

The
WITCH'S
DAUGHTER

Paula Brackston



THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

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www.thomasdunnebooks.com
www.minotaurbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brackston, Paula.
The witch's daughter / Paula Brackston.—1st U.S. ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-312-62168-1
1. Witches—Fiction. 2. Warlocks—Fiction. 3. Immortality—Fiction. 4. England—Fiction. I. Title.
PR6102.R325W58 2011
823'.92—dc22

2010037441

First published in England by Snowbooks as *The Book of Shadows*

First U.S. Edition: January 2011

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Batchcombe, Wessex, 1628

Bess ran. The clear night sky and fat moon gave ample illumination for her flight. She feared the dawn, for with it would come the discovery of her absence, and then the hunt would begin. The fetters still fastened around her legs rattled against her anklebones with every stride, a single broken link on each all that remained of her chains. Metal rubbed through young skin until a thin slick of blood trailed in her wake. Her bare feet slapped through the shallow mud, retracing a route that was so familiar as to be imprinted on her mind, clearly mapped, allowing no false turns as she fled beyond the village boundary and ran toward the woodland. Still the short journey felt longer than it ever had, the trees seeming to recede before her, recoiling from her boiling panic, never coming nearer however hard she ran.

An illusion. Merely a trick of the moon shadows. I must not falter.

Her breath sounded loud in her ears, loud enough to wake a light sleeper in an outlying cottage, her heartbeat surely too thunderous to go unheard. She pressed on, at last reaching the cover of the first slender trees. The darkness in the copse was of a different nature. The early spring foliage admitted only fractured moonbeams, and roots and brambles clutched at her from both sides of the path. On she ran. She gasped as stones scraped her soles. She splashed through a brook, the chill water momentarily numbing her wounds before gritty earth from the forest floor forced its way deeper into the lacerations with every footfall. An owl screeched his disapproval of her presence. A badger drew his snout back into his sett, waiting for the disturbance to pass.

The freshness of the night air stung Bess's throat. Even as it made her cough and fight for breath, she did not slow her pace; nor did she think to care, after so many hours in the stifling confines of her prison cell. Here at least was air to breathe. She crested a small hill and paused, steadying herself against the trunk of a great ash. She could taste the woodland on

her tongue: the moss, the silver lichen, the rising sap of the trees. Beyond that, two more things clearly described themselves: her own fear and the sea. Both saltinesses spoke of terror and of freedom. She peered forward along the path and into the heart of the forest. That way lay escape from her captors. That way he would be waiting for her, horses ready, provisions, a plan, a destination to ride for. She pushed herself from the tree, summoning what strength she had left, but something held her back. Something inside her made her wait. *Consider*, it said, *consider the cost of that freedom*.

A distant noise caused her to start. Hounds. They would be upon her in moments; she could not hesitate. Yet still that voice would not be silenced. *Consider*, it warned.

Mother? What should I do?

By way of an answer the night breeze carried the scent of the sea to her nostrils. From the village the baying of the dogs grew louder and was now accompanied by shouts. A movement in the darkness ahead caught her eye. She was sure now she could make out the silhouette of rider and horses. Those who hunted her would take her life, that she knew. But what price would she pay Gideon for her freedom?

No. I shall not go to him. I will not.

She turned and sped down the eastward path, away from the trees, away from the hungry hounds, and away from him. In moments she had broken free of the woods and was racing across springy turf, out in the open, heading toward the one choice left to her: the sea. She felt rather than heard him come after her. She dared not look back now. As she reached the cliff path, a watery sun raised itself above the horizon, bleeding bitter red into the sea. A flat, shadowless daylight replaced the night, leaving Bess exposed. At the cliff's edge, she stopped. Looking toward the village, she could see torches spluttering in the grayness and make out featureless shapes moving rapidly nearer. Even above the hypnotic rasping of the waves on the rocks below, she could feel hoofbeats shuddering through the earth. Though he did not call out, she could hear his voice inside her head, *Bess! Bess! Bess!*

Bess would not turn. To meet his gaze would be to lose her own will. Below her the high tide allowed no glimpse of sand, only deep water and bone-shattering limestone and flint. The sun climbed higher, so that when she lifted her eyes heavenward, it was to see an apocalyptic sky before she stepped forward into nothing.

My name is Elizabeth Anne Hawksmith, and my age is three hundred and eighty-four years. Each new settlement asks for a new journal, and so this Book of Shadows begins.

IMBOLG

FEBRUARY 2, 2007—FULL MOON

Awoke at dawn on my first morning at Willow Cottage to a heavy fall of snow. The landscape lay coyly clothed in ermine, waiting to reveal itself to me upon better acquaintance. The sky blushed briefly, lending a fleeting warmth. My bedroom window affords, as I had anticipated, an excellent view of the village of Matravers. Set on a small tump at the far end of the green, my little house is pleasingly separate from the cluster of thatched cottages and the short brick terrace that make up the center of the village. Also situated around the green, which boasts a chalk stream and duck pond, are a post office and small shop, a genteel coaching inn, and a bus stop from which children are taken to school and pensioners go to the weekly market in Pasbury. The church is at the other end of the green, set back and mostly obscured by impressive yews. The lane beyond the church gives access to the canal that runs west toward Pasbury. From the front of my house I have clear sight of anyone approaching, while the modest copse behind gives me seclusion. I can choose when to see and when to be seen.

I do my best to remain as invisible as my admittedly unusual appearance will allow. A woman on her own will always attract attention, particularly if she is in any way different. With this in mind, I keep my long hair tied back loosely and often wear a hat. My father used to say I had autumn hair and that this must have come about because of my September birth date. It is true, the color is a perfect match for that season—a blend of the burnished gleam of ripe chestnuts and highlights of oak leaves turned copper by the falling of the year. In itself such color, even coupled with my hair's exceptional length, would not provoke curiosity. It is the way such deep tones contrast with the broad white streak that runs from the right side of my brow that causes people to look again. This is not some silvery mark of maturity but a snow-pure swathe, an icy sweep, as though the Goddess of Winter has touched me and left her

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mark. Indeed, I wish that the origin of the feature were so harmless. The truth is so much darker.

I am also tall and, despite my great age, remain vigorous and strong, my outward appearance suggesting I might perhaps be fifty, no more. I dress for comfort, practicality, and so as not to draw attention to myself. These days fashion can be adapted to suit the caprice of any woman, it seems, so that my long skirts, my liking for rich colors and fabrics, and my favorite garments collected over many years of roaming this earth can all be worn without appearing anything more than a little eccentric.

The cottage will, I am confident, serve my needs well, after small alterations. I plan to create a path from the back door directly to the stream, which runs through the willows that give the place its name. The holly hedge on the front boundary needs additional planting, and I must find space for elder, birch, and rowan when the time is right. The garden must be completely dug over, and something will have to be done about the lack of shade to the west of the house. It is perfect for an herbary, but it is a large space and anything else placed there will surely scorch. The house must stay as it is for now unless intemperate weather prevents me from working outside. If there is a clear sky for the moon tonight, I will pace out my kitchen garden and mark it with hazel sticks. I might even venture for a night walk, though I doubt I shall go as far as the edge of the great woods that lie on the horizon behind the house. They beckon, but I am not ready to go there yet. They are of another time.

It is easy on a shining day such as this, when all is newness and future, to forget for whole moments the past. As if it cannot cast its shadow on the taintless snow. Imbolg is my favorite time of year to find a new home, signifying as it does looking forward to rebirth and renewal. But I cannot afford to become complacent. I must not allow myself to drop my guard. These picturesque surroundings are certainly benign, as I predict most of my new neighbors will prove to be. The danger, as always, will come from afar. It does not lie in wait but follows me. I can never let myself be made vulnerable by the illusion of safety.

FEBRUARY 6, 2007—MOON IN THIRD QUARTER

Snow still cloaks the valley, though it has been corrupted now. A trail left by the belly of a badger shows my back garden to be part of a run. I will

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have to talk him out of digging up my young plants come Ostara. The lane beyond my front gate is black once more, and the village itself is a mess of brown gardens and gray, lumpen effigies the children have abandoned. Cautious pedestrians have worn the pavements to slithers of icy water and dense patches of shrunken snow. All are temporarily afflicted by a curious gait. Each stride falls short of their expectations as it crumps into a shriveled drift or stretches muscles uncomfortably as feet slide through the slush. They have all been much too busy with the weather to bother me.

I have begun work in the garden, but the ground is horribly affected by the receding snow. Aside from planning and some preparatory clearing, there is little I can usefully do. This has forced me to turn my attentions to the house itself. The rooms are curiously small and boxy, two at the front and two at the back, downstairs and up, giving the appearance from the front of a dolls' house, with windows squarely positioned on either side of the door. I dislike the way the entrance opens onto the bottom of the stairs, but there is little I can do about it. The structural alterations required to change it would mean employing builders, and having strangers in the house for many weeks would be too great a price to pay.

The room at the front will be perfectly adequate for my sitting room, though I will rarely use it. The dining room I can utilize for drying plants and storing herb oils and pillows. It is in the kitchen that my most serious work will take place. I spent time there today, considering the best places to store my potions and unctions. The room boasts an excellent solid fuel stove, a quarry tiled floor, and west-facing French windows giving on to the garden. I lit the stove, taking a moment to burn a sage bundle and bless the space with its pungent smoke. As I stood, eyes closed, enjoying the stillness and promise of my new home, I became aware of a light scratching noise. The hairs at the nape of my neck began to rise, and I had the sensation of a caterpillar wriggling its way down my spine. I opened my eyes and looked in the direction of the noise. I need not have been alarmed. At the window a yellow-necked wood mouse was nibbling at the frame. I undid the latch.

'Good morning to you,' I said. 'Won't you step inside?'

He regarded me with dew bright eyes for a second or two before scurrying through the open window. I felt the icy chill of his naked ears as he brushed by. He completed a circuit of the room before settling to wash his

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paws by the stove. I fetched him a morsel of bread. 'I will strike a deal with you,' I told him. 'Tell your family to let my stores alone, and in return I will set out a daily meal for you on the windowsill. Do you agree?'

He paused in his ablutions. No sound came from the tiny creature; rather, I felt his acknowledgment of our bargain. It will be worth a few crumbs to have my supplies free from the attentions of mice.

I have already positioned my oak table, dresser, and merchant's chest, which fits snugly next to the Belfast sink, and put up shelves on the far wall for my many storage jars. The space succeeds in being both warm and light and will be a good place in which to work. Last night the moon's beams fell through the curtainless glass and washed the room in their pearly light.

Later, I went out into the copse and lit a candle, calling on the spirits and fairies of the woodland. I invited them to show themselves and assured them that they were welcome to stay and that I would not take their rightful home from them. I am a guest in their woodland, and during my stay here I will use it with care and respect.

FEBRUARY 10, 2007—FOURTH QUARTER

The snow has gone and been replaced by an iron frost, which means my gardening continues to be frustrated. Nevertheless, I managed to give the holly hedge some much-needed attention and clear spaces ready for the new plants. I am lucky to have such a protective boundary to my property. Parts of it must have been put in when the house was built, which I understand to be well over a hundred years ago. How long that sounds, and how much the world has spun and shuddered in that century. And yet, for me, it is but a chapter in my life. In truth, I have more in common with the ancient oak on the village green, though I doubt it has seen as many summers as myself.

While I was working on the holly, a squirrel came to see what I was about. He was a fine specimen, with long tail and dense silver fur. I bid him come closer, and he was happy to climb onto my arm and sit on my shoulder. There is comfort to be had in the company of wild things and delight to be found in their trust. I became aware I was being watched. I am, of course, always alert to the sensation of being observed, but on

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this occasion I was not alarmed. I sensed a peaceful presence, albeit one possessed of great energy. I paused and made as if to stretch my aching back, the squirrel jumping down and hurrying away as I did so. I caught sight of a slender girl standing in the lane. She was dressed inadequately against the cold and fidgeted in her fashionable boots. She looked at me with an open face, curiosity written on her pleasant features.

'Good morning,' I said and waited.

'Hi.' Her voice was soft. 'What are you doing?'

'As you see'—I pointed with my trowel—'repairing the hedge.'

'Bit cold for gardening, if you ask me.' She rubbed her hands together and then began to blow on them.

I wondered how old she was. She was shorter than me, but many women are. Fifteen maybe? Sixteen? The cusp of adulthood shifts from one decade to the next, backward and forward, so that I am unable to guess accurately anymore. Her tight-fitting clothes and obvious desire not to hide her body spoke of a young woman, while her hesitant voice and lack of eloquence suggested an awkward child. Seventeen, I decided. Little more than the age I was when my world collapsed. When I was thrown into an interminable future of hiding and solitude.

'I like this cottage,' said the girl. 'I like the way it sits up here watching the village. Its windows are like smiley eyes, aren't they?'

'You could say that.'

'Saw the smoke coming out the chimney,' she said. 'This place was empty when we moved here. You new too, then?'

'New to Matravers, yes.'

'We've been here a month. Feels like a bloody lifetime.' She began to flap her arms, as much in agitation as to keep warm.

'You don't like the village?'

'The place is okay, fields and stuff, but I mean, there's not much to do here, is there?'

'Not what you're used to?'

'Nah, we come from Basingstoke. Dulwich before that. God knows where we'll end up next. Mum gets an idea in her head and that's it, we're packing. She thinks the countryside will be better for me. Less chance I'll get into trouble. Less chance I'll have a life, more like.'

I looked at her more closely. There was something about this young creature, something appealing, something honest and trusting that is

rarely found in a stranger. I caught myself considering offering her a mug of hot chocolate to warm those frost-nipped fingers. But no. It would be so easy to encourage a harmless neighborly acquaintance, but I must not. I returned to my task, turning my back on the girl.

‘You should wear a warm coat on a day like this,’ I told her.

I felt her watching me for a moment longer, then heard her leave. I confess a coldness gripped me that would not be got rid of by any amount of manual labor. Soon I went inside and busied myself in the kitchen, not wanting to dwell on the hard truth that had made me send the girl away. The heavens know I am accustomed to keeping my own company; it cannot be said to be an unfamiliar state for me. Nonetheless, there is but a spasm between solitude and loneliness. And I live in the knowledge that my friendless state is not a choice but a necessity, for my own safety and for that of anyone who would be close to me.

I put myself to the task of unpacking the last of the boxes. There is something comforting in the sight of well-stocked shelves, so that by the time I had positioned the last of the storage jars of pickled beetroot I had shaken off my earlier melancholy. The gleaming rows of glass and provisions suggested order and security. This evening I lit only candles in the kitchen and sat by the stove with the fire door open, watching a log of apple wood burn. The sight of it warmed me as much as any heat it might have given out. I was dressed, as is my habit through the winter months, in layers of comfortable clothing—a fine silk vest, soft woolen tights, cotton shirt, a heavy cord skirt that skims the floor, and two light sweaters. My sealskin boots were given me by an Inuit fisherman during my time spent in the great ice plains of the north. I peeled off a wool-mix knit. The yarn crackled as I tugged the garment over my head. Small sparks fizzed between the fibers and my hair, visible in the semi-darkness to a keen eye. I turned to the table and set some oil to warm in the burner. Rosemary. Soon the room was filled with the uplifting fumes. As it always did, the scent made me think of my mother. Her eyes were blue as the flowers of the plant, and her presence as powerful and restorative as the essence of the herb. Even now I can see her patiently showing me how to bind bundles of the twiggy stems together and hang them up to dry. I could have been no more than six years old. She would stand behind me and wrap her arms around mine, leaning forward to help my fumbling fingers. I was enfolded in her limitless motherly love, and I would breathe

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in her own sweet smell. She had such patience. Such tenderness. Such determination to teach me all that she knew, to share with me all her wonderful knowledge. It is the cruelest of the torments of my great age that grief does not abate, not beyond a certain level. It merely continues, my only companion across oceans of time.

FEBRUARY 13, 2007—MOON ENTERS CAPRICORN

Still cold, but the frost is weakening. I ventured into the village today. I was aware I had been putting it off. Whilst I do not wish to encourage more than the most basic of acquaintance with my neighbors, I know it to be a mistake to remain completely distant. To be a recluse is to be mysterious beyond the endurance of villagers of this modern age. Better to allow a polite exchange of nods and hellos and discourse about the weather. I strive to be dull in my conversation, even to the point of rudeness if it is unavoidable. I will impart only sufficient information for those with an interest to construct a dry history for me. That way I may be left in relative peace. However, I had not reckoned upon finding the teenage girl in the village shop when I went there to buy some simple groceries. Clearly not put off by my curtness during our previous meeting, she seemed pleased to see me.

‘How’s the hedge?’ she asked.

‘Taking shape slowly, thank you.’

‘Are you going to paint the outside of the house?’ she asked. ‘I saw one like that once done in light blue with white windows and a navy door. Like a fairy-tale house. That’d be fab.’ She faced me, eyes bright with her idea.

I wondered at her interest in the place. She was on her own as before. Had she no friends in the village? In my experience, teenage girls rarely did anything alone. I reminded myself she too was a newcomer and might not yet have had time to make friends.

‘I hadn’t thought,’ I told her. ‘The color of the walls is not hugely important to me.’ I went about my shopping, hoping that would be the end of it, but she trailed after me up and down the aisles like an over-eager flower girl.

‘Have you got a dog? Great garden for a dog, with those woods at the back. Mum won’t let me have one. Says the hairs would clog up the vacuum.’

'No. No dog.' I took a bag of brown sugar from the shelf.

'Oh, I like brown. Especially the crunchy stuff. On cereal. Do you like cereal? It's over here, look. Honey Crunch or Cocosnaps? No, someone skinny like you'd be more into muesli, I reckon. Do you like muesli?' She held up a packet, beaming now.

I looked at her levelly.

'You ask too many questions,' I said, moving toward the counter, keen to be gone.

'That's what Mum says. But then, how can I learn anything if I don't ask questions?'

'That's another one.'

'Yeah, I suppose I just can't help myself.' She giggled, a joyful sound, like spring rain falling into a dew pond.

A tightness gripped my chest as I realized it was not my younger self the girl reminded me of, aside from her age. It was Margaret, my dear sweet baby sister. Margaret of the light step and easy laughter. Margaret who adored me as much as I did her. Yes, there was something about the openness and innocence of this girl that had also been at the heart of Margaret's character. I nodded hello and thank you to the shopkeeper and handed over my money. As I turned to go, the girl stood looking at me, blocking my path to the door, as if waiting for something.

'Shouldn't you be at school?' I asked.

'Teacher training. We get the day off to study at home.'

'Then shouldn't you be at home, studying?'

The girl had the good grace to blush. 'I came in to get a Valentine's card,' she said, 'only I can't choose. Look.' She pointed to the display near the counter. 'Funny, sexy, or romantic—what d'you reckon?'

'That rather depends on whom it's for.'

She blushed deeper and studied her feet.

'Michael Forrester.'

'Well, what is Michael Forrester like?'

'He's wicked. Everybody likes him. Especially the girls. And he's brilliant at sports. Athletics, rugby, swimming. Wins everything. He's so cool.'

'His ego must be sufficiently inflated already, by the sound of it. I should save your money.'

'Oh no, he's really nice. He held the door open for me once. And he said hello.'

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'And how long have you been carrying a torch for this paragon?'

'What? Oh, dunno. Only met him last month, didn't I?'

Her voice had dropped to a whisper, and her whole demeanor told of the torture of unrequited love. She was pretty enough but clearly lacked confidence. And something else. There was an absence of worldliness about her, despite her sham bravado, which, while strangely appealing to an adult, must have been a handicap for her among her peers. I saw now how solitary the girl must be. She did not fit in. She was an outsider. At that moment, with her guard down, loneliness emanated from her in painful ripples. The sound of the shop doorbell saved me from having to advise her further.

'Morning, Mrs Price. Tegan, how are you, my dear? How is your mother? Ah, our newest new neighbor, forgive me for not having called in to welcome you to Matravers before now.'

I looked round to see a stout, bearded man offering me his hand. His eyes shone with the love of life, and his smile was broad and sincere, but the very sight of him made my temples pound. It was not his fault. How could he know how the presence of a priest would affect me? How could he ever imagine the fury that his Church ignited within me? The same Church that had condemned my mother and taken her from me. I took a breath to steady myself, but the smell of communion wine lingered on his vestments. Still his hand remained extended toward me. He waited. The girl waited. Mrs Price behind the counter waited. Such a small moment, and yet it would define my position in the village for as long as I live here. I straightened my shoulders and mustered a smile, clutching my purchases to me.

'Sorry,' I said, indicating my packages.

'Oh, not to worry.' He smiled on and dropped his hand, 'I'm Donald Williamson. You'll find me at the vicarage most evenings. Feel free to drop in; Mary would love to meet you.'

'Thank you. I'm busy unpacking at the moment, but I'll keep it in mind.' I began to edge past him, struggling with the revulsion such proximity to one of his kind inspired in me.

'Any time,' he called after me as I reached the door, 'and hope to see you on Sunday. Ten o'clock. All are welcome.'

I shut the door on his further entreaties and strode for home. Even after all this time I found it near impossible to conceal my feelings for an official of the Church. I had good reason to feel the way I did, but even so

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I was angry with myself. It was foolish not to be more in control and ridiculous to experience such fierce emotions toward every harmless reverend who crossed my path. Before I had reached the other side of the village green, I was assailed by a strong sense of foreboding. Unsettled as I was by the meeting with the priest, I recognized this to be a separate threat. I stopped. I lifted my chin and slowly looked about me. There was nothing to be seen. Not a movement. Not a shadowy figure. Nothing out of the ordinary. Silent thatched cottages. A quiet terrace. An empty bus stop. Ducks quacking with reassuring vulgarity on the pond. Nothing to be frightened of. Nevertheless, it was with no small amount of relief that I reached the sanctuary of Willow Cottage and closed the door swiftly behind me.

FEBRUARY 17, 2007—NEW MOON

Clear skies for my first day of trading at Pasbury market. I was up before dawn to load the car with my produce. The vehicle is, by any standard one cares to judge, a mixed blessing. It is an elderly Morris Traveller—small and cheap to run but with a roomy boot and helpful rear doors to allow me to transport my herb teas, oils, lotions, soaps, preserves, and wine hither and thither. It necessitates, however, the most tiresome paperwork. It is impossible to own a car and guard one's identity at the same time. Every few dozen years I am compelled to reinvent myself, largely to be able to comply with the requirements of traffic laws. Nevertheless, I admit to a certain fondness for the vehicle itself. I rarely travel far, but without the car my market trading would be difficult, and the stall is an essential way of generating income. And of allowing those who need me to find me, of course. Even in this supposedly enlightened Age of Aquarius, I am unable to put a sign on the door saying WITCH—SPELLS AND POTIONS FOR EVERY OCCASION. No. I must adjust and adapt and present myself with a more . . . acceptable face to the outside world. The car was reluctant to start but responded to a spell. I left the engine running while I finished loading and secured the doors with string. I was locking up the house when I heard the motor stall. Without thinking, I focused, made myself still, and repeated my spell. There was a moment's hesitation, and then the engine sprang into life once more and chugged on happily. It was

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only when I returned to the vehicle that I noticed Tegan standing at my gate, her expression all too clearly revealing that she had witnessed my remote motor mechanics. She grinned, her eyes bright. I pushed past her and secured the gate.

'If you'll excuse me, I'm in rather a hurry,' I told her.

'Where are you going?'

'Pasbury, and if I dally, I shall be late setting up my stall.'

'In the market? Cool. Can I come?'

'What?'

'To Pasbury. With you. I could help.'

'I manage perfectly well on my own, thank you.'

'Go on. You don't have to pay me. Just give me a lift and I'll help you unload this lot.' She nodded at the boot of the car before stooping to peer through the rear window. 'What's in there, anyway?'

I looked at the girl. As always, she was wearing too few clothes for the chill weather and had about her a lostness that I could not ignore.

'What are you doing up at this hour?' I asked.

She shrugged, 'Mum woke me up coming in off her night shift. Couldn't get back to sleep. Mum was out like a light.' She kicked at a small stone. 'I didn't feel like staying cooped up in there with no one to talk to.'

'Won't your mother wonder where you are?'

'No.'

I sighed. I would really rather not have had the company of a garrulous adolescent, but she was hard to refuse. 'Get in. And don't fiddle with anything, especially the door handle. It keeps coming . . . there! What did I say?'

'Sorry.'

'And put your seat belt on. The last thing I need is the attention of some nosey policeman.'

The town of Pasbury is unremarkable but adequately supplied with shops and services. The market itself is, in truth, a lackluster affair. A mixture of worthy food, antiques of dubious provenance, pet supplies, heavily glazed china, and clothes that have had their labels excised. I had secured for myself a modest pitch, but in a good position at the bottom of the high street, where most shoppers would pass on their way to and from the car park and bus stop. Tegan put herself to good use helping me set up, apparently in no hurry to leave me. She showed an interest in my

stock. So much so that I was quickly weary from explaining things to her. I gave her a handful of coins.

‘Go and buy us hot drinks,’ I told her. No sooner had she gone than a young woman parked her stroller at the stall and leaned over to scowl at the oils. There emanated from her such agitation, such anger, that I took a step backward. I noticed purple discoloration where her cheekbone met her hairline. She saw the direction of my gaze and turned to let her hair swing forward, but she knew that I had seen the bruise. Her babe was red-eyed but slept on in his stroller.

‘What’s that for, then?’ the girl demanded, prodding at bags of rosemary leaf.

‘It is helpful for rheumatism. And to ease period pains. The leaves make a tea.’

‘Tea? It smells disgusting. How do you use this?’

‘That is an aloe vera unction. A balm for burns, stings, that sort of thing.’

She dropped the pot back on the table. I pitied the poor creature, so young yet clearly so unhappy. I pointed to a bottle of bergamot oil.

‘This is very good for lifting the spirits.’

‘Huh! Give me a rum and Coke any day.’

‘And this gets rid of negative energy.’

‘Have you got one for getting rid of cheating bastard husbands?’

Now I understood. I fetched a small blue glass bottle from the box I kept on my side of the table. The label bore only the picture of a half moon.

‘You might like to try a few drops of this.’ I handed it to her, and she peered at it suspiciously. ‘It makes a person more . . . *considerate*,’ I explained.

She laughed, then caught my eye.

‘How much?’

‘See if it works first. You can pay for the next one if you’re happy with the results.’

My first day of trading in Pasbury went slowly, but I detected a certain interest. I have found it often takes time for people new to my wares to pluck up the courage to buy them. No matter. Time is something I have in abundance. Tegan stayed with me the whole morning, only reluctantly agreeing to catch the bus home after I insisted she do so. I do not want to attract her mother’s disapproval, and I was aware the girl had not asked permission to leave the village. I paid for a pie for her lunch and gave her

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the busfare back to Matravers. She claims to be keen to accompany me every Saturday. We shall see.

FEBRUARY 24, 2007—FIRST QUARTER

The holly saplings I ordered were delivered this morning, and the ground is at last soft enough to work on. I spent a productive hour planting in the gaps I had cleared and am pleased with the results. I have long reconciled myself to being able only to garden in the short and mid term, as I know I will not be able to stay anywhere long enough for more than this. Still, slow growing as they are, the feisty holly bushes will knit well with the rest of the hedge in a few months. And I have the satisfaction of knowing they will survive long after I have moved on. Holly is one of the most protective plants to set about a garden, and I would not be without it. Whilst not sufficient on its own to guarantee safety, it forms a powerful part of my Wicca arsenal. Later, I unpacked my supply of herbal sachets and hung sweet herbs inside the doors and windows of the cottage.

FEBRUARY 26, 2007—FIRST QUARTER

The weather has turned unseasonably mild, sending bulbs into frantic activity, which they may regret when the frost returns. I have seized the moment and dug over the kitchen garden. The steady toil required to turn such a large area of patchy lawn into beds lifted my spirits. Impossibly ancient I may be, yet I am sufficiently blessed to retain youthful health and vigor. After a morning's effort, I had stripped to my shirtsleeves, and my skirt was hemmed with mud. The soil here is good—loamy and free draining but not so much so as to have difficulty retaining water. I must resist the temptation to plant too early. This is but a false spring. It is curious how my long march through the years on this planet has done nothing to teach me patience. My mother used to chide me for my lack of it, and I still fret and fidget when compelled to wait longer than seems reasonable.

It was while I was leaning on my fork that Tegan arrived at my side. I was startled by her sudden appearance but far more disconcerted that I

had not heard her approach. I saw she had abandoned her silly boots and was wearing trainers instead.

She noticed me jump.

‘Sorry. I rang the doorbell; then I heard you digging. Wow, have you done all this yourself? You must be exhausted.’

Despite myself, she made me smile.

‘I enjoy a little hard work now and again,’ I said. ‘Do you like gardening?’

She shrugged, ‘Never done any, really. Unless you count growing cress on the kitchen windowsill.’

‘It’s a start, I suppose.’

Again, the girl seemed to be waiting for something. She certainly must be a friendless soul to come looking for the company of a stranger on a mild afternoon, when other teenagers would no doubt be in a gaggle somewhere. I held out my fork.

‘Here, you try.’

She grinned, then took it from me. She stabbed ineffectually at the earth, her face registering surprise at how little impact she made. She tried again.

‘Lean your weight onto the fork. Look, like this,’ I leaned over and repositioned her hands, showing her how to use her body to drive the tines into the ground. She giggled, that indomitably cheerful sound again, and did as I instructed. It was clear she was a quick learner, and soon she had picked up a rhythm and was making slow but steady progress through the sward.

‘Keep it up,’ I told her and went into the house. From the window I watched her work. She tired quickly but did not give up. I filled two glasses with hot fruit tea and then went to stand at the door.

‘Would you like to come in for a warm drink?’

She did not need to be asked a second time. She followed me back into the kitchen and took the tea from me, sniffing the steam warily.

‘What is it?’

‘Fruit tea. Rosehip and orange. Drink it while it’s hot.’

She sipped, then smiled, then sipped some more.

‘Hey, this is great. I’ll tell Mum to get some.’

‘I’ll show you how to make it one day,’ I said, surprising myself at the rashness of such a promise.

The Witch's Daughter

'You made it? Wow, cool.'

The girl began roving the room, studying my store of bottles and jars. 'This is the stuff you were selling on your stall. I never thought you actually made everything. Did you do all this?'

And so we fell to discussing the oils and incense and herb pillows and sachets that I produce. I explained how I sell them at markets or sometimes to shops. She appeared fascinated, running her fingers along a row of blue glass phials, pausing to sniff a basket of drying lavender.

'These are cool,' she said. 'Is that what you're going to grow out there?'
'Some herbs, yes, and flowers for the oils, and vegetables, of course.'

A thought occurred to her.

'I don't know what to call you. You still haven't told me your name.'

'Elizabeth. You can call me Elizabeth.' I took a sip of my own tea, then asked, 'Tegan is unusual—is it Cornish, perhaps?'

'Welsh. My mum used to go there for holidays as a child, that's all. Another of her whims. To be honest, I think it's the only thing she really likes about me.'

She held my gaze, and the small silence was full of longing and hurt, so much so that I wanted to take her in my arms as my mother would have done me. Instead, I turned to rinse my glass at the sink.

Tegan noticed my journal on the kitchen table.

'Oh, is this for your . . . recipes, and stuff?' She moved to pick it up.

'Put that down,' I said, more sharply than I had intended. The wounded look on her face troubled me, so that I found myself suddenly wishing her gone. I was unused to having anyone inside my home. 'If you've finished your tea, you should run along home. Just because you have no demands on your time, do not assume that is the case for everyone,' I told her, turning to stoke the stove to avoid her crestfallen expression. After she had left, I felt an irritating regret. Even now, I am not sure whether it was because I let her into the house or because I sent her away.

This evening I spent some hours preparing a new batch of oils. I made a dozen or so bottles of lavender and the same of peppermint. It is light and pleasant work and ordinarily holds my attention, preventing my mind from dwelling on things about which I can do nothing. On this occasion, however, I found my thoughts wandering. I was thinking of Tegan. And of Margaret. I cannot think of one without bringing the other to mind. And try as I might to linger only on happy images of my dear sister,

Paula Brackston

I cannot keep the deathly pallor from her skin when I picture her with my mind's eye.

FEBRUARY 28, 2007—SECOND QUARTER

The mild spell continues, shedding light rain but nothing else. Tegan has proved herself more resilient than I had bargained for and reappeared the next day as if I had never uttered harsh words. Indeed, she has become a frequent visitor. I cannot pretend I have tried to discourage her. I admit I find her freshness and enthusiasm endearing. She soaks up knowledge like bread dipped in broth. She is possessed of such a keenness to learn and has assisted me in clearing the mess of brambles in the far corner of the garden. I have given her an old pair of boots and equipped her with heavy gloves. The poor child had nothing suitable of her own. I asked her why she did not spend time with her new school friends, and she explained none of them lived in the village and that the bus service is irregular and expensive. I ventured to ask if her mother might object to her being out of the house so much—surely there was homework to be done? It seems her mother is a care worker at a home in Pasbury. She works long hours and varied shifts. She is happy that the girl is occupied. There is no mention of a father or of any siblings.

I confess I am allowing myself to feel at ease here at Willow Cottage. Since that sense of threat the day I encountered Reverend Williamson, I have not had any negative sensations or moments of alarm. Could it be that I have at last found a safe haven? Can I have finally stepped beyond the reach of those ever-outstretched claws? The notion is seductive, and I am loath to taint it with caution and care. When we had finished our work, I had Tegan join me in placing a candle and a small circle of pebbles in the newly cleared area. I explained to her that I believe it will make an excellent sacred space. The heavens alone know what the child made of such a statement, but she happily went along with positioning the stones and helping me choose a candle. I will burn sage oil come the full moon and ask for continued protection.