

Excerpt from THE OLD POWER RETURNS by
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Chapter 1

Southern New England,
in the early 1980s

The last time that Meg saw her, Alicia Anderson had been injured in a mysterious explosion. And bitten by a vampire.

Trying to act nonchalant, Meg MacMillan clasped a notebook in her arm and walked briskly into a nearby conference room. Once inside, she arranged her notebook and pen on the table, as if ready to take notes at a meeting, and then confidently dialed a number from memory.

She had taken a seat facing the door so that she could look out its small window and know if anyone was coming. She adopted a bored, slightly tired expression as she waited for the person at the other end to pick up, so that if anyone *did* look in, they'd assume she was on a business call.

Privacy was important. Such was the life of a witch in the modern world. Meg, whose witch name was Matricaria, kept that part of her life private. None of her co-workers knew. She preferred it that way.

At the other end, Janith, the coven co-leader and Meg's friend and confidante, picked up the phone and listened as Meg softly and swiftly told her about the young woman she had just seen in the hallway.

"Are you sure it's her?" Janith asked.

"I used to work with her, remember? I saw her every day." Meg twisted and stretched the coiled telephone cord as she spoke, then craned her neck slightly to look through the glass panel of the door, checking for movement.

"But it's been three years."

“Yes, I know, but I’m sure it’s her. It’s not just her looks, but her mannerisms, and the haunted atmosphere around her— ”

“You mean her aura?”

Meg stopped playing with the telephone cord as she tried to visualize what the differences were. “Yes, I guess her aura. She probably looked completely normal to everyone else. But I felt an immense sadness around her, a hollowness.” She thought back to the explosion, the smoke, the acrid smell of something foul burning, the two tiny marks on Alicia’s neck that she had seen as the unconscious woman was taken away on a stretcher.

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I looked up her name in the company phone directory. No Alicia Anderson listed, but it takes a while sometimes for new names to be added. I could always call the operator and ask, but I think I’ll just wait until the new directory comes out next week and look again.”

“What if her name’s not Anderson anymore? What if she’s married?”

“Many people keep their maiden names now. You did. Alicia would have. I remember her talking about names when someone at work got married, about how she’d definitely keep her maiden name. She was very adamant. If the woman I saw is Alicia, I’d say there’s a good chance she’s Alicia *Anderson*. If not, how many Alicias can there be around here? Especially Alicias with long, straight hair, and that haunted look?”

“Okay, but proceed carefully. She was in shock for a while after the incident. It may have rattled her permanently. Seeing you might flip her out.”

“I agree. That’s why I didn’t just walk up to her and ask. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

Meg hung up the phone and rose from the conference room chair. *Good luck, indeed. It might take more than luck to pull this off tactfully.*



On the way back to her desk, Meg recalled the last time that she had seen Alicia. Three years. Had that much time really passed? Yes, indeed it had, and now that she thought about all that had happened since, she was surprised it hadn’t been longer. Three years ago Meg was a journeyman programmer starting a new job at Theoretic, a small research company. She was also training to be a witch.

No, not a green, warty-faced Hallowe’en impossibility, but a goddess-loving, nature-worshipping wielder of magic. Although she felt in tune with

the worship of the old pagan gods from her first steps on the path, she hadn't initially believed in magic.

Or vampires.

How things changed. Oh, how things changed...

First, there were the dreams of an unrevealed danger. Then there was the tarot card reading with a too-real vision of blood pooling on the cards. By the time she and her covenmates figured out what was going on, her co-worker, Alicia, lay unconscious, having used a laser in one of the research labs to do battle with a vampire who had just possibly killed one of the security guards.

That was the last that Meg saw of the guard who was with Alicia. After he recovered from injuries, the direct cause still uncertain, he was transferred to another facility. It appeared he had been hurled across the room, but it wasn't clear how. The safety report indicated that he was probably thrown bodily by the explosion, but rumor had it that the safety investigators weren't really sure.

Rumor also had it that his new job was one with less responsibility, much less responsibility. Despite the fact that there was never a public announcement, the grapevine said that management held him partially at fault for the unexplained explosion. And then there was the question of Alicia. What was she doing accompanying him on his rounds?

Alicia's story was that they were walking together because she was on her way back to the computer room and he happened to be going that way, too. His story was that he couldn't remember. The doctors seemed to back him on that. Amnesia, due to trauma.

Although Alicia returned to work almost immediately, Meg never was able to ask her what happened. After the "incident" Alicia appeared so haunted and fragile that Meg hadn't dared ask. Her coven leaders agreed it probably wasn't a good idea. "When she's ready to talk, she will," Janith had said. Rob, the other coven leader and now Janith's husband, agreed. "And if she's not ready, and you try to force her to relive the experience, you can do more harm than good."

Six months later, Meg was offered a spectacular job at a computer company. On her last day at Theoretic, she said goodbye to Alicia and gave her her phone number, with a casual, "Let's keep in touch, okay?" But Alicia never did.

And now here she was at the computer company where Meg now worked. What was it that Rob and Janith always said about fate? "If you're meant to deal with something, you will. And it will chase you until you do."

Apparently Meg was meant to deal with the mystery...

And Alicia was meant to make sure of that.



Alicia's Diary

January 25, 1980

I saw a woman at work today who looked a lot like Meg. I wanted to go over and say hi to her, but what would I say? "Hi, remember me? I was involved in that mysterious explosion at Theoretic."

But I've got to know what really happened and why... not just that day, but in the months leading up to it. Was Wesley really a vampire, or did I imagine it all? Am I still imagining it?

Sometimes there are just floods of feeling, or shadowy dreams like grainy black-and-white silent movies. Sometimes there's just a phrase on my lips in the night, which fades before I can speak it.

But it's real. Very real. And I need to find out what it was and what it all means.

And if it will happen again.

Alicia capped her ballpoint pen and closed the diary, wondering if writing in it was even worth it. What she had written was sheer pabulum, a worthless diatribe. But at least she was writing *something*.

The therapist said it would be helpful, but Alicia wasn't sure she believed that. How could writing it out help, especially when it seemed that lately she was just writing drivel? Melodramatic drivel.

"Just write," the therapist said, and so Alicia wrote. She wrote words that were alien to her. Dreamy, poetic words with no real meaning, no real substance. It was so unlike her. Alicia was pragmatic, logical, strong. Alicia had worked her way up from nothing, and had survived—survived what?

What? *What* had she survived? Alicia lit a cigarette, a nasty habit she had picked up since the incident, and inhaled deeply. *What was it* that she had survived?

Chapter 2

“Hey, Alicia. Want to sit with us?”

Alicia turned to determine the source of the voice. A few feet away she saw a jovial woman waving energetically. Norma. *Of course*. In every department there seemed to be one person who was the social glue that held the group together. In this department, it was Norma.

Being about twenty-five pounds overweight, with strands of gray showing in her permed hair, Norma looked like a very young grandmother, or a very weathered mother. Her white turtleneck and cardigan did nothing for her pasty complexion, and it was only her mascara, blue eye shadow, and pink lipstick that kept her from looking deathly ill. Ignoring the large, gaudy, plastic jewelry that was becoming popular, Norma always wore only a small cross on a thin gold chain and 14-carat gold post earrings. In style and manner, she exemplified “mom” and comfort and sensibility.

Alicia was never one for sitting and chatting in the cafeteria— not in high school, not in her previous job— but she was new at Universal Info and knew that it would be to her advantage to get to know her co-workers even though she had been raised to believe that school and work were not places for socializing. She had lived by those rules, but noticed that those who were sociable seemed to do better. They seemed to get the information and resources they needed. And so, more out of practicality than desire, she would force herself to be social. Instead of eating at her desk as she wanted to do, she had abandoned the emotional safety of her desk for the company’s large-but-crowded cafeteria. Standing hesitantly at the entrance, her brown paper lunch bag clenched in a nervous hand, she had been nonetheless relieved when Norma called out to her. At least now she wouldn’t have to invite herself to join in.

“Okay,” Alicia said, sliding into an empty seat next to her co-workers.

Norma gestured to the two other women who were sitting with her. “Alicia, you know Betty and Carol, right?” Betty, unlike Norma, looked very un-grandmotherly. Her hair was blond, blow dried, and sprayed, her skirts short and tight, and her shoulder pads big. But like Norma, Betty came across as warm and friendly, not snobbish or bitchy like Alicia expected

her to be, and she gave Alicia a hearty hello. Carol was somewhere in between Norma and Betty. Her clothes weren't as modest as Norma's, but not as daring as Betty's. Her makeup consisted of only eye shadow and lipstick. But like the other two women, she was pleasant and cheery, and it was that, Alicia surmised, that had drawn the three women together as friends.

As Alicia opened her brown paper lunch bag on the stark laminated plastic lunch table, Norma continued what appeared to be a conversation in progress. "So, Betty, when's the party?"

"Next Wednesday, around seven. Alicia, wanna come? It's KopperWerkes."

"Copper works?" Alicia didn't recognize the name.

"They sell copper things: household goods like candleholders, bowls, plaques, gelatin molds. Things like that."

Sliding her sandwich and cookies from out of the bag, Alicia pondered how to decline without hurting the woman's feelings. Her budget was limited. Paying a mortgage, even with a roommate, left little disposable income. Alicia was more apt to put any extra money in the bank, as a cushion against hard times, than to fritter it away on unnecessary things. "Uh, thanks, but I really don't need any of those right now."

Betty waved her hands in dismissal. "Oh, you don't have to *buy*. Just come along. We'll have snacks and dessert. You'll have a good time."

"Okay, I'll think about it," Alicia fibbed, thinking that she most likely would *not* think about it.

Norma seemed to sense that Alicia was just being polite. She looked at Alicia directly, re-engaging her in the conversation before turning away to another co-worker. "You should. Really. Just come for the party. No one expects you to buy anything." She smiled and then turned to her right. "Carol, did you go to see that psychic?"

Carol swallowed the bit of sandwich she was chewing and hastily washed it down with a gulp of soft drink. "Yeah. This guy is really great. He is soooo accurate. He knew about my aunt's surgery and my cousin's new baby and my boyfriend."

Normally shy, Alicia couldn't keep herself from butting in, not where logic was concerned. "Couldn't he have guessed some of that, though?"

Shaking her head, Betty chimed in, "Carol didn't tell him anything, and he just came out with the fact that her aunt's name was Audrey and that she was having her gall bladder removed. How could he know that?"

Alicia pondered the information. While it was true that gall bladder surgery wasn't that rare and therefore it could have been a lucky guess,

how did he know the name Audrey? It wasn't that common a name. And how did he know it was Carol's aunt? She turned to Carol. "Could someone have told him your aunt's name?"

"How? No one knew I was going. I just woke up Saturday morning and decided to call for an appointment. There was a cancellation, so I got one for that night."

"Okay, but how did you know about him? Does a friend go to see him? Could he have heard about your aunt from a friend?" Alicia believed that people really could be psychic, but she also knew they could be con artists. He could be either.

"Nope. I heard about him from a friend where I used to work, and that was a year ago. I was lying in bed, thinking about things, you know, like where I'm going in life, and I remembered hearing about this psychic, 'The Wizard of Westville.' I didn't even know my aunt was sick. She just started having gall bladder problems last week."

Alicia had to admit that it didn't sound as though there was much room for deception. "Hmmm. It *does* sound like he couldn't have learned it through regular means..."

Norma mopped up the spaghetti sauce from her plate with a slice of Italian bread and continued. "Ever been to one? I'm going to try to get an appointment. I could make one for you at the same time."

Five years ago Alicia would have laughed at the suggestion, at the thought of paying money to someone who might have powers of perception, but who more than likely had the powers of a well-studied confidence man, but her encounters with the unknown had taught her that there were indeed things that were unexplained. She was getting nowhere trying to find her own explanations for what had happened three years ago. Her therapist, who still didn't know the full story of the explosion, had encouraged her to reach out more, to not try to do everything on her own. To ask for and get help from others if needed.

"I don't know. Is he expensive?"

"Nope, readings are just fifteen dollars."

Fifteen dollars was a lot for Alicia to spend on non-essentials. Even though the economy was beginning to improve after the gas crisis and other shortages of the last few years, Alicia needed to watch her budget. Fifteen dollars was about three times the cost of a movie or a meal. Still, if he *was* psychic, maybe he could help her figure out the inexplicable events of the past. "Okay, sure, why not?"

"Good! I'll try to book us some appointments. His Saturdays are usually booked in advance, so we'll have to do a weeknight. Are you free on weeknights?"

“Right now I am. I’m planning to go back to night school, but that won’t be for another couple of months, after I’m here long enough to be eligible for tuition reimbursement.”

“In a couple of months it’ll be summer.”

“I know. I’m going to sign up for the summer sessions.”

Betty laughed a gentle, sincere laugh. “Wow. That’s dedication. I couldn’t do that.”

“Sure you could—” Alicia stopped herself, remembering how often she had had this conversation with her friend Susie. Susie, who had disappeared one night, just before the explosion, leaving her daughter with her ex-husband. A sharp pain tore through Alicia’s soul as the memories resurfaced. *Susie! What had happened to Susie?* She had been so absorbed with her own problems that she never asked, never followed up.

Carol’s voice brought her back to the present. Alicia missed the first sentence or two, but caught her saying, “Okay, I’ll call and let you know when he’s available.”

As the conversation at the table shifted to what had happened in the last episode of *Knot’s Landing*, Alicia busied herself folding and refolding her paper napkin. The deep painful memories of Susie faded and she found herself becoming more excited by the prospect of the reading.

What if he was psychic? Then she would be only days or weeks away from the truth.



“Alicia?”

Alicia turned at the sound of her name. “Meg! What are you doing here?” *So, it was Meg!*

Meg smiled. “I work here. And you?” She stepped over to the side of the long hallway to let someone pass.

“Me, too. I just started a couple of days ago, in Manufacturing Systems.”

“I thought I saw you in the cafeteria, but I wasn’t sure. How have you been? Have you been at Theoretic all this time?”

Alicia flinched on hearing the name. *Theoretic*. For some reason, hearing Meg say the name was actually worse than working there. “Yeah. Maxwell left and the new manager was really good to work for, so I decided to stay until I got my Associates Degree. They finally promoted me to Junior Programmer—”

“Congratulations!”

“Thanks! So I stayed, but after a while I started getting itchy feet. And you?”

“Just before you came back from medical...” There was an awkward moment where pain flashed over Alicia’s face. As if to break the moment, Meg quickly continued, “I could see what Maxwell was really like, and I didn’t want to keep working under him. I had no idea he was going to leave. A friend of mine had started working here at UI and gave me a call when an opening came up. I interviewed and they offered me the job. I’ve been in the Marketing Systems Group ever since. So, where is everyone? Are they all still at...” Meg paused as she searched for a word to replace the company name that seemed to bother Alicia. “Are they still at the old place?”

Alicia flattened against the wall as two men pushed an object the size and shape of a refrigerator past them. Mounted on a wheeled skid, the blue metal cabinet and clear cover of the minicomputer held Alicia transfixed as it passed. As a programmer, she didn’t see the actual machines these days. These days someone else mounted the data tapes, as she had once done, carefully lacing the cool ribbon of magnetic-coated plastic through the maze of capstans, tension arms, and rollers. Someone else— maybe even a young woman near her age— closed the clear plastic door, pressed the power button, and then listened to the click and whir of the tape drive as it tried to find *Beginning of Tape*. Someone else listened to the hammers of the print heads as they slammed against the night-colored ribbons; listened to the flat, white noise of the air conditioning and the hum of the fans in the computer. Listened for footsteps, for door creaks, for... *listened, listened, listened...*

Meg was looking expectantly at Alicia, no doubt a little troubled by her momentary lapse into dark reverie. Alicia recovered quickly. “You remember Joey? He called me about a year and a half after he got laid off. He’s not in computers anymore. After the layoff, he went to Florida and worked construction with his cousin. He didn’t want to work *outdoor* construction anymore— ‘That stuff’s too hard,’ he said. He came back that summer to see what he could find up here for interior work. I had just made an offer on a house— ”

“You bought a house? That’s great!”

“Yeah. It’s just an old single-family on the south side of town, not the best area. It needed a lot of work, and since Joey didn’t have anything else lined up, we arranged a work-for-rent deal. He did that for a month or two until he got work on a regular site.”

Another minicomputer was being pushed past them, causing the two women to pause in their conversation long enough for it to pass.

Meg looked down the corridor in the direction from which the computers were coming. Apparently satisfied that she wouldn't be interrupted again, she continued, "So where is he now?"

"He's still at the house, but I don't see much of him. He's got a girlfriend and spends a lot of time at her place. I asked him why he just didn't move in with her and he said that his 'nana' would kill him if he moved in with someone before marriage!"

They both laughed at Joey and his endearing fear of his nana. Nothing, not even his parents scared him as much as his old-world, immigrant grandmother. She barely spoke English, but she spoke it well enough to let him know what was right and what was wrong. An amusing thought darted through Alicia's mind... *Maybe I should have set Nana on Wesley...*

Meg's voice brought her back from her short musing. "So, how's the house going?"

"Okay. The house is old, it wasn't kept up very well, and it's in a bad part of town, but that means it didn't cost a lot. I still might need to take on another roommate, though. But it's what I wanted, a place of my own, something my parents didn't have."

Meg glanced at her watch. "Do you mind if we walk and talk? I have a meeting at the other end of the building."

Alicia pushed off from the wall that she was still leaning heavily against. "Sure, no problem."

Meg turned and began walking down the hall with long, deliberate strides. "So how did you end up at UI?"

Alicia stopped while she thought of the answer to the question and then remembered she should keep walking. "I wanted to move on, get some more experience elsewhere, but you know how it is. If you don't have experience on the right machines, you can't get a job. COBOL is COBOL no matter which computer you're programming on. Yeah, there are differences, but all you need is a few months to pick them up. But try convincing a headhunter of that. They wouldn't even think of sending me on interviews for jobs that required mainframes because I had experience only on UI minis."

It was the same old story, but some of the sting was gone. Alicia used to dwell on how unfair the business world was, not promoting her only because she didn't have a degree, not hiring her even though her job skills were highly transferable, but her therapist had helped her understand that that's just the way things were. It wasn't *personal*. Alicia had two choices: she could overcome the odds or be crushed by them. She could wallow in self-pity or learn to use her emotional energy for better things. She had chosen the latter.

Meg listened intently as Alicia continued, "One day I was taking a course

here at UI and one of their operators was in my class. He said there might be an opening here for a junior programmer soon, so I gave him my resume. At first UI was a little wary of hiring someone away from a customer of theirs, but by then Theoretic had announced that they were moving the business lab to Atlanta. UI relaxed because it wasn't likely that Theoretic would have a problem with them hiring away a northeastern employee."

"Oh, I didn't know about Atlanta. Sounds like you moved just in time." Meg stopped at the intersection of another long hallway. "Well, here's where I turn off. Are you going this way?"

Alicia shook her head and pointed in the opposite direction. "No, I'm going to go outside for a cigarette."

"Cigarette? I didn't know you smoked."

"Yeah, I started when— when I was at Theoretic. Stress. I keep thinking that I should try to quit once I get over the new job terrors."

Meg smiled. "Well, good luck. It was nice seeing you. Maybe we could have lunch someday?"

"There's not really enough time to go out, but maybe we could get together in the cafeteria some time?"

"That would be nice. Well, I have to go. See you later."

"Bye. Good seeing you."

Alicia watched as Meg disappeared down the long beige corridor. Seeing her walk away reminded Alicia of Theoretic when Meg had joined the company. It had been a much simpler time when Meg started. But not when she left.



It was bitter cold when Frederick awoke, and that irked him. Not the sensation of cold, for he felt it not, but the fact that the cold drove people into their homes, into their cars, away from his grasp.

A few miles west lay a hotel that resembled a castle, turrets and all. He could easily wait in the parking lot until a female guest drove in. If she had out-of-state plates, he could just happen to appear at the right time and help her with her luggage. If not, he could walk ahead of her, opening the door for her and making small talk as he followed her to the hotel bar.

But the hotel was across a busy highway, two lanes in either direction, and although he had discovered the ability to move quickly enough to make it across, that alone could attract attention.

No, Frederick would hunt close to home tonight.

