

THE
FIRST
WITCH
OF
BOSTON

A Novel

ANDREA CATALANO

PRAISE FOR *THE FIRST WITCH OF BOSTON*

“Fans of *The Frozen River* will love *The First Witch of Boston*! Fiery, outspoken Margaret Jones and her husband, Thomas, find themselves outliers in straitlaced Puritan Boston, but trouble back in England leaves them no choice but to make a home in Massachusetts. When Thomas draws the spite of a local widow and Margaret’s skill with healing herbs rouses suspicion of black magic, both will find themselves battling witch-hunters in a court case destined to make history. Andrea Catalano draws a tender, intimate portrait of a marriage and a bold defense of an independent woman ahead of her time.”

—Kate Quinn, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Rose Code*

“A sumptuous and heartrending tale of the dark power of fear, loss, and love against all odds, *The First Witch of Boston* is a moving and accomplished debut.”

—Heather Webb, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Queens of London*

“I knew I was going to love this novel from the first page, where Andrea Catalano immerses you in the world of seventeenth-century Boston. Her research is impeccable but never gets in the way of a gripping, emotional story. Thomas Jones’s love for his outspoken, opinionated wife, Maggie, and hers for him, are beautifully described, and their tragedy is almost Shakespearean. This is a story that will stay with me for a long time.”

—Gill Paul, internationally bestselling author of *Scandalous Women*

“Andrea Catalano’s *The First Witch of Boston* conjures the treacherous history of witches, women, and injustice in America. Her research is ambitious and beyond impeccable. But it is the exquisite portrayal of a marriage that is the star at the beating heart of this novel, and the best I’ve read in years.”

—Kimberly Brock, bestselling author of *The Fabled Earth* and *The Lost Book of Eleanor Dare*

“Catalano’s timely and heart-wrenching treatise about the injustices against women in early America will leave traces etched in the reader’s soul.

Sensory, sensual, and evocative, *The First Witch of Boston* is the not-to-be-missed historical fiction debut of the season.”

—Aimie K. Runyan, bestselling author of *The School for German Brides*
and *Mademoiselle Eiffel*

“What a wonderful, moving novel. Catalano’s debut is great historical fiction that brings the past alive in an exquisitely human, truly emotional way. I absolutely loved it.”

—Megan Chance, bestselling author of *Glamorous Notions*

“A brilliant debut, full of passion, peril, and heartbreak. Between her gorgeous prose and her endearing characters, Andrea Catalano has established herself as one of the most exciting new authors in historical fiction.”

—Olivia Hawker, bestselling author of *One for the Blackbird*, *One for the Crow*

“A rare and powerful debut—one that will hold you in thrall from beginning to end. Catalano gives voice to all the passion, anguish, and injustice surrounding the life and death of a woman who deserved a better fate than the one history dealt her. Lyrically written and impeccably researched, *The First Witch of Boston* settles into the deepest places in your soul, and remains there long after finishing. An artful, important masterpiece of historical fiction.”

—Paulette Kennedy, bestselling author of *The Witch of Tin Mountain*

THE
FIRST
WITCH
OF
BOSTON

**THE
FIRST
WITCH
OF
BOSTON**

A Novel

ANDREA CATALANO

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Text copyright © 2025 by Andrea Catalano
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Lake Union Publishing, Seattle
www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Lake Union Publishing are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

EU product safety contact:
Amazon Media EU S. à r.l.
38, avenue John F. Kennedy, L-1855 Luxembourg
amazonpublishing-gpsr@amazon.com

ISBN-13: 9781662526008 (paperback)
ISBN-13: 9781662525995 (digital)

Cover design by Lisa Amoroso
Cover image: © Nicole Matthews / ArcAngel



*For Robert,
forever my love and best friend.
As Anne Bradstreet wrote,
“I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold.”*

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: Charlestown, Massachusetts Bay Colony

PART I: THOMAS

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FIVE

CHAPTER SIX

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHAPTER NINE

CHAPTER TEN

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHAPTER TWENTY

PART II: MAGGIE

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[AUTHOR'S NOTE](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

PROLOGUE

Charlestown, Massachusetts Bay Colony

June 28, 1648

As he waited upon the dock, Thomas Jones wanted nothing more than to be rid of Massachusetts.

He wiped the mist from his brow with the back of his hand, surveying his worldly possessions: two trunks and one basket containing a wary-eyed tortoiseshell cat. The cat regarded him with disdain.

“Come, Molly, take that look from your face.” He reached down and ruffled the fur of her sizable mane.

“We could use a good mouser aboard.”

Thomas stood straight and found himself looking down into the ruddy and perspiring face of the captain of the ship *Welcome*, which awaited him at the end of the dock.

The captain’s eyes widened slightly as he took in the height and breadth of Thomas.

Thomas held the brim of his hat and nodded once. “She’s a good mouser, she is.”

The captain smiled down at the cat. “No doubt she is that, judging by the look of her.” The captain held out his hand. “Captain Davies.”

“Thomas Jones, sir.” He shook the captain’s hand but then paused, his blood going cold. Would the captain have heard of him? The fear that followed his introduction of himself was not immediate. There was a slight delay, like when one dashes down a cup of rum and the force and fire of it takes the briefest moment to take hold. It was the same as when someone mentioned his wife, and he thought of her—pictured her in his mind’s eye—and then, just when the woman who was his wife became real, tangible, someone who awaited him at home, an icy wind encircled the whole of him and reminded him that she was gone. The surprise was followed precipitously by the feeling of falling from a great height, and the only

thing that grounded him once more was the solid and unmoving sadness beneath his feet, reverberating through each weary step.

“And where is it you are headed?” the captain inquired. “New Amsterdam or Virginia?”

“Neither.” Thomas cleared his throat, squinting against the sun as he gazed up at the rigging of *Welcome*. “I make my way to Barbados, sir.”

“Oh aye? Have you been before?”

Thomas shook his head.

“This time of year, it’s as hot as the cauldrons of hell, it is.” Captain Davies chuckled at his own remark. “What takes you there? Some business to attend?”

Thomas smoothed the corners of his mustache with his thumb and finger, mulling how best to answer, for Captain Davies was not of Boston, and the answer was a most complicated one. “You could say that, sir. More of a new beginning.”

“So I’ve heard many a man say that, and it always means they are trying to get away from a woman.” The captain pulled upon his salt-stained coat lapels and nodded knowingly.

Thomas was at a loss for words, and so he looked down to the cat. Perhaps she might know the proper, witty response. She looked up at him with her peridot-green eyes as though saying, “How dare you think *I* might get you out of this mess?”

“Very well, I’ll not wrestle any secrets from out of you. Have Smitty here see to your trunks and come aboard. I’ll begin passage negotiations at noon.”

Thomas mounted the gangplank, his back turned to land and the place that had been his home for the past two years. There was no home without *his* home, his heart, his haven. No sanctuary existed for him any longer now, and this knowledge was like a deadweight upon his shoulders. He was weary from it.

But then he did look over his shoulder and back to land one last time, only to curse it.

“The husband of Margaret Jones, over there.”

He heard the whispers while he stood upon the deck, gazing eastward toward the Atlantic’s great gray expanse. He had grown accustomed to the hushed tones that had followed him for weeks—they were not unlike rats’

scratching upon a wall or door, unnerving in spite of their persistence. "Thomas Jones, there he be."

Thomas turned toward the source. A woman in a crisp-white cap, her boy's hand clasped in hers, her other hand wrapped tightly round the arm of a man, presumably her husband. She gasped when Thomas's eyes met hers, then bid her family to turn away.

Pious fools. Boston was infested with them.

Just then, the ship began to lurch starboard side. The wood of the hull groaned like a ferocious, angry beast, only to be drowned out by the shouts and screams of frightened passengers. Thomas took quick hold of nearby rigging to steady himself. The ship listed farther, and he watched helplessly as those who were not so quick to act fell over, tumbling, sliding, like apples spilling from a toppled bushel. Clumsily and frantically, mothers and fathers haphazardly grabbed hold of small children as they slid starboard. Scared young voices rang out, as did the horrified cries of frightened babies. Thomas flung out his arm to catch an elderly man who was beseeching God whilst he lost his cane and tumbled after it. Awkwardly, Thomas dug his fingers into the man's frail, spindly arm, his nails ripping through the worn wool of his coat sleeve. "Steady, steady!" Thomas shouted through gritted teeth, trying with all of his might to pull the old man toward the rigging so that he might gain a hold himself, but the man thrashed in his fear. Before Thomas lost his grip upon him, the man's cloudy, aged eyes stared into his.

"Jones!" the man exclaimed, recognizing him. And Thomas could not be sure whether it was the fear of falling into the ocean or the fear of his hand upon him that produced a shriek of dread before he rolled away and toward the rest of the starboard passengers.

Sure-footed mariners swore oaths, shouting for the ship hands to climb to the port side to counterbalance the weight of the precarious vessel. Thomas pulled himself to gain better purchase of the rigging, glancing round in confusion. What could cause such dramatic tipping when they were not yet out to sea, when no storm's winds disturbed the day?

"The witch's husband!"

The hairs upon the back of Thomas's neck rose. He turned to his right to see who had uttered the slur and was met with angry stares from men and women, old and young.

“The husband of Margaret Jones! The Devil’s hand! The witch hanged two weeks past!!” a voice wailed. A chorus of pathetic prayers and pleas to God followed.

“Get him off the ship! He, too, must serve Satan!”

“Off! Off! He must be thrown overboard to save us from evil!”

What had God wrought upon him now? Had he not endured enough? There were moments when Thomas awoke in a cold sweat from some nightmare, only to stare into the darkness of a reality that was worse than the nightmare from which he had awoken. He now felt as though he might never escape the macabre dream that his life had become.

Mariners scurried here and there, following barked orders from the quartermaster. But some paused in their labors, noticing how the passengers pointed and stared at Thomas.

“What’s the trouble?” a young seaman with closely cropped curls asked a young lass.

She pointed at Thomas from her safe place at the doorway of the captain’s quarters. “It’s him! The husband of Satan’s witch, she who was hanged!” she hissed.

Thomas alternately wanted to climb portside and jump ship and wrap his carpenter’s hands round the lass’s neck and wring, wring, wring until she turned blue and her eyes went red. But his breath caught in his chest, for he remembered gazing down upon his wife as he held her in his arms one last time, her skin blue, her neck blackened, her wide, surprised eyes a mottled, bloodshot explosion. “Sleep now, Lovely,” he had said as he drew her eyelids down. “Sleep now.”

The pain, the constant agony of it, made him squint and shake his head.

“Look how he denies it!” said the lass.

He stared back, his eyes intent upon hers. “Not ever.”

The outraged hisses, the constant ill judgment that followed him like a stench that made him choke to breathe, swirled round him. But he knew his heart well. “I am the witch’s husband.”

“Thomas Jones.” Captain Davies, accompanied by two constables who all climbed whatever they could grab hold of, approached his rigging.

“You’ve got to go,” the captain said, frowning. He shook his head. “The ship won’t right itself. We’ve a good cargo: eighty horses and 120 tons of ballast being evenly distributed. We can’t make sense of it. Some of the

passengers, they tell me that you be the husband of a witch, and that it's your dark arts at work." The captain labored to take hold of Thomas's rigging and came closer. "I don't believe such nonsense," he said in a low tone to Thomas, glancing warily side to side, "but what work is this?" His eyes darted worriedly round his listing vessel. "This is not natural. You must go, Jones. I cannot lose my ship, my livelihood. You've got to go."

Thomas resigned himself. "I understand completely, Captain Davies."

"You're to be removed from this ship," declared one of the constables, clasp ing in his grip what Thomas assumed to be a writ from the Boston Court. Unfortunately, he had become familiar with this formality of late.

"I'll not put up any fight. But I shall gather my cat from below deck, and I would like my trunks brought to the dock."

"Aye, they shall, then be on your way, Jones," the captain said before shuffling away and ordering deckhands to retrieve the trunks.

A crowd of passengers was clustered on the port side of the ship in an effort to bring the vessel right. When they caught sight of him, some muttered in prayer. Others gaped as though they looked upon the Devil in the flesh. How very absurd it all was, he thought, as though his presence were the cause of the listing. Madness! The same madness that had taken his wife from him. He did not know whether to weep or to scream. Instead, laughter bubbled up inside him like wretched bile, low, bitter, and angry. "All I want is to be rid of this place," he declared, and never had he heard his voice come so loudly.

The constables shoved him forward toward the gangplank. He made his way down, and when he reached the dock, he placed Molly's basket near his feet and turned. "See you there?" he asked, gesturing with his hand toward the ship. "She has not righted herself, has she now?"

A moment later, four deckhands approached, Thomas's trunks in hand. Quickly they returned his passage fare, placed his worldly possessions before him, and turned to make their way back aboard. But they paused before the gangplank, staring up at *Welcome*.

A chorus of exclamations rang out as the ship suddenly began to tip port-wise. Beseeching unto God turned into a chorus of joyous shouts of relief. Passengers recovered their footing, rising, their mouths agape in wonder. With a great, echoing groan and a surge of waves that splashed upon the docks, the vessel had miraculously righted itself.

The seamen slowly turned and stared at the two trunks they had just hauled to the dock. One, wide eyed, looked at Thomas and stuttered, “What—what have you in your trunks?”



“Come here, my fine lady.” Alice Stratton reached inside the basket and scooped Molly out, cradling her and kissing the top of her head over and over. “I did not think I would ever see you again.” She sat down at her table, beside her husband. “So, Thomas, what mischief has befallen you now?”

Thomas, having sold his house the day before, had nowhere to go and take refuge except the home of his dearest friends, the Strattons. Surprised to see him, yet without question, they had welcomed him inside.

“Mischief. I like that choice of word.” He smiled at Alice, his wife’s dearest friend. But the smile did not reach his eyes. Tears welled up and spilled before he could stop them. He was never a man prone to crying—it was not like him to display his emotions. Things were best kept inside, where he might mull them over, try to understand the meaning behind the pain. But of late, he was like a cup running over.

Alice promptly put Molly down beside her on the bench and reached her hands across the rough-hewn table made smooth by thousands of hours of preparing meals. She took his hands in hers and squeezed tightly. “Come now, friend, tell us—what happened at the docks?”

“I . . . I cannot explain it.” He withdrew his hands from hers, studied the patterns of calluses upon his palms. Mountains and plains, mountains and plains. A testament of toil, a source of pleasure to his wife. His breath shuddered as he wove his fingers together. “The ship, it seems, was listing starboard and would not be righted.”

“How’s that?” asked Samuel. “When I came by you at the docks, the ship looked stable and sound.”

“Aye, that’s true.” Thomas nodded.

Samuel’s thick red brows had drawn together as though he were trying to solve a riddle.

“The ship did not right itself until I and my belongings had been ushered back to the dock.”

There was silence but for the sound of Molly lapping at a bowl of buttermilk upon the floor.

“Come now, you can’t be serious.” Samuel leaned back from the table, scratching his beard.

Alice’s eyes were upon him. “That he is, Husband. Why would he lie?” With a sigh, she rose from the table and made her way to the hearth, where she peered into the kettle and stirred the contents. She stood straight, hands upon the small of her back, stretching herself as she studied the fire. The firelight danced upon her dress and apron. She was a pretty thing but so small and thin. Yet Thomas knew well that her slight build belied the tenacious, stubborn strength within her.

“What was in your trunks, Thomas?” Her gaze did not waver from the hearth. It was as though she sought an answer from the flames. “There must be something, something which you still hold on to from which you must part yourself.”

He knew what it was. It lay at the bottom of the trunk, like sunken treasure on the ocean floor, or a secret letter hidden from seeking eyes and fingers: her wedding gown.

Alice turned toward him, and he could see in the quiver of her mouth that she waged war with tears. “You must bring yourself to do it.”



Once Samuel and Alice had retired to their bedchamber—the room on the other side of the hearth—Thomas sat in silence, finishing his ale. He studied the pewter tankard by the light of the lone candle on the side table. It was finely crafted, a gift given to the Strattons when they were wed back in England. They had only two, and Alice had always set them before Thomas and his wife when they came to dine. “Come now, pretend you are newlyweds, once again,” Alice would say as she placed her beloved tankards before them. His wife would laugh—the sound low and melodic, sweeter than any song he had ever heard.

And he recalled his response to Alice the first time she had performed this kindly gesture. “I need not pretend—she shall always be my bride.”

Maggie had moved closer to him upon the bench then, slipped her hand beneath the table and squeezed his thigh tightly as she pressed her lips

to his temple. His temple, she loved to kiss him there. “It smells so much like you,” she purred softly into his ear as she breathed him in.

He placed the tankard down upon the side table and nearly convulsed at the pleasure of the thought, the pain of the loss.

The last time she had kissed him upon his temple was a fortnight before, within her jail cell. And her words rang through his mind like some Catholic prayer.

“When I am gone, do not be weighed down by sadness. Be lifted by hope—the hope that we have always shared. Be rid of this life, be rid of every vestige of it—of me!”

He had chafed at her words, his despair taking the guise of anger. “Silence, Maggie! Shut your mouth for once! Stop talking nonsense!”

“You heed me!” she had bellowed through lips chapped and cracking. “Every trace of me must be destroyed! Promise me you shall be rid of it all—sell it, burn it, I don’t care.”

“You talk madness!”

“Nay! I dread the thought of you keeping some part of me and being dragged into some lonely abyss, for innocence . . . a life—your life, to be tainted by this stain upon mine! Swear to me you shall do as I ask. Swear it!”

The ferocity of her words stifled his protest. Reluctantly he nodded once. “I shall.”

He had made a vow, a promise to her, the hour before her execution. He swore he would do all that she had asked of him. He did not know how he could go on without her, despite her plea that he do so. But now, at least, with this small action, he could begin to make good on his promise.

And so, by the hearth’s light, Thomas unlocked the trunk with which he had deceived his wife’s last wish. Beneath the carpentry tools and beloved books, his fingers discovered before his eyes might the fine damask fabric. Tenuous in his movements, he removed the folded emerald-green silk. He unfurled it before him upon the hearthrug. Something scratched at his wrist, and he saw that it was a dried sprig of rosemary. Like a flash of lightning, in his mind came the image of his wife on their wedding day in Saint Mary’s Church of Uffington. Clad in the emerald-green damask, she had worn a wreath made of rosemary and ivy crowning her mass of unruly dark curls. She had looked like a painting of the Virgin Mary he had seen as a child.

Squinting against the tears, he brought the precious fabric to his nose, hoping to smell some vestige of his wife, but found only the scent of musty felt and leather. His reverie was interrupted by the soft thud of something upon the rug. Moving the fabric aside, he found a small red-leather-bound book. He had never seen the volume before; had it been tucked away in the folds of his wife's gown all this time? He ran his fingers over worn leather binding, then, with his thumb, carefully lifted the cover. He was met with the soothing sounds a book that longed to be opened made—crackles and snaps like a collapsing log in a hearth.

April 8th, 1646. We have come to Massachusetts to make a new life for ourselves. We have made a home in Charlestown, to the north of Boston, upon the mouth of the River Mystic. The house is good enough. My Love shall improve it with his great skill. Where he is, that is my home. I am blessed. I know this well.

Thomas's eyes traced the slanted, scratchy scrawl he knew to be his wife's handwriting. He had never known her to record her days. When he saw her scribbling with a quill, he had assumed she worked at account ledgers. He skipped ahead a few pages. Her entries seemed occasional.

June 1st, 1646. Today I prepared a salve for Goodwife Warren. She requested one for her son, Lemuel, age ten, who suffers from a persistent, wet cough.

Base: lard

Herbs: 3 parts Hyssop to 1 part Rosemary and 1 part Pennyroyal.

There was the daily business he had suspected. Also, he noted scraps of papers inserted here and there, what seemed to be bills of purchase and sale, notes of gratitude from those she had healed, had seen through birthing, suffering, dying. But upon turning a page, he noticed that she had also written upon the back side.

This eve, shall sup on cod, cooked in broth of onion, bay, and thyme, with potato. Shall serve apple slices with honey and cinnamon. Pleases my Love this way.

“Aye, so it does,” he muttered back to the words. And he remembered, the sharp, tart crispness, the flowery-sweet honey, and the cinnamon—so dear but worth every shilling—cinnamon like the Orient upon your tongue. He had eaten like a ravenous child given a sweet treat. She had laughed, low and pleasing, as she wiped a trickle of honey from his chin with the rough pad of her thumb, then put it in her mouth and sucked it clean with a smack of her lips. He sat her upon his knee, put his hand beneath her skirts. She exhaled. She was always ready when he was ready. She had said it was because they had been made for each other, intended from the time they ceased to be stars and took their first breaths in the world of the living.

Aye, they had been intended for one another, it was true. And there, in his hands, leather bound and written in a dancing scrawl, was proof of this truth, this love like purest truth. His treasure, his other half, his life full when it had been incomplete before her, her and everything that she brought: the wisdom, the pleasure, the comfort, the challenge, and now this, the utter loss like falling from a great height and never, never finding the ground.

He ran his fingers over her words absently, then in awe, realizing that this book—diary or journal of hers—was one last secret corner of her heart

that he could know intimately.

Sudden anxiety like a cold wind found its way inside him. What if the book contained something, some awful revelation, that would shatter what had been so very good? Did this benign, leather-bound missive actually hold some darkness, some evil, so much so that it had the power to tip a loaded vessel in the harbor? His heart raced. Was this the proof that his Maggie had, indeed, entertained Satan? Did it contain some sinister knowledge, cunning spells? Could this book be the undoing of all he held most dear?

In Thomas's heart, a war waged between icy fear and the warmth of the anticipation, the pleasure of reliving his life with her, his Maggie, his own.