(Excerpt from ***Infant Bride***)

Salem, New Hampshire, March 2011

In the spring of 2011, a Bavarian beer garden in the north end of Salem, New Hampshire, was razed to the ground by a Nashua contractor in preparation for the construction of an isopropyl filtering facility that would service a rubbing-alcohol factory also slated for development there. The beer garden had been closed for almost a decade, and the area around it already appropriated and primed, but that one bit of property stuck fast. After a kitchen fire in 2002, the insurance carrier, suspecting self-inflicted arson, launched a long, halting investigation. Starved so long of their claim, the owners eventually defaulted on their mortgage and abandoned the property, and the corporation that wanted it prevailed. A little red tape remained—zoning issues, community meetings—but the beer garden was coming down and the plant going up in its place.

Work began on the first of March. All of the demolition was accomplished in one day. The next stage would take longer: churning up the earth to prepare the foundation for the ground work. On the first day of phase two, a backhoe operator noticed in the dirt scooped up by his shovel what appeared to be a long branch tangled in twigs and twine. When he dumped it out, somehow the twine snagged underneath the shovel, yanking the branch forward, and a large rock wrapped in black cloth snapped up and lodged atop it. It looked like—they stopped everything. A skull in a hood with two eye holes cut in it had snapped up like abruptly awakening from a violent rest. And there was a spine attached to the skull. And there was all else. The workers threw a tarp over the hole; the foreman called the police; the police summoned the coroner; the coroner sent for the state

archaeologist; the president of the historical society dispatched its senior curator of artifacts. It was not only quickly determined that the skeleton was not even remotely recent. It was also found not to be alone.

Instead of resting directly on earth, the skeleton had been placed on a loose layer of dirt, about two heaping shovelsful. Some scraping revealed more bones: another skeleton underneath. As the state archaeologist dug a trench around the remains, a police officer leaned into the grave and rapped the ledge of earth on its right with his service revolver. A hole crumbled open. The archaeologist crouched and peered through it, into a maw, much deeper than the other and full of bones—stacks of bones: too many. He called a colleague in Methuen, Massachusetts, with experience in land mine removal in Cambodia, who arrived in a half hour in his lavender track suit. The coroner's assistant, Aviva, procured a larger tarp and some self-sealing evidence bags while the historical society curator scrounged up two buckets and another wheelbarrow. The archaeologist's colleague brought his two favorite mattocks—large hand tools like angry pie cutters. There were shovels and spades on the scene already. There are no ambulances for very old bones. A temporizing dialogue precedes the next stage of excavation.

Do you want to do anything before you do anything?

I want to go lawn bowling before I do anything.

Are we good enough? Really good? I mean, we can proceed here, yes?

A tent goes up, I thought. Wait. Doesn't it go up?

Aviva!

A small one. Not like—

I mean, this isn't an arrowhead. It's not like this is an arrowhead.

Aviva! Gloves. Gloves! I knew something.

We aren't forgetting anyone else? To tell us what to do next or not to, no?

In jail I'll look it up in the law library and get back to you.

Thank you. Which explains a lot.

Ultimately they recovered their competencies and pressed on. It was soon apparent to both the coroner and the archaeologist that the bones of the first two skeletons belonged to very young females. It could also be observed that they had never given birth. They were modest in frame but not small children, most probably in their early adolescence. The teeth of the one were all right, while the other had suffered an abscess that must have distracted her much. Their eye sockets were visible through the holes in their hoods. Around each of their necks was a noose. Their hands were bound, but loosely. Actually, one hand was bound and the other dawdled inside a very lazy loop. Of these last three details, two were inconvenient. If these girls had died legally, their executioners would have bound them, but competently. If they had been done away with otherwise, the same would hold true. And what could be the rationale for cutting eye holes if the hood's purpose was to blind the one wearing it? Was maybe the purpose of a hood here something other than the dominant convention? Really, who knew.

Eventually they got the second grave open and saw that, yes, this was beyond them. Other parties were called in to assist—a preservation specialist from Cambridge (nice lady); an architectural historian who stood around the perimeter of the dig like he had no pockets to put his hands in. Yet he took his responsibility seriously. You see, a revelation like this one, it beckons those it does not invite, and all who show up are compromised in precisely the same way. Official or informal, they were welcome, they were jealous, they were terrified, they had much work to do here, and who could say with any confidence what their job was, any of them, but to witness and to witness carefully,

with modesty and curiosity and with gentle and undeterred hands. All together they uncovered the second grave. It would be found to contain seventeen other skeletons in total, layered in their long hole. The farthest down was by herself. On top of her lay two other skeletons. All of them wore hoods with eye holes and were similarly, diffidently, bound. This second set of remains was covered with a layer of white clay. From there the layers ascended, of bones and clay, one layer three girls astride. Shreds of whatever clothing they had worn—it had all but disintegrated—clung to their bones, yet their black hoods, though pocked by rot, had remained whole enough. The skeletons were all female, all approximately the same size. After the last set of bones, there were no more of them.

The most perspicuous thing about the second grave was that the bodies in it had been buried perpendicular to the bodies in the first. When this observation was made, the archaeologist and the curator had the same idea almost at once; neither would claim later to have ventured it, because they thought the thought together out loud. If they could consult a map of that area from the likely period of the burials—eighteenth century, they bet, at least; some time very, very far away—they felt quite sure it would show that this location was somewhat removed from the heart of any village or town that had been there then, but well within walking distance of one. In fact, they guessed that it would be right in the middle of a well-traveled thoroughfare, perhaps at an actual crossroads. Whoever directed the burials had intended to disorient the ghosts of these girls, to disincline them to haunt the place where they had lived and died. Only some deaths are bad deaths and thereby subject to such severe repudiation, and these, clearly, were among them. If the curator and the archaeologist were correct about where the graves had been located, all that time ago, then they had their answer.

They were correct. A cursory search by the head archivist at the historical society provided the confirmation. In the late seventeenth century, a crossroads between two towns had stood just here, in what was not yet Salem, New Hampshire, but an unincorporated area on the northeastern flank of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The clay had most likely been employed to mitigate the odor so that the pit could be kept open. The first of the suicides to be put in it had been preceded by the suicides in the other grave and then rapidly succeeded by others. It must have been fairly disruptive, this pit, yet it had quite clearly been committed to, doggedly; in order to accommodate body after body it would have had to have been dug and redug, over and over again, to get deep enough, necessitating exhumation after exhumation after exhumation. The gravediggers would have needed to remove the clay and lift out all of the bodies already in there to create another layer, every time. Why had they not simply given each girl her own grave and scattered the lot of them around the crossroads? Alternatively, why did they even dig a second grave at all? It made no immediate sense. But sense seemed to have had little to do with any of this. Actually, it was the most honestly remarkable thing about the girls in the first grave: that they had tried to bind their hands themselves, and that whoever buried them had not yet realized the significance of this gesture, of their deaths in general. Who knows how many more hangings it took before the import of the horror that surely attended them was understood. The communication was simple and inescapable. An imitation has an origin. Someone had gone before them. Not even the first girl was the first girl who hung. The curse was ruthless and perseverant. Who had the little witch been? Where are her bones?

The eye holes still meant nothing to any of us.