The Devil in the Air

# June, 1692

 The air was warmer, the snow mostly melted but not gone. Birds chirped knowing summer was close. The ground was muddy and Abigail Williams’ boots stuck as she walked with the crowd. It was a day no one would likely forget soon. The day Salem Village hung their first witch. And it was Abigail’s fault. She could feel the bile rising in her throat with every step; acid threatening to fill her mouth with her mistakes. Others gave her a wide berth, except for Betty Parris, who walked next to her, eyes glued to the ground. Abigail noticed how dirty both their skirts had become, mud caked on the hems. They’d need to be scrubbed. The movement stopped—they’d reached Gallows Hill.

Budding trees surrounded them like skeletons. Murmurs moved through the crowd. Mary Walcott, Mercy Lewis, and Ann Putnam were standing in the front. Abigail saw a smirk cross Ann’s face as the wooden cart carried Goody Bishop up the hill, wheels creaking. Abigail’s stomach knotted. Betty grabbed for her cousin’s hand and Abigail held tight. She barely heard as Goody Bishop was asked once more about her guilt.

“I know nothing of it,” she said, her voice clear and strong. Stronger than she looked; eyes dull, face dirty, spirit not quite broken. Abigail felt her staring as if Goody knew that her life was in the young girl’s hands. But Goody Bishop’s guilty sentence protected Abigail’s secret, the one she couldn’t tell even Betty. Abigail would never admit the woman’s innocence and that fact poisoned her, turned her heart to stone, and filled her gut with acid.

The noose, tied and hung earlier that morning, was tightened, thick hairs scratching her slender pale neck. As the knot slid closer to her, the rope pulled at her tender skin. There would surely be a mark. Abigail could see it move up and down as Goody Bishop swallowed, could see her veins pumping with nerves and fear, the circulation already slowing. The noose hung on, even after the hangman let go, the weight pulling back, telling Goody Bishop what was to come.

Abigail tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry as an old well. She could hear Betty’s labored breathing. The younger girl’s eyes were still on the ground. Abigail looked to the clear blue sky, but could not find the words to ask for her God’s forgiveness.

 There were shouts from the crowd, “Witch! Hang her!” and Bridget Bishop was dropped, the ladder taken from under her feet, and Abigail heard the crack of her neck and the horrible gurgle that rose from her throat. Everything was still but the swish of Goody Bishop’s swinging body and the creaking sway of the branch she was tied to. If anyone cheered, Abigail didn’t hear them; her ears ringing. Betty’s sweaty grip tightened. The crack would echo in Abigail’s mind and follow her into her nightmares forever.

 Townspeople milled about, talking with each other in hushed tones. The air was different with a dead woman present. A dead witch.

 “That’s just the first one,” one woman said.

 “Think of all the others still in prison,” her friend replied. “How many will make it to Gallows Hi1l?”

 “If Satan doesn’t take them in prison, like Goody Bishop, they deserve to make the trip up the hill.”

 “Don’t let spite poison you.”

 “Don’t let sympathy for the devil condemn you,” the woman said with eyes narrowed. Her friend pursed her lips, face lined with fear and shock.

 “I have no sympathy for the devil,” she said and hurried away.

 Abigail felt rooted, sucked in by the mud and her guilt. She couldn’t bring herself to look at Goody Bishop’s lifeless body, the weight of her death heavy on her soul. But she couldn’t leave either, though Betty was tugging her hand, in a hurry to get as far away from there as possible. Surely Abigail belonged to the devil now.

 Ann walked by with a smile, Mercy and Mary followed behind like ducklings. Their faces were unsure, but like Abigail, they were stuck in the evil fantasy they’d created.

 “This is just the beginning,” Abigail heard Ann whisper. What had they done?

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 It was all in fun at first, Abigail thought as she helped Betty with the day’s wash. But it had gone too far.

The chore was taking the girls much longer to complete with their slave Tituba in prison, the first confessed witch. She’d stayed alive by joining in the girls’ game, and Abigail was grateful for it. No one was supposed to die.

 Abigail reached for the next piece of laundry to string up and noticed the tears rolling down Betty’s face. She set the linen down and crouched next to her young cousin. She gently wiped her soft cheeks and pulled the girl into her, the fabric of her dress soaking up Betty’s continuing tears.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” Betty mumbled into her shoulder. “Goody Bishop…she was mostly a pleasant woman. She died with the devil on her back and the Lord on her tongue. We put that devil there for no good reason.”

 Abigail hugged her tighter, feeling the sobs shake her thin frame. Despite Goody Bishop’s downfall as a Puritan woman, she was no consort of the devil, and both Abigail and Betty knew it. But Betty didn’t know that Abigail did have good reason for accusing her; it would be one of them, and Abigail did not wish to die.

 “We’ll make this right, Betty. We must stop this foolishness before others get hurt.”

 Betty looked at her in disbelief. “There’s no going back now. Ann—”

 “Ann is a wicked creature.”

 “One who will point her finger at us. We’ll be next on Gallows Hill if we go back on our word.”

 Abigail knew she was right, knew Ann would surely expose her, but she couldn’t fathom going forward with this. It was one thing to point a finger in fun, another to tighten the noose in wickedness.

 “We have to stop this, Betty.”

 “And face the court? My father? We cannot.” Betty’s eyes were full of pain and regret, each tear carrying the fear of punishment with it. “If Ann does not raise a finger in accusation, Mary or Mercy will. We are only safe if we continue as we are.”

Abigail released her and went back to hanging laundry, telling herself she would not be a part of this any longer. She was the reason Bridget Bishop was now dead, her body hanging limp for the entire village to see, her soul stolen because Abigail had given her own to the Devil. Goody Bishop’s trial was the last she would testify at.

# January, 1692

 It started with Ann’s game.

 “It’ll be fun, I promise,” she told Betty and Abigail.

 “I don’t know, Ann. If my father finds out, he’ll think us evil. This is a devil’s game,” Betty said.

 “It’s no such thing. Don’t worry yourself so much. Abigail?”

 Abigail considered it and looked subtly to Tituba in the corner, who ignored her. This game was not much different than much of the work she did under Tituba’s watch. But to do it in front of the other girls…

“Fine, but only this once,” she said.

 Ann’s face lit up. She filled a glass and grabbed an egg. Tituba paid no mind to the girls, carrying on with her stitching; the Reverend’s good coat needed mending.

 The three girls situated themselves in front of the glowing hearth, sitting cross-legged, knees touching. Ann set the glass in the middle of their small circle and handed the egg to Abigail.

 “You first,” she said. “Let’s see what kind of man you’ll marry.”

 Abigail knew what Ann was doing. She’d been the outcast since they moved to Salem Village three years prior. When Abigail lost her parents the Parrises took her in. The other young girls had questions with Ann always at the head of the group. Abigail refused to answer them, not wanting to relive the hard memories of losing her family to raiding Indians and barely escaping with her life. Betty wouldn’t speak of it when asked; she was no gossip, and she only knew parts of the story. Her loyalty was a gift nonetheless. Ann hated not knowing and was always trying to cause Abigail failure and misfortune. Now, she wanted to watch as the egg in the glass told Abigail that she would marry a butcher or a carpenter, where it was well known that Ann wanted to marry a doctor or a reverend—she had no time for those who did hard labor.

 Abigail held the egg gingerly. She could feel Betty’s anxiousness rolling off her in weaves.

 With a sigh, Abigail cracked the egg into the glass. She held her breath as they all watched the broken yolk move through the water, waiting to see what shape would appear. Ann smirked, surely hoping for something deplorable. Betty bit at her already raw fingernails.

 As the egg formed a menacing shape in the water, the smirk fell from Ann’s face and she looked to Abigail. Abigail felt the blood drain from her. The cold seeped into her bones and she couldn’t feel the fire burning next to her.

 A whimper escaped Betty, and Abigail grabbed the glass and threw its contents into the fire. The logs hissed in protest.

 “What are you about, tryin’ to freeze us all,” Tituba said.

 “My apologies,” Abigail said, staring at the reduced flames. Her eyes began to water, but the coffin-shaped egg was still seared into her mind. Abigail’s death omen did not bode well for anyone, and this game, this witchcraft, could kill them all, especially her.

 Tituba brought more logs to the fire and Abigail tried to catch her eye. Tituba refused to look at her, though. Abigail pulled the girls into a corner of the room. The fire and candlelight didn’t reach them, and the small windows did little to light the room. The cold pushed through their woolen dresses. Even in the dark Abigail could see the fear in the other girls’ eyes.

 “I knew this to be a terrible mistake,” Betty said, her chin trembling.

 “Speak of this to no one,” Abigail whispered harshly, though she knew Tituba could hear.

 “Our sin will be found out,” Betty said Ann was uncharacteristically silent.

 “Not if we keep quiet. Think how angry the Reverend will be if he discovers we’ve played Ann’s devil game.”

 “It’s not my devil game,” Ann countered.

 “You brought it to us, insisted we play. You brought evil into this house.”

 “I did no such thing! You have the devil inside you, Abigail Williams. This is proof of it.”

 “We’ll, all of us, be blamed,” Betty said. Ann quieted for a moment.

 “You’re right,” she said. “We must do as Abigail begs. We can speak of this to no one.”

 Abigail released the breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. Her anger at Ann was replaced with Betty’s fear of punishment. Fortune telling was witches’ work, and witches belonged to the devil.

 “This shall be our secret and our secret alone,” Abigail said.

 “We have no secrets from the lord,” Betty said.

 “May the Lord forgive us, but may He be the only other that knows of this.”

 Betty sighed, signaling defeat. She would not tell.

 “Cross your heart,” Ann demanded. Abigail and Betty did as the older girl said. Abigail knew she would not find sleep that night.

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 The Reverend and Betty were sleeping soundly, small snores slipping through Betty’s lips and deep, even breaths lulling the Reverend into his dreams. Abigail snuck out of the house and around the back to the slave quarters. To where Tituba and John Indian slept. The freezing air bit at her bare feet—she didn’t dare risk shoes.

 She knocked softly on the rough wooden door and heard shuffles from behind it. John Indian opened the door a crack, the candlelight from behind him casting strange shadows over his face.

 “I must speak with Tituba,” Abigail said.

 John Indian did not speak, but glanced over his shoulder, nodded slightly, then opened the door wider for Abigail to enter.

 “Yes, child?” Tituba said.

 “I am in trouble.”

 “Those girls earlier today,” she said, not asking.

 “Yes,” Abigail responded. “Ann had us fortune telling, and I—” she trailed off. “Well, I was given a death omen.”

 “What kind of omen?” Tituba sat up straighter on her meager straw mattress on the floor.

 “A coffin.” Abigail could feel the weight of the silence in the small room. “I’m not sure what it means for me, but I am worried that my secret will be revealed. That Ann knows.”

 “How could she know such a thing unless you have told her?”

 “I have not.” Abigail was stern in her denial. “I know the danger of telling anyone. But I fear that this—this will be my undoing.”

 “You must convince them otherwise,” Tituba said. “You must not be labeled a witch.”

 “But how?”

 “You cannot speak a word of your practice, of my help in the matter. You must keep these girls from speaking of your omen. By whatever means.”

 John Indian placed a handful of herbs in a pouch and handed them to Abigail.

 “Protect yourself, child,” Tituba told her.

 “Goddess help us all,” she muttered before leaving, the protective pouch clutched in her hand so no one would see.

# June, 1682

 Another died, this time in prison. Five more were convicted. Abigail was growing thin from her nightmares. She had accused some of them, had pointed her own finger in fear and anger, and now their lives were likely to end while she lived.

 “My dear Lord, forgive me for these countless sins,” she began. Her throat tightened and she could not finish her halfhearted prayer to a God she’d stopped worshipping long ago. She knelt alone next to the small straw bed she shared with Betty. The Reverend stopped family prayers not long after the fits began. He spent the days following fasting, in constant prayer over his daughter and niece, hoping their sickness would leave them. He didn’t know Abigail’s sickness was part of her. Now most of his days were spent in the courts, trying to release witches from the devil’s grasp. He hardly spoke to Abigail and Betty; Abigail thought he feared their fingers turning toward him. She feared he’d find out her witchcraft had never been an act.

 The next month would bring five more hangings with the warmer weather. Five more souls Abigail and her friends had sentenced to death. Five innocent people, stolen from life for a foolish game, for self-preservation.

 “Lord,” Abigail tried to start again. She needed this prayer, needed the God of these people to hear her. She needed every prayer she hadn’t said since the trials began. Her mouth was dry, tongue-sticking when she tried to form words. She moved to the corner and ladled a drink of yesterday’s water into her mouth. Kneeling once more, she continued. “Save me from this evil taking over my body. Bring peace to this village, to my heart. Cleanse my soul of the devil let in by children’s games. Allow me to live a good, correct Puritan life.”

 Her heart beat fast, the prayer causing more worry than contentment. What if her words were lost on deaf ears? Ears turned far from her many months ago? How then could she purge herself of this evil and right her wrongs? Worse, what if He heard her, listened, and answered? She did not want to live a Puritan life, with their strict rules and closed minds. She wanted to heal, grow, and learn. To be a part of the Goddess’s world. But she could not for fear of death. She would have to live in the shell of a Puritan girl.

 Betty walked in, carrying a fresh bucket of water.

 “What are you doing?” she asked.

 “Praying,” Abigail told her. Betty looked shocked. She set the heavy bucket down.

 “What good will that do now? Father prays and prays and nothing happens. We are a cursed village. God will not hear us.” Her face was tight, her muscles rigid. Abigail knew fear and guilt lived behind it all.

 “It hurts no one to try.” They had this argument many times before. To Betty, there was no coming back from a sin this overwhelming. It had taken over the souls of the town; righteousness and goodness would never walk these streets again. It saddened Abigail to see how horribly these trials had affected the girl—she was once the most pious child Abigail knew, through her father’s staunch sermons often caused her great worry. Now, she had no hope or faith left. She had grown hard, angry.

 Betty snorted. “Best be on with it. Father will be expecting supper.”

 Abigail rose from her knees, her body feeling heavier than her age should allow. She fixed her shirts and prepared to go on with her day. Betty gave her a stony stare before turning to her own chores.

# January, 1692

 Nightmares followed Abigail despite the protective pouch she’d hidden under a board beneath the bed. She tossed and turned and yelled out in the dark. Betty woke and tried to calm her, but her fits didn’t stop. Betty called for her father. The Reverend tried to wake the girl, but though her eyes were open it was as if she saw nothing.

 “What evil is this?” he asked Betty.

 Betty could not look him in the eyes. “I know not, Father. She started yelling and twisting as if tormented.”

 “Whatever foolishness you two are brewing should be gone by morning.” The Reverend returned to his bed, mumbling a prayer.

Betty hoped he was correct, and laid back down next to Abigail. Her eyes were closed again and she was stiff. Betty slipped into her own fitful sleep but Abigail took no notice.

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Abigail woke to the cold morning. Her eyes were tired and burning as if she did not sleep. Her hair was a tangled mess under her and her heart was still beating fast. The coffin remained vivid in her mind, floating ominously in the water, clouding it. She pulled the blanket up to her chin, trying to ward off the frigid cold. She heard the fire in the hearth but could not feel its warm tendrils moving over her body. A shiver raced through her. Betty was still asleep next to her, her small body providing some warmth, but not enough to reach the deep, aching cold that now lived in Abigail’s bones. She could not move, her eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

Betty woke, turning toward her. “Are you all right now?” Her face was creased with worry and exhaustion. Abigail knew her cousin had been dreaming the same nightmares she had.

She did not respond. Her mind was turning the image over again and again. What did it mean for her? Would it give her away?

“You were yelling and tossing as if something were after you,” Betty told her. Still no response. “Please come out of this, Abigail.” But Abigail would not. She was rigid as a board and silent, eyes still open.

Betty rose from the bed and dressed. She was hesitant to fetch her father but knew she must. He was already at the hearth praying. Tituba was fixing breakfast near him, trying to keep quiet the way he liked.

“Father,” Betty started softly. He hated his prayers being interrupted. He stayed silent for a moment longer, hands clasped tightly together in front of him. “Father, it’s Abigail.”

The Reverend sighed. “This better not be some foolish game for you to interrupt my prayers. The Lord has no time for such things.”

“This is no game, Father. Abigail… she stares but does not respond. Her body is stiff and still. She breathes, but it is as if she is not there.” Betty started to shiver, but not from the cold.

The Reverend stood, his eyebrows coming together. “Let us see then.” He followed Betty to the girls’ bed, where Abigail had not moved.

“Abigail, what is this?” She did not respond. Her mind was wandering elsewhere, wondering how she could come back from such a sin, worried that death would follow her. Worried that Ann would tell their secret, find out her secret, that she would be shunned by the whole town for her misfortune. Or worse: hanged.

“Speak, girl. This is no game.” There was agitation and a slight anger in the Reverend’s voice. Abigail remained still and silent. The Reverend knelt next to her and put his hand on her clammy forehead. Her skin was warm to the touch, as if fever ran through her body.

“I fear our young Abigail may be ill.”

“Yes, sir,” Betty said. “Shall I fetch the doctor?”

“Let us pray,” he said and left the room.

Betty moved closer to her. Her eyes were shut and her body was becoming rigid again. Her chest was heaving, her face covered in a light sweat.

“This must be some fever,” Betty said. She heard the door creak open and was quiet, not wanting her father to hear her. Ann moved into the room, though, and Betty chewed at her fingernails.

“Good day,” Ann said to Betty, but she looked to Abigail. There was awe and a mischievous light in Ann’s eyes.

“Good day,” Betty said. “We weren’t expecting you. Abigail is not well, it’s best if you leave us.”

“Not well,” Ann parroted. She walked up to Abigail and took the girl’s now-limp hand. “Your slave allowed me in. What are you doing, Abigail?” Ann turned to Betty when Abigail did not respond.

 “Tis a fever.” Betty’s bit fingers started to bleed.

 Ann squeezed Abigail’s hand until the girl gave a small cry.

 “I knew it!” Ann yelled.

 “You know nothing,” Abigail said in a raspy voice.

 Betty moved closer. “Why did you not speak when Father called?”

 “I could not,” Abigail said, a small tear escaping her eye. She looked exhausted.

 “Or would not,” Ann added. “What a fun game.”

 “This is no game,” Betty said.

 Abigail closed her eyes briefly.

 “We could go along with it,” Ann said. “Then no one would suspect our fortune telling. Just long enough to forget what happened.” She gave Abigail an accusatory look.

 “We?” Betty said.

 “Of course. Abigail can’t be the only one afflicted.” A smile crept onto Ann’s face. Abigail did not speak.

 “This is wicked, Ann Putnam. We can do no such thing.” Betty was firm, something Abigail had never heard.

 “Betty is right,” Abigail added. “We’ve sinned enough. We cannot keep this game up.”

 “But we must,” Ann said. “How do you think we will be punished if we don’t?”

 “How do you know anyone will find out?” Abigail asked.

 “Your slave saw us,” Ann said. “Why would she not speak against us if asked?”

 “Pretending to be ill won’t help us,” Betty said. “It will only make our sins worse. We must tell Father—”

 “Speak of this to the Reverend, and I will tell him it was you who began it,” Ann said sharply.

 Betty’s mouth snapped shut, her lips forming a tight line. Ann could be wicked, and both girls knew she would hold true to her word if tested. They knew they would be punished for their wrongdoing. But how would more wrongdoing make it right?

 “If you would blame anyone, Ann Putnam, it would be me,” Abigail said. “Do not bring harm to Betty for your amusement.”

 “This is not for my amusement. It is to keep me from punishment.”

 “Your selfishness will not aid you.” Abigail paused, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath, pushing herself onto her elbows. “I will play your game, but only until the fortune-telling is gone from our minds.” Ann was dangerous, and Abigail did not want to cross her. She did not want to see Betty caught in Ann’s grasp because of her own misfortune. Mostly, she did not want to give Ann any reason to spy and discover her secret.

 Ann looked to Betty, triumph shining in her eyes, a smirk on her face. Betty looked to the floor and sat heavily on the edge of the bed. She did not speak, but Abigail knew she was resigned to the older girls’ decision.

 “This shall be fun,” Ann said before leaving Abigail and Betty alone with their thoughts.

 Abigail closed her eyes, wishing for sleep, but she only saw the coffin. Nothing good would come from it, of that she was sure. She would not find rest any time soon. She grabbed Betty’s hand, fingers raw and dotted with blood, and squeezed.

 “Lord, forgive us,” Betty said softly.

 “Goddess, protect me,” Abigail silently repeated over and over. Surely one of these deities would hear them.