

Prologue

*It's now high time that ev'ry Crime
be brought to punishment:
Wrath long contain'd, and oft restrain'd,
at last must have a vent:
Justice severe cannot forbear
to plague sin any longer,
But must inflict with hand most strict
mischief upon the wronger.*

*The Day of Doom, Stanza 139
Michael Wigglesworth, 1662*

Salem, Massachusetts, July 19, 1692

Felicity Dale came to see the hangings. Her body tensed with apprehension as she observed the townsfolk gather. Those of stature like the parish Deacons or the Court Magistrates claimed front row seats on the grassy knoll above the village. Behind them, the crowd was energized -- a tightly wound coil of humanity eager to spring loose.

Though the day was young, heat seeped into the earth and radiated upward. A scent of lilacs hovered like heavy perfume around Felicity and the tall grass stood straight and still in the lifeless air. Beads of sweat made their way down her neck. Tucking wisps of platinum hair neatly under a starched white cap, the sixteen-year-old wound her way through the throng, nodding at familiar faces, which meant nearly everyone in the tiny Massachusetts enclave.

The crowd hushed as a giant of a man wrestled a ladder out of a wagon and brought it to lean on the wide, sprawling branch of a massive oak. The Hanging Tree. He wore black from head to toe with nary a hint of color. Coiled over his shoulder hung a sturdy, braided noose knotted by thirteen twists of the rope for strength and ready for its purpose. The man climbed the ladder, tossed the rope over the thick limb and yanked it tight.

Felicity knew that one by one, five women would hang that day. All five known to her. Elizabeth Howe of Ipswich, Sarah Good and Rebecca Nurse of Salem Village, Susanna Martin of Amesbury and Sarah Wildes of Topsfield. Who would be first?

She gnawed on her lower lip as three sheriff's constables ushered the women forth. Their hands were bound behind their backs as they faced the spectators who swayed rhythmically to a silent hymn. Two burley deputies prodded the first matron who was to die up the rungs of the ladder. Old Sarah Wildes. Magistrate John Hathorne stood at the base of The Hanging Tree, face somber and drawn. Attired in a formal suit of gray accented by white collar and cuffs, he held a rolled-up parchment in his hands.

In a voice throaty and stentorian, he bellowed, "Do you repent, Goody Wildes? Do you confess to practicing the art of witchery and bringing your wicked spirit upon these girls, the innocent children of Salem?"

Sarah Wildes shook her head, gray wisps of fine hair sprouting beneath her cap as tears streamed down her face. The harder she sobbed, the more the crowd hooted and jeered. Finally, unwilling to relinquish her pride, she thrust her chin out and straightened her back.

Felicity could have sworn Sarah's eyes bore right into hers. A deep shudder set her lips trembling. Not I, Goody Wildes, she yearned to shout. I had naught to do with this. T'was the others, not I. I have not spied wolves, or one-eyed cats or yellow birds. Nay, spirits do not come to me in dreams. Still, guilt pierced Felicity like a sword at her denials. Indeed, she had much to do with this. She knew the truth but could not act on it.

At that moment she saw them, the girls responsible for this travesty. They taunted the convicted woman, mocking her with insults and curses in language unfit for the tongues of young Puritan maidens. It made Felicity ill to look upon their beaming faces, eyes sparkling, lips moist. Could no one see through their subterfuge, their dissembling? Not even God?

Drums tattooed on both sides of the scaffold as the sheriff tightened the noose around Goody Wildes' throat. Before Felicity could blink, the giant in black kicked the ladder out from beneath the woman and her body jerked and twisted in the air for what seemed an eternity. Hanging was a slow agony; worse, it visited the most terrible indignity upon a soul, as the victim's bladder and sphincter let loose and bodily wastes flowed to the ground. The crowd inhaled and all that could be heard that summer morning was the gurgling sound of a witch strangling to death. Then the

body stilled. But the image of Goody Wildes' face, its wide and sightless eyes, its slack pale mouth, seared into Felicity's brain, to be recalled in future, recurring nightmares.

A rumble rippled through the mob as the deputies brought the next victim forward. Felicity's stomach flopped and her meager breakfast began to rise into her throat. The ritual was repeated as the second woman hanged. Felicity tried to force her eyes onto her shoes but could not keep them from flying upward at the roaring of the crowd. By the time the fifth and final woman had been executed, Felicity felt deadened. Her limbs seemed unable to respond to her brain's commands, thought processes slowed to a fugue-like state.

Jostled by the crowd, she finally stirred herself to action. Shouldering her way through the crush of heated bodies, she fled upward further and further from the hangings to the very pinnacle of Gallows Hill, the highest point in Salem. From this summit she could see water in three directions. On one side, the hill dropped off to sheer rock, a desultory locust tree and the confluence of the Wooleston, Endicott and North Rivers. But Felicity cared nothing for the view. Her breaths came in harsh gasps and she collapsed to the ground. The coolness of the earth on her hot cheeks felt heavenly, and as she calmed, she found herself peering down the jagged back slope to where the executed women, having been condemned as witches, would be buried. . . in the cracks and crevices of the hillside's rocks. There would be no decent, Christian burial for them. No mercy. In her mind, Felicity could see the bodies stuffed into the stony fissures, a hand or foot sticking out like a child's poppet. She shook off the ghastly images.

Odd sounds coming from behind a nearby cluster of boulders caught her attention. Rising to her knees, she crept around to observe. Eighteen-year-old Elizabeth Booth lay partially nude on the ground. Poised above her, naked from the waist down was Deacon Elijah Burton.

A surge of hatred rose within Felicity like a malevolent tide, deeper and more violent than any she'd ever experienced. This pious man, this pillar of the community, was forcing himself on a woman, much like he'd done on her this winter past, forever changing her world. Anger ate through her like a fire ripping through sun-dried fields.

Felicity took a step forward, fists clenched, ready to defend her friend, then paused. Elizabeth moaned softly and her head arched backward. She moved her hips off the ground as if reaching for him. The Deacon moved lower, to, to --. Surely he would not, could not. Felicity held her breath as this man of the church kissed Elizabeth's most private parts. . . places God forbade a girl to even herself touch. Her mind could not comprehend this reality. The Deacon did not rape Elizabeth. Nay, she was a willing participant.

A choking sound erupted from Felicity's throat. Lifting her skirts, she tripped and stumbled her way down the uneven hillside kicking up dust and stones in her path. When she finally reached bottom, she clasped her hands together, lifted her head to the sapphire sky and mouthed a prayer.

Surely the Devil had come to Salem.

Washington, D.C.

2006

Chapter 1

December 15, 2006

Professor Ernie Parks gulped down the last dregs of tepid coffee and grimaced. He turned back to the pile of books and papers on his desk and the opened tome before him, *Witchcraft in Salem Village*, by Winfield Nevins, 1892. He'd had a hell of a time getting the copy. A friend who owned a used bookshop managed to snag this classic somehow. . . for a steep price. But, Parks thought, it was worth every penny. Fascinating. A Victorian view of sorcery in the colonies. From prudes to Puritans. Ha.

He leaned back in his beat-up swivel chair and gazed without seeing at the jumble of books and journals stuffed into old wooden bookcases, more stacks of the same rising in every corner of the room like crooked skyscrapers. Not an inch of wall space remained to display his degrees or articles of acclaim. The sole ornamentation in the office sat on his desk: a photograph of his wife and young son. His son. Jesse. Now two years dead. Whenever his thoughts drifted in that direction he spurred himself to action. Anything but dwell on Jesse. He strode over to the window and looked out at the campus square. Snow had begun to fall and the flakes twisted and spun in a whirlwind of white. The ground was already covered, so much prettier than the brown grass and gray concrete six stories below.

Those righteous Puritan pricks, he mused. Oh, they were clever. But he was on to them. More than three hundred years later, the truth would come to light. And Ernie Parks, history professor *ordinaire*, would be famous. An academic star featured at conferences and colloquia around the world. A poor black kid from the slums of the District would change history. Yes.

As if in a blink daylight faded. He returned to his desk and switched on the small lamp. A glance at the wall clock near the door told him he had wasted twenty minutes daydreaming -- it was already five o'clock. Doris wouldn't be expecting him for at least an hour. Right now she'd be sailing through the front door of their tiny house, tossing legal briefs on the hall table and hustling up some dinner without changing out of her courtroom suit. The professor smiled as he thought of his wife of ten years. Parks still wondered how such a beauty could end up with a

homely guy like him. Doris always said he had panache. He grinned. She'd be proud of him now.

Without warning, his eyes began to blur and he realized suddenly how tired he felt. Not just a normal tired from teaching and research all day, but bone-weary tired. His fingers felt numb. So did his toes. He stretched his arms and shook his hands, thinking they'd fallen asleep. But the tingle started to crawl through his body, up his calves to his thighs, which tensed in spasms, then up his spine. Parks pushed himself to his feet but his legs wouldn't support him.

"What the hell?" he murmured, as his body sank back into the chair with a will of its own.

His eyes began to close and at that moment he knew. He watched his hand reach for the coffee mug as if in time-lapse images, stutter-motion. The mug tipped over and a small rivulet of grainy liquid pooled on the desk. Parks lowered his head on his arms as the world went black.

The door to the office opened with a tiny squeak, the only sound in the building. The intruder knew that every year at this time, faculty and staff of the Georgetown University History Department got together to celebrate the holidays. No one would return to the campus that day.

The intruder hesitated a moment then closed the door softly and turned off the light. Professor Parks' office appeared dark to the outside world, just like the other offices in the History and Economics Building.

But wispy moonlight filtered into the room providing enough light for the mission. Snow – fell heavily beyond the window and the visitor unlatched and raised it. Cold air whistled in. He slapped Parks' face and it brought no response. Good, oblivion. He propped the professor up in his chair and swung it over to the computer. Using gloved fingers, he cleared the screen and opened a new Word document. Then, manipulating Parks' fingers to press the keys, he typed the message.

Doris – I'm sorry, but I miss him too much.

The intruder nodded at the words. He left Parks slumped in his chair while he grabbed the coffee mug off the desk and wiped the spill with a handkerchief. Tucking both the cloth and mug in his overcoat pocket, he looked around to see what might have been missed.

Satisfied, he took hold of Parks' arm and hoisted him out of the chair. Hugging Parks around the waist, he half dragged, half carried the unconscious man to the window. He leaned him against the windowsill and took one last look outside. The Quad was devoid of life and the newly fallen snow smothered sound like thick fur earmuffs.

The intruder clutched the professor's shoulders and turned him. Facing Parks' back, he shoved the man out the window to the pavement six stories below. The body seemed to float in slow motion. Even when it slammed into the ground, the effect seemed softly surreal.

For a moment the intruder felt panic, a burning in his throat, an ache in his gut. Too late now. But nothing stirred and an eerie silence filled the void. How could someone die so violently and the world not notice? He stared as the body bled out onto the silvery fleece. Its position, arms and legs outstretched at odd angles, reminded him of a child's angel in the snow. A bloody black angel.

The killer spun around abruptly, rushed to the bathroom and spewed up his last meal.

December 16

Maggie Thornhill pressed the elevator button for the tenth time. She eyed the door to the staircase but had no intention of walking up six flights to the top floor. The lift arrived and Maggie entered, pressed six, and tapped her foot in agitation. Finally, the doors opened and as she stepped out, a man flew into her, knocking her bag off her shoulder. Contents went careening across the tile floor.

"Shit," she muttered and dropped to her knees.

"Maggie?"

She looked up. "Frank?"

"Damn, I'm sorry." He knelt to help her collect. "Lotta crap in here." He handed her a squeeze ball that looked like the planet Earth.

"Yeah, well hello to you too."

They both stood.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“You mean, what’s a philistine like me doing in the history building of Georgetown?”

She scrunched her face, then turned to the commotion down the hall. Her heart lurched at the sight of yellow tape and a swarm of crime team investigators. She knew the sight well since she often worked with the police as a digital analyst.

“What’s going on?” she said. “God, that’s not Phillip Ambrose’s office, is it?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You know Ambrose?”

“I have an appointment with him,” she glanced at her watch, “in two minutes.”

“No, that’s not his office.” Lieutenant Frank Mead pointed to another door down the hall.

“That is.”

“Whose office is that?”

“Dr. Ernest Parks.”

“What? No. Oh no. What happened?”

“Did you know Dr. Parks?”

“You said ‘did.’”

“What?”

“You said ‘did I, not do I’, past tense.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Mead said, pulling out a roll of Tums and popping a few.

“He’s dead?”

Mead crunched.

She did a spin and slapped at her leg. “God Almighty.”

“Back to my question, did you know him?”

“No, but I was going to. He was to be one of my advisors on this dissertation.”

“Finally going for the Ph.D., eh?”

She sighed, leaned against the wall. “Yeah. Coursework is all done. Just had to complete the final project.”

“Which is?”

“Oh, Frank, it was so perfect. Howard Roth, the History Chair, finagled this for me, not an easy thing, seeing as the documents are so valuable, and he was able to pull the strings with Boston Historical Society and it was so --.”

“Perfect, yeah, right. So what’s the project?”

“I’m going to digitize all the Salem documents from 1692, you know, so they’ll be in electronic form and last forever. Preserving the past, so to speak and --”

“Salem, as in Salem witches?”

She grabbed his roll of Tums from his hand and popped a few.

“*Agita?*” he asked.

“And more if this project is kaput.” She pushed her fingers through her wild mop of hair.

“Frank, what happened to Dr. Parks?”

He hesitated, looked around. “He was found dead, six stories beneath his window last night.”

“He jumped out of his window?”

“Maybe.”

Maggie opened her mouth, closed it. They looked at each other.

“You’re homicide.”

“Bingo.” Frank waved his hands. “No, hold on. We don’t know what happened yet, so don’t go making assumptions.”

“Have you talked to Dr. Ambrose yet?”

“Yup. Just leaving. You meeting him?”

She nodded.

“Well, he’s a bit shaken so don’t be surprised if he cancels. Said he was going to visit Mrs. Parks. Guess they’re long-time friends.”

Maggie didn’t know what to say. She picked up her bag that was sitting beside her on the floor and started moving toward Ambrose’s office. She hadn’t even met the man and she was dreading this meeting.

“Frank, would you let me know what happens?”

He chomped on his Tums. Then he nodded and headed toward the crime scene.