

The Witches of Windsor: Book 1

The
WITCHFINDER'S
SERPENT

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The devil is precise; the marks
of his presence are definite as stone.

—Reverend John Hale, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

Prologue

THE WITCH OF IPSWICH

Rushmere Heath on the Eastern Outskirts of Ipswich,
Suffolk, England, September 1645

Matthew Hopkins, the well-respected and highly sought-after Witchfinder General, sat atop his horse, making his way slowly toward the gathering of spectators. It was unusually chilly for early September. In addition to the tall capotain hat, with its flat top and narrow brim, he wore his woolen cape to the proceedings—and though he suspected he wouldn't need it much longer, for the time being at least, he was thankful to have brought it along.

Taking a deep breath, he scanned the area, excitedly taking in the view. Open grassland sprawled in all directions, its greenery baked brown by weeks of summer sun. Patches of cheerful pink and purple heather broke through the drab landscape, flouting the onset of autumn. Off in the distance, a platform had been constructed, a heavy, wooden pole erected at its center. It was this structure that filled him with exhilaration—this and the impressive throng of people surrounding it.

They were all here because of him. He was the one to extract the

confession from old Mary Lakeland. No one else had been able to do so—the crone had proven to be a tough nut to crack.

“Nice job, Hopkins,” said Justice John Brandling as he rode past. The man was one of the judges who had prosecuted the Lakeland case. Bailiff Richard Pupplet rode alongside him.

Hopkins nodded to each of the men in turn as they hurried on ahead. Brandling was one of the officials set to preside over the execution—and no normal execution it would be. Due to the charges to which she had been found guilty, Mary Lakeland was to be burned at the stake—not hanged in the manner of most witches. This was a first for Hopkins—of all the women he had dealt with in East Anglia, no others had been set ablaze for their crimes.

His success in this case would only bolster his reputation, he knew. He would be even more highly sought after—and he and his partner, John Stearne, would be able to charge top rates for their services. Mary Lakeland had certainly made him work for the confession, however. For a time, he had wondered if she would outlast him, if she would be the first subject to endure all his interrogation techniques without breaking.

They had stripped the old woman naked and used a witch-pricker to hunt for a witch’s mark. There had been no confession, even though her seventy-year-old skin was awash with discolorations and blemishes—any of which could have been placed there by the devil himself. They had beaten and starved and deprived her of sleep, to no avail. They had bound her cross-legged and left her that way for more than a day. Not even the cramping and discomfort of that experience had broken her. Finally, they had forced her to march naked, back and forth, hour after hour, until her strength had waned, and her bare feet had bloodied a path on the hard stone floor of her cell.

Eventually, she had collapsed. The thin skin of her knees tore as it struck the rough surface, and her bruised body came to rest in an ungraceful heap at the witch hunter’s feet.

“Mother Lakeland,” he had said. “You are a stubborn one—are you finally ready to confess?”

He had taken the low moan, emanating from deep within her throat, as the affirmation he sought.

“Do you admit to being a witch? Did you in fact use witchcraft to murder your own husband?”

He was rewarded with another moan. The old woman's eyelids fluttered weakly in her semiconscious state.

The interrogation continued in this manner—and before long, Mary Lakeland had confessed to each and every one of her sins to the complete satisfaction of Hopkins and the two witnesses he had arranged to have present. In the end, the court had found her guilty, and she had been sentenced to death. It had been the crime of murdering her husband that had escalated the severity of her charges from felony to petty treason, thus warranting the uncommon execution by fire.

And soon, he thought excitedly as he approached the milling crowd on this cool September morning, *old Mother Lakeland, the evil witch of Ipswich, will be burned at the stake.*

The men were hoisting the unconscious woman's body by the time he had arrived, securing it firmly to the stake with heavy chains. Dressed in a simple white gown, Mary Lakeland's wrists and ankles had been bound with rope. A noose had also been tightened about her throat—an indication that she had already been choked into unconsciousness as a gesture of mercy. In all likelihood, the noose, with the aid of the smoke and hot gasses from the pyre, would bring death by suffocation before the worst of the flames reached the woman's flesh.

Bundles of sticks and brush had been piled high around the small platform, intermingled with heavier pieces of dried timber and branches. Hopkins noticed that other items of scrap had been stacked around the base of the construction as well—weathered sections of wooden fencing, fragments of broken furniture, and other flammable objects that had no doubt been added by enthusiastic onlookers.

Shortly, Justice Brandling appeared. After giving a summary of Mary Lakeland's crimes, he signaled for the execution to begin. Four men with torches approached, each one choosing a different cardinal point around

the pyre. As one, they touched fire to kindling, and the towering heap of wood began to burn.

In moments, Hopkins could feel heat radiating from the bonfire. The blaze spread far more quickly than the witchfinder had expected, stoked, perhaps, by the cool morning breeze. Mary Lakeland's limp body hung unmoving, partially suspended above it all, the flames dancing about her legs.

Suddenly, her gown caught fire and it, too, began to burn. The glowing hot conflagration traveled swiftly up her body, leaving scorched and blistering skin in its wake. It reached her hair. The long gray locks burst into flame, fluttering loosely about her shoulders.

It was then that Hopkins heard the collective moan from the crowd. He watched in horror as Mary Lakeland's burning head shifted, her now-open eyes widening in terror, a silent scream issuing from her swollen, useless windpipe. Her body began to twitch as she struggled weakly, uselessly against her bonds.

Several members of the crowd turned and fled in that moment, having seen enough. The witch fell still as the flames grew taller, and before long, the smell of cooked flesh permeated the air. Soon, Hopkins decided that he, too, had seen enough. Although the pyre and witch's body would burn for some time, there was no doubt in the witchfinder's mind that Mary Lakeland was dead. His job here was done. It was time for him to move on. The war against witches had only just begun, after all. Other towns were in desperate need of his services. They needed him—and it would be wrong to keep them waiting . . .