

THE FEAR OF RAVENS

Esme Quentin exposes a cauldron of suspicion, bigotry and revenge, when she uncovers a sinister truth in a family's ill-fated past.

31st October 1995

The chanting began earlier than usual.

She jolted upright, sloshing water over the edge of the bath, dousing candles and drenching the bathroom floor. Three nights of torrential rain had brought her respite and she'd dared to believe they wouldn't come again. How naïve. They'd relish tonight of all nights.

She scrambled out of the tub, grabbing a towel to wrap around her, and glared towards the window. No use in peering out into the darkness trying to see them. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction. Besides, they never came close enough.

Until now.

She swapped the towel for her dressing gown, and stormed out of the bathroom, through the kitchen and into the living room. She'd had enough. This time they'd not have it all their own way. This time she'd go out there and confront the little tykes. She seized the CD player on the shelf beside the fireplace and pressed play, turning up the volume to its maximum setting. Then she ran up to the bedroom.

Upstairs even Black Sabbath wasn't loud enough to deaden the escalating cat-calls from outside. *Witch, witch, witch.* She grabbed her clothes and raced back downstairs, suppressing the fear that was in danger of triumphing if she allowed it a chink of opportunity. Kids, she kept telling herself. Bored kids. Don't let them rile you. Don't let them win.

As she reached the hall, she heard the clatter of the letterbox and she faltered. She laid a finger on the kitchen door and pushed it open. A folded piece of white paper lay menacingly on the mat. What now? More religious ranting? There was something about this that implied more than kids and their warped kicks. She moved towards the door, snatched up the note and retreated.

It had gone quiet outside. She held her breath and listened. Only the sound of the blood pumping in her ears and the hissing of the tall oak behind the cottage, as the wind breathed in and out through its gale-scorched leaves. If they'd finished for the night, she'd got off lightly this time. Perhaps they were getting tired of their perverted games.

She drew herself back against the wall, steeling herself to unfold the paper and wincing as she read the spidery writing.

"Hate the whore... burn her with fire"

What tormented person was this? What had she ever done to them?

Hammer blows began pounding on the door and she clamped her hands over her ears. She backed away, sliding along the wall, her eyes staring; terrified the door would give way under the force. When the letterbox rattled, she screamed.

The acrid stench of burnt flesh polluted the kitchen as a tangle of smouldering fur and feather dropped on to the door mat.

1

Esme Quentin first met Sean Carlton three days before his fatal visit to The Kings Arms.

She'd driven into the car park of Torridge Reclamation salvage yard and was climbing out of her Peugeot when a yellow Fiat Coupé sped through the gate and pulled up beside her. The driver unfolded his long limbs and got out of the car, pulling up the collar of his inadequate jacket against the rain. Late thirties, she reckoned. Cropped blond hair emphasised the neatness of his appearance: smart black trousers and fresh white shirt.

'Excuse me,' he called over the roof of his car. 'I'm looking for Temperance Mill. You don't happen to know where it is, by any chance? I was told it was out this way.'

Esme grabbed her duffel coat hood as a gust of wind threatened to snatch it off her head. 'Yes, it is around here, but I'm not sure exactly where.' She glanced across the yard towards the outbuildings on the opposite side. 'My friend will know. I'm just on my way over to see her. You might as well come with me and get out of the rain.'

He nodded. 'OK. Thanks. That'd be good.'

They picked their way past neat rows of bricks, old wooden beams and reclaimed roof tiles lying on the ground towards the stone building on the end of the row. Above the entrance hung a small wooden sign saying, *Ted Henderson, furniture restoration*. Esme pushed at the half-open door and went inside.

The workshop smelled of sawdust and resin. A workbench stood in the centre and woodworking tools of all descriptions hung on a rack above. A small pot-bellied stove squatted in one corner, its black flue towering up through the roof of the corrugated iron building, beside a battered leather armchair.

Maddy Henderson stood by the workbench, her hands on her hips, staring into the distance. She was dressed in jade-green running gear with a white headband, her copper hair gathered tightly in a ponytail.

'Maddy?' Esme said.

Maddy looked up as though she'd just been shaken out of a trance. 'Esme,' she said, shaking her head. 'Sorry. I didn't hear you come in.'

Esme pulled down her hood, rescuing her dislodged hair clasp. She gestured to the man behind her as she fixed the clasp back in place on the top of her head. 'Maddy, this guy's looking for Temperance Mill. That's the name of Anna's place, isn't it?'

'Anna?' the man said, stepping forward. 'Is that Anna Brannock, who owns the reclamation yard?'

Esme shot a cautious glance at Maddy. He seemed very well informed.

Maddy walked towards him. 'Sorry? And you are?'

The man reached inside the pocket of his shirt and pulled out a card which he handed to Maddy. 'Sean Carlton. Private Investigator.' He cocked his head over his shoulder. 'Erm... couldn't help noticing the sign out there. If this is Ted's workshop, I'm guessing you must be his daughter.'

'Yes, that's right, I am.' Maddy swallowed. 'Was.'

Carlton frowned and slowly shook his head. 'Hey, listen. I was gutted to hear about the accident. Sorry I couldn't make the funeral.'

She peered at him. 'You knew Dad?'

'Sure. Have done for years. We were in the force together for a while before I went freelance. In fact, I only saw him recently...I couldn't believe it when I heard. Terrible. Especially knowing how much he loved being in his boat...' He shifted his weight. 'Sorry. I'm not being very tactful. It must still be a bit raw.'

Maddy gave him a weak smile. 'Yes, it is. But that's OK.' She glanced over at Esme. 'I'm still trying to... well, you know... I haven't quite got used to it.'

He nodded. 'Sure. I understand.'

Maddy cleared her throat. 'So what's your interest in Temperance Mill, then?' she asked.

'To be honest, it's Temperance Cottage my enquiry relates to, rather than the mill,' Carlton said, scratching his cheek. 'The name intrigues me, though. Temperance. One of the infamous Bideford Witches, who were executed in the 17th century, was called Temperance, wasn't she? Is that how it got its name? Someone even suggested it was haunted.'

Maddy gave him a sardonic smile. 'I think someone's been having you on. The cottage assumed to be theirs burned down in the 19th century. But that was up in Old Town, not down here near the river. More likely the name's associated with the pledge to stay off the evil drink. You know, The Temperance Movement. There was a Temperance Hotel in Bideford once, I think.'

'Weren't they the last women in England to be hanged for witchcraft?' Esme said.

'Pretty much. There's another woman, Anne Molland, they think was executed 3 years later, in 1685.'

'I really need to get up to speed with the story,' Esme said. 'It's fascinating.' She turned back to the private investigator. 'You were saying it was the cottage you were interested in?'

'Yeah, that's right. Temperance Cottage. I'm trying to trace a Miss Ellen Tucker. She lived there about 24 years ago?'

'Really?' Maddy said. 'I didn't know it was lived in that recently. I always assumed it'd been derelict for years. Like, for ever.'

'So you've never heard of Ellen Tucker?'

'No, sorry.'

Carlton looked at Esme, who shook her head. 'Don't look at me. Can't help you, I'm afraid. I've only recently moved to the area.'

He turned back to Maddy. 'Ever aware of unpleasant things going on down there?'

'What sort of unpleasant things?'

'Strange goings on? Trouble from the locals? Talk of witchcraft?'

She frowned and shook her head. 'No. Nothing like that.' She cleared her throat. 'Look, you're probably right about talking to Anna. She's lived here all her life and would know the mill's history. And the cottage, too. She's out demolishing a wall at the moment, but she should be back in an hour or so. Why don't you call back then?'

'But if this was 24 years ago,' Esme said, 'Anna would have only been about 7 or 8 back then, wouldn't she? Isn't she younger than you, Maddy?'

Maddy nodded. 'Yes, you're right. Of course she would. So she may be no more help than me. But her parents would know. If this...what's her name again?'

'Ellen Tucker.'

'If Ellen Tucker lived in Temperance Cottage, she'd have rented it off them. They live at Hill Farm.' Maddy gestured towards the door. 'I'll show you.' The three of them stood at the threshold as Maddy pointed to the area of rising land beyond the yard. 'It's up that way. Go back up the main road towards Bideford, then first left up the lane there, about a mile or so. Farm's on the right hand side. Can't miss it. Daniel or Marianne Meddon is who you need to speak to.'

'OK. Great. Thanks.'

The sound of an engine eclipsed his reply. They all turned to see a Torridge Reclamation van screech into the car park below and skid to a halt.

'Or you could have a word with Drew,' said Maddy, nodding towards the new arrival. 'Anna's husband. He's local. He might remember. He's a bit older than Anna.'

Carlton nodded. 'OK. Will do.' He inclined his head. 'You've been very helpful, both of you. Appreciate it.'

'No worries,' Maddy said.

Esme smiled. 'Good luck.'

They both watched as Carlton headed back across the yard towards the car park. 'That's if Drew Brannock deigns to talk to him, of course,' said Maddy, under her breath.

'Not the friendly type?' Esme said. 'Ah, see what you mean,' she added, as Carlton approached Drew only to receive a cursory glance, before Drew muttered something and turned away. Carlton shrugged philosophically and walked back to his Fiat before getting in and driving off.

'I assumed he'd be out helping Anna,' Esme said, watching as Drew picked his way across the yard, dressed in clean jeans and a white tee-shirt, clearly having been nowhere near a building site.

'You're joking, of course. He's supposed to be a partner in the business, but I've never seen him contribute anything. It's Anna who does all the hard graft.'

'And she puts up with that?'

Maddy rolled her eyes. 'He has contacts, she says. Which means he doesn't have to get his precious little hands dirty.'

Drew reached them. A fringe of dark, dishevelled hair lay flat against his forehead, damp from the rain. His piercing blue eyes skimmed Esme before he addressed Maddy.

'That guy,' he said, tossing his head back towards the car park. 'What did he want?'

'Hello, Drew,' Maddy said. 'How lovely to see you. May I introduce my friend, Esme Quentin?' Esme found it hard to hide her smile at the sarcasm in Maddy's voice, but Drew didn't seem to notice.

'Hi, Drew,' Esme said.

Drew grunted and cocked his chin briefly at Esme before turning back to Maddy. 'So? What did he want?'

'Why didn't you ask him yourself?'

'Cos I'm asking you,' Drew said.

Maddy rolled her eyes and folded her arms. 'He's a private eye, if you must know. Not that I could tell him anything. I told him to talk to Daniel or Marianne.'

'About what?'

'Oh, some woman who used to live at Temperance Mill Cottage.'

'Ellen Turner or Tucker or something, wasn't it, Maddy?' Esme added. 'Lived there twenty-odd...'

But Drew had already turned away, heading back to the car park.

'Charming,' Maddy said with a shrug. They watched him jump inside his van and squeal out of the entrance, narrowly missing a milk tanker coming down the road.