

Frost Borne Communion

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1 Chapter One: Arrival

The convent stood out against the harsh, unforgiving landscape like a beacon of warmth and light in a sea of unending snow. The surrounding prairies were silent; blanketed by millions of sparkling crystals glinting off the winter sunlight. Barren trees stretched their skeletal arms up towards an icy sky, while distant mountains loomed like slumbering giants behind them. In this frozen wilderness, the convent remained untouched and isolated, a place that seemed to exist outside time itself where forgotten secrets lay buried beneath endless drifts of snow. The convent had become a refuge for many lost souls, who sought shelter from the world's harshness and turmoil. It was a place of solace where weary travellers could find safe harbour in its walls. After long days of journeying through the snow-covered plains, they would find comfort in its familiar embrace as they warmed themselves inside by fireplaces or in the chapel's hallowed embrace. As night fell, the light of the convent shone brightly against the darkness. It seemed as if something sacred was hidden within these walls... something that could be revealed only to those who had made a pilgrimage here and crossed its threshold. Most of those who stopped by were seeking refuge from a harsh winter; some found respite in both body and soul while others left more bewildered than when they had arrived. But one thing was certain, for those who found their way to the convent were never the same afterwards.

The next morning, as dawn broke, a lone figure appeared out of the darkness and made its way through the snow towards the entrance of the convent. The figure was bundled in tattered clothing and wore a hood low over its face so as not to be seen. It seemed that it had made the journey for a specific purpose and was determined to enter the convent no matter what. The figure approached the entrance, where a single nun stood guard, her hands clasped before her in silent contemplation. She stepped aside without speaking and gestured towards the door, allowing wordless entry. A group of nuns made their way solemnly up the path, the sound of their footsteps muffled by the soft morning light. Each wore a deep hooded habit and cloak, and carried a rosary around her neck. The first nun was an elderly woman with gnarled hands that had seen decades in prayer; she lifted her aged head to scan for danger before committing herself further down that path. Behind her followed three more women: one bearing a wizened face with sharp eyes used to seeing all things; another mumbling softly as if in conversation with some unseen visitor; the last a tiny woman with bright eyes and an inviting smile that seemed to promise safety. The figure bowed its head slightly as the group approached, taking their silent permission to enter as an invitation.

With a quick glance back at the guard nun, who nodded in approval, she stepped inside. The light of the golden morning sun streamed in through the stained glass windows, and as she did so there was a great stillness that seemed to settle over the room. The whole group felt a sudden sense of peace wash over them as they all entered, their worries and anxieties melting away until nothing remained but an ethereal calm. Candlelight flickered in one corner, casting a gentle warmth throughout the room. The figure was a small woman with bright eyes. She introduced herself as Elsbeth, explaining that she had been sent by her Order to help them on their journey. "My friends," she said slowly, her voice warm and calming, "I have been sent here to help you on your journey." She paused for a moment as if considering her words carefully before continuing. "This is a sacred place where we can connect with the divine and ask for guidance in our lives. It is a place of healing, growth, and learning. Together we can unlock the secrets of this universe and become closer to the divine." The group sat transfixed as Elsbeth spoke, her words washing over them like a fresh spring. They felt themselves opening up to these new ideas and possibilities that she presented. She continued, "Let us begin our journey by focusing on ourselves. Each of us has something unique to offer the world, and we must embrace that part of ourselves if we are to reach our full potential." She asked them each to close their eyes and take a few moments for themselves before beginning a guided meditation. As Elsbeth began her soothing words, the group found themselves entering a world of peace and serenity. They felt their worries and cares melt away as they were filled with an inner sense of lightness and warmth. After several minutes, Elsbeth instructed them to slowly open their eyes, take a few deep breaths, and feel the connection between themselves and all that is around them. Elsbeth closed her eyes and began to recall the details of a long journey. She had followed the trail of an ox wagon that had rumbled across the grassy prairie along the cold path to the convent and she was tired. The sun was setting in a brilliantly blue sky when she came upon the twenty-foot high walls surrounding this imposing religious fortress, nestled against groves of pine trees like so many sentinels on guard.

The convent seemed to float amongst the wild, a cold island of remote refuge in an unforgiving landscape. The walls held back its secrets and provided protection from the brutality beyond. The yellowish-gray sky spread over them like a blanket, void of all hope and light; seeming to promise only dark night with no end in sight. Even here nature withheld its comfort - there was no babbling brook or singing birds - just the relentless wind that moaned through cracks in doors and windows alike. It whistled as if yearning for release from this barren place where time stood still without purpose or

respite for those cloistered within.

The group sat in stunned silence and looked around the dreary chapel slowly coming to terms with the desolation of their comfortable cocoon. Elsbeth broke the hushed reverence by calling them to join her in prayer, and they readily obeyed. Kneeling on hard wooden benches, she began softly chanting an old hymn which seemed to reverberate through the chamber, warming their cold hearts ever so slightly. In those moments of reflection, each of them allowed the silent sorrow to settle over their souls like a thick blanket and they found themselves longing for home even more deeply than before. When Elsbeth finished her prayer she opened her eyes and gazed upon them all with great affection before speaking. She reminded them of the promise they had made to each other as each new member arrived - that no matter how hard this journey could become, they would never forget one another and never give up. "As we continue on our way, let us remember this moment and carry it with us," she said solemnly. She paused for a moment, allowing her words to sink in. The room was still deathly silent and every face was looking up with awe. Finally she concluded with a determined nod of her head: "We can show them that we are strong, when they try to tear us down."

They all nodded silently in agreement and rose from their knees with a newfound courage. Outside, the cold weather had returned with a vengeance. The wind blew in gusts across the trees. The nuns stirred into activity, surveying the grounds and calmly securing their home from the coming storm. Windows were shuttered tight with wooden board, chickens herded to shelter in a nearby barn, and buckets filled with sand set at the corners of each building to catch any flooding. With all duty finalized they gathered in prayer for divine protection before rushing off one by one back to their dorms as snow began falling around them like a soft white blanket.

2 Chapter Two: Mystery

She started to create a sanctuary for herself in her small room, filling it with items that made her feel closer to home. She placed little stones and flowers around the room, and lit incense daily so that the sweet scent could melt away any feeling of frigid loneliness. She had left her family a week ago, walking through the night and into the morning with a small pack on her shoulder. In her bag were only some clothes, blankets, food for several days journey and a few dollars in change. As she crossed the countryside she saw many signs of war: abandoned homes where battles had been fought; fields

barren from destruction or overgrown with weeds; farm animals left to fend for themselves in barns and sheds, but all these things faded away as Elsbeth came closer to where she needed to be; soon enough it was just herself against whatever might lay ahead. "Is everything up to your standards of comfort?" Sister Elsbeth was snapped out of her daydream by the question from a silhouette in the doorway. Mother Seraphine leaned in and said, "We need you to help us. We need you to clean out the dorm room of a dear sister that left our convent." She could see apprehension flash across Elsbeth's face but she pressed onward. "It needs to be done quickly, if this thing is going to go according to plan. It may not be pleasant work but it will certainly help move things along faster." Elsbeth nodded slowly then stood up from her chair and stretched her arms above her head with determination before saying, "Alright then... let's get started". The two of them made their way to the dormitory where a single bed, desk and wardrobe were waiting. Everything was covered in dust and cobwebs. Elsbeth started by clearing away the cobwebs and then moved on to wiping down all surfaces with a damp cloth. She opened up windows as well, allowing fresh air to fill the room. Mother Seraphine made her way through the stillness of the hallways, illuminated only by the soft candles that seemed to find their way on behalf of some unseen flame. Now alone, Sister Elsbeth reached for the desk, cleaning it slowly and methodically with a wrinkled cloth. Reaching inside one side drawer she found a collection of hand-written letters, musty smelling, each one tucked away securely in envelopes decorated with tiny drawings and signatures from days gone by. She flipped through the crumbling pages with her thumb, skimming past prayers and blessings until she hesitated on a letter signed by Sister Georgette. It was addressed to Bishop Vincent and detailed her mission to investigate reports of outsiders attending a 'forbidden feast' in the private walls of the convent. Curiosity piqued, she read further into Georgette's account; the bishop had charged her with determining whether outsiders had participated, based on rumors circulating through the congregation. Elsbeth's heart raced as she read further and it seemed clear that Bishop Vincent had suspected that Elsbeth was the one responsible for inviting the outsiders, though Sister Georgette's report to Bishop Vincent did not mention names. Elsbeth was about to close the letter when a folded note, tucked away amidst its pages, caught her attention. Written in a delicate script, it read:

"To Bishop Vincent, I have been asked to investigate the supposed gathering of outsiders and I must admit that my curiosity is piqued. My work means something more than a routine inquiry - it may be an opportunity for redemption. I am coming soon to speak with you regarding this matter and

pray that you will accept my offer. Sincerely, Sister Georgette Thomson"

Elsbeth knew that Sister Georgette had stumbled upon something of such gravity that it could not be contained in a single letter. She had to go in person, but before she could get the chance to spill the beans, she disappeared without a trace. Fear and worry kept rising within Elsbeth like floodwaters breaching their banks; her mind raced as she frantically tried to piece together what this all meant and how much Sister Georgette may have known about whatever mystery lay tangled beneath this strange affair. She straightened up the desk, her gaze lingering on the stack of letters she had sorted and piled. With a slight shake of her head, she set them aside for another time. Wrapping herself in a shawl against the cold winds whipping outside, she made her way to chapel. As night settled around campus and inky shadows started their dance along pathways lit by fading lanterns, that chill air moved through cloisters with an unrelenting persistence; one so keen it was as though all warmth had been stolen away from earth itself until only frigidity remained with no hint of return or relief ever again. She kneels in the silent room, her head bent deep in prayer. Her hands are folded, and her eyes drift closed as she implores God for guidance. In the past hour shed heard talk of a 'forbidden feast' what could it be? She muses upon this question as if pushing aside heavy curtains and unveiling hidden secrets beyond understanding. The revelation struck like lightning perhaps it is something to do with celebrating on the Day of Atonement despite abstaining from doing so usually? She continues to ruminate on the possibilities, feeling a coldness in her heart she had not noticed before. Although she is unsure what tomorrow will bring, She pondered the implications of her findings for a moment before deciding to keep them to herself. Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the dressing table and began preparing for the silent dinner. She found her old wrap dress still hanging in its place in her closet, put it on with loving care and ran a brush through her hair. When she was ready, she took one last look at herself in the mirror before turning off all of lights except one small lamp by which to read until bedtime. With that done, she made sure all doors were tightly shut and opened up what would be an evening full of reflection and contemplation. Seated with the others in the silent dining room, her thoughts raced as she tried to come to terms with what she had discovered. She replayed the events of the day over and over desperately seeking an answer that seemed too much of a paradox for even herself to understand. Just then, the stillness of the room was broken when one of her companions spoke up. "I think I understand what you're going through," someone said calmly. "Sometimes in life, we come across things that challenge us and confuse us but if we open our minds to possibilities

beyond our own understanding, we can find unexpected beauty amidst this chaos." "SILENCE!" Mother Seraphine shouted as a few sisters left to the kitchen. They returned to the table, each with a plate filled with freshly butchered meat. The rich smell of cooked protein wafted through the air as they all looked from one plate to another in anticipation. The first cut was made and everyone's eyes alighted on their own portion of juicy tenderloin steak. All sat contentedly inhaling its aroma and savoring its flavor for several minutes before returning to contemplation. With renewed enthusiasm, they continued enjoying mouthful after hearty delightful mouthful until no piece remained untouched by their eager hands. Mother Seraphina broke the silence that had descended upon them by offering a toast for giving thanks to the heavenly abundance they were so blessed with. As her companions raised their glasses in appreciation, she looked around and saw the contentment on everyone's faces as they digested this nourishing meal. She smiled in satisfaction knowing that she had done her part in providing them with sustenance for this day. The dinner quickly came to a close and the sisters bade each other farewell as they plodded through the frigid winds towards their dorms, fortified by Mother Seraphine's kindness and generosity. As they walked away into the fading light of dusk, Mother Seraphine thought back on Elsbeth cleaning the missing nuns room. She had been so diligent in her duties even though no one had asked her to. She remembered feeling a gentle tug at her heartstrings when Elsbeth's gaze met hers as she passed by, and how happy she felt seeing the happiness in Elsbeth's eyes. Mother Seraphina smiled quietly to herself as the soft rays of sunlight crept over the horizon to reveal a new day. Elsbeth might be none, but her light shined brighter than anyone's in that moment, and Mother Seraphina was thankful for it. She thanked God for all of His blessings, especially those found in the least expected places and for not starving in the barren cold prairies.

3 Chapter Three: Storm

The next morning, Elsbeth awoke to the sun's bright glare and she silently thanked God for giving her strength for another day. With a renewed sense of energy, she vowed to her herself anew in order to survive the winter with courage and hope. She had faced much worse before, and she would be able to face whatever came her way in the nunnery. Elsbeth was determined to endure the isolation from the world and the cold of winter with courage, resilience, compassion and empathy - traits that were honed while struggling against adversity in her past life. She was deeply aware of the beauty and

importance of sisterhood, which Mother Seraphina had nurtured among her sisters. Although she sometimes clashed with Sister Thora over different points of view, Elsbeth respected her inquisitive nature and all that it could bring to the nunnery. Mother Seraphine kept a watchful eye on Elsbeth as she adapted to the nunnery life. Despite her stern exterior, Elsbeth knew without a doubt that Seraphina had her best interests at heart and was protective of all her sisters. With guidance from both Mother Seraphina and God, Elsbeth believed she could make it through this winter safely and successfully. In spite of the difficulties she faced, she felt secure in knowing that she had the support of her new family and she was determined to make it through. With strength, courage, and compassion Elsbeth faced another day in the nunnery with grace and confidence. The nuns clustered in the chapel, gathered for morning prayers. Their chanting voices echoed off the walls as they entreated their Lord. Then, from an alcove to their side emerged a procession of new faces – more nuns in simple brown habits and white wimples. As they advanced slowly into view, light shimmered through windows behind them illuminating each figure with a cherubic halo of gold and silver rays; so reminded that although it was man-made majesty which brought these holy women within its walls– it was divine grace that blessed them with life everlasting. Sister Elsbeth stood at the center, among her peers. God had given her a chance to begin again and she was determined to set a passionate example of faith in this new life she had been given. Despite their struggles with the isolation from the world and cold winter, each nun could draw strength from one another's presence for it was not God but the divinity of their collective spirit that sustained them. This was the foundation on which Sister Elsbeth built her compassion and empathy; each new sister welcomed with open arms and a prayer in her heart. Through their kindness and sacrifice, they could learn to lean on God in times of hardship and joy alike. A beacon of faith in this new home. Together, they were all part of the same divine family. Mother Seraphine led the sisters in prayer, frowning while scanning those present, pausing on Sister Elsbeth for a moment. As the echoes died away, they stirred at once and rose from their seats. There was no sound as they filed out; an unspoken agreement had been made to enter into silence when breakfast was served. Everyone proceeded to the dining hall without a word being spoken, taking care not to disturb anyone else's peace or concentration by making any unnecessary noise with their feet or bodies. They quietly took up places around the tables set for them before silently partaking of breakfast together without interruption for some time afterwards. It was only after the meal that Elsbeth took her first step towards true integration into the sisterhood. She nervously approached

Mother Seraphina and bowed before her, placing her hands on the ground in a gesture of respect and submission. "I thank you for your kindness," she said quietly yet firmly, risking a glance up at the matriarch. Mother Seraphine met her gaze and smiled slightly. "Sister Elsbeth, welcome to our home," she said kindly. "You will be welcomed here with open arms as one of us. We have much to learn from each other and I trust you shall find your place among us soon enough." She gestured for Elsbeth to stand before embracing her fondly. The nuns glided silently past the chapel, their black robes billowing in the draft like shadowed curtains. They took no notice of one another; each was lost deep in her own thoughts, their faces composed and serious. As they neared the kitchen door at the end of a long hallway, some signaled to one another for tasks: One with an incline of her head; two with raised hands, a sign that she would take care of laundry duties that morning. Then they all slipped inside and started to prepare for their chores: scrubbing tables and floors, kneading dough for breads and baked goods, chopping vegetables for soups and stews. At the center of the kitchen stood Mother Seraphine, watching them all with a critical eye. Elsbeth had only ever seen her like this—aloof and distant, yet still striving to fulfill her duty as head mother in enforcing order among the nuns. Her noble spirit served as an inspiration even when she was reprimanding her flock. Elsbeth felt an instant respect for her and knew that despite the struggles of the isolated nunnery life, Mother Seraphine was a person of true compassion and empathy. She turned to Elsbeth with an expression of weary warmth, as if she had been expecting her all along, and said kindly "Now let's get you settled in, Sister Elsbeth. You must be exhausted from your journey; the creeping cold will soon take hold on this mountain." Mother Seraphine asked Sister Thora to take Sister Elsbeth for a tour of the monastery grounds. She took her by the arm and began walking towards the gardens, pointing out various statues and sculptures that were important to them. As they walked along the stone pathways, winding through tall maple trees that swayed heavily in the cold wind, Thora paused and pointed towards a meadow filled with dead plants and wilted flowers. "This is one of my favorite places when I need to clear my head," she said. "It's so peaceful and serene despite the cold. I'm sure you will find solace here too, Sister Elsbeth." Elsbeth smiled, feeling a kinship with her newfound friend. She could tell that Thora held deep admiration for Mother Seraphine, as did the rest of the sisters - and indeed for good reason. Despite her strict nature, Mother Seraphine had a profound kindness that was always evident in her words and actions. As they continued their tour of the grounds, Elsbeth couldn't help but admire Thora's spirited nature and courage to challenge traditions. She could see why she was so beloved by

the other nuns - her optimism for change brought hope to everyone. Sister Asterid was the first to notice the signs of a wind storm that had been rolling in for days. She felt it in her bones and saw it in the sky, gathering strength like an increasing swell on a bright-blue sea. With urgency she ran to warn those inside of what was coming, calling out instructions with each step down the hallway toward safety: "Close every window! Gather everything from outside you might need!" In moments they were all racing back into their hurriedly prepared kitchen; ready and hopeful despite knowing that this may not be over soon. Elsbeth watched Thora rally the sisters around her, their fear subsiding as hope swept through the group. She was determined to make sure everyone was safe and warm despite being isolated from the outside world, and her compassionate and empathetic nature shone through in that moment. Mother Seraphine too seemed encouraged by Thora's presence; she gave a subtle nod of approval as Thora took charge of the situation. Even in the face of a fierce storm, Thora's spirited nature and courage to challenge traditions made her a beacon of hope for those seeking change within the convent. With determination, Mother Seraphine sealed the windows shut while inside they all prayed that safety and shelter would come in time. The storm raged on for hours, but eventually its fury abated, leaving a calm of quietude in its aftermath. In that moment, the nuns all looked to Thora for guidance. Taking a deep breath and looking around the room, she said with assurance "We will survive this." Her warm reassuring smile brought a sense of relief to everyone present. The following morning as they stepped outside from their shelter, Elsbeth noticed something change in Mother Seraphine; despite her stern exterior, Seraphina's maternal instincts were clear as she looked upon the sisters with a deep love and protection. Though they may clash in their views sometimes, it was through Thora's courage that brought out the best in Mother Seraphine. From then on Elsbeth would never forget Sister Thora and all she had done for the convent; though she could never quite explain why, she found solace in the strength of Thora's spirit. Even in the face of tremendous odds, even when it seemed like hope was lost - with her courage and determination to make a change, Sister Thora found a way to bring light into the darkness. And amidst all this Elsbeth had realized that though we may struggle at times, even in the her darkest moments - we shall survive. And so with newfound courage, Elsbeth set forth on her journey with a promise to herself; no matter how difficult life may become, she vowed never to give up hope. She was determined to use that same strength and determination as Sister Thora - learning from those around her and bring light into the darkness that had so long shadowed her. The nuns wasted no time after the storm. One by one, they emerged from the convent

and into the grey morning light smeared with rain clouds, each clutching a broom or mop made from wood that had been cut onsite in their workshop. They moved without speaking; only a few words exchanged here and there as they worked to clear away debris left behind: branches strewn about like kindling, small rocks scattered hither-thither over pathways slick with mud, all of which was quickly swept aside until once again everything seemed neat and orderly. In unison they returned inside their humble abode, having done what they could to assure the convent wasn't damaged beyond repair. Sister Elsbeth nervously approached Mother Seraphine in the quiet hallway. She stood quietly, waiting for a moment to be acknowledged, though she could feel her heart pounding against her chest in anticipation of the question on her mind. Finally summoning up all of the courage within herself, she asked timidly "Mother Seraphine would you tell me about sister Georgette? I need to know what happened." Mother Seraphine sighed and nodded slowly before turning towards Elsbeth with a kind gaze; understanding and compassion evident in even just This small gesture. "Sister Georgette was new here - full of life and curiosity, eager to learn more about our customs and rituals. She had a special interest in one of our annual Advent traditions an ancient custom that is not spoken of openly for fear it might bring trouble upon us all," Mother Seraphine said with a shudder. Elsbeth's eyes widened at this, wondering what this 'forbidden feast' could be. Before she had the chance to ask any further questions, Mother Seraphine continued her explanation. "Sister Georgette did not understand our way of life or the sacrifices we must make in order to survive here and keep our traditions alive. She ventured out beyond the walls of the nunnery in search of knowledge, despite our warnings to stay put. We soon began to receive reports that Sister Georgette had gone missing and we feared the worst." Tears filled Elsbeth's eyes as she listened, overwhelmed with sadness at this tragic story. "We have searched far and wide for her but there has been no sign," Mother Seraphine sighed. "We must have faith that she will be found safe, but until then we must all struggle with the isolation from the world and its cold grip." Elsbeth couldn't help but feel a deep empathy for Sister Georgette and those who sought her return. Despite her own struggles with the nunnery's customs, she could not help but admire Mother Seraphine's compassion and dedication to her sisters. She could only hope that Sister Georgette would return, safe and sound, to the arms of her family. Until then, Elsbeth vowed to push forward with courage and faith in the face of uncertainty. With a heavy heart, Elsbeth returned to her quarters alone unable to shake off the sadness of Sister Georgette's disappearance. She could only hope and pray for her safe return, and found solace in her rosary beads as she closed her eyes to sleep.

4 Chapter Four: Tension

The next morning, Elsbeth joined her sisters in prayer as usual. Though she still wondered about the mystery of Sister Georgette's disappearance, she reminded herself to keep faith and remain hopeful for a miracle. As they finished their prayers, a sudden gust of wind blew through the chapel; and when it cleared, Elsbeth could have sworn she saw Mother Seraphine's face soften with relief. A moment later, Mother Seraphine's aged face seemed to hold a secret, as if she had something hidden in her mind that she was unwilling or unable to share. She sat in silence, but an unspoken mystery lingered around her like smoke from a recently extinguished candle. Her lips moved almost imperceptibly and the lines of worry on her forehead deepened as if suppressed thoughts threatened to spill over of their own accord and reveal what lay beneath that half-smile of hers. But Elsbeth could only guess, and for now her questions remained unanswered. She bit her lip would she ever find out what happened to Sister Georgette? Why was Mother Seraphine so secretive about it all? It seemed as if in that moment an invisible hand had shuttered the window to a secret world far beyond Elsbeth's understanding, one that could not be opened without a key. Maybe she had to take matters into her own hands and find out the truth about Sister Georgette and the 'forbidden feast' for herself. And if she stumbled upon any other dark secrets, so be it; for only then would Elsbeth finally understand who Mother Seraphine truly was beneath her stern exterior and just what was hidden in the shadows of that 'forbidden feast.' But first, she thought, I must continue looking for clues. With a heavy heart and a determined gait Elsbeth exited the nunary's chapel in search of Sister Georgette...and perhaps answers to her questions as well. She knew one thing was for sure; if there were secrets to be found, Mother Seraphine would be the one to hold them. She was sure of it. With this resolute thought in mind, Elsbeth's courage rose and she finally understood why she was sent to the nunary, for her investigation had only just begun. So with that thought in mind, Elsbeth set out on an adventure to unlock the truth behind Sister Georgette's mysterious disappearance and the forbidden feast. She was determined to do whatever it took to shine a light on the shadows lurking within her walls. But little did Elsbeth know, Mother Seraphine was watching her every move from afar, ready to protect her beloved nuns from all of the secrets Elsbeth was about to uncover. With a steely determination, Elsbeth moved forward not knowing what would come next, but trusting that she had been sent for a purpose...and it was time to find out what it truly meant. Mother Seraphine was a formidable presence, and it seemed to the

others that her shadow grew more ominous with each passing day. Sisters Thora and Asterid tiptoed around her like skittish mice, darting away if she so much as looked their way. Tension began to build whenever they were in the same room together; an unspoken competition brewed between them for approval from Mother Seraphine, who watched all three of them like a hawk watches its prey. Even Sister Asterid's sweet singing voice could not lighten the atmosphere which had descended among their small cloistered family; rather than soothing tensions it was starting to do the opposite. Sister Asterid and Sister Thora sat in a corner of the chapel, the sun's morning rays streaming through stained glass windows. As their fellow sisters sang hymns, each sister began to hum along with their own tune. Suddenly this peaceful atmosphere was broken by an argument as one sister accused the other of singing too loudly off-key. Tempers flared and voices rose as Thora looked at Asterid with an accusing glare and said, "What did you think you were doing? Couldn't tell the key of the song?" Asterid threw her hands up in frustration. "I was singing! This isn't a library; it's a worship service!" Thora retorted, "It doesn't matter people are here to pray and listen to God's word. Not your caterwauling." Asterid scowled and crossed her arms over her chest. "This is why we can never have nice things around here; because some people just don't understand that music and worship can be separate. God is a source of joy, and singing brings us one step closer to Him." Thora looked away, her anger dissipating as Asterid's words sunk in. She had forgotten that for some people, their faith was intertwined with their passion for the arts. Thora sighed and said, "I'm sorry. I just want everyone to do the right thing and keep this place sacred." Asterid nodded, understanding in her eyes. "I know," she said softly. "But don't forget that even God appreciates a good song every once in awhile." The two sisters shared a smile before joining back into the chorus of voices, singing praises of joy to their Lord. Through it all, Thora knew that her daring had come from a source much bigger than herself - the spirit of God. This thought encouraged her to challenge convention, inspiring those around her to seek out change and accept the beauty of individuality within the walls of this convent. Thora's spirited nature and courage to challenge traditions make her a beacon of hope for those seeking change within the convent, ultimately leading them closer to God and a greater understanding of themselves. As the song came to an end, Elsbeth felt the tension growing in the room. She sat a little stiffly, her hands on either side of her notebook, noting each exchange as if it were an entry in a ledger: Mother Seraphine's reprimand here; Sister Thora's rude response there; the tension between Sister Thora and Sister Asterid. Suddenly aware that she was being watched, Elsbeth

looked up to find Mother Seraphine's eyes upon her from across the room, hard and questioning. A chill ran through Elsbeth's body as she quickly looked away, a surge of emotions rising inside her. She had never felt so out of place in her life, but she couldn't deny the comfort that came from being surrounded by such strong and compassionate women who were willing to stand up for what they believed in and follow their own hearts. As the day drew on, Mother Seraphine stepped lightly through the doors of the refectory and passed by, oblivious to her sisters who had gathered for lunch. She kept her gaze fixed on the horizon as though propelled forward by a mysterious force. Her steps were light but purposeful, directed towards an unknown destination that lay beyond sight and out of reach. With each step she felt a strange stirring in her heart which drove her onward; until at last, when all trace of doubt had dissipated from within, she opened one final door, revealing something she didn't want anyone finding out about but something that was needed so the nuns could survive the harsh winter to come.

5 Chapter Five: Another

Sister Agnes's journey through the wasted lands had been long and treacherous. The wind whipped her fiery locks into a frenzy as she trudged through the desolate terrain, the icy chill permeating her very bones. Her heart pounded in her chest like a drumbeat as she closed in on the convent, which seemed like a beacon of hope amidst the bleakness. The snow crunched underfoot, the only sound breaking the eerie silence that hung heavy in the air. The bare trees lining the pathway creaked and groaned under the weight of the relentless barrage, their skeletal forms reaching skyward like accusing fingers. The bitter taste of frost lingering on her tongue, a constant reminder of the harshness of her surroundings. Darkness embraced her like a cloak, swallowing everything in its wake, but she pressed on, fueled by a burning resolve. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the imposing structure of the convent stood before her, like a testament to a bygone era, its granite walls rising up like a fortress against the elements. She took a shuddering breath, feeling the chill penetrate deep into her core. Sister Agnes mounted the steps, each footfall echoing hollowly within the cavernous entrance hall. The doors swung open with a creak, revealing a warm glow that felt like a welcoming embrace after the biting cold outside. She paused, taking stock of her new home: the rich scent of incense filled the air, mingling with the musty odor of aged wood and old prayer books. Candlelight flickered softly,

casting dancing shadows on the stone walls. A group of elderly nuns glided past her in the hallway, their black habits swishing softly against the floor. Their eyes widened when they saw her, surprised by the fiery red hue of her hair and the defiance etched on her features. She could feel their whispers trailing after her like a ghostly presence, but she paid them no mind. Her heart thrummed with anticipation as she made her way deeper into the labyrinthine corridors, eager to begin her mission. Her arrival disrupted the serene calm of the convent, stirring up emotions among the sisters like a storm on the horizon. Some saw her as a threat to their way of life, while others viewed her as a much-needed breath of fresh air. Mother Superior Seraphine, however, was not amused. "You are known to challenge tradition at every turn," she scolded, her voice trembling with rage. "This is not how things are done here." But Sister Agnes was unyielding. "Our faith demands that we challenge ourselves, Mother Seraphine," she replied, her words carrying weight despite her youth. "We must adapt to the changing times, or risk becoming obsolete." The other sisters listened in awe and anticipation, their eyes glinting with curiosity. They had never seen their leader so flustered before. The tension was palpable, thickening the air like a blanket of fog. Sister Agnes stood her ground, unafraid of the consequences. The storm outside had escalated into a cacophony of howling winds and relentless rain, battering the walls and windows. Sister Elsbeth watched from the sidelines, her heart hammering against her ribcage as she tried to make sense of what she was witnessing. As night fell, the storm showed no signs of abating. The sisters huddled together in their cells, praying for deliverance from the storm's wrath. Sister Elsbeth couldn't shake the feeling that they were being punished for their transgressions, their sins manifesting in the form of this hellish tempest. The following day, they emerged from their cells to assess the damage. The once idyllic gardens were reduced to muddy swamps, the former beauty of the convent now marred by splintered wood and shattered glass. Mother Seraphine, her brow furrowed with concern, led the charge to repair and fortify their home against future attacks. The chill in the air was bitter, cutting through Sister Elsbeth's habit like a knife. Each gust of wind carried with it a bone-chilling cold that seeped into her bones, making her shiver uncontrollably. She watched as the other sisters worked tirelessly to patch up the holes in the roof and reinforce the walls, their breaths fogging up in front of them like ghostly apparitions. The rain pounded against the convent's walls, sending shudders down Elsbeth's spine as she thought about what else might be lurking outside. Despite their best efforts, there were some things that even the sisters couldn't protect themselves from. As they worked, she glanced over at Mother Seraphine, who appeared unphased

by the elements. The older woman moved with a sense of determined grace, her hands working tirelessly to repair the damage. The smell of rot filled Elsbeth's nostrils as she stepped on something slimy beneath her feet. She looked down to see one of the chickens, its head completely frozen over, its eyes bulging in terror. Her stomach churned at the sight, remembering how they relied on these creatures for their meager food supply. She forced herself to continue working, trying to ignore the growing hunger pangs in her gut. Mother Seraphine seemed oblivious to the freezing cold and death surrounding them, focused entirely on their task. But Elsbeth knew something wasn't right - something sinister lurked beneath their peaceful appearance. By the time darkness fell, the storm had passed and the sisters retreated to their quarters for warmth. Shivering, Elsbeth huddled next to the fire, her fingers turning blue despite the heat emanating from the flames. Agnes sat next to her, her red hair tousled from the storm, a defiant glint in her eye. "We can't survive like this," she whispered hoarsely, stirring the embers with a stick. "We need more food, warmth, and shelter." Sister Asterid nodded in agreement, her eyes wide with fear. "I know we rely on God for sustenance, but how long can we go without?" Sister Thora emerged from the shadows, her dark hair matted to her forehead. "We have enough supplies to last us a few days," she replied softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "But after that..." She trailed off, leaving the rest unsaid. Mother Seraphine entered the room, her face serene as ever. "God will provide," she said confidently, her voice echoing through the chamber. The other sisters nodded in agreement, some with more conviction than others. But Elsbeth couldn't shake the unease settling in her stomach. She glanced at Agnes, who shared her worries. They knew it couldn't rain forever, but what would come next? That night, as the wind howled outside, Elsbeth lay awake in her narrow bed, unable to shake off the nagging feeling that something was wrong. The storm raged on, battering the walls and windows of the convent, as if nature itself was determined to tear them apart. She could hear the other sisters tossing and turning, their prayers mingling with the sound of the storm. The next morning, when they emerged from their chambers, the world had changed. The rain had turned to snow, and a thick blanket of white covered everything in sight. The trees outside were coated in a layer of ice, and even the birds seemed hesitant to fly. Mother Seraphine's face was grim as she surveyed the scene. "A blizzard is upon us," she said gravely. "We must prepare." The sisters scattered, each with a different task - fortifying the buildings, collecting wood for the fire, tending to the animals. Elsbeth found herself helping Sister Margaret Walsh, who seemed surprisingly adept at chopping wood despite her frail appearance. They worked in silence, their

breath fogging in front of their faces, the cold seeping into their bones. As they labored, Elsbeth couldn't help but think about the last time she had been outside - the taste of fresh air, the crunch of leaves underfoot, the warmth of the sun on her skin. She longed for those simpler times, when the world didn't feel so cold and cruel. But now, all they could do was survive. The days blurred together as the storm raged on - the wind howling, the snow piling up, the temperature dropping, the food diminishing... But like the Mother Superior said, God will provide.

6 Chapter Six: Brewing

In the ancient convent, the melodic chants of the sisters echoed through the halls, their voices rising and falling like the tides of an ocean. Despite the soothing rhythm, an underlying current of unease rippled beneath the surface. Sister Elsbeth, with her striking features and piercing blue eyes, could feel it. The once harmonious community had begun to fracture, torn apart by the fiery presence of a newcomer. Sister Agnes, with her fiery red hair and unyielding spirit, was shaking the foundations of the convent, challenging traditions and stirring up emotions that had been long suppressed. It was as if a storm was brewing on the horizon, threatening to tear down everything they had built. As she made her way to the kitchen for her morning meal, Sister Elsbeth could feel the tension in the air. Sister Thora, her tall, wiry frame silhouetted against the flickering candlelight, muttered under her breath about the "troublesome redhead," while Sister Margaret Walsh, with her mousy brown hair and pale skin, fidgeted nervously with her rosary beads. Mother Seraphine, the leader of the convent and a woman of regal bearing, sat at the head of the table, her expression stern as she watched over her daughters. She had always been a pillar of strength, emanating an air of authority that demanded respect, but now there was a certain weariness in her eyes. It seemed the weight of the world was resting on her shoulders as she tried to maintain order amidst the chaos. Across the room, Sister Agnes sat with a group of like-minded sisters, their voices raised in passionate argument about the need for change. The scent of rebellion hung in the air like incense, intoxicating and unsettling. Sister Elsbeth could not help but notice the way their hands gestured wildly, painting pictures of a future they dreamt of - one where the convent walls no longer held them captive. Despite her curiosity about this new world beyond the convent gates, Sister Elsbeth found herself siding with Mother Seraphine. The older woman had always been a paragon of discipline, and the thought of losing that stability unnerved her.

She watched as Mother Seraphine took a sip of her tea, her hand trembling slightly, and felt a pang of sympathy. She approached cautiously, sensing the tension in the air. "Mother Superior," she began softly, "may I be of assistance?" Seraphine looked up, her eyes weary but grateful. "Sister Elsbeth, you are always welcome. Please, join us." As they sat together, she couldn't help but notice the faint taste of power on Mother Seraphine's lips, like the bitter tang of a herb she had tasted once before. It was the taste of control, of order. And yet, beneath it, she sensed the woman's concern for her sisters. She listened intently as Mother Seraphine spoke of the importance of tradition and the dangers of straying from their path. Suddenly, a door slammed shut, echoing through the silent halls. The sound bounced off the stiff walls, amplifying the tension in the air. Mother Seraphine stood up quickly, her face pale. "It's time for bed," she said sternly. "All of you." The younger nuns rose obediently, their whispers trailing off into the night as they returned to their cells, the candlelight flickering behind them. Sister Elsbeth watched them go, feeling a rising sense of unease. She lingered behind, unable to shake the feeling that something was very, very wrong. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Agnes sitting alone by the window, staring out into nothingness. She hesitated before approaching. "Sister Agnes," she said softly, sitting down beside her. "Is everything alright?" Agnes turned to her, her fiery hair aglow in the moonlight. "I'm fine," she said curtly. "But we can't let them silence us forever. We have to fight for what's right." Elsbeth nodded slowly, her heart racing. "I know," she said quietly. "But how? And at what cost?" Agnes turned back to the window, her face set in determination. "We'll find a way," she said. "We have to." As they sat together in silence, Elsbeth couldn't shake the feeling that they were being watched. She glanced around nervously, her eyes falling on Thora who was standing in the doorway, her eyes narrowed with anger. "What are you two plotting?" she demanded. "Nothing," Elsbeth replied quickly, her voice wavering. Thora advanced on them, her footsteps echoing ominously on the cold stone floor. "Don't lie to me, Sister," she snarled. "You're one of them, aren't you?" Elsbeth flinched, her mind racing. "I'm not... I'm not sure what you mean." "Don't play dumb with me!" Thora spat, her voice echoing off the walls. "I know you're all secretly plotting against Mother Superior." "That's enough, Sister Thora," Elsbeth said firmly, standing up to address the older nun. "We were simply having a conversation about our concerns for the convent." Thora's face twisted into a sneer. "Concerns?" she scoffed. "More like defiance. You and your kind think you know better than our beloved Mother Superior?" "We only want what's best for the sisterhood," Agnes chimed in, her tone steady despite the tremors in her voice. "We can't

continue living in ignorance forever." Thora's fists clenched at her sides. "Ignorance?" she repeated. "We live a life of devotion, of service to God. What more could we ask for?" "We can ask for truth," Agnes said fiercely. "And for change." Thora took a menacing step forward, her eyes burning with fury. "Change is dangerous," she hissed. "It leads to chaos... to darkness." Elsbeth felt a chill run down her spine at the word darkness. She had seen it before, in the shadows that danced in Agnes' eyes and the haunted expressions of Ingrid. Was this what they feared? As they stood there, frozen in the face of Thora's rage, Elsbeth couldn't help but taste the metallic tang of fear on her tongue. The soft flicker of candlelight cast eerie shadows on the ancient walls, turning them into twisted, writhing masses. Outside, the wind howled like an agonized creature trapped in a cage. Suddenly, there was a thud from upstairs - the sound of something heavy hitting the floor. They all jumped at the noise, their hearts pounding in unison. "What was that?" whispered Elsbeth, her voice barely audible over the pounding of her heart. No one dared to answer. They stood there, eyes wide, hands trembling, as the silence stretched on. Finally, Thora broke the tension. "Get to your chambers," she snapped, pointing to Agnes and Elsbeth. "You've disrupted our peace long enough." As they turned to leave, Elsbeth caught a glimpse of Margaret huddled in the corner, her eyes wide with fear. She gave the younger nun a reassuring smile, hoping to ease her worry. But Margaret only nodded shakily and returned to her book, burying herself in its pages as though trying to escape the world around her. In the end, it was Sister Asterid who followed her into the darkness of their dormitory. As they changed into their nightgowns, Elsbeth confided in her closest friend about her conflicted feelings. "I know change is needed," she said, "but I'm not sure if I'm ready to face the consequences." Sister Asterid sat down on the edge of her bed, her face etched with concern. "What consequences?" she asked softly. Elsbeth sighed heavily, running a hand through her chestnut hair. "Secrets. Lies. Maybe even excommunication." She shuddered at the thought. "But I can't go on pretending anymore." "Then let's pray," Asterid said simply, her voice trembling just a little. And they did, their voices blending together in a haunting melody that echoed off the cold stone walls. Together, they beseeched the heavens for guidance and strength, begging for clarity in a world that seemed to be spiraling out of control. Finally, exhausted from the day's events, they drifted off

7 Chapter Seven: Outsiders

The snowstorm howled like a possessed beast, tearing at the earth with its furious gusts and drowning out all sounds but its own fury. The wind whipped through the skeletal trees, bending them to its will, while the thick flakes blanketed everything in sight, obliterating any trace of the world beyond the veil of white. It was a nightmare of nature's wrath, a storm that could snuff out the light of civilization in an instant and leave only darkness and despair in its wake. In such conditions, it was easy to lose one's way, to become lost and suffer a fate worse than death. Yet for the two outsiders, this was no ordinary reckoning with the elements. They trudged on, their boots sinking into the snow with every step, their faces set in determined expressions, driven by a mission that eclipsed any discomfort or fear. The man, with rugged features that spoke of a life hardened by hardship, marched ahead of the woman, his broad shoulders hunched against the onslaught of the elements. He wore thick layers of clothing that barely muffled the sound of his heavy breathing, his eyes scanning the horizon for any signs of their quarry. The woman followed close behind, her long coat billowing out behind her like wings of darkness, every step an act of defiance against the unyielding cold. They had been walking for hours now, ever since they had received word that her friends had ventured into these treacherous lands in search of solace and never returned. She clutched her staff tightly, her knuckles white with desperation, hoping that it would guide them to safety. As they approached the looming figure of the convent, its spires jutting out from the snowy vista like fossils rising from an ancient sea, they both felt a shiver run down their spines. The nuns who dwelled within were rumored to be harsh taskmasters, unyielding in their devotion to their faith and utterly inscrutable to outsiders. But tonight, they needed help, and they were willing to pay the price for it. The bells tolled ominously in the distance, each strike echoing through the valley like a hammer on an anvil, warning all who dared to venture near of the dangers that lurked within these hallowed halls. But still, the duo pressed on, their footsteps growing louder with every step, a rhythmic beat against the suffocating silence. The heavy iron door groaned as they pushed it open, revealing a dimly lit foyer with walls adorned in flickering candlelight. Their eyes adjusted slowly to the gloom, taking in the shadows dancing along the stone walls and the eerie hush that filled the air. "We're here for the missing ones," the man growled out, his voice a low rumble that seemed out of place in this hallowed silence. "We need your aid in finding them." The woman spoke up as well, her voice trembling slightly, her breath hitching in the frigid air. "We've been sent by the Count himself

- we cannot return empty-handed." Mother Seraphine watched them from her seat by the fireplace, steepling her fingers together, her face impassive. She could feel the convent's eyes upon her, like a thousand piercing needles digging into her back. She knew they whispered about her decision to let outsiders inside these walls; some even calling for her head for it. But she believed in justice above all else - even if it meant breaking tradition. The wind howled outside, battering the convent like a ravenous beast trying to break free. Snowflakes swirled and danced, painting the world white, obliterating everything in their path. It was a nightmare of nature, a maelstrom of ice and fury. "Welcome," she uttered, her voice calm yet commanding. She rose from her seat, her robes flowing around her like the cloak of authority she wore so well. Her eyes darted between the two outsiders, taking in their appearance. The man was tall and broad-shouldered, his face hidden beneath a hood that cast an ominous shadow over his features. The woman by his side was slender yet resilient, her eyes burning with determination. They were an odd pair, she mused, but they had business here. "My name is Mother Seraphine," she introduced herself, extending a hand. It trembled slightly, but no one would ever guess it. "I trust you found your way here despite the storm?" The man bowed his head, revealing a rugged yet handsome face with a jagged scar running down his cheek. The woman remained stoic, her gaze never leaving the older woman's face. "We did, Mother Superior. My name is Jacob, and this," he gestured to the woman beside him, "is Amelia." Their voices were rough, like gravel against stone, yet there was no hint of malice in their words. They were here on a mission, she could feel it in their very bones. And yet... something about them unsettled her. Amelia spoke first, her voice cold as ice. "We need your help." Mother Seraphine nodded, hiding her surprise well. "And what sort of help might that be?" Jacob took a step forward, his eyes scanning the pristine halls. "We're looking for someone. A man named Thomas." The words hung in the air like a shroud, heavy and foreboding. She hesitated, weighing her options. To involve herself in the affairs of outsiders could mean disaster - but to turn away those in need would go against everything she stood for. "May I ask why you seek Thomas?" Amelia's grip tightened on her staff, her knuckles white. "He's missing." Mother Seraphine's brow furrowed, her gut twisting. "Missing? For how long?" Jacob let out a sigh. "He's been gone a fortnight." She nodded slowly, maintaining her composure. "I see. Well, we do not have anyone by that name here. Perhaps you may have been misinformed." The lie sat heavily on her tongue, but it had to be done. She couldn't risk revealing their secrets, not yet. Jacob shook his head, a frown marring his features. "But we were told - " "Perhaps your informa-

tion is incorrect," she interrupted gently, her voice like honeyed steel. "Rest assured, if he had been here, we would have aided you in your quest." The three exchanged glances, uncertainty etched on their faces. "Very well," Jacob said after a moment. "But we will return." Mother Seraphine nodded once. "Of course. Now, please, come in and join us for tea. We have much to discuss." Inside, the air was heavy with anticipation. The convent was a place of silent prayer and contemplation, but right now, it felt as if the walls were closing in. She led them through the winding halls, their footsteps echoing off the cold stone walls. The scent of burning incense filled her nostrils, mingling with the musty aroma of old books and candle wax. Sister Maria hurried to prepare the tea, her hands shaking ever so slightly as she poured the steaming liquid into delicate china cups. They took their seats, the outsiders looking around warily. Mother Seraphine smiled, her heart racing as she waited for the right moment to strike. The room was decorated in shades of burgundy and gold, the stained glass windows casting dancing shadows across the walls. The wooden table creaked under their weight as they settled in. She leaned forward, speaking in a low voice, her eyes never leaving their faces. "I must warn you," she began, "our convent has its fair share of... peculiarities. Some may find it unsettling." Her gaze flickered towards the door leading to the crypts beneath them. "But rest assured, we mean no harm." The outsiders exchanged uneasy glances, not quite believing her words. She continued, her voice dropping even lower. "There are secrets that must be kept hidden - for the greater good." They nodded, not quite understanding, but too afraid to ask questions. She watched them carefully, relieved that they didn't push the issue. The tea, when it arrived, was bitter and strong, each sip burning their tongues. They sipped quietly, eyes darting around the room, taking in every detail. Each nun watched them with unblinking eyes, their curiosity piqued and their minds whirring with questions. Mother Seraphine watched them as they drank, her own thoughts turning inward. She knew what awaited them, but she couldn't let them discover the truth too soon. Not until she had no other choice. "You two must be hungry after travelling in this weather," Mother Seraphine said while making a hand gesture to some nuns by the door. "We should be on our way," responded Amelia. "I could eat," Jacob stared at Amelia with a frown. "I guess I could as well," Amelia stared down at the floor. Outside, the storm raged on. Thunder boomed in the distance as lightning lit up the sky like a canvas of fireworks. The wind howled like a pack of wolves, shaking the ancient walls of the convent. It was a force to be reckoned with, yet inside, all was calm. The nuns led the outsiders to the refectory, a large room where they took their meals together. The long wooden table was

set with simple yet nourishing fare - hot soup, fresh bread, and a steaming cup of tea. It was simple but comforting, just what they needed to warm their bodies and spirits after their treacherous journey. They sat side by side, the sisters observing them from across the room. Their eyes flickered with curiosity and suspicion, wondering who these outsiders were and what they wanted. Mother Seraphine watched from the head of the table, her face impassive. She knew something was amiss but couldn't put her finger on it. As they ate, the flavors mingled on their tongues. The soup was rich and hearty, filled with earthy vegetables and herbs. The bread had been freshly baked, its crust crisp and golden brown. The tea was strong and soothing, warming their insides like a hug from a loved one. Despite their situation, they felt a strange sense of peace wash over them. But as they reached for their third helping of soup, Sister Thora gasped. There was only one chicken left - the last frozen chicken. A wave of tension washed over the room. The sisters exchanged worried glances, their movements slowing as they realized the significance of what this meant. Mother Superior Seraphine glared at Sister Agnes, who merely shrugged nonchalantly. She had insisted on feeding the outsiders, but she hadn't anticipated this consequence. Desperate to keep up appearances, she offered to go find more, but no one moved. They couldn't risk it; the outside world was too dangerous, too unpredictable. Amelia took a sip of her tea, feeling the warmth spread through her veins like a gentle caress. Jacob stared out the window, his jaw clenched. The storm was still raging outside, snow pelting against the panes and turning the world into a blinding whiteout. It seemed as if nature itself was conspiring against them. Sister Elsbeth watched them both, her heart heavy with worry. She knew they needed help, but she didn't know how to give it without causing chaos within these sacred walls. Across from her, Sister Asterid fidgeted, her hands trembling slightly. She had always been timid but was finding courage she didn't know she possessed. Meanwhile, Sister Agnes sat back, her face blank but her mind racing. She knew change was coming whether they wanted it or not. She could feel it in the air like a shift in the winds before a storm. And she was determined to be at the center of it all. As Mother Superior Seraphine stood to leave, the door creaked open, admitting a gust of icy wind. Everyone held their breath as they waited for what was next. In the kitchen, Sister Thora stood with Sister Ingrid, their faces pale and strained. They exchanged worried glances before turning back to the task at hand. The last frozen chicken had been discovered, its icy flesh gleaming under the harsh light. As they worked together to prepare it for cooking, they couldn't shake the feeling that this was more than just a meal; it was a symbol of their fragile existence. Back in the dining room,

silence reigned as the nuns resumed their meal. Each bite of food tasted like ash in their mouths, each sip of tea like lead. Their eyes flickered between the outsiders and each other, curiosity and suspicion warring within them. The wind howled outside, mocking their fragile sanctuary. Sister Elsbeth finished her meal first, her stomach churning with nausea and worry. She excused herself, her shoes echoing against the stone floor as she walked away. In the solitude of her room, she collapsed onto her bed, staring up at the ceiling and wondering how much longer they could last. Outside, the storm showed no signs of abating. It seemed to have settled in for the night, like an unwelcome guest who wouldn't leave. The howling grew louder, more insistent, penetrating even the thick stone walls of the convent. Sister Elsbeth shivered, covering herself with a thin blanket that did little to ward off the cold. Sister Agnes watched her leave, her fiery hair a beacon of defiance in the dim light. She turned her attention back to her meal, but her mind was elsewhere. Tomorrow would come, and with it, change. Whether it would be for better or worse, only time would tell. Mother Seraphine sat at the head of the table, her eyes closed in prayer. She could feel the weight of her responsibility pressing down on her shoulders. How much longer could they survive? And at what cost? She opened her eyes, meeting the gaze of Sister Asterid across the room. A shared look passed between them, full of concern and uncertainty. Sister Thora sat next to her, scowling at the outsiders. They didn't belong here, she thought. They were disrupting their way of life, their traditions. But even she couldn't deny the desperation in their eyes. She took a sip of her tea, its bitter taste reminding her of the harsh reality they all faced. Meanwhile, Sister Ingrid sat alone in her cell, her fingers tracing the rough stone wall. Memories of another life flooded her mind, a life she had left behind for this one. She shivered, the cold seeping into her bones. The storm raged on, as if nature itself was trying to warn her of something she couldn't quite grasp. She glanced up at the imposing walls of the convent through the high circular hole in the stone that acted as a window, feeling trapped and alone. The wind picked up, whipping her hair around her face, carrying with it the scent of death. "We must prepare," she whispered to the empty room. "The end is near."

8 Chapter Eight: Secrets

The heavy wooden door of the convent creaked open as Sister Elsbeth stepped through its archway, her bare feet whispering against the cold stone floor. The early morning light filtered through the stained glass windows,

casting an array of colors across her face, but she barely noticed; her mind was filled with the weight of her decision. She had stayed awake long into the night, pacing in her chambers and replaying the events of the previous day over and over again in her head. Despite her deep devotion to the order, she couldn't shake the feeling of guilt that clung to her like a second skin. In the distance, she heard the soft hush of other nuns waking up, their footsteps echoing in unison as they made their way to the chapel for morning prayers. The scent of incense wafted through the halls, mingling with the musty scent of old books and candle wax. The air was thick with anticipation, and Sister Elsbeth could almost taste it on her tongue. She moved quietly, her habit brushing against the floor as she approached the entrance to the chapel. As she opened the door, the familiar sound of hymns washed over her, but something felt off. The sisters were not their usual serene selves; there was a tension in the air that she couldn't quite place. Mother Superior Seraphine's eyes were hardened, her brow furrowed as she sat upon the ornate throne-like chair at the front of the room. Her gaze lingered on Sister Agnes, the newcomer who had caused quite a stir since her arrival. Sister Thora sat rigidly, her lips pressed into a thin line, her knuckles white as she gripped the pew in front of her. Sister Ingrid's haunted expression seemed to deepen, as if she knew what was coming. Sister Elsbeth took her place amongst the other nuns, her mind whirring with uncertainty. She glanced at Sister Agnes, noticing how she held herself with newfound defiance. The fiery redhead met her gaze briefly before lowering it again. Sister Elsbeth's heart thudded in her chest as she waited for what would come next. The hymns continued, their melody growing louder and more fervent, but it did little to ease the tension. Mother Superior Seraphine rose from her seat, casting a stern gaze over the congregation. "This is not the first time that Sister Agnes has challenged our ways," she began, her voice resonating through the room like a thunderclap. "Her disrespect for tradition will not be tolerated." Sister Agnes' chin lifted defiantly, her eyes narrowed in challenge. "We must adapt to changing times, Mother," she retorted, her voice clear and bold. "The world outside does not stand still." A murmur rippled through the room, some nuns nodding in agreement while others shook their heads disapprovingly. Mother Superior Seraphine's face flushed, her eyes burning with disapproval. "Silence!" she commanded, her voice echoing off the stone walls. Ingrid couldn't help but shiver as Sister Agnes stepped forward, standing beside Mother Superior Seraphine. She closed her eyes, preparing for the worst. The silence that followed was deafening. Finally, Mother Seraphine broke it, her voice trembling with anger. "Enough!" she cried out, slamming her crucifix down on the table. "There will be a hearing

this evening to decide Sister Agnes' fate." She spun on her heel, her habit swirling dramatically, and stalked out of the chapel. The other nuns exchanged glances before filing out, their footsteps echoing in the cavernous space. Sister Elsbeth swallowed hard, her stomach churning with dread. She turned to Sister Asterid, finding her standing by the window, staring out at the snow-covered courtyard. "We need your help," she whispered urgently. Sister Asterid looked up, her brown eyes wide with surprise. "What is it?" Sister Elsbeth took a deep breath. "We believe Mother Superior Catherine is hiding something," she began, her voice barely above a whisper. "And we think it involves Sister Georgette's disappearance." "What?" Sister Asterid gasped, her eyes darting to Sister Agnes before returning to Elsbeth. "You can't be serious." "We are," Sister Agnes added, her tone steely. "We need you to help us find out what's going on inside these walls." Sister Asterid frowned, biting her bottom lip. "But that could put you all in danger," she warned. "Especially if you're right." "We know," Sister Elsbeth replied, her heart pounding in her chest. "But we can't just stand by and do nothing." Sister Asterid hesitated, then sighed heavily. "Alright," she agreed, nodding solemnly. "I'll do what I can." As night fell over the convent, the five women met in the library. The oil lamps flickered softly, casting eerie shadows across the ancient tomes and scrolls. Sister Margaret Walsh sat huddled over a tome, her fingers tracing the leather-bound spine as she muttered to herself. A thin layer of dust coated everything, undisturbed for years. They moved quietly, like ghosts in their own home, as they searched for any clues that might explain what was happening within these hallowed halls. Sister Ingrid, her dark hair falling over her face as she pored over an old manuscript, suddenly let out a gasp. "Here it is," she whispered, her voice hoarse with excitement. "A passage about a special potion, said to grant immortality." They gathered around her, their breath misting in the cold air. Sister Elsbeth leaned in close, her eyes scanning the ancient text. "What does it say?" Sister Ingrid read aloud, her voice trembling with fear. "It was guarded by a secret society of nuns who swore to protect it at all costs." She looked up, her haunted gaze meeting Elsbeth's. "That's why Mother Superior Seraphine is so protective of the convent's secrets." "We have a lead," Elsbeth said grimly. "But how do we find these sisters?" The room fell silent, the only sound the flickering of the lamps and the rustling of old pages. Outside, the wind moaned through the cracks in the walls and sent shivers down their spines. Inside, Sister Elsbeth's mind raced as she tried to piece together the fragments of information they'd gathered. She stood up, feeling the weight of their shared burden. "We must confront Mother Superior Seraphine," she announced. "Before it's too late." Sister Agnes nodded,

her fiery hair reflecting the flickering light, "I'll go with you." They left the library, their footsteps echoing on the stone floor. The corridor stretched before them like a long, dark tunnel, the shadows deepening as they walked. The smell of incense and age hung heavy in the air, mixing with the scent of fear and uncertainty. As they reached Mother Seraphine's office, they paused, gathering their courage. Sister Elsbeth raised her hand to knock, her heart hammering in her chest. A single tap, then another, louder this time. Slowly, the door creaked open. Mother Superior Seraphine sat behind her desk, her eyes narrowing at the sight of them. "What do you want?" she demanded. Sister Elsbeth steeled herself. "We have questions," she said, her voice steady despite the tremor in her chest. "About the convent's secrets." Mother Seraphine didn't flinch. "You dare challenge my authority?" She rose from her seat, her tall frame towering over them. "Leave this instant." But they didn't move. Sister Agnes stepped forward, her voice ringing loud and clear. "We will not be silenced," she said, her gaze unwavering. "We deserve the truth." For a moment, the room was still. Then, Mother Superior Seraphine sighed heavily. "Very well," she said, gesturing for them to enter. The three sisters filed in, their footfalls muffled by the plush carpet. The sunlight through the stained-glass window cast intricate patterns on the floor, like a sinister game of cat and mouse. Mother Seraphine closed the door behind them, trapping them in a world of whispers and shadows. "Ask your questions, then," she said, settling back into her seat. Sister Elsbeth took a deep breath. "We believe there's a connection between the recent disturbing events and the convent's history," she began. "We've found evidence of a secret society within these walls." Mother Seraphine's face hardened. "There is no such thing," she insisted. "The Sisterhood of St. Mary's has always been pure." Sister Asterid spoke up, her voice trembling slightly. "We know about Sister Georgette," she blurted out. Silence filled the room, thick and oppressive. "What of her?" Mother Superior Seraphine's brow furrowed. "We think she might have been investigating some outsiders participating in the 'forbidden feast'," Sister Elsbeth said. "She was going to talk to Bishop Vincent." At this, Mother Superior Seraphine's eyes widened, fear flaring briefly before being replaced by something colder, darker. "You're wrong," she said, her voice low and dangerous. "Leave this room now, before I call the church elders." Sister Agnes stepped forward, her spine straight, her voice steady. "We cannot ignore this any longer," she said. "The convent is in danger. We must investigate further." Mother Superior Seraphine's face flushed with anger. "You dare challenge me?" she roared, rising from her chair. Her eyes flashed, and Sister Agnes took a step back, but didn't flinch. Sister Asterid put a hand on her friend's arm, a silent plea for calm.

She turned back to Mother Seraphine, her voice soft but firm. "We're not asking for permission," she said. "We're telling you what we know. You have the right to know the truth." Mother Seraphine studied them, her gaze piercing. "Truth is a dangerous thing," she said finally. "It can destroy everything we've built." Sister Ingrid cleared her throat, speaking for the first time. "The truth," she said, "is often necessary for growth." Mother Seraphine sighed heavily, her shoulders slumping. She knew they were right, but change terrified her. "Very well," she said eventually. "But proceed with caution. Investigate quietly, and only within the confines of the convent." Sister Elsbeth let out a shaky breath, feeling a mix of relief and dread wash over her. They had their permission, but now they had to unravel the secrets that lay buried beneath the convent's centuries-old history. As they filed out of the room, she could feel the weight of their task pressing down on her shoulders. In the library, Sister Margaret Walsh waited, her mind racing with the knowledge she'd uncovered. She poured over old texts, trying to decipher their cryptic messages and hidden meanings. She felt like a detective, unraveling the past one book at a time. The musty smell of old paper filled her nostrils, and the scratching of her quill on parchment echoed in her ears. The convent's secrets were here, waiting to be found. Sister Ingrid retreated to her chambers, shutting the door behind her. She sat on her narrow bed, eyes closed as she attempted to quiet her racing mind. What demons haunted her past? And why was she so determined to keep them hidden? Sister Asterid paced nervously through the halls, her footsteps echoing off the stone walls. The convent was a maze of corridors and secret passages, each one hiding its own dark secrets. She glanced over her shoulder, half-expecting to see disapproving eyes watching her every move. Sister Elsbeth knelt in the chapel, praying for guidance. The stained glass windows cast colorful patterns on the floor, but she felt no peace. Her mind was too full of questions, her heart too heavy with fear. Meanwhile, Sister Agnes was peering through a window at the convent walls. She breathed in the cool autumn air, feeling a strange sense of imprisonment and unease. The world beyond was vast and unknown, but it held the key to the truth she sought. As night fell, the convent fell silent. The only sound was the rustling of pages turning and the soft whisper of secrets escaping from their bindings. Unbeknownst to them all, a storm of a different sort was brewing. . .

- 9 Chapter Nine: Decisions
- 10 Chapter Ten: Calm
- 11 Chapter Eleven: Loyalties
- 12 Chapter Twelve: The Forbidden Feast