

Prologue

Family, Friends Mourn As Boy Killed On Eve of Graduation

By Ingrid Collins

The University of Texas community was rocked by tragedy over the weekend when Samuel Pollard, age twenty-four, died in his apartment the night after finishing his last round of final exams. Authorities are reporting the cause of death as a drug overdose --

CRUNCH!

Sam Pollard took no notice of the crumpled up newspaper report of his death even as he stepped on it. He continued down the sidewalk that led to the Barton Creek Mall, pulling the hood of his bright orange sweatshirt a little further over his head. There was probably no need to hide his face, Sam knew -- he'd never been famous, and the odds that he'd be recognized while shopping were relatively low. Still, Sam prided himself on being informed, on keeping up with the news, and so he knew what had happened to others like him. Better safe than sorry.

Sam looked around at the others approaching the mall, a thrill of paranoia running through him. None of the others were wearing sweatshirts. Of course they weren't -- the summer heat still ruled Texas with an iron fist, which meant that it was ninety degrees outside on a relatively *cool* day. Everyone else was in short sleeves or tank tops. *Crap. Maybe I should have gone with sunglasses or something...*

He shuffled through the glass doors into the mall, passing a nail care store to his left and an arcade on his right. The latter was more to his taste -- he wanted distraction, after all, something to take his mind off of what had happened. But his eyes lit immediately on the newest *Resident Evil* game, which stood at the entrance to the arcade, and he decided to keep walking. Somehow, shooting zombies just didn't appeal to him right now.

Down the corridor to the right was a man giving a speech on a raised platform. *Decent size crowd.*

"... what to *call* them," the man screamed into his megaphone, his words reverberating around the mall. "Organizations like ABLE claim it's important to refer to our supernatural neighbors as 'arcanes.' They say that terms like 'supernatural' or 'paranormal' are demeaning. But we know the truth, don't we?"

"*Yeah!*" roared the crowd, in unison.

Ouch. Sam winced.

"We in the Salvation Alliance know that such well-intentioned political correctness is dangerous, don't we?"

"*Yeah!*"

Sam held back a shudder.

"We know that tolerance is the first step toward acceptance, even advocacy of unnatural

lifestyles, don't we?"

"Yeah!"

"Right. Not going *that* way." Sam walked on. He was suddenly cloyingly certain that each patron he passed was staring at him, taking careful notice of his sluggish movements or perhaps seeing his face underneath the hood. Why had he ever thought a hood would hide his features to begin with? Even though he was overdressed, he felt increasingly naked. He was constantly sure that discovery was only a moment away

Finally, he found what he was looking for -- the miniatures store. He especially loved the small model robots, loved buying them and spending hours absorbed in the details of painting them. It was a cathartic process, and every completed robot gave him a fresh sense of accomplishment. The discipline and attention to detail required to do it well had proved useful in law school, too.

But as he was about to go in, he noticed something in his peripheral vision -- someone was watching him. Someone was watching him very intently, in fact. A young man, surely no older than Sam himself, wearing a white t-shirt and faded jeans. Sam cautiously moved to enter the store, and the other young man moved to block the doorway. Kind of a ridiculous move, given that the entrance was much wider than the young man was.

"Excuse me," Sam said, quietly and politely.

"No."

Fuck. I was afraid of this.

"I'm just here to shop. I don't want any trouble."

"Neither do we." The young man made a gesture with his arm that encompassed the entire population of the mall. "Which is why I think you should leave."

"I haven't done anything wrong."

"You don't have to," the young man drawled. "See, these fine people have plenty to worry about already -- keeping their jobs and making sure their kids don't get sick and all. You being here means they have to worry about getting bitten, too -- and we just don't need that, you know?"

"I'm not gonna bite anyone," Sam subtly tried to move around his unwanted conversation partner and into the store.

But the man moved with him, blocking his path. "It doesn't work that way, *mutant*. The Hunger makes you crazy -- out of control. You think we're *stupid*?" He shoved Sam backward so hard that Sam stumbled, then toppled into the fountain.

A sharp pain shot through his back as it impacted against the fountain's stone base. *So now my clothes are obvious and soaked*. He pushed himself upright again, muttering, "Well, actually "

It was then that he realized that the noise of him falling into the fountain had attracted attention, and that passing shoppers were stopping and turning to look. He could hear frenzied whispers from every direction as the passersby consulted fearfully with each other.

"Is he really --"

"I hear just standing too close can infect you --"

"Is there a gun store in this mall?"

Sam got the hint. His outing to the mall was over. Turning away from the store and the young man who had accosted him, he started toward the exit, doing his best to quicken his pace and cursing the fact that he was physically unable to run. For now, the bystanders in the mall seemed afraid to pursue. He could only hope that continued ... and that no one called mall security

Those guys usually had guns.

Chapter 1

"Well, you don't look much like a lawyer," said the man who opened the door for Hunter, his deep voice booming as his brown eyes locked on Hunter's own.

Hunter wasn't sure what to make of the comment, so he decided to take it in stride. His lips turned upward in a smile and he answered pleasantly, "I'm sorry to hear that, sir, but I *am* a lawyer." He reached a hand into his pants pocket and pulled out his wallet, and from the wallet he withdrew one of his business cards, handing it to the other man. The other man took the card, his eyes narrowing as he scrutinized the card. On its front was printed:

Hunter Gamble
Associate Attorney
McCLAIN & GAMBLE, P.C.
Arcane Defense Law Practice

"We Get Results -- Like Magic!"

The firm's address and phone number were on the back of the card. After a minute spent silently studying the information, the stranger looked back up at Hunter, still seeming unconvinced. "You must be Mr. Orr," Hunter said.

"Why are you dressed like that?" Confused disbelief was written on Mr. Orr's features.

"Excuse me, Mr. Orr?" he asked politely.

"I said, why are you dressed like that?" As he spoke, Mr. Orr's hard brown eyes looked skeptically at Hunter's grey t-shirt covered by a short-sleeved, unbuttoned button-down shirt.

Hunter raised an eyebrow at Mr. Orr. "How should I be dressed, sir?"

"I dunno," Orr shrugged. "I thought all you lawyers wore suits and had sticks up your asses."

It was not lost on Hunter that Mr. Orr was currently wearing a suit, or that his posture, expression, and general demeanor all strongly suggested that he had a stick in a similar location.

But he didn't say that -- after all, Mr. Orr would hopefully soon be a client, and it was best not to offend the person who was paying your bills.

Well, to the extent that this job *ever* paid Hunter's bills.

"Well, there are all kinds of lawyers, Mr. Orr," Hunter flashed the other man another easy smile, "but enough about me. I understand you're in need of my services."

"Yes. Come in." Mr. Orr stood aside and gestured for him to enter the house. Inside, Hunter found a perfectly tidy living room, with a couch behind a coffee table on which lay a small stack of magazines and newspapers. A television was against one wall, and a plaque above the fireplace read, "*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.*"

Hunter took all of this in with a glance before returning his attention to Mr. Orr. "So, tell me about the nature of your problem," Hunter started, before realizing that there was a more logical first question. "Actually, first, if you don't mind my asking, what sort of arcane are you?"

Mr. Orr's head snapped back to Hunter so fast that it should have given the man whiplash. "What'd you say??" he asked, sounding offended and angry.

"I asked you what sort of arcane you are, sir," Hunter repeated. "Mage, vampire, werewolf? You don't strike me as a zombie, but I suppose anything's possi --"

"Now, *listen*," the other man bellowed, wagging a finger in Hunter's face and regarding him with cold fury, "don't you *ever* imply I'm one of those goddamn paranormal freaks ever again, you hear me? I'm a good, law-abiding man, I'm not some supernatural!"

"I'm sorry, sir, no offense intended," Hunter raised his hands in a gesture of surrender to placate the man, "but you understand I'm an arcane defense lawyer, right? So if you're not an arcane, then I probably can't --"

"Melvin?" came a female voice from out of sight as an athletic-looking blond woman appeared from around the corner. "Are you talking to the law -- who are you?" she asked, stopping in her tracks as her eyes fell on Hunter.

Hunter walked forward and extended his hand. "I'm Hunter Gamble, I'm an attorney. You must be Annabelle, Melvin's wife."

"That's right," Annabelle answered in a no-nonsense tone, taking his hand for a brief moment and shaking it. "Why are you dressed like that?"

Oy. "I generally wear civvies when I'm not going to court."

"If you wanna get clients, Mr. Gamble, you should show up to meetings looking respectable," Annabelle Orr told him, her tone that of a mother lecturing a child.

"Yeah, well, about that, as I was just explaining to your husband, I think there may have been a misunderstanding when we spoke on the phone. You see, my firm's practice is limited to arcane defense, and since your husband says he's not an arcane --"

"My husband's not the one with the legal problem."

"Oh!" Hunter exclaimed, confusion evaporating in a heartbeat. "Oh, of course, I should have realized. Who is it, then, you?"

"Our daughter, Sabrina," Annabelle told him. "Melvin, get Sabrina down here! We kept

her home from school today just to talk to you."

"You didn't have to do that, Mrs. Orr, I could have come after school or --"

"*Sabrina!*" Melvin Orr bellowed. "*Sabrina, get down here!*"

Hunter's eyes went to the stairs. For a full minute, nothing happened. And then, a young woman trudged down the stairs, blond hair tied back in a braid. She looked roughly like a shorter, younger version of Annabelle Orr, and was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. Her eyes were fixed on a book she held in front of her -- a copy of *Macbeth*. She seemed so unaware of her surroundings that Hunter was surprised she made it down the stairs without falling.

"Studying for English class?" Hunter asked amicably.

Sabrina looked up at him. "Memorizing lines," she told him, as if this were the most obvious thing in the world. "Dress rehearsal's in three weeks."

"Oh," he grinned. "School play?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she snorted, waving a hand dismissively at the suggestion. "I try very hard to stay *out* of the school plays. It's just too embarrassing." With that, she returned her eyes to the script.

"Nervous that everyone else will be better than you?" Hunter asked. She was a teenage girl, after all -- status was everything at that age.

Sabrina gave him a look that suggested she thought he was surely stupid. "*Ashamed* that everyone else is always *worse* than me," she corrected him. "No no, I do community theater. There are *still* a lot of embarrassing moments, but Mom and Dad say I'm not allowed to join a professional company until I finish school." From her expression, she found this restriction quite silly, but gave a resigned shrug and went back to her script.

This time, it was her father who interrupted her. "Sabrina, this is Hunter Gamble. He's the lawyer we're thinking about having defend you in your case."

"Oh. Hello," she walked forward and shook Hunter's hand.

"Pleasure to meet you."

"Yeah," Sabrina answered. Then one of her eyebrows lifted inquisitively. "So why are you dressed like that?"

"Oh for --" Hunter let a bit of frustration show through his normally calm demeanor before forcing himself to remain pleasant. "I'm not as comfortable in a suit. I feel more like myself this way," he answered diplomatically, and truthfully.

The suit's like my Superman costume, Hunter thought. I wear it to save the world, then change back into my normal clothes.

"You don't feel like yourself in a suit?" Sabrina seemed to find this a strange concept. Hunter shook his head. "It's too formal. Too stuffy."

"You don't like being formal and stuffy?" Sabrina asked.

"Not especially, no."

"I think you picked the wrong profession."

Gotta love this family, Hunter thought. "Well, you may not like my clothes, but I think

you'll like my results. Your parents tell me you're having a legal problem."

"Some *moron* at Sabrina's school is *slandering* my daughter," Melvin Orr roared.

"Melvin, calm down!" Annabelle urged him, putting a gentling hand on his arm. "Let Sabrina tell him."

"I'm just saying, dear, I think we ought to *sue* the little rat bastard for defamation!"

"*Melvin!*" Mrs. Orr looked aghast.

Hunter held up a hand to forestall further ranting from Mr. Orr. "I appreciate your anger, sir, and I'm sure there's a very good reason for it, but your wife has the right idea. I'd like Sabrina to tell me about what happened, if you wouldn't mind."

Mr. Orr fell silent, though his face made plain that he didn't like being shut down in that way. Hunter, not caring in the slightest what Mr. Orr did or did not like, turned back to Sabrina, regarding her pleasantly. "So, what happened?"

"Paul the Pimple Face thinks I attacked him," Sabrina explained.

Hunter couldn't help laughing slightly. "Paul the Pimple Face?"

"Paul Storton," Sabrina told him. "Resident chess grandmaster and professional pain in the -- err," she stopped herself as she realized her father was still in the room. "Anyway, we call him Pimple Face because of his acne problems."

"All right," Hunter nodded, wondering if he had been like this as a teenager. "Why does he think you attacked him?"

"He walked into the auditorium while I was rehearsing my lines," Sabrina told him.

"Apparently being a chess master doesn't take many brains, because he decided I was some sort of supernatural and that I *must* be casting a spell on him. He ran away in terror and the next thing I knew, the police were pulling up in front of the school!"

"Okay, so your classmate decided you were an arcane --"

"A *supernatural*," Sabrina insisted.

"Your classmate decided you were an *arcane*," Hunter emphasized. "What were you charged with?"

"Aggravated assault. Apparently the prosecutor thinks that since I'm *obviously* a witch," Sabrina rolled her eyes to show what she thought of *that* notion, "the spell --"

"The spell itself constitutes a deadly weapon sufficient to justify making it a felony charge instead of a misdemeanor," Hunter finished for her.

"Yeah," Sabrina answered, looking as if she hadn't understood a thing he'd just said.

"That."

Hunter nodded. "All right. Are you a witch?"

"*What?*" Sabrina asked angrily, eyes flaring.

"Sabrina, let me explain something -- as your lawyer, it doesn't make the slightest difference to me whether you're innocent or guilty. Even if you *were* casting a spell on him, if you want to plead not guilty, I'll go to court and tell the jury you're innocent. But it helps me to have the fullest picture of what happened that day that I can."

Sabrina still looked deeply offended. "*I'm not a witch!*" she said, sounding aghast at the suggestion. "I'm not some supernatural freak!"

"Okay, so you're not an arcane," Hunter corrected her again.

"*Supernatural.*"

"*Arcane.*"

"Oh, good *grief!*" Sabrina erupted, raising her arms in frustration, her green eyes flashing at him. "They're *supernaturals*, okay? Mages and zombies and the rest have no place in the animal kingdom! Hell, most of them don't even reproduce in the normal way!"

"Just because we don't *know* something is a part of nature, doesn't mean it isn't. Science has been wrong before, you know," he shot back, sounding increasingly peevish.

"Nature has produced serial killers and child molesters, too," Sabrina countered. "Doesn't mean the rest of us should welcome them."

Hunter was ready to explode on her for that, but Mr. Orr spoke first. "*Mr. Gamble,*" he cut in, tone full of finality, "our daughter is a perfectly normal young woman, and I'll thank you not to suggest otherwise again. I'll *also* thank you to tell us if you can help her."

Hunter sighed, forcing himself to be calm. Then he turned to Mr. Orr. "I think I can, but I have a few more questions first, if that's all right."

Slowly, Mr. Orr nodded. "Good," Hunter said, and returned his attention to Sabrina. "So, Sabrina, this was *Macbeth* you were rehearsing for?"

"Yes."

"And what role do you play?"

"I'm one of the Three Witches," Sabrina told him matter-of-factly. Hunter face-palmed as she continued, "When Pimple Face walked in, I was rehearsing their incantation. You know, '*Double, double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble,*'" she recited, her voice assuming theatrical tones.

"So you're rehearsing to play a witch and you get accused of being a witch," Hunter summarized.

"That's the idea, yes," Sabrina confirmed.

"Can you help her?" Mr. Orr asked.

Hunter grinned tightly. He found the Orrs incredibly annoying, and he doubted that that would ever change, but if he and Kirsten did their jobs right, this case should be a slam dunk.

"Yes. I think I can."

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Several months later, the bailiff called the courtroom to order as Hunter sat there in his suit, a necktie knotted around his neck. Sabrina was next to him. "This court is now in session!" he called out. "All rise for His Honor, Judge Martin Treeworth."

"Where are we?" he asked, looking alertly at the bailiff.

“Docket number one-zero-dash-zero-zero-five-two-seven, People of the State of Texas vs. Sabrina Orr,” the bailiff answered readily. The judge looked over to the prosecutor’s table, where a young woman sat in a grey pantsuit, brown hair pulled back in a hair clip, an eager expression on her face. She rose as Judge Treeworth regarded her.

“Melissa Norton for the People, Your Honor,” she told him crisply.

“Hunter Gamble for Ms. Orr,” he answered, forcing himself to stand crisply at attention. The formality had always been the part of the job Hunter hated most – what did it have to do with helping people?

“And why are we here, counselors?” Treeworth asked.

“Your Honor, we’re here because I’ve filed a motion to dismiss. The charges against Ms. Orr are not only baseless, they’re unconstitutional, in clear violation of my client’s First Amendment right to Free Expression.”

“She was casting a spell, Your Honor, which is itself an offensive action that is clearly beyond the protections of the First Amendment,” Norton returned without hesitation.

“She was rehearsing for a production of *Macbeth*, Your Honor,” Hunter answered, looking exasperated. “Ms. Orr was cast as one of the Three Witches. The director of the play can confirm it *and* I would point out that the State has offered no evidence to the contrary.”

"That's because it's *impossible* for us to do so, Your Honor, as Mr. Gamble is well aware. Verbal spells are identical to normal speech until completion," Norton countered. "You can't hold us to an impossible burden of proof."

"The State's burden of proof isn't my client's problem, Your Honor," Hunter countered briskly.

"The law is clear. *Brandenburg v. Ohio*," Hunter rattled off, making a mental note to himself to thank Kirsten for finding the case for him. “The state can only punish speech that incites imminent lawless action. That requires both an incitement to lawless action and some indication that the lawless action will actually occur, and neither of those requirements are met here. There’s no reason to put the court, a jury, or my client through a lengthy trial just because some fifteen year old boy freaked out and decided Sabrina was a teenage witch.”

“Mr. Gamble *has* a point, Ms. Norton,” Judge Treeworth pointed out, flipping through some papers on his desk. “According to his motion, the words Ms. Orr was overheard saying were ‘eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog.’ That’s hardly an incitement to violence, and certainly doesn’t show any indication that violence was about to occur.”

To her credit, Norton was ready for that answer. “Your Honor, ever since The Unveiling, the line between speech and action has become blurred. You and I both know that mages and other arcane often need to do nothing but finish their incantations to harm their victims. *Brandenburg* was decided in a time when a person needed to raise a fist or a weapon to do another person harm. That just isn’t the case anymore.”

“So you’re saying that the decision needs to be revisited?” Treeworth asked.

“Yes, Your Honor,” Norton nodded.

Treeworth exhaled deeply and leaned back in his chair. He steeped his fingers in front of

him and was lost in thought for a moment. Then he leaned forward and spoke, slowly and deliberately. “I certainly understand that many parts of the law were rendered obsolete by the Unveiling,” he began, “including our old notions of what can constitute an assault. And I understand that sometime, probably in the very near future, the law will need to catch up to the reality. Having said that ... I’m bound by the dictates of the Supreme Court, and they’re quite clear. This case provides neither an incitement to lawless action nor any evidence that such action was about to occur. Moreover –“

“Your Honor,” Norton started to object, but Treeworth asserted himself.

“*Moreover*, neither the Congress of the United States nor the legislature of this state has seen fit to try to change the definition of ‘assault’ by statute, despite considerable pressure from groups like the Salvation Alliance. In the absence of such Congressional action ... I’m afraid my hands are tied. I’m sorry, Ms. Norton, but I will *not* be the first judge to criminalize theater rehearsal.”

Hunter cheered inwardly, carefully keeping his outward reaction to a minimum, then turned to Sabrina. This was usually the part where the client thanked him, blessed him, hugged him, sometimes even wept for joy at having beaten the system. But Sabrina did not. She simply nodded and said, “I guess I’ll see you around,” before turning to walk out of the courtroom.

Hunter was shocked. “No ‘thank you’?”

Orr shrugged. “I was innocent. You proved it. Good job, but it’s not like there was much to fight about.”

With that, she turned and headed toward her parents, who were separating themselves from the flock of people in the audience moving toward the courtroom exit. By turns, they embraced her and kissed the crown of her head, their faces radiating relief. Grinning, Sabrina's father waved to Hunter. Then, without saying another word to him, the three of them turned and left.

Hunter sighed. “Being a hero is so overrated,” he muttered, watching Sabrina’s retreating back.

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