

WITCH
FINDER
RUTH WARBURTON



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Dedication – to be supplied



Luke lifted his head and sniffed the dusk. The rich smell of roast chestnuts pierced the cold foggy air, above the more familiar Spitalfields stink: horse manure, coal smoke, rubbish. Another day he might have searched his pockets for a farthing, bought a paper cone of hot, burst chestnuts and burnt his fingers as he ate. Not today. Not with his stomach churning like a wash tub and a fluttering sickness in his gut.

Instead he pushed past the scurrying children and sharp-faced errand boys, and stepped into the foetid, muck-strewn road.

At the Cock Tavern the gas-lamps were lit and the working girls called out to him, trying to catch his eye for the evening trade. Their cheap perfume wafted across the muddy street, cutting through the sharpness of the burning chestnut skins. He turned up his collar, readying himself to run the gauntlet.

‘Come on now, Luke Lexton!’ Miriam called as he drew near. ‘A man like you can’t be a monk all yer life. I’ve seen you with those horses, how’s about I teach you to ride something a bit more lively?’

‘Don’t listen to her!’ Phoebe twirled her skirts as he passed, flashing her crimson petticoat and stockings. ‘I’ll give you the first ride for free, Luke. For a birthday present, eh?’

‘My birthday’s been and gone yesterday,’ he muttered into his muffler. ‘And I’m late for me uncle.’

‘Come back with your uncle and all!’ Miriam cried. ‘William Lexton’s a fine figure of a man too!’

They were still giggling and making eyes over their fans as he rounded the corner.

It was full dark when he entered Fournier Street, the narrow brick houses rising high either side of him. Once these had been the homes of Huguenot silk-weavers, a fine prosperous quarter. Now the silk was woven in far-off India, but on a fine day you could sometimes see bright scraps still fluttering in the windows. Tonight every window was closed and dark, and the yellow-grey fog hung low, trickling between the buildings like a living, breathing thing. The single hissing street lamp barely pierced the gloom, but Luke still pulled his muffler high and his cap low, and he looked up and down the street before he knocked on the door of a shuttered house, three times slow, three fast, three slow.

‘Who’s there?’ The voice behind the wooden door was gruff.

‘A man looking for work.’ It was the first time Luke had spoken the words, but he’d learnt them by heart long ago. Now, as he said them, his voice low, he felt something tighten round his heart.

‘What’s your trade?’

‘I can wield a hammer.’

‘Then enter, friend.’

The door swung wide, a shaft of firelight piercing the fog.

‘Come in, young Luke, your uncle’s inside.’ John Leadingham the butcher stood back against the wall, holding the door as Luke squeezed into the narrow hall.

Inside the small parlour a knot of men were crowded around a smoky fire, their heads low and faces grim. They looked up as Luke entered, and then stood, welcoming him with claps on the back.

‘Luke, my boy.’

‘Come on, lad, take a seat by the fire. It’s a foul night.’

‘Are you ready then?’ His uncle, a tall broad man with a blacksmith’s scarred hands, took a grip on Luke’s shoulder, looking at him steadily.

Was he ready? He swallowed and nodded.

‘Come on now, cat got yer tongue?’

‘Yes, Uncle. I’m ready.’

‘Not “uncle” after tonight, lad.’ Will Lexton gave him a smile. ‘After tonight we’re brothers.’

Not if I fail, Luke thought. But he knew what his uncle's answer would be to that: *You won't fail*.

'To the Brotherhood!' Benjamin West raised his tankard high, so that it gleamed in the firelight.

'To the Brotherhood!' William Lexton, John Leadingham and a dozen other voices joined in.

'To the Brotherhood!' Luke said. He had no glass to lift.

'Are we all 'ere?' John Leadingham looked round the circle of faces. There were murmurs as the men looked for missing faces, counted under their breath, then nodded. John gave a final, confirming nod and said, 'Then let the meet begin. Men, put on your masks.'

There was a rustle all around the room as hands dug in pockets and hoods were slipped over heads, and within a few moments all the faces except Luke's were covered with a black hood. Suddenly these were no longer men he'd known since childhood, friends of his uncle's, market traders and bargemen and farriers and smiths, but strangers – strangers with hard eyes that glittered through the slits in their masks. They didn't move, but somehow he had the feeling that they pressed in on him, leaning forward hungrily. He stood his ground, but it took all he had to stop himself from taking a step backwards, out of the circle of glittering eyes, running home through the familiar stinking streets of Spitalfields, back to the forge.

Then one man, gowned as well as masked, spoke. Luke thought it might be John Leadingham, but his voice was hard and harsh, not the hoarse friendly croak that called

out the price of meat all day long from the blood-spattered stall in Smithfield market.

‘Luke Lexton, you’ve come here to our meeting house, you’ve given the secret passwords and entered into our circle. What is your purpose here tonight?’

‘I wish to join the Brotherhood,’ Luke answered. His voice was very low, but he was relieved that it sounded firm to his ears.

‘Before I put to you the trial by knife and the trial by fire and the trial of the hammer, I must tell you this; once you join the Malleus Maleficorum there is no way out except one: death. D’you understand?’

‘I do.’

‘I give you this last chance; you may go freely now with no hunt at your heels. Do you wish to leave, or join us, now and forever?’

Luke’s heart was pounding in his ears and he found his fists were clenched, his bitten nails ground into his palms.

‘I wish to join you,’ he said harshly. ‘Now and for ever.’

‘Good,’ the man said, and his voice beneath the black mask held a smile. ‘Good man.’

He paused for a moment and Luke passed his tongue over dry lips, tasting salt sweat from the heat of the fire and the close-packed bodies in the room. Then the man carried on.

‘Three trials you must face, to join the Brotherhood. Three trials, and if you fail ’em you face death. D’you understand, Luke Lexton?’

‘I understand.’

‘Then let the trials begin,’ said the masked man, and there was a hushed murmur around the group, though Luke could not make out any words. He searched for his uncle, but he could not pick him out of the circle. William Lexton was a tall man – Luke was six foot and his uncle topped him by an inch – but in the flickering firelight the silhouettes seemed to wax and wane like shadows, growing taller against the wall and then dwindling back, until Luke could not have said which shape was which.

‘First, the trial by knife,’ said the man. He drew back his black robe and in his hand was a long knife with a wicked edge and a point that glinted in the firelight.

Luke swallowed. His uncle had told him nothing of what would happen tonight, saying only that it was not worth either of their skins to spill the secrets of the Brotherhood to an outsider. Luke would know the day after his eighteenth birthday and not a moment before. But something in his eyes had told Luke that his uncle feared for him and pitied him, and now he began to understand why. The knife must have been six, eight inches long, and as wicked and sharp as the tongue of a nagging woman.

‘Take the knife, Luke Lexton.’

Luke put out his hand. He let it hover over the hilt of the knife for a long moment, trying to summon up the courage to do what he knew he must. It was too late to turn back, too late to run now. As the man had said, there was no way out, except one.

Don't be a bloody coward. The voice in his head was harsh with fear and fury. *Don't disgrace yourself. If you fail now . . .*

His fingers closed over the hilt of the knife. It was warm from the fire and fitted into his palm.

'This test is a test of obedience and purpose, Luke Lexton. By taking this test you show that if you are tasked with something you will do it, without question, without counting the cost to yourself. If you falter, if you lack purpose and resolve, we are all lost. Only by the strength of one can we all succeed. Understand?'

'Yes,' Luke said. His voice sounded strange and grim in his own ears. 'Yes. I understand.'

'Good. Put the knife to your belly.'

He felt sweat prickle across his face and spine and for a moment he didn't believe what he'd heard. This couldn't be right – they couldn't mean him to stab himself, surely?

'What?'

'Put it to your belly,' said the man, and there was a steel in his voice that made Luke realize his role was not to question, but to obey.

He shrugged off his coat and muffler, and then put the tip of the knife to the flesh of his belly, in the soft place beneath his ribs, where there was nothing to stop its slide but skin and muscle. He felt a sickness in his gut as the point bit and a tiny fleck of blood stained the whiteness of his shirt.

'Now, stab yourself, Luke Lexton, and if you value your life and the Brotherhood, hold fast. Do you understand?'

'I understand,' Luke said. A kind of hopelessness rose up in him: the realization that the only choice before him was death or disgrace. He gripped the knife, feeling the hilt slip beneath his sweating palms, and he tightened his grip until his fingers hurt and the tendons on the back of his hand stood out, shadowed in the firelight.

For a minute he thought of dropping the knife, of running – but there was his uncle. And more: at his back there were the shadows of his mother and father and all they'd suffered. If he couldn't do this thing for his own honour, surely he could do it for theirs?

Remember why you want to join, the voice in his head hissed, full of venom. Remember what it's all for. Do it, you coward.

He lifted the knife and stabbed it into his gut, gasping as the hilt hit hard against the skin of his belly and he could go no further.

For a minute he felt nothing, but then pain blossomed across his side and the blood began to trickle down his belly, soaking into the worn cloth of his work trousers. He felt sick, sick with pain, sick with the knowledge of what he'd done.

'Take it out,' said the man, his voice hard and clipped. Luke closed his eyes, dreading the slick, grating tug and the mortal gush of blood and guts. Then he pulled.

There was a murmur around the circle, an exhalation of breath and then a few relieved guffaws.

Luke opened his eyes and looked at the knife in his hand.

For a minute he didn't understand. His eyes were blurred with sweat and he had to lift his arm to wipe his brow and clear his vision. Then he saw.

The blade of the knife had slid up inside the hilt, until only a sliver remained – just an inch, barely. It was that which had stabbed his side, making the blood come. But it was not a mortal wound, nothing like it.

'Well done, Luke Lexton,' said the man, his voice warm and strong. He held out his palm and Luke gave back the knife with a hand that shook. 'Well done. You were strong and steadfast, and your courage saved your life. Look,' and he showed Luke the little button in the handle which, if the hilt were gripped hard and firm, released the blade to slide inside the hilt.

'If you'd not held fast, if your grip had wavered, it would've been death to you. D'you see? The switch wouldn't have released the blade, it would've stayed firm and stabbed you to death. Only someone who grips the hilt and drives the knife firmly home can live. It's a test of trust and faith. To show that although what we ask of you may not always make sense, there's always good reason behind it, and only that trust will see us all through.'

Luke closed his eyes, feeling the blood hot on his side and the weakness in his legs, and he nodded, wishing it were all over, wishing he could go home, but knowing it had barely begun.

'You've passed the trial by knife. The second trial is the trial by fire,' said the man. He stepped forward, towards the

fire, and Luke saw that there was something resting on the edge of the grate: a long metal handle, with the far end plunged into the heart of the coals.

The man wrapped a cloth around his hand, picked up the handle resting on the hearth and drew the glowing tip out of the fire. It was a brand: he'd seen one often enough to recognize it. Luke's uncle used them on horses and sometimes cattle, if their owners needed them to be marked. He'd even branded a few animals himself, when his uncle was busy, and he'd always winced at their pain and their bellowing cries, but never thought that one day . . .

The end glowed so bright he could not see the design, only the heat that shimmered from it, making the air ripple and waver. Then the man thrust it back into the heart of the fire and spoke.

'Take off your shirt.'

Luke swallowed against the dryness in his throat and he began to fumble with the buttons of his shirt. The men watched, their eyes glinting in the firelight as his reluctant fingers loosened one button, then two, then another, and another, until his shirt hung loose and he could feel the heat of the fire on his naked chest and belly. Blood was already crusting around the cut he'd made, the trail down his side turning black and cracked. He took off the shirt and laid it on the floor at his feet.

'This test is a test of endurance and silence. You must not flinch. You must not cry out. By enduring this test in silence you show that your loyalty to the Brotherhood may

be tested, but you will not betray them by any cry or word. Do you understand?’

Luke nodded, not sure that his voice would obey him, but the man shook his head.

‘Speak, Luke. Do you understand?’

‘I understand,’ he said hoarsely.

‘Then kneel and hold fast to the chair.’

Luke knelt, holding on to the back of the chair, feeling his breath coming fast and his heart racing beneath his ribs as if he might be sick. One of the other men held on to the seat of the chair so that it wouldn’t rock or fall if he flinched or fell himself. Luke heard the whisper of ash as the man took the brand from the fire, and his blood sang in his ears, a strange, fierce, fearful song.

‘Hold fast, Luke Lexton,’ said the voice.

Then there was a hiss and a heat against his shoulder. For a moment there was no pain and he thought it was all a trick, as the knife had been. But then a roaring, tearing anguish began to engulf his skin and his muscles, until it seemed as if even the bones of his shoulder itself were burning. A great bellow of agony rose up from his guts and he almost cried out, but just in time he remembered his promise of silence and he gripped on to the struts of the chair and bit into his own forearm so that no sound escaped but his tearing, whimpering, ragged breaths.

Beneath his closed lids, constellations of pain exploded and spun and his blood roared in his ears. He wanted nothing more than to beg for it to stop, to scream for water,

for pity, for *anything*.

The circle of masks was completely silent, listening to his struggle, listening for any cry. Then, after what seemed an age, the first man spoke.

‘Well done, Luke Lexton. You’ve passed the trial by fire.’

There was a hiss of breaths released around the room and Luke gave a sobbing groan.

‘Get something for the burn,’ the man said, and one of the masked men came hurrying forward with a pot of grease, like the one Luke’s uncle used when he burnt himself at the forge. He felt his shoulder smeared with the ointment and then hands helped him to sit, pulling him to a settle, dressing the burn with a clean cloth.

‘You’ll have a wound for a few days,’ said the man. ‘And then a mark, as we all do. As best we know, the meaning of this mark is not known to any outsiders. We show it to none but our wives – and they mustn’t know what it signifies. D’you understand?’

This time Luke could not speak, he only nodded, and the man seemed satisfied.

‘Good. Good man, Luke Lexton.’

They passed him his shirt and, with their help, he struggled into it, feeling the bandage over his shoulder grate and move as the rough cloth jostled the dressing. There were teeth marks in his arm. He’d not broken the skin, but there would be a welt there for a while.

Someone passed him a half-drunk tankard and he drained it, before he realized that it was not beer, but gin.

It burnt his gullet and then smouldered in his gut, and he half sat, half lay across the settle in front of the fire, feeling the sick cold in his limbs subside a little with the warmth of the fire and the warmth of the gin.

‘And now, for the last trial – the trial of the hammer.’

‘Wait,’ said a voice from beneath a hood, and for the first time Luke recognized his uncle’s voice. ‘Give him a minute, Brother. He’s in no fit state—’

‘He’s conscious,’ said the man in the gown sternly. ‘He knows his own mind and can plead his own case. Luke Lexton, are you fit to continue?’

Coward, whispered the voice.

Luke was sick and sweating, but he managed to sit up straighter. He wasn’t about to back down now and shame himself and his uncle and the memory of his parents. He nodded.

‘I can carry on.’ His voice was strange in his own ears. His throat felt tender and raw, as if he had screamed himself hoarse, though he knew full well he’d not made a sound except for shameful pup-like whimpers. He wondered if his uncle had been this weak, or if he’d borne the brand in proud silence, and he gritted his teeth and forced himself fully upright. ‘I can carry on.’

‘Good man,’ said the man in the gown. ‘Now, this last trial is different. All we require of you tonight is that you accept the task and undertake to do it to the best of your abilities, or die in the attempt. Tonight the moon is full – when the full moon rises again, either they must be

dead, or you. D'you understand?'

'Yes,' said Luke, though he did not.

'Bring out the book,' said the man. There was a rustle at the back of the room and an old masked man limped slowly forward, a huge brass-bound book in his hands. The man in the gown fitted a brass key to the lock and opened the book.

Inside was page after page after page of closely written names, some with a line through, some scratched out so harshly that the paper was rough and hollow.

'This book contains the name of every witch known to this organization – some of them listed thanks to you, Luke – and every one we've sworn to hunt down and kill. The men and women named here have poisoned our brothers and sisters, enslaved them, enchanted them, even killed them. Every one has a heart as black as pitch and it is our sworn duty not to rest until London is wiped clean of their kind. After the trial of the knife and the trial by fire, we ask our Brothers for one more trial to prove their worth – the trial of the hammer: they must pick a name from the book and kill that witch. Do you understand?'

'Yes,' said Luke. And now he did. He stared at the list of names, the faded, scratched handwriting swimming before his eyes. 'What of the ones who're scratched out?' he asked.

'They're the ones your Brothers have killed before you.'

'How do I choose?'

'We let God choose. We bind your eyes, give you a pin.'

God will guide you to the name. Are you ready?

'I'm ready,' Luke said. He sat motionless while they tied a cloth over his eyes and then pushed a pin was pushed between his fingers. Then he felt for the stiff pages of the book beneath his other hand.

He turned the pages slowly, carefully, blindly. There was only one thing in his mind: a figure. A figure he had glimpsed by firelight long ago and the tall shadow it cast on the bedroom wall behind it. It was almost fifteen years since he had seen its shape, but it was still burnt into his mind, and his eye, and all of his nightmares.

This is for my ma, he thought, as his fingers ran down the list, as if touch could guide him to the right name. *This is for my pa*, as he came to a stop, the pin poised in his hand. *Please God, let it be him. Let it be the right one.*

He stabbed with the pin, feeling it pierce the page deep, deep, as he ground it into the book with all the strength of his hatred.

'He's chosen.' The man's voice rang out in the small room. 'Let it be witnessed; he's chosen.'

Luke fumbled with the bandage and opened his eyes, blinking, to the firelight and the circle of faces. Then he bent his head to the book, to see what name lay skewered by his pin.

'Rosamund Greenwood,' he read aloud, with a stab of fury. A woman. He knew nothing about her, except that she was a witch. A witch, but not the one he'd wanted, and for that alone he hated her, as if the rest wasn't reason

enough. She'd robbed him of avenging his father and mother and—

'No.' A voice was rising from the back of the room in panic. 'No, no, no. He must choose again.'

'Brother.' The gowned man held up a hand. 'You know the rules . . .'

'No!' The speaker tore off his mask and Luke saw his uncle standing there, his face flushed with the fire. 'You must be mad, John! Her brother's Alexis Greenwood, thick as thieves with the Knyvets, or so they say. To send a green boy up against witches like that—'

'You know the rules.' The gowned man spoke wearily but firmly. 'Put your mask back on, Brother, or you'll be thrown from the meeting.'

'He'll be killed!' William roared.

'She's nowt but a sixteen-year-old girl, William,' another voice tried to put in. 'It coulda bin worse—'

'Worse? Only if she'd picked Knyvet himself, or another of the Ealdwitan! And then I might as well cut his head from his shoulders right here and save us the trouble of fetching his body. Let him choose again, I say!'

'No.' John pulled off his own mask and faced William. His face was both angry and sad. 'The rules are the rules, William. We can't pick and choose for our own, you know that as well as I. God knows, we've had hard choices before – Bates, Jack Almond, young Tom Simmonds. We've lost Brothers and mourned 'em but—'

'Not in a lost cause!' William's voice broke, and he took

John by the shoulders. ‘We’ve lost fights, lost men, I know that as well as you. But this is a lamb to the slaughter. Do *not* do this, John. You’re a good man – better than this.’

‘Hey,’ Luke said from where he sat. They took no notice of him. He stood and said louder, ‘Uncle! *William!*’

Two faces, red in the firelight, turned to look at him. Luke thought they’d almost forgotten he was there.

‘It’s my choice,’ he said bitterly. ‘Mine. And I choose to take the task. A sixteen-year-old girl, you said – and you think I’m a lamb to the slaughter?’

‘You don’t understand, boy—’ William began, but Luke broke in. His fists were clenched so that his nails made half-moons on the skin of his palms.

‘I understand. I understand that every other man here’s done as I’m being asked to do, and none of them backed down. Don’t take away that right from me. I’ll not have men say I was too frightened to face a girl fresh out of the schoolroom.’

‘Luke . . .’ William put out a pleading hand, but Luke turned away from his uncle towards John Leadingham.

‘I accept the task. I’ll kill the girl. And there’s an end.’