

Little towns and secrets: a guilty pleasure for some and a harsh reality for others. Witches have secretly been in control of the town council for years and the town has prospered...until now. As they search for the truth behind the mysterious death of one of their shop owners, they uncover disturbing secrets about an ostracized witch and their own coven leader, making it unclear which one may have been using black magic to murder.

Coven

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TONY RUGGIERO



COVEN

Where Witchcraft Meets Murder

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Chapter One So Mote It Be.

Bob Whitworth sat in his car staring at the bloody smear on the windshield. The red droplets danced and slithered their way down the glass creating zigzag patterns which seemed to be in tune with the song that was playing on the radio, *Eye of the Tiger*, the theme song from *Rocky III*. Bob hadn't turned the radio off because he had not moved a muscle since he had tried to stop the car in time to avoid hitting the man. The theme music played unheard because right now only two things occupied every nuance of his body and mind; he was only eighteen years old, and he had just killed someone.

"Sir? Sir?" someone called.

Bob turned his head, the small movement making his stressed muscles twinge, to see a policeman standing beside his car and bending over so as to match his sitting position. The officer's face was lit up by the blue and red lights of the police car making his face appear as if it changed with each strobe of the light. The blue light was good and the red light was evil came to Bob's mind. As he faced these two opposing forces, he wondered if the shifting faces were a reflection of his own life and the accompanying changes that were about to take place and which would last forever.

"Are you hurt?" the policeman asked. "Can you hear me?"

Blue. Red. Blue. Red.

"No. I'm not hurt. He's dead, isn't he?" Bob said in a voice that sounded devoid of emotion.

"Sir, I need you to step out of the car and bring your license and registration." The policeman gripped the door handle from the outside and pressed the latch. The door of the Ford Galaxy 500 creaked as he opened it. "Sir, can you please step out of the car?"

Bob slowly got out of the car and stood. His entire body felt numb and unresponsive to his own commands. His body

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was moving in some sort of Hollywood movie slow motion. He wavered slightly and placed his hand on the side of the car to steady himself.

“Can you stand here or do you need to sit?” the policeman asked.

“I’m okay,” Bob answered, feeling ashamed at saying it. He wished he could have said no—he wasn’t okay, that he had had a seizure or some kind of fit that could explain what had just happened. But he couldn’t. Instead he used his shaking hand to retrieve his license and registration and handed them to the police officer.

“One Baker Charlie,” the radio from the police cruiser blared. The officer began to move in that direction, but then turned back to Bob.

“Please wait here, I’ll be right back,” the policeman said as he returned to his cruiser and began talking with someone over the radio.

Bob heard the sound of a zipper being pulled and looked in that direction. Less than twelve feet from where he stood, one of the emergency medical techs was unfolding a large black bag on the ground next to the body of the man. The body had been draped with a blanket upon which dark splotches were appearing and growing larger. Bob knew it was the man’s blood.

Not knowing why, Bob walked toward the body, stopping within a few feet of where it lay. Another EMT stood with his back to him arranging the limbs of the dead man underneath the blanket so that they would be able to place him in the bag. The two EMTs went back to the ambulance to get the gurney leaving the body lying there on the ground. Bob took the few remaining steps until he was standing next to it.

As if sensing his presence, the body under the blanket moved. A hand, a bloodied flesh-torn hand, came out from underneath the blanket. It slowly moved across its body, reaching for the top corner of the blanket as if it meant to pull it off. As it moved, Bob heard a coarse-sounding voice come from beneath the blanket.

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“You killed me. You killed me. I will haunt you for the rest of your life. You will know no peace...no peace for the rest of your life...no peace for the rest of your life...”

Bob wanted to get away, but he couldn't move. The bloodied hand was getting closer to the end of the blanket so that it could fling it away and come for his killer.

“No! I don't want to see it. It was an accident! No...No...No...”

Bob Whitworth awoke. The familiarity of the framed pictures on his desk and walls told him that he was in his office and that he had fallen asleep in his chair. He was safe. *Safe*. He was amazed that after all these years the dream returned with such renewed energy that it left him shaking and exhausted. The exhaustion soon overcame the fear and he leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He immediately drifted off; he was too damn tired to care anymore as he sank back into darkness.

* * *

“Come to me,” a voice called to Bob.

He opened his eyes, but he couldn't see anything. It was perfectly black all around him.

“Come to me,” it called again.

The voice was neither feminine nor masculine. It sounded...neutral. He tried to sense what direction it had come from, but couldn't. The darkness still refused to allow him any sight, but he smelled damp earth, a musty smell of some kind that he remembered when he had been in a damp earthen basement the first time.

Suddenly light appeared, slicing through the darkness like a piece of paper being ripped apart causing him to squint at its brightness. As his eyes adjusted, he saw the light was a narrow beam, almost spherical in shape like a large cone. In the center of the cone of light, he saw the shape of a person—a naked person.

“Hello?” he called tentatively.

There was no response.

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“Are you alright?”

Bob moved nearer to the cone of light, trying to peer inside the beam at the shape that was there. As he focused his eyes on the image, the shapely curves and contours of the body took form and it quickly became apparent he was looking at the shape of a woman, a very beautiful and naked woman. Her shape mesmerized him, and it took conscious effort to move his eyes away from the alluring parts of this lovely creature. But he wanted—no needed—to see the face that went with the captivating and alluring form in front of him. She managed to stay turned away from him no matter what angle he tried to approach her from.

“Come to me,” the voice called again this time the tone revealing the feminine origin. “I am the Earth, I am Fire, I am the Wind, I am Water—I am *the everything*.”

“Who are you?” he asked, still slowly moving to try and attain a position where he could see her face. But she still evaded his questioning gaze. However, he could now tell that her hair was black or dark brown. “Who are you?” he repeated. “Why am I here?”

“Come to me! Partake of the All and be fulfilled. Walk the line that separates the light from the dark. Reap the rewards or suffer the punishment if you stray too far. Follow your destiny...pleasure or death awaits you. You must heed the calling or perish within your own lust. Follow your destiny...”

“I don’t understand? What does that mean?”

“Follow your destiny...”

Ring-Ring, echoed in his mind.

“Pleasure or death awaits you...”

Ring-Ring, the sound returned and everything around him began to fade away.

“What does it mean? Wait...”

Bob jerked awake in his chair. He opened his eyes and was greeted with bright sunlight streaming through the windows of his office. He raised his hand to block the light that poured into his. Instinctively he checked the time, it was

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almost seven AM. *Damn... fell asleep. I must have... strange dream... what is...*

Ring-Ring

The telephone was ringing. He reached for the phone.
“Hello?”

“Bob Whitworth?”

“Yes.”

“Tony Schuster from World Realty in Norwich, Connecticut. I hope you don’t mind me calling you at work. I tried your home number and thought maybe you were an early to work kind of guy. Are you an early to work kind of guy?”

“Ah...yes,” Bob stumbled the words out as he tried to remember who the hell Tony Schuster was. He said he was from where? World Realty? Any remnants of the dream quickly left his mind as he struggled to place the man.

“Well that’s an admirable trait,” Tony continued. “I’m kind of like that myself. That’s why I’m calling you at this hour. I wanted to let you know about a great deal I came across because it won’t last long. You’re still interested in the antique shop?”

“Oh...yes. The antique shop.” Now Bob remembered. A couple of months ago, he’d sent some email queries out to realtors when he thought he could get the financing he needed. But the banks ended up not being as enthusiastic as he thought they would be. The financing deal fell through like a rock through thin ice.

“I found you a real beauty,” Tony Schuster said. “Just what you asked about,” he continued on not letting Bob get a word in.

“Mr. Schuster, I don’t think...”

“Call me Tony.”

“Okay. Tony. I appreciate what you have done for me, but the financing deal didn’t work out as I thought it would. I’d love to get into a shop, but the money is a problem. I’d hate to mislead you and let you believe I could afford it right now. I’m sorry, I should have phoned to let you know to abandon the search”

Tony Ruggiero

"I understand what you're saying, Bob, but at least hear me out. Come on, what could it hurt? It's my time and my dime."

"Okay," Bob conceded. "I guess you may as well tell me about what you found."

"A nice shop in Putnam, Connecticut—that's near Rhode Island. The town makes their living off the tourist industry. A lot of New Yorkers and New Jersey folk migrate up that way during the warmer months. Ever heard of it?"

"No."

"Anyway, the shop's not overly big, about 1500 square feet and it's located right on the main street through the town. Storage and display areas like you requested. It even comes with stock attached, a complete package deal."

"Sounds sweet, but we're back to the problems with financing."

"And another 1200 square feet on the upper level used as living quarters."

"Hmm," Bob murmured. Now he knew he couldn't afford it. It was too perfect and exactly what he had thought of when he was looking. He could live upstairs above the shop, no need for a separate apartment or house. *It was perfect.* However, he couldn't help but start seeing the numbers in his head. The stock alone would be worth a nice penny if it were anything decent. But he had let Tony get this far; he might as well let him finish telling him about the whole deal.

"I know what you're thinking," Tony said. "Can't afford it. Am I right?"

"Hit the nail right on the head," Bob shot back.

"You remember what price we were talking when you first asked me to look around?"

"Ballpark around two hundred fifty thousand," Bob said.

"Yes, well how does one hundred seventy five sound?"

"For everything?"

"Yes, sir," agreed Tony.

"Sounds too good to be true."

"I can make it sound even better," Tony added.

"I doubt that!" Bob added as he chuckled. He was beginning to think Tony had his zeros mixed up.

"Approved financing from the local bank in the town. G-u-a-r-a-n-t-e-e-d."

"No way. It's got to be some kind of joke or something."

"No joke as long as you aren't a dirt bag."

"Define dirt bag?" Bob asked. His heart was beginning to beat hard in his chest. This was a deal of a lifetime if it was true...but what if that question showed up on the form again? *Have you ever been convicted of a felony, if yes, please explain.*

"Usual stuff. No bankruptcies, loan defaults, criminal activity in the past few years. As long as the credit check doesn't show any bizarre stuff, it shouldn't be a problem."

Past few years...would he be safe with saying no?

"How much down?" asked Bob.

"I think they want ten percent."

"You're kidding. Come on, Tony, this whole thing is just too good. What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. I mean it's not perfect. What is? Sure it could use some sprucing up, but nothing major."

"What happened to make them sell so cheap?" Bob asked curiously.

"Last owner was hit by a car right out in front of the store, kind of a bizarre accident."

"Hit by a car?" Bob asked slowly. The image flashed through his mind of Greg Wainwright's face, the eyes wide open and looking into Bob's soul as he slid down his windshield. Bob forced it out of his thoughts.

"Well not exactly a car; some tourists passing through with one of those big RVs. The shop owner, I think his name was Caruso or something, stepped right out in front of them and those things do not stop on a dime. Can't figure how he couldn't have seen the damn thing."

"An RV?"

"Yeah one of those big monsters—twenty plus feet. Anyway the town doesn't want the store to go empty. That's bad for business and all, you know, perception. The folks there, the town council, and other shop owners figure if a

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store suddenly closes, there's a problem. Bankruptcies are like the plague, once they start, they get kind of catchy. So they bought the place from the estate along with the stock of merchandise. Now they've got the need to offload it and quick. And at this price, I can assure you of one thing; it's not going to last long."

"If everything is as you say, I couldn't agree more," Bob said.

"How soon can you get up here?" asked Tony.

Bob looked at his desk calendar already knowing it was Friday. "I can be there...say...by tomorrow afternoon, sometime between three and four?"

"Fine. I'll let them know so they have to give you first right of refusal as long as no other offers have already been received. I'll fax you the floor plans and layout of the place along with a map of the local area."

"Thanks, Tony. You can't imagine how much I am looking forward to seeing the place. It just sounds so perfect."

"Yeah. You know what they say when something like this comes your way. It's destiny."

Destiny. For the first time since he had answered the phone, Bob thought about the peculiar dream he had. *Follow your destiny.* Hadn't she, the woman in the dream said the same thing? The woman. The gorgeous woman whose face he had not seen. He quickly decided that she could replace his usual nightmare of the accident as often as possible. He shook his head from side to side. *Man that was the craziest dream I've ever had.*

"Bob, you still there?" Tony asked.

"Yeah. I'm here. Sorry, ah...just thinking about the place already. Well I don't know about destiny and all that. If you really want to know, I still think it's too good of a deal. I bet as soon as we walk into the place, the floor collapses or walls cave in or something."

"Think positive, Bob. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay Tony and thanks. Thanks a lot. You can't imagine how much I'm looking forward to getting out of here. Take care and I'll see you tomorrow. Bye now."

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Bob hung up the phone and looked out the window. The morning sunshine had been replaced with angry looking red-colored clouds. A storm was coming, Bob thought. Probably rain the whole trip, but right now, he didn't care. He would go to Connecticut tomorrow with a glimmer of the possibility of the chance for a clean start.

He kicked his feet up on the desk and folded his hands behind his head.

Hell—it can rain all it wants, but nothing is going to mess with me—or my destiny.

* * *

“World Realty, Tony Schuster, can I help you?” he said as he picked up the ringing phone.

“Did you call Mr. Whitworth?” the woman's voice asked.

Tony immediately recognized the voice of the mystery woman who called him yesterday. He still wondered if this whole thing might be some cruel joke being pulled on Whitworth, but it was a win-win scenario for him and he would have been crazy not to accept. If things didn't work out as planned, he wasn't out a thing and would still make some money.

“Yes, ma'am. I called him earlier. He'll be coming up this weekend just as you asked,” he said confidently. “If your details are correct, it sounds like you're giving the place away and he'd be a fool not to buy it. But with this kind of deal, you'll have quite a few people showing up.”

“There will be a few, but not many. You've done well.”

“Well thanks,” Tony said, “did you take care of the financial matter we agreed upon?”

“Yes. The funds have been transferred to your account. A bonus will be sent if Mr. Whitworth decides to buy the property.”

“Could you hold on please? I have an emergency call on the other line.”

“Yes.”

Tony Ruggiero

“Thanks. Be right back.” Tony put the phone on hold and pressed the numerical keys on the computer keyboard for his bank account. When his account came into view, he scanned the deposits. There it was, five hundred dollars. This was the easiest money he had ever made. All he did was place a phone call to tell someone about some property. Cool.

He picked up the phone and released the hold button. “Back again. Sorry for that interruption. I have a big deal I’m working and...”

“I trust you’re satisfied that the money has arrived and that you’re prepared to sell the property?”

“Ah, yes.” Tony felt his temperature rise. He didn’t like being transparent, and this woman had just read him like a child who got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Rest assured that I can sell anything to anyone. He’ll buy it all right.”

“We will see,” she answered.

He thought he heard skepticism in her voice. He kicked his feet up and placed them on the corner of his desk. “So, what gives? Why have you gone through all this trouble to get this particular guy to come to town?”

“Mr. Schuster,” the woman’s voice began in a tone that sounded impatient, “our deal does not require that kind of information to be exchanged. I hope you will honor our agreement and be very discreet about what has just transpired. If you can’t live up to your side, the money can still be withdrawn.”

“Lady, forget I even asked. Was there anything else I could do for you?”

“Not for the moment. Just ensure that Mr. Whitworth arrives as you have promised.”

“I’ll do my part. It’s been a pleasure. Goodbye.” Tony hung up the phone. “What a bitch.”

Chapter Two Days Earlier in Putnam

*Bide the Wiccan laws ye must in perfect love and perfect trust.
“The Rede of the Wiccaē”*

“Damn!” Joe said as he dropped his key. He bent down to pick it up, but his hand was shaking so violently his fingers refused to grasp it. When his fingers made contact with the hard cement sidewalk, an immediate sensation shot through his hand and up his arm—cold! He felt and saw the goose bumps appear on his arms and he momentarily shivered. His voice stuttered as his teeth clattered. “I’m shivering? Can’t be...it’s summer, and I know the temperature has to be at least eighty-five degrees! What the hell is going on around here?”

It’s the breath of the Dragon, Joe...it’s coming...

“What? Who said that?” Joe turned around searching for the voice. He felt his body tremble again, but not from the cold, but rather from the voice in his mind and the way it penetrated his body as it violated everything he perceived as reality and forced him to recognize it even though he refused to grant it ownership.

His eyes searched the usual tourist traffic for signs of anything abnormal. Nothing. He glanced up and down Main Street of the small town of Putnam, Connecticut. It all looked so normal. All the shops, like the one he owned, were busy. He felt himself sneer at the irony of the situation; for him to close the store now was not very smart from a business standpoint, but he didn’t care anymore. He wanted out of the store...and everything else about this damn town. Things had gotten out of control and...

You didn’t seem to mind it before, Joe. After all, you had more than you deserve didn’t you?

“No! Leave me alone!” he screamed. He turned again looking for the source of the feminine voice, but he saw nothing.

Tony Ruggiero

Yes, you had your fun. Now it's time for some payback, Joe. Got your running shoes on?

He closed his eyes tightly. "No! I refuse to believe any of this bullshit! This is not happening. I'm not well. That's all it is. I'm sick. My mind—you did something to it!"

You don't believe that...do you, Joe? I did nothing. You have done it all by yourself.

Ignoring the voice, he opened his eyes and demanded that he focus his attention back on the key. After several seconds of attempting to pick it up, it finally succumbed to his fingers. He gripped it firmly in the palm of his hand. It's cold as an ice cube, he thought as he peeled it away from his skin. Using one hand to steady the other, he managed to get the key in the lock and turn it. He breathed a large sigh of relief. It was then he saw his breath mist in the air in front of him.

The breath of the dragon. It's coming for you, Joe. Just for you...

"No...No...this is bullshit!" he said as he stared in disbelief at the quickly dissipating mist he'd exhaled. "No way can this—" he stopped in mid sentence. He stared at his own reflection in the glass panels of the door. For a moment, he forgot the cold as he stared at his own face. It looked old with wrinkles at the corners of his eyes and the large bags underneath them. His flesh sagged around his cheeks. His hair was lighter too, going gray?

"This fucking place is killing me. I'm only forty damn it! Only forty! The best view of this town will be in my rear view mirror as..."

Movement from inside his store caught his eye.

What? I just checked it before I locked up, he thought. His eyes searched through the glass of the door for what he'd just seen. Nothing. He placed his face up to the glass and peered closer. A large face, not human, loomed toward him and slammed into the glass. Glistening sharp teeth inside of a long open snout snapped wildly as saliva splattered on the glass and oozed its way down. Eyes the size of golf balls with yellow diamond slits stared at him. A sickly realization settled over Joe as he realized the monster was grinning at him.

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It's happy to see you, Joe.

"No! No! Get away from me!" He screamed as he flung himself away from the door. His feet tangled together, tripping him, and he tumbled his way onto the common sidewalk as his mind refused to let go of the horrible image the voice demanded he recognize.

Now Joe, is that any way to treat the nice dragon?

As Joe continued to tumble, his mind diverted his fear from what was happening to images he recalled from when he was a child. He was sitting alone in his room watching the dark corners and the closets for any movement. He knew the creature was in his room, waiting for him to go to sleep, and that was when it would get him. He would wake up to the putrid smell and the cold scaly touch of the creature. He would scream for his mother and father to come and help save him from the beast. But they never saw it. They told him it was just his imagination and that he'd had a bad dream. Eventually they stopped coming to his calls.

They didn't believe you either. Nobody will, Joe. Nobody.

As he came to a stop, he turned back toward the store and watched as the dragon smashed through the door, placing a heavily clawed foot onto the same walk that he was now lying on. "This can't be real? Dreams aren't real! They can't hurt you! It's nothing but mumbo jumbo bullshit!"

Not real? Come on, Joe. It's as real as real can be.

The thud of the creature's weight sent a tremor along the sidewalk as it brought its other foot through the door. It stood erect on its feet, measuring at least nine feet in height, and weighing in at several hundred pounds. Its scaly green skin rippled with large muscles that the broken glass had not even scratched.

Get up! Run! He told himself. Run! Joe struggled to get to his feet, but fell back down. The coldness in his legs caused him to lose feeling in his limbs, making it difficult to achieve any balance. His hands splayed out on the cement in an attempt to achieve some purchase, and were cut from the broken glass. Bloody handprints covered the area around him, resembling a child's finger painting project.

Tony Ruggiero

Not real, Joe? Isn't that your blood?

Grasping the solid pipe of a parking meter, he pulled himself erect. The dragon was close—very close. He could smell its breath, a cold and putrid odor of dead things, rotting and infested with maggots. He could almost feel its guts swarming with maggots.

Everything's not perfect, Joe. You just have to learn to deal with this and very, very quickly.

The creature stepped toward him, its mass blocking any path to the left or right. Joe turned toward the street. "Help me! Please somebody help me!" he called out.

People walking up and down Main Street turned toward Joe with puzzled looks on their faces. He expected to hear screams as they saw the abomination that was pursuing him. But there were nothing but nervous laughter. They simply stared at him as if he was the cause of all that was happening.

"What the hell is wrong with you people? Can't you see it?" he screamed.

Cars with out of state license plates continued along the busy street, the drivers glancing curiously from shop to shop.

"Help me! Please somebody help me!" he screamed again. "Don't let it get me!"

"Don't let it get me" Listen to you. You're starting to sound like a little baby. This wouldn't have happened if you didn't get greedy, Joe. But you did and now you'll pay the price.

The creature's shadow loomed over him. Joe saw a huge claw make its way toward him, its talons glistening in the sunlight, its eyes never leaving him. He screamed as he lunged into the street to escape the approaching claw.

* * *

Mr. Edgar Witherspoon, a retired schoolteacher of seventy-two years of age, was driving his twenty-six-foot RV down Main Street in Putnam.

“It’s somewhere around here,” his wife Eleanor said loudly above the sounds of her hands searching through the contents of her large purse.

They were looking for a shop his wife Eleanor wanted to visit. One of her friends had mentioned it to her in passing and went on and on about the great deals she found in the store. Edgar wasn’t really listening. He was thinking how this was their last trip with the RV. His eyes were getting worse, and his reaction times were getting slower. There had been three close calls on this trip, more than any other year since they had begun their snowbird migration and travelling north for the summer and south for the winter. Eleanor blamed the other drivers, but Edgar knew it wasn’t them; it was his slowing and aging reflexes. It was time to start taking the train he thought.

“Do you see it?” Eleanor asked reminding him that he was supposed to be helping her look for the store.

“What’s the name?” He asked as he crooned his neck an almost one hundred and eighty degrees to see if he had passed it while he was woolgathering.

“Simple Elegance? Or something like that,” she said glancing at a crumpled piece of paper in her hand she had found in her bag. She removed a pair of glasses from her purse. The lenses were as thick as a magnifying glass, but not quite as thick as the ones Edgar wore. She placed the glasses up to her face, not actually putting them on, but so that she could look through the lenses and focus on the note. “Yeah, Simple Elegance. That’s what I wrote.”

Putting the glasses back in her purse, she looked back up and scanned the street. It took a few seconds for her mind to translate the shock before she could yell: “Edgar, watch out! That man!”

“What ma—?”

There was a thump he could feel despite the weight of the RV. A thump and a sickening cracking noise that coincided with what felt like he’d driven over a huge pothole.

Edgar finally brought the RV to a stop.

Tony Ruggiero

“Oh my God,” Eleanor said as she looked at Edgar in disbelief.

“No. I...couldn't...have...” Edgar began, but quickly became quiet and withdrawn as the crowd of people encircled the RV.

Edgar had only been going about twenty-five to thirty miles an hour, but by the time he stopped, they had rode over the man with both the front and rear tires crushing the life out of him.

* * *

“It’s an unfortunate accident,” Putnam Police Chief Martin Daniels said to the group of people assembled for the monthly Town Hall meeting. Along with every shop owner in town and concerned citizens, the remaining eleven members of the town council were also present, filling the community hall to beyond its normal capacity.

Martin Daniels was a large man, a former semi-pro football player and twelve-year veteran of the police force in Boston. His large physical presence with several inches over six feet in height and weight in excess of two hundred-fifty pounds stood out in the crowded room and he towered over most of the people. When you shook hands with him, it felt as if your hand had been swallowed up within his massive paw. Although his physical presence was intimidating to some, to those who knew him, he was a kind and generous man. His agenda was clear from the day he took the job as Police Chief in Putnam: He would have no tolerance for those who crossed the line and broke the law. He walked over to where the rest of the council members were seated and removed his sport coat and placed it on the back of the chair but he didn’t sit down.

“Yes, a very unfortunate accident,” Mayor Sharon Robbins agreed as she stood. Her appearance was in stark contrast to the burly Chief Daniels. She was above average in height, almost five foot ten inches, weighing one hundred and thirty pounds, but she still paled in comparison to the Chief’s massive figure. Her dark hair was pulled tightly into a bun

which only accented her light complexion and dark eyes. She stood straight and erect, her hands clasped together behind her back.

“I’ve asked Chief Daniels to conduct a thorough investigation with the State Police into what has happened,” she continued. “I know there is a lot of speculation about the death of Joe Caruso. You all have concerns, some business and some personal, and there is always someone out there who wants to start some unsubstantiated rumors to stir things a bit. I don’t think we need that right now. Let’s hear what the Chief has learned. Chief?”

“It has been substantiated by several eye witnesses,” he began, “that Joe Caruso ignored the traffic and stepped into the way of the oncoming vehicle which killed him. No one saw anything chasing or pursuing him. Some say they heard him say something to that affect, but again, nobody saw anything. As to the glass that was lying on the sidewalk, the only thing we can think of was that he broke the door himself when he closed it. Perhaps he was distraught about something that made him slam it so hard it broke, that part we are still unclear on. As to the elderly driver who hit him, no charges are pending against him, and he has voluntarily turned in his license. He has no connection whatsoever to the deceased.”

“The State Police investigators agree that there is not enough evidence that warrants this investigation to go any further. The death has been recorded as the result of an unfortunate vehicle accident caused entirely by a pedestrian acting in an unsafe manner.” He paused for a few seconds as his eyes scanned the crowd looking to see if there were any questions up to this point. Seeing none, he continued. “As to rumors around town that Joe Caruso was not happy with the way some things are run, that is pretty much common knowledge. He didn’t agree with many of the town’s regulations for the storeowners, and he openly voiced his displeasure right here in this hall. That was his right as is anyone else’s in this room. But I can assure you that the investigation has shown no connection to any of those accusations and had nothing to do with his death. Now, are

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there any questions?" The Chief stood where he was for a few moments. When there appeared to be no questions, he sat down.

"Thank you, Chief Daniels," Mayor Sharon Robbins said. "Are there any more questions or need for discussion on this matter?"

"Mayor Robbins," a woman said as she rose from her seat. "I don't want to seem cold about Mr. Caruso's death, but the story made local papers; I don't know how much farther it went with the media. Do you think there will be any harm done to the businesses? The last run of the summer is just about here; it's usually a good time. I hate to think that something like this would scare away any customers."

"These things pass in time. It's not like it was a vicious murder in the street or anything. It was an accident, an unfortunate one, but an accident nonetheless. I have conferred with our Commerce Director, Jane Rosen," she indicated where Jane sat listening," and she has already planned some marketing advertisements that should bolster any loss of revenue."

"Thank you," the woman said and sat back down. As Sharon waited for the next question, out of the corner of her eye she saw someone moving in the back of the room. *Damn...she's here.* It was only a momentary glimpse of the woman, but she knew who it was.

"Anything else on this issue?" Sharon asked as she looked toward Martin. When she made eye contact with him, she indicated the direction she had seen the woman. Martin slowly stood up and casually walked to the water fountain on the side of the room. He took a drink as he turned his head sideways looking in the direction that Sharon had indicated. He returned to his seat and indicated with a quick shrug of the shoulders he hadn't seen anything. Sensing the silence that had settled over the room, Sharon assumed there would be no more questions and decided it was a good place to end the meeting.

"Maybe the witches killed him!" A woman's voice called from the back breaking the silence.

Coven

Most of the people sitting up front turned to look where the voice had come from. Sharon didn't need to look. She knew all too well who the voice had belonged to; a day hadn't gone by when she wished she hadn't.

"I was wondering how long before that was going to come up," she said with a whimsical grin trying to lighten the mood. A few chuckles from the crowd also joined in. "As we have told you tonight, the investigation reveals no kind of wrong doing. As to whether or not there are witches in the town, if there are, as long as they are law abiding citizens, like most of you, they aren't doing anything that's illegal. The study of Wicca is just as legal as any other religion; the U.S. Congress said so in 1986." Changing to a firmer tone, she continued, "However, I think there are a few troublemakers in town who just want to rile up the rest of the people. Its counter productive and a waste of time. I wish those people would just get over it and find some other form of amusement that doesn't hurt the rest of us."

"Hear-hear," an agreement was voiced from the audience and was quickly joined by others.

Sharon smiled. "It's getting late. If there is nothing else, I suggest we call this meeting adjourned." A round of sporadic clapping ensued. "Good night everyone, and be safe going home," Sharon called and waved.

People began to file out of the community hall. The eleven members of the town council, except for Chief Daniels, gathered around the Mayor. He waited until the last person had departed and then he locked the doors to the town hall. When he was sure the building was secure, he returned to the group.

"I caught a brief glimpse of her in the back," said Sharon looking in the direction where she remembered the voice had come from. "Then, she disappeared into the crowd, but you know she was the one who brought up the witch question again."

"Yes, it makes sense," Sam Ellison the Fire Chief, said in his raspy voice. "I didn't see her, but I know it was her. I have a feeling about this kind of thing."

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The remaining town council members were silent as they waited for the mayor to speak.

“Martin, are you positive the death was an accident?” Sharon asked.

“Positive? It appears that it was just as it seems. The only thing that is odd is that he was scared of something before he died. I’d say terrified. The coroner tests show his adrenaline levels were off the scale—*before* he died.”

“Drugs? Maybe some type of hallucinogen?” Joan Santiago the director of emergency services asked. “Could he have been having some hallucination of being pursued?”

“No, he was clean,” said Daniels, “and his apartment was also clean for any kind of drugs. The State cops and I searched everything thoroughly.”

“Could it really have been *her* here tonight?” asked Clyde Sanders, the town attorney. “I mean, she’s the odd one. Everyone knows she’s a little off-center. Why draw attention to herself?”

“Oh it was probably her all right,” Martin said, looking perplexed. “She doesn’t miss an instant to stir up a hornet’s nest. But what I can’t figure is why?”

“Like you said, to stir up trouble. She thrives on making things difficult for us,” Sharon said with a strong exhale. “I think that’s how she has her fun. The question is: Is she somehow connected to the death?”

“What’ll we do?” another member asked.

“We shall work magick to help the misguided,” Sharon said. “Tomorrow night we shall gather and work to better this person who has fallen from the path.”

“What the high Priestess wishes, shall be done by her covenant,” Martin acknowledged.

“The high Priestess and Priest shall be obeyed,” the rest of the group spoke in unison. They each removed a pentagram that was attached to a chain under their clothing. They caressed them and placed them next to their hearts.

“The pentagram,” Sharon began, “the five points of life, the Spirit, Water, Fire, Earth and Air. We invoke the pentagram’s positive energy to come to us.”

Coven

“The energy shall come,” the coven chanted.

Martin recited: “We shall meet in the light of the moon and work our magick to protect us and our town from any harm. Those who send their negativity our way shall fear the three-fold punishment that will be theirs.”

“So it shall be,” the rest of the coven of witches chanted.

* * *

Julia Leftson closed the door to the home she had lived in for her entire life. She tossed the car keys onto the table and watched as they slid across the ceramic tiled top and came to a stop a few inches from the end. The sound echoed through the empty house reminding her she was all alone—as always. Removing her leather jacket, she tossed it over the chair. She opened the refrigerator and took out a can of soda. Popping its top, she drank deeply.

You had to do it, didn't you? Had to go to their little meeting and try and start something, didn't you? And what did you accomplish?

Ignoring her own thoughts, she took the can of soda and went into the living room. She sat down in the old leather chair, hearing the swoosh of air escaping from the chair cushion as if it was a cancerous old man's labored exhalation. Picking up the television remote, she pressed the power button. She didn't care what was on, as long as the voices filled the empty air of her house so she wouldn't have to listen to her conscience.

She remembered the way her father, mother, and her—she stopped the memory before it could finish. She wanted to ignore thinking about the other...about *her*.

As far as I am concerned, she didn't exist...she never existed.

Julia and her family used to sit in this very same room watching the nightly news, every evening year in and year out. There would be no conversation during that solemn hour as the world events were broadcast into their living room. But

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after that hour, things would return to normal and the events of the day the news commentator chose to talk about forgotten. Mother and father would talk about their day, and she would tell them about her day at school. Then the phone call came on a Wednesday night. And they were gone. All of them were gone.

Feeling sorry for yourself, are you? That's no excuse for your actions. You'll have everyone thinking about you—instead of what they should really be concerned about...the Others and what they're doing.

Still ignoring her own thoughts, she stood and walked over to the full-length mirror in the hallway. Standing in front of the mirror, she stared at her reflection. At thirty-seven, she was tall, standing just under six feet, and pale complexioned. Although she was not fond of doing it, she usually used a lot of makeup to make her skin appear much darker. Altering of her complexion was something she had never done while her parents were alive—but she did it now.

She ran her fingers through her long, thick jet-black hair. Looking at it and remembering their features. She had mom's hair and dad's skin. Her eyes were black as coal, her father used to say. She saw the dramatic contrast of the light skin, dark hair and eyes, she knew she was attractive. The decision to darken her complexion was more symbolic with her changing personality this past year or so. Or was it longer than that? She couldn't remember.

She still had her school figure, at one hundred and fifty pounds and well curved in all the right spaces. Or at least that was what the men she dated used to tell her before...

Before. Before everything changed. Now there's no one I can confide in. Some of the shop owners deal with me, buying my paintings, but other than that, I'm all alone. Except for the purpose. I still have that.

A cat jumped up into her lap startling her. "Christina, how did you get in here? I thought I left you outside?" The cat's purring grew in intensity as Julia stroked the animal's brown fur. "You must have heard my thoughts didn't you? I'm not really alone, am I?"

The cat jumped off her lap and headed toward the kitchen and the cabinet where her food was stored. “And here I thought you came to me out of love? You must be hungry, huh? Okay. Mommy’s coming.” Julia rose from the chair and went into the kitchen. Opening the pantry door she retrieved the cat food and poured some into the small bowl. Christina quickly moved in on the bowl’s contents. As she ate, Julia stroked its fur gently. “We all need someone, don’t we?”

He scorned you didn’t he? He turned to the other...to her. You wanted to be his friend and help him, but he wouldn’t listen. You gave him what she wouldn’t, but he still turned to her—so you used him to get back at her, and now he’s dead. Just like...

She left Christina to her food and went to the window. She slid the thick curtains aside and looked out into the darkness. Although she lived on two acres, she still made it a habit to check outside before she went to the basement. She couldn’t imagine anyone coming to visit her, but there were kids who came around every once in awhile to see if they could see her doing whatever it was the kids were saying she did these days. Whenever she caught some, she chased them off. The yard had so many sinkholes in it that someone could catch their leg in one and break it and she would be blamed, as usual. There were ‘No Trespassing’ signs posted all around, but no one paid them much mind. They’d rather risk their fool necks trying to get a glimpse of the abomination that lived here.

That’s what you are, isn’t it? An abomination? Look what you’ve done this time...poor Joe didn’t...

“I’m going downstairs, Christina,” she called to the cat. The cat looked up from its bowl as if to acknowledge her statement before returning its attention to the remaining kibbles. Julia opened the door next to the pantry that led to the basement. Flipping on the light switch she slowly descended the old wooden steps. The earthy smell of dirt and dampness greeted her. She loved that smell. She removed a stick match from the box and, holding it away from her hair, slid the match along the rough side of the box until it flared.

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She breathed in the scent of the sulfur mixing with the aroma of dirt and inhaled deeply allowing the flavors to mix on her tongue.

She moved toward where the candles were arranged and carefully lit them one by one around the circle carved into the earthen floor. She turned off the lights and removed her shoes, shirt, pants, undergarments, and finally, her socks. The feeling of the cold earth on her feet was exhilarating. The goose bumps rising along her body brought her to awareness as she cleared her mind of all thought. The images of earth, wind, water, and air entered into her mind to complete the cleansing. When she was ready, she entered the circle. As if on cue, Christina joined her, rubbing her body against Julia's shin. Julia smiled at the cat and began.

"Into the circle I pass, leaving all those thoughts of trouble behind. I come into the circle clean and fresh to call upon the creatures of the All to help me. To help me so that others will not die from the evil that resides in us and especially in the town. To provide the strength and the tools to help me to do what must be done to complete the cleansing."

She closed her eyes emotionally immersing herself into the peace she felt. Slowly an image shaped in her thoughts. It appeared as a lump of red earthen clay. She could smell it, the smell of mother Earth. Then she felt the heat of fire as the temperature rose around her. The lump of clay began to soften, not quite becoming a wet pile of ooze, but becoming much softer than its natural state. The wind blew from one direction, then quickly changing to another—and yet another. It took the quickly cooling clay and shaped it. Water sprinkled upon it next, followed by the heat of the sun's warmth that dried the clay.

The mound of clay had been shaped into a non-descript image of a man. Around the man was an aura, an aura of pain. Something from the past lingered within him, a painful experience when he was a young man. He couldn't let go of it...or it of him.

There is a use for such painful thoughts. It makes us what we are. Take our pain away and pleasure and joy mean

Coven

*nothing. Use the pain as a tool and much may be accomplished.
And so it shall...he will come soon, and it will begin.*

Chapter Three

Live and yet live—fairly take and fairly give.

“The Rede of the Wiccaē”

The earlier prediction of a storm had not materialized; in fact, it hadn't rained a drop as Bob exited off of I-395, following the sign for Putnam that read: three miles. Since his departure from Virginia, the weather had held and he enjoyed a beautiful late summer day. As he slowed his car to the new speed limit of thirty-five miles per hour, Bob watched the landscape he was driving through change. He found himself surrounded by an interesting mixture of rural and old town scenery. The narrow streets and roads contrasted immensely with the interstate he had just left. “That’s why we drive at high speed on interstates, we aren’t missing anything,” he mused.

There was also a sense of age to this area, a rustic feeling of going back in time, he thought. In between the small towns, he saw homes whose foundations were built from stone. He drove past fence lines which were more often rows of stone stacked upon each other winding their way along the uneven terrain of the land, rather than the traditional wood type. He guessed the rock came from the ground when it had been cleared for farming and had to be used for something. But now the area was no longer farmed as intensely as it had been, and it was returning to forests as the trees reclaimed the fallow fields, creating lovely areas of natural beauty.

As he neared the town, he noticed that the houses were placed closer together, looking more modern with their aluminum siding and concrete foundations. He also heard the sound of a train, its whistle blowing often. He guessed there was a train station in the fair city of Putnam. In a few more minutes, his theory was proven as he entered the city limits. To his left he could see the outline of the train station. He pulled over to the side of the road to get his bearings.

Removing the map that Tony had sent him, he found the train station and oriented himself to where he needed to go. The coffee shop where they were to meet was at the far end of Main Street. He looked up and saw a sign that advertised public parking. He remembered Tony had written a note on the map saying to park on the far side of the station, over on South Main Street. The public lot on the other side was normally full this time of the year. It would be easier to park and walk the rest of the way given the layout of the town and its one-way streets.

The parking was tight as Tony had suggested it would be. Apparently the last part of the summer was a heavy traffic time for the town shops. License plates from New York, New Jersey, and Rhode Island outnumbered the Connecticut plates by about four to one. Bob thought that the tourists must be getting in their last vacations and spending what they have left before their thoughts turned to the holidays. Finally, he eased the Honda Civic into a parking space and turned it off.

He opened the car door and stood, feeling his body's protests after sitting for almost the entire length of the twelve hour drive. He checked his watch, three o'clock. He had told Tony sometime between three and four. "Not bad, Bob. Right on time," he said casually. *Yeah, right on time to hear that the good deal no longer exists or Tony had misinterpreted it and you just drove twelve hours for nothing.*

He closed the door of his car, trying to ignore his negative thoughts. The entire time he was driving similar thoughts had entered into his mind. He tried to ignore them, but they kept coming back. *Just once I deserve a break. Maybe this is it. The one thing I have been waiting for—a clean start.*

He walked in the direction of the center of town. People were going to and from the parking lot, and most were carrying bags from purchases. A good sign, he thought. According to the map, there were only two streets that ran through the center of town, cutting it in half both horizontally and vertically. This large cross-like area comprised the majority of the retail businesses of the town along with the coffee shop he was to meet Tony at.

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As he walked he passed under a train trestle feeling the coolness of the air compared to the sunlit area he had just come from. When he emerged on the far side, he encountered the first shop on the right hand side of Front Street. He stood for a moment reading the sign. The first line was in large bold cap letters: *The Psychic Connection*, then in smaller letters: Wicca Books—Tarot Cards—Spices—Herbs—Stones—Psychic Readings by appointment only.

“Well that’s an interesting start,” he said not realizing he had spoken aloud. He turned to see if anyone had heard him. None of the passersby were looking at him so he assumed not. Wicca? Wasn’t that like witches or something? He shrugged his shoulders and began to walk on. He took a few steps and then stopped and turned back toward the store. He was suddenly curious. He wanted to see what the average shopper of such an establishment looked like. He imagined seeing the typical image of a witch, dressed all in black, her long and crooked nose rising from a horrid and scary face. And of course, the tall pointed black hat.

But as he watched, he saw nothing of the sort. Both men and women going in and coming out of the shop looked like everyday people. He guessed some of them were tourists like him and seeing the shop for the first time they may have been curious as he had been. “Not even a broom or anything,” he said aloud jokingly again not realizing he had vocalized the thought.

“Excuse me,” a woman’s voice said startling him.

“Ah...,” he murmured as he began to turn around. He immediately felt his face redden as he imagined that she had probably heard what he said. He continued, “I was just talking to myself.”

When he completed his turn toward the sound of the voice, he faced a woman. A pretty woman he immediately thought, tall and slim, her dark hair stood out in sharp contrast to her light skin, highlighting the features of her face. “I...was just taking in the sights,” he said. He knew it sounded corny, but it was the best he could do at the moment.

He found it difficult to not stare at her. She was quite attractive, especially her dark eyes. They were appealing in some strange way. He was surprised at his instantaneous moment of attraction to her. *Come on Bob...knock it off, she probably heard you and thinks you're nuts.*

She looked in the direction he had been looking and then turned back to him. "Most people find the shop a novelty." She smiled. "But they actually sell some pretty neat stuff."

"It's different," Bob agreed, trying to regain his composure and sound normal—and also to stop staring at her.

"Relax," she said playfully. "You probably had the same reaction to it everyone else does who aren't from around here. I bet you're thinking about witches, black cats, and brooms?"

Bob laughed. "Yes. I have to admit you're right." He felt more relaxed with her honesty and openness on the subject.

"Most people don't realize that Wicca is about many things," she continued, "most of which is not related to the images that we commonly think of. It's actually a religion and..." she paused and raised her hand to her mouth. "I'm sorry, I'm rambling."

"It's quite all right," Bob said. "It's interesting." He liked the expression her face took on with the embarrassment. Kind of cute, he thought.

She turned and looked around the area as if looking for someone; then faced him again. Bob caught a look and thought she was looking at him as curiously as he had been looking at her only a few moments ago. *Is she having the same thought as I had earlier? Is she interested in me?*

The moment quickly passed and she said, "You should take a look in the store. They really do have some interesting things."

"I might do that," Bob said although he didn't think it very likely. Psychics and card reading weren't exactly in his line of beliefs.

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“Well I really must be going,” she began, “I just wanted to make sure you were okay. Have a nice stay in our fair town,” she started to turn away from him.

“You’re from here then?” he blurted quickly before she had a chance to move.

“Sure am. Born and bred so to speak.”

“Can you tell me if *TK*’s coffee shop is up this way?” Bob knew it was; he had the map in his pocket and it was clearly marked. He surprised himself with this spontaneous desire to prolong the conversation with her.

“Sure, go on down to the light and take a right. It will be on your right side. Or you can take a right on Main Street and then left at the next corner. Can’t miss it,” she said and smiled.

“Thanks. Appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. Bye.”

“Bye,” Bob said and watched as she walked in the direction toward the parking lot. He was actually enjoying watching her. She was attractive, but not in an overtly sensuous way, the best word that came to his mind was pretty in an innocent sort of way. *Cute, very cute. I think I like it here. Maybe I’ll run into her again—after all, it is a small town, right?*

When she had passed from his view, Bob turned back toward the center of town and moved on. He decided to try and get a feel for the place, as if he was just another tourist. Was it attractive, clean, the type of shops—things like that. As he walked and checked out the stores, he was surprised as he passed antique store after antique store. Some dealt in large items such as furniture, while others were more into the smaller items. A lot of competition, he thought. Making profits in this town would require novel ideas and intricate pricing. But with that thought he also realized that he had not seen many similar items from store to store either. Everyone must carve their own little niche in the market and that would show some effort on the part of the shop owners to not dip into each other’s merchandise line. He made a mental note to check that out. He assumed there would be a chamber of commerce or some form of store representation in the town. It would

probably be a smart move to place a call with them and ask those kinds of questions.

He decided he would take the right on Main Street, this way he could see more of the stores. The corner of Main and Front Street was called Antique Corner, each corner having an antique shop on it. He continued walking. On his right was an antique shop that spanned both Front and Main Street, creating an L shape store, called the *Antique Meeting Place*. It was a huge store and the sign in the window claimed it was "Connecticut's Largest Antique Mall," covering about 22,000 square feet.

Next on his right was a restaurant called the *Town Inn Bar and Grill* followed by the *Millennium Antique Shop*. On the left side were more antique shops starting from the corner and working toward him, but the names were hard to see through the trees. After them there was some kind of office for a well drilling and pump service, which appeared out of place amongst the shops.

Next came a bookstore called, *Fairyland Books*, which tempted Bob to go over and take a look. He could never resist a bookstore, especially the small independent shops. The window display featured a wonderful display of Alice in Wonderland Books and associated memorabilia along with fairies and other mythological creatures. He was tempted to go in, but decided he would save it for later. Going further down the street he came to another antique store, *Castle Antiques*, which occupied several storefronts followed by a quaint teashop, *Mrs. Crossroads' Pantry*.

He walked until he came to the corner of Bundy Street where he had to make a left to reach the coffee shop. Before heading down, he looked further down the street to see what was there. He saw a florist and gift shop, a travel agency, an insurance company, an arts center, and a church. Quite a variety for a small town, he thought, quickly followed by another thought that the variety was also quite a necessity to keep a small town from vanishing as was happening in many areas these days: who needs small towns when you can go the

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mega mall metropolises of today? All cement and plastic and without any sense of age to them—how he despised them.

Okay, enough commentary, Bob, let's get going before we're late.

He went down Bundy Street and turned to his left and found TK's coffee shop. As Bob prepared to enter the shop, he recalled the black and white image of Tony from the business card he had faxed along with the other information. Bob hoped that he would recognize him and not appear like an odd tourist gawking at the locals. He entered the shop and found it very crowded. Bob searched the tables and booths but didn't see Tony. There was a counter seat open so he moved for it and sat down. It was three-thirty; Tony may have assumed Bob's arrival would be closer to four instead of three.

"May I help you?" a waitress asked.

"Uh...coffee please," Bob said quickly hardly looking at the waitress. He was still concentrating on looking for Tony. While he waited, he watched the people in the shop. He didn't think that most of them were locals as he had first imagined because many of them had bags that were labeled with local store logos and addresses. He was curious to see their "mood," or how they felt about shopping. Usually when people don't find good deals, at least in their own minds, they are not very relaxed, nor do they hang around to have a cup of coffee. If they were pissed off, they usually jumped back in the cars and went home. From what he could tell, everyone seemed in a good mood—happy customers—a good sign.

When Bob returned his gaze to the counter, he saw the waitress had brought the cup of coffee and placed it in front of him without saying a word or even making a sound. He picked up the cup of steaming coffee and sipped it. He started thinking that perhaps he should go on ahead and check out the prospective shop now; he was really anxious to see this "great deal," and he could swing back to see if Tony arrived later. He would only be gone for a little while.

"Can I help you?"

Bob looked up and saw the waitress. She had surprised him with her quiet approach.

She looked like a friendly woman, her face held warm eyes and gentle curving cheeks. Her tone of voice indicated such a calm disposition that he imagined she might often listen to anyone who had a lot to say and not ever interrupt him until he was done. Bob guessed her age at right around fifty.

"I didn't mean to startle you," she continued. "You look like you're looking for someone."

"Well...yes," he began hesitantly. "I'm supposed to meet a realtor here. His name is Tony Schuster," he said as he reached into his pocket to get the paper with his picture on it. "We agreed to a time between three of four."

"Oh Tony. Yeah, he was in here earlier. He left about ten minutes ago with Martin Daniels, the Chief."

"Chief?"

"Yeah, the Chief of Police, top cop of our fair province," she said in an exaggerated, but friendly, manner.

"Nothing wrong I hope?" Bob asked warily.

"Oh, I shouldn't think so; he'll probably be right back."

"Bob." A voice called from the door. Bob turned and saw it was Tony. He was a skinny man, maybe one hundred-fifty pounds and average height. His hair was mostly gray, but full and thick. His face bore the look of a serious nature, distinct wrinkles from the corners of his eyes that were easily visible.

"Hi, Tony," Bob said as he rose. He met the realtor as he moved toward the counter and shook his hand. He noted that although Tony wasn't a large man, his handshake was firm.

"It's nice to finally meet the person that belongs to the voice and email. Sorry I wasn't here when you arrived. Did you have a good trip?"

"Not bad, a little long in the saddle," Bob said as he stretched his back.

"I know what you mean. Seems the older we get, the harder it is to sit in that driver's seat for those long hours."

"Yeah, I know." Bob answered. The sight of Tony made him anxious to see the property. "So why don't we take a look? You know I'm dying to see it."

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“That’s why I was late. There’s been an interesting development about the property.”

“Oh?”

“Come on, we’ll walk over there and take a look at it. I’ll explain as we go.”

Bob paid for his coffee, leaving a dollar tip for the waitress who was busy at the other end of the counter listening to someone else. He stepped out on the sidewalk with Tony and they began to walk with Tony leading the way.

“So what’s up?” Bob asked after a few moments of silence.

“Apparently there are some other folks interested in the property.”

“I thought you said I would get first crack at it?” Bob asked. He felt that sinking feeling in his stomach return.

“According to the town attorney, Clyde Sanders, the offers received were virtually at the same time from different agents in neighboring towns.”

“So what does that mean?” Bob asked, trying to conceal the aggravation that he was starting feel.

“I’ll get into that, but why don’t we take a look at the place and see if you like it first. If you do, I’ll explain the rest to you.”

“Fair enough, but I’m going to make the assumption that I still have a fair chance if I like the place, to buy it. Is that correct?”

“That sounds about right.”

As they walked, they sidestepped a steady stream of pedestrians, or shoppers, as Bob thought. His mind was in high gear about business as he continued to size up the market potential and not worry about what Tony had just alluded to. They turned left and back onto Front Street and headed up a small incline. When they reached the intersection they were back on Main Street.

Bob studied the area closely with one issue in his mind: Would I shop here? The streets appeared very clean and neat. Baskets of late blooming flowers hung from the antique style lampposts which added a bit of old time charm and town

pride. The shops were all tastefully decorated and their fronts were clean, windows shining in the late afternoon sun. They waited at an intersection to cross, a steady stream of out of states license plates rolled by filled with people trying to find parking spots on Main Street instead of parking in the public lot and having to walk into town as Bob had done. Three loud motorcycles rolled through the intersection, two men and a woman, wearing the typical Harley Davidson logos on the backs of their leather jackets.

“Quite a variety of traffic through here,” Bob commented.

“That’s for sure,” Tony agreed. “This area has its share of both tourists passing through and a fair amount of celebrities who have homes nearby. We respect their privacy and they add a certain *cachet* to the area.”

When a break in the traffic came, they crossed the street at the busy intersection. They headed down the other end of Main Street—opposite the side that Bob had already seen. They proceeded down the block passing Florence’s Antiques then an Antique Art and Framing Store, followed by a small shop with what looked like Egyptian items in the window called the Antiquities Shop. On the other side of the street was a large building called Henshaw’s Antiques; followed by a small restaurant called The Arbor, and then what appeared to be a conglomeration of stores in one building. After that came the public parking lot and the train station.

“Here it is.” Tony said drawing Bob’s attention back to where they were, “79 Main Street.”

Bob turned and looked at the two-story brick building. The building was not very wide but appeared to be quite deep. The street side of the first floor of the building was virtually all glass. That was good, lots of display area. The door seemed different; the glass looked as if it had been recently replaced. The second floor had large windows instead of the standard sized windows found in a home. Bob assumed that was done in the event the second floor was used as store space rather than living quarters. His initial scan of the outside revealed no

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major flaws. The brick could use a pressure wash, but other than that, it looked sound. The name on the window, in large gold letters was: "*The Special Touch: Fine Antiques from Yesterday for Today.*" Not bad, Bob thought. He like the name so much, his initial thought was that he would keep it.

Bob stepped closer to the main display window to take a look at the pieces inside: a maple china hutch, an English mahogany linen press, circa 1810, and a pair of Victorian parlor lamps. Smaller items included a Doulton Bursalem vase, circa 1882, and a Moorcroft pottery pomegranate vase, circa 1923. With just a cursory examination, his mind noted that these were not low end priced items. If all of the stock were of similar quality, this would indeed be the deal of a lifetime.

"Let's go in." Tony said as he retrieved a key from his pocket. As he slid the key into the lock and turned the handle, the door opened with a loud creak. "Need some oil there," he said.

"No. That's part of the atmosphere and deliberately cultivated," Bob said. "Hearing the creak, a sound associated with old wood, gets you into the mindset for looking at antiques."

"Oh. I get it. Pretty sharp idea," Tony chuckled.

Bob stepped into the store and was greeted by the smell he loved; aged oak and cherry. As he quickly glanced around the area, the shop appeared not to have been touched since the previous owner had walked out the door. In fact, it almost looked as if, given a mild cleaning, it could open for business today. He toured the two large display rooms, seeing the same quality of merchandise he had seen in the window. The storage area was fairly empty with only a piece or two tucked away, everything else was on the showroom floor.

"I had a quick appraisal done on the inventory," Tony said as he handed the list to Bob. "I'm not much into antiques, but this stuff adds up really quick if you know what I mean."

"The good stuff always does," Bob agreed. He took the list and performed a cursory scan of it. He had been right

about the quality of the pieces; the inventory value was around twenty-five thousand dollars.

“Let’s take a look upstairs,” Tony said.

Bob folded the list and placed it in his pocket. They proceeded up a stairwell from the small office on the main floor. The wooden steps creaked as they ascended. They emerged onto a landing that appeared to be the center or main room of the upstairs area. It was sparsely furnished with a sofa, coffee table, and a lamp on a small end table.

“That door leads into the bedroom, your bathroom is there,” Tony pointed to his right. “Kitchen is there,” he said as he pointed behind them. “A small office is there,” he said pointing in front of them.

Bob’s eyes scanned the old furniture. They weren’t antiques, just furniture that had seen better days. The sofa was so worn that the fabric was nearly translucent. “What’s this?” Bob asked as his eye caught sight of the different color fabric of something that was stuffed into a corner of the sofa. He walked toward the object that protruded between the cushion and the sofa arm. Grabbing the fabric he pulled it out. The oddly shaped item was a small stuffed doll, about the same size of Bob’s hand. It wasn’t anything fancy; in fact it looked like it had been made with an inexperienced hand. The sewing was very crude. The face had buttons which didn’t match for the eyes and nose, the mouth was just stitching of some sort. But it was the way the stitching looked that caught Bob’s attention. It appeared as if the mouth was sewn shut.

“Some kind of doll, I guess,” Tony said as he peered at it in Bob’s hands. “Certainly not anything fancy; rather crude in fact. I hope they didn’t pay much for it.”

“Yes,” Bob agreed, “the former owner, Mr...?”

“Caruso,” Tony offered.

“Did Mr. Caruso have any children?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think he was even married, but these days—who knows.”

Bob continued to look at the doll. The stitches that represented the mouth; something bothered him about that but he couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

Tony Ruggiero

“I’ll give it to the city attorney,” Tony said. “I think he’s handling the affairs and if there were any children or anything, I assume he would know.” Tony reached for the doll. But Bob hesitated for a few seconds in giving it to him. “Is something wrong?” Tony asked.

“No, of course not. Here you go,” Bob said as he handed the doll to Tony. Tony placed it into the soft side briefcase that was slung over his shoulder. Bob still couldn’t understand his own momentary fascination with the odd object. He quickly dismissed it as his thoughts returned to the shop. “Let’s finish checking out the place.”

Bob toured the remaining rooms, trying to contain an enthusiasm that was about to explode. It was perfect. The living area furnishings left a lot to be desired—it was apparent the previous owner wasn’t much on comfort—but he could replace them with his own. Bob found himself smiling. *This place has an aura or something to it. This is exactly what I have always imagined having. A dream come true.*

“You’re not superstitious are you?” Tony asked, driving Bob from his thoughts.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” confused at the sudden change in conversation, Bob didn’t understand what Tony was trying to say.

“The last owner being killed out in front,” Tony said as he nodded in the direction of the front of the building.

“I thought you said it was an accident?”

“It was. But some people are funny about that kind of thing. I’d just thought I ask. Small towns are like that. Superstitious.” Bob looked at Tony with a perplexed look, Tony continued. “Hey don’t get me wrong, I’m trying to sell you the place. I just ask because you seem like a nice enough guy; I want you to be happy, but I know you’re not from a small town back in Virginia. Here it’s a different way of life.”

“I want it,” Bob said to Tony with such firmness in his voice that there could be no doubt. He looked around the main floor of the store again, feeling a powerful longing to have the place. “Now tell me about this other issue with the property.”

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Coven

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