

Chapter 1

The Evil Among Us

Pungo Virginia 1698

"It was her, she was the one who ruined my crops. I know it was her. The whole field of cotton rotted with blight and was eaten by weevils. She did the same thing to my brother James's cotton. I saw her, she had changed herself into a sleek, black cat with blazing, gold eyes. When I spotted her she saw me watching her, a black canker among the white cotton. She slunk away into the woods. Thought she'd got away with it, she did, but just before she disappeared in the trees I saw her change back into her womanly form. Oh yes, it was Grace Sherwood for sure. Taller than most women, that dark, curly hair hanging loose down her back, naked as the day her mother birthed her. Two days later every pig on my farm got sick with the scours and died. She's the one, Magistrate. She's a witch and everybody in Princess Anne County knows it. All that knowledge of witching herbs and parading around in britches like no self respecting woman would think of doing. I want payment for my crop and livestock and if you want to end evil among us you'll hang that cursed creature before her bewitchings do any more harm."

John Gisburne's face was bright red with anger and his bony finger pointed toward the middle aged woman who stood quietly before the magistrate with her head held high and her elegant but calloused hands at rest by her side. The high cheekbones, curly black hair and dusky complexion had always given rise to rumors that her white mother had been unfaithful to her husband and Grace was the bastard child of a savage Indian or negro slave. It was a heritage that did nothing to endear her to her White neighbors nor to ensure her

fair treatment at their hands. There was a defiant expression on her face. Her's was a countenance of aging beauty accentuated by determination and dignity. Her hazel eyes held a fire within them. They were piercing, as if she could see into the souls of those she looked at. "Devil eyes." they were called by some in the county. It didn't help that Grace had "The gift." She could see things that were hidden and predict certain things before they happened. The people depended on her healing art but they were afraid of her.

The elderly, stern magistrate looked out over the crowd.

"Do any of you have more to witness against Goodwife Sherwood concerning these many charges of witchcraft?"

Elizabeth Barnes, a plump, old woman with wisps of gray hair visible around her white cap stood and pointed at the accused.

"Aye, I've seen her too. Them gold eyes glaring at me. There was that big, black cat sitting in my vegetable garden, brazen as could be. I took my broom and started toward it and it ran to the edge of the woods. It was then I saw it turn into a naked woman. It was Grace Sherwood, alright. Standing there laughing at me before she ran into the woods. Next day she came into my bedchamber and whipped me with a horsewhip. I saw her leave though a keyhole disguised again as a black cat. That very day every plant in my garden was dead. No doubt in my mind she's in league with the devil, doing his bidding and causing suffering to come upon the good folk of Pungo."

There were gasps and whispers and dozens of eyes staring at Grace Sherwood.

A little boy of about seven years was urged by his mother to stand up. Fear was evident on his face as he began to tell his own story regarding the accused.

"I saw a big, black cat at Muddy Creek on the path to Pungo, close to the Sherwoods' farm. It looked mean at me and hissed. I ran away and it ran after me. It scratched my back bloody and I heard it

say with a woman's voice,

Stay away from my house, Boy, or I'll do worse to you next time. I was awful scared and ran home as fast as I could."

No more testimony was forthcoming so the magistrate turned toward Grace Sherwood.

"What say you Goodwife Grace Sherwood, to these serious charges made against you?"

The large crowd gathered in the parish church leaned forward to better hear what the accused had to say for herself. She opened her mouth and spoke in a unemotional tone.

"My neighbors are angry because of a border dispute. I refused to give them the half acre they falsely claimed where our properties join. I am no witch, just an ordinary woman. I am a healer, that's what I use my herbs for. I've not seen any of you refusing my help when you're sick.

I was born here and have lived among you all my life. Most of you knew my parents, John and Susan White, good Scottish stock and honest people. My father being a carpenter and owning the farm he bequeathed to my husband. You know well my husband James and my three sons who were born here and became men here. I have healed many of your ailments and your livestock's as well with my herbs and delivered most every child here who is twenty years and under. I even helped bring into this world the boy who lies about me today.

There is no law in this colony restricting what a woman can wear. I make no apology for wearing my husband's britches. All of you know of my husband's illness. Someone has to do the farm chores. A skirt only hampers my work. I've seen how some of you men watch me when I walk by. Do you appreciate what you see? You are filled with lust and devoid of love. None of you, not one, has ever offered to help with the heavy work on my farm, yet you want to condemn me for

wearing britches.

You are a sorry lot, all of you. You women are as deplorable as your husbands. I see the anger in your eyes when you notice them noticing me, yet you accept my help birthing your children and caring for your sick, help I never withhold or ask payment for.

As for transforming into a cat, have you all taken leave of your senses? Maybe I should transform myself into a seagull and fly away out to sea, far from this place and you people who accuse me of such evil, ridiculous things. Do what you will. I have nothing more to say about any of this."

The magistrate consulted in whispers with the other judges seated next to him. His eyes glared with anger and his lips turned up in contempt as he delivered their judgment.

"Grace White Sherwood, you were accused last year in this court of bewitching Mr. Capp's bull and causing its death. As in that case you will not have to pay for the ruined crops and garden or make compensation to the boy's parents. The evidence is inconclusive but if we see you brought before this court again there will be stern measures taken to end your destruction and mischief."

Grace silently walked toward the door never looking at any of her neighbors who stood on either side of her path. She had paid a price all her life for being different, the price was steadily increasing. Grace squared her shoulders and started down the dirt path toward her farm at Muddy Creek. It was a long walk in the brisk autumn air. Grace mused about many things and contemplated the same questions she had been asking most of her life.

I've not claimed one inch of land that was not rightfully mine. I've never done harm to any of them. I've sat beside their sick beds, comforted them on their death beds, saved both mothers and babies from death. Why do they treat me with such contempt? I'll sue them, She thought, I'll sue them all for defamation of character. Little hope

of winning but sue them I will.

Grace walked at a brisk pace, day was wasting and she knew she would need to give James his food and do the chores when she finally arrived home. She reveled in the crispness of the air and the bright color of the leaves. As she walked she recited scripture verses and sang songs. Some were hymns and some were the risque ballads she remembered her father singing as he worked the fields when he thought no one was listening. The thought of her father with his little, secret songs made her laugh out loud and broke the sadness of such a difficult day. Good memories were a blessing and Grace had many of them.

Life is a strange mixture of good and bad, bitter and sweet, light and darkness, she thought, just as people