

Chapter Three

Live and yet live—fairly take and fairly give.

"The Rede of the Wicca"

It hadn't rained a drop as Bob exited off of I-395, following the signs for Putnam that read: three miles. Since his departure from Virginia, the weather had turned out to be a beautiful late summer day; the earlier premonition of a storm had not materialized. As he slowed his car to the new speed limit of thirty-five miles per hour, Bob watched the landscape of the area change from the bland interstate to a country-like setting. The area was a mixture of rural and old town scenery. The narrow streets and roads contrasted immensely with the interstate he had just left.

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. There were also 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 land, creating lovely areas of natural beauty.

As he neared the town, he noticed that the houses became closer together, looking more modern with their aluminum siding and their 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 in the town. He looked up and saw a sign that said 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 the 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 protesting after sitting for almost twelve hours of the drive. He checked his watch, three PM. 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. 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 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 mega mall metropolises of today? All cement 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 the 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 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—

"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 often used to 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 just have that look like your looking for someone."

"It's fine. And yes, 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.

"I don't think so, he'll probably—"

"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 Tony 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."

"That's why I was late. There has 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 in the direction Tony indicated the store was.

"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 you 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 old 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 of 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 here."

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, and 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 me 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 standard size windows found in a home. Bob assumed that was done in the event the second floor was used as store space and not living quarters. His initial scan of the outside revealed no 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 not change it.

Bob stepped closer to the main display window to take a look at the pieces there: a Maple china hutch, an English period 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 pants pocket. As he slid the key into the door and turned the lock, the door opened with a loud creak. "Need some oil there," he said.

"No. That's part of the atmosphere gimmick," 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 to not have been touched since the last owner was in it. In fact, it almost looked as if it could open today for business, with a mild cleaning. 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, only a piece or two in there, everything else was on the show room floor area.

"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..."What's this?" Bob asked as his eye caught sight of a 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 kids?"

"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.

"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 his soft 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."