

Chapter Four

Cast the Circle thrice about to keep all the evil spirits out.

The Rede of the Wiccae

Mayor Sharon Robbins walked over Bridge Street as she headed toward the town hall building. Underneath her she could hear the familiar sounds of the rushing water as the Quinebaug River. She had walked the familiar route every day for the past two years, but today, she found herself automatically acknowledging the friendly greetings of people she passed as she languished in her own thoughts.

She had awoken in a reflective mood this morning and had found herself evaluating her accomplishments in her life. Why this had risen in her thoughts with such a demand for attention, she didn't understand. She assumed though that there was a reason. There was a reason for everything, and she naturally obeyed the calling of her own inner self.

I must be in need of a cleansing of the mind so I can focus on what is coming. The past never goes away no matter how much comes after it.

Whenever she thought about the earlier years, she always skipped over the high school days. There were too many bad memories there that she didn't want to remember, and thought it best to just skip over them.

Best to let those dogs lay where they're buried...if only they would stay buried.

Her parents had moved to Florida after she finished high school. Sharon had refused to go there with them and stayed against their wishes. Her rebellious attitude, as it had been called, had lingered throughout the years that followed, and they hadn't spoken much since then even after several attempts at reconciliation.

Come on Sharon, that's all in the past. Look at what you've accomplished. Look where you are today, not where you were twenty years ago.

College. She successfully completed her Bachelors and Masters in Public Administration—all good things. Things she was proud of. But she also remembered the troubling road she had been on for those first four years.

I was young—and foolish. I thought I knew what love was. I didn't. I was going to get an education outside the classroom as well from inside whether I wanted it or not.

Sharon was a young girl, shy and inward, born and raised in a small town. It's always easy to look back and say why a person does things. That first year of college she needed support and most of all she needed a companion. She married the first man that came along. Joe Robbins. It was a marriage destined to fail from the beginning.

Marriage? It never even got off the ground—heck it never left the back seat of his car. I thought it was so romantic then—I never saw the rest of it coming until it was too late.

Through the first year of college, they explored each other, first what they thought was love and intimacy along with the usual alcohol and drug experimentation. It was a fun time for two people without any inhibitions or ambitions; a time where things didn't matter except for having fun. She thought that those good times would help her get through the years of college, to protect her from her shyness and difficulty in making new friends. But most of all, it made the past of high school fade away—for a while.

The past wouldn't stay there though, I had to shove it into the closet and lock the door. But it always manages to leak out from time to time and resurface to remind me it was, and still is, there.

Joe and Sharon's differences grew as time went by, widening the gap between their worlds. When Joe got tired of the partying, he dropped out of college and went back to working in his father's automotive business. It was fast and easy cash and that was what he wanted. Things between them were okay in the beginning, but their diverging interests for achievement began to drive them apart. Sharon developed a new perspective; she always asked herself what was next to strive for, and she saw life as a continuing process of improving one self.

The self is important. If we are to define what we shall become we must understand ourselves.

Joe became more and more content to work the day-to-day business of the auto shop without any conscious thought of improving or expanding it. Instead, he looked to excitement from drugs and alcohol. When she confronted him, his actions became more violent over time, and when he began to beat her—that was the last straw for Sharon. She shunned him and he eventually turned to another woman.

Another woman? Oh—how cold I am. I don't even call her by her name. She was perfect for him, wild and without any reservations, the complete opposite of me. She had been waiting for such an opportunity to present itself.

Joe overdosed the year she graduated college. Instead of denouncing the man for what he had done and how he treated her, she remained silent and let him be buried with some dignity. Besides, the rest of the town had known of his actions, she saw no need to bring it up. When she finished her four-year degree, she thought of leaving town, maybe going off to some city somewhere, but instead stayed and opened her own business in the town.

This is where I belong. I wouldn't let her drive me away from where my energy thrives. But she just wouldn't let up. She kept coming and coming...

Sharon worked on her master's degree part time in the evenings and weekends and completed it two years later. During that time her business, which was nothing more than an antique novelty shop, those odds and ends that couldn't find a place in the traditional type shops, grew into quite a successful enterprise, which she sold for a considerable profit later on. It was also during that time that her interest in Witchcraft and the study of Wicca surfaced.

Religious topics were always uncomfortable for her. She never got involved with a church, although she believed in a supreme being or beings. While she was in college, she needed to fill an elective during her last semester; choices were slim, and with her schedule with the store, that narrowed it down to a course in religion, in this case, Wiccan. Although she hadn't cared much for the course in the beginning, as it progressed and she did the readings and research, she became interested.

In Sharon's mind, Wicca was much more common sense than many other religions. It centered on the life force, the energy in everything around us that people used every day. Use what you would, but give back what you take. Simple enough. A coven was just like any other church group, people gathering to worship and enjoy the fellowship of others. The coven structure concept and the different levels of witches were similar to positions obtained in other churches through study and advancement. Her studies also dispelled a lot of misconceptions she had in regards to the stereotype of witches and witchcraft and the defining of magick, a release of energy used to affect change for the betterment and not the things as shown on the TV series *Bewitched*.

The instructor of the course, Joan Call, who had acknowledged from the start of the class that she was a practicing witch, saw Sharon's interest and asked her if she wanted to come to a public meeting of a Wiccan group...a group of witches. Surprising herself, Sharon quickly

agreed and accompanied Joan to the meeting, which was being held at someone's home. There were ten other people there, members of the Coven as it was called, and they warmly received Sharon into their circle. She felt so at ease with these people and their way of embracing the simple concepts of life, she felt that this was where she wanted to be. She joined the Coven and began her indoctrination into Wicca and becoming a witch. That was over ten years ago.

It all came together then, it seemed so simple, the idea that I could use the powers of good magick to help the town. But if the entire coven were in positions to help the process even more—it would work that much better.

Yearning to get involved in the public administration of the town, she volunteered her time on the commerce committee. Later, she accepted a part time position in the Mayor's office and eventually decided to run for Mayor. Being a shop owner and familiar with most other owners and locals in town, she had a strong political base and was easily elected to the position.

From that seed, we have grown. We began to—

"Sharon," a voice called from behind her. She turned and saw the city attorney, Clyde Sanders walking quickly to catch up to her. A tall skinny man with constantly rosy cheeks as if he was always running or in a hurry.

"Hey, Clyde," she said as she waved. "How are you doing today?"

"Fine. I'm glad I caught you. We have a bit of an issue we need to resolve," he said as he pushed his glasses back up on his nose.

"What's that?"

"The store: Joe Caruso's shop. We have three people interested in it, and we need to decide how we want to handle the selection."

"Why not just go into a bidding process?"

Clyde looked at her questioningly.

"What?" she asked.

"I guess you've forgotten. We placed a clause into the contract when the town purchased the business to prevent that. We figured anybody has money, but we wanted to select someone who would be a positive influence to the community."

"That's right, now I remember. Sorry. I was daydreaming earlier. I guess my head was still in the clouds. You said we had three candidates?"

"Yes, at the moment. Their realtors are discussing the scenario with them and letting them know that they will have to sign the waiver stating that they understand there will be no bidding but rather an interviewing of the candidates. We need to cover all the legal stuff so someone doesn't cry foul and try to sue us later."

"Well I guess we need a committee to do the interviewing then. Who do you think should be on it?"

"You would chair, of course. We should include me for legal matters, Jane for commerce, Pete from the Merchant's Association, and Robin as the Citizen Representative. I think it wouldn't hurt to have the rest of the council available as a show of unity."

"Good idea. Go ahead and set it up."

"They are all from out of town, New York, New Jersey, and Virginia. Seeing as how they are all here today, I'm going to try and do this tonight or tomorrow morning."

"Not enough time tonight, or in the morning. We have to make our showing at the various churches, remember?"

"That's right, I forgot. How about tomorrow afternoon?"

"Fine."

Clyde turned to leave in the same hurried manner in which he had arrived.

"Clyde," Sharon called. "Slow down. You're going to give yourself a heart attack if you don't learn how to relax."

"Oh...yes. I know...I know. You're probably right. Bad habit of mine."

Sharon smiled and shook her head. He said it with the embarrassing look of a child who had done something wrong; she had to struggle to avoid laughing out loud. "We'll have to work on that. I'll see you tonight?"

"Of course; the coven is meeting at Martin's house at nine?"

"Yes. See you then."

###

"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."

Tony glanced pensively to his left, and then his right. He exhaled strongly, and then began. "Apparently there was a screw up with the accepting of offers from agents or their clients. I told them this might happen, but they didn't listen to me."

"And?" Bob asked impatiently.

"Instead of one person in the city attorney's office taking the offers, several were involved, and they didn't talk to each other until after they discovered what happened."

"The bottom line?" asked Bob.

"The bottom line is that there are two others who want to buy the property."

"So what happens now? Do I need to submit a higher bid?"

"No. That's the catch. There was a clause in the offering that forbids the bidding process on the property. It was offered for a set price. In the event of a screw-up, as has occurred, there will be an interview process with members of the town council. There was a stipulation clause in the contract that in the event of multiple offers, those interested would go before the council and give their reasons and proposals for purchase or they walk away from the deal."

"Isn't this kind of strange? I mean to not just let it go into the bidding process? The town would get more money, wouldn't they?"

"Sure. The bidding could bring in more money. It's definitely not a standard real estate deal. But like I was telling you earlier, this is small town, USA. They want to bring the best person into the town, someone who can contribute to the overall health and well being...or something like that." Tony looked away from Bob and took a few steps around the living room, pacing a small circle.

"So this council, they are going to do what?" asked Bob. "Ask questions that somehow show my true colors or something?" The thought of an interview made Bob nervous. He immediately wondered what he would say if anything came up about having a criminal record which would lead make him have to explain about the accident.

"I guess. If you're still interested, the meetings have been set up for tomorrow afternoon at one."

"Tomorrow afternoon? Why not tonight?"

"Small town; they go to church on Saturday night and Sunday mornings; religion before commerce, my friend."

"That means I would have to haul butt out of here late Sunday to get back for work on Monday."

"Well, why don't you call off on Monday? Say you're ill or something?" suggested Tony.

"You don't know my boss. He's very old school and a pain in the ass. He'd come looking for me at home to make sure I really was ill."

"You're kidding, right?" asked Tony.

"No. I saw him fire someone for doing something similar. He didn't say that on the dismissal papers but we all knew that was what really happened."

"Well," Tony began as he rubbed his chin with his hand, "if you got the property, would you really care about the old stinker?"

"Good point," Bob said. And he really did want the property. He wanted it more than anything else right now. *Screw the old boss man Cartwright. It's time to take a chance.*

"Okay, I'm in," Bob said. "But you have to help me prepare. How about I buy you dinner or something? We can talk about the town so I can get a feel for what they might ask."

"I love to take you up on the free meal," Tony said as he looked at his watch, "but it's going on five, and I have to get back to Norwich."

"You won't be here tomorrow?"

"No. Besides there isn't much I will be able to do for you tomorrow. Do the interview thing and let me know how it goes. It's going to be held in the town hall at one o'clock. I've already put a good word in for you with the town attorney. I'm going to see him before I leave, and I'll pump you up some more. But what it really comes down to is what they are looking for in the person."

"Any suggestions?" Bob asked.

"Take a walk around and look at the other stores. They'll be open for about another two hours or so. Get a feel for the place. Then tonight, sit down and make up a list with the good

things you can bring to this place. But also think about any drawbacks because that will probably be what they will ask you. Be prepared. Admit your weaknesses, but have a plan on how you can overcome them. The key point is what you can do to help the overall well being of the town. If you go in there saying that you can out market or out sell everyone else, they'll think you're a troublemaker with only one thing on your mind. Think cooperation before making a big profit. They want someone who will fit in, not someone who wants to turn the place on its head. And whatever you do, don't lie. Be straight up. These people...they have a strange way of knowing if you are telling the truth or just saying what they want to hear."

"Okay. I think I can handle that," Bob said although he wasn't really sure if he could.

"Good. I'll call the attorney late on Sunday or first thing Monday morning and see if I can find anything out. They promised the decision would be made quickly. Any other questions?"

"One. Is there a place to stay in the town?"

"I don't think so. I'm pretty sure there is back on the Interstate 395 not far from the exit. Just head back and you'll see signs."

"All right then," Bob said as he offered his hand. "Appreciate all your help."

"Good luck. I hope you get the place. I'll call you."

"Thanks, Tony," Bob said. They walked toward the door and stepped out onto the sidewalk of Main Street. Tony closed and locked the door.

"I'll be talking to you," Tony said as he turned and began walking.

Bob thought about what he would do. He could visit some of the shops and talk to the folks, make some discreet inquiries, and then grab a bite to eat. Maybe he could overhear some local conversations to help him get a feel for local issues. After that he could find a hotel for the

night. He remembered seeing a restaurant on the other end of Main Street not far from the coffee shop.

As Bob began to walk back toward the center of town, his eyes fell upon a rack in front of one of the stores that contained newspapers. He stopped and looked. "The Putnam Town Gazette." *Local information; this would come in handy.* The paper was free and he grabbed one. The paper wasn't very thick but that didn't mean there wouldn't be any useful information in it. He folded it and placed it in his sport jacket pocket for later reading.

###

As Tony approached the office of Clyde Sanders, the city attorney, he silently cursed the people who had mishandled the acceptance of offers for the store. They were screwing around with the easy money he had figured on pocketing from his mysterious telephone benefactor. However, even without the consideration to the money, Tony thought that Bob Whitworth was a nice enough guy, or so he appeared to be. If he could make him happy by getting him the place and putting some money into his pocket at the same time, so be it. The ultimate goal, whatever it was, of the woman who was paying him to get Bob here didn't come into play with his thoughts on the matter.

He reached the door of the city attorney, Clyde Sanders, and knocked.

"Come in," a voice answered.

Tony entered the office. "Hi, Clyde."

"Hi, Tony," Clyde said as he rose from his chair and shook Tony's hand.

Tony eyeballed the man's disarrayed office. There were stacks of papers in piles that occupied about half of the small office. You couldn't walk in a straight line from corner to corner without having to detour around one of them. "I just wanted to stop by on my way back to Norwich...and of course put in a good word for Bob Whitworth."

"Of course," Clyde said and smiled. He darted around the room placing papers on stacks of other papers. "He knows about the interview tomorrow?"

"Yup. He'll be there. He loves the place, and I really believe he's the kind of person you would want. Nice wholesome kind of guy."

"Well if that's the case he should do well tomorrow. We'll have to see how the council feels about him." Clyde darted back to his desk, picked up a sheet of paper, and moved toward another stack in a corner of the room.

"You have my number if you need anything else from me?" Tony asked as he continued to speak to the moving target.

"Sure," he said as he looked up. "Its right..." he looked toward his desk and then walked over to it and picked up Tony's business card which sat on a pile of other cards. "I have it right here."

"Good, then I'll be—oh I almost forgot." Tony rummaged in his briefcase. "I found this over at the shop. I figured it might have belonged to a child." He removed the small doll from his bag and held it up. As Clyde turned and looked in Tony's direction, his energetic movements about the room came to a screeching halt as he looked at the doll. "I figured if anyone knew if there were any children that might have left it, you would know."

"Ah...I..." Clyde stammered as he stepped to where Tony was standing and slowly reached out with his hands to grasp the doll. "This was in the store? Where?" Clyde asked as he intently studied the face of the doll and the odd stitching around its mouth.

"Yeah. Bob Whitworth found it tucked into a corner of the sofa." Tony took a step back from Clyde. He was puzzled by Clyde's intentness and the scrutiny he applied to the doll; it unnerved him a little. "I never saw it when I was in the place before, but Bob picked up on it immediately. It's funny how someone new can walk into a place and see something that everyone else missed. Curious looking thing—looks like someone made it and didn't have much doll making experience. And that stitching for a mouth, haven't quite seen anything like that before."

"Yes. It is strange isn't it?" Clyde said slowly. "I'll have to check the files to see if there were any children, I don't recall any."

"Perhaps it was left by someone who stopped in the shop and Mr. Caruso placed it on the couch and forgot about it," Tony offered.

Tony watched as Clyde finally took his eyes from the doll and looked back up at him with an odd smile. Tony thought the smile was somehow forced as if something was bothering or disturbing Clyde and he didn't want him to know it. He suddenly didn't feel like hanging around any longer than he had to in Clyde's office. "Well, I guess I'll be going," Tony said and made a motion to leave.

"Thanks for dropping it off," Clyde said as he moved with renewed speed toward the door and opened it for Tony. "We'll be seeing you."

"Take Ca—"

Tony's body hadn't cleared the doorway before the door slammed closed behind him. He heard the sound of the lock being engaged. He paused and looked back at the door. *Strange—a very strange one there.* He walked out of the building and to his car for the ride back to Norwich.

###

Clyde hurriedly picked up the phone but dropped it because his hand was shaking so badly. He grabbed it with two hands and forced his fingers to punch the number pads.

"Hello, Chief Daniels."

"Martin, it's Clyde."

"Hey Clyde, what's—"

"I just finished talking to the realtor, Tony Schuster."

"Yes. What did—"

"He found something—in the store—Caruso's store—you need to see this—hurry!"

"For goodness' sake, slow down Clyde. Take a deep breath and then tell me what you're talking about."

Clyde felt his heart pounding in his chest. He breathed in and out in long inhaled and exhaled. His heart began to slow to a more comfortable pace.

"Are you all right?" Martin asked after a few seconds. "You're going to have a damn heart attack one of these days if you don't learn to slow down."

"Yes...better," Clyde said slowly.

"Okay, tell me what he found?"

"It's probably better if I bring it over."

“Okay. I’ll be waiting,” Martin said.

###

The Town hall and the Police Station were both located on Church Street; each on opposite ends of the Bridge Street intersection. It took Clyde less than ten minutes to walk over to the Police Station from his office in the Town Hall building. He knocked on Martin's door with a series of short nervous knocks.

"Come in."

Martin was sitting behind his desk looking over some papers. He looked up as Clyde stepped inside of his office and could see that Clyde hadn't calmed down much. His face was red and his chest heaved up and down.

"So Clyde what's eating at you?" Martin asked in a tone that was even and calm. He knew that Clyde was easily excitable and in most instances there was no reason for it. He was just an excitable person by nature.

Clyde slowly removed the crudely made doll from his briefcase and placed it on Martin's desk. "A poppet."

"Poppet?" Martin said as he stared at the doll. "What kind is it?"

"I'm no expert on poppets Martin; I haven't been a practicing witch as long as you have," Clyde said in a voice that Martin thought bordered on hysterical. "I think they are nasty little things that—"

"Stop it Clyde! This is very serious," Martin said in an authoritative voice. "Get hold of yourself, right now. For God's sake, calm down! Sit down and relax."

Clyde slowly lowered himself into one of the chairs in front of Martin's desk. He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. Martin poured him a glass of water and handed it to him. "Here, drink some of the water."

Clyde took a few sips of water. "Thanks, Martin," he said after a few seconds.

"Now," Martin began, "let's see what the most exaggerated thing is about it?" He picked it up and studied it. The small doll appeared tiny in the man's large hands. His gaze fixed on the face of it as his fingers ran along the stitching along its mouth. He held it up so Clyde could see it better as he pointed. "Its mouth is stitched in a peculiar way."

"I saw that. What do you think it means?" Clyde asked.

"It looks like it represents the mouth being sewn shut. I think it's a binding poppet," Martin answered quickly. "It's used to keep someone from talking about something. My guess would be that someone didn't want Mr. Caruso talking about something."

"Who?" asked Clyde.

"Don't know who, but you know that poppets are used by witches quite often."

"One of us? You think one of us did it?"

"Not necessarily. Maybe it was..." he didn't finish his statement aloud, but the word came to his mind. *Her*. "Bring it with you tonight. We'll have Sharon take a look at it and see what she thinks."

"Why don't you take it? The thing gives me the creeps," Clyde implored.

"Okay," Martin said as he took the object from Clyde and placed it on the corner of his desk. "What about the realtor, Tony Schuster? Did he have any idea what it is?"

"No. I don't think so. But he didn't find it. The guy who wants to buy the place found it...a Mr. Bob Whitworth."

"What do you know about him?"

"Nothing. He's scheduled for an interview tomorrow with the other two prospective buyers."

"Well, there isn't anything else we can do about this right now. We should probably take a look at this Mr. Whitworth and see if he has any history or anything. Are you okay now?"

"Fine. I just got a little excited," Clyde said the embarrassment evident in his voice.

"All right then, I'll see you later tonight."

"Okay, Martin. And thanks."

"What are friends for?" he said as he rose from his chair and patted Clyde on the shoulder. "Everything is going to be fine. You know...coming up roses. Just relax."

"You're right, agreed Clyde. "See you tonight."

###

By the time Clyde arrived back to the Town Hall, he felt much better; it was as if a great burden had been lifted from him, however he couldn't remember what that burden had been. He remembered the conversation with the realtor Tony Schuster and couldn't help the feeling that there was something he had missed or hadn't realized the importance of what he had been saying earlier in his office. It came to him after a few seconds. The prospective storeowner, the very promising Mr. Whitworth, would make a perfect addition to their town.

Clyde stopped and looked back toward the Police Station. The thought that Martin had agreed with that assessment flooded his thoughts. In fact, hadn't he just told him that a few minutes ago? Yes—he thought so too. What else had Martin said? Oh yes...tonight the meeting,

don't forget. Of course he wouldn't forget—he so much looked forward to the meetings. Why would Martin think he would forget about it? Clyde shrugged his shoulders and instead of going back into the Town Hall, he walked toward his car.

###

Martin picked up his phone and pressed the intercom.

“Yes Chief,” a woman answered.

“Marjorie, I'm heading home. If anyone needs me you know where I'll be.”

“Okay Chief. Have a good one.”

“You too.”

Martin grabbed his handheld radio, his briefcase, the poppet, and headed for his car. As he tossed his items in, he looked at the poppet again with strange interest. The stitching across the mouth was very odd; he thought perhaps he had been wrong about it being a binding poppet. He ran his fingers along its mouth feeling the contour and roughness of the crude stitching. He shrugged his shoulders and placed it on the floor of the back seat.

Thirty minutes later he hummed a tune as he pulled off of Route 44, Providence Pike, and onto East Putnam Road. Less than a quarter mile later, he turned into his gravel driveway that ran for about a half mile and led to his secluded home. As the gravel crunched under the tires, he continued humming. He couldn't exactly place the name of the tune, but he liked it all the same.

He remembered his conversation with the overly excited Clyde. Usually, he found himself frustrated when he finished talking with Clyde when he was in an agitated state, but today had been different. Clyde had brought him some good information about the person

looking at the store. What was the guy's name? Whitworth. Bob Whitworth, he thought and smiled. Yes sir—looking forward to meeting him tomorrow.

Yet Clyde had acted a little strange though, he thought. There was a little thing that nagged at Martin; why had Clyde reminded him about the meeting tonight. *After all, the meeting is at my house—how would I forget? Silly guy. Oh well.* There was something else...what was it? He couldn't remember. By the time Martin reached his house, he had forgotten what it was that Clyde had said. It had probably been nothing important anyway. He stopped the car and turned it off. Grabbing his radio and briefcase, he went into his house. He had things to do in order to prepare for tonight's meeting.

What was that tune, he asked himself. *Everything's coming up roses...*