

CALLING MR. LONELY HEARTS: A NOVEL

Synopsis:

A former priest enlists the aid of demons to take revenge on the three women who ruined his life and career.

He gives a woman everything she could want, answers her deepest unspoken needs, her hidden thoughts, her darkest desires. But Varick isn't just too good to be true, he is hell-sent.

Roxanne, Del, and Alice were girls together at Our Lady of the Hills School, where they met and came to adore their teacher, Father Romero, a Cuban refugee. For one of the girls, Father Romero was far more than a crush, and as a result he is driven away from his faith and his home and into an empty spiritual darkness that makes him easy prey for true evil.

Years later, Romero takes his merciless revenge—revenge that is terrifying, sexually-charged and surreal as a fever dream. No one in the women's lives is safe. Not even an unborn child.

Excerpt:

Chapter One

She was just plain Alice, and they never let her forget.

Roxanne and Delilah, who was called Del, knelt close to Alice by the light of a candle, the skirts of their stiff blue school uniforms crumpling against her. Del rested a hand on Alice's shoulder as though she might try to get up from the leaf-strewn ground and run away. But they all knew she wouldn't. Roxanne used a twig to stir some pungent concoction in a shell-thin African bowl she had brought from home. The odor suffused the copse like the fug from an ancient outhouse. To Alice, it smelled suspiciously like a

baby's dirty diaper. There was something else, though. Something caustic and chemical-smelling that made her eyes water.

"I don't have to eat it, do I?" Alice said.

"Oh God," Del said. She hadn't wanted to go along with this whole thing in the first place. She was nervous enough about being in the park after dark. And there was something deeply wrong with what they were doing, she knew. Witchcraft on television was fine, but this was something else.

"Of course not," Roxanne said, her voice patient. The bowl was heavy in her hands, though it hardly contained anything at all. If she were a few years older than thirteen, she would know it was heavy with her own desire—a desire that she could, at that moment, identify only as dimly sexual.

"Get her coat off," she told Del.

"Come on," Del said. "Don't be a baby, Alice."

*She reached for the buttons on the front of Alice's pea coat, which was exactly like the ones she and Roxanne were wearing, though Roxanne's had a black velvet scarf with elaborate roses etched into its nap tucked beneath the collar. Alice didn't help with the coat, but she didn't resist, either. Del flung the coat and the blue cardigan sweater with its *Our Lady of the Hills* crest onto the dormant grass.*

Alice shivered in her blouse, hoping that she would be able to leave on at least her skirt and socks.

Roxanne nodded. Del's cold-numbed fingers tugged at the buttons of Alice's blouse.

“For pity’s sake,” Roxanne said. “Alice, you need to unbutton your blouse. You don’t have to undo it all the way. Then you need to lie down.”

Alice did as she was told. Roxanne put down the bowl and tucked the discarded coat beneath Alice’s head. She brushed her fingertips over Alice’s brow and smiled. Sweet, tender Alice. Though perhaps not so sweet—she whined sometimes. But at least she was Pure Alice, who had never been kissed—a virgin, as they all were.

“Now. Everyone be quiet,” she said, picking up the bowl. Her hands shook a bit with the excitement of it all. She closed her eyes.

The words she spoke—seemingly to the sky, or the air in front of her—were unintelligible to the others. Her tone was one of supplication: a petition or a prayer, not so different from the prayers the priests said at mass. She tried for the same singsong in her voice, the same careful cadence. She’s added a few thoughts and words of her own to the spell she took from the satanic witchcraft book she stole from the public library, thinking that they would make it more effective.

The herbs in the mash were ones she remembered being used in a joyful Santeria rite that her mother had taken her to, when her mother was on one of her “spiritual quests.” It was this blending of dark magic and the divine that she believed would give them what they wanted.

Alice squeezed her eyes shut, trying to ignore the cold, but she had to clench her jaw to keep her teeth from chattering. Del picked up the flickering candle in its fragile hurricane and curved over it as much for warmth as to protect it from the unpredictable air around them. Roxanne pressed her fingertips against Alice’s shoulder. She dipped the fingers of her other hand into the bowl, then touched them to Alice’s bare chest.

Alice turned her face away from the hideous smell. Whatever was now on her chest felt like frozen sand. But she held still. She was doing this for all of them. Roxanne didn't recognize the depth of Alice's faith in her. Alice would die for her.

Del watched, wondering how Alice could let something so strange, so horrible, be done to her. Alice's face was as plain as her name, not homely, but fair and unfreckled, with high, broad cheekbones and too-thin lips. Alice's was not a threatening or even very expressive face. She smiled often, but her smiles were tentative, as though someone were always watching her and she didn't know if she should be smiling or not.

Alice reminded Del of a stray dog that had hung around their house for several months. She hadn't liked the way the dog flung itself at her feet, its belly exposed. It was a sneaky dog, pushing their elderly spaniel away from her kibble when it thought no one was watching, peeing on the rug when her mother let it inside, shivering, on snowy days. She knew she would probably go to hell for thinking so, but she wasn't sorry when a speeding pizza delivery car knocked it to the side of the road, its neck twisted.

She had never known Alice to be sneaky, or to do anything that would hurt or betray any of them. But there would be a first time, she was certain.

She watched as a woolly caterpillar inched its way into Alice's dull blond hair, its body curving gracefully as it moved. As it crawled toward Alice's cheek, Alice's lips and forehead contorted. Was she in pain? Del held her breath, thinking Alice might cry out.

"Roxanne!" Del said, stopping Roxanne in mid-chant.

Alice's eyes opened in a bald stare before rolling back to show two half-moons of white below their trembling lids. Even by the light of the candle, her lips looked blue; her body stiffened and began to spasm, lifting itself from the ground.

Before Roxanne could move away, Alice's left arm hit outward, catching Roxanne mid-stomach so that she gave a loud gasp. The bowl flew from her hand.

Del began to scream, then—remembering that they were in the park and anyone could hear—covered her mouth to stifle it.

Alice jerked, her teeth clapping together with each violent throw of her head, her small, flat breasts shuddering. Now it was Roxanne who stared. Alice was like a mechanical doll, broken, frantic and wild in its malfunction. She was fascinated. Everything about Alice was always so predictable, so studied. But she had become interesting.

With a final upward thrust of her torso, Alice's body was calm, but her face was tinged blue, her eyes slitted, still with just their whites showing.

As Del scuttled away to crouch beneath a tree, the candle dropped to the ground, shattering its glass globe.

"We killed her!" Del said. "Shit, Roxanne. We killed her!"

Roxanne tilted her head, watchful. A slow curl of breath escaped Alice's mouth and dissipated.

"She's breathing," she said. "Quit freaking out. There wasn't anything in there that could hurt her." She twisted around to find the bowl, but could see nothing in the gathering dark. "And now it's all gone." They would have to start over again because she hadn't finished. Just another few minutes.

"We have to get someone," Del said. "What's wrong with her?"

Roxanne was in motion now, stuffing things into her book bag.

“The only place anyone is going is home,” she said. “Just don’t tell anyone you saw her tonight. She probably won’t remember anything anyway--damn it, Del, the candle!” She pointed to the ragged circle of burning leaves surrounding the still-lighted candle. The flames were small and tentative, etching black stripes into the palms of the leaves around it.

Del found herself looking stupidly at the fire for several beats, knowing what was going to come next, imagining Alice’s frozen body being consumed by the flames.

“Del!” Roxanne shouted.

Del swept handfuls of leaves on top of the burning ones, patting them with her hands. Were the leaves stoking the fire or stopping it? She couldn’t tell.

“Help me,” Del said. But Roxanne didn’t move. Del buried the flames until just a few whispers of smoke rose from the pile.

“We have to go,” Roxanne said. “Are you coming?” In the distance, they heard a shrill whistle, someone calling a dog or a child indoors.

“How can you be so hateful?” Del said. But Roxanne was moving away, confident that Alice would come to herself. She had homework to get to, and she was already thinking of the sketch she would do of Alice’s face, that look of emptiness, of complete abandon.

Del ran, her book bag thumping against her back. At the edge of the park, she crossed Arthur Street without bothering to go down to the crosswalk at the corner. When a passing car blew its horn at her, she stumbled onto the opposite sidewalk. She made her

way up the hill toward her house, breathing hard in the cold night air, hardly believing what she was doing.

Every lamp in every house she passed seemed to be burning as though to expose her. A dog she didn't know emerged from one of the yards and jogged along beside her for a few moments. Glancing down, she saw that it was short-haired, light brown with large splotches of black—a shepherd, maybe, or some mix.

“Go home,” she said, but it didn't even look up at her. She wondered if her fear had attracted it. She was afraid for herself. Afraid for Alice. A dog like this—maybe even this very dog—might find Alice in the park. Her mind couldn't form the next horrible thought.

At the next corner, the dog stopped while she walked on. She looked back to see it staring after her, its breath lifting in misty bursts beneath the streetlamp.

Her father's car was in the driveway. It was after seven and she had missed dinner. When she tried to decide what she would do next, she could think only of Alice. How could she go into the house as though nothing had happened and eat the food that her mother left warming in the oven for her? How could she sit down and do her homework, watch Seinfeld or Saved by the Bell or some stupid movie and wait for the phone call from Alice's father, who would want to know why Alice hadn't come home?

She thought of how she'd let that caterpillar crawl into Alice's hair. She would go to Hell for what she had done, even though it wasn't her fault Roxanne was so mean.

As she slipped into the garage, she dropped her book bag gently inside. The smell of cooked sauerkraut came to her through the kitchen door, but she wasn't hungry. She tripped over her father's toolbox—the single-car space was stuffed full with boxes and

bikes and workshop equipment—and felt something sharp graze her leg. Groping around the shelves by the door, she finally laid her hands on the flashlight they used for camping.

Del hurried toward the back of the empty park, praying that the pale glow she saw was some trick of the streetlamps or someone using one of the barbeque grills for a winter picnic. But she knew better.

“Alice,” she whispered.

The flames clung to the ground in the copse like a brilliant orange blanket. Alice stood in the opening, silhouetted against the light. She cried out, holding her forearm to her eyes against the beam from Del’s flashlight. In the moment before Del jerked the beam from Alice’s face, she saw that Alice’s skin and clothes were streaked with dirt and ash. Bits of leaves poked from her hair. Del thought of the caterpillar, but knew it was the least of Alice’s problems. It was the wild look in Alice’s eyes—a look of fear and anger and confusion—that caused her stomach to clench.

“Stay away from me,” Alice said. “Go away.”

“But it’s me,” Del said, slowing her step. She was more afraid of Alice than she was of the dog that had followed her up the road. But it wasn’t actually Alice that she was afraid of. It was whatever had happened to Alice, whatever had changed her. The flashlight’s beam caught one of Alice’s legs, which were covered with dark streaks: blood, maybe, or feces?

“I saw you,” Alice said. “I saw you run away.”

“I’m here,” Del said, trying not to look at Alice’s exposed breasts, which were sharply divided by the stripe of noxious salve Roxanne had applied. “We have to leave.”

The fire didn't seem to be spreading beyond the copse, but, still, she knew it wouldn't be long before someone saw it. There would be questions.

Alice wouldn't move.

"You just passed out for a few minutes," Del said. "It wasn't even that long."

"I was dead," Alice said, her voice flat.

"Let's go home," Del said. She didn't like this Alice at all. This Alice frightened her.

"You both left me here," Alice said. "And I was dead, but he told me to come back."

"Don't be stupid," Del said. "Just come on. We'll all be in trouble if you don't come." She was on the verge of leaving Alice alone again, now that she knew Alice was alive. It didn't matter anymore that Alice was the purest of them or that Roxanne had promised that the so-called spell would attract a guy for them, and only for them. She told herself that it was a bunch of bullshit that Roxanne had made up. If only Alice would be quiet about it.

"He came for us, but you didn't even wait to see him," Alice said. "Don't you want to know what he looks like?"

"Get your stuff," Del said. The fire had not yet reached Alice's coat and sweater and book bag. But it was Del, not Alice, who gathered them. She buttoned Alice's blouse and stuffed her into the coat as though Alice were an idiot child. Then Del shoved the book bag and sweater into her arms, causing Alice to stumble backward.

As they left, Del almost tripped over the lost bowl. She kicked at it, driving it several feet away.

“Stop! Roxanne will be mad if you lose her bowl,” Alice said.

Roxanne, who was the one who said they should leave Alice in the park, the one who ran away first. Del has known Roxanne since they were both four years old, but she still didn't completely understand why Roxanne did some of the things she did. Her mother had told her that Roxanne “acts out” because she didn't know her father, and that she thought she was special because she was “artistic.” But those seemed like lame explanations to Del.

“I wouldn't worry about Roxanne, if I were you,” Del said.

Ignoring her, Alice ran to the bowl and tucked it into her book bag.

They walked in silence until they reached Alice's house, one of the grand old mansions overlooking Victoria Park's duck pond.

“Fix your hair,” Del said. “You've got leaves and stuff in it.”

Alice bent over and quickly brushed her hands through her hair. When she came back up again, she smiled at Del. There was a smear of dirt across her left cheek, but Del didn't mention it.

“Thanks,” Alice said.

Del didn't respond, but turned away to walk home. She couldn't wait to get away from Alice, whose eyes had at last lost their wild look. It was seven-thirty and Del was finally hungry. She didn't ever want to see Alice again.

After she'd gone only a few steps, Alice called to her.

“He looks like an angel,” Alice said. “A perfect angel.”