

SLOANE DUFFY: HELL'S KITCHEN CHRONICLES

Series One. Episode One. THE BRASS VEIL

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1895 — New York City

Chapter One — The Ambush

The fog tasted of coal smoke and the river.

Cornelius Bancroft moved through it the way a man moves through a room he knows is occupied — carefully, listening with his whole body, each step placed with the deliberate patience of someone who has done this too many times to be careless and not enough times to stop being afraid.

The alley was narrow. Brick factories rose on either side, their walls slick with condensation, their windows dark. Somewhere above, a steam vent hissed — a sharp exhalation that sounded almost alive in the stillness. His breath misted before him, mingling with the fog until he could not tell where one ended and the other began.

In his right hand, a purpose-built brass Westinghouse electric lantern — a prototype — cast a steady glow that held the darkness at a polite but unconvincing distance. In his left, a silver dagger caught the light and threw it back in cold, clean lines.

Five years hunting these devils, he thought. You would think I would learn not to come alone.

But there was never anyone to bring. Burton was capable — more than capable — but Bancroft had spent two decades training the boy to fight. He was not yet ready to watch him die.

A sound.

Metal creaking. Above.

Bancroft raised the lantern slowly, angling the light upward along the factory wall. The fire escape materialized out of the fog in pieces — iron railings, rusted grating, bolted supports — and crouching on the platform three stories up, a shape that did not belong to any architecture.

The werewolf was enormous. Seven and a half feet of hunched, coiled muscle wrapped in dark fur that glistened with moisture. Its jaws hung open, slavering, the teeth too long and too many for the mouth that held them. But it was the eyes that stopped a man's heart. Yellow. Bright as gas flame. And intelligent — horribly, unmistakably intelligent. This was not a beast looking down at him. This was a conscious mind.

Bancroft set the lantern down on the cobblestone. Carefully. The way you set down something precious when you know you are about to need both hands.

"Come on then," he said quietly. "Let us have it done."

The creature rocked forward on the grating. Back. Forward again. The iron groaned beneath its weight. Muscles bunched along its haunches like cables drawn tight, and Bancroft watched it the way he watched everything — calculating the angle of attack, the distance, the half-second between leap and impact where a blade could find its mark.

Then, behind him: a growl.

Low. Close. The kind of sound that does not echo because it comes from everywhere at once, filling the air the way cold fills a room when someone opens a window in January.

His eyes widened.

"Bloody hell. Two of them."

He spun.

The second werewolf was already in the air.

There was no time to think. Decades of training drove his body where his mind could not follow — he rolled with the impact as the creature slammed into him, letting the brick wall catch them both, absorbing what he could and surrendering the rest. Pain exploded across his side, his face, his ribs — claws finding flesh with the ease of fingers finding piano keys.

But he had the dagger, and the dagger found its mark.

Silver drove into the werewolf's chest. Direct to the heart. The blade sank to the hilt and the creature screamed — a sound that began as something no throat should produce and ended as something terribly, recognizably human.

"Please—" the voice was agonized, Irish, the accent thickening as the beast fell away and the man emerged. "I did not — I could not help it—"

It collapsed at Bancroft's feet and died.

Bancroft staggered backward. His hand went to his face and came away red. Three deep claw marks ran from his temple to his jaw. His shirt was soaked through on the right side — the bite wound in his torso pulsing with a heat that had nothing to do with blood.

"Damn you," he gasped, pressing his hand against the wound. "Damn you to hell."

His knees hit the cobblestones. The dagger was still buried in the dead man's chest. He tried to pull it free and his hand slipped — too much blood, too little strength. He tried again. Failed.

From above, the iron grating screamed.

The first werewolf launched itself from the fire escape. Three stories. It fell like a stone and landed like a cat — crouched ten feet away, claws clicking on wet cobblestone, yellow eyes fixed on the wounded man kneeling before it.

Bancroft tried to stand. His legs would not cooperate. He looked at the creature — at the intelligence in those yellow eyes, the patience of a predator that knows its prey cannot run — and he did the only thing left to him. He straightened his back, spat blood onto the stones between them, and spoke to it as though addressing something that could understand him.

"You will have to do better than that."

The werewolf snarled. Its muscles coiled.

BANG.

The gunshot exploded through the alley like a whip breaking the silence in half. The werewolf jerked — a silver bullet punching through its chest, the impact snapping its body sideways. It staggered. Took one step. Another.

Then it fell.

It twitched once on the cobblestones and went still, and as it died, the fur began to recede. Bones cracked and reshaped beneath skin that rippled like water finding a new level. Within seconds, the massive creature was gone and in its place lay what it had always been underneath — a man. Naked. Ordinary. A dockworker's build, a dockworker's hands, a face that belonged to a stranger.

Two dead men on wet cobblestones. Neither of them recognizable.

Burton Ward stepped out of the darkness with a smoking revolver still raised, sweeping the alley with the precise, trained economy of a man who had been taught to clear a space before lowering his weapon. He was young — mid-twenties, dark-haired, grim-faced — and his eyes held the particular steadiness of someone who has just killed for the first time and decided to process it later.

He scanned. Two bodies. One wounded man. No further movement.

He lowered the gun.

"How bad?"

Bancroft looked up from his knees. Blood ran freely down the right side of his face, collecting in the lines that five years of this work had carved there. He managed a tired nod. Something between gratitude and exhaustion.

"Your timing," he said, "is impeccable."

Burton was already kneeling beside him, hands moving over the wounds with a clinical efficiency that would have impressed the doctors who could not explain what they would find in those injuries tomorrow.

"What were they?"

"I think they are called werewolves." Bancroft winced as Burton pressed against the torso wound. "The gun?"

"I removed it from the box in your private library."

Bancroft touched the claw marks on his face. His fingers came away trembling.

"Lucky for me."

"Sir?"

"Special bullets. Special bullets."

Burton's jaw tightened. He looked at the two dead men — naked, ordinary, Irish by the look of them, dockworkers by the calluses on their hands — and then back at the man who had raised him since boyhood.

"We need to get you home. Now."

"The dagger—"

"Leave it. Move. Now."

Bancroft let himself be lifted. Burton hooked an arm under his shoulders and took the weight, retrieving the lantern with his free hand. They moved toward the dark end of the alley — two figures becoming one shape in the fog, the lantern's glow shrinking behind them like a candle being carried into a cathedral.

"Burton," Bancroft said. His voice was weakening. "If I do not make it—"

"You will make it." Burton's grip tightened. Fierce. Certain. The certainty of someone who cannot afford to believe otherwise. "I will not lose you."

Behind them, blood pooled on cobblestones between two dead men who had been strangers in life and would be strangers in death. The handle of the silver dagger stood upright in one of them like a grave marker.

Police whistles pierced the fog. One. Then another. Closer.

The lantern's light disappeared into the darkness, and the alley returned to what it had been before Cornelius Bancroft walked into it — empty, silent, and waiting.

Two days later...

Chapter Two — Palm Sunday

I opened the bar and the deceased were already waiting.

That was the thing about owning a public house in Hell's Kitchen — you never really closed. The living came and went by the clock, driven by thirst and loneliness and the ordinary gravity of needing somewhere to be. The dead kept their own hours. They were there when I locked up at night and they were there when I came down in the morning, and the distance between those two moments was filled with voices I could not shut off and sleep I could not find.

It was Palm Sunday. I knew this because Father O'Sullivan had reminded me twice already, each reminder carrying the weight of a man who believed my immortal soul was at stake and my attendance at Mass might save it.

I had not gone.

I had opened the bar instead, because whiskey does not judge you and the departed do not care what day it is.

The fog. Not quite Spring, not quite Winter. The dampness that would not give way — hovering outside the smoked glass windows like a customer who cannot decide whether to come in. Through it, Hell's Kitchen moved the way it always moved: heads down, collars up, the whole neighborhood leaning into the day the way you lean into a wind that never stops blowing. I could hear the paperboy out front, working the sidewalk with more optimism than the headlines deserved.

"Read all about it! Two dead, one missing in Factory District! Mysterious robbery gone wrong!"

Two dead. In this neighborhood, that barely qualified as news. I wiped the bar and tried not to think about the dead people I could actually see.

Murphy was on his usual stool, elbows on the bar, watching me with those guilty eyes that never stopped asking for something he couldn't name. Murphy McDougal. Forty-something. Broad shoulders. The dark blue uniform of the New York City Police Department, which might have commanded respect if not for the three bullet holes in his chest. He had never told me how he died. I had learned not to ask about things ghosts weren't ready to tell — which meant I spent most of my time not asking about anything at all.

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Rose stood near the window, arms crossed, staring at the street with the silent fury of a woman who died angry and planned to stay that way. Rose Van Hayden. Early twenties. Pretty, underneath the rage. She wore a dress that had been burned — not singed, not smoke-damaged, *burned* — and she wore it like armor. Like evidence that no one had bothered to examine.

Mrs. Van Der Berg occupied the center of the room the way she had probably occupied every room she'd ever entered — completely, decoratively, and with the supreme confidence of a woman who had never once doubted she was the most interesting person present. Sixty-something. Elaborately dressed in a Victorian gown that would have been excessive at the opera and absolutely absurd in a Hell's Kitchen public house. She was examining my ceiling beams with the expression of a museum visitor who suspects the collection is beneath her dignity but is determined to be polite about it.

All three of them glowed faintly blue-white. All three of them were mostly transparent. And all three of them started talking at once.

"You look terrible, Sloane. When did you last sleep?"

"He is not wrong. You are killing yourself with this gift."

"Darling, you are practically translucent yourself. One might mistake you for one of us."

"Good morning to you too, Murphy," I said, and reached for a glass.

My hand shook. It did that now — a tremor I couldn't control and couldn't hide, no matter how hard I gripped. I poured a beer anyway. Carefully. Set it at the empty stool at the end of the bar.

"For Larry."

Mrs. Van Der Berg's voice softened. "He does appreciate it, dear. Even if he cannot drink it."

A moment later, the air near the stool thickened, and Larry Livingstone faded into view. Dockworker clothes. Friendly face. Barely visible even by ghost standards, as though he'd never quite committed to being fully present — in life or in death. He looked at the beer. Looked at me. Nodded with a gratitude that made my chest ache, because the gesture was so ordinary and the impossibility of it was so complete.

He could not touch the glass. He could not lift it. Could not drink.

Every morning, I poured it. Every morning, Larry appeared.

Some rituals are not about function. They are about being seen.

The door opened and the smell of the docks walked in ahead of Mr. O'Malley, who wanted whiskey and got it without having to explain why.

"Morning, Miss Duffy."

"Coming right up, Mr. O'Malley."

My voice did the thing it always did when the living were present — went brighter, steadier, a mask I put on with the same efficiency as the apron. You'd never know what was underneath unless you knew to look. And nobody living ever looked.

I reached for the whiskey. As I poured:

"—and I am telling you, that copper on the corner is taking bribes from—"

"Murphy, please." I did not look at O'Malley. "One at a time."

"Eh? You say something, Miss Duffy?"

"Just talking to myself, Mr. O'Malley. Long morning already."

He drank his whiskey. Oblivious to the three dead people watching him. That was my life. Every day. Every hour. Two conversations running side by side, neither one knowing the other existed. The living saw a bartender who talked to herself sometimes. The dead saw the only person in New York City who could hear them. I stood in the middle and tried not to drown in either direction.

"The factory owner's grandson still runs the business," Rose said from the window. Her voice had that flatness it got when she was saying something she'd said before and would say again until someone did something about it. "Still locks the doors during shifts. Nothing has changed."

"I know," I murmured, my back to O'Malley. "I am looking into it."

"Hmm?"

"I said, how is the work at the docks, Mr. O'Malley?"

Then came the small voice. The one that cracked me open every single time.

"Have you... have you seen my mother?"

I turned slowly. My chest tightened the way it always did when Tommy spoke.

He was barely there. Peeking out from behind a chair near the back wall — a boy of ten or twelve in newsboy clothes, thin as a whisper, shy as something that has been hurt too many times to trust easily. He was fainter than the others. Newer to this. Not yet solid in his ghostliness, as if he hadn't fully committed to being dead and was still hoping someone would correct the mistake.

Tommy Harrigan did not understand that he was a ghost. He played the role of a newsboy still — waiting for his mother to come back, the way she promised she would. Every morning, the same question in the same small voice. Every morning, it broke me a little more cleanly than the day before.

I crouched down toward his level. I couldn't help it. The gesture was instinct — maternal, protective, fierce in a way I did not know I could be until a dead child asked me for help.

"Morning, Tommy. Did you sell many papers yesterday?"

He did not answer that. He never did.

"She said she would come back for me."

"Not yet, sweetheart. But I am looking. I promised I would help you find her, did I not?"

His face carried hope the way a cracked cup carries water — carefully, and not for long.

"You will not forget? You will not leave like... like everyone else?"

"Never." The word came out harder than I intended. A vow, not a reassurance. "I promise you, Tommy. I will find her."

He smiled. Barely. Then faded back behind the chair, retreating into whatever space ghosts go when they are not quite ready to be present.

O'Malley finished his whiskey without noticing a woman making promises to empty air.

"Right then. Off to work. Good day, Miss Duffy."

The door closed behind him, and I stood slowly. The effort of rising was visible in how hard I gripped the bar for balance, and I was grateful there was no one living left to see it.

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The next person through the door was not a customer.

Father Brendan O'Sullivan entered The Brass Veil the way weather enters — announced by a shift in pressure that everyone feels before they see the cause. Black priest's suit. White collar. And on his face, the specific exhaustion of a man who loves someone he cannot save.

Murphy muttered from his stool. "Here comes trouble."

"Uncle Brendan." It was not a greeting. It was a wall going up.

"Sloane." His voice held the careful tone of someone who has rehearsed this conversation and knows it will go badly regardless. "We need to talk about this business of yours."

"Not now, Uncle Brendan. I just opened for the day."

"You are making the same mistakes she did." He moved closer. Urgent. Afraid. "Your mother—"

"I am nothing like her."

The words came out sharp enough to cut, and I had said them before — many times, to him, to myself, to the mirror on mornings when the nosebleeds started before breakfast. The sentence was a shield I had forged from shame, and I raised it every time someone spoke my mother's name in that particular tone. The tone that meant *you are becoming what she was*.

"You are practicing the occult." His voice was not angry now but pleading, which was worse. "Taking money from desperate people. Telling them lies about speaking to the departed. It is exactly—"

"I do not lie." My hands gripped the edge of the bar. "I do not take their money. And I do not prey on them as she did."

He stopped. And there it was on his face — the pain of a man standing on both sides of an impossible line. Priest on one side. Godfather on the other. And the girl he'd baptized in the middle, doing something his faith told him was evil and his heart told him was real.

"The Church is clear, Sloane. Spiritualism is of the devil. You are endangering your immortal soul."

"Then my soul is my own concern."

"You are my goddaughter. Your soul is very much my concern."

Silence. The kind that happens when two people who love each other have said all the wrong words and run out of right ones.

Rose spoke from the window, arms folded, defiant. Without taking her eyes off the scene outside. "He does not understand. He cannot see us."

O'Sullivan made his final try. "Stop this. Please. Before it is too late. Before you become exactly what she was."

He turned to leave.

"I am not her." My voice cracked on the last word. "I will never be her."

He paused at the door. Everything in his posture said he wanted to turn back. His hand was on the handle. Twenty-Six years of watching Mick Duffy's daughter grow, five without his best friend sat on those shoulders, and every Sunday he lit a candle for the man and prayed for the girl, and none of it was enough and he knew it wasn't enough and he left anyway.

The door closed.

My eyes were wet. I wiped them quickly — the way you do when you don't want anyone to see, even though the only people watching are dead.

"He loves you, lass." Murphy. Gentle. The gentlest thing a man with three bullet holes in his chest had ever said. "He is just... wrong."

"I know."

The bar was empty of the living now. I stood behind the counter with an old occult book open before me — worn leather, cracked spine, pages soft with age — and turned through it. Searching. Not finding.

My nose bled.

A single drop fell on the page, red spreading into the yellowed paper like a small confession. I wiped it quickly, my hand shaking.

Sloane. This is dangerous.

My father's voice. From nowhere. From the air itself. Gentle, firm, Irish — the voice of a man who had been dead for five years and never once stopped trying to protect me from the things I insisted on doing.

The ghosts could not hear him. Only me. Mick Duffy existed in a different register than the others — not visible, not present in the way they were, just *there*. A voice in my ear that I had learned to trust absolutely, because it was the only voice I'd ever had that asked nothing from me except that I come home safe.

"I know, Da."

If O'Sullivan discovers you—

"He will not. The monks will be at Palm Sunday Mass.

So you have been planning this?

I touched the monk's habit spread across the bar. Brown wool. Hooded. My disguise.

"Yes. I do not have a choice anymore."

Silence from my father. The silence of a parent who knows their child is right and wishes they weren't.

I touched my own face. Felt the hollows beneath my cheekbones. The bones too close to the surface. The exhaustion that had settled into my body the way damp settles into basement walls — permanent, structural, part of the architecture now.

"I am dying, Da."

My voice broke in the quiet of the empty bar, and for a moment I was not a medium or a bartender or a guardian of the dead. I was just a sick, scared, twenty-six-year-old woman with no one living to hold her.

"I cannot sleep. I cannot eat. The voices never stop. Tommy hiding in corners. Murphy going in circles. Rose demanding justice. Mrs. Van Der Berg gossiping endlessly. If I do not learn to control this, it is going to kill me."

All right. His voice. Gentle as a hand on the back of my head, the way he used to do when I was small. *Then be careful. And come home safe.*

"I will."

I picked up the habit. Began putting it on. Through the window, St. Brigid's Cathedral stood against the gray sky — Gothic stone, holding the answers I needed and the man who would never willingly give them to me.

I looked at it. Set my jaw.

"Mind the bar," I told the ghosts. "I will be back."

Mrs. Van Der Berg settled into her chair with the air of a woman preparing for a performance. "Going somewhere you should not, dear?"

I grabbed my shawl. "Probably."

Sloane Duffy

MEDIA

Chapter Three — The Criminal's Prayer

The side entrance of St. Brigid's Cathedral had a lock I could pick in my sleep, which was fortunate, because I was not far from that condition.

I crouched at the door in the brown habit, hood up, working the pick with fingers that were practiced even when they trembled. The lock was old. The Church, despite cataloging threats from every corner of the globe, relied on hardware that was a century out of date.

"Come on," I muttered. "Come on..."

Click.

"Thank You Lord."

I said it the way I always did — with genuine gratitude and zero irony, as if God might reasonably be expected to assist with breaking into His own house.

I slipped inside.

The back stairwell was dark stone, descending into candlelight. My breathing echoed. I kept one hand on the wall and moved quickly — the monks were at Palm Sunday Mass, which gave me a window, but not a wide one.

The monks' archive room was empty when I passed through. Six desks. Six lamps. Each glowed a vivid turquoise—casting a light that felt subtly different from gaslight or candle flame, though I couldn't have told you how. Books, papers, maps everywhere. A mechanical device sat silent in the corner. A spool of paper feeding one end, a long strip of dots and dashes piled haphazardly on the floor.

I walked through confidently. Carrying myself like someone who belonged, because confidence was the best disguise I owned. Better than the habit.

"As I passed one of the desks, I saw another strip of that coiled paper, partially inserted in yet another unfamiliar machine. This one appeared to translate the tape into something I could read. Westinghouse. I acknowledged the name stamped on the housing. He is a famous inventor like Thomas Edison. A printed page sat in its output tray. It caught my eye."

...werewolf attack in Manhattan... victim a prominent citizen...

I slowed. Read it again. Kept walking.

"Werewolves?" I whispered to myself. "In New York? They ARE real?"

A problem for another day. I had my own monsters in which to deal.

The vault door was heavy iron, ancient lock. I discovered this during my last excursion. It will be my first trip through.

I knelt. Lock picked out.

"You would think they would improve their locks."

Click.

"Thank You Lord."

The criminal's prayer, second verse. I pushed the door open.

What lay beyond took my breath.

Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Hundreds of candles. A Gothic stone chamber that seemed to exist in its own small century, removed from the city above the way the dead are removed from the living — present but unreachable. Ancient leather-bound volumes lined every wall, their spines cracked with age, their pages holding secrets the Church had been collecting for longer than Hell's Kitchen had existed.

I stood small among the towering shelves and felt, for the first time in months, something other than exhaustion.

"Sweet Mary," I breathed. "They have been documenting it. All of it."

I pulled a random volume. Opened it. Handwritten Latin. Sixteenth century. Vampire accounts.

Vampyre of Prague... exorcised by holy water... staked through the heart...

I closed it. Replaced it. My hands were shaking again but not from exhaustion — from the weight of what surrounded me. Every shelf. Every volume. Centuries of the impossible, documented and cataloged by men who believed.

"It is all real," I said to no one. "Not just the dead. Everything."

I moved through the stacks. Searching. Scanning titles I could barely read. Then I found it — a thick leather tome: *De Occulta Philosophia — Actualis*.

I opened it. Latin text, but God bless whoever had drawn the diagrams — symbols, the Planchette design, Celtic knotwork. The same shapes that decorated the necklace at my throat.

"Pictures," I said. "Thank God for pictures."

I carried the heavy book to a research table. Sat. Opened it. Leaned over the pages and began trying to translate what I could, tracing the diagrams with my finger, fighting the Latin, fighting my own exhaustion, fighting the tremors in my hands.

I was so absorbed that I did not hear the footsteps on the stairs.

I did not hear the iron door creak.

I did not hear anything at all until a voice spoke behind me — firm, authoritative, and belonging to a man who clearly believed he had every right to be here and that I did not.

"The archive is closed. You should not be here."

I stiffened. My hand went to the Planchette at my throat — instinct, comfort, the way a child reaches for a blanket in the dark.

I did not turn around.

"You do not belong here," the voice said. Closer now.

I turned.

He was young. Mid-twenties. Dark hair. Dark clothes. More handsome than was necessary. A face that carried the particular sternness of someone who has been trained to lead and has not yet learned when not to. He stood ten feet away with the posture of a man who expected to be obeyed and the eyes of a man who was desperately afraid of something he couldn't control.

He looked at me — at the monk's habit, at the blonde hair that had no business being inside a hood, at the book open on the table behind me — and his expression shifted from authority to confusion.

"You are not a monk."

I lifted my chin. "Obviously not."

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Chapter Four — The Stranger in the Vault

"You are trespassing," he said, stepping closer. "How did you even get in here?"

"Carefully."

It was not the answer he wanted. I could see that in the way his jaw tightened — the particular frustration of a man accustomed to being taken seriously encountering someone who was not going to give him the satisfaction. He was well-dressed beneath the dark coat. Not working-class. Not of Hell's Kitchen. Not of my universe. From the cut of his clothes to the way he stood — spine straight, shoulders back, the posture of someone who had been taught that the world would make room for him if he carried himself correctly.

He was about to learn that presence alone is not always adequate to carry the day.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" He was advancing now, genuinely angry. "This is Church property. Sacred ground. Breaking in here is—"

"I know what it is."

"Then you know I should summon Father O'Sullivan immediately."

The name hit me like cold water. The little bit of color I had left faded instantly. He stopped. He recoiled — almost imperceptibly.

"Please do not."

He studied me. I could practically see the calculations happening behind his eyes — the same way I calculated when a patron had overindulged, or when Murphy was building toward something he couldn't say. This man was reading me.

"Why should I not?"

I hesitated. The truth was a risk. But then, everything I did these days was a risk.

"Father O'Sullivan. He is my godfather. Brendan is his first name."

Confusion crossed his face. He looked at me again — young woman, clearly unwell, clearly terrified beneath the defiance, standing in a monk's habit in a forbidden vault at ten o'clock on Palm Sunday morning — and I watched him trying to fit the pieces together.

"If he is your godfather, why are you breaking into his archive? Why not simply ask for access?"

The laugh that came out of me was not pretty. "Because he would never give it to me."

"Why not?"

"The Church condemns what I do."

That hung in the air between us. He did not ask what I did. Not yet. But I could sense the question forming.

"No," he said, shaking his head as if trying to clear it. "You do not have permission. You broke in. That makes you a criminal."

"I may be a thief, but I am not a criminal."

"What is the difference?"

"Intent. I do not steal for greed. I steal to survive."

He stared at me. I stared back. My hands were shaking worse now and I gripped the edge of the table to hide it.

"Survive?" He was genuinely confused. Not performing confusion — actually lost. "What does that even mean?"

"It means exactly what I said."

He ran a hand through his hair. Frustrated. Then tried another approach, and it was certainly the wrong one.

"Women do not belong here. You should not even be in this building without a male guardian, much less breaking into forbidden—"

"What are YOU doing?"

He stopped. Blinked.

"I... what?"

"You are here. In the forbidden archive. What are you doing here?"

"I have permission. Father O'Sullivan gave me—"

"So you have a key and I have lock picks. We both got in. The difference is you asked and I did not."

Silence. I pressed it.

"The Church hoards knowledge that people are dying for. If they will not share it freely, then I will take what I need."

He stared at me for a long moment. Something shifted in his expression — not agreement, exactly, but recognition. The recognition of a man who knows desperation when he sees it, because he is carrying his own.

"What exactly do you need from these books?"

My hand went to the Planchette. The gesture was unconscious — I always touched it when I was frightened, the way other women clutch a rosary or grip their own wrists. The carved wood was warm against my fingers. The stone at its center caught candlelight that wasn't quite candlelight.

"You do not want to know."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it is true."

He studied my face. I studied his. And beneath the stern Fifth Avenue exterior, I saw what I had been too defensive to notice before — he was afraid. Not of me. Of something else. A sense of urgency had brought him to a forbidden archive in a cathedral basement on Palm Sunday morning with a key he hadn't needed, because a woman with lock picks had beaten him there. He was on his own mission.

"Try me," he said.

"Why are you here?" I asked. "What are you researching?"

The wall went up. Not all the way — men like him don't lower walls, they lower drawbridges — but enough.

"Someone I care for has been attacked. By something unnatural. I am trying to find out what it was. How to cure it."

My expression softened before I could stop it. Recognition.

"So you are researching the supernatural."

"Yes."

"Not academic curiosity. Survival."

"Exactly."

Something shifted between us. Not trust — not yet —possibilities. Two people standing in a forbidden room, both desperate, both running out of time, both willing to break rules for the people they loved.

"Help me identify what attacked him," he said. Formal. Offering. "Tell me what you know about the supernatural. In exchange, I will not report you to Father O'Sullivan."

"Why would you make that bargain? You said yourself I am a criminal."

"Because we are both desperate. We both seek answers the Church has locked away. We are both fighting for someone we love." A pause. "We can help each other. Or we can both fail alone."

I looked at his face. Saw genuine desperation. Genuine need. Not performance. Not a Fifth Avenue gentleman playing at charity. Just a man running out of time, the way I was running out of time, grasping at the closest thing that looked like it might help.

"All right. I will help you identify what attacked your mentor."

I did not take his offered hand. But I nodded. Agreement.

"But I am not giving back the stone."

The corner of his mouth turned up. Barely. "I would not expect you to."

Chapter Five — The Confession

He deserved more than a nod. He had offered not to destroy me, and in return I had agreed to help save a stranger's life. The least I owed him was the truth about why I was standing in a forbidden vault at all.

"I can communicate with the dead."

The silence was deafening. He was deciding whether I was dangerous or simply insane.

"You communicate with the dead," he said carefully. The way you speak to someone holding a weapon they may not know how to use.

"I see them. I hear them. They speak to me and I answer. Every day. Every moment. They never stop."

He studied my face — the exhaustion, the trembling, the dark circles that no amount of sleep would fix because sleep was exactly what I could not do.

"How long have you had this gift?"

"Gift?" The laugh was bitter. "You call this a gift?"

"How long?"

I looked away. "Not long. But it has gone out of control."

"What do you mean?"

"I cannot shut it off. I cannot rest. They are always there. Always talking. Always needing." My voice was breaking and I could not stop it. "I cannot sleep. I can barely eat. It is killing me."

My hands shook. Badly. I held them out toward him — not reaching for him, just showing him. Evidence. The tremor was violent enough that neither of us could pretend it was nerves.

He watched. And I could see the calculation shifting — from suspicion to something more dangerous. Consequential. Belief.

"You are not telling me the truth," he said quietly. "Not all of it. How did you acquire this gift? You said you have not had it long. What happened?"

Shame. Visible, physical shame, the kind that sits on your face like a bruise. It was simply a reaction that I could not control. I did not like it. Particularly in his presence.

"My mother held séances. In the back of a tavern. People paid her. Desperate people. Grieving people." I forced the words out. "It was all fake. She used neighborhood gossip. Cold reading. Theater. She took their money and gave them lies."

"And yet you knew."

"I knew. I said nothing. I watched her prey on them and I did nothing."

His face softened. Not the way I expected. Not with judgment — with recognition. As if he understood what it cost to carry a sin you committed by standing still.

"How did this happen to you? If your mother was a fraud, how do you have this gift?"

My hand went to the Planchette. Held it up. The carved wood. The Celtic knotwork. The stone at its center glowing faintly in the candlelight of the vault.

"This necklace was hers. A prop for her séances. It has a setting. Empty. For a stone."

I touched the center.

"I found a crystal. Beautiful. It looked like it would fit. So I pressed it in. Just to see. Just because it seemed right."

My voice dropped to a whisper.

"It activated. The moment I pressed it in, everything changed. I could see them. The dead. All of them. Everywhere."

His eyes widened.

"The crystal. Where did you get it?"

I could not lie to him. Not after everything. Not standing in the basement of the place I had stolen it from.

"I stole it. From here. From the Church equipment vault."

He recoiled. "You stole sacred Church property. You activated this with stolen goods."

I held out both hands. They shook violently. Uncontrollable.

"Look at me. Look at what it is doing to me."

He looked.

"It is killing me. Every day I grow weaker. I cannot control it. I cannot turn it off." I dropped my hands. Exhausted. "So yes. I stole it. And I would steal it again. Because without it, I was alone. With it, I am dying. But at least I can hear my father's voice."

The vault was silent. Candles flickered. Centuries of documented horrors stood sentinel from their shelves.

"My family is all gone," I said. The words came tumbling now — the dam had burst. "I have no one. My father was a policeman. An honest one. He was killed. Murdered. I tried to reach him through my mother's board. Nothing worked. Because I did not have the stone. I was desperate and alone and I just wanted to hear his voice one more time."

I stopped. Breathing hard. Too much said. Too much laid bare. To a complete stranger.

The unnecessarily handsome man was quiet for a long time. When he spoke, his voice held no judgment. Only a sadness that mirrored my own.

"What you are doing... the Church teaches it as occult. Forbidden. Dangerous to your soul."

I looked down. Could not meet his eyes.

"Then I will answer for it when I am dead."

Chapter Six — Pictures

We sat at opposite sides of the heavy table. Ancient books spread between us. Candles burning. The cautious beginning of an alliance that neither of us had intended.

"What is your name?" he asked. Formal. As if introductions in a forbidden vault were a perfectly normal social convention.

"Sloane. Sloane Duffy."

"Burton Ward."

Brief nod. Back to reading.

"Sloane," he said, without looking up. "How Irish of your parents."

I smiled. Did not look up either.

He found the werewolf texts before I did — his Latin was better, which he did not need to announce but which was immediately obvious in the speed at which he turned pages.

"Lycanthropy transmitted through bite," he read aloud. "Victim transforms at full moon. Curse spreads."

He looked up. Horror dawning.

"Full moon. Five days. If he was bitten..."

I did not know what that meant yet. But I watched his face and saw a man doing arithmetic with someone's life. I thought to myself. That would be Good Friday, two days before Easter. That was all I was able to process at that moment. Another weight on a scale that was not balancing in my favor.

I opened a thick volume and stared at dense Latin text that might as well have been Greek.

"Of course," I sighed.

"What is wrong?"

"Latin. Complicated Latin. I can read simple phrases. Church Latin. This is scholarly text..." I showed him a page — dense, archaic, impenetrable. "This might as well be Greek. I was rather hoping there would be more pictures."

"Illustrations."

"Illustrations."

He stared at me.

"I hope this does not become habit," I said.

"What is that?"

"Correcting me."

Then — despite everything, despite the gravity of it all, despite the dying mentor and the stolen stone and the five hundred years of supernatural records towering above us — the corner of his mouth turned up again.

"Pictures."

"I am a visual learner."

A moment. We were almost laughing. The tension cracked just enough to let something human through.

"Those books on the lower shelf," he said, pointing. "They appear to have been handbound by the monks. Translations, likely. Simple Latin or even English annotations. Try those."

"Thank you."

"We both need answers. Language should not be an obstacle."

I found the shelf. Found readable English notes. A weight lifted.

Time passed. Pages turned. The candles burned lower.

"You said claws," I said, thinking aloud. "Teeth. Inhuman strength. At night. The wounds will not heal?"

"Precisely. The doctors cannot explain it. Nothing works. The fever comes and goes. He is weakening."

I cross-referenced what I was reading with what he was telling me, and the pieces fit with the horrible precision of a diagnosis you do not want to confirm.

"Certainly a werewolf. This passage confirms what you are telling me. The bite transmits a curse. Wounds resist normal healing." I looked up. "Your mentor was bitten?"

"Yes. On the torso. Deep."

"Then he is cursed. Lycanthropy. He will transform at the next full moon unless..."

I trailed off. Now I understood the horrible irony. The full moon will appear on Good Friday. The scale of justice has a horrible sense of irony.

The candle nearest me guttered and I moved the book closer to another, leaning in, my nose nearly touching the page.

Then I found it.

"Here," I said, my finger on the passage. *"Killing the alpha werewolf breaks the curse for all victims. The alpha's death severs all bonds. All who were bitten are freed instantly."*

Burton stared at me.

"Killing the alpha," he said slowly. "The one who created them."

"The source. We must find whoever turned those two men who attacked your mentor.

...and kill him."

The words settled over us like a fog of their own. I could feel the weight of them pressing down — not just on Burton, whose face had gone gray with the implications, but on me. Because I had spoken them. And speaking them made them real.

"We must find whoever turned them," Burton said quietly. "And kill him. In five days."

"I am sorry. But that is what the book says. It is the only cure."

He looked at the bed — or rather, looked past me toward some distant point where his mentor lay dying, and I recognized the expression because I had worn it myself. The expression of someone calculating what they are willing to do for love, and finding the answer terrifying.

"Then we find him. And we do what must be done."

Chapter Seven — The Cost

My eyes were closing. Overwhelmed. I could feel the book pulling me down the way gravity pulls water — inevitably, patiently, without caring what you had planned.

"Miss Duffy?"

I jerked awake. The page had imprinted itself on my cheek. Burton was half-standing, alarmed.

"Miss Duffy, when did you last sleep?"

"I... what?"

"When did you last eat? Sleep?"

I rubbed my face. The candle wax had pooled. Time had passed. I could not account for it.

"I cannot remember."

His eyes moved over my face — the dark circles, the trembling, the pallid skin — and something in his expression changed. Not pity. Something quieter and more dangerous than pity.

"I understand," he said. "Your struggle is real."

He did not ask me to explain. He did not demand proof. He simply looked at me — at the evidence written on my body — and believed.

Nobody had done that before. Not the living, anyway.

Chapter Eight — Propriety

"We need to be certain," I said. "We need to see your mentor. This is too important to rely on books alone."

He hesitated. The drawbridge raising.

"Bring you to his home? That would be highly irregular."

"Your mentor is dying. We have five days. Do you truly care about what is regular right now?"

His face hardened with resolve. The same face I had seen ten minutes ago threatening to report me to my godfather was now deciding to bring me home.

"You are right. We do not have time for propriety."

He stood.

"Come with me. We will examine him together. If you can confirm it is a werewolf, then we know what we are fighting."

I stood. Grabbed the book. The stolen, forbidden, Church-property book.

"Then we find the cure. Together."

We looked at each other across the table. In the candlelight, surrounded by centuries of documented horrors, two people who had met twenty minutes ago as adversaries made a wordless agreement to trust each other with everything they had.

It was not much. But it was more than either of us had walked in with.

Chapter Nine — Two New Yorks

We moved toward the door. Side by side now. Something had shifted and neither of us was pretending it hadn't.

"Thank you," I said quietly. "Thank you for not going to Father O'Sullivan."

"We have an agreement, Miss Duffy. I keep my word."

I stopped. Pulled off the monk's habit. Underneath: cream blouse, dark skirt, apron. Working-class. Authentic. Nothing to hide behind anymore.

Burton turned and saw me properly for the first time. Our eyes met briefly. He looked away — proper.

"You are taking the book?" he said, noticing the heavy tome under my arm.

"I might need to reference it. When we examine your mentor."

A slight pause. Then a nod. "Of course. Logical."

He did not object. Just like that, the man with the key had become an accomplice to the woman with the lock picks. I slipped my hand into my skirt pocket and touched the brass goggles I had taken from the equipment vault on a previous visit — stolen Church equipment, hidden, safe. I glanced at Burton. He was looking the other way.

Good.

"This way," he said, quiet and urgent. "Quickly. Before the monks return from Mass."

We climbed the back stairwell together. Coordinated. Trusting. It felt strange, moving in step with someone living. I had been walking alone for so long that the presence of another body beside mine — warm, breathing, casting a shadow — felt almost as impossible as the ghosts.

Outside, a horse-drawn carriage waited. Elegant. Expensive. A driver in formal livery sat atop.

I stopped. Stared.

"That is yours?"

"My employer's. He keeps several."

He opened the door for me. Gentleman's manners. Automatic. The kind of courtesy that comes from training so deep it operates without thought — which meant it was genuine, or so practiced that the difference no longer mattered.

"Miss Duffy?"

I clutched the stolen book tighter. Stepped up into the carriage — awkward, uncomfortable, navigating skirts and a doorframe designed for women who did this every day. I had never been in a carriage. Not once in twenty-six years of living in the same city where carriages passed my bar every hour.

Inside: cushioned seats. Clean glass windows. The smell of leather and something floral — probably whatever they used to polish the wood. A small, enclosed world that moved through the city without touching it.

Burton sat across from me. Comfortable. At ease. His world.

I sat as rigidly as I could, holding the book against my chest like a shield.

Silence filled the carriage. Uncomfortable. Overwhelming. The exhaustion on the cusp of taking hold again.

"Have you always lived in Hell's Kitchen?" he asked. Polite. Reaching for something safe.

"Yes."

"It is a... vibrant neighborhood."

I finally looked at him. "It is a poor neighborhood, Mr. Ward. You do not need to pretend otherwise."

He looked chastened. Good.

"I apologize. I did not mean to condescend."

Silence again. I softened. Slightly.

"It is home. My home. I know every face. Every street. Every ghost."

He nodded. Understanding — or trying to. The carriage rocked gently over cobblestones as we crossed from one New York into another, and I watched through the window as Hell's Kitchen faded behind us and something else took its place. Wider streets. Cleaner stone. Gas lamps that actually worked. Buildings that didn't lean. People who weren't leaning either.

I did not belong here. Every block made that clearer.

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Chapter Ten — Fifth Avenue

The carriage stopped before a building that made me forget how to breathe.

Four stories of Gothic Revival stone. Marble steps. Iron railings. Windows that probably cost more than my bar was worth. It sat on Fifth Avenue the way Fifth Avenue sat on everything — heavily, permanently, with the unshakable confidence of money that had been money for a very long time.

"Sweet Mother Mary," I whispered.

Burton exited first. Offered his hand to help me down. I took it because the step was high and my legs were shaking. I released it immediately.

"This is where you work?"

"This is where I live. Mr. Bancroft raised me. He is more than employer."

"He is family."

"Yes."

The front door opened. An elderly butler stood in the marble entrance hall — distinguished, formal, British to the last thread of his immaculate suit. His eyes moved to me the way a jeweler's eyes move to a stone of uncertain quality. Assessed. Classified. Dismissed.

"Mr. Ward. Welcome home."

"Jameson. This is Miss Duffy. She is here to attend to Mr. Bancroft."

"Indeed, sir."

Two words. Both of them cold enough to preserve meat.

We entered the marble hall. Three servants were visible in doorways — two maids and a footman — and every one of them stared at me with the particular expression reserved for things that have been tracked in on someone's shoe.

"Who is that?" one maid whispered.

"Some Hell's Kitchen woman, by the look of her."

"What is Mr. Ward thinking, bringing her type here?"

I heard all of it. My face hardened. My chin lifted. I was used to being looked at — the dead looked at me constantly. But the dead looked at me with need. These people looked at me with contempt, and contempt was a different kind of haunting.

Burton turned sharply. I had not expected the anger.

"Miss Duffy is here to help Mr. Bancroft. You will treat her with respect."

Silence. The servants' faces went blank. The butler's remained exactly as it was — unchanged, because men like Jameson do not allow their expressions to be influenced by men like Burton. They simply wait.

"That will be all, Jameson. We are not to be disturbed."

"As you wish, Mr. Ward."

Burton turned to me. His expression softened. Guilt visible.

"I apologize for their rudeness."

"I am used to it."

Something crossed his face when I said that — a flash of pain that surprised me, because it was not pity. It was anger. Anger that I had to be used to it. Anger at a world that had taught a woman to expect cruelty so thoroughly that she armored herself with acceptance.

He said nothing. But he did not forget it. I could tell.

Chapter Eleven — The Dying Man

He stopped at a bedroom door. Gripping the handle. Not opening it.

"He may not be lucid. The fever comes and goes. He may say things that do not make sense."

"I understand."

"He is all I have." His voice dropped. Vulnerability cracking through the Fifth Avenue composure like water through stone. "The only family I have ever known."

I recognized that tone. I heard it every morning in my own voice, talking to ghosts.

"Then we will save him. Together."

He opened the door.

The room smelled of medicine and something worse — something beneath the medicine that the medicine was trying to hide. Ornate wallpaper. Heavy curtains drawn against daylight that would not help. A wealthy man's room, full of beautiful things that could not save him.

Cornelius Bancroft lay in a large bed surrounded by medicine bottles. Late forties. Three deep claw marks scored the right side of his face — savage, precise, the kind of wounds that told a story even without words. Bandaged torso. Pale. Weak. The eyes of a man who had been formidable once and knew he was running out of time to be formidable again.

He saw me. Confusion.

"Who... Burton, who is this woman?"

"Someone who might be able to help, Cornelius."

I approached the bed. Set the book down. I was not nervous — I had spent three years dealing with the dead. A dying man was at least alive, which meant he could answer questions and provide information, which put him ahead of most of my clientele.

"Mr. Bancroft, my name is Sloane Duffy. I need to examine your injuries. May I?"

"Examine? Are you a nurse?"

"Something like that."

I leaned over him. And as I did, the Planchette around my neck began to glow.

Turquoise light. Bright. Brighter than I had ever seen it in the bar. The stone was reacting to something — something in the wounds, something in the curse that lived in them. The light pulsed gently against my collarbone, warm and urgent.

My eyes widened. Whatever was killing this man, it was not natural. The stone knew it. I knew it.

The tidal wave of fatigue returned. I steadied myself against the bedpost, gripping it tightly. If I looked as bad as I felt, nobody seemed to notice.

I recovered. After a slight pause, I asked. "May I see the bite wound?"

Burton carefully pulled back the bandage on Bancroft's torso. I leaned closer.

The bite was deep. Infected — but not with any infection a doctor would recognize. The edges of the wound were dark, almost black, and the skin around it had a feverish heat I could feel without touching it. The Planchette glowed brighter still.

I said quietly. "The curse is active."

I looked up at Burton.

"It is just as the book described. Werewolf bite. The curse has taken hold."

"But it can be cured?" His voice was desperate. Pleading. "There must be—"

Bancroft stirred. His hand grabbed weakly at Burton's sleeve.

"Burton... the attackers... did you...?"

"We killed them both, Cornelius. You are safe."

Bancroft's eyes unfocused. Fever rising. He was slipping.

"The police... they identified... Dock workers... they said... Morrigan's men attacked me..."

The name landed in my chest like a fist.

Burton and I looked at each other. Alert.

"Morrigan?" I said carefully, leaning closer to the bed. "Declan Morrigan?"

Bancroft's voice was barely there now. "Dock boss... Irish... controls everything... the docks... smuggling... Tammany protection..."

His eyes closed. Gone — to sleep or to fever, I could not tell which.

I straightened. I was shaking, and for once it had nothing to do with the stone.

"I know who Declan Morrigan is."

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Chapter Twelve — The Only Cure

Burton paced. Hand through his hair. The composure that had survived servants' cruelty and my criminal trespassing was finally cracking.

"There must be a cure. There must be something. Silver. Holy water. A ritual. Anything."

"Mr. Ward."

He did not hear me. "Five days. There has to be—"

"Mr. Ward. Burton."

He stopped. Looked at me.

I was reading the book. My face, I imagine, showed horror.

"The curse cannot be broken by silver alone," I read aloud. "Holy water may burn the beast but will not cure the victim. Exorcism is ineffective."

I looked up.

"There is only one way to break a werewolf curse."

"What? What is it?"

"Killing the alpha werewolf breaks the curse for all victims. The alpha's death severs all bonds. All who were bitten are freed instantly."

He stared.

"Killing the alpha. The one who created them."

"The source." I closed the book. "We must find whoever turned those two men who attacked your mentor. And kill him. In five days."

The room was silent except for Bancroft's ragged breathing and the ticking of a clock that seemed much louder than it had any right to be.

Then Bancroft's eyes opened. Lucid. Focused. Cutting through the fever with a clarity that startled both of us.

"Burton. Listen."

Burton was at his side immediately.

"Morrigan. It has to be Morrigan. He runs everything on the waterfront. Controls the docks. Tammany protection. Untouchable."

"The alpha. You think Morrigan is the alpha werewolf."

"His men. The two who attacked. I recognized the tattoos. Dock guild marks. Morrigan's boys."

His eyes closed again. Slipping away.

I was standing very still. My hands gripped the edge of the book so hard my knuckles were white.

"Miss Duffy?" Burton's voice was careful. "You know this man?"

"Declan Morrigan runs the docks. Ruthless."

My voice was doing something I could not control. Thickening. Breaking apart at the edges.

"My father was investigating systematic theft at the docks. Morrigan's operation. He was lured there. Five years ago."

I could not finish the sentence properly. My hand went to my mouth.

"They killed him."

Burton's face showed horror. And then understanding. And then something that looked like the first stage of a rage that would take days to finish building.

"The same man who is killing your mentor," I said, and I could hear my own voice as if from a great distance, steady and shaking at the same time, "murdered my father."

Chapter Thirteen — **Together**

We stood on opposite sides of Bancroft's bed, looking at each other over a dying man's body, and the silence between us held more than either of us could say.

Shared enemy. Shared loss. Two strangers who had met as adversaries ninety minutes ago, now bound by the same name.

"We will stop him," Burton said. Quiet. Fierce. "Together."

I nodded slowly. My jaw was set. But my face — my face was doing something else. Because the word *together* carried a weight I had not been prepared for. I had been alone with this for five years. Alone with the ghosts, alone with the stone, alone with my father's murder and the knowledge that the man who did it walked free on docks I could see from my window.

And now someone was standing across from me and saying *together* and meaning it.

"Together," I said.

But Burton saw my hesitation. He was better at reading people than I had given him credit for.

"Finding him will be enough," he said. "I will do what must be done."

Relief flooded through me. And with it, guilt — because being relieved that someone else would bear the burden of killing a man was its own kind of cowardice, and I knew it.

"I will help however I can," I said. "Just not... not that."

He accepted it. Simply. Without judgment. "I understand."

We stood there a moment longer. United by a shared enemy. A partnership deepened by grief neither of us had expected to share.

Then we left the room, and I did not look back at the dying man in the bed, because looking back would have meant acknowledging that we were leaving him to fate, and faith in fate was a luxury I had not been able to afford for a very long time.

Chapter Fourteen — What He Is Not Telling Me

The Brass Veil looked exactly the way I had left it, which should not have surprised me and somehow did. After everything — the vault, the confession, the carriage, the mansion, the dying man, the name *Morrigan* sitting in my chest like a stone — I had half expected the bar to have changed. To have registered the earthquake that had just torn through my life and rearranged itself accordingly.

But no. The gas lamps still glowed amber. The wooden floor still creaked in the same places. The smoked glass windows still turned the outside world soft and uncertain. And the ghosts were still exactly where I had left them — because ghosts do not have anywhere else to be.

I came through the door clutching the stolen book, and every transparent head in the room turned toward me.

"Sloane." Murphy, off his stool, concerned. "Where have you been? You were gone all day."

"You look worse than usual." Rose. Sharp as always. "What happened?"

"You went somewhere dangerous, did you not?" Mrs. Van Der Berg, settling back in her chair with the satisfied air of a woman whose suspicions have been confirmed. "I can always tell."

I moved behind the bar. Set the book down. My hands were still shaking. Everything was still shaking.

"I went to the Church archive. I found information."

Murphy's eyes widened. "You broke into the Church? Again? Sloane, if O'Sullivan discovers".

"I was careful."

Rose crossed her arms. "What did you learn?"

I looked at them — my ghosts, my found family, the dead people who had become the closest thing to friends I had — and I told them the truth.

"I learned that werewolves are real. The Church has been tracking them for centuries."

The ghosts exchanged glances. The kind of glance that means someone has said something obvious and no one wants to be the first to point it out.

Mrs. Van Der Berg did not have that problem.

"Well, of course werewolves are real, dear. I thought everyone knew that."

Tommy appeared from behind a chair. Shy. Hopeful. The same expression he always wore — the expression of a child who has been told to wait and is still waiting and does not yet understand that waiting might be all there is.

"Miss Sloane? Did you... did you find anything about my mother?"

My heart. Every time.

I crouched to his level. "I am so sorry, sweetheart. I was researching something else today. But I have not forgotten you."

"You will still look for her?"

"Always." Fierce. A promise that cost me something every time I made it, because I did not know if I could keep it. "I will always look for her, Tommy. Until I find her. That is my promise to you."

He smiled. That small, fragile smile that lasted about as long as a match flame. Then he faded back.

I stood. Gripped the bar. Breathed.

Murphy drifted closer. His face had changed — the guilt was still there, it was always there, but something else had joined it. Fear.

"Sloane. A word. Private."

I followed him to the corner, away from the others. Away from the few living patrons who had wandered in while I was gone and were now nursing drinks in blissful ignorance of the dead people moving around them.

"What is it, Murphy?"

"Why this sudden interest in werewolves?"

"I was distracted."

"You are going down a dangerous path with this."

I studied his face. The fear was real — not the casual anxiety of a ghost worried about his medium, but something deeper. Something that went to the marrow of whatever ghosts have instead of bones.

"What do you know about Declan Morigan?"

Murphy flinched. An actual flinch — his transparent form flickering the way ghosts do when something hits too close.

"I worked for him. When I was alive. Took his money. Made certain the NYPD never got close."

"What is he really, Murphy? What is he capable of?"

He stepped backward. His eyes — haunted even by ghost standards — looked at something I could not see. Some memory that lived behind them and would not leave.

"I cannot. I... there are things I saw. Things I did. I cannot speak of them."

"Murphy, please. If you know something that can help—"

"I know too much." His voice dropped. "That is why I am dead, Sloane. Because I learned things I should not have."

I opened my mouth to press him. He cut me off.

"Two of Morigan's men were killed. Killed by a hunter. A professional."

I turned away. Cleaning a glass. Trying to look casual for the living patrons.

"Yes. Burton and his mentor killed them. They were defending themselves."

Murphy's hand — transparent, unable to touch — reached toward my shoulder and passed through.

"Sloane. Sweetheart." His voice shook. "There are worse fates than death. Far worse."

I stopped cleaning. Looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

"There are worse fates than death. Far worse."

"You keep saying that. What are you talking about?"

He looked directly at me. His eyes held something I had never seen in them before — not guilt, not sorrow, but *terror*. The terror of a man who has seen the bottom of the darkness and knows exactly how far down it goes.

He would not elaborate. Could not. He turned away.

"Murphy? Murphy, if you know something—"

He faded into shadow. Gone.

I stood alone behind the bar, holding a glass I had forgotten to put down.

"What is he not telling me?"



Chapter Fifteen — The Moral Divide

The door opened later that evening and Burton Ward walked into my world for the second time. He paused just inside — taking in the bar the way a man takes in a foreign country. The warm amber gaslight. The worn wooden tables. The mismatched chairs. The whiskey-stained bar top and the dusty chandelier and the old boxing poster on the brick wall. Everything authentic. Everything lived-in. Everything the opposite of marble halls and formal livery.

Several patrons turned. Whispered.

"Who is that, then?"

"Fifth Avenue, by the look of him. What's he want with Sloane?"

I wiped my hands on my apron. "Mr. Ward. What are you doing here?"

"Miss Duffy." Formal. Quiet. Out of place but unwilling to show it. "I needed to speak with you. About Morigan."

I glanced at the living patrons. They were listening with the dedicated attention of people pretending not to.

"Perhaps somewhere more private?"

The ghosts were all watching. Of course they were.

"Oh my," Mrs. Van Der Berg murmured to the others, leaning forward in her chair. "How very interesting."

"What does he want with her?" Murphy. Suspicious. Protective.

"Nothing good comes from wealthy men in Hell's Kitchen," Rose said.

I led Burton to the corner booth. Shadowed. A single candle between us. The most private space in the bar, which was not very private at all.

The ghosts drifted closer. Watching from a respectful distance. Except Mrs. Van Der Berg, who settled into an adjacent chair with the air of a woman taking her seat at the theater.

"Should we...?" Murphy gestured vaguely.

"Let them talk," Rose said. "But stay close. I do not trust him."

"Oh, I am absolutely staying," Mrs. Van Der Berg said. "This is far too interesting to miss."

Burton leaned forward across the table. Urgent. Quiet.

"Four days until the full moon. We need to find Morrigan immediately. We need to find a way to get to him."

"I might know someone," I said. "Someone who knew Morrigan when he was alive. He may be able to tell us where he can be found."

"Who?"

"A friend. Someone I trust. He worked with Morrigan. Took his money."

Burton's eyes narrowed. "A corrupt policeman?"

"A dead one. He may be willing to help."

He absorbed that. Accepted it. The man who two hours ago had caught me stealing from a church was now prepared to take intelligence from a corrupt dead cop. Desperation is a great equalizer.

"If he can get us to Morrigan, I will take any help. Even from the corrupt dead."

"I will ask him tonight. He visits the bar most evenings. He may know Morrigan's routine. Where he can be found alone."

"Good. Yes. We work together. Find him. And then..."

He trailed off. The sentence had an ending, and neither of us wanted to say it.

"And then you do what you have to," I said quietly.

Silence. The candle between us flickered.

"Yes."

I looked down at my hands on the table. They trembled. I gripped them together, trying to force them still.

"Burton, I..." My voice was small. I hated how small it was. "I do not know if I can."

"Can what?"

I forced myself to look up. Meet his eyes.

"I cannot help you kill him. I help the dead find peace. I do not create more of them. That is not who I am."

He stared. Disbelief. Then something worse — hurt.

"But we must. It is the only way to save Cornelius. You know this. The book said—"

"I know. I know we must. I know what the book said." The words were tumbling now, anguished and urgent. "But I cannot be the one to — I cannot kill. Even him. Even for this."

"You will not help me? When it matters most?"

"That is not—"

"He killed your father." Controlled anger rising. "He is killing my mentor. The man who raised me. And you will not—"

"I will help you FIND him." I interrupted with a fierceness that surprised us both. "I will help you plan. Research. Investigate. I will get you Murphy's information. Everything. Everything except deliver the killing blow. I cannot cross that line."

My hand reached across the table. Stopped just short of touching his. Pleading.

"Please understand. I see death every day. I live with the dead. I know what it costs. I know what it takes from you. And I know what it would do to me. To my soul." My voice was breaking now, and I let it, because breaking was more honest than holding. "I cannot become that. I cannot become someone who creates the dead I spend my life helping."

Burton pulled back. Walls going up. Cold.

"Then I will do it alone."

Long silence. Painful.

My eyes burned. But I did not argue. Could not.

Then something shifted in his face. He looked at me — really looked — and saw the anguish. The moral struggle. The woman who wanted to help and could not cross a line she had drawn in her own soul.

His anger faded. Understanding replaced it. Slowly. Like dawn.

"You are right. Finding him will be enough. I should not ask you to become what you are not."

Relief. And guilt. Both at once, filling the same space.

"I will help however I can. I will be there. I will support you. I will get you to him. Just not that. Not the killing. Please."

"I understand. I will bear the burden myself. Alone."

"I wish I were braver," I said quietly. "Stronger. Like you."

Burton's expression changed. The last of the anger left and something else took its place — something gentle and certain and entirely unexpected from a man who had been a stranger twelve hours ago.

"You are the bravest person I have met, Miss Duffy. You face death every day. You speak to the dead. You help them when no one else can. And you still choose compassion over vengeance. That is courage. Real courage."

I looked up at him. Tears threatening. Not falling.

"Thank you."

Our eyes held. Understanding. Respect. And beneath both — something neither of us was ready to name.

The ghosts, watching from nearby, offered their assessments.

"Well." Mrs. Van Der Berg, to the others, impressed. "He meant that. Quite genuine, I think."

"Maybe he is not so bad," Murphy conceded. "For a Fifth Avenue type."

"We shall see," Rose said. But she was softening. I could hear it.

Burton stood. Formal again. Distance restored.

"I should go. It is late. And you have customers."

He glanced at the living patrons, who were watching us with the exact amount of subtlety you'd expect from Hell's Kitchen dockworkers witnessing a private conversation between their bartender and a Fifth Avenue gentleman. Which is to say, none.

"Tomorrow," he said. "We begin the hunt. Ask your friend about Morrigan. Where we can find him."

"I will. I promise."

He turned to leave. Stopped. Looked back.

"Thank you, Miss Duffy. For your honesty. Even when it costs you."

He left. The door closed. Cold air from the street rushed in and departed with him.

I watched him go. Conflicted. Guilty. Relieved.

Murphy drifted over.

"You did right, lass. Do not let him make you into something you are not."

"But what if I am failing him? What if he needs me and I cannot—"

"You are not failing him. You are being true to yourself. That matters more."

I nodded. Unconvinced.

The bar emptied slowly. I cleaned. Wiped down tables. Washed glasses. The rituals of closing — the same every night, comforting in their monotony, the only part of my day that did not involve the dead or the dying or the impossible.

Murphy approached again. The fear was back.

"Sloane. One more thing. About Morrigan."

I turned. Exhausted. But listening. Always listening.

"Two of his men were killed. Killed by a hunter. A professional. Someone who knew to use silver."

"Yes. Burton and his mentor killed them. They were defending themselves."

"Sloane. Sweetheart." His voice was shaking again. The same tremor as before, but deeper now. Building toward something he could barely contain. "There are worse fates than death. Far worse."

I stopped cleaning. Set the glass down. Looked at him.

"What do you mean, Murphy? You keep saying that. What are you talking about?"

He looked at me. Directly. And in his eyes I saw something that went beyond the guilt, beyond the fear, beyond the three bullet holes and the corrupt cop's shame — I saw a man who had stood at the edge of something vast and dark and had understood, in the way that only the dead understand anything, that the darkness was deeper than death itself.

"There are worse fates than death," he said. "Far worse."

He turned away.

"Murphy? Murphy, if you know something—"

He did not answer. Faded into shadow. Gone.

I stood alone in my bar. The last glass unpolished. The last candle guttering.

"What is he not telling me?"

No one answered. The bar was empty. The ghosts had retreated to wherever ghosts go when they have said too much or not enough.

I wiped down the last stretch of bar, and the Planchette glowed faintly at my throat — protection and beacon both — and I did not know what it was protecting me from, and I did not know what it was calling toward me.

I was about to find out.

Chapter Sixteen — The Hunters

Across the city, in a different kind of darkness, a man stood at the edge of a dock and gave orders to other men who feared him the way prey fears the thing that owns the field.

Thick fog rolled off dark water. Gas lamps created amber islands that illuminated nothing beyond their own small circles. Ships creaked at their moorings. The Hudson River lapped against wooden pilings with the patient rhythm of something that has swallowed many secrets and is willing to swallow more.

Declan Morrigan stood prominent at the dock's edge. Late forties. Weathered. Irish. A dock boss's build — powerful, practical, built for labor and violence in equal measure. Around him, four dockworkers stood in the particular posture of men who have learned that standing near this man means standing very still.

His eyes were yellow. Not metaphorically. Not a trick of the gaslight. Yellow the way fire is yellow — bright, alive, and wrong in a human face. They caught the lamplight and held it in a way that human eyes do not.

"Two of my boys dead," he said. His voice was controlled. Cold. The Irish accent carried authority the way a blade carries an edge — naturally, without effort, dangerous even at rest. "Silver used. Whoever did this knew exactly what they were doing."

One of the dockworkers shifted. Nervous. "Should we lie low, boss? If someone knows what we are—"

Morrigan turned. The yellow eyes blazed. Fangs — just barely visible — caught the light when he spoke.

"Lie low?" The words came out quiet. Quiet was worse than shouting with this man. "No. We do not hide. We do not run. We are the hunters. We have always been the hunters."

He stepped toward them. The pack — because that is what they were, a pack, bound and obedient — stepped back. Instinct. The instinct of creatures who know, at a level deeper than thought, that the thing in front of them is the source of their curse and the master of their lives.

"Find who did this. Find who killed Patrick and Seamus. Bring them to me. Alive if you can. Dead if you cannot. But bring them."

They nodded. Obedient. Bound.

"We will make them sorry they ever heard the name Morrigan."

He turned back to the water. Patient. The fog wrapped around him like something that recognized its own.

"Four days until the moon," he said softly, to himself or to the river or to whatever ancient thing lived behind those yellow eyes. "Plenty of time."

FOUR DAYS UNTIL FULL MOON.

Sloane Duffy

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Chapter Seventeen — The House Advantage

The bar was closed. The candles were out. Sloane Duffy stood behind the counter in the darkness, visible through the smoked glass window as a silhouette — small, alone, working.

She did not see the figure standing across the street.

He was tall. Well over six feet. Pale aristocratic features barely visible in the space between gas lamps where the light did not quite reach. Continental elegance — a long dark coat, a wide-brimmed hat — and a stillness that no living man possesses. The stillness of something that does not need to breathe and has therefore stopped bothering.

He had been standing there for some time. He would stand there for some time longer. Patience, for him, was not a virtue. It was a condition. Five hundred years of existence had compressed urgency into something vestigial — a memory of what it felt like to need things quickly, faded now to almost nothing.

Almost.

His eyes were fixed not on the woman but on something she wore. Something at her throat that called to him across the centuries the way a lighthouse calls to ships — steady, persistent, impossible to ignore. He tilted his head. Barely perceptible. Sensing.

"Fascinating," he said quietly. To himself. To the fog. To the centuries of solitude that had become his only reliable company. "Absolutely fascinating."

The figure smiled. Ancient. Patient. Knowing.

"After all these centuries," he said, "here you are. Smack in the middle of a place called Hell's Kitchen."

A pause. The smile widened.

"Tonight, the house holds the advantage. I will deal myself in when the time is right. Soon."

Inside the bar, the faint turquoise glow of the Planchette surrounded Sloane like a halo she could not see. Protection and beacon both. The warm light pulsed gently against the smoked glass, and the woman who wore it went on wiping down the bar, unaware that she had just become the most interesting thing in New York City to the most dangerous thing in New York City.

He turned slowly. Walked into the fog. The mist closed around him the way water closes over a stone — completely, silently, as if he had never been there at all.

END EPISODE ONE

Sloane Duffy

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