

A.M. KEEN



DRAWING DOWN
THE MOON

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**Drawing Down
the Moon**

by

A.M. Keen

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“He met with the Devill, and cheated him of his booke, wherin were written all the witches names in England, and if he looks on any witch, he can tell by her countenance what she is.”

Matthew Hopkins

Execution

A mass of flames roared within the winter's night. People flooded to the centre of their town grasping tools and torches, yelling within an atmosphere thick with anger and aggression. Voices babbled into one roar aimed towards the woman who had been judged and sentenced.

"Kill her!" came cries from within the gathering crowd.

"Kill the witch!"

Through the tools and pitchforks emerged a defenceless, fearful woman, yanked into compliance by a firm grasp of her hair. The town's executioner dragged the woman toward her fate across a solid, frozen ground through the increasing mass of bodies. The woman pulled against him as she attempted to escape, but the giant beneath the black hood paid little attention. Try as desperately as she might, he was simply too powerful to resist. The accused wailed between the bodies of the crowd, her battered legs bruised and bloody from their attacks as she passed through. Men kicked her. Women spat on and clawed her skin. The fading dress she wore began tearing from pressure it simply could not withstand. In the wake of her struggle followed the clergyman of the town. She turned back briefly to him, looking for a final chance from God that she may be spared. "Please father, please help me." The reverend continued his journey, clutching a small bible tightly to his chest.

"And unto you we continue His work in His holy name. We deliver you to the Dark Lord, of whose practice you have openly embraced, so that your soul may now take its rightful place within the very flames of Hell itself," he responded. The prayer was all but lost within the thunderous crowd amassed around them.

"Heathen!" came a women's scream.

"I am not a witch!" the accused retorted, still protesting her innocence this late in the trial.

At the doorway of a small stone house a young woman stood, looking out at the chaos swarming through the town. The candles burning inside her home flickered within a breeze that drifted through the open door. She stood, tense, as the scene played out across the open town square often used for communal activities. Today the happy community would bear witness to another display of human cruelty, all in the name of the Holy Lord and His good work.

“Ellie, go inside,” came a gentle voice from behind. Her father pushed past into the chilly night. He was a large man, his face hidden by a dark beard. Ellie stepped aside to allow his large physique past. “This is not for you to see.”

“Are they going to kill her?” Ellie asked.

Her father looked over his shoulder at the baying mob. His expression told her everything she needed to know.

The woman accused continued to fight against the executioner. Her legs and midriff ached from the blows bestowed upon her by onetime neighbours and friends. A bald patch on her scalp bled heavily from the struggle. Her nose had been shattered from the violence inflicted during the final journey. The crowds used their fists, their feet and any weapon which they had managed to find against her. At the centre of the square lay a wooden stake, some fifteen feet in length. Its base was hidden by twigs, branches and logs which would serve as fuel for her punishment, the accusation of witchcraft.

Fear surged within her body as she kicked at her tormentor. Her face struck the cobbled ground and snapped backwards as he retaliated, thrusting her down to the floor with ease. Pain screamed across the side of her face. Her nose and mouth streamed blood. The simple dress now tore at the seams. The executioner lurched down and grasped her hair once more, dragging the barley conscious woman on her stomach. As she teetered on the edge of consciousness, a succession of kicks thudded into her torso, breaking ribs. Each strike sent new pain through her body. Each

one brought with it a fresh wound from which she was unlikely to recover.

Lying prone on the freezing ground the stake fell upon the accused's back. Her arms yanked behind the wooden shaft and became bound together, so tightly that they turned white. The villager's assisted the executioner to hoist the limp body, allowing more rope to be threaded underneath and around the stake. It was drawn so tight that her chest restricted, and an already broken body struggled to draw even a rasp of a breath.

The accused watched as the terrain beneath her began to move. The crowd cheered: her fate now sealed.

A deep, circular hole excavated for the trial was cleared of debris by community member's intent on helping. The accused woman had no idea that the crowd was parting, allowing a clear passage through to the town square. Many followed, shouting obscenities and detriment until finally arriving at her destination. Men from the crowd helped as they hoisted the stake in the air and placed its base in the ground. It slid in and stood upright as intended. The crowd cheered as she towered above them, bound so tight she remained aloft, defying gravity. Her pale skin glowed within the orange light created by the flames.

Villagers began throwing fuel wood toward her feet. They cheered and gestured as she remained suspended in the night sky. Through blurred eyes a sea of bodies flames, pitchforks, spades and hoes appeared.

The last of the firewood was thrust to the stake, scratching across her legs. Below, a dignitary lifted a hand to silence the crowd. She recognised him as Mayor Randall, the elected leader of the small community. The crowd's shouts turned to murmurs and eventually to silence; a silence broken only by the roaring of the torches.

"Let this be a lesson!" Randall shouted across the flicker of the burning flames. "Let this be a lesson to all who dare to live amongst us and practice the unholy worship of the Dark Lord! We will not tolerate you! No witch, no warlock nor anything otherwise

that may set foot within our holy town! This shall be their fate!” A cheer erupted from the townsfolk as he grabbed a torch and turned to face her. “Miss Bunyon, you have been judged guilty of the crime of witchcraft! Your lies and deceit have insulted our good town, and the Lord God Almighty himself! How dare you! How *dare* you! Your infiltration of our peaceful town will not be tolerated! The Dark Lord’s minions will watch on in fear! We will not tolerate you, or anyone who practices the Dark Arts. Your crime is witchcraft. Your punishment is death! May you return to the Hell from whence you were spawned, you foul wench!” The flame ignited the branches and the smell of burning wood wafted immediately from the fire. The crowd cheered and yelled as she began a struggle against the growing fire. So vigorously did she fight that the ropes binding her wrists cut into the skin. More torches were tossed onto the fire increasing the intensity of the flames. Smoke emerged and danced away in to the cold sky. Miss Bunyon struggled as the heat crept up from below, screaming as loudly as her broken body would allow, prompting laughs and taunts from the onlookers. The smoke stung her eyes. With blurred vision, she watched the Reverend make the sign of a cross with his right hand, then return to clutch his bible.

The witch screamed as fire caught the tattered dress and began burning her feet. The pain intensified. Her toes and feet burned black and shrivelled as the flames drew larger, spreading up her legs towards the stomach. Her skin blistered. The dress caught fire at her torso, now hiding cracked, charred skin. Clumps of roasted flesh fell from her thighs. She screamed as the searing heat grew hotter and reached her breast, burning what remained of her clothing and the long hair that had fallen on it. Her screams rang out from the roaring flames, so bloodcurdling that some of the townspeople stopped their jeering.

Miss Bunyon, judged and now executed, released one final scream and fell silent.

Through the cheers of the people Mayor Randall turned to the Reverend. "These woods are full of them," he said, gesturing to the dense forestry that surrounded his township. "These witches, ghosts, lycanthropes and other unholy creatures fester like flies around a rotting carcass."

"Maybe this will serve as a lesson to any who may be watching," the Reverend responded.

"Maybe, but maybe we need to go a stage further."

"Why? Have we not already done God's work as he would wish?"

Mayor Randall placed a hand on the Reverend's shoulder. "We have done a fine job serving the Lord and delivering this heathen to the bowels of Hell, but maybe we should send a greater message."

"And what, pray tell, do you have in mind?"

"I sent message to Parliament not a month past to request the assistance of a Witchfinder. A Witchfinder is someone who can cleanse these parts and allow us to live peacefully."

"A Witchfinder?" the vicar replied. Randall noticed the concern within his voice. "Won't that cost our treasury dearly?"

A cheer erupted as the stake finally gave way to the heat of the fire and collapsed into the flames, along with the blackened body of the cremated woman. A mass of embers launched into the air.

"Father, I would rather ensure the safety of our people at a cost to our town than have our people live in fear of those creatures dwelling beyond our eyes in the safety of the trees, wouldn't you so agree?"

Slowly the clergyman nodded. Randall smiled and patted his back. He turned his attention back to the surrounding forest. There had been many reports of a particular witch lurking outside his town and a community of lycanthropes dwelling within the trees. He knew it would cost the community, but losing shillings was more acceptable than losing lives.

"A Witchfinder will hunt anything unholy in these parts and kill them," he explained. "Not only will it save our township the horror of which we have witnessed this night, but it will also provide a

greater consequence for those who may consider turning to worship the Dark Arts.”

“And if he doesn’t?” the Reverend asked.

“Then there is nothing more that we can do.”

Fear

The proud church of Elkwood stood overlooking the township to which it served. Situated on a hill on the outskirts of the town, the religious building served as a symbol of hope and sanctuary to any that set foot within its doors.

On this day, the Lord's Day, the townsfolk began their service on a dull, overcast winter's morning. This Sunday was indeed a bitter one, with a thick frost forming on the town's roofs and open areas. Ice had formed where puddles once lay and icicles hung from ledges where water once ran.

Hymns could faintly be heard across the entire town from the farms at its borders and down into the square, where the smouldering remains of the judgemental fire and its victim still crackled occasionally. The fact that the fire had still burned during such a harsh night suggested to the townsfolk that this lady had indeed been in league with the Devil, and these were the embers of flames from Hell as the Dark Lord returned to reclaim her.

The hymn came to an end, and as it did so Reverend Thomas stepped up the small, wooden staircase to address the congregation from his humble pulpit. The church rustled and creaked with the sound of its flock returning to its benches in preparation for the sermon he was about to deliver. Ellie settled back on to her pugh. A cold, uncomfortable breeze circulated inside the building. During the summer she enjoyed the warm breezes dancing about from outside, but winter was another thing altogether. Ellie knew the biting temperature would ensure the Reverend's words were heard and not missed by dozing churchgoers this Sunday.

"These are strange and troubled times we are living in within our peaceful community, and the Lord's protection and love is what we will need to see us through."

Ellie studied this man of the cloth, preaching the Lord's way against the backdrop of a small glass window. He was a man of sixty or more years. The good Lord had deemed it appropriate to

deprive his servant of his hair, except for long stringy grey strands that were found around the base of his head and hung unkempt across his shoulders.

“However, these dark days may lead some to believe that He has forgotten us, or chosen to turn His back on our prayers. This is, of course, untrue. The good Lord will never turn His back on the loyal servants of His cause. He is concerned for us, and for our safety, as the recent events befalling our peaceful town are forged by the hands of the Devil himself!”

The church erupted in to chatter. The Reverend’s words appeared to be causing alarm. Ellie sat next to her father in silence, watching the rest of her neighbours expressing their concern and anger. She pushed her long, black hair behind her ears and looked to him.

Reverend Thomas raised his hands in the dull light. Ellie noticed the reassuring smile he delivered to bring the congregation to order. “My children, my children,” he began, regaining the attention of the audience, “this does not mean He has forsaken us. It means we must, with His blessing, find our own way to fight the battle between good and evil in His name.”

A man stood from the bench ahead of Ellie. “How do we fight a witch as strong as the one plaguing our town? Or those filthy lycanthropes which lurk near? And what about the coven of ghosts haunting these trees? How do we combat them?” Ellie caught a glimpse of Mayor Randall, who turned from his privileged seat in front of the pulpit. The angry man continued. “To catch and trial a witch who is young and inexperienced is simple, but how can we destroy the hag living deep within the woods? She is stronger than any witch ever to plague our town!”

Many of the villagers echoed their agreements in one monotonous murmur.

Ellie watched as Mayor Randall looked toward the Reverend and rose from his seat. “Settle down. Settle. Now, it is no secret that we are indeed being tormented by she who dwells within the woods. She will also have help from those corrupted within our

good town, like Miss Bunyon whom we discovered last evening, as well as the lycanthropes of which you speak.”

“You mean there’s more?” a voice shouted.

A moment of silence passed inside the church. Ellie expected the worst. “Yes, we believe there are.”

The churchgoers erupted in panic and anger. The timber building rocked to its foundations as the churchgoers raged within its confines.

“Settle down!” boomed the voice of the Reverend above the frustration. “There will be no anger in the house of God!”

The anger subdued immediately. The viciousness with which they shouted made Ellie uncomfortable. The Reverend’s voice had been authoritative, and in her eyes, welcome.

Her attention returned to Mayor Randall, who adjusted his clothing as though he was beginning a speech. “Now, the good father and I,” he stated, gesturing with an open palm towards the Reverend, “have decided that, yes, you are right, all of you. We can deal with simple witches and informants within our town, but as you rightly say, not against the hag nor the lycanthropes from the forest who torment us and our way of life. Therefore I have sent word to London, to request the assistance of a Witchfinder to aid us in these darkest of times.” Ellie listened nervously as the mayor explained his actions. “Now, it will cost us a substantial amount of shillings for his services, and due to the breakdown of trade with our surrounding towns and villages, all whom are afraid to travel the routes to our town, we are in dire financial straits. But I believe that once the witch is finally found and executed the routes will once more be re-established and we will be able to return the finances to our commerce chamber, and thus our town will once again thrive.”

“And if it doesn’t?” came a man’s voice from the middle of the gathering.

“It will, my friend,” Randall replied, his voice one of confidence. “The best Witchfinder in England and his company operate within our area. He will rid us of that cursed hag and any other who may

be in league with her. Meanwhile, I ask you all to remain vigilant. Watch out for any unusual practices by your mothers, daughters, aunts, nieces and grandmothers, even by your neighbours and the men within our town. Report any suspicious activity immediately.”

The sermon came to an end with the Lord’s Prayer, after which the townsfolk flooded through the oak doors and down to their frozen town to enjoy the remainder of the day. Ellie’s father had remained at the church to speak with Mayor Randall, allowing his daughter to wander down the hill and back to town unaccompanied. As Ellie took the short walk home a body jumped from behind a tree forcing a surprised squeal from her. The smiling face of Jack McDonald filled her eyes, and after a moment’s shock she returned the smile.

“For you,” he said exuberantly, and placed a cluster of snowdrops in her hand. “Before they vanish.” Ellie continued her smile. She was shocked that Jack knew snowdrops would vanish at the end of spring. For some strange reason they had sprouted early this year, February to be exact. This lengthy winter was another event that the town blamed on the witches curse they believed she had cast over them. “One day,” Jack began as the pair resumed walking side by side, “I will take you for my wife, Ellie.”

“Is that right?” One day she would allow it, but he didn’t know that.

“One day,” he repeated optimistically. “But until that day, this is all I can offer.” He pecked her on the cheek and sprinted away down the hill towards the town. “Until we meet again!” he shouted over his shoulder.

“Fool,” she said quietly, clenching the snowdrops in her hand.

Nightfall

As night approached slowly over the sleepy township, Mayor Randall arranged a handful of men around the outskirts of the town to settle the nerves of the people. When darkness fell across the land, imagination wandered and fear spread throughout the community. Fear was a potent weapon, and nothing spread amongst the people more quickly.

The charred remains of the previous night's victim had been buried in an unmarked grave somewhere within the woods. The only people in attendance were Randall, Reverend Thomas and the gravediggers. Once it was dumped in the earth Thomas blessed the corpse and splashed holy water on the grave whilst muttering a prayer. The earth began to fall on the white sheet sewn around the body, signifying the end of the witch and a victory in the name of the Lord. On their slow walk back to the town, Randall and Thomas had decided that sentry duty would be the best action to take. With the old hag lurking somewhere within the trees, and a freshly buried witch, they both feared some kind of retaliation or even resurrection.

Eight men, including the town's executioner, hard-working labourers and farmers, volunteered to take the dangerous posts, each for a shilling apiece. As darkness emerged and the cold night set in, they took their flames and tools before pairing off, each posted on the cardinal points.

Beyond a farm to the east stood Stephen Elcombe and Ray McDowell, two men who worked in the town's windmill. Tonight both men guarded the structure in which they worked so laboriously.

"You believe she was a witch?" Elcombe asked as their amber flame illuminated the small area they were guarding. Ray leant against the timber fence that separated the field from the woods, placed his elbows on the top slat and looked in to the trees.

“Certainly,” he replied, gently sighing in the darkness. He caught sight of his own breath and suddenly felt just how cold the winter’s night had become. “She was an odd one that Miss Bunyon, that was certain. Using plants to heal herself, and using her left hand for everything she did. Aye, she was a witch alright. What more proof do you need?”

Stephen turned to him. “What do you make of the Witchfinder heading to town? You really think that a man can kill a witch? I mean, if the hag decides to use her powers I don’t see how anyone can contend with her?”

“Stephen, you forget that a Witchhunter is skilled in all things strange that lurk in these dark lands. He has a team who will be just as experienced. There will be ways to counter her spells that we as commoners are unaware of, but a Witchfinder? He’ll know. He’s probably seen everything she will throw at him and laugh in her face.”

Ray looked to the sky and watched as the full moon passed silently behind drifting clouds. A sharp wind drifted between the trees at the edge of the woods. Darkness smothered the light and engulfed the town, leaving only the flickering flames at the outskirts where the sentries were posted.

Ray returned his gaze in to the darkness. A loud rustle broke the silence. “What was that?” he asked.

“What?”

“Just then. Did you hear it?”

“What?” Stephen asked again.

“There. The trees rustling.”

“The trees... Ray, we’re on the outskirts of the woods. Of course you’re going to hear leaves and branches in the wind.”

“No, it sounded like something was there.” Stephen turned and looked into the looming darkness. Ray followed his gaze in to the landscape behind the trunks and branches, now illuminated by the flickering, amber torch. He peered into the forest, squinting in an attempt to sharpen his focus.

Stephen looked quickly across. "I don't see or hear anything. Maybe your imagination has got the better of you?"

Ray shot back a glare, annoyed that his comrade did not believe him. "There is something out there," he said bluntly, holding his own torch at arm's length.

"I'll check," Stephen replied.

"Don't-"

"Ray!" Stephen snapped, "I'll just have a quick look."

Ray sighed. "Quickly, then get back. I'm telling you there's something out there."

"I won't be long. You think I want to be out there? No, I don't. If I see or hear anything I'll be right back."

The wind breezed past, ruffling their clothes and breaking the eerie silence. Ray offered nothing in reply but a simple nod.

Stephen turned and left the borders of the town, carrying his flickering light and his pitchfork. Ray watched as his friend vanished beyond the trees.

He waited in the cold, open air, looking up to the treetops that roared with every gust as the breeze became more forceful. The branches swayed against the patchy sky. He looked over towards the town in an attempt to see the torches of the other sentries. There were none. A shiver ran down his spine. A frisson of fear crept over him and he looked back in the direction of the trees. The torchlight Stephen was carrying had been swallowed by the darkness.

Ray began pacing along the fence, waving the torch to see into the night. The trees waved back as the wind became more constant around their branches. The darkness engulfed him. His fear intensified. Stephen was still lost to the forest. He continued pacing, his feet scraping the forest debris as he moved. A howl surged through the trees. The sentries posted around the town, Ray included, stopped and listened as the beastly roar echoed from the forest. It whistled away into the skies and vanished in the darkness. From the distance another howl began, softer and more distant. Ray froze. The final howl echoed as it fell silent, replaced by the

sound of the wind in his ears. He stood in front of the threatening trees. The clouds fragmented by the wind as they sailed across the full moon. The flame on Ray's torch flickered as the wind took hold. He held it towards the forest. Somewhere in there Stephen lurked, and Ray was overwhelmed by an uneasy feeling that his friend was not alone. The wind plastered his clothes against him. Finally he drew courage.

"Stephen?" he said nervously in the dark void. "Stephen, are you all right?" Nothing responded but the swaying leaves chattering in the breeze. Still no torch light from the depths of the forest. "Stephen?"

A growl rumbled near to the labourer. His eyes widened. The flame in his grasp offered little light in the blustering wind. He could see nothing. A scream, a roar, and Ray fell heavily to the grass. Dazed momentarily he rolled sideways, placing a hand on his chest which ached. He checked himself for injury and poked his body, sensing he had been harmed. His chest was as it should be and there was no tear to his clothing. He had been struck by something, and struck violently. Adrenalin surged through his veins. Quickly, Ray scampered to his feet and turned to the flame still burning on the ground. Rubbing his chest he stooped down and picked up the light in a clean sweep, spun round immediately and turned to face the forest. Nothing. A patch of blood began to seep from his heavy coat. Fearing the worst he pulled open the garment and tore his buttoned shirt to see the injury. All he could find was skin, stained orange by the feeble light of the flame of his torch, nothing more. After a moment of relief he began scouting the area to see what had knocked him down. Whatever it was had been injured. Nothing left blood behind and remained unhurt. What had hit him? What had left blood? Debris, twigs and rocks were all he could find in the flickering light waved in the darkness. He stepped further on. His heart sank. On the frost lay a severed leg, bleeding profusely from its stump. Blood trickled across the frost. Bone and muscle glistened in the light of the flame. "Good Lord," Ray whispered in to the cold air, his breath steaming as it