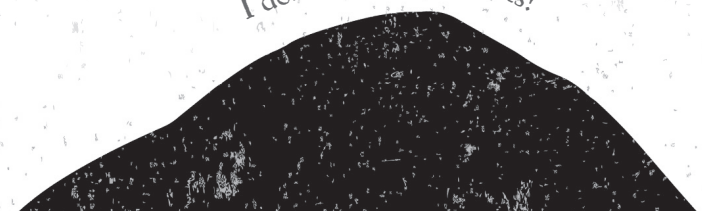
The Witching Stone

I don't believe in witches!
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I don't believe in witches!



DANNY WESTON

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This book is for Meg Shelton –
the moment I saw her grave,
I knew I had to write about her.

Danny Weston



CHAPTER ONE

THE VILLAGE

As days went, Alfie thought, this one wasn't looking promising.

It was a bright sunny afternoon in July, and he was stuck in a little village somewhere north of Preston. After a quick look around the place, the only thing he'd found that might be of any interest was the local graveyard.

Which, when you thought about it, was pretty depressing.

'Look,' Dad had told him, ten minutes earlier, as they stood in front of the offices of the local estate agent, Blackwood and Phibes, 'Here's the plan. I have to go in here for an initial meeting, just to say hello to the staff and so forth, find out what they want from me. I'll be there for maybe forty minutes . . .

an hour, tops. And then, we'll find somewhere to have dinner together.'

'Great,' said Alfie, trying, but failing, to sound enthusiastic.

'I mean, it beats me why we have to be in Woodplumpton in the first place,' Dad continued. 'I told them I could do everything remotely from my desk at home, but they insisted they wanted me here, to project manage the whole thing. And they were happy to pay for accommodation, so . . .'

'I know,' said Alfie. 'You don't have to explain.'

Dad clearly felt that he did. 'See, what I still don't understand, Alfie, is why you didn't just stay at home. You're old enough to look after yourself now. I could have driven back at weekends. You'd have been fine.'

'I just fancied a break,' said Alfie. 'I thought it would be fun.'

Dad threw a disbelieving look around the deserted streets, clearly not convinced. 'You'd have had so much more to *do* in Bristol,' he reasoned. 'And all your mates would have been there.'

Alfie shook his head. 'No, Dad. They're on their summer holidays. They're in Spain or Portugal or Ibiza, or whatever. It would have been dead.'

Dad looked wounded by the remark. 'Look, Alfie, I'm sorry we couldn't afford a holiday abroad this year, but you know that's just the way things are right now. Maybe once I've got the fee for this job tucked safely away in the old bank account, we can have a think about going somewhere a bit more exotic

for Christmas.'

Alfie shrugged. 'Yeah, whatever,' he said. 'This place looks . . . OK. Sort of . . . countrified. What's it called again. Wood . . . ?'

'Woodplumpton.'

'Yeah. And, it's only for a few weeks, right?'

'Sure.' And then Dad had launched into his regular speech about the gig economy and how he was a freelancer and how freelancers always had to go wherever the work was. Which is why the two of them were here in Woodplumpton, so Dad could spend a month redesigning and project managing the new computer network at Blackwood and Phibes. Happy days.

Dad looked thoughtful. 'The reason you came,' he said. 'It's not because of what happened with Sophie, is it?'

Alfie tried not to scowl. He didn't even like hearing her name.

'Course not,' he said.

'Because, you know what people say. Plenty more fish in the sea, right?'

'Yeah, sure. They do say that, don't they. No worries.'

And that was pretty much the end of the conversation. Dad had gone into the estate agents' and Alfie had been left to wander aimlessly around the village looking for something – anything – of interest. Which is why he was wandering aimlessly through the stone gateway of the church, killing time and contemplating the empty vacuum of the summer that lay ahead of him like a great big yawning chasm.

OK, so Sophie was a sensitive subject. It had been three months now, but it still felt raw. She was the first girl he'd ever properly been out with. They'd been an item for a couple of months, and it had begun to feel really serious. And then, completely out of the blue,she'd dumped him and taken up with Brendan, one of his best friends. No big deal. Things like that happened every day, right? But, it still hurt to be reminded.

He trudged dejectedly along the flagged stone path that led to the church, cutting between rows of neatly tended graves, each one with its own bland inscription, most of them obscured by patches of moss and lichen. And he was just thinking about turning around and walking straight back out of there when he came to an oddity – a large round boulder just to the right of the path and beside it, a brass plaque that read *THE WITCHES GRAVE.*

He stopped in his tracks and looked down at it uncertainly, thinking that this was something he'd never seen in a graveyard before. Not that he'd spent much time in them, but still, it was unusual enough to make him pause. He moved a little closer so that he could read the rest of the words etched into the plaque.

BENEATH THIS STONE LIE THE REMAINS OF MEG SHELTON, ALLEGED WITCH OF WOODPLUMPTON, BURIED IN 1705.

'Yeah, right,' he said, scornfully. As he turned away somebody popped up from behind a headstone a short distance to his left,

with a suddenness that almost made him jump out of his skin.

'Sorry,' said the girl. 'Didn't mean to startle you.'

'Oh, you didn't,' he assured her, a little too quickly to be convincing. She was dressed all in black and she had that kind of severe make-up that Goth girls seemed to favour – thick black mascara and crimson lipstick, with straight glossy black hair that hung to her shoulders. She had silver dangly earrings and was holding something in one hand, that looked like a square slab of crayon. Her fingernails were painted midnight blue with tiny white skulls on them. And that was the detail that got him interested in her.

'You said something,' muttered the girl, by way of explanation, I thought you were speaking to me.'

Alfie shook his head and pointed to the boulder. 'Nah, I was just . . .' But the girl had already bobbed down again, out of sight. After staring in her direction for a moment, Alfie felt compelled to walk around the boulder to see what she was up to. He'd imagined she must be putting flowers on the grave of a much-loved grandmother and prepared himself to be polite and sombre about it – but when he came around the far side of the gravestone, he saw that she had taped a large sheet of tracing paper over the front of the stone and was rubbing the brown crayon across it in order to get a copy of the words.

'School project?' he ventured.

She gave him a scornful look. 'Who does those any more?

No, I just thought this would make a cool T-shirt design.' Alfie stepped a little closer so he could read the inscription over her shoulder:

Remember as you walk on by
As you are now so once was I
As I am now so shall you be
Prepare yourself to follow me.

'Who'd wear that on a T-shirt?' he chuckled.

She didn't look up. 'Me, for one,' she said. 'And I reckon there might be a few others out there who'd buy it.'

'Isn't it a bit . . . gloomy?' he asked.

Now she did turn her head to throw Alfie a despairing look. 'Don't you ever watch the news?' she asked. 'There's some very gloomy stuff happening in the world right now. This might come as a shock to you, but art reflects life.'

Alfie watched for a moment as the girl's hand swept expertly across the gravestone, picking up all the little details of the old-fashioned font and the lichen-encrusted surface of the stone. 'So . . . er . . . how do you make that into something you can actually wear?'

'Purple Onion,' she said.

He stared at her, uncomprehending.

'It's a company I use online. I send the design to them and,

if they get any orders for it, they make them and send me a cut.'

'Yeah? And you make money from that, do you?'

'Well, I'm not exactly ready to retire to a private island in the Bahamas,' the girl admitted. 'But it brings in a few quid. And anyway, it's just a sideline. I'm an artist really. Well, I'm trying to be.'

Alfie shrugged. 'Go you,' he said. 'I'm Alfie, by the way.'

She was interested enough to stop working for a moment, then stood and turned to look at him. 'I'm Mia,' she said. She started to reach out a hand, but then realised it was covered in brown crayon and abandoned the idea. She studied him for a moment. 'So, you're not from round here then?'

Alfie frowned. 'Is it that obvious?' he asked her.

'It's a small place. I know most of the faces here. Yours is new.'

'Er . . . yeah, well I live in Bristol most of the time. But my dad has got some work here and it was a bit too far to commute, so we'll be based here for the next month.'

'Couldn't you have stayed with your mum?' she asked him.

He shook his head. 'My parents split up when I was little,' he explained. 'My dad got to keep me. I still see Mum now and then. She's married to somebody else now.' Alfie saw the look of doubt on her face and added, 'Seriously, it's cool.'

'So, where exactly are you staying?'

'Oh, it's just this guest house in the village,' he said.

This seemed to pique her interest. 'A guest house?' she echoed.

'Which one?' But before he had a chance to reply, she added, 'Oh, please tell me you're staying in The Excelsior.'

He grinned. 'We are!' he cried. 'But . . . how did you know?'

Mia laughed. 'I didn't. But there's only a few to choose from and it would be just your luck to end up in that hell hole.' She grinned conspiratorially. 'I take it you've met Selena then?'

'The woman who runs the place?' Alfie frowned. 'I didn't catch her name, but she was there when we checked in. She seemed a bit . . .' he searched for an appropriate description and latched on to the only words that seemed appropriate '. . . up herself?' he ventured.

Mia laughed. 'Tell me about it! Selena Holbrook has a reputation around the village. Whatever you do, don't get on the wrong side of her.'

'I'll try not to,' Alfie replied. 'Er . . . how would I do that?'

'By being normal.' Mia seemed to remember something. 'You're not eating there, are you?'

'We haven't yet. We've only just arrived, but we're supposed to be having breakfast there every morning, so . . .'

'Avoid it if you can!' Mia urged him. 'Their food is legendary – as in, legendarily bad. I've lost count of the cases of food poisoning they've had. Her husband is the chef and he's *terrible*. I only tolerate them because of the Stan Lee connection.'

Alfie frowned. 'Stan Lee? What you mean, the guy who wrote *Spider-Man*?'

'Sure. Stan the Man. That was his catchphrase, right? Excelsior!'

'I'll take your word for it,' he told her.

Mia smiled. 'Not a comic book fan? We'll have to work on that.' She seemed to remember something else and turned her head to look towards the boulder. 'It seems you're a bit too ready to diss one of our local celebrities. "Yeah, right"? That *is* what you said, isn't it? In a sarcastic voice?'

Alfie turned his head to follow her gaze. He'd momentarily forgotten all about the stone and the inscription. 'Oh, that?' he said. 'Sure. Well, it's a load of nonsense, isn't it? I mean, witches don't exist, right?'

She put her hands in the back pockets of her black jeans and wandered over to the boulder. Alfie followed, happy to spend a little more time talking to her.

'I tried that inscription on a T-shirt once, but it didn't sell,' murmured Mia. 'Which is weird because this grave is famous.'

'Really?'

Oh yeah. People come from all over the world to have a look at it. As far as I know it's the *only* witch's grave that can be found in a churchyard. They didn't usually make it on to consecrated ground. They were usually buried at a crossroads with no marker. So, Meg being here is something of a mystery.'

Alfie chuckled. 'You talk about her as though she's real,' he said.

'Well, she *is*. Or at least, she *was*. Women were accused of witchcraft all the time back in the day.'

'Seriously?'

'Oh, I know what you're thinking. Pointy hats, crooked noses and broomsticks, right? But that stuff is just set dressing. Usually, they were lonely old women who had a way with herbs and probably knew a thing or two about midwifery.' She pointed to the inscription. 'Of course, poor Meg here, she's a late example. 1705. That's nearly a hundred years after the Pendle Witches.'

Alfie nodded, but his blank expression must have given him away.

'You've heard of the Pendle Witches?' she prompted him.

He shook his head. 'No. Should I have?'

'Well, they're famous.'

'Not in Bristol.'

'Hmm. Well, theclue's in the name. They came from Pendle, Lancashire, not so very far from here. They were accused of witchcraft and were taken to trial. I think ten of them were hanged in the end . . .'

'Hanged? You mean . . .' Alfie mimed the action of being strung up and stuck out his tongue.

'Oh, yeah. You can Google it if you don't believe me. It would have been around 1610, I think. People had grudges against them, you see. It was very easy to make up lies about them,

say they'd been seen dancing with the devil or some such nonsense. Then the people that accused them could get their hands on whatever land the women owned. I imagine it was the same kind of thing with poor Meg, here.'

'Yeah, but you don't really believe there's a body under that stone?' insisted Alfie. 'For one thing, the grave wouldn't be long enough.'

Mia nodded. 'Not if she was buried in the usual way,' she admitted. She smiled oddly. 'But Meg was different. She was buried head down.'

Alfie couldn't tell now if she was messing with him. 'Get away,' he said. 'Why would they do a thing like that?'

'Because the first two times they put her in the ground, she dug her way out again. She was seen wandering around the graveyard at night.'

Alfie stared at her. 'No way,' he said.

'Way. It was a bit of a problem, as you can imagine. The good people of Woodplumpton couldn't sleep safe and sound in their beds with one of the undead wandering about the place, could they? So they figured if she was head down, well, she'd just keep digging herself deeper and deeper into the earth, wouldn't she? And they put that big boulder on top just to make sure she'd never find her way out again.'

Alfie knew it was nonsense and yet he couldn't stop a cold chill running through him at the thought of a woman clawing

her way through the dark, cold soil. He grimaced. 'That's just nonsense,' he muttered. 'That couldn't happen.'

Mia shrugged. 'I grew up here. Everybody knows the story and I'd say most people believe it. When we were kids, we used to dare each other to walk around the stone and . . .' She hesitated, as though reluctant to continue.

'Go on,' Alfie prompted her. 'And do what?'

'Well, it's just this local superstition. None of us were ever brave enough to try it.'

'Tell me about it!"

She sighed. 'You're supposed to walk around The Witching Stone three times and each time, you say . . .' Alfie noticed how she lowered her voice to a cautious whisper. 'I don't believe in witches.'

'That's it?'

Mia nodded.

'And what's supposed to happen if you *do* say that?'

'Well, they reckon . . .'

'Yes?'

'. . . that Meg will come after you.'

'And then what?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't know. But I don't expect it would be pleasant.'

Alfie laughed and rolled his eyes. 'I've never heard such tosh!' he said. 'Seriously.' He lifted his hands and arranged them

into claws. 'Meg's coming after you. Wooooh!' He noticed how uncomfortable Mia looked, how she edged back a little from the stone as he spoke. 'You really went for that stuff, didn't you?'

She shrugged. 'I guess.'

'You'd do it now though, right?'

Mia shook her head. 'No way,' she said.

'Oh, come on! Why not?'

'You don't get it. You're not from round here. It's one of those things that you'd never risk. Just in case.'

Alfie felt a sudden powerful urge to impress her. 'Let's give it a try,' he suggested. 'Come on, what's the worst that could happen?' He started to walk around the stone.

'Don't,' she said quietly.

'I don't believe in witches!' Alfie replied.

'You've made your point,' Mia told him.

He ignored her and began a second circuit.

'I don't believe in witches!' he said, louder this time.

'Please!' said Mia. 'You don't have to prove anything to me.'

He began a third circuit.

'I DON'T BELIEVE IN WITCHES!' he yelled. And stopped in his tracks as he felt something cold and powerful fasten around his ankle, holding him in place. He stared down in shocked surprise and there must have been something in his expression that betrayed his dismay because Mia looked at him and gasped, 'Are you all right?'

And as suddenly as the feeling had come, it left him and he was able to move his foot. He laughed, a little uncertainly, and then looked at Mia. 'I was . . . just . . . kidding,' he said. 'You know, trying to spook you.'

'Are you sure? You've gone as white as a sheet.'

'Don't be daft. I'm fine.' He looked quickly around the graveyard, just to make sure that things were normal, and had the sudden weird impression that everything had been taken away and replaced with identical replicas of what had been there before. He glanced at his watch.

'I should go,' he said. 'I'm meeting my dad for dinner.'

'Not at The Excelsior!'

'No. We'll find somewhere in the village, I expect.' He looked at her. 'Well, thanks, er . . . Mia. It's been an education. Will I see you around?'

'Sure, why not?' She pulled a phone from her pocket. 'We can swap numbers if you like?'

'Cool.' He pulled out his own phone and they added each other to their contacts list. She was looking at him uncertainly the whole time.

'Are you sure you're all right?' she prompted him. 'You look kind of funny.'

'I always look like this,' Alfie quipped. 'Don't worry. If old Meg wants to come after me, she'll have a fight on her hands!'

He'd expected to get a laugh out of her but she just looked thoughtful.

'OK,' she said. 'Well, see you around.'

'Yeah, see you.'

Alfie retraced his steps along the path and was slightly puzzled. He had every reason to feel cheerful – he'd just met somebody he was really interested in and that didn't happen very often. Hardly ever. So why did he feel so . . . anxious?

He turned through the gates of the church and walked along the street beyond. As he went, he couldn't shake the powerful feeling that he was being watched. *Ridiculous*, he thought.

But when he turned and glanced back down the road, he saw that a cat was following him.