

Wild Ones
by
Della Boynton

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Chapter One

From the old oak pulpit of the Fellowship Church, he delivered a stinging rebuke. They were supposed to witness by leading good, Christian lives, he reminded his congregation. Giving an umpire who made a bad call a black eye was nowhere in the bible or the handbook of what constitutes sportsmanship. Where was the good example they were supposed to be setting for the eleven year old players?

He heard muffled, unrepentant snickers.

Last Saturday's football game at Lowell's Tractor Field, between the Pirates and the Grizzlies, had been a shameful display of brawling. There had been two arrests. It was clear several parishioners were not ashamed of their fellow townsfolk. Serving a community of farmers, he was used to men and women who worked as hard at their leisure as they did tilling a rocky field into submission, or herding livestock over large expanses of pasture with only a horse and a nimble dog. Men and women at a competitive game, who were pumped full of adrenaline from a back breaking day of work, was not a good combination.

As punishment, he allowed his sermon to drone on for some time, probably as mind numbing as the ceaseless sound of cicadas in the fields outside the church. Not that he had many people to torment. There were only fifteen parishioners in his church, most of them past sixty years of age. It was unfortunate that whoever had landed a punch on Kirk Runion, the volunteer umpire, who was big enough to be mistaken for a well fed steer, was not here to suffer along with these people. He had been taken to the emergency room the night before. However, Kirk Runion, sporting his black eye, was in the second pew and scowling at the clock on the wall. The plain round dial read 10:30 a.m. His sermon usually ran until 11:00 a.m. The Reverend wished he could exempt him and allow him to go to his Sunday brunch early. For that matter, he wished he could exempt himself. He was feeling a definite ennui.

The narrow stained glass panels, on either side of the heavy oak double doors at the entrance, depicted crosses draped with purple cloth. The sun shining through them created colored sunspots. Those sunspots shone on the back four rows of old chipped and scratched pews, the ones that hadn't been filled since the previous pastor, his father, had passed away. The Reverend Peter Strike found himself staring at them instead of the bible before him. He knew the sermon, and the part of the bible he was using as an example, well enough for his tongue to be on autopilot. Timothy 2:24; a servant of the Lord must not be quarrelsome, but he must be kind to

everyone, able to teach, and forbearing.

Along with the light from the other windows in the room, Peter noticed that the sunspots illuminated dust suspended in the air. It created an illusion of a moment frozen in time, as if his sermon was a tailor made level of hell that he had been consigned to for his sins. He wondered if his parishioners were having the same thought.

Peter's eyes wandered to one of the tall windows that lined the walls of the small church. Through it he could see a heat haze rippling over rolling hills that were covered in yellow dandelions, intermittent sprinkling of purple loco flowers, and isolated stands of pine trees. The mountains in the distance, skirted with the old growth forest in Tammany State Park, were white capped and dark against a blue, cloudless sky. It was hard to quash a strong desire to be out among the dandelions despite the heat.

Peter pulled his eyes away with difficulty and looked down at the pulpit before him. On it, he thumbed the already well-thumbed pages of a bible that had probably been printed during the Civil War. He attempted to pass off his momentary distraction as that of a sorely disappointed priest looking for strength from the Lord. Internally, Peter chastised himself. It was a bad morning, he thought, when even his attention drifted from his sermon. Unfortunately, he was not the fire and brimstone preacher his father had been. He could not conjure up with words appropriate descriptions of Hell to get his parishioners full attention in order to save their souls.

The rattling of a substandard conditioner, along with the sounds the thin walls of the church allowed to intrude into the small space, vied with Peter's voice. The loud drone of cicadas was constant and could be ignored, but the raucous cawing of squabbling crows and the sounds of numerous eighteen wheelers on the nearby highway could not. That highway, previously narrow and full of pot holes, had been paved and widened a year ago. Now truckers used it as a fast way to get from city A to city B because of its rarity of traffic lights and police officers willing to leave the A.C. in their vehicles and write speeding tickets.

Peter had a soft voice lacking in the bass that was needed to carry his words to the entire church. He remembered his father's deep, booming voice eliciting fervent hallelujahs and shouts of amen from even lip service churchgoers. Peter's voice couldn't even compete with the sound of truckers shifting gears to tackle the steep hill just south of the church.

Peter supposed his reluctance to see his small flock as hardcore sinners in need of redemption was hampering his delivery as well. Old Mrs. Hargrove, for example, was ninety.

She headed a quilting bee and still did charity work. She sewed onesies to distribute at the hospital for needy newborns. Peter couldn't imagine Heaven rejecting her soul. He often had to remind himself that she might secretly smoke, drink to excess, and run a dog fighting ring. A priest couldn't know all aspects of a parishioner's life. He had to speak to secret sins. That logic sounded hollow to him, though, when Peter tried to tell that sweet, smiling woman, who's dark skin was wrinkled by long days spent among her flower beds and who still sang hymns beautifully, that she was in danger of hellfire.

The main door opened and closed with a rattle of loose hardware and the scrape of heavy oak, covered in generations of white paint, on the old warped jam. Peter frowned at the interruption and looked up from the pulpit and the large antique bible covered with his notes. A few parishioners turned to see who it was, eager for a break in the tedium of his sermon. Peter's fingers gripped the well-worn corners of his podium where several generations of priests before him had braced themselves, and took a breath to chastise whoever was late. The words died in his throat.

A young woman had taken a seat at the back of the church. Peter surmised she was sitting in the very last pew because she wasn't sure of her welcome. That was understandable. She appeared to be one of the traveling bohemians that had been plaguing the nearby small town since they had established a yearly get together in Tammany State Park not more than a few miles east.

The townsfolk and the farmers hated how they wandered the streets in their mix of Middle Eastern, gypsy, and second hand store clothing, smoked pot, stole from the farmer's fields and the local stores, and always smelled strongly of patchouli and clove cigarettes. Their get together was called the Hajj, but it could have been more aptly named Sodom. The tales told of wild orgies, drug induced dancing and mayhem, and the numerous rape reports, deaths, and unsolved murders attributed to them produced a slew of annual legal motions to ban them. The organizers of the Hajj won every case. They were either well connected or had deep pockets to pay off State officials.

The woman had long blonde hair that had been kissed by the sun until it was almost white. The color reminded him of his misspent youth on California beaches watching a myriad of leggy bottle blondes walk the warm sands. Her big blue eyes, pale skin only lightly tanned, and heart shaped features left him no doubt that her hair was natural. She wore a sundress with spaghetti

straps the color of her eyes and sandals that were totally impractical for the rocky countryside or the treacherous ground among the pine forests in the Park. That forest was filled by steep ravines and caves obscured by undergrowth an unsuspecting person could fall into and never be heard from again. Peter imagined some filled with Hajj participants from previous years; piles of bones in colorful gypsy or second hand clothing. It was a morbid image that was hard to dismiss from his mind.

The congregation began whispering to each other. Some expressed only curiosity, but there were dark frowns on a few faces. John Hyland claimed to have lost sheep during the last Hajj and Freddy Marshall, whose farm was closest to the forest, had lost both livestock and expensive farm equipment.

Petula Winton, a tall, elderly, black woman, with her hair upswept into a tight bun and dressed in a black dress with a bright green coat, decided to bring the congregation to order by clearing her throat loudly. That simple sound from her commanded silence and everyone's immediate attention as if she had divine power. She gave Peter a firm nod and rose. She walked to a piano by the pulpit with a straight backed measured tread that made him think of a disapproving Catholic nun. That was his signal to ask the congregation to open their hymnals.

Petula gave him another firm nod of approval and began to play *How Great Thou Art*.

*O Lord his God,
When his in awesome wonder
Consider all
The works Thy Hand hath made,
I see the stars,
I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy pow'r throughout*

Petula had been his father's dedicated assistant longer than he'd been alive. She had greeted Peter's sudden appearance as her beloved pastor's long lost son with deep suspicion. When his father had passed away not eight months later that suspicion had deepened. Though Peter had followed in his father's footsteps and shown himself to be a solid, upstanding individual with a deep commitment to God, he had not put to rest her doubt that a light skinned, mixed race young

man with light grey eyes and straight dark hair, could be the son of a very dark, heavy set, African American man with an afro. As for Peter, he had his own suspicion that Petula had been in love with his father and that she thought he had come between her and her aspiration to be the next Mrs. Reverend Carl Williams. Never mind the fact that Williams had never remarried after his first wife had passed away five years ago. Peter's mother had never held the honor. She had been a one night indiscretion, one of those real blonde California girls who had tempted a God fearing man on vacation.

That thought was enough to divide Peter's attention between his singing congregation and the woman at the back of the church. He eyes sought her out even as his sang. He tried to tell himself it was in priestly concern, but the truth was that he was just as weak when it came to blondes as his father.

She was gone.

Peter's eyes swept the church and his singing faltered. He was certain he would have heard the doors grate against the jam if she had exited, yet he couldn't deny that she was no longer in her seat. Every corner of the small church was bathed in light and there wasn't enough room under the pews for a full grown woman to hide.

Through a window Peter saw a flicker of movement. At first he thought it was one of the squabbling crows or a low flying buzzard. The buzzards often used the open field to catch warm thermals and they liked to roost on the tin roof despite the summer heat. It was neither of those things. Instead he saw the woman walking up a hill that was covered in wild flowers and tall grass and crowned by a thick stand of lodge pole pine trees. Her sun dress caught a small breeze and rippled along with her white-blonde hair. She seemed an image out of a fine painting; nature, beauty, and rarified sunlight. Mesmerized, Peter's eyes followed her until she was amongst the trees and gone from sight.

Peter had stopped singing. How Great Thou Art had ended, though, and silence reigned. He brought his attention back to his congregation. They were staring at him, some in concern, but others with derision. Petula's withering look spoke volumes. He was not his father. How true that was and how right she was to be suspicious of him. He had let his guard down and stopped playing his role. He had to recover and quickly.

Frowning at his congregation Peter said sternly, "You sounded as if you were thinking more of your empty stomachs than Our Lord in Heaven." He thumped the palm of his hand down on

the pulpit to punctuate his words. “You sounded so counterfeit his was ashamed to sing with you. He was asking God to pardon you and to give you one more chance to sing his praises. Redeem yourselves by singing Crown Him with Many Crowns as it should be sung.”

Petula was caught off guard. She was several beats behind Peter’s request as she turned back to her piano and began the song. Mrs. Hargrove was the first to sing, her voice rising up beautifully to Heaven. The rest of the congregation quickly began singing as well, standing and giving it the passion the song deserved.

*Crown Him with many crowns,
The lamb upon the throne:
Hark! How the heav'nly anthem drowns
All Music but its own!
Awake, his soul, and sing
Of Him who died for thee,
And hail him as thy matchless King
Through all eternity.
Crown Him with many crowns
Crown Him with many crowns*

Peter sang along with fervor. The Reverend Williams would have been proud. Or maybe up in Heaven, surely knowing the truth now, he was outraged at Peter’s subterfuge. He was the veritable cuckoo in the songbird’s nest after all. Desperate to find a place in the world, he had taken the place of the deceased Peter Strike, the real illegitimate son of Carl Williams. He now had family and a community, more than he’d ever had in his entire life. He wasn’t going to lose either because of his own stupidity. He wasn’t going to allow a New Age-Boho chick to distract him again.

Chapter Two

“So you’re the one that’s been getting in his garbage?”

The dog looked like a husky mix. Its fur was white with touches of cinnamon on ears and tail. Its face had a cinnamon colored mask and a smattering of cinnamon dots like freckles. Its pale blue eyes regarded Peter warily as it slunk away from the contents of his raided garbage can. The dog had tipped it over onto its side, adding to the numerous dents in the metal. The bones of its previous night’s rib dinner had offered little in the way of scraps. It had been good and it had sucked the bones clean of meat.

The dog looked thin. Its thick fur was dirty and matted in places. One ear had a tick near the end. Its mistrust of humans was pronounced. Peter didn’t think it was a stray that campers had lost, or a farm dog looking for an extra meal. He was sure it had been on its own for a while and that someone had probably dumped it along the nearby highway. Him, Peter corrected himself as the dog hiked a leg on a nearby bush, pissed, and then loped away through the tall grass.

Peter righted his garbage can and cleaned up the refuse. He felt irritated at first, but after he closed the lid firmly, he found himself going to the back of the church. Inside the whitewashed wood frame house reserved for the Pastor, Peter hunted through the refrigerator for better scraps. He dumped leftover chicken and potted meat, with a questionable date, onto a paper plate. He added a half of a ham sandwich that had been lost on a back rack behind the condiments and was now dried out and unappetizing. He filled a plastic bowl with water and then took the paper plate and bowl back to the garbage can. The dog was not there.

Peter whistled hopefully.

He searched the hills to the sound of cicadas, the wind through the high grass, and the distant calling of crows and songbirds. The dog did not reappear, yet Peter felt eyes watching him.

Peter placed the bowl and the plate on the ground and left them there. He felt foolish. The dog was gone and he was probably about to feed the ants or a lucky raccoon. The boy in him that had always wanted a dog couldn’t help making the attempt. In his mind he was already naming him, even though he was making sound, adult arguments why a dog would be a bad idea. Freckles— Cinnamon— Bandit— Silver— Blue... Blue was a good name. Even as Peter settled

on it, he knew that men like him had to be prepared to move at a moment's notice. He had a long list of reasons why certain bad men would want to find him. If he had to run for it, Blue would be the first casualty. Blue needed to find a young boy on a farm; a place where he could grow old loved and without any more incidents of abuse.

Peter returned to his work. Wearing khaki shorts, tennis shoes, and a loose white shirt, he was trying to tame the wild growth that used to be ordered beds of flowers and hedges. He had spent his eight months with the Reverend Williams fixing the sagging floor of the church, replacing bad plumbing, and stopping leaks in the roof. After cementing his succession as Pastor, he was turning his attention to the outside. He had repainted the old buildings, taken out an oak tree that had died in a drought year, and was now bringing order to chaos in the plant world within an acre from the church.

You would think his efforts would win over Petula, but the most she gave him was a *stink eye* and a dubious sniff. She acted as if he was a drunk trying to convince her of his sobriety. If she hadn't been a permanent fixture in the community and the church, if she hadn't played piano so well, and if she wasn't so very good at keeping the bills paid and the tithes coming in for repairs, upkeep of the new pastor, and charity work, Peter might have dismissed her. He needed her like he needed his right hand, though, and he was sure Reverend Williams had felt the same way.

A movement caught Peter's eye. Yards away, he saw crows erupting from the tall grass, cawing in outrage. Their wings fluttered like dark flags as they flitted to safety. A stand of purple loco weed swayed and then went over abruptly. Something was rolling in it. After a few moments of intense action the weeds stilled and the dog stood up. He shook himself and then trotted away without looking at Peter. He was now full of burs.

"Loco," Peter chuckled. The dog had just named himself.

Peter had been using a hoe to break up the rocky soil and the weeds. He swung it over one shoulder and went to where he had left the water and the food. Both were still there. The food was already being enjoyed by ants.

"Loco," he now said like a swear word.

He wasn't good enough for Petula and now he wasn't good enough for a stray dog.

After leaning his hoe against the church wall, Peter threw the food into the garbage and tossed the water out of the plastic container onto a clump of larkspur that was brown and

struggling in the heat. Feeling that his act of charity had at least found someone in need, his turned to take the bowl back into the house.

“Have you seen Evie?”

Peter started badly and fumbled the bowl. He juggled it in his hands until he had a firm grasp of it again, all the while keeping it between him and his surprise visitor as if it could help him if he was attacked. Finally, clutching it against his chest, he sized up the diminutive woman. She in turn was sizing him up just as warily.

“Blonde woman with blue eyes,” she said. “She’s young, like me.”

And that would be their only similarity, Peter thought. Her appearance was very unique. She had a pixie like face and a body that couldn’t have weighed more than 100 pounds. Her wild head of red dread locks was adorned with beaded white feathers, gold gypsy pendants, and bound together with colorful, overlapping bandanas. She wore large, round, steampunk style, sunglasses with gold rims that had small cogs on the sides and filigree designs around the lenses. Those lenses were opaque and mirrored his wary expression. Her tiny body, clothed in psychedelic colored tights, overlarge hiking boots, and a beaded swim suit bikini top, looked overwhelmed by her jewelry. Dozens of heavy silver bracelets, necklaces, and large earrings were adorned by chunky red, blue, and crystal stones. Their design had a definite Tibetan influence.

“A young woman matching that description attended my church service yesterday,” he finally replied. “She didn’t stay long.” He motioned towards the hill to their left. “I saw her go that way.”

Her lips pursed. They were full lips. Movie stars paid thousands of dollars for lips like those. Peter was certain hers were natural. Her head tipped down and she looked over her sunglasses at him. Her eyes were as green as new leaves and framed by dark lashes. He might have thought of bonnie lasses in the Scottish Highlands, if it weren’t for a certain ethnic flair to the smile she was giving him now and the texture of the strands of her hair escaping her dreads.

“You’re a priest?”

“Reverend Strike.”

She didn’t say that he didn’t look like a Reverend. Perhaps that was too obvious. Instead her smile dropped as her index finger pushed her sunglasses back into place. She managed to look incredulous even behind her mask of mirrored lenses. “Evie doesn’t like churches. Why would

she go into yours?”

“To get out of the heat?”

She mulled that over as she looked past him. He thought about what she was seeing. A hoe, a shovel, turned over, rocky earth. Normal people would have concluded he was gardening. Peter wasn't normal and neither was she. He knew the exact moment when she began to suspect that he had buried the body of Evie in the defunct flower beds.

“I'm going to plant petunias.”

“They'll die.” Her voice sounded a little weak, as if she couldn't help her nature and had to correct his horticultural blunder despite her fear.

“What do you suggest?” He kept his voice calm and tried not to take offense as she took a step backward.

“Salvia, monardella, or some lavender flowers.”

“Two purples?” He surprised her with his knowledge.

“I like purple.”

Peter didn't mention that his favorite color was red. It brought to mind blood. He didn't want to reinforce her suspicions that he was a serial killer.

“I need to keep looking for Evie,” she announced firmly. “Thanks for the info. She might have gone into town and hooked up with someone. I'll check there.”

“Is that likely? For her to hook up with someone, I mean?”

The set of her mouth told him she was troubled. “No. She's an innocent babe in the woods, actually; a newbie to the scene. I've been looking after her. I had an all-nighter with the acrobats, though, and she slipped out of camp early.”

Acrobats? Peter couldn't help thinking about sex and acrobats. He had a lewd mental image of her that involved a trapeze and very limber men. He dismissed it quickly, but she clenched her jaw and he wondered if she had guessed his thoughts.

“If his see her again, I'll tell her you're worried about her,” Peter promised. He had an opening and he used it. “She'll want to know your name.”

She hesitated and then gave him a fake one. “She knows me by Calypso.”

It was an unusual name for an unusual person. It fit her, but it made Peter think of sunny beaches, surf, and ocean breezes. It wasn't the name of someone who lived in forests and hung from trapezes with acrobats, naked or otherwise.

Calypso tilted her head down and looked at him over the rim of her glasses again. Her stare was intense. He felt challenged, maybe even threatened. She was going to leave, her eyes told him, and he was going to be sorry if he tried to stop her. Her diminutive size should have made that challenge laughable, but he felt uneasy instead. During the darker parts of his past, Peter had learned not to underestimate people.

“Thanks.” She made the word short and sharp and then she walked past him and headed for the nearby highway. Peter thought it must be Calypso’s way of ending their interaction in a way that was supposed to convey to him that they were not friends or on casual terms. He wasn’t supposed to follow her. For reasons he couldn’t fathom, he ignored her unspoken warning and did just that, as if she was a magnet drawing him after her.

They passed Peter’s turned over flowerbeds, the ornamental white rocks he had dug out of them piled to one side in a loose pyramid like a pagan alter. While digging them out, he had been unsuccessful in stifling unchristian like thoughts toward Reverend William’s late wife. He suspected she had designed the beds and had fancied the rocks. He was determined to replace them with rich soil, mulch, and a drip hose.

The gravel drive wound towards the highway with overgrown brown grass and sunburnt dandelions waving in a breeze on either side. A crow flew by them, circled until they determined that they didn’t have food, and then drifted off to the East. Heedless of her brief escort, Calypso walked quickly. Her boots made crunching sounds on the gravel and her red dreads, pendants, scarves, and feathers bounced on her back with each step she took. Peter’s tennis shoes were quieter, but not soundless. She had to know he was following her.

Peter wasn’t prone to casual hookups. The moment had to be right, the moon a certain shade of blue, her personality just so, and no chance that she could find him again, or want to identify him to law enforcement. He wasn’t one of those predators, or abusive sons of bitches who he thought should be put behind bars for life, but he hadn’t been an upstanding citizen either. There were warrants for his arrest for good reason. His crimes didn’t rise to the level where redemption was out of the question, though, and it was his intention to stay on the right side of the law.

His friends in his old life would have died laughing, seeing him chasing after a wild looking woman who didn’t want any part of him. They would have recognized the old him in his actions. He was appalled at the risk he was taking. Calypso already suspected he had done something to Evie. He was only confirming her fears and making certain she would spread her suspicion that

the new pastor was suspect.

“It’s a long way to town,” he said loudly, wanting her to know that his motives were pure, even though he was confused as to what they actually were. “Hitchhiking is dangerous. Most of the traffic isn’t local.”

“Are you suggesting an alternative?”

She hadn’t turned or slowed her steps. He had to talk to her back.

“I can give you a ride into town. I need to buy plants.”

Two doves were pecking in the dirt at the end of the drive. They erupted into the air in a whirlwind of wings as she approached. They circled each other high in the blue sky and then perched on a telephone wire that ran along the highway.

“Is that a pick-up line?”

“More like an offer from a concerned citizen.”

She eyed him over her shoulder and then began looking for a likely person to hitch a ride from. Several cars sped by. A red truck, covered in dried mud, didn’t meet her unspoken standard either.

“Concerned citizen? Not Pastor?”

It was a slip of the tongue that he couldn’t afford. He tried to recover, but the words didn’t sound as reassuring as he had hoped. “Some people are put off by religion.” Yes, he definitely sounded like a serial killer trying to pick up his next victim. He couldn’t help sighing. She surprised him by laughing and turning to look at him fully. Her smile had dimples.

“You don’t date much do you, Reverend?”

“No,” he admitted.

“Keep practicing.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but she stopped him.

“On someone else.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shrugged and looked at the road again. “I get a lot of that. People are drawn to the unusual. The problem, though, is that they get tired of it quickly too. Find a nice church lady, Reverend... Do you have a first name?”

“Peter.”

She frowned. Still looking at traffic, she said, “You don’t look like a Peter. More like a...”

Hunter.”

That was his real name. It shocked him. His heart skipped a beat and he broke out in a cold sweat, wondering if she knew him from his other life. He calmed himself down with difficulty as reason reasserted itself and he realized that she was making fun of his bad attempt to hunt her. He wasn't certain he was doing that. He felt confused, drawn to her, but certainly not interested in complicating his stolen new life with a girlfriend. If he wanted sexual relief, he drove fifty miles away from town to a biker bar, where a nice looking, older lady named Cherie, was more than willing to give a younger man a ride in bed without any complications. Even though her curly blonde hair was getting peppered with gray, she had a body that looked good wearing a bra top made out of black leather, a black leather mini skirt, and high heels. He don't think she bought his story that his was a traveling salesman, but she never questioned him about it and she always had a smile for him and a shouted *How the hell ya' been?*

“I move around a lot,” Calypso said as she stepped forward and began waving down an approaching semi. Peter heard the sound of brakes and it began to slow. “You're cute,” she continued, “but I'm going to be gone next week. I could totally damage your reputation by then.”

Her words made it sound as if there was a chance they could get together, but she was sacrificing any good time to be had for his sake. Like him, she wasn't opposed to sexual encounters with no complications. That might have turned some men off, but Peter felt strangely disgusted with himself, not her. He was more critical of his friends with benefits arrangement with Cherie, as if that made him not good enough for Calypso. It was a definite double standard that he was imposing on himself. Perhaps it was because Calypso imagined that he was who he was pretending to be, an honest, upstanding, pastor of a church. It was possible that was the man she was interested in, not a man who had seldom shaken hands with the law. Even though she hadn't known the late Peter Strike, he still felt measured by his standard and left wanting. The real Peter had been a hero after all and he was only the man the real Peter had died saving.

The semi came to a halt and a heavy set, balding, man, possibly in his late fifties, looked down at Calypso in interest through his open cab window. He had close set, brown eyes and a generous bulge in his lower lip caused by, Peter suspected, a wad of chewing tobacco. The trucker confirmed his suspicion by spitting off to one side of Calypso. The spit hit the gravel in a brown splatter. A yellow butterfly fluttered over to it to investigate. “What's up, little lady?” the man asked in a heavy Carolina accent.

“I need a ride into town.” Calypso smiled brightly up at him. She was a slight, defenseless looking Boho girl that had the sun in her red hair, white gravel dirt on her shoes, and an air about her that made him think of hippie coffee shops, love-ins, and poetry slams.

The man tapped the door of his truck with a fat finger. A decal read *No Hitchhikers*.

“Three miles,” she promised. “That’s not far enough to be called hitchhiking.”

The man chuckled deep in his chest and spat again. It almost hit the butterfly. The insect fluttered away to a safer place among the high grass and dandelions. “Sounds right.” The trucker looked at Peter and squinted, as if his eyesight was poor. “What about him?” He made that question sound like a warning. If Peter was coming, his tone said, it was a deal breaker.

Calypso made a dismissive gesture with her hand. “He’s staying.”

“All right, then. Hop on board.”

Calypso looked back at Peter and her smile was different, it was serious and friendly, not fake like the one she had given the driver. She asked, “If you see Evie, please tell her to go back to camp.”

“I will.” Peter was letting her go and he wasn’t happy about it. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Life is all about taking chances, but thanks for caring.” Calypso didn’t let Peter see her eyes. The mirrored lenses of her sunglasses were a wall, repelling him and preventing him from arguing further. She nodded to indicate something behind him and said, “Stick with your church and your dog and forget about crazy people like me. Normal is underrated.”

It seemed she had discarded the idea that Peter was a serial killer. He could almost feel happy about that, but it was quashed when he saw the driver lift up a can of beer and take a swig. He finished it off as Calypso opened the passenger side of the van and climbed in. As she closed the door, the trucker crushed the empty can in his fist and tossed it out the window. It rattled on the gravel. The trucker grinned at Peter and then turned to say something to Calypso as he released the brakes of the semi and began going down the highway. He left behind the stink of diesel fuel and, as a final insult; his tires sent a spray of pebbles into the air that peppered Peter’s bare legs. Peter winced as he quickly stepped back.

Peter picked up the empty beer can and crushed it further, surprised at his flare of temper. The sudden greasy feeling under his fingers instantly repulsed him. He felt like flinging the can away from him. He muscles tensed as if to carry out the thought, but, after a long moment of

indecision, he throttled down on the desire. He was the only one who was around to throw it away. He was just going to make the job harder.

Growling a curse under his breath, he held the can more gingerly in an attempt to reduce the contact between his skin and the area of greasiness.

Turning back towards the church, he spotted the dog a few yards away. It was half hidden by the grass and seemed in no mood to come any closer.

Peter was feeling ineffectual and rejected and that tapped into his deep seated insecurities, the ones he tried to hide and lock down tighter than his temper. He had been less than stellar at Sunday service. He had failed to keep Evie from leaving and somehow disappearing. Calypso had rejected him soundly, preferring a ride with a trucker, who probably was a serial killer, rather than stay with him. A stray dog would rather starve than take food from his hand. Now the dog seemed to be taunting him. Yes, that was irrational, but reacting rather than thinking had put him where he is today.

Peter raised the can and almost threw it that time. The dog laid back his ears and crouched submissively. Peter lowered the can, feeling ashamed of himself. The dog seemed unsure, perhaps wondering if it was safe to move. He finally made a decision and slunk away, low and quick. Peter was sure he'd seen the last of him and he didn't blame him.

The can dropped limply to Peter's side and he sighed as he briefly scrubbed his free hand across his face. The sun was hot on his shoulders as he reluctantly walked back to his work. He stopped to drop the can in the garbage and then picked up his hoe. The cooler part of the day was now passed but the work still had to be done. Years of neglect wasn't going to fix itself. Maybe he wasn't good at dealing with people or dogs, but he could do manual labor. He had spent some of his younger years digging ditches on road crews until he decided that cheating the system was a hell of a lot easier— or so he thought until he had been caught.

Peter's education into the imbedded corruptness of his home town, and how the people in power made annoyances like him disappear permanently, had been quick and brutal. He'd been lucky to get away with only a few scars. Having to hide under an assumed name for the rest of his life to keep them from finding him was better than no life at all. It should have been a lesson he could never forget, yet he was still letting his temper and his poor decisions continue to slip his control. Calypso had been afraid of doing him damage by sticking around. The truth of the matter was that he was far more capable of doing her life harm.

Peters was pretending to be a pious man who was choosing to be as cloistered as a Catholic priest to better worship God for a reason. If he was alone, he reasoned, he had to remember fewer lies and there was less chance that someone might discover who he really was. Besides, attachments only meant heartbreak. Everyone in his life had left or been taken from him. Cherie was the only exception, but he could hardly count her. Their shallow friendship consisted of small talk before sex. Neither of them asked questions beyond, *Was that good for you?*

He found another empty whiskey bottle. Peter pulled the dirt caked thing out of the earth and added it to the pile of eleven others. Someone had been using the flower beds to hide a drinking problem. He wondered if it had been the late Mrs. Rebecca Williams. All the bottles seemed old. Reverend Williams had talked about her lovingly, as if she had been as perfect and sinless as an angel straight from Heaven. Nobody was without sin, Peter thought sourly, but he still wanted to dismiss the thought of the woman drinking secretly and burying bottles. If Williams was his pretend father, then she was his pretend step-mother. He was living in the home she had lovingly cared for and ministering in her church. These flower beds might have been her pride and joy at one time. If the bottles were hers, they were his secret to keep. After he finished cleaning out the flower beds, Peter put the bottles in a plastic bag and put them in the garbage.

The area around the church looked barren now: piled rocks and bare, turned over dirt the only things left for a half acre. He had piled all the dead and dying vegetation in a compost bin at the back of the house. It was next to a covered rain barrel that was positioned under the gutters of the house. A downspout terminated in a hole in the wooden cover. That cover lifted off sideways to allow someone to employ the rusty watering can hanging from a hook nearby. Painted on it in faded blue letters was the name *Rebecca*.

When he returned to the beds to make a mental list of the soil, mulch, plants, and drip equipment he would need, Peter found himself positioning Rebecca's mountain of white, round stones in borders around the planters. It was homage to her memory, he supposed, to leave something she had liked behind. It made him feel less guilty for cursing her name over the same stones earlier.

Peter was exhausted. There was a recliner, a fan, and a cold beer with his name on it in the house. He put away his tools, but after, instead of going to his just reward, he stood and stared at the highway and the passing cars and trucks. He followed it with his eyes towards town.

The little town of Windham was a skiing destination in the winter and a hiker's paradise in

the summer. With the Tammany State Park and falls close by, along with Deer Lake and the Lindo River in the neighboring Pontinac Valley, they were in a key position to capture a large share of tourism. The town council and the older residents, though, families that had first settled the town, were against turning into just another tourist destination. The battles between council members and local businesses was legendary he had heard. Still, for all the arguments to keep the town rural, a *reflection of its citizenry*, it was a place that had the same atmosphere as Martha's Vineyard. It didn't feel like a place where farmers, fisherman, and hunters would feel welcome. It felt like a town where the wealthy sipped champagne and enjoyed the theatre in the evenings. Calypso might get a few harsh words or dirty looks, but it wasn't a backwoods town in the Appalachians. She was safe from physical harm.

A worried part of his brain added, *if* she had reached the town.

Peter wiped sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand and felt sweat also soaking his shirt. He was covered in dirt, scratches, and a few bug bites. He needed to shower, shave, and change if his was going to go into town.

He squinted at the sun and then checked his watch, as if some of his primitive DNA memory still needed him to confirm that his technology matched a time tested standard. He was too far removed from cave man days, though, and the sun only told him it was past noon. His watch, a more precise instrument, was black and chrome and had a function on the bottom of the face that was backlit with a blue LED light. It had come with a reputation of being used by Special Forces in the military. Though most of its many functions and numerous dials were still a mystery to him, he could find the time. It was just three a.m.

Peter went into the house, ignoring the voice in his head that never failed to get him into trouble. That voice was his selfish, never thought out, impulse to do what he wanted and not what was prudent.

"Don't be ridiculous!" he firmly said out loud, "I am not going. Calypso can take care of herself. I'll get an early start tomorrow, purchase everything I need for the flower beds, and have it all finished before it gets too hot. I deserve to sit in my lounge chair, watch TV, and have a beer. You are not going to convince me otherwise."

There was no one to see how crazy he sounded talking to himself and he didn't care if the dog was hiding close by and listening. He even let the screen door of the house slam shut after him to punctuate the finality of his decision. He had found the perfect hiding place. No one was

questioning his identity as Peter Strike. He was not going to get involved with two girls who were bad news and were going to be gone in a week. Calypso had made the right decision and it was time he did as well.
