

BURNING GIRLS:

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Twig dolls peculiar to the small Sussex village of *Chapel Croft*. The dolls are made to commemorate the *Sussex Martyrs* – eight villagers who were burnt at the stake during *Queen Mary's* purge of *Protestants* (1553–8). Two of the martyrs were young girls. The *Burning Girls* are set alight in a ceremony held every year on the anniversary of the purge.

Prologue

What kind of man am I?

It was a question he had asked himself a lot lately.

I am a man of God. I am His servant. I do His will.

But was that enough?

He stared at the small whitewashed house. Red-tiled roof, bright purple clematis crawling up its walls, bathed in the fading glow of the late-summer sun. Birds chattered in the trees. Bees buzzed lazily amongst the bushes.

Here lies evil. Here, in the most innocuous of settings.

He walked slowly up the short path. Fear gripped his belly. It felt like a physical pain, a cramping in his gut. He raised his hand to the door, but it opened before he could knock.

'Oh, thank God. Thank the Lord you came.'

The mother sagged at the doorway. Lank brown hair stuck to her scalp. Her eyes were shot through with blood and her skin was grey and lined.

This is what it looks like when Satan enters your home.

He stepped inside. The house stank. Sour, unclean. How could it have come to this? He looked up the stairs. The darkness at the top seemed thick with malevolence. He rested his hand on the banister. His legs refused to move. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, breathing deeply.

'Father?'

I am a man of God.

'Show me.'

He started to ascend. At the top, there were just three doors. A boy, slack-faced, in a stained T-shirt and shorts, peered around one. As the black-clothed figure approached, the boy pulled the door shut.

He pushed open the door next to it. The heat and smell hit him like a physical entity. He placed a hand over his mouth and tried not to gag.

The bed was stained with blood and bodily fluids. Restraints had been tied to each bedpost, but they hung loose. In the middle of the mattress a large leather case lay open. Sturdy straps held the contents in place: a heavy crucifix, a Bible, holy water, muslin cloths.

Two items were missing. They lay on the floor. A scalpel and a long serrated knife. Both slick with blood. More blood pooled, like a dark, ruby cloak, around the body.

He swallowed, his mouth as dry as the summer fields. 'Dear Lord – what has taken place here?'

'I told you. I told you that the devil –'

'Enough!'

He spotted something on the bedside table. He walked over to it. A small black box. He stared at it for a moment and then turned to the mother hovering in the doorway. She wrung her hands and stared at him pleadingly.

'What shall we do?'

We. Because this was upon him too. He looked back at the bloody, mutilated body on the floor.

What kind of man am I?

'Get cloths and bleach. Now.'

WELDON HERALD, THURSDAY,

24 MAY 1990

MISSING GIRLS

Police have appealed for help in the search for two missing Sussex teenagers: Merry Lane and Joy Harris. The pair, who are believed to have run away together, are both aged 15. Joy was last seen at a bus stop in Henfield on the evening of 12 May. Merry disappeared from her home in Chapel Croft a week later on 19 May, after leaving a note.

Police are not treating their disappearance as suspicious but are concerned about the girls' welfare and are appealing for them to get in touch with their families.

'You won't be in trouble. They're worried. They just want to know you're safe and you can always come home.'

Joy is described as slight, around 5 foot 5 inches tall, with long, light blonde hair and delicate features. She was last seen wearing a pink T-shirt, stone-washed jeans and Dunlop Green Flash trainers.

Merry is described as thin, 5 foot 7 inches tall, with short, dark hair, and was last seen wearing a baggy grey jumper, jeans and black plimsolls.

Anyone who sees them should report the sighting to Weldon Police on 01323 456723 or call Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

One

'It's an unfortunate situation.'

Bishop John Durkin smiles, benevolently.

I'm pretty sure that Bishop John Durkin does everything benevolently, even taking a shit.

The youngest bishop to preside over the North Notts diocese, he's a skilled orator, author of several acclaimed theological papers and, if he hadn't at least tried to walk on water, I'd be amazed.

He's also a wanker.

I know it. His colleagues know it. His staff know it. Secretly, I think, even he knows it.

Unfortunately, no one is going to call him on it. Certainly not me. Not today. Not while he holds my job, my home and my future in his smooth, manicured hands.

'Something like this can shake the faith of the community,' he continues.

'They're not shaken. They're angry and sad. But I won't let this ruin everything we've achieved. I won't leave people now when they need me the most.'

'But do they? Attendance is down. Classes cancelled. I heard that the children's groups may move to another church.'

'Crime scene tape and police officers will do that. This is not a community that has any love for the police.'

'I understand that –'

No, he doesn't. The closest Durkin gets to the inner city is when his driver takes a wrong turn on the way to his private gym.

'I'm confident it's only temporary. I can rebuild their trust.'

I don't add that I need to. I made a mistake and I need to make amends.

'So now you can perform miracles?' Before I can answer or argue, Durkin continues smoothly. 'Look, Jack, I know you did what you thought was best, but you got too close.'

I sit back stiffly in my seat, fighting the urge to fold my arms like a sulky teenager. 'I thought that was our job. To build close ties with the community.'

'It is our job to uphold the reputation of the Church. These are testing times. Everywhere, churches are failing. Fewer and fewer people are attending. We have an uphill battle even without this negative publicity.'

And that is what Durkin really cares about. The newspapers. PR. The Church doesn't get good press at the best of times and I've really screwed things up. By trying to save a little girl and, instead, condemning her.

'So, what? You want me to resign?'

'Not at all. It would be a shame for someone of your *calibre* to leave.' He steeples his hands together. He really does that. 'And it would look bad. An admission of guilt. We have to give careful consideration to what we do next.'

I'm sure. Especially considering my appointment here was his idea. I'm his prize show-dog. And I had been performing well, turning the once-derelict inner-city church back into a hub of the community.

Until Ruby.

'So, what do you suggest?'

'A transfer. Somewhere less high profile for a while. A small church in Sussex has suddenly found itself without a priest. Chapel Croft. While they nominate a replacement, they need an interim vicar.'

I stare at him, feeling the earth shift beneath my feet.

'I'm sorry, but that's not possible. My daughter is taking her GCSEs next year. I can't just move her to the other end of the country.'

'I've already agreed the transfer with Bishop Gordon at the Weldon diocese.'

'You've *what? How?* Has the post been advertised? Surely there must be a more suitable local candidate —'

He waves a hand dismissively. 'We were chatting. Your name came up. He mentioned the vacancy. Serendipity.'

And Durkin can pull more strings than frigging Geppetto.

'Try and look on the bright side,' he says. 'It's a beautiful part of the country. Fresh air, fields. A small, safe community. It could be good for you and Flo.'

'I think I know what's best for me and my daughter. The answer is no.'

'Then let me be blunt, Jack.' His eyes meet mine. 'This is not a fucking request.'

There's a reason why Durkin is the youngest bishop to preside over the diocese and it has nothing to do with his benevolence.

I clench my fists in my lap. 'Understood.'

'Excellent. You start next week. Pack your wellies.'

Two

'Christ!'

'Blaspheming again.'

'I know, but —' Flo shakes her head. 'What a shithole.'

She's not wrong. I pull the car to a halt and stare up at our new home. Well, our spiritual home. Our *actual* home is next door: a small cottage that would be quite pretty if not for its alarming off-kilter bearing, which makes it look like it's trying to slope away, quietly, brick by brick.

The chapel itself is small, square and a dirty off-white. It doesn't look much like a place of worship. There's no highpitched roof, cross or stained glass. Four plain windows face the front: two up, two down. Between the two upper windows is a clock. Florid writing around it proclaims:

'Redeem the Time, for the Days are Evil.'

Nice. Unfortunately, the 'e' has worn off the end of 'time', so it actually reads, 'Redeem the Tim', whoever he is.

I climb out of the car. The muggy air immediately shrinkwraps my clothes to my skin. All around us, there's nothing but fields. The village itself consists of about two dozen houses, a pub, general shop and village hall. The only sounds are birdsong and the occasional buzzing bee. It sets me on edge.

'Okay,' I say, trying to sound positive, and not full of dread, like I feel. 'Let's go and take a look inside.'

'Aren't we going to look at where we're going to live?' Flo asks.

'First the house of God. Then the house of his children.'

She rolls her eyes. Communicating that I'm impossibly stupid and tiresome. Teenagers can communicate a lot with eye rolls. Which is just as well, seeing as oral communication hits something of a brick wall once they turn fifteen.

'Besides,' I say, 'our furniture is still stuck in traffic on the M25. At least the chapel has pews.'

She slams the car door and slouches along grumpily behind me. I glance at her: dark hair cropped into a ragged bob, nose ring (hard fought for and taken out for school), and a hefty Nikon camera slung almost permanently around her neck. I often think my daughter would be a dead cert for Winona Ryder's role in a remake of *Beetlejuice*.

A long path leads up to the chapel from the road. A battered metal postbox stands just outside the gate. I've been told, if no one is here when we arrive, that this is where I will find the keys. I flip up the lid, stick my hand inside and . . . bingo. I pull out two worn silver keys, which must be for the cottage, and a heavy iron thing that looks like it should open something from a Tolkien fantasy. I presume this is the key to the chapel.

'Well, at least we can get in,' I say.

'Yay,' Flo deadpans.

I ignore her and push open the gate. The path is steep and uneven. Either side, tilting headstones rise up from the overgrown grass. A taller monument stands to the left. A bleak grey obelisk. What look like bunches of dead flowers have been left at its base. On closer inspection, they're not dead flowers. They're tiny twig dolls.

'What are those?' Flo asks, peering at them and reaching for her camera.

Automatically, I reply, 'Burning Girls.'

She crouches down to snap some shots with her Nikon.

'They're something of a village tradition,' I say. 'I read about it online. People make them to commemorate the Sussex Martyrs.'

'The who?'

'Villagers who were burnt to death during Queen Mary's purge of the Protestants. Two young girls were killed outside this chapel.'

She stands, pulling a face. 'And people make creepy twig dolls to remember them?'

'And on the anniversary of the purge, they burn them.'

'That is way too *Blair Witch*.'

'That's the countryside for you.' I give the twig dolls a final contemptuous glance as I walk past. 'Full of "quaint" traditions.'

Flo pulls out her phone and takes a couple more pictures, presumably to share with her friends back in Nottingham – *Look at what the crazy yokels do* – and then follows me.

We reach the chapel door and I stick the iron key into the lock. It's a bit stiff and I have to push down hard to get it to turn. The door creaks open. *Properly* creaks, like a sound effect in a horror movie. I shove it open wider.

In contrast to the August sunshine, it's dark inside the chapel. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust. Sunlight peters in through the grimy windows, illuminating a cloud of dust motes floating thickly in the air.

It's an unusual layout: a small nave; barely enough room for half a dozen rows of pews facing a central altar. Either side, a set of narrow wooden stairs leads up to a balcony where more pews look down upon proceedings, like a tiny theatre, or gladiator's pit. I wonder how the hell it ever passed a fire inspection.

The whole place smells stale and unused, which is odd, considering it was used regularly until a few weeks ago. It also manages, like all chapels and churches, to feel both stuffy and cold at the same time.

At the bottom of the nave, I notice that a small area has been cordoned off with a couple of yellow safety barriers. A makeshift sign is hung on one of them:

'Danger. Uneven flooring. Loose flagstones.'

'I take it back,' Flo says. 'Total and utter shithole.'

'It could be worse.'

'How?'

'Woodworm, damp, beetle infestation?'

'I'll be outside.' She turns and stomps from the building.

I don't follow. Best to just let it lie. There's little I can say to console her. I've uprooted her from the city she loves, the school where she felt settled, and brought her to a place with nothing to offer except fields and the aroma of cow shit. It's going to take some work to win her over.

I stare up at the wooden altar.

'What am I doing here, Lord?'

'Can I help you?'

I swivel round.

A man stands behind me. Slight and very pale, his chalky pallor accentuated by oily black hair, slicked back from a high widow's peak. Despite the warm weather, he wears a dark suit over a collarless grey shirt. He looks like a vampire on his way to a jazz club.

'Sorry, never had a direct reply before.' I smile and hold out a hand. 'I'm Jack.'

He continues to stare at me suspiciously. 'I'm the warden of this church. How did you get in here?'

And I realize. I'm not wearing my collar and he's probably only been told that 'Reverend Brooks' is arriving today. Of course, he could have looked me up online, but then, he also looks like he still uses an ink and quill.

'Sorry. Jack Brooks. Reverend Brooks?'

His eyes widen slightly. The tiniest hint of colour touches his cheeks. I admit, my name causes confusion. I admit, I enjoy it.

'Oh, goodness. I'm so sorry, It's just –'

'Not what you expected.'

'No.'

'Taller, slimmer, better looking?'

And then a voice shouts: 'MUM!'

I turn. Flo stands in the doorway, white-faced and wide-eyed. My maternal alarm shrills.

'What is it?'

'There's a girl out here. She's . . . I think she's hurt. You need to come. *Now.*'