

## **EXORDIUM—A PROFANE FIRE**

An orange glow pulses in the October darkness. A bed of white-hot logs and dried kindling burns beneath an inferno of paper. Manuscript bundles wither into frail ash, and leather-bound covers curl into dried rinds around sacred words. These texts told the early history of the Sisters of Loretto, but now the actions of their foundresses and the thoughts of their priestly confessor smolder upon the pyre. The words of this hallowed Kentucky wilderness and the Sisters' young past evaporate into the cold autumn sky, leaving their wispy ghosts to linger over the faces of those around the blaze.

Nearly thirty Sisters cluster around the fire. They are old and young, a few with deep creases on their foreheads and others with plump cheeks. Yet every face, no matter its age, is full of anguish. Some cry, and their tears mingle with the sweat dripping down their necks. Their woolen frocks and shoulder-length veils absorb the heat in the air. It seeps into their habits, into their bones. These women have toiled and endured to establish a holy order that could thrive in the wilderness. But now the records of their foundation are disappearing right before their eyes. They burn with fury, but no one moves to extinguish the fire. They cannot. They have taken vows.

All they can do is glare at the short man in priestly robes who presides over the flames. After throwing one last piece of paper onto the pile, he crosses his arms with satisfaction. Because he is God's representative, he fully believes that his actions are just. He has the right to cleanse any kind of rebellion that may live in the hearts of these Sisters. He scans the crowd of women, and his eyes land on one in particular. His stare makes a single command: obey.

Mary gazes back at him with devastation in her brown eyes. A lock of grey hair sticks to her square jaw. She tucks it in and wipes the sweat dripping down the bridge of her crooked nose.

It feels like this sacrilegious fire is burning her from the inside, and she boils with hate toward the priest for doing this to their order, the order that *she* founded. Falling to her knees in prayer, she clasps her hands together so tight that her knuckles turn white. Her voice rises above the shadows, but she never lowers her eyes from the man's stare.

Reaching behind her, she grabs the arm of a Sister whose olive skin glows golden in the flame. Helen can't feel the full depth of Mary's pain, but she wants to be loyal to her old friend. To show her support, she grips Mary's fingers and lowers herself onto the wet grass. Before joining the prayer, she calls over her shoulder to the girls huddled near the schoolhouse door. As a teacher, Helen worries for her students and how this display might damage their young spirits. The children flock to Helen as she reaches into her habit and pulls out a prayer book. They appeal to heaven and unite as one voice, one spirit.

This communal body turns toward a third woman on the opposite side of the fire. Although Isabella is young, she wears a mantle of responsibility on her broad shoulders. Like Mary, she is devastated, but she cannot give into weakness. Now is the time for strength. Her bright blue eyes are angry as she turns toward the priest. She does not hide the scowl twisting her features, nor does she bend in obedience. Instead, her rage burns like the fire he commanded them to build. Raising her hands to the sky, she stands ramrod straight and joins the prayer. As the leader of Loretto, she must set an example.

The flames rise with their words as the documents burn faster and brighter. Though their papers are being offered to the air as smoke and ash, all is not lost. The legends of such women will not simply dissolve into obscurity. Not if others continue to tell their story.