



Of Faith and Fangs

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: She was made to hunt her own.
They call her a Nightwalker, the first of many.

A creature of the night, a vampire, made by religious zealots intent to eliminate all vampires and witches.

But what darkness lurks beneath the surface of her “holy” crusade? She hasn’t lost her faith. Alice still believes in the God she’s always followed.

But are vampires beyond salvation?

Will her obedience to the Order of the Morning Dawn truly save her?

Are they telling her the truth, or feeding her lies...

...all in an effort to turn her into the perfect weapon?

In 1891 Alice Bladewell lost her human life. It was when her new existence began. For more than a century, she was an agent of the Order of the Morning Dawn, a pseudo-religious organization dedicated to the elimination of all vampires and witches.

You’ve read about Alice before in *The Legacy/Fury of a Vampire Witch*, in *The Legend of Nyx*, and in *Alice in Vampireland*.

This is Alice’s story. How she became a vampire, made to kill other vampires – and how she became the nightmare that the Order feared the most.

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Chapter 1

1891. Exeter, Rhode Island

I knelt before God with bleeding knees. My soul ached as I prayed, desperate for Him to hear me. The words tumbled from my lips in a whispered torrent. My knuckles whitened as I clutched my hands together, pressing until pain shot through my fingers. Pain kept me present. Pain kept me faithful. And faith, as Daddy always said, was the only bridge between this world and salvation.

“Lord, hear my prayer,” I whispered, eyes fixed on the crude wooden cross hanging above the altar. Evening light filtered through the narrow windows, painting golden stripes across the austere stone walls of our little Exeter church. The emptiness around me felt right—just me and God in the dying light. “Strengthen my hands for your work. Make me a vessel of Your mercy.”

The church’s sparse interior suited the Puritan congregation that filled it each Sunday. Plain wooden pews, unadorned walls, and a simple pulpit where Daddy delivered his sermons on hellfire and redemption. No graven images here—just faith, raw and unembellished. The candles flickered in their iron holders, casting long shadows that danced like spirits along the floor. Each shadow seemed to stretch toward me, reaching with formless fingers.

I’d been here since the afternoon service ended, long after the last parishioner had gone home to supper. Time slipped away when I prayed. Minutes or hours—it hardly mattered.

The wooden floorboards creaked behind me. I didn't turn. In prayer, I belonged to God alone, and whoever waited could wait a moment longer.

"The Lord is my shepherd," I continued, softer now. "I shall not want..."

The creaking stopped. Breathing—two people waiting. I recognized Daddy's impatient shuffle, the way his good leather shoes scraped against the floor when he was anxious to speak. The other person stood perfectly still, so still I might have imagined him if not for the weight of his presence.

"Amen," I finally whispered, crossing myself before rising to my feet. My legs ached from kneeling so long, but I welcomed the discomfort. Sixteen years old, and I'd learned early that pain had purpose.

I turned to face my father, Reverend William Bladewell, his tall frame silhouetted against the dimming light. Beside him stood Mr. George Brown, one of our congregation's elders, his face a mask of rigid control that couldn't quite hide his anguish.

"Alice," Daddy said, his voice softer than the one he used from the pulpit but still carrying that note of authority. "Mr. Brown needs to speak with you."

I nodded, folding my hands at my waist like Mama had taught me before consumption took her three winters ago. "Elder Brown," I said with appropriate deference. "How may I be of service?"

Mr. George Brown's coat trembled on its hook in the entryway, as if caught in a breeze, though the air inside was still. I glanced at it, then back at the man. His face looked carved from stone, weathered by grief and something else—shame, perhaps.

"Miss Bladewell," he began, then faltered. His eyes darted to my father, seeking

permission, or perhaps courage.

Daddy nodded slightly. “Go on, Mr. Brown. Alice is strong in faith. She can bear what you have to say.”

Mr. Brown cleared his throat. “It’s my Mercy,” he said finally, his voice cracking on his daughter’s name. “She’s at the sanatorium. The consumption—“ He broke off, composing himself with visible effort. “The doctors say she hasn’t long.”

I felt a pang of genuine sympathy. I’d seen consumption’s slow, merciless work too many times. “I’m sorry, Elder Brown. I’ll pray for her recovery, and if it not be God’s will, her peaceful passing.”

“It’s not just her body that concerns me,” Mr. Brown said, his voice dropping to almost a whisper. “It’s her soul.”

A chill rippled through me. Something in his tone—something beyond grief.

“Mercy has...” Mr. Brown paused, looking down at his hands. They were trembling. “She’s become a secret witch.”

The word hung in the air like a curse. I crossed myself reflexively, a habit I’d picked up from a faithful friend of mine, from the church down the road we were forbidden to enter. Daddy often scolded me for it as too Papist, but he said nothing now.

“Are you certain?” I asked, careful to keep my voice steady.

Mr. Brown reached inside his coat and withdrew a small, leather-bound book. The cover was worn, the binding frayed. “I found this among her things when I was bringing her some clothes at the sanatorium.”

He handed it to me with reluctance, as if the mere touch of it might corrupt. I took it carefully, opening to a random page. Scrawled handwriting filled the margins around strange symbols and diagrams. Words in Latin mixed with phrases I didn't recognize. Recipes for potions and incantations. My stomach tightened.

"I didn't know," Mr. Brown said, his voice hollow. "My own daughter, and I didn't know."

The candle nearest to us sputtered and died, leaving us in deeper shadow. I closed the book and handed it back, trying not to appear too eager to be rid of it.

"She needs salvation before she passes," Mr. Brown said, his voice breaking on the words. His rigid control finally crumbled, revealing the desperation beneath. "The consumption's taken my wife, and now it's taking my Mercy. But I can't bear the thought of her soul ensnared by the devil forever."

"What can I do?" I asked, though I already sensed what was coming.

Daddy placed a hand on my shoulder. "You've nursed your mother through her illness. Your cousins too. You've sat with the dying, read scripture to them, prayed over them."

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“And never once fallen ill yourself,” Mr. Brown added, a note of awe in his voice. “Everyone knows the Lord’s hand is upon you, Miss Bladewell. Those you pray for find peace, even in death. Not to mention, you’re not much younger than my Mercy. She may listen to you as my pleas meet deaf ears.”

I looked down, uncomfortable with their regard. I wasn’t special. Just lucky, perhaps. Or maybe unlucky to have watched so many die while remaining healthy myself.

“The Lord protected you then,” Daddy said, his fingers tightening on my shoulder, “and He will protect you now.”

I understood then what they were asking. “You want me to visit Mercy at the sanatorium. To pray with her.”

“To save her,” Mr. Brown corrected, his eyes bright with unshed tears. “Perhaps not her body—the doctors say she’s unlikely to recover given her condition. But her soul. To bring her back to Christ before it’s too late.”

The weight of their expectation pressed down on me. I was just a girl—what did I know of saving souls? But I couldn’t deny the call I felt. The purpose that had driven me to my knees day after day.

“The sanatorium is no place for a young lady,” I said, but the protest sounded weak even to my ears.

“You’ve seen worse,” Daddy reminded me. “You’ve sat with the dying before. Held their hands as they passed.”

True enough. Death and I were old acquaintances, though not quite friends.

“Please,” Mr. Brown said, the word torn from him like a confession. “She has no mother to guide her. And I—“ He broke off, his hands clenching into fists. “I’ve failed her somehow. Failed to see the darkness taking root in her heart.”

I thought of Mercy Brown. I’d seen her in church, a girl a few years older than me with hair nearly as dark as night and a restless energy that always seemed at odds with the solemnity of worship. I’d heard whispers about her—that she asked too many questions, that she read books no proper young lady should touch. I’d never given the gossip much mind. Mercy never paid me much attention, but when she had, she’d been kind.

“Why me?” I asked. “Surely there are others with more experience, more wisdom—“

“Because God has marked you,” Daddy interrupted, his voice taking on the resonant quality he used from the pulpit. “He has kept you safe from the consumption that took your mother, your cousins. That’s no coincidence, Alice. That’s divine purpose.”

I remembered those long nights by sickbeds, scripture readings that seemed to bring comfort even as death approached. The strange peace that sometimes came over the dying as I prayed. Was that God working through me? Or just the natural surrender to the inevitable?

“She asks for you, specifically,” Mr. Brown added quietly.

I looked up sharply. “Mercy asks for me? But we hardly know each other.”

Mr. Brown nodded. “She mentioned you in her last diary entry. Said she’d heard of your... gift. Your immunity. She said—“ He hesitated, clearly uncomfortable. “She said perhaps you had a power that could help her.”

A chill ran through me at the word “power.” It sounded too much like the language in that witchcraft book.

“Not power,” I corrected firmly. “Faith. If I have any gift, it comes from God alone.”

“Of course,” Mr. Brown said quickly. “That’s what she needs to understand. That true salvation comes only through Christ, not through the dark arts.”

One of the remaining candles guttered, throwing strange shadows across Mr. Brown’s face. For a moment, he looked like someone else entirely—someone harder, colder. Then the light steadied, and he was just a grieving father again.

“Will you go to her?” Mr. Brown asked. “Will you try to save my daughter’s soul?”

I closed my eyes briefly, seeking guidance in the darkness behind my lids. What would Mama have done? She’d always taught me that faith meant action, not just words. That we served God by serving others, especially in their hour of need.

“Yes,” I said finally, opening my eyes. “I’ll go. I’ll pray with her. For her.”

Relief washed over Mr. Brown’s face. “Thank you. Thank you, Miss Bladewell.”

“The Lord works through the willing heart,” Daddy said, squeezing my shoulder in approval. “Alice, you’ll go tomorrow. I’ll make the arrangements.”

I nodded, though uncertainty gnawed at me. What did I really know of witchcraft, of the devil’s temptations? I’d lived a sheltered life, protected by Daddy’s strict rules and our congregation’s vigilance against sin. Was I truly prepared to confront the darkness in a dying girl’s soul?

“I’ll need to prepare,” I said, thinking of the Bible verses I should review, the prayers

that might reach a heart turned toward evil.

“Of course,” Daddy agreed. “Mercy may be afflicted by a devil, one that will not hesitate to lash out at you if it perceives your strong faith as a threat. You must be prepared for a spiritual battle.”

The phrase made me shiver. Battle. As if I were preparing for war, not merely visiting a sick girl.

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“I should tell you,” Mr. Brown said hesitantly, “Mercy can be... persuasive. She has a way about her—a way of making the wrong seem right.”

“The devil’s oldest trick,” Daddy nodded. “But Alice is strong in faith. Aren’t you, daughter?”

“Yes, Daddy.” The response was automatic, ingrained from childhood.

But as Mr. Brown and Daddy began discussing the practical arrangements for tomorrow’s visit, doubt crept in like the shadows lengthening across the church floor. Was I truly strong enough? Or was I just a girl playing at faith, untested by real temptation?

Apparently, Mr. Brown had a few things to show me. Things that would give me a better idea of how far into these dark arts Mercy had actually fallen. It was a bit much for a girl of my age and naivety, but it was an education I’d better receive sooner than later.

Chapter 2

We stepped into the biting January air, our breath crystallizing before us like the ghosts. Night had fallen completely now, wrapping Exeter, Rhode Island, in a shroud of darkness broken only by scattered windows glowing with lamplight. Daddy walked on one side of me, his tall frame casting a long shadow across the frost-stiffened ground. George Brown trudged on my other side, a man visibly collapsing under grief’s weight, yet somehow still standing. The cold seeped through my woolen coat, but I welcomed it—the sharp bite of winter always felt cleaner than the stifling

heat of sickrooms.

The three of us moved in silence down the narrow street. Our footsteps echoed against the wooden boardwalks, a hollow, empty sound that matched the hollowness inside me. I'd agreed to something I wasn't sure I could deliver. Salvation for a witch? Was that even possible? Was that even my right to attempt?

"It's not far," Mr. Brown said, his voice startling in the quiet. "Just past the mercantile."

I nodded, though I already knew where the Brown house stood. Exeter wasn't large enough for secrets about locations. But it was large enough for secrets of other kinds, apparently.

A dog barked somewhere in the distance. The sound hung in the frigid air, unanswered.

"You're very quiet, Alice," Daddy observed, though his tone suggested he approved of my silence.

"I'm praying." A half-truth. The noise of my mind largely drowned my prayers out—doubt and fear and curiosity all tangled together like yarn that had fallen to the floor to be batted about by a cat.

"Good girl," Daddy said. I felt a stab of guilt for the deception.

We turned down a side street where the houses stood closer together, shoulders touching like mourners at a funeral. The Brown home was the third one down—a modest two-story structure with dark windows and a small front porch. Unlike the other houses on the street, no smoke curled from its chimney.

The door creaked open, revealing a dark interior that smelled of wood polish and something else—loneliness, perhaps, if loneliness had a scent.

Mr. Brown struck a match, touching it to an oil lamp that cast wavering light across a narrow hallway. “This way,” he said, leading us toward what I assumed was the parlor.

I followed, noting the heavy Bible on the hall table, the austere cross hanging on the wall. A proper Christian household, by all appearances.

The parlor was cold, but Mr. Brown quickly knelt before the fireplace, arranging kindling and logs with practiced movements. “Please, sit,” he said, gesturing to the chairs arranged in a semi-circle before the hearth.

I perched on the edge of a high-backed chair, my eyes drawn to the bookshelves that lined one wall. Volumes of religious texts dominated—commentaries on scripture, histories of the church, sermons and theological writings from the likes of John Owen. A proper elder’s library.

The family portraits arranged on the mantelpiece told their own story. George Brown as a younger man, standing stiffly beside a seated woman with hair long, curly and dark as Mercy’s. A boy who must be Edwin, Mercy’s brother, sitting stiff and straight faced. And Mercy herself—perhaps fifteen in the photograph—her eyes bright with an intelligence that seemed to challenge the camera itself.

“That was taken three years ago,” Mr. Brown said, noticing my gaze on the portrait. “Before Margaret—my wife—passed.”

“Where’s your son?” I asked. “Surely you didn’t leave him alone in this cold house.”

“With his aunt for the evening,” Mr. Brown confirmed. “I’ll retrieve him in the

morning.”

The fire caught, flames licking tentatively at the logs. Mr. Brown remained kneeling before it a moment longer than necessary, as if drawing strength from the growing warmth.

“You have a lovely home.” The politeness was automatic.

“It was,” Mr. Brown agreed as he finally rose and took a seat opposite me. “When it was full.”

Daddy settled into the chair between us, his posture rigid as always. “Perhaps you should tell Alice more about Mercy’s condition,” he prompted. “The physical and the... spiritual aspects.”

Mr. Brown nodded, reaching for the portrait of Mercy. He cradled it in his large hands, thumbs brushing the wooden frame. “The consumption came on suddenly last summer,” he began. “One day she was helping with the church picnic, the next she was coughing blood into her handkerchief.”

I knew that progression all too well. The sudden onset, the rapid decline. I’d watched it take Mama and others.

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“The doctors say her lungs are nearly gone,” Mr. Brown continued, his voice flat, as if reciting facts about a stranger. “She’s so thin now. Like a bird with hollow bones.” His façade cracked slightly. “My fiery girl, reduced to this.”

I swallowed hard. “I’m sorry.”

“The physical suffering, that’s...” Mr. Brown shook his head. “It’s terrible to watch, but it’s natural. Part of God’s plan, even if we don’t understand it. But this other matter—“ He set the portrait down carefully and reached into his pocket, withdrawing a wilted flower. “I brought this back from my last visit three days ago.”

The flower had once been white, but now it was browning at the edges, its petals curling inward like fingers forming a fist.

“She had it on her bedside table,” Mr. Brown explained. “When I asked about it, she refused to answer. So I brought it to—“ He hesitated a moment. “Other trusted Christian brothers who suggested it accords with an unholy spell. One supposed to grant the damned a kind of protection, undoubtedly by the hand of the devil’s diabolical legions. She’d... enchanted it somehow.” His voice caught on the word.

A chill that had nothing to do with the room’s temperature crawled up my spine.

“She started changing after her mother passed,” Mr. Brown continued, turning the wilted flower in his fingers. “Asking questions in Sunday service that no God-fearing girl should ask. Disappearing for hours into the woods. Coming home with strange herbs and stones.” He glanced at the portrait again. “I thought it was just grief for her mother working itself out. I was too lenient, perhaps.”

“Grief takes many forms,” I said softly, thinking of my own after Mama died. The anger, the bargaining, the long nights of prayer that felt like screaming into a void.

“But this goes beyond grief,” Mr. Brown insisted. “This is deliberate turning away from God toward... toward evil.”

I thought of the book he’d shown me in the church, those strange symbols and Latin phrases. “When did you first suspect she was practicing witchcraft?”

Mr. Brown’s eyes flicked to Daddy, then back to me. “Six months ago. I found a book under her mattress—not the one I showed you, another one. Basic spells, it claimed. I burned it immediately and prayed with her. She seemed repentant.”

“But she wasn’t,” Daddy interjected.

“No.” Mr. Brown’s shoulders slumped. “She just became more secretive. By the time the consumption struck, she was too far gone in her... dabblings.”

I remembered my nights sitting with Mama as the consumption ravaged her body. The prayers that seemed to ease her pain, if only for moments. The scripture readings that brought peace to her eyes. “In my experience,” I said carefully, “those facing death often turn toward God, not away from Him.”

“That’s what I’d hoped,” Mr. Brown said. “That she’d see the fragility of life and turn back to faith.” He set the wilted flower on the table beside Mercy’s portrait. “Instead, it’s as though she blamed God for it all, and turned instead to heresy. Worse than heresy. A heretic might be deceived into clinging to a wolf that appears as a sheep. It appears my daughter has wholeheartedly embraced the wolf itself.”

The fire popped loudly, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. In the sudden flare of light, I noticed how deeply lined Mr. Brown’s face was, how the skin under

his eyes sagged with exhaustion.

“I’ve spent so many nights,” he said, staring into the flames, “trying to understand where I went wrong. How my daughter could stray so far from the path.”

“The fault isn’t necessarily yours,” Daddy said, his voice gentle for once. “The devil is cunning, and young women, belonging to the weaker sex, are particularly susceptible to his lures. It was Eve, remember, who the serpent approached first. That is his way. Men are easily seduced to evil by women—thus the devil will regularly corrupt the woman that he might through her afflict righteous men.”

I bristled slightly at that, given I read the Genesis story differently. After all, it was not good that man was alone—and this before sin came into the world. It was the only thing God had made that he’d said wasn’t good. Even a perfect man, it seems, was incomplete without a woman. Woman might have been the first deceived, but the man was altogether insufficient alone even before the snake whispered its first lies. Rather than debate the point with my father—who’d surely chastise me for challenging his paternal authority—I kept my face carefully neutral.

“Still,” Mr. Brown said, “a father is responsible for his children’s moral education. I failed her somehow.”

I thought of my long nights of prayer and scripture readings that had seemed to bring comfort to the dying. The strange peace that sometimes came over them as I prayed. Was that truly God working through me? Or just the natural surrender to the inevitable?

“I’ve heard your prayers have healed a few who’ve fallen to consumption,” Mr. Brown said suddenly, his eyes finding mine with an intensity that made me want to look away.

“I don’t heal anyone,” I blurted. “God heals. I’m just... there.”

“But you’ve never caught it yourself,” Mr. Brown pressed. “Despite tending to your mother, your cousins, and others in the congregation. Everyone says it’s a miracle.”

I shifted uncomfortably. I’d heard the whispers, of course. The speculation about why I remained healthy while others sickened and died. Some called it divine protection.

“I’ve been fortunate,” I said. The same answer I always gave.

“More than fortunate,” Mr. Brown insisted, leaning forward. “Blessed. Chosen, even.” His voice trembled. “If anyone can reach Mercy’s soul before it’s too late, it’s you.”

The weight of his expectation pressed down on me like a physical force. What if I failed? What if I couldn’t bring Mercy back to God?

“I can try,” I said. “When should I visit?”

“Tomorrow,” Mr. Brown said. “I’ve already spoken to the sanatorium. They’re expecting you at ten o’clock. They’ve arranged for you to be her roommate.”

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I cocked my head. “But I’m not ill.”

“This will require a constant presence,” Daddy encouraged, squeezing my shoulder. “If you pose as a patient, someone who knows what it’s like to lose a mother and be dying of the same condition, you may be able to reach her before it’s too late.”

I sighed audibly. Talking to the girl once—that was something I was happy to do. To stay in the dreadful sanatorium, a place that reeked of death, was another matter. Then again, my Jesus had subjected Himself to far worse to save me. He’d done it for Mercy, too. Even if she didn’t appreciate or understand it. Perhaps that’s exactly what I needed to do now. To take up my cross.

“Let me show you something more specific,” Mr. Brown said, retrieving Mercy’s diary—I doubted she’d expected he’d be reading it. His fingers trembled slightly as he opened it. “This is from two months ago, when the consumption first took a serious hold.” The lamplight caught the yellowed page, illuminating Mercy’s handwriting. I leaned closer, drawn despite myself to the frantic energy of her words. What I read made my breath catch in my throat.

Dearest Diary, the letter began innocuously enough.

The night rituals bring me strength when the coughing fits are worst. Last evening, I crushed the herbs my father thought were medicinal tea (forgive my deception) and burned them on the windowsill. The smoke formed shapes no science can explain—faces of those long dead, reaching hands, mountains I’ve never seen. I spoke the words Moll taught me, and for three blessed hours, I didn’t cough once. The power is real. More real than what Reverend Bladewell preaches on Sundays.

I glanced up at Mr. Brown, whose face had hardened into a mask of shame and anger. “Who is Moll?” I asked quietly.

“A woman from the edge of town,” he replied, his voice tight. “Lives alone in the woods. I’ve heard whispers about her for years, but never thought...” He trailed off, shaking his head. “Never thought my Mercy would seek her out.”

I returned to the letter, my fingers pressing into the paper as if I could extract truth from its fibers.

Father, I suppose you’ll find this someday if I do not find a spell sufficient to cure my condition. You will say it’s the devil’s work, but I’ve seen beyond that simplistic view now. There are older powers in this world, Father. Powers that existed before the church tried to bury them under its doctrines. Powers that don’t care if I’m a respectable young lady, only that I’m willing to see.

The consumption may take this body—I’m not a fool about my chances—but Moll has shown me another way. A way to persist. To transform. On Samhain night, I spoke with Mother. Not her spirit as you might think, but HER—real and present. She looked at me with such peace in her eyes.

“Samhain,” I murmured. “Halloween.”

Mr. Brown nodded grimly. “Witch’s sabbath.”

The claim that she’d spoken with her dead mother sent a shiver through me. I’d sat with my own mother as she died, prayed for her soul’s peaceful passage. The thought of calling her back, of disturbing her rest in Heaven—it felt profoundly wrong.

“There’s more,” Mr. Brown said, turning a few pages. “This one’s from just three weeks ago.”

The handwriting in this one was more erratic, the letters tilting at uneven angles as if written by someone in a fever dream—or a trance.

The most extraordinary thing has happened. Moll has introduced me to her coven. Father, don't look so horrified as you read this—they're mostly ordinary women seeking control in a world that offers them none. We met under the crescent moon and I felt such POWER coursing through the earth beneath my feet, up into my weakening body.

Moll says I have a rare gift. That when I called to Cernunnos, he actually appeared—visible not just to me but to all present. This never happens, she said. She's declared me her "daughter of the night" and promised me immortality. Someone will come within three moons to offer me a different kind of life. I won't die, Father. I refuse.

The doctors shake their heads when they think I can't see. They don't understand why I'm still breathing with lungs so damaged. It's because I've found another source of breath, another way to sustain this failing flesh until the savior Moll promised arrives.

The desperation in Mercy's words was too familiar—the frantic bargaining of someone staring death in the face. But where my bargaining had taken the form of endless prayers, hers had turned to darkness.

"She writes of powers that no Christian should seek," Mr. Brown said, his rigid posture betraying his shame. "Gods rising from the earth. Spirits answering her call. Immortality." His voice cracked on the last word. "As if such a thing were possible. As if it wouldn't damn her soul if it were."

"She's afraid," I said softly. "Fear makes us grasp at anything that offers hope."

“Not anything,” Daddy corrected sharply. “Faith offers hope. Prayer offers hope.”

“What she’s doing—“ Mr. Brown paused a moment. “What she’s doing invites damnation.”

I studied Mr. Brown’s face, noting the deep lines etched around his eyes, the way his mouth seemed permanently turned down at the corners. This was a man carrying a weight I couldn’t fully comprehend—watching his daughter die while simultaneously fearing for her eternal soul.

“May I see one more?” I asked, gesturing to the open diary. “You’d said before she mentioned me in one of her latest entries.”

Mr. Brown hesitated, then turned a few more pages. The handwriting had deteriorated further, some words barely legible, trailing off into scratches and strange symbols.

I dreamed of Alice Bladewell last night. The preacher’s daughter. I’ve watched her at church—the way she prays with such perfect faith, the way consumption passes her by while it devours everyone else. They say she has a gift for comforting the dying. I think it’s more than that.

I need to understand her power before my time runs out. Three moons are nearly gone, and I fear Moll’s promise may not be fulfilled. If her way fails, perhaps Alice’s spell—and there must be one—will do the trick. The voices say Alice is special—marked somehow. Protected. Maybe there’s power in her prayers that even she doesn’t understand. A power that could be... borrowed.

A chill spread through me. “She thinks I have power. She’s mistaken.”

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“Of course she is,” Daddy interjected. “Whatever protection God has granted you is His alone to give or take away. It can’t be... borrowed.”

But something in the way Mr. Brown avoided my eyes made me wonder if he shared some of Mercy’s suspicions. If he too thought there was something unnatural about my immunity to consumption.

“You understand now,” Mr. Brown said, “why I’m so concerned. It’s not just her body dying—it’s her soul being corrupted. These delusions about ancient powers, about immortality...” He spread his hands helplessly. “I’ve tried everything. Scripture readings, prayers, even bringing our pastor to speak with her. Nothing reaches her.”

“And you think I can?” I asked, unable to keep the doubt from my voice.

“She dreamed of you specifically,” Mr. Brown reminded me. “And you have a way about you, Alice. A gentleness combined with strength. I fear in her deteriorated state she’s turned to delusions, but couldn’t God work through her delusions? Couldn’t he use you to show her that there’s a path to eternal life that doesn’t involve compromise with the devil?”

I wasn’t convinced—if only because this was a desperate move. If they had come to me weeks ago, perhaps I could have helped them reach her. This felt beyond me. But as I looked at Mr. Brown’s desperate face, at the family portrait showing Mercy as she once was—bright-eyed and full of life—I felt something stir within me. A sense of calling, perhaps. Or simple human compassion.

“I’ll go,” I said, more firmly this time. “Tomorrow morning, as agreed.”

Relief washed over Mr. Brown's features. "Thank you. The sanatorium has been informed. They understand your true purpose, so the tonics they give you will be nothing at all—sugar and water. But you must play the part."

"I understand." I nodded, rising from my chair.

As I prepared to leave, my gaze was drawn to Mr. Brown's bookshelf again. The leather-bound volume I'd noticed earlier was still partially visible, its spine adorned with symbols similar to those in Mercy's letters. One symbol in particular caught my eye—a half-circle like a rising sun with rays extending outward. The same design I'd glimpsed on the medallion under Mr. Brown's collar.

I moved closer, as if drawn by an unseen force. "What is that book?" I asked, pointing to it.

Mr. Brown stepped quickly between me and the shelf, his hand moving to cover the book. "Nothing that concerns you," he said, his tone suddenly sharp. "Just... research."

But there was something in his haste, something in the way his eyes wouldn't meet mine, that raised questions I couldn't articulate. Why would a church elder possess a book with occult symbols? And why hide it if it was merely for research?

"I see," I said, though I didn't. Not really.

"It's getting late," Daddy observed, glancing at the mantel clock. "Alice needs her rest before tomorrow."

Mr. Brown nodded, visibly relieved. "Of course. I've kept you too long already."

He walked us to the door, the tension in his shoulders easing only when we stepped

onto the porch. “God be with you tomorrow, Alice,” he said. “Mercy may not make it easy for you, but remember—beneath the illness and the... confusion, my daughter is still in there somewhere.”

“I’ll remember,” I promised.

Chapter 3

The next morning was bitter as a mouthful of lye soap. Frost sheathed every window, the sun barely a rumor behind thick, ragged clouds. My father walked me to the carriage depot in silence; the only sounds the steady crunch of our boots and the nervous patter of my heart. Exeter’s streets looked even smaller in daylight, as though the cold had shrunk the houses in their frames. Not even the blackbirds sang.

We said our goodbyes with the stoicism of the freshly bereaved. Daddy pressed a paper-wrapped parcel of food into my hands, then clasped my shoulders so tightly I thought my bones would grind to powder. His eyes glimmered with pride and something darker—anxiety, or perhaps the fear that his daughter’s faith was a thing as fragile as a frozen pond.

“The Lord be with you,” he said, then made the sign of the cross on my forehead with a trembling thumb, a gesture half-remembered from his own Papist father.

“And also with you,” I whispered, head bowed.

The depot was a bleak single room with a bench along the wall and a battered stove that only succeeded in melting the ice nearest its feet. I waited alone. At ten precisely, a black carriage arrived, drawn by a pair of horses. The driver—a man as pale as wax—helped me in without a word.

I prayed the whole way to the sanatorium. Not for myself, but for Mercy, and for the

strength to do what needed to be done. I prayed with the stubborn persistence of a weed in a graveyard. Every mile was a litany, every jostle of the carriage a punctuation. By the time the building came into view, my lips were numb from hushed recitation.

The sanatorium rose above the barren trees like a mausoleum built by madmen. Three stories of soot-stained brick, its windows narrow and barred, its roof a bald, shingled scalp. A small iron gate admitted us to the grounds, where a few stunted bushes clung to life beside a frozen fountain. There was no welcome, not even a caretaker sweeping the stoop. Just a bell-pull, which I tugged with reluctance.

The door swung open to reveal a nurse so tall and thin she looked like a jointed marionette. Her uniform was starched and white, her cap perched on a nest of greying hair. Her face was not unkind, but so impassive it might have been carved from tallow.

“Alice Bladewell,” she said, voice as cool as the air. “We’ve been expecting you. Follow me.”

The entryway smelled of coal smoke and something sharper: lye, perhaps. The floors were scrubbed to a dull shine, and every footstep echoed as if the building were hollow. I followed the nurse—Miss Hartwell, she introduced herself—past a series of doors, some marked with numbers, others left blank. There were no flowers, no paintings, nothing to soften the relentless geometry of the place.

“I trust you understand the purpose of your stay,” Miss Hartwell said, never slowing her stride. “You’re to provide company and spiritual counsel for Miss Brown. But you will also be subject to all standard protocols: morning inspection, medication, and so forth. Is that clear?”

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“Yes, ma’am,” I said, though my skin crawled at the thought of submitting to another’s routine. I had agreed to this—God help me—but the weight of it pressed down already.

Miss Hartwell stopped in front of a thick wooden door with a brass plate: WARD 2-B. She rapped once, brisk and commanding, then opened it.

The room was small and perfectly symmetrical. Two iron bedframes, each topped with a thin mattress and white blanket, stood at opposite walls. Between them, a single table bore a battered pitcher and a pair of chipped enamel cups. A crucifix hung above the bed that was supposed to be mine—above Mercy’s bed, only a bare nail. The window—narrow and barred—let in a wan shaft of light that split the air like a knife.

Mercy Brown sat on the bed to the right, knees drawn up, arms wrapped around herself. She wore a plain hospital gown that swallowed her frame, her hair cut short and jagged as if done by an impatient hand. Her face had the translucence of old wax. Her lips were bloodless, her eyes so sunken they seemed not to belong to her but to some darker passenger riding her body to its destination. She did not look at me. She stared at the window as though there might be something on the other side worth seeing.

“Miss Brown, you have a new roommate,” Miss Hartwell announced, voice modulated for the delicate. Mercy did not react. She had been alive, once, in the way of girls who do not yet realize life is a waiting room for sorrow. I’d seen her at church, saw her laugh with her brother Edwin on the church steps, eyes vivid and clever and green as pondweed. This was not that Mercy.

“Please get settled,” Miss Hartwell said to me. “Lunch is at noon. Medication at two. I’ll be back then.” She left with the same silent efficiency with which she had arrived.

I set my small suitcase on the foot of my bed, unpacking what little I’d brought: two changes of dress, a hairbrush, a leather-bound Bible with my mother’s name inscribed on the flyleaf, and a wooden cross Daddy had carved for me when I was a child. I placed the Bible and the cross on the table, like a claim staked in hostile territory.

Mercy’s eyes flicked to the cross, then away. She coughed once—a dry, rasping sound like a broom dragged across stone. She clamped a handkerchief to her mouth, and when she pulled it away, there was a smear of red so dark it looked black.

I waited until her breathing eased before I spoke. “Mercy?”

She did not turn. “It’s Alice. From church. Remember me?”

She exhaled through her nose, a sound I couldn’t interpret. Then she said, “Who are you?” Her voice was papery, the syllables folded and refolded until only the outline remained, infused with a faint confusion.

I sat on the edge of my bed, fingers interlaced and white-knuckled. “I read your letters. Your diary entries, rather. Your father shared them with me.” I hesitated, unsure whether this would spark anger or relief. “He’s worried for you. We all are.”

Mercy made no reply. She reached beneath her pillow and drew out a small, black-covered notebook—the new diary, presumably, since her father still possessed the other. Her hands shook as she turned its pages. Latin phrases marched across the paper, interspersed with rough sketches of symbols I did not recognize. On one page, she had drawn a woman’s face split down the middle—half angel, half skull.

I reached for my Bible, fingers tracing the gold lettering. I wanted to say something

comforting, to offer a prayer or a psalm, but every word felt trite in the shadow of this place. Her confusion about me must be the delirium from her sickness, I reasoned, as her father had shown me writings where she clearly mentioned me.

Mercy snapped the diary shut and glanced at me for the first time. Her eyes were not green but a washed-out grey, the color of rainwater pooled in a tombstone's inscription. "If you're here to save me, you're late," she said. Her mouth twitched upward in a smile that didn't reach her eyes. It might have been the beginning of a laugh, had she the strength to spare for laughter.

I cleared my throat. "It's never too late. Not for God."

She coughed again, longer this time. When it passed, she said, "God has other priorities." She lay back on her pillow, eyes drifting closed. "But thank you for trying."

I sat in silence, feeling like a child who had been given a riddle in a language she could not read. After a while, I knelt beside my bed, not because I felt especially holy, but because I needed to do something with my trembling hands. I whispered the 23rd Psalm, tripping over the words in my hurry to fill the emptiness. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..." I faltered, the words catching in my throat.

Mercy opened one eye and watched me, neither mocking nor moved, just present. When I finished, I remained kneeling, forehead pressed to the thin wool of the blanket. I prayed for Mercy, for myself, for all the lost souls whose names I did not know. I prayed until my knees burned and my thoughts ran dry.

When I stood, Mercy was watching the window again. Outside, the wind picked up, rattling the bars with a sound like teeth chattering in a skull. The sanatorium seemed to lean in, listening for secrets. I took my place in my bed—playing the role of a

patient best I could.

Time passed in that room with the slow, deliberate cruelty of a metronome. The light changed from grey to blue to the dim ochre of gas lamps in the corridor. Dinner was a bowl of gruel that tasted of wet cardboard, delivered by a red-faced nurse's aide who smiled like she'd been coached on the mechanics but never told what it was for. Mercy did not eat. She prodded the bowl with her spoon, then set it aside and stared at the wall.

I tried several times to draw her into conversation. I told her about the girls I used to play with back home, about my mother's apple cake, about the time Daddy had set his sleeve on fire during a sermon and finished the benediction before putting it out. Each attempt died in the air, unanswered. Mercy listened, but with the impassivity of a confessor who's already heard every sin and grown bored by them all. I would have given up, except I could not. That's what it means to be sent on a mission, I suppose.

When the sky outside turned to ink, I tried again. "What are you writing?" I asked, nodding at the black book in her lap.

Mercy's fingers tightened around the covers. For a moment, I thought she might throw it at me. Instead, she answered in a voice too dry to betray irritation. "I'm keeping a record. In case someone else needs it."

"Like a recipe book?" I tried to make it a joke, but the words landed heavily.

"More like a roadmap." Her mouth twitched again, less a smile and more a muscle spasm. "We're all so lost, aren't we?" She looked at me, as if seeing me for the first time again. "What did you say your name was?"

I tried to keep my voice even. "Alice." The delirium was clearly worse than I'd imagined.

“Then you’re lucky,” Mercy said, opening her diary, flipping to a page near the middle. “I have nothing but the cold.”

I stared at the page. Written in Mercy’s delicate, looping hand were words in Latin I recognized from scripture, but intermixed were words I didn’t know. There was a diagram of a skeleton with a flower blooming in its ribcage, petals inked in red.

I tried again. “What happened, Mercy? You used to sing in the choir. You knew the Psalms better than I did.”

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She didn't look up from the page. "I learned new songs." She traced a line along the spine of the skeleton. "Did you know the Witch of Endor brought the ghost of Samuel back from the dead to talk to Saul? The Bible says so."

"I know the story," I said. "But that was a sin. Saul was punished for it."

"Maybe he was just curious," Mercy said, so softly I almost missed it. "Maybe he wanted closure. Maybe God punishes people for wanting too much."

The silence between us grew thick, clotted with the sounds of the sanatorium: a distant cough, a footstep in the corridor, the faint clink of keys.

"Do you ever pray?" I asked.

Mercy laughed again, this time with genuine amusement. "Only when I want something I can't have."

I wished I could argue. But I'd prayed so many times for my mother's suffering to end, and each time the only answer was more pain. My own faith felt like a wound that had healed over, leaving a numb scar behind.

Mercy's head drooped, her breathing shallow. I watched her for a long time, afraid that if I blinked she'd vanish, or worse. When she finally drifted into sleep, I crossed to her bed and tucked the blanket around her. Her body was so light I thought it might float away if not for the weight of the disease inside her. On her nightstand, she'd placed a small bouquet of dried flowers—lavender, thistle, and something else I didn't recognize. The stems were bound with a strip of cloth torn from her gown. I

wondered if it was another spell, or just a memory of a world with color in it.

I returned to my bed, knelt, and prayed again. I prayed for Mercy, for her brother Edwin, for all the broken girls locked away in this blasted place. I prayed with everything I had left, which wasn't much, but had to be enough.

"Lord," I whispered, "make me a vessel of your mercy. Let me bring light to this darkness. Let me be more than I am."

The room did not answer. The crucifix above my bed stared down with the same carved agony as ever. Outside, the wind moaned. The air inside grew heavy with the smell of blood and old flowers. I lay in bed fully clothed, too cold and too afraid to do otherwise. I lay awake for a long time, listening to Mercy breathe. Now and then she muttered words I could not understand, sometimes in English, sometimes not. I wondered if she was speaking to the dead, or if the dead were speaking through her. Sleep came at last, but it was no comfort. It came on as a fever—waves of heat and cold, shivering fits, the taste of rust at the back of my throat. I dreamed of black rivers and burning fields, of voices chanting in a language I did not know but half-recognized. Sometimes I heard my mother, sometimes Mercy, sometimes my own voice echoing back at me in a tone I did not trust.

At some hour deep in the night, I awoke with a start.

It was well into the night, and I was shivering in my sheets, trying to sleep through the moaning and screaming of the other patients. I must have been sleeping, because I jolted awake when Mercy stood beside my bed. "Sorry," she whispered, her voice raspy. "Just trying to figure out how you manage to sleep through all this ruckus."

I rolled my eyes, then reached to my ears and pulled out two wads of cotton.

Mercy smirked. "I have to say, that's pretty smart."

“Doesn’t work that well,” I said. “But it muffles the noise enough that I can sleep... a little...”

She looked at me, a girl only a year or two older than me, and asked, “Aren’t you afraid to die?” Her eyes, in the dim light, seemed to hold a flicker of recognition, but it was quickly lost in the haze of her illness.

“What’s there to be afraid of?” I asked.

“You know, death. It’s so... final.”

“I have my faith,” I said. “Don’t you believe?”

“I have my beliefs,” Mercy replied.

“Then why are you afraid?” I asked.

She shrugged through her shivers. “I mean, you can have faith. That’s all well and good. But how can you be certain of it—absolutely certain? Isn’t there any doubt at all?”

“Everyone has doubts,” I said. “But why dwell on the part of you that doubts? If I’m going to die, I’d rather die believing.”

“But what if your faith is wrong? What if your belief is misplaced?” Mercy asked.

I smiled. “Then at least I didn’t spend my last days in the world miserable and terrified.”

Mercy huffed. “Maybe that’s all I have left,” she said. “Maybe it’s my fear of dying that keeps me fighting, that keeps me alive.”

“You think fear will keep you alive? How many people die with fear?”

“Most people, I suppose.” She scratched the back of her head, a few loose hairs caught in her fingers.

I nodded. “I don’t need fear to fight for my life. Why do you?”

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Mercy bit her lip. “I don’t know. I really don’t. But it’s there, my fear. I don’t know how I can just up and decide not to be afraid.”

“Don’t pay attention to your fear,” I said. “That’s how it binds you, how it controls you.”

“How’d you get such a strong faith? You can’t be older than sixteen,” Mercy asked, as if genuinely curious about a stranger.

“My daddy’s a preacher,” I said. “I guess I just grew up believing. Isn’t that when you need faith the most, when otherwise all you’d have is fear?”

Mercy nodded. “Thanks for the tip. Have any more of those cotton balls, by chance?”

I smiled, reached into a little bag hanging from my bed, and handed her two of them.

“Thanks.” She forced a smile.

“Sleep well.”

“Yeah, you too,” Mercy replied. She returned to her bed, shoved the cotton in her ears, and within moments, I heard her even breathing.

The darkness was absolute, except for the silver blade of moonlight that sliced through the barred window, spilling across the floor like spilled milk. The sanatorium was silent now, all the distant voices snuffed out. Even the wind had stopped.

Something woke me up. Maybe it was a chill, or some kind of survival instinct.

I tried to turn over, but my body would not move. A pressure that was not heavy but infinitely persistent pinned me to the mattress. My eyes were open, but only just. Through the slit of my lashes, I watched as the room seemed to breathe—shadows swelling and receding with each halting breath I managed.

That's when I heard the scratching. At first, I thought it was a rat, or perhaps a bird that got trapped in the chimney. But the sound was wrong—too regular, too insistent. It scraped at the window bars, slow at first, then faster, as if testing for weakness. My mind raced with scripture: "He prowls about like a lion, seeking whom he may devour."

I tried to speak, but my tongue was leaden, stuck to the roof of my mouth. A low whisper, just above the threshold of hearing, threaded its way into the room. It was Latin, but not the kind I knew. It was guttural, broken. I heard Mercy reply in a voice not quite her own, a voice that quavered and shrieked with equal force.

The window swung open without a sound. A figure slipped through the bars, impossibly thin, impossibly tall. I saw only its outline, backlit by the moon: a coat that fluttered like crow's wings, a cap pulled low over a face I could not see. It moved through the room but without the sound of footsteps, as if hovering across the space. It moved to Mercy's bed and knelt beside her. She did not scream, did not even flinch. She just opened her eyes, pale and blind as a dead fish. The figure leaned in, and for a moment I thought it would kiss her. Instead, it pressed its lips to her throat.

I wanted to shout. I wanted to call for help, to invoke God's name, to recite the Lord's Prayer or a Psalm. But my voice was gone. All I could do was watch as the thing—no, the man, for in the shifting light I saw he was at least partly a man—drank from Mercy with slow, reverent hunger. Her face changed as it happened. The lines of pain smoothed away. Her lips parted in a smile, or maybe a grimace, but for the

first time since I'd seen her in the sanatorium she looked alive, truly alive. The blood ran down her neck in a thin black line, pooling in the hollow of her clavicle.

The man straightened, wiped his mouth with a handkerchief, and looked directly at me. His eyes glowed red, but not the garish red of theatrical devils or masquerade masks. It was the red of a sunset glimpsed through closed eyelids, the red of spilled wine. He tilted his head, as if acknowledging my presence. Then, in a single fluid motion, he turned and slipped back out the window, vanishing completely.

I lay there for what felt like hours, heart hammering so hard I thought it might break my ribs. When I finally managed to move, I crawled to Mercy's bed on hands and knees. She was cold. Her chest did not rise. Her diary had fallen to the floor, open to a page with a sketch of a crescent moon and a girl walking alone beneath it. I pressed my ear to her lips. No breath. I felt for a pulse, found none. Her skin was smooth and flawless, the grey cast of death already creeping in at the corners. A cry built in my throat, but I choked it down.

Had that man not arrived, the one who'd drunk her blood, Mercy might have lived a few days more. I might have had the chance to save her. But now, I'd clearly failed. And try though I wished, I couldn't bring myself to cry for the nurse. I couldn't speak at all—as if the strange man had cast a spell on me, as if he'd commanded me to remain quiet. Or, perhaps, it was out of abject horror. Would I ever be able to speak again? I'd heard stories of men, soldiers from the Civil War, who returned and never spoke another word the rest of their lives. It was thought to be on account of the terrors of war. Was that what happened to me?

Dawn arrived with all the warmth of a blade drawn across skin. The sanatorium's corridors filled with the faintest rattle of keys and footsteps, the subdued theater of the morning routine playing out behind every door. Through the fogged window, the outside world was blached white, as if God himself had spilled milk across the landscape and left it to curdle. I sat on Mercy's bed, spine curled against the wall, the

cross still clutched in my fist. My knuckles ached, but I did not relax my grip. I could not.

A sharp knock split the silence. The door opened before I could answer, and in strode Miss Hartwell, trailed by a doctor in a brown suit so worn it might have been his only one. He smelled of mothballs and stale tobacco. His hair was parted precisely.

Miss Hartwell's eyes flicked to Mercy, then to me, then away. "Doctor," she said quietly.

The doctor moved to Mercy's side, stethoscope already in hand. He touched her wrist, her throat, then pressed the cold disc to her chest. I watched him work, unable to speak or even to stand. He lifted one of Mercy's eyelids and let it fall again. He did not look at her face, only at the evidence.

"She's gone," he said, voice flat as the surface of a pond. "No pulse. Pupils fixed."

Miss Hartwell nodded. She produced a form and a pencil stub, and the doctor scrawled something in a cramped hand.

I tried to rise, to say anything, but my legs would not answer. The world tilted, then steadied. My body felt both empty and too full, as if every nerve ending was crowded with bad news.

"Time of death?" the nurse prompted.

"Five minutes past six," the doctor replied. "Notify the family."

He was already halfway to the door when I found my voice. "Wait," I said, a pathetic croak. I was half-surprised that I was able to speak at all.

He turned. “Yes, Miss Bladewell?”

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I wanted to ask what had happened. I wanted to say I had seen something, that I believed someone had come in the night and stolen Mercy away, that death was not a thing that happened in a vacuum but had to be caused by something, or someone. But I heard myself say only, “She was alive at midnight. I heard her breathing.”

He looked at me with professional boredom. “The disease is not kind. Sometimes it’s sudden.”

Miss Hartwell moved to the bed, hands deft and efficient. She folded Mercy’s arms across her chest, brushed the hair from her brow, and closed her eyes. Then she stripped the sheets, rolling them into a tight bundle as if she were making a bed for a new arrival.

The doctor made a final note and left without another word. I watched him go, feeling a tremor in my chest that I recognized as something close to rage, or maybe terror.

Miss Hartwell turned to me. “Would you like a few moments alone?”

I nodded. I could not look at her. I could not look at anything.

When she was gone, I reached out and touched Mercy’s hand. It was cold, yes, but not rigid. The skin was soft, almost warm in the crook of her fingers. There was no rigor mortis, no sign of the slack-jawed horror I’d seen in other corpses. Instead, Mercy’s lips were curved in a faint smile, as if she’d finally remembered the punchline to a joke she’d been chasing her whole life.

I stared at her for a long time, searching for the boundary between life and death, but

found only a blur. I wanted to pray, but the words would not come. My hand shook as I picked up the Bible from the nightstand, but it slipped from my grip and landed on the floor with a thud that sounded final.

In the hallway, I heard the rumble of the laundry cart. Soon they would come to take Mercy away, to wrap her in a sheet and consign her to the cold earth. I wanted to weep, but my eyes were dry.

The nurse returned with a pair of orderlies. They wheeled in a gurney, lifted Mercy onto it with practiced care, and rolled her out without ceremony. Her diary was left behind. I picked it up, thumbed through the pages, trying to make sense of the words and drawings. None of it meant anything. Or maybe it meant everything, and I was just too blind to see it.

The room felt larger with Mercy gone, but emptier, too. The air was stale. The cross, my Bible, the handful of things I'd brought with me—none of them seemed to matter in the face of what had happened here.

I sat on my bed, staring at the blank wall across from me. I tried to pray, but the silence was so deep it drowned out even my thoughts. All I could do was listen to the wind rattling the window and wonder whether Mercy's soul had gone anywhere at all.

Soon, my father would pick me up, I was sure. But that was no consolation. What was that man—the one who took Mercy's life? He seemed a man, but something more. Was it the devil himself? Had Mercy fallen so far into Satan's clutches that the fallen angel arrived himself to usher her into hell? I didn't even know what to think, much less if I could tell anyone what had happened. Who would believe me if I did?

Chapter 4

I came back from the sanatorium with a fever in my head. It wasn't a real fever—I didn't feel ill—but it baked behind my eyes and set my hands to trembling if I let them rest too long. My father said it was grief and overexertion, and that I'd soon recover with sleep and prayer. He'd never known the kind of nights that waited behind the closed doors of a place like that. He didn't know what I'd seen.

A part of me blamed him for sending me there. But this was a mission—and if the apostles could risk their lives to save souls, boldly accepting their own deaths, how could I cower in fear? What I'd seen hadn't come for me. That man, that thing, had come for her.

He tried to give me two days of peace, but even the parsonage seemed hollowed out, as if the cold from the sanatorium had followed me home and taken up residence in our walls. My room, which I'd once found comfortingly small, now seemed like a cage. I paced the boards until I wore a line in the floor, then knelt at my bed and pressed my forehead to the faded quilt. I prayed for Mercy Brown, for her soul, for her family. I prayed for myself that the memory of what I'd seen would scab over and heal, or at the very least dull to a bearable throb.

I always believed in the devil. I was certain of the existence of demons. Even in an era of so much progress, where many believed that humanity had become its own salvation, I saw evil everywhere, waiting in the shadows, ready to pounce when we least expected it. I'd never actually expected to encounter evil that way, not a demon in the flesh. What else could it have been, that creature that ended Mercy's life? And why had it done it? Had she summoned it with her witchcraft, with her strange drawings? Had she bidden it to take her out, a merciful death for a girl ironically named?

Sleep did not come. The dark outside my window was too perfect. In the stillness, I heard every sound: the shifting of the foundation, the shiver of trees in the wind, the hush of my own blood in my ears. I prayed harder. When my lips became numb from

softly chanting psalms, I recited them silently in my mind, allowing the rhythm of the words to soothe me like the ebb and flow of the tide.

I woke from a trance—I don't remember falling asleep, but I must have—when a pounding at the front door echoed up through the house. My father's voice, gruff with sleep, cut through the silence. He was not a man easily startled, but this was not a time of night for callers. His footsteps moved quickly down the hall, the floorboards creaking in staccato. I drew my shawl tight and pressed myself against the door, listening.

The voices in the parlor were hushed and urgent. My father, and another man. I recognized the other voice by its quiver: George Brown.

They did not come upstairs right away. There was a scraping of chairs, the hush of glass on wood, a faint clinking as my father poured something—a comfort, perhaps, or the illusion of one. I pressed my ear to the cold pane of my window and saw nothing but darkness, and in the darkness, nothing but a growing dread.

When at last my father knocked at my door, I was already standing beside it. I opened it and found him there, the old lines in his face set deeper by worry.

“Mr. Brown is here,” he said. “He needs to speak with you.”

“Now?” I said. My voice was so thin it nearly vanished in the corridor.

He nodded, and the look he gave me was strange—a warning and a plea all at once.

Mr. Brown was waiting for me in the sitting room. His clothes were rumpled and mismatched, as if he'd dressed by feel in a room with no light. His hair, always combed so flat it shone, stood up in tufts. His hands trembled, but not from cold; the tremor came from somewhere deeper. He rose as I entered, but did not offer a

greeting.

“Miss Bladewell,” he said. Then, more softly: “Alice.”

He looked older than his years, and more than that—he looked like someone who’d literally gone to hell and back.

I nodded, unsure if it was proper to speak.

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He gestured to the threadbare chair opposite, and I sat. My father stood by the hearth, one hand resting on the mantle, the other hidden behind his back.

“I need to know what happened that night,” Mr. Brown said. He looked at his hands, as if surprised to find them still attached to his body. “They said you were there when Mercy died. I have to know, were you able to bring her to repentance?”

I couldn’t find the words. I shook my head.

“Did anyone come and visit? Before she died?”

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. “I was there, and I—“ I could not finish the thought.

He nodded, as if I’d confirmed something he’d long suspected. “You saw something, didn’t you?”

I tried to look at my father for guidance, but his eyes were trained on the fire.

“I did,” I said.

George’s jaw worked for a moment before he could force the words out. “I’ve seen her. Mercy. Since the day she died.”

That wasn’t the admission I had anticipated, yet it felt genuine, much like how some nightmares continue to feel real—you understand, even as you awaken, that the fear won’t disappear with the morning light.

“She comes at night,” he went on, voice so low I had to lean forward to hear him. “She comes to the window, or sometimes she slips in through the cracks in the wall. Always at night. I’ve seen the marks on Edwin’s neck. He won’t admit it, but the boy is pale and weak, and he’s afraid.” George’s face contorted, and for a moment I thought he might collapse inward, like a house with its beams rotted through. “I know what it means. I know what it is.”

He looked up at me, and the desperation in his eyes was so raw I felt my composure crumble.

“Tell me,” he said, “what did you see in the sanatorium?”

I tried to speak, but my mouth was full of sand. I closed my eyes and forced myself to remember. The figure at the window, the impossible way it moved, the hunger that bled from its eyes.

“There was a man,” I said, the words barely above a whisper. “Or—it looked like a man, but I don’t think he was.” I shuddered. “He was tall, and thin, and his eyes were...”

George’s face turned ashen. “They were red.”

“He drank from her,” I said, my hands gripping the arms of the chair so tightly I thought they might splinter. “He drank her blood, and then he looked at me. He saw me, but it was like he was looking through me. I was frozen, petrified. I couldn’t move.”

My father broke his silence at last. “This is madness.”

George shot him a look of contempt, then returned to me. “It is not madness. There are things older than the church, older than all your prayers. In the old country, we

knew how to deal with them. Here, we pretend they don't exist, and so they take what they please."

I wanted to object, but the memory of Mercy's face, twisted in its final satisfied rictus, held my tongue.

"I need your help," Mr. Brown said, voice cracking. "You are the only one who saw it, the only one who can say what really happened. We require your testimony, if I'm to do what I intend."

I shook my head, but he pressed on. "The demon who inhabits my daughter comes every night. I hear her scratching at the walls. I hear Edwin talking to her in his sleep. Sometimes I see her in the yard, standing among the dead stalks, her white dress shining in the dark. She has no shadow."

I swallowed, trying to push the image away.

"You're special, Alice," Mr. Brown continued, his words tumbling out in a rush. "They say you are immune to the disease. Maybe it's true, or maybe you just have not been claimed by it yet. But you survived, and she did not. I believe an angel protects you, an angel whose aid we require."

"I can't—" I started, but he cut me off.

"You must," he said. "If you don't help, she will take Edwin. She will take the whole town. The thing that drank her soul that night did not finish its work. It left something behind."

The silence that followed was as complete as a burial was supposed to be.

"What do you want me to do?" There was nothing else to say.

Mr. Brown leaned forward, his face inches from mine. “Come to the church tonight, after the last bell. There will be others there—men who know what must be done. We cannot do it alone.”

He looked at my father, who met his gaze with a mixture of anger and fear.

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“We need you,” Mr. Brown said, and I saw in his eyes that he truly believed it. “My son’s life depends on it.”

He stood, and for a moment he seemed to waver, as if unsure the floor would hold him. Then he straightened, the old stiffness returning to his shoulders.

“I will see you tonight,” he said.

He did not wait for a response. He let himself out, the door slamming behind him.

My father and I sat in silence until the fire died down and the cold crept back into the room. I wanted to ask him what he believed, but I was afraid of his answer.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off.

“You will do as Mr. Brown requests.” It was more a command than a request. “I am sorry, Alice. I never wanted to involve you in any of this.”

I couldn’t protest. It wasn’t my place. “Yes, father.”

Chapter 5

The church after nightfall was nothing like the church by day. In daylight, it was austere but familiar, every shadow accounted for. At night, it was a mouth with all its teeth pulled, the absence of song or sermon leaving a silence that pressed against the windows and oozed beneath the doors.

I slipped through the side entrance, my shawl pulled tight and my footsteps barely audible on the stone floor. The nave was empty, the pews like rows of gravestones. The pulpit loomed overhead, carved with verses that once seemed immutable but now felt as fragile as ice. The only light came from the crack under the basement door, a wavering orange that pulsed like a heartbeat.

I paused at the top of the steps, letting my eyes adjust, then made my way down. The air grew colder with each step, and by the time I reached the bottom, my breath was visible in the candle glow. There were maybe a dozen men in the room, arranged in a semicircle of chairs. Some I recognized—Mr. Hobbes the butcher, Mr. Norris from the school, old Doctor Fields whose hands shook so badly he had to tie his pen to his wrist. There were others I'd only seen at a distance, nodding along to my father's Sunday sermons.

They were not the men I knew. By candlelight, their faces were waxy and severe, their expressions stripped of every trace of neighborliness. They sat rigid, hands folded or gripping their knees, and did not look up as I entered.

Mr. Brown stood at the center, back straight, eyes fixed on some distant point above our heads. There were papers in his hands, and as I approached, he shuffled them nervously, as if the act itself might conjure up the courage he lacked.

He cleared his throat. "We begin."

No one moved, but the silence somehow deepened.

"Miss Bladewell," he said, "thank you for coming."

He gestured for me to take a seat at the end of the arc. I obeyed, folding my hands in my lap, determined to show no fear. The only woman in a room full of men who'd decided I was necessary.

Mr. Brown turned to address the gathering. “Brothers,” he said, “we are met tonight because the evil we have long feared has come among us. Not as rumor or suspicion, but as a fact. My own daughter is the proof.”

A few of the men shifted in their seats, but none spoke.

“She is dead, and yet the devil lives through her,” George continued. “She has visited Edwin in the night, and left him weaker each time. I have seen her, and I have seen the thing that walks with her. Miss Bladewell has seen it as well.”

He looked to me, and in the silence I realized he was asking me to confirm it.

“Yes,” I said. My voice echoed off the stone.

Mr. Norris leaned forward, his knuckles white. “How can we be certain?” he said, voice trembling. “There have been stories, but—“

“Let the girl speak,” someone muttered from the shadows.

I cleared my throat, feeling all their eyes on me. “It wasn’t a person,” I said, searching for words. “Or if it was, it’s not anymore. I saw it in the sanatorium. It moved like smoke. And Mercy—she didn’t fight. She seemed... relieved.”

A hush fell, thicker than before.

Mr. Hobbes let out a breath through his nose. “So it’s true,” he said. “A vampire.”

The word landed with a thud. No one laughed.

Mr. Brown nodded. “It is true. My daughter has become the very thing we are sworn to fight.”

I sat up straight. “Sworn?”

Mr. Brown looked at me, and for the first time, there was a kind of apology in his face. “You deserve to know,” he said. “This church—our congregation—is one of many fronts for the Order of the Morning Dawn.” He let the words settle. “We are dedicated to stamping out evil wherever it takes root. Witches, warlocks, anything that traffics in the darkness. But most of all—those that return from the grave.”

It was absurd, yet it explained so much. The sermons on vigilance, the secret meetings held late at night. I thought of my father, who never let me wander outside after sundown.

Mr. Brown gestured to the floor at his feet, where someone had chalked a symbol into the flagstones: a half-circle, rays radiating outward, ringed in a language I didn’t know. “The rising sun,” he said. “Our charge is to bring light where darkness looms.”

I looked around the room. Every man was watching me now, gauging whether I was fit to be trusted, or if I would run screaming into the night.

Mr. Brown squared his shoulders. “There is a way to put things right. It is not pleasant, but it must be done.”

He was interrupted by a heavy sound—the groan of the basement door opening behind us. A figure stood in the entry: a woman, stooped and wild-haired, her dress a mess of stains and patches.

Moll Dwyer, the witch from the woods. I’d never seen her, but she looked like those

who knew her described her.

The men erupted.

“You can’t bring her in here!”

“She should burn for what she’s done—“

“George, have you lost your mind—“

Moll paid them no mind. She advanced into the circle, a look of contempt on her weathered face. Her eyes were clear and sharp as cut glass, and when she spoke, her voice carried above the shouting.

“Be still, all of you. I am not your enemy tonight.”

A few men lunged for her, but Mr. Brown raised a hand and they halted, if only out of shock. The room vibrated with rage and fear.

Moll fixed her gaze on me, then on Mr. Brown. “You asked for my help. You said you would listen.”

Mr. Brown nodded, his lips pressed so tight the skin went white.

She turned to the men, her voice steely. “You can exorcise a ghost, and you can drown a witch. But a vampire—“ She spat on the floor. “A vampire is something older, and far more clever. You cannot frighten it, and you cannot reason with it. You must destroy its heart, or it will keep coming. No matter how many times you bless the grave.”

The men muttered curses under their breath.

Moll continued, her tone almost mocking. “There is a ritual. One you will not like. But it’s the only thing that works.” She glanced at me again. “It must be performed by one who has not been claimed by the curse. Who cannot contract the ailment that’s befallen so many of you. The boy you seek to save will have contracted it, and any of you who try to do what must be done will fail without protection.”

It took me a moment to realize she meant me.

Mr. Brown finally spoke, his voice trembling but clear. “We need you, Alice.”

I stared at him, at all of them. “And what if I refuse?”

“Then Edwin dies,” Mr. Brown said. “And after him, all of us. The demon that has taken my daughter will devour the entire town if she gains more strength.”

Moll nodded. “It will not stop until it is finished. That is the nature of the thing.”

No one moved for a long time. The candles guttered, their light stretched thin against the darkness.

I looked at the symbol on the floor, at the men whose faces I had grown up with, now twisted by fear. I thought of Mercy, and the peace I’d seen in her face as she died. I thought of the thing at the window, waiting for me to flinch.

“I’ll do it,” I said. My voice was steady, even as my hands shook.

Moll smiled, and it was not a kind smile. “Good,” she said.

She turned to Mr. Brown. “Tell her where to meet me, and bring the others if you have the stomach for it. But don’t wait. The sun will be up soon, and you’ll want this done before then.”

No one moved. The only sound was the pop and hiss of candle fat.

She began with a wordless look at each face in the crowd, as if tallying which would see tomorrow's dawn and which might not. When her eyes met mine, I saw not contempt but calculation—an abacus behind cataract-clouded irises, every bead tallying debts and curses owed.

Someone in the crowd—the butcher, or maybe the schoolmaster—spat on the stone and said, “What’s this old witch got to teach us? It violates everything the Order stands for to ally ourselves with her!”

Moll smiled, showing teeth uneven as a graveyard.

“We have no choice.” Mr. Brown’s words were hushed. “I beg you all, for the sake of my son. It’s the only way to end this nightmare.”

“You’ll dig her up,” Moll said. “Tonight, before the full moon drops. You’ll find her corpse as fresh as the day she died, or fresher.” She didn’t blink. “You’ll cut out the heart, burn it to ash, and feed the ashes to the boy. I must be there to ensure all is done properly. The ashes will cure the infection.”

“That’s madness,” someone barked from the back. “You’ve lost your mind, George. Or worse, you’re bewitched.”

Mr. Brown didn’t answer. Instead, he raised his head, looked at the crowd, and said, “Again, I beg you, for Edwin’s sake. The marks on his neck. He’s dying. Faster every day. I will not allow the devil that took my daughter to take my son as well.”

The crowd seethed, then splintered into debate—some for, some against, all of them loud.

Through the chaos, Moll's voice knifed out: "There is no second chance. At sunrise, it's too late. If you want to save the boy, you dig her up now. Or you can wait and see the horror unfold."

A voice, high and thin, called from the edge: "And if you're lying to us? What then?"

Moll shrugged. "Then you've wasted a cold night and a bit of sweat. But if I'm right—" She looked at George. "You'll thank me, or at least let me be."

"What is your price?!" the man with the high voice snapped.

"Again, only that your Order leaves me and my coven be. We will not harm you or anyone in this town."

George fell to his knees. It was not a graceful motion; his legs gave out, and he caught himself on his palms. "Please," he said. "I've already lost my wife and daughter. I cannot lose my son too."

I'd never seen a grown man break like that. It was not theatrical. It was genuine, as if his spirit had broken.

Moll stepped forward, and for a heartbeat I thought she might gloat. Instead, she put her hand on his shoulder and said, "Do it quick. Do it before you lose your nerve."

The debate died, the men exhausted even by their own uproar.

Moll turned back to the mob. "You think me a witch, and maybe I am. But what Miss Brown has become is an abomination to both our kinds. Tonight, you'll see that even

enemies can have a common cause. For once, let the enemy of your enemy be your friend.”

No one cheered. No one offered thanks. The men simply gathered their coats and their shovels, and the sound of boots on stone was the only response.

Chapter 6

We left the church in a convoy of silence, the moon glaring down on us in judgment. My father joined us, though I’d never seen him look so distraught. What we were doing—it violated everything I’d ever heard him preach, everything he’d taught me.

The cemetery waited, silent as a closed book, the ground already riven with frost. The men fanned out, their lanterns winking on one by one as they approached the new grave.

I trailed at the rear, Moll at my side. She reeked of tallow and wild herbs and something else.

“She was your friend?” Moll asked, not unkindly.

“Not really,” I said, voice brittle. “I barely knew her.”

“No matter,” said Moll. “You’ll be her friend tonight. Though I must warn you, it will feel the opposite.”

We watched as the men got to work. No one spoke, clearly disgusted to do a witch’s bidding. The mound gave way quicker than I’d thought; the ground was softer, maybe. If Mercy truly had been rising from her grave, it made sense.

The coffin came up with a groan. The lid was forced, and the lantern light pooled on

Mercy Brown's face, smooth and alive as if she'd only fallen asleep.

A gasp rippled through the crowd. Even in death, she was beautiful.

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Mercy's eyes shot open in terror. Everyone gasped.

"The devil!" Hobbes announced.

"The knife!" Moll demanded. Mr. Brown gave it to her, and before Mercy could move, she plunged it into her abdomen.

The screams were piercing, the agony alive. Everyone else looked away—except for me and Moll.

"Are you sure this will do it?" Mr. Brown's voice trembled. "Are you sure this will kill the demon that has overtaken my Mercy?"

"Indeed, it will." Moll spoke calmly, as if she'd done this before. "It is the only way. We must burn her heart and liver and feed the ashes to your boy if you hope for him to recover."

"I don't like this," my father protested. "This is witchcraft. It's of the devil!"

Moll glanced at my father even as she continued to cut at Mercy's flesh. "Tell me, preacher. Does your faith have prescriptions for how to vanquish a vampire, how to heal those afflicted by their bite?"

"No, ma'am. But this..."

"Proceed," Mr. Brown directed. "We can repent of these sins in time. But we must eliminate the demon! We need this to heal Edwin."

Mercy's face was contorted with rage. She locked eyes with her own father, her stare both murderous and filled with pain, with betrayal.

Mercy squirmed.

"More garlic!" Moll shouted. "She's strong. I must complete this before she rises."

Mercy's scream sent shockwaves through the crowd. Mr. Brown took two steps back as his undead daughter pleaded with him. "Daddy! Please stop!"

"It's okay, Mercy." Mr. Brown tried to stay calm, but his words were laced with anguish. "Your soul will be free from the demon soon."

"Fuck you!" Mercy screamed.

"It's the devil within her speaking," my father added. "You mustn't listen to it."

"It's not the fucking devil!" Mercy snapped, her eyes still fixed on Mr. Brown. "It's me... It's your daughter!"

I could see tears welling up in Mr. Brown's face before he turned away. "Make it quick. I can't bear to look."

"Moll, you bitch!" Mercy shouted.

The witch looked at Mercy, empathy in her eyes.

Moll reached her hand into Mercy's chest. I saw the heart in her hands as she placed it in a bowl held by the preacher. Then she cut again and pulled out another organ. Mercy's screams persisted.

“Burn them,” Moll ordered. “And do not let any of the ashes escape. The boy will need it all.”

As they set her heart on fire, Mercy screamed as though she could feel the burn. “You’ll be damned for this, all of you!”

Finally, silence. Mercy’s face remained frozen in mid-scream.

The smell was worse than death. It filled the air, seeped into my clothes, wormed into my nose. The heart turned black in the flame, then to ash. Moll scooped the ashes into a vial and corked it.

She handed it to me. The glass was warm.

“Give it to the boy,” she said. “Mix it with wine, or milk, or water from the old well. But don’t wait.”

I took the vial. My hands did not stop shaking.

The men put Mercy’s remains back in the coffin and buried it again, not with reverence but with grim efficiency. When the grave was filled and the ground tamped down, we all stood for a long moment, not knowing what to say.

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Moll broke the silence. “There’s always a price,” she said. “Tonight, you paid less than most.”

She turned and left, her shadow trailing behind her like a second self.

I stood there until the others had gone, the vial of ashes burning in my palm. The Bible in my other hand felt heavier than any weapon, heavier than the heart in the bottle.

At the far edge of the cemetery, Mr. Brown waited. He didn’t speak, just took my arm and guided me toward his house, where Edwin was waiting.

I did not look back. There was nothing left to see.

I followed Mr. Brown back to his house, the bottle of ashes cradled in my hands. The moon had gone behind clouds. I wanted to pray, but for the first time, I didn’t know how. Would God even hear our prayers, given what we’d done?

Mr. Brown did not speak, not until the front door was shut and bolted behind us. The house was unlit, the only warmth the embers in the parlor stove. He slumped into a chair, his face slack. I hovered by the door, not sure if I was meant to stay.

After a long time, he said, “She was so small when she was born.” His voice was thick with something old—regret, maybe, or shame. “I held her in one hand, like a bird.” He stared at the floor. “Now she’s—“ He could not finish.

I wanted to say it would be all right, but even I didn’t believe it. So I said nothing,

just listened to the slow breakdown of a man who'd lost everything worth keeping.

He looked up at me, eyes rimmed with red. "Do you believe it'll work?" he asked. "What the witch said."

I didn't know how to answer. "I don't know what I believe."

He nodded, then stood, steadying himself against the table. "Edwin's upstairs. Please, hurry."

When I entered Edwin's room he looked worse than I expected. His eyes were ringed with purple, his hair matted to his head.

George steered him into a chair, then turned to me. "How do we do this?"

I set the bottle on the table, hands trembling. "She said to mix it with something. Water, or milk."

He fetched a chipped mug and filled it from the pitcher. I poured in the ashes, watched them settle at the bottom. The water turned cloudy, then grey, then red at the edges. I pushed it across the table.

Edwin looked at his father from across the room. George nodded.

He drank it down in two gulps, the liquid streaking the sides of the cup like dirty snowmelt. He coughed, wiped his mouth, and looked at me.

"Will it hurt?" he whispered.

I shook my head, though I knew it was a lie.

He folded into himself, shivering. George kept his distance, afraid to contract the illness.

The change, when it came, was nothing like the stories. No lightning, no screams. Edwin's breathing slowed, then steadied. The bruises faded a little, the color coming back to his lips. He looked up, eyes unfocused, and smiled a thin, tired smile.

"Thank you," he said. I almost believed he meant it.

Mr. Brown looked at me as if I'd performed a miracle. But I knew better. I'd seen the way Moll's eyes lingered on the ashes, the twitch of her mouth when the heart caught fire. This wasn't a cure. It was a trade.

As I stood to leave, Mr. Brown caught my arm. "Will you stay?" he asked. "Just for tonight. In case he needs help. I still cannot get too close, and it breaks my heart to see him in pain."

I nodded. I sat on the edge of the parlor sofa. I watched the window, waiting for the thing I'd seen at the sanatorium. But the night passed in silence.

In the early hours, I slipped out. I walked past Mercy's grave, the dirt already frozen over. I whispered a prayer—for her and for all of us.

Chapter 7

The following day drifted by in such a dense haze that it was like trying to breathe through wool. I went through the motions: rising, washing, setting the table for breakfast. I heard my father's voice in every room, always pitched just above the hum of my own thoughts. He was gentle at first—he must have expected me to be fragile. I would have resented it, if I could muster any feeling at all.

I hadn't had anything to eat since the previous night, but I didn't feel hungry. I didn't have the stomach for food. My hands shook, but only when I held them still. If I kept moving, they seemed almost normal. I swept the floors, though they were already clean. I washed a window that I'd only washed a week before. I folded and unfolded the same shirt until the seams began to fray. Whenever I looked up, I caught my reflection in the glass. Each time I was surprised to see myself intact, not cracked down the middle like the porcelain dolls we'd buried with Mama.

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My father hovered in the periphery, always just out of reach. He made tea and brought it to me, the cup rattling gently in its saucer. I sipped it because he expected me to, not because I wanted it. He asked how I slept. I lied. He asked if I'd like to talk. I shook my head, or pretended not to hear. He waited for a sign—some clue that his daughter was still somewhere beneath the mask—but I couldn't give him that comfort.

I spent the morning in the kitchen, but my mind was still in the graveyard. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw the heart burning in the bowl, the ash swirling in water, the way Edwin's lips had smudged the rim of the glass. I heard Mercy's scream echoing off stone and frozen dirt. I saw her face, first alive, then dead, then something else altogether.

By noon, I was sure I would never speak again. It was like the feeling I'd had after I saw the man bite Mercy, but compounded a hundred times. Maybe I had gone mute, like Nathanael Forsyth, a nice young man from the church who'd returned home after serving in the U.S. Army. He'd been in what they called the Wounded Knee Massacre. Physically, Nathanael came back in one piece. But he left his soul on the battlefield. As the story went, they'd slaughtered over three hundred Indians that day. It changed the poor boy. He'd never be the same again—and he hadn't said more than a few words since his return.

I knew now a little what that must've been like. To see something so terrible that it sends your soul into hibernation, if not into hell. I wasn't much more than a walking, cleaning corpse. Not unlike that monster Mercy used to be—for a few nights, anyway.

Though I suspected she wasn't scrubbing dishes or sweeping floors.

My father would not be denied.

He found me at the table, elbows propped on the wood, hands covering my face.

"Alice," he said, his tone gentler than I remembered him ever being, "you haven't touched your breakfast."

I looked down at the plate. The eggs had gone cold and congealed, yellow pooling at the edges like the fat on cooling broth.

"I'm not hungry," I said. My voice sounded strange in the room, as if it belonged to someone else.

He sat across from me, folding his hands in front of him like he did when counseling parishioners in distress. "I realize last night was... difficult," he began, choosing his words with the caution of a man laying powder near an open flame. "But you did well, Alice. You did as the Lord commands. You brought comfort to the dying, and peace to the living."

I felt a wave of nausea, sharp and sour. "Did I?" I asked. "Did I bring peace? Or did I just watch a girl get torn to pieces and then help her brother drink what was left?"

His face pinched at the memory, but he did not look away. "It was necessary. You saw what she had become. You saw what was at stake."

I laughed, thin and brittle. "Did I, father? Because from where I stood, it looked like a room full of grown men taking orders from a witch and then pretending it was God's work."

He flushed, color rising in two sharp spots on his cheeks. “Do not blaspheme, Alice.”

“I’m not blaspheming,” I said, my voice trembling with something like anger, maybe, or just exhaustion. “I’m just trying to understand. You tell me witchcraft is evil, but when there’s no other hope, we run to it like a dog to its vomit. You say we trust in God’s plan, but the minute things get ugly, we grab our shovels and our knives and do whatever it takes to save ourselves. What’s the difference? Is it only witchcraft if someone else is doing it?”

He sat back, folding his arms. The lines around his mouth deepened. “You have every right to feel what you feel. No one should have to see what you saw last night. But you need to understand: desperation drives men to do things they otherwise would not. Mr. Brown has lost his wife, his daughter—he was not about to lose his son as well. Would you have let the boy die?”

I thought of Edwin, his face as pale as milk.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe that would have been kinder.”

He looked at me for a long time. “God is good and gracious, Alice. He forgives those who repent. Even when we act out of fear.”

I stared at the table, tracing the wood grain with my thumbnail. “Do you think Mercy wanted forgiveness? Do you think she wanted anything from us at all?”

He exhaled, slow and deliberate. “I think she was lost. Lost to her pain, lost to her grief. I think you tried to help, and that’s all anyone could have asked of you.”

I shook my head, unable to agree. “You don’t know what that witch was really up to. You really expect she did what she did to help a man who belongs to an order that wants her dead?”

He frowned, but didn't answer right away. "You're right to be suspicious. Moll is dangerous, and not to be trusted. But sometimes God uses the wicked to accomplish His purposes. We see it in scripture—Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, the Roman centurions."

"And you think God is using Moll Dwyer?" I asked. "Or are we just too weak to admit we've lost control?"

He didn't answer that, either. Instead, he reached across the table and took my hand. His was warm and rough, the skin callused.

"I'm proud of you," he said softly. "Even if you don't see it."

I wanted to pull my hand away, but I let it rest in his.

"Sometimes," he said, "God calls us to walk through fire. But He does not leave us there."

I thought of the grave, the ash, the scream. I did not feel delivered. I felt scorched to the bone.

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I spent the rest of the day pretending to busy myself with chores. I swept the entryway twice, then polished the silver, though we never had guests. I rearranged the pantry, only to find myself putting everything back exactly as it had been.

Still, Mercy's face haunted every quiet moment. The way her eyes had opened in the coffin, wild and red and desperate. The way she'd screamed not in fear but in rage and unimaginable pain, as if even in death she'd refused to let the world have the last word.

By dusk I was so tired I could hardly stand, but the prospect of sleep terrified me. Even if Mercy was dead—really dead, this time—the thing that made her was still out there. Would he be angry about what we'd done? Would he come after us in vengeance?

I was heading to my room, planning to read until my eyes gave out, when a knock rattled the front door. Not the tentative tapping of a visitor, but a frantic, uneven pounding.

My father met me in the hallway, his face already tight with concern.

"It's Mr. Brown," he said. "He's—he's in a state."

I followed him to the entry, and there was George Brown, hatless, his hair in disarray, his coat thrown over his nightshirt. He looked ten years older than he had the night before, his eyes red-rimmed and swollen.

"Alice," he said, his voice so hoarse I barely recognized it. "You have to come. It

didn't work."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

He looked past me, to my father. "It didn't work. Mercy's out there. I saw her, I swear on the Holy Book. She came to the window, just like before."

My father tried to reason with him, his tone steady but urgent. "Mr. Brown, we burned her heart. There is no way—"

"She was there!" George shouted, spittle flecking his chin. "I saw her, and she saw me. The boy is sick again. Worse than before. Please—please, help."

A tremor ran through me, cold and deep.

"I'll come," I said, before my father could protest. "Just let me get my coat."

My father stepped between us. "Alice, this is not—"

"I have to," I said. "It's my fault, isn't it? I was the one who gave Edwin the ashes."

"What do you think you're going to do about it?!" My father screamed. "You're just a girl. You've done enough!"

"Just a girl?" His dismissal only hardened my resolve. "You want to protect me now, but you sent me into that sanatorium without a second thought?"

"It wasn't like that—"

"Then you let them use me again. To do that horrible ritual."

“She’ll be safe,” Mr. Brown insisted. “She might be the only one who can stop... the devil.”

“Your daughter, you mean?” I resisted the urge to stomp through the floor. If I hadn’t been just a girl, I might have had the strength to do it.

Mr. Brown shook his head. “My daughter is dead.”

I clenched my fists. I wasn’t raised to disrespect my elders, but even a minister’s daughter has her limits. “Is that what allows you to sleep at night, Mr. Brown? Because I heard her screams. I heard how she called out to you as you let that witch cut her apart. That didn’t sound like a devil to me. It sounded like a terrified girl, like your daughter.”

“Enough!” My father had heard enough. “Both of you! We’ve reached the end of the line. There’s nothing more we can do.”

“Your daughter has a guardian angel,” Mr. Brown insisted. “There’s no other way to explain it. Given that the rest of us are tainted in our sin, on account of our dabblings with the witch...”

I huffed. “I took part in that too.”

“Not by choice,” Mr. Brown said. “We took advantage of you. You have a pure heart, Alice.”

I snorted. “I don’t know about that.”

Mr. Brown didn’t flinch. “What we’re facing is pure evil. We made a grave mistake, trying to conquer evil with evil. We have no choice now but to turn to someone who is untainted by our sin. Your light might be the only thing that can stand against the

darkness that's consumed—“

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“Your daughter.” I finished the sentence for him. “Say her name, Mr. Brown.”

“I can’t. She’s not—“

“IF YOU WANT MY HELP, SAY HER NAME.”

It probably took a good ten seconds before he mustered a reply. “Help Mercy. Please, Alice. We have things you can use, things you might wield against her. Weapons that can defeat a creature of the night.”

“A creature?” I cocked an eyebrow.

“It’s a weapon that can stop Mercy. That can help her.”

“What kind of weapon?” I asked.

Mr. Brown took a deep breath. “Let’s just say I’d use it if I could. But I’m too tainted. All of us are. I’m afraid you are our best hope of wielding it against her... against Mercy and the devil that’s taken her.”

Chapter 8

George Brown waited for me in the vestibule, coat already buttoned against the cold. He offered a hand, not out of gallantry, but because he didn’t trust me not to run.

We walked side by side through the midnight streets, each footstep sinking into the frost-bitten crust of snow. Neither of us spoke. The moon hung low and mean,

flattening our shadows across the frozen ruts. The further we went, the more the world seemed to shrink—houses drawing their curtains tight, not a single lamp burning in any window. Exeter was a town of watchers, but tonight all eyes were shuttered.

The church, when we reached it, was nothing but a silhouette. My own father's sermons still rang in my head, the certainty of his voice rebuking all that lurked in darkness. I wondered what he'd think of his daughter summoned to the very bowels of this place by a man who saw devils in the faces of his own children.

We entered through the vestry, where the air smelled of beeswax and dying flowers. George led me to a narrow stairwell at the back, half hidden behind a curtain meant to keep out drafts. He did not light a lamp, only pressed a candle into my hand and struck a match.

"Down," he said. His voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

I descended the stone steps. They were slick with moisture. I clung to an equally moist railing, afraid my feet might slip out from under me and I'd be left making the rest of my trip down the stairs on my rear end. Fortunately, one footfall after the next, I made it down safely as the steps led me into a small crypt-like chamber, the ceiling so low I ducked on instinct.

Candles burned everywhere. There were a dozen men, maybe more, all shrouded in dark coats and hoods. Their faces floated above their collars like pale moons, every one of them pinched by secrecy and the sharp tang of fear.

At the center stood a man I did not know. He was not tall, not broad, but he radiated authority like heat from fire. His suit was neat, the only spot of order in the entire miserable room, and his eyes flickered blue in the uncertain light. He did not speak at first, only looked me up and down, measuring my weight and worth with a single

pass.

Mr. Brown cleared his throat. “She’s here.”

“I see,” said the man at the center. He had an accent that I could not place—maybe Boston, maybe somewhere colder. “You are Alice Bladewell?”

I nodded.

He pressed his lips into a close-mouthed smile. “Thank you for coming, Miss Bladewell. We have heard much of your... resilience.”

He gestured to the space before him. “Please. Stand here.”

I did. The eyes of every man in the circle bored into my back. I could smell their sweat, their anxious breath, the faint stink of garlic.

“My name is not important,” said the man at the center. “Tonight, I speak for the Order of the Morning Dawn.” He lifted something from the table beside him: a crucifix, carved from dark wood, its arms bound in iron. The metal looked black and pitted, as if it had once survived a fire. “We were told you might be able to bear this. That you have not been... touched, by what afflicts so many.”

He held it out to me. I hesitated.

“Take it,” he said, and there was no mistaking the command in his voice.

I reached out. The wood was warm—impossibly so, as if it had been pressed to a living body moments before. The iron bands bit into my palm. The moment I closed my fingers around it, I felt a crawling sensation behind my eyes, like a swarm of ants moving through my brain. The air shimmered blue-white around the crucifix, and

every candle in the room guttered at once.

Someone gasped. Someone else said, “God above—“

I almost dropped it, but the leader’s eyes pinned me in place.

“That’s it.” His voice was urgent. “You see it too, don’t you?”

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“I—“ I wanted to say no, to hand it back, to have nothing to do with this. But the crucifix pulsed against my skin, vibrating with a low, hungry frequency.

One of the men in the circle crossed himself, muttering a prayer under his breath.

The leader turned to the room. “You see? She is the one. The key.”

Every eye swung back to me. Some full of hope, some of dread. None of them saw me, only the thing they wanted to see.

I tried to hand the crucifix back. The leader shook his head, his smile tightening. “Hold it. You must hold it until the vision passes. That is the first proof.”

My knuckles turned white. The blue light intensified, not in the room, but in my own mind. I saw things: bones stacked like kindling; faces gnawed hollow by disease. I smelled milk gone sour, and the sweet metallic rot of blood. The crucifix throbbed with every image, as though it fed on my revulsion.

I gritted my teeth. “What is this?”

The man’s eyes softened, just a little. “It is the weapon that will end this.”

He stepped closer. “Do you know why we called you here? Why it has to be you?”

I shook my head, but the blue light made everything swim. My pulse pounded so hard I thought I might faint.

He gestured to the men in the circle. “All of us, at one time or another, have failed. We have succumbed to seduction, trickery, or force, compromising with evil to defeat it. We bear the stain. But you, Alice—your faith is pure. Untainted.” He said it like an accusation. “The vampire cannot touch you. The witch cannot corrupt you. You are the shield.”

I tried again to hand him the crucifix, but it stuck to my palm, as if magnetized. I had to force it away, and even then my hand ached from the effort.

“It’s wrong,” I said, my voice shaking. “It doesn’t feel holy. It feels—“

“Dead?” The man smiled, as if this was a compliment. “That is the way of such things. The relic was forged for a single purpose. To destroy the thing that is neither dead nor living. Only one whose heart is still wholly alive can wield it.”

I realized I was shaking.

“You’re asking me to kill Mercy Brown.”

The word “kill” was a stone in the air. None of them flinched.

The leader nodded. “She is already dead. Therefore, she is not your friend. Not even your enemy. She is a vessel for the darkness that walks in this world. You must empty her.

I felt the room squeeze in around me. “No. I can’t.”

“You will,” he said. “Or she will destroy everything you love.”

My mouth was too dry to argue. I looked around at the circle of faces—men I’d known since childhood, who’d traded goods with my family, who’d shared hymnals

in the pews.

All of them wanted me to be the key.

The circle of men drew in, close enough I could hear the nervous grind of their teeth. The leader studied my hand, the crucifix clamped between whitened knuckles, as if he might will it to do something more dramatic. I waited for a sign—a dove, a tongue of fire, anything to justify the tremor now working its way up my arm. It finally came, though the manner of the sign took me by surprise.

A blue-white glow emanated from the wood, causing the room's shadows to retreat into the crevices.

“Now,” the leader said, “Pass it to Mr. Brown.”

I wanted to drop it, but my hand refused. George Brown stepped forward, his expression an uneasy blend of expectation and dread. He took hold of the crucifix, and for one lurching second our hands overlapped—the stubble on his knuckles rasping my skin. As I let go, a whine like an overstrained wire sang in my ears.

George held the crucifix before him, arm rigid as a gun barrel. He stared at the wavering aura, now pulsing faster, the blue-white edge creeping up the iron bands toward the outstretched figure nailed to its center. The wood smoked, faintly, as if resisting the change.

Someone behind me gasped. The sound echoed off the stone, then ricocheted around the circle. Mr. Norris—always the first to doubt—took two steps back. “That’s not natural.”

The leader spread his hands. “It is not natural. That is the point.” He looked around, daring anyone to meet his eye. “This is the sign we were promised. The power of the

angels, awakened by one of pure faith.”

He turned to me, the pinpoints of his gaze knitting my limbs to the floor. “The Order thanks you, Miss Bladewell.”

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I shook my head. “I haven’t given you anything.”

“You don’t have to,” the leader said. “Faith is not a coin to be spent. It is a force that—“ He smiled, teeth wet and white. ”—persists, lingers, that others might benefit from its embrace.”

Embrace? I was incredulous. I hadn’t done anything on purpose. How had I turned this strange crucifix into a beacon? What about me really made it work? I had faith, of course, but was it actually pure? My gut told me something else was going on—they needed me to awaken whatever magic lingered in this relic, but was it really a miracle, a gift of angels as they seemed to suggest, or another “spell” stolen from the likes of Moll Dwyer, only passing as a gift? The one thing I’d learned about the Order of the Morning Dawn in the short time I’d known of their existence was that they were not beyond hypocrisy—provided their compromises produced what they believed were desirable results.

George Brown’s hand shook as he lifted the crucifix higher. The blue light brightened, throwing moving shadows across the hoods of the gathered men. The leader watched with the calm of someone who’s already seen the future. “With this,” he said, “we can finally put my daughter to rest! We can destroy the demon that’s imprisoned her soul!”

I stood in the ring of men, pulse hammering so hard in my throat I thought it might choke me.

The leader of the Order—still just “the man at the center” to me, though I now understood every congregation had men like this, built from equal parts conviction

and ice—allowed the silence to thicken, stretching it until the air itself vibrated with the tension.

“We have a plan,” he said finally, his voice pitched for the acoustics of stone and blood. “There is always a plan. The only question is whether you are prepared to do your part, Miss Bladewell.”

I wanted to protest, to refuse, but something about this man frightened me. Against my better judgment, I simply nodded.

The leader barely smiled, only the upturn of a single muscle at the corner of his mouth. “Good. Then let’s review.”

He raised his hand, and the circle of men leaned in as if drawn by a single string. “Tomorrow evening, we will confront the vampire. She may attempt to return to her home again, but she’s also claimed victims near the tavern.”

I gulped. Victims? I didn’t want to admit it, but maybe this so-called “Order” served a necessary purpose. Vampires were a thing like ghost stories, tales told of their haunts around campfires or by older children trying to frighten the younger. I’d never thought they were real—and when I’d learned they were, that Mercy had apparently become one, I doubted they were as evil as people imagined. If such a thing existed, surely they were misunderstood. But if Mercy Brown had truly claimed victims—more than one—maybe this creature that she’d become was as evil as these men believed.

“Miss Bladewell,” the leader continued, you will carry the stake.” He gestured to the bundle of tools on the table—a length of sharp wood, splintered at one end and stained dark at the other. “You will attempt to drive it through her chest. If this fails, as it might, seeing as though the creature’s heart was removed once already, you are to use the second measure.”

I snorted. “If you burned her heart, why even attempt it?”

“Because we cannot say why, despite what we’ve done, the vampire still rises. It is a peculiar mystery, and the simplest explanation is that we’d only been made to believe that we’d taken her heart, that the witch who appeared to cut it out of her had done so by sleight of hand.”

“We think that we may not have removed Mercy’s heart at all,” Mr. Brown added, though I could tell from the look on his face he didn’t quite believe it.

I didn’t either. “I heard her screams. I saw what happened. I find it hard to believe the witch did anything less.”

“Witches are notoriously skilled at deception,” the leader insisted. “But you are right to believe that there is some other diabolical magic that revived the vampire, that she has defied all our knowledge and found a way to exist apart from her heart. That is why we have another plan.”

“The glowing crucifix?” I added. “You want me to use that against her?”

“Not exactly.” George Brown nodded curtly. “You’ve awakened the celestial power within it, and we thank you for that. But your faith protects you from the likes of vampires. You need to distract it, to get close enough to give someone else—me—the opportunity to expose the vampire to the light emanating from the cross.”

“Distract her?” I tilted my head. “You’re certain she can’t harm me?”

“Of course we are.” Mr. Brown sounded matter-of-fact, but there was a hesitancy in his voice that made me question it.

The leader, eager to move past the question, signaled to one of the hooded men at his

right. The man reached under the table and produced a burlap sack, the bottom heavy with something coarse and pale. “Crushed garlic,” the leader explained. “The old stories are not wrong. She will not be able to breathe, to see, to resist. The sack goes over the head. Immediately.”

“And then?” I asked, voice barely there.

The leader’s eyes lit at the question, as if he’d waited all night for me to speak. “Mr. Brown will reveal the crucifix. The vampire cannot bear its celestial light.” He regarded George with a new, sharp interest. “You will finish it, Mr. Brown.”

“I still don’t understand why I shouldn’t carry the crucifix. If I have to get that close—“

“Because it is my cross to bear.” Mr. Brown barely held back his tears. “It is my fault that I’d not prevented Mercy from getting involved with witchcraft to begin with. It is my duty, according to the vows I’ve taken as a member of the Order, to be the one to eliminate the devil that has awakened in what used to be my daughter.”

I swallowed, forcing the bile back down. I still didn’t like the plan—and I wasn’t sure I was as protected by my supposed “purity” as they seemed to think. But what choice did they have? I was just a girl, and these men had authority. My father had insisted I do as they ask. It wasn’t becoming of a lady to refuse the demands of such men, much less for a puritan girl to disobey her father.

Chapter 9

I stepped into the winter night, each breath crystallizing before me like the ghosts of prayers never answered. The wind bore teeth, gnawing through my woolen coat as if it were nothing but cobwebs. George Brown walked beside me, his hooded robe billowing around him. Neither of us spoke. What words could possibly prepare us for

what lay ahead? We were hunting a girl I once knew—a girl who was supposed to be Mr. Brown's daughter, but was now something else entirely, something that had no right to walk among the living. At least according to the Order of the Morning Dawn.

The crucifix hung heavy in George's grip, its blue-white glow muffled beneath his cloak. I'd wrapped a thick scarf around my neck, partly against the cold, partly as a protection against... well, if the legends were right, and I wasn't sure they were, vampires often went for the neck. My scarf wasn't perfect protection by any means, but it was something. An inconvenience, perhaps that might buy me an extra half-second if things didn't go according to plan. The burlap sack filled with crushed garlic swung against my side as I walked, its smell largely suppressed. Occasionally, a faint aroma would reach my nose.

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Main Street lay empty, with all windows unlit and doors securely locked. Even the tavern, typically aglow with lamplight and echoing with the sounds of merriment, was unusually quiet, as though the entire town had chosen to pause and hold its breath. “People say they’ve seen her here,” Mr. Brown whispered. “Taking victims. Young women, mostly”. I nodded, unable to force words past the knot in my throat. The stake tucked inside my coat pressed hard against my ribs, a constant reminder of what I’d agreed to do. “Remember. She is not my daughter anymore. She’s not your friend, but she might attempt to deceive you into believing it’s so. What walks in her skin is a demon, nothing more.”

A demon. The word rang hollow. I had to wonder, did he have any proof that’s what a vampire was? Or was he simply going off of what the Order of the Morning Dawn told him? What if he was wrong? What if Mercy was still there, frightened by what she’d gone through, desperate for salvation? I’d seen Mercy in the sanatorium, seen her cough blood into handkerchiefs, seen her wither and fade. I’d watched her die. Whatever had visited her bed that night had not been merciful—but she’d welcomed it. Then there were the screams when the witch cut out her heart. The cries to her own father... that didn’t sound like a demon. It sounded like a girl in agony, misunderstood, betrayed.

I thought of those screams at the most ironic of times—because another scream sounded from nearby.

It wasn’t Mercy. It was someone else, another woman, shrieking in terror. It came from the narrow alley beside the tavern. Mr. Brown grabbed my arm, hard enough to bruise. “There,” he hissed. We moved toward the sound, our footsteps suddenly too loud on the frozen ground. My heart hammered against my ribs, each pulse a

reminder that I was alive, terribly alive, and about to face something that existed beyond the boundary of death. The alley reeked of old beer and rotting vegetables, the scents oddly comforting in their mundanity. But as we crept deeper into the shadows, another smell rose beneath them—copper and salt, warm and wet. Blood. My foot struck something soft. I looked down to see a woman's purse, its contents spilled across the dirty snow. A handkerchief, some coins, a small comb with teeth broken. A life interrupted.

That's when I saw them. Two figures pressed against the brick wall at the alley's end, so tightly entwined they might have been illicit lovers. But there was nothing loving in the rigid arch of the woman's back, the way her hands clawed uselessly at her attacker's shoulders. Mercy held her pinned, one hand tangled in the woman's hair to expose her throat, the other clamped over her mouth to stifle her cries. Even in the darkness, I knew it was Mercy. The curve of her neck, the way she tilted her head—these were details burned into my memory from our time in the sanatorium. But everything else about her had changed. Her movements were fluid and predatory, her skin luminous in the faint light that spilled from the tavern's back window. She looked healthier than she ever had while alive.

I stepped on a piece of broken glass. The crunch was deafening in the silent alley.

Mercy's head snapped up. Her eyes caught the dim light and reflected it back, red as burning coals. Blood smeared her mouth, black in the darkness. She released her victim, who slid down the wall and crumpled into a heap. "Well," Mercy said, her voice musical and strange. "If it isn't little miss perfect". She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, casual as a child caught with jam. "You're a long way from church, aren't you?"

I couldn't speak. My tongue felt swollen in my mouth, every word I'd rehearsed suddenly inaccessible.

Mercy took a step forward, then another. She moved like water over stones, all fluid grace. The girl I'd talked to in the sanatorium had been gaunt and feverish; this creature was something else entirely—beautiful and terrible.

“And Daddy dearest,” she continued, glancing at Mr. Brown. “Come to see your little girl? I'm touched.”

George trembled beside me, whether from rage or fear I couldn't tell. His knuckles whitened around the hidden crucifix.

Mercy reached into a pocket and withdrew a small silver flask. She unscrewed the cap and took a long swallow, her throat working. Lowering the flask, she revealed a crimson-stained grin.

“How about a drink?” she offered, extending the flask toward me. “It warms you right up on a night like this”.

I found my voice at last. “I don't drink”.

“No?” Mercy tilted her head, considering me. “That's right. You're a good girl, aren't you, Alice? Always so pure. Always so... faithful.” She spat the last word like a curse.

“Tell me, Mercy,” I said, my voice steadier than I felt. “What does it feel like to die?”

Something flickered across her face—surprise, perhaps, or a ghost of the human girl she'd once been. “What do you mean?”

“I was there,” I pressed on. “I watched you die in that sanatorium bed. I saw what came for you”. Mercy's smile widened, revealing teeth too white, too sharp. “The Mercy you knew is still dead,” she said. “I'm brand new”. She took another step

closer. “Better. Stronger”. I felt for the sack of garlic at my waist, fingers closing around the rough burlap. The Order’s instructions echoed in my mind: get close, distract her, use the garlic, then the stake. The crucifix would do the rest.

“It’s a sin,” I said, playing for time. “What you’re doing. Those people you’ve hurt—“

“Sin?” Mercy laughed, the sound high and hollow. “That’s rich, coming from someone who helped cut out my heart and feed it to my brother. How is Edwin, by the way? Still sipping soup laced with my ashes?”

“You’re not Mercy,” I said, voice shaking now. “You’re just wearing her face. The real Mercy is gone.” She was close enough now that I could smell her—not the rot I’d expected, but something sweet and coppery, like metal left in the rain. “Am I?” she asked. “Or am I more Mercy than I ever was? Free from all those rules and fears. Free from illness. Free from death.”

I moved before I could lose my nerve. In one motion, I pulled the sack of garlic from my belt and flung it over her head, aiming for her face. The crushed cloves spilled out, a cloud of pungent dust that should have blinded her, choked her. “By the Order of the Morning Dawn,” I shouted, drawing the stake from inside my coat, “to hell with you, devil!” I drove the stake toward her chest, putting all my weight behind it. I wasn’t thinking of Mercy Brown anymore, but of the thing that had taken her, the demon that had to be sent back to the pit it crawled from. The stake drove into Mercy’s chest with a dull thud, meeting no resistance other than the skin it pierced. Yet, to my horror, there was no blood, no cry of pain—nothing. She stood there, unfazed, as if I had merely tapped her with a feather. The stake had found its mark, but without a heart to pierce, it had no effect. Mercy laughed again, reaching up to tear the sack from her head. The garlic dust clung to her hair, her face, but she merely wrinkled her nose in exaggerated disgust. “That stinks,” she said, brushing the garlic from her dress. “Really, Alice. Garlic? Stakes? You’ve been reading too many penny

dreadfuls”. Her smile returned, wide and wicked. “None of that works on me. I’m something... different”.

With a force I couldn’t resist, Mercy grabbed my scarf and ripped it from my neck. A sharp, searing pain bloomed in my throat as her teeth sank into my flesh. Immediately, I went limp, my muscles betraying me, and my vision blurred, the alley spinning into a dark, formless void.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Mr. Brown move, throwing back his cloak to reveal the glowing crucifix. The blue-white light bathed the alley, turning the snow to silver. “Back!” he commanded, voice cracking with fear. “Back to the hell that spawned you!”

Mercy didn’t even flinch. She stared at the crucifix, a puzzled expression crossing her features. “Interesting toy,” she said. “But I’m afraid you’ve been misled about its effectiveness”.

That’s when I noticed the shadow behind George, a darkness deeper than the night itself. It moved like fog, coalescing into the shape of a man—tall and thin, with eyes that gleamed red in the crucifix’s light. “George!” I screamed. “Behind you!” My vision blurred at the edges, and the world spun as the cold numbness that had been building inside my veins intensified. I felt my knees give way, and the darkness swallowed me whole.

Chapter 10

“We suspect Mercy Brown killed him.” Silas’s voice was precise, emotionless. “After she killed you. She went to your home. Your father opened the door to her, likely expecting your return. We found him, his throat torn open and his body exsanguinated on the doorstep.”

I felt something crack inside me, some essential part that had been holding me together. My father—stern, righteous, flawed, but mine—gone. I couldn't weep, though my body shuddered with the impulse. No tears came. Another confirmation of what I'd become.

“Why did they die, but I didn't?” It made little sense. If the vampires drained both Mr. Brown and my father, why was I alone in this... condition?

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Silas rubbed his brow. “Tell me, Alice. What’s the last thing you remember?”

I took a deep breath, but it wasn’t satisfying. It was as though my new body no longer required it. “Mercy bit me. Mr. Brown tried to use the crucifix. The light washed over me. But then I saw a dark figure show up behind Mr. Brown. The same figure who bit Mercy in the sanatorium.”

Silas nodded slowly. “Then it happened, as I suspected. The power in the crucifix completed your transformation. Though the vampire drained you, the light sustained you, ensuring that your death would be... transitory.”

“But my father...”

“No such light shone on him. I am sorry, Alice.”

“You’re lying,” I whispered, but I knew he wasn’t. I could smell the truth on him like I could smell the gun oil on his clothes, the soap on his skin, the blood pumping through his veins.

His veins. My attention fixed again on his throat, on the steady pulse visible beneath the skin. I could hear it now—the wet, rhythmic thump of his heart, pushing blood through his body. I could smell it, rich and coppery and alive. The burning in my throat intensified to agony, and my mouth filled with something that wasn’t quite saliva, thicker and tinged with metal.

Hunger. Thirst. Need.

I lunged against the restraints, no longer caring about answers or my father or anything but the blood pulsing just beneath that thin barrier of skin. The leather at my right wrist snapped, my arm flying free. I reached for him, fingers curled into claws, a sound escaping me that was more animal than human.

Silas stepped back smoothly, unsurprised. He drew a crucifix from his pocket and held it before him, not in fear but with the clinical interest of a scientist conducting an experiment.

The moment the cross entered my field of vision, pain lanced through my head, driving into my eyes like hot pokers. I screamed, turning away, my free arm shielding my face.

“As I thought,” Silas said, making a note in a small book he’d produced from his pocket. “The aversion is immediate and severe.”

“Take it away,” I gasped, the pain still radiating through my skull.

He tucked the crucifix back into his pocket. “The holy water test won’t be necessary, I think. Your reaction to the cross is confirmation enough.”

The pain receded, leaving me trembling. The hunger remained a constant, gnawing presence, but the immediate frenzy had passed. I slumped back against the table, my broken restraint dangling uselessly.

“What are you going to do with me?” I asked, my voice hollow.

Silas pulled a chair closer and sat, maintaining a careful distance. “We’re going to train you, Miss Bladewell. The Order has protocols for situations like yours.”

“Situations like mine?” I echoed, disbelieving. “You make it sound like a common

occurrence.”

“Not common,” he admitted. “But not unprecedented. The Order has, on rare occasions, made use of turned agents. Vampires who retain enough of their humanity, enough of their moral compass, to continue serving the cause.”

I laughed, a harsh, broken sound. “Moral compass? I want nothing more right now than to tear your throat out.”

“The bloodlust is strongest at first,” he said. “It can be managed. Controlled. Channeled.”

A thought struck me, terrible in its implications. “You planned this,” I whispered. “You wanted me to be turned.”

Silas’s face remained impassive. “We did not plan for Mercy Brown to kill you, no. But we recognized the potential the moment we found you in that alley, your dead eyes already red, your fangs growing.”

I allowed my tongue to trace the teeth that didn’t feel like they belonged in my mouth.

“I want to pray,” I said suddenly, the words surprising even me. “I need to pray.”

Silas’s expression softened fractionally. “I wouldn’t advise it.”

I ignored him, closing my eyes and beginning the words that had been my comfort since childhood. “Our Father, who art in Heaven—“

The pain was immediate and overwhelming. It felt as if my skin was being flayed from my body, my bones crushed to powder. I screamed, thrashing against the

remaining restraints, my back arching off the table. The words of the prayer died in my throat, replaced by animal howls of agony.

When it finally subsided, I lay shaking, my dead body wracked with phantom tremors. No tears came, though my chest heaved with sobs. I couldn't even weep for what I'd lost.

“The aversion to prayer is particularly severe in those who had strong faith in life,” Silas said, his tone almost gentle. “It’s why the cross caused such a reaction. The stronger your faith in life, the more your aversion to it in death.”

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“That’s bad theology.” I snorted.

“For humans, yes. But so far as I’m aware, our theology has no redemption for your kind. Not that’s been written, anyway. There is reason to believe it’s possible.”

“To be saved?” I could barely get out the question.

“Through the successful fulfillment of a divine mission. You must embrace your new nature like Christ embraced the villainous cross. What men meant to use to extinguish all hope must become that which delivers life, which saves the world.”

“You want me to save the world? I’m not God. I can’t do that.”

“But you can help. You can eliminate those evil ones who share your nature, but lack your spirit, your faith.”

I snorted. I wasn’t even sure what to make of that. What good was my faith if I couldn’t so much as pray without it feeling like a herd of elephants was trampling my skull?

“Do not worry,” Silas said, standing and adjusting his cuffs. “You were made for a purpose. You will get your revenge, Nightwalker. You will earn your redemption and save us all.”

Nightwalker. The name fell like a stone into the hollow where my soul had been. It wasn’t Alice. It wasn’t even a person. It was a thing, a creature, a weapon.

“I’ll never serve you,” I whispered. But what choice did I have? Where else could I go? Who else would take in the monster I’d become?

Silas smiled for the first time, a thin, cold curving of lips. “You already do, Miss Bladewell. You already do.”

He turned and walked away, his footsteps fading as he left me alone with my hunger, my pain, and the terrible emptiness where my soul had been.

Chapter 11

Hunger clawed at my insides like a rabid beast, tearing through where my soul used to be. The restraints bit into my flesh—all but the one at my right wrist that I’d snapped in my frenzy. I felt hollow, a walking tomb with nothing inside but echoes of the girl I once was and the monster I’d become. The room’s darkness didn’t bother my new eyes; I could see every crack in the stone ceiling, every water stain on the walls, all with perfect clarity. What good was such sight when all it showed me was the prison of my damnation?

I wasn’t sure how long Silas had been gone. Minutes? Hours? Time stretched and contracted like taffy in my new perception. The only constant was the burning in my throat. I tried not to think about blood, but my mind betrayed me, conjuring images of pulsing veins and warm, wet life flowing just beneath fragile skin.

So much for visions of gumdrops and sugarplums dancing in my head. Those days were long gone. Now I had visions of gaping wounds and recreational dismemberment.

My father’s face swam before me, and the memory of what Silas had told me—Mercy, killing him on our doorstep—sent a spasm of grief through my body. I tried to weep, but no tears would come. Even that small mercy was denied me now.

“Daddy,” I whispered to the empty room. “I’m so sorry.”

I tried to remember the scripture he’d taught me, seeking comfort in familiar verses, but the moment the holy words formed in my mind, pain shot through my skull. It was as if my very brain rejected what had once been my foundation. I was cut off—from tears, from prayer, from God Himself.

The door opened with a sound that would have been subtle to human ears but crashed like thunder against my heightened senses. Silas entered, carrying a small wooden case and wearing an expression of careful neutrality. The scent of his blood—sharp, metallic, alive—hit me with the force of a freight train. My remaining restraints creaked as I involuntarily strained against them.

“Control yourself, Miss Bladewell,” he said calmly, though I noticed he kept his distance. “That’s your first lesson.”

I forced myself to stop struggling, though every muscle in my body screamed to lunge for his throat. “I can’t,” I rasped. “It hurts.”

Silas nodded, setting the case on a small table just out of my reach. “The hunger is always worst at first. It will become manageable with time and practice.” He opened the case, revealing several glass vials filled with dark liquid. “We have methods.”

The smell hit me immediately—blood. My body responded with a violence that shocked me; my back arched, my free hand clawed at the air, and something between a growl and a moan escaped my lips.

“This is from faithful donors,” Silas explained, selecting one vial. “Members of the Order who understand the necessity of your... condition.” He held it up to the dim light, examining the contents. “You must consume it quickly. If you don’t drink it soon after it’s shed, it’ll lack all nourishment.”

He approached cautiously, the vial extended before him. With his other hand, he produced a small wooden stake, its tip gleaming with silver. “A precaution,” he said, noting my gaze. “Not a threat—unless you make it one.”

I struggled to focus on his words, my attention fixed on the vial of blood. “Why are you helping me?” I managed. “I’m a monster now. Why not just kill me?”

“Because monsters can be useful, Miss Bladewell.” He unscrewed the vial’s cap, and the scent intensified. “Especially those who have your faith. I realize it might not be easy to believe—but you may still serve the Lord as you are. Now, drink.”

He held the vial to my lips. I turned away, a last desperate attempt to cling to whatever humanity I had left. “I can’t. It’s wrong.”

“Is it?” Silas’s voice was surprisingly gentle. “Think of it as medicine. Would you refuse medicine for consumption? For cholera? This is no different.”

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“It’s blood,” I whispered. “Human blood.”

“Yes. Freely given. And without it, you will weaken, and the hunger will drive you mad.” He pressed the vial against my lips again. “You will become the very thing the Order fights against—a mindless predator. Is that what you want?”

I closed my eyes, remembering my father’s words about the wages of sin. But I wasn’t alive anymore, was I? The rules that had governed my life—were they still binding in this half-existence?

“The practice of feeding only on willing donors, on blood freely given,” Silas continued, “is a form of asceticism. A denial of your baser nature. This is how you will subdue the passions of your damned condition. It is the only path to redemption for your kind.”

Redemption. The word pierced through the haze of hunger. Was it possible? Could I find my way back to God, even as this thing I’d become?

The cool glass touched my lips again, and this time, I did not turn away. The first drop hit my tongue, and my world exploded. The taste was beyond description—copper and salt and sweetness and life itself, distilled into liquid form. My throat burned with both revulsion and desperate need. I seized the vial from Silas’s hand, tilting it back, letting the blood flow down my throat in greedy gulps.

It was over too quickly. I let the empty vial drop from my fingers, horrified by what I’d just done, yet already craving more. The relief was immediate but incomplete—like trying to douse a forest fire with a single bucket of water.

“More,” I rasped, hating myself for asking, hating myself more for needing it.

Silas nodded, retrieving another vial from the case. “The first is always the hardest,” he said, uncapping it. “It gets easier.”

“I don’t want it to get easier,” I said, even as I reached for the second vial. “I don’t want to be this. But at the same time...”

He didn’t reply, simply watched as I drained the second vial, then a third. With each swallow, my mind cleared a little, the feral edge of my hunger dulling to a more manageable ache. By the fourth vial, I could think beyond the next moment, beyond the next drop of blood.

“Better?” Silas asked, his gaze assessing.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I was disgusted by what I’d done, by how good it had felt, by the way my body hummed with borrowed life.

“Do you still want to rip me apart?” His tone was clinical, as if he were asking about the weather.

I considered the question honestly. The urge was still there, a low pulse beneath my thoughts, but no longer the overwhelming compulsion it had been. “No,” I said finally. “Not right now.”

Silas seemed satisfied with this answer. He moved to the restraints at my ankles, unfastening them with quick, efficient movements. “Remember,” he said as he worked, “I can end you if necessary. I’ve done it before.”

The threat should have frightened me, but instead, it was almost comforting. Someone could stop me if I became the monster I felt within. “I understand.”

He freed my left wrist last, then stepped back, stake still in hand. “Stand up. Slowly.”

I complied, easing myself off the table with unnatural grace. My feet touched the cold stone floor, and a shock ran through me. I could feel everything—the minute vibrations of Silas’s heartbeat traveling through the ground, the skittering of a mouse behind the walls, even the subtle shift of air currents around us. I gasped, overwhelmed by the input.

“What’s happening?” I clutched at the table for support, though my balance was perfect. “I can feel—everything.”

“Your senses are enhanced,” Silas explained, maintaining his distance. “Sight, smell, hearing, touch—all amplified beyond human capability. It’s part of what makes your kind such effective predators.”

I took a tentative step, marveling at how the floor seemed to speak to me through my bare feet. I could sense the building’s foundation, the weight of the earth above us, the very pulse of the world. “There’s someone walking in the corridor,” I said, surprised by my certainty. “Three doors down. And... a cricket outside? How far down are we?”

“Twenty feet below ground.” Silas nodded, impressed despite himself. “And yes, Lady Margaret is making her rounds. You’ll learn to filter such information, to focus on what matters.”

“Is she one of your... donors?” I couldn’t keep the bitterness from my voice.

“Yes. As will I, occasionally, if necessary.” He touched his neck briefly. “The Order has worked with Nightwalkers for generations. Though you’re the first we’ve created in the new world.”

“Nightwalkers,” I repeated. The name still felt wrong on my tongue, a label for something I couldn’t bring myself to accept. “What does that even mean?”

Silas moved to a small chest against the wall, retrieving a bundle of fabric. “It means you walk in darkness but are not of it. You hunt evil—other vampires, witches, creatures that prey on humanity—using the very abilities they possess.”

He handed me the bundle—clothes, I realized. A plain black dress, stockings, boots. Simple, practical garments that would allow me to blend into the night. “The Order of the Morning Dawn acknowledges that sometimes darkness must be fought with darkness.”

I took the clothes, my fingers running over the fabric with new sensitivity. “And you think I’ll just... agree to this? Become your weapon?”

“I think you want redemption,” Silas said simply. “I think you’re looking for a path back to God, and this is the only one available to you.”

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I stared at him, seeing the conviction in his eyes. He truly believed what he was saying—that I could somehow atone for what I’d become by killing others like me. “What about the crucifix?” I asked. “The one Mr. Brown had, the one that glowed blue-white. Why did it work for me then, but crosses hurt me now?”

Silas’s expression darkened. “That particular relic is... complicated. And unfortunately, it’s been lost—we believe Mercy or her companion took it after they killed George Brown.”

“But what was it? Why did it respond to me?”

He sighed, running a hand through his close-cropped hair. “Celestial power infuses this holy relic. An angel forged it and gave it to us. There are seven of its kind, held by different chapters of the Order. The cross responds to true faith—which you had in abundance. Eventually, we’ll need you to retrieve it. When you’re ready..”

“And now?” I gestured to myself, to what I’d become.

“Now, even if we recovered it, there’s no telling what it would do to you. Prayer causes you pain. Common crosses burn your eyes. That relic might destroy you entirely—or it might do something else, something unprecedented.” He shook his head. “Until we find it again, it’s moot speculation.”

I clutched the clothes to my chest, a shield against a world that had become too sharp, too loud, too much. “So that’s it? I hunt for you or face damnation?”

“Not for us,” Silas corrected. “With us. And your alternative isn’t just

damnation—it's becoming like Mercy Brown. Losing the last shreds of your humanity until you're nothing but hunger and cruelty." His voice softened slightly. "This is your only indulgence, your only clemency. One opportunity to redeem yourself, even though you walk quite literally only in the shadow of death. I want to see you prevail. I don't want to see you fall prey to your nature, to become the monster that most of your kind devolve into. And every vampire will, without a mission, without a proper penance."

I snorted. "I thought we were puritans. We don't believe in penance."

"Not for the human faithful, that's absolutely right. You're less than human, Alice. To become again for whom Christ's atonement applies, you must become as the cross itself. Standing alone, an instrument of death, a vile thing meant to evoke fear, but when joined to Christ, the choicest instrument of the salvation of the world."

The honesty in his voice surprised me. For all his clinical detachment, there was something like compassion in his eyes—or at least, the memory of it.

"I don't know if I can do this," I admitted. "Hunt. Kill. Even if they deserve it."

"You can," he said with quiet certainty. "You will. Because the alternative is unthinkable." He moved toward the door, stake still in hand but held loosely now. "Get dressed. Your training begins tonight."

As he reached the threshold, I called after him. "Silas." He paused, looking back. "What if I run? What if I just... disappear?"

His smile was thin and joyless. "Then I will hunt you down myself, Alice Bladewell. And I will not fail." He closed the door behind him, leaving me alone with my borrowed strength and the taste of blood still fresh on my tongue.

Chapter 12

Silas led me through a maze of stone corridors, each twist and turn mapped instantly in my mind. The scent of earth grew stronger as we ascended, damp giving way to frost, until finally a heavy iron door groaned open and the night air rushed in like a living thing. I stopped at the threshold, overwhelmed. The world I'd known all my life was gone, replaced by something so vivid, so raw. It might have been an entirely different reality. Stars weren't just pinpricks of light—they pulsed and sang. The wind carried stories from miles away—pine sap, deer musk, wood smoke from distant hearths. The moon bathed everything in silver that my new eyes perceived as clearly as daylight. This was the night as I'd never known it—not as absence, but as a realm of its own, vast and vibrant and waiting.

“Come,” Silas said, his breath clouding in the winter air. “The night won't hurt you anymore. It's your domain now.”

I stepped outside, feeling the crunch of frozen ground beneath my new boots. We stood in a small clearing surrounded by dense woods. No buildings were visible beyond the stone structure we'd emerged from—a root cellar entrance, I realized, disguised to look abandoned.

“Where are we?” I asked, my voice sounding too sharp in the quiet night.

“About five miles outside of Exeter,” Silas replied. “The Order maintains several facilities like this one throughout New England. Places to train, to prepare our members to fight the evil that lurks in the night. In this case, to shelter those who need... special accommodation.”

Like vampires, I thought. Like monsters.

I turned slowly, taking in the surrounding forest. The trees were winter-bare, their

branches reaching toward the sky like supplicants. I could hear the heartbeats of small animals hidden in burrows, the rustle of an owl's wings a quarter-mile away, the slow drift of clouds across the star-field above. The sensory richness was intoxicating.

"It's beautiful," I whispered, horrified at my own reaction.

Silas glanced at me. "Beauty is irrelevant. What matters is utility." He pointed to the woods. "Your senses are heightened. Your strength and speed are enhanced. Tonight, you learn to use these abilities to hunt."

My stomach twisted at the word. "Hunt? I've had enough blood for now."

"Not for food," he clarified. "For tracking. For killing those who would prey on the innocent. The skills are the same, regardless of the purpose."

He reached into a giant wooden box near the door of the facility and withdrew a small cage. Inside, a gray opossum hissed and bared its teeth. Its eyes caught the moonlight and flashed red—the same unnatural hue that now colored my own gaze.

"What happened to it?" I asked, taking an involuntary step back.

"Vampire blood." Silas held the cage up, allowing me to see the creature more clearly. "When ingested, it can create a lesser form of infection in animals. Not a true vampire, but something in between—vicious, blood-seeking, a shadow of the real thing."

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The opossum lunged at the bars, tiny claws extended. Its heartbeat was rapid, erratic, nothing like the steady rhythm of the forest's natural denizens.

"You've been creating these things?" The thought sickened me.

"We have methods of containing the infection." Silas's voice betrayed no emotion. "This creature was already dying—rabies. Now it serves a purpose. Your purpose." He met my eyes. "You will track it, hunt it, and kill it before it can harm anything else."

"And if I refuse?"

His hand moved to his pocket, where I knew he kept both stake and crucifix. "Then you're of no use to us. And we don't tolerate useless things."

I looked away, unable to hold his gaze. "Fine. Release it."

Silas opened the cage door and upended it. The opossum dropped to the ground, landing on its feet with unnatural agility. It froze for a moment, sniffing the air, then darted into the underbrush with a speed no ordinary marsupial could manage.

"It has a head start," Silas said. "Find it. Kill it. Return to me when it's done."

"How am I supposed to—"

"You'll know." He stepped back, fading into the shadows near the cellar entrance. "Your body remembers what your mind refuses to accept. You're a predator now,

Alice. Act like one.”

I stood alone in the clearing, the opossum’s scent already fading on the wind. I closed my eyes, trying to center myself in this overwhelming new reality. What was I supposed to do? How did one track a creature through a forest at night?

The answer came not as a thought, but as instinct. My nostrils flared, separating the opossum’s distinctive odor—fur, musk, the wrongness of vampire blood—from the thousand other scents of the forest. My ears picked up the rapid patter of small feet, already distant but clear against the background of wind and creaking branches.

Without conscious decision, I moved. Not running, not yet, but gliding between trees, each step precisely placed. The forest floor spoke to me through my feet—here a depression where the creature had landed, there a scatter of dead leaves disturbed by its passing. I followed, my body operating with a confidence my mind didn’t share.

The night embraced me, wrapping around my form like a second skin. I realized with a start that I was cold—I could feel the temperature, register it as information, but it didn’t bother me the way it once would have. My dead flesh had no need for warmth.

I quickened my pace, sliding between trees, leaping over fallen logs with effortless grace. The opossum’s trail grew stronger—it had paused here to sniff at a hollow tree, changed direction there when an owl swooped low. I was reading the forest like a book written in scent and sound and subtle signs.

A part of me marveled at this new ability, this effortless communion with the night world. Another part recoiled, recognizing the predatory nature of my pursuit. I wasn’t tracking the opossum out of curiosity or scientific interest—I was hunting it. My body thrummed with the ancient rhythm of predator and prey, a dance as old as life itself.

The chase led me deeper into the woods, where the trees grew closer together and the underbrush thickened. I caught glimpses of movement ahead—a flash of gray fur, the twitch of a naked tail. The opossum was fast, unnaturally so, but I was faster. The gap between us narrowed with each passing moment.

As I ran, memories flickered through my mind—incongruous, unwelcome. My father teaching me to track rabbit prints in fresh snow. “God gives us signs, Alice,” he’d said, crouching beside me. “In nature, in scripture, in the quiet moments of prayer. We need only the wisdom to read them.”

What signs was God sending me now, in this mockery of the hunt? What wisdom could I glean from the monster I’d become?

The opossum veered suddenly, climbing a gnarled oak with frantic speed. I followed without hesitation, my fingers finding purchase in the rough bark, my body moving with a spider-like agility that should have been impossible. I climbed twenty feet in seconds, the branches barely swaying under my weight.

The creature had reached a hollow near the top, its red eyes gleaming from the darkness within. It hissed, showing teeth too long for its mouth, a grotesque parody of my own transformation. Its heartbeat thundered in my ears, frantic with fear and the corruption in its blood.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, not sure if I was addressing the opossum or myself.

I reached into the hollow, faster than thought. My hand closed around matted fur, feeling the creature’s spine beneath my fingers. It twisted, sinking its teeth into my wrist. I felt the pressure but no pain—another reminder of what I’d become.

With a quick, brutal motion, I snapped its neck.

The sound was deafening in the quiet forest—a sharp crack that sent sleeping birds scattering from nearby branches. The opossum went limp in my grasp, its red eyes dulling to gray in death. Blood seeped from its mouth, black in the moonlight, staining my pale skin.

I held it for a long moment, this small creature corrupted by the same darkness that now flowed through me. Had it understood what was happening to it? Had it mourned its loss of self, its transformation into something unnatural? Or had it simply surrendered to new instincts, embracing the hunger and speed and strength without questioning their source?

The knowledge that I'd killed something—ended a life with my bare hands—hit me with physical force. I'd never even swatted flies as a human, always capturing them in cups to release outside. My father had done the hunting and butchering in our household; I'd prepared the meat but never witnessed the death that preceded it.

Now I had killed, and part of me—the new, monstrous part—had enjoyed it.

I climbed down from the tree, the opossum's body dangling from one hand. My movements were smooth, economical, nothing like my human clumsiness. My feet touched the ground soundlessly, and I stood in the silent forest, moonlight filtering through bare branches to pattern the earth around me.

The memories came then, not in fragments but in a flood. My father reading scripture by lamplight, his voice rising and falling with the ancient rhythms. My mother, before consumption took her, teaching me to bake bread, her hands guiding mine through the kneading. The warmth of the church on Sunday mornings, sunlight through stained glass, the comfort of familiar hymns sung by familiar voices.

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All gone now. My father murdered on our doorstep. My mother long in her grave. The church forever closed to me—its prayers like knives, its crosses like fire. The world I'd known was as dead as the creature in my hand, and I couldn't even weep for its passing.

I tried. Standing there in the moonlit forest, I tried to cry for all I'd lost. I felt the grief, the overwhelming sorrow, but no tears would come. My dead body refused this final human release.

“Dear God,” I whispered, flinching at the pain the words caused, “what am I now?”

The forest offered no answer. The stars continued their cold burning, indifferent to my suffering. The wind carried no message, no comfort. I was alone in my damnation.

I looked down at my hands—pale, strong, stained with the opossum's blood. They were trembling, not from exertion or cold, but from the weight of understanding. These hands would kill again. These hands would never again fold in prayer without agony. These hands were no longer human.

Taking a deep breath I didn't need, I turned back toward where Silas waited. The path was clear to me, marked in scent and memory, a straight line through the tangled woods. I followed it, the opossum's body swinging at my side, each step taking me further from the girl I'd been and deeper into the darkness I'd become.

The night embraced me, claimed me as its own. And somewhere in the distance, I thought I heard Mercy Brown laughing.

Chapter 13

The forest held its breath as we approached the cabin. Shadows stretched like reaching hands across the forest floor, and somewhere, a crow called out a warning. I followed Silas's broad back, my footfalls silent where his boots crushed the underbrush. Three months since my transformation, and still I marveled at the way my body moved—like water, like wind—divorced from the clumsy humanity I'd once known. The cabin's rotting beams emerged through the trees, and my nostrils flared at the mingled scents of mildew, wood smoke, and the unmistakable musk of human fear.

"She knows we're coming," I whispered.

Silas didn't turn. "It doesn't matter."

The dusk light filtered through pine needles, painting everything in shades of blue and gray. My eyes—once merely human—now registered every variation of shadow, every subtle movement. A mouse scurried beneath fallen leaves twenty yards to my left. The heartbeat of a rabbit pounded from somewhere behind us. And ahead, in that dilapidated cabin with its sagging porch and broken windows, a human heart fluttered like a trapped bird.

I swallowed hard against the thirst that rose unbidden. Three months wasn't long enough to master this new hunger. Three months of prayers that burned my tongue, of crosses that seared my vision, of holy water that raised welts on my skin. Three months of Silas's stern guidance and the Order's rigid training.

Three months since Mercy Brown had turned me, then vanished into the night.

"Focus," Silas said, as if reading my thoughts. "Remember your purpose."

My purpose. To hunt those who wielded dark powers. To protect humanity from supernatural threats. To atone for what I had become by destroying others like me. Not necessarily vampires, but any who traversed the path of darkness. The Order of the Morning Dawn had found me wild with grief and hunger, offering structure and redemption when I'd lost everything else. My life, my prayers, my father.

The irony wasn't lost on me—I had gone from praying over the sick and the lost to becoming something that fed on them.

We paused at the edge of the clearing. The cabin stood before us, a black silhouette against the darkening sky. One window glowed with feeble lamplight. The roof had partially collapsed on the western side, and the porch listed dangerously to the right. Nature was reclaiming it inch by inch—moss crept up the walls, and a young birch had sprouted through the steps.

Silas turned to me, his face half-hidden in shadow. The scar along his jaw looked deeper in this light, a permanent reminder of some past violence.

“The witch has been practicing for months,” he said, his voice a low rumble. “Six children have fallen ill in the nearby town. Two are already dead.”

I nodded, forcing myself to focus on the mission rather than the way his pulse beat steadily in his throat. Silas was safe from me—he had some kind of talisman, something he refused to show me, that repelled me if I touched him—but the awareness of his blood never quite left me.

“The Order has tracked her movements since winter,” he continued. “She trades with local farmers, offering charms and potions. She’s been seen gathering herbs by moonlight and speaking to animals.”

“Speaking to animals isn't witchcraft,” I mumbled.

Silas's eyes hardened. "Don't start doubting now, Nightwalker. We have testimony from a farmer's wife who saw her dancing naked in this clearing, surrounded by floating lights. We have a child's corpse with strange markings carved into its skin."

I looked away. How was I supposed to know if this evidence was true, or if Silas was making it up on the spot? "What's our plan?"

"I'll take the lead. You'll follow. If she attempts to escape, you'll intercept her." His hand moved to the silver dagger at his belt, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the ornate hilt. The blade had been blessed by the Order's chaplain—lethal to both witches and vampires. "If she begins an incantation, I'll silence her immediately."

"And if she's innocent?" The question slipped out before I could stop it.

Silas's expression didn't change. "The Order doesn't make mistakes, Alice."

But they did. Of course they did. I'd heard of witch trials elsewhere in Massachusetts, but Silas and the Order didn't even bother with fake juries and judges. They gathered the evidence and rendered a verdict and a sentence without giving the accused much chance to respond at all.

"Remember," Silas said, sensing reluctance in my silence, "this is your path to salvation. Each witch we stop, each vampire or witch we destroy—it cleanses you a little more in the eyes of God."

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I wasn't sure I believed that. Then again, the God I'd worshipped as a human girl was absent. He hadn't spared me from this life—if you could call it that—so maybe I'd been wrong about everything. Then again, Silas was wrong, too. Silas had believed that a girl with faith like mine would be protected from evil, protected from vampires. Mercy Brown begged to differ.

Despite my reservations, I nodded anyway.

“Let's go,” Silas said, drawing his dagger.

We moved across the clearing, Silas with practiced stealth, me with the unnatural silence of the undead. The porch steps creaked beneath his weight but held. I followed, feeling the rotting wood shift beneath my feet. The door was weathered gray, its paint long since peeled away. A crude symbol had been carved into the wood—a circle containing a five-pointed star.

“Proof,” Silas whispered, nodding at the mark.

But I'd seen similar symbols in Daddy's church—decorative stars at Christmas, circles representing God's eternal nature. This proved nothing. Besides, it looked freshly carved. How could I be sure that the accused had carved it herself? What if Silas or someone else with the Order carved it there to “mark” our target, or to poison the well against the supposed witch? I wasn't entirely sure that Silas was beyond manufacturing evidence if it supported his predetermined condemnations.

Before I could speak, Silas kicked the door open with a splintering crash. We surged inside, Silas with his dagger raised, me with nothing but my unnatural strength and

speed.

The cabin's interior was illuminated by a single oil lamp on a rough-hewn table. Bundles of dried herbs hung from the ceiling beams. Shelves lined the walls, crowded with jars of powders and liquids. A fire smoldered in a small stone hearth, filling the single room with smoky warmth.

The supposed witch stood beside the hearth, her gaunt face illuminated by the dying flames. She was younger than I'd expected—perhaps thirty, with dark hair streaked prematurely with gray. Her eyes widened at our intrusion, but they held defiance rather than fear.

"I've been expecting the Order's dogs," she said, her voice surprisingly steady. "Though I didn't expect one of them to be dead."

Silas stepped forward, the silver dagger gleaming in the lamplight. "By the authority of the Order of the Morning Dawn, you are condemned for the practice of witchcraft and the murder of children."

The woman's lips curled. "I've murdered no one. I've healed those I could—those the doctors gave up for dead."

"Silence!" Silas barked. "Your confession is not required."

She backed away, her hands moving in strange patterns as she began to whisper words in a language I didn't recognize. The air in the cabin seemed to thicken, pressure building against my eardrums. The lamp flame bent sideways, though there was no breeze.

Silas lunged forward with practiced grace. The witch tried to dodge, but he anticipated her movement. Instead of plunging the dagger into her heart, however, he

deliberately slashed across her forearm.

Blood welled from the cut—bright, vibrant red against her pale skin.

The scent hit me like a physical blow. My body reacted before my mind could intervene—pupils dilating, nostrils flaring, muscles coiling. Hunger roared through me, drowning out the thought, drowning out the prayer that instinctively rose to my lips. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not—

The witch's heartbeat filled my ears, drowning out everything else. I could see the pulse in her neck, count each precious beat pushing blood through her veins. Blood that smelled of iron and salt and life itself.

“Alice,” Silas said, his voice distant through the roaring in my ears. “Control yourself.”

But he'd stepped back, giving me clear access to the bleeding woman. Her incantation faltered as she registered the change in my stance, the inhuman focus of my gaze. She pressed her wounded arm against her chest, but it was too late. The intoxicating scent of her blood had already filled the air.

“Stay back,” she warned, resuming her strange words with increased urgency.

I took a step forward, then another. Some part of me—the part that had once knelt in prayer at Daddy's church—screamed in protest. That part recited fragments of scripture like broken shields: Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death... Yea, though I walk...

The witch's back hit the wall. Her chanting grew louder, more desperate. Something invisible pushed against me—her magic attempting to hold me at bay—but my hunger was stronger than her power.

“Please,” she gasped, abandoning her spell. “I’m not what they told you. I heal people. I—“

I crossed the remaining distance in a blur of motion. My hands gripped her shoulders, pinning her against the rough-hewn logs. Up close, I could see the flecks of gold in her brown eyes, the faint freckles across her nose, the chapped skin of her lips as they formed one last, desperate plea.

“Our Father, who art in heaven—“ she began.

My teeth sank into her throat, cutting off the prayer. Had she truly evoked the Lord’s Prayer after clearly attempting to cast spells at Silas and me? Could this woman be a witch of a sort, without abandoning her faith? It seemed absurd—and probably was—but were her deeds actually spells at all? Were they, perhaps, prayers I’d never been taught to pray, only appearing as magic to my ignorance?

The first rush of blood was a shock—hot and vital and overwhelming. I drank deeply, feeling her struggling grow weaker as her life poured into me. Her heartbeat stuttered, tried to recover, then faded. Memories flashed through my mind—not mine, but hers. A child with fever, cooling beneath her hands. A man’s grateful smile. Herbs gathered by moonlight while she sang soft hymns.

I didn’t know if she was a witch or not, but she wasn’t villainous. She wasn’t a murderer, as Silas had insisted. She was a healer. And now I was the murderer...

Horror broke through my bloodlust, but too late. Her heart gave one final, weak flutter, then stilled. I released her, and her body slumped to the floor, pale and empty. Blood—her blood—dripped from my chin onto my white blouse. The same blouse I’d worn to church every Sunday of my human life.

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I staggered back, the room spinning around me. “Oh God,” I whispered, though the evocation of God sent jolts like lightning through my skull. “Oh God, what have I done?”

Silas stood watching, his expression a calculated mix of disappointment and something else—something that looked horribly like satisfaction. He slid his dagger back into its sheath with deliberate slowness.

“Control yourself, Nightwalker,” he said, his voice stern but his eyes gleaming. “This is not what we trained for. I thought I forbade you from drinking directly from a human.”

“But you cut her, you meant me to—“

“No excuse!” Silas’ voice boomed, almost rattling the dead woman’s cabin. “These missions will often involve struggle. You must resist the temptation to feed in the presence of blood! You have enough evil within you to atone for as it is. The more you kill like this, like a vampire and feed, the more you’ll have to atone properly. The Lord will only accept these sacrifices as whole-burnt offerings.”

All words. A charade, carefully crafted. He wanted me to believe I’d made an error. I’d added to my guilt, binding me more to the Order and their promise of redemption.

Did he really want me to believe this had been an accident? The careful way he’d cut her arm. The strategic step backward.

He had meant for this to happen.

“You knew,” I whispered, wiping blood from my mouth with a trembling hand. “You knew I would—“

“I knew your nature could overcome your training,” he corrected smoothly. “A regrettable weakness, but one we must work to correct.”

He knelt beside the dead woman, making a show of checking for a pulse he knew wasn’t there. His fingers came away stained with her blood, and I saw him subtly rub them together, testing its consistency.

“The Order will be disappointed,” he continued. “Our mission was to interrogate her about her coven. She could have led us to other witches in exchange for an easy death. Do not mistake my resolve. She needed to die, but we must be judicious about it.”

Lies. All lies. I could see it now in the satisfied set of his shoulders, the careful way he was constructing this narrative.

“She wasn’t what you said,” I managed, my voice barely audible. “She was praying. That was the Lord’s Prayer.”

Silas stood towering over me. “Many witches hide behind false piety, Alice. It was a desperate ruse to deceive us at the last minute. You of all people should know that. Didn’t Mercy Brown attend your father’s church? Didn’t she have a bible at her bedside in the sanitorium?”

The mention of Mercy sent a fresh wave of confusion through me. Mercy, who had seemed so kind. Clearly, Silas used her name for a purpose. Mercy was the one I’d tried to save, but couldn’t. She was the one who bit me, who made me what I was. He wasn’t wrong—a part of me wanted revenge, even as I still pitied her.

“We must leave,” Silas said, already ushering me to the door.

“You’re not going to burn the body?” I asked.

Silas huffed. “Other members of the order will take care of it. You are in too fragile a condition, too vulnerable.”

I remained frozen, staring at the woman’s lifeless form. The herbs hanging above her—common plants for healing, just like the ones Mama had used. The symbol on her door—no different from decorations I’d seen in Christian homes. The prayer on her dying lips—the same one I’d recited every night of my human life.

Chapter 14

The abandoned mill loomed against the moonlit sky, its broken windows like empty eye sockets in a decaying skull. Two weeks had passed since the cabin, since I’d drained that woman dry while her Christian prayers died on her lips. I’d barely spoken to Silas since then, but silence was its own kind of communication. He knew I suspected him. He simply didn’t care. “Another witch,” he’d said this morning, sliding a crude map across the table. “More dangerous than the last.” His eyes had held a challenge, and God help me, beneath my dread lurked a shameful anticipation.

The great wheel of the mill hung motionless above the stagnant river. Rust had frozen its mechanisms decades ago, though water still trickled through the rotting paddles. Silas moved ahead of me, his dagger already drawn. I followed with a reluctance that wasn’t entirely feigned.

“She’s skilled in fire manipulation,” Silas whispered as we approached the mill’s sagging door. “The Order believes she’s responsible for three house fires in Providence. Children died, Alice.”

I nodded, but doubt had taken root. “What evidence do we have?”

Silas’s eyes narrowed. “We’ve been over this. The Order doesn’t require your approval of its intelligence. Do not forget, Alice. That we are offering you this chance at redemption is a mercy we’re not required to offer. It’s only on account of your past faithfulness, and for your father’s sake, we’ve agreed to allow you this chance to save your soul.”

“Right.” I wasn’t sure I believed it anymore, but what else could I do?

Inside the mill was a hollow cathedral of dust and shadow. Machinery stood like forgotten altars, and the floor was littered with debris from the collapsed upper level. Our footsteps echoed despite our caution. If anyone was hiding here, they already knew we’d come.

She emerged from behind a massive gear assembly—a red-haired woman in her forties, her face lined with exhaustion rather than malice. Her hands rose immediately.

“I’ve done nothing wrong,” she said. “I’m just seeking shelter.”

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Silas advanced with the confidence of righteous purpose. “Eileen Maddox, the Order of the Morning Dawn has evidence of your communion with dark forces.”

The woman’s eyes darted between us, lingering on me with sudden recognition. “You’re the preacher’s daughter,” she whispered. “The one who survived the consumption. The one who prayed over the sick.” Her gaze hardened. “Now look at you. What would your father say?”

The words struck like physical blows. I faltered, and in that moment, Silas attacked. Not a killing blow. Instead, he slashed her shoulder, deep enough to bleed freely, but not to incapacitate.

The scent hit me like a wave. My body tensed, ready to spring. But this time, I recognized the manipulation. This time, I tried to resist.

“Remember your training,” Silas said, stepping back just as he had before. “This is your path to redemption.”

The woman started chanting, her hands weaving patterns in the air. The surrounding dust swirled, and sparks danced between her fingers. Real magic—not like the simple healing of the previous woman.

But even as I registered the threat, my hunger overwhelmed my reason. I lunged forward, teeth bared, and caught her mid-incantation. Or was it mid-prayer? Her blood was hearty and rich. I drank until there was nothing left, then dropped her empty body to the floor.

Silas watched with that same careful mixture of disapproval and satisfaction.

“Your control needs work,” he said, but his eyes gleamed with success. “I believe the only way you’ll overcome this problem is through exposure. Next time, you’ll do better.”

That night, alone in my sparse quarters at the Order’s regional headquarters, I tried to pray. The words burned my tongue, but I forced them out in a whispered torment.

“Our Father, who art in heaven—“

Pain lanced through my skull. I pressed on.

“Hallowed be Thy name—“

My skin began to smoke faintly where I’d clasped my hands together. I welcomed the pain. It was righteous. It was deserved.

“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done—“

A memory surfaced: Daddy at the pulpit, his tall frame commanding, his voice ringing through our little Exeter church. “Sin takes many forms,” he’d thundered. “But none so insidious as the sin that disguises itself as necessity.”

I’d been sixteen then, sitting in the front pew in my best Sunday dress, hanging on his every word. The good daughter. The faithful daughter. The daughter who prayed over the sick and was mysteriously spared from their fate.

I forced myself back to the prayer, though each word scalded. “On earth as it is in heaven—“

Another memory: Mama on her deathbed, her face hollow with consumption, her eyes bright with fever. Me, holding her hand, reciting Psalms as she slipped away. The peaceful smile that had touched her lips at the end—had that been God’s mercy, or just the relief of final surrender?

I unclenched my burning hands and stared at the blisters forming on my palms. The price of prayer for the damned.

November brought us to a forest clearing where frost rimmed the dead leaves underfoot. Our target—a woman barely older than me—had made her home in a structure half-cave, half-cabin built into a hillside. Smoke rose from a crude chimney of stacked stones.

“Witch,” Silas declared, with the certainty of the righteous. “She’s been stealing livestock from nearby farms for sacrifices. The Order has tracked her for weeks.”

I said nothing. The pattern was apparent now—just enough truth to justify the hunt, just enough doubt to torture me afterward.

“Focus, Nightwalker,” Silas said, using the name the Order had given me. Never Alice anymore. Alice had died with her humanity. “Remember why we do this. Each witch destroyed brings you one step closer to salvation.”

I questioned his words in my mind. He’d told me before that those I’d drained damned me further. Now, he seemed less concerned with the manner of my success than that I completed the mission. Whole-burnt offering, perhaps that was ideal, but he seemed to think now that even if my killings indulged my darkness, the sacrifice granted me a mercy that counterbalanced my evil. I wasn’t making progress toward my redemption, but maybe I wasn’t damning myself any further. Provided, of course, the witches I was killing were actually witches.

We approached from different angles. The young woman fled out the back at our arrival, but I caught her easily, my inhuman speed an obscene advantage. She fought with unexpected strength, clawing at my face and screaming curses that made the air vibrate strangely.

Silas arrived as I pinned her against a tree. With deliberate precision, he cut a line across her collarbone. Blood welled up, black in the fading light.

“She’s resisting,” he said, stepping back. “Do what needs to be done.”

“Please,” the woman gasped. “I’ve harmed no one. The animals were already suffering. I only meant to end their pain—“

I tried to resist. God as my witness, I tried. My body shook with the effort of restraint, but the hunger was a living thing inside me, clawing its way out. I bent my head to her wound and drank until her struggles ceased.

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Afterward, wiping blood from my chin, I caught Silas watching me with that same calculated approval.

“Better,” he said. “Quicker this time. Less hesitation.”

I turned away, disgusted with him, with myself. “Was she really a witch?”

“She was practicing unnatural arts,” Silas said, but he didn’t meet my eyes. “Again, Nightwalker. The Order doesn’t make mistakes.”

Maybe they did, maybe they didn’t. One thing was obvious—they didn’t care about mistakes.

That night, I dreamed of Daddy’s church. In the dream, I knelt at the altar with bleeding knees, but no matter how hard I prayed, God remained silent. The crucifix on the wall bled, and when I looked down, I realized I was drinking the blood and water that dripped from Christ’s wounded side.

I woke screaming, my throat raw, my pillow wet with bloody tears.

What a vile image. What did it mean? Had I really descended so far that even my dreams had embraced sacrilege?

December found us in a decrepit farmhouse miles from the nearest town. Snow had begun to fall, muffling the world in white silence. Our breaths—Silas’s breath—formed clouds in the frigid air. Mine formed nothing, another reminder of what I’d become.

“This one’s dangerous,” Silas warned as we trudged through knee-deep snow. “A practitioner of blood magic.”

I almost laughed at the irony. What was I, if not a practitioner of blood magic in the most literal sense?

The farmhouse stood abandoned in a sea of white, its weathered clapboards gray against the snow. One window glowed with faint candlelight. As we approached, I caught the scent of human fear—now familiar, now anticipated.

“Remember,” Silas said, “the Order expects results. Your redemption depends on your service.”

The pattern had become clear through repetition. Find a solitary woman. Declare her a witch based on circumstantial evidence. Force her to defend herself. Spill her blood. Watch me feed. Get out of there and wait for some unknown lackeys of the Order of the Morning Dawn to show up before first-light to burn the evidence.

We broke down the door together. The woman inside was elderly, her white hair loose around her shoulders, her hands steady as she faced us. Someone had drawn a pentagram on the floor in what looked like animal blood.

“Proof,” Silas hissed, gesturing at the symbol.

But I’d seen enough now to doubt.

The old woman’s eyes widened at my words. “I didn’t do that!” she insisted. “Please—I left to get medicine to help my granddaughter, and this was here when I returned. The consumption took my daughter last spring, and now the child shows symptoms.”

Silas didn't wait for more explanations. He lunged forward, his dagger slashing across the woman's arm. Blood sprayed in an arc across the room, splattering the rough wooden walls.

"Alice!" the woman cried. The use of my name rather than 'Nightwalker' arrested my attention. "I know who you truly are. You prayed for the sick. You helped them. Please—"

But her words faded beneath the roaring in my ears. The blood called to me, a siren song I couldn't resist. I fell upon her with the hunger of the damned, drinking until there was nothing left but an empty shell and my own echoing shame.

Silas's hand fell on my shoulder as I crouched over the body. "Good," he said, and the satisfaction in his voice was no longer disguised. "You're learning efficiency."

I pushed his hand away and stumbled outside into the falling snow. The pure white flakes sizzled as they landed on my blood-warmed skin. I fell to my knees, the cold seeping through my skirts, and tried to pray despite knowing it was futile.

"Forgive me," I whispered to a God who no longer heard me, enduring the pain my prayers rightfully earned. "Save me."

Back in my quarters, I sat motionless for hours, staring at my reflection in the small mirror on the wall. My face was unchanged from my human days—though my deep blue eyes had turned red, I had the same sleek brown hair, the same features Daddy had called "a map of your mother's goodness." But now those features masked a monster.

Three months since my transformation. Three months of hunting for the Order. And what had it brought me but deeper damnation? Each kill had been justified with the promise of redemption, but I was no closer to salvation than when I'd started.

Memory rose unbidden: Mama teaching me to bandage wounds when I was barely ten years old. “The Lord works through willing hands,” she’d said, guiding my small fingers to tie a neat knot. “Sometimes grace is as simple as easing another’s pain.”

I hadn’t eased pain. I’d ended lives. And for what? For an Order that used me as a weapon? For a man who manipulated my hunger for his own purposes?

Another memory: Daddy reading from Proverbs by lamplight. “My child, if sinners entice you, do not consent.”

Too late, Daddy. Far too late.

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I rose and moved to the window. Outside, snow continued to fall, covering the world in false purity. Somewhere in the distance, church bells rang, calling the faithful to evening prayers. The sound pierced me with a longing for what I'd lost.

The door to my quarters opened without a knock. Silas stood there, his broad frame filling the doorway, snow melting on his shoulders.

“We’ve located another witch,” he said without preamble. “We leave at dawn.”

I turned from the window to face him. “And if I refuse?”

His expression hardened. “The Order doesn’t recognize refusal, Nightwalker. You serve or you perish.”

When he was gone, I sank to my knees on the cold wooden floor. Not in prayer this time—prayer was beyond me now—but in desperation. The faces of the women I'd killed flashed before me, each one clear in memory. The healer with her herbs. The fire-worker with her tired eyes. The young woman in the forest. The old grandmother trying to save her family.

Had any of them truly been what Silas claimed? Or had they simply been convenient targets—isolated, vulnerable, and ultimately disposable?

A terrible suspicion took root. What if none of those women were actually witches? If that was true, I'd not only indulged my vampiric urges, solidifying my own damnation, but I'd earned no redemption since what I'd murdered wasn't evil at all?

I thought of Brown, who had transformed me. Had she been truly evil, or simply confused? She'd attended Daddy's church, sung hymns with apparent sincerity. Yes, she'd gotten wrapped up with Moll Dwyer, she'd dabbled in things she shouldn't have, but was that on account of her evil, or because of her father's overprotectiveness? She wouldn't be the first girl to rebel against an overbearing parent. It was barely tolerated, especially in our congregation, but it wasn't uncommon.

I hadn't understood then. Maybe I still didn't. But one thing was becoming clear—the Order of the Morning Dawn was not what it claimed to be, and neither was Silas Blake.

Dawn would bring another hunt, another victim, another feeding engineered by Silas's careful orchestration. The cycle would continue, driving me further from the girl I'd been, closer to the monster they wanted me to become.

Unless I found the strength to resist. To change. But how could I, given what I was, given what I needed?

Chapter 15

January brought a killing frost that silenced the woods. The cabin before us could have been the twin of our first hunt—the same sagging porch, the same broken windows, the same sense of isolation pressing in from all sides. But I was not the same Alice who had followed Silas unquestioning into that first trap. Three months and countless deaths had hardened something in me, crystallized a resolve beneath my obedient exterior. My hands trembled not with anticipation but with determination as we approached through the snow-laden trees. Tonight would be different. Tonight, I would not feed.

“She's been here two weeks,” Silas said, his breath forming clouds in the frigid air.

“Local farmers report livestock found drained of blood. Classic signs of blood magic.”

Or hunger like mine, I thought but didn't say. The similarities weren't lost on me—a solitary woman, accusations of blood rituals, isolated location. How many of our targets had been vampires rather than witches? How many had been neither, simply convenient sacrifices to keep me fed and compliant?

“The Order wants her questioned before disposal,” Silas continued. “She may have connections to a larger coven operating in Massachusetts.”

Snow crunched beneath his boots as he walked. My own steps were silent, barely leaving an impression on the pristine white blanket. Another reminder of what I'd become—a creature that moved through the world with little trace, as insubstantial as the shadows we stalked through.

“You've been quiet,” Silas observed, glancing sideways at me. “Having doubts, Nightwalker?”

“No,” I lied. “Just focused.”

His eyes narrowed, but he said nothing more. We'd played this game of half-truths for months now. He pretended to believe my obedience; I pretended not to see his manipulation. But tonight the game would end, one way or another.

The cabin appeared through the trees, a dark blot against the snow-covered clearing. Smoke rose from its chimney in a thin, tentative line. Someone was home, waiting for the death we brought.

“Same approach as usual,” Silas said, drawing his silver dagger. The blade caught the moonlight, flashing like a silent warning. “I'll lead, you follow. If she attempts an

incantation, you know what to do.”

I nodded, though my stomach twisted with dread and resolution. I’d fed two days ago—another “witch” in another forgotten corner of New England—so the hunger, while present, wasn’t overwhelming. I could resist. I had to resist.

We crossed the clearing, our mismatched footprints—his deep and definite, mine barely disturbing the snow—leading straight to the cabin door. No attempt at stealth this time. Silas wanted her to know we were coming. Wanted her afraid.

He kicked the door open with a splintering crash. We entered the cabin’s single room, a space barely large enough for a rough bed, a small table, and a hearth where a meager fire struggled against the cold.

The woman spun to face us, dropping the book she’d been reading. She was young—perhaps twenty—with dark hair pulled back in a severe bun and eyes wide with fear and recognition.

“The Order,” she whispered, backing against the far wall. “I knew you’d come, eventually.”

Silas advanced, dagger raised. “By the authority of the Order of the Morning Dawn, you are condemned for the practice of witchcraft and unholy communion with dark forces.”

The woman’s hand moved to a small pendant around her neck—a simple wooden cross. “I’ve committed no crime against God or man,” she said, her voice steadier than her trembling hands. “I’ve harmed no one.”

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“The blood rituals,” Silas pressed. “The slaughtered animals.”

“I’ve taken no life,” she insisted. “The farmers’ animals die of the cold, not my hand. I merely... use what would otherwise go to waste.”

My entire body tensed. Not a witch. A vampire—like me.

Silas’s strategy shifted instantly. He lunged forward, not to kill but to provoke. His dagger slashed across her arm, drawing blood—vampire blood, rich and dark and different from human blood in subtle ways only another vampire would notice.

The scent hit me, but it wasn’t the overwhelming temptation of human blood. It called to me in a different way—recognition rather than hunger. I remained rooted in place, hands clenched into fists, body trembling with the effort of restraint.

The woman hissed in pain, her eyes flickering to me in confusion. She’d expected me to attack. Silas had expected me to attack.

“What are you doing?” Silas demanded, turning to me. “Help me subdue her!”

I shook my head, taking a step backward. “She’s not what you claimed. She’s not a witch.”

“She practices blood magic,” Silas insisted, his voice hardening. “The evidence is clear.”

“She’s a vampire,” I breathed. “Like me.”

The woman's eyes widened further. "You're with them?" she asked me, disbelief plain in her voice. "You hunt your own kind for them?"

Silas's expression shifted from expectation to genuine anger. The mask of stern guidance fell away, revealing something harder and colder beneath. "It doesn't matter what she is," he snapped. "The Order's mandate covers all unholy creatures. Now do your duty, Nightwalker."

But I couldn't. I wouldn't. The faces of all those I'd killed flashed before me—the healer with her herbs, the fire-worker with her tired eyes, the young woman in the forest, the grandmother trying to save her family. Each one declared witch and executed without trial. Each one feeding my hunger while feeding Silas's hidden agenda.

"No," I said, the word falling between us like a blade.

Silas stared at me as if I'd sprouted a second head. "What did you say?"

"I said no." My voice grew stronger. "I won't do this anymore."

For a moment, his face registered pure shock. Then his expression hardened into something terrible. Without warning, he whirled and launched himself at the female vampire with inhuman speed. She was quick, but Silas had decades of experience hunting our kind. He dodged her desperate swipe and drove his shoulder into her midsection, slamming her against the wall hard enough to crack the logs.

Before she could recover, he had the silver dagger at her throat. Not killing her—silver wouldn't kill a vampire, though it burned like fire—but causing excruciating pain. She screamed, the sound piercing through the cabin's close confines.

“Stop!” I cried.

Silas gave me a look of pure contempt. “Too squeamish suddenly, Nightwalker? After all the witches whose throats you’ve torn out?”

He dragged the struggling vampire outside into the snow. I followed, horrified, yet unable to look away. With brutal efficiency, he forced her to her knees, then produced a coil of rope from inside his coat. Not ordinary rope—I could smell the holy water it had been soaked in, see the prayers carved into its fibers.

“Blessed rope,” he explained unnecessarily as he bound her wrists behind her back. “Weakens unholy creatures. The Order has many such tools.”

The vampire sobbed as the rope burned her skin, leaving smoking welts wherever it touched. I’d never seen Silas use such implements before. He’d never needed to—he’d had me to do his killing for him.

“Please,” the woman begged, looking at me rather than Silas. “Sister, help me. We’re the same.”

Silas laughed, a harsh sound in the winter stillness. “You’re nothing alike. She serves the Order. You serve only your own hunger.” He tightened the blessed rope, drawing another scream from her throat. “Now, tell us about your brood, your maker. Names. Locations.”

“There is no brood,” she gasped. “I’m alone. I’ve always been alone.”

Silas backhanded her across the face, the silver ring he wore leaving a smoking gash on her cheek. “Lies. The Order knows of at least five blood practitioners operating between here and Boston.”

The woman spat blood at his feet. “I know nothing of others like me. I was turned and abandoned. I’ve survived alone, harming no humans, never feeding to the point of death.”

Silas straightened, his face cold with decision. “You still drink blood—forbidden in Leviticus! The pyre it is!”

I clenched my fists. His condemnation hit hard—he could have said the same to me. Some day, I suspected, he might. If I ceased to be useful.

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He turned to me, his eyes hard as flint. “Gather wood, Nightwalker. Large branches from the edge of the forest. Stack them here.” He kicked at the snow, clearing a rough circle.

I didn’t move. “This is wrong.”

“This is duty,” he countered. “This is your path to redemption.”

“Redemption?” I laughed bitterly. “Is that what you call this? Torture and murder?”

His hand moved to the hilt of his silver dagger. “Careful, Alice. Your sympathy for this creature borders on treason.”

The use of my real name—not Nightwalker, but Alice—was meant to remind me of what I’d been, of the human girl who’d knelt in prayer in her father’s church. But it had the opposite effect. It reminded me that Alice Bladewell had been raised to show compassion, not cruelty.

“I won’t help you burn her,” I said.

Silas’s expression darkened. “Then watch me do it alone.”

He dragged the bound vampire to the center of the cleared circle, ignoring her renewed struggles and pleas. Then he moved to the edge of the forest, breaking branches from the trees with methodical precision. I stood frozen, caught between the instinct to flee and the terrible compulsion to witness what I’d enabled for months.

The vampire's eyes found mine. "Please," she whispered. "If you have any mercy, kill me quickly before he returns. Don't let him burn me."

I took a step toward her, then another. The dagger I carried—smaller than Silas's, but just as deadly—seemed to burn against my hip. One quick stroke across the throat would end her suffering before Silas could intervene.

But before I could reach her, Silas returned, his arms laden with branches. He dropped them beside the captive, then gave me a measuring look.

"Having second thoughts about your rebellion?" he asked, misinterpreting my approach. "Good. Help me build the pyre, and perhaps we'll disregard your prior disobedience."

I turned away, walking back toward the cabin. "I'm leaving."

His hand caught my arm, fingers digging in with bruising force. "You're going nowhere, Nightwalker. You will stand and watch. You will learn what happens when our targets aren't dispatched quickly and efficiently. You could stake her if you'd like. We could burn her heart out painlessly. But because you refuse, her heart will burn no less, and she'll feel every lick of the flames."

He dragged me back to the clearing, positioning me where I'd have a clear view of what was to come. Then he returned to his grim work, stacking wood around the kneeling vampire in a careful circle.

When the pyre was complete, he doused the wood with oil from a flask he carried. The pungent smell filled the clearing, mixing with the vampire's fear-scent and the crisp winter air.

"Last chance," he told his captive. "Tell me about the others."

“There are no others,” she insisted, her voice cracking with terror.

Silas struck a match against his boot and held the tiny flame before her eyes. “Fire purifies,” he said, his voice taking on the cadence of ritual. “Fire cleanses what God has judged unclean.”

“Don’t,” I whispered, but he wasn’t listening to me anymore.

He dropped the match onto the oil-soaked wood. Flames erupted with a whoosh, racing around the circle. The vampire screamed as fire climbed the pyre, reaching for her with hungry orange fingers. Her bound body thrashed against the blessed ropes. But there was no escape.

I tried to turn away, but Silas gripped my shoulder, forcing me to watch. “This is what happens when you fail to complete your mission efficiently,” he said, his voice carrying over the woman’s screams. “This is the consequence of your misplaced sympathy.”

The vampire’s clothes caught fire, then her hair. Her screams became inhuman, a sound of such pure agony that it seemed to pierce the very sky. I struggled against Silas’s grip, but he held me fast, his strength far exceeding mine.

“Remember,” he continued, his face illuminated by the hellish glow, “securing redemption from the evil you’ve become requires sacrifice. Next time, offer them a quicker death.”

Next time. As if there could be a next time after this. As if I could ever again participate in the Order’s brutal crusade.

The screaming stopped eventually. The vampire’s body blackened and crumbled within the flames, reduced to ash and bone. Only then did Silas release me, stepping

back with grim satisfaction.

“The Order will need to be informed of your hesitation today,” he said. “But I believe you’ve learned your lesson. Haven’t you, Nightwalker?”

I said nothing, my face a hollow mask as I stared at the dying flames. Inside, something had broken—or perhaps healed. The comfortable lies I’d told myself about redemption and duty had burned away, leaving only the stark truth: I had become a monster serving monsters.

Chapter 16

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Exeter slept while I haunted its streets, a ghost among the living. My footsteps made no sound on the cobblestones; my breath formed no clouds in the January air. The town I'd once called home felt foreign now, viewed through these cursed eyes that saw too much—every shadow harboring potential threat, every distant heartbeat a reminder of what I'd become.

Three months since my transformation, and still I couldn't reconcile the monster I now was with the faithful daughter I'd once been. My hands, pale in the moonlight, had torn out throats. My mouth, once shaped only for prayer, had drunk the lifeblood of those Silas called "witches." God's silence had never been so deafening as it was now, walking these empty streets.

At least Silas trusted me enough to allow me out at night. So long as I didn't come back fully fed—biting without authorization was strictly forbidden—he promised I'd gradually gain more freedom and sooner that later I might be able to go on the Order's missions alone.

The storefronts stood dark and shuttered against the night—Parker's General Store where Mama used to buy fabric for my Sunday dresses, the cobbler's shop where Daddy had his boots mended each winter, the milliner's where we never shopped because Mama said their hats were "too worldly." Each familiar landmark seemed to judge me as I passed, aware of the blood that stained my conscience, if not my skin.

I could hear everything: a cat stalking a mouse in the alley beside the bakery; an infant's restless whimpers from an upstairs window; the rumbling snores of the blacksmith who'd always tipped his hat to Daddy after Sunday service. My heightened senses transformed the sleeping town into a symphony of life from which

I was forever excluded. I was neither alive nor dead—trapped in an unholy limbo.

The image of the burning vampire haunted me. Her screams echoed in my memory, cutting through the silent night as they had cut through the winter air just days ago. I'd stood and watched. I hadn't stopped it. I'd been complicit, just as I'd been complicit in all the deaths before. Had any of them truly been what Silas claimed? Had any of them deserved their fate?

"Monster," I whispered to myself, the word hanging in the frozen air like a pronouncement. "You have become death."

I paused at the intersection where Main Street met Church Road. To my right stood Daddy's church, its spire reaching toward heaven like an accusing finger. No lights burned in its windows—the God I'd once served with such devotion apparently kept bankers' hours now. I hadn't been inside since before my transformation. Couldn't bear to desecrate the sacred space with my unholy presence.

Not to mention, if some other minister had taken Daddy's pulpit, I wasn't sure I could handle it. I preferred to imagine Daddy was still inside, at his study, preparing Sunday's homily. I knew it wasn't true, just a fantasy, but when that's all you have to live by, you embrace it. Perhaps if I imagined it that way enough, somehow, some way, it might come true. If God was still out there, if I still had a guardian angel, if miracles were possible.

"Daddy," I whispered, staring at the dark church. "What would you say if you could see me now?"

I knew the answer. Reverend William Bladewell had been uncompromising in his sermons against evil. "The wages of sin is death," he'd thundered from the pulpit. "And those who consort with darkness shall find no mercy in the light of God's judgment."

He'd been particularly venomous about Catholics. "Papists," he'd called them, spitting the word like poison. "Blood-drinkers who claim to consume their God in their blasphemous rituals." The irony wasn't lost on me. I'd become the very thing he despised—a literal blood-drinker, damned beyond redemption.

Yet here I was, still in Exeter, doing the Order's bidding, seeking... what? Absolution? Understanding? Or merely the comfort of familiar streets as I contemplated an eternity of darkness?

I turned away from the church and continued walking, passing the silent, snow-covered cemetery where Mama lay buried. I couldn't bring myself to visit her grave. What would I say? "Sorry I've become an abomination, Mama. Sorry I won't be joining you anytime soon. I could live like this forever, or go to hell, but I can't go where you are." The thought was unbearable.

As I approached the edge of town, the houses grew sparser, the darkness deeper. Few streetlamps lit this section of Exeter, where the poor and the immigrant populations lived in cramped quarters. The Irish neighborhood lay ahead—Catholic territory, as Daddy had always warned us. "They worship idols and practice necromancy," he'd said, though I wasn't sure I believed it.

Something changed in the air—a subtle shift that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. I was being watched. My eyes scanned the darkness, my body instinctively coiling for fight or flight. Three months of training with the Order had honed my predatory instincts, even as it had dulled my humanity.

A figure emerged from the shadows between two buildings—a man in a long black coat, moving with purpose rather than stealth. My enhanced vision cut through the darkness, revealing a weathered face framed by gray-streaked hair, kind eyes set in a face lined with both smiles and sorrow. He carried a wooden cane, leaning on it slightly as he approached.

I tensed, ready to disappear into the night. Had the Order sent someone else to retrieve me?

“Good evening,” the man said, his voice quiet but carrying clearly through the night air. He stopped at a respectful distance, studying me with an unnerving directness. “Or perhaps I should say good morning. It’s well past midnight.”

I said nothing, calculating the distance to the nearest alley, the fastest route out of town.

“You’re Reverend Bladewell’s daughter,” he continued. “Alice, isn’t it? I’ve seen you with your father at the market. Though not recently.”

His accent carried the faint lilt of Ireland, softened by years in America. His collar identified him clearly—a Catholic priest. What was he doing out at this hour?

“I don’t know you.” My voice was hollow.

“Father Thomas O’Malley,” he replied with a slight bow. “St. Mary’s parish.” He gestured vaguely toward the small stone church at the edge of the Irish quarter. Then, without warning, his expression shifted to one of gentle recognition. “I know what you are.”

My body went rigid. “I don’t know what you mean.”

He took a step closer, and I fought the urge to retreat. “You’re not breathing,” he observed quietly. “Your skin has the pallor of marble. And your movements...” He tilted his head slightly. “Too smooth. Too controlled. Like a predator.”

Fear and rage surged through me. Had he been sent by Silas, after all? Was this some new trap?

“What do you want?” I demanded, baring my teeth slightly. The hunger stirred within me—always present, though I’d fed recently enough to control it. For now.

Father O’Malley didn’t flinch. “I want nothing from you, child. But perhaps I can offer something instead.”

“I doubt that very much, Father.” I infused the title with all the disdain Daddy had taught me to feel for Catholic clergy. “Unless you’re offering your throat, which I don’t recommend.”

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His lips quirked in what might have been a smile. “An interesting proposition, but no. I’m offering understanding. Perhaps even hope.”

“Hope?” I laughed bitterly. “For this?” I gestured at myself. “There is no hope for the damned, Father. Your church teaches that as clearly as mine does.”

“Does it?” he asked mildly. “I’m not sure you’ve studied our teachings as thoroughly as you believe.”

I remembered Daddy’s sermons about Catholics—how they worshipped statues, how they believed their priests could forgive sins, how they claimed to drink the actual blood of Christ in their blasphemous communion. Blood-drinkers, he’d called them. The irony struck me again, sharper this time.

“I know enough,” I said. “Enough to know that God has abandoned me. That I’m beyond salvation.”

Father O’Malley leaned heavily on his cane, studying me with those penetrating eyes. “No one is beyond salvation, Alice. Not even those who walk by night.”

The certainty in his voice caught me off guard. “You seem remarkably calm for someone confronting a vampire, Father.”

“You’re not the first I’ve encountered,” he said simply.

This revelation stunned me into momentary silence. The Order had led me to believe vampires were rare, isolated creatures—aberrations to be hunted down and destroyed.

The thought that this aging priest might have knowingly spoken with others like me was disorienting.

“And you’re still alive?” I asked finally.

He smiled, a genuine expression that softened his weathered features. “Clearly. Perhaps because I offered understanding rather than condemnation.”

“Understanding won’t quench my thirst for blood.”

“No,” he agreed. “But it might help you find a way to live with it that doesn’t require becoming a monster.”

The words struck deep. Wasn’t that exactly what I’d been searching for? A way to exist without surrendering completely to the darkness within me? Without being used as a weapon by Silas and the Order?

“How?” The question escaped before I could stop it, betraying my desperation.

Father O’Malley glanced toward the eastern horizon, where the sky remained dark but would eventually lighten. “That’s a longer conversation than we have time for tonight. But if you’re truly interested, come to St. Mary’s tomorrow night. Late mass, midnight. The sacraments might offer you a path toward healing, a form of redemption.”

I scoffed, falling back on Daddy’s teachings like a shield. “Sacraments? Wafers and wine that you pretend is actually flesh and blood? That’s your solution?”

“I don’t expect you to believe it now, given your background,” he observed. “But given how you’ve changed, but appear very similar to what you were before, is it that hard to believe such a change might occur in our masses?”

His words left me speechless.

“I should warn you,” he continued, “it won’t be painless. Holy ground will burn you. Prayers will sound like knives in your ears. The consecration itself may cause you more agony than you can bear.” He paused, his eyes gentle but unflinching. “But pain can be purifying. Pain can remind us we’re still human.”

I burst out laughing. “Still human?”

“Is it that absurd?” the priest asked. “Do you not still have the remnants of a conscience? Have you considered even a moment that the reason it hurts to pray, to enter a church, to even say the name of the Lord, is because it’s your cross, the path you must take to become new with Him?”

The echo of Daddy’s words from long ago rang in my memory: Pain kept me present. Pain kept me faithful.

“Why would you help me?” I asked, suspicion warring with desperate hope. “Why not just drive a stake through my heart and be done with it?”

“Because that’s not my calling,” he said simply. “My calling is to shepherd souls toward God, not to judge which souls are worthy of the journey.” He turned to go, then paused. “The choice is yours, Alice Bladewell. Midnight tomorrow. St. Mary’s.”

He walked away, his cane tapping a steady rhythm against the cobblestones. I watched until he disappeared around a corner, my mind racing with conflicting emotions. Every instinct warned me this could be a trap. Yet something deeper than instinct—something that might once have been called faith—whispered that Father O’Malley had offered me the first genuine chance at redemption since my transformation.

The eastern sky remained dark, but I knew dawn approached. I needed shelter before the sun rose. As I turned toward the abandoned root cellar at the edge of town where I'd been hiding, I realized I'd already made my decision.

Tomorrow night, I would go to St. Mary's. Not because I believed Catholic rituals could save me, but because after months of darkness, even false hope was better than none at all.

And if it was a trap? Well, perhaps death would be a mercy.

Chapter 17

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St. Mary's loomed before me, stone walls silvered by moonlight, stained glass windows like dark eyes watching my approach. Even from the street, twenty yards away, I could feel the building's resistance to my presence—a subtle pressure against my skin, as if the very air around the church was trying to push me back into the darkness where I belonged. I paused at the iron gate, my hand hovering over the latch. The small cemetery flanking the church reminded me that I now walked a strange path between life and death, belonging fully to neither realm.

Midnight bells tolled, their sound reverberating through my sensitive ears like hammers against anvils. It was time. I had promised to come, and despite every instinct screaming at me to flee, I pushed open the gate and stepped onto consecrated ground.

Pain shot through the soles of my feet, traveling up my legs like lightning seeking ground. I gasped, faltering mid-step but forcing myself forward. Each footfall on the church path sent fresh waves of agony up my spine. This wasn't the mild discomfort I'd felt near Daddy's church—this was active rejection, as if every inch of soil had been soaked in something that recognized my unnaturalness and sought to burn it away.

Father O'Malley waited at the church entrance, a compact figure in black silhouetted against the dim light spilling from the open doors. His face registered my pain but showed no surprise.

"You came," he said quietly as I approached. "I wasn't certain you would."

"Neither was I," I admitted, stopping several feet from the threshold. The pain in my

feet had subsided to a constant, dull burn, but I could feel stronger resistance emanating from the doorway itself.

Father O'Malley held something in his hand—a small crystal vial filled with clear liquid. “Holy water,” he explained, seeing my gaze. “Blessed at Easter vigil last year.” He removed the stopper. “This is your first test of faith, Alice. To enter God’s house, you must first endure His purifying touch.”

I stared at the innocent-looking water, remembering how the blessed rope had burned the female vampire’s skin, leaving smoking welts. “You want to burn me?”

“I want to help you,” he corrected gently. “But the path won’t be easy. Nothing of value ever is.”

I took a deep breath, and clenched the fist of my right hand as I extended my left, palm up. Father O'Malley’s eyes held mine as he tipped the vial, allowing a single drop to fall onto my skin.

The pain was immediate and shocking—as if someone had pressed a red-hot coal against my flesh. I bit back a scream as smoke rose from my palm, the sizzling sound obscenely loud in the quiet night. The smell of burning flesh—my flesh—filled my nostrils.

“Breathe through it,” Father O'Malley instructed, though breathing was merely a conscious choice for me now, not a necessity. Still, I found myself gulping air, using the rhythm to focus beyond the pain.

When the burning subsided to a throbbing ache, I looked down. A perfect circular welt marked my palm, red and angry against my pale skin.

“The first is always the worst,” Father O'Malley said, his voice carrying notes of both

compassion and clinical assessment. “Are you ready to continue?”

I nodded, unable to trust my voice. He dipped his fingers into the vial and traced a cross on my forehead. This time I was prepared for the pain, but preparation didn’t lessen it—only my reaction to it. My skin smoked beneath his touch, the burning sensation cutting deep, as if he were carving the sign directly into my skull. Yet I remained standing, teeth clenched, eyes fixed on his.

“In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,” he murmured.

The Latin words themselves seemed to press against me, heavy with centuries of faith. When he finished, the burning gradually subsided, leaving another welt I could feel but not see.

“Now you may enter,” he said, stepping aside.

I hesitated at the threshold. My experience at Daddy’s church had taught me what to expect—rejection, pain, divine judgment made manifest through physical suffering. But what choice did I have? Return to the Order and Silas’s manipulations? Continue killing innocents to feed my cursed hunger? Or face this pain in hope of... what? Salvation seemed too much to ask for. Perhaps just understanding would be enough.

I stepped through the doorway into St. Mary’s Church.

The interior was dimly lit with dozens of candles, their flames creating dancing patterns of light and shadow across the walls. Unlike the stark simplicity of Daddy’s church, St. Mary’s embraced a different aesthetic entirely. Colors assaulted my enhanced vision—richly painted statues of saints lined the walls, their expressions serene or suffering. Gold gleamed from the altar at the front. Red velvet draped the altar steps. The air hung heavy with incense that made my heightened senses reel—frankincense and myrrh, ancient scents that bypassed my conscious mind and

spoke directly to something older, deeper.

Most shocking of all were the images—everywhere I looked, visual representations of biblical scenes that would have been considered idolatrous in my father's congregation. Christ on the cross, his agony depicted in painful detail. The Virgin Mary with a sword piercing her heart. Angels with outstretched wings. It was overwhelming, almost dizzying.

A handful of elderly parishioners occupied the front pews, their heads bowed in prayer or contemplation. Why were they at a midnight mass? I'd figured the priest would be here alone—unwilling to risk any of his prisoners to the threat of my hunger.

None turned to look at us. Father O'Malley guided me to a pew at the very back, where the shadows were deepest.

"The pain will continue," he warned in a whisper. "The prayers, the ritual—all of it will cause you discomfort. You may leave at any time if it is too much. However, I'd urge you to return. Try to hold on a little longer each time you visit."

I nodded, sinking onto the wooden bench. Even the pew seemed to resist my weight, the wood creaking in protest. I noticed smaller details now—the worn spots on the kneelers where countless faithful had prayed, the faint smell of beeswax and dust beneath the incense, the way sound carried differently here than in Daddy's church, echoing against stone rather than absorbed by plain wood.

A priest—not Father O'Malley, but an older man with stooped shoulders—emerged from a side door and approached the altar. The mass began with words I didn't recognize, Latin phrases that seemed to hover in the air like physical things. Each syllable pressed against my skin, not painful exactly, but uncomfortable—like tiny needles pricking at my consciousness.

As the service progressed, the discomfort intensified. When the congregation recited prayers together, their voices merged into a sound that made my skull throb. I pressed my hands against my ears, but it didn't help—the pain came from within as much as without. It was as if the words themselves recognized what I was and sought to drive it out.

Yet strangely, I didn't want to flee. Despite the pain—or perhaps because of it—I felt more present, more aware than I had since my transformation. The hunger that constantly lurked within me seemed temporarily quieted, pushed into the background by this new sensation.

The elderly parishioners didn't notice my distress, their attention focused entirely on the ritual unfolding before them. One woman clutched rosary beads. A man with gnarled hands crossed himself with reverent precision. They seemed transported, connected to something I could feel but not fully comprehend.

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Father O'Malley knelt next to me, offering an oddly reassuring presence even though he was the one responsible for my present distress. "The mass has meaning beyond the words," he whispered. "Each gesture, each response—they connect us to two thousand years of faith, to believers who came before and those who will come after. In fact, we believe they're here with us even now. Since Jesus rose from the dead, and we believers belong to the body of Christ, death doesn't divide us, either."

I watched as the priest at the altar raised a white disk above his head. "Hoc est enim Corpus meum," he intoned.

The pain that shot through me then was unlike anything I'd experienced before—even my transformation had not hurt like this. It felt as if every cell in my body were being torn apart and reassembled. My vision blurred, darkened at the edges. I clutched the pew in front of me, my fingers digging into the wood hard enough to leave marks.

"This is my body," Father O'Malley translated beside me. "Given for you."

The priest now raised a chalice. "Hic est enim calix Sanguinis mei..."

Another wave of agony crashed over me. Blood. He was speaking of blood, and something in me—the monster, the vampire—recoiled in recognition and terror. This wasn't just wine being transformed in symbol; something real was happening, something my undead nature recognized and feared.

"This is the chalice of my Blood," O'Malley continued, "the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness

of sins. Do this in memory of me.”

I couldn’t bear it any longer. With a strangled sound that might have been a sob, I stumbled to my feet and lurched toward the door, barely aware of Father O’Malley’s concerned gaze following me. I burst outside, gasping unnecessarily for air, and collapsed onto the church steps.

The pain subsided almost immediately, leaving me trembling with reaction and something else—something I couldn’t immediately identify. I sat there, staring up at the star-filled January sky, trying to make sense of what I’d just experienced.

It hadn’t felt like an attack. Not exactly. The pain had been real, excruciating even, but it wasn’t the same as the pain I’d felt when Silas had pressed a silver crucifix against my skin as “training.” That had been purely destructive, meant to weaken and control. This had felt... different. Cleansing, somehow. Like lancing an infected wound—agony in service of healing.

I touched my palm where the holy water had burned me. The welt remained, but the skin around it felt strangely alive—more sensitive, more present than the rest of my cold flesh. I wondered if the mark on my forehead looked the same.

The church door opened behind me. Father O’Malley emerged, leaning heavily on his cane. Without a word, he sat beside me on the step, mindful of the distance between us.

“How do you feel?” he asked after a long silence.

“I don’t know,” I answered truthfully. “It hurt. More than I expected.”

He nodded. “Yet you endured longer than most would on their first visit.”

“Most?” I turned to look at him. “You’ve done this before? Invited vampires to mass?”

A small smile touched his lips. “As I told you yesterday, you’re not the first of your kind I’ve encountered. Why else would I even offer a midnight mass?”

I stared at him with new curiosity. “And the others? What happened to them?”

“Some couldn’t bear it and never returned. Others found the strength to continue, to push through the pain.” He looked toward the cemetery beside the church. “A few found peace, of a sort.”

“Death, you mean.”

“Not always.” His eyes, when they turned back to me, held a depth of understanding that made me want to weep. “Alice, what you experienced in there—the pain, the rejection—it’s not punishment. It’s recognition.”

“Recognition?”

“Your body—your transformed nature—recognizes the divine presence and reacts to it. Like iron glowing red in fire, pain is merely the visible sign of a deeper transformation taking place.”

I considered this, turning the idea over in my mind. “In Daddy’s church—in my church—they taught us that suffering was punishment for sin.”

“And do you believe that still?”

The question caught me off guard. Did I? After everything I’d seen, everything I’d done?

“I don’t know what I believe anymore,” I admitted. “Except that I don’t want to be a monster. I don’t want to kill for Silas or the Order. I don’t want to kill at all.”

Father O’Malley nodded slowly. “That’s a beginning.” He rose stiffly, using his cane for support. “Will you return tomorrow night?”

I looked back at the church, remembering the agony of the consecration, the feeling that my very being was being unmade. Could I endure that again? Did I want to?

“Yes,” I heard myself say. “I’ll return.”

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Something like approval flickered across his weathered face. “Good. We have much to discuss—about faith, about what you are, about what you might become.”

“What I might become?” Hope—dangerous, foolish hope—stirred within me. “What do you mean?”

“All in time, Alice.” He gestured toward the eastern horizon, where the sky remained dark but would eventually lighten. “You should seek shelter before dawn. We’ll continue tomorrow.”

As I stood to leave, a strange impulse made me turn back. “Father? Thank you.”

He inclined his head slightly. “Don’t thank me yet, child. The road ahead is long and will not be easy. But perhaps, at the end of it, you’ll find what you’re seeking.”

“And what am I seeking?” I asked, genuinely curious about his assessment.

His eyes met mine, unflinching. “Not absolution, I think. Not yet. First, you seek understanding—of what you are, of why God permits such darkness in His creation.” He paused. “And beneath that, something simpler: you seek to be more than your hunger.”

His words struck with uncomfortable precision. I nodded once, then turned away, moving swiftly through the night toward my temporary shelter. The eastern sky remained dark, but somewhere beyond the horizon, dawn was coming. For the first time since my transformation, I found myself looking forward to the next nightfall—not with dread, but with something that might, with time, become hope.

Chapter 18

It felt like a double-life. Most days, Silas was gone, undoubtedly looking for supposed witches or vampires he might send me to murder. At night, the more I played the role he wanted me to, the more I was free to go to mass. It was the last thing Silas would think I was doing—which might be one reason why it felt so safe, despite how painful it was each visit.

The sacristy smelled of beeswax and old incense, a small room hidden behind the altar where priests prepared for mass and stored sacred vessels. Father O'Malley had led me here after another mass I couldn't get through, offering me this quieter space to recover from my ordeal.

I sat on a wooden chair, my hands still trembling slightly, watching as he methodically extinguished candles and stored away vestments. Every movement seemed practiced, reverent—a ritual in itself. The walls were lined with cabinets of dark wood, worn smooth by generations of hands. A crucifix hung above a small washing basin, Christ's carved face captured in an expression of serene suffering that made me look away. This hidden room felt like crossing into another world entirely, far removed from the Puritan simplicity I'd been raised in, where even a cross without Christ's image had been considered suspect by some.

"The pain subsides more quickly each time," Father O'Malley said, noticing my still-shaking hands. "Your body—or whatever animates it now—begins to recognize the difference between destruction and purification."

"During the consecration, it feels like I'm being torn apart. I don't get why that moment is so difficult. It's like it's I'm the one being sacrificed, like my body is the one being broken."

"Yet here you are." He smiled slightly. "Still whole, still yourself."

Was I, though? Still myself?

Father O'Malley removed his stole—the long embroidered cloth he'd worn around his neck during mass—and kissed it before carefully folding it into a drawer. “Do you know what happened on that altar tonight? What happens during every mass?”

“Your priest said some words over bread and wine,” I replied, falling back on what Daddy had taught me. “And all of you pretended they became something else.”

If my bluntness offended him, he didn't show it. Instead, he nodded thoughtfully. “That's a common misunderstanding. We pretend nothing. We believe—no, we know—that the substance changes while the appearances remain the same.”

“That's impossible,” I said automatically.

Father O'Malley's eyebrows rose slightly. “Is it? You still appear human in most respects. Your face is the same one you've always known. Yet something fundamental to your nature has changed, hasn't it? The substance of what you are transformed while the accidents—the outward appearances—remained largely the same.”

The parallel caught me off guard. I'd never considered my transformation in those terms before.

“That's different,” I protested. “What happened to me was... unnatural.”

“Was it?” He sat across from me, his hands resting on his cane. “Or was it merely something outside your previous understanding of nature? The world contains more mysteries than we can comprehend, Alice. The line between natural and supernatural isn't as clear as we like to believe.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Daddy always said Catholic beliefs about communion were blasphemous. That you claimed to sacrifice Christ again and again, when scripture clearly says He died once for all.”

“Your father misunderstood our teaching,” Father O’Malley said gently. “We don’t sacrifice Christ anew—we participate in His one eternal sacrifice. Time works differently in sacred spaces.” He glanced toward the altar visible through the doorway. “When the Eucharist is consecrated, we’re not creating something new; we’re connecting with something eternal.”

The concept was difficult to grasp, yet strangely compelling. I’d experienced firsthand how different time felt since my transformation—how nights stretched endlessly, how moments of feeding compressed into blinding intensity.

I still struggled with the idea. “Jesus said to do this in remembrance of him. That’s what it’s all about. Remembering what he did.”

Father O’Malley laughed a little. “That might be how a modern lady like you at the end of the nineteenth century in America thinks about remembrance. But what we have there is a technical term. It’s connected to the Passover ritual and Exodus 13:8. When Jewish people celebrated the Passover, they were to regard themselves as participants in the original Exodus, as though they were themselves being rescued from slavery by the Lord. So likewise, when we use the word ‘remembrance,’ it’s not about nostalgia. The word Jesus used there actually means joining ourselves to his death and resurrection, the distance of time and space completely removed, so that his sacrifice is real for us, and in us.”

“So you genuinely believe that wafer becomes flesh?” I asked, unable to keep the skepticism from my voice.

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“I do.” His certainty was unshakable. “Not in a crude, physical way that our senses can detect—the appearances of bread and wine remain. But in its deepest reality, its substance, it becomes Christ’s body and blood.” He leaned forward. “The body and blood of Christ can be both symbolic and literal, just as you are both dead and alive.”

The words struck me with unexpected force. Both dead and alive. It described my condition perfectly—this liminal existence, this neither-nor state that had become my reality.

“You said before that I wasn’t the first... like me... that you’d encountered.” I realized I was changing the subject. “The others—did they come to believe as you do?”

Father O’Malley’s expression grew distant. “Some did, in time. Others found the concept too difficult to accept. Faith isn’t something that can be forced, Alice. It can only be offered and received freely.”

I thought about the Order, about Silas and his rigid certainties. There had been no freedom there—only commands and consequences.

“How can you reconcile this?” I gestured at myself. “My existence with your faith? Silas says that vampires are abominations, unholy creatures that God will destroy.”

“Silas Blake’s theology is warped,” he replied with surprising frankness. “God’s creation is vast and complex. Scripture tells us that Christ came to reconcile all things in creation to Himself—all things, Alice, not just those that fit neatly into our human categories of good and evil.”

He rose and moved to a small cabinet, returning with a worn Bible. The sight of it made me tense—the last time I’d tried to touch scripture, the pages had scorched my fingers.

“Don’t worry,” he said, noticing my reaction. “I won’t ask you to touch it yet. But I want to share something with you.” He opened to a marked page. “Did you know that all Christians for nearly fifteen hundred years believed that when they received the Eucharist, they received the true body and blood of Christ? This wasn’t a Catholic innovation—it was the universal understanding.”

I frowned. “That can’t be right. Daddy said—“

“Your father was speaking from a tradition barely four centuries old,” O’Malley interrupted gently. “Listen to what Ignatius of Antioch wrote in the early second century—a man who had learned the faith from the apostles themselves. He spoke of certain heretics who ‘abstain from the Eucharist and prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness raised again,’ then he exhorted the Christians he was writing to at Smyrna to ‘stay aloof from such persons.’ Have you ever considered, dearest Alice, that the earliest Christians might have considered your father to be a heretic on account of what he told you concerning the Eucharist?”

The certainty in his voice gave me pause. The implication that my late father was a heretic might have sent me into a rage if it wasn’t for the fact that this priest had cited a source that was hard to deny. I mean, even if this Ignatius guy wasn’t inspired like the apostles, since he learned from the people who actually wrote the New Testament, he probably had a lot better of an idea what things really meant than my father did more than eighteen hundred years later. What had me so startled, though, was that Daddy had always presented Catholic beliefs as late corruptions of true Christianity. Father O’Malley was suggesting something different—that it was the Puritan view that was the innovation.

“But scripture—“ I began.

“Scripture supports this understanding,” he said, turning pages. “In John’s Gospel, chapter six, Jesus tells his followers quite explicitly: ‘Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.’ When many of his disciples found this teaching too difficult and stopped following him, did Jesus call them back to explain it was just a metaphor?”

I had to admit I didn’t know. I’d read the Bible cover to cover multiple times in my human life, but Daddy had always explained the difficult passages for us. That particular passage had always confused me, but Father O’Malley seemed to find its meaning plain.

“No,” Father O’Malley continued. “Instead, he turned to the twelve and asked if they would leave too. He didn’t soften his stance or clarify that he was speaking symbolically. He repeated the hard teaching and asked for faith.”

He handed me the open Bible, careful to hold it so I wouldn’t have to touch it. I read the passage he indicated, seeing it with new eyes. The words themselves seemed to shimmer on the page, challenging my understanding.

“I can imagine how the disciples struggled with this teaching,” Father O’Malley said softly. “It violated everything they understood about Jewish dietary laws, about what was possible. Yet Peter’s response is perfect: ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’”

“Eternal,” I echoed, the word catching in my throat. Eternity stretched before me now—an endless procession of nights, of hunger, of isolation. Was that what Christ had offered? An eternity like mine?

“Not like yours,” Father O’Malley said, as if reading my thoughts. “Eternal life in

Christ is about quality as much as duration. It's about fullness, about becoming what we were created to be."

"And what was I created to be?" I asked, the question escaping before I could stop it. "A monster? A killer?"

Father O'Malley closed the Bible and set it aside. "I don't believe that's what God intended for you, Alice. Your current state—this corruption—it may be a deviation from His original design. But that doesn't mean you're beyond His reach or His redemption."

I laughed bitterly. "Redemption. That's what the Order promised too. They said each witch I killed brought me one step closer to salvation."

Father O'Malley's expression darkened. "And do you believe that?"

"I did. For a time." I looked down at my hands—hands that had torn out throats, that had been stained with blood. "Until I realized they were using me. That Silas was manipulating me, cutting his victims to trigger my hunger, knowing I couldn't resist."

"The Order of the Morning Dawn has strayed far from its original purpose," Father O'Malley said, his voice tight with controlled anger. "They were founded to protect, not to destroy. To help those afflicted by darkness, not to exploit them."

I looked up sharply. "You know about the Order?"

He nodded grimly. "Our paths have crossed before. We have... competing understandings... of how to address supernatural phenomena."

This revelation shifted something in my understanding. "Everything you're explaining... it's nothing like what I grew up thinking your church believed."

A smile touched Father O'Malley's lips. "I'm not surprised. There are many misconceptions about Catholic teachings."

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“Daddy said you worshipped statues,” I admitted, glancing at a small figurine of Mary on a nearby shelf.

Father O’Malley chuckled. “Do you worship photographs of your mother? Do you actually adore the photographs themselves? Or do you value them as connections to someone you love?” He shook his head. “I’ve heard it all. That we ‘added books’ to the Bible. That we believe the Pope is sinless. That we think we can earn our salvation with an abundance of good works.”

Despite everything, I found myself smiling. Because all the things he was denying are exactly the things I assumed he believed. “Daddy said Catholics weren’t allowed to read the Bible.”

“Ah yes, that old chestnut.” He gestured to the well-worn Bible on the table. “I must have missed that particular instruction.”

Our shared laughter felt strange—inappropriate even—given my condition and the seriousness of our discussion. Yet it also felt healing, as if puncturing the balloon of prejudice I’d carried for so long.

“I’ve met maybe ten people in all my life who actually hate the Catholic Church,” Father O’Malley said when our laughter subsided. “I’ve met thousands who hate what they think the Catholic Church is.”

The words resonated deeply. “I understand that feeling,” I said quietly. “Being misunderstood.”

He nodded, his expression softening. “I imagine you do.”

A silence fell between us, comfortable rather than strained. Through the small window high in the sacristy wall, I could see stars beginning to fade as dawn approached.

“Do you really think there’s hope for me?” I asked finally. “Beyond what the Order promised?”

Father O’Malley’s gaze was steady, assessing. “I believe there is, Alice. But I’m concerned about the Order’s influence on you. They’re using you for their own purposes—purposes that I’m certain have nothing to do with your salvation.”

“I’ve realized that,” I admitted. “We once had a mission. Silas made me watch as he burned another vampire, a girl not unlike me. Said it was my fault for refusing to kill her quickly.” The memory made me shudder. “He enjoyed it, Father. The suffering, the power. And I’d been helping him.”

Father O’Malley’s hand twitched, as if he’d almost reached out to comfort me but thought better of it. “The path to hell is often paved with actions we believe will lead to heaven,” he said softly. “The Order began with good intentions, centuries ago. But power corrupts. Spiritual power perhaps most of all.”

“So what can I do? What am I supposed to become?” The questions came from the deepest part of me, the part that still hoped for meaning beyond mere survival.

“In time, perhaps, you’ll be ready to know,” Father O’Malley said. “For now, it’s enough that you’re here, seeking something beyond the darkness. That you recognize the monster isn’t all you are.”

“The hunger is always there,” I confessed, my voice dropping to a whisper. “Always

waiting. I try to control it, but when there's blood..." I thought of the women I'd killed, the lives I'd taken at Silas's orchestration. "It takes over."

"And yet you resist it," Father O'Malley pointed out. "You question it. That alone sets you apart from many with your... condition."

"Not well enough. Not consistently enough."

"Sanctification is a process, not an event," he said, using a word I'd never heard before. "The same is true of healing. Of forgiveness. Of learning to live with what you've become without surrendering to its worst impulses."

He rose and moved to the window, checking the lightening sky. "You should go. Find shelter before sunrise. But return tomorrow night, if you're willing. I believe regular exposure to the sacraments might help you control your darker urges."

I stood as well, feeling both drained and somehow lightened by our conversation. "I'll come back," I promised. "There's nowhere else for me to go, really."

Father O'Malley's smile held genuine warmth. "There's always a choice, Alice."

Three weeks had passed since my first visit to Father O'Mally at St. Mary's—three weeks of midnight masses, of theological discussions in the sacristy afterward, of cautious hope blooming like a winter rose in frozen ground. Each night, I slipped away from my daytime hiding place, a forgotten root cellar at the edge of town, and followed streets I once walked as a living girl. The hunger remained, a constant companion that whispered and clawed, but something else had begun to grow alongside it—a fragile awareness that I might be more than my thirst, that the monster wasn't the sum total of what I had become. Father O'Malley called it grace. I wasn't ready to name it yet, afraid that acknowledging it might somehow cause it to vanish like the morning mist.

The first week had been the hardest—each step onto consecrated ground an exercise in endurance, each prayer a needle in my ears, each blessing a fresh wave of agony. I'd fled the sanctuary multiple times, unable to bear the consecration of the Eucharist. Father O'Malley never pushed, never judged. He simply waited, offering the same patient guidance night after night.

"The pain is purpose," he'd explained one evening as I trembled in the sacristy after a particularly difficult mass. "Your body rejects what your soul craves. The struggle itself is transformative."

I'd nodded, not entirely understanding but willing to believe there might be meaning in my suffering beyond mere punishment. It was more than the Order had ever offered me.

By the second week, subtle changes had begun. The holy water at the church entrance still burned my skin, but the pain faded more quickly. The Latin prayers still pressed against me, but I could remain seated through them rather than fighting the urge to flee. I still couldn't bear to witness the consecration, but I lasted longer each night before needing to escape.

I'd confided in Father O'Malley about the hunger, about how I managed it. "Donated blood," I'd admitted reluctantly. "From Silas. I don't know where he gets it. But he insists that the donors are willing."

He hadn't recoiled or condemned. "You're trying," he'd said simply. "That matters."

Now, as the moon cast long shadows across the snow-covered cemetery beside St. Mary's, I approached the church with a familiar mix of dread and anticipation. The pain would come, as it always did, but so would the strange peace that followed—a feeling of being scoured clean from the inside out.

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Father O'Malley waited at the door, a ritual that had become our nightly custom. His weathered face showed more fatigue than usual, the lines around his eyes deeper.

"You look tired, Father," I said as I approached.

"Old bones," he replied with a dismissive wave. "They protest the cold." He held out the small vial of holy water, another part of our ritual. "Shall we?"

I extended my hand. The water fell onto my palm—a single drop that sizzled against my skin. The pain was sharp but brief, like touching a hot stove rather than being engulfed in flames. Progress, of a sort.

Inside, the church was empty save for the elderly sexton lighting candles at the altar. The sexton nodded at us without curiosity—Father O'Malley had explained my presence as spiritual counseling for a troubled young woman, not entirely untrue.

We took our usual places in the back pew. No mass tonight—Father O'Malley had suggested a different form of healing.

"I've been thinking," he said quietly, "that you might be ready for confession."

I stiffened beside him. "Catholics confess to priests," I said, falling back on Daddy's teachings. "Puritans confess directly to God."

Father O'Malley smiled slightly. "And how has that been working for you?"

The question hung between us, gentle but pointed. I'd tried praying since my

transformation—the words burning my tongue, my skin smoking where I clasped my hands together. God’s silence had been my only answer.

“I was taught that confession to another person is unnecessary,” I said, softening my objection. “That it puts a mediator between the sinner and God.”

“Scripture suggests otherwise,” Father O’Malley replied. “In James 5:16, we’re instructed to ‘confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.’” He turned slightly to face me. “And in John 20, Christ breathes on the apostles and says, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.’”

I’d read those passages before, but Daddy had always explained them away—contexts, metaphors, temporary instructions for the early church. Hearing them now, in this place, they carried a different weight.

“Confession isn’t a burden, Alice,” Father O’Malley continued. “It’s healing. There’s something powerful about speaking our sins aloud, about naming the darkness within us so it loses its power over us.”

I thought about the secrets I carried—the people Silas made me hurt, and worse. The weight of those deaths pressed on me daily.

“How could saying words change any of that?” I asked, genuinely curious rather than defiant.

“Words have power,” he replied. “God spoke the world into existence. Christ is called the Word made flesh. The words we speak shape the reality we inhabit.” He gestured toward the confessional, a small wooden booth near the side of the church. “In confession, we speak truth about ourselves and hear truth in return—that we are forgiven, that redemption is possible.”

I studied the confessional with trepidation. “And you believe this would help someone like me? Someone who can’t even say God’s name without pain?”

“I believe it might be the final step to removing that pain,” he said carefully. “The sacraments work through the barriers we construct around ourselves. Your guilt, the sorrow you feel over the things you’ve done for Silas, it’s eating away at you. It’s clinging to the darkness that the pain is trying to purge. It continues to hurt when you pray, when we apply the holy water, because you are holding on to that darkness like a life raft. Confession is about letting it go, and letting grace take its place.”

We sat in silence for several minutes, the only sounds the soft footsteps of the sexton as he finished his duties and the occasional crack of candle wax. Outside, snow began to fall, tiny flakes visible through the stained-glass windows as they caught the light.

“What would I have to do?” I asked finally.

Relief flashed across Father O’Malley’s face. “Enter the confessional. I’ll sit on the other side of the screen. Begin with ‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned’ and tell me how long it’s been since your last confession.”

“I’ve never made a confession,” I pointed out.

“Then say that,” he replied with a gentle smile. “The formula isn’t what matters—it’s the honesty behind it.”

I rose slowly, my body suddenly feeling heavy with the prospect of what lay ahead. Father O’Malley led the way to the confessional, pointing to one side of the wooden booth.

“Take your time,” he said. “I’ll be waiting when you’re ready.”

The interior of the confessional was small and dark, with a wooden kneeler facing a screen that separated it from the priest's side. The space smelled of old wood and decades of whispered sins. I knelt, feeling strangely vulnerable in this tiny, enclosed space. Through the screen, I could see Father O'Malley's silhouette as he settled on his side, head bowed slightly.

"Bless me, Father," I began, the words feeling foreign on my tongue, "for I have sinned. I've never made a confession before because Daddy said it's sacrilege."

"Go on," he encouraged when I fell silent.

Where to begin? With the killings? With my transformation? With the doubt that had plagued me even before Mercy Brown had turned me?

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“I don’t know how to do this,” I admitted. “There’s so much...”

“Start with what weighs on you most heavily,” Father O’Malley suggested. “The sin or regret that comes to mind first when you lie awake at dawn.”

Without hesitation, a name rose to my lips. “Mercy Brown.”

“Tell me about her,” Father O’Malley said quietly.

I took an unnecessary breath, steadying myself. “She turned me into this. A vampire. She was dying of consumption at the sanatorium. Her father asked me to pray with her, to save her soul before she passed.” The memory was vivid—Mercy’s fevered eyes watching me as I read scripture by her bedside. “I failed. Or maybe she failed. I don’t know anymore.”

I paused, gathering my thoughts. “Someone showed up, a vampire, and turned her into one. I think it was arranged as a way of saving her life, since she was dying. After that, well, I tried to stop her. I was trying to help. The people from the Order said I’d be safe, that my faith protected me from her. But it didn’t work.”

“She bit you.”

I nodded. “Drank my blood. When I woke, I was... this.” I gestured at myself, though Father O’Malley couldn’t see the motion through the screen. “I hate her for what she made me,” I continued, my voice cracking. “But I can’t stop thinking that if our positions were reversed, I might have done the same. I hate her, but I feel bad for her. Maybe it’s that I hate myself more for not being able to save her until—“

“Until what?” the priest asked.

“Until it was too late.”

“What else bothers you, Alice?”

Now that the big one was out of the way, the rest flowed rapidly like a river after three days of rain. The Order finding me, me waking strapped down with Silas looming over me. Silas training me, using me to hunt “witches” who may have been nothing of the sort. The blood I’d drunk, the lives I’d taken, the growing suspicion that I’d been manipulated into becoming the very monster I feared.

When I finally fell silent, the confessional seemed to hold my words, cradling them in the darkness like precious, terrible things finally given shape.

“Your anger toward Mercy is understandable,” Father O’Malley said after a long moment. “She violated you in the most fundamental way, changing your very nature without consent.”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Forgiveness doesn’t mean forgetting the harm done to you,” he continued. “It means refusing to let that harm define your future. It means releasing the power that person holds over you—the power to make you bitter, to make you become like them.”

I considered this, turning it over in my mind. “Forgiveness is a kind of freedom, then?”

“Exactly so,” Father O’Malley agreed. “Not for her sake, but for yours. And forgiveness is a process, not an event. It happens gradually, in layers, as you continue to choose it day by day—or in your case, night by night.”

“And the others?” I asked. “The women I killed for the Order? How do I seek forgiveness for that?”

“By living differently now,” he said simply. “By using whatever time God grants you—be it hours, days, years or centuries—to bring healing rather than harm. True repentance isn’t just feeling sorry; it’s changing direction.”

He guided me through an act of contrition—a prayer asking for forgiveness—speaking the words for me when they burned too much for me to say myself. Then he pronounced words of absolution, his voice taking on a formal cadence that seemed to resonate in the small space.

“God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

The words seemed to settle over me like a mantle. Not miraculous transformation—I still felt the hunger, still knew what I was—but something had shifted, a weight lifted that I hadn’t realized I’d been carrying.

And it didn’t hurt. Not even a little. It was like I was new again. I was still... well... a vampire. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t human, too. It was like God’s image was restored in me. Like I had another chance.

“Thank you, Father,” I said quietly.

“Your penance,” he continued, “is to perform an act of kindness each night for the next week. Something small, something that brings light rather than darkness into the world.”

I nodded, though he couldn't see me. "I will. But is my forgiveness contingent on that? Like how do I know if I've done enough?"

The priest billowed a hearty laugh. "The absolution was already spoken, Alice. There's more to sin than your personal guilt. Sin has a double-effect. It also wounds your soul. This penance isn't about earning forgiveness. Think of it as a prescription, a way to heal in your soul. To live out your forgiveness in a meaningful way."

When I emerged from the confessional, Father O'Malley followed a moment later. He moved to the font of holy water near the church entrance and beckoned me over.

"Try it again," he suggested.

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Hesitantly, I dipped my fingers into the water, braced for the familiar burning sensation. To my astonishment, the water felt cool against my skin—uncomfortable, like touching ice, but not agonizing. My fingers remained wet rather than burned.

Father O'Malley smiled at my expression of shock. "Progress," he said simply.

"How is this possible?" I whispered, staring at my dripping fingers.

"Grace works in mysterious ways," he replied. "The sacraments are channels of that grace—confession, communion, baptism. Each connects us to Christ's saving power in a different way."

"Communion," I echoed, remembering the pain I'd experienced during the consecration. "I don't think I could ever—"

"Perhaps not yet," Father O'Malley acknowledged. "But eventually, if you're ready to receive the Eucharist, it might be the key to your freedom, to your healing."

"Drinking Christ's blood," I murmured, the concept suddenly resonating differently given my condition. "Body and blood, soul and divinity."

"The true food and drink of eternal life," Father O'Malley confirmed. "But there's no rush, Alice. Healing takes time, especially healing as profound as what you're seeking."

I glanced toward the eastern windows, where the darkness had begun to soften almost imperceptibly. Dawn approached, sending me back to my hiding place for another

day.

“Will you return tomorrow night?” Father O’Malley asked.

I nodded, looking once more at my hand, still damp with holy water that should have burned me. “Yes. I’ll return.”

“Perhaps you’ll be ready for your first communion, then.”

“Really?” I asked.

Father O’Malley smiled wide. “I’d recommend fasting until then.”

I licked my fangs. “No blood. Got it. Shouldn’t be too difficult. Abstain from human blood, and get the blood that can make me truly alive again!”

I could see in the priest’s expression he was proud of me. Still, my gut twisted. “I don’t want to go back to Silas.”

“I know you don’t. But perhaps, that’s where you’re needed. To them, you’re a Nightwalker. A creature of darkness. Perhaps, though, they’ve got it backwards. They don’t realize it, but you are the true light of the morning dawn, Alice. If you feel you must leave, I understand. I will help you find a new place to settle. But this might be an opportunity to make a difference. Think about all the people they’re harming.”

“I can’t stop thinking about it,” I admitted.

“The way I see it, you have a choice. I won’t tell you which path to take. You can run away and pray that God stops the Order someday. Or you can accept the calling. You can be the knight of heaven, and fight back against their masquerade.”

It was a lot to think about, but the idea resonated. I needed a purpose, and God had seemingly given me a new opportunity to embrace my faith. I never thought I'd become Catholic, of all things. Daddy was probably rolling over in his grave, and he hadn't even been turned into a vampire!

Still, maybe it was the kind of faith I needed, something real, something that was more than an idea to accept in my head, but one that met me where I was, in a priest's words spoken as if said by Christ himself, and tomorrow, in the body and blood of Christ on my tongue.

This wasn't the backwards religion I'd been brainwashed to believe it was, even by my father, who probably believed what he was saying was accurate. My father was wrong. This faith that Father O'Malley shared with me was beautiful. It was profound, and my experience told me—in addition to the Scriptures the priest shared—that it was real.

I didn't understand all of it. There were still things that the priest practiced that were an enigma. Some of the teachings remained a bit foreign, but Father O'Malley said that everything he believed—with the right eyes to see—could be justified in Scripture, and we'd get there in time. That in itself was a revelation, since I'd thought that Catholics believed tradition could make up new doctrines on the fly. According to Father O'Malley, the tradition the Church embraces is apostolic tradition, and that the New Testament is itself the primary, inspired, and inerrant written record of said apostolic tradition.

So much for believing that the pope could infallibly command the entire world to sing 'I'm a little teapot,' as an indulgence, condemning anyone who didn't do all the proper hand motions to eternal hellfire, or a few thousand years in purgatory. Papal authority, according to the priest, didn't work that way. Neither did purgatory—which he said was more about the purification of the human being as he or she enters God's presence than a literal place where we suffer for our sin. Christ,

he said, had already suffered for our sins.

I still wasn't convinced of that one. The praying to Mary and the saints was a topic we'd have to tackle another day, but I'd learned I'd made all the wrong assumptions about everything else Catholics believed. So, I suspected, I held a caricature of their actual beliefs about that issue, too. We didn't have time to get into it then and there, but he assured it that contrary to popular belief, it's really all about keeping Jesus at the center of the faith. It was enough to make me curious, at the very least.

One day at a time, it was a journey into a world that could take several lifetimes to exhaust. And thankfully, I might have exactly that opportunity. Then again, I suspected the fullness of truth was too big that even if I lived a million lifetimes, I'd barely scratch the surface.

As I slipped out into the predawn darkness, the hunger still curled inside me, still whispered its dark promises, but now something else whispered too—something quieter but more persistent. A voice that suggested I might become more than my thirst, more than the monster Mercy Brown had created or the weapon Silas had tried to forge.

I might finally have a purpose. Salvation was nearer now than ever before. For the first time since my transformation, I believed there might be a path forward—not back to what I had been, but toward something new.

Chapter 19

The stone steps descended into darkness, each one taking me further from the night sky and deeper into the Order's underground sanctuary. My footsteps echoed against damp walls, the sound bouncing back to me like whispered warnings I chose to ignore. Gas lamps flickered in iron sconces, casting my shadow in grotesque proportions against the stone—elongated one moment, compressed the next, as if the

darkness itself couldn't decide what shape I should take. I touched my fingers to my palm, still cool from the holy water that had, for the first time, not burned my skin. Father O'Malley's words echoed in my mind: "Progress." If only Silas could see me now.

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But he wouldn't see. Couldn't know. The thought of tomorrow night's Communion filled me with a fragile hope I dared not examine too closely, like a butterfly cupped between protective hands. My face remained carefully neutral as I descended the final steps into the main corridor. The Order had eyes everywhere, and Silas had taught me well how to read the smallest betrayals of emotion. I would not betray myself now.

The corridor stretched before me, hewn from bedrock and reinforced with ancient timbers that groaned beneath the weight of earth above. Water trickled down one wall, collecting in a small channel that disappeared beneath the stone floor. The air hung heavy with the scent of mineral-rich soil, mold, and something else—something metallic and familiar that made the hunger within me stir despite my recent feeding.

Blood. Fresh blood.

I paused, tilting my head to listen. Voices carried from the main chamber ahead—Silas's commanding tone rising above others I didn't recognize. Women's voices, their words indistinct but their cadence marked by fear or pain or both.

A frown tugged at my lips. The Order rarely brought outsiders to their sanctuary. Even I, their weapon, their "Nightwalker," was kept at arm's length, allowed only into specific areas at designated times. What was happening in the main chamber that required the presence of women? I hadn't been invited there before. It was off-limits. But now, something drew me there. A compulsion I couldn't define.

I approached the heavy iron door that separated the corridor from the chamber, my enhanced hearing catching fragments of conversation.

“...remarkable progress...” Silas was saying.

“...the hunger is insatiable...” a woman’s voice replied, her words slurred as if speaking through pain.

“...connected through blood...” another voice, lower pitched, but couldn’t tell if it was an effeminate man or an older woman.

I pushed the door open; the hinges protested with a low groan that announced my arrival more effectively than any herald. The conversation ceased abruptly. All eyes turned toward me.

The main chamber opened before me, a cavernous space supported by thick stone columns. Braziers burned along the walls, filling the room with smoky light and the scent of pine resin. At the center stood Silas, his tall frame dominating the space as always, his pot-marked face half-illuminated by the uneven light.

But it was what lay beyond him that froze me in place, that sent a shock of recognition and horror through my dead heart.

Cells. A row of iron-barred cells lined the far wall, each one occupied by a woman. Not just any women—women I knew. Women whose throats I had torn open. Women whose blood I had drunk until their hearts stuttered to silence.

Women who should be dead.

The healer with her herbs. The fire-worker with her tired eyes. The young woman from the forest. The grandmother who had been trying to save her family. Their faces were hauntingly familiar, branded into my memory by guilt and regret.

But their eyes—their eyes were different now. No longer human, they glowed with

the same hungry luminescence as my own. They watched me with a terrible recognition, their gazes following my movements with predatory attention.

They were vampires. All of them.

“Alice,” Silas said, his voice warm with something like pride. “Perfect timing. Come, witness the miracle of redemption.”

He extended his hand, beckoning me forward. My feet moved of their own accord, carrying me past columns and braziers toward the cells. The women pressed against the bars as I approached, their nostrils flaring, their bodies swaying slightly as if drawn by an invisible force.

“They sense you,” Silas explained, placing his hand on my shoulder in a gesture that once might have felt paternal but now seemed possessive, controlling. “They recognize their sire.”

“Sire?” The word felt wrong on my tongue. “I don’t understand.”

But I did. As I voiced my denial, a clear and dreadful realization took shape inside me. I hadn’t killed these women. I had fed on them, yes—drained them to the point of near-death. But Silas had never intended for them to die. He had collected them afterward, brought them here, and somehow healed them, initiated their transformation.

“Your blood carries power, Alice,” Silas said, confirming my horrified realization. “When you feed, you take their life into yourself. But the bite also introduces something of a venom, your essence, into their weakened bodies...” He gestured at the cells with reverent satisfaction. “Typically, those bitten die without intervention. But I should say, the Lord Himself has healed them, completed their evolution that we might use the tools of the enemy against him! You are all like the cursed

cross—cursed, indeed, but a curse that might bring healing when used toward God’s purpose to rid the world of even greater curses, of graver evil!”

One of the women—the healer whose herbs had hung from her cabin ceiling—pressed her face against the bars, her once-kind eyes now wild with hunger. “Mother,” she whispered, the word twisted into something unnatural. “Mother of blood.”

The others took up the whisper, a chorus of voices that scraped against my nerves like fingernails on slate. “Mother... mother... mother of blood...”

Silas squeezed my shoulder, his fingers digging into flesh that could no longer bruise. “See how they recognize you? The bond of blood is sacred. Unbreakable.”

I struggled to keep my expression neutral, to hide the revulsion and betrayal that threatened to overwhelm me. How many times had Silas cut these women, provoking my hunger, knowing exactly what would follow? How many times had I been his unwitting accomplice in creating more monsters like myself?

“How long?” I asked, my voice steadier than I felt. “How long have you imprisoned them here?”

“Since the beginning,” Silas replied. “Since your first hunt.” His voice took on the cadence of a sermon. “Through you, they are saved from their witchcraft, reborn as warriors of the Order.”

I thought of the female vampire Silas had burned alive, her screams echoing through the winter forest. She’d been turned already, she wasn’t subject to my sire bond. She couldn’t be recruited to the Order’s warped mission. So, she became a demonstration to ensure my continued cooperation. An object lesson, meant to show me the ruthlessness that the Order could embrace if I ever crossed them.

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My gaze swept across the cells, counting. Five women. Five hunts. Five lives I thought I'd ended in my bloodlust. Five souls now trapped in the same unnatural existence as my own.

And then I saw it—the subtle gleam of triumph in Silas's eyes. This was no miracle of redemption. This was calculation. This was power. I didn't believe for a moment that God had completed their transformations by some kind of miracle. Silas did it. He still had the crucifix that I'd awakened, that Mr. Brown carried, the same one that supposedly ensured my final descent into the hell that had become my existence.

In the wake of this nightmare, the reality that stood in front of me, I nearly forgot about all the hope I'd gained from Father O'Malley, all the progress I'd made toward overcoming the darker part of my nature. In an instant, all I wanted was to kill and destroy, to tear the Order of the Morning Dawn apart member by member, limb by limb.

But I also had enough sense to know I couldn't do it alone. I wasn't strong enough to do it, and Silas was trained, protected somehow. And I had to wonder, was vengeance the salvation I'd been after, night after night, at St. Mary's? I knew it wasn't—but I could think of nothing else.

“Tomorrow night,” Silas said, his hand still heavy on my shoulder, “you will lead them on their first hunt. Their first step toward redemption through service, just as you have been redeemed through yours.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. The hope I had carried felt dim. Just minutes ago, I was eager for my first communion—I was ready to welcome the final agony, to

feel the suffering of the Crucified One who re-presented himself to me in the appearance of bread and wine. Now, I wasn't even sure I'd be able to make it there. How could I, when I had a mission to lead these... Nightwalkers... on a mission for Silas?

"I've waited months for this moment," Silas continued, his voice lowered for my ears alone. "For you to see the fruits of your sacrifice. For you to understand your true purpose with the Order."

My true purpose. Not redemption. Not salvation. But reproduction—creating more weapons for the Order's crusade against those they deemed unholy.

The hunger within me twisted again, recognizing its reflection in the eyes that watched me from behind iron bars. My progeny. My victims. My responsibility.

"Tomorrow night," I echoed, the words hollow. "I understand."

But it didn't feel like understanding. It was more like drowning. Like someone had tossed me a rope while the sea was overwhelming me, only to have it yanked away from me just as I was about to take hold of it and be brought safely aboard ship.

Chapter 20

Silas's hand remained on my shoulder as he guided me forward, his fingers digging in like talons. The cells stretched before us in neat rows, an inverted and grotesque mockery of the pews in Father O'Malley's church. Where I had found hope in those wooden benches, here I found only despair etched in iron and stone. The chamber air hung heavy with the metallic tang of blood—old stains darkening the floor beneath our feet, fresh droplets gleaming on collection tools arranged with surgical precision on a nearby table. My nostrils flared involuntarily, the hunger inside me responding even as my mind recoiled.

“Walk among them,” Silas instructed, his voice carrying the cadence of a proud father showing off his children. “Feel the connection. They are yours in blood.”

I stepped forward, moving between the rows of cells as if in a nightmare. The cold seeped through my boots, a damp chill that rose from the earth itself. Iron manacles hung from the walls at intervals, their hinges rusted with what might have been age or dried blood. Beneath the overwhelming scent of blood,

“Magnificent, aren’t they?” Silas continued, following a step behind. “Each one selected for potential, each one saved from the corruption of witchcraft through your intervention.”

“Saved?” I cocked an eyebrow.

“Of course, dearest Alice!” Silas’ tone had never been more patronizing. “They were damned already, each one of them, in their diabolical practices. Had they simply died naturally when you eliminated them, they’d have earned hellfire for sure. Your kind might be devils, but as I’ve told you, you’re not hopeless devils. You have a path toward salvation—provided you eliminate more evil in the service of our sacred Order than your nature represents.”

I didn’t argue with him. I couldn’t, if I intended to remain here as Father O’Malley suggested, to find a way to dismantle the Order of the Morning Dawn from within. There’d be a time for my light to shine here, but this wasn’t that time. Then again, if these ladies truly were subject to me above all else, Silas had made a hefty gamble. Did he truly believe that I was loyal—had I deceived him that thoroughly that he’d give me an army beholden to my command?

I didn’t believe it even a little. He had something else up his sleeve, a way to eliminate us if we fell out of line. He wouldn’t give me this kind of power if he wasn’t hiding an ace up his sleeve, something even greater than the threat I might

become.

The first cell contained a young woman from the forest—she had fled from her half-cave, half-cabin when we arrived. In life, she had fought with unexpected strength. In undeath, that strength had been magnified. Her fingers gripped the iron bars, bending them slightly with pressure that would have been impossible for human hands. Her eyes followed me, luminous with hunger and something else—confusion, perhaps, or accusation.

“I’m sure you remember her. This one was turned three weeks ago,” Silas explained. “She’s adapted remarkably well to her new condition. Strong. Resilient. Quite useful traits in a soldier.”

Soldier. The word chilled me more than the damp stone beneath my feet. Is that what Silas saw when he looked at me? At them? Not souls to be saved, but weapons to be wielded?

In the next cell, the fire-worker with her tired eyes pressed against the bars. Her hair, once streaked with premature gray, now gleamed unnaturally black in the dim light. The transformation had reversed some signs of aging, though the weariness in her gaze remained.

“Mother,” she whispered as I passed, the word slithering from her lips like something unclean. “We feel you. We know you.”

The other women took up the whisper, their voices blending into a discordant chorus. “Mother... maker... sire...”

I flinched at the sound, each word striking me like a stake to the chest. These women hadn’t asked for this existence any more than I had. Yet here they were, bound to me through blood and violation.

“They sense your presence,” Silas explained, his voice taking on the quality of a lecturer. “The bond between sire and progeny is one of the most fascinating aspects of your condition. They feel your hunger as their own. They sense your emotions, your intentions.” He stepped closer, his breath warm against my cold skin. “And they will obey your commands as if they were divine writ.”

“Commands?” I echoed, struggling to keep my voice steady.

“You are their maker,” Silas replied. “Their sire. The hierarchy is clear and unbreakable. They cannot refuse a direct order from you, any more than you could resist the hunger when it first took hold.”

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I thought of those early days after my transformation—the all-consuming thirst that had driven me to acts I still couldn't fully face in memory. The thought that I held such power over these women made me sick with revulsion.

“And who commands me?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

Silas smiled, the expression not reaching his cold eyes. “The Order, of course. As it has always been. As it shall always be.”

His words confirmed what I suspected. They had something they could use against me if push came to shove. I suspected it was that crucifix, the one that Silas wanted me to believe was taken by Mercy and her sire the night I was turned.

We reached the end of the row, where a small desk had been positioned. Papers were spread across its surface—maps, diagrams, lists of names. Silas gestured toward them with proprietary pride.

“The Order of the Morning Dawn has chapters across New England,” he said. “Each one now undertaking the same holy work we pioneer here. Salem. Boston. Providence. New Haven. All creating their own Nightwalkers, all preparing for the coming crusade.”

“Crusade?” The word felt like ashes in my mouth. “So you admit it. You planned this from the start? You meant for me to bite those girls?”

“Apologies, dearest Alice.” We'd come a long way from the earlier hunts when he'd refused to call me anything other than Nightwalker. Now, I wasn't merely

Nightwalker, or even Alice. I was dearest Alice. “You must understand that this is revolutionary. Your extraordinary transformation presented the Order with an opportunity we’d never had before. A way to get an upper hand against the devil himself, to seize the vilest of his corruptions, and turn them against hell itself.”

“Uh huh.” I held back the vitriol I wanted to spew into his face.

“Against the darkness that threatens to engulf us all,” Silas continued, his voice taking on the fervent quality I’d heard in Daddy’s sermons against sin. “Witchcraft spreads like a disease through our communities. Foreign influences corrupt our youth. Papists seek to undermine the true faith.” He spread his hands across the maps. “We fight a war on multiple fronts, Alice. A war that requires soldiers who cannot die, who do not tire, who know no fear.”

Soldiers like me. Like the women in the cells. An army of the undead, bound by blood to serve the Order’s interpretation of God’s will. That he’d listed Papists—people like Father O’Malley alongside witches wasn’t lost on me. If Silas only knew the truth—that he was the darkness, that he was the one who’d undermined the true faith, that the Order of the Morning Dawn was nothing less than an agent of Satan, deluded by self-righteousness and blinded by self-importance.

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” Silas continued, his voice lowering to a reverent whisper. “Who would have imagined that the darkness we contend with would offer us the tools essential for our triumph? What you perceive as a burden—your affliction—has turned into a gift.”

I turned away, unable to bear the zealous light in his eyes. My gaze fell upon the cell containing the former healer—the first woman whose blood I had drunk at Silas’s orchestration. Unlike the others, she stood quietly, her hands at her sides rather than clutching at the bars. Her eyes met mine directly, and what I saw there stopped my breath.

Not hunger. Not confusion. But clear, unmistakable awareness. A silent communication passed between us—recognition, understanding, and beneath it all, a plea. Help us.

I averted my gaze quickly, afraid that Silas might notice the exchange. But the woman's eyes had spoken volumes in that brief moment. She was more than her hunger. She remembered who she had been. And she wanted freedom, not from her condition, but from the cells that contained her. From the Order that had manipulated her transformation.

Just as I wanted freedom from Silas's control.

"You're quiet," Silas observed, his tone sharpening with suspicion. "Does the magnitude of your role overwhelm you?"

I forced myself to meet his gaze, to school my features into an expression of appropriate awe. "It's... a lot to take in. I never imagined my bite could create..."

"Life from death," Silas finished for me. "Strength from weakness. Purpose from chaos." He clasped my shoulders with both hands. "This is why God saved you, Alice. Not just for the witches you could hunt alone, but for the army you could help us build."

"I don't understand. You said there were other chapters. I didn't bite all those people, I didn't make them."

"There are other candidates, Alice, who've volunteered to take up your dark mantle, fervent members of the Order who willingly subjected themselves to vampires, that they might be like you. Once the vision was plain, our chapters all across these United States agreed to the plan."

And there it was. More Nightwalkers, but each chapter under a “sire” who’d been loyal to the Order from the beginning, who knew what they were getting into. It also meant the crucifix we’d used wasn’t the only one. I had to wonder, though, what the actual source of the magic that seemed to course through it was. I doubted it was angelic, as they’d claimed—it was witchcraft of a kind. It had to be.

I realized these other chapters also served a double-function to ensure my compliance. Even if I resisted, if I turned on Silas, there’d be other Nightwalkers out there willing to eliminate me and my progenies.

The women in their cells watched us, their eyes gleaming in the dim light. Eight pairs of eyes, all bearing the same unnatural luminescence as my own. All bound to me through blood and violation. All victims of Silas’s grand design.

“They hunger as you hunger,” Silas said, his voice almost gentle. “They will obey as you command. Tomorrow night, you will lead them on their first hunt—a test of their abilities and your control over them.” His fingers tightened on my shoulders. “The Order has great expectations for you, Nightwalker. Do not disappoint us.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. The weight of responsibility pressed down on me like a physical force—not just for my own actions now, but for the actions of these women I had unwittingly created. These women who looked to me with my hunger mirrored in their eyes, who called me “mother” with voices that dripped with need and resentment.

As Silas led me away from the cells, back toward the iron door, I felt the healer’s gaze following me. That silent plea echoed in my mind: Help us.

But how could I help them when I could barely help myself?

Chapter 21

Silas's private office felt like entering the mind of a general planning a holy war. Maps of New England dominated the walls, dotted with red pins marking towns I recognized—Salem, Boston, Providence—and smaller settlements whose names meant nothing to me. Strings connected certain locations, creating a web of purpose I could only guess at. Ancient leather-bound texts shared space on his heavy oak desk with modern journals, their pages marked with ribbon bookmarks and protruding notes. The room smelled of pipe tobacco, ink, and the faint metallic scent that seemed to follow Silas everywhere—gun oil mixed with blood. I stood before his desk, hands clasped behind my back, the perfect picture of the obedient soldier while my mind raced with the impossible choice now before me.

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Silas settled into his chair, the worn leather creaking beneath his weight. Unlike the main chamber with its dramatic shadows and flickering braziers, his office was lit by steady gas lamps that cast an unforgiving white light over everything. No place for secrets here. No shadows to hide in.

“Tomorrow night’s mission is of critical importance,” he began, pulling a detailed map from beneath a stack of papers. He spread it across the desk, weighted corners with small brass figurines—a cross, a sword, a scale, and something that looked disturbingly like a tiny coffin. “The coven we’ve been tracking has chosen the full moon for a significant ritual. Our intelligence suggests at least seven practitioners will gather near the old mill.”

My eyes fixed on the map, on the location he indicated with a decisive tap of his finger. The old mill—barely thirty minutes from St. Mary’s Church, where Father O’Malley would be waiting for me. With my vampiric speed, I could get there in five minutes provided I was fully fed—but I wasn’t. I was fasting, with the intention to receive the Eucharist.

“You will lead your progeny from the eastern approach,” Silas continued, tracing the route with his finger. “The forest provides adequate cover, and the stream will mask any sounds of your approach. The Nightwalkers may be newly turned, but their instincts should serve them well enough.”

“When do we depart?” I asked, though I already feared the answer.

“Midnight,” Silas replied. “The witches won’t begin their ritual until the moon reaches its zenith. We want to catch them in the act—evidence of their corruption in

plain sight.”

Midnight. The exact time Father O’Malley had scheduled our meeting. The exact time the midnight mass would begin, the mass that would include my first Communion as a vampire. The sacrament that might be my only path to reconciling what I had become with what I once was.

“Your mission is to contain and eliminate the threat,” Silas continued, oblivious to my internal crisis. “I will observe from a distance to assess the Nightwalkers’ effectiveness in combat. And to ensure compliance.”

The last part was meant for me. The compliance of the others was practically guaranteed—provided I remained in line.

My fingers twitched at my sides as I calculated possibilities. Could I complete the mission quickly? The old mill was closer to the Order’s headquarters than to St. Mary’s. Even if we departed at midnight and dispatched the supposed witches immediately, I’d never reach the church before the mass concluded. Not to mention, Silas would probably expect a debriefing.

Did he intend to turn all of these witches we were supposed to eliminate also? Was that another reason he meant to remain hidden in the woods?

Could I postpone with Father O’Malley? Ask him to hold a special service later? I had no way of sending a message. No way to explain without revealing where I’d been spending my nights. I’d already made confession. I was prepared for it. If I followed through with this mission, it would be like going back to square one. There’s no way I could obey Silas without ending up neck-deep in the worst kind of sin possible.

Could I feign illness to Silas? Claim some weakness that prevented me from leading

the hunt? The absurdity of the thought almost made me laugh aloud. I was a vampire. I didn't get sick. Even raising such a notion would rouse Silas' suspicions—and the one thing I couldn't let him know about was that I had another path, a real way, toward redemption.

“The primary objective is to test the Nightwalkers' obedience to your commands,” Silas was saying, his voice penetrating my frantic thoughts. “Secondary objective is elimination of the coven. We believe their leader possesses a grimoire of considerable power—you'll recognize it by the red leather binding and silver clasps. Secure it if possible.”

I nodded mechanically, struggling to focus on his words while my mind screamed with frustration. After weeks of progress with Father O'Malley, after the miracle of touching holy water without pain, after the relief of confession—to have this chance at real redemption snatched away by Silas's timing was a cruel joke.

“Alice?” Silas's sharp tone snapped me back to attention. “You seem distracted. Is there a problem with tomorrow's assignment?”

His eyes narrowed as he studied my face, searching for any hint of deception or reluctance. I forced myself to meet his gaze steadily, to school my features into an expression of appropriate focus.

“No problem,” I lied. “I'm simply... unexperienced. Perhaps we should delay it until I've had more opportunity to test the limits of my sire bond over the others. What you're talking about, a potentially powerful coven, could be an actual threat if we're not properly prepared.”

Silas continued to study me, the scar along his jaw more pronounced in the harsh lamplight. I held his gaze, remembering how Daddy had taught me to face down bullies in the schoolyard. “Stand straight, look them in the eye, and they'll back

down.” Different circumstances now, but the principle held.

“Thankfully, you have the day to test your abilities however you wish within the safe confines of our facility. I expect you to do so.”

I suppressed a sigh—I thought I’d come up with an excuse, but Silas didn’t accept it.

He rose from his chair, circling the desk to stand beside me. Too close. Close enough that I could feel the talisman he carried—the one that weakened me when he touched me, left me vulnerable.

“The Order has invested considerable resources in you, Alice,” he said, his voice softening in a way that made me more uneasy than his commands. “In what you represent. In what you can help us achieve.” His hand settled on my shoulder, heavy with an unspoken threat. “Your redemption continues tomorrow night. Don’t disappoint me.”

The weight of his hand felt like a brand, marking me as property.

“I won’t disappoint,” I said, my voice hollow even to my own ears.

He nodded, satisfied with my acquiescence. “Good. You’re dismissed.”

I turned to leave, my movements carefully measured, betraying none of the turmoil that raged within me. As I reached the door, Silas spoke again.

“The hunger in your progeny will be stronger than their will,” he said. “Remember that. Use it to control them if necessary. They will obey you above even their hunger.”

I paused, my hand on the door handle. “And if they don’t?”

Silas's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Then they will face the same fate as the vampire in the forest. The Order has no use for the disobedient."

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The implication was clear. The real threat was directed at me. I nodded once, then slipped through the door into the corridor beyond.

As I climbed the stone steps back toward the surface, toward the night sky and the freedom it represented, my mind churned with impossible choices. To defy Silas meant risking everything—not just my own existence, but potentially the lives of the women who were now bound to me through blood.

I couldn't see a way I'd make it to mass. Surely, Father O'Malley would understand if I had to delay my first communion a single night. Then again, I didn't want to complete the mission at all. Would committing such murder in obedience to Silas undo all the progress I'd made already? Would it lead me back into a state of mortal sin?

Tomorrow night loomed before me, a crossroads with no clear path forward. The hunger within me twisted with anxiety. I pushed it down, forced it back into its cage. I would not let it rule me. Not now.

"Guide me," I whispered to the God who I'd just started to believe might hear me again. "Show me the way."

But only silence answered, and the hunger that waited, patient as death itself, for tomorrow night to come.

Chapter 22

The basement steps creaked beneath my feet as I descended into darkness. Each

wooden plank protested my weight with the shrill complaint of ancient timber, announcing my arrival to those waiting below. The damp air pressed against my skin like a cold, wet shroud, carrying the metallic scent of old blood and the musty breath of forgotten places. I had come seeking monsters, only to find broken reflections of myself.

A single lantern guttered in the corner, throwing wild shadows across stone walls slick with condensation. Its weak light barely penetrated the gloom, but my eyes—changed as they were—needed little illumination. The basement of the Order's hideout stretched before me like a tomb, its low ceiling and narrow confines a prison for those who had once been human, who'd been free.

They huddled together in silence, these women I had hunted. These women I had believed dead by my hand. Their faces turned toward me as one, eyes gleaming with an unnatural light that mirrored my own. The witches who weren't witches. The innocent I had condemned. Now Nightwalkers like me.

"You," hissed the older woman, her gray hair hanging limp around hollow cheeks. "Come to gloat over what you've made of us?"

I stepped forward, keeping my spine straight the way Daddy taught me when facing sin. "I've come to lead you."

Bitter laughter rippled through the small cluster of women.

"Lead us?" The younger one with tired eyes scoffed. Her name escaped me—I had known her only as the fire-worker, the one who could coax flames from nothing but breath and will. "You led us to slaughter once already."

"I need to know your names." I held my voice steady despite the guilt that threaded through my chest. "All of you. Your real names."

Silence fell heavy as a burial shroud. The women exchanged glances, a silent communication passing between them. I recognized the bond of shared suffering—they had been reborn in blood and darkness together, while I had suffered my transformation alone.

“Why should we tell you anything?” asked the woman from the forest. “You could have resisted Silas, instead you did his bidding. You didn’t care about our names then.”

“I believed what I was told. I thought—“ I swallowed hard. “Silas told me I was doing God’s work. Deep down, I knew it was wrong, but you have to understand. I’d lost everyone. It’s not an excuse for what I did, but I didn’t choose to become like this, either.”

“And now?” The grandmother’s voice cut sharp as a filleting knife.

“My name is Alice,” I insisted. “And I need yours. We’re bound now. Whether we want to be is irrelevant. The Order has made sure of that.”

The hunger pangs struck. A sharp reminder of my fast. Three days without blood left me weakened—at first it made everything dull, but somehow now, it strangely heightened my senses. The others wouldn’t know this feeling yet—they were being kept fed, docile.

“Martha,” said the grandmother finally, her chin lifting in defiance. “I was Martha Holloway before your Order took everything from me. I was trying to save my granddaughter from the consumption with remedies my mother taught me.”

I nodded, committing her name to memory. “Martha,” I repeated.

“Ruth Simmons,” said the tired-eyed woman, the fire-worker. “Not that it matters

anymore.”

“Sarah,” whispered the forest woman. “Just Sarah. They took my family name when they took me from my home.”

The healer with the herbs remained silent, her eyes fixed on me with undisguised loathing.

“And you?” I pressed gently.

“Elizabeth Porter,” she said after a long moment. “Though I doubt that matters to the Lord anymore, now that I’m damned.”

“We aren’t damned,” I said automatically. “We didn’t choose to be what we are. We can choose what to do with what we’ve become.”

“Listen to her,” sneered Ruth, the fire-worker. “Still spouting their gospel. Tell me, Alice. If we’re so redeemable, why do they keep us chained here like animals?”

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I glanced at the iron manacles attached to the far wall. They weren't wearing them now, but the chafe marks on their wrists told their own story.

"This wasn't what I ever wanted, either," I said, my voice dropping lower. "But we can make the best of what we've become. We must rise above our natures, find something bigger than ourselves. Ironically enough, fixing our eyes on something above keeps our feet firmly planted on solid ground."

The words felt hollow even as I spoke them. But they'd come from Father O'Malley. A bit of advice that had borne fruit—but was it for naught? After this mission, could I ever make it back to him, to finish what I'd come so close to completing?

Martha snorted, a surprisingly human sound from her inhuman throat. "Pretty words from the preacher's daughter. Did you believe them when you were draining the life out of me?"

"When can we get more blood?" A fifth voice piped up from the shadows. She was younger than the others, barely more than a girl. A year or two younger than me. Her eyes were fever-bright, her movements jerky with need. I didn't remember biting her—but then again, some of the attacks were like fever-dreams, a blur. During those first few weeks, when Silas let someone's blood loose, it was like something else took over, everything became a blur. "They said we'd get fed if we listened to you."

"Rebecca," Elizabeth murmured, placing a restraining hand on the girl's arm. "Patience."

"I'm hungry," Rebecca whined, looking at me with naked longing. "You smell

different. Cleaner.”

“I’ve been fasting,” I explained, taking an instinctive step back. “It helps with control.”

“Control?” Ruth laughed. “Why bother? We’re monsters now, aren’t we? Might as well embrace it.”

“No,” I said firmly. “That’s what they want. To make us believe we have no choice but to obey. We’re more than what they’ve made us.”

Sarah moved closer, her movements graceful despite her weakened state. “What exactly does your precious Order want from us, Alice? Why create us only to cage us?”

I hesitated, then decided truth was the only currency that might buy their trust. “Silas has assigned us a mission. There’s a coven they want subdued.”

“More witches to hunt?” Martha’s voice dripped with disgust. “So we become the hunters now?”

“It’s our chance to prove ourselves. To show we can be trusted beyond these walls,” I explained, unsure if I even believed it myself anymore.

As they debated among themselves, my attention suddenly snagged on something else—voices from beyond the thick stone walls. My fasting had sharpened my hearing beyond what even these newly-turned Nightwalkers could detect. Silas’s familiar cadence reached me first, then another voice—cultured, with an accent I couldn’t quite place.

”—eliminate the Papists interfering with the Order’s plans.” Silas’s words filtered

through the stone like water through sand.

“St. Mary’s will be cleansed by dawn,” replied the stranger. “The priest has been meddling too long.”

Father O’Malley. My stomach twisted with dread.

“Alice?” Sarah’s voice pulled me back. “What is it?”

I blinked, realizing I’d gone rigid with shock. The others hadn’t heard—their senses weren’t as acute as mine.

“Nothing,” I lied, even as my mind raced. “Just thinking about the mission.”

Two paths stretched before me, equally treacherous. Follow Silas’s orders, lead these women against another supposed coven, earn the Order’s trust while condemning more innocents. Or rebel, risk everything to save Father O’Malley, perhaps doom us all in the process.

I moved like a shadow among shadows. The basement extended beyond our holding cell, a labyrinth of stone chambers connected by narrow passages. I pressed my back against the damp wall, inching toward the faint voices that had caught my attention.

A slash of amber light spilled from beneath a heavy oak door ahead. I crept closer, careful to avoid the betraying floorboards I’d mapped in my mind during previous visits. Silas’s voice drifted through the wood, measured and deferential in a way I’d never heard before.

”—appreciate your journey from Amsterdam,” he was saying. “The situation here has progressed faster than expected.”

“Clearly,” replied another voice, cultured and precise. Dutch, it seemed. “Though I question the wisdom of entrusting such delicate matters to... novices.”

I eased closer to the door, finding a small gap where the hinges had warped with age. Through it, I glimpsed a chamber lit by several lanterns, their flames throwing wild shadows across stone walls lined with weapons. Silas stood with his back to me, shoulders squared beneath his austere black coat.

In front of him stood a figure that chilled my lifeless blood even more than usual.

He was tall and impossibly thin, dressed in garments that belonged to another century—a severe black doublet with a starched white collar that emphasized the marble pallor of his skin. His face might have been sculpted by a Renaissance master, all sharp angles and aristocratic planes, untouched by time yet somehow ancient. Silver-white hair was precisely trimmed. But it was his eyes that froze me in place—amber like a wolf’s, golden almost. Not red like the rest of us—but he was unmistakably a vampire.

Desiderius. That’s what Silas called him. He’d led me to believe I was the first Nightwalker. Clearly, that wasn’t the case. This vampire predated me by centuries, but seemed more cozy with Silas than you’d expect from an ancient vampire whose existence the Order officially opposed.

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“Our Boston chapter has been cultivating their own brood for nearly a decade,” Desiderius said, his long fingers tapping a rhythm against a leather-bound tome. Apparently, I wasn’t even the first Nightwalker in America. “We require skilled lieutenants, not frightened girls playing at redemption.”

My gaze shifted to the shadows behind him. There stood three figures, still as statues—two men and a woman, all with the same predatory stillness that marked them as Nightwalkers. But unlike my newly-turned sisters in the other room, these vampires radiated confidence and lethal grace.

“Alice Bladewell has proven herself dedicated to our cause,” Silas countered. “She successfully neutralized five practitioners in as many weeks.”

“And then you turned them,” Desiderius observed coolly. “Creating untested variables.”

“Opportunity presented itself.”

I dug my nails into my palms. Opportunity. That’s what we were to them. Convenient tools. The Order hadn’t rescued me from Mercy Brown’s attack—they had probably orchestrated it, just as they had orchestrated the “witch hunt” that led me to condemn innocents.

“The girl possesses profound Puritan faith,” Silas continued. “Her father was a respected reverend. Her dedication to scripture is unmatched. She’s precisely the kind of vampire easily won over to our cause.”

Desiderius made a throaty sound, almost a laugh, but restrained. “You misunderstand the transformation, my friend. The turning doesn’t merely change the body—it alters how one perceives faith itself.” He moved to a table where a map lay spread, Boston and its surroundings marked with red crosses. “The very concepts of salvation and damnation shift when one becomes immortal.”

“Which is precisely why we must eliminate outside influences,” Silas insisted. “Particularly this Papist priest.”

“Ah yes, Father O’Malley.” Desiderius pronounced the name with delicate distaste. “Your report mentioned he aids vampires.”

“He offers false comfort to the monsters, promises of salvation through sacraments rather than service to our cause.” Silas’s voice hardened. “If my new Nightwalkers encounter him too soon, he could threaten our larger mission.”

“And you believe your girl—this Alice—might be swayed by him?”

Silas hesitated. “She’s... compassionate. She loves God and has complied with most of my orders. Still, she hesitates. It’s that kind of lingering sense of goodness from her former humanity that might make an alternative path appealing. The Nightwalkers must believe that there’s only one way to save their souls—through obedience to our cause, by eliminating more evil from this world than they themselves represent.”

One of the shadow figures behind Desiderius stepped forward—the woman, her movements liquid and precise. “Compassion is a luxury of the living.”

“Indeed,” Desiderius agreed. “This is why my brood will handle the priest and his church. St. Mary’s will be cleansed by dawn, while your younglings focus on the supposed coven in Dorchester.”

Silas gasped, but it was clearly sarcastic. “You question my judgment?”

Desiderius narrowed his eyes. “You’ve condemned people on less, Silas. Your methods aren’t endorsed by all of us. Still, you remain in good standing with the rest of the Order, and I’ve committed myself to assisting you in this matter. I can understand why you’d hesitate exposing your vulnerable infant Nightwalkers to the likes of the priest.”

“The timing is fortuitous,” Silas nodded. “The church will be mostly empty at that hour. While I have no love lost for Papists, I also would prefer to avoid an all out war with them.”

“All will be ash by morning,” Desiderius assured him.

Something shifted in Desiderius’s posture then—a sudden stillness that reminded me of a predator catching an unexpected scent. His head tilted slightly, nostrils flaring.

“We are not alone,” he said softly.

I froze, hardly daring to breathe. My fasting state had masked my presence thus far, but Desiderius was older, stronger. His senses would be beyond even my understanding.

“The basement contains only our Nightwalkers,” Silas replied. “Securely held.”

Desiderius moved toward the door with inhuman speed. “Are you certain of that?”

I retreated silently, pressing myself into an alcove where the shadows lay thickest. My mind raced with calculations—I couldn’t return to the others without revealing the passage I’d discovered, but remaining meant certain discovery.

“Perhaps it’s merely hunger making you uneasy, old friend,” Silas suggested. “You’ve traveled far..”

Desiderius paused, his hand on the door latch. For one terrible moment, I thought he would step through and find me. Then he turned, amber eyes scanning the room once more.

“Perhaps,” he conceded.

“Your caution is why the Order values your counsel,” Silas said smoothly. “Now, shall we discuss the particulars of tomorrow night’s operations?”

As they returned to their plotting, I slipped away, each step a prayer for silence. My mind burned with revelations and betrayal. The Order hadn’t saved me—they had used me. They hadn’t made me a Nightwalker to fight evil—they had created me to be their weapon against innocents.

And now they planned to destroy the one person who had shown me true redemption was possible.

Chapter 23

Five pairs of hungry eyes tracked my movements as I paced the length of our miserable sanctuary, their red glow piercing the gloom like dying embers. These women—my women now, God help me—had once been ordinary, alive. I'd taken that from them with my own fangs, transformed them into Nightwalkers unwittingly. I wasn't sure what was worse, that I'd thought I'd killed these women, or that I'd been complicit in turning them. Either way, there was plenty of guilt I could hold on to. Then again, Father O'Malley heard my confession. He gave me penance to heal my wounds. I couldn't allow myself to wallow in guilt—to doubt the absolution is to doubt Christ Himself.

I had to lead them, even though I was probably the last person—human or vampire—they'd want to follow. And what I was about to tell them could mean killing them all over again. The chances of our success were slim, but I didn't have a choice.

“We're not going upstairs,” I said, stopping my pacing to face them directly. “Not for Silas, not for the hunt.”

Rebecca, the youngest both in human years and vampire existence, hissed through teeth that had sharpened with hunger. “But you promised us blood tonight.” Her hollow cheeks and fever-bright eyes made her look like consumption incarnate—a disease I'd spent my human years fighting and now embodied in twisted form.

“There will be blood,” I conceded, “but not where Silas intends.”

Martha rose from her corner, her movements carrying the dignity of her sixty years despite her transformation. “Speak plainly, child. What game are you playing?”

I drew in an unnecessary breath, a habit from my human days that still brought comfort. “I overheard Silas planning something with an older vampire. His name is Desiderius. From what I could gather, he leads another brood of Nightwalkers for a different chapter of the Order of the Morning Dawn. Though I’m not sure Desiderius was made by the Order. I’m not sure why he’s working with them, but perhaps he’s as deceived as I was, that I could earn my salvation by doing Silas’s bidding.”

“What are you suggesting?” Martha asked.

“Silas is bringing an army of men from the Order along with Desiderius and his nightwalkers to a church.”

“A church?” Rebecca snorted. “That’s odd.”

“They’re attacking St. Mary’s Parish. They intend to murder the priest. He just so happens to be a good friend of mine.”

Sarah tilted her head. “The priest? What threat could a single priest pose to the Order?”

“He knows what they really are,” I said. “What they’ve been doing to us. He’s offered me...” I hesitated, the words sounding hollow even in my own ears. “A different path. One that doesn’t require us to be the monsters they’ve made us. Silas doesn’t know yet that I’ve been meeting with Father O’Malley. He knows, though how the priest has been helping vampires like us.”

Elizabeth, who'd been silent until now, laughed. "You think a priest has a path for creatures damned by God? We're beyond salvation, Alice. That's why they chose us. I don't believe the Order's nonsense about redemption, but I wouldn't trust a priest either."

"I trust him, and you should, too." The order came out harsher than I'd intended—it wasn't supposed to be an order, but I wasn't really sure how this whole 'sire bond' worked. I was still a novice in all things vampire. All five women stiffened, their bodies responding to my will even if some of their minds rebelled. "Father O'Malley believes, and I've seen evidence, that our condition doesn't have to mean damnation. That through God's grace, if we are willing to persevere and follow the path of suffering and sorrow, we can find everlasting joy and salvation."

Rebecca lunged forward, her movement too quick for human eyes to track, stopping inches from my face. "Pretty words from a preacher's daughter. You can't pray away our needs, Alice. My entire body craves blood. I want it, I need it, I will have it!"

I met her gaze without flinching. "My father believed faith could conquer anything," I said softly. "Even death. I'm not asking you to pray the thirst away. I'm asking you to redirect it—use it to find the resolve to fight against those who are stronger than we are, use it to help, to protect the innocent, to stop Silas from hurting anyone else."

The basement fell silent save for the steady drip of water. Martha was the first to speak, her voice carrying the weight of decades of wisdom. "You want us to fight our own kind? For a priest?"

"If not for the priest, for ourselves," I corrected. "Desiderius has lived for centuries, and may have been serving the Order for decades. He and Silas plan to murder Father O'Malley as an example to anyone who might help our kind. If we allow that, we accept that we are nothing but the Order's weapons. Their hunting dogs."

Ruth stepped forward. These new nightwalkers had objections. I could have just ordered their compliance, but I thought it wise to give them the freedom to fight with me by choice. I'd say I couldn't live with myself if I forced them to do this against their wills—but I wasn't entirely sure 'living' was an issue anymore. Not the way it used to be. "You think some holy water and prayers will wash away what we are? The Order made us this way for a reason."

"Yes," I agreed, "they did. To hunt and kill at their command. To be feared by those they wish to control. But what if we could be more? What if our hunger, our speed, our strength could serve a purpose beyond slaughter?"

Sarah huffed. "The church is consecrated ground. We'd burn at the threshold. Or was that just another lie Silas told us?"

"It will hurt," I admitted. "Silas wasn't lying that it would hurt, but I think he presented it to you the wrong way. Not all pain is trying to kill you. The pain will be... considerable. But it won't destroy us." I moved to the center of our circle. "We focus not on getting inside, but on meeting Desiderius's Nightwalkers where they are—remember they'll have the same problems we will on church grounds. I've endured it already. I won't experience the same pain you will. I will move ahead and try to keep you safe, to give you every advantage I can. The best chance will be to create a diversion, draw them away, and then a small group of us pushes through the pain to reach Father O'Malley."

"And you?" Elizabeth asked, her voice tight with suspicion. "Will you burn with us on this holy ground?"

I hesitated, remembering the strange peace I'd felt when I'd ventured into St. Mary's before, the absence of the pain that should have consumed me. "I... won't feel it the same way. I don't know why. But I can help you through it."

Rebecca snarled, her hunger making her reckless. “Of course. The blessed Alice Bladewell, immune to consumption in life, immune to holy ground in death. Always special, always chosen.”

“Not chosen,” I snapped, my own patience wearing thin. “Cursed, same as you. But I’ve learned something in my time with Father O’Malley. Our curse... it responds to will. To faith. The pain you’ll feel—it’s not destruction, it’s purification.”

“Purification?” Martha’s tone betrayed her skepticism.

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“It won’t be easy,” I told them, softening my tone. “But nothing worth doing ever is. It takes discipline, prayer, and determination to find faith, glory, and beauty even in pain and suffering, to find light even in our darkness.”

Rebecca’s laugh was brittle, but she no longer challenged me directly. “If you’re wrong, we burn for nothing.”

“If I’m right,” I countered, “we take the first step toward something more than mere existence. Toward actual redemption. To being more than monsters.”

St. Mary’s parish loomed against the night sky like a fortress, its stone walls and stained glass glowing in the moonlight. I crouched behind a tombstone in the cemetery, with my progeny beside me. Nightwalkers from Desiderius’s brood patrolled the grounds, their pale faces like death masks. Order members, in black coats, entered the church, unaffected by holiness that repelled vampires. Something was amiss. Desiderius’s voice echoed from within the church, though he should have been in agony on consecrated ground. Instead, he moved freely inside while his brood stayed outside.

“How is he in there?” Ruth whispered. “The sanctity should be burning him alive, right?”

I shook my head, uneasy. “I don’t know. But it means something.”

Rebecca’s fingers dug into the earth beneath us, her hunger making her restless. “There are too many of them. We’ll never get past.”

“We don’t need to fight them all,” I said, studying the patterns of movement around the church. “We just need to confuse them long enough to slip through.”

Martha touched my arm, her cold fingers steady despite the danger. “What are you thinking, child?”

I pointed toward the eastern side of the church where shadows pooled deepest. “The side entrance there—I think it’s used for funeral processions. It’s our best chance. But we need a distraction.”

Sarah, who had been silent until now, spoke up. “I can draw them off.” She didn’t close her eyes this time. Instead, she brought her fingers to her lips and let out a series of sharp, reedy whistles, mimicking the distress call of a rabbit, followed by the deeper, guttural bark of a fox. It was uncanny, the sounds indistinguishable from actual animals. A distant rustling in the undergrowth answered her call, growing closer. “It’s done. But it won’t last long.”

“That’s not witchcraft,” I said, a new understanding dawning. “It’s clever, though.”

Sarah nodded. “Of course it isn’t witchcraft. The Order needs witches to justify its existence. I tried to prove it, to argue that my methods weren’t magical at all, but Silas didn’t buy it. They were just looking for a reason to kill me.”

Ruth nodded, understanding blooming on her face. “I can create a distraction.” She extended her hands, palms slightly cupped. For a breath-taking moment, nothing happened. Then, a tiny, almost imperceptible shimmer appeared on her right palm, and with a faint, almost inaudible pop, a small, pale flame flickered to life, dancing for only a second before vanishing as quickly as it appeared. It wasn’t the roaring inferno I’d once imagined her capable of, but a brief, startling flash, like a match head igniting and quickly blowing out.

My initial awe quickly gave way to a dawning, uncomfortable understanding. The faintest whiff of something sharp, acrid, like burnt matches, reached me. I remembered stories from the county fair, travelling showmen demonstrating “chemical wonders.” A sudden, almost shameful insight hit me. Phosphorus. That was it. I’d read about its properties in some of Father’s old scientific journals—how it could ignite on contact with air, how a tiny amount could create a sudden, brief flash. It wasn’t some mystical fire-working ability at all, but clever chemistry.

Ruth, catching my discerning glance, just rolled her eyes. “The Order dismisses anything they don’t understand as witchcraft. I suppose those new automobiles would have been condemned as powered by sorcery a hundred years ago, but now it’s understood as ingenuity.”

“Brilliant.” I turned to Elizabeth and Rebecca. “You two come with me and Martha through the side door. Sarah and Ruth will create the diversion and follow when they can.”

Rebecca’s eyes glowed brighter with anticipation. “And once we’re inside?”

“We find Father O’Malley and get him out,” I said firmly. “No matter what.”

We waited, tense and silent, until the first animals began emerging from the woods—foxes, raccoons, even a few deer, moving with unnatural purpose toward the church grounds. The Nightwalkers patrolling the perimeter turned toward the disturbance, confused by the sudden presence of so many creatures.

“Now,” Ruth whispered, and with a blow from her palm sent a flame arcing through the air. It landed among dry autumn leaves, which caught fire immediately. More flames followed, creating a semicircle of fire that drove the animals into greater frenzy and forced the enemy Nightwalkers to scatter.

We moved quickly, using our supernatural speed to cross the open ground between the cemetery and the church. As we approached the side entrance, I felt the others hesitate, their bodies instinctively recoiling from the invisible barrier of sanctity.

“Keep moving,” I urged. “Remember, the pain is real, but it won’t destroy you. Focus on the goal, press into the pain.”

Martha was the first to step forward, her jaw clenched against the pain. “I’ve birthed eight children in my life,” she said through gritted teeth. “This is just another kind of labor.”

Elizabeth followed, then a reluctant Rebecca. I stepped across the threshold last, bracing for the agony that never came. The others noticed my lack of reaction immediately.

“How?” Rebecca gasped, her face contorted with pain as the holy ground seemed to burn through her dead flesh.

“Like I said, the pain purifies. I’ve gone through it already.”

My admission seemed to strengthen their resolve—I’d been through it, I was proof that the pain was worthwhile, that there was a way to get beyond it and come out better than before.

I led them deeper into the church, past the vestibule and toward the main sanctuary where I could hear Silas’s voice accusing Father O’Malley of conspiring with Satan. Just hearing it made my ice-cold vampire blood boil. It was all I could do to hold back. If this plan was going to work, charging in fangs bared wasn’t the most likely strategy to succeed.

We paused at the sanctuary doors, peering through the crack between them. The sight

within froze the dead blood in my veins.

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Father O'Malley hung suspended from a large wooden crucifix in the center of the sanctuary, his arms and legs bound with thick rope. Blood trickled from his forehead where thorns had cut into his skin—a mockery of Christ's passion. Silas stood before him, reading from a book bound in what looked disturbingly like human skin. And beside him, watching with cold interest, stood Desiderius—impossibly calm, impossibly present on consecrated ground.

“Now,” I whispered, and we burst through the doors.

The Order members inside—five of them besides Silas—turned toward us in shock. Desiderius merely raised an eyebrow, as if our arrival was an interesting but minor development.

“Alice Bladewell,” Silas said, closing his book with deliberate slowness. “I should have known your faith would waver. Too much of your father's weakness in you.”

“Let him go,” I said, ignoring the taunt. “Father O'Malley has done nothing to deserve this.”

Silas laughed. “Nothing? He's been harboring vampires, teaching them to resist their nature—teaching them lies about redemption. He undermines everything we've built.”

My progeny fanned out behind me, their pain temporarily forgotten in the face of immediate danger. Martha and Elizabeth moved to the left, Rebecca to the right, creating a semicircle that slowly advanced toward the altar where Father O'Malley hung.

“And what exactly have you built, Silas?” I asked, buying time for Ruth and Sarah to join us. “A world where you create monsters just to control them? Where faith is a weapon of hate?”

Desiderius stepped forward, his movement so fluid it barely disturbed the air. “Interesting questions. Would you care to elaborate?”

I didn’t waste time on further conversation. Not while Father O’Malley was fighting for his life. With a surge of vampiric speed, I launched myself toward Father O’Malley, moving faster than human eyes could track. One of the Order members tried to intercept me, but I batted him aside with supernatural strength, sending him crashing into the first row of pews. Another raised a crossbow, but Rebecca was on him before he could fire, her hunger finally finding release as she tore into his throat.

I reached the crucifix and began working at the ropes binding Father O’Malley’s right wrist. “Hold on,” I whispered. “We’re getting you out of here.”

As I turned back to free Father O’Malley, I caught Desiderius watching me with an expression I couldn’t quite decipher—something between curiosity and recognition. For a moment, our eyes locked across the battle-torn sanctuary. He could have charged after me, stopped me from helping the priest. But he wasn’t doing anything. Just watching. Observing.

I resumed my work on the ropes, unsure how to explain to old vampire’s behavior, but grateful he wasn’t trying to stop me. Blood from Father O’Malley’s wounds smeared my hands, the scent of it igniting a hunger I forced myself to ignore. Behind me, the sounds of battle filled the sanctuary—hisses and screams, the crack of breaking wood as bodies were thrown against pews, the wet tearing of flesh as my progeny unleashed their nature on the Order members who had made them monsters. I had just loosened the rope around Father O’Malley’s right wrist when the distinctive click of a crossbow being cocked cut through the chaos.

“Step away from him, Alice.” Silas’s voice carried the cold authority that had commanded me for months after my transformation. “This is God’s justice for a heretic.”

I didn’t turn, continuing to work on the ropes. “There’s nothing godly about crucifying a priest, Silas.”

The crossbow bolt whistled past my ear, embedding itself in the wooden cross inches from Father O’Malley’s head. I flinched but didn’t stop.

“The next one goes through your heart,” Silas warned, already reloading.

Father O’Malley’s eyes met mine, his gaze surprisingly steady despite his pain. “Go,” he whispered. “Save yourself and the others.”

I shook my head. “Not without you.”

Silas barked an order across the sanctuary. “Desiderius! Bring our wayward daughter to me.”

A hush fell over the battle as the ancient vampire glided toward us, his movements so graceful they seemed almost human. Up close, his pale features carried an aristocratic hauteur that centuries of undeath had only refined. His golden eyes studied me with unsettling intensity.

“You’re different,” he observed, his aristocratic voice carrying over the chaos. “I can smell it in your blood.”

I tensed, ready to defend Father O’Malley with my life, or whatever remained of it. “Stay back.”

To everyone's shock—mine most of all—Desiderius smiled. "I've been waiting three hundred years for someone like you, Alice Bladewell."

Before I could process his words, Desiderius spun with supernatural speed and tore the crossbow from Silas's hands, snapping it in two as if it were kindling.

"What are you doing?" Silas demanded, backing away in confusion.

"Repaying an old debt," Desiderius replied calmly, before driving his fist through the chest of the nearest Order member. The man collapsed, blood pooling beneath him as my progeny hissed with renewed hunger.

"This priest saved me decades ago," Desiderius explained between vicious attacks on his former allies. His fighting style was unlike anything I'd seen—not the desperate savagery of new Nightwalkers, but something almost balletic in its precision. "I've been waiting for an opportunity to repay that debt."

I stared in disbelief before turning back to the ropes. With Desiderius joining our side, the battle's tide had turned. His own Nightwalkers outside seemed confused, some fleeing into the night, others attempting to enter the church only to be driven back by pain of the consecrated building and ground.

Martha appeared beside me, her hands steady as she worked on the ropes binding Father O'Malley's feet. "Strange allies we've made tonight," she murmured.

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As I freed Father O'Malley's left wrist, the church doors burst open. More Order members poured in, these armed with crossbows, silver knives, and stakes.

"Down!" Desiderius shouted, shoving an Order member aside to reach us.

I pulled Father O'Malley from the cross just as Silas pushed through the melee, drawing out a crucifix—the same one that Silas told me the vampires stole, the one I "awakened" before my turn. It glowed with a sickly blue light.

"You should have stayed loyal, Desiderius," Silas called. "Now you'll burn with the rest of these abominations."

He raised the crucifix high, and a beam of light shot forth like liquid fire. It struck Sarah first as she turned to flee. She didn't even have time to scream before her body crumbled to ash, the particles drifting through the sanctuary like obscene snow. Elizabeth was next, the light catching her mid-leap as she tried to attack Silas. Her face registered a moment of perfect surprise before she too dissolved into dust.

"No!" I screamed, the sound tearing from my throat with such force that the stained glass windows shuddered in their frames.

Martha pushed me behind her, her maternal instinct asserting itself even in undeath. "Run," she commanded. "Get the Father out—"

The light struck her full in the chest. For a heartbeat, she remained whole, her eyes meeting mine with a strange peace. "It doesn't hurt," she whispered, before disintegrating like the others.

Grief struck me like a physical blow, driving me to my knees. These women had been my victims, then my progeny, and finally my responsibility. In the space of seconds, three of them had been reduced to ash—their second deaths on my conscience just as their first had been.

Ruth and Rebecca had taken cover behind the altar, their eyes wide with terror. Desiderius moved to stand between us and Silas, his ancient face twisted with fury.

“That weapon was created to destroy demons, Silas” he snarled. “We are not demons. You pervert its purpose, just as you’ve perverted everything the Order once stood for.”

Silas laughed, the sound echoing off the church’s vaulted ceiling. “God’s creatures? You’re an abomination, Desiderius. All of you. That you can stand on consecrated ground changes nothing.”

“It changes everything,” Father O’Malley said weakly, leaning heavily against me. “It proves what I’ve been telling Alice—that faith and love, not nature, determines one’s relationship with the divine.”

Silas’s face contorted with rage. “Blasphemy!” He raised the crucifix again, this time aiming directly at me and the priest.

What happened next seemed to unfold in slow motion. Desiderius launched himself forward with supernatural speed, placing his body directly in the path of the light. The beam struck him full force, and he screamed—a sound of such agony that I felt it in my own dead heart. His ancient flesh began to burn, blackening and peeling away in layers, but unlike the others, he didn’t immediately turn to ash.

His advanced age must’ve given him more resilience. Or, perhaps, it was something else. An innate holiness, despite his unholy form. The same kind of righteousness

Father O'Malley promised me was available, if I was willing to take up my cross, if I was willing to subject my darkness to the light of the world.

The scent of charred flesh filled the sanctuary, thick and choking. Desiderius remained standing, his body smoking but intact, his golden eyes fixed on Silas with centuries of hatred.

"Run," he gasped to me, his voice barely recognizable through his ruined throat. "I can't hold much longer."

Father O'Malley clutched my arm. "Alice, we must go. Now."

The crucifix's light seemed to be weakening, its glow dimming as if whatever powered it was being depleted. Silas noticed too, cursing as he shook the artifact.

"Ruth! Rebecca!" I called. "To me!"

They darted from behind the altar, keeping low, their faces contorted with pain from both the consecrated ground and the loss of their sisters. As they reached us, I saw Ruth's hands were still flickering with flames—smaller now, but present.

"Can you create cover?" I asked her.

She nodded grimly. "Enough to get us out the side door."

I looked back at Desiderius, still standing between us and Silas, his body a charred ruin that somehow refused to collapse. His sacrifice—the debt he claimed to owe Father O'Malley—had bought us precious seconds.

"Thank you," I said, knowing he could hear me even across the chaos.

His head inclined slightly in acknowledgment. Then, with a roar that shook dust from the rafters, he summoned what strength remained and lurched toward Silas.

With Desiderius occupying Silas, I saw my chance. The processional torch stood in its holder near the altar, its flame dancing like a beacon in the chaos. I moved with preternatural speed, snatching the heavy brass pole from its stand. The metal felt cold against my dead skin, but the weight was nothing to my vampiric strength. It was a long-shot, but I had to try. I couldn't join in the fight—that crucifix might burn me alive like it had the others. Not to mention, Silas had a talisman of some kind that weakened me when I got too close. This was the best chance I had.

When I launched the torch, it cut through the air, its flame trailing behind it like the tail of a comet.

Silas turned at the last second, perhaps sensing the danger. His eyes widened in shock—the look of a man who believed himself untouchable suddenly confronted with his mortality. The torch struck with such force that the brass pole punched through his neck, pinning him to the wooden panel behind him. His mouth opened in a silent scream as blood fountained from the wound, spraying across the marble floor.

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The crucifix fell from his hand, its unnatural light dying as it clattered against the stone. Silas clawed at the pole transfixing his throat, his movements growing weaker with each passing second. Blood continued to pour from the wound, filling the sanctuary with its copper scent.

What happened next would haunt me for whatever remained of my existence.

Ruth and Rebecca, driven beyond reason by the smell of fresh blood, abandoned all pretense of humanity. They moved as a blur, reaching Silas before his body had even begun to slide down the wall. Ruth reached him first, her hands still flickering with dying flames as she tore into his shoulder with teeth that had fully extended into fangs. Rebecca attacked from the other side, ripping into his abdomen.

I stood frozen, unable to look away from the feeding frenzy. These were my progeny—my responsibility—tearing a man apart like wolves on a fallen deer. Blood splattered across their faces, across the holy floor, across the altar itself. The sounds they made weren't human—wet, desperate gulping punctuated by growls of pleasure that belonged in the darkest circle of hell.

Father O'Malley clutched my arm, his fingers digging into my cold flesh with surprising strength. "Alice," he whispered, his voice thick with horror. "We need to go. Now."

But I couldn't move. Couldn't tear my eyes from the scene before me. This was what we were. What I had made them. What the Order had made me. Monsters wearing human faces, driven by hunger so intense it obliterated all reason, all faith, all hope of redemption.

“Alice.” Desiderius’s voice, barely recognizable through his burned throat, cut through my paralysis. The ancient vampire was scorched, his skin burned by the celestial light—if that’s what it was—emitted by Silas’s crucifix. He looked less like the pristine Dutchman I’d watched from afar and more like a genuine creature born of hell itself.

But he wasn’t that. He’d helped us—probably intended to the entire time, but was affected by Silas’s talisman the same way I was. Just as I couldn’t overpower Silas, without assistance, even a vampire as old and as strong as Desiderius couldn’t.

I held up Father O’Malley, letting him use my body like a crutch. The priest winced with every step.

“Thank God they didn’t nail me to the cross,” Father O’Malley murmured.. “Small mercies.”

“It wasn’t a grace on Silas’s part,” I said, my voice hollow as I forced myself to look away from my feeding progeny. “He knew if he drew blood, things could get out of hand. I suspect if these young vampires bit you, given your grace, it would destroy them before it could harm you.”

Desiderius smiled and shook his head. “Silas told me you were a righteous girl. If that’s the case, if the blood of the pure repelled vampires, how’d you become one to begin with?”

“It seems my faith still had some growing to do.” I nodded firmly. “Or, perhaps, it was God’s will that I become what I am. I’m hardly a saint. I just killed a man.”

Father O’Malley placed a hand on my shoulder, his touch offering comfort I didn’t deserve. “You did what was necessary,” he told me. “God understands the difference between protecting those you love and murder.”

I took a deep breath. “Does He? I was raised to believe all killing is sin.”

“Then you were raised with simplistic theology,” Father O’Malley said firmly. “The God I serve—the true God, not the vengeful caricature the Order worships—understands context. Intention. Necessity. In a sinful world, love sometimes demands we do what we’d otherwise never do.”

Desiderius made a sound that might have been agreement or pain. His body was healing, I realized—slowly, far slower than it should for a vampire of his age, but the worst of his burns were closing, new pink skin forming over charred flesh.

“How did you survive?” I asked him. “The others turned to ash instantly.”

His golden eyes met mine. “Age grants certain... resistances. In addition, faith protects in ways the Order has never understood.” He looked toward the altar, where Ruth and Rebecca still fed, though their movements had slowed, their hunger finally sated. “We must get your young ones and the Father someplace safe. It’s possible Silas had reinforcements lying in wait.”

Father O’Malley nodded. “We need to get to the rectory. I have supplies there—blood for your kind, medicine for my wounds.”

“You knew this might happen,” I said, studying his face. “You’ve been preparing.”

“I’ve been serving vampires in secret for decades,” he admitted. “Offering sanctuary, communion, absolution. Desiderius was my first... unlikely parishioner.”

The ancient vampire’s ruined mouth twisted into what might have been a smile. “I sought to test the limits of my damnation. Instead, I found something unexpected—hope.”

Ruth and Rebecca had finally finished feeding. They rose from Silas's corpse, their faces and clothes drenched in blood, their eyes unfocused with satiation. They looked like children who had gorged themselves on sweets, drunk on their excess.

"We need to go," I told them, my voice carrying the command of their sire. "Follow us to the rectory. Stay close."

They nodded dumbly, too blood-drunk to argue. I helped Father O'Malley toward the side door, Desiderius limping beside us. As we passed the altar, I caught sight of my reflection in a polished silver communion plate—my pale face spattered with blood, my eyes still glowing with predatory light. I looked like what I was—a monster playing at redemption.

"Second thoughts?" Father O'Malley asked quietly, seeing my hesitation.

I shook my head. "Just... wondering if this path leads where you think it does. If creatures like us can ever truly be more than what the Order made us."

"The Order didn't make you, Alice," he said. "They merely changed your form. What you are—what you choose to be—that comes from within."

I looked down at my blood-spattered hands. The same hands that had nursed the dying, that had prayed for salvation, that had turned innocent women into Nightwalkers, that had just killed a man. The same hands that now supported a priest who believed in redemption for the damned.

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“For all our sakes, I want to believe you,” I whispered. “But what happened tonight...”

“It wasn’t pretty.” Father O’Malley shuddered. “But neither was Jesus’ crucifixion, and now for those given the eyes of faith, there’s nothing more beautiful. Will you see yourself the way your Maker sees you, Alice?”

“My maker?”

“I’m not talking about Mercy Brown.” The priest knew her name from my confession. “I’m talking about your real Maker.”

“I don’t see it right now,” I admitted. “But I’ll keep trying, Father.”

As we slipped out into the night, leaving the desecrated sanctuary behind, I felt something shift inside me—not the hunger that had become my constant companion, but something older, more human. The weight of choice. The burden of responsibility. The faint, flickering hope that even in darkness, there might be light.

Three of my progeny lay scattered as ash across the church floor. Two more followed me, drunk on human blood. Father O’Malley leaned against me, his faith unshaken despite the night’s horrors. And Desiderius, ancient and enigmatic, had chosen our side. What I still didn’t understand was why he’d waited so long to finally turn against the Order. Why had he infiltrated them if he’d always hoped to betray them? Why had I of all the young vampires he’d met through the centuries given him the boldness to act?

Questions I'd ask later. I'd demand answers, even though I couldn't formally make any demand of a vampire so old as Desiderius.

All I knew was that the Order wasn't my true family. This was my new congregation. My new family. My new purpose.

Chapter 24

We stumbled into the rectory through a side door that Father O'Malley unlocked with trembling hands. The smell of blood clung to us like a second skin—Silas's blood on Ruth and Rebecca, Father O'Malley's blood soaked into his own clothing, and whatever remnants of my humanity I'd left behind in that desecrated sanctuary. I supported the priest's weight as we moved deeper into the building, away from the carnage, toward what he promised would be sanctuary. But sanctuary from what? The Order? Or from what we'd become?

The back room of the rectory was barely large enough for the five of us. A single oil lamp guttered on a desk cluttered with papers and leather-bound books, casting elongated shadows across our faces that made us look more monstrous than we already were. Father O'Malley eased himself onto a wooden chair with a grimace, the rope burns on his wrists angry and red in the weak light.

"There are clean cloths in that drawer," he said, nodding toward a small cabinet. "And a bottle of iodine."

I retrieved them, my movements mechanical. The cabinet smelled of incense and old paper, a peculiarly human scent that made my throat tighten with something like longing. I handed him the supplies, careful not to let my cold fingers brush his warm ones.

"Thank you, Alice." He dabbed at the cuts on his forehead where the thorns had

pierced his skin. Each touch made him wince, but he didn't stop. Pain was sometimes necessary for healing. A lesson I'd learned several times over as of late.

Ruth and Rebecca huddled in the far corner, as far from the priest as the small room would allow. Their faces were smeared with blood that had begun to dry and flake, their eyes glazed and unfocused. The feeding frenzy I'd witnessed in the church had left them drunk and disoriented, caught between horror at what they'd done and satisfaction of the hunger that had driven them to it.

Ruth's hands shook as she stared at them, at the blood caked beneath her fingernails. "I didn't... I never..." Her voice was barely a whisper.

I placed my hand on her shoulder, feeling the tremors that ran through her body. "I know," I said, though I didn't, not really. I'd never given in to the hunger that completely, never let it consume me the way it had consumed them. Was that faith, or just fear? I wasn't sure anymore.

Rebecca rocked back and forth beside Ruth, her teenage face contorted with emotions too complex for her years. She'd been the youngest when she died, barely sixteen, the same age I'd been when I sat with the dying and prayed for their souls. Now she was both dead and undead, caught in a twilight existence that defied all the theology I'd been raised on.

"I can still taste him," she murmured, running her tongue over her lips. "He tasted like... like power. Like salvation." She looked up at me, her eyes clearing slightly. "Is that wrong?"

What could I tell her? That feeding on a man's lifeblood was a sin? We were beyond such simple judgments now. "It's done," I said instead. "We did what we had to do to survive."

Desiderius stood apart from us, his back straight despite the horrific burns that covered half his face and neck. His flesh was knitting itself back together with agonizing slowness, new pink skin forming over charred tissue. He caught me watching and inclined his head slightly, a gesture that might have been acknowledgment or simply pain.

“You’re healing,” I observed.

“A benefit of age,” he replied, his aristocratic voice reduced to a rasp by his damaged throat. “Though I must admit, I haven’t felt pain like this since the Inquisition.”

The mention of such ancient history reminded me that this creature had walked the earth for centuries, had witnessed horrors I could scarcely imagine. What path had led him from those dark times to this moment, standing in a priest’s study, having betrayed his supposed allies to save a man of God?

Father O’Malley finished cleaning his wounds and looked up at us, his gaze moving from face to face. Despite everything, his eyes held no fear—only a deep, abiding compassion that made me want to look away.

“We can’t stay here long,” he said. “The Order will have sentries watching the church. They’ll be looking for us.”

“Where can we go?” I asked. The weight of responsibility pressed down on me—not just for myself, but for Ruth and Rebecca, for what remained of the progeny I’d unwittingly created.

“There’s a chamber beneath the church,” Father O’Malley explained, leaning forward despite his pain. “A sanctuary built during the days when Catholics were persecuted here. Few know of its existence now.”

“Below the church?” Rebecca’s voice cracked with fear. “But the consecrated ground—it burns us.”

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Father O'Malley shook his head. "Not all of you. Not Alice, not Desiderius. And for you and Ruth, the pain will lessen with time and faith. It's purification, not destruction."

The words echoed what I'd told my progeny before our attack on the church. Had I been right, then? Was there truly hope for creatures like us?

"The chamber has no windows," Father O'Malley continued. "No way for sunlight to reach you. There are supplies there—blankets, candles, books. It will give us time to plan our next move."

"Our next move?" Ruth looked up from her bloodstained hands. "What next move? Sarah, Martha, Elizabeth—they're gone. Turned to ash. We've lost everything."

"Not everything," I said, more firmly than I felt. "We're still here. We still have a choice about what we become."

"And what is that?" Rebecca asked, her voice small. "What can we become, besides monsters?"

I had no answer for her—not one I believed in my soul, if I still had one. I looked to Father O'Malley, hoping he might offer the comfort I couldn't.

The oil lamp flickered, shadows dancing across his weathered face. "Witnesses," he said simply. "To a truth the Order has tried to bury—that grace can reach even those they deem beyond salvation."

Desiderius made a sound that might have been a laugh, if his throat hadn't been burned raw. "A noble sentiment, Father. But sentiment alone won't protect us from what's coming."

"No," Father O'Malley agreed. "But it gives us reason to fight." He stood, wincing as he put weight on his injured leg. "We should go. The passage to the chamber is behind the altar—ironic, I know, that your salvation lies through the very ground that pains you."

Rebecca's eyes widened with panic. "I can't—I can't go back in there. Not after what happened. Not after what we did."

Ruth nodded in agreement, her trembling intensifying. "The pain... I don't think I can bear it again so soon."

I knelt beside them, taking their icy hands in mine. These women had been strangers to me in life, accused witches I'd hunted at the Order's command. Now they were bound to me by blood and death and whatever twisted version of motherhood vampirism had granted me.

"You can," I told them. "You're stronger than you know. And this time, you won't be alone. I'll be with you every step."

They looked at me with such naked trust that I nearly flinched. What had I done to deserve such faith? Nothing. But perhaps that was the point Father O'Malley had been trying to make—grace wasn't earned but given freely, even to the most undeserving.

"Lead the way, Father," I said, helping Ruth and Rebecca to their feet. "We'll follow."

As we prepared to leave the small sanctuary of the rectory for the uncertain protection of the hidden chamber, I caught Desiderius watching me with an unreadable expression. Something like recognition flickered in his ancient eyes—or perhaps it was merely the lamplight playing tricks.

“What?” I asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“Nothing,” he said, his ruined mouth attempting a smile. “Just wondering what it is about you that makes me think perhaps, after all these centuries, I might finally be on the right path.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. So instead, I simply nodded and turned to follow Father O’Malley into the night, toward whatever salvation or damnation awaited us beneath the church.

The chamber beneath St. Mary’s lay hidden for nearly two centuries, its existence known only to a succession of priests who guarded its secret. Candles burned in iron sconces along the walls, their flames steady in the still air, casting our shadows like giants against ancient stone. Father O’Malley had led us through a narrow passage behind the altar, down worn steps that spiraled into darkness, until we reached this unexpected sanctuary. I watched Ruth and Rebecca huddle together on a pallet in the corner, their faces still etched with pain from crossing the consecrated ground above, while Desiderius stood near a crude wooden cross, seemingly lost in memories older than any of us could fathom.

“You’ve been here before,” I said to him. It wasn’t a question.

Desiderius nodded, the movement causing fresh pink skin to stretch across the burns that still marked his aristocratic features. “Many times, though not in recent years.”

Father O’Malley settled himself on a wooden chair, his wounds freshly bandaged but

still clearly causing him pain. “Desiderius has been a friend to this parish longer than I’ve been alive,” he said. “Perhaps it’s time you shared your story with Alice and the others.”

The ancient vampire turned to face us fully, his golden eyes reflecting the candlelight. When he spoke, his voice emerged as a rasp from his damaged throat, yet carried the unmistakable cadence of another century, another world.

“Vienna, 1823,” he began. “I had existed for nearly two centuries by then, moving from place to place as suspicion grew or I tired of the endless cycle of feeding and hiding. I had been many things—a merchant, a scholar, occasionally a monster when hunger or anger overcame my restraint.”

Rebecca looked up, her bloodstained face intent on his words. Ruth too seemed drawn to his story, momentarily distracted from her trembling hands.

“I encountered Father Adalbert Neuhauser quite by accident. He was carrying the Eucharist to a dying man, and I... I felt it as he passed. A presence I had not experienced since my transformation. Something that called to what remained of my human soul.”

Desiderius moved closer to the cross, his fingers hovering near but not quite touching the wood. “I followed him. Watched him administer last rites. And when he emerged from the house of the dying, he looked directly at me, standing in shadow, and said, ‘You may come to me when you are ready to return to God.’”

“He knew what you were?” I asked, incredulous.

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“He did.” Desiderius’s burned lips attempted a smile. “He belonged to a small faction within the Church that recognized our kind not as demons, but as souls trapped between life and death. A kind of embodied purgatory, if you will. Not a place where you’re meant to complete your punishment, but an opportunity to experience profound purification.”

“Profound, perhaps.” I chuckled. “And quite painful.”

“As it was for our Lord,” Desiderius added. “Father Neuhauser invited me to the church—not to destroy me, but to offer me a path toward communion.”

Father O’Malley nodded. “The Order of the Morning Dawn insists along with many other believers who are unaffiliated with the Order that all supernatural beings are demonic in origin and thus beyond salvation. But Father Neuhauser and those like him maintained that vampires retained their human souls, even if their souls were separated from their flesh for a time. Their souls could be recovered and healed. There may be a corruption that warped our nature, but we are not irredeemable.”

“My first attempt to take communion was...” Desiderius paused, searching for words. “Excruciating. The pain of crossing the threshold was nothing compared to what I felt when the host touched my lips. It burned like the sun itself had been placed on my tongue.”

“But you endured it.”

“Not at first,” Desiderius admitted. “I fled, cursing Neuhauser for his cruelty. But something called me back, week after week. The pain lessened gradually, though it

never disappeared entirely. And something else happened—something unexpected. The body and blood of Christ became my nourishment when human blood could not satisfy. Today, I’m free from the consumption of common human blood entirely. I live solely on the Eucharist. It’s still human blood, but it’s pure—the body and blood born of the Virgin Mary, inhabited by the Son of God.”

Rebecca made a small, disbelieving sound. “You mean you stopped feeding on humans completely?”

“Not immediately,” Desiderius said. “The hunger remains—it always remains. But it became manageable. And the few times I fell back into those habits, it never satisfied. It wasn’t like I’d remembered it. So, I returned to confession and the Eucharist. It’s been a decade since I last consumed common human blood.”

Father O’Malley leaned forward, his eyes intense. “This is what the Order refuses to understand—that redemption is a process, not an event. When your view of salvation boils down to a single moment, a prayer, or stepping forward, and that’s that, it’s hard for them to imagine those who are so corrupted by evil as a vampire could possibly be saved. What the Order tells you, it’s all a farce. They don’t even believe it. Still, they’re content to use you—and they don’t believe they can lose their own salvation, so they justify that enabling the proliferation of one evil to destroy greater evil is justified. However, there’s not a sinner who has ever been born who doesn’t have a path back to grace, vampires included. It’s just for some, the path takes longer to traverse. It’s more arduous and painful. But for those who persevere, the reward is infinitely greater than the worst you’ll endure on the way.”

Desiderius nodded. “Actual demons cannot be saved, but vampires can. A true demon feels no pain in God’s presence—only hatred. It’s indifferent to holiness because it has no capacity to recognize it. But we—“ he gestured to include all of us, ”—we feel the burn because somewhere inside, we remember what it was to be human, and it’s in our makeup, in our design to desire communion with the divine.”

Ruth looked up, hope flickering across her blood-smeared face. “So the pain will lessen? As it did for you?”

Desiderius smiled at her kindly. “With time. With faith. With persistent effort to resist the darker urges of your condition.”

Father O’Malley rose, moving to a small chest in the corner of the chamber. From it, he withdrew a worn leather volume. “Humanity itself has thrived on bloodshed,” he said, his voice taking on a prophetic quality. “Wars, conquests, revolutions—all justified in the name of progress, of necessity. We tell ourselves these are aberrations, but perhaps they reveal something fundamental about our nature.”

He opened the book—a journal, I realized, filled with handwritten notes and newspaper clippings. “Signs and portents suggest the coming century may be the bloodiest yet. New weapons, new hatreds, new justifications for old sins. Mankind’s true bloodlust will be exposed for all to see.”

Rebecca shivered. “What does that mean for us?”

Father O’Malley’s gaze swept over us, lingering on me and Desiderius. “It means you have a purpose beyond mere survival. When that day arrives—when humans reveal themselves capable of horrors that rival anything your kind has done—you must stand as witnesses to a truth they have forgotten.”

“What truth?” I asked.

“That it is never too late to return to the Lord,” Father O’Malley said simply. “That His bloodied hands await all who seek redemption.”

Desiderius bowed his head, the gesture both reverent and aristocratic. “You speak as Neuhauser did, before the end.”

“Before what end?” I asked.

“Before the Order found him,” Desiderius said, his voice hollow with old grief. “Before they burned him for heresy, for daring to suggest that creatures like me might find salvation.”

“I nearly received a similar sentence,” Father O’Malley added. “But those of us who are killed for grace, who earn a martyr’s death, are not cursed. We’re blessed to die for the One who died for all. I suppose that particular blessing will elude me, at least for now.”

“I’m grateful as well,” Desiderius added. “I couldn’t bear the thought of enduring such a loss a second time.”

“Is that why you infiltrated them?” I finally asked. “The Order? To avenge him?”

Desiderius looked at me with eyes that had witnessed centuries of human folly. “Partly. But also to understand them—to learn how such hatred could persist across generations, how faith could become so twisted. I hoped to change their minds, to show them that as a vampire, I wasn’t evil. That maybe they’d see the truth of our potential redemption in me. Instead, they saw in me only an opportunity—to kill, to hate, to destroy.”

Father O’Malley placed a hand on Desiderius’s shoulder—a priest offering comfort to a creature that his own Church officially denied could be saved. “And now you’ve found another path.”

“With Alice,” Desiderius said, turning to me. “When I saw you in the church, unaffected by the consecrated ground, I knew you were like me. That somewhere in your transformation, grace had worked a miracle.”

I shook my head, uncomfortable with the weight of his regard. “I’m nothing special. Just a preacher’s daughter got bit.”

“No,” Father O’Malley said firmly. “You’re a soul in progress, just like all of us. And now, perhaps, you’re ready to take the next step toward reclaiming the humanity your condition has obscured but not destroyed.”

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“What step?” I asked, though I already suspected what he meant.

Father O’Malley moved to a small altar I hadn’t noticed before, set against the far wall of the chamber. Upon it rested a chalice and paten, the simple tools of his sacred office.

“Communion,” he said softly. “The true blood that can satisfy the hunger in your soul, if not the one in your body.”

I looked at Ruth and Rebecca, at their frightened, hopeful faces, and at Desiderius, who had walked this path for centuries before me. In that moment, I felt the weight of choice more heavily than I had since the night of my transformation—not just for myself, but for all those who might follow.

“I’m ready,” I said, and took my first step toward the altar, toward whatever salvation or damnation awaited me there.

Father O’Malley moved with the reverence of long practice as he prepared the altar, his wounded body forgotten in the familiar ritual. He unfolded a small linen cloth, placed it with careful precision, then set out the chalice and paten—simple vessels for the most sacred of mysteries. The candles threw his shadow against the ancient stone walls, making him seem both larger and more fragile than he was. In this hidden chamber beneath a church built by persecuted believers, we were about to attempt something that defied everything the Order of the Morning Dawn believed.

Rebecca’s voice broke the silence, pitched high with fear. “What will happen to us? Will it hurt like the church did?”

Father O'Malley turned to her, his face gentle in the candlelight. "I won't deceive you," he said. "You will feel pain when the words of the Lord are spoken, and again when the bread and wine become the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ."

Ruth flinched at the mention of Christ's name, her hands instinctively rising to cover her ears. The word hadn't hurt me since that first night in the sanctuary with Father O'Malley, but I remembered the burning sensation all too well.

"The pain is most intense for the newly transformed," Father O'Malley continued, his gaze moving between Ruth and Rebecca. "It's not punishment, but purification—like fire burning away impurities in metal. In time, with faith and perseverance, it will lessen."

"How much time?" Ruth asked, her voice barely audible.

Desiderius answered before Father O'Malley could. "It could take days or years. For me, it was nearly ten years before I could hear the Mass without feeling as though my skin was being flayed from my body." His aristocratic features, still partially burned from the crucifix's light, arranged themselves into something like compassion. "But each time was easier than the last."

Rebecca's eyes widened. "Ten years? I can't—I don't think I can endure that long."

"It doesn't have to take that long," Father O'Malley insisted. "Desiderius here was already a very old vampire. His patterns and habits had taken deeper roots. For you, if you are open and willing to endure the process, it may be possible after only witnessing the consecration a few times."

I moved to sit beside her on the pallet, taking her cold hand in mine. "It only took a few nights for me. I'm finally ready to receive it. I think."

“I should say you are.” Father O’Malley nodded firmly as he donned a simple stole—not the full vestments he would wear for a public Mass, but enough to mark the sacredness of what we were about to witness. He moved to stand behind the altar, his expression solemn yet hopeful.

“In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti,” he began, making the sign of the cross.

The Latin words seemed to shimmer in the air, heavy with centuries of devotion. Ruth and Rebecca tensed beside me, their bodies rigid with anticipated pain. I felt it too—a distant pressure, but it didn’t hurt anymore. It was almost soothing. Desiderius stood perfectly still, unaffected by the words.

As Father O’Malley continued the ancient liturgy, the pressure grew for my progenies. Rebecca was the first to break, a small whimper escaping her lips as she scrambled back from the altar, pressing herself against the far wall of the chamber. Ruth lasted longer, her face contorted in a grimace of determination, but by the time Father O’Malley reached the Eucharistic prayer, she too retreated, joining Rebecca in the shadows.

“Hoc est enim Corpus Meum,” Father O’Malley intoned, raising the host.

The pressure intensified, becoming almost physical—not pain exactly, but a weight so immense it threatened to crush me beneath it. I remained standing, drawing strength from Desiderius’s unwavering presence beside me. His centuries of practice steadied me, showing me it was possible to endure, to push through to whatever lay on the other side of this purifying fire.

“Hic est enim calix Sanguinis mei,” Father O’Malley continued, raising the chalice.

Something shifted inside me then—a loosening, as if tight bands around my chest had suddenly released. The pressure remained, but it no longer threatened to overwhelm.

Instead, it felt almost like an embrace, firm but not crushing.

Father O'Malley's eyes met mine as he approached with the host. "Corpus Christi," he said softly.

"Amen," I whispered, and received the wafer on my tongue.

It didn't burn as I'd feared it might. Instead, it melted like snow, cool and clean. I closed my eyes, waiting for the revulsion that should come with consuming anything other than blood, but it never arrived. The host settled within me, a presence both foreign and familiar.

When Father O'Malley offered the chalice, I took it with steady hands. "Sanguis Christi," he said.

"Amen," I responded, and drank.

The wine—no, not wine anymore, but blood, perfect blood—touched my lips. A single drop would have been enough, but I took more, unable to stop myself. It coursed through me like liquid fire, not burning but illuminating, revealing hollows and shadows I hadn't known existed inside my transformed body.

This wasn't the hot, copper tang of human blood that had sustained me since my transformation. This was something else entirely—ancient and new all at once, the ideal blood from which all other blood was just a shadow. It filled me in ways that no feeding ever had, satisfying a hunger deeper than the physical craving for life that drove my kind.

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I handed the chalice back to Father O'Malley, leaving barely a drop at the bottom, which he gave to Desiderius.

From the corner, Ruth and Rebecca watched at a distance where the pain was more bearable, witnessing something they couldn't yet comprehend. Their time would come, or it wouldn't—faith couldn't be forced, only offered and accepted.

As Father O'Malley completed the Mass, the pressure gradually subsided, leaving in its wake a strange clarity. I felt more present in my body than I had since my transformation, more aware of its limitations and its possibilities. I was still undead, still caught between worlds, but for the first time, I understood that this liminal existence might have a purpose beyond mere survival.

In the stillness that followed the final blessing, I found myself remembering a psalm Daddy had often quoted during his sermons: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”

I had been walking through that valley since the night Mercy Brown drained my life. But in this moment, with Christ's blood still warm within me, I made a silent vow: though I walked through the valley of the shadow of death, I would not allow death to claim or define me. I would live—not just exist, but truly live—in whatever form God had allowed me to continue.

Desiderius caught my eye across the altar, his ancient face peaceful despite the burns that still marked it. He nodded once, recognizing something in my expression that told him I had crossed a threshold. That I'd been made new.

Father O'Malley extinguished the candles one by one, returning the chamber to shadow. But something of the light remained, glowing within me like an ember that refused to die. Whatever came next—whether hunting the Order that had created and betrayed us, or finding others of our kind who might be shown this path—I would carry that ember forward, proof that even in darkness, light could endure.

I glanced at Ruth and Rebecca, still huddled together in their corner. They were my responsibility now—not just as their sire, but as someone who had glimpsed a truth they might someday be ready to embrace. I would not abandon them to the night, to the hunger, to the despair that came with believing oneself damned beyond redemption.

“Rest now,” I told them softly. “Dawn approaches, and with it, dreams. Tomorrow night, we begin again.”

And in the sacred darkness of that hidden chamber, surrounded by the living and the undead, I felt something I had not expected to find again: real joy, real life, real love.

THE END OF BOOK ONE

To Be Continued in...