

Prologue

13th June 1785

Pushing the heavy oak door into its frame, he twisted the key and heard the lock click into place. He stumbled over to the bed and collapsed onto the mattress, lying perfectly still for a moment as he whispered a prayer.

“Lord, keep them from me. As a good Christian servant I beg you.”

The sweat running from his forehead stung his eyes and as it touched his lips, it tasted of salt.

Like sea water.

Once again, he could hear the waves beating against the side of the ship, could sense the rise and fall of the ocean beneath him.

And he could hear their cries. No matter that they spoke in a heathen tongue, he knew they were begging for mercy. To be saved.

But they had no right to haunt a decent fellow like him.

No right at all.

There was a sound, like the moaning of a suffering beast, and then silence.

11th September 1953

She emptied the contents of the cardboard box onto the table. But the odd assortment of books, old newspapers and magazines did not interest her. Instead, she tore the box itself into small pieces. Then she began writing on each of them.

The words came thick and fast, drawn up out of her memory like the lines of an old nursery rhyme. Her pen felt guided by an unseen hand. She paused just once, to peer out of the window at the fading grey light. Time was running out.

“Get a move on, stupid girl,” she scolded herself, before getting back to the writing.

When she had finished, she carried the pieces of card into the front room and put them in place. Then she went out into the hallway and turned on the light above the door.

Martin

The crunch of the car's tyres on the damp gravel driveway heralded his arrival. The curtains twitched as he pulled up outside the house and by the time he'd switched off the engine she was at the door. She held her hands tightly against her chest, her pale knuckles locked together. He'd never seen her looking so anxious.

"Oh Martin," she said. She sounded like she was about to start crying. "I'm so pleased to see you." There were the beginnings of tears in the corners of each eye.

"How long's it been like this Mary?" he asked, reaching into the back of his estate car and lifting out a battered old portable stereo.

"Since Thursday," she sighed. "I know I should have called earlier but I don't like to..." Her voice trailed away just as her head drooped. She felt old and weak and stupid for not having had the sense to ring him when it first began. He laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Well I'm here now my dear, so why don't you take me inside and show me what's up?"

At his touch, the woman lifted her face and managed half a smile. She led him in through the hallway and on past the kitchen into the back parlour.

"I can see the problem," he said, as he bent his head to clear the low doorway and stepped into a room with faded, patterned wallpaper.

"It's been getting worse and worse," Mary said, glancing back and forth between her visitor and the table in the centre of the room.

"It's rather excitable isn't it?" He pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes as he studied the scene before him. There was a cup on the table and it was dancing.

The small blue china mug was moving about the table top in a jaunty kind of way, swirling round a bowl and spoon already laid out for tomorrow morning's breakfast. Then it headed towards the cereal box, jerking and twirling like a puppet on strings.

“How have you coped with this since Thursday?” he asked, looking at the neatly arranged breakfast things that she’d laid out, despite the presence of a clearly possessed item of crockery.

“Well, I was hoping it might just... you know...” She looked at him for some sign that he did indeed know what she was hoping for. He just raised an eyebrow.

“...stop of its own accord?” He tried to stifle his laughter but it ended up coming out as a weak snort. “Oh you know these things rarely fade out on their own. They always need a little nudge of some kind.”

He set down the stereo and pressed a button on the top. As he straightened himself and the voice of Aretha Franklin began to fill the room, he dipped a hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small battered, black book. He opened at a page marked with a slip of paper and began to read in a kind of half shout, fighting with the volume of the music.

He’d got the idea of using the stereo from a news report about police in America trying to end a siege at a house. They had parked a truck outside and played loud music through giant speakers for two days straight until the bank robbers, or whatever they had been, had given themselves up, grateful for the peace and quiet that jail might bring.

The same technique worked well on troublesome ghosts. He figured it was the energy the music carried; not in the physical sense of sound waves but in the way the singers put so much into what they were doing. Which is why he chose either rock classics, Motown or old soul tracks. He still found the last choice ironic but it was true. A bit of Marvin Gaye or good old Aretha could help shift even the most tediously reluctant spirits. The energy in Aretha’s voice made the hairs of his arms stand on end so God only knew what it did to the petulant dead.

And it was working tonight.

The cup was now bouncing frantically up and down on the table. It sounded like an angry judge trying to call order in a courtroom.

It wanted silence.

But still the music and the reading from the book went on. Now the cup tilted to one side and began to spin elliptically on the edge of its base.

“It’s getting angry,” Mary said. Martin just nodded and carried on with his reading. He could sense another victory was on the cards. His voice dropped in pitch. He called it his Bishop’s Voice, though it was unlikely he’d ever get that call. Men like him were outsiders. He liked it that way.

But still... an image of himself in full purple regalia slipped sideways into his mind and almost knocked him off track. He refocused his thoughts. Nothing should distract him now.

The cup was spinning so fiercely that it had begun scratching the surface of the table, making a sharp grating sound as it wore away the veneer. It was the sound of an animal clawing at the woodwork. The sound of something trying to get in. Something in pain.

Mary held one hand across her mouth to stop herself from crying out. Then the atmosphere suddenly changed as energy flooded into the room from a place beyond the patterned walls. It was not something that either of them could see or hear, certainly not over the music and Martin’s Bishop’s Voice or the bestial scratching coming from the table. Instead they felt it pressing in on them like a thick blanket was wrapping itself around their bodies. The closest comparison that Martin could ever make was of stepping into a room where the heating was up too high. But even as this strange force touched their skin and closed in around their faces, it was neither hot nor cold and it had no smell or taste. They simply sensed it pushing back at them, trying to force them from this space.

In Mary’s case it worked. As the presence filled the room she fled into the kitchen and shut the door behind her. “Are you all right Martin?” she called. He did not stop his reading,

he dare not pause even for a moment, but his voice rose in a great swell as a way of signalling to her that all was well. He was so close now.

Then it was over. The cup could take no more and shattered into fragments which flew in all directions. One hit a picture frame on a side cupboard, breaking the glass and knocking it to the floor, while another struck the wall and tore a small flap of the patterned paper away. At once the presence in the room was gone. From behind the door Mary shrieked with terror but in the parlour Martin simply switched off the music and closed his little book.

“Amen.”

By the time the car crunched its way off the driveway Mary had composed herself and was standing by the door to wave him off. Martin smiled at her and reached to his neck. He pulled away his white collar and dropped it on to the passenger seat, next to the home-made apple crumble that she had given him in lieu of payment. “I’ll have that for supper,” he laughed as he backed out on to the road. Shifting into first and pulling away, the Reverend Martin Ledger smiled to himself at another job well done.

He headed off down Merryweather Lane, a winding, narrow road where the branches of the trees on either side stretched out to meet in the middle. The light from the car’s headlamps made it look like he was driving down a leafy tunnel and the effect quickly became hypnotic. He blinked hard and licked a finger before rubbing a line of wetness under each eye. Apparently Roman soldiers used to do the same when they were on night-time guard duty, but he bet they never had to hustle an ageing Volvo down a wet road strewn with leaves.

There was a light mist rolling in off the fields like smoke. It moved from right to left in front of him and reached up at the car with wispy little fingers. If this had been a dry summer’s evening then he might have assumed that someone had a bonfire on the go. But

this was a cold, damp night in late October and no one in their right mind would be trying to set light to soggy leaves after all the recent rain.

This was Henchcombe's very own atmospheric anomaly known as Fairy Mist: a watery, gaseous fog that occasionally wafted its way down into the village off the moor. No one was quite sure what caused it, although it had wound its way into various local stories and songs and a man from York University had once made a study of it. You could even pick up a small but informative leaflet on the subject down at the library, open every Tuesday and Thursday from ten till two.

Distracted by the thoughts of Fairy Mist, leaflets and the library's opening hours, Martin suddenly realised that his eyes were starting to blur again and that he wasn't quite sure which way Merryweather Lane went next. As the gateway into a field loomed up out of the dark he flicked the wipers on to clear the windscreen and refocused his eyes on the road ahead.

He reached the end of the lane and turned left, down Haycock Hill. The trees and hedges that had bordered the road were now replaced with houses and cottages that became more and more frequent as he dropped into the heart of the village. There was Arthur Stephen's house on the left, then Mr and Mrs Broadhurst's cottage followed by the Tompkinsons' and over on the right the house owned by the late Murray Finch. It was good to see a 'Let Agreed' sign finally standing outside.

Then, set back from the road surrounded by trees, was Lucy Mayfield's ramshackle bungalow with the light glowing over the porch. The village kids called her 'Light on Lucy'. The paintwork may have been peeling and several of the cracked windows may have been replaced with sheets of cardboard but she never let her light go out. Martin smiled as he went past and gave it a little nod; an acknowledgment of the little things that made life in the village so interesting.

On he went, past more red tiled cottages with crooked, smoking chimneys. Past the petrol station and late night shop, where the glow of fluorescent lighting reflected off the damp road. Then the Black Bull pub, which looked to be heaving with drinkers. Eventually he dropped into the square and swung a left past the enormous oak tree that stood on Parson's Green, the patch of grass that marked the very centre of Henchcombe. He slid the car up Church Lane and pulled on to the drive way outside the vicarage; a fine Georgian house with a grey slate roof and high sash windows. He smiled up at the house as he climbed out of the car.

"You look pleased with yourself," said a woman's voice. Julia was standing by the open front door, the light from the hallway pouring over her shoulders. Even in her baggy jumper and tattered old jeans, she still made his heart skip a beat.

"It's this place. I never stop thinking how lucky we are to have it."

"You're getting ahead of yourself. It's never going to be ours. Or has the Bishop offered to sell it to you to raise a bit of petty cash?"

"Don't diss the Bishop," he laughed and he kissed her on the lips, before drawing her close for a moment. Then she stepped aside to let him pass and closed the door behind them, shutting out the dark, wet night.

"How were the ghoulies?" she asked, as he hung up his jacket in the hallway.

"It was a spirit," he answered, "and I wish you'd take it a bit more seriously. He tried to sound cross but he could never manage it with her. She was just so..."

"Talking of spirits, do you fancy a drink?" She disappeared into the kitchen and he heard the familiar sound of a bottle top being unscrewed. It was Martini Time.

A minute later they were stretched out in the living room, sipping from a pair of cheap supermarket tumblers. The end of the day was their catching-up time but they said nothing for a while, simply enjoying each other's company, the sense of sharing the same space. It

brought about a quiet sense of comfort, just to know that the other was there while they enjoyed their drink. This was a parishioner-free zone.

In the end it was Julia who spoke first. "This is a bit weird you know."

"Weird?"

"Yeah. An hour ago my husband was exorcising one of his parishioners. Driving out evil beasties from her broom cupboard. Now he's here with me on the sofa having a drink."

"It's all part of the job." He took another sip.

"I know, but some husbands have normal jobs you know."

"Yeah I do know. But I'm not qualified for much else. It's the Church or the dole."

She laughed round the sides of her glass. "I mean it though. If I sit and think about it for too long, it is a bit weird. How many has it been this year? Six? Seven? Even if I think it's all cobblers, it's still a bit odd."

He swallowed slowly. "It's just this place I guess. Third most haunted village in England, blah, blah. I don't really think about it much to be honest."

"Yeah, right." There was a gently teasing tone to her voice. "Only because you love it so much. Adored vicar by day, rock and roll exorcist by night."

He said nothing and she went back to her drink. Another minute passed before either of them spoke again.

"Oh, I took a call from a couple from Leeds this afternoon," Julia said. "They want to get married next June. On a Sunday."

"Sunday?" He sighed. "Please tell me they didn't ask for a ..."

"Sunday morning? Yes."

He sniggered so much a trickle of drink rang from the corner of his mouth. This was a standing joke between Julia and him; people who simply "had" to be married in Saint Michael's, even if they were ignorant of the church's most basic functions.

“I just pointed out that Sunday morning is when the church is being used for services. They seemed surprised.”

“What, that some people might actually come to church outside of weddings, christenings and funerals? And on a Sunday morning of all times?”

“Something like that. They’re going to rethink their plans and get back to you.”

They drank a little more in silence before Julia said, “Oh, and a woman rang for you this afternoon.”

“Really?” He tried to fake a guilty edge to his voice.

“You should be so lucky. She’s doing some research into Marcus Trowbridge and wants to poke around the church.”

“Trowbridge? Not that old pirate again. He’d be loving this, if he wasn’t down in the crypt, the bastard.”

“Well this woman’s interested in how a prominent slaver ended up buried in pride of place in a church.”

“I hope you pointed out that even the Church of England owned slaves.”

“Nope. I left that up to you. I think she’s coming down to see you at some point.”

“Great.” Another mouthful of drink slid down. Answering questions about the village’s most infamous son was his least favourite pastime.

Suddenly Julia raised herself up on the sofa. “I almost forgot. Lucy Mayfield rang just before you came in,” she said.

“Good grief.” Martin took his glass away from his lips. “When does she ever ring anyone, least of all me: the daft fool vicar?”

“That’s not fair. She doesn’t think that about you.” Julia laid a hand on his chest. “She only talks like that when it’s about Edward Monkton.”

“Hmm.” Martin frowned. Monkton had been his predecessor at Saint Michael’s and had held the post for nearly forty years. He had been very much a vicar of the old school: strict, conservative and about as warm and friendly to his parishioners as a dead fish. Not everyone had liked him, least of all Lucy Mayfield, who would happily voice her opinion on the Reverend Monkton’s failings. He had assumed she felt the same about him.

“What did she ring for?” he asked.

“Actually, the poor love sounded really upset. Her niece and nephew are thinking of putting her in a home and selling the house to pay for it. She’s really worried about it. She asked if you could stop by and see her. I said yes, of course.”

“Of course,” sighed Martin as he took another sip of Martini, “I’ll pop by in the morning.”