

Chapter Eight

When the Lady's Moon is new, kiss the hand to her times two.

"The Rede of the Wicca"

As the door closed, Sharon held her hand to her mouth as she stifled a laugh. She had been quite amused by Mr. Whitworth's analogy of his relationship with the store and not her. Her sideward glance at some of the other members revealed they, too, had found it amusing even though they didn't know about their brief encounter yesterday.

She remembered their chance meeting yesterday as he stood pondering the *Psychic Connection Shop*. She reexamined her thoughts, remembering the odd moment of attraction she had for this stranger. Knowing this wasn't her usual manner, she discarded the thought quickly. But now, after hearing him speak, he revealed a personality she found both amusing and interesting. His obvious shyness, the way in which he avoided her gaze and his enthusiasm toward the store and town caused her to smile. It was obvious he wanted the store very badly, and even casting her own thoughts of possibly personal interest aside, he was easily the best candidate and maybe in more ways than one...her thoughts dictated firmly. She chastised herself for the thought as she now felt herself blush and squirm in her chair as if the temperature rose abruptly. She wondered if anyone else noticed anything peculiar about her actions.

"Well," Clyde began as always in his usual hurried demeanor. His words returned her to the present. "I think Mr. Whitworth would be a nice addition to our town."

The rest voiced their agreement except she noted that Chief Daniels was silent. "Martin?" she asked. "What do you think?"

"I have mixed feelings about him. Part of me says yes, but something else inside is urging caution."

"Is it the driving accident?" Joe Robinson, the transportation director asked.

"No, I don't think so. That was a long time ago. He's obviously still bothered by it, which I can understand. He was very young, and I'm sure many of us in this room can recall something foolish we did at that age. If he wasn't still bothered by it, I might have reservations about him." He paused for a few moments. "I keep wondering if it's the poppet thing. Did anyone else sense anything like that?"

"What do you mean?" Clyde asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm confusing his enthusiasm for something else. It's like he seems driven or obsessed about the idea."

"Don't forget Martin, the poppet was destroyed last night," Sharon began, "any spells attached to it were dispersed with the object."

"True," Martin agreed. "But if black magick is at work, some of the rules that we know may be changed or altered from what we're accustomed to. If someone had seen him yesterday, we could have had—some sort of comparison to his normal or untouched aura before he encountered the poppet."

"I spoke with him briefly yesterday," Sharon said and immediately felt unduly scrutinized as the members turned toward her with a questioning look.

"When?" Martin asked.

"It was early afternoon. I was walking toward here when I saw him standing near the Psychic Connection Shop. He looked as if he were lost, so I asked him if he needed any help. We spoke for maybe a few minutes and then I left. He never mentioned anything about being here to

look at the store. The only thing he asked me was where the coffee shop was. I assumed he was another tourist."

"That was where he was meeting the realtor," Clyde added, "so he couldn't have been to the store yet and encountered the poppet's influence."

"Did you sense anything from him then?" Martin asked, "anything that might indicate that he had been tampered with in any way?"

Sharon thought about the flash of attraction but said nothing for a few seconds as she remembered their brief exchange. "No. I didn't sense anything odd from him." She understood Martin's concern. It was in his nature to be curious and question everything, he was a cop after all.

"After what we saw last night," she began, "the supposed images of the dragon that was summoned and used against Joe Caruso, I can understand your concern, and I agree with it. If, and remember I'm saying if, we have no physical proof that the removal of Caruso from the store and town was an act of premeditated violence, we will have to treat it as a random act. We just don't know. In any case, no matter who is selected to take over the store and join our town, he would have to be watched for a while to make sure there were no ulterior motives involved. In the best interests of filling the vacancy, Mr. Whitworth appears to be the best choice we have. What do you think?"

"You're right, Sharon," Martin agreed. "Maybe I'm just a little jumpy about the whole thing. If everyone else thinks Mr. Whitworth is okay, I say we go with him."

"So it's agreed?" Sharon asked as she scanned the faces of the council members. Each person in return nodded or voiced approval. Sharon smiled, relieved that the interview process

would go no further and that Mr. Whitworth would be around to...continue to amuse and interest her.

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As the door closed shut behind him, Bob blew out a large breath of air.

Good going Bob, you had to mess it up in the end with that dumb—dumb statement about the relationship thing with the store.

He moved toward the lonely chairs in the empty hallway. He felt so tired from the tension of the interview that when he sat he almost fell into the chair. He rubbed his eyes with his fingers as he replayed the other parts of the interview. With the exception of his last remark, he thought the majority of the interview had gone pretty well. He had surprised himself with the confidence in which he had spoken about the accident. Normally he would freeze up and stammer his way through it, but today it was if he had...had help.

When the accident had come up during the interview, he felt the images that haunted him time and time again about to assault him, but the woman from his dream appeared next to him in his car and did what he could never do: she covered his eyes from seeing what was going to happen. He wondered how or why it happened, but he knew there was no logical explanation for it. Right here and now, he saw no reason to question the event, no matter how bizarre it may have been, if it helped him get the store. And the Mayor—Sharon Robins, what were the odds that out of the few people he had met yesterday in town, she would have been one of them? Pretty long odds probably. He found that her not quite shy, but not forward, personality interested him.

That made two interesting women he had met in a span of a few hours yesterday.

Julia, he didn't know her last name, whom he had bought the painting from, was very forthright in her comments and actions. In contrast was Sharon Robbins, the Mayor, whose personality was business-like and reserved. They were opposites, but both interesting in their own way.

Just as he was beginning to think that this town could be home for him, he felt the usual premonition of dread attack and rip at the pleasantness of his thoughts. He only hoped that his wishes to get the store would not be dashed by the promise of "we'll get back to you" which really meant "see you later." And the thought of going back to face old man Cartwright and his you'll do it or somebody else will attitude, made his stomach churn with revulsion.

"Mr. Whitworth," a voice called. Bob looked up and saw the attorney, Clyde Sanderson, had come back out of the room either very quietly or he had been so involved in his own thoughts he hadn't heard him. *Moment of truth.*

Bob tried to scrutinize the man's expression for any telltale signs of a decision, but all he saw was the neutrality that most attorneys possessed. "Can you come back in for a moment?"

"Of course," Bob answered.

More questions? What else could they want to know?

He slowly rose from the chair and moved toward the door that Clyde held open for him. His steps were unsteady, his feet feeling heavy, and he had to concentrate to place one in front of the other.

Come on...get in there...either way it's almost over.

He entered the room that he had left only minutes ago—although it felt as if a lifetime had passed for him as he waited. His gaze immediately went to the Mayor, Sharon Robbins. Her eyes met his, but her expression revealed nothing of what was about to happen.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Whitworth," Clyde said as he closed the door. Bob sat, the creaking of the chair sounding very loud to him in the silence of the large room. He tried to swallow, but found his mouth had become so dry that he couldn't. He knew they were going to say they were sorry and that he wasn't exactly what they were looking for...but another part of him...the part that had helped him through the rough moment when the accident came up, that part told him that they were going to tell him yes. He felt confused. Which is it going to be? He remembered the help the woman in his thoughts had given him...would it go further?

"Mr. Whitworth," Sharon began, forcing Bob to clear his mind of his thoughts. Her voice cut through the silence as if an explosion had gone off right next to him. He felt himself grip the sides of his chair, his palms sweating—he held his breath. "After careful consideration, the council has decided that you are the best person to take over the store. Congratulations and welcome to Putnam."

The room began to spin in front of him. Gray splotches flashed across his vision. Breathe. Breathe. He sucked in a gasp of air fighting the need to cough. He lowered his head to try and help his hyperventilating. Breathe.

"Mr. Whitworth, are you all right?" He heard Clyde's voice ask.

"Y-e-s," he said in a harsh gasp still not looking up. Then in a few seconds he added in an uneven voice, "a moment please." A glass of cool water was placed in his hand. Bob looked up and saw Chief Daniels standing next to him.

"Take a drink, it'll help," he said. Bob managed to take a few small sips. It did help, and in less than a minute, his breathing became steady and regular. As he glanced up, he noted that Mayor Sharon Robbins was on one side and Chief Daniels was on the other.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. It must have been from the excitement of getting the store. My breath just kind of left me when you were talking. You did say that I did get the store?"

"Yes I did, but if I had known that you were going to react so strongly, I would have found a gentler way to tell you," Sharon said as she smiled. A few chuckles came from the rest of the members. "Are you sure you are okay?"

"Yes. I don't usually get that nervous or have that type of reaction. I'm sorry."

"Nonsense," she said. "We're touched that you feel so strongly about it," she said as she placed her hand on his shoulder. "You're sure you are okay? We can have the doctor take a look at you."

"No thanks. I'm fine." Now that his breathing was back to normal, he smelled the scent of soap on her skin from her closeness of her hand. It was a mild scent, not perfumed, but the smell of something like pine or evergreen.

"Well, I think we're done here then," she said as she removed her hand and turned to the rest of the members. He felt a momentary pang of regret at the removal of her hand. "Clyde probably has some paperwork for you...he always has something that needs to be filled out. Right Clyde?"

"Just a few things. I'm sure Mr. Whitworth would like to get that out of the way as soon as possible if he feels up to it."

"Sure. The sooner the better," Bob agreed.

"Well, congratulations again," she said as she offered her hand. He took it and shook it gently. The skin of her hand was smooth, almost silky in texture. He felt the urge to take her hand in both of his so he could sample the smoothness further, but the thought left him as her hand relinquished its hold on his.

"Thanks," he said.

"How soon until you move up here?" Sharon asked.

"As soon as possible depending on the paperwork processing," Bob said as he looked toward Clyde.

"Shouldn't take more than a week—ten days at the most since we're handling everything right here in town," Clyde spoke as if the answer had been staged in his thoughts and ready to come out on demand.

"That's great," Sharon said with an enthusiasm that surprised Bob. As he looked at her curiously, Chief Daniels stepped up to him and offered his hand. "Congratulations. Clyde has all the council members' names, addresses and telephone numbers if you should need anything. Just give us a call."

"Appreciate it, Chief Daniels," Bob said as he shook his hand.

"First things first," the Chief began, "Rule number one..."

Rule number one—don't piss off the witches, Bob's mind filled in from his conversation earlier with Andrea, but he didn't say anything.

"...we go by first names here, not a whole lot of call for titles. You can call me Martin."

"Great, I'm Bob," he said.

"Just call me Sharon," the mayor added in.

"So what's rule number two?" Bob asked without thinking.

"Rule two," Martin began, "rule two is go back to rule number one. We try to keep everything simple here. Right, Sharon?"

Bob watched as Sharon and Martin glanced at each other. It was only for a few seconds, but he saw that they were close in some way. Not romantically, but more like friends for a long time and perhaps having the same goal or cause in their lives.

"That's right," Sharon chimed in as she glanced at her watch. "Where has this day gone, it's almost three already. Well, I must be going. Nice meeting you Bob, and look forward to the grand re-opening."

"Same here. Pleasure meeting you," Bob said.

Sharon turned toward Clyde. "I'm out of here to unless you need me for anything Clyde?"

"No. We won't be long either," Clyde answered.

"We'll see you Bob," Martin said as he moved toward the door with Sharon.

Bob nodded at Sharon and Martin as they left. He particularly wanted to see if she looked at him...in an interesting way. He saw her eyes dart back to his for a few seconds and she smiled. He smiled back and the door closed behind them.

"Okay Bob, ready?" Clyde asked.

"I'm ready for anything," Bob said as he felt almost beaming with anticipation. Things are finally going my way.

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"That's it," Clyde said as he placed the last form into the vanilla folder. "I'll drop them off at the bank tomorrow morning."

"You don't anticipate any problems?" Bob asked.

"No, not at all. Everything seems fine. If I were you, I'd start packing and getting ready to move. The paperwork should go through in a couple of days, and you'll have the keys in your hand in about the same amount of time."

"Great," Bob said as he rubbed his eyes. It had been a long day...but a good day. He glanced at his watch, almost five.

"You're not heading back tonight are you?" Clyde asked.

"No, in the morning." He remembered the note from Cartwright to be in bright and early and that was a phone call he had to make tonight. He could just blow it off, but that wasn't like him. As much as the old man was a pain in the ass, he still would make the phone call and tell him that not only was he not going to be there in the morning, but that he wasn't coming back at all. He felt a certain satisfaction pass over him and smiled.

"That's a shit eating grin if I ever saw one," Clyde said.

"Inside joke. I was thinking about how I'm going to break the news to my boss."

"Not a good relationship?" Clyde asked as he placed the folder into his briefcase and fastened the clasps shut.

"That's putting it nicely." Bob answered. He assumed they were finished. He rose and offered his hand. "I sincerely appreciate all the help, Clyde. You can't believe how much I'm looking forward to this."

"My pleasure. I'll call you in a day or so to let you know how it's all going, but I imagine that you can have the keys by the end of the week. I know the bank manager, and seeing how the town is backing everything, this should be a walk in the park."

"That sounds wonderful," Bob said. "I'll look forward to hearing from you. Take care."

"You too."

Bob left the office and headed to the parking lot. When he reached his car he unlocked it. The first thing he did was check to make sure the painting was all right. He inspected its wrapping and was satisfied it was okay. Next he sat in the driver's seat and let out a long sigh of satisfaction and relief. He was exhausted, yet he felt exhilarated at the same time. He was reminded by his stomach's loud and obnoxious growl that he was hungry. Remembering he had only had the donut this morning and had skipped lunch, his hunger was quickly justified. A good meal—a celebratory meal was what he needed to end this perfect day.

He started the car up and drove back toward Main Street. Both pedestrian and vehicle traffic was still quite high considering the lateness of the day. His progress was slow, but he didn't care, his hurrying days were over. He couldn't help but stop in front of the store again for a few minutes and just stare at it. He was already getting ideas of how he would change the window designs and what items he would place in them to attract people into the store.

His painting would go upstairs in the living area. Some things just weren't meant to be shared with everyone. The painting was a private thing...just for him and him alone. He didn't want people touching it or staring at it downstairs. After all, it had attracted him—it had called to him and that kind of relationship was private and ...yes, even intimate.

I won't share it with anyone.

His stomach growled again. He remembered seeing a restaurant at the other end of Main Street. It would probably be easier to just leave the car and walk from here, he thought. As he got out of the car, he rechecked the doors of the car to make sure they were locked. Satisfied, he began walking toward the other end of Main Street. In less than two minutes, he saw the sign for the Town Inn Bar and Grill.

Several people were waiting to be seated and he joined the line.

"Well, hello there," a feminine voice called.

He turned to his left and saw Andrea, the woman from the store, Simple Elegance, where he had bought the painting.

"So how did the interview go?" she asked.

"Oh—great. Looks like I have my shop in your fair town."

"Well congratulations," she said with an honest smile. She looked at the line in front of him. "If you're waiting to eat, I have a table for two and there's only me."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not. I haven't even ordered or anything yet."

He hated eating alone—and the company would be a nice change. "Well in that case, yes. I'd love to join you."

"Follow me," she said and stepped into the dining area. She led him to a table by the window that looked out onto Main Street.

"You closed early today?" he asked, remembering that there were still quite a few people out there.

"Close early? No way! My husband, Mike, is watching the place. I was just so hungry...and bitchy as he says when I am hungry, so he sent me over here to eat. He had something earlier."

Bob suddenly became self-conscious about sitting with a woman in a strange place where he didn't know the people like she did. This was a small town and he didn't want to start off on the wrong foot—give people the wrong impression before he even got settled. "Aren't you

worried people will see you eating with a strange man?" He said it in a lighthearted manner and then wondered if it was too forward of a statement to make. But it was too late to take it back.

"In this town? No. Everyone knows me. And you're not a stranger—you're a fellow shop owner now." She said it in as relaxed of a manner as he had. He immediately felt comfortable.

"Yeah—I guess I am," he said in a dreamy manner, relishing the sound of the words.

The waitress appeared at their table to take their orders. "What can I get you?" Her blond hair was tied back, but strands had come loose and dangled in front of her face. When she spoke, the strands puffed as her breath brushed them aside. She looked tired from what apparently had been a long day. Bob decided it would not be a good time to be indecisive and quickly scanned the menu and decided upon the special, the T-bone steak. Why not? Live a little...

"Hi, Sarah," Andrea said to the waitress. "How's business?"

"Hey Andrea, long day." The waitress looked at Bob questioningly.

"Sarah, this is Bob Whitworth, he's taking over The Special Touch store."

"Pleased to meet you," she said. Her harried demeanor changed somewhat as Andrea's pronouncement that he was not someone she needed to maintain a front for. She looked around the restaurant as she spoke. "It's like everyone wants to eat at the same time...I wonder if they are all telepathically connected or something when it comes to hunger."

They all laughed at the joke and stares from nearby tables looked questioningly toward them. "So have you decided?"

Bob indicated for Andrea to go ahead. "I'll have the special—the T-bone."

"Make it two," Bob chimed in.

"Two specials—it'll be a little while. I'll try and put a rush on them for you."

"Thanks," Andrea said as the waitress turned and circled to another table. Bob watched as she stopped at three more tables before placing the order in for the kitchen. "So what's your plan?" Andrea asked bringing his attention back.

"Plan?"

"When are you moving in?"

"Oh...as soon as possible; could be as early as next weekend if everything goes right. I'm surprised how fast things can move when the Town Council is involved."

Andrea chuckled briefly.

"What? What's so amusing?" he asked.

"Oh sorry. But you're right. They can make things happen when they want to. They are a very...proactive group. But keep in mind...it works both ways."

"I don't follow."

"When it's something they think is good, it's like you said, they move quickly. However, if it's something they don't believe in, they can stonewall with the best of them. They make no bones about it when it comes to letting everyone know that they maintain a very tight control on what happens here."

"So you don't like the way they operate?"

"I didn't say that," she said quickly. She took a cursory glance around the restaurant. "I just have my...concerns."

"Well if a lot of people felt that way, they can always be voted out, right?"

"Yes that's true—but it never happens. I think the majority of them have been in office for about 8-10 years. It's almost as if they have a way of convincing even the most adamant dissenter that their choices or decisions are the better ones in the long run."

"Sounds like effective leadership."

"That's one possibility," she added cautiously.

"But you don't believe that?"

"I'm not sure," she said as she looked away from Bob and at the other people sitting around them.

Bob was puzzled by her aloofness. He saw no harm in a proactive town council. If they were really screwed up, they would have been voted out or heading down that path in the near future. The people he had met during his interview all seemed legitimately concerned about deciding what was best for the town. Maybe he was being too nosy—perhaps there was some personal reason she felt that way. A change in topic seemed appropriate.

"So what does your husband do—for a living? Does he work the store also?"

"No," she answered. Bob thought he saw a look of relief on her face that the subject had changed. "Mike works for the shipbuilding industry in New London. The store is mostly my bailiwick. He helps on the weekends and with some of the buying. It's kind of a hobby—"

"Here you go," the waitress Sarah said as she placed their dishes of food in front of them.

"Thank you," Bob said as he inhaled the aroma of the cooked meat. It looked and smelled great. He hadn't realized how hungry he had been until now when the smell of the cooked meat spurred his hunger.

They ate and talked about the town and business. As they sipped coffee, Bob looked at his watch and was surprised to see it was nearly 6 PM.

"Wow, I didn't realize it was so late."

"Me neither," Andrea said as she checked the time also. "Mike will think I took off on him or something." Bob looked at her, concerned about her statement. "Only kidding," she added.

"Plans for the rest of the day?" she asked.

"I'm heading back at the crack of dawn to Virginia. But I have to call my old boss tonight and tell him I won't be there in the morning."

"Why don't you just tell him you're through at the same time?"

"Eh...that's not like me. I'll tell him I'll work up until the last minute if he wants me to."

Sarah returned with the check, which Bob took from her. Andrea began to protest, but he just waved her to silence with his hand. "Don't bother, this was my treat—after all you saved me from the long waiting line to get a table. You can get the tab next time—okay?"

"Would it matter if I argued?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Okay then, and thank you."

Bob placed the money on the table, ensuring he left a sizeable tip for Sarah. It could never hurt to have a waitress remember you the next time you came in, especially if you're a regular. "You want to come by the store and meet my husband?"

"I'll have to pass. I really do have to get an early start tomorrow. When I come back, maybe we can all have dinner or something."

"Sounds great," she said as they stepped out onto the sidewalk. "Well, congratulations again, and hope to see you soon."

"Thanks, appreciate it."

Andrea crossed the street and walked to her store. Bob headed to his car where he had left it near his store. As he approached his car, he saw a white piece of paper had been stuck under the wiper blade. He removed it and unfolded it thinking it was some kind of advertisement. As he studied the paper, he saw that it was handwritten, not a copy.

Congratulations on getting the store. News travels fast in a small town—whether good or bad. Remember we have an agreement. I'll expect you to live up to your end. Julia.

"Well I'll be damned," he said. He found himself smiling over the fact that this woman had gone to this length to learn he had gotten the store—and to put the note on his car. Combine that with the interesting Mayor—Sharon—and this new change of life for him, it was looking better by the minute.

He folded up the piece of paper and placed it in the glove box. He drove off toward the interstate and the hotel humming a tune *Welcome to the Hotel California...*