



PAUL M CLARK

THE
WITCHFINDER'S
MARK

A SAMUEL HAWKE STORY

"... a terrifying new chapter in folk horror." —D.B. Weiss
(co-creator of *Game of Thrones*)

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'The fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaves of the Devill, the Witches . . . hath moved me (beloved reader) to dispatch in post, this following treatise of mine . . . to resolve the doubting harts of many; both that such assaultes of Sathan are most certainly practized, & that the instrumentes thereof, merits most severly to be punished.'

Daemonologie, King James I (1597)

Chapter 1

20 February 1644

An eccentric old woman, snarling, creaky and bent. Annie Parsons hunched in her chair, dribbling and murmuring. Strings of lank, grey hair hung about her face like an abandoned spider's web. Grime made the whiteness of her shift barely visible. It clung to her body like a loose skin about to be shed. Her bony wrists and ankles red and black with the sores of a long spell in irons.

Samuel Hawke stood over her, rigid, arms folded, about to perform his service for the town and the county of Hampshire and, more importantly, for God. 'How many have you cursed, Mrs Parsons?' his voice boomed.

Annie Parsons mumbled in a gravelly tone, 'I have cursed the Robertsons and the Pyes and the Shepards and the Knoxes.' Her eyes rolled around, unable to focus.

A wave of gasps filled the cramped room. A constable sat behind a small table, scribbling notes with a quill, a small candle providing the light he needed. Evidence for the court. Four others in the room sat in each corner, watching Annie Parsons as they had done for three days and two nights.

Samuel turned to the constable. 'Has the woman been visited?'

'He appeared on the second night,' said the constable. The watchers nodded in agreement. 'In the form of a black rat. We remained still. He tried to communicate with her. As soon as she spoke in a tongue we could not understand, he left. From then, the widow Parsons was silent.'

Samuel stared deeply into the old woman's eyes, then shook his head slowly. 'There we have it,' he declared. 'She is in league with the Devil. She communicates with his forms. And behold, he leaves his mark on her.' Samuel drew back her loose sleeves. The dark patches on her hands and arms provided further evidence of her guilt. Again, gasps swept through the room.

Her head rolling from side to side, Annie Parsons continued to mumble incoherently, like a small child trying to learn how to count under its breath.

Samuel took a sheet of paper from the constable and read the indictment. 'Annie Parsons, you are accused under the *Witchcraft Act* of 1604. You cursed John Reece, a cooper, and his good wife, and murdered her unborn child with your words. When did you make this covenant with Satan?'

'I have never met him,' she sobbed, 'animals only. Cats. I have lots of cats. Sometimes a big hairy thing with ears . . . what do you call it?'

'In the last year, how many times have you attended Mr Shelley's church?' he boomed, gesturing to the constable to keep up with his quill.

'Mr Shelley . . . Such a nice . . . nice church. Stone. White walls. Nice looking . . .'

'The Lord's Prayer . . .' Samuel cleared his throat. He was near. 'Recite it for me.'

'Is our Father in heaven? Really in heaven? Or is he . . .?'

‘Enough!’ Samuel’s father had warned him of people who turned away from God. Satan extended his fingers everywhere. He stepped backwards and held out his arms as though presenting a work of art he’d just created. ‘The evidence is plain to see. She bears the Devil’s mark on her arms where Satan’s familiars suckle on her blood. She communicates with him through his creatures. And I have sworn witness testaments that she has cursed livestock, made sick of children and in the case of Goody Reece, murdered her unborn child with her words.’

He looked at the constable and the watchers. Their eyes fixed on him. Their faces frozen and white. Samuel was near. Just the confession. During his apprenticeship with the Reverend James Wilmot, it was easy to secure convictions. Wilmot was a master at eliciting the confession, playing off people’s superstitions, especially in smaller Puritan villages where everything was the Devil’s work. Even Catholics were accused. But Samuel’s intellect had always transcended superstition, unlike his father’s. He was a better man, refusing to succumb to the ‘fire and brimstone’ doctrines of the Old Testament. But using those words proved powerful. Wilmot had taught him how to produce the evidence required to rid the world of the unwanted. Witches? These people were merely outcasts. But fear was real. Fear would compel people to say things. Even see things. And evidence of the Devil was all around, seeping through the terror in the world like ink blots creeping through water. It simply needed drawing to the surface.

Samuel leaned towards the old woman and spoke with a soft voice. ‘According to folk, you were a beautiful woman, Mrs Parsons. Is that true?’

Annie Parsons smiled and blushed, and bowed her head. ‘Yes,’ she giggled.

‘And this declined after your husband disappeared? Is that when you signed your pact with the Devil?’

Tears welled in her eyes. ‘Seth?’ She flicked her head around as if following someone in the room. ‘Seth? Is that you? Are you there?’

Samuel paced. ‘Where is Seth Parsons? Do you see him?’

Annie Parsons pointed at nothing. More gasps rushed through the room like wind through trees.

Samuel leaned towards her again. ‘I can be your saviour,’ he whispered, ‘I can help you gain redemption for you *and* your husband.’

She lifted her gaze, eyes glistening and wanting. ‘Seth is here. Seth can hear me, you know. He talks to me.’

‘I know he speaks to you,’ whispered Samuel, ‘Satan speaks through him, does he not? Tell me, woman.’

She offered a crooked smile. Tears followed the crevices in her cheeks. She lowered her head and wept quietly. ‘Let me sleep.’

‘And who else?’ Samuel leaned in even closer. ‘Tell me and you can sleep. Who else?’

Her head rolled backwards. ‘I think Seth is dead,’ she whispered, ‘so who is *he*?’ She pointed again. More gasps from the watchers. The constable’s hand shook as he scribbled his notes.

‘Do you think he is Satan in disguise?’ asked Samuel.

‘Yes.’ Annie Parsons bowed her head. ‘He must be. Seth is dead.’ Her shoulders jolted with every sobbing breath.

Samuel ignored her crying and placed his hand on her shoulder. ‘May God find it in his heart to show you mercy.’ He turned to the constable. ‘You have everything you need. Inform the magistrate.’

Samuel preferred it this way. Some witchfinders were less concerned about questioning, resorting instead to torture. Some even persisted with swimming – an archaic technique best left in the past, even though many still believed in it.

But some people were beyond saving.

The next day, as a representative of the law, the constable presented the evidence to the judges. The Devil's marks. Communicating with the dead. Reactions to the Lord's Prayer. Her trance-like state. And the cats. Always houses full of cats. And, of course, the final confession sealed the verdict. Guilty of murder by witchcraft. Samuel received a pleasing fee.

That night, at the local inn, members of the Anglican congregation bought drinks to reward him for his work in removing such evil from their community. The acclamation was always intoxicating. He imbibed the comments about how God had blessed him. Better still was the awe of the risks he took in his job. He soaked up the joy with a false smile knowing that if his father knew the truth of his work, he would condemn his own son to hell. The wine helped push this thought away as well as the haunting faces of the dead who would visit Samuel in his sleep more frequently than ever nowadays.

'How do you ward off the curses, sir?' shouted one of several red-faced sycophants huddled around him.

'Years of training,' replied Samuel, gesturing for more wine, 'and a strong will. And of course, faith in the good Lord and His protection.'

'Are you ordained, sir?' a soft voice came from the small crowd.

Samuel looked through the men to see a young woman, glowing in veneration, pretty in her grey calico dress and white coif that covered her hair, tied back in a neat bun.

'No,' he replied, 'I am not ordained as such, but I spent many years mastering my craft under Minister James Wilmot. A strong Puritan man from London. He taught me to harness the power of God, which is why I am able to reveal Satan's work.'

'Then we have James Wilmot to thank,' declared another, holding a pewter mug aloft.

‘No, sir,’ called Samuel above the cheers. ‘You have Samuel Hawke to thank tonight!’

The room erupted. Shouts of ‘Hurrah, Samuel Hawke’ echoed through the inn. Amid the bonhomie, Samuel put down his goblet of wine, flicked a gaze towards the young woman, and retired to his room, knowing it would not be long before a knock on his door would signal the company of someone who yearned to feel closer to God for a single night. It also meant he could forego sleep, if only for a couple of hours, because sleep had become a bitter enemy for too long.

*

The next morning came too soon, as it always did. Dry mouth and sore head, Samuel left the milky warm body in his bed to dress and prepare for his chosen ordeal. First, he packed his belongings. This was his ritual, allowing him leave immediately, once he’d completed this final, dreaded act.

He attended a small gathering of witnesses at the Market Cross. His father would be proud of him. Another witch condemned. Proof of God’s victory over Satan. And his only son, Samuel, the one he’d sent to Wilmot for a better life than that of a carpenter, was doing God’s service. This *was* God’s service. Or God’s burden because Samuel felt only nausea in this moment.

The sheriff and the constable led Annie Parsons up the steps to the gallows. Samuel’s mentor had always refused to attend these events. Too gruesome. But this was Samuel’s way. He needed to see this. This was his self-imposed price for ‘God’s service’. An investment in shame. As usual, he focused on the benefits of this life. He watched, distracting his mind. *This money will pay for a fine room in London.*

The sheriff fitted the rope around the old woman's neck. *New clothes with brass buckles and polished shoes. This woman has been an affront to this town.*

The sheriff checked the knot on the rope. *Imported French beef in red wine sauce.*

Annie Parsons requested no minister. She wanted no hood so she could see the sun for the last time. She looked over at Samuel, blank-faced. Samuel's body chilled. He stopped thinking about the hotel room in London, and the wine, and the new clothes. Even the joyful accolades from the townsfolk became empty. The old woman's face drew him in; he was unable to look away. He imagined her husband working on a lathe. She had raised two children – both had died young from the pox.

The sheriff kicked away the stool and a loud crack interrupted Samuel's thoughts. Annie Parsons' body dropped. Her head jolted to the side. Her mouth snapped open with a rapid, deafening yelp. The look of shock carved into her face. Mouth open, tongue bulging, eyes like baubles. Her body tensed and convulsed. Arms stiffened down to her fingers which seemed to claw at something that wasn't there. The last minute of her life drained away. Her legs kicked then twitched and trembled. Finally she became limp.

A plain wooden box stood against the gallows beckoning her old, withered frame inside, where she could be slowly eaten by the earth, month by month, year by year, until her physical existence was as dissolved as any memory of her life. But for Samuel Hawke, her face would remain visible to haunt his nights, like those before her. It was time to leave.

A return to London proved tempting. The wine and the warm beds could dull the faces of the dead for a time. But the letter Samuel had received that very morning preyed on his mind. He took it from his pocket. Signed by a Magistrate Williams from Lancashire.

. . . request your presence in the examination of two sisters, Mary and Elizabeth Chancel, beying twins at the age of 15 yrs. There have been divers reports of their villanie and several divers incidents have occurred in our village since the death of Sarah Chancel, mother. Jacob Chancel, father, had vanished at the same time of finding Sarah's deceased remayens. The Devill is abound in Lancashire . . .

So the Devil is in Lancashire. A place of great superstition. A case like this could bear the fruit of numerous convictions if people's tongues were loose enough. Samuel's fee would be substantial. Enough to live out his days upon.

*'The fables of witchcraft have taken so fast hold and deepe root
in the heart
of man, that fewe or none (nowadaies) with patience indure
the hand
and correction of God. For if any adversitie, greefe, sicknesse,
losse of children, corne, cattell, or libertie happen unto them;
by & by they exclaime uppon witches . . .
But whatsoever is reported or conceived of such maner of witch-
crafts, I dare avow
to be false and fabulous . . .'*

The Discoverie of Witchcraft, Reginald Scott (1584)

Chapter 2

6 March 1644

Trudging through the dew-speckled grass of late winter, Samuel approached Beckborn's small Anglican chapel with the village constable scurrying behind him like a rowing boat in the wake of a trade ship. The only representative of the law in the village, he looked like most of the others – grey, thin and lifeless – in his ill-fitting brown woollen tunic and cloth cap. The two men could not appear more different. While the constable walked with a shallow hunch as though his shoulders could barely hold his frame, Samuel strutted stiffly, his riding boots crunching through the grass. His broad-brimmed hat kept the drizzle from his face as the small beads of rain clung to the blackness of his cloak and overcoat. Samuel always made the point of parading his black attire as everyday wear, a sign of his wealth and success as a witchfinder, due to the expense of black dye. His groomed Van Dyke beard attracted looks from some of the villagers. He enjoyed the pomp.

Bearing the hallmarks of a standard witchcraft accusation, two girls, Mary and Elizabeth Chancel, were seemingly at the centre of the disappearance of their father and the death of their mother. So

far, his investigations had yielded little. Once the novelty of his attire had worn off, the people of Beckborn proved less than accommodating. Some crossed the road to avoid him altogether. Doors closed and shutters slammed as they spotted him around the village. His warrant from the sheriff of Lancaster meant nothing to these people.

The few folk who did not leave the inn upon Samuel's arrival claimed to know little about the Chancels. 'Jacob kept himself to himself' and 'the twins were typical girls, really' and 'I didn't know Mrs Chancel' were the standard replies, all accompanied by fleeting over-the-shoulder looks, as though no one wanted to be seen or heard discussing the subject. Certainly, they were peddling half-truths, or outright lies. By midday, Samuel had grown tired of this and decided to act.

The church warden, another man who looked like he was about to die of rot, had arranged for the body of the girls' mother, Sarah Chancel, to be exhumed.

The door of the main church building was already open and the warden gestured Samuel and the constable inside, head bowed and cap in hand, as if inviting dignitaries into his home. 'Will there be anything else, sir?' He eyed Samuel like an object of curiosity, head tilted sideways.

Samuel ignored the old man and entered.

The chapel was typical of most Anglican village churches. Plain-looking. White walls. Wooden pews. A small altar and a wooden pulpit at the front. No decorum whatsoever. Samuel always had a revulsion to this dullness. Artistry was lost on Puritan ministers. Tiny windows, allowing only a fraction of daylight to enter. It took time for Samuel's eyes to adjust. But his eyes were not yet needed as the putrid smell assailed his nostrils with every step. Heavy on his chest and inviting the taste of rotting flesh in his throat. He pulled out a handkerchief and put it to his nose and mouth to replace the

foul stench with the fragrance of lavender. It didn't really help.

'Oh, God's feet,' the constable gagged.

Samuel turned to see the man retching and heaving until he ejected his modest lunch onto the stone floor.

Samuel pulled out a second handkerchief. 'Put this to your mouth,' he sighed. 'It may help a little.'

The coffin stood at the front of the church. The stench grew stronger as they approached. The church warden had found the courtesy to prise open the coffin lid so Samuel could simply lift it. The coffin was smeared with mud – it had been in the ground for almost a week. Samuel could make out darker patches through the underside which looked like the wood had absorbed large quantities of liquid.

He bore a dark expression. 'Have you ever seen a dead body before, Constable?'

'Not this old.'

'Then prepare yourself. It will not be a sight to be relished.'

He lifted the lid quickly and pushed it to the floor. The sickly odour of rotting flesh swelled from within the coffin and engulfed the men like a noxious cloud. Samuel turned his head away for a second. Again, the constable retched and stepped backwards, trying to escape the worst of it. Samuel peered inside. The body of Sarah Chancel was beginning to bloat. The skin was a multitude of yellows, purples and reds. Several large green patches added to the myriad of nauseating colours. He expected this. A dark, foul-smelling liquid saturated her gown and pooled beneath her body, soaking into the wood itself. Thankfully, a veil covered her head and sunken face.

'The body is starting to turn,' Samuel said through his handkerchief.

The constable struggled to speak. 'Have you not seen enough? What purpose does this ungodly act serve?'

'Hold your tongue and allow me to act!'

He observed the corpse for a moment. Summoning the courage to remove his handkerchief, he placed both hands on the torso. Through the thin, damp dress, the spongy skin was like rotten fruit just before it was about to liquefy. There was a subtle movement under his palms as maggots crawled over the disturbed flesh. He took a breath and gathered himself. He needed his evidence. *No sign of any major wounds. No knives. No deep cuts. The colour suggests that Sarah Chancel did not bleed to death. Difficult to determine bruising which would indicate a struggle. The skin is too discoloured. But wait. The neck. Something feels wrong.*

Samuel placed his hands on Sarah Chancel's neck. He examined the bones within the stem. The neck was misshapen. The skin was twisted like a corkscrew as though her head had been turned almost a full circle. Samuel removed his hands, clasping them together to disguise their trembling. Only someone intent on murder would do such a thing – and only someone in possession of great strength. A man, clearly. Samuel paused for a moment. Sarah's husband Jacob had vanished. So why were the two girls accused?

'Constable.' Samuel turned to see the constable, ashen, eyes watering, fragrant cloth over his nose and mouth. 'Sarah Chancel's neck has been broken. Quite severely.'

'Then it *was* murder,' heaved the constable.

'I have no doubt. Tell me, was Jacob Chancel a large man?'

'Not particularly.'

Samuel nodded slowly.

'Do you think Jacob Chancel murdered his wife?' asked the constable, slowly backing away.

Samuel lifted the veil to reveal the corpse's face – stretched, yellowed skin, almost leathery in texture. There was a clear scar on her right cheek, just below the eye. About the size of a thumbnail, but distinctly raised like a burn. The shape of a five-pointed star. Samuel

felt a cold shiver. A curious thing. Too small for a branding iron and clearly not the cause of her death. And unlikely the work of fifteen-year-old twin girls. But he had not come to Beckborn to find innocence. He needed to be paid.

Chapter 3

The two men drew deep gulps of air on the short walk back to the Moorland Inn. Neither could speak. Fresh country air had adopted a new meaning for Samuel. He would be more hesitant to judge the earthy smell of a Lancashire village next time. The odour of death clung to their clothes and their skin and their hair. The constable held onto his handkerchief and Samuel did not have it in him to ask for it back.

Samuel looked around the scattering of grey stone houses in the village of Beckborn, bemused at how people lived like this, their morose sadness a reflection of life in these parts. Plumes of smoke rose from several dwellings, the largest being the inn. It stood aside the one main road, which was more of a wide dirt track. It gave the appearance that the whole village was built around the inn. A few small lanes crawled off in directions that presumably led to some of the farms on the outskirts. From there, the nothingness of a bleak Lancashire countryside rolled on for miles, hours from any other life. To describe Beckborn as desolate seemed complimentary.

The noise of the drizzle and the men's footsteps trudging across the unkempt road punctuated the silence.

Finally, the constable heaved out a sentence. 'What are your intentions now, Mr Hawke?'

Samuel observed the constable's sickly face. 'I need to remove

this stench and I suggest you do the same.’

‘I will go to the beck and wash there, sir.’

‘Very well,’ Samuel replied, fleshy aromas still invading his nostrils. *The last thing I need is that smell following me around for the remains of the day.*

Watching the constable wander off to wash and change, Samuel recalled the look about him when he arrived. He’d seen it many times before. It was both a blessing and a curse dealing with village constables, often appointed because they were the only barely literate men in the village. Once the issue of witchcraft was raised, the constable bore such a look of discomfort, as though he wished to hide in his cottage until Samuel’s departure. But he had remained present during the visit to Sarah Chancel’s body – when most men would have excused themselves.

The Moorland Inn offered meagre lodgings, but he intended only a short stay. No one had spoken to him except the constable. Even the innkeeper, an ageing man who looked like he enjoyed his wife’s cooking far more than the patrons, had remained mute about the Chancel farm. Samuel ordered the innkeeper’s wife to heat up some water and bring some linen cloths. Muttering under her breath, she led him through the kitchen and into a small room. The steaming jugs of water soon arrived, and Samuel squeezed a cloth against the back of his neck. The warm trickle down his spine soothed him. He noticed the innkeeper’s wife standing in the door, staring like he was a source of entertainment.

‘Will there be anything else, Mr Hawke?’ she asked, her round shape filling the door frame.

Samuel waved her away.

He dressed in a fresh white shirt, black woollen tunic and breeches. Wilmot had always encouraged him to carry a spare set of clothing. ‘Examinations can get messy,’ he would say. Samuel recalled a number

of confessions where the accused had vomited across the room, often catching his boots or part of his breeches. Sometimes it was caused by the realisation of what they were confessing to. The looks on their faces as they uttered words that could never be unsaid. The creeping inclination of their fate. Some would grow calm with resignation of their own demise at the gallows. Others panicked at the prospect and reacted in the most troublesome ways. And some hoped that their judge would show mercy on their wicked souls because they'd denounced the Devil a thousand times. But sometimes, with the more steadfast, Samuel improved his chances of a favourable outcome by mixing some panther cap mushrooms with water. Once ingested, they would speak with a loose tongue, often in mindless ways. But the mushrooms caused incessant vomiting, adding to the legitimacy of the confession, but soiling the clothes of the unwary.

Taking his hat and cloak against the constant drizzle of Lancashire's skies, he headed out to meet with the constable once more. As imbecilic as this lawman was, he was critical for this investigation.

The constable's cottage stood at the end of the village lane. Next to it, two horses huddled together in a paddock as the drizzle smothered them in a thin blanket. He knocked with authority, paused for a couple of seconds, then knocked again. Drawn and tired-looking, and dressed only in his undershirt and breeches, the constable opened the door. Apologising for his attire, he beckoned Samuel inside.

Daylight barely lit the room. A shadow rose up the stone walls and it smelled damp as though the house itself had soaked up the river. Samuel placed his hat and coat on the back of an old wooden chair. Two more chairs stood by an ash-ridden fireplace and a cooking pot sat on the floor. The only things that stopped the room from feeling more like a dungeon cell were the few household sundries dotted about.

'I'd like to know more about the Chancel twins.' Samuel got straight to the point.

The colour drained from the constable's face. He sat opposite Samuel and began chewing the skin around his thumbnail. 'Of course. The Chancel girls.' He sighed. Then gazed at the unlit fireplace, nodding slowly.

Samuel watched. The pause grew unnatural. 'Please,' he broke the silence, 'take your time.'

The constable looked at Samuel and quickened his nodding. Sarcasm was clearly wasted on the people of Beckborn. 'Such a tragic business,' he said. 'I presume you have spoken to Magistrate Williams?'

'Unfortunately not. He was indisposed in Bolton and could not meet with me.'

'Of course.' The constable's face flickered. 'Parliament holds Bolton, thank our Lord. But Royalist forces are gathering in this county.' He leaned forward and spoke in a hushed voice as though the very walls were eavesdropping. 'I think they mean to take the town, but that is not all I fear.'

Samuel too leaned forward. 'Tell me. What is it you fear?'

'The Chancel farm . . .'

Samuel's voice cut through the quiet. 'Of course you do, sir. If there are witches on the farm, they are certainly to be feared.' He sat back and crossed his arms. Always looking for his moment to strike, suspicious locals were the most effective means of collecting evidence, and the testimony of a lawman would bear much fruit.

The constable looked to the door, as though someone might walk in at any moment. 'Sir, the farm is *cursed*.' A tear welled in his eye and he sat, expressionless and still.

Samuel waited for more.

Nothing.

The constable continued to stare at his fireplace, consumed by his thoughts.

'Constable, I require your testimony. What compels you to say the farm is cursed?'

The man looked up and slowly shook his head. Tears crawled down his thin cheeks as he muttered under his breath, 'I should have listened to Mrs Chancel. I did not believe her and now I have played my part in the Devil's plan.'

Talk of curses and the Devil's plan, along with a body showing signs of murder. This investigation appeared favourable in more ways than Samuel had hoped. Everyone in England had heard of the Pendle trials, a generation ago. Not thirty miles from this small village ten witches were convicted and executed at the hands of Justice Roger Nowell. The only thing Samuel could not understand was why a savvy witchfinder had not offered his services for this lucrative affair. Samuel would not allow such an oversight to be repeated in Beckborn. If the constable continued with this narrative, this could be Pendle on a grander scale. And his fee would be handsome.

'T'was I, Mr Hawke,' the constable continued, 'I sent her back to the farm. I sent her to her death.'

Samuel leaned forward. 'What did you do?'

Chewing the skin on his thumb, eyes flicking around the room, the constable shifted in his seat before speaking. 'Last month, Sarah Chancel approached me with a grave concern. She testified that her daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, were bewitched. I was quite taken by this news. Yes, the Chancels could be difficult people . . . quarrelsome, especially with each other, and they had a few moments of defiance from the girls, especially on God's day before attending the meeting hall . . .'

Samuel lifted his hand. He took a breath. 'The girls were resistant to attending church?'

‘I have witnessed this before in the young and foolish.’

‘But still, Constable.’ *More evidence.* ‘Refusal to enter God’s house is a certain sign. And along with the accusation from Mrs Chancel, you did not think to report it?’

‘Sir, I did not feel safe to talk of such things. It was common knowledge that Jacob Chancel had traded for horses with the local Royalists. For what? Information? The more we hear about Royalist forces moving closer, the more men are dragged from their homes and hanged as spies. I did not wish to become one of those men. So, at the time, I dismissed it. If every constable acted upon every accusation of witchcraft, sir, half of England would be swinging from the gallows.’

‘Indeed,’ replied Samuel, gesturing for the man to continue.

The constable paused, took a breath as though his words required more air. ‘It was the next day Sarah Chancel’s body was discovered in the copse by the farm.’

‘And what of Mr Chancel?’ asked Samuel. ‘When did he abscond?’

‘I do not think he absconded, Mr Hawke. I fear he is also dead, but we are yet to discover his remains.’

Samuel took a breath and looked at the lawman, a figure of resignation slumped in his chair. In the poor man’s mind, he had failed to act. Failed to take Sarah Chancel’s superstitions seriously. It was almost cruel to allow him to believe that her death had anything to do with her accusing her daughters. Mothers did this more times than Samuel could count, thinking it could be a way to encourage more godly behaviour or to dissuade a girl from liaisons with a boy. But this case was obvious. Jacob Chancel had murdered his wife. Why? Samuel was not interested in answering that question. He may have worried that she was about to divulge his dealings with the militia. Or he may have simply had one too many drunken arguments. But as long as the village of Beckborn suspected witchcraft, Samuel’s business was secure.

He encouraged the constable to continue. He told Samuel of the girls' strange demeanour at their mother's funeral. Walking in unison like soldiers practised at marching with their left and right steps. Heads bowed, making no eye contact with any of the elect. They did not sing, nor did they utter words of prayer. They just stood, staring, with a look in their eyes that spoke of a secret they shared but would not tell. It was as though they had signed a covenant. And not a single tear was shed by either. Upon being offered food and rest by the Reverend Bayley, they declined.

The constable's expression darkened. 'And then their words chilled my bones, Mr Hawke.' He paused, not thinking, but reliving the day. 'They spoke together. Exactly together. They said, "We must tend to our farm". Then they smiled and left. Just like that. Do you not think this is odd, sir?'

'This is weak evidence.' Samuel would need more before examining the girls. 'Grief causes all kinds of behaviour.'

The constable bowed his head once more.

'Tell me, why did you not arrest them?'

'I informed Magistrate Williams that I suspected murder by witchcraft. I think he did not believe me, but he agreed to travel up from Bolton to investigate. He advised me not to arrest the girls. I think he had it in his mind that Jacob Chancel was the culprit.'

'Interesting.' Samuel raised his brow. 'The tone of the letter I received from Mr Williams was very explicit. He wanted me to investigate the girls, not look for Jacob Chancel. What do you think changed his mind?'

Once more the constable choked on his words. Visibly trembling in his chair, he wrung his hands together and tapped his feet as though his very body were a source of discomfort. 'It took him some time to arrive, what with the soldiers and the patrols. Dangerous travelling in these parts.' His voice shook again. 'By the time he

arrived, it did not take him long to realise that God had forsaken Beckborn. We are in hell, Mr Hawke.’

Samuel tried to distract the constable. ‘How so?’

The man wiped his eyes and rubbed his face. Gathered himself and spoke calmly, gently, with the demeanour of a person moments before the drop on the gallows. ‘You see, Mr Hawke. God has abandoned Beckborn to the Devil. I knew this when the Reverend Bayley went up to the farm to pray with the girls. He did not return. If we are without our minister, what of our lives in Beckborn? We are no longer protected by God, Mr Hawke. The girls returned to that farm to continue their covenant with Satan. Mr Bayley, a man of the cloth, is likely dead, or worse, signed a covenant himself. When Magistrate Williams arrived, he too set off for the Chancel farm, but turned back with a look on his face and words that only death will make me forget.’

‘What did he say, Constable?’

‘We are all in hell.’

Samuel paused. The letter from the magistrate seemed clearer. The Devil was in Lancashire, so they believed.

For Tracey, Zephan and Asha

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Samuel Hawke is a charlatan. His lucrative career as a witchfinder is built on fabricated evidence and forced confessions. His guilt grows with each innocent person he condemns and his only remaining motive is the financial rewards his profession offers him.

In Beekton, Lancashire, two girls are accused of witchcraft. Samuel travels to the isolated village for an investigation which may pay enough to be his last. He finds a community torn apart by fear and paranoia. His hopes of a simple examination are dashed when the mystery of the two girls unravels in a deadly way.

Rescued by another, actual, witch-finder, Samuel is plunged into a world of the supernatural and the occult. Strange people with immense power lurk on the fringes of society, hiding behind the veil of superstition and belief, causing chaos in war-torn England. Samuel must find the sister witches, before he is hunted down and destroyed, whilst navigating through the violence and suspicion of a country ravaged by war.

**A devilishly dark folk horror novel set
during the English Civil War.**



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