

You Can Take the Girl Out of the Coven....

By S.K. Dubois

I crossed the Arkansas state line just before midnight. To celebrate, I took a quick hit – not enough to mess me up, just something to mark the occasion. Now that I am back, the past six months feel like a dream. I messed up, and rehab was my last shot, at least, as far as my family was concerned. Not drug rehab, but more of a spiritual rehab – a gentle exorcism.

“Find the Lord and learn to be a god-fearing woman,” they said. So they sent me to a place where we sang church songs and read the Bible nonstop. Preaching and counseling nearly drove me mad. But I do want a normal life, don’t I? I do want to be part of my family, right?

So I went and I stayed and I tried to fit in. It worked, kind of. I know how to act now if I want to make them happy. I can do it to keep the peace.

The dark forest highway took me further south until the soft smell of magnolias and lilacs became overpowering.

I took another hit, and my lids grew heavy. I had to stop for the night. A light in the distance – a shimmering vacancy sign marked the turn to The Rowan House Bed and Breakfast.

At the end of a long drive, the French Colonial house suggested another time. I pulled into the graveled parking lot and climbed the wide steps to a comfortable porch.

As if she’d been waiting for me, a lady opened the door. Tall, stately – a proper southern lady with white hair coiffed in a bun, she reminded me of pictures I’d seen of my grandmother on my mother’s side. The one they were afraid I’d take after. Came to a bad end, so they said.

“Come in, darling,” she said, with the soft southern drawl I’d missed so much while I was away. “You look plum wore out.”

“I hope I didn’t wake you.” My own accent seemed strangely absent. I guess getting religion means losing something, too. How much of myself had died? “I just couldn’t drive anymore.”

“Of course you couldn’t.” She led me to a comfortable parlor. “Come and sit a spell. Have a cup of herbal tea to relax. Then we’ll get you to your room.”

On a gleaming table beside the settee, sat a burnished silver tray bearing an antique blue and white teapot and matching cups and saucers. Steam drifted from the teapot’s spout. The chinoiserie design depicted a grove of delicate trees with a vibrant red phoenix perched in the branches. My eyes must have been exhausted because the phoenix winked a red eye at me.

“Would you happen to have any wine?” I blinked away the vision and sat down.

"I'm so sorry, but no. We don't keep that spirit here." She turned to a polished walnut hutch and opened the glass door. "I do have a very nice bottle of scotch, however, if that interests you."

She splashed a liberal portion from a green bottle into my cup and pushed the cup and saucer across the table. The peaty aroma of the single malt blended with whatever herbs were in the tea, and I couldn't imagine anything better. The first sip was heaven. The second, even better.

"Now tell me where you're bound so late at night."

"I'm going home. I've been away," I told her. "At a Bible camp."

Her eyes brightened, and she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

"How lovely to have a true believer here," she murmured.

We chatted about nothing until I nodded over my second cup of whisky and tea.

"Your room is at the top of the stairs on the left," she told me. "Enjoy your stay."

The bed was soft, the room airy. I fell asleep immediately, only to wake in the middle of the night. Voices echoed from the corridor, but no one was there.

"Whisky, and too much driving," I muttered. A prickle on my neck, a tingle in my thumbs warned me of something darker.

An orange glow outside beckoned me to the window. I pulled the curtain aside to see a fire some distance from the house—a bonfire in the middle of a field. Figures moved around the flames. The moon, just past full, rose above the trees.

On the path below my window, a group of young men scuttled toward the fire. Faint laughter, a glitter of steely knives, and then the smell of smoke drifted into my room. The unmistakable buzz of chaotic magic rippled across my skin. I knew what was happening in that field, and my keepers of the past six months would have told me to get away.

My heart pounded in time to the faint beat of drums. Breaths came in quick puffs. Magic sparked like lightning around me. I inherited this chaos from my grandmother—and now it burned like a torch. They hadn't killed it, completely, but the retraining had been thorough.

The next thing I knew, I was running for the door. I'm not certain if I intended to escape or not. I couldn't choose.

My hostess, no longer the sedate southern lady, caught me in the parlor. She pulled me out into the yard. I broke free, tearing my blouse. Her sharp claws raked my shoulder.

At that first touch of skin on skin, she stopped her pursuit. I hesitated in the darkness, torn between what I'd been told I should do and what my soul most desperately wanted—no, needed to do.

"Oh, darlin'," she breathed softly. "I had no idea who you were."

“Who am I?” I asked, still befuddled by the howl of bedlam.

She patted my arm and took my hand, comfortingly, and now the firmness and ill intent vanished.

“You’ll remember soon enough. Come meet my friends and enjoy the occasion.” She laced her fingers through mine. I went willingly.

“Welcome home,” she said.