

STRANGE
MAGIC

SYD MOORE

POINT
BLANK

A Point Blank Book

First published in North America, Great Britain and Australia by
Point Blank, an imprint of Oneworld Publications, 2017

Copyright © Syd Moore 2017

The moral right of Syd Moore to be identified as the Author
of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

All rights reserved.

Copyright under Berne Convention

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

ISBN 978-1-78607-098-2

ISBN 978-1-78607-099-9 (ebook)

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses,
organizations, places, and events are either the product of the author's
imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual
persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Oneworld Publications
10 Bloomsbury Street
London WC1B 3SR
England

Stay up to date with the latest books,
special offers, and exclusive content from
Oneworld with our monthly newsletter

Sign up on our website
www.oneworld-publications.com

[definition] Strange /streɪn(d)ɪ/

Adjective: {Aphetic – Ofr. *Estrange* (mod. *estrangle*) :-

L. extraneus EXTRANEOUS. Cf. ESTRANGE a.}

1. Unusual, unexpected, weird; seemingly inexplicable
2. A vague sense of feeling unwell or ill at ease
3. Previously unfamiliar, not visited or encountered; alien
4. *Physics:* having a non-zero value of strangeness

Comparative adjective: stranger; *superlative adjective:*
strangest

Synonyms: Odd, curious, peculiar, funny, bizarre, weird, uncanny, queer, unexpected, unfamiliar, abnormal, atypical, anomalous, different, out of the ordinary, out of the way, extraordinary, remarkable, puzzling, mystifying, mysterious, perplexing, baffling, unaccountable, inexplicable, incongruous, uncommon, irregular, singular, deviant, aberrant, freak, freakish, surreal, alien.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sixteenth-century Essex was not a great place to be a woman. Or a man. Or even a child. It was a particularly risky place to hang out if you were poor. Especially if you also happened to be the village healer. Witchcraft accusations were spreading like a rash throughout the county, disrupting hundreds of lives. In 1582, a particularly virulent epidemic of witch-hunting broke out in the small village of St Osyth, to the north-east of the county. Scores were accused, thirteen gaoled and two unfortunate souls were executed by hanging. One of the condemned was the healer Ursula Kemp. The following story has been inspired by her life, death and the bizarre twisting tale of what happened to her centuries later.

PROLOGUE

She hadn't been idle, no sir, but the Devil sure had found work for her hands. God, had it been a long day, she reflected, though at least there was a gin and tonic with her name on it waiting in the social club. Frankly, Staff Nurse Anna Redmond could not wait one moment more to get the hell out of the Intensive Therapy Unit. They had been one nurse down. A recurring situation. High turnover. ITU was probably the most stressful ward in the hospital. Not everyone could hack it. But even so, today had been particularly difficult. They'd had two admissions within the space of an hour which meant a couple of patients required transferral to High Dependency and the relatives hadn't been happy about that. Not at all. But there wasn't much she could do about that.

'Needs must when the Devil drives,' she said out loud when she reached the nurses station.

Sister Marilyn looked up from the computer. 'Well, he certainly has been out and about with his legion of gremlins. I can't remember the last time we had a day like today.'

Anna shook her head. 'Tuesday, if I recall.'

SYD MOORE

‘Ah, that’s right, two days ago. How could I possibly have forgotten?’ She smiled wryly.

‘Early onset Alzheimer’s.’ Anna laughed. Gallows humour was part of the job description. Had to be. Coping mechanism, she supposed. ‘Well, I’m off. Doctor Jarvis beckons.’ She pictured him at their regular side table depositing her tall drink with his long slender hands.

‘Oh, I . . .’ Marilyn emitted a half-sucking, half-squeezing noise with her lips. The action lent her something of a simpering expression.

‘What?’ Anna knew that look. A request was coming. A favour no doubt.

‘Be a dear, Anna,’ the sister cooed, ‘and just look in on our little lamb before you knock off, eh?’

The ice cubes would have started melting into her gin by now and though she was nearly dead on her feet, she couldn’t refuse. Max was a special case. The mere thought of his name pulled hard upon her heartstrings. You tried to be objective, not to get involved, but sometimes you couldn’t help it. It was the same for all of the nursing staff. And this one – oh, Lord – such a tragedy.

‘Go on then,’ she submitted. ‘Just this once. As long as you don’t go feeding no Mogwai, right?’ She picked up the patient notes and winked.

A frown stitched between Marilyn’s parting. ‘Feeding what?’

‘The gremlins.’ Anna laughed at her bafflement. ‘Not after midnight. Or else tomorrow will bring more mayhem and I can’t be doing with another day like today.’ She ducked,

STRANGE MAGIC

narrowly missing the paper projectile Marilyn had thrown at her head, and pushed her weary legs down the corridor.

It really had been an odd sort of day. Lots of accidents. Lots. An old guy had come in, early afternoon, with a deep laceration on his forearm and no memory of how it happened. Before that a young woman who had been felled by a pub sign in the shape of a pumpkin. Even one of their own gardeners, who tended what was left of the green spaces about the grounds, had been hurt by a falling tree.

True, it had been very windy.

A storm had been brewing for the past couple of hours. Flying debris could account for some of the incidents but there was an unaccountable upsurge in the number of admissions that was rather unusual for the season. Maybe it was a full moon.

Slipping open the door to the private room she glanced out the window opposite and up into the clouds. The wind was sending thick navy patches scudding across the moon, but she could see her hunch had been right. It was full. Thank God, she wasn't on night shift – the crazies would be filling A&E to the brim.

Through the branches of a nearby tree, the wind began to whistle and whine.

Anna shivered and exhaled noisily. It was stuffy in here but that was preferable to being outside tonight. For once, she was rather glad the windows were painted firmly shut.

Time to focus on her last job.

The broken form of Maximillian Harris, Max for short, lay tucked into the sheets. The poor kid was in there somewhere,

SYD MOORE

she was sure, hovering in that unknown limbo between life and death.

Comas were unusual things. There was no handbook on how to deal with such victims and no specific course of action either. One size did not fit all. It was a pain explaining this to managers intent on imposing patterns to shave budgets and economise by bulk-buying drugs or equipment. Each patient was different. Though if it were possible for some to be more exceptional than others, more unique, then little Max was it. The eight-year-old had fallen from a tree six days ago and remained unconscious ever since. Scans and X-rays had revealed no reason for his comatose state. In actual fact, there was some acceleration of activity in the hippocampus. Another aberration which no one could explain.

Her stomach sank as the shrunken form on the bed came into view. It was cruel how the human body transformed from vital to wasted in such a short space of time. The boy on the stiff white sheets should have been back up in the trees or looping through pedestrians on his BMX. Not here, pumped full of tubes that leaked and tore his pale skin. Less like a boy than an impression of one: a sad stain on the sheet.

Tonight, she noticed for the first time, the bone beneath his skin was becoming more visible. The age-old omen of death.

Anna sent a briskly efficient smile at Lauren Harris, his mother, seated in her usual place beside Max, face propped up on one elbow on his bed. She was asleep. Lauren had only left his side for one night, last night, and had returned this morning more gaunt and jaded than she had been before. Clearly she could not endure a moment away from her injured son.

STRANGE MAGIC

Trying not to wake Mrs Harris, Anna crept round the bed and quietly took Max's hand. Cold and limp, as always.

'Hello, poppet,' she said soothingly, feeling for his pulse. 'It's Nurse Redmond. Just seeing how you are.'

The boy's lips were parted slightly as if he was getting ready to say something. They often looked like that. Such false hope.

'What have you been up to today, then?' she continued. All staff made it their business to talk to the patients, however unresponsive. Hearing was always the last thing to go.

Now that was odd.

Anna scowled at the clock on the wall.

Max's pulse was up.

Tachycardia.

Oh dear.

The monitor indicated his blood pressure was also becoming elevated.

She checked his temperature: thirty-eight, thirty-nine. *Crap.*

With an urgency she would have concealed had his mother been awake she lowered her head to his chest and listened. The breaths were coming in faster than they should.

The ECG beeped three times and the alarmed sounded.

Anna straightened up and hit the red switch above the bed. A buzzing noise went off in the corridor.

What on earth was going on inside the poor boy? Haemorrhage? Where?

Max's head moved.

It was a strange movement – bumpy, mechanical – as though his was a puppet head pulled by a master puppeteer.

Then his chest heaved and he coughed.

SYD MOORE

Anna stopped still.

The boy's eyes flew open wide.

'Max?' she ventured gently. There was something different about him. Something was darker. Of course six days of coma would change a person.

At once, almost in response, his fingers tightened their grip on her. She winced. He was absurdly strong. *How?*

'Ouch,' she squealed as he crushed her index finger into his palm.

Mrs Harris roused herself sleepily and looked to the bed. 'Nurse Redmond?' she said, then locked her gaze on the little boy. 'Good God! Max?' She began to smile but then stopped. 'What's the matter with his . . . ?'

'Easy,' Anna murmured for the boy was now fully awake, squirming his body away from them, into the headboard, ripping the drips from his arms.

She put on her best nurse's voice. 'Come on, Max. Sit back down.'

He snapped his neck to her and let go a guttural snarl.

Instantly she saw what had disturbed his mother. It was his eyes – they were a dense pure black. Not just the iris – the whole damned things. Like someone had dripped ink into them.

Anna backed away, but the child pulled her back. 'Nay,' he said, his voice gritty and taut. 'Nay more.'

Something outside scratched at the window glass.

Lauren inched closer gently, the hope in her face turning to something more uncertain. 'Come on, darling. Calm down. Mummy's here.'

STRANGE MAGIC

‘Nay,’ he protested, louder now. Then, with something between a moan and a choking sound, he let go of Anna and turned his hand to Lauren, striking her cheek hard. ‘Thou not be Mother.’

Nurse Redmond angled her face towards the door. Unable to stay the horror from her voice, she called out quickly, ‘Marilyn! Assistance here at once.’

When she looked back to the boy he was upright, standing on the bed. *Surely not*, she thought. By rights he’d be too weak.

Vengeful eyes formed two narrow slits, his mouth aped the twist of a Greek tragedy mask.

‘Max,’ she said, her voice unfirm, the treble rising. ‘Come down.’

As if angered by her words, the boy’s hands fisted and threw out at right angles to his sides.

Crucifixion pose, thought Anna. *What on earth is happening?*

She took a breath and tried to still her mind but as she did the windows of the ward flew open – and a tearing wind funnelled into the room. She gawped wordlessly as the casements clattered and swung back and forth on their hinges, opening and closing like angry mouths.

Lauren Harris let go an anguished cry.

Something outside howled as a strange vibration rumbled through the building, shaking the equipment and causing the bed to shake and roll on its wheels.

All at once the windows shattered, sending a swarm of glass everywhere.

Anna heard another shriek. For a second, she thought Marilyn had come to her side, then realised it was her own voice.

SYD MOORE

She was screaming loudly, wildly. For what she saw defied all logic. Max was no longer standing on the bed but hovering several inches above it: a puppet suspended by an invisible string.

‘Christ help me,’ she whispered to herself, as all the little shards of glass filled the air, floating about them like a rotating horde of locusts.

Then another voice leaked from the boy, low, dark and bassy, as if echoing inside a drum.

‘Fetch me the Devil’s whore,’ it roared.

Everything, including the small child, crashed hard on to the floor.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Devil’s lair,’ the old woman yelled at the top of her lungs, her voice hoarse and earthy. ‘You go in there and Hell will be waiting for you. You’ll burn, like the witches. Burn.’

Truth be told, it wasn’t the warmest welcome I’ve ever had, though equally, it wasn’t the worst either.

I manoeuvred into one of the many free spaces in the car park. One solitary vehicle, a rusting yellow Fiat, occupied the ‘Cars’ section. In the ‘Coaches’ section, a beaten-up minibus with a school crest on one side, barely visible through a coat of graffiti, had been parked with haste. At least I assumed haste; it was stationed diagonally across three spaces. All the same, there was more activity here than I anticipated.

The woman at the gate to the museum kept her eye on me from the protest camp she’d erected on the kerb. A camping table was taped with handwritten posters and though she leant towards me and waved a placard in her hand, she didn’t come on to the land. Presumably there was an injunction keeping her off the property.

I’d put money on her not being the first.

SYD MOORE

Her gaze was riddled with questions, or maybe contempt (it was too far away to see for sure): mouth screwed into a tight knot, eyebrows strung up high.

I stuck my hand out of the window to see if it was still raining. I'd be really fed up if the damp made my hair go frizzy. I'd only recently had a dip dye and the bleached bits soaked up moisture like sea monkeys, then similarly developed a life of their own. It was a pain. I felt around my shoulders and checked the ends. Still desiccated. Excellent. I wanted to make a good impression.

I swung out my legs, and stood up to survey my bequest.

'Ditch the witch,' came the scream from behind, a little less voluble this time. I turned back and regarded the old attention seeker coolly. Dementia or fanaticism perhaps. Personally, I viewed both to be genuine mental illnesses. Though it was never about what I thought. The woman pushed up her felt hat and snorted. Clots of wiry hair fell down to her chest. With her protruding nose, red from the cold, and a tatty black raincoat that had collected the fog into its folds, I thought she looked more like a witch than anyone I might find in the museum.

'You the new owner?' she called out, tutting and rolling her eyes.

I nodded. 'That's right.' Word got around quickly in these parts then. 'Septimus's granddaughter – Rosie.'

The old girl's lips curled instantly at the mention of Granddad. 'Your grandfather may be damned but there's still time to save your soul. This unholy abomination must come down. It is the only path to salvation.'

'Well, I'm going to sell it, so your wish might come true,' I returned gleefully, only just stopping myself from poking out

STRANGE MAGIC

my tongue. That'd shut her up, I thought with triumph. But she merely grunted and spun her placard round. On the other side was written *Sodomy is sin*. She stuck out her chin and pointed at it.

'Thanks,' I said and locked the car. 'I'll bear that in mind.' Then I turned my back on her. *Nuts like that must come with the territory*, I thought, as I made my way over to the entrance.

The powers that be had certainly organised the weather to enhance the creepiness of the place – a dark mist hung over the shoulders of the lumpen, whitewashed building. It wasn't as big as I remembered it, though I had been quite small on my last visit here, so my perspective was probably skewed.

But it was just as weird.

I had no idea what it had been before my grandfather transformed it into what he dreamt would become the Great Essex Witch Museum. Maybe an old mill or bakery? The sign outside, next to the handmade protest camp, suggested that at some point his ambitions had tailed off, for there was no 'great' any more. I had no idea when that was. After our last visit I didn't see him again. The family wasn't close.

To my mind the place had the look of a big white skull. Its porch jutted out about twelve feet from the main body of the building, like a solid rectangular jaw. Two leadlight windows on the first floor were placed far enough away from each other to give the impression of sharp glittering eyes. The entrance beneath them, a heavy timber door framed in an arch, formed a murky mouth, and the sign which swung over it (an outline of a witch on a broomstick) was its wonky nose. You couldn't shake the feeling it was watching you.

SYD MOORE

A peal of Vincent Price's laughter echoed silently in my head and ripped a shudder through my stomach as I marched. I think Septimus had once tried to show me the actor's performance in *Witchfinder General*. I recalled also that my dad had stopped him before it got too grim. I must have been seven or eight back then. It was one of the few memories of my grandfather that still persisted: a slightly batty but kind sort of chap, with corduroy patches on his cardigan and a stash of Caramac chocolate bars that he stealthily supplied to me and my brother despite my mum's 'no sweets' rule.

The surround of pine trees defining the boundaries of the land evoked a sense of siege, like they were a barrier against prying eyes, or perhaps had been grown to shield the more sensitive souls from the other side. I liked them. To me their dark green swaying branches conferred a kind of Christmassy magic to the little enclosure. I could see exactly why Septimus had planted them – they kept the place perfectly gloomy. You needed that in a witchcraft museum, right?

I crunched across the damp gravel. The car park was clearly in need of some maintenance and pitted all over with puddles. I stopped under the witch sign to inspect the bolts. One of them was coming away from the wall. That'd have to be fixed before I got the estate agents in, though I doubted any potential buyers would be interested in purchasing a witch museum, deep in the heart of Essex, on the outskirts of Adder's Fork, a village with one pub, which had lost all its passing trade when the new road to Chelmsford was built five years ago. I was more likely to attract a developer who would bulldoze the museum and construct a brace of smart executive homes. The

STRANGE MAGIC

new road might have been bad for jobs in the village but that spelt peace and tranquillity for upwardly mobile families with two-plus cars looking for a little piece of England that was a commutable distance from London, in the catchment area of a good Ofsted-rated primary school and ten minutes' drive from a proposed new Waitrose.

I was going to be quids in. At last. Thank you, Granddaddy Septimus.

'Don't mind Audrey back there, she's quite harmless but not allowed on the property any more,' a deep and rusty baritone rumbled beside me, causing me to leap in fright. 'And I'll get that fixed.'

'Wha—?' I started. 'Where did you come from?'

'Sorry.' A tall man in a bright yellow sou'wester and matching oilskin jacket smiled from under a thatch of white hair. Perfect teeth, false probably, and a thick moustache. He looked like a fisherman who'd lost his boat. Two very bright blue eyes narrowed as I looked him. 'Miss Strange?'

'It is indeed. Hi.' I slipped out my hand. 'Good afternoon. You must be . . .'

'Bronson. That's right, ma'am. If you don't mind me saying so . . . I've got to say, you look the spit of your Aunt Celeste. Thought for a second, when I saw you get out of that car, I was seeing a ghost.'

It'd been said before. Usually by my dad after one too many sherries. 'It's Rose or Rosie, not ma'am, please, and don't worry, Bronson, I'll take it as a compliment. From the pictures that I've seen of Celeste, the resemblance is mighty preferable to taking after Dad.'

SYD MOORE

His mouth curved and he put down a bucket that he'd been holding to shake my hand vigorously. It was wet but he didn't say anything about it. 'Ah, that's right. How is Teddy?'

Teddy. It was odd to hear Dad referred to like that. He was Ted to Mum and all his friends and that monosyllabic simplicity captured him perfectly. Teddy evoked childish fancy and underwear: Teddy Ruxpin, Victoria's Secret. Ew. Absolutely not my honest-to-God I'm-off-down-the-allotment/just-half-a-cup-love/I'm-on-the-double-yellows/plain-speaking plain-acting plain dad.

'Ted is still the same as ever, thanks.' I smiled brightly. Correcting his name like that might have come across a little priggish but I needed to wipe my mind of a bear in French knickers.

Bronson pushed a finger under the sou'wester and ran it round the rim. 'Still in the old money business? Accountancy wasn't it?'

'Well, he's retired now,' I told him, noticing that as well as very blue eyes he had very rosy cheeks. For an old bloke he looked quite the picture of health. 'But Dad likes to keep his hand in. Does the Rotary Club's books. You know, volunteering.'

Bronson nodded slowly. On closer inspection his rosy complexion was made up of dozens of broken veins. Maybe he'd been in the military at some point. He had that kind of bearing. Perhaps an outside role. Those thread veins didn't come from a desk job. Exposure to the elements was more likely to be the cause. There was a brownish tinge to his shaggy moustache too. A smoker. Roll-ups probably.

STRANGE MAGIC

‘And Maureen?’ he asked politely. ‘She’s well, I hope? Only met her a few times but she seemed very nice.’

I scratched my head and squinted at the museum façade, a prick of memory coming back to me. The perspective of the place retracted to a child-size point of view. Maureen, my mum, holding my hand. *Crunch, crunch, crunch* over the gravel. This gravel. The same drive. ‘I remember the last time we were all here. My brother, John, mucked around and did something to a waxwork. Granddad got annoyed. We didn’t come back again.’

‘No, I don’t suppose you did.’ He stepped back from me and away from the conversation. ‘Well, come on in. You’ll be wanting to see Samuel then.’

I pulled my feet out of the puddle I had sunk into and saw, to my dismay, that my new leather cowboy boots were covered with blotches of thick sticky mud. Typical. This is what happened when you strayed too far from civilisation. I’d slung them on this morning with a new pair of skinnies and a shirt-type blouse that I thought looked quite cool in an asymmetric way. I was hoping to give the impression of smart, casual and solid to my new employee. Though now it sounded like employees.

‘Samuel?’ I asked, squelching up to the front steps. These were covered with pinky-red tiles, a stiff square tongue lolling out of the archway. ‘I thought you were the one running this place? The curator?’ The term sounded wildly out of place here but most people who organised things seemed to use that title these days. You couldn’t shake a broom down the job centre without hitting a festival curator or two.

SYD MOORE

Bronson opened the door and half shook his head. 'Oh no, Rosie, I'm just the caretaker, love.'

Oh, that's right, I thought, *the handyman.* 'Of course,' I said and stepped over the threshold into a lobby. 'There's a salary been left in Granddad Septimus's will for you. Not for too long though, I'm afraid. Ten months' worth, I think the solicitors said. Sorry not to be able to do more, but it'll give you enough time to find something else. Unless—' I looked at the snowy mop of hair on which the sou'wester perched. 'Unless, of course, you want to retire. There's a pension that's been set up.'

The thread veins flushed and he pulled his whole body up so that he reared over me. He really was quite tall. 'Retire! Why would I want to retire indeed? I've been here since your grandfather started the place. I've no intention of deserting it now. Not when it needs us to get back in the saddle.'

I'd touched a nerve but stood my ground. This sort of thing didn't faze me. I was plenty used to people's indignation, real or not. 'Yes, but like I was saying there's only ten months' worth of wages left in the kitty.'

Now he'd heard me voice it as a purely economic concern he seemed to climb back down. 'Well, Sam will sort that out. Or if not him then the museum will turn something up, Rosie love. You'll see.'

'Well, I'm not sure it will this time, I'm afraid . . .' I said, my voice petering out as I caught sight of the display directly behind him.

On the far side of a sheet of glass, three waxworks were caught in a macabre mechanised dance. The poorly painted backdrop suggested the brickwork of a dank and dingy

STRANGE MAGIC

dungeon. A scrawny prisoner in nothing but a grubby sackcloth shirt that barely covered his privates was suspended from the wall in chains. Before him stood a dark-robed figure. He had his back to the prisoner on the wall and was grimacing through a dusty beard at the viewer. His hand rested on a wooden lever, which he jerked back and forth. The motion activated a blunt crescent blade suspended from the ceiling over a second prisoner. This one, wearing only a vest and a pair of short shorts, more appropriate for a 1970s swingers party, was fastened to a bench by manacles. As the blade went up, the tortured man in hot pants pushed up his head. His eyebrows were high and tense but the glass eyes had slipped and crossed giving the impression he had seen something astonishing up the ragged tunic of the prisoner on the wall. The mouth, which should have been configured in an expression of deep horror, had lost its lower lip and looked like it was trying to keep a lid on the giggles. As the blade came down, his head wobbled down. As the blade went up again, the head followed too. If I looked more closely I'd probably spot the string that connected the two. The display wasn't going to scare anyone. A lopsided sign fastened over the glass read *The Inquisition*. Like the exhibit, it too was old and flaking and ready for the tip.

This place didn't stand a chance.

'I don't want to get off on the wrong foot,' I refocused on the caretaker and spread my weight across both (muddy) boots so I looked firm and sturdy, 'but I shouldn't deceive you – I'm not planning on keeping the museum. In fact, I'll only be here for a few days.'

I held my breath and waited for his face to crumple.

SYD MOORE

It didn't.

Not even a crack.

I wondered if he hadn't heard me but was too polite to ask me to repeat myself.

I rocked back on my Cuban heels and watched him.

But he just shrugged and gestured to a hatch opposite. 'Office is through there, where you take the money for the tickets. Till. Filing cabinets. Books and resources and whatnot. Then the main exhibits are in here.' He turned and pointed to my left and a studded door surrounded by a green fluorescent light. The vivid blue eyes fixed on me and twinkled. 'Well, you best run along then and speak to Sam.' There was an oddly soft, paternal layer to his voice now. With one hand, he gently patted my arm and with the other moved to pull open the green-lit door. I marvelled at his strength. The door was clearly heavy. There was certainly life in the old boy yet. 'He'll be towards the back of the museum, in the Talks Area, with some kids from the local borstal by the looks of it. Could do with a hand, I reckon.'

I looked at the darkness within and grimaced, wondering if there was another route that might avoid the 'borstal' kids. 'Er, is there a back door?'

Bronson misread my hesitation. 'Oh, it's all right. Nothing to scare you. If Septimus named you then you'll have no qualm with anyone in there. Go on. They don't bite.'

For a second I wasn't sure who he was referring to.

'They're waiting,' he said.

Then, to my great surprise, he firmly pushed me in.