**WITCH HUNTER by Georgina Coope**

Chapter 1

Last night was the last night of my life! It was also the worst. I think what hurts most is the knowledge that it didn’t have to end like this. I know I brought this upon myself, and I can’t say life was too short. An old, bent, some might say crazy old woman, with coarse white hair and wrinkled features, should probably say her time had come. But it hadn’t. The horrific events of these past couple of days were nothing more than pure evil!

My name’s Alice Bennet and I lived all my life in the small, remote village of Oaknell Rising. I can’t say I was particularly friendly towards the other villagers. In a way I was sort of cut off, I don’t really know why, but that’s what age does to you. That was how I liked it. Children scared each other with stories of the mysterious, old crone who would boil you in a pot if you came to close! People did come to see me though, whenever anyone had an illness that needed curing, or a wound that needed treating. All day long I busied myself making remedies for those brave enough to venture near me. Not that they had a choice. There was no doctor for miles around, and everyone knew that medicine bought from me was guaranteed to work. There was a lot of speculation surrounding my secretive formulas. Nobody knew what was in them and I would never in a million years tell my secret to anyone. It would be buried with me in my grave. Yet they trusted them all the same, because they had to.

Late one night I was sat hunched in my old, battered chair in my small, battered cottage, with my gnarled, battered fingers smoothing Selky’s soft, black fur. Selky is (or was, I don’t know which) a black cat with haunting, green eyes that I found abandoned deep in the woods I can’t remember how many years ago. She stretched lazily across my lap, purring softly as I droned away to myself. “You don’t need anyone” I muttered “No one except Selky, the trees, the wind and the fire. Nothing, no one, ha! They think you mad, you not mad. You have power, such power over their tiny, tiny souls. If only they knew, if only they could see. Tiny, tiny…”

At that point I must have nodded off because the next thing I remember is a loud crash that woke me up with a start. I jumped to my feet nearly sending Selky flying, but she sprang from my lap just in time. Shattered glass and an all manner of coloured liquids littered the already filthy floor. All that remained of my remedies. My eyes narrowed furiously at the petrified figure lurking in the shadows. “Who are you?” I croaked angrily “What are you doing in my house?” As they slowly emerged into the light I could see it was a woman who appeared to be in her late thirties. Wisps of light brown hair escaped from the loose bun at the back of her head. She wore a grubby apron, grey dress and her face looked puffy and tired. As I spoke she hurriedly backed away, knocking into the rows of shelves where the jars had once sat. “What are you doing in my house?” I repeated, never once lifting my icy glare from those hazel eyes.

“P…P…Please” stammered the woman “my little boy is sick. I only need…”

“Oh, so he’s sick is he?” my voice was calm now, mocking her every word.

“Yes. Please, we can’t afford the treatment and I’ve got six other little ones at home who could catch it any moment.”

“You were planning on paying for them I suppose?”

At first she said nothing, but at last she whispered “he’s only five.”

“Only five?” I repeated. “You dare come here? You dare…” All of a sudden I flew into a murderous rage! “I suppose that gives you the right to steal other people’s property?” I shrieked. “Well I’ll tell you something. I don’t know what rules you play by but they don’t apply to me!”

“Have you no heart?” she cried. This time returning my blood curdling stare. “No heart at all? Don’t you know what it is to help others? Have you ever showed kindness towards anyone in your life?”

“If your idea of kindness is sneaking into someone else’s house and trying to steal their remedies then no, and I don’t intend to start now!”

Her face was red with anger and I could tell she wasn’t going to give up. “What sort of human being are you?”

“Even if I wanted to help I couldn’t. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but because of you I haven’t any remedy to give.”

“At least give me the formula!” Her desperation showed in her voice. “You can’t keep them hidden forever, one day someone will discover your secret!”

“You know better than to ask that.” I have to admit I was astonished. How much further was this woman prepared to go? “It’ll die and be buried with me! Now get out!”

“A woman like you doesn’t belong on this earth! There are people in this village who ask each other what sort of life this is for you, shut up in here day after day like a prisoner. But I’ll tell them. I’ll tell them everything you said to me tonight. They’ll see that you don’t deserve their sympathy because you’re nothing more than a selfish, cold hearted witch!” With that she turned towards the door.

“You’ll pay for this” I shouted after her. “I’ll make sure you regret the day you set foot in this house for the rest of your life!”

And so, with my threats and cackling laughter burning in her ears, she disappeared into the dark and gloomy night!

Chapter 2

The tranquil silence of the next morning was broken by a chorus of grief stricken screaming. From my chair I could hear the pattering of feet and the slamming of doors as every family within ear shot ran to see what was happening. Screaming isn’t common in a village like that, so it was only natural that it stirred up quite a commotion. Heaving my heavy bones out of the chair, I shuffled over to the window to see what was going on. Through the heads of a gathering crowd I could make out seven covered stretchers being carried out of one of the houses. Trailing the procession were a man and a woman, arms tightly wrapped around each other, with red, tear stained cheeks, who looked like they’d just witnessed the end of the world.

It was a moment before I realised it was the same woman who had broken into my house only a few hours before. Her cries could clearly be heard over the anxious voices of about two dozen spectators.

“What’s happened?”

“Daddy, why are they crying?”

“Move over.”

“I can’t see.”

“What’s on the stretchers?”

All of a sudden their words were cut off as the whole village gasped as one. A small hand, white as a sheet, slipped free from under the covers and was now hung limply from one of the stretchers! In stony silence, as if on cue, every single head looked in the direction of my cottage, and I found myself facing the hysterical accusations of a mother who had just lost all her children!

“You did this!” she screamed. “You killed them, and you don’t even have the courage to come out here and face us! Wasn’t it enough for you to ruin your own pitiful life, so you had to destroy ours too? Why? Why? Why?”

“Mary” her husband interrupted “we don’t know for sure.” But I could see him shaking with the effort to keep calm. There was no controlling her! Mary wrenched herself from his grip and started pounding him with her fists!

“Evil!” she shouted “she’s evil I tell you!”

“Mary…” He clutched her to him.

“Witch, you’re a witch Alice Bennet!”

Then the crowd parted to let through a tall, dark haired man all dressed in black. He wore knee high boots, a wide brimmed hat, and there was an unmistakable gleam in those bright, blue eyes.

“Did I hear someone say ‘witch’?” he asked.

Chapter 3

We knew who he was immediately, one of the many money seekers now roaming our countryside, taking advantage of people’s superstitions and fear. A witch hunter! A man who rid communities of their witches for a fee any terrified villager would be more than willing to pay. As soon as I saw him my door was open and I was outside. In one glance I knew this was the one person I could not hide from, no matter how hard I tried. I could feel his eyes piercing me, even when my own were tightly shut. Everyone was holding their breath, waiting for the fight to start.

“Alice Bennet I presume?”

I nodded. What could I say? Suddenly Mary threw herself at his feet!

“Sir I beg of you. Wipe this murderer from the face of the earth!”

Gently he pulled her to her feet.

“What reason do you have to believe that Alice Bennet is a witch?” he asked.

There was nothing I could do except grit my teeth and listen as Mary recounted every detail of the previous night.

“She made them sick. Look at them they’re dead and it’s her fault!”

Fresh tears cascaded down her face. It was no good I couldn’t keep my mouth shut any longer.

“It’s not true sir. Yes, she did come to me last night and yes, I did refuse her a remedy. But the consequences of that were not my doing. I can’t help it if people are unable to pay. I need food and shelter just as much as them.”

“So you deny threatening her?”

“No, but it was only words. Nothing became of them.”

“How is it then,” he continued “that this woman’s children somehow all caught the sickness and died of it in the same night?”

That did it. A surge of rage boiled up inside me, threatening to explode!

“Listen to me! Mary said herself last night that it was only a matter of time before the others caught it. This whole event is nothing more than pure coincidence.”

“You can cure the sick” someone yelled out. “And won’t tell anyone how!”

“We’ve all heard you” added someone else. “We’ve all heard you nattering away to yourself all night long. That’s what witches do!”

I am sorry to say that Selky chose that particular moment to leap out the window and arch her back at the apparent intruder.

“Her Familiar!” a man called out. “She’s a witch. Kill her!”

I stared at them in disbelief. It was only too clear that this witch hunter had seen what he came for.

“My name,” he told the wild crowd, “Is John Hemming. And you, Alice Bennet, are on trial on suspicion of witch craft! Prepare the swimming test!”

Chapter 4

They stripped me of my clothes so I stood naked and shivering on the bank. A strong breeze had picked up that chilled me to the very bone. I hoped no one would think I was scared. Before me the still, icy waters of the stream lay waiting, ready to decide my fate! Meanwhile, Hemming was addressing the rest of the village.

“As you know water is pure. It won’t accept anything as evil as the soul of a witch. The test is simple. If she sinks she’s innocent and can carry on her life as if nothing ever happened.”

Innocent, I thought, and drowned!

“If she floats” he went on “she’s guilty and hanged!”

There were cheers and shouts as two large men bound my hands and feet together, while a longer rope was tied around my waist. They lowered me into the water, pulling the ropes tight. Despite everything part of me still dared to hope that I might stand a chance. Shutting my eyes tight I concentrated on nothing except the coolness of water around me, trying to push away the creeping dread now rising in the pit of my stomach. Please Lord, I begged, do not let this be the end. But the seconds went by and I still didn’t sink. The crowd was getting impatient.

“Hang her, she’ll never sink!”

“Kill the witch!”

“No!” I said desperately. “It’s the ropes. They’re holding them wrong!”

All ready I could see I was fighting a losing battle. These people had turned their hearts against me. (Not that they were ever in my favour in the first place.)

“WITCH, WITCH, WITCH!” They jeered.

Finally Hemming held up his hand for quiet and I held my breath, praying.

“The result is clear… She’s a witch, hang her!”

As they noose was placed around my neck and the stool kicked away, all I could think about was how I could have prevented this! Air rapidly left my lungs and I clawed at my throat desperately trying to breathe! My eyes felt like they were about to bulge out of my head. Everyone clapped and cheered and shouted, as little by little I felt my life slowly ebbing away. Death had come for me and there was nothing I could do to stop it! As my vision blurred the last thing I saw was John Hemming, a look of the upmost triumph on his wicked face, and Selky looking up at me with those green, haunting eyes.

Beware, people of Oaknell Rising. I may be dead but your nightmares are only just beginning! Wherever you go, wherever you are I’ll be waiting around every corner! I’ll make you suffer! You won’t ever be free! Poor, pathetic souls, you don’t know what you’ve let yourselves in for!

I’m not the first and I won’t be the last. Every day innocent women are turned upon by their friends and sent to the gallows. I sometimes think witch hunters don’t care whether they’re real witches or not, as long as they make lots of money. But sometimes…just sometimes…they get lucky. Every now and then a mysterious, old crone dies who perhaps isn’t so innocent after all. There are many witches out there leaving so much pain, misery and grief in their wake. You can’t stop them, you can’t reason with them, and neither holed stones nor rowan can keep them at bay. Whether I am one or not, whether the deaths of Mary’s children really were just coincidence…well…I’ll let you decide that one for yourself!