

Blood of the Devoted – Chapter 1

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Chapter 1

The smell of fresh bread engulfs my senses until I'm practically drunk on the aroma. A daily occurrence when one works in a bakery. Then there's the warmth from the oven, like a gentle embrace. Dad slaps another lump of dough on the counter, a sound as familiar as my rumbling stomach. Flour coats my fingertips. All of these things sing of home. The only life I know. I pull out a fresh set of loaves on a tray. The edges are browned to perfection. I inhale the crispness. "You know, I'm kind of hoping we don't get any customers today," I say, "If it means we get to finish the leftovers."

Dad rolls his eyes. To him, bread is just bread. It's his work.

Of course, my wish for no customers is quickly denied. As per usual, the regulars come streaming into the bakery as soon as we open. Actually, ten minutes before we open. There's no stopping them.

First is always Prudence, clutching at her burlap sack which still contains crumbs from the previous day. For all she talks, she has never mentioned her family to me. I assume she has children or grandchildren given that she goes through a whole loaf on the daily. I would struggle with that, even with my love of bread.

"Ah, Minnow, lovely to see you, as always," Prudence says, pulling me into a hug over the counter and pecking me on the cheek. I ignore the pain of the edge of the bench digging into my abdomen. "Perry, what have you concocted for us all this morning?" she asks Dad.

"Just the usual," Dad replies. Then, after a pause, he pulls out a few loaves wrapped in paper. "Plus these... fig and poppy seed. The fruits were a kind donation from Ms Creed. Would you like one, Prudence? First customer of the day gets it half-price."

Prudence swats her hand to the side dismissively. "No, you know I don't believe in fruit-bread. No need to go mixing things that each do better on their own." She hands some coins over to Dad, who places a brown loaf in her sack.

Next through the door is Sal. I've known her all twenty-two years of my life, but she looks as young as when I first saw her. People say that she did a Witch a favour once when she was twenty-eight, and since then she's been Blessed with endless youth. Or at least the visage of it. I'm not sure I see the appeal. Why would you want everyone to treat you like you were young when you've got so much life experience and wisdom to offer? And surely love would be painful – loving those your age but never looking like someone they should love? My theory is the Witch tricked her into wishing for something she didn't understand the consequences of. Witches aren't known for their honesty and goodwill.

I've only encountered one Witch. I was about nine. The whole village went quiet as she passed through, bolting their doors and guiding their children away from the windows.

I had been working at the bakery, and Dad was sick in bed. It didn't occur to me that anything was amiss that day: the sun still shone and the bread smelled as good as ever. I was wrapping a round loaf into a paper parcel when I saw her out the window: a hunched figure wearing a midnight blue veil which hid her face as she slowly ambled down the street. Around her wrist she wore a circle of river reeds woven together.

I couldn't understand why I felt a sudden chill in my chest, as if my heart was frosting over. Despite the discomfort, I brushed the flour off my hands and went to the door, which always hung ajar to welcome customers.

I stood in the doorway just as she passed. Even though she was in the middle of the street, it felt as if she was only an arms-length away. The eeriness of the surroundings began to sink in, and I realised everyone else had vanished. This woman – could she even be called a woman? – and I were the only souls in sight. The curiosity within me was drowned out by the terror I felt. It was the feeling that I'd stepped into a room and seen something that I shouldn't have.

Just as I began to back away from the doorway, the Witch turned in my direction. Even though her eyes were covered by the veil, I could tell she was looking directly at me.

For some reason, rather than grabbing the door handle with my quivering hand and staggering inside, I stayed there and held her gaze. Chest puffed out, palms closed, jaw clenched.

A moment passed, and then she turned and continued on her way.

I never told my parents about what had happened. When Dad asked me if I had seen the Witch everyone was talking about, I said I had been throwing out burnt bread. I felt like I had to keep a secret and that the Witch would know it if I hadn't.

Sal shows more interest in the fig and poppy seed bread. She's clearly more adventurous than Prudence. Sal flashes Dad a smile on the way out, showing off her sharp canine teeth. Sometimes I wonder if she's flirting with him. Dad has mentioned knowing her when they were children, so maybe she's his age. It's hard to imagine, comparing her to my Dad with his thin grey hair, lined forehead, spotted hands and crow's feet.

A few more customers wander in, happy to purchase their bread with a quick "please" and "thank you" before heading on their way. Others stop to chat, commenting on the weather or the new bridge. Everyone is ecstatic about the new bridge. The River Ursa passes by the edge of the village, and for almost a year the bridge to the eastern side has been uncrossable due to storm damage. People had to travel five hours north through the forest on foot to reach the next crossing. The newly-erected bridge has been a hot talking topic for over a week now.

I've grown a bit weary of the conversation myself, but old Betty Gray has a contagious enthusiasm that draws me in today.

"A bunch of lads are heading out to Haunted Lake for a day of fishing," she says cheerily. "Now they can march straight across and follow the eastern path."

"No-one should be visiting somewhere called 'Haunted Lake'," says Dad with a shake of his head. Betty swats his arm. "Oh, please. You used to head out there every weekend when you were in school. Your lot hauled boats along and everything."

Dad shrugs. "Maybe we shouldn't have. There are eels in that water, you know. And it's murkier than muddy puddles."

"Can I go?" I ask, turning to Dad.

"Don't see why you'd want to," murmurs Dad.

We both suddenly remember that I'm well and truly an adult and can go wherever I please. It's easy to forget, since our relationship and daily life haven't changed for the past fourteen years since I started working at the bakery.

"You can do what you like in your own time," Dad states. "But your shift lasts another three hours." I sigh.

Betty glances at me with a sparkle in her eye. "Maybe Cillian can take you on the weekend."

I frown. "Who's Cillian?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you!" Betty claps her palm against her head. "My nephew, Cillian, is coming to stay with me. Well, technically he's my grand-nephew, but we don't need to acknowledge how old I'm getting."

"Is he my age, then?" I query.

"Yes. Perhaps a tad older. But he's a lovely boy. Charming. I'd better head home – he's arriving this evening, and I need to have supper ready!" She waves her loaf of bread in our direction and heads out the door.

A charming boy. I have to admit, the village is lacking young men of that description. I picture the 'lads' heading out to the lake today. It'll be Smith, who is always full of snide remarks and looking to point out any mistakes one makes. Then Helix, who travels every autumn to play flute around the country. He's very talented, but doesn't have time for anyone else. Sometimes I think he only spends time with the others to keep up the appearance of being an ordinary young man. And Haystack... I forget why we started calling him that. I guess I'd say he's sweet. But not charming. He likes knitting and once made me a scarf. It was summer. He's fat like me, but he's tall as well. I used to think I'd marry him if I never met any other contenders. But it appears I lost all interest over

the years. Small village life doesn't lend itself to romance, when everyone is in everyone's business all the time.

Dad hands me a bowl of bean soup with a slice of bread. "Can you go feed your Ma? It's past twelve. She'll be getting hungry."

I take the soup into the cottage behind the bakery. Our humble abode. It's a good thing I'm an only child, because there wouldn't be room for anyone else in here. Ma and Dad have their own room, and I sleep on a bed by the fireplace in the living room.

I knock on the door to my parents' bedroom, even though I know Ma won't respond. She's sitting where she always is, facing the window, her back to the door. I wonder if she would be happier being in a different spot each day, but Dad insists she prefers the spot by the window when it's too cold to go outside.

"Ma?" I say.

Every time I call her name, I can't help but feel a flicker of hope that she'll say something in return. It's been seven years now since she became like... this. One day, she had been absolutely fine; the next, she was on the floor with no words left. The apothecarist, Heron, was hardly any help. She said that these things just happen sometimes and that there was nothing she could do.

Ma can walk with help from Dad or I, but she never chooses a direction. It's hard to tell what she's thinking, or even if she's thinking at all. Her green eyes don't reveal anything. Her long black hair is starting to show grey streaks. I inherited the black hair from her, but mine sits just below my shoulders. Hers flows down to her tailbone and always did, even before she lost her words.

"I've brought you some soup," I tell her. I kneel in front of her seat. I have to feed her, bringing each spoonful to her mouth. Occasionally it dribbles down her chin and I dab at her face with a handkerchief.

I'm ashamed that I refused to help when she first changed. Dad did everything: fed her, helped her with the chamber pot, walked her around the garden each evening, read to her, dressed and undressed her. I was too angry. I think I thought if I didn't help, it would be less real. Like it never happened.

Now, it's part of my daily routine. Dad still does the majority of the caring, but I always do lunchtimes and brush her hair at the end of the day. I offer to do more, but Dad refuses. He loves her so completely, and doing everything he can for her is his way of showing it, especially since he doesn't know if she hears his words. It's not a thankless job to him: just seeing her is reward enough.

I wonder if I'll ever love someone that much. Or be loved that wholly. I've never met anyone who made me feel that way and, if I spend my life in this village, I might not ever.

Have I ever wanted to leave the village of Schlafhold? Its cute set of cottages nestled in the forest has plenty of appeal. One main street where you can buy anything you need. A well of clean water. A few nearby hills for picnicking. And now, of course, a marvellous bridge stretching over the river and leading to the meadows beyond.

I've visited other places, including the big town of Harethorn. I say "big town", but Dad told me that a population of one thousand people is still fairly small compared to some of the distant cities. They have a main street, too, but it was so full of bustling and yelling when I visited that I almost felt I would pass out. We were there for the annual Food Market Spectacular. Dad sometimes operated a small stall there, but other times we'd gone just to experience it. We only tasted free samples, since our money was worth less there and we have never been particularly rich in the first place. But I didn't complain: I delighted in the sips of cardamom tea, the slices of fresh peaches, the nuts roasted in sugar and honey... The corners of gingerbread were my favourite. I would pinch them between my fingers and take one small bite at a time, only taking another when the ginger taste had faded from my tongue.

But I was always pleased to return home, short of breath and with aching feet from the three-day walk. Because that's what Schlafhold is. Home. Chickens in the yards and chimney smoke in the evenings. Everyone knowing your name and treating it like treasure.

There are less customers in the afternoon. Among them is Everett, who only comes in once a week or so. He's a tall, broad-shouldered man in his forties, with hairy forearms and a brown beard. He never says much. Dad knows that he's always after two brown loaves, so they never exchange a word. Everett has figured out that if you never partake in the village gossip, the gossip never latches onto you. Sure, I've heard rumours that he fought in the War for the Wilds and came back different, but that's the only morsel of information anyone has about him.

Finally, exactly one minute before closing, Poppy Pellet hurries through the door with her two children in tow.

"So sorry I'm late," she says. "Kia! Jay! Can you stand still for a moment, please?!"

The children continue to run amok, but at least they avoid knocking over any displays. All of the shelves are empty now, anyway.

"What've you got left?" Poppy asks, breathless.

Dad hesitates. Normally he keeps a couple of spare loaves under the counter, just in case we sell out. It appears that today, even those loaves have been distributed.

"I'm real sorry, Pop," says Dad. "We're about to close up, and there's nothing left."

Poppy's jaw drops. "Nothing at all?"

Dad and I shake our heads.

Poppy glances back at the children. "That's... that's okay. We got plenty of ham from the butcher's on the way here." She ushers the children out the door.

Dad turns over the sign hanging at the door so it says 'CLOSED'.

"It pains me," admits Dad, "But maybe she's learnt not to come in right as we close."

Trying to teach someone a lesson? That doesn't sound like Dad at all. He raises a hand to the back of his neck and rubs it. "I'll save some for her tomorrow."

That sounds more like him. Finding ways to be kinder.

It's a cold night in the thick of winter. I poke at the fire, willing it to warm the house faster. Dad is busy with Ma, dressing her in her nightclothes. I find myself wondering about how Smith, Helix and Haystack enjoyed their day at Haunted Lake. I've never been, but there's a painting of it in Betty's house. It's barely a quarter of a mile wide and looks quite unpleasant: dark water next to a conglomeration of run-down, abandoned buildings. The meadows along the way appear much nicer to traverse. The area to the east of Schlafhold is a lot less foresty, with open fields, rolling hills and little creeks that break off from the River Ursa.

Maybe I will go and visit the lake with this 'Cillian' who Betty has invited to the village. After all, there is not all that much to do here once you've had a stroll in the forest and a picnic on the hill.