

**The Witch Bottle**

**by**

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There was definitely something following me.

I'd stopped three times now, feeling a little bit foolish, as I pretended to first tie my shoe lace, then check my watch and finally, running out of ideas, look at an imaginary map.

Each time I'd looked over my shoulder, all that I had seen had been the great shadow of the churchyard's yew trees, patches of nettles buzzing with insects and the odd blackbird perched on the crumbling dry stone wall. Despite the idyllic early autumn day I felt anxious. I felt like I wasn't alone and I most certainly should have been.

Being alone was my speciality.

To be honest, I quite liked my own company which was just as well as no one wanted to be friends with the daughter of the new Headteacher at Marsden Secondary. Especially as my Dad had just that week given a speech in assembly laying out his plans for the school. A new very unfashionable uniform, more detentions and tougher rules generally. I was a social outcast.

The churchyard gate rattled in a sudden gust of wind and I increased my pace as the grasses, heavy with seed, rustled. Again, I couldn't see anything but I had the feeling that there was someone or something just behind me and it had been like this since yesterday. Since Mum and Dad discovered the bottle.

We'd moved to Little Marsden at the beginning of the summer. It had given Dad time to unpack and for us to settle into the new house before term started. I didn't like the new house as soon as I'd laid eyes on it. Yes, it was the picture perfect cottage complete with the thatched roof and obligatory rose around the door but the truth was that the thatch had rats nesting in it and the rose was infested with greenfly. Although it was bigger than the modest terrace we'd had in the city it seemed more claustrophobic to me. The dark beams felt as

though they'd crash down on my skull at any moment and the whitewashed walls seemed to crowd around me at night as I huddled in my bed, clutching, Mr Bonce, the now one eyed stuffed dog I'd had since I was three. I hadn't wanted to crush my parent's enthusiasm for the 'wonderful' new house and the 'delightful' little village so I'd made do as best as I could. I'd got Dad to put up some cheap bookshelves and now my favourite novels nestled alongside my collection of old knick knacks and fossils - what I called my 'cabinet of curiosities'. There were a couple of ammonites, some sea glass, some old bits of broken pottery and a coin, undated because most of it's face had worn off. Every now and then I'd add to it; objects I found on my walks, on the dried up river bed near the old bridge or on the newly ploughed fields.

Now, the bottle lay alongside my collection. I say bottle but it wasn't like a pop bottle or even an old fashioned glass milk bottle. It was made of earthenware, a kind of wheat colour and it was a little bigger than my outstretched palm. It was broken, split exactly in two from when Dad had dropped it while retrieving it from behind the chimney breast and something poked out, just visible, looking like old bits of straw and rust. Dad had been doing some renovations. He'd been patching up some holes in the chimney, even though he wasn't strictly supposed to do anything to the house without planning permission as the house was grade two listed or something, but he'd got fed up of Mum nagging him about how cold the living room felt, even when she'd got a fire going. She'd pointed at the missing bricks in the chimney and said he ought to do something about the draft. She said she'd felt like someone was breathing down her neck with that blasted wind whistling round the front room.

As I neared the church I tried not to look at the gravestones all around me. Why had I decided to take a short cut? I resolved that if I got home safely I would walk the long way around tomorrow instead. I'd put up with having to walk along the lanes and having to

endure the hostile company of the few other students that walked that way home. Something slid past in my peripheral vision. I whipped my head around just in time to see the tail of a cat disappear behind one of the gravestones. The stone itself was leaning over, a mirror image of the ones surrounding it, like some giant hand had been playing dominoes.

Luckily, being September it was still light. The long nights of winter were a few weeks off yet. Then, I'd definitely walk the long way home, even though there were two girls in our year group that I was avoiding more than the others. They really gave me the creeps.

I'd first encountered them in chemistry. I was last into the lab and as a result the only place to sit was next to the spotty kid with body odour problems that no one else talked to. Halfway into the lesson I was warming to him. His name was Hubert apparently and as long as I held my breath when he reached up for anything it was okay. He was uninterested in chemistry as I was. I was just lighting the Bunsen burner somewhat tentatively (I'd always been terrified of fire, even the tiniest of flames) when something hit me on the back of the head. At first I tried to ignore it. Hilarious, I thought, someone's having a laugh at my expense yet again. Just one of the joys of being the Headteachers daughter in a smaller than average school. But after the third time it happened something in me snapped and my temper got the better of me.

“The next idiot that does that is going to get this Bunsen burner up their...”

I faltered as I saw two pairs of identical green eyes looking at me with amusement. They both had waist length dark wavy hair, freckles and the most alarming green eyes I'd ever seen. There was something feline about them. The one on the left, the one holding the elastic band that had acted as catapult was laughing softly. She flicked her hair to one side and turned to the other girl and said something I didn't catch and they both laughed at the joke. I turned back to Hubert, red faced who was busy poking the end of his pencil in the

solution that we were supposed to be heating.

As I rounded the corner of the church tower beneath the empty stare of the gargoyles I almost walked straight into a figure that was hunched over freshly dug earth. I nearly screamed but quickly clammed my mouth shut when I realised it was just the church caretaker. He was resting on his spade talking to a boy who was sat in the shadow of the church, back against the sandstone. The boy looked about my age but wasn't wearing school uniform. Instead he wore ripped jeans and a grubby old band t shirt. His hair was dark and fell over his eyes. As he looked up at me, he squinted into the sunlight that filtered through the boughs of the yews.

“Afternoon.”

The old man touched his cap. I didn't realise people still did that. Mind you, this was Little Marsden, a touch backwards if you asked me. I smiled briefly in acknowledgement and started to make my way past them.

“Ah, you'll be John Davenport's little girl then won't you.”

His old brown face crinkled into a smile. I bristled at this. Little girl! Honestly, I was nearly sixteen. The boy by the church wall sniggered. I shot him a look.

“Err..yeah, that's me.”

“Are you all settled in then? You'll be in the old rectory won't you? It's where the old vicar used to live. Mind, it's stood empty a year or two, I'll tell you. They stuck the two parishes together see. Weren't enough bums on seats so to speak. Vicar over at Gribbley does it all now.”

“Oh right. Yes..mm” I pretended to look at my watch.

“Suppose your Mam and Dad'll be expecting you home then? Just let us know if there's anything you need.”

With that, he turned back to his digging. I shivered, hoping it wasn't a grave and hurried home.