the same tall uniformed officer we had come downstairs with interposed himself. "We need to get your statement now."

"Go ahead," I urged and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll be here when you're through."

"Just have someone bring her up to Homicide when you're done," Ben instructed the officer then looked over at Felicity and winked. "I'll make sure he's here. Oh, and by the way... "

"Aye?"

"Love the accent."

"We haven't been able to get anything out of him, not even a name," the uniformed officer told us as we approached the door to the interview room. "We already took care of prints and pics. Booked him as a John Doe. PD's office has been notified and the on-call legal beagle should be on the way."

"So is he waiting for the attorney?" Ben queried the patrolman.

"Dunno," the young man shrugged. "He hasn't said much of anything, except for yammering about Tracy Watson every now and then. Mainly he just sits there and stares off into space. There was a bottle of booze in his pocket and he blew about two points over the limit."

"Great. So we've got a liquored up JD runnin' around tweaking television personalities tits and he just happened to have that Bible in his pocket."

"That about sums it up," the officer replied. "So I don't know what you're going to get out of him until he sleeps it off."

"You pretty sure he understood his rights?"

"He indicated that he did, but in his condition... "

"Yeah," Ben nodded and let out a sigh as he gripped the doorknob and gave it a twist. "Wonderful."

The old man was still wearing handcuffs when we entered. They had endeavored to clean him up to some extent, but the telltale stain of his encounter with a large double latté was still drying on the front of his ragged overcoat. In actuality, the hot drink had succeeded in washing away some of the accumulated filth from his face and a few weathered blotches of almost clean skin peeked through the dirt randomly. His chin was bristling with at least a month's worth of scraggly beard and his grey hair was matted and stringy.

Felicity's comment about the old man being a bit rank had been a kind one. In the confines of the small room the stench of stale urine and long fermented human sweat was almost overpowering. The smell of decaying garbage hovered about the bum like a halo, intermixing with the other putrid odors to form an invisible eye-watering haze of foulness. It was a small wonder she hadn't picked up more of the offending scent than she had.

He didn't even look up as Ben and I entered the room and pressed the door shut behind us. Instead, he continued vacantly staring at the wall through sunken, clouded eyes as he rocked in his seat. His hands, braceleted at the wrists, were held splayed alongside his cheeks, one finger crooked and tugging at his lower lip. Slowly he would slide them downward, smearing a small trickle of drool as he did so. Finally, he would press his palms together and steeple his fingers beneath his chin for a brief moment and then repeat the entire mannerism from the beginning. Every now and then a soft whimper would emit through his nose.

After a moment of watching the old man, Ben glanced over at me and cocked an eyebrow, then looked back and cleared his throat. "Whatcha watchin' there, Pops?"

The bum absently continued his introverted ritual and answered with nothing more than another low, nasal whine.

My friend let out a tired sigh and reached up to massage the back of his neck. "Sir, I'm Detective Storm and this is Mister Gant. We would like to ask you some questions, if you don't mind."

A mixture of emotions was tumbling throughout the small room, the majority of which were emanating from the old homeless man. My empathic senses easily detected an undertone of love and lust, stunned betrayal, pain, and confusion. As would be expected though, primarily I felt his fear of the situation.

"Sir," Ben spoke again while waving his free hand in front of the man's face, "can you hear me? Do you understand why you're here?"

Slowly, the bum turned his head and rolled his clouded eyes up at the imposing figure that was Detective Benjamin Storm. He continued to rock in place, but after a moment, he left his hands resting on his cheeks and began working his jaw as if to speak. Finally, after a raspy false start, he allowed his cuffed hands to fall to the surface of the table and his face spread into a chastened frown.

"Tracy is mad at me," the old man muttered. "I shoodn't have touched Tracy."

That was wrong."

The odor of cheap bourbon and sour breath trailed along with his words, mingling thickly with the other unpleasant redolence. I caught myself searching the ceiling for the non-existent exhaust fan and trying to will one to appear.

"Sir, do you understand your rights as they were told you by the other officers?"

"Yes, I unnerstan. Is Tracy okay?"

"Yes, she's fine."

Thus far the old man had seemed relatively lucid, though obviously not entirely sober. Ben fell silent and held his gaze, gauging by instinct whether or not he should press forward with more questions. After a moment, he continued, "Sir, would you mind answering a few questions for us?"

"The other lady wuz mean," the old man mumbled. "She hit me. But she had pritty hair. What questions?"

"We'd like to ask you about something you had in your pocket. A Bible."

"Ex-oh-duss," he nodded vigorously and proceeded to misquote the highlighted passage, "Whiches shall not live."

"That's what was bookmarked," Ben agreed then urged him on. "Can you remember where you got the Bible?"

"It wuz on the table," he answered.

"Can you tell me where this table was?"

"By the fire," he returned matter-of-factly and shrugged. The old man continued to stare at Ben as if he fully expected the answer to make perfect sense to us. Before the obvious next question could be asked his face slackened and his eyes seemed to lose focus for a moment. Leaning forward, he began to search Ben's face. "Is Tracy okay?"

"I already told you, Ms. Watson is fine," my friend returned impatiently. "Now can you be a little more specific about where you obtained this Bible."

"Tracy, Tracy." The old man grinned sheepishly and began singing, "Tracy, Tracy, I love Tracy. Tracy with the big, big tits!"

Ben shot another glance over at me, and it took no great skill to read the expression that had applied itself to his chiseled features. The old bum wasn't exactly residing in the same plane of reality that we were. Whether or not this was entirely due to the alcohol in his system still remained to be seen.

"The mean lady with the pritty hair hit me," the bum announced. "Didyu 'rest her too?"

"Sir... " Ben started.

"She wuz mean." He furrowed his brow and belched loudly. "Tracy is nice." Again he began his off-keyed ditty, "Tracy, Tracy, I love Tracy... "

"Sir," Ben cut him off with a disgusted sigh, "please concentrate on the question. Where did you get the Bible we found in your pocket?"

My friend's voice had taken on a sharp, biting tone that made the old man flinch and cower away. I could easily sense that his irritation with the state of affairs was rising and that his temper was well on its way to a minor flare at the very least. I knew this would serve no purpose other than driving the old man's memory further out of our reach and decided to break my self-imposed silence.

"You said it was on a table next to the fire," I volunteered in a soothing voice. "Can you tell us where the fire was?"

The bum cautiously shifted his gaze over to me and stared quizzically. "Fire?"

"Yes," with my eyes fixed to his I spoke, keeping my timbre light and even, almost to the point of being a dull monotone, "you were telling us about the Bible you found on the table."

"On the table," he echoed my words, nodding slightly as he did so.

"Right." I smiled and continued to soothe him with my voice, "You said the table was next to a fire. Can you tell me where the fire was?"

He, himself, having been on the receiving end of such an impromptu hypnosis by me, Ben quickly caught on to what I was trying to do. He immediately ceased pressing with his own questions and fell silent. He even went so far as to back away from the small table as if he thought he might somehow be in my way.

"The park," the old man mumbled and blinked. "The fire wuz in the park."

I could feel how hard he was concentrating on the question and in a way felt sorry for him. I knew it was just as hard for him to make sense of his disjointed remembrances as it was for me to cajole them to the surface. I wasn't even sure my expenditure of energy was going to get us anywhere, for the old man may have seen nothing at all.

I could only hope that it wouldn't be fruitless, because the tightening that now crept along my scalp was a harbinger of the payment I would be doling out in the very near future.

"Good," I nodded, and then urged calmly, "Now can you remember anything else about the park? What did you see?"

Wide-eyed horror slowly crept into the bum's face, forcing his befuddled expression aside, then finally overtaking and replacing it entirely.

An acrid burn washed over my skin as my hairs rose on end. Gelid fear tickled the pit of my stomach and threatened to force its way outward through every pore on my body. The barest glimpse of what the old man had seen that night hazily began to form as the experience was blurted into the ethereal space between us.

"Oh no!" he cried and began shaking his head. "No! She's in the fire! No!"

An image visible to only the old man and I began to congeal and clarify, offering its testimony of the events that were played out. I stared hard into the vision

searching for anything that would even remotely equal a clue.

Without warning, dull pain bludgeoned me with a rock hard fist directly between the eyes as the small snippet of that night was unceremoniously ripped from my grasp, even before I had had the opportunity to truly view it.

I turned suddenly at the sound of the interview room door flying open and was greeted by the image of a beleaguered young man wielding a briefcase and a file folder. He followed the swinging barrier hastily inward while glaring angrily in my direction. Ben shifted quickly to the side to avoid being creased by the heavy metal rectangle pivoting on its hinges.

"Just what the hell do you two think you are doing?" he demanded as he waved the file between us. "Which one of you is Detective Storm?"

"That would be me," Ben answered coldly. "You are?"

Considering the current circumstances, I was glad the man was focusing his attention on Ben. The primary thrust of agony was now beginning to fade, but I knew something just this side of bearable was going to be left in its wake.

"I am this man's attorney." If the young man was taken aback in any way by Ben's stature, he didn't show it outwardly. Instead, he turned on him as he answered the question and spat authoritatively, "I want both of you out of here right now."

"Slow down," my friend held up his hands in mock surrender. "Your client has been Mirandized and he agreed to speak with us. Besides, we aren't even discussing the assault."

"Alleged assault," the court appointed attorney insisted. "And my client, according to your own department's Breathalyzer test is legally intoxicated. I am certain the blood test you gave him will prove that out. He is in no condition to agree to speak with you about anything without adequate representation present."

"Hold on just a minute... "

"No, YOU hold on. Unless you want me to bring the both of you and this department up on charges, I suggest you two get out of here and let me speak to my client!"

Ben let out a resigned sigh and shook his head, "Come on, Row. Let's get out of here."

I gave a gentle nod and turned toward the open door. Before I completed a single step for the opening the old man's voice met my ears in a pleading tone, "Hey, Mister."

I stopped mid-stride, tried to ignore the thudding in my skull and turned back to him. As I did, the still fuming lawyer interposed himself between us and spoke quickly, "As your attorney I strongly advise against continuing your conversation with these men."

"Mister," the old bum looked around the body obstructing his view and appealed to me once again while shaking his head, "Tracy shoodn't feel bad cuz she spilt her

drink on me. I know it was uh accident. Kin you tell her for me? I doan wan' her ta' feel bad."

It wasn't what I had hoped he was about to tell me, but I wasn't surprised. The sudden interruption had undone everything I had started to accomplish and the drunken old man had instantly reverted back to his fantasy world.

"Sure," I said. "Can I tell her your name?"

"Name?" He looked back at me with a puzzled frown.

"Yes sir, your name. Can I tell Ms. Watson your name?"

A wild-eyed grin spread across his face and he began clapping his hands together as best he could with the hardened steel restraints still encircling his wrists.

"Puddin 'n' Tain," he giggled suddenly. "Puddin 'n' Tain, thas' my name, ask me agin an I'll tell ya the same!"

I simply turned and walked out of the room, leaving the old man to gleefully chant a new rhyme. Before the door shut, we heard the Attorney angrily spit a demand after us, "I want someone in here to get these handcuffs off my client!"

"Fucking idealistic little snot-nosed bastard," Ben voiced his deprecating slur about the young public defender as he drove his doubled fist into his open palm. The impact elicited a loud pop that echoed seemingly forever down the long, tiled hallway. "Sonofabitch probably just passed the bar last week."

"I hate to play devil's advocate here," I offered as we continued down the corridor. I was forced to increase my pace in order to keep up with my friend's long, angry strides. "But, be that as it may, he has a point. That old man in there is far too inebriated to make accurate judgments at the moment. You saw that for yourself. Fact is he might not even be mentally capable of making decisions that are in his own best interest, period."

"Maybe so, but you were beginnin' to get through to him weren't you?" It was as much a statement as a question.

"He appeared to be starting to regress back to that night, but I can't tell you how much was fantasy and how much was reality."

We slowed and rounded a corner, then came to a halt before a metal door. Gouges and chips littered the grey, semi-gloss finish, forming a mottled background for uneven, faded letters across its face that read 'STAIRS'. Above the door an exit sign glowed dully.

Ben rested one hand on the doorknob, and then jerked his free thumb over his shoulder toward the interview room we had just left. "But you could have if you hadn't been interrupted by Perry Mason back there, am I right?"

"I can't guarantee you that, but yes," I nodded slightly, "it's possible."

"Well weren't you doing some of that hocus-pocus stuff to him? You know, like

when you hypnotized me into seeing that spider on my arm that time?" He referred to a simplistic glamour I had used to demonstrate hypnosis to him months ago.

"Kind of. Not exactly like that, but along similar lines. Mainly I was just trying to help him remember."

"I thought so." He levered the door open and motioned me through.

"In all honesty, he would probably be easier to hypnotize once he's sobered up anyway," I added as we started up the stairs. "It's obvious that he already lives in a bit of a fantasy world and the liquor was not only acting to perpetuate that, but also to confuse him even more. An insane mind is not an easy one to read or affect."

"Well, now that he's got an attorney I wouldn't count on getting that chance anytime soon. Jeez, white man, you're gonna have to teach me some of that 'hocus-pocus' stuff one of these days."

"Trust me, it's not all that much fun."

"I dunno... Bet that little Svengali deal is a blast at parties."

"Believe me, Chief, sometimes the payback is a bitch. You just think it would be fun because right now you can't feel the headache I have coming on."

CHAPTER 17

Members of the Major Case Squad had broken off into various groups by the time we returned to the squad room on the upper floor. Some in small teams discussing and exchanging ideas; some alone with telephones pressed purposefully to their ears; still others already out on the streets. No matter the particular duty being executed, though, they were all striving toward a singular purpose. To find a killer and stop him before anyone else could become a victim.

"The Systems Administrator of the Miller woman's ISP is supposed to meet one of us at their office around noon," the young detective named Chuck told us. "He says they keep their logs for ninety days, so we might have a good shot."

The three of us were positioned around Ben's desk in a small huddle of our own. My friend stood leaning against the piece of furniture with his hands thrust deep in his pockets and a dejected scowl glued to his angular features. The young detective had accosted us with the information almost as soon as we had come through the double metal and glass doors that served as an entryway to the squad room.

Ben nodded thoughtfully and cocked an eyebrow at me. "Tell me again what this is gonna do for us?"

I was just swallowing a handful of decomposing aspirin from a bottle that looked like it had been rolling around in the desk drawer for the past decade. I had tried to

eyeball a measurement that looked like it might equal somewhere around three or four whole tablets, then finally gave up and simply filled my palm with the chunky granules. Hopefully the analgesic would kick in soon, because a small troll with a ball peen hammer was already having a party inside my skull.

I chased the crumbling white pill remnants down with a quick gulp of fresh coffee that wasn't much better than the hours old brew from earlier. The bitter tang of the medicine combined with the Java leeching into the back of my tongue and I had to bite back a reflexive gag.

"Whoever sent her the threatening E-mail," I finally explained, setting my cup aside and forcing myself to ignore the throbbing in my temples, "would most likely have an E-mail address or a domain header embedded in it. If we can get that information, we should be able to trace it back to their service provider, and get their billing information."

"Unless the sender spoofed it," Chuck volunteered.

"Yes, that's true," I agreed.

"Spoof?" Ben shot a puzzled look between us.

"Masked, or somehow altered the address and domain," the young detective detailed. "Kind of like filing off a serial number."

"Simply fucking lovely," Ben's right hand went up to smooth back his hair as he muttered the curse.

"Even if it was spoofed, as long as they have the POP-three logs and the original piece of mail, the assigned routing number should at least allow us to track it to the mail server that delivered it originally," I offered.

Chuck returned an animated nod. "True, but that's all you'd get. No account info. And if you're talking AOL or something, that's a big goddamned ISP. That's not even taking into account if it was sent through an open relay."

"So what's the story? There's still a way to track him down even if he did this 'spoofing' thing, or no?" Ben queried.

"In theory, yes," I told him. "I have to be honest though, I don't think this guy is that computer savvy. In fact, we should consider the fact that the threatening E-mail might not have even come from him."

"Whaddaya mean?" my friend asked.

"This kind of hate crime is not terribly uncommon." I described, "The idea of taunting or degrading someone from behind the anonymity of the keyboard is terribly appealing to some. Unfortunately there are a large number of individuals out there who are closed minded and hateful, but are just a little too inhibited to step over the line in person. Hide them behind a computer monitor and a phone line and they suddenly change. The inhibitions disappear because they believe no one knows who they are and they think that they can't be caught."

"So you're saying this kinda shit happens all the time?" Ben appealed.

Chuck had been bobbing his head at strategic points throughout my statement. "It's rapidly becoming the preferred method of sending anonymous hate mail."

I shrugged in agreement. "Sure. I've been on the receiving end of threatening E-mail myself."

"What the fuck?" Ben's eyes grew wide. "Why haven't you ever told me this before, white man?"

"So you could what, Ben?" I questioned. "Fly halfway across the country and beat up... oh, I don't know..." I shrugged, "maybe a beer swilling bigot in his mid-twenties whose biggest thrill in life is denigrating others over the Internet? People like that aren't worth your time any more than they are mine."

My friend stared at the floor for a moment, silently working his fingers on a tense knot at the back of his neck.

"Okay," he finally spoke, "so if I understand what you two are saying, this lead may or may not get us any closer to our guy."

"Right," Chuck answered.

"Correct," I assented. "But there's only one way to find out and that's to go talk to the Administrator of Kendra Miller's ISP and see what kind of information we can get."

"You know," Chuck offered, "Internet stalking is a Federal Crime. You might want to get the Feeb's in on this."

Still massaging the base of his neck, Ben twisted around and motioned across the room with his free hand. "Hey, Constance, you got a minute?"

We were sitting in a small waiting area in one corner of the Homicide Division squad room. My auburn-rnaned wife was planted lethargically in her seat next to me, one leg draped over the other, unmoving. Ever since I had known her, whenever she sat with her legs crossed she would invariably begin lightly tapping her foot in the air to a rhythm only she could hear. Her now uncharacteristic motionlessness was a sure indicator of her fatigue.

Her upper torso was slightly twisted and tucked neatly into the crook of my shoulder with my arm hooked about her. She cupped a half-full coffee mug in her dainty hands, absently running the tip of a neatly manicured nail around its rim.

I rested my chin lightly atop her head and could smell the fresh sweetness of juniper wafting from her soft hair. I closed my eyes and relaxed, feeling the fistful of aspirins beginning to force my headache into submission.

"We'll be leaving in about thirty-minutes or so, I guess," I told Felicity in a quiet voice. "I don't know how long it will take, but I wouldn't expect more than an hour or two."

"That's okay," she answered with an exhausted near whisper. "I called my client

before I came up here. They still want to see if we can do the shoot today so I really need to be getting over there."

Between her lingering hangover and coming down from the adrenalin rush, I knew she was fading fast. I also had no doubt that she would muster a second wind and do everything in her power to make her client happy, and succeed as usual. This evening, however, one could be certain that she was going to crash, and crash hard.

"You look to me like you need a few more hours sleep as opposed to working," I admonished. "No offense intended. You're still the prettiest sight I've seen all day."

"None taken," her voice lilted as she rested against me. "Surely I feel like I could use it myself. And I suspect you need to have your glasses checked then."

"Uh-huh. My glasses are fine, sweetheart."

"Ahh, you're just besotted then." My petite wife let out a satiny, musical laugh, then stretched cat-like against me and pressed herself deeper into the cradle of my arm. "Oh, and I almost forgot, Austin called shortly after you left this morning. He'd like to take us to dinner tomorrow night if we're free. I told him I'd check with you."

"I don't see why we couldn't," I expressed. "I can't say what's going to happen between now and then, but as far as I know I'll be available. And I definitely didn't get to spend much time with him last night. How did all that work out anyway?"

"What's that? The fight?"

"Yeah," I affirmed and gave her arm a squeeze, "best I got from you last night was that you'd bailed him out."

She let out a breath and inhaled deeply. I could feel a slight movement of her head against me as she gave a shallow nod. "The charges were dropped. Austin didn't hurt him that badly, and seems that after Daddy was finished threatening the hotel management with lawsuits they were apologizing and assuring him they would take disciplinary action against the bartender."

"Leave it to Shamus," I intoned hollowly. "So some poor stiff is going to lose his job on top of getting pummeled by my brother-in-law, all because he happened to make a joke about me? I can't live with that."

"I'm thinking not, so don't worry," she returned. "Daddy told them they should leave it be. Just let men be men and be done with it."

"If the guy dropped the assault charges though, you can be sure he got some pressure from the upper management."

"Aye. Surely you're correct on that."

"I realize Austin felt he was just being loyal to a family member, but he should really go apologize to the man."

"He probably already has." She reached over and gave my thigh a loving pat. "That's where he was planning to go this morning after breakfast."

A flat-bottomed mass of clouds hung like an anvil over the small corner of Saint Louis' South County; an oppressive reminder of winter casting a harsh, blue-grey silhouette across the mounded snow. The temperature managed to bootstrap itself to a few degrees above the freezing point by the time the clock hands met at twelve. This, in combination with the moderate amount of sunshine that peeked through, had already rendered the small dusting of the fresh white stuff we had received overnight to a damp memory. It was now continuing to work silently at melting away the remnants of the recent miniature blizzard.

The general populace of the city and county were visibly active in the wake of this serendipitous 'almost heat wave.' Self-service car washes were raking in the quarters as patrons choked their small lots—everyone vying for positions to wash the corrosive road grime from their vehicles. For every clean car to exit on the backside, seemingly two more would rush to join the throng waiting for a turn. As we passed by these small pockets of frenzied activity we saw no less than half a dozen fender benders caused by the impatient confusion.

Special Agent Mandalay turned the dark sedan into the parking lot of a plain looking strip mall on Gravois. Due to the possible Federal jurisdiction surrounding this crime—or portion of a larger crime—she and I had been elected to make this call. Constance was, of course, the official representative of law enforcement. I was along simply as a translator. Someone to make sense of any computer and Internet jargon she might not be familiar with.

Everyone else, including Ben and Deckert had either remained behind or set out in different directions, all intent on following up other leads, sparse as they were. Another purpose for my friend to remain at the MCS command post was to be able to direct the actions of the squad. Even his superior officers were giving him free reign over this case based on his recent past history with the last serial killer and to an even greater extent, me. Because of his relationship with me, as well as the circumstances surrounding the last case, he was viewed as the ranking officer when it came to crimes that dealt with anything even remotely related to what they termed 'occult dealings.' I suppose that in their opinion, a madman going around murdering Witches by all the conventions of the Inquisition fell under that particular heading. I guess I had to agree.

The long brick building we were rolling toward across the wet asphalt was nestled comfortably between a small restaurant on the right and what appeared to be a light industrial area to the left. A Laundromat equipped with its own bar, aptly titled 'SUDZ' occupied one end of the structure. Neon signs painted on the window boasted a Tuesday and Thursday singles night. Not exactly *my* idea of a good time, but then I had never been one for enjoying either activity—doing the laundry *or* singles night at a bar. Not even when I was single.

The opposite end housed the office and showroom of a small accounting firm with a decidedly ethnic name. A few other nondescript businesses occupied the center, with our destination sandwiched in between. South County Online Internet Services, L.L.C.

Constance nosed her sedan into a space in front of the establishment and directly next to an older, but apparently well maintained Cutlass Supreme. The car showed almost no sign of the chalky whitish-grey salt that coated her vehicle, and in fact, was even steaming slightly in the sunlight as water from an extremely recent wash evaporated into the chilled air. It couldn't have been pulled into its space very long before we arrived.

A haggard looking man with shoulder-length hair, dressed in denim jeans and an oversized sweatshirt bearing the logo of a modem manufacturer stood outside the door of the service provider. His winter coat hung limply open over his thin frame and his wide eyes bore the signature glaze of the programmer's trinity—caffeine, nicotine, and a late night spent staring at the sixty hertz scan of a computer monitor. Years ago, before I had gone into business for myself, I had seen a very similar face staring back at me from the bathroom mirror each and every morning.

He took a deep drag from the remains of the cigarette held between his thumb and forefinger as he watched us get out of the vehicle. With a lazy flick, he sent the butt sailing through the air in the direction of a large coffee can without even looking. I assumed the receptacle was partially filled with sand, but it was impossible to be sure as it was already overflowing onto the sidewalk with the extinguished remnants of countless other cigarettes. The butt impacted the concrete near the can and exploded a small shower of red embers outward to quickly die, then rolled to a stop and lay smoldering amidst the others that had come before it.

The bedraggled man nodded in our direction as he blew out a thick cloud of smoke intermixed with steamy breath, "You two the cops that called?"

Constance reached into her coat as she stepped around the front of the car and withdrew the leather case containing her credentials. In a practiced motion she smoothly flipped open the wallet with one hand to display her badge and identification to him.

"I'm Special Agent Mandalay with the FBI," she stated in an even, businesslike tone. "This is Mister Gant."

"FBI, huh. I was just expectin' cops," the man grunted, then chuckled lightly. "Shouldn't you be a redhead and shouldn't he be taller?"

Constance glanced over at me with a thin frown sealing her lips, but refrained from commenting on the TV show reference she had probably heard more times that she could easily recollect. Fluidly closing the leather case, she thrust her identification back into her pocket and looked back to the man.

"You are the Systems Administrator for this Internet Service?" the tone of her voice turned the statement into a question and she motioned to the sign on the window that proclaimed South County Online to be the 'Leading Edge in Internet Information Services.'

"That's me," he extended his hand as he acknowledged in a somewhat unsettled tone, having most certainly noticed Agent Mandalay's cold reaction to his quip. "Rocky Wendell."

We exchanged quick handshakes and then followed him through the door into the dark interior of the building.

"I can put some coffee on if either of you want any," he told us as we tagged along through the reception area, past a service desk, and into a corridor lit dimly by a glowing exit sign.

"Thank you, no," Constance gunned down his offer with sharp vocational politeness. "We're running a little short on time, so if you could just answer a few questions about one of your clients we'll let you get on with what's left of the weekend."

Wendell hesitated for a moment after slapping a pair of switches and stood studying her face as fluorescent illumination poured into the hallway and rear half of the building. It was becoming obvious that the petite Federal Agent's demeanor had him off balance. It was almost as if he wasn't quite sure how to handle dealing with a woman in a position of authority.

Finally, he simply shrugged, then turned and continued down the corridor. "Suit yourself."

"Kendra Miller, yeah, here it is," Wendell told us from behind a glassy eyed stare at a screen positioned on his desk. "Witchvixen at yadda yadda yadda." He ripped off a string of keystrokes and we could see the light of the screen flicker across his face as it changed. "According to her activity log, I think she might have taken that nickname a little too seriously... Says here she was subscribed to some of those wacko newsgroups... alt dot WitchCraft, alt dot witches, alt dot Wicca... "

"Do you have any record of her complaining of threatening or harassing E-mail?" Agent Mandalay interrupted him before he could continue reading off the list.

"Just a second." He tapped out another series of clicks and clacks on the keyboard then once again the screen flickered and he slowly began nodding, "Yeah... yeah, looks like about a month ago. She got a crank E-mail and called. Looks like we just set up a trap filter on her account for that addy."

"Did you have to trap an entire domain?" I inquired.

"Nope, whoever it was didn't bother to spoof it. Address and IP were clean. It was an easy trap, not that it mattered. She only got the one E-mail."

"Nothing else?" I pressed.

"Nope. Just the one." He shook his head. "We E-mailed a notification of the problem to the originating server and didn't even get an acknowledgement back. We assumed they just took care of it."

"Can you give us a copy of that information?" Mandalay asked.

"Sure." He rolled back a foot or so and punched the power switch on a laser printer that was positioned behind him. "You want a copy of the original crank

E-mail too?"

"Please," she affirmed.

We watched on in silence as he rapidly issued a series of commands through the keyboard, then sat back and raised his eyebrows at us. "Be just a second. It'll spool just as soon as the printer warms up. You know, if you want my opinion she was pretty much looking to get harassed if she was hanging out on newsgroups like that." He let out a sudden cackling laugh. "I mean get serious. Witches? What a bunch of nutballs."

Constance and I remained silent and waited patiently as the device came ready then began spitting out sheets of paper. After a moment, Wendell gathered the short stack of warm twenty-pound bond and handed it across the desk to Constance.

"Originating SMTP server is part of a privately owned domain," he offered as she leafed through the pages, handing each one to me in succession as she finished scanning it. "Info is right there in the header."

"Rowan," Constance submitted as she handed over a sparsely printed page, "have a look at this."

The text contained the standard date, time, tracking number and header information one would find on any E-mail. The TO line read `witchvixen@sthcnty-online.net`. The FROM read `wthchnter@repent.com`. The body of the message was what really struck home. In bold black against the stark white paper the words 'Thou Shalt Not Suffer A Witch To Live' stared back at me. Below that familiar sentence was another, less eloquent phrase, 'You will burn you fucking bitch!'

I glanced over at Constance and raised an eyebrow, then turned my attention back to the man behind the desk.

"Did you by any chance run a check on this domain to see who owns it?" I asked.

"Just a sec..." he replied and once again assaulted his keyboard.

Almost instantly the laser printer wound up from a low squeal to a high pitched whine like a miniature jet preparing for takeoff. With a sharp click followed by a dull thunk, it peeled off a fresh sheet of paper from the tray and a moment later spit it out the top. Wendell snatched it up and perused the printing on its face briefly before tossing it on the desk in front of me.

"That's a 'whois' on it," he explained. "Shows who the domain is registered to, gives a contact name, phone number, all that. From the looks of the address the owner's local."

I gave the listing a quick once over, noting the address as well, then slid it over to Constance who picked it up and began to quickly read.

"We appreciate all your help, Mister Wendell," she told him as she slowly stood and extended her hand, all the while still looking at the information on the page I had

just given her. "We will be sure to contact you if we have any further questions."

I followed her cue and rose up from my chair as well.

"Glad I could help," the man returned as he shook her hand, then looked over at me and reached out to shake mine. "Mind if I ask you something?"

"What's that?" I queried.

"Well I always thought you Feds were supposed to be clean cut and all," he spoke as he pumped my right hand and gestured at his hair with his free appendage, "but you've got a ponytail and a beard. What's up with that? You some kind of undercover agent or something?"

"Mister Gant isn't with The Bureau," Constance volunteered.

"She's right, I'm not," I smiled at him. "I'm one of those nutball Witches."

CHAPTER 18

"Yeah, that's right, last four digits are two-five-two-two," Agent Mandalay spoke into her cell phone as she cranked the steering wheel and backed us out of the parking space. The tires let out a dull squeal as they spun against the wet pavement before taking hold. "Address looks like it's a private residence in West County... Millchester... Guys name that holds the registration on the domain or whatever is one Allen Roberts. That first name is spelled A-L-L-E-N... Yeah, like a surname. The last name is Roberts, R-O-B-E-R-T-S."

"Yeah... Yeah... Uh-huh, okay... Rowan and I are on our way there right now. Uh-huh, okay, call me on my cellular if you need to. Uh-huh, yeah... I'd say about twenty-minutes... Okay, see you there... Bye."

The phone let out an audible squelch as she pulled it away from her ear and stabbed the 'end' button with her thumb, then dropped it onto the seat.

"Storm and Deckert are meeting us there." She glanced quickly at me as she seized a break in the traffic and pushed the sedan out into the westbound lanes of Gravois. "Carl is calling in some backup from County right now."

"You know," I started hesitantly, "I don't really want to rain on your parade, but something just doesn't feel right about this. I don't think this is our guy."

"Why not?" she asked, settling into her seat and smoothly accelerating the vehicle as we merged with the flow.

"It's just not right." I shook my head. "It... it just doesn't feel like him."

"What about the message?" she posed. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live? Exodus twenty-two eighteen, just like was highlighted in the Bible that old bum had

in his pocket. You said you were sure he got it from the Miller crime scene."

"I am sure," I agreed. "And yes, it is the same verse, but that is the most commonly quoted, and misinterpreted mind you, passage from the Bible with regard to Witches and WitchCraft. It is definitely not out of the question that someone else would quote it in their hate mail."

"Well what about the rest of it? The whole 'You'll burn you fucking bitch' part?" Constance insisted, "That's exactly how she was murdered, right?"

"Granted, he did burn her, but the whole comment doesn't sound like this guy at all. He passes judgment using the questions and conventions of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, and he quotes it directly. It definitely has a tendency to be much more eloquently worded. This is not to mention the fact that he passes the judgment in person just as it would have been done at a Witch trial. He's very intent on adhering to these methods, up to and including the motions of proving out the accusation through some means of torture. I don't believe he would actually verbalize, or in this case write, the judgment until he had done that at the very least.

"The use of denigrating expletives in calling her a 'fucking bitch' is way out of character as well." I shook my head vigorously. "No, I think this is all just a bizarre coincidence."

"You don't think it's just a little TOO bizarre?"

"Believe me, I can see where you're coming from, Constance," I admitted with a sigh, then endeavored to explain my logic. "But, just from my own experience I can tell you that when you mention Witches to someone, one of the first things they think of is burning at the stake. You'd be surprised how many people out there believe that those accused of WitchCraft in Salem were burned, when in fact they were hanged. While in one respect that is a testament to the apathy of the population, in another it shows how the whole myth surrounding Witch Burnings has become a very common and deeply ingrained fallacy. I really don't find that comment surprising at all. Besides, for all we know, whoever wrote that E-mail could have meant she was going to burn in hell. That's another well worn expression we've *all* been subjected to at one time or another."

"You could be right," Agent Mandalay rejoined, "but I think the similarities between the E-mail and the actual crime are too important to ignore."

"Don't misunderstand," I expressed. "I'm not saying that anything should be ignored, least of all this. I'm just telling you that I truly don't believe this is the guy. It just doesn't feel right."

Constance snapped a quick look over her shoulder and then eased the car onto the ramp to highway two-seventy. We continued wordlessly for a few moments, the ticking sound of the turn signal filling the cab like a metronome as she blended us into the other traffic. With another glance behind and quick check of the mirrors, she hopscotched the government sedan across a trio of lanes and leaned on the accelerator.

"So this is one of *your feelings*, huh?" she finally voiced the half question.

"Yeah. One of *my feelings*" I affirmed.

The landscape was beginning to slip past the windows at an ever-increasing rate and the other cars sharing the highway with us had become only momentary flashes of color. I let my gaze drift over to the dashboard and saw the vibrating needle of the speedometer hovering somewhere between seventy-five and eighty.

"Well I guess we'll know soon enough," Agent Mandalay expressed matter-of-factly. "Storm is supposed to be getting a description of this guy from DMV. Besides, we should be there inside of ten minutes anyway."

"Got two cars in the driveway. DMV shows both of them registered to Allen Roberts," a stocky, black officer clad in a crisp tan over brown County uniform, told us. He was among a number of people I had seen today who was devoid of a jacket or coat, regaling themselves in the illusion of spring-like weather in the heart of winter. Absently he reached to his belt and adjusted the volume of his radio as it chattered with the voice traffic of the other units patrolling the suburbs of Saint Louis. "Shades are up and I caught some motion through the front window on a drive by. Someone is definitely home."

Constance and I had met up with Ben, Deckert, and the patrolman on the parking lot of a small combination gas station/convenience store less than a half-mile from the residence. Cars streamed in and out of the station at random intervals. Some moments every available pump would be occupied, and at others the lot would be almost empty. The occasional patron would stop for a moment and stare in our direction, drawn in by idle curiosity at the small assemblage of badge-wearing individuals. I could feel their eyes upon us making the hair stand on the back of my neck as they gazed in wonderment. Being the only non-law enforcement member of the group I suddenly felt thoroughly conspicuous and horribly out of place. Logically, I knew that the onlookers had no way of knowing that I wasn't just another cop, but that didn't stop the prickling sensation from running up and down my back.

In truth, since the beginning of this case, I had been treated by all of them as though I was one of their own. I had only recently begun to realize that I was an altogether vested member of this elite group and that I had been accepted fully into their fold. They depended on me to make sense of things that were unknown to them. They used me to track bizarre killers the way a traffic cop uses a radar gun to catch speeders. While some of my talents and revelations still brought a furrowed brow, or even a brief glazed look of fear, they were doing all this with little or no question.

Still, acting as an advisor and explaining my supernormal visions to a room full of cops was one thing. Being in the middle of an operation such as this one was an entirely different story. I beat back the rhizome of anxiety that was starting to spread and reminded myself that this wasn't the first time I had done this. It wasn't something new to me at all and, in fact, was even a bit mundane considering my last

experience, which had been an all out assault on a killer's house. That time I had been clad in a bullet proof vest and wallowing in the thick of it for the sake of rescuing a little girl he intended to ritually sacrifice for some still unknown purpose. The urgency of that situation combined with the adrenalin rush hadn't afforded me the opportunity to feel this out of place on that night. I guess I was making up for it now.

"Great." My friend nodded as he planted his large hand on a map spread across the hood of the patrol car and studied it carefully. Every now and then a cold breeze would whip around the end of the small building, lifting the edge of the carefully drawn grid and threaten to take the paper into flight. "That's terrific. This probably isn't going to be much of anything, to be perfectly honest. Well, unless forensics is way off on their height estimation, the description of this Roberts individual we got from his license info actually doesn't match up with the physical profile of our bad guy. But, according to what Agent Mandalay and Rowan found out he's somehow connected with the threatening E-mail one of the victims received so he might know something. Basically, I'd just like to be ready in case he bolts."

"The patrol areas overlap here, here, and here," the uniformed man offered, using his finger to indicate points on the carefully inked grid. "If he runs and manages to get past you, he's not going far."

"Good deal," Ben nodded as he spoke and pushed his own finger around the sheet of intersecting lines, then tapped it on the final destination. "We're just gonna knock on the front door, so you take up a spot on this side street here and keep an eye out."

"Yes sir," the patrolman replied with a curt nod, and then proceeded to quickly fold the map.

"Okay folks," my friend announced as he looked around our small huddle. "Let's get moving. Row, you ride with me."

I followed him to his van and climbed in to the passenger side while Deckert shook hands with the uniformed officer and finished thanking him for his help, then joined Agent Mandalay in her vehicle.

"Constance told me you think this is a dead end," Ben stated as he twisted the key in the ignition and the engine kicked over.

"Honestly, yes," I agreed. "After seeing the actual E-mail, I don't really believe it has anything to do with the killer."

"Lovely," he replied while waiting for the other two cars to back out, watching intently in his side view mirror. "So we just spin our wheels some more."

"I could be wrong," I ventured.

"Yeah, like I've seen that happen a lot lately," he replied sarcastically. "No, if you've got one of your feelings, then you're probably right, but we gotta check it out anyway. So, you get anything outta that space cadet number you were pulling this morning, or did ya' finally decide it was just a bad dream?"

"Haven't given it much thought," I admitted. "It's been kind of a full day so far."

"Uh-huh," he grunted as he gunned the engine and pushed the van into a backward arc. "Get no argument from me on that."

With a tired sigh my friend cranked the shift lever down into drive and urged us forward.

"Well," he volunteered, "on the up side maybe I'll get to have dinner with my family for a change. Although, Allison did say she's making a meatlump tonight."

"Don't you mean meatloaf?"

"You ever had Al's meatloaf, white man? Trust me, she's making a meatlump."

The heart of Millchester was a West county suburb of the semi-affluent and moderately comfortable. Tree-lined streets hosting domiciles in the range of two hundred fifty thousand dollars. Some a little more, some a little less. For the area, your basic upper middle class subdivision. It was the kind of neighborhood where a reference to 'the gardener' was pretentious slang for the third party service that manicured the lawn in the summer and plowed the driveway in winter. A place where 'the club' was the private pool and tennis courts maintained by a subdivision committee.

As one skirted closer to the edges of the township, further into the periphery, property values lowered perceptibly, and though kept up, houses showed more obvious signs of age and wear. Still, the community was one for those within a comfortable level of income. This was where Allen Roberts lived.

The house was a split-level brick dwelling that showed every appearance of being fairly well maintained. The driveway and sidewalk were clear of snow and the slowly melting piles of the white stuff rose above the rest of the tableau to outline the salt-stained concrete. An evergreen hedgerow wrapped around the foundation buried beneath drifts. Here and there random boughs would peek through applying small splashes of emerald against the stark white blanket.

We had arrived within five minutes of leaving the gas station/convenience store and parked on the street in front of the residence. Ben had conveniently positioned his van to block the mouth of the driveway with Special Agent Mandalay's sedan only a few feet behind. We could see no movement through the unshaded windows and it didn't appear that anyone noticed us as we advanced on the home.

Detective Deckert split off from us as we reached the start of the sidewalk and he continued up the driveway to the corner of the house. There, he positioned himself to keep watch on a side entrance.

"Are you guys always this edgy when you go to question someone?" I asked as the three of us ambled along the path and started up the short flight of steps to the porch.

"When it's even remotely possible they have something to do with a psychotic

killer?" Ben glanced back and asked me rhetorically. "You bet your ass." Then, looking over at Constance, he raised a questioning eyebrow. "So, you wanna draw straws?"

In answer, Agent Mandalay reached out and gave the doorbell a double stab with her thumb. Beyond the darkly stained oak door the muffled ping-pong of the chime echoed twice in rapid succession and was followed shortly by the dull thudding of someone descending carpeted stairs. After the raspy metal on metal grating noise of the deadbolt being twisted, the door swung open, breaking the weather tight seal with an audible swoosh.

A thirtyish man with sandy hair stood peering at us from behind the glass of the storm door. He was dressed in grey sweatpants and a matching sweatshirt; both bore the stylized music note logo of the local hockey team. After taking a sip from an oversized coffee mug he canted his mouth into a disgusted frown, then unlatched the exterior door and pushed it slightly open.

"I'm not buying anything," he stated flatly before anyone else could speak. "And if you're from some church, I'm an atheist and I'm not interested, so leave me alone."

"Mister Roberts?" Constance queried, "Mister Allen Roberts?"

"Yeah," he nodded and took another sip from the mug. "Like I told you, I'm not buying anything, so don't waste your breath."

"No problem, sir," Ben intoned. "We aren't selling anything. We'd just like to ask you some questions."

"Mister Roberts," Constance continued, easily withdrawing her ID wallet and splaying it open as I'd seen her do before, "I'm Special Agent Mandalay with the FBI. This is Detective Storm with the... "

Her incomplete sentence hung in the air as all color drained from Allen Roberts face and his eyes grew wide with surprised fright. I felt the fear skate up my spine as he projected it wildly and my defenses automatically enveloped me to ward off the intensely broadcast emotion. Less than a second later, the coffee mug Roberts had been just bringing to his lips slipped from his grasp and exploded in a shower of ceramic shards across the threshold.

"SHIT!" he exclaimed in a panicked voice.

As the cup and its steaming contents splattered through the opening Constance leapt backwards propelling herself against the wrought iron railing that ringed the porch. The blatantly unnerved man retreated from the doorway, making a hasty attempt to swing the oak barrier shut in our faces, only to have it wedge against one of the larger shards of the broken ceramic before reaching mid-swing.

"Awwwww fuck!" Ben spat under his breath as he motioned quickly to Deckert with one hand and simultaneously withdrew his sidearm from its shoulder holster with the other. With a swift quarter turn of his torso my friend planted his hand on my chest and drove me toward the stairs. All the while he kept his eyes fixed on the doorway and his large frame between any possible threat and me. "Get outta here,

Row! Get behind the van! Now!"

I stumbled back, grabbing the railing for support while I struggled to maintain my balance. I could see that Constance was already gripping her weapon stiff-armed before herself at eye level and was glaring down the sights as Ben yanked the outer door wide.

"Federal Officer!" she bellowed in a crisp, commanding voice as she proceeded through the opening with Ben glued to her heels.

Deckert hopped a short distance down to a snow covered patio area and hustled around the corner of the house, his hand also filled with a nine-millimeter equalizer. I caught only a quick glimpse of the portly detective's fedora adorned head as he disappeared behind the brick wall.

I continued to twist as I back peddled down the short set of stairs, fighting to turn backward motion into forward as I came to face the street. I had no real clue as to why Allen Roberts had reacted this way to the sight of Agent Mandalay's badge. My senses detected only fear and I felt none of the calculated malice that had been present at each of the crime scenes. I could only assume that if he was in fact responsible for the threatening E-mail, he realized that such harassment over the Internet was considered a hate crime and was at this very moment regretting the action.

However, I was still firmly convinced that the vile piece of electronic detritus that had been delivered to Kendra Miller's online address was no more than a coincidence. An accidental event that was leading us further from, rather than closer to, the actual killer.

I pumped my legs hard, pounding my feet against the curved concrete walkway, striving to obey my friend's order to remove myself from the near proximity. Adrenalin was just taking over as I reached the end of the driveway and hooked myself around the back of his van.

A white Crown Victoria, its door emblazoned with the brown, red, and gold seal of the Saint Louis County Police department screeched to a halt in front of me, light bar flickering madly. The officer Ben had stationed on the side street across from Allen Roberts' home hit the pavement while the vehicle was still coming to a complete halt. Before I could process the overwhelming abundance of visual information assaulting me, the uniformed cop had grabbed my collar and dragged me down behind the open door of the car.

"Dispatch, this is unit nineteen," the officer spoke rapidly into a hand mic. "Detective Storm and the FBI agent are inside. Detective Deckert has moved his position to the back of the house. Over."

The radio crackled with static and the faint voices of overlapping channels, then blared the feminine voice of the dispatcher into the frosty air. "Affirmative, nineteen. Backup is rolling on your location. What is your status?"

"I am in a secure position in front of the residence," he answered. "Everything's quiet at the moment. Over."

Hissing static returned for a brief second.

"Nineteen, be advised, Detective Deckert informed us earlier that there would be a civilian consultant on the scene. One Mister Rowan Gant. Do you know his status? Over."

"Affirmative," he spoke as he keyed the microphone. "Mister Gant is safe. I have him right here."

The dispatcher's businesslike voice filtered from the speaker once again, "Affirmative, nineteen."

The muted crackle of the cross-talking radio traffic filled the thickness around us as we waited for any indication of what was happening inside the walls of the home. Less than three minutes had elapsed since Ben had muscled me off the porch and ordered me out of what he perceived as harm's way.

My legs were already starting to cramp as I knelt on the cold asphalt next to the County Police cruiser. I watched the still open entrance to the house intently, peering past the stocky officer in front of me, straining to detect any movement or noise that might indicate what was happening inside those walls.

That self-conscious, 'I don't belong here' feeling was once again wrapping me in its prickly embrace—threatening to smother me with its special brand of anxiety. It was all but forgotten when a large, familiar figure appeared in the doorway.

The rush of excitement died a lingering, but painless, death, as Ben Storm exited the residence and lethargically ambled down the stairs. He was already strolling down the driveway when a pair of County squad cars joined us on the street. My friend was slowly shaking his head and a dull frown affected a deep crease in his chiseled features. He held his badge out in plain view for the newly arrived officers to see before slipping the attached cord over his head and hanging the shield about his neck. Detective Deckert reappeared around the corner and was soon trundling alongside, quickening his pace in order to match the long strides of the tall Native American cop.

All around us, drapes were being pulled back and blinds parted. Front doors stood open with families of onlookers crowded into the small spaces; peering out from behind panes of breath fogged glass as they chattered with one another about the unfolding scene. Glancing across the street, I noticed the round-cheeked impression of a child's face pressed against the lower section of a storm door, staring at us in wide-eyed amazement. Momentarily, the youngster was whisked away by protective adults intent on keeping her from harm, but giving no consideration to their own safety as they themselves, continued to gawk.

As short and sweet as the burst of action was, this was probably the most excitement this small community had seen for ages. I didn't have to hear what the spectators were theorizing to know that the speculations were growing wilder with each spoken word. One could be sure that exhilarated phone calls were already being traded among neighbors, friends, and relatives.

"All clear," Ben told the officer as he approached us. "Agent Mandalay has

Roberts in custody."

The officer nodded and keyed his microphone, "Dispatch, this is nineteen. House is secure and subject detained. Over."

"Affirmative, nineteen," the dispatcher's voice crackled in reply.

"Do me a favor, Golden," Deckert addressed the uniformed cop. "Have dispatch get a van from the Crime Scene Unit out here just in case."

"You wanna go ahead and coordinate out here while I take Rowan in?" Ben asked Deckert.

"Yeah, go ahead," Carl, answered with an animated nod. "I got it covered."

"C'mon, Kemosabe," my friend said as he clapped me on the shoulder and jerked his head in the direction of the house. "Need you to look at this."

"What?" I queried as we started back up the driveway. "Did you find something?"

"Maybe, I dunno. Asshole ran straight for a room full of computer shit. Stopped him just as he was trying to type somethin' on a keyboard." He sighed. "There're wires and crap runnin' all over the place. Looks like fuckin' NORAD in there or something. I need you to tell me just what the hell we're lookin' at."

CHAPTER 19

In reality, Allen Roberts had actually managed to type something into the keyboard. He'd even managed to hit enter. Truth be known, he'd succeeded in typing that something three separate times before Ben and Agent Mandalay had stopped him. Our only saving grace was apparently his haste-induced clumsiness. At each glowing prompt on the screen was a short string of characters that in another situation would appear to be the daily jumble from the feature section of the newspaper. In this particular case, however, it was obvious to anyone with a basic knowledge of computers that the unintentional anagram 'KLLIFLIE' was supposed to have spelled out the command 'KILLFILE.' Had he been successful in executing the utility, Roberts would have effectively erased all of the data from the machine.

Ben hadn't really exaggerated about the wires and other gadgetry in the room, although what appeared to him as an intimidating monstrosity of electronics was to me simply a computer technician's playroom. Of course, I was in the business and my own home office wasn't much different in appearance from this one. My friend, on the other hand, disdained the thought of using a computer and did so only when it was an absolute necessity. Taking that fact into consideration I could understand his finding the flashing lights and purring boxes a bit intimidating.

"It looks like some kind of network to me," Agent Mandalay offered as I stood

surveying the contents of the room. "Beyond that, I couldn't tell you."

Allen Roberts was sitting in a wheeled desk chair, hands cuffed behind his back, watching quietly as I nodded and continued my cursory inspection. A sudden attack of bravado overcame him when I stepped closer to a humming machine mounted in what appeared to be a recycled minicomputer peripheral's cabinet.

"Leave that alone!" he demanded angrily as he started up from the chair. "You still haven't shown me a warrant!"

Constance, who was positioned behind him, snapped her arm out in a blur of motion and twisted her hand into the collar of his sweatshirt as he rose. Leverage and balance being fully on her side, she jerked him back down and unceremoniously planted him hard in the seat before he could take a single step.

"Don't do that again," she ordered sternly.

"Buy a vowel, Roberts," Ben shot back. "All we wanted to do was ask you a few questions. You wouldn't even be wearing those bracelets right now if you hadn't acted like a damn fruitcake."

"Screw you!" the man spat. "You still need a warrant."

"Cool it, Roberts," Constance instructed him evenly. "Keep it up and I'll add assaulting a Federal Officer to the report."

"Assaulting a... What assault?" he asked incredulously, "I didn't assault anyone!"

"I don't know about that," she chided. "I seem to recall you hurling a coffee cup at me."

"I did not! That's a lie! I just dropped it and you know it!"

"Looked to me like you threw it at her," Ben volunteered with a thoughtful nod. "Yeah, the more I think about it, the more I'd definitely have to say you threw it. Yep, wingin' a full coffee cup at an FBI agent's not a real bright move. Especially Mandalay here. She's kinda got a reputation for bein' a real hardass if you know what I mean. Sure am glad I'm not you."

"This is crazy!" the man sputtered. "You know I didn't throw that cup. You're lying."

"Which one of us do you think a judge is going to believe?"

My friend's sarcastic query was met only with angry silence.

"Of course, I might be willing to forget about that little indiscretion if you were to stop acting like a jerk and cooperate instead," Agent Mandalay suggested. "You know... answer a few questions. Maybe explain what was so important in here that made you run like a scared rabbit?"

"I'd give that one some thought," Ben expressed. "Just between you and me she's not usually this forgiving."

"I want my lawyer," Roberts grumbled.

"Fine with me," Constance rejoined.

"Not exactly the choice that *I* would have made." Ben shrugged then turned and spoke to me in a clipped tone as he gestured at the rack of equipment, "Go ahead, Chief. What is all this shit?"

He was outwardly showing signs of fatigue and I'd seen him like this before. His biggest problem, or perhaps asset, depending on your point of view, was that he often cared too much. It wasn't unusual for him to run on little to no sleep along with inordinate amounts of coffee whenever he was working a case. Considering the previous nights events I knew he was running on pure caffeine—We all were. The sharp bite that now permeated my friend's voice told me he was riding on the edge and that Allen Roberts' attitude wasn't helping his overall demeanor.

The simple fact of the matter was that we were all on edge. Constance had, for all intents and purposes, threatened Roberts with the assault charge. Such a tactic coming from her was overtly uncharacteristic of her by-the-book persona we all knew so well. Even Carl Deckert looked like he had aged ten years in the matter of a week.

And then there was me.

I had become so unbalanced by my own rabid fears of the history this killer was re-kindling that I was breaking one of my own cardinal rules. I wasn't keeping myself properly grounded. While my ethereal senses continued to work in overdrive, there was no proper outlet for the by-products of those supernormal energies. Like a transformer with a short circuit, I was almost literally burning myself out. And as evidenced by the episodes Felicity had experienced I wasn't doing her any good either.

At this moment my gut instinct was telling me that this whole avenue was an exercise in futility that would get us no closer to solving these murders. Though I certainly understood that every lead needed to be followed, I couldn't shake the growing impatience that was even now tickling the base of my brain.

With a sigh I moved in closer to the rack and gave the blinking lights, humming machines, and tangled wires a once over, slowly nodding my head and muttering to myself as I identified the individual components.

"It's definitely a network," I acknowledged shortly. "But it looks like it's also an Internet domain server, which is pretty much what we expected." I began pointing to various pieces as I named them off, struggling to keep apathy from seeping into my voice. "This is the hub, this is a router, and unless I missed my guess this box here is the server itself. Okay if I touch the keyboard?"

"Hold on a minute," Ben answered flatly, "I'll be right back." He returned in just over a minute and handed me a packet containing a pair of surgical gloves. "Just in case."

I nodded as I pulled the thin latex sheaths over my hands and inspected the black, rack-mounted unit a bit closer. On the small pull out keyboard stowed beneath it, I backspaced the misspelled 'killfile' command into non-existence and tapped in my own instructions for a directory listing.

"Yeah... " I muttered and nodded as I scanned the listing that streamed across the monitor. "Yeah, looks like it's the web server all right. Some kind of proprietary turnkey box running under a network shell program. Not the most sophisticated web host on the block, but they're popular. A lot of small businesses and Mom 'n' Pop ISP's use them."

"Is it where the message came from?" Ben pressed.

"Probably. It's a web server and considering that the domain the mail came from is registered to Mister Roberts here... " I allowed my answer to trail off and punctuated it with a shrug.

"Message?" Roberts blurted and tossed a puzzled glance between us. "What message? What are you talking about?"

"Whaddaya mean 'probably?'" Ben ignored him and spat back at me with heated annoyance, "Can't you tell?"

"I mean exactly what I said!" I barked, my own voice an open wound bleeding tension into the room. "Probably! I don't know for sure and I'm not experienced with this particular piece of software. It's highly likely based on the facts we have at our disposal that this is the server that the mail originated from. Beyond that, I can't say for sure just yet. Contrary to what you've seen in the movies, Ben, you can't just type in 'give me the secret information' and have it automatically pop up on the screen!"

My friend caught himself as he began to snarl an angry retort and left the vitriolic words unspoken. Silence rang through the atmosphere filling the room with its thickness. Almost simultaneously we grinned sheepishly at one another and shook our heads.

"Smartass," Ben replied with a slight chuckle as he reached up to massage the back of his neck. "Sorry, white man. Can you figure it out?"

"Yeah," I nodded and smiled back. "Give me a few minutes and I'll be able to tell you for sure."

"Are either of you going to answer me?" Roberts spouted once again. "What are you talking about? What message?"

"I thought you wanted your attorney?" Constance posed sarcastically.

Roberts shook his head and tried to look back at the petite Federal Agent, then appealed to Ben once more, "What is this all about? Why are you guys here?"

My friend stared him down for a moment then pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and huffed out a tired sigh. "A threatening E-mail message was apparently sent from here to a Ms. Kendra Miller. Last week, Ms. Miller turned up dead. We came here to ask you a few questions about it."

Ben, Constance and most especially myself shared an incredulous, slack jawed gaze at the man when he opened his mouth and replied with a note of bitter calm, "Dead, huh? Well, I warned her."

"At first, I really didn't mind the 'bi' thing," Roberts explained across the small table in the interview room at the MCS command post. "In fact, it was... well... you know, kind of a turn on."

By the time we had arrived downtown the earlier fits of bravado had taken hold and his attitude had morphed from the original sudden panic to a self-righteous cockiness. For the moment however, even with his current disposition, he was at least talking. Unfortunately, what was coming out of his mouth so far was not only less than helpful, but instead, appeared to be acting more as a caustic irritant for Agent Mandalay.

Constance was leaning with her back against the wall a few feet away. Upon hearing the comment she looked at the man with a disgusted smirk and raised an eyebrow, but kept silent.

"Do us all a favor, Roberts, and spare us your little sex fantasies." Ben shook his head then smoothed back his hair. "Get back to the E-mail."

"Well, like I said, at first it was no big deal, but when she started spending all her time with 'queen lesbo the lawyer and her dyke club' it was pretty obvious that she had to have a thing for one of them." He paused and looked at us as if we should feel sorry for him. As though we should view him as an emotionally damaged victim of a soured love affair. "And then, well she started screwing around with all that WitchCraft shit... That was just plain weird, okay? Hell, for all I know they were having some kind of lesbian orgies or something. Of course, that would have been fine if I was invited, you know."

"What did I just say, Roberts?"

"Yeah, okay. So finally I just told her she had to make a choice. It was either them or me."

"So as long as her sexuality was entertaining for you, then it was okay," Agent Mandalay spat, still glaring at him from across the room. She stood rigidly postured, pressed against the dull institution grey wall as if she were seeking to disappear into its face. Her arms were entwined in a tight fold across her chest and her body language loudly broadcast the fact that this man had definitely gotten under her skin in a bad way.

"Look," he returned, obviously enjoying himself. "Her hanging out with them all the time was no different than if she'd been hanging out with a bunch of men. They were just as big a threat to our relationship, so of course I was going to be jealous. But yeah, I got off on it for a while. You know, a couple of babes getting' all wild on each other. It's every guy's fantasy."

Constance quietly seethed at the comment. She was almost visibly trembling with bright, crimson anger.

"Not necessarily EVERY guy, Roberts," Ben interjected, taking mute notice of

the Federal Agent's swelling ire. "Now get on with it."

"Anyhow, that's not why I told her she had to make a choice. That Wicker crap or whatever she was involved in was way too weird. I didn't find out about it until she started in with that group or I may not have started dating her in the first place. It's like some kind of cult or something. If you ask me, they're the ones you should be talking to. They probably sacrificed her or something."

"Nobody asked you," Ben replied.

"It's not very likely that her coven had anything to do with it, Mister Roberts," I stated evenly. "And it's called Wicca, not wicker. Wicca is a religion. Wicker is furniture."

"Yeah, whatever," he retorted. "I still think it's some kind of cult."

"So your solution to all this was to harass her by sending threatening E-mails?" Ben steered the conversation back onto course with a sardonic query.

"E-MAIL," Roberts stressed the singularity. "I just sent the one and besides, I was drunk." He continued as if being inebriated was a valid excuse. "I barely remembered sending it until I got a notice from her ISP about it. And yeah, I was pissed. It's bad enough to lose your girlfriend to another guy, but to another woman? And then all that weird Witch crap on top of it."

"But you took the time to set up the domain," I interjected.

"Yeah, so?" he countered. "Ten minutes and a credit card gets you a domain name. Seemed like the way to go at the time."

"So if you are completely innocent here, why is it you bolted when Agent Mandalay showed you her ID?" Ben posed.

"Look, I'll talk to you about all this other shit, but I'd rather not get into that part until I speak to my lawyer."

"Of course not," Constance huffed.

"Is there something on that computer that you don't want anyone to see?" my friend pushed. "From what I understand you were trying to erase the data when we stopped you."

"Lawyer," came his one word response.

"Something on there that might connect you with the murder?"

"LAW-YER."

"Okay then. Fine." Ben sighed. "How about telling us what you meant back at your house when you said you had warned Ms. Miller?"

"I meant I warned her. I told her if she kept messing around with that WitchCraft shit something was going to happen," he answered matter-of-factly.

"You warned her or you threatened to kill her?" Ben chided.

"WARNED, Detective. And it looks like I was right."

"You were right, or you made it into a self-fulfilling prophecy?"

"You just don't give up do you? I was right, that's all."

"Did you kill Kendra Miller, Mister Roberts?" Agent Mandalay had pushed away from the wall and now slammed the blunt question into his face with a cold stare.

"HELL NO!" he shot back. "How many times do I have to tell you people this? All I did was send that one E-mail. Shit, I hadn't even seen her for three months!"

"So why did you bother with the E-mail then?" she pressed as she drew closer to the small table. "Why wait three months to send it?"

"I dunno. Like I said, I was drunk. And I think that night I was surfing some lesbo sites on the web."

"Excuse me?" she barked angrily.

"You know, checkin' out the Lez fetish websites," he answered, taking great relish in the fact that he was annoying the Federal officer. "That's probably what got me thinking about her, so I sent the E-mail."

With no warning whatsoever, Constance strode quickly forward, her hands outstretched as she drove her inertia bearing weight into the edge of the small table. A loud moan escaped from its four legs as they scraped across the tiled floor and the opposite side of the piece of furniture slammed hard into Allen Roberts' midsection. The air in his lungs vented from his mouth in a raspy huff and he wheezed as he fought against the pressure to replace the escaped breath.

Both Ben and I stood frozen, completely dumbfounded by what we were witnessing. We had all seen Agent Mandalay display an almost frightfully hard edge in the past, but always with an even temperament. Explosive anger of this order was something entirely new.

"You putrid little bastard!" she spat as she held him pinned against the wall with the edge of the wooden table. "You make me sick!"

"Whoa, Mandalay!" Ben quickly stepped forward and grasped her shoulder with a large paw. "Back off."

Still brimming with a full head of steam she twisted away from his grasp and gave the table a furious shove before letting go. One side lifted slightly and the legs made a dull clack as they bounced down against the floor. Wheeling around, the red faced FBI Special Agent exited the interview room in a tempest of wordless emotion, making certain to slam the door on the way out.

"What the hell you think that was all about?" Ben asked me as he looked after her.

"Did you see that?" Allen Roberts coughed as he finally regained his breath. "She assaulted me! You're my witnesses!"

"I didn't see anything," Ben spat back without turning.

"That bitch assaulted me! I'm pressing charges!"

"Shut up, Roberts," Ben instructed in no uncertain terms.

"I think I'd better go see if Constance is okay," I offered.

"Yeah, that's prob'ly a good idea," my friend agreed.

"Fuckin' dyke bitch," came a muttering voice from behind us.

"I thought I told you to shut up, Roberts."

Another disparaging epithet exited the man's lips as I was leaving the interview room. Before the door had fully closed, I caught a calm query from my friend that managed to do what the earlier no-nonsense instructions had failed to accomplish.

"Look asshole, do you want me to cuff you to the chair and let her back in here with you for a while?"

Outside the interview room, at the far end of the hallway, a low wooden bench lined the wall. Tucked neatly into the corner, Constance Mandalay now occupied a small section of the worn real estate. She was pitched forward, elbows on her knees, and her forehead cupped in her hands. The distance between us was short enough that I could clearly see that she was trembling.

A uniformed officer with an armload of file folders rounded the corner and shot the young woman a cursory look as he passed. He did a double take then threw his gaze back and forth between the two of us. As I made my way steadily toward her I simply nodded then gave him a thin-lipped smile when we met and then passed one another in the chilly corridor.

While the cop continued on his way, I paused for a moment before a dented vending machine and thrust my hand into my pants pocket. After rummaging around for a moment I extracted a small handful of loose change, along with my car keys. After picking out the quarters I shoved the keys and remaining silver back into my pocket.

A quick once over of the large blue and white appliance told me what my options were as I dropped a trio of coins into the slot. An electric hum followed by a hollow cardboard thunk elicited from the device as I held my fingers splayed out against the round buttons labeled double cream and double sugar. After a moment or two of steamy hissing and watery sputtering, the paper cup overflowed onto the stainless steel grill it adorned. I slid back the splattered Plexiglas door and tilted the cup to pour off some of the excess, then placed it carefully atop the machine and repeated the entire process.

On the second go around I was forced to prematurely open the translucent shield and straighten out the cup before the coffee began to dispense. The hot liquid barely missed my fingers.

Drinks in hand, I continued the few steps down the corridor to the bench and placed one of the cups next to Constance before taking a seat a respectful distance away.

Remaining silent, I took a cautious sip of the Java and found much to my

satisfaction that it was just as bad as I thought it would be. Still, it was a cut or so above the tar I'd had in the Homicide Squad Room earlier in the day, so that was a plus.

"Looks like I've got a pair of Kings, Queen high," I finally announced while holding the paper receptacle at eye level and inspecting the dull image of a poker hand that graced it. "I didn't look at yours. Wouldn't have been fair."

After a moment, Constance leaned back with a sigh, picked up the coffee I'd set next to her, and peered into the muddy brown liquid. "I usually take mine black."

"Me too," I nodded. "But it's been my experience that coffee from one of those machines tastes like something on the order of hot water poured over pencil shavings, so I figured the cream and sugar might help. Just pretend it's a cheap latté."

"Thanks."

"Not a problem."

We continued to sit in silence as she sipped at the coffee and absently picked at the rim of the paper cup with her thumb and forefinger. I could still feel a flow of anger coming from the Federal Agent, though it had greatly subsided and was still decreasing. The waves of emotion appeared now as a dull aura enveloping her petite frame. This was, at the very least, an improvement over the fiery-eyed, vermilion monster that had been gnashing its teeth in the interview room earlier.

"Three aces," she eventually muttered.

"Guess I should have looked," I answered.

Again, a less than peaceful quiet embroidered the atmosphere of the hallway. I held my own voice, allowing the stillness to work in my favor.

"Well, I guess I blew that one," she sighed when the desire to express herself finally surfaced. "I'll probably be up in front of Bartlett before the evening is out."

"Your word against Roberts," I replied calmly.

"You and Storm were in there. You both saw me lose it."

"Ben says he didn't see anything."

"What about you?" she asked in a dull voice.

"Me?" I paused and gathered my words. "I saw a friend in distress is about all."

"Neither one of you need to be lying for me," she admonished.

"Look," I stared into my own coffee cup for a moment before continuing. "Roberts isn't injured in any way and I expect by the time Ben gets through talking to him he won't be pressing any charges. I'm not defending your actions mind you, but we all have a breaking point. For some reason you obviously hit yours."

"Yeah." She nodded. "You're probably right. Still, I shouldn't have let him get to me."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"You've got enough to deal with without me dumping on you," she contended.

"Truly good friends are a rarity, Constance," I expressed. "I always have time for my friends."

She allowed a weak smile to play across her lips and shot me an embarrassed glance, then brushed her hair back and sighed. "It was the whole lesbian thing."

"I kind of picked that up." I nodded then took a sip of the overly sweetened brew. It had now cooled enough to drink without fear of a scalded tongue so I toned down my original caution. "Does homosexuality bother you?"

"What? No, no, nothing like that," she explained. "Just assholes like Roberts that get off on watching two women together."

I mulled over her comment before replying, "Okay."

"That doesn't make much sense does it?"

"Not entirely, but it's not my place to judge the feelings and opinions of others."

She let out an exhausted sigh and I could feel her reluctance to speak fading into the background. Her anger had quelled, leaving only a sad emptiness in its wake. It was a pain dulled by time, but still in possession of sharp barbs that, if brushed against, could open the wound anew.

"This stays between us, right?" She stared at me with deadly serious concern glazing her eyes.

"Of course," I answered.

There was a short interlude where she searched my face and found only truth behind my answer. She then stared at an unseen spot on the floor while nervously fidgeting the rim of the paper cup between her fingernails. Finally, whatever courage or imagined approval she sought within came into being and she spoke.

"I had an older brother, Rowan," she began flatly. "His name was Brandon and he was gay."

"*Had?*" I couldn't help but notice the emphasis on the past tense. "Was it HIV?"

"No, not AIDS. I almost wish it had been." She breathed the acronym as if it could have been a welcome friend. "In a lot of ways that would have been much easier to cope with."

Constance drew in a deep breath then, like taking a bitter dose of medicine, rushed headlong into the explanation. "Around four years ago Brandon was locking up the bookstore he managed. It was late and he was alone... Classic setting for something to happen I suppose—in fact, to this day when I talk about it it doesn't seem real. It sounds like a scene from a made-for-TV movie..."

"Anyway, before he ever got his key out of the door he was jumped from behind by a liquored up homophobe who beat him to death with an aluminum softball bat."

Her pragmatic explanation poured into the quiet hallway, starkly revealing her

personal tragedy for me to witness. A simple dissertation unblemished by the heavy emotions she had incarcerated deep within.

"I'm sorry," I told her after a solemn pause, then as if to add to the surreal cliché of the stories fold, I automatically asked the obvious. "Did they ever find the guy who did it?"

"Oh yeah," she nodded. "They found him. He was too drunk to cover his tracks or even bother with getting rid of the bat. The police followed his bloody footprints right back to his apartment which, as it happens, was two doors down the hall from Brandon's." She looked over at me with the vacancy of cold grief in her eyes. "The one thing that I'll always remember is what the Sonofabitch said when they arrested him. He said that if Brandon had been a gay woman instead of a gay man then he wouldn't have killed him. In his words it was because, 'a couple of hot 'Lesbos' are a turn-on but two 'Fags' is just sick.'"

CHAPTER 20

"So did you find out what was eating at Mandalay?" Ben asked as we headed toward the building's exit.

The troubled Federal Agent had left police headquarters well before Ben had finished with Allen Roberts. Now, more than three hours later, this was the first opportunity that had presented itself for him to ask me about her. She had still been engaged in a lethargic wrestling match with her anger when she aimed herself homeward; however, this was far better than the ten round pugilistic event she had exhibited earlier. I had no doubt that what she really needed at this point was a healthy cry and a good night's sleep. Unless I missed my guess, some portion of that catharsis was probably taking place at this very moment.

"Yeah, we talked about it," I said, dragging my coat on as we approached the door. "But it's something I can't really get into." I left my comment at that in hopes he wouldn't force the issue.

When it came to Ben Storm, I should have known better than to rally behind such a hope.

Muteness oozed from my friend to form an expectant bubble of quiet around us for a measured beat. Just as he opened his mouth to pump me for details the door swung open and a pair of uniformed officers bustled through. Ben exchanged a quick nod with them as they continued past us with a frosty wind trailing along behind. The rush of cold spilled a full twenty feet into the room before the door was once again completely shut. With the darkness of night the reprieve of sunshine was over and winter's breath had returned.

"Yeah, uh-huh. So what's the deal?" he pressed when he felt they were out of earshot, his words forming an ephemeral cloud of white on the lingering chill.

"Seriously, I promised her it would stay between us," I confessed.

"That's fine. I'm not gonna tell anyone." He gave me an animated nod. "Now really, what gives?"

"I'm not kidding, Ben. I promised Constance I wouldn't talk about it."

"Look, Row." He brought his fingers to bear on the tension in his neck, but only after an unconscious smoothing of his hair. "I admire your loyalty, I really do, but for all intents and purposes Mandalay physically attacked a suspect." The last words of his sentence were enhanced by the fact that they were spoken in an urgent whisper. His eyes quickly darted to reassure himself that we were still out of earshot. "The brass really frowns on that kinda stuff, not to mention what the media could do with it."

"I know, Ben, but she didn't actually hurt him did she?"

"No."

"Is he going to be pressing charges?"

"No, I don't think so. Besides it would be his word against hers and there wasn't a mark on him so they'd have a hell of a time making it stick."

"Okay then," I shrugged.

"No, not 'okay then.'" My friend stabbed a finger at me. "She got lucky this time, but that's not the point. The POINT is that she attacked a suspect without just cause."

"I know she was out of line, Ben, but she was provoked," I expressed. "You saw how Roberts was getting under her skin and he just kept pushing even after you told him to stop."

"What? You mean all that 'lesbo fetish' stuff?" His eyes grew wide as he looked back at me, his index finger still hanging in the air between us. "Is Mandalay a lesbian? Is that what this is all about?"

"No, Ben, she's not gay. Not that I'm aware of anyway."

"Then what? I don't get it."

"I'm telling you I can't say." My voice had taken on the imploring tenor of my emotional appeal. "I made a promise and if there is one thing a person has in life it's his or her word. I cannot and will not break my word to her."

Ben was growing impatient with me. I could not only see it in his eyes but feel it flowing outward from him as well. I truly wanted to explain to my friend what had made Constance snap like she did. Consciously I knew that simply telling him would most likely get this all over with in a heartbeat. That, however, was not the only thing I was conscious of. What resided most in the forefront of my mind was the fact that I could not betray the trust of a friend—even if it was for another.

"Listen." He sighed heavily then detailed his case in a stern, clipped voice, "I have to work with this woman. I may very well have to count on her to keep me from ending up sleeping under a rock with my name chiseled on it. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Now, I respect your standing by your promise and I know it's something that is very important to you. I also have a lot of respect for Mandalay. She's a good kid even if she is a Feeb. But the bottom line is that I don't know her well enough to make a judgment call, so right now that respect has to take a back seat to reason... What I've gotta know is if she's got some kinda problem that's gonna affect her ability to do her job."

"I don't think you have that to worry about, Ben."

"You 'don't think?'" he demanded. "Think isn't good enough, Rowan. What I saw in that interview room looked like a potential problem to me and the last thing I need right now is an unstable Fed on this team. You've got to give me something more than that."

"What if I tell you it's a feeling?"

"No." He shook his head quickly. "No 'hocus-pocus', Row. I know that *Twilight Zone* stuff works but I need something more on this one. If you know what's up you need to tell me."

"If I could tell you what it is you know I would. I'm sorry, but you're just going to have to trust me on this."

"I'm dead serious here, Row. I don't need her having a meltdown and fucking up this investigation. I haven't got time for it."

"She'll be fine." I let out my own weighty sigh. "Really. What she needs right now is exactly the same thing we all need—a decent night's sleep and something to eat besides donuts and bad coffee. That's all I can say."

"Yeah... okay... " he finally assented, shaking his head all the while. "But I've gotta tell ya, Row, I'm not feeling real good about this at all."

He continued to work his large hand on the back of his neck as he fell silent. He had made it perfectly clear that he was not at all convinced of Agent Mandalay's stability. I knew from past experience that his grudging acceptance of my reassurance was going to continue to eat away at him. At the moment it was a prominent, but still small, bother. Very soon it would grow into a malignant vexation that would further poison his perception of the Federal Officer.

"I know you prefer to shy away from anything you consider 'touchy-feely,' Ben," I offered. "But, you could call her and ask her yourself, you know."

"Me ask her what's up?" he asked rhetorically. "I'm no good at that crap."

"Well, that's my only suggestion if you want to know anything more than I'm at liberty to give you."

After a moment of quiet thought he took in a deep breath and huffed it out. "So what if I do call her? Is she just pissed or is she gonna cry or something?"

"She might. I don't know."

"Jeez, Rowan. I vapor lock when Allison starts to snuffle."

"Ben," I appealed. "It's obvious that this is going to keep working on you until you get an answer. You know that I can't give it to you, but if you talk to her, maybe she will."

"Ya'think?"

"Maybe." I nodded. "It's worth a try. I'm sure Constance can understand your concerns. She's just as much a part of the cop fraternity as you are."

"Yeah... maybe you're right." A look of resignation molded itself to his features. "Maybe I'll do that."

"I think it would be a good idea," I told him with a nod. Then, as much to ease his tension as for curiosity, I maneuvered the subject into a different lane. "So whatever happened to Carl? I didn't see him upstairs."

"Oh, he left a while ago. He took Roberts out to the County lockup since he lived in their jurisdiction," he replied with a noticeable drop in his stress level.

"What ended up happening with that?"

"Something to do with pirated software or something like that," he explained. "Federal Offense so County will probably be turning him over to the Feebs at some point. Guess he'd better hope Mandalay is off that day, huh?"

"That would probably be in both their best interests," I agreed. "So anyway, when are you going to get out of here? I thought you were planning on dinner with the family."

Ben shot a tired glance through the glass doors at the darkened sky and then rolled his watch face up and gave it a calculating stare. As he let his arm drop he conceded yet another defeat at the hands of his vocation. "Well, it looks like that idea is in the dumper, not that I expected any different. Guess I'll wrap up a few things here then go home and have a cold meatlump sandwich."

"Does Allison know you talk about her cooking like that," I queried with a smile.

"Hell, white man, she's the one that named it meatlump. So what about you?" He dipped his head at me. "What're you gonna do? I'm sure Al made plenty if you wanna come by."

"Thanks, but I'm beat and I'm liable to crash hard as soon as I get something in my stomach. There's some leftover Dublin Coddle in the fridge at home so I'll probably just nuke a bowl and then hit the sack."

"Dublin Coddle? Sounds funky. That something from that party?"

"Yeah. Actually it's kind of a potato, onion and sausage stew. It's pretty good."

"Maybe I should come with you. Sounds a damn sight better than meatlump."

"I'm sure there's more than enough if you want."

"Nahhh," he shook his head, "I was just kidding. If I hurry maybe I can tuck my kid in for a change. Besides, I think I'm probably right there with ya' on the whole crashing thing."

"Yeah, I thought you might be," I echoed. "So how about tomorrow? Where do we go from here?"

"Well," my friend's tone again grew somber, "NARC will keep working the Roofies angle and I guess we'll see what we can come up with on the whole Catholic thing. The Archdiocese wasn't what you'd call thrilled when Osthoff and Martin showed up, if ya' know what I mean."

"I can imagine. So you probably don't really need me down here tomorrow then?"

Ben pursed his lips as he thought for a moment, and then shook his head. "Well, I'd like to have you there if we get a chance to talk to that old bum again, but other than that probably not. If you've got something else planned already then go for it. I'd appreciate it if you could stay near a phone though."

We both shifted out of the way as another pair of officers skirted around us to exit the building.

"I don't really have anything planned other than getting caught up with some work that's been piling up."

"I can understand that... So I'll be able to reach you if I need to though, right?"

"Yeah, I'll be at the house." I nodded as I reached out and leaned on the door.

"Okay, Kemosabe. I'll talk to you later then. Drive careful."

"I will," I answered and pushed the door open. "Don't stay here too late. And do yourself a favor, call Constance."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll do that," he called after me as he turned and headed toward the elevators.

With the introduction of the incident with Agent Mandalay the order of my thoughts had been radically shifted. Now, an earlier unvoiced concern was once again surfacing. I had considered mentioning it to Ben, but with the other events of the day still woefully fresh in our minds, I finally elected to table it for another day. Unfortunately, I knew for certain that it was something that couldn't wait for very long.

What had gone unsaid between my friend and I was the fact that I was harboring my own troubling doubts as well. They were, however, not about Special Agent Mandalay, or him, or any of the other members of the Major Case Squad. My deep apprehension was about my own effectiveness in this investigation.

I had been on a frightfully uneven keel from the very beginning and had yet to right myself. I had somehow managed to have my moments of attunement, but they were few and far between. Balance was something I still had not signed a contract with. Truth be told, I hadn't even opened negotiations with it. I was drifting about

with no ground and no focus, grasping aimlessly at an ethereal lightning rod and missing at every pass. Thus far, the only thing I had been able to do with any modicum of success was to bleed profusely from preternatural stigmata, spit swimming pool water on the carpeting, and announce that we would soon find another body. That wasn't really the kind of help that was expected of me and it was getting us nowhere.

I was fully aware that if I didn't get myself under control soon not only was I going to be of no help to the police, but I was going to become a severe risk to my own well being. An ungrounded Witch is a dangerous Witch and as disconnected as I was right now, I was leaving myself open to things I didn't even want to consider.

It was my own fault I was in this situation and I knew it. I forced myself to make a personal promise to do what it took to get back on track. Now all I had to do was keep my word to myself.

I joined the zipper on the front of my coat as I walked and began pulling it upwards, all the while clinging hard to the warmth of my resolve to spend some time grounding and centering. An angry gust of winter chill made one last assault on the shrinking seam and managed to slip inside the folds of my jacket. Rounding the corner of the building on my way to the parking area where my truck currently resided an involuntary shiver danced along my back and I quickly flipped my collar up around my ears.

Slowly, dull fingers of pain inflicted an unwanted massage at the base of my neck and began inching along the back of my tightening scalp. My guess was that the handful of granulated aspirin I took earlier had finally worn off and now the headache that had been making a home inside my skull was being aggravated by the cold.

The fingers slowly transformed into an octet of stinging tendrils as they conquered the crown of my head and thrust their poisonous caress inward. Metered pounding announced its cadence directly behind my forehead, becoming louder with each step I took. Completing the rhythm section of the painful orchestra, the thick rush of blood filled my ears in harmony with the hammering metronome.

I came to a halt at the corner, my eyes watering and stinging from a combination of the headache and icy wind. I shot a painful glance up the street to check for traffic and saw only what appeared to be a large delivery van parked parallel to the curb thirty or so yards away.

The sound of a metal sliding door, badly in need of adjustment and lubrication, forced itself past the din in my ears, sequestering itself faintly in the background. With another quick glance I stepped out into the street and immediately stumbled as a stab of pain expressed itself.

I scarcely heard the hurried footsteps of the officer who rushed up behind me and grasped my arm. "Sir, are you all right?"

I blinked past the pain as I regained my balance and carefully nodded, "Yes, thank you. I just tripped I guess."

In the distance the scraping of the metal door repeated itself ending in a hollow

thud. I imagined the sound had an almost frightened urgency this second time around.

Headlights sparked to life and a low, mechanical roar overtook the night, underscored by the high-pitched grind of recalcitrant gears. A sharp ice pick of near agony bit hard into the core of my being as the black panel van, greyed with a patina of salt and grime, pulled away from the curb. The officer and I waited as the vehicle accelerated and passed in front of us, then hooked almost angrily around the corner, its transmission protesting all the while.

"Looks like he's in a hurry," the officer mused as he let go of my arm. "Guess he got stuck working O/T or something."

"I guess," I echoed, not really sure what else to say. "Well have a good evening sir. And watch your step." "I will," I acknowledged. "Thanks again." As the uniformed cop and I continued in different directions, a tickle in the back of my mind told me that something about that van was supposed to be familiar. An itch in the front of my mind told me to go home and steep a handful of willow bark in a cup of hot water then drink it as fast as I could. The itch won.

By the time I reached my truck and climbed into the chilly cab, the makings of the all out migraine had at least settled enough for me to make it home in one piece.

"Wherefore, since you, Rowan Linden Gant, are fallen into the damned heresies of Witches, practicing them publicly, and have been by legitimate witnesses convicted of the sin of heresy, or by your own confession received by us in Court; and after your capture you have escaped, refusing the medicine of your salvation: therefore we have summoned you to answer for the said crimes in person before us, but you, led away and seduced by a wicked spirit, have refused to appear... "

My heart pounds forcefully in my throat as I run to escape the angry voice.

Darkness surrounds me.

Agony envelops me.

Fear feeds upon me.

"And whereas the Holy Church of God has long awaited you up to this present day of kindness and mercy, that you might fly to the bosom of her mercy, renouncing your errors and professing the Catholic Faith, and be nourished by the bounty of her mercy; but you have refused to consent, persisting in your obstinacy... "

I cannot escape the voice.

I cannot escape the darkness.

I cannot control the fear.

"Therefore, following in the footsteps of the Blessed Apostle Paul, we declare, judge and sentence you, absent or present, to be a stubborn heretic, and as such

to be abandoned to secular justice... "

I pump my legs harder against the frozen ground, each step excruciating torment.

The fear has become visceral terror.

I am consumed.

"And by this our definitive sentence we drive you from the ecclesiastical Court, and abandon you to the power of the secular Court that, if it ever should have you in its power, it will moderate its sentence of death against you... "

Silence.

Pure.

Clean.

Dim light creases the darkness before me.

The sturdy form of a tree unfolds itself in the light.

A tree bearing corymbs of white flowers, their very presence making it stand as an oddity against the snow at its base.

A European Mountain Ash.

A Rowan Tree.

So enraptured am I at the appearance of this tree in full bloom that my fears are forgotten.

My terror melts away.

My pains dulled to non-existence.

Slowly I begin to circle the tree as red fruits appear and the delicate flower wither.

I continue as the berries follow in the same fashion leaving only the feather-like leaves.

When I round the backside of the tree, they too atrophy and die.

The once sturdy timber now stands bereft of its foliage, appearing sickly and barren.

Confusion fills the void once occupied by fear.

Deep in the now dull and lifeless trunk a scar puckers. As I watch it forms a circle bisected along the arc by small hash marks. In its center an X marries itself with a P.

Below it another appears.

And another...

And another...

And another still...

A quintet of the blemishes now infects the peeling bark.

Sound interrupts the stillness.

Metal against wood.

Stabbing.

Scraping.

Carving.

I continue my trek around the dying plant in search of the source.

In a surreal wipe, the back of a robed figure appears opposite me.

Finding myself devoid of words I simply stare in silence. The scraping sound ceases and the figure cocks its head to the side. Slowly and purposefully the figure reaches up and pulls back the hood of the robe to reveal a tangle of fiery red hair. The figure turns to face me.

Kendra Miller stares at me with vacant eyes, in her hand an athamè. On the quickly rotting tree trunk behind her is a freshly carved Monogram of Christ. With nothing resembling any form of emotion she raises her hand and points the athamè at me.

My confusion flees.

Fear returns in force, surging upward from the depths of my bowels.

"Whereas you, Rowan Linden Gant have duly and properly admitted your crimes, and having before us the Holy Gospels that our judgment may proceed as from the countenance of God, by this sentence we cast you away as an impenitent heretic and sorcerer... "

The intermittent sounds of creaking punctuate the sentences that spill imperiously from the dark voice.

"... And do hereby deliver you unto the power of our most Holy God. As you are damned in body and soul, your sentence on this day is death. The sentence, to be executed immediately and without appeal in the manner of hanging. "

My eyes snapped open at the explosive sound of a gallows trap door violently swinging wide.

The first thing I saw was the pitched ceiling of the upper floor of my house. I tilted my head forward and stopped the moment the sore ache shot from one side of my neck to the other. Awakened by its friend in the upper vertebrae, a nagging pinch began to dance about my lower back. Acute awareness of my position in the chair told me I had been there far too long.

Slowly I allowed my head to begin its forward tilt once again but decided to take things one-step at a time and told the rest of my body to stay put. A well-worn paperback copy of the *Malleus Maleficarum* was splayed out on the desk in front of me with my glasses placed carefully in the center. A half empty bottle of beer sat

to the right; next to it, a ceramic mug that had contained willow bark tea.

The sound of the fan on my computer hummed in a medium pitched drone punctuated by a regular staccato smacking noise to my left. I shifted my bleary gaze in the direction of the wet sound and it came to rest on the corner of my workstation.

There, Salinger, our Himalayan, was perched carefully on the edge of the desktop peering wide-eyed at me over the rim of a bowl. His wary feline gaze locked with mine and he tensed in preparation to bolt, but continued to lap at the discarded remnants of my dinner.

After a moment or two of playing stare down with the fluffy cat, I shifted my weight and allowed the chair to pivot forward. Salinger immediately leapt down as the springs groaned in protest, but took only a few quick steps before turning and planting himself a short distance away with Emily and Dickens. Apparently the cats had been taking turns at the feeding trough.

I rubbed my eyes to dislodge the sleep still clinging in them then slid my glasses onto my face as I stood. The clock in the corner of my monitor read eleven-seventeen so there was still plenty of time for sleep before the sun made its way over the horizon. Mechanically, I shut down my system and switched off the master switch on the power strip before scooping up the open volume from the desktop.

For a double beat of foggy consideration I pondered taking my dirty dishes down to the kitchen and at least put them in the sink. The tug of war over what to do ended as soon as my muddy brain centered on the fact that the kitchen was farther from my present location than the bedroom. That question answered, I left the bowl for the cats to fight over.

As I started out the door, I realized that I was unconsciously carrying the copy of the *Malleus Maleficarum* that had been in front of me. I didn't even remember why I had picked it up. I started to toss it back onto the desk and noticed my finger was thrust between the pages, physically marking the place I had apparently left off.

Curiosity momentarily interrupted the desire for sleep so I flipped the book open and gave the text before me the once over. The marked pages screamed back in crisp black and white, starkly announcing the thirteenth method of arriving at a definite sentence when a person is accused of heresy.

Question number thirty-two. The method to be put to one who is convicted but who hath fled or who Contumaciously Absents himself.

As I read the words that followed, I imagined for a moment that there was always the possibility that the lack of sleep combined with re-heated Dublin Coddle could be responsible for my most recent night terror. Unfortunately, there was no denying that they couldn't have been a factor the night before.

I carefully tucked a scrap of notepaper into the binding and closed the cover before laying the volume back on the desk. Now, I wasn't entirely sure if I wanted to go back to sleep.

I had to resign myself to the fact that I was no longer just another Witch among the myriad of Pagans—closet or otherwise—that lived in this city. The fact that I was the official Witch of the Major Case Squad wasn't what now set me apart either.

I had already been tried, convicted and sentenced in the deranged court of a serial killer.

I was on the list.

CHAPTER 21

"Keep going at this rate and we're just going to need to get ya' a shield," Ben mused as I clipped a laminated visitors pass to my shirt. "You'd be the bad guys worst nightmare—A Witch with a badge."

"Yeah, don't do me any favors," I retorted. "Remember, I know the kind of hours you work."

"Wuss," my friend chuckled.

My ideas about getting caught up with the workload from my Custom Software Consulting business had been declared null and void the moment Ben had called. At least he hadn't gotten me out of bed. My wife had seen to that herself.

Felicity was into the second day of shooting with her client and had left the house well before dawn, but not before prodding me awake on her way out and instructing me to clean up the broken soup bowl on the office floor.

I had wanted to talk to her about my late night revelation but was denied the opportunity by the obligations of normal daily life. In some ways it was a minor relief, because I wasn't entirely certain how to approach what I wanted to say. If I was correct in my assessment and I was on the killer's list, then at some point he would be coming for me. When he did, I wanted Felicity as far away from ground zero as possible. Since I was ground zero that meant getting her far away from me. In her mind that would mean I was shutting her out once again.

It was no stretch at all to imagine: I could see her adamant glare and steadfast posture when she cocked her head and explained to me in her own patented fashion that she would be doing no such thing.

With that portion of my day's agenda being forcibly rescheduled for a later time, I planned to bury myself in maintaining code for my client base. After cleaning up the mess the cats had made of my laziness and treating myself to an extra long hot shower, I settled in to do just that.

Following the trend that had already been set, I had barely gotten started on replies to my E-mail when the phone pealed out its annoying demand.

"Well, I appreciate you comin' down, white-man," he continued. "I know you had work to do and all."

"That's okay," I offered as I followed him. "I was planning to call you later anyway."

"Yeah, I figured you would," he remarked. "The answer is 'yes.' I called Mandalay and she filled me in on what happened to her brother. Everything's fine."

"That's great, Ben," I told him in an absent tone that bespoke of my diverted attention. "That wasn't actually why I was planning to call you though."

Ben stopped mid-stride and turned to face me. "Something wrong, Row?"

"Yeah, I think so," I admitted, shifting to the side to allow a secretary who was quite obviously on a mission to pass by. "If you've got time after we're through talking to the old man I'd really like to bounce it off you."

"Hey, we can talk about it right now if you want."

I considered his offer and weighed the urgency of my request. Standing in the middle of Police Headquarters I was fairly certain that I was safe for the time being. "After the interview is fine."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," I finally nodded. "Yeah, it can wait."

"Okay, it's up to you," he told me as we continued on our way through the Monday morning flood of uniformed cops and civilians alike. "By the way, I've got some paperwork in my desk for you to sign off on. We can do that after the interview too."

"Paperwork?" I repeated the word with a puzzled tone. "Paperwork for what?"

"For the consulting fees I put you in for," he answered. "Won't be much, but if we're gonna keep draggin' you away from your real job you oughta get something."

"You know that's not necessary, Ben."

"So donate it to charity or whatever." He shrugged to punctuate his reply. "I already got it approved so you might as well just sign the papers and take the check."

"Thanks, Ben."

"Not a problem, man. So anyway, like I was saying on the phone, I got a wake up call at about half past still dark telling me that Tracy Watson was dropping all the charges against the old guy. She even came down here this morning to see him."

"Sounds like she must have had a change of heart, then," I said.

"It's more likely that the station was lookin' to get some good spin on it," he grunted. "She showed up with a couple of suits that breezed through here like they owned the place. She was all dolled up with a stack of publicity photos under her arm and had a cameraman surgically attached."

"Bet that was a circus."

"Put it this way, between the coppers that were drooling all over themselves and the ones that couldn't get up from their desks for ten minutes, it would have been the perfect time to rob a bank."

"That bad, huh?"

"Can't blame 'em really. You'd have to check with Vice to be sure, but I'm betting there's at the very least one or two ordinance violations for what she was doing to that sweater."

"How about the old guy?"

"Starstruck, I guess," he ventured. "Pretty much just sat there staring at her chest. When he did talk he just babbled something about a truck."

"A truck?"

"Yeah. Who knows? Maybe he wants her to buy him a truck. Nobody could make any sense of it."

"So have you talked to him yourself yet?" I queried while following my friend down a flight of stairs.

"For a couple of minutes. He's sober but he still ain't all there," he acknowledged. "Only name we can get out of him is Bob and that damn near took an act of Congress. Still not sure if it's for real or not. He's got no priors so his prints didn't help us at all. He's just another discarded human being. We see 'em every day."

"That doesn't make it any more palatable," I asserted.

"No, it doesn't," he agreed. "But what are you gonna do? Some of 'em like it that way. I seem to recall you telling me once that I couldn't protect the whole world. That applies to you too, ya'know."

"I know, I know," I acknowledged.

"Anyhow," Ben continued filling me in, "I dunno how long they had this guy in the shower but they managed to get the stink off him... And he got to sleep in a warm bed last night, even if it was lockup... He's had a decent meal for a change... Got him some fresh clothes from one of the local shelters... Oh yeah, and the TV station Watson works for sent along a brand new coat for him. Cheapest publicity they'll ever get."

"Maybe so, but at least he's got a decent coat now."

"Yeah, there is that," he acknowledged.

We had pushed through the heavy door and had made our way down the familiar hallway while Ben rattled off the latest information on the old man. We now came to a halt in front of an interview room and my friend paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"So I figure I'll let you do the talking," he told me. "Kinda do the 'hocus-pocus' thing and see what you can find out, ya know?"

"I'll give it a try but I can't make you any guarantees. It doesn't always work like that."

"I know," he nodded as he twisted the knob and pushed the door open. "But I got faith in ya'."

The old man was sitting at the small table that occupied the center of the room and true to what my friend had said he was almost unrecognizable as the foul-smelling bum we had visited the day before. The untold layers of grime that had once painted him were now distant additions to the waters of the metropolitan sewer system and his foul perfume had been replaced by the sharp tang of antiseptic soap. While by no means a perfect fit, he was clad in fresh clothing far less threadbare than his original attire.

His face was sporting a lurid grin that displayed several missing teeth and he repetitiously fingered an eight by ten glossy that was gripped in his weathered hand. His intent gaze never left the crisp lines of the autographed photo even while Ben exchanged a few words with the uniformed officer who had been waiting inside the door. After sending the guard on a break my friend pressed the barrier shut and silently leaned against the wall next to it with his notebook at the ready.

I glanced at Ben and he simply jerked his head toward the man at the table while looking at me expectantly. I was feeling more than just a little pressure and it wasn't helping my overall ability to ground and center. No matter what he had said out in the hall, it was plainly obvious that Ben didn't truly understand the realities I had explained. He was expecting me to perform a feat of hypnosis on command and provide him with the answers he wanted, simple as that.

I suppose that in a way it was my own fault. I had worked so hard during the previous case to overcome his intense skepticism that I had now pushed him to the opposite end of the spectrum. Combined with his being present to witness the bizarre events that had attached themselves to me during this investigation, I should have expected something like this. I only hoped that I wasn't about to let him down, but I already had a very nasty feeling that a rather large disappointment was peering angrily over the horizon in my general direction.

"Good morning," I finally said to the old man as I ventured further into the room.

He continued to grin, occasionally smacking his lips as he emitted guttural grunts and chirping noises. His stare never left the photograph and his fingers lovingly caressed the crisp greys that formed Tracy Watson's image, lingering with each pass on the shadows that outlined her ample chest.

"They tell me your name is Bob," I volunteered. "Mine is Rowan."

No response.

I stepped closer to the table and listened. Between the chirps and gurgles he seemed to be muttering something under his breath. I strained to understand the muted words and found only an endless loop of 'Tracy, Tracy, I love Tracy.'

After a short wait I pulled out the chair opposite the man. "Mind if I sit down,

Bob?"

Still no response.

Just the almost musical repetition of his undying love for Tracy Watson.

I went ahead and took a seat. The old guy was so enraptured by his visit from the television meteorologist that nothing else existed for him in this space and time. The reinforcement of his fixation wasn't going to make my task any easier.

Reaching across the small table, I passed my hand back and forth through his tightly focused stare. "Bob, are you listening to me?"

His gaze never wavered. No motion or sound from him gave any indication that he was even aware of anyone else's presence in the small room. It became immediately obvious that approaching him purely on the physical plane was going to be useless.

I pressed myself for a moment to find the balance I would need in order to even begin making an attempt at what Ben wanted me to do. If I was going to avoid a repeat of yesterday's pounding headache, or even achieve a small modicum of success in this task, I was going to have to anchor myself in one place for a change. Drifting haphazardly about and allowing random ethereal events to play themselves out through me wouldn't do us any good in this case. I was still entertaining doubts that any of the ones I had been tortured by so far had done us any good to begin with.

I closed my eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath, steadily in through my nose then let it slowly out through my mouth. As I exhaled fully I began systematically relaxing my body, starting at my toes and working my way up. I was engaging myself in the simplest of methods to attune to one's surroundings. An exercise pulled straight from WitchCraft 101.

Grounding and centering was the most basic of all things a Witch would do. The process in and of itself quickly became second nature to anyone who studied The Craft for any period of time. While the process remained the same, after a while it became nothing if not automatic. To have to take the time to actually concentrate on grounding was a rarity brought on by unusual circumstance. The fact that I was now sitting in a quiet room with no real distraction, but still had to consciously force myself to follow these simplistic steps made me feel like a clumsy neophyte.

What had been almost instinctively happening for my entire adult life, and in less than sixty seconds, was now taking intense thought and more than five minutes. I knew I was off-center, but this was much worse than I had originally thought. This latest realization didn't help me at all.

When I finally opened my eyes the old man was still fingering the photo and was giving no indication whatsoever that he even knew we were in the room with him. Over my left shoulder I could feel impatient expectance swirling around Ben in a slowly expanding eddy.

My ethereal connection to an earth ground was complete but tenuous. There was

no doubt in my mind that it wasn't going to last.

Focusing my gaze on the unresponsive man I opened my otherworldly senses and summoned a calm, soothing energy to fill my voice. "Bob," I began in a near monotone. "I'd like to talk to you for a little while, if that's okay?"

Slipping in under the plane of everything physically tangible, my words centered themselves on the old man and drove inward with the singular task of gaining his attention. As they struck their intended mark, he furrowed his brow slightly and ceased his barely intelligible noisemaking.

With his stare seemingly interrupted by something unseen by anyone but him, he slowly lifted his eyes to meet mine and blinked groggily toward focus. The grin had melted from his face momentarily to become an expressionless sag, but now returned in a wide swath as he tilted the eight by ten in my direction.

"Tracy," was all he said.

"I know, Bob. She's very pretty," I nodded, keeping my voice even. "But I was wondering if we could talk about something else for a moment. What do you think?"

"Tracy came to see me," he muttered. "She luvz me."

"I'm sure she does," I agreed. "But I really need to talk to you about something else, Bob. Do you think we could do that?"

"An ah luv her," he started nodding.

"Bob, I'm serious." Without thinking I projected urgent anger into the flow of energy as I spoke. "I really need to talk to you about something else for a minute."

The old man grew very still and almost visibly inched away from me. I wordlessly chastised myself for losing patience so quickly. I could already feel my hold on the ground weakening.

Bob stared at me for a long measure, brow creased and a frown pursed on his chapped lips. I mentally beat down my impatience and imbued my voice once again with calm.

"I'm sorry, Bob. It's just that this is very important."

"We kin talk if you want," he answered slowly, blinking at me with a somewhat confused expression. It was as if he was unsure as to why he was bothering with me in the first place.

On a supernatural level I had managed to capture his fleeting attention. Now I had to keep it. Whatever form of mental disability this man had been cursed with, it was manifesting itself as a melange of unfocused and simplistic behavior. I felt like I was talking to a small child. In some very real ways, I suppose I was. It should have made my task just that much easier. Instead, the randomness of his jumbled thoughts was only serving to make my head hurt.

"That would be great," I continued. "Yesterday you and I were talking about a Bible you had in your pocket. Do you remember that?"

"Yes," he nodded vigorously. "I 'member. You wanteduh'know 'bout thuh fire."

"That's right," I echoed in a soothing voice. "You were telling me about the fire and something that was in it."

"Ah found sum cig'rettes." He grinned at me proudly. "Whole pack. I wuz gonna smoke um too. Till thuh lady wit the pritty hair mashed um up."

"Bob, what about the fire?"

"Uh lady." He cocked his head slightly and nodded at me. "Summon put uh lady in it. She had pritty hair."

"The lady in the fire?"

"No, thuh lady what hurt me. She wuz mean but she had pritty hair. She mashed up man cig'rettes."

"She's not here right now." I locked my gaze with his and struggled to keep him on a track I could follow. "She's not going to hurt you. Now tell me about the lady in the fire."

"Didju know Tracy come to see me today?" he answered matter-of-factly. "Ah toad her 'bout thuh truck."

My ground was continuing to strain and weaken as I fought to insinuate myself into the old man's stream of thought. I was embarrassed and even somewhat horrified that such a plebian task should be so difficult for me to perform. At the very least I should be able to maintain a simple ground without expending all of my energy on it.

"What about the lady in the fire?" I pressed. "Did you see who put her there?"

"Ah got a new coat too. Tracy gived it to me. Did'ju see thuh truck too?"

"What truck, Bob?"

I didn't know it was happening until it happened. The very last thing I could recall was reaching frantically for an imagined handhold as my ground severed in a blue-white shower of ethereal sparks. Every last erg of energy I had generated was catapulted forward like a rubber band stretched to its limit, and then released. No longer doled out in a controlled fashion the rush of supernatural static impacted the old man full force before rebounding threefold. I didn't even begin to have a chance to erect a defense against the returning tidal wave of energy. Not that I could have done anything to protect myself against an onslaught of my own making anyway.

In less than one second I became painfully aware of the sensation that follows the deployment of an airbag.

"Are you gonna talk or did you go mute on me?" Ben's voiced reflected from the tiled walls of the men's room. Its sharp echo died a quick and painless death after a single hard repetition.

I had yet to say a word since leaving the interview room. All I'd been able to do was nod the affirmative each time Ben asked me if I was okay. The moment I had stepped into the freedom of the hallway I wordlessly made a beeline for the nearest restroom with my friend trailing along behind.

"I can talk," I answered him softly.

"Finally!" he exclaimed. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," I returned hoarsely and nodded without looking at him. "I'll be okay."

"So what gives? You were just sittin' there yakking with the old guy and the next thing I know he's screamin' like an idiot and you're holdin' your head like you've just been clocked in the face with a two-by-four," he described. "You wanna tell me what the hell that was all about?"

Fortunately, the old man's screaming had ended as abruptly as it had begun and he was now perfectly content to be once again drooling over his picture of Tracy Watson. Had it been otherwise, I'm sure there would have been much more commotion than had occurred.

I was standing at the sink holding my hands cupped beneath the spigot as I stared into the mirror at my drawn face. Soon they were filled to overflowing with cold water. Before answering him I took a moment to bury my face in the pool of chilly liquid before it could all seep through my fingers. Slowly I massaged the water against my burning skin, allowing my fingertips to linger at my temples for a long moment before falling away. At this moment, with the way I felt, I would have welcomed the headache that had plagued me on the previous day.

I remained pitched forward, leaning on my forearms against the basin, remnants of the water dripping from the end of my nose to splatter against the porcelain. The spigot continued to trickle with a liquid hiss, spewing its offering into the sink to disappear down the drain.

"Backlash," I answered succinctly.

"Backlash?" He repeated the word in an almost questioning tone as if it were alien in meaning.

"Backlash," I echoed.

"From what?" he asked after a moment.

"From me not being grounded."

"That some kind of Witch thing?"

"You could say that."

There was a loud ratcheting followed by a mechanical thunk. The pair of noises repeated twice in close succession, shadowed only by their dull echoes, then silence fell in behind them. A tearing sound came close afterward and a moment later my friend was handing me a wad of paper towels.

"So why weren't you grounded?"

"I seem to be having trouble with that particular task lately," I answered as I accepted the towels. "Thanks."

"No problem. Any idea why?"

"I wish I knew. I guess it really started about the time the whole thing with the pool water happened... I suppose that shock to my system might have something to do with it... But, to be honest this whole investigation has had me off kilter," I offered. "The idea of someone reviving the *Burning Times* must have affected me a little worse than I originally suspected it would."

"Okay, I'll buy all that." He began pacing between the basins and the stalls. "But you seemed okay yesterday. I'll admit you were a bit unsettled but nothing like this. You've gone downhill in a big way all of a sudden, white man. What's different now? What else is going on?"

"Well, I think it might be what I mentioned earlier that I wanted to talk to you about," I admitted as I dabbed the brown paper at the wet spots on my face. "I had a pretty serious dream last night."

"Like where you get one of those weird clues or something?"

"Something like that I guess," I granted. "It was a continuation of the nightmare I had the other night. The one I wasn't sure meant anything."

"You think it means something now."

"I'm pretty sure it does."

"Yeah, and?"

I sighed heavily before allowing my answer to spill into the room, "I think I'm on the list."

"You mean like ON the list, on the list?" my friend's incredulous voice reverberated through the porcelain echo chamber as it suddenly rose in pitch.

"Yeah," I almost whispered. "Like ON the list, on the list."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me this sooner?" he demanded.

"Like I said, I planned to talk to you about it as soon as we were done with the interview."

Ben came to a halt in front of me and shot his hand up to his neck. "Alright, so where's Felicity right now?"

"She's safe," I told him. "She's with a client."

I could almost see the cogs and wheels turning behind the massive Native American's eyes as he calculated and schemed around the information he had just been given. After a short interlude of silence he dropped his hand from his neck and pointed at me.

"Okay, here's the deal," he instructed. "You and Felicity are staying with me and Al. I'll call her as soon as we get upstairs."

He was already starting to hustle me toward the door of the men's room as he spoke. We rushed past the trash receptacle so fast I think the wad of paper towels I tossed at it ended up on the floor.

CHAPTER 22

Ben was not at all keen on the idea of our keeping the dinner date we had arranged with Austin for this evening; but in the grander scheme of things, that was actually the least of his concerns. What provided his strongest point of consternation was the fact that Felicity and I had refused to abandon our home in the face of my being the target of a serial killer. While at first I was almost inclined to go along with his cautionary actions, after some thought I knew for certain that if this killer wanted me bad enough he would find me wherever I holed up. Hiding away at Ben's would most likely only prolong the inevitable and that would guarantee to tip my internal scales even further from center in the process.

As frightening as the entire prospect was, I mused aloud that this might even be the break we needed. There was next to nothing in the way of useful evidence thus far and in my own opinion I had been no real help to the investigation either. If the killer was after me then perhaps we could set a trap with me as the bait. My friend wasted no time informing me that I had seen too many television shows and that this was real life and not an episode of the latest cop drama. It simply didn't work that way.

For a moment, I made a grab for the diaphanous skirts of a long shot and partially allied myself with Ben to make a half-hearted attempt at convincing my wife to follow his advice and stay with he and Allison for a while. I knew better than to even make the suggestion, especially considering that being pulled away from her photo shoot and escorted to the police station by a pair of uniformed officers had already set her mood at an oblique angle to the rest of the world. My bid for the brass ring ended as soon as she rolled her eyes while turning to face me, and then slowly cocked her head to the side. From behind a spiral fall of fiery auburn curls her jade green eyes subjected me to the Felicity O'Brien trademark 'I beg your pardon' glare. Her message was received free of any distortion or ambiguity whatsoever and no further word was spoken on the subject—from me at any rate.

Better than an hour passed by while Ben continued to demand, argue and even plead with both of us, but as sound as his contentions were we remained steadfast in our decision to stay put. In the end he finally conceded grudgingly, but only under a specific condition. We were to be afforded the same protection as the other individuals that were believed to be on the killer's list.

We agreed with the compromise and then Felicity dropped the other shoe—our

dinner engagement with her brother. Before my friend could even begin to object she outlined in no uncertain terms that there was no room for negotiation on this point.

Ben had let out a resigned sigh as he automatically massaged the back of his neck. After a trio of short phone calls he laid out his own non-negotiable terms.

One, he would be pulling the first watch with us personally.

Two, we were to eat at a busy, very public restaurant with valet parking and he wanted to know which one it was before we left.

Three, we were to go straight there and come straight home.

And finally, four, we were to meet him at our house no later AND no earlier than eleven PM.

Had the service at the restaurant been slower, or had we encountered a little more traffic on the streets, we just might have been able to comply with the last point.

The fact that the glowing digital clock on the in dash radio read ten-thirteen PM at the moment we exited the highway didn't really register; even though I looked directly at it.

"Aye, Rowan, an' you're sure now you wouldn't want to be stoppin' for a cheeseburger or some such?" Austin's cheery voice boomed from the back seat of Felicity's Jeep. "That fare on your plate didn't seem enough for a young lad, much less a grown man."

"I got plenty," I told my brother-in-law with a chuckle. He had been ribbing me about my dinner selection for the better portion of the evening. I knew it was all in fun and it seemed to be keeping him entertained. Besides, it was keeping my mind off the far less pleasant realities I was facing and a diversion was something I desperately needed, so I played along.

"I'm still thinkin' you would have been better served with a good steak, man," he offered as he reached forward and gave me a good-natured jab in the side. "What was that frou-frou you ordered again?"

"Seared sea scallops with bourbon-horseradish-mustard and grilled asparagus in a balsamic vinaigrette."

"Aye and what about that plate of cheese and such?"

"Mozzarella, red onions and tomatoes with olive oil. It's called a caprice salad."

"Frou-frou, man!" he announced once again.

"Really, Austin," Felicity piped up with her own musical laugh. Her Celtic timbre had been thoroughly reinforced by the evening spent with her brother. "Surely now you're the only one I know who would go to a restaurant celebrated for its seafood and order a steak."

"Aye, the menu said 'Surf and Turf,' didn't it now?" he ventured. "I simply told the lass to keep the surf and bring me extra turf."

"Aye." My wife nodded into the rearview mirror. "Sure'n that Colleen was makin'

eyes at you too. You were just puttin' on a show for the young lady."

The stick shift clicked smoothly as she pushed the vehicle through a quiet intersection and accelerated along the avenue in the direction of our subdivision.

"I'm single then, aren't I?" Austin chuckled.

"Aye, you are," Felicity answered. "But she was a bit young then. She'd soon grow tired of an old man like yourself."

My brother-in-law's infectious laughter filled the interior of the Jeep as we hooked through a turn and continued down a familiar tree-lined street toward our home. A pair of short blocks later the radio's luminescent clock displayed ten twenty-two PM. As the last digit blinked itself into a three we made the arc from the street into the driveway and followed the concrete strip to the rear of our house. The next turn to the left banked us around the back corner and brought the harsh swath of blue-white from the vehicle's headlamps to bear on the garage door.

The Jeep screeched to a halt as Felicity less than gently applied the brakes, adding her own high-pitched yelp of surprise to the sudden noise. Austin's retort was abruptly transformed into a deep huff as he pitched forward heavily against his seatbelt. My hands went automatically to the dash as I did the same. With my palms still planted firmly before me I lifted my head and simply cast a mute stare through the windshield.

Over spray fogged the outline of the graffiti that graced the normally solid white overhead door. Haste had been an obvious factor to the perpetrator of the artwork as evidenced by the watery trails of the runs that had trickled from the paint. Still, a familiar and somewhat steady hand had been applied to the task. The symbols were large, even, and painstakingly clear.

Rev. 21:

I blinked hard and glanced at the clock on the dash. It read ten twenty three PM. I looked back at the garage door, in some way hoping that I had been momentarily affected by a small mass hallucination.

It still read Rev. 21:

"Call nine-one-one," I mouthed as I began to fumble with the catch on my seatbelt, my voice the barest trace of a whisper.

"What?" Felicity croaked.

"Call nine-one-one," I repeated, forcing the prickly lump of fear in my throat to stand aside and allow the words to pass. "And get out of here."

The catch popped and I nervously wrestled my way out of the harness. The rhizome of fear in my throat had spread its invasive roots outward, making my hands tremble and my dinner become a cinder block resting uncomfortably in the deep well of my intestines. I shouldered the door open and shakily poured myself out onto the drive.

"You aren't staying here by yourself!" Felicity admonished in a frightened tone.

"What if he's still here?"

"That's exactly why I want you out of here," I shot back.

"Aye, Rowan," Austin voiced as he untangled himself from his own safety harness and began tilting the passenger seat forward to create a path of egress. "She's right. You can't be stayin' here by yourself with a madman runnin' about. I'm comin' with you then!"

"No, Austin," I quickly objected. "I want you to stay with Felicity."

"But Rowan man, you can't... "

"I'm serious," I asserted as I cut him off. "If he's still here I'll deal with it. I need to know that Felicity is safe and I want you with her in case something happens!"

"I'm not leaving you here!" my wife contended.

"Don't argue, Felicity!" I ordered as I was pushing the door shut. "Just call nine-one-one and get away from here NOW!"

My voice was hard and demanding. Fear of what I might be about to face sharpened it. Fear of any harm coming to my wife honed it beyond to a razor's edge. I had never used such a tone with Felicity before. I caught the look that creased her face just before her own fear obscured it from view. I knew then that she understood why I was asking her to do this. She didn't want to leave, but she knew that she had no choice.

Gears meshed violently as she jammed the vehicle into reverse and stepped on the gas. The Jeep's engine roared up from idle and propelled them backwards around the corner and out along the driveway. I listened as the rout faded then began anew with a squeal of tires against damp asphalt.

I stood alone in the darkness, steeled momentarily by the knowledge that Felicity was safely away. My heart was rattling in my chest as it turned somersaults, using my diaphragm as a trampoline and my lungs as tumbling mats. Irregular breaths pulsed hard out of my mouth condensing in moist clouds before my face. I struggled to avoid hyperventilating.

My legs were stiff and heavy with near terror as I slowly turned to face the back of my house. Darkness still shrouded me and I looked up above the door leading into our sun porch. The floodlights on the outdoor sentry appeared to still be intact, but remained obstinately unlit. The motion sensor should have snapped them to life the minute we had rounded the corner, but it hadn't.

I searched my memories from earlier in the evening, but my thoughts were cloudy and anything but the here and now was obscured by a thick fog of fear. I suddenly couldn't remember if it had been Felicity or I that had locked the back door and set the alarm. I didn't know if the outdoor light had been inadvertently shut off or purposely disabled in some less than obvious fashion. I knew only that I was standing in the dark paralyzed. Frozen in place by horrifying thoughts I couldn't escape.

I fought to seek a ground, feeling like a coward as my hands continued to vibrate in time with my anxiety. Taking in a deep lungful of the gelid night air, I held it for a pair of heartbeats, then allowed its escape in a measured stream. I found no calm waiting for me as I had hoped. I had only my resolve.

Pressing myself to move, I covered the short distance to the deck in a fraction of a minute that presented itself to my addled senses as at least a full hour. Carefully, I climbed the shallow flight of stairs and made my way toward the sun porch. I glanced quickly around to see if anyone was hiding in the shadows, only to discover that the night itself was one enormous shadow and I was standing in the middle of it. As I turned and took a cautious step I unknowingly brushed against an arm of a pinwheel squirrel feeder. With the delicate balance of the partially eaten ears of feed corn suddenly disturbed, the assembly rotated with a timid squeak and dull thump as the heavier cob swung downward. As the feed laden arms assumed their new positions the lowest of the four slapped against the back of my shoulder with a thud. I leapt forward with a yelp and spun, nearly stumbling over my own feet as I tensed. The corncob continued to swing gently as it settled in toward stillness.

My unseen attacker now identified I breathed a short sigh of relief and turned, then took the last few steps to the porch door.

My bladder felt weak and the caustic acid of panic was brewing in my stomach. My hand was trembling uncontrollably as I reached for the handle and wrapped my fingers around the chilled metal. Summoning whatever courage I could find hiding behind the towering levies of abject terror, I twisted my wrist.

Locked.

The panic subsided slightly at the discovery and I let my sweat covered palm fall away. Apparently the lock had not been tampered with and the rear of the house was still secure. Now, since I didn't carry a key to the back door my only course of action would be to enter the house from the front.

I turned to head in that direction and was immediately blinded by a stringent beam of light that I would later discover had emanated from the business end of a ridiculously powerful *Mag-Lite*.

A voice barked angrily in the darkness, "POLICE! DON'T MOVE AND KEEP YOUR HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE THEM!"

Flicking tufts of fur could be seen hanging just below the exposed rafters of our living room ceiling. Dickens, Emily and Salinger each had taken a position on the wooden beams to watch the proceedings below as Police officers and crime scene technicians went in and out of the house. Every now and then one of the felines would dip a whiskered face down alongside its perch and inspect the goings on in the dining room. It was obvious that they weren't at all pleased with the intrusion into their territory.

The dogs had been far worse in that regard until they had been temporarily

banished to the bedroom. At least they had finally given up on the incessant barking.

"Go ahead, Ben," I told my friend. "Yell or something."

"What for?" he asked in a dull monotone.

"Because that's what you do," I answered. "It's how you deal with people who screw up. I screwed up."

He had arrived hot on the heels of the uniformed Briarwood officers who had been first on the scene. They were in the process of verifying my ID when his van fishtailed to a halt in front of my house, a magnetic bubble light on the corner of its roof casting evenly spaced red flickers across the faces of my neighbors homes.

Now, as we spoke, the Crime Scene Unit was gathering what little evidence they could from my defaced garage door. A thorough inspection of the house had revealed nothing to indicate that the perpetrator of the painting ever made it inside, or even tried to for that matter.

"I'm not gonna yell," he replied with a tired sigh. "I've discovered it doesn't do any good with you. You aren't scared of me."

I didn't say anything else. I simply took a sip of my coffee then held the cup cradled in my hands. Felicity and Austin had returned and were positioned around the dining room table with me. They remained silent as well.

When they had arrived Felicity hit the ground in full motion the moment she saw me standing in the driveway with Ben and the other officers. She slammed into me with all the force her petite frame could muster while running in a long, far less than billowing wool skirt. She had clenched her arms around me and the very first thing she said was, 'For as long as you live Rowan Linden Gant you NEVER ask me to do that again or I'll make you wish you hadn't.'

I knew she meant it.

Ben leaned against the wall, then neatly folded his arms across his chest and eyed me calmly. "So what exactly were you planning to do if that asshole had been in the house?"

"I don't know," I admitted with an embarrassed shrug.

"Good plan," he added a raised eyebrow and quick nod of his head to underscore the sarcastic statement.

"I know... I screwed up."

"Yes, you did," he agreed. "You started by getting here before eleven, which I specifically told you not to do. Both of you. Now other than that, you did great right up until you got out of the Jeep."

"Yeah. I know," I conceded.

"You entered a potentially dangerous scene unarmed and completely unprepared. It's beyond me what you were thinkin'."

"I was thinking this guy needs to be stopped."

"Yeah, I can agree with that. But just how did you think you were gonna do it?"

"I hadn't gotten that far yet."

"Jeez, Rowan," he exclaimed. "Whatever's got you all outta whack on the 'hocus-pocus' stuff must be affecting your judgment too. What you did was just plain stupid!"

My friend fell silent and studied me from across the room. I wasn't sure what was going through his mind but the glassy shimmer in his eyes told me that he was wrestling with something that was going to involve a serious decision.

"You'd do it again, wouldn't you?" he finally asked.

I pondered the question with a frown and after a moment doled out the truth, "Given the circumstances, yes, I probably would."

"Storm?" A deeply timbered voice vied for attention from the kitchen doorway.

"Yeah, Murv, whatcha got?" Ben turned to the head Crime Scene technician.

"A lot of nothin'," the man drawled. "No prints, no fibers, no nothing. Looks like whoever it was just did the spray job and beat feet... And they apparently did that entirely on solid ground 'cause there's not a fresh imprint in the snow anywhere around this house."

"Yeah, I was afraid of that."

The CSU tech shrugged. "Got samples of the paint for the lab, not that I'm expecting much."

"Great, thanks," Ben told him. "Why don't you and your team go ahead and wrap it up."

"Will do."

"Austin?" Ben directed himself at my brother-in-law.

"Aye?"

"Can you hang out for a bit and keep Felicity company?"

"Aye, no problem that."

"Good. Come on, Rowan, let's you and me take a walk."

"This," Ben told me, "is a *Glock Seventeen*."

We were standing on the street at the back of his decrepit looking Chevrolet van. The doors were splayed open and he had just withdrawn his large hand from a gym bag. In his palm was a sturdy black holster filled with the handgun he was now describing.

"Austrian designed, mounted on a lightweight, high impact plastic frame," he continued as he unsnapped the holster and withdrew the firearm. "Magazine releases here."

He held the pistol out into the glow of the streetlamp with the muzzle pointed at the ground and displayed the grip to me. Using his thumb he pressed the release and slid the magazine out with his other hand.

"Ben... " I started to object as I realized where this was heading.

"Shut up and learn," he cut me off succinctly, and then began indicating points on the weapon with his index finger. "Sights are here and here. This is a semi-automatic and the firing pin is fully enclosed here, so there's no hammer like on your revolver. The slide is spring-loaded and it's actuated each time you fire so keep your thumb down and out of its way or it'll take a chunk out of it. Guaranteed. There's a safety here. You depress it automatically when you squeeze the trigger so the only thing it's good for is keepin' it from firing if you drop it. Follow me so far?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"This is a high capacity magazine." He held up the oblong rectangle for me to view. "It holds seventeen nine millimeter rounds." He turned the magazine at an angle to display the blue nosed bullets it carried. "These are *Glaser Safety Slugs*. They're eighty-grain rounds with number twelve shot suspended in *Teflon gel*. They're specifically designed to frag on impact and not ricochet. This does two things. One, you don't send a wild round through the wall and kill your neighbor. Two, they make a very nasty mess of soft targets. If you hit him you'll fuck him up. Guaranteed."

He turned the magazine back on its side and made a show of sliding it into the bottom of the grip. "Mag goes here, just slide it in till it locks." The telltale snap of the catch taking hold punctuated his instruction. "Pull the slide back, let it go, and it's ready to rock."

Ben jacked the metal slide on the weapon backwards as he stated the instruction then released it. With a quick mechanical snap and a metallic ping, a shell was extracted from the magazine and chambered. He lifted the *dock* and continued his demonstration.

"Hold it firmly, cup your left hand and press the knuckles of your right hand into your left palm. Extend your arms and pull back with your left while pressing forward with your right. Use equal pressure and you get a stable firing position. No stupid TV bullshit or anything. Hold it upright and use both hands. Sight down the barrel just like you would with your revolver and squeeze the trigger, don't jerk it.

"If it misfires or jams, don't panic. Just turn it on its side and repeat what I just showed you. Just rack it and return to the firing position. Got it?"

"Yeah, I've got it."

Ben carefully slid the sidearm back into the nylon holster and snapped the loop over the grip before handing it to me. "I want that on your belt at all times. Any questions?"

I could smell the pungent odor of solvent and light oil wafting from the handgun as I hefted it. It had obviously been very recently cleaned. This told me that Ben hadn't made this decision on the spur of the moment as I had originally believed.

There had been serious thought involved and he had intended to arm me even before the incident tonight. Still, I wasn't sure how comfortable I was with the idea.

"Are you sure I need this, Ben? We've got the *Ruger* in the house." I referred to the .357 magnum revolver Ben had convinced us to purchase some years ago for the purpose of home protection. At that time, he had put both Felicity and I through a much less abbreviated version of what he had just finished.

"This one is easier to conceal and no offense, white man, but Felicity is a hell of a lot better shot with that revolver than you are. This one has almost three times as many rounds so maybe you can hit somethin', which reminds me—This gun has a little quirk. The first two rounds out of it will be about six inches low, but don't worry about that. Just aim it dead center and keep pullin' the trigger. When it's empty the breach'll lock open."

"Aren't your colleagues going to wonder why I'm carrying a pistol?" I made another appeal.

"Wear a coat and don't go through any metal detectors and they'll never know."

"Let me rephrase that, Ben. You know I'm not licensed to carry this."

"Yeah, so?"

"A little technicality called breaking the law?"

"Better judged by twelve than carried by six, paleface."

"I'm still not so sure about this... "

"Look, Row, I can't be with you twenty-four hours a day, and to be honest, I just don't trust you not to pull another stunt like you did tonight." He levered the doors on the van shut as I sidestepped out of the way. "Just indulge me. Put the damn thing on your belt and don't let me catch you without it until this is all over."

"Okay," I surrendered. "But I won't guarantee that I'll use it."

"Trust me, Kemosabe. I hope like hell ya' don't ever have to make that decision."

In the resulting quiet my friend pulled a pair of stubby *Chateaus* out of his pocket and offered one to me. He proceeded to slip his cigar out of its cellophane wrapper and with a quick snip he trimmed the end. Borrowing his guillotine, I followed suit.

After lighting the tight roll of tobacco and giving the glowing tip a cursory inspection he tucked it in the corner of his mouth and puffed.

"So fill me in," he said between clenched teeth. "What's the scoop with Rev. 21:8?"

"Book of Revelation, Chapter twenty-one, verse eight," I told him as I finished igniting my own smoke. "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers," I stressed the word sorcerers, "and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."

"Second death?"

"The proverbial afterlife, Ben. I think maybe since he couldn't kill me tonight he just wanted to make sure I know that I'm going to burn in hell."

Austin was supposed to be leaving for Ireland the next morning and had reluctantly departed our home somewhere around one AM; but only after we had spent a solid hour convincing him there was nothing he could do. We still weren't sure whether or not he was going to cancel his flight.

Neither Felicity nor I had come down from our adrenalin highs so after a fitful try at sleep we elected to sit up with Ben.

It was four-thirty in the morning and the deep fold of darkness had yet to lighten when he and Felicity came out the back door in search of me. My friend had been maintaining his caffeine buzz with one cup of Java after another and I was supposed to be brewing a fresh pot of the fuel. Unfortunately, somewhere in that process time had suddenly segmented itself and fallen away from my reality. A void now occupied the space in my mind between then and now. I was barely conscious of standing coatless in the cold air, shivering as it chilled me through.

"Rowan, honey, what are you doing out here? What's wrong?" My wife's concerned voice was the first to meet my ears.

"Dammit, white man," Ben's words followed close behind. "You scared the hell out of us."

Their voices prodded me from my catatonia and I broke my locked gaze from the inscription gracing my garage door. As their thick words formed coherence in my sluggish brain I slowly turned to them.

"What are you doing out here by yourself?" my friend persisted.

"I... I don't know," I stammered.

Felicity let out a sudden gasp then gently grabbed my hand and pulled my arm further into the light.

"Awwww, Jeez! What the hell is this?" my friend exclaimed as the reason for her surprise came into full view.

I looked down at my arm.

Scattered randomly across the surface of my flesh were a half dozen small welts, each one surrounding a puckering lesion. Thin trickles of blood still wept from the puncture wounds to streak my skin. The deep pricking sensation that had been masked by my earlier blankness returned with a sharp, biting rhythm. In my mind there could only be one meaning for this torture.

"I think he might have moved to the next name on the list," was all I said.

It was late afternoon before the Major Case Squad managed to determine for an absolute certainty that Amanda Marie Stark was missing.

CHAPTER 23

Nothing.

There had not been a public or traceable move from the killer for almost seven days. A mere dwindling handful of sixty-minute revolutions around the clock face were all that stood in the way of officially making it an entire week since the suspected kidnapping of Amanda Stark.

Each day had slid quietly and uneventfully into the next. Each one completely devoid of anything to set it apart from another except for the random appearance and disappearance of various lacerations on my arm. I didn't even want to imagine what was happening to the young woman who was on the receiving end of the tortures the wounds were mimicking. Unfortunately, I couldn't keep from it.

The Major Case Squad frantically chased down every lead—even the insignificant ones—and as feared they had all fallen colder than the winter's chill. The miniscule amount of evidence that had been collected endowed us with no more information than we already possessed. There were no witnesses to be found. No new clues brought forth into the light of the day.

The daunting concrete wall of a dead end alleyway was staring us squarely in the face and it showed no remorse.

If there was anything positive to be said it was that the nothing we faced included that there had been no more killings. Unfortunately, that one positive was tainted with an overshadowing negative. We all knew beyond any doubt that another murder was looming close and Amanda Stark would be the victim. Even worse, there was every indication that there was nothing we could do would stop it from happening unless something suddenly led us to the killer's doorstep; and that was something that seemed less probable with every moment that passed. The unspeakable horror that no one wished to voice was simply the fact that it would most likely be the exact catalyst it was going to take to resurrect this case.

A sixth violent murder was the other shoe we all abhorred, but knew would strike the floor no matter what we did. Until then, the investigation was all but dead.

So, expectantly, we waited.

As we approached the final hours of the week, within each of us the mainspring of tension was twisted tightly in upon itself. With the coil of stress hovering a mere quarter-turn from the point where that clockwork spring would violently release, the internal mechanisms of our psyche's kicked into high gear. In defense of our own individual sanities we all became mindless automatons. Each moment was spent awaiting the heavy soled thud that would return us to a horrific reality, and with any

luck, provide us with a tangible lead.

With the investigation at a standstill, a frighteningly eerie apathy had epoxied itself to the city of Saint Louis. While the search for this serial killer officially remained a priority, bureaucrats were in control of the purse strings and decisions made behind closed doors routed tax dollars to projects viewed as more important by those in power. Overtime for the members of the MCS became a thing of the past and officers were shifted and shuffled to meet the demands of other cases. Suddenly, the round the clock protections originally provided for those believed to be on the killer's list became little more than semi-frequent drive-by's courtesy of the local police departments.

Adding insult to injury, Detective Deckert was forced to reluctantly absent himself to fill in for a vacationing colleague with the County Homicide division. Shortly thereafter the FBI recalled Special Agent Mandalay, assigning her to tend other duties deemed more critical in light of the stalled manhunt. Ben continued to head up what was left of the effort, even with the greatly reduced staff.

And then there was me.

While I was still listed as a consultant for the MCS, there was very little for me to consult about. With each cut or contusion that inexplicably appeared on my arm I became a barometer by which we knew, or at least suspected, that Amanda Stark was still among the living. Beyond that, I was relegated to playing the role of potential victim; watched over day and night by Ben and off duty officers who owed him for one reason or another.

The 'Ghoul Squad' was no more.

I was almost certain that the seemingly endless supply of favors owed my friend was in reality a rapidly mounting debt for him. While I knew he had markers he could call in, Felicity and I were never left alone and it would have taken one man several lifetimes to accumulate such a surplus of obligations. Fortunately, Carl and Constance took it upon themselves to fill whatever shifts they could and I knew they were doing it out of friendship and not for the trade off.

My daily objections always fell on deaf ears with Ben. It didn't matter to him that I felt it unfair that I should receive protection when the other potential targets weren't; or even that I was worried about what he would end up owing to the parade of cops who came in and out of my home. He had told me before that he was going to protect his 'corner of the world,' and there was no stopping him from doing just that—whatever it took.

Truth was, I was actually relieved to have them there. Not so much for my own safety as for the peace of mind it gave me knowing I wouldn't have to worry about Felicity if something happened. The real debt being accumulated was on my end. I owed my friends in a big way.

When the long anticipated other shoe finally did meet the floor, the resulting explosive crash instantly reduced our anxious calm to shimmering crystalline shards that fell abrasively upon the landscape.

It didn't seem like we had been in bed any time at all when I awoke to heavy handed pounding on our bedroom door blended with the distant sound of my name being urgently called. Strategically placed within the stream of noise a duet of angry barks and growls filled out the cacophonous melody. At first, I thought it was nothing more than the dying remnants of a dream as I strained to listen in the darkness and heard only the rhythmic in and out rush of ocean waves droning from a compact disk set on repeat. I had been using the natural sounds for a meditation aid as I urged myself back toward center—not that I had been overly successful. Apparently, on this night, Felicity and I had fallen asleep with the player still running.

I gave a moment's consideration to answering the phantom voice and decided I should check the time first. I rolled to the side and before my eyes were even fully open a square fist of pain rained a double jab down upon my forearm. I winced as I started to move the appendage and sent the agony in a reverberating right hook up through my elbow and into my shoulder. Reflexively I reached for the origin of the torture and was presented with a handful of sticky wetness far beyond anything that had occurred in the past septet of days.

I knew instantly that the voice had not been a dream at all.

"Goddammit, Rowan! Felicity! Wake up!" Ben Storm's muffled demand joined once more with his frantic hammering against the bedroom door and again the dogs loudly announced their displeasure in return.

"Hold on," I managed to croak out through the pain as I sent my hand searching for the switch on the bedside lamp.

By now the commotion had awakened my wife and she was groggily dragging herself up from her pillow while yawning, "What's going on?"

"Ben's at the door," I groaned as I continued to grope for the light.

"Are you alright?" Felicity questioned as she tossed back the blankets and rolled out of the bed. "You sound like you're in pain."

My hand brushed across the switch and I fumbled with it for a moment before snapping the device to life. The first thing to meet my eyes was the smear of blood on the nightstand where I had been feeling around. The second was the blood soaked patches on the bed sheets. The third was the puckering Monogram of Christ carved deeply into a purplish welt on my forearm. Blood continued to ooze thickly from the symbol as I stared at it with a dejected frown.

"Oh Gods, Rowan!" my wife yelped as her bleary eyes fell across the wound. Till now she had only seen the monogram as fading pink scars on my flesh and the variety of tortures of the past week had never achieved this level of trauma. This was the first time she had witnessed the stigmata in full gory bloom.

The pain was already starting to subside. My ethereal tormentor had my full attention and the added push of suffering was no longer needed. "It's okay. I'll be all

right," I told her. "Let Ben in. I'm pretty sure I know what he wants." I glanced at the clock and saw that my earlier thought had been correct. We hadn't been in bed long at all. It was only ten thirty-four.

"Jeezus H. Christ..." Ben muttered from behind his hand as he covered the lower half of his face in an attempt to ward off a sweetly vile stench.

My wife and I were following suit as the malodor grew in intensity with each intake of breath.

With February racing toward a close the ever-changeable pattern of St. Louis' weather had executed a backflip and the jet stream was temporarily exacting kindness on the Midwest. The mercury had been hovering a healthy handful of degrees above the freezing point for a few days now in a practice run for the spring thaw. The combination of patchy leftover snow, evaporation, and temperature created the ideal condition for the misty fog that was now rolling in upon us. In a matter of hours it would be an opaque grey veil obscuring everything it touched, but for now it was a clammy humidity that carried with it the stink of burning flesh.

Through the teaming haze that forewarned of the coming thickness a discordant flurry of attention-grabbing emergency lights generated blurry star-filtered patterns in the air. Emanating from no less than five Metropolitan St. Louis City police cruisers, two fire engines, one emergency rescue vehicle, and an undetermined number of cars belonging to detectives with the Major Case Squad the area was a cluster of strobing illumination. Each pulsing flicker of luminescence was immediately blended, bisected, and bounced in triangular directions by the silvery stainless steel plates that composed the *Gateway Arch*.

A sharp twinge insinuated itself through my nerve endings and I absently reached to my wounded forearm as we walked, feeling the soreness swell throughout. I wasn't sure why the pain had suddenly returned but I feared perhaps another mark might be appearing soon.

Felicity had hastily bandaged my arm while we both shrugged into clothes in record time—record time at least for someone who was not a firefighter. All the while Ben had impatiently waited in the living room where earlier he had been keeping vigil. His anxious shuffling was marbled throughout with frustrated 'hurry up's' and 'come on you two's.' When all was said and done we were ready to go in less than five minutes. It had only seemed longer. With my friend behind the wheel of his van and the corner of the roof adorned with his own madly flickering red emergency light, traffic signs and speed limits became instantly null and void. In just less than twenty minutes from the time we left the driveway we sped down the park access road and jerked to a halt on the grounds of the *Jefferson National Expansion Memorial*.

Now that we were here, I would just as soon have been almost anyplace else. And the more I dwelled on that desire, the more my arm began to throb.

An ashen-faced rookie clad in the uniform of the City Police department was just unfurling a roll of bright yellow barrier tape when we signed in to the crime scene. The vacant look in his glassy eyes was reminiscent of inner redolence brought on by abject horror. His cold emptiness combined with the unmistakable fetor wafting from a point several dozen yards behind him acted as a harbinger of the abomination we were about to witness.

"Who's running the scene?" Ben asked the officer while Felicity and I penned our names on the log.

"Detective McLaughlin," he answered distantly.

I had grounded myself before leaving the van and thankfully, for the moment at least, I didn't seem to be having any trouble maintaining the connection. However, compared to my normal level of ethereal protections, the shield I had cast about myself was a fragile eggshell in danger of cracking at any moment. Unwanted visions were angrily demanding ingress through the porous envelope and the fearful disgust felt by the young man was already seeping through to bathe me with frigid anxiety. What he had witnessed had brought him close to his own personal threshold and I could feel his need to retreat.

The emotion injected itself into me, gelling in my heart and oozing outward through arteries and veins to poison my body on the whole. I had to beat back an overwhelming desire to turn and flee. My forearm tensed as blackjacks of pain threatened to crush it.

"She with the body?" Ben prodded information from the traumatized officer.

The uniformed man simply nodded as if his voice had left him and continued mechanically about the task of cordoning off the area.

Our end-on angle of approach to the South leg of the metal half-parabola had obscured our view when we arrived. Now, as we ventured past the young officer and toward the active portion of the scene the sickening charred odor grew thicker with each step. The lighter tang of kerosene slipped through the heaviness to layer itself with the fetid stench and lift it higher on the moist night air, making it inescapable.

"Look, I know you've been havin' some kind of problem with the 'hocus-pocus' stuff, Row," Ben stated as we walked. "So if you don't think you can handle this... "

"I have to handle it," I answered matter-of-factly as his voice trailed off even though I desperately wanted to grab his offer of escape and run as far away as it would let me.

That very thought brought another blinding stab of pain to bear on my forearm. I could feel the warmth of the blood soaking through the bandages and trickling along my skin.

"No you don't." He stopped in his tracks and turned to me. "You've been way too weirded out on this whole thing, Row. I don't know what's goin' on, but you ain't right white man. Especially here lately."

"Ben is right, Rowan," Felicity added with more than a hint of personal fear in her voice. "You aren't balanced and you know it. Maybe we should wait at the van."

"You can wait there if you want," I offered, "but I don't have any choice in this."

"The hell you don't!" my friend admonished. "I just gave you a choice and I'm damn near ready to make it an order. I should cuff your ass and park you in a squad!"

"Do it now then because that's the only way you're going to stop me."

"What the fuck? Stop you?" he appealed angrily. "Just what the hell has gotten into you, Rowan?"

"I was summoned here, Ben," I told him with absolute conviction. "Just as I was summoned to all of the other scenes."

"You were what?"

I thrust my arm out for them both to see. Though the fabric of my shirt and jacket covered it I knew all they would need to see was my bare hand. In the wildly choreographed splash of lights, the crimson rivulets of fresh blood streaking it were plain to see. I winced as yet another stab of pain twisted through the hot flesh.

Felicity closed her eyes and sighed.

Ben merely shook his head and muttered, "Jeezus, white man."

"Do you think I WANT to be here?" I asked. "Do you think I actually WANT to see what this sick bastard is doing to innocent people? Trust me, I've let the thought of running from this investigation cross my mind more than a few times tonight. I didn't invite these marks to appear on my arm. Someone on the other side who is trying to tell me something is putting them there, and if I can believe the last dream I had that someone is Kendra Miller."

"But what is she trying to tell you?" Felicity pleaded.

"I still don't know. But I can tell you this—every single time I've thought about turning and running from this the pain has intensified. Judging from the bleeding my guess is that this wound has gotten worse, not better. The last time I didn't pay attention to one of these marks I ended up with pool water in my lungs."

"And Christine Webster had been drowned... " my friend admitted quietly.

"This time he killed with fire again. I really don't want getting my attention to progress to that step if you know what I mean." I fell silent and allowed my arm to drop back to my side. Ben and Felicity simply stared at me. After a moment I let out a long sigh. "I'm here for a reason. I was summoned. I don't have a choice until I figure out what that reason is."

"You still aren't grounding very well," Felicity softly intoned with a razor sharp edge of seriousness in her voice.

"I know," I answered simply.

"So what about all the *Twilight Zone* stuff?" Ben questioned. "You mentioned

something about not bein' grounded the other day when you had that backlash thing. Isn't it dangerous?"

"It can be," I assented.

"Yes, it can, so I suppose you leave me no choice either then." Felicity shook her head. "Someone has to be there to keep you from going too far."

As we rounded the base of the Arch, the picture of the horror was revealed to us at first in small, disorganized sections. It took several moments of pondering the scene before the pieces began to interlock into a meaningful panorama.

Disheveled detectives in various modes of dress, most looking as though they were just dragged kicking and screaming from the warmth of their beds, were milling about in a loose group. One of the throng was interviewing a pair of uniformed officers and another was talking to a Park Ranger who looked to be just this side of hysterics.

CSU technicians focused their attentions on a lamppost at the landing of the stairs that led down from the park grounds above. Flash units added their intense brilliance to the dancing lightshow as techs took pictures of the metal pole as well as the marred concrete surrounding it. White residue caked itself to sections of the post and spread out across the walkway to partially obscure a spray painted rendering of the ever familiar Monogram of Christ. A few feet away, a tented marker inscribed with the number two rested on the ground next to a carelessly abandoned and recently used fire extinguisher.

Other members of the CSU were closely scanning the stairs with powerful lights, searching for anything out of place. Every now and then one of them would pause, stare intently, and then with an almost dejected fall of the shoulders, continue on.

Near this tightly contained work envelope a white sheet covered something roughly the size and shape of an average human being. Plastic IV tubes snaked beneath the fabric and the detritus of various emergency medical supplies littered the ground. Two chalky looking paramedics were carefully and systematically returning the tools of their trade back to their respective cases.

My temples were already beginning to throb.

A trim figure clad in blue jeans and a leather bomber's jacket stood apart from the center of the activity. I instantly recognized her as a City Homicide Detective who had pulled several shifts watching over Felicity and me.

Detective Charlene 'Charlee' McLaughlin stood almost motionless, her right arm across her chest, palm cupping her left elbow as the appendage angled upward to rest her loose fist against her chin. She stared quietly at the shrouded body, her eyes wide and glazed. She hazarded only a brief, lethargic glance at us as we drew closer.

We stood wordlessly for a long measure before Ben finally broke the silence in a solemn voice, "Fill me in, Charlee."

"Caucasian, female. Tied to the lamppost and torched," she said in a thick monotone. "She was still alive when I got here, Ben."

My friend allowed the comment to rest for a beat before continuing, "You okay?"

"Yeah." Charlee nodded her head under a thick shag of ash blonde hair. "Yeah, I'll be all right."

"They work on her long?"

"Ten minutes. Maybe fifteen. She arrested pretty soon after they got here," she detailed with a deep sigh. "Probably for the best. From what the Paramedics said she most likely wouldn't have lived through the night anyway. Just would have been that much more suffering for her."

"Yeah, well she shouldn't have had to suffer at all," my friend expressed dully. "Any witnesses?"

"Not that we've found yet but I've got some uniforms out looking. I'm not expecting much, I mean, look where we are." She tossed her hands out palms upward and glanced around. "Not much activity around here in the middle of the night."

"Yeah, but we can always hope. What about the Ranger?"

"He's giving a statement to Ackman right now. He told me she was already on fire when he pulled up. Says he didn't even realize she was a person until he started on her with the extinguisher. Called nine one-one as soon as the fire was out. The uniforms with Osthoff were first on the scene."

No one had noticed that I was drifting closer to the sheet-covered corpse. Even Felicity was so involved in listening to the conversation that she had missed my slow but steady movement as well. I wasn't even consciously aware of it until I found myself kneeling next to the body.

"Don't suppose there was an ID?"

"No, she was nude, just like the others, and the fire didn't help of course... but from what we can tell she does fit the description of Amanda Stark. We'll have to wait on the Coroner for a positive.

"We did find a Bible." She pointed at the stairs where another tented marker, this time adorned with the number one, stood next to a book.

"What'd the asshole have to say this time?"

"Pretty straightforward," Detective McLaughlin answered. "Exodus 22:18. Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

"At least he's consistent," Ben spat. "I hate to ask, but did the victim say anything before she died?"

"Actually yeah. Didn't make much sense and to be honest I'm not sure I heard her right considering what the fire did to her throat and all, but I'd almost swear she said 'truck'."

I barely heard her utter the word before my own scream of agony exploded into the foggy night.

CHAPTER 24

"Amanda Marie Stark, in accordance with the thirty-third question, in as much as you stand accused of the heresy of WitchCraft by another of your kind, and as you have admitted these crimes and remain still impenitent... "

Terror, cold and absolute punctures my bowels.

I don't know how long he has had me captive but it seems as though it has been forever.

I don't know how I have endured all that has been done to me.

My mind races.

I remember the taste of a lime green snow-cone on a sweltering summer day when I was seven.

I remember getting caught cheating on an algebra exam.

I remember that I have dry cleaning to pick up.

I don't know why I remember the things I do.

I just do.

I still feel the fear.

Why did I answer the door that night?

I wasn't expecting anything.

Delivery trucks don't run that late anyway.

What was I thinking?

"In as much as you have been found guilty, and that you are damned in body and soul, your sentence on this day is death. The sentence is to be executed immediately, without appeal, in the manner of expurgation by fire. "

A single spark in the night.

A faint flickering glow.

A bright explosion fills the darkness.

Fire billows upward across my nude body.

The heat is beyond imagination.

I remember burning my hand as a small child.

I remember the fear.

I feel it anew.

"May the Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon your soul." The angry voice reaches me through the rush of the fire.

I hold my breath.

I twist against my bonds.

I want to scream.

That damn truck.

A cold steel talon rips into my shoulder and I feel myself wrenched violently backward. Cacophonous screaming pierces my eardrums as I hurtle upward.

Downward.

Forward.

Backward.

I no longer know.

I spiral through nothingness.

I am blind.

I am omniscient.

Colors bleed and disappear. Greyness blooms and contrasts itself against the backdrop of space.

A random chord plays out of sync with the universe.

My heart stops.

My heart races.

My lungs tighten and burn.

Hot yellow fire explodes past me.

Thick fog douses the flame.

Reality slams into me full force as dull color erupts into view.

"ROWAN!" Felicity screamed my name as she shook me hard.

I gasped in a deep breath as I snapped my eyes open and stared back at my wife. Ben and 'Charlee' were kneeling on the ground with her and everything was moving in a mad rush. I saw 'Charlee' gesturing at the Paramedics and Ben frantically saying something I couldn't make out.

I could feel the warm barrier of Felicity's own shields as she cast them around me to ward off the vision I had inflicted upon myself. My earlier ground had been severed the moment I allowed the veil between life and death to be pierced. I would

never have been able to cling to this plane of existence had she not intervened.

Though the supernatural connection between Amanda Stark and myself was effectively cut, the stream of consciousness that had been set into motion was forging ahead unhindered. Memories I might otherwise have considered random flashed before me in an endless stream, repetitive and disorganized. Folding one into the next like an insane exercise in origami.

"... Tracy gived it to me. Did'ju see thuh truck too?"

Delivery trucks don't run that late anyway.

*"... I'm not sure I heard her right considering
what the fire did to her throat
and all, but I'd almost
swear she said
'truck.'"*

I'm crossing the street. A large, black panel van rolls past. A patina of grey and white from salt and road grime dusts its dark exterior.

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

*A multi pitched mechanical groan emits from
beneath the van, audibly announcing
the improperly meshed gears.
A cold tingle dances
up my spine and
my scalp
tightens
painfully.*

My head is killing me. The thick rush of blood fills my ears

in pulsing time with the hammering inside my skull. The sound of a metal sliding door, badly in need of adjustment and lubrication forces itself past the din...

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

I look up the street to check for traffic and see only what appears to be a large delivery van parked parallel to the curb.

"... I toad her about thuh truck."

"... Did'ju see thuh truck too?"

"... But I'd almost swear she said 'truck'."

A sharp icpick of agony bites deeply into the core of my being as a black panel van, greyed with a patina of salt and grime pulls away from the curb. The low mechanical roar is underscored by the high-pitched grind of recalcitrant gears as the vehicle accelerates and hooks almost angrily around the corner.

*That damn truck.
Delivery trucks don't run that late anyway.*

"... But I'd almost swear she said 'truck'."

"... But I'd almost swear she said 'truck'. "

"ROWAN!" My wife's determined voice once again waded through the flotsam of remembrances.

The present collapsed inward to replace the rampant kaleidoscope of the past pin wheeling through my mind and the stream of thoughts crashed forcefully into the wall of reality.

"She did say truck," I whispered as the snippets of visions and conversations blended into a solid, tangible deduction.

"What?" Felicity asked as she searched my face. She had stopped the insistent shaking but her hands remained tightly entwined in my shirt.

"She did... " My voice came as thin wisp once again and I aborted the sentence to clear my throat before finally continuing in a stronger tone. "She did say truck. The killer is driving an old delivery truck."

As I voiced the revelation I could almost physically sense the dull pestilence of confusion as it drained from my being.

The disconcerting light show had lessened considerably once the fire trucks and rescue vehicle had departed the scene. The Coroner's Hearse would be arriving in due course and Amanda Stark's remains would be zipped into a body bag and driven the short distance to the morgue. Even now the CSU technicians were packing up and the crime scene would soon be officially cleared.

"That's right, a dark colored panel van. Probably black. Like a delivery truck," Ben said into his cell phone and shot me a questioning glance at the end of the sentence.

I nodded assent and mouthed the color.

"Yeah, I can hold for a second."

Once I had convinced he and Felicity that I was okay we had moved away from the crime scene proper to put some distance between Amanda Stark's corpse and me. My wife was diligently maintaining preternatural defenses around the both of us, but the physical distance was an added measure of safety. I was feeling particularly helpless at having to depend upon her for protection in an arena I was so familiar with but I was also beginning to feel confident that my vulnerability was rapidly coming to its end. At almost the very instant the staccato barrage of memories had cemented themselves into a single lucid and meaningful thought I had automatically grounded. The connection had remained strong and unchallenged since and the adjunct to my recent revelation that came as a deep feeling of calm was still with me. Things were starting to make sense.

"So how're you feelin'?" Ben addressed me with a stab of his finger while he was placed on hold. Out of habit he shifted the mouthpiece back out of the way as he spoke.

"You're actin' like you just came out of a coma or somethin'."

"In a way I did," I confessed. "I think maybe my inability to connect the dots is the reason I've been so out of it."

"You've had trouble makin' sense of stuff before and it's never done this to ya'. Why now?"

"I think it might go back to that night at the morgue... "

Ben held up a finger in a 'hold that thought' motion as he was summoned back to the phone. "Yeah, black," he repeated to the person at the other end. "So, what I need you to do is pull all the motor vehicle registrations for panel vans in the city and county, then cross reference the owners against their DMV files. Start with black ones and work into the other colors if you don't get a hit. What we're lookin' for is a male, over six feet, most likely Caucasian, mid to late thirties."

He listened to the device for a moment then barked into the mouthpiece once again, "You've got computers don't ya? Uh-huh, yeah... So turn 'em back on or whatever. Whaddaya mean you can't? Yeah, well your maintenance schedule isn't my problem. No, tomorrow afternoon isn't good enough. You've got till I get there which is about," he stole a quick glance at his wristwatch, "ten minutes from now... Uh-huh... Sure... Well I guess you'd better get started then shouldn't ya'? Yeah? Well right back at ya'."

My friend stabbed the device off with a disgusted frown then tucked it into his jacket pocket. "Sorry 'bout that. So what about the morgue?"

"The night I channeled Kendra Miller," I continued. "I don't think that connection was ever fully severed. What's been happening to me ever since has probably been me channeling her frustration at not being able to get her message across."

"And?"

"And it just created a vicious circle," I expounded. "As I channeled her frustration I became even more disconnected and frustrated myself. I was trying so hard to understand that I wasn't focusing. For want of a better analogy, I couldn't see the forest for the trees."

He took a moment to smooth his hair and give his neck a thoughtful massage before resting back against the side of his van and folding his arms across his chest.

"Okay, so I guess that would explain why you've been all fucked up," he finally stated. "Ta' be honest I was just beginnin' to think you'd gone off the deep end."

"You and me both."

"Okay, now what's the deal about the delivery truck outside police headquarters?"

"Like I said," I explained. "It was the day you brought Allen Roberts in for questioning. That night, when I left the station the killer was waiting for me. If it hadn't been for the fact that an officer came up right behind me at the street corner I'd probably have been the latest victim."

"So why the hell didn't you say something about it before now?"

"Because until now it was just another delivery van parked on the street. I didn't know that it was the killer stalking me," I answered. "I'll admit that at the time something did seem familiar, but I was still fighting a headache from our session with

the old guy, not to mention everything else that had happened that day. Plus, by that time I'd been so far out of it that nothing clicked and I just spaced it off. Now that everything has come together it seems obvious. The sound was really the key."

"How so?"

"It's the way the transmission sounded when he drove past me that night at the station. When I channeled Kendra Miller at the morgue I heard the same grinding sound in the background. It didn't seem to fit, but I can't say that I know exactly what you're supposed to hear when you're being burned alive, so I just wrote it off. When we arrived at the Cherrywood Trails crime scene, a plain black panel van passed right in front of us when we were crossing the street. Remember? The driver slowed down and when he shifted gears, there was the same high-pitched grinding noise."

"So this bastard was right there when we arrived at the Christine Webster scene and we missed him?"

"He's probably been within sight at every one of the scenes, Ben," I returned. "Even tonight."

"It would stand to reason," Felicity chimed in. "If he truly believes in what he is doing he will want to see his mission completed. He'll want to see that the people have gathered 'in the town square' so to speak. To know that they have witnessed the wrath of God."

"Yeah, great," Ben muttered. "So he could be watchin' us right now."

"Not likely." I shook my head. "He's not stupid, and like I've said before he's not doing this for the thrill. Once he sees that his work has been witnessed he will move on. Just like the Cherrywood Trails crime scene. He just drove by. He didn't stop and mingle with the crowd."

"So if he just cruised by on Memorial Drive and saw the lights and activity he woulda been happy?"

"Probably."

My friend rubbed his large hand across his chin and huffed a misty breath into the fog before giving his watch another glance. "Okay, so look, I've gotta go back to the station and kick some ass on this whole DMV thing. I really doubt there's anything you can do to help so we might as well get ya' back home so you can get some sleep.

"Now, Mandalay wasn't scheduled to come over and relieve me till about five-thirty so I need to find someone to watch ya' till she gets there."

"I think we'll be fine for a few hours, Ben," I offered. "He's already performed an execution tonight."

"Yeah, so? Last time he went on a rampage he killed three people in a night, not just one."

"True, but he held Amanda Stark captive for a week and we're pretty sure what

was happening to my arm was a good indication of what he was doing to her during that period. It's not hard to guess what he was after. You can bet that his list of names has grown considerably and we don't really know that he's following a particular order. I may not even be a priority anymore."

"But you don't know that for sure," he chided.

"Well no, I don't."

"Then I'm finding someone to watch you until Mandalay shows up."

For the second time in a single night I was awakened by the sound of urgent pounding on my bedroom door. Also for the second time in that same night I was fairly certain that I hadn't been in bed for very long. At least this time, when I rolled over to look at the clock, the insistent pain of an ethereal symbol tattooing itself into my arm didn't greet me as it had done earlier.

"Mister Gant," Detective McLaughlin's urgent voice came from the other side of the door and was followed by another round of rapid knocking.

"Just a sec," I called out.

Bleary eyed, but feeling whole for the first time in almost two weeks, I climbed from the bed and shushed the dogs. After quickly pulling on my jeans I opened the door.

'Charlee' McLaughlin was possessed of a fresh, farmer's daughter kind of face that bordered on the quintessential definition of cute. On any given day her youthful appearance betrayed no indication whatsoever that she had recently turned forty.

Looking at her now, I would have guessed her age far beyond those four decades.

Her face was drawn tight and absent of any color save for a chalky white pallor. Worry creased her brow and absolute terror filled her eyes. My mind shunted immediately into high gear as it raced through the various scenarios that placed a killer at my door.

"What's wrong?" I stammered and took a half step back as the latest of the possibilities flashing in my head had the killer already in the house and forcing her to awaken us.

"Mister Gant, I have to leave," she told me in a frantic tone as she struggled into her leather jacket. "My husband just called me. Our daughter was in an accident and they've taken her to the hospital."

"Oh Gods!" Felicity's voice came from behind me as she roused from the bed. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Charlee answered, her eyes beginning to shine with the first warning of tears. "Scott said something about the fog, a drunk driver and emergency surgery. I'm supposed to meet him at the hospital."

She was already starting to shake.

"Go," I told her. "We'll be fine."

"No," she shook her head and gave me a pleading look. "You have to come with me. Agent Mandalay won't be here for another three hours and I can't leave you alone."

I started to object, but before I could form the words the gremlin named 'Reason' whispered in my ear. 'Charlee' needed to be with her daughter and it was a very real possibility that time was not on her side. I instantly realized that arguing the point was the last thing I needed to do right now. Especially when that argument would be with a distraught mother who carried a gun.

My unspoken objection turned inside out to become a concession. "Okay. Give us just a minute to get dressed."

From the time Ben had bestowed upon me the loaded and holstered *Glock 17* it had been making its home in my sock drawer. As far as I was concerned it could have stayed that way, and since I really hadn't left the house for the past seven days it never presented itself as a problem. Earlier in the evening however, when we had left for the crime scene, my friend had displayed his militant attitude about the weapon and badgered me into wearing it. When we arrived back home the only thought on my mind was crawling into bed and sleeping until spring. My clothes were a non-concern and they ended up in a less than neat pile gracing a chair in the corner of our bedroom. Now, due to our haste, the sidearm was still attached to my belt beneath the folds of my jacket and it was feeling incredibly awkward.

As we exited the house the full effects of the shifting weather pattern met us immediately. In the matter of a few hours the clammy mist had thickened into a full-blown shroud of wet fog. Distant streetlights had become dim yellow globes of illumination unnaturally suspended in the white emptiness. From our front porch we could barely make out Detective McLaughlin's sedan sitting in our driveway.

"Which hospital?" I asked as we hurried down the stairs.

"University," she replied as she shakily fumbled with her car keys and succeeded only in dropping them. Her cool, professional detachment had fled in the face of a family crisis.

Felicity was quick to scoop the key ring from the flagstone sidewalk. "Why don't you let one of us drive?"

'Charlee' still maintained enough of her wits to realize that my wife's offer was the safest bet for all concerned and quickly nodded the affirmative.

I was just preparing to climb into the rear seat of her Taurus when further up the street, in the near distance, a set of headlights sparked to life. A low, mechanical roar overtook the night, underscored by the high-pitched grind of recalcitrant gears as a dirty black panel van pulled away from the curb and accelerated past us.

CHAPTER 25

I blinked hard as I swiveled my head to follow the dusky red taillights of the old delivery truck. I simply couldn't believe what I was witnessing. A pair of heartbeats skipped up to my throat before slamming into the pit of my stomach then slowly rising back to my chest.

"No. That couldn't have been..." Detective McLaughlin stammered at me across the roof of her car.

"Call Ben," I stated evenly as I pushed the car door closed and started toward the back of the house with my hand digging in my pocket.

"Rowan! NO!" Felicity called after me.

I ignored her initial appeal as it echoed in my ears. By now I was sprinting and I had made my decision. 'Charlee' needed to get to the hospital right away, not to mention that I doubted her effectiveness with her being as distressed as she was. The killer already had a head start and I didn't want his lead to grow any wider. I couldn't let this chance slip past without even trying. I had no choice but to pursue him myself.

"ROWAN!" my wife screamed again.

"MISTER GANT!" Detective McLaughlin's voice rang in behind.

"I'm just going to follow him!" I yelled back over my shoulder in an attempt to thwart the objections.

I continued my rush down the driveway through the open gate and punched my key into the truck's door lock. It took a pair of clumsy twists from my trembling hand to rotate the key in the proper direction and I still re-locked it once before getting it right. As I swung the door open I called back to my wife a final time, "Call Ben now! Tell him to call me on my car phone!"

The engine rolled over immediately and as I flipped on the headlights I pressed my thumb against the switch to ignite the yellow fog lamps mounted on the grill. With a jerk I pulled the shift lever down to drive and leaned on the gas. The truck was already in motion before I had the door fully closed.

Steering with my knees I thrust my left arm through the shoulder harness and dragged it across my chest and lap with my right. Grasping the steering wheel once again I struggled with the belt, fighting to slip the metal connecting finger into its receiver. Each time I would force it down the end would catch under the nylon holster attached to my side. In frustration I finally aborted the quest as Detective McLaughlin's car blocked my egress and I needed both hands to crank the truck into

a shallow turn through my front yard then over the curb.

I glanced quickly into my rearview mirror but the fog had spilled into the void behind me, obscuring everything.

At least two minutes had expired since the panel van had roared past the end of my driveway. Not a very long span of time at all in the grand scheme of things; a complete lifetime when you are that far behind someone you are chasing in a dense fog.

I jammed on the brakes as a stop sign erupted out of the mist and the truck slid to a halt on the wet pavement where the entrance to our subdivision made a 'T' with the main road. The delivery truck was nowhere in sight as I threw a hard look in either direction. Turning right would take me into the business district of Briarwood. Turning left would take me to Highway Forty.

The in-dash stereo was set at a medium volume and a haunting feminine voice was chanting from the speakers as the loaded CD picked up where it had last been shut off. The tempo of the song made a sudden leap and I pressed the vehicle forward, hooking into a screeching left turn. In less than thirty seconds the lights of the overpass were before me and as I slowed I was once again faced with a decision.

East or West.

To the West were Millchester, Wallfield, Waynesville, and straight on to Kansas City. To the East were access to northbound one-seventy or the St. Louis City Limits and eventually the PSB across the river to Illinois. Everything in my being told me that if I were going to run, west would be the direction that *I* would take. But it wasn't me that was running.

I punched the accelerator and cranked the steering wheel hard to the right, propelling the truck down the ramp and onto eastbound Highway Forty. The speedometer needle rotated smoothly upward passing fifty, sixty, then clearing seventy. As it struggled toward ninety a pair of dull red spots appeared in the dense white curtain. Seconds later they veered onto the Hanley/Eager off-ramp.

I followed them.

Catching up to the delivery truck was definitely a part of my plan. Actually catching it wasn't. I wanted only to keep track of him until the professionals with badges and handcuffs arrived, so I backed off the accelerator on the approach to Hanley and watched carefully as he made the almost U-shaped turn through the intersection and onto Eager road. He didn't seem to be in a hurry so I had to assume he felt he was safely away and that no one was in pursuit. Either that or I was chasing the wrong guy. The growing throb in my temples told me that the latter was unlikely.

I reached to the dash as I rolled to a halt at the top of the ramp and extinguished the headlamps and fog lights. Waiting for a nervous three count I then made my own arc through the intersection and continued blindly down the road. Using the faint glow of the distant overpass lights for guidance in the failing visibility I pressed along right at the speed limit, hoping all the while that I wasn't appearing as an on-again, off-again phantom shadow in his oversized side view mirrors.

It was only a minute before I reached the terminus of one-seventy where it emptied into Eager, eastbound Highway Forty, or directly into the entrance of the Briarwood Shopping Mall. I lightly braked to slow myself as I came under the illumination of the powerful lights regularly spaced along the Mall parking area on my left. As I watched ahead the van hooked a casual right, slipping under the Highway Forty overpass and into the northbound lanes of the Innerbelt. I waited for another cautious count of three, then switched on only my headlights this time and followed along a respectable distance behind.

My temples were really starting to ache.

More than fifteen minutes had elapsed and I was beginning to feel like I was in hot pursuit of the proverbial white Bronco as we tooled along at a speed exactly matching the posted limit. In an attempt to remain undetected I held back a fair distance, always making sure to keep the van's tail lights in sight, but just barely. Other traffic on the highway had been sparse at the beginning and was now nonexistent so I even went so far as to exit and fire up the fog lights before shooting straight across and down the ramp on the opposite side of the overpass. I could only hope that if he had noticed my lights in his rearview mirror that a different configuration would bely any suspicions he might have.

I shot a quick glance at the clock on the in dash stereo and saw that we were coming up on a solid twenty minutes since I had begun my lone chase. Ben still had not called. I resisted the sudden urge to panic as the realization blended with the bizarre reality I was making for myself. There could be a million reasons why he hadn't called me yet, but I was damned if I could think of any of them at this particular moment. Concerned, I reached for my cell phone.

My decision to take the initiative was immediately aborted as I directed my attention back through the windshield and past the slapping wiper blades to the taillights bracketing the silhouette of a large panel van. My momentary lapse of attention had led me off my pace and I had now gained on the vehicle, easily placing my truck within view of his mirrors. I may not have been visible to him myself but it was a sure bet he knew my vehicle and at this decreased distance he would be able to see its outline as well as I could see his.

The earlier stab of panic forced itself between my shoulder blades and I backed off the accelerator. I could already feel a cold sweat breaking out across my forehead as I tried to nonchalantly veer onto the first exit ramp that presented itself.

I once again extinguished the fog lamps and sat watching the blinking red traffic

signal for a slow count of three, then added a second trio for good measure. This exit was a downhill ramp and the angle placed me well below where I could see the highway. I had to assume I had not been noticed and that I was being overzealous in my attempt to remain unseen. Pressing through the intersection I guided my truck up the on ramp, picking up speed as I went. So intent was my focus as I sought to catch up to the black panel van that I didn't notice it coming rapidly alongside to purposely block my merge.

Which one of us impacted the other first was a point of contention I wasn't particularly interested in arguing at the moment. The simple fact was that he had every intention of running me off the road and down the embankment. At this juncture he was succeeding beyond any shadow of a doubt.

The sound of creasing metal joined with his screaming gearbox and protesting engine to form a madman's symphony of anger. Inertia was on his side and with the van being much larger than my truck I was being forced at an angle onto the gravelly shoulder.

A stiletto of pain twisted behind my eyes as the earlier throb in my temples imploded. Blinking back tears I forced myself to remain focused. I fought to crank the steering wheel to the left and then floored the accelerator with no effect.

Reaching down I locked the shift lever into low four and gunned the engine once again. Loose gravel slung from beneath my tires as all four wheels engaged in a high-torque distribution of the power, but the measure was too little, too late, and met with only limited success. For every inch I would gain it seemed his mass would push me back three.

The passenger side door let out a dull scrape as the truck bounced against the metal post of a traffic sign and dragged slowly along. I could hear the hateful cry of the van's gears as he shifted to apply more force against my vehicle. If things continued at the current pace I was going to be rolling down a hill in less than half a minute.

In desperation I let off the gas and jammed on the brakes. As my truck continued scraping along the signpost I rammed the shift lever on the column into reverse while straightening out the wheels, then jumped on the gas pedal.

In the mixing din of the two battling engines my truck bucked against the van, and with the scream of ripping sheet metal, it lurched backward. I immediately pulled the steering wheel hard to the left to keep from propelling myself down the embankment or into the overpass abutment. There was a loud thud and the sound of shattering glass as the passenger side mirror was ripped from the door by the signpost. The front quarter panel dragged roughly against the metal stanchion and the corner of my bumper caught it hard, causing the truck to shudder, but I continued moving. The driver's side was still scraping against the side of the killer's vehicle as he continued his angle of attack.

Another loud crack issued as the driver's side mirror disintegrated against the black van and my truck made a sudden lurch rearward. The moment my headlights

cleared his bumper I slammed on the brakes and jerked to a halt.

The panel van itself leaped forward with equal force once the resistance of my truck had been removed. Without a moments hesitation he serpentine back into the lane and sped off.

A brief moment of calm ebbed through the cab as I sat watching the taillights of the van disappear into the thick fog. The fleeting instant of quiet was quickly replaced by the ambient noises around me.

A thick rush filled my ears and I realized that I was panting hard just to get air past the goiter of fear that was currently setting up house in my throat. The intense pain that had been ricocheting around inside my skull was now settling in for an extended stay and hadn't even begun to show signs of dulling. But worst of all, a violent itch had burst forth on my forearm and I knew it would soon be a festering wound. My best guess was that he had already kidnapped someone else before he ever came looking for me.

Through it all a dulcet toned singer was melodiously relaying a story about a highwayman and his one true love as the in-dash changer continued to randomly shuffle between the loaded CD's.

I pressed the stick into high four and cranked the shift on the column into drive. I had come this far and I wasn't about to lose him now, especially if he had someone in the van with him.

This had to end and stealth was suddenly no longer an issue.

It didn't take long for me to catch up to him. For all I know he wanted me to, but it didn't really matter. All that was important to me at this point was that he was not going to get away. I was charged by an absolute resolve to see to it no one else was made to suffer.

Everything I had seen in the past weeks was flashing before me in billowing Technicolor with an emotional soundtrack comprised of self-imposed guilt. I hadn't been able to pick out the clues we needed and people had died. I had been so off-center that a young woman had been tortured for an entire week, and even though I knew it was happening, I couldn't find a way to make it stop. Now, it was entirely possible that this killer had yet another victim in hand and I knew I would never be able to live with another Amanda Stark on my conscience.

We were now at the opposite end of the Innerbelt and making the wide arc onto the eastbound leg of highway two-seventy. There were still no other vehicles to be seen on the road and I fell in immediately behind him as we made the left hand merge into the empty fast lane.

My truck being lighter, I was now the one with the advantage. The speedometer needle climbed rapidly past eighty and had its sights set on ninety and beyond as I leaned on the accelerator and shot to the right to whip my vehicle up alongside his.

Looking to my left I saw the side of the large delivery truck looming ever closer as it angled into me once again. I jerked the steering wheel hard and shunted right while urging my truck to go faster.

The density of the fog still obscured everything save for the occasional cluster of lights to one side or the other of the highway. Every now and then an illuminated highway sign would appear overhead in a flash of green and white, then disappear behind us as if it had only been imagined.

The orange stylus of my speedometer was hovering just below the one hundred mile per hour hash mark and the steering wheel was beginning to vibrate. I locked my arms to hold the truck on course and the reverberations climbed up my arms to make my entire body shudder.

As we continued our weaving race, an old cliché passed through my head. There's never a cop around when you need one.

We had been trading positions for several miles now as we weaved back and forth across the eastbound traffic lanes in a high-speed game of tag. The corridor we traveled had narrowed quickly as highway two-seventy funneled down into two lanes in each direction. What seemed like a solid half hour had in reality been less than ten minutes. I was now positioned just off his right rear side and gaining fast. As I inched the nose of my truck up alongside I caught a subtle leftward lean of the van and anticipated his next move.

As he quickly jerked to the right I let off the gas and threw my own wheel to the left, crossing behind him, then punching down on the accelerator as my front bumper narrowly missed his rear. In a flash, not only had I gained but was now ahead of him by a half car length. With a yank I tilted my wheel back to the right and brought my truck directly in front of the van.

As I took my foot off the gas I stiffened my arms to brace myself against the coming impact.

Even with my body stiff in preparation, my head snapped back hard as my rear bumper took the blow. The truck lurched forward and I started pumping the brakes just before the van slammed into me once again.

The speedometer needle was dropping and I watched in my rearview mirror as the large delivery truck tried to veer around me. Even through the stabs of pain in my skull I anticipated his moves and canted my steering wheel with a frenzied motion to keep in front of him. Right now the only thing on my mind was stopping his vehicle. What I would do once I had accomplished that I still didn't know.

The van met me full force for a third time and remained locked against my bumper. We had dropped below eighty and I continued to pump the brakes as the indicator fell. We were barreling down the center of the highway, straddling the white

line. Tortured banshee cries screamed from my tires each time the brakes took hold. As our speed dropped below seventy I applied the pedal longer each time while still fighting with the steering wheel to keep him behind me.

Glowing lights slowly bloomed in the veil of grey mist before me, and I was soon able to discern the dim outline of an exit. Apparently, so could the killer.

As we came upon the ramp there was a sudden roar from behind as the engine in the panel van wound up against a lowered gear ratio. The screaming transmission protested the abuse it was receiving as it was downshifted mercilessly. Before I could react, the killer veered off onto the exit, clipping the right corner of my rear bumper hard and sending me into a shallow skid.

I reflexively twisted the steering wheel in the direction of the skid and pumped the brakes slowly. Each time they would catch the wet pavement the truck would slide further toward the center of the highway. As the bed of the truck whipped around I was now facing the opposite direction and I straightened the wheel as I jammed on the brakes hard.

The tortured squeal of rubber against asphalt married with the sound of scraping metal as the passenger side impacted the concrete barrier dividing the highway, and I jerked to a sudden halt.

I had finally stopped at a point twenty yards beyond the exit ramp on the Riverview Drive overpass. I was pointing west in the eastbound lanes and I was butted up against the concrete median so I couldn't see for sure where the van had gone. Without a second thought I let off the brake and jumped once again on the accelerator, shooting diagonally across the traffic lanes and making a hard left down the ramp.

At the bottom of the hill I locked up the brakes once again and slid to a halt with the battered nose of my truck sticking out into the intersection. I flipped a mental coin and turned left, ignoring the stop signs as I went. I was less than a mile down the road when my head began to clear and the throbbing pain that had once occupied it drained away.

I immediately slammed on the brakes and turned around.

The force five migraine returned as soon as I cleared the underpass heading south and I knew I couldn't be far behind him. My misaligned driver's side headlamp canted awkwardly at the pavement illuminating it in a harsh swath of blue-white. If it hadn't been for the bizarre angle at which it now shone, I probably would have missed the shining skid marks.

In June of nineteen twenty-nine the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge opened. The fifth bridge to cross the Mississippi, linking Missouri to Illinois, it was one of the longest continuous truss bridges in the country at slightly over one mile in length. By nineteen sixty-eight a newer, wider bridge had been opened up river, and the 'Old Lady' had been closed. After over thirty years of sitting silent, the structure had

finally been renovated for use as a pedestrian-only bridge linking hiking and biking trails on either side of the river.

It was here to which the skid marks led.

Yet again I applied my overtaxed brakes and slid the truck to a slightly canted halt. At this stage the bridge was only open on weekends between early spring and late autumn. A tall, chain link fence surrounded the entrance to what was originally a park-like area leading up to the old toll bridge. The wide gate that would normally be locked shut was now splayed open in a deformed mass, barely hanging from its hinges.

This close to the river the fog was nearing terminal density and visibility was threatening to disappear. I twisted the steering wheel and followed the marks through the ruined gate, advancing with caution as I pushed through the opening.

With my engine revving barely above idle I made my way around the left perimeter of the gravel parking area, fully expecting a large black panel van to loom dully in my headlights at any moment. It never did, and as I came upon the entrance proper to the old bridge, my fear was confirmed.

Two evenly spaced metal posts had been set at the mouth of the bridge to bar vehicular traffic from entering. The leftmost of the barrier posts was now slanted at an outward angle from a recent impact. If I strained to follow the beam of my one still-aligned headlamp I could just barely make out the iron gate slightly beyond the posts that was used to close off the entrance. Just like its chain link predecessor, this one had been violently flung open.

I slowly idled the truck up the ramp and between the metal barriers. The rampant itching on my forearm had intensified and joined with a painful soreness that I knew to be a precursor to yet another weeping stigmata. Urgent emotion was declaring that I needed to race across the bridge to catch up with my quarry before the gory symbol was brought into being. Bitter logic was arguing that I was crossing a bridge that hadn't been used by vehicles in over thirty years and that visibility was near zero.

My throbbing temples told me that he wasn't far away, so logic won out for a change.

Now at the opposite end of the scale from the earlier chase, I cautiously urged the truck along at just over ten miles per hour. The Old Chain of Rocks Bridge was only a two-lane structure and I steered up the center casting my intent gaze forward as I made my way along the slow incline.

The clinging mist combined with my headlights to create an eerie forced perspective. The rust marred superstructure rose around me to blend with the shadows. The lower beams bore a recent coat of dull green paint and a four-foot fence painted a bright blue lined each side. The sight line of the structure faded quickly into the veiled atmosphere to join with an imaginary vanishing point.

The old patched pavement before me was marred by graffiti imprinted upon it throughout the years of non-use. Some of it benign declarations of so-and-so-loves-so-and-so, some of it disgusting epithets, all of it enhanced by the

shiny wetness overlaying the asphalt.

I had traveled maybe a third of the distance across the bridge when I finally saw the red taillights of the panel van peering back at me like a pair of demonic eyes in the grey ether. I forced myself to maintain my wary pace and much to my surprise continued to gain on them. In less than a minute a perfect outline of the vehicle was visible and the swath of my headlamp fell across the back to reveal the rear doors hanging open.

In an automatic motion I halted the truck and pushed the gearshift into park. A demolition crew was now working with a jackhammer directly behind my eyes and the rabid itch on my forearm had mutated into a fiery burn. Somewhere within all of the pain it crossed my mind that I was suddenly in way over my head.

I sent my hand in search of my cell phone and fumbled the device out of the dash-mounted holder. When I glanced down to punch in Ben's number I realized why I hadn't heard from him yet. I had forgotten to switch it on. I quickly pressed my thumb against the power button and the moment the unit completed its flashing and self-diagnostic chirping, an urgent peal emitted from it. I stabbed the button to answer and placed it against my ear.

"Ben?"

"GODFUCKINGDAMMIT ROWAN!" my friend's voice distorted through the earpiece. "WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?"

"He's here, Ben," I stated urgently. "I'm right behind him and I think he might have someone else out here!"

"WHERE? WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?"

I had quickly switched the phone to my left ear and was reaching to the dash to turn down the volume on the CD player when the battered driver's side door of the truck swung violently open with a loud groan. Before I could utter anything more than a surprised yelp a massive hand slapped against the back of my neck, its bony fingers wrapping around to almost completely encircle my throat.

The cell phone flew from my hand and clattered across the pavement as I was wrenched forcefully from the seat and tossed like a piece of discarded trash against the bridge's safety rail.

In the confusion my fingers had spun the volume knob on the stereo in the opposite of the intended direction and music now blared raucously into the night.

CHAPTER 26

Acute slivers of pain were rapidly followed by an overwhelming dull ache across

my back as I roughly impacted the metal railing and tumbled to the wet asphalt. I let out a tortured scream as I suddenly felt the flesh ripping on my forearm to form what I knew could only be a bloody rendition of a religious symbol. Realization punctured the storm of agony inside my skull and I knew instantly that the victim I was assuming he had in his clutches was in fact, me.

"Wherefore, since you, Rowan Linden Gant, are fallen into the damned heresies of Witches, practicing them publicly, and have been by legitimate witnesses and your own confession, been convicted of the sin of heresy," an ominously dark and distinct voice began in the shadows, blending deeply with the music to lend a surreal edge to the recitation.

The tone was intimately familiar from my visions and hearing it now, steeped in the trappings of the physical plane, paralyzing fear arced through my very being.

"And as you have refused the medicine of your salvation, we have summoned you to answer for the said crimes before us, but you, led away and seduced by a wicked spirit have refused to appear."

Eddies of the thick mist swirled around the huge silhouette as it advanced toward me. Looking up from my prone position he appeared to me as an absolute giant, easily dwarfing Ben by several inches. I shuddered with an involuntary start as I pressed myself into the cold metal fencing and reached upward to the rail. Gritting my teeth against the aches criss-crossing my body I fought to drag myself to my feet.

"Whereas the Holy Church of God has long awaited you up to this present day of kindness and mercy," he continued his recitation of question thirty-two as he moved closer still; verbally applying the razor to the guilt he had already confirmed. "That you might fly to the bosom of her mercy, renouncing your errors and professing the Catholic Faith, and be nourished by the bounty of her mercy; but you have refused to consent, persisting instead in your obstinacy."

My knees were weak with terror as I unsteadily gained my feet. His imposing figure was stationed directly between my still idling truck and me, making that avenue of escape unattainable. I seriously doubted that I could outrun him and as he loomed through the fog my options were growing slim.

The man was haloed in backlighting from the oddly canted headlamp on my truck reflecting from the damp sheen that coated the bridge. My eyes were beginning to adjust to the odd scheme and I could just make out his long, haggard face. His eyes set back in deep shadowy wells and framed by a shoulder length hood of stringy white hair that blended into his colorless pallor.

His thin frame was clad entirely in black with a priest's collar encircling his craning neck. With each word he spoke his throat would undulate as if he were swallowing hard. His freakish appearance served to propel the already soul-chilling fear deeper into my core.

He was directly before me now and as had happened in my vision, that fear became an all-consuming visceral terror. I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I could

only stare back in stunned horror.

In a sudden flash, the man brought his hand up and thrust it downward. Out of pure reflex I brought my arm up and twisted quickly away, but unfortunately, not quickly enough. The cold steel spike of an ice pick bit hard into my shoulder and I could feel it scrape along the bones that formed the joint. I howled in agony as he mercilessly ripped the stiletto back out and plunged it once again into my upper arm.

His voice boomed imperiously against the backdrop of the music and my agonized screams. "Therefore, following in the footsteps of the Blessed Apostle Paul, we declare, judge and sentence you to be a stubborn heretic and as such to be abandoned to secular justice!"

The sharp pain slapped me out of my quadriplegic stupor and I lashed out, throwing my uninjured arm forward and into his midsection. Twisting my weight into the motion I connected with a solid punch that took him by surprise and staggered him backward. I didn't believe for even a brief second that I would get that lucky again and I bolted for the first opening that presented itself.

I could feel the ice pick still buried to its handle in my upper left arm and my hand was tucked into a deformed claw that shuddered with pain. Hot tears were streaming down my cheeks and the wet mist of the fog felt even colder wherever it touched my bare skin. My attempt at escape lasted for a half dozen frenzied steps around the front end of my truck before I felt the bony hand clamp like a vise on my shoulder.

I was jerked violently backward, then immediately thrust back forward at an angle where I made an instantaneous stop against the railing on the south side of the bridge. The air leapt from my lungs and I gasped as I pitched forward. The erupting stigmata on my forearm intensified to compete with, and then overshadow, all of the other pains that racked my body. At some point my glasses had gone the way of the cell phone and I cast an unfocused gaze at my hand and saw the small streams of blood dripping from my clawed knuckles.

I fought to regain my breath and I was once again grasped by the neck and pushed sideways. As the killer held me against the chilled metal I felt something rough and plastic-like dragged across my face. Looking down with bleary eyes I saw the nylon rope hanging about my neck bound with a coil of thirteen loops in a perfect hangman's noose.

"Rowan Linden Gant," the deep voice began once again. "By this our definitive sentence we drive you from the ecclesiastical Court, and abandon you to the power of the secular Court, that having you in its power now moderates its sentence of death against you."

In a sudden sense of motion I felt my feet leave the ground and my body being lifted forcibly upward. I tried to grab for the rail but my hand slipped from its slick surface and I continued to rise.

The killer proceeded with the passing of my fate. "Whereas you, Rowan Linden Gant have duly and properly admitted your crimes, and having before us the Holy Gospels that our judgment may proceed as from the countenance of God, by this

sentence we cast you away as an impenitent heretic and sorcerer."

He had now lifted me over his head, as one would press a set of barbells. As strong as he was, he was struggling against my weight and was unable to fully extend his arms. I could feel him shaking as he held me there and stepped against the rail. I almost froze in panic, fearing that if I fought against him he would drop me over the side. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that just such an action was what he had planned but I certainly didn't want to help him accomplish it.

"In accordance with the thirty second question we do hereby deliver you unto the power of our most Holy God... " His voice cracked as he strained to hold me.

My mind raced in search of a way out and I realized that in his haste to end my existence he had neglected to bind my hands. If it was, as it appeared, his intention to hang me, the opposite end of the rope had to be secured. I could think of only one thing to do.

Trying my best not to attract his attention I quickly hooked my injured left arm up against my chest and forced my bloody fist up through the noose encircling my neck. As I pressed upward I was able to slide the nylon rope over my head and the loop dropped down along my arm to encircle it just above my elbow.

"As you, Rowan Linden Gant, are damned in body and soul, your sentence on this day is death. The sentence, to be executed immediately and without appeal in the manner of hanging."

So intent was he on passing sentence, he had yet to notice my movements. I knew there were only seconds left now that the words of judgment had officially been spoken. In an adrenalin edged rush, I rotated my wrist and twisted a pair of loops around my forearm, then forced my hand open and grasped tightly to the nylon rope. The fleetingly morbid thought that it was too bad that we Witches couldn't really fly shot through my mind as he pronounced my end.

"May the Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon your soul."

With his last statement he pitched forward and grunted as he forced his arms outward. As I began to roll and drop away I shot my free right hand out and grasped tightly to a handful of his stringy hair and held fast. I heard him yelp in surprise as he was pulled forward and levered over the rail.

Together, we fell into the shadowy mist of nothingness.

CHAPTER 27

The steel trusses that make up the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge form a superstructure that rests upon beams and piers to span the five thousand plus feet to

the other side of the Mississippi. In an angular trek they hopscotch across the water like an undulating multi-humped serpent before taking a twenty-four degree turn and continuing on their merry way to the other side. It was at the vertices of two of these truss sections that we went over the side.

In the pit of my stomach I experienced an instant feeling of weightlessness followed rapidly by the heavy sense of impending death. I held tightly to the nylon rope as it slid quickly through my bare hand like a serrated knife. My palm burned, begging to let go, and I consciously gripped the lifeline even tighter.

There was a loud, clanging thump as our bodies impacted the wide steel support running beneath the joint of the trusses. We hesitated for a moment and I felt myself continuing to fall as I slid between the decking and the beam. I continued downward for a handful of inches before the rope tightened around my forearm. Less than a foot later I jerked to a sudden halt as the noose tightened and the line snapped taut.

I felt muscle tear as the inertia of my plummeting body was stopped cold by nothing more than my left shoulder being forcibly dislocated. I had cried out in pain so often in the past few minutes that my voice was completely raw and all I could manage was a pathetic whimper.

Thus far my idea had worked. I was still alive.

Through the mist I could just make out the lights of the water treatment plant located in the distance, just south of the actual rock chain that gave the bridge its name. The normally lazy river rushed over this stone anomaly to create a dull roar below. My ever-present phobia of drowning sent a wave of fear to pierce my bowels and was rapidly joined by the terrifying realization that I was not all that fond of heights either.

Above, music still blared from my idling truck and the mournful strains of a violin added sad emotion to a slowly rising bass hum. A heavy groan punctuated the music from somewhere near my head.

I was twisting slowly on the end of the rope and simply hung there trying to deal with the pain as I lazily spun around to face north. Prickling numbness was overtaking the pain in my hand and forearm as the tight nylon cord dammed off the blood flow. I was almost thankful as it began to ooze downward into my dislocated shoulder.

I could feel something in my right hand and I slowly brought it up to my face. A large wad of dirty white hair was protruding from between my fingers as they remained in a death grip. Slowly, and deliberately, I forced my hand open and allowed the mass to fall. I watched it as it floated lightly away and melted into the thick mist.

In retrospect, I should have been paying attention to the activity immediately above and to my rear.

A cold palm came quickly against the back of my neck and bony fingers slipped about my throat from the left. I gasped and kicked as the killer began squeezing as tightly as he could.

Evenly, and with great purpose, bass notes echoed with haunting measure into the night against the crying of the violin.

The smooth tempo of the movement began its migration toward a spastic rhythm.

I sputtered and bucked as I clawed at the massive hand that was threatening to crush my windpipe. I struggled to slip my fingers in behind his and pry them away but his grip was too tight.

"As you, Rowan Linden Gant, are damned in body and soul," his angry voice announced as if the words were necessary to validate his actions. "Your sentence on this day is death. The sentence, to be executed immediately and without appeal."

The back of my head rang hard against the metal beam as I kicked the air and fought to breathe. I could hear my own gurgling as consciousness announced it would be leaving soon. I grasped weakly at his fingers before my arm fell away to my side and bounced against an annoying lump on my belt.

Frantic notes plucked sharply on the strings of a harp insinuated themselves into the ebb and flow of the music from above...

The melody continued wafting down as I tried to reason out what the annoyance could be. I told myself in no uncertain terms that this was neither the time nor the place to worry about such things. My arm spasmed and caught once again against the weighty protrusion at my side, urging me to think harder on its meaning. In a black and white silhouette against the inside of my eyelids the nature of the object flashed to the front of my fading thoughts. My hand shook uncontrollably as I hooked my fingers beneath the retaining strap on the holster and pulled. They shuddered and numbly slid away with no effect.

A brace of violins engaged in an angry exchange bringing ever more urgency to the pace of the melody...

The killer was hanging precariously from the support beam, leaning out and downward to reach me. As he shifted for a better position his hand loosened in a quick spasm. It wasn't much, but it was enough. I gasped in a small slice of a breath and felt a brief moment of clarity surge through my body.

I pushed my still shaking hand back up to my side then thrust my thumb beneath the nylon strap and pushed outward. With a dull pop it released and I immediately wrapped my hand around the grip of the pistol.

The miniscule piece of breath I'd been able to grasp was failing quickly and my vision was darkening as my eyes started rolling back in my head. The abbreviated lesson in the use of the pistol flashed through my mind as just so much jumbled nonsense. I could find no way to apply the instructions to my present situation.

Being unable to aim I centered on what was left of my strength and pressed the gun upward at an angle across my chest until it met resistance.

The panicked voices of various stringed instruments blended to a thick, disharmonious crescendo in my ears...

For a brief instant I considered the fact that my left arm was now completely numb and I silently begged for the resistance I found to be his arm and not my own. Then, tensing my body, I pulled the trigger.

The muzzle flashed.

The explosion reported deafeningly in my ear.

The spent shell ejected directly toward me and transferred its searing heat to my cheek.

Thick blood spattered like heavy rain across the side of my face.

The cold fingers snapped open.

Something thudded heavily against me and fell away.

A tortured scream faded into the distance below.

A single violin cried into the night, fading with sorrowful purpose toward silence... Everything went completely black.

The tinkling sound that met my ears made no sense at first. I couldn't really place it as anything I was familiar with other than the fact that it sounded like metal against metal. Even at that it was competing with a thickness that filled my head and made everything muddy and dull.

Numbness still permeated my left arm as well as a good portion of my shoulder and upper chest. I could feel the dampness of the fog against my face but didn't really care. Warmth was creeping into my body now to replace the chill, or so I believed. All I wanted to do was go back to sleep but the annoying brightness of the noise was growing louder.

From somewhere in the back of my head random voices began backfilling the silent spaces to push urgently in and out of my semi-conscious world. On the periphery of my senses I could feel something immediately in front of me and the sharp tinkle was emanating from it.

My slow twist halted and I felt something warm pressing against the side of my neck. For a brief instant I considered the pistol still gripped tightly in my right hand and thought perhaps I should shoot the intruder. Fortunately for us both the message traveled a maze of nerve endings and never found its way to the proper set of neurons to affect the motion.

I slowly opened one eye as I continued to feel the gentle pressure against my neck. Finally, partial focus sluggishly set in through the misty darkness and I was greeted by the concerned face of a Paramedic in full climbing gear suspended before me in the fog.

"He's still alive!" I heard him say as he removed his fingers from my pulse point and began to carefully attach a safety harness about my waist. "Can you hear me, Mister Gant?"

I forced my other eye open and attempted to answer but was only able to emit a thin whisper that scarcely resembled ayes.

I barely remember anything that followed. Whether an hour passed or only five minutes, I couldn't say. All that remains clear are the chaotic sounds of a crime scene investigation in full swing and Ben Storm's concerned face, haloed in fog and flickering emergency lights, looking down at me as I lay on a gurney.

"Goddammit, white man. You just can't stay out of the middle of shit, can ya'?" was all I heard him say before I slipped once again into nothingness.

CHAPTER 28

"The plates were stolen," Ben was telling me. "We tracked the VIN on the panel van but didn't get much. The artist sketch from your description hasn't matched up to anything and the prints he left on your truck were too smudged to be much good to us at all. The two partials the CSU pulled off the bruises on your neck still haven't hit on AFIS yet so that's lookin' like it'll be a bust. Either way, we sent all of 'em along with the blood samples to the Crime Lab in D.C."

I was staring out the window of my hospital room, watching as winter tried to rally back with a sudden cold front. The grey sky spit wet flurries in a thwarted attempt at actual snow and the look of it all gave me a slight chill. Gloomy was the only way to describe it and it matched my mood well.

Five hours of surgery had gone into repairing my arm and shoulder, so I was told. All I knew of it consciously was the fact that my left arm was now completely immobilized and the incisions were already starting to itch mercilessly as they began to heal. My voice was weak and hoarse from a bruised larynx and the rainbow of colors ringing my neck formed a hand shaped contusion that still throbbed with tender soreness. I didn't even remember the CSU tech taking the close up photos of the two fingerprints that had been temporarily pressed into my flesh.

A burn scar in the perfect shape of a nine-millimeter shell casing graced my left cheek, and beneath the rope bruises on my forearm a faint pink outline of Christ's Monogram still remained. Other than that, physically I was on the mend. Emotionally, however, I still wasn't entirely sure what kind of damage had been done. Daily visits from a psychiatrist didn't do much to determine that fact, either.

I had given them my description of the killer shortly after waking up from a twenty-four hour sleep. To the best of my ability I had relayed the events to Ben and he had filled in some of the blanks for me.

Detective McLaughlin's daughter had arrived home completely unscathed shortly after I had set out in pursuit of the killer. The present theory was that it was he who

had called 'Charlee's' husband with the ruse. This theory only served to create more questions about how he knew who to call and where he might have obtained his inside information. Rumor was already bandying about that an internal investigation would be forthcoming.

My only other question had been how they had found me. To that, the answer had been simple. When the killer had knocked the cell phone from my hand it had remained on and broadcasting. With the help of Special Agent Mandalay and the cell company, they had managed to triangulate the general vicinity of the broadcast. Also, a motion sensor at the end of the bridge had alerted the authorities that someone had passed by the locked gate on the grand Old Lady. And finally, a phone call from the night watchman at the water treatment plant who had noticed dim lights from the vehicles headlamps served to pinpoint the frantic search.

The first officers had actually arrived on the scene in time to hear the report of the *dock* when I had fired it.

"There's still too much ice in the river to drag, but we did a full search of the surrounding area," my friend continued. "The bastard's body will probably end up on the rocks in a month or two. Or maybe downriver with the flooding from the thaw... Hey, Row... You listenin' to me?"

Ben's sudden silence wedged its way into my ears and his words registered in the moment that followed, "What? Yeah..." I croaked in a pained whisper. "Yeah, I'm listening."

"So anyway," he proceeded. "It looks like we might not be able to identify this asshole unless we can find the body and come up with a dental record match. That's assuming he's had dental work. Of course, eventually there's gonna be a house turn up empty with all that shit in the basement you described. If we're lucky whoever finds it'll think it's weird and call us. Maybe that'll give us a clue about who this prick was."

"You won't," I forced my voice through the dull ache.

"Won't what?"

"Find his body." I slowly shook my head. "He's still out there."

"Yeah. Suckin' mud from the bottom of the river."

"No. He's still alive."

"Get real, white man," my friend objected. "You shot the bastard point blank."

"I shot him in the arm, Ben," I rebutted.

"With a high frag round that contained *Teflon* gel," he detailed. "At point blank you probably blew the fucker's arm clean off and that gel's toxic. Not to mention that from your description of the events that followed, he fell off the bridge and into the river. No way he coulda survived."

"I know all that, Ben, but it's a feeling. He's still out there. Alive."

"Can't go with ya' on this one, Kemosabe. You're just rattled. You must not be

doin' that groundin' thing or somethin'. The asshole is toast, no two ways about it."

I didn't belabor the point. Maybe Ben was correct. I hadn't exactly been walking a very balanced path over the past month, and what had occurred on that bridge a mere handful of nights prior was still pounding in the back of my skull. Guilt over not being able to stop this miniature inquisition in time to save the lives of several innocent individuals, Pagan and Non-Pagan, was an ever-present tingle along my spine as well. My intuition in this particular instance could very well be wrong.

At any rate, I could only hope that it was.

Three Months Later...

EPILOGUE

It was obvious to the casual observer that the man was favoring his left arm. Whenever he would move it he would do so stiffly and occasionally reach over with his right hand to give his shoulder a quick massage. Other than that minor point, he seemed non-descript enough. Long brown hair tied back in a ponytail, a neatly trimmed beard, and glasses. Less obvious and only upon closer inspection would you notice the odd pink scar on his forearm or the brooding gaze beneath his brow.

Sun shone brightly down upon the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge and a warm spring breeze playfully wove itself through the green painted trusses that made up the superstructure of the Old Lady. The man lingered for a long while at the join of two of the metal beams where they created an inverted triangle. His gaze held fast across the muddy brown waters of the Mississippi river to the rock levy that caused them to roil and whitecap in a shallow defined arc across the full width of the river.

Nearby, a strikingly beautiful woman clad in a photographers vest commanded a pair of leashed canines to sit and stay. Brushing back her unruly mane of long red hair she then brought a camera to her eye. Carefully bringing it to bear on the nearest of the pair of gothic looking water intake towers that rose majestically from the river

on the south side of the bridge, she depressed a button and the shutter clicked, followed by the whirring motor drive as it advanced the film within.

The man cast a glance in her direction and allowed himself a brief, thin smile as she gazed back at him. Reaching into his pocket he withdrew a stone and worked it in the palm of his right hand with his fingers. If one listened close he could be heard whispering softly as he looked hard at the smooth rock.

"In you I place my fears, my regrets, and my guilt," he almost chanted. "From you I retain my hopes, my dreams, and my strength. With you I cast away the negative and keep only the positive. I am one. I am whole. I am free."

At the end of the third repetition the man drew back his arm with a twist of his body then thrust it rapidly forward, casting the stone into the spring air. He watched on as the burdened rock fell in an arc until it disappeared from sight and made the tiniest of imperceptible ripples in the water below.

The woman had moved close and now slipped her arm in about the man's waist and laid her head against his shoulder. The man allowed himself a short relieved sigh as he hooked his own arm around her and pulled her tight.

With a short whistle they called the dogs that had been waiting obediently and continued lazily across the span of the pedestrian bridge. Among the faded graffiti that marred the asphalt a fresher, brighter grouping of spray painted lines, only months old, resided where the man had been standing.

A Circle, decorated with hash marks along the side arcs, and encompassing a large letter X that was bisected by a large letter P.