



# Forbidden Hunger

By

**Shawna Moore**

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## Chapter One

### *1700 Salem Village*

Dew dripped from the trees and speckled my naked body. Leaves rustled and teased the soles of my feet. My soul stirred with each step. Sarah Bradford, you're dallying with the devil. Goodman Danforth's hands clapped a frantic rhythm, and I spun toward the smiling man.

"Dance before the sun reaches its highest point in the sky. No matter this is the Sabbath." A long tongue snaked from between his full lips and licked.

Around me, five other young women laughed and thrust their arms heavenward. Reckless souls we were. Tucked amidst the fall foliage, we reveled, our late morning passed in a peculiar communion of flesh and free spirit.

Charles Danforth held out his hands, and the thick fingers wiggled in the chill wind. "Such a beautiful sight. Who among you will grant me pleasure this good day?"

Abigail Hunt stilled and approached the man who had coaxed our bodies into convulsions for countless beats of our hearts. She cupped her full bosom and pinched the plum-ripe nipples between her slender fingers.

Tendrils of brown hair clung to her cheek, but she let them remain. "A dance with the devil would surely cure the ache within my body, would it not?"

"Indeed, my lovely." He walked among us, stopping at those who invited his touches and kisses. "What of you, Sarah Bradford? Are you ready to receive the devil's seed?"

Seed? Wetness trickled down my leg. He circled me, and with each pass brought his black-robed body closer. A single finger dragged down my spine and came to rest against the swell of my bottom.

"Ready?"

"Yes." His laughter turned into a throaty growl that sliced through the wind much as a scythe. "'tis the first time you have joined us." Wet lips pressed against my ear. "You will not tell of this time you've spent in our company, will you?"

My tongue, leaden with unspoken words, curled against the back of my clenched teeth. At my swallow, he came in front of me and I stared into his eyes—eyes the color of a blackbird's wing caught

in a shaft of sunlight.

A toss of my head brought his hand hard against my bottom. From the pocket folds of the robe, the other hairy hand produced a flacon. Laughing, he removed the cork from the narrow neck and tipped the glass vessel toward his hand. Fragrant, brown oil poured into his palm, and Rebecca Giles accepted the empty vessel.

He swiped his hands together and knelt in front of me. At the cawing of a crow, I started. His glistening fingers splayed wide and struck my bare belly. They slithered down over the gentle swell, and a fire erupted deep within my womb. A sharp snap of his wrists brought the bottom knuckles of his thumbs together at the tangle of curls between my legs.

I closed my eyes and drew in the scent of his strange potion. Pepper. Clove. The tang of wild grasses dried and crushed at the end of their season.

“Are you one of the Devil’s disciples, Sarah?”

Hellfire laved my ankles, and my legs trembled. “Not that I am aware.”

“Then why do you tempt me today?”

Opening my eyes, I let my gaze settle on a plump oak. “What of tempting? Why do you bring us here?”

His oily fingers combed through the golden-brown tuft of my maiden curls. He brought his face close and kissed the air before them. “If I tell you why, we must then engage in the Devil’s dance.”

Despite the passing of seven days, the memory of the Sabbath ritual remained strong. A fire caught in my belly and flared toward my legs. Today, another torment, one made of flesh and blood, filled the doorway of our farmhouse. He stood before me, handsome and smiling. Words of welcome clogged in my throat.

Thomas Thorne, a doctor by trade, a temptation foremost, paused on the threshold before entering. He tucked his chin in address. “The calf is weak yet will live, Goody Bradford. Jacob and Giles are tending the animals. Never have I witnessed such a peculiar wrapping of the birth cord as with this one.”

My dear mother allowed herself a smile, but one that faded fast. “Thanks be to you, but let us speak not of peculiar ways. More than one scourge has befallen us of late. Come and warm yourself in front of the fire. The chill outside is worse than in winter.”

“Scourge? What of such a foul thing?”

Her fingers knitted together and rested against the full black skirt. Each pull of the work-

roughened flesh made my heart clutch. “Since the last Sabbath, something is troubling our Sarah. Her body will wither if she continues to shun sustenance.”

Thomas Thorne towered many heads above Rachel Bradford. He followed her to the fireplace then stilled his booted feet. His lips curled, and his cheeks bore traces of too much time in the wind. I delivered a sound pinch to my leg. My moments spent looking at the sturdy doctor were surely more sins against my already burdened soul.

He pulled a heavy hand through the shock of dark-brown hair resting over his forehead. “She has fallen ill?” Furrows formed beside his eyes and mouth.

Where earlier cold fingers picked at my bones, warmth replaced their horrid scratching. Dare I reach up and straighten the strands of hair fallen from the pins? Such a fool I was for dancing with those Devils seven days ago.

“We pray for guidance,” my mother said and beckoned him closer. “Come now, clean those hands proper that did God’s bidding.”

With a few long strides, Thomas’s feet devoured the distance between us. Covered in crimson blood from the tips of his fingers to his wrists, he passed me but not without provocation.

Tipping the pitcher, I filled the shallow basin. Thomas offered a smile, a smile that carried with it an invitation. To what? Soon, he would rid his flesh of outward impurity. The foulness within me dealt far more a problem. It would take more than mere water to wash away my sinful thoughts and the vexation within my womb.

Tonight, my eyes would strain as they looked upon the Scripture. A longer prayer would find my tallow burning low before the last words of repentance left my lips.

Thomas drew his hands through the water, his fingers dripping and curling toward the roof of the farmhouse. Each splash struck a chord deep inside me.

Strange stirrings that usually came in the night now welled within. In the pit of my belly, a ball of heat curled and drove lower. My hands trembled, and the pitcher left them. The vessel struck the floor and split into many pieces. Pottery shards scattered over my boots.

“Look what you have done, girl. If you were not one of strong faith, I should fear the Devil was trying his best to turn you wrong.” My mother’s skirt rustled as she crouched near my feet.

Let it never be said Rachel Bradford failed in attributing every ill to Satan himself. Kneeling, I helped her stanch the spilled water.

“There now, child. That will do. You have been rather poorly of late. Sit thee down in the front room and rest.” Her eyes, blue as the wildflowers of spring, searched my face.

Any other day of the week, the task she had dealt would prove nearly as difficult. But today, the Sabbath, my legs yearned to carry me far from this room. Far from this warm home. Hands on my bended knees, I remained facing away from the commanding figure of Thomas Thorne. Without a doubt, he was my test. A hindrance to my salvation. A man who set my mind wandering what sins a weak woman might commit in his presence.

“Where are my manners?” A rustling to my right brought Thomas into view. He reached for the folds of the apron mother held and bore the broken crockery toward his chest. Bits of hay clung to the sleeves of his black woolen overcoat. Brown hairs sprouted from the skin on the tops of each finger.

A clattering ensued in my head. My legs faltered and I toppled sideways, my face striking a spot near mother’s boot. A piece of grit burrowed into my cheek, yet I clamped my lips. With a swipe of one finger, I loosed the cursed dirt and stood. Blackness blotted out my sight. Voices swirled around me, sometimes clear, at others garbled. I pitched backwards. My backside struck the floor and burned as though stuck with many burrs. My legs thrashed while someone attempted to still them.

“What has happened?” my mother cried.

Arms tugged and tormented me, and I slapped at the air. “I...I...”

“Ssssh. You are overwrought.” Thomas’s thick fingers touched my quivering lips before disappearing. Strong hands steadied my shoulders.

My throbbing heart heaved toward my tongue, but a deep breath quelled its wicked ways. At opening my eyes, I watched the flames lick at the logs. Thomas’s hands warmed me through. The sweetness of the hay mixed with the stench of animal blood still on his hands or coat. I swallowed several times to beat back the vile liquid rising in my throat.

Yes, Thomas was right. I was unable to speak without my thoughts tumbling and my sight blurring. What had come over me? My belly would hold nothing more than some broth, taken before the Sabbath.

“I would be obliged for any help getting her up the steps.” My mother bestowed a feather-soft kiss on my forehead.

But nonesuch came from Thomas, not even a stroke of his hand on my brow. If only the demons would go away and stop bedeviling me. “Hold her hands,” my mother said in barely above a whisper. “She appears to be clawing at something.”

Thomas nodded at mother. “I shall put her to rest.”

My feet left the floor, and the room spun like a child’s top. Thomas hauled me into his arms and bore me up the steps to my cherry four-poster bed. As my body touched the mattress, he loosed his

hold. He returned my stare, and tiny flecks of gold dwelled within the brown depths of his eyes.

He looked about the room, but my mother had not followed. “Please bring some wet cloths for her head.” His voice split the silence of the room. “A cup of warm tea, too.”

“But I do not want any.”

From against the wall, he pulled my favorite chair, a William and Mary with a cane back and seat. Instead of sitting, he approached the bed. The canopy flapped against his head, and he lowered to where I lay.

Gentle hands stroked the tears from my damp cheek. Over my chin, they traveled, along the curve of my neck and down to where my lace collar rested. His fingers fluttered over the delicate handiwork.

Thomas’s lips played where the fingers had been. “What troubles you, dear Sarah? Pray, tell me. She will not hear a word you utter.”

I studied the seams of the canopy. “Something is at me of late.”

“Surely, you do not believe—?”

As though pulled from above, I sat up in bed and brought my face so close to his our breaths met. “I believe in God, if that is what you seek. I am not one of the Devil’s disciples.”

“I would not put that upon you. I am only worried as to why you are so distracted. Every time I come upon you, your legs wobble as a newborn calf’s. You speak as though someone is tugging at your tongue.”

I strained to hear any sounds of approach on the stair steps. Nothingness met my ears, only the sound of Thomas breathing and my heart beating harder with each moment passed.

The wool of his overcoat chafed my fingers as they closed around his arm. His lips worked together, but no words came.

“Something troubles me, Doctor Thorne. Can I be wrong in believing I am too faithful to fall prey to the Devil?”

Thomas glanced over his shoulder and placed a steady finger upon my lips. My tongue sneaked out and touched the pad of flesh. Sweetness met my mouth, and I swallowed several times to deliver it to my belly. A moan rattled in his throat, and his eyes closed for a brief time. Behind the veined veils of his eyelids, the orbs that provided him sight darted.

Upon opening them, he pulled the thick finger away. “If you will, I have something that might cure your ailment.”

I nodded and edged closer to him. “Nothing would make me happier.” My hand found his on

top of the bedspread. "Take this burden from my body."

He placed his mouth next to my ear. The stirring between my legs resumed. I burrowed my backside into the feather-stuffed mattress, but the tempest would not cease.

His breath came hot and heavy. "If you commit to my healing, we must keep it a secret. I care too much about you to have tongues wagging more than a dog's tail."

"A secret?" I clapped a hand over my gaping mouth. If mother heard such an evil word, she would fill my belly with the bitterest of purgatives. Only when I had washed every whit of ruination from myself would her hands and mind rest.

He caught me by the shoulders. Both of his thumbs traced circles and made me shiver. "*Our* secret. A secret that will remain with us to the grave."

Unseen fingers plucked at my body and tickled between my legs. I kicked back the blankets and flung my legs over the edge of the bed. In these darkest hours before dawn, the bed-sitting room walls cleaved around me.

No matter how many times I tossed my head, the yawning mouth of the demon remained. Yellow eyes capped above the crooked nose and stared into my soul.

My feet hit the floor, and I ran toward the washbasin. I dunked the cloth several times and wrung the water from it. Pulling up my nightdress, I plunged the clean, cool cloth between my legs and clamped it there. Down over my thighs, water dripped along with the wetness already there.

Swollen from my touching, my bosom heaved underneath the linsey-woolsey garment. I passed my hand over the tender peaks, and more heat raged through my loins. My knees trembled, and the cloth fell away. Picking it from the floor, I flung it into the basin and flopped onto the bed.

*Our secret. Our secret.*

Keeping secrets, even with Thomas, was a sin. The throbbing between my legs combined with the pain in my cheek. Surely no further ills would befall me from visiting him for relief of my wound and torment? If my absence were discovered, I would claim a sudden fever and desire to walk alone until sleep willed me to stop wandering.

But my desire went well beyond a cure for my bodily woes. I leaped from the bed, not bothering to smooth the covers. From the chair, I claimed my stockings and pulled them on. Over the nightdress, I donned a simple frock that bore no tedious lacings to trouble my fumbling fingers.

*We must share in the Devil's dance.*

May the fires of Hell consume Charles Danforth. He was in Salem Village not on a mission of



God but of the Devil. Churchwarden, indeed. His mission had me worshipping at his heathen gathering. Yes, I must rid myself of this devilment. I stepped into my boots and wrapped the shawl around my shoulders. Doctor Thomas Thorne would perform a miracle, take away my possession and purge the poison from my body.

Darkness draped over Salem Village, and I stepped deeper into the night. The Devil plucked at my soul. I beat my hands against my chest to keep him at bay. My body would, one day, join with another, but he would be human and of God's earth.

Never would I accept some demon that would claw at my clothes and render me bare for his sanguine bidding.

The wind's icy fingers scratched my face, but I pressed on through the fields. With the stout branch, I poked the familiar pathways. Doctor Thorne would heal me. His kind words and warm hands would banish all ills.

Underfoot, withered leaves crunched, and my boot soles ground them against the solid earth. A bountiful field of rye waved in the distance and caught the moon's light. I carved a swath past Goodman Abbott's farm and later came upon Goodman Smith's homestead.

My hair whipped in a wild tangle about my face. Thomas's fingers would comb it into place as they had earlier today. He would not scoff that the pins were gone as was my linen cap. The same heat would rise in my womb, and my cheeks would bear the flush of my sinful ways.

Thomas was a sympathetic sort, not a man who passed judgment. We had conversed many times in the churchyard. For three years he had treated the maladies of villagers, often accepting little or no payment for his services. I tramped onward, forging through wind that did its best to push me back. What was this untold healing of which he spoke? That which would become our secret? The tips of my fingers still smarted from paging the Scripture before dousing the candlewick. If anything could drive a demon from my body and soul, at least until I met with Thomas's healing, those Christian studies would suffice.

Ahead of me, the quaint cottage lay low against the surrounding land. A deep breath brought the pleasing scent of burning wood. Sometimes, on nights when sleep would not come, I sneaked downstairs and poked the low-burning logs with the iron. They always spat at me as though they would rather smolder.

Unlike the wood's heat, a far different kind coiled in my belly. I lengthened my steps, drawn to the amber welcome of a lantern in Thomas's window.

The stone walkway rose up to my wide-stepping feet, and in short time I reached the front door. My knuckles barely tapped the dry wood than the door opened. I cast the walking stick behind me and Thomas drew me inside. My shawl slipped down over my shoulders. A smile parted his lips, and his eyes traversed a lazy path from my neck to my knees.

He gathered my cold hands and kissed each knuckle. "You must not be afraid, dearest Sarah. 'tis not the Devil inside of you, only your desires surfacing when we are together."

"D-desires? You speak of sins of the flesh? A pure and decent woman dare not consider conversing of such things, even with her husband."

A single shove of his arm sent the door closed. His laughter rang throughout the room, rattling the relics polished and displayed on the shelf above a roaring fireplace. "Tonight I will bring you deliverance from your woes. But first you must warm your weary self in front of the fire."

Weary? I was not in the least. Well, only unless he considered the loneliness that settled so deep it struck my bones.

Though the rafters bore down upon all beneath, my breath came easy at the rustic charm of the cottage. Thomas crossed to the trestle table while I sought the fire's warmth. I turned toward him. One long finger trailed around the edge of the mortar, while the fingers of his opposite hand closed around the thick pestle. He brandished the instrument and began pulverizing the contents of his vessel.

"You will enjoy this brew from herbs. It will relax and warm your body. Perhaps then you will not fear sharing your thoughts with me? I covet many things, Sarah. Among them is your trust."

"Covet? Share my thoughts? The Sabbath has barely passed."

"Oh, yes." His arm dropped and ground the pestle harder against the herbs. "Hopefully, you will share your thoughts and even more. I love you, Sarah Bradford. My love is so potent it robs me of rest. For three years, my mind and body have been tormented. Since the first moment in the churchyard, I have lusted for thee and longed to fulfill many desires. I am hopeful you feel the same. What will you tell me, Sarah? Will you commit to me or run from my presence like a frightened fawn?"

He turned and lifted the pestle to his lips. His long tongue appeared and licked around the plump tip before disappearing. I laid my hands against my legs. Blood beat in my head and behind my eyes. Much as the pig caught on the roasting spit just beyond, I was a prisoner of my own evil doing. Wood smoke floated before my face, and I moved farther away from the fireplace.

That one simple gesture brought me closer to Thomas. Closer to his smiling lips. Yes, the Devil was at work here in Salem Village. To think of those poor souls who suffered trials in 1692. At the time, I failed to grasp their strange possession. Now, eight years after my own cousin was condemned

for being a witch, I suspected my body to be among those afflicted.

I opened my arms and accepted him close. He embraced me for a moment before pulling away. At arm's length, he studied me. The palm of his right hand reached out and pressed above my heart.

“Can you cure my malady, Thomas Thorne?”

Warm and wet, his mouth came upon mine. The gentle pull of his lips deepened and consumed the flesh underneath. My moan floated into his mouth, but my ears picked up the sinful sound. At the thrust of his tongue past my teeth, my drawers dampened and my womb seized.

Finished with his feast, Thomas let me loose but combed his fingers through my tousled hair. “I can do that and so much more.”

## Chapter Two

Thomas dipped the silver spoon into the earthenware mug. Steam curled around his fingers. Throughout the room, lighted tallow burned low. Wax trickled down the side of each candle much as the wetness between my legs.

The spoon emerged, and he blew against the brew several times before bringing it to my mouth. At first, the bitter potion burned, but after several more swallows of his medicine, a rather soothing effect settled in.

“Have you seen the Devil, Sarah?” His nostrils quivered much like a hound’s when scenting a rabbit.

“You think I am possessed? I came here to have you tend my cheek.” At my lie and flight from him, a chair tipped and struck the floor.

“Not by the Devil. Oh, no. Your affliction is quite a normal one, though not many womenfolk dare admit the same. The beast that bothers you comes from within not without.”

My tongue remained still. With each *tick-tock* of the mantel clock, my unspoken desires continued to consume me. Underneath the bodice, my flesh yearned to burst free.

Boot heels trampled the floor. Strong arms spun us together. Breath rushed from my body. My tender bosom bumped against his chest, and my heart caught in my throat.

His hands fondled my backside. “You are a woman trapped by your own longings. Longings you dare not express, even to your family. Nor to God.”

“’tis not so. You are the Devil to...”

His mouth lowered onto mine. Softly, he sucked. I parted my lips and allowed his tongue passage within. My heart thumped harder. The darkness and distrust within me departed, replaced by a glowing, bright warmth embedding deep within my bones and soul.

His hand fumbled between us. He eased the shawl from my shoulders, and it dropped behind me. “I am not an evil man. You know I have loved you from afar, Sarah. Remember the bundles of wildflowers this past summer? The soft leather boots? Did your mother not tell you? Those were from me. Small tokens of my affection for the most beguiling woman in Salem Village.”

Tell me? She had spoken not of Thomas nor shown me these gifts. “Promise you will rid me of the unrest within my body?”

His teeth nipped my neck, and the tongue swirled over the swollen flesh. The buttons of my frock sprang open at his feverish tugs, and I canted my hips toward him. A growl rattled in his throat.

He lapped below my left ear. “Do not be afraid. I will do whatever you wish. This night is ours. A night to explore, to satisfy our bodily hunger.”

*Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.*

I lay on the bed and watched him in the candle glow. Candles rendered by my mother. Rachel Bradford minded her candle-making business as well as my father minded the farm. Thomas’s long fingers worked over each of his buttons until the heavy shirt fell away from his broad chest and shoulders. He neared the bed and swiped his hands together.

*Swish. Swash. Swish. Swash.*

The scent of roasting pig flesh filled the air. Fat from the burning hide dripped and hissed at hitting the pile of wood underneath. My gaze dropped below Thomas’s belly. A lump bulged beneath his drawers, and my body seized at the sight.

Satan was casting my lot in life, for I was not betrothed to the man approaching the bed on which I lay. I swallowed and my throat clogged. Be gone, foul fingers that choke the breath from my body. You will not find welcome, tonight or any other.

“Show me where you are troubled, my love. Reveal your suffering to me so I might end the torment.”

The feather mattress, burdened by the weight of my body, sank more each time I moved. I turned myself away from the beauty of Thomas. Tears stung my eyes and rolled down my cheeks. He was telling the truth. The Devil was not having his due with me. I was an educated and sensible woman, not one to believe in such. My body uncurled at the touch of his hand on my back.

“Come to me, my love. Tomorrow, I shall tell your father of my intentions.”

My feet flailed the air as I turned to confront him. “You wish to...?”

*God in Heaven.* A Christian woman, I should cover my eyes. Gone were all of his garments. He had divested himself of every proper covering while I cowered on the farthest corner of the large bed. My heart opened and a heavy burden lifted.

He settled onto the edge of the bed. Bare arms and legs covered with honey-brown fur rested beside me. His long back tapered and flared into a lean hip which burrowed into the mattress and caused me to pitch closer to him.

“Make you my wife? Indeed, that is my desire.”

I reared up and tumbled off the foot end of the bed. Despite my ignorance in the ways of men and women, I stood and approached Thomas. The nearest candles cast golden light over his bare chest. Halos of hair surrounded the hard, rouge buds. At standing, his left leg brushed against my skirt and sent a chill over me.

Thomas's body possessed many places my lips and hands longed to explore. We watched each other, and my heart bounded beneath my nightdress. With the tips of his fingers, Thomas pushed the unbuttoned frock to the floor, and I stepped free.

He knelt and gathered the hemline of my nightdress in his hands. His fists tapped against my trembling fingers, and I accepted the cloth. For each bit I raised the garment, his hands traced a path upward. At reaching the middle of my leg, he paused and wet his lips. Raising my arms, I sent the nightdress over my head and far behind me. A few tugs brought the stockings to my ankles. His fingers made short work of the laces, and he pulled the boots from my feet. The stockings followed, and I kicked them aside.

His breath came in short rasps, and mine did none the better. A single stretch brought him to his feet. The devilish hands grabbed for my bare backside and drew me tight to him. Against my belly, his hardness rested. Over the years, I had witnessed animals mating in barns and fields. My ignorance was not such that my mind could not conjure the purpose of Thomas Thorne's full-blooded organ.

His fingers sought mine and drew them down. "Touch me, Sarah. Make me know the meaning of love with a pure woman."

"But, I do not..."

The other hand cupped gently against my mouth. Perfume from the crushed herbs blended with the musk from his body. I drew in a deeper breath of him before the hand left my face. Against my palm, the damp pouch of flesh between his legs stirred, and I let it drop.

His laughter and smile followed. "Lay thee down on the bed. Show me where you are troubled."

I tossed my head and remained standing. Over his chest, I moved my hands. Tight coils of hair tickled my palms. My womb wept, the trickle coming faster down the inside of my leg. Into the pit at his belly, I plunged my thumb.

He growled and drove his fingers past the cleft of my bottom. "Like a ripe fruit, your softness parts for my fingers and also for my hungry mouth."

After placing a hard kiss on my lips, he bent my body like a maple branch. Before I took another breath, his hot tongue trailed over my bosom and closed around the nub of flesh at the tip. I cried out as

he abandoned the suckling and knelt in front of me.

Filling my hands with his hair, I held him against me. Hot breath billowed against my flesh. “Am I to your liking, Thomas?”

His nod brought another bolt of heat that traveled from my belly to my legs. At the tangle of curls capping my maidenhead, his face lay buried. Caught between his teeth, some of the hairs pulled free at his tugs. He urged my legs apart and placed his tongue at my most sacred place.

As one might lick a homemade sweet, he sucked at my weeping hole. The tender flesh wetted his mouth, and gurgling noises filled the air. Heat, this time more intense, knifed through my loins. His tongue ravished the same swollen bean my fingers had touched many of those nights when I surrendered not to sleep.

He landed a bite to my nether folds, and I bucked against his face. My sins and his were ravaging me, but so be it. Thomas loves me. I love him.

Nothing else really matters.

Rocking back on his heels, he allowed me freedom from his wicked lessons. “Your body has betrayed you, dearest Sarah. Where I have just supped is where you are troubled, is it not?”

Words, though I willed them, would not coax from my mouth. Into the throbbing void between my legs, I thrust two of my fingers and pulled them out. Wet from fingertips to bottom knuckles, I held them in front of his face. He swooped, devouring them and the strange honey.

“I am not a puppet made of cloth and string, Thomas. I am but a woman, made from bone and weak of flesh.”

One final pass of his tongue and it ceased its torment. “Many would claim you are a witch at such an admission of weakness. But I do not see you that way.”

With a growl, Thomas stood and swept past me. From the table, he plucked a carving knife and approached the hearth. The silver blade shone in the firelight. As he reached the spit, his arm shot forward, and the knife blade pierced the hog’s roasting hide.

Broth from the melted fat bubbled past the wound and dripped onto the woodpile beneath. At meeting the burning logs, it sent glowing ash upward. I placed my hand where Thomas’s mouth had been and shivered. A twist of his wrist carved a section of roasted meat loose, and he speared the succulent morsel.

It sizzled as he brought the bounty to his lips. “I am a hungry man. I ask for your patience, my love, while I consume a bit of food. Afterward, I shall consume you.”

## Chapter Three

Thomas wiped the lard from his lips and fingers. He flung the linen cloth onto the table and approached me. A haunting smile lifted his lips. Some might deem him a demon, but I thought him the most interesting creature God ever wrought.

No, Heaven could not forever contain a presence as noble and commanding as Thomas Thorne, so God sent him down to care for us here on Earth.

“Are you sure you will not enjoy some of the fine pig given me by Goodman Bright?”

Behind Thomas, a large desk with a slant top provided a place for my eyes to rest. Far better they land there than behaving in a bolder way than I had been brought up.

“No, thank ye. I am not hungry.”

With a thump, his knees struck the bed and the rest of his body followed. He crawled between my legs and placed his warm hands beside my hips. “You do not want food but a man’s flesh. Only by partaking of such flesh will your suffering end.

End? Dear God, would fire lash down from Heaven and burn me alive on this strange bed?

“Do not pull your lovely face into such a frown. While we become one, I long to see your smooth skin dappled with the sweat of our deed.”

“Deed? What deed?”

He stretched and landed his body on mine. The hardness of him stabbed along my belly. His hands fitted beside my face and accepted the tears that fell.

“A special bond we will soon make. A bond that will be cherished always.”

My arms, pinned underneath him, still trembled like leaves teased by the wind. Each breath brought the scent of him to me, and I drew it in.

His body moved and freed my limbs. Together we formed an odd star, my arms and legs jutting out to the side and Thomas straight as a stick.

For a man who labored to deliver others from their ills, his body bore the strength of an ox. He licked his lips and then laid his tongue over my right bosom. The tender bud beneath tightened, and I pulled my knees up so that he fit fine between my legs.



“Yes, Thomas. Cure my ailing body.”

A moan rattled in his throat, and he clamped his teeth over the swollen nub of flesh. My tongue stilled, and my fingers clawed the bedclothes. But Thomas lingered not long there, and he kissed a hot path lower toward my belly. My hips left the mattress. The tips of his fingers bore into my backside, and I lifted higher.

“Open your legs to receive my cock,” he said. “Let me fill your womb with my hot seed.”

Cock? What of a farmyard foul? The full-blooded organ met the wetness between my legs.

“Yes, Sarah. You know what to do. Put me inside of your body, and all will be well again.” His hardness nudged me.

Closing my eyes, I curled my fingers around the column of hard flesh and pressed it into the sensitive verge. Despite the chill and damp outside, a fire raged in my belly. I swallowed the pain and moved against him.

Both of his hands lifted me higher and bore me hard upon his lap. My legs lay behind him, and he began bouncing me as one might a child. His thick organ thrust deeper inside of me, prodding and filling my womb.

“You are mine, Sarah Bradford. Mine for this moment. Mine forever.”

He held me close, and I sank into him. His fingers stroked over my back before cradling my backside. Despite the crackling of the logs and the throbbing of my heart, Thomas’s shriek sliced through my soul. Sweet breath rushed against my face. His upper body arced, drawn tight as a bowstring, and his teeth ensnared his bottom lip.

Warmth built in my own body and culminated in my screams muffling his own. My nails carved furrows into his back as my womb ignited. Both heels scraped over the blanket.

He draped against me and rested his cheek on my shoulder. Sweat dripped from his face and trickled down my bosom and onto my leg. Knitting my fingers through his damp hair, I prayed our bonding had driven the Devil from me.

Each time he blinked, his eyelashes beat against my bare flesh like butterfly wings. “You must let me tend you.”

Tend me? Had not he already given my heart and womb that for which they longed?

I let him go and abandoned the warmth of his body. Plump before, the feather pillow now sank as I settled. Thomas stirred at our separation and rained kisses over my neck and the swell of my heaving belly. At the wet curls, he placed a longer, deeper kiss.

“Never have I been gladder to leave Salem Town and make my bed here for the night.” He rose

and swung his legs over the side.

“You are not among us each day?”

“For two, soon three, sunrises, I have dwelled in this cottage. Goody Allyn’s ague has ebbed, your father is pleased with the calf, and I...”

I reached out, and the tips of my fingers touched his back. “What about you, Thomas? Will those words forth so I might hear them.”

“I sated the hunger that might have driven me mad. Sated it with the woman I love.”

Turning, he placed two fingers over my lips. The eyes that earlier gazed upon my bareness now searched my soul. Brown as our beloved mare. Brown as the buttons on mother’s favorite dress.

As he stood and stretched, I lifted my arms and let them fall limp beside my damp body. His bare feet scuffed along, bearing him toward the center of the room. He poured water from the kettle into the washbasin and carried it to my side. Instead of remaining, he walked over to the desk. Wood grated against wood as he opened one of the small drawers. His right hand foraged and emerged with a tiny vial. Removing the stopper, he returned and tapped some of the contents into the basin.

As he placed the vial and bowl onto the woven bed rug, water slapped against the sides. His body turned away. While guilty as one who had stolen a fat goose, I cared not that my eyes followed his retreat to the far side of the room. From a peculiar bottle, he sloshed wine into a pewter goblet. He set the bottle down and plugged the neck with a chipped cork. As though in ceremony, he raised the vessel.

His nose hovered over the cup, sniffing and snorting. “Let us drink to our love and everlasting bond.”

Much as the pendulum in bowels of Goody Norton’s clock, the pouch of skin between his legs swung with each step he took. I propped on my elbows and canted my face toward the hand holding the goblet. Against my lips he pressed the cold pewter, and I opened them wider to accept his mulled repast. A slight tip decanted the savory grape brew over my tongue. I swallowed and received another pour.

“Lay thee down, Sarah.”

A spear of heat struck my loins, and my legs thrashed and pulled the bedclothes loose. Thomas’s left hand tipped the contents over my bosom and belly. A deep red stain snaked over my damp skin and pooled in the center of my body. Some of the wine trickled into the tiny pocket above my maiden curls. At moving my legs apart, a pungent musk assailed my nostrils and mingled with the tang of the glistening spirit.

He set the cup away and crouched over me, teeth bared yet a smile curling his full lips. With a

swoop, he claimed the wine. Lapping at my flesh, he stole the precious droplets even from the pocket. I clung to his shoulder. When finished, he reared up and placed a fragrant kiss on my opened lips.

“I...I...”

“You are a woman who is none the weaker for submitting to the will of her body.” He reclaimed the cup and toasted the surrounding air.

His forefinger wiped inside the goblet and emerged wet. A clatter rose to the rafters as the vessel struck the basin. He drew the finger over my curls and brought it to rest against the tender button between my legs. I moved underneath his hand and unseated the warm poker made of flesh. He stuck the finger between his lips and suckled. When his mouth ceased its working, his tongue supped at the same spot as the finger had touched. My skin prickled, and a joyous shout sprang from my throat.

He rolled away from me and left our nest. “Now that we have sated our forbidden hunger, ’tis time for you to return.”

Only the honey-brown waves crowning his head came into view as he ducked beside the bed. The basin of water appeared along with his arm, and he set the bowl beside me. Before I could swallow, the other arm stabbed skyward and waved the cast off woolen shirt. He pulled himself to full height and dunked a handful of the garment into the steaming water. The strong hands that had earlier touched my body now wrung water from the sleeve. At reaching the bowl, each droplet sang when reunited with the others.

His body leaned over mine. He gently guided the cloth over my bosom and belly. Chills chased down my back. Lavender reached my quivering nostrils. The fever burning within me ebbed. Night had fallen, and for the first time in weeks, no unseen hands pulled at my limbs. No weight burdened my womb.

He brought the soft cloth lower and washed the sensitive flesh between my legs. When I moaned and canted my hips heavenward, the busy hands stilled.

The shirt lofted from his hand and landed on a Wing chair beside the desk. With the woolen blanket, he dried the dampness from me. I heaved a long sigh, purging the staleness from within.

“What say you, dearest Sarah? Will you run from me revolted?”

“No, Thomas. God has given you a great gift. Your hands have healed me. While we were...there...the evil stayed away.”

He left me and stood several paces from the bed. The fingers of his right hand curled around the stirring thickness below his belly. I clambered to the edge and reached for him.

“What do you want, dearest Sarah?” With each word, he neared until the tip of the aroused flesh

brushed against my lips.

As my mouth opened, he fed me his cock. At the slip of my tongue over the blooded veins, heat coursed through my body. I pulled the hardness deeper inside. My sucks echoed with his moans. His hand claimed mine and fitted it around the sac beneath.

While he clutched my hair, I sated my hunger. Along his belly, my nails raked. His hips moved against my mouth. I managed another swallow before the sac drew tight against his cock. The wind howled at the window, and Thomas howled inside the cottage. Bitter milk spilled into my mouth and down my throat. At his violent dance, I let loose of him and fell back on the bed.

“Oh, Sarah. Such happiness I have never known.”

A smile flickered on his lips, and he covered his slackening organ with a meaty hand. In the near-silence, we dressed. My heart bounded beneath my breast, and no amount of willing on my part ceased its thrum.

Crossing to the desk, he opened yet another drawer. Upon returning, his fingers unfurled and revealed a tin treasure box. His thumbnail caught against the edge and brought the lid loose. From inside, he claimed a black velvet ribbon and set the empty box aside.

“Turn away from me, Sarah.”

While I stared at the door, his fingers combed through the knots in my hair. Down my back, he wove a braid and tied the end with the length of fine ribbon.

“There.” He spun me around and into his arms. “It belonged to my mother. Father and I lost her to childbirth only a short time after I left her bosom. The day I set my heart and hands toward the healing of others, he gave me the ribbon and a gold pocket watch.

“I shall not remove your offering until the latest possible moment.”

Reaching behind me, he grasped the braid and lopped it over my shoulder. Placing a kiss on the very end, he winked. “Now my beloved shall appear as chaste and proper as any. Some may claim you have sinned, but you have given me love. For that gift, I shall slumber more fitfully than a king. While I have not truly rid you of the hysteria, it will only now come as a result of our special bond. You are not a puppet of the Devil, or any of his servants here on earth, Sarah Bradford. You are a woman who has displayed her affection for me in a most delectable manner.”

“I have not sinned?”

“What you have done, we have done, is God’s bidding. It is meet for a man and woman who will enter into the covenant of marriage.”

“What of my allurements to venery? If our dalliance is discovered, we shall be censured for

crimes of the flesh. Public humiliation will befall you. Those in the village whom you have healed will turn against you. I shall be forced to stand in the market where all can look upon my shame.”

“’tis no shame in our love. I would not allow such to be put upon you.”

“What of my worry? My face will surely betray me. I repent my every sin. My wound will heal but not my guilty soul. No salve can perform such a miracle.”

“Penitence is not necessary when speaking of pure love. God does not deem your love for me a sin. Or a crime. There are some who walk among us ascribing to such a narrow view, but Holy watchers speak many untruths. Put thee on no different face than before, and remain true to your moral convictions.”

While I wrapped the shawl around my shoulders, he plucked a pot from an oaken cupboard. A soft scraping made me stare after him, but his broad back prevented my learning the task at which he toiled. I looked away and pulled at a strand of yarn, loosed by many seasons of wear. The slap of boot heels made me start.

Were my thoughts betraying me as well? “My mother has a bundling board once used by my elder sister, Hannah, and her husband, Goodman Chandler.”

“Will you tempt me to bundle in your bed without the board? If so, I shall not complain. Should there be a courting stick, our wanton words will fall upon only one ear instead of many.”

I nodded. “There is such a stick.”

He pressed a small tin into my palm. “Salve for your cheek.” With the same finger he had poked me earlier, he tapped some of the odorous wax onto my face. “None will be the wiser. Your mother believes I have already given you this same medicament.” He placed a hand above my heart. “Keep our secret close and hidden behind your precious lips. Let it fill your body much as lifeblood.”

Not only lifeblood but also love for the man, Thomas Thorne.

“We will be together always, Thomas?”

“Whether in the town or village, the choice shall be yours. Nothing short a divine calling at death shall part us, dearest Sarah.”

From where I hunched sidesaddle on Thomas’s mare, I looked toward Heaven and thanked God for his goodness. Thanked him for delivering me to a loving man who removed the taint tormenting me. Where on my journey to meet Thomas the sky had been smudged with the soot of night, a pleasant gray now pushed the darkness away.

Stopping several yards from the familiar stonewall and clapboard farmhouse, he reined in the

horse and dismounted. Only a single snort came from the gentle beast. Thomas's steady hands bore me to the ground, and I left the warm perch behind.

His fingers laced with mine and chased the cold from them. "Before your mother ladles porridge into your bowl, I shall speak with your father."

"And ask for my hand?"

Laughter rumbled low in his throat. "Not only your hand but all of you, my beloved Sarah Bradford."

## Chapter Four

I crouched at the top of the stairs, straining to hear the words spoken by the two men at the bottom landing. Clutching the shawl around my shoulders, I shivered. Thomas kept his promise. While my eyes grew heavy and my body trembled, I favored listening over sleep.

"Sarah hasn't shown herself this morning," my mother said. "I'll see what's keeping her idle."

On the tips of my toes, I entered my room and crawled underneath the woolen blanket. My body gripped at each thump of mother's boots upon the steps.

If she thought me ill, her questions would be scarce. At noticing my shawl in a heap upon the floor, I blamed Satan for my blunder. Chills chased over my body.

Past the threshold my mother came, her lips drawn together much as stitches in the hem of my skirt. "What on earth possesses you now, Sarah? 'tis well past time for morning chores to be done."

“A pain holds my head and belly captive much as yesterday.”

“Ahhhh. A bit of porridge and tea will set you right.”

Louder footfall echoed, and soon Thomas’s towering body filled the doorway. “She’s ailing still?”

“Seems that way.” My mother wiped her hands on the apron.

Thomas winked, and my heart set on a fierce pace. “This is not a day when the woman I love should be low as the ground.”

My mother neared and created a barrier between my beloved and me. “Pale as cream, she is.”

*“Meet me in the woods after the sweeping.”*

Abigail Hunt’s whispered message played in my mind. I had almost forgotten the request of my dearest friend, my head filled only with thoughts of Thomas and our carnal cleaving.

Mother gently tugged the blanket from my curled fingers. “You look as though someone has frightened you. What is troubling you now?”

*“Meet me in the woods after sweeping.”*

Goodman Barlow and Goodman Danforth would also be in those woods, their bodies covered only with billowing black cloaks. Visions of their massive organs flitted past my half-closed eyes.

Another nudge of my mother’s warm hand roused me from the wicked reverie. “Answer me, dear. Shall I bring some tea and porridge?”

“No, I prefer to take my meal downstairs.”

“Your father and Giles are already turning their hands to work. There will be none to keep you company.”

“Yes, there will,” Thomas said and crossed to my bed. “I will stay for awhile in the event she requires company or more of the salve.” His long fingers stroked below my wounded cheek. “Fine healing. I expect no scar will result.”

Perhaps not on my face, but the effect Thomas had on my heart and the rest of my body was a far different matter.

My mother took my hands in hers and steadied my rise. Her lips lingered close my right ear. “Thomas has spoken with your father this morning.”

“Spoken?” I mouthed the word, though Thomas surely overheard.

Another breath brought the scent of baking bread and raw *flower* to my nostrils. Mother canted her head away from me.

“Time is passing. Let me bear Sarah downstairs, Goody Bradford. Far better for strength to

serve this deed.”

Mother nodded and rose to her feet. Her slight body wobbled and then steadied. “I thank you for your kindness, Thomas Thorne. God shall bless those who look after my Sarah.”

With a slight sweep, she spun away from us and headed down the short flight of steps. A wide grin parted Thomas’s full lips, and I longed for them to suckle me.

His hands found mine and clutched them tight. “Of what were you thinking? Our time together or some other torment? Your lovely brow wrinkled much as a grape left too long on the vine.”

A bolt of heat sang throughout my body, and I flung my legs toward him. The tips of my toes grazed his knees. One pull of his arms brought my feet onto the floor. He cast a quick glance toward the doorway and then landed a soft kiss on my lips.

“You must not tempt the Devil under this roof, Thomas.”

“And you must cease tempting me, my dearest.”

I pried my fingers loose from his and pointed toward the hallway. “I will find my way downstairs alone. Better for you not to tarry too long. My mother’s eyes miss little.”

“Nor do mine.” Thomas’s hands closed around my nightdress and drew it above my belly. Crouching, he lapped at my wet curls and tugged them with his teeth. “They see everything. Every lovely thing.” Another kiss and he stood.

The garment floated down over my nakedness, and I raced toward the wardrobe. “Go now. Get thee away from me, Satan.” Laughter rose in my throat, and I swallowed it whole.

“For now, I shall take my leave. Later, I shall take my fill of your delightful flesh.”

A stone skipped past my right foot. Odd that it came from behind, instead of rooted from the earth by my own steps.

*Hsst. Hsst.*

Two quails flapped past. The crackling of twigs halted my progress. Thomas, you ornery devil. You must keep your distance, lest suspicions become aroused more than we.

*Hsst. Hsssthsst.*

The sound came softer than any from Thomas’s lips. “Abigail?” The word carried on my harsh whisper.

From behind a nearby birch, Abigail’s gaunt body emerged. A small burlap satchel pressed against the front of her frock. At present, her golden hair laid wound atop her head in a braid. Goodman Danforth always combed his fat fingers through it loose and tossed the pins into the pine needles where



she couldn't find them.

"Where have you been? Someone might see me this close the clearing and wonder the reason for my walk."

Nearing my cousin and friend, I pointed toward her bundle. "What is that you carry?"

Abigail's face flushed more than berries on a bush. "For want of a more proper word," she said and darted her gaze around me, "it is an offering."

"Offering? To whom? For what?"

"My brother Henry caught this dove at my behest."

"What use have you for a dove?"

Her cold fingers flattened and pressed upon my mouth. "Speak not so loudly. Someone might hear us."

A toss of my head shook off her hand. "What if they do?"

A tiny beak prodded the hole Abigail had poked in the sack. Pity the poor creature trapped within. Her gentle strokes silenced the cries.

"Goodman Barlow asked me to bring this for the ritual."

A ritual? Deep inside my head, a clanging ensued. More of the devil's play for a man who professed to be a doctor. No, he was not a proper healer but more likely a creature from Hell.

"Goodman Barlow is nothing more than a heathen." I snatched at the satchel, but Abigail pulled it from my reach. "He says he will cleanse our sinful souls, but I believe his only mission is to defile us further. The same goes with Goodman Danforth."

"You speak untruths. You must join us before the milking. They ask you bring some cold ashes from your hearth."

My womb wept at recalling the wild dancing and groping hands of the men. Thomas's touch was far preferable.

"And if I refuse to come?"

"They claim they will reveal you and your sins."

Sins? What did Barlow and Danforth know of my sins? Yet if they were witches, they surely knew every thought in my head, every move of my body.

"Very well." The stirring between my legs heightened. Deep within my womb, something struck at me. "But this shall be my last."

"Goodman Danforth decries those who defect. He says they will burn in Hell for their wicked ways."

“Burn in Hell? I think not, Abigail. My heart and body belong to God and only one other man. A man who is a true healer and not someone who merely calls himself a doctor as does Goodman Barlow.”

Abigail’s mouth flopped open but no words came forth. I nudged the toe of her boot with mine, but only gurgling noises rose from her throat.

“Come now, Abby. Satan has not struck you speechless. Such is a foolish belief.”

“T-thomas Thorne.”

“Yes, he is the man I shall marry.”

Abigail’s head bobbed. “No, I mean behind you.”

A single step backward and my body collided with an unmovable barrier. Strong hands gripped my shoulders. The nail tips were blunted and cast a dark plum from the pressure the man placed on my body.

“You think it wise to be in these woods alone, Sarah Bradford?”

My body caved at the familiar voice. “No, Thomas, but we mean no mischief.”

His touch lightened. “What of mischief and of that dove?”

Abigail and I regarded each other. My heart thumped against the bodice of my dress. The fingers loosed their hold and freed me. I turned and confronted my beloved.

Thomas’s potent brown gaze sliced through me much as the knife with which he’d carved the roasting hog. “Who brings you here, Sarah. Tell me. I will keep your secret.”

A hawk screamed overhead, and Abigail took flight. The pounding of her boot heels rose from the forest floor. Thomas rocked my quivering body.

“You have never seen the likes of what goes on here.” My words struck his woolen vest, and I buried my face against him to escape the chill wind.

“The deeds of the Devil?”

I nodded, and tears trickled down my cheeks.

He reached up and bore them away on his camphor-scented finger. “I will hide in the thicket and observe the evildoers. You will merely watch the proceedings.”

“If I don’t, Goodman Barlow and Goodman Danforth will...”

“They will what? Condemn you? I think not. If I discover their deeds are less than honorable, I will expose them. Barlow has always despised me. His jealousy of my healing talent consumes the man. And Danforth claims to be a man of the Puritan Church? He is a sinner of the foulest kind.”

“All of the young women chosen have family members who were convicted as witches. Those

two men have threatened to expose us in much the same way. They say we are afflicted, and only they can remove the Devil's taint. We heed their words as we don't want to suffer the same guilt and shame as those before us..."

"So that is why you to commune with them. When did this practice begin?"

"I know not the exact origin. One day, three of us walked in the woods. Goodman Barlow came upon us and claimed he saw a bird, the name of which I don't recall. After some time of searching with him for the winged creature, we gave up and headed homeward. After church a week ago, he approached Abigail."

Golden flecks appeared deep within Thomas's eyes. "Approached her in what manner?"

"He told her to repent her sins. She told him she did, but he advised he knew a way to unburden her troubled soul."

"And that is how he lured you and the other two into the woods?"

"There were six of us in all."

"Six?" Thomas ground the word out between clenched teeth. "Those filthy..."

My body heaved toward Heaven, lifted by his strong arms. At lowering me, his mouth claimed mine. Hot and demanding. As I opened my lips to admit his tongue, a moan rattled deep in his throat. A finger of sunlight forced through a clump of clouds and cast down upon us.

"God, how I love you, Sarah. If a cold wind wouldn't lick at your flesh, I would have you here among the fallen leaves."

I sank my teeth into his lower lip, and he let me fall to my feet. "There are ways to keep the wind from me."

The deeper we advanced into the dense woods, the faster lifeblood coursed throughout my body. Undergrowth snarled around our ankles. Each time we kicked loose another vine, a more tenacious one took its place.

Pinecones crackled at each step. I trod upon one and pitched forward into Thomas's back.

He drew me around front and planted a kiss upon my forehead. "We will stop here. Are you certain of your desires this day?"

I searched his handsome face. "I have never wanted anything as much."

"Save for the love of an honest man."

"That as well."

He cupped my breasts. Button after button loosed at the bidding of his fingers. The woolen

overcoat left his warm body, and he placed it over my stiffened shoulders. From beneath the flap of cotton material, he plucked my right breast. Bowing his head, he clamped his teeth over the swollen nub and suckled.

The wind and my fingers combed his coarse hair into a wild tangle. His tongue sneaked out and lapped along the valley between my breasts.

“You are the sweetest gift God has ever brought me, Sarah.” He crouched and pressed his face against my belly. Beneath the dress, no drawers clung to my body nor would they prevent his lips and cock from having their fill.

Canting my hips, I rubbed myself against his nose and mouth and tugged harder at his hair. “I want our bodies to cleave as never before.”

He backed away, his nostrils spewing hot breath over my outstretched hands. “Your passion knows no boundaries, does it, my dearest?”

A sudden gust of wind slapped at my face. Thomas bore me sideways and against the trunk of a sturdy oak. Caught in his hands, my skirt rose toward my bosom. With a wild laugh, he kissed my maiden curls. Each flick of his tongue landed closer to my belly.

“Let us be as we were last night.” My body shivered as another rasp of his breath struck my bareness.

Another kiss fell on my flesh, this one lingering much longer and ending with a sharp nip of his teeth. My heart thumped harder, and he let my dress fall.

Thomas raised his head and searched my face. “We shall have our time to share in that way. For now, a kiss will more than sustain me.”



## Chapter Five

From underneath the bedcovers, I pulled the small burlap sack. A twist of my hands rendered the sack's bottom plump as my feather pillow from the ashes stuffed inside.

Sighs I could not swallow billowed between my open lips. Far easier scooping the burnt remains from the fireplace than hiding them from mother's keen eyes. If she ever learned of my sins, her wrath would be swifter than that of Satan.

Gathering the hem of my skirt, I rolled it toward my belly. Air wafted over my legs, and the linsey-woolsey drawers did little to repel its chill. I unbound the ties and stuffed the small parcel into my waistband.

Even a few steps forward proved trying, as my waddle was more pronounced than that of any Eider duck. Mother would surely question my strange gait. Warmth built inside my belly, and I joined the ties at my waist. A soft hush sounded as the dress left my hands and settled around my legs.

The steps groaned more than usual as I descended. God was making my misdeed known to every listening ear. Only three more steps remained between my body and an escape free from scrutiny. Earlier, I had tended to the milking. Not far from this staircase, Goody Bright and mother hummed a favorite hymn and set themselves to pie making. Father and Giles were tending our brood mare. All hands were busy, and so much the better. If only prying eyes were the same.

The front door swung wide, and a chill wind sang up the steps. My father entered and scuffed his mud-covered boots over the braided rug. While there were plenty of other places his gaze might have drifted, it chose to land square on me.

"Sarah! There is color in thy cheeks again. Your ailing troubles us. I pray it has passed."

"Whatever deviled me is gone. Mother's tea is a blessing."

He removed his hat and rapped it sharply against the side of his lean leg. A shock of graying light-brown hair covered his scalp. "Why are you not with the other women?"

"Mother and Ruth are fine." I folded my hands in front of my trembling body and stepped onto the floorboards. "With the milking done, I am off for a walk with Abigail."

"That will do you good." The soles of his work boots struck the polished wooden planks between us. At reaching me, he bundled me close. "Anything to make my dear daughter happy."

Happy? Oh, yes. I was even happier knowing my family looked upon Thomas Thorne with

much favor.

Work-roughened fingers stroked my cheek, and I returned his embrace. Never would I bring shame upon my family. My part in the ritual today was purely for the purpose of revealing those vile men for what they were—filthy, desperate creatures who weren't worth mentioning.

"I pray we all stay that way." Even if my wicked ways are discovered.

"Thomas Thorne is a fine doctor. A fine man."

"That he is." A deep intake of breath caused my bundle to shift. Extricating myself from father's sturdy arms, I headed on a straight path to the front door.

"Don't ever do anything to turn him away, Sarah."

The words struck my ears, and I slumped against the doorframe. "May I never." A silent prayer played in my mind. "May I truly never."

The ends of Thomas's woolen overcoat flapped as he ran toward me. Strong arms bundled my cold body tight. His kisses came warm and soft above my ear. My loins ached, and I longed for the touch of his lips and tongue.

"I feared something might detain you." He nuzzled my neck.

"For the past hour, I have fought with whether I should forget my promise to Abigail."

Thomas's fingers bit into my shoulders. "You want to those men to stop bedeviling you and others, do you not?"

"Yes, but the notion of being near them makes me ill."

"Is there anything I can do to ease the burden heaped upon you, my dearest?"

Much as a fire consuming a pile of logs, my love for Thomas flared throughout my mind, body and soul. Over the front of his shirt, I trailed my chapped hands, seeking the heat from his body. Wanting to become one with him again.

"Your eyes do not meet mine, Sarah. Am I wrong that your thoughts at this moment are far from pure?"

Laughter left my lips, and I rested my palms on his belly. "Pure? Why do you speak of pure, Thomas? In short time, I will be among those who seek bare flesh and more. How can my mind conjure Christian images when I'm..."

"A victim of your own desires."

Caught in his hands, my body lifted toward Heaven.. My shawl sifted beneath my feet, and Thomas's mouth fitted over mine. His hot breath rasped against my nose, and a throbbing beset my

heart and womb.

I pulled my lips from his. “Yes, Thomas. Let our bodies join once again. Put your cock inside of me. Let us bond as never before.”

The rough flap of his tongue thrust inside my mouth and teased into the corners. Our sighs and sucking filled the air. His hands tormented my bottom, rubbing and pinching. With my hands around his neck, I parted my legs and wrapped them around his waist.

“Such a rabid hunger hath my love. I promised to do no more than gently touch or gaze upon your body before we are wed.”

“No! I beg of you. Satisfy me, Thomas. Satisfy my forbidden hunger.”

“What if we are discovered?” He cradled my bottom in his hands and rocked me hard against his belly.

“Do this for me. Please. Each time I dwell with those demons, the stirrings come upon me.”

Drawing back, I gazed into his deep brown eyes. Bright as thick drops of maple syrup. Long eyelashes swept against his cheek. His determined fingers tucked into my tenderness and drove my dress into the cleft.

“God in Heaven, I want you so much. My cock is ready to burst from beneath these breeches. But our embrace is far from wise.”

“What is wise will not satisfy the torment within my body.”

“Only if you know a place where none shall come upon us.”

A push of my hands against his shoulders parted us. My feet met with the ground. Wetness dripped down my legs, and I clamped them together.

“There is a place.” I dashed deeper into the woods. Follow me, Thomas. Let us concentrate on something pleasant, as another fouler thing will soon be upon us. A place I always go when I want to dream or make a fond memory.”

Several quail scattered at my approach. Pine boughs rustled and scraped at the surrounding air. Somewhere, an owl hooted. Hush, foolish friend. Do not reveal us.

Wind whistled around my head and body. A slight tug from behind told of Thomas’s presence. I stilled my steps, and he came alongside of me.

“As I have said, Sarah. You will not join in their filthy games. There is only need for you to bear witness.”

We chased each other into the thicket, stumbling at each step yet venturing farther into the forest.



A rabbit jumped near my boot, and I stifled a cry.

At reaching the familiar oak bearing my mark, I stopped. "This is the place."

Thomas craned his neck, his chin tipped into the wind. "You aren't afraid?"

I embraced my beloved, and the satchel shifted underneath my dress. "Fear is not possible when I am with you."

The smile faded from his lips. He searched past me. For who or what?

"You are woman enough to tempt the Devil, but I warn you against such games as those played by Danforth and Barlow."

"After today..."

He swooped upon me, gathering my body so tight against his my breath caught in my throat. "Will this be the last? I pray I am able to cease the ways of those demons. Rituals? I'm sure I will sicken at the sight."

I crept my hand between us and stroked the hardness underneath his woolen breeches. A moan rattled in his chest. The scent of wood smoke and cedar lingered on his shirt. Drawing in another breath of him, my womb seized.

His hand fitted over top of mine. "You wish to touch my cock?"

"I am hungry, Thomas."

At his gentle tug, the pins left my scalp, and the long braid dropped to my back. While some of his fingers played along my spine, the others snatched the braid and drew it to his mouth.

His tongue teased the tuft of hairs bundled at the end of the braid. "Then I shall feed you."

Kneeling in front of Thomas, I admired the hardness he called his cock. Each tug of his hand made the flesh redder. A tiny drop of dew rested at the tip. He canted his hips toward my mouth, and I licked the wetness away. A bit salty, like the juice from roasting meat. His musk assailed my nostrils. I drew in a deep breath and fitted my mouth over him.

The grating of my teeth over his full-blooded organ made him growl. He pulled the edges of his overcoat close and shielded my face from the wrath of the wind. Burrowed inside the woolen folds, I supped. Drawing my tongue along the musky length, I closed my eyes.

Back and forth, my lips rode over him and he moaned. The soft sac rested against my left palm. He lengthened and pricked at my throat, and I let some of him loose.

"My seed will soon spill."

I nodded, ready to receive the hot liquid. While bitter, it would warm my belly. The flesh sac

shivered and drew toward his body. His hands gripped the sides of my head, and more pins tumbled free.

Against my mouth, his body strained. The coarse brown hairs below his belly tickled my nose and cheek. As my lips surrendered all but his thick tip, a flood of his seed filled my mouth. I swallowed his precious gift and lost my footing.

My bottom struck the hard earth. Leaves crackled in my hands, and my legs stiffened. A fire erupted in my loins and shot through both legs. Damp broke out all over my body, and Thomas offered his hand.

“Come to me, dear Sarah.”

Our fingers folded together, and I stood. “I am unfit for the company of Christian folk.”

“No, my love. You are a very fit and fine woman. Because you bow to this temptation does not mean you are...”

*Hsst. Hssthsst.*

I stumbled backwards, my boots losing their battle. Thomas turned away from me and tended himself. More hisses carried on the wind, and Abigail appeared a short distance from us.

Her arms waved, carving a wild swath over her head. “Why are you so far from the proper path?”

Why so far, indeed? “Come over here, then we shall talk.”

Thomas’s sturdy arms bundled me from behind. “I do not believe she witnessed our embrace.”

“Nor do I, but one never knows with Abigail. You can rest assured she will keep our secret if she has. A public flogging would not coax words from her lips if she willed them silent.”

Pale curls tangled beside Abigail’s flushed cheeks. Each time she combed them back, more fell in their place. “Latecomers do not bode well with Goodman Danforth.”

“Thomas will be watching today. We will expose those devils for what they truly are.”

Abigail nodded and turned back to the path. “You must realize they see everything around them.”

“They are mortals and see no more than you or I,” Thomas said and caught my hand in his. “Their powers are feigned. Soon, all in the village will be made aware of the evildoings in these woods.”

Vine tendrils clung to the trunk of a massive maple. Thomas held me much the same as we followed Abigail toward the preordained meeting place. I swallowed several times to banish the

bitterness from my mouth. Dear Thomas. My lips crave your cock, but the seed you spill is far more potent than any of mother's purgatives.

"Did you bring the ashes?" Abigail's words carried above the crackling of twigs.

"Yes."

Thomas squeezed my hand harder. "So that is what rested beneath your bodice."

Abigail halted and I narrowly missed colliding with her. She screwed her face into a scowl. "Have you gone mad? Speak not. Those devils will hear."

Laughter rumbled low in Thomas's throat, and we continued along the tedious trail. Abigail veered left and deeper into the woods. More pines sprang from the solid earth and towered above us. A beam of sunlight sliced through the boughs and warmed my upturned face.

The peculiar hooked branch loomed ahead. Abigail stuck her left arm out straight at her side. "We are almost there. Doctor Thorne must leave us."

I spun into Thomas's open arms and raised my lips for a parting kiss. The warm flesh of his mouth played upon mine. Lifeblood coursed through my body, and my heart bounded beneath my tender bosom.

Our tongues tangled for a moment, and he pulled away. "Go, my love. Remember what I said."

A shrill whistling prickled my skin. Goodman Barlow always summoned us in such a manner.

Abigail ran toward us and snatched my left arm. "Tarry not, Sarah. The ritual awaits."

Without a backward glance at Thomas, I fell into step beside her. Casting all common sense to the wind. Communing with the Devil. May God forgive my many sins?

To my left, Thomas advanced for a short piece and crouched low to the ground. Ahead of us came the sound of voices chanting. The others were already assembled.

Goodman Danforth would flail our naked bodies with his oiled whip for tarrying. The rustling to my left ceased. A slight turn of my head revealed Thomas had settled and remained hidden from view. Another tug of Abigail's hand brought me forward. Each step I took brought me closer to the outstretched hands and staring faces of my friends and the Devils.

The Devils who sought to steal my purity and my soul.

"What have we here?" Goodman Barlow swigged from a pewter flask. At removing the neck from his mouth, he swiped a meaty hand over his full lips. "Some flesh upon which I might feast?"

## Chapter Six

White rocks formed a ring around a low pit. A fire crackled in the center. Coils of blue-gray smoke rose toward the tree line. Goodman Barlow poked his hand into a small pouch. When his fat fingers emerged, they sprinkled fine grains over the flames.

From behind, cold fingertips dragged over my arm. I closed my eyes and drew in a deep breath. The scent of simmering herbs and grass filled my nostrils and throat.

“Yes, my dear. Commune with us today.” Goodman Danforth’s lips hovered near my right ear. He caressed my bottom. “Did you bring the ashes?”

“Of, of course.”

“Give them to me.”

At opening my eyes, I gasped. A newcomer to the group stepped free of her dress. Prudence May, one of the plainest young women in the village. Her aunt lost every child she bore, and her uncle shot himself in the head while hunting rabbits one day last year.

“Why do your fingers remain idle?” Goodman Danforth’s boot heel trod upon my toes.

Barlow’s laughter rose above the fire.

I turned away from the men and women, but a blood-stirring growl landed on my ears. Another pinch of Danforth’s fingers brought tears to my eyes.

“Turn and face us, Sarah. We long to gaze upon your beauty.” Liquor lingered on his breath and made it even more fetid.

Better listen and not rile him further. Wheeling on him, I willed my hands steady as they freed each stubborn dress button. Wind beat against my bare bosom.

Danforth’s fingers fumbled past my bodice and teased my nipples into harder peaks. “’tis not the time to feed, but I feel like a suckle.” A long pale tongue thrust from between his lips, and he bent toward me.

Barlow pulled him back. “You are a fool. Remember the ritual.”

Though the weaker of the two men, Barlow clearly held court in these woods today. Danforth’s lips curled, and he grunted in reply. Thank God. Those sharp teeth would not graze my flesh.

Danforth accepted the sack of ashes from my trembling hand and pressed them against the Goodman Barlow’s coat front. The twine sang as the doctor untied and removed it. He plunged his hand in to the wrist and pulled out a fistful of ash. With a cry, he dropped to his knees and cast the ash forth.

Amber flames turned blue at the tips and danced toward the sky. Barlow muttered something in a strange tongue, and Danforth dragged me toward the fire pit.

His hands grabbed the folds of my bodice while Barlow wept like a babe. “You are not pure, Sarah Bradford.”

“No, she is the Devil’s daughter.” Barlow howled like a whipped hound. “Those ashes came from the hearth of a whore. A woman who has brought pleasure to other men.”

“There is only one thing to do.” Danforth’s wet words struck my cheek.

“Yes.” Barlow pounded the ground with his fists. “We must make her confess. Then, we will cleanse her body in the only way proper.”

Whore? I brought pleasure to other men? Only Thomas. My head throbbed and my belly tossed. Bitter liquid rose in my throat, and I swallowed it back. They would defile me if none stopped them. How could they know of my bonding with Thomas?

Yes, Thomas. You can laugh and say they are mortal men, but they are not. Danforth grabbed at my bodice and held me close.

Be gone, you Devils.

“No!” Prudence May, stepped from behind the fire. “You brought me here for cleansing. It is I who shall offer my body for your bidding today.”

Prudence traced a crooked circle with the toes of her right foot. Leaves scattered, but the earth remained hard. Her naked body swayed into the wind, and her flame-red hair fluttered behind.

Goodman Barlow approached her and played his hands over her body. From his flask, Danforth decanted wine over her bosom, and Barlow’s pointed tongue licked off every drop. Abigail picked at the satchel inside of which flapped the dove. All of the other women fell to the ground. Their legs thrashed and they clawed at their bellies.

Cold burrowed deep within me and settled in my bones. No matter how many times I looked toward Heaven, not a single bird flew past. God’s creatures shunned this heathen gathering, but I remained. Drawing closer to the fire, I kept my distance from Barlow, Danforth and Prudence.

Wood smoke filled my nostrils. Heat from the flames would have singed my face had I gone a few steps closer. Barlow tugged at the tangle of red curls below Prudence’s belly while Danforth stroked the hardness at the front of his breeches.

The stirrings came again, this time more intense than ever before. Only my time spent in Thomas’s bed brought them harder. My body filled with heat, and I hugged myself. Hannah Marsten’s legs stilled and she sprang to her feet. From beside a massive pine, she dragged another satchel. She culled a piece of crockery from inside and laid it near the fire pit.

Barlow bent and licked between Prudence’s legs. Wetness pooled in my drawers. How I wanted Thomas. Not here, but in the cottage’s large bed in which we’d lain. Our limbs enmeshed. Hearts beating together. Whispering how much we meant to each other. Our tongues, hands, private places all with one purpose.

To feed our forbidden hunger.

At emerging from the spot where he supped, Barlow’s lips and chin were dripping. Smiling, he licked her honey away and swallowed.

On all fours, he crawled to the crockery and stabbed one arm in my direction. “Bring me the rest of those ashes. It matters not you are not pure. It will not make a difference in what I am about to do.”

I answered his bidding and backed away. He tapped only a small portion of ash into the bottom of the bowl and then motioned to Hannah. She passed him several cloves, which he crushed in his fat fingers before dropping them into the bowl. More herbs exchanged hands between the unholy pair.

Though I should have turned my eyes from their vulgar practice, I watched. Enthralled. Eager to learn more.

With the end of a stout stick, Barlow pressed against the herbs. Danforth poured water from another flask onto the herbs, tossed the flask aside, and claimed the crock from Barlow. He stepped close the flames and tipped some of the contents into one column of rising amber. The sleeve of his coat caught, and he pulled back. Falling to the ground, Danforth cursed and doused the flame. At righting himself, he returned the bowl to Barlow.

Prudence canted her face toward the bowl's rim, and Barlow tipped it to her lips. Swallow after swallow, not one word was uttered by anyone present. I stood next to Abigail and watched the carnal ceremony.

Danforth clapped his hands together. "Let loose the dove."

Abigail answered his bidding and freed the bird. It lofted high into the sky, far above the treetops. Far away from this heathen gathering.

Prudence lay upon the cold ground, arms outstretched. Barlow straddled her nakedness, pinning her fast with his knees. As his fat body lowered, hers writhed. Her fingers clawed the air and her legs seized. Bits of damp leaves and dirt clung to her pale skin, and strange gurgling sounds came from her throat. Danforth and three of the girls bolted into the woods.

Abigail tugged at my arm. "Come, Sarah. We must go. The Devil has arrived. He might claim us next."

My heart heaved toward my throat and my feet refused to leave the spot where they stood. She looked first at Barlow and Prudence, then at me. I shrugged and she dropped the satchel. The shawl sifted from her shoulders as she headed back in the direction we had come.

Thomas appeared beside the path taken by Abigail. "What in God's name has happened?" He approached Barlow and pushed him away from Prudence. "The girl is having a fit. Damn you and your devilishness."

I picked up the crockery and held it tight in my hands. Should Barlow attempt to harm Thomas or me, I would break this pottery over his thick skull.

"Get thee home, Sarah," Thomas said but labored over the still body of Prudence.

"Why should the whore leave? Of course, she answers to you for everything. She fills your bed."

"Sarah! Prepare Goody May for the news. I will be along soon."

The fire in Thomas's eyes burned through my flesh and into my bones. I hastened from his

sight. At reaching a clump of bramble, I knelt, dropped the crock and clutched my knees. Sleep would surely not come tonight.

“How dare you cast aspersion upon Sarah Bradford’s good name,” Thomas said. “When I reveal your dark deeds, none will look upon you with favor again.”

“We’ll see. You declare Sarah Bradford a good woman? She wanders to your bed in the middle of the night. I followed her on the Sabbath past. Fornicators, the pair of you. What will the villagers think when I tell that tale, hmmm?”

The small bit of food I managed earlier this morning churned in my belly, and I pressed myself tight to quell the rumblings. Those snapping twigs and faint footfall had not been my imagination. The Devil Barlow had watched me. Followed me. Shivers beset my body, and I wrapped the shawl close. Not only had he watched me but watched Thomas... Tears burned my eyes.

The men’s argument continued and stilled. Barlow stormed away, his threats carrying on the wind. Thomas bent over Prudence’s body and again attempted to rouse her from the strange slumber. Grabbing a blanket from near one pine, he bundled it around her body. He then picked up the burlap satchel in which Abigail had kept the dove. One rip of his strong hands split the sack. With the cloth and his boot, he snuffed the low flame and scattered some dirt over the smoldering remains. After swiping his hands over his breeches, he lifted Prudence’s body from the ground.

There was not time to tarry, and I resumed my steps. Despite my earlier dallying, I made my way to where the paths converged. I would not be far ahead of Thomas, but I could claim the vines clung to my ankles and prevented quicker passage if he came upon me.

At reaching the place where the trees grew sparse, I broke into a run. Goody May lived not far from the church. Many thought her to be a witch, yet I paid little mind to the ramblings of foolish others. My boot soles beat against the solid ground. This was a path few wandered. Thank God I had the sense to find it before today.

Breath left my body in great heaves. Onward, I ran, not bothering to look back. The church loomed ahead. I parted the air with my arms, driving forward like the unrelenting wind. Another breath caught in my throat, but I forced it out and drew in more. I surveyed my surroundings. Goody Norton’s. The Lake homestead. My heart galloped harder, and a gust of wind shoved me forward.

At reaching the stone walkway at Goody May’s, I stilled my mad feet let my blood calm. Only a few more steps brought me onto the stoop. Twice, I rapped on the weathered oaken door. A glance behind revealed no sign of Thomas or Prudence.

The door creaked open, and Goody May peered at me through half-closed eyes. “My dear, you



must come in from the cold.” She reached out and touched my arm with a wrinkled, red hand. “It appears as though the Devil himself has been at your heels.”

I sipped from the cup of warm cider. Quilts hung from hand-hewn racks, and a pot of stew simmered on the hook. The toe of my boot traced along the floorboard.

Open your mouth and tell her the news. “Prudence has taken ill. Doctor Thorne will be along with her soon.”

“Ill?” Goody May set the sewing basket aside and stood. “Prudence is as fit as any farm animal. The girl has never had ague. What ails her?”

“Doctor Thorne came upon her while walking in the woods.”

The widow crossed to the carving board, broke off a piece of bread and shuffled toward me. She pressed the brown crust into my hand. “What were you doing in the woods, Sarah Bradford?”

*Keep your lips busy.* I bit into the bread, filling my mouth with a fair portion. The more I chewed, the more she paced and pointed one of her long fingers at my face.

“What do you know of Prudence’s ways?”

I shook my head, laid the remaining bread on the trestle table and took a long draught of hot cider. Slowly, I lowered myself onto the bench. Closing my eyes, I conjured images of the afternoon.

*A dove in flight over the treetops. Flames licking at the air. Goodman Barlow’s hands and mouth between Prudence’s legs.*

*And all of those heathens fleeing a sick young woman in her time of need.*

*Devils among us.*

A thump sounded to my left. Someone kicking the door with the toe of his boot? I opened my eyes and glanced around the cottage.

“’tis them.” Goody May bustled toward the door and flung it open. “God in Heaven...”

At her cry, the widow collapsed in a heap on the floor.

While Thomas tended Prudence, I roused Goody May. Her lips worked together but no words came. Both gray-green eyes stared into my soul.

With a soft squeeze, I fitted my hand over hers. “Come with me. Prudence is with Doctor Thorne.”

“Will she...is she still sleeping?”

“I do not know. Let us speak of more pleasant things.”

“She is everything to me. All I have in this wretched world. My husband is gone. My babies were taken from me at birth. I have nothing other than my daily service to God. Please, don’t let *her* be taken from me.”

For someone of slight build, Goody May’s grasp proved strong. I helped her to her feet and we headed toward the small area that served as the bed-sitting room. The glowing logs hissed at my passing. Hold me not in disregard.

Thomas stood at our approach. “She is awake but very weak. Feed her some bread and a broth made from barley and clove. For many hours, she will dispel the Devil.” He steadied the washbasin beside Prudence who lay propped upon several pillows and a folded blanket. “But she will be fine by the next morn.”

“How can I ever repay such a kindness?” Goody May took mincing steps toward Thomas and her ill niece.

Thomas gathered and patted her trembling hands. “My work is not yet done.”

Nightfall once again found my mind and body in a state of flux. Not a soul stirred in Salem Village. At raising my head to wipe away the tears, a faint clapping noise reached me. A man approached, his body erect atop the horse.

“You should not be out on a night such as this.” Thomas’s voice brought a flood of heat to my loins.

“I came here to pray before closing my eyes in slumber.”

He climbed from the mount and hastened to my side. Gentle hands brushed alongside my face, and I canted my body toward his. Warmth rushed from my neck to my belly as his fingers dropped to my bodice. Both nipples stirred, and I longed for him to suck them until I cried.

“Let me take you home.”

“No. This church is the only place my restless soul settles. I have seen so much. Witnessed the wicked ways of men who claim to be Christians.”

“I am going to expose Danforth and Barlow. The sun will no sooner shine than I seek out the magistrate.”

“He will not listen.”

“My cousin, Henry Moresby, will see those heathens answer for their sins.”

I buried my face against his shirtfront and drew in his scent. “What about my sins, Thomas?”

“You are one of strong faith. The fact you bore witness to Prudence’s plight will strengthen the

case against these Devils.”

“How will you counter Barlow’s allegations? He followed me. He likely watched our bodies naked in your bed.”

The strong hands tightened around my shoulders. “You stayed behind when I asked you otherwise. You know of Barlow’s treachery.”

With a nod, I played my mouth over his. Silver light from the sky dappled his forehead and cheeks. After claiming a kiss, I licked my lips. Spices from Goody May’s venison stew lingered on his breath.

He accepted my embrace for a mere heartbeat before pulling away. “You are tempting me again, Sarah Bradford.”

“Please, Thomas. Teach me more of the ways of men and women. If not, my body will not settle.”

“Barlow may be watching us now.”

“I do not care. Let him.” My arm stabbed in the direction of the signpost. “Tomorrow, our announcement will be posted.”

His hands strayed to my bottom, and they squeezed two handfuls of flesh. “It shall. Are you quite certain my bed is what you seek?”

“Yes. Your bed and your...cock.”

## Chapter Seven

The sweet-scented straw grazed the soles of my feet, and I curled my toes over a pile of the golden grass. “No one will come into the barn. We won’t be watched here.”

“What makes you certain of this, Sarah?” Thomas stripped the shirt from his broad chest and flung it beside my feet.

“Goodman Barlow is not fool enough to venture here after what we witnessed today.”

“Be not too sure of that, my dearest. He has threatened us both and will not rest until we answer for our actions.”

“We?” My fingers froze over the dress buttons. “We have done nothing wrong.”

“In our eyes and minds, we have not. In those of others, we would be considered vile and loathsome to look upon.”

Thomas removed his breeches and bundled them tight. As he cast them from his hands, they took flight. They rose toward the barn rafters and descended upon a milking bucket. Three cows blinked at our presence but remained silent. Lady Grace and Trust stomped the straw in their stalls and snorted a few times before calming.

The thickness of Thomas’s cock came into view as he shucked the drawers down both legs. I gathered his garments and buried them behind a sturdy bale. Rare was the night when a soul save for me stirred. If anyone discovered our light, there would be plenty of room back there for Thomas if he tucked his body tight.

I combed my fingers through the hairpins and let them fall around me. My dress slipped down with a sigh, and I stepped free. Thomas teased his hot fingers underneath the waist of my drawers, and I tugged the lacings loose. As they dropped and rested against my ankles, his hands squeezed the bare flesh of my bottom.

“You are a very beautiful but foolhardy woman.”

“’tis no worse than our bundling in my bed. We would cast away the board and keep everyone from sleep. Out here, only the animals know of our ways.”

“How I fought to keep from landing a fatal blow to Barlow’s head earlier today.”

Would that his lips fall upon my body instead of more words. I stepped onto the blanket and spread my legs. Reaching between them, I found the tender button of flesh and stroked it hard. Thomas neared and knelt, his nose close to my hand. At each quiver of his nostrils, my fingers flicked harder. Honey poured into my hand, and I held out my palm. Two lashes of his tongue devoured every drop, and his hands clutched above my knees.

His teeth tugged upon my maiden curls, and my skin prickled. With a soft cry, he fitted his mouth over me and sucked hard. I bucked against his face, sinking into his licks and bites. Heat curled deep within me, rising higher with each trace of his tongue. Thomas’s gurgles brought the moans from

my throat and a snort from our mare.

“Come to me, Thomas. Let me put your hard organ inside of my body.”

A raise of his head brought his handsome face into view. Together we flopped onto the blanket, limbs entangled more than those on any tree. I reached between us and cupped his cock.

In the lantern glow, his skin shone golden. “Are you not content our bodies remain apart until we marry?”

“No. I want to feel you inside of me.”

“The ritual incited you, did it not?”

“Yes, but let us not speak of those devils.”

His hand rested on my bosom. He drew his blunt nail along the pale flesh and the tip budded. A pinch brought another flood from my womb. Thomas trailed his hand over the swell of my belly and rubbed over the damp maiden curls. Down, down, those hot fingers strayed until they plunged into the pit between my legs.

I arched against his hand, bringing my hips from the blanket. The fingers worked inside of me. Stroking. Thrusting. Touching everywhere.

He pulled away, and cold air wafted over me. My wetness clung to three of the fingers on his right hand. With a grunt, he straddled me, his thick cock pointing toward my face. I grabbed his hand and closed my lips over two of the wet fingers. The more I sucked, the more his teeth clenched. A droplet came upon my belly, and I let loose his fingers.

The tip of his cock wept, and he formed a fist around the full-blooded length. While I met his gaze, he plunged deep into my womb. My teeth caught my upper lip, and I swallowed a scream.

He reached for my hands and our fingers laced. Much as a rider clung to the reins of a wild horse, Thomas clung to my hands during his spirited ride. Each time he entered my wetness and pulled back, my heels pounded the blanket. At the deepest thrust, he let loose my hands and grabbed my hips. He pulled backwards and struck the blanket. I hurtled toward him and landed in his lap.

“Hold onto my hands, Sarah. Keep me deep inside you.”

I ground my palms against his and folded over my numbing fingers. A boiling heat seized my belly, and I rose up off him. Looking down, I watched the cock appear. Only the thick head rested inside my body. With a laugh, I eased back onto him, and the thatch of brown hairs beneath his belly met mine.

His skin shone wet, and his chest rose and fell faster with each rasping breath. “I love you more than life itself.”

“And I love you, Thomas.”

Underneath my weight, his body shuddered. After several heartbeats, he stilled and rolled me off. “Tomorrow, after your morning chores, come to the meeting house.”

“Where you will post our announcement.” I tugged him toward me.

Thomas delivered warm kisses over my face, each one good as goose down. “We must watch our carnal ways when among others, my dearest.”

We lay together on the blanket, our noses nearly touching. Down over his belly, I dragged my fingers until they met with the sac draped against his leg. “You will be there with the magistrate?”

“Indeed.” He combed the tangled strands of hair from my shoulder and cheek. “He will hear the truth about Barlow and Danforth.”

“The truth of their devilish deeds?”

“Yes. First, I will call upon Goody May and Prudence. I pray she has purged the poison from her body.”

“All will be well for us tomorrow.”

Thomas smiled. “I pray so. Those devils cannot be allowed to further influence the good people of Salem Village. Their evil must end.”

Everywhere I walked, fingers pointed and tongues wagged. Whispers clogged my ears and cloaked my soul. Goody Norton turned her face from me and strode past without even a nod. Goodman Tanner snorted at me, much as would a stubborn mare.

Abigail remained scarce, as did the other young women who danced in those dark woods. Arms wrapped tight around my body, I walked behind the church. Here, away from shunning and scrutiny, I would commune with God while saying my prayers.

Sunlight dappled the leaves yet clinging to the maple branches. The air smelled of apples and dead grass, and I drew in a deeper breath. I paused and lowered my body. Knees resting against the cold ground and withered grass, I folded my hands and bowed my head.

“Dear God, I...”

A large hand pressed against my nose and mouth, and strong arms hauled me backward. “You think those prayers will do one whit of good, whore? ‘Tis time you learned a proper lesson.”

The more I struggled, the rougher his handling. Downed branches scratched my legs, and small rocks scraped my hands and arms. As I swallowed, the dragging stopped, and fat fingers stuffed a wad of unctuous cloth into my mouth. Another hard tug turned my body sideways, and my face met with

damp, dead leaves. Dead weight pressed me from above, and a leather cord whipped around my wrists.

I shut my eyes, and pain shot through my skull. My hair tangled in someone's hands, and they pulled my head toward my spine. The rough burlap grazed my skin as the sack lowered over my face. Blood beat through my body. My ankles were drawn together and suffered the same binding as my hands. A warm palm rubbed my calf and stilled, then sharp teeth closed over the same spot.

A devil on earth had captured and claimed me as his own.

The wind whistled as my body lofted toward Heaven. My chin bumped against bone, likely the man's shoulder. A slap landed against my bottom, and I arced to free myself.

Each step taken by the man who held me prisoner made my hands ache. Wetness trickled down my fingers, and I smudged them over his woolen coat.

He pulled my loose braid harder. "There's only one way to deal with witches like you."

Each muffled word reached me, though my head pounded with each trample of the devil's boot heels. I clenched my teeth over the foul-tasting rag. Bitter liquid rose in my throat and choked my cries. The wind's cold fingers, and those of my tormentor, took turns on my flesh. I twisted harder, but to no avail.

"Once there is a proper fire, the devil will have his due."

One rough hand sneaked underneath my dress and stroked between my legs. Low moans rattled in his throat. The devil could be none other than Barlow or Danforth. Would Thomas come upon us before this vile creature branded or burned me?

His plump fingers pinched my nether lips. "Let me look upon you."

The burlap sack lifted, and I stared into the florid face of Goodman Danforth. He laughed, and the sour stench of liquor filled the air in front of me. A bulge formed at the front of his breeches, and he patted himself.

"You are a most beautiful creature. But 'tis far better for Salem Village to remove such a temptation. None will ever discover my deed. Most will forget you ever existed."

My mind conjured a possible escape. Why not play Danforth's game? Thomas had taught me enough about pleasuring a man. Luring this louse would not prove difficult. I scooted closer and pointed the toes of my boots toward his crotch.

"So, the witch wants to satisfy my cock?"

I nodded and raked my bound hands over the ground. Lots of sharp rocks where I sat. Rocks that would render me a free woman. As I scraped at the leather, a thick splinter lodged underneath my

thumbnail and split the skin. My wrists came apart as the rotten tether snapped.

He unwound the cord from my legs. Danforth was not only a devil but also a fool. I gathered the frayed ends between my fingers, slumped beside him and waited. Working my wrists together, I let blood fill my numbed fingers.

More bitterness filled my mouth, and I sank my teeth into the rag. At my gurgling and coughing, he pulled a flask from his overcoat.

“We will have none of that noise. Have a drink of something and stop your barking.”

Another nod of my head and he pondered the flask. My fingers unearthed a small rock, and I closed my palm over its cold smoothness. He laid the flask beside his leg and began unbuttoning his breeches. At the turn of his head, I edged closer.

*Mmmmmmmph. Mmmmmmmph.* The fetid cloth burned my tongue.

Look at me, you filthy heathen.

“Your lover, Thomas Thorne, has spilled his seed inside Prudence. Did you know of this? The girl says he is the cause of her sickness. Barlow and I have told the good people of Salem Village of your evil ways and of his.

He clamped his thick, hairy fingers around the flask and opened the lid. After swallowing a long draught, he wore a crooked smile.

Lies. Nothing but lies. Those townspeople stared at me because of his lies.

“Doctor Thorne will be drummed from Salem Village. But first, I must take care of you. Refuse my kindness and attentions, will you? You know not a good man when you gaze upon him. Witch! Soon, your body will be buried in a deep hole. I shall snuff the smoldering remains with dirt.”

He leveled his black gaze upon me, and I hurled the rock and struck him between the eyes. His fat hands flailed at his face, and he cursed my existence. I stood and ran, my feet pounding over the same path we’d traveled only moments before.

“Damn you, witch. You will pay for your deeds.”

My legs carried me closer to the church, but I changed direction. Not a soul stirred to question the reason for my flight. More unholy oaths echoed in my ears, but I kept on my course.

“Damn you, witch.”

I skirted a sturdy birch and bore toward the meeting place. Stale breath heaved from my chest and out my open mouth. The lacing on my boot loosed, and I stumbled forward. Ahead, Thomas and the magistrate watched my approach. Danforth closed upon me, and my body crumpled to the ground.

“God in Heaven, Sarah.” Thomas rushed to my side and drew me into his arms.



“Get her away from me.” Danforth’s words rang in my ears.

The tip of a cane stabbed the ground beside me. “What is troubling you, young woman?”

Cradled against Thomas’s body, I looked up and into the face of Magistrate Henry Moresby. Black whiskers covered his cheeks and chin.

“Sarah Bradford is unclean. She is the devil’s daughter.” Danforth stood beside the magistrate and rubbed the weeping gash above his nose.

Thomas turned my hands over, and my blood seeped over his pale fingers. “Someone has bound her. I’ll wager that someone is you, Danforth. When I am through...”

“When *you* are through?” Danforth shoved past the magistrate. “Who will believe a fornicator such as you? A man who has one woman with child and another sharing your bed.”

My scream carried on the wind. “It is not true. It cannot be true.”

“Hush, my love.” Thomas rocked me and, with a clean handkerchief, wiped the blood from my hands and wrists. “Those who prevaricate will pay for their sins.”

“Did you cause this young woman harm?” The magistrate rose to full height and faced the blubbing Danforth.

“She speaks more untruths. I found her and offered...”

Thomas’s left arm stabbed toward our accuser. “Just as I found Prudence May. I am told Barlow visited her this morning. *He* likely put those evil words of accusation into her mouth. *He* fed Prudence from a poisoned cup.”

Magistrate Moresby looked upon me. My confession would condemn two vile men...and Thomas if Barlow were believed.

My words might even condemn me, but I could not allow others to be harmed. “Thomas speaks the truth. I was there in the woods as were several others. We witnessed the poisoning among other wicked deeds.”

“You will tell of them?” The round-bellied official stroked his whiskers.

“I will, including how I suffered Goodman Danforth this afternoon. Thomas has done his duty. If it were not for him, Prudence might have perished.” I pointed to Danforth. “Ask him of those rituals in the woods. He knows far more than he is telling.”



## Chapter Eight

Thomas gathered my hands and held them to his lips. “Our announcement is posted.”

“The village folk look upon us with scorn.”

“Worry not. The truth will out.” His long strides bore us in the direction of Goody May’s.

“Do you believe Prudence will recant and tell the truth?”

“I pray she will, but what of you? Do you wish to make your part in those rituals public knowledge?”

“Anything to rid Salem Village of those devils. There have been too many lies. No one else must suffer.”

“Sarah! Slow thy steps.” Abigail trotted toward us, her shawl flapping much as a bird’s wings.

Thomas clutched my hand and teased his thumb over top of mine. “Will you come forth, Abigail? Will you tell of the wrongs you have witnessed?”

“I shall.” Breath rushed from her mouth. “Though Goody May is decrying your good name, Doctor Thorne. She says you will burn for your bold ways.”

Two women, both with heads bowed, came alongside the widow May’s cottage. Goody Norton and Hannah Marsten. The pair paused at reaching the front stoop, turned and scowled in our direction.

Hannah flicked her hand in front of her nose. “Go away. You don’t belong among Christian folk.”

Abigail muttered a farewell and bounded ahead. Her golden hair, caught in a thick braid, loosed and flopped against her back each time her feet struck the stone pathway.

Thomas halted and pulled my body against his. “I will talk sense into Prudence. Barlow will be trapped by his tales. Do not worry. No other woman has caught my attention. Only you, my love.”

*Only you. Only you.*

“But I cannot, will not stand idly by while Barlow’s jealousy and evil prevail.” Tears stung my eyes and Thomas’s face blurred.

He leaned over and kissed the salty droplets away. “If you must.” A squeeze of his hands warmed my body and heart. “I love you more than life itself, Sarah Bradford.”

“And I you, Thomas Thorne. Our intentions are good before God. True, someday death will part us, but I won’t let lies bury me.”

The contents of Goody May’s sewing basket lay strewn over the floor. A ball of black yarn lofted from Prudence’s hand and struck the mantel clock.

“Devils! I am surrounded by devils!” Her shrieks rattled the dishes in the hutch, but Prudence continued her rant. “Make them go away.” Her wiggling fingers tore at the air between herself and Thomas. “Please, Doctor Thorne. Rid this village of their foulness.”

While Thomas held one of her arms, Goody May stilled the other. Together, they guided her onto the bed while Hannah, Abigail and I tidied the room.

“What is it you wish me to do?” Thomas plucked a cloth from the basin and wrung the water from it. He mopped over her face and neck. “Tell me, Prudence.”

“It is not true. You are not the father of the child in my belly. Doctor Barlow spread his seed within me.”

Thomas cast the cloth aside and glanced at Goody May. “Do you know? Does she speak the truth?”

The frail widow nodded and tapped two fingers over her mouth. “He came here this morning.” She stood, her head hung, and paced. “So many times.”

“What of so many times?” Thomas turned toward his trembling elder.

Goody May’s tears fell and struck the floor. Her soles dried them in passing. How her pain wound its way around my heart and seeped into my soul. My belly churned. May Barlow burn in Hell for his ways?

Laying my hand upon her back, I stilled her steps. “Barlow was the father of *your* babies.”

“Hush, Sarah.” Thomas stood and pulled me away from the sad woman.

“Why should I hush? I am certain I speak the truth. Doctor Barlow fed Goody May the same herbs as he poured down Prudence’s throat. Barlow’s wickedness likely drove Goodman May to his death. Is this not so, Goody May?”

“Ahhhhhhh.” One of Goody May’s hands gripped the wooden rocker but slipped free. The threadbare cushion sifted to the floor. Underneath, the braided rug quieted each slap of the carved rungs.

Prudence sprang from the bed and clawed her coppery braid loose. “We were warned never to speak of his visits. My dear aunt has suffered him many times. Now I am another victim of his vile

ways.”

“‘Tis true.” Hannah Marsten stepped toward the center of the bed-sitting room. “I witnessed Doctor Barlow calling here. Many times. Then, I found it not peculiar in the least. Little did I know of the reason for his visits.”

A soft creaking sounded behind us. In the entrance stood Magistrate Henry Moresby. “What the devil hath wrought, the law must make right.”

Sweet-smelling oil shone on Thomas’s fingers. I shivered and burrowed my bottom against the woolen blanket.

“This will ease the bite of your wounds.”

Another swipe of his hands and my womb wept harder. The touch of a good man could make any woman forget the wildness of her ways. Reaching between my legs, I poked between the plump folds of my nether lips and wetted two of my fingers. At pulling them away, I placed them upon my beloved’s lips. The gleaming tips of his fingers met my mouth. We both sucked and licked, my moans meeting his and blending so fine. The heat from our breaths dried the remaining dampness.

From the small oaken table near the bedstead, he secured the bottle of healing balm. The small cork popped at his pulls, and the savory scent bloomed and tickled my nostrils. He decanted several more drops before replacing the cork and setting the glass vessel aside. The fragrant pool danced on his palm.

“The blight cast by Barlow and Danforth will be gone. When I see what they have done to you, what they have put upon other women, my very soul stirs.”

“I shall bear outward scars, but others have suffered wounds that will never heal. That I was able to keep him from more malice today is a blessing.”

Thomas’s fingers traced along the furrows and welts made by Barlow’s leather bonds. Where the blood failed to crust, his fingers caressed and eased oil. Twice I winced as he touched a tender spot, but my heart thrummed as a result of his doctoring.

“Better?”

“Those rocks gouged my wrists. The fact God placed them near me was Providence. Barlow’s keen sight failed him today.”

“Whereas Barlow has marked others, your aim put a proper mark between his eyes. That will matter little, for he will soon hang.”

“If he is convicted for his crimes.”

“Oh, I have every faith justice will prevail.”

Stretching my body toward Thomas, I unseated his laboring hands and brought mine upon his strong shoulders. “Let us pray it does.” I nodded toward the table. “Before I take leave, will you banish the chill from my body?”

Though the oil proved settling, Thomas’s hands pressing my flesh made all the difference. His hardy pokes into all my swollen, secret places. His tongue traveling over my nakedness. Licking. Lapping the wetness between my legs.

The pale tip of his tongue emerged. “Your wish is my desire.”

With a shout, I strained toward the table and wrestled the bottle from his fingers. At pulling the cork free, I plunged it into the pit at my belly.

“Come here beside of me.” My clean hand patted the blanket.

A growl rattled in Thomas’s throat. “Temptation in the truest form, you are. Patience is not a virtue you possess, Sarah Bradford.”

The oil dispensed with one tip of my hand. He played his fingers over mine, accepted the bottle and set it down. Heat built between my hands as I rubbed them together. Thomas landed with a thump beside me, and he kissed the air between us.

“You can soon resist my affections, but first I long to touch the man who will become my husband.”

Arms outstretched, I straddled his naked body. Hovering over his hard organ, I clapped my oiled hands together. Unbound from the braid, my hair tumbled over my shoulders.

Thomas’s hands squeezed my legs and tickled behind my knees. “You hold me under a spell every time we are in this bed.”

“You believe me a witch?”

“Not at all.”

What would a witch do to a handsome man like Thomas? Laughter left my lips, and I undulated over him. My hips moved to a peculiar cadence echoing within my skull. Over my breasts, I ran the greased palms.

“You are as wild as the woodland animals,” he said and gripped his full-blooded cock.

While his fist drove against the hard shaft, I poked three fingers into my wetness. Heat flared in my belly and rushed toward my hand. The tender button grew and hardened underneath my thumb, and I lowered to Thomas’s lap.

From a squat, I landed my hands onto his heaving belly. My toes grew heavy, and I dropped to

my knees. Brown hairs on his body coiled against my flesh. Behind my bottom, his cock jutted. I crawled forward, bringing my hands up over him. His nubs poked at my palms, and his breaths came heavy.

“Will you warm my cock this cold evening?” He reached behind me and smacked my upturned bottom.

“This cold evening and many others.”

A steady trickle started down my leg. Some of my dew struck his belly. Hungry for a taste of him, I claimed one of his taut nipples between my teeth.

His fingers parted the cleft of my bottom, and one drove deep inside. I moaned and rocked against his wrist.

He pulled from me and spanked me yet again. At his wicked laughter, I raised my head. He held my hips and bore me toward the tip of his cock.

Together, we eased my crotch over his thickness. Resting the heels of my hands on his chest, I drew in a deep breath and blew the stale air out. Another thrust of my hips sheathed Thomas’s length. My faint cry flew to the rafters.

“You have a fine seat, my love.”

“But you are not horseflesh.”

“That is true, but I’m as wild as any stallion when ridden by you.”

He tickled my belly and combed his fingers through my wet maiden curls. One by one, he stuck each of the five in his mouth and licked them clean. When finished, he dropped his hand and smiled. Not the usual smile of Thomas Thorne, but a smile that spoke of his lust for life.

His lust for me.

With each bounce of my bottom on his lap, his chest and head rose off the bed. He fitted his hands around my hips and ground me hard against him. As he let me loose, I reared up, reached behind and drew a fingernail over his sac. Most of his cock remained deep inside me, and I clung to him.

“Ahhhhhhh. Yes, Sarah. You bring me great pleasure. Soon, our clandestine meetings will end. Marriage will bring us both to the same bed.”

“Mmmmmmm.” I pulled the cork from my belly and tossed it onto the table.

Another hearty slap nearly unseated me from his hardness, and I leaned toward his chest. Breath heaved from my mouth and struck his damp face. My bosom pressed against him, and another ball of heat built within my womb. I reclaimed his cock. My legs seized and then straightened. Thomas bucked against me.

Back and forth we rocked and rode each other until the commotion ceased. The mattress bounced at the flopping of his legs. Only one candle burned and cast light upon our bare bodies. His low moans made me shudder. Thomas gathered my tangled hair in his hands. A single gentle tug rested my chin against his surging chest. His brown gaze drifted over my face, and his soft cock slipped from me.

Underneath my right breast his heart bounded. The sound of our shallow pants met my straining ears, and the musk of our spent bodies filled the air.

One of his fingers trailed down my spine. “There is a tract of land not far from this cottage. A beautiful plot not far from the home of your mother and father. Would you be happy to make such a special place our home?”

“I would, indeed. And I have already made a special place in my heart for you, Thomas Thorne.”