

CHAPTER TWO

Bruce Topping was not only a multimillionaire investment banker, he was also the high priest of the coven. He lived here in this apartment that faced Central Park from the east side of Fifth Avenue. His girlfriend, Spring Lisko, a blonde former model and actress, was the high priestess and lived with him. Bruce was a little younger than Daniel, but not much. He had an authoritative bearing that arose from his Ivy League background and a moneyed pedigree.

In addition to Daniel, the executive with the Ballard Media Group, there were six other members of this Manhattan coven. First were the high priest and priestess, Bruce Topping and Spring Lisko. Then there was Barbara Martinez Blessington, a stunning woman in her mid-thirties who was a business department executive of *Gladstone Magazine*, a biweekly that covered the federal government and Wall Street. Next were two pretty ladies in their late twenties: a Wall Street broker, Joy Little, and a commercial real estate broker, Nancy Albright. The seventh member was a corporate attorney in his mid-thirties, Blake Laughlin, who graduated from Harvard Law. Most people, with the images of Halloween witches firmly in their minds, would be astounded to see this very well-groomed and seemingly normal group of people practicing witchcraft.

When Daniel had joined the coven, five years earlier, Bruce Topping had cautioned and counseled him about what he felt was extremely important: “Never do anything for selfish reasons or to hurt a fellow member,” he had told Daniel. Bruce followed an ancient Druid strain of witchcraft, and he had added some of his own beliefs into his mix.

Bruce's living room looked like the inside of a luxury hotel. It held somewhat cold, expensive furniture framed by high ceilings of pure white and walls of the same color. Tall red velvet drapes cascaded to the floor. They helped insulate the room from the honking and bustling of the traffic below and, tonight, the howling winds of the winter storm. A huge fireplace contained a roaring fire, necessary on a night like this one.

One by one, all the members arrived. Now they sat and relaxed on a large sofa and three huge armchairs in the main living room. This furniture was placed near a circular table from which the members sipped wine and ate some light refreshments as they discussed the various topics for the meeting—the business of the day. There was always discussion about expanding the coven's membership to thirteen members.

Bruce said, "It's always a temptation to invite someone from work to join the coven. But that can cause problems. Supposing we decide for one reason or another to reject this person, or this person decides to change his or her mind. People talk, even if they promise not to. Look, we all hold prominent positions in this city. There are many misunderstandings about our religion. We must exercise care to protect ourselves."

Barbara Blessington said, "Bruce, that's very true; our livelihoods are at stake. As much as we embrace witchcraft, there are people out there who would look on us with suspicion. Membership drive missteps would affect our ability to make mainstream livings."

Daniel suggested, "We must do outside surveillance of anyone we consider for membership. Investigate who their associates are, their religious beliefs. Would they be devoted to Wicca?"

Bruce nodded in agreement. "Look, the seven of us found each other. I'm sure with care and caution we'll weed out the curiosity seekers and gain strength in numbers."

Nancy Albright, the commercial real estate broker, had written out her desire to sell a downtown building to a group of Japanese investors. Another member, Joy Little, wanted the evening's cone of power to be directed to curing her ailing father. During this evening's Wicca

ritual, the members believed they would be raising energy. The cone of power would be formed by the conveners standing in a circle, holding hands, and focusing on a single point above and in the center of the circle. After mentioning their prayer requests and exchanging views of the world events of the day, one by one, each member chose one of Bruce Topping's magnificent bathrooms, and each individually took a hot salt bath to purify themselves.

Each one returned "skyclad," or in the nude. This coven believed that clothing inhibited the natural forces coming from the members' bodies. Only the high priest and priestess returned from their baths wearing diaphanous white robes. Spring Lisko wore a jeweled crown on her head and a ceremonial garter belt under her robe. She was now the goddess force of fertility and creation. Bruce Topping's head was adorned with the traditional horned helmet, the symbol of his priesthood. He had now become the ancient deity of masculinity and the hunt.

All seven members moved into the ceremonial room of Bruce's apartment. A rectangular table draped in black cloth had been set up as the traditional altar for a Wicca ceremony. It held a pentagram, four candles, and each of the four elements: water in a goblet; fire, in the form of a candle; salt for earth; and incense as the symbol for air. The altar was placed north to south. The only light in the room came from flickering candles. In the center of the huge ceremonial room was a nine-foot circle drawn on the floor. The coven members sat around the circle as the high priest began the ceremony, kneeling in meditation. He then placed candles on all four sides of the room.

Raising a white stick that represented a sword, he banished any evil influence from his realm in each of the four directions, and then drew the sign of the pentagram as he moved each time, from east to south to west and to the north. A sound system lightly played the sound of jungle drums.

Bruce began his incantation. "I conjure thee, o circle of power," he said, and he called for the mighty spirits to enter the circle. Shortly thereafter, a chant began as the coven members circled in a counterclockwise motion, chanting in Celtic, Hebrew, and English.

The high priest called for the things to happen that the coven members had requested earlier in this evening's meeting.

The tempo of the drums increased, and the members began sweating lightly. The action seemed to then slowly move, for all coven members, to a somewhat out-of-body experience.

It was early in the morning of the following day before the coven members concluded their monthly meeting. Refreshed by this exotic ceremony, they would return to their mainstream lives.

Max, the doorman, having consumed the full flask of brandy, was concentrating the best he could under the circumstances on calling for their cabs.