

Approx 6206 words

**The Witch Bottle**  
by  
**Sarah Peacock**

**'Thousands stood at a distance muttering that it was a hard case to hang a man for  
destroying a wicked old witch'**

*From the records of the trial and execution of Thomas Colley, chimney sweep -  
Hertfordshire's Last Witch Hunt, 1751*

**Derby Assizes, 1761**

Thomas Deakin could have done with a drink. He stared around the room full of strangers and shook his head. This was like a very bad dream – worse than the one he'd had about that goat with the eyes the previous night. There were all sorts of hoity toity types sat watching him like he was some kind of prize bullock on display and the urge to simply walk out and go back down the *Half Moon* for a jug of ale was overwhelming.

The big wig, the Lord Justice - or so he'd been told, leant forward and frowned at him.

“So, if you could provide us with your version of the events on August 22<sup>nd</sup> last year Mr Deakin?”

Thomas scratched his head, dislodging a cloud of soot. They'd not let him bathe in that awful place with the bars on the windows and the guards. Granted, not that he bathed much normally – weren't much point in his trade as chimney sweep. Anyhow, people liked to see him all sooted up. It showed that he didn't mind a bit of hard graft and some even thought it was lucky. Nothing stranger than folk, he mused.

“Mr Deakin?” The Lord Justice's voice rose in volume.

The big wig was talking about that day that Thomas regretted stepping foot into the *Half Moon*, and there weren't many of them. Truth was, he was hardly ever out of the public house. The work made him thirsty, see? He looked down at his battered and soot covered boots before answering.

“You mean the old witch?”

The Lord Justice sighed. “Yes, yes. The events please? What happened?”

“Well someone came in the pub shouting about how there was a crowd gathered up on

the green, over near the mere. They said they had a witch, that they were going to duck her.”

Thomas fidgeted. There were so many pairs of eyes on him now. He didn't like to be the centre of attention, not without a drink inside him anyway.

“Please continue.”

“Well I went to see what all the fuss was about didn't I?”

He thought back to that day. It was a little hazy around the edges as he'd a few too many, as usual, but he remembered all the folk heading to the green. There were hundreds of them. There were a lot he didn't recognise - must have travelled to see it. Everyone was chattering excitedly. Some had even brought a picnic. Not much happened in Little Marsden and this was nearly as good as a travelling fair.

When he got to the green, he'd had to push through the crowd to get a good view. Next to the mere was John Totley, a lead miner he knew from the village. John had the old woman, Martha Atkins, tied up with a bit of old rope and wrapped in a sheet. He was dragging her into the mere. Martha was whimpering and resisting as best as she could but Thomas knew not to be fooled. She was a strange old thing alright, living up on the edge of the village near the wood under that big Elder. Didn't everyone know that was a witch's tree?

Thomas, conscious that he was in a bit of bother and that folk in the assizes were gawping at him and waiting for him to speak, continued.

“They had the witch in the mere. There was a big crowd. Everyone in the village knew she was a witch. She'd cursed Robert Lee, the landlord of the *Half Moon*, made his ale go bad didn't she? Oh, and Edward Garner, farmer up the lane from me said she'd cursed his cattle. Every single one of them cows died over the summer. Queer it was.”

“I see Mr Deakin.” The Lord Justice looked down at the sheets of paper in front of

him, deciphering the near illegible hand before continuing. “And what exactly did you do next Mr Deakin?”

Thomas rubbed at the stubble on his jaw. He hadn't liked the way the old witch had been looking at him. They were a funny old lot, that family, didn't mix with the rest of them. They were hardly ever seen outside that hovel of a cottage by the woods. Someone in the Half Moon had told him that a friend of his sister-in-law had brought a potion from the old witch once. Something to do with a love rival. He'd shook his head when he heard that. Devil's work it was. It gave him the spooks.

“Well, I saw John having a bit of trouble with the old witch. She wouldn't stay still would she? So I stepped in to help. I helped him get her in the water and hold her down.” He grinned at the memory. “I even rolled her over a few times, dunked her under good and proper. I got a round of applause for that.”

He remembered the gurgling sound she'd made as he held her head under, the sheet slipping away to reveal the filthy wrinkled body underneath. It'd made him retch and he'd had to push her head down hard into the mud, determined to finish the job properly. They'd be no more trouble in the village then would there? No cattle dying. No farmers going out of business. No wives running off in the night.

“Thank you Mr Deakin. You may sit down.”

Thomas looked around the assizes, expecting to see smiles and nods of approval. Hadn't the crowd at the mere that day cheered and clapped? For a moment, he felt his whole world slide a little as the blank faces stared back at him, and worse, some frowning and shaking their heads. He didn't like it. These folk weren't like him and the other villagers were they? He ought to be back in the *Half Moon*, where he belonged, a jug of ale in his hand.

They'd all have a good laugh wouldn't they, when he got back and regaled the other drinkers with this story?

The Lord Justice shuffled the papers on his desk and coughed. "We'll meet again in one hour to discuss the verdict." He looked at Thomas disdainfully. "Take him away."

Thomas hadn't quite believed it when the Lord Justice had come back later and delivered his verdict as 'Guilty of murder'. He'd shaken his head in disbelief as they'd brought him a letter to sign. Didn't they know he couldn't read? He'd not wanted to put his mark on it, hadn't known what it said, had he? But they'd threatened him, roughed him up a bit and eventually read him a bit before they made him sign it. It said something about him being deluded, that he beseeched others not to believe that there were such beings as witches on earth. As he'd scribbled awkwardly with the quill, he'd assumed it was some kind of joke. Of course there were witches. They were all a round, in plain sight and they had to be stopped.

He could hear folk outside shouting, applauding him for doing the right thing and killing an evil old witch. Why were the men in charge making him say that evil didn't exist? These were strange old times indeed.

As the led him from his cell and walked him up the scaffold, put the rope around his neck he saw the folk turning their backs. Someone shouted that it wasn't right, killing an innocent man for getting rid of the devil. His last thought, as the platform gave way, before the noose snapped his neck, was 'I wish I'd had that drink.'

## Chapter One

Jane bent down and retrieved the bottle from where it had fallen. It had smashed in two on the flagstones and there were things poking out of it; feathers, rusty pins and what looked like bits of hair. Disgusting. She put it down quickly, wiping her hands on her jeans. What kind of crazy human being would put something like that inside a fireplace?

“Ooh let me see.” Her mum leant over her and poked at the thing. “Interesting. Looks really old. We should ask your Dad about it.”

Jane groaned. Dad would think it was wonderful. He'd be off as soon as he set eyes on the awful thing, taking it to his local metal detecting club, where it would be poked and prodded by a load of men like her Dad - the sort that liked wearing anoraks and polishing their coin collection.

“I don't understand how it fell.” said her mum, examining the ancient brickwork of the fireplace. Inglenook apparently, very old. “I'll have to have a word with the builders. They can't leave things like this. It's dangerous. Could have killed somebody.”

Jane poked the bottle with her foot. It gave her the creeps.

They'd moved to Little Marsden at the beginning of the summer. It had given them time to unpack and settle into the new house before term started at the new school. Jane didn't like the new house as soon as she'd lain 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 they'd had in the city it seemed more claustrophobic. The dark beams felt as though they'd crash down on her skull at any moment and the whitewashed

walls seemed to crowd around her at night as she huddled in her bed, clutching the now one-eyed stuffed dog that she'd had since she was three. She hadn't wanted to crush her parent's enthusiasm for the 'wonderful' new house and the 'delightful' little village so she'd made do as best as she could. She'd got Dad to put up some cheap bookshelves and now her favourite books nestled alongside her collection of old knick knacks and fossils - what she called her '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 its face had worn off. Every now and then Jane would add to it; objects she found on her walks, that she picked on the dried up river bed near the old bridge, or from the newly ploughed fields while her Dad did his metal detecting. It was better than standing in the cold, bored to tears and he insisted that she go with him. Hobbies were important he said.

"Jane?" Her mother called from the kitchen. "Can you go into the village and get us some pasta? I want to make bolognese for tea."

Jane sighed. Going to the village shop meant talking to Mrs Deakin and Mrs Deakin liked to talk. A lot. She picked up her MP3 player. Maybe she could avoid having to talk to anyone at all by listening to music instead.

It was tourist season and she had to cross the single road that ran through the village with care, as the cars sped past, the sticky faces of children pressed up against the windows regarding her like she was some kind of performing animal in the zoo. Wasn't it meant to be quieter here? She missed the anonymity of Nottingham, of the way she could walk through the Broadmarsh shopping centre without a single person stopping her or asking her endless questions about her family.

The square tower of the village church rose from amongst the canopy of surrounding trees, their crowns heavy with leaves. Bees buzzed around the white flowers of the tall weeds that lined the path that was her short cut to the shop. She didn't like using it when it was dark but it was the height of Summer. The sun didn't go down until well into the evening at the moment and she got to stay up late as a bonus. The church yard was full of old gravestones that leant over at odd angles, covered in lichen. The names on them sounded odd. No one was called names like those any more. There'd be no 'Montague Summers' or 'Aubrey Ashworths' at the new secondary school she'd be going to. No, she imagined they'd be all 'Tatias' and 'Portias' and would be driven around in Range Rovers, harping on about their ponies to their glamorous fake-tanned mothers. She'd stick out like a sore thumb.

Jane. Why did her parent's have to call her Jane? Plain Jane. Boring Jane. At her last school they'd even resorted to calling her Jane the Brain. How lame was that?

As she rounded the corner of the church tower, trying to ignore the ugly faces of the gargoyles with their frog eyes and sticking out tongues, she almost walked straight into the figure that was hunched over freshly dug earth. Wearing a flat cap, with tufts of white hair sticking out beneath, 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 her own age, wearing ripped jeans and a grubby old band t shirt. His hair fell over his eyes and as he looked up at her, he squinted into the sunlight that filtered through the boughs of the yews.

The caretaker touched his cap, "Evening."

Jane didn't realise people still did that. Mind you, this was Little Marsden, a touch backwards if you asked her. She smiled briefly in acknowledgement.

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

His old brown face crinkled into a smile. She bristled at this. Little girl! Honestly, she was nearly sixteen. The boy by the church wall laughed quietly and she 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 Gribley does it all now.”

“Oh right. Yes..mm” Jane pretended to look at her 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. Jane shivered, hoping it wasn't a grave and hurried on to the shop.

Back at home, Dad insisted that they sat at the table. He'd gone to the trouble of setting it with table mats and napkins. This usually meant he wanted to talk, spend what he called 'quality family time'. Why couldn't they just eat it in front of the telly, plates on their knees, like her friends did in Nottingham?

“Just do as he says.” said her Mum quietly, behind her hand. “It keeps him happy.” Jane shrugged and slid into her chair, the fake leather squeaking beneath her bum.

“Been out then Jane?” Her Dad asked smiling. He peered at her over his glasses waiting for her reply. She knew that he wanted her to get out more, make some friends but it wasn't easy. She didn't have a metal detecting club with its piles of rusty old coins to bond over. How was she supposed to make new friends? The old ones had taken years of primary and junior school to develop.

“Yes.” Did going out to buy milk count? She had met the church gardener she supposed. Oh, and the boy, but she didn't know his name yet.

“Hmm.” Her dad cut his spaghetti carefully, put a forkful into his mouth and chewed. His moustache wriggled up and down like an insane caterpillar as he ate. Jane looked away.

“Did you tell him about the bottle?” Jane's mum asked. She put down her knife and fork down and leant forwards excitedly. She hardly ever ate. She just picked and prodded and talked about joining slimming clubs.

“What's that?” Her dad looked at her with interest.

“A weird bottle fell out of the chimney. Mum thinks it was the builders that loosened it. It's over there.” She pointed at the coffee table with her knife.

Her dad frowned and got up. He went over to the coffee table and picked the two halves of the bottle up. A bit more of the contents spilled out onto the carpet.

“Careful John. I've only just hoovered.” said her mum. He pushed his glasses further up his nose and squinted at the bottle.

“I might be wrong but I think it's a witch bottle.”

“Witches?” Her mum grimaced. “I don't like the sound of that. Sounds a bit spooky.”

“People used to put them under the floors, in walls and in chimneys of their homes to ward off witchcraft. They were a suspicious lot.”

Jane stopped eating. Well this was interesting.

“I don't like it John.” Her mum pushed her plate away. “Put it in the garage. I don't want it to turn out like 'Most Haunted' or something.”

Jane's dad laughed. “Don't be silly Muriel. There's no such thing as witches, or ghosts for that matter.”

“Just put it in the garage.”

“If it makes you happy.” He shrugged. “But I should take it to the next history society meeting. Trevor would be really interested.”

Jane watched as her dad carefully wrapped the pieces of the bottle in a napkin from the dinner table and went out to put it away. Perhaps life in Little Marsden wouldn't be so dull after all.

She was reading, tucked up, watching the clouds swell through the skylight above her bed when there was a knock on her door. Her dad stuck his head round.

“So how are you set for tomorrow then?”

She looked at her rucksack, carefully packed and set at the foot of the bed. “All ready I suppose.”

“Promise me that you'll get stuck in. Try and make new friends eh?” He came and sat on the edge of the duvet, picked up the book she'd been reading and glanced at the blurb.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Just promise me that you won't tell everyone that we're related.”

“I can't give you a lift to school then?”

Jane thought of the battered old Volvo, with its trail of black smoke and 'I love Otters' stickers. No way, she would not be seen dead in that thing. And if people found out that the new Headteacher was her dad, then she'd be in real trouble. It was going to be hard enough to make friends anyway with all the Portias and Tatias.

“No, I'll get the school bus.”

“Ok then.” He gave her a slightly awkward kiss on the top of her head before he left her watching the grey sky once again.

## Chapter Two

She couldn't look. The school bus was a massive sea of unfamiliar faces and most of them were staring at her. Cheeks burning, she looked down at her battered converse. Stumbling up the steps into the aisle of the bus, she pushed past the line of school bags and shoes until she saw a space. There were a pair of very pointy black boots complete with skull shaped buckles occupying the seat next to the empty space. She slid into the seat quietly.

“I sense death.”

As the bus rumbled off, Jane shook her head, puzzled, as the voices of the other students around her picked up their tempo once again.

“Pardon?” She turned to look at the person sitting next to her. A girl about her own age with heavily made up eyes and too pale face stared back matter of factly. She pushed a strand of purple hair out of her face and sighed. How did she even get to be allowed in school looking like that? Jane's mum wouldn't even let her paint her nails.

“Death.” The girl put her finger (Blood red nails, Jane noticed with envy) to her lips before looking conspiratorially over Jane's shoulder.

Jane shook her head in confusion and looked down the bus. There must be somewhere else to sit, surely.

“I sensed it when you got on. It's following you.”

“Err..yeah..thanks for the warning.” Jane forced a smile just as a paper air plane

soared over the seat in front and poked her in the eye. There was a fit of laughter from a bit further down the bus and Jane shrank into her seat.

The girl picked up the air plane, wrinkled her nose at it, before standing up and sending it back down the bus. She finished this action with a flick of her middle finger and Jane couldn't help but smile.

“Lilith.” The girl put out her hand, meaning for Jane to shake it but Jane just stared at the girl's pale fingers. “Like the Goddess, you know. Dark. Evil. All that stuff.”

“Right.” Jane finally shook her hand. “I'm Jane.” She grinned at Lilith's frown. “Yeah, I know. Don't even start.”

Jane made it through registration safely and into her first lesson. English, her second favourite. They were going to study 'The Crucible' by Arthur Miller. She thought of Lilith. Lilith wasn't in all of the same sets as her and instead she'd found herself sat next to a dull, spotty boy whose name she couldn't even remember. Lilith would like this play. It was about witches and the devil apparently. She'd tell her at lunch time. They'd agreed to meet in the art studio. Lilith said it was where all the best people met. Jane was pretty sure she meant the weird ones with no friends but then, she supposed, she was one of them now.

She'd got lost on the way to the art studio, getting caught up in a wave of students all rushing for the lunch hall and it had taken her nearly half of her lunch hour to right herself, find the place and calm down from a near panic attack. Lilith was sat in a corner of the room, surrounded by paint brushes, dirty jam jars and dried up flowers in vases.

“Evening.” She didn't look up from the book she was reading, reclining on a workbench, feet up and legs crossed.

“Yeah, sorry about that. Took me a bit longer than I thought.”

“But you're here now.” Lilith closed the book with a snap and sat up, swinging her legs over the side of the bench, pointy boots dangling.

“Where are the others?”

“Hmm?”

“The others. You said it was where all the cool people met.” Jane glanced around the deserted room. It was just them. Not even an art teacher in sight.

“We're the cool ones Janey.” She smiled alarmingly, displaying a row of very white teeth. Perhaps she's a vampire, thought Jane, running a hand absent mindedly over her exposed throat. “Let's go and eat. I've got some hummus sandwiches if you fancy splitting.”

No, not a vampire. They didn't eat hummus did they?

“Houmous?”

“Yeah, didn't you know Janey? Meat is murder.”

“Oh right.”

Lilith narrowed her eyes at Jane, looked her up and down. “Seems you have a lot to learn.” She turned and walked over to a bench near the window overlooking the school field. There were kids running about like mad men. One boy had another's head under his arm, rugby tackling him to the ground. Lilith flashed another smile over her shoulder. “Luckily you've met me.”

“So, what do you think of the village?” Lilith chewed her sandwich slowly, regarding Jane with shrewd over-kholed eyes.

“Nice.”

Lilith frowned. "Really?"

Jane told her the truth. It bored her. It felt like a prison. Why did her parents think it was more relaxing in Little Marsden? Why did they keep harping about about the open space when in reality Jane felt more stifled than ever? Lilith listened without comment. She ate her sandwiches, nodding every now and then.

"I know." She pulled a packet of hula hoops out of her bag. "We came here two years ago and I still can't stand it. Drives me nuts. And the people are so weird."

Jane took in Lilith's purple hair, multiple silver earrings and huge crucifix. Truth was, she knew what she meant. Everyone was so nice. It wasn't normal was it?

"It has it's benefits though."

"What do you mean?" asked Jane searching in her rucksack for a banana.

"There's loads of really interesting places round here to explore. You know, go off by yourself to. The woods down by the old bridge are pretty cool and then there's the stones."

"Stones?"

"Yeah, we've got a stone circle. It's not exactly Stonehenge but it's still quite cool. Up on the moor by the Ashworth's farm." Lilith had a glimmer of excitement in her eyes. "I like to go up there at full moon." She lowered her voice, glanced over her shoulder, "It's where I do my sabbaths."

"Your what?" Jane had got no idea what she was talking about.

"Sabbaths. Full moon rites." Seeing Jane's complete look of incomprehension, she sighed. "Witchcraft Jane. I'm a witch."

Jane laughed. "Yeah right."

Lilith didn't look amused. She zipped up her school bag, face blank. "I'll lend you a book about it." She got up and started to walk towards the door that led to the corridor.

"Wait." Jane hurriedly grabbed her rucksack. She remembered something. "You should come over. After school."

Lilith paused and turned, eyebrows raised. "Why's that then?"

Jane smiled. "We found something you might be interested in. In the chimney of our house. Dad says it's an old witch bottle."

Lilith nodded, eyes lighting up with interest. "See you after school then. We can walk home together."

There was a special assembly at the end of the day. Jane had been dreading it. Her Dad was going to introduce himself as the new head of the college. She prayed that no one would guess they were, in fact, related.

She cringed. There was some really embarrassing Dad rock playing as the students filed into the school hall. Her Dad probably thought it was 'hip' with the kids. He really had no idea. She found a seat and squirmed down against it's plastic. Her chin was practically touching her chest, she was so slouched but at least she couldn't see the stage. Then she heard his voice.

"Good morning everyone!" His worst most cheerful teacher voice. She shut her eyes and counted the seconds until she could escape. "It's so good to finally meet you all. My name is Mr Davenport and I'm the new headteacher. Now, I think you'll find I'm quite approachable and remember a thing or two about what it was like to be your age.."

She could hear whispers and giggles behind her and her cheeks flamed. This was

awful. Back in Nottingham, he had had the sense to work at another school. Not the one his daughter went to. It was bad enough that he was going to be her RE teacher but he was also the head. He'd be known by everyone in the school and probably hated too.

“As you can see, I've reintroduced a school uniform as I think it puts everyone in the right frame of mind. We all belong to the school. We're all family, one big happy community.”

Jane heard a barely suppressed groan behind her. She had to agree with whoever that had come from. The new uniform was not becoming. For a start it was maroon. Wasn't that a colour that had gone out in the nineteen seventies? Jane knew that she looked even more pasty and lumpen in it than she normally did. Glancing over to her left, she eyed Lilith. How did she make a maroon blazer look so cool? Okay, so she had pinned a vast array of badges on its lapels and that certainly wasn't allowed. Lilith was bound for detention and a letter home sooner or later, she was sure.

Her Dad continued his speech. Jane peeped between the shoulders of the students in front of her and noticed that he'd worn his lucky tie. She shook her head. It was mustard yellow and had diagonal dark green stripes running down it. It looked like he'd vomited his lunch all down himself. She felt ashamed by his lack of fashion sense.

“We have introduced a few new rules. Number one, no mobile telephones in school.”

A low mumbling started around Jane. The students were not happy with this. If he wasn't careful he'd have a fully fledged riot on his hands. Back in Nottingham, her school had gone with the times. They'd positively embraced mobile phones, letting the students use them in lessons to help with their work. Admittedly, there were always a few that would abuse it and spend the entire lesson texting their mates but there'd always be kids that messed around wouldn't there?

“Number two. Every student should join at least one after school activity.” The chatter grew louder. The assistant head had to step in and restore order. Jane sank even lower into her seat. She glanced at the clock behind the stage. Five more minutes.

“I believe that hobbies are important.” Her Dad pulled himself up to his full height, adjusted his tie and continued, “Every student will join a club. I myself am a keen metal detectorist..”

Jane pulled her fringe over her face and stared at the parquet floor of the hall. She counted down the seconds until the bell went.

Lilith was waiting for her outside school. Leaning against a set of railings, she examined the chips of her nails, looking up every now and then to glower at a passing student.

“Well that was a bundle of laughs wasn't it?” She pushed away from the railings, swinging her bag over her shoulder and following Jane. “What a moron eh? That new headteacher won't last five minutes before he's mauled by this lot.”

Jane mumbled something non-comittal and hurried on. How was she she going to

explain that it was her Dad? She had a growing knot in her stomach as they climbed aboard the school bus. What time would he be home? Maybe she could kick Lilith out before he turned up. Why had she ever invited her around? This was madness.

Lilith reached into her bag and pulled something out. “Look what we're reading for English. Cool eh?”

Jane glanced down at the book's cover. The Crucible. Same as her.

“Snap.”

“What? You're doing the same one?”

Jane nodded. “I thought you might like it.” She smiled. “Didn't realise how much though. What with all your witchery and that.”

“Yeah. I'm looking forward to reading it for a change. They make us read some pretty bland stuff for English but this I can't wait to get stuck into. Might pick up a few things.”

Lilith leafed through it as Jane stared out the bus window. She could hear the other students talking around them. The main subject was the awful new head. Someone was saying they were going to get their parent's to complain to the office. It was their human right wasn't it to have a mobile phone?

It was raining. Not surprising really. The summer was all but over. It had been stifling hot all week and she could feel the storm building. It was one good thing about being out here in Little Marsden. She had quite a good view over the fields and woods from her bedroom window and she liked the outdoors really. She had never had much chance to get out in Nottingham. They'd gone for walks down by the river Trent or by the canal but it wasn't really the same. Out here she could watch the tree line and sky before bed. There had been huge fat grey clouds building all week and now there was a sickly tinge to them. She could practically feel the static charge in the air.

The house was quiet. Her Mum was probably down the shops or something so Jane let them both in with her own key. Lilith stepped into the front room and nosed around for a bit.

“Nice.”

Jane shrugged. “It's alright I s'pose. I've got a good room. Come and see.”

Lilith walked up to the fireplace and started running her hands along the bricks. “Is this where they found it then?”

She meant the witch bottle. “Yes. It kind of fell out by itself and smashed on the floor. Made a right mess.”

“Mmm.” Lilith was bending down and twisting awkwardly, trying to get a better look up the chimney. She withdrew her head and looked pointedly at Jane. “Well you know things don't just fall out by themselves.”

“We'd had the builders in.”

Lilith ignored her. “Perhaps the house is trying to tell you something. “Perhaps, it's the right time.”

“The right time for what?” Jane looked at her friend quizzically. Why did she feel the need to be so dramatic all of the time. Didn't she get tired of it?

“I don't know. Not yet.” Lilith cocked her head on one side. “Where is it then?”

Jane grimaced. She knew Lilith would want to see the ugly thing. She steeled herself. “In the garage.” She grabbed her dad's spare set of keys off the owl shaped key holder on the wall and beckoned for Lilith to follow. “Gives me the creeps though. Don't say I didn't warn you.”

Lilith grinned wolfishly in reply.

### **Chapter Three**

The garage was dark and still and smelled of old engine oil and creosote. The concrete floor was cool beneath Jane's bare feet as she rocked onto her tiptoes to reach for the light switch.

Approx 6206 words

“Oh crap”

“What is it?” Lilith hissed behind her. Jane could feel her breath on the back of her neck.

“Bulb's gone.”

Jane thought she heard rustling in the corner. “What was that?”

“Rats?”

“Thanks for that.” Jane peered into the corner but all she could make out were unfamiliar shapes and the edge of dust sheets. She curled her toes up, hoping there weren't really rats. She had a horrible image in her head of them nibbling at her feet.

“Have you got a torch?”

“Oh yeah. Wait a minute.” Jane felt around by the door, on top of the old chest freezer. Sure enough, her fingers fell upon the camping torch that her Dad had got her when she went on her first camp with the Brownies. She pushed the button and a feeble white glow fell over the garage floor. Luckily there were no rats.

“It's over here.” Jane went over the shelves where Dad kept all his metal detecting equipment. The witch bottle was lying on its side amidst a pile of old horse shoes and some bits of broken pottery.

Lilith was staring at the metal detector. “This yours?” She cocked one painted eyebrow in surprise.

“No, of course not. It's my Dad's.”

Lilith nodded and then a slow look of comprehension spread across her features. “It's not is it?” She put up a hand to stifle a laugh.

“What?” The knot in Jane's stomach tightened even further.

“Davenport.” Lilith frowned. “What's your surname Jane?”

Jane held her breath wondering if she should lie but she knew it was already too late.

“You've got me.” Her shoulders slumped. “Don't tell anyone.”

Lilith laughed to herself. “Your secrets safe with me Janey.” Her eyes roved over the shelf and she moved quickly to the witch bottle, her crimson nails wrapped around the earthenware crocks. More bits of hair and rusty pins fell out, scattering themselves amongst the horse shoes. Lilith was transfixed. She bent down, nose millimetres from the horrid thing.

“Wow.”

“I thought it was supposed to repel witches or something. How come you can pick it up?”

Lilith shrugged. “It was only superstition. There's no proof it even worked.” She turned it over in her fingers. “But the person that lived here.” She pursed her lips in thought. “They must have been scared enough of something to bury it in the chimney breast like that. I bet it's not even the only one.”

“Well, it's shame that it doesn't even work then.” Jane suppressed a shiver. “I wonder what happened to the people that lived here.”

“Maybe the witch got them.” Lilith grinned with relish. “Or maybe it was meant for one person in particular. Spells can be personalised like that. Maybe there was someone they were really scared of but they managed to keep at bay.”

“I hope so.” Jane turned away from the bottle and made her way to the garage door.

“Come on. Leave it there. Let's go and get a coke.”

Sarah Peacock

The Witch Bottle

Approx 6206 words