



The Bewitching Of
AVELINE JONES

For Janna, my dark half

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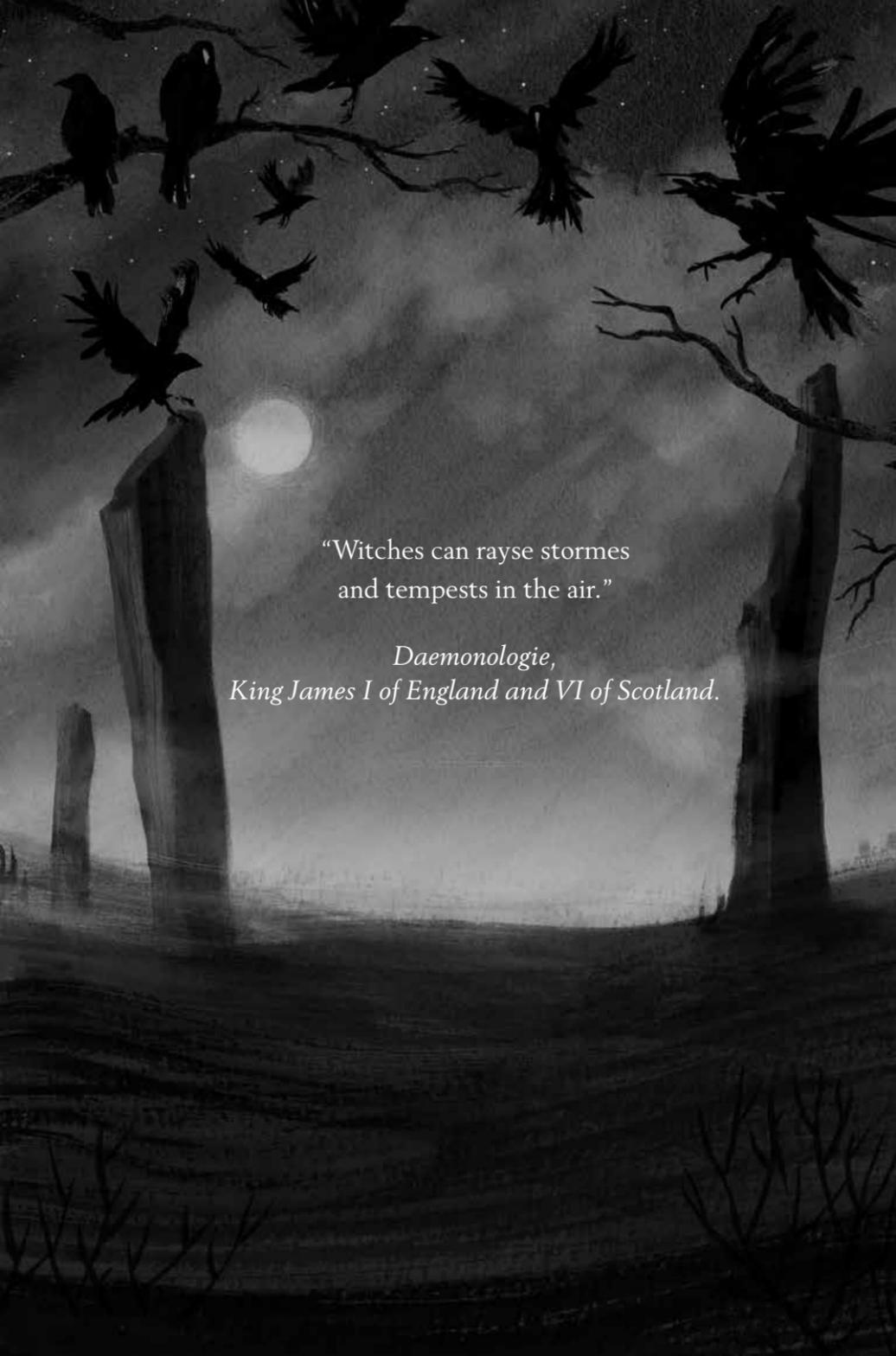
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Phil Hickes

Illustrated by Keith Robinson





“Witches can rayse stormes
and tempests in the air.”

Daemonologie,
King James I of England and VI of Scotland.



Chapter 1

Stone and Glass

Aveline Jones glared at the thorny bramble lodged in the sleeve of her T-shirt. Wincing, she freed herself from its spiky grip. This was the most ridiculously overgrown garden she'd ever stepped foot in. Sighing, she took off her grimy glasses and wiped them on her T-shirt. She would be staying here for the next couple of weeks, so supposed she'd better get used to it.

Aveline's mum worked for a charity and had been so busy recently that Aveline had abandoned hopes of actually going away for a summer holiday. But then, with just enough time for a break before school started back up in September, her mum had announced that she'd booked them a cottage in the countryside, not too far from Bristol

where they lived. Aveline would have preferred two weeks on a beach in Spain, but this was better than nothing. So while her friends were probably swimming in a perfect blue ocean somewhere, here she was, having a fight with a blackberry bush.

However, there was one very good reason why Aveline was willing to risk injury to reach the end of the garden.

The Witch Stones.

There was an ancient stone circle, right here in Norton Wick, the village where they were staying. The name gave Aveline the shivers. Ghosts, ghouls and witches were, of course, her specialist subject, and this creepily named stone circle had been mentioned in a book she'd read once. Now she would be able to visit it for real. Apparently, the stones had been here for thousands of years but, as far as Aveline could tell, nobody *really* knew why the circle had been built, though there were a lot of theories.

Some said it was a type of calendar, so ancient people could keep track of the seasons. Others said it was a temple, where people might come and worship the gods. There were those who claimed that aliens had built it. Others said it was connected to the druids, ancient Celtic priests who were either healers, wizards or bloodthirsty fiends, depending on who you believed.

Aveline found it all very interesting, but it was the *name* of these stones that really fascinated her. The book she'd read hadn't mentioned anything about witches, so why were they called The Witch Stones? The first step in finding the answer would be to see them for herself, and the owner of the cottage had told them that the stones were *very* close by. Right at the end of the garden, in fact.

Steeling herself for more scratches from the vindictive blackberry thorns, Aveline fought her way onwards. She would have thought someone might have tidied the place up before they'd arrived. Plants and weeds thrust themselves skyward, blocking her path at every turn. Sparrows and thrushes scuttled in the undergrowth. Huge spiders bobbed between the bushes on gossamer threads. Bees buzzed busily between the bright flowers, pollen coating their little legs like fuzzy yellow leg warmers. It felt as if she'd stepped uninvited into a private party.

Following a nasty encounter with some nettles, and a brief scuffle with a hawthorn bush, Aveline was making good progress when her foot hit something hard that made a clinking sound. Bending down, she rummaged around in the undergrowth. Light glinted off something in the dark soil. Intrigued, she dug her fingers into the earth

until they closed on something solid. Burrowing deeper, she prised the object loose.

A bottle.

Old by the looks of it, with a thin neck and small oval body. Its glass was green and murky and impossible to see through, even after she'd cleaned off the clods of dirt. Straightening up, Aveline held it to the sunlight. Her fingers tingled, but that could just have been nettle stings. Inside she could see *something*, but it was hard to tell exactly what that *something* was. Just a blackish blob. All the same, it gave her the chills; a ripple of unease crept up her arms.

Giving the bottle a shake, she heard a tiny rattle. Examining the neck of the bottle more closely, she saw that it had been sealed with a thick layer of wax, which might have once been red but was now the colour of tar. She tried pulling it loose, but it was as hard as cement. It seemed that if she wanted to see what the bottle contained, she would probably have to smash it – something she was reluctant to do. In fact, part of her wanted to leave it well alone. But she was curious, too. Old bottles with things inside them couldn't just be ignored.

Holding it between finger and thumb, Aveline finally found her way to the bottom of the garden and placed it

carefully at the base of the stone wall that separated their cottage from the fields beyond. A huge rhododendron bush offered some welcome shade and so she sat down beside it to catch



her breath. A few minutes here in the earthy coolness would be a welcome relief from the mugginess of the late afternoon. August had been blisteringly hot and even though they were nearly at the end of the month, it showed no sign of cooling down.

Rubbing the scratches on her arms, Aveline glanced back at the cottage. They'd arrived an hour or so ago, along with a small mountain of supplies. Being in a new place felt disorientating. The view was different. The smells were different. Everything was different. And she'd certainly never stayed anywhere quite so remote before. The village had been hard to find, tucked away down twisting, narrow lanes. With its crooked houses and weathered signposts, it felt as if the world had moved on but forgotten to tell the residents. That had been one of the reasons why her mum had wanted to come here –

she'd thought it would be fun for them to get away from the bustle of the big city. Well, she'd certainly got her wish, Aveline thought with a smirk. Not only had they got away from the city but it felt like they'd stepped back in time. There were unsightly brown stains on the cottage walls. The taps dripped. The roof leaked. The windowpanes were cracked. The place was like an old man with creaky joints and a nasty cough. Aveline had been relieved to discover it had electricity and hot water. But it did make her wonder – when had anyone last stayed here? It felt like they were the first people to enter the place for a hundred years.

Feeling a little cooler now, Aveline clambered to her feet and spotted a small wooden gate in the garden wall. Just like everything else here, it had seen better days. The green paint had faded and blistered and the lock was brown with rust. With a loud grunt, Aveline tugged the bolt free and pushed the gate open, the screech of its hinges a sure sign that it hadn't been opened in a long time.

Immediately, her eyes widened.

In front of her was a ring of gigantic, moss-covered stones. She'd found them – The Witch Stones – almost within touching distance of where they were staying.

Aveline had wondered if she might have to pay to go and see them, but here they were in all their glory, with no car parks, ticket booths, information stands or other visitors to be seen. It felt like she'd stumbled into a secret place, hidden away in the green folds of the countryside.

Stepping closer, Aveline sniffed the warm summer air. Her first impression was that the stones smelled of cow dung. But then there *was* a herd of cows milling around, so that made perfect sense.

She counted thirteen stones in total, double-checking to make sure. Three stones stood upright, shaped like giant arrowheads – gigantic chunks of rock that looked as if they weighed a thousand tonnes each. The other stones lay flat in the grass, their scarred, grey expanses like the backs of huge whales when they surface for the briefest moment.

Aveline stared with her mouth gaping, immediately fascinated by this eerie monument. It did seem a little strange that she was the only one here, especially as it was the peak of the summer holidays. In fact, the only other living things to be seen were the cows, which wandered idly between the stones, munching on the lush summer grass while swatting away flies with their tails.

She considered the situation. The stones were certainly in a remote location. And while impressive, they weren't

anywhere near as grand as the giant megaliths at Stonehenge, which attracted coachloads of tourists from all over the world. Maybe it was simply because these weren't as famous? Anyway, she didn't mind one bit. It meant she would have them all to herself.

Then she heard laughter. Maybe the stones did have another visitor after all?

Suddenly shy, Aveline retreated back through the wooden gate and hunkered down in the foliage of the cottage garden, leaving the gate open so she could still see the stones. The day had a hazy, fuzzy feel about it now, everything starting to soften like melting butter. The horizon shimmered. Midges danced lazily between the sun's rays.

As Aveline watched with heavy eyes, a figure emerged through the haze. A girl. Dressed in a flowing white dress, which contrasted with her long black hair, she tiptoed through the long grass as if following the steps of some ancient ritual, trailing her hands over the stones and stroking them like a cat. Aveline couldn't tear her eyes away, transfixed by the girl's curious movements.

What on earth was she doing?

As Aveline stared, the girl paused, then shot a look in her direction, a glint of a smirk flashing across her dark



features. Aveline had thought she'd done a good job of concealing herself, but the girl appeared to have known instantly that she was being observed. Embarrassed, Aveline shrank back further into the long grass. It wasn't good to be caught staring.

Grabbing the bottle she'd found a few minutes earlier, she traced her way back through the garden as quickly as she could, cursing as the brambles tried to grab her again. Running into the cottage kitchen, she pulled herself up on the edge of the sink and peered out of the window, but although she could just about see the stones through the open gate, the girl had disappeared.

"You know what curiosity did to the cat, Aveline," her mum said from behind her.

"Stopped it dying from boredom?" Aveline snapped, jumping down.

Her mum laughed, tossing the curls back from her face.

"Oh, come on, Aveline, it's not *that* bad here. What were you looking at?"

"I went and found the stone circle and I was going to have a look around but there was a girl there."

"Well, maybe she's a kindred spirit – she might be as fascinated by those stones as you are. You should have gone and said hello—"

“Mum,” Aveline said, cutting her off before she had a chance to get into one of her *you should immediately make friends with everyone you see* conversations.

“Anyway, what’s that horrible dirty thing on the nice, clean counter?” Aveline’s mum said, taking her cue to change the subject.

“I found it in the garden. It’s an old bottle. But I don’t know what’s in it, because it’s sealed shut.”

“Well, I’d rather it stayed in the garden.”

“But there might be something valuable in there!” Aveline protested.

“Yes, there might also be nasty germs. If it’s been in the garden for a long time then I’m sure it can survive a few more days out there.”

Aveline was about to argue, but then remembered that they were supposed to be having a relaxing time, so she picked the bottle up and opened the back door.

“Okay, I won’t be a minute.”

The warm breeze fanned her face. Gingerly, she made her way down through the garden again, being careful not to trip with the bottle in her hand. Once at the wall, she peered out through the gateway at the stones, wondering if the girl was still there, but apart from the cows the site appeared to be deserted. Reaching down, she placed the

bottle carefully in the soil, scooping a few handfuls of earth round it to keep it from toppling over. Her mum was right. If it had been buried out here for this long, it'd be fine until she decided what to do with it. And actually, Aveline wasn't sure she wanted it in the cottage either. Something felt...off about it, so perhaps she should do some research first before she did anything else. Her friend, Harold, would definitely be able to help. She'd met him last year and his great-uncle owned a bookshop. Harold was coming to stay with them for a few days and he might be able to dig up a book about old bottles that he could bring with him. She made a mental note to speak to him before he arrived.

As she stood back up, a large magpie landed on the garden wall.

"Shoo," Aveline said. "Go away and mind your own business."

In her head she heard the start of a familiar rhyme:

One for sorrow, two for joy...

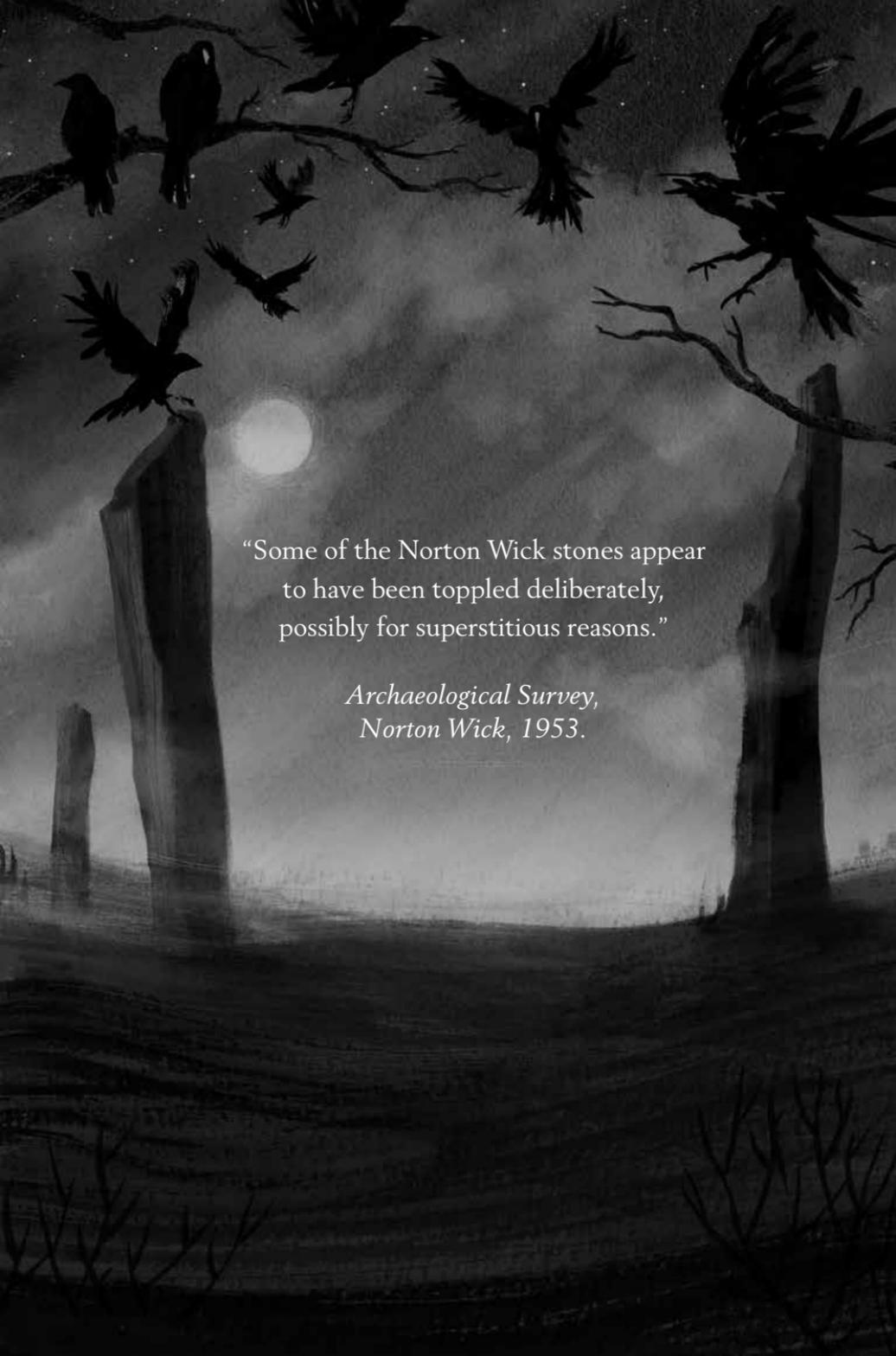
She couldn't remember the rest. Meanwhile, the magpie had ignored her command and stared at her with its beady black eyes. Opening its wings, it let out a raucous caw that sounded uncannily like mocking laughter – or a cackling witch.

A witch for The Witch Stones.

As if hearing her thought, the magpie wheeled away, landing on the tallest of the stones before cawing once again. Aveline turned her back on it and ran up to the cottage.

Just before she reached the door, something made her turn around for one final look. Standing on tiptoe, for a second she thought she saw a silhouette crouched in the gateway, staring up at the cottage. Aveline didn't wait to see who it belonged to. The shadows were creeping up the path and she hurriedly shut the door behind her, taking care to slide home the lock.





“Some of the Norton Wick stones appear to have been toppled deliberately, possibly for superstitious reasons.”

*Archaeological Survey,
Norton Wick, 1953.*