

Salem VI! Rebecca's Rising

by Jack Heath and John Thompson

Prologue
Burlington, Vermont,
October 17, 1978

The man stood in the shadows, shivering, rocking from foot to foot to keep his toes from freezing and watched his breath whiten in the cold air. It was only mid-October, but up here in Vermont the unseasonably frigid night felt like January. Across the street the lights of Davis Hall burned through the clear air and reflected a dull glow off the frost-rimmed grass.

The man checked his watch. Nearly four a.m. Most of the college kids seemed to have turned in for the night, because the vast majority of the room lights were off. The man didn't care about most of the kids at all. He cared about one single kid, in room 321, and he didn't care about

him in the way a parent might. He cared about him the way a risk management specialist cares about looming liability. The kid wasn't a problem yet, but the man knew he had the potential to become a big problem. Nobody knew exactly when it might happen, but according to people who knew more about this than he, the kid had begun to glow with awareness in the past couple days. It was way too early. It was pure luck that somebody with the ability to see such things had spotted him and gotten word back to Salem. Awareness didn't normally develop, if it ever did, until much later in life, but if people said it was happening now, the man wasn't going to argue. As a self-defined risk management specialist, his job was to nip problems like this in the bud.

He looked again at the window of room 321. It had been dark for two

hours, and he knew the room's three occupants were totally dead to the world. He'd made sure of that, because earlier that afternoon, dressed as a University of Vermont janitor, he had picked the lock on their room and injected their pony keg with a little mixture of his own, a concentrate of dissolved sleeping pills that would put them down deeper than the alcohol ever could. The whole point was to make sure they were sufficiently unconscious so the smoke and heat could do their job.

And now as he watched the window, he saw the first wisp of smoke escape. It was very subtle. If he hadn't been staring at the window he never would have seen it. It meant that the very small incendiary device he had planted in one of the room's electrical outlets had ignited and was starting to feed on the old dormitory's walls. The

device would never be detectable, not after the tinderbox dorm had fully caught fire. And it would definitely catch fire. He knew this because earlier that evening he had also disabled the dorm's sprinkler system. The three boys in the room would be dead within fifteen minutes. No doubt some other kids would die, too, but that couldn't be helped. It would be collateral damage, just like what the papers used to call it a few years earlier when the Air Force accidentally napalmed a village in Vietnam.

John Andrews tossed his head from side to side on his pillow and wondered for the hundredth time if he was going to hurl. Maybe two hours earlier when he'd gone to bed he'd suffered through the exact same thing, and now here it was back, the room spinning like a top. He cursed himself for sucking down

so much of the pony keg he and his suitemates had tapped. Stupid, really stupid, he told himself.

But then he corrected himself, he really hadn't swilled that much beer. He'd drunk more lots of other nights and not felt half as smashed. Same with his suitemates. Both guys could usually hold their beer, but they'd both been slurring their words, and when they first went to bed he was pretty sure he'd heard one of them barfing out the living room window.

Now, strangely, he was awake again, and it was still the middle of the night, and he had the bed spins for the second time in a couple hours. How was this possible? Usually when he went to sleep with a load on, he slept like the dead until sometime around noon the next day. Only something had disturbed him. He struggled to remember. Had it been a shout? If that was it then he'd heard it in a dream because it had been an old lady's voice, but a harsh and forceful voice and incredibly loud, and there weren't any old ladies in Davis Hall.

In spite of having a terrible case of the spins he was keeping his eyes closed and starting to sink back into sleep. He was so totally out of it he didn't even care if he blew lunch all over his bed. But then he heard the voice again. "Get up!" The voice slammed him, as impossible to ignore as a dental drill in his ear. Actually it was even worse than that because it was coming from inside his head, like some strange old lady was locked in there wanting to get out.

He struggled to open his eyes, working hard against the heaviness of alcohol, feeling like a diver trying to swim to the surface in a pool filled with Jell-O. Had it been beer or tequila shots he'd been drinking? He really hadn't had that much to drink. How could he feel this hammered? He heard the voice a third time, a female drill sergeant shouting, "Get up!" and this time it slices through his drunkenness like a sharp knife cutting through rope. Knowing he had to stand if only to stop the painful caterwauling in his brain, he slid one foot out of bed and put it flat on the floor.

Weird. Davis Hall had a lousy heating system so the floor should have been cold, but it was hot. In fact, it was really hot. He pushed himself up on one elbow, took a deep breath through his mouth, and right away started to cough.

Boy, am I a mess, he thought as he continued to hack. He tried to suck down another breath, but it caught in his lungs like a jagged piece of chicken bone. He sat up reflexively, and that was when he began to realize that,

between the hot floor and the air, he had a much bigger problem.

He was still coughing, nearly retching, as he reached over and fumbled for his bedside lamp. When it came on a surge of panic helped sober him because he saw that the room was full of thick gray smoke, so much that he couldn't even make out the door about ten feet away.

He lurched out of bed, stumbled to the window, and threw it open. He shoved his head into the cold air and took deep breaths until he stopped coughing. Slowly, as his brain started to work he looked down three stories to the frozen ground, and then his eyes went across the street to where a man was standing in the shadows. The man was nearly invisible, just a shadow slightly darker than the night, but John hesitated because he thought the man was staring up at him. "Help," he called, his voice hoarse from coughing and barely more than a whisper. "Fire."

Strangely, the man did not move. John blinked. Was he imagining this? Smoke was pouring out the window all around him, but the guy wasn't budging? The smoke had to be easily visible from across the street, and yet the man continued to stare up at the dorm like he was waiting for something to happen, or maybe like he was looking directly at John. What was wrong with this jerk?

"Move!" Another shout pierced his brain, the feeling like somebody was stabbing the inside of his skull with an ice-pick. It made him forget about the guy and think about his roommates and all the other people on the floor. Where had the fire started? Did they know about it? Were they already evacuating? Why weren't the alarms going off? Weren't there supposed to be sprinklers?

Feeling a surge of panic he left the window open, got down on his hands and knees where the smoke was much thinner, and crawled toward his door. On the way he pulled on the jeans he had thrown off when he got into bed and pulled on his boots. He didn't bother to lace them. The bedroom door was hot, but no hotter than the floor. He opened it and looked out. More smoke, but thankfully no sign of flames.

He crawled into the living room, found a pitcher of beer that was still three-quarters full then grabbed a crumpled sweatshirt off the floor nearby, soaked it with the beer, and held it against his face like a filter. Then he crawled to the door that led to his roommates' bedroom. When he turned on the wall light he could barely make out two lumpy forms under the blankets on the two beds.

"Fire! Get up!" he croaked.

Neither one moved. John crawled to the window, stood up, and heaved it open to let in some fresh air. He stuck his head out and took a quick breath so his lungs could work. "Get up! Get up!" he shouted. At that, Steve, one of the suitemates, made a groaning sound and started to cough. John crawled over and jerked him out of bed and onto the floor.

"Wha're you doin', man?" he mumbled, barely coherent. He seemed terrible out of it, much drunker than he should have been given how much beer they'd consumed.

"The dorm's on fire." John slapped him hard across the face. "Wake up!" Steve barely seemed to register the slap. John dragged him to the window, pulled him up, and hung him out. "Breathe!" He left Steve and crawled over to Mike's bed. Like he had with Steve, he grabbed Mike by the arm and jerked him to the floor.

"Lemme 'lone," Mike slurred.

John slapped him just the way he had Steve, alarmed at how little Mike responded. He dragged him over to the window and pulled him to his feet beside Steve, and a second later both suitemates were hanging out the window coughing.

"Stay here," John said. "Don't leave the window unless you can get out on your own. I'm gonna go pull the alarm and knock on the other doors on the hall. I'll be back in a minute."

John crawled toward the door that led into the hallway, felt it, and realized it was hotter than the other doors had been but still not in flames. He cracked the door, half afraid a wall of fire would come shooting inside. He was relieved to see only thick walls of smoke in both directions. He tried to recall where the smoke alarm was located. They had showed him during freshman orientation, but of course he hadn't paid attention.

To the left was a double with two girls, one from Massachusetts, the other from Virginia. He had fantasized about getting the blond from Virginia into bed, but now he only thought about keeping her alive. He tried the door handle, but it was locked. He banged on the door, then swiveled around, sat on his butt, and hammered the door with both feet. The third time the lock gave and the door swung inward. "Get up!" he shouted.

Fortunately the girls had gone to bed reasonably sober. They were coughing, but they woke up and got their window open.

"Get out as quick as you can, okay?" he said.

As soon as they said they would, he crawled out and since the girls' room was the end of the corridor, he went

in the other direction. He kicked in three more doors and got the occupants out of bed before he managed to spot the fire alarm in the near darkness. He stood up, broke the glass, and pulled the switch. Suddenly the loud smoke alarm filled the hallways with noise.

With the alarm blaring, he continued on. That's when he saw the flames glowing lurid and yellow through the smoke. He also saw the bathroom door. Knowing what he had to do next, he crawled into the shower, turned it on, and soaked himself from head to toe, then tore the shower curtain from the rod and soaked it as well. Crawling back into the hallway, he took the biggest breath he could, stood, and wrapped the dripping shower curtain around his head and torso and ran toward the flames at the farthest end of the hallway.

His lungs were burning before he'd gotten halfway, but there was nothing he could do. The wall just past the last room door was totally in flames. He grabbed the door handle and jerked his hand away because the metal was so hot it blistered his skin. He took the shower curtain, put a thick wad of it against the handle, and tried again. The door was unlocked, and he stumbled inside, went straight to the window, and jerked it up.

He sucked down a couple quick gulps of air then went to the single bed in the room. He tried to wake the sleeper, but she did not open her eyes. John could hear voices in the hallway now as other students from other floors responded to the alarm and began to knock on other doors, making sure everyone was out.

"Two guys in three-twenty-one!" he shouted into the smoke. "Get them out."

He went back to the window, took one more breath, returned to the bed, and heaved the girl over his shoulder. She was deadweight, nearly impossible to carry in his current condition. John stumbled to the door, which was now on fire. He shouldered it open, felt a lick of flame on his exposed ear and neck and kept moving, passing open doorways as headed toward the stairway at the far end of the hall. As he was going down the stairs he met two campus security officers coming up. They took the comatose student from his shoulders.

"Any others up there?"

John nodded as he bent over coughing. "Gotta check on my suitemates," he managed after a few seconds. "Three- twenty-one."

"We got 'em both a minute ago," one of the officers said. They carried

the unconscious student out and helped make sure John got down the stairs. When he stumbled into the freezing Vermont night, he realized he wasn't wearing a shirt. At the same time the cold air lit up the burned skin on his hand and his ear and neck. The pain nearly took him to his knees, but he didn't think about that. He was thinking about the guy who had stood and watched the smoke roil out around him when he opened the window and who hadn't done a damn thing to help.

John pushed past the security officer who was trying to get him over to an ambulance where EMTs were treating students for burns or smoke inhalation and headed across the street to where the man had been standing. He wanted to find the jerk and drive his fist right into his nose, and he looked around, trying to recall exactly what the guy had looked like. He could only remember a dark silhouette. The guy hadn't been too short or tall and hadn't been particularly fat or skinny. He'd probably been wearing a down parka and stocking cap like everyone else in Vermont in late October.

The only feature that had been distinctive had been the guy's eyes. Even from across the street John had felt the...what...the hatred that had seemed to make them burn brighter than the night. Well, if he found the guy, John was going to make him understand what hatred really felt like.

Late the next day, wearing thick bandages on his neck, ear, and right hand and still loopy from the prescription painkillers he'd been given, John accompanied his suitemates when they got permission to go back into what had been their college freshman room. A fireman led them up the stairs and down the corridor where water still dripped from the ceiling. What was left of the blackened carpet squished under their feet, and the reek of smoke came from every surface. The pony keg they had tapped was now a puddle of

melted aluminum. John went into his old bedroom and saw that nearly all his clothing, bedding, books, shoes, ski and hockey gear, and UVM knapsack had been burned or badly charred. The few items hanging in his closet that hadn't been burned were soaked with soot-colored water that had dripped from above and heavy with the permanent stench of smoke.

He turned a slow circle, studied the devastation, remembering how little beer he'd actually drunk but how smashed he'd felt when he went to bed. It was a miracle he was still alive because he knew how soundly he slept when he'd had a few. What had woken him? Had it really been a dream? He remembered the shouting old woman. How could he forget her? He'd never heard a voice with so much power.

He was about to walk out of the room when he glanced once more at what was left of his desk and the skeletons of burned books atop it. As he scowled at the destruction, he noticed something white on the floor. Out of curiosity he went over to see what had managed to keep its color amid all the char. On the far side of his desk where it had apparently fallen to the floor in all the confusion, he could see what looked like one of his papers.

He bent over and picked it up, feeling the wetness

of the pages that had somehow survived. He let out a sarcastic laugh because except for some black singe at the bottom of the cover sheet, they looked almost perfect. The paper's title, "Rebecca Nurse: A Wrongful Death in Salem's Witch Trials," was still crisply legible.

"Dude, what's funny about this?" his roommate Steve asked from the doorway.

"This." John held up the paper. "I just finished typing it yesterday. Somehow it survived. I can still hand it in. Go figure."

He looked again at the paper and below it his name and the date, Sunday, October 17, 1978. Rebecca Nurse, his distant ancestor, he thought, recalling the family portrait of the woman that hung in his great aunt's house. She had been a grim-faced Puritan with a face like a Rottweiler, but it was weird because it had almost seemed like he had felt her presence looking down on him when he wrote the paper. It was probably her he had conjured up in his dream to make himself wake up. He snorted another laugh as he tucked the paper under his arm and headed out of the room. He was thinking Rebecca Nurse was so ugly she could probably wake the dead, so it was nothing for her to wake up a drunk college student.

Chapter One
Salem, Massachusetts,
October
17, 2012

JOHN ANDREWS PULLED THE COVERS BACK from his face, slowly opened his eyes, and croaked out a curse. The early dawn light that managed to make its way through his curtains hurt like a stab wound.

"Crap," he said as he elbowed himself into a sitting position, put his feet on the cold floor, and started to bat his hands in the direction of the alarm. Some idiot announcer was saying it was unseasonably cold for late October. Like he needed to be reminded since he could nearly see his breath in the cold bedroom. He stood, shivered, padded into the bath- room to pee, then slipped on his terrycloth robe and slippers and headed downstairs to make

coffee. At the bottom of the stairs he flipped the thermostat from 50° up to 70°. What had he been thinking last night?—well, the point was he hadn't been thinking—then pulled open the front door and snatched the three plastic bags containing The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Boston Herald.

In the kitchen, he tossed the papers on the counter, hit the switch to start the coffeemaker then started dumping the papers from their bags. On their one or two bounce trip from the delivery guy, across the sidewalk to his doorstep, each bag managed to pick up some street crap, which always dropped onto his counter. It made a mess, and the mess reminded him of Julie. She'd been a cleanaholic, always after him to sponge off the counters and put things away.

He missed being told to clean up. He missed the noise of another person. That wasn't even the start of it. He missed too many things.

He put the papers in a pile, wiped his hand across the granite counter, and swept the crumbs of street dirt into the sink. He glanced at the plate on the counter beside him and the dirty glass and empty bottle. Pizza crust on the plate, a bare drop of scotch left in the glass and none in the bottle. How many straight nights of pizza, he wondered. Maybe four, maybe five. How many straight nights of scotch? He chuckled a humorless laugh. Way too many to count. More to the point, how many nights had that dead fifth lasted? Two? Two and a half? Something like that.

If Julie was here she would have a fit, disgusted at his diet and his drinking. "It's your fault," he said to the empty kitchen.

He got his coffee, but before he started skimming the papers he looked at his reflection in the kitchen window. He still looked okay on the outside, he thought, giving himself a frank appraisal. Mostly full head of brown hair with just a tinge of gray over the ears. Trim physique, flat stomach, much flatter than he deserved. Good genes helping to cover for bad behavior, he thought. The face was still there, too, good cheekbones, strong chin, reasonably tight skin, amazing lack of bags under the eyes considering how much single malt went down his throat every night. It was a face that still could be on national network news every night if that was what he wanted, but he didn't. He just wanted his quiet life and his quiet little newspaper. He was done with the big leagues and the stress. He was done with love. He was holding it together, he told himself. Just barely.

