

# **Falls**

## **A Samuel Branch Novel**

By Eric Dontigney

### **Chapter 1**

It started on a Tuesday, which is a bad day for things to start. I think it has something to do with process. Mondays and Fridays are natural breaks and that makes them good days to start things, but Tuesdays are good for working through things. In that spirit, I had spent the day purging the stray tendrils of foreign energy that accumulates on us all. Everything has energy and little bits of it shed off. Brush up against someone in line, you walk away with a bit of them and they walk away with a bit of you. Like pet hair, a little bit is harmless. Let it go for a month or year, though, and suddenly it's clogging everything and giving you respiratory problems. Most people, by which I mean normal people, can go a lifetime and never give it a second thought. All that stray energy just doesn't impact their lives in a meaningful way. For someone who works magic, though, it can be fatal. Since I'm in no great hurry to bump up against fatal, I'm conscientious about dusting off that energetic pet hair.

So, given that it was Tuesday and I was cleansed, I thought it would be a quiet night. I mean, seriously, who expects to encounter an embodied primal force on a Tuesday? If I happened to be standing in an ancient temple that was built on a ley line, with monks chanting in background and the full moon shining down on me, during the height of the autumnal equinox, you better believe I'd expect to meet something powerful and dangerous. It just doesn't play out that way behind a coffee shop on Tuesday night. So, try to understand how deeply it annoys me

that it did play out that way.

I stopped by Java Jossie's for a pick me up. I always need one before my weekly Why-I-Should-Give-Up-The-Magic-Game lecture series with Father Bradley. For reasons beyond my ken, he decided that he was going to save the sinning soul of Samuel Branch. Personally, I think there are better candidates than me, but it makes him feel better. So, I let him try to convince me that what I'm doing is wrong, but I can't do it without a healthy dose of caffeine. Hence, my stop at the only place in a thirty mile radius to get a decent cup of coffee, at least if you listen to the caffeine aficionados. It was decorated under the rather bohemian and always in-flux sensibilities of the owner. She was a late blooming entrepreneur of a widow who had caught the enlightenment bug and liked to tell me I just had a bit of the devil in me. For the past few months, the customers had been soothed to the sounds of sitar music and presided over by small statues of Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva. Her fiercely loyal staff had seamlessly adapted to this latest fad and wore kurtas and saris, or retail approximations, as their uniforms. Evidence of previous fads were everywhere, ranging from the enormous dreamcatcher hanging from the ceiling and a pentacle mosaic set into the floor to a painting of a laughing Buddha on the wall. It wasn't for everyone. One review referred to the décor as a life-sized tribute to existential crisis, but I liked it.

Java Jossie's was seemingly immune to the social stratification that defined the customer base in most coffee shops. The place didn't discriminate based on age, gender, occupation or dubious status as a mortal human being. Walk in at the right time and you can find yourself in line with just about anyone. As I waited in line, I could see at least two power ties, a mohawk and a guitar case ahead of me. I laughed to myself a little as I caught a snippet of conversation between the mohawk and one of the power ties.

“I doubt that,” said power tie.

“No, seriously man, there’s an app for that. Here, let me show you.”

So you understand just how good the coffee is at Jossie's, I had already waited in line for ten minutes to get my vanilla latte. For the record, I don't stand in line anywhere for ten minutes just to get coffee. Or ever. I'd spent more than a few hours of my life, and purchased an obscene amount of coffee, trying to work out just how they made their vanilla lattes taste that good. My current working theory was that they mixed ground vanilla beans with the coffee. My experiments at home hadn't yielded great results yet, but I had high hopes. So, I hope you can understand the dilemma I found myself in when I finally made it to the counter and placed my order. It was just a flicker in my peripheral vision, but those things catch my attention. I turned my head enough to catch a blur of what looked like a teenage kid running past. I wouldn't have given it a second thought, a running teen just isn't that unusual, but I got interested in a hurry when I saw Krin run past a few second later. Krin was a typical, small-time practitioner of black magic. I suppose he had a real, grownup name, but I didn't know it. People involved in the magical world get cagey about names. In the grand scheme of things, Krin had limited magical talent to go along with his limited intelligence. Unfortunately, he was also a big man and his mean streak ran a mile wide. In other words, he was more than dangerous enough to pose a threat to a teenage kid. I wavered for a split-second before I threw a ten on the counter.

“I'm coming back for that,” I yelled to the barista as I bolted out the door.

I sprinted after Krin. He disappeared around the corner. I put on a little more speed and nearly knocked an elderly couple over when I went wide around the corner. I apologized as quickly as I could, but Krin and the kid were out of sight. I took off again in the direction I had last seen Krin moving and had to double back to an alley when I heard a muffled yell. It was a

rookie mistake to ignore the alley and I gave myself a mental slap to the back of the head. I stepped into the alley and I could see Krin. He had two fistfuls of shirt and was pressing the kid up against a wall. I try to be an open-minded guy, but this wasn't my first rodeo with Krin. I'd never known the man to be on the right side of anything in the entire time I'd been aware of him. It's hard to extend faith to someone who has no credibility ~~with you~~.

The smell of old coffee permeated the air and I found myself simultaneously hoping and dreading that one of the Jossie's staff would come out to put something in the dumpster. They were a socially conscious lot and would call the cops if they saw what was going on. That would give me a bargaining chip. On the other hand, Krin wasn't above stalking, harassing and beating up people he perceived as having crossed him. I should know. He tried it with me. It ended with me giving him a short and brutal lesson in choosing your enemies, but not everyone has that as an option. I finally came down on the side of hoping no one came out while this went down.

"Krin!"

"Mind your own business, Branch."

"You've got a kid pinned to a wall. What business do you think I'm in?"

Realistically, this was well outside my business, but it's not exactly like there is a magic 911 people can call. It wasn't always like that, but we have to police ourselves these days. Sometimes, that means you get involved, even when you don't want to, and even when you don't know all the details. Krin turned to say something to me, probably rude, and then his eyes went wide. His head swung back to the kid he had pinned against the wall. He let go and stumbled back from the teen, holding his hands out in front of him. I could see his lips moving and I strained to hear what Krin was saying. Whatever he was saying, it was too quiet to make out. What was clear was that he was afraid.

I felt it then and understood his sudden fear. Power. I mean real power. People like me, the ones who can manipulate the energy all around us, like to think of ourselves as the unacknowledged rulers of the world. It's hard not to feel a little cocky and self-important when you can manipulate forces most people can't even see. At the end of the day, though, what we do is tinker and meddle. The stronger ones affect tangible change in the world. That takes some power. Actually, it takes a lot of power, but it also gives us all a misguided view of our importance. I was about to get the reality check equivalent of a kick to the crotch.

What I felt in that alley made the most powerful things I had ever done seem like cheap sleight of hand, which is saying something. I'm not the most powerful guy out there, but I pack enough magical punch to make most people think twice about throwing down with me. The amount of energy that kid was pulling out of the air, or putting in the air, I wasn't sure which, made my teeth hurt. There was so much of it swirling around in that alley that it made every hair on my body stand on end. There was one spooky moment where I thought it might actually lift me off the ground. I didn't know what the kid had in mind, but anything that calls for that much power only has one, and only one, end. Krin knew it too. He turned and started running toward me. He got all of three steps when all that energy coalesced around him. He reached a hand out toward me and I reached out in return, mostly on reflex, when his entire body disappeared inside a sphere of blue-white lighting. Krin may have screamed, right before he was obliterated by that ball of lightning, but all I heard was the pounding of my own heart in my ears. I didn't care much for it. If I had been capable of running at that moment, psychologically or physically, I would have. Damned ineffective nervous system. The only thing I could manage was squeezing my eyes shut against the painful light.

“I have your attention?”

I forced my eyes open and all I could see was the afterimage of Krin's body in the lightning. I tried to turn my face away from it, but you can't escape something that's been seared onto your retina or into your memory. I won't pretend that there was any love lost between Krin and me, but it was still a horrible way to die. More to the point, if this was just to get my attention, killing Krin was completely pointless. There are easier ways to get my attention, I assure you. I couldn't help but think that this was as much an object lesson for me as it was an attempt to attract my attention. I tried to blink away the afterimage. Did he have my attention?

“Yes, you could say that you are the only thing that has my attention at the moment.”

“Good. There are things to discuss.”

“So I'm clear, when you say discuss, do you mean talking or do you mean me going the way of our dearly departed friend there?”

The boy, if anything with that kind of power qualifies for so innocuous a term as boy, cocked his head and stared at me. The stare continued for far too long and I felt a bead of cold sweat run down the back of my neck. I thought about saying something else and decided to keep my trap shut until the kid said something. An eternity later he straightened his head and gave me a ghost of a smile.

“Oh, yes, you're using humor. I encounter it so rarely. Perhaps you will make me laugh again. Simple talking will do for now.”

Some tiny, long dormant shred of a self-preservation instinct sprang into a swift and violent action to keep me from saying the next thing that came into my mind. Instead, it forcibly delivered a saner response out of my mouth.

“Talking it is.”

## Chapter 2

The boy walked by me and onto the sidewalk. He turned his gaze on me and waited. Some core of resentment I have toward anything that close to omnipotence made me wait a moment. It was a stupid power play that had no measurable impact on the boy, which did nothing for my ego and amped up my aggravation. What's a second to something that probably doesn't experience time in any linear fashion? It was a wasted effort, all in all. I accepted the inevitable and joined the boy on the sidewalk.

“Perhaps a ride in your,” the boy paused, “car. A degree of privacy is appropriate.”

I wondered how long it had been since this boy, or whatever the hell he actually was, had last set foot on the mortal plane. He was familiar with the idea of a car, but the language was clearly foreign.

“Just a minute, let me get my coffee,” I said.

The boy gave me a flat stare.

“Look, I waited in line for better than ten minutes to get that coffee and I already paid for it. I'm going inside to get it. So either zap me with your godlike ball o'lightning or wait here for one minute.”

Don't blame my self-preservation instinct; it doesn't get a lot of exercise. The boy gave me another overlong stare before nodding. I went inside and, as promised, was back out the door in under a minute. I nodded toward the nondescript old sedan I drove. It had been a Ford in a previous life, but the exigencies of my existence had taken a toll the vehicle. The only original part was the frame. I called it Fordenstein in my puckish moments.

We climbed into Fordenstein and I drove us around making random turns and generally heading nowhere in a hurry. It wouldn't have impressed anyone trained in evasion, but it kept me

occupied until the kid decided to say something. This took considerably longer than I would have liked. The experience of riding in the car seemed to be a novelty he wanted to stretch out. He passed the time staring out the window, chin resting in his hand. Then again, for all I knew, he could have been occupied with silently destroying anyone trying to eavesdrop on us. I didn't ask because I didn't want to know. My too-good-to-have-been-brewed-by-mortal-hands vanilla latte was long gone and I found myself wishing for another before he finally broke the silence.

“You have a purpose to fulfill,” said the boy.

“Doesn't everyone?”

“No.”

It was something I already knew, in the vague way we all know we're going to die, but it was creepy to hear him say it out loud. Everyone wants to think they have a purpose to fulfill in life. It helps us all pull through the tougher moments to think that way. The idea that most people exist for no particular reason just doesn't sit well. To hear it put out there with no emotion set my teeth on edge.

“I have purpose to fulfill. Are you going to elaborate on that or is this just a friendly reminder?”

“There is unrest.”

The urge to tell the boy that he had just described the human condition flitted across my consciousness. Then I got down to brass tacks. It wasn't people that he was talking about. If it had been, he wouldn't be sitting next to me. This left me with a nasty feeling that I was about to get the worst possible news. Even run of the mill magical problems were never simple. Magic can, literally, alter the laws of reality. Sometimes, most times, the changes were temporary or fixable. If the force behind them was powerful enough, they weren't. Problems that involved

those kinds of forces were always terrifying to me and I suspected this would be one of them.

“Where is there unrest?”

“Here, in this place. It is diffuse, but its qualities disturb the Lords and Ladies.”

I nearly ran the car off the road. People prattle on about gods and goddesses, demons, devils and angels. At a functional level, they're all real. Or some very close approximation thereof. The real power though, the big, scary, end of the universe power, rests in the hands of the Lords and Ladies. The one rule, nearly the only rule, that everyone accepted without question was this: avoid the Lords and Ladies. They knew nothing and cared nothing about human beings. They were subject to no law, no boundaries, save the ones they had imposed on the primordial chaos. Rules they could change again at a whim. This was just damned peachy. The fact of the matter was that the errand boy they had sent could probably crack the whole damn planet in half without really trying.

“No offense, but what could possibly disturb the Lords and Ladies? They invented time, compelled the universe to behave in a rational way.”

“True. They did do those things, but it is irrelevant. What disturbs them is that the qualities of the unrest suggest the presence of the Bound.”

If you've never felt the blood drain from your face, I recommend you pass on the opportunity.

“Wouldn't it be a bit of a contradiction for the Bound to be causing anything here?”

“Your language is limited. Suffice it to say that it is not impossible. It is the reason the Lords and Ladies are experiencing disquiet.”

I knew it was coming. I knew it and there wasn't one damn thing I could do to stop it. Impotence sucks.

“I suppose this is where I come into it, somehow?”

“You were selected.”

“By whom?”

“The Lords and Ladies. Who else could send me?”

I wasn't sure which to address first.

“I don't know who you are.”

“No?”

“I don't see how I could.”

“I am the Glynn.”

I wanted to cry or curl up in the fetal position, maybe both. Bad enough to get involved with the Lords and the Ladies, but they sent their personal hatchet man to deliver the message. Now I knew exactly how long it had been since he last set foot on the mortal plane. Think world-ending, cataclysmic events involving water.

“You said I was selected by the Lords and Ladies. Which one?”

“All of them. They requested you by name.”

“Of course they did. It's that kind of day,” I said. “Selected to do what exactly?”

“Determine if one of the Bound is indeed extending its influence here. Possibly intervene, if it should become necessary.”

I had to pull the car over. I thought I might vomit. I turned and looked at the Glynn.

“Let's set aside for the moment the fact that any agent of one of the Bound would be able to destroy me without a second thought. If, and that is a huge if, I am able to determine that one of them is exerting influence here, what do you expect me to do about it in the half-second I have to live before it kills me?”

“Summon me.”

“How?”

“With this.”

The Glynn reached out toward me. I thought he was going to hand me something until he plunged his hand into my chest. Make no mistake, I mean inside my chest. I stared down at his wrist and then looked at him in disbelief. He cocked his head in the same way he had when I had acted like a smartass.

“This may hurt a little,” he said.

My world exploded into agony. It felt as though I had shoved a fork into the world's biggest wall outlet. I had the hysterical thought that this might be a bit like what Krin had felt right before he died. I'll never win the toughest man alive award, but I'd been through my fair share of physical pain over the years. No one has accused me of being a wimp in a long time. So understand me when I tell you that it was some of the most intense physical pain I have ever experienced. The last thing I remember, before I blacked out completely, was worrying that my spine might actually snap from the muscle spasms arching me back in my seat.

### **Chapter 3**

I don't think I was out for too long because it was still dark when I woke up. I was groggy and disoriented, so it took a second for me to realize the car was moving. I grabbed for the steering wheel, thinking I'd fallen asleep while driving, and there was a moment of panic when my hands found nothing but air. The adrenaline cleared my head a little and I registered that I was in the passenger seat. I looked over to the driver's seat and saw the Glynn at the wheel, looking rather amused as he drove. I started to say something and a spasm in my chest left me

gasping for air. I braced myself with a hand on the dashboard, trying to pull in air against rebellious muscles. The Glynn never took his eyes off the road.

“That should pass quickly,” he offered.

The spasm passed and the constriction eased. I took a couple of deep breaths and felt a little embarrassed about my fear. There is just something about not being able to breathe that sets my brain to automatic terror mode. Hey, don't judge me until you've tried it.

“Did I die?”

“No. I expected that your physical form would respond strongly, but it was the first time I have ever needed to do such a thing.”

“You never did that before! What if I had died?”

“I don't believe you would have been chosen if what I was going to do would kill you. It would have been pointless.”

It was a perfectly reasonable response, logical even, and I found very little comfort in that thought. I set great store by being alive and I don't like it when other people gamble with my life, however small the risk. There was a throbbing in my head that made me rub my temples. The recent surge in my adrenaline and anger didn't seem to be helping matters, as my blood pressure was still spiking, making the throbbing that much more intense. I would have given almost anything for a bottle of water. I felt a brief surge of energy and the Glynn tapped my arm. I looked over and he was holding out a bottle of water. I took the water because I really did need it, but the implications didn't sit well in my stomach.

“You can read my thoughts?”

“I am able to do so now.”

“Is this permanent or am I going to be able to have a private life again one day?”

“The connection is new, so your thoughts are open to me. Soon, the connection will narrow. However, should you have dire need or encounter one of the Bound, you will be able to summon me by concentrating.”

“Seems like a lot of pain for such a small thing.”

“The connection was simplicity itself. The pain was from the rest of it.”

“The rest of it?”

“The Lords and Ladies deemed that your,” the Glynn actually sniffed at me, “meager abilities would be insufficient to ensure your survival until the completion of your task. They instructed me to augment you. You should be capable of living through an encounter with a servant of the Bound. I would have preferred to empower you to handle the entire task yourself, but those were not my instructions.”

I fought down the urge to take the bait and ignored the insult. It was harder than it sounds. As loathe as I was to get dragged into this mess of someone else’s making, I needed information more than getting mine verbally against the Glynn.

“Speaking of my task, any thoughts on where I should start?”

“The Paths.”

“Lovely. It gets better and better.”

I cracked open the water and downed the whole bottle. It helped a little. I leaned back into my seat. I wondered if I should take over the driving duties and then let it go. I had the feeling that, even if the Glynn ran over a dozen people, somehow it would never land on me. Besides, he had on the only real smile I had seen on his face. I suppose it was the fact that he was wearing a teenager’s face, but it would have made me feel like a jerk to take this away from him. That and I didn’t need to make him my enemy. He could have crushed me as easily as he had crushed Krin.

“Do you like driving?”

“Yes,” said the Glynn. “I like it very much.”

“Isn't it a bit mundane?”

“Perhaps for you.”

I rolled the idea over in my head. I guessed that the Glynn only experienced corporeal form like this once or twice in a millennium and then only to exact some horrific punishment onto a transgressor. Driving was something so stupidly simplistic that it probably bordered on the sublime for him. We drove through the city at random and the Glynn proved to be a capable driver. While he drove, I dozed to try to shake off the aftereffects of my, ahem, augmentation.

“I am summoned,” announced the Glynn.

I hadn't felt anything, which disturbed me a little. That kind of telepathic communication should have been accompanied by some kind energy. The fact that it wasn't meant the Lords and Ladies weren't just operating at a level I couldn't comprehend, they were working in ways that quite possibly fell outside the domain of the rules in which we all expect magic to operate. If that was true for the Lords and Ladies, it could be true for the Bound as well. I added that to the list of things that didn't fill me with warm and fuzzy feelings. The Glynn altered course and, fifteen minutes later, delivered us to my place. It was silly, but I didn't like that the Glynn knew where I lived without asking. No doubt, he and his keepers could find out where anyone lived, but there's a principle to be observed. I'm not sure exactly which principle it is, but I'm very confident it exists.

I'm a low maintenance kind of guy and my house is a small place. What it does have that makes me love it beyond reason is thick walls that keep out most of the ambient noise in the neighborhood. Take it from anyone that has lived in a lousy college apartment: thick walls are

worth their weight in gold. We got out of the car and looked at each other across the hood. He glanced back at the steering wheel for a split second. Maybe it was because he was wearing the face of a teenager or had enjoyed the driving so much, but I softened a little toward the Glynn.

“If I manage not to get myself killed in all of this, you should come back here. We'll take another drive.”

A wary look crossed the Glynn's face and I felt a touch of pity for him. Not a lot of friends for someone like him, I suppose. His casual killing of Krin made more sense to me.

“You speak honestly?”

“Yes. I mean it.”

“I would enjoy that a great deal.”

“You know, I think I would too. That is, if we can skip the electrocution.”

The Glynn looked at me without blinking.

“Humor, again. You are very amusing. I think I like you.”

I started to say something and realized I was about to speak into empty space. That annoyed me, mostly because I expected something more dramatic. When an immensely powerful messenger from even more powerful masters makes an exit, you expect a certain level of show. It doesn't have to move the world, but would a flash of light or a puff of smoke have been too much to ask? I gave the empty space where the Glynn had been a nasty look and then went inside. I headed straight for the kitchen. A gallon of water later, I felt a little better. I wandered into the living room. The light on the answering machine was an angry red eye, blinking at me furiously. Great, I thought, lots of messages. Everyone had been on me for years to get a cell phone, but I didn't care much for them. They always seemed like electronic leashes to me, so I keep resisting. I know, one day, I'll have to suck it up and buy one of the stupid things, but I'm

going to put it off as long as I can. I stared down at the answering machine and wavered. I was tired. The last thing I wanted was to press that button and get sucked into some other kind of problem. The light continued to flash and I gave in, pressing the play button. It cheerfully informed me that I had three messages. The first two were from Father Bradley, which I had expected. The last message I didn't expect.

“Sam, it's Jean. I'm in town. I'm staying at that the little bed and breakfast we used to go to. Come see me, please. It's important.”

Hearing her voice on the machine was like getting sucker punched in the face. At first it just blinds you as your brain rattles in your head. Then it hurts. Then it makes you mad. Jean. Good God, how many mistakes can one life handle? I chastised myself for that. Mistakes were made and we went our separate ways, but she hadn't been one. It still didn't mean I wanted to see her. Seeing her either meant a conversation I wouldn't like or an argument I didn't want. We were like; I drew a blank and groped for the right descriptive. Sex and chocolate offered my overtaxed psyche. It was too close to being a literal truth for my taste. Better and better, I thought. I looked down at the machine and then at the clock. It was too late to do anything useful today and I felt a surge of relief. The sit down with Jean was inevitable, but it had been one of those days and I was happy to put her off until I'd gotten some sleep.

#### **Chapter 4**

It's an immutable truth of my life that I hate the sound of a phone ringing. If I could have gotten by without one, I would have. So when the first thing I heard in the morning was the phone ringing, it just amplified what felt like the mother of all hangovers. I swung at the phone and knocked it off the nightstand. It bounced around on the floor and I could hear a voice coming

up at me from the receiver. I tried to ignore it, but I succumbed to the human imperative to make contact and picked it up.

“Make it good,” I muttered, rolling onto my back and glaring at the ceiling

“Christ, Branch, that's a hell of way to greet a friend.”

Nope, this was one problem too many. I rolled over again, and dropped the receiver onto the cradle. I took a little smug satisfaction in the act. There were five seconds of glorious silence before the phone started ringing again. I swung my legs out of bed, picked up the entire phone and put it back on the nightstand. I sighed a little and picked up the receiver before the machine picked up in the other room.

“Whatever it is, Matt, I'm not interested. I'm already on something here.”

“Just hear me out, Sam. You know I only call when it really matters.”

The pounding in my head receded enough for me to start using my brain. I really didn't need anything else on my plate, but he did only call when it was important. If I couldn't avoid this, maybe I dredge some good from it.

“Alright, Matt,” I said. “Are you still on speaking terms with Carmichael?”

“Sure. Why?”

“You're going to smooth the way for me. Do that and I'll hear you out.”

“No one on the planet can do that. He hates you. You stole his wife.”

“I did not steal his wife, Matt! For God's sake, they'd been divorced for two years.”

“He doesn't see it that way.”

“Look, this is the deal. I'm not asking for him to talk to me, see me or do anything else that would tarnish his stainless steel self-image. I just need access to some ground he controls.”

“You mean,” started Matt.

“Yes, I mean.”

“Shit, man, what are you into?”

“Nothing you'd believe. Now are you going to do it or not?”

“Okay. Okay. I'll do it. I don't know how, but I'll do it.”

“Good. Start talking, I'm hearing you out.”

“You'll have to see this for yourself, Branch.”

“Oh, come on, give me a break here. You're certain we can't do this over the phone.”

“Oh yeah.”

I relented and took down the address where he wanted to meet. It was a shady part of town, not horrible, but not great. It's a gray area, the kind of place where magic thrives and magic problems brew. I probably should have said no to Matt, but Carmichael controlled access to the Paths. I couldn't get in without his permission, at least not without a fight I wasn't sure I could win. I got myself cleaned up and took a ride out to see Matt. I found him waiting in front of an old, rundown apartment building. He was chatting with a woman I recognized. She read palms for people in the park and was homeless about half the time. Her name finally floated up from the dim reaches of my aching head. I walked up to the two of them and shook hands with Matt.

“Hi Matt.”

“Branch.”

“Hi, Emily.”

I offered my hand to Emily. Homeless, dirty, she was still a human being that I had never known to hurt anyone. She smiled and took my hand. She let out a little cry and snatched her hand back as though it had been burned. Matt and I shared a glance.

“Emily,” I asked, “are you alright?”

She gave me a pain-filled look and massaged the hand she had snatched back.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “You couldn't have known.”

She spun on her heel and walked away fast.

“What,” said Matt, “do you suppose that was about?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“I doubt it, but we'll talk about that some other time. Let me show you why you needed to see this for yourself.”

Matt led the way into the building and we climbed several flights of creaking stairs to the top floor. The whole building was a little sad. It had been a nice place, once upon a time. The handrail was solid hardwood and I suspected the steps were as well, if you could see them beneath the ugly, industrial grade carpet some moron has glued down. It was a tribute to indifference and neglect. Matt paused in front of a door and opened it with a key. I used to ask him how he got the kind of access he did; now I just accept it. We've all got our gifts. We stepped into an apartment suffering from the same kind of neglect evident in the rest of the building. The carpeting was of the same color and quality as the carpet on the stairs. I could see some yellowed linoleum in what was probably the kitchen. It was clear, though, that someone had made a conscientious effort to keep the place clean in the not so distant past. The carpet was vacuumed and the linoleum had the tell-tale sheen that gives away a mopping.

“You a real estate broker now, Matt?”

“In there,” he said, pointing through an open doorway.

I fervently hoped that there wasn't a body in there. Bodies weren't Matt's style, but he was the go-to-guy for the local authorities concerning the occult and otherwise unexplainable. I was his go-to-guy for the stuff he couldn't explain. I consider it a dubious honor. Who wants to be

considered an expert on the stuff so bizarre and horrible that no one else has the expertise or stomach for it? I stepped into the other room and came up short.

“Well,” I said to no one, “that’s new.”

## Chapter 5

I’ve seen some weird stuff over the years, but I had never seen a ritualistic arrangement like the one in that room. The fact that I didn’t recognize the arrangement meant very little in itself. That’s not why Matt called me in to see the room. Magic users have preferences and come in all flavors. Acknowledging power can be a difficult process and attributing the results to prayer, rather than the ends of your own will, is a popular method of dealing with power. Others don’t mind acknowledging their own power, but prefer ritual magic, like the Wiccans. Every method has its advantages and disadvantages. Prayer and ritual shield you in some ways, act like buffers between you and the immanent. Being a pragmatist, I preferred a direct approach. I skip the middle man and go for direct energetic manipulation. It’s a trade-off. I gain speed but lose out on the protections offered by ritual and prayer. The other advantage to my approach and the reason Matt called me is that, in a situation like this, I could get a sense of what a ritual was all about. Just like a flash of bright light leaves an afterimage on the eye, working with energy leaves an afterimage, an imprint, on the world. The stronger the energy used in a ritual, the stronger the imprint it leaves behind. If you know how to look, you can see it. I know how to look.

Matt hovered momentarily before he asked, “What do you think?”

“I’ll let you know in a minute.”

I moved deeper into the room to get a closer look.

“I won’t be disturbing evidence will I?”

“No, the cops and forensic people have come and gone already,” murmured Matt, his gaze fixed on the unpleasant spectacle before us.

I focused my attention back onto the room. Something or someone had died in the room, based on the amount of blood. Then there was the smell, sickly sweet and stomach turning. It's one of those God awful smells that comes at you when you aren't expecting it, like during a dream or at a barbeque. I fear sometimes that it will be the last thing I smell in life. The idea keeps me up at night.

The hallmarks of ritual sacrifice were all in place. There were black candles scattered across the room, wine and some arcane symbols, but all similarity ended there. In ritual sacrifice you expect certain things, like inverted pentagrams, candles at the points, and upside down crosses. This room was all wrong, which was saying something given that the frame of reference was a satanic ritual. Everything was a jumble. Pagan runes and indecipherable text were scattered throughout. There wasn't an altar or ritual tools; though it was possible they were taken when the killers left. I thought about it: possible, but not likely.

“This is wrong,” I said to Matt.

“I know that. There's nothing right about ritual sacrifice. Christ.”

“No, I mean everything here is wrong.”

I looked over at Matt and could see he was right at the tipping point between academic detachment and fear. Given that I was a little afraid, it seemed a healthy response on his part.

“Look, Matt, you knew something was off or I wouldn't be here. Spill.”

“There was no body.”

“So, they took it with them.”

“They didn't. The blood, it's all confined to this room. You could maybe get a body out

without dripping too much, but no way you could get one out with zero evidence. Your turn.”

“On the surface, this looks like a ritual killing, but what ritual? What school of thought? This is pure chaos. There isn't a unifying principle here. You know as well as I do that ritual magic requires some governing architecture to protect the practitioner. Circles, pentagrams, holy water, the structures that control and direct the flow of energy. There's nothing like that here. This is either a cover up or somebody is insanely stupid.”

“Do you read anything from the room? You know, the other stuff?”

“Are you high?”

“What?”

“You want me to open myself up to that!” I gestured to the insanity. “If, for argument's sake, this falls into the category of insanely stupid, there could be anything lurking around in there. I'm not doing any kind of open reading until I've got a better idea of what happened here.”

“What should I tell the cops?”

“The truth, which is that as far as either of us know, there is no direct occult connection here. Of course, you understand that when I say us, I mean you.”

“Of course”

“This is a hodge-podge. If I had to guess, I'd say it's a red herring. Someone is just trying to divert attention with occult trappings.”

“And if it isn't?”

I looked back into the room, trying to draw some meaning from it.

“Have them to keep it sealed off. Tell them that you need to spend more time researching or studying it.”

“You didn't answer my question.”

“If it isn't, there's nothing for them to do. Nothing they can do.”

Despite what I had said to Matt, I wanted to read that room. It was a feeling that bordered on compulsion. I didn't trust it. I was still way off from what the Glynn had done to me the night before. I was jittery, off-center, and that is never the time to act on impulse. I didn't dare touch power until I had a better idea of what would happen when I did. Whatever had happened in that room, I'd done everything I could for the moment. Back to the bigger issue in my day.

“Did you talk to Carmichael?”

“Yes,” said Matt. “I had to listen to a ten minute rant about what a prick you are, but he agreed. In fact, what he said was, 'Tell that jackass he can have what he wants.' He really hates you.”

“I know he does.”

I had known Carmichael would say yes. There is a code of conduct. It's informal, as such things go, but none of us violate it lightly. Carmichael controlled access, but he didn't control the Paths themselves. It was common ground that any of us could walk, although could is the operative term there. It's not that the Paths are dangerous, precisely, but the place operates on its own set of rules. It takes a certain flexibility of mind to navigate there and, even then, it strains the brain. Cling too tightly to how things behave in the regular world and it can actually damage the psyche to spend much time in the Paths. I'd spent time there years ago and I had enough flexibility of mind to do it, but I didn't like it. I absolutely did not relish the thought of going back. It's where the Glynn had pointed me, though, and I didn't see another place to start.

It did give me a tiny moment of amusement to imagine Carmichael gnashing his teeth about it. To deny me access would have drawn down a degree and magnitude of attention that he didn't want. I'll never make the front pages, but my name carries some weight in certain circles.

Carmichael screwing up my personal life was one thing, but personal issues had no bearing on a request like mine. I needed access for a magical reason and a denial would have to be for a magical reason. It was a reason he couldn't provide. He may have hated me, but he knows I'm all business when it comes to matters of power. Just as importantly, so does everyone else. By using Matt as an intermediary, I had made it clear that this wasn't personal. The niceties had been observed. I turned to Matt.

“Thanks, I owe you one.”

He waved it off and said, “Just let me know if you pull anything from this mess. Someone died and I'd like to be able to point the police toward a body. Empty coffins don't give families much closure.”

“I'll let you know if I find anything.”

I left Matt inside the apartment to continue his attempt to glean some insight from the room. I felt better as soon as I hit the hallway. The compulsion to read the room evaporated, like so much fog on a sunny morning. The feeling left so abruptly, I questioned whether it really existed. I shook my head a little and wished I could just go home. I needed some time by myself without distractions. Things were piling up too quickly and I was off my game. I pushed out the front door of the apartment building and spotted a pay phone nearby. I prematurely mourned their eventual passing. It was a sign of the times and the nature of change that they were a dying breed, but I like them. I fed a couple quarters into the phone and started to dial in the number to the bed and breakfast where Jean had a room. My finger hovered over the last button for so long that the machine dumped my quarters into the little change slot. I hung up the phone, collected my quarters and stuffed them back into my pocket. I'd like to say that something noble motivated the action, but it was simple anger. I had told her, warned her, not to come to me again for help.

I'd get back to her when I was good and ready, if that day ever came. I walked over to my car with a healthy sense of self-righteousness. Someone had died. The freaking Lords and Ladies had tapped me to track down, potentially, one of the most dangerous things in the whole of creation. The Glynn had played havoc with my nervous system. I had more important things to deal with than Jean.

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