

A Darker Shade of Midnight By Lynn Emery

Prologue

LaShaun lit a long tapered white candle on the altar and sat down on a bench near the front of The Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Los Angeles. The white marble statue softly reflected dozens of flames. The Virgin Mary looked down with a serene expression of acceptance and forgiveness. No matter what sins those who sought refuge had committed, she was willing to absolve. LaShaun tried to pray, but the words stuck in her throat.

“Hello, child,” a quiet voice spoke with the lilt of a Latino accent.

The rustle of fabric caused the flames to waver. LaShaun looked up. The nun wore an expression not unlike the statue before them. Even at fifty Sister Adalia had the smooth brown skin of a woman ten years younger.

“I’m okay, Sister.” LaShaun started to stand, but a light touch on her shoulder from the nun’s hand stopped her.

“You’re here because your heart is at peace?”

“You know me too well,” LaShaun replied with a smile that soon faded. “I have to go home.”

“I see.” Sister Adalia sat next to her with a soft sigh. “You’ve come a long way, not just in miles. Maybe it’s time.”

“Monmon Odette needs me. No matter what our differences, she loves me. But if I go back... will I be tempted to slip into my old ways?” LaShaun fingered the red onyx beads of the bracelet on her right wrist. The golden cross that dangled from it felt comforting against her skin.

“You’re a changed person. That change goes deeper than you think,” Sister Adalia said.

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“And the spirit I summoned?” LaShaun whispered the forbidden truth that she had shared with Sister Adalia. Only one other person knew, Monmon Odette.

“We humans do more than enough evil on our own. Don’t give the devil and his minions so much credit.”

“You and I know there are angels. There are demons at work in the world as well. My family has mixed the old religions from Africa with Catholicism for generations. More than a few of us have paid the price. I can’t run from fate anymore.” LaShaun bowed her head.

“You needed that time and distance to find yourself. The strength of your ancestors is in your blood.” Sister Adalia looked at the cross that hung on the wall in an alcove behind the altar.

“I hope you’re right, sister.” LaShaun raised her head to look at Sister Adalia, and then followed her gaze to the cross.

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen,” Sister Adalia quoted the scripture in a reverent tone.

“The old religion warns there is a price to pay for dealing with spirits. So does the Bible.”

“Our Blessed Mother will protect and guide you. Of that I’m sure. However, if you need a human ear, call me. Better yet, send a text or a tweet. I’ve got my new smart phone. ” Sister Adalia patted the pocket of her dark blue jumper.

LaShaun laughed. “Twenty-first century nun to the rescue.”

“Our order already has a Facebook page,” Sister Adalia said, laughing with her. They stood together and walked to the altar filled with lit candles.

“Thank you for being my friend.” LaShaun squeezed her hand.

“I’m glad we met. You’ll be just fine,” Sister Adalia replied.

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Before LaShaun could respond a gust of warm air pushed down the center aisle of the pews. The candle flames danced crazily, but didn't go out. The lights of the church dimmed and long shadows on the walls gave the impression of a crowd in the sanctuary. Sister Adalia gasped and made of the sign cross. The warmth changed to a chill in seconds. Then the light grew strong again.

“May God be with you.” Sister Adalia let go of LaShaun's hand. Her dark eyes sparkled with alarm.

With a nod goodbye, LaShaun left the church and went out into the crisp night air. She drove to the townhouse where she lived in the bedroom community of Hawaiian Gardens, California outside Los Angeles. She opened the front door just in time to pick up the ringing phone. A family member told her what she already had sensed. There were dark, sad days ahead.