

*New England, 1690*

THE COARSE WOOLLEN BLANKET SNAGGED ON A THORN AND A SMALL TEAR stretched open.

‘*Wait,*’ whispered Patience as she wriggled her delicate hand out of her sister’s tight grip.

She shuffled back through the crisp undergrowth and squatted by the bush, drawing back a strand of hair behind her ear. In the near-black of the forest, she began to carefully untangle the fabric from its prickly prison.

‘You really are the owner of your name,’ said Ingaret. ‘Come along now!’

Ingaret hurried over to the blanket and ripped it from the bush, and then grabbed Patience’s hand so quickly their palms clapped together.

‘You cannot hide that tear from Mother—’

‘*Shh,*’ Ingaret hushed. ‘I will fix it before she wakes.’ She caught Patience’s moss-green eyes in the dark. ‘It will be our secret.’

Upon light, dainty feet they quickly skimmed over broken twigs and brittle leaves leaving the ants and crickets undisturbed; the hems of their home-spun nightgowns brushed across their ankles and any bristly growths from the dry earth. Ingaret hardly suppressed her giggles as they ventured deeper into the forest and farther away from home.

‘My sides are splitting!’ said Patience.

‘Then let us rest here.’

The sisters hoisted their gowns up to their waists, to avoid getting mud stains their mother would question, and sat upon their bare bottoms with the gathered cloth on their thighs. Ingaret shuffled closer to Patience making sure their knees were touching, and then covered them both entirely with the blanket.

Finally, the hooting and buzzing of the restless forest sounded a world away, and their slowly calming breaths quickly warmed them in their brown makeshift tent.

‘I can hear you smile, Ingaret.’

Ingaret giggled again.

‘What is it now?’ Patience asked, playfully.

Ingaret thought for a moment before replying, 'You are becoming a woman so quickly.'

Patience laughed softly. 'And you still play like a girl.'

Ingaret smiled and her tacky lips and tongue gave her away once again. She could feel her hair gently waft from Patience's breaths, and whenever Patience heard a sound close by, she'd turn her head towards it causing the blanket to softly pull at Ingaret's scalp.

'Do you ever feel afraid out here, Patience?'

Patience considered the question and all of its implications for a long moment before replying, 'Not since the first time. I can go anywhere with you, I mind not our darkling adventures.' She paused for a moment. 'And the Lord to mee a shepherd is, want therefore shall not I—'

Ingaret joined, 'Hee in the folds of tender-grass, doth cause mee downe to lie.'

Ingaret grabbed her sister's thighs and nudged closer, her knees now resting upon Patience's.

'But I do feel a certain pain,' Patience said. 'A guilt that I often cannot seem to bear. Perhaps it is because I know we should not be doing this, we should not be out here after telling goodnight, and I know this because you bid me not to speak of it to Mother or Father.'

'Must you speak of it?' Ingaret asked.

'Must sisters have secrets?'

'Of course!'

The air inside their woollen shelter was now almost too thick to endure, but occasionally a light draught would lose its way outside and stumble in through the tear, cooling their faces before it was suffocated by their exhalation.

'I know not—' started Patience.

'Mother has secrets!' Ingaret interjected. 'Aye! Even Father has secrets. What do you make of that? Father speaks the name of Goody Mabel in his sleep. I heard it more than once. Of she he clearly dreams.'

Patience digested the gossip thoughtfully.

'But if *you* know of it how can it be a secret—'

'Because I am not *supposed* to know. Nobody is. That is why it is so

special. What we have is special!

‘But should we not tell Mother Father thinks of another? Even in their own bed! You know, and now *I* know, it is no longer *not* to be spoken of. Come morning we must—’

Ingaret quickly leaned forward, overestimating the distance between them, and bumped a kiss partially on Patience’s mouth. She subtly sucked Patience’s top lip dissolving her next few words. When she eventually pulled away the temperature within the tent had increased twofold.

‘Wipe it out of mind,’ whispered Ingaret.

‘I fear these woods bring mischief out from within you,’ Patience nervously laughed.

Ingaret slowly leaned forward again and rested her now clammy forehead against Patience’s. The soft tips of their noses sought out one another in the dark as they smelled that unfamiliar sweet patch of skin above each other’s lips.

A low, guttural squeal, as if from a wounded beast, exploded out of the dark; it bubbled and scratched as if its throat was the wound itself. The sisters clasped onto one another as hard, heavy hooves clomped about them.

‘Ingaret! I am frightened!’ said Patience, as her nails clamped into Ingaret’s back.

‘The Lord to mee a shepherd is, want therefore shall not I,’ Ingaret started into Patience’s ear with a fragile quiver in her voice. ‘Hee in the folds of tender-grass, doth cause mee downe to lie: To waters calme me gently leads, restore my soule doth hee.’ Patience wouldn’t speak for fear of antagonising the unknown creature but begged that Ingaret continue. ‘Hee doth in paths of righteousness: for his names sake leade mee. Yea though in valley of deaths shade I walk, none ill I’e feare: because thou art with me, thy rod and staff my comfort are . . .’

The grunts and tongue-smacking soon retired off into the distance and the ground ceased to thump any longer. The girls waited for the stale scent of parasite-infested, river-damp mane to diffuse before they both let out a sigh disguised as a laugh.

‘I cannot breathe, it is so warm in here,’ Patience whispered. ‘And my

hands—if there was a light you will see how they flutter.’

Ingaret held Patience’s hands once again to steady them and then brought them up to her face. She kissed the delicate knuckles of her sister with absolute permission, and then her fingers lingered along Patience’s forearms up to her shoulders where she began to tug at the neckline of Patience’s nightgown. Patience’s shoulders tensed up at the sensation and Ingaret paused.

‘Forgive me,’ Patience gasped.

‘Not at all . . .’ said Ingaret, ‘. . . I shall go slow.’

Ingaret leaned in again and softly kissed and sucked at the hollow of her sister’s neck. Patience cooed involuntarily which inspired Ingaret to explore further. She untied the drawstring of Patience’s neckline and then slipped her sleeves down past her elbows revealing her modest breasts for Ingaret to palm. Patience had been swept up and wanted to feel the swell of flutterings inside her swarm withal, so she guided Ingaret down to the dewy plane between her breasts and took in a deep breath.

Once again, a soft breeze entered their nest and Patience savoured it, until it was followed by a soft beam of concentrated candlelight from a distance. Caught between pleasure and fear, Patience could not move.

‘Your heart beats like a storm,’ said Ingaret, between kisses.

‘. . . Somebody is out there.’

Ingaret bolted upright blocking the light from the peephole, and then out in the darkness was a quick *thipp* jolting her into a gasp, followed by another. As Patience called for her sister, Ingaret fell to one side, taking the blanket with her and revealing Patience naked to the forest. Two trembling arrows spiked out of the woollen mound Ingaret had become and mahogany-red pools slowly engulfed the blanket. Heavy footsteps fast approached and Patience quickly dressed again before the stranger met her.

‘What are you doing out here?’ the young man demanded, removing the new arrow already primed in his bow. He turned his lantern up to see the weeping nubile with damp blonde hair cascading across her face like dead eelgrass. He gasped, ‘Mr Mason’s child—’ He couldn’t help but notice

the whites of her thighs but turned away allowing her to soon cover them.

Another harassing squeal screeched out in the distance. 'It's not safe out here,' he said. 'You shouldn't be in the forest alone after dark—'

And then he saw her: a small, muddied foot protruding out from beneath the blanket. As if a boulder the weight of a bear had landed in his gut, his knees nearly betrayed him.

'Ingaret—' he said to himself. He returned his arrow to his quiver and secured his bow over his shoulder as he dropped to one knee to uncover his unwitting kill. 'I . . . I thought . . .' he stuttered, 'What were you *doing* out here!?'

Patience had no words, and without hesitation, the man picked up Ingaret and held her like a father does a babe, careful not to nudge the protruding arrows in her back. Patience rose to her feet, grabbing Ingaret's hand, and followed the young man's familiar strides out of the forest.

The village was almost as dark as the woodlands. Not a single window glowed, and the hunter had concealed the glare of his lantern so as to not cast any shadows within people's abodes.

They reached the Mason household, and the wood and windows were just as black as all the others as if a fire had ravaged it in the daylight hours. The young man quickly and firmly knocked on the door and did not have to wait long for it to crack open. The squinting face of a bony man snatched from his dreams peered out above a small candle.

'Mr Mason . . .' said the hunter, with a tremble in his voice.

'Do you know the hour, Anthony?' he grumbled. 'What could you possibly—' Patience stepped out from behind the hunter. Her tears glistened in the flickering light. 'Daughter!'

Mr Mason flung the door wide open, its full swing crashing into nearby furniture, and pulled Patience in, but she still clung on to Ingaret's hand. When he saw the clasped hands leading up to the bloodied arrows his wind escaped him.

'Edward?' called a plump woman from the staircase. 'What's all this noise?'

*Thanks for reading.*

*The entire short story is available upon request or online at leading eBook stores...*

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