

# Salem VI: Chain of Souls

By Jack Heath and John Thompson

## Prologue

The girl's feet kicked up small puffs of dust as she walked down the dirt lane. The greens, blues, and reds of her plaid skirt seemed to pulse with every step, and the wind tossed the blazer covering her white blouse, each gust making it rise and writhe as if trying to escape the strain of her backpack straps. Her hair was dark, tied in a neat ponytail, and her face had a youthful glow that betrayed her age. She was at best thirteen, maybe fourteen.

The sky overhead was a swirl of heavy gray clouds that seemed to threaten rain, yet the path was hard and bone dry. An ancient stone wall ran along beside the lane; and beyond, the ground rose to what should have been a verdant meadow. Instead, sheep grazed on scabby brown grass that clung to the hillside.

The man looked down on the scene with growing dread. Something was terribly wrong. He called to the girl, imploring her to turn around, to go back to wherever she had come, but his voice, barely escaping his mouth, faded into the heavy gauze of the approaching storm. He tried to run after her, but his movements were slow and restrained, like a fly trapped in ether.

This was a dream, he knew it was a dream, but through the horror of his past he understood that something about this dream was more, was real. The man cried out, screaming at the top of his lungs, but the girl kept walking.

Up ahead of her an enormous oak webbed the ground with twisted shadows, its barren limbs catching what little light there was, and deeper, beyond the edge of the

shadows, was pitch black, as if some terrible secret was hiding in the darkness, waiting for the girl there—something he could feel, something he knew with all his senses was horrible beyond words, that related to another place, another girl.

Suddenly, his dream changed, and he saw the place where he had found the other girl. It was a room of white tiles with shackles set into the walls, the girl's nude body sagging in the chains, her belly slit open and her intestines spilling obscenely, the floor pooled with blood. The young girl, the one with the backpack, was walking into the exact same fate.

John Andrews bolted awake, his body tense with panic, his heart pounding, his pillow and sheets soaked with his sweat. Beside him Amy gripped his shoulder and switched on the bedside lamp.

"John," she said, her voice soft yet urgent. "It's okay. You were having a dream."

Andrews pulled up his knees and brought his head forward, balling himself up like a child hiding from the world. "The Coven," he groaned.

"It's over," Amy assured him as she worked her fingers into his shoulders, trying to unknot the muscles. "They're all dead, all of them. They can't hurt anyone anymore."

John tried to focus on the warm light from the lamp, the reassuring touch of Amy's hands on his shoulders, on the words she was speaking. More than anything, he wanted to believe her and be assured the Coven had finally been destroyed.

He was safe in his bed on Pickering Wharf in Salem, Massachusetts, he

told himself. He wasn't on some dusty lane in god-knows-where. There wasn't a girl in danger. Amy was right. The Coven was gone. After all, hadn't he seen the bodies of the leaders? There was no mistaking the fact that they were dead because he was the one who had killed them, all of them except his friend Rich Harvey, who had killed himself, and he had seen that with his own eyes, too.

It was hard to imagine that all of those things had taken place just a week earlier. Already it seemed like another lifetime or another world because the discoveries had been so horrifying, the violence so unbelievable.

John knew that over the past week his mind had shut down, almost like it had been shocked into a state of suspended animation. He hadn't thought about the Coven; he hadn't relived the bloody scenes. He had just gone through his days with his mind almost blank, getting up, taking long walks, eating, sleeping, never allowing himself to process the atrocities of the previous weeks.

Now he realized he was starting to come out of it and re-enter the real world, and he was enough a student of psychology to know that nightmares were a natural part of reawakening. This bad dream wouldn't be the last one, and it was probably perfectly normal.

Only something nagged at him. He remembered something Captain Card said when they were alone together in the underground warrens of the Coven. John hadn't thought about it until now, but he was sure that Card said there had been a seventh member of the Coven. Card, a Massachusetts State Police detective, had been very cryptic and

tight-lipped, and the few things he had let slip seemed to have only leaked out by accident. John wracked his brain to recall what else Card had said. He recalled something about the fact that the ultimate leader of a Coven was apparently called the Inquisitor, and hadn't Card also said that all the Covens were organized the same way?

All the Covens, plural? The word had sat in his brain for the past week like a cancer, silent and waiting to be discovered. John felt a sickness deep inside. His mind reeled and images and memories of visions past—visions of Rebecca Nurse—came flooding back. As hard as he had tried at first to deny those visions of his long-dead relative, he had finally accepted that they were real. Now the same part of him that knew Rebecca Nurse had been real knew what he had just seen was no dream. The girl was real and she was still walking, just entering the deep shade beneath the ancient tree. What waited for her there was the same evil he had defeated before; he could feel it. That meant the Coven might be gone from Salem, but it wasn't destroyed.

John sat up and turned to face Amy. "What?" she asked, seeing the alarm etched on his face.

"It's not over. It's not even close to being over."

## Chapter One

When John Andrews walked downstairs the next morning to make coffee, he stopped at the bottom of the staircase and looked into the living room at the portrait of his ancestor, Rebecca Nurse.

ALL PHOTOS BY LEAH WALKER.

"Please talk to me," he said, gazing up at the painting. Just like almost any portrait of a Puritan woman, Rebecca Nurse was unquestionably not pretty in her black dress with a high white collar. She sat in a rocking chair working on a piece of embroidery as her unsmiling face gazed out of the portrait.

Until very recently, John had hated the portrait, which had come as part of the furnishings of the house he'd inherited from his great aunt. His aunt's one condition on giving him the house had been that Rebecca's portrait had to remain hanging in the house. For years John had never understood his aunt's reasoning, but he had honored that condition, hanging the portrait out of sight.

He used to joke that Rebecca Nurse had been "as ugly as a Rottweiler with a sore ass," but that was before the spirit of Rebecca Nurse helped him avenge the murder of his late wife. Until a few weeks ago, John Andrews would have scoffed at the idea of spirits, and when Rebecca first appeared to him, he had feared he was losing his mind. However, after the events of the past few weeks, his cynicism, or what he might have called his reporter's skepticism, had been totally demolished. He no longer had any doubt spirits existed or that they could communicate with the living, or, for that matter, that Devil worshippers had been living around him in Salem.

It turned out the Coven had operated in Salem for the past three hundred years and been responsible not only for the Salem witch trials, of which Rebecca Nurse had been the final victim, but also for countless blood sacrifices over the intervening centuries. John Andrews knew he was a man whose sense of certainty about everything in life had been badly weakened.

In fact, he now acknowledged that the spirit of Rebecca Nurse was the reason he had survived the events of the past month. She had been the key to unlocking the Coven's foul secrets and had shown him the secret door that allowed him to attack them in their underground lair. In so doing she had opened him up to the mystical or spiritual power—whatever it had been, he still had no idea what to call it—that had allowed him to kill the leaders of the Coven. As a result, John had moved Rebecca's portrait and it now hung where it belonged, in the place of highest respect and visibility in his home, right above the mantelshelf.

Having spent his professional life

as a journalist, Andrews had been armored with a heavy sense of skepticism and doubt that would have made it nearly impossible for anyone to convince him of the things he had now experienced personally. These days he not only believed that the spirits of the dead could communicate with the living, he actually missed having that communication and wished Rebecca Nurse would continue to guide him as she had in the days when they struggled together against the Salem Coven. However, as if their victory over the Coven had somehow released her spirit to go wherever spirits went when they were at peace, Rebecca Nurse remained silent as she had in the days following Andrews's final battle with the Salem Coven.

Andrews stood in front of the painting for another few seconds. "Not talking to me again today? You even there anymore, or have you gone on permanent vacation? Not that you don't deserve a permanent vacation, of course, after everything that happened to you. I hope you're someplace with palm trees and a nice beach and people to bring you those little drinks with umbrellas in them. And no offense, but I hope you can finally get out of those heavy black clothes, maybe get some shorts and sandals." Finally, he shrugged, knowing anyone who overheard him would think he was absolutely nuts, and he went to the front door to bring in the morning papers. He grabbed *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*, tossed them onto the counter, went to the coffeemaker and hit the on button then went back, pulled the papers from their plastic tubes and started scanning the morning headlines.

He always read *The New York Times* first and skimmed over the paper's descriptions of disasters and conflicts around the world: another battle in Afghanistan, a car bombing in Iraq targeting Shiites, flooding in Thailand, a riot over growing unemployment in Spain. Strangely, when Andrews read world events, he actually found they relaxed him. At least these were straightforward things that happened month in and month out, year after year. A man could deal with wars and

famines and floods, he joked to himself, but not with Satan-worshipping Covens doing blood sacrifices in his own backyard.

As the aroma of brewing coffee filled the kitchen Andrews started to feel better, and his memory of the nightmare that had awakened him a short time earlier faded from his memory. That was when he turned the page and saw the article about a drought in Great Britain. Something about it nagged at him, and he saw the girl from his dream again, her foot-steps kicking up small puffs of dust. The dream's setting with the rural lane, the stone wall along the road, and the grassy hillside with herds of sheep had been so quintessentially British, all except for the dryness.

The other thing that troubled him was that he had been so preoccupied recently with matters closer to home he didn't think he'd even been aware the U.K. was suffering a drought.

So why would he have dreamed it? Was it just some massive coincidence? Did the dream mean something, or was it simply a bad dream? He couldn't shake the feeling it actually meant something, and the whole thing gave him chills.

He stepped over to where he had his cell phone on the charger to look up the number for Captain Andrew Card. Card was a Massachusetts State Police detective John had taken down into

the warren of underground passages in order to show Card where he had fought and killed the leaders of the Coven. However, when they had reached the room where the fight took place, John had been shocked to find that the dead bodies and all the other evidence had been removed. As stupefied as John had been, Card had seemed unsurprised, and that was when he had let slip the fact that he knew far more about the Covens and Devil worship than he had previously admitted.

John had tried to call Card several other times since they'd discovered the bodies were missing, but Card had never returned his calls. John assumed the detective was extremely busy, and that he'd also probably assumed John wanted to talk things out, rehash what had happened and ask a lot of questions Card might be unwilling to answer.

Still, those questions had been eating at him. How much more did Card know? Why wasn't he willing to be more forthcoming? John needed answers, not only because the journalist inside him craved information, but also because what he had said to Amy earlier in bed was true. It wasn't over. He felt it in his guts like an essential truth, but he couldn't say why.

He needed someone who knew more than he did to help him understand, but there was no doubt in his mind the danger still existed. It wasn't as close as it had been, but it was out

there in the darkness. His nightmare had been a reminder of that truth, but was it more? Was it an omen of something in the future or a warning he should act on now? He needed to know these things. As foolish as he might sound recounting all this to anyone else, he was willing to take the risk, and Card was the only person John could think of to call.

Card's cell phone rang until a recording asked John to leave a message.

"Andrew," John said, leaving another message. "I had a dream last night and . . . look, I know this sounds totally hysterical, but I'm pretty sure I was seeing a girl who was about to be taken by the Coven. But it wasn't this Coven; it was a different one, someplace else. Maybe in England, but I can't be certain. It looked like England, but it could have been a lot of places. I don't know who else to tell this to. Please call me."

