

Witches

By Kathryn Meyer Griffith

Originally a Zebra mass market paperback

For my sweet brother, Jim Meyer, who passed away on May 27, 2015. He was a great singer/musician/songwriter. If you'd like to listen to some of his songs, here they are:

<http://tinyurl.com/pytftzc>

Other books by Kathryn Meyer Griffith:

Evil Stalks the Night

The Heart of the Rose

Blood Forge

Vampire Blood

The Last Vampire (2012 Epic EBook Awards Finalist)

Witches

The Calling

Scraps of Paper-The First Spookie Town Murder Mystery

All Things Slip Away-The Second Spookie Town Murder Mystery

Ghosts Beneath Us-The Third Spookie Town Murder Mystery

Egyptian Heart

Winter's Journey

The Ice Bridge

Don't Look Back, Agnes

A Time of Demons and Angels

The Woman in Crimson

Four Spooky Short Stories

Human No Longer

Night Carnival

Forever and Always Novella

The Nameless One erotic horror short story

Dinosaur Lake (2014 Epic EBook Awards Finalist)

Dinosaur Lake II: Dinosaurs Arising

Dinosaur Lake III: Infestation

Most of her books are also now in audio books.

*There is a **Prologue** but here is:*

Chapter 1

A small cabin outside of Canaan

The present

Amanda knelt on the floor before the hearth, shivering, weak from lack of sleep and food. Her hands shook as she laid the wood.

Stacking the kindling carefully, she witched a bright flame from her hand to the wood, fanning the first fragile flames with her breath until it caught. Then she added the bigger logs, and the fire roared. She searched its blue heart, trying not to dwell on what she was actually doing.

Outside, the storm grew in fury, thundering at the doors and windows as if it knew what she was going to do.

The wind moaned. *Sacrilege...sacrilege....*

Something thumped persistently against the door. She'd locked Amadeus, her familiar, out. He didn't like it. He knew she was up to no good.

In silence, she prepared for the rest of the ritual. With chalk, she drew a five-pointed star with alternate points connected by a continuous line—the pentagram. She painstakingly finished the preparations for the ancient incantation she'd begun earlier in the day. A spell that a white witch should never invoke.

Don't do this.

The flames whispered. *Jake...Jake.*

A tortured, lonely heart ignored her inner voice. The truth.

She sighed, pushing her hair back from her face. It was tangled and greasy. When was the last time she'd washed it, or taken a bath, for that matter? Weeks? What a sight she must be now, she thought. She must truly look like the witches of the old myths. Smiling wistfully, she tugged the frayed sweater tighter around her.

Since Jake, her husband of ten years, had died, she'd had no time for anything except for anger, self-pity, and tears.

Her conscience kept warning her not to go on, but she refused to listen.

You can't call Jake back from the dead. It breaks all the laws of white witchcraft...and you're not a black witch. You'll never be able to pay the price.

There was a price to pay for every spell a witch wove, every favor she asked from her magic. The bigger the favor, the higher the price. The more precious, or forbidden the request, the higher the final payment, gotten one way or another. For every push, there was a pull.

Amanda, if you do this, you could damn your soul to hell. Her inner voice warned her again. *Don't go to the dark side.*

Not to mention the danger.

All the same, another night without Jake? Another night alone? To have Jake back, wouldn't that be

worth it? Her inner voice was mute.

Even witches got lonely. She frowned in the crowding shadows as she crouched before the fire, her haunted green eyes obsessed. Even witches fell in love. Even she, who'd once believed she never would.

She did...with Jake.

She remembered the first time they met ten years ago, the way he'd looked, what he had said.

He'd been so handsome, tall, dark-haired with sensitive, knowing blue eyes full of humor and wisdom. He'd had a beard then, in the beginning, and had reminded her for some reason of a medieval tinker. All he'd needed was a leather bag slung across his broad shoulders.

He'd come across her in the woods one spring day as she gathered mushrooms. The first time he'd looked at her, she knew he'd be the one she would love. Something in the soft breeze that cavorted around her told her so.

He'd grinned at her as she'd stared boldly back, his eyes appreciative.

"You're lovely. Are you real?"

She'd laughed. "Yes."

He'd reached out his hand, and she'd taken it without hesitation. Love at first sight. It'd never happened to her. Before, she'd thought such talk of love and passion a fable. Worse, she'd always scoffed at it.

She'd had a lot to learn; and Jake had been eager to teach her.

They'd been lovers from the beginning. No coyness or modesty on her part because they'd been fated to meet, fated to love; it'd been right from the first touch, the first kiss.

They'd made love in the woods on a warm night. He'd been amused by her that first time, after their gentle lovemaking, when she'd told him she'd loved him before in another life and the ones before that.

"We've both lived before, many times. We were lovers in each one."

"How can you be so sure of that?" he'd asked softly, not disbelieving, but skeptical.

"I just am. I know things. Do you think that I bed every man I meet while walking in the woods?" she'd teased him gently.

"Well, I did wonder about that."

For an answer, she'd brought his lips down to hers and kissed him sweetly.

"What are you, then, to know such things?" he'd coaxed, holding her close to him in the dark, still teasing. "A witch?"

"I don't advertise it," she'd replied in a hushed tone, serious. She never told people what she was. "But yes, I am, and some of us believe in reincarnation. Spirit traveling. What a soul doesn't learn in one life, it must come back again to learn in another.

"I've met you before in my travels, my love. I've found you again in this life." There'd been happiness and wonder in her voice. She'd known it was true, amazing as it was. Jake was the one she'd been waiting so long for and had never thought she'd find, not in this life anyway.

He'd studied her in the dark, not answering for a long time. She was afraid he didn't believe her, afraid he thought her to be eccentric, or worse yet, crazy. Then, with the bouquet of honeysuckle wafting around them in the night, he'd spoken softly to her. "I don't care what you are, woman. All I

know is that I found you, and I know here,” his hand pressed on his chest above his heart, “somehow already, without a doubt, I love you. Don’t ask me how I know it so soon, I just do. You’re mine and I’ll never let you go. Crazy woman, old maid, witch, or whatever.”

“Don’t worry, Jake,” she’d whispered later, smiling in the gloom. “I’m a white witch. A good witch.” He could just make out the upturning of her lips.

He’d waited for her to go on, but she’d only said, “I’ve given you enough to think on for a while.” Then, she’d sighed into his strong shoulder, both of them wrapped in a blanket, sleepy, leaning against a large tree.

“Someday, I’ll tell you everything, my love. Someday.” Touching his heavy eyes, she’d bade him sleep. Cradling his head in her arms, she’d thought about what a difference loving him would make in her life.

Yes, she was a witch. Born a witch as her grandmother before her, and her grandmother before her. Most of her ancestors had been witches, or warlocks. That simple. The gifts and skills passed down from one generation to another. The power to heal. Foresee the future—sometimes. Shape change. Control the weather. Each witch had her own special gifts. White witches, who swore to help humanity. Witches, who often believed in a merciful God and worshipped nature, but never Satan.

As the night birds disappeared, and the day creatures began to rise with the dawn, she’d led her love to her bed. From that day on, for ten beautiful years, nothing had ever separated them.

Weeks later, as they’d cuddled before a fire in her shack on the edge of the woods, when he’d known her better and seen her powers first hand, she’d told him everything about her witchery.

“I’m of the Old Religion, before it split itself into Dualism.”

“Dualism?”

“A creed that holds that there are two sides to God. The Diabolic or black witchcraft believes that the evil side, Satan, is stronger. White witches, the pure Old Religion, believe that the good side, God, is stronger and that we receive our powers from Him. It’s a very ancient, misunderstood religion. We’re not allowed to interfere with the world.”

“Ah, like the Prime Directive in *Star Trek*?”

“*Star Trek*?” she’d inquired, puzzled.

“That’s right, you don’t watch much television, do you?” He recalled she had little use for it. “It’s an old television science fiction show about Captain Picard and his crew, who travel through space from one world to another. They’re not, usually, allowed to tamper with the civilizations they encounter, only observe. It would upset the worlds’ delicate balances, you see.”

“That’s it exactly. We witches are supposed to keep a low profile, help from behind the scenes, observe. Not call attention to ourselves, never hurt anything or anyone. If we do use our powers to hurt, we pay dearly for it.”

“Ah, so the cults, the animal and human sacrificing, Satanic masses, and that sadistic mumbo jumbo we read about all the time is the *bad* side of witchcraft?” He had caught on quickly.

“The dark side.” She supplied the word for him. “Black magic. Evil people who bastardize the Old Religion’s beliefs, worship Satan and his legions. Sick people who want attention. It’s given witchcraft a bad name. True witches are healers, not killers. We abhor people like that and fight their evil

whenever we can.”

She'd shrugged. “Most people don't know that, though. They're so superstitious, Jake, even in these times, so afraid of what they don't understand.” She'd sighed, knowing this well from her own experiences. “I learned early to keep my religion, my powers hidden. It scares people. They think all witches idolize the Devil, drink baby's blood, or cackle over a steaming inky kettle full of foul-smelling animal parts. Just like in the dark ages. Warts on your nose and hair like a greasy mop.” With this, she'd finally laughed.

In time, Jake accepted what she was, and loved her more for it. They'd even married in the old way, just the two of them exchanging their vows under the sacred oak trees. She would have done anything for him.

However, fate had something else in store for Jake. One thing a witch must accept was that one cannot defy fate. It was too strong.

What would be would be.

A rainy night, slick roads, and a smashed up car—and Jake was gone.

Now, with her heart breaking, her eyes shut, her hands waving languidly over the fire, she chanted the nefarious words that would bring her husband back from the dead.

Mandy...no, Mandy....

Something crashed against the door, as if something or someone were throwing themselves against it. Wood splintered, but the door held. Amadeus, who had powers of his own, was fighting mad now. It was his responsibility to protect her, protect her from herself, if need be. She heard him growling at her through the door.

Open up, Mandy. Open the damn door!

“No. I told you, Amadeus, either help me or go away.”

The cat grumbled beyond the door, hissed and spat as loud as any big cat, and the battering resumed.

Amanda's eyes flew open, widened as the apparition began to take form inside the pentagram—the outline of a man, tall, his arms thrown over his face as if in defense.

“Jake?” She moaned, staring at the thing.

It lowered its hands and a ghoulish, misty face peered out at her, a face so full of torment and fear, Amanda fell back in shock.

“Don't do this, Mandy, I beg you! Remember me as I was. I don't belong there anymore.” She heard the plaintive whisper, an echo on the still air. Its hands reached out to her. “Let me go. You don't know what you're doing.”

She couldn't stop. The enchantment wasn't complete. It would be better when it was. He was between two worlds now and he would be frightened. Half-formed. *Between two worlds.*

If she wasn't careful, those unearthly denizens—shade demons, she called them—that haunted that dead world could escape into hers. So dangerous. What the hell was she doing opening the forbidden portals like this?

What happened if she was a moment off, a word wrong and the demons came through? If she unleashed them? A disaster.

Amanda steeled herself, wiped the fresh tears from her face with the back of her hand. “Damn it, I want you back, Jake. I’ll have you back,” she swore.

She took up where she’d left off, knowing if she stopped at this point of the spell, it could ruin everything. Everything.

The door groaned behind her under its assault (damn but that cat was strong), the wind screamed outside the windows. The candles placed around the pentagram fluttered in a strange breeze in the shadowy room.

Amanda’s heart froze. She stopped in the middle of the spell, her eyes going wide with fear, her hands half-raised before her, and her head thrown back as the flames from the fire glowed more brightly across her tense face.

What was that word? Suureerustus? Summertus? Or....

She stared at the blurry figure trying to form in the circle. It was yelling at her now...something...something...she couldn’t make out the words.

It was no longer alone.

Things writhed around its melting feet, flew about its head. Terrible things. Things from the dead world. Unholy things. Gaping mouths with sharp bloodied teeth, glittering fiendish eyes in deformed, hideous bodies. Some almost human, some insect like. Others indescribable. Some growing before her eyes to be taller than she was.

Monsters. Coming through the barrier, crossing the lines of the pentagram, into her world.

Amanda grabbed the nearest thing with which to fight them off, a broom, and started swinging at them.

She was so busy hitting and spewing out new spells to keep the shade demons from coming through that she never heard the door burst open; never felt the cool storm wind enter the cabin until something determined and furry flew by her face toward the pentagram, hissing all the way.

Then Amadeus was helping her herd the malignant spirits back from where they’d come. All claws, teeth, and unearthly glowing eyes. He snarled the word *Sutterus* at her in passing and Amanda quickly supplied it in the spell where it belonged.

The demons began to slowly dissolve in shrieks of rage.

Don’t send us away! Don’t send us back there! Let us out. Out!

Jake’s figure returned. A shadow with hanging head. Just one or two sentences and the incantation would be complete. Jake would be there, solid, before her.

Amanda hesitated. The thing in the circle looked so pitiful. So unnatural.

Before she could finish, soft, but strong paws clamped tightly around her neck and wouldn’t let go. Something howled like a banshee in her ear, as sharp teeth angrily nipped it. She couldn’t breathe.

“Amadeus! Get off!” She screamed, tumbling to the floor with the huge cat on top of her, still holding on like a leech, its yowling and screeching enough to wake the dead—instead, it woke her.

By the time she’d yanked the cat off, throwing him roughly against the opposite wall so that he yelped in pain, and she’d crawled back to the pentagram, Jake was gone. The enchantment broken.

Amanda gazed at the empty pentagram for a long time, suddenly horrified, disgusted at what she had almost done.

She'd almost crossed the line. Almost. Thank God for Amadeus.

She curled up on the floor next to the fire and sobbed, the last of her anguish finally releasing itself. The cat limped over to her and licked the tears from her face. He didn't seem to be angry with her any longer. Just worried.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you, Amadeus, so sorry." She pulled him into her arms, and hugged him like a baby until he began to purr. "Forgive me?"

Of course.

"Thank you for that, Amadeus. You saved me from making the biggest mistake of my life."

He was smart enough not to answer that one. She snuggled him, rocking on the floor.

"I had no right," she moaned into his matted fur finally.

"What was I thinking of? I have no right to bring back the dead. No matter how much I loved him. He's gone now. I must accept it. Go on."

In reply, the huge cat purred louder and huffed in cat language.

About time you wised up. About time. I was getting tired of baby-sitting. I've got more important things to do.

He reached up with his paws and captured her wet, tear-streaked face between them, his eyes huge, golden, so human and understanding.

It will get better, Mandy. It will. I promise.

Amanda looked at him, his fur still fluffed up from his fight, his ears twitching, as he tried to grin at her. Cats couldn't grin. It made him look funny. Like the Cheshire Cat.

"Amadeus, I miss him so."

I know. It'll pass. Give it time. I'll help.

She knew he was right. He was wise. Nodding silently, she stared at the remnants of the pentagram, the broken lines, and the dying flames of the gutted candles. Her tears continued to fall as she held Amadeus.

The cat bequeathed her a perceptive look, his feline eyes shining. He was a huge, battle-scarred Blue Maltese. He was also a very ancient and very powerful familiar, given to her by her grandmother on the day of her birth, thirty-four years ago. She had no idea how old he was, only that since she could remember, he'd always been there to guard over and guide her. He'd pulled her out of many a tight spot. She trusted him.

His duty accomplished, he'd had enough of her coddling, and jumping from her arms, he stalked away to his favorite spot on the padded rocking chair before the fire. His expression and the stiffness of his tail let her know he was still a little miffed at her for trying it in the first place.

"You're right to be mad at me, Amadeus," Amanda murmured contritely.

Outside, the storm had peaked, and she could hear the soft patter of rain hitting the cabin's roof. The snug little cabin that Jake had built for her in their first year together. Though he'd been a master potter who taught his craft for a living, he'd been a heck of a carpenter, as well. Amanda had always told him that his magic was in his hands, and she'd been right. The cabin was the prettiest home she'd ever had.

She touched the wall next to her, memories of the two of them working on it together making her cry more. She could drive a nail and frame out a room with the best of them now. Just another thing

Jake had taught her.

On her hands and knees, she scooted back to the pentagram, and with the edge of her skirt, rubbed at the chalk furiously until the star was a mess of smeared lines. A great shudder rippled through her body when she was finished. Now nothing could cross over.

Amanda got up from the floor and, like a sleepwalker, made her way to the door. Stepping outside, she ran to the huge oak tree at the back of the house, and let the October rain soak her to the skin. She felt so worn out and useless. So dirty.

Maybe, it would help wash her clean.

Even in the dark, she could see the silver-outlined clouds stampeding above like crazed animals before a forest fire. The world went on. Life went on. Jake or no Jake.

Standing silently, staring up through the branches at the night sky, she let the rain mingle with her tears, her back braced stiffly against the tree's trunk.

She did her penance, praying for forgiveness, relieved that Amadeus had stopped her in time. Before she'd brought Jake totally back.

Witches usually didn't fool with the dead, the calling up of the dead, or ghosts. You could never tell what you'd get in the end. Some spirits were mischief oriented, some cunningly wicked or just plain evil. It made sense. The people who'd been good in life had gone on to the next life, or to heaven. Only the troubled spirits returned.

Jake wouldn't stay in between for long. His was a good soul.

The night was turning colder, the wind picking up again, the storm finding new energy somewhere, and the rain felt like tiny slivers of ice on her skin, making her shiver.

The house behind her, forlorn as it had become the last few months, beckoned. Safety. Warmth.

She made a dash for the door, slipping into the house. The door slammed behind her, and she leaned weakly against it in the dark; listening to the storm beat wildly at the outside, wanting so badly to get in.

Though she loved storms, it was good to have shelter. She heard limbs tear from the trees, and crash into the roof. She heard the trees' agony. All witches could. Trees hurt just like people. It was true.

Only a witch would think things like that, because they, too, were as much a part of the earth as the trees, the sky, and the wind. She covered her ears until it stopped, refused to feel their pain. She had enough of her own.

She peered out the window into the rain, caressing the cool glass with quivering fingers as the water dripped from her clothes onto the floor.

Jake had loved a good storm.

Touching her way across the tiny kitchen, she opened a cabinet door. She kept extra candles just for such nights. She could have turned on the lights, but she preferred candlelight.

As with other modern conveniences, electricity, telephone, and television, she could have as easily lived without them. Like her ancient ancestors had. In the old ways. She chopped her own wood, sometimes cooked her food outside over an open wood fire as Jake had shown her, when the weather permitted.

In the last ten years, she'd learned to live off the small game and fish she caught, what grew in her

garden, and what she gleaned from the forest, as her great-grandmother, Jessie, had. Ways that she'd nearly forgotten years ago during her city life and cringed now to admit that she had ever forsaken them in the first place. For a woman who could snap her fingers and have almost anything in the world, it felt good to know she could do it the human way, too.

She was a modern witch who'd come back to the old ways in the last twelve years and was now glad of it, stronger for it. She could make it, she knew she could. Even without Jake. She used her magic sparingly. Little comforts mostly that no one could hold against her.

She lit the candle with a touch of her fingers, another witch's trick.

The gentle light fluttered, throwing elusive shadows behind her on the wall, driving the ghosts away.

Drying off, she put on different clothes. She dressed as if she lived a hundred years ago, favoring long dark-colored dresses with full skirts, and shawls. It's what she felt most comfortable in. Out in the woods of Connecticut, it could get really cold in the winters and besides, Jake had said that she wore the archaic clothes well.

She prepared her supper. A large chunk of sourdough bread she'd baked the day before, chilled butter, and cheese. She witched up a bottle of sweet red wine. Then another.

She called softly for Amadeus; searched the unlit corners, his usual hiding places. Contrary thing. Suddenly, she couldn't find him anywhere; he was probably still peeved at her. Just when she needed a friend.

"All right, you little devil, go hungry, then," she grouched, and ate alone as the candle's velvet light flickered across her closed face. It was a pretty face, usually, especially when she smiled. She possessed large eyes the color of new grass, strong cheekbones, pouting lips, and fair skin framed by long curling brown hair, with a tint of red, that fell to her waist. Not beautiful, but appealing.

Amanda finished her supper, her appetite better than it'd been in months. Everything tasted delicious. She drank too much wine, and soon she was smiling tipsily at some old poignant memories of herself and Jake. He would forever be a part of her heart, her memories. She would always love him.

Someday she'd see him again. In another life. She glanced down and there was Amadeus purring, circling her long skirts just like his old self.

"So you've come out finally, have you? Not angry with me anymore, my friend?" She scooped him up into her arms to hug him. He allowed her to do it, actually continued to purr. She laughed, glad to have things back the way they used to be between them. It was as if a great burden had lifted from her. Amadeus knew it, too. He meowed and licked her fingers. No back talk. He was behaving like a real cat, which meant he was pleased.

She took Amadeus and sat in the living room in the rocker before the dying fire. Amadeus was content in her lap as she petted and rocked him back and forth soothingly. The wine had made her light-headed, carefree.

The storm's winding down. Tomorrow morning there'll be a mess outside for me to clear away.

When she went to bed, it was to sleep soundly. There were no horrible dreams any longer, no dreams at all. When she woke up in the morning, there was a sleepy-eyed, yawning Amadeus curled in the space between her arms, and a bright autumn sun greeted her cheerfully through her bedroom

window.

There was that vibrant mustardy tang to the air she loved so much in the fall. It filled her with energy. It made her want to get up, and do something—anything—just to prove that she was alive.

For the first time, she thought of her dead husband and was amazed to find that the memories warmed her heart, made her smile. She would always have him. A memory away.

She was finally healing.

Humming, she got out of bed, belted a fleecy, blue robe around her waist, and with a pesky Amadeus treading on her heels, fixed them a large breakfast of bacon, eggs, and blueberry muffins. Amadeus ate food like a person, and she'd need strength to clean up the storm's debris.

Some of the muffins she saved for her friend, Mabel, an eighty-three-year-old widow who lived past Black Pond on the edge of town, in a tiny trailer. Mabel's arthritis had become so bad, she wasn't able to bake the way she used to and Amanda often took her home-baked gifts. She'd been Jake's friend first, her friend now. Amanda didn't have many friends, so she felt especially guilty for having neglected Mabel as much as she had during the last months. There was no excuse for it.

Today she needed to see her.

She set aside a muffin or two for Ernie Hawkins, the mailman, for when he came by later on his rounds. Another friend of Jake's she'd inherited.

Jake had always invited Ernie in for a cup of coffee, something to eat, and the latest gossip. Ernie liked to talk almost as much as Jake had. She'd awake many a morning to hear Jake and Ernie chattering in the kitchen about politics or the state of the economy. They'd had a running chess game going on. She could still see them hunched over the board, dropping muffin crumbs and slurping down coffee. Another memory that made her smile now.

She watched Ernie trudge past her mailbox every day. A short man with a friendly face, intelligent dark eyes, and long hair streaked with gray. A country storyteller. He knew something about almost everything and everyone. He'd smile and wave at her. Ernie hadn't stopped in for coffee in a long time, though.

Maybe, he didn't know what to say to her now. Maybe, he missed Jake, too.

Like Mabel, she'd neglected him.

A plaintive meow at her feet seemed to second the thought.

She cleaned up the breakfast dishes, then went to put some clothes on.

She looked out her bedroom window, shaking her head at the damage. "Come on, Amadeus, let's go outside and see how bad it really is. See what kind of spell we'll need to clean it up. What do you say?" She slipped a shawl on and with Amadeus trailing, tail straight up like a flagpole, she went out the door.

Outside, she tugged the shawl closer around her shoulders. The morning had a real bite to it. Amadeus trundled across the leaf-strewn ground, hugging the earth and playing with the crinkly leaves. Watching him made her chuckle.

In the sunlight, she could see the rain from the night before had formed a thin layer of frost, sparkling on the blades of grass and the trees' limbs like winking diamonds. One of the larger trees on the side of the house had been shattered in the storm. Huge limbs had splintered away from the main

trunk and crashed onto a section of the roof. It didn't seem to have damaged the roof much. Jake had made the little house strong.

Strolling around the house, she took stock of the storm's toll. One of the rear windows had been broken. Limbs everywhere. Trash from half the county. All in her yard.

Closing her eyes tightly, she began to concentrate on the words of a spell and soon experienced that curious vertigo she did when witching.

The wind began to pick up, the leaves rustling, cascading about and maddeningly chasing themselves when she raised her hands. There were a series of jarring crashes, loud whooshes.

When she opened her eyes, the split tree was whole again. There were no limbs perched precariously upon the roof, no branches or trash anywhere. The broken window was an unmarred pane of shining glass.

All was as it had been before the storm.

Rebecca, her older sister, would have been pleased.

Triumphant, but weary, she returned to the house and into the kitchen, and plopped down on a chair at the table. As soon as she was able to get up again, she fixed herself a cup of hot tea to regain her strength.

Her magic only took moments, but she paid the same price physically as if she'd done the actual labor.

She laid her head down on the table for what felt like an instant, but when she raised it again time had flown by like sparrows. Three hours had passed. That's what not eating and mourning all these weeks had brought. It had made her weak and taken more out of her than she'd realized.

Ernie would have passed by a long time ago. She'd missed him. Stretching and yawning, she went out to check the mailbox.

It was warmer, and the frost was gone.

The mailbox on the crooked post waited for her. "Amanda Givens" the only name left on its round dented side. She'd removed Jake's name after he'd died.

There were two letters. The distinctive handwriting on both telling her right away who they were from. Her sisters, Jessica and Rebecca.

She opened Jessie's first.

Her husband had been promoted again...her two little girls had the flu, but were getting better...she was taking more craft classes up at the community college...wasn't the news awful lately, so much killing...how could Amanda stand living there alone in the middle of nowhere, especially with all that terrible cult activity going on (as if Amanda couldn't take care of herself)...when was she coming for a visit, or better yet, had she considered the possibility of moving back to Boston?

Aha.

She had two sisters. Jessie was the youngest, and the only non-practicing witch of the three. She didn't miss the magic, she was really into the wife/mother thing. She had a normal family, a husband named John who was a computer programmer at a local college, and two daughters, Debbie, eight, and Abigail, eleven.

Amanda grinned into the sunlight. Every one of Jessie's long letters ended the same. Come home.

She never gave up.

They could have sent e-mails like everyone else in the world, but she and her sisters liked doing it the old way. Real snail mail letters. Amanda liked getting and saving them. They were real, she could hold and touch them. She had a boxful under her bed.

Besides, Amanda didn't have a computer in the cabin. Rebecca kept bugging her to get one, but she stubbornly refused. Maybe someday.

She tucked the letter into its envelope.

Amanda's father had died when they were babies, and their mother had died when Amanda was twenty-three, right before she'd moved here and met Jake.

Her face grew melancholy at the thought of her mother, her heart heavy. Ghastly images of that fatal car crash eleven years ago still came unbidden to torture her. To remind her that the someone who'd been responsible had never been caught. Their mother had been a powerful white witch and she'd had many enemies. One of them had murdered her. The authorities had labeled it an accident, but Amanda had known better. The stench of black magic had been all over her mother's corpse. Whoever had done it had been strong. Strong enough to hide their crime from Amanda, though she'd been young at the time and still hadn't come into her own. *It would have been different now.*

Afterward, Amanda hadn't been able to stay in Boston. She'd escaped to the woods of Connecticut.

She pushed the sorrow, the guilt away and turned her thoughts back to her sister, Jessie.

Though Jessie had no talent whatsoever as a witch, she couldn't make a pin disappear, Amanda had always been closer to her than Rebecca. They were a lot alike. Jessie really cared about her. Since Jake died, Jessie had been the one in closest touch with her, the most understanding.

Jessie didn't understand about this place, though. She didn't understand how it had called to Amanda long before she'd ever found it. As if it had chosen her.

Amanda's haunted eyes drifted around at the house butted up against the woods.

She couldn't leave this place. This was her home. This was where she'd found and loved Jake. She'd never leave.

Jessie meant well.

In her mind's eye, Amanda saw Jessie, with her wild reddish hair and gleaming green eyes so like Amanda's, smiling, as she was probably doing at that exact moment. Sometimes, Amanda could zero in on her sister that easily. There was a strange bond between them, always had been. Even without witchcraft.

Perhaps, she would go and see them all soon. She did miss them, and she wanted to see how little Abigail was doing.

Abigail, a true witch, if Amanda had ever seen one. She was going to have such power one day. Did Jessie know that yet, she wondered?

Jake and Amanda had wanted children of their own so much. Jake would have been a great father. For some reason, it had never happened. It'd been the only sadness between them.

Frowning, Amanda took the other letter and opened it. Rebecca's letter was short, plain, and to the point, like Rebecca herself.

Rebecca was divorced again—was that her fourth or fifth? Amanda had lost count. Why did she

keep marrying her lovers when she swore she hated men so? Her marriages never lasted. You'd think that at forty, she'd be too smart to keep making the same mistake over and over. She crashed recklessly through life like each day was her last. How could she ever love another when she didn't love herself?

Rebecca's letter also said that she'd be doing a psychic convention in the area in the next few weeks during her latest book tour and would drop by for a visit.

Well, what a surprise.

Amanda finished the letter and folded it up as she walked toward the cabin.

Rebecca.

She had the makings of a great witch, Amanda brooded, but she played it like some cheap parlor game, milking it for every penny she could. She wrote lurid, sensational books on witchcraft and satanic cults, did séances, sold her spells like a damn gypsy, and did the whole talk show circuit like some traveling dog and pony show. It'd always been a huge bone of contention between them.

Amanda never made money by trading on what she was. It was her religion. Her calling. She didn't put price tags on it.

She and Rebecca had never been close. That damned old sibling rivalry—made worse because they were both witches, and Amanda had always been by far the most gifted—had lurked between them, poisoning their relationship and killing any real sisterhood there might have been. On Rebecca's part only. Amanda couldn't have cared less who was the more potent witch.

What did Rebecca want from her? To be friends now, because they were both husbandless? Amanda rubbed her eyes, sighing.

At least Rebecca dealt only in white magic. Amanda should be thankful for that. So many ambitious witches went to the dark side.

Amanda dropped the letters into one of her ceramic pots in the middle of the kitchen table. She'd answer them later.

Right now, she had a basket of food to prepare and take to Mabel, and it was getting late.

Thinking of Rebecca, and how she made her money, reminded Amanda she was broke herself.

It didn't take much money to live here, but she needed some.

She grew her own food in the summer and canned or froze it for the winter months. There were the fruit trees Jake had planted years ago. She got by. Being a witch, she knew the ways of fertility, the secrets of the earth. Yet money was nice. She couldn't grow or witch everything she wanted. If she did, she'd be a physical wreck.

In a small wicker basket, she placed a jar of her special peach preserves, the muffins, some tangy cheese and crackers, a roll of Mabel's favorite sausage, and the special herb tea that helped her arthritis. Tea laced with magic, so the old woman's pain would go away for a while. With the cooler weather, Mabel would need it.

When she was ready to go, she stood in the middle of her front room and wove a simple spell to protect her house from intruders. Hardly took any energy at all. Protection spells never did.

Outside, she strode across the yard to where her workshop sat waiting patiently for her to return. In the beginning, it was just a large wooden shed Jake had built to store his potter's wheel, supplies, and pots after he'd completed their house.

It'd been Jake who'd suggested, since she was so good with her hands, that she try throwing pots. She'd be a natural. As always, he'd been right and something unexpected had happened. She'd proved not only to be good at it, she quickly learned everything he had to teach her and over the next few years had surpassed even him. She grew to love it, learning about every facet of pottery, its history, and the different styles and techniques. Soon, she not only created the pots, but designed her own intricately patterned ones decorated with ingenious slip designs and glazed in bright colors.

Jake thought they were so lovely, so unique, that one day he took some into town and had them placed in a local store, Jane's Gift Shop. They sold like hotcakes and an artist was born. Amanda had been selling them there ever since, and getting a good price, too, along with her homemade fudge and taffies from her grandmother's old recipes, another idea of Jake's. Now, everyone in the area knew her, not only for her pottery, but for her delicious candies.

Since Jake had taught advanced pottery classes in town, he rarely had the time to create new pots, as he would have liked, so soon the workshop became her place.

The door stuck like it often did and she yanked at it, going inside. It was musty. The spiders had been busy, she could tell by the gossamer-thin webs floating everywhere, but she couldn't see their inhabitants anywhere. It was getting too cold, almost November.

In one corner, the old potbellied wood stove hunkered, wood still piled up high next to it.

Jake had believed in preparing early. He'd cut and stacked the wood months ago in the heat of summer. She could still see him sweating over the large axe as it rose and fell, see the shine on his bare shoulders, the determination on his handsome face.

In the back, hiding in the shadows, there was a place where she kept her witch's pharmacopoeia of dried herbs and plants in labeled pastel Tupperware all lined up on a wall of shelves. She used to spend hours in here while Jake was away teaching his students. Happy hours.

She stared at the place, clutching the covered basket under her arm. Everything was dusty now.

A half-finished pot sat forlornly on the dirty potter's wheel, as if rebuking her for her negligence. She hadn't been in here since Jake had died. She ran her fingers across the caked, dried clay. If she could only go back to the day, the hour, the very minute she'd first started that pot, Jake would still be alive. She shook her head.

Suddenly, the old familiar urge to feel something taking shape beneath her fingers stole over her and a faint smile slipped out.

It's still there. It hadn't left, as she'd feared it had; soon, she knew, she would go back to work. The shop that carried her creations was out of them. Jane wanted to know when she'd bring in some new things and Amanda could use the money waiting for her.

She couldn't put it off forever. Going into town. Getting on with her life.

Closing and locking the door behind her, she began the long walk through the woods to Mabel's trailer. She'd never owned a car and didn't care to, though she could drive one and kept her license up to date. She had a small motor scooter Jake had gotten her last year for her birthday, but she preferred to walk when the weather was nice as it was today.

She could magic herself there, but wanted to feel the earth under her feet, sun on her face. Trees waving above her. It helped her think. She loved crunching through the burnt-scarlet and dun-yellow

leaves. Loved the woods.

For a while, coming out of nowhere, Amadeus trailed her, hiding playfully behind skinny trees, and jumping out every once in a while, trying to scare her.

“You want to play games, hey?” she teased, whispering a harmless spell, dissolving into invisibility. There’d be no side effects, unless she stayed away too long. She held her giggles in at Amadeus’s antics when he realized she was gone. He meowed pitifully and ran in dizzy circles. Searching.

The witch’s cat was smart, though. She’d played this trick on him before. At first he froze, his whiskers moving, his ears perked, sniffing the air. He lunged, rubbing up against her, purring triumphantly. His claws kneaded her sharply in the legs through her skirts, pricking her just enough to make her break her silence.

“You mean puss...that hurt.” It didn’t really, and he knew it, purring smugly in her arms when she snatched him up.

Visible again, she twirled around slowly with him and the basket, raining kisses on his head until he protested loudly. Laughing, she put him down.

At a safe distance, he stood indignant, tail straight up like a pipe cleaner, and glared at her with yellow eyes, meowing, telling her off. Still laughing, she watched him prance back into the forest.

A snap of her fingers and he could be back in her arms. That really made him angry but she wouldn’t aggravate him so today. She had other things to do.

She moved through the bushes and the trees, listening to the wind rustling the leaves together. She was warm in her brown, woolen dress belted at the waist, heavy leggings on underneath, a white shawl she’d crocheted with her own hands, and a soft hat low over her eyes. Her hair in a loose braid down her back.

She was a little breathless by the time she came to Black Pond, so she rested a while under the immense weeping willow nearby. The pond was so peaceful, so lovely.

Leaning against the willow’s rough bark, she sat in the grass and daydreamed, skimming her fingers lightly over the ground as the gentle wind played about her. She could understand why they called it Black Pond. The water was calm and so dark blue it appeared black.

Tall water reeds and brown furry cattails waved in the breeze as hordes of tiny animals scurried about the water’s perimeter and in the pond itself. Waterfowl glided above its surface and called out plaintively. Insects droned along with the wind. A bluish mist floated oppressively above the pond even now in the brightest part of the day, and made her fancy that to walk into it would be to disappear into another time, another century. It was an eerie, breathtaking place.

A strange place. She shivered, and wished she’d worn a heavier shawl. She’d been by the pond many times on the way to Mabel’s, but rarely stopped. Now, gazing out at the ruffling water and a distant line of birds racing high above, she wondered why she’d stopped today.

An old place, she mulled over the realization, but not a happy one, she could sense it. The faintest traces of magic lingered on the breeze.

Was this one of the meeting places of the satanic cult she’d begun sensing weeks ago, the cult everyone was gossiping about? The one she couldn’t seem to find or see when she scried?

She couldn’t be sure.

Muted images crowded into her mind of women and men moving around a bonfire, chanting obscenities and shedding innocent blood beside the pond in the dark and her face fell into a frown. Yes, long ago a witches' coven had met here. Centuries ago. Yet her skin still crawled. Black magic. Satan worshippers. Then the uneasy feelings were gone.

It'd been a long time ago.

The leaves over her laced the blue sky and whispered things she couldn't quite hear.

Amanda could have sworn someone sighed her name. She listened for a few more minutes, but there was nothing, only the wind sighing through the trees.

Loneliness did strange things to a person. She'd been achingly lonely these last months, cutting herself off from the world, like a wounded animal licking its wounds. It was time to rejoin humanity. The thought of a hot cup of tea with a friend, just to hear another person's voice again, was so very appealing.

She got to her feet, and as she was brushing off her skirts, she glanced up and saw the shimmering apparition. It hovered about midway across the pond, above the water, its face a misty white oval as its arms opened and beckoned toward Amanda.

The specter was so faint. Amanda could barely tell it was a woman, but it was.

She sensed such an overpowering melancholy in the spirit—an aching hunger—that it made her wince, cringe back from it.

The ghost tried to speak, but the words were indistinguishable. As Amanda stared, startled but not really frightened, it dissolved into the mist, as if it had never been. All it left was a haunting echo on the chilly wind.

Amanda...Amanda.

It knows my name.

For a time, Amanda stood there on the bank, speculating on the mystery. She'd never known a ghost to come uncalled; she hadn't summoned it. Moreover, it knew her name.

A shiver swept through her body as she recalled what she'd almost done the night before.

Had she called something up, anyway? Sucked a random haunt into her world?

No, this ghost was different. She couldn't put her finger on why—yet.

A twig snapped loudly behind her.

If I did accidentally bring something out from the spirit world, I'll have to do another spell to reverse the damage.

She turned from the pond and continued on her way.

Soon Mabel's trailer was looming in front of her.

Mabel was rail-thin and not more than five feet tall, with pale blue eyes and wispy hair the color of clean snow that she wore tucked up with bobby pins. Lines etched her small face. Her eyes seemed to see right through a person. She appeared frail but had an indomitable spirit. Thought every day was a gift from God.

When Gus, Mabel's husband, had been alive, they'd had a lovely three-story Victorian farmhouse that had been in her family for over a century, and thirty prime farming acres on this side of Canaan. Then Gus had gotten cancer and after his death, she'd had to sell it to satisfy the creditors, to pay the

hospital and the doctors.

With that familiar look of loss on her face, she'd confided to Amanda many times that she missed her old home. The home where a German immigrant named Gus Sanderson had courted and won the heart of a shy girl of fifteen. They'd fallen in love, married, and farmed the place for over fifty years together. They'd hoped to pass it down to their children, a boy named Jon and a girl named Emma.

Of course, as these things sometimes turned out, neither child had wanted the farm when they grew up. Jon had traipsed off to war, never to return, and Emma had slunk away with a sweet-talking salesman to raise a family of her own far away. Later to die far away. She'd hated the farm, anyway.

"Imagine, I've outlived them all, even my children. Never even see my grandchildren," Mabel had said one day when Amanda had been visiting. "They live on the other side of the country. Since Emma died years ago of pneumonia at thirty-three, I've never heard much from her kids." Mabel believed that Emma had really died from poverty, too much work, grief, and having children too quickly.

"I still write to them sometimes. The letters come back." She'd shrugged her stooped shoulders, her watery blue eyes haunted.

"I wonder sometimes what Emma's children are like. Daydream about them coming and taking me away from here. Back to their home where they'll love me and take care of me. Need me." Her thin body had sagged a little more.

Mabel was alone, even more than Amanda. Amanda still had family.

The old woman lived on a meager social security check, clipped coupons, and only had her thirteen-inch black and-white TV for company. She couldn't afford a telephone or a cell. She said the bills had gotten too ridiculous with all the added charges she could never figure out. For years, first Jake and then Amanda had tried to get her to move her trailer to one of those trailer parks in town so she could be closer to other people. She never would, because she wanted to stay close to the land and farm she'd lost. She was a spunky lady.

Oh, the stories she could tell. She'd spent her childhood in a different world than today's. Her previous life on their farm had been idyllic and nostalgically peaceful. Sometimes, listening to her reminiscing about the hard work, the gatherings with neighbors, their friends, Amanda yearned to be able to walk back into time and somehow become part of it. To have known Mabel when she'd been young and happy.

She'd grown fond of the old woman.

Knocking on the trailer door, she heard shuffling feet, and mumbling behind it. Someone shoved over a curtain, and Amanda glimpsed a frightened face, then a recognizing, welcoming smile.

Amanda smiled back at her, waved. The door opened. "Amanda, well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes, child," Mabel greeted her, ushering her into the trailer. As small as it was, it was always as neat as a pin.

"Been a long time since you've visited me, Amanda. I was beginning to think you didn't want to be bothered any longer with an old woman like me. Too much trouble." She clicked her tongue.

She looked tired.

Amanda hugged her warmly. The woman was so glad to see her it made her feel even guiltier.

She set the basket down by the door and removed her hat.

“You’re no trouble, Mabel.” A pause. “I’ve missed you. I’m sorry I haven’t been over lately but I needed some time alone. To get my head together. I’m doing better now. From now on, I won’t stay away so long at a time. I promise.”

Mabel grinned, showing her empty gums. Amanda had caught her unaware and she hadn’t had time to put her teeth in. They hurt, anyway, she complained.

“You’re smiling.” Mabel’s voice was an ancient rustling. “It’s about time. You can only grieve so long, child. Take it from me, I know. No matter how much you loved someone.” There was a caring in her that melted Amanda.

“Being happy now doesn’t mean you didn’t love him. It’s not a betrayal.”

“I know that, Mabel,” she whispered, as she took her shawl off and laid it on the threadbare sofa. All she had to do was turn around to bump into the kitchen table, the rooms were so cramped. She sat down, observing Mabel as she bustled around the stove boiling water for tea.

It felt good to be there again.

“Cold out there today, Amanda?” Mabel inquired as she set the steaming cups on the table along with her antique crystal sugar and creamer bowls.

“Chilly, but not bad. That storm was a killer last night.” Amanda stirred her tea.

“Wasn’t it?” Mabel agreed.

“You don’t seem to have any damage here, though.” Amanda glanced out the window in front of her. “You’re lucky. You should have seen the mess at my place.”

“Got it taken care of?”

“I think so,” Amanda said evasively. “Winter’s coming, it won’t be long now. The wind’s nippy but the leaves are breathtaking reds and oranges. Beautiful.”

“Always is this time of year around here, child,” Mabel remarked, good-naturedly. “You walked, then?”

“Yes. I needed the exercise after being cooped up so long in the house....” Amanda trailed off, recalling the last weeks and months, the misery and the sadness. The loneliness.

She met Mabel’s eyes and saw the same feelings reflected back at her. She felt the full impact of her neglect. She’d been without Jake for only a couple of months, while Mabel had been alone for years.

“I’m so sorry,” she spoke, knowing Mabel would understand. “I’ve neglected you.”

“You don’t need to apologize to me. I’m just glad you’re all right. I was getting mighty worried about you. If my old bones would have carried me, I’d have limped over and checked on you myself. It’s hard, I know, child, being alone. You must miss your Jake something awful. The pain will lessen and it’ll get easier as time goes by. Just be glad you had someone who loved you as long as you did. Some people never have that. Cherish his memory.”

Mabel had thought the world of Jake, too. That was how Amanda had met her, through Jake.

One of his pottery students had belonged to a church in town that took meals and used clothes to the elderly of the area who could no longer get around. One day Jake had helped the church deliver food to Mabel.

It’d been a vicious winter with lots of snow. Mabel’s furnace had gone out the week before. She’d had too much pride to ask for help.

Jake had found her huddled in the tiny kitchen, warming her body over the open oven door, trying to stay warm, a blanket wrapped around her and mittens on her frozen hands. He'd felt so sorry for her he'd stayed and worked on the furnace. He'd gone back to town to buy the necessary parts, out of his own pocket, and wouldn't leave until he'd fixed it. He'd been appalled at the way the woman had been living. Forgotten and destitute.

From that day on, Jake had cared for her like a son. Maybe because he'd never had a mother of his own—she'd divorced his father when he was a baby—Jake's father and his father's mother, Grandma Cloie, raised him. His father had passed away when Jake was fifteen and his grandmother when he was twenty.

Mabel had loved to bake German strudels and yeast breads for him before her arthritis crippled her. Mabel had loved Jake, too.

"Being alone's not so bad," Mabel declared, wincing from her arthritis, as she lowered herself into the chair beside Amanda.

She gazed at the cooling cups of tea and the empty table. "I wish I could offer you something to eat, but my social security check is so small it barely gets me through the month."

The basket, Amanda thought.

"I remembered that, so I came prepared. I brought us something to eat. It's in the basket by the door." Amanda got up and retrieved the bundle.

She emptied the contents on the table. "Peach preserves, sausage, crackers, cheese, fresh-baked muffins and that tea you like so much."

Mabel's eyes were grateful. "You're too good to me. Such a kind person." She got out plates and napkins and placed them on the table. Mabel had located and put her dentures in.

The way she devoured the food shocked Amanda. How hungry she must be, and her next check wouldn't come for another week. Yet Amanda knew enough not to say anything, it would hurt Mabel's pride.

She'd make sure, though, that she didn't eat much and leave whatever they didn't eat. She'd bring more later, too.

As they ate, they chatted about trivial things. Amanda poured her more tea. Soon it'd make her sleepy, but that was the magic working. Her pain would be gone.

Amanda suspected that Mabel knew there was something different about the tea, but she never asked questions, never mentioned it, as she never mentioned the rumors spread in town about Amanda being a witch. Mabel believed in such things, Amanda knew that, but she also loved her enough to respect her privacy. They just never talked about it.

"Amanda, I do believe this is the best batch of peach preserves you've ever put up," Mabel judged, yawning, as Amanda made her a third cup of tea.

"Reminds me of the preserves I used to can on the farm when I was a girl. We had, oh, about ten acres of fruit trees—apples mostly—and every year my daddy would hire these migrant workers from down south to harvest the fruit when it was ready. Boy, some of them were characters, some so strange." She moved her head, rubbing her wrinkled hands down the length of her legs through her faded housedress, as crumbs clung to her chin and tumbled into her lap.

“I remember this one elderly Mexican named Carlos something-or-other when I was about twelve or so. His whole family camped on our property one summer so they could work. There was a mess of them. Lived in a ratty old covered wagon and tents. They had a daughter about my age, can’t recall her name at all, so that’s why I began visiting them.” She squinted her eyes as if she were looking back over the years. “I do recall her grandpa, Carlos, well enough. I can still see him sitting cross-legged, wrapped in blankets, before their campfire at night as he spun his stories. He was blind. Eyes were all white and he wore these gaudy clothes like a gypsy. Wore all these things, talismans he called them, around his neck. To ward off evil. He didn’t talk above a whisper and was always peering around as if he could see. Petrified of something, a demon he called it, that he believed was stalking him. He was into voodoo or something like it.”

Amanda’s hand stopped tapping against her saucer.

“He said he and a friend meddled in affairs he should’ve left alone and a witch hexed him. He never told me exactly what he’d done to that witch, refused to speak any more about it than that, but he did tell me that his punishment wasn’t near as bad as his friend’s...his friend lost his sight and his tongue was torn out by the demon the witch had sent after them. Then the demon took him away. Carlos never saw him again.”

“Did you believe what he told you?” Amanda couldn’t help but ask. She knew of black witches and their demons. They’d call them up from hell, or the world in between, or from another dimension. All were possible and the demons were vicious. Unstoppable.

“Not back then.” Mabel gestured dismissively with her hand. “I was a child, innocent of the evil in the world. I thought the old man was nuts.”

“Now?”

Mabel stared off somewhere past Amanda. “Well, now, I’d believe almost anything. I’ve lived long enough and seen enough strange things. I’ve seen ghosts.” She brought haunted eyes back to Amanda’s face. “Saw Gus out in his garden not more than two days after we buried him. He stood up and waved at me. I ran outside, but by the time I got to the garden, he wasn’t there any longer.”

Amanda thought of Jake and of what she’d tried to do the night before. She shook away the vision of Jake half-formed in the circle.

“Must have been quite a shock for you.” Amanda smiled. She wasn’t a hypocrite. She might not scream that she was a witch from the rooftops, but she also never denied what she was, if faced with it, and never made fun of other people’s beliefs.

“No, not really,” Mabel sighed. “It was so good to see him. It was somehow comforting to know that there was an afterlife of some kind. Not merely a black void.” She laid a wrinkled hand on her chest above her heart. “Even though I’m a religious person, it still felt good to have some kind of proof. Seen with my own eyes.

“I’ve been looking for him ever since.” Her face sadder. “But he’s never come back.”

“Maybe he will, someday.” Amanda patted the other woman’s shoulder.

“Maybe.” Then she sighed again, drank more of her tea, her eyes getting heavier. She was fighting to stay awake.

“I’ve been reading the newspapers lately, Amanda,” she said. “This satanic cult stuff is scaring me.

They found a family murdered yesterday out by Harbor Light. Four of them. Awful. They were tortured to death.” Her voice fell to a frightened whisper. “Eyes gouged out, tongues torn out. Burned. Awful, awful.” Mabel’s sleepy eyes still reflected horror.

Amanda’s stern expression covered a growing rage. “I hope they catch them soon.” Mentally she made a note to cast out a spell net for them. She should have long ago, but this was the first time she’d been aware they were actually hurting or killing people. It would take some work. They had a strong magic shield up against her kind. She’d have to break it down. It could take days.

“Me too, Amanda. You shouldn’t be living out in that cabin all alone.”

Amanda nearly smiled. “Oh, I can take care of myself. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“They won’t bother an old woman like me. Besides...” Mabel shuffled up from the chair, disappeared into the other room, and returned carrying a huge shotgun. “If anybody I don’t know comes around, or tries to break in, I’ll fill all their butts with what’s in here.” She grinned slyly. “And I’m still a damn good shot. Gus taught me years ago. Haven’t forgot. So I can take care of myself, too.” She laid the gun against the wall.

“I bet you can.” Amanda chuckled and started clearing the dishes off the table, rinsing them in the sink, her back to Mabel. With the talk of witches and cults, something nagging at her subconscious finally surfaced.

“Mabel, do you know anything about a place called Black Pond? About a mile from here?”

“Black Pond?” Mabel responded hesitantly.

Amanda looked over her shoulder at the old woman hovering over the table, and when her eyes met Amanda’s, there was an unusual evasiveness in them.

“Why do you ask, Amanda?”

“Well, because today, on the way here, I stopped a moment to rest there, by the willow tree, and I thought I saw something above the water. Floating.”

Amanda recognized the fear on Mabel’s face and quickly added, “Ah, never mind. It was probably just my morbid state of mind.” Her thoughts brushed again across the ill-fated ritual of the night before. “An illusion in the mist.” Amanda shrugged.

Mabel stared at her. “You saw something?”

“In the mist, I saw a woman,” Amanda replied. “She was calling to me. She knew my name. It was the strangest thing. I only wondered what history was attached to that place.”

Mabel got up and fussed with something at the end of the kitchen counter. “Place is haunted,” she said simply. “You know, it’s known by another name. Some of the older people in town still call it Witch’s Pond.”

“Witch’s Pond?”

She nodded. “Has to do with its history. You probably saw *her*.” Mabel chortled softly.

“Her?”

A bony hand settled on Amanda’s shoulder after she’d sat back down and she looked up at Mabel.

“*Her*. The witch of Witch’s Pond. You’ve never heard the stories, then, have you?”

“No. Tell me.” She’d captured Amanda’s interest.

Mabel settled tiredly into her chair. “When I was a child my mother warned me about that place.

Told me never to go near it. People disappeared there. The children in town used to dare each other to go there at night and wait for her. Not me, though, I wasn't brave enough. There were horrible rumors about that place; about what had happened there."

"What happened there?"

Mabel inclined her head, her face troubled. "They were supposed to have killed a suspected witch there. The woman's name was Rachel Coxe, if I remember rightly. The town accused her of being a witch at the height of the witch scare sometime in the seventeenth century.

"You know, though it never got as bad here as Salem or Boston, the witch mania infected the townspeople, sure enough. They believed Rachel was a witch, along with a few others, and the townspeople hounded her. I don't think there was ever a trial and she tried to escape them.

"They say they tracked her, and drowned her in the pond. Her wronged spirit is supposed to be waiting there to take revenge on those who killed her, or win vindication, so they say."

Rachel, Amanda's mind whispered. Knowing a spirit's name was having power over them, like knowing the name of a demon. You could control them.

"Not long after Rachel disappeared, a trapper found body parts strewn along a section of bank at Black Pond. That was the beginning of the legend. Hideous things have occurred there ever since. Some campers were supposed to have disappeared late in the eighteenth century near the place. Three children drowned there when I was a girl. Lots of people through the years have seen things there, like you.

"Did she say anything to you?"

"No, just called my name, then evaporated," Amanda intoned, thoughtfully. She'd strolled over to the door, was looking out.

"I can't believe you saw the ghost, and nothing happened."

I'm a witch, that's why, Amanda thought. "Lucky, I guess. You really believe that it's dangerous?"

"Things *have* happened there."

Outside Mabel's kitchen, the sun was sliding down into the treetops. Everything had that tint of winter pink, like one of those paint-by-number sets she'd had as a child. Night came swiftly in late October.

"Why did they murder her?" Amanda asked, curious. She hadn't felt any danger emanating from the ghost earlier, but then some ghosts could hide their true intentions.

"According to the old stories, she caused the town's livestock to get sick, did wicked things and cast evil spells, was promiscuous, which wasn't all that unusual for the times, no matter what you've read in your stuffy old history books. They said she was able to see the future. She was a renegade. Extremely beautiful. The women of the town despised her because the men wanted her. Then they claimed she killed her married ex-lover and the chase was on."

"So they murdered her for it?" Amanda's hair rose on the back of her neck. People had treated her cruelly for what they believed she'd done over the years, too, so she could empathize. Boston still haunted her.

"Well, no one knows if they really killed her. The story went that Rachel was a witch. That she'd killed not only her ex-lover in cold blood, but her own children as well."

“She killed her own children?” Amanda echoed.

“They found their bodies, butchered, and some thought she’d used them in a sacrifice. I don’t recall how many children she was reported to have had, or if they were boys or girls. It’s an old tale. Rachel just disappeared one day, some say she wasn’t seen again; while another version went that the vengeful townspeople did catch up with her—and killed her at Black Pond.

“When the apparition of a woman first appeared at the pond, and evil things began to happen there, people put two and two together and believed the ghost was Rachel. No one knows the real story, except Rachel, and those who killed her, perhaps. If they did.”

Amanda glanced over her shoulder, pretending the story hadn’t affected her. It had.

Through the ages, people had unjustly tormented and persecuted witches for crimes they’d never committed. So much evil done against them: the Inquisitions, the torturings, and the mass burnings. All the atrocities perpetrated on those poor helpless wretches in the name of religion always made Amanda sad and angry. It wasn’t in the name of justice or for God that witches were condemned, but for man’s lust for power or his fear. God was a gentle, loving being. It was man who could be the heartless bloodthirsty beast. It was easier for man to mask his bestiality under the convenient guise of doing what he thought God would want him to do.

It made Amanda sick to dwell on it. She was a witch, too.

“Do you believe Rachel haunts Black Pond?” Amanda asked Mabel.

“Black Pond’s a place of darkness. I don’t know about the rest.” Mabel studied her. “I’d stay away from there if I was you. You seem especially susceptible to such things.”

“Perhaps I am,” Amanda replied softly.

Amanda’s sixth sense was squirming. An uneasiness nibbled at her. There was more to this.

“Mabel, that’s an intriguing story, but I’d best be going home now. It’s getting dark outside. And I wanted to sketch some designs tonight for the new pots I’m making tomorrow.”

“Well, it’s about time you got back to work.” Mabel gave her a guarded glance, seemingly glad to have dropped the subject of the witch, with night coming on.

Fetching Amanda’s empty basket, her hat, and her shawl, she didn’t utter another thing about Rachel as she said her good-byes.

“Thanks for the company and the delicious food, Amanda. Come by again real soon.”

Amanda gave the old woman a strong hug, gazing down at her. She’d left the remnants of their feast for Mabel.

She’s so frail and tiny, can’t weigh more than a sack of potatoes, all pale skin and brittle bones. She’s so old. What will I do when she goes, too? Amanda brooded. *I’ll truly be alone out here, then. Just Amadeus and me, and my memories.*

When Mabel walked her to the door, Amanda noticed that she was no longer wincing in pain, or limping. Just very tired. Good.

She left, stepping out into the lengthening shadows of an autumn twilight. The air was heavy with the promise of coming frost. Jake and she used to bundle up warmly and take long walks on such evenings.

For a moment, she stood at the edge of the forest and looked back at the trailer. She took the time to

weave a spell over it and the old woman. If there were any devil's disciples around, Amanda wanted to protect Mabel and make sure she'd be safe.

On her way home, she strode briskly through the woods, warm in her shawl, her eyes on the ground as the light turned an iridescent mauve and then to dark amethyst shadows. It was cold and still.

For some unnamable reason, she went a different way home than she'd come. Nowhere near the pond or so she thought.

She halted on a large slab of rock halfway home to take some pebbles out of her shoe. After she'd tossed the rocks into the tall grass, she was straightening to leave when she blinked and found herself standing beneath a huge willow tree on the edge of a dark body of water.

The pond. The same place she'd been earlier when she'd seen the ghost.

Startled, she gazed around. The sun was a dim crescent on the horizon, the night ready to take over, and the wind was suddenly icy.

"How did I get here?" she demanded aloud to no one, backing away from the willow tree.

There was a dangerous presence around her. The air glacial. Leaves crackled under her unsteady feet.

The cries for help originated in the distance, deep in the darkening woods. A woman's screams pleaded for mercy and grew louder and more horrifying as Amanda listened, holding her breath. There were the echoes of galloping horses, their thundering hooves pounding; bloodthirsty shouts and jeers like a hunt...coming nearer...nearer, toward the pond, until Amanda had to clasp her hands over her ears to shut out the horrendous sounds.

The rabble surrounded her. The noises so ear splitting, and the woman's terror so palpable, she could almost reach out and touch it.

The trees' leaves and the bushes were violently disturbed, the dirt splattered up from the ground, stinging and pelting her. So real, she felt a horse's warm, heaving flank slide past her, and she jumped. The scent of the horses, the leather of the saddles, even the sweat of the men was cloying—was real. All around her.

Yet, there was nothing there.

Phantoms. All.

An eerie trance descended over Amanda as the invisible shades pranced around her. In macabre fascination, she listened as a woman groaned and cried on the ground. Amanda's heart pounded along with the woman's terror. She spun about, sweeping the area with her eyes and then her hands, but there was nothing she could do to aid the woman for there was *nothing* there.

This had all happened in the past.

One last wail crescendoed into the vibrating dusk and something heavy flew by—she felt the air ripple as it went past her—into the pond's waters and a woman's dying scream echoed into dead stillness.

Amanda's ears were still quivering with the unearthly sounds; she couldn't escape them. Shutting her eyes, she shouted out an ancient spell, one she hadn't used in a long time and the past released her.

The woods were silent once again.

She cautiously opened her eyes.

Directly in front of her was a dark clothed woman, ephemeral as fog, hovering above the pond's seething waters, beckoning to her. Trying to tell her, or warn her, of something.

"Rachel?"

"Yes." The eyes were pools of gloomy emptiness.

"What do you want of me? Why did you bring me here without my consent?" she reprimanded angrily, her firmness concealing her apprehension.

The ghost didn't answer, only moaned. It was drawing closer, as the water began to purl, surging before it in waves.

For a terrifying moment, Amanda couldn't move. She felt the frigid water lapping hungrily at her feet, trying to suck her in. A force so strong, her body could barely resist it.

The wraith was mouthing words, her arms outstretched, almost touching her.

"Amanda...help...me...find...peace." The apparition begged over the wind that whipped wildly about them.

"I don't know what you want from me. I cannot help you. I'm sorry. You shouldn't be here. I command you to return to your grave!" She yelled at the spirit.

"No!"

Amanda invoked a stronger spell to send the ghost back.

It worked.

The hold on her snapped like an overextended rubber band and Amanda fell backward, tumbling to the ground.

The apparition screamed in rage, and Amanda cringed in stunned surprise as it faded back into the wet mist until it was gone. The water continued to churn tumultuously, and the willow tree's branches lashed out at her as if they were alive and trying to beat her.

That wasn't how a spirit usually responded to a powerful witch.

Amanda turned and walked away through the darkness. Her steps dragging now from the two spells that had sapped her energy. She had to get home and sleep. She was so weary.

Rachel might have been a white witch too; her guilty conscience pricked her. Like her. Perhaps she should have helped her.

No, the Old Religion doesn't allow it. What was in the past, was in the past. It would do no good to resurrect it now.

Later, recovered from the magic, and safe in her home before a blazing fire, with Amadeus at her feet, Amanda drew up another enchantment to cancel out any lingering traces of the disastrous one of the night before. That spell had most likely brought Rachel into the real world and she was sure the new one would get rid of her. Amanda couldn't help but feel pity for Rachel.

Rachel, who couldn't rest. *What torment her soul must have endured for its hate to still have so much power after all this time.*

Too much power for a dead woman or a dead witch, if that was what she'd truly been.

Rachel. What did you really want?

Amanda didn't really want to know the answer because knowing might only cause her more guilt. Interfering with the dead was no business for a live witch.

She gazed pensively into the flames.

She could do something for Rachel's spirit, though.

Softly, she spoke the words of one final spell, one that would give Rachel's soul peace. Forever—or so she hoped.

That was the least, and the only thing, she could do for a long-dead sister witch. Even that drained her so much she fell asleep in the rocking chair, fire still crackling, Amadeus cuddled in her lap; forgetting completely her vow to find the satanic cult that was causing havoc in the area.

She'd just done too much magic in one day.
