

## Chapter Two

Days Earlier in Putnam, CT

*Bide the Wiccan laws ye must in perfect love and perfect trust.*

*The Rede of the Wiccae*

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

*It's the breath of the Dragon, Joe...it's coming...*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Movement from inside his store caught his eye.

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

*It's happy to see you, Joe...*

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

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

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

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

As he came to a stop, he turned back toward the store and watched as the dragon smashed through the door, placing a heavily clawed foot onto the same walk that he was now lying on.

"This can't be real? Dreams aren't real! They can't hurt you! All that mumbo jumbo bull shit—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

People walking up and down Main Street turned toward Joe with puzzled looks on their faces. He expected to hear screams as they saw the abomination that was pursuing him. But there were none. They simply stared at him as if he was the cause of all that was happening.

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

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

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

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

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

###

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

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

They were looking for a shop his wife Eleanor wanted to go to. One of her friends had mentioned it to her in passing and went on and on about the great deals she found in the store.

Edgar wasn't really listening. He was thinking how this was their last trip with the RV. His eyes were getting worse, and his reaction times were getting longer. There had been three close calls on this trip, more than any other year since they had begun their snowbird migrating north for the summer and South for the winter. Eleanor blamed the other drivers, but Edgar knew it wasn't them; it was his slowing and aging reflexes. It was time to start taking the train he thought.

"Do you see it?" Eleanor asked reminding him of what he was supposed to be doing—helping her look for the store.

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

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

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

"What ma—?"

Thump—Bump—Crack!

Edgar finally brought the RV to a stop.

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

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

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

###

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

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

"Yes, it is a very unfortunate accident," Mayor Sharon Robbins agreed as she stood. Her appearance was in stark contrast to the burly Chief Daniels. She was above average in height, almost five foot ten inches, weighing one hundred and thirty pounds, but she still paled in comparison to the Chief's massive figure. Her dark hair was pulled tightly into a bun, which accented her light complexion and dark eyes. She stood straight and erect, her hands clasped together behind her back.

"I've asked Chief Daniels to conduct a thorough investigation with the State Police into what has happened," she continued. "I know there is a lot of speculation about the death of Joe Caruso. You all have concerns, some business and some personal, and there is always someone

out there who wants to start some unsubstantiated rumors to stir things a bit. I don't think we need that right now. Let's hear what the Chief has learned. Chief?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Positive? It appears that it was just as it seems. The only thing that is odd is that he was scared of something before he died. Very scared. The coroner tests show his adrenaline levels were off the scale—*before* he died."

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

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

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

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

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

"What shall we do?" another member asked.

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

"What the high Priestess wishes, shall be done by her coven," Martin acknowledged.

"The high Priestess and Priest shall be obeyed," the rest of the group spoke in unison.

They each removed a pentagram that was attached to a chain under their clothing. They caressed them and placed them next to their hearts.

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

"The energy shall come," the coven chanted.

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

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

###

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

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

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

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

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

Julia and her family used to sit in this very same room watching the nightly news, every night. There would be no conversation during that solemn hour as the world events were broadcast into their living room. But after that hour, things would return to normal and the events of the day the news commentator chose to talk about forgotten. Mother and father would talk about their day, and she would tell them about her day at school. Then the phone call came on a Wednesday night. And they were gone. All of them were gone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She left Christina to her food and went to the window. She slid the thick curtains aside and looked out into the darkness. Although she lived on two acres, she still made it a habit to

check outside before she went to the basement. She couldn't imagine anyone coming to visit her, but there were school kids who came around every once in awhile to see if they could see her doing whatever it was the kids were saying these days. When she did catch some, she chased them off. The yard had so many sinkholes in it that someone could catch their leg in one and break it and she would be blamed, as usual. There were no trespassing signs posted all around, but no one paid them much mind. They'd rather risk their fool necks trying to get a glimpse of the abomination that lived here.

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

"I'm going downstairs, Christina," she called to the cat. The cat looked up from its bowl as if to acknowledge her statement, and then returned its attention to the remaining contents. Julia opened the door next to the pantry that led to the basement. Flipping on the light switch she slowly descended the old wooden steps. The earthy smell of dirt and dampness greeted her. She loved that smell. She removed a stick match from the box and slid it along the rough side of the box. It flared, and as she smelled the familiar scent of the sulfur, she inhaled deeply.

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

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

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

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

*There is a use for such painful thoughts. It makes us what we are. Take our pain away and pleasure and joy means less. Use the pain as a tool and much may be accomplished. And so it shall...he will come soon, and it will begin.*