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THE CRAFTSMAN

Written by **Sharon Bolton**

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Dear Reader,

On a spring day in 1612, a mill owner called Richard Baldwin, in the Pendle Forest of Lancashire chased two local women off his land, calling them ‘witches and whores,’ threatening to ‘burn the one and hang the other,’ and, in doing so, set in motion events that led to the imprisonment, trial and execution of nine women on the charge of murder by witchcraft: the infamous Pendle Witch Trials.

Legend has it that female children born in the shadow of Pendle Hill are baptised twice. First, in church, as is customary. And then again, in a dark pool at the foot of the hill, where they are pledged to the service of another master entirely. These girls spend their lives coming to terms with their unusual heritage, because to be a woman of Pendle is both a blessing and a curse.

As far as I know, I have only been baptized once, but I am a woman of Pendle. The women who were hanged for witchcraft in 1612 could have been my great, great aunts or my ancestral grandmothers. And from my earliest days I’ve known that, had I been born in such a time of misogyny and superstition, I might well have been marked out a witch.

Because I have always been different – the slightly weird girl at the back of the class, who didn’t fly with the wind, or follow the beaten path - so, I have always been intrigued by what makes some women into witches.

The north of England, my homeland, is a dark place. It is the place

where, for hundreds of years, dissidents have fled and outlaws have thrived. Shortly before I was born, Ian Brady and Myra Hindley preyed upon the children of the north. As a young woman, my freedom was severely curtailed by the reign of the Yorkshire Ripper. Mary Ann Cotton, Harold Shipman, Peter Dinsdale, Donald Neilson, were all killers of the north. I am often asked why I write the sort of books I do. Maybe that's why.

But there is one book that I have always wanted to write. The book about me, and women like me. Women of the north, who stand out from the crowd, and who are punished by that same crowd for daring to be different. I have always wanted to write a book about witches. Specifically, how women become witches. Do they make that choice themselves, or is it made for them? I used to think the latter, that it is societies that create witches. Now, after several years of research, I'm not so sure. I no longer dismiss the idea of witchcraft. Now, I think we all have powers within us. And some of us have learned to use them.

The Craftsman is the story of women, and witches. Of the children we love and must protect. And of the men who fear us.

I do hope you enjoy it.

Sharon Bolton

THE CRAFTSMAN

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THE CRAFTSMAN

SHARON BOLTON

TRAPEZE

Part One

‘I have supped full with horrors.’
Macbeth, William Shakespeare.

Chapter 1

Tuesday, 10 August 1999

On the hottest day of the year, Larry Glassbrook has come home to his native Lancashire for the last time, and the townsfolk have turned out to say goodbye.

Not in a friendly way.

It might be just fancy on my part but the crowd outside the church seems to have grown during the brief, chill, funeral service, swelling the numbers that arrived early to claim a good spot, the way people do before a big parade.

Everywhere I look, people stand among headstones, flank the perimeter wall and line the footpaths like some ghastly guard of honour. As we follow the coffin out into sunshine bright enough to cauterise wounds, they watch us, without moving or speaking.

The press are here in force, in spite of the date being kept secret for as long as possible. Uniformed police hold them back, keeping the paths and the porch clear, but the photographers have brought stepladders and huge telescopic lenses. The rounded, fluffy microphones of the news presenters look powerful enough to pick up the scampering of church mice.

I keep my eyes down, push my sunglasses a little higher on my nose, although I know I look very different now. Thirty years is a long time.

A few yards ahead of me, beads of moisture swell and burst

on the necks of the pallbearers. These men leave a trail behind them, a smell of aftershave and beer-infused sweat, of suits that aren't dry-cleaned quite often enough.

Standards have slipped since Larry's day. The men who worked for Glassbrook & Greenwood Funeral Directors wore suits as black as newly mined coal. Their shoes and hair gleamed, and they shaved so close as to leave raw, rash-scarred skin behind. Larry's men carried the caskets reverently, like the works of art they were. Larry would never have permitted the cheap, laminate coffin I can see in front of me.

Knowing that his own funeral fell short of the standards he'd insisted upon could have been a bitter disappointment to Larry. On the other hand, he might have laughed, loudly and cruelly, the way he did sometimes, when you least expected it, when it was most unnerving. And then he might have run his fingers through his black hair, winked suggestively and resumed dancing to the Elvis Presley tracks that seemed constantly to be playing in his workshop.

After all this time, even thinking about Elvis Presley's music sets my heart racing.

The cheap coffin and its bearers turn like a giant, crawling insect and leave the path. As we head south towards the Glassbrook family plot, the heat on our faces is as intense and searching as limelight in a down-at-heel musical hall. In Lancashire, this high on the moors, hot days are scarce, but the sun today seems determined to give Larry a foretaste of the temperatures waiting for him in his next place of confinement.

I wonder what words his headstone might carry: *Loving husband, devoted father, merciless killer*.

As his last minutes above ground tick away, the crowd seems to press forward and hang back simultaneously, like a confused tide that can't quite remember whether it is ebbing or flowing.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, half hidden behind the rim

of my sunglasses, I spot the teenagers. A boy and two girls, small, skinny, dressed in garishly coloured polyester. The eyes of the adults flick around the churchyard, resentfully at the mourners, nervously at the police, curiously at the media. The teenagers watch only the chief mourner, the woman who walks immediately behind the vicar, directly in front of me.

She's beautiful in a way that no one would have predicted when she was fifteen. Her hair has become honey-blonde, and her body has filled out. No longer does she resemble a carnival puppet, its head too big for its spindly stick body. Eyes that used to stare like those of a startled bushbaby from a TV wildlife programme are now the right size for her face. The black dress she wears has the crisp texture and clarity of colour of a brand-new purchase.

A muttered whisper suggests the watchers are following. The woman in the new black dress turns her head. I can't help but copy her and see that the three teenagers are coming too.

At the sight of them, the wound on my left hand begins to hurt. I tuck it into my right armpit, using my upper arm to bring gentle pressure against the pain. It helps, a bit, but I can feel sweat trickling down between my shoulder blades. The vicar is no more relaxed than I am. His handkerchief is out, rubbing the back of his neck and dabbing at his forehead, but he begins the burial prayers with the air of a man who knows the end is in sight. At the appointed time, the pallbearers lessen the tension on the ropes they hold and the coffin wobbles lower until we no longer see it.

That's when it hits us. I see my own thought reflected in the eyes of those around me, and a whisper of troubled energy ripples through the crowd.

'Better than you deserve, you bastard,' calls a voice from the back.

This is exactly what Larry did to his young victims. He

lowered them into the ground. Only they weren't dead.

One of the teenagers, the youngest, has wandered away from his friends and is half hiding behind a headstone. He peers out at me with a sly curiosity. Stephen, the name comes to me quickly. The skinny kid in the blue shirt is Stephen.

A slick, sweating pallbearer is offering me earth and so I take a handful and approach the grave. There are no flowers on the coffin lid, nor were there any in church. I don't remember ever seeing a church without them before and I have a sudden vision of the women of the parish coming solemnly and silently into the building last night to remove them, because this is not an occasion for flowers.

Close to the church wall, barely visible behind the crowd, is the man who was the sexton in the old days. He is dressed in a black suit now. He doesn't look up, and I don't think my old friend has seen me.

I let the earth fall, conscious that, behind me, it is being offered to the other mourners, who are politely shaking their heads. Taking it was the wrong thing to do, then. The thing that has made me stand out. Again.

The prayers are complete. 'Judge not,' ad-libs the vicar, suddenly brave, 'that ye be not judged.' He bows to no one in particular and scurries off.

The pallbearers fade into the background. I step back too and the woman with honey-blonde hair is alone at the grave.

Not for long. The watchers are egging each other on to become participants. Slowly the mass creeps forward. The teenagers, too, are drawing closer, although they are harder to see than the adults in the bright sunshine.

The watchers come to a standstill. The woman in black looks at them directly, but none will meet her eyes. Then a woman of sixty-something steps forward, until her sandalled feet, toenails grimy with dust, stand on the very edge of the grave. I know this

woman. Years ago, she confronted me, when misery and anger got the better of all her decent instincts. I remember her fat finger jabbing at my face, the bitterness of her breath as she leaned in and stabbed me with her threats and accusations. Her name is Duxbury; she is the mother of Larry's first victim, Susan.

Standing on the edge of Larry's grave, she sucks in breath, leans forward and spits. It is possibly the first time in her life that she has done so. The spittle is thin, dribbling. If it makes a sound as it hits the wood, I don't hear it. The next to approach the grave is more practised. A huge, bull-necked, bald-headed man, probably younger than the creases in his skin suggest. He hawks and then phlegm, solid as congealing paint, smacks onto the coffin. One by one the others follow, until the coffin beneath them must be spattered with spittle flowers.

The last of them to approach the graveside is an elderly man, thin and dark-skinned, eyes like stones. He looks round.

'Nowt personal, lass,' he says to the woman in the black dress, as I try to imagine anything more personal than spitting on a grave. 'We never blamed you.' Bow-legged, arthritic, he moves away.

For a minute, maybe more, the woman in the black dress is motionless, staring at something in the middle distance. Then, without looking back, she crosses the grass towards the path, perhaps bracing herself to run the gauntlet of reporters and photographers. They have kept their distance during the service, but they didn't come here for nothing and they won't leave without something.

I follow in her wake, but a sound grabs my attention and I stop. Behind me, at the graveside, I hear the teenagers making high-pitched, sucking noises as they try to copy the adults and spit on Larry's coffin. I suppose they have more excuse than most, but what they are doing seems feeble, and beneath them. I think I might speak to them, tell them it must surely be time to

move on, but when I look back, they are nowhere to be seen. Those three kids haven't walked the earth in thirty years and yet I can't help but feel that the woman in the black dress has seen their ghosts too.

Chapter 2

I have no means of knowing exactly what Patricia Wood suffered in the hours following her disappearance. I suppose I should consider that a blessing.

After we found her, everyone said they couldn't bear to think about it, that it was too terrible even to imagine, that one really shouldn't dwell on such things.

If only I could help myself. Imagination is a valuable tool, vital for any detective worth his or her salt. It's also the heaviest cross we bear.

And so I imagine that Patsy regained consciousness slowly, and that her first lucid thought was that she was struggling to breathe. The fabric that covered her face was satin, light in weight, but in a confined space full of stale air it must have felt stifling.

There would have been an evil taste in her mouth, partly the result of not drinking for several hours. Disorientation would have been the worst of it, though, in those first few minutes, without a clue where she was or how she got there. Any memories she could dredge up would have been half formed, a mass of random pictures and snatches of dialogue. She would have tried opening her eyes, closing them, opening them again and found no difference at all.

I think at this point she would have tried to move. To push

herself to a sitting position. That’s when panic would really have set in, when she realised that she was entirely boxed in.

It was worse than that, of course. Patsy was deep in the ground. Buried alive.

Chapter 3

One or two of the older reporters stare as I leave, their eyes narrowing as they search their memories. I made the right decision not wearing uniform today. Given time, they'll place me, but I don't give them time. I push my way out through the gate and head up the hill towards my car. In any event, they are far more interested in the woman in the stylish black dress with the honey-blonde hair. She needs a police escort to get through the crowd, and I catch a glimpse of her as the waiting car pulls away. She looks at me from the passenger seat. In church, she'd given no sign of even knowing I was there. I assumed she'd forgotten me, that to her I was just another curious bystander. That glance through the darkened glass tells me she remembers me perfectly.

I chose to lodge with the Glassbrooks rather than in any of the other boarding houses on offer when I moved to Sabden because I sensed an eccentricity in the family that appealed to me. They were different, somehow, to most of the people I met in town. I thought of them as colourful, exotic birds, surrounded by a flock of small, noisy, dust-covered house sparrows. After just a couple of weeks in Lancashire, I was acutely conscious of how very different I seemed to the people around me. I was looking for birds of a feather, I suppose. Not my only mistake, in this town.

They lived on the outskirts of Sabden, in a large, detached

house. The narrow gravel drive is choked with weeds now, and dandelion seeds come drifting towards me like an airborne army. Moss covers the low stone wall that holds back the banked garden, and the grass between the fruit trees hasn't been cut in months, maybe years. It is a tiny meadow now. The white clusters of cow parsley reach almost to the low branches of neglected fruit trees, where plums, already rotten, are abuzz with wasps. There are hundreds of apples on the trees, but the fruit is tiny and worm-ridden. A mush at the foot of each suggests that, for years, successive crops have fallen and rotted.

I round the only bend in the drive and see the house. A stone mansion, built for a factory manager or wool merchant at the turn of the twentieth century. Paint has peeled away from the porticoed front door, and the huge bay windows are dirty and cracked in places. That room was the lodgers' sitting room, where I spent my evenings when I could no longer reasonably stay at work and my room felt too lonely. The two other lodgers were men. Another police constable, called Randall (known as Randy) Butterworth, and a quiet, plump man in his forties called Ron Pickles, who worked with Larry at the funeral business. They and I talked sometimes, occasionally played cards, but mainly we stared at the grainy, dancing screen of a twelve-inch, black-and-white television. There was talk that the family, in the bigger parlour, which overlooked the rear garden, had a colour TV, but this remained a rumour.

The tiny television set is still there. So are the PVC-covered armchairs that felt slick and sticky in summer, too cold for comfort in winter. Barring broken light bulbs littering the carpet, the damp stains on the walls and the dirt on the windows, the lodgers' sitting room is exactly as I remember it.

I follow the path to the rear, keeping my eyes fixed on the walls and windows of the house. The curtains are drawn on the family parlour, but I have no real memories of that room anyway.

I was never invited in. The back door is open.

I step up and peer into the room they called the back kitchen. It's small, with a huge stone sink and stained wooden worktops. Wall-mounted shelves hold dust-covered crockery, dull glassware and huge copper pans. My own mother would have called this a butler's pantry, but the word 'butler' wasn't part of the lexicon of the people of Sabden back in 1969.

'Hello?' I say.

No one answers. A painful twinge shoots from my left hand towards my elbow as I step inside. A door opposite would take me into the bigger kitchen, where Sally cooked meals for her family and her lodgers. Her lotions and potions, as Larry called them, were made in this room, stored in a walk-in cupboard by the back door. She had a gas cooker, old back in 1969, to boil up herbs and roots. It's still here.

I hear a low-pitched buzzing sound behind me and turn to see that bees have found their way inside somehow. In, but not out again, because over a dozen tiny, black-and-orange corpses litter the windowsill. Sally kept bees. There were four hives at the bottom of the garden, and during the spring and early summer that I lived here, she'd often go out to feed or inspect them, wrapped up in her heavy white veil and thick gloves. On warm days, she'd sit and watch the predictable trajectory of the worker bees as they zoomed out of the hives heading for blossom.

She had a habit, one I found curious but charming, of making sure the bees were kept informed of any important news in the family. When Cassie, her elder daughter, won a music scholarship, she was sent straight outside to tell the bees. The news of the death of Larry's aunt was told to the bees before some of the family were informed. Calamity would fall on the house, Sally told me, if the bees were kept in the dark.

'Can I help you?' someone says, in a tone that suggests helping me is the last thing on her mind, and I turn to see a stout,

grey-haired woman in her seventies standing in the doorway. I fish in my bag and find my Met warrant card. I have no authority in Lancashire, but I doubt she'll know that.

'Assistant Commissioner Florence Lovelady,' I tell her. 'I was looking for the family.'

'Haven't lived here for years,' she says, with her habitual note of triumph when giving bad news.

I know who this woman is. Sally had a 'woman that does' who came in every day to help with the cooking and cleaning. This woman served me breakfast and dinner six days a week for five months and every two weeks brought a clean set of nylon sheets to my room. She never knocked before entering, just announced, 'Sheets,' before dumping them on the bed. I was always expected to change my own bed, but I'm pretty certain she did the job for the men who lodged here. She was the kind of woman happy to wait on men but considered it beneath her to do the same for a woman, especially one younger than herself. In the late 1960s, the worst sex discrimination I had to deal with always came from other women.

I let my gaze move around the dusty surfaces, glance over the dead insects and say, 'I'm surprised they haven't sold it.'

'The girls wanted to. It was Sally who hung on.'

'You're Mary, aren't you? I lived here. In 1969.' I don't add, 'Back when it happened.' It hardly feels necessary.

She squints at me.

'The family called me Flossie,' I say reluctantly. 'My hair was different then. A much brighter shade of red.'

'Ginger,' she says. 'Colour of carrots.'

'How are you, Mary?' I ask her.

'You were covered in freckles.' She takes a step closer, as if to check whether I still have them. I do, although they've faded over time. 'You went bright red when someone showed you up.'

'Where is Sally, do you know?' I ask. 'Is she still alive?'

‘Northdean Nursing Home at Barley,’ she tells me. ‘She won’t speak to you.’

I still have my warrant card in my hand. ‘Do you mind if I look around?’ I ask her.

‘Suit yourself,’ she tells me. ‘I need spuds. Then I’m locking up.’

She leaves me, heading towards the vegetable garden, and I walk further into the house. I don’t open the door of the parlour – old habits die hard – and have no interest in the lodgers’ sitting room, so instead I walk along the high-ceilinged corridor until I’m almost at the front door, then turn and climb the stairs. My room was the smallest of those given to the lodgers, at the back of the house, overlooking the Hill.

The door sticks and for a moment I’m tempted to see it as a sign that there is nothing to be gained from dredging up old memories. But my stubborn streak always won out against my better instinct and I push hard.

The lilac-and-blue crocheted bedspread that I hated is still here, but its colour has faded from years of being exposed to sunlight. The narrow bed under the window is made up, and I wouldn’t be surprised if those are the sheets I slept on all those years ago, that if we were to employ the forensic techniques that weren’t available to us in the 1960s, a trace of me could still be found. After all, who else would have lodged here after what happened? The door on the narrow wardrobe is hanging open. One of the drawers in the chest by the bed isn’t properly closed and I spot a plastic hairbrush in it that might have been mine once. It is as though no one has been in this room since I left it in a hurry. Randy and I weren’t allowed back after Larry Glassbrook’s arrest. Our things were collected by other officers and I spent the rest of my time in Lancashire in a guest house on the other side of town.

The three police posters that I taped to the wall are still here.

Missing, reads the first. *Have you see Stephen Shorrock? Missing*, says the second. *Have you seen Susan Duxbury? Missing*, again, on the third. *Help us find Patsy.* I taped the posters directly opposite my bed, in spite of Mary's grumbles that they were morbid and would damage the woodchip wallpaper. They were the first things I saw when I woke up each morning, the last at night.

As I'd approached the house, I'd avoided looking at Larry's workshop, a one-storey brick building a short distance from the back door, but I can't avoid it now. Its flat roof is directly in front of my window.

I reach out and touch the wall for balance, take a deep breath, although the air in here is stale and warm.

The workshop is where Larry spent most of his time, where he played his music – no, I do not want those songs in my head – and where he made the coffins and caskets that held the remains of Sabden's dead.

And a few of its very unlucky living.

Chapter 4

The words ‘coffin’ and ‘casket’ are used interchangeably, but the two are quite different. A coffin is a six- or eight-sided box that follows the contours of the body: narrow at the head, widening at the shoulders, tapering in again towards the feet. Think Dracula, rising. A casket is bigger, rectangular, usually with a large, curved lid.

Larry Glassbrook made both, but hardwood caskets were his passion. I lodged with his family for five months in 1969 and once – when he was bored, I think – he invited me into his workshop. He played music as he worked – Elvis Presley, almost certainly – and broke off from time to time to roll his hips or slick back his dark hair. Larry was a handsome man and he made the most of his resemblance to the King of Rock. He was rarely short of female attention, but to be honest, I found him a bit creepy. There was no doubting his skill, though.

He started with the lid, gluing and pressing together long slats of oak in a rounded vice. He used joint fasteners, a sort of heavy-duty staple, to make sure they couldn’t move. The box was made in a similar fashion, glued, fastened and joisted to give it strength. Larry liked to boast that his caskets could carry men weighing 300 pounds or more. The lid was fastened to the box with four metal hinges and sixteen screws.

No one was getting out of a Larry Glassbrook casket once they

were shut inside. In fairness, very few people tried.

Coffins and caskets weren't hermetically sealed in those days. If they had been, Patsy Wood might have died before she ever regained consciousness. Larry's caskets were closed using a method he invented himself. Immediately below the rim of the lid, directly opposite the outer hinges, were two locking mechanisms hidden beneath decorative trims. When the latch was turned, a small metal strip on the inside of the coffin, concealed behind the fabric lining, slid into place and prevented the lid from being dislodged during interment, or by any clumsy handling. If Patsy had known where to feel, if she'd managed to tear away the satin lining, she might have been able to unlock the casket.

She'd still have needed to deal with the ton of earth above it.

She didn't find the locks. We know that. But I can still imagine her reaching frantically around the tiny space she found herself in. I think she'd have screamed then, her voice loud and scared, but angry too. At fourteen, we don't imagine anything really dreadful can happen to us. At that point, she would have thought she was the victim of a practical joke, horrible but temporary. If she yelled loudly and long enough, they'd get her out of here, wherever 'here' was.

She would have called out the names of those she could last remember, the people she'd been with before it happened. One of the things I wonder, when I think about Patsy's time in the casket, is how quickly she stopped shouting for her friends and began to call for her mother.

I'd put it at less than thirty minutes after she came round, but I imagine time goes slowly when you're trapped beneath the earth.

Caskets are bigger than coffins. She'd have been able to reach up, feel the smooth, pleated satin inches above her head. I think at that point she would have known what contained her. She knew the Glassbrook family. She knew what Larry Glassbrook

did for a living. She'd probably been invited into his workshop, or sneaked in with her friends, to see the wooden boxes in various stages of readiness. She'd have known then that she was trapped in a casket, although she'd probably have called it a coffin.

I imagine her falling silent, believing her mates (because of course it was her mates – who else would play such a trick on her?) were just outside the casket, listening to her screams. Patsy would have forced herself to be quiet, thinking they'd be quicker to let her out if they thought she might be in real trouble. Maybe she even gave a gasp or two, as though she were struggling for air.

When that didn't work, because it couldn't work – her friends were nowhere near – I think she'd have screamed again, long, loud and hard this time. I have no idea how long a person can scream before it becomes impossible to go on. I hope I never find out. But at some point, maybe when she'd been conscious for about an hour, Patsy would have fallen silent, if only for a time.

The exertion would have exhausted her. She'd have been panting. Hot. Sweating. It would have occurred to her that air was probably in short supply. I think this is when she would have begun to plan, to think of any possible ways of getting herself out. She'd have started, tentatively and as calmly as she could, to explore her surroundings. And then she'd have discovered something even more terrifying than that she was trapped in a coffin.

She wasn't alone.