

# :::a minute before friday

book 3

jo kadlecek

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*He said to them, “Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”*  
—Mark 4:21-23

February 2006

## ::Chapter One

They didn't look like witches. Not a pointy hat or broomstick in sight. And yet the more I stared, the more I noticed something else was missing: light.

I didn't know how they'd managed it, but the fifty or so people gathered at the intersection of the sidewalk and the university entrance looked as if the darkness of a movie theater had somehow spilled onto them, even while sunlight flickered on the leaves and buildings behind them. They stood motionless by a tall oak tree, an odd contrast to the busy pace around them.

Granted, it was only 7:56 in the morning and I wasn't exactly awake. It didn't help that, despite the sunny blue sky, the February temperatures had dropped to eighteen degrees. My cheeks stung. The early-morning sidewalk traffic of students and professors hurried past with heads down and hands stuffed in pockets to keep warm.

I swallowed the bitter air and stepped toward the dark corner, yanking the earflaps of my cap as far down as they'd go—which made my hair stick out sideways—and pulling up the collar of my coat, which made my neck disappear so that I must have looked like a clown. A few of the night people suddenly smirked as I walked toward them. Or maybe the crunch of the snow beneath my boots signaled to them, “Danger, outsider approaching.”

They shifted. I stopped where I was and smiled toward them, one of those hopeful little smiles you developed the first day of class when you were the new kid and wanted someone, anyone, to like you. Of course, it rarely seemed to work then. And it sure wasn't working now.

Sometimes religion reporting was a lonely job.

An hour before, I'd barely rolled out of bed, and so was hardly in the mood for an encounter with the dark side—beyond my own mirror, that is. Our apartment had been freezing, so I'd tossed my red parka over my flannels, stumbled into the kitchen, and dumped yogurt in a bowl, when my phone rang. I poured some coffee and answered.

"You busy?" It was my editor, Skip Gravely. I looked at my mug and the clock.

"Uh, well . . ." This was not a good sign. Instinctively, I reached for pen and notebook.

"Just got an interesting call about the Wiccans who are—"

"Did you say Wiccans?" I asked, gulping the rest of my coffee. "You mean like witches . . . with cauldrons and wands and—"

"Yes, those Wiccans. Seems they're tired of being discriminated against and want to be treated like every other law-abiding religion so they're going to—" Skip paused as if he were looking for something. "They're holding a rally right now and are going to—"

"A rally? In this weather? Now?"

"Apparently, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs won't allow Wiccan symbols on headstones," he said. "So they're rallying at the steps of Regal University, where I guess they thought they'd get both support and press."

I blinked. "Couldn't they wait until spring?"

Skip laughed. “Devotion requires sacrifice, doesn’t it? Anyway, got a pen?” He gave me names and an address of where they were on the campus. I knew the university wasn’t far from my apartment building, though I hadn’t actually visited it since moving here. It was one of those places nearby that you always intend to see but never quite get to.

A bell rang in my head, reminding me that I knew someone who either worked there or took classes there, though I was too groggy this morning to remember whom.

“Why Regal, Skip? Why not city hall or the park?”

“Are you kidding? The university loves this sort of thing. They’ve got a long history of civil disobedience and protests and cheering the underdog. See what you can find out, okay?” I stared at my breakfast. “Oh, and dress warm.”

Who invented cell phones anyway? Or mornings?

I jumped in and out of the shower, traded my flannel pajamas for a wool sweater and jeans, and threw on my parka and cap. The frigid air slapped my face when I hurried down the steps and across the street. My brain was sleepy. I was fairly sure my parents hadn’t dabbled in Wicca during their early spiritual pilgrimage—at least not that I could recall. I did remember a classmate in college named Wanda who’d given a speech once in a communication class on being a member of a Wicca congregation. A guy in the class teased her from that point on, calling her Wanda the Witch. I had felt badly for Wanda, but at the same time I hadn’t tried too hard to find out any more about her religion.

Now, standing near this strange dark corner of the campus, I wished I had.

I lit a cigarette, the organic kind, for backup. Tobacco always seemed to reverse my central nervous system from full throttle,

and for some reason it tasted better in the elements of a winter day—just like cigarettes were always the best on chairlifts above a ski slope back home in Colorado. Granted, the Surgeon General’s warnings had helped me quit twice already since taking this job. But on this cold sunny morning, as I approached an organized number of prospective spell-casters who stood in the shadows of one of the country’s most prominent Ivy League universities, it seemed as good a time as any to light up again.

“Lord, have mercy,” I said out loud. I saw my breath; that was how cold it was.

The group stood ghostlike at the entrance of the college. They’d turned a tall cardboard box into a podium and stenciled a large five-point star in a circle across it. People stared blankly at the snow-crested branches above them, threatening to sprinkle snow on their heads anytime a breeze passed. Each of them wore black, though I wasn’t sure if that was because of their beliefs or because it seemed the most fashionable color to wear in this city. I inhaled my cigarette, feeling suddenly self-conscious of my red parka and green hunter’s cap, and took in the crowd.

A middle-aged woman in a long black skirt, jacket, and scarf was at the podium. Her short-cropped hair was dyed blue-black, a stark contrast to her chalky face. She held a bullhorn to her lips but rested her other hand in her jacket pocket. The crowd—comprised primarily of women her age—offered an occasional nod or chant, but mostly they seemed as unresponsive as the mannequins in the Fifth Avenue windows.

“. . . because it’s time this country accepts us for who we are. Wiccans. Humans. Divine. And citizens with as much right to wear our beliefs on our sleeves—and our tombstones—as Catholics or Protestants,” she said. Her voice hummed. I dropped

my cigarette to the ground, stepped on it, then picked up the butt and tossed it in a trash can. Then I shoved open my notebook and jotted down the speaker's words. The cold air pricked my fingers.

"Why do our children have to hide the fact that their mommies are witches? It's the twenty-first century! Why do some of us here today have to keep our Wicca a secret for fear of losing our job? Or our friends?" I scribbled while her volume increased. "And what's so wrong with our religion that in the land of the free we must believe and practice our rituals in private?" A delicate applause rose from the crowd—though I suspected some were simply warming their hands or waking up—and I jotted more notes. A few college students shook their heads as they passed us. Others stopped to listen. But everyone came to an abrupt halt when a shrieking noise cracked the morning air behind us.

"What's so wrong?!" Behind us, a skinny pale man in a hunting jacket threw his fist in the air as he screamed at the woman—making the boy in my college class look like an Eagle Scout for how he treated Wanda. "What's wrong?! You sacrifice children for their blood! You have orgies with the Devil!" Then he shoved a sign high above his head that read, "Hell Is for Sinners Like You!" And in a voice that reminded me of a thousand fingernails against a chalkboard, he screeched, "God hates witches and Satan worshippers and homosexuals! You are an abomination to the Lord of the Universe!"

I sighed. Men like him did not make my job any easier.

Two campus security officers quickly emerged from the crowd, gripping the man's elbows and ushering him toward the street. The people around the podium merely tossed him a glance before looking back at the woman with the bullhorn.

She continued as if she'd not heard a thing the man had

bellowed: “We bring no harm to others. We only want to be heard. Don’t we deserve the freedom to worship as we want and to be remembered for what matters most to us? Just as our soldiers deserve to be buried with dignity.” She bowed her blue-black head and stepped backward, passing the bullhorn to an older man, whose crew-cut hair and shaved face had a military style to them. He cleared his throat and brought the contraption to his chin.

“My name is Griffin Lewis,” he said, his voice low and tunnel-like. “I’m here this morning to tell you that we will appeal every decision the government inflicts on us until brave soldiers, like my son, can have the Star of our Center go with them to the other world.” He dropped the bullhorn to his side for a moment and glared at us as if he were trying to recognize a face in a darkened room. His eyes squinted, then widened and narrowed again. He pulled back the megaphone to his lips and continued with his speech, attracting a few more passersby. He was met with slight affirmations from the crowd, and I tried simply to write down my observations, though I wasn’t doing a very good job. My hands were shaking and there was a strange sensation in my stomach. But the winter cold wasn’t the only thing making me shiver. I rocked back and forth to stay warm. And I glanced at the sun to remember it was there.

When the military man stopped talking, he and the woman with blue-black hair began to pass out petitions for the crowd to sign. Only a few took out a pen. Some handed the papers to the next person and hurried off, while others tucked the papers into their pockets. Shadows fell across their faces. A few made small talk to those standing beside them. The rally was ending, and I remembered Skip’s charge to see what I could find out.

I adjusted my green earflaps and approached a tall woman

who was wearing a baggy black leather jacket that made me think of a motorcycle rider. When she saw my notebook, she shook her head and turned away. I tried talking with a younger woman carrying a backpack, but she did the same. Each time I asked someone about the rally or their religion or why they were standing out in the freezing cold on a February morning, I got a vacant stare. Most simply looked toward the star on the podium or smiled flatly or pretended not to hear.

Finally, Griffin Lewis, the man who'd spoken, approached me.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked, though his tone didn't sound like a question.

"Not sure. I was just wanting to find out a few things for the—" I began, holding out my hand to shake his. But he interrupted and slipped a petition into mine.

"We're glad to talk with anyone who'll treat us as they want to be treated." It was the clearest sentence I'd heard yet, but I couldn't ignore the caution inside it.

"I can appreciate that." I nodded. "My editor sent me out here this morning, Mr. Lewis—which is no small thing, believe me. Anyway, he'd heard the recent DVA ruling and wondered why it was so important to have the Wiccan pentacle—"

"Why is it any different from the cross or the Star of David?" Anger now laced his voice before it dropped in pitch but not volume. "Why can't I put it on my son's grave?" His eyes darted somewhere else, as if he were remembering something he did not want to. The woman speaker, who'd come up beside him, intervened.

"Griffin's son was killed in combat," she said calmly, stepping toward me as if to protect her friend. "And since the

government doesn't think much of us, it hasn't seen fit to add us to its 'approved' list; our religious symbols aren't allowed on our tombstones." She licked her lips. "We think that's wrong. In fact, it's evil."

I tried to wake up a little more, in case I hadn't just heard a witch calling the government evil.

"I'm sorry for your loss," I said to Griffin Lewis. He offered a quick nod. I shifted toward the woman at the same time the crowd began breaking up. "Somehow I missed your name. You won't mind if I quote you in an article I—"

"I have nothing to hide, although I can't expect you'll be any different from the others," she said. A vertical line formed between her eyebrows, and she lifted her shoulders, tying her scarf on her neck. "I'm Lady Crystal Lenowitz, High Priestess of the Eastern Order of the Pagan Sanctuary."

I wrote her name in my notebook, expecting she'd continue to tell me what else her group hoped to achieve. I'd covered enough protest rallies to know that was usually how it worked: say a few words, hand out flyers, and find the reporters to convey exactly what you wanted to communicate. But Lady Crystal stopped after she introduced herself. I looked up and her lips went tight. I tried again: "So you—and the Eastern Order of the Pagan Sanctuary—are hoping today's rally accomplishes . . . ?"

She glared. I waited. Finally, she sighed as if I'd asked the silliest question in the world.

"I want to send Griffin's boy—and all others—off with pure enlightenment. Nothing more or less. That's all. Perhaps you can print that . . . correctly." She crossed her arms, signaling the end of our discussion.

"Excuse me?"

“You know, without all the other . . . lies.”

“Lies?”

“The stereotypes. The judgments. We get it all the time, you know.”

“You do?”

Lady Crystal smiled faintly. “Course we do. We’re *witches*. . . . You yourself were probably afraid to come this morning, weren’t you?”

A bristly quiet formed around us like that in a cemetery at dusk. I felt a cold breeze across my face at the same time a branch above me thumped snow onto my head. I took it as a sign.

“Okay, well, I’ll do my best. And since it isn’t exactly chatting weather, here’s my business card. Feel free to call me later if you . . . if there’s anything else that might enlighten me, okay?” She took my card as I smiled the new-kid smile again but with no effect. I turned toward the street without looking back to see what the Wiccans were doing or if that corner of the campus was still thick with night. I was too cold.

I ducked first into a corner deli for a coffee warm-up, then headed down into the subway station, where I fumbled through my bag for my MetroCard. Finally, I found it and swiped the turnstile. Not many commuters were standing around the subway platform, which meant I’d either just missed a train and that was why the underground shelter was so empty, or it was a slow time of day, or both.

I sniffled from the cold and guzzled my coffee. They’d served it in one of those little blue paper cups with a Greek goddess sketched on the side that seemed to be everywhere in this city. Then again, there were a lot of things that were everywhere here all the time: Yellow cabs. Chinese take-out menus. Tourists with

shopping bags. It was New York City after all, home of the fastest minute on earth. The capital of the whole world. As my colleagues at the newspaper called it, the City of all Cities. The Big Apple.

And Coffee Mecca of the Universe, as far as I was concerned. If I was desperate for a mocha or hazelnut, an espresso or cappuccino, I didn't have to look more than a block to find it. Even the traditional blue cup French roast I held in my hand made me feel lucky. So did the constant flow of pizza shops, pretzel stands, and bagel joints on every block. Some days it was hard choosing, so I'd pick up one of each and enter carb heaven. Between the bakeries and hot-dog stands, coffee bars, Godiva specialty shops, and secondhand bookstores, this city was a nonstop smorgasbord every day I walked out of my apartment—not to mention a minor heart attack waiting to happen for folks whose membership card to the local fitness center was three months expired but who carried it in their wallets anyway, just in case.

Like me.

“Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin.”

I whipped my head from side to side. No one.

“Okay, God,” I whispered. “I promise I'll start exercising again. Soon.” I shifted uneasily, guzzling some more, hoping the caffeine would soon take effect. This was turning into a weirder morning than usual. I peered down the tunnel to see if a train was coming. Nothing. I decided that as soon as I got in to the office, I'd call Mrs. Green's Fitness Planet on Eighty-ninth to see if she still had that monthly special.

“Jon-na . . . Light-foot . . . Mac-Laugh-lin!”

I was in trouble now. Had Lady Crystal followed me from the rally? My eyes darted around the benches and platform. Though a few more people had trickled into the subway, I didn't

see anyone I knew, let alone anyone who resembled a witch. Then again, Lady Crystal looked like an ordinary New Yorker, so that didn't help. I gulped the last of the coffee and tossed the blue cup into the trash can. I had to wake up. I was hearing things.

I clapped to get the blood flowing, when a loud clicking sound came over the speakers. I expected an announcement from the transit agent that a southbound Number 2 train would soon be approaching 110th Street. Instead, I heard a worried voice bellow, "If there's a Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin waiting on the platform, please come to the window immediately. Jonna Lightfoot MacLaughlin to the ticket booth."

I looked back through the turnstile where I'd come in and saw the soft silhouette of the clerk behind the window. She was moving the microphone to the side and resuming her place behind the counter. I backtracked my way through the gate.

"I'm Jonna MacLaughlin," I hollered into the tiny window speaker, my breath fogging the glass.

The woman with a round wrinkleless face and gray streaks in her hair smiled. She brought the microphone back to her chin and leaned toward me. "Did you lose this?" She held up a laminated New York state driver's license with my frizzy-headed mug shot taken last summer when I first got here. I fumbled through my bag.

"I guess I did," I said. "How'd you find it?"

"It must have fallen out when you were looking for your subway pass and someone turned it in," she said, still smiling. "Sugar, you might want to be a little more careful."

"I might want to be a lot of things." I sighed, feeling the red of my Irish cheeks give me away. She slipped the license into the tray and laughed.

“You just be yourself, Jonna Lightfoot,” she said into the microphone, a silver lining in her voice, a steady wisdom in her eyes. “Just as the good Lord made you.” The light grabbed the golden name tag on her jacket and I made out the letters: “E-m-m-a J-e-a-n T-i-p-t-o-n.” She caught me reading.

“Call me Emma. Nice to meet you, Jonna.”

“A pleasure.” I nodded. “And thanks for . . . this.” I waved my license in the air at the same time I heard a train screeching into the station. She tilted her head toward me as if she were, well, Glinda, the Good Witch of the North about to send me on my trip home. Then she pulled the pencil from behind her ear and pointed it like a wand toward the gate for me to hurry toward the train.

I had witches on the brain.

Just as the doors of the subway slid apart, I glanced back at Emma. She waved. And for the first time that morning, I felt awake. And warm. I waved back, thankful for a friendly face in a city that sometimes felt tougher to navigate than the moguls on a Colorado ski slope back home.

I found a seat next to a man in a Sikh turban who was reading today’s *New York Clarion*. I couldn’t help myself: I peeked over his shoulder at the Metro section page and saw my boss’s handwriting all over it. From the profile about the local cabdriver-turned-activist for safer streets to the story on a small-businesswoman’s innovative recycling effort, as well as the dozen other headlines, I could spot his “kinder and gentler” approach to news 5,280 feet away. In fact, if it hadn’t been for Skip Gravely, I thought as I pulled off my cap, I wouldn’t be sitting here reading the *Clarion* on my neighbor’s lap on the Number 2 southbound train — after I’d already covered a chilly rally for witches on an Ivy League campus.

My first editor at the *Denver Dispatch* and longtime mentor in all things newsworthy, Skip hired me right out of college. I might have stayed a Mile High granola girl forever if he hadn't been the first to suggest this beat. I'd spent a lifetime training for it, he said, after listening to all my stories of how my mom and pop fiddled or faddled with just about every belief system when I was growing up in Summit County. How they taught my brothers and me about Buddhism, pantheism, Judaism, and all other *isms* they explored before settling on Presbyterianism. Skip thought these early spiritual encounters had uniquely prepared me, so he promoted me to be the number one—and only—religion reporter at the *Dispatch*. After a couple years of page-one stories, his old friend Hattie Lipsock recruited me to the *New Orleans Banner*. But when the *New York Clarion* called him and offered him this job as managing editor, Skip was determined to bring with him as many of his own reporters as he could.

By then, the Southern charm of the Crescent City had worn off for me. I'd watched a few too many "fine Christian men" flatten the only good stories I could find. God, I'd come to learn, might have once established the Bible Belt of the South, as folks liked to claim, but the belt no longer held up many people's breeches. All who lived near the Mississippi River were automatically good Christians, just like they were members at the local country club, city council, or Ladies Auxiliary—regardless of who got hurt along the way. When Skip made me the offer, I was more than ready for a new adventure.

I was still covering religion, only now it was New York style. Which meant—as I discovered again this morning—everything qualified for my beat. Even my subway neighbor with the turban might have been an interesting story, until we stopped at

Ninety-sixth Street and he hurried off with his *Clarion*. An enthusiastic subway preacher stepped in at the next stop and called me to repentance. And by the time we pulled into Thirty-fourth Street/Penn Station, I'd also heard a Hare Krishna chant for inner tranquility, and a Catholic priest appeal for dollars.

At least, he looked like a Catholic priest. Until I told him I'd given at church last Sunday and he cursed me. He shook his collection jar next to his ear like it was a tambourine, mumbled about his daily quota, and shoved an unlit cigarette between his teeth. That, I had to confess, seemed like a pretty good idea.

Outside, on Thirty-third Street, across from Madison Square Garden, I yanked down my flaps and pulled out a cigarette. A light snow had begun to fall, reminding me of a Rocky Mountain winter morning. Tomorrow I would toss the pack—even if it was organic—and I would join Mrs. Green's Fitness Planet—even if there wasn't still a special. I would. Tomorrow.

As I turned onto Seventh Avenue, I caught a whiff of hickory coals from a hot-pretzel stand. I breathed in gently and bought another breakfast. After a few bites and a couple more steps, I was in the lobby of the *New York Clarion*, an old eight-story factory building in the fashion district that had been converted fifty years ago. As the number three daily newspaper in a city with over half a dozen, plus scores of weeklies, everyone believed the *Clarion* was on its way up the ladder of influence and eventually uptown in location as well. For now, though, our neighbors were tiny clothing and fabric boutiques, theater rehearsal studios, a small kosher deli named Goldwasser's, and various modeling agencies. Not another newspaper, magazine, or publishing company for at least ten blocks.

Skip Gravely was standing peacefully in the newsroom

talking to a features reporter. The tall lanky editor wore a dark green suit and tie that hung neatly on his frame, as wrinklefree as his attitude. His chin was a trimmed blend of brown and white whiskers, and his glasses reminded me more of a professor or a banker than of an editor for a daily newspaper. While most editors and reporters in the newsroom were a frenetic combination of high-octane caffeine under looming deadlines, Skip had always been a calming presence. Chamomile tea with a beard.

He grinned when he saw me, finished his conversation, and came over to my cubicle.

“So? A magical morning?”

“Spellbinding,” I said, not able to resist. I plopped my bag on my desk and logged on to my computer, then took off my coat and cap, wondering if my hair looked as funny as it felt.

“I expected such. Anything interesting?” he asked, adjusting his glasses.

“Too early to tell.”

“What, they’re holding more protests?”

“I meant it was too early in the morning for me to tell what in the Wiccan world was happening.” And as if another drop of snow fell on my head and woke me up all over again, I looked at my boss and wondered aloud, “How in the world did you know about the rally?”

The corners of Skip’s mouth curved. “An old friend tipped me off early this morning. I sent a photographer just after you to—”

“You have a friend who’s a witch?”

“Hardly. Just a professor at Regal. We’re old classmates. He stayed to study ancient religions; I joined the newspaper business.”

“What? You’re a Regal grad, Skip?”

“Shhh! I have a reputation to maintain,” Skip whispered. He glanced at his yellow pad, took the pen from behind his ear, and wrote something I assumed was related to this assignment. Again, Regal sounded familiar. I knew someone linked to it but couldn’t for the life of me remember who. It would pester me until I figured it out. Skip looked up from his paper.

“Reputation aside, Lightfoot, let’s try to run something on the rally for tomorrow, okay? I’ll call you when I get the photos.” It was the kind of tone that didn’t wait for a response, a gracious but firm authority that simply expected—and received—compliance.

I watched Skip walk through the newsroom maze of desks and cubicles toward his office, stopping to talk with reporters and editors along the way, his gait deliberate but slow. How was it that even after knowing him my whole career, I just now discovered he’d been educated at one of the oldest universities in New York? It had never occurred to me that Skip had gone to college in the first place, let alone an institution like Regal.

I shrugged, my own mysterious connection to the campus nagging in my head.

I flipped through my drawer of business cards I’d collected over the years. The buzz around the newsroom grew. Reporters were coming in from the cold, and editors were handing out assignments. I flicked the next business card and the next, but no one’s card jumped out. None had the university’s logo—a king’s crown—or seemed remotely connected. Was I hearing things again? Who had talked with me recently about Regal?

I shut my eyes, trying to imagine the answer, and a series of faces popped up randomly in my mind: Matt, my eldest brother; Griffin Lewis, the Wiccan man I’d just met; Mrs. Widener, my

ninth-grade English teacher; the subway faux-priest; a sports reporter named Chip; my mother with my pop; Emma, my new subway friend; David Rockley . . .

My eyes shot open. David Rockley worked at Regal, in the library with rare books and old files. That was why I recognized the name. But this was a fluke, I reasoned, a strange coincidence, and all the incentive I needed to pick up my *Cromwell's Encyclopedia of World Religions* and focus on the W's.

Wiccans, I read, worshipped the divine in nature. That sounded close to my parents' experimentation with pantheism, which said God was in all of nature and nature was all of God. During that season on their spiritual road trip, every day in the mountains became a worship service. My mom loved to hold up her hands to the clouds, and my pop always claimed nothing could beat the scent of evergreens. But that was where the similarity seemed to end. Wiccans, I read, carried their practice further into the magic arts and witchcraft so they could exert what they believed would be a distinct influence over their destinies.

Most Wiccans viewed themselves as pagans who worshipped pre-Christian deities found in the universe around them, but they didn't seem too interested in demons. The more I read, the more I realized Wiccans were as different from each other as Protestant denominations. The image I'd had of pointy hats and broomsticks was clearly out of date. It seemed instead that witches professed balance and harmony as life goals, eliciting the help of many gods or goddesses, and were offended if anyone called them Satanists. The confusion, I guessed, was in part because the Wiccan pentacle, the five-pointed star inside a circle, was sometimes associated with symbols of Satanism. Each point on their star represented the elements of nature—air, fire, earth, water, and the spirit

—within the eternal circle of life, not like the symbols of the biblical enemy. One paragraph in my *Cromwell's* even said that Wiccans were not allowed to “dominate, manipulate, control, or harm others, unlike Satanists.”

That was a relief. At least I didn't have to worry too much if I wrote a story Lady Crystal didn't like. But the line was still a little blurry for me, in part because what I was reading about their ancient customs sounded more like New Age spirituality than a bona fide religious tradition. Which made me wonder why a witch's star should be considered a sacred symbol any more than a pitchfork or a scythe? Christians had a cross to remind them of Christ's death, Jews saw the Star of David as a link to their Hebrew heritage, and Muslims had a crescent moon and star. But what was the point of a symbol that was pagan, not religious, as Lady Crystal had said?

Then again, when I clicked on the Web site for the Department of Veterans Affairs, I saw that even atheists were included on the list of approved religions. Their atomic-looking symbol with an “A” planted in its center was featured alongside the thirty-five other sacred signs, half of which I recognized from growing up, and the other half from religions I'd barely heard of. So, according to the government, a belief in no god—or many gods, for that matter—qualified as a religion.

I didn't know if this made my job easier or harder. How would I ever know which stories to cover if everyone's beliefs were considered official religions?

My head hurt. I clicked off the Web site, shut the encyclopedia, and realized I'd been so busy studying Wiccans that I hadn't yet checked my e-mails since I'd come into the office. There were the usual spam messages, denominational announcements, and

invitations to church potlucks. I scrolled through most of them, deleting the potlucks, and listened to the only voice message waiting for me. And that was when the morning escalated to an all-time high in terms of weirdness: David Rockley was hoping I would join him for dinner.

He had something to tell me that could no longer wait.