



## *Sister Mary Teresa Bloods In*

**A**fter I blood in tonight, I'll finally get my beads. But I need my brand first.

We're at Inked Habits, our spot down on the Square. The sisters have been coming here since our first Major Superior rolled up on the frigid North Country eighty-five years ago. Sister Chabanel stands at my side while our boy Javi gives his stencil one last go-over. Chabby's pushing three hundred fifty pounds, so when she crosses her arms, it's a stretch to clasp her own wrists. She could crush our day care flock's little heads like so many grapefruits, but she's got the sweetest soprano this side of the Vatican eunuchs. Chabs was the youngest until I came, though she's still got decades on me—forty long, gray years in the desert before I was even born.

Javi takes his throne. He's got a sleeve of *papel picado* tattooed up his right arm, its shading soft as tissue paper.

"Here?" he asks, gloved hand peeling back my wimple, caressing the long vein of my neck. His two latexed fingers are gentle, and they send my heart pumping: *I want, I want, I want*. But I try to remind myself I'm a one-Man woman now, bride of redemption and servant of the Sisterhood.

"There," I say, voice cooler than Pietà's smooth marble kiss.

Sister Chabs pulls back her wimple to reveal her own brand: St. Noël Chabanel, hair parted like a rake reformed, mustache so kempt and downy you can feel it whispering God's words. His eyes look heavenward, averted from nothing and no one, not even the light of his own, blazing glory. St. Chabanel, brained by a savage's hatchet on the frozen Canadian plain.

"Ink to neck," Chabby says, "made for life. We give it all up for the one true calling."

"Sisters of the Atonement in this world and the next," we say as one, and bump fists.

Chabs is one bad bitch.

"You sisters is touched," Javi says, but he's got this shit-eating grin because he knows that already. We've been going to his family and only his family since the beginning. Not like the Precious Bloods. Those

---

*Photograph by Grant Whitty on Unsplash*

hags in the 3-1-5 summon their goons from Tattoomb of Lazarus to the monastery every time they need a new teardrop inked.

The Bloods worked us over years ago, stole what was most sacred from us. Tonight, I'm going to take back what's ours.

"Let's begin, *oui?*" Javi says, though he's neither French nor Canadian. Javi's got this Castilian lisp and skin blacker than my tunic.

He runs a fresh tube of stick deodorant along my neck and places the stencil carefully, carefully, all beneath Chabby's gaze. Javi's not nervous though; he's got cold ink for blood, and when he peels the stencil off, he stands back and says, "Voilà."

Chabby turns my chin this way and that with her thumb, squints down at the likeness of my namesake, and offers a curt nod of assent. Javi oils the lines and begins.

"*Putá madre!*" I yell when the needles first bite down. I've been learning Spanish from the day laborers' *niños* who fill our childcare center. Chabs lets loose deep, sonorous bellows despite her sparrow's pipes. I can feel her laughter, like I'm bound in a tapestry of singing cello strings, and then I'm laughing too. "*Hija de gran puta!*" I call her, and tears are streaming down her cheeks; she's waving those ham hock hands in front of her face as if to scatter my words.

"*Cállate,*" she rumbles, "*basta.*" And Jesus Christ, Lord in heaven, I love this, I love her, I love all of my soon-to-be sisters-for-eternity.

"*Basta ya* both of you, *oui?*" Javi says. He's got the needles hovering over my neck like a coiled viper. "Do you want Santa Teresa Ávila or some holey Padre Pio, eh?"

"OK," I say, pinching the bridge of my nose. I exhale. "OK, let's do this."

The needles begin their drag again, and it's a sweet pain, one I miss when my skin grows numb to the pierce and pull.

The original plan is straight black, a close-up of Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*. I want Teresa's face in stark lines. My skin is her skin, marble white. I'm not interested in shading, because faith was cut and dry for St. T of A. It descended on her as an angel from on high, carrying a long spear of gold, its iron point a fire, and as Javi's needles bite and burrow—my own little act of fleshly mortification—I can hear Teresa's words thunder through my chest:

*He appeared to thrust the spear at times into my heart, to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish*

*to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying.*

Teresa's eyes part, her mouth rolls open, and I would give my life for an ecstasy like that, for a love so complete. I've gone everywhere looking for it. It wasn't until I heard the call of my fellow Sisters of Atonement that I thought I finally might have found a home, a family to live and die for.

Chabs says when I first came to the convent, she could see the long years of my troubled relationships stretched out behind me, like a parachute hauled through a blizzard.

"You needed to be cut loose," Chabs said, "and we had the knife."

But I don't see it that way. What I needed were the winds to turn. I needed to be pulled forward, not dragged back. I want my past to be less of a lonesome burden, more of a reminder, prodding me along. I had no mom to speak of and only met my pops once. The last thing he said before he left the diner was: "If you're going to get anywhere in life, you need to learn to forget."

That line—ancient, absent-father wisdom, delivered apropos of nothing, as if he had a right. It could have come straight from the mouth of my doctor when he said I'd never bear a child. "Fine by me," I said, stopping him short. "I don't need some man to make me a mother."

It's Father McGivney who talks at us that way now, which is to say: like every guy I've ever known. Their words are for themselves, not us. I finally realize that.

Once the linework is finished, Javi wheels back for a look. I like the way his eyes brush over me. He sees who I am, not what. Chabby bends next to him so that their faces are side by side, and I see the egg of a smile nestled in the corner of her mouth.

"Yeah?" I say.

"On point," she says.

"You're sure I can't offer a little life?" Javi purrs. "A kiss of rouge?"

"That's not what I had in mind," I say.

"Passion like this deserves a hint of naughty about the cheeks, *oui*?" Javi continues.

"What do you think?" I ask Chabs.

"I agree."

"American traditional," Javi says. "Timeless."

“That’s all I’m looking for,” I say.

Something that’s forever.

An hour passes before Javi finishes shading and coloring. He towels me off, gentle and sweet, and holds up a mirror.

When I gaze at my ink I can feel my own fire descending, my ardor matched only by the Teresa etched indelibly onto my neck. Cheeks in flames, pupils rolled back to white, eyelids bruised with a touch of blue mascara, lips the faintest blush of pink. Modesty in rapture.

“Bless you,” I say.

“Your come to Jesus moment,” Chabby says, and we laugh nervously. Some alternate meanings are too hard to deny.

“Welcome to the crew,” Javi says, holding up a camera and taking my mugshot. He rubs an ointment into my skin and bandages my name saint up tight. His touch reminds me of what I’m giving up, and my skin goes flush. But Javi’s the only good man in any of our lives, I have to remember that. I pull my wimple over the dressing.

“Not quite yet,” Chabby says, handing him a roll of bills, bound rubber band tight. “But soon. Time to head out, Sister MT.”

It’s the first time anyone’s come close to calling me by my new name, the one I will assume once I’ve blooded in to my full place in the Sisters of Atonement.

Sister Mary Teresa.

We beat it out into the night, air so fresh Chabby peals out a high C to the heavens. She stretches her arms wide, as if she could drape the firmament along her curves like a mink. A cop car stops and shines its spotlight on her, and Chabs is suddenly front and center of her own stage. When the cop sees it’s just us, he kills the light, and Chabby’s roaring with laughter again.

“That good?” I ask.

“Halle-fucking-lujah,” she cries. “I live for this.”

St. Teresa burns her assent along my neck. I can feel my pulse beneath the bandage.

“Shit Chabs,” I say. “You need to get tested. Your fuse is all burnt out. You’re nothing but gunpowder.”

But this is the way life is meant to be lived, I think.

“You ready to get yours?” Chabby asks.

“I’m ready,” I say, and for once in my life, I hope I am.

Our beige MasterAce minivan—aka the Sister Sledge—is parked out front of Inked Habits. Its windows are tinted kiddie-creeper black; you can’t see nothing through its shade. I slide open the side door and

smoke pours out, a few empty cans of Milwaukee's Best clatter onto the pavement. Sister Hairy Melon's been hitting it hard.

Her real name's Mary Helen, but one of the *niños* gave her the tag and it stuck. Schoolyard wit binds like cement. Melon's old enough to have birthed the entire convent, a buck seven and counting. She sits up front puffing away at a cigarillo clamped between her perfect teeth, can of Beast half crushed between an arthritic knot of fingers. Despite those claws of hers, Hairy Melon's got handwriting that'd make Martha Stewart want to off herself for shame. I climb into the back seat, smooth out the confession guides we use to cover the stains and cigarette burns. Melon turns to look at me, one eye clenched, and her face does indeed resemble a shriveled, hirsute cantaloupe.

Chabs opens the door and gets in, the Sister Sledge settling beneath her weight.

"What's good, short hairs?" she asks Hairy Melon.

"Who's she?" Melon asks, the she being me.

Chabby gives me a look in the rearview mirror like, *This chick*, and doesn't bother replying. Melon's seen too many of us come and go to waste what few breaths she's got left talking to a novitiate. Not until I blood in, Chabby says. Old hearts break easy, and the next time will likely be the last. Melon puffs, pulls out her cigarillo like she's uncorking a bottle of sherry. She's got this mole on her tongue she can't ever leave alone, and as she chews it, the smoke dribbles out over her chin whiskers in a way I've practiced but can't perfect.

"She pussy out?" Hairy Melon asks.

"MT? Not on your life."

"I wouldn't bet nothing on my life," Melon says, looking at me, her voice a sandpaper rasp. I sense a tiny nod in my direction, though. "Small miracles." She's a ballbuster, Hairy Melon, a sister of the cracked-ruler variety. She ashes in the cupholder. "Well," she says to Chabby, though she's still looking at me, "what are you waiting for? I don't wanna die in this shit-can jalopy."

Hairy Melon comes along every time we make contact with the Precious Bloods. Chabby carried her out to the van in her arms like a bride dragged over the threshold, Melon with a fistful of cigarillos for a bouquet, a six-pack of brew roosted in her lap. She cannot abide her Hoveround, which is currently growing moss in the grotto, upturned by an empty bottle of sacramental wine. She went ass over tit one evening and stayed out there all night in the dew. When we found her in the dawn, she lay moist and shimmering beside Our Lady of Lourdes, but Melon was still as incorrupt as Bernadette Soubirous herself.

"It's not a sacrilege if it isn't consecrated," she said of the wine.

Hairy Melon. Wacked out but necessary. Old people are camouflage. We can do whatever the fuck we want with this crone in the car, and no one says anything. She can fake a heart attack like nobody's business, which I know something about. My old flame Clement used to say I could fake anything, but that was another life.

Chabby fires up the Sledge on the first start, a heavenly portent, and we head out. The roads are slick in the spring night. Pink-orange streetlights shine off the pavement, rising from the ground like a glory. We're bathed in it, we're breathing it, but we're quiet—even Melon, who flicks the last dying ember of her homuncular cigar out the window. She does not light up again.

How often have they come this far, only for a novitiate to back out? How long since a new sister said her vows? We teach our *niños* that the flipside of faith is loyalty, but what's loyalty when there's no one to receive it? What's faith, when there's no one to profess? None of the sisters say that I'm the Atonement's Future Incarnate, the one flicker of youth in an aging order, but I feel it. Before all this, my own future was nothing but a shank to my chest. Now it's the sisters who have me hooked, and I feel myself drawn forward. It tugs like a bitch, but I'm trying to have faith in the pull of my heart.

"Hey," Chabby says, and her eyes are two deep stoups in the rearview mirror. "You good?" And as with my old man, the words are more for her than me.

My hands are acting of their own accord, origamiing the shit out of a confession guide until it's a string of beads that hums through my fingers like a prayer. Sister Hairy Melon peers around once more, body on a swivel with her head. She smiles, or something like it, and says, "She's fine."

"MT?" Chabby says.

"I'm fine," I say. "I'm chill." Though in all honesty, my nerves are as shot as the Sledge's struts.

Chabby parks at the corner of a long road. The street dead-ends in a cul-de-sac, where the Precious Blood Monastery squats among the braided cedars like a leering mouth. Chabs and Melon will not come with me. When you blood in, you blood in alone.

I have plenty of experience being alone, but my neck is warm—warm, as if to say, *No more*. Is it the heat from my brand, or is it the afterglow of Javi's fingers? I may never be touched like that again.

Old desires are hard to tame, but now's the time to try.

"Catch you on the other side," I say, and open the door.

"Come back a sister," Melon says.

Before the Bloods rolled in, *we* made the Host in this town. That was *our* beat. The ovens at the Sisters of Atonement Convent hummed out their love all day, great iron tongs clasped to unleavened bread, solemn Christograms baked into their disked faces. We were the supplier from St. André Bessette's in Montreal to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Poughkeepsie. Wafers shipped out by the thousands.

It was *our* calling.

Then the Precious Bloods carved out some turf of their own in the North Country. Off the bat we knew they were the real deal. We're technically religious sisters, but they're hardcore nuns. Completely cloistered, weekly adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, OGs of pew-worn knees...I mean, shit, even if they never hit the streets and get their hands dirty, you can't knock them for dedication—like some drug lords holed up in their hillside Culiacán compound, *they never leave the monastery*. Which is whatever. They deal with arts and crafts, we with the broken lives of our flocks.

Or as they put it: the Atonements tinker with the minds and bodies of this world; the Bloods are shepherds of the eternal spirit.

That should have told us something from the start. Who wants to fuck with *shepherds of the eternal spirit*?

It was Father McGivney, the cowed Mick, who they strong-armed into talking to the bishop. McGivney, who never hesitated to remind the world that as women of the church, our place in the hierarchy was in the basement with the gays and single mothers. But he had never dared say these words to our faces, so when McGivney turned up one day at the convent, he was in the prelate's Jaguar, Bishop Loverde in tow like a human shield.

The Precious Bloods were new, yes, McGivney said, but they'd proven their faith and loyalty. They wanted more responsibility (read: *a bigger slice of the pie*), beyond making their confession guides (*finger paintings*) and stringing Miraculous Medals (*boondoggles*).

"Given your work with the day care center," McGivney said, glabrous pate shining like a wet egg, "we thought, perhaps..."

Major Superior Mary Joan stood patiently, toes pigeoned, pointing like arrows at these two unwitting Sebastians. I can only imagine that woman's face then. I've seen her reduce a child to tears with a smile. If Chabs is a bad bitch, Major Superior is *la puta ama*.

"Well..." McGivney said, the coward. He looked sidelong at Loverde, who would not proffer himself, but only stood at McGivney's elbow, nodding, smiling with all those equine teeth; just looking at the man conjured images of him braying in his sleep at night.

Major Superior's the only one of us with two brands. On the right side of her neck is Joan of Arc, flames curling her feet like a wick. Joan's got armor and a sword that thrusts when Major Superior clenches her jaw. To the left, a sign of her Marian devotion: the dancing sun of Fatima, a great, fiery orb. To have Major Superior approach you is to watch the sun plunge toward the earth as if it were the end of the world.

Major Superior, the Walking Judgment.

"You want to give them the Host," she said bluntly, no doubt stepping toward Loverde and McGivney, who both felt the hot tide of doom setting on them.

"Yes," McGivney said, after a prod from his prelate.

"Why," Major Superior said, the word spoken not as a question but a pronouncement of guilt. She moved closer, McGivney's breath rippling through her habit. Her temples worked, little Joan stabbed and slashed. By now, the others had gathered, descending silently like so many Judiths. The sisters are social predators, and they dotted the grotto, blinking into the morning sun. Curtains parted, windows slid open as if electrified. Screens popped from frames and tumbled through the air, landing quietly in the boxwoods and azaleas below. Chabs appeared on the convent roof, aspergillum in hand, thirsty for a liquid to spray—and there wasn't any holy water in sight. Major Superior leaned forward, her lips just shy of McGivney's neck, and she seemed to sniff his very sins. "You call yourself a man?" she asked.

"Please," McGivney said. Loverde was frozen to the spot, eyes on the great bulk of Chabby as if she were an archangel who would descend upon them, brandishing her aspergillum like a mace. He was smiling a crazed weakling's smile. The decision was ultimately his, but he'd made his boy McGivney take the rap.

"I want to hear it from you," Major Superior said to Loverde. "Is this an order?"

Loverde, who could not stop smiling, peeled back his lips from his long teeth. Was it his imagination, or were the sisters drawing nearer? He did not see them move, but somehow, they were upon him.

"Yes," he said, and then both men were retreating, hauling ass to their shining Jaguar, while the Sister Sledge, ancient even then, sat idle in the corner of the lot. McGivney and Loverde disappeared down the drive, two men who held power with no concept of how to wield it.

Under any other circumstance, this would have sent a riot through the sisters, but not today. Chabby was down from the roof in an instant, light of foot, commanding a nimble grace in the way only the big-boned can. She stood by the Mother Superior's side. Even this early in her tenure, Chabby was a willing lieutenant.

“What’s the order?” she asked.

Major Superior shook her head, rolled up her sleeves, and spat on the ground.

“Fucking Franciscan obedience,” she said, and gazed up at her fellow Sisters of Atonement. “We’re sending the baking tongs over to the Bloods,” she said. Then, more quietly to Chabby, “Get it over with. Do it today.”

Did it hurt? Of course. It hurt so much, I’m speaking as if it happened to me, though this all went down before Chabby took her final vows, before I was even born. Now I’ll never know what it’s like to bake the Host, to have in my hands that warm, soft wafer, to hold it up and watch the light pour through its skin, knowing what this thing I made is ordained to be.

The power of transubstantiation is not ours. Only a priest can transform the wine to blood, the bread to body, but we once birthed the Host in our little ovens, this vessel destined to become the Son of God. The Bloods took that from us.

It sometimes seems strange, me aching for the Host I never got to bake, but it burns like a phantom limb. This is an old, familiar yearning, a sorrow I’ve felt for as long as I can remember: to have something taken that you’d always thought was yours to give.

The Precious Blood Monastery never sleeps. I know, because we’ve scouted it for twenty long months.

It’s said the Bloods live in a mystic world, a half-conscious trance. By day, they move as if through a vision, floating along their bright hallways, basking in white light. By night, their sleep is interrupted by prayers and adoration and Hours of Reparation. Some say they exist in a fugue state, one foot in this world, one in the next, minds divorced from bodies in search of the Paschal Mystery—like junkies prowling for a fix. I’ve heard reports of strange voices echoing within their cloistered walls, prophetic visions soughing on tongues of fire, words spoken not in the speech of the human plane.

But I know the truth: sleep deprivation will take a toll on the best of us, and these bitches are cracked out. I know only five Bloods live there now, so if we are a dying breed, they are all but extinct. When they took our tongs, they bit off more than they could chew. I know that of those five Bloods, three were shipped straight from the Philippines to keep the order intact, including Superior Mary Cruz herself. It’s not tongues, but a strangely-musical Chavacano-Tagalog mixture that warbles through the monastery.

And I know that anyone who fucks with my sisters is in need of Atonement.

But as I creep along their footpath, I realize from the get-go there'll be trouble. The scent of cedar is not from the trees that line the walk like crosses to Calvary—it's thicker than that, thurible thick, a blanket of incense to warm the night and coat my tongue.

Unscheduled adoration.

During Eucharistic adoration, the consecrated Host is displayed in a monstrance on the chapel altar, and it cannot be left alone. There's always a lookout. That means the Bloods will be taking shifts of prayer, awake all night in its presence. Did someone tip them off? I wonder. Now would be the time to turn back. I could always try another night.

The air is cool but comfortable. A full moon inks its blue-silver light across the lawn, reaches through the trees and down along the concrete walls of Precious Blood. A soft breeze turns the leaves belly-up in the night. I'm alone here, and no matter what the other sisters will say, if I back out before bleeding in, I'll be alone at the convent tonight as well. I'm standing at the monastery entrance. The vestibule is always unlocked, open to anyone in need of a midnight prayer. I could put this off, but twenty months is long enough.

Fuck that noise, I think, and push through the door.

Inside it's silent, or rather, the only sound is the same that fills my ears during prayer, a blood whisper. The emergency lights are on, red EXITs and dim overheads. A tendril of incense reaches through the cracked door of the chapel. Shining on the altar is the monstrance. It's a sunburst elevated on a base, a self-haloed wonder. The living Host is tucked safely in its womb. There's a Blood in there somewhere, on her knees. I listen for movement. Nothing. I gather myself and remember what I'm here to do.

It's not the tongs I'm going to take. As bullshit as it seems, we're bound by an oath of obedience to the Church; we've sworn deference to the chain of command. Baking the Host is the Blood's calling now, and there's nothing to be done for that.

I'm here for their supply.

I know the unconsecrated Host is boxed up in a cool, dry room in the east wing. It's ready to be shipped out around our old turf. If we can't bake the Host anymore, we can take what should have been the work of *our* ovens. It's a small thing. Petty, perhaps. But it's a matter of loyalty. This is what it takes to bleed in to the Sisters of Atonement now.

I creep by the chapel door and freeze. Superior Mary Cruz sits in the front pew, facing me. Tears of blood stream down her ancient face, which is nearly black in the dim light. The Bloods get one droplet

inked for every year in the order, and her face is covered, like Jesus in Gethsemane. Her red scapular pours around her body. I'm made, I think. It's over.

But then I hear a soft, lonely sound. Her breath comes and goes in even waves, and that's when I notice that her knees are pulled up to her chin, she's using her scapular for a blanket—Sister Mary Cruz isn't even facing the monstrance. She's asleep.

This is a major fuckup. When the Blessed Sacrament is exposed, you've got to be there, and she's long gone.

The Precious Bloods: once so diehard, but not anymore. Where is my elation? Where is the joy? As I watch Superior Mary Cruz in her silent, secret sleep, I feel her youth creeping in, wrapping itself around her like that blood-red scapular. She's a child again, and I see myself beside her in the chapel, knees drawn in, body tucked into a darkened corner, alone. It's a moment of peace from the too-rough world, from the coarse hands that dictate everything in our lives and know only how to take. And I realize what the other sisters would also see if they were here: Superior Mary Cruz is not the enemy. The Bloods aren't the problem, and neither are we. None of us rule or command. It's the men of this world who tell us what to do and how. Men who confuse power for knowledge, authority for justice. Men who tear us apart. It's a bitch, but while we're bound to act obediently, we don't have to follow orders in our hearts. There's only One of them who can judge us, and our Man isn't into casting stones.

I won't take your supply of Host, I think, watching the rise and fall of Superior Mary Cruz's chest. The hard work of your hands and ovens, the source of sleepless nights and endless worries—I'll leave that alone.

But my neck is burning, my bandage is red hot, and I know that even if Superior Mary Cruz is no longer my enemy, she's seriously dropped the ball. Besides, forgiving is one thing, forgetting is another—even absolution requires atonement—and I need something to show for this night. I smile. There's more than one way to prove my devotion.

I creep into the chapel, feet cat-quiet on the carpeted floor. Father McGivney set up this perpetual adoration, no doubt, and the old meddler hasn't left his humeral veil. I can't touch the monstrance with my bare hands, so I pull my habit off—my own kind of veil—and wrap the shining shaft in its folds.

I turn, and Superior Mary Cruz is still snoring. Sleep tight, I think, filled with a sudden sororal affection. In a way, I'm helping. This Host of ours will not be left alone.

Back outside, I'm running to the Sister Sledge, and it doesn't even occur to me how this change in plans might be perceived. I slide the

door open with one hand, climb in, and Chabs and Melon are staring back at me, faces lit by my golden loot. Does the monstrance catch the moonlight, or is it shining of its own accord?

“What the fuck, MT,” Chabby says.

“Drive,” Melon snarls.

We’re with Major Superior Mary Joan in her office, Chabs, Hairy Melon, and me. Melon begs off to sleep, and when Chabby hoists her in her arms, Melon looks at me with those deep, tired eyes, and says, “Don’t wake me in the morning if she’s gone.” She disappears through the dark threshold, small, smaller still, a child, not a bride.

Old hearts break easy, I think, and the next time...

“Major Superior,” I begin.

“Don’t,” she says.

So we wait, not another word spilled between us, the monstrance gleaming bright as ever on her old, dun desk. The room has the barren orderliness of parochial school—clean despite the decay. It smells of hand-sharpened pencils and chalk dust, which is forever cemented into the cracks of Major Superior’s hands. She’s in a robe and Tims, and as she looks at the Blessed Sacrament, she peels off her habit like a girl watching a fly ball sail overhead, up and out of reach. Major Superior drags the habit across her forehead, along her neck, and I see just how dull her brands have become. Even the Walking Judgment is old.

I fidget with my paper beads from the car. They’re the only ones I’ll get tonight.

Chabs returns and takes the seat between us, legs spread wider than a man on a subway. She plops her hands on her knees, thumbs pointing in, and the three of us stare at my luminous plunder on Major Superior’s desk.

“Fucking A,” Chabby yodels.

“Don’t I know it,” Major Superior says, and looks at me. “This isn’t what was asked of you, Mary Teresa. Did obedience once enter your mind? The Blessed Sacrament is in that monstrance, the *Body of Christ*, not some box of unleavened bread. When McGivney finds out, he’ll be crying sacrilege to the bishop like that.” She snaps her fingers, and a cloud of chalk powder bursts from them. “And then your fate will be up to those men. Out of our hands entirely.”

“I’ll turn over my wimple,” I say. “I’ll clear my room—”

“Slow your roll,” Major Superior says. “I haven’t given an order yet. I need to think. Morning. Then we’ll talk.”

I nod. The miniature St. Chabanel on Chabby’s neck seems to be praying for my life.

"I'll leave the monstrance here," I say.

"No," Major Superior says, swift as perdition. "If shit goes down—"

"Right," I say. "Protect the Sisterhood. Take the rap."

Saying the words is to set me apart from the others.

I rise and lift the monstrance, still swaddled in my veil.

"You can't sleep," Major Superior says. "Not with It in your room."

"Heard," I say, and head into the dim hallway.

"I told you it was too soon," Major Superior hisses at Chabby.

When I look back, they're watching me, these Sisters of Atonement. Their brands, faded as they may be, still say everything about who they are. I'm inked too, marked permanently by my desire, but my brand is bandaged, covered, shrouded beneath a pall.

Maybe Major Superior's right, I think. Maybe I'm not ready to trade passion for devotion.

I go back to my room and settle in for a long, sleepless night.

*But I do sleep, and in my sleep, she comes.*

*Skin as white as marble, eyes that see within, a mouth to moan at every thrust.*

*I can feel it too, the blaze where we are pierced. My hands sing along my body and come away wet and red.*

*Her eyes part, and she sees me. The light on her face is blinding. She holds out her hand as the spear stabs and draws Blood.*

*We come together as our fingers lace like sutures. The pain is great, but we sisters will share it, it is a burden to bear together, an agony so sweet that it passes through our flesh, through our hearts, buries itself deep, deep, in the secret places we have sworn from love.*

When I wake, a burning spreads through my body, pours from my mouth as a moan. I have the blazing monstrance shaft in my bare hands. Major Superior may be uncertain of my devotion, but I'm having none of that. The Sisterhood is calling to me. I know where I belong.

There's no question of my belief, no doubt of my desire—what I believe and what I want are one and the same. Faith and body have aligned, a once-in-many-lifetimes moment. My fingers ride up the naked monstrance, and even this idle wandering is a profession that sings in flames. I cannot contain this feeling. I cannot be contained. What was once *everything* to me, I now know is nothing, but I've found a love complete to fill the void.

Am I making sense? Can it even be said?

There are no words to speak, only Blood to be drawn, and I hear It rushing through me, I feel the lapping of Its salutary waves.

My door opens, and the sisters stand outside. It's the dead of night, but our monstrance shines like a rising sun. Its rays are spears that pierce us all. Mother Superior Mary Joan's face is awash in light, and I can tell those men McGivney and Loverde are the last things on her mind. She calls me forward with two beckoning fingers. We file into the dining room, a family's procession, and I set the monstrance on the table, our own altar.

"Mary Teresa," Sister Chabanel says.

I turn to look. Sister Mary Helen is in her arms, their two sets of eyes on mine.

"You're bleeding," Sister Mary Helen says.

I cup my bandage, and my hand comes away wet. But when I peel off the gauze and look at my reflection in the monstrance, there is nothing but Santa Teresa Ávila in ecstasy on my neck. She is immaculate, and bright, and rapturous.

"Sister Mary Teresa," Major Superior says, correcting Sister Chabanel. She is not unkind. She tosses me a bundle, a coiled string that curls through the air and unwinds as it lands with a wooden rap on the table before me: my rosary beads.

Major Superior looks at each of us, my fellow Sisters of Atonement and me, and she is coy and womanly. She reaches for the monstrance, unclasps the latch that lets its sunbeams part, and allows the Host to tumble softly into her hand. She holds up that bread, and there ain't a man alive who will dare tell me I can't make it my own flesh and blood. Who needs a father, when you have such a crew of mothers?

And we *all* bad mothers.

Major Superior laughs. We join her. The music, the glory and music that fills our halls. We're riotous. We're crying. We're in love.

Major Superior passes the bread to me. I hold it up, this Blessed Sacrament, and it's *ours* now, consecrated anew. I break the Host in two. A drop of red stains our corporal, and I can't tell if it's St. Teresa or the very body in my hands that weeps this Blood. I break the Host again and again, smaller and smaller, until there's enough to go around.