



THE SACRIFICE AT ST. JULIAN'S

Grimlock Cove, 1887

The moon hung heavy over St. Julian's Catholic Church. Bitter winds ripped dying leaves from nearby trees, rattled the windows. In the church's attic, Rep. G. Bell and his daughter, Bella, lie dead in their law books. Bella was situated at one side of the room by the stove, while her father was pushed against the wall opposite Rep. G. Bell's desk. Since the two were killed, but Bella was a girl of twelve years, Bella's body was considered as a relic, and she lie awake afraid of the autopsy, the ghastly moans of the old church, the concern of the people calling her name in the news.

OSCAR WHITING

THE SACRIFICE AT ST.
JULIAN'S
(PREVIEW)

FROM "TALES FROM GRIMLOCK COVE"

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THE SACRIFICE AT ST. JULIAN'S (PREVIEW)

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Grimlock Cove, 1887

The moon hung heavy over St. Julian's Catholic Church. Blustery October winds ripped dying leaves from nearby trees and rattled the windows. In the church's attic, Renata Cordero and her daughter, Bella, lie tucked in their straw beds. Renata's bed was situated at one side of the attic by the stairs, while Bella's was pushed against the far wall opposite Renata's. It had been hours since the two had settled in, but Bella did not sleep. As a girl of twelve years, Bella hardly considered herself a child, and yet she lie awake afraid. It wasn't the autumn winds or the ghostly moans of an old church that concerned her. It was the voice calling her name from the shadows.

"Bella?"

Thinking it might be her mother, Bella brushed thick curls of auburn hair from her face and looked to Mother's side of the room. A shaft of moonlight came through the circular

attic window, pushing back against the darkness that otherwise filled the room. Mother's bed lay hidden from the moonlight—where the darkness gathered.

"Bella?" the voice came again.

This time Bella heard it more clearly. It was feminine, but this was not her mother's voice. Though it's tone had been kind, a stranger's voice is still a stranger's voice. Glancing around, she saw no one, and the voice called again. Bella retreated beneath her blanket, lifting the edge just enough to peek out. She looked to the dark corner where her mother slept but saw only a wall of shadows. Bella thought to call for her mother, but Mother hated to be woken up, and her temper left bruises, so Bella remained as still and quiet as the dead. It was peculiar, though. Bella held that a moth beating its wings could wake Mother, so if Mother could sleep through the sound of this voice, then perhaps she, Bella, had imagined it.

"Time is short," the stranger said.

At this, Bella snapped the blanket down over her head. Her instinct was to scream, but she did not scream, and she did not cry. Instead, she offered up a hushed, rote prayer to a dead saint just as Mother had taught her, hoping to soothe her overactive imagination. But her prayer was cut short when slow, steady footsteps approached. The boards creaked beside her bed as the stranger came to a stop, and that voice came again—inches from her ear.

"There must always be a sacrifice."

Bella's eyes pooled with tears. Be it fear or her own stubbornness, she did not move. Though the stranger lingered, she kept herself tucked in as though her blanket were a fortress, until the stranger's steps trailed off through the attic. After a long while, her racing heart slowed, her eyes grew heavy, and Bella slipped into a fitful, shallow sleep.

When Bella was only three, her birth mother had taken violently ill. Shortly thereafter, her father had buried her mother in a soft patch between their garden and the sea. Shortly after Bella's sixth birthday, she'd awoken to the sound of her father moving about their humble shack of a home. Despite the black clouds shrouding the horizon, he'd intended to head for the cove to retrieve his traps, promising to return with a bounty of Dungeness crabs—enough for a few meals and more than a few dollars at the market. After a kiss on her forehead and a great big bear hug, her father had stepped out into a dark morning that, as God willed it, had left Bella an orphan.

Renata Cordero was also well-acquainted with loss. After her husband's persistent cough had fallen silent, Renata had found herself a widow with an infant boy. The church had noted the widow's situation and had made her an offer. So long as Renata maintained the church, the church would provide her and her child food and shelter. She'd agreed to the church's terms and had made her home in the drafty attic of St. Julian's Catholic Church, but only six years after having moved in, tragedy had found Renata once again. Her son had gone missing.

It had been at this time when the church had met to discuss the future of the late fisherman's daughter, the orphan Bella. The tall, svelte Renata stepped forward without hesitation and declared in a quiet yet determined voice that she would take the child in as her own. Mindful of Renata's recent loss, the church had been unanimous in their decision to place the orphan in the widow's care. Six years later, Renata and Bella continued their service to the church they still called home.

Young Bella spent her days caring for St. Julian's and her

evenings perched at the attic window, reading books from the church library. Some of the books she kept indefinitely, knowing the town of Grimlock Cove had little appreciation for the written word. She had books on the sacraments, church history of the 16th and 17th centuries, and even a few books in Italian, which she kept even though she couldn't read them. Bella had even managed to sneak a rather scandalous book into her collection. A carpenter, who'd been replacing some flooring for the church, had found the book hidden in the floorboards. The priest had intended to burn the forbidden tome, but the ever curious Bella had rescued the book and kept it hidden amongst her things.

As evening approached, Bella found it impossible to concentrate on her reading. The voice from the night before lingered, persistently echoing, *There must always be a sacrifice*. The priest at St. Julian's, Father Riley, had once said hearing voices was a telltale sign of witchcraft. The matter had arisen when Mrs. Crow had claimed to have heard Father Riley engaged in unrequited intimate relations with one of her daughters. Tragically, Father Riley's severe tests proved both Mrs. Crow and her daughter were suffering hallucinations due to their own involvement in witchcraft. With that revelation, the will and fire of godly men purged Grimlock Cove of the Crows' wickedness. Bella considered Father Riley's wisdom with a heavy heart. If she had suffered delusions—imagined voices and such—it would explain why her mother hadn't heard the voice, but this explanation didn't sit well with Bella. After all, she hadn't any experience with witches, witchcraft, or any such thing. She'd been born in a salt-worn fishing shack and raised in St. Julian's. Sure, she'd hidden away one forbidden book, but it was just a book.

The hour grew late, and having found no comfort in her thoughts, Bella turned her attention to the world outside the attic window to watch the dusk sun melt into the horizon. As

the sun set, the forest that wrapped around the town became a jagged silhouette against the darkening sky. Flickers of firelight lit the windows of Grimlock Manor, which sat far and high on a hill overlooking the town. Horse-drawn buggies cast long shadows as they left along the main road. The lazy clip-clop of hooves grew faint as the last horse turned off the road and onto a dirt path that led out of town. Once the town's main street had settled for the night, Bella knew it was time to lock the church doors and set about her evening chores.

"Come along, Bella. Don't drag your feet," Mother said, waiting at top of the stairs. She pointed to the attic floor, where olive green paint had cracked and peeled, revealing stained wood. "I'm picking up a can of paint tomorrow to touch up the floor, but I don't want you making it any worse than it already is, and mind yourself on the stairs. The church hasn't the funds for the carpenter to repair the loose boards."

Bella gave a terse nod. Mother started down the stairs to the nave, and Bella followed after, annoyed. It's not her fault the floors were peeling. It's not as though she were the only one walking around the attic.

After the pair had dusted, swept, and mopped the nave from one end to the other, Bella set about extinguishing the altar candles. She puckered and blew out each votive one by one, and when the last flame died, she watched as a single wisp of smoke rose from the ashy wick. The thin, gray band slithered up, vanishing into the shadows that filled the church. Bella had always found it curious how strangely grim the church became in the absence of light. Stained glass windows that had shone so vibrant in the daylight became dull, gray, and lifeless. The crucified Christ above the high altar—a symbol of love and sacrifice—became a shadowy, corporeal wraith in the dark. All of St. Julian's became an inverse image of itself—a baleful tomb rather than a holy temple.

Mother stood by the attic stairs at the back of the nave,

where she struck a match, and lit her candlestick so Bella could find her way to the stairs. As Bella crossed from the altar to her mother, she noticed the portraits of mournful saints and angels along the walls. Father Riley had said the saints looked down with love, and angels' eyes were always on God's children. But these saints seemed to hide their eyes from Bella, and the angels regarded her with pity. Bella turned her attention back to her mother's light, dismissing what she'd seen as the shadows playing tricks on her eyes. When Bella arrived at the foot of the stairs, Mother handed her the candlestick.

"Mind your steps, Bella," Mother said as the pair started up the stairs.

Bella climbed the stairs carefully and said, "Are we alone here?"

"What do you mean?"

When Bella reached the attic, she placed the candlestick on her mother's nightstand and crossed over to her own bed. "I mean, are we alone in St. Julian's?"

"Father Riley says we are never alone in the house of God," Mother answered coolly.

Bella climbed onto her straw mattress. "Yes, but is there someone else besides God?"

Mother's knees popped, as she lowered herself to the edge of her bed. Her tall, lean frame appeared haggard, and she sighed, seeming to resent her aging body. "There is no one else," she said, letting down her salt and pepper hair. "Only the angels."

Bella noted how quickly her mother's hair—once black as a burnt wick—had grayed.

Mother leaned forward to blow out her candle but stopped when Bella asked, "How old are you?"

Her mother straightened up, raised a brow. "How old do you *think* I am?"

Bella paused and gave her mother an appraising look.

"Sixty years, but not a year more than that," she added, intending to be polite.

Mother scoffed.

"Older than the town?" Bella said, surprised that her mother could be so old.

"No," Mother said, leaning in again to blow out the candle.

"Older than St. Julian's?"

Mother gave up on putting out the candle and straightened up again. "What's this about, Bella?"

Bella didn't want to admit she feared the dark, but the words leapt out of her all the same. "I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

Feeling childish at the prospect of admitting she was afraid of the dark, Bella replied, "Well, not so much afraid. I just—I don't feel safe here."

"You don't feel safe? Here in the church?"

Bella's eyes fell.

"Where is your faith?" Mother asked.

Bella said nothing as guilt welled up.

After a moment, her mother continued, "Well, the way you mumble your prayers and drag your feet to your chores, I should've known your faith had faltered."

"It's not that, I just—"

"If your faith hasn't faltered, what have you to fear?"

"I fear we're not truly safe in this church."

Mother raised a brow and leveled a sharp eye at Bella. The longer the two sat in silence, the more uncomfortable Bella grew. She thought perhaps she should apologize or walk back what she'd said. *I've misspoken*, she could say, but before Bella could diffuse, her mother shifted her focus to their surroundings and said, "But who could fault you? Suffer the children, so say the scriptures. To the meek belong the kingdom of God, isn't that what they say?"

Bella held her tongue, unsure of how to answer.

"It must be difficult for you to believe when impoverished servitude is your lot in this 'kingdom'," Mother continued. "When all the power is reserved for those of means."

Bella thought of the Grimlocks. Through the attic window, she could see the moonlit manor on a far hill. "Like the Grimlocks?"

"The Grimlocks," her mother said, groaning. "This town calls the Grimlocks pioneers. They claim we owe our founding family for braving the wilderness with nothing but faith and the favor of the Lord."

As her mother continued, Bella's mind wandered back to the strange voice she'd heard. Mother had said there was no one else here but the angels. Could the voice she'd heard been some kind of warning from an angel?

"Are you listening?" her mother said, snapping Bella to attention.

Bella hadn't heard a word but knew to nod quickly.

Though clearly skeptical, Mother continued, "As I was saying, they built this town on the backs of people like me, but that's not how history tells it. As the story is told," her mother paused, clearing her throat importantly, "as a terrible storm raged all around, our founding family sought shelter in a small cove. As they clung to their last fraying threads of hope," she paused again and folded her hands with mock reverence, "John and Mary Grimlock were visited by an angel of the Lord."

"An angel?"

"Indeed," her mother said, returning to her usual tone. "The angel told the Grimlocks they were fulfilling God's will."

"So, they weren't afraid?"

"I suspect the truth is they arrived with a wagon full of supplies and paid laborers, but of course, that's not how legends are made. With miles of lumber, fields of fertile soil,

and rivers of fresh water, this was the Grimlocks' promised land. The town believes the Lord promised this land to the Grimlocks, but alas," her mother swept a hand across their humble surroundings, "it would appear all that wealth had been promised *only* the Grimlocks."

"The true test of our soul is how we treat the weak in *our* time of need," Bella said, quoting a devotional Mother had given her. "Isn't that right, Mother?"

Mother said nothing. She sat rigid, appearing agitated. Bella couldn't imagine how a devotional could trouble Mother. Wishing to avoid any discord, Bella returned the conversation to Mother's story. "So, what did the angel look like?"

"I doubt there was an angel, Bella, but if there had been, it would've—"

"How did they *know* it was an angel?"

"It is poor manners to interrupt," her mother snapped.

"I'm sorry," Bella said in a small voice. Mother's sharp tone normally preceded a rod

across Bella's legs. Though even the priest preached mercy, Mother seemed to think mercy was too permissive and preferred the rod of correction instead.

"As I was saying," Mother continued, "the angel blessed the town, and now you and I play *very* important roles. *We* are blessed to shiver in the house of the Lord while the Grimlocks grow fat in their furs before a roaring fire."

Bella shifted uncomfortably. Her mother's once faith-filled disposition had darkened since the church had declined her request for improved living conditions. Mother had reassured Father Riley that she didn't expect luxury, but had insisted there must be some middle ground between her straw mattress in a drafty attic and his feather bed and furs.

"What if you married, Mother?"

Mother stiffened, her face growing hard. "The priest isn't told to marry for provision. Why should I be any different?"

Bella braced herself as though she were about to be struck.

Her mother sighed her disapproval. "You read all these books and yet you understand so little."

Bella's countenance fell. She looked at the books on the floor beside her bed and felt foolish under her mother's gaze. The scriptures had said a kind word could dissuade the wrathful, so Bella attempted a kind word. "But I have you to teach me, Mother. I won't disappoint you. I'll marry well."

Mother softened with a bitter smile. "A vocal woman is destined to be alone, with only herself to talk to. She must either be quiet or accept her lonely lot in life."

"I don't wish to be alone."

"Then be quiet and mind what is expected of you."

"I could marry a Grimlock," Bella said. "Then we'd have furs and fires to keep us warm."

"Truly," her mother said, her words dripping venom. "But I'd rather see the Grimlocks hung by the neck with their opulent furs and laid to rest in their own damned fires." Mother leaned forward, her brown eyes glinting in the candlelight. "Understand this, Bella. Power *always* requires sacrifice, but it is *never* the powerful who pay the price." With that, Mother snuffed the candle's flame, and the attic fell dark, save for the moonlight coming through the window.

Bella's conversation with Mother had done little to comfort her. She dreaded sleep despite the prior night's encounter having left her exhausted, but not long after Mother had put out the light did Bella's eyes grow heavy, and she drifted off into a dream. She did not dream of far off places or wondrous things. Instead, she found herself standing at the attic window, looking down on the Main Street.

The town was closing as the sun vanished in the horizon. It was just another evening until she saw it—something like

smoke, black as pitch and about three feet deep, spilling out onto the street from beneath her window. Her stomach sank. Something wicked had infested the town, and it was coming from St. Julian's. Bella's pulse quickened, her fists pounding on the window. She shouted to warn the people in the street, but no one noticed her or the encroaching smoke. Across the street, her mother stepped out of the general store with a can of paint, a hammer, and a small box of nails. Bella's shouts turned to frantic screams as the smoke slithered up, serpentine and predatory, winding itself around her mother's pale, gaunt frame. Mother stopped, and her mouth fell open. The smoke moved up and slithered into her open mouth. After a deep, gasping inhale, Mother's eyes glazed over, and she stood there, vacant as a marionette. Bella's head split with screams of a young boy. Clutching the sides of her head, she struggled to stay on her feet, keeping her eyes on her mother. Mother's hands went red with blood. It ran from her fingertips, pooling in the dirt at her feet. Then blood spilled from her mouth, pouring over her teeth and down her chin. Bella shrieked, slapping her hands against the windowpane, but Mother stood perfectly still, unmoved. Despite the sight of her, the townspeople carried on—either unaware or unconcerned. When the blood ceased to run, Mother's pale skin blushed with color, and her gaunt frame filled out, appearing stronger, nourished, and well-rested. Mother's eyes once again found focus, and after a moment, she started forward as though nothing unusual at all had happened.

A dry heat swelled behind Bella. She reeled around to find black smoke—that same as she'd seen in the street—had crept into the attic. The air soured, and Bella struggled for a full breath. With what little breath she had, Bella issued a throat-rending cry for help. Undeterred, the smoke slithered up to Bella, coiled around her legs, and climbed up her belly to her neck. She struggled against it, but the will of the wicked thing

proved too strong. The smoke smothered Bella, drowning her voice in a cacophony of loathsome voices. The voices were aged and frightened, yet angry and demanding. Louder and louder the voices shouted, mocking Bella's will, casting blame and curses. Bella ached, weeping in silence, herself growing angry, yet powerless under the full weight of it all. Suffocating, burning, breaking, she collapsed, swallowed up by this darkness.

Bella awoke in her bed, breathing fast and damp with sweat. She sat up and looked around, but saw no smoke, no creeping darkness—only the usual shadows broken by the single shaft of moonlight coming through the attic window. Though it had all been a dream, Bella pulled her arms and legs in tight under her blanket and let very real tears fall. She had been so helpless—so alone in her dream. She'd hoped, as she'd cried out, that her mother, the priest, or anyone willing to help would hear her cries, but no one answered. Could they not hear her, or did they simply not care?

As Bella lie curled up in her bed, the stranger's voice returned. "Bella?"

She pulled her blanket over her head and hid, trembling.

"Do not be afraid. I am an angel of your Lord."

Bella took a shuddering breath and wiped the tears from her eyes, remaining hidden.

"You are a chosen vessel of your Lord," the voice said. "It takes a brave soul to fight the darkness, but an even braver soul to stand their ground when the darkness fights back."

A hand came to rest on Bella's head, the fingers lightly tapping a broken rhythm. Bella's heart beat in her throat, her every breath shallow.

The voice spoke in a close whisper, "The sun will rise again and warm you once more. Wait for nightfall, and upon the midnight hour, meet me at the altar of your Lord."

With that, the floorboards creaked as footfalls trailed off.

Bella remained tucked in beneath her blanket. The angel had called her brave, but she certainly didn't feel brave. She did, however, understand why everyone who had ever met an angel in the Bible had been so afraid, but it did leave her to wonder, indignant, *Why don't angels visit at a more reasonable hour or properly introduce themselves? Did no one teach them manners?*

Thank you for taking a peek into Grimlock Cove. Bella's story continues in "Tales From Grimlock Cove," a collection of ten stories set in the quiet town of Grimlock Cove.

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With Appreciation,

Oscar

