

Chapter Five

To bind the spell every time, let the spell be spoke in rhyme.

The Rede of the Wicca

Bob walked along Main Street glancing into the windows of the shops. He had stopped in three shops so far and engaged in casual conversation with some of the people. They all seemed friendly enough. The one thing he noted in his conversations was that they were all very supportive of their town and the other shop owners. It seemed a very cooperative spirit, which Bob thought was good thing, and there was no apparent animosity toward other shop owners about pricing or types of merchandise they carried.

As he continued to walk down Main Street, he decided to cross the street to the area where he couldn't see the storefronts earlier because of the trees that lined the sidewalk. He casually browsed the windows of the storefronts. A painting in the window of one of the shops caught his eye and he stopped to take a closer look.

I remember this!

The background was completely black. In the center of the painting was a naked woman, only her back side depicted, standing in the center of a spotlight...no not a spotlight, but a cone of light, he corrected himself. Her arms were upraised, her fingers reaching upward. Her feet were spread wide emphasizing the contours of her taugt legs and thighs. Her hair was dark, brown or black, and was midway down her back.

My dream. The woman from my dream is in the painting.

As Bob continued to study the painting in the window, two arms reached down and lifted the painting up. The two arms led to a woman in jeans and a sport shirt with the name, Simple

Elegance, embroidered on the pocket. She looked up and saw Bob and smiled at him. She had red hair and a fair complexion. Her smile was warm and friendly and Bob smiled back.

She motioned to the picture with a questionable look. Bob pointed to it and then to his eyes indicating he wanted to take a closer look. She pointed toward the door and motioned for him to come in. Bob nodded and headed toward the door that led into the shop. The name Simple Elegance was on the door, below it read: Treasures for the Heart and Home. Catchy phrase, Bob thought as he pushed the door open and entered the shop.

"Hello, my name is Andrea," the woman said. "Welcome to Simple Elegance.

"Hi. I'm Bob Whitworth," he said and shook her hand.

"You were really looking intently at the painting," Andrea said. "I felt bad about moving it. I've placed it over here, would you like to look at it?"

"Yes I would. I was walking by and it caught my eye...it's so strange. I had a dream the other day and I could swear I saw a scene just like this." He felt odd telling this perfect stranger about a dream he had, but she seemed very nice. She placed the painting on the floor and leaned it up against the wall. Bob took the few steps to where the painting was and kneeled to look at it.

"You have to buy it then," she said with a hint of humor. "It's fate. You had the dream and now here it is. You were meant to buy it."

"How much is it?" he asked knowing he didn't have much money to play with.

"Well it was four hundred, but it hasn't sold so I was turning it back to the painter. I carry several pieces on a consignment basis."

"Four hundred...ooh boy. That's a little out of my price range, I could afford maybe two hundred," he said as he looked at it again thinking he would really like to have it.

"Well the artist is on her way to pick it up. She should be here in less than thirty minutes. You can see if she would go for that price. Do you have time to wait?"

"Sure," he said.

"Great. How about a soda or some water?"

"No thanks. I'm good."

"So Bob, if you don't mind me asking, are you visiting or shopping this trip?" she asked as she sat down on a high stool next to the register.

"Both I guess," he laughed. "I'm being interviewed by the town council about the shop that recently became vacant."

"The Special Touch, Caruso's place?" she asked.

"That's the one. I've always wanted a place of my own and it's so perfect. But because there are three people interested, we have to be interviewed."

"Well, I wish you luck."

"Thanks," he said. "I hate to impose, but would you mind telling me what you know about the town and the other shops? This is the first time I have been here, and I'd kind of like to get a feel for the place. I've walked around and talked to some of the other owners, and they all seem pretty nice."

"Sure, I don't mind. Have a seat," she said as she pointed to a chair to the side of hers.

"I really appreciate you taking the time."

"No problem. Let's see, well I've been here about two years now. This is my first store also. It's an interesting place. The town was incorporated in the 1800s, which is younger than a lot of the surrounding areas. It has seen its share of fires, floods, and hurricanes, and of course the usual abandonment for the malls. This downtown area used to have the turn of the century

department stores, clothing, furniture, and shoe stores; the usual stuff you find in every small town. I think the bookstore used to be a soda shop at one time. The little playhouse is close to a hundred years old. But, over the years it has changed to suit today's shoppers, now Putnam is Antiques."

"So I noticed," Bob agreed. That is just about what every store carries."

"Right, but you probably also saw that everyone has a unique niche in the market."

"Yes, I did," he agreed. He remembered noting that earlier. It was good to know his observation had been correct.

"If you count all the small dealers, there's quite a few. Add ample parking and restaurants, and you have a town the tourists love to come to and hopefully spend their money."

"Quite a bit different than the bigger areas, isn't it?"

"You bet," she agreed with a large smile. "I guess the big adjustment for me was that it was a bit of a cultural shock coming here; it's the type of small town where everyone kind of knows everyone else's business, if you know what I mean?"

Bob nodded. "Yeah, I know."

Andrea continued. "But don't get me wrong, I don't mean it in a bad way. It's just that news travels fast here and because everyone talks to each other...well it just gets around."

"That would be something different for me. I was born in Norfolk, Virginia, and now I'm living in Smithfield, Virginia. I work in an antique-reproduction shop. It's not a large city but pretty big. What about this town council, a good bunch?"

"Oh yes. The mayor and the rest of the council members take a very active role with the shop owners. They realize that commerce is very important in a small town like this. We have

monthly meetings with the council and raise any issues that are of concern to us. Most times they take care of them or work with us in resolving any problems."

"Do you have many problems here?"

"Not many. There is an occasional dispute between owners. You may have already seen that most shops deal in the same line of merchandise. There are one or two shops that are exclusive in what they carry, and that's because no one else wants it."

"Yes, I saw that," Bob agreed. He remembered the Psychic Connection Store.

"We try and stay in our little niches, so to speak, but every once in a while, some owners will get into it over some item. It happened to me once, another store down the way claimed that I was carrying something she was."

"How was it resolved?"

"Well if we can't settle it ourselves, the council will arbitrate and decide. In this case the council decided the items were different enough to not warrant any action."

"That is certainly different than a typical economic market system. Usually pricing resolves the issue."

"This is not like most places," she said with emphasis. "Remember I said it is small town. You have to remember, people who own shops here are looking for more than just making a buck. Most of us make a decent living, not phenomenal, but okay. It all depends on the tourists. But that's not what it's about...I don't know how I can explain it...it's the way of life we like so much here. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, I guess it does," Bob answered although he still found the system of arbitration odd. "The Psychic Connection; is that one of the shops on its own?"

"Yes. They do a pretty good business too."

"Is there really a market for that kind of stuff?" Bob asked, thinking that it was merely a novelty.

Andrea smiled and laughed. "Don't you know where you are? This is New England, witch and ghost capital of the United States, or so they say. I think New Orleans is second with its ghosts and voodoo stuff, maybe even the vampire corner since Anne Rice did that *Interview With a Vampire* book."

"I didn't know that," he said.

"Don't feel bad. I didn't know it either when I first arrived. Here, you have the all the religions, including Wicca. I would guess that the numbers for the different denominations are somewhat evenly spread, however, many suspect that there are a lot more witches that don't advertise, if you know what I mean?"

"Why is that?" he asked.

"A lot of people still react the same to witches and witchcraft today as they would have in the 1950's so they tend to keep their religious beliefs to themselves. Most of them are harmless regular folk, and you wouldn't know who was a witch and who wasn't. Me—I get along with pretty much everyone."

"You said, most. Do you some reservations?"

"Hey, there are bad apples on every tree, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I guess that's true. I can swallow the Wiccan religion thing, but witches...no I don't think so." He gave Andrea a serious look. "You don't really believe the witch thing?"

"There have been some stories about things happening around town caused by spells being performed, stuff like that. I've never seen anything...first hand. But there's even been talk about Caruso—"

"Andrea?" a woman's voice called.

Andrea turned toward the voice. "Over here, Julia," she called back.

Bob turned toward the voice as the woman stepped into view. She was tall and slim, wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, and sunglasses. Her hair was dark, most of it covered with a ball cap. Her complexion was light and there were splotches of pink as if she had applied some powder in a hurry. She glanced at Bob curiously for several seconds and then looked back toward Andrea.

"I'm sorry," she began, "I didn't mean to interrupt. I just came by to pick up the painting."

"You may not have to pick it up after all," Andrea said as she turned toward Bob. "Julia this is Bob Whitworth. He's interested in the painting."

Bob stood and offered his hand. "Hello," Bob said. "I have to admit that it did catch my eye."

"Thank you," she said as she shook his hand very briefly. Her grip was so light that Bob barely felt her hand.

"Yes," Bob continued, "your painting...I know this is going to sound weird and all, but I do believe that I had a dream with elements very similar to the painting.

"Really?" Julia said, her tone of voice changing to one of interest. "That's interesting." Her attention was fully on Bob now.

"I told him it was fate, Julia." Andrea added. "He has to buy the painting now."

"I would love to own it, but would you be willing to take two hundred for it?" Bob asked. He wished he could see the woman's eyes behind the sunglasses to see if she was thinking he was ludicrous with his low offer.

"Well...I—"

"I don't mean to be insulting or anything by such an offer," Bob blurted out, "but honestly I like the painting, but I'm being realistic, two hundred is as high as I can go. Once I get...or rather if I get situated in town with the store, maybe we could work out some kind of deal with some of your other art."

"Excuse me?" Julia said, "I don't understand?"

"What Bob means Julia," Andrea began, "is that he is trying to get the store Joe Caruso had. But he won't know until the council decides. Apparently they have three offers to evaluate."

"Oh I understand now," Julia said. She appeared to contemplate what Andrea had said for a few seconds, and then as if she had reached an understanding with her own indecision, turned back to Bob. "Two hundred—you said?"

"Yes." Bob answered. He was starting to feel ashamed for his low offer, but she hadn't said no—yet. He studied what he could see of her features, searching for any type of sign or feeling, but he saw none. His eyes moved from her and toward the painting that was resting next to the wall beside her.

"Hold out your hand," Julia said.

"Excuse me?" Bob asked. He had heard her request clear enough, but he didn't understand it.

"Your hand, hold it out. I want to see something," Julia explained.

Bob slowly raised his hand, and then offered it to her. Julia grasped it firmly inside of her own hands. Bob noticed that her grip was in stark contrast to the one she had used earlier when they had shaken hands. This one was much firmer. She turned his hand palm side up and studied it for several seconds. Bob glanced at Andrea who smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"Ah—what are—" Bob began.

"Shhh," Julia ushered. She held his hand within one of hers, and with her other hand, traced her fingernail along his palm traveling along the lines that traversed it.

She's reading my palm? Bob thought as her finger moved along his flesh. He felt a series of chills run along his spine; goose bumps came and went several times as her finger continued. He was beginning to feel embarrassed and glanced toward the door of the shop to see if anyone was coming in. Although he felt awkward by this surprised action, Bob also felt something else. In a way, he thought this strange woman and what she was doing was kind of...well exciting.

"Excuse—"

"Shhh," she told him again. She placed his hand between her two hands and pressed it firmly. The goose bumps Bob had experienced were now replaced with warmth. That part he liked. Again he was surprised at the force of the pressure she applied. The heat began to increase, and he felt his hand begin to sweat against hers. Just as he began to feel self conscious about it, the sensation of heat was gone. She removed her hands, allowing Bob to retrieve his hand back. Bob looked at his hand expecting to see droplets of sweat, but there was none. His hand was dry.

Julia walked over to the painting and kneeled in front of it. She placed her hands on the canvas for several seconds. Bob saw her lips move but no sound crossed her lips, at least not any that he could hear. He was about to ask her if she was okay when she suddenly stood and faced him.

"Okay, two hundred it is," she said in a matter of fact tone as if nothing odd had just occurred. "And with future consideration of consignment for some of my art work when...if you get the store."

"Ah—deal." Bob blurted, surprised by her sudden decision, but happy he would get the painting. "Now how about telling me what that hand thing was all about."

"Just wanted to get a feel for what kind of person you are...that's all. I wouldn't make a deal with someone I couldn't trust. The painting and you have things in common—a perfect match. People don't believe that a painting can *change* a person's outlook, but I think you and the painting will change together—again something in common."

"In common? Changing? I don't—"

Bob's digital watch beeped at the hour. Julia looked at her own watch. "Well, I have to run. It's been a pleasure doing business with you Mr. Whitworth. I look forward to working with you very soon. Take care of *our* painting."

"Of course, I mean yes to both, and please call me Bob," he said.

"Okay, then Bob it is," Julia said and for the first time, she smiled. Then she turned to Andrea. "I'll come by in a day or so Andrea. Bye."

"So long, Julia," Andrea said.

Julia turned and hurried from the store. Bob watched with a keen interest that surprised him as Julia hurriedly departed. Thoughts of the woman in the dream and the similarities to the way Julia moved haunted his thoughts as did the erotic effects that both had upon him.

"Well congratulations Bob, looks like you have a painting for two hundred," Andrea said.

"Yes, it appears so. But can you please tell me what all of that was about?" he asked as he handed her his credit card. "In common and changing. She was so...I don't know, cryptic about it."

Andrea swiped the card and handed it back. While she waited for the charge to process, she began to wrap the painting in brown paper. "You remember what we were talking about earlier...about the witches?"

"Yes."

"Well Julia is a witch. She doesn't try and hide it like a lot of others. She's right out in the open if you ask her."

"And that hand thing?"

"I guess she was doing what she said, seeing if she could trust you. I don't really believe in all of the things I hear about witches, but I know quite a few folks around here who believe in these things. But hey, whatever the case, she's happy and you're happy. Right?"

"I guess."

"And look, another omen. She must think your going to get the place, that's why she struck the bargain with you."

"Well if that's the case, she's awful trusting. If I get the store I will of course honor my word, but how does she know I'll keep my end of the bargain? It's not like we signed anything."

"Oh she knows you're good for it. Rule number two in this fine community of ours, your word is your contract."

"Of course," Bob agreed. "I think that's a good rule."

Andrea handed Bob his painting, "here you go, your first and hopefully not your last purchase in Putnam."

"Thank you Andrea for everything. It's been both very informative and entertaining."

"Good luck with your interview tomorrow," she said.

"Thanks," Bob said as he placed his hand on the doorknob. He was about to turn it, but stopped. He turned back toward Andrea. "Earlier you said rule number two, what's rule number one?"

"Rule number one is you don't piss off a witch," Andrea said in a terse, yet serious tone. "They're like a dog with a bone that just won't let go."

"Of course not," he answered quickly. Her tone had carried such conviction that it had caught Bob off-guard. He had not subscribed to the whole witch scenario she had described earlier, so he assumed she meant pissing off anybody, especially other storeowners.

"After all," Andrea began her voice returning to her earlier tone, "We all have to get along together."

###

It was near nine in the evening by the time Bob ate and found a hotel for the night. He followed Tony's advice and headed back toward the interstate near exit 96 of I-395 and found the King's Inn at Route 12. It wasn't the Marriott or Hilton, but it was fine for the night.

As he settled into his hotel room, Bob unwrapped the painting and placed it on the low dresser next to the television. He stared at it with amused interest. There was something about it, maybe just the way the light in the room illuminated it, but it looked different somehow. The image was...sharper? *Probably just the light.*

As Bob stared at the painting, he tried to think of any other painting he, or he and his ex-wife, Sarah, had ever bought any. The answer was none. He had bought reprints and lithographs, but never a painting. Such an uncharacteristic move on his part surprised him—and what surprised him even more was that the whole thing had been triggered by a dream. Maybe Andrea was right, perhaps it was fate, karma or whatever you want to call it, but maybe, just maybe it was a sign that things were going to change for the better.

He yawned, stretched backwards over the bed, and heard the crinkling of paper. He reached inside his jacket pocket and found the *Putnam Town Gazette* he'd picked up earlier. He

remembered he'd wanted to see if he could get some feel of the town before the interview tomorrow—along with the information Andrea and Tony had already given him. He unfolded the six page local paper and spread it out on the bed. The front page consisted of two articles, one about a road improvement project outside of town and the other about local school's curriculum being updated. He flipped to the next page, and the first article caught his interest. He read out loud.

"Local store owner killed in accident. On Wednesday, Mr. Joe Caruso, owner of The Special Touch Antique Store, was killed when he stepped out in front of a recreational vehicle on Main Street. Chief Martin Daniels stated that the reason why Mr. Caruso stepped in front of the oncoming vehicle was still unclear, however all indications are that it was an accident. The State Police were called in to assist in the investigation, and after interviewing several eyewitnesses, reached the same conclusion. Lacking any credible evidence to the contrary to indicate foul play, the death has been officially declared an accident. The recreational vehicle was driven by Mr. Edgar Witherspoon, who was understandably shaken by the accident. Mr. Witherspoon has refused to drive the vehicle any further and has had another relative take it home for them."

"Mr. Caruso had been the owner of the antique store for just about one year. He was well-known in the community and will sadly be missed. His burial was held on Sunday and attended mainly by his fellow shop owners. There are no surviving family members."

How the hell could he have not seen an RV coming his way? Maybe he was messed up, drunk or something. Distracted by some thought? Distracted?

The nightmare flashed in his mind; the image of Greg Wainwright being hurtled upward as Bob drove the car into him. *Did Greg Wainwright see me coming? No-No-No—that was...different. He was drunk...it wasn't my fault!*

Joe Caruso was dead...and the store needed a new owner. Bob immediately felt guilty. The thought crept into his mind and he couldn't help but think Mr. Caruso's misfortune was the big break he'd been waiting for. Caruso's death, as ironic as it might be, would become Bob's good fortune if he got the store. *But wasn't that the way life is? Didn't things happen for a reason—both good and bad?* He thought so.

He scanned the remaining pages. Town council meeting, commerce meetings, local craft shows and exhibitions, an article about the closing of the local High School with pictures of the newer and more modern school which was soon to open. New book arrivals at the library, weather forecasts along with Fall and Winter predictions.

When he turned the next page he saw the heading: Dates from the Town Historian. He scanned the article looking for points of interest:

- ❖ Formation of the town in 1855, from the land taken from Pomfret, Thompson, and Killingly.
- ❖ Named for the local Revolutionary War hero, General Israel Putnam.
- ❖ Tragedy strikes in 1955, the Great Flood.
- ❖ Extraordinary comeback of the downtown area which is now thought of as the Antique Capital of Connecticut, and possibly of New England.
- ❖ Town Statistics: population: 8580, area land: 20.3 square miles, police officers: 15.

Seeing nothing of any more interest, the only thing that Bob thought he could do tomorrow before the interview was drive around the town and the surrounding area, maybe walk the stores again to try and get a better feel for the place. He also had to make the dreaded phone call to his boss, Mr. Cartwright, and tell him he wouldn't be there on Monday. That wasn't going

to be fun—he knew the old man would ask questions and read him the riot act for asking for time off without any advance notice. Bob could imagine the cranky old bastard's voice: *"If you don't want to work, just say so. I'll find another asshole to replace you; there are plenty of them out there you know."* Bob forced the old man's voice from his thoughts as he slid off his jeans and shirt and crawled under the covers. He would deal with that tomorrow.

He thought he would be too excited to sleep, but he soon drifted off. He awoke about three hours later; the unfamiliarity of hotel surroundings always seemed to bother him when he was away from home. Half awake and half asleep, he blinked at the brightness of the light from the desk lamp that was still lit, another thing about staying in hotels—he always kept one of the lights on. His eyes still unfocused, he looked away from the light and in the direction of the painting still sitting on the low dresser where he had placed it earlier. As his half opened eyes stared at the woman in the conical sphere of light, he thought he saw her flesh, shiny from drops of moisture covering it, undulate with the movement of muscle. He felt the momentary stirrings of his body; a reaction to the image of the woman's movements and her glistening skin, but it quickly passed as his eyes closed and he drifted back off into a dream.

###

Bob was in his car and approaching the spot where Greg Wainwright would step out in front of him. Having suffered through it so many times before, he knew every nuance of this dream. He tried to move his feet toward the brake—to stop the car before it was too late. But as always, he had no affect on what was to happen. He was doomed to live out the horrible death again and again...

"I can help you," a woman's voice said from beside him in the car.

Bob jumped with surprise. There was not, nor had there ever been, anyone else in the car with him that day. Bob looked toward his right. There was a woman was in the passenger seat.

She was dressed in dark purple—a hooded robe covering her face and casting it in a dark shadow he couldn't see through. "Who are you?"

"I can help you," she said.

"Help me what?" Bob asked, but somehow he knew what she meant. She could put an end to it—this nightmare. "How can—"

"I can." She said it so firmly it rattled his brain with its force. "I can make it go away!"

###

Greg Wainwright took his first unsure step from the sidewalk onto the street between the parked cars—still out of site from the oncoming vehicle.

Another step—Greg belched from the beer—tasting it in his throat. Everything was spinning, his balance teetering as he swayed and pushed off of the car parked in front of him and behind him. His stomach pitched violently as bile filled his mouth. He turned his head and spit it out onto the parked Honda Civic in front of him. Then he turned and took another step.

Greg began to vomit, but instead of turning his head to the side, his loss of coordination caused him to look downward, and he vomited on himself. He stepped out into the street; his continued vomiting acting like propulsion as he tried to run away from it.

###

Bob saw Greg Wainwright emerge from between the two-parked cars. He was running almost directly toward his car. He tried to move his foot, but as it had happened—he couldn't. He froze. "Help me," Bob crooned to his mysterious passenger.

"It's too late," she said calmly. "You're going to kill him—again. You must accept me and trust me."

Greg looked up just as the car struck him. It sent him flying into the air at just the right thrust and angle to smash headfirst into the windshield as the car's momentum carried it forward.

Bob sat perfectly still as he watched Greg Wainwright slide down his windshield, the blood leaving a track eerily resembling a slime trail of a snail or slug. The same feelings of revulsion and fear bolted through him as they had the day it had happened.

"You killed him...again," she said in a matter of fact tone.

Bob flushed with anger. "Are you my tormentor? Here to make me feel guiltier than I already do—if that's even possible?"

"I told you. I can make it stop."

"How? How can you make something that has happened stop? Tell me—damn it!"

"When you're ready to listen, I will tell you." Her image began to fade.

"Wait! Stop! Don't—"

###

Bob lurched up to a sitting position in his bed in the hotel room. "Don't—"

He looked around the room. He was alone. The lamp on the dresser was still on as he had left it, the painting sitting along side of it. He got up and went into the bathroom. He leaned on the sink and ran the water until it was warm, then he soaked a face cloth in the warm water and rung it out. He wiped his face, letting the warmth of the cloth help relax him. When the tears began to flow, he held the cloth to his face.

No more...please. I can't take it anymore. Please God...make it stop. It wasn't my fault. It wasn't my fault. Why am I being punished for so long?

He raised his head and looked at his face in the mirror searching his red, irritated eyes for an answer. "I didn't do anything wrong! It was a God-damned accident!"

He threw the face cloth into the shower, knocking the little bottle of shampoo and conditioner off of the ledge where they had been placed. He stood listening to the sound the little bottles made as they slid around the bathtub until they came to a rest near the drain. He took deep breaths trying to slow his heart from thumping hard in his chest. After a minute or so, his rage and frustration vented, he felt calm enough to leave the bathroom and try and lay back down.

He turned the bathroom light off and headed back to bed. He stopped at the mirror above the dresser and stared at himself in the dim light. His face had some red splotches on it, probably from a combination of the rage and warm cloth he had applied while in the bathroom. He raised his right arm and held it out straight in front of him. The forefinger on his hand pointed at himself in the mirror. "No more. No more of this shit!" he said in a calm, but stern voice. "This is a new chance for me, and I'm not going to let anything or anyone ruin it. I'll do whatever it takes—*whatever it takes*—to get a new start. *I deserve that much!*"

He turned away from the mirror and returned to bed. Sliding under the covers and arranging his pillow comfortably under his head, he exhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and fell quickly asleep.

End of Chapter Five.

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