

The Holy Fall - Meda

“Liquor is of the Devil’s breath! It poisons the soul and corrupts the mind! And now by the grace of God almighty, and the will of our nation, it has been banished from our land!” The Reverend Elijah Boone stood at his pulpit, sunlight slanting through the stained glass and breaking across his face like shards of fire. The people in the pews broke into amens and applause as Elijah stood at the head of the church, proud and righteous. He had preached temperance for years, long before the Volstead Act made it law. He believed America was being reborn, cleansed, purified. But as the rows emptied and people funnelled out, Elijah felt the silence wrap around his throat and he stumbled into the back room, locking the door behind him as he went. His shaky hands reached for the small, wooden crate stuffed behind old newspapers and his fingers struggled with the rusty lock. Inside was a single, half empty bottle of Kentucky bourbon.

“It’s not addiction.” He spoke as if the Lord could hear him in this moment of sin. “Just medicine.” His hands shook too much these days; the nerves from his wartime injury still burned under the skin. But somewhere under the whispered prayers he knew. He knew that God knew his wicked truth. That night, as he poured a careful measure into a chipped glass, the radio crackled with news: another raid in Kansas City, another speakeasy shut down. Federal agents were making arrests even in small towns now. The Lord’s work, they said. Elijah sipped, the bourbon burning down his throat like confession.

The following Sunday, after his morning sermon a stranger appeared at the back of his church. He waited until the pews were empty before approaching the pulpit. “Harsh words against liquor, Reverend.” He nods, tipping his hat to Elijah.

“The scripture demands it.” He nods to the stranger as he clasps his hands together in hopes to conceal his traitorous tremors.

The man smiled thinly and narrowed his eyes slightly. “And yet, I hear tell a certain preacher’s been buying medicine from the doctor - medicine that smells a lot like bourbon.”

Elijah’s stomach dropped and dug his fingernails into his hands, hard enough to break the skin. “Who are you?”

“Call me a friend,” the man said. “A friend who runs a small operation out west of town. Folks need their spirits, Reverend, and you - well, you’ve got influence. A pulpit’s a powerful thing. Help us keep quiet business quiet, and we can help you, too.” He slid a thick wad of cash over the altar before turning on his heel and walking out of the church, the only sounds the click of his shoes and Reverend Boone’s raggedy breaths.

In the evening, Elijah steepled his fingers as he leaned over and stared at the notes on the table. The church was in need of new pews and the roof was leaky. He sighed and took a few notes from the stack stuffing them into his wallet. As he leaned back in his armchair, he picked up the flask from inside his coat pocket and took a swig.

At next month's sermon, the draught from the wonky side door was gone. Two weeks later, the old leak in the corner of the roof was gone. Then the squeaky floorboard, and new stained glass windows, followed by new robes. People said it was a miracle from God.

A blessing for devotion and good-heartedness. During the day, he preached, prayed and promised blessings and good faith for all but at night the crates came and went along with the sleazy looking men that came with. But all good things must come to an end.

One night, after a particularly long sermon, and most people had filled out, he remained. The air was still- almost too quiet. He flinched slightly as heavy footsteps echoed. A hand landed on his shoulder “Reverend Boone, we have reason to suspect you are working against the law. Do not resist, otherwise we will have to use force.” Elijah sighed and stepped to the side allowing them in. There was no doubt they knew, but maybe they would miss it and buy him some time. That would have been preferable, but alas, after less than twenty minutes of searching they found what they were looking for. Fifteen dusty crates, shoved in the back of the storage room, each full to the brim with liquor.

As the cold metal of the handcuffs tightened painfully around his wrists, he was bundled out of the church. With his head down, he walked past the disappointed glares of the townspeople as they whispered and muttered.

Three months passed and the cell was no better then the church before the renovations. Headlines across the city had painted him a scandalous villain; a traitor of God. He knelt before the only window in his cell, basking in the moonlight as he muttered, “Forgive me Lord.”