

Chapter 1

Just after two o'clock in the morning, the Witch of the North and the Witch of the East came onto the ice just south of the Loon Creek Inn. It was closed for the winter, so their cars could be parked there with no problem and not be seen. At approximately the same time, the Witch of the West and the Witch of the South came onto the ice from Timber Point. Basically closed for the season, there was a caretaking couple who lived there year round, but they were away on a well-deserved two-week cruise. If they had been in residence, the two witches would have parked their cars off the entry road and walked through the property to the lake. Instead they had parked very close to the lake. Like the witches of the North and East, they were tied together with a thirty-foot nylon rope, an end knotted around the waist of each one. The Michigan DNR (Department of Natural Resources) had issued its "Ice Unsafe" warning two weeks ago and all the fishing shanties had been pulled. The four witches knew the ice was unsafe, but it was the proper time and they had no choice. The day and hour was decreed by the Legend of the Ice Bear.

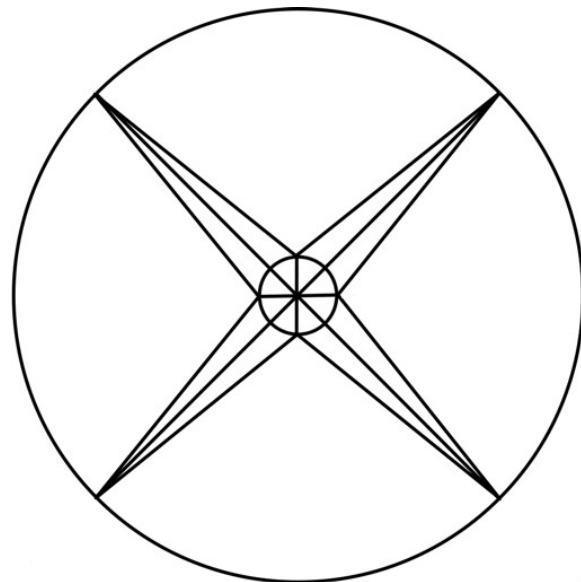
Despite the fact that the sky was partly cloudy and the moon was in its wane, the two groups showed no lights other than the dim blue screens of their smart phones used in GPS mode to be guided to their goal. The coordinates of their target had been set in the middle of the summer on a boat ride by the Witch of the East. It was over the hole that was the deepest part of Hibbard Pond: 110 feet. They moved slowly with the lead witch of each group poking the ice in front of her with the handle of a broom. And it was no ordinary broom because, of course, these were not ordinary witches. These were Besoms with handles of oak limbs cut live and bark removed. The bristles were thin

branches of Birch trees that abound on the shores of Hibbard Pond and tied to the oak handle with ropes made from natural materials. Each group's path was not straight because weak ice was constantly encountered. Accordingly the journeys took close to an hour, giving them an hour to prepare and the preparations were numerous. While the lead witch carried a broom in one hand and smart phone in the other, the trailing witches carried the burden of necessary accessories. Following The Witch of the North, The Witch of the East carried metal buckets. In her left hand, she had two buckets nested together with the top one containing a two-gallon zipper freezer bag with four cloths soaked in kerosene. In her right hand, she carried two nested buckets with the top one containing six spray paint cans: two large red and four small gold. The Witch of the South, who followed the Witch of the West, carried a gas-powered ice auger and that required her to use both hands. To see them crossing the lake you would have believed they were witches because they wore black robes with bell sleeves and hoods that they had pulled up over their heads for warmth. Yet except for the color of the robes they could easily have been monks because of the similarity of the robes. They were two strange looking pairs: in both cases the lead witch was tall, the Witch of the North being five foot ten inches and the Witch of the West five foot eight. However, the Witch of the East was five foot two and weighed only a hundred pounds, yet she bore her load like a trooper. The Witch of the South was taller by four inches but weighed a good one hundred fifty pounds more.

Finally reaching their goal, they put down their burdens and three of them unfastened the safety ropes that had connected them. Then the Witch of the North stood on the ice above the deep hole of Hibbard Pond holding in her hand one end of a thirty-

foot rope. The Witch of the East had kept the other end tied around her waist and she swept the ice clear of snow and debris as she walked counterclockwise in the circle dictated by the rope. When the first circuit had been completed, the broom was replaced by a spray can of red paint and a second circuit completed, moving clockwise this time, marking the circle. Once this was done, the other two witches used the brooms to clear the ice and snow from the inside of the circle just marked.

The area cleared, guided by her GPS, the Witch of the North moved to the exact northeast point of the circle and moving southwest marked her path with red spray paint while the Witch of the East did the same southeast to northwest. Then a small circle with a five-foot radius was made at the center, and two diameters



made in the small circle, one north to south and the other west to east. Then the northeast point on the big circle was connected to the east on the small circle and the east on the small circle to southeast on the large and continuing until a four point star had been made. Then each of the witches used a spray can of gold paint to make strange rune-like words in the four open areas of the large circle outside the star. This work was all completed in a half hour. Then the Witch of the South used an ice auger to drill holes in the center of the circle and at the northeast, southeast, southwest and northwest points of the large circle. Each of the witches put a metal bucket containing a kerosene soaked rag

into an outer circle hole. In this entire process, no areas of thin ice had been encountered but this was expected. After all, this rite had been preordained.

With ten minutes to go before the anointed time, the four witches gathered outside the circle to drink from bottles of water they had carried with them in pockets under the cloaks and to share tokes of a spliff (a marijuana cigarette rolled with some tobacco in it for better burning). Then feeling sufficiently fortified (although the South Witch would have traded the spliff for a pint of vodka), each witch took her place just outside the circle and watched her smartphone. The North Witch was at the northeast point, East Witch at the southeast, and so on. Precisely at 3:20 an alarm sounded on each phone and the witches each used a butane charcoal lighter to ignite the kerosene rags in her bucket. At 3:23 they began to chant the words that appeared on the screens of the smart phones:

Je•jii•baan O•jib•we a•kiing nda nji•baa•mi,

bgo•se•ndi•mi•go•yin wii wii•doo•koo•yaang.

Mko•mii•ma•kwa, kiin ge•chi•pii•te•ndaa•go•zi•yin,

bi•di•shi•shnaang, mii•nzhi•naang nbwaa•kaa•win.

While these were words most people could not understand, they were not the kind of words that people would expect witches to say – rather they were Ojibwe, an Algonquian language spoken by the Chippewa Indians of Upper Michigan. They were words of an ancient ritual derived from the Chippewa Legend of the Ice Bear.

Each of them was so intent on the recitation that the Witch of the North almost didn't hear the faint boom that emanated from the darkness above them. For her the ritualistic chant had been memorized and she was able to move her eyes from the smart phone to the skies above her without ever missing a beat. What she saw there brought

*The Witches of Hibbard Corners* by Douglas Ewan Cameron

terror to her heart. She had expected an emanation coming as a result of the ritual, but through the hole in the center of the circle, the one not filled with a metal bucket containing a burning kerosene soaked rag. But she had not expected to see a fiery ball plummeting earthward from the dark night sky and heading straight for them.