

So it begins . . .

October 27, 2004

the garden

After one hundred years, he found himself back in the same spot, as anxious as the eleven-year-old who stood there a century before.

*You ain't ever got enough of it – not now, not ever.*

*You don't ever want it on your hands, and it slips through the cracks when you need it the most.*

Allen contemplated that bit of wisdom as he watched the downpour of pure white sand. The six-foot-tall wrought iron hourglass reflected his face back to him as the last grains dropped into the lower vessel. He brushed at his sparse blond hair. His hairline had long ago lost its acquaintance with his forehead, and the fine lines in his brow threatened to merge into one large wrinkle. That wrinkle deepened as he squinted into the glass.

*I've waited a long time for this.*

The gigantic timepiece – the focal point of the magnificent garden – stood in the middle of the cobblestone court, watched over by the oldest oak tree in the world. Allen watched the warping of his image as the glass began its turn. Catching a glimpse of his once-blue eyes, he donned his heavy-framed spectacles. The quarter-inch lenses effectively disguised his clouded orbs. He adjusted the glasses on his narrow face as sharp clicking heels entered the courtyard behind him.

One quick glance skyward . . .

“It's time,” she whispered over his shoulder.

He didn't turn to look at her.

“I know.” Allen took a deep breath. “A question first, Bienn. How many people did you kill today?”

A momentary pause, a single breath in time –

A rustle overhead signaled the escape of a lone oak leaf on a passing breeze.

Somewhere in the grass, a small creature made its way home for the night.

“Four.”

Just a number.

Just a fact.

No remorse, no second thoughts.

“I see.” Alan turned left and headed for the French doors just off the garden.

“Will you tell him?”

“Why?” Again, he kept his back to her. “Need another corpse for your collection?”

“No, it’s just . . . he’s going to want it more than ever now. If you tell him . . . .”

Allen didn’t answer. Opening the doors, he left the garden and walked into . . .

*Purgatory.*

It was the ticking . . . and the smell; not necessarily in that order, that made him have to stop and gather himself whenever he entered here. Once a library, the room’s handsome walnut bookshelves still covered three of the four walls, but the shelves now held ancient artifacts and strange things in vials and jars. The magnificent paintings that once graced the gallery stood forlornly in the corner on the floor, filthy with dust, their wall space covered with clocks, clocks, and more clocks. Such a collection of timepieces – large, small, ancient, new, analog, digital, battery-powered, sun-powered, water-powered – they covered walls, shelves, tables – clicking and ticking, the sound of time rushing away to the past.

*And the smell . . .*

Alan moved through the gloom, guided by the single candle burning in the silver candelabrum on the corner desk. Most people would have found the room too dark to traverse, but he had no problem seeing –

The antique Persian carpet beneath his feet needed cleaning.

Or hearing –

Rasping whispers of air moved in and out of congested passages. A strangled cough came from the big wingback chair, the only one in the room.

Or smelling –

“Well?”

Alan tried not to breath. “The eclipse begins in twelve hours.”

“Do we have the boy?”

“No, we couldn’t reach him.”

Silence – a cold, dead silence you would expect from inside your coffin.

Deprived lungs burned, air rushed in.

Sound – noises you would expect to hear in that confined space –

The dull bumping of your heart against your ribs –

The sound of rushing blood –

“I don’t care how it’s done.” The words wheezed out into the darkness. “The choice is yours, but we have ninety days. We need the boy or the book. If you know where the book is, get it. If you plan to get the boy, do it now. If you want to continue to live . . .”

The breathing from the chair returned to its labored rhythm, indicating his dismissal. Allen left the room, closing the French doors quietly but firmly behind him. The garden air smelled delicious after the stench of that room. He went out to the ancient oak tree and pressed his back its crusty bark. For a long moment he remained still.

*Hell!*

He snatched off his glasses and scrubbed them harshly with his handkerchief as if trying to remove a stain – or the memory of what he'd seen.

A whisper from the darkness, "I see you're still alive."

"For now. You'll have to wait at least three months to get a shot at me."

She rose gracefully from her perch on the delicate bistro table and strolled away into the darkness.

"I can wait."