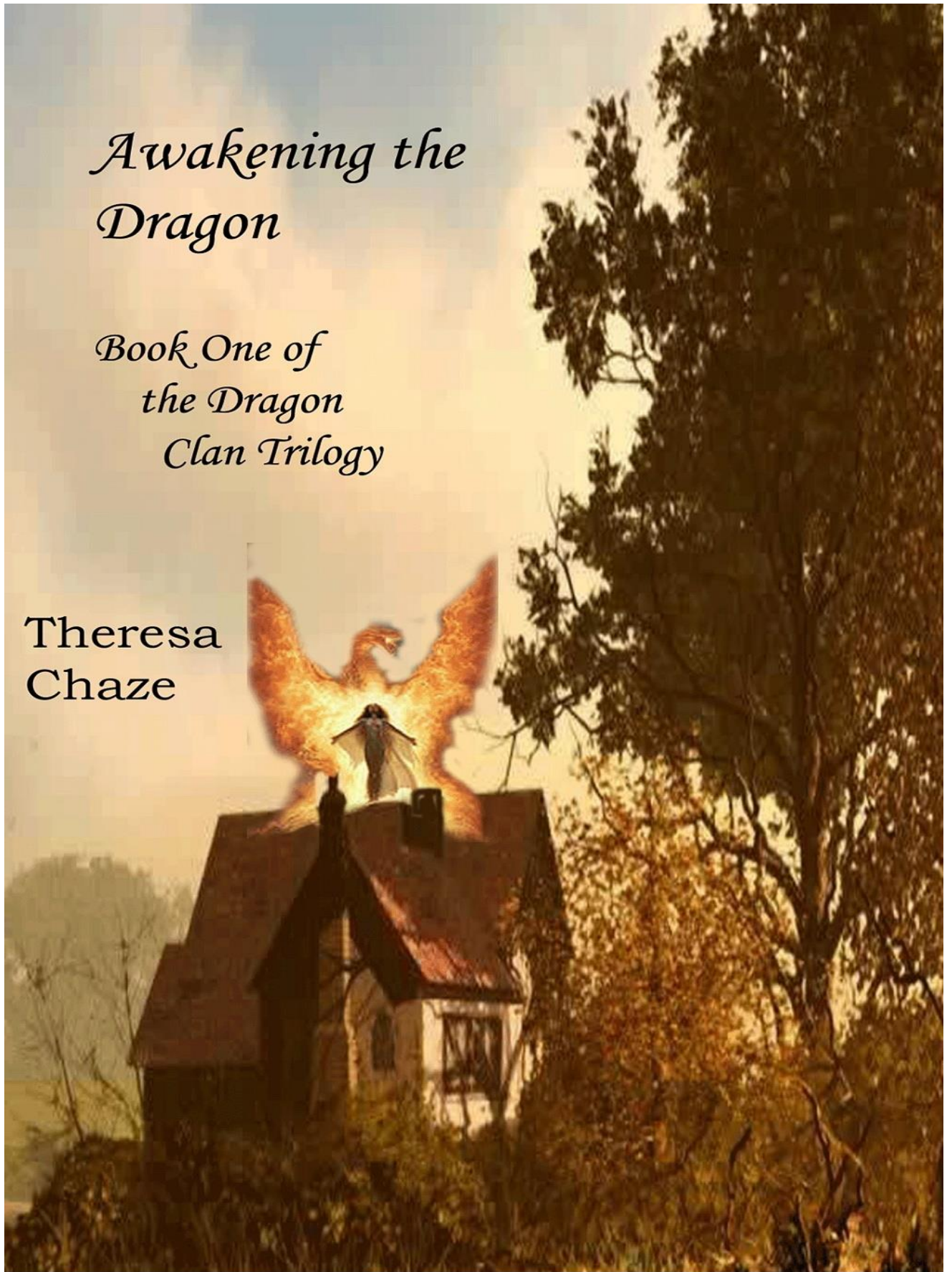


*Awakening the  
Dragon*

*Book One of  
the Dragon  
Clan Trilogy*

Theresa  
Chaze



*AWAKENING THE DRAGON  
BOOK ONE OF THE  
DRAGON CLAN TRILOGY*

*BY  
THERESA CHAZE*

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Published by Valkyrie Publishing  
Traverse City MI 49684

To Susan Owens, Karry Barolo and all the other  
Beings of light without their help this book  
wouldn't have been possible.

## PROLOGUE

It played out in the reflection of the window like a disjointed movie put together by a drunken editor. Some of it was fact; some of it was dream intuition.

He had snapped awake and been pulled to the window. Sleepily, he had watched the woman that had given birth to him, for he no longer thought of her as Mother, walk down the path, which led to Grandmother's cottage. He had thought it strange. Returning to bed, sleep quickly retook him to the land of dreams. On the wings of his intuition, he followed her down the path. He watched her take the key from beneath the pot and slip inside. Grandmother had been in deep meditation. The intruder watched her just outside the illumination of the candle within the dancing shadows it created. He felt rage radiate from her. Kevin tried in vain to wake himself. Slowly the older woman stood and turned. The two women argued. Grandmother slapped at her. The younger grabbed her arm in mid-air and dragged her to the top of the basement stairs. He screamed for his grandmother and struggled to free himself from the realm of sleep. His body wouldn't respond. The older woman disappeared backward into the darkness of the stairs, her hands flaying in the air, desperately trying to find a handhold to save herself. The younger closed the door only to reopen it and flick on the light. She descended to check her handy work. He watched the older woman's spirit rise; it flew to him. Wordlessly, she told him how much she loved him and made him promise to care for all she loved. She reminded him of the laws of karma and to guard which path he chose to follow. He thought it strange but promised all she asked. The white light appeared. She entered and was gone.

The edit jumped forward in time to a shot in the night, to finding his Father's body on the path and discovering the note his father left in the fireplace partially burned. He hadn't understood why his father felt responsible for his mother's death. He hadn't killed her. Kevin knew this to be a fact. That night, he had finally woke himself and had run downstairs only to find Father in his study, staring at the late-night news. In the time between then and now, Kevin had thought and rethought his father's demeanor. He hadn't understood it then; he still didn't. He hadn't turned around when Kevin called to him. The floor squeaking in the hallway behind them had startled them both as Mother tried sneaking upstairs. Slowly Father stood. His face was pale. Tears streamed down his cheeks. He called to her. She stopped on the bottom step. Slowly she turned. Kevin recognized her face, but he didn't know the person he saw in those cold, hard eyes. Father had ordered him to go to bed. Kevin turned to protest that he was a college graduate and was too old to be sent to his room; the look on his father's face changed his mind. Kevin wasn't sure whether it was the rage, shame, or soul-ripping pain, but it was enough to startle him into compliance. Raising his voice, he repeated the order and shoved him toward the stairs.

Reluctantly Kevin had complied, walking past the woman on the stairs. He couldn't look at her. She reached for him. He pulled away and continued to his room. He never looked back as the study door closed behind them.

Six months later, he found his father's body on the path. The note was in the study fireplace. It was crumpled and partially burned. The note said, "he could no longer live with the lie." Everyone thought he had murdered his own mother. But they hadn't read the note in which he had begged Kevin postmortem be stronger than himself. He had said that because he loved her so much, he had waited too long to tell the truth. Kevin read and re-read the note, wanting yet not wanting to understand the meaning behind the words.

He hadn't heard her come into the study. Mother said his name and he looked at her. Wordlessly, he held it up. He wanted to understand. Startled, she stammered an incoherent explanation and tried to grab it from him. He shoved her hand away. Again the stranger he met that night on the stairs returned. Kevin finally began to understand all he had seen that night and the message his father was trying to send. It made him sick. He looked into her eyes. They were full of hatred. Yet she was still his mother. He still loved her. Yet he knew what she had done. He didn't have proof; but as he shoved the note into his back pocket, he knew what she had murdered grandmother. Through the years, he had questioned just how responsible his father had been in his own death. The rage burned within, yet he couldn't face the truth about the mother he loved with all his heart. They never spoke of it again while he was sober. The only way he could cope with the rising fury was to bury it deep inside. To do his best never think of it. But it never went away--it never healed. Instead for close to ten years festered and poisoned the rest of his life.

Kevin lifted the glass to his lips and drained it, quickly following with a slice of lemon. He was the editor and he was going to change the direction of the story. That afternoon, she had finally gone too far. Ripping the pentacle from around Anna's neck and firing her for her beliefs was the last straw. He had offered to rehire her. Mother inherited Father's stock in the mill, so he couldn't fire her, but he could ensure Mother would never bother her again. Tearfully she had refused, claiming the stress of the job wasn't worth the paycheck. If she sued, he would understand and would pay whatever was fair to make it right.

Filling the glass, he held it up to the moonlight. The liquid distorted Diana's image. The liquid sparkled with the Goddess's full face. "Diana, great warrior Goddess, Isis, Great Mother, Hecate, Goddess of all that is unseen" his words were slurred, but he spoke from his heart. "I don't have the courage to do it myself. Hear my prayer. Moon Goddesses both light and dark see the truth hidden in my heart. With your eyes so full and bright, bring the evil truth into light. Help justice prevail by removing the veil. So the murderer will be known and be forced to atone. With greed and hatred in her heart, she forced loved ones to part. No matter how she lies and hides, show all others where the truth resides. No mercy or grace shall be offered or granted--" Suddenly he couldn't think of a word to rhyme with granted. He didn't care. The hatred in his heart made his intention clear; nothing short of vengeance would satisfy him. Ceremoniously, he drank the liquid, believing himself too drunk to be heard by the Goddesses.

Across the time and space separating deities from mortals, they heard him and the others' petitions for justice. They heard and said, "So mote it be."

## CHAPTER ONE

Rachael could still smell the lilacs from the backyard. The bushes were in full bloom, filling the air with their sweet scent. Beside the house, roses had already begun to climb the trellis with this year's new growth. At one time, the garden had been well maintained, but not for many years. *Do I want to buy it? Or I do want to continue looking for something closer to what I envisioned?*

The cottage tugged at her heart. It was lonely and frightened. Looking at the windows facing the backyard, she watched the reflections of the high clouds drift across the windows. For an instant, they took on a bronze sheen of the great air Dragon, Moltra. This just wasn't a spiritual place; it had been blessed by the dragon spirit. If she had blinked, she would have missed the sign. She was meant to be here. The path would be cleared one way or another for her.

Opening Dragon's Den had been a long-time dream. More than a New Age store, Rachael called it "New Spirituality", a place to meet, learn, and find support in a safe, loving environment. It would be a warm, spiritual fuzzy where you could buy supplies. The Goddess provided the finances through the state lottery and a dart revealed the location. The move back to Northern Michigan went well. The building she had foreseen had been quickly found and leased with an option to buy. All the resources she needed seemed to fall into her path. In less than a month, the renovations had been completed.

The only thing missing was a comfortable place to live and grow her herbs. The physical and psychic noise from the other apartments made it difficult to sleep, frequently giving her nightmares. The other houses she'd seen didn't have the right feel, not like this one, which seemed to say welcome home. According to the confusing agent, who went out of her way to tell her, it had electrical and plumbing problems. Rachael hadn't found anything she described on the inside. With all the other agents, they had walked around the inside together, discussing the pros and cons. This one wouldn't step toe one inside. But it wasn't a problem. Rachael had wandered around at will, touching and exploring. She opened drawers that normally would be private. They were all empty, waiting for the next inhabitant. Part of her wanted to leave a ring or a charm as a promissory note that she'd return. *So what if it didn't have a fireplace. It did have ten acres to walk about without interruption and garden space for her herbs.* The trees both shaded the house and gave privacy. There were deer tracks all around the house; some led up onto the porch. Squirrels ran around freely; several nests were perched among the trees. The stream across the backyard was no small plus.

But did she want to take on the responsibility when the Goddess might once again ask her to move? Yet the security of a permanent place for the litter boxes and being able to pound a nail where ever was really attractive. Looking around, she saw the awakening beauty and promise of security. *Could this be my home?*

"Yes." Came the answer on the wind to her unspoken question.

Rachael looked around but saw no one beyond the normal forest inhabitants. A slight breeze blew her hair across her face like a mother's caress; she brushed the strands back into place and continued to walk around the yard. She stopped at the birdbath. Built of fieldstone, it stood as a monument to the previous owner's love of nature. Last night's rain had filled it, yet the water was clean. She didn't understand why there weren't decaying leaves or pine needles floating. A male wild canary flew over her shoulder and landed on the rim. Ignoring her, it took a quick dip and shook off the excess. It briefly looked up at her and flew away. Rachael watched it until it disappeared into the tree canopy.

Chattering redirected her attention. A black squirrel sat on a branch just up and to the left. They are amazingly adaptable, she thought. "Aren't you the cute one?"

It dropped something. Rachael caught it in midair. It was an acorn.

"Thank you. But I don't have anything for you."

It chattered and scurried back up the trunk into the lush greenery above.

"You talking to me?" The agent called from the front yard. "I didn't understand what you said."

Reluctantly, Rachael joined her at the front of the cottage. She didn't like the woman. But she wasn't sure why. Yes, there were all the Bible quotes and negative comments which contributed, but that wasn't the main reason. There was something she couldn't define. She was younger than herself. Impeccably to the point of being annoying, she was dressed in the current fashion. Her hair was perfectly styled with the perfect manicure. She was the perfectly packaged Christian, complete with a gold cross dangling around her neck and a Bible quote for every situation. Rachael stepped into stride with her as she walked toward her sedan.

The agent suddenly stopped. "As I said before, the house is as-is. Bad plumbing. Electrical shorts and all. It'll cost you a fortune in repairs."

"All it needs is a little TLC."

"I have much better listings. Closer to town. Better price. Fewer repairs. Being a single woman you want something that will be easier for your suitors to find." With a casual wave of her hand, she emphasized her point. "Besides you'll find a good man and get married, so you won't want to put a lot of work into a house built for one."

"Aren't you supposed to sell its good points? If I was the owner, I'd be finding a new representative."

Suddenly she looked uncomfortable. The keys jingled in her hand. "It's not the house. Exactly. It's just that I like you. You deserve a safe, beautiful house."

Rachael sucked the front of her teeth. *Here it comes*, her inner voice whispered. Outwardly, she looked directly into the brown eyes. "Are you saying this house isn't?"

Again, the keys jingled in her hand as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, implying she would like to return to the car. "I have another house to show you."

"I like this one."

Hesitating, she cleared her throat. "I'm legally bound to tell you that a woman died here. She fell down the basement steps and broke her neck. Her son found her the next morning."

"It's not haunted." Although there was something, Rachael hadn't sensed a resident ghost.

"Of course not! I'd have told you that." She waved her hand in careless dismissal, yet she started toward the car. "Our church could have fixed that. The big problem with the house is that she was a witch. And you know what they say about them."

"No. What do they say?" The anger rising within her, Rachael emphasized the word "they". It was always they, never I or we, but the "they" that never take responsibility for what they do or say.

"The house is tainted. Cursed. No one can live there safely anymore. It has to be burned down to purify it."

Furious, Rachael grabbed her arm, spinning her around. "First blacks, Orientals, and gays. And you more than implied that being single is some sort of sin."

She yanked her arm free. "Are you implying I'm a bigot?"

"No, madam. I'm saying it straight out. I've been in your presence for less than three



hours. The only nice things you've said were about the member of your church."

"I don't have to listen to this!"

"Then leave."

Startled, both women snapped around to face the baritone voice riding into the clearing astride a deep brown quarter horse. "What are you doing here Savannah? This house isn't for sale to your church or anyone."

"You know my name is Abigail Hanson. And I have a contract with your mother." She snapped back.

"My mother doesn't own this house or the land around it." His gloved finger pointed first at his chest, "I do." The digit snapped around to point at Abigail, "and you are trespassing."

"The courts will change that."

"Savannah, Savannah. You and Mother need to join the rest of us in reality." His voice was smooth, taunting her further into anger. "She doesn't own it. Never will."

"Judge Patterson--"

"Has been disqualified for bias. My ever so innocent, blessed Mother," the sarcasm and anger dripped from his voice, making the word "mother" more of a curse than a blessing, "will not be able to hide behind his robes anymore." He nudged the horse forward. "Neither will any of you if something happens to my house."

"Excuse me." Rachael stepped closer to the horse and rider. Her nostrils quickly informed her they'd been riding hard.

For a moment, he looked down at the reigns in his large hands. Slowly he turned his head; the shadow from his hat obscured most of his facial features, including the expression in his eyes. "I'm sorry they wasted your time. The house is not for sale."

"Don't listen to him. His mind is tainted." Abigail cut in, trying to pull Rachael away.

"Shut up!" He snapped.

Direct, to the point, Rachael began to like him. She pried the fingers from her arm, fairly certain bruises were forming beneath them. "I'm just looking for a place to live. I have enough battles of my own."

He tilted his head upward, revealing the auburn stubble on his chin. "It's difficult to explain. The house's not safe because their fanatical church keeps trying to burn it down."

"Because the woman who lived here was a Wicca?"

Surprised he tilted his head, revealing smooth, fair skin and blue eyes. Sadly, he nodded. "Hard to believe these days."

"Thou shall not suffer a witch to live." Abigail hissed. "Satan took your Grandmother's soul. He'll take your soul too."

Impatiently he tapped the saddle with the reigns. "Lady, next time you can explain to the sheriff. Now get off my property."

Rachael was impressed with his self-control. Her little voice told her Abigail Hanson was an extremely lucky woman to be able to leave under her own power. There was more involved in this situation than just the sale of a house.

Furious, Abigail threw the house keys in the dirt. "I'll drive you back to the office." She turned heel to toe and marched to the sedan, yanking the door open and slamming it shut behind her.

The house seemed to call her; it was lonely. She picked up the keys but felt reluctant to turn them over to their rightful owner. *It wasn't fair. They wanted to destroy it; he refused to live in it. It would be a perfect home for us.* Looking up at the figure in the saddle, she hesitated. The

keys were warm and comfortable in her hand.

"You'll miss your ride." His voice held a hint of amusement. "And it's a very long walk. Especially in those shoes."

"I'd like to talk to you about the house."

"It's not for sale." The harshness quickly returned.

Nervously, she sucked the front of her teeth. "It's lonely."

Startled, his left eyebrow arched and he leaned forward in the saddle; it squeaked beneath him. "Aren't you afraid of devils?"

"In the Wicca religion, there are no devils."

"Are you sure?"

She looked up directly into the blueness. They were warm, yet distant, unreachable to the mere mortal. "Positive."

So began the battle of wills. He was trying to impress her; she refused to look away. His pupils narrowed, exposing a narrow band of brown. She leaned forward, placing her open palm on the mare's neck. The muscles beneath quivered. The tail switched. A hoof stomped impatiently.

A fly landed on his cheek. Involuntarily the muscles twitched: he didn't blink. She reached up and brushed it away.

Abigail blew the car's horn. The horse snorted and danced away from the disturbance. Rachael jumped back. The moment was broken; the duel was a draw. The horn blew again, a long blast of frustration. The horse reared. He fought for control of the frightened animal both with the reins and with soothing words. Rachael dashed to the car. Through the open window, she grabbed Abigail's hands and yanked them away from the steering wheel.

"You trying to kill us?"

"Get in the car!" Abigail snapped.

"Not even if my only other option was walking barefoot on broken glass!"

Abigail pulled her arms free, one bouncing off the back of the seat, the other banged against the inside of the door. Quickly she threw the car into reverse. "Find your own way back!" The wheels spun, kicking up dirt and gravel as the car shot backward out of the driveway and disappeared down the road in a puff of dust.

Coughing, Rachael tried to wave the dust away from her face. *I'd done it again*, she thought, *me and my mouth. It truly was going to be a long walk back. Hitchhiking at my age*, she laughed at herself, *someday I'll learn. But, obviously, not today.*

The horse had calmed and he had dismounted. Gently he ran his hands down one of her legs then moved on to another, checking for injuries. He wasn't as tall as she expected; slender build, but not so much he didn't fill those jeans quite nicely.

*Now, now she chided herself. Nearly run over. Finding herself in the middle of a holy war, deserted, and still having lusty thoughts.* She smiled, *that's what happens when you approach your sexual prime.* Pushing the stray strands back over her head and tucking them behind her ear, she crossed the distance between them. "Is she okay?"

Without looking up, he crouched. With a gentle tap of his finger, the mare allowed him to pick up her leg and he examined the hoof. Resting it against his thigh, he reached into his back pocket and removed a jackknife. Opening it, he used the larger blade to remove a stone jammed into the hoof. Carefully he cleaned away the remaining dirt, inspecting for damage. He smiled and slowly returned the foot to the ground. Experimentally she tested it by shifting her weight onto it. She stomped twice and her ears went forward. "Good girl." He straightened, patting the

back of her neck.

Rachael released the breath, she hadn't realized she was holding. "Is she okay?" She repeated.

His hands still holding the bridle, he turned to face her. "Seems so. How 'bout you?"

"Dusty."

He laughed and offered his hand. "Thanks. Kevin Mitchellson."

Accepting it, she stepped closer. "Rachael Franklin."

"New in town?"

"Month and a half."

"Why here?"

"I'll answer your question if you answer mine." She indicated the house and the settling dust leading down the driveway.

"Long story."

"It'll give me a chance to talk you out of a long walk."

"I'll be having one of those as well. Belle has a bruised foot." Smiling he removed his hat and pushed back his auburn hair. It was damp and thinning at the temples. "This was my Grandmother's home. She built it when my Grandfather died and my Father took over the lumberyard. She didn't think it was right we live in a small house and she live alone in the big one. But she didn't want to leave the grounds. She designed it herself."

"She used Feng Shui."

With a flick of his wrist, he snapped his hat back on. "You know the terminology. I'll give you that." He turned on his toes and took the reins, heading toward the path he arrived on. "No comment. Have a nice walk."

"No comment. What does that mean?"

He stopped. "It means. You're not the first reporter who's tried to get me to admit my Father committed matricide and then suicide."

"Wait."

"Why?"

"I'm not a reporter."

"Then why are you so interested?"

She searched for a reason to give. She found none. "I don't have a reason beyond I'm looking for a home. Before you ask. I don't know why I like it. I just do." She hesitated briefly. "I'm not looking for trouble. I suspect I'll get that when my bookstore, Dragon's Den, opens on Beltane."

He halted in his tracks. Slowly turning, a smile replaced the sneer. "Good thing you didn't mention it earlier. No telling what she'd done to the owner of the new devil store."

"Your sarcasm isn't appreciated." Angrily Rachael decided she preferred to walk. She turned towards the driveway.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk."

"It's five miles. But only a half-mile to the main house. I'll drive you."

"Not enough room for me and that redwood size chip on your shoulder."

"Ouch!"

"Have a good life." She continued down the driveway.

"Don't you want to talk about the house?"

It was her turn to suddenly stop. She pivoted on her toes, placing her hands firmly on her

hips. "It's not for sale."

He shrugged.

"Jerk me around and you won't like the results."

"Do what you will, but harm none." He countered.

"So your Grandmother taught you."

"Who taught you?"

A breeze blew her bangs across her face; she tucked them back behind her ear. "None of your business."

"Now who has a chip?" Leading the horse, he walked closer. Would you like to see the inside? You might not even like it."

"Been there; done that."

"You got in?" The surprise in his voice raised the tone an octave.

She nodded.

"You lie!"

"That's it!" She spun on her toes and marched down the driveway.

"Wait! Wait a minute!"

The horse whined. From behind, she heard the scuffle of boot and hoof dancing around each other. He swore. The horse snorted. Running feet came toward her. He grabbed her from behind. Her self-defense training kicked in and he went flying into the dirt, landing face first. Smugly she stepped over him. He caught her ankle. She stopped.

"Let go of me." The anger welled up in her. His moods changed faster than anybody she'd ever met and frankly, she wasn't inclined to indulge him. "Or you won't like the results."

Spitting out the dirt and blood, his lip continued to bleed. "Are you always so violent?"

"I don't believe in violence."

"Is that why I have a bloody lip?" Without releasing her ankle, he sat up, sliding his hold up her right leg. "I just want to know how you got in."

"The front door." She punctuated each word with anger. "We did have a key."

"Did Savannah go in?"

"No. She wouldn't."

"Aren't you curious why?" He released her ankle to wipe away a trickle of blood from the center of his bottom lip. "Only three of us have been able to go in since the coroner took Grandmother's body out. Myself and two of her closest friends. The house wouldn't let anybody else in. Dad even tried breaking a window. The rock bounced off, nearly hitting him in the head."

"Maybe it doesn't like bullies."

"Seems to like you well enough."

"I'm not a--" She stopped in mid-sentence, realizing her words didn't match her actions. "Sorry. I'm not usually so aggressive."

"Really?" His eyebrow arched. "You seem so well-practiced."

Nervously, Rachael sucked the front of her teeth. She took the class for a reason and his behavior was it. She was sorry for hurting him but didn't regret protecting herself. *You simply don't invade a person's body space without an invitation.* She offered her hand to him. "Let me make amends."

"He wiped his lip with the sleeve of his shirt. "Will you help or hurt?"

"Who grabbed who first?"

"Point."

"I'm not keeping score." She again extended her hand. "Are you?"

Taking her hand, he pulled her to the ground. "I'd call us even."

Rachael lay on her side next to him, admiring his profile. With it tied back, you couldn't tell how long his hair was from the front. She guessed it fell past his shoulders. His features were angular. She thought he was attractive in a direct sort of way. She liked his ability to maintain eye contact without being intrusive or threatening.

Kevin looked down at her. At first, he cocked his head to the side. An expression of wonder crossed his face, adding a new dimension of light to his eyes. He blinked and smiled as his shield rose.

She didn't know if he was protecting himself or hiding behind them. But what did he have to hide? For a moment, the battle of wills threatened a rematch, but only for that instant.

He gently clasped her hand and brought it to his lips, carefully wiping away the blood first. "I'm Kevin Mitchellson."

"I'm Rachael Davis Franklin. I'd like to buy your house."

"I'd love to sell it to you. But it's not up to me."

"What was all that before?"

Laughing, he released her and fell back into the dust. "Oh, legally it's mine. I pay the taxes. I still come twice a week to water the plants. Occasionally I even dust. But it's not really mine."

"Unique perspective. Very Native American."

"With this hair color?" Kevin lifted himself onto his elbow. "What brought you to Coyote Springs?"

"A dart."

"A dart?"

Sitting up, Rachael pushed the stray strands back over her forehead, once again tucking them behind her left ear. "I was born sixty miles from here. I wasn't happy. Family stuff. I worked my way through college at a small shop making incense and essential oils. It was owned by Beverly Franklin. She was like a mother to me. I earned my MA in business."

"She was your teacher?"

"Beverly taught me more than the arts. She taught me, unconditional love. Because of her, I was able to release my anger and guilt, but mostly my fear."

"Fear?" He leaned closer, resting his folded arms on his bent knees. "You don't seem to be afraid of anything."

"Even as a child, I saw things others didn't. Now I know how to deal with them."

"Grandmother taught me how to use my gifts. She was an herbalist and a healer. She cared about everyone."

"Beverly never turns anyone away." Rachael smiled. "I'll be carrying her line of products. She'll also be teaching a class this fall. Anyway to shorten a long story. I won a lottery, which provided the prosperity for the store." She hesitated. "I asked the Goddess where she wanted me to go, then threw the dart. This is where it landed. Two out of three. Three out of five."

"Didn't want to come back. Got the picture."

"Too close to the family."

Slightly nodding, he stood and offered her his hand. "I understand. Completely. If it wasn't for Grandmother and my promise to care for the mill's workers, I'd boogied on out of here long ago."

"It's amazing what we'll promise in the name of love." She nodded, but stood on her own and started brushing the dust from her jeans. "We all have free will."

"In any case. On to the next step."

"Which is?"

"You opening the front door and going in by yourself."

"Any particular reason?"

"Humor me."

Rachael held out her open palm. "Keys, please. Unless I'm supposed to use open-says-me."

"Good trick if you can do it." He reached into his shirt pocket, taking out the keys the agent threw to the ground. He held them out. "If that doesn't work, use these."

She took them. For a moment, their fingers touched. A shock went through her. It wasn't sexual exactly, but the strong electrical impulse of his life force. It wasn't light; it wasn't dark. The color was gray. At some time, he had been tempted, leaving footprints on the dark path. But what or when she couldn't read. She curled her short fingers around the keys and walked around him toward the house.

Climbing the front steps, she wondered why here, why him? She opened the screen door and inserted the key. It turned easily. The door swung open. Suddenly she felt nervous; more than she knew was at stake

She stepped in, closing the door behind her. It still smelled musty. No not musty, but the dusty settledness of a lonely house. The sun cast patterned shadows of the lace curtains across the floor and up the

opposite wall. Plants were everywhere. Most needed transplanting. On the table in the corner, an asparagus fern had begun to wilt as the roots cried for more room. Rachael remembered seeing larger pots and soil in the kitchen. She picked up the fern and carried it down the hall to the back of the house.

The kitchen was cooler and darker than the more sun-exposed front of the house. It was also definitely the heart of the house. Even in the shadows of the day and the tree, the room had a light of its own. She placed the fern on the counter next to the sink. Taking the largest pot from the shelf next to the back door, she filled it half-full with soil. Returning to the sink, she taped the clay sides of the fern's pot, pulling it free. With her available hand, she dug a hole in the soil of the new pot adjusting the depth and width to fit the root base. The soil was dry, leaving fine dust on her fingers and under her nails. Turning on the water, she rinsed her hands and adjusted the temperature. She watered the fern allowing the water to fill and flow through the pot, continuing down the drain.

She felt gratitude from the plant. A random act of kindness. She leaned forward and looked out the window. *There was so much that needed to be done. Trimming. Pruning. Transplanting.* Suddenly she felt as if she was no longer alone. Looking around the room, she saw no one, yet the feeling persisted. "Who's here?"

The sensation lessened but remained.

Rachael knew she was being watched. Sensing the ones, who had crossed over, was one of her family's talents, but she was the only one of the last two generations who chose to develop it. Running her hand along the countertop, she sensed the love that had once filled the room. Not only in the food that had been prepared here but also in the intimate chats between loved ones around the small oval table in the center of the room. The woman who designed and had the cottage built was a strong, loving soul who knew how to find the good in the darkest shadow. *I wondered if that is what killed her.*

"What are you doing?"

Startled, Rachael spun around, her fingers catching with the spindly shoots, partially uprooting it. "It needed transplanting." She felt defensive and angry with herself for being so caught off guard. She patted the plant back into place. "It was going to die."

His voice softened. "I'm sorry. When you didn't come out, I got worried."

"Why?" She shook her head, the long strands dancing around her waist. "There's nothing wrong with the cottage."

"That's not it." Folding his arms across his chest, he leaned against the flowered-papered wall. "It's the house. Some places have an energy of their own. Most can't handle the level here. It's too intense. I can last a couple of hours. After fifteen minutes, my skin begins to itch. After about a half-hour, my head begins to ache and it only gets worse. Most people can't handle it that long."

"I don't know what you mean."

"An energy vortex--"

"I know what that is." She snapped, not meaning to. "Sorry. But you're implying there is something wrong here. Miss Abigail," she motioned quotation marks around the name, "implied the same thing. I haven't found problem one. The water works. It tastes good. No bare wires that I can see. I haven't tried the furnace."

"You are comfortable here." The surprise was evident in his voice. He relaxed his arms, allowing one to drop to his side; the other he tucked into his front pocket. "You've been here almost a half-hour. It hasn't affected you."

"Earlier it was longer than that."

"The energy hasn't changed."

"Without a good airing, it never will."

"I open the windows twice a week and keep it clean."

"Short term it works." She softened her tone, sensing he was doing his best. "The house would eventually accept you."

"It's been over ten years. It doesn't want a master; the cottage wants a mistress. But not just any woman. A specific woman who knows how to channel the energy of the ley lines that interconnect in the backyard." He looked away. His gaze slowly drifted along the floor to the back door. "I also have other reasons."

"Which are your own."

His eyes focused on her, the blue seemingly brighter, more alive. "I won't sell the house. I'm not ready to let it go yet." He hesitated. "But you can live here. No rent. No strings. Just take care of it. Maybe with someone living here, they'll think twice about burning it down."

"I see." Her internal alarm went off, as her past distrust of men surfaced. She shifted her weight away from him. Taking a deep breath and centering herself, she asked the Goddess for advice for the present situation, qualifying that the sign was not too ambiguous to be useful. She closed her eyes and exhaled. She reached for her center, the place of knowing without reason; it was her place of faith. An image came into focus. It was the house. The gardens were once again cared for and lush. The roses had reached the top of the trellis. She could almost smell the full blooms. A breeze blew through the trees, changing the shadow patterns on the well-maintained lawn. A blue jay swooped through the backyard and landed on the tree stump. A deer walked out of the brush. She walked to Rachael, nuzzling her palm. Gently she scratched between her ears.

It was peaceful.

Blinking she opened her eyes. Kevin still stood in the same position. Rachael never knew how long her attention would be focused inward. This time it seemed to be only moments. She looked upward to meet his gaze. "There will be rules."

"Rules?"

"No unexpected visits. Midnight or otherwise."

"Excuse me?" Confused he tilted his head, but did not shift his eyes. "Oh, if I had wanted you as a sexual partner--" He stopped himself. Glancing downward, he scraped the heel of his left boot on the toe of the right. "It'd be your idea as well. Any others?"

"I consider the house my own. I make any changes I want."

"If the house lets you. It's cool by me. You pay the costs."

"Agreed. Lastly. When you are ready to sell, I want the first option. And I want it in writing."

"Agreed." He extended his hand. "Will a handshake hold until we can make it legal?"

She took his hand. Electricity shot through his palm. He would bear watching. He did have talents and the will to use them. "Works for me."

"When would you like to move in?" He released her hand. Reaching past her to open the window, his shoulder brushed against her. The light scent of cinnamon surrounded him.

He knows his stuff, she thought. "Consider it mine now. But it'll take me almost a week to move in. There are a few things that need changing."

"Like the locks."

She didn't like it; he read her too well. She'd have to set up her defense systems as soon as possible; she wasn't going to let him see one vulnerable area in her life. Gently she pushed him away from her.

Smiling he backed off. "I'll go get my car and drive you back to town. I'll have the contract drawn up. You'll have that long to change your mind or have the utilities changed over into your name."

"I won't change my mind."

He nodded and reached into his pocket, pulling out his key ring and taking two keys off. "Here are my keys."

"Thanks. She took them from his outstretched hand, carefully avoiding contact with him. "I'll wait for you here. There are other plants that need my attention. I also need to make a list."

"A list?"

"Of what paint to buy. That wallpaper has to go."

He laughed from deep within. Stepping backward, he half-turned and patted the flowered pattern. "Good luck. It's been here a while."

"Obviously since the sixties."

He wiggled his finger in front of his face. "Wrong. Grandmother loved it so she had it specially made in the eighties. She said she always wanted to have full blooms even in the dead of winter."

"According to Feng Shui, this is my relationship space. It'll be some shaded of pink, red or white."

"You have all that now."

She forced a smile. "They're lovely, I'm sure."

He laughed and shook his head. "Good luck. You'll need it."



Adding an Irish lilt to her voice, she cocked her head and leaned against the sink. "It's not a man who needs the luck blessing but anyone who comes without being invited to do so. This be a peaceful private place. I being a mind to keep it that way."

The color drained from his face. "I see."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He staggered back as if she had struck him. Quickly he turned on his heels and was gone.

Rachael stared at the empty doorway not knowing how to respond or what to think of his behavior. She slowly shook her head. He

was too confusing to understand. She didn't want to try. Instead, she counted the empty pots and the amount of potting soil remaining. She calculated there was enough soil to transplant three more plants. There was a philodendron in the bedroom and a spider plant in the dining room that was in desperate need. She would decide on the third later.

Walking up the stairs, Rachael wondered about the woman who lived there before. The décor wasn't the typical grandmotherly type. It was a house of contrasts. In places, it was loud and bold. Beneath the intense color was a pleasant base that brought it all together. It was the accumulated feeling that gave the cottage a very strong sense of peace, that made the outside world seem unimportant.

Her footsteps echoed up the stairway and down the hall. A fine layer of dust hung suspended in the air like invisible cobwebs. She resisted the temptation to try to brush them away from her face. She opened the bedroom door. The sun shone brightly through the southern window, making the room warm and dry. She checked the plants. All of them needed water.

Opening the window, she stood in the cool breeze, allowing it to freely blow through her hair. The scent of lilacs drifted up from below. Closing her eyes, Rachael smiled, grateful for the blessing. The birds sang. Somewhere nearby a couple of squirrels chattered. She opened her eyes. They were in an elm halfway to the top. They chased each other, stopping every few moments to chatter, then continued the game.

The door slammed behind her. She jumped and spun around. The breeze had visibly stirred the dust and slammed the door. "Okay. Okay." She spoke aloud. "I'll get back to business. New pot for you" She picked up the philodendron. "And a round of drinks for everyone. But don't be thinking that this makes you the boss. I still haven't made it official."

Laughing she propped the pot on her hip and opened the door; she slid the footstool in front to prevent it from slamming shut again. She continued down the hall and stairs into the kitchen. Placing the pot on the counter, she walked to the shelves. "Would you prefer blue, green, or ick--the magenta?" She didn't expect an answer on any level, but it was a nice touch to ask. She picked the blue. The magenta would wait until absolutely necessary. She filled it half-full with soil and returned to the sink.

Humming to herself, she moved into the moment. The past no longer existed. The future would wait. Her only focus was caring for the plants. The philodendron was transplanted and watered. She left it in the sink next to the fern. Picking up the watering can, she filled it and returned to the bedroom.

It was the same as she left it. No ghosties had moved the settled dust or closed the window. The air did seem a bit fresher. That was all. Starting in the right corner, she watered the plants in a clockwise fashion. Why she didn't know. She didn't even notice until she was half-finished. It was a habit, she supposed.

Finishing, she stood in the middle of the room. It was a little odd-shaped, yet pleasing to the eye. It would take finesse and creativity to work around the L-shaped wall with the sloping ceiling. The wall seemed to be an afterthought or a sudden extension to the room. It gave it character. The dresser in that corner fit so well that she might keep it and refinish it to match her furniture. The bed she wasn't too sure of. The four-poster was too dark for the room and filled most of one wall. Testing the mattress, she found it soft and comfortably inviting. She resisted the temptation to lay down on it. Besides, she liked the warm hug of her own bed.

Through the window, a car could be heard pulling up. Rachael thought it was a bit soon for Kevin to be back. Maybe his horse's hoof wasn't as injured as he originally thought. She closed the window, reminding herself to tell him which plants had been watered.

Rushing downstairs, she went directly to the front door and opened it. Stepping on the front porch, she saw the familiar sedan. Abigail opened the door and got out, holding Rachael's purse before her.

"So he stranded you?" She smugly walked toward the house. "I'm not surprised."

Rachael didn't think she could possibly dislike the woman more; she was wrong. Crossing the yard, she retrieved her purse. "Wrong. He went to get his car. But it'll take longer since you injured his horse."

"Too bad."

"So sad. I can tell how sorry you are." The sarcasm dripped from Rachael's voice. "For the record. I'm moving into the house."

The shock visibly registered on her face. "I don't believe you."

"Believe this. You and your church are not welcome at any time for any reason."

"We could help you--"

"Do nothing!" Rachael snapped. "Something else you should know. I am the owner of Dragon's Den. We open in ten days. You do anything to annoy my customers or me and I'll have you in court so fast you won't have time to count your beads."

"You're another one!" Abigail stammered.

"You bet your sweet fanny!"

She physically stepped away from Rachael, the coloring draining from her face, making her lipstick seem more obscene against the paling skin. With a trembling hand, she made the sign of the cross. "We can still save your soul. Repent your wickedness." The fear in her voice drowned the conviction, but she did not stammer.

"You leave me in peace," Rachael continued, "and there will be peace between us. Harm me or mine--"

"And you'll what?" Abigail cut in, rallying her courage. "Curse me? Send your devils to haunt me?"

"No. Call the law."

"They can't protect you from God."

"God I have no fear of. Nor do I dislike the true followers of the Christ energy. The ones who actually do no harm in his name. The ones who actually walk the path of peace, wisdom, and love are truly children of God." Rachael stepped closer, pointing her right index finger at the retreating figure. "It's the pretentious bigots who falsely claim to work in its name that do the damage. The ones who judge others and refused to see how their own actions do harm. It's the ones who twist the doctrine of love and peace into reasons to lie, cheat and kill that gives all the others a bad name. I know many actual Christians. They don't promote arson or attack others who don't walk the same spiritual path."

"We follow the Bible. It's God's words that lead us." Abigail snapped back. Just as quickly, her voice softened. "Please let me lead you back to the one true God."

"What makes you think your beliefs are more valid than mine?" Without waiting for Abigail to answer, Rachael shifted her weight on her back foot and quickly continued. "You stand on street corners, invade our homes--what makes you think anyone wants to hear it? The only Christians I have problems with are the ones who try forcing their beliefs on me. The one who threatens me when I refuse to join the flock. I have a religion. It feeds my soul and gives me comfort."

"I am charged to spread the word of God." The angry edge returned to Abigail's voice.

"Preach it to the choir. No one else wants to hear it."

"I'm doing God's work!"

Rachael slowly shook her head. "That's been the claim for centuries when people do evil to others."

"I'm not evil!" Abigail stopped. Staring up at the sky, she screamed. "I love God! I hold no other before him."

For a moment, the forest became alive with sound as Abigail's voice scattered birds and squirrels. Chattering and squawking they drown out the echo of her voice. Then there was silence. A single bough from an oak fell between them. Rachael sensed it was time to end the conversation before her temper awakened and permanent damage was done to both.

There was nothing she could say to bring peace between them. Rachael turned on her heels. She marched into the house and slammed the door behind her. Leaning against it, she realized for the first time she was trembling. *Why couldn't people just be kind to one another? Live and let live. Religions didn't need to clash. Everyone had their own path; all we needed to do was respect each other enough to allow everyone to follow their own.*

Outside, the car door opened and closed. The car started and pulled out of the driveway. She didn't watch. She wanted a cup of tea. No, she needed a cup of tea. Spearmint and Chamomile. Any witch worth her salt would have them growing in the garden. There was a kettle and cups in the kitchen. The stove worked. All she needed was to find the main ingredients in the backyard. Taking a deep breath, she headed for the back door.

Quickly she found what she needed. The full kettle was already steaming on the stove but had yet to whistle. Washing the herbs in the sink, she wondered about the woman who had died here. *Did she have to face the same kind of bigotry?*

"No."

Startled, Rachael turned around. The room was empty, yet the voice had been so clear and distinct. The feeling of being watched had returned and intensified. "Who's here? I know there is someone. Show yourself or be gone." Impatiently she looked around, waiting for a response. Nothing. Yet the atmosphere was charged; she couldn't see it but she could feel it dance on her skin. Not an itch nor a tickle, it felt as if ants trailing feathers were marching all over her body. Absent-mindedly she scratched her arm while looking around the room. It was trying to play games, she had aces and trump. She pulled out her traveling alter out of her purse. Inside she found the baggy of sea salt and took it out. "Spirit hiding between realms. Seeking to be the one at the helm. I call your forth," Rachael poured salt directly on the floor in the form of a circle, "in this time a place, limiting you to this now blessed space. Appear now so that I may see and hear what keeps you in this place." Rachael waited. The circle remained empty.

"I was waiting for my replacement." The voice held the remains of an Irish accent. Not so much that she was born in Ireland, but more likely her parents were and the speech pattern

migrated into her just as her parents migrated to their new home.

Again, Rachael was caught off guard. She spun around to face a woman with golden red hair streaked with gray and white. Her face was lined yet appeared vibrant, as was her whole stature. She was slender and strong; her posture carried no signs of the age that her face and hair implied.

"Who are you?" Rachael turned to meet her squarely. "How is that you appear outside the sacred circle?"

Her arms gracefully spread. "This is-was my home. I could not leave until another had come to be its guardian."

"You're Kevin's Grandmother?"

She nodded. "You may call me Grandmother if you wish."

"No. Thank you."

"As you wish. Then Sarah. That is what I was called before I died." She pointed to the kettle. "Your water is nearly ready and my time is short."

"Are you looking for justice?"

Again, she nodded. "That and more."

"What do you need me to do?"

"Let the justice unfold as it will. You being here has already set it in motion. The one who murdered my son and me will be called into account. But you must be careful." Her image intensified. "I have searched the world for the one who had the strength to channel the energy of this place--the one who could complete the cycle set in motion so long ago." She smiled and held out her hands, palms facing Rachael. "What I couldn't prevent before, I have been able to recreate with the new matrix, where justice could be met and the scales balanced."

"I don't understand."

"You will child. But only after you have truly awakened the dragon within you." She stepped closer, raising her arms before her palms upward. "You must choose. Now. But do not do so lightly. By accepting these gifts, you will be one of the hubs of the wheels of justice."

Rachael didn't know what to say. Deep inside, she had already made the decision. It was long ago, remembered only in dreams of a faraway place. It was an oath that was sealed in blood, hers and many others. She knew without knowing how that she and three others were the only ones. Four pillars to support the way for the others. She knew this to be true, yet her conscious mind balked. She had fought so hard to free herself from unwanted ties and obligations. She closed her eyes and sought the truth from her soul. Breathing deeply she connected with the whole of herself. As if with a will of their own, she raised her hands over Sarah's, the palms pointing downward. Rachael opened her eyes and met her gaze. "I accept your gift with all the responsibilities and challenges it brings."

Sarah nodded. Her hands lifted upward. The center of her palms glowed and slowly began to spin as the vortexes formed. Rainbows of color swirled and mixed as the speed increased. The whirling increased until the colors were smeared together. The matrix had formed. Only then did she raise them to meet Rachael's. Intertwining her fingers with Rachael's, she nodded.

Rachael nervously smiled and prepared herself. It felt like a tiny mouse was trapped between their palms. Soft movement entered through her palm chakras. Her hand glowed with the rainbow matrix. Rapidly it spread up her arms and filled her body with a loving power that Rachael never even imagined existed. Every cell, every nucleus energized with the new power. Images flashed in her mind too rapidly for Rachael to remember. Instead, she stored them until the time she would need the information. Sarah released her and stepped backward. Slowly

Rachael sank to her knees, resting her face in her palms.

"You must make this your own as soon as possible. Change the energy matrix. The one I created will no longer protect you. I have waited so long for you because this is a very powerful place. The energy comes directly from Gaia. Through the ley lines, you can touch all the others. There is nowhere in the world you cannot reach once you learn the matrix code. "

Rachael looked up at her. "But how?"

Sarah quickly cut her off. "Gaia will teach you and the others of your tribe who will follow from the other place and time. After they have gathered, Gaia will show you the way to right old wrongs and heal the festering wounds. But until then you must make this place a beacon of light so they may feel the energy and be awakened to the memories of the before time. Allow it and it will give you strength beyond what you could possibly imagine."

"I don't understand."

She smiled. "You will child. Soon you will. Call the tigers, the leopards--all the cats of power and wisdom. They are very close to your soul. Join them with the spirit of this place and your own dragon tribe. Once they are partnered, no harm can be done to you or yours." She disappeared, returning only as a shapeless image. "Tell Kevin--" she momentarily hesitated, but quickly resumed, "that his hatred will destroy him and all I created." Her voice took on a distant, hollow tone. "Tell him to remember what I told him." She vanished; only this time she didn't return.

Rachael stared at the now empty space. Never before had she experienced anything so intense. Slipping into the nearest chair, she leaned forward; crossing her arms on the table, she used them as a pillow. The familiar dizziness washed over her. Early in life, she learned the more she fought it, the longer it lasted. However, if she simply gave in, it passed quickly without any lasting effects. The visitation left her with more questions about the cottage. *If I am to be part of the balancing of justice, I need to know more. But who could she ask?* She hadn't been in town long enough to find a circle she knew well enough to trust to do a séance, nor had she developed a trust bond with any of the other Wiccans in the area. Contacting the dead alone could be very dangerous, so she would have to rely on the living to give her the information she needed.

Taking a deep breath, she cleared the remaining fuzziness and looked around the room. The burner had been turned off and the kettle moved. Steam rose from the spout. It was ready. And so was she.