

JAMES TYNION IV  
AND KIERSTEN WHITE

SOMETHING

IS

KILLING

THE

CHILDREN

HOPE IS A KNIFE

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JAMES TYNION IV  
KIERSTEN WHITE

Based on the series co-created by  
James Tynion IV and Werther Dell'Edera



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## **THERE ARE MONSTERS IN THE WORLD.**

The Order of St. George exists to protect that secret, and to eliminate those monsters when they can.

Within the Order of St. George, there are houses. One, lurking in the shadows of Chicago, is the House of Slaughter. Inside its walls, Scarlet Masks see to the needs of everyone within, Azure Masks track and control information, White Masks work in packs to take down the biggest monsters, and Black Masks?

Black Masks hunt alone.



## PROLOGUE

**E**rica Slaughter held the phone to her ear, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. “It’s never a bear or a serial killer, no matter how many times we sell that story.”

The landscape didn’t blur so much as meander outside the window. Erica never minded the long trips, though. It was nice to be alone. Or at least as alone as she could be on a bus full of fellow travelers. They were at last out of the flat, open middle of the country and into the gold-tinged green of Idaho summer. The air was thick with heat, shimmering and pulsing. She could almost make shapes out of it, but she knew better than to imagine things that weren’t there. She’d learned that lesson as a kid.

“I know,” Aaron snapped on the other end of the line. He sounded tired. He always sounded tired lately, even though *he* wasn’t on hour twenty-three of this bus route. “But have you ever heard of a monster quietly lurking for thirteen straight months without so much as severing a child’s limb, only to suddenly reappear and kill again?”

He had a point. Monsters could be sporadic, but to go totally dormant after a single kill? Never.

Aaron was better at logistics, research, and the general politics of the House of Slaughter than Erica was. That was part of why he advised while she *did*. Sometimes she wondered why he didn’t become a Scarlet Mask. She never pressed it, though.

Much as they all bickered, as Black Masks, he and Jessica were the only family she had. She knew where she'd be without them: dead.

"I think we're being punished," Aaron muttered when she didn't answer.

"Says the guy *not* on the bus perfumed with the odor of human despair. I stink. I need a shower."

He ignored her and continued his conspiracy theorizing. "Cecilia can sense blood in the water. She's been showing up more, asking pointed questions about Jessica. And the White Masks are taking all the good ones lately."

Erica traced a finger down the window, wishing she could push through the glass, leave the bus, leave everything. "There are no good ones."

"You know what I meant," Aaron said with a snarl, which was as good as an apology. He only got defensive when he knew he was wrong. "But if it's a bear or a serial killer, it's not our problem. I'll even approve a plane ticket back for you."

Erica snorted and ended the call without saying goodbye. The plane ticket seemed about as likely as two kids torn to shreds by a serial killer a year apart. Maybe she'd get lucky, though. There was always hope.

She opened her bag and rooted around amidst the blades for her water bottle. A middle-aged man stumbled up the aisle, the sour waft of alcohol preceding him. He'd at last decided to see who the owner of the perky blonde ponytail was. Erica looked up. Her perpetually wide, acidic green eyes, sitting in the bruised hollows of her face, had been described as everything from haunted to spooky to disturbing. Combined with her collection of visible scars, they were usually enough to overcome aggressive

male interest. Sure enough, her would-be seatmate turned and went right back where he came from.

*He seemed nice*, a voice hissed. Erica zipped her bag emphatically closed.

Eventually the bus led to another bus, which led to a long walk down a country lane that smelled like burning asphalt. The air was thick and muggy, humming with hungry mosquitoes, and the sun beat so heavily on Erica's bare shoulders that she put on her green canvas jacket despite the heat. The trees, at least, were beautiful. As long as she didn't wonder what they might be hiding.

No matter how many small towns she visited, Erica never got used to the threat of them. She shifted her backpack, debated switching it to the front to protect her tender insides. There was something inherently hostile about a place in the middle of nowhere. A suspicious defiance built into the town charter, reflected in the windows and eyes peering out at her. There was no hiding in a small town, and Badwater was as small as they came.

A single main road cut through the hunching green around them. Along it was a gas station, a no-name hardware and grocery store, a bar, a diner with the windows boarded up, a doctor's office that looked about as welcoming as the boarded-up diner, a school, and a church. Most of these buildings looked old. Weathered wood and worn brick, resigned to their continued existence until the day the forest and weeds were at last able to reclaim them. But there was something *aggressive* about the bright white church. Maybe it was the way it stood at the end of the street, cutting off the road and forcing it to split in either direction. A rock in the center of the river that everything else flowed around . . . or that unwary swimmers smashed against.

Beyond the church on either side were a few rows of timid houses, each identical flat-fronted ranches. And each with a view of the church—or in view of the church, depending on how they felt about it looming over them. More people than Erica expected to see at this time of day were headed in that direction.

One thing Erica didn't notice was a hotel. Shit. So much for her luck changing. She'd hoped she could pretend to be a reporter looking into the deaths, but this didn't seem like the type of place that would welcome attention. She already had the backpack and the boots. She could be a backpacker on her way up to Washington? The more she looked like she might need help with money or food, the harder people would work to ignore her, which suited her purposes better.

She ducked into the shadows between the abandoned diner and the doctor's office and watched as several families walked toward the church. Their Sunday best clashed with their somber, bloodless expressions. Either Badwater was remarkably devout, or Erica had arrived in time for a funeral.

A kid stopped in Erica's sightline, bending down to tie the laces on their beat-up, doodled-on pink Converse. Just from what Erica had seen of Badwater so far, this child stood apart. Hair shorn close to the skull, skin warm brown with bruising beneath both eyes and a swollen nose, no easily discernible gender. The kid couldn't have been more out of place. And in a small town like this, that could make someone feel like a monster . . . or so afraid that they might just make one themselves.

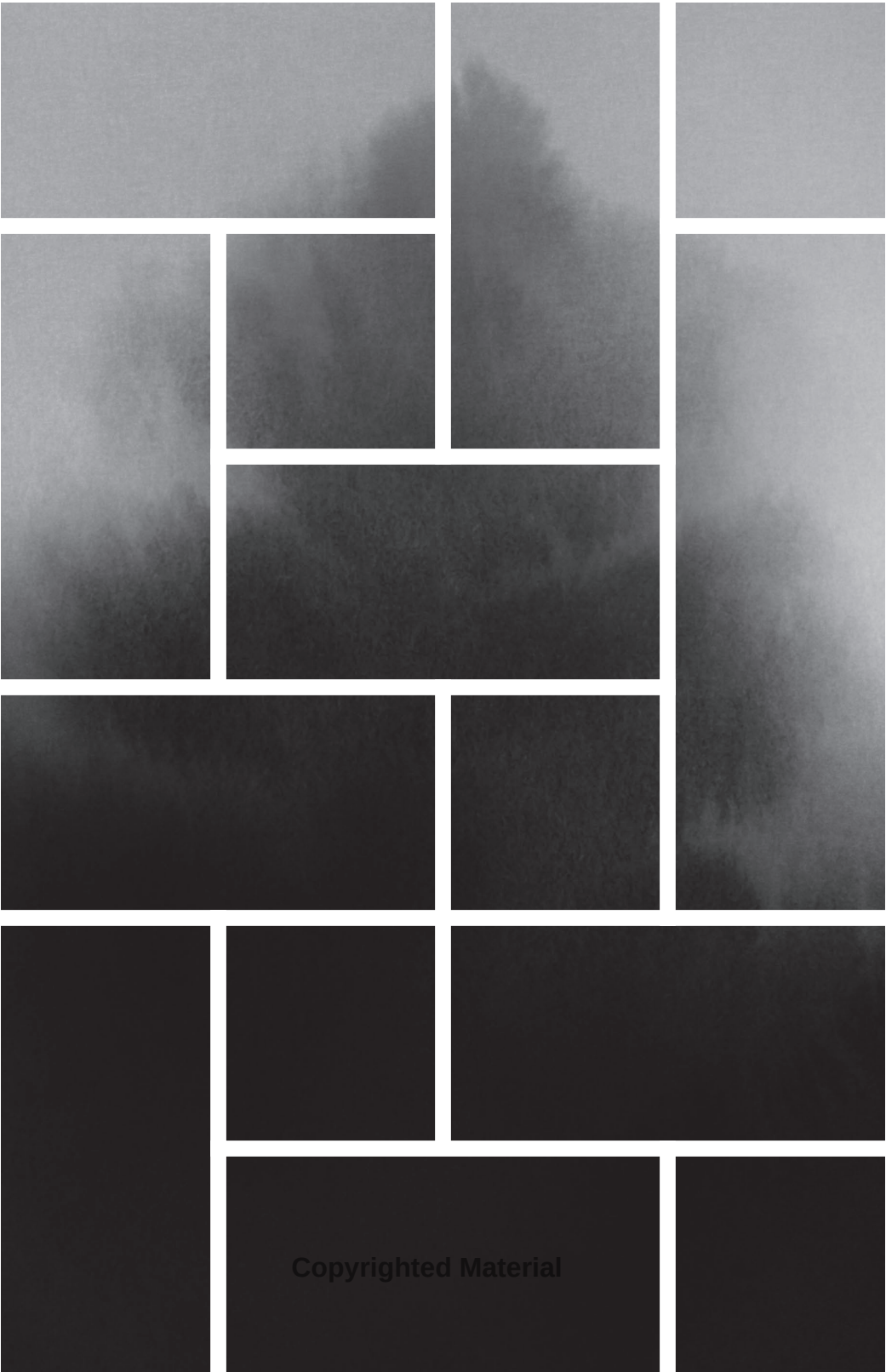
It was never only about finding a monster. Erica *also* had to find the child who was the source of the monster. And she now had a pretty good idea as to who that might be. Good timing on her part, for once.

“Don’t fall behind, Mitali,” a woman said, her voice tight with stress. The girl, whose name Erica now knew, scurried to catch up, slipping easily into place between her parents. Her hands reached out and found theirs. Erica felt a slight pang of—not jealousy, not quite, but maybe longing for something she’d lost before she knew to appreciate it.

Unlike Mitali and her parents, who walked alone, everyone else clumped together in groups. As another handful of adults passed by, Erica heard the words “torn apart, just like Sarah,” whispered in a tone of horrified wonder.

Erica sighed and headed for the cover of trees. It was *never* a bear, no matter what they might hope. She was a Black Mask. She should know better than to have any hope by now.

Erica crept toward the funeral to find a kid and stop a monster.



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TWO DAYS EARLIER

MONDAY

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O N E

# COLE



hat happened to your face?” Mitali asked with genuine sympathy.

Cole couldn't, *wouldn't* accept sympathy. Not from anyone, but especially not from that freak.

“What happened to yours?” he sneered back.

Mitali, as usual, was too stupid to know when she was being insulted. She never reacted the way he wanted her to. When she showed up with buzzed hair and he called her a boy, she'd just shrugged and said hair was hair. When he made fun of her big anime tees, she said he'd probably like *Naruto* if he gave it a chance and invited him over to watch it. As if he'd ever go to her house.

But Cole wasn't going to give up. Not today. He needed to hurt her for caring. Because when people cared, it made it worse. It made it real.

“If someone hit you,” Mitali said, “you should tell a trusted adult. If you don't have one, you can talk to—”

“Shut the fuck up, loser!”

That got a reaction. They weren't allowed to swear at school, not even at recess or lunch, when they mostly just sat around and listened to Dylan drone on about whatever video game he was

playing lately. As sixth graders, they were all too old for the playground now, a fact that made Cole sad. He wanted nothing more than to play four square, tag, wallyball, anything that let him run around and not have to think for a few minutes.

Mitali's expression cooled. She narrowed her round brown eyes, tilting her chin up. "I was just trying to be a friend."

"If you need a friend, go be friends with Charity-case over there." Cole pointed at Charity, sitting nearby on a bench in the shade, hands clasped in front of her. As usual, she was in a faded floral dress that looked like it came out of a donation bin. Her blonde hair was in those two braids he'd tugged on more times than he could count. He wished he could grab them now and pull as hard as he could, just to feel something. "No one wants to be friends with her, either. You two would be perfect for each other."

Color rose in Mitali's cheeks. "Leave her alone."

Cole felt a mean spike of triumph. He could make fun of Mitali and she didn't care, but she cared if he talked shit about creepy Charity. Charity wasn't fun to tease. She just did that thing where she went blank and muttered words to herself that he couldn't quite make out. But if Charity was a sore spot for Mitali, he'd stick his thumb in and press as hard as he could.

He raised his voice to make sure Charity could hear him. "Why? Is Charity your girlfriend? Is that why you're trying to become a boy? So you can date her?"

Charity flinched even further into herself, like she wanted to blend in with the bench. The other kids had started gathering now. There were five of them in their grade. Used to be six.

Mitali rolled her eyes. "I'm not trying to become a boy. I'm just being who I am. Everyone should be."

"I bet Sarah's glad to be dead." Cole threw each word like a rock. "At least now she doesn't have to pretend to like Charity."

Charity closed her eyes and put a hand over her mouth, letting out a low, pathetic noise. It was satisfying, in the way scratching a bug bite was—euphoric and painful at the same time. Cole didn't know why he felt driven to be mean to Charity. But he knew why he wanted to make Mitali cry. She thought she was better than him. Better than all of them. She wasn't, and she never would be, and he'd show her.

Mitali stepped right up to Cole, jabbing him in the chest with her gross finger. "You're a pathetic little worm and you'll never be happy. But you *still* don't deserve whatever happened to your face, so just come talk to my dad about it and we can—"

Mitali staggered back, hand over her nose. It was spurting blood. Cole's own hand was still in a fist. He stared at it in shock. It was numb, but he could tell it would hurt soon. He hadn't meant to hit her. It was like time had skipped. Like someone else did it.

He really didn't mean it. Didn't want to see her crying, after all. But he couldn't say any of that.

"I'll kill you if you ever talk to me again, you fucking freak," he shouted. Then he ran. There was a gap in the fence at the back of the weed-strewn baseball diamond. He darted through it into the trees that surrounded the school.

Cole had hit a girl. That meant the principal's office. Principal O'Neill would be on his own kid's side, obviously, but that wasn't who Cole was afraid of. He'd have to sit there with his dad next to him, knowing he'd made him get up from his chair and come to the school, knowing what would be waiting when they got home.

*Never hit a girl*, his dad had said to him last year. *If you can't get them to obey without hitting them, they already know you're weak.*

But he wasn't trying to get Mitali to obey. Just to shut up and stop looking at him like he was broken. Besides, Mitali didn't even count as hitting a girl. Not really. He knew exactly what his dad thought of her and her mom, referring to Mrs. O'Neill as "that foreign bitch." Maybe he'd even be proud that Cole hit Mitali. His son, standing up for the rest of the town against the invaders.

But the fact that Cole hadn't slowed, pushing deeper and deeper into the forbidden trees, was proof enough that he didn't really believe what he was telling himself. The best he could do was avoid pissing Dad off, but that was getting harder lately. A call to sit in front of Principal O'Neill? Cole couldn't even imagine how angry Dad was going to get.

And what if Mitali came to the meeting, too, and brought up Cole's black eye in front of the principal? Their teacher, a grouchy woman who made a daily two-hour drive to teach grades four through six, hadn't so much as glanced at it. What story could he tell that would reassure an adult who actually paid attention?

Cole stopped. The thick ferns were starting to trip him up. He'd lost his usual path, and the cedar trees felt menacing. Like anything or anyone could be behind their thick trunks. After Sarah died a year ago, all the grownups decided that no kids were supposed to play in the woods anymore. Some of the parents actually enforced it. But Cole had never stopped.

He came here nearly every afternoon, lying on his back beneath the ferns, sometimes until it got dark. He pretended their

leaves were a roof and he was a wild thing safely burrowed away. He'd imagine finding Sarah out here. That she'd never really died, she'd just been hiding the whole time. She'd smile and show those dimples he always liked as she suggested they hide together forever.

Any future Cole used to picture included Sarah. Out here in the woods, he could pretend she still had a future. Pretend he had one, too.

Besides, he'd do anything to spend a little more time away from home with the crack of beer cans and the constant threat of pain. These were *his* woods. He was safe here.

"I'm safe," he whispered. The lie tasted bright and coppery, like blood. He crouched, pressing his forehead against his knees, trying to be anywhere else, be anyone else. He imagined he was back on the playground, playing tag. Like they used to when they were little, back when Sarah was still alive, before he knew that kids could be gone forever. Her death was when he learned to be truly afraid. When he realized that one of these days, Dad could just . . . kill him.

A soft rustling sound snapped Cole back to the present. He stood, wiping under his eyes, clenching both hands into fists. Maybe Mitali had followed him, but creeping quietly didn't seem like her. And if it was her, and she was being that sneaky, she wasn't here to make sure he was okay. She was here to hurt him back.

He waited, ready for the attack. But his heart didn't stop racing. It picked up. His breath kept catching, like it wanted to stay safe and hidden inside the cage of his bones.

There weren't any other kids out here. Cole knew it the same way he knew these woods.

“I’m safe, I’m safe,” he tried to whisper again, but even as he said it, he knew it was a lie. His body had realized something his brain hadn’t yet. At last, it clicked: *There was no noise now.*

The forest was never quiet. Birds chirping and scratching the forest floor, tiny things skittering, the hum and drone of air heavy with summer insects. It was like someone had hit pause on the television. Nothing was more dangerous than when Dad hit pause and turned to look at him.

Cole needed to run. He tried to whisper it to himself, tried to scream it at himself, but he’d been so trained to freeze that he couldn’t help it now. Besides, he couldn’t feel his hands or his feet.

He was going to be just like Sarah, here and then gone. Instead of dread, though, relief descended on him. He’d been so afraid of dying. Of wondering when it would happen, what it would feel like, whether anyone would care.

He was going to get at least a few of those answers now. He waited, trembling, for his dad to break free of the trees. Because Cole had always known the truth. There was only one person in Badwater capable of ripping a girl to pieces, and Cole lived with him. Now Cole would die because of him.

But Cole wasn’t quite right about what the trees held. Piss coursed down his legs as *something* at last broke free. The piss didn’t have time to cool before being joined by a hot rush of every other fluid once held by his fragile, breakable body, as Cole learned what it felt like to die.

T W O

# CHEYENNE



roctor Stone's weekday afternoon sermons were never as well attended as his Sunday offerings, but Cheyenne always made a point of sitting in the front row, back straight, head upright. A visual signal to everyone else to pay attention. And, if she was being honest, a visual signal to everyone else that *she* was paying attention. No skulking in the back. No running into the woods with older kids—or men. None of the folly of her youth that led her to flee Badwater back then.

She glanced at Charity's bowed golden head, her strawberry hair catching the light from one of the windows. Twelve years ago, when Cheyenne was fifteen, she stole her grandma's car and left. Charity was just a fluttering in her abdomen then. Days like today it still felt surreal that Badwater was the only home Charity had ever really known, when Cheyenne swore she'd never return.

Even more surreal that she now considered this church a second home. She'd fought tooth and nail when her hateful grandma tried to drag her here as a child while her great-uncle was still preacher. It was abandoned and fell into disrepair during her early teens, and Cheyenne had taken full advantage of the empty building. Half the graffiti she'd covered up during the remodel

had been her own. She was just grateful that she never did anything worse than smoking, drinking, and loitering here. It would have been a lot harder to cover up memories of other sins.

Cheyenne had told Proctor Stone about the church eight years ago. How it was technically hers, after her dad and grandma died. He felt prompted to save it—and Badwater. Cheyenne had her doubts, but as always, she tried to walk through them in faith. If Proctor Stone felt called to Badwater, then Badwater it was.

The building had been in horrible shape, worse even than Cheyenne expected. The pristine white walls and clean wood floors of today gave no hint of the weeks she spent scrubbing raccoon piss out of the corners, scraping bird droppings off the exposed beams crossing under the open, peaked ceiling, and painting over the mistakes of her past while Proctor Stone focused on sanding down and refinishing the old pews. It had been hard work, but worth it. Even little Charity, only four years old then, had helped by dutifully sweeping up.

Cheyenne knew that, despite the name on the legal documents, no one thought of the church as hers. She didn't, either. Not really. It was Proctor Stone's. But she was proud of it regardless, because to her, this building was evidence of how far she'd come. Of how she'd taken something everyone else viewed as corrupted, disgusting trash, and turned it into something beautiful and worthy of respect.

She'd fought her way back from hell, and Proctor Stone had been at her side every step of the way. She deserved to be here. She'd earned her spot.

Proctor Stone paused his sermon mid-sentence, holding the silence until it became almost awkward. Then he took off his

reading glasses and set aside his notes. That triggered a little more attention among the congregants, sparse though they were. Cheyenne could feel the shift in energy. She always enjoyed watching as Proctor Stone reacted to his audience's moods like an expert guide navigating an unpredictable river.

"Badwater," he said, letting the word linger in the air. "Such a strange name for such a wonderful place. As you know, when I first met someone from your town, I didn't have a pulpit. All I had was a square of the sidewalk, peddling truth to unwelcoming ears, bearing the stones and slings of the world. Until one young woman stopped and listened."

He smiled down at Cheyenne. She smiled back. As hard as it had been to come home, at least no one could question her place now. Not when a man of God had chosen her as his special favorite. Before him, many men had chosen Cheyenne as their favorite. But Proctor Stone was the only one who viewed her spiritually rather than physically. She held that like a shield against the lingering feelings from her traumatic youth—others' feelings as well as her own.

"Badwater has given me so much. My chosen ones, here not because of loyalty to a larger church, with endless coffers and bureaucratic dogma. But out of loyalty to our town. To this place." He held his arms wide, encompassing the congregation. "My flock. My church. Our church."

Cheyenne's smile grew until she was nearly as warm inside as the sweltering room. *Our church.*

A trickle of sweat rolled down her back, puncturing some of her happiness. She once again wished for an overhead fan in place of the giant iron chandelier Proctor Stone had picked. Or at the very least, new windows and screens, both of which she'd

suggested instead of spending their scant funds on the chandelier. But she'd been overruled.

"I was even given my title here," Proctor Stone said, letting out a studied chuckle he injected whenever he wanted to introduce some levity to his sermons. "Before I met Badwater's prodigal daughter, I went by *Protector* Stone. That's what I thought I was."

Cheyenne tried not to flinch at being referred to not by name but by reputation. She waited, smile still in place, for Proctor Stone to talk about her daughter. Charity was the one who called him Proctor Stone first, unable to pronounce all the syllables of protector.

"But coming to Badwater, I realized you don't need a protector. This town is fierce and formidable. All it needed was a gentle authority, standing watch, helping you pass your trials and tests."

Cheyenne's smile dropped. Why didn't he talk about Charity? It might help public opinion. Cheyenne knew Charity was odd, worried that she was being bullied at school, couldn't help but notice that people didn't like her daughter. But after what Charity had been through last year, of course she was quiet and strange.

Cheyenne didn't ask for much. She was happy to be Proctor Stone's assistant. To take care of the man who took care of so many others. But Charity had gotten so intense since Sarah's death. Cheyenne had thought it would get better with time; it hadn't. She'd have a talk with Proctor Stone about what they might do together to help her.

He kept speaking. "I look out on your faces, and I love you."

Once again, he didn't glance at Charity. Much as Cheyenne wanted him to be a father or grandfather figure to Charity, he

always kept a rigid distance between them. He did it out of respect, not wanting people to assume anything inappropriate in his strictly platonic relationship with Cheyenne, but surely there was room for him to be a little warmer toward a girl who desperately needed it?

“It hurts to love you,” Proctor Stone said, putting a hand over his heart. “Because I want so much for you. I want you to know peace, to know safety, to know God as I do. But I know more than just God. I know, firsthand, of the demons lying in wait. Creeping in the shadows, stalking even the most innocent among us. Waiting to catch us in our weakest moments. The world would have you believe there is no God, and therefore that there is no evil. But I testify to you today, here—” He slammed a fist into the pulpit, startling several people. “I testify that demons are real and that it is only through our faith that we can hold them back. Will you join me? Will you let me hold back hell itself to keep you safe?”

No one made a sound. This was Cheyenne’s prompt to call out an enthusiastic yes, breaking the silence and prompting others to. But before she could, she heard a tiny voice next to her.

“Yes,” Charity whispered. Cheyenne looked down at her, but her blood froze when she saw not the zealous attention she expected, but something else entirely. Charity was *terrified*. A tear streamed down her face.

Cheyenne took her hand and squeezed, leaning down to whisper in her ear. “It’s just a metaphor. You’re safe.”

When she looked back up, she saw Proctor Stone’s gaze on her, a cold demand in his expression.

“Yes,” Cheyenne blurted as quickly as she could, but the moment had passed. She’d missed her cue.