# The Somerset Tsunami



Emma Carroll

90 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE
FABER & FABER

First published in 2019
by Faber & Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House,
74–77 Great Russell Street,
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset in Garamond Premier by MRules
Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved
© Emma Carroll, 2019
Image p.ix © Shutterstock

The right of Emma Carroll to be identified as author
of this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77
of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book is sold subject to the condition
that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent,
resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's
prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in
which it is published and without a similar condition including
this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–33281–6




2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Person for TRIAL

On suspicion of

# WITCHCRAFT

TO BE HELD AT THE

SPRING ASSIZES

GLASTONBURY,
FOR THE COUNTY OF SOMERSET

12th January 1616

# 1

## A FEW MONTHS EARLIER . . .

## IN WHICH OUR HERO'S LIFE TAKES A STRANGE AND DRAMATIC TWIST

# 1

We lived in a hamlet called Fair Maidens Lane, which wasn't a lane at all, but half a dozen moss-roofed cottages cowering against the weather. For as long as I could remember, there'd been no grown men amongst us, just women, girls and my brother, Jem. As for fair maidens, there was Abigail, my elder sister, though she was only middling pretty. Our womenfolk were a capable lot, breeding pigs, catching fish, crushing herbs, and birthing babies in the local towns and villages, and had a reputation for doing all of it well. Yet we were our own little community, bounded by the Severn Sea on one side, the Quantock Hills on the other. And because none of us needed rescuing like maidens in stories had you believe, our hamlet's name came to be a fine joke. No harm was meant by it, at least, not then.

The first sign of change was a slight shift in the air which I supposed was the coming of autumn because it made gooseflesh rise up along my arms. Then Jem,

who at fifteen summers was two years my elder, got taller as if he'd grown overnight like a magic plant. Every morning his breeches rose further from his knees. Where once he'd been as soft as a fresh loaf, he was now all wrist bones and shoulder blades, and had a voice that squeak-boomed when he spoke.

'Mercy, brother! Grow any taller and the birds'll start perching on you,' I exclaimed one morning when he had to bend to avoid the ceiling beam above our heads.

'Come here and say that, Fortune Sharpe!' he threatened, Fortune being my name, though I was yet to discover why.

We chased each other out of the house, ducking and squealing under Abigail's laundry lines, which sent next door's youngster pigs tottering to the fence to see what all the fuss was about. Our neighbour, Saddleback Sally, was known far and wide for breeding exceptional pigs. We ran on, past Leathery Gwen's, who had skin as tough as hide from the hours she spent catching crayfish along the shore. The timber cottage opposite hers was home to Ruth and Jane Redfern, local midwives and clever in the ways of herbs.

Before we knew it, we'd reached the last dwelling in the hamlet, Old Margaret's, with its dairy where she

made delicious yellow cheeses. In the pasture beyond, she kept a herd of cows that our mother, and her milking stool, tended every day. Mother was paid well for her skill. And so we'd always been told to be polite to Old Margaret.

As Jem and I hurtled past, still laughing and shouting, Old Margaret was out in her yard rinsing cheesecloths.

'What's all this noise, then?' she cried, flapping a cloth at me. 'Anyone would think the devil himself was chasing you!'

I slowed down.

'Haven't you anything more useful to do than tear around, making mischief?' she scolded.

'Sorry,' I muttered, though I'd never been a walk-on-tippy-toes sort of girl, and Old Margaret knew it as well as anyone. I'd grown up wearing boys' shirts and leggings, and my only dress was an ugly hop-sack thing that'd once been Abigail's. Unless Mother told me to wear it, it stayed stuffed in a dusty corner under my bed.

Old Margaret turned to Jem. 'About time you earned your keep, and all.'

'Yes, mistress, sorry, mistress,' he said, so contrite I couldn't help sniggering behind my hand.

Apologising again, we hurried on. A sharp left took

us up over the common land before it dropped away steeply to the coast. If you followed your feet downhill through the gorse bushes, you'd arrive at a little brown-sand cove where the river ran into the Severn Sea. It was my favourite place in the whole world – not that I'd seen much of anywhere beyond Bridgwater, but still.

The beach was empty. Once Jem and I had wrestled each other to the ground, and I'd declared myself the winner, we fell apart to sit on the sand. Every day I'd find a reason to come down here, to stare at the ocean and smell the salt air. It came from Father, my special love of the sea. I'd been only two years old when a savage winter tide snatched him from the shore where he'd been out glatting for big, fat eels. My one memory of him was how he slept at night with the shutters open in all weathers, just to hear the waves. It brought peace, so he'd said.

Usually, it worked like a salve for me too, yet today I found myself mulling over our encounter with Old Margaret.

'D'you think she meant it?' I asked Jem, chewing the frayed edges of my thumbnails. 'About us needing to be more useful?'

At home, us children all had our tasks: collecting firewood, feeding hens, chopping herbs, growing

vegetables, making candles. Though none of it brought in any real coin, like the saddleback pigs or Old Margaret's cheese.

Jem stretched his long spindly legs. 'You know there are people watching us, don't you?'

'Where?' I spun round, scanning the hill of common land we'd just passed over.

'Not *right now*, you goose,' Jem tutted. 'Generally, I mean. It's been going on for a while, so Abigail says. They're riding as far as the crossroads once, maybe twice a day.'

The crossroads was about a quarter of a mile from Old Margaret's house. It was where the main road stopped and became a narrow track down to our cottages.

'Who's watching us?' I wanted to know.

'Our neighbouring landowners, apparently—'

'Who own all the land between us and kingdom come,' I finished for him. 'What do they want with us?'

'They're just looking – for now.'

This last bit he said in a wary, loaded way. For we both knew how rich these landowners were, and that wealth meant power. These men decided the laws a magistrate might enforce, and the punishments for breaking them.

Not that we'd done anything wrong. No one here owed money or had thieved anything or done a murder, as far as I knew. Yet the thought of being watched unsettled me. Since Jem didn't say any more about it, and with the sea spread before me, I soon forgot it, though. And I wondered how the waves might look to someone in Spain, say, or even further away in that brand-new country they were calling America. There were many different ways of seeing the same thing.

As we soon found out to our peril.