

Harm None

a rowan gant investigation

12 FREE SAMPLE CHAPTERS

*ALL IS
#FORGIVEN*

M. R. Sellars

HARM NONE

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

12 FREE SAMPLE CHAPTERS

An Occult Thriller Novel

By
M. R. Sellars

E. M. A. Mysteries

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

HARM NONE: A Rowan Gant Investigation

An E.M.A. Mysteries CHAPTER SAMPLER

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For my parents.
Thank you for teaching me
that the true value of the
written word is priceless.

*Eight words ye wiccan rede fulfill,
AN IT HARM NONE, DO WHAT YE WILL.*

Final Verse
The “Wiccan Rede”

PROLOGUE

“Be it known to all that the circle is now to be drawn,” stated the slight, robed figure as she raised her arms upward to the sky. Her dainty hands held tight to the leather bound handle of a dirk, its brightly polished blade reflecting the light of the full moon high above. “Let no one be here but of their own free will. Blessed be.”

“So mote it be” came a solemn chant in unison from the coven members gathered around her.

The air was still in the large, semi-wooded Saint Louis backyard as the Priestess slowly and purposefully drew the ceremonial knife, her athamè, through the air above her, scribing a five-pointed star, starting and ending with the top point. With the imaginary Pentacle drawn, she fluidly lowered the dirk and brought her arms to rest outstretched before her and pointing to the East.

“R.J.,” she said to the young man directly before her. “Would you please light the circle candles?”

The young man gave a perceptible nod and pulled back the hood of his robe to reveal his mane of long black hair. Turning, he struck the end of a wooden fireplace match, bringing it to life, and as the flame settled to evenness, merged it with the wick of a yellow votive candle resting in a homemade stand.

“At the East, I bring light and air to our circle,” spoke the strawberry-blonde priestess from the center of the group. “All hail the Watchtower of the East, element of air. May it watch over us in our circle. Blessed be.”

“Blessed be,” chanted the gathering around her.

The young man worked his way to the South, and touched the burning match to a red votive.

“At the South, I bring light and fire to our circle” came the priestess as she made a clockwise quarter turn. “All hail the Watchtower of the South, element of fire. May it watch over our circle. Blessed be.”

“Blessed be.” The chant in unison came stronger.

Evenly, the young woman turned to the West as the young man brought a blue candle alight.

“At the West, I bring light and water to our circle. All hail the Watchtower of the West, element of water. May it watch over our circle. Blessed be.”

“Blessed be!” Stronger still the chorus echoed.

“At the North, I bring light and earth to our circle,” the priestess melodically spoke as she turned. The young man applied the fire to a green candle fixed securely in its holder. “All hail the Watchtower of the North, element of earth. May it watch over our circle. Blessed be.”

“Blessed be!” The coven’s chant lifted skyward, harmonious and strong.

The Priestess kissed the blade of the athamè and lifted it upward, scribing the Pentacle in the air once more.

“All hail the four towers, and all hail the God and Goddess. We welcome and invite Pan and Diana to join us in this rite we hold in their honor. Blessed be, so mote it be!”

“Blessed be, so mote it be!” chimed the coven.

At this point, the dark-haired man had returned to his original position in the circle, and the members had joined hands, interlocking their fingers, left palm up, right palm down.

“Ariel,” his gaze leveled on the priestess, “may I ask that you lead us in the weave.”

The young woman gave a nod and after once again kissing the blade of the athamè, laid it reverently on the altar before her.

“Weave, weave,” she began the melodious chant, “weave us together. Weave us together, together with love.”

The remaining members of the coven joined in and they sang the verse twice more. When the last note had drifted away on the still air, no sound was left but for the midsummer song of the crickets.

“The circle is cast,” Ariel finally said. “You may release hands and we shall remain as one.”

The group released their grasps on one another and while remaining alert and attentive to their priestess, began to relax.

“Our circles are a happy time,” she continued, her strawberry-blonde hair drifting lazily about on a sudden breeze as she turned around the circle, bringing her eyes to bear on each member’s face. “A time for us to rejoice in our kinship with nature...with the Mother Goddess Diana...and with Pan the Hunter. Our circles are meant for exchanging knowledge. Tonight...” Ariel caught her breath and looked down at the ground. She paused for what seemed an eternity to all present as a single teardrop began its slow journey down her cheek. Sadness welled in her voice as she began once again to speak. “Tonight, we come together to make a decision; a decision that will affect the direction and future of this coven. We have all discussed this over and over, so I will spare you the details.”

The members of the coven lowered their gazes to the ground as she once again paused and angrily wiped away another tear that had escaped her eye. They knew how much she hated losing control of her emotions, and they felt a great empathy for her. They remained quiet and kept their gazes averted as she struggled for her composure. However, one member among the group refused to grant her the reprieve. He stared at the back of Ariel’s head, unblinking, with cold grey eyes. His face remained expressionless, and to the coven, that cold countenance was the most frightening thing of all.

“Let it be done,” stated the young dark-haired man known as R.J. in a compassionate attempt to assume her painful burden.

He stepped forward to the altar and lifted a pewter goblet from its weathered surface. One by one, R.J. stepped before each member of the coven and held the goblet out to them, and one by one, each member deposited a single stone. When he came before the expressionless, grey-eyed man, he waited. The man continued to stare, as if looking straight through him to remain fixed upon Ariel.

“Go on, Devon,” R.J. said, “you still have a vote.”

Momentarily, the expressionless man’s eyes unglazed, and he focused his glare on R.J.

“I don’t recognize this vote” was all he said, and once again he seemed to stare icily through to Ariel.

R.J. fought back his desire to tell Devon just where he could get off. This was going to be over soon enough, and he knew there was no need for an altercation now. He continued around the circle and came finally to rest in the center.

Standing at the altar opposite Ariel, R.J. held out the goblet and let a stone fall into it from his own palm, silently casting his vote. Slowly, Ariel lifted her hand to its rim and dropped in her stone. It rattled and clinked in the tense silence of the circle, then fell still. She brought her gaze up to meet R.J.’s, drew a deep breath, and then gave a slightly perceptible nod. R.J. tilted the goblet down to the altar and poured the stones out upon its surface. The pebbles glittered, as if winking back at them in the candlelight, each of their polished surfaces obsidian black.

Ariel turned and faced Devon, summoning every bit of strength in her being and borrowing from her fellow coven members as much as she could.

“You know the most basic law of The Craft is to harm none.” She stared at him coolly as anger seeped in to replace sadness. “You have violated that law, Devon.”

He continued to stare back at her, pupils large in his irises like puddles of ink in dirty grey ice. The circle candles flickered as a mild breeze began to blow.

“So I sacrificed a dog,” Devon answered her frostily. “You little wimps are just afraid to take the next step. You’ll never be anything but a bunch of wannabees.”

Ariel continued, ignoring his comment. “For your disregard for life and the most basic of Wiccan laws, you are hereby banished from this coven. Your punishment is that which you bring upon your own self, as anything you may do will return to you threefold. May the God and Goddess take mercy upon you.”

“So Mote It Be,” the members of the circle solemnly chimed.

Devon looked slowly around the circle, resting his cold gaze for a moment upon each member of the coven; finally, leveling it once again on Ariel’s face.

“You’re going to wish you never did this, Ariel,” he said. “Fuck you... Fuck all of you.”

Three weeks later...

CHAPTER 1

Blue-white wisps curled upward from the lit end of a tight roll of tobacco that was hooked under my index finger. I took a lazy puff and rolled the spicy smoke around on my tongue before blowing it outward into an evenly spreading cloud that wafted about on the warm breeze. Then, with a lazy stretch, I rested my forearm across my knee and contemplated the slowly growing ash on the end of the cigar.

It had been more than six months since my last cigarette, so my wife, Felicity, was none too excited when I decided to revive my old habit of cigar smoking. As I am not one to do things halfway, these weren't the greenish, dried out logs you pick up at the local stop'n'grab. Not at all. My humidor was filled with rich, Maduro-wrapped symbols of masculinity available only from a good tobacco shop. Inevitably, with such quality there comes a price, and said price served simply to provide Felicity with yet another reason to harbor disdain for the habit.

Of course, with any marriage—well, good ones anyway—there is a generous amount of compromise. The “compromise” that had been reached in ours was something on the order of a matter-of-fact statement from my headstrong wife of, “If you're going to smoke those things anyway, you're going to do it outside!” After eight years with this auburn-haired, second generation Irish-American dynamo on a five-foot-four frame, I had learned to cut my losses and run; for as much as she hated to admit it, Felicity fit neatly into the stereotype of the tempestuous, Irish redhead. Though her singsong accent was normally faint—unless she was tired, angry, or had been in close proximity to her relatives, whereupon it became very pronounced—her stubbornness and temper were with her 24/7.

In this particular instance, however, the fact that there was no way she was about to let me in the door with a lit cigar was only one of a trio of reasons I had for being parked on the cement stairs of our modest, suburban Saint Louis home this warm, late summer's evening. The second and most important reason for smoking outside was that we had only recently discovered that Felicity was six weeks pregnant. The third—I was waiting for someone.

Earlier in the day, I had received a phone call from my long time cohort, Ben Storm, a detective with the Saint Louis City police department. Since he had a tendency to work somewhat bizarre hours, I was pleasantly surprised when he suggested that he drop by this evening for an impromptu drink to congratulate us on our impending family addition. I was more than agreeable to the idea; unfortunately, the tone of his voice told me there was an underlying, less social reason for the visit. His inflection only confirmed a suspicion that had been nagging at me for nearly two days now.

Late Wednesday night I had received a short, cryptic call from a distracted and extremely official sounding version of my friend. He had been seeking information about the meaning of a religious symbol known as a Pentacle. Though I knew he was perfectly aware of my religious practices, I was mildly amazed he had equated me with the

emblem. In keeping with his official demeanor that night, as soon as I finished giving him the requested details, he abruptly ended the call with curt politeness.

When we spoke again today, I was sure I had detected a definite note of that same distraction in his voice. I hoped that I was wrong but deep inside felt that I wasn't. However, on the chance that I might have misinterpreted the tenor of his speech, I had kept the observation to myself, mentioning it neither to him nor Felicity.

"I take it Ben hasn't gotten here yet." I heard the half question, half statement from my wife through the screen door behind me.

"Nope," I replied and took another lazy draw from my cigar. "But you know how Ben is. If he says six in the evening, he really means eight."

"Ever since his promotion, we're lucky to see him at all," she expressed. "Are Allison and Ben Junior coming?"

"I doubt it. He said something about Al taking the little guy out shopping for clothes."

"Well..." She pushed the screen door open a bit to allow one of our cats to exit the confines of the house. "I'm going to go upstairs and pay some bills. Let me know when he gets here. I don't want to miss this little celebration. Remember, I'm the one who's pregnant."

"I doubt that you'll let me forget it," I answered, looking back at her with a grin. "I'll call you when he shows up."

She smiled in return and left me to my cigar and quiet contemplation of the tree-lined street, as well as my attempts to dull the secret, foreboding sensation with a tumbler of single malt scotch on the rocks. Ten minutes short of an hour later, not only had I still not managed to shake the feeling, but it grew even stronger as a tired-looking Chevrolet van rolled into my driveway. The engine knocked and complained as the driver switched it off, and then it sputtered into silence. After a moment, the door opened with a labored screech, and the occupant extricated himself from the seat.

Ben Storm was a Native American, six-foot-six with jet-black hair and the finely angular features one associated with the boilerplate portrayal of feather-adorned natives from TV Westerns. He kept himself in excellent physical condition and made a very imposing figure both in and out of uniform. When he had been a street cop, I often joked that he was the last person I would want to see coming down a dark alley at me if I had done something wrong. He always made it a point to bet that he would be the first person I would want to see coming down that alley were I in trouble. I never hesitated to agree.

Just over a year ago, fate dealt him a winning hand. He had been promoted to Detective and was assigned to homicide investigations. This was a radical, though welcome, change from knocking down the doors of crack houses, which had been his previous assignment. Now, at times, his work schedule had become less structured and was often expanded with overtime. However, that time was more often spent interviewing suspects and gathering evidence than dodging bullets sprayed from an illegally modified, Tech Nine machine pistol in the hands of a fifteen-year-old gangbanger.

I knew for a certainty that his wife was happy to have him out of the direct line of fire. Felicity and I had made no secret of the fact that we were just as relieved.

The van door made a loud groan of protest as he pushed it shut, then he turned and strode up my sidewalk with a brown paper bag tucked casually under his arm.

"I can't believe you're still driving that old piece of crap," I called to him and motioned toward the decrepit looking Chevy.

He was halfway up the flagstone walkway when he stopped, looked back at the vehicle for a moment, then turned back to me. "What?" he answered, feigning insult, then with a shrug continued walking. "It still runs."

He climbed the stairs and parked himself on the edge of the porch then stretched and let out an exhausted sigh.

"Ya'know," he finally said as he set the paper bag carefully on the first step. "Bein' a copper is a menial job... It's kinda like bein' the secretary for all the chaos out there in the world...But anyway..." He reached into his jacket and pulled out two cigars then handed one to me. "Congrats on the kid ya' silly 'effin white man."

"Thanks, Chief." I took the cigar and gave it a close look. "Dominican, eh? Been hanging around the tobacconist playing Wooden Indian again?" I grinned.

"Yeah, blow it out your ass," he laughed. "One of the coppers I helped with a case owed me one and finally paid up." Reaching into the bag he pulled out a bottle of *Glenlivet* and a bottle of de-alcoholized white zinfandel. "So where's the little woman?"

"Upstairs doing that bill paying thing," I answered, sliding the cigar beneath my nose with a flourish and sniffing the spicy, Spanish cedar veneer that encased it. "She's gonna just love you for this," I continued, waving the expensive smoke at him. "I'm supposed to call her down when you get here, and I suppose that would be about now."

"I'll get 'er," he told me as he stood up and took a stride to the door. "I need a glass and some ice anyway. You good?"

"I could go for a couple of cubes. Just fill the ice bucket and bring it out if you want."

"Everything still in the usual place?" he asked as he opened the door.

"Yeah, same as always."

I could hear him calling up the stairs to Felicity as the screen door swung shut; something pseudo-official sounding about having the place surrounded and that all tiny red-headed women should come out with their hands up. His call was answered by my wife bounding down the stairs followed closely by our English setter and Australian cattle dog vociferously making their individual presences known. A few short minutes later he returned, laden with the ice bucket, a fresh glass, and Felicity in tow.

"So, before you even get started with your cop stories," my wife began, perching herself on the ledge near the stairs, "how are Allison and Ben Junior?"

Ben extracted the cork from the bottle of white zinfandel and filled the wine glass she held forth.

"Good," he answered. "Pretty good. Al said ta' tell you guys 'hey' and sorry she couldn't make it. The little guy told me to make sure I said 'hi' to the dogs."

"We really need to find some time to get together for a barbecue or something," I stated as he planted himself back on the edge of the porch and went about the task of opening the Scotch.

"Yeah," Ben returned. "Why don't ya' tell that to the bad guys. I could use a little time off." He poured himself a drink and topped mine off before sticking his cigar between his lips and setting it alight with a wooden match. "Ahhhhh," he exclaimed, blowing out a stream of pungent smoke. "I've been so damn busy lately, I really haven't

had a chance to enjoy a cigar... Ya'know, I think this is the first time I've had anything lit in my mouth in a month."

"Like you really need it," Felicity admonished. "Allison and I get you two to quit cigarettes, and the next thing we know you're sucking on some other burning carcinogen."

"Boys will be boys," I told her.

"Yeah," Ben chimed in. "What he said."

The friendly chatter eased my mind for the time being, but I still felt a nag in the back of my skull. Sitting here, I knew that just as I had suspected, my friend was without a doubt its undeniable source.



Later in the evening, we called out for pizza and moved our celebration indoors. After putting the dogs through their paces for a handful of the crusts, Felicity said her goodnights and went off to bed, for she had an early outing with her nature photography club the next morning.

Ben had grown quieter as the evening wore on, leaning more heavily on the Scotch than I can ever recall him doing before. After I finished clearing the dishes from the table, he refilled our glasses from the near-depleted bottle of *Glenlivet*, and then we ventured out to the back deck.

My friend dropped his large frame heavily into a chair and went about trimming the end from a fresh cigar as I lit the citronella-oil-filled tiki torches that rimmed the deck. Mosquitoes had been bad this summer, and these seemed to stave them off fairly well while providing an unobtrusive light. After bringing the last torch to life, I took my seat opposite Ben at the patio table and proceeded to work on my own after-dinner smoke. I could literally feel his introspection building to a point of release and knew that the worry clouding the back of my mind would soon be summoned forward.

"You'n Felicity are still into that Wicca thing, right?" Ben queried after an extended silence.

"If you mean have we converted to Catholicism or something, no we haven't," I answered. "We aren't connected with a coven right now, but we still practice. Once you're a Witch, you usually stay a Witch." I lit my cigar and then took a sip of my Scotch. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," he replied hesitantly.

I knew there was more to the question than mere curiosity, but I also knew better than to press this particular subject with Ben, for that would only serve to make him feel ill at ease. He had always been willing to accept that Felicity and I practiced what was considered by most to be a non-traditional religion but usually showed a clear desire to leave it in the background. Out of sight, out of mind. As with most things that didn't fit with the majority view, the masses, including Ben, were entirely off base in their misconceptions regarding Wicca, WitchCraft and almost any other alternative religion for that matter.

I had once attempted to explain to him that Wicca and WitchCraft, or simply "The Craft" as we often call it, involved no pointed hats, bubbling cauldrons, or flying brooms. To the knowledge of any practitioner of the religion, it never did truly include such

things. I told him that Wicca was simply an Earth religion, and as for deities, ours were the Earth and the Moon: Diana and Pan, respectively. There was no evil intent, and in fact, our most basic and all-important covenant was to “Harm None.” We viewed our religion as a way of life through which we did our best to live in harmony with nature, and through study and meditation, we attempted to learn control over the natural energies that inherently reside within all of us. I further explained that in doing this, we sometimes developed abilities that some would consider psychic in nature, such as an uncanny sixth sense or the ability to heal others and ourselves: We think of these as learned talents, nothing more, and nothing less. I even added that I knew of no incident where anyone had been turned into a frog, except in fairy tales. The simple fact was that even if that were possible, no self-respecting Witch would consider it.

Even after I had answered his several pointed questions, he still clung to his misconceptions, and so, out of respect for him, I made sure to steer clear of the subject entirely.

Now, for the second time in less than a week, Ben was asking me about a part of my life he normally avoided. I wasn’t about to push, so I was more than willing to bide my time and wait for him to get around to what he wanted. I could feel his preoccupation thick in the darkness around us, so I was certain my wait would be a short one.

“So... You remember when I called you ‘bout that five-pointed star a couple days back?” he finally asked.

“You mean the difference between a Pentacle, and a Pentagram?” I returned. “Yeah, I remember.”

“That’s it,” he affirmed. “Would ya’ mind tellin’ me the difference on that again?”

“No problem. A Pentacle is basically just what you said, a five-pointed star surrounded by a circle. It’s a very common symbol in the Wiccan religion. When it’s upright,” I scribed the symbol in the air with my finger, “with only one point at the top, it represents man and the spirit as it rules over the four elements. That’s when it’s called a Pentacle. If on the other hand you turn it one hundred-eighty degrees, and two of the points are at the top,” I spun my finger in a circle, “it’s called a Pentagram and represents the spirit’s union with material elements.” I relaxed back into my chair. “Some however, place an improper, albeit widely accepted, meaning on the Pentagram. They claim it represents Satan, evil, black magic, etcetera.”

“So, if it’s right side up or whatever, it doesn’t mean anything evil?” he posed.

“It actually depends on who drew it, and the significance THEY placed on it, but it’s really nothing more than a symbol. Inherently, neither of them mean anything evil,” I answered. “In my religion anyway.”

Ben stared thoughtfully out into the night, absently fingering the rim of his Scotch glass and quietly puffing on his cigar. I didn’t disturb him. Instead I watched the orange glow on the end of the cigar each time he puffed and waited patiently for the next question.

“What about colors?” he asked. “Do ya’ color it in or somethin’? You know, like a rainbow?”

“Sometimes you’ll find a different color at each of the four corners,” I answered. “Yellow in the upper left, blue in the upper right, red in the lower right, and green in the lower left. They represent the elements of Air, Water, Fire, and Earth. On occasion the top point will be white, representing Akasha, or the spirit.”

“Would they be pastels?” he queried.

“Well, I suppose if you wanted to be artistic about it they could,” I laughed. “But they don’t have to be. Just yellow, blue, red, green, and white.” I could feel his tension congealing around us and knew that something about a Pentacle was really bothering him. I was just about to break my own rules and press for the problem when he elected to reveal it on his own.

“So listen, Rowan,” he began. “I’ve got this case I’m workin’ on, and ta’ be honest, it’s really got me screwed up. It’s not normal...there’s somethin’ real strange about it.”

“Something to do with a Pentacle, I assume?” I asked, already knowing it to be true.

“Yeah,” he continued. “The theology expert the department called in can’t seem to make up his mind. His theory changes every time we try to talk to ‘im. A couple of the old timers on the force say the whole thing reminds them of a Satan-worship-slash-cult-murder they worked a few years back. That’s why I called you Wednesday night.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“I was almost ready ta’ agree with ‘em about the cult stuff, but somethin’ kept eatin’ at me,” he explained. “I’m sittin’ at my desk thinkin’, ‘where have I seen this star thing before?’ All of a sudden it hits me...” Ben pointed at me and waved his hand about. “Hangin’ around YOUR neck.”

The fact that he had been able to match me with the symbol suddenly made sense. The quarter-sized pendant I wore was for all intents and purposes a part of me, for I almost never took it off; much as one who wears a Crucifix or the medallion of a patron saint. For the most part, it remained hidden behind the fabric of my shirt, and I had honestly never given any thought to the fact that he might have noticed it, but obviously, he had. Of course, what good is a cop if he’s not observant?

“So you called me to find out if I was in a cult or something?” I posed.

“Hell no, I knew better than that. I called ya’ because I figured ya’ just might know a little more about what it means than the wingnut the department hired.” He let out a frustrated sigh. “Now the problem is I’m even more confused.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, if this star is a good thing, I don’t get why it was at the scene.”

“If I’m following you, you’re talking about a murder, correct?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he answered and took a long swallow of his drink. “Murder... Sacrifice... Something...”

“And you’re sure what you found was a Pentacle, and not a Pentagram?”

“It had five points, and it was right side up,” he explained. “So yeah, it was a Pentacle I guess.”

“So what does your expert have to say?”

“Well, the latest theory from that Einstein is that it’s a ritual sacrifice from a Satanic African cult called Santeria.”

I puzzled over the information wordlessly for a moment, staring deliberately into my own drink as I formed a response. “I realize that I haven’t seen the evidence myself, but based on what you’ve said, I would seriously doubt that.”

“Why?”

“To begin with, a Pentacle isn’t a Santerian symbol, but that’s only a minor part of it. Santeria is an Afro-Cuban religion, not a cult, and it has nothing to do with Satan worship. Their sacrifices are normally small animals such as chickens, not human beings.

In most cases, the animal is cooked and eaten as a part of the ritual. Truth is, they treat their dinner with more respect than you or I do.

“Another thing you might want to take into account is the fact that the actual Satanic religion doesn’t endorse human blood sacrifice either. My guess would be that your expert has some pre-conceived notions and is misinterpreting the facts.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” Ben looked at me with an expression of mild surprise, his cigar held frozen several inches before his face.

“I read a lot,” I told him. “Wicca and WitchCraft get compared to everything under the sun. Good, bad, and otherwise. I just like to keep up with what I’m being accused of.”

“Makes sense.” Thoughtful silence followed his measured reply, leaving us with the trilling night song of countless crickets.

I realized my explanation had, unintentionally, served only to add more confusion to his current discomposed thoughts. I could also feel his aura of internal conflict as he debated over his next question. In the interest of addressing both of the complications, I voiced my own query, “So...Are you looking for help?”

“I shouldn’t drag you into it,” he answered after a long pause.

“You aren’t dragging me anywhere, Ben,” I told him. “If what happened is actually some kind of cult sacrifice, it could mean something bigger than just one homicide. Besides, the fact that you found a Wiccan symbol bothers me just as much as it does you. Like I’ve told you before, our most basic rule is to ‘Harm None’. Even if it has nothing to do with the religion, if I can help you track down whoever did it, then let me.”

Ben ran one hand through his hair and smoothed it back, a gesture I had come to equate with his being lost in thought. I had known this man for more years than I cared to remember and had seen him through good and bad. He was a consummate professional, without a doubt. Still, I knew that all the training and even all the experience in the world could never prepare someone for every scenario he may encounter in this line of work.

I was constantly amazed by my friend’s ability to remain detached and objective in an investigation, but tonight was different. I had never seen him so disturbed by a case. Ever. I could tell from his troubled demeanor that this one must be beyond what even a seasoned veteran considered bad.

“I’ve got some pictures with me,” he finally spoke after what seemed a lifetime. “Do ya’ think you can give me an idea of what some of the stuff might mean?”

“I’ll be happy to give it a try,” I told him.

“You haven’t seen this stuff yet,” he replied. “It’s bad, Rowan.”

“I understand.”

“No you don’t,” he sighed. “When I say bad, I mean it’s fuckin’ sick.”



I had just turned on the overhead light in the dining room and seated myself at the table when Ben returned from his van with his briefcase. He peeled off his sport coat and threw it over the back of a chair then sat down. With a quick snap, he released the latches on the case and retrieved a large manila envelope bearing a case number and the word EVIDENCE printed in bright red block letters. I could see sweat already forming on his brow, and his hands trembled slightly as he handed me the packet.

“Man,” he said. “I really hate ta’ do this to ya’. This shit is enough to give ya’ nightmares. It has me.”

“Like I said,” I took the envelope, “you aren’t doing anything to me. I offered to help.”

I unwrapped the string that held the package shut and folded back the flap. Tilting it, I slid out a healthy stack of eight-by-ten photographs, some color, some black and white. I began thumbing through the pictures slowly, studying each one carefully and giving Ben my general impression of the images.

The first photo was of a crudely painted Pentacle on a wall. Sections were shaded in pastel yellow, blue, and green. The outline of the symbol was a deep, rusted red, and a portion of it was smeared with the same color.

“Now I see why you were asking about the pastels,” I stated. “But the red looks a little strange. Not really a pastel.”

“It’s the victim’s blood,” Ben volunteered matter-of-factly, his voice almost a whisper.

“Oh,” I replied. I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

The second picture showed the Pentacle at more of a distance, revealing a mound of black and a mound of white on the floor. The following picture, a close-up of the mounds, showed them to be candles that had burned until they extinguished themselves, leaving behind hardened puddles of wax.

“Obviously a ritual of some sort,” I told him. “I’m not sure for what.”

I thumbed through more pictures of the candles and wall from various angles. The black and white images were much easier to tolerate, though knowing that the Pentacle had been inscribed in blood made me imagine I could still see the glaring red within the crisp black and grey tones. Eventually, I came to a picture of another wall. In the same dripping crimson strokes as the Pentacle were the words “All Is Forgiven.”

“The consultant still can’t manage to explain that,” Ben told me, indicating the pictured words. “He says it probably has somethin’ ta’ do with blood sacrifice rituals. Says he thinks it might...”

“No,” I interrupted him, holding up a hand, “those words have nothing to do with a blood sacrifice ritual.”

“Whaddaya mean?” he queried, sitting up a little straighter and focusing his attention.

“Your *expert* is apparently pretty full of misinformation. I’m not saying that there wasn’t a sacrifice ritual performed mind you, but just because the victim’s blood was used, that doesn’t make it so,” I detailed. “The Pentacle and the inscription are components of a spell.”

“You mean a hocus-pocus-poof-you’re-a-frog kinda spell?”

“No. That’s a fairy-tale misconception. While spells sometimes do involve what can be called magick, they are primarily something like a prayer. This particular spell is a separate ritual unto itself, and if I’m right, then I’m willing to bet your killer performed it because of the murder, not as a part of it.”

“I still don’t get it,” Ben told me, both eager and frustrated.

“Just a second...” I got up from the table and went across the room to the bookshelves. “I just want to verify something real quick to make sure I’m right.” I

scanned the shelves reserved for our Wiccan and alternative religious literature and quickly found what I was after. “Here it is...”

I pulled the book from the shelf and leafed quickly through it as I strode back across the room and once again took a seat at the table.

“What is that?” Ben asked as I continued rapidly turning and perusing the pages.

“A grimoire,” I told him. “Kind of like a recipe book for Witches.” I stopped leafing through the book, and my eyes followed my finger down the text while I quietly mumbled to myself. Eventually I came to rest halfway down the page. “Yes, it’s a variation of an Expiation spell.”

“A what?” Ben’s still confused voice reached my ears as I handed him the spellbook and quickly leafed back through the pictures I had already seen. According to the grimoire, a piece of the spell appeared to be missing. I felt sure it was there but that I simply hadn’t noticed it.

“An Expiation spell,” I repeated. “A ritual to rid yourself of guilt and regrets—a way of asking forgiveness from yourself. I’m not finding it...” I stated hurriedly. “Was there a cup or goblet there? It would have had wine in it. Or maybe water.” Only silence met my ears. “Ben?” I queried again, looking up.

He was staring at me across the table, face ashen, the spellbook held loosely in his hands.

“Are you okay?” I asked, growing mildly concerned.

“Yeah, we found a wine glass all right,” he said quietly. “But, it wasn’t filled with wine.”

The look on his face told me that which I needed but didn’t want to know.

“It was filled with blood wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “We think the bastard drank her blood.”

The two of us shared a wordless stare as we were simultaneously bludgeoned by the revolting possibility he had just voiced. I swallowed hard and slowly forced my eyes back down to the permanent visual records of the abomination. Five photographs later, it was my turn for the greyish pallor to overtake my face. The glossy color image before me showed a bed with the nude body of a petite young woman draped across it. Her mouth was frozen in the oval shape of an agonized scream, her dull eyes staring horrifically into space. The wall next to the bed was spattered wildly with blood. Her throat had been cut, and her long, strawberry-blond hair was matted into the sheets, which flowed to the floor like a crimson waterfall. From the ragged incision at her throat to a point just below her waist, and from shoulder to shoulder, she was nothing but bare exposed muscle. She had been skinned.

As if that weren’t enough, there was something else that made me hold my breath a beat longer. That something was the fact that her face held more than just a passing familiarity to me.

“An invocation rite,” I stated flatly, fighting back insistent waves of nausea.

“What’s that?” Ben asked.

“A ritual used to call forth someone or something from another plane of existence.”

“You mean like a spirit or somethin’?”

“Yeah,” I answered, “it’s the ‘or something’ that bothers me.”

“How can ya tell that’s what it is?” Ben pressed. “All the symbols were with that Expiation thing.”

“The flaying,” I answered. “Skinning and mutilation are considered parts of a ritual sacrifice for invocation in some old religions. Have you gotten a report from the coroner?”

“No, not yet... Why?”

“Whoever did this...” I caught my breath and started again. “Whoever did this probably skinned her alive. The sonofabitch performed two rituals. One to invoke who knows what, and one to forgive himself for doing it.”

“Jeezus,” Ben whispered.

“I need to see this crime scene, Ben,” I told him, still staring at the two-dimensional horror.

“I don’t know, Rowan...” he began to protest.

“No, Ben,” I shot back, “I’m serious. I don’t know for sure what this guy is up to yet, but you’ve already told me that your expert can’t find his way around the block. If this bastard is really trying to do what I think he is, then I doubt if he’s going to stop here. If I’m physically on the scene, maybe I can find something that will help.” Without realizing it, I had stood up from my seat and had begun pacing. “Besides,” I stopped, looked down at the picture for a moment and then back to Ben’s face, “I know the victim.”

“You know ‘er?” He stared back at me incredulously.

“Her name’s Ariel Tanner,” I stated quietly and then turned away as if having the photographs behind me would make them magically disappear. I took a deep breath before adding, “She’s a... was... a Witch.”

“How did you know her?”

“I was her teacher. I instructed her in The Craft.”

I could hear him scribbling quickly, making notes like a good cop was supposed to do. I had started him on the road to solving one of his mysteries, but an entirely new one was unfolding before me. A new one that my instincts were telling me would need to be solved very quickly.

“Shit,” Ben muttered as he made his decision. “Okay. I’ll pick you up in the mornin’.”

“I’ll be here.”

CHAPTER 2

I didn't have any of the nightmares Ben warned me about—of course, you have to go to sleep in order to have nightmares. I was still sitting at the dining room table, absently studying the pattern of the sponge-painted walls when Felicity awoke and wandered in.

"Aye, it's four A.M.," she said with a yawn as she hooked her arm around my neck and fell into my lap. The fact that she wasn't fully awake was allowing a hint of her Celtic brogue to show through. "How late were you and Ben drinking, then?" She reached out to the table and picked up my coffee cup then took a swallow. "Yech, needs sugar."

I wrapped an arm about her waist and held her close. I had never been any good at breaking bad news to people, and I wasn't really looking forward to doing it now. I let my head rest against her chest and took in the sweet scent of her long auburn curls. I felt comfortable and safe against her, and I held her even tighter. A foreboding deep inside told me that this was the last time I was going to feel this way for a while, so I allowed it to linger as long as I could.

"Row," she asked, resting her cheek against my head. "What's wrong?"

Her drowsy voice threw back my thin security blanket of denial and exposed me once again to the frigid reality I had come to accept only a few hours before. I took in a deep breath and let it out in a slow sigh, and then reluctantly, I spoke, "Remember Ariel Tanner?"

"Of course," she replied. "What about her? Is everything okay?" She pulled away, remaining in my lap, and bringing a hand beneath my bearded chin, raised my face to meet her concerned gaze.

"She was murdered," I told her. "Ben is the investigating officer."

"Oh no..." she whispered, her voice trailing off, and then hugged me tightly. "When did it happen? How?"

"A couple of days ago. As for the how...well, it wasn't pretty. It looks like it might have been a ritual murder."

"A ritual murder!" she gasped. "You mean as in someone sacrificed her?"

"That's how it appears." I continued, "In the crime scene pictures Ben showed me, anyway."

Her voice suddenly took on a sharp, almost angry tone, "Why would he show pictures to you, then? Has he lost his mind?"

"Now don't go off the deep end." I helped her gently from my lap and stood up. "He had no idea that I knew her, and he was showing me the pictures because I offered to help. It seems his expert wasn't having much luck deciphering the symbols left at the scene." Picking up my coffee cup, I went into the kitchen to freshen it, Felicity trailing along behind.

"I see." She calmed and held out a cup she had retrieved from the cabinet. She stopped me when I had filled it just over halfway. "Were you able to figure anything out for him?"

I leaned against the counter and took a sip of hot java. “Well, whoever committed the crime performed a ritual flaying, I would assume in order to invoke something. What’s interesting though, is that there were also blatant signs of what I’m pretty sure was supposed to be an Expiation spell.”

“Expiation spell,” she repeated while stirring sugar into her cup. “So do you think that the killer felt remorse and was trying to get rid of the guilt then?”

I nodded. “That’s my best guess for now. I’ll know more in a few hours.”

“What happens in a few hours?” she queried, her bright, green eyes peering at me over the rim of her cup as she took a drink.

“I’m going to look at the crime scene with Ben.”

“You’re what?!” Her eyes grew large and she nearly dropped her mug. “What in the name of the Mother Goddess are you doing that for?”

“Calm down, sweetheart.” I held up my hand defensively. “You know as well as I do that if this creep is for real, he’s likely to do something like this again sooner or later. Probably sooner.”

“Aye, so let the police handle it,” she shot back. “It’s their job, not yours.”

“I intend to,” I told her. “But you also know that if he’s leaving behind blatant occult symbology, the media and the cops will end up on a real ‘Witch’ hunt. If they knew what they were looking at to begin with, then Ben wouldn’t have asked for my advice.”

“Well.” She calmed significantly as the logic took hold. “You’re right about that.”

“I just want to make sure they get the real bad guy and not pin it on some poor unsuspecting kid just because he has long hair and a copy of *Buckland’s Complete Book of WitchCraft* on his bookshelf.”

“I agree,” she surrendered.

“Besides,” I said, turning and attempting to look out into the darkness through the sliding doors but seeing only my ragged reflection staring back at me, “if this cretin actually has a background in The Craft...”

“...It’s going to take a Witch to catch a Witch gone bad,” Felicity finished the sentence for me. “And that Witch is going to be you.”

“It might have to be,” I told her.

“Aye, that’s what scares me,” she replied.



I convinced Felicity to go ahead on her planned outing with her nature photography club but only after promising to call her if something of consequence happened. She made a great show of placing her cell phone prominently in a pocket of her photo vest and reminding me of the number before loading her equipment and setting out. I had showered and tied my long brown hair back in a ponytail after she left and was making a futile attempt to relax on the front porch swing when Ben pulled into the driveway.

“Hey, paleface,” he greeted me as he climbed the stairs.

I held up my hand in a classic TV Indian greeting. “How, Tonto.”

“However I can get it.” He motioned to the coffee cup in my hand. “Got any more of that? I’m havin’ a hell of a time wakin’ up this mornin’.”

“Yeah, sure,” I replied, getting up and opening the door. “Same here. It’s the only thing standing between me and sleep right now.”

Ben took a seat in the living room and was promptly accosted by a large, green-eyed, black cat that elected to take up residence in his lap. Dickens, as we called him, loved having visitors, especially men, and was quick to claim them for his own. I headed for the kitchen while he settled in, then quickly returned with a steaming cup of black coffee and handed it to Ben.

"I gotta be honest with ya', Rowan," he began, scratching the purring lump of fur beneath its chin. "I was thinkin' on the way over, and I'm not so sure about you goin' to the scene and all."

"What's the problem?" I asked. "Is it because I'm a civilian?"

"No, not at all," he answered. "Civilian consultants ain't that unusual. What I'm worried about is the fact that you knew the victim."

"I see," I nodded. "So you think I might be too close to this whole thing."

"It crossed my mind," he answered and then took a sip from his cup.

I had seated myself across from him in my favorite chair, an antique rocker. Gazing thoughtfully into space, I gently nudged it into motion. I had been told more than once by my parents that as a child, whenever I was lost in thought, I would rock, rocking chair or not. I still did.

"I'm not going to lie to you Ben," I finally said. "It does get to me that Ariel is the victim, and yes, she was a good friend even though we hadn't seen one another for over a year." I stopped the chair and leaned forward. "On the other hand, I have knowledge that might help to catch whoever did this. I think I demonstrated that last night."

"I'll give ya' that," he replied. "But what do you think you're gonna find at the scene that wasn't in the photos?"

"Hopefully something that will tell me if this guy is for real or just trying to make it look that way."

"And that somethin' would be?"

"I won't know until I see it...or feel it," I explained. "What I'm looking for might not be visible to the naked eye."

"You mean like some kinda *psychic* thing? You know I don't believe in that stuff."

"I know, but I do, and if it gives you a solid lead, what does it matter?"

"Okay, tell me this." He skipped past answering my question and proceeded into another of his own. "You ain't lookin' for revenge or somethin' are you?"

"No. Not at all," I answered with unabashed honesty. "There's no need. What goes around comes around. He'll get what's coming to him whether I help you or not...Eventually."

"Yeah, well that's a pretty idealistic sentiment."

"It comes with the religion."

Ben grunted and stared thoughtfully into the depths of the mug held between his large hands. After a short period of suggestive silence, he looked up at me with deadly serious eyes. "Mind if I ask where ya' were Wednesday evenin'?"

I was taken aback by the question and what it implied. At first I was hurt and then angry. It took less than a second for the anger to be replaced by understanding. I knew the victim, and I knew The Craft. The symbols and words in the pictures were no great mysteries to me. I was sure that Ben didn't truly suspect me of the crime, but if he was going to bring me into this investigation, someone was bound to ask the question. He was correct to assume that I would prefer it came from him.

“Felicity and I had dinner with my dad,” I answered. “We went over to his place around four-thirty and left from there.”

“Where’d you eat?”

“Union Station,” I told him. “There’s a restaurant down there with a fantastic mixed grill. Before you ask,” I added, “we got home around nine-thirty.”

“Your old man can verify this, right?”

“The phone’s right there.” I pointed at the bookshelves. “His number is on the speed dial. I’m sure the receipt is upstairs if you want a copy of that too.”

“I’m sorry, man.” He looked back down at his drink. “You know I had ta’ ask...”

“...Or somebody else would,” I finished the sentence for him. “It’s all right. I was a little miffed at first, but I understand.”

“Okay,” he answered, then drained the coffee from his cup and set it on the table before him. “Let’s go do this.”



Ariel Tanner had lived on the first floor of a four-family flat on a street called Shenandoah within the city limits of Saint Louis. From my house in the suburbs, it took the better part of thirty minutes to reach it even though the Saturday morning traffic was light. The morning sun was already climbing in the sky when we rolled into the alleyway behind the flat and Ben pulled the Chevy into something resembling a parking space.

“This is it,” he told me, switching off the knocking engine and pushing open his complaining door.

I climbed out as well, and we stood in the small patch of grass that served as a backyard, quietly studying the rear entrance of the building. A short flight of wooden stairs led up to a whitewashed exterior door. The porch light, fitted with a dim yellow bulb, still burned in the crisp shadows caused by a small overhang jutting from the brick wall to cover the landing.

“The apartment next to hers,” Ben told me, “and the one directly above are currently unoccupied.” He pointed to each of the windows. “The other upstairs apartment belongs to a forty-year-old woman who’s stone deaf. Besides, she wasn’t even home.”

A ghostly flash of noise battered my eardrums for a moment. The briefness and ethereal quality of the mechanical rumble told me it was only in my head, but I knew immediately what it meant.

“And the air conditioner was running,” I stated. “No one could hear her over the noise if she screamed.”

“Yeah,” Ben paused and looked at me sideways. “The other neighbors didn’t hear a thing.” We started walking toward the stairs. “Anyway, the outer doors automatically lock, and there were no visible signs of forced entry, so we assume she either knew the killer and let ‘im in, or he had a key or somethin’ of that sort.”

“Locksmith, maybe,” I offered as we climbed the stairs and came to rest on the landing.

“We’re checking into that,” Ben replied. “The upstairs neighbor was the one that found ‘er when she was comin’ in later that evenin’. Her door was propped open, and the neighbor thought it was a little strange.”

“Deliberately propped open?”

“Looked that way.”

“Odd...” I mused aloud. “That would seem to indicate that whoever did this wanted the body found quickly.”

Taking out a key that had been provided to the police by the landlord, he opened the exterior door, and we stepped into what could be referred to as a small, shared mud room. To either side, there was a door, each with a large, sectioned pane of glass. Peering through the left window, one could see that the apartment was empty. Through the right, the small kitchen appeared lived in. Shiny copper pots and pans hung from a ceiling rack in the center of the room, and there was a can of vegetarian chili sitting on the counter in front of a small microwave—a last meal that was never eaten. Ben took a small lock blade from his pocket, opened it and cut the Police Crime Scene seal on the door. Stowing the knife and using another key, he unlocked the door.

“Uhhh, Ben.” I reached out and grabbed his arm as he started to push the door open. “I’d better warn you about something.”

“Warn me ‘bout what?” He turned to face me.

“This...” I started. “This might get a little weird, for lack of a better word.”

“Are you talkin’ about that hocus-pocus shit again?” he asked, still holding the doorknob.

“One,” I shot back. “Yes, if that’s what you want to call it. Two, it’s not shit.”

“Okay, okay,” he answered, knowing that he’d raised my ire. “Sorry. But I already told ya’ I don’t really believe in all that stuff.” He slipped his hand up to smooth his hair and let out a resigned sigh. “Okay, look, I’ll give it a try your way, but don’t expect too much from me. I operate in a world where physical evidence is what makes the case.”

“Fair enough. For the sake of argument though, you might want to take notes. Also, if I *zone out* on you, don’t touch me. That would break my concentration.”

“Okay,” he answered and pushed the door open. “Whatever you say.”

I knew he was still unconvinced, but I also knew I could trust him to do as I asked. In any event, as soon as the door swung open, there was no turning back.

The first thing I felt was the hair on the back of my neck as it stood on end then was rapidly followed by every other hair on my body mimicking the action. My skin began to burn as if I were baking under a sun lamp. Proceeding forward, I stepped through the entrance, followed closely by Ben. I scarcely heard the faint click of the door as he pressed it shut.

“Be careful of that crap they used to dust for prints, it’ll stain...”

I held up a hand to cut him off and walked quietly through the kitchen, working my way to the counter. I began to consciously control my breathing, slowly and deeply in through my nose and out through my mouth. I relaxed and imagined a spire of light, white and pure, running from the soles of my feet to the center of the Earth. In a matter of moments, I was “grounded,” and I cleared my mind, allowing it to become a blank, unblemished slate. I slipped easily into a shallow trance, and when I felt relaxed, centered, and in control, I reached out to touch the unopened can of chili on the counter. When my hand made contact, I invited the last few moments of Ariel Tanner’s life to play themselves out upon the empty screen I had created.

My vision tunneled, and colors bled away, running like paint being poured from a can. I could hear the melodious humming of a female voice, pretty and distinct. I looked around to see where it originated, only to realize that it was coming from within me as I

assumed Ariel's role. A part of me struggled to remain earthbound, and I knew that the humming was occurring only inside my head. My conscious self would have to narrate what I was seeing for Ben.

"I, Ariel, am humming," I told him. "I'm happy and I'm getting ready to fix myself something for dinner."

"Whaddaya mean 'you, Ariel'?" Ben was perplexed. "What are ya' talkin' about?"

"Just listen," I instructed him.

What was that? A noise. Maybe there's someone at the door. I'd better check.

The scenario continued to project itself inside my mind, and I turned and walked to the door. I was vaguely aware of Ben quickly shuffling out of my path and following along behind me.

"There might be someone at this door," I continued talking aloud. "She heard a noise, and she's checking on it. She's opening the door."

That's funny, no one there. I was sure I heard something. I guess I just imagined it. Oh well, I need to eat soon. I just took my insulin twenty minutes ago.

"There's no one there." I went on, "She thinks she must have imagined the noise." I turned and walked back to the counter. "She's a diabetic, and she has to eat something because she just took her insulin."

"Yeah, we found it in the fridge," Ben told me hesitantly, and I didn't admonish him.

What?! What's going on? Who's there? STOP! Let me go! Don't do that! Get that away from my face! What's that smell? I'm gagging. Stop it!

I could feel her struggling as she was grabbed from behind, and I was forced to tense my own muscles to keep from lashing out in a mirrored response. A phantomlike, sickly sweet odor tickled my nostrils, urging me to drift off into sleep. I shook my head, fending off the woozy sensation. "Someone grabbed her from behind. She's struggling, but he's too strong. She smells something. He put something over her face. Chloroform or something..."

Dizzy. Sleepy. I'm falling. Falling.

"She's blacking out," I stated urgently.

Ouch! What was that? Something bit me on my arm. Did a mosquito get in here? No. It felt like a needle. Oh, I feel strange. What's happening to me? Why does my head feel like this. I'm dizzy. Why is the room getting so dark?

"Pain," I almost shouted. "Something on her arm. A bite? No, a needle. The bastard drugged her. Look at his face, Ariel! Dammit, look at his face!"

The sequence ended in a black fog, and I stumbled against the counter. I sensed Ben reaching for me uncertainly then pulling back, apparently remembering I had told him not to touch me if I tranced.

"I'm okay," I told him, regaining my balance and pulling off my glasses in order to rub my eyes. "He drugged her. Did the medical examiner check for drugs?"

"Should have. Tox screens are SOP," Ben answered. "I still don't have a report yet. You sure you're all right?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," I answered. "Let's keep going. Maybe she saw his face at some point."

"Look, Row," Ben started. "Uhhh... Are you tellin' me that you're actually seein' what Ariel Tanner saw the night she was murdered?"

“Believe it or not, Ben,” I looked at him squarely in the face. “Yes. That’s exactly what I’m telling you.”

“Jeezus,” he said, “I’ve seen some strange shit, but this...” his voice trailed off.

Though I had explained to Ben some of the more minor aspects of WitchCraft, this was the first time he had ever seen any of the abilities I had cultivated in my studies. Considering his feelings on the subject, I realized I was asking him to take a rather large leap of faith, but of all my non-practicing friends, I felt certain he could be the most open-minded even if he hadn’t demonstrated it as yet. I flashed him an understanding smile to let him know that I understood what he must have been thinking at the moment and patted him lightly on the arm as I moved past into the wide hallway.

At the end, I could see where the passage opened into a combination living room/dining room area. To my left, there was a closet and bathroom, to my right, the doorway to Ariel’s bedroom. I continued my measured breathing as I stepped lightly along the worn hardwood floor. Once again, my hairs began to pivot upward painfully and my skin to sear as I entered the actual scene of the murder.

Blood on the walls and sheets had turned a rusty brown where it had continued to dry. A tracing of Ariel’s body was stretched out across the bed like a frozen caricature of the once vibrant young woman, the yellow lines clashing with the brownish red crust of dried blood. I moved slowly to the bed then grounded and centered. Once again, the color rapidly drained from the scene about me, and I felt myself being sucked into a dark tunnel.

Oh my head hurts. Why can’t I see? It’s dark. No, there’s a light. I have to move toward it. My arms. Why can’t I move my arms? I’m cold.

As before, the events of that night flooded into my brain caustically. I was experiencing her terror. Her pain.

Why am I on my bed? I’m cold. Where are my clothes? My arms hurt. My back hurts. What’s that noise?!

“I’m...she’s...” I started again, speaking from the trance I had fallen into. “...On the bed, my arms hurt and I can’t move them. They’re tied behind me...her. I’m...” I fought to maintain a separation between the experience and myself. “...She’s nude. The air conditioner is on and it’s blowing on her. She’s cold. She hears a noise.”

Who’s there? Why can’t I speak? I’m trying so hard but nothing is coming out. I’m so cold. I’m frightened. What’s happening? That noise again. Someone is here. They’re moving around. Why can’t I remember anything? My head hurts.

“He’s moving around, but she can’t see him,” I continued. “He must be out of her line of sight or maybe out of the room. I’m not sure.”

A crash! Am I being robbed? Oh please, let whoever it is just take what they want and leave. Wait. Someone grabbed me when I was in the kitchen. Who was it? Oh why can’t I remember? I’m cold. I’m scared.

“She heard a loud crash or something. From another room maybe,” I spoke. “She thinks it might be a burglar, but she still can’t see. She remembers being attacked in the kitchen. Whatever he drugged her with is still working on her. She’s foggy. She’s having trouble moving. Come on, Ariel,” I continued out loud. “Fight it. Concentrate.”

Maybe if I try to move forward. Ouch, that hurts. Just a little more. I’m so cold. Why is this happening to me? There, now I can see the door. Ohhhh, I’m feeling sick...hanging upside down...I can’t. Oh my head hurts.

“She managed to move herself a little. Her head is hanging over the side of the bed now, upside down. It’s making her nauseous.”

Who is that? Why is this person in my house? Why is this person wearing a ceremonial robe? Pull the hood back. I can’t see who you are. It’s cold. No, don’t go to that side of the bed, I can’t see you. What are you doing? Am I going to be raped? Please, don’t let him rape me.

“He came into the room,” I continued. “He’s wearing a ceremonial robe, and the hood is covering his face. He walked around to the other side of the bed. She can’t see him. *NO, don’t do that. I can’t see you.*” I slipped for a moment, and Ariel blended into the voice of my conscious self. “She’s afraid he’s going to rape her.”

What are you doing? He’s touching me. What? What are you saying? You’re sorry? Sorry about what. It’s cold. My arms are killing me. Why are you doing this?

“He’s speaking to her!” I exclaimed out loud. “He’s telling her he’s sorry. She doesn’t understand. Concentrate, Ariel,” I coached the vision. “Help me help you.”

What are you talking about? Sorry? What are you sorry about? I don’t understand. Tell me what you mean. Your voice sounds familiar, but I can’t remember who you are. Ouch! What are you doing? Get off of me. Oh, why can’t I scream? If I could just scream, someone would come to help me. It’s cold. Get off of me. What is that in your hand? What are you doing?!

“He’s on the bed with her. On top of her.” I relayed the vision to Ben. “His voice seems familiar to her, but she can’t place it. He has something in his hand.”

My athamè! What are you doing with my athamè? No! No, don’t do that! STOP!

My head exploded. At least, that is how it felt as a desperate scream that only I could hear echoed forever inside my skull. My skin burst into a violent blaze, and starting at my throat, running the length of my chest then spreading rapidly outward, I felt as if every single nerve were raw and suddenly plunged into a vat of alcohol. I clawed at my own chest, fighting to push away the ethereal knife that was ripping my flesh.

“Dear Gods!” I cried. “The son-of-a-bitch is skinning her alive with her own athamè!”

I fell to my knees and continued to claw at the air in front of me. I was faintly aware of Ben’s concerned voice screaming my name, but I couldn’t respond. I was trapped in the vision. I could see nothing but dull red and black as I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, fighting to deny the searing pain. I could feel the blade of the athamè, at once steely cold and white hot, as it slid beneath my skin, separating the layer of nerve impregnated flesh from the rest of my body. I was certain I could hear thick tearing as my hide was peeled away, exposing muscle, nerves, and hot viscid blood. I screamed my own guttural wail of agony as I struggled to break free of this vision I knew could easily kill me. It seemed to last an eternity. It seemed to last only a second. Time no longer meant anything.

Why doesn’t somebody make him stop?

“I can’t Ariel. I can’t,” I sobbed.

Why? Why are you doing this? Where are you going? I hurt so bad! Why did you do this? I have to see you. Who are you? What are you doing with those candles? Why are you drawing a Pentacle on the wall? It’s such a bright red? Where did you get that red? What are you writing? I hurt so bad.

“What the hell is he doing?” I whimpered aloud.

What are you doing with that wine glass? No. Don't come back over here. Go away. Go away. What are you doing?! NO!

Again blinding pain.

Again a scream, but unlike the other, cut short at its peak to become a faint gurgle followed by silence. He had cut her throat. Her slowly fading misery continued to play its sickening scenes inside my head. I saw, as she saw through dying eyes, her killer raising a wine goblet filled with blood. A goblet to be used for his own perverse distortion of an Expiation spell as he prepared to forgive himself for the unspeakable things he had just done.

I was just beginning to lose sight of consciousness when I was unceremoniously lurched back into the physical realm.

“Rowan! Talk ta’ me! What’s goin’ on?!” Ben screamed frantically. He grabbed me by the front of my shirt and shook me so violently that his knuckles pounded into my chest. “ROWAN!”

“He was practicing,” I sobbed, pressing the heels of my palms against my eyes, driving back the tears and fighting to bring my breathing back to normal. “The bastard was just practicing.”

“What the hell are ya’ talkin’ about?!” Ben practically screamed. “Practicin’ what?”

“Practicing the *art* of flaying,” I spat, pulling my hands away from my eyes. “He didn’t even try to perform an invocation ritual. He was just teaching himself how to skin someone alive.”

“What the hell for?”

“To prepare,” I answered, climbing to my feet and steadying myself against the wall. “He’s trying to learn... Most likely so that he can actually perform the invocation sometime in the near future. Trust me, he’s not going to stop here. This is only the beginning.”

“This is fucked up, man,” Ben stated wildly, turning in place, looking about the room as if some unseen creature was about to sneak up on him. “You saw all that?! You felt what she felt?!”

“Yes.” I had begun to regain some composure. “That’s exactly what I did. The fact that she was a Witch made it easier to do and...” I paused, “much more intense than I was expecting.”

“Okay, look,” Ben told me sternly. “I’m not entirely sure what I think about this, but I can damn sure tell you no one else at the department is gonna believe it, so this stays between you and me, got it?”

“Yeah, I got it,” I answered. “Just let me help you get this S.O.B.”

“If any of this stuff matches up with the coroner’s report,” he waved his notepad in front of me, “you better believe you’re gonna help.”

“Good,” I told him. “Now let’s get out of here. I need to get away from this before it sucks me in again.”

I walked past Ben to the door and reached into my shirt pocket for my glasses. I looked back to see that he was following me then turned back to the doorway.

I turned back just in time to see a young man with long dark hair and the lamp he was swinging at me.

CHAPTER 3

I lifted my arm instinctively to guard my face, and the table lamp met it with violent force. The vase-like, imitation china base shattered and continued its arc, glancing against my forehead. The blow struck hard enough to stun, causing me to lose my balance and fall backward to the floor. A gash had been opened at my hairline, and blood immediately began to trickle down my face and into my right eye. I had deflected enough of the impact that I felt certain I wasn't seriously injured, but my ears were ringing, and I knew I was going to have one hell of a headache.

In the same moment I was falling to the floor, I saw Ben's large form flash in front of me as he took two large strides and slammed my attacker forcefully against the wall.

"You better get out of here," the near breathless young man croaked. "I called the cops. They'll be here any minute."

Ben held the young man against the wall, twisting one arm up behind his back while pressing him into the painted plaster. With his free hand, he ripped his badge from his belt and shoved the gold shield into the attacker's face.

"I AM the cops!" he shouted angrily. "Who the hell are you, and what're ya' doin' here?!"

"I'm sorry, man!" The young man now seemed a bit more frightened as the realization of what he had done set in. "I didn't know who you guys were. I came by to water Ariel's plants, and I heard voices. I thought you guys were burglars or something. Really, man, I'm sorry," he spoke frantically.

"You okay, Row?" Ben queried, looking back at me as I dragged myself from the floor and stood up shakily.

"A bit rattled," I answered. "I think I'm okay. There always have been four of you, right?"

Ben cracked a smile and turned back to the young man who was still held firmly in place against the wall.

"So we know why you're here," he continued. "But ya' still didn't tell us who ya' are."

"R.J.," he answered. "My name's R.J. Does Ariel know you're here? What's going on?"

I looked at Ben, then back at the gory sight of the bedroom. He immediately picked up on my cue and maintaining his grip on the young man, pulled him away from the wall and guided him out the door into the hallway. I followed along, stooping to pick up my glasses, which had been knocked from my hands, then exited the room, closing the door behind me. While Ben still held R.J. in the hall, I went into the bathroom and found a washcloth. After running it under cold water, I wiped the blood from my eye and forehead and then used it as a compress on the gash and the rapidly rising welt.

"What's going on man?" R.J. exclaimed as I came out of the washroom. "Why won't you tell me what's going on?"

Ben had him spread eagle against the wall and had apparently searched him while I was tending to my wound. He was studying what I assumed to be R.J.'s identification. He nodded to me and released his grip on R.J.'s shoulder. For the second time this morning, I was confronted with being the bearer of bad news. After a brief moment of indecision, I elected to treat it like removing a bandage and take a "get it over with quickly" approach.

"Ariel's dead, R.J.," I told him as he turned to face me, rubbing his shoulder where Ben's viselike grip had been. "She was murdered."

"She was what?!" he exclaimed. "No way, man, I don't believe you. She's visiting a friend in Chicago for a week. She can't be dead."

"I haven't got any reason to lie to you about something like this," I replied.

"He's serious, man," Ben echoed as he returned the wallet to him.

R.J. stared at Ben, then at me. I could see in his eyes that the reality was sinking in, but he was still desperately fighting to deny it. Ben had relaxed his guard, and I was tending to my wound, so when the young man bolted for the bedroom door, neither of us were prepared to stop him. He rushed past me and flung open the door, bursting into the room. He only managed to travel three steps into the horror before freezing in place. Ben and I were immediately behind him as he stared at the blood-soaked bed like a frightened child. The stunned silence was finally broken as his head dropped and his shoulders began to heave. I led him gently from the room as he buried his face in his hands, sobbing uncontrollably.



In the small backyard of Ariel Tanner's flat, we waited for R.J. to calm down. I had the impression that Ben wasn't necessarily convinced that he wasn't putting on a performance for our benefit. Of course, Ben was suspicious of everyone, and that was one of the things that made him such a good cop.

Personally, I could feel the anguish exuding from the young man, and I seriously doubted that it was an act.

"When did this happen?" R.J. queried at last, wiping his reddened eyes with his shirtsleeve.

"Wednesday," Ben told him. "Sometime after six in the evening." He was holding a small notebook and ever vigilant, continued, "So, were you her boyfriend?"

"No," he sniffed. "Just a friend."

"You said you were here ta' water the plants. I assume Miz Tanner gave you a key?"

"Yeah."

"When would that have been?" Ben pressed as he scribbled more notes.

"Last Sunday. She was supposed to leave last night, and she asked me if I'd keep an eye on the place."

"And that's the last time you saw 'er?"

"Yeah."

Ben paused for a second as he turned to a fresh page, then tilted his head to look directly into R.J.'s face. "Mind tellin' me where you were Wednesday night?"

"I was..." He started to speak and then caught himself. He almost visibly pondered his answer for a split second before continuing, "I was out of town on a camping trip."

"Were you with anyone?"

“My dad. It was our annual fishing trip,” R.J. answered, then his eyes grew wide with sudden realization. “Am I a suspect?!”

“It’s just routine,” Ben told him. “But I’d prefer it if ya’ kept yourself available.”

“How long did you know Ariel?” I asked him.

“A couple of years,” he replied. “I was a member of...” he paused uneasily, “...a club she was in.”

“You mean you were a member of her coven?” I questioned.

He stared back at me with a shocked, almost frightened, expression. He reached up to his chest and fingered a silver Pentacle hanging about his neck as if he had forgotten it was there.

“It’s not what you cops think...” he started.

“Whoa,” I stopped him and jerked my thumb over my shoulder at Ben. “He’s the only cop here. My name’s Rowan Gant.” I held my hand out to him. “I’m a Witch too.”

“Rowan Gant,” he repeated my name as he took my hand and shook it. “The Rowan Gant that Ariel studied with?”

“Yeah,” I returned. “That’s me. I’m just here as a consultant.”

“Ariel talked about you and your wife all the time,” he continued. “She even had a picture of all you guys together on a camping retreat you took.”

I smiled slightly, remembering the trip well. Felicity and I had taken Ariel and a number of other Wiccan friends on a weeklong retreat to the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois just over two years ago. We had camped, studied nature, and become closer to Mother Earth as well as one another. We had ended that trip with a ritual circle on Summer Solstice, one of the religion’s four Lesser Sabbats.

After what I had experienced in the apartment less than an hour before, the memories of that holiday were pleasant and very welcome.

“I’m glad it was a happy time for her,” I told him.

“I thought she told me you were into computers or something like that,” he said.

“I am.”

“Then what are you consulting with the police about?” he queried.

“You probably didn’t notice the walls in her bedroom,” I started carefully. “There were some symbols left behind. Her death is apparently related to The Craft in some way.”

“Devon!” he screamed suddenly. “I’ll kill him! I’ll kill the son-of-a-bitch!”

With that, he once again bolted past both Ben and me as he ran full speed up the small space between the buildings with my friend on his heels. Being shorter of stature and much wirier, R.J. was able to negotiate the cramped alleyway with slippery ease, quickly widening his lead and bursting out on to the street. I, with my throbbing skull, arrived in front of the building just in time to see Ben trying to yank open the door of a gold Trans Am.

R.J. gunned the engine, and the car jumped away from the curb, tires squealing against asphalt. Ben managed to follow alongside for a few steps before losing his grip on the handle, and choosing discretion over valor, back-peddled from the vehicle as it sped away.

“Are you all right?” I called to him as he jogged toward me.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he nodded. “Did ya’ catch what he said?”

“He said he was going to kill someone named Devon,” I replied. “I seem to have triggered it when I told him Ariel’s death was somehow connected to The Craft.”

“Well,” he said walking toward the back of the house. “Let’s get back to the van and get his plate number out over the air. I’m thinkin’ maybe we need ta’ find out who this Devon guy is.”



Using the police radio in his van, Ben was able to get R.J.’s license plate number, as well as a description of the car and him, out to the on-duty patrols. We were just pulling into the parking lot of the medical examiner’s office when a call blared over the tinny speaker stating that he had been picked up. Ben quickly instructed the arresting officer to bring him to the M.E.’s office where we would be waiting.

Ben was thumbing through his notes as we walked across the lot in the general direction of the entrance. After flipping back and forth between pages a trio of times, he settled on a particular scribble and glanced over at me.

“What’s an at-tommy?” he queried as he searched his breast pocket for a writing implement.

“Athamè,” I corrected. “It’s a Witch’s personal knife. It’s used in rituals and the practice of The Craft. Why?”

He quickly added the words “Witches Knife” to the scrawled notation.

“When you were doing that thing, whatever it was, back at the apartment, you screamed something about the killer using Ariel’s own Ath-Tommee,” he still stumbled over the word, “to skin her.”

“Yeah.” The thought brought back unpleasant phantom pains in my chest. “That’s what I saw.”

“Whaddaya use it for?” he continued. “To sacrifice things or something?”

“No,” I answered. “Not in the sense you mean. A Witch’s athamè should never draw blood, and the only sacrifice a Witch makes is of him or herself.”

“So ya’ think Ariel Tanner was tortured and killed with her own Witch knife?” he voiced.

“Yes,” I answered. “Which is something that made it even worse for her because an athamè is a very personal tool to a Wiccan practitioner. Hers was a dirk.”

“Which is?”

“A European double-edged dagger about six inches long,” I explained. “It’s double-beveled and has a black handle.”

“Is that somethin’ you saw in your vision?”

“Yes. But I knew even before then. I gave it to her when she went out and started her own coven. It was a gift.”

We entered the coroner’s office and were greeted by a pleasant young woman at the reception desk who led us back to a room with stainless steel tables and tile floors: a room where the emptiness of death pervaded every sense to one who is aware. The young woman introduced us to Dr. Christine Sanders, the chief medical examiner who was also the M.E. working Ariel’s case.

Despite my protestations, Ben pointed out my recent injury and asked if she might be able to take a look at it. After an effusive amount of concern, I was forced to be x-

rayed and the gash stitched up. This was not something I expected from someone who spends her days with the dead, and I made the mistake of stating as much. She was quick to point out that she was in fact an M.D., so I elected not to argue.

Once my spur-of-the-moment medical treatment was finished, we gathered in Dr. Sanders' office. With its carpeting, mauve walls, and strategically placed paintings, it was a much more pleasant place to be than the chilled antiseptic realm of the autopsy suite.

"Ariel Tanner..." she began. "Just finished that one yesterday afternoon. You guys are lucky you caught me here," she added. "This is supposed to be my day off. I only came in to finish up some paperwork."

"I know the feelin', doc," Ben replied.

Dr. Sanders continued leafing through a thick file folder and finally came to rest on the page she sought. Her glasses hung loosely on a chain around her neck, giving her a stern look. Her demeanor, however, was much more pleasant than her outer appearance immediately suggested. She tossed back a shoulder-length shock of grey-flecked, brunette hair and slid the glasses onto her face, resting them lightly on the end of her nose.

"It appears that we are still waiting on some of the tox screen results," she told us. "But cause of death was due to an acute trauma to the neck resulting in massive blood loss. Judging from her histamine levels, the trauma to the chest..." She looked up over her glasses at me then to Ben.

"It's okay," he told her. "He's consulting on the case."

"...Then," she continued, "the trauma to the chest and excision of the dermis occurred antemortem."

"In English, doc," Ben said.

"She was skinned alive, Detective."

Jotting down quick notes, Ben continued, "Any idea what the killer mighta used ta' accomplish that?"

"Based on the size and shape of the wounds..." She looked back at the file and flipped over some more pages. "A short, beveled blade of some sort, but that's just a guess."

"One last question," he asked. "And it might seem a bit odd. Did ya' find any marks on her arms? Like a puncture wound?"

"Now that you mention it, yes we did," Dr. Sanders answered. "There was a puncture wound on her left arm, consistent with an injection. I assumed it was from a dose of insulin since she was a diabetic."

"We've got reason ta' believe she might have been drugged. Possibly with an injection," Ben told her after glancing quickly at me.

"We took a tissue sample," she submitted. "It's being screened with all the rest."

"Dr. Sanders?" the intercom on her desk blared.

"Yes, Cecilia?" she answered.

"Sorry to bother you," the disembodied voice continued issuing from the speaker. "But there is an officer here in the lobby to see Detective Storm."

"Thank you," Dr. Sanders said to the young woman at the other end then turned back to us. "Is there anything else I can do for you gentlemen?"

"I think that's it for now," Ben told her, standing and stowing his small notebook in a shirt pocket. "I'd appreciate hearin' from ya' as soon as the tox results are in." He handed her his card.

"No problem," she replied, clipping the card to the front of the file folder and then turning to me. "And you, sir... I recommend you go home and get some rest."

"You'll get no argument from me," I answered and shook her hand. "Thanks for the quick treatment."

"You're very welcome," she smiled. "It's nice to see one of my patients leave under his own power for a change."

Once outside the office, I turned to Ben as we headed down the intersecting maze of corridors toward the reception area. "So what do you think?"

"I think if that puncture wound turns up somethin' besides insulin that you're one spooky S.O.B." was all he said.



We were met in the lobby by a uniformed patrol officer and followed him outside to his vehicle. Ben sent him across the street for a cup of coffee, and we climbed into the back of the squad car on either side of R.J., leaving the doors partially open to avoid being locked in. His hands were cuffed behind him, and he appeared even more disheveled than earlier. He shot Ben a frightened look as we climbed in and then glanced at me as if asking for help. It was obvious that he had never been through an ordeal such as this.

"Would ya' mind tellin' me," Ben started, "just exactly why I shouldn't throw the book at ya'?"

"For what?" R.J. squeaked, trying unsuccessfully to appear tough.

"For pickin' your nose in public," Ben shot back sarcastically. "It doesn't really matter! Let's look at the facts. One. I'm tryin' to conduct a homicide investigation. Two. You show up at the scene and clock my consultant in the face with a table lamp. Three. You flee the scene screamin' that you're gonna kill some individual by the name of Devon. Killin' someone is a felony, ya'know." He paused for effect. "Now put yourself in my place. What am I supposed to think?"

R.J. hung his head and squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. I could feel his anguish, his fear...his sadness. Quite a bit had been thrust upon him within the last few hours, and I was sure that he was rapidly approaching critical mass. I only hoped that I would be able to defuse it without getting in the way of Ben's investigation.

"He wasn't even home," R.J. finally muttered.

"You mean Devon?" I queried.

"Yeah, Devon," he answered, nodding his head. "His neighbor said he hasn't been home for a couple of days."

"Who is this Devon character?" Ben asked, once again flipping open the cover of his ever-present notepad.

"He used to be a member of our coven," R.J. said, glancing quickly at Ben, then back at me, as if only I would understand. "Up until a few weeks ago."

"He didn't leave on very good terms I take it," I coached.

"We banished him. He had been straying from the path for a while, and he started talking about ritual magick a lot. It was like he was trying to get us involved too."

“Ritual magick isn’t necessarily a bad thing.”

“His idea of it was.”

“Okay, go on,” I told him, glancing up to look at Ben who met my gaze quietly and continued scribbling.

“We didn’t know how long he had actually been practicing Black Arts, but he really got a big head about it.” R.J. squirmed a little more against the biting handcuffs then continued. “He started bragging about an invocation rite and even showed us where he had done it.”

“What did he sacrifice?” I asked, knowing what the ritual implied.

“A dog,” R.J. spat, showing a flash of disgust. “He said he got it from the pound. It made all of us sick, but Ariel took it the worst. She felt like she had failed or something.”

“That’s a Pisces for you,” I told him. “I remember how she used to beat herself up over what she considered her own failings.”

“It wasn’t long after that when we held our Full Moon meeting. Devon was unanimously cast out of the coven.” He looked back to Ben as if a sudden rush of anger had displaced his fear of his own current situation. “He told us we would regret it.”

“So ya’ think Devon is the one who did this to Ariel?” Ben interjected.

“It has to be,” he replied. “He was mad at all of us but especially with Ariel. If what Rowan said is true about her murder being connected to The Craft...”

“What’s his last name?” Ben cut him off.

“Johnston. Devon Johnston. He lives over in South City.”

Ben wrote down the information as R.J. relayed it to him and then looked up from his notebook. I caught his eye and motioned for him to step out of the car with me. He nodded and shoved his door open wider.

“We’ll be right back,” I told R.J. as I pushed against my own door. “I know this hurts man. I know it’s tearing you up inside... I’m feeling it too. Ground and center, you’ll feel better.”

He nodded, and even as I exited the car, he began to consciously slow his breathing just as he had been taught.

“What do you think?” I asked Ben over the roof of the vehicle, keeping my voice low.

He squinted and held up his notebook to shade his eyes. “I think there’s somethin’ he’s not tellin’ us,” he answered me in his own quiet tone. “He was kinda hesitant when I asked him about where he was Wednesday night... Not ta’ mention the fact that he has a key. What about you?”

“I picked up on that too, but honestly I think he’s just a scared kid. What about his story on that Devon Johnston guy? If he actually did sacrifice an animal then a human could be the next logical progression.”

“Yeah, I definitely wanna have a chat with Mister Johnston.”

“If you’re game,” I submitted after a moments pause, “I’d like to try something.”

“What’s that?”

“I’d like to talk to the rest of the coven members.” I continued, “Get an idea of their feelings about Devon. And,” I added, “THEIR stories about what happened at that Full Moon meeting.”

“You think the kid’s makin’ it up?” Ben asked. “You’re startin’ ta’ sound like a copper.”

“I don’t really think that he’s making it up, but I think his judgment may be a bit left of center,” I answered. “Actually, what I do think is that he was in love with Ariel Tanner.”

“Where the hell’d you come up with that?”

“Just a feeling.”

“Well, I’d actually like to talk to them anyway, so I guess we can get their names from him and call them downtown,” he suggested.

“No.” I shook my head. “I think that might make them a little too uncomfortable, and they’d just clam up. Remember, you’re dealing with a group of Witches here. We’re already persecuted enough.”

“You got a better idea?”

“I want to let R.J. make the calls and get them over to my place,” I recited my idea. “A nice, informal atmosphere where we can talk Witch to Witch.”

“I don’t know...” Ben started.

“I want you there too,” I added, stopping him before he could finish his objection. “I just don’t want to spook these people. I’m pretty sure that I know their type a little better than you do. Remember, I’m one of them.”

Ben paused then smoothed his hair back, letting his hand rest at the back of his neck, his telltale physical manifestation of intense thought. I knew that he was concerned about what he considered to be an unorthodox approach to the investigation, but it had lost its normalcy the moment he asked for my advice. I also knew that he was still skeptical about the entire concept of WitchCraft, even with what he had witnessed so far today.

“Okay,” he finally told me. “When do ya’ wanna do this?”

“Tonight if at all possible,” I replied.

He nodded and then frowned. “Yeah. Sooner the better. Shit! Allison’s gonna have my ass.”

“So what’s new about that?”

I opened the door to the patrol car and squatted down next to it. R.J. looked over at me, as the sound had apparently startled him.

“Do you think you can get in touch with all of the coven members pretty quickly?” I asked him.

“Sure. Why?”

“I want to get everyone together over at my place this evening if we can.” I continued, “We really need to talk about what’s happened, and the more information we can get, the quicker the cops can catch whoever killed Ariel.”

“But...” R.J. started.

“I know, R.J.,” I interrupted. “I know you think that Devon did it, and what he’s getting himself into is some sick shit, I agree. But, right now there’s no proof it was him. Believe me, they plan to pick him up and question him.” He settled back in the seat as I talked. “We have to help the police, man. Not fight against them. Okay?”

“Okay,” he nodded after a short silence and then hung his chin down to his chest.

“We’re on,” I told Ben as I stood up.

My friend nodded and stepped to the driver’s door of the squad car. He opened it and reached in to the controls near the dash. He punched a button and the light bar atop the roof blinked to life. The pre-arranged signal quickly caught the eye of the officer

belonging to the vehicle, and he was soon making his way back toward us from the coffee shop across the street.

After signaling the patrolman, Ben got in the back seat momentarily and unlocked the handcuffs that were restraining R.J.

"I'm gonna have the officer drop ya' off at your car," he told him. "You've got a real friend in Rowan here, so don't fuck it up and pull any shit this time."

R.J. nodded quietly and rubbed his wrists where the restraints had bit into his skin.

"Here." I held out a business card to him. "This is Detective Storm's card. My number and address are on the back. Tell them we'll have sandwiches and the like so they can eat there. Say we set everything up for about seven tonight? Sound good?"

"Okay," he nodded.

"Stay grounded." I smiled at him. "We'll work this out."

Ben returned the handcuffs to the patrolman and instructed him to return R.J. to his vehicle. We both thanked him for his time and watched them pull away before making the short trek across the parking lot to the van. It was coming up on noon, and I was starting to fade. Exhaustion, not only from the lack of sleep but from the mental trauma of channeling Ariel's murder, was taking its toll.

"You really think the kid's gonna show?" Ben asked me, looking quickly each way then nosing the van out into the traffic.

"Yeah." I slumped in my seat. "He'll show. I'm sure of it."

"I hope you're right," he told me as we entered the flow and came to a halt at a signal that had just winked to crimson. "Ya'know, Rowan," he said after a pause, still looking straight ahead. "If I didn't know ya' better, I'd have ta' consider ya' a suspect."

"Because of everything I told you this morning at Ariel's apartment," I stated matter-of-factly.

"Yeah," he sighed. "Ya'know I'm gonna have ta' check out your alibi with your dad."

"I figured you would. In fact, I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

He looked quietly out his side window and then turned his eyes back to the front. It was apparent that he was wrestling with something other than my whereabouts Wednesday night. "Ya'know, I'm still kinda weirded out about this stuff," he finally admitted.

"I know."

He looked over at me. "For your own sake, keep this between us."

"I will," I told him.

The dull background noise of the city was sharpened momentarily as a horn blared to our rear, angrily alerting us to the fact that the traffic light had changed. Ben pushed the van into motion, and we rolled on through the intersection and down the street in the general direction of my suburb.

"Mind if I use this?" I asked, picking up his cell phone.

"Go ahead. Gotta call the little woman?"

"Yeah," I replied, punching in my number. "She should be home by now."

After a pair of trilling rings, the phone was answered by my wife's tranquil voice. The evenly spaced, rattling noises in the background told me she was in the darkroom, probably processing the film she had shot on her outing. We exchanged greetings, and then I relayed a sketchy outline of the morning's events before filling her in on the plans

for the evening. I had gingerly talked around the incident involving the table lamp and my forehead but knew that I had better warn her before she saw me. I had to pull the phone away from my ear quickly to protect my hearing as soon as I uttered the words x-ray and stitches. A moment or two later, I held out the handset to Ben.

“She wants to talk to you,” I told him.

CHAPTER 4

Fortunately, Ben knew Felicity well, and as a cop, had dealt with distraught individuals a number of times before. He allowed her to decompress and simply listened as she vented her feelings regarding the circumstances of my injury. Just as fortuitous was the fact that Felicity was not one to hold a grudge and worked through her anger very quickly. By the time we pulled into the driveway of my Briarwood home, they had both apologized to one another, and the entire incident had somehow become my fault for having my face in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Ben dropped me off and headed, I assumed, to his own home in order to spend what little time he could with his family. He planned to return for the meeting somewhat earlier than the rest and had told me he was still trying to figure out how to make it up to his wife and son. Something told me he would be taking time out to visit my father along the way. After a quick wave, I ambled up the stairs to my front porch and was greeted by Emily, our calico cat, who leapt lithely down from the window ledge and began weaving herself about my legs, purring madly.

“Yes, I missed you too,” I told her as I stooped to pick her up.

Emily continued her throaty trill as I allowed her to drape herself across my shoulder, then lifted the lid on the mailbox and retrieved the contents. There was the usual mix of bills and junk mail, as well as a yellow pickup slip for a package that had needed a signature—most likely one of my client’s software in need of modification or repair. Felicity had probably been in the darkroom ever since returning from her photo expedition and had missed the postal carrier. I resigned myself to picking it up at the branch office on Monday since it was already after noon. Besides, my evening was already booked, so working was out of the question anyway.

I twisted my key in the deadbolt lock of the heavy, oak front door and pushed it open, following it inside then closing it behind me. I lifted the rumbling ball of fur from my shoulder and gently placed her on the arm of the couch then tossed the mail in the small wicker basket Felicity kept by the door for just such a purpose. Fatigue washed over me, and the sofa was all but screaming my name. I sat down and within moments became horizontal on the soft cushions. Emily remained perched on the arm, near motionless, her ears at full attention, as if she were a small furry gargoyle watching over me. Scarcely had I reclined that I heard my wife’s footsteps as she came up from the basement and into the living room.

“I thought I heard you up here,” she said softly, seating herself on the edge of the sofa next to me.

I looked up to see her lightly freckled face, framed by her auburn hair wrapped loosely in a *Gibson Girl* about her head. It never ceased to amaze me how this woman I had married could easily slide from hippie activist to china doll in the blink of an eye. Her bright green eyes stared back with concern as she reached out and lightly touched my forehead near the stitches.

“How are you feeling?”

“Physically or spiritually?” I asked, weakly smiling back at her.

“Both.”

“Physically,” I told her, “like I’ve been hit by a truck. Spiritually...drained, but still grounded.”

“I wish you wouldn’t do these things to yourself,” she gently admonished, lightly placing her hand over the wound on my head. “A person can only take so much.”

“I’ve got to be honest with you.” I relaxed, feeling the healing energy she was directing through her hand. “I lost control today. When I channeled those last few moments of Ariel’s life, I couldn’t keep myself separated. She kept breaking through and taking over. I know it scared the hell out of Ben.”

“Oh, Rowan,” she whispered. “It scares the hell out of me too.”

Felicity was filled with an inherent desire to make everything well and at the moment, she wore a deeply empathic grimace. I watched her close her eyes and felt her ground and center, directing a cool wash of energy over me that appeared in my mind as a soothing green light. Soon, my dull headache subsided, and the last knots of tension uncoiled from my neck and shoulders.

“Have you eaten?” she asked me.

“No,” I answered. “Not yet.”

“I’ll go make you something.” She leaned forward and lightly kissed me on the forehead. “You just relax.”

I vaguely remember the smell of corned beef hash and eggs wafting into the room as I drifted into tortured sleep.

Screaming.

Screaming forever with no pause. Distorted noises. Sounds of ripping and tearing. The forever tortured banshee wail. I am in Ariel Tanner’s apartment. The kitchen. I am standing in the kitchen. The room is bathed in a surreal wash of white. I shade my eyes against the stark brightness.

Silence.

Clear, unbroken silence.

My heart pounding. Thump thump, Thump thump, Thump thump. Louder. Fighting to escape from my chest. Blood rushing in my ears, pushing back the silence.

Fear.

Pure, unadulterated terror.

“Please come in,” a voice.

I turn to face the direction of the voice. 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 the rushing in my ears. “It’s been so long.”

“Ariel?” I question.

She jerks spasmodically, and the smile flees her lips. Her eyes grow wide and she looks down. A spot of crimson appears on the high neck of the lace gown and begins growing. Spreading. Her mouth falls open in shock, and she looks back at me with questioning eyes. The vermilion stain waxes unceasingly, covering her chest.

“Why, Rowan?” she mouths. “Why?”

Darkness.

*Falling. Wind rushing past. Faster, faster, faster...
An unearthly sound. A demonic chord growing stronger.
Impact.*

I'm standing in Ariel Tanner's bedroom. Everything is cast in an eerie blue light. Her body is spread across the bed, her dead eyes staring at me. I walk toward her, and they follow me. The bloodstains appear black in the supernatural light. A sound at my back, slow and rhythmic, but unintelligible. I turn. A figure in a robe is there lighting candles.

"Who are you?" I ask, but my voice is drowned out by the muffled chant.

I take a step forward and the figure disappears. There is a sound like a crashing wave, recorded on tape and played in reverse. The murmur is behind me now. I turn again, and the robed figure is on the opposite side of the bed. The figure is pointing at me. The chant becomes louder, and though disjointed in its cadence, clear.

"All...Is...Forgiven. All...Is...Forgiven..."

"Why?" a voice drifts over the chant.

I look down to see Ariel's mutilated corpse. Her lifeless eyes glare back at me and her mouth slowly animates.

"Why, Rowan, why?"

An endless scream.

I awoke with a start, my hair and clothes drenched in a cold sweat. Felicity was once again sitting next to me on the edge of the sofa, deep concern creasing her brow and sad tears clouding her eyes.

"Are you okay?" I asked her, immediately worried by the expression on her face.

"Yes," she sniffed. "I'm all right. The question is are you going to be okay?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I think so."

"You kept saying 'Why, Rowan, why', over and over," she told me as she intertwined her fingers with mine, then wiped away a tear with her free hand. "All I could feel from you was fear, and I couldn't wake you."

"How long was I out of it?" I asked with a sigh.

"About half an hour," she returned. "What's going on? You've never done anything like this before."

"I don't know. Probably just a bad dream." I reached up and brushed a loose strand of hair from her face. "The things I've seen in the past twenty-four hours would give anyone nightmares."

"It's more than that," she told me. "You and I both know it."

I lightly caressed her cheek. "Never can fool you, can I?"

"This isn't going to stop until you find the killer, is it?"

I didn't answer. I didn't have to.



By some miracle, I actually slept. No dreams, no visions, no nightmares. It was only an hour, but at least it was peaceful. Upon waking, I re-heated and practically inhaled the meal Felicity had made for me earlier. I never realized corned beef hash and eggs could taste so good. After eating, I parked myself in my upstairs office with a solid stack of

reference books. The Expiation spell had been readily recognizable to me, even considering the killer's sickening variations, but the rest of it was only vaguely familiar. I knew from past reading that flaying and vivisection of a live sacrificial victim were components of the invocation rites performed by ritual magicians of days long past. What I wasn't clear on was what he might be trying to invoke or why. I felt that if I could pin these facts down, I might have a clue about what he would do next. Whether or not this would be important to the police, I also didn't know, but it was important to me.

It became quickly obvious after only a few moments study that the healthy pile of books held none of the answers I sought. Reference material about The Craft didn't deal with the horrors I had only recently witnessed, and any other historical texts in my possession touched on it only briefly. Feeling this avenue now closed, I pushed the books off to the side of my desk and switched on my personal computer. A few keystrokes and mouse clicks later, I was logging in to my local Internet service provider and merging with the electronic fast lane of the information superhighway. I navigated through the various starting pages and came to rest at my objective, a database search screen. I began my quest for information by typing in the keywords HUMAN SACRIFICE and clicking on the SUBMIT icon. If my service provider happened to be randomly monitoring this line, I mused silently, they were probably thinking I was some kind of psychopath. The status lights on the modem flickered quickly, and the screen re-painted itself, displaying the online addresses of the various matching World Wide Web sites.

The majority of the web pages listed dealt with historical text and benign non-literal references such as those sacrifices one person makes for another. I was simultaneously pleased and demoralized by the listing of sites that purported to be reservoirs of information regarding active religions that encouraged the actual sacrificing of a human victim. Upon closer inspection, they were obviously no more than idle electronic chatter, but they contained information I felt might be useful. Still, I was violently disgusted by the fact that anyone would claim to subscribe to such beliefs. The world really didn't need any more sickos than it already had.

When all was said and done, I had conducted several searches of the "Web" using keywords ranging from BLOOD SACRIFICE to FLAYING. With each of these searches turning up a listing of site addresses, I easily investigated over one hundred web pages within a few hours. The information I gathered held references to historical events and dead religions, as well as fictional books and horror movies. All of it told me that I was on the right track in my belief that the killer was practicing for an invocation ritual, but it still didn't tell me who or what he was trying to invoke.

The digital clock resting in the corner of my monitor screen attested to the fact that the afternoon had slipped by virtually unnoticed. It was rapidly approaching time for our meeting with Ariel's coven, and I knew Ben would be arriving early. I logged off the network and shut down my computer after the printer spit out the last of the information I had sent to it. Much to my chagrin, I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror as I made my way downstairs. My clothing was disheveled, my hair matted and stringy, and my face pallid and drawn. Overall, I looked like death warmed over. A glance at my watch told me I still had some time, so I decided to become acquainted with hot water and a bar of soap.



I was just climbing out of the shower when Felicity poked her head in the door and told me Ben had arrived. By the time I finished drying off and throwing on some clothes, the two of them were parked at the dining room table. I joined them and helped myself to a mug of hot ginger-mint tea.

"I did some research on invocation rites." I indicated the sheaf of papers I had brought down from my office. "Pretty general stuff. Not much help to be honest."

"I'll take your word on it," Ben nodded as he spoke. "So, Red Squaw here was tellin' me you had a hard time of it after I dropped ya' off this afternoon."

"Nightmare I guess," I told him. "I'll get over it."

"Uh-huh," he grunted, unconvinced. "By the way, I dropped in on your old man."

"I thought you might," I nodded. "How'd he handle it? Should I be expecting a call?"

"Prob'ly not. I didn't wanna get him all worked up, so I told him I was in the area and just stopped in to say hi."

"Were you able to find out what you needed?"

"Yeah. I managed ta' fit it into the conversation."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Hey, no prob, white man."

During our conversation, Felicity had remained steadfastly silent. It suddenly dawned on me that she hadn't expressed any interest in the somewhat cryptic exchange, so I turned my attention to her side of the table. A familiar file folder lay open across an equally familiar envelope near the center. A thick stack of crime scene photographs were spread neatly before my wife. One of the glossy monstrosities was resting carefully between her fingers as she studied it intently. All the while, she absently chewed on her lower lip as she concentrated.

"What the hell are you doing?!" I sputtered, nearly choking on a mouthful of hot tea.

"Catching up," Felicity spoke without looking up from the pictures.

"Dammit Ben!" I turned to him. "Are you out of your mind?!"

"Hey!" He held his hands up defensively. "She told me you wanted her ta' look at 'em."

"It's not his fault, then," she stated, deftly laying the photo she was studying on to a stack then looking up at me. "That's what I told him."

"Well forget it," I exclaimed and started reaching for the grisly prints. "I don't want you looking at these things."

"NO!" Felicity angrily snapped, grabbing my wrist and forcing my hand away. "I didn't ask you what you wanted!"

"Wh-wh-what?" I stammered, surprised by her sudden outburst.

"I'm not letting you get away with it this time, Rowan," she stated, an emerald fire of determination blazing in her eyes as she held my gaze. "You're always trying to protect me. I know why you do it..." Her voice softened. "But I'm a grown woman, not a child. I saw what this experience did to you this afternoon, and I'm not going to sit on the sidelines and watch it tear you apart. I'm going to help."

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into," I pleaded.

"And you do?" she shot back. "You yourself admitted that Ariel ripped through your defenses and almost took over. We both know that something like that could kill you."

“Excuse me?” interjected Ben, who had remained quietly neutral until this point. “Whaddaya mean, kill ‘im?”

“If a spiritual entity,” Felicity explained, turning her attention to him, “manages to take control, especially in the case of something such as this, and plays out the last moments of its physical life, it will repeat the event with the channeling host.”

“Are you tryin’ to tell me that Ariel Tanner’s spirit or somethin’ would kill him?” Ben asked, still confused.

“Not on purpose,” she continued. “But if she was in control of his physical body and re-experienced her death, the shock could kill him, yes.” She returned her gaze to me. “You didn’t bother to tell him that did you?”

“I didn’t think I would need to worry about it,” I answered sheepishly.

“Jeezus H. Christ!” Ben exclaimed. “This is fuckin’ nuts! All I’m tryin’ to do is solve a murder here, and I got some kinda weird ass *Twilight Zone* episode going on around me.”

We both turned to look at him as he threw up his hands in exasperation and fell back in his chair. After a moment, he again leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. He quietly looked from my face to Felicity’s then down at the table.

“Listen,” he said, “I’ve always figured you two for a coupl’a tree-huggin’ agnostics or somethin’, which I got no problem with. You know that. But, I don’t really know much about this whole Wicca-slash-WitchCraft thing, and ta’ be honest, I’m not sure if I wanna know any more.” He paused as if trying to pick his words carefully. “I can’t believe I’m sayin’ this, but this mornin’ I saw some stuff that I can’t explain. Right now I’m willin’ ta’ accept it. But, I also saw my best friend rollin’ around on a floor clawin’ at his chest like he was havin’ a coronary or some shit like that. Now,” he pointed a finger at me and brought his gaze up to meet mine, “YOU start bein’ straight up with me if there’s some kinda risk involved.” He then shifted his attention to Felicity. “And YOU. Watch his back or whatever you Witches do. Okay?”

“You can count on it,” she told him, her face spreading into a smile.

“Yeah,” I added, “you’re right.”

“Okay,” he said, relaxing and settling back in his seat. “So R.J. and company are s’posed to be here in about half an hour. You palefaces wouldn’t happen to have a slab of buffalo or somethin’ around here would ya’? I’m starved.”

CHAPTER 5

Ben had demolished a plate of sandwiches by the time the doorbell rang. At the sound, the dogs immediately shifted into territorial protection mode and yelped riotously. The cats, which had been entertaining themselves in a free-for-all wrestling match, scattered. Salinger, our Himalayan, was the only feline left to be seen, and he was perched well out of reach on the exposed rafters of the living room.

When Felicity and I remodeled our house, we had vaulted the ceiling in an effort to create a lofty, open feel. The cats had discovered the rafters and learned, to their great delight, that they afforded both a safe haven and a bird's eye view of everything that happened in the room. Salinger sat upon them now, intently studying the scene below. It was clear he thought something interesting was about to happen.

I answered the door as Ben assisted Felicity in setting out platters of freshly made sandwiches and honey cakes along with a large thermal carafe of iced chamomile tea, as it had inherent calmative properties. We wanted the surroundings to be as comfortable and hospitable as possible for this group.

To Wiccans, the death of a brother or sister of The Craft is supposed to be considered a graduation, an advancement to the next level of learning, and therefore treated not as a time of sorrow but as a time of celebration. I assumed the members of the group would be of roughly the same age as R.J. Because of this, I suspected that this was the first time any of them would be dealing with the crossing over of a fellow Witch. This fact, combined with the circumstances of Ariel's death, was likely to bring on grief as opposed to happiness.

Once the necessary questioning was finished this evening, Felicity and I would be taking it upon ourselves to offer counsel to this leaderless coven and help them along their path.

Swinging the door open, I was greeted by a small huddle on my front porch. Apparently, Ariel's coven believed in safety in numbers, and they had elected to descend upon us as a group. Turning, I commanded our two boisterous canines to sit. They immediately planted themselves where they stood, though Quigley, the Australian cattle dog, continued to whine quietly. With the commotion settled, I returned to the task at hand and pushed the screen door open with a smile.

"Rowan Gant?" a young brunette queried.

"That's me," I answered. "Come on in."

I held the door as the five of them filed in and proceeded to nervously mill about in my living room. I closed the door, turned to our guests, and noticed that there were no familiar faces.

"How many more of you should we be expecting?" I asked.

"This is it," replied the brunette guardedly. She had apparently been elected speaker for the group. "Except for R.J."

"I noticed he was missing," I returned, smiling. "Didn't he come with you?"

“No,” she answered. “We aren’t sure where he is. He called all of us and said to be here at seven tonight.”

“Well,” I proceeded, “I’m sure he’s just running a little late.” I held out my hand to her. “Since he’s not here to do the introductions, I suppose we should do that ourselves. Obviously, you have me at a bit of a disadvantage...”

“Calliope,” she said, taking my hand. “But everyone calls me Cally.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Cally proceeded solemnly around the group, and I was introduced to Shari and Jennifer, two blonde young women who were obviously identical twins. Continuing, I met a tall, lanky young man with hair the color of a ripened tomato named Randy and finally, his wife, a statuesque woman with dark, penetrating eyes and coal black hair. Her name was Nancy. I led them through the archway into our dining room and repeated the introductions for Felicity and Ben.

“So where’s the kid?” Ben asked, referring to R.J. as he surveyed the group.

“He seems to be running a little late,” I told him, adding a sharp look to encourage a bit more tact.

“Why doesn’t everyone have a seat and get comfortable,” Felicity interjected, slicing surgically through the tension in the room then motioning to the serving platters on the table. “If anyone is hungry, please help yourself. That’s what it’s here for.”

We had installed both leaves in the table, and it was more than large enough to accommodate the small gathering comfortably. There was a noticeable amount of distance kept by the group between themselves and us, especially Ben. I had a feeling that the brushed stainless, nine-millimeter pistol nestled under his arm in a shoulder holster played a role there, as he had draped his jacket over a chair, leaving the handgun exposed. He had done this purposely, I was sure, using it as an intimidation tactic on this youthful group.

It was apparent that the four young women had attempted to apply an appropriate amount of makeup to their faces in order to disguise the fact that they had been crying. It was also obvious, even to a casual observer, that Randy had shed a few tears as well.

“I’m not gonna stand on ceremony,” Ben announced with a shrug, then reached out and grabbed a sandwich.

“Aye, do you have a hollow leg or something?” Felicity gave him an astonished look. “You just ate three sandwiches less than forty-five minutes ago!”

“Don’t get decent food that often,” he told her between bites. “I’m not home that much.”

“Don’t let Cochise over here scare you,” I told the group. “Dig in. We need to wait for R.J. anyway.”

Quietly, one by one, they helped themselves to the food before them. They ate mainly in silence; uttering only necessary polite phrases required whenever offered a drink, or more to eat. It was rapidly approaching eight P.M. when the doorbell finally sounded again. Felicity brought the dogs to rapt attention as they once again began to howl, and I excused myself from the table.

As expected, R.J. was on the opposite side of the door when I pulled it open. He smiled sheepishly and pulled open the screen door.

“We were starting to wonder about you,” I told him quietly as he stepped inside.

“I’m sorry, man,” he apologized and looked around nervously. “I saw Cally’s van out front. Is everyone here?”

“Yeah,” I answered, shutting the door. “We were just waiting on you. Everyone’s in there.”

I pointed to the dining room, and he advanced around the corner with a solemn expression and joined them at the table. Something definitely seemed different about R.J. since I had last seen him, and I wasn’t sure whether it was good or bad. In any event, before he had ever exited the living room, my ears discerned a low growl followed by a throaty yowl and hiss. I turned and looking up at the rafters, saw Salinger glaring down at R.J., ears laid back and tail twitching. Animals being considered by some as good judges of character, I took note. Something about R.J. had set Salinger off. Fortunately, for the moment, I was the only one who noticed.

“Where ya’ been, kid?” Ben was asking as I rounded the corner into the dining room.

“I had some stuff to do,” R.J. answered as he took a seat next to Cally.

“You couldn’t call?” Ben retorted.

“I was busy, okay?!” The young man spat indignantly. “It’s not like I’m under arrest or something, or am I?”

“It can be arranged!” Ben challenged, starting to rise from his chair.

“All right, all right, all right,” I intervened. My voice rose with each syllable, and I motioned him to sit back down. “Before this goes any further, let’s all calm down. Now, R.J...” I looked over at him. “It would have been common courtesy for you to call and let us know you were running late.” I turned to my simmering friend. “And Ben, no one here is under arrest to my knowledge, right?”

“Right,” he answered grudgingly.

“Sorry I didn’t call,” R.J. muttered.

“I know everyone is on edge here.” Felicity reinforced my intrusion into the dispute. “But going at each other like that isn’t going to accomplish anything.”

“Listen,” Ben offered. “Maybe I was outta line jumpin’ on R.J. like that, but I’ve just got this thing about bein’ on time.”

The group looked silently around at one another then back at him. They all seemed too tightly strung but quietly nodded in assent.

“Okay then,” he proceeded. “We might as well get started then. I’ve already been through this with R.J., so I’ll ask the rest of ya’. When was the last time you saw Ariel Tanner alive?”

“See, I told you,” R.J. announced haughtily. “The cops are trying to blame it on us!”

“Do you intend to Mirandize us, Detective Storm,” Cally interjected bluntly.

“Don’t tell me, let me guess.” Ben threw up his hands and rolled his eyes. “Law student.”

Cally held her position at the table, but the look on her face showed that Ben had just exposed what she believed to be a trump card. It became immediately obvious why she had been picked as the speaker for the group. Now that he had knocked some of the wind from her sails, I hoped we could get on with what had brought us all together.

“I already told ya’,” Ben explained. “Nobody here is bein’ accused of anything. These are just routine questions. As for Miranda, since nobody is under arrest, there’s no

reason to read anyone their rights. We just wanna talk to ya' about Ariel Tanner and Devon Johnston. Okay?"

"There's no reason for any of you to be on the defensive," I added. "We're all on the same side. We just want to find whoever is responsible for Ariel's death."

Once again they cast timid glances between themselves. Finally, someone other than Cally spoke up.

"So this isn't just some shakedown 'cause of us being involved in The Craft?" Randy asked.

"No," I answered. "Not at all. Surely R.J. told you that Felicity and I are Witches. I was Ariel's teacher."

"Yes, he did..." Shari said.

"...But you're with the cops," Jennifer finished.

"So?" Ben interposed, "You got some kinda problem with cops?"

"It's usually the police that have a problem with us," stated Randy, still wearing a befuddled expression.

"Yeah," Shari agreed. "Ever since that one cop here in the county started giving lectures..."

"...About how WitchCraft is evil and the same thing as Satan worship. You know," Jennifer finished again.

"Are you two gonna do that all night?" Ben asked staring at the twins.

"Do what?" they asked simultaneously.

"Never mind," he shook his head. "And yeah, I know what you're talkin' about. I'll admit that there are quite a few coppers that don't understand what you guys are all about. Hell, I don't even understand it, but I can tell ya' this... Rowan has been my friend practically forever. Shit, I was his Best Man when he and Felicity got married. I know that Rowan isn't doin' anything *quote quote* evil." He held up his fingers and made invisible quote symbols in the air before him. "And if you guys are into the same thing he is, I've got no reason ta' believe that you are either."

"So are we all clear on where everybody stands?" I asked after an expectant pause.

"Yeah," Cally once again spoke, this time with a relaxed smile. "We're clear."

The rest of the group voiced and nodded their agreement, and the tension drained quickly from the room. I had expected a little rough going at first because of Ben's presence. The last thing that crossed my mind was that I would come under some kind of suspicion because of my relationship with the police, especially after the way R.J. had behaved toward me earlier in the day. I was painfully aware that the general public misunderstood Witches, but I never imagined that Witches would misunderstand one of their own.

As the group was settling in, I noticed Dickens, our black cat with the fondness for male visitors, lurking in the shadows. He silently padded forward to the chair R.J. was seated in and then reared back on his haunches as if he were about to climb into his lap. Suddenly, the hair along his back stood on end, and he puffed out like a furry black balloon. His ears laid back, and he dropped back down to all fours then skirted widely back around the chair to investigate Randy instead. "That's two of them who don't seem to like him," I thought to myself and wondered if Emily would make her opinion known.

"I'm glad that's taken care of," Felicity piped up. "Now can we get down to business?"

“Ben?” I looked over to him questioningly.

We had discussed this meeting earlier between ourselves and decided that he should take the lead. What we would reveal regarding the case so far was already public knowledge. There had been a leak at the department, and the local paper’s headline for the day had read “SATANIC KILLER LOOSE IN CITY.” The story that followed contained grotesque, sensationalized details of Ariel’s death.

“As you already know,” he started, “Ariel Tanner was murdered sometime this past Wednesday evening. There were no witnesses, and I’ll spare ya’ the details of her death, except ta’ say that it was particularly gruesome, and whoever did it is one seriously sick bastard. I brought Rowan into the investigation as of Friday evening because of some symbols left at the scene. He was able to decipher what our *expert* couldn’t and has helped pick out a few clues we might otherwise have missed. Any questions so far?”

“R.J. said you told him that the murder was connected with The Craft,” stated Randy. “Do the symbols you mentioned have something to do with that?”

“Yes they do,” I answered. “There was a Pentacle drawn on the wall, and it was shaded with the colors of the four towers, leading me to believe they were hailed.”

“How do you know it just wasn’t something that Ariel had done?” Cally posed.

“Because,” I took a deep breath and continued, “the Pentacle was drawn, and the Southern Tower shaded, with Ariel’s blood.”

Cally gasped and the rest of the group stared on at me as if I’d just slapped them. In a way, I guess I had.

“I’m sorry,” I told them. “I really am. Believe me, it gets worse, so if you don’t think you’re up for hearing this...”

“No,” Cally answered my hanging question quietly. “Go on. We have to know what happened.”

“As long as you’re sure.” I looked on and continued only after they had all agreed. “In addition to the Pentacle, the words ‘All Is Forgiven’ were inscribed on the wall in the same manner. Also, a black candle and white candle had both been burned. A wine goblet was used, and,” I choked slightly, “it appears that Ariel’s blood was in it.”

“What does it mean?” Shari asked. “What is this guy...”

“...Some kind of vampire?” Jennifer finished.

“I doubt it,” I answered. “I expect it’s just a sick twist he added to the spell.”

“What spell?” Randy questioned.

“An Expiation spell,” Felicity explained. “You might never have dealt with one before, but it is pretty basic. It’s a ritual performed in order to rid yourself of guilt and regrets. Kind of a *self atonement* spell.”

“So you think whoever did it regretted killing Ariel?” Cally queried.

“So it would seem,” Felicity answered.

“That would mean you’re looking for a Witch then, right?” asked Randy.

“Yes and no,” I told him. “It’s very likely that the killer practiced WitchCraft at some point in his life, and he’s obviously familiar with the Wiccan religion to a degree. The Expiation spell shows that, even if he did warp it hideously by using Ariel’s blood.” I paused to let my words settle in. “Based on the fact that he, for one, broke the basic rule of ‘Harm None,’ and for two, went through the motions of a blood sacrifice, I would say he fancies himself a ritual magician. A mage of the Black Arts.”

“And that,” Ben sighed, “brings us back to why we asked you all to come here tonight. R.J. spoke with Rowan and me this mornin’, and I’m sure he’s told ya’ all about it.” He looked over at R.J. who dipped his head in an affirmative. “He gave us some information with regards to a Devon Johnston who was apparently hooked up with your group until recently.”

“Have you found him yet?” R.J. asked

“Not yet,” Ben answered, “but we’re lookin’.”

“I understand that Devon was starting to play around with Black Arts and the like,” I stated. “Do any of you have any thoughts on that?”

With the exception of a few questions, thus far, Ben and I had done the majority of the talking. Now, placing that burden upon the group elicited only an uneasy silence. The atmosphere might have been cleared, but the undercurrent of tension was still circulating slowly around the table.

“What about you?” Ben urged, directing the question at Nancy. “You haven’t said two words since ya’ got here. You got an opinion on this guy?”

“I didn’t know him that well,” she answered, appearing clearly apprehensive at being singled out. “I’m kind of new to the coven...I don’t really know.”

“If you want my opinion,” Cally spoke up, protectively redirecting our attention. “I don’t think Devon could’ve done it.”

“Why do you say that?” Felicity queried.

“He’s a lot of talk, and no action.”

“What about the invocation rite?” R.J. asked indignantly. “He sacrificed a dog. He showed it to all of us.”

“A dog is one thing, R.J.,” Cally retorted. “But a human being? Besides, he wouldn’t harm a hair on Ariel’s head. He was crazy about her.”

“Excuse me?” Ben chimed and gave her a look of great interest.

“That’s right.” She turned her attention to him. “The guy was madly in love with her. It just about destroyed him that she voted to cast him out of the coven.”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

“He told me himself.”

“When?” I urged.

“He called me the night after the coven meeting.”

“Why did he call you?” Felicity asked. “I thought it was a unanimous vote, which would mean you voted him out as well.”

“True,” Cally answered. “But I guess he figured I would still talk to him. He’s my cousin.”

“Your cousin?” Ben interposed.

“Not a blood relation,” she added quickly. “I’m adopted. I can’t say that he’s my favorite relative in the world, and what he did to that dog makes me ill, but I don’t see him killing Ariel. He had it bad for her.”

I noticed R.J.’s face was creased with a tight-lipped frown, and he appeared to be stewing. With every word that came out of her mouth, his temperature seemed to rise.

“Anyone else?” Ben asked. “What about you two?” He motioned to the twins, Shari and Jennifer.

“He was in love with Ariel all right...” Shari told us.

“...You didn’t have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out,” Jennifer chimed in.

“So you don’t think he was capable of killing her?” I questioned.

“Maybe,” Jennifer answered.

“I don’t know,” stated Shari.

“He was a little weird if you ask me,” Randy spoke up.

“I’m askin’ you,” Ben told him. “You wanna elaborate on that?”

“I dunno,” Randy proceeded nervously. “He just struck me as kinda odd. He didn’t talk much, but he was really into the whole ritual thing, you know?”

“Go on,” I prodded.

“Well,” Randy continued, “I’ve been practicing for about six years now, and I don’t know about you,” he focused on Felicity then me, “but I was under the impression that Wicca is really about ‘deeds not words’ you know? Like, the ritual is just a tool and not the main focus of the religion.”

“That’s how we look at it,” Felicity told him.

“Well, not Devon,” he told us. “The ritual was *it* for him. If it wasn’t exactly perfect, then as far as he was concerned it wasn’t worth doing.”

“Randy’s right about that,” Cally said. “He spent all kinds of time rehearsing rituals for Sabbats.”

“He even got real upset with me at a circle once...” Shari intoned.

“...Because she didn’t recite something exactly like he wrote it,” Jennifer added.

“See!” R.J. finally burst. “You all agree that something was wrong with the guy. And Rowan just said that whoever did this was into rituals.”

“You’re just jealous, R.J.” Jennifer spat.

“What have I got to be jealous of?!” He was practically out of his chair now.

“Come off it, R.J.,” Shari told him. “Everyone knows you had the hots for Ariel too.”

“Sure we do,” Cally interjected. “You followed her around like a lost puppy.”

“Shut up, Cally!” R.J. shouted.

“Or what?” she baited.

“Stop it all of you!” Felicity was on her feet. “This is ridiculous. Your friend... Your sister in The Craft has been murdered, and you’re sitting here arguing like school children! Rowan and I studied with Ariel. I know damn well she thought better of you, or she never would have stood in circle with you then!”

The room fell silent. Each member of the group looked self-consciously about the room as the gravity of Felicity’s words set in. Chairs made shuffling noises as they shifted in their seats and shamefully realized she was correct.

“Okay,” Ben inserted his voice into the silence. “Now that that is finished... Did Miz Tanner happen ta’ mention to any of ya’ that she may have a reason to fear for her life?”

Heads swiveled back and forth indicating the negative amidst soberly mumbled “No’s” and “Not to me’s.”

“Out of curiosity,” I queried, “do you have any other former members, and have you had trouble with any of them getting involved in things they shouldn’t?”

“Not really,” Cally expressed. “At least I don’t think so.”

“You haven’t kicked anyone else out?” Ben posed.

“No,” she replied.

“How about members leaving of their own accord?” Felicity interjected. “Has that happened recently?”

“There was Stacey and Roger,” Shari piped up.

“And Will,” Jennifer added. “But they all left a few months ago.”

Ben noted the names with his quick scribbling. “Did they leave on good terms?”

“Pretty much so, I guess,” Randy, answered. “Will moved to Florida for his job, or I’m sure he’d still be with us.”

Nods of agreement circled the table at his comment.

“What about the other two?” I pressed. “Stacey and Roger was it?”

“Yeah,” he answered. “They just stopped showing up.”

“Ariel said Stacey was just a poser,” Cally explained. “Once she found out that she wasn’t going to learn how to cast a spell on her ex-boyfriend, she lost interest. We figured Roger was just there because of her, because as soon as she stopped coming, so did he.”

There was nothing unusual about having a poser enter and leave a coven. Some individuals would attempt to embrace the Wiccan religion based entirely upon their misconceptions about it. When they discovered that The Craft was about a harmonious existence with nature and NOT about “casting spells upon your enemies,” they would become almost instantly disenchanted. Just like the two individuals that had just been described, a poser would simply and harmlessly go away.

As if on cue, the end of Cally’s statement was punctuated by a quiet, evenly spaced, electronic beep that became increasingly louder with each pulse.

“Can I use your phone?” Ben asked me, switching off his pager.

“Sure,” I replied. “You want to use the one in the bedroom?”

“If you don’t mind.”

“You know where it is.”

The tension had ebbed once again, and Felicity took her seat at the table once more. The group started muttering apologies to one another, and faces were starting to break back into weak smiles.

“Hey, Rowan,” Ben called from the bedroom down the hall. “Can I talk to ya’ for a minute?”

I excused myself and made my way back to where he was. We spoke in hushed tones, and he explained to me what the phone call had been all about. After listening attentively to what he had to say, I called for Felicity to come back and join us. I heard her excuse herself and tell the group she would only be gone a moment, then seconds later she entered the room and shut the door behind her.

“What’s going on?” she whispered, leaning against the doorframe.

“Do you think you can take over here and get these kids to comprehend what it means for a Witch to cross over?” I asked her gravely. “I need to go with Ben.”

“Why?” She bolted up from her relaxed position. “What’s wrong?”

“That page was from my lieutenant,” Ben answered. “The Major Case Squad is taking over the investigation... Rowan was right, it looks like this psycho hit again.”

CHAPTER 6

A predicted weather system had been moving in throughout the afternoon and evening, and before Ben and I left for the crime scene, a warm, gentle rain had begun to fall. Felicity, though not happy about being left behind, realized the importance of looking after the spiritual well being of the group seated at our dining table and immediately shifted into a nurturing maternal mode. Six pairs of questioning eyes fell upon us as Ben donned his sport coat and announced that we were leaving.

“Who is it?” Cally asked.

“We don’t know yet,” he told her. “I just got the call.”

“Where did it happen?” Randy intoned.

“The body was found in a park here in the county,” Ben stated irritably. “That’s all I know until we get there. You ready yet Rowan?” He gave me an anxious look.

“In a sec...” I answered.

Felicity was stuffing a small camera bag with various pieces of equipment and film I had requested. The fact that she made her living as a professional photographer afforded me the luxury of having a better than average camera on hand whenever the need arose.

“I thought you were a city cop,” R.J. announced. “Why are you investigating a murder out here in the county?”

“Normally a muni would handle its own case load,” Ben stated, noticing that I still wasn’t prepared to leave. “But this crime got flagged ‘cause of the similarity to the Tanner case. Ya’see, back in nineteen eighty-one, the Greater Saint Louis Major Case Squad was formed as a multi-jurisdictional task force. Pretty much it’s a collective of departments around the Metro area that investigates highly publicized or related crimes. Ariel’s murder was my case, and so now that they have been given jurisdiction over it, I’ve been temporarily re-assigned to head up the investigation. I go wherever the scene is.”

“Here,” Felicity was telling me. “You’ve got the *PZ-1* with a 28-to-80 and macro. It’s loaded with high speed transparency, and I put fresh batteries in it and the *Sunpak*.”

“Thanks,” I said and kissed her on the cheek. “I don’t know how long this is going to take.”

“Don’t worry,” she answered. “I’ll take care of everything here.”

While waiting for me, Ben quickly jotted down everyone’s phone numbers in order to contact them with any further questions and then handed out his business cards. We expressed hurried goodbyes to the overwhelmed group and hastily headed out into the dense melancholy of the stormy night. I pulled Felicity aside on the front porch as she saw us out, lagging for a moment behind Ben who had already ventured forth into the rain and was starting his van.

“Look, I don’t know if you noticed or not,” I stated, “but Salinger and Dickens seem to have some kind of problem with R.J.”

“Don’t worry,” she answered. “I’m sure you’re just being overly suspicious because of everything that’s going on. It’ll be okay.”

“I just want you to be careful,” I continued.

“I’ll be fine,” she admonished. “Now go, then. Ben’s waiting.”

I watched her wave to us then turn and go into the house as we backed out of the driveway. I wasn’t sure that she was correct, but then, after all that I had been through, it was possible that I had become more suspicious than usual. Maybe Ben was rubbing off on me. In any case, I knew my wife well, and she would be just fine. I also knew that she had almost instant access to a loaded *Ruger* .357 magnum, for neither of us was naive enough to think that the rest of the world believed as we do. The very concept of “live and let live” seemed almost alien to the general populous anymore, and the headlines of the newspaper or a quick glance at the evening news gave testimony to that fact. At Ben’s urging, for our own protection, Felicity and I had purchased the weapon and been rigorously trained in its proper use by him. If it came down to a matter of life or death, I was certain my wife wouldn’t hesitate to pull the trigger.

“So,” I asked Ben as we motored down the street, its shiny wetness reflecting the glare of the streetlights. “Exactly where are we headed?”

“Some park called Thayer,” he answered. “You know where it is?”

“Yeah, it’s not far from here. Hang a right at the next stop sign.”



We arrived at the park and turned in to the main access road, following it past the ball field and darkened pavilions. Ben had placed a magnetic bubble light atop the van and plugged it into the cigarette lighter receptacle as we entered. The red light flickered eerily across the face of the uniformed officer at the gate and reflected brightly from his rain-slicked yellow poncho. Ben rolled down the window and held out his ID to the officer, who illuminated it with the bright beam of a three cell *Mag-Lite*.

“Evening, Detective,” he said and brought the beam to bear on me. “Who’s that with you?”

“Consultant,” Ben answered him authoritatively.

The sodden officer nodded and pointed the long flashlight up the road. Its beam, though powerful, eventually dissipated into the murky darkness.

“Just over that rise, sir,” he told Ben. “Then about two hundred yards. Evidence unit is all over the place, you can’t miss it.”

Ben thanked him and rolled up his window, pushing the van into motion up the slight grade. The wind and rain were beginning to pick up, and a few distant flashes in the western sky were testimony to a rapidly approaching thunderstorm.

“Look behind your seat,” Ben was telling me as we topped the rise. “Should be some rain slickers back there.”

I turned in the seat and rummaged about in the dark. My hand brushed against what felt like a gym bag, and I yanked it from beneath the seat and tugged on the zipper.

“In this bag back here?” I asked.

“Yeah, prob’ly.”

I could feel the van slowing and pitching slightly to the left as Ben took a wide turn into a parking space and brought us to a halt. I quickly found the rain ponchos I sought and with them in hand, turned back around in my seat.

The spectacle outside the windshield was illuminated like a toppled-over Christmas tree stuck in overdrive. Red lights, blue lights, and white lights on emergency vehicles, even yellow caution lights on sawhorses blinked randomly in the night. The lack of sync in the pulses seemed to bring even more chaos to what appeared to be an already disordered scene.

Ben reached out and grabbed one of the slickers from my motionless hand, taking notice of my blank stare and mouth agape.

“Welcome to my world,” he told me, then paused. “Sucks don’t it? Go ahead an’ put your poncho on.”

I broke from the short stupor and began pulling the yellow plastic rain gear over my head. The extra room in the cab of the van made me realize why Ben refused to get rid of the decrepit vehicle.

“How should I introduce ya’?” Ben asked, unlatching his door. “I doubt if they’ll go for Good Witch of the East.”

“How about, Alternative Religion Specialist,” I replied.

“Sounds good ta’ me.”

A distant streak of lightning followed by a sharp crack and low rumble of thunder alerted us to the ever-increasing violence of the storm as we stepped out into the downpour. We walked across the parking area, past the flapping yellow tape that cordoned off the crime scene. I was concerned that important evidence might be washed away, but my fears were soon allayed when I noticed the core of the activity involved the cinder block building that housed a set of the park’s restrooms.

“Ben Storm,” my friend told another detective, displaying his badge as we approached him. “City Homicide Unit. I’m assigned to the MCS.”

“Carl. Carl Deckert. County Police.” The thickset, greying detective reached out and shook Ben’s hand. “You the one investigating that Tanner homicide?”

“That’s me,” Ben answered.

“This your partner?” he queried, reaching out to shake my hand.

“Rowan Gant,” I told him, returning the gesture.

“He’s a specialist on alternative religions,” Ben explained. “He’s consulting for us on the symbols left at the Tanner crime scene.”

Detective Deckert motioned to another officer who produced a partially sodden clipboard. Ben scrawled a signature on the damp paperwork and then indicated a spot for me to sign and record the time.

“Well,” our stocky escort said as the three of us began walking toward the entrance to the restroom. “You’ve got plenty to consult about. Looks like a freakin’ Satanic graffiti party in there.”

“Have you ID’d the victim?” Ben questioned.

“Found a purse,” Deckert continued. “Driver’s license matches up to a Karen Barnes. Twenty-eight years old...”

A bright flash exploded in my eyes, momentarily blinding me. At first I thought a streak of lightning had hit nearby, but the telltale clap of thunder was never forthcoming. Instead I heard shouting, expletives, and what sounded to be a scuffle.

“What the...” Ben exclaimed.

“Shit!” Detective Deckert shouted. “How the hell did he get in here?!”

My vision began returning to normal, and what had sounded like a scuffle was revealed to be just that. Two uniformed officers were on either side of a struggling young man holding a camera affixed with a powerful flash unit.

“Get him outta here!” Deckert ordered the two officers. “And tighten up the perimeter!” he shouted after them as they dragged the photographer away. “Sorry about that. Freakin’ media. Every damn one of ‘em’s got a police scanner. Sometimes they get to the scene before we do.”

“You were sayin’?” Ben prodded.

“Oh, yeah,” he continued. “Karen Barnes, twenty-eight years old. Lives about three blocks from here. Looks like she was out walking her dog. The son-of-a-bitch killed it too.”

“Family been notified?” Ben asked.

“Got a car waiting for the husband. Neighbor said he was out of town on business. She was expecting him back tonight.”

“Any kids?”

“No. Just her and the spouse.”

“Well at least there’s that.”

We had paused at the entrance of the women’s restroom on the side of the cinder block structure. Evidence technicians were exiting, carrying bulky cases containing the tools of their trade.

“Being a public restroom, there are prints everywhere,” Deckert pointed out. “We didn’t find anything real fresh except for some smudges. Looks like he was wearing gloves.” He pulled a pair of packets from the pocket of his trench coat and handed one to each of us. “Speaking of which, you better put these on just to be safe.”

I took the offered surgical gloves and with some work, managed to pull them over my damp hands as we entered the building.

I caught my breath and nearly stumbled as waves of ethereal pain washed over me. I quickly fought to disconnect myself from the supernatural plane associated with the scene and ground myself here in this reality. A sharp pain, followed by a frigid, tingling sensation consumed my body, then slowly subsided as I mentally slammed on the brakes, preventing my otherworldly senses from continuing down the path that beckoned them.

“You okay?” Ben whispered in my ear, grabbing my arm to steady me. “You aren’t getting ready to flip out or do that channeling thing are you?”

“I’ll be all right,” I answered in a hushed tone. “I caught it before it happened.”

“Good. Just try not to go all *Twilight Zone* on me with the rest of these guys around here.”

A white sheet was arranged in the center of the room covering a section of the smooth, grey concrete floor. Beneath the shroud laid the lifeless body of another young woman. Patches of deep crimson diffused slowly through the sheet at various points where it contacted portions of the torso. A cloying odor, both sweet and musty, intermingled with the stench of the restroom, tingling my nostrils. The pungent scent was all too familiar.

“Sage and rose oil,” I stated aloud.

“Come again?” Detective Deckert asked.

“That smell,” I told him as he started taking notes. “It’s sage and rose oil. Probably a little charcoal mixed in to help it burn. Did you find a pile of ash anywhere?”

“In the sink over there.” He pointed. “That mean something?”

“He burned it to cleanse the room,” I replied. “Sage is often used in incense for purification. You’ll probably find salt in the North, South, East, and West positions of the room as well.”

I stepped past him and peered in the sink at the pile of grey cinders. The floor in the area was littered with broken glass, silvered on the back. The mirror above the washbasin had been shattered.

“Evidence unit took the larger pieces of the mirror with them,” he offered. “We don’t know if the killer broke it or if vandals did it earlier.”

“My guess would be that he did it,” I told them, turning and finding Ben taking notes. “Probably before he performed the ritual.”

“Why do ya’ think that is?” Ben asked.

“If he was trying to invoke something...” I caught myself, remembering that Detective Deckert was in the room. “You know, if he thought he was attempting to conjure up a spirit,” I explained. “Some legends have it that if a spirit witnesses its own reflection in a mirror, it will become mesmerized and therefore, trapped. I would guess he probably subscribes to that belief.”

“So the wacko busted the mirror,” Deckert’s gruff voice interjected. “So his little ghost buddy wouldn’t see himself?”

“It’s one possibility,” I replied carefully.

The wall opposite me was inscribed with a familiar-looking Pentacle. The symbol was drawn on the painted, cinder block wall, once again in blood and shaded with pastels. At the base of the wall, slugs of hardened black and white wax were obvious remnants of extinguished candles. Nestled next to the solidified remains stood a simple wine glass, partially filled with coagulating red liquid. Between the symbol and the floor was once again lettered, All Is Forgiven.

“So,” Deckert was asking Ben. “You think it’s the same guy?”

“Oh yeah,” I said as Ben turned to me. “It’s the same guy all right. Only this time, he might not have been practicing.”

“Whaddaya mean ‘practicing?’” Deckert looked from Ben’s face to mine and back with a puzzled expression.

Ben explained. “We’ve got reason to believe that the ritual this guy is performin’ was never actually completed at the first scene. He was doin’ like a dress rehearsal or somethin’.”

“Holy shit!” the detective exclaimed. “This prick committed murder to rehearse a murder? Holy shit!”

“Tell me about it,” Ben chimed.

“Well, if he did what he set out to do, then he probably won’t kill any more, right?”

“I don’t know for sure,” I answered as I squatted next to the covered corpse and examined the floor. “He might not be finished yet.”

“Finished doing what exactly?” Deckert questioned.

“Invoking whatever spirit he’s after. He’ll continue to perform the ritual until he has succeeded,” I explained. “Or, at least, perceives that he has.” I paused thoughtfully for a moment before speculating aloud, “He might kill again because maybe he wants to get caught.”

“What makes ya’ think that?” Ben asked.

“The Expiation spell.” I motioned at the wall behind them. “I originally thought that it was an aberration at the first scene. Possibly because whoever killed Ariel Tanner might have known her. But this...it might have been the real thing for him. The actual ritual played to its conclusion, yet, he’s still seeking atonement from himself. It doesn’t make sense to perform an atonement ritual at the site of a sacrificial ritual.

“You see an Expiation spell is a private thing, very much like going to confession. By performing it at the scene, essentially he exposes himself. He may be seeking atonement from society as well. In short, kind of a sick cry for help. So it leads me to believe that either he wants to get caught, or he’s not finished yet. Maybe even both.”

“Jesus,” Deckert said. “Where did you get all that from?”

“Trust me,” I heard Ben say. “You don’t wanna know.”

“Let’s just say I did a lot of research this afternoon,” I told him as I stood and walked over to the rune-covered wall. “Anyway, it’s just a theory.”

I pulled out the camera and fired up the flash unit. The thyristor began charging with a low hum and then grew quickly to a quiet whine. Status lights began glowing on the unit’s back, indicating its readiness.

“Crime Scene Unit already took pictures,” Deckert told me as I placed the *PZ-1* to my eye and began tightly focusing on the Pentacle.

“I know,” I replied absently. “But I’d like to take some of my own if it’s okay.”

“Hey,” he answered. “Whatever makes you happy.”

“Who found the body?” Ben inquired.

“Local kid,” Deckert responded. “He was out walking his dog. Says when he walked it by here, it just went nuts. Broke away from him and ran in. Apparently, the door had been propped open.”

“Animals can sense death,” I stated aloud, still taking pictures of the scene before me. “He did the same thing with Ariel Tanner. The door was propped open. Could be he wanted the body found as soon as possible.”

“You sure you ain’t some kinda psychiatrist or something?” Deckert asked the back of my head.

“I’ve got a semester of college psych,” I told him as I turned. “But that doesn’t qualify me to practice the science, no.”

“Well,” he continued. “You sure sound like some kinda FBI shrink. It’s like you’re getting inside this asshole’s head or something.”

“Like I said, I’m just speculating,” I replied.

Detective Deckert didn’t realize how close to the truth he was with his last comment. My experiences channeling Ariel’s death and the blatant evidence left at both scenes were all acting as catalysts to pull me in. The more I saw, and the more I sensed, the more I feared what would be waiting around the next corner.

“What time do ya’ think the murder occurred?” Ben inquired.

“Based on the time the neighbor says she left for her walk,” Deckert started, “and the time the kid found her, we’re estimating somewhere between five-thirty and eight P.M.”

“Between five-thirty and eight,” Ben repeated, looking at me from the corner of his eye.

I knew what the glance implied. He had been suspicious of R.J. from the beginning, and I had to admit, his actions this evening coupled with his late arrival at the meeting

hadn't helped. Salinger and Dickens voicing their feline distaste had even compelled me to wonder about what the young man was hiding.

"We might be able to pin it down a bit closer," Deckert intoned, "once your M.E. gets here."

"She's here."

A voice came from the doorway, and the three of us turned to face a bleary-eyed woman clad in faded denim. Dr. Christine Sanders pushed back the hood of her rain-soaked jacket and hefted a thick aluminum case from one hand to the other.

"Detectives." She nodded to them as she entered the room. "I thought I told you to get some rest, Mister Gant."

"And I thought this was your day off," I replied with a slight smile.

"Me too," she returned. "But that was before the captain of the Major Case Squad called me at the request of Detective Storm."

"You're familiar with the Tanner case," Ben stated matter-of-factly.

"Officially, I'm only here as a consultant," she informed him. "This is out of the city jurisdiction. You're just lucky the county coroner and I have an understanding."

"I know, Doc. I just want the best on this."

"Save the flattery for your wife, Storm," she told him with a weak grin. "You're still going to owe me big."

By now, Dr. Sanders was kneeling next to the body of the young woman and had thrown back the sheet that had been covering it. The injuries appeared very similar to those of Ariel Tanner. The skin had been peeled away from what I could see of the woman's chest, leaving behind raw, exposed muscle. Her eyes stared off blankly, and her face wore a grimace of excruciating pain and horror. Her arms were twisted behind her body, and though I couldn't see them, I was sure they were bound.

A departure from the similarity with Ariel's torture was the fact that Karen Barnes' mouth was covered with a wide strip of duct tape. It had been wrapped tightly around her head to keep it from coming loose. Her ankles were also secured in the same fashion, and the tape wrapped around the post of a stall to keep her legs in place.

"I'll have to do a swab," Dr. Sanders was telling us. "But if he's establishing a pattern, I doubt if she was raped. The Tanner woman wasn't."

"He didn't rape her," I said. "That would have soiled her. He wouldn't defile his sacrifice."

I moved around to get a better view of the body and was about to expand upon my statement when the angle that had been blocked by the doctor's kneeling form came into my line of sight. Directly beneath Karen Barnes' rib cage, a deep, ragged incision stretched horizontally across her flayed torso. The uneven gash puckered open like a bloody, toothless smile, exposing lacerated internal organs. Instantly I turned away and bolted for a stall, bile rising in my throat.

A few moments later, I heard Deckert asking from behind me, "Are you gonna be all right?"

I had just finished expelling the contents of my stomach into the toilet I was kneeling before. I spat and wiped my face then stood and flushed.

"Yeah," I answered weakly. "Sorry about that. I'm not as used to this stuff as you guys."

“Used to it, hell,” he answered. “I came close to doing the same goddamned thing earlier.”

I walked out of the stall, and Deckert patted me on the shoulder as I passed him. Dr. Sanders was cutting the body loose from the metal post, and the County Coroner had come in and was preparing a body bag. Ben was facing away from the morbid activity looking very green.

“Her heart has been removed. Can anyone here tell me if it was found?” Dr. Sanders asked as she and her peer rolled the body and slid the open, rubberized bag beneath it, then let it gently back down.

“You won’t,” I told them, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. “He took it with him.”

“What, like a souvenir or somethin’?” Ben asked.

“No,” I replied. “As part of the ritual.”

The violent bout of vomiting had shocked my system and broken my concentration, effectively weakening my defenses against otherworldly interference. Dizziness swarmed over me as the room began to spin. I was losing control. My ears filled with a rushing sound, and color melted liquidly from the images before me. I fell backwards down a dark tunnel, speeding inexorably away from an ever-diminishing point of light. When I at last jerked to an abrupt halt, I was floating above the room, looking down upon the recent past.

A hooded, cloaked figure.

A pretty, vital young woman bound nude on the floor.

A dirk. I know that dirk. It belonged to Ariel.

She wants to struggle but she can’t. I can feel her trying to scream, but he’s taped her mouth. Her head hurts. She remembers someone attacked her from behind.

What are you doing? Get away from me with that knife!

I can feel the silent scream, the searing pain as the knife bites into flesh, peeling back the skin.

“Stop it you bastard,” I say to myself, struggling to break the connection.

“I’m sorry,” he says to her.

Why is this happening? Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come...NO!

I see him press the knife, Ariel’s athamè, into her solar plexus and draw it across carefully, making the ragged cut.

The pain is unbearable, indescribable.

He slowly removes a surgical glove.

He thrusts his hand into the incision. With a twisting motion, he wrenches it back out.

Still quivering.

Dripping.

Karen Barnes heart lay in his hand.

“Rowan,” Ben’s voice echoed in my ears. “Hey, Rowan.” He was nudging me. Colors flashed back into the scene and kaleidoscoped wildly before finally settling to their proper shades and places.

“Yeah,” I half whispered. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“You kinda spaced on us there,” he told me.

“Just a second.” A sudden realization hammered down upon me. “Dr. Sanders, don’t you do something with Superglue and a black light to find fingerprints on skin?”

“Cyanoacrylate fuming,” she corrected. “And it’s a bit more than just a black light. But it really depends on the circumstances. Sometimes we use Ninhydrin. Fingerprints on skin are very short lived. Perspiration and other natural secretions destroy them rather quickly. Why?”

“He took off his glove before he removed her heart.”

“How can you know that?” Detective Deckert asked me.

“Intuition. Inspiration. Divine perception. It doesn’t matter,” I spoke quickly. “Trust me on this. He took his glove off.”

CHAPTER 7

With some colorfully worded urging from Ben, the medical examiner finally agreed to check the body for latent fingerprints. Still, neither she, nor Detective Deckert, seemed inclined to believe my claim about the glove, and I couldn't really blame them. I could provide no evidence to back up my statement, and they really had no idea who I was. I often thought that life would be much easier if I could just say, "Hey, I'm a card carrying Witch, see?" and show an ID badge. Of course, that would only work if the rest of the world were disposed to saying, "Oh, well, why didn't you say that in the first place?"

We spent a few additional minutes looking over the interior of the restroom, and I took several more pictures, including some of the body, shot in haste to avoid another bout of vomiting. Deckert pointed out the remains of Karen Barnes' Jack Russell terrier heaped in a corner. The animal's skull was crushed, apparently from having been repeatedly dashed against the cinder block wall. Grossly violent yet still a much more merciful death than faced by its owner. Dr. Sanders bagged the remains of the dog at Ben's request, and then we followed her back out into the stormy night. Detective Deckert and I tagged along behind as Ben drew up next to her.

"What are the chances of getting' some preliminaries back tonight, Doc?" Ben asked.

"You're kidding, right?"

"No," he answered bluntly. "Did I sound particularly funny to you?"

The rain had slowed momentarily, but the earlier downpour had flooded the low-lying sidewalk. The wheels on the gurney containing Karen Barnes' body made sadly mournful swishing noises as they rolled through the puddles.

"Who's going to authorize this?" Dr. Sanders stopped in her tracks and stared angrily back at Ben. "Remember, I'm only here in a consulting capacity."

"Look," Ben softened, "I'm sorry about the wisecrack. It's been a long day, and right now I'm not seein' the end of it."

"I know," she answered, calming. "Same here."

"Listen, no offense," he addressed the county coroner. "But do you have any problem with allowin' Doctor Sanders here do the autopsy?"

"None taken. It's unusual," he answered with a weary nod. "But it's okay with me. I don't suppose it would be a problem with the right paperwork."

"Submit whatever ya' need, and I'll sign off on it," he told him with a tired smile.

"Where can I reach you?" Doctor Sanders queried.

"Right now I'm not sure where I'll be. You can try to catch me at my office, and if you don't get an answer then beep me. The number's on my card."

"Okay."

Deckert and I had stopped behind them and allowed Ben to do the talking. We stood in the light rain and watched as Doctor Sanders and the county official loaded what was once a living, breathing human being into the back of the coroner's hearse. The hatch-like

door slammed shut with a dull finality as if audibly marking the end of Karen Barnes' existence.

Farther in the distance, across the parking lot and behind the police barricades, a small city had grown. Microwave dishes and retractable towers were pointed skyward, extending from the roofs of numerous news vans. Bright lights shined surrealistically through the night, igniting the falling raindrops into fleeting fiery gems. Primped, pressed, and preened reporters staunchly clutching umbrellas faced cameramen and rehearsed their expressions of concern.

"Fuckin' vultures," Ben muttered.

He and Detective Deckert traded cards and set up a meeting time for the following morning, as they were both assigned to the Major Case Squad. We shook hands and parted, leaving Deckert to wrap up everything at the scene while Ben was to go get the ball rolling with the rest of the MCS. We had barely made it halfway to the van before we were ambushed.

"Detective Storm, Detective Storm, can I have a word with you."

A lithe, young beauty in a neatly fitted trench coat and high heels was sauntering quickly toward us. Her hair was fashionably coiffed and honey blonde, the exact shade of which I was certain could only be available from a bottle. The cameraman behind her suddenly switched on an intense spotlight and bathed us with its harsh glow. As we squinted against the glare, the woman stopped before us, effectively blocking our path.

"I'm here on the scene with Detective Benjamin Storm of the Saint Louis City homicide unit. Detective Storm, does the fact that you're here mean that the Major Case Squad has been called in?" she spoke rapidly into a microphone and then thrust it forward into Ben's face.

"Go away Brandee," Ben told her. "I'm not in the mood for this right now."

Ben started around her, but she quickly sidestepped, her high heels clicking on the pavement.

"Is it true that this homicide is related to Wednesday evening's murder of Ariel Tanner?" Again, the microphone bearing the stylized logo of her station shot forward.

"Talk to the public relations officer," Ben returned flatly.

"And you sir, your name is?" She shoved the microphone toward me.

Before I could get "no comment" past my lips, Ben reached out and removed the microphone easily from her dainty hand. With a quick snap, he disconnected the line cord and handed the device back to her.

She looked at him, dumbfounded for a moment, then angrily stamped her foot as her luminous, blue eyes grew large, clearly revealing an empty void behind them.

"I said," Ben, told her, as he brushed past, "go away Brandee."

We heard her wheel about as we continued across the lot to the van. She let out a frustrated shriek that was rapidly followed by the sound of the disconnected microphone as it roughly impacted the pavement near us and skittered by.

"I'm going to get this story, Storm!" she screamed after us. "You're not doing this to me again!"

By the time we climbed into the van, Brandee Street was berating her stony-faced cameraman, her arms flailing wildly as he simply stared at her.

"What'd she mean 'you're not doing this to me again'?" I asked Ben as he started the van. "And what the hell is she chewin' his ass for?"

“Brandee Street has never, I repeat, NEVER gotten a story from me,” he answered, pulling his plastic poncho over his head. “As for ol’ Ed out there, she probably just caught him addin’ to his collection.”

“His collection?” I puzzled, removing my own rain slicker. “You know that guy?”

“Hell yes, all the coppers know Ed. He’s been a cameraman for years. As to the collection, he tapes reporters when they throw temper tantrums. He’s got a whole library of ‘em... calls hers ‘Brandee Whines’.”

“Seems like they would try to get him fired.”

“Oh, they have,” Ben, continued. “Ed’s got a couple of things goin’ for him though. First, he’s the best cameraman in the state. Second, a real good union.”

“Bet that pisses them off,” I mused.

“Uh-huh. Drives ‘em nuts. I’ll have ta’ give you a call next time Ed wants to get together for some beers and ‘movies’.”

“Count me in.”

We pulled out of the parking space in silence. The windshield wipers tapped out an irregular swooshing tempo as they displaced the rain, only to have it return a second later. We slowly started past the news vans, enduring the bright lights that were quickly brought to bear on us. I was sure that Ben felt some extra heat coming from the savage glare Brandee Street was throwing at him as we hooked around her vehicle.

“So,” Ben said as he nudged the van along, exiting the small city of reporters. “You went off into ‘la la land’ there for a minute.” He shot me a quick glance then returned his eyes to the road. “That where you got that whole glove thing from?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “That’s what I saw him do. I don’t know if it will do any good or not. He didn’t take the glove off until just before he pulled her heart out.”

“Shouldn’t that have caused you some damage or somethin’?” he queried. “You know, like Felicity was talkin’ about this afternoon.”

“If I had experienced it directly,” I explained. “Like I did with Ariel. This wasn’t the same. I didn’t get pulled into the experience. It was like I was just a spectator.”

“So you didn’t feel anything this time?”

“Well, yeah, I felt some of the pain. Just not directly.”

We continued along quietly for a moment or two, winding along the park access road and out to the main street.

“Did ya’ see his face?” Ben asked.

“No,” I answered. “I wish I had. I’ve never witnessed a past event like that before, and it came on me all of a sudden. I think when I got sick I let my guard down, and that’s why it happened. How long was I blanked out anyway?”

“Around a minute, maybe two,” Ben told me. “Deckert thought ya’ were gonna puke again.” He paused for a moment and merged with the main street traffic. “Did ya’ see anything besides the glove thing?”

“Ariel’s athamè,” I told him. “He used it again.” I hesitated. “A lot of fear... A lot of pain... She was trying to recite the Lord’s Prayer to herself when the bastard pulled her heart out.”

We rode the rest of the way to my house in silence. The storm was dying out now, and the rain had tapered to a gentle, patchy sprinkle as the tail end of the system moved through the area.

“I don’t know what’s gonna hit the news tomorrow, Rowan,” Ben spoke as he came to a halt in my driveway. “But for now, this whole thing stays with us. You can tell Felicity, but I don’t want those kids in there babblin’ all over creation if ya’ know what I mean.”

“Yes,” I answered, “I know exactly what you mean.”

“Do you think you can meet with the MCS tomorrow?” he queried.

“What for?”

“I’d like you ta’ fill them in on the symbol and inscription,” he explained. “Along with some of the ideas you had tonight. I think it might give us some places to start.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, mulling over the implications. “I’m not some kind of ‘FBI shrink’ like Detective Deckert said.”

“I know, but you’re the closest thing we’ve got to an expert,” Ben answered. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Okay. Just say when.”

“I’ll call you in the mornin’. Go get some rest. And give the squaw a hug for me.”

I watched as Ben backed out of the drive. The handset of his cell phone was pressed to his ear. Even at a distance, I could see his mouth moving rapidly and a sad look in his eyes. I knew then that he was talking to Allison—telling her yet again not to wait up for him.

“We saw you on the news.”

I heard my wife’s voice behind me and turned to face her. She had come out on the porch where I was standing.

“Did they get my good side?” I joked half-heartedly and then gave her a tired peck on the cheek.

“The cheek?” she pouted. “Don’t you love me anymore?”

“Considering the gastric event I experienced, until I brush my teeth and get a swig of mouthwash...” I trailed off.

“It was bad, huh?” she asked, instantly understanding.

“Worse than Ariel,” I told her. “But I can’t tell you about it until we’re alone.”

“I understand.”

We went into the house, and I headed directly for the bathroom where I could make myself a bit more presentable. When I returned to the dining room, the entire group was seated around the table talking. They were in a much more relaxed mood than before I left.

“So what happened?” R.J. immediately asked as I sat down.

“I can’t tell you much,” I answered, pouring myself a glass of tea. “Suffice it to say, there was another murder.”

“Well,” Cally intoned. “Was it the same killer or what?”

“We think so,” I replied.

“We saw you on the news, Mr. Gant...” Shari stated.

“...But just from a distance,” Jennifer continued.

“Rowan. Please.” I nodded, remembering the glaring lights and sea of reporters at the scene. “So, what did they say?”

“They’re calling him the Satanic Serial Killer,” Randy intoned. “They said he killed this woman the same way he killed Ariel. Is that true?”

“I wish I could tell you guys,” I answered, “but I can’t. If the police are going to be able to trust me to help them with the investigation, then I have to follow their rules.”

There was some grumbling, but with Cally’s prodding, they all grudgingly agreed. She was a strong young woman and level headed for the most part. With a little further training in The Craft, I felt certain she would be able to pick up with the coven where Ariel had been prematurely forced to leave off.

“So how did things go around here after Ben and I left?” I questioned, looking about. “From the looks of things, I missed a circle...Any good discussions or revelations?”

Extinguished candles still sat in holders on the table: yellow, red, blue, green, and a white one in the center. Two small dishes, one containing salt, the other water, were positioned together with the white candle, and the last crumbs of a honey cake adorned a plate. A pewter goblet and Felicity’s athamè completed the centerpiece. I could still feel the leftover energy that had been created by the casting of the circle and raising a cone. I was sorry I had missed it, especially since I could feel a trace of darkness in the energy. Something tainted was lingering in the background, and I feared it was coming from a particular individual in this room. If I had been present in the circle, I might have been able to pinpoint its source.

“We talked quite a bit about crossing over,” Felicity chimed with a smile.

“Yeah,” R.J. added. “It was pretty intense.”

“Ariel never said anything about the crossing,” Cally interjected. “We had all read about it, but...well, you know.”

“Yes, I do,” I answered. “I’m afraid I was probably a little lax in her teachings when it came to that. I had to deal with another particularly difficult crossing a few years back, so I have a tendency to avoid the subject sometimes.”

“Who?” Cally asked.

“My mother,” I answered.

“Your mother was a Witch?” Randy questioned.

“Yes, she was,” I told them then fell quiet.

“So we held a simple death rite for Ariel tonight.” Felicity broke the silence. “It went fairly well, except...”

“Ariel won’t leave...” Shari interrupted.

“...She won’t cross the bridge,” Jennifer finished.

“That isn’t unusual,” I told them as I pondered what the twins had just said. “In the case of a violent death, one’s spirit sometimes hangs around on this plane searching for closure.”

“You mean Ariel’s stuck here?” Randy exclaimed, emphatic concern in his eyes.

“Maybe for a while but probably not permanently,” I comforted him. “We can try another rite once the killer is caught. Maybe that will allow her to move on.”

I looked at my watch. It read midnight. I suddenly realized I was running on four hours sleep out of the past forty.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” I stated with a shallow yawn. “But I’m beat, and I need to hit the sack.”

The pendulum clock on the wall began to bong out its count of the hour as the hands finally came to rest on twelve. Cally looked at her own watch, and her eyes widened slightly.

"I'm sorry," she exclaimed. "I didn't realize it was this late."

"Nothing to apologize for," I assured her. "It's been a long day for all of us."

"Do you think," Randy queried as they all began gathering themselves to leave, "that maybe we could have circle with you and Felicity again sometime? You know, like a Full Moon meeting or something?"

"Certainly," I grinned.

"Of course." Felicity smiled. "We'd love to."

The group gathered their things, and then Cally, Nancy and the twins hugged both Felicity and myself. Randy hugged my wife and shook my hand. R.J. still seemed to remain somewhat aloof. He shook hands with both of us, and when I clasped my hand about his, I mentally probed for the streak of darkness I had felt earlier. He had been taught well, and his defenses came up, immediately blocking my psychic exploration. I was more experienced and could have easily broken through the ethereal wall separating us, but it was both inappropriate, and at this point in time, uncalled for. He looked back at me coolly, knowing full well what I had tried to do, and said nothing.

Once they were gone, Felicity sent the dogs out to take care of whatever they needed to do and then let them back in. I had just finished letting Emily out the front door to go on her nightly "mouse patrol" when the rambunctious canines scrambled past me and into our bedroom. My wife trailed along behind them, switching off lights as she went. We finished locking up the house and shutting off the remaining lights together then dragged ourselves off to bed as well.

The crisp, fresh sheets on our waterbed felt wonderful, and I expelled a tired sigh as I stretched out. A tranquil hum issued from the slowly spinning ceiling fan above as it moved the cool air about the room. I heard the light switch in the bathroom, and Felicity emerged, having twisted her hair atop her head and donned an oversized t-shirt bearing the faded quip, "Photographers do it in a darkroom." After moving the bedroom light from dim to off, she gently slid into the bed next to me and rested her head on my shoulder.

"Do you want to talk about it now?"

Her voice drifted to me in the darkness. I shifted and slid my arm around, pulling her closer.

"It's the same guy," I told her. "No doubt in my mind. I don't think he was just practicing this time though, but I can't be sure. It looked like he performed a full ritual..." I paused. "Complete with removing the victim's heart."

I could feel her shudder against me. I wasn't sure how I felt about giving her the details, but I knew that if I didn't, she would get them from Ben as soon as I turned my back.

"Why in the park?" she asked.

"I don't know," I replied. "Based on what I've seen so far, I'm thinking he might want to be caught, but this was more than a little brazen if you ask me."

"From what I saw on the news," she lent, "those restrooms were the ones in the back of the park. They're pretty isolated."

"I know, but still, people walk their dogs back there. That's how the body was found. A kid walking his dog." I told her, "Dog went nuts when they passed by the restrooms. The door was propped open, and he broke loose and ran in."

"Poor kid," Felicity sighed. "I doubt if he was ready for that."

“Yeah, he was still talking to a police shrink when Ben and I left.”

“Do you think the killer knew the victim?”

“We didn’t find anything to indicate that,” I answered. “So I’d be inclined to say no, but I’m sure they’ll be checking into it.”

“Did they find anything at the scene that might help?”

“Not much,” I answered. “He hailed the towers and performed an Expiation spell again, presumably after the other ritual. He bound her wrists and ankles and gagged her with duct tape. They might get something off that. When I projected...”

I felt her tense against me, and I knew what she was thinking.

“...Don’t worry, I didn’t channel, I just projected. It wasn’t the same as with Ariel...”

She relaxed, and I gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“When I projected, I saw him pull his glove off before he reached in for her heart.” I couldn’t believe how calmly I was relaying this story. I hoped that I wasn’t becoming jaded to the atrocities I had witnessed lately. “I don’t know if they’ll get anything, but they’re going to look for latent prints on the body.”

“Maybe that will turn something up,” she said.

“Maybe. Even if it does, unless he’s on file from some previous offense or something, it won’t be much help in finding him.”

The waterbed rippled slightly, and we felt movement in the dark followed by a muted rumble growing closer by the second. Within moments, Salinger climbed onto my chest and curled up, purring interminably as Felicity scratched his ears.

“That reminds me,” I said shifting slightly, recalling Salinger’s earlier opinion of R.J. “How did the circle go for you? I noticed a little streak of dark in the residual energy when I sat down at the table.”

“It was there during the circle too,” she told me. “It really didn’t seem to come from anyone though. It was more like it was just hanging around from something else. It wasn’t terribly overwhelming or anything, so I just had everyone ground all their negative thoughts and energies. I figured it was probably their thoughts of seeking revenge and such.”

“You could be right,” I mused. “I suppose some of it could have been left hanging around. How did the cats act?”

“Nowhere to be found,” she answered. “They were probably in here asleep on the bed.”

“You know Ben really suspects R.J.,” I told her. “Especially after the time of death for Karen Barnes was placed somewhere between five-thirty and eight P.M.”

“Karen Barnes. They identified her pretty quickly.”

“Her purse was at the scene.”

“I know R.J. was late and all,” she stated. “But I think Ben is on the wrong track. I would have felt something from him if he had done it. He wouldn’t have been able to mask that while in the circle.”

“Well,” I intoned, “I tried to feel him out when he shook my hand, and he put up defenses immediately.”

“You would have done the same if someone tried to check you out,” she told me. “That doesn’t make him guilty of anything.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

We laid wordlessly in the dark listening to the sound of the humming fan blend with the contented, throaty rumble of the lump of fur curled up on my chest.

“Is Ben going to call tomorrow?” Felicity finally asked.

“Yeah,” I answered. “In the morning. He wants me to meet with the Major Case Squad. I might end up needing those slides.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to get up early and process them, so I can get them mounted,” she stated and then gave me a light kiss. “Go to sleep dear. You have to be exhausted.”

“I am.” I patted her lightly on the rear as she rolled over. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I stared off into the darkness, the meter of the swirling fan blades setting up an audible, hypnotic rhythm. I was so tired I felt I could sleep forever, but at the same time, I was still coming down from the adrenalin pumping through my veins. I listened to the soft rhythm and started a mental exercise to relax. Clearing my mind, I allowed the stress of the past two days to pour out of me like water from a faucet. I closed my eyes and let the last thoughts in my head drift away.

Before long, my body was completely infused with a comfortable drifting sensation. Indigo darkness enveloped me broken only by a bright blue light in the distance. I reached for the light, and I was gone.

CHAPTER 8

Felicity allowed me to sleep in the next morning, and it was going on eight A.M. when I finally dragged myself from the bed and into the shower. I felt rested for the first time in what seemed like forever. Apparently, I had been too exhausted to have any nightmares, and about that, I wasn't going to complain.

My wife was seated at the dining room table when I was finally dressed and prepared to meet the day. A portable light box inhabited the surface of the table, and she was huddled over it with a loupe held to her eye. A stack of freshly mounted color slides occupied the space to her right, and she was inspecting them one by one as she arranged them on the illuminated panel before her.

"How did you sleep?" she asked without looking up.

"Better than I expected." I kissed the top of her head. "How'd the slides come out?"

"Technically, okay, though I can't say as that I really care for the subject matter," she returned. "But I wouldn't quit my day job if I were you."

"Always the critic," I told her. "You eat yet?"

"No. These haven't exactly done wonders for my appetite." She dealt another handful of the transparencies onto the light box. "Besides, I was waiting for you."

"Well, isn't that sweet?"

"Not really. It's your turn to cook."

"I should have known."

I was in the kitchen quickly sautéing onions when the phone rang. I picked up the receiver and tucked it between my ear and shoulder while I whisked eggs to a medium froth in a mixing bowl. "Hello?"

"Good mornin'" came a familiar, but rough voice. "I didn't wake you guys, did I?"

"No, we're awake, Ben," I told him. "I'm just now making breakfast."

"What are we havin'?" he asked.

"What do you mean we?" I laughed. "Are you on your way or something?"

"Actually," he replied, "I'm in the driveway."

"In that case, you're having a Denver omelet and hash browns."

I hung up the phone and retrieved the carton of eggs from the refrigerator then began cracking more of them into the bowl.

"Honey?" I called out. "Could you unlock the front door? Ben's in the driveway."

I was folding large chunks of chopped ham, peppers, onions, and shredded cheese into a fluffy omelet when a haggard, unkempt Ben Storm ambled into my kitchen and helped himself to a cup of coffee.

"Are you sure you're going to be able to do without doughnuts this morning?" I asked, sliding the finished omelet from the pan and preparing to make another.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he replied, seating himself at our breakfast nook. "Like I haven't heard the cop-slash-doughnut jokes before. You get any sleep last night?"

"Uh-huh," I grunted, pouring frothy eggs into the pan. "How about yourself?"

"Got a couple hours." He sipped his coffee. "Didn't get home till four this mornin'."

“How’s Allison taking all this?” Felicity asked. She had been standing in the doorway and now took a seat opposite him.

“She’s not happy about it,” he answered. “But she’s been through it before. It goes with the job.”

“What about the little guy?” I asked, sliding plates containing omelets and hash browns before them.

“Not as good. He doesn’t understand why I’m never home.” Ben shoveled in a mouthful of food and sat chewing thoughtfully. “I think I’m gonna take a vacation when this is all over.”

“Might be good for you,” Felicity told him. “AND your family.”

I finished filling my plate and joined them at the small bar. After moving some magazines, there was just enough room for the three of us.

“So,” Ben asked between bites, “have ya’ seen this mornin’s paper?”

“I brought it in,” Felicity answered, “but I haven’t even unrolled it yet.”

“You might wanna put it in a scrapbook... or the garbage, depends on how ya’ look at it.” He gestured at me with his fork. “You’re all over the front page.”

“Me?” I stopped a forkful of food halfway to my mouth and put it down. “What am I doing on the front page?”

“Remember the asshole with the camera that jumped out in front of us last night?” Ben was up and refilling his coffee cup. “Anyone need a warmup?”

Felicity held out her cup, and he topped it off.

“Anyway,” he continued, returning to his plate, “he caught ya’ like a deer in headlights.”

By now, I had gone into the living room and returned with the rolled up newspaper. Taking my seat back at the nook, I slid off the string and unfurled it. My wife leaned over next to me in order to view the curiosity. Offset to the upper left of the front page was a large color photo of Ben, and Detective Deckert, and myself as we were walking toward the crime scene last evening. As Ben had said, the look of surprise on my face gave me the appearance of a stunned animal. Forty-eight point type below the masthead spelled out the headline, “Police Witch Hunt.” The lead of the story read, “Saturday evening, Saint Louis Major Case Squad detectives brought Rowan Gant, a self-proclaimed witch, to Thayer Park, the scene of yet another grisly cult-like murder.” The rest of the story went on to recount details of both Ariel’s and Karen Barnes’ murders and speculate about my involvement in the investigation.

“How the hell did they come up with this?” I exclaimed. “How’d they know I wasn’t just some cop?”

“Sidebar, page five,” Ben answered, placing his dishes in the sink. “Hey, you got any of those cake things left over from last night?”

Felicity directed him to the honey cakes as I rapidly flipped through the pages of the newspaper and found the accompanying article to which he had referred. Another photo of me, this time black and white, was staring back. This particular photo had been taken when I had addressed a group at a local Wiccan gathering two years ago. The article was a slightly reworked copy of the original interview I had given that reporter.

“Somebody at the paper had a good memory,” Felicity intoned, peering over my shoulder.

“Yeah,” Ben added, “I’ve already caught ten kinds of hell from the chief because of it.”

“I’m sorry, Ben,” I told him, folding the paper and tossing it disgustedly on the nearby counter. “I guess you won’t be needing me at the meeting today then.”

“Shit yes, I need you at the meetin’,” he answered and sucked down a honey cake in one bite. “I said I caught ten kinds of hell. I didn’t say he won.”

“I should have known,” I said as I gathered the rest of the dishes and started washing them.

Felicity rolled her eyes at Ben as he devoured the remaining cakes, then she grabbed a towel and began drying the freshly washed plates.



The dining room table had seemed to become our *command center* over the past few days, and once again, we gathered around it to look over the slides and discuss the upcoming meeting with the rest of the Major Case Squad.

“Did the coroner come up with anything last night?” I asked Ben as he looked at slides with a small illuminated viewer.

“Partial thumbprint,” he answered, “but it was pretty smudged, so we only got three points. AFIS didn’t show any hits.”

“AFIS?” Felicity asked.

“Automated Fingerprint Identification System. Ya’ see,” he retrieved a ballpoint pen from his breast pocket and made marks on his thumb, then showed it to us, “a fingerprint is made up of what they call points. These points come together to make the unique pattern of the print. You or I can have some of the same points on our prints, but when you add them all up, voilà, unique as a snowflake. AFIS is an on-line database that allows us to break down the points that we obtain from a print and convert them into a number. You feed the number in, and the computer checks the database for matches or hits against anyone who has ever been arrested and printed by an AFIS participatin’ department. The *quote quote* magic number of points to make a positive ID is eight. With three, we have the possibility of at least narrowin’ down the field.”

“So,” she continued, “since you didn’t get any hits, that means he probably has never been arrested, right?”

“At least not by a department hooked up with AFIS.” Ben put away his pen and rubbed the ink from his thumb. “Other than the print, the M.E. came up with the fact that the size and shape of the wounds are consistent with those from Ariel Tanner. And also, there was some metallic residue left behind on her ribs.”

I replayed last evening’s vision in my head, watching carefully. I forced myself to remain detached and clinical. I didn’t want to lose my compassion, but I also wanted to keep my breakfast where it belonged.

“From the dirk,” I volunteered, “when he cut her open.”

“The M.E. said somethin’ like that,” Ben confirmed.

“Was there anything else?”

“Minor blunt trauma to the head and upper back. Looks like she put up a fight.” He read to us from his notes, “And a puncture wound on her arm, just like Ariel Tanner.”

“So what I saw was right,” I told him. “He’s drugging his victims in order to immobilize them. Do you know what he’s using yet?”

“M.E.’s still trying to identify it, but the sample from Ariel Tanner came up negative for insulin,” he answered. “You bring up an interestin’ point, though.”

“The killer knows something about drugs and how to use them?” Felicity interjected.

“Bingo,” Ben replied. “Which means the killer probably works in a hospital or something.”

“Makes sense,” I chimed.

“Guess what I found out about your lamp-swingin’ buddy?” He looked at me seriously.

“R.J.?” Felicity asked.

“Yeah, R.J.,” Ben answered. “Seems he’s an orderly at County Hospital, in the emergency room.”

“I know that might seem to fit,” Felicity stated, “but an orderly? Would he really know that much about the drugs and such?”

“Can’t say,” he told her, “but if he pays attention and reads a lot, who knows. In any event, he could have access to controlled substances at his job.”

“I don’t know, Ben,” I added. “I agree that something’s going on with R.J. that he’s not telling us, but do you really think...”

“Hey,” he interrupted. “You yourself said that Ariel Tanner thought she knew her killer. Right?”

“She thought she recognized the voice.”

“So add it up,” he continued. “Friend of Ariel Tanner. He has a key to her apartment. Access to controlled substances and a medical background of sorts.” He was counting the points off on his fingers. “Shows up out of the clear blue at the victim’s home Saturday, and finally, he shows up here an hour late last night.”

Remembering a detail from the day before, I quickly volunteered, “But he said he was out of town on a fishing trip with his father when Ariel was killed.”

“Yeah, I know, but I didn’t find him all that convincing.” Ben brushed away my objection. “So I already had a talk with his dad. They didn’t actually leave on that trip ‘til later that night, and ‘Pops’ had no idea where the kid was before that. Based on the approximate time of death from the coroner, he had plenty of time to do it.”

“Didn’t you upset his parents?” Felicity asked with concern. “I mean, implying that their son is involved in a murder and all...”

“Hey, I just told ‘em the truth,” he answered. “It’s just routine. If they get their shorts in a bunch then that’s their problem.”

“Why would he have lied?” I mused aloud.

“Maybe he did it.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Okay, so who knows?” Ben shrugged. “But I intend to find out.”

“If knowing the victim is an important factor, then what about Karen Barnes?” I queried. “Is there anything to indicate that he knew her?”

“Not yet,” he shot back. “Maybe he picked her because of the color of her hair... Maybe because the opportunity was there... Shit, maybe he didn’t have to have a reason.”

“Still,” Felicity objected, “Rowan or I should have felt something from R.J. if he had killed Karen Barnes just before coming here. We’re both Witches you know.”

“What’s that got to do with it?” Ben turned to her. “Besides, why are you so attached to this kid anyway? You act like you’ve known him forever or somethin’.”

“I just have a major pet-peeve about innocent people being railroaded... And in a way, I DO know him pretty well. When I cast circle last night, he was in it.”

“So?” Ben shrugged, obviously not understanding the significance of her comment.

“So a circle is a very intense ritual in The Craft,” she explained. “You are joined with your peers, and you share energies. To be able to hide your true feelings during a circle would take more practice than I can even imagine. I don’t even know if Rowan or I could do it, and we’re both definitely more skilled than he is... No. R.J. was wide open last night. I refuse to believe he did it.”

“Tell that to a judge and see how far it gets ya’,” Ben replied. “Besides, nobody has convicted the kid yet. I’m just gonna ask him some more questions.”

As much as I wanted this to be over, and even with my feelings that R.J. was hiding something, I found the thought hard to comprehend. We hadn’t known him long, but I trusted my wife’s instincts as well as my own. The morose silence that followed Ben’s announcement was abruptly punctuated by Salinger as he leapt to the table and let out a sudden, mournful yowl.



Felicity and I followed Ben, driving in her Jeep. I had imitated his mode of dress by affixing a tie about my neck and wearing a lightweight, tweed sport coat over my jeans. My wife had opted for her no-nonsense look, donning a grey summer suit and black pumps. She also wore glasses instead of her normal contact lenses, which only served to enhance the businesslike appearance she had assumed. The back seat of our vehicle contained a carousel tray loaded with a small selection of slides from the roll I had shot last evening, as well as our slide projector.

“So what do you think about this whole thing with R.J.?” Felicity asked me as she shifted gears and merged with the traffic.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Ben makes it sound pretty convincing, and I did have that feeling last night... You said you felt it too.”

“Yes, I did,” she stated. “But it wasn’t that malevolent.”

“True,” I responded, “you would think that someone evil enough to do what this guy has done would be giving off some seriously bad energies.”

“That was my thought.”

“What about Salinger and Dickens?” I questioned. “Something about him really turned them off last night. I could maybe understand Salinger, but Dickens? He loves everybody.”

“Maybe R.J. has his own cat or something,” she speculated. “If they smelled another animal on him, then that might have set them off.”

“That’s a possibility,” I agreed. “I know Ben says he just wants to talk to him,” I continued, “and I hate to say this, but I think he’s had it in for R.J. since the very beginning.”

“It’s his nature to be suspicious,” she told me. “And I’m sure he’s just being thorough. Just doing his job, you know. Don’t worry, Ben won’t railroad R.J., or let anyone else. You know him better than that.”

“I know you’re right about Ben,” I told her. “But I don’t know if he’ll be able to control the rest of them. You can bet he’s getting pressure from the top on this.”

Felicity looked over at me sadly for a moment and then returned her gaze to the road. I knew she didn’t want to consider the possibility that Ben could succumb to the public-opinion-guided wishes of his superiors when a young man’s life was at stake.

“Shut your window then. The wind is messing up my hair” was all she said.



The command post for the Greater Saint Louis Major Case Squad had been set up in some conference rooms at the Weston city hall, which also housed the small township’s police station. Since we lived nearby, the drive was short. According to my watch, it was approaching eleven when we arrived.

“I’m gonna warn ya’,” Ben said as we walked with him across the parking lot, “these guys have already seen the paper.”

“I suppose they’re expecting some kind of weirdo then,” I returned, referring to myself.

“I expect you’re gonna get some blank stares and snide remarks,” he told me. “But if ya’ keep the *Twilight Zone* stuff just between us, I think it’ll be okay. I’ll be there ta’ back you up.”

“Well, I appreciate that.”

Ben led us down a long, tiled hallway and signed us in with a dour-faced desk sergeant, who from all outward appearances, should have retired ten years earlier. He less than enthusiastically provided Felicity and I with visitors badges, and we proceeded on with no interruption. Ben opened the door to a conference room then motioned us in. We were greeted full force by what can only be described as an ordered chaos.

The room was a fissure of activity within an otherwise silent structure. Cafeteria tables were erected against walls, doubling as desks, copier stands, and phone banks. Chipped, blue metal folding chairs clinked as they were being set up. Some squeaked as they were propelled across polished linoleum tiles by the innumerable police officers and support staffers teaming within the confines of the room. The discord of already ringing phones mixed with the murmurs of voices to form a tumultuous racket.

“How many people have you got working on this case?” Felicity asked, taking in the riotous scene.

“Hell, I’ve lost track,” Ben answered. “Other than the core officers assigned to the MCS, all the municipalities involved are giving up whoever they can spare, and then there’s the support personnel... Hell, I don’t even try to figure it out anymore. What’s really scary is, until around midnight last night, this was an empty room.”

We advanced farther into the activity, all but ignored by the bustling members of the Major Case Squad. Making our way through the crowded space, we found a place to store the slide tray and projector we had lugged in. Continuing to follow Ben like two strangers brought to an unfamiliar party by a friend, we proceeded to a table set up with coffee and much to my chagrin, doughnuts. We had just begun filling our typical white Styrofoam cups from a large urn, Felicity lamenting about the biodegradability of them, when we were approached by someone known to Ben and me both.

“Hi, Ben. When did you get here?” Detective Carl Deckert approached us and scooped a coffee cup into his hand.

“All of about five minutes ago,” Ben replied, then turned toward us. “You remember Rowan Gant, and this is his wife Felicity.”

“Nice to meet you,” he said with a smile, lightly shaking Felicity’s hand, then taking mine firmly. “Hell of a hatchet job they did on you in the paper this morning.”

“Well...” I half stuttered, trying to choose my words carefully, “I can’t exactly sue them for libel.”

“Hell,” Deckert returned, “I pretty much figured you were some kinda psychic or something last night anyway. You were comin’ up with too many things that nobody else could see.”

“Excuse me if I seem surprised,” I asked, “but what was said in the paper doesn’t bother you?”

“The only thing that bothers me is that the media decided to sensationalize it,” he told me as we all took turns doctoring the bitter brew with packets of sugar and powdered creamer. “Truth be told, my mother used to have what she called ‘visions’. Everyone in the neighborhood used to call her a Witch, but they listened because her ‘visions’ always came true. I don’t recall her ever being involved in all the stuff you talked about in that interview, but I’ve seen stranger things. If it helps catch this asshole, I don’t really care.”

“It’s nice to know we have another friend with a badge,” I told him. “They’re pretty rare.”

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t expect many more outta this group. Ben and I are probably it.”

As I looked about the room, I started noticing the cold stares and whispers among the members of the Major Case Squad. I was sorely afraid that what Carl Deckert had just said would soon prove to be true.

At 11:30 we accompanied Ben, as well as the rest of the officers, to an adjoining conference room. Here, the tables were lined in neat rows, and at the head of the room stood a small podium. Felicity deftly set up the slide projector and mounted the tray of transparencies, then seated herself to one side with Ben and I. There remained a dull murmur as detectives took their places at the tables and talked among themselves. Once everyone who belonged in the meeting was seated, Ben stationed himself at the podium and waited. It took only a moment for a quiet hush to fall over the group, broken only by the sharp sounds of ballpoint pens clicking and notebooks being opened to fresh pages.

“First off,” Ben began, his voice tired but clear, “for those of you who don’t know me, I’m Detective Ben Storm with the city homicide unit. I am the investigating officer on the Tanner case.

“Secondly, let me thank all of you for being here on such short notice. I realize a lot of you came in last night and haven’t slept yet. Trust me, I know how ya’ feel.”

A light, weary chuckle randomly skipped through the room.

“Everyone here should have copies of the case files on Ariel Tanner and Karen Barnes,” Ben continued. “If ya’ don’t, then let me know after the meeting and I’ll get them to ya’. I wanted to go over some of my notes with ya’ and field any questions you might have. I’d also like to compare notes on the Barnes homicide from last night.

“Look.” He paused and let out a deep sigh. “We all know there’s a psycho asshole out there, and he’s killed two women so far. It’s our job to find him and put a stop to it.”

I watched on as Ben looked down at the slanted top of the podium and opened a file folder.

“Here’s the basic run down,” he stated, looking back up at the group. “Ariel Tanner, Caucasian female, twenty-six years of age. Her body was found in ‘er apartment last Wednesday evening by her neighbor who noticed her door was propped open. There was no sign of forced entry. Her hands were bound behind her back with duct tape, her throat was cut, and her upper torso had been skinned. This latter procedure was done while she was still alive people... Just so you understand.

“Upon arriving at the scene, we found the words ‘All Is Forgiven,’ inscribed on the wall with the victim’s blood. Also drawn on the wall was a Pagan symbol referred to as a ‘Pentacle’. Finally, a wine goblet was found, containing residue of Miz Tanner’s blood. All of this leads us to believe that the murderer performed some type of ritual sacrifice.

“There were no witnesses, and the neighbor wasn’t home. Coroner’s report turned up a puncture wound that is consistent with an injection, so it appears that our bad guy is drugging his victims. Also, there was no evidence of rape. Any questions?” Ben shuffled the papers back into order as he looked out over the seated detectives.

“Did she have a boyfriend?” a voice called out from the back of the room.

“Not as far as we have been able to determine, no.”

“Had there been any cult activity in the neighborhood?” someone else asked.

“We checked that out,” Ben answered. “All we found were a few high school kids tryin’ to put a ‘hex’ on a teacher. They were harmless, and we scared the hell out of them.”

Once again, a mild chuckle rolled through the otherwise somber room.

“The report indicates,” a stone-faced detective near the front of the room spoke up, “that the first victim was involved in the occult. In particular, she was the *priestess* of a Witches coven. What did that turn up?”

“We have, in fact, spoken to her coven. It seems they kicked a member out a few weeks ago, so we’re lookin’ at the revenge angle, but that doesn’t seem likely now that we have a second murder. The ex-member’s name is Devon Johnston... So far, we’ve been unable to track ‘im down. I’ve got the other member’s numbers, and we can check them out...”

I was holding my breath, waiting for Ben to say something about R.J. He looked over at me for a moment, then back to the sea of faces.

“...Any more questions?” He scanned the room with a long, silent pause. “Good, then I’ll turn you over to Detective Carl Deckert.”

Ben stepped away from the podium and took a seat with us once again. Detective Deckert winked at us as he trundled by and filled the void behind the rostrum. He hitched up his pants and cleared his throat, then addressed the gathering.

Deckert’s diatribe went much as Ben’s had, including a general summation of the facts surrounding Karen Barnes’ case, followed by a short question and answer session. When he was finished, he and Ben traded places at the front of the room once more.

“Now that we have that out of the way,” Ben told everyone, “I’d like to bring up a consultant that has been working on the Tanner case with me.” He turned and gestured toward me. “Rowan, would you like ta’ join me up here.”

Judging from the stares that suddenly came my way, I knew immediately that I wouldn’t.

I wouldn't *like* it at all.

CHAPTER 9

Ben remained behind and slightly to the right of me as I positioned myself at the stand. I looked out over the numerous detectives seated at the tables, and as I had been warned, they all stared back at me blankly. I noticed a copy of the day's newspaper resting prominently atop the notebook of one of the officers in the front row. The newsprint was neatly folded to display the front page, picture and headline. It may have been coincidence, but it definitely appeared deliberate. My heightened senses easily detected suspicion and disapproval seeping from the group, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Felicity shift nervously in her seat. She could feel it too.

"As Detective Storm told you," I began nervously, "my name is Rowan Gant. I have been consulting with him on the investigation of Ariel Tanner's murder, and more recently..."

"Where's your broom?" a disembodied voice interrupted from the back row.

A grating laugh rippled through the room. Ben started forward, ready to admonish the speaker and anyone else in the room, or so it appeared. I thrust my arm out and stopped him, then looked over and shook my head. He stepped back without a word, though I could feel him seething beneath his silent facade. I took in a deep breath and turned back to the seated officers. Apparently, there was to be no dancing around this problem, and hiding behind Ben definitely wouldn't help. This was something I would have to handle myself if I wanted to gain any respect from them.

"Actually, my broom is at home," I told them sarcastically, indignance replacing the trepidation. "We came here on my wife's *Hoover Deluxe*... Now, since you all want to act like a room full of school children," I looked around, making eye contact with as many of them as I could, "are there any more smart-ass comments before I continue?"

I remained silent, staring out at them, continuing to meet their eyes and hold them. Some of them looked quickly away. Some fought to hold fast, then folded as the others before them.

"Why the hell should we listen to you?" the voice came from the back row again.

This time I pinpointed him. He was a young cop—younger than the rest anyway—with dark, styled hair and the rugged features that often graced print advertisements for men's cologne. He fixed his blue eyes on mine and held my gaze. He was not going to be easily persuaded.

"Could you come up here, please?" I asked him, motioning him toward the front.

"What the hell are you doin'?" Ben hissed at me.

"Let me handle it," I whispered back over my shoulder.

By the time Ben and I had completed our exchange, the young detective had come to the front and was looking back out at his colleagues with a wide grin. He was obviously quite pleased with himself, and the other detectives were enjoying the spectacle as well.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Bill," he answered, still pleased.

I motioned to the corner of the room. "Detective Deckert, could you get the lights please?"

He nodded and switched off the overhead lights. Felicity picked up on the cue and responded by switching on the slide projector.

"Let's step over here out of the way, Bill," I told the young detective as I slid the rostrum to one side.

Once we had moved, Felicity tapped a switch on the slide projector's remote control, and the tray advanced, audibly dropping a transparency into the beam of light. The auto-focus kicked in, and a larger than life image of the Pentacle from Karen Barnes' murder scene glowed back at us.

"Can you tell me what we're looking at, Bill?" I asked him.

"It's a star," he told me. "What Detective Storm said, ya know, a Pentacle."

"Very good," I said. "And what does it mean?"

"Whaddaya talkin' about?" he asked, his voice somewhat less confident than before.

"What is the inherent meaning of the symbol, Detective?" I asked again.

"Oh, yeah, that." He shuffled slightly. "Well it means worship the devil and Satan and stuff like that."

"Sorry," I stated apologetically. "Wrong answer."

I motioned to Felicity in the dim light provided by the image reflecting from the screen, and the slide changed. Now the words that had been inscribed on the walls of both murder scenes brightly stared back at us.

"And these words, Detective," I continued, "'All Is Forgiven.' Can you tell me why the killer inscribed them at both scenes?"

"That's easy," he returned. "He's forgiving the victims."

"Hmmm. A little closer but sorry, wrong again. Next slide please."

Suddenly the wall was lit up with the sickening image of Karen Barnes' flayed torso, her glazed eyes gaping back at us.

"Can you tell me why the killer excised the victim's skin, Detective...?" I received no answer. "Detective?"

I turned and saw the young man facing away from the image, breathing heavily and obviously fighting back nausea. I decided that I had made my point and that he was no longer nearly as pleased with himself. I motioned across the room; the lights came back on and the projector shut down.

"Go back to your seat," I told him, then turned and took my place back at the podium.

Ben was grinning at me when I looked up at him, and Detective Deckert flashed me a smile with a surreptitious thumbs up. The rest of the detectives in the room remained quiet as my heckler returned to his seat. A good number of them looked just as green as he did.

"That," I began, "is why you should listen to me. If you want to catch this guy, you need to know *why* he is doing what he is doing. And, that is what I'm here for.

"I'm going to be straight up with you. I really don't give a damn if you like me or not. I don't expect you to believe in my religion or follow its covenants. What I do expect is for you to give me the respect that I deserve and recognize the fact that I just might be able to answer some questions that you can't. I'm here to help you, not entertain you.

“Look, I’ll be the first one to admit that I’m not an expert criminal psychologist or anything like that. What I have to say is simply my interpretation of the facts available based on my knowledge of the Wiccan religion. As I said, knowing the whys and wherefores behind what the killer is doing just might prove useful in catching him.” I paused to let my words settle. “Now, I’m sorry if I made you look like an ass, Bill, but you seemed rather intent on acting like one even without my help... So, can we get down to business and figure out a way to catch this son-of-a-bitch before he kills again?”

A grumble of assent rolled through the room. I could tell that the majority of them still weren’t happy about having me involved in the investigation, but at the same time, I think they realized I might be able to shed some light on certain aspects of the cases.

“Fine,” I continued. “I’ll begin with telling you something that I am sure you already know. You are dealing with a very unstable individual. The second thing I will tell you is what you aren’t dealing with here... What you aren’t dealing with is a Witch.”

I paused and waited for the chairs to quit shifting and the whispers to subside.

“If you will allow me to explain,” I told them. “I am not saying that the person committing these murders is not attempting to practice some type of ritual magick, in fact, I definitely believe that that is exactly what he is doing. I also believe that he thinks the rituals used by a practitioner of The Craft play some part in it. This is very simply not true. An actual practicing Wiccan, or Witch, holds to a very specific covenant within the religion. That covenant is to *Harm None*. Witches do not, I repeat, DO NOT sacrifice people or animals in their rituals. The reason I’m telling you this is that it’s going to be very easy for you to point your finger at anyone who might happen to be a Wiccan practitioner, simply because this killer is mimicking one of our rituals. I really would like to avoid that. Not only would it cause undue grief for innocent individuals, it would be extremely counterproductive. For example, just because lemons are yellow and tennis balls are yellow, it doesn’t mean you can make lemonade out of tennis balls...What I’m really trying to get at is that just because one mentally unstable individual is using the symbols of the Wiccan religion and committing violent murders, it doesn’t mean that all Wiccans are psycho serial killers. Don’t put blinders on and follow that kind of distorted logic because it’s not going to get us anywhere.”

They were looking back at me a bit more attentively than earlier. I didn’t know if I had convinced them, but I hadn’t lost them, and at this stage of the game, I had the feeling that this was all I could hope for.

I motioned to Detective Deckert and Felicity once more, and again the room was pitched into darkness. Instantly, the slide projector came to life, clicking rapidly as my wife backed the tray to the beginning.

“This, as we have already established, is a Pentacle. In this position, with a single point at the top, it represents man and life. It is a very common symbol in the Wiccan religion. If this were to be turned one hundred-eighty degrees so that there were two points on top, it would then be referred to as a Pentagram. Some cults have taken it upon themselves to assign a meaning of evil and darkness to the Pentagram, claiming it represents Satan. Notice the horns and the pointed goatee.” I indicated the various points on the screen, “Factually, this is inaccurate; however, it has become widely accepted as true over the centuries. That’s probably where you got your misinformation, Bill.”

I stepped away from the podium and into the path of the slide projector. The image took up a large portion on the wall, and I was able to physically point out aspects without entirely blocking the beam of filtered light.

“In this instance, an upright Pentacle was inscribed as part of a ritual known as an Expiation spell. This spell, or ritual, is particularly Wiccan and is the one that the killer has mimicked with some notable variations. Next slide please...” The projector clicked and chunked as the first image was ejected and the second one dropped in its place. “These words, ‘All Is Forgiven,’ are also a part of this ritual. The Pentacle and the words were all inscribed at both crime scenes. As Detective Storm already told you, the victim’s blood was used to draw the symbol and letters. This would be one of the deviations I mentioned a moment ago. The other would be that instead of using wine or water for the spell, the killer once again used the victim’s blood...The fact that this was done, shows that this second ritual was performed after the murder. This correlates with the fact that an Expiation spell is used as something of a ‘self-atonement’ ritual—similar to penance given in a confessional. This leads me to believe that the killer is feeling remorse for what he’s done and is seeking to relieve the guilt.

“Next slide.” Once again the projector rotated the tray and displayed the grisly image of Karen Barnes’ mutilated corpse. “The method of killing has involved ritual flaying in both cases, followed by cutting the throat in the case of Ariel Tanner and removal of the heart in the case of Karen Barnes.”

“What’s the point?” a voice asked. “Is he some kind of sadist or something?”

“While that wouldn’t surprise me,” I answered, “the point behind skinning the victim is to bring them to a heightened sense of pain and fear before their death. From what I have been able to research, our killer appears to be attempting to invoke, or call forth, some spirit or daemon. This, he apparently believes, requires a human sacrifice and requires that the sacrifice be aware of the process. Whatever it is that he desires to call forth apparently feeds on pain and fear.”

“I thought you said you Witches didn’t do shit like that” another voice came out of the dark.

“We don’t,” I replied. “Like I said, he isn’t a Witch.”

“Then where’s he coming up with this stuff?” the same voice asked.

“Fiction,” I answered. “Horror movies. Novels. Perhaps even any number of texts available on the subject of Black Magick, both accurate and inaccurate. It wouldn’t surprise me to find a little of the Spanish Inquisition mixed in as well.”

“So,” a different voice piped in, “what you’re sayin’ is that all this is just a ration of shit, and he’s just a sick bastard goin’ around killing people.”

“Yes and no,” I returned. “I definitely agree with the ‘sick bastard’ part of your comment, but his rituals aren’t just some ‘ration of shit’ as you put it. First off, a ritual is nothing more and nothing less than you make it. It is a way of focusing one’s energies, and it can be something that you make up yourself. It doesn’t have to be some pre-prescribed set of instructions that were written by someone else.”

“Hold the phone,” another voice chimed in the dark. “You aren’t actually suggesting that this wacko is going to bring some beast or demon here from hell or something are you?”

“What I’m suggesting,” I told them, “is that a ritual is used to focus one’s energies to make something happen—like praying or the chants that monks sing. If you’re asking

if I personally believe that he's going to invoke something, just let me say that I think there are forces out there that are better left alone, and we'll leave it at that."

I waited wordlessly while my last statement soaked in. There were a few whispers among the group but to my surprise, no recurrence of the earlier heckling, so I continued.

"Now, I realize I haven't really told you much about the killer, and unfortunately, I'm not able to do much more than speculate based on the existing evidence.

"First, as I said, he's not a Witch, but he appears to be intimately familiar with The Craft. He might have been a member of a coven at one time or another, but if he actually practiced, I would think it more likely that he was solitary. It's possible that his knowledge of Wicca was or is derived mainly from literature available at almost any bookstore.

"Second. Because of the lack of various components, I have reason to believe that Ariel Tanner's murder was done out of his need to practice his ritual. Karen Barnes' may well have been an actual performance of the sacrifice. I can't be absolutely positive about that because as I told you, he's making up his own ritual here. The basic components of it tell me generally what he's trying to do, but so far, he's left nothing behind that points me to anything specific. Based on what was done to Karen Barnes, my guess would be that it was the real thing for him, but I don't believe he's finished. Until he at least perceives that he has conjured whatever or whomever he seeks, then he will continue to execute the ritual.

"Point three. As depicted in this image, the skin was removed from the victim with notable precision considering we believe that the instrument used to accomplish the task is what's known as a dirk. For those of you unfamiliar with the name, it is a double-edge, European dagger that is about six inches long. Ariel Tanner owned one for use in Wiccan rituals. It was missing from her apartment. Someone able to do this probably has some experience at it and has more than likely skinned an animal or two."

I could hear scribbling in the dark. I may not have reached all of them, but at least some of them were taking notes, and that bolstered my confidence almost immediately.

"Finally. This individual is meticulous about his rituals. The flaying, the inscription, the use of a purification incense. He took his time and made sure he followed a regimen he had set for himself. This is going to indicate someone deeply involved in ritual and ceremony.

"In both instances, he made it a point to prop open the door to the house or building where he committed the murder. This may indicate that he wants the bodies found as quickly as possible. Couple that with the Expiation spell, and I would theorize that he wants to be caught and punished. He is seeking not only atonement from himself but from the world as well."

"If the asshole wants to get caught, why doesn't he just turn himself in?" came another query.

"My guess would be that he would consider that too easy," I replied. "I don't know. Like I said before, I'm not a psychologist, I'm just here to interpret the symbols and ritual for you. The rest is pure speculation. Lights please..."

The lights came up in the room, and I heard Felicity switch off the bulb on the projector, though she left the fan running in order to cool it down. It droned on in the otherwise somber room.

“That’s really all that I have for now. I know it’s not much,” I told them, making my way back to the rostrum. “I will be in contact with Detective Storm and will let him know if I’m able to glean anything else from all of this. Are there any more questions?”

“Yeah,” one of the detectives in the center of the room spoke up. “I’m curious about somethin’. Ain’t you s’posed to be called a warlock?”

“Big fan of *Bewitched* were you?” I chuckled, feeling the mood in the room lighten at his query. “No, I am a Witch. The definition of warlock is ‘liar or breaker of promises’. The word has also been used to describe a practitioner of the *Black Arts*, either of which I am most definitely not. If you want to get right down to it, I’m really just a person like any of you, only I happen to be of a different religion.”

“It’s heresy. I don’t care what you say.” The statement was punctuated by a notebook slamming shut and a chair screeching on linoleum.

The voice had issued from a man everyone recognized. Detective Arthur McCann stood up and strode toward the door. He had been a valued member of the county police department for as long as anyone cared to remember. He was the prototypical good guy and esteemed member of his church. I had known him well a few years back when I helped out waiting tables in the small family diner my mother had owned and where he had been a regular customer. These days, he appeared in the paper often, a one-man task force bent on the eradication of the Wiccan religion and occult practices in Saint Louis. It was his belief that anything which didn’t include his God was nothing more than a cult and therefore evil. He was not about to listen to anything different.

“If you insist on having a Witch involved in this investigation...” He turned as he reached the door, fixing his gaze on Ben, who was standing next to me. “Then I will have no part of it.”

“Arthur,” I stated evenly, “how many times have I told you, good is good and bad is bad. I’ve done nothing bad.”

“You speak heresy,” he spat back angrily. “You go against the word of God.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” I returned. “And it bothers me that it hasn’t been that long ago that you thought I was a pretty good guy...Until you found out my religion that is.”

He didn’t answer, his face just grew redder, and he stormed out of the room, angrily slamming the door behind him.



While I could still detect a definite lack of enthusiasm for my presence in the investigation by the rest of the members of the Major Case Squad, there had been no more outbursts for the rest of the briefing. We left the frenetic activity behind as Ben escorted us out of the building, dropping off our visitor’s badges with the desk sergeant before exiting into the bright, sunlit day. The small, nomadic media city from the night before had positioned itself in front of City Hall, and local television personalities were vying for positions from which to do their live reports.

“Looks like a goddammed airhead convention out there,” Ben spat as we walked.

The sun was beating down hard on the pavement, and combined with the moisture from the previous night’s rain, we had the makings of a legendary Saint Louis summer day. The humidity was thick in the atmosphere, and the stillness of the air made the

ninety-four degrees on the thermometer seem less than accurate. Felicity peeled off her light jacket and arranged it over the back of her seat when we arrived at the Jeep.

“I have to tell you,” I said to him as I stowed the slide projector and tray, “it went much better than I expected.”

“Yeah, but what was that crap with McCann? I didn’t know you two knew each other.”

“Awhile ago,” I answered. “Back when Mom had that diner. I helped out waiting tables and got to know him then.”

“Oh yeah,” he said. He had been to the diner many times himself. “So I guess he’s outta here.”

“Looked that way,” I said, haphazardly tossing my own jacket into the Jeep and getting a stern look from Felicity. “So, why didn’t you say anything about R.J.?” Knowing my wife’s expressions, I retrieved the jacket and hung it properly over the back of the passenger seat.

“Pretty much ‘cause I’m workin’ on a hunch,” he explained. “You see, the way I look at it, everybody starts with ten bricks in their pile. As the investigation progresses, some of the bricks get moved into the suspicious and/or guilty pile, and the rest stay right where they were and don’t bother anybody. Right now, I’d say R.J.’s only managed to move a couple’a his bricks over to the suspicious pile.”

“When were you planning to talk to him?” I queried.

“I kinda figured on paying him a visit a little later this afternoon.”

“What’s the plan with Devon?”

“We’re sittin’ on his house, and I got a basic description from his cousin out on the streets,” Ben answered.

“Hey,” Felicity interrupted, “in case you two haven’t noticed, it’s hot and muggy out here, not to mention that I’m the only one standing here in heels.”

“Point taken,” I told her and then looked back at Ben. “Do you have a little free time to get us in to the Karen Barnes murder scene?”

“Yeah, why?” he asked.

“I’d like to play a hunch of my own,” I answered. “I want to make sure I didn’t miss something last night.”

CHAPTER 10

Leaving the parking lot proved to be much more of a nuisance than I originally expected. We were exiting ahead of Ben, and the moment our Jeep rounded the corner of the building, the drive was blocked by a swarm of reporters and cameramen. Felicity pressed lightly on the accelerator, inching us through the mob as they thrust microphones at our windows and barked questions made unintelligible by the din of them all speaking at once. Viewing the spectacle, it was impossible to miss Brandee Street, short skirt, trendy hair and manicured nails, as she ruthlessly insinuated herself between the others.

“Mister Gant,” she shouted over the uproar. “What exactly is your role in this investigation?”

Even with the windows up and the air conditioner cranked as high as it would go, I could still hear her singsong voice. I ignored her and reached over to turn up the radio.

“Mister Gant.” She was shuffling along at my window as we inched forward. “Is it true the police have called you in to communicate with the spirits of the victims?”

Suddenly, the crowd parted, and the reason became instantly clear as we saw the flashing red lights and uniformed officers executing much-needed crowd control. With a quick glance in either direction, Felicity shifted gears and gunned the engine, letting out a short squeal from the tires as she propelled us away from the bedlam. I turned and looked out the back window and saw Ben’s van behind us, emergency bubble-light flashing on the corner of the roof. Once we merged with traffic, it switched off, and I saw him reach out and pull it inside.

“Awfully determined young lady, wasn’t she?” Felicity asked as we came to a stop at a traffic light.

“You could call it that,” I answered. “Ben yanked her chain last night, and she threw her microphone at him.”

“You’re kidding,” she stated incredulously.

“Nope. Not kidding. She launched it at him, but she missed.”

“What did he do to her to get that kind of response?”

The light changed, and Felicity nudged the Jeep forward into the intersection then hooked into a left turn.

“Apparently there’s some kind of long running adversarial relationship between the two of them,” I answered. “She follows him around chasing stories, and he won’t give her the time of day. Last night he took the microphone out of her hand and unplugged it, then handed it back to her.”

“Serves him right then.”

“What do you mean?” I questioned.

“Never make a woman angry then be stupid enough to hand her something to throw at you.”



The small cinder block building in the back of the park was cordoned off and locked up just as I had expected. We parked our vehicles and followed the same path we had last evening, this time without the rain and organized pandemonium of the crime scene investigation. Ben produced a key and opened up the restroom.

The pungent aroma of the charred sage and rose oil still hung faintly in the air, mixing with the sharp and musty odors of old disinfectant, damp concrete, and the coppery smell of blood. The heavy door swung slowly shut behind us, creaking on hinges badly in need of oil.

“Once the crime scene unit clears this place,” Ben told us, “someone is gonna have a hell of a mess to clean up.”

Darkening stains smeared the floor where Karen Barnes’ body had laid. Spatters of blood spread forth, rusting from bright crimson to dull reddish brown. Smooth surfaces, such as the basin and walls nearby, were greyed by the powders that had been used in the futile attempt to find fresh fingerprints, and all but the smallest shards of the shattered mirror had been removed from the scene.

“It’s cold in here,” Felicity stated, hugging herself and shivering slightly.

“Whaddaya mean cold?” Ben asked in disbelief. “It’s close to a hundred degrees out here.”

“Not that kind of cold,” she told him. “The cold of death. It’s strong enough for me to feel it.”

“So you’re gonna go all spooky on me too,” he said, then turned his attention to me. “What are you lookin’ for in here anyway?”

I walked around the interior of the restroom slowly and silently. I had no earthly, or even unearthly, idea what I was looking for. I only knew that something had suddenly begun to gnaw at the back of my brain. A relentless nagging that told me I had missed something that had been staring me straight in the face the night before.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “But if it’s here, I’m going to find it.”

I continued to shuffle around the small room, intently inspecting walls and fixtures that had already been perused by eyes more prying than mine. I could feel the same coldness Felicity had mentioned and gave a barely noticeable shiver as it danced subtly up my spine.

“Did I say anything last night when I spaced out?” I asked aloud.

“No.” Ben recalled, “You just kinda went blank and stared off. You weren’t zoned for long before I decided to snap you out of it... With what Felicity said and all... Ya know...”

“It’s all right,” I told him. “I understand.”

“Why do ya’ think ya’ might have said somethin’?” he queried.

“Just a thought,” I replied, still making my way around the stalls. “I’ve just got this nagging feeling that I missed something.” I glanced over at him. “And for some reason, I think that *something* might be important.”

“Well, guys,” Felicity spoke up. “My feet are killing me. I’m going to run out to the Jeep and see if my tennis shoes are in my gym bag.”

My wife started for the door with a deliberate turn. The gritty shuffle of her shoe soles against the concrete was rapidly followed by a sharp, tinkling sound as she inadvertently kicked a small piece of the broken mirror, sending it skittering across the floor.

“HOLD IT!” I exclaimed. “Don’t move.”

She froze. Ben froze. I froze.

“What is it?” Felicity finally whispered.

The sound triggered a memory, the memory induced a thought, and the thought congealed in my brain as I closed my eyes and listened to an imaginary pane of glass shatter inside my head. Slowly, I opened my eyes and looked to my wife, then to Ben.

“The mirror,” I told them.

“Yeah. You told us why ya’ thought he broke it last night,” Ben stated. “Somethin’ about not wantin’ ta’ trap whatever he was callin’ up, or somethin’ like that.”

“I know,” I returned. “But that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Then what?” Felicity asked as she relaxed her stance.

“If Karen Barnes was standing in front of the mirror when she was attacked,” I began.

“Then she might have seen the killer’s reflection,” she finished for me, light dawning in her eyes.

“Excuse me,” Ben interjected, “but Karen Barnes is not gonna be givin’ any eyewitness descriptions. In case you’ve forgotten, she’s dead.”

“This is true,” I told him. “However, I might be able to do the same thing with her that I did with Ariel.”

“Channel her?!” Felicity exclaimed. “Don’t you think that’s a little too dangerous?”

“Not if you help me,” I replied.

“Whoa,” Ben interjected. “This ain’t one of those things where you could die or somethin’ is it?”

“Yes it is.” Felicity turned to him quickly. “If it isn’t done correctly.”

“Well I dunno then...”

“Hey,” I interrupted them both. “The operative phrase there is ‘done correctly’. If you help me,” I indicated to my wife, “and we take some precautions, I shouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

“What precautions?” Ben queried.

“An anchor on this plane, for one,” I answered. “Getting me the hell out of there before the moment of death for another.”

They both looked at me as if I had totally lost my mind. I knew it was because they were worried about the possible consequences, and to be honest, I was too—but I was also bound and determined to proceed with the idea.

“We have to stop this S.O.B.,” I told them. “If doing this could keep him from killing someone else, then I would never forgive myself if I didn’t go ahead with it. I don’t think the two of you could either.”

They fell silent, first looking at me, then each other, then back to me, and finally, to the floor.

“I’m going to go change shoes,” Felicity eventually said. “If we’re going to do this, I plan on being as comfortable as possible.” With that, she pulled the door open and headed for the Jeep.

She had only been gone a few moments when Ben broke his thoughtful silence. He broadcast his current state of mind by smoothing back his hair and letting out a short sigh.

“Ya’know,” he spoke, holding his hand at the back of his neck. “Even if you do ‘see’ somethin’, it’s inadmissible as evidence. There’s no way I can trot you in to the D.A. and say ‘here’s an eyewitness’... You realize that don’t ya’?”

”I know,” I answered. “But if I see something, and it gives us a clue or some place to start looking, it’s worth the risk.”

“I can’t ask ya’ ta’ do this.”

“You’re not,” I told him. “I’m volunteering.”

He shuffled about in place. “So, how long is this gonna take?”

“If it all goes as planned, it shouldn’t take more than ten minutes or so.”

“What can I do ta’ help?”

“Make sure no one disturbs us.” I paused for a moment, and then added, “And I wouldn’t be opposed to you keeping your fingers crossed.”

The door once again creaked open, and Felicity reentered minus the pumps and sporting her aerobics sneakers.

“I don’t want to hear it,” she told us as she came through the door. “I know the shoes don’t match the outfit, but they’re comfortable. So, how do you want to do this?”

“Ben,” I said as I turned back to him, “if you’ll just watch the door and take notes if necessary...”

“You got it,” he replied, backing up to the door and taking out his notebook.

I took a position near the washbasin and motioned for Felicity to join me. I selected this point in the room for its obvious proximity to the once-intact mirror. The simple fact was that I wasn’t necessarily ecstatic about what I was going to do either. I wanted to be in and out as quickly as possible, so I planned to use every advantage available. If my idea worked, physically positioning myself here would allow me to enter the vision close to the point I wanted to see and then get out quickly, before Karen Barnes took me into death with her.

“Simple cone,” I told my wife. “Raise it and project a rope. One end of it should be around my waist, and you should have the other end. I’ll try to stay with you, but if necessary, I’m going to let myself fully immerse in the regression, so it’s up to you to pull me out if you sense that I’m in trouble... You gonna be able to handle this?”

“Let’s do it,” she replied, nodding in assent.

We joined hands, left palm up, right palm down. Felicity and I relaxed in unison, our breathing falling easily into sync. We had cast many a circle together, just she and I, and this process had become nothing if not automatic. We both centered ourselves and grounded with the earth, feeling ethereal forces swirl about us in an ever growing, ever tightening, choreographed helix. Energy began flowing from her left arm and into my right. It rushed throughout my body, coursing through muscles, arteries, veins, and nerves, and worked its way around until it completed the circuit, flowing out of my left arm and into Felicity’s right. The connection continued, rapidly increasing until the current appeared to us as a solid blur.

I began imagining a rope fixed securely about my waist, the free end anchored here in the physical plane, held fast by my wife. I knew she would be imagining something very similar within her own mind as well. The image solidified, and it was time for me to go.

“Are you ready?” I whispered.

“I’m ready,” Felicity answered, her own voice held low.

“Do me a favor and don’t let go,” I told her, then allowed my inner self to fall backwards into the void.

Colors came and went in a tumultuous blizzard, much as they had when I had done this at Ariel’s apartment. Sound slowed and faded, melting into the darkness, then returned as a loud rushing in my ears. Light poured in and the scene before me began to coalesce. It formed in harsh blacks and whites, like a picture on a television screen with the contrast turned to maximum. The brightness slowly dimmed, and color flooded into the apparition until it achieved an appearance of something just the other side of normal.

“Buster, settle down,” her voice, my voice, our voice was saying.

A Jack Russell terrier is dancing around our ankles. We’re trying to sidestep him as he rings the leash around our legs.

“Buster, sit!” our voice orders the small dog.

He sits and holds one paw up. He whines lightly.

We’re turning on the water now. The handle on the faucet squeaks. How many times have we heard that before? It’s such a familiar sound. We’ve been here before. We are washing our hands now; Buster is still whining.

A sound. The door is creaking; someone else is coming in to use the restroom. We hope she doesn’t have a dog with her; Buster will freak out. We’re turning off the water. Buster is growling. She must have a dog with her.

“Buster, stay!” our voice orders him.

We’ll be out of here in just a second. DEAR GOD, what’s happening? Let me go! What are you doing? We are struggling. Someone has grabbed us from behind. Buster is barking. Stop that! There is something over our face now. It smells strange. Our ears are ringing. We’re weak. The room is getting dark.

Look in the mirror, Karen, I told her... or myself... or whatever we had become.

He let go. We have to turn around. We have to run. We’re falling. No, push up on the basin. The room is spinning. Ouch, something stuck us on the arm. We’re pushing up on the basin. Our knees are weak. We have to stand up. We’re looking at the mirror. What is that over our shoulder? It’s moving. Who is that?

I strained to see through Karen Barnes’ eyes the reflection in the mirror. I concentrated and let myself enter into the vision with all my being.

Darkness.

Silence.

My head is killing me, what happened? I can’t move. This bed is hard. Light. I can see. Wait a minute. I’ve been here before. This isn’t home, it’s...I can’t remember. I’ve been here before though. Where’s Buster? Why can’t I move? My arms are numb. I wish I could move them. What’s going on? Who am I?

Did I just see someone move? Who are you? Where are you? Where am I?

What is that smell? It’s strange. I’ve never smelled anything quite like it before. It’s like...It’s like burning roses. My head is really killing me. Where’s Buster?

I'm in the park. I'm in the restroom in the park! Now I remember. Someone grabbed me. My God, am I paralyzed? Somebody help me.

Who am I? Karen? Yes, that's it. I'm Karen.

That movement again. I can hear something. Something shuffling. What is it? Wait a minute. There's something over my mouth. Why is there something covering my mouth. A rapist. I'm being attacked by a rapist! Please, somebody come in and help me. Somebody stop him.

Where is my husband? He isn't home yet. Somebody help me. Where is Buster? My head is killing me. Please somebody help me. Don't let him rape me.

What is that? Something is on top of me. No, SOMEONE is on top of me. What are you doing? Don't rape me, please don't rape me. Why are you wearing that robe? What is that in your hand? Your eyes, I can see your eyes. I've never seen eyes that grey. They're so cold.

NOooo!

He's cutting me. My skin is on fire.

NOooo!

Pain. Pain beyond all.

Fear.

Darkness.

What is that tugging at me? Who am I? Karen? No, that's not right, Karen's dead...If Karen is dead then who am I? There's that tugging again. It's coming from my waist. A rope. I'm tied to a rope. Who is that? She's pretty. What beautiful red hair she has. What is that she's saying? I can't hear you. Speak louder. Do you know who I am? Are you the one that is pulling on the rope?

Falling.

Darkness.

Light.

He's still on top of me. How long was I passed out? It couldn't have been long if he's still here. Dear God I hurt. My chest is burning. What is that pressure? Why is this happening? Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come...NOooo!

Pain.

Ouch! What are you doing? It hurts when you pull on that rope so hard. I've seen you before. You have such pretty hair. What? You want me to come to you? Why? Do you know who I am? I thought I was Karen but Karen is dead. Why are you so upset? I'm very tired. Maybe I should just go to sleep.

Darkness.

Light.

Fear.

Pain.

Terror.

Darkness. Cold, endless darkness.

I was intrigued by the sight before me. I wasn't entirely sure how I was managing to float above it in mid air, but I was comfortable, and the mechanics of it were the farthest thing from my mind. Ben and Felicity were kneeling on the floor, and my friend was checking the pulse on a body sprawled between them. They looked very grim and seemed upset.

"Rowan, follow my voice."

I heard my wife call to me, but I never saw her lips move. I wondered why she couldn't see me; I was floating right above her.

"He hasn't got a pulse!" Ben exclaimed. "I'm going to start CPR."

"Who hasn't got a pulse?" I thought. I needed to see whom they were huddled over.

"No!" Felicity told him. "Not yet, this isn't what you think it is."

"Rowan, I know you're there. I'm pulling the rope as hard as I can. Help me! Follow my voice."

Once again, Felicity's melodious voice echoed in my ears, but her lips never parted. I floated a little closer. I had to see who was lying on the floor between them.

"Are you fucking nuts, Felicity?" Ben exclaimed loudly. "He's dying! His fucking heart stopped beating!"

"Dammit Ben," she shot back at him wildly. "I know what I'm doing, and your interruptions aren't helping!"

"Rowan! Help me dammit! Follow my voice!"

Ben jerked back in surprise from my wild-eyed wife. I don't think he had ever truly experienced her temper until now. I looked down between them as the space opened enough for me to see. The body on the floor had a very familiar face. Brown hair. Bearded. A small scar on his forehead. Exactly like a scar I had on my own forehead. It slowly dawned on me that I was looking at myself.

"Rowan!"

There was a sharp tug at my waist.

I began falling.

White noise filled my ears. I felt a sharp burst of pain through my chest, and I began hungrily gasping for air. I opened my eyes and looked up to see Ben and Felicity staring back at me. Ben shook his head as if he had just witnessed a miracle and let out a long sigh. Felicity's lips parted in a slight smile as she stroked my forehead.

"Welcome back," she said.

"Thanks for not letting go," I whispered.

CHAPTER 11

The hot, bright sun flooded the landscape, beating down upon us from the clear sky and broiling the last drops of moisture from the ground. By late afternoon, no one would be able to tell that it had rained the night before. I was sitting on the back of Felicity's Jeep drinking the remains of a lemon-flavored sport drink she had kept in her gym bag. The drink was hot and tasted horrible. Its acidic tang slightly burned the back of my tongue and my throat as I swallowed. I had tried to refuse the beverage; my wife however, insisted I drink it all in order to replenish the electrolytes in my body.

My eyes were still adjusting to the glare as I watched Ben and Felicity in silence. I remembered the entire incident clearly. The two of them were shuffling about nervously, making it a point to avoid one another, not saying a word or even making eye contact. Every now and then one of them would ask me how I was doing, and Ben even asked me several times if he should take me to the hospital. I finished the last of the sport drink with a gulp and screwed the lid tightly back onto the plastic container then tossed it over my shoulder into the rear of the Jeep.

"Are you two going to kiss and make up?" I finally asked.

Ben and Felicity both stopped in their tracks and looked at me suspiciously.

"Yeah," I told them. "I heard you two snap at each other. I may not have been in my body at the time, but I was in the room."

"So look," Ben started, looking down at the ground. "I'm not really used to this kinda stuff, Felicity. I..."

"Aye, you don't have to say it, Ben," Felicity interrupted. "We were both on edge. If we should be mad at anyone, it's him." She motioned to me. "Not each other."

"Wait a minute," I protested. "I wasn't involved in your little spat."

"I beg to differ," my wife informed me. "Just exactly who was laying in there with no pulse? I told you it was dangerous."

"She's right, Rowan," Ben chimed in. "I thought you were dead, and for what?"

"Grey eyes," I told them.

"Excuse me?" Felicity intoned.

"Grey eyes," I repeated. "The killer has got grey eyes. I saw them."

"So you actually did see somethin'?" Ben queried as he flipped out his ever-present notebook.

"Just the eyes," I answered. "He was either very careful about being seen, or he was very lucky."

"That's somethin' I don't quite understand," Ben stated.

"What's that?" Felicity asked.

"Why would he care?" he continued. "It's not like his victims can give an eyewitness description."

"Fear," I stated simply. "I think that might be why he props the doors open too."

They both stared at me blankly as if I had lost them.

“Think about it,” I proceeded. “When my body shut down in there, my spirit or soul, whatever you prefer to call it, left. But it didn’t go very far, obviously, because I watched you two argue about giving me CPR. That’s what turned me on to this idea. I think the killer not only feels remorse but fear as well. He performs the Expiation spell for forgiveness, and he props the door open so his victim’s spirit can leave.”

“I still don’t see the connection with hiding his face from the victims,” Ben puzzled.

“He fears retribution from the spirits of his victims,” Felicity interjected, realizing what I was trying to explain. “He keeps his identity hidden so they can’t find him.”

“You mean ta’ tell me he thinks the ghosts of his victims will come after him for revenge?” Ben asked incredulously. “That’s nuts. That’s just plain nuts.”

“It all depends on what you believe, Ben,” I told him.

“What about the fact that he killed her out here in the park?” he protested. “It seems like that would fit more with the wantin’-ta’-get-caught theory you mentioned.”

“I don’t know why he killed her out here,” I replied. “I just know what I feel, and what I feel right now is that he’s propping the doors open to let the victims’ spirits escape.”

“This is a pretty secluded section of the park,” Felicity interjected as she shaded her eyes and looked around. “You’ve got the wooded area with the fitness trail, but that’s about it. Most of the activity would be taking place closer to the front of the park where the pavilions and ballfields are.”

“Jeezus, this is one twisted fuckhead,” Ben muttered.

“We knew that already,” I told him.

“Does R.J. have grey eyes?” Felicity asked.

“Not that I recall,” I replied, “but I can’t say that I paid that much attention.”

“I still wanna talk to ‘im anyway,” Ben stated flatly.

Ben’s comment was followed by an awkward pause as his suspicion had once again reared its omnipresent head.

“So why don’t we head over to the house,” Felicity finally suggested, breaking the silence. “It’s cooler and there’s fresh, herb, sun tea in the fridge.”

“Sounds great to me,” I intoned. “Besides, that’s where my cigars are.”

“I’m with you,” Ben added.

Felicity rolled her eyes and went around the Jeep to climb into the driver’s seat.



Felicity was changing into shorts and a t-shirt while Ben and I set fire to a pair of cigars out on the back deck. I was just finishing the final adjustments to the patio umbrella when she came out to join us, preceded by our two bounding canines. She set a tray containing glasses and a pitcher of iced tea on the table and then lithely draped herself in a chair to join us.

It was still early afternoon, and the temperature had not yet begun to decline. The air remained thick with humidity, but there was a slight breeze, and as long as we stayed relaxed in the shade, the clime was at least tolerable.

“So I made a coupl’a calls on the way over here,” Ben announced, helping himself to the tea. “Seems Deckert managed to dig some info up on Devon Johnston.”

“Have they found him?” I asked, taking my turn with the pitcher and pouring a glass for my wife.

“Not yet,” he continued, “but we’re still lookin’.”

“What did Detective Deckert come up with?” Felicity asked, taking a sip of her drink.

“Found Johnston’s parents,” Ben answered, “or his mother anyway. His dad is deceased.”

“Why did it take until today?” I queried. “Not that I’m being critical.”

“Illinois license,” he replied. “We were just searching the Missouri DMV records initially. His mom lives in Urbana, and apparently, that’s where he grew up. He just never switched his driver’s license over. But, that’s not the interestin’ part. It seems that one Mister Devon Johnston was recently dismissed from his position as a medical technician with Mercy Hospital... And accordin’ to his records with the DMV, he’s got grey eyes.”

“So that should take the heat off of R.J.,” Felicity stated.

“Not really,” Ben told her. “It just gives me another asshole who’s moved one of his bricks into the suspicious pile ta’ worry about. Granted, his bricks are a little heavier than R.J.’s.”

“Seems to me they should be a lot heavier,” I interjected.

“Like I said,” Ben blew out a stream of smoke, “the information you get from one of your visions doesn’t do a damn bit of good in a courtroom. If it gives us a lead, great, but I still hafta come up with hard evidence. Hell, I don’t even know why I believe you. This ain’t exactly an everyday method of investigation, you know.”

“Maybe because you’re an open-minded individual,” Felicity chimed. “Whether you want to admit it or not.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “But sometimes, I still feel like I might be a little nuts to go for some of this stuff.”

I knew exactly what Ben meant; I had even been known to be a bit skeptical myself in earlier years. I had been a practitioner of The Craft for all of my adult life, and though I had come to accept the things my otherworldly senses would tell me, I could still be surprised. As someone unfamiliar with the supernatural talents of the mind, this had to be very hard for him. I had to admit, he was holding up better than most.

I took advantage of the momentary silence to watch our dogs at play in the sun-soaked backyard. They tumbled and rolled with one another, tails wagging in a delighted frenzy as they wrestled, oblivious to the horror we three humans were being forced to contemplate. I sometimes wished I could be just as unmindful.

“Any ideas where Devon might be?” I queried, ending the self-imposed reticence.

“Nada,” Ben answered with a slight, somewhat animated shrug. “His mother hasn’t heard from him in six months, or so she says. We’ve got somebody sittin’ on her place too, just in case. We checked with his former co-workers, and it appears like he’s a bit of a loner. None of ‘em really got to know ‘im that well, and from what was said, they really didn’t care to either.”

“What about Cally?” Felicity intoned. “He called her once. Do you think he might try to contact her again?”

“We hafta hope that she’ll tell us if he does,” he returned. “We’re watchin’ her place, but if he calls ‘er or meets ‘er somewhere else, we’ll prob’ly miss it.”

“Can’t you follow her?” I asked.

“Not enough evidence at this point.” Ben turned his attention to me. “Last thing we need is ta’ get nailed for harassment.”

Ben paused as he puffed on his cigar and quietly watched the hummingbirds assault a hanging feeder like WWII era airplanes in a spectacular dogfight. Eventually he reached up and began smoothing his hair. Felicity and I looked at each other then back to him, as we were both intimately familiar with the gesture.

“So let me ask you somethin’,” he finally spoke.

“Shoot,” I returned.

“You said somethin’ about this creep taking Karen Barnes’ heart with ‘im so he could ‘finish the ritual’. What was that all about?”

“It’s part of the sacrifice,” I explained. “And what he does with it is entirely dependent upon what he is trying to accomplish. He might burn it, or he might bury it... Hell, he might eat it.”

“I was afraid you were gonna say somethin’ like that,” he mumbled.

“I wish I could say for sure, but I’m still not entirely clear on what he’s trying to do.” I continued with a frustrated sigh. “To be honest, something about his whole ritual is bothering me.”

“How so?” Felicity asked.

“The energy at the crime scene.”

“What energy?” she queried, confused. “I didn’t feel anything except death.”

“Exactly,” I replied.

“What are you two talkin’ about?” Ben interjected his question, coming fully upright in his seat and paying rapt attention.

“Whenever a Witch or practitioner of magick does something, an invocation for example,” I explained, “he or she leaves behind residual energy. Kind of a left over that just floats around until it dissipates.”

“So what’s your point?” he pressed.

“That excess energy wasn’t there,” Felicity stated. “Neither of us felt it.”

“I was at that scene within hours of the murder,” I told him. “And we were there again today. That energy should hang around for a good long time, but there’s nothing there. Just the energies given off by Karen Barnes. Her fear, pain, and especially her death.”

“Okay,” Ben replied slowly. “So I’d still appreciate it if ya’ could tell me what this is s’posed ta’ mean.”

“Maybe nothing,” I answered. “There could be a few different explanations, like maybe he just went through the physical motions but didn’t actually perform the ritual as he should have. It’s just something that kind of bothers me.”

“So it’s not a lead or anything like that.”

“No. At least I don’t think so.”

Ben returned his attention to the cigar held loosely between his fingers then relaxed and leaned back in his seat. It was obvious that he was on edge, and I was certain that a lack of sleep was partially to blame.

“When is the last time you had a decent night’s sleep, Ben?” Felicity asked him, following my thoughts as if I had spoken them aloud.

“I think it was sometime during winter ‘bout three years ago,” he answered facetiously.

“Do you really need to talk to R.J. today?” I questioned. “Couldn’t that wait till tomorrow?”

“Probably. Why?”

“You need sleep, Ben,” my wife stated matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, chief,” I agreed. “No offense intended, but you’re all edgy, and you look like someone ran over you with a truck.”

“Your health is going to start suffering,” Felicity intoned. “You can’t keep going like this. You really need to decompress.”

“Yeah... I know,” he answered with a sigh. “I haven’t seen my wife face to face in nearly a week. Shit, she told me this mornin’ on the phone that the little guy asked her if Daddy still lived there.”

“Go home, Ben,” I told him. “Go home and hug your kid, kiss your wife, and have a meal with your family. Then get some sleep.”

“I haven’t got the time,” he objected.

“Unless you have some kind of secret information that you haven’t told us about,” I admonished, “you aren’t going to catch this guy tonight. You need some sleep, man. Besides, it’s not just you working this case. The entire Major Case Squad is on it now.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right.” He slumped more noticeably in his chair. “But I still wanna talk ta’ the kid today. I think I’ll sleep better if I do.”

“If that’s what it takes, do it,” I told him. “But get some rest either way because something tells me we haven’t seen the end of this yet.”

“What a cheerful thought,” he mumbled.



Ben eventually left us in search of R.J. Felicity and I spent a quiet afternoon together trying not to think about serial killers and of course, were unable to ponder anything else. In an effort to put the subject out of our minds, we made a quick trip to the store and returned with fresh, yellow fin tuna steaks for the grill. Together with a medley of vegetables from our garden, we made a light meal and after cleaning up the dishes, generally lazed about into the evening hours.

Stories of Ariel Tanner and Karen Barnes’ murders flooded the airwaves as the top story during the late evening news on every station. Details about the crimes were convoluted and misconstrued to the point that they were telling a different story on each channel. The two points they all agreed on were the nominative “Satanic Serial Killer” and the practice of flashing the newspaper photo of me on the screen. Touching my thumb to the remote, I rolled back through the channels in the hope they had found something else to talk about. I was giving serious consideration to turning off the chattering box when a familiar face, other than my own, leapt out at me from the screen. I swiftly reversed the direction of my scan and came to rest on that station.

Detective Arthur McCann’s worry-lined face stared back at me with concern and determination creasing his brow. Apparently, he had just finished speaking as the picture suddenly cut to a wide-eyed Brandee Street anxiously clutching a microphone. I punched up the volume a notch and settled in.

“Can you explain a little more about the Wiccan religion,” she asked him.

“Certainly,” Arthur returned authoritatively. “This so-called religion is nothing more than a fancy name for cult activities. The individuals involved undermine the morals of our children and recruit them into these cults. There they become addicted to drugs and often are the victims of sexual abuse.”

I had heard his speech before, but each and every time, I was amazed by what he said. I found it hard to believe that an intelligent human being could be so blind to the truth.

“Do you believe that one of these Wiccan cultists is responsible for the bizarre murders that have recently occurred?” Brandee’s voice came again.

“Since I’m not involved in the investigation, I cannot directly comment, but I will say that it wouldn’t surprise me,” he answered.

“You have been one of the leading authorities on cults within the Saint Louis County Police Department for the past few years. Why aren’t you involved with the Major Case Squad?”

“I resigned from the MCS this morning due to a shift in caseloads,” Arthur succinctly replied.

“Way to go Arthur,” I thought as I listened to his reply. “At least you engaged your brain before opening your mouth this time.”

“Would your resignation have anything to do with the involvement of Rowan Gant as a consultant to the Major Case Squad?” Brandee persisted.

“I have no comment on that.” He continued his guarded, tactful stance.

“Mister Gant is a self-proclaimed Witch and practitioner of the Wiccan religion,” she pressed harder. “You yourself stated that this amounts to nothing more than a cult.”

Arthur’s face had reddened, and I could tell that he desperately wanted to spill his guts. He was dying to tell the world of the police department’s moral decrepitude due to my involvement. He probably even wanted to take a few verbal shots at me personally. But Arthur McCann was only a few short years away from his pension, and whatever his personal beliefs, he was still a dedicated cop.

“No comment,” he finally returned.

The picture changed back to the talking heads behind the anchor desk on the stylized set. They began to banter back and forth, making what they believed to be clever quips about me, and Witches in general.

It wasn’t long before I was thoroughly disgusted with the entire exposition and switched the television off. Following my wife’s example, I went to bed.

A distant scream.

Darkness.

Indigo Darkness.

A point of light far away.

A distant scream.

The light grows brighter. Larger. Closer.

I move toward the light.

The light stays beyond my reach.

A violent chord struck sharply upon an unearthly instrument. Grating tones that seem to last forever, carrying themselves visibly aloft on directionless winds. Sounds that can be seen as well as heard.

A terrified scream.

Grey.

Damp, thick greyness.

It's raining. Not heavily, just a gentle mist. A light sprinkle raining down from a gloomy grey sky.

"Rowan, so nice to see you again."

I turn to the voice and find Ariel clad in white lace. She smiles at me then looks upward. I try to speak but have no voice. She looks up at the sky, the misty rain lightly bathing her innocent smiling face. She looks back to my face, eyes smiling and a strand of hair clinging damply to her cheek.

"It always rains here," she says to me. "I don't know why. It's mostly just a misty rain."

A dark figure rises from the grey nothingness behind her.

A figure black as night.

A figure wrapped in a hooded robe.

"Do you like the rain, Rowan?" Ariel asks me. "I do, but I think it rains too much here. What do you think?"

A flicker of light.

No, a reflection.

There is something in the dark figure's hand.

Once again I try to speak. I try to warn her. I scream a silent scream.

Her eyes grow large in sudden astonishment. Her lithe body jerks upward in a violent spasm. A crimson stain spreads savagely across her breast.

I've seen this before.

I can't make it stop.

I can't look away.

"Why, Rowan?" she mouths wordlessly. "Why?"

Indigo darkness.

A distant ceaseless scream.

"Why don't you make it stop, Rowan?"

I turn again. Ariel faces me, her lace gown streaked vermilion. Glassy eyes stare unblinkingly at me. Her lips are frozen in a perpetual scream, yet only silence moves past them.

"How can I make it stop, Ariel? Tell me." My voice halts and jerks, changing in speed and pitch as if haphazardly pieced together.

"Please make it stop, Rowan?" Her pleading voice meets my ears.

Her lips never move.

Misty rain.

Grey misty rain.

An endless scream.

I don't know when the nightmare started or even how long it lasted. It could have begun mere moments after I closed my eyes or for all I knew, the last slumbering seconds

before reopening them. Logically, I knew that the entire sequence couldn't have taken more than a few minutes at the most. Emotionally, I was certain it had lasted for hours.

Felicity was still sleeping soundly when I awoke bathed in sweat and tangled almost irremovably in the sheets. My heart was racing, and I gasped hungrily for air to feed it. Slowly, I withdrew myself from the damp snarl of the bed linens and retrieved my Book of Shadows from the nightstand next to me then made my way to the bathroom and closed the door. I switched on the light in an effort to chase away my sudden irrational fear of the darkness then perched myself on the cool tile ledge surrounding the tub and began the task of relaxing. Fifteen minutes and three cups of water later, my pulse and breathing finally returned to normal.

Pulling the ink pen from its loop in the cover, I opened the Book of Shadows, my diary of dreams and thoughts, and proceeded to record every detail of the vision I could remember while it was still fresh in my mind. Every single thing I saw, no matter how nonsensical. Every little nuance of my emotions, each and every sliver of information, I scribed within the pages of the book until there was nothing left to write.

Senseless fear fought to grip me once again as I doused the light and returned quietly to the bedroom. I mentally beat the emotion down and after returning my Book of Shadows to the nightstand, slid into the bed next to my wife. I cuddled next to her in search of comfort, and she shifted lazily as I slipped my arm around her. I pressed myself to relax and rested my cheek against her soft auburn hair, drinking in its sweet scent. Before long, fatigue won out over irrational panic, and I floated easily into the world of sleep.



The clock on the nightstand read 1:45 A.M. when I rolled over and peered blearily at its glowing face. I was enveloped in a fog of half sleep and struggled to grasp the concept of why I was awake at such an hour. A loud, obnoxious clamor reached my ears and then fell silent. I closed my eyes and decided I must be dreaming, then rolled over. The noise, now more clearly a ringing sound, filtered into my ears again and was followed by Felicity's sharp elbow poking me in the ribs.

"Aye, Rowan, get the phone, then," she mumbled from her own half dream state.

I rolled back to face the nightstand and groped for the receiver. When my fumbling fingers finally located the device, I grasped it and lifted it from the cradle, cutting off the noise mid-ring.

"Hello," I croaked, my voice permeated with sleep.

"Didn't wake you, did I?" Ben's tired voice came rhetorically from the earpiece.

"You're not in my driveway again, are you?" I mumbled.

"No," he replied. "But I can have a squad car there in about fifteen minutes if you don't feel like driving."

"What's wrong?" I asked, quickly becoming more alert.

"Number three" was his only reply.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

While the city of St. Louis and its various notable landmarks are certainly real, many names have been changed and some minor liberties taken with some of the details in these stories. In an instance or two, they are fabrications, such as the existence of a coffee shop/diner across the street from the Metropolitan Saint Louis Police Headquarters. These anomalies are pieces of fiction within fiction to create an illusion of reality to be experienced and enjoyed.

In short, I made them up because it helped me make the story more entertaining, or in some cases, just because I wanted to. After all, this is *my* fictional version of Saint Louis.

And since we are talking about *fiction*, please note that this book is *not intended* as a primer or guide for WitchCraft, Wicca, or *any* Pagan path. It is important to mention that the vast majority of rituals, spells, and explanations of these religious, spiritual, and “magickal” practices used in these works are, in point of fact, drawn from actual Neo-Paganism – *but they are not tied to any one specific tradition or path*. The mixture of practices engaged in by the characters in these novels is often referred to as “Eclectic Paganism” and “Eclectic WitchCraft,” being that they borrow from *many different religious paths and traditions across the full gamut of spirituality* in order to create their own. Therefore, some of the explanations included herein will not work for all Pagan traditions, of which there are countless. This does not make them *wrong*, it simply makes them *different*.

If you are actually seeking in-depth information on the subject of Paganism and WitchCraft, there are numerous **Non-Fiction**, scholarly texts readily available by authors such as Margot Adler, Raymond Buckland, Scott Cunningham, and more.

Also, remember that the “magick,” and of course, the psychic abilities depicted here are what some might call “over the top,” because it *doesn't really work like that*, as we all know. But, like I have been saying all along, this is *fiction*. Relax and enjoy it for what it is...

Finally, if you are saying, “I’ll bet he had to write this note because someone took these stories way too seriously,” give yourself a cigar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would be sorely remiss if I didn't take a moment to thank at least a few of the individuals who were there to act as my sounding boards and as my moral support staff throughout the creation of these novels—

As this series has been ongoing for more than a dozen years, the list has grown, with specific mentions for specific novels. With this being a collection of the first three books, that list could be endless. In the interest of brevity, there are the usual suspects who have been there from day one – *or close to it* – and have remained with me throughout...

Sergeant Scott Ruddle, Metropolitan Saint Louis PD
Scott “Chunkee” McCoy
Johnathan Minton
Duane Marshall
My Wife
My Daughter
Anastasia “Missus Loota-Chack” Luettecke
Mike Luettecke
Daystar
Countless others

And Coffee...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A member of the [ITW](#) (International Thriller Writers), M. R. Sellars is a relatively unassuming homebody who considers himself just a “guy with a lot of nightmares and a word processing program.” His first full-length novel, *Harm None*, hit bookstore shelves in 2000 and he hasn’t stopped writing since.

All of the current novels in Sellars’ continuing Rowan Gant Investigations saga have spent several consecutive weeks on numerous bookstore bestseller lists as well as a consistent showing on the Amazon.com Horror/Occult top 100. In 2010, a short spinoff novella titled *MERRIE AXEMAS*, and featuring one the supporting characters from the Gant novels, spawned a new series centered on Special Agent Constance Mandalay.

Sellars currently resides in the Midwest with his wife, daughter, and a pair of rescued male felines that he describes as, “the competition.” At home, when not writing or taking care of the household, he indulges his passions for cooking and chasing his wife around the house. She promises that one day she will allow him to catch her.

M. R. Sellars can be found on the web at:

www.mrsellars.com

And on major social networking venues...

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