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Opening Extract from...

Witch Hunt

Written by Syd Moore

Published by AVON

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SYD MOORE

Witch Hunt

AVON

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For those who were prevented from telling their story.
And for Granddad York.

'Besides, when any Errour is committed
Whereby wee may Incurre or losse or shame,
That wee ourselves thereof may be acquitted
Wee are too ready to transferre the blame
Upon some Witch: That made us does the same.
It is the vulgar Plea that weake ones use
I was bewitch'd: I could nor will: nor chuse.
But my affection was not caus'd by Art:
The witch that wrought on mee was in my brest.'

Sir Francis Hubert
Quoted in *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* by Alan MacFarlane

'The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, ideas, prejudices, to be found only in the minds of men. For the record, prejudices can kill and suspicion can destroy. A thoughtless, frightened search for a scapegoat has a fallout all its own for the children yet unborn.'

Rod Serling, creator of *The Twilight Zone*
and civil rights activist

Prologue

They told me not to come.

He said 'Twill do no good. Nay more.' And he tried to touch my shoulder and bring me back into the court but I was too quick and ran pushing through the crowd. Some saw me and stepped aside, unwilling to be touched, as if they might catch my sin. Others shrieked.

I made off through the side lane.

And then I came here.

I have put on my cap and wrapped a shawl over too. So none may see me.

Though I see all.

And I see them: bound and tethered in a pen.

Like sheep.

Then there are the others, the eager spectators.

So many cluster before me, edging their way forward, craning to get a good view, that I can only catch glimpses through the space between my neighbours' shoulders. On their faces some have smiles. The girl beside me, only two or three years younger than I, licks her lips and stands up on her toes. Her father, in starched lace and black, pulls her back down and, with a stare, admonishes her excitement. But the woman beside him, whom

I saw at a stall selling nuts for the crowd, has a face full of glory. Her eyes are wide in anticipation. In her hands she has a knife and fingers it greedily. She will try to get some hair from the dead for keepsakes to sell on.

A hush falls over the crowd as the first is helped up to the scaffold. I can see from the way she stumbles it is Old Mother Clarke. Her ancient face is creased with lines of age and knots of confusion. Two of the men assisting the execution have taken an arm each to support her, for she cannot stand firm with but one leg. She staggers forward and clutches the man on her right to steady herself as the hangman puts the noose over her head.

A woman at the front of the crowd near the gallows hurls something rotten. It hits Mother Clarke on the chin and she looks about to throw some rebuke back but before she can open her mouth comes the push. Her wizened frame drops and cracks as the noose does its work. Quickly. Thank God. And she is turned off.

Next it is Anne Leech. Younger than Mother Clarke, she wrestles with the hangman as much as she can with her hands and feet bound. There is little way to fight. But she will not go without one. One of the throng of eager spectators, a man with a red beard and broad shoulders, goads her and calls 'Witch. You will go to the Devil now.' Anne always had more spirit than others and she spits at him and calls out a curse. The crowd starts to move, excited by the show, laughing as the hangman roughly slips over the noose. But Anne is angry and wild. She begins to bring down a curse on the hangman, but cannot finish: a shove from behind stops her words. But it does not stop her life and she twists and turns on the end of the line like a fish from the brook. The hangman speaks to the man

at his side and points to the cross beam. The rope is coming apart. He calls for a ladder but not in time for the rope to unravel and Anne falls with it to the ground, catching the side of the scaffold as she goes down.

The crowd surges forward to watch. She is picked up and shown. To their delight they see she has dashed out an eye and is carried back up to the third noose and hanged once more. A deep red drip from her face darkens her dress yet still the twitching goes on. A girl at the front runs forward to pull on her legs but she is stopped by the broad-shouldered man.

Above Anne the hangman and his men throw up another rope. Elizabeth Clarke is being taken down. I cannot see where they take her corpse.

And there is another witch now on the platform. I do not know her name. She has soiled herself with fear. It is hot and her face is greasy with sweat. As she is brought to Elizabeth's noose she falls down in a fainting fit and is dragged over to the side. The hangman calls for a pitcher of water to rouse her. She must be awake to see her end.

And then she *is there on the scaffold. Her long black locks move gently as she turns to the noose. I gasp as I see her watch Anne's feet jerking without rhythm to her side. But she says nothing. She is solemn. Silent. Unhearing of the jeers of the crowd come to witness her end. But I see her eyes searching over the faces.*

For a moment I think perhaps our eyes meet and I see in them a movement, a quick darting, a widening of the whites. Does she see me? I raise up my face and move back my shawl, bolder now, unconcerned about what the spectators may do if they recognise me. My confidence is short-lived: I pull back suddenly and flinch as the noose comes down over her slender

white neck. Her mouth opens and I think she is about to speak but I cannot be sure because she has been pushed from the stool. The noose has strung tight. Her neck snaps to an unnatural angle, the feet kick out and then are still.

And I fall to my knees and am sick across the cobbles.

Oh God have mercy, what have I done?

What have I done?

Chapter One

11th October, 2012

It was the night that I bumped into Joe. So I guess, you could say that it wasn't ALL bad. I mean, it was terrible. There was no getting away from it: painful, gut-churning and all the rest. But at least something *good* came from it.

And when I say I bumped into Joe I mean exactly that. Literally. I was drunk, but in my defence I had had a seriously bad day. Anyway, there I was, coming down from the high giddy arc of a – even if I do say so myself – quite magnificent thrashing pirouette.

I *know*. At my age: thirty-three going on fifteen. Ridiculous.

Though to be fair, I had checked with the fount of all knowledge, Maggie Haines, beforehand.

'Am I too old to slam in the moshpit?' I had been swaying even then. Maggie, my dear friend, sometimes boss and celebrated editor of arts magazine, *Mercurial,* had peered at me and wriggled her button nose. Her face had a distinctly kittenish appearance, which was thoroughly misleading. The pretty feline exterior concealed a steely determination and unsettling intelligence that had notched up two degrees and an MA and which had far more in common with

panthers than domestic cats. I knew Maggie would give it to me straight – no messing. She was sober and had a grim look about her. And she hadn't wanted us to go to the club at all. In fact she'd been dead set on getting me straight home; I think I must have already been in a right old state when we'd left the pub. We were on the way to the local cab rank just a couple of blocks down when I heard the music coming from the basement of a venue and decided we should all go in. She'd said no. In fact she'd said 'No way,' and tried to wrap me up in her embrace and physically carry me down the road. But Jules, Maggie's hubby, put a staying hand on her arm and said, 'Let her.' Then he'd turned to me and said, 'Just for a bit, Sadie, okay?'

This time, though, Maggie looked like she was coming back with a firm 'no', but Jules convinced her (I think he'd had a few drinks and was starting to liven up a bit himself).

'Look around you, Sadie,' he said in answer to my question, with a grin that was only half-formed. There was sympathy in it and hints of condescension, but I didn't care. I followed his lead and stole a wider glance at the club. Stifling and dimly lit, it was packed full of sweaty bodies in varying states of inebriation and spatial coordination. The outfit on stage was playing at full pelt and the throng of clubbers clustered at their feet were going for it.

'Go on then,' Jules said. 'But we'll go straight home afterwards. Pogo is de rigueur here. Don't worry about your age. It's a punk covers band. We're surrounded by middle-aged spread. That bloke down the front with the red mohican looks past sixty.'

He was right. The place was jammed with bald heads and beer bellies. Not a pretty sight. The majority of blokes

were in the full throes of midlife crisis, desperately trying to hold on to their proudly misspent youth. The band themselves would have averaged about fifty-five in a '*10 Years Younger'* age poll. Though if you went on energy levels alone, you'd put them in their early twenties. They were setting the crowd on fire.

Saying that, you can't go wrong with the Buzzcocks, can you?

So, once I'd been granted permission, I launched myself into the front of the crowd and for about three minutes and twenty seconds I was able to submerge myself in the thumped-up beat and drag my head away from the awful images reeling in my head. Ironically the only time my thoughts stilled that day were as my body whirled and whirled.

For that, I will always salute thee, Punk Rock.

So, what happened was this; the alcohol had interfered with my sense of perspective and, in addition, boosted my energy. The result was a grand overshooting of the moshpit. In fact, I think if Joe hadn't been there with his mates, I probably would have landed flat on my arse amongst the broken glass at the edge of the dance floor.

That would not have been a great look.

But he was.

A six-foot-something, human monolith, standing there, very upright, radiating principle and that good old-fashioned honesty of his. You could suss his confidence from the way he owned his space. He was firm. Unfazed. And, luckily, ready to cushion my fall. I remember the way he propped me back up and looked at me, and, because he was out of his usual context, I had a split second of objectivity. I took

in the regulation cropped brown hair, the round wholesome eyes and not-so-designer stubble, casual t-shirt, jeans, trainers. He could have been a manual labourer: a carpenter or a builder. He had a pint in his hand and a cheeky grin on his face that gave him dimples. I remember thinking 'Not bad at all,' and then doing some hurried shoe shuffle on the floor to correct my balance and retrieve what shreds were left of my dignity. And then he said, 'Nice of you to drop in on me like this, Sadie.'

I recognised the voice and looked closer and said, 'Oh. Joe?'

And he laughed and said, 'One and the same.'

But after that, it's just fragments.

I must have talked to him and his mates for a bit till I returned to the dance floor, pulling Joe greedily and then taking him with me. I don't think he particularly wanted to dance. In fact, even though my perception was pretty clouded, I got the impression he was just going on bodyguard duty for me.

Then I rebounded back to Maggie and Jules and introduced him. I think they were saying that they wanted to go but I wanted to stay, and made some big dramatic thing of finding my drink and downing it in one. I bet that's what pushed me over the edge, because the next moment I was in the toilets revisiting the dignified spread that had been supplied earlier at the pub.

When I came back Maggie and Jules had got my coat and Joe had got his.

Maggie said, 'I dunno – he's offered to drive us home. How many has he had?'

I laughed and said, 'Not likely to have had any, Mags. He's a copper.' Then I got twisted up in my coat and Jules frowned.

I think Joe must have heard all that because he leant over and flashed his warrant card and said, 'It's all right, I'm not over the limit. She's off her head and needs to go.'

And I put my arm round his shoulders and said, 'But I haven't been cunting at all Drinkstable.' Then I hiccupped.

When I woke up in the back of Joe's car we were outside my flat. Maggie and Jules had already been dropped off. Joe brought me up the stairs of my small flat. I think he even carried me into my bedroom, laid me on the bed and took my shoes off. And that was over and above the call of duty to be sure.

I remember trying to kiss him. And that he pulled away and said, 'Not tonight, Sadie. I would but I can't.' Then he did that phone thing that people do with their hands – an L-shape like an old receiver – you call me or I'll call you.

I think he was sympathetic.

But when he closed the door I started bawling. And I carried on doing that till I passed out.

What a mess.

To be expected I suppose.

After all, it's not every day you bury your mum.

Chapter Two

Tuesday, 17th October

It began like a drip in a far off place. A vast echoing chamber. Or a faltering trickle into a dark yawning cave. First sibilance. Just off a hiss. Followed by a wheezy gasping sound. 'Ssss – rhey.'

Was it drawing closer or becoming louder? It was certainly getting clearer, wafting to me on an unfelt breeze. 'Sorr- rhey.' Puffed out in tones of torment. Fleshed out with a sob.

Falling on my ears, with a cold snatch of breath I got it. The single word. And it was on my lips. 'Sorry.'

Then I was sitting up in bed, awake. Fully alert. Despite the lightness of the cotton nightie sweat had pooled under my breasts. I was gulping down air as if I had only just reached the surface of some dark, subterranean lake. The bed sheet was twisted around my legs like a boa constrictor trying to eat me alive and my heart was banging like mad.

What *was* that?

Had I said that? Or was someone in the flat?

I strained to listen into its depths.

The hum of the fridge. The trees shushing in the breeze outside my window. The sound of roadworks further up the

hill. A door slamming in the neighbour's flat. The deceleration of a train pulling into Chalkwell station.

But nothing else. No one in the flat.

It must have been me.

Well, I knew I had just articulated the word – said it out loud as I was coming into consciousness. But I had a notion that I was merely repeating someone else's plaintive cries.

Sorry.

It had happened several times since the funeral. Each time I had woken up from a nightmare I couldn't remember, with the absolute conviction I was not on my own.

But then, the mind has a funny way of dealing with grief.

And of course, I *was* sorry.

Terribly.

The guilt was almost unbearable.

I knew Mum had been trying to talk to me. That last time we were alone at the hospice. I'd walked in to find her sleeping, so had kissed her on her forehead. Her hair was spread like a black fan across her pillow. She had been a young mum, and if you looked past the lines the illness had carved on her face, with her perfect semi-circles of long dark lashes and her thick black hair, she was still as serene and beautiful as a Renaissance Madonna.

But she'd woken at my touch and when she realised it was me she'd made a big thing of trying to meet my eyes. At first I thought she said, 'Sadie – fit.' It was difficult to tell. Her speech was much impaired since the last stroke. She'd been left with paralysis on the left side of her face and was unable to move her left arm.

'You okay, Mum?'

She was frustrated. 'Ift.'

I said nothing, waiting for her to try another attempt.

She struggled up a bit. I reached behind her and helped her sit up onto the pillows, plumping them carefully as she rested her neck.

She took a breath and looked at me. Her mouth opened, tongue lolling to the front. 'Gift.'

'A gift?'

She nodded.

'Okay. Who for?'

She moved her good hand in my direction. 'You.'

'You have a gift for me?' I looked at the bedside table. Glass, hand cream, anglepoise lamp.

'No. Come.' She paused for breath. 'To . . . you.'

'I have a gift coming?'

She expelled a lungful of air and shuddered. I could see the frustration scratching across her face. 'Speak Dan.'

Dan was my mum's boyfriend of about twelve years. A nice chap with a heart of gold. But he'd gone AWOL a couple of days before and Mum was in a real state about it, naturally. The poor woman was totally incapacitated, unable to do anything to find out where he was.

Thing was, Mum and Dan had a lot of things in common. They were both educators; both furious campaigners for human rights; and they both loved me. But, and this was a big but, they had both experienced long periods of depression. Mum's strokes had been a result of high blood pressure, which, in turn, it was suggested, had been brought about by her often high state of anxiety. See, Mum didn't have bouts of sadness, she had episodes of deep clinical depression, some of which developed into psychosis and paranoia. Just like Dan. In fact, that's where they had met – in a private

clinic. Therefore we were all concerned about his absence. I shook my head and said, 'We still can't find him, Mum. He's not at work. He must have had to go somewhere urgently.'

Mum did a shrugging sort of action with her good side and said, 'Sadie.' She made a move that looked like she was trying to shake her head, making an effort to form her lips and shape the words. Though her dark eyes were alert I couldn't understand her, so I took her good hand and placed a pencil in it. Mum's elegant fingers groped for the pad of paper that never left her side. It took her a while.

Her writing was getting worse. When she finished I tried to decipher what she'd written. I could make out a 'B' then an 'O' but the figure after it could have either been an 'X' or a 'K'.

I looked at Mum. 'Box?'

Mum's lips suckered in. She looked more fragile than ever. Then she let out a wail and started to judder, her head shaking back and forth. It was so frustrating for her.

With the functioning side of her face she tried to speak. 'Earme.' Working hard to take in a good breath of air, she swallowed and said, 'Portent.' She was really het up. I hated to see her like that but I just couldn't understand her meaning.

'Sorry, sorry.' I focused on the writing. Perhaps it wasn't an X but an O and a K? 'Book?'

She made a sound like the air going out of a balloon. I leant in and smiled at her. She was sweating and her hair was messed up. I pushed a couple of black strands away from her eyes. Despite everything, she still had only a dusting of grey.

Stiff creases divided her forehead. Her good hand was

clenched into a fist. She was working out how to say what she needed to tell me.

I cut in, trying to relieve her of the effort. 'Okay, the book. I know you don't like the idea but Mum . . .'

She made a strangled sort of sound, then slumped back into her pillows, giving up communicating. But her hand crept into mine. I squeezed it. Gently.

See, I finally got my book commissioned ten days previously. It wasn't life-changing but it was definitely a good deal. In between the various loops and curves of my volatile career as a freelance journalist, I had been writing a book on the Essex witches.

Mum always said she thought we were distantly related to one. And there was this song, an old Essex folk ballad, *The Weeping Willow,* which Mum thought was connected to an ancestor. And there was a game in the playground: the kids would form a circle around one blindfolded child, the 'witch', and then you'd all dance around. When the verse ended the blindfolded child would try to catch one of the circle dancers. Whoever they caught was out. I can't remember all of it but there are a couple of verses that stick:

They kicked them off and laid them down
And put them in the cold hard ground
The summer wind blew long and chill
The Divil bade her do his will
Pale and wild pale and wild
The witch did down the child

She picked her up and put her down
The willow's leaves wrapped round and round

Her evil cries filled the air
And so did end the bad affair
Pale and wild pale and wild
The witch did up end the child

I think it was the song that got me interested, even as a child. That, my mother's proud connection to it, and the fact that Essex had so many witches. There was folklore and myths about them everywhere I turned. And, if I'm honest, I did seek them out. I was always a bit of a spooky girl, fascinated by rather macabre stories and shrunken heads. My dad tried to get me interested in Roald Dahl, but to his great disappointment I quickly cast off *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* in favour of *Tales of the Unexpected*. As I got older, I started delving into the witch hunts. It turned out to be rather sobering. In fact I soon became both horrified and hooked. The statistics were phenomenal: between 1580 to 1690 the combined total of indictments for witchcraft in Hertford, Kent, Surrey and Sussex was 222. In Essex alone over the same amount of time it was 492 – although recent studies put the number at 503. More than most other counties in the UK, by a long stretch. All those poor souls put to death by superstition. And did we know their names? No. We knew about the Witchfinders: James I, Matthew Hopkins, John Stearne. But if you were asked to name one of their many victims you'd be lost.

When I read about their stories I was revolted. They stayed with me. I just couldn't get them out of my head.

I'd been a freelance writer for several years and I guess a book is always floating somewhere in the back of your mind. But it seemed almost like the idea just sprang into my mind,

fully formed, like it had been nestling in the shadows all the time. I spent some time on a synopsis and had pitched it to a fair few publishers. I knew Mum was proud of me – she had wanted to write herself and even considered going into publishing when she was a teenager. She once told me she did work experience but had been put off. She wouldn't say why. But she was pleased, I think, in that way that parents are, that I was doing what she had failed to. Anyway, the book was not met with the unbridled enthusiasm I had expected. In fact, I had had a series of rejection letters and was just about to go back to the drawing board, when I got a call from Emma of Portillion Books. She loved my sample chapter, and what she called my 'fresh new unstuffy voice'. The proposal, she said, had been presented in an acquisitions meeting and got a rapturous reception. Consequently, I had been given a contract.

I was elated.

But there was a fly in the ointment: Portillion Books were the literary part of the Robert Cutt empire. The owner of a fleet of fast food restaurants, a football club, a few social networking sites, several magazines and two new private academies in London, Cutt was a powerful tycoon and a generous donor to the Conservative Party. The current rumour was that he was hoping to be made a Lord with a view to fast-tracking to a cabinet position. Political commentators were speculating that the Department of Culture, Media and Sport had already reserved him a parking space.

In our house Cutt's name was a swear word. He wasn't known for his great pay and conditions and cracked, as in *broke*, most of the unions his workers had been affiliated to. Plus, he was generally a bit of a git. Ruthless, you know the

sort – did well out of the banking crisis. You could see corruption all over his face whenever his mug was in the papers.

I came from a firmly socialist background. Mum, a History teacher, and Dad, with his background in trade unions, constantly railed against continued control and acquisition of British media till Dad departed when I was sixteen. Dan had been less vehement when he came on the scene in my early twenties, but only fractionally. Unsurprisingly, Cutt was our antichrist.

But I was desperate to get my book published and I kind of felt that I'd have to swallow down my righteous outrage to get the witches' stories out. It was a compromise, true, but I was prepared to make it. A whole chunk of me didn't like or approve of that, but I was weak. And okay, okay, if I'm honest, there was the ego thing going on. It was, I justified to myself, only the book wing of Cutt's empire, after all.

Mum, on the other hand . . . When I'd sprung it on her she'd had a mixed reaction. At first she was over the moon to hear I'd at long last got a book deal, but then, when I told her who it was with, her expression dimmed. She'd started trying to say something about jewellery. I don't know if she was making some point about wealth or something but whatever it was she'd got so distressed that the nurse, Sally, had to come in and sedate her. It was horrible. I didn't ever want to see that again.

So you can see why, on that particular day, when she was really not looking very well at all, I was trying really hard to sound upbeat and positive about it all.

'I'm due to meet Emma next week.' My voice sounded purposefully cheery. 'I'm so excited. I'll get the contract, then

as soon as I sign it they'll give me part of my advance. Isn't that great? I mean it's so tough being freelance. A lump sum will really help out. And it's my chance to get the stories of the witches out there. Maybe I can find our ancestral witch. And if we *are* related, then surely it's a kind of duty too?'

Mum was frowning and doing her best to say something, but I didn't want to hear what she had to say. I wanted her just to listen and be proud of me and to say it was okay.

And it wasn't only that which made me fill up every inch of breathing and conversation space in her room in the hospice that afternoon. No. At the back of my mind there was the notion that what she truly wanted to tell me was that she loved me and I couldn't let her. Don't get me wrong – we did tell each other quite often, but there was something in the atmosphere that afternoon that made me desperately not want to hear it. Almost as if I did then there would be finality in the words. For if she told me she loved me and I told her I loved her too everything would be harmonious, and she would be able to slip off away into the everworld, her work here done.

And I didn't want that. I wasn't ready to lose her just yet. So I didn't let her speak.

God, if only I had. I should have. I should have let her tell me.

She so wanted to. In fact, she was struggling with all her might to tell me.

And now, I know what it was, I am ashamed.

She was seriously worried – rightly so.

If I'd let her speak she would have told me the truth. Then maybe I would have been forewarned. And forewarned is, as they say, forearmed.

But I didn't, did I?

I gabbled on and on until the nurse came in and had to administer the drugs. And then Mum was tired. When I came back in, she had fallen asleep. So I went home.

And it was that night, as the moon sailed upwards, my mother, along with her unspoken words, finally let go.

But I couldn't.

And now I was haunted by my stupid stupid actions. Hearing the word 'sorry' in my dreams, waking up to unknown sobs.

I moved my legs off the bed and crept into the shower.

Unfortunately there are some stains that just won't wash away.