

## WITCH JAR

### Chapter One

Reaching in through the broken pane, John Preston opened the door, glanced round briefly, then walked inside. The hall lay deserted at this hour, smelling of dust and decay, the late afternoon sunlight shining through the tall lancet windows. Placing his battered school bag on a chair, he walked over to the small room at the rear of the hall and, closing the door behind him, began to undress, carefully hanging his clothes on the rusty peg behind the door. Then he sat on the faded brown sofa and waited. He stared at the print on the wall. Entitled "The Light Of The World", it depicted a blonde Christ, holding a lantern. Stiff and lifeless, the painting offered the viewer a pious and claustrophobic view of Christinity, far removed from the original Nazarene. Yet, the ornately effeminate figure spoke to him. It touched his soul.

He looked at his watch. He was early, a quarter of an hour too early. 5.30 pm was the agreed time of their rendez vous. Twice a week he would come here after school, undress, then sit on the sofa and await his visitor. No one else knew of these visits. The hall, being semi-derelict and hidden behind tall laurel bushes, was largely ignored by the local populace and a perfect place for clandestine meetings. He would not have been here had it not have been for the compelling need that burned within him. But twice a week he came here to be abused. He was not proud of what he did, but nevertheless, he felt a terrible compulsion to do it. For the past year he had kept these assignments a secret from his parents and friends. At times he was filled with disgust when he pictured himself in this squalid room and imagined over and over what he did but he came back just the same, telling himself that soon there must be an end to it.

The door opened. His visitor was smiling as he always did. Greeting him briefly, he watched from the couch as the man removed his jacket, shirt and trousers, laying them carefully on the arm of the sofa. Then there were the usual questions. Did he come alone? Had anyone seen him entering the hall? How was he feeling today? He gave perfunctory answers, then rolled over at the man's touch, his arms stretched out over the sides of the sofa. He closed his eyes, hoping that soon it would be over.

The man straddled him. He felt a hand gripping the back of his neck, then something hard against his throat, a piece of electrical flex. He cried out, then tried to raise himself from the sofa but it was too late. The flex tightened. He was choking, unable to breathe. The flex was cutting into his flesh now, he was losing consciousness. For the last time he tried to lift himself onto his elbows, push the heavy weight from his back and shoulders, but it was no use. The flex was as tight as a violin string and it was choking the life out of him.

Then blackness.

John Bottrell readjusted his rear -view mirror and, turning off the engine, stared at the face which glared back at him accusingly.

Already, the deep furrows of middle age had begun to score his forehead and about the eyes lay the telltale crow's feet. It was a face he no longer had a connection with, a face marked by countless days which he no longer had any desire to remember. During those long years in the Met, he had carried that face about with him, treating it like an old battered briefcase, ignoring the summons of his soul. And those years of neglect had brought him to his nemesis. He had hated what he had become and in time he had sought to anaesthetise part of himself through drink and self destructive acts which had threatened to engulf him entirely. In so doing, he had lost the better part of his soul.

He wound down the driver's window of his battered Renault . A stream of warm, balmy September air drifted in, brim-full with bracken, dried moss and damp earth. He breathed in deeply. It had been two summers ago when he had last breathed that pure air. He had come here to Cornwall at the invitation of a former colleague, only to find himself caught in a web of occult intrigue and madness. It had ended badly. He recalled himself sitting on the edge of a cliff, staring up at a cloudless sky as the seagulls wheeled above him. On that perfect summer's day , he had vowed never to return to this strange, haunted land.

However, that had been the far west of Cornwall , and that day was the culmination of a long and twisted tale which he no longer wished to remember. He opened the door of the Renault and stretched his legs. He looked around him. Overhead, a buzzard circled, searching for its prey, its high keening sound filling the air. Leaning in to the glove compartment, he extracted an ancient briar , and, stuffing it with his favourite pipe tobacco, he lit the aromatic mixture, then watched as a plume of smoke drifted into the still air.

He had forgotten the remoteness of this far western stretch of land which lay beyond the main body of Cornwall. The Lizard was a place apart, a forgotten stretch of moorland, far from the hustle and bustle of its only town, Helston. He had been here only once before, years ago, with his wife, on one of those rare and memorable visits during a late August when the bracken was a golden brown and the sea lay calm and undisturbed. They had bathed in the warmth of the Atlantic ocean and lain together on the beach at Prussia Cove, locked in the perpetual embrace of an endless summer. The warmth and comfort of that memory drifted back to him now as the pipe grew warm in his hand. Bittersweet was that memory for it was the summer which preceded his wife's death, an event which forever lay like a shadow upon his soul.

Breaking his reverie, he finished his pipe and knocked the remaining embers onto the tarmac by the edge of the car. Then he reached into the glove compartment again, and extracted the Ordnance map. He examined it closely. By his reckoning, he was some 7 miles north of the B4238. At the crossroads, he must turn left into the village of St Sampson. Somewhere, in a valley just to the south of the village, lay the cottage which had been gifted to him by his late mother in law.

He glanced at the estate agent's details. A small, two bedroomed cottage, described as a listed building, cast in granite, surrounded by a small garden, hedged by yew trees. This had been the place where Frances had grown up. Strange that he had never visited it before in the early years of their marriage. When Frances had died in the car crash her mother had been unable to cope with the tragedy and had moved abroad, to the south of France, where she had spent the remainder of her days. The old cottage had lain here, locked and untenanted, at the mercy of three consecutive Cornish winters. God only knew what state he would find it in on his arrival.

So this had been her last gift to him. It was in some ways a portal into a childhood he had never known. He had been a city kid, brought up in the vast suburban sprawl of south London. Frances, on the other hand, had walked these cliffs, swum in these clear blue waters and heard the same high pitched keening sound of the buzzard which, even now, wheeled above him. Already, as he stared intently at the photograph of the cottage, he felt somehow closer to her. Coming here was a way of honouring her memory.

He reached into his breast pocket and brought out the worn tobacco pouch which was his constant companion. Tucked into the inside flap was a small photograph of Frances. For a second, he gazed at the long face framed by dark hair. It was an old photograph, taken on one of those holidays, which they had enjoyed together in Cornwall. It was the late summer of 1976, the summer of the heatwave. In the photograph, Frances leaned against a harbour wall, the battered handbag, which accompanied her everywhere slung loosely over her shoulder. A half finished cigarette was perched on her lower lip. He recalled the cool of the evening and the smell of the seaweed, which clung to the foreshore. He recalled the meal they had shared in the small restaurants by the harbour walls. He remembered it all in painful detail.

He snapped the wallet shut and climbed back into the car, cursing the pain of those cherished memories. The Renault's engine exploded into life, and he swung the wheel to the right, out into the dusty road, his right-hand simultaneously winding up the window. He must have forgotten to use his rearview mirror, for within seconds of his manoeuvre, the silence was shattered by the sound of a car horn, and he was thrown forward onto the steering wheel by a rear shunt. He

jammed on the brakes, then turned angrily. Through the rear window he saw a woman's face, gazing back at his with astonishment.

Undoing his seatbelt, he climbed out of the car, clutching his right shoulder, which had collided with the driver's door. The occupant of the other car was a petite, small featured woman. Dressed rather eccentrically in a colourful, piebald trouser suit, pearl grey eyes gazed back at his. He was about to remonstrate with her when some instinct made him pause. Instead, he regarded her carefully for a few seconds, observing her dreadlocked blonde hair and high, domed forehead. Although she was of middle age, her skin bore the tanned, polished appearance, which suggested long exposure to both wind and sea.

Grimacing at him, saying nothing, she attempted to open the car door but found that it was stuck fast.

"Hang on a moment", Bottrell advised, then went to the back of his own car, where he procured a screwdriver. In a moment, he had wrenched open the door.

"I am so, so sorry," she began, clutching her forehead, where a deep gash had begun to ooze blood.

"Look, never mind, let's get you a plaster for that wound."

Bottrell was surprised at how conciliatory he sounded, considering the nature of the damage to the rear of his Renault.

"You came out so fast. I just didn't see you. The bend's rather sharp at that point you see," she continued, rather lamely.

"We can sort that out later. Just sit down for a moment, while I see to that gash."

She subsided into silence, her face suddenly drained of colour. Bottrell cleaned the wound and applied the plaster with the care and practice of someone who had followed this procedure many times.

"I suppose we'd better exchange names and insurance details", she suggested. "I don't recognise you. Are you on holiday or something?"

"Not exactly", he replied. "I'm here on business you might say. Property to be specific."

"Not a second home owner, I hope." It was meant as a joke, but her eyes, suggested that she was deadly serious.

"No, not a second home. It's my own place... or soon will be."

She stretched out a long, lean hand.

“Melanie Pearson. I live at Holly Cottage, on the edge of St Sampson.”

“John Bottrell. Perhaps you can help me, then, Melanie. I’m looking for Yew Tree Cottage. Just a minute.”

He reached into the glove compartment and brought out the estate agent’s details.

“Oh, I know this place. Actually I wondered why it hadn’t been up for sale. It’s in a bit of a state mind. Been like that for a while.”

Her face, which had now regained its colour, seemed animated. She got out of the car and leaned against the bonnet of the small Vauxhall saloon as if she were leaning against the bar of her local. He found himself warming to her informality as she continued to speak.

“It’s a listed building. But I guess you know that. About 1600 or thereabouts. Or so the Vicar told me. Bags of history attached to it – a bit like mine as a matter of fact. Anyway, welcome to St Sampson – even if I have smashed your car.”

She grinned and he was unable to resist grinning back at her. He couldn’t help noticing that around her exposed, tanned neck there hung a small pentagram on a silver chain. Although tall and lean, she was not unattractive and spoke with an infectious vivacity which reminded him of Frances.

“Never mind about the car. We’ll sort it. Perhaps you could do me the kindness of showing me where Yew Tree Cottage is.”

“You’ve not been here before then ?”

He nodded.

“The cottage was a gift. I inherited it from my mother-in-law.”

“Lucky you ! OK. Jump in and I’ll take you there. “

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The cottage was even more derelict than he had anticipated. It lay at the end of a rough lane, some distance from the road, the front of the building almost entirely obscured by three tall yew trees whose ancient bodies stood intertwined. The scantle roof was almost entirely obscured by moss, the granite walls seemed the worse for wear, whilst on the ground floor one of the windows hung open

sorrowfully on its hinges, its putty entirely gone. The once fine mahogany Georgian door was now stripped of paint and pitted by a succession of Cornish winters.

Melanie helped drag one of his heavy suitcases from the car and they made their way past a pile of unopened junk mail and bills in the hall to the kitchen.

Bottrell stared around in consternation as Melanie opened cupboard after cupboard in search of the basic commodities. The kitchen was bare and somewhat grimy. There was a smell compounded of damp and something which had crawled into a corner and probably died there. Bottrell sighed, suddenly weary. He could die for a drink but at present that was not an option.

“I’d offer you a coffee or tea, but under the circumstances...”

“Not to worry. Old Mother Hubbard’s been in residence by the look of it. Look, I’ve a suggestion to make. How about we pop over to my place and I’ll make you a coffee instead ? The village shop only opens a few mornings each week and you’ve certainly missed your opportunity by now.”

Once again he found himself charmed by her frank manner.

“You’ve made me an offer I can’t refuse. I’m grateful. Lead on.”

Leaving the suitcases in the hallway, they made their way out into the daylight past straggling rhododendron bushes and an emaciated hebe which threatened to engulf the pathway. A strong autumnal wind had arisen and the yew trees rustled as they passed.

At the gate, Melanie looked back and smiled at him. It was a brief, engaging smile, and once again he found himself struck by the similarity between this Good Samaritan and Frances. It was not her physical appearance but something about her eyes which he found almost uncanny. He felt as if somehow Frances was here with him, looking through her eyes, regarding him in that way he would always remember. He had had that feeling before when visiting places they had shared when she was alive but he had never experienced this emotion with another human being apart from Frances. Only places.

Pausing to shut the half demolished gate, he glanced back at Melanie’s car. Already the sun had reached the edge of the horizon. A golden light had turned the moorland gorse into a deep brown and behind the curve of an adjacent hill he could hear the deep boom of high waters as they crashed against ancient cliffs. *Welcome back*, said Frances, somewhere from within that slow thundering sound . *Welcome back. Why did you stay away so long ? I needed you here, with me. So long. So very long.*

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Holly Cottage lay on the far side of the valley and it was as remotely positioned as his own. By now almost too weary to keep his eyes open, Bottrell followed Melanie up the narrow track, surrounded on all sides by dark bushes where blackbirds heralded their approach with shrill alarm calls.

Although ancient like his own cottage, the building which lay in the hollow had been considerably renovated, boasting new window frames and a stout front door, which, when opened, threw out a cosy glow and smells of fresh pot pourri. Melanie indicated a battered leather armchair and he collapsed into it at once while she went to the kitchen to make fresh coffee for the two of them.

“It’s homely.” He glanced round as he spoke, taking in the room. A plethora of pine bookcases and small lamps jostled for space with ancient auction room chairs and a sofa whose crumpled upholstery was cleverly concealed by a rich plum-coloured oriental drape.

Melanie appeared at kitchen door, a silver coffee pot in her hand.

“It was our – still is – my dream home.”

He regarded her carefully, sensing some private tragedy.

“You live alone here ?”

“No, I have a daughter - Isobel. I had a partner, Paul, but he – died.”

Her voice trailed away and he became aware of a clock ticking on the mantelpiece behind him.

“I’m sorry – Here, let me...”

He took the coffee pot from her and she returned to the kitchen for the coffee cups. Reaching into his breast pocket, he drew out his tobacco wallet and began opening it, then thought better of it.

“It doesn’t matter. I can talk about it now. There was a time when I couldn’t, mind.”

She poured the coffee and a rich, satisfying aroma of freshly milled beans assailed his nostrils.

“Forgive me for asking but – are you married, or in a relationship ?”

He brought the steaming cup to his lips and warmed his hands on it. Outside, in the gathering dusk, the bushes seemed alive with birds. He stared back at her. She seemed unreal to him, this woman with eyes like Frances', sitting opposite him, in this place at the world's edge. Perhaps he felt this way because he was exhausted. He felt confused, he was drifting, as if he were at the ocean's edge, listening to her voice, which was not Frances' but seemed so like her own.

"I was married," he said, at last. "My wife died – in a car accident some years ago now. I know what you must have been through."

"Her name was Frances, wasn't it?"

He felt as if a bolt had struck him. Sensing his alarm, Melanie leaned forward and placed her hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"No. It's OK," he faltered.

"It's an ability I have. I kind of read people's minds. My mother had it too. It's probably a hereditary thing."

"Look," he said, standing up, avoiding her gaze. "I think I should go. Feel rather tired. You've been most hospitable, Melanie."

"Call me Mel. Most of my friends do."

"You've been very kind Mel."

"Before you go, why don't I get you a few things from the kitchen – basics to tide you over."

"A pint of milk would be good."

"I've made up a small box of essentials. I'll get them for you."

She went to get the box and he scanned the room again. A great number of books, most of them relating to the occult. Was she one of the great tide of new agers who had settled in this ancient land? He wondered. Before he turned to go, he cast his eye along the granite fireplace. On the mantelpiece stood a curious object: a dark green bottle which, judging by the irregularity of its glass, probably belonged to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

"Admiring my witch jar?"

“Your what ?”

“My witch jar. It tells a story. But not tonight perhaps. Maybe we could meet for a drink when you’re settled ?”

He smiled, eager to disarm her after his over-reaction.

“I’d like that.”

“If you like, I’ll introduce you to a few of the locals. It’s a tight knit community here – and not without its problems, as I’m sure you’ll discover. Here’s my phone number,” she concluded, pressing a small square of paper into his left hand.

He made his way out into the darkness, pausing before Melanie turned on a security light in the porch to guide his steps. At the end of the lane he stopped by the car and waited a few moments before climbing in. The night air was fresh and sweet with the smells of dried gorse and bracken, He had forgotten that rich intoxicating blend of odours. It came back to him now, a distant memory distilled from a time almost beyond imagining when he was young and in love and mortality was unthinkable.

As his eyes adjusted to the pitch black of the night he could just make out the intermittent flash of the Lizard lighthouse as it cast its great beam across the slate black ocean. *Ten fathoms deep thy father lies...* He thought of Yew Tree Cottage, a place as yet without a soul which he now had to make his own. He would shore up its windows and breathe new life into it with his battered possessions. Maybe buy a few carpets and install a wood burner. And get a cat. Most certainly a cat. And in due course invite Melanie round for tea. All in good time.

He was about to wind up the window when a low, sonorous boom crashed in on him, sending a chill through his bones. For a moment he felt afraid. Then he began to laugh at his own timidity. It was the lighthouse of course, sending out its warning sound. As he turned on the car headlights he saw that the night mist had already started to engulf the edges of the road ahead. He must make haste. In a moment he had swung the car out onto the road in the direction of Yew Tree Cottage.

## **Chapter Two**

He slept fitfully, aware of the sounds of the storm which all night sighed and soughed its mournful song through the downstairs window. At one point he dragged himself downstairs and attempted some remedial work on the frame but,

realising that he was without the necessary tools, he gave up in disgust and returned to bed, cursing beneath his breath.

By first light he was up and making coffee in the kitchen, grateful for the milk and extra provisions which Melanie had procured for him. Her face danced before him as he stood waiting for the kettle to boil. In his trouser pocket he found the note with her phone number scribbled on it. He would try ringing her later once he had established order in the cottage and dealt with the removals men.

At nine o'clock the removals lorry arrived. Two men and a boy made light work of his meagre furnishings. The narrow staircase refused to accommodate the larger of his three bookcases and he was forced to house it in the lounge. By mid morning he had lit the small calor gas burner and attempted to drive the smell of damp out of the building as the men heaved their way in and out of the tiny rooms. Once he had located his tool chest, he was able to make good the window, thus shutting out the strong westerly which continued to attack the front of the cottage.

By mid-afternoon he had tipped the men and now found himself standing at the door, staring back at the retreating lorry. The storm had finally abated. Sighing with relief, he plugged his pipe with fresh tobacco and sat in his favourite wicker chair, listening to the tick of the grandfather clock. Outside, the trees still shifted and sighed as if refusing to surrender to the silence of the day.

He checked the phone but found it still had no dial tone. No matter. It could wait. He grabbed his waxed coat and made his way out, past the yew trees, into the lane beyond where the clear air tugged at his clothes and washed his bleary eyes.

He was climbing now, out of the valley, up a footpath between lines of beech trees, whose ancient, lichen encrusted bodies stood like sentinels on either side of him. As he reached the summit of a hill, he gained a clear perspective of the village, laid out beneath him. It was a smaller settlement than he had anticipated, granite buildings in the main, some with thatched roofs. At one end of the main street was what looked like a pub, and at the other a church. In the distance he could just make out the roar of the A road, the main link route to Helston. Behind him, as he turned, he could see the great brown spread of the moors, dotted at intervals with ancient barrows. Here there were few signs of human habitation but three dots in the sky told him that this was the domain of the ubiquitous buzzard which he had seen evidence of yesterday.

The sun rolled out from behind a cloud and he was momentarily stunned by its power and magnitude. Within minutes it beat down on his face and hands. Maybe it had to do with the reflective nature of the ocean which lay on both sides of the broad peninsula. He recalled how, when he had holidayed here years before with Frances, it had taken only a few days' exposure to the sun to turn them both a nut brown.

It took him a good fifteen minutes to weave his way down into the main body of the village. He discovered the village shop quite quickly and soon filled a bag with extra provisions. An unpretentious store which doubled as the village post office, the place was nevertheless adequate for his immediate needs, staffed by an elderly woman who eyed him with a mixture of amusement and suspicion and who declared herself with great pride to be Mrs Trevorrow.

He found a bench on the village green and consumed a pack of unhealthy pre-packed sandwiches before continuing his exploration in the direction of the village church.

As he reached the top of the hill, past the broad sweep of cottages which marked the western boundary of the village, he stopped and looked upwards at the church spire, a handsome Victorian reconstruction which rose majestically against the blue of the horizon line. Tall oaks gave way to a large open space, bounded by railings and a kissing gate.

He passed through into a neglected graveyard where the majority of the tombstones were so sunken into the soft, moss-lined soil that only a series of humps announced their presence. The church appeared to be Norman with some post reformation additions. Set in the exterior of the church walls were odd, irregular shaped stones, many of them carved in the shape of human figures but none of them recognisable except for one which he thought might have been a small Sheila-na-gig, perhaps of Saxon origin.

The main doorway of the church of St Sampson, decorated with leaves, grotesques and animals, was unusually ornate and from the buttresses directly above him, strange creatures jutted forth, their snarling mouths curled back, tongues lolling.

Bottrell approached the porch, his eyes flickering uncertainly over the bellies of the creatures above him. A massive round handle permitted him entry. The door, a huge affair, cast seemingly from the trunks of three ancient oaks, creaked open on its hinges and he was at once assailed by an odour of age and decay, tinged with the bitter – sweet smell of rosewood.

What immediately caught Bottrell's attention, however, was a figure, carved in stone and mounted on the north wall. He pushed his way between the pews and stared upwards into a face so apparently inhuman that its presence in this place of Christian worship gave him pause.

It was cast in grey granite, its great, primitive face distinguished by an ugly bulbous nose. From the top of the head two distinct horns emerged, almost lost in a tangle of wild hair. The eyes were lidless, their sculptured centres devoid of

meaning or expression. The lips were two straight pencil lines in parallel; the chin was square and jagged.

The body of this gargantuan figure dwindled sharply to a point and where the hands and feet might have been were two pairs of talons. The birdlike quality of the figure was endorsed by the faint outline of wings, set either side of the hunched shoulders.

But above all it was the primitive face which dominated the statue.

As Bottrell made his way to the altar in order to inspect this strange figure at close quarters, he was suddenly aware of footsteps echoing down the centre of the nave. He turned, startled by the unexpected intrusion.

The owner of the footsteps was a short, bespectacled priest in his middle years with a curious, albino complexion. Small, grey penetrating eyes peered from behind heavy, black-rimmed glasses.

There was something about the priest, he thought, which he found vaguely familiar, as if he resembled someone he had encountered once before, but try as he might, he could not dredge it from his memory.

“Welcome,” he said, approaching Bottrell and offering a tiny hand in greeting. “I see you find our Celtic figure interesting.”

“Is it as old as that ?”

“Ninth century I’m told by those who make it their business to know about such matters. One historian told me it could be older.”

“It’s a lovely church, reverend.”

“Miles is the name. Miles Martin. I’m glad you think so. You’re not from round these parts I take it ?”

He spoke with a faint Cornish accent but underlying it was a hint of somewhere else, Canadian or American.

“Just arrived – yesterday in fact. I’ve inherited Yew Tree Cottage. “

“Ah, Mrs Robert’s old place. It’s been empty a while.”

“Yes, I’m hoping to breathe new life into it, so to speak. I’m John Bottrell by the way.”

“A Cornish name. And an eminent one. Author and collector of our most ancient folk tales. No relation I suppose ?”

“None that I’m aware of.”

He led Bottrell down the side aisle towards the lady chapel and away from the main altar. A small candle shone there in the dim shadows and there was a whiff of incense. It was all very high church he thought. His guide reeked of it.

“We’re a little off the beaten track here. Not mentioned in the colour supplements as it were. This is where we found our ancient friend by the way.”

He was pointing to the altar.

“It was inside, you see. Inside the altar. This one is older than the high altar – probably, though one can’t be exactly sure – older than the existing church – which is certainly Norman. We discovered the statue some twelve years ago whilst some workmen were conducting repairs to the stonework.”

“Why would it be inside the altar ?”

“Goodness knows. Presumably someone wanted it hidden for a reason. Not a very pretty sight, is it ?”

He laughed with a curious high pitched, wheezing laugh which Bottrell found strangely disconcerting.

The priest smiled at him.

“You have not heard of the legend of St Sampson I take it ?”

“Saint Sampson was one of the Celtic saints of Cornwall. He was famed for destroying a standing stone which the local heathens venerated as some sort of phallic memorial. The story goes that he released the inhabitants of this area from the worship of this...” . He paused and glanced again at the figure above them. “... this creature by driving him down a nearby well. Alas, he appears to have lost his life in the process ! After that, the people were of course, converted to Christianity. It’s an amusing little tale, at any rate. You’re from London, I take it ?”

“Yes, originally, but I have connections with the area.”

“Forgive me but your name is oddly familiar. No matter. It will come to me. Feel free to explore the church. The brass in the lady chapel is remarkably well preserved by the way. Particularly the figures of Robert Weatherby and his good

wife, over yonder. I'm sure you'll enjoy your time here. We're a rather mixed community of course. Not uniform by a long chalk. Have you met anyone yet ? ”

“Melanie Pearson – up at Holly Cottage.”

“Ah yes. An interesting and quite gifted young woman. Her views on spirituality are somewhat eccentric and just a tad dangerous I find, but she is not without spirit. Well, Mr Bottrell, I must attend to my duties. Good day to you.”

He smiled again, then made his way to the belfry.

Outside, Bottrell found the sun now high in the heavens and the sky cloudless. Above him, the grey slate of the church tiles gleamed in the summer heat. The trees in the churchyard stood silent save for a solitary blackbird, perched on a branch. He heard its song falter, then cease. How cold it seemed here. Unnaturally so.

At the edge of the graveyard his eye caught sight of a slate tombstone which seemed to him newer than the others which encircled it. On its face he read the inscription: “To Mother Lakeland, Wrongly Condemned: 1668 – 1698. In Memoriam. “ Beneath the letters stood an ornate pentagram.” Then he paused to light his pipe, gazing at the inscription, somewhat mystified, then turned to leave.

He made his way out past the lych gate onto the road, trying to figure out why he had been so eager to leave. The stone figure ? No, it was not that, but something about the church itself, something ancient and potent. From an early age, he had been gifted with the ability to sense and see things which others could not. His mother had had the gift and perhaps he had inherited it from her. On several occasions it had been useful to him in the past. Once, during those long years in the met, it had saved his life. But in the main it was a burden to him, something he simply had to deal with. Frances had described him as a psychic but he had never laid claim to the word, fearing that it might box him in, label him. Maybe if he had truly psychic abilities, he told himself, he might have foreseen the circumstance leading up to her death in the tragic road accident which had dogged him for so much of his life. What comfort was it to him then, he asked himself bitterly ?

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Some time in the late afternoon the phone rang. He had returned to the cottage and made a futile attempt to arrange some furniture in the lounge but, finding his energy fast expended, he had slumped into the armchair, opting for a large glass of malt. He watched, wreathed in tobacco smoke and alcohol induced nostalgia as the daylight thinned to ribbons and dusk came down upon the old cottage like a bat's wing, enveloping the outside world in darkness.

He was jolted from a dream which he only half recalled but which he had found quite disturbing. As was often the case in his dreams, he was the watcher. The room was surely the room he sat in now, yet it was somehow older and barer, furnished in the manner of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. On one side of a long oak table sat three men in Puritan garb, high collared and black gowned. On the other sat a woman of middle years with a deeply lined face. Her hands were tied behind her back and she slumped forward, her greying hair masking her lined face. The men appeared to be interrogating her. In the background stood a priest whilst two younger women looked on.

Exactly why the scene before his dreaming mind appeared to disturb him he could not say, yet he was certain that this was no fiction, that somehow he was looking down a long corridor into the past. On past occasions he had learned to trust his instincts about such matters. So when the phone drilled into his unconscious mind and the figures in the dream dissolved to grey wraiths, he was glad of the summons.

“John. It’s me – Mel. How are things ?”

“Oh fine. Settling in, you know. Thanks for the provisions by the way.”

“It was no problem. Glad to be of help. Thought you might like that drink by the way.”

“Fine, although I already seem to have started. Exhaustion, I guess. Where are you phoning from?”

“Still at Holly Cottage. Do you want to walk over and I’ll show you the local or are you too tired?”

“No. I’m fine. Be there in 10 minutes.”

When he arrived at Holly Cottage, a young girl with jet black hair answered the door.

“Come in,” she said casually. “Mel’s upstairs getting dressed. You must be the new bloke.”

He stared back at this vision in black leather. Silver bangles adorned her tattooed arms and around her neck was a large silver chain from which hung a pewter pentacle.

“Thanks. I’ll wait here,” he answered.

“I’m Isobel – Mel’s my mum.”

She grinned in a fresh, disarming way which reminded him of her mother.

“Hear she crashed your car?”

“Just a bit.”

Mel loomed in the doorway. Her casual apparel had been jettisoned in favour of a sumptuous turquoise skirt, leather boots and a rich mohair jumper.

“This is Isobel, my daughter.”

“Yes, we’ve already met.”

Isobel grinned knowingly and shut the door behind them.

\* \* \*

The pub was small and busy. Low oak beams, strung with dried hops, gave a feeling of intimacy. The beer, which was the pub’s own brew, was strong and flat as beer used to be in Bottrell’s youth. They sat on one side of an angle nook, the buzz of the bar’s twenty or so customers humming around them.

“You were telling me about your witch jar, Mel.”

“Oh yes. The witch jar.”

“You said there was a story attached to it ?”

Mel looked thoughtful.

“It was Paul who found it. We’d not long moved into Holly Tree Cottage. Anyway, he decided he’d open up the fireplace. He found the jar in a recess. I didn’t much care for it. It had some stuff in it. Nails and what not. I was feeling a bit odd at the time – a shade hormonal. I chucked the contents away – something I shouldn’t have done.”

“Why not ?”

She paused and sat staring into the base of her glass for a few moments as if deeply troubled.

“Because that’s when the trouble started. “

“Trouble ?”

“Everything seemed to go wrong after that. It was odd really. Paul and I had difficulties. He was called away for long periods on business. And I started drinking – which I shouldn’t have done since I was pregnant with Isobel. It was about a year after that that Paul died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was totally unforeseen – a shock. He’d gone into the garden to chop wood for the multi-fuel burner. I heard a cry and when I got outside there he was, lying on the ground. It was a heart attack. Nothing to be done. He was only twenty four at the time.”

Her eyes filled with tears. He reached out and touched her arm in a gesture of reassurance.

“Let me get you another drink.”

He made his way to the bar through the smoke and chatter. A short, squat individual with cropped ginger hair and a florid, drink-fuelled complexion, squatted on a stool at the end of the bar, surrounded by three young agricultural labouring types. He was holding forth in an aggressive fashion about the virtues of the hunt. From his expensive tweed suit and military tie, Bottrell guessed he was the local pro-hunt representative. He banged his empty glass on the bar to attract the publican’s attention and then turned to leer at Bottrell who turned quickly away. A chorus of laughter followed him back to his seat where he found Melanie looking thoughtfully across at the bar.

“How are you feeling ?”

“I’m OK – really. I see you’ve met Guy Weatherby.”

“You mean the oaf in the tweed suit ? No, I didn’t meet him, fortunately. I simply observed him.”

“Just as well. You wouldn’t want to know him.”

“Wouldn’t I ?”

“Not unless you’re a hunt supporter.”

“Which I’m not.”

“He’s master of the hounds. And local squire. He lives up at the far end of the village in the big manor house. His family have lived there for generations.”

“I think I saw a brass tablet with that name on it in the church this afternoon.”

“You went to the church ? What did you make of it ?”

Bottrell took out his pipe and began to fill it.

“I thought it a rather strange place, as a matter of fact. That carving for instance...”

“St Sampson’s demon ?”

“Is that what it’s called ?”

“That’s what the locals call it. Not a pretty sight, is it ? The Saint fought the demon and saved us all from sin – so the legend has it !”

“I take it you don’t believe in that particular tale ?”

“No more than I believe in Christianity’s other, more ridiculous tales, like the virgin birth, for instance.”

“Tell me,” he said, pointing to the pentacle round Melanie’s neck, “do you have your own, alternative belief system ?”

“I suppose you might call me a pagan, but that would be putting a label round my neck, and not a pentacle.”

“Enough said. Tell me about the master of the hunt.”

“Oh there’s not much to tell really. He thinks he owns the village of course – which I suppose he almost does. Half the properties here are owned by the Weatherby family. He likes to hold court in here – especially on Friday and Saturday nights. And he runs the local hunt almost single-handedly. He’s a fanatic about it. Got into a great deal of trouble with some of the local farmers recently. Isobel hates his guts.”

“Why’s that ?”

“She a sab.”

“I see,” he said, thoughtfully.

“One day he’ll get his come uppance. And I won’t be sorry to see it,” she added with such an edge to her voice that he paused and stared back at her.

“I’m finding it rather claustrophobic in here,” he observed. “Shall we stroll outside – get some fresh air ?”

Melanie concurred.

Outside, the night air began to clear his head. They walked together in silence for some way, past cottages whose closed curtains danced with the flickering images of a dozen televisions.

At the top of the hill they paused by the entrance to the churchyard where Bottrell relit his pipe and stood staring at the tall outline of the church steeple.

“Tell me, Mel, who exactly was Mother Lakeland?”

“Ah, you’ve been looking round the churchyard.”

“Yes, and met the vicar.”

“Oh, the Reverend Miles Martin, no less,” she laughed.

“And he’s amusing because...?”

“Never mind,” she said, cryptically. “Another time perhaps. Mother Lakeland, though. There’s a most wronged lady.”

\* \* \*

Bottrell eased himself into the old leather armchair that was his constant and most endearing companion. Then, digging into his pocket for his reading glasses and pushing them onto the bridge of his aquiline nose, he lit his pipe and opened the small discoloured paperback which Melanie had thrust into his hand on his return to Holly Cottage. A faint odour of her patchouli perfume wafted up from the scuffed pages. She had told him much about Mother Lakeland, but, most intriguing of all, it seemed that Yew Tree Cottage had once been the place of her residence. A wise woman and herbalist, she had fallen victim to the lordly attentions of Robert Weatherby, Knight and merchant, in the year 1698. It was at his baronial hall, still the residence of the Weatherby family in the shape Of Guy Weatherby, that she had been interrogated and found guilty of witchcraft related crimes.

For many years Weatherby had harboured a deep and obsessive hatred for the “damnable practice” of witchcraft and had made himself a self appointed expert on the subject. For him, hanging was too mild a punishment for “sorcerers, witches and the rest of that hellish livery” and he had looked to the Continent for confirmation of his extreme views, where he found comfort and support. A year before Mother Lakeland had been arraigned, Weatherby had tried to prosecute a young boy called Thomas Perkins, who was attracting attention in the village by

means of his prolonged fits and “the vomiting up of nails”. He had employed a priest from Helston to confine the boy to a room where he had been walked up and down for three consecutive nights and days in order to procure a confession from him that he had signed a pact with Lucifer. However, this plan had failed owing to the intervention of the boy’s father, a wealthy wool merchant, who objected to his son’s treatment to the Truro magistrates. The boy had been freed and Perkins senior had taken out a civil prosecution against Weatherby.

Bottrell charged his whisky glass. Then he switched on the small lamp at his side and began turning the yellowed pages. The book was a facsimile of the original, which had been printed in Truro in 1699, a cheap, sensational chapbook, the like of which he had seen before.

“On September 14<sup>th</sup>, in the village of St Sampson, (ran the account), a special assembly was gathered under the authority of Sir Robert Weatherby, Knt.. Its purpose was to examine and try two women, one Mother Lakeland of Yew Tree Cottage and one Joan Hariden, seamstress. Their reasons for practising maleficium were various. Mother Lakeland “sought revenge upon Thomas Letherland and Mary Woodruffe, now his wife. “ She further saith that her Divell told her that Elizabeth Harris, about six or seven years since, curst the child of one John Woodcott, and so it came to pass, the child growing weak with a distemper, and limbs bloated so that she expired.

“When Mother Lakeland was brought to the gallows she “desired all people to take warning by her, and not to suffer themselves to be deceived by the Divell, neither for lucre, money, or malice, or anything else, as she had done: but to sticke fast to God.” The Divell came to her in the shape of a large dog. She called the Divell her Impe which bid her to forsake Christ and leane to him, whereupon she saith that she scratched herself with her nailes and fetched blood from her breast, and she wiped it with her finger and gave it to her Impe who wrote the covenant with it. She also claimed to have killed a man, one Goodman Chilman of Manaccan who said that she stole a pigge, whereupon she cursed him and he pined away and dyed.. About three quarters of a year agoe, as she was in bed about twelve or one of the clocke, in the night, there lay a rugged thing upon her bosome which was so very soft, and she thrust it off with her hand...”

He felt suddenly weary. The confused sensationalism of the narrative, with its mixture of fact, fantasy and evidence no doubt obtained under the permitted mild torture of the English legal process of the period, had begun to tire his mental processes. He finished the whisky and lay back in the armchair, exhausted by the day’s events. Outside a distant barn owl hooted and he watched through the curtainless window as a half moon slid into view from behind a bank of inky cloud.

An image of Melanie crept into his half slumbering mind, then disappeared as if she were a wraith. He decided that, though tempting and seductive as she was, he

must at all costs restrain any thoughts he might have of carnal desires for her. He had just arrived in the village, he did not really know her, and besides, he had been in a similar situation before, again in Cornwall, and that situation had ended in disaster, admittedly through no fault of his own. No, he must remain detached. Detachment was good for him. It was an old and trusted friend.

He closed his eyes. Far off, he could hear the crash of the ocean on black, glistening rocks. It must be full tide, he mused.

*“Ten fathoms deep thy father lies,  
Those were jewels that were his eyes.”*

He was sure he had got that quote wrong. What was it ? Shakespeare ? Spenser ? No matter. It fitted his mood. The whisky had brought back his old, sweet melancholy. Or was it this cottage with its memories of an old, wronged wise woman ? Who was Mother Lakeland and what lay behind the story of her conviction ? The chapbook told him nothing. Never mind. It would wait.

Then sleep came upon him.

