

Prologue

SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS, 1692

EVERY TIME THE GUARD ARRIVES, IT IS AN EXCITEMENT. THE moment his keys jangle in the door lock, my fifty or so cell mates stir excitedly, roused from their listless despair. Filthy hair is tossed back. Sleepy eyes are rubbed clear.

The guard is very tall, with a starkly pale face. On these patrols, he does not wear the metal helmet that reminds me of a horseshoe crab. His musket remains holstered at the side of his doublet. He is not fearful of us captive women.

Or that's what he wants us to believe, at any rate.

He's revolted by the stench of body odor and spoiled food that greets him. With raised chin, he makes no effort to conceal his contempt.

A few women plead on bended knees, arms outstretched.

"My husband cannot look after the children and also tend the harvest. Our crops are withering."

"I'm told my baby is ill. Release me, I beg you."

"I have done nothing wrong! Please!"

One woman assaults him with logic. "Why would I kill

Goodwife Smith's cow? I simply complained that her milk was becoming too expensive. That doesn't mean I wish her — or her cow — any ill. I need the milk that the Smiths sell. How can they accuse me of killing the cow with evil spells? *I don't even know what a spell sounds like.* This is not right. I demand to be let go."

The slave woman Tituba sleeps shackled in the corner, dreaming of her little girl, Violet. They are in the rye field behind the house, playing among the rustling stalks. I know this because her dream thoughts are vivid and flow easily into my clairvoyant mind. I am grateful that she is not recalling the terrifying episodes of demonic possession that put her here.

These women are innocent. I'm sure of it. Yet — innocent or not — in the coming days they will dangle from the hangman's noose on Gallows Hill. Seventeen have been executed already. One man, Giles Corey, was crushed to death. Two have died in jail.

Four-year-old Dorcas Good looks at me, big-eyed and scared, from across our cell. The demonic thing running rampant through Salem has not even spared this child.

Dorcas begins to sob pitifully and I cross to her side, rubbing her skinny shoulders as she whimpers into my skirt. The guard, clearly unnerved, hurries through the door, locks it, and disappears.

The pleading women slump to the ground, as though the guard has taken their last sparks with him. No more arguments are voiced once he's gone.

I lean back against the wall. After fifteen or so minutes, voices enter my head, as they always do in the moments just before I drift off to the distant shore of sleep. I can hear my cell mates thinking.

I have always been able to hear the thoughts of others. Not just imagine them. Really hear them inside my head.

Tom must get word to Uncle James. He can help.

I am so scared. I don't want to hang.

My baby will die without me.

It is driving me insane.

I focus on a memory that helps me shut out the voices; I try to see it in my mind's eye as clearly as possible. *It is spring. I am beside a forsythia bush; its flowers have already burst open in shades of fiery yellow. My sister is there. We are about to crawl into an opening in the bush, to its dark center.*

The other women's voices are blocked by my memory's images and no longer plague me.

Instead, it is my own voice that warns me. My own voice that expresses fear.

I try to sleep. But sleep won't come.

There is too much to worry about.

Will the evil come back for me?

It might.

The hideous, demonic creature that I have let loose on Salem Village might not be through with me yet.